



Please Remove My Nonsensical Asian Tattoo

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By Michael Y. Park

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She thought it said "blood and guts," but it really said "blood and intestines." He thought it said "rock 'n' roll," but it really said "to sway and to roll."

The touchy-feely, quasi-spiritual trend of getting Asian-language tattoos became popular in the 1990s. For many youngsters, or for people who wanted to feel young, a tat with the characters for "peace" and "truth" seemed just the thing.

But now that the fad-following hipsters of a decade and a half ago have graduated to jobs and families, they are going to tattoo-removal specialists in droves, trying to erase an embarrassing reminder of the mistake they made one drunken night so many years ago: They were permanently inked with an Asian-language word that didn't say quite what they thought it did.

"It seems to be a current in the tattoo studios ... where it gets passed on and passed on, and the translations get more obscure until you're not even putting on your skin what you thought you were," said Dr. James Morel, of [DR. TATTOFF](#) in Beverly Hills, Calif., which is seeing a flood of people asking for their Asian tattoos to be removed because of mistranslations.

New York City jewelry designer [Jane Ko](#), 30, who is Chinese-American, has been approached countless times by sheepish and somewhat befuddled strangers and acquaintances who have asked her to translate tattoos that they once thought were Chinese characters for attractive concepts like "power" and "love" but now suspect might actually say "General Tso's Chicken special" or "gullible white boy."

"I've seen some pretty funny Chinese characters that they offer on tattoo-parlor walls," she said.

Other ridiculous tattoo translations Ko has seen include "blood and guts," mutated into "blood and intestines" in Chinese, and "rock 'n' roll" corrupted as "to sway and to roll."

"That would be translating it literally, but nobody would actually use those characters to say 'rock 'n' roll' in Chinese," she said. "In Chinese people would ask, 'Why would you 'get the rolls?'"

Maria Robinson, a video game designer in Oakland, Calif., who was born in China, has often seen people with badly written tattoos that were supposed to be Chinese. In one case, the Chinese text was actually upside-down.

For the non-tattooed, at least, the results can be worth a good laugh. Ko recalled one instance in which a man approached her with a tattoo on his forearm that he had always taken to be the Chinese character for "spirit."

"I was like, 'Why did he have that tattoo?'" she said. "It really said 'gas'" (Ko assured the man that it was close enough).

For the most part, the artwork errors seemed to be honest mistakes. A shaky or inexperienced hand could alter or obliterate a delicate rendering; some turns of phrase are simply untranslatable, and their literal translations laughable; and the complex dialectical shades involved in any language, but especially Chinese, mean that a character that seems profound in

Mandarin could mean something ridiculous in Cantonese.

Sometimes an Asian character will be well-rendered but upside-down or reversed as if in a mirror. And often it appears as if whoever recommends a tattoo has a less-than-firm grasp on the basics of Asian grammar, applying English-language rules to an alien tongue — sticking the word for “power” to the left of the word for “love,” for example, is nonsense, not “powerful love,” in Chinese, which requires a complete sentence of at least five characters to convey that idea.

It’s the rare tattoo artist who’s conversant with all the vagaries of Asian languages, and the Asian characters seen on tattoo-parlor walls are often pre-made renderings — or “flash” — purchased en masse at conventions or from other studios, meaning there’s no guarantee of orthodoxy or meaning.

“The tattoo studios will put it up as flash art, and those characters they thought were the characters for “power” or “self-strength” or “self-expression,” the ones they wanted to get, you can see that’s not the correct translation,” Morel said.

Not that it seems to matter at first to many of those who come into tattoo studios, according to Mike Bakaty, owner of [Fineline Tattoo](#), the oldest continuously running tattoo parlor in Manhattan, which has seen the Asian-tattoo craze peak in the past decade.

He makes a point of warning those asking for Asian tattoos to get their would-be tattoo triple-checked by people fluent in reading and writing the language.

“We got a Chinese guy at a convention in Canada who sold us a bunch of sheets,” he said. “But even the slightest change in tone or of the stilts in the characters can change the meaning. I always say, ‘I know I look Chinese, but I can’t write Chinese and I can’t speak Chinese — and I don’t actually look Chinese, either.’ I think they like it more for the look, anyway.”

And for specialists in tattoo removal, it’s more than an excuse for humor — it’s great business.

Morel said that his business averages between seven and nine clients a week seeking to get an Asian-language tattoo removed. Of those, he said, five or six typically complain that their tattoo was mistranslated or didn’t say what they originally thought it did. Many got their tattoos in the mid-’90s and tired of the fad, he said.

And Morel predicts the next big tattoo fad people will want off.

“It’s like the lower-back tattoo — the tramp stamp — probably will be.”

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