

# LI CUNXIN

Chinese ballet dancer who defected to the West

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## Topics

- Asia
- Motivation

Li Cunxin (pronounced Lee Schwin Sing) is a remarkable man borne of a remarkable story. He has published a remarkable book about his extraordinary life. In his runaway best selling autobiography, *Mao's Last Dancer*, Li recounts his determination, perseverance, vision, courage and hard work, and in particular, the sacred family values and integrity that he learned in poverty-stricken China, which has driven him to become one of the best dancers in the world. 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 Mao's communist China, and at the age of 10, he was selected to train in Madame Mao's Beijing Dance Academy. 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. Li hated dancing during his first two years and pined for his family. But fear of what he would return to kept him going. At first his grades were poor, but soon, under the guidance of a special teacher, his true potential was recognised and developed. Li's astounding determination and drive became apparent as he practised his turns at night by candlelight, and hopped up and down stairs with sandbags tied to his ankles to build his strength.

When he was 18 Li was offered a soloist contract with the Houston Ballet. After two years, Li defected to the West in a dramatic media storm which involved the then Vice President, Mr George Bush Snr. A few years later, he fell in love with another Houston Ballet dancer, 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.

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 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.

The rich story of Li's inspirational life is recounted in the book "*Mao's Last Dancer*" which was published in September 2003. It quickly rose to No. 2 on the Australian Non-Fiction Best-Seller List and was named in Amazon.com's Break-Out Books list after only several weeks after its US release before receiving the Christopher Award for Literature. The Young Readers edition of Li's autobiography was released in May of this year. He is now a successful stockbroker in Melbourne.

Li is a very special speaker with a remarkable story. He takes you on the inspirational and moving journey of his life. Recounting his achievements in an honest and passionate presentation. Li illustrates the true meaning of goal setting,

the power of focus and determination to go beyond your known limits and the courage to take advantage of extraordinary opportunities.

To hear Li speak is to be privileged to hear a unique story of determination, passion, integrity and love. It is an empowering tale with so many lessons for all of us. This combined with the supporting ballet sequences and still photographs create an experience to be cherished. In April 2005 Li was one of only five international authors to be invited by Barbara Bush to speak at the prestigious “Barbara Bush Celebration of Reading Forum” which raises money for literacy projects in American.

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