



EDUCATOR GUIDE



The Peking Acrobats

This guide is geared toward teachers of grades PK - 12.

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About This Guide

Use this guide to help your students anticipate, investigate, and reflect upon your live performance experience. This guide is geared toward teachers of grades PK - 12.

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The great thing about the arts is that they can often evolve to meet their context. That means that many of the activities shared are flexible to a lot of different contexts depending on how you choose to frame them in your class. We know you all are experts on your classroom and students, so we invite you to use these lessons and activities as guideposts and adapt them to fit your classroom management style, range of student ability, and time constraints.

LEARNING CONNECTIONS

Social Studies: Chinese history and culture, Immigration and Migration
Performing Arts: Acrobatics, Dance

LEARNING STANDARDS ICON KEY



Educators, we invite you to share with us what you did in your classroom around this guide or the production. You can email eschildkret@portlandovations.org or reach us via [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#).

We want to hear and see what great learning is happening in your classrooms.

Introducing the Performance

It is often helpful to share some context with your students before they attend a live performance. Read below for more information on the performance you're coming to see.

About Peking Acrobats

Defying gravity with amazing displays of contortion, flexibility and control — The Peking Acrobats push the limits of human ability. They perform daring maneuvers atop a precarious pagoda of chairs and display their technical prowess at such arts as trick-cycling, precision tumbling, juggling, somersaulting, and gymnastics. The Peking Acrobats are part of a time-honored Chinese tradition, rooted in centuries of Chinese history and folk art. Tradition demands that each generation of acrobats add its own improvements and embellishments; because of this, high honor is conferred upon those skilled enough to become acrobats.



The Peking Acrobats have been touring the world sharing the art of Chinese acrobatics for more than 30 years. They have redefined audience perceptions of Chinese acrobatics, with performances that combine amazing physical feats, traditional Chinese instruments, and high-tech special effects. They have also appeared on numerous television shows and specials, in movies, and in front of symphony orchestras. In 1999, they set the world record for the human chair stack on FOX Network's Guinness Prime Time television show by balancing six people precariously atop six chairs, 21 feet in the air, without safety lines. The Peking Acrobats uphold a rich and ancient folk art tradition, bringing it to new technical heights while integrating twenty-first century technology.

What To Expect

The Performance

- The performance is 50 minutes long
- The performance includes acrobatics like human pyramids, tumbling, balancing, flips, and juggling
- Acrobats use props like chairs and fans in their performance.

The Sound

- All sound will be amplified with speakers.
- The performance includes live singing and pre-recorded music. Music is soft and slow at times and upbeat at others. Parts of the performance may be loud.

The Lights

- The Peking Acrobats' performance includes theatrical lighting to highlight the performers. The lights will be bright and colorful at times, and dark and moody at others.
- A follow spot is used during the performance.
- The theater will go fully dark at times.

Resources

- Plan your visit to Merrill Auditorium: portlandovations.org/about/accessibility-merrill-auditorium/
- Learn more about accessibility at Portland Oventions: portlandovations.org/about/accessibility/

Being an Audience Member

An audience member is a part of a larger community – an audience - and you all work together to create your theater experience. Audience members play a special and important role in the performance. The performers are very aware of the audience while they perform. Sharing their hard work and joy with you is one of the best parts of being a performer. 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 talking from the audience can be distracting. A theater is designed to magnify sound and even the smallest whispers can be heard throughout the auditorium. The Peking Acrobats encourage clapping at parts of the show you enjoy.

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? How many can you name?
- What kind of responses might an audience give to different types of performances?
- 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?



The interior of Merrill Auditorium

Essential Questions

What are acrobatics?

Characterized by incredible feats of agility and coordination, acrobatics are the ancient art of jumping, juggling, tumbling, and balancing. Acrobats often use tools like plates, poles, and one-wheel cycles as part of their performance. Acrobatics are one of the oldest athletic disciplines in the world, with roots reaching back as far as 4,000 years to the Xia Dynasty in China (2070 B.C.E-1600 B.C.E). Acrobatics emerged as a discipline in the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E-9 C.E) and became widely popular in China in the prosperous Tang Dynasty (618-907 C.E.). Today, acrobatics are both an art and a competitive sport practiced all over the world.



A stone engraving from the Eastern Han Dynasty depicting acrobats juggling balls and swords, accompanied by musicians.

What makes Chinese acrobatics unique?

Wuqiao County in China's Hebei Province is the home of Chinese Acrobatics with dozens of specialized training schools. Students of acrobatics begin studying the art at around age six and work daily on core skills like the handstand, tumbling, flexibility, juggling, and dance. While all acrobats learn the core skills, most specialize in one specific skill over time to become an expert. There are several traditional acts that are often included in performances of Chinese Acrobatics. Look for these as you watch the Peking Acrobats:

Hoop Diving: Once called "Swallow Play," this act is over 2,000 years old. Acrobats jump, dive. And tumble through stacked hoops, imitating the movements of swallows in flight.

Spinning Plates: Acrobats use long, thin sticks to support spinning plates, often combined with balancing and tumbling.

Double Pole: A group of acrobats climb up and down thin poles performing a variety of feats of balance, agility, and strength.

Bicycle: Acrobats perform on a moving bicycle or single-wheel cycle creating striking shapes and images with their bodies.

Contortion: Performers gracefully bend and twist their bodies into shapes, often while balancing objects on their arms and legs.

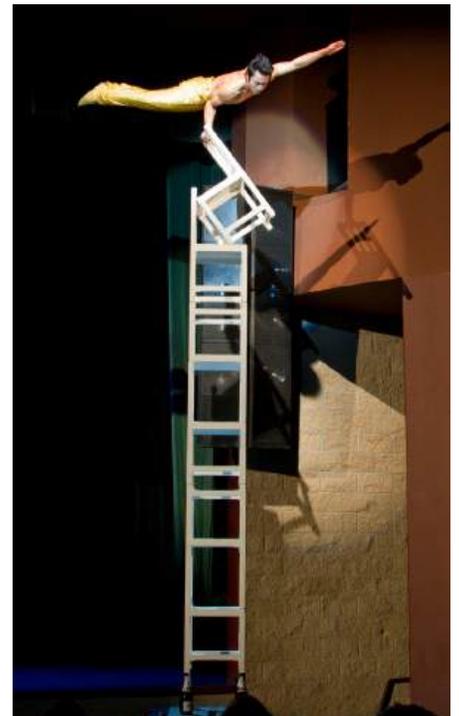
Juggling: Acrobats throw and catch objects like umbrellas, jars, and tables with great dexterity and speed. They may use both their hands and feet in their juggling acts.

The Lion: An act with roots in Chinese folk dance, the lion represents the spirit of renewal. Big Lion is played by two acrobats, while Small Lion is played by one. The lion rolls and jumps, exhibiting strength, agility, and tranquility.

Chair Stacking: While on a pagoda or ladder of chairs, acrobats practice handstand and other acts of balance.



Bicycle



Chair Stacking

Is there just one Chinese culture?

Definitely not! There are many cultural systems within China that are derived from different ethnicities and regions. There are over 50 minority ethnicities who call China their home, and they all have their own distinct culture. Differences appear in dress, cuisine, religion, music, holidays, marital customs, and more. Throughout history, the cultures in China have also been influenced by foreign cultures. Sometimes this influence came from countries who occupied parts of China (Japan, Germany, and Russia), some influence came through Christian missionaries. More recently, the hegemony of Western culture around the globe has brought many western customs into Chinese society.

What is the history of Chinese immigrants in Maine?

It is widely acknowledged that people from China first visited or immigrated to what is now the United States around the mid-1800s with the hope of participating in the Gold Rush in California. So what brought Chinese people to Maine? Gary Libby, an attorney and writer in Portland who has done extensive research on this topic shares some of his knowledge below.

The majority of the Chinese people who came to the US in the 1840s up until 1882 when Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, came from China's Guangdong Province on the southeastern coast across from Taiwan. It is believed that the first Chinese person ended up in Maine by accident. A man arrived in Portland in 1857 having stowed away on a ship docked in his home of Amoy Island (now Xiamen). By the time he was discovered by sailors they were too far in their trip to return to China. His Chinese name is not known because he took the American name Daniel Cough when he arrived. Mr. Cough moved to Tremont, Maine on Mt. Desert Island and opened a general store that he ran until the early 1900s. There are a few other known immigrants to Portland around this time. Aar Tee Lam opened a tobacco shop on Federal Street and then opened a Chinese restaurant in 1880. Portland had a Chinese restaurant before many other bigger cities across the country. At that time there were 9 Chinese people known to be living in the state. In the late 1800s a 14 year old boy from China, Sam Lee, arrived in Portland and started his own Chinese hand laundry store. [mainememory.net]

Prior to the Chinese Exclusion Act Chinese women and children did not come to the United States since they were not allowed to work. Following the Act, no Chinese people were allowed to come to the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act was not repealed until 1943 due to the United States' desire to build a stronger relationship with China during the World War II. Today, there are over 5 million people who identify as being of Chinese descent in America [Pew Research Center, 2015].



Toy Len Goon, an immigrant from China, used this electric iron in her Portland laundry in the 1950s. She and her husband raised their children in the Woodfords area of Portland. In 1952, Toy Len Goon was elected American Mother of the Year and traveled to Washington, D.C. to receive congratulations from the First Lady, Bess Truman.

PRE-PERFORMANCE LESSON ACTIVITIES

Here are some ideas for lesson activities that expand on the essential questions, topics, and themes of The Peking Acrobats.

Observe and Describe: Objects in a Bag

Practice observational skills with your students before attending The Peking Acrobats performance with the activity below.

Materials:

- A large non-transparent bag (such as a paper bag)
- A selection of common objects. Choose objects that vary in size and shape.

Note: this activity can be done as a full class or in small groups. If you choose to try the activity in small groups, you'll need enough bags of objects for each group to have their own!

1. Place 3-4 objects in a bag and invite a student to select an object to describe to the class. Give the student a moment to closely observe their chosen object without removing it from the bag.
2. Have the student describe the object in as much detail as possible without saying its name or its function. Use as many senses as possible to describe the object.
3. Allow students to ask 3 clarifying questions about the object. Remember, the student in the hot seat may not name the item or its function. Students may ask things like “how much does it weigh?” “can you throw it” etc.
4. Invite students to guess what the object is.
5. Continue until everyone has had an opportunity to describe an object.
6. After the activity, reflect with your students: How did you use your senses to describe an object? What skills did you need to use to guess the object correctly? What was challenging about describing objects? What was challenging about asking clarifying questions? How might we use these skills when engaging in an activity like watching a performance or reading a book?



Check out Recommended Books

As you prepare for the performance, check out these books by Chinese-American authors curated by [I'm Your Neighbor Books](#). Follow the links below to learn more about each title and find activities and discussion questions.



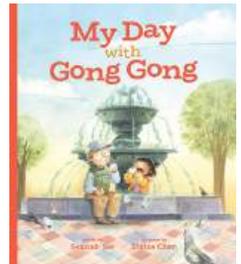
My Day with Gong Gong By Sennah Yee

Learn more about the book:

<https://imyourneighborbooks.org/book/my-day-with-gong-gong/>

A lesson plan, coloring pages, and an interview with the author:

<https://www.annickpress.com/Books/M/My-Day-with-Gong-Gong>



The Year of the Dog By Grace Lin

Learn more about the book:

<https://imyourneighborbooks.org/book/the-year-of-the-dog/>

Behind-the-scenes information from the author, activities, and lesson plans:

<https://gracelin.com/the-year-of-the-dog/>

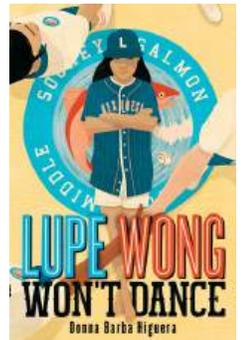
Lupe Wong Won't Dance by Donna Barba Higuera

Learn more about the book:

<https://imyourneighborbooks.org/book/lupe-wong-wont-dance/>

Educator guide with discussion questions, activities, and curriculum connections:

<https://www.dbhiguera.com/lupe-wong-wont-dance>



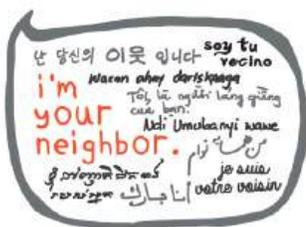
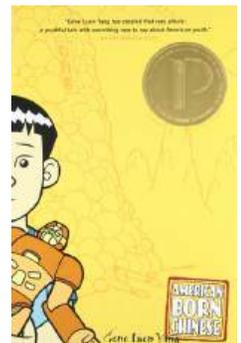
American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang

Learn more about the book:

<https://imyourneighborbooks.org/book/american-born-chinese/>

Teachers' guides on graphic novels featuring American Born Chinese:

<https://firstsecondbooks.com/resources/>



Welcoming Library

Ovation partners with I'm Your Neighbor Books to curate diverse books and provide resources for young people, families and educators to engage deeply in literature and story.

POST-PERFORMANCE LESSON ACTIVITIES

Post-Performance Discussion Questions

1. Consider the core skills of Chinese acrobatics—handstand, tumbling, flexibility, juggling, and dance—where did you see acrobats using these skills?
2. What did you learn about Chinese acrobatics and culture through this performance? What are you curious about after watching it?
3. Many of the acts in the performance use imagery to recreate a living thing—like a plant or an animal—using the human body and props. What images stick with you after the performance? What do you think they represented?
4. Some scholars argue that Chinese theater and acrobatics illustrate life through moments of struggle and joy. Where did you see moments of struggle in this performance? Where did you see joy? What other art forms do you think perform this same function?



Double Pole

Practice Three-Ball Juggling

Juggling is one of the foundational skills of Chinese Acrobatics, and it's a skill that can be practiced safely in a classroom with minimal materials. Try juggling with your students following the steps below.



Materials:

- 3 juggling balls per student. Make sure your juggling balls are soft! Bean bags or balled up socks work well (see the video below for instructions on how to make juggling balls from socks).
- An open space

The Rainbow Throw:

1. The rainbow throw is the foundation of juggling. Throw a juggling ball from one hand, as high as your forehead, and into the other hand.
2. As you throw, think about using a scooping motion, like scooping ice cream, to throw and catch the ball.
3. Try throwing the ball with both your left hand and your right hand.

Practice the rainbow throw with students until everyone is comfortable throwing the ball from one hand to the other with the feet planted.

Add a second ball:

4. Hold a juggling ball in each hand. Using the rainbow throw, Throw the ball in your left hand, then the ball in your right hand (one at a time).
5. Catch the juggling balls in the opposite hand one at a time. Try chanting “throw, throw, catch, catch” as you go—this helps connect the mind and body.
6. Practice alternating which hand begins the throwing—start with the left hand, then the right hand. Throwing with one hand and then the other helps prepare for three ball juggling.
7. Remind students to aim to throw balls as high as the forehead, throwing it higher or lower makes it harder to catch. Use the forehead as a guide—when one ball reaches the forehead, throw the second ball.

Adding a second ball is hard! Encourage students to remain positive and keep practicing, dropping balls is part of the process.

Add a third ball:

8. Begin with 2 balls in the hand you write with (or the dominant hand) and one ball in the other hand.
9. Practice throwing balls to learn the pattern. Throw ball 1 with the dominant hand (remind students to use the rainbow throw technique), throw ball 2 with the other hand, then throw ball 3 with the dominant hand. Allow balls to fall on the floor.
10. When students feel comfortable with the throwing pattern, try to catch the balls as their thrown. Throws should have a good consistent beat—consider playing music (something with a strong walking rhythm) to help students maintain the beat.
11. Students might find it helpful to juggle facing a wall.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Maine's Chinese Community

Bennett, Troy R. "Maine's Chinese History Is 'More than Just Ethnic Food and Laundry'." Bangor Daily News, bangordailynews.com/2019/01/31/news/portland/maines-chinese-history-is-more-than-just-ethnic-food-and-laundry/

"1952 National Mother of the Year." American Mothers, Inc., 14 May 1970, www.americanmothers.org/1952-national-mother-of-the-year/.

Chinese American Friendship Association of Maine (CAFAM): <https://cafammaine.org/>

Portland Chinese-American History Walking Tour: <https://cafammaine.org/portland-walking-tour/>

Maine Memory Network Chinese in Maine
<https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/165/page/424/display>

History of Chinese in America

"Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts." Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/chinese-immigration>

Wu, Yuning. "Chinese Exclusion Act." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 22 Nov. 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/Chinese-Exclusion-Act.

"The Chinese Exclusion Act." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/chinese-exclusion-act/.

History of Acrobatics in China

"The Acrobats of China's Wuqiao County." NPR, National Public Radio, 16 May 2006, <https://www.npr.org/2006/05/16/5408362/the-acrobats-of-chinas-wuqiao-county>.



Portland Ovation, founded in 1931, presents dynamic performing arts events including classical music, jazz, opera, dance, theater, and Broadway. We believe that cultural enrichment should be high quality and accessible to all. Ovation collaborates with other nonprofit organizations, education systems, and the business sector to promote lifelong learning while celebrating the power and virtuosity of the performing arts. We bring the exhilaration of the performing arts into our communities with free events as part of Ovation Offstage, connecting artists and audiences. Join us at unexpected “art happenings,” classroom workshops, masterclasses, community discussions, and pre-performance lectures to explore together the relevance and connection of the performing arts to our lives.

Land Acknowledgment

Portland Ovation’s programs are presented on Wabanaki land, home of the Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki and Penobscot Nations, their elders past and present, and future generations.

We encourage you to learn more and take action in support of Maine’s Indigenous communities through the following organizations

[Abbe Museum](#)

Maine’s premier museum dedicated to indigenous history and culture. Their mission is to inspire new learning about the Wabanaki Nations with every visit.

[Maine-Wabanaki Reach](#)

A Native-led non-profit that supports the self-determination of Wabanaki people through education, truth-telling, restorative justice, and restorative practices in Wabanaki and Maine communities.

Created and written by Dr. Liz Schildkret & Sarah Coleman

Designed by Katie Day

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We want to know what *you* thought about the performance. You can write your answers below or draw a picture on the back of this page. Thank you!

PERFORMANCE: Peking Acrobats – Tuesday, February 28, 2023

SCHOOL NAME: _____ **TEACHER NAME:** _____ **GRADE:** _____

YOUR NAME: _____ May we use your name when we share your comments?
Yes__ No__

What did you like about Peking Acrobats? Why did you like that part?

What was something that you learned during the performance?

What would you like to tell other kids about Peking Acrobats?

What types of performance would you like Portland Oventions to offer in the future? (Feel free to share what type of art you are interested in (theater, dance, music), what cultures you might like to see, what topics the art might connect with, or specific artists.)

We want to know what you thought about the performance.

Draw a picture of a part of The Peking Acrobats that you liked. Thank you!



YOUR NAME: _____ SCHOOL: _____ TEACHER: _____ GRADE: _____

Please scan and email to offstage@portlandovations.org or mail to Portland Ovations 120 Exchange St Portland, ME 04101

Please take a few moments to fill out this survey after you attend the performance. You can also fill it out [online here](#). Your response provides valuable insight on the impact, accessibility, and relevancy of the School-Time Performance Series and will allow us to improve and strengthen the program. Thank you.

PERFORMANCE: Peking Acrobats – Tuesday, February 28, 2023

TEACHER NAME: _____ GRADE(S) OF STUDENTS: _____

SCHOOL NAME: _____ CITY/TOWN: _____

EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

1. From your perspective as a teacher, how would you rate Peking Acrobats?

Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

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

4. What was your primary reason for bringing your students to Peking Acrobats?

- I wanted my students to experience the performing arts.
- The performance topic fit with my curriculum goals.
- The date and time of the performance fit our schedule.
- The ticket price is affordable.
- Other (please specify):

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

6. Did you use the Educators Guide provided by Portland Ovation before or after attending the performance?

Yes No

7. Why or why not?

8. What improvements could we make to the Educators Guide to serve you and your classroom better?

9. How would you rate the following components of attending the School-Time Performance?

	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
Reserving & paying for tickets	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Communication about the day of the performance	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Arrival at the venue	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Departure from the venue	<input type="checkbox"/>				

10. What types of performances would you like to bring your students to in the future? (Feel free to share art forms, topics/themes, specific artists, etc.)?

11. A number of generous individuals and organizations make it possible for Portland Ovation to offer these School-Time Performance tickets at extremely discounted rates. Is there anything you'd like them to know in terms of your experiences or its impact on your students?