

Kanji of the year is 'rei' as it reflects the new imperial era

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN
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Seihan Mori, chief priest of Kyoto's Kiyomizudera temple, paints a giant version of the kanji of the year, "rei," at the temple on Dec. 12. (Yoshiko Sato)

KYOTO--The Japanese public has given its verdict for the kanji character that best sums up events of 2019, and it is "rei," the first character in the name of the new imperial era, Reiwa.

The Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation announced Dec. 12 that rei was the top vote-getter among 216,325 suggestions received nationwide with 30,427 votes.

Seihan Mori, chief priest of the famed Kiyomizudera temple here, ceremoniously drew the character on a sheet of traditional "washi" paper measuring 1.5 meters by 1.3 meters with a calligraphy brush to announce the outcome in an annual year-end ritual held at the temple in the city's Higashiyama Ward.

The overall verdict was that the character best reflects the year that marked the start of the Reiwa imperial era with Emperor Naruhito's enthronement on May 1.

The characters for the new era name were taken from "Manyoshu" (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves), Japan's oldest known

poetry anthology that dates from the Nara Period (710-794). It was the first new era name that has its source in a Japanese classic.

Many voters said the name Reiwa provided an opportunity to rediscover Japanese traditional culture.

The character "rei" is also used in terms such as "law amendment," "legal compliance," "issuance of an alert" and "evacuation order." Citing these definitions, many voters said the character reflects key events of 2019, such as the increase in the consumption tax rate from 8 percent to 10 percent, scandals in the entertainment industry and natural disasters.

The practice of choosing a kanji of the year started in 1995. This year's kanji is the 25th character to receive the designation.

The runner-up kanji was "shin" (new), which received 14,850 entries, followed by "wa" (harmony), the other character of the new era name, with 10,281 entries.

The characters "hen" (change) and "wazawai" (disaster) followed with 7,749 entries and 7,302 entries, respectively.

Last year, the kanji "wazawai" was selected, which means disaster, reflecting deadly natural disasters and the seemingly daily fare of political scandal and power harassment.

(This article was written by Jiro Omura and Masayuki Takashima.)

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