

# *The Peking Acrobats*

## *Flynn Student Matinee Study Guide*



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# FLYNN

## **About the Company**

*“Just being able to entertain and be on stage, it’s a privilege...  
When you see people doing things that you don’t think is possible,  
it gives you the ability to dream bigger and do anything in life.”*  
—Steven Hai, Creative Director of the Peking Acrobats

The Peking Acrobats are a company of Chinese acrobats and musicians who create exuberant performances that combine awe-inspiring acrobatics, traditional Chinese instruments, and high-tech special effects.

They have appeared on numerous TV shows and performed across the world. In 1999 they set the world record for the tallest human chair stack when six performers held handstands on top of seven stacked chairs, without safety lines. (There is no recording available of the actual world record, but [this video](#) of a single Peking Acrobat doing a chair stack is still incredible!)

The New York Post says, “The Peking Acrobats are pushing the envelope of human possibility,” combining agility and grace in remarkable feats of ‘pure artistry.’ ”

The Peking Acrobats are directed by the Hai family, which boasts three generations of famous acrobats in China. The troupe will astound, amaze, and inspire you, while offering a taste of Chinese culture, so that audiences around the world can better understand their rich culture.



*Peking Acrobats performing a chair stack!*

## **Behind the Scenes**

In 2012, the Peking Acrobats made [a series of short YouTube videos](#) showing glimpses behind the scenes, in which you can meet the performers and see how they get their incredible shows onto stages across the world – including The Flynn! Xie Hai Yi, an acrobat who was 19 at the time of the video, started performing with the company when he was only 9 years old. “I love being onstage and getting that feeling...I love the excitement, the adrenaline,” he says.

Artistic Director Ken Hai, who founded the Peking Acrobats in 1986, says of the process, “We recruit the best performers and put them all together... We must practice each act until we get it right.”

It takes about six months to mount a touring production of the Peking Acrobats, with about 3-4 months to gather visas and 2 months of pre-production in Beijing and Los Angeles. They travel with a truckload of lighting equipment, props, costumes, traditional Chinese instruments, and

more. The performers and crew tour their show for 3-4 month stretches at a time – a long time to be away from home, but an incredible experience!

And here’s something you might not think about: before the audience – or even the performers – arrive at the theater for the show, the crew spends 4-6 hours getting all the equipment set up so that the show can be perfect every single time.

### **Becoming An Acrobat**

The Peking Acrobats begin training at a very young age. While they make everything appear easy onstage, there is a great deal of difficulty associated with the feats they perform. A contortionist or any flexible athlete has to work hard most of their lives, combining diet and exercise with practice and discipline, to be able to perform these amazing feats.

In China, being selected to become an acrobat is an honor, and brings with it a great deal of prestige and the possibility of international travel. Many of the acrobats in China descend from families of acrobats. These families of acrobats begin training their children at a very young age; some even start training as soon as they can walk. Many families send their children to special schools devoted to the arts, beginning at age 6. At these schools, they devote half of their day to honing their acrobatic skills, including contortionism, 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! In their teen years, some will be chosen to join an international touring company like The Peking Acrobats. While on tour, the acrobats see many corners of the globe and meet new and different people. They are representatives of their country and art, and they take great pride in being selected to perform for audiences like you!



*Peking Acrobats taking plate spinning to the next level*

### **Performance Traditions in China**

As the cultural and political center of China, Beijing houses political institutions, prestigious universities, art museums, and theatres. Beijing has a long and rich theatrical history, dating back centuries to the Shang dynasty (1523-1028 BCE). During the rule of the Shang dynasty, “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 BCE) court entertainers were very popular. Clowns, wrestlers, acrobats, singers, and musicians entertained emperors and their attendants by acting out mythical stories and famous fables.

These kinds of entertainment eventually led to the creation of [Peking Opera](#) (also known as Beijing Opera), an art form that combines singing, dancing, acrobatics, martial arts, pantomime, highly stylized acting, costume, make-up, and more to create fantastic stage productions. Peking Opera, originally performed only for the royal court, was formalized in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and is made up of a combination of many traditional opera, music, puppetry, and performance forms from different regions in China.



*Peking Opera performers in traditional costume and makeup*

### **Instruments & More**

*Here are a few of the incredible things you might see onstage during a performance by the Peking Acrobats!*

You’ll see a live orchestra with [traditional Chinese instruments](#) including:



*Yangqin – a dulcimer played with bamboo mallets*



*Guzheng (a plucked zither, similar to a harp)*



*Erhu (a small bowed instrument with two strings)*



*Dizi (a flute made of bamboo)*



*Yangqin (a dulcimer played with bamboo mallets)*

**You'll see people perform acts of contortionism**, a physical movement practice which involves the dramatic bending and flexing of the human body. Contortion is often part of acrobatics and circus acts. In general, contortionists do have a certain degree of unusual natural flexibility, which is enhanced through years of gymnastic training and physical discipline.



*Peking Acrobats performing acts of contortion*

You'll also see a lot of familiar items being amazingly repurposed by the acrobats and contortionists. Many of their props are items that would have existed two thousand years ago when acrobatics became popular in China, including jugs, plates, drinking vessels, sticks, and hoops.

### **Reflection Questions**

*Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:*

#### **Before the Show:**

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about acrobatics, what comes to mind?
- What do you know about Chinese culture? Are there any Chinese art forms you've heard of before?
- If you could go to a special school where you could spend half the day honing your skills in something, what would you go to school for?

#### **After the Show:**

- How did the show meet or break your expectations of acrobatics?
- What was the most incredible thing in the show? What was incredible about it?
- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- Could you identify any of the traditional Chinese instruments the musicians used in the show? Which ones?
- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?

### **Resources**

- Human Chair Stack  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7GI-FuVyGg>
- "Behind The Scenes" video series  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PRMfryz\\_nY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PRMfryz_nY)
- Short Peking Opera Intro Video  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnMRIzpO4nU>
- 25 Musical Instruments of China  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=algwi6TzUdU>