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Americans Misuse Chinese Characters

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From the moment Spaniards -- or was it Vikings? -- first dropped anchor and encountered the natives whom the Spanish called Indians (because they thought they had landed in India), the land now known as America has been a multicultural place. And of course it's much more so today. Just check out our faces and dialects and music.

And our signs -- in English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and more. Well, maybe it's Chinese.

Mandarin Chinese characters, called Hanzi, are hot right now. They're a popular decoration on clothing and artwork and tattoos.

But as Tian Tang, a young Chinese American who's a graduate student at Arizona State University, points out on his Internet website, Hanzismatter.com, an awful lot of these characters are just plain wrong. Some are not even Chinese at all, but pretty little ink strokes that sort of look Chinese.

Mr. Tang's site shows us a colorful shirt decorated with a powerful, leaping tiger. Next to the beast are nine Chinese characters. But they translate into gibberish -- words like unicorn and chicken and superficial. Not one of the characters has anything to do with tigers, or even cats.

Other Hanzi, delicately tattooed onto a woman's back, translate as crazy diarrhea. Surely this wasn't what she ordered from the tattoo artist.

So, America is a multicultural melting pot. But reading the signs doesn't always tell you who you're melting with.

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