

2013 Kanji of the Year: “Rin” Takes the Ring

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Culture Society

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A little while back we took a look at the **key words of 2013**. But there is another lexical popularity contest that takes place at the end of the year—the annual Kanji of the Year award, sponsored by the Japanese Kanji Proficiency Society, the organization that puts out the **Kanji Kentei** examinations.

The results were announced on December 12 at **Kiyomizu-dera**, a Buddhist temple (and UNESCO World Heritage Site) in Kyoto.

The winning kanji for the year, receiving a total of 9,518 votes, was 輪 (*rin*; *wa*). The character means “ring” and is used in the word for the Olympic Games, 五輪 (*gorin*)—literally, “five rings.” The main reason for this choice was the **selection of Tokyo** as host of the 2020 Summer Olympics. But a number of other reasons were cited for the choice, including the hope that the “circle of support” for the recovery of areas impacted by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami will expand.

This is the second year running for an Olympic-related kanji to top the charts, following the victory last year of 金 (*kin*), “gold,” chosen in reference to the **respectable medal count** for Japanese athletes at the 2012 London Games (as well as Yamanaka Shin'ya's **Nobel Prize** and other gold- or money-related news items of the year).

The runner-up in 2013, earning 8,562 votes, was 楽 (*raku*)—a reference to **this year's pro baseball champions**, the Tōhoku Rakuten Golden Eagles. Here again, though, all sorts of other reasons were cited for choosing the kanji, including the hope that people's lives will get a bit “easier”—another meaning carried by the character—through **Abenomics**.

There was a fair amount of overlap between this year's **four winning words** and the top vote-getting kanji. For example, the third-ranked kanji for 2013, 倍 (*bai*), is taken from the expression 倍返し (*baigaeshi*), “Pay them back double!”—the catch-line from a popular TV drama that was one of the four top terms of the year. And the seventh-ranked kanji, 今 (*ima*), meaning “now,” also comes from one of the four winning expressions, 今でしょ (*ima desho*), “Why not now?”—a phrase popularized by the exam prep school teacher Hayashi Osamu.

The other two kanji rounding out the top five for 2013, respectively, were the character for “east” 東 (*higashi*) and for “wind” 風 (*kaze*). The former is apparently a reference to all sorts of happenings in 2013, including the selection of Tokyo (東京) as the host of the 2020 Olympics and the fact that a baseball team from the region of Tōhoku (東北)—again, those Rakuten

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Eagles—won this year’s championship.

I had assumed the popularity of the kanji for “wind” was related to the release of animator Miyazaki Hayao’s final film, *Kaze tachinu* (*The Wind Rises*), but the **Japanese explanation** on the website of the Japanese Kanji Proficiency Society refers to the fact that 2013 had an unusually high number of **typhoons and tornados** in Japan, as well as the hope that the upcoming Tokyo Olympics and Abenomics will change the “economic winds” in a more favorable direction. (There were a surprising number of references to Abenomics in the explanation of this year’s popular kanji.)

The Japanese Kanji Proficiency Society has been voting on its kanji of the year every December since 1995. Several of the popular kanji for this year are past champions, such as 金 (*kin*), which won in 2000 and in 2012 (both in connection to the Olympics). And more than a few of the winning kanji over the year have been characters with less than jovial images.

In 1998, the kanji for poison, 毒 (*doku*), took the prize in connection to a dreadful incident involving a **pot of poisoned curry** cooked up in Wakayama Prefecture that year. And the character for “war,” 戦 (*sen*), was the top vote-getter in 2001, the year of 9/11.

But some happier sounding kanji have been winners, too, like the 2005 choice of 愛 (*ai*), the character for “love,” or the 2011 winner 絆 (*kizuna*), referring to the emotional “ties” or “bonds” forged among the Japanese as they worked together to recover from the March 11 disaster.

Here’s hoping that 2014 turns out to be a year suited to one of the friendlier-sounding kanji characters.

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