

Shanghai Is Trying to Untangle the Mangled English of *Chinglish*

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SHANGHAI — For English speakers with subpar Chinese skills, daily life in [China](#) offers a confounding array of choices. At banks, there are machines for “*cash withdrawing*” and “*cash recycling*.” The menus of local restaurants might present such delectables as “*fried enema*,” “*monolithic tree mushroom stem squid*” and a mysterious thirst-quencher known as “*The Jew’s Ear Juice*.”

Those who have had a bit too much monolithic tree mushroom stem squid could find themselves requiring *roomier attire*: extra-large sizes sometimes come in “*fats*” or “*lard bucket*” categories. These and other fashions can be had at the clothing chain known as *Scat*.

Go ahead and snicker, although by last Saturday’s opening of the [Expo 2010](#) in Shanghai, drawing more than 70 million visitors over its six-month run, these and other uniquely Chinese maladaptations of the English language were supposed to have been largely excised.

Well, that at least is what the Shanghai Commission for the Management of Language Use has been trying to accomplish during the past two years.

Fortified by an army of 600 volunteers and a politburo of adroit English speakers, the commission has fixed more than 10,000 public signs (farewell “*Teliot*” and “*urine district*”), rewritten English-language historical placards and helped hundreds of restaurants recast offerings.

The campaign is partly modeled on Beijing’s herculean effort to clean up English signage for the 2008 Summer Olympics, which led to the replacement of 400,000 street signs, 1,300 restaurant menus and such exemplars of impropriety as the *Dongda Anus Hospital* — now known as the Dongda Proctology Hospital. Gone, too, is *Racist Park*, a cultural attraction that has since been rechristened Minorities Park.

“The purpose of signage is to be useful, not to be amusing,” said Zhao Huimin, the former Chinese deputy consul general to the United States who, as director general of the capital’s Foreign Affairs Office, has been leading the fight for linguistic standardization and sobriety.

But while the war on mangled English may be considered a signature achievement of government officials, aficionados of what is known as Chinglish are wringing their hands in despair.

[Oliver Lutz Radtke](#), a former German radio reporter who may well be the world’s foremost authority on Chinglish, said he believed that China should embrace the fanciful melding of English and Chinese as the hallmark of a dynamic, living language. As he sees it, Chinglish is an endangered species that deserves preservation.

“If you standardize all these signs, you not only take away the little giggle you get while strolling in the park but you lose a window into the Chinese mind,” said Mr. Radtke, who is the author of a pair of picture books that feature giggle-worthy Chinglish signs in their natural habitat.

Lest anyone think it is all about laughs, Mr. Radtke is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Chinglish at the University of Heidelberg.

Still, the enemies of Chinglish say the laughter it elicits is humiliating. Wang Xiaoming, an English scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, painfully recalls the guffaws that erupted among her foreign-born colleagues as they flipped through a photographic collection of poorly written signs. “They didn’t mean to insult me but I couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable,” said Ms. Wang, who has since become one of Beijing’s leading Chinglish slayers.

Those who study the roots of Chinglish say many examples can be traced to laziness and a flawed but wildly popular translation software. [Victor H. Mair](#), a professor of Chinese at the University of Pennsylvania, said the computerized dictionary, Jinshan Ciba, had led to sexually oriented vulgarities identifying dried produce in Chinese supermarkets and the regrettable “fried enema” menu selection that should have been rendered as “fried sausage.”

Although improved translation software and a growing zeal for grammatically unassailable English has slowed the output of new Chinglishisms, Mr. Mair said he still received about five new examples a day from people who knew he was good at deciphering what went wrong. “If someone would pay me to do it, I’d spend my life studying these things,” he said.

Among those getting paid to wrestle with Chinglish is Jeffrey Yao, an English translator and teacher at the [Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation](#) at Shanghai International Studies University who is leading the sign exorcism. But even as he eradicates the most egregious examples by government fiat — businesses dare not ignore the commission’s suggested fixes — he has mixed feelings, noting that although some Chinglish phrases sound awkward to Western ears, they can be refreshingly lyrical. “Some of it tends to be expressive, even elegant,” he said, shuffling through an online catalog of signs that were submitted by the volunteers who prowled Shanghai with digital cameras. “They provide a window into how we Chinese think about language.”

He offered the following example: While park signs in the West exhort people to “Keep Off the Grass,” Chinese versions tend to anthropomorphize nature as a way to gently engage the stomping masses. Hence, such admonishments as “*The Little Grass Is Sleeping. Please Don’t Disturb It*” or “*Don’t Hurt Me. I Am Afraid of Pain.*”

Mr. Yao read off the Chinese equivalents as if savoring a Shakespearean sonnet. “How lovely,” he said with a sigh.

He pointed out that this linguistic mentality helped create such expressions as “*long time no see,*” a word-for-word translation of a Chinese expression that became a mainstay of spoken English. But Mr. Yao, who spent nearly two decades working as a translator in Canada, has his limits. He showed a sign from a park designed to provide visitors with the rules for entry, which include prohibitions on washing, “scavenging,” clothes drying and public defecation, all of it rendered in unintelligible — and in the case of the last item — rather salty English. The sign ended with this humdinger: “*Because if the tourist does not obey the staff to manage or contrary holds, Does, all consequences are proud.*”

Even though he had had the sign corrected recently, Mr. Yao could not help but shake his head in disgust at the memory. And he was irritated to find that a raft of troublesome sign verbiage had slipped past the commission as the expo approached, including a cafeteria sign that read, “*The tableware reclaims a place.*” (Translation: drop off dirty dishes here.)

“Some Chinglish expressions are nice, but we are not translating literature here,” he said. “I want to see people nodding that they understand the message on these signs. I don’t want to see them laughing.”