



Waiting to be solved
Chinese puzzle exhibit intrigues the eye and the mind
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Interlocking culture

■ Exhibit of antique Chinese puzzles in S.F. is a treasure trove of folk art

By Alyssa Phillips
STAFF WRITER

THE CHINESE LANGUAGE does not have a word for "puzzle." The characters for "enhancing," "intelligence," and "games" must be fitted together in a specific order to create a close translation.

That irony is not lost on Berkeley puzzle enthusiasts Wei Zhang and Peter Rasmussen, a married couple who have spent the last 12 years traveling the globe collecting antique Chinese puzzles and their oral histories.

For the first time, the public can view pieces from their Yi Zhi Tang (means "art and intelligence") collection in an exhibit titled "Chinese Puzzles: Games for the Hands and Mind" at the Chinese Culture Center in San Francisco through Oct. 11.

Growing up in the Xinjiang Province in China, Zhang first became fascinated with puzzles as a child when she saw someone playing with a nine linked rings contraption. Zhang was so captivated that she went home and created her own, using items she found around the house.

Her childhood passion was reignited as an adult when Zhang and Rasmussen attended a puzzle party thrown by friends. Zhang remembers thinking, "I played with these when I was little."

Afterward, she decided she wanted to learn more, but found limited information. Frustrated, Zhang asked Rasmussen, "Why don't we write about Chinese puzzles?"

The couple spent the next 12 years traveling to China, Europe and the East Coast of the United States searching marketplaces, attending auctions and following tips in their hunt for long-forgotten and discarded antique puzzles.

Along the way, they also collected oral histories relating to the items, speaking with the grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of the craftspeople who created the pieces.

"This type of folk art is disappearing so fast," Zhang says, pointing out that several of the sources the couple spoke with are now deceased, and without Zhang and Rasmussen,

Exhibit

- **WHAT:** "Chinese Puzzles: Games for the Hands and Mind"
- **WHERE:** Chinese Culture Center, 750 Kearny St., Third Floor, San Francisco
- **WHEN:** Through Oct. 11; 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays
- **TICKETS:** Free; 415-986-1822, www.c-c-c.org

Online

- Check out the puzzle exhibit at the Chinese Cultural Center at InsideBayArea.com/living

"If it's locked up, it has no life; if you can't touch them, you can't understand it."
— Wei Zhang



SARA BOUGHEDIR and Felix Kurz work on a puzzle at the Chinese Culture Center.

the history would have been lost forever. The couple dedicate several months a year to their search. "I did the calculations, and when you add it up, over the last 12 years we have spent nearly three years total in China," Rasmussen says. Their collection now includes more than



BURR PUZZLES such as this one have tested people's ingenuity for ages.

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Puzzle

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1,200 pieces. In fact, there was only enough space for one-eighth of the items to be included in the exhibit at the Chinese Culture Center.

Entering the gallery, visitors are greeted by four large white panels, each displaying a bright-red Chinese character. Several large glass cases are placed throughout the room displaying nine linked rings, sliding-block puzzles, burr puzzles, bottom-filling pots, fairness cups and tangrams (seven pieces arranged into various shapes). Three large black-and-white images have been blown up to cover the walls separating the gallery room.

The exhibit also offers a hands-on component, inviting the public to test its problem-solving skills on several reproduction puzzles. Zhang considers the hands-on aspect to be one of the show's most important elements.

"If it's locked up, it has no life," she says; "if you can't touch them, you can't understand it."

Zhang picks up a nine linked rings puzzle from the table and begins to move the rings back and forth. Her eyes



PETER RASMUSSEN and Wei Zhang have put some of their private collection of Chinese puzzles on display at the Chinese Cultural Center in San Francisco.

light up as she explains that a version of this puzzle exists that is so long and involved, "the Earth would disappear before we could solve it."

The couple's goal is to eventually bring their collection back to China to be placed in a puzzle museum. In the meantime, Zhang views this exhibit as "a small step toward getting people to appreciate Chinese folk art." It's meant to entertain visitors, but also

to expose them to aspects of Chinese culture that they may not be familiar with or explore otherwise.

The couple hope their work will lead to a better understanding and appreciation for this under-represented aspect of Chinese culture. Their plan appears to be working. One guest-book entry reads, "I am so proud to be Chinese."

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