

Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre & Dr Susan La Marca

Mao's Last Dancer **by Li Cunxin** **(Younger Reader's Edition)**

Year 8 - 9

Background

This autobiographical text outlines in clear, accessible language the life story of Li Cunxin. As an 11 year old poor peasant boy, Cunxin is chosen to study ballet at the Beijing Dance Academy. For a poor boy in Mao's China of the 1960's, this is an opportunity many can only dream of. However, it means leaving everything he knows for a hard, physical and mental struggle, pushing his body through the pain to sculpt the body of an elite ballet dancer. Before he even understands this, though, it means leaving his home and everything he knows.

All Cunxin wants to do is go home, but he does not turn back. Rather, he grasps the opportunity he has been given, and works hard to be the best he can be.

The book follows Cunxin's life through his days as one of the world's great dancers and then onto his life in the west. It is both an emotional and inspirational story about one man's ability to grasp life, and to make the best of his talents, set against the backdrop of a complex country and an oppressive social and political system.

Objectives

The following statements from VELS and the draft statement on the National English curriculum support the foci chosen for this text:

Literature, which is fundamental to the English curriculum, uses language to represent, re-create, shape and explore human experience... Through reading, writing, listening to and talking about literature, students extend their understanding of the world and of themselves.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English Domain Level 6*, page 26.

While the nature of literary texts is dynamic and evolving, they are recognised as having personal, social, cultural and aesthetic value and potential for enriching students' lives and scope of experience.

ACARA (2009) *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English. Literature*, page 5.

At Level 4, students read, interpret and respond to a wide range of literary, everyday and media texts in print and in multimodal formats. They analyse these texts and support interpretations with evidence drawn from the text. They describe how texts are constructed for particular purposes, and identify how sociocultural values, attitudes and beliefs are presented in texts. They analyse imagery, characterisation, dialogue, point of view, plot and setting.
Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English Domain Level 4*, p. 19.

Focus

Different Tellings

Since the younger reader's edition of *Mao's Last Dancer* was published, the story has also been produced in two other formats. These are a picture book and a film:

- *The Peasant Prince* (picture book) (2007) by Li Cunxin, illustrated by Anne Spudvilas
- *Mao's Last Dancer* (film) (2009) director Bruce Beresford and writer Jan Sardi. (official website <maoslastdancermovie.com>)

The draft statement on the National Curriculum for English rightly sees all of these forms as part of the literary experience:

Literature includes a broad range of forms such as novels, poetry, short stories, plays, fiction for young adults and children including picture books, multimodal texts such as film and a variety of non fiction.
ACARA (2009) *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English. Literature*, page 5.

Each of these three formats contains the essence of Cunxin's powerful story, but each conveys the story in a different way.

- Consider how each format uses the material of Cunxin's life.
- What does each format do well?
- What does the visual component of the picture book and the film bring to the story?

Assessment

Compare two of the formats considering the strengths and weaknesses of both.

Focus

Struggle

- Physical

Being chosen for ballet training was the beginning of many years of hard and difficult training for Cunxin (pages 93, 119-125, 211, 309)

Did Cunxin face physical struggle in other ways?

Consider his early family life.

As readers can we identify with the extremes of his physical struggle?

- Mental

Cunxin also faced many occasions when his ability to cope emotionally was taxed, or his personality was tested. Identify some incidents in the text that demonstrate Cunxin's mental struggle.

Does Cunxin use similar strategies to cope with this as he would in the face of physical strain?

Which is more difficult, challenging or confronting; Cunxin's physical or mental struggle?

Some of Cunxin's trials contain both physical and mental struggle (e.g. Pages 186-7, 190, 195-6). During these times what is it that enables him to continue?

Assessment

The different forms of Cunxin's story - words, film, music and illustration, show how various artists have responded to his story and in particular his many struggles. In art, images, poetry or film respond to the emotional or physical struggle that Cunxin experienced.

This could take the form of a photo story compilation of images set to music or a work of art.

Related Reading

China

Jiang, Ji-Li *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution*.

Shuyun, Sun *Ten Thousand Miles Without a Cloud*.

Leblanc, Andre *The Red Piano*, (picture book) illustrated by Barroux, English translation by Justine Werner. (Based on the life of the Chinese international concert pianist Zhu Xiao-Mei)

Life's challenges or struggle

Castrission, James *Crossing the Ditch: Two Mates, a Kayak, and the Conquest of the Tasman.*

Chang, Jung *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*

Eggers, Dave *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: a novel.*

Freeman, Cathy *Born to Run: My Story.*

Martin, Jesse *Lionheart: A Journey of the Human Spirit [with Ed Gannon].*

Pilkington, Doris *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence.*

Mah, Adeline Yen *Chinese Cinderella: The Secret Story of an Unwanted Daughter*

LAST DANCER

YOUNG READERS' EDITION

From unbelievable poverty
to international stardom –
the inspiring true story of one
boy's dream come true

