

LI CUNXIN



Teachers' Notes
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MAO'S LAST DANCER - YOUNG READERS' EDITION

by Li Cunxin

Summary

Mao's Last Dancer is the autobiography of Li Cunxin. It tells his gripping tale of growing up in a poor family of six boys. At age eleven Li Cunxin was plucked from school by visiting officials to attend ballet school in Beijing; far away from his close knit family.

Mao's Last Dancer not only tells the true story of a boy growing up and leaving home, but of his determination to become the best, overcome self doubt and question his loyalty to Communist ideology and his home country. His monumental personal struggle is set against the backdrop of the Mao's regime of the sixties and seventies. This was an era of strict adherence to regulations and government suppression of the Chinese people.

This novel is a great chance to introduce students to autobiography whilst also investigating elements of history, politics, and conflicting loyalties. The physical challenges of the dance classes and performances are detailed, alongside personal triumph of persistence and perseverance.

Mao's Last Dancer will appeal to a wide range of students at many different levels.

These notes accompany the Puff in Young Reader's Edition. It is intended for students in the year seven to year nine levels.

(NB: Although in Chinese the surname comes first i.e. Li, I have used Li throughout the notes as it is the preferred name of the author after years of Western usage. The pronunciation of Li's given name, Cunxin, is Tswing Sing.)

From unbelievable poverty
the inspiring true story of one
boy's dream come true



The Autobiography Genre

Autobiography and biography are popular genres. They provide a bird's eye view of someone's life. For some this is voyeuristic, for others it allows some comparison of our own human existence.

- Do you enjoy this genre?
- Recall another autobiographical film or story that you have seen or read. What is appealing about it? Compare and contrast.

This autobiography is told in chronological order. In this case it starts with birth, childhood, leaving home and going abroad. It is told from the author's recollections and relies on Li's memories of childhood. Often autobiographies unfold around events that stand out such as starting school, family occasions, getting into trouble and leaving home.

- What problems could there be with this method of recalling past events?
- What scenes stand out as told by Li?
- What influence do Li's early years have on his adulthood?
- What events in your childhood stand out?

Lifestyle/Childhood/Family

Encourage students to draw up a chart in their workbooks for note taking throughout their reading of the novel and during class work.

Some possible headings could be:

Childhood experiences	Page ref.	Li Cunxin	Student's experiences
Family structure Extended family			
Physical resources: e.g. home bedrooms heating money transport			
Illness & Medical treatment			
Village experiences			
Starting school			
Childhood past times Recreation			
Food			

Using the notes from the chart:

- Students could compare Li Cunxin's upbringing to their own, this could be an oral or written activity.
- They could debate which type of upbringing is more valuable.
- Interview grandparents and compare their upbringing to the above.

Throughout Li's childhood there are examples of great struggle: not having enough food or coal, being ill and not affording to go to the doctor, sharing a bed with three brothers and regularly having lice. Li Cunxin grew up in poverty, yet throughout the first section there are examples of great warmth and love alongside terrible hardship.

- Can there be any joy in this kind of upbringing?
- Make a list of what you think are the elements of a happy family upbringing.
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of having five siblings and a large extended family nearby?
- How does this compare to your family?
- Does affluence make you happy or want for more?

Chinese Fables

A fable is a short tale designed to illustrate a moral.

- Think of a fable in your own culture, what is the moral of the story? (E.g. the tortoise and the hare; the Emperor's new clothes.)

Y (There are at least four fables throughout Mao's Last Dancer. Ask students to re-read the following and explain the moral of each story.

- The Frog in the Well (p43)
- The Emperor and the Cricket (p54)
- The Millet Dream (p164)
- The Archer (p182)

How did these fables apply to Li's life?

Chinese Customs/Superstitions

There are many Chinese customs peppered throughout the novel

- Bound Feet (pIX, p21)
- Arranged marriages (introduction)
- Chinese medicine/herbs (p7)
- Ginger tea (p23)
- Cure for warts (p34-6)
- Dust on cuts (p33)
- Snakeskin and green onion (p33)
- Customary death practice (p62-5)
- Funeral clothes (p65)
- Lucky look/three long toes (p97)

- What makes these anecdotes interesting?
- What effect does including these give to the novel?
- Explain three of these beliefs in more detail. Compare this practise to New Zealand in the 21st Century.

Physical Struggle

Although Li was lucky to have three long toes (p97) he was not necessarily a natural dancer. When he was chosen it was more luck than skill, with a last minute inclusion at teacher Song's request (p91):

"What about that one?" she said.

"All I knew about ballet was what I'd seen in the movie The Red Detachment of Women. I had no idea what ballet was all about."

- Why do you think his teacher might have pointed him out?

Li's hamstrings were torn (p93) during his selection but he bore the pain because he was determined to be chosen.

- Why was he so determined?
- What other physical hardships did ballet pose? (p119-125, 211, 309)
- In what other ways had Li been accustomed to physical hardship?
- Do you think this helped when it came to ballet?

Mental Struggle

How do the following traits manifest in Li's personal development

- Motivation (p209-10)
- Perseverance (p187, p190)
- Inner Strength (p187-9)
- Confidence (p195)
- Pride (p15-6)

Read the *Paper Tiger* scene (p182-5). Outline the incident.

- How does this affect Li's self esteem?

Chapter Ten is titled *'That First Lonely Year'*.

When you re-read this chapter keep in mind Li was only eleven years old when he went to Beijing.

- How does Li overcome homesickness?
- Li describes himself as being a *'bird trapped in a cage'* (p130). Why?
- What was his 'cage'?

Li's visit home during Chapter Twelve (p168 onwards) results in a major turning point. He now realises that he has no future at home with his own family.

"Never forget where you come from," she said. "Work hard and make a life of your own. There is nothing here except starvation and struggle!" (p170)

'I knew now, with sudden shock, that I could never go back to the life I used to have....I knew my future lay ahead, not behind.' (p172)

- What made Li come to this realization?

- What had changed for him?
- Why was this so difficult for him?

Characters

- What traits did Li's Niang and Dia instil in him?
- Describe the influence of his family on Li.
- How did this prepare him for later life?
- In what ways have your parent's values shaped your own life?

Teachers

- Which teacher did Li learn the most from?
- Do you have to like a teacher to learn from them?
- What are the characteristics of a good teacher?
- In what ways does teacher Xiao motivate Li (Chap. 13)?
- What do you think of his methods?

Friends

Li makes a couple of good friends at the Ballet School.

- What is your own definition of a friend?
- Why do people need or have friends?
- Write down three or four words that describe these characters:

The Bandit

Chong Xiongjun

Ben Stevenson

Political and Historical Context

Read the final chapter 'A Short Note on the Long History of China'.

- With students, develop a definition of Communism.

Communism comes from the Latin *communis*. This word was based on *com*, meaning together and *munus* meaning duty or service.

One simple definition is: a political system where one single party owns the property and means of production.

Further explanation of the People's Communes and the Cultural Revolution would probably be useful. Most school libraries will have some text books which would be of use here. Using your school library you could put together a set of books from the sections covering China, Communism and propaganda. There may also be video materials in your school.

Propaganda

Explain that Chairman Mao came to power with a huge agrarian population that was largely uneducated, poor and hungry. He set about convincing the people of China to believe in his ideal of Communism.

- How would he go about persuading illiterate people to accept this regime?

- Find some examples of Communist propaganda posters from library texts or from the internet.
- If using the internet, run a search, Google has an image button. Teachers or students should type “Chinese Communist Party Pictures” into the search engine. If using Google click the image button. A variety of pictures, posters and paintings will come up.

N.B: A great website is www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/crc.html. This has loads of images and simple information. The Cultural Revolution campaigns is a great section, fairly simple and with some pictures.

Select a couple of the Communist Party posters and discuss:

- What is propaganda? Develop a definition.
- Why were propaganda posters used?
- Why use posters and not leaflets?
- Encourage students to identify any of the key people from the posters.
- What is the message of the poster? Is it propaganda? Why?
- What is the difference between advertising and propaganda?

Propaganda and the arts

- In the viewing of *Giselle* (p197), what were the students supposed to be studying by viewing this ballet?
- Was it successful?

Find examples of the way ballet was used to promote the Communist party philosophy.

Li says on page 276 ‘*I realised I had been manipulated by Chairman Mao’s communist propaganda for many years*’.

- Find some examples of propaganda in *Mao’s Last Dancer*.
- When did Li realise Mao’s rhetoric wasn’t true?
- Why might many of the Chinese people not be able to come to this realization themselves?
- Why was it difficult for Li to trust people from the West?
- How did Chairman Mao brainwash the masses in China?
- How would other Chinese people feel about Li’s defection from China?
- What resentment does defection promote?
- Can you think of another person who has defected from their own country to represent a Western Country? How are they viewed?

Chairman Mao, the Red Guard and the Cultural Revolution

During the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) Chairman Mao’s Red Guards tried to destroy traditional customs, books and clothes. Many academics and artists were persecuted or exiled.

Re-read page 56 – 59.

- Why did the Red Guard burn and destroy books, paintings, artwork and shrines?

- Why was the head of the village accused of being a Counter Revolutionary?
- What was the purpose of the executions on p59?
- What were Mao's Little Red Scarf Guards?
- Why would the government get such young children involved?

On pages 177 – 178 Li finds a foreign book under this bed.

- Why did the teacher hide the book under the bed?
- Why didn't the teacher just give it to Li?
- What other examples are there in *Mao's Last Dancer* of destroying traditional Chinese ways?
- Why was finding and keeping the section of an American book so exciting for Li (p87)?
- What does the keeping of the book tell us about Li's character?

Read pages 178 – 179.

- What had happened to some of the artists at the ballet school?
- What does 'rehabilitated' mean in this context (p178)?

Read pages 173 – 179. This is the section when Li went to hear Chairman Mao speak.

'I experienced an extraordinary sense of belonging, a sense of being in the presence of some divine being. I was so proud to be a young Guard of Chairman Mao.' (p174-5)

- What is a 'divine being'?
- Why was Mao so appealing to Li Cunxin and others?
- How does this compare to how he feels at the end of the novel?

Students could research one of the following; this would suit an oral presentation.

- Mao Tse Tung
- The Great Leap Forward
- Madam Mao
- Cultural Revolution
- Little Red Book
- The Red Guard
- People's Communes
- The Long March
- Chinese Communist Philosophy

Teachers could find some examples of the way Communism was portrayed in the 1950's in New Zealand. There may be audio-visual and non-fiction examples in their own schools or on the internet. Some students' older family members may remember the 'Reds under the bed' scare of the 1950's.

'I saw myself as Mao's Last Dancer'

- Consider the title taken from page 319.
- How had Mao's regime in some way provided Li Cunxin with an opportunity?

Extended Written Responses

Personal/Reflective

- What is the greater, physical or mental struggle? Or are the two inseparable?

'Although we have no money, no food, and can't buy clothes, and although we live in a poor house, one thing we do have is PRIDE. Pride is the most precious thing in our lives. Throughout our forefather's struggles, the Li family always had a good reputation. I want every one of you to remember this: never lose your pride and dignity no matter how hard life is.' (p16)

- How does a person hold on to their pride in the face of adversity?

'I knew at the bottom of my heart that my destiny lay in the fields as a labourer, like hundreds of millions of others.' (p26)

- What are the factors which help Li escape his destiny?
- Does destiny play a part in your future? In what way?

Social/Political

"Our Chairman Mao... He is leading us to the first stage of communism. A hand was raised. 'What is the final stage?'

'The ultimate wonderland!' There is no starvation, no class distinction, no need to work long hours. Total equality. Everyone will work willingly and share equally. There will be no greed or laziness, no cheating or unfairness. We will have the best of everything. Total Happiness!" (p166 – 167)

- Why didn't this happen?
- Can it ever happen?

Informative

Li's final performance with the Houston Ballet took place in China. It was the first time he was allowed to perform in China and the opening night was broadcast on television.

Imagine you are a reporter for the Beijing Daily newspaper. Write a review of his performance and his life and what he has done for China while considering the following:

- What conflicts might Li Cunxin raise in some Chinese people?
- How do some nationals view defectors?
- What highs and lows has Li Cunxin experienced in his lifetime?

N.B: A Google search of Li Cunxin (image) will bring up many photos and images of Li. Students could use these for a mock newspaper article, or they could be used to generate discussion.

Creative

Imagine Li keeps a journal during his years at the Beijing Ballet School. Write his journal covering this time.

- What private thoughts might he have had?

Consider some of the events at the Ballet School such as:

- rescuing the bird but then writing the self-criticism (p128)
- visiting the Great Wall (p146)
- practising in the candle light
- finding the little book under his mattress (p178)
- homesickness
- making new friends
- receiving the fountain pen from his father (p159)
- going to America

There are many other events that could be included!

'Cunxin is our family's crown jewel! He is allowed to pursue a future. Why won't you let me go to Tibet?' (p169)

- Write a letter from Cunyuan to his mother and father while he is away from his family putting forward his point of view.

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

