

INTRODUCTION

by

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In his stories, Hong Kong writer David Wong casts a cool yet not unsympathetic eye on the human condition. His simply crafted tales reveal the prevalence of illusion and the inevitability of disillusion. He can move swiftly from gentle satire to shocking reality, and his stories are not only about the human condition itself but as experienced in the changing world.

“In A Yangchow Garden” depicts a young Englishman, mesmerised by the beauty and serenity of a garden which seems to him to reveal all the depth and wisdom of traditional Chinese culture, suddenly shocked out of his illusions by the revelation of cruelty and barbarism, far away but still in the same country.

As the title of the collection suggests, David Wong’s characters are mostly Chinese and their stories are set over the last fifty or so years, decades of dramatic and often terrifying change in China. Some, such as “The Tennis Ball”, depict pre-war Treaty Port life in China, when to a small boy from a poor Chinese family, a tennis ball seemed talismanic, symbolic of the leisured life of foreigners who could spend a whole afternoon hitting balls across nets whilst his mother, a servant aged before her time, worked for a pittance. For him, illusion was followed by disillusion but he was young enough to understand and learn.

For some characters, problems arise from the imposition of foreign systems, such as the traffic light system in Hong Kong which makes life even harder for an elderly rickshaw-puller in “Red, Amber, Green”.

A theme that runs through many of the stories, including “Red, Amber, Green”, is that of honesty, “the innate honesty of man” as a Taoist had it. The old rickshaw-puller is baffled both by the traffic lights and the complexities of the English legal system in Hong Kong. A journalist and his son are faced with bureaucratic corruption in “The Legacy of Liu Pui”. A Chinese girl whose health is broken by imprisonment over an innocent

friendship with an English girl (cemented by bars of Cadbury's chocolate) refuses to lie. Characters reacting to their circumstances all reveal their innate honesty.

The author's skill in describing eternal human dilemmas and setting them in a Chinese context can teach us a great deal. Their resonance is international for most of the stories have been published or broadcast in places as far apart as the United States and Belgium, the United Kingdom and Hong Kong.

A fascinating story is "The Prisoner of Portland Place", set in the Chinese embassy in London, where the republican revolutionary Sun Yat-Sen was temporarily imprisoned in 1896. The Portland Place embassy seems even more of a prison to a Chinese diplomat in the late 1960's as the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution brought normal life to an end and killed off aspiration.

Yet even harsh treatment, betrayal and corruption do not necessarily drive out a love of home and family and China itself.

The chocolate-lover has a chance to leave for America but returns to China to seek justice. An illegal immigrant in London, a refugee from the Tienanmen incident, is featured in "The Erhu Player", taking on a grim job washing up in a restaurant, his future quite out of his control, for he is trapped by fear of betraying his friends and relatives to the Chinese authorities and of revealing the truth of his living conditions to his family back in Gansu. Through the story "Getting Married" we learn of the long, humiliating and harsh procedures involved when an outsider seeks to marry a mainland girl at a time before the country opened up to the world.

Learning, often from bitter experience, David Wong's characters seek resolution to eternal problems, sometimes complicated by external factors. Some do so with resignation, some with an admirable optimism.