



INCREDIBLE! ACROBATS OF CHINA

A Brief Overview of China

China is one of the world's oldest civilizations. Its written history goes back 3,500 years. China lies in eastern Asia. It is the world's largest nation in population, and is the third largest in area. Only Russia and Canada have more territory.

What does spaghetti, a wheelbarrow, the compass, paper, gunpowder, silk cloth, porcelain and acrobatics have in common? They were all invented in China.

The first recorded use of gunpowder by the military was during a period of Chinese history known as the Five Dynasties. They simply put the gun powder in clay posts, set it on fire and threw it. The fiery explosion was enough to send their enemies running in the other direction.

Several hundred years before the invention of gun powder, in a period known as the Qin Dynasty, something we use everyday without even thinking much about it was invented: paper!

The Chinese take great pride in what is known as "the four inventions," the compass, gunpowder, paper and printing. They should be proud! These inventions transformed sea transport, warfare and literacy—not just in China but all over the world.

What about spaghetti? If you think spaghetti is Italian, think again. Spaghetti originated in China. And the next time you are in a hardware store and pass a wheelbarrow, remind yourself that it was invented in China also.

Although we have put to use many of the things the Chinese people have invented, there are some practices in China which are much different from what we are used to. For example, the Chinese calendar is much different from ours. When our calendar came to the year 2000, the Chinese calendar will show the year 4698! Obviously, their calendar is several thousand years older.

The Chinese do not use an alphabet to make up words. They use characters. Each character represents a thought, a concept or an idea, which has a meaning of its own. These characters are combined in group of one, two, three or four together to form what we think of as words.

Which leaves one last thing to think about — acrobatics. Ancient stone carvings, earthen pottery and early written works trace the ancestry of today's spectacular acts to an era long since vanished. Even Confucius's father was an acrobat—a strongman of unrivaled strength who, it is claimed, lifted 1,000 pound city gates to let an army storm through.

It was during the Han Dynasty, more than two thousand years ago, that the Chinese saw the first acrobats, magicians, and jugglers. Acrobats, with their amazing skill of strength and impossible balance, developed out of the annual village harvest celebrations. Chinese farmers and village craftsmen, with relatively little to do over the long winter decided to spend their time improving their societal positions by becoming acrobats. They practiced the art form with just about anything they

could find around the house and farm. . . cups, saucers, tables, chairs plates . . . Even their own bodies, with which they formed human walls and pyramids. Every year in the fall the village's peasants would join in the village share in a celebration of a bountiful harvest . . . a sort of Chinese Thanksgiving. It was at this time that the common people would show off their skills by performing fun and exciting feats of daring and strength using household tools and common items found around the farm and workshop. Building on the traditional performances today's artists have added new techniques and spectacular stunts thrilling audiences around the globe. Highly skilled, rigorously trained, and superbly talented, these performers follow an unbroken tradition since 700 BC.

Chinese Acrobatic Skills

Hoop diving has its origins during the harvest time when the field workers used a tool shaped like a large tambourine. These large hoops with a woven mesh bottom were used to shake and divide the grain from the leaves and stems. It became a tradition to challenge each other to see who could dive through these hoops and to see how many or how tall a stack could they dive through.

Similarly, the pottery maker would learn to juggle and spin his wares. Spinning a pot to make it uniformly round and smooth is a natural action of the potter. However, when he adds to this a few tricks of juggling and tossing high into the air, he becomes a local hero performing a thrilling feat.



Climbing to the top of a tall stack of chairs. . . the spinning of plates on the end of a long bamboo stick . . . balancing small wooden benches on the head . . . flipping bowls with your feet . . . climbing tall poses and long leather straps . . . these and most other traditional Chinese acrobatic acts derived from the lifelong skills of the village peasant, river sailor and local craftsman.

Children learned skills from their fathers and grandfathers before they were of school age. The tradition of Chinese acrobatics is therefore one that they have passed down from generation to generation to become the feats of strength, balance and grace that comprise this unique tradition of China. Like traveling European gypsies, the great acrobatic families of China would entertain the city rulers and the village people at ceremonial carnivals and public theaters. Today there remain only a few brothers and sisters of the famous old acrobatic families. They have now organized China's traditional entertainments into professional acrobatic troupes with formal academies for training young promising entertainers and internationally award winning performing companies. Still today China has an annual competition for the acrobatic academies. Acrobats representing troupes from all over the nation compete once a year to see who will win the all important Gold, Silver and Bronze Lions.

Obviously, immense athletic ability and a keen sense of timing are vital to becoming an acrobat, but so is an appreciation of oriental philosophy. The skill of "Qi Gong" or "spirits from air", a semi-religious study of the form of breathing and movement is very important to acrobatics. Qi Gong teaches one to use the mind and body together in perfect harmony with each other. While a thorough knowledge of Qi Gong is not a requisite for acrobats performing with modern-day circuses, the tradition of Qi Gong has roots in a 2000-year tradition that began in China. All early acrobats were well founded in the tradition of Qi Gong. The incredible performances are much like the acts first put on for Chinese emperors and royalty for the last 2000 years.

The Dragon Dance — In Chinese mythology, the Dragon King rules the middle kingdom. The Dragon King lives in the heavens. He is the fiery king in the sky. His first wife is the Firebird, or Phoenix. They are the sun and the moon and rule the natural order of the world.

The Dragon King has a son, who is also a Dragon. He is the prince that rules the earth. This son lives in a magnificent palace in the waters of the earth. The wild oceans, the rivers that rush through the mountains and plains, and the beautiful lakes are the domains of the Dragon Prince.

As it is in many places on earth, the rainfall is seasonal, it comes and goes during the year. In periods of drought people thought it might never rain again. In China, the people were always worried about whether it would rain. For this reason, the magic men, or Shamans, gave the people of the village the Dragon Dance, performed for the Dragon Prince, to remind him to send rain. This is very similar to our native Americans and people in other cultures who perform a rain making dance to bring rain to the people and the land.



In ancient China, the main crop was millet, not rice. Rice, which was for wealthy city people, needs a great deal of water to grow. When the new year arrived and spring came to the land, the people would perform the dragon dance in celebration . . . and perhaps the Dragon Prince would remember the people's needs once again.

The Lion Dance - The Lion Dance is not originally from China although we know it now as a part of Chinese tradition. As we know, there are no lions in China, the lion is only found in Africa. The Lion Dance was actually a gift to an ancient emperor of China from a kingdom far to the west. Perhaps the Lion Dance originated from a time when the African lion roamed a territory much greater than the African continent.

The lion, with his strength, represents a powerful figure that protects the villagers from evil spirits and the devil. This is why Chinese often have lions guarding their gates and doorways. Lions are also thought to bring strength, balance and health to the village and its people.

Today there are two different styles of lions in China. The lion of northern China is big with a beautiful golden head and big eyes. The long fur hide of the Yak was traditionally used for the costume of the lion in northern China. In the south, the lion dance costumes are much more festive and comical. The body is made of different colored fabric and the head consists of fabric stretched over a wire frame.

VOCABULARY WORDS

dynasty	acrobatics	population	peasant	philosophy
Yak	Middle Kingdom	rigorous	craft	characters
mythology	Confucius	tradition	festival	Phoenix
civilization	wares			

ACTIVITIES TO DO BEFORE SEEING THE SHOW OR VIDEO

1. Have the students read or read to the students the general information sheets about China and Chinese acrobatics.
2. Discuss the vocabulary terms from the reading.
3. Having read the general information, ask the students to speculate about the performance they are about to see.
 - A. What types of things do they predict will happen.
 - B. Have the students write a description of the most spectacular acrobatic feat they can think of then draw a picture of it. (Students may want to work with partners for this activity.)
3. Find mainland China on a map. Locate Shanghai and Beijing. The New Shanghai Circus troupe is from Shanghai. Beijing is the capitol of the People's Republic of China.
4. Historically, the skills of Chinese acrobatics were handed down form "father to son" or "mother to daughter". Even today, many members of Chinese performing troupes are from the same family.
 - A. Discuss the reason that this might be so.
 - B. Ask your students to describe what things they have learned from their parents that they now do as a family (fishing, hunting, skiing, knitting, cooking, etc.)
 - C. Ask your students to identify and describe any traditions found in their families. See how far back in their family's history they can trace the tradition. (You may need to prompt them with ideas like having a star on the Christmas tree or always serving hot dogs on July 4.)
5. Ask if any of your students practice magic tricks, or study gymnastics, Chinese martial arts or dance? If they do, ask them to explain how they practice and perhaps do a small demonstration for the rest of the class.
- *6. Have the students read or discuss with the students the section "The Theater Experience" .



* If the students will be seeing the show live.

ACTIVITIES TO USE FOLLOWING THE PERFORMANCE

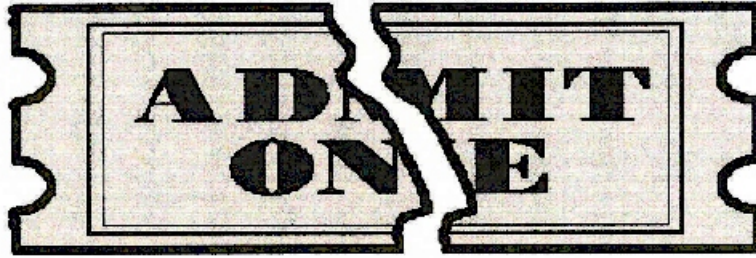
1. Discuss the Acts
 - A. Which appeared to be the hardest, easiest?
 - B. Which one took the most training?
 - C. Which one did they like best? Why?
 - D. What made the acts good?
 1. Was it the skill of the performer?
 2. Was it the costuming, lighting, music, or personality of the performer?
 - E. What goes into making an act enjoyable for the audience?
 - F. Which acts do the students feel that they could do?
2. Compare and contrast the Chinese acrobat performance they have seen with other circus and magic performances they have seen before.
 - A. How were they similar?
 - B. How were they different?
 - C. In what way do you feel the Chinese traditions contributed to modern-day performances?
3. Explain that the acrobats seen in the show began their acrobatic training at a very young age. Children usually begin to audition for acrobatic academies at age 8 or 9 and will begin training immediately if accepted. Some even begin as young as 4 or 5 years of age. In this country we consider this to be very young to begin career preparation.
 - A. Ask the students if they have considered a career. What sort of special training will they require to reach their individual goals?
 - B. Have the students interview a parent of a friend to find out how he/she trained for his/her profession.
4. Design a new act.
 - A. Have the students imagine and create a new spectacular feat for the acrobats to perform.
 - B. Draw a story board showing the different high-points of the act.
 - C. Discuss what training and skills would be necessary to perform the act.
5. Consider the physics in acrobatics. Using some of the basic laws of physics explain how the acts are put together.
6. Discuss the music used in the Chinese performance.
 - A. What type of instruments were used?
 - B. Compare and contrast it to the western style music.
7. Create a class mural. Remind the students that most of the acts seen in the show were once part of village festival celebrations in China. Ask them to imagine the acts they saw as part of a grand outdoor Chinese festival. Ask them to create a mural which would depict all of the acts they saw which might be seen at such a festival. (They may wish to do research on Chinese landscapes and classic style architecture.)



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES TO USE IN THE STUDY OF CHINA

1. Prepare a time line of the historical dynasties of China. Divide the class into small groups and assign each group a specific dynasty for which they will research and prepare a report.
(Note how some of China's dynasties have actually lasted longer than the existence of the USA)
2. Research the major holidays of China on the internet. Report your findings to the class.
3. Read some Chinese folk tales and prepare original illustrations for them.
4. Research other Chinese art forms such as Beijing Opera, cloisonne, fireworks and report to the class your findings.
5. As a class discuss the similarities found in different cultures ie. dragons, common elements in folk tales, angels and devils, dances or ceremonies for rain, festivals, religious customs, burial customs.
 - A. Speculate how people in different cultures and on different continents could have such similar ideas.
 - B. Research to see if there are any known reasons for this.
6. If possible, visit museums to view their collection of Chinese ceramics, paintings and sculpture.
7. Research Chinese arts in the library or on the inter-net.
8. Learn to cook a traditional Chinese meal.
 - A. Prepare a cookbook for the class.
 - B. Prepare a Chinese meal for the class.
9. Research and prepare a report about modern day China. (Use no fewer than 3 references. Only one may be an encyclopedia)
10. Pretend you are planning a tour to China. Prepare a travel brochure for a 12 day trip to China.
 - A. Be sure to include no fewer than 3 major cities.
 - B. Remember to include money, time changes, clothing needs
 - C. Include pictures of places you will visit and a map.
11. Plan your own Festival or Carnival.
 - A. Survey the members of your class to find out what some of their talents are.
 - B. Plan your own festival that showcases the talents of the class.
 - C. Rehearse the acts and invite other classes from your school to attend.





THE THEATER EXPERIENCE

A live theatrical production is exciting and vibrant. The actors, the audience, the backstage personnel, are all part of the experience. You, as part of the audience play an important role in the atmosphere of the production and your response to the performance of the entertainers. It helps them (and can hinder them) in their performance.

When there are parts of the production that you particularly enjoy, naturally you should feel free to laugh and clap. Remember, however, you will be seeing a LIVE performance, and that even with today's use of sound amplifiers, unnecessary noise of any sort will not only annoy others in the audience, but may affect the performers on stage.

The theater was created for people to use and enjoy. It is a pleasure to have you there as a participant in the show. Please do not mar the seats or other furnishings by putting your feet on them. The usual rule in theaters where live performances are given is that there is NO eating, drinking or smoking in the theater by anyone. Make sure to follow that rule where it applies.

We hope you enjoy this theater experience and that you will return, either with your class or with your friends to enjoy other presentations that may interest you.

