

YELLOW DRAGON AND THE RED FOX

a feature length coming of age drama
by Anthony Etherington

First generation British Born Chinese teenager Adam (Zhu) Zhang is desperate to leave school and pursue his passion for cheffing but his warehouseman father, burdened with memories of rural poverty, wants him to stay on and study for university. With his GCSE exams just two months away and the bullying at home and school getting worse, Adam despairs. Only the friendship of wannabe Goth Kurt Fogg stops him dropping out altogether.

As the final exam nears, Zhang senior announces that he has arranged a summer job for Adam at a friend's accountancy practice. Adam is appalled, even more so after his doting mother, who frets that he is becoming alienated from his roots and the local Chinese diaspora, voices her support for the proposal. Despite his initial reluctance, however, Adam soon finds that he enjoys the world of profit and loss and cash flow and, as the weeks pass, potential ventures start to take shape in his mind. Mr Shen, his boss, is impressed and when Adam's dire GCSE results lead to him fleeing his parent's flat and moving into Kurt's place he offers to keep him on.

Life in the Fogg household is a revelation, Adam has never known an adult as laid back as Kurt's divorcee mother. She lets him and Kurt spend hours gaming or immersed in Adam's Yellow Dragon comics and 'chop-socky' DVDs. She even turns a blind eye to his night-time assignations with Kurt's fifteen year old sister, Courtney. But the idyll comes to an end when Adam meets Shu Sun, a chef who owns a pub called The Red Fox. On hearing that Sun is looking for a kitchen assistant Adam makes his pitch, gets the job and moves in.

Sun is an inspiration, demanding and impatient when busy but otherwise instructive and considerate. His anecdotes about life in the army catering corps back in China fascinate Adam, revealing a resilience and optimism that he comes to admire. Meanwhile, Sun's outspoken Mancunian wife Lynne runs the bar and keeps the show on the road. They are a great team.

Other characters who brighten Adam's day include waitresses Anna, a student from Hong Kong, bright and ambitious, and Laura, a buxom Brummie with a foul mouth and a ready laugh. And then there is the curious figure of Jing Li, the pub's elderly, simple-minded drudge, tall and stick thin and dressed permanently in mackintosh, baggy pantaloons and slippers. Jing cleans in the morning, collects glasses at night and answers every communication with a single, crow-like response: 'Harr'. He is a total enigma to Adam.

The only blot in this exciting new world is Tung Pan, the barman who occupies the attic room next to Adam's. Initially welcoming, Tung's attitude changes after Sun publicly

praises Adam for decorating his room, jokingly contrasting his initiative with the barman's off-duty idleness. The next day Tung corners Adam in the dry goods store and threatens violence if he shows him up again. Having no idea how to handle the situation, Adam begins to withdraw.

Fortunately, Adam has Sun's encouragement to keep him going. And the boss isn't the only one to cheer him up, either. One evening, Jing Li gives an impromptu whistling performance in the bar. Watching him chirruping and warbling, his sad eyes fixed on the ceiling, the customers mesmerised, Adam realises there is more to the old man than meets the eye. A few days later, when he discovers Tung pinning a terrified Jing up against the kitchen cupboards, Adam confronts the barman. After screaming obscenities Tung barges past Adam and returns to his room. The sound of his rock music blaring out brings a smile to Adam's lips. A little self-respect has been restored.

As Christmas nears and business booms, Jing falls ill and is confined to bed in his small, bare room. Adam sits with him during his breaks, feeding him soup and rattling on merrily about the Christmas stampede. One evening he takes one of his prized comics for Jing to read and leaves it on his bed.

Reluctantly, Adam spends Chinese New Year with his parents and the Shens at the Chinese Centre. But the planned reconciliation with his father, orchestrated by Mrs Zhang, fails after father and son row and Mr Zhang storms off. Later, as Adam opens the traditional red envelope and eyes the cash it contains, he realises his father's good intentions.

Jing is admitted to hospital and Adam and Sun visit him in the medical ward. Adam is shocked by the old man's frail appearance and rattling chest. But as they are about to leave Jing smiles serenely at him and says something in Mandarin. Adam, nonplussed, smiles awkwardly until Sun translates Jing's blessing: 'Life is a privilege, don't give up on it'.

Back at the pub, Adam discovers Tung in Jing's room, rummaging through the old man's drawers. Once again he challenges the barman who responds by waving a wad of letters in his face, claiming they are further evidence of the old man's duplicity. Adam tries to snatch the letters away and the two of them end up wrestling on the floor. Sun dashes in, pulls them apart and orders them to tidy the place up. But Tung refuses, accusing Sun of treating everyone like idiots. Sun slaps him and there is a stand-off before Tung calls them all 'losers' and walks away, telling them he's leaving for good.

Three days later Jing dies. The Red Fox is closed and his body is laid out in an open coffin in the Bar. A faded photograph, propped up on the small altar at the foot of the coffin, shows a young Jing Li smiling at the camera, his arm around a pretty, dark-haired woman cradling a baby: his wife and son, according to Sun. The following week, after Jing's cremation, the mourners gather at the pub and listen, astonished, as Sun recounts how he once ran the kitchens in a border town garrison where Captain Li – known as Yellow Dragon because of his bravery – was commander. When the town was besieged after a trivial border incident escalated, Captain Li had given Sun the job of overseeing

the night-time evacuation of the remaining civilians. But after being intercepted by enemy soldiers the evacuees fled back to town, only to find that six people, including Jing Li's wife and son, were missing. A distraught Captain Li set out, alone, to find them. He never returned. Five years passed before Sun stumbled across his former commander in the local park, dressed in rags and half crazy.

Sun finishes his eulogy with a sad shake of his head. There is silence, the mourners are agog. Then Adam stands and starts clapping and, one by one, the rest of the mourners follow, until everyone is on their feet, applauding loudly.

That evening, an emotionally drained Adam packs his comics and DVDs into a storage box and puts them on top of the wardrobe. When he comes across the book the Foggs gave him for his seventeenth birthday and reads Kurt's inscription he realises that Jing and Sun have taught him much, including the importance of loyalty. He puts down the book and picks up his phone.

April, 29 years later – Adam, grey haired and smart-suited, tidies Jing's grave before paying his respects. Back in the office in his up-market restaurant he studies his graduation photograph – proud arms around proud parents – while discussing an acquisition with his business partner, Kurt. Later, after his daughter has dropped off his four year old granddaughter, Amber, Adam and the child head off to visit his ageing parents in the suburbs.

As Adam and Amber cross the busy station square, she asks him to tell her a story when they are on the train, something with Yellow Dragon and 'Foxy' in. Adam stops, kisses the girl and says how much he would enjoy that. They carry on across the square, hand in hand, and are swallowed up by the crowds.

THE END

Contact details:

ANTHONY ETHERINGTON

anthonyetherington@btinternet.com

Tel: +44 (0)1926 863600

Mob: +44 (0)7748 904132