# COVID-Sensitive Kanji

Guest post by Janny H. C. Leung

New words or phrases, such as *covidiot* and *Zoom fatigue*, cropped up in the English language in the past year as people looked for new ways to express their feelings and experiences in the pandemic. Yet, the most Covid-complaint neologism may be found in a non-alphabetic language rich in visual meaning. The winner of the 11th round of the Sousaku Kanji Contest is a redesigned character that separates the two persons (人) in a seat (座) to make sure that they comply with social distancing measures in 2020.

original character

座 座
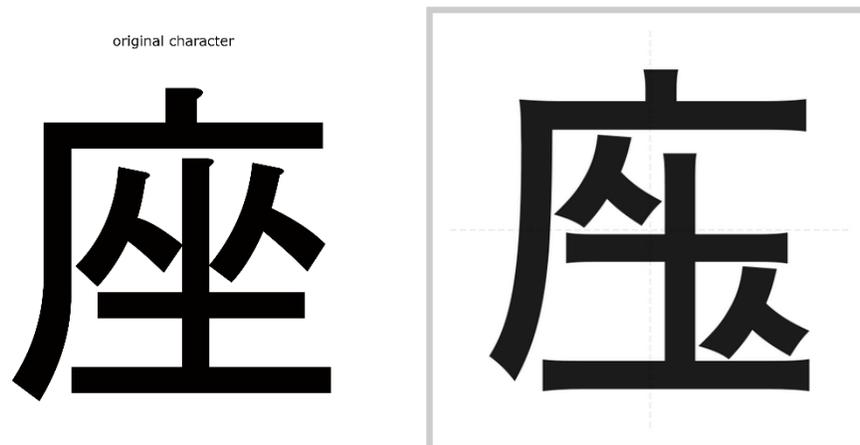
A winning entry in the university students' category playfully represents how meetings (会) are now all held on Zoom, in the comfort of one's home.

original character
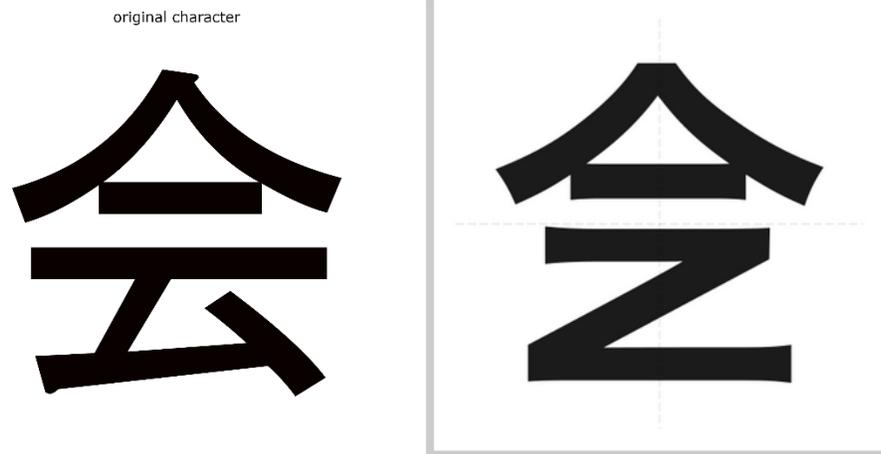
Some of the entries demonstrate not only orthographical creativity but also creativity in calligraphic style and visual representation, such as the word image (画) which is rendered foldable like a laptop.

original character
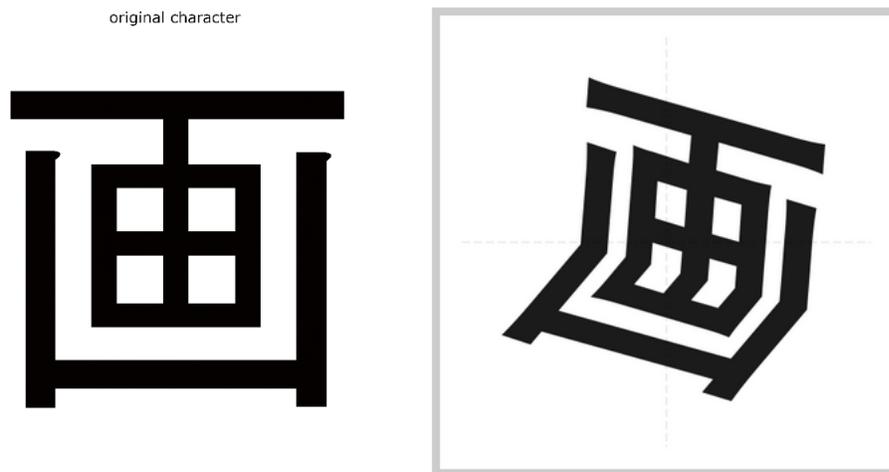
The Sousaku Kanji Contest is an annual competition to create pseudo-kanji. In Japanese, *sousaku* means creation or creative work. The Japanese language makes heavy use of *kanji* (漢字), a logographic writing system developed in ancient China which contains pictograms, ideograms, and various compound characters made with smaller components (called radicals) that contribute to meaning or pronunciation.

Unlike pandemic slang that emerged in the English language, where a newly coined word or phrase could go viral and enters popular usage instantly, it is much harder for creative pseudo-kanji to gain traction in everyday language, not least because our existing computer technology is largely

designed based on Latin-script alphabets. Multilingualism on the Internet does not only influence the vitality of languages but also how information and knowledge are shared (see https://en.unesco.org/themes/linguistic-diversity-and-multilingualism-internet).   Although different input methods allow users to type non-alphabetic languages on the QWERTY keyboard, one can only retrieve logograms that are already in the database. For speakers of orthographic languages living in the digital age, it is easier to express their originality in the way logograms are combined to form larger units of meaning. Perhaps rarity is exactly why it is so amusing to see innovative creations in a logogram itself.

You can browse winning entries in this and past years on https://sousaku-kanji.com.

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