

Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions

The Copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyright material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction not be "used for any purposes other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

THE
NEW YORKER

THE NEW YORKER

The best writing anywhere, everywhere.

Subscribe for \$1 a week, and get a free tote bag.

UNINVENT THIS
MAY 16, 2016 ISSUE

BAD CHARACTER

By Ted Chiang

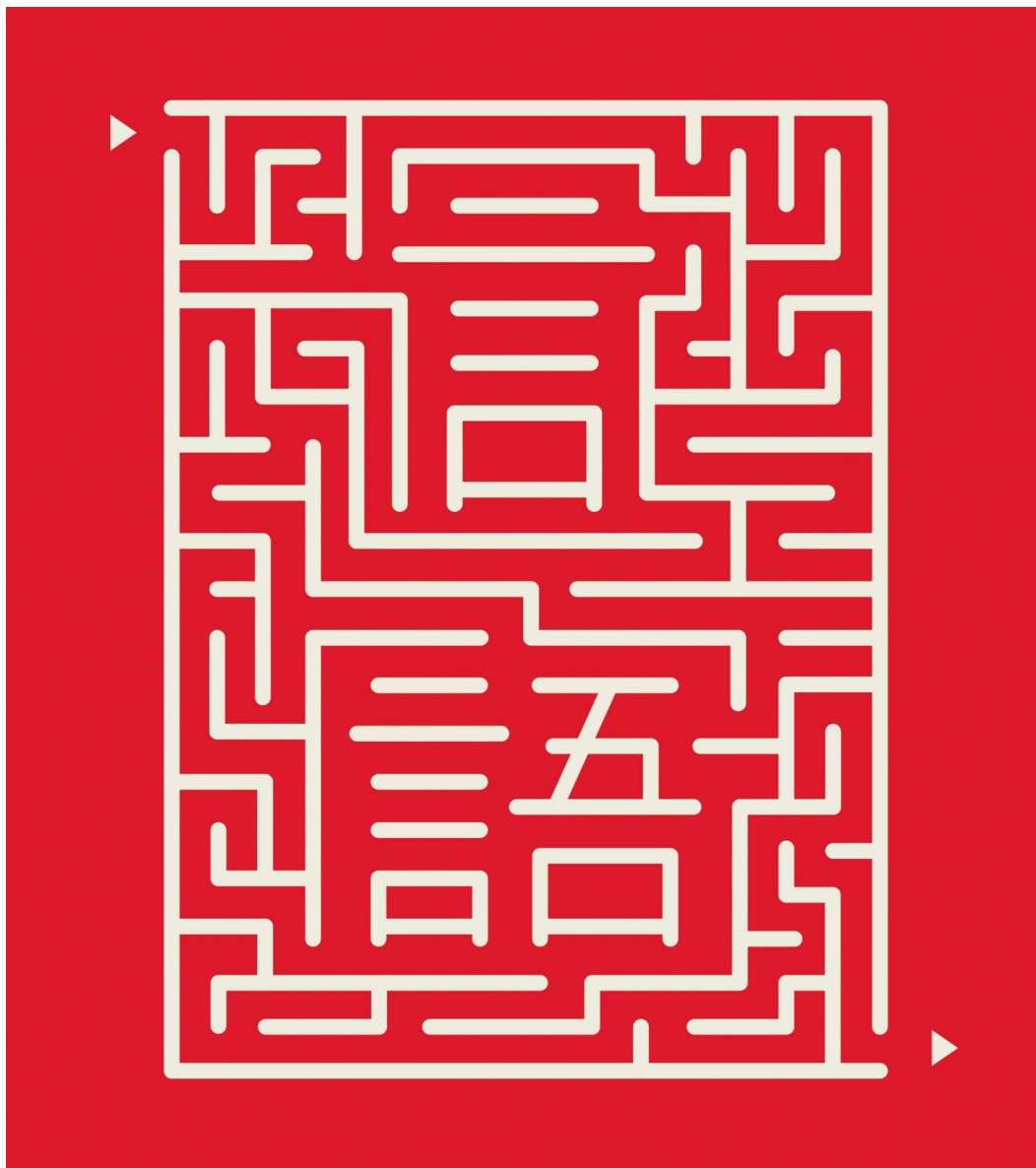


Illustration by Joon Mo Kang

It's not personal. I never learned anything in the Saturday-morning Chinese school I was forced to attend as a child, but that's not what motivates my choice here. There were plenty of reasons for my poor performance in those classes—my

THE
NEW YORKER

No, my objection is a practical one: I'm a fan of literacy, and Chinese characters have been an obstacle to literacy for millennia. With a phonetic writing system like an alphabet or a syllabary, you need only learn a few dozen symbols and you can read most everything printed in a newspaper. With Chinese characters, you have to learn three thousand. And writing is even more difficult than reading; when you can't use pronunciation as an aid to spelling, you have to rely on pure memorization. The cognitive demands are so great that even highly educated Chinese speakers regularly forget how to write characters they haven't used recently.

The huge number of characters poses other obstacles as well. I've flipped through a Chinese dictionary, I've seen photographs of a Chinese typewriter, I've read about Chinese telegraphy, and despite their ingenuity they are all cumbersome inventions, wheelbarrows for the millstone around Chinese culture's neck. Computers and smartphones are impossible to use if you're restricted to Chinese characters; it's only with phonetic systems of writing, like Bopomofo and Pinyin, that text entry becomes practical. In the past century, there have been multiple proposals to replace Chinese characters with an alphabet, all unsuccessful; the only reform ever implemented was to invent simplified versions of the more complex characters, which solved none of the problems I've mentioned and created new ones besides.

So let's imagine a world in which Chinese characters were never invented in the first place. Given such a void, the alphabet might have spread east from India in a way that it couldn't in our history, but, to keep this from being an Indo-Eurocentric thought experiment, let's suppose that the ancient Chinese invented their own phonetic system of writing, something like the modern Bopomofo, some thirty-two hundred years ago. What might the consequences be? Increased literacy is the most obvious one, and easier adoption of modern technologies is another. But allow me to speculate about one other possible effect.

One of the virtues claimed for Chinese characters is that they make it easy to read works written thousands of years ago. The ease of reading classical Chinese has been significantly overstated, but, to the extent that ancient texts remain understandable, I suspect it's due to the fact that Chinese characters aren't phonetic. Pronunciation changes over the centuries, and when you write with an alphabet spellings eventually adapt to follow suit. (Consider the differences between "Beowulf," "The Canterbury Tales," and "Hamlet.") Classical Chinese remains readable precisely because the characters are immune to the vagaries of sound. So if ancient Chinese manuscripts had been written with phonetic symbols, they'd become harder to decipher over time.

Chinese culture is notorious for the value it places on tradition. It would be reductive to claim that this is entirely a result of the readability of classical Chinese, but I think it's reasonable to propose that there is some influence. Imagine a world in which written English had changed so little that works of "Beowulf"'s era remained continuously readable for the past twelve hundred years. I could easily believe that, in such a world, contemporary English culture would retain more Anglo-Saxon values than it does now. So it seems plausible that in this counterfactual history I'm positing, a world in which the intelligibility of Chinese texts erodes under the currents of phonological change, Chinese culture might not be so rooted in the past. Perhaps China would have evolved more throughout the millennia and exhibited less resistance to new ideas. Perhaps it would have been better equipped to deal with modernity in ways completely unrelated to an improved ability to use telegraphy or computers.

I have no idea if I would personally be better off in such a world, assuming that it's even meaningful to talk about my existing there at all. But there is one thing I'm certain of: in a world where Chinese was written with phonetic symbols, I would never have to read or hear any more popular misconceptions about Chinese characters—that they're like little pictures, that they represent ideas directly, that the Chinese word for "crisis" is "danger" plus "opportunity." That, at least, would be a relief. ♦

Read something that means something.

Try *The New Yorker* for a dollar a week. [Subscribe now.](#) »

Sign up for our daily newsletter: the best of *The New Yorker* every day.

Enter your e-mail

Go

Recommended Stories

NEWS DESK

HOW MUCH CHINESE CAN YOU LEARN IN THE U.S.?

By Evan Osnos Jun. 30, 2010



THE NEW YORKER CRAZY ENGLISH

By Evan Osnos Apr. 21, 2008



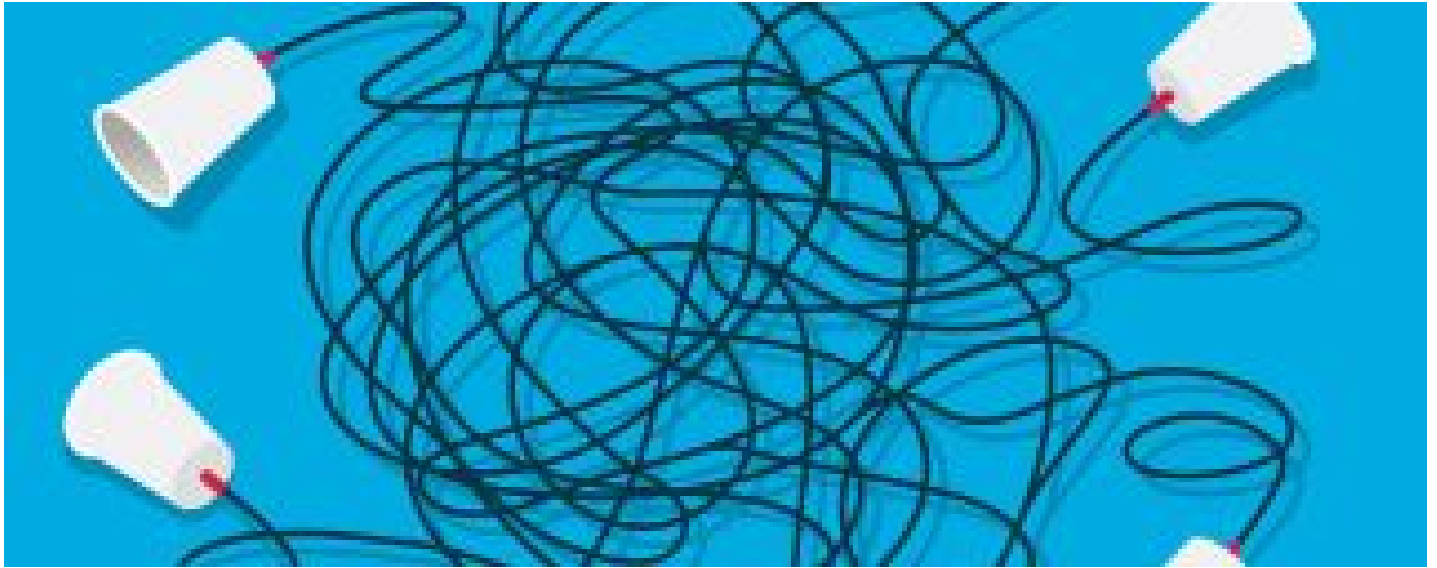
UNINVENT THIS

DANCE, OFF

By Charlie Brooker May 09, 2016



THE
NEW YORKER



UNINVENT THIS

CALL ME CRAZY

By Carrie Brownstein May 09, 2016

THE NEW YORKER

The best writing anywhere, everywhere.
Subscribe for \$1 a week,
and get a free tote bag.



[LISTEN TO THE NEW YORKER RADIO HOUR](#)

•
[BUY THE COVER](#)

•
[PLAY THE JIGSAW PUZZLE](#)

[FOLLOW US](#)



[Sections](#)



[About](#)

