

KANJI CLINIC

Get set for next year's overhaul of official kanji

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Kanji aficionados and educators are buzzing over the biggest kanji news in nearly three decades: Next fall, for the first time since 1981, Japan's government is expected to announce a revision of the *joyo* (general-use) kanji list. Currently numbering 1,945, these kanji comprise the official list allowed for use in newspapers and government publications, and Japanese school children are meant to learn them all during their compulsory education.

Since 1981, a tsunami of kanji has crashed into Japanese daily life, creating a pressing need for the government to reassess exactly how many and which kanji its citizenry should be expected to read and write. Due to advances in Japanese software technology, 10,000 characters — five times the current number of joyo kanji — can be called up on cell phones and personal computers with the tap of a finger.

A committee of the Council for Cultural Affairs, the chief think tank within the Agency for Cultural Affairs (which advises the education minister), began hammering out the revised joyo list four years ago, and in September 2008 it announced 191 kanji candidates for first-time inclusion. None of the candidates have changed in the past year, but the committee may still tweak the 191 before issuing its final recommendations in February.

Five characters from the current joyo list are slated for removal: 銚 (*SEN*, pig iron), 錘 (*tsumu*, spindle), 匁 (*monme*, a unit of weight), 勺 (*shaku*, a unit of capacity), and 脹 (*CHOU*, swell). The candidate list as it stands, therefore, is comprised of 2,131 characters.

Vigorous debate about the list has taken place in committee meetings in the past four years. Japanese language educators have objected in vain to inclusion of such adult-themed kanji as 淫 (*IN*, lewd), 艶 (*EN*, charming, voluptuous) and 賭 (*ka-keru*, gamble). Two kanji much requested in a public-comment forum last spring were 鷹 (*taka*, hawk) and 柿 (*kaki*, persimmon), but the panel has decided not to include these. It has also elected not to axe forum

participants' least-popular kanji — 鬱 (*UTSU*, melancholy), written with an eye-popping 29 strokes.

Eleven characters comprising the names of prefectures and major cities (e.g., 阪, *saka*, slope, as in 大阪, *Osaka*; 奈, *NA*, what, in 奈良, *Nara* and 神奈川 *Kanagawa*; 阜, *FU*, hill, in 岐阜, *Gifu*; and 熊, *kuma*, bear, in 熊本, *Kumamoto*) will make their joyo debut, as will 韓 (*KAN*, South Korea). All these are currently classified as *jinmei* (name) kanji.

Characters representing everyday items such as 枕 (*makura*, pillow), 鍵 (*kagi*, key), and 箸 (*hashi*, chopsticks) also landed on the candidate list, along with some anatomy-kanji (e.g., 腎, *JIN*, kidney; 顎, *ago*, chin; and 尻, *shiri*, buttocks). New joyo verbs include 蹴 (*ke-ru*, kick), 呪 (*noru-u*, curse), and 瘦 (*ya-seru*, become thin).

In addition to frequency of use, the committee also considered characters' ability to serve in compound words. For example, now that 璧 (*HEKI*, splendid) is poised to become general-use, *kanpeki* (perfect) officially can be written with two kanji (完璧, complete + splendid) instead of its off-kilter kanji-kana manifestation, 完ぺき. Commonly used compound words such as *aisatsu* (挨拶, greetings), *shitto* (嫉妬, jealousy), and *aimai* (曖昧, vague) are each comprised of two new joyo kanji.

Another panel consideration was the preservation of Japanese culture through its written language, as evidenced by such candidates as 伎 (*KI*, skill, in 歌舞伎, *kabuki*), 詣 (*mou-deru*, visit a temple, in 初詣, *hatsumoude*, New Year's Day temple visit), and 藍 (*ai*, indigo, in 藍染, *aizome*, indigo dying).

Pronunciations were also debated. For new joyo kanji 凄 (*tremendous, amazing*), for example, *SEI* (as in 凄惨, *seisan*, lurid) will be approved, but the commonly heard *sugoi* will not.

Whet your appetite for learning the new joyo kanji candidates with today's quiz. And dig further into the new kanji feast at www.kanjiclinic.com, where you will find a list of all 191 candidates, along with their pronunciations, compound word examples and an English meaning for each.

Quiz: Match the following food and drinks, all containing one or two new *joyo* kanji candidates, with their meanings and pronunciations below. Current joyo kanji are in bold.

1. 串
2. 鍋物
3. 丼
4. 餅
5. 梨

6. 煎餅
7. 煎茶
8. 麴
9. 焼酎
10. 蜂蜜

- a. *mochi* (rice cake)
- b. *donburi* (rice served in a bowl with other food on top)
- c. *sho-chu-* (distilled Japanese spirits)
- d. *nashi*
(pear)
- e. *nabemono* (hot food served in a pot)
- f. *senbei* (rice cracker)
- g. *kushi* (skewer)
- h. *hachimitsu* (honey)
- i. *sencha* (green tea)
- j. *men* (noodles)

Answers:

1. g
2. e
3. b
4. a
5. d
6. f
7. i
8. j
9. c
10. h

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