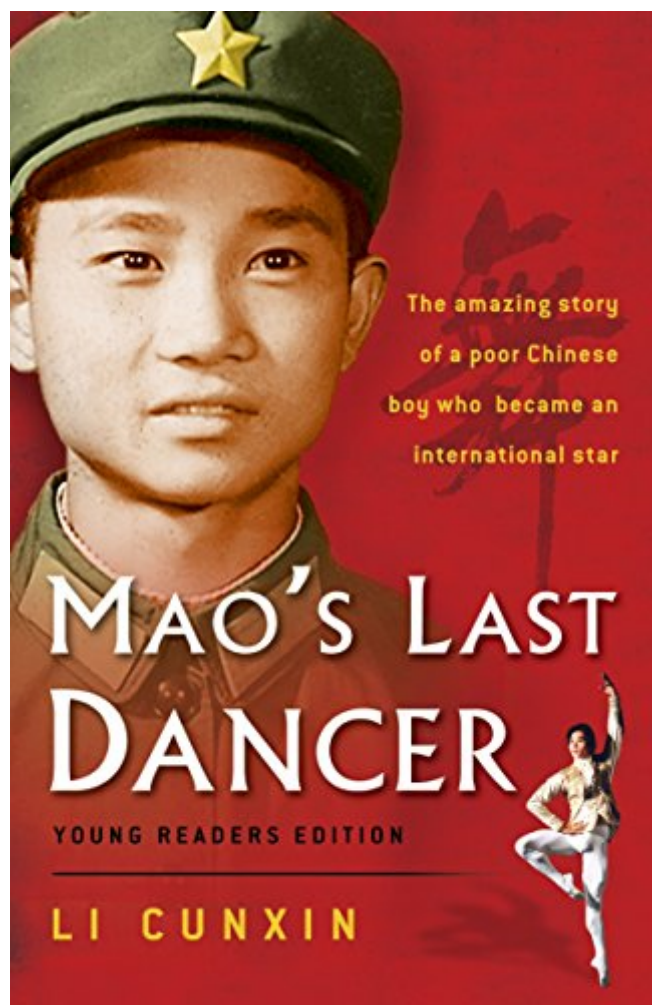


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# Mao's Last Dancer, Young Readers' Edition



## Synopsis

At the age of eleven, Li Cunxin was one of the privileged few selected to serve in Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution by studying at the Beijing Dance Academy. Having known bitter poverty in his rural China home, ballet would be his family's best chance for a better future. From one hardship to another, Cunxin demonstrated perseverance and an appetite for success that led him to be chosen as one of the first two people to leave Mao's China and go to America to dance on a special cultural exchange. But life in the U.S. was nothing like his communist indoctrination had led him to believe. Ultimately, he defected to the west in a dramatic media storm, and went on to dance with the Houston Ballet for sixteen years. This inspiring story of passion, resilience, and a family's love captures the harsh reality of life in Mao's communist China and the exciting world of professional dance. This compelling memoir includes photos documenting Li's extraordinary life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When my wife and I moved to Texas in the early 1980's, the Houston Ballet's performances were a refreshing antidote to the Southwest's unrelenting commercialism and fixation with football and barbecue. Under Ben Stevenson's lively direction, this troupe of superb athletes pushed the bounds

of gravity with grace and verve. Among the foremost in their number was a supple young oriental dancer who was obviously feeling his way toward familiarity with American culture, but always showed uncommon spirit, sensitivity, and vitality in his approach to movement. This was Li Cunxin (pronounced Shwin-Sin). He became our favorite male dancer, and his photos are on our walls today. This marvelous autobiography by Mr. Li opened our eyes to the unimaginable gulf he had to leap in order to appear before us. When he was plucked from among millions of other peasant children to attend Beijing Dance Academy, the train ride to Beijing was his first. His meals at the Academy were the first time he'd ever had enough to eat. His untrained tendons and muscles were ruptured repeatedly by the contortions he was forced into. Beijing's approval for him to leave China on scholarship to Houston Ballet Academy was China's first such concession to an artist in almost forty years. The first time he ever felt air-conditioning was on the plane to America. His first automobile ride was from the Houston airport to Ben Stevenson's house. And so on - the simple dance outfit purchased for him upon his arrival cost the equivalent of two years of his father's salary in China. The book contains hundreds of poignant reminders of the risks Mr. Li took in breaking the bounds of his peasant heritage and infuriating both the Chinese government and his American friends when he defected.

There seems to be no end of stories by and about people who came of age during the darkest days of the Cultural Revolution. This book is different from most of them in a couple important respects. First of all, Li Cuxin's family were peasants. Perhaps it would be a bit strong to say that they "missed" the revolution, because Li Cuxin does describe one particularly graphic scene where he witnessed an execution. But they were not personally struggled against. The peasants were the idealized heroes of the Cultural Revolution. Li Cuxin's suffering was poverty, pure and simple. But there are lots of poor people in the world. Secondly, the benefits Li Cuxin was given were unique in that they were not given him by the country he went to (America). They were given to him by the People's Republic of China. And the life he went to was really unreal. Most Americans do not live like the people Li met when he came to America. So this book is not a classic story about a persecuted person who somehow managed to find freedom in the West. As such, I must admit that I often had mixed feelings while reading this book. I don't want to spend too much time on that, but I want to address it, because it is central both to what is right and what is wrong in this book. For me, the centerpoint of this book is Li Cunxin's decision to defect to the West. He married one of his fellow dancers secretly, and told his benefactor from the Houston Ballet that he was not going to return to China. It is this decision that really defines this story, because everything that happens

before it can in some way be considered an influencing factor. And everything that happens after it is a result of it.

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