



LI CUNXIN

“Mao’s Last Dancer”

From Chinese Peasant to the World Stage and the West.

http://www.funnellentertainment.com.au/celebrity_speakers/li_cunxin.htm

“A powerful story of the human spirit.”

Li Cunxin (pron “Lee Schwinsin”) is a remarkable man borne of a remarkable story. He has published a best-selling book about his life. He writes most appreciatively of his loving mother. He recounts the family values, and in particular integrity, that he learned in poverty stricken China. He tells of how the sixth of seven sons born to peasants grew up worshipping Mao Zedong before defecting to the United States.

Li was born into "bitter poverty". There was never enough food to go around in his family's two-bedroom home in the Chinese coastal city of Qingdao. He barely wore shoes until he started school at the age of nine, and until eleven he slept top to toe with his parents and younger brother. But, he is quick to point out, it was a happy upbringing in a home full of love.

One day, a delegation from Madame Mao's Beijing Dance Academy arrived at Li's school, part of a provincial tour aimed at finding young people they could whisk away to study ballet and serve in Chairman Mao's revolution. "He asked us all to stand up and sing We Love Chairman Mao," he recalls. "As we sang, the four representatives came down the aisles and selected a girl with big eyes, straight teeth and a pretty face. They passed me without taking any notice, but just as they were walking out of our classroom, our teacher Song hesitated. She tapped the last gentleman from Beijing on the shoulder and pointed at me. `What about that boy?' she said. The gentleman from Beijing glanced in my direction. `Okay, he can come too,' he said in an offhand manner."

And so began Li's dance career. He was 11 when he left home to begin a harsh training regime at the Beijing Dance Academy. There was no music, no museums - just a bare field, hard labour." Li hated dancing during his first two years in Beijing and pined for his family. But fear of what he would return to kept him going, and he took to heart his mother's advice: "Go and do something special with your life. Don't look back!" At first his grades were poor, but within a year his astounding capacity for work became apparent. He practised his turns at night by candlelight, and hopped up and down stairs with sandbags tied to his ankles to build his strength.



"I worked hard on my hamstrings," he tells. "I once fell asleep in bed in the splits position and when I woke up I had to be helped up by my classmates because I couldn't feel my legs at all. By now I was practising in those studios five times a day compared to the usual once-a-day routine of the other students."

Li was 18 when another delegation came scouting for talent. This time it included Ben Stevenson, part of the first US cultural delegation to communist China, offering two students a summer school scholarship to the Houston Ballet Academy. Li was chosen.

Everything about America overwhelmed him, from Coca-Cola to the plane he flew in. Li was alarmed at the wanton waste associated with mass consumerism, but his most disturbing realisation was that Americans, whom he had long regarded as the enemy, were warm and welcoming. The West's seduction of Li Cunxin had begun.

Li was frightened and confused and questioned himself. "Why had Chairman Mao, Madame Mao and the Chinese government told its people all those lies about America? Why are we so poor in China. And why was America so prosperous?" He tried to tell himself that his strong communist faith was still unshakeable, but Li knew he was lying to himself. He had now tasted freedom, and Li couldn't lie to himself about that.

Li went back to China, but soon returned on a yearlong internship with the Houston Ballet. He fell in love with fellow dancer Elizabeth Mackey, and began to feel "torn between two possible lives": his love for 18-year-old Mackey and the freedom offered in America, as opposed to his life and obligations in China. The day before he was due to return to China, Li resolved his split allegiances by taking Mackey to the local courthouse and marrying her.

On Stevenson's urging, Li met the Chinese consul in Houston to explain that the defection was his idea alone, not Stevenson's. But once inside the consulate, Li was separated from his new wife and locked in an upstairs bedroom. Li's lawyer argued his case downstairs, while upstairs the consul lectured Li about the illegality of his marriage and his obligations as a Chinese citizen to follow Chinese, not American, laws. As the night wore on a group of journalists gathered outside, realising they had a front-page story unfolding. "Look, there are members of the press out there and they are not going to go away," Li's lawyer told the Chinese officials. "They are going to make this into a big story." The Chinese kept insisting that, as a lawyer, he should know how to control the press. "Charles [the lawyer] laughed," Li writes. "This was America, he explained several times. In America, even lawyers could not control the press."

Across town, George Bush senior, then US vice-president intervened. Soon President Ronald Reagan was briefed, FBI agents had surrounded the consulate in Houston, and negotiations between Chinese and US diplomats had begun. His defection was the headline story in America. Twenty-one hours later, Li emerged to face not only freedom but also a crowd of 200 and a phalanx of television cameras.

Li was offered a soloist contract with the Houston Ballet and continued to dance, but within 18 months his marriage to Mackey had foundered under the weight of cultural differences. A few years later, he fell in love with another Houston Ballet dancer, Australian (Rockhampton) born Mary McKendry. They married in 1987, and in 1995 moved to Melbourne where Li became a principal dancer with the Australian Ballet. He quickly made an impression. "He was one of the most exquisitely trained classical male dancers the AB has ever had," according to The Australian's Melbourne dance critic Lee Christofis,



"and he used his skills to the most dramatic effect possible. "Li's jumps and turns were the highlights of a meticulous technique."

By now 34, an age at which many dancers have already hung up their shoes, Li was wondering how he would continue to support his two (soon to be three) children when his dancing career ended. Learning how to compound his money was his latest fascination, so in 1997 he began studying at the Australian Securities Institute with a view to becoming a stockbroker.

For his final two years with the Australian Ballet, this meant rising at 5am to start barre work, then racing to the stock exchange by 8am to study until noon.

By the time he joined the rest of the company's dancers for afternoon rehearsals, he had already put in a full day's work (Li is now a senior manager at one of the biggest stockbroking firms in Australia).

Taking the family back to China every couple of years "to witness that sweat still happening today" is one way of instilling his own values in his kids. Another is "teaching them how to work" - he encouraged Sophie, for example, to continue with ballet when she considered dropping it. "It's one thing to easily quit when it gets hard. You can back off and say, 'I'm going to do tap or jazz - it's far easier.' But where's the challenge in that? It's these hard moments in life, how you react to them, that count."

Li's story, "Mao's Last Dancer", was published in 2003 and immediately hit the top of Australia's best sellers list and won the Book of the Year Award. It is in the 23rd printing and has since been published in over 20 countries. In its first year it has already sold over 160,000 copies.

His book is a unique story of determination, passion, integrity and love. It is an empowering tale with so many lessons for all of us. An experience to be cherished.

As a motivational and inspirational speaker, Li's unique real life story works with corporations and conferences', their various themes and objectives.

CLIENT FEEDBACK

"Riveting – how lucky we are. Without a doubt one of the best speakers we have had in many years, outstanding."

Australian Friendly Societies Association (AFSA)

"Personally I found Li excellent to work with and a thoroughly lovely man with a great story."

AMP

"Great choice of speaker. Thank you for letting us hear the story. Inspiring for all, even those in business. Totally wonderful."

CPA Australia

"Comments included: Inspirational Outstanding, excellent. Mr Li was absolutely inspirational. Excellent story. Very inspiring, great choice as a keynote speaker. It has been a long time since I have heard such a wonderful delivery presentation. FABULOUS. Very emotional and inspiring. Brilliant session. Really inspirational. The best presentation I have ever attended."

CPA Australia



"I would like to thank you for your contribution in making our conference such a success: you are in a class of your own. As your story was about courage, loss and challenge, it transported the listeners into your experiences and aspirations. Your delivery was powerful and effective and you certainly had the audience with you all the way, conquered, inspired and enriched. Your presentation was beautifully structured and tailored to our theme, and you skilfully intertwined a mixture of content, humour and inspiration. You are without doubt one of the better speakers we have heard and the standing ovation you received was testimony to this fact. Your contribution to the success of the PwC Conference was significant and for that we are most grateful."

PricewaterhouseCoopers

"Without a doubt one of the most powerful and invigorating presentations I have seen. Extremely impressed by Li's impact, style, personable nature and overall attitude."

PricewaterhouseCoopers

"Li has left a lasting impression of courage and determination amongst those who listened to his moving story."

Townsville City Council

"As our closing speaker, your presentation filled our franchisees with humble inspiration that was evidenced by the focus and absolute silence in the room. Standing ovations may be common in the ballet but they're rare at a Quest Conference! You received one as a result of having touched a sensitive chord with every person present. Thank you for communicating to our group on such a special level."

Quest Serviced Apartments

"Li Cunxin was an inspiring and motivating speaker for our clients and staff. The feedback from those who attended was very positive and energetic. After the lunch there was an air of excitement amongst visitors and I have since heard from others (who were unable to attend) how moving Li's story was. Li was able to engage with our audience and encourage them to achieve their best. Thank you for recommending him."

PricewaterhouseCoopers

"Li was simply the most outstanding speaker I have heard in the many years of attending Rotary District Conferences – and indeed any sort of Conference! The fact that he received a spontaneous standing ovation from people who never give such ovations is testament to his incredible impact on his audience, and the feedback we have received from many of the attendees reinforces this. Li was such a delight to work with from an organizing perspective, and his humility and "human-ness" sat magnificently with the principles of Rotary. There are no accolades high enough for the warmth and beauty of Li as both a speaker and a human being. It has been a privilege to come to know him."

Rotary International District 9780

"Excellent. The collective tears from our members would have filled a bucket after Li's account of his emotional, profound and inspirational life journey at our retreat at Peppers Resort in the Southern Highlands of NSW. What an amazing start to our retreat. Li Cunxin is a rare human being who has the ability to affect people with his story and be in our minds for the rest of our lives."

Young Entrepreneurs Organisation



"Li's performance was most impressive and inspirational. He is probably the best speaker we have ever engaged at the City of Whittlesea. His story is fascinating and he presents it with great passion, humility and dignity."

City of Whittlesea

"Li was a very personable and inspirational speaker, his relaxed style was a great way to finish a very business orientated and structured conference day. It was a pleasure to deal with Li."

Connection Events

"Excellent. Li Cunxin was a great addition to our speakers. It often takes a special speaker to confidently impart his message within an arena of over 5000 people; Li was easily able to achieve this outcome and was a positive inspiration to all attendees. There were literally thousands of people wanting to meet him at the conclusion of his presentation. He would be a great additional to any conference."

IDA International

"Excellent. Li was fantastic & once again full credit to your organisation for identifying a suitable speaker for Motivation Monday. The particular qualities we require are fairly unique. Li had to adapt his presentation to accommodate 3 different audiences, all in one day. He did it with ease. Even the sceptical secondary school Year 9-10 audience was captivated."

Mark Rees Financial Services

"Excellent. We have had more positive feedback from our clients about Li's presentation than any other speaker we have used in the past. Having read his book, I was hoping our clients would really enjoy hearing his story. They loved it and he exceeded my expectations."

Rancie McLean

"Excellent. Li was an exceptional speaker - appealing to everyone in the audience. His manner and delivery were excellent and his story certainly touched everyone. We often arrange speakers for this conference and keeping up the high standard is extremely difficult and I am happy to say that Li lived up to and exceeded everyone's expectations. The feedback from clients and staff has been outstanding and we have Li to thank for that. Li was extremely adaptive to the audience and I appreciated the time he took before the event to make sure everything was organised to staying around after the event to field all his fans and questions! I would certainly recommend Li in the future as he truly is a remarkable (and humble) man with a remarkable story."

William Buck



**Peter Funnell
Entertainment**

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35 years of entertainment expertise



“Excellent!

Li was fantastic. When the delegates completed their evaluation of the conference he was rated as OUTSTANDING. His story and the way that he tells it is captivating. You could have heard a pin drop in the room while he spoke. I would highly recommend him as a conference speaker.”

AMCA

Li was amazing - very inspirational - he had the whole theatre hanging on his every word and made us laugh and cry at the same time. He received a standing ovation when he finished speaking and ensured our Conference finished on a high note. He made himself available after his presentation for delegates to purchase his book and he must have had almost every one of our 700 delegates in the queue waiting for him to sign - and some of them bought as many as 5 copies each!

The Conference Team

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