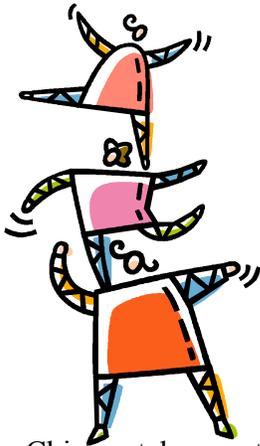


SHANGHAI CIRCUS

A Brief Overview of China



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

What do spaghetti, wheelbarrow, compass, gunpowder, paper, silk cloth, porcelain, and acrobatics have in common? They were all invented in China!

The Chinese take great pride in “the four inventions” – the compass, gunpowder, and paper and printing. These inventions transformed sea transport, warfare, and literacy – not just in China but all over the world – much to be proud of!

In a period known as the Qin Dynasty, paper was invented. Several hundred years later, in a period known as the Five Dynasties (907-960 AD), the first recorded military use of gunpowder was noted. Gunpowder was put in clay tubes, set on fire, and thrown. The resulting fiery explosion was enough to send enemies in the opposite direction.

Most of us think spaghetti is Italian, but not so. And most of us use a wheelbarrow without knowing it, too, was invented in China.

Although many items the Chinese invented are put to use, there are some practices that differ from ours. For example, the Chinese calendar is more than two thousand years older than our calendar. In our year 2000, the Chinese year was 4698. In addition, the Chinese do not use an alphabet to make words; characters are used. Each character represents a thought, a concept, or an idea, which has a meaning of its own. Characters stand alone or are combined in groups of two, three, or four to form what we think of as words.

Ancient stone carvings, earthen pottery, and early written works trace the ancestry of today's spectacular acrobatic acts to long ago eras. During the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), more than two thousand years ago, Chinese saw the first acrobats, magicians, and jugglers. Acrobats, with their amazing skill of strength and impossible balance, developed from annual village harvest celebrations. 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. Cups, saucers, plates, jars, tables, chairs – articles of daily use found around the house and farm were used for practice. With their own bodies, human walls and pyramids were formed. Then, during the villages' fall harvest celebrations, common folk showed off their skills by performing fun, exciting feats of daring and strength.

Building on 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 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 they could 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 the potter adds a few tricks of juggling and tossing high into the air, he becomes a local hero performing a thrilling feat.

Some traditional Chinese acrobatic acts derived from the lifelong skills of the village peasant, river sailor, and local craftsman are these

- climbing to the top of a tall stack of chairs,
- spinning plates on the end of a long bamboo stick,
- balancing small wooden benches on one's head,
- flipping bowls with one's feet,
- climbing tall poles with long leather straps.

Before they were school-age, children learned skills from their fathers and grandfathers; therefore, the acrobatics tradition passed down from generation to generation. Like traveling European gypsies, the great Chinese acrobatic families entertained city rulers and villagers at ceremonial carnivals and public theaters. Today, only a few brothers and sisters of the old, famous acrobatic families remain. They have now organized China's traditional entertainment 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 with acrobats representing troupes from around the nation to win the 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 "Qigong" or "spirits from air", a semi-religious study of the form of breathing and movement, is very important to acrobatics. Qigong teaches one to use the mind and body together in perfect harmony with each other. While all early acrobats were well founded in the Qigong tradition, a thorough knowledge of Qigong is not a requisite for acrobats performing with modern-day circuses.



THE THEATER EXPERIENCE

A live theatrical production is exciting and vibrant. The actors, the audience, and 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. Your response helps them, and can also 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 also affect the performers on stage.

The theater was created for people to use and enjoy, and 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 chewing gum, eating, drinking, cell phones, pagers, or smoking in the theater by anyone. Make sure to follow that rule.

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.



ACTIVITIES TO DO BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE OR VIDEO

Read to the students, or relate, or have the students read, the general information sheet about China and Chinese acrobatics.

1. Discuss vocabulary terms, as needed, from the reading.
2. After reading and discussing the general information, ask students to speculate about the performance they are about to see.
 - A. Predict what will happen.
 - B. Have students write a description of the most spectacular acrobatic feat they can imagine and then draw a picture of it. This could also be a pair-share activity.



3. Locate mainland China on a map. Then locate Shanghai and Beijing. The New Shanghai Circus troupe is from Shanghai. Beijing is the capital of the People's Republic of China.
4. Historically, the skills of Chinese acrobatics were handed down from father-to-son or mother-to-daughter. Even today, many members of Chinese performing troupes are from the same family.
 - A. Discuss why this might be so.
 - B. Ask students to describe what they have learned from their parents/grandparents that they now do as a family, e.g. fishing, hunting, skiing, knitting, cooking, gardening, games, etc.
 - C. Ask 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. (Some prompts to use – a particular ornament on the Christmas tree; a 4th of July celebration; a birthday meal.)
5. Through conversation, discover if any students know magic tricks, do gymnastics or martial arts, dance, play a musical instrument, or play on a sports team. If anyone does, prompt him/her/them to describe how they practice, how often, with whom, and with how much conviction.
6. Refer to THE THEATER EXPERIENCE sheet, read, and discuss, depending on whether seeing the show live or on video.

ACTIVITIES TO USE FOLLOWING THE PERFORMANCE

1. Discuss the performing acts.
 - A. Which ones appeared to be the hardest, easiest? Why?
 - B. Which one took the most training? Why?
 - C. Which one was liked the best? Why?
 - D. What made the acts good?
 - 1) How did the performers' skill make the act successful?
 - 2) How did the costuming, lighting, music, and props make the act successful?
 - 3) How did a performer's personality affect the act?
 - E. What goes into making an act enjoyable for the audience?
 - F. Which acts do students think they might be able to attempt and possibly do?
2. Compare and contrast the Chinese acrobat performance just attended with other circus and magic performances the students may have seen.
 - A. Note similarities and differences.
 - B. What Chinese traditions contributed to this modern-day performance?
3. Review 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 8-9 years of age and will begin training immediately, if accepted. Some may even begin as early as 4-5 years of age.) In our country, we consider this to be very young to begin career preparation.
 - A. Discuss career considerations. What sort of special training will various careers require to reach individual goals?
 - B. Have students interview a friend's parent to find out how s/he trained for his/her profession.
4. Design a new act.
 - A. Have students imagine and create a new spectacular feat for the acrobats to perform.
 - B. Sketch/draw a type of story board demonstrating the sequence of the act's parts.
 - C. Discuss what additional training and skills might 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 this Chinese acrobatic performance.

A. What types of instruments were used? What affect did the music have on the acts?

B. Compare and contrast this music to our western-style music. Why or why not would other music be effective in the performance?

7. Create a class mural. Consider that most of the acts seen in the show were once part of Chinese village festival celebrations. Imagine the acts as part of a grand outdoor Chinese festival. Research on Chinese landscapes and classic architecture may provide additional information for an authentic piece.



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 project or presentation. (Some of China's dynasties have actually lasted longer than the existence of the USA.)
2. On the internet, research the major holidays of China. Report to the class in a project or presentation.
3. Read some Chinese folk tales and prepare original illustrations for them.
4. Research other Chinese art forms such as Beijing Opera, cloisonné, and fireworks. Report to the class.
5. As a class, discuss the similarities found in different cultures, e.g. dragons, common elements in folk tales, angels and devils, dances or ceremonies for rain, festivals, religious customs, burial customs.
 - Discuss, speculate, and consider how people in different cultures and on different continents could have such similar ideas.
6. Visit museums – in person or on the internet – to view their collections of Chinese ceramics, paintings, sculpture.
7. Research Chinese arts.
8. Learn to cook a traditional Chinese meal. Share Chinese recipes, cookbooks, utensils, food products with the class.
9. Research and report (in some form) about modern day China.
10. Pretend you are planning to tour China. Prepare a travel brochure for a 12-day trip.
 - A. Include at least three major cities.
 - B. Include money, time zones, appropriate clothing, official documents, etc.
 - C. Include maps and pictures of places you will visit, and modes of transportation.
11. Plan your own Festival or Carnival.
12. Research more about the Four Inventions and other inventions attributed to China.
13. Research more about the land areas and populations of China, Russia, and Canada.
14. Research more about the land and sea routes between China (Asia) and Europe during the mentioned dynasties.
15. Research more about eastern and western circuses.

