

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

The burgeoning popularity of Sudoku in China is not only improving youngsters' logical thinking, but fueling success at international competitions, **Xing Wen** reports.

It's Friday, and 500 primary school and junior high school students sit in a hall in Xianghe county, North China's Hebei province, each using a pencil to fill in the empty squares of a grid that is divided into nine blocks of nine squares each.

These young finalists have been selected from the preliminary contests of this year's national junior Sudoku competition which were held in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou and 15 other cities across the country. Some of them are hoping to gain entry into the 2018 China Sudoku Championship on Saturday, where they will fight for the opportunity to represent the country at this year's World Sudoku Championship in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic.

The numerical puzzle, first created by a Swiss mathematician in the 1780s, is now gripping China.

The country boasts 20 million Sudoku lovers and, according to Xu Yan, deputy secretary general of the Beijing Sudoku Association, the craze can be traced back to 2007 when a Chinese squad debuted in the World Sudoku Championship after China was granted membership of World Puzzle Federation — the organizer of the competition.

Xu, being among the first group of Chinese participants in the WSC, says her experience at the international event gave her great confidence for the development of Sudoku in China, which she believes has a promising future.

"The intellectual pursuit was introduced relatively late in China," says Xu. "I hope that, with a few years of systematic training, we can continue to send excellent players to compete on the global stage."

In the years following the foundation of the Beijing Sudoku Association in 2012, Xu and other Sudoku lovers spared no effort in promoting the puzzle, delivering speeches in communities and schools, organizing events for various age groups and even designing Sudoku teaching materials and courses for different levels.

"Children are in need of an extra class that can improve their logical thinking skills. The puzzle is an alternative avenue for them," says Xu, adding that further cooperation with schools is underway.

Will Shortz, chairman of the World Puzzle Federation, says it was impressive to see China develop children from a very young age to solve Sudoku puzzles and become enthusiasts, especially given their outstanding performances in both team and individual events at the WSC in recent years.

"Our mission is to increase the interest of people around the world in intelligent puzzles and bring puzzle lovers together socially," says the chairman. "That's happening



From top: Ming Letian, a junior high school student from Dalian, gives a demonstration after winning at a national junior Sudoku contest held on Friday in Hebei province; students from primary schools and junior high schools solve Sudoku puzzles at the national junior event; parents watch a monitor to track their child's performance in the contest hall. PHOTOS BY XING WEN / CHINA DAILY

here, as this event has a much bigger base than any other country."

"The players get younger," Xu says, recalling that when she attended the WSC in 2007, she was 36 years old and the only juvenile player in the national team was 15 years old. Last year, however, the average age of the members of

the national team was just 17. "In many domestic Sudoku events, the under-8 group usually turns out to be the largest one," Xu says.

Luan Xiaozhou, a Sudoku teacher from Dalian, says the main appeal of the intellectual game is that it is accessible to most people because it does not require any formal educa-

tion or linguistic ability and needs only a small amount of mathematical skill.

"It's a good pastime for the whole family," he says. "What we gain from figuring out the fastest way to complete the puzzle is how to become better problem solvers."

Luan encourages his followers to attend domestic and

overseas Sudoku events, as these provide young Sudoku players a platform to flex their muscles, test themselves and learn from their role models.

Arguably, one such role model is 18-year-old Chen Shiyu, considering that she ranked fourth at the WSC in 2016 and received an offer to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology earlier this year.

Chen grew stronger with the puzzle's burgeoning popularity in China, regularly attended Sudoku events held by the Beijing Sudoku Association since 2013 and, as a result, fought her way onto the national junior Sudoku team.

She says what appeals to her is the logic behind the digits and the variation of the question types in Sudoku.

As a soon-to-be applied math major at MIT, the Beijing native says the game helps her stay focused on study, because solving the puzzle requires 100 percent concentration and allows no room for error.

Ming Letian, who failed to get full marks in mathematics by just 0.5 point in his senior high school entrance examinations this summer, agrees that Sudoku is conducive to lifting academic ability.

As the winner of this year's junior event, he says that Sudoku contests offer him an opportunity to position himself among his peers and communicate with Sudoku masters.

"I'm obsessed with the sense of achievement after I have worked out a solution," says the rising star who also competed in Saturday's China Sudoku Championship.

He has never concealed his ambition to be a Sudoku star, concluding: "I want to represent China on the international stage as a national team member."

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David Feng shares stories about China's high-speed railway system on a train trip from Beijing to Shanghai. CHEN WEISONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Train fan takes the online route

BEIJING — David Feng is not a train worker nor a frequent business traveler. However, in the first five months of 2018, he made 166 train journeys, traveling 53,000 kilometers across China.

The Chinese-Swiss train aficionado has become an online celebrity for his livestreaming of Chinese railway lines, stations and trains of various kinds.

Over the past decade, Feng has visited over 2,300 Chinese railway stations out of the more than 3,000 spread across the country. And he is now making a documentary called *Next Station: China*, where he plans to capture more than 2,200 stations around the country.

So far, he has filmed more than 300 stations.

Feng, who was born in 1982 and grew up in Switzerland, completed his undergraduate, master's and doctorate degrees in broadcasting and communications in China, and is now an associate professor at the Communication University of China.

His interest in China's railway system began 10 years ago when he first took the Beijing-Tianjin intercity train, China's first high-speed railway line inaugurated on Aug 1, 2008.

The train's top speed of over 300 km per hour surprised him, as it was 50 percent faster than the trains he took in Germany.

"It was like stepping into the 22nd century," he recalls.

Since then, Feng has taken numerous trains in China and posted what he saw and thought on websites.

"China's railway system is advanced, and there is nothing wrong with bragging about it," he says.

China had 25,000 km of high-speed railway lines by the end of 2017, accounting for 66 percent of the world's total.

So far, Feng has livestreamed in English to netizens all around the world, on topics ranging from the opening ceremonies of new high-speed railway lines to the Spring Festival travel rush, the world's largest seasonal migration.

His broadcasts have drawn the attention of netizens from Asia, Europe and the United States.

"An Indian netizen said the new high-speed railway stations in China are like air-

ports, calling them 'rail-ports'." Feng says.

He also likes correcting the English translations at stations.

"Chinese high-speed railways use the best trains, so naturally, they should use correct English too," he says.

He once saw a ticket machine with a sign that said "buffet ticket office", and a ticket counter called "artificial ticket office".

So, Feng decided to start a column called "Railway English" on his Sina Weibo microblog to bring attention to the incorrect translations. And it was not long before a railway bureau noticed his microblog and invited him to give a lecture.

He is now a regular visitor to several bureaus for English instruction.

His book, *1,000 Sentences for Passenger Service*, was published in 2017. And without any promotion, the first batch of 3,000 books sold out in two weeks, purchased mainly by employees of China's railway system.

So, the publishing house soon printed 10,000 more books.

Separately, he has also helped to compile a handbook of everyday English terms for Beijingers to prepare for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

Recently, Feng visited the construction site of the new airport in Beijing, which will be a major transportation hub not only for airlines, but also for railways, metros and highways.

Speaking about his visit, he says: "There is no word in English that can describe the magnificent view of this new airport."

Meanwhile, Feng likes offering advice to the railway authorities. And in 2013, he came up with 100 suggestions, such as developing train coaches with transparent roofs to allow for sight-seeing.

Feng's Chinese wife, who he met during their doctorate studies, supports his passion and they sometimes take trains together.

According to current Chinese regulations, Feng will qualify to apply for permanent residence in China in 2020.

"I will definitely apply for it and continue to spread the word about Chinese railway culture," he says.

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BRICS helps build youth ties

XIAMEN — To Strauss' *Radetzky March*, Marianna Donner, a Russian ballet teacher, instructs three girls at the Banlam Grand Theater in Xiamen, East China's Fujian province.

Donner, who started learning ballet as a 7-year-old, has been a dancer for 24 years before she left her Russian hometown of Yaroslavl last April to work as a ballet teacher in Xiamen.

Since then, Donner has taught more than 50 students. "Ballet to Russia is what Peking opera is to China," says Donner. "I am honored to act as a cultural ambassador in Xiamen."

Donner says she came to

China because the country is relatively unknown to her and has many opportunities, and she fell in love with Xiamen thanks to its good weather, nice environment and friendly people.

Xiamen hosted the BRICS summit in September 2017, which showcased cooperation between the world's major emerging markets: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

In her opinion, BRICS has helped to promote people-to-people exchanges and to embrace cultural diversity.

"I am interested in China's kung fu tea and I would also like to learn yoga," says Donner. "With closer ties between

BRICS countries, we can understand each other much better."

Wilma Hugo, a South African student at Xiamen University, has spent more time than usual on the internet looking at news about the BRICS summit recently. After studying how to teach Chinese at the university for more than two years, she is about to start an internship as a Chinese teacher in her hometown of Worcester, a city 1,000 kilometers south of Johannesburg.

Hugo has been interested in Chinese kung fu movies since childhood and, in 2010, she started to learn Chinese at Stellenbosch University in South Africa.

In 2016, Hugo won a scholarship offered by the Chinese government to study at Xiamen University.

"The more Chinese I learn, the better I get to know China," says Hugo. "The country is developing quickly and is more open than ever. In addition, it has developed good bilateral relationships with many African countries."

Hugo was happy to see the recent BRICS Summit being held in South Africa this year.

"The event will help more Chinese people to learn about Johannesburg, just as South Africans learned about Xiamen last year. People from both countries will gain a closer insight into each others' cul-



Wilma Hugo, a South African student at Xiamen University, talks with a Chinese classmate. The 28-year-old plans to become a Chinese teacher in her hometown. LIN SHANCHUAN / XINHUA

tures, and the event is like an incentive to do so," she says.

In 2016, South Africa's Department of Basic Education announced that they planned to open Chinese class-

es in 500 primary and high schools in five years.

"There is a fervor for learning Chinese in South Africa. However, more Chinese teachers are needed," says Hugo. "I

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