I am not Chinese. My daughter is Chinese. Jasmine was adopted from a Shanghai orphanage when she was three months old. Now she is fifteen, beginning her junior year in New Jersey.

Over the years, I've made many futile attempts to introduce my little China doll to her heritage and cultural identity. But like a series of alien skin grafts, she rejects every one. Many American-Chinese children know little and care less about China. I understand this in the same way that I do not care much about Ireland, despite my Irish ancestry. When you wear your ethnicity on your face, however, it's a different story. So a few years ago, I tried a new approach.

My fantasy was that if I learned to read and write in Chinese, Jasmine would imitate me and magically absorb this talent as her birthright. I picked up a copy of the Practical Chinese Reader and began teaching myself the intricate curlicues and cursives of the world's most widely written and spoken language: Mandarin.

Jasmine's reaction: “Daa-ad, get a life! I'm American!” So far, she’s asked me to teach her only two Chinese words: 絕口 Bi zui! “Shut up!” She said she needed those words to silence a jerky kid at school, who was constantly pestering her to, “say something Chinese.”

But I’m already addicted. Hooked on phonics, Confucian-style. At this very moment, I’m squinting into a computer screen, straining my brain to decipher Chinese characters that signify “rubber milk head.”

Rubber milk head? Substitute “nipple” for “milk head” and the word means “pacifier.” I can’t imagine needing to use that word, now that my kids are beyond babyhood. But when a word picture pops up randomly on the learning page of this Chinese website, I try to unravel its meaning. I’m also using the chat room to trade messages with an anonymous college student somewhere in Shanghai. The squiggly tadpole tails, rectangles, slashes, and hen-scratches keep scrolling down the page. I try to unscramble the meaning of doodles in the shape of snakes, swords, pagodas, and dragon boats. My cyber pen pal and I are chatting in pin yin, a confusing Roman letter approximation of Hanzi, which is what Chinese characters are called in Mandarin. I block out the English dictionary meaning of each word and try to decipher the characters. The Hanzi he’s sending me right now suggest a sideways, insect-like something-or-other, divided with a knife. Think. Think. If he’s using a knife, it must be something he eats. I can’t picture him slicing and dicing a beetle. So “sideways” must be the clue. Think again. Got it! A crab, with its sideways skittle. He’s talking about lunch.

Interpreting ideograms that bear no relation to actual words requires the mental gyrations you need to solve a Rubik’s Cube with the left hand while your right hand works a sudoku puzzle. I’m no brainiac. I just keep banging my skull in frustration at the mystery of it all. Inside those intricate Chinese squiggles lie all sorts of hidden meanings, nature symbols, anatomical references, mythical beasts, and mysticism. The nature images are poetic. The mythical beasts historic.

How did I become so obsessed with this amazing, but seemingly indecipherable Chinese writing? Am I so self-deluded that I believe I can some day master these ancient ideograms?

A woman from Taiwan warned me: “Don’t even try. The more you learn, the harder it gets.”

A “don’t even try” challenge is irresistible to an ex-military guy like me. So I soldier on, scribbling the tiny crosses and backslashes and inkblots over and over, struggling to imprint the squiggles on my fading memory bank. I’m getting better at it. These days, they sell Mandarin software and flash cards that allow you to count the number of characters you’ve memorized. When you combine and recombine the characters, I’m up to about a thousand. Xinhua, the official Chinese
media agency, says you need only 900 to read a newspaper. Are they joking? Let’s take just one word: xiang, pronounced “shi-ang.” The most common usage is to think something or to miss someone. But in an online dictionary, www.mdbg.net, the word in combination with other characters has 1,253 different meanings, from sunflower seed to magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

I can understand about 25 percent of the story I’m reading right now in Peoples’ Daily — something about the FDA approving a drug for obese dogs. Beyond the headline and first few paragraphs, most of the words are a blur. My brain goes blank. In the chat room, the Shanghai student says he knew 7000 characters by the seventh grade. At that rate, I would need only 23,000 more to graduate from college in Beijing.

Still, I keep scribbling with a felt-tip pen until my writing hand cramps into a claw. My desk looks like a Beijing stationary shop during the Ming Dynasty. The desktop is littered with bamboo brushes, rolls of rice paper, ink blocks, a Chinese ink stone, calligraphic pens, a marble signature block, and red seal paste. Scotch-taped to the desk are several “Tables of Stroke Order.” If this script doesn’t sound tricky enough already, consider that there is also a rigid order of brush strokes for each character: top to bottom, left to right, inside-out, upside down and sideways. In fact, the character for Spring is sometimes written upside down because it then looks like a flower sprouting out of the earth.

When I say “rigid” I’m picturing a master Chinese calligrapher beating his disciples over the head with a stick. “It is forbidden to write unbalanced or lopsided characters,” beginners are warned on the China Style Web Directory. They must find a center of gravity to each character — a harmony between “fat” and “lean” strokes. “Learners are not allowed to be stereotyped or stagnant... they are forbidden to behave like raving maniacs or to adopt a vulgar style.”

You must wonder what the ancient calligraphers would have thought of the Beijing Olympics logo. You’ve probably seen it hundreds of times by now without realizing that the dancing stick-figure is actually a stylized calligraphic character 京 (jing), as in 北京 (Beijing), meaning “North Capital.” The seal is called “The Dancing Beijing,” suggesting “Welcome to Beijing.”

Calligraphy means “beautiful writing.” I’ve been told that mine isn’t half-bad. But I’m not interested in the aesthetics. I do not own a solitary scrap of traditional Chinese artwork. My interest is strictly focused on cracking this crypto-writing scheme. At times, I feel like a codebreaker and I’m getting only half the message. Slowly but surely, I’m getting it down. Some day, someone will explain to me why I have trouble recalling people’s names, yet I can remember every jot and tithe in the characters for Chairman Mao’s famous saying, “American imperialism is a paper tiger.”

This is a compulsion. It consumes me for several hours a week. Quality time that I could put to productive use, taking my daughters to buy another pair of jeans at aeropostale, a new iPod, or haranguing them to stop text-messaging their friends and do their homework.

Two years ago, I would drain the poisons out of my system each morning by doing the New York Times crossword puzzle before work. Crosswords and anagrams now seem like kindergarten stuff. For real brainteasers, try Chinese characters.

Even the simplest, one-syllable word can require three or four complicated pictographs.

Here’s an easy word coming up on the chat room now: The characters stand for electricity, brain, fishing net, and suitcase. Get it? He’s talking about a website address. See an electric brain is a computer. The net stands for Internet. And a suitcase is where you keep personal stuff.