

# Golden Dragon Acrobats

THURSDAY • APRIL 6, 2017 • 10 AM • 60 MINUTES

MERRILL AUDITORIUM, PORTLAND





## WELCOME

Portland Oventions has brought a dynamic season of exceptional performing artists to Portland, Maine, including classical music, jazz, opera, dance, theater, and Broadway since 1931. Portland Oventions believes that cultural enrichment should be accessible to all and provides quality live performances and education experiences. Oventions collaborates with other arts organizations, nonprofits, education systems and the business sector to promote cultural enrichment and lifelong learning and celebrates the power and virtuosity of the performing arts.

In addition to live performances, we bring the exhilaration of the performing arts out into our community with season-long educational and outreach programs called Oventions Offstage. Oventions Offstage creates resonating moments when artists and audiences connect. Whether it's an unexpected "art happening," a workshop or masterclass with a visiting artist, a lively community discussion, or a pre-performance lecture, Portland Oventions invites you to join us as we explore together the relevance and connection of the performing arts to our lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Oventions Offstage is made possible in part with support from New England Foundation for the Arts, Culture Club Portland, National Performance Network, Elmina B. Sewall Foundation, The Onion Foundation, Unum, Sam L. Cohen Foundation, Bank of America, Maine Arts Commission, Confucius Institute at the University of Southern Maine, and Dead River Company.



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Elmina B. Sewall  
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## Golden Dragon Acrobats STUDY GUIDE

This guide includes information about Golden Dragon Acrobats broader cultural and literary connections; suggested activities designed to engage and sustain your students' learning before, during, and after the show; as well as a number of local resources to help you extend your learning. Please note connections to Common Core State Standards.

Use this guide to help your students anticipate, investigate, and reflect upon your live performance experience.

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS:

- Reading Literature
- Reading Informational Texts
- Writing
- Speaking & Listening
- Language
- Maine Learning Results: Theatre
- Movement
- Character
- Improvisation

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**CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE**

The Confucius Institute at the University of Southern Maine is part of a worldwide partnership providing opportunities for people to learn about Chinese language and culture. There are almost 500 Confucius Institutes internationally, and over 100 in the United States alone. These institutions serve as a platform for cultural exchanges between China and the world, and as a bridge reinforcing friendship and relationship building. The Confucius Institute at the USM is the first to be established in the state, and is partnered with Dongbei University of Finance and Economics in Dalian, China.

The Institute currently offers Chinese language courses to undergraduate and graduate students at USM, as well as:

- Language and culture classes through Osher Lifelong Learning Institute
- Language and culture classes at local K-12 schools
- Support for existing Chinese language programs in K-12 schools
- Assistance for eligible schools in applying for a Confucius Classroom or Chinese teacher
- Training for local Chinese teachers
- Cultural events
- Cultural seminars
- Summer camps in China
- Scholarships to study in China

The Confucius Institute at USM also offers other programming related to Chinese language and culture as requested by the university, local schools, businesses, and organizations. For more information, please contact us:

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Confucius Institute  
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Gorham, ME 04038

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# Golden Dragon Acrobats STUDY GUIDE

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## Study Guide

Originally from Cangzhou, Hebei province, in the People's Republic of China, the Golden Dragon Acrobats have toured for more than 30 years to international acclaim. They practice the rigorous art of Chinese Acrobatics, an art form that first became popular in China 2,500 years ago. The 25 acrobats are athletes, actors and artists who have trained since childhood. They will amaze your class with acrobatic feats they perform using their bodies and simple props including everyday objects like plates, jugs, bicycles, umbrellas and more.

This study guide will prepare your students for their upcoming performance.

Your students can actively participate at the performance by:

- **OBSERVING** how the performers use their bodies
- **MARVELING** at the skill demonstrated by the performers
- **THINKING ABOUT** all the practice that goes into each act
- **REFLECTING** on the sounds, sights, and performance skills on display at the theater



# Golden Dragon Acrobats STUDY GUIDE

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## About the Performance

### Guiding Questions:

- What makes the Golden Dragon Acrobats performance special?
- When do acrobats start training?
- What are some of the things the acrobats will do at the performance?

The performance will feature astounding acrobatics with theatrical enhancements and Chinese traditional dance. The group features contortionists, tumblers and jugglers in acts such as plate-spinning, bicycle pagoda and juggling everything from balls to umbrellas using not only hands but feet. The acrobats will be seen perching atop a 30 foot tower of chairs, bending like rubber and balancing human pyramids while riding moving bicycles. With performers trained in the rigorous art of Chinese acrobatics since early youth, the Golden Dragon Acrobats have garnered international acclaim.

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## About the Artists

The Golden Dragon Acrobats hail from Cangzhou, Hebei province, in the People's Republic of China and have toured the United States continuously since 1978. Its 25 members are athletes, actors and artists who have studied and trained for their craft since early childhood. The group has performed in all 50 states and in over 65 countries across the world. The Golden Dragon Acrobat troupe had its Broadway debut at the New Victory Theater in 2005, and was nominated for two Drama Desk Awards for its performance. The group's founder, producer and director, Danny Chang, is one of the world's leading promoters of Chinese acrobatics. He began his training at the age of eight with his family's acrobatic school in Taipei, and began performing with its touring wing, the Golden Dragon Acrobats, at age ten. He is the recipient of many awards, including the prestigious Medal for International Faith and Goodwill by the Republic of China's Coordination Council for North American Affairs.

## Staff for the Golden Dragon Acrobats

Producer, Director: Danny Chang  
Choreographer, Costume Designer: Angela Chang  
Administrative Director: Jessie Liu  
Technical Director: Randy Williamson  
Technical Assistant: Gregory Kuvolo

## List of Performers

### Male

Tian Jun Zhang  
Yang Liu  
Xiao Meng Guo  
Xian Yang Guo  
Jun Wei Zuo  
Jun Hao Zuo  
Qiang Qiang Liu  
Kai Zhang

### Female

Shao Zheng Wang  
Qi Qi Hou  
Ping Gao  
Ting Ting Zhong  
Guan Wei Zu  
Li Ying Yan  
Hong Xing Chen  
Ya Ru Wang

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## About the Art Form

### Guiding Questions:

- What kinds of props do the acrobats use?
- How is Chinese culture reflected in the performance?
- What are the four basic acrobatic skills?

Acrobatic acts have evolved throughout the history of China. China is credited with producing some of the best acrobats in the world. Chinese acrobats maintain a notable style and standard routines. However, there are some similarities between the acrobatic schools of different countries. All recognizable circuses have juggling acts, trapeze acts, handstand acts and comic relief. Differences are reflected in theatrical presentation, including music, novelty acts such as clowns, and lighting.

### Signature Chinese Acrobatic acts:

**Hoop Diving:** This act is over 2,000 years old. Also called “Dashing Through Narrows,” it was once known as “Swallow Play” because the performers imitated the flying movements of swallows (birds) as they leapt nimbly through narrow rings.

**Unicycle bowl flip:** In a relatively new feat, an acrobat rides a very tall unicycle on a round table, kicking up bowls, kettles and spoons with perfect

grace, and piling them on her head. **Chinese Vase:** Acrobats playfully squeeze into tiny brightly colored vases as they perform tricky acrobatics—smiling all the while.

**Rolling Balance Contortionist:** Graceful and beautiful bending and twisting into unbelievable knots, frequently while balancing precariously perched objects on every limb.

**Double Pole:** A group of acrobats climb up and down thin poles demonstrating agility and strength to execute a variety of dangerous movements. This act requires a tremendous amount of upper body and abdominal strength.

**Chinese Diablo:** Performed in China for over 100 years, two sticks of bamboo are connected with string to spin an additional piece of wood (like a yo-yo) back and fourth in a variety



# Golden Dragon Acrobats **STUDY GUIDE**

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of timed movements. The Chinese Diablo makes a whistling sound when it spins.

**Spinning plates:** Performers use numerous long, pencil-thin sticks to support spinning plates that look like lotus leaves facing the wind or colorful butterflies flitting and dancing. This act is often combined with balancing and tumbling, as when a performer spins 12 china plates with both hands while in a headstand on a rubber ball!

**Chair stacking handstand:** A collective act involving two to seven acrobats and as many or more chairs. While on a pagoda or ladder of chairs, the performers practice handstands and other stunts requiring tremendous arm strength, as well as superior balancing skill.

**Bicycle:** Acrobats ride together on a single bicycle, take it apart, turn it over a table and display a variety of postures, notably the beautiful tableau of a peacock fanning its feathers.

**Foot Juggling:** Many different objects can be used in juggling. Jar juggling demonstrates simplicity and steadiness. Originally, peasants used grain containers to perform various feats in celebration of a bumper harvest. Later, jar tricks were adapted by acrobats and became one of their most popular entertainments. Performers lie on a special seat and juggle or catch objects with their feet. Long ago, in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), jugglers manipulated bottles, plates and jars with their feet. Now performers toss tables, umbrellas, rugs and any number of household items.



**Lion and Dragon acts:** This act comes from Chinese folk dance developed from Buddhist beliefs. The lion represents the spirit of renewal and is revered for dispelling bad luck. Big Lion is played by two acrobats, while Small Lion is played by one. The lion rolls and jumps, exhibiting attributes such as strength, agility and tranquility. Accompanied by traditional percussion instruments, this act creates a jubilant and festive atmosphere.

Acrobatic acts are performed either solo or in groups. Group acts require team cooperation, trust and constant communication. The disadvantage of a group act is that when one performer becomes incapacitated or decides to leave the group act, it puts the other acrobats at risk in their careers. It often happens that acrobats need to start over again. However, in creating a new act or learning a new specialty, an acrobat doesn't need to spend two years learning the four basic acrobatic skills; tumbling, flexibility, handstand, dance.





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## Acrobatic Training and Handstands

The first two years of acrobatic training are the most important for aspiring acrobats. Acrobatic students work daily on basic skills. The four core foundational skills for Chinese Acrobats are handstand, tumbling, flexibility, and dance. Every student will usually have greater talent for one of the four core acrobatic skills. Among the four, handstand is the most important. Many of the signature acrobatic acts have some form of handstand in the performance. Master teachers have commented that, “handstand training is to acrobats what studying the human body is to a medical student.” It is the essence of Chinese acrobatics. An acrobat goes through progressive steps to learn basic to advanced handstands. Handstand training directly affects three areas of the body, shoulders, lower back, and wrists. A weakness in any one of these three areas of the body will compromise the development of learning the handstand. In China, the basic handstand is learned by 6-8 year olds. This is first done against the wall. In three to six months of full time training, students start off with increments of one minute and build up to one half hour of wall handstands. During this time, the three areas of the body are getting stronger and stronger. Students will develop the ability to hold the free handstand shortly after this time. Holding a still handstand is translated in Chinese as the “Dead handstand.” A good handstand is one that has good form and versatility. A versatile handstand is a position from which the acrobat is able to execute many variations. The handstand is the most disliked training aspect for the young students. When

one is upside down in a basic handstand, all of one’s weight is on the wrist, shoulder and lower back, so there is natural pressure to want to come down. There is absolutely no way to cheat while in a handstand, because once you are upside-down, only your two hands are on the floor holding you up. After the initial two-year training, only a few acrobats will specialize in the handstand. However, handstand training is essential to all acrobatic work, due to the importance it has in strengthening the body, mind and spirit of the acrobat.



*The mural An Outing by the Lady of Song of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) depicts the grand scene of a Peeress's outing. Walking in front of the large procession is an acrobat doing pole balancing with four young boys doing stunts. These figures are vivid, lively and vigorous, and is considered the most complete extant Chinese mural containing images of acrobatics.*

## History of Chinese Acrobats

The art of Chinese Acrobatics is an ancient tradition that began in China more than 2,000 years ago. Over its long and rich history, acrobatics has developed as one of the most popular art forms among the Chinese people. While many historical records provide evidence for the development of Chinese acrobatics as far back as the Xia Dynasty (4,000 years ago), it is most commonly held that the art form did not become wildly popular until approximately 2,500 years ago when it began to capture the attention of the country's powerful emperors. Acrobatics first developed during the Warring States Period (475BC-221BC), evolving from the working lives of its

people in Wuqiao county, located in Hebei Province. It was natural that acrobats first used the things around them— instruments of labor such as tridents, wicker rings and articles of daily use such as tables, chairs, jars, plates and bowls—as performance props, to experiment with balancing and performing other acrobatic tricks. In a time when China was traditionally an agricultural society, where there were no electronic gadgets or telephones, people had time to use their imaginations to learn new skills such as acrobatics. And these acts were incorporated into community celebrations, for example, to celebrate a bountiful harvest. This unorganized form of entertainment and leisure eventually evolved into a form of performance that became recognizable to the Chinese people.

During the Han Dynasty (221BC-220AD) these rudimentary acts of acrobatics developed into the “Hundred Plays.” Many more acts were soon to develop. Music accompaniment and other theatrical elements were added as interest in the art form grew among the emperors. According to the stone engravings unearthed at Yinan County of Shandong Province in 1954, there were superb acrobatic performances with music accompaniment on the acrobatic stage of 2,000 years ago, including acts that are familiar to this day, such as Pole Climbing, Rope-Walking (the present day Tight-Wire Feats), Fish Turned into Dragon (the present day Conjuring) and Five Tables (like the present Balancing on Chairs). In the Tang Dynasty, known for its extraordinary flourishing of Chinese culture, the number of acrobats greatly increased and their performing skills much improved. The famous poets of that time, Bai Juyi and Yuan Chen, wrote poems on acrobatic performances. In the Dunhuang mural painting “Lady Song Going on a Journey,” there are images of acrobatic and circus performers. Since these early times, acrobatics have been incorporated into many forms of Chinese performance arts, including dance, opera, wushu (martial arts) and sports. Acrobatics have gone beyond the boundaries of performance, serving an important role in the cultural exchange between China and other Western nations including the United States. Today, China presents acrobatics in the international arena as an example of the rich traditions of Chinese culture and the hard-working nature of the Chinese people.

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## Family Acrobatic Troupes

Acrobatic troupes were traditionally family-owned, and members made their living roaming the countryside as street performers for their livelihood. Many of the famous acrobatic families in China continued this tradition through many generations. Two famous acrobatic families were the Dung family and the Chen Family. Throughout China, the Dung Family was known for their magic. The Chen Family was famous for their unique style of juggling, with a signature program using as many as eight badminton rackets at one time. Other acrobatic troupes have tried to match the skill level of juggling of the Chen family with little success. It was common practice that family acrobatic troupes would only teach their own children and close relatives the secrets of their acts in order to keep the secret techniques within the family last name and carry on traditions. [Note: This was also the case in European circus families, where circus families were continued through many generations.]

## Acrobatics in China after 1949

On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was formally established, with its national capital at Beijing (known in the West as "Peking"). All the companies and businesses in the nation became the government's property, including the acrobatic troupes. Generally, the Communist government approved of acrobatics as an art of the people, not an elite art form. The people's government made great efforts to foster and develop national arts and acrobatics gained a new life as every province, municipality and autonomous region set up their own acrobatic troupes. In Communist theory, everyone is provided for and taken care of equally: the term "Iron Rice Bowl" means all eat out of the same rice bowl. For acrobatic troupes, this meant that operational costs for acrobatic troupes were subsidized by the local governments and didn't

need to worry about meeting annual financial earnings. However, while in China, Wayne saw inconsistencies, as people in powerful government positions received more financially and have many perks. In the "new" China, there have been great improvements in contents and skill of acrobatics. Acrobatic leaders have set up a designing and directing system aimed at creating graceful stage images, harmonious musical accompaniment and Mao Tse-Tong (1893-1976), founder of the People's Republic of China, greets Chinese acrobats good supporting effects of costumes, props and lighting to turn their performances into a full-fl edged stage art. The present Chinese acrobatics is full of optimism, determined to reflect the industry, resourcefulness, courage and undaunted spirit of the Chinese people. Additionally, recent changes in government structure in China, including more freedom to create and build, have led to dramatic improvements in the working lives of acrobats. Now, they can form their own performing groups, look for show opportunities and perform later into adulthood. In current times, there are over 100 government operated acrobatic troupes and hundreds more family and private troupes performing in China.



# Golden Dragon Acrobats STUDY GUIDE



## Learning Activities

### Performance and Culture • Questions for Students:

1. How many years do acrobatics go back in Chinese history?
2. At what age do acrobats typically begin training in China?
3. What types props are used in acrobatic routines?
4. Can you name three of the major cities in China?
5. Why do acrobats wear colorful costumes?
6. Name the 4 basic acrobatic skills learned basic training.
7. Name 5 acrobatic acts created in China.
8. What are the “3 P’s” common to the secrets of learning acrobatics and becoming a good student? Younger elementary students: Practice, Practice, Practice Older students and adults: Practice, Perseverance, Patience
9. Name one word to describe acrobatics?
10. Can you remember one major Chinese holiday celebration that always features acrobats?

### Visual Arts • Discussion and Activity:

Think about the Golden Dragon Acrobats performance. Which amazing feat was your favorite? Discuss what you liked best about the show and why. Create an advertisement for a future Golden Dragon Acrobats performance. Make sure to incorporate an illustration and words that you think reflect the best part of the show.

### Vocabulary Builder

Practice dictionary skills and build vocabulary. Look through the study guide and make a list of unfamiliar words. Check the glossary on page 14, and then use a dictionary to look up the meaning of words. Write and share sentences using your newly learned words.

### Common sayings in acrobatic training schools:

“Seven minutes on stage is equal to seven years of training.”

“Must be able to enduring suffering to become a good acrobat.”

“Not too fast, not too slow: need patience and middle road to find success in your acrobatic skills.”

### References

Books: The Best of Chinese Acrobatics by Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China.

Websites: [www.goldendragonacrobats.com](http://www.goldendragonacrobats.com), [www.redpanda2000.com](http://www.redpanda2000.com), [www.CirqueduSoleil.com](http://www.CirqueduSoleil.com), [www.ringling.com](http://www.ringling.com)

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## Glossary

**acrobat:** a skilled performer of gymnastic feats, as walking on a tightrope or swinging on a trapeze

**agility:** the ability to move quickly and easily

**adeptness:** skillful performance or ability without difficulty

**autonomous:** self-governing, independent, subject to its own laws only

**choreographer:** a person who creates dance compositions and plans and arranges patterns of movements for dances

**contortionists:** a flexible performer able to move muscles, limbs and joints into unusual positions.

**equilibrist:** one who performs acts of balance

**evolve:** to change and develop gradually

**exaggerate:** to increase or enlarge abnormally

**gymnast:** a person highly trained to display strength, balance and agility

**jubilant:** showing great joy, satisfaction, or triumph

**garner:** to get, acquire, earn leisure: time free from the demands of work or duty, when one can rest, enjoy hobbies or sports

**novelty:** state or quality of being novel, new, or unique; newness

**prestigious:** having a high reputation, honored, esteemed

**renewal:** to restore or replenish, restart

**revered:** to regard with awe, admiration, and devotion

**rudimentary:** most basic and simple

**somersault:** a stunt in which the body rolls forward or backward in a complete circle with the knees bent and the feet coming over the head

**troupe:** a company, band, or group of singers, actors, or other performers that travels about together



## THEATER ETIQUETTE

Audience members play a special and important role in the performance. The performers are very aware of the audience while they perform and each performance calls for different audience responses. Lively bands, musicians and dancers may desire audience members to clap and move to the beat. Other performers require silent focus on the stage and will want an audience to applaud only when they have completed a portion of their performance. As you enjoy the show, think about being a part of the performance.

- What are the differences between attending a live performance and going to a movie or watching television?
- What are some different types of live performances? Name a few as a class.
- What kind of responses might an audience give in each circumstance?
- What are the different cues that a performer will give you so that you know how to respond? For example, might they bow or pause for applause?

Also, remember that a theater is designed to magnify sound and even the smallest whispers or paper rustling can be heard throughout the auditorium. You are part of a community of audience members and you all work together to create your theater experience.



# Student Response Form

Please guide your students through this form. Students may write and/or draw pictures to respond to the performance.

**PERFORMANCE:** Golden Dragon Acrobats • APRIL 2017

**SCHOOL NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**STUDENT NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_ **GRADE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**VISUAL RESPONSE:**

Draw your favorite moment from Golden Dragon Acrobats below.

What did you really like about the performance?

What would you tell other kids about the performance?

Please print your name below to give Portland Ovarions permission to use your comments in future promotions.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Your Name Here

**MAIL RESPONSES TO:**  
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# Teacher Response Form

Please take a few moments to fill out and return this form after the performance. Your response to our School-Time Performance Series helps us plan for the future. Include any comments from class discussion as well!

**PERFORMANCE:** Golden Dragon Acrobats • APRIL 2017

**SCHOOL NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**YOUR NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_ **GRADE(S) OF STUDENTS:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What made this a valuable experience for your students?** (If it wasn't, why not, what can we do better?)

**How did this live performance connect to or enhance your curriculum?**

**If you used this guide... did the study guide help you in preparing for and reflecting upon the performance with your students? Why or why not? OR if you knew about the guide but opted not to use it, tell us why you chose not to use it.** (We want to design the guides so that they are helpful tools for teachers—your feedback is key!)

**Tell us about planning the trip:** How did you hear about this School-Time Performance? How was the process when arranging transportation?

**Tell us about the trip itself:** How was the arrival and dismissal process? Were all of your specified seating needs met?

**What types of performances would you like to see in the future? (topics/themes, genres, specific artists, etc.?)**

**A number of generous individuals and organizations make it possible for us to offer these School-Time Performances at extremely discounted rates. Is there anything you'd like them to know in terms of your experience or its impact on your class?**

Please sign below if Portland Ovarions has our permissions to use any of your comments in future promotions.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign here

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