

Study Guide for Teachers

Li Liu

Traditions of Chinese Acrobatics

presented by
Young Audiences New Jersey & Eastern PA
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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Li Liu began performing in schools in 2005, at first collaborating with other circus artists, and eventually developing her own solo show. Li's performance includes hand balancing, plate spinning, trick cycling, foot juggling, ribbon dancing, and Chinese water bowl manipulation. Li also touches on various aspects of Chinese language, geography, and culture while sharing her work and travel experiences.

Traditions of Chinese Acrobats gives student volunteers the opportunity to try some of the easier (and safer!) acrobatic skills, such as ribbon dancing and basic plate spinning. The audience learns the historical significance of traditional lion and dragon dances and students are encouraged to think about what it might have been like to grow up in a different time and place.

LEARNING GOALS

Students will:

- Be introduced to the culture and acrobatic/dance heritage of China.
- Appreciate the skill and technique involved in performing traditional Chinese acrobatics.
- Gain a greater appreciation for diverse historical traditions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

The history of Chinese acrobatics is often said to date back at least two thousand years. Ancient texts document considerable activity during the Han Dynasty (221 BCE–220 CE). Many of the props that were used by acrobats centuries ago were common everyday items, such as chairs, tables, bowls, jars or urns, and plates. These same objects are still in use today, along with more modern inventions like the bicycle.

All acrobats in the Chinese system of training must first become proficient in the basics of tumbling, hand balancing, and dance. Together these three disciplines are called *ji ben gong*, which loosely translated means “work coming from nothing.” A more accurate English rendition of the phrase would be “foundation.” It's only after mastering the basics or foundation that students are permitted to specialize and create their own acts.

In the 1970s acrobatics in China began a rebirth, and the 1980s brought a true revolution in the level of training and performance. The Chinese government began to wake up to the fact that there was a lot of money to be made from exporting goods and services. Large troupes of acrobats were sent abroad to perform in Japan, Singapore, Western Europe, the United States, and Canada. Today, competition for spots in the best acrobatic schools is still considerable, but with the rise of a white-collar class in China, more and more talented people are pursuing university degrees or going into fields that require less vigorous physical training.

BEFORE THE PROGRAM

1. Have students do research in small groups on the People's Republic of China. The groups can teach each other about what they learned. Some topics to explore include geography, history, population, culture and lifestyle, as well as government. Students may want to focus on how these characteristics compare with those of the United States.

2. As a class, discuss how information and traditions are exchanged and passed on within a family or culture. Ask students to share stories, songs, or special traditions particular to their own families and cultures. Explore how important these traditions are for students. Does it matter if students are recent immigrants, or if their families have been in the United States for a long time? Why might this be the case?

VOCABULARY WORDS

The official language of the People's Republic of China is called *Putong Hua* or "the common tongue." We refer to it in English as Mandarin. Below are some commonly used Mandarin words and phrases.

Numbers

One – <i>Yi</i>	Two – <i>Er</i>
Three – <i>San</i>	Four – <i>Si</i>
Five – <i>Wu</i>	Six – <i>Liu</i>
Seven – <i>Qi</i>	Eight – <i>Ba</i>
Nine – <i>Jiu</i>	Ten – <i>Shi</i>

Some Common Phrases

How are you?—*Ni hao ma?*
Good morning—*Zaoshang hao* ("Morning good")
Good night—*Wan an* ("Night peaceful")
Where are you going? —*Ni dao nar qu?*
What's your name? —*Ni jiao shenme mingzi?*
Please help me—*Qing ni bang wo de mang*
Please come in!—*Qing jin!* ("Please near!")
See you later—*Zai jian*
Thank you—*Xiexie ni*
You are welcome—*Bu keji*

ARTIST INFORMATION

Li Liu was born in the city of Shenyang in Liaoning Province in the Northeast of China. When she was 6 years old she began her acrobatic training, and the following year she was chosen to attend the Chinese National Circus School in the capitol city of Beijing. While in Beijing she trained for eight hours a day until the age of 16. During the evening she was required to study math, science, the reading and writing of Chinese characters, and other academic subjects.

For many years Ms. Liu traveled extensively throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia with the Liaoning Acrobatic Arts Troupe. She performed with Zirkus Knie in Switzerland, Circus Krone in Germany, and with countless other touring shows around the world. She came to the United States in 2000 with Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus. She is a regular on the NBA and WNBA half-time circuits and is a featured performer on Princess Cruise Lines.

AFTER THE PROGRAM

1. Review and discuss the acrobatic feats seen during the performance and how each acrobatic piece differed from each other. Discuss how people of different cultures express creativity in different ways and incorporate objects common to their own culture.

2. In China, the color red is a symbol of celebration and good luck. What do specific colors symbolize in our culture? Consider the following:

- Red, white, and blue for patriotism.
- Red roses, white roses.
- To call someone "yellow."
- To be "green" with envy.
- To say someone has a "black" heart.
- Wearing white for a wedding, or black for a funeral.

Where did these color symbols come from? Are they still relevant to students today?

3. Make ribbons so that your students can do a Ribbon Dance. For each ribbon, you'll need 3 yards of thin rayon fabric/lining material in a 45-in. width. Cut it into 3 strips, each 15 in. wide by 36 in. long. These are your ribbons. Get inexpensive wooden dowels about $\frac{5}{8}$ in. diameter from a hardware store. Have them cut to 15 in. lengths.

How to: Gather ribbons at one end of the dowel. With a small piece of duct tape secure the material on the tip of the dowel. Wrap the rest of the dowel with the tape. To prevent fraying of the material, put a seam at the end of the ribbon, either by hand, with tape, or by machine.

RESOURCES

Asia Society Kids: <http://kids.asiasociety.org>

The British Museum, Ancient China:

<http://www.ancientchina.co.uk/menu.html>

China Institute: <http://www.chinainstitute.org>

The Met Chinese Art on the Timeline of Art History:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/keywords/china>

Museum of Chinese in America:

<http://www.mocanyc.org>