

ACROBAT



SCHOOL STUDY GUIDE

- Li Liu's Biography
- The History of Chinese Acrobatics
- Fun Facts About China
- The Traditions of Chinese New Year
- The Chinese Language



LI LIU'S BIOGRAPHY

Li Liu was born in the city of Shenyang which is located in Liaoning Province in The Northeast of China. When she was six 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.

In 1984 her artistic cycling act won a gold medal at the prestigious Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain in Paris, France. She often teamed with her sister Liu Ying to create duo acts that were conceived of and coached by her father Liu Gui Ting. In 1995 their duo hand balancing act was selected to perform at The Wu Qiao International Circus Festival where they were awarded "The Golden Lion" prize.

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 in Italy, Holland, France, South Africa, Singapore, Japan and Indonesia.

She came to the United States in 2000 with Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus and toured all over the US for two years. Li has been living in the US and working as a freelance performer since 2002. She is a regular on the NBA & WNBA half-time circuits and is also is a featured performer on Princess Cruise Lines.

Li began performing in schools in 2005, at first collaborating with other circus artists, and eventually developing her own solo show. The 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 with the students and staff.

The show is primarily geared toward elementary school audiences (grades K-6). Students get a hands-on shot at trying some of the easier (and safer!) skills such as ribbon dancing and basic plate spinning. They learn the historical significance of traditional lion and dragon dances and are encouraged to think about what it might have been like to grow up in a different time and place.

THE HISTORY OF CHINESE ACROBATICS

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 BC - 220 AD). 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 such as 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.

Despite the popularity of acrobatics in China, historically the performances themselves rarely took place in theaters because the art form was looked down on by the “feudal” or ruling class. It wasn’t until The Communist Party came to power in 1949 that acrobatics was given new life. As many as 120 acrobatic schools were set up throughout the country and students were selected at a very young age to attend what were considered prestigious training facilities.

Tragically, acrobats along with intellectuals, religious leaders and many other talented people were persecuted during the excesses of “The Cultural Revolution,” the worst of which lasted from 1966 until 1969. Schools, universities and monasteries were shuttered and many acrobats were sent to the country to plant rice, work in factories or perform other physical labor that was meant to “clean their minds.” During this period training still continued but at a much lower level and in secret.

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, 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.

FUN FACTS ABOUT CHINA

- China is the third largest country in the world with a landmass slightly larger than that of the US and slightly smaller than that of Canada.
- In terms of population China has more people than any other country on Earth with more than 1.3 billion inhabitants. The majority of these people are Han Chinese but there are 55 additional officially recognized ethnic groups or “minzu” as they are called in Mandarin.
- One out of every five people in the world is Chinese or of Chinese origin.
- Construction on The Great Wall of China was started in the 7th Century BC and continued for more than 2000 years. In Chinese the structure is called “Chang Cheng” or “Long Wall.” It is often said that the structure was built to keep out invaders from the north, but the original, smaller walls were erected by feudal warlords to protect their lands. Over the years these walls were joined together and by the time of The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) the structure extended for approximately 6,000 kilometers or 3,600 miles.
- Only slightly less impressive than The Great Wall is The Grand Canal, which connects Beijing in The North with Hangzhou in The South. The oldest parts of the canal date back to the 5th century BC, and the various sections were finally combined during the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD). Its length is just over 1,100 miles. The Grand Canal allowed trade over great distances and also meant that soldiers stationed in the north of the country did not have to devote a lot of their time and resources to agriculture. Today the canal is used more for the transport of building materials such as bricks, gravel and sand, or fuels such as coal and diesel.
- China is divided into 29 provinces the biggest of which is Xinjiang or “The New Territory” (sometimes called Sinkiang in The West) and Xizang which we know as Tibet. Guangdong Province in the south is the most populated province with almost 100 million people!
- Despite an economic boom over the last two decades, China today is still largely a bicycle culture. People use their bikes to get to and from work, to take their children to school, for shopping, or to transport goods such as food, clothing and even furniture! Bicycles share the many smaller city streets with cars, trucks, traveling vendors and pedestrians.

THE TRADITIONS OF CHINESE NEW YEAR

Chinese New Year is based on the lunar calendar and begins with the appearance of the second new moon after the winter solstice. It runs for 15 days and is rich in family and community traditions. Because a lunar year is about eleven days shorter than a solar year, the dates for Chinese New Year change slightly from one year to the next.

For children this is an especially exciting time. Parents and grandparents give them little red envelopes called ‘hong bao’ which contain money. These envelopes are supposed to confer monetary success on the children who receive them. The number five is considered lucky so the recipient might, for example, get \$5.25. Amounts with the number four are avoided, as the pronunciation of the Chinese word for “four” is too similar to the pronunciation of the word for “death.”

Traditional dragon, lion and ribbon dances are also performed in public places during Chinese New Year. These dances are believed to chase away bad spirits. The lion dance in particular requires a lot of skill as two acrobats must work very closely together in order to perform the intricate movements.

The Chinese New Year holiday shares many similarities with Christmas celebrations here in The West. Families get together to spend time with one another, exchange presents, and to eat dumplings. The preparation of the dumplings is very labor intensive and is considered a communal activity among Chinese women. Some of the dumplings are prepared and cooked with coins inside. People who eat a dumpling containing money will also be lucky in the coming year!

The first day of Chinese New Year it is customary for people to wear new clothes, usually socks and a new shirt or sweater. The color red is considered propitious.

Much in the same way that many people in The West believe in the signs of the zodiac, the Chinese people follow a calendar that is based on a twelve-year cycle. Every person’s birth year is represented by an animal and people are considered to have certain personality characteristics depending on the year of their birth. The twelve animals of the “Chinese zodiac” are, in order, the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. 2010 is the year of the tiger and 2011 will be the year of the rabbit. Pairings of husbands and wives or boyfriends and girlfriends are considered more or less favorable based on whether or not their birth years are compatible.

THE CHINESE LANGUAGE

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. There is some disagreement among linguists as to just how many Chinese "languages" there actually are because so many dialects are spoken in different parts of the country. This is due in large part to the fact that there are 56 officially recognized ethnic groups within the boundaries of present-day China. In the south of China, in addition to speaking Mandarin, people also speak Cantonese or "Guangdong Hua."

Mandarin is characterized by its four tones. Depending on what tone a word is given, its meaning can vary quite dramatically. Tonal languages are generally thought of by westerners as being extremely difficult to learn. While this may be true, there are some enthrallingly easy aspects of spoken Chinese. For example, words do not change endings in the plural, there are no tenses and there are no verb conjugations!

"Tomorrow, I will go to the store to buy some things" would be translated as "Mingtian wo qu shangdian mai dongxi" or "Tomorrow, I go store buy thing." Such foreign-sounding syntax takes some getting used to, but once the patterns are learned, they can be applied to communicate countless ideas. Additionally, a form of the roman script called pinyin can be used so that traditional Chinese characters called ideographs or Hanzi can be written using our alphabet!

Following are some of the more common Chinese words and phrases, which are written in pinyin. If you have a classmate or a friend who speaks Chinese, ask him or her to help you out with the pronunciation. Pay special attention to the tones!

Numbers

One - Yi
Two - Er
Three - San
Four - Si
Five - Wu
Six - Liu
Seven - Qi
Eight - Ba
Nine - Jiu
Ten - Shi

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