THE PEKING ACROBATS

Applause Series Curriculum Guide
February 12-13, 2015
Dear Teachers,

Thank you for joining us for the Applause Series presentation of the Peking Acrobats. Based on the ancient Chinese tradition from more than 2,000 years ago, The Peking Acrobats perform astounding acrobatic feats accompanied by live traditional music. They are experts at trick-cycling, precision tumbling, somersaulting, and gymnastics. By experiencing their performance, it is our hope that your students will not only be amazed at the astonishing balance, flexibility and strength of the Peking Acrobats but will gain new appreciation and interest in China’s rich culture and history.

We thank you for sharing this very special experience with your students and hope this study guide helps to connect the performance to your in-classroom curriculum in ways that you find valuable. In the following pages, you will find contextual information about the performance and related subjects, as well as a variety of discussion questions and assessment activities. Some pages are appropriate to reproduce for your students; others are designed more specifically with you, their teacher, in mind. As such, we hope that you are able to “pick and choose” material and ideas from the study guide to meet your class’s unique needs.

See you at the theater,

Des Moines Performing Arts Education Team

Support for Des Moines Performing Arts education programs and the Applause Series is provided by:


This study guide was compiled and written by Karoline Myers and edited by Michelle McDonald. Based in part on 2015 study guide materials by The Peking Acrobats.
**ABOUT DES MOINES PERFORMING ARTS**

Des Moines Performing Arts is a private, nonprofit organization and is an important part of central Iowa’s cultural community. It is recognized nationally for excellence as a performing arts center and is committed to engaging the Midwest in world-class entertainment, education, and cultural activities.

Des Moines Performing Arts presents professional touring productions, including theater direct from Broadway, world-renowned dance companies, family programming, comedy, and concerts.

Education and Community Engagement programs are core to Des Moines Performing Arts' mission as a nonprofit performing arts center.

**Public education programs** allow audience members and local artists to make meaningful and personal connections to the art they experience on our stages. Guest lectures and Q&As with company members allow audiences to explore the inner workings of the performance. In addition, master classes, workshops, and summer camps taught by visiting performers give local actors, dancers, and musicians the chance to increase their skills by working directly with those who know what it takes to succeed on the professional stage.

Through its **K-12 School Programs**, Des Moines Performing Arts strives to ensure that central Iowa students have affordable access to high-quality arts experiences as part of their education. More than 50,000 students and educators attend curriculum-connected school matinee performances through the Applause Series annually. In addition, Des Moines Performing Arts sends teaching artists into the schools to provide hands-on workshops and residencies in special opportunities that engage students directly in the creative process. And, through its partnership with the John F. Kennedy Center, Des Moines Performing Arts provides teachers with in-depth professional development training on how to use the arts in their classrooms to better impact student learning. The Iowa High School Musical Theater Awards is Des Moines Performing Arts’ newest initiative to support the arts in Iowa schools, providing important learning tools and public recognition to celebrate the achievements of students involved in their high school theater programs.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

More than 350,000 people visit Des Moines Performing Arts venues each year.

Des Moines Performing Arts opened in 1979.

Des Moines Performing Arts has three theater spaces:
- Civic Center, 2744 seats
- Stoner Theater, 200 seats
- Temple Theater, 299 seats (located in the Temple for the Performing Arts)

No seat is more than 155 feet from center stage in the Civic Center.

Cowles Commons, situated just west of the Civic Center, is a community gathering space that is also part of Des Moines Performing Arts. The space features the Crusoe Umbrella sculpture by artist Claes Oldenburg.

As a nonprofit organization, Des Moines Performing Arts depends on donor funding to support facilities, programming, and education programs.

The Applause Series started in 1996. You are joining us for our 19th season of school performances.
YOUR ROLE AS AN AUDIENCE MEMBER

Attending a live performance is a unique and exciting opportunity. Unlike the passive experience of watching a movie, audience members play an important role in every live performance. As they act, sing, dance, or play instruments, the performers on stage are very aware of the audience’s mood and level of engagement. Each performance calls for a different response from audience members. Musicians and dancers may desire the audience to focus silently on the stage and applaud only during natural breaks in the performance. Audience members can often take cues from performers on how to respond to the performance appropriately. For example, performers will often pause or bow for applause at a specific time.

As you experience the performance, consider the following questions:

- What kind of live performance is this (a play, a dance, a concert, etc.)?
- What is the mood of the performance? Is the subject matter serious or lighthearted?
- What is the mood of the performers? Are they happy and smiling or somber and reserved?
- Are the performers encouraging the audience to clap to the music or move to the beat?
- Are there natural breaks in the performance where applause seems appropriate?

A SPECIAL EXPERIENCE

Seeing a live performance is a very special experience. Although it is not required, many people enjoy dressing up when they attend the theater.

THEATER ETIQUETTE

Here is a checklist of general guidelines to follow when you visit the Civic Center:

* Leave all food, drinks, and chewing gum at school or on the bus.
* Cameras, recording devices, and personal listening devices are not permitted in the theater.
* Turn off and put away all cell phones, pagers, and other electronic devices before the performance begins.
* Do not text during the performance.
* Respect the theater. Remember to keep your feet off of the seats and avoid bouncing up and down.
* When the house lights dim, the performance is about to begin. Please stop talking at this time.
* **Talk before and after the performance only.** Remember, the theater is designed to amplify sound. Other audience members and the performers on stage can hear your voice!
* Use the restroom before the performance or wait until the end. If you must leave the theater during the show, make sure the first set of doors closes before you open the second — this will keep unwanted light from spilling into the theater.
* Appropriate responses such as laughing and applauding are appreciated. Pay attention to the artists on stage — they will let you know what is appropriate.
* Open your eyes, ears, mind, and heart to the entire experience. Enjoy yourself!
Thank you for choosing the Applause Series with Des Moines Performing Arts. Below are tips for organizing a safe and successful field trip to the Civic Center.

ORGANIZING YOUR FIELD TRIP

* Please include all students, teachers, and chaperones in your ticket request.
* After you submit your ticket request, you will receive a confirmation e-mail within five business days. Your invoice will be attached to the confirmation e-mail.
* Payment policies and options are located at the top of the invoice. Payment (or a purchase order) for your reservation is due four weeks prior to the date of the performance.
* The Civic Center reserves the right to cancel unpaid reservations after the payment due date.
* Tickets are not printed for Applause Series shows. Your invoice will serve as the reservation confirmation for your group order.
* Schedule buses to arrive in downtown Des Moines at least 30 minutes prior to the start of the performance. This will allow time to park, walk to the Civic Center, and be seated in the theater.
* Performances are approximately 60 minutes unless otherwise noted on the website and printed materials.
* All school groups with reservations to the show will receive an e-mail notification when the study guide is posted. Please note that study guides are only printed and mailed upon request.

ARRIVAL TO THE CIVIC CENTER

* When arriving at the Civic Center, please have an adult lead your group for identification and check-in purposes. A Des Moines Performing Arts staff member may be stationed outside the building to direct you to a specific entrance.
* Des Moines Performing Arts staff will usher groups into the building as quickly as possible. Once inside, you will be directed to the check-in area.
* Applause seating is not ticketed. Ushers will escort groups to their seats; various seating factors including group size, grade levels, arrival time, and special needs seating requests may be used to assign a group’s specific location in the hall.
* We request that an adult lead the group into the theater and other adults position themselves throughout the group; we request this arrangement for supervision purposes, especially in the event that a group must be seated in multiple rows.
* Please allow ushers to seat your entire group before rearranging seat locations and taking groups to the restroom.
* As a reminder, children under the age of three are not permitted in the theater for Applause performances.

IN THE THEATER

* In case of a medical emergency, please notify the nearest usher. A medical assistant is on duty for all Main Hall performances.
* We ask that adults handle any disruptive behavior in their groups. If the behavior persists, an usher may request your group to exit the theater.
* Following the performance groups may exit the theater and proceed to the their bus(es).
* If an item is lost at the Civic Center, please see an usher or contact us after the performance at 515.246.2355.

QUESTIONS?
Please contact the Education department at education@desmoinesperformingarts.org or 515.246.2355
Thank you!
**VOCABULARY**

**acrobat:** a performer who performs gymnastic and tumbling feats.

**act:** a part of a performance. In acrobatics, an act often refers to a specific trick or stunt performed by the acrobats.

**ancient:** a historical reference to all history before the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 A.D. Chinese acrobatics, which evidence suggest started at least 2,500 years ago, is an ancient art form that is still performed today.

**agility:** the ability to move quickly and easily.

**balance:** steadiness or equal distribution of weight. Acrobatic feats require great balance.

**choreographer:** a person who creates movement compositions and plans and arranges patterns of movements. Choreographers often plan and design dances. Acrobatic acts also are designed by a choreographer.

**Communism:** an economical system in which the community collectively owns all resources and products. The government then decides how the resources and products will be distributed to members of the community.

**contortionist:** a flexible performer able to move muscles, limbs and joints into unusual positions. Acrobatic troupes feature contortionists.

**dynasty:** a succession of rulers from the same family or group. Dynasties ruled China until 1911.

**feat:** an act or product of skill. In acrobatics, a feat often refers to a difficult stunt or trick.

**flexibility:** ability to bend easily. Acrobats’ bodies must be very flexible.

**handstand:** an act where the body is supported in a vertical position by balancing on the palms of one’s hands. The handstand is the most important skill for acrobats to master. Children studying to become an acrobat often spend the first year of their training just working on handstand skills.

**pagoda:** a particular style of building that is popular throughout Asia. Acrobats imitate the pagoda’s shape by forming human pyramids and using props (such as fans) to mimic the detailed roof lines.

**props:** items used on stage during performances. Examples include plates, porcelain vases, or chairs. In acrobatics, props are most often common, everyday items. This stems from acrobatics’ origins, when peasant people would use items around themselves to try to perform new tricks and stunts for their own entertainment.

**symmetrical:** two sides of something are identical or balanced. To create a bicycle pagoda, for instance, the acrobats must have complete symmetry.

**tumbling:** gymnastic acts that consist of leaps, somersaults and other flips.
ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

Since their debut in 1986, The Peking Acrobats have redefined audience perceptions of Chinese acrobatics. They perform daring maneuvers atop a precarious pagoda of chairs; they are experts at treacherous feats of daring, trick-cycling, precision tumbling, somersaulting, and gymnastics. They defy gravity with amazing displays of contortion, flexibility, and control. They push the envelope of human possibility with astonishing juggling dexterity and incredible balancing feats, showcasing tremendous skill and ability. They are masters of agility and grace.

Run Time: Approximately 1 hour

LIST OF ACTS
The Peking Acrobats’ performance will likely include the following acts:

- The Lion Dance
- Bodacious Body Balancing
- Let’s Have a Ball!
- Diving Daring Do
- The Sound of Rolling Walnuts
- It’s a Tight Squeeze
- Let the Spinning Plates Spin
- The Happy Chefs
- Contortion by Candlelight
- In the High Chair
- Human Pyramid / Bicycle Pagoda
- Finale

COSTUMES
The acrobats will have several costume changes during the show. Pay attention to the bright, vibrant colors and how the costumes contribute to the feel of each act.

LIVE MUSIC
The Peking Acrobats perform to accompaniment of live musicians who play traditional Chinese instruments with a modern flair. As an added treat for their 2015 North American Tour, The Peking Acrobats are joined on stage by members of Jigu! Thunder Drums of China. Hailing from the Shanxi Province in China, this world-renowned company of drummers, percussionists, and musicians has thrilled audiences around the globe with their awe-inspiring performances.

“The Peking Acrobats [are] pushing the envelope of human possibility...Pure artistry!”

- New York Times
ABOUT THE PEKING ACROBATS

Learn more about the artists that you will see perform.

STYLE
The Peking Acrobats strive to redefine audience perceptions of Chinese acrobatics. In addition to showcasing their tremendous acrobatic abilities, the Peking Acrobats perform to accompaniment by live musicians playing traditional Chinese instruments with modern flair. They also work to incorporate high-tech special effects that coalesce with the music and their awe-inspiring feats, to create a new level of spectacle.

No doubt, the Chinese acrobats of the Han Dynasty would be awe-struck and amazed at how their modern-day counterparts have elevated their art form, and the fact that their folk art tradition, begun so many ages ago, is still going strong, even into the 21st Century!

ON THE SCREEN
The Peking Acrobats have been featured on numerous television shows and celebrity-studded TV specials. They set the world record for the Human Chair Stack on FOX’s Guinness Book Primetime TV show where they balanced six people precariously atop six chairs 21 feet up in the air without safety lines!

The troupe was also featured in director Stephen Soderbergh’s hit film Ocean’s 11. Qin Shaobo, a current member of The Peking Acrobats, also appeared in that film’s two blockbuster sequels, Ocean’s 12 and Ocean’s 13.

AMBASSADOR ROLE
The Peking Acrobats play an important ambassadorial role, sharing the epitome of a rich and ancient folk art tradition, with audiences around the world. This marks their 29th North American tour! They also perform extensively throughout Europe – building their reputation as the finest Chinese acrobatic troupe in the world!

“BEHIND THE SCENES” VIDEO SERIES

Part 1—Getting it all Started:

Part 2—The Performers:

Other Videos in the Series:

Part 3—The Musicians
Part 4—Setting the Stage
Part 5—On with the Show
POPULAR ACTS IN CHINESE ACROBATICS

**HOOP DIVING**
This act is over 2,000 years old. Also called “Dashing Through Narrows,” it was once known as the “Swallow Play.” The performers imitate the flying movements of swallows [birds] as they leap nimbly through narrow rings.

**DOUBLE POLE**
A group of acrobats climb up and down thin poles demonstrating agility and strength to execute a variety of dangerous movements.

**SPINNING PLATES**
Performers use numerous long, pencil-thin sticks to support spinning plates that look like lotus leaves facing the wind or colorful butterflies flitting and dancing. This act is often combined with balancing and tumbling.

**BICYCLE**
Acrobats ride together on a single bicycle, take it apart, turn it over a table and display a variety of postures, including the beautiful tableau of a peacock fanning its feathers.

**LION ACT**
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, exhibiting attributes such as strength, agility, and tranquility. (Read more about the Lion Act on page 10.)

**CHAIR STACKING**
While on a pagoda or ladder of chairs, the performers practice handstands and other stunts.

**HANDSTAND**
Performers gracefully bend and twist into unbelievable knots, frequently while balancing objects on every limb.

**FOOT JUGGLING**
Performers lie on a special seat and juggle and catch objects with their feet. Objects may include tables, umbrellas, and rugs.

**CONTORTION**
Performers gracefully bend and twist into unbelievable knots, frequently while balancing objects on every limb.
THE LION DANCE: THE LEGEND

LEGEND #1
A long time ago, a strange creature appeared in China that horrified and ate men and animals. The fast and fierce creature was called 'Nien' (or Nian), and his name, when spoken, just happened to sound like the Chinese word for 'year'. Neither the fox nor the tiger could fight the 'Nien' effectively, and in despair, the people asked the lion for help. So, the lion shook his mane, and with a loud ROAR, rushed towards the creature, and wounded it. The Nien hurried away with its tail between its legs. But, it announced it would return to take revenge, and one year later, the Nien did return. This time the lion couldn't help the people because he was too busy guarding the Emperor's Gate. So, the villagers decided to do the job themselves. Out of bamboo and cloth, they created an image of the lion, and then two men crawled inside it, and approached the Nien. The "lion" pranced and roared and the monster fled away again. This is the reason why, on the eve of the Chinese Lunar New Year, which usually occurs at the first new moon following the end of the last lunar month of the year, in January or February, the Lions always dance, and when they do, they are frightening away the evil spirits for yet another year (or, Nian!)

LEGEND #2
Another popular belief is that the Lion Dance finds its roots in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 B.C.). Legend has it that the Emperor had a strange dream one night. In his dream, an odd creature he had never seen before saved his life and carried him to safety. The next day, wondering what this creature was and what the dream meant, the Emperor described it to his ministers. One of the ministers explained that the strange creature resembled an animal called a "Lion," which did not exist in China at the time. The Emperor, wanting to see this "Lion" while awake, ordered his ministers to create a model of it, and, because in the dream the lion saved him, the lion came to symbolize good luck, happiness, and prosperity.

HOW IT WORKS
Inspired by these myths, as well as others, Lion Dancing has spread from Emperors to the people, and has become a vital part of Chinese folk culture.

Usually the lion is enacted by two dancers. One handles the head, made out of strong but light materials like papier-mâché and bamboo. The other dancers other plays the body and the tail, under a cloth that is attached to the head. The “animal” is sometimes accompanied by three musicians, playing a large drum, cymbals, and a gong. A “Little Buddha” dancer teases the “Lion” with a fan or a giant ball. The head dancer can move the lion’s eyes, mouth, and ears for expression of moods. Every kind of move has a specific musical rhythm. The music follows the moves of the lion: the drum follows the lion; the cymbals, and the gong follow the drum player.

*The Lion Dance: The Legend* adapted from the 2015 Peking Acrobats study guide.
HISTORY OF CHINESE ACROBATICS

The art of Chinese acrobatics is an ancient tradition. Read on to learn more about the factors that influenced the art form’s popularity and how the art form has evolved over the years.

FIRST RECORDS
Over its long and rich history, acrobatics has become one of the most popular art forms among the Chinese people. While many historical records provide evidence for the development of this art form as far back as the Xia Dynasty (4,000 years ago), it is most commonly believed that acrobatics did not become wildly popular until approximately 2,500 years ago when it began to capture the attention of the country’s powerful emperors.

Acrobats used everyday things around them – instruments of labor such as tridents, wicker rings and articles of daily use such as tables, chairs, jars, plates, and bowls – to experiment with balancing and other acrobatic tricks.

In a time when China was traditionally an agricultural society – where there were no electronic gadgets or telephones – people used their imaginations to learn new skills such as acrobatics. These acts were incorporated into community celebrations, such as to celebrate a bountiful harvest.

During the Han Dynasty (221BC-220 AD), the basic acts of acrobatics developed into the “Hundred Entertainments.” Many more acts soon developed. Music accompaniment and other theatrical elements were added as interest in the art form grew among the emperors. Many of these acts are still performed today – such as Pole Climbing, Rope-Walking, and Conjuring.

EVOLUTION OF CHINESE ACROBATICS
Since these early times, acrobatics have been incorporated into many forms of Chinese performance arts, including dance, opera, wushu (martial arts), and sports.

Today, 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.

AMBASSADOR ROLE
Acrobatics now serve 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 a living example of the rich traditions of Chinese culture and as evidence of the hard-working nature of the Chinese people.

HISTORY OF CHINESE ACROBATICS is adapted from the CAL Performances SchoolTime Study Guide: Golden Dragon Acrobats.
ACROBAT SCHOOLS
Most Chinese acrobats are selected to attend special training schools at around six years of age. Students work long and challenging hours to hone their craft. Six days a week they practice gymnastics, juggling, martial arts and dance in the mornings. The children then take general education classes in the afternoons.

BASIC SKILLS
The first two years of acrobatic training are the most important for aspiring acrobats. Acrobatic students work daily on basic skills. The four core foundational skills for Chinese acrobats are mastering the handstand, tumbling, flexibility and dance.

HANDSTAND TRAINING
Among the four basic skills, handstand is the most important. It is considered to be 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 goes through progressive steps to learn basic to advanced handstands. Training directly affects three areas of the body – shoulders, lower back, and wrists. A weakness in any one of these areas will compromise the acrobat’s ability. In China, the basic handstand is learned by the youngest, beginning students, starting against the wall. In three to six months of full time training, students build up to one half hour of wall handstands. During this time, the three areas of the body become stronger until at last students are able to hold the free handstand.

Young acrobats intensely dislike handstand training. In a basic handstand, one is upside-down with all the body’s weight on the wrist, shoulders, and lower back. There is natural pressure to want to come down and the hands are the only support for the body.

After the initial two-year training, only a few acrobats will 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.

ONGOING STUDY
Acrobatic acts are performed either solo or in groups. Group acts require team cooperation, trust, and constant communication. When one performer leaves the group act, it puts the other acrobats at risk in their careers. It often happens that acrobats need to start over again. However, in creating a new act or learning a new specialty, an acrobat has already mastered the four basic acrobatic skills.


TRAINING TO BECOME A CHINESE ACROBAT is adapted from the CAL Performances SchoolTime Study Guide: Golden Dragon Acrobats.
CHINESE ACROBATICS MYTH-BUSTERS

Myth #1: Contortionists apply snake oil to their joints or drink special elixirs to become flexible.
This was a popular myth during the 19th century when medicine shows hired contortionists to prove the effectiveness of their arthritis “medicines.” The Peking Acrobats do not use magic potions or snake oil to be able to perform, but what they put into their body definitely has an effect on their abilities. Instead of some magic potion, the acrobats eat very healthy foods, consuming lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, lots of lean meat and drinking plenty of water. That is not to say that, occasionally, they do not like to eat junk food now and again, but they do so in moderation!

Myth #2: “Double-jointed” people have more joints than most people do.
Every fully-formed person has the same number of joints. "Double-jointed" is a slang expression used to describe the appearance of a person who can bend much further than one might think a joint would allow a limb to bend.

Myth #3: Contortionists have to dislocate their joints when they bend unusually far.
As long as the joint socket is the right shape, most extreme bends can be achieved without dislocating the joint. Dislocations are rarely used during contortion acts since they make the joint unstable and prone to injury. And, a dislocated limb cannot lift itself or support any weight!

Myth #4: Contortionists can bend “bonelessly” in any direction.
The amount of flexibility of every joint in every person varies from below average to extremely flexible. Contortionists can create the illusion of having “boneless” bodies by specializing in the skills that show off their most flexible joints, with the help of their acting talent and mime skills.

Myth #5: You are either born a contortionist or you’re not. Muscle flexibility can be acquired with persistent training, as long as the shape of the bones in the joint does not limit the range of motion. Most professional performers claim they were not unusually flexible before undergoing years of intense training.

*Chinese Acrobatics Myth Busters* adapted from the 2015 Peking Acrobats study guide.
ABOUT CHINA, pg. 1 of 2

TECHNOLOGY
During most of human history – and until the 15th century – China was the most advanced country in the world in terms of technological development and culture.

Chinese inventions include:
- Paper
- The compass
- Gunpowder
- Printing
- Bell
- Fork
- Noodles, including spaghetti
- Oars
- Kite
- Cultivation of rice
- Fireworks
- Matches
- Tea

SIZE
China is the fourth largest country in the world. Its land mass is only slightly smaller than the United States. Its population of 1.3 billion is the largest in the world – more than four times the size of the U.S.

China has such a large population that strict laws regulating population growth have been instituted. Married people of the Hun majority (92% of the population) are generally allowed to give birth to only one child – unless the couple are both only children themselves, and then the couple may have two. Minority families may have as many children as they wish.

GOVERNMENT
The earliest and most enduring system of government in China began around 1111 B.C. It was dynastic in structure, which means that an emperor ruled until he died or passed it on to his son or nephew.

In 1911, a revolution ended over 2,000 years of imperial rule. By 1921, the Communist Party of China was founded. In a Communist state, all businesses, property, foods, goods, and services are owned and operated by the government and are distributed to the people by the government.

Over the last 30 years, the Chinese government has changed to a unique political blend. China maintains a communist government within a socialist society and capitalist economy. The opening up of China to Western ideas has dramatically affected its people. A gap is widening between rich and poor.
ECONOMY
More and more of the world’s products are being manufactured in China. The country’s gross national product has grown as much as 10% over the last few years. After the United States, China is now the second largest economy in the world.

POLLUTION
No country in history has emerged as a major industrial power without creating a legacy of environmental damage. Because of its unprecedented economic growth over the last three decades, China’s pollution problems have shattered all precedents. 70% of water in China is polluted and only 1% of the 560 million city dwellers breathe air that is considered safe. The Chinese are working hard to counter the effects of this tragic situation.

SYMBOLS OF OLD AND NEW CHINA
The Great Wall of China was built and rebuilt between 5th century B.C. and the 16th century to protect the northern borders of the Chinese Empire. It is the world’s largest manmade structure.

The Chinese were excited to host the 2008 Olympic Games. Because the government knew that the games would allow many of the world’s people to see inside China for the first time, many improvements were made – thousands of trees were planted, new hotels were build, and old sites were renovated for tourists.

SCHOOLS IN CHINA
China has the largest educational system in the world. Over 1,170,000 schools of various kinds enroll more than 318,000,000 students. The entire education system is run by the central government.

In China, children start school at six years old and must attend for nine years. Primary education is free, but the parents pay for everything from the children’s paper to the school’s electric bills. Secondary education is paid for by the parents, with scholarships available for those in need. To continue into high school, students must do well on a series of tests, and it is steeply competitive to get into the best schools.

Every student in China does morning exercises before school and at a set time during the school day. The exercises are done in unison and are accompanied by recorded music.

ABOUT CHINA is adapted from the CAL Performances SchoolTime Study Guide: Golden Dragon Acrobats.
1) OBJECT BALANCING

**Best for:** Grades K-12

**Explanation:** Acrobats train for years to develop strength, flexibility and balance. In this activity, students will practice balancing a stick made from rolled up newspaper on their palm.

**Goals:** To explore balance

**Materials:**
- Open area
- Newspaper
- Tape

**Activity:**
1. Have students each take a large sheet of newspaper and roll it up as tight as they can.
2. Ask students to tape the newspaper roll in the middle and the ends. (Teachers can also prepare “newspaper sticks” in advance.)
3. In an open area, invite students to place their “newspaper stick” on the palm of their right or left hand and try to keep it balanced and upright.
4. Do this for a few minutes and then reflect with the following discussion questions.

**Follow-up Questions:**
1. What was challenging about this activity?
2. What is balance?
3. When do you use balance in your daily life?
4. What do you think acrobats’ training is like in order to develop their excellent balance skills?

2) HUMAN SCULPTURES

**Best for:** Grades 2-12

**Explanation:** Acrobats use strength, flexibility and balance to create an astonishing assortment of shapes with their bodies. In this activity, students will explore making sculptures with their bodies — both singly and in pairs.

**Goals:** To prepare to observe the acrobats create complex shapes with their bodies and to understand the flexibility and cooperation such feats require.

**Materials:**
- Open area

**Activity:**
1. Ask students to spread out in an open space. Each person should find their own personal space bubble.
2. Ask students to imagine that they are like clay and can mold their bodies into different shapes like triangles, circles, and squares or into objects like tables, flowers, ladders, etc.
3. Ask students to experiment with using high, medium and low levels as they make shapes with their bodies.
4. Encourage them to try to use their entire bodies when making their shapes. If students need direction, you may call out different shapes (geometric shapes, letters, numbers, objects, etc.) for them to try to make with their bodies.
5. Next, ask students to work in pairs to continue to try to make different shapes and object sculptures.
6. When students are done experimenting in pairs, provide time for reflection about the difference between making shapes by yourself or with others.
7. To conclude, encourage students to look for shapes that the acrobats make with their bodies during the performance.

**Follow-up Questions:**
1. What skills do you need to make different shapes or sculptures with your body?
2. What was challenging about this activity?
3. What was it like making shapes by yourself?
4. What was it like making shapes with a partner?
5. What sort of shapes do you think you will see the acrobats make with their bodies during the performance?
3) CHINESE PERFORMING ARTS

**Best for:** Grades 1-12

**Explanation:** Acrobatics is one of the oldest forms of performing arts in China. In this activity, students will watch video of other Chinese performing arts, take notes on their observations, and use it as a catalyst for their own writing.

**Goals:** To understand that there is a wide variety of Chinese performing arts and to write reflectively about experiencing a cultural art form.

**Materials:**
- Computer(s) with internet access
- Speakers connected to the computer
- Paper
- Pencils

**Activity:**
1. Visit the John F. Kennedy Center’s ArtsEdge website and search for the “China: Arts & Culture Video Series”. (Full link at right.)
2. Either individually or in small groups, ask students to carefully watch one of the following videos:
   - Beijing Traditional Music Ensemble
   - Tornado by Cai Guo-Quiang
   - Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra
   - Shaanxi Folk Art Theater
   - Yunnan Singers
3. As they watch, ask students to fill in the “Critical Response Worksheet”* on page 19. The worksheet asks them to record what they notice in the video, what it reminds them of, what questions they have as they watch, what emotions they feel or see, and what they think the meaning of the art is. (Teachers of younger grades may choose to facilitate this as a group conversation rather than individual writing. Use the worksheet to guide the conversation step-by-step.)
4. After the video ends, give students additional time to continue to fill in their Critical Response Worksheet.
5. Video by video, invite students to share one of their top observations, questions, memories, feelings or speculations.
6. Last, provide students with time to free write using their notes and the video as inspiration. They may write a story, a journal entry about an experience the video reminded them of, a poem, etc.

**Follow-up Questions:**
1. What, if anything, surprised you about the video that you watched?
2. Have you ever seen or experienced anything similar?
3. Do all cultures create art? Why?
4. Why do you think the Chinese people created this art form? What does it help them to express?
5. What ways do you express yourself?

**China: Arts & Culture Video Series**

*Critical Response is an artful tool developed by the Perpich Center for Arts Education.

4) HEADLINES FROM CHINA

**Best for:** Grades 3-12

**Explanation:** In this activity, students will research current events in China.

**Goals:** To develop understanding of what life is like in China today.

**Materials:**
- Newspapers, magazines

**Activity:**
1. There are regularly news stories about events in China. Have students look for news about China either on the television or radio, or in newspapers or magazines.
2. Ask students to bring in articles or to write a paragraph version of the stories they heard in the media.
3. Invite students to share their news stories about China with each other and discuss the current events and topics.
4. As a class, choose a handful of articles that most interest you. Then in groups of 4 or 5, have students research a topic more in-depth.
5. Have students give a brief presentation on their findings to the class.

**Follow-up Questions:**
1. Which news story most interested you about China? Why?
2. Based on your research, in what ways is China different than the U.S.? In what ways is it similar?
Critical Response Worksheet:  

Name:_____________________

CHINESE PERFORMING ARTS  (Activity on page 17)

Record your thoughts as you watch a video on one of China's performing arts forms.

1. I notice...  
   (Describe what you see and hear.)

2. This reminds me of...  
   (This can be something you have done, seen or watched before.)

3. This makes me feel... OR I see these feelings in the art...

4. I wonder.... 
   (What questions do you have as you watch this?)

5. I think that... 
   (What do you think this piece of art means? Why did the artist make it?)
POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES & ASSESSMENT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Themes and Connections

1. If Chinese theatre is an illusion of life, which part of the performance illustrated struggle? Which part illustrated joy? How did they specifically show joy and struggle in the show?

2. If you were to create an acrobatic routine to depict one of your struggles, what would that struggle be and how would you show it? Follow the same creative process to depict one of your joys.

3. What have you learned about China or the Chinese people through the acrobats' performance that you found most interesting?

4. Using information in the study guide and what you saw in the performance, consider all the training that goes into being an acrobat. What does acrobatics show us about the human race and our capabilities? Compare training to be an acrobat to striving for your individual goals in life and how you might "train" for your own future career.

5. Consider Chinese acrobatics as an art form. What Western (European, American, Latin, etc.) art forms are similar to Chinese acrobatics and why are they similar?

6. Consider the myths discussed in this study guide about Chinese acrobats. How does your new knowledge of the truth behind these myths change the way you look at acrobatics? Does it change at all? Does the science behind acrobatics make the art form more accessible to you now? How does knowledge of facts and science change how we look at art and life in general?

Performance Components

1. How did the lighting add to the show?

2. How did the costumes help to express the ideas or moods of each act?

3. What did you notice about the musicians? Had you heard or seen similar instruments before? How did the live music enhance or change the performance?

ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

1) WRITE A REVIEW
Ask students to imagine that they are a critic for the school newspaper. They are going to write a review of Peking Acrobat's performance to inform others about what they experienced. They should describe with detail: what they saw; what they heard; how the performance made them feel; what the performance reminded them of; and what their favorite part was and why. Remind students that they must paint a picture of the experience with their words so that others who did not see the performance can imagine it as vividly as possible.

2) CHINA AND ACROBATICS
Review with students one of the background information sections included in the study guide (Training, History of Acrobatics, or About China). Assign small groups of students 1-2 paragraphs from that section. Invite students in their groups to create a tableau (frozen picture with their bodies) that they believe demonstrates the main idea of their section. Have students share their tableau for one another and explain their pose choice. Encourage students to use various levels and facial expressions.

3) YOUR ARTISTIC IMPRESSION
Create your own artistic impression of the performance. Using shapes, lines, colors, patterns and other artistic elements from your imagination, draw or paint a picture that expresses how the performance made you feel. Use art to interpret your impression of the performance and qualities of the music.

4) WRITE A LETTER
After attending the performance, discuss the experience with your students. Ask them questions about what parts of the show they found to be most exciting or surprising. Next invite students to write letters to the performers or to the Des Moines Performing Arts' education donors about the experience. After writing their letter, students can illustrate a scene from the performance. Mail finished letters to:

Des Moines Performing Arts
Attn: Education Department
221 Walnut Street
Des Moines, IA 50309

Discussion questions adapted from The Peking Acrobats 2015 study guide.
RESOURCES AND SOURCES

CLASSROOM RESOURCES

*Online collection of lesson plans and multimedia resources for various grade levels related to different forms of Chinese arts.*

"Children Acrobats." 
*Video of 4 impressive child acrobats competing on a Chinese television show called “Who’s the Hero”.*
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo3KZPrTD5M

Acrobat Training Photo Series, by photojournalist Natalie Behring. 
*See photos of children training at the famous Zai Ming Acrobatic School in Wuqiao, which for many families is seen as an avenue out of poverty for their children.*
https://www.flickr.com/photos/chinapix/sets/72057594057177983/

STUDY GUIDE SOURCES

"Artful Online." Perpich Center for Arts Education. 
http://opd.mpls.k12.mn.us/perpich_center_for_arts_education_artful_online


Orway Center for the Performing Arts. Shangri-La Acrobats Study Guide. 
http://www.ordway.org/education/studyguides/

The Peking Acrobats. Official Website. 
http://www.chineseacrobats.com/pa.php

BOOKS

Chinese acrobatics grew out of a folk custom. Read a selection of folktales to learn more about the folkways of the Chinese people.


