

# Niang – mao's last dancer



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Silence: Life without Li in the commune, reminiscing on times spent with Li ' Don't look back! ' Not one day has gone by, since I have spoken these words to my son at the fruitful age of 12, that I have not felt proud of him. It has been what feels like one hundred years of missing Li and living without him, all redeemed from witnessing him in one performance that would change my perspective forever. I was always hopeful for Li, and felt lucky that my son, out of all other promising students in Qindao, had been chosen to dance for Chairman Mao.

Although the luck of the Cunxin family had changed, it was difficult to adjust to life in the commune without Li's presence as a guiding light, or a helping hand. Having 7 sons while living our conditions was stressful on my poor heart, and Li was aware of this. He always told me how he wished he could help me feel better. He was a good boy, and is to this day. There were days when all I wanted to do was scream and shout at those boys, but Li made me feel comfortable and safe. He always would show me love and affection either through his kind and encouraging words, or through the warmth of his comforting cuddles.

That little boy had no idea that his success was our hope of breaking out of the vicious cycle of poverty. If he had known this, he might have been keener to go to the dance academy. The day Li had been chosen was one of the happiest of my life. While life in the commune was a struggle and, as a family, we were always working our very hardest. Li's absence had lifted the pressure of having to feed a household of 9. Li had been sending home letters frequently, and I could sense the lies through his words. He was not committing himself fully to the art of ballet - I could tell.

I am his mother, after all. The result of his homesickness was not trying his hardest at what he was chosen for. At this same point of time in his life, he had informed me that Chairman Mao was a great influence on him, and was granted youth membership of the communist party. This was one aspect of my son's life that I knew could take him far, if nothing else. Before his years at the Academy had begun, Li was already learning propaganda phrases and songs in school back home in Qingdao. He would come home after the school day had ended only to recite more songs about how much he loved Chairman Mao.

When I was to converse with him about what he has learnt in school, he told me truthfully that he hadn't really understood anything, and not much academic subjects were taught. He didn't seem interested at the time, but I thought it would just be a matter of time before he would learn more about the communist lifestyle, and maybe he could bring pride to the family by an alternative route - and lead the family out of poverty by becoming involved with communism. His disinterest was shown through the letters sent home while at the academy.

Li didn't enjoy learning so many subjects at first, all he wished to do was just dance. As the years progressed, it was soon 1976 and change in the world as we knew it was upon the citizens of China. This was a year of political change in China, as Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four had just occurred. The whole country was in shock, and yet, my thoughts were constantly with Li. What would be the change to his normal routine? Would he still be able to dance, or have to return home? He would never be the same person if this was to happen.

At home in the commune, we were anticipating a call, a letter or even a visit from city officials to inform us that Li was no longer needed at the academy. Finally, we did receive a letter. But it was not from city officials or the Beijing Dance Academy itself - It was from Li. He told us of his mentor whom he had admired greatly was inspiring him to work harder every day. And that he was confident that his dancing would most definitely prove to be worthwhile. As long as I knew this, life in the commune could never be as hard as I thought.