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The 2014 Kanji of the Year: “Zei” (Tax)

Culture

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For lovers of Asian languages, December 12 each year carries a far greater significance than simply the opening of another door on the advent calendar. Since 1995, this has been the date chosen by the Japanese Kanji Proficiency Society for the announcement of the Kanji of the Year, the single character deemed most evocative of the events of the last 12 months.

A Taxing Selection This Year

This year’s winning kanji is 税 (*zei; mitsugi*), meaning “tax.” The twentieth Kanji of the Year took a total of 8,679 votes, or 5.18% of the total 167,613. The reasons for its selection are clear: on April 1 this year the government raised Japan’s consumption tax **for the first time in 17 years**, bringing it from 5% to 8%. Meant to bolster funding for the country’s future social security needs, this tax hike impacted Japanese wallets and brought about drastic swings in the economy as a whole, with consumers front-loading major appliance, vehicle, and home purchases ahead of

April 1 and curtailing spending after the higher rate went into effect. Two straight quarters of negative growth thereafter convinced Prime Minister Abe Shinzō to put off the next planned rate hike, from 8% to 10%, until the spring of 2017.

Coming in second was 熱 (*netsu; atsui*), meaning “hot,” with 6,007 votes. Likely reasons for its selection include the steamy weather in Japan this summer, as well as **dengue fever** and Ebola hemorrhagic fever, both of which use the character for the “fever” part of their names. The third-place character was 嘘 (*kyo; uso*), “lie,” chosen for its connection to news stories like local politician Nonomura Ryūtarō’s bizarre, weeping explanations of his repeated travel to hot-spring resorts on the public dime, **disgraced scientist Obokata Haruko’s** papers on STAP cells that were retracted by the journal *Nature*, and the revelation that the deaf composer Samuragōchi Mamoru had relied on a ghostwriter to craft his popular tunes—and may not even be deaf.

Japan’s Annual Kanji Ritual

It stands to reason that December should be a time for retrospection, but why this date specifically? As with many promotional occasions in Japan, the thinking comes down to a *goroawase*, a numerical wordplay deftly punning on the digits featured in the date, in this case “1212.” By playing around with potential readings of these numerals, it’s possible to arrive at the phrase “ii ji ichi ji” (良い字一字), or “one good character.”

In contrast to the annual **Words of the Year**, which are chosen each November by a seven-member selection panel hand-picked by organizing body Jiyū Kokumin Sha, the Kanji of the Year is decided by a public vote, conducted via the Internet, postal submissions, and a number of polling boxes at selected locations nationwide from early November.

While this year’s *zei* is an easy one to explain, previous winners ([a full list is here](#) for readers of Japanese) have often been tapped for a broad range of reasons. The 2005 winner, 愛 (*ai*), “love,” featured in the name of the Aichi World Expo and signified the wedding that year of Princess Nori (now Kuroda Sayako), but was also selected for the marked absence of love seen in vicious crimes by underage offenders. The 1997 choice of 倒 (*tō; taoreru, taosu*), “fall/topple,” was inspired by the failure of Yamaichi Securities and other major Japanese firms, as well as the Japanese soccer team’s success in knocking down a string of tough opponents to qualify for the World Cup in the following year.

Kiyomizudera, the temple in Kyoto where the head priest writes the winning character each year, will host a special retrospective show on the characters of the past 20 years through Friday, December 26.

(Banner photo: Mori Seihan [left], chief priest at Kiyomizudera, produces this year’s calligraphy for the character 税. © Jiji.)

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