

consists of spinning and spinning that often forces her to throw up. She trains all day to get as many spins as possible in a minute.

"It's okay. I'm getting used to it.

"I've embraced sprains, bruises and even fractures as part of my acrobatic life," she adds.

Yan started to train in acrobatics when she was 8 years old. "I loved doing those exciting stunts, such as somersaults and flying high in the air," she says.

At the age of 11, Yan was picked by the Shanghai Circus School. She left her hometown in Jinzhou, Liaoning Province, in northeast China, and started her acrobatic studies and rigid dorm life in Shanghai with 100 other kids ranging from 8 to 18.

For more than a decade, the school in Shanghai's southwest, has produced a great number of talented acrobats. As China's top acrobatic institute, it enrolls students from all over China.

Children are taught circus techniques, including stunts, contortion, high-flying, magic, clown shows and more, while also learning Chinese, arithmetic and English in the same way as the middle school students do.

They normally begin training at the age of 9 or 10 and graduate with a technical secondary school diploma.

Admittedly, acrobatics, which involves skillful control of the body and artistic agility, requires extremely hard work and often leads to injuries.

Children who pursue acrobatics as a career are typically those who have switched from sports schools, dance or gymnastics teams.

After all, they have a better chance of becoming an acrobatic superstar than earning an Olympic medal.

After one or two years, the children are divided into different programs based on their physical characteristics.

The balancing programs require greater strength in the arms, such as jacking up a giant vat on the head, while the somersault demands stronger leg muscles, a lighter upper body and more explosive power.

Since the first day of school, Yan has adhered to a rigid daily schedule. She gets up early and spends the entire morning doing countless somersaults.

"If someone makes one wrong

move, the whole class is 'punished' and have to do the somersaults all over again," Yan says.

In the second year of school, she was picked to practice ring swinging, a large ring hung up high in the air. "It's exciting. I love the feeling of flying around in mid-air," she says.

Yan switched to practicing the loop rotation — on the ground — after being chosen as a sub actress for the "ERA Shanghai 2" company last year. She now shuttles from her school in the city's southwest to the circus in the northeast twice a week.

But she now enjoys a little more freedom outside of the stringent school dorm life. She is permitted to use a cellphone, sleeps longer in the morning, and gets paid during the internship. She even sneaked out of the circus once, the first time she got the chance to tour the city she has been living in for seven years. In theory, a student under the age of 18 is not permitted to go out alone.

Yan is still waiting for her big break as a leading actress.

"I don't think about it too much. At least, I've got a job, and a new life ahead," she says.



Students hone their skills on the springboard.
— Ma Xuefeng



Boys take part in dance lessons. Acting and dancing, rather than physical strength, balance, and agility, are increasingly important in today's acrobatics shows.
— Ma Xuefeng

Right: To spin, Yan must work with a principal actor. They must whirl around the ring together and perform daring stunts.

Below: An injured girl looks on as the girls practice on a monocycle.
— Ma Xuefeng

