



# Golden Dragon Acrobats



Welcome to Keynotes, a performance guide created by the Education Department of the State Theatre in New Brunswick, NJ. These Keynotes are designed to be used before and after attending the performance of Golden Dragon Acrobats.

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## Dear Teacher,

Originally from Cangzhou, Hebei province, in the People's Republic of China, the Golden Dragon Acrobats have toured for 28 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 you and your class with acrobatic feats they perform using their bodies and simple props including everyday objects like plates, jugs, bicycles, chairs, umbrellas, and more.

## Using This Study Guide

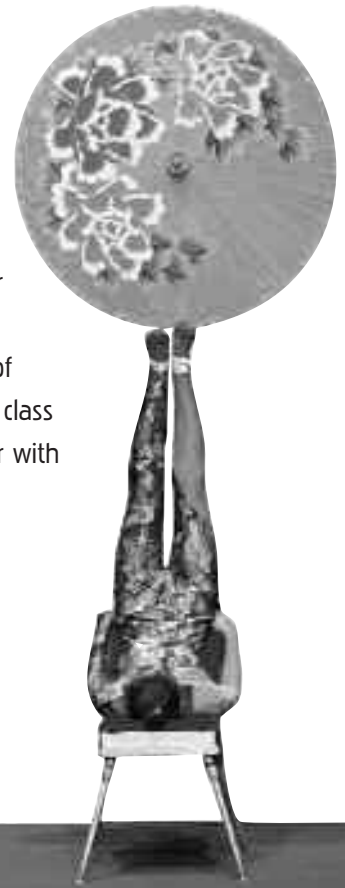
The performance has been recommended for students in grades Pre-K through 5. Depending on the age and ability of your students, some of the pages in these *Keynotes* can be used "as is," while other pages should be used as a guide for teacher-led discussion and activities. Here are general suggestions for using this guide:

- **Pages 2-6** are intended to be used by teachers for their own information as well as for points of discussion with students.
- **Pages 7-9** are activity pages designed to be photocopied for older students. Teachers of students in Pre-K and Kindergarten are encouraged to read the information aloud to the class and modify the activities as needed. The activities can be used directly by the students or with the teacher acting as facilitator.
- **Pages 10-11** are activity pages designed to be photocopied for younger students.

We also suggest that you encourage your students to participate in the performance by:

- **OBSERVING** how the performers use their bodies;
- **WATCHING** the way that the performers work together as a team;
- **THINKING** about all the training and practice that goes into each act;
- **REFLECTING** on the many different sounds, sights, and skills on display at the theater.

We look forward to seeing you at the State Theatre!



# Meet the Golden Dragon Acrobats

For more than 27 centuries, Chinese acrobats have been thrilling audiences, making it the “longest running” folk art form in history. In China, acrobats are revered much the same way prima ballerinas and opera singers have been in the West. The performers of the Golden Dragon Acrobats represent this honored tradition, mixing acrobatics, traditional dance, spectacular costumes and ancient and contemporary theatrical techniques to present a show of great skill and beauty.

The Golden Dragon Acrobats have become the world’s leading Chinese acrobatic troupe, performing more than any other company. Danny Chang, the director of the troupe, and his wife, choreographer Angela Chang, have taken their company from Cangzhou, Hebei province in China, around the world to all 50 states and over 65 countries on five continents, including performances at such venues as the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Germany’s Elspe Festival, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Caesar’s Palace in Atlantic City, and the Seattle Children’s Festival.

The Chang family became one of the leading touring groups in China and Taiwan. Danny Chang, with his brothers and cousins continue the proud tradition. His father and uncles were given charge over the National Institute for Acrobatic Training in Taipei. Today they annually train over 200 nationally auditioned young people ages eight to seventeen. These talented youngsters in their “magnet schools” study academics half of each school day and train with their acrobatic coaches the other half. They learn things like using their feet to toss umbrellas, juggle balls, and balance full trays of glasses!



## Did You Know?

*Acrobat* comes from the Greek word for walking on tiptoe.



## Golden Dragon Trivia



- ❖ Some members of the Golden Dragon Acrobats have been training since they were five years old.
- ❖ The performers in the troupe range in age from 17 to 22.
- ❖ During the show, each performer makes a minimum of six to eight costume changes.
- ❖ It takes up to three months to create one of their costumes, from initial design to finished product.
- ❖ The company travels with 28 cast, crew, and staff people.
- ❖ Following Chinese custom, the company does everything together, like a family. No one gets special “star” treatment.

# About The Performance

This full-length performance by the **Golden Dragon Acrobats** features traditional Chinese acrobatics and dance, enhanced and adapted for the theatrical stage. The company will perform the following program:

**Act I      Straps, Poles, Rope Dance**

A gravity-defying introduction in which acrobats on poles, ropes, and straps perform leaps, flights, and death-drops.

**Act II      Contortionist, Umbrella Juggling, Ball Juggling, Hat Juggling**

A contortionist balances glasses of water on different parts of her body as she turns and twists into unbelievable positions. Then the company demonstrates the seemingly endless possibilities of juggling: using hands, feet, and other body parts to manipulate umbrellas, balls, hats, and other objects with remarkable speed and precision.

**Act III      Swaying Board Balancing, Table Hoop, Dancing Plates**

Acrobats execute stunts while balanced atop a board that is placed on top of a cylinder. Women twirl plates while performing amazing somersaults, turns, and backbends—highlighted by a climax of fall-defying backbends. Meanwhile, men perform creative and athletic dives through hoops of different sizes and heights.

**Act IV      Power Act, Spinning Wheel**

Two male acrobats show off their amazing strength as they contort their bodies and balance off each other in seemingly impossible positions. Then the company, in colorful costumes, spin inside and around giant hoops. Dazzling lighting effects add to the magic.

—Intermission—

**Act V      Silk Act**

The performers wrap and twist themselves in silk streamers (called the “tissue” or “silk”) suspended from the ceiling to the stage floor.

**Act VI      Ladder Act, Diablo Yo-Yo**

An act of precision and balance using freestanding ladders and household items. Then women juggle diabolos—butterfly-shaped Chinese yo-yos that are balanced and tossed on a string stretched between two sticks.

**Act VII      Tower of Chairs**

During this breathtaking act, an acrobat builds and ascends a tower of chairs piled thirty feet in the air.

**Act VIII      Flags & Finale**

The performance finishes with colorful flags, a bicycle act, spectacular tumbling, and gymnastic formations.

*Program subject to change.*



**Hat Juggling**



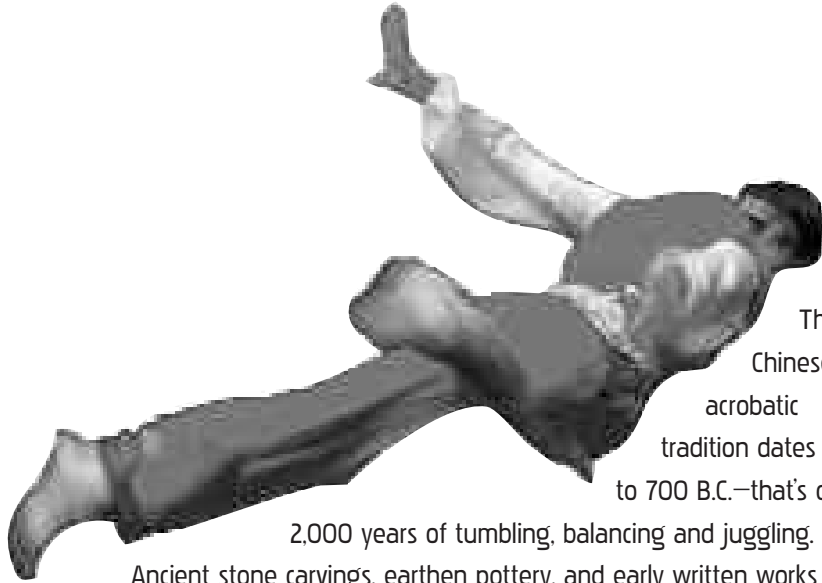
**Table Hoop**



**Spinning**



**Bicycle Act**



The Chinese acrobatic tradition dates back to 700 B.C.—that's over

2,000 years of tumbling, balancing and juggling.

Ancient stone carvings, earthen pottery, and early written works trace the ancestry of today's spectacular acts. These relics tell the tales of famous acrobats—like the story of Confucius' father, an acrobat, who, according to legend, lifted a pair of 1,000-pound city gates to make way for an army.

The art of Chinese acrobatics developed out of the Lunar New Year harvest celebrations, where the village's peasants and craftsmen would hold a kind of Chinese Thanksgiving. Acrobats would use household tools and common items found around the farm and workshop to display their exciting feats. Performers passed their skills down from generation to generation and developed this unique Chinese tradition. The great acrobatic families of China entertained everyone from city rulers to villagers, performing at ceremonial carnivals and public theaters across the land.

Over the years, as China plunged into economic and social upheaval, many fine arts were lost and acrobats found themselves on the verge of starvation. Since the Communist Revolution in 1949, the government has made great efforts to foster and develop the arts in China, and acrobatics has enjoyed a new life.

Today, only a few descendants of the old and famous acrobatic families remain. These individuals have organized China's traditional entertainers into professional acrobatic troupes with formal academies for training young promising entertainers and internationally renowned companies. Modern-day Chinese acrobatics reflects the industry, resourcefulness and courage of the Chinese people. At present, there are over 120 professional acrobatic troupes across China, and more than 12,000 people are involved in performing.

## China Facts

- ❖ The country's official name is the People's Republic of China.
- ❖ Its capital city is Beijing (say: bay-JING).
- ❖ In area, China is the world's fourth-largest country.
- ❖ The country's population is over 1.3 *billion*.
- ❖ China was one of the earliest centers of human civilization.
- ❖ The written Chinese language is the oldest in continuous use. It uses over 10,000 characters.
- ❖ Among the many things the Chinese are credited with inventing are gunpowder, paper, the compass, printing, kites, clocks, the abacus, and spaghetti.



Many Chinese circus acts evolved from the activities of everyday life: work, leisure, religious observances, etc. The props and equipment in today's acrobatic acts are derived from tools, toys, and ordinary household objects used in bygone days. Here are some specific examples of modern Chinese circus acts and their connections to the past:

**Contortionism:** Flexibility is a highly cultivated skill in Chinese culture as it plays a large role in traditional Chinese dance, acrobatics, and martial arts.

**Cycling Feats:** These acts don't date as far back as some of the others but still stay true to the theme of creating beauty with everyday objects. The most well-known bicycle act features a large group of acrobats on one bicycle creating a moving tableau of a peacock spreading its feathers. In parts of China, the peacock is a traditional symbol of good luck, happiness, beauty, and honesty.

**Diabolo:** With a history dating back 2,000-3,000 years, the diabolo is one of the oldest acts performed today. In fact, diabolos were created so long ago that no one knows who really invented them to begin with! Diabolos are both a Chinese sport and a folk toy. A string runs between two sticks that are held in the hands, and the string supports a spinning spool. Once the speed of the spool is increased, it can be made to do all sorts of tricks.

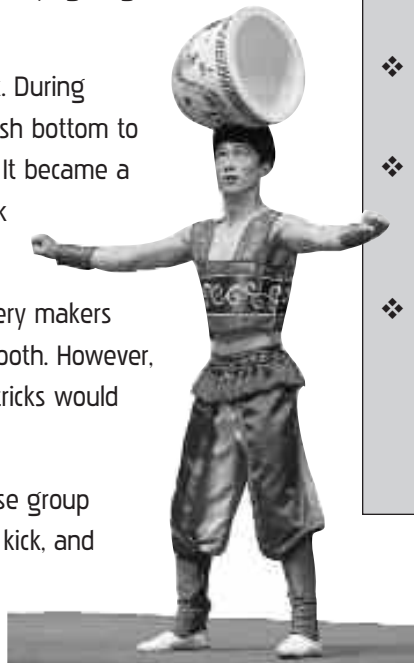


**Hand Walking on Suspended Straps:** Originally developed by sailors maneuvering on sail rigging, this act requires deftness and strength. Relying on their wrists and forearms for support, performers balance, pose and posture upside-down at dizzying heights on long woven strips.

**Hoop Diving:** Hoop diving has its origins in fieldwork. During harvest time, field workers used large hoops with a mesh bottom to shake and divide the grain from the leaves and stems. It became a tradition to see who could dive through the tallest stack of hoops.

**Jar Juggling:** As they do today, ancient Chinese pottery makers would spin jars to make them uniformly round and smooth. However, the potter who added a few high tosses and juggling tricks would attract a crowd, sell more jars and become a local hero.

**Wushu:** Wushu is the name given to traditional Chinese group gymnastics. Performers in these acts tumble, flip, jump, kick, and create intricate poses reminiscent of Chinese martial arts—the tradition from which Wushu stems.



## Post-Show Discussion

- ❖ What elements of traditional acrobatics did you see in the Golden Dragon Acrobats?
- ❖ What did the Golden Dragon Acrobats have in common with American circuses? How were they different?
- ❖ How would you describe the performance to someone who didn't see it?
- ❖ Have you ever taken an everyday object (like a pencil, a plate, or a ball) and tried to do astonishing tricks with it?
- ❖ What are some of the traditional games, dances, etc. practiced by your family or cultural group? Do any of them resemble the acts performed by the Golden Dragon Acrobats?

# Activity: Dance of the Dragon

The dragon is an important symbol in China and part of one of the most important holidays, the Chinese New Year. During this festival, parades of dragons dance down the street, bringing prosperity and good fortune to the new year.

An emblem of the emperors of China, the dragon represents strength, bravery, and nobility. The Chinese people proudly call themselves “Lung Tik chuan Ren,” or “descendants of the dragon.” The dragon appears in art, literature, architecture, songs, dances, and other aspects of Chinese culture.

The Chinese dragon is different in appearance and character from the fierce, fire-breathing dragon of Western culture. It combines the features of many creatures: the body of a snake, scales and tail of a fish, antlers of a deer, and talons of an eagle. It is not considered evil, but a symbol of power and respect. In fact, in China it is forbidden to show images depicting the killing or disfiguring of a dragon.

With your class, try creating your own Dance of the Dragon. Here’s how:

1. In groups of 3 or 4, brainstorm ideas for creating a dragon using all the people in your group. You can use your bodies, as well as any materials or supplies in your classroom. As you talk with your group, ask yourselves:
  - What are the different parts of a dragon?
  - How does a dragon move?
  - How can you use everyone in your group to move like a dragon?
2. After you have explored ideas for moving as a dragon, make up a dance for your dragon. Your dance does not need to have a lot of moves; since this dance is usually done while marching in a parade, you can keep repeating your moves over and over again. Make sure your movements are clear.
3. Have each group share their Dance of the Dragon with the rest of the class. To enhance your parade, ask your teacher to play some traditional Chinese music to accompany the dances.



## Afterward:

- ❖ What did it feel like to become a dragon?
- ❖ How did you work together as a group to create the dragon?
- ❖ How did your group decide to make your dragon move?
- ❖ If you wanted to make your dragon dance even better, what would you change? Did you see any moves in the other groups’ dances that you might want to use?

It takes intense, focused training to become a successful acrobat. Members of the Golden Dragon Acrobats are highly trained professionals who began learning their craft at a very young age—some as young as five years old. Just as important as individual skill, though, is teamwork and trust between the performers in the **ensemble**.

An ensemble (say “ahn-SAHM-bull”) is a group that works together to create a performance. Some important elements that you need to make a successful ensemble are:

- Cooperation
- Trust
- The ability to solve problems as a team
- Respect for others in the ensemble

Ensemble is a French word that means “together.”

See how well you can work in an ensemble by trying the following game, called “Human Knot.” Here’s how it works:

1. Form a group of at least five people. Everybody stand in a circle and put your hands into the center.
2. Each person grabs onto two different hands. No one should be holding two hands from the same person, nor the hand of someone next to them.
3. Once everyone is “connected,” your group must work to detangle yourselves without letting go of your hands.
4. After you’ve played the game successfully, try it again—but this time, no talking!

## Afterward:

- ❖ What was the hardest part about this game?
- ❖ What skills and strategies did your group use to untangle your human knot?
- ❖ Did your group work together in a different way when you were not allowed to talk? How?
- ❖ Can you think of other types of activities where the ensemble skills you used in this game would be needed?
- ❖ Can you name some specific examples of working as an ensemble that you saw in the Golden Dragon Acrobats’ performance? What might have happened if they did not use all of their ensemble skills?

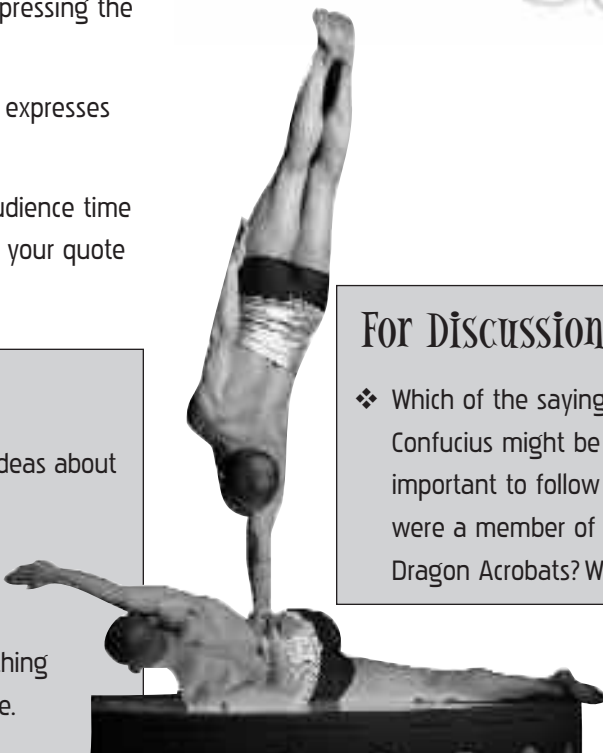


One of China's most important historical figures is **Confucius** (known as Kongzi to the Chinese). He lived from 551-479 B.C. A thinker, political figure, teacher, and philosopher, Confucius expressed ideas that had a profound influence on life and thought in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. His teachings, preserved in the Analects, offer guidelines about the ideal conduct of people and governments.

We know Confucius today mainly from his short sayings that express great wisdom about human behavior. Here are some of his sayings:

- "Respect yourself and others will respect you."
- "Forget injuries, never forget kindness."
- "Study the past if you would define the future."
- "When anger arises, think of the consequences"
- "What one does not wish for oneself, one ought not to do to anyone else; what one recognizes as desirable for oneself, one ought to be willing to grant to others."
- "It does not matter how slow you go so long as you do not stop."
- "Everything has beauty but not everyone sees it."
- "To see what is right and not to do is lack of courage."

1. Get into a group with two or three of your classmates. Together, choose one of the quotes from the list above.
2. Discuss the meaning of the quote. What do you think Confucius was telling us? Have you heard any sayings or quotes from other people expressing the same idea? How could we benefit from this idea today?
3. Based on your discussion, create a **tableau** (frozen picture) that expresses the idea of your quote.
4. Share your tableau silently with the rest of the class. Give the audience time to look at your frozen picture and say what they see. Then read your quote to them and explain how you showed it in your tableau.



## Afterward:

- ❖ How are Confucius' ideas the same or different from your own ideas about the way people should behave?
- ❖ Do you think it is possible to live by Confucius' rules in our society today? Why or why not?
- ❖ Try inventing your own "Confucius says" quote expressing something that you think is important about the way people should behave.

## For Discussion

- ❖ Which of the sayings of Confucius might be especially important to follow if you were a member of the Golden Dragon Acrobats? Why?



A passport is an official document issued by the government. You take it with you whenever you travel to a foreign country. It provides proof of who you are and your country of citizenship, and gives you the right to reenter your native country.

Do you have a passport? What country is your passport from? Where were you traveling when you needed your passport?

Make your own passport! Cut out the pictures of things you'll find in China and paste them in the correct spaces. Fill in your information, attach your photo and you have your own passport to China!

## PASSPORT



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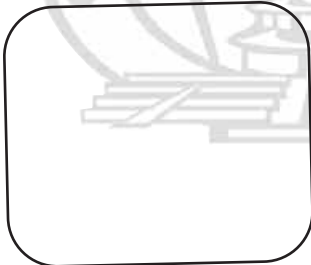
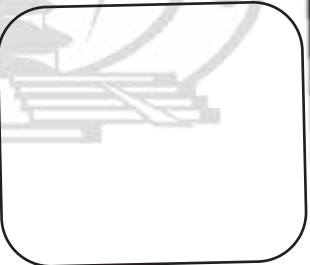
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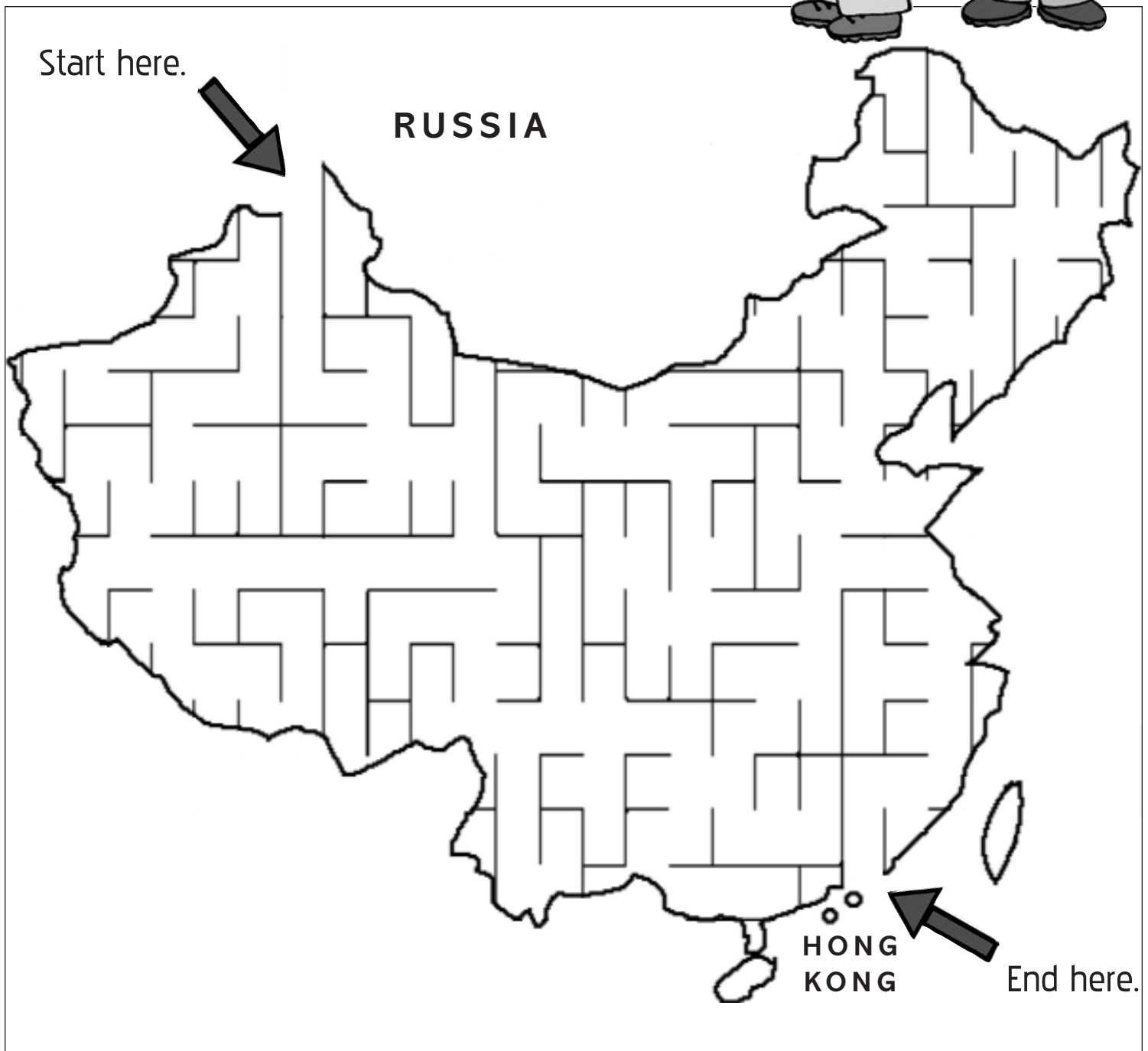
	
<b>Dragon</b>	<b>Panda Bear</b>

	
<b>Himalayan Mountains</b>	<b>Great Wall of China</b>



Activity: **A-MAZE-ing!**

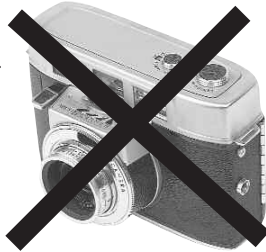
Can you get across China?  
Start in Russia and follow  
the maze to Hong Kong!



## Do You Know Your Part?

As a member of the audience, you are an important part of the performance. Before you arrive at the theater, make sure you know your role!

- When you enter the theater, follow an usher to your seat.
- Once the house lights (the lights in the part of the theater where the audience is sitting) go down, focus all your attention on the stage.
- Attending a live theater performance is not the same as watching television at home. At the theater, talking, eating, or moving around disturbs the performers and other members of the audience. So watch and listen carefully to the performance. And please—no food, beverages, or chewing gum!
- Don't bring cameras, camcorders, tape recorders, or any other recording equipment to the performance. You will not be allowed to use them.
- If something in the show is funny, go ahead and laugh. And of course, please applaud at the end of the performance if you liked what you saw!
- After the performer finishes taking his bows, stay in your seat until your group gets the signal to leave the theater.



## Resources

### BOOKS

- Circus Techniques: Juggling, Equilibratics, Vaulting*, by Hovey Burgess. B. Dube, 1990
- I Want to be an Acrobat*, by Ivan Bulloch and Diane James. Two-Can Publishers, 2000 (grades Pre-K-3)
- Look What Came From China!*, by Miles Harvey. Franklin Watts, 1999 (grades 2-5)
- Made in China: Ideas and Inventions from Ancient China*, by Suzanne Williams, illustrated by Andrea Fong. Pacific View Press, 1997 (grades 4-6)
- Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat: Acrobat Cats*, by George Daugherty, illustrated by Gretchen Schields. Scholastic Paperbacks, 2002 (grades Pre-K-3)

### WEBSITES

- [www.goldendragonacrobats.com](http://www.goldendragonacrobats.com)  
Official website of the Golden Dragon Acrobats. Order their DVDs, watch video clips, and more.
- [www.chinaculture.org](http://www.chinaculture.org)  
Information about China, including acrobatics
- [http://albany.k12.ca.us/ams/library/chinese\\_inventions.htm](http://albany.k12.ca.us/ams/library/chinese_inventions.htm)  
an extensive list of websites about Chinese inventions
- [www.teachcircus.com](http://www.teachcircus.com)  
dedicated to helping teachers and others give effective instruction in circus arts
- ### MUSIC
- Eleven Centuries of Traditional Music of China*. Legacy, 1994
- Phases Of The Moon: Traditional Chinese Music*. Sony, 1990



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Wesley Brustad, *President*  
Lian Farrer, *Vice President for Education*

Keynotes written and designed by Katie Pyott and Lian Farrer  
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