

LOOK out K*

* TRENDS, CULTURE, DISCOVERIES, IDEAS, PEOPLE

Hanzi Goes Hollywood | Mishaps From Pop to Plots

→ During the filming of 2002's "Crossroads," Britney Spears and co-star Taryn Manning got tattoos of a Kanji they believed meant "mysterious," according to media reports at the time.



Spears was reportedly distraught when she found out later that the character actually meant "strange."

→ In the Jan. 11 episode of the NBC sitcom "Committed," a character is informed by a

take-out delivery man that his tattoo doesn't actually mean "fiery strength," as he thought. Rather, it indicates that he plays the female role in a relationship of two males.

Culture

That Asian T-shirt or tattoo may not mean 'Sexy Mama' after all

Tian Tang was road-tripping through New Mexico this past summer when he noticed a Mitsubishi Mirage proudly emblazoned with Chinese characters. But he immediately spotted one little problem: The decals identified the car as a Honda Prelude.

The incident inspired him to create Hanzismatter.com, a blog dedicated to the misuse of Hanzi and Kanji in Western culture. (Hanzi are Chinese characters; Kanji are Chinese characters borrowed or modified for use in Japanese). Since the site launched in September, examples of garbled tattoos, T-shirts, advertisements and other gaffes have poured in. Tang, a graduate research assistant at Arizona State University in Tempe, and his international panel of Chinese and Japanese experts decipher and debate the often-baffling finds.

"I had known that Westerners weren't very multilingual, but started increasingly noticing mistakes," said the 28-year-old Tang, who moved to the United States from China in 1990. The site's take-home message: "People want to stand out. They don't want to learn something."

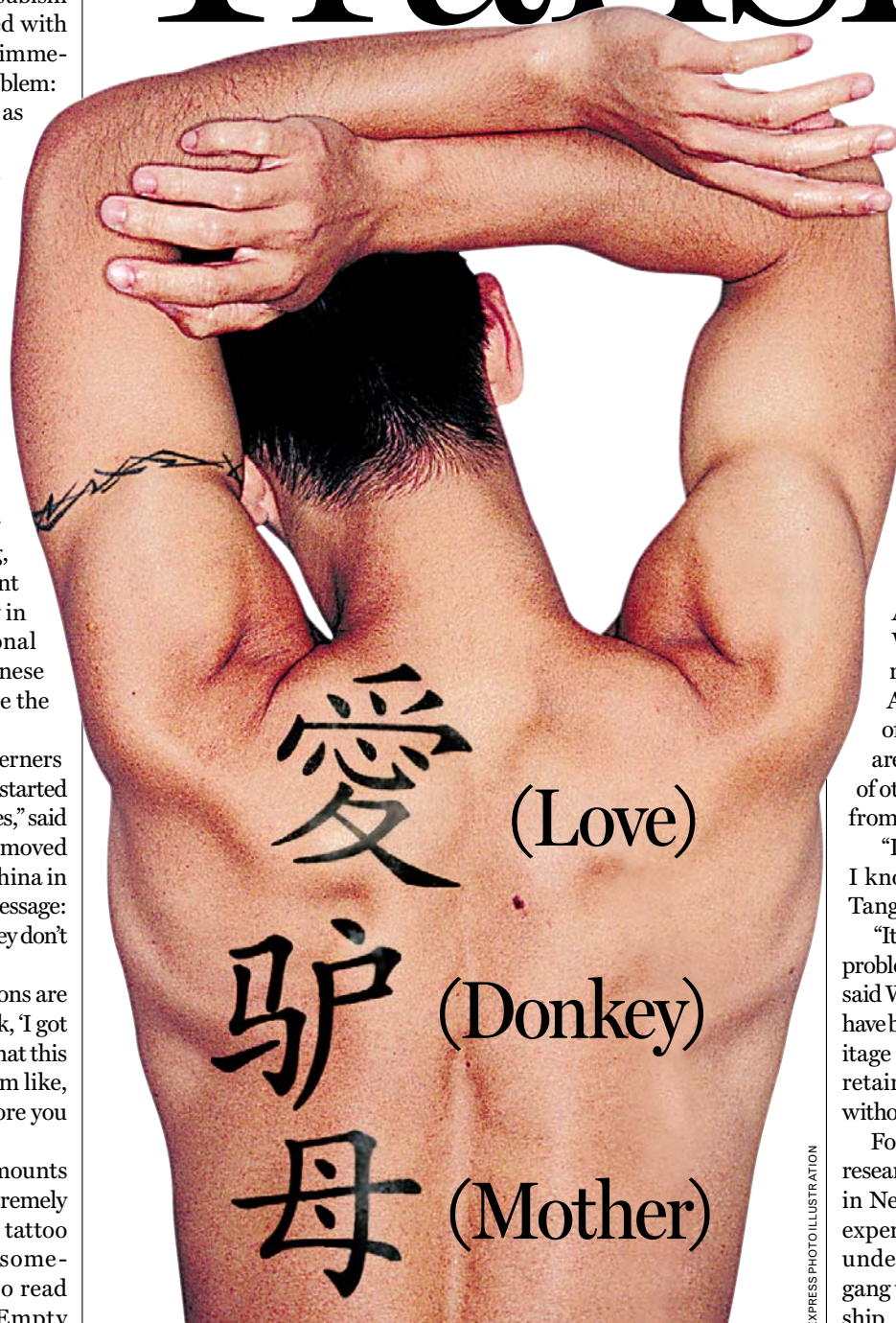
The majority of submissions are photos of tattoos. "People ask, 'I got the tattoo, can you tell me what this means?'" said Tang. "And I'm like, 'Why didn't you do this before you got that tattoo?'"

Most of what he sees amounts to gibberish, such as an "Extremely Military Affairs Stopping" tattoo or, in the tragic case of someone who thought her tattoo read "Mike," "Healthy Catch Empty

Lost in Translation

"People want to stand out. They don't want to learn something."

TIAN TANG, FOUNDER OF HANZISMATTER.COM



Achievement." Some flubbed characters don't even exist.

Tang is especially bewildered by corporate errors, such as a Nike ad for LeBron James basketball shoes — which he said reads "Extinguish fire from the base" — and an Urban Outfitters T-shirt printed backwards.

Just as people don't have to fully understand another culture to be fascinated by it (ask any starry-eyed exchange student), "you don't need a knowledge of the language to like Asian characters," said Gary Weaver, professor of international communications at American University's School of International Service. People are most attracted to the aspects of other cultures that are different from their own, he said.

"It's like, 'I'm cultured because I know something foreign,'" said Tang.

"It's not just Anglos that have this problem, it's American Asians, too," said Weaver — especially those who have become removed from their heritage through the generations and retain an interest in their culture without a full grasp of the language.

For example, while Weaver was researching Asian-American gangs in New York, he encountered FBI experts who were having trouble understanding the characters a gang was using to signify membership. It turned out gang members

were arbitrarily taking them from tuna cans. "They just look pretty and mysterious," he said.

Tang just wishes he'd stop seeing the same mistakes: missing dots, extra dashes, backwards characters. In tattooing, he sees frequent errors on the "flash," the slate of characters from which customers choose designs. Tattoo artists may use out-of-date characters or sources, and the meanings of characters can also change over time. "If you really want to get it done, do your research," he advised.

Gino Anthony of Midtown Tattoo in the District uses online Hanzi and Kanji dictionaries to find the right characters for tattoos. If there's any doubt, he charges the customer \$19 to consult a paid dictionary service. Sometimes he'll walk down the block to an Asian take-out restaurant and check with its employees, he said.

"If it takes seven more minutes to verify it, it's worth it, you know?" Anthony said. He may be more concerned than his customers: Some of them don't care whether their tattoo is in Chinese or Japanese, he said.

To some, it may not even matter what a tattoo (or a T-shirt or a car decal) means — as long as it looks like it *should* be meaningful. Asian characters say "something, but other people don't know what it is," said Sikhia Billingham of Washington's Black Enque Tattoos and Piercings. "It's like a secret."

But if you see your tattoo on Hanzismatter.com, you'll know the secret's out. CHRIS MINCHER (EXPRESS)