Born in a commune of impoverished families in a small village in Shandong Province, Li Cunxin was destined to work hard in the fields. Initially skipped but picked on the advice of a teacher during a school visit, Li appeared confused by a rough pre-screening in the provincial capital Qingdao. He was selected to travel to Beijing to audition for Madam Mao's Academy of Dance and was admitted to her ballet school after passing a series of physical fitness tests.

Seven years of intensive training followed. He struggles at the academy and doesn't do well when trying to deal with his homesickness. With no freedom in his busy schedule, he had to combine hours of dance lessons with intense academic activity. He also tried to join the Communist Youth Party, enduring tough interviews. Once in, the extra part of his time is spent in meetings. But Cun Xin doesn't care; now he has a career:

Serve glorious communism. The arrival of a new teacher who doesn't like to shout very much changes his gloomy outlook on dance. It puts more emphasis on having fun and learning about strengths and weaknesses. Teacher Xiao keeps an eye on Cunxin, spotting something other teachers hadn't yet seen. The teacher also (dangerously) differs from others at the academy because of his devotion to classical ballet, considered too Western to be taught at the school (as opposed to the politically motivated, strident form favoured by Madame Mao). His determination and courage, paired with Teacher Xiao's advice and motivation allows him to be the top of the class, offered more and more roles. This leads to him being grudgingly permitted by the Academy to travel abroad to Ben Stevenson's Houston Ballet company as a visiting student for six weeks as the government has slightly slackened its censorship of Western culture due to upheavals in position.

In the United States, he begins to question the Chinese Communist Party dictates upon which he has been raised. America is not filled with filthy-looking capitalists, and the sheer wealth and size of the buildings and the people clearly indicate that China is the poverty stricken country, not America. However, he knows this sentiment is too dangerous to be spoken, and upon return to China, even though he loved every bit of America, he tones it down and recites some Communist propaganda for the report to be filed so he can return in two months time. However, despite the lies, the government refuses to let him return to the U.S. Three months later, he manages to get his visa and goes—this time for a full year dancing in the Houston Ballet. He starts a secret romance with aspiring American dancer, Elizabeth Mackey, keeping it a secret so his government doesn't find out and send him back. He is quickly promoted to soloist position and allowed five more months. In the last month, Cunxin is reluctant to leave, so he and Elizabeth rush their marriage so that Cunxin can remain in the United States indefinitely, thus avoiding a defection which may have consequences for his family. Visiting the Chinese Consulate to announce his decision while trying to prevent the sure backlash on Stevenson, the resident Chinese diplomat forcibly detains Li in attempt to coerce his return to China; when he continues to refuse to go willingly, the Party agrees to release and allow him to stay, but revokes his citizenship and declares he can never return to the land of his birth. Full of concern for his family, Cunxin continues to dance, but his relationship with Elizabeth ends in divorce, and he cites his youth and cultural differences as the reason.

Cunxin is quickly promoted to principal dancer status, making numerous premieres and winning awards, but severely injured his back, putting him out of commission for over two months. Despite the setback, he continues dancing, and soon after, the Chinese government allowed his parents to come to America to visit him after six years of being cut off from his family. They came to see him in "The Nutcracker," and cried when they were reunited, to a standing ovation from the audience. Lee met and married Australian ballet dancer Mary McKendrey, and they finally returned to her native land. Cunxin met the former Master Xiao and performed for him and his parents, but felt inexplicably guilty about the huge difference between his lifestyle and others in the village, but he was relieved to think that he had accomplished everything. His mother always wanted him. They returned to America and continued dancing.

Kanshin and Mary were devastated when their first child, Sophie, was born severely deaf. Maria gives up her career to care for her, and Sophie leads a simple life as a result, also taking dance lessons to follow in her parents' footsteps. They have two other children who are perfectly healthy, but have decided to move to Maria's home country of Australia. His farewell performance of Romeo and Juliet will be broadcast live across China to 500 million viewers. In Australia he continues to dance but works as a manager of one of Australia's largest brokerage firms. He continues to visit his mother and his village and never forgets where he is from.