

Chinese Puzzles:

Games for the Hands and Mind

I recently had the pleasure to attend an exhibition in San Francisco titled “Chinese Puzzles: Games for the Hands and Mind”. While most of its visitors saw the artifacts as a wonderful and diverse collection of old Chinese puzzles, collectors of fine Chinese antiques also recognized them for the rare Chinese porcelains, books, and wood furniture that were present.

This exhibit, at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, ran from July 22 through October 11, 2008. But if you missed it there, do not worry. The collectors who have amassed this amazing collection of 1200 antique Chinese puzzles, only a small part of which is on display, have hopes that the show will travel. It will also live on in the catalog to the show, *Chinese Puzzles: Games for the Hands and Mind*, available from Paragon Book Gallery in Chicago, and a much larger book on Chinese puzzles that they are still at work on.

In only a dozen years, Chinese-born collector Wei Zhang and her husband Peter Rasmussen have quietly acquired a large, diverse and well-documented collection of Chinese puzzles, only a few of which are familiar to western collectors.

There are more than 150 puzzles on display in the show, with the oldest items on exhibit being from the Ming dynasty: a *blanc de chine* “fairness cup” (*gong dao bei*) and a brass paperweight made in the form of four boys sharing two heads. The largest puzzle is a specially commissioned six-piece wood burr puzzle measuring 33” x 33” x 33” that was made in China and was modeled after an antique Chinese burr puzzle also on display. Tangram sets, puzzle locks, puzzling images of the “four-happiness”

boys, puzzle vessels, wire puzzles, and more, are shown along with artistic images of them in old Chinese prints, books and photographs.

The museum quality show is accompanied in the galleries by related “hands-on” puzzles for children of all ages to play with. And stay and play they do! On the day that I visited the gallery, dozens of people had come to a special Puzzle Party, where hundreds of modern puzzles were out on the tables for all to try. Even more special was the unexpected Chinese visitor who had come to the show, then gone home to get some pliers, wire cutters, and some wire. He came back to make his own copies of the nine linked rings and related “ingenious rings” puzzles for his own pleasure later. He had never done this before, but his interest was like other Chinese visitors to the show who remembered when the nine linked rings was a favorite puzzle in their childhoods in China.

One of the accompanying videos demonstrates how some of the ceramic puzzle vessels work, and a beautiful half-hour-long video documents the past and present state of puzzles in China and the role that Wei and Peter have played in their resurgence. This exhibit demonstrates their love and passion for this interesting, but relatively unknown, art form.

For more information on the collection, the collectors, the exhibit, the videos and the publications, and much more, please visit www.ChinesePuzzles.org.

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木製七巧板
 Tangram pieces in finely carved box
 Sandalwood
 Canton, Qing dynasty, 19th century



銅製九連環
 Nine linked rings
 Brass
 Hancheng, Shaanxi province, 19th–20th century



木製華容道
 Sliding block puzzle
 Softwood
 Shanghai, Republic period, 1930s

Photos by Niana Liu