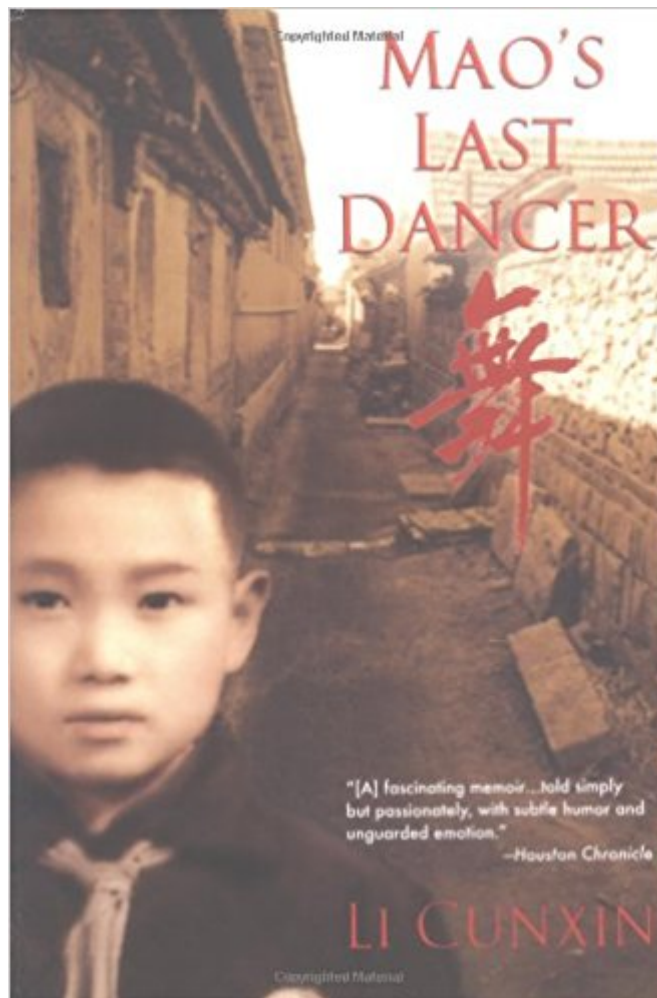


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# Mao's Last Dancer



## Synopsis

**THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER** The extraordinary memoir of a peasant boy raised in rural Maoist China who was plucked from his village to study ballet and went on to become one of the greatest dancers of his generation. From a desperately poor village in northeast China, at age eleven, Li Cunxin was chosen by Madame Mao's cultural delegates to be taken from his rural home and brought to Beijing, where he would study ballet. In 1979, the young dancer arrived in Texas as part of a cultural exchange, only to fall in love with America-and with an American woman. Two years later, through a series of events worthy of the most exciting cloak-and-dagger fiction, he defected to the United States, where he quickly became known as one of the greatest ballet dancers in the world. This is his story, told in his own inimitable voice.

**THE BASIS FOR A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE**

## Book Information

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Age Range: 18 and up

Grade Level: 12 and up

## Customer Reviews

This is the heartening rags-to-riches story of Li, who achieved prominence on the international ballet stage. Born in 1961, just before the Cultural Revolution, Li was raised in extreme rural poverty and witnessed Communist brutality, yet he imbibed a reverence for Mao and his programs. In a twist of fate worthy of a fairy tale (or a ballet), Li, at age 11, was selected by delegates from Madame Mao's arts programs to join the Beijing Dance Academy. In 1979, through the largesse of choreographer

and artistic director Ben Stevenson, he was selected to spend a summer with the Houston Ballet; the first official exchange of artists between China and America since 1949. Li's visit, with its taste of freedom, made an enormous impression on his perceptions of both ballet and of politics, and once back in China, Li lobbied persistently and shrewdly to be allowed to return to America. Miraculously, he prevailed in getting permission for a one-year return. In an April 1981 spectacle that received national media attention, Li defected in a showdown at the Chinese consulate in Houston. He married fellow dancer Mary McKendry and gained international renown as a principal dancer with the Houston Ballet and later with the Australian Ballet; eventually, he retired from dance to work in finance. Despite Li's tendency toward the cloying and sentimental, his story will appeal to an audience beyond Sinophiles and ballet aficionados; it provides a fascinating glimpse of the history of Chinese-U.S. relations and the dissolution of the Communist ideal in the life of one fortunate individual. 8 pages of b&w photos not seen by PW. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Grade 6 • In 1961, just three years after Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward, Li Cunxin was born, the sixth son in a family of Chinese peasants who eked out a meager existence on a rural commune. During his childhood he endured unimaginable poverty and hardships and witnessed the shooting of 15 "counter-revolutionaries" by Mao's Red Guards. When chosen to audition for Madame Mao's Beijing Ballet Academy at age 11, ballet became his chance for a good job and enough food for life. Many years of training, two U.S. trips, one premature marriage, and a defection later, Li joined the Houston Ballet as a principal dancer, paving his way to international fame. Although told in a rather bland style—mostly in basic declarative sentences—the information about the country at this time and the danger and angst that accompanied the dancer's decision to defect will be of interest to teens. This Young Reader's Edition of the adult book (Putnam, 2004) gives a much fuller portrait than the author's picture-book version, *Dancing to Freedom* (Walker, 2008). The black-and-white photos, the abbreviated history, and time line will help students place Li's life story into historical context. With the current interest in all things Chinese, and with the immigration debate in full swing, this is a good choice, both to promote an understanding of Chinese culture and to provoke a discussion about the issues facing today's immigrants. • Nancy Menaldi-Scanlan, LaSalle Academy, Providence, RI Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is the inspirational tale of a boy/man who trains as a dancer in China under Mao's communist regime. Told in a straight-forward, unembellished style, it presents countless fascinating details of daily life and relationships that present a vivid picture of what the author experiences. The account is especially moving because it offers insight into the lovable character of people once considered enemies by the United States. Li Cunxin's peasant family endures brutal hardship, working long hours every day, suffering extremes of weather and lack of food, and yet they are quite resigned and able to enjoy each other and the good they have. Even the broader community seems to rejoice with Li Cunxin's successes rather than wallow in self-pity or envy. The story evokes sympathy for people who suffer under communism, but are also vulnerable to official propaganda, as we all are.

This book truly makes you realize how difficult it is for many people to manage to get enough food to feed their families in China. It makes you realize how good it is in America and how many freedoms we have. Well told story.

This book is one of those that you cannot put away till the end. Li Cunxin writes in a simple way, but with that rare skill of keeping you baffled through all its chapters. It traces Cunxin's early life in a peasants' commune in rural China, suffering abject poverty, to his eventful obligatory trip to Beijing, to study ballet at the Beijing Ballet Academy, under China's strict communist discipline and rules, where he completes 7 years of training. Initially Cunxin hated ballet, but after several years, he learned to appreciate its beauty and artistic value. That turning point made him work harder, and the rest is history: he became one of the best dancers of the world of his time. It is a very touching book. Also very interesting because besides Cunxin's personal life as it relates to the ballet world, one learns about Mao Tse Tung's Cultural Revolution in China through the eyes of a poor peasant child who turned into an international star, not without before having caused a diplomatic conflict between China and USA. I recommend this book for all ballet lovers and to those who have an interest on China's history under Chairman Mao's communist rule and its impact on China's education and social life of that time.

I just finished this book, and picked it because I have visited China and had so many horrible and questionable things about when Mao was Chairman of China. This is a true story written by the main character, Li, a poor peasant of a close family of 7 boys. It's amazing how poor the

pheasants were during Mao's rule and what they did to survive. Very fortunately for Li, because of his body type, he was picked to go to the main Chinese ballet dance academy in Beijing at 11 years old. He was so young and homesick for two years, then really got into his dance with classes each day for 7 years. Li gets an opportunity to visit the Houston Ballet and sees how Americans are free and not the evil propaganda of the west that Chairman Mao brainwashed everyone in China to believe. Li falls in love in Houston, defects, divorces, remarries and has raises a family in Australia. He remains close to his big family and travels to China often and sees how China changes after Chairman Mao leaves office. The history involved in this book along with the juxtaposition of Li's personal life by this very good writer makes this for an amazing book! One I will always remember.

This is a wonderful book, Li Cunxin's struggle against impossible odds to go from a life of abject poverty to become a great ballet dancer. As a writer, Li has a great ability to portray and convey how a given experience feels, whether his life as a small boy, dance school in Beijing, his defection in Houston, his unsuccessful first marriage, his growth and success as a world class ballet dancer. My only criticism is that towards the end of his book Li's successes seem unending. He is not only a great dancer, but a perfect father, husband, stockbroker etc. But, given Li's drive and resilience, perhaps that was inevitable. In the end, it is a worthy book to read.

I am a former ballet dancer, and I think that "Mao's Last Dancer" is a wonderful rags to riches story, fraught with emotional heartache and determination. During Chairman Mao's rule, anything but the strictest loyalty and the following of rules could cause one to be executed. Li Cunxin was granted a three week "work/study" permit to dance with a well-known American ballet company. Living in the United States contradicted all that he had been taught since he was a little child in rural China. He learned to not be afraid to express his views and ideas and to let himself soar as a dancer. While here, he fell in love with one of the ballerinas, who subsequently became his wife. They are now living in Australia - his wife's home country - with their three children. I loved the feel-good story of success against adversity. The DVD is well worth watching.

I loved and adored this book.....I am an avid fan of the ballet, so this book was perfect for me.....This book was well-written, full of drama and life! I loved the way he progressed in his goals.....I loved his expression of love for his family.....what a marvelous book! I have ordered the CD as well now, as I want to see this beyond my imagination.....thank you for this book.....it has given me great pleasure.....I actually hated to finish reading it.....Gayle

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