

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: Shanghai Acrobat

AUTHOR: Jingjing Xue

(translated by Bo Ai)

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SUBJECT: Memoir, autobiography, inspiring true stories, *Mao's Last Dancer*, communist China, Chinese history, circus arts, performance, migration, resettlement, acrobatics

Book description

For readers of *Mao's Last Dancer* comes the inspiring true story of a world-famous acrobat who left communist China to begin a new life in Australia.

Jingjing Xue was born in China in 1947, during a period of civil war. Jingjing, left in an orphanage in Shanghai, was destined to a life of hardship before officials singled him out and enlisted him to train with the Shanghai Acrobatics School.

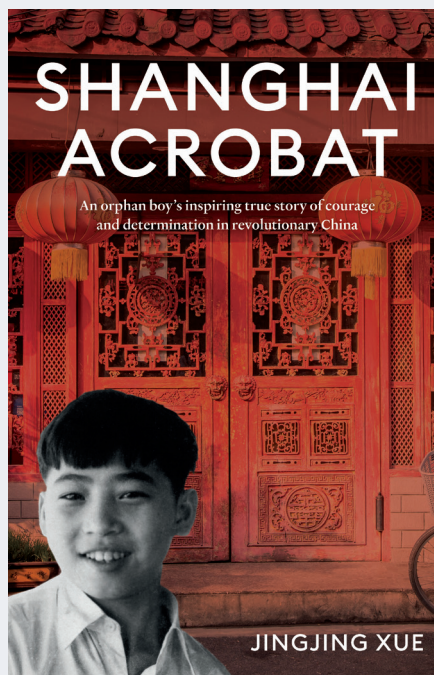
Shanghai Acrobat tells the moving story of Jingjing's rise from poverty to become an admired performer in China and beyond. Through the turbulent period of the Cultural Revolution, he realised the value of freedom. This is a story of hope and perseverance, of overcoming adversity and of finding a place to belong.

Praise for Shanghai Acrobat

'A beautifully written book ... a poignant, riveting story of determination and perseverance against the odds. This is a success story that will resonate for those from all over the world who have called Australia home.'

—ANDREW KWONG, AUTHOR OF ONE BRIGHT MOON

'Inspiring ... the richness of detail, along with the photographs, reveal a marvelous story of endurance and fortitude.' —KIRKUS



About the author

Jingjing Xue was a star performer with the Shanghai Acrobatic Troupe. Considered one of China's best acrobats, from 1961 to 1987 he performed around the world with the Shanghai Circus. He has trained performers in China and at the National Institute of Circus Arts in Melbourne. Three of his students have won gold medals in international circus competitions. *Shanghai Acrobat* is his first book.



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Discussion Points

1. In the prelude to the book, Jingjing talks about a Chinese legend that describes humanity being divided into three parts: people who are immovable, people who are movable, and those who move on their own. Discuss this idea. Which do you think you are, and which do you think you were taught to be?
2. At the start of the book, Jingjing likens the selection/recruitment of children to the acrobatic school to cattle being selected at a market. How do you think a young person might understand complex ideas like communism?
3. A child's mind is like a piece of blotting paper: it will absorb whichever colour is applied to it.' What does the author mean by this? Discuss radicalisation in a current context. (QAnon, Men's Rights Activists, Jihadism, etc.)
4. What was the role of the Shanghai Acrobatic Troupe in international relations in the late '50s and early '60s?
5. What was the author's impressions of England and the British museum at the time of his visit as a young man, and then in hindsight when writing his memoirs? How does this relate to public discourse around British galleries and museums holding culturally significant artefacts from occupied nations?
6. On their tour of the Soviet Union the acrobatic troupe see an old woman begging at a train station. They are ordered not to speak of this incident again. Why? What does this tell us about the political landscape of the time?
7. What did joining the Youth League and the invitation to join the communist party mean for JingJing? How did it change the trajectory of his life?
8. What was the 'smashing of the Four Old Things'? What impact did this have on the cultural history of China?
9. Jingjing's imprisonment and experience with the special investigation team brought him to the conclusion that there is no such thing as truth and anything could have any meaning. Do you agree?
10. Discuss the meaning of art in life. What benefit did Jingjing's art provide him? How did it shape his life? When his American passport was denied and he was subsequently shunned from the performance troupe, how did this affect him?
11. With Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Jingjing stated: 'An unhappiness that had accumulated in my heart disappeared.' What did Mao's death mean for Jingjing and for Shanghai?
12. Jingjing had set himself the goal of surpassing first Malgit, then Ocinsky's achievements in acrobatics. Why do you think he did this?
13. Jingjing's search for his family and questions about them have been a constant since he was left at the orphanage, indeed, the book is dedicated to his unknown parents. Discuss the power of family, history, and knowing your roots.
14. Jingjing eventually left China and migrated to Australia. It took years before he was able to continue his vocation of teaching gymnastics. Discuss the migrant experience both for Jingjing and others.