

First Person

## Found in translation

**WHENEVER I SEE A T-SHIRT WITH ASIAN CHARACTERS,** I suspect it translates into “stupid tourist.”

More likely it's accidentally meaningful gibberish, as I concluded from the Global Technology Initiative trip to China and Taiwan last spring.

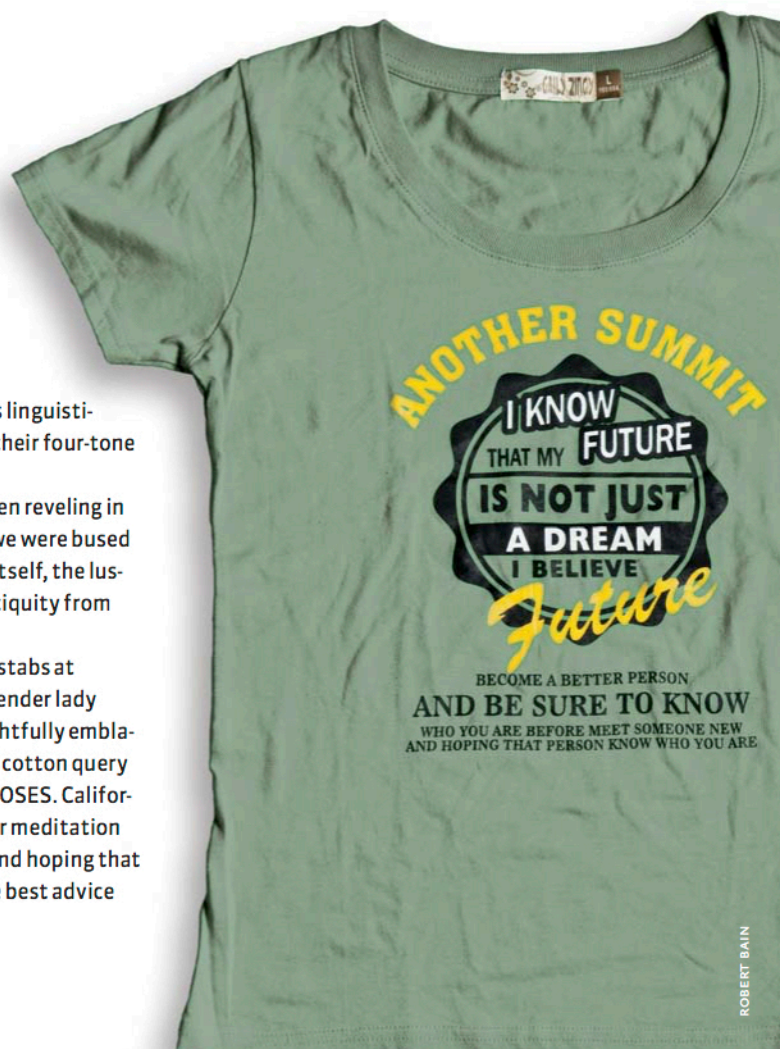
SJSU taps top engineering undergrads, along with a few interdisciplinary interlopers like me, to spend a fortnight in technology development countries, alternating ambassadorships between India and China since 2004.

Although our group spent a semester studying Chinese cultural history, I was linguistically under-prepared with a mere three language classes and a tenuous grasp of their four-tone speech, barely remembering hello—*nǐ hǎo*, and thank you—*xièxie*.

Once there, I was awed by the artistic nature of Chinese written language, even reveling in the evocative glyphs of strip malls. I felt like I was in an urban art installation as we were bused around hot and hazy Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, then Taipei. A history lesson itself, the luscious calligraphy of the printed Chinese language was generated by artists in antiquity from the object that each symbol depicts.

Interspersed throughout this vibrant visual and verbal communication were stabs at English iconography on signs and shirts, ranging from hilarious to profound. A slender lady sported the message “Gangster Lovely Gangster,” and a stocky matron was insightfully emblazoned with “Orient Native Overlap.” I bought my nephew a tee with the quizzical cotton query “The man who wants a garden fair, or small or very big. RESULTS. RESULTS AND ROSES. California Dreaming. Dave’s Surf Shop.” My younger niece will receive a top with a longer meditation that concludes with “be sure to know / who you are before meet someone new / and hoping that person know who you are.” *Xièxie*, random translation, for providing me with the best advice I’ve ever given.

—Karin McKie



ROBERT BAIN