

# GOLDEN DRAGON ACROBATS

## FROM CHINA



## — STUDY GUIDE —

Originally from Cangzhou, Hebei province, in the People's Republic of China, the Golden Dragon Acrobats have toured for more than 30 years to international acclaim. They practice the rigorous art of Chinese Acrobatics, an art form that first became popular in China 2,500 years ago. The 25 acrobats are athletes, actors and artists who have trained since childhood. They will amaze your class with acrobatic feats they perform using their bodies and simple props including everyday objects like plates, jugs, bicycles, umbrellas and more.

This study guide will prepare your students for their upcoming performance.

Your students can actively participate at the performance by:

- **OBSERVING** how the performers use their bodies
- **MARVELING** at the skill demonstrated by the performers
- **THINKING ABOUT** all the practice that goes into each act
- **REFLECTING** on the sounds, sights, and performance skills on display at the theater



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# 1 Theater Etiquette

## **Be prepared and arrive early.**

Ideally you should arrive at the theater 30 to 45 minutes before the show. Allow for travel time and parking, and plan to be in your seats at least 15 minutes before the performance begins.

## **Be aware and remain quiet.**

The theater is a “live” space—you can hear the performers easily, but they can also hear you, and you can hear other audience members, too! Even the smallest sounds, like rustling papers and whispering, can be heard throughout the theater, so it’s best to stay quiet so that everyone can enjoy the performance without distractions. The international sign for “Quiet Please” is to silently raise your index finger to your lips.

## **Show appreciation by applauding.**

Applause is the best way to show your enthusiasm and appreciation. Performers return their appreciation for your attention by bowing to the audience at the end of the show. It is always appropriate to applaud at the end of a performance, and it is customary to continue clapping until the curtain comes down or the house lights come up.

## **Participate by responding to the action onstage.**

Sometimes during a performance, you may respond by laughing, crying or sighing. By all means, feel free to do so! Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form. For instance, an audience attending a string quartet performance will sit very quietly, while the audience at a gospel concert may be inspired to participate by clapping and shouting.

## **Concentrate to help the performers.**

Performers use concentration to focus their energy while on stage. If the audience is focused while watching the performance, the artists feel supported and are able to do their best work. They can feel that you are with them.



# 2 About the Performance

## Guiding Questions:

- What makes the Golden Dragon Acrobats performance special?
- When do acrobats start training?
- What are some of the things the acrobats will do at the performance?

The performance will feature astounding acrobatics with theatrical enhancements and Chinese traditional dance. The group features contortionists, tumblers and jugglers in acts such as plate-spinning, bicycle pagoda and juggling everything from balls to umbrellas using not only hands but feet. The acrobats will be seen perching atop a 30 foot tower of chairs, bending like rubber and balancing human pyramids while riding moving bicycles. With performers trained in the rigorous art of Chinese acrobatics since early youth, the Golden Dragon Acrobats have garnered international acclaim.



# 3 About the Artists

The Golden Dragon Acrobats hail from Cangzhou, Hebei province, in the People's Republic of China and have toured the United States continuously since 1978. Its 25 members are athletes, actors and artists who have studied and trained for their craft since early childhood. The group has performed in all 50 states and in over 65 countries across the world. The Golden Dragon Acrobat troupe had its Broadway debut at the New Victory Theater in 2005, and was nominated for two Drama Desk Awards for its performance.

The group's founder, producer and director, Danny Chang, is one of the world's leading promoters of Chinese acrobatics. He began his training at the age of eight with his family's acrobatic school in Taipei, and began performing with its touring wing, the Golden Dragon Acrobats, at age ten. He is the recipient of many awards, including the prestigious Medal for International Faith and Goodwill by the Republic of China's Coordination Council for North American Affairs.

## — STAFF FOR THE GOLDEN DRAGON ACROBATS —

Producer, Director: Danny Chang  
Choreographer, Costume Designer: Angela Chang  
Administrative Director: Jessie Liu  
Technical Director: Randy Williamson  
Technical Assistant: Gregory Kouvolos

## — LIST OF PERFORMERS —

### Male

Tian Jun Zhang  
Yang Liu  
Xiao Meng Guo  
Xian Yang Guo  
Jun Wei Zuo  
Jun Hao Zuo  
Qiang Qiang Liu  
Kai Zhang

### Female

Shao Zheng Wang  
Qi Qi Hou  
Ping Gao  
Ting Ting Zhong  
Guan Wei Zu  
Li Ying Yan  
Hong Xing Chen  
Ya Ru Wang

# 4 About the Art Form

## Guiding Questions:

- What kinds of props do the acrobats use?
- How is Chinese culture reflected in the performance?
- What are the four basic acrobatic skills?

Acrobatic acts have evolved throughout the history of China. China is credited with producing some of the best acrobats in the world. Chinese acrobats maintain a notable style and standard routines. However, there are some similarities between the acrobatic schools of different countries. All recognizable circuses have juggling acts, trapeze acts, handstand acts and comic relief. Differences are reflected in theatrical presentation, including music, novelty acts such as clowns, and lighting.

## Signature Chinese Acrobatic acts:

**Hoop Diving:** This act is over 2,000 years old. Also called “Dashing Through Narrows,” it was once known as “Swallow Play” because the performers imitated the flying movements of swallows (birds) as they leapt nimbly through narrow rings.

**Unicycle bowl flip:** In a relatively new feat, an acrobat rides a very tall unicycle on a round table, kicking up bowls, kettles and spoons with perfect grace, and piling them on her head.







**Chinese Vase:** Acrobats playfully squeeze into tiny brightly colored vases as they perform tricky acrobatics—smiling all the while.

**Rolling Balance Contortionist:** Graceful and beautiful bending and twisting into unbelievable knots, frequently while balancing precariously perched objects on every limb.

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

**Chinese Diabolo:** Performed in China for over 100 years, two sticks of bamboo are connected with string to spin an additional piece of wood (like a yo-yo) back and fourth in a variety of timed movements. The Chinese Diabolo makes a whistling sound when it spins.

**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, as when a performer spins 12 china plates with both hands while in a head-stand on a rubber ball!





**Chair stacking handstand:** A collective act involving two to seven acrobats and as many or more chairs. While on a pagoda or ladder of chairs, the performers practice handstands and other stunts requiring tremendous arm strength, as well as superior balancing skill.

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

**Foot Juggling:** Many different objects can be used in juggling. Jar juggling demonstrates simplicity and steadiness. Originally, peasants used grain containers to perform various feats in celebration of a bumper harvest. Later, jar tricks were adapted by acrobats and became one of their most popular entertainments. Performers lie on a special seat and juggle or catch objects with their feet. Long ago, in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), jugglers manipulated bottles, plates and jars with their feet. Now performers toss tables, umbrellas, rugs and any number of household items.



**Lion and Dragon acts:** 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, exhibiting attributes such as strength, agility and tranquility. Accompanied by traditional percussion instruments, this act creates a jubilant and festive atmosphere.



Acrobatic acts are performed either solo or in groups. Group acts require team cooperation, trust and constant communication. The disadvantage of a group act is that when one performer becomes incapacitated or decides to leave 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 doesn't need to spend two years learning the four basic acrobatic skills; tumbling, flexibility, handstand, dance.



## Acrobatic Training and Handstands

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 handstand, tumbling, flexibility, and dance. Every student will usually have greater talent for one of the four core acrobatic skills. Among the four, handstand is the most important. Many of the signature acrobatic acts have some form of handstand in the performance. Master teachers have commented that, “handstand training is to acrobats what studying the human body is to a medical student.” It is the essence of Chinese acrobatics. An acrobat goes through progressive steps to learn basic to advanced handstands. Handstand training directly affects three areas of the body, shoulders, lower back, and wrists. A weakness in any one of these three areas of the body will compromise the development of learning the handstand. In China, the basic handstand is learned by 6-8 year olds. This is first done against the wall. In three to six months of full time training, students start off with increments of one minute and build up to one half hour of wall handstands. During this time, the three areas of the body are getting stronger and stronger. Students will develop the ability to hold the free handstand shortly after this time.

Holding a still handstand is translated in Chinese as the “Dead handstand.” A good handstand is one that has good form and versatility. A versatile handstand is a position from which the acrobat is able to execute many variations. The handstand is the most disliked training aspect for the young students. When one is upside down in a basic handstand, all of one’s weight is on the wrist, shoulder and lower back, so there is natural pressure to want to come down. There is absolutely no way to cheat while in a handstand, because once you are upside-down, only your two hands are on the floor holding you up. 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 importance it has in strengthening the body, mind and spirit of the acrobat.



# 5 History of Chinese Acrobats

The art of Chinese Acrobatics is an ancient tradition that began in China more than 2,000 years ago. Over its long and rich history, acrobatics has developed as one of the most popular art forms among the Chinese people. While many historical records provide evidence for the development of Chinese acrobatics as far back as the Xia Dynasty (4,000 years ago), it is most commonly held that the art form did not become wildly popular until approximately 2,500 years ago when it began to capture the attention of the country's powerful emperors. Acrobatics first developed during the Warring States Period (475BC-221BC), evolving

from the working lives of its people in Wuyao county, located in Hebei Province. It was natural that acrobats first used the things around them— instruments of labor such as tridents, wicker rings and articles of daily use such as tables, chairs, jars, plates and bowls— as performance props, to experiment with balancing and performing other acrobatic tricks. In a time when China was traditionally an agricultural society, where there were no electronic gadgets or telephones, people had time to use their imaginations to learn new skills such as acrobatics. And these acts were incorporated into community celebrations, for example, to celebrate a bountiful harvest. This unorganized form of entertainment and leisure eventually evolved into a form of performance that became recognizable to the Chinese people.

During the Han Dynasty (221BC-220AD) these rudimentary acts of acrobatics developed into the “Hundred Plays.” Many more acts were soon to develop. Music accompaniment and other theatrical elements were added as interest in the art form grew among the emperors. According to the stone engravings unearthed at Yinan County of Shandong Province in 1954, there were superb acrobatic performances with music accompaniment on the acrobatic stage of



*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.*

2,000 years ago, including acts that are familiar to this day, such as Pole Climbing, Rope-Walking (the present day Tight-Wire Feats), Fish Turned into Dragon (the present day Conjuring) and Five Tables (like the present Balancing on Chairs). In the Tang Dynasty, known for its extraordinary flourishing of Chinese culture, the number of acrobats greatly increased and their performing skills much improved. The famous poets of that time, Bai Juyi and Yuan Chen, wrote poems on acrobatic performances. In the Dunhuang mural painting “Lady Song Going on a Journey,” there are images of acrobatic and circus 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.



### **Family Acrobatic Troupes**

Acrobatic troupes were traditionally family-owned, and members made their living roaming the countryside as street performers for their livelihood. Many of the famous acrobatic families in China continued this tradition through many generations. Two famous acrobatic families were the Dung family and the Chen Family. Throughout China, the Dung Family was known for their magic. The Chen Family was famous for their unique style of juggling, with a signature program using as many as eight badminton rackets at one time. Other acrobatic troupes have tried to match the skill level of juggling of the Chen family with little success. It was common practice that family acrobatic troupes would only teach their own children and close relatives the secrets of their acts in order to keep the secret techniques within the family last name and carry on traditions. [Note: This was also the case in European circus families, where circus families were continued through many generations.]





### Acrobatics in China after 1949

On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was formally established, with its national capital at Beijing (known in the West as "Peking"). All the companies and businesses in the nation became the government's property, including the acrobatic troupes. Generally, the Communist government approved of acrobatics as an art of the people, not an elite art form. The people's government made great efforts to foster and develop national arts and acrobatics gained a new life as every province, municipality and autonomous region set up their own acrobatic troupes. In Communist theory, everyone is provided for and taken care of equally: the term "Iron Rice Bowl" means all eat out of the same rice bowl. For acrobatic troupes, this meant that operational costs for acrobatic troupes were subsidized by the local governments and didn't need to worry about meeting annual financial earnings. However, while in China, Wayne saw inconsistencies, as people in

powerful government positions received more financially and have many perks. In the "new" China, there have been great improvements in contents and skill of acrobatics. Acrobatic leaders have set up a designing and directing system aimed at creating graceful stage images, harmonious musical accompaniment and Mao Tse-Tong (1893–1976), founder of the People's Republic of China, greets Chinese acrobats good supporting effects of costumes, props and lighting to turn their performances into a full-fledged stage art. The present Chinese acrobatics is full of optimism, determined to reflect the industry, resourcefulness, courage and undaunted spirit of the Chinese people. Additionally, recent changes in government structure in China, including more freedom to create and build, have led to dramatic improvements in the working lives of acrobats. Now, they can form their own performing groups, look for show opportunities and perform later into adulthood. In current times, there are over 100 government operated acrobatic troupes and hundreds more family and private troupes performing in China.

# 6 Learning Activities

## Performance and Culture • Questions for Students:

1. How many years do acrobatics go back in Chinese history?
2. At what age do acrobats typically begin training in China?
3. What types props are used in acrobatic routines?
4. Can you name three of the major cities in China?
5. Why do acrobats wear colorful costumes?
6. Name the 4 basic acrobatic skills learned 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. Name one word to describe acrobatics?
10. Can you remember one major Chinese holiday celebration that always features acrobats?



**Visual Arts • Discussion and Activity:**

Think about the Golden Dragon Acrobats performance. Which amazing feat was your favorite? Discuss what you liked best about the show and why. Create an advertisement for a future Golden Dragon Acrobats performance. Make sure to incorporate an illustration and words that you think reflect the best part of the show.

**Vocabulary Builder**

Practice dictionary skills and build vocabulary. Look through the study guide and make a list of unfamiliar words. Check the glossary on page 14, and then use a dictionary to look up the meaning of words. Write and share sentences using your newly learned words.

**Common sayings in acrobatic training schools:**

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

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

“Not too fast, not too slow: need patience and middle road to find success in your acrobatic skills.”

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# 7 Glossary

**acrobat:** a skilled performer of gymnastic feats, as walking on a tightrope or swinging on a trapeze

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

**adeptness:** skillful performance or ability without difficulty

**autonomous:** self-governing, independent, subject to its own laws only

**choreographer:** a person who creates dance compositions and plans and arranges patterns of movements for dances

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

**equilibrist:** one who performs acts of balance

**evolve:** to change and develop gradually

**exaggerate:** to increase or enlarge abnormally

**gymnast:** a person highly trained to display strength, balance and agility

**jubilant:** showing great joy, satisfaction, or triumph

**garner:** to get, acquire, earn **leisure:** time free from the demands of work or duty, when one can rest, enjoy hobbies or sports

**novelty:** state or quality of being novel, new, or unique; newness

**prestigious:** having a high reputation, honored, esteemed

**renewal:** to restore or replenish, restart

**revered:** to regard with awe, admiration, and devotion

**rudimentary:** most basic and simple

**somersault:** a stunt in which the body rolls forward or backward in a complete circle with the knees bent and the feet coming over the head

**troupe:** a company, band, or group of singers, actors, or other performers that travels about together



## Notes