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From the Los Angeles Times

## WEB WATCH

### Indelibly lost in translation

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Chinese characters, or hanzi in Mandarin and kanji in Japanese, are imprimaturs for hipness these days. Used primarily as décor — on T-shirts, furniture, on about half of the NBA and on Britney Spears — the symbols look cool, but what do they really mean? How much do we trust that the fresh ink from our friendly neighborhood tattoo artist really says "year of the dog" and not, say, "year of the dork"?

Britney learned the hard way. She thought one of her tattoos read "mysterious," but if translated correctly, the characters etched on her hip mean "odd" or "strange," says Tian Tang, 29, creator of <http://www.HanziSmatter.com>, a website dedicated to the misuse of Chinese characters in Western culture.

Spears' ex-boyfriend Justin Timberlake has also been tagged on the site. Timberlake stars in the upcoming film "Alpha Dog," based on the story of the drug dealer Jesse James Hollywood. The site posted a still from the movie and asks, "Why would a hard-core criminal get a tattoo that says 'ice skating' on his arm?"

Tang, an engineering grad student at Arizona State University, began taking photos of mistakes and publishing them online in late 2004.

The site's visitors — it gets a niche 2,500 hits a day — tune in for a rudimentary lesson in Chinese. (Chinese characters are the same when read — it's the pronunciation of those characters that distinguishes the dialect such as Cantonese or Mandarin.)

Many of the gaffes are simply upside-down or reversed lettering, but Tang has spotted a few doozies too. The Phoenix Suns' Shawn Marion has a tattoo on his leg that, according to the site, "... could be a Japanese phonetic translation of 'The Matrix' but many Chinese-speaking fans would probably snicker at Shawn 'Demon Bird Moth Balls' Marion."

But the weirdest tattoo, he says, was one that read "crazy diarrhea" on a woman's lower back. Tang blogged about it and heard back from the woman in question, who said that the selection was intentional.

Try explaining that one to the grandkids.

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