

SHANGHAI ACROBATS

OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA



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KEYNOTES



THE COMPANY

Founded in 1959, the Shanghai Acrobats of the People’s Republic of China is one of China’s official acrobatic troupes, owned and supported by the state. After more than 50 years, it has become one of the most influential and competitive acrobatic companies in China, winning many awards at acrobatic and circus competitions at home and abroad. Touring worldwide since the 1980s, the company has performed in more than 30 countries, including the U.S., Germany, Spain, Britain, Mexico, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Japan, Turkey, Canada, Indonesia, Fiji, Cameroon, Guinea, and Nigeria. The troupe has helped introduce Chinese acrobatic and circus art to a worldwide audience, serving as cultural ambassadors wherever they have traveled.

The Shanghai Acrobats have toured with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus as well as Stardust’s World Christmas Circuses in Germany and the Netherlands. They performed in Cirque du Soleil’s *Mystère* in Las Vegas, and for seven years at the Rixos Hotel in Turkey. Their show, *ERA*, played for two years in Xinyang, one of China’s tourist cities. In 2012, the company toured Canada with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony’s 52 piece orchestra. The Shanghai Acrobats of the People’s Republic of China’s 2016 coast-to-coast tour of North America features the debut of their latest production, *Shanghai Nights*.

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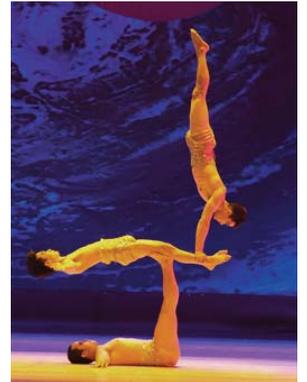
State Theatre New Jersey—creating extraordinary experiences through the power of live performance.

ENERGY - ADAGIO TRIO

Hu Tao, Li Yi, Deng Xinpeng

In acrobatics, adagio (ah-DAH-jo) is an act that shows off strength, balance, and teamwork. In this number, the three acrobats move into a variety of interesting poses, using each other for balance and support. There are two roles in this type of stunt: flier and base. The base remains in contact with the floor—crouching, standing, kneeling, or lying down. The flier balances on the base's feet, hands, shoulders, back, thighs, etc. The number is called Adagio because it is performed slowly. (Adagio is a music term meaning slow.)

Energy - Adagio Trio



GIRLS FOOT JUGGLING WITH BALLS

Tao Linyu, Li Jin, Zeng Nifei, Zeng Jing, Chen Fang

As you can tell from the name, this act involves juggling objects with the feet. It can be performed standing up or lying down. Some of the objects used in Chinese foot juggling are balls, umbrellas, and jars. The juggler's feet twirl the items at top speed and toss them from one foot to the other.

Girls Foot Juggling with Balls



JAR BALANCING ON HEAD

Liu Yang

Jars, originally used to hold grain, were also used by peasants to perform various feats during harvest celebrations. Jar juggling and balancing were adapted by acrobats into a highly popular entertainment. The performer skillfully balances, spins, tosses, and rotates a large vase without using her hands!

Jar Balancing on Head



CLOWNING AND KICKING BOWLS TO HEAD ON ROLA ROLA

Nie Jian

A rola rola (also called a rola bola) is a board placed on top of a cylinder. The performer balances on the board, which moves and teeters back and forth on top of the cylinder. Though he acts like a clown, he does some serious stunts, such as flipping bowls from the top of his foot to the top of his head, while trying not to fall off the board. He even balances on two or more rola rolas stacked on top of each other, all of them rolling and sliding in different directions.

Clowning and Kicking Bowls to Head on Rola Rola

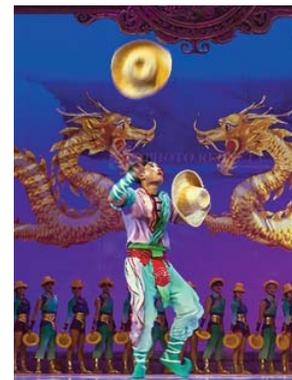


STRAW HATS PLAY

Qiu Guosheng, Zhou Zhenliang, Wu Yan, Zhou Tianchen, Yuan Yuan

The performers work as a perfect team in a comical hat juggling routine. They make it look easy, but they have worked together from childhood to perform this act with speed and precision.

Straw Hats Play



VOCAL IMITATION

Zhang Kui

Vocal imitation is one of China's traditional arts, showing up in historical records dating back as far as 2,300 years. Performers imitate all kinds of sounds, such as animals, humans, machines, and the weather.

HIGH CHAIRS

Cheng Zhi

This is one of the most exciting—and nerve-wracking—acts in Chinese circus. The performer balances on chairs that he stacks one on top of the other, climbing higher and higher and performing acrobatic stunts (such as handstands) as he goes.

High Chairs



BALLET ON SHOULDERS

Luo Xichen and Hu Tao

A graceful ballerina performs beautiful moves high above the stage, balancing on her partner's hands, head, and shoulders with just the tips of her toes.

Ballet on Shoulders



HOOP DIVING

Xiong Yi, Wu Yan, Zheng Tian, Li Chong, Liu Ying, Wang Dingding, Zhang Jie

Hoop diving first appeared in China during the Han Dynasty, and was known originally as "Swallow Play" because the performers were supposed to imitate the movements of swallows (birds) as they jumped through narrow rings piled upon one another. It is one of the oldest Chinese acrobatic arts, with origins in farming. During harvest time, field workers used large hoops with a mesh bottom to separate the grain from the leaves and stems. It later evolved into a competition to see who could dive through the tallest stack of hoops.

Hoop Diving



Today, many Chinese acrobatic companies (including the Shanghai Acrobats) blend traditional acrobatic skills with the style of contemporary “cirque.” The tumbling, balancing, juggling, and other feats are artistically choreographed; the overall impression is beautiful as well as athletic. Flashy costumes, dramatic lighting, and atmospheric music contribute to the overall effect. But the most impressive element remains the performers’ amazing strength, flexibility, and agility.

Here are some of the skills to look for at the performance:

BALANCING

The Shanghai Acrobats’ performance features many variations on balancing skills. In acts such as Jar Balance on Head, the performer balances an object—making it roll and spin while trying not to let it fall. With acts such as Adagio Trio, the performers balance their own bodies and don’t use any objects.

JUGGLING

Juggling is an ancient art found in many cultures. Some of the earliest-known jugglers were Chinese warriors and entertainers from as far back as 770 BC. The most common form of this skill is toss juggling: tossing and catching objects in patterns using the hands. Objects can also be juggled with the feet and other parts of the body—even the mouth! There are endless variations on the objects used, how many are juggled at one time, and the patterns the objects take as they fly through the air. Juggling can be done by one person, or two or more people working as a team.

FEATS OF STRENGTH

Some of the performers specialize in feats that show off their impressive body strength, lifting and carrying one, two, three, or even more of their partners at one time.

GYMNASTICS

Some Chinese acrobatic stunts are based on gymnastics, a sport with origins in ancient Greece. Jumping, running, and wrestling kept men physically fit and helped prepare them for war.

DANCE

Although the acrobats don’t actually dance, many of their movements look a lot like what you would see in a ballet. At the Shanghai Acrobats performance, look for pointed toes, gently curving arms, precise movements, erect posture, and graceful gestures.



In China, becoming a professional acrobat takes many years of intensive training and hard work. Students begin training around the age of five or six. They leave home to live at the school full time. During their first month, they cannot leave the school grounds, and family visits are not allowed. After that, parents are allowed to see the children only on weekends.

At school, students are up at dawn and train about 10 hours a day, six days a week. They practice core acrobatic skills—gymnastics, juggling, handstands, martial arts, flexibility, and dance—performing the same actions over and over again until they can do them perfectly. In addition to acrobatics classes, students also take general education classes.

As many as 100,000 Chinese young people are enrolled in the country's acrobatics schools. Most students will demonstrate a strong talent in one particular area, and then focus on developing that special skill. After about ten years of study, the most talented students are chosen for professional troupes. Only a very few make it into international companies such as the Shanghai Acrobats.

IT TAKES TEAMWORK

Living and training together helps the students develop other skills that are extremely important to the safety and success of the acrobats. Each member of the group depends on the others to perform their part, whether it's making a perfectly-timed toss of a straw hat or staying strong and steady at the bottom of a human pyramid. Some important qualities the acrobats need to have are:

- **COOPERATION**
- **TRUST**
- **THE ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS AS A TEAM**
- **RESPECT FOR OTHERS IN THE GROUP**
- **TAKING INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR PART OF THE PERFORMANCE**



The handstand is one of the first skills an acrobat is required to master.



A young acrobat works on developing flexibility.



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This student is practicing Straw Hat Juggling.



Another student works to perfect her Bowl Balancing technique on the rola rola.



Students in their dormitory at the Changfa Acrobatic School practice their skills.



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Over its rich 2,500-year history, acrobatics has emerged as one of the most popular art forms in China. The earliest acrobats were agricultural workers and artisans who used the things around them—farm implements, tables, chairs, jars, plates, and bowls—as performance props. They experimented with tricks such as tumbling, balancing, juggling, plate spinning, and rope dancing. These entertaining acts became part of community celebrations, such as harvest festivals. Gradually, acrobatics developed into a type of performance recognizable to anyone in China and even captured the attention of the country’s powerful emperors.

Historical artifacts including poetry and stone-engravings from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) provide a record of elaborate acrobatic performances with musical accompaniment, including acts that are familiar to this day, such as pole climbing, rope walking, and balancing on chairs. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), acrobatics greatly increased in both popularity and skill level. The great poets and painters of that era depicted acrobats and circus performers in their work.

Acrobatic troupes were traditionally family-owned, making their living roaming the country as street performers. Many of the famous acrobatic families in China continued through many generations. Usually acrobatic families taught their acts only to their own children and close relatives in order to protect their secret tricks and techniques.

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, all the companies and businesses in the nation—including the acrobatic troupes—became government property. China’s Communist government approved of acrobatics because they saw it as an art of the common people. They made great efforts to foster and develop national arts such as acrobatics; soon every region had its own acrobatic troupes. Eventually, each company developed its own style and acts, and competitions began to be held between the troupes.

When China began to open up to the West in the 1980s, there was an exciting cross-pollination between the two acrobatic traditions. In 1981, Chinese acrobatic acts competed in an international circus festival for the very first time, winning gold and silver medals. As Chinese acrobats became famous around the world, many Western circuses—including Cirque du Soleil, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and the Big Apple Circus—began to hire them for their shows. At the same time, Chinese companies began to develop a new style of their own, inspired by Cirque du Soleil, but with a distinctive Chinese flavor.



Clay figures from the Tang and Han dynasties showing acrobats performing Handstands and bowl spinning



A 17th-century Dutch engraving showing street circus performers in China

- China's official name is the People's Republic of China.
- Its capital city is Beijing (bay-JING).
- In area, China is the world's fourth-largest country.
- At more than 1.3 billion people, China is the world's most populous country, with almost 20% of the Earth's overall population, and nearly four times as many people as the U.S.
- China is tied with Russia as the country sharing a land border with the largest number of countries (14).
- China is considered to be the world's longest continuous civilization, going back more than 40 centuries.
- There is no single Chinese spoken language. About 70% of the people speak Mandarin, the country's official language.
- The written Chinese language is the oldest in continuous use. It uses over 10,000 characters.

- China's Forbidden City was the imperial palace from 1420-1912. Located in the center of Beijing, it has 980 buildings and about 9,000 rooms.



- At 3,915 miles, China's Yangtze River is the longest river in Asia, and third-longest in the world.
- Stretching 5,500 miles, the Great Wall of China is the largest human-built structure in the world.
- Chinese New Year is the country's most important holiday. It begins on the new moon on the first day of the new year and last for 15 days. There are many colorful traditions associated with this holiday.

- In Chinese culture, the dragon represents power, strength, and good luck. It was the symbol of the Emperors of China.



- China has the largest educational system in the world—over 1,170,000 government-run schools enroll over 318,000,000 students.

- The giant panda is native to central China. It is classified as a vulnerable species, with an estimated 1,850 living in the wild.



- Among the many things the Chinese are credited with inventing are gunpowder, fireworks, paper, the compass, kites, printing, the umbrella, clocks, the abacus, toilet paper, and spaghetti.
- Fortune cookies are not from China. They were invented in 1920 by a worker in a noodle factory in San Francisco, U.S.
- China's national sport is table tennis (ping pong). In the 2016 Summer Olympics, China won gold in both women's and men's individual and team competitions.



SHANGHAI

- With a population of around 24 million, Shanghai is China's largest city and one of the largest cities in the world.
- It is China's leading commercial and financial center.
- Located on the east coast of China at the mouth of the Yangtze River, Shanghai is the world's busiest seaport. The city's name means "on the sea."
- The city is a blend of ancient and modern, with towering skyscrapers as well as historic Chinese buildings.



THE HUMAN KNOT

See how well your group can work together by trying this popular theater game. Here's how it works:

1. Form a group of at least five people. Everybody stand in a circle and put your hands into the center.
2. Each person takes the hand of two different people in the circle. You should not be holding the hand of anyone standing directly next to you. There should not be any empty hands.
3. Without letting go of any hands, your circle must untangle itself. If you get stuck, let the people who are watching give you some suggestions.
4. After you've played successfully, try it again—but this time, no talking!

REFLECTION:

- What was the hardest part about this game?
- What skills and strategies did your group use to untangle your human knot?
- Did your group work together in a different way when you were not allowed to talk? How?
- Can you think of other types of activities where the teamwork skills you used in this game would be needed?
- What are some examples of teamwork that you saw in the performance of the Shanghai Acrobats?



FIND YOUR BALANCE

Whether executing a perfect handstand or spinning a huge jar on your head, balance is one of the most important skills an acrobat needs to practice. Try these balance exercises.

1. Stand on both feet and find your body's center of gravity—the point where it is in perfect balance.
2. Now stand on one foot. Has your center of gravity changed? What happens if you move your arms into different positions while you stand on one foot?
3. With a partner, stand with your toes touching and hold each other's wrists. Both of you lean back, using each other's weight as a counterbalance to keep from falling. Try this with a partner about the same size as you, then with someone much bigger or smaller. How does your counterbalance change with partners of unequal size?
4. Try your two-person counterbalance again, this time experimenting with lifting up a foot, holding out an arm, or

using different connecting points (other than holding each other's wrists).

5. Add a third person and see what kinds of counterbalances you can create. Can one person balance the other two?
6. In your group of three, choose your three favorite balances. Try moving smoothly from one shape to another, changing balance points with each transition.
7. Try working in a bigger group—four or more—to create a group shape using as few contact points with the floor as possible. Each person should be connected with the shape. Try to move your shape across the room without losing your balance or breaking the shape.



FAMILY TRADITIONS

At one time, traditional Chinese acrobatic troupes were family-owned, with each generation passing down its tricks and skills to the next. As a class, discuss these questions:

- What are some things (for example, an object, a celebration, a recipe, or a saying) that have been passed down from generation to generation in your family?
- Is there someone in your family who is the keeper of family stories and traditions? Who?
- Do you think it's important to hold onto these family traditions? Why?
- When discussing family traditions, were there any common threads among the class? What were they?

KNOW YOUR ROLE

Live theater is a collaboration between the performers and the audience. The artists have spent weeks, months—even years—creating a show to inspire and entertain you. The audience has a responsibility to play its part by being respectful and considerate of both the performers and the rest of the audience. Make sure you know your role:

- During the show, focus your full attention on the stage.
- Turn off all electronic devices. Keep them turned off for the entire show.
- Texting or checking messages during the show is a distraction to everyone around you, so resist the temptation!
- Don't talk during the show unless the performers invite the audience to do so.
- If you have to get up during the show to use the bathroom, exit and enter as quietly as possible.
- Food and drinks are not allowed inside the theater.
- Recording or photography of any kind is not permitted.

RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

BOOKS

Chinese New Year Picture Book: Spring Festival Facts and Stories for Kids and Adults, by Christina Huo. Amazon Digital Services, 2015.

I Want to be an Acrobat, by Ivan Bulloch and Diane James. Two-Can Publishers, 2000 (grades 2-4).

Lucky Bamboo Book of Crafts: Over 100 Projects & Ideas Celebrating Chinese Culture, by Jennifer DeCristoforo. 2013.

WEBSITES

Circopedia's History of Chinese Acrobatic Theater
www.circopedia.org/The_Chinese_Acrobatic_Theater

Travel China Guide covers many aspects of Chinese culture and history, including food, holidays, demographics, religion, architecture, and other subjects.
www.travelchinaguide.com/intro

Circus: Projectile Motion. Part of PBS' Circus series, this video demonstrates the art and physics of juggling.
nj.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/1ee31d2b-a002-46e4-9967-cedcd59e9583/1ee31d2b-a002-46e4-9967-cedcd59e9583/#

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