CHINA AND HER PEOPLE

Peking (pron. pea king), which means “Northern Capitol” in Chinese, has been a center of civilization for thousands of years. The area around Peking was inhabited by some of the earliest known, pre-historic human beings. Sometime between 1918 and 1939 the fossilized remains of Peking Man (also known as homo erectus pekinensis) who lived about 50,000 years ago, were found in a village around 30 miles southwest of Peking. It is also certain that nearly 3,000 years ago, Neolithic communities existed on or near the location of present day Peking.

The earliest and longest enduring system of government in China was the Dynasty, beginning around 2070 B.C.E. During this period, an emperor ruled until he died or passed the throne on to his first born son, nephew or grandson. As a result of political upheaval in 1911, led by revolutionaries, the most famous of which is Sun Yat-sen, the Dynastic government finally ended. Years of war and civil conflict followed, and in 1949 the Communist Party of China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, took control of China’s mainland and it became the People’s Republic of China. Communism is a form of society where all businesses, property, foods, goods and services are owned and operated by the government. Today, many Peking citizens are employed by the government and receive wages, housing, health care and an education as compensation. In the early part of the 20th Century, the city’s name was changed from Peking to Beijing (pron. bay jing) because, as the story goes, foreigners who visited the city kept mispronouncing the word Peking! (pron. pay king)

The citizens of modern Beijing are diverse and multi-faceted, as the old embraces the new with great fervor. The Chinese are now able to enjoy many of the modern conveniences that we in the West have come to take for granted. While many still commute to work or school by bus or bicycle, increasingly the influences of the West can be seen in fancy cars, shopping malls and even fast food restaurants! During leisure time, young people in particular enjoy a wide range of activities, many involving modern technology like playing video games, chatting with friends on their cell phones, enjoying DVD’s at home and surfing the Internet. While such innovations were once rare or even forbidden in China, today they are more prevalent than ever, allowing the Chinese to reap the many benefits of modern technology.
The Chinese also adhere to many of the more traditional ways. Many people practice the ancient art of T’ai Chi ch’uan (a Chinese form of exercise and meditation) either alone or in groups in parks. Young people in Beijing enjoy taking day trips to the numerous historical sites, like the tombs of the Ming emperors, and the Great Wall. The older people of Beijing, especially the men, gather in restaurants and tea rooms to talk or sit quietly, pondering life and its responsibilities.

Children in China learn early to appreciate and revere their elderly relatives. Even though living space is at a premium in Beijing, families try to be responsible for aging parents, grandparents and other elderly relatives. Because these elders have given of themselves to raise and educate the families of tomorrow, the Chinese people give the elderly great respect for their wisdom from life’s experiences.

The ambition of most families is to provide their children with a higher education or, if this is not possible, to secure them a good job. For many, the Chinese government takes over in the education of the nation, where the family leaves off. The Chinese government still runs most schools, kindergarten through college, the universities, and the technical schools as well. School begins for children at age 6 when they start Kindergarten. After five years of Chinese language, arithmetic, physical education, music, art, natural science and political doctrine, Chinese students enter ordinary middle schools. Here, students take classes in politics, Chinese language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, foreign languages, history, geography, basic agriculture, physical education, music and art. Students attend ordinary middle school for six years. Most Chinese students do not return to their studies after middle school and work instead in a factory, on a farm, in the military or other form of government service for the rest of their lives.
As the cultural and political center of China, Beijing houses political institutions, prestigious universities, art museums and theatres. China, Beijing in particular, has a long and rich theatre history, dating back centuries to the Shang dynasty (1523-1028 B.C.E.). In this period, “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 B.C.E.) court entertainments were very popular. Clowns, wrestlers, acrobats, singers and musicians entertained emperors and their attendants by acting out mythical stories and famous fables.

These entertainments were the precursors of Peking Opera, which is a multi-faceted art form, unlike Western Opera. Peking Opera combines singing, dancing, acrobatics, martial arts, pantomime, highly stylized acting, costume, make-up and more to create fantastic stage productions. The fundamental belief of Chinese theatre-goers is that theatre, at best, should be an illusion of life. Good Chinese theatre must show the real struggle of humans to succeed and survive as well as the joys of living.

THE PEKING ACROBATS take part of the philosophy of Peking Opera and bring it to the world. Acrobatics as an art form displays the grace, beauty, strength and agility of the human race. In their performances, THE PEKING ACROBATS make feats of the seemingly impossible, possible right before your very eyes! To be able to do this, however, requires a lot of dedication, determination and years of study and practice. In China, being selected to become an acrobat is an honor and brings with it a great deal of prestige and the possibility of travel for their children, so parents encourage their children to audition for acrobatic schools. However, this is also a great sacrifice for parents and students. If selected, the acrobatic school they attend will often be far away from family, friends, and the lives with which the students were familiar. Once selected to attend a special acrobatic school, students take their general education classes in the morning hours. In the afternoon, they will practice 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!
Most acrobats begin their life in art at around age 6, but are not selected to become part of a professional performing troupe until around they are 16 to 18 years of age. Imagine being chosen for a professional troupe and traveling the world at such a young age! While on tour, the acrobat will see many corners of the globe and will meet new and different people. THE PEKING ACROBATS are representatives of their country and art, and they take great pride in being selected to perform for audiences like you!

**A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE PEKING ACROBATS**

A typical day in the life of THE PEKING ACROBATS, while they are on tour consists of early mornings on the bus to drive to the city where they will perform that evening or the next day. Upon arrival, they go to their hotel and get settled into their rooms. Then, they go to the theatre where they prepare for their performance. After the performance, there may be a reception or brief party where the Acrobats meet and greet audience members. After this, it’s back to the hotel, where everyone has a good night’s sleep before starting all over again the next day. During their time off, they often organize a quick game of European-style football, which we call soccer, badminton or table tennis. They also listen to Asian Pop or Rap Music, play video games, go to the cinema, enjoy a swim at their hotels, read a book or write home to their families. In essence, the performers are very much like young people here in America, only they travel the world sharing their incredible physical talents.

The performers see a great deal of America while on tour and enjoy meeting people from all walks of life in their travels. When they return home to China, they have a wealth of memories that they eagerly share with their families and friends. Becoming a member of THE PEKING ACROBATS means hard work and being far from home for long periods of time, but it also offers benefits such as traveling and fun.

THE PEKING ACROBATS are directed by the Hai family, who are very famous acrobats in China and the US. Their clan boasts three generations of acrobatic tradition! This troupe will astound, amaze and inspire you, while at the same time providing a taste of Chinese culture - bringing us a little closer to mutual understanding between all peoples!
THE PEKING ACROBATS begin training at a very young age. While they make everything appear easy on stage, there is a great deal of difficulty associated with the feats they perform. Because of their unique abilities many myths have been perpetuated about both contortionists and acrobats. While most of them are due to people’s unfamiliarity with human anatomy and physiology, some are just falsehoods that are invented and perpetuated down through the years by promoters and others in order to make the act appear even more mysterious. The truth is that 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.

Contortionism is an unusual form of physical display 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. These performers have inspired comic book characters, just as DC Comics the Elongated Man, who is a superhero and a reserve member of the Justice League! With all of this mystery surrounding the acrobat’s abilities it is no wonder that there have been so many myths created to explain how they do it. Let us explore and bust some of those myths right now!

**Myth # 1: Contortionists apply snake oil to their joints or drink special elixirs to become flexible.** This was a popular myth in the 19th century when medicine shows hired contortionists to "prove" the effectiveness of their arthritis medicines. Their extreme bending was not actually the result of their medicines, but the flexibility of the contortionist. THE PEKING ACROBATS do not use magic potions or snake oil to be able to perform, but what they put into their body definitely has an effect on their abilities. Instead of some magic potion, the acrobats eat very healthy, consuming lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, lots of lean meat and plenty of water! That is not to say that every once in a while they do not like to eat junk food, but they do so in moderation!
Myth # 2: "Double-jointed" people have more joints than most people do. Every fully-formed person has exactly the same number of joints. "Double-jointed" is just a slang expression used to describe the appearance of a person who can bend much further than one might think a joint would allow a limb to bend.

Myth #3: Contortionists have to dislocate their joints when they bend unusually far. Since some loose-jointed people are able to pop a joint out of its socket without pain, it may be hard to tell whether a joint is actually dislocated without an x-ray. However, as long as the joint socket is the right shape, most extreme bends can be achieved without dislocating the joint. Actual dislocations are rarely used during athletic contortion acts since they make the joint more unstable and prone to injury. Also, a dislocated limb cannot lift itself or support any weight.

Myth #4: Contortionists can bend “bonelessly” in any direction. The amount of flexibility of every joint in every person varies from below average to extremely flexible, including every degree of flexibility in between. Contortionists can create the illusion of having “boneless” bodies by specializing in the skills that show off their most flexible joints, with the help of their acting talent and mime skills. THE PEKING ACROBATS spend years training, stretching and exercising everyday to be able to be as flexible as they are. They attend special schools where they spend half of their school day just training to be Acrobats one day. Even after they have left school, it is very important for them to continue training. They spend weeks rehearsing for their shows before they go out on tour, and along with their 1 to 2 hour performances 5 to 8 times a week, they stretch and warm up before every show.
**Myth #5: You are either born a contortionist or you’re not.** Muscle flexibility can be acquired with persistent training, as long as the shape of the bones in the joint does not limit the range of motion. There are a relatively small number of professional performers who claim they were not unusually flexible before undergoing years of intense training. Those who have naturally flexible joints, however, start out with an advantage, both in knowing that they have an aptitude for contortion, and the amount of flexibility they can eventually achieve. A PEKING ACROBAT is not born, but nurtured. 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 spend half of their day devoted to honing their acrobatic skills, including contortionism and other facets of the art. And in the teen years, some will be chosen to join an international touring company like THE PEKING ACROBATS.
THE LION DANCE IN MYTH AND LEGEND

Not only are there myths about the Acrobats but there are also myths about where the acts they perform originated. Of all China’s cultural festivities the Lion Dance is one of the most amazing to watch. It combines theatre, music, history and Kung Fu to create a spectacle that dates back thousands of years and is still performed to this day. The Lion Dance is a part of many festivities like the Chinese New Year, planting and harvest festivals, openings of businesses and weddings. The Lion Dance is believed to chase away evil spirits, bring good luck, longevity, happiness and prosperity. The Lion symbolizes strength and happiness, courage and power, making the Lion Dance a favorite entertainment of the ancient Chinese Emperors as well as the common man.

Although lions as a species are not native to China, their stories date back to the Han Dynasty (205 – 220 CE), when they were first sent across Asia via the Silk Road, a major trade route in early and medieval history, as gifts from the Persian Empire to the Chinese Emperors in order to gain the right to trade with Silk Road Merchants. Many different stories have been told about the origins of the Lion Dance, and following are just a few of these great myths:

A long time ago a strange creature appeared in China and horrified and ate men and animals. The fast and fierce creature was called 'Nien' (or Nian), which sounds like the Chinese word for 'year'. Neither the fox nor the tiger could fight the 'Nien' effectively and in despair the people asked the lion for help. The lion shook his mane, rushed towards the creature and wounded it. The Nien hurried away with the tail between its legs. But it announced it would return to take revenge. A year later the Nien did return. This time the lion couldn't help the people. He was too busy with guarding the emperor's gate. So the villagers decided to do the job themselves. Out of bamboo and cloth they created an image of the lion, and then two men crawled inside it and approached the Nien. The 'lion' pranced and roared and the monster fled away again.

This is the reason why on the eve of the Chinese New Year, which usually occurs at the first new moon following the end of the last lunar month of the year, the Lions always dance. And when they do they are frightening away the evil spirits for yet another year.
Another popular belief is that the Lion Dance finds its roots in the Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE). Legend has it that the emperor had a strange dream one night. In his dream, an odd creature he had never seen before saved his life and carried him to safety. The next day, wondering what this creature was and what the dream meant, the emperor described it to his ministers. One of the ministers explained that the strange creature resembled an animal called a "Lion", which did not exist in China at the time. The emperor, wanting to see this "Lion" while awake, ordered his ministers to create a model of it, and because in the dream the lion saved him, the lion came to symbolize good luck, happiness, and prosperity.

Inspired by these myths, as well as others, over the years, Lion Dancing has spread from Emperors to the people, and has become a vital part of Chinese folk culture. Usually the lion is enacted by two dancers. One handles the head, made out of strong but light materials like paper-mache and bamboo, the other plays the body and the tail under a cloth that is attached to the head. The 'animal' is accompanied by three musicians, playing a large drum, cymbals and a gong. A Little Buddha teases it with a fan or a giant ball. The head dancer can move the lion's eyes, mouth and ears for expression of moods. Every kind of move has a specific musical rhythm. The music follows the moves of the lion: the drum follows the lion; the cymbals and the gong follow the drum player.

Another version of the Lion Dance is colored with military significance. In this version, the Lion's head, carved of wood, and the tail, made of fine silk, bends and weaves as the lion gazes to the west in hopes of returning to his homeland, which was lost to invading barbarians, explain the Lion boys, who are symbolically costumed as those invaders while they tease the lion. The Lion's homesick sentiments, displayed by skillful acrobatics, were meant to inspire the militant fervor of generals and warriors in frontier areas to recover lost lands.
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