



## THE SHANGRI-LA CHINESE ACROBATS®

Suggested Study Guide\*

### BEFORE SEEING THE PERFORMANCE:

1. Ask the class to brainstorm all that they know about China and the Chinese people.
2. 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 then share their definitions with the class.
3. Discuss capitalism and communism. Have students discuss how their life would be different if they lived in a communist country.
4. Have students read and discuss the attached information about the City of Beijing, China, Chinese daily life, politics, theatre and background on Chinese Acrobats.
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?

### 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 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 process to depict one of your joys.
3. What have you learned about China or the Chinese people through the acrobats that you found most interesting?
4. Using the attached information and what you saw in the performance, consider all the training that goes into to 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?

*\*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 the students enjoy this cultural experience that will deepen their understanding of this unique culture!*



## CHINA AND HER PEOPLE

Peking, which means “Northern Capitol” in Chinese, has been a center of civilization for thousands of years. The area around Peking was inhabited by some of the earliest known, pre-historic human beings. Sometime between 1918 and 1939 the fossilized remains of Peking Man (also known as *homo erectus pekinesis*) 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.

The earliest and longest enduring system of government in China began around 1111 B.C. and was dynastic, a system where an emperor rules until he died or passed the throne on to his first born son, nephew or grandson. As a result of political upheaval in 1911, the dynastic government was ended and the communistic state was installed over a period of time. This is where all businesses, property, foods, goods and services are owned and operated by the government. Today, many Peking citizens are employed by the government and receive wages, housing, health care and an education as compensation. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the city’s name was changed from Peking to Beijing (pron. *bay jing*) because, as the story goes, foreigners who visited the city kept mispronouncing the word Peking!

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 or school by bus or bicycle, increasingly the influences of the West can be seen in fancy cars, shopping malls and even fast food restaurants! During 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 DVD’s 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.

The Chinese also adhere to many of the more traditional ways. 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, tombs of the Ming emperors, the Great Wall and (yes!) going to the movies.



The older people of Beijing, especially the men, gather in restaurants and tea rooms to talk or sit quietly, pondering life and its responsibilities. 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.

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. 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, kindergarten through college, the universities, and the technical schools as well. 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 or on a farm, in the military or other form of government service for the rest of their lives.

As the cultural and political center of China, Beijing houses political institutions, prestigious universities, art museums and theatres. China, Beijing in particular, has a long and rich theatre history, dating back centuries to the Shang dynasty (1523-1028 B.C.). In this period, "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 B. C.) court entertainments 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, unlike Western Opera. 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 theatre-goers 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 SHANGRI-LA CHINESE ACROBATS take part of the philosophy of Peking Opera and brings it to the world. Acrobatics as an art form displays the grace, beauty, strength and agility of the human race. In their performances, THE SHANGRI-LA CHINESE ACROBATS make feats of the seemingly impossible, possible right before your very eyes! To be able to do this, however, 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 travel for their children, so 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 were 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 are not selected to become part of a professional performing troupe until around they are 16 to 18 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 SHANGRI-LA CHINESE ACROBATS are representatives of their country and art, and they take great pride in being selected to perform for audiences like you!



## **A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE SHANGRI-LA CHINESE ACROBATS**

A typical day in the life of THE SHANGRI-LA CHINESE 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 often organize a quick game of European-style football, which we call soccer, badminton or table tennis. They also listen to Asian Pop or Rap Music, play video games, go to the cinema, enjoy a swim at their hotels, read a book or write home to their families. In essence, the performers are very much like young people here in America, only they travel the world sharing their incredible physical talents.

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 SHANGRI-LA CHINESE ACROBATS means hard work and being far from home for long periods of time, but it also offers benefits such as travel and fun!

THE SHANGRI-LA CHINESE ACROBATS is 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 - bringing us a little closer to mutual understanding between all peoples!



## SUGGESTED VOCABULARY LIST

acrobat	one who is skilled in feats of balance and agility in gymnastics.
audition	a trial performance, as 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 or corporately owned.
communism	an economic theory or system of the ownership of all property by the community as a whole.
commute	to travel 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, etc.; amends; remuneration; recompense.
dedication	selfless devotion.
doctrine	something taught; teachings.
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. Also called <i>kinetics</i> .
dynasty	a lord, ruler; a succession of rulers who belong to the same family; also, the period during which a certain family reigns.
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, protection, etc.
neolithic	designating 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, etc.



### **BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR FURTHER READING**

Bannister, Judith, *China's Changing Population*. (Stanford University Press, 1987).

Birch, Cyril and Keene, Donald, eds., *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, 2 volumes. (Grove, 1965, 1972).

Fraser, S.E., *China: Population, Education and People*. (La Trobe University Press, 1984).

Qifeng, Fu, *Chinese Acrobatics through the Ages*. Foreign Languages Press, 1985).

Qin, Zhong, *Everyday's Chinese*. (China Books, 1985).

Turner-Gottschang, K., and Reed, L.A., *China Bound*. (National Academy Press, 1987).