

SchoolTime Study Guide



Peking Acrobats

Monday, January 26, at 11 a.m. & 1:30 p.m. & Tuesday, January 27, at 11 a.m.
Zellerbach Hall, University of California, Berkeley

Welcome to SchoolTime!

On **Monday, January 26, at 11 am or 1:30 pm**, or on **Tuesday, January 27, at 11am**, your class will attend a performance of the **Peking Acrobats**.

During the SchoolTime performance, the Peking Acrobats will astound the audience with their mastery of this 2,000-year-old art form. Gymnasts, contortionists, tumblers and jugglers will spin plates, perform balancing and aerial acts, create a bicycle pagoda and juggle everything from hats to jars with their hands, feet and entire bodies. The acrobats are accompanied by live musicians playing traditional Chinese instruments, while exciting theatrical effects add to the spellbinding performance.

Using This Study Guide

This study guide will help engage your students with the performance and enrich their field trip to Zellerbach Hall. Before coming to the performance, we encourage you to:

- Make copies of the **Student Resource Sheet** on pages 2 -3 and pass them out to your students several days before the show.
- Share the information from **About the Performance & the Artists** on page 4 with your students.
- Read to your students from the **Acrobatics in Chinese History** section on pages 8-10.
- Have your students participate in two or more of the **Activities** on pages 11-12
- Reflect about the performance with your students by asking them **Guiding Questions** on pages 2, 4 and 5.
- Use the **Glossary** and **Resource** sections on pages 10 & 13 to immerse students even further in the art form.

At The Performance

Your students can actively participate during the performance by:

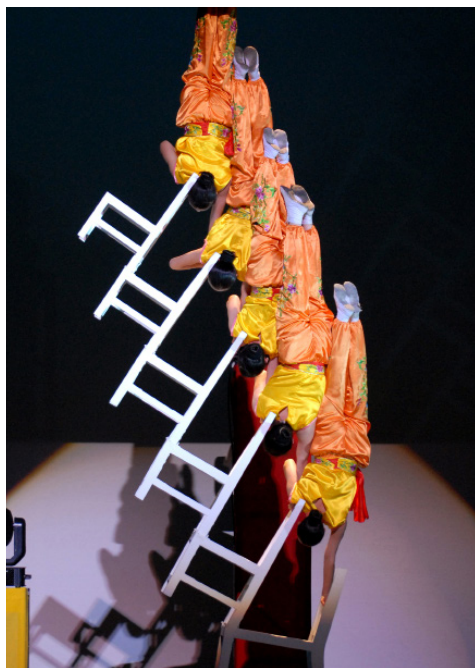
- **OBSERVING** how the performers use their bodies when working alone or in groups
- **MARVELING** at the skill & technique demonstrated by the performers
- **THINKING ABOUT** the practice, training, focus and teamwork that goes into each act
- **NOTICING** how the music, staging and lights enhance the acts
- **REFLECTING** on the sounds, sights, and performance skills on display

We look forward to seeing you at SchoolTime!

Laura Abrams
Director, Education & Community Programs

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1 Your STARRING Role in the Theater



As an audience member, you are a STAR, too. You play an important role. You are an active member of the performance experience—the performers need YOU in order to give you their best work.

S.T.A.R. Audiences

S = Support the artists by being attentive and focusing on the performers..

T = Tune in: Listen and watch for understanding.

A = Appreciate the performers by clapping at the right time. For example, when a scene or dance ends, or when the stage lights fade to dark.

R = Respect the performers and other audience members. At a performance, you, the other audience members and the performers are sharing this experience together and are part of a performance “community”. Think about ways you can best support the community’s performance experience.

We invite you to be a **STAR** today and to help your classmates shine too.

ENJOY!



2 Student Resource Sheet

Peking Acrobats

Questions to Think About:

- What do the Peking Acrobats have in common with other acrobats you've seen? How are they different?
- What everyday objects do you see in the performance and how are the artists using them?



The Performers

The Peking Acrobats are from the People's Republic of China. They have performed all over the world for more than 50 years. Unlike most Chinese acrobatic companies, the Peking Acrobats are accompanied by live music. Objects of daily life—chairs, tables, poles, ladders, bowls, plates, bottles, and jars—are often used for props as the troupe performs dazzling feats of acrobatics, contortion, martial arts, aerial acts, juggling and more.

The Performance

The acrobats will do their best to impress with amazing acts, such as spinning plates on sticks, juggling objects with their feet, balancing human pyramids on top of moving bicycles, twisting their bodies into all kinds of shapes, and much more. The acrobats perform alone (solo) or

with others (in a group or “ensemble”). Each act requires strength, flexibility and concentration. Group acts also need the performers to cooperate well with each other. One person's carelessness puts everyone in danger.

History of Chinese Acrobats

Acrobatics developed over 2,500 years ago in the Wujiao area of China's Hebei Province. As people didn't have television or other electronic inventions, they learned new skills that developed into complicated acrobatics. Using their imagination, they took everyday objects like tables, chairs, jars, plates and bowls and practiced juggling and balancing with them.

Acrobatic acts became a feature at celebrations, like harvest festivals. Soon the art form caught the attention of emperors who helped spread the acrobats' popularity. As their

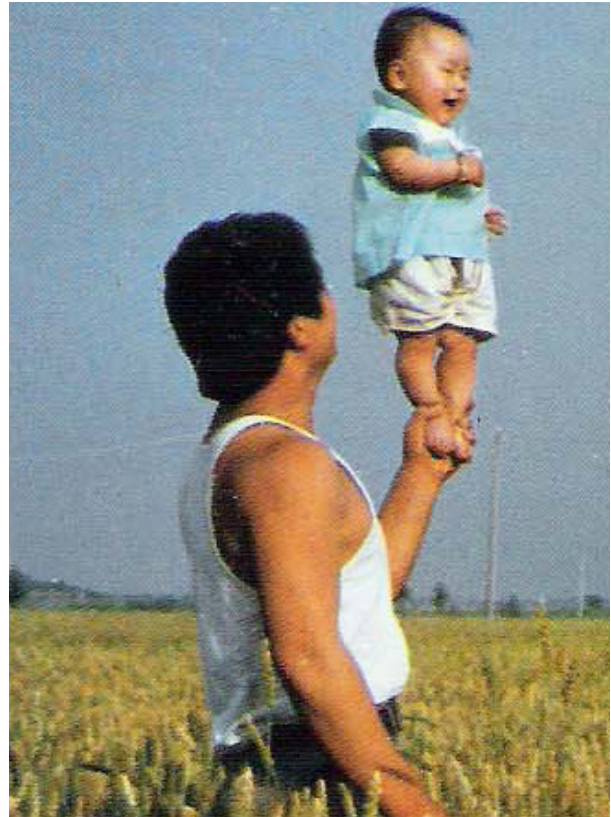
audience grew, acrobats added traditional dance, eye-catching costumes, music and theatrical techniques to their performances to make the experience even more enjoyable and entertaining.

Chinese Acrobatics Today

Today, in the “new” China, acrobats have made great improvements in both the staging and skill of their art form. Companies use music, costumes, props and lighting to create striking and imaginative stage productions.

Acrobatic Training

There are as many as 100,000 people who attend special acrobat schools in China today. Students start training at age five or six, working from early in the morning to late afternoon, six days a week. Students learn and then continue developing the four skills which are an acrobat’s foundation: handstand, tumbling, flexibility and dance. After almost 10 years of hard training, the most talented students join professional city-wide troupes, and only a few of these skilled performers are then chosen to be part of internationally known companies like the Peking Acrobats.



3 About the Performance & Artists

Peking Acrobats

Guiding Questions:

- ♦ How do you think live music adds to the Peking Acrobats performance?
- ♦ How do the Peking Acrobats balance themselves, each other, and objects?



The Peking Acrobats' SchoolTime performance features theatrically staged acts of astounding acrobatics. Contortionists bend like rubber, while acrobats and jugglers perform amazing balancing and aerial acts, spin plates, create a bicycle pagoda and juggle everything from hats to jars using not only their hands but also their feet and sometimes their entire bodies.

Please see [page 5](#) in "[About the Art Form](#)" for a list of acrobatic feats that may be included in this performance.

"Nearly everything the Peking Acrobats did was amazing -- and stunning, and breathtaking and WOW!" (*Seattle Times*)

The Peking Acrobats

The Peking Acrobats are from the People's Republic of China. An offspring of the Great China Circus popular during the 1920's, the Peking Acrobats became a professional acrobatic company in its own right in 1958. The artists of this troupe perform under the direction and choreography of

Hai Ken Tsai, a famous performer from a family of Chinese acrobats going back for three generations.

Although Chinese acrobats rarely perform with live music, the Peking Acrobats are accompanied onstage by Jigu! Thunder Drums of China. This world-renowned company of drummers, percussionists, and musicians play traditional Chinese instruments, such as the erhu (small bowed instrument with two strings), pipa (lute-like string instrument), dizi (flute made of bamboo) and the yangquin (dulcimer played with bamboo mallets).

Among the finest acrobatic artists in China today, members of the Peking Acrobats bring an ancient folk art to life, along with the pageantry and spectacle of a Chinese circus. Through their performance, you will experience a taste of Chinese culture and virtuosity.

"At no time have we seen anything like the Peking Acrobats. Feats of clowning, dexterity, grace, strength and coordination rippled from the stage..." (*The Chicago Tribune*)

4 About the Art Form

Acrobatic Artistry

Guiding Questions:

- ♦ How does a student learn to be an acrobat?

The acrobatic arts have evolved for over 2000 years in China, a country credited with producing some of the best acrobats in the world. Chinese acrobats maintain a notable style and standard routines. Chinese acrobats learn handstands, juggling, trapeze, and balancing, and, as in most recognizable circuses around the world, also maintain juggling, trapeze, handstand acts and comic relief. Differences between troupes are reflected in theatrical presentation, including music, novelty acts such as clowns, and lighting.

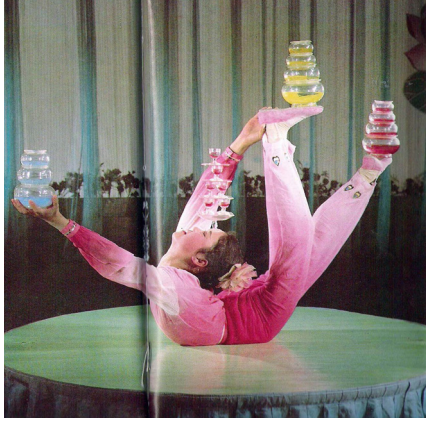
Acrobatic Training and Handstands

In China, acrobats are selected to attend special training schools at about age six. Students work long and challenging hours six days a week. The first two years of acrobatic training are the most important. They practice gymnastics, juggling, martial arts and dance in the mornings, and then take general education classes in the afternoons.

Students work daily on core skills: the **handstand**, **tumbling**, **flexibility**, and **dance**. They are also expected to be skilled in **juggling**. Each student will have a more pronounced talent for one of the four core acrobatic skills. The handstand is considered the essence of Chinese acrobatics. Many signature acrobatic acts include some form of handstand. Master teachers have commented that, “handstand training is to acrobats what studying the human body is to a medical student.”

An acrobat trains in progressive steps from basic to advanced handstands. Training directly affects three areas of the body— shoulders, lower back, and wrists. A weakness in any one area compromises the acrobat’s ability. Beginning students begin by doing handstands against a wall. In three to six months, they build up to a half hour of wall handstands. The three areas of the body become stronger until at last students are able to hold the free handstand.





In Chinese, holding a still handstand is translated as a “Dead handstand.” A good handstand has pleasing form and versatility, meaning the acrobat can execute many variations from that position.

Understandably, young acrobats find this early training challenging. In a basic handstand, one is upside down with all the body’s weight on the wrist, shoulder and lower back. As pressure on these body parts increases, students must resist the natural inclination to come down, and since their hands are their only support, there is no way to cheat.

After the initial two-year training, only a few acrobats specialize in the handstand. However, handstand training is essential to all acrobatic work, due to the role it plays in strengthening the body, mind and spirit of the acrobat.

Signature Chinese Acrobatic Acts

Acrobatic acts can be performed solo or in groups. Group acts require team cooperation, trust and constant communication.

The disadvantage of a group act is that when one acrobat cannot perform or leaves the act this puts the others at risk in their careers, and they must start over again. But, at least the new acts or new specialties they develop are based on central acrobatic skills; tumbling, flexibility, handstand and dance.

The SchoolTime performance of Peking Acrobats may include the following acts:

Spinning Plates: Acrobats spin plates on iron sticks while balancing, dancing or tumbling all the while.

Contortion: Performers squeeze their bodies into tiny spaces and twist into unbelievable knots while delicately balancing objects.

Hoop Diving: With dynamic speed and rhythm, acrobats jump, dive and tumble through stacked hoops up to 7 feet high.

Balancing: Performers balance precariously perched items on various parts of their bodies and balance themselves on large and small objects.

Aerial Acts: Using leather straps or strips of silk acrobats perform feats of strength and daring high in the air.

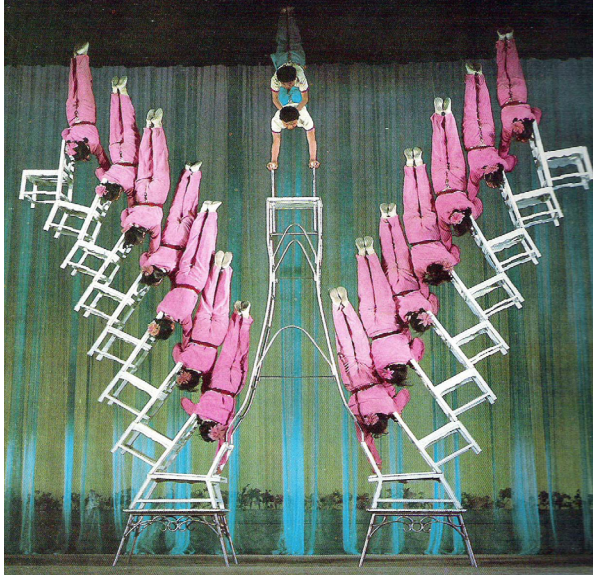
Double Pole: A group of acrobats climb up and down thin poles to execute a variety of dangerous movements. This act requires a considerable amount of upper body and abdominal strength.

Juggling: A team of acrobats juggle, throw and catch hats with amazing speed, synchronization and



dexterity. Others juggle jars, tables, umbrellas and other objects with their feet.

Lion and Dragon: This act comes from Chinese folk dance developed from Buddhist beliefs. The lion represents the spirit of renewal and is revered for dispelling bad luck. Big Lion is played by two acrobats, while Small Lion is played by one. The lion rolls and jumps, displaying qualities of strength, agility and tranquility.



Bicycle: Acrobats perform on moving bicycles creating a human pyramid, pagoda and other stunning shapes and images.

Finale: The entire company comes onstage to create striking stage pictures and perform spectacular balancing and tumbling acts.



5 Acrobatics in Chinese History

Acrobatics is a time-honored art form in China. With a long and rich history, acrobatics is one of the most popular art forms among the Chinese people. Some historical records provide evidence for the development of this art form as far back as the Xia Dynasty (4,000 years ago.) However, it is more likely that acrobatics developed approximately 2,500 years ago when the art form's impressive physical feats caught the attention of the country's powerful emperors.

Evolution of Chinese Acrobatics

Acrobatic arts were developed during the **Warring States Period** (475BC-221BC), evolving from the working lives of people in Wujiao (pronounced oo-chow) county of Hebei Province. Acrobats first used everyday items around them—instruments of labor such as tridents, wicker rings and household articles like tables, chairs, jars, plates and bowls—as performance props in balancing and juggling acts.

At a time when China was an agricultural society, when there were no distracting electronic gadgets or telephones, people used their imaginations to practice the skills of acrobatics: handstands, tumbling, balancing, juggling, and dancing. Their acts were incorporated into community celebrations, for example, to celebrate a bountiful harvest. These entertainments eventually evolved into well-appreciated, professional performances.

Most of Chinese history is studied as Dynasties, periods known by the names of their rulers. During the **Han Dynasty** (221BC-220AD) home-made rudimentary acrobatic acts developed into the “Hundred Entertainments,” followed by many variations. Music and other theatrical elements were added as interest in the art form grew among the emperors.

Stone engravings from Shandong Province unearthed in 1954 show acrobatic performances

with musical accompaniment on stages of 2,000 years ago, including acts that are familiar to this day, such as Pole Climbing, Rope-Walking, conjuring and Balancing on Chairs.

In the Tang Dynasty, known for the extraordinary cultural flourishing, the number of acrobats increased and their performing skills improved through prolonged practice. Famous poets of that time, Bai Juyi and Yuan Chen, wrote poems about acrobatic performances. In a painting at Dunhuang called “Lady Song Going on a Journey,” there are images of acrobatic performers.

Since these early times, acrobatics have been incorporated into many forms of Chinese performance arts, including dance, opera, *wushu* (martial arts) and sports. Acrobatics have gone beyond the boundaries of performance, serving an important role in the cultural exchange between China and other Western nations including the United States. Today, China presents acrobatics in the international arena as an example of the rich traditions of Chinese culture and the hard-working nature of the Chinese people.





The mural *An Outing* by the Lady of Song of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) depicts the grand scene of a Peeress's outing. Walking in front of the large procession is an acrobat doing pole balancing with four young boys doing stunts. These figures are vivid, lively and vigorous, and is considered the most complete extant Chinese mural containing images of acrobatics.



Mao Tse-Tong (1893–1976), founder of the People's Republic of China, greets Chinese acrobats.

Chinese Acrobatics Today

Modern acrobatic acts are designed and directed with the goal of creating graceful stage images. Harmonious musical accompaniment and the added effects of costumes, props and lighting turn these acrobatic performances into exciting full-fledged stage art.

There are now over 100 acrobatic troupes performing the ancient art both in China and all over the world.



6 Glossary

acrobat: a skilled performer who does gymnastic feats like handstands, tumbling, tightrope walking and trapeze work

agility: being able to move quickly and easily

aerial act: performance acts that take place high in the air

balance: an even distribution of weight; keeping or putting something in a steady position so that it does not fall

choreographer: a person who creates the movements for dances

comic relief: a funny scene in between dramatic or suspenseful moments in a performance

conjuring: to perform magic tricks like slight of hand where something appears out of nowhere

contortionists: a flexible performer who can move their muscles, limbs and joints into unusual positions.

gymnast: a trained athlete who displays physical strength, balance, skill and agility

Hundred Entertainments: shows performed 3,000 years ago in China that included acrobatics, song and dance numbers, comedy, magic and instrumental music

martial arts: a traditional Asian self-defense or combat sport that doesn't use weapons but depends on physical skill and coordination (Karate, aikido, judo, and kung fu are considered martial arts.)

novelty act: a new and interesting performance piece that appears different from what is usually seen

signature act: a performance piece connected with, or made famous by, a specific company or troupe

somersault: a complete body roll either forward or backward in a complete circle, with knees bent and feet coming over the head

trapeze: a short horizontal bar suspended from two parallel ropes, used for gymnastic exercises or for acrobatic stunts.

troupe: a company or group of performers that works, travels and performs together

7 Learning Activities

Pre-show Activities

An effective way to engage your students in the performance and connect to literacy, social studies, arts and other classroom curriculum is to guide them through these standards-based activities before they come to the show.

Common sayings in Chinese acrobatic training schools:

Reflect on and discuss the following sayings with students:

“Seven minutes on stage is equal to ten years of training.”

“One must be able to enduring suffering to become a good acrobat.”

“Not too fast, not too slow: you need to be patient and to follow the middle road to find success in your acrobatic skills.”

Performance and Culture

Questions for Students:

1. How long have acrobatics existed in China?
2. At what age do acrobats typically begin training in China?
3. What types of props are used in acrobatic routines?
4. Can you name three major cities in China?
5. Why do acrobats wear colorful costumes?
6. Name the 4 acrobatic skills learned in basic training.
7. Name 5 acrobatic acts created in China.
8. What are the “3 P’s” common to the secrets of learning acrobatics and becoming a good student?
Younger elementary students: Practice, Practice, Practice
Older students and adults: Practice, Perseverance, Patience
9. Think of one word to describe acrobatics.
10. Can you remember a major Chinese holiday celebration that features acrobats?

Performing Arts (Grades K-6)

Object Balancing: Activity and Reflection (Grades K-6):

Teacher Prep: Make newspaper sticks for each student. To make a stick, take two large sheets of newspaper, roll them up as tightly as possible and tape them in the middle and at the ends. Ask students to:

- Place their “newspaper sticks” on the palms of their right or left hand and try to keep it balanced and upright.
- After doing this for a few minutes, ask them to reflect on their experience of trying to balance the sticks.
- Discuss the acrobats’ training – the practice and work that goes into developing their skills.

Human Sculptures: Activity, Discussion and Kinesthetic Reflection (Grades K-8)

Invite students to imagine their bodies are like clay and they can mold them into different shapes (like triangles, circles, and objects like tables, flowers or ladders.)

- On their own, ask them to experiment with using high, medium and low levels when creating shapes, and encourage them to use their entire body.
- Then, have students work in pairs or in groups to create more shape and object sculptures.
- Afterwards, discuss as a class the difference between making the shapes by themselves and with others.

Ask students to look for the shapes the Peking Acrobats make with their bodies during their performance. After the performance, invite students to remember one shape that stood out in their memory and imitate this shape. Ask the entire class to imitate this movement after the student has shown it.

Post-show Activities

Reflecting on the performance allows students to use their critical thinking skills as they analyze and evaluate what they’ve observed during the performance. Student reflection also helps teachers assess what students are taking in, and what they aren’t noticing.

Visual Arts & English Language Arts (Grades K-6)

Discussion and Activity:

Ask students to think about the Peking Acrobats’ performance.

- Which act was their favorite? Discuss what they liked best about the show and why.
- Invite students to create an advertisement for the Peking Acrobats’ performance. They should include an illustration and description (or a “quote” from a made-up review) that reflect the best part of the show.

Additional References

Books:

The Best of Chinese Acrobatics by Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China.

Websites:

www.redpanda2000.com

www.CirqueduSoleil.com

www.ringling.com

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74xg3VUZhoI&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qpa3NjYaEWc&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qmvDL6qICI&NR=1>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enFBCCjT9Ms&feature=related>



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About Cal Performances and Cal Performances in the Classroom

The mission of Cal Performances is to inspire, nurture and sustain a lifelong appreciation for the performing arts. Cal Performances, the performing arts presenter of the University of California, Berkeley, fulfills this mission by presenting, producing and commissioning outstanding artists, both renowned and emerging, to serve the University and the broader public through performances and education and community programs. Cal Performances celebrates over 100 years on the UC Berkeley Campus.

Our Cal Performances in the Classroom and SchoolTime program cultivates an early appreciation for and understanding of the performing arts amongst our youngest audiences. Workshops and classroom visits prepare students for deeper engagement when they experience hour-long, daytime performances by the same world-class artists who perform as part of the main season. Cal Performances in the Classroom and SchoolTime have become an integral part of the academic year for teachers and students throughout the Bay Area.



This Cal Performances SchoolTime Study Guide was written, edited and designed by Laura Abrams, Rica Anderson, Nicole Anthony, Kenny Wang, and Wayne Huey.

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