

# The National Acrobats of the People's Republic of China Teacher Guide

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## About the Performers

Direct from Beijing, The National Acrobats of The People's Republic of China (China National Acrobatic Troupe) was the first National Performing Arts Troupe established by the government of the People's Republic of China in 1950. It has performed intensively throughout the world annually around the globe. The Company's repertoire includes a myriad of International and National Gold Prize winning Acts, such as "Slack Wire" (Presidential Gold Award at the 24th Cirque de Demain Festival in Paris), "Diabolo" (Presidential Gold Award at the 26th Cirque de Demain Festival in Paris), "Pagoda of Bowls" (Golden Clown Award at the 28th Monte Carlo International Circus Festival) and among others. The Company's Acts have received sensational reviews both at home and abroad for numbers such as "China Soul", "Reverie", "Acrobatic Spectacular" and "Splendid".

Based in Beijing, China, the Company owns a large Institution for Acrobatic Schooling, Training and Repertoire. The Institution has over 150 Acrobatic resident performers and over 500 Acrobatic Students of all ages. Funded by a special grant from the Beijing Municipality, the Company invests each year in new productions as well as acrobatic science research and creation in addition to the training facilities of the center, which with its dedication to improvement of and renewing of Acrobatic standards has become one of the largest Acrobatic and Circus Arts Center's in China and the world.

The Company has toured abroad to over forty countries including Switzerland, Israel, Finland, Italy, France, Germany, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, India, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Costa Rica, Dominica Republic, Sweden, Mexico, Russia, Portugal and Spain. In 2011 the Company will make its inaugural tour of the United States and Canada.

## About the Art Form

### 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. 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 unpleasant. In a basic handstand, one is upside down with all the body’s weight on the wrist, shoulder and lower back. There is natural pressure to want to come down and, since the hands are the body’s 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.

### ★ Think!

- When do students typically start studying acrobatics?
- Name the four core skill students learn in their training.
- What is considered to be the essence of Chinese acrobatics?



# Signature Chinese Acrobatic Acts

**Spinning Plates:** Thirteen acrobats spin plates on two iron sticks, dancing all the while.

**Contortion:** Performers twist into unbelievable knots while balancing precariously perched objects.

**Leather Straps:** Using great strength, four men suspend and balance themselves in midair with leather straps.

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

**Aerial Silk:** A romantic aerial act featuring a man and woman who perform acrobatic tricks while hanging from strips of silk.

**Single Hand Balancing:** On top of a perch, a performer balances her entire body using the strength of one arm.

**Grand Acrobatics & Martial Arts:** The entire company creates pyramids and performs spectacular balancing and tumbling acts while a martial arts performer displays his martial arts skills.

**Straw Hats Juggling:** Ten acrobats juggle, throw and catch hats in a breathtaking performance.

**Balance on Benches:** In this traditional Chinese circus act that is rarely seen today, acrobats balance several benches on their feet.

**Diablo:** Performed in China for over 1,000 years, two acrobats perform tricks with a kind of yo-yo connected with string to sticks of bamboo.

**Russian Bar:** Acrobats do somersaults and other feats on a beam that is balanced on the shoulders of two performers.

**Icarian Acrobatics:** Performers tumble and do somersaults on each other's feet.

**Acrobatics of Five:** Contorting and balancing their bodies, performers create beautiful stage pictures.

**Lasso:** Performers show off their mastery of ropes in a series of tricks.

**Bicycle:** Sixteen acrobats perform on moving bicycles.





# History of Chinese Acrobatics



Acrobatics is a time-honored art form in China. With a long and rich history, acrobatics has become 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), though it is more likely that acrobatics were not developed until approximately 2,500 years ago when its impressive physical feats caught the attention of the country's powerful emperors. Acrobatic arts were developed during the Warring States Period (475BC-221BC), evolving from the working lives of people in Wuyiqiao (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 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.

## Family Acrobatic Troupes

Traditional acrobatic troupes were family-owned, making their living roaming the countryside as street performers. Many famous acrobats continued this lifestyle through many generations, including the Dung family and the Chen Family. The Dung Family was known for their magic acts, while the Chen Family was famous for their unique style of juggling, with a signature act that used as many as eight badminton rackets at one time. Other acrobatic troupes have tried to match the skill level of the Chen family's juggling feats with little success. Family acrobatic troupes would teach only their own children and close relatives their secrets to keep the techniques and traditions within the family last name. (This was also the case in Europe, where circus families continued through many generations).



### ★ Think!

- Name five signature Chinese acrobatic acts.
- Name a festival in which acrobatics is used to celebrate.
- How long have acrobatics existed in China?
- What is the character name of the acrobat role in Chinese Opera?

# The Chinese Opera



The main features of Chinese Opera are a spectacle of song and dance which, together with the colorful costumes, make-up, acrobats, jesters, storytellers, acting, poetry and martial arts combine to present the Opera in a very attractive way.

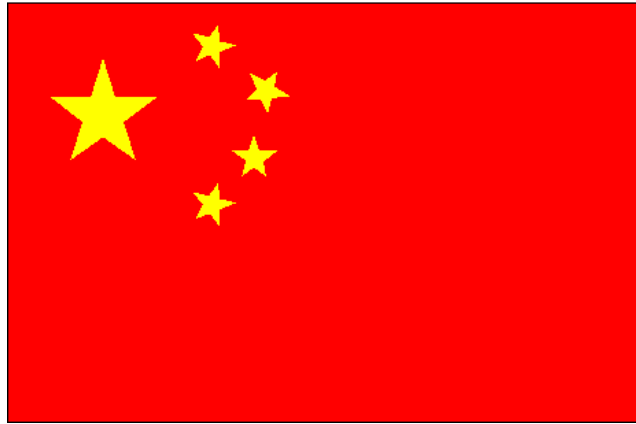
The earliest known theatre appeared in the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960 to 1279) with a square stage enclosed by railings. During the period of first emperor Kublai Khan in the Yuan Dynasty (A.D. 1279 to 1368) the opera had evolutionary changes and the period was classified as the Golden age of the Classical Opera. In the 19th Century the Opera was dominated by a form called Peking Opera featuring colorful costumes, elaborate make up, facial expressions and was spoken and sung in Mandarin dialect. Other operatic forms also evolved using the dialects of different areas, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chiu Zhou and Suzhou. The plays come from legendary tales and some are interpretations of actual historical events such as "The Three Kingdoms" and the "Outlaws of the Marsh".

The majority of the Operatic Clothing design came from the Ming Dynasty (A.D. 1368 -1644). The magnificent embroideries, the gorgeous headdresses, the jeweled girdles for the men, the hair ornaments for the women, the high court shoes which help to increase the height of the performers and the different styles of face painting are the most attractive features people would like to explore.

In the Chinese Opera, there are generally four main categories of roles: sheng (the male roles), dan (the female roles), jing (the painted face roles), and chou (clowns). Each category is further subdivided into distinct types. An actor typically trains for a single type of role within one category. Actors who can play multiple types of roles within a single category are considered especially talented. An actor almost never plays roles outside his or her category. The Wu Sheng, or acrobat, performs much of the most exciting elements of Chinese Opera. A special Wu Sheng role is that of the Monkey King, featured in a number of operas based on the famous story A Journey to the West.

Costumes and makeup are very important in Chinese Opera. Character's faces are usually painted different colors to suggest specific traits. Red stands for courage, loyalty and straight forwardness. Black represents impulsiveness and Blue, cruelty. White stands for wickedness and a white nose represents joviality.

## Facts About China



- The fourth largest country in the world, China is slightly smaller than the United States. Its population of 1.3 billion is the largest in the world—more than four times that of the U.S.

### Population Control

- Most of Chinese history is recorded by the family names of the dynasties. During most of recorded history —through the 15th century— China was the most advanced country in the world in terms of technological development and culture.

- Because of its huge growth, China struggles with pollution issues. 70% of the water in China is polluted and only 1% of the 560 million city dwellers breathe air that is considered safe.

- Married people of the Han majority (92% of the population) are allowed to give birth to only one child except if the parents are both single children themselves (then they may have two). Minority families may have as many children as they wish.

- 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 a capitalist economy.

- Children start school at age six and attend for nine years. Average classes have sixty students. Primary education is free, but parents pay for everything from paper to electric bills. Parents pay for secondary education. To continue into high school, students must do well on a series of tests.

# Learning Activities

## Social Studies

Headlines about China

- Ask students to search for news about China on television, radio, the internet, newspapers or magazines. They may make up their own headlines or write a one paragraph version of stories they've seen or heard.
- Have students share their news stories about China with each other and then discuss the current events and topics.

Extensions:

- As a class, choose articles that are most interesting to the students. In groups of four or five, have students research the topic in more depth, and share a brief presentation with the class.
- Ask students to brainstorm together what they know about China, the Chinese people, and the Chinese government. Invite them to write a few paragraphs about what it might be like to live in China. In what ways might it be different from the way they live here?

*Kansas State Standards*

*High School & Middle School Social Studies:*

- *Economics Standard: The student uses a working knowledge and understanding of major economic concepts, issues, and systems applying decision-making skills as a consumer, producer, saver, investor, and citizen of Kansas and the United States living in an interdependent world.*
- *Geography: The student uses a working knowledge and understanding of the spatial organization of Earth's surface and relationships between peoples and places and physical and human environments in order to explain the interactions that occur in Kansas, the United States, and in our world.*
- *History Standard: The student uses a working knowledge and understanding of significant individuals, groups, ideas, events, eras and developments in the history of Kansas, the United States, and the world, utilizing essential analytical and research skills.*

## Visual Arts & English Language Arts

Discussion and Activity:

Ask students to think about the National Acrobats of China's performance.

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

*Kansas Common Core Standards*

*Middle School & High School Language Arts & Literacy*

- *Text Types and Purposes*
- *Production and Distribution of Writing*
- *Presentation of knowledge and ideas*
- *Knowledge of Language*

*Kansas State Standards*

*Visual Arts*

- *Using Knowledge of the Elements of Art and the Principles of Design*

## Resources

Cirque de Soleil

<http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/home.aspx#/en/home/about.aspx>

Short video clips of acrobatics and other elements of performance.



New Shanghai Circus

<http://acrobatsofchina.com/en/>

Performing troupes website. Includes information, pictures, and video.

Lonely Planet

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/china>

Lonely Planet's travel guide to china. Information about monuments, geography, pictures, video, etc.

*This guide was created for teachers taking part in the yearlong Teacher's China Workshop. The workshop is a yearlong exploration for teachers in our area to learn more about the Chinese culture, history and art. The workshop was organized by the Lied Center of Kansas, KU's Center for East Asian Studies, The Spencer Museum of Art and KU Theatre. There will be additional guides as we journey through the various Chinese focused events and performances here at KU.*

***We hope the general public finds these guides useful as well.***

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