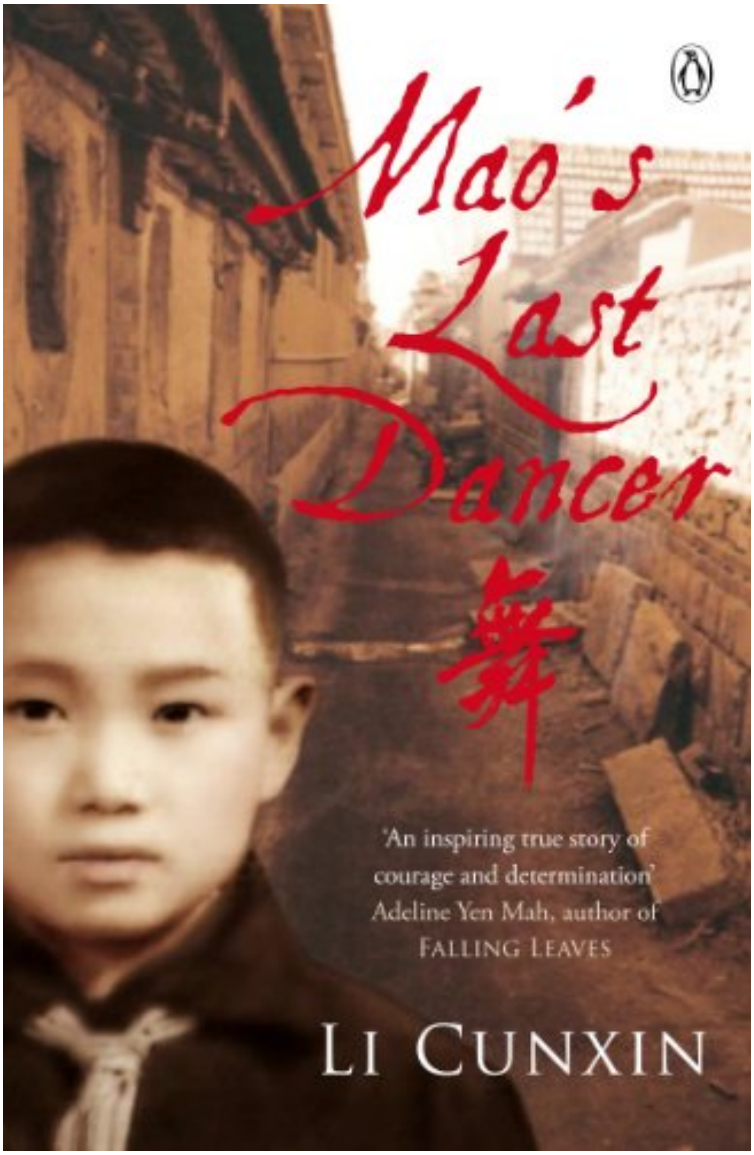
Mao's Last Dancer



Par Li Cunxin
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(Download) Mao's Last Dancer

Par Li Cunxin : Mao's Last Dancer before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mao's Last Dancer:

Description : Description du produitFrom a desperately poor village in northeast China, at age eleven, Li Cunxin was chosen by Madame Mao's cultural delegates to be taken from his rural home and brought to Beijing, where he would study ballet. In 1979, the young dancer arrived in Texas as part of a cultural exchange, only to fall in love with America-and with an American woman. Two years later, through a series of events worthy of the most exciting cloak-and-dagger fiction, he defected to the United States, where he quickly became known as one of the greatest ballet dancers in the world. This is his story, told in his own inimitable voice.

Prsentation de l'diteurRaised in a desperately poor village during the height of China's Cultural Revolution, Li Cunxin's childhood revolved around the commune, his family and Chairman Mao's Little Red Book.

Until, that is, Madame Mao's cultural delegates came in search of young peasants to study ballet at the academy in Beijing and he was thrust into a completely unfamiliar world. When a trip to Texas as part of a rare cultural exchange opened his eyes to life and love beyond China's borders, he defected to the United States in an extraordinary and dramatic tale of Cold War intrigue. Told in his own distinctive voice, this is Li's inspirational story of how he came to be Mao's last dancer, and one of the world's greatest ballet dancers.ExtraitTable of ContentsTitle PageCopyright PageDedicationPART ONE - MY CHILDHOODChapter 1 - HOMEChapter 2 - MY NIANG AND DIAChapter 3 - A COMMUNE CHILDHOODChapter 4 - THE SEVEN OF USChapter 5 - NA-NAChapter 6 - CHAIRMAN MAOS CLASSROOMChapter 7 - LEAVING HOMEPART TWO - BEIJINGChapter 8 - FEATHER IN A WHIRLWINDChapter 9 - THE CAGED BIRDChapter 10 - THAT FIRST LONELY YEARChapter 11 - THE PENChapter 12 - MY OWN VOICEChapter 13 - TEACHER XIAOS WORDSChapter 14 - TURNING POINTSChapter 15 - THE MANGOChapter 16 - CHANGEChapter 17 - ON THE WAY TO THE WESTChapter 18 - THE FILTHY CAPITALIST AMERICAChapter 19 - GOOD-BYE, CHINAPART THREE - THE WESTChapter 20 - RETURN TO THE LAND OF FREEDOMChapter 21 - ELIZABETHChapter 22 - DEFECTIONChapter 23 - MY NEW LIFEChapter 24 - A MILLET DREAM COME TRUEChapter 25 - NO MORE NIGHTMARESChapter 26 - RUSSIAChapter 27 - MARYChapter 28 - GOING HOMEChapter 29 - BACK IN MY VILLAGEChapter 30 - ANOTHER WEDDINGAFTERWORD TO THE ORIGINAL EDITIONPART FOUR - MY STORY CONTINUESChapter 31 - KEEPING HEARTS WARMChapter 32 - NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLEChapter 33 - PAPER WISHESAcknowledgementsDISCUSSION GUIDEPHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITSABOUT THE AUTHORLis well-paced account of the ensuing cloak-and-dagger episodes that lead to his defection to the West adds suspense to a tale already full of adventures, but there are no conventional bad guys to be found in it. Indeed, he writes with fine compassion for the Chinese consul who attempts to dissuade him from becoming an outcast: unlike me, he had to go back and would probably never manage to get out again. Nicely written and humane: for anyone interested in modern Chinese history or for fans of dance.Kirkus sHonest and refreshing.Adeline Yen Mah, author of Falling LeavesA moving, true story of family love and a boys great courage on his journey from terrible poverty to the world stageone of the books of the year.Womens Weekly (Australia)It is in large part this books resemblance to good fiction that renders it so readable. The scene in the Chinese consulate after Cunxin defects is fraught with real menace, charged with potential for violence and even international incident, and could hardly be better described . . . a crackling yarn.The Sunday Independent (Ireland)Li Cunxin has written a remarkable book about his own remarkable journey. It is really about the nature of family love, courage, and obsession. Maos Last Dancer is told with simplicity, but Lis style is deceptive. It takes skill to write simply, just as it takes years of backbreaking work to make ballet look elegant and effortless.The Sydney Morning HeraldVery evocative.Financial Times Remarkable.The Sunday Telegraph (London)His autobiography traces profound political change, from the disastrous results of Maos Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s to Chinas gradual opening after 1978, under new paramount leader Deng Xiaoping. Gold Coast Bulletin (Australia)Anything but boring.Houston PressMaos Last Dancer is not a typical dancers story. Yes, Li triumphs over physical pain. More important, he illustrates the sustaining power of deep cultural roots and enduring familial love. Evoking a vivid sense of lifes evolution in communist China and the stark contrast of Western society, he also crosses chasms of the heart. And while Maos Last Dancer is not a self-improvement book, Lis courage and perseverance ultimately make his story more inspiring than a dozen tomes by the likes of Dr. Phil.Houston ChronicleHis story will appeal to an audience beyond Sinophiles and ballet aficionados.Publishers WeeklyHe is an expert storyteller, and his memoirwhich includes his struggles to perfect his art in the tense political framework, the complex events surrounding his defection, and the heart-breaks and joys of his professional and personal livesmakes for fascinating reading. The portions dealing with his childhood and loving family in Qingdao are especially poignant, and the work as a whole unfolds with honesty, humor, and a quiet dignity. This book has wide appeal, for it concerns not only a dancers coming-of-age in a turbulent time but also individual strength, self-discovery, and the triumph of the human spirit.Library JournalTHE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP Published by the Penguin Group Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephens Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of

Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.) Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi110 017, India Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore, 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.) Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South AfricaPenguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, EnglandThe publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.ISBN: 9781101458778Li, Cunxin, date. Maos last dancer / Li Cunxin. p. cm.ISBN: 97811014587781. Li, Cunxin, date. 2. Ballet dancersChinaBiography. 3. DefectorsChinaBiography. I. Title. GV1785.L475A320042003047199 792.8092dc21 [B]To the two special womenin my lifemy mother and my wifeA WEDDINGQINGDAO, 1946On the day of her marriage, a young girl sits alone in her village home. It is autumn, a beautiful October morning. The country air is cool but fresh.The young girl hears happy music approaching her house. She is only eighteen, and she is nervous, frightened. She knows that many marriage introducers simply take money and tell lies. Some women from her village marry men who dont have all their functional body parts. Those women have to spend the rest of their lives looking after their husbands. Wife beating is common. Divorce is out of the question. Divorced women are humiliated, despised, suffering worse than an animals fate. She knows some women hang themselves instead, and she prays this is not going to be her fate.She prays to a kind and merciful god that her future husband will have two legs, two arms, two eyes and two ears. She prays that his body parts are normal and functional. She worries that he will not be kindhearted and will not like her. But most of all she worries about her unbound feet. Bound feet are still in fashion. Little girls as young as five or six have to tuck four toes under the big toe and squeeze them hard to stop the growth. It is extremely painful, and the girls have to change the cloth bandages and wash their feet daily to avoid infection. The tighter the feet are bound the smaller the feet will become. Eventually all five toes grow together. Infections often occur, and the girls are so crippled they have to walk mostly on their heels. But when this bride was about eight and her mother tried to bind her feet, two or three years later than was usual, she defied her and ran away. Her mother eventually gave up, but secretly she was pleased. A daughter with unbound feet could help do the hard chores. But would her future husband and in-laws think the same?The groom is a young man of twenty-one. He leaves home before sunrise. Sixteen strong men are hired to carry two sedan chairs for the three-hour journey from his village to the brides. There are trumpets, cymbals, gongs and bamboo flutes, and the brides sedan chair is covered with red and pink silk banners and flowers. The grooms is a simple blue sedan chair, which will leave from the east side of the village and reenter from the west.As soon as the grooms entourage leaves home, the women of his family start to prepare the house and the wedding feast to follow. They glue colored-paper cuttings all over the walls, doors and windowsdifferent shapes, with lucky words on them, to symbolize happiness and good fortune. They place a square table in the center of their courtyard and cover it with a red cloth. In the center they place nine huge bread rolls, called mantos, in the shape of a pagoda. There is also a metal bowl, with candlesticks and incense holders on either side. On the ground are two round bamboo mats.The bride is in such a panicked state by the time her groom arrives. He wears a dark blue cotton mandarin gown and a big tall hat, with silk flowers pinned over his heart. He kneels, and kowtows three times, bowing his head all the way down to the floor, always facing north, always in the direction of the god of happiness.Tea, sweets, roasted sunflower seeds and peanuts are then served. A lunch feast follows, but the cost of the meal will break the brides family finances. Many relatives and friends chip in to help, but the favors and debts will have to be repaid in years to come. The grooms entourage has to be satisfied, however. The meal will affect her new familys attitude toward her. It will determine whether she will have a smooth or bumpy ride on the way to her in-laws house. The young bride remembers that a friend of her mothers was married a year beforeat her wedding, the musicians played funeral music and the carriers walked her around in circles, making her dizzy and sick. Even worse, the carriers lowered her sedan chair to the ground, which is very unlucky: that bride would end up with a life of hard work instead of a life of luxury. All this was caused by the in-laws dissatisfaction with the food that was served at her house.While

the grooms people drink their wine and eat their food, the bride sits on her bed, her kang, away from everyone, with her silk veil concealing her face. This is called the quiet sitting. She wears a long dark maroon gown, with pink silk flowers sewn onto it. Her hairpiece is full of beautiful colored hairpins and flowers, and is very heavy. She has no jewelery because her family is too poor.Soon, her second brother secretly whispers to her through a crack in the door, My brother-in-law has all his moving parts! This is news from heaven. The young bride sobs with joy.Toward the end of the meal, the brides mother brings her a bowl of rice, a double-sided mirror and ten pairs of red chopsticks. The bride has to eat three mouthfuls of rice, and the last mouthful she spits into her mothers pocket. She has to keep some rice in her mouth to last all the way to her in-laws house before she can swallow, symbolizing that she will never starve along the entire journey of her life. Then she puts eight pairs of chopsticks into her mothers pocket. The remaining two pairs she keeps, the ones with chestnuts and dates tied on them, symbolizing the early arrival of sons.The bride cannot stop shaking. Tears stream from her eyes as she spits the rice into the pocket. Soon she will become someones wife and another familys daughter-in-law. She grabs her mothers hand, as if clutching onto a life-saving straw.You silly girl, her mother says to her. Dont cry! Youre going to a family with enough food. Do you want to be poor for the rest of your life? She takes out her handkerchief and gently wipes her daughters tears and hugs her long and tight for the last time. My girl, Ill always miss you and love you. Take good care of your husband and hell take good care of you. Obey him and make him happy. Bear many of his sons. Look after your mother-in-law like youve looked after me. Be kind to her until she dies. She lowers the veil over her daughters face, and leaves, feeling nothing but pain.The bride sobs quietly for the first half of her journey to the grooms village. She has never left home before. She is terrified. At the halfway point one of the carriers shouts, Halfway point, flip your mirror! So she takes the mirror shes been given and flips it over: now she should forget her past and look forward to the future. Then she is met by a group of four carriers from the grooms village, to make the changeover. She doesnt touch the ground. The musicians continue their happy wedding tunes, and the carriers walk carefully along the uneven dirt road.When she arrives at the grooms gate, the metal bowl on the table is already flaming with fire. The candle and incense are lit. The groom gets out of his sedan chair and waits for his bride, her face still concealed by her thick silk veil as she is assisted out of her sedan chair by two of his sisters. They walk together toward the table while a local wise man reads loudly an ancient poem. Few people understand it because few of them have ever gone to school, but the bride and groom kneel on the two round bamboo mats while they listen, and afterwards kowtow. The groom then takes his new brides hands and helps her up. She cannot see the flames from the bowl on the table, but she can feel the intense heat. This fire is the fire of passion, the fire of love.Before the bride takes her first step with her husband, the grooms fourth brother gently brushes the soles of the brides shoes with a time-worn iron filled with burning coals, to give her warmth from the end of her body right up to her heart. Led by her husband, she walks slowly toward the door, where there is a horses saddle. They have to cross over it together. The bride cannot see anything through her veil and she is so afraid that she will trip, but the saddle symbolizes hard times in life and they have to overcome it together. She hesitates. Her husband squeezes her hand. Stop. Now lift your foot, he whispers. She pulls up her gown to her knees and steps over safely. But as soon as her second foot touches the ground, her heart sinks. She has shown her unbound feet to the entire world! Her in-laws will be disgusted. She wants to scream, to go home to her mother. She will be laughed at, humiliated for the rest of her life. Her husbands family will think shes brought them disgrace and shame.Her husband feels her hesitation. Are you all right? he asks quietly.She doesnt answer. What can she say?Lets go to the kang, he says gently.On one of the inside corners of the kang sits a triangular wooden box called doo. Glued onto it is a diamond-shaped double-happiness paper sticker, and inside are different kinds of grains: wheat, corn, rice, millet, sorghum . . . they represent the hope that the newlyweds will have plenty of food throughout their lives. There is a pair of axes too, called fu, meaning fortune, with chestnuts and red dates tied to their wooden handles, and there are also two thin quilts handmade by the grooms sisters, folded into square sitting mats.First the bride hands her husband the red handkerchief that her mother had given her. He puts it inside the doo. Then she hands him the pair of chopsticks with chestnuts and dates attached, and he carefully sticks them upright into the grain.After a few awkward moments, the groom says in his gentle voice, Reiqing, bu yao pa, wu bu hui shang ni. Dont be afraid. I wont hurt you.All day the bride has longed to remove her veil. Now she hesitates. She is afraid. Her husband might not like her appearance. But she is reassured by his gentle tone.She nervously lifts her veil and, for the first time in their lives, they are able to look at each other.Both cannot believe their luck. The bride sees he is handsome. There is something honest and humble

about him too, and he immediately captures her heart.The groom keeps looking at his bride and is stunned by her beauty. They sit there, speechless, until their widen your heart noodles arrive, made by the brides mother, to comfort the newlyweds hearts, to symbolize acceptance of each others fortunes and faults, the bride letting go of her old family values and adopting her new familys ones. Then comes the warming your heart rice wine, and they drink from each others cups with crossed arms.The grooms brothers, their wives and his sisters come forward one by one to wish the newlyweds a happy life together, until their silver hairs and beard touch the ground. Then the grooms youngest sister, about the same age as the bride, whispers to her, Im so happy to see your big feet! Ive got them too! She gives her new sister-in-law a wink and flies out of the room, giggling. The young bride is overjoyed.The groom is soon called away to the wedding banquet to drink with his friends and relatives, while the bride begins her sitting through the time. For three days she sits, legs crossed in a lotus position, back straight, for every waking hour. She eats and drinks little, to avoid frequent trips to the toilet.Many relatives, friends and neighbors visit during those three days, and on the first night people come to make chaos. The newlyweds have to withstand much teasing and tricking, especially the bride. She is expected to pour visitors drinks, light their cigarettes and peel the peanuts to feed into their mouths. Making chaos will go on until very late into the night, and by the time the last visitor leaves, both bride and groom will be exhausted.On the fourth day, by tradition, the bride takes her new husband to visit her own family. They like their new son-in-law, and they are happy for their daughter. My girl, count your blessings, her mother tells her. Dont look back. Its only starvation and a hard life here. Youre now a Lis girl. Make him love you.She knows her mother is right. When she gets into the back of the cart and looks back at her familiar village for the last time, she has no tears. She knows her family will no longer be her main source of comfort. Her name and place are changed forever. Her destiny lies ahead.So it was for this bride and groom, my mother and my father, in Qingdao in 1946. My mother looked at her strong husband in the front of the cart and felt lucky and proud that day. Her new husband seemed dependable, like a rock. He seemed gentle, kind and considerate. She felt the urge to know him, understand him, and care for him. She leaned over to my father in the front of the cart and asked him if she could sit beside him. Without a single word, he moved over to the side and let his new bride sit close.PART ONEMY CHILDHOOD1HOMEMy parents, as newlyweds, lived with my fathers six brothers, their wives, his two sisters and their children, a total of over twenty people crammed into a six-room house. My mother was the youngest daughter-in-law, so her status in the Li family was the lowest. Family hierarchy had to be respected: she would work hard to prove her worth.Often my mother would not see my father until late in the evenings, because he worked at two jobs, either away in the fields or carting building materials, all day long. Then the family would sit for dinner under the candlelight (there was no electricity in the village then), with men eating at one table, women and children eating at others. My parents hardly set eyes on each other during that first year of marriage. Sometimes, in the dim candlelight, my mother would even mistake one of her brothers-in-law for her own husband.The women of the house would sew, wash, clean and cook. My mother was meticulous and efficient, and the speed and quality of her work won her mother-in-laws approval. To cook well was a sign of love and care. My mother was often the one sent to deliver the food to the men in the fields too, because of her unbound feet. Then she could see her husband in the daylight, and her sisters-in-law secretly envied her such freedom.My mothers mother had died within the first year of my parents marriage, so my mother would visit her father once a year with gifts and special food she cooked, even though she was never loved by her father in the same way as he loved his sons. A son could work in the fields. A son could bring home a daughter-in-law. A son could carry on the family line. To fail to have a son was considered the greatest betrayal of ones ancestors.The people who lived in the New Village had been forced to move there during the Second World War from another village about twenty miles north. The Japanese had occupied Qingdao and built an airport where my fathers family used to live. The New Village was still small then, with just over three hundred and fifty families, a two-roomed office and an open square. Later, loudspeakers, from which Maos official revolutionary doctrines were broadcast, would hang from poles or sit on peoples rooftops. The houses were attached to each other in long rows with a gap of about four feet between each row.My parents continued to share a house with my fathers familyas the family grew and more children arrived, they simply built more adjoining rooms. Their first son had arrived about a year after their marriage, their second just over two years later, their third two years after that, and then their fourth, Cunsang, in 1955. But Cunsang was lucky to have survived his first week in the Li family. When he was only a few days old, there was an accident. Two of the bigger brothers were playing, stacking up chairs, and the chairs crashed down upon Cunsangs head. He started having seizures. My mother took him immediately to the hospital

where the doctor told her that he most likely had brain damage, but was too young to have any treatment. All my mother could do was take him home.For several days he did not feed, he cried nonstop and the seizures continued. Finally, in desperation, my mother wrapped him in a little handmade blanket, took him out into the snow, and left him on the Northern Hill, close by our village. She thought somebody with magic power might save him. She cried all the way home.My fathers mother, Na-na, came by later to check on her new grandson. Na-na was a kind, tiny little woman. When she found the baby missing, she begged my crying mother to tell her where he was. Eventually she did, and Na-na rushed on her crippled, bound feet to the Northern Hill. She found Cunsang and took him home. He was blue all over, nearly frozen to death, and had a severe fever for several days. But then, miraculously, Cunsang stopped crying. The seizures ended and he seemed to recover. He too grew up with the rest of his brothers in that crowded house, and my mother eventually came to be known as that lucky woman with seven sons.My familys house looked into the back of someone elses house, and that house looked directly into theirs. It had a small front courtyard which was enclosed, in years to come, by six-foot stone walls. People with money had the stones delivered and secured with mortar, but my family was too poor, so my father and some of the older sons went to the mountains to bring those stones back themselves, by horse and cart. You could see through the holes in the wall and spy on the neighbors, and once part of the wall fell apart.My familys property had no backyard. The house itself was built with big stones and bricks, with German-style terra-cotta tiles, made locally. Inside, my parents and their sons had four rooms: two small bedrooms about eight feet square, a slightly larger bedroom about ten feet square and the kitchen-cum-living-room, which was about the same size as the larger bedroom. It had two built-in woks with big wind boxes attached to make fire. Those woks occupied three-quarters of the space in that room. Crockery cupboards were built into the walls, and a small freestanding wooden pantry, made by my father, stood in one corner. There was no refrigeration and no running water, only a huge clay pot for storing drinking water. If both woks were in use at the same time, there would be no space for people to pass through that room without having to move aside whoever was operating the wind box.The woks backed onto the bedroom walls, which were covered with newspaper wallpaper, and which contained the chimneys. Fire and smoke would travel through under the mud-brick beds and escape through the walls on the other side. The mud-bricks were supposed to retain heat, but they were not very effective: as the night wore on the beds became colder.The floor was a reddish earth. During the wet weather, water always seeped through the earth and my father would have to take out the wet floor and wait for a dry day to replace it, every inch with new earth, pounding it down with a huge wooden hammer. The harder the floor, the less chance there was for the water to penetrate.There were no wardrobes in the house. Clothes were stored in papier-mch boxes my mother made, stacked on the two small beds during the day and moved onto the floor at night. There was also a main bed about the size of a small double bed, and eventually my parents and all their sons had to share those three beds. The main bedroom was also the room where my family ate, and the only room with an attic: it was my fathers secret hiding place for important things like money. Others were forbidden to go there.After waking each morning on the freezing beds, everyone would fold the blankets into rolls and tuck them neatly away. What remained was a bamboo mat. A wooden tray about two by four feet, passed down from my fathers ancestors, would be placed on top of the mat and the family would sit around it, cross-legged, knee to knee, to eat each meal. Three of the older sons had to sit on wooden stools by the edge of the bed because there wasnt enough room around the tray for everyone.My family had to go to one of the village wells to fetch water, carrying it back in two buckets that hung from either end of a bamboo pole balanced across the shoulders. The adults and the big boys would carry big buckets, and the little boys had smaller buckets. Water was heated in the big wok, and wooden or clay basins about three feet wide and a foot deep were used for baths. There was one public bath in the commune shared by over ten thousand people, which my family couldnt afford, and no bathroom in the house, only a toilet, which was a hole in the ground in the front courtyard. You had to stand or crouch on two wooden boards, one on each side of the hole. There was no roof, so it was freezing cold in the winter. Half of the toilet was inside the wall, and half outside, to allow the lowest class of laborer in the village to collect the waste, which was used in the fields as fertilizer. Hed use a wooden spoonlike scooper and pour the waste into two wooden barrels that sat on each side of his wheelbarrow. The shit man pushed his wheelbarrow through the narrow streets every day, and if people were coming toward him, theyd move aside and allow him to pass. One day the shit man had a collision with a bicycle. The foul contents of the wheelbarrow ran all over the street. What a smell! Even after the neighbors washed the shitty area over and over with water, the dreadful smell remained and everyone avoided that street for a long time. Neighbors complained to the head of the village and tried to

have the shit man replaced, but no one else wanted to be the next shit man.My family had to utilize every inch of their front yard. There was a small vegetable patch, climbing beans on the stone walls, and a pigsty with a couple of pigs, but there was never enough food to feed the people, let alone the pigs, so the pigs were always very thin. Eventually they were sold to the commune. There was also a chicken yard, but again, the chickens never received enough food to produce many eggs, and the few they did lay were sold in the market for badly needed cash.The commune allocated each family in the village a piece of land. My familys was one twentieth of an acre, halfway up the Northern Hill, about fifteen minutes from home. It was so small that it could only be used to grow essential foods, such as corn and yams. On Sundays, which was the only day my father could spend at home, the entire family, including the children, worked on this land with him. All the land in Li Commune was divided into small, stepped terraces, and everything was done by hand using shovels, picks, hoes, sickles and plows. At one stage the village had the luxury of two old, starved oxen, which were used for plowing, but they were slow and often refused to walk, despite constant whipping. They too eventually died, one after the other.My mothers earnings, as with all the peasants, depended on the weather and luck. They had no say in what to plant: the central government in Beijing decided that. My family planted mainly wheat in the winter, corn, yams and sorghum the rest of the year. The government would get the first and biggest portion, at the government-set price, and the rest was divided among the peasants according to the number of members in each family and how many points the family earned during the year. This apportioned food would be counted against your earnings at the end of that year. Every day, the head of each working group in the village would register who worked and for how many hours. Then, at the end of each month, all the peasants would gather and decide how many points each person was entitled to. The most a man could earn in a single day was ten points, which was about one yuan or roughly seventeen U.S. cents then. Women normally received about half of a mans earnings.One year, there was a severe drought and nobody was paid a single yuan for a whole year. The village had to borrow some money from the Qingdao government to lend every family so they could buy food to survive. It took the people in the village more than two years to repay that loan, and still the peasants had to eat anything that moved, and some things that didnt. Often they couldnt even find any bark to eat.My family was very poor, but there were even poorer people than the Li family in our commune. By the time I was born there was deprivation and disease everywhere. Three years of Maos Great Leap Forward and three years of bad weather had resulted in one of the greatest famines the world had ever seen. Nearly thirty million people died. And my parents, like everyone else, were desperately fighting for survival.I was my parents sixth son. I was born on 26 January 1961. By then my parents had been married for fifteen years, and the Li family had grown to become a large extended family. Our na-na, my fathers mother, lived next door, and his fourth brother (we called him Fourth Uncle) lived next to her. Our third uncles family lived in front of us, but he died of an unknown disease in his early thirties and left four young girls and a boy. My father, whom we called Dia, and our fourth uncle became their de facto fathers.Its a Chinese custom that the mother stays in bed for a month after giving birth. Their babies are delivered at home by a local midwife. To get out of bed and work before the months end was supposed to be bad for the mothers health, and it could do unthinkable harm in her later years. But I was born just twenty days before the Chinese New Year, and this was the busiest time of the year for my mother, my niang. Because of my birth she was far behind in her preparations for the feast. She had no daughter to help her. Our na-na tried to help, but she had bound feet. So my niang didnt have the luxury of staying on her kang for that first month.My life began with near tragedy for my parents. When I was just fifteen days old, my niang left me on our kang and wrapped me in a cotton quilt before going to the kitchen to make her bread rolls for the Chinese New Year. Mothers in China always wrapped their babies arms tightly against their bodies and laid them facing up, so the babys head would grow to the normal shape. That day my niang had so many rolls to steam that the kang where I was lying got boiling hot. I was probably suffocating in the tightly wrapped quilt. I struggled my right arm loose, and the kang badly burned the middle of my arm.When my niang first heard my screams, she thought I was crying for milk. She had none left in her breasts, so at first she did not respond. By the time she came to check on me, the whole elbow area of my right arm was severely burned and blistered.The burn quickly became infected. Two days later, my entire right arm had swollen up and turned bright red. My parents had no appropriate medication. They could not afford to take me to the hospital. The burned area gradually became full of pus, and I developed a dangerously high fever. I screamed constantly day and night.They finally had to borrow some money from our relatives and friends to take me to the hospital. Your son has a severe infection, the doctor informed my parents. He is too young to take any medication. You should have come

earlier. Your only alternative is to apply some herbal medicine. But I cant guarantee this will work.What will happen if it doesnt work? my niang asked, desperately afraid.He may lose his right arm. As soon as you see the infection spread, bring him in and we will have no choice but to cut his arm off, he replied.My parents looked at their tiny son and couldnt believe that he might grow up with only one arm. My niangs guilt was beyond description. My dia kept telling her that there would be a cure somewhere. They took the doctors prescription and purchased the herbs from a local medicine shop. My niang followed the doctors instructions and stewed the herbal ingredients in the wok. They applied the dark liquid to my arm. It didnt help. It made the infection worse, and the redness began to travel away from my arm.My niang started to panic. She took me to see many healers who lived in our area and tried their different secret family recipes, to no avail. Then my fourth aunt said to my niang, An old healer told my mother once that bai fang helps infections. Why dont you try it? Bai fang was a meat tenderizer that looked like white rock salt. It was full of acid. At first my niang didnt take the suggestion seriously, but with all other options exhausted she decided to give it a try.When she first applied the bai fang I screamed like a stuck pig. She couldnt bear to see her son suffering such pain and she seriously doubted whether a meat tenderizer would ever work, so after a few tries she stopped the treatment.But my fourth aunt believed strongly it would work. Ni tai sin yuen la! You are too soft-hearted, she said to my niang. She locked her door, crushed the bai fang into a powder and rubbed massive amounts onto my raw, exposed muscles. She was literally rubbing salt into an open wound. I screamed nonstop the whole day. Every hour she would wash my arm with warm water and reapply masses of bai fang.Years later my niang confessed, I was outside your fourth aunts door and my heart bled each time you screamed. The sound of your cries was like a thousand sharp knives cutting into my guilty heart! Several times I banged on your fourth aunts door, trying to take you away. Thank the gods for your fourth aunts determination. She just ignored me.My fourth aunt wasnt really sure whether this bai fang would work either. She nearly gave up many times that day. But she knew this was the last chance they had to save my arm.By the end of that day I had lost my voice completely from screaming. But my aunts determination saved my arm. The infection slowly went away. A large scar remained, and in years to come, in moments of crisis, I would always touch it. It would become my link to my niang and a reminder of her love.Three years later, my niang gave birth to her seventh son, my youngest brother, Cungui, who we called by his nickname Jing Tring. My parents knew they couldnt provide enough food to feed the sons they now had, and as far as I can remember there was never enough food. Meat, seafood and eggs were all on a strict quota system, along with oil, soy sauce, sugar, salt, wheat and corn flour, rice and also coal. Every family was allocated a very small quantity of these items each month, but often they were not available at all.We ate a lot of dried yams. They were the easiest things to grow, so most of our land was used for yams. I was often woken up at five oclock in the morning by my niang to go to the yam fields with my big brothers before they started school for the day. We each carried a shovel and a bamboo basket made by our dia, to dig for any yams that might have been overlooked by the peasants during harvesting. We were cold and hungry but the hope of those yams for breakfast always kept us going. Often the fields had already been turned over by others in equally desperate circumstances, and we returned home with empty baskets.During summer, every familys front yard and roof were covered with slices of these yams drying in the sun. They looked like snowflakes. Some people even laid them out on the street. But if rain came, you had to quickly pick them all up, for if they got wet they soon went moldy. Once they were dried, the sliced yams would be stored in a huge clay pot in my older brothers bedroom or in our dias attic.Dried yams were our basic food for most of the year. We occasionally had flour and corn bread for a treat, but those were my niangs special reserves for relatives or important visitors. We had dried yams, steamed or boiled, almost daily, week after week, month after month and year after year. Dried yams were the most hated food in my family, but there were others in the commune that could not even afford dried yams. We were luckier than most. We were luckier than the thirty million who starved to death. Dried yams saved our lives.One year, I remember that our commune experimented with growing peanuts on a few small pieces of land, but it was a disappointingly meager crop. After the peanut field had been harvested, a group of boys my age, about five or six years old, followed some of the older boys with spades and bamboo baskets, trying to find peanuts in the ground that, like the yams, might have been missed by others. None of us found many peanuts after hours of earth churning, but on the edge of the field one of the boys discovered a rat hole, a lucky find for starving boys! He immediately started digging. We gathered around him as if he were a magnet: rats always stored food for winter, so we were all excited and envious of the boys find. We knew not to kneel by the rat hole because local superstition told us that if we did the rat tunnel would disappear. So the boy dug as fast as he could, with his

ass in the air. Several times he nearly lost the tunnel because the rats tried to block it. Then he found that it branched out in different directions, and soon he discovered three stores: one of peeled peanuts, one of half-peeled and the third of unpeeled peanuts. We never saw the rats; we thought they had a secret escape route.That lucky boy gathered almost half a basketful of peanuts, but secretly I felt sad for the rats, losing their food like that. They too might die of starvation that winter. What a cruel world, I thought, where we had to compete with the rats for food.Mealtimes in my family were always sad for my niang. There was often nothing for her to cook. We would look at what little food there was on the wooden tray and, out of respect for our elders, always wait for our dia to start. One day, when my niang served dinner, it was clear there was not enough food for everyone.I dont feel hungry, our dia said casually. I had a rather big lunch today. You all go ahead.Each of us had our chopsticks in hand, ready to swarm on the food. But we hesitated. Our niang was next in line. She quickly gave our dia an annoyed look and made zhi, zhi, zhi sounds with her tongue. Dont you dare not eat! Your health is our entire familys security. We will all only be drinking water if you starve yourself to death!I really mean it. Im not hungry, our dia protested innocently.Dont annoy me, you liar! our niang admonished, and she picked some food up with her chopsticks and put it in our dias bowl. We started to eat only once he took the first bite. Our parents always ate their food slowly to allow us more food. On many occasions our niang told us to leave the best food for our dia because he was our main breadwinner. But our dia always made excuses and told us we should give the best food to our niang: if not for her we would all have only northwest wind for dinner.We rarely ate meat. Once a month we would wait in long lines at the market for the fattest piece of pork available. Our niang would extract lard from it to use for cooking later, but everyone else wanted the fat pork too, so we didnt get it very often.One afternoon, my niang heard that the meat shop in our commune was selling pork, but only for a few hours. She borrowed one yuan from my fourth aunt and told me to run to the meat shop as fast as I could in case they ran out, which they often did. It was a good half hour away. There were three long lines of people waiting by the time I arrived. An hour later I handed the cashier my money and our ration card, and I was given a small piece of fatty pork. I was so excited! I knew my niang would be happy with such a fatty piece.She was ecstatic. She immediately cut the pork into small pieces and started to cook them to extract the lard. I was her wind-box pusher. The delicious fragrance and the sound of sizzling pork made my tummy rumble. She was in high spirits. What a good piece of pork! This amount of lard will last us a while, she said, and handed me a bowl with a small piece of pork crackling in it. Dont burn your tongue, she warned. The crackling melted in my mouthnothing in the world could taste as good.My niang also cut up a cabbage to cook. This will be a nice surprise for your dia!That night, when the cabbage dish was served, we could actually see the traces of precious oil floating in the sauce! My second brother found a small piece of pork in the cabbage too, and put it into our dias bowl. Our dia immediately passed it to our niang. Our niang passed it back to him. Dont be silly! she said, I especially cooked this for you. You need it for your strength at work.My youngest brother was sitting next to our dia. Our dia turned to him and said, Jing Tring, let me see your teeth. Before our niang could say anything, he put that piece of pork into my brothers mouth. There was silence, and a long, sad sigh from our niang.It was always like this. Often a small piece of meat in a vegetable dish would be passed from person to person because it was so scarce. Seven pairs of hungry eyes would look at our parents, begging for more. But no begging words were ever spoken because we all knew how difficult it was to get any food at all. There was simply nothing more to cook. My parents didnt know where the food for our next meal would be coming from.To survive, my niang worked every spare hour she had in the fields, as well as cooking and looking after her boys. She cooked three meals a day, every day. We never dreamed of going to a restaurant. There was only one restaurant in our area anyway, and it mainly served the government officials. Often my niang had to bury her pride and borrow food from relatives or neighbors. She was an extremely resourceful cook and could make delicious dishes from anything, except dried yams. I hoped never to see another piece of dried yam as long as I lived. They looked whitish before cooking and turned pale gray afterwards. They had no taste and stuck in our throats, so we normally had a bowl of hot water to help get them down, or if we were lucky we would get a bowl of watery rice, wheat or corn congee. Congee is like thin porridge, with very few grains in it.I loved watching my niang cook while I pushed the wind box. This was a special time for me. I could talk to her alone then, and have a little bit of undivided attention. I was her favorite wind-box pusher, the fastest among my brothers to make the fire. I was also the most patient. My joy and sadness fluctuated along with my niangs. She would be in such a happy mood when she had oil, seafood or especially if she had a piece of pork. I would ask her many questions about the cooking, and I learned when to add certain spices and how to be a good cook.Food wasnt

our only problem of course. Even the water we used had to be boiled. We were not allowed to drink unboiled water. We were told that unboiled water from the village wells could give us worms. My brothers and I all had worms many times throughout our childhood. We would get knotted stomachs and bad pains, and our parents would wake us up and give us some sweet medicine to chew. We called them the vomitable worm killers. They came in the form of candies shaped like miniature pyramids. The first taste was bearable, with some sweetness, but after five of them I wanted to vomit. And I was only halfway there: I had to eat ten of them! My poor older brothers suffered even more, because the older you were the more worm killers you had to chew. We took them at night while our stomachs were empty and the worms had nothing to eat except the vomitable worm killers. After that, for the next few days, we had to be on a strict diet of warm food, warm water, no sweet, salty or oily food, and no seafood. That meant only one thingdried yams, meal after meal. Sometimes the worms didnt come out for days and we had to repeat the whole process. Most of the time the worms came out still alive, usually many of them and all about a foot long. The older brothers hated their younger brothers for this horrible ordeal because we, most likely, caused the annual drama by not washing our hands regularly. They had no choice but to go through this process each year.But despite our poverty, our parents always taught us to have dignity, honesty and pride. Never to steal or do things that would harm others. Our good family name was most sacred and should be protected with all our might.I tested this one day when I was playing at a friends house. I was about five. Sien Yu was the same age, and his uncle, who lived in the city, had brought him a small toy car when hed visited the day before. It was the first time I had ever seen a toy car. I had never seen anything more beautiful in my life! Sien Yu let me play with it for a while. I loved it so much. When he went inside to get a drink, I took it and ran home.Where did you get that? my niang asked suspiciously.I . . . I found it on the street.She knew I was not telling the truth. No one in our area could afford to spend money on a toy. Who did you just play with?Sien Yu, I replied.She took my hands firmly and pulled me back to Sien Yus house. She said to his mother, Sien Yus niang, is this your sons toy car?Sien Yus mother nodded.Im sorry, I think my son has stolen your sons toy car, my niang said.Dont get upset, Sien Yus mother replied. Your son is too young to understand.Im ashamed, Im ashamed of what my son did! said my niang, and apologized profusely. She tried to make me do the same, but I felt too embarrassed and refused, and wished I had never seen that toy car. I wished for a hole in which to hide. I wished for thick skin to cover my face. I felt the blood rushing to my neck. I tried to escape from my niangs firm grip. I wanted to run away and never come near Sien Yus house again. I hated my niang for embarrassing me like this. She shouted. She wanted the entire world to know I had stolen my friends toy car. I screamed and kicked as she dragged me home. I want a car! I want a car! I yelled.As soon as we went inside our house, with despair in her eyes, she pulled me to her chest, hugged me tightly in her arms and sobbed. It was as though she had suffered as much humiliation as I had. Im so sorry to do this to you, she whispered tenderly. Im so sorry we are too poor to buy you a toy car. After a brief moment she continued. Im too stupid to have all of you in this cruel world! You dont deserve this suffering! I felt her tears streaming onto my hair. We are too poor! The gods in heaven wont answer our prayers, and even the devil below has abandoned us. We are born with a hopeless fate, she sighed.Stop saying that! Dont say anything! I begged her. I hated to see her so sad.She continued as though she hadnt heard me. How I wish I had the money to buy you a toy car! But we dont even have enough money for food.Ill have enough food for you one day! I swear! I said to myself.She hugged me tighter as she sobbed. I didnt know how long she hugged me, but I didnt want her to stop.That evening, at dinner, after she had told everyone what I had done, my dia started lecturing us. Although we have no money, no food, and cant 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 forefathers struggles, the Li family always had our pride and dignity. We have 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.2MY NIANG AND DIAMemories of my niang and my dia are always related to how hard they both worked. Our dia was often up before five-thirty in the morning, which meant my niang had to be up even earlier to cook him breakfast. With all the cooking, washing and sewing she had to do, she hardly had time or energy to pay each of us much attention. We all fought over her love and affection, and she was constantly exhausted. She cooked every meal, made all our clothes for every season and made all our quilts and blankets too. She carried the laundry either to the stream about twenty minutes south of our house or to a dam about half an hour away up on the Northern Hill. The stream often had little water in summer, and our big clay water pot would be covered with ice in the winter. Yet she had no alternative for washing the dishes and clothes.We always had to be extra careful that we didnt run out of coal for cooking and heating in the middle of winter.

There was a great shortage of black coal throughout China, so we never had enough, not even half-burned coal, to heat the water for my niangs huge amounts of washing. Each family was apportioned a small quota of black coal on strict rations, but we only used it to ignite the half-burned coal, which looked like little pieces of gray sponge. This coal had already been burned once by factories or power stations, and if we saw some on the side of the road or in the garbage we would pick it up and take it home. Half-burned coal was very hard to light. It needed black coal to keep it burning. Using the wind box, my niang first lit some dried grass, which was gathered and stacked during summer. Sometimes it could take up to fifteen minutes to light the fire. On windy days, the smoke from my niangs cooking would fill the house, and we would all wake up in the morning coughing.The small amount of black coal that was allocated to us we would try to keep for winter heating. The temperature in Qingdao could go as low as minus fifteen degrees Celsius, and often the inside of our house felt colder than the outside. Wed mix the black coal with some dirt to make it last longer. Even heating up some water for the washing was a luxury for my niang. But our patched clothes were always clean. She took immense pride in making her seven sons look well cared for.Every aspect of life was hard for my parents. We even had to sleep in the same bed. Jing Tring and I slept with them until I was eleven. All four of us, head-to-toe. I hated my brothers smelly feet right by my face, and he must have hated me more since I was taller than he was. Sometimes hed end up on my side of the kang with the quilt all to himself, and Id have to grab the quilt back. But I loved sleeping with my parents. It felt so safe. I often wondered why my niang always looked for her hairpins on my dias side in the mornings and imagined what they were up to while we were asleep. So often I tried to pretend that I was asleep in order to find out their secrets, but I never managed to stay awake.I rarely saw a smile from my niang, but when I did, my heart would blossom like a lotus flower. I would have given anything to make her smile. Occasionally, in my nave way, I tried to cheer her up with stories. When I was only little, my second brother had done some jobs for someone in the village and hed paid my brother with a young goat. We put all our prayers into that goat, hoping that when she grew up she might produce some milk for us which we could sell for cash. I loved that goat. I took her anywhere I could to feed her grass and I brought grass home for her every day.As I passed our main bedroom window one day, I overheard one of my niangs friends telling her, I heard there is a rare and special goat that will sneeze out a worm sometimes. This worm can cure some rare diseases. The government in Beijing would pay a lot of money for it!Not long after, as I was going to take the goat to eat some grass before sunset, my niang said, Just look at this skinny goat! Do you think anyone in their right mind would give away a milk-producing goat? I knew she was in despair over our shortage of food that day, and she was short-tempered. I tried to think of something that would cheer her up and suddenly remembered her friends tale about the goat.I put on my best innocent face. Niang, I saw our little goat sneeze out a worm the other day.She looked alarmed, and asked me excitedly, What does the worm look like?A whitish caterpillar about the size of my finger. I stuck out my second finger.What happened to the worm? she asked eagerly.The goat ate it very quickly, I replied casually.Next time when she sneezes out the worm you must pull the goat away from it and try to capture it. This kind of worm is worth a lot of money! She became happier then, and seemed to dream. Maybe this is our savior goat, she murmured to herself, and she would forget about her despair for a while.But one day I told the same story once too often and she realized I had been making it up all along. Get lost! Dont think you can fool me again!What a shame, I thought. Now I would have to think of a cleverer tale to cheer her up.And the goat? She eventually died, from starvation, the following winter.My niang was also recognized as one of the best seamstresses in the village. Sewing was one of the most important pastimes for the ladies. My parents simply had no money to buy ready-made clothes, and my niang didnt have a sewing machine. So the older ladies would teach the younger ones, and they often gathered together as a sewing group in our small, crowded house, even though they knew we were very poor, to share their secrets, drink tea and gossip. The women of the village loved to come and share their happiness or their problems with my niang, and her sewing skill was admired by many. Her stitches looked as if they were made by a sewing machinesmall and perfect. Once she was asked by a friend to redo some machine-sewn zippers because he preferred my niangs delicate stitchwork.My niangs warm personality was well liked and respected by people of all ages in the surrounding villages. Like my dia, she always tried hard to help others. Besides that lucky woman with seven sons, she was also known as the live treasure. Men occasionally stopped by our gate to have a chat with her: most women would have been intimidated and embarrassed, talking to men other than their own husbands, but not our niang. For this, Na-na often fondly called her that wild girl.But my niang was also an open-minded person, receptive to new ideas. Maos Cultural Revolution boasted that one of the great achievements of the Red Guards had been the

establishment of evening schools. These were especially aimed at teaching the uneducated peasants Maos communist ideas. We were all given copies of Maos Red Book. I was six years old then, and I remember two enthusiastic young Red Guards coming to teach my niang to read. She never learned to recognize individual words, but she could memorize entire paragraphs of Chairman Maos sayings. She would practice while she was washing, cleaning, sewing and cooking: I often saw her lips moving as she silently recited passages from her book. She was considered a model student.One day, while my niang was trying to make a fire to cook dinner, two young Red Guard girls came into our house to check on her reading progress. She was having a terrible day and couldnt get the half-burned coal to light. Smoke filled the whole room. My niang was a sensible, fair woman: she was polite and explained that she didnt have time to talk just then and asked them to come back another time. So the girls left and she pulled all the unlit half-burned coals out and tried again. She asked me to push the wind box for her. But just as she was going to start cooking, the two girls came back. They kept insisting on testing my niang on her understanding of Maos Red Book. They had to report back to their group leader that evening they said.I could see my niangs anger growing. Eventually, she told me to get up off the floor and asked one of the girls to push the wind box. She handed the second girl her wok flipper and asked her to take over the cooking. The two girls just stood there and looked at each other, very confused. By now my niang was frustrated and at the end of her patience. She roared at them. I could learn Chairman Maos sayings every day, all day long, until I die, but who is going to do my cleaning, washing and cooking? Who will bathe my sons, sew their clothes, provide my entire family with three meals a day, every day of the year? Who will cook things out of thin air? Do you think Chairman Maos words will fill our stomachs? If you can come back every day to help me do all of these things, I will learn whatever you want me to learnand more!The two girls left, red faced. That night my niang told my dia what shed said to the two girls. He just smiled. That was the end of my niangs educational adventure, and the two girls never returned to our house again.By the time I was eight, the hard work and poverty had begun to wear down even my niang, strong as she was. She woke up one morning complaining of dizziness and a headache, and she didnt eat any breakfast. My youngest brother, Jing Tring, and I were home with her. She had planned to do a lot of washing that day but found the water in our storage pot frozen hard. So she packed up a heavy clay washing basin full of clothes and, carrying a wooden washing board under the other arm, she headed to the man-made dam on the steep Northern Hill.I knew she didnt feel well. I begged her not to go. Ill fetch you some water so you can do your washing at home.It will be slippery at the well with all the ice around it! Do you want to die in the well? she replied impatiently. I have to finish these clothes, or your brothers will have to wear filthy clothes to school tomorrow. She walked out the door. If I dont get back before your dia gets home, tell him to come and help me carry the clothes back.A couple of my friends came over to our house to play that morning. Then, around noon, a neighbor rushed to our house, shouting, Hurry! Your niang has fainted halfway between the dam and your house!My dia was not yet home from work and often he had to finish his quota of lifting heavy materials for the morning before he was allowed to take his lunch hour. Most of the time he wouldnt come home for lunch, but that morning hed said he would try to get back because he knew our niang wasnt well.I asked my friends to look after Jing Tring, then rushed to my fourth uncles house to see if he was home. The door was locked. In a panic I rushed to another neighbors house, but realized immediately that she would not be able to help: she had tiny bound feet. It would take her all day to walk up the Northern Hill on the rough dirt road.I ran to a couple more houses and found no one to help. Then I ran as fast as I could toward the dam. Tears streamed down my face. I was afraid that I would be too small to be of any help.I found my niang lying on the side of the road, her clay washing basin broken in pieces, the pile of washed clothes scattered around in the dirt. She looked so pale. I threw my body on top of hers and shook her violently. Niang! Niang, wake up! I shouted, panicking, fearing she was dead. When my face touched hers, I felt it burning and she lay in my arms, motionless.A few minutes later she slowly opened her eyes and asked me, in a weak whisper, Where is your dia?He is not home yet! I replied, frightened, but relieved she was still alive.From Publishers WeeklyThis is the heartening rags-to-riches story of Li, who achieved prominence on the international ballet stage. Born in 1961, just before the Cultural Revolution, Li was raised in extreme rural poverty and witnessed Communist brutality, yet he imbibed a reverence for Mao and his programs. In a twist of fate worthy of a fairy tale (or a ballet), Li, at age 11, was selected by delegates from Madame Mao's arts programs to join the Beijing Dance Academy. In 1979, through the largesse of choreographer and artistic director Ben Stevenson, he was selected to spend a summer with the Houston Balletthe first official exchange of artists between China and America since 1949. Li's visit, with its taste of freedom, made an enormous impression on his perceptions of both ballet and of

politics, and once back in China, Li lobbied persistently and shrewdly to be allowed to return to America. Miraculously, he prevailed in getting permission for a one-year return. In an April 1981 spectacle that received national media attention, Li defected in a showdown at the Chinese consulate in Houston. He married fellow dancer Mary McKendry and gained international renown as a principal dancer with the Houston Ballet and later with the Australian Ballet; eventually, he retired from dance to work in finance. Despite Li's tendency toward the cloying and sentimental, his story will appeal to an audience beyond Sinophiles and ballet aficionadosit provides a fascinating glimpse of the history of Chinese-U.S. relations and the dissolution of the Communist ideal in the life of one fortunate individual. 8 pages of bw photos not seen by PW.