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## Cool Tat, Too Bad It's Gibberish

By CINDY CHANG

LOS ANGELES

SHAD MAGNESS wanted to celebrate the love he felt for his young son with a grand gesture.

At a Los Angeles tattoo parlor four years ago, he had two Chinese characters etched in a prominent spot on his left forearm. He assumed that the translation in the sample book the tattoo artist showed him — "one love" — was correct.

The first sign of trouble came six months later, when Mr. Magness was shopping at a Staples store and the checkout clerk informed him that the characters on his arm meant not "one love" but "love hurts."

Mr. Magness consulted some bilingual co-workers, who confirmed the bad news: his tattoo did indeed trumpet the pain of failed love.

"I've been kind of embarrassed about it ever since," said Mr. Magness, 31, a real estate appraiser in Orange, Calif. "I guess that's what you get for not being able to read it."

Mr. Magness is now undergoing a series of time-consuming treatments to remove the tattoo, which appropriately enough to the sometimes ouch-inspiring procedure can also mean "loves the pain."

Christina Norton of Redondo Beach, Calif., is also getting her tattoo lasered off.

At the tattoo parlor, "I asked the guy, 'Are you sure?'" Ms. Norton recalled. "He assured me, so then I went ahead and did it." Now she knows that her tattoo is meaningless out of context with other characters. "Ever since I found out, I was like, I have to get it off," she said.

James Morel, the chief executive officer of Dr. Tattoff, tattoo removal specialists in Beverly Hills, Calif., says his clinics sign up five or six new patients a week who, like Mr. Magness and Ms. Norton, have discovered that their Chinese tattoos mean something drastically different from what they intended.

The Chinese character tattoos, which have been popular for more than a decade, are as commonly spotted on college students from the heartland as they are on baristas in Berkeley.

Sports Illustrated recently featured a spread on N.B.A. players' Chinese tattoos, quoting the Chicago Bulls center Tyson Chandler as saying he checked with Yao Ming of the Houston Rockets before getting a tattoo meaning "love."

Britney Spears was apparently not so cautious. She reportedly got a tattoo she thought said "mysterious" but actually meant "strange."

At the root of the craze for Chinese tattoos is the same fascination for Eastern traditions that has fanned interest in feng shui and Asian-theme clothing and décor. But by imprinting the Chinese characters indelibly into their skin, the owners of the tattoos take their Asian fetish, and the consequences of less-than-perfect knowledge, to a different level.

Because they must rely on the word of others to ascertain the meaning of the characters, they are vulnerable to honest mistakes as well as malicious jokesters.

Tattoo artists — few of whom know Chinese — copy the characters from templates that are often of uncertain

provenance and are easily corrupted if a word is unwittingly substituted, or if someone decides to take liberties by altering a few strokes. When two characters are combined to form what is in English a catchy phrase, context can be lost and the result can be hilarious — or worse.

"Everybody here that does tattoos, we understand that if you combine the characters together, they have a different meaning," said Ricky Sturdivant, a tattoo artist in Normal, Ill. "We try to express that to the customers, but sometimes they want us to do it anyway."

Errors are common enough to be good business for tattoo removal specialists, and to fuel a blog, [www.hanzismatter.com](http://www.hanzismatter.com), which posts photographs of botched tattoos accompanied by sardonic commentary from Tian Tang, a Chinese-born engineering student.

The blog takes the name Hanzi Smatter from the Chinese term for the ideograms that are composed of as many as 30 strokes and take years of practice to write fluently. Hanzi are also used extensively in Japan, where they are referred to as kanji, and to a lesser degree in South Korea.

Mr. Tang finds plenty of fodder on Web sites like Body Modification Ezine, [www.bmezine.com](http://www.bmezine.com), where entire photo galleries are devoted to hanzi-kanji tattoos. Some of Hanzi Smatter's 2,500 daily visitors e-mail him about tattoos they are thinking of getting or to verify the meaning of tattoos they already have, which sometimes puts him in the awkward position of having to deliver bad tidings.

"I'm very surprised a lot of times that people will e-mail me about their tattoos, and they never found out the real meaning before they got it," said Mr. Tang, 29, a graduate student in materials engineering at Arizona State University who moved to the United States when he was 13. "Some of them are close, but some are just way off."

One elaborate tattoo posted shortly after his blog's inception in late 2004 means "power piglet," according to Mr. Tang's translation. Another, on a woman's lower back, says "motherly beast blessing."

Marquis Daniels, of the Dallas Mavericks, thought he was getting his initials in Chinese characters but what his arm actually says is "healthy woman roof," Mr. Tang said. Similarly, Shawn Marion of the Phoenix Suns was under the impression that his nickname, "the Matrix," was tattooed on his leg, but Mr. Tang says the inscription translates as something like "demon bird moth balls."

Some hanzi tattoos, Mr. Tang explains on his blog, are nothing but gibberish. A few appear to have been copied backward. And to a Chinese or Japanese person's eyes, the calligraphy is almost always atrocious.

Hanzi-kanji tattoos became trendy in the late 1980's or early 1990's, tattoo experts say. They were a niche taste as far back as the early 20th century, when globetrotting sailors would dock in Asian ports and leave with a colorful souvenir, according to C. W. Eldridge of Berkeley, a tattoo artist and tattoo historian.

To Angela So, 27, a Canadian from Hong Kong who reads Hanzi Smatter regularly, people who get Chinese tattoos without researching the meaning are trivializing a language with a storied literary tradition and a written record going back well before the birth of Jesus.

"A lot of Western people get tattoos, and even though it's for personal reasons, they make everything so exotic," Ms. So said. "They do insult the culture. After all, Chinese culture has been here for thousands of years."

Mr. Eldridge is among the tattoo artists who will not execute a hanzi unless the client has verified the meaning with someone who knows the language, whether it is a Chinese-speaking friend or the waiter at the neighborhood sushi restaurant. Many also require a waiver absolving them of responsibility if a customer later discovers an error.

"If you're going to mark your body in a permanent way, you have to do your research," said Marisa DiMattia, a New York lawyer and the editor of the online tattoo zine Needled, [www.needled.com](http://www.needled.com). "If someone has done their homework and still wants to get the kanji, and they've made a mistake, don't expect the tattooist to say, 'That's not what it means.'"

The same warning might be extended to the other side of the Pacific, where a tattoo subculture is in full flower in Japan, and body art is just beginning to catch on in China.

Mr. Tang of Hanzi Smatter is well aware that the sword of linguistic ignorance can cut both ways. His blog was partly inspired by [www.english.com](http://www.english.com), which documents amusing English gaffes by Asians on T-shirts, street signs and product packaging.

Horitaka, a tattoo artist in San Jose, Calif., who specializes in traditional Japanese designs and travels often to Japan, said he recently spotted a tattoo in a Japanese magazine that said, in English, "truth love" instead of "true love."

"You'll see kanji here and there, but young people there are the same as young people here," Horitaka said. "A lot of Americans want kanji because it's a little exotic, whereas a lot of Japanese are getting Western writing."