



# *The Peasant Prince*

Written by Li Cunxin and illustrated by Anne Spudvilas

## SYNOPSIS

The story of Li Cunxin's remarkable life has already reached thousands of readers throughout the world, a story that was first published in 2003 as *Mao's Last Dancer*. But it has always been a story about childhood, and now, with the publication of this picture book version, Li's story will be enjoyed by very young children as well.

Our picture book story begins with Li and his beloved father flying a kite together on the bleak, wind-swept fields around Li's childhood village. It is here that Li's father tells him an old Chinese fable - a story about a frog who was determined to escape from a deep, dark well. This story of the little frog's determination touched Li so much that it became a constant reminder to him of his own life and of how, if he was just as determined, he might be able to escape from his life of poverty.

The text and illustrations together show us this life of poverty and starvation as Li and his family constantly battled against it. We see his many brothers longing for more food, sleeping head to toe on the dirt floor of their tiny village home, of how they had to walk through the snow to a makeshift school to learn how to be good citizens for Chairman Mao. It was a life of great hardship, but also one where hope was never far away.

The opportunity came for Li when one day, quite unexpectedly, a group of Madam Mao's representatives came to Li's school. They would choose some students who would be taken away to study ballet for the glory of Chairman Mao. Just as they were leaving, Li's teacher tapped one of the gentlemen on the shoulder and pointed to Li. 'What about that one?' she said. And so Li was tested, and finally chosen, to become a ballet dancer. It would mean leaving his family, his brothers and his beloved mother, the only home he had ever known. Li would go to Beijing and study ballet – for many years to come.

We see Li's sadness as he leaves and journeys across China to start a new life in a strange and daunting place. His homesickness and longing for this family consume him, but we also see how he overcomes this – he makes a great friend and becomes inspired by his teachers. He remembers the little frog in the story his father told him, and Li becomes determined to study hard and become the greatest ballet dancer he can.

His time as a ballet student is beautifully conveyed, and as Li grows into a young man, we see him take an extraordinary opportunity to study in America. And from there he dances around the world, becomes a famous star and the success he dreamed of really does come true. And at last, by the end of the story, we see Li reunited with his mother and father as they come to see him dance in America. But he never forgets the little boy who grew up in a poor village many years ago in far-away China. We see how he managed, through sheer hard work and determination and with the love of his family, to escape from his own deep well.

## WRITING STYLE

*The Peasant Prince* is written in the same simple style as Li's original story in *Mao's Last Dancer*. But the focus of the story here is firmly on childhood and growing up, on hope and determination. His voice, as he relates his life story to young children, is beautifully conveyed, beginning the story in the third person. Li acts as our own personal storyteller, there in the room with us, telling the reader of a boy who lived in China in a tiny brick house, who loved to fly a kite. It is told in much the same way as you would tell any fairytale to a child. But then Li

moves into the first person: 'That small boy was me, and my story begins with that kite.' And throughout the story, Li keeps to this simple tone - ideal for the very young child to listen to, and for parents and teachers to share, as they read the book aloud. It has a warmth and empathy that is a delight to experience.

## THEMES:

- Poverty
- Hopes and Aspirations
- Uncertainty
- Belonging
- Dedication
- Motivation
- Success
- Ambition
- Change
- Loneliness
- China – political and cultural climate under the rule of Chairman Mao

## POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What kinds of wishes might Li have tied to the kite? How might Li's wishes compare with your own wishes?
- What message was conveyed in the story of the frog in the well? Can we predict what the story might be about this early in the book, given that the young boy kept thinking about the sad frog, long after his father had finished the tale?
- How would you describe Li's childhood? Study the setting and clothing of the characters in the story. What inferences can you make about the society in which they live, from these elements? How does their life contrast to yours?
- The pictures on the wall of the Cunxin home and the school room are almost identical. Who might the man be in the photographs? What influence might this man have in Li's life? What role might he play in China? Given that Li is living in poverty, do you believe he is a successful leader?
- Put yourself in Li's situation at the time he left his family home. He was eleven years old, had moved to a new and unfamiliar city, didn't know anybody, lacked confidence in his training at the Beijing Academy and was experiencing overwhelming homesickness. Yet on the other hand, Li was being given the opportunity to change his financial circumstances and realise his dreams. What would Li be feeling at this point in time? How would you feel in the same situation? What does it tell us about Li's character?
- Given his difficult start to schooling at the Beijing Dance Academy, how did Li's situation change after two years? Were his relationships with The Bandit and Teacher Xiao have been the primary impetus for Li's growing confidence? Do you think that these relationships would have been so influential, if Li had not had the struggle in his first years of schooling?
- Why does Li begin practicing at night in the light of a candle. Reflect back on the story of the frog in the well. Do you think this story has any relevance to Li's commitment to his training? What personality trait was Li developing in this period of his life? What stories may Teacher Xiao have told Li to encourage his determination?
- How would Li's experiences in his first two years at the Beijing Dance Academy have prepared him for his visit to America? What emotions would he be experiencing when he visited America?
- Study the colours used by the illustrator in the early part of the story. What message is conveyed through these colours? At what point in this story do these colours change? How is this related to Li's experiences? Study the colours used on the double spread of Li dancing in America. What emotional message is conveyed? Through the judgement of colours alone, what part of the story is Li at his happiest? Why do you think this is the case, in relation to the narrative?
- Reflect back on Li's childhood in Qindao, and the millions of children in China that did not receive the same opportunity, to become a world famous dancer. Do you think that

Li deserved the success he attained? Do you think another child could have achieved the same level of success?

- What message does this story convey about success? Can you generate a list of qualities that Li (and therefore a successful person) needed to have to realise his dreams. In what areas can you develop, to realise your own dreams?

## ACTIVITIES:

- Create a pictorial Venn diagram showing the similarities and differences between Li's life and your own.
- Research the influence of Mao's communism in China. Contrast this to the contemporary China, which is emerging as a world super power. Invite a Chinese born guest to speak to the students about their experiences living in China under Chairman Mao, and the changes to their life (and China as a whole) following Mao's death. Students can write a reflective piece about freedom of ideas or leadership or indoctrination of political ideals.
- Make a timeline of Li's life. Use colours to symbolize the happiest and saddest points in his life. Write an explanation of what is happening to Li at these points.
- Like Li, write your wishes on a piece of paper and tie them to some string to fly in the classroom. Develop an action plan to achieve these wishes and list the personal qualities you will need to realise your dreams.
- Read the stories told by Teacher Xiao as cited in 'Mao's Last Dancer' (p.184- dreams of the 'unattainable', p.211- the bow shooter, p.238- the mango). Discuss the message in these stories with the students. Are there any stories in the Australian culture, which have important messages about the way to live? Develop a list of these and the important meanings they have.