Suggested Study Guide*

BEFORE SEEING THE PERFORMANCE

1. Ask the class to brainstorm all that they know about China and the Chinese people.
2. Ask students to locate China on a map of the world. How does China's geographic location, size, and different climates affect the daily lives of the people there? How has China's location and different climates affected Chinese history?
3. Have students read and discuss the attached information about the city of Beijing, Chinese daily life, politics, theatre, and the background on Chinese acrobatics.
4. Discuss capitalism and socialism as economic systems. Discuss democracy and communism as governmental systems. What are the pros and cons of each system? How would your daily life be different if you did not live in a Western democracy?
5. Based on the attached information, have the students compare their daily lives to the daily life of an acrobat-in-training? How does their routine differ? How is it the same?
6. Review the attached vocabulary list. Or, assign a portion of the list to different groups of students and have them provide definitions. Have the groups share their definitions with the class as they relate to the actual definitions from the list.

AFTER SEEING THE PERFORMANCE

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 that? Follow the same creative process to depict one of your joys.
3. What have you learned about China or the Chinese people through the acrobat's performance that you found most interesting?
4. Using the attached information and what you saw in the performance, consider all the training that goes into being an acrobat. What does acrobatics show you about the human race and our capabilities? Compare training to be an acrobat to striving for your individual goals in life.
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. If someone asked you about the performance you saw, what would you tell them about and why would you pick that particular part?
7. Consider the myths discussed in the attached study guide. How does your new knowledge of the truth behind these myths change the way you look at the subject? Does it change at all? Is the subject clearer to you now?

**Please note that this is only a suggested guide. As each group of students differs, instructors may wish to focus on only a few of the proposed topics of discussion or create their own study guide more suited to their particular student group. An original study guide may be derived from the attached background on China, the bibliography provided, or by using other sources of choice. The Management hopes that your students enjoy this cultural experience and that it deepens their understanding of this unique culture and art form!*

CHINA AND HER PEOPLE

A Brief Overview

Peking (pron. ***pee*** *king or* ***pay*** *king)*, which means "Northern Capital" in Chinese, has been a center of civilization for thousands of years. Some of the earliest known pre-historic human beings inhabited the area around Peking. Sometime between 1918 and 1939 the fossilized remains of Peking Man (also known as *homo erectus pekinensis*), who lived about 50,000 years ago, were found in a village around 30 miles southwest of Peking. It is also certain that nearly 3,000 years ago, Neolithic communities existed on or near the location of present day Peking. In the early part of the 20th century, the city of Peking was renamed Beijing (pron. *bay* ***jing****)* because, as the story goes, foreigners who visited the city kept mispronouncing the word Peking!

The earliest and longest enduring system of government in China was the Dynasty, beginning around 2070 BC. During this period, an emperor ruled until he died or passed the throne on to his first-born son, nephew, or grandson. As a result of political upheaval in 1911 led by revolutionaries, the most famous of whom was Sun Yat-sen, the Dynastic system of government finally ended. Years of war and civil conflict followed. In 1949, the Communist Party of China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, took control of China's mainland, and it became the People's Republic of China. Communism is a form of society where all businesses, property, foods, goods, and services are owned and operated by the government. Today, although private enterprise does exit and is flourishing in China in many areas of endeavor and industry, most Chinese citizens are employed by the government and receive wages, housing, health care and an education from the government as compensation for their work.

The citizens of modern Beijing are diverse and multi-faceted, as the old embraces the new with great fervor. The Chinese are now able to enjoy many of the modern conveniences that we in the West have come to take for granted. While many still commute to work and school by bus or bicycle, the influences of the West can increasingly be seen in fancy cars, glossy high-rise apartments, shopping malls, cell phones, computers, and fast food restaurants. During their leisure time, young people in particular enjoy a wide range of activities, many involving modern technology like playing video games, chatting with friends on their cell phones, enjoying DVDs at home, and surfing the Internet.

While such innovations were once rare or even forbidden in China, today they are more prevalent than ever, allowing the Chinese to reap the many benefits of modern technology. Simultaneously, the Chinese also adhere to many traditional ways of life. Many people practice the ancient art of T'ai Chi ch'uan (a Chinese form of exercise and meditation), either alone or in groups in parks.

Young people in Beijing enjoy taking day trips to the numerous historical sites, like the tombs of the Ming emperors, and the Great Wall. The older people of Beijing, especially the men, gather in restaurants and tearooms, to talk or sit quietly, pondering life and its responsibilities. Children in China learn early to appreciate and revere their elderly relatives. Even though living space is at a premium in Beijing, families try to be responsible for aging parents, grandparents, and other elderly relatives. Because these elders have given of themselves to raise and educate the families of tomorrow, the Chinese people give the elderly great respect for their wisdom from life's experiences.

The ambition of most families is to provide their children with a higher education or, if this is not possible, to secure them a good job. For many, the Chinese government takes over in the education of the nation where the family leaves off. The Chinese government still runs most schools, universities, and technical schools. School begins for children at age 6 when they start Kindergarten. After five years of Chinese language, arithmetic, physical education, music, art, natural science, and political doctrine, Chinese students enter ordinary middle schools. Here, students take classes in politics, Chinese language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, foreign languages, history, geography, basic agriculture, physical education, music, and art. Students attend ordinary middle school for six years. Most Chinese students do not return to their studies after middle school and work instead in a factory, on a farm, in the military, or in other forms of government service.

As the cultural and political center of China, Beijing houses political institutions, prestigious universities, art museums, and theatres. Beijing has a long and rich theatrical history, dating back centuries to the Shang dynasty (1523-1028 BC). During the rule of the Shang dynasty, "seers" performed ceremonial songs and dances to honor the gods, invoking them to drive out pestilence, cause crops to be abundant, or create other "miracles." By the Han dynasty, (around 202 BC) court entertainers were very popular. Clowns, wrestlers, acrobats, singers, and musicians entertained emperors and their attendants by acting out mythical stories and famous fables.

These entertainments were the precursors of Peking Opera, which is a multi-faceted art form. Peking Opera combines singing, dancing, acrobatics, martial arts, pantomime, highly stylized acting, costume, make-up, and more to create fantastic stage productions. The fundamental belief of Chinese theatregoers is that theatre, at best, should be an illusion of life. Good Chinese theatre must show the real struggle of humans to succeed and survive, as well as the joys of living. THE PEKING ACROBATS take part in the philosophy of Peking Opera and bring it to the world. Acrobatics as an art form displays the grace, beauty, strength, and agility of the human race. In their performances, THE PEKING ACROBATS make possible feats of the seemingly impossible, right before your very eyes!

To be able to do this requires a lot of dedication, determination, and years of study and practice. In China, being selected to become an acrobat is an honor, and brings with it a great deal of prestige and the possibility of international travel. Parents encourage their children to audition for acrobatic schools; however, this is also a great sacrifice for parents and students. If selected, the acrobatic school they attend will often be far away from family, friends, and the lives with which the students are familiar. Once selected to attend a special acrobatic school, students take their general education classes in the morning hours. In the afternoon, they will practice gymnastics, juggling, martial arts, and the dynamics of balance, speed, and timing to perfect their craft - the students do this *every day, six days a week*!

Most acrobats begin their life in art at around age 6, but most are not selected to become part of a professional performing troupe until they are around 16 years of age, which is the age of emancipation in China, whereas here in the West a young person becomes an adult at 18 years old. There are some acrobats who excel at their studies, and are selected to become professional performers when they are as young as 13 or 14 years of age. Imagine being chosen for a professional troupe and traveling the world at such a young age! While on tour, the acrobat will see many corners of the globe and will meet new and different people. THE PEKING ACROBATS are truly representatives of their country and art, and they take great pride in being selected to perform for audiences like you!

DAILY LIFE FOR THE PEKING ACROBATS®

A typical day in the life of THE PEKING ACROBATS while they are on tour consists of early mornings on the bus to drive to the city where they will perform that evening or the next day. Upon arrival, they go to their hotel and get settled into their rooms. Then, they go to the theatre where they prepare for their performance. After the performance, there may be a reception or brief party where the acrobats meet and greet audience members. After this, it's back to the hotel, where everyone has a good night's sleep before starting all over again the next day.

During their time off, they spend their time much like Western young people. They might organize a quick game of soccer, badminton, or table tennis. They listen to Asian pop or other kinds of music, they play video games, text, and e-mail their families and friends at home, they go to the movies when there is time on the road, they enjoy a swim at their hotel, or simply read a book and have a rest! In essence, the performers are very much like young people here in the West, only they travel the world sharing their incredible physical talents and showmanship with vast audiences.

The performers see a great deal of America while on tour and enjoy meeting people from all walks of life in their travels. When they return home to China, they have a wealth of memories that they eagerly share with their families and friends. Becoming a member of THE PEKING ACROBATS means hard work and being far from home for long periods, but it also offers benefits such as traveling and fun!

THE PEKING ACROBATS are directed by the Hai family, who are very famous acrobats in China and the US. Their clan boasts three generations of acrobatic tradition. This troupe will astound, amaze, and inspire you, while at the same time providing a taste of Chinese culture and bringing us a little closer to mutual understanding between all peoples!

CHINESE ACROBATIC MYTH-BUSTERS!

THE PEKING ACROBATS begin training at a very young age. While they make everything appear easy on stage, there is a great deal of difficulty associated with the feats they perform. Because of their unique abilities, many myths have been perpetuated about both contortionists and acrobats. While most of these myths come from people's unfamiliarity with human anatomy and physiology, some are just falsehoods that were invented and perpetuated down through the years in an effort to mystify a given performer's skills. The concept of mystification occurs when a truth is purposely hidden to confuse or bewilder another person or a group of people. The truth is that a contortionist or any flexible athlete has to work hard most of their lives, combining diet and exercise with practice and discipline, to be able to perform these amazing feats.

Contortionism is an unusual form of physical display which involves the dramatic bending and flexing of the human body. Contortion is often part of acrobatics and circus acts. In general, contortionists do have a certain degree of unusual natural flexibility, which is enhanced through years of gymnastic training and physical discipline. These performers have inspired comic book characters, such as the Elongated Man, who is a DC Comics superhero and a reserve member of the Justice League! With all of this mystery surrounding the acrobats' abilities, it is no wonder that there have been so many myths created to explain how they do it. Let us explore and bust some of those myths right now!

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." Their extreme bending abilities were not actually the result of their medicines, but were simple the unusual flexibility of the contortionist.

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 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. Since some loose-jointed people are able to pop a joint out of its socket without pain, it may be hard to tell whether a joint is actually dislocated without an x-ray. However, as long as the joint socket is the right shape, most extreme bends can be achieved without dislocating the joint. Actual dislocations are rarely used during athletic contortion acts since they make the joint more unstable and prone to injury. It important to note that 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, including every degree of flexibility in between. 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. THE PEKING ACROBATS spend years training, stretching and exercising everyday to be as flexible as they are. They attend special schools where they spend half of their school day just training to be acrobats one day. Even after they have left school, it is very important for them to continue training. They spend weeks rehearsing for their shows before they go out on tour, and along with their one to two hour performances, five to eight times a week, they stretch and warm up before every show.

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. There are a relatively small number of professional performers who claim they were not unusually flexible before undergoing years of intense training. Those who have naturally flexible joints, however, start out with an advantage, both in knowing that they have an aptitude for contortion, and the amount of flexibility they can eventually achieve.

A PEKING ACROBAT is not born, but nurtured. Many of the acrobats in China descend from families of acrobats. These families of acrobats begin training their children at a very young age; some even start training as soon as they can walk. Many families send their children to special schools devoted to the arts, beginning at age 6. At these schools, they devote half of their day to honing their acrobatic skills, including contortionism and other facets of the art. And in their teen years, some will be chosen to join an international touring company like THE PEKING ACROBATS.

THE LION DANCE: THE LEGEND

Not only are there myths about the acrobats, but there are also myths about where the acts they perform originated. Of all China's cultural festivities, the Lion Dance is one of the most amazing to watch. It combines theatre, music, history, and Kung Fu to create a spectacle that dates back thousands of years. The Lion Dance is a part of many festivities, like the Chinese New Year, planting and harvest festivals, openings of businesses, and weddings. The Lion Dance is believed to chase away evil spirits, bring good luck, longevity, happiness, and prosperity. The Lion symbolizes strength, happiness, courage, and power, making the Lion Dance a favorite entertainment of the ancient Chinese Emperors, as well as the common man.

Although lions are not native to China, their stories date back to the Han Dynasty (205 – 220 B.C.), when they were first sent across Asia as gifts from the Persian Empire to the Chinese Emperors in order to gain the right to trade with Silk Road merchants. Many different stories have been told about the origins of the Lion Dance, and following are just a few of these great myths:

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), which sounds similar to 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, 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, the Lions always dance and when they do, they are frightening away the evil spirits for yet another year (or, Nian)!

Another popular belief is that the Lion Dance finds its roots in the Tang Dynasty (618-906 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.

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 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 teases it 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.

Another version of the Lion Dance is colored with military significance. In this version, the Lion’s head, carved of wood, and the tail, made of fine silk, bends and weaves as the lion gazes to the west in hopes of returning to his homeland, which was lost to invading barbarians. The “Lion Boys” are performers costumed symbolically as the invaders who tease the lion. The Lion’s homesick sentiments, displayed by other skillful acrobatics, were meant to inspire the militant fervor of generals and warriors in frontier areas to recover lost lands.

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SUGGESTED VOCABULARY LIST

acrobat--one who is skilled in feats of balance and agility in gymnastics.

audition--a “hearing” or trial performance by an actor, dancer or musician to demonstrate suitability or skill.

capitalism--an economic system in which the means of production and distribution are privately owned for profit.

communism--an economic theory or system of the ownership of all property by the community as a whole.

commute--to travel some distance regularly between one’s home and work or school.

compensation--that which is given or received as an equivalent for services, debt, want, loss, suffering.

dedication--selfless devotion.

doctrine--ideas or theories that are taught; teachings of a set of ideas or theories.

dynamics--the branch of mechanics that is concerned with the effects of forces on the motion of a body or system of bodies, especially of forces that do not originate within the system itself.

dynasty--a lord or ruler; a succession of rulers who belong to the same family; also, the period during which a certain family reigns, as in the Ch’in Dynasty.

fossil--any hardened remains or traces of plant or animal life of some previous geological period, preserved in rock formations in the earth’s crust.

invoke--to call upon for blessing, help, inspiration, or protection.

myth--a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being, hero, or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation. An unproved or false collective belief that is used to justify a social institution or set of beliefs.

mystification--something obfuscated or hidden to confuse or bewilder another person or group of people.

neolithic--desginating the latter part of the Stone Age, during which man developed polished stone tools and weapons, raised cattle, etc.

pantomime--a drama played in actions and gestures to the accompaniment of words sung by chorus or music.

pestilence--any virulent or fatal contagious disease.

precursor--one who or that which goes before.

ponder--to think deeply; to deliberate; to meditate.

revere--to regard with deep respect, love, awe, and affection.

seers--a prophet; one who foretells; a soothsayer.

troupe--a company or group of touring actors, singers, dancers, and etc.

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