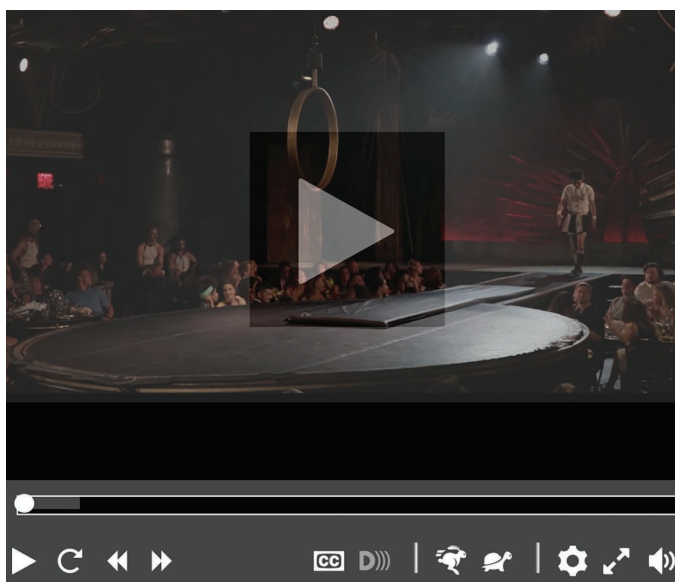


THE FLIP SIDE

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The Flip Side (https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/file_sets/vq27zr37h)

The Flip Side presents the globalized circus world, where disparate people and acrobatic cultures come together, clash, and ultimately transform each other. This documentary showcases the coming-of-age of a Chinese circus artist who leaves home at age nine and goes on to perform with Cirque du Soleil and The 7 Fingers.

The Flip Side (Le revers de la médaille) est une plongée dans le milieu du cirque mondialisé où des personnes et des cultures acrobatiques très différentes se rejoignent et s'opposent pour finalement se transformer les unes les autres. Ce documentaire

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retrace l'entrée dans l'âge adulte d'un circassien chinois qui quitte sa famille à neuf ans pour rejoindre le Cirque du Soleil et le collectif Les 7 doigts de la main.

Keywords: circus, China, Cirque du Soleil, 7fingers, 7doigts, traces, Daqi, Shana Carroll, Queen of the Night, cirque, Chine

Director's statement

When I first started making my documentary *The Flip Side*, my goal was to profile a Chinese circus artist and capture his incredible life's journey. At age nine, Daqi left his parents to attend a gruelling state-run circus academy, which was part of China's system of state-run troupes and schools that began in the 1950s (Zhang, *Bending the body for China*). Virtuoso skills were drilled into him through endless repetition and corporal punishment, a standard part of Chinese acrobatics training (Lu 16) that, at the time in the 1990s, was still permitted. With the hoop-diving skills he acquired, Daqi went on to lead the Shenyang Circus Troupe to win the top Chinese circus award, then left this stable "iron rice bowl" job to perform with another Chinese troupe in what he thought was the pinnacle of the contemporary circus world: Cirque du Soleil's *Dralion*. Eventually, he left the Chinese circus world altogether and reinvented himself artistically with the intimate, avant-garde Montreal circus troupe The 7 Fingers, starring in one of the first casts of *Traces* and then serving as an artist and coach on a new show, *Queen of the Night*.

Over the course of producing the documentary, however, I found its center of gravity shifting away from Daqi's singular story and toward the relationship between Daqi and Shana Carroll, the director of both *Traces* and *Queen of the Night*.

I was introduced to Daqi through Montreal-based cultural geographer Dr. Tracy Zhang, a preeminent researcher on Chinese circus. We met in the summer of 2015 and spoke tentatively about collaborating on a documentary. In August of that year, she contacted me to let me know Daqi was in Montreal rehearsing a redux of *Traces*, but that he would be leaving for the European tour in a few days. Shana, the show's director, would also be available for an interview. I hurriedly booked a plane ticket for that weekend and began searching for a cinematographer. Through a stroke of luck, Miguel Henriques, one of Montreal's top circus cinematographers, was also available and willing to shoot an independent documentary on a shoestring budget. Dr. Zhang would serve as the film's producer.

Telling Daqi's story was a continuation of my interest in using an ancient Chinese art as a lens through which to view China's transition from a state-run

economy to a market-driven economy, as well as its simultaneous opening to the rest of the world. My 2014 memoir *Beijing Bastard* was a coming-of-age story about both myself and China's capital at the turn of the century. The story pivoted around my fraught relationship with a Peking Opera family who found their cherished art dying in the face of the country's modernization. But *The Flip Side* has a more optimistic outlook. While economics may be pushing young Chinese people into the rigours of acrobatics, international interest in the ancient art of circus is helping it not only stay alive but also evolve and remain vital for a whole new generation of audiences. The unique trajectory of Daqi's life represents the merger of China's ancient acrobatic tradition with the glitzy world of contemporary circus based in Montreal around Cirque du Soleil.

This merging of Chinese circus skills and Western contemporary circuses that began in the 1980s occurred through three main avenues: hiring by large circuses like Cirque du Soleil, dedicated training programs that brought Chinese teachers to the West, and informal exchanges. Cirque du Soleil, founded in 1984, began hiring Chinese circus artists around 1987 (Zhang, *From China to the Big Top* 41). In the 1980s, members of the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe were sent to the West to train circus performers—first, a team went to Australia in 1983 and 1985, then the troupe's artistic director, Lu Yi, travelled to the US in 1990 (Farrell 95). He would eventually stay in the US and become the master teacher for San Francisco's Pickle Family Circus and Circus Center, training generations of circus performers. He is widely known as the person who brought Chinese circus skills such as pole climbing, hoop-diving and diabolo to the contemporary circus world (Janiak). Hybrid intercultural performances, once a novelty, are now an accepted part of contemporary circus in the West (Farrell 101).

Many narratives about this exchange have focused on the skills the Chinese circus brought to the contemporary circus world of the West; less has been written about the effect that joining Western circuses has had on Chinese circus and Chinese circus artists. My documentary aims to fill this gap.

As we shot the interviews with Daqi and Shana in Montreal, several storylines emerged. The first was about Daqi's transformation from a technical virtuoso into an expressive artist, followed by his subsequent evolution into a coach with a wealth of acrobatic knowledge from China to share. The second was about the emotional story underneath—about Daqi losing his family early in life when he moved into the residential circus academy and finding a home in the circus, particularly with Shana as a mentor and close friend. He ended by saying that his dream was to pursue Chinese-style training of Western performers and bring Western performance techniques back to China, a continuation of the history of cultural exchange that began in the 1980s.

As Shana told her own story, I was surprised to find that theirs was more than just a chance encounter; she had been trained by Lu Yi in The Pickle Family

Circus, an intimate ragamuffin San Francisco circus troupe, and had even married Lu's Chinese protégé. This training made her more appreciative of the richness of Chinese circus history and techniques, which made her more open to working with Daqi. In my years researching Chinese circus, I have frequently heard Chinese circus artists being looked down upon because of prevailing stereotypes—they are robotic and unemotive, they seem interchangeable. Shana's history with Chinese circus artists gave her reason to take a chance on Daqi in a production that depended on radical openness and self-disclosure. I found that the connections between Chinese and North American circuses were artistic and commercial, but also personal and intimate.

I presented a rough cut of the documentary, then titled *The Lost Boy*, to the Montreal Working Group on Circus Research, a gathering of academics interested in the aesthetics, economics and ethics of contemporary circus hosted by Louis Patrick Leroux at Concordia University. The feedback I received there radically transformed the film. Shana's story had snuck its way into the film, and viewers wanted to know why, in a profile about Daqi, she was taking up so much airtime. Her presence felt like a distraction, viewers told me. It was then that I realized the documentary was actually about their relationship and should be a conversation between them—about how their lives had led them to each other and how they had then influenced one another.

Filmmaker friends told me my documentary would be more competitive on the film festival circuit if it were fifteen minutes long instead of twenty-five. I considered this carefully. At fifteen minutes, the story would have stopped after Daqi learned expressive stage techniques from Shana on *Traces*. But at twenty-five minutes, Daqi was able to evolve into a coach, bringing his decades of hoop-diving experience into the training and choreography of *Queen of the Night*. It was crucial to me that Daqi's story counter the stereotypical and subordinated images of the Chinese circus artist and portray one with expressive power and artistic authority. I kept it at twenty-five.

That I would become interested in the circus as a locus of equal cultural exchange should have come as no surprise to me. My 2012 multi-platform experimental documentary *Planet Takeout* uses the humble, ubiquitous Chinese take-out as such a locus—a place where immigrant restaurateurs mix with the urban communities, often of communities of colour, in which they are embedded. *Planet Takeout* found a home at WGBH as part of the national Localore initiative to innovate public media.

After the feedback session, I altered the film's structure to flip-flop between Daqi's and Shana's stories, and I changed the documentary's title from *The Lost Boy* to *The Flip Side*. The documentary now charts each artist's path toward their fateful meeting—they both went from living at home (Daqi in Shenyang, China and Shana in San Francisco) to an itinerant few years in the corporate world of

Cirque du Soleil, then relocated to Montreal to work with the more intimate 7 Fingers. I was very deliberate about not portraying their meeting as a binary clash between East and West, but rather as a meeting of artists from geographically located centers of circus culture, each with their own distinctive strengths and aesthetics.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the inherently itinerant nature of circus is that people from disparate cultures meet, challenge each other, learn from each other, sometimes fall in love, and then radically reshape the circus world's landscape. This documentary celebrates the highest expression of that ethos—approaching the other with a spirit of openness, respect, humility, curiosity and play.

Thanks to the ease of working with digital media and video conferencing technology, I was able to work with professionals all over the world to edit and complete the film. I screened multiple rounds of edits and facilitated conversations between crew—my Brooklyn-based video editor Patrick Flynn talked to the colorist Evan Anthony in Manhattan; the composer Paul Damian Hogan in Brooklyn talked to the sound mixer Omar Juarez in Mexico City; the animator Mengxi Yang in Los Angeles talked with the animation photographer Zhu Xuesong in Shenyang, China. I also hired Wisconsin-based graphic designer Matt Frost to create the movie poster and Mexico City-based video editor Leslie Atkins to cut the trailer. Nancy Marcotte, a French-speaking Canadian producer based in Quebec, cleared the extensive archival permissions from Canadian television. As was appropriate for a documentary about the circus world, it was a truly international production.

The Flip Side premiered on the film festival circuit in 2018 and was screened at seven festivals, including the Asian American International Film Festival and the DisOrient Asian American Film Festival of Oregon, where it won the Best Short Documentary award. The award committee noted that “the mutual respect and artistic collaboration between Daqi and Shana in *The Flip Side* is incredibly inspiring and deeply felt through your skillful direction.” *The Flip Side* is ideal for showing in educational settings, as students would respond well to the subject matter and the portrayal of a collaborative relationship. The half-hour length also makes the film suitable for classroom viewing. A guide to paired readings can be found in the Appendix.

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Appendix

1. Modernization of China. *The Flip Side* explores China's transition to a market-based economy through the lens of one of its ancient arts. It would pair well with my memoir *Beijing Bastard* (Gotham/Penguin, 2014), which follows a Peking Opera family as they cope with the loss of their cherished art.
2. Chinese circus studies. *The Flip Side* draws upon the work of its producer, Dr. Tracy Zhang, who has written articles about the importation of Chinese aesthetic labour into large Western contemporary circuses ("From China to the Big Top: Chinese Acrobats and the Politics of Aesthetic Labor, 1950-2010") and the use of circus in Chinese nation-building and diplomacy ("Bending the body for China: the uses of acrobatics in Sino-US diplomacy during the Cold War"). These articles would pair well with Rosemary Farrell's overview of the integration of Chinese circus skills in Western contemporary circus in *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).
3. Circus studies. *The Flip Side* is directly relevant to the growing area of general circus studies (mostly comprised of scholars from cultural studies and performance studies). This emergent field, currently more prominent in Canada and Europe than in the US, is reflected in recent edited volumes such as Leroux and Batson's *Cirque Global* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), Arrighi and Davis's *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), and Tait and Lavers's *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2016).
4. Work, labour and migration. *The Flip Side* explores transnational circuits of labour, migration and cultural production within an unexpected arena—global circus. The film's producer, cultural geographer Dr. Tracy

Zhang, has published several articles that explore Chinese labour in global circus. The film could also be used alongside texts such as Elizabeth L. Krause's *Tight Knight* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton University Press, 2015) or Ilana Gershon's edited collection *A World of Work: Imagined Manuals for Real Jobs* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

5. Expressive culture, art and performance. *The Flip Side* ethnographically explores the dynamic relationship between performance practices, generic constraints, creativity and individual self-expression. It could pair well with ethnographies such as Fred Myers's *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Duke University Press, 2002), Jesse W. Shipley's *Trickster Theatre: The Poetics of Freedom in Urban Africa* (Indiana University Press, 2015) or Graham Jones's *Trade of the Tricks: Inside the Magician's Craft* (University of California Press, 2011).
6. Cultures of East Asia, North America and Asian America. *The Flip Side* explores cross-cultural exchanges and trans-cultural syncretism between Chinese and North American circus cultures. It could pair well with works such as Aihwa Ong's *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Duke University Press, 2012), Julie Chu's *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China* (Duke University Press, 2010) or Mei Zhan's *Other-Worldly: Making Chinese Medicine through Transnational Frames* (Duke University Press, 2009).
7. Education, socialization and apprenticeship. *The Flip Side* explores personal trajectories through different modes of transmitting and acquiring embodied cultural practices, from a draconian circus academy in China to the kind-hearted teaching style of an expatriate Chinese circus master living in San Francisco. It would work well in classes on the anthropology of education alongside texts such as Lilly Chumley's *Creativity Class: Art School and Culture Work in Postsocialist China* (Princeton University Press, 2016), Eitan Y. Wilf's *School for Cool: The Academic Jazz Program and the Paradox of Institutionalized Creativity* (University of Chicago Press, 2014) or Ann Marie Fleming's *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam: An Illustrated Memoir* (Riverhead Books, 2007).