

# SPECTACLE

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# Lu Yi *The Heart of the San Francisco School of Circus Arts*

by Harriet Heyman

**How this master of Chinese acrobatics came to teach at a struggling nonprofit circus school is a story that whips and winds like the tail of a Chinese**

*Drago*

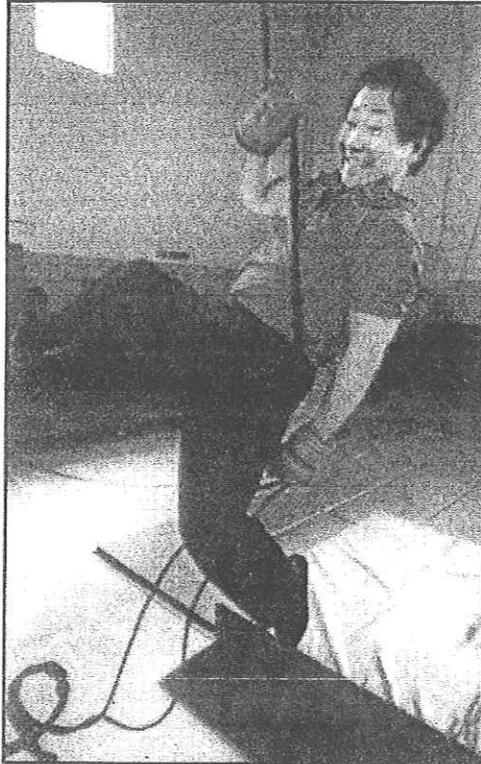
**I**f you walked into the San Francisco School of Circus Arts, looking for the most accomplished acrobat, your eyes would not be drawn to Lu Yi. Lu Yi is 62; most of his students are children or young adults. He is small, and the male acrobats, American and otherwise, tower over him. One big guy ties his curly hair back with a bandanna. He looks like a pirate. Another has a pensive, classically handsome face, the resident Heathcliff. Another man has the body of a Percheron and star quality.

Amidst all this young male musculature, Lu Yi stands out in contrast. He wears a Perry Como sweater over a shirt, loose-fitting pants, Chinese slippers and wire spectacles. All day long, while teaching, he sips tea from a Mason jar. Swollen green-tea leaves hover near the bottom of a brown liquid that looks like dreggings from a fish tank.

Lu Yi has not one gray hair. His skin is smooth. In a gym where everyone is in motion, across the floor and through the air, Lu Yi is the serene center. In English he uses words sparingly, aimed at the heart of the matter. It is a talent derived of acrobatics—economy of movement, economy of words.

Circus-rigging takes up a lot of gym space—the flying trapeze rig, net, trampolines, ropes, bars and hoops suspended from crane bars. By contrast, Lu Yi's basic equipment is minimal: a bench, a wall, a mat and safety lines. In flying trapeze, a teacher shouts cues that echo in the cavernous gym. Lu Yi's classes are quiet. A word and a gesture suffice. Many people try a flying trapeze class once for kicks and never return. Thrill-seekers don't approach Lu Yi, nor would he take them. His classes are for people who train seriously and for the long haul.

Lu Yi was a star performer in China. When he says training is bitter, he knows of what he speaks. His apprenticeship as a child acrobat makes Oliver Twist's orphanage look like a posh summer camp. Lu Yi went on to become the star, artistic



director and head of the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe, one of the finest in the world. Known for inventing daring new twists on old tricks and for creating new ones, Lu Yi enriched the lexicon of an art form whose basic grammar has changed little over 2500 years. At least one of his tricks, a two-man head-to-head catch launched from a teeterboard, has, as far as he knows, never been repeated.

Lu Yi and his troupe traveled the world. He trained performers at Australia's Circus Oz and at New York's Big Apple Circus. He has judged the most prestigious international circus competitions and earned the "Lifetime Achievement in Circus Arts" award from the Circus Fans Association of America. Today Lu Yi is the master trainer of the San Francisco School of Circus Arts, the only fulltime public circus school in the United States. Though the school has plenty of

recreational students, Lu Yi's classes are limited to performers, aspiring performers, promising children and a few committed adult amateurs.

Lu Yi is serious, but not somber. He laughs readily, and a job well done wins a pat on the shoulder or a rub on the back. When Lu Yi is not happy with students' work, they know it. He never yells, he never raises his voice, but his opinion is so highly valued that the least sign of displeasure weighs heavily. His students revere him, though he is a reluctant mentor. Lu Yi is a man in control of his own ego. All the students feel a bond with this man. If he were to leave the circus school, its heart would be gone.

He is at the gym six days, 60 hours, a week. He expects, and receives, similar dedication from his performing students. His dream is to create, from the children he trains, a circus ensemble that is technically and artistically superb, and for the school to be the springboard for a rebirth of circus arts in America.

**L**u Yi was born in 1939 in a village in Jiangsu Province near the South China Sea. His father farmed while his mother raised their three boys and two girls. The family of seven lived in a mud house with a thatch roof. After the war the family moved to Shanghai, where Lu Yi's father sold fruits and vegetables. Poor children didn't go to school. Instead, a self-appointed teacher rounded up neighborhood children for lessons.

Lu Yi was a playful child. He loved watching the street performances and outdoor entertainments common in those days. A knife juggler mesmerized him. Because a set of juggling knives was beyond his family's means, Lu Yi used his mother's brooms to teach himself to juggle. Playing with everyday objects—tables, chairs, jars, bowls, wicker hoops, pitchforks, umbrellas—and using them to spectacular effect, is an essential character of Chinese acrobatics.

In this ancient art form, magic springs from the ordinary. Acrobatics depicts in stylized form Chinese history, folklore and daily life: the hunt and harvest, war and love, friendship and mischief-making. The rich cultural substrate of acrobatics comes into play in opera, theater, dance and visual arts. Enjoyed by emperors and commoners alike, acrobatics has been tossed about in the cross-currents of Chinese history. The Communists vilified it as a relic of the feudal past, then reinstated it as an emblem of revolutionary vitality.

A local performer noticed Lu Yi's self-taught skills and introduced him to a famous acrobat of the day called Pan Ying. Pan Ying came from a family of acrobats going back several generations. At this time, just after the Second World War, acrobatics lay outside the reach of law. Children could be treated like slaves. Cruelty was commonplace. But Lu Yi loved circus, and he had a flair for acrobatics. He was eager to apprentice himself to Pan Ying, and his parents did not dissuade him; the boy was only 11, and if he worked hard, someday he might earn a modest living as an acrobat.

Training began before sunrise and Lu Yi returned home



close to midnight. During the day, meals were the only breaks. His education was acrobatics. Learning to read and write, considered a waste of precious training time, was forbidden. The film "Farewell My Concubine," depicts boys training in acrobatics for the opera. Lu Yi commented that the boys in the film had it far easier than he did. "We were always prepared to be beaten or whipped," he said. "It was to enforce discipline. It was so unpredictable. Sometimes you were beaten for nothing, because the teacher hated you."

During our interview, Lu Yi bent over and placed my hand on a burl of scar tissue on his head where a half century ago a teacher struck him with a stick. Other scars he did not reveal. He and the other boys were beaten on their bottoms and backs. "One morning we thought we were doing well," he said. "But for no reason he hit us. We were embarrassed to take showers or bathe. We didn't want anyone to see our bodies—because of the marks of shame. Others would have assumed we had been mischievous." One little boy, 10

years younger than Lu Yi, was singled out for special brutality. His name was Xia Ke Min, a bright, exceptionally talented boy with an antic spirit. Almost as a daily ritual, Pan Ying beat the child about the face. After two years, Xia fled the school, and his mother, seeing the child's swollen face and scars, didn't force him to return.

**T**oday acrobats practice on mats or crash pads and wear belts attached to safety lines. The teacher spots, which can mean giving a boost or breaking a fall. In Lu Yi's boyhood, the children trained on a cement floor. "If we were lucky, we had a fiber mat, very thin," he said. "There was little spotting. The teacher wanted to make you do more yourself, so you would learn faster." Children hit their heads and were injured in other ways. "If you got hurt, you could not say anything. The teacher would get angry and push you to do more. You could not talk about pain. You would be scared to talk about pain or fear. The teacher would hate you more."

In *Farewell My Concubine*, a boy practices splits using a rope slung over a rafter and tied to his ankle. He pulls on the free end to stretch his leg upwards.

Lu Yi's teachers had a more direct approach. They made the boys straddle two benches, and leaned with their full body weight to split the boys' legs. Or two teachers would simply pin a child and pull apart his legs until the muscles loosened. The bitter-is-better school of training had other variations. Wearing thin clothes, the boys were sent out in the snow to spin plates. Plate spinning demands minute rhythmic wrist movements. The theory was, if you could make muscles work well in the cold, they would be doubly responsive in warmth. Lu Yi spun plates until his teachers called him in. Long after, his hands ached, and the cold stayed in his body.

Boys and girls trained together, sometimes as partners in pyramid building. As girls tend to be more flexible, they were steered toward contortion, juggling and high-wire walking. The girls' training was no less bitter than the boys'. Lu Yi believes the girls suffered more, physically and psychologically. "The teachers pushed them very hard. Girls' muscles are different from boys'. Their bodies were not ready."

And why did Lu Yi stick it out? "I loved circus. I learned lots of skills quickly. I was not the one who was

beaten most." Lu Yi was a quick study, small, nimble, strong and versatile. Pan Ying rewarded his finest apprentice: five yuan a performance, big pay for the time. At age 15 Lu Yi was launched as a performer.

In China, students master a basic grammar of acrobatic movement: tumbling, backbend, cartwheels and handstands. The handstand reigns above all else, embodying strength, control, coordination, balance and focus. Children practiced handstands against a wall or freestanding for long periods of time. Lu Yi said he was not the best at holding handstands; twenty minutes or so was his limit. Other students held them far longer.

Pan Ying's uncle was said to be able to hold a freestanding handstand for hours. This was in the old days, when time was measured by burning a scent stick. When the last ash went up in smoke, the acrobat came down.

In Lu Yi's class, if the boys were told to hold a handstand for 30 minutes, they could not come down an instant before. If they toppled sooner, they had to repeat the entire 30-minute exercise or risk a beating. (Eventually, Pan Ying was put in prison—not, however, for beating children, but for sedition.)

## "Don't be an acrobat! Training is too bitter!"

In "Chinese Acrobatics Through the Ages," a history of the art form written with an unwavering Revolutionary spin, the author states: "Beginning with the founding of the first acrobatic troupe [in 1950], acrobats have given primary importance to the work of 'weeding through the old to bring forth the new.' They ban[ned] those presentations harmful to the mental and physical health of the performers and those which unduly stimulated the senses of the spectators. Some of the presentations banned were, 'Climbing a Mountain of Knives,' 'Dismantling a Human Body into Eight Pieces,' 'Swallowing a Sword,' 'Rolling on a Board Studded with Nails,' 'Eating an Electric Light Bulb,' 'Dancing on Broken Pieces of Glass,' 'Swallowing Five Poisonous Creatures' (scorpion, viper, centipede, lizard and toad), and 'A Snake Worms into Eyes, Ears, Nostrils and Mouth.'"

In the early 1950s the long arm of government came down hard on the freak shows. It also brought all the acrobats in from the cold. This was less because it had suddenly taken a liking to itinerant acrobats than a move to revive traditional acrobatic arts for revolutionary purpose. Street performances were

anned. Outstanding acrobats were jelled from different cities and invited to perform in Beijing before Mao, Zhou Enlai and other leaders. These select performers became the first acrobatic couple of postwar China. They toured European countries to promote China's prestige abroad. Art as a political tool as a long tradition in China. The notion anathema to Western ideas of artistic freedom, but in this case it had salutary effects on the acrobats' welfare. The acrobats were treated as prized possessions, touring the globe, meeting heads of state, staying in good hotels—all closely monitored, of course, by a government cop-as-chaperone.

In 1956 Lu Yi, age 18, made his first trip outside China. He and the rest of what was now called the Shanghai Acrobatic Troupe arrived in Budapest in the dead of winter. The troupe performed and enjoyed good food and comfortable accommodations in an international hotel overlooking a gigantic statue of Stalin. The troupe was so popular, it was invited to extend its stay. After a few days, however, attendance dwindled. Abruptly, the performances were stopped. The acrobats were told to stay in their hotel rooms and keep the shades drawn. They heard shots. Peeking out, they saw buildings raked by gunfire. They saw troops, but didn't know which side was which. The only thing clear was that the statue of Stalin, upright when they arrived, was now on its side. Shut up in their rooms, the acrobats received less and less food, until daily rations dwindled to bread and water.

Suddenly, they were told, get out, don't pack, forget the luggage. The acrobats were herded onto a bus bearing a special flag signifying they were non-participants; and driven to the Czech border. From Czechoslovakia they made



Lu Yi, second from left, at age 23, with Xia Ke Min, third from left.

their way by train back to China. This was Lu Yi's first trip abroad. Until then, his whole life had been the confined world of acrobatics in his home city. "I had never seen a real war before."

The following year Lu Yi and the troupe moved to permanent quarters in Nanjing. "In Shanghai we had lots of performances and little training. In Nanjing we had time and a good place to train, a salary, health care." A tutor visited the troupe, fitting literacy training around the acrobats' training regimen.

Lu Yi asked Xia Ke Min, then 11 years old, to return to the circus, promising he would not be beaten. Xia came to live with Lu Yi, and Lu Yi created unique tricks for his talented protégé—the first-ever quadruple somersault off a teeterboard, the first head-to-head catch from a teeterboard with Lu Yi catching. Xia was still the clown and mischief-maker, though. "So much talent," said Lu Yi, "He was hard to control." Remembering Pan Ying, Lu Yi vowed he would never hit students. But once Xia's antics became too much. In fury Lu Yi hurled a chair at him. Xia Ke Min was cat-quick though; he caught the chair.

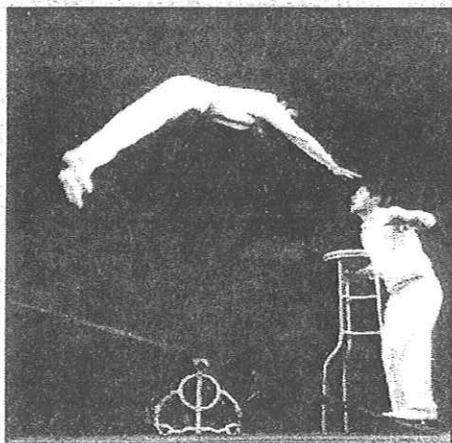
In 1959 Lu Yi won "Star Performer" in the Nanjing Arts Festival. He also was awarded a salary of 95 yuan a month. Only his partner in a balancing act and the wife of the head of the troupe earned as much. It was an astonishing wage, more than he could possibly spend. "You could buy a whole duck for 30 cents." He sent money back to his family in Shanghai.

Conveying monetary value in terms of food must be understood in the context of the times. In the late 50s and early 60s, mad economic policies of Mao's "Great Leap Forward" caused mass starvation. An estimated 30 million people died. In cities, food was tightly rationed, even among government officials.

The Nanjing acrobats fared better than most people. During the famine, they were allotted special quotas. As a star acrobat Lu Yi received extra rice, as well as meat, sugar and fruit. He enjoyed other advantages as well. While most acrobats were housed four or six to an apartment, Lu Yi shared his apartment with only one other performer.

Over the years Lu Yi became renowned for his inventiveness. His specialties were hand-balancing, teeterboard and a pagoda of bowls, stacked ever higher, while riding a unicycle. He refined the "Tornado" in which acrobats spin up a pole using arms alone. He invented plate-spinning while doing high aerial contortion. He created an act where three acrobats on bicycles balanced in tiers.

No matter how well-trained a performer is, acrobatics is inherently risky. I asked Lu Yi if he felt fear at times. He said he was not afraid when he was on his own, only "if my partner made a mistake." In the head-to-head catch from a teeterboard, he said, "I was a good catcher. I would rather be hurt myself



Photos from 1962 show Lu Yi (base) and Xia Ke Min (top).

The photo at far right is the head-to-head catch from a teeterboard, a trick Lu Yi invented and, as far as he knows, has never been repeated.

than let my partner get hurt." Once, during a catch, he flayed the skin off both his shins. "The bones were sticking through. All the sweat was coming out in my face, but I didn't cry," he said. A week later he returned to work.

The Nanjing Acrobatics Troupe traveled the world. After an African tour in 1966, Lu Yi returned home to a China different from the one he had left. The coupling of Chinese arts and politics had worked mostly in favor of Lu Yi and other acrobats. Then the Cultural Revolution turned logic on its head. Suddenly, one of China's premiere acrobatic troupes was a pariah. The Nanjing acrobats were allowed to train, but forbidden to perform. Lamely, they sought to conform to the new rules of the Revolution by wearing olive-drab uniforms as costumes. "This did not work well," Lu Yi said tersely.

In those days, the common man was venerated and a star like Lu Yi was scum. Lu Yi does not debate politics, nor is he a China basher. He believes that he and the troupe were caught up in the capriciousness of the times, a victim of in-fighting among different political camps. If the elite acrobats were now viewed as reactionary dogs, could they not be made to learn new tricks? To this end, the chairman of the troupe was replaced by a people's triumvirate—a farmer, an army officer and a factory worker.

Lu Yi protested: How could people who knew nothing direct professional acrobats who had trained all their lives? His criticism was seen as a slap against Mao. For speaking out and for the counter-revolutionary crime of being the star of an internationally acclaimed acrobatics troupe, Lu Yi was arrested. In 1970 he was sent to a "re-education" camp in Nanjing. Confined alone, guarded day and night, he was made to write reams of self-criticisms. "I had to write why I didn't agree with the communists, why I had complained, why I had separated myself from ordinary people, why I worked so hard to be different from others."

Stardom worked in odd ways. It had provoked Lu Yi's downfall, but it also won him decent treatment. One of the guards, who was a student, knew of Lu Yi and admired him. Another guard was also amiable. When supervisors came by, the pair played heavies. Afterwards, they were cordial towards their prisoner. Visitors were forbidden. "My wife missed me so much," said Lu Yi. "We had only been married a year, and she had just had a baby." Once the couple finagled a reunion. He told the guards that his wife had lost her house key. When she came to see him, she brought the infant girl.

Lu Yi spent a year in seclusion, no

handstands, no training, just the endless tedium of writing self-criticism. "I was lucky," said Lu Yi. "Other people were tortured and starved to death." And in despair, many committed suicide.

When the political winds shifted and Lu Yi was released, he was put in charge of student training, then promoted to lead the Nanjing troupe. At age 34, he was by far the youngest person ever to be awarded this prestigious position. Normally the heads of pre-eminent Chinese acrobatic troupes were men well past their performing days. Soon he was judging national competitions in Beijing. And after a decade of not being allowed outside the country, the Nanjing acrobats were sent on tour around the world.

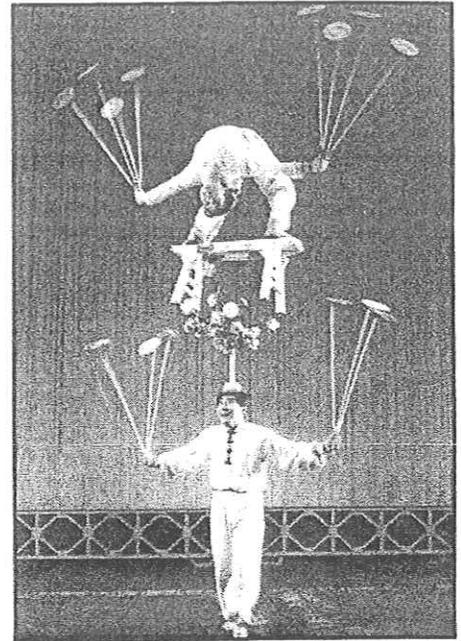
Of all the acrobats Lu Yi met during his travels, he most admired the Russians and Hungarians. Their training was "bitter" like his own, but produced sweet fruit. He picked up tricks and methods from foreign performers. But he did not try to change the essence of Chinese acrobatics: the costumes, performance in a theater, the formal stylized repertory. Though Lu Yi does not say so, any attempt to open up Chinese acrobatics to Western ways would have carried the taint of subversion.

**D**uring my talks with Lu Yi, he would speak Mandarin to his daughter Lu Yue, who translated. When the subject of his departure from China came up, Lu Yi spoke for himself. He said that he did not defect, and leaving China was a painful decision.

Since the Cultural Revolution, he had lived a good life. He loved his work, circus, traveling and representing his homeland as a star practitioner of an ancient art. He didn't care about politics; his sole aim was excellence in the art form he loved. His acclaim grew. He wrote a definitive acrobatics book, *On Teeterboard*. He was president and artistic director of the artists jury in Nanjing, and vice-chairman of the All-China Acrobatics Artists Association.

In 1988 and 1989 the troupe worked in New York with the Big Apple circus. Lu Yi co-directed performances. While in New York, democracy protesters were massacred in Tiananmen Square. After the last show in New York, four Nanjing acrobats defected. As the troupe was about to leave, another two defected. Lu Yi and 25 other members returned to China.

"When I returned," he said, "the Cultural Department in Beijing criticized me for letting the acrobats defect," he said. "My heart broke." In all his previous travels, no one had ever defected, nor had



**Lu Yi invented this trick circa 1975. He says many people have copied it and do it better than he ever did.**

he himself ever been tempted. "So many times, I could have left," he said. "In 1988 I trained performers at Circus Oz in Australia. The circus offered me lots of money and a big house. I refused. I said 'I have to go back.' I was loyal to China."

In Beijing Lu Yi heard rumors that he would be forbidden to travel and, worse, he would be arrested to do another "self-examination." He was still under contract with Big Apple and due back in New York. Fortunately, slippage in the system, or schizoid politics, rescued him. Refused a visa from Beijing, Lu Yi found support, and a visa, in Nanjing.

While training Big Apple performers in New York, he met Judy Finelli, a founder of San Francisco's Pickle Family Circus. "She said to me, 'Don't go back to China. Stay here.' I felt bad about the criticism in China. I was very angry. I decided to stay."

Lu Yi was named creator and director of acrobatics of the Pickle Family Circus. And so he began a new life in the United States. His two daughters, then 17 and 19, were allowed to join him in San Francisco, but the government forbade his wife to leave. "In China they still wanted me to come back." Meanwhile, the Chinese consulate in San Francisco put Lu Yi under surveillance. His phone was tapped, and he was followed. "They could see that all I was doing was training performers."

Besides leaving his homeland, being separated from his wife and spied on, Lu Yi had to navigate in a foreign

culture. He spoke no English. Although he had traveled widely, it was always within the confines of the acrobatic troupe. To find his way home to Berkeley from San Francisco, he had to count the subway stops, for he could not read the signs. He dismisses these difficulties. The worst part, he said, was that "I lost all my accomplishments. My talents were not recognized, at least not as well as in China. In China, acrobats are important. This is not true in the United States."

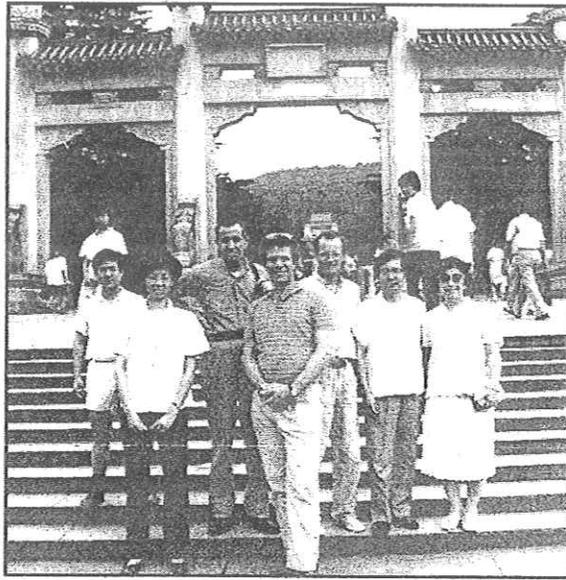
After three years' separation, Lu Yi's wife was allowed to join her husband. At this point in our interview, Lu Yi's daughter broke in. "I was happy to see my mother," said Lu Yue. "The food got better. You see, in China our dad never cooked. He was always working. Then when we were alone in San Francisco, we all had to learn to cook."

At Lu Yi's request, the Pickles invited Xia Ke Min to come work, and the old friends from Shanghai were reunited in San Francisco. Lu Yi taught Pickles artists and the kids he hand-picked from the newly created circus school. He had a keen eye for children with the right bodies and self-discipline for acrobatics. In China he had supervised training of a 6-year-old girl and a 10-year-old boy who became the youngest contestants ever to win first prize at the prestigious Paris circus festival. But the Chinese approach smacked of favoritism. American parents bristled. They felt that their darlings, regardless of innate talent, should receive equal treatment from the master. Cross-cultural adjustments were called for.

More serious issues loomed. The Pickle's ever-shaky finances toppled into bankruptcy. The fledgling circus school saved itself by legal separation, but its position was little better. In the heartland of capitalism Lu Yi found himself in a novel situation. In China circuses don't go bankrupt. They are state-supported. In fact, just about everywhere but here, circus receives sponsorship, governmental or otherwise.

Eventually the Pickles reorganized as the New Pickle Circus, and school and circus moved to a derelict high school gymnasium. Acrobats bundled up in layers of clothing to keep muscles warm in a dilapidated gym as cold as a morgue.

**F**or Lu Yi, the past is a reference point, not a weight on his soul. In July 1999 he became an American citizen, 10 years after Tiananmen square. "At the



Alan Slifka, third from left, Paul Binder, center, Dominique Jando, Lu Yi, and Madame Xia, the Chairman of the Chinese Acrobats, in Nanjing, prior to Lu Yi's debut with the Big Apple Circus.

swearing-in ceremony," he said, "the judge said, 'Now, this is our country, our children. We are responsible.' I have a second life now, that I want to dedicate to students in this 'new country' of our circus school."

"Training is bitter," Lu Yi's axiom, emblazons a school T-shirt. It's a joke students share. Training may be bitter, but Lu Yi is kind. His style of training is a world away from the daily brutality he endured. Students work hard, and they revere him. "There's no way you give up on him," said a performer in her 20s who studied with Lu Yi since high school, "because he doesn't give up on you."

**L**u Yi has taught me more than acrobatics. I have learned how differently people react to adversity. His own teachers were cruel, but he is kind. He has quiet dignity, and treats his students with respect.

He had everything: talent, work he loved, international acclaim, a comfortable life, a family. Then, overnight he became a prisoner. Another person might have been bitter. But Lu Yi harbors no bitterness. His attitude is analogous to acrobatics; you need flexibility as well as strength; a body that is clenched cannot move freely.

Acrobatics isn't simply about technique and muscles. It's about how you carry yourself throughout the day. Lu Yi is not speaking idly when he advises, "Use the breath." The Chinese term *qi* means "breath" or "movement of air." It connotes not only the physiology of respiration but also the life force circulating

throughout the body. Lu Yi teaches the kind of breathing used in wushu, traditional martial arts, dance or singing. He teaches students to breathe from the area called the *qihai*, the "sea of air." It's three fingers below the navel and deep in the belly—the center of gravity and the source of power. From the sea of air all energy flows.

A few years ago Lu Yi observed my two sons during the circus school's summer camp. Will, who was seven at the time, was compact, puppy-like and comical. Left to his own devices, he was inclined to curl up in bed with a bowl of crackers and a stack of "Tintins." He is an old soul, never the first to try anything. He watches. He absorbs. Then he attacks a problem with laser-like concentration. Jake, his elder brother, is the natural acrobat of the family. He is loose-limbed, agile and daring.

"I am interested in your son," said Lu Yi.

"Jake?"

"No, the younger boy. Will would make a good acrobat. I see how his mind works. Practice is two hours, three times a week, after school. Training will be bitter." Lu Yi smiled benignly.

I was flattered. Will had been chosen by the master. Within me, a stage-door mom stirred.

Will's response to this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity was as unequivocal as a brick wall. "No." My fantasy was shattered.

"Don't push him," said Lu Yi. "Children should play."

Lu Yi understands that kids in the United States go their own way far more so than in China. He is fighting the same battle, at a different life stage, with his own daughter Lu Yue. Thirty-odd years ago Lu Yue was the newborn who, with her mom, visited her father in "re-education" camp.

During our interview Lu Yue kept her foot propped up on a chair. She was recovering from an operation after a skiing accident. Her father fretted. She laughed. As soon as her knee healed, she said, she was heading right back to the slopes. The master acrobat who used to perform head-to-head catches from a teeterboard, stiffened. "I don't like skiing," said Lu Yi, clearly miffed. "Too dangerous." ☹

*Harriet Heyman is a writer based in San Francisco. She trains in flying trapeze at the San Francisco School of Circus Arts.*