

CHINA CROSSROADS

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Why Nobody Can Write Chinese Anymore – And It Doesn't Matter

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Throughout the world, the Internet and digital technology has made writing by hand increasingly rare. For the speakers of most languages, this new normal has not caused any deterioration of the ability to write their native language by hand. But due to the special features of the Chinese writing system (and, to some extent, Japanese) virtually all Chinese people – even the highly educated – are increasingly beset by a condition known as “character amnesia” (ti bi wang zi 提笔忘字), the inability to write many common characters by hand. This talk recounts the history of this problem in Chinese culture, outlines the reasons for the current state of affairs, and makes the case that the new digital technology is both the cause and the solution to the age-old problem of how to handle the thousands of Chinese characters.

[David Moser](#) is an Associate Professor in the Foreign Languages Department at Beijing Capital Normal University. He holds a Master’s and a Ph.D. in Chinese Studies from the University of Michigan, with a major in Chinese Linguistics and Philosophy. He was a visiting scholar at Peking University in 1986 to 1989, and a visiting professor for five years at the Beijing Foreign Studies University, where he taught courses in Translation Theory and Psycholinguistics. He was Academic Director of CET Chinese Studies at Beijing Capital Normal University, an overseas study program for U.S. college students, where he taught courses in Chinese history and politics. From 2017 to 2019, he was the Associate Dean of the Yenching Academy at Peking University, a two-year Master’s program for Chinese and international students from all over the world. Moser has worked at China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing as a program advisor, translator, and host, and continues to be active on Chinese television as a commentator in both Chinese and English on news shows such as CCTV Dialogue and World Insight. He has appeared often on BBC radio as a commentator on the daily program Business Matters, and is also a frequent China analyst on Al Jazeera television. He is author of [A Billion Voices: China’s Search for a Common Language](#). He currently co-hosts with Jeremiah Jenne a biweekly podcast Barbarians at the Gate, which covers aspects of Chinese history and modern culture.

[China Crossroads](#) hosts talks on all topics related to China, including business, foreign policy, and other areas as they relate to China, the idea being that China is both already a “crossroads” of the world and itself at a “crossroads” in terms of its future global influence. For more information, contact Frank Tsai at editor@shanghai-review.org.