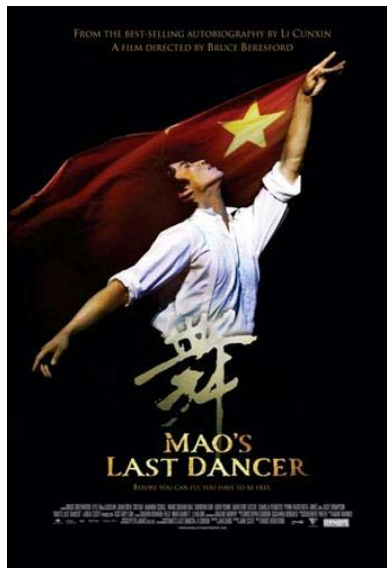


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# MAO'S LAST DANCER STUDY GUIDE



A Film by Bruce Beresford  
(117min., Australia, 2010)

[www.maoslastdancermovie.com](http://www.maoslastdancermovie.com)

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## Introduction

Directed by acclaimed Australian filmmaker Bruce Beresford, *Mao's Last Dancer* (2009) brings the captivating and inspirational story of Li Cunxin to the screen. Li began life in a desperately poor village in Qingdao in north-east China, amidst the chaos and turmoil of Mao's Cultural Revolution. His peasant family toiled in hardship and privation, struggling daily to ward off starvation. One day – a day that would change his life forever – Li's school was visited by uniformed officials, Madame Mao's cultural delegates. They were searching the country, examining millions of children, looking to select students to mould into representatives of Chairman Mao's great vision for China. As the men were about to leave, Li's teacher pointed at the eleven-year-old boy and said, 'What about that one?' And so began Li's long separation from his family and his rise to excellence in the rarefied world of ballet. During his difficult climb to the top, he endured the punishing rigours of training at the Beijing Academy, and discovered in himself tremendous reserves of determination and self-discipline. The story of his loyalty to his family, his exile in the West, and his pursuit of artistic freedom propelled his autobiography to the international bestseller list. Now the combined talents of Beresford, Jan Sardi (scriptwriter) and Jane Scott (producer) present a powerful account of Li's courage and integrity to a whole new audience.



## CURRICULUM LINKS

**T**HIS WONDERFUL FILM could be used in the junior and middle secondary school Key Learning Areas of Film/Media Studies, English, SOSE, Art and (Chinese) History and Politics. It could also be used in VCE English as a text for studies in identity. Some senior primary teachers might also find the story's inspirational qualities appealing. Certainly Li's life stands as a ringing endorsement of qualities and values we would all wish to imbue in the next generation: resilience, commitment, self-discipline and determination. The personal and emotional themes it touches upon include:

- the importance of family values
- love
- passion
- courage
- determination
- striving to realise one's dreams
- human achievement
- excellence
- meeting challenges
- goal setting and achieving goals against odds
- commitment and focus
- embracing changes
- continuous improvement

- positive attitude
- leadership
- daring to make tough choices

The film also provides an entertaining and engaging framework within which to explore aspects of China and its recent history.

Given the varied ages and learning contexts of students who could potentially use *Mao's Last Dancer*, the main aim of this guide is to present a wide variety of teaching and learning opportunities based on the film, ranging in sophistication and complexity. Teachers are encouraged to pick and choose tasks that suit the particular interests and abilities of their students – not to work through the guide systematically. Teachers may choose to present a selection of appropriate activities as a matrix, with students given the responsibility to complete a set number of tasks. Most of the activities target literacy outcomes: speaking and listening, reading and writing. There are also activities that address film analysis, ICT and creative thinking. Challenging statements in quotation marks are dotted throughout the guide and may be used as starting points for whole-class discussion, for oral presentations, or as essay or debate topics.

*Li's life stands as a ringing endorsement of qualities and values we would all wish to imbue in the next generation: resilience, commitment, self-discipline and determination.*





## DISCUSSION POINTS & ACTIVITIES

### DURING SCREENING

- During screening, encourage students to take thorough notes on the ways in which the filmmakers explore themes in Li's story through:
  - > the characters – their thoughts, actions, experiences and relationships
  - > the actions or events in the story
  - > the settings
  - > the social, political and cultural world represented in the film
  - > the tone used

### LI, HIS LIFE & TIMES

'If it's mental strength and courage you're after, then you can't go past Li Cunxin!' – Teacher Gao

- Write a timeline for Li Cunxin's life, referring to notes taken during the screening of the film. Plot the changes that take place over time; link these changes to key events or key moments in the film. How does the film convey these changes through symbolism, change in tone, etc.?
- Write a motto to embody Li's attitude to life, its tri-

umphs and difficulties.

- Brainstorm adjectives that describe Li's character. Write a detailed character portrait of Li.
- In two columns, note down the key features of Li's life in China and his life in the West. What are the dramatic differences? What are the continuities?
- Write an imaginary account of the path Li's life might have taken had he not been chosen for ballet training.
- 'Li achieved brilliance as a dancer partly because of the hardships he endured during his childhood.' Discuss.
- Shortly after Li's arrival at the Academy, we see a shot of the boys' bunks in the dormitory and we know Li is sobbing into his mother's handmade quilt. Teacher Hung demands, 'Who's crying? Crying is a sign of weakness. Stop it immediately'. Discuss the idea that Li had no choice but to endure. How are his spirits lifted in this scene?
- Imagine you are Li and it is the first year of your separation from your family. Write a letter to your beloved Niang, describing the conditions, your daily routine, and your homesickness.
- What is the biggest obstacle Li must confront? Remind students there is no right or wrong answer to this question, but to use evidence from the film to support their arguments.



### CULTURE SHOCK: LI IN AMERICA

- What was Li led to believe about the West before he visited America? What surprised him? Were some of his expectations of the evil capitalist system borne out by his own experiences? What might he have thought when he discovered that so much he had been taught about the West was wrong?
- What personal qualities allow Li to adapt to the vastly different world he finds himself in after his defection?
- Make a list of some of the repercussions of Li's decision to defect. How does Niang react to news of her sixth son's defection? Does she feel personally responsible?
- Does Li's decision to remain in the West mean he has repudiated communist values?
- Make a list of some of the cultural differences that strike Li on his arrival in America. (Consider: muffins, blenders, big houses, affluent shopping centres, cash machines, discos, people's apparent freedom to make disparaging comments about their politicians, Pepsi.)
- Why is Li disturbed by Ben's extravagance?

### CHARACTERS: THE PEOPLE IN LI'S LIFE

- Write a study of one of the minor characters. Who are the key minor characters? What is their role in the story?

How do the minor characters relate to, impact upon or contrast with Li?

- Develop a dramatic monologue that might be spoken at a key moment by one of the characters in the film.
- Write five assertions about one of the characters in the film. Pass these around the class and collect information about whether others agree with the statements and the reasons for the views presented.
- Li's mother, Niang, shows her great love for Li by insisting he take the opportunity to leave for Beijing. She sews him a quilt and prepares pork dumplings to celebrate. She doesn't speak of her own fears or feelings. Write a monologue for her to deliver, outlining how she feels about her family's situation and Li's departure.
- Could Niang have refused to allow Li to go to Beijing?
- What does Dia give Li before he departs for Beijing and what does it represent in terms of his parents' hopes for his future? (His father gives him a pen that was given to him by his own father in hope that he might learn to read and write. Mao's legacy is clearly mixed, but one undisputed area of improvement was literacy. Li's obvious intelligence and ability to learn a foreign language were also significant factors in the path his life took.)
- 'The hardest thing for a mother is to push her young child away, knowing his opportunities lie elsewhere.' Discuss.
- Write an account of Teacher Chan's fate after he was removed from the Academy.





- Li queries Ben about the meaning of the term 'chink', after an encounter on a city street. Ben answers: *You know when you're in the theatre, and everyone is getting seated, and the curtain is closed? If the stage light is on, and the curtain parts just a tiny little bit, then the light from the stage shines through what we call a 'chink'. So, if someone calls you a 'chink' Li, what it means is that they see the light that is there inside of you.* Why does Ben choose to shelter Li from the racist and derogatory meaning that was undoubtedly intended by the person who called Li a 'chink'? Is this the film's only reference to racism?
- Why does Ben feel so strongly that Li should return to China? What exactly is Li jeopardising for Ben by his actions? Why does Ben feel personally betrayed? Do you think Ben fully understands what life is like for Li in China?
- What factors account for the breakdown of Li's marriage to Elizabeth? Do you believe they would have married if Li had been allowed to extend his stay in America? Do you think that if Elizabeth had been accepted into the Company the marriage might have been happier?
- 'Liz is the film's most important secondary character, in that she gives the lie to the glorious myth Li embodies: that commitment and hard work will triumph over all odds. Liz's evident frustration, envy and disappoint-

ment remind us that Li is exceptional and extraordinary. We can't all make it.' Discuss.

- Given this is a biopic, do you think anyone might feel unhappy with the way they are represented in this film?

### A TALE FROM THE HEART, MADE FOR THE SCREEN: STORYTELLING & STRUCTURE

- How does the film's opening sequence convey a sense of Li's first impressions of America? Why might the filmmakers have chosen to start the film here, midway, and use flashbacks, rather than proceed with a linear, chronological narrative? Why start the story in America and not China?
- Use the picture story book, *The Peasant Prince*, to scaffold a storyboarding exercise on one of the film's key sequences.
- Conduct a close analysis of one scene, culminating in a presentation to the class.
- Construct an alternative ending or a scene from an alternative point of view. Present it as a script and a performance. Write an account explaining and justifying your choices.
- Have each student write a question about the film that puzzles him or her on an index style card. Use these cards as the basis for whole class discussion, mind-mapping key points raised to be used in essay writing.

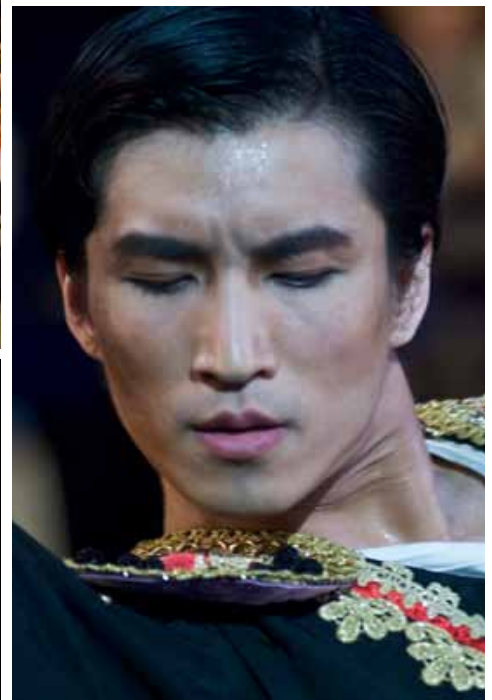


- Keep a 'key moments' diary for the film. Head each section with a summary description of the moment, then below this, draw up three columns: Who? What do they do? Why do they do it?
- In groups, create a tableau to represent a selected key moment in the film; explain to the class why they have positioned people as they have, what the facial expressions are intended to suggest, etc. Compare the different tableaus – is there a dominant interpretation of the scene? Which presentation did students find most convincing and why?
- Are there any details of the story that you would like to know more about?
- Li's story has had a host of incarnations: biography, children's picture story book, Adelaide Symphony Orchestra musical production, and now film. What is it about this story that captivates audiences? (The book stayed on the Australian Top 10 Bestseller List for over one and a half years and it is now in its thirty-second printing. It has been published and sold in over twenty countries. It won the Book of the Year Award in Australia, the Christopher Award in America and was short-listed for the National Biography Award.)
- Choose one of the parables used in the film, and analyse its thematic significance in terms of Li's character and journey. Set it out as a graphic storyboard.
  1. Once upon a time, inside a deep, dark well, there

lived a frog. This frog could only see the opening of the well. One day, a toad arrived at the top of the well. The toad saw the frog and said to the frog, 'Come up and have a look. The world up here is huge and bright.' From then on, the frog dreamed of jumping out of the well to see the world.

2. There was a young guard in the Emperor's palace who wanted to be an archer but he was not strong enough, and so he carried heavy logs for a year. When he finally came to pick up his bow it felt as light as a feather.
  3. The Lucky Carp wind chime: 'Legend has it that as the carp swims upstream it has to leap over many obstacles, and with the final leap it turns into the Celestial Dragon.'
- 'Li's story has the power and compelling simplicity of a fairy tale.' Discuss.
  - 'We all love Li's story because it promises us that life can take unexpected directions. It offers us a glimmer of hope from amidst bleak and seemingly intractable struggle. But in our admiration for Li and his triumph, do we risk turning our backs on the millions of ordinary peasants who starved to death? Does his story pacify and distract us from a greater, more common truth?' Discuss.
  - 'The film strives to reassure us that we are united by basic human concerns for family, love and freedom, regardless of race or politics.' Discuss.





### A MATTER OF MOOD: IMAGERY & TONE

- Discuss and have students write a description of the film's tone, voice and perspective.
- Choose a particularly striking passage of imagery to analyse.
- Imagine you are Bruce Beresford, the film's director, setting out a brief for the costume and set designers, and the locations to be used. What has been achieved with the look of the film? How crucial is this to the sense of the story's authenticity? What visual elements, in terms of props, costumes and locations, are particularly significant in establishing the mood and tone of the film?
- Make a list of 'inspirational' stories with which this film fits (e.g. *Rocky* [John G. Avildsen, 1976]). Consider other types this film fits with: biopics; from rags to riches; fish out of water; triumph of the human spirit; etc.

### COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

- Choose a scene from the book that is not included in the film and map out how you would bring it to the screen.
- Which aspects of the book does the film focus on? How much of the film takes place in America and how much takes place in China? Is the emphasis in the book similar?
- Does the film leave out anything from Li's story that

you thought was important in the book? If so, consider possible reasons why the filmmakers may have had to cut certain parts of Li's story.

- Why might the publishers of the children's picture story book version of Li's story have decided to change the title of the text to *The Peasant Prince*?
- Li's book has been an international bestseller and has been published in several languages, including Chinese. Can you find out anything about how it was received on publication in China?
- What is the difference between a memoir and an autobiography?
- How many times do you think screenwriter Jan Sardi read *Mao's Last Dancer*? Choose a book that means a lot to you and outline how you would adapt it for the screen.
- What particular difficulties might a screenwriter face when adapting a true story for the screen?

### THE BIG BALLERINO: A STORY OF DANCE

'I don't want to walk – I want to fly.'

– Li Cunxin

- How might Li's dancing style have been different if he had not defected?
- Is there anything uniquely Chinese about Li's dancing?
- Li is very unhappy during his early years at the Acad-





emy and confides in a teacher that he doesn't like ballet and doesn't understand it. What happens to change his attitude?

- What might Li have been feeling as he watched the video of Baryshnikov?
- Do you think the hardship, cruelty and privation Li suffered during his years at the Academy were justified by his later achievements? Does the end justify the means? Might a child willingly forgo a more balanced childhood in the pursuit of excellence? Is a child capable of understanding what is being sacrificed? What price is too high to pay for excellence?
- Do you believe dancers are born or made?
- What can you find out about the Vaganova method?
- What can you find out about the Beijing Arts Academy?
- Li says to Liz, 'I must dance political ballet in China, but I dance better here, because feel more free'. What limitations are placed on artistic expression in Communist China? What do you make of the revolutionary ballet we see performed for Madame Mao?
- What does Ben mean when he says of the Chinese dancers, 'There's no emotion, they're not connected, I'm not engaged. They remind me more of athletes than dancers'?
- Do you think Li accomplished all of his goals as a dancer?

- Compile a list of adjectives to describe the qualities we see in Li's dancing.
- Write an account of Li's time with the Australian Ballet, his performances, partnerships, etc.
- Li was one of forty peasant children chosen out of millions for training at the Academy and, as we know, his story is one of great success and triumph. Write an imaginary account of one of the other children for whom the opportunity did not lead to success.

### THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

- Outline the key differences between capitalist and communist systems.
- One of Li's teachers at the Academy tells the young students that in 'final stage' communism, there will be no class distinctions, no greed and no hunger. Discuss the possibility that communism is fundamentally an idealistic, utopian belief system, whereas capitalism is at its heart pragmatic, founded in atomism and informed self-interest.
- Li is instructed by a Chinese official prior to his trip to America, 'When in doubt, let your communist principles guide you'. What exactly are 'communist principles'?
- Li is told to be polite, not to accept gifts and not to trust anyone, especially women. Is any of this advice helpful or necessary, or does it just reveal cultural prejudices and misunderstandings?

## KEY CAST

**BEN STEVENSON:**  
Bruce Greenwood  
**CHARLES FOSTER:**  
Kyle MacLachlan  
**NIANG:** Joan Chen  
**LI (ADULT):** Chi Cao  
**DIA:** Wang Shuang Bao  
**LI (TEENAGER):**  
Chengwu Guo  
**LI (CHILD):** Huang Wen Bin  
**ELIZABETH:** Amanda Schull  
**DILWORTH:** Aden Young  
**LORI:** Madeleine Eastoe  
**MARY:** Camilla Vergotis  
**CYNTHIA DODDS:**  
Penne Hackforth-Jones  
**JUDGE WOODROW SEALS:**  
Jack Thompson

## KEY CREW

**PRODUCER:** Jane Scott  
**DIRECTOR:** Bruce Beresford  
**WRITER:** Jan Sardi  
**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:**  
Troy Lum  
**CO-PRODUCER CHINA:**  
Geng Ling  
**DOP:** Peter James  
**PRODUCTION DESIGNER:**  
Herbert Pinter  
**COSTUME DESIGNER:**  
Anna Borghesi  
**KEY MAKE-UP ARTIST:**  
Viv Mepham  
**EDITOR:** Mark Warner  
**COMPOSER:**  
Christopher Gordon  
**SOUND RECORDIST:**  
David Lee  
**LINE PRODUCER:**  
Sue Mackay  
**CHOREOGRAPHER:**  
Graeme Murphy  
**POST-PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR:**  
Katherine Heads  
**FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:** Mark Egerton  
**SCRIPT SUPERVISOR:**  
Christie O'Connell  
**CASTING – INTERNATIONAL:**  
Sharon Howard-Field  
**CASTING – AUSTRALIA:**  
Nikki Barrett  
**CASTING – CHINA:**  
Li Hai Bin  
**STILLS PHOTOGRAPHER:**  
Simon Cardwell



- Do you think people in China today would think Li is a 'filthy defector'?
- What did Teacher Chan say or do that caused him to be labelled a 'counter-revolutionary'?
- What did it mean to be a 'class enemy'?
- How do you think Chinese audiences might feel about this film? How is China presented?
- Did you learn anything about China from watching this film?
- Ben explains a cartoon on a T-Shirt to Li as 'just a bit of nonsense, like a lot of things in America'. Does the China Li knows allow for nonsense?
- How difficult do you think it would have been to organise and gain permission for Li's parents to visit him in America?
- Li was born in 1961 under what was effectively a totalitarian regime. How has China changed since his childhood?

## HISTORICAL/POLITICAL CONTEXT

Topics for further research include:

- Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek
- the Chinese Civil War
- the Long March (1935)
- Chairman Mao
- Mao's Legacy (consider issues such as literacy, life expectancy)
- The Great Leap Forward (1958)
- The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)
- The Little Red Book
- Maoism, Communism
- The Red Guards
- The Gang of Four

## A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO LI'S AMAZING STORY

- What does it mean to be 'inspirational'? Write about someone in your own life who inspires you.
- What qualities does Li demonstrate in his life that you admire?
- What would you like to excel at?
- What are the obstacles in your path to achieving your dreams?

- Li says, 'The best advice I received was from my mother when I left home at age 11. It is to not look back, to keep going forward.'<sup>11</sup> What is the best advice you have ever received? What advice would you like to give a younger friend or sibling at an important turning point in their life?
- In what ways was your childhood similar/different to Li's?
- At the age of eleven, Li says his ambition is 'to serve the Revolution and be a Red Guard for Chairman Mao'. What was your ambition at the age of eleven? We might choose to identify the young Li's ambitions as the obvious product of indoctrination, but we are all to some extent products of our environments. What are the sources of your ambitions? (Consider identity factors: social, cultural, familial, personal, historical.)
- Li is one of forty students selected out of millions for special training. This is clearly a turning point in his life and informs everything that comes after it. Many of our lives are not shaped by such dramatic and momentous events. What can you identify as turning point moments in your life so far? Can you see the hand of fate at work in who you have become and what you value and strive for?
- Prior to his trip to the States, Li is advised by a party official to 'show them you're honest and hardworking' – which he certainly does! Imagine you were travelling to a very different culture: what Australian values would you hope to embody and represent?
- Over a shot of the young Li, all alone and heading for Beijing in 1973, we hear Ben's voice: 'There are times when you just have to be strong'. Write about one such moment in your life.
- What would you find most difficult about being removed from your home and family?
- What would you find most difficult about migrating to a foreign country?
- Li speaks of feeling 'free' in America. Freedom is often aligned with democracy and is a core American value. Do you feel free? When do you feel free? What makes you feel free? When are you aware of the limits on your freedom? Do we value freedom more in the West? How important is some sense of freedom to artistic expression?





## REFLECTING FURTHER ON THE FILM AND THE FILMMAKING PROCESS

- Imagine you are the film's producer, Jane Scott, seeking funding for this project. Write an outline of your intentions, the purpose and value of the film.
- Write a review of the film to be published in a daily newspaper.
- Write a fifty-word synopsis of the film to be published in a television guide.
- Who is the audience for this film? Do you have to like ballet to enjoy the film? Does the huge success of the book guarantee an audience for the film?
- What filmic techniques are used to show the passage of time and to slip between different time frames?
- Consult the list of credits at the end of this guide. Choose one role and write an outline of this person's responsibilities during the production of the film.
- Design a poster to promote *Mao's Last Dancer*. Annotate your poster, explaining the rationale behind your design choices.
- Imagine you had an opportunity to interview the film's director, Bruce Beresford. Compile a list of ten questions you would like to put to him, considering issues such as his motivation and purpose in making this film, and any particular difficulties or challenges he faced during production.
- Discuss the significance of the film's title. In what ways is Li 'Mao's last dancer'? What does it mean to be 'last'?
- What difficulties might have arisen from shooting on location in Beijing?
- 'The scenes of young Li at the Academy in Beijing are among the film's most intriguing because they offer Western audiences a glimpse into a seldom-seen world and a very alien culture.' Discuss.
- What can you find out about Joan Chen, the actor who plays Li's mother? Her early life bears some resemblance to Li's, in

that she was discovered as a young girl on the school rifle range by Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing. She excelled at marksmanship and was selected to study acting. She trained at the Shanghai Film Academy and then enrolled at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages before moving to the United States to further her studies in 1981. Write a biographical account of Chen's life.

- Chi Cao, who plays the adult Li, trained at the same Academy as Li and also went overseas at a young age, not knowing the language but hoping to further his dancing career. (In Chi's case, he left his family and went to London to join the prestigious Royal Ballet School at the age of fifteen.) Write a profile of Chi.
- Compile a list of great ballet films (*The Turning Point* [Herbert Ross, 1977]; *The Red Shoes* [Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948]) and analyse what they all say about ballet and the tremendous sacrifices it demands. Which film best captures for you the power of ballet? What techniques do each of the films use to convey the spirit of the dancing?
- What do you think Li thinks of the film?

### Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> Kate Snedeker, 'Mao's Last Dancer: Interview With Li Cunxin', *Ballet-Dance Magazine*, 25 October 2006.

## Resources

### Books

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