

# The Racing Pulse

By Lucy Pawlak • Illustrated by Israel Ramírez



Linlin stands outside her son Nian's bedroom and says, "Knock-knock!" "One second! Uh, I mean come in." When Linlin enters Nian's room, she finds him sitting at his desk. He turns to smile at her, looking as innocent as a baby. "Hello, Mom! What's up?"

"Hello, Nian. What are you doing?" asks Linlin, frowning.

"Well isn't it obvious?" The boy points sweetly at an open textbook. "I am working hard on my homework." Linlin looks around the room. The window is open, and a breeze blows in. Posters of dancers cover the walls. It looks like a space was cleared for some sort of activity that has suddenly stopped. The bed has been pushed against the wall, and the desk is sitting right next to it. Linlin looks at her son's red and sweaty face, and she notices he is rubbing his ankle. It doesn't seem to her like he was working, so she raises an eyebrow suspiciously.

"Oh, really? So, what exactly are you studying?" she asks.

"I'm learning all about the amazing history of Chinese medicine!" says Nian, a little hesitantly. Linlin can hear that Nian is out of breath; she can see that his ankle is causing him some pain, too; it looks a little swollen. "Why are you staring at me like that?" asks Nian.

"I just heard a lot of noise coming from up here and then a big crash, so I thought I should check if you're OK. Can I just ..." She takes his wrist in her hand and measures his pulse; she frowns. "Are you sure you were working?"

"Yes," answers Nian, quickly pulling his wrist away and smiling nervously.



“Chinese medicine is a huge subject. What part are you studying?” she asks.

“The first doctor ... from ages ago ... His name rhymes with mine. Uh, it’s ... Bian ...” Nian hesitates and glances at the pages of his book for the answer.

“I see,” says his mother. “Do you mean Bian Que, the legendary Chinese physician who lived over 2500 years ago?” Nian nods slightly. “So, can you tell me about his four-step method?” she asks, looking hard at her son.

“No, I haven’t gotten to that part yet,” he replies, still **massaging** his ankle.



“Oh, that’s funny because it’s what Bian Que is most famous for. He used it to diagnose his patients. First, you have to look at their outer appearance. Then, you listen to their breathing. Next, you should ask how they feel. And finally, you take their pulse. For example, when I came in the room just now I looked at your outer appearance: red in the face and sweaty, even though the windows were open. I listened to your breathing and heard that you were also out of breath. And you have obviously hurt your ankle. Plus, I took your pulse, which was very fast. From all that, I diagnosed that you had not been working; instead, you were probably dancing.”

“Just a little bit,” protests Nian.

Linlin continues, “Actually, I already **suspected** that because the noise you made jumping around was coming through the ceiling. I guess you fell and sprained your ankle, which is why I heard a big crash.”



“Mom, I just want to dance! Why should I study all this medicine stuff? I already know I want to be a dancer!”

“Nian, you never know where your life will lead you!”

As Linlin is speaking, Nian stands up to test his ankle. He spreads his arms **gracefully**, leaning forward to put weight on his ankle, and he frowns from the pain.

“Actually, Bian Que’s story is pretty impressive, and maybe it’s more important for you than you think. You may as well sit down and listen while you rest your ankle,” says Linlin. Nian sits down and starts to **sulk**.

Linlin smiles and says, “Great! So, he began life working at an inn for wealthy travelers. A quiet elderly gentleman stayed for several nights, and, long before he learned about medicine, Bian Que took such good care of the guest that the gentleman decided to reward him by passing on his knowledge. He gave Bian Que many books on medicine and told him to study them. He also gave him a mysterious package of powder, which he was told to mix with water and then drink.”

“Bian Que followed the old man’s instructions, and, thirty days later, he was amazed to find that his eyes had changed and that he could see inside bodies. Over the following years, Bian Que walked across China using his X-ray vision to diagnose and treat both rich and poor people. He used herbs and performed **acupuncture**, massage, and surgery.”





“OK, Mom, that’s a nice fairy tale, but X-ray vision is something for superheroes in comic books, not humans!”

“Maybe ‘X-ray vision’ is just a way to explain that he could see problems in the body that others couldn’t **perceive**,” Linlin suggests.

“OK,” says Nian, looking less **defiant**. “Give me an example.”

“Well, when Bian Que was in the state of Cai Ban, he visited the ruler in his castle. The moment he entered the great hall, he could see that the ruler was sick. ‘You are lucky, sir. Your sickness is only skin deep. It’s not too late to treat it,’ he said. But the ruler was distrustful and replied, ‘You just want my money. I feel perfectly fine.’”



“The next time Bian Que visited the ruler, he told him sadly that the disease had entered into his blood. ‘Nonsense!’ the ruler replied. ‘The only thing upsetting me is your stories. Stop bothering me, you annoying doctor!’ When Bian Que returned the next time, he could see that the disease was now in the ruler’s stomach. ‘Sir, if you don’t let me treat you, I am afraid this will end badly for you!’ ‘Oh, stop it!’ said the ruler. ‘I think I can tell whether I am sick or not. It’s my body after all, and I feel fine!’”

“He was right. If someone says they feel fine, the doctor should leave them alone,” says Nian.



“Well,” continues Linlin, “the last time Bian Que visited, he entered the great hall, and when he saw the ruler, he gasped and walked straight out again. The ruler sent his servants after him to ask why he had left, and Bian Que explained to them, ‘When the disease was only skin deep, I could have treated it easily with my herbs and powders. But now it has reached right into his bones, and I can do nothing.’ Bian Que left the court with great sadness, and the ruler died later that day.”

Nian is starting to pay attention: “Interesting, but do you have any stories with happy endings?”

“Yes, this one is almost the opposite. When Bian Que was visiting the state of Guo, he found all the people out in the streets crying. ‘What has happened here?’ asked Bian Que. ‘Our great ruler died in his sleep,’ they replied. There was something strange about the way they described the death of their ruler, so Bian Que asked if he could see the body. They led him to where the body lay, and Bian Que noticed right away that the body was warm. After examination, he was able to see that the ruler was not dead at all, but in a **coma**. He used all his knowledge of acupuncture and herbs to bring the ruler back to health, and, within a month, he was cured.”





“Those are cool stories, but I don’t see how they’re important for my dancing.”

Linlin raises her eyes up to the sky. “Come on. It’s common sense! Bian Que was famous for listening to the bodies of his patients and seeing what was wrong. He treated the whole person, thinking about their energy level, what they ate, and their daily life.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. As a dancer I guess I should see my body like that.”

Linlin smiles, pleased to see that her son is starting to understand. “Exactly! What you put into your body is what you get out of it: cut down on junk food, get enough sleep every night, stretch well before exercising. You have to understand how to take care of your body if it’s going to be so important for your dancing career.”

“OK, so where do I start?” asks Nian, suddenly a little more **enthusiastic**.



“Well,” replies Linlin, “Bian Que was probably the first doctor to sense that the body had a circulatory system. He called it *chi*, meaning the circulation of energy and blood around the body. He could tell a lot about a patient’s health just from listening to their pulse. You can start by learning how to take your pulse. You can find it in your wrist or neck. Let’s try the wrist. Hold out your hand, palm facing up.” Linlin demonstrates with her wrist, and Nian copies her. “Now, we press the index and middle finger on the wrist right below your thumb. You only need to press lightly to feel the pulse. Ah, there it is. Now we count the number of beats we can feel in 60 seconds. Most people have a resting pulse of between 60 and 100 beats per minute.”



They check Nian's pulse, and it comes out as 45. "Whoa, mine is much lower!" says Nian. "I'm not sick, am I?"

"Don't worry," Linlin smiles, "it's lower because you are in such good shape. When you check your pulse, you are feeling the blood being pumped around your body by your heart. One of the ways I could tell that you had been dancing earlier was that your pulse was very fast."

Linlin notices Nian is still rubbing his ankle. "Anyway, how's your ankle?"

"Fine, I just sprained it."

"Well, you know Bian Que probably could have helped you with that, too. He was an expert in acupuncture."

"Oh, really, tell me more!" says Nian.

"Acupuncture has existed for 5,000 years. It involves putting needles as thin as single hairs into certain parts of the body to treat problems with the body's *chi*. People say acupuncture can help heal your pain and give you energy, too. One of its uses is to relieve muscle pain and stiff joints, so, as you can imagine, it comes in pretty handy for dancers!"



"Thanks Mom, that's so interesting!" says Nian. "So, can we get some acupuncture for my ankle now?"

Linlin smiles at her son's enthusiasm. "I'll do some research. In the meantime, you can write all this down, and please try to stay in your chair this time!"

"OK, deal!" says Nian.