

# Ancient Chinese art finds new home

By Arlene Funkh  
special writer

**D**R. JIAN Chen of Westland has a collection of carvings so tiny they must be viewed with a magnifying glass.

Chen, 46, a native of Shanghai, a major city in China, possesses pieces of ivory scarcely larger than a grain of rice. These pieces are inscribed with Chinese poems, proverbs and Bible verses.

"The carvings are (done by) my brother in Shanghai," Chen said. "This is called micro-sculpture."

His artist-brother is 45-year-old Fuh Chen, employed as an engineer at an automotive company in Shanghai.

"IT IS A HOBBY," Chen said. "He is self-taught. As a boy he liked to carve on a stone."

The pieces are unusual because they are "tiny, but abundant in content," according to Chen.

The technique calls for prolonged concentration, followed by a very rapid carving with a tiny surgical scalpel.

Dr. Jian Chen was a physician and surgeon in China. He came to the United States in 1982, and for the past five years has been employed as a research associate in the surgical department at Westland Medical Center. Chen has passed the necessary tests and hopes to be certified soon to practice medicine here.

His wife, a surgical oncologist (cancer specialist) remains in China, but Chen hopes she will be able to join him in the United States. Their 24-year-old son also is in China.

According to Chen, micro-sculpture is an art form that was popular around 600 A.D. during the Tang Dynasty, and continued to the Sung Dynasty (860-1280 A.D.).

"IT REQUIRES managing (the) breathing, while transferring the

mental image to the fingers," explained Chen. "He remains still and calm for a long period, until he feels the pulsation of his own fingers."

During this period of intense concentration, the artist "puts a picture in his mind," Chen explained. Then — using a delicate, micro-surgical scalpel — he quickly carves the Chinese characters onto the very small pieces of ivory.

"Once he is ready — once he does it — he can't stop," Chen added. "He has to finish immediately, in one to five minutes. If he stops, he can't continue on the same piece of ivory." Later, the characters are filled in with black ink, and the artist signs his piece in red ink.

Chen's brother prefers ivory, which is easy to preserve and doesn't crack easily. The poems and proverbs express universal themes such as love, tranquility, loyalty and friendship.

One carving is a tiny crucifix. Another contains a 103-word poem carved on an ivory chip roughly the size of two rice grains.

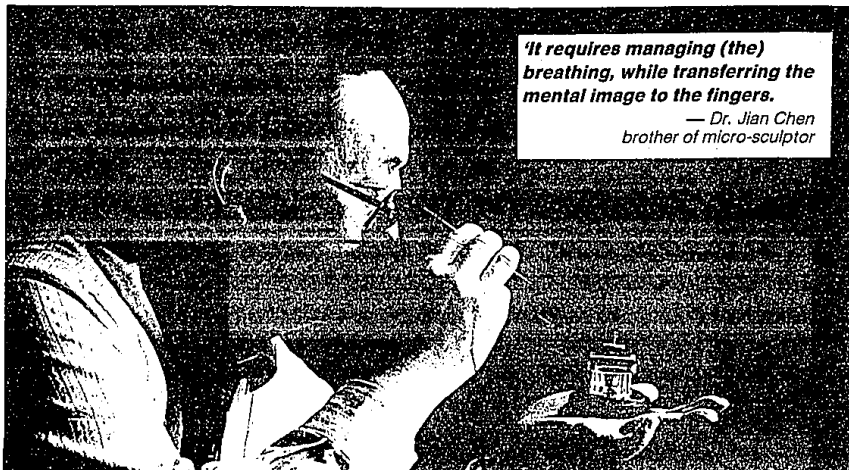
CHEN HAS AROUND 30 of his brother's 100-piece set of carvings. He has mounted them on earrings, gold charms and laboratory slides. They must be viewed with the assistance of a strong magnifying glass.

According to Chen, only a handful of people in China — which has a population of one billion — are skilled in the art of micro-sculpture.

Marshall Wu, curator of Oriental art at the University of Michigan's Museum of Art, agrees that micro-sculpture is "relatively rare because it isn't an easy job to do."

"You are born with a certain eye so you can do that small carving," said Wu, who was born in China. "You do need to concentrate."

In Wu's opinion, carvings in gen-



*"It requires managing (the) breathing, while transferring the mental image to the fingers."*

— Dr. Jian Chen  
brother of micro-sculptor

Dr. Chen examines the micro-sculpture of a crucifix his brother made. It is believed to be the smallest in the world.

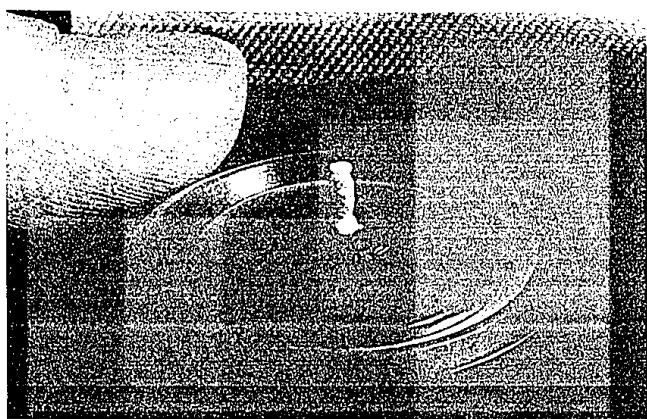
eral can be enjoyed for their beauty and intricate detailing. However, they are "not extremely valuable" nor are they a serious enough art form to be exhibited in a museum.

"Carving is considered very close to pop art," Wu said.

Chen's pieces are not for sale. He has prepared a slide presentation of his brother's carvings, and he attends meetings of the Livonia Carving Club and the Metropolitan Carving Club. Chen hopes to bring his brother to the United States to show more pieces of his work.

"THIS (CARVING) makes me closer to my culture," Chen said. "I represent my brother in a carving show. That is the way I have to show this art to America. The (local) carvers had never seen those tiny things. They are used to working with large pieces."

Chen recently has been spending time with his other brother, Ding Chen, 44, who has been visiting from China. Ding Chen, an orthopedic surgeon, will soon be taking part in a yearlong research fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.



Micro-sculpture of a vase.

**The micro-sculpture technique calls for prolonged concentration, followed by very rapid carving with a tiny surgical scalpel.**



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