

# Fiction

Group 3



# The Spiral

*Bishop Hall Jubilee School, Ma, Gabriel – 13*

I sauntered from the ships back to the temporary camp on a beach on Island Fiji. We were on a stopover before crossing the pacific and returning home. Taking my time to enjoy the caliginous sky dotted with sequin-silver, sparkling and shimmering stars, like scattered moon dust in the sky, I sat down, digging my fingertips in the sand. The saltiness in the soft breeze coming from the sea afar brought back some long-forgotten memories...

“Arm your weapons!” A deep, coarse command blasted behind us. There we stood on the deck of the main ship, where commander Zheng He was trying to work out a plan to bring down the fast-approaching brigantine before things got worse. But it was too late. The smell of gunpowder struck our nostrils. Then, in a New York minute, there came a ginormous ball, like the one on a flail, imploding down on the deck heavily. A few of the soldiers managed to roll over and avoid it but one, who was not so fortunate, was hit on the leg and started to wince in pain. “Hold your line!” screamed Zheng He, with all his years of frustration printed on his face. We lit the ropes and three of the canons were sent on battle but would never come back.

The firefight continued. My ears were aching in pain because of the ear-piercing blasts of the canons, and my hands have blisters all over the fingers frantically adjusting the main sail. I started to lose my concentration. “Boom!” The same as the one the pirates first struck. What I saw was just a dodgeball on the deck, I closed my eyes, being too afraid to look at my worst fear. I was thrown backwards, like a ping-pong. The sickening feeling of anti-gravity made my stomach hurt like someone just pulled it out of my body. I couldn’t hold it. I let out a “bleech!” I remember the medical team rushed towards me... and everything went black.

I was woken by the sound of waves tumbling by the hull, as if it was about to break its wooden boards. I tried to sit up to have a better glimpse of my wounds at the mirror, but the flying ship tossed me around the cabin. I tried to help myself with some mantou, but also in vain. Hearing Zheng He’s commands to keep the ship moving, I started to wonder why I had chosen to leave the comfort of home. It would be so much better to farm and feed the pigs. I looked outside the cabin on the deck, and asked myself, “when can I go home?”

I tried to roll over to sleep, but instead, I was secretly hoping that time would fly over the rough conditions. The ship started to cruise ecstatically. Hearing the bow cutting through the water makes a good piece of music to sleep! After all, go on the voyage may not be that bad, perhaps, we might discover new land and people...

“Land ahoy! Land ahoy!” the watch-over crew woke me up at the point of the mast at the first sight of sighting the hazy outline of an island. I rolled out of bed and dashed to the deck. We started to slow down and threw the anchors. The crews and I were so elated and exhilarated to reach the land. However, the natives were not so happy. They welcomed us with their troops, thinking that we are invaders. Holding our hands up, we gestured, trying to explain our innocent intention. Zheng He was the last joining us. With a few crews, there he carried all large chest of gold, silver, and precious items. The natives, in return, shared their unique food, music and sports. It was the best time.

Time passed by, like a non-stop train, chuffing pass you for seconds and it was gone. We boarded our ship, and the human figures slowly disappeared from our sight.

“Splash!” Reality. We had faced the same battles and fun all over again for a few times. And finally, we were on our final stop back home. Although the sea could sometimes be electrifying, there’s no place like home. I was enjoying the peaceful night until the watch-over crew (again) signaled us, “Pirate concussion! Pirate concussion!”

“Oh no! Here we go again.”

# New Tales of the Unknown

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Davidson, Hannah – 13*

*From the year 1405 (also known as the year of the rooster in the Chinese zodiac calendar) there were 8 voyages led by the influential eunuch: Zheng He.*

***But the public only knew about seven.***

*The massacre of 1424, known to only the emperor and the only survivor: Zheng He.*

*The voyage happened in between the sixth and the final voyage.*

*Over 10,000 sailors died and almost all ships were incinerated.*

*After 595 years one thing has not yet been revealed:*

*The murderer.*

1420

I'm picking tomatoes in the field. The rain is pouring down, wetting my hair, drenching my clothes. I walk inside, there is a leak in the roof. My father is still farming and my mother is inside our kitchen. I walk into the small cabin with my bamboo basket and place it on a small stone block.

I pick up the small stone block as the tomatoes roll onto the soil-covered ground and I swing it over my head, hitting my mother. My head is spinning. I pick up the axe on the kitchen table and swing it at the head on the ground. It rolls among the tomatoes.

I run over to the rice fields.

Five minutes.

Ten minutes.

Fifteen minutes.

I arrive and I wade through the water. It is silent. No one is here, they all left because of the rain. Except for a man with baggy brown trousers and no shirt. Filled with adrenaline, I run over to him.

I grab him by the neck and thrust his head into the water. Until he drowns.

That man was my father.

I killed them both.

Their only daughter.

1421– Ming Dynasty China

I've heard rumours that my people are looking for me. I ran away to China, I have been charged with one of the worst crimes. Karma is coming for me, in my next life; at least that's what they say. Two full moons ago I was taken by a group of people, they told me I was a killer and branded two words down my back: 兇手.

Murderer.

If anybody finds me, I'm dead.

So I have to leave China.

1423

I've heard of these voyages. Led by this man called Zheng He, and one is leaving in a year's time. I have a plan. I'm going to board the ship and sail away so that I can get away from this place. I don't know where I'm going but anything is better than where I am now. Maybe to Persia, or the coast of Africa. I just need the transport. And the tools.

1424– Day Before Departure

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**4 years**

**Two dead**

**One killer**

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I killed another man today. His name was Wang Lei. The thrill of killing excites me. He had a wife and three children. So I killed them all. I can't have any witnesses.

My hair is gone, my clothes are tattered and I am packed. It is time, time that I embark on a journey that will save or cost me my life.

**4 years and one day**  
**Seven dead**  
**One murderer**

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There are thirty-one ships and 10,264 people according to the records. I have to disguise myself as a man, I have to blend in. Most of all, I have a plan, I need to execute those plans and I need to get out alive.

*Dying is inevitable.*

*But killing is an art.*

*Murder is seen as a sin, a crime.*

*But the people who really know how to end someone's life,*

*Know that it takes effort, planning and extreme amounts of insanity.*

31 ships, 10,264 people. I am on ship number 24 with 472 other men. They don't know that I am planning to kill them all by the end of the month.

I met a man. His name is Li Qiang, he talks of his homeland in the fields. He farms rice.

Just like my father did before I killed him.

But I don't tell him that.

"I am Liu Wei," I say

"Oh, and what do you do?" He replies

"I am a potter," I respond.

"Do you have a wife?" he keeps talking.

"Yes," he doesn't take the hint.

"Where are you from?" I hope this is the last question.

"Yingtianfu." If he says anything else I will impale him on the metal blade on my belt.

He goes away.

We spent hours cleaning the deck of the ships, making inventory and training. I go and collect gunpowder from the stockroom. It's been one month and I have made my strategy. I need to isolate our ship and then blow it up.

No evidence.

No survivors.

Except for me.

4 full moons after the departure

It is a dry night, perfect conditions.

Everyone is asleep and I've been keeping watch.

I am in my sleeping quarters, getting ready. Above there is a fire crackling in the hearth.

It is a wooden ship and the fire catches easily.

I stab Li Qiang and bring him over to the next ship, for medical aid yet I know he will not make it out alive. Just as our ship succumbs to the flames I convince them on ship number 23 to sail away.

Goodbye ship number 24.

October 5, 1424

We've arrived at the ports of Chittagong. I am on ship number 20, we carry the gold items. Zheng He and 10 others meet with the king of Burma. I come with and witness the exchange: jewellery and gold for an alliance.

This I don't understand, I think that you don't need allies to have greatness. I think that one only achieves true greatness when you are alone. When you have no one left to care for and nobody to love. Then, you can truly be great.

April 2, 1425

We've travelled to Cuttack, Calicut, Bangkok, ship numbers have been dwindling. The Admirals find themselves making excuses for each one: sea monsters, raging storms, local pirates; somehow overcoming the massive amounts of artillery and weaponry that were stationed on the ships.

On each ship, I take a different name:

Wang Wei.

Li Jun.

Zhang Yong.

Li Jie.

The list goes on.

There are only 5 ships left, carrying 153 people.

I have to get rid of the 4, take the first – which holds Zheng He – and sail away.

After killing him.

Currently, I'm on ship number 5, carrying 70 people. I got bored so I decided to have some fun. I maim 11 of them. One with a spear, two with arrows, and the others I simply stab: as I did with Li Qiang.

The rest go down in flames. This time people start questioning me, so I say that this man from the ship went crazy, set himself on fire and killed the rest with him. But I escaped.

January 27, 1426

I finally killed them all. Except for 1. I board the first ship and it is silent.

I think he's sleeping so I climb down to his room with my knife. The ship so quiet I can hear my heart beating. But he is not in his room, nor his kitchen.

Yet I find something completely different, a board with drawings of me, the burnt ships and all lines pointing to me.

So he was going to kill me. Then he ran away, so now there is someone out there who knows who I am and what I'm doing.

Which gives me more reason to run.

August 3, 1426

I don't know where I am going. I just know that I can't go back to China. I see land and I sail towards it.

I bring all the riches on land: the gold, the silver, the necklaces. I start dancing, singing, cheering, laughing.

The locals come, they think I've gone crazy, they think I am the devil's messenger.

So they kill me.

They stab me with my own swords, they choke me with my own gold necklaces.

Until I am a still corpse on the soil of who knows where.

I guess karma caught up to me.

So until the end, I wear my status with pride.

**兇手。**

I am a murderer.

I murdered 10,520 people.

And I am proud of it.

*Zheng He sailed back to China and met with the emperor.*

*He made up a tale that convinced the masses that the 7th voyage didn't happen.*

*It took 5 years but eventually, the final voyage sailed.*

*The murderer's (whose name is unknown) only defining characteristic was that she had a tattoo on her back.*

*She died on the shores of an unknown country and was never found.*

Dear unknown,

Before reading this, be warned. This story might have a disturbing start but know that it has an even worse ending. This story is even too painful for me to look at but I guess here I am. Writing to no one in particular. So don't say you weren't warned. And now to the very beginning.

I don't know where to start. It all just started from the first fire. The fire that set a different course for my life. It was in the town square. I was playing with a group of kids. I killed thirty-seven of them. I didn't mean to. Really. I was just so upset. They had insulted me and it was the last straw. I am sick. I know. I think I've always known. Since I was little, I was different.

Thirty-seven.

Since then I haven't looked back. I tried to make a new life. I ran away, far away. I have changed my name so many times since then that I don't even remember what it is. All I know is that I have a gift. Really, a sick gift. I can burn things. But really burn. With my hands. I don't know how or why but you may already know me as the burning man. A dragon to those of you in the future.

After that I ran for what seemed to be forever, and I finally found something that might help me. The Ming voyages. It was my only chance to say goodbye to China and rid myself of the shame and start anew. A clean slate. That was a mistake. But I'll learn that soon enough. Just as the saying goes: if you can't fight it, embrace it. And I did exactly the opposite from that.

I survived three days onboard until I started a fire in the storage room. I didn't mean to. I was just getting supplies for my janitorial job. We were already docked somewhere to switch ships and I couldn't stop it, so before spreading it more, I left. Crying silently, I made my exit and saw the ship burning behind me. Sixty-seven more. Sick to my stomach I added that to the thirty-seven from before.

One hundred and four. Innocent souls who didn't deserve their fate.

On the next ship, I killed seventy-two.

One hundred seventy-six.

And on the third, I thought it would be different. I had even made a friend. I lasted there a week and a half before having killed seventy-nine. No survivors on any of the ships. Please forgive me.

Two hundred and fifty-five.

After ship number five where I had already got to a total number of three hundred and eighteen. By then I had decided enough was enough.

Through all the voyages, I had already gotten to Paris. By the time I got out, I convinced myself that it wouldn't happen again. No way. Wrong. I was so naïve to think that I could control myself. But I just caused havoc and ended up running away again. Once I got out of Paris, I settled in some isolated farm in the middle of nowhere. The owners had clearly abandoned it so why not?

It worked for a little while. I kept myself under control and didn't let my emotions get the best of me. I actually had hope. But after a while, it had faded and I was going back to my old ways. Looking and looking everywhere, I *had* to find a permanent solution. and after looking for a long time, I found it, and it helped, so who was I to argue?

I spent a couple of months on the farm but of course, our story hasn't really even begun. This is where things changed for the worse.

The start of my end begins when a some farmers and city people, living a few kilometers away, somehow found out about my presence and decided to pay me a little visit. I'll spare you the details (they're too horrid to share anyway) but it involved a lot of pitchforks and fire, from both sides. I got out of there but unfortunately, I had gone crazy again and five men had lost their lives that day. Three hundred and twenty-three. Forgive me.

By the end of the battle, I had ended up at the nearest train station and used the last of my money to pay for a carriage. My last chance. Destination? Valladolid, Spain.

Once I arrived, it was night so I found a bench to sleep on near a church. Everything was fine so far, which was a good sign. The next morning I wandered around a little bit and got to know the town. It was the best place to start over. I could feel it. Walking past a flower shop, I saw that it didn't have many workers so I went to see if maybe I could get a job there and get my life back on track. The owner was pretty hesitant at first but after some convincing, she said she needed someone to help her with deliveries so I took it.

Everything was going really fine. I mean I had a job and got to see more of Valladolid by doing deliveries all over town. It was nice. But then came Wednesday, exactly four days after my arrival. I was almost done for the day when there was a last minute order from some high-class person who needed the flowers to be delivered urgently. So, I set out to find this person's place. He lived right next to the church I slept next to so it was kind of easy to find.

When I knocked on the door, I thought I was coming home that night. Whatever I called home. But clearly, someone upstairs had other plans.

When the door opened, I saw a tall guy with a very familiar face.

"Hola. Si no se está quemando hombre." He paused. I had no idea what he was even saying so I just let him continue. "Te he estado siguiendo. Quemando todos esos lugares y matando a todas esas personas, ¿cómo lo haces?"

"I'm sorry could you please repeat that, I don't know how to speak Spanish."

After that, it was just a blur, but for the sake of this, I'll try to explain it. The guy must have punched me in the face since I then found myself fighting him. And you the reader, the unknown must know by now that anger is what triggers and fuels my sick powers. So while more and more men joined in beating me up, we moved closer and closer to the church, and I was closer and closer to anger. Once I reached my limit, I must have set something on fire because I found my lungs filling up with smoke. I felt close to losing consciousness when the guys had suddenly stopped beating me up and started coughing as their lungs too were filling up with smoke.

Next thing I know, the church started to blaze, red and fiery flames consuming it, soon erasing it from there forever. The last thing I saw before what I thought was me dying was a single red rose turn to black as my vision started to darken.

My heart stopped — And then started again.

I woke up in a daze. I didn't know where I was but I certainly wasn't myself. I had suddenly changed, or maybe I just felt it. I was on the bank of a river. I looked back and saw smoke and ashes. It smelt off, like something burnt, and I had the worst headache.

I remember then just looking into the pond and feeling shocked. I didn't understand what or who I was seeing. The image reflected from the river was of a scaly boy with wings. A boy with some sort of horns and weird nostrils. I looked like a deformed snake. Some sort of demon.

Even though I was shocked and worried, it all made sense. Everything. I just understood it. These powers were no coincidence. I was somehow turning into some sort of dragon-snake-demon-monster.

I remembered all my mixed feeling but that didn't matter until I saw a torn up wanted notice with a sketch and the words: FIRE DEMON; WANTED FOR KILLING SEVEN-HUNDRED AND MUST BE

PUNISHED FOR CRIMES AGAINST PEOPLE! Those people must have followed me and tried to get me killed. I wouldn't blame them.

One thousand and twenty-three. One thousand and twenty-three people I had killed, and I was determined to not increase that number anymore.

So I flew away, as far as possible from there as I could and found refuge in the mountains. I couldn't kill myself and but I couldn't bear the pain of what I had done. So I isolated myself from humanity and their ways. After this, it will be that way forever at one thousand and twenty-three.



# Forgotten Boy

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Golovsky, Milly – 13*

Beasts of the oceans. The boats float here in the bay just below me, impatiently. Almost as if yearning for the feeling of the open currents. I share the urge. My life is good, but then that's it. It is just good. My toes savour warmth from the hearty cabin fire. My nana in the kitchen, the smell of the ornate spices and roasting onions making my mouth water. "Bo-Hai come to the kitchen right now", she exclaims sharply, "be a good boy and help you grandma with the vegetables." I was raised by her and my father, in a small cabin by a shipyard. My nana loves me with all her heart. My father did, until one day he stopped.

Ten years later...

"That will be three bronze coins," the cashier asked.

I crane my neck and glance over my shoulder to see my father's great ship standing in all its glory. From a lowly sailor to a celebrated captain. As he rose through the ranks, his affection for me withered. To him, I am now nothing more than a mere scullery assistant.

Today is the day we have been waiting for. It is January 19, 1431, and very soon we will be setting sail on a voyage of a lifetime. The 7th of the Ming Journeys. An army of ships awaits at the dock, their towering sails billowing in the wind. The anticipation has been growing inside all of us: captains, chefs and the thousands of crewmen.

"All aboard," the Quartermaster booms. I rapidly turn my neck to see my father's ship, pulling away from the dock, with the other ones close behind. The market street overflowing with merchants with their vastly different stores. I drop the final supplies I was to get, and the bag of money I am holding, leaving the bronze and brass coins toppling to the ground. I thought I had more time. I sprint towards the docks, full of fear, this ship is my only home.

The soles of my shoes dig into the ground, running closer a spray of ocean water hits me. Cold and salty. My father's boat, the one with treasure, has already ventured away, with the final boats trailing behind. I fight through the crowds but no one cares. A scream leaves my mouth but no one can hear me. Finally, I get through but it doesn't matter anymore. The dock is empty now, a sense of emptiness overcomes me. I slowly hobble towards a nearby bench. My nana has passed and there is nowhere else for me to go.

I lie down on the bench in a fetal position for hours until the light begins to fade and the hunger in my stomach grows. My brain racking for the image of the map that I had barely seen, I need to catch up to the fleet. I shift my position and then realise just nearby is the night market. Slowly I plant my feet onto the ground and push off from the bench, my head spinning a little.

The hustling and bustling of the busy night market warm me. All the smells create an eccentric aroma, filling my nostrils, however, the crowds are overwhelming. To get away I walk down a dimly lit side alley. To one side, I see a rather strange building, seeming very out of place. I can hear the murmuring of voices coming from inside. Curious but cautious I peek in to see, a narrow hallway with the highest of ceilings. Shiny black bricks coat the wall as the faint light reflects off them. At the end of the hallway lies a round table seating eight richly dressed merchants. One of them stands and begins to pace around the table. We lock eyes for one-hundredth of a second but it's enough for them to notice me.

"Hey boy," he grunts, "what are you and your nosiness doing here?"

"Get out!" The other men quietly but angrily agree with him,

Full of shock I stutter, "Oh I'm s-sorry" I hastily walk away but don't turn my back on them. I hear them arguing clearly in a dispute, their voices echoing eerily. The same man then speaks again, "Boy come back here for a second." I freeze and then slowly turn around to see them grinning unnaturally at me. I swallow and then stiffly make my way towards them. "So boy, what leaves you wandering around here? This is no place for a fresh piece of meat like you." I cautiously explain how I ended up sitting before them, an uneasy feeling settling in my gut.

After I finish speaking their leader breaks the uncomfortable silence.

“We have a little business we want you to get done for us.” He snaps his fingers and two more men dressed alike enter. They throw a bag down about the size of an infant onto the table, they want me to deliver it to Cuttack, India. I realise this is on the way to where my father’s fleet will dock in Calicut. Delivering this parcel for them could be the only way I can get food and board to make my journey, even though I don't know its contents and expect it could something illicit.

Nanjing, January 20, 1431

At the rise of the dawn I quietly leave with the bag attached to the horse they have provided me for my journey, and a few meagre supplies to get me started. Leaving Nanjing it will be many months before I can even hope to catch up to the fleet as they journey southward. I will have to travel overland to get to Cuttack, across China, then through Burma and the Delhi Sultanate.

Chittagong, April 2, 1432

More than a year has passed, riding on my horse. Through our journey, we had seen beautiful sunsets that we thought nothing could compare too. But then the sunrises would come exploding with colour and would be just as beautiful as the night before.

As we ride closer to the final destination, at times I forget the reason behind this. Although it always comes back, igniting a flame inside of me.

Cuttack, June 15, 1432

With my hands steady on the reins, I glance down to check on the package I was delivering. I see it gently bumping against the side of the saddle, untouched and unopened. Getting closer to the city houses begin to appear, as we near the markets, I see the tables yielding with thousands of spices. I dismount the horse and tie him up. A man approaches us, he catches a glimpse of the bag and then silently nods. I go around untie it from the saddle and place it into his arms. Abruptly the man takes the reins and starts walking away. Sensing fear the horse resists and begins to kick. I stroke him calmly on the forehead, stilling his movements. Calmed I stroke him for the last time.

I walk down to the dock and find myself once again sitting on a bench. The dock is crowded with traders and merchants making their sales. To my right is a small group, I overhear them discussing their next trip. To Calicut. I walk over and introduce myself, “Hi, my name is Bo-Hai. “I couldn't help to overhear that you plan to sail around to Calicut?” “Yes we are,” one of them replies “, and the name’s Mei-Xiu.” I smile and ask, “Would it be okay for me to join? In return, I can prepare the meals.”

Calicut, July 7, 1432

Three weeks it had been, smooth sailing on the ocean currents. We had just docked and tied up the ropes. I occupy myself with shipyard tasks as the months go by.

Calicut, December 10, 1432.

It has come to the final month of the year and I begin to fear that I have missed them. But then, out from the mist emerges a great fleet of boats. The same fleet of boats I had known so well. I proceed to the dock mixed with caution and excitement. From the deck of the front boat, I see the head chef. We meet eyes and he welcomes me on.

As the weeks go, to my father I’m invisible. The hardship I endured to be with him feels like a waste. I can only hope over time some warmth and affection will find its way into his heart.

My left-hand grasps the icy door knocker belonging to the office of our Captain. In my right hand, a bowl of tangmian soup. I knock once. No answer. I lumber in to find him sitting at his desk, back arched with his head in his palms. I walk quietly to place the bowl on a nearby chair, careful not to disturb him. But I know he’s aware that I’m there. His eyes focus on me, at last, I can see warmth in his eyes.

“Thank you...my son.”

# It Comes and Goes

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Himmelmann, Afik – 13*

It was a numbing winter morning, Kaia woke to the sound of men and women yelling outside; she jumped off the bed, throwing something on and running outside to see what the commotion was. As soon as she stepped outside she saw Zheng He's new recruit standing with a piece of paper and five armed men behind him.

“Zheng He would like to give all the men and young boys an opportunity, an opportunity to travel the great seas and to voyage into unknown lands and collect any treasure”, exclaimed the ‘henchman’ as everyone calls Zheng He's new man.

Kaia was unsure of what she should be feeling; should she be feeling happiness? Sadness? Should she be offended? Or maybe indignation. But she couldn't put a name on what she was feeling because she was experiencing them all in one moment and her thoughts escalated to the worst. Kaia ran back into her home, slammed the door and just stood. She just stood in the empty room, when it was silent, you can hear the high pitched buzz running through your head. At sundown Kaia was still at the same place staring at one point in the wall, she suddenly unfroze and began to think about how amazing it would be to travel the world and see different land and get treasures and be able to be respected as a woman. She could picture it clearly in her mind, her standing at the front of the ship feeling the wind upon her face, looking out to the massive ocean that lies ahead of her. She zoned out of her fantasy and continued to pack.

Kaia woke up with the sun and had gotten a piece of crumpled up paper to write her loved ones goodbye for the voyage. She walked to her parents' home to drop off her letter to them, when she saw a man telling this woman she wouldn't make it alive and how she isn't worthy of going to any of the seven voyages. The man walked away and Kaia got a clear view of the girl, it was her friend Imogen, Kaia quickly slipped the letter under the door and ran to Imogen. She screamed out her name, a few seconds after Imogen looked at Kaia in disgust and walked away. It was so unclear to Kaia what had just gone, but she shook her head and thought it was nothing. As she headed to the docks she got a numerous amount of disgusted people staring at her and she was able to hear them talking but only parts because they whispered so quietly that all you can hear are mumbles.

Kaia stepped on board and heard the muted speaking of the crew on board and people in line to be recruited. She had never felt this uncomfortable around so many people. Zheng He, captain of the first and many after voyages, walks out from below deck and screamed out a few words that sounded like gibberish then looked right at Kaia.

“What is a lady doing on my ship?” asked Zheng He.

“Hello, I would like to join your crew for your first voyage,” said Kaia with excitement in her voice. Zheng He looked around at all the men standing on board and laughed to the top of his lungs.

“You? Want to go on my ship? Ha!” yelled Zheng He.

“What is so surprising about a woman wanting to go on a voyage?” questioned Kaia.

“Sorry miss but I am all full with men who are going,” he said.

“Really? You couldn't spare one person out of the 27,000 people you got?” asked Kaia.

“No, now I would like you to get off my ship.” he said in a serious tone.

Kaia stormed off stomping her feet with every step taken so that they could hear her anger. She wondered how someone could have been so rude towards her. She kept on walking, deep in thought, feeling confused, angry, sad, annoyed. Then, out of the blue, came a thought to her mind: the only way for her to get on that ship was to disguise herself as a man. She didn't even know how it was possible but she knew it had to be done. At sundown she had gotten everything she needed to have to be a man, she knew it was crazy and that no one would believe it but she had to do this, she had to get on that ship and see the world.

Kaia had a rough night, she rolled out of bed and got all her belongings ready for the weeks or months to come, and she headed out to the docks. As she got there the group was treating her as if she actually was a man and she couldn't believe what she was seeing, she thought about how when she came as a woman she was handled and embarrassed in front of all those people and as a man she was shown respect. As soon as she walked onto the ship they pulled back the piece of wood that connects between the dock to the ship. Kaia

had never felt more excited in her entire life. As soon as the town started to fade away Kaia had wondered if any of this was actually a good idea, she thought about everything she was leaving behind but at the same time, she thought about the great wonders that she is going to see.

After a little while, Zheng He sprung out of nowhere and told every crew member that they were part of something big, something that they will be remembered forever. Zheng He told everyone that tomorrow morning we will reach our first destination. Everyone walked in a steady pace below deck wherein every inch of the room there was a hammock for a lot of people. Everyone took one hammock and fell asleep.

In the morning everyone was already upstairs and doing what they are assigned to. Kaia walked back and forth trying to think of a way to seem like she is doing something effective but she couldn't. A few seconds later, Zheng He talked to a few men and they took off on a small boat to the land near us. A few hours later they come back and tell us all to come to the shore. After everyone gets to the shore, Kaia runs onshore and tries to catch her breath. Suddenly a bunch of men wearing masks attacks us and almost no one escapes she tries to run but one man with a long scar across his eye grabs her and pulls her away. Kaia wakes up with five other people next to her and she sees that she's all alone in the room with those people so she tries to break free, though she tries as hard as she can she was never able to break free.

A few days past and Kaia is sure that no one is coming for them, so she tries once more to get out of this position and she stands up and falls to the ground, breaking the chair that she was tied to. But while doing this one of the chair legs stood up straight and stabbed her right from the back to the front. She looked down and saw the wood sticking out of her stomach, it was something she would have rather not seen. She drags herself across the floor to one of the crew members trying to free them. Once one got free he let the other four go and they ran out of the room they were kept in.

Kaia turned onto her back and just laid there helplessly, she looked up at the ceiling wondering if it was ever worth it to have even wanted to go on this voyage, to end up like this, knowing that this would be the end. Kaia laid on the floor as the pool of blood became into an ocean. Kaia stared at the one spot in the ceiling and thought to herself that this could not be the end. She looked closer at the ceiling and saw the air vent, and put the chairs one on top of the other and climbed until she reached it and crawled through to the outside. She could feel the warmth of the sun on her face and she could feel the sand on her back. She knew that it was alright to let go because she knew where she is and she knew, that everything was going to be okay. Even if she doesn't think it. Kaia stares at the sun's brightness, feeling every last moment she has to enjoy this new and amazing rush of emotions one last time. Kaia smiled and a single tear dropped from her eye as she said,

"I'm ready."

She closed her eyes and was finally ready to let go of everything.

# Revenge is No Reward

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Lyons, Itai – 12*

I sit in the dark, damp cell and listen to the crashing of metal doors. Clank. A man just got thrown in the cell beside me. His face bloody and bruised, must have just had a beating. It won't be his last.

"Name's Ju Ban," he says because I'm staring right at him.

"Xie Zuan," I say.

"What are you in here for?" Ju Ban asks.

"My revenge."

"There's got to be a story there. Can you tell me?"

"I've got a life sentence, so I definitely have the time."

And so I began my story...

*It was getting dark. The sun was setting over my father's fields. I was with my mama, waiting, just waiting for a sign that he would be back soon. We were also hoping that he too wasn't gone like all the other sailors that we heard were killed as they stepped off their boat for the first time in five years. And so we waited.*

*Finally he came, late at night. I watched him walk to the house. He wasn't alone. He was with two pirates, both holding swords gleaming with the blood of the other sailors. That was the last time ever saw them. They were left crying together on the floor as the floor reddened.*

*Then they took me into a life of piracy, away from my home. All of my friends my family just watched as I was taken. That night is what led me on my path to revenge. I didn't see those men for a while after, but every day I wished that I had my revenge.*

*My captain, a giant-sized pirate with black eyes and a black heart, would kill a entire village if the villagers didn't show him 'Honour', like he had any. I wanted to kill for revenge not for sport. At least I still had some morals left back then.*

*It was five years after that when I finally got away from the captain I had been sailing with. If I was to take my revenge I couldn't do it under the rules of the captain. Although it was hard to do, I rallied some of my fellow crewmates to help. We always managed to get a job done. It was night when we attacked. I smashed my way through the doors to the captain's cabin while the rest of my men stabbed and fought with any men that refused to join us. His black heart was no more. That was the only honor I ever showed him. I'm not proud of it, but I couldn't have him get in the way of my revenge plan. I had waited too long for it.*

*As my first act as captain, I ordered my men to set sail for my hometown. With any luck one of the wretched men who ended my parents life would be there and I would take my revenge on him. It was two weeks after we set sail that I found my way back to the town. It was exactly the same as I remembered it. Down to the fishing boats that seemed to swarm the bay like vultures do over a dead horse, to the beauty of the mountains behind the town and the smell of the earth and sea.*

*We docked and unloaded our loot. As soon as we got off the boat we were crowded by villagers who were hungry for money. I sent six men to go and sell some of the loot and then to reload the ship with food and fresh water. Then me and two of my strongest, toughest men left for the taverns to search for the men that killed my parents. I made sure that all of my men were armed with swords. Even I carried swords with me. Two of them hidden beneath my robes of black that were pulled over my head. The robe was so no one would recognise me, I looked just like my father, but it was also to hide the weapons that were hidden within the robes. Every time I think about him and back to that day that I lost him and my mother, I wanted cause pain to the ones that did this to me.*

*As I entered the tavern I immediately recognised one of the men. I sat next to him and offered him a drink. Of course, he replied yes. After he finished the drink and had a chat with me, I made my move and punched him in the face. My men held him up by the arms as I continued to strike him in the guts. Most murderers try to be discreet about killing, but not me. I wanted my revenge and my pain to be heard and felt through my victims. I lowered the hood on my robe and showed him my face. After that I left him swaying gently in the wind like an apple does from a fruit tree. He was hung on a flagpole, that stood out on the pier. The flag turned red with blood. I now had some revenge. But I needed more.*

*I went back in the tavern with my men to gather information. One of the drunken men, with one leg and one arm, told me about what happened to the other man. Five years before that, the two men split up. The other man became very successful but feared capture and death by the Chinese emperor. So he plead with the emperor to have mercy and promised to serve him. He then joined the Ming voyages as captain of one of the ships.*

*We got back on the ship, and set sail searching the seven seas for the Ming ships. The man in the tavern had sailed with them, so he told us the direction they were headed in for a meeting in India. Eventually we found them, and raised our flag which we had recently changed to the Chinese flag, and we boarded the fleet's ships asking for jobs. And as the captains saw that I already had captain experience, they made me assistant captain of one of their enormous ships. In my short time on those ships I would learn the last one died from a disease that seemed to never leave.*

*One night, I set off to meet the other captains to see if my information was correct, that the second man was part of the fleet. It was. There was no time to waste. I found the second man soon enough and quickly and quietly sliced his throat, then once again had my men hang him from a flagpole.*

*After that I got back on my ship and stirred my way away from the fleet and made my way back to my town, I was still not pleased. Every time I looked at the sky all I saw was the blood of my parents, dripping onto the wooden floor. I wanted more. What about the villagers who had just watched my parents be killed. They let me be taken into piracy. I wanted them all to know pain like I did. So much that I lost all my humanity.*

*I destroyed the village and the people who had watched me being taken. I ran through the town with my men while we slaughtered everyone in the town and burned the village.*

*Soon enough almost three hundred soldiers poured into the village and captured my men. Many of them just surrendered straight away. I don't blame them, just the sight of those soldiers in gleaming uniforms with swords and all the determination in the world, would make any man horrified. The soldiers shouted that they would kill my men until I surrendered.*

*I ran from them and found myself hiding in a house full of flames, alone. It's there that I realized all the destruction I had caused. I listened to the pleas of my men. I cried for all the people lost because of me, then I walked out of the house to the soldiers and put my swords down.*

*They only kept me alive. I was an example of what people like me deserved.*

*Each day I wait to be hanged. I do deserve it. I went mad with revenge, and even after I got it I still wasn't pleased. So each day I wait and wait till the people I got my revenge on get their revenge too. It will never end. That's how revenge is, it never ends.*

"That's it. That's all of my story. You can see what has become of me since," Xie Zuan says.

"I just had a debt to pay, you monster," says Ju Ban.

He shakes the bars of our prison cell and yells for help. As he screams, I do too, but I don't scream for help, I scream for them to hang me.

# The Great Escape

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Razon, Tamir – 11*

Zhang Yo had a turbulent life. Transitioning from being a respected and wealthy voyager in the Ming Dynasty to a slave tasked with constructing the Great Wall for the Qing Dynasty. He understood that there was no longer a place for him in such a dynasty.

Our voyage has completed its duty, and we now return home to the final destination of Beijing. The journey will be rough, but eventually we will make it. In order to get to Beijing, we had to make a few stops along the way. One stop in particular would change my life forever – our stop in Taicang. In Taicang, I witnessed poverty that I had never seen before. One man in particular struck me as needy, and I gave him and his family the last of our supplies for the voyage. The emotions of pure joy on his face are ones which I will never forget. We then arrived in Beijing on July 22. The city was very empty, all we saw were a couple of people on the street. We were wondering where the whole town went.

When we got to the Emperor's Palace to report back about the results of the seventh voyage, a new emperor greeted us showing the construction of The Great Wall. My gut told me something wasn't right about this new emperor, and before I could do anything about it, he commanded us to stop the series of voyages once and for all. Along with all men in the workforce, he forced us all to become slaves and help construct the great wall – possibly at the price of our lives.

The first day of work was the hardest day of all. We were forced to bring gigantic bricks up from a frozen lake and and pull them up a mountain, draining us to the very end. When we would get to the top we would add the brick to the wall. All of this effort, would be for a single brick. It was like this every day. The wall's construction had been taking its toll on me. I knew life was different now, and I couldn't take it anymore. I had to escape. The only way I could escape was if I would go to “collect” bricks for the wall and run when the opportunity presents itself. That is the only way.

The next day, I woke up and went to work. I approached the lake slowly and when I realised the guards were off duty I sprinted as fast as I could. Using every last bit of energy, I jumped over walls and dodged trees, but I was no match for the guards.

They took me to another guard and said, “帶他 (take him).” I was taken to the main jail in Beijing. I was there for almost 5 years, after which they released me back into slavery. I knew I was lucky to be alive. I knew I could not escape now, it was no longer as easy as before. I was constantly being followed. It was impossible.

10 years had passed, and I could not continue working. I was 52 years old. I was tired. I saw so many people die since I got out of jail. Work was getting tougher, and I was getting weaker. It was frightening. I finally decided to escape again, I couldn't take it anymore. This time, though, I was not going to get caught. The soldiers were no longer paying attention to me. I was labelled as “old” and was no longer a threat. Although I seemed old, I was still capable of doing many things. I spotted a new guard. One who lacked confidence. He was very young. I didn't want to harm him, but I needed to. It was crucial for my plan: I was going to steal his armour, and pose as a soldier – making it easy for me to escape. I waited until it was dark, I saw the guard was alone. I slowly crept up behind him, and before he could do anything I choked him and he went unconscious. I took his armour and left as fast as I could. Another guard spotted me leaving and began chasing me, but I managed to lose him by hiding in a cave for that night. I understood that he would still be looking for me the next day, so I stayed in the cave for a few weeks until I finally decided to try go back home.

I was a month into my escape home. I was so thirsty, I had nothing to eat or drink. I could barely see anything. I was about to faint on the sand. My whole body hurt. I got to a dead end – the edge of a cliff. I rested there for a while. I saw a man like figure approaching me. It was a guard that worked at The Great

Wall. He had a knife in his hand. I moved backwards, panicking. I heard a cracking sound, but before I could do anything I fell. I landed on a ledge and fell unconscious. When I woke up I was in a hospital on the other side of China. The man that I saw attacking me was actually from Taicang, and was part of one of the families which I gave money to while I was still a Ming voyager. It was all a hallucination. Thank God.

After I was healed he took me to his house. I slept there for a while. I stayed there for 2 days eventually I told him that I had to leave to my family in 上海 (ShangHai). He offered that he would take me there in his rickshaw so I agreed. It wasn't a long journey, it just took a week. It was nice to see how our culture has changed so much since I left. When we finally arrived in 上海(ShangHai), I offered him to come over to my house to have tea. He said he had to go back to his family so we said goodbye and I thanked him for everything that he had done for me, and he left. When I arrived home I was so happy to see my wife and my two daughters. I was overjoyed to meet their husbands and my grandchildren. It was the best day of my life.



## Mid Ocean

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Ronen, Daniella – 12*

1409

Loud thunder, water already at waist length. The sail is torn and ripped. The ship has begun to sink. I wasn't even supposed to be there that day. I was only ten at the time and the only reason I was on that ship was because I had no other home. For four years I lived with my brother on that ship, ever since our father has abandoned us. Luckily for us our father's friend, now the captain of this ship, has offered us work in exchange for a home. This is where we ended up, sinking in the middle of the ocean.

We were on the journey back to China. We had what we came for. Just when everything was supposed to work out, a storm came, and then it all began. Water invaded our ship, impossible to control. I remember my brother's grip on my hand, tugging me as we ran to the captain. My brother Li Wei was sixteen years old. Unlike me, he was supposed to be there, he was at the right age. Even if our father wouldn't have abandoned us shortly after our mother's death, my brother would still be training to be a ship captain. It was his dream since he was five and it is unlucky he never got the chance to fulfill it.

We reached the captain, out of breath. "Sadly there is nothing I can do," he said without us having to explain, "I suggest you go onto the second ship and try to save yourselves."

"But what about you captain?" Li Wei asked as if surprised there wasn't much to be done.

"A captain needs to put others before himself. But I will take care of myself I promise," he replied "Now go, hurry or there wouldn't any space left."

We both knew this was probably the last time we would see him but we also knew it won't do any good if we died as well so we just ran, a very long run.

Water flooding everywhere. Just by looking at the other ship you could tell the overcrowding was unbearable, everyone pushing and shoving each other to save their own lives. As we got there we discovered there was barely room for one, if only we had been there earlier. That was the moment that I hate to remember until this very day. I feel a gentle push on my back and I realize that I have crossed over. I turn my head and see my brother on the other side. My brother left me and never came back.

1426

If I haven't mentioned it before my name is Li Qian. My name means strong in Chinese. I always found it hard to understand why I was named 'strong' when I wasn't. When I lost my brother I wasn't strong, I was weak, and for two years I found it hard to continue. Slowly I understood he wouldn't have wanted me like this. I need to be 'strong'. I realized that although my brother's life has ended it doesn't mean mine should end too.

This led me to where I am now, 17 years later, captain of a ship. It has been 2 years since I got the role of a captain and my project has been finally launched. My crew and I are now on the way to the Pacific Ocean along with 2 other ships. Last trip was a disaster. Many people died on the way, the boat sunk taking many important possessions with it. This trip has lost a lot of respect for China from other countries. Even now people still remember the irresponsibility of the leaders on this trip that have caused all this damage, but all this is about to change. We are going to find that ship and retrieve all of the remaining objects and some broken parts of the ship to commemorate this journey and gain back our respect.

Only a few days in the sea and it feels like a year, irritation is building up. I have been yelling at my crew for a very long time. When you are stuck with many people on a ship there will be a moment when you need time for yourself, my moment was now. I look straight into the sea. Thinking deeply as the sun blinds. "Captain!" Of course someone had to ruin my peacefulness.

I move to find my assistant standing where the steering wheel is, Wang Yong was supposed to be moving it but for some reason my ship has decided not to cooperate. We go up, must have hit a wave, then suddenly down. We move to the left then instantly right. Just when the ocean has settled down we see in front of us an enormous ship coming towards us at full speed. "The steering wheel doesn't move! What should we do captain?" yelled Wang Yong. One thing I learned was that captains have to make the most difficult decisions. I push Wang Yong out of the way and grab the wheel. "Lower the sail!" the white sheet crumples down. I turn the wheel with full power to the left. Suddenly a big crash is heard. I open my eyes, feels like I haven't seen light in years. It took a moment until I was sure that I was not dead and that our ship survived, well at least most of it. I hear screams from the other side of the ship, I run. Apparently the back of the ship was damaged. I look to my right and see a big crowd huddled, looking down at the ocean. I walk there, slowly, not wanting to know what was going on. I gasp, now I understand why the screams. In this deep ocean, on this bright colourful day were lying still two of my best assistants, dead.

Of course the tragic incident has delayed us but somehow we managed to recover both physically and mentally. We have finally gotten to our destination. We have lost a lot, but sometimes you need to lose to reach the final target. I look back, there is a big pile of odd possessions behind me, ready to be brought back. It took awhile but we got it.

Everyone on the ship is celebrating but me. I know this feeling, it is still too familiar to forget although a lot of time has past. I look up to the sky and there it was proving my point, a storm is about to come.

Gray clouds, rain dripping all over, glass shatters from the frightening thunder and lightning. Everything was tearing up, just when everything was peaceful. The only lucky thing was that I knew, I knew not to

celebrate too early. It was déjà vu, just the thought of it made me shiver. I have dedicated so much time of my life for getting closure and even though we went here, to the place of his death I still feel like I didn't. I knew my brother deserved such a better life than he got, and the only difference now was that I realized I didn't deserve this life either.

The boat suddenly shakes, everyone was rushing around trying to get off to another less damaged ship. Just when things couldn't get any worse a little drop of water appeared, growing bigger as the seconds pass by, our ship began to sink. Since I am the captain, worried people kept coming to me running asking the same thing and I answered repeatedly. "There isn't much to be done, the water is already everywhere, try and find somewhere to escape and save yourselves!"

After everyone was gone and I was the only one left, I ran to the boat. I see the last boy about to climb on, there is barely any space left for him. He struggles and I come to help. He is onto the ship. I run forward and then freeze, even if I tried really hard the chances of there being space for me were really low, I saw it as a sign. Suddenly I see the boy whom I just helped. He stares at me in shock then quietly asks, although was probably scared for the answer "but what about you captain?" I smile, I had the perfect answer to give him. I whisper back to him quietly, "a captain needs to put others before himself." He gets further and further away as the ship moves. So there I was all alone on the ship knowing the end was near but instead of feeling bad I was looking forward. I have dedicated most of my life to get closure, I have wasted a lot of time trying to understand the reason of things happening. So now, I knew that all I was ever hoping for and the best closure I could ever get would be a reunion, a reunion with my brother.

# Zheng He

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Selevan, Bradley – 14*

Thoughts were rushing through my head as I was putting the last of my clothes into my full, leather trunk. I got on the floor and put all of my body weight onto the trunk as I struggled to buckle the latches. I went to my curtains and pulled them open. It was still dark outside, the sun was just shining across the horizon. I quietly picked up my luggage and walked to the front door. I knew that it would be my last time here. My father startled me as he walked out of the dark dining room.

“You can’t keep running away from your problems, Xie Wan,” my father said to me in a soft voice. “I am not running away,” I said to him with a harsh tone. “I just can’t stay here. All these terrible memories are all that’s ever in my mind. Seeing my mother cry in these rooms, and now she’s just gone.”

I began tearing up and unlocked the door with one of my hands and the other reached for my trunk. I began to walk out of the house. My father grabbed my arm with force.

“Coward!” he hissed at me and slammed the door in my face.

My life has always been a mess. I grew up in a small house, with two parents that would always fight. I spent most days sneaking through the village, taking anything I could get my hands on. When I was around fifteen, pick-pocketing was a hobby of mine. It was a risky task, but I was struggling and it was a risk I was willing to take. My mother became ill and the treatment was too expensive for our family. She slowly suffered for years, until her final day came. It was my eighteenth birthday. Nothing has been the same since. My dad’s anger had never been worse, he was taking out his sadness on me. He was bringing home a new whore every night. Seeing a woman walk out of my father’s room in the morning was heartbreaking. I couldn’t deal with this torture anymore. I knew it was time to get away, start something new and not feel like such a waste.

I was ready to be out at sea for a while. My mother would always walk me down to the port when my dad couldn’t get a grip of himself. She would tell me everything would be alright. She always reassured me that it would just be hard for a while, but everything will be clear eventually. I stopped believing in the things my mother would tell me. All my hope was so close to being completely gone.

I slowly made it down to the harbor. There were at least fifty boats docked against the waterfront. These boats were later filled with the thousands of men crowding the area, including me. We were setting sail for our journey to the coast of East Africa later that day. The sun fully rose as the admiral, Zheng He, rose to inform us about how our next few years at sea would look. He was a very inspirational man. He gave his life to the emperor and I have always found that to be a sign of true commitment. I always aspired to have that much motivation and enjoyment of my work.

As we boarded the ships, each person was shown to their sleeping chambers. The room was tiny and consisted of a chest of drawers and a low mattress. I placed my heavy trunk, which I have been lugging around all morning, in an empty corner of the room. We had five minutes to be unpacked and changed into the wardrobe we were given as we entered the boat. I put the sheets that were in one of the drawers on the mattress. We weren't given a pillow. We were instructed to bring our empty bags with us as we would be keeping them in a room all together.

The sea was rough as we headed out. The wind was strong and the sails were filled with all the breeze. Our boat was the last to leave and we were at the back of the long trail. It was rough learning all the new skills that would be needed for the next few years, but I got through it strong.

The sky was filled with crazy colors during the sunset. Taking time while I was admiring the sky was the moment where all my hope came rushing back. I could be something. I can make an impact.

The next few weeks were difficult. They were full of hard work and disappointment, but we were not giving up. The clouds were building up during the day and it began to rain moments before it became dark. We were prepared for the storm. We tied everything down and had everything put inside. The waves were big and the rain was strong. People were screaming and yelling orders, but everyone was too stressed. The waves grew bigger and people began to say we weren't going to make it. The boats ahead of us were much larger than our small boat. People kept yelling, but everyone went silent when we saw the wave in front of us. The wave crashed down on us hard and that was that.

I woke up with bruises and cuts all over. I was alone. I got up and my vision adjusted to the dark. I was in some sort of cave on the water. I was scared and worried about what would happen to me. I made my way to the edge of the water and could see parts of the destroyed boat. I could see the shapes of my fellow sailors at the bottom of the sea.

I stepped back with terror. How could this happen? What have I done to deserve this? I was stuck in the middle of nowhere, with no one. I sat down on the cold rocks and began to cry. 'I should've just stayed with my father.' I thought to myself. I knew anything was better than being there though. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. I couldn't deal with everything.

I woke up a little while later and it was still dark outside. I sat in silence for a little while before I heard footsteps. I followed the sound deeper into the cave. I was shocked to see a man beating a woman on the floor. The man turned around and looked me in the eyes. It was my father. I was shocked and yelled "No!" as I dived into the two people to stop the beating. I landed hard on the ground. There was no one there. I felt insane.

"Xie Wan?" I heard from behind me. I stood up fast and turned around to see my mother. I stood there silently, not able to move. She turned around and told me to follow her. I walked slowly behind her. She led me to the edge of the water. I reached out to her, but she backed away from my hand. She took a step into the water and kept walking.

I slowly followed behind her, deeper into the water. She turned back and looked into my eyes then dived into the water. I followed behind her, deep down into the water. She kept going down and so did I. All of a sudden bubbles formed all around her and once the bubbles were all gone, I saw what she truly was, a monster. Something I could never explain. It grabbed onto my leg as I tried to swim away. It dragged me down. I was struggling to breathe and I was too deep down to make it.

My vision became blurry as my lungs filled with the water. Its eyes glowed green. That was the last thing I saw before the darkness I'd see forever.

# The Kader Brothers

*Carmel School Association Elsa High School, Wigisser, Alex – 11*

There are many famous stories of the Ming voyages. On these massive ships, there was gold, jewellery, and spices. A lot of people attempted to steal from the ships, some were successful and some weren't. This is the story of one of the greatest heists in the world. It all started with these brothers, the Kader brothers.

Axmed and Mahad Kader were regular brothers; they fought and laughed. Mahad was the older brother and he was taller, faster, louder and stronger. Axmed was the younger brother and was quite; he didn't really socialize very well, but he was very smart. Axmed and Mahad liked being with each other very much and most of the time they were inseparable. Their parents cared greatly for the boys; they cooked for them and made clothes for them. Axmed and Mahad's parents didn't have a lot of money; they had a farm. On the farm, they grew vegetables and had chickens, sheep, and cows. Life was good and peaceful on the farm.

One day, Mahad went out to run some errands which his mother sent him to do when suddenly he saw a big crowd gathered around the dock where there were huge ships. He immediately saw why there was all this commotion. The ship was so big that even from afar he could see it as if it were only a few meters away. Mahad couldn't believe his eyes. He ran towards the crowd. He thought, "If the ship is as big from this distance, I need to see it up close". When he finally got next to the boat, just a few meters away, he felt so small. He was, in fact, super tall at 1.90 meters but for the first time in his life, he felt like an ant. He then asked a fellow farmer, "Why is everyone staring at the floor and not at the huge ship?"

The fellow farmer replied, "I am old and short and my eyes aren't the best so why don't you look yourself? You're extremely tall!" Mahad then went on his tippy toes and saw A LOT of gold, spices from China and jewellery.

Mahad ran to tell his family about this massive commotion and his mother asked "Do any of the farmers get this gold?"

Mahad didn't know so he just said, "Yes."

"Then let's go collect some gold and spices." Replied his mother.

Mahad answered in a wobbly voice, "They have put it back in the ship."

"You two boys have 2 days to collect the gold and spices." Said his mother with clear authority. The two boys agreed to do this task.

Mahad grabbed Axmed and ran outside to talk to him. At first, Axmed was confused and asked "What's wrong?"

Mahad answered in a very worried voice, "I don't know if you can get the gold." Axmed told Mahad to go down the hill and ask the sailors on the ship. Mahad picked Axmed up and dashed to the ship. When they got to the ship Mahad asked the sailor if the gold and spices would be given to the farmers. The sailors didn't understand anything so he asked a farmer if you can take the loot.

The farmer said, "DO NOT touch that loot! Earlier today a farmer was brutally beaten up by the sailors." Axmed asked how did she know, to which she answered, "Because I saw it!"

Mahad and Axmed had a private talk and agreed to not tell their mother about it as they didn't want to see her upset. After talking for a while they agreed on another thing; they agreed to steal from the ship. Axmed suggested that they can use the little shed behind the house to plan the heist but first they needed to know where they stored all the gold and spices. Their plan was to stay up late until they stored the gold and spices back in the ship. Axmed had a notebook that he would write down everything he was thinking about and how to plan the heist. Once Mahad came back from seeing where they store the loot it was time to come up with the plan.

First, they needed a distraction so Mahad thought they can take their noisiest chicken and let it scream so it could distract the two guards at the front gate protecting the entrance to the ship. Meanwhile, Mahad would sneak in through the gate. Inside the ship, there would many sailors. Axmed thought this could be a big problem but Mahad can knock out a sailor and pretend to be the sailor. Mahad then asked, "Where am I going to put the body!?"

Axmed answered in a soothing voice, "Relax, I saw they needed to use barrels to take the loot back into the ship so just put him into a barrel."

He then had to get to the basement and get some gold and spices to bring it back to Axmed. Mahad and Axmed thought they would do it the last day they were going to be here which was tomorrow. The next morning they were observing the whole day until it was really late the heist had to begin now.

Mahad and Axmed gave the plan a second thought before really doing it. They knew that their parents needed this so they started the heist. They got the chicken and put it on the floor, they then gave it a little smack and it went wild. The guards started to get irritated and started chasing it with their spears. Then Mahad got onto the ship and ran to the barrels; he saw a sailor collecting barrels to organize them. Mahad then jumped, scared him and punched him in one shot out cold. Mahad changed into the sailors' clothes. He then followed a sailor with some gold in his hands to the basement. After the sailor put the gold back into the basement Mahad silently grabbed the gold and spices and put it into a big sack and rushed to the gate. Outside the gate, he saw the two guards with a dead chicken. Axmed saw Mahad. Axmed then immediately rushed to the dock and grabbed the chicken and started to fake cry to distract the guards. The guards were laughing but they also were starting to get irritated. So irritated that they lifted up their spears and were about to stab Axmed. Right before they did, Mahad struck his spear across the two sailors bodies. Mahad was in shock but didn't want to show it so he threw the spear with the bodies into the water.

Axmed and Mahad sprinted back to the shed and didn't know what to do with all the loot. Axmed had a great idea; he thought they could pretend to dig holes to plant crops but put the loot inside the holes so it looks as if they just came across the loot while digging. The next morning Mahad was "digging holes for the crops" and came across the loot. Mahad immediately ran to his parents and told them about the gold. They all darted to the loot. Axmed and Mahad's mother and father were in shock. They said it was a miracle from God, but in reality it was a miracle from their boys.



# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Chinese International School, Zhu, Edward – 12*

On a land, which we now know as Calicut, in the West Coast of India, legend among local people speaks of a strange event many years ago.

That day, a ghostly assembly of ships clouded the horizon. Each one of these ships was the size of countless houses, with dragons painted elegantly and flawlessly against the sturdy wood. The clouds covered the sky; no, not the clouds, those were sails, stacks on stacks of red, flowing cloth, each a darker silhouette of the one before.

As the ship progressed forward, a wave of foreign sailors alighted from their ships. There was a large commotion from the other side as the natives scurried over to see what was happening. However, they ran straight away from the port in fear. There were shouts and cries far away as natives reached for spears in an attempt to protect themselves, or run away. The port was empty.

A group of native soldiers in red tunics rushed over, followed by five other groups, each holding spears and shields. They were led by a middle-aged, limping man in a slightly darker tedious red dhoti, shoulders bowed and his chin out and down. Before they started marching towards the bridge extending from the port, a representative climbed down gracefully from the ship, followed a bit less swiftly by three guards.

“Greetings,” the foreign representative said in Arabic after a few minutes of silence. “We are from the land of Ming Empire and I would like to greet you fine people of this land. We come in peace. Do you fine men have a spokesperson? Because –”

“I am their spokesperson,” the man in a dhoti interrupted in Arabic. He limped slowly, and walked at a crooked pace towards the crew. “My name is Rama Kushna,” he chirred.

“We are glad to meet your people.” The foreign representative said in Arabic. “I am Ma Huan, a representative from my fleet. We come in peace.”

Rama Kushna attempted a smile. “You have travelled a long, long way for this.” He paused. “What do you want?”

“Your country contains countless goods that we seek to trade with our own goods.”

“I’ll report to my king,” Rama Kushna said in a shrill voice.

He arrived at the palace, with the red elephant decorations sent swinging about as he swung open the door, where the King held an emergency meeting.

“Rama Kushna! Tell everyone about the event,” the King, sat in the far-end part of the table in a overly cushioned red chair, announced with a skeptical tone drifting off his words. As he fiddled at his bushy beard, his pet parrot echoed,  
 (“event, event.”)

“Your Majesty, a fleet of ships from the Ming Empire just arrived at our port. Their fleet is like nothing we’ve seen before. They say they have brought trade items for us, but I see that they have more soldiers than their items.”

“The ‘floating city’ has come to our attention lately,” one advisor in red chattered.

“Indeed?” the King droned sarcastically. (“indeed? indeed?”)

Rama Kushna continued: "I do not trust them! Remember how the Mongols tricked us decades ago? After all, they have many neighbours, why go to us? We must stop them!" There was agreement throughout the council.

"What do you mean!" the advisor in red robes chirped loudly. "You can't just stop them! They haven't done anything to you yet!" There were some mild murmurs of agreement.

"What? They have just swarmed our entire trading port with men. They have the potential to end all of mankind in our country!" Rama Kushna declared.

"They promised to give you goods! Let's wait for a while and see what'll happen!" the advisor in red argued.

"You can't do that! They might suddenly pounce up on us without us noticing anytime!" Rama Kushna spat. "What do you think, Your Majesty?"

The King stroked his thick beard and his pet parrot squeaked. He paused. "Well, if you put it that way..... you're still wrong, Rama Kushna. We'll host a banquet and consider trading."  
("trading, trading.")

Rama Kushna opened and closed his mouth repeatedly in rebuttal, but nothing came out. He rose, and darted his eyes around and concluded, "Tell me if you change your mind." Then he limped out of the room, with his boring mojari bobbing slowly up and down as it hit the floor.

The foreigners were informed about the banquet, and on the second day, Zheng He, the Grand Director, and his crew arrived at the palace. They were treated with an appetizing banquet of rather exotic foods. Waiters dressed in tight outfits scurried about, carrying plates and bowls of steaming curries and broths. Dancers with tighter outfits swayed and swung to the beat of a musician's sitar. Most people from Calicut, including the King, couldn't understand Arabic, so Rama Kushna was their translator. Via Ma Huan and Rama Kushna, the visitors and the people from Calicut commenced in fascinating conversations.

"Dear King of Calicut, our Grand Director, Zheng He, has a letter to present to you from our emperor," Ma Huan grandly announced.

"I am honored," the King droned, loosely wearing a smile. ("honored, honored,")

Zheng He's buffed frame and admirable height towered over the King, and his beardless face trumped that of the King's as well, especially his shiny eyes. There just seemed to be this aura around him. Zheng He read in Chinese in a grand voice, "You, O King, live beyond the confines of many seas. You, O King of your honorable nation, sit upon a throne occupied through successive generations by predecessors, all of whom have been styled respectful and obedient..." The letter was written in both Chinese and Arabic.

"Can someone help me translate this letter?" the King said afterwards.

"Your Majesty, allow me!" Rama Kushna whined and stretched out his palm like a plate towards the King.

The King looked around desperately to see if there was other volunteers, but to his misfortune, there were none. He tossed the letter to Rama Kushna, who rasped out a translation.

"This means that they want to take all your goods and assert dominance later over your men."

"What...!?"

("what! wh-squawk!.eEeEeCh!")

"...did you say?!" He boomed, clutching his parrot's neck tightly with his wrinkled hands. "They want to make Calicut a part of Ming empire and steal your treasures."

Upon hearing this, the King roared, “Enough from the clown!” He slammed the table, threw the parrot on the floor, and pointed at Zheng He, “You think you can steal from us and just walk away?!” then commanded the native soldiers, “Grab that man now!”

Two native soldiers grabbed Zheng He by his stocky arms and dragged him away. His guards were disarmed immediately, and Ma Huan too, who pulled out an anlace. There were screams and shouts in hall. Some of Zheng He’s crew tried to escape, but all of them were grabbed by the guards, who cuffed the crews’ hands together and thrustured their heads against the table. Plates, food bits, soups, and sauce crumpled or slipped against the hard ground.

Before the King could continue, an Arab envoy picked up the damaged letter, then declared, “Your Majesty, why are you getting so angry at this letter? It’s been translated incorrectly by Rama Kushna!”

A silence hung about in the room as the envoy, who was now sitting down on his chair, continued, “The letter means that, they want to perform trade with our country.” Another advisor then came over and confirmed it. “What did you just say?” the King turned his head around to face the foreign envoy. There was silence for a minute or two. The silence was broken by the King’s muttering.

He spoke quietly, “I am extremely sorry for this, but there has been a terrible mistake here.” He raised his voice and roared, “Where is Rama Kushna?!” He pointed sharply at an empty chair.

He then realized that Rama Kushna had already dashed out the doors, leaving crumbs and smudges of his overturned food lying on the ground. Guards stormed out the doors, and all they saw was some rumbling of the trees, and then nothing.

The King muttered slowly, “It’s too late. The bastard could be gone miles away.” He paused. The men placed a shocked Zheng He back on his seat.

Zheng He signalled his men to carry over a trunk with a cover of silk. Zheng He swished the blanket of silk off and opened the trunk. In the dying light of the moon, the tall porcelain vase showed off its smooth curves and intricate coloring.

“We have brought to you, O King, a selection of our finest vases from the Ming Empire..” Zheng He smiled grandly.

On this large chunk of land, which we now know as Calicut, legend among local people speaks of a strange event many years ago...

# Life Through Unforgettable Voyages

*Delia School of Canada, Rajput, Aditi – 14*

“Yeh were a lil’ baby at that time, Cheng”, Uncle Zhang told me whenever I asked him to recite me the story of when Li found me. Uncle Zhang had worked for 45 years under him and his dad until Li died. Zhang was a juvenile man, around 15, when he joined Li’s dad’s crew. He was like a little seedling who just sprouted from under the ground at that time. But as time passed, he made friends and learnt a lot from his dad. Unfortunately Li’s dad, Luis died in a battle at the age of 40, leaving Li to be made the next captain. Li proved himself to be a prominent captain with admirable leadership skills. Li died as well after 10 years. Uncle Zhang was like my dad and Li like a brother, being the dearest for me.

I went to uncle Zhang. His cabin, with some other people from the crew, is just above mine. All these people here are like a family to me because I have lived my whole life here. I held the doorknob and entered his cabin. “Hello uncle Zhang. Would you mind telling me the story of when Li found me, please?” I inquired him. “Again!! Oh, okay. Don’t make tha’ face. I’ll tell yeh the story yet again. C’mon now, sit here.”

He began “We were on this ship with captain. The sun’s heat was so blisterin’ tha’ day, I thought it was goin’ ter fry me like an egg. And then Wong, one o’ the workers guarding the sails tha’ day started shouting, jumping up and down. ‘*Captain, captain. I see smoke over that island. A lot of smoke. Come, hurry, look...*’ he yelled on the top of ’is lungs. The captain came in burstin’ open the door of his cabin ‘*What happened?*’ ‘*Captain, do you see the smoke over that island?*’ While tryin’ to block sunlight with his hands, he peered in tha’ direction. ‘*Hmm...interesting! Wong, turn the sails in that direction. We are going to have a look of the island. Take the required things. I want half the crew, stay back, look after Thunder Dragon. Zhang and Wong, accompany me. Get to work!*’ Thunder Dragon is the name of our ship.

Uncle Zhang continued “We reached the shore after half an hour. We disembarked the ship with captain and started walkin’ in ter the heart o’ the forest coverin’ the island. We walked, encounterin’ different types o’ animals and plants o’ the land, some o’ which were perilous while the others harmless.

The sun had started ter set and all of us were extremely tired. ‘*We haven’t found anything yet, captain. Even the sun has started to set. Shouldn’t we board the ship before nightfall?*’ Mack, one o’ our crew guys, suggested. ‘*You are right. Let’s turn and—*’ Captain stopped mid-sentence an’ started sprintin’. He called out ‘*Hey, smoke’s coming from that direction. Follow me.*’ We reached in ter a clearing in the forest. It seemed like a village, set off on fire. ‘*What is this place?*’ Wong asked. As we moved forward, we could see dead bodies lying all over the place, bleedin’, so dreadful to see because o’ the way it was burnt. We searched all the huts an’ finally reached the hut in the center. Captain, Mack, Wong and I cautiously entered the hut. Captain went in ter a room and came out with some basket. ‘*Look at this*’ he showed. We all huddled in a circle. He removed the sheet coverin’ the basket and there you were, Cheng, less than a year old. You began crying. We all stared in shock that everyone was dead, except you” Uncle Zhang stopped. I could see that he was recalling the reminiscence of that day. “You were so adorable tha’ we could not think of leaving you like tha’. So, for the sake o’ humanity we took you. We scoured the place again and went back ter the ship. While we were walking back, I asked ‘*What do ya reckon her name should be*’ and we came up with many names. Finally, we consulted captain. ‘*I expect her to be even braver in the future. How about a name expressing power— like, Chenguang*’ he said. We agreed and thought the name to be exquisite. We reached back ter the ship and showed ya ter everyone else. They were amazed by ya. From then, you were with us” he concluded. I am always flabbergasted by this story no matter how many times I have heard it. But the biggest question was how did I survive? “Uncle Zhang, do you know that how could I have survived at the time?” I asked him for the thousandth time. “I dunno Cheng but I was thinkin’ about tha’ earlier and likely it was your parents who hid you in a secure place with the sheet over you, ter protect ya. Your parents were killed in the incident. I can say tha’ cause I saw a lady with a similar face as yours. Not sure if she was your mother. Must have died protecin’ ya. Otherwise, I dunno. It’s pretty late now. Should go sleep” he said. “Yes, good night. You should sleep as well.” I left the room and went back to the cabin. I put off the lamp hanging over my table and fell to sleep almost instantly.

I had a dream or should I say a nightmare and there were my parents being tortured. I don’t know how they look like but the feeling was more than anything else to explain it. I suddenly woke up and a cold sweat broke off. There are other things dreadful than this. I still remember that day clearly. I was 15 then.

It was a bright day. No sign of anything unpleasant. I was playing in my cabin with Li when suddenly we heard noises of a racket, swords clanging against other and cannon balls being shot. Li quickly went out.

I understood at once, someone had attacked us. I went on the deck and what I saw was enough to terrorize me. Uncle Zhang came towards me and asked me to go and hide in a cabin. I had started to run towards my cabin but what I saw gave me courage instead of appalling me. Half of our crew was dead fighting. I couldn't leave my family at such a crucial time. So I took my slingshot and aimed at a tall person from other crew. The stone hit the person on the head and before he could realise, I shot another stone towards him and knocked him unconscious. It gave me more courage and I took out my sword before a half giant looking person came towards me and without even thinking that I was so younger than him, took out his sword and almost killed me when Li approached and stopped him. I came to know later that the half-giant was the captain of the other crew. Li fought him and he almost won before 5 more people came to help the half-giant. I was shrieking that this was unfair and ran to help him but Zhang caught me and sent me to my cabin. I was locked in my cabin, furious for not being able to help. I was peeping through one of the holes and saw that Li was badly hurt. The half giant got up on his knees and took two swords. Li's back was facing me and he was on his knees, trying to get up. The half giant pierced the swords right through Li and there was blood all over. I was scandalized. After what seemed like hours, the opponent crew had left because of losing and Uncle Zhang came into my cabin flinging open the door. I ran towards Li's body. I was sobbing like a baby and blaming myself that I couldn't help. I shouldn't have done that and listened to uncle Zhang when he told me to go back in my cabin at once. We had lost more than half of our crew and Li. Everyone was weeping and no one talked any more for days. Uncle Zhang explained me that it wasn't my fault and I was just trying to help. But I had lost my brother.

A year later everyone decided to make me the new captain and I ought to be a just and a humane captain. I decided that we would visit different villages and kingdoms all over the world on our Thunder Dragon and spend our time helping those in need. We would spend all our treasure in this task and ask kings to donate for a nice cause. It will make a change in the world because if we as sailors can do such things, why not others who are even more capable than us. After all, it is the most satisfactory thing I can do for Li.

# Dragon Kite

*Delia School of Canada, Saha, Vaniya – 13*

It's been 10 years since they found me. I was only a wee lad of 11. I can't remember my parents except my mum had ginger-tawny hair and my dad had the eyes of emeralds, which they gave to me. All I can remember was a bright flame engulfing our town while I was afloat on the vast sea with a gold coin in my grasp. It was all I had, all I had left. Days passed by and I could feel my flesh dissolving into my bones. Though being surrounded by saline water, my throat yearned for fresh liquid. I must have drifted halfway across the ocean already. I drifted and drifted, and that's how they found me.

"What use will it be to have this childer on board?"

"Maybe I might tell you when you get this kid some water!"

My eyes peeled open when a bucket of water was dumped on me. A great way to meet someone. I woke up to face 10 grown men circling the bed which I was drenched upon. They had this foreign look, but it didn't prick any memory.

"So when can we eat this scanty little lad?"

'Excuse me?' I thought.

"We ain't eating anyone! We have fish and that's what we're gonna eat! Otherwise, it would be called cannibalism!"

'What's that...?'

"Shut your imbecile mouth. He's listening!"

As they proceeded their dispute, I crawled out of the creaky bed. Thanking that these gruesome looking men had voices so obstreperous they never heard me. I attempted to keep a low level by crouching down. I finally go to the door when—

"Oi, the kid's escapin'!"

This was my cue. I ran. Least did I know there were another 10 pirates dwelling outside with their ears to the wall while being surrounded by buckets of soapy water. Looking back over my shoulder the ones I had encountered were already pouring out. So I ran and I ran. I never realized that these pirates were so feeble-minded they kept running in circles behind me. It was like a race of laps. I overtook the ones at the back, the back ones overtook me. It all happened in such a blur we all forgot what our aim was and just ran in circles.

"STOP WITH THIS SWASHBUCKLING NONSENSE!"

A man with a voluminous charcoal hat appeared. He seemed rather ordinary, but his thick faded crimson coat and his lengthy knotted beard made him stand out.

"I said we'd get the boy, not chase him around like mindless ducks for a crumb of bread! You, what's your name?" It sounded more like a demand. With that, he produced a thin but cuspidate sword and placed the tip on my neck.

"It's Jake, Jake Wesley," I trembled, whispering the latter.

Disregarding me, the man lifted his sword to his face, narrowing his eyes as if inspecting it. "Little Wong, clean my sword. It still has blood." He tossed it to a short and rather pale-looking man. "And Big Wong, tie this Jack. We don't want another cat and mouse chase now do we?" a pause. "I SAID DO WE?"

The once silent men erupted into fraudulent laughter. The vain leader stood with his chin high. Gosh, how did I end up here? Big Wong seemed like the opposite of Little Wong, tanned and muscular. Yet he had the same round face with the bulb-like nose of his little brother. He winded the rope around me that scraped my damp skin of water and sweat. One of the pirates walked up and poked me with a cleft mop. I tried evading but the weakness in my body persisted. I slowly backed away until the floor beneath me felt... unstable.

I seemed to be steadying myself on a plank at the edge of the ship. With the biting stabs of the mop and the spraying water on my exposed feet, I chose my only option.

“What do you have against me?!”

“There’s no use of keeping you alive!”

“You think I even wanted to end up with you people?” This made him pause for a moment. His eyes focused on me. A whispering conversation stirred between the rest.

“Hmm, we can’t be sure to trust someone who’s come from the other side of the Earth. First, you must do something for us to prove that you are trustworthy!” he projected as he laid the sword on me again.

An hour later I found myself dumb-founded while scrubbing the decks while the others were in the cabin discussed me. Shivers ran down my spine as I watched the ocean water stand unnaturally still.

*Thump... Thump... Thump...*

Steady footsteps were coming towards me as I hurriedly got back to work.

“Come here, will you?” The captain motioned at a space alongside him as he leaned upon the sides of the ship. His demeanour had suddenly changed like a switch had been flicked. His voice had the same gruffness but it was soothing. I made my way discreetly past the soapy floor next to him. “Earlier back there, you stood up to us. It was a very brave thing to do.”

“Th-thanks.”

“You remind me of someone. Of my own father.”

“Re-really?”

“You sure do! How did you end up on the sea anyway? Where your parents, boy?”

“Jake actually. I ended up here since my village had caught a terrible fire. My parents left me in the sea instead of being stuck in the fire with the rest. They thought I might be found.”

“Well, you clearly look like you are somewhere from England.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s been decades since I’ve first stepped on a ship. I bet I’ve travelled around the globe more than there is to travel!” I tried my best to fake a laugh, but his boastful joke made no sense to me. We chatted along a while longer before he said “It’s time to bid the stars goodnight now,” and gave me a wholesome pat on the back. I felt a connection with him, though I couldn’t explain it as we made our ways to the cabins. The others had made a makeshift bed for me out of layered cloth and a cashmere blanket on top. Though it not as welcoming as the one at my now-burnt-down home, I slept like a bag of sand, with the lack of proper sleep in weeks, I felt...

*SPLASH!*

I was woken up with a startle. Not again Mr. Pirates...

“Come on kiddo! We’re here!”

“It’s Jake... and what do you mean by ‘we’re here?’” I picked myself from the bed and dragged my legs that were tied to invisible weights across the floor. I looked over the sides that were suddenly taller than me. They must have been stretched overnight. Or did I shrink? I peeked over the side to see a grey haze with a faint hue of green. “Where are we?” We sailed closer to this Island. Capt’ looked back at me with a grin.

“Welcome to my home country- China!” Captain seemed to have drunk a de-ageing potion. He was jumping up and down frantically to get a better view. We descended the ship, which I later learnt was called ‘Dragon Kite’. “Mumma!” An old lady stood patiently, looking for her son. Captain ran towards her to embrace. I guess captain just beat the record of the tightest bear hug. His mother peeled his body away but pulled back for a spirited kiss on the forehead.

‘I’m so proud of you,’ was what I read from her teary face. Gosh, I felt like my eyes started welling up.

“Let me show you around, Jake!” Captain said. His mother nodded in agreement, he must have told her about me. Capt’ tugged my hand and within an hour, we were in a market place. It was an enthralling place to see, clothes of exquisite fashions, cuisines delicately prepared and huddles of people with different ethnicities. “Welcome to the pirates market! We buy and sell our goods here!”

“I thought pirates were about stealing.”

“Nah, that would just be being a horrible human.”

“Robin Hood wasn’t horrible.”

“Stop making up stuff, we have a business to run.” Captain rushed towards our little assemblage of pirates while I decided to stroll around and have a better look.

A tiny young boy, the age of about seven, sat in the corner. His clothes were torn and hardly any flesh was left on his body. Like me.

“Hey, I know you can’t understand me,” I started off, “but I want you to have this,” I fished out my gold coin. After all, it was just a piece of metal, nothing compared to the value of someone's life. “You need it more than me.” Carefully placing it in his ever so fragile hands, I carefully stood back up, only to meet a passionate pat on the back from Captain.

“You will be a great pirate, boy.”



# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Diocesan Boys' School, Fung, Cheng Kiu Alex – 13*

## Prologue

Historically, Chinese dragon is not only a symbol of imperial power but also strength, particularly control over droughts, typhoons, and floods. Although it is impossible to study the dragon's power is true or not, but for thousands of years, there have been numerous stories, tales, and legends about dragons. In people's mind, the dragon is always mysterious and sacred.

I travelled with the admiral Zheng He and my father, Chen Hai for an expedition to the Indian Ocean in winter five years ago. It was really a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We encountered an incredible incident which was not written in history, but one which I saw with my own eyes.

★ ★ ★

My name is Chen Dan with a nickname, Xiao Dan. I am twenty years old. I have gone sailing with my father since childhood. He has been working as the Captain of the ship sailing with Zheng He in the past six voyages.

“Xiao Dan, I'm going to take the seventh voyage with Zheng He next month,” said Father. “Xuande Emperor has again appointed admiral Zheng He to command the fleet. This expedition is going to have more than three hundred gigantic ships travelling to South China Sea, Indian Ocean and Red Sea. So, they are seeking for twenty-seven thousand men for this expedition.”

“How long will you be away this time?” I inquired disappointedly.

“This is gonna be three years. Do you want to come with me?” asked Father.

“Really?” I exclaimed, overjoyed. “I'd love to come with you! So, what's my role gonna be? A captain like you?”

“Of course not,” he replied. “You'll be the First Officer reporting to the Captain on the Supply ship.”

“Wow! My dream job, First Officer! I'll be responsible for hoisting the anchor and taking care of the fitting out of the vessel and examining whether it is sufficiently provided with ropes, pulleys, sails and all other rigging that are necessary for the voyage, right?” I overjoyed.

“This time I'll be working on the Treasure ship with the admiral Zheng He. Son, make sure you listen to the order from the Ship Captain, okay?” Father said sharply.

“Sure, Father!” I answered cheerfully.

★ ★ ★

It had been 100 days since I left my hometown, Nanjing. In my ship, I gazed up, and saw millions of stars shimmering in the coal-black sky. The moon shone in the cloudless sky with all her gleams. She looked like a glossy dish of silver. The sparkling stars twinkled around the moon and made her more ravishing. The scenery was just so magnificent.

When I was relaxingly looking at this beautiful sky, someone called out my name.

“Xiao Dan!”

It was Ship Captain, Xuefei.

“What's the matter, Captain?” I asked.

“Our supplies are running out after the battle with the pirates. We should replenish the supplies, like livestock, food and firewood on an island and continue exploring as soon as possible. Otherwise, the fleet would not have enough food supply for twenty thousand crewmen,” he said seriously.

“You’ve gotta be kidding, Captain. In this vast and boundless sea, how can we even find an island? You really got such a great idea,” I responded sarcastically.

A dim light rose from the horizons ---- it was dawn. When I gazed upon the surface with my binoculars, I saw an island full of triangular scales. The coastline of the entire island looked exactly like a serpentine bay. I believed that the roofs of the houses on the island were reflected as the triangular scales.

“Captain, Captain, I’ve sighted an island with villages along the coast!” I cried with a shudder.

“Fantastic! Good job, Xiao Dan. Go ahead to take a junk and grab a few crewmen to investigate that island. Carry these gold, silks and porcelains with you and see if you can trade for some supplies. If the place is safe for trading, come back and I’ll report to our admiral Zheng He. Perhaps, we’ll settle that for a short period of time.”

“Yes sir, Captain,” I saluted.

\* \* \*

I quickly jumped onto a junk with a few crewmen heading to the island. When our junk got closer to the land, the picture seemed totally different from what I saw through my binoculars. I couldn’t see any trees and bushes. It’s even uninhabited. The strangest thing was the triangular scales that I thought were rooftops disappeared. When we landed, it was weird that there’s no beach along the coast. The ground was slippery with reflections of our faces like a mirror. White smelly smoke came up from the ground. I had a gut feeling that we were on a dangerous island. We walked about three miles and were perplexed by some squeaky noises around us. Some crewmen were shuddering in fear.

“Hey guys, two houses!” said Taojun, one of the crewmen yelled joyfully.

“They don’t really look like the houses that we saw in other nations. The creepy rooftops are like long needles with pointed claws, doors are in elliptical shapes with no windows,” said Hanxiao another crewman worriedly.

“Don’t worry, perhaps they are just a tribe living on this land. Guys, get ready our finest silk, porcelains and a box of gold. We’re going to have a big trade with the tribe. Let’s move.” I pretended to be calm.

When I stood in front of the door, it suddenly open by sliding to the left. It was weird that no one was standing behind the door.

The inner of house was in pale colour with mirror-liked walls and floor. The walls hung up with uncountable tiny strange cubes. We could see through inside of the cubes. They were blinking in different colours which made us feel dizzy. Then, we hurried along a silent corridor with shuddering fear.

A tall skinny man dressed in a shiny silver, gleaming long hooded robe suddenly showed up in a short distance. We were all frozen to the spot. Hanxiao’s shaky body almost sent him sprawling, and I caught his arm quickly.

I took a deep breath and stammered, “Hey, good...good morning! We’re coming for trading with you.”

“He’d no feedback. Seems... he couldn’t understand our language. Let’s show him our finest silk and porcelains!” said Taojun quaveringly. The strange man walked closer to us with his head looking down. We all kept our wary eyes on him. An uncomfortable premonition of fear pervaded my senses.

The man showed that he wasn’t interested in our finest silk and porcelains. He suddenly reached out and patted on Hanxiao’s shoulder. He then sniffed and whispered to him which we didn’t understand. Hanxiao became muddle-headed and disoriented. Apparently, he was bewitched and bewildered by the man. He lost control of himself and walked away with the tall man.

“Hanxiao! Come back! Come back!” whispered Taojun.

“Wait! Wait!” I shouted to the tall man and tried to stop them. I showed the whole box of gold to him. The shiny gold attracted his attention. He reacted with alacrity by turning around and reaching out his hands. He stopped in front of the gold.

“He likes gold!” said another crewman.

“Hanxiao is in danger. I need to rescue him.” I told myself.

I took a deep breath and rushed to Hanxiao and grabbed him back. All of a sudden, there was an invisible force pushing us and we crashed towards the wall. A cube dropped off from the wall. I picked it up. In a flash of time, his palms glowed and all the gold melted. We froze in alarm and held our breath.

“You guys carry Hanxiao! Let’s run!” I bawled. We all finally climbed on board and heaved a sigh of relief.

★ ★ ★

“Captain Xuefei, it’s a weird island.” I gasped in horror.

“Hanxiao was bewitched by the tall man,” said Taojun quivered.

“What have you traded with the gold, silk and the porcelains?” said Captain furiously.

“A...a strange man melted our gold with his...his glowing palms. The porcelains were all broken when we’re fleeing,” I wailed in fear.

“Take me to the island now!” Captain urged.

“What? We have to go there again?” I shivered.

When our ships almost approached the weird island, something strange happened.

“Where’s the island?” I said in surprise. Suddenly, the sky became coal-black. We all gazed up. Everyone was surprised that a huge thing was slowly hovering above the sky. In the blink of an eye, a huge serpent-like object rushed through the sky and disappeared into thin air. We were stricken into silence and staring in disbelief. Some sailors cried, “It’s a dragon!”

## **Epilogue**

On that night, I looked at the cube that I brought from the weird island. Is the legend of the dragon true? Why did the island disappear? Many questions popped up in my mind. In retrospect, it was a nerve-wrecking experience.

# Ming Treasure Fleet

*Diocesan Boys' School, Lee, Jayden – 12*

I always knew that I would have to serve my nation, but not as honoured as taking part as a young crewmember of the seven voyages of the Ming treasure ship fleet.

The ships were hand-built piece by piece with wooden planks. Apart from the basic accommodations, most of the cabin were converted into storerooms which houses the priceless presents we planned to give away, and other things we received from the other countries, like the hundreds of jars of spices gifted from the leader of Africa. We had been staying on the ship for a long time already. We were assigned to complete different tasks everyday—ranging from scanning the horizon for any pirates or objects that provide an imminent threat, to scrubbing every little surface of the ship with a rag. Crewmates were divided into two groups—the day group and night group. The day group worked in the day and slept soundly at night, and the night group was vice versa. The day group had a more challenging condition to work in due to the scorching sun but were allocated to more straightforward assignments. The night group had a more arduous job, as pirates were more prone to organise a sneak attack at us, so they must be ready to fight at any moment's notice. They also had to complete more wearisome jobs, as the sun wasn't roasting them like a pigling, and the air was more refreshing and cooler. I thought at first that being a part of the day group was going to be so torturous, but with the constant jokes, puns and encouragement of crewmates, I was finally paving a way through all the hardship I suffered. We joked around, talked about ourselves and often had to calm down a mate who was homesick. We had gone through a lot of challenges with our crew mates, which made us learn more about each other and co-operate better. We had gone through a lot of unbelievable stories, and this is my favourite one.

We were on the ship, heading north. The sky was a dark shade of grey, threatening to rain without any notice. The wind was howling ferociously. The sea was in a cranky mood—huge waves crashed upon each other and humongous waves were born. The ship, in all its mighty glory, spurred on despite the harsh blows of the waves. The ship creaked and swayed from one side to another. By then, I was already worrying that the ship might tip, but was assured that the boat was well enough to avoid capsizing. Violent sounds of seawater sloshing and slamming to the side of the boat came into the cabin. The crew were lolling around in the cabin, playing traditional Chinese chess and smoking. Smoke gathered in the air. The chess pieces were jumping up and down like hot potatoes on the chessboard due to the rocking ship. Up on the deck was only Zheng He, navigating the ship to our destination, standing there impossibly like a lamppost, rooted there without even stumbling over. Then the situation deteriorated. The ship lurched even more furiously and sometimes we even lost up sense of being upright. Jars of spices and strands of pearl cascaded down from shelves round us. Some of the crew rushed down to the storage room to check whether the porcelain vases and other gifts were still safe and sound, as it was our meagre ways of extending an olive branch with the leaders of the other far-flung civilizations. Others went to keep an eye on the animals we obtained from the other leaders who willingly gave it to us in return for our presents, which were two brown animals with even browner spots and a stretchy neck, with two tiny sprouts on top of its head. Just in all the middle of the chaos, I peeked out of the window and what I saw was just simply bad news. There was a grey fin protruding out of the water, bobbing around, then it reared up and the entire creature shot out of the water. What most appealed to us was its enormous mouth and bloodstained teeth, which horrified some of us. We all know what it was and what it was capable of, as we had all first-handily seen what happened to a crew member when it he had fallen out of the boat by accident. The grey, pointed and slithery creature had held the member with the enormous jaws and chomped, demolishing its meal in a short matter of time. What we had to endure was not the blood, but the members shriek of pain and agony, which still frequently drifted into my head. The sight of such a bloodthirsty and terrible creature make my skin go cold. My head spun, and I felt dizzy. We all knew that we had to get away as we were sure that those gleaming teeth could gnaw and rip its way into the ship and devour us all. There was a huge stampede as the crowd ran hell for leather to get to the top of the deck and be on higher ground. However, we had a gigantic problem. The wind had slashed the sails into shreds and now they were a tattered mess. We couldn't go forwards nor backwards until we could get a replacement for the sails. My best friend, Ni Hao, shakily suggested, "We can sew our bedsheets together to make a makeshift sail." As if proving us wrong, the side of the ship began to sag and we all lost our centre of gravity. I quickly concluded that the creature must have ripped one of the wooden planks and water was rising to the brim of the empty bottom of the ship. Zheng he, who was still rooted to the same spot, quickly scrapped the idea of using bedsheets to make a sail as we did have the time, and told us that even if our ship sank, we would be all be all-you-can-eat-buffet of the creature, meaning that we had to eliminate the shark until we could solve the problem of the sinking of the ship. We couldn't use our knives, partly because they were only short-ranged, and partly because we had left them in the bar that we had gone to before boarding the ship. We then relied on the only defence mechanism that was built into

the ship—the 5 cannons mounted on each side of the ship. We had only 8 cannonballs, since the government had expected us not to run into trouble as Zheng He was the captain. Turns out he wasn't such a captain at all, or he would have put more protection around the boat. We gingerly inserted the cannonballs into the cannon and ignited the rope. The air around us smelt of burning just as the cannon gave a large bang. The cannonballs spat out simultaneously, just as the ship gave me last sag and completely lost it. It felt like a rope was suddenly cut and we were the falling end of the rope. My heart skipped a beat as I lost my footing. We stood in total astonishment as we saw the first cannonball hit the creature, taking its life instantly, and the other cannonballs lined up behind it. With a dull thunk, they reflected off the cannonballs in front of it and it ricocheted back to the falling boat. We all took an involuntary step backwards due to the cannonballs rocketing towards us. They slammed into the falling side of the boat, punching a dent in the wooden body, and causing the ship to rocket to the other direction. The ship hesitated a bit before settling in its original position, but only temporarily. Zheng He told us to take the opportunity to fix the hole in the bottom of the ship. We ripped out planks from the floor of the deck, and with hammer and nails, quickly leaped down into the water, with our legendary breath-holding skills and incredible water-repelling eyes, we waded to the gaping hole, and used the planks, nails and a hammer to fix the hole. We then went down to the basement of the ship and emptied out all the water by using porcelain vases we planned to give away. We all then stripped our mattresses clean of the bedsheets and using a needle, merged them together into a huge sail. We quickly filled the sail with wind and scampered, in fear that the creature might return. After that incident, we were ordered to keep strict watch everyday day for any of the creatures. If we really can manage to slip away from death, I'll be happy to do it. This incident made us more aware of our surroundings and be prepared for the worst. I hope all the best to us as we continue to embark on our journey.

# Journal of Zheng He, first voyage. (1405–1407)

*Diocesan Boys' School, Poon, Adrien – 12*

July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1405

We have finally set sail! I couldn't believe that emperor Zhu Di entrusted me with all these ships and men. Can you believe that these 280 ships actually contain more than 200 thousand *TongQian's* worth of treasure and 1000 men? So far there's not much weather problems, but Wang predicts that there will be some fearsome tempests as we cross the middle of the sea. I hope none of my men get diseases. That would be catastrophic.

July 22<sup>th</sup>, 1405

It's been a week since my last entry, and we are starting to run into some choppy waves along the Vijayan coast. There has been some water seeping into our grain stores---- we fixed that soon enough. The crew are very cheerful since they are well fed. 2 months left until we reach Champa.

July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1405

Two of my men were caught stealing wine from our stores. I had them whipped on a post to discourage any rebellious crewmen. How dare them! The weather has calmed down a bit, and food is still plentiful. No diseases so far.

August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1405

So my right hand, Wang, had this 'brilliant' idea to hang our wet clothes from the mast so that they could 'dry faster'. Well, I'll tell you what really happened. Half of them got even *more* drenched by the sea spray, and the rest got blown off. I told him that our method (making the men wring out their clothing and putting them in the cabins to dry) was *much* safer and prevented the loss of fine clothing. Oh, and the wind is getting really strong. I commanded the oarsmen to steer closer to shore, so even if we get blown out to sea, we'll not be completely lost.

August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1405

Oh dear---- a mast from one of the treasure ships has been broken off by the wind. 20 of my men were forced to abandon ship and swim to safety to a rope floating by, connected to my command ship. Well, there goes one-fiftieth of our treasure. The cook, Chung Gaot, from the sunken ship got a concussion from the falling rigging. Everyone was sad, since his roasted pigeon was *exquisite*. We won't be eating much good food for a few days, because our other cooks aren't very skilled ones.

August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1405

Finally, the raging gale has subsided---- for how long we don't know. Chung Gaot is still passed out. We gave him herbs that reduce swelling, so that he won't sustain any lasting injuries. The crew are getting dull---they've become bored of dicing and gambling their shoes. We should've hired a storyteller to keep the men entertained, since the men won't work hard if they are bored and tired.

September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1405

It's been 12 days since my last entry. I couldn't write for the last week because the storms hit our fleet hard and blew a couple of men overboard. Luckily, they grabbed onto some floating timber and were saved from drowning. I was also nearly blown overboard, but my hand was entangled in some ropes and that stopped me from going over. My entries are going to be less frequent as the storms get more plentiful.

October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1405

Catastrophe! Some rats have stowed aboard on our ship and the plague is with them. More than 30 of the oarsmen are affected. They had swollen welts all over their body and were vomiting and shivering. Once we give them medicine and root out the rats' hiding place, all should be well.

October 26<sup>th</sup>, 1405

We found the rats' lair--- the inside of a large, hollow log in the oarsmen's cabins. The physicians on our ships predict that the men will require 20 more days to fully recover. Chung Gaot is completely fine now, and our food is great once again. We have nearly reached our destination---- two more weeks!

November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1405

We have reached the coast of Vijaya, Champa! The guardsmen on the coast tower were so amazed of our ships that they stared in awe at them until Wang rang a bell loudly in their faces. They permitted us an audience with their king the next day.

November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1405

We presented the gifts of tea leaves, pandas, bamboo, gold and silk to the king. He was overjoyed, and swore that he would pay homage to China annually. Mission complete!

December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1405

The crew and I all had an excellent time bartering with the locals and exploring Vijaya's cultures, but it's time to go. We prepared our ships and set sail to our next destination: Ceylon!

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Fleet

*Dulwich College Beijing, Jiang, Eddy – 12*

The blazing hot sun shone down onto my bare back, mixing with the putrid scent of rotting wood, causing me to go numb with disgust. I hunched over, and collapsed onto the floor, groaning. “HaiHang! Are you okay there?”, I heard my father ask. I got up and replied: “Yes, I’m fine!”. Ever since I was born, I knew that my father was a selfless person, always volunteering for community projects in our village, giving whatever portions of food he could spare to those who needed it the most and even paying for the others when they had no money. I, on the other side, was an adventurous person. When they looked for volunteers for these voyages across the world, I was one of the first in our village to sign up. In the beginning, my father disapproved of my actions, constantly trying to talk me out of the idea. Eventually, he gave up, and signed himself up too as he would not let me go alone.

Right before noon, the captain, captain Chen, called me to his cabin. He smiled warmly at me and said: “Come, I have something to discuss with you.” He pointed to the chair opposite to him and I sat down. “I have reviewed your recent performance on-board,” he continued, “And I, along with my peers, have decided to assign you to the crow’s nest.” I couldn’t believe my ears: no more errands running, no more cleaning up and even better, getting a more exciting job! I accepted the offer without hesitation and thanked captain Chen. He then sent me off towards my new job. I could almost see myself standing tall upon the crow’s nest, the cool sea breeze blowing my face. I was fully ready for this new adventure!

Things were going well at my new job. The only issue was that I was bored. Nothing interesting was going on as imagined. All that I did every day was keep watch in the scorching sun while the brightness gave me headaches. One day, boredom got to me, and I fell asleep. When I woke up, my mind was fuzzy. However, even that could not blur the scene that occurred in front of me.

There were a dozen or so large ships sailing towards us. Not until they got closer, revealing skull and crossbones painted onto a black flag, did I recognize that they were pirate ships. I remember that once father had educated me about these ships when I was small, and ever since I was afraid to encounter them. But here I was, presented with a fleet of pirate ships. I clambered down from the crow’s nest as quickly as I could and I was just about to run off and warn everybody of the siege, when a sudden impact jolted me off balance and I felt myself hit the deck hard.

They had arrived.

It was pandemonium on the ship. Everyone was running around, screaming “Pirate attack! Get ready to fight!”. Next to me, the captain’s cabin door flung open, and Chen stormed out. He took one glance at me and his anger swelled up. He was just about to explode when Li, the captain’s right-hand man, came running towards us. “Captain, we need you!” he barked. Chen glared at me one last time, and ran off with Li. My first instinct was to run away and hide, but my curiosity of what would happen got the best of me. I ran off after them.

When I learnt about pirates before, I knew they were ruthless, but I had never expected them to be so bloodthirsty. Running towards captain Chen and Li, the scene around me threatened to make me throw up. The stench of dead bodies wafted through the air, making me gag. All around me, there lay bloody corpses of my fellow crewmates and the attackers. What shocked me the most was that all my crewmates’ bodies had small holes in their flesh from reasons I didn’t know. I pulled away from the corpses and wondered nervously whether my father’s body lay with the others, whether he had died in the attack or was gravely wounded and might soon die of his untreated injuries. I tried to ignore it, but the image of my father lying lifelessly on the soggy wooden deck was too hard for me to bear, so I tried to just focus on walking, one step at a time, until eventually, I spotted Li in front of me. Just as I did, Li slumped to the floor, lifeless. I was frozen in fear. Standing behind Li’s body was a pirate who wore an eye patch and held a weapon I could not recognize. He was looking down at the corpse with a smile on his face. When he noticed me, his smile vanished, and he aimed his weapon at me. All of a sudden, I heard a loud bang and instantly, I felt a splitting pain shooting through my shoulder.

I crumbled to the ground. I looked over at my shoulder and saw that the entire area of fabric was stained red with my blood. The pirate walked closer to me and aimed his weapon straight at my head. I could not believe that it would all be over for me. My journey, my future, my life. All because I was stupid enough to

join the voyages. Stupid enough to follow the captain and Li to my death. I closed my eyes, waiting for death to come fast and painlessly. But, it didn't. Suddenly, I heard a crunch and bodies hit the floor. I opened my eyes and saw that father was on top of the pirate, wrestling him down. He only had time to yell "HaiHang, run!" before the pirate shoved him away.

The pain in my shoulder made my mind go numb. I didn't hear anything that father said except for the word "run". I got up and ran away as fast as I could, the edges of my eyes going black with the constant blood loss. After about a minute of running, I slowed down and caught my breath. Once the immediate threat was over, my mind started working again. And then it hit me – what I had just done. At the most crucial moment, I ran away from danger, leaving father behind. All that father had done for me, all he had protected me against, worthless, because I left him to die. I shook my head. I could not be a son like that. Father's expectations of me was for me to become a real man, however, no man abandons others, let alone his own father, in events which could result in death only because he valued his own life more. I turned around, and darted back to father, ignoring the throbbing pain in my shoulder the best I could.

I got back just in time to see father cornered by the pirate, who was reaching for his weapon. I instantly panicked, not knowing what I could do in time to save father. My eyes darted around, but I saw nothing I could use. By then, the pirate was already aiming at father. Without thinking, I launched my body at full speed towards the attacker and tackled him to the ground. His weapon went off, but the projectile pinged harmlessly away. No longer in danger, father reacted, grabbing the enemy's weapon and smacking him hard in the head with it. The pirate's eyes glassed over when he collapsed to the ground. The pain from my wound then got too much to bear, and I blacked out.

I woke up with a start. I was in my bed, a piece of cloth wrapped around my injured shoulder. Captain Chen sat by my bed and smiled when I woke. Seeing my confusion, he started to explain what happened while I was unconscious. He told me that I, alongside my father, took down the pirate captain and made the rest of the attackers retreat. Also, he told me that sadly we only had half of our remaining crew members left. When I asked him what we should do next, he simply smiled, and told me, "Life is just a long voyage, waiting to be discovered."

It has been 10 years since the voyages ended. I am now living a peaceful life in my village with father and mother. I have gone on a few more voyages afterwards, but no one could compare to my first. Although most of the things that happened during the first voyage was a blur, father's motivation throughout the journey stayed with me forever. I've been asking myself ever since where father's courage came from, and I can slowly understand that it comes from his selflessness and his love towards others. I hope to pass these morals onto my decedents, and hope that, with all that father's actions have taught me, I will become a real man.



## Admiral or Pirate?

*Dulwich College Beijing, Lu, Michael – 12*

Autumn sweeps over China, glazing the beautiful maple trees bronze and rustic red. The fourth voyage is set to fly, my enormous wooden ships sitting serenely on the azure sea. By the sides of the ships, cannons, polished to reflect the sun; on the ballast, a huge dragon figurine posed to strike fear into all who mean evil to us. High-spirited and singing, my crew of 5000 well-trained soldiers and sailors await my final instructions.

I watch as the druid cast dragon knuckle bones onto the sandy floor. His eyes are shut with concentration and sweat is dripping down his forehead. Finally, as if pricked by an invisible needle, he jerks his head up and smiles feebly— “All the signs are favorable; the Gods are on your side.”

Another voyage — trading, patrolling, but more importantly, gaining and preserving the respect of foreign countries and traders, accumulated over years and years of hard work and toil. And now we set sail from Palembang, the strait of Malacca.

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Wind blows through the masts of my ship, and the waves lap obediently at my feet. The azure blue of the sea and the sky make it impossible to discern where the horizon starts. Gradually, a small smudge of green in this giant canvas of blue. My crew grows animated, rushing to the front of the boat. Peering at the first sight of land in a month, they holler and whoop. Smiles and cheers break out over the top-deck, penetrating the crusty skin build by weeks of sullen silence.

Stepping off the boat, we are greeted by a group of well-dressed, middle-aged men. They all have that same, tired expression, hidden behind a facade of welcoming and benevolence. Streaks of grey dash their knotted hair, the crow's feet by their eyes and the wrinkles etched onto their faces all tilt upwards as we approach. Behind their mask of all smiles and enthusiasm, I can see that everything they do is tinged with fear. Fear of me and what I represent. The quick glancing gazes at me; the slight tremble of the arm.

Nothing escapes me, nothing escapes us. They are afraid of us, because we control the trade routes, we control what comes in and goes out. With a snap of my fingers, or my name on paper, I can stop goods from coming into their port in an instant.

Though both of us know it is a one-sided affair, the lead trader and I go to a secluded garden to discuss our goods. He is a tall man, his face pocketed with acne scars. Leaning on his delicately carved cane, he speaks in a slow, flaky monotone. “What do you have to offer in exchange for our cotton?”

Soon we are finished, and I go back to my ship. It is clear that this port is stale — simply no one comes to trade here anymore. Their product, cotton, is just not needed anymore — silk, a much better fabric, has been on the market for long now, and at a much better price too.

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My crew and I visited island after island, port after port, extending our reach to even the smallest of ports. We have seen lush islands and barren wastelands, swampy marshes and rolling mountains. For me and my crew, nothing is impossible.

Standing at the prow of my ship, I am proud to see my crew working diligently and efficiently. The synchronized rowing of the oars, the polished decks and the agile rigging-monkeys calling out everything around us. A chorus of voices and sounds fill the air. My crew are the best, the elite of the elite. Suddenly, one of the rigging monkeys shout out, “Ship ahoy!”

A ship? Here? Why, this part of the sea is practically deserted! Squinting against the blazing sun, I peer into the patch of sea my lackey points to. A huge fleet. In the distance, I can barely see the sign imprinted on their sails, but... could it be them? The dragon insignia that strikes terror into the hearts of all of us traders. Or maybe it is not a dragon. Maybe I am mistaken.

Still, isn't it better to be prepared?

I bark out order after order, my crew frantically obeying each with precision: Haul up the mast! Prime the cannons! Get ready to fight!

A grim smile appears on my face — this will be a battle to the deaths.

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“Fire!” A steady line of flame erupts from my ship — lighting up the mast and the prow of our enemy.

Sweat, blood and the stale odor of gunpowder lingers in the air, a foul stench, the stench of death. Drawing closer, they fire off a rally of cannon shots as well. All shots miss.

Our ship draws nearer and nearer — as it does I can clearly see just how few men are on their ship— half of what we have. My men are swarming over their ship, and I whoop, leaping over the side of my ship to join the fray of battle.

Swords and spears clash; roars, yells and screams penetrate the sooty air. I plunge my dagger into the breastplate of a soldier recklessly charging towards me, feeling the squelch as the metals enters the flesh. A fountain of blood erupts out of the wound, and the soldier trampled under the feet of another who take his place. My new adversary swings his spear wildly, exposing the underside of his chainmail. I duck, stabbing swiftly at the unguarded region. A strangled cry escapes his lips. Suddenly out the corner of my eye, I see a stream of armored soldiers flowing from the hull of the enemy's ship — a trap!

"Fall back!" My shout is inaudible over the noise of battle. It is futile to continue. Slashing a foot-soldier down his front — he crumples instantly, I resign myself to the end. Soon, we are all overpowered.

The haughty captain of the ship leers over me, grinning horribly. "So Chen Zuyi, it ends like this. Finally, we cross paths. I knew I would find you. You know, I wasn't even looking. I am simply on a trading voyage, I see you are on the same."

I sneer back at him, "Scoundrel, you know you stand no chance of defeating my crew in a fair fight, so you employ an underhanded ambush to surprise us, do you."

"Underhanded or not, you will be hung."

"Zheng He, you will pay for this!" Fury courses through my veins, replaced immediately by a cool rage, simmering beneath my skin. Is there any way for me to persuade him to release me? "Admiral, why do you attack me? You and I are not so different, we both trade for a living, both have immense fleets, and are both ignored, hated, unwanted. I am a pirate, a castaway, and you? A Eunuch. You will never be remembered, never thought of after your death. You will be forgotten, recorded only in the dusty annuals of each passing year. No family to carry on your legacy, no children to look after you. You wouldn't kill me, a defenseless man? I am just like you!"

"Am I, Zuyi?" By now the soldiers surrounding me has vanished, back down where they came from.

"Perhaps. True, I am a eunuch, but that doesn't mean I cannot do great things. This is my first voyage, and the Yong Le emperor has promised me greater things to come"

"And you believe him? How has he treated you? As a servant, a slave, just another messenger to do his bidding! You are worthless to him, as I am!"

Has it worked? I can see the shadow crossing over his brow, I can almost hear the working of his mind turning this over and over in his head. Zheng He stares at me. His eyes remind me of a snake, waiting to strike. I tilt my head away, only to see my pride ship sinking, burning into its watery grave. The only visible parts are the masts already charred at the sides, smoking and frayed... They are just like the Admiral's — only his has the imperial sign, the dragon on it.

"Is that true Zuyi? Yes, perhaps I will never beget any child of my own, but does one really need a family to be remembered? I will have my own legacy, regardless of whether I leave a bloodline or not. My legacy is defined by my actions and deeds, the people I help, the ports I visit, and the friendships I build. Unlike you. You will only be known as a criminal, remembered by the families of the people you've killed. So no, Zuyi — we are not that similar — perhaps in what we do, but not how we are remembered."

Abruptly, a hood is wrapped around my head, obscuring my vision... *So this is how it ends...*

# Thank You

*Dulwich College Beijing, Rhyu, Suah – 12*

The same hot, sunny days onboard.

The same life.

The same day after day—looting, dividing money, you and the others sneaking back home, waking up early the next morning on repeat. That was your life.

You hated it.

Every time some poor, defenseless stranger fell for your antics, you would feel the same jolt of guilt. He had *earned* this money. He deserved it. Did you really want to cause others pain for yourself?

The answer was, *yes*. Not just because of selfishness.

Even though you couldn't stand stealing, you couldn't afford *not* to. You needed to take care of your *meimei* and your mother. No other family member was capable enough. It was down to you—if you couldn't, you would all starve. To death.

You preferred living, thank you.

Groaning, you rubbed your eyes tiredly as you scanned the sky outside the window. The clouds were a brilliant tangerine–orange, tinted by the sun. The *xiaomus* must have been feeling good.

Your fingers clumsily found your clothes, and you grimaced as you pulled your sleeping robe off. You only had two robes, which was common for poor households, and one was your sleeping robe, so it did get quite smelly.

Fumbling with the knots, you undid the scratchy tie and shrugged the clothes on easily, carelessly looping the knot. A hand stopped you.

“*Jiejie...*” Your little sister mumbled. “You're going out?”

“Yes.” A smile spread across your face, seeing her. “*Minghao*, sleep.”

“I'm hungry.” She whined. “And your knot is wrong, *jiejie*. Let me do it.”

You succumbed as she groggily sat up and started to knot.

“See.” She said sternly. “It goes into it like that. Then you wrap it around this one, see, so it's sturdier.”

Laughing, you embraced her. “I love you, *Minghao*.”

Her small, quick breaths louder in your ear, she sleepily murmured, “Love you too.”

Carefully setting her down, you saw that she had fallen asleep. Your lips brushed her forehead briefly and with one last glance, you stepped towards the door.

You lost track of time.

*Pat, pat, pat.*

You kept running.

*The sooner I finish, the better.* Squeezing your eyes shut, you let the cold *qiufeng* envelop you. The autumn wind was cold, especially against frail clothes. You didn't mind—you deserved it. Deserved all the misery in your life.

Approaching the rendezvous, you slowed down.

Breathing raggedly, you jogged towards the ship concealed behind willow trees. Woody brown and resembling a polished log, it was rather easy to camouflage. A trustful tool. One that helped sustain your family.

Also stolen.

As you walked up to your ship, *Zhihao* greeted you.

“How's your sister?” He asked.

You remembered her small, slender hands working a knot. “Good.” A shrug. “Better than usual, ever since we got that last shipment of wood and steel.”

“Shipment.” Your best friend laughed. “Do you know how rich you sound?”

“Very.” You sighed, running your fingers through your hair. “Most likely the rich are still in bed right now.”

“Of course.” *Zhihao* nodded. “Life's unfair, after all.”

The “light comment” didn't feel like one.

A heavy weight settled on your shoulders as you contemplated,

*Why did it have to be?*

A hundred answers.

*Because we're cursed by the gods.*

*Because I'm a bastard child.*

*Because I'm unlucky.*

"*Minhao.*" *Zhihao* tugged your arm, jolting you out of your daze. "It's time to set sail."

In a trance, you followed.

You strode along the deck, frowning. No ships were spotted, and you thought about having to see your *meimei* empty-handed.

The slapping of feet. You turned to see a crew member rushing towards you, tripping over himself.

"Ship." The member, *Zhixun*, reported.

Your eyes widened. "Ship?"

"Big one." He confirmed. "Riches, gold, spices. Enough to earn money worth a lifetime."

You pursed your lips.

"*Zhixun*, those are king's ships."

He grimaced, turned back. You could imagine cogs turning. His father deemed "shameful" and his mother a woman "infused by *guis*", he longed for survival.

"*Minghao.*" He knew he had struck a nerve. Feeling a pang in your chest, you stared at your sandals, contemplating.

*Zhixun* had a way of saying little words with maximum impact. He'd skirted around everyone's words, he knew words could hurt. He knew to deliver wounds for defense. The others? No better.

This was a ship full of broken people.

This was a ship full of ignored people, China's lowest. This was a ship of unfortunate, unfairly treated people. This was the part of China the emperor hid, for fear of dirtying China. This was the struggling part of China.

You had to do this. Not just for your sister. For the others.

"Follow it." You ordered *Zhixun*.

He nodded, hopeful.

Louder, you shouted, "Follow that ship! Cut it off from the channel, they'll have to backtrack or face us, we'll have the upper-hand. Go!"

Your ship increased speed, diving, as you commanded, right between the channel.

You uttered a prayer.

The ship drew nearer.

Your heartbeat increased.

It lurched, stopping. Men in silk robes cried out, alarmed.

*Another sin*, you thought. *These men will be the ones visiting my dreams tonight.*

Formed by years of practice, the crew vaulted over and landed on the other ship, drawing the men to corners before any reaction. Deciding to join, you leapt over, sighting *Zhixun* fastening the ships together.

"What's this?" Your voice dropped. The scratchy cloth around your face suffocated you, but you didn't unfasten it. Them telling the emperor of your identity meant certain death. A bad thought, not only because of death, but because your *meimei* and your *mama* would be left alone.

The men were in a semicircle, facing your crew. They varied in height and appearance, but all seemed like experienced sailors.

"The Captain?" A man gestured to you. Your eyes flitted over him. The leader.

"Yes."

Behind you, *Zhihao* glared. "Identify yourself. Men from the *Huangdi*?"

"The emperor?" The man chuckled good-naturedly. "Yes. I am *Zhenghe* and this is my... second voyage.

Now, it's only fair if *you* identify yourselves."

"We have the upper-hand." Your smug tone was forced. *Now we're even stealing from good-natured men. He seems nice enough.*

*We have no choice if we want dinner tonight.*

"I assume you are pirates?" *Zhenghe* straightened his sleeves.

Jaw clenched, you looked away, tugging at your own scruffy ones, knowing that you didn't *want* to pirate.

*Zhihao* nodded for you, brushing his black hair back and glancing at you. "That's obvious, no?"

"You're..." Captain *Zhenghe* gestured at the poorly dressed crew, at your ship, then finally at your gaunt frames. "...poor people."

You lifted your chin. "Poor, but not without dignity." Glaring. "Reveal my identity and my best man will stab you in your sleep."

“Rich, but not without dignity.” The captain retaliated. “Understood.”

You untied the scarf and dropped it.

“There.”

Petrified.

“You...” the man seemed at a loss for words. “You’re a *haizi*. A... *xiaonuer*.”

“So?” Scowling.

“Why is one so young risking themselves?” Stunned, he guiltily compared his fancy attire to yours.

“I have no other option.”

“The emperor allows this?” He looked outraged. “You are children! You must be protected!”

“Cruel times.” You warily studied him—that had been an unexpected reaction.

“You do not have education? Better clothes? Luxury?”

You darkened. *Zhenghe* said of things nobody on the ship could afford, things he thought other people could afford but actually could not. “Not everyone can live luxuriously and wear silk. What I’m doing now is for survival. There is no *choice* upon the matter. Unlike you, who’s been offered everything on silver platters, I must do anything to support my family.”

Silence.

“Answering you, Captain, I cannot afford *luxury*. It’s a cruel world.”

*Zhenghe*’s eyebrows knit. “Take it.”

Astounded, you snapped towards him.

“Take it.” He repeated. “Take everything. I cannot stand to watch youth live agonizingly while I am resting at my home with unnecessary things. Take it.”

“I...” It was your turn for silence. Your mouth moved wordlessly like a *yu* out of water.

“Yes...” *Zhenghe* looked distressed. “Not enough...Please, I wish you luck with gifts.” He walked forwards and pressed something into your hand—a jade hairpin, embroidered with gleaming gold. “This was for a friend’s wife, but I see you need it more.” He closed your fingers over it. “You carry wisdom, young one.”

“I...thank you.” You bowed. “I’m in your debt.”

“No.” He replied. “The country is in yours. I am in yours. Thank you for teaching me. Thank you for sharing your wisdom. Thank you for opening my eyes.”

“You flatter me.” You responded. “Until we meet again.”

“Until we cross paths.” He bowed. “*Tianfei* be with you.”

Then he retreated to his cabin.

“*Tianfei* be with you.” You responded, and turned, swinging over to your ship.

“*Zhihao*.”

“Yes?”

“No more stealing.” You said in realization.

He broke out grinning. “No more.”

And the two of you watched the sunset, the peace settling at last.

# A Shril Cry

*Dulwich College Beijing, Trivedi, Suvarn – 11*

A shrill cry echoes throughout the sleeping chambers and wakes me up.

Footsteps rapidly rush down the corridors of the ship, jostling my bunk from side to side.

I hastily sit up in confusion and nick my ear on the sharp edge of the bunk, unsteadily gawking at the chaos that is ensuing through the ship. I rush out of my room and glance around at the rusted wood and metal corridors. Officers suited in green stand blatantly at either end of the hallway, commanding orders and harshly ushering workers up the stairs and onto the main deck. Workers are racing down the corridors, hurriedly packing their little amount of belonging and wearing their special gear, the ones used in an onboard emergency. I immediately realize what the commotion is.

The ship is being attacked.

I swivel around and glance at the array of battle gear set out on the side table of the room, laid out next to the painted wood picture of my mother. I pick the painting up, gazing at her eyes through the smeared wood and I know I must go on and into battle, for his sake. She came from an extremely poverty-ridden family and had chosen to abandon me for money. My father however, is onboard the ship with me working as an entertainer for the luxury of Zheng He, the captain of the ship. He is our family's only source of money.

Pain jolts down my back. An official is standing by my dorm and whipping me with a wooden stick, yelling at me for my lack of speed. I promptly grab my red and white gear off the cracked and splintered surface of the side table and suit up ready for what is about to happen.

I step out into the outer hallway and see that it is completely empty. Sounds of heavy footsteps and the lugging of weapons means that preparation of battle has already begun. Hurriedly, I run down the corridor and up the rickety stairs to the main deck, as I know I must succeed in battle. Rumors and tales of soldiers being viciously beaten after being cowards in battle have been passed among the soldiers. As I nervously survey the turmoil that is taking place upstairs, I reluctantly climb up and into the weaponry room to pick up my weapons: a simple dagger and a sword. A porthole sits on the rusted wall behind me and shows a sight beyond belief; the Manchurian's ship, almost twice the size of ours, resting upon the water next to us no more than 300 feet away.

A sudden blow rattles the ship, shaking the worn-out walls. On spur of the moment, I rush up to the main deck and wield my sword. The attack has begun.

In orderly chaos, the full force of the fleet military charges towards the opposing force and creates a sound as loud as an explosion from a cannon. As I run across the wooden floor, something catches my attention, lurking in the corner of my eye. A dark, almost distinguishable figure is climbing down the rear stairs of the ship, cautiously disappearing from view behind the wooden barrier that separates the opening of the stairs and the main deck; I am aghast. Not fighting in battle is as bad as killing the captain in this ship. I sneak quick glances around me, and then slowly back up away from the battle and towards the stairs.

Crouched, the ringing and concurring sound of outraged war cries and the killing of men drowns out my footsteps as I discreetly walk over the patterned floor, filled with paintings of Chinese women and designs which guide me to the stairs.

Taking a deep breath, I exit the main deck and take slow steps down the stairs.

The sound of footsteps echo throughout the chamber and continue echoing as the figure walks just a few meters in front of me. The caved-in walls of the room seem to stare down at me as I tiptoe past the intricately designed walls, careful not to make the wooden floorboards creak. I am in awe of the figure, knowing the bravery or stupidity he has to leave the battle and go back into the ship. But then again, I am too.

Abruptly, he pauses at the end of the corridor in front of the pantry, where the ship's monthly and sometimes yearly food supply is stored, an essential element to the coordination of the ship. He swivels around, facing the open door of the pantry and darts inside, disappearing inside as quickly as he had gone down the stairs. I gasp. Why is he in there and what could he possibly be doing?

Unanticipatedly, a heavy wave of footsteps passes over the roof creating a loud, deep noise which unexpectedly startles me and knocks me over into the corner of the corridor.

I freeze. A rustling sound is coming through the open door of the pantry and deep, low grunts which seem to be coming from the figure which I can now distinguish as a sleek-bodied man, with lengthy legs and a slight limp in his right foot, as I can only see the back side of his body. He cautiously looks around the pantry, and then slowly reaches out to pick up a single biscuit, cocking his head and examining it carefully.

He reaches his hand out again but this time he picks up the whole stock supply of biscuits and while observing the biscuits queerly, he cocks his hand back and throws them out of the window with his full force.

Startled, I stumble backwards into a wall, scratching myself against a splinter. I grimace in pain, holding back my voice as I know it will give my presence away. The food, the only thing that the crew live on, is being thrown away by him? The ship could be a hundreds of miles away from land, yet the person is throwing the food away?

I hastily look back at the room, now dotted with crumbs. More than half of the food is now gone, laying deep within the sea, far from return. The figure is continuously breaking apart packages and packages of food, each time disposing of them in the vast and endless ocean.

The figure makes a sudden movement and gropes around his silk belt to reveal a thin but relatively short needle, no longer than the span of his hand. Curious, I watch in awe as he grasps the needle tightly and shuffles over to the edge of the room near the open porthole, shuddering as he does so. Peculiarly, he takes a deep breath and raises the needle up high and jabs it in a downward motion through the wooden floor. A small trickle of water slowly gushes out from the newly made hole in the floor.

In delayed and sudden realization of what he has done, the figure drops the needle and careens backwards towards the open and dilapidated door of the pantry. The room is starting to flood and is submerged to the height of the doorstep. I nimbly run through to the pantry, tackling the figure with my full force, restricting his breath and wrapping a linen drape around his face, covering it. Eventually he stops struggling and lies on the drenched floor, breathing heavily. I begin dragging him across the soaking wet floor.

An abrupt and sudden sound echoes out from the right side of the hallway, shaking the floors and the walls. Zheng He, the commander and the captain of the ship is standing a few feet behind me, a sullen expression covering his face.

“Hand him over to me,” he announces. “I will deal with him separately.”

Reluctantly, I step backwards, and follow the captain’s orders, a flurry of emotions engulfing me.

Zheng He harshly escorts the figure up the stairs to the execution room, beckoning me to come with him.

Hesitantly, I step down and walk through the corridor with my head down as a sign of utmost respect.

Shaking, he draws a long and sharpened sword from his belt and raises it high above his head. He singlehandedly rips the linen drape off the figures face to reveal...

My father. Lying on the floor, about to be executed, is my father.

“Wait!” I cry out, bewildered by the occasion taking place in front of me. I run towards my father and place a hand over his body.

“Yo—Yo—You don’t understand,” he says, tears streaking down his face.

“I work for the Mongol government. I was just following orders,” he stutters, backing into the nearby wall.

Zheng He pushes me aside and readies his sword above his ear.

And with one final motion, he swings it down and plunges it deep into my father’s chest.

# The Ming Treasure Voyages

*ELCHK Lutheran Academy, Man, Hilary – 12*

Pirates have the talent to steal gold and use it themselves, my name is Xalian and that's what happened to me. When I was born, my father had no money and we were poor. Everything happened so fast but I can tell you a little bit about what happened; so when I was 2 years old, my father left us and joined to pirates to steal gold, they searched for many many places. Succeeded and tried to steal more; when it was my 11th birthday, I made a wish that my dad would come back! Guess what, he did.

My dad came back with a bunch of money, almost enough for a living. I didn't want that because all the money he took, are all from the pirates. My father took the money because he made a deal with the pirates that my father would give his first son or daughter to the pirates. That's what he did, sold me to the pirates when I was 11. That's why I say everything went so fast.

Now, I am stealing gold as the pirates told me to because it has just been 2 years since my dad sold me to the Ming Treasure Voyages but they treated me like one of the Ming treasure voyages! They took care of me, gave me food and they would play with me to entertain me because at first, I didn't know who were they. I am happily stealing gold but something happened while going to China.

When we were celebrating how much gold we stole, the people from China saw us and wanted to fight us. I was devastated and very frightened because I froze like a snowman. I panicked and almost had a heart attack, pirates told me to stay on the boat, I did what I could to keep myself safe, everyone knew that giving up was better to fight the Chinese people. I took a big risk and did something magical, none of the pirates could have done it!

What I did was I stood up, got out of the boat... and... I got captured by the Chinese people! I blacked out because one of the Chinese people shot me. This was the first time we failed to steal gold, even worst, I even got questioned by the Chinese people, good thing I know Chinese! It was really scary, I was terrified by them. They asked me a lot of questions and I explained it, let's say that it went bad but better than imagined because my Chinese is really bad. The pirates, that said that I can call them my family, were waiting for me. Well for my case, I answered all these questions asked by them with one answer, I had no idea that it would actually answer all their questions but it still did. I said: "Please help us with our poorness for us Ming Treasure Voyages..."

We sure will thank you when we get the money, if you don't help us, I really need help with my family... Please! Will you help us, I respect that you say no because we are not your close friends or family... We... r...really nee...d yo...ur help!" That was what I really said to the Chinese people, after the Q n A session, this is what I said to the pirates: "I was stammering all the way in Chinese, you guys don't know help scary that was! I am now just 15 and you guys don't even save me and help me with my Chinese, it's a good thing that my real family taught me some of it only!" That was the first time I have ever called the pirates my family, I know that they are not really but I at least need to tell the Chinese people that I am very close to the pirates.

Now that I have been through that horrible thing, we had another problem... One of the pirates has been killed! Not just any pirate, it's the one pirate that has actually accepted me as his family. I remember that he would always say: "Xalian, my boy, how will I live without you, you know my body, it stays very strong everytime I see you, I hope you will accept yourself into pirates like us. Your father was the bravest man when he gave you to me because he knew that his wife was a bad influence for you, I am sorry that you got to live with your horrible mother! Staying here will give you a better life, no one will harm with me protecting you!" I don't get why he has to say these same words every time when I was younger, it takes about 1 minute to say it! Now I understand a little bit why he had to say it.

We had to attend a funeral for this pirate. I will never forget how he treated me before. These are some of the memories that I will never forget. One day, I told my fellow pirates about something; I said: "Hey Mr pirate, I need to say something to you. I actually feel homesick. The only thing that had kept me from being



homesick is that pirate that had taught me lots. I am so sad now that he had been killed! I need to take revenge for his death, he was a loyal person before he even died! But for now, I need to see my family, discover the truth why that Pirate said that my mother was a bad influence for me... So I need your help with doing that, I live in Scotland and I have never seen my parents since I am 12. I am now 18 if I didn't tell you yet, sorry about that. Anyways, the pirate that died is called Captain Rod, the pirate I talked to is called Pirate K. I don't know anyone of them since I don't talk to them much...

Now, we have arrived in Scotland and I finally got to see my family. I asked my father some questions privately because I didn't want to say it in front of my mom. I asked: "Dad, why did you lie a few years ago about mom being a bad influence? You definitely know that she is not the kind of doing bad things!" My dad heard me and replied: "I did what I had to do to keep you away from mom! You were the most beloved person and I was poor, no one cared about me, your mom only loved you! You have to go before I change my mind and kill you! **YOU ARE NO ONE TO COMPARE TO SON, YOU WILL NOT WIN ME!**"

Of course! Dad killed Captain Rod, not mom, everybody I visited lied to me! Captain Rod lied to me to keep my dad safe from not letting me know and did what's best to get out of my dad's way! Mom knew that dad was possessed by a ghost! I finally understand why everybody lied to me! I really should not live on this earth anymore! Suddenly, someone behind me said: "Xalian, you are too blinded by your stupid friend rod. You must know, killing yourself will stop your father being possessed but Rod just had to get you out of the way! This is all a misunderstanding.

We, Ming treasure voyages, must not fight back anymore, before, we stand our ground. Now, we collapsed but we must now do nothing and nothing will happen to us anymore! Just don't fight back. My family got back together and I became a spirit, a good. I watch the Ming Treasure voyages to see if they do anything bad. They must now! This is my story. We don't know the future but this ended well.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*ELCHK Lutheran Academy, Man, Kaitlyn – 13*

*It is safe to say that the majority of people in the world know about the cold-hearted, ruthless, greedy and vicious pirates that sailed across the seas, looking for treasure in foreign countries to unrightfully claim as their own.*

*What the majority of the world doesn't know about, is that there was a time where there were voyages that carried treasures like pure gold and fine silk for the voyagers to give away as a gift, perhaps to the nobles of their country, perhaps to the poor as an act of kindness.*

*This is the story of Qiao, a young boy from the rural parts of China, and his adventures with the Ming Treasure Fleet.*

Qiao, a thirteen year-old boy, used to live in a small cottage near a worn-down town in the Northern parts of China. His father constantly worked in the fields, trying to provide enough crops for the family while his older sister, Yu, spent hours spinning wool into cloth to trade for chicken and pork. His mother had an illness and was very weak, she never stayed out of her bed for more than two consecutive hours.

One day, a stranger offered Qiao a very strange job, which ensured a much better life for Qiao's family, for he would receive a lifetime's worth of gold as a reward afterwards. He couldn't say no.

From that day on, Qiao became a voyager of the Ming Treasure Fleet.

Along with his voyage friends, Qiao was taught swordfighting and hand-to-hand combat. They were trained to become stronger, they were taught to swim, and were even taught stealth. For two years, it was all 'wake up, train, eat, sleep and repeat' for Qiao and the other newcomers while the more experienced voyagers got to sail around the seas, exchanging treasures with many different countries.

Qiao's first voyage was when he was fifteen. It got him very excited. He's heard countless stories from his seniors and older voyagers about how beautiful it was out in the seas, watching the sun as it rises or sets in the horizon, and how different yet unique the people from faraway countries were. Qiao has always wanted to see all that for himself.

As Qiao expected, he absolutely loved his time sailing through the crystal blue waters. The sky was always clear, the sun warmed his skin everyday, and the cool sea breeze carried a little savoury taste.

For most of the time, the Ming Treasure Fleet successfully received beautiful items from foreign regions and countries. Qiao and his friends were even able to create positive bonds with many of the countries and places they visited. His life as a supposed 'pirate' wasn't that bad...

... or so he thought.

About three years of being on board, Qiao faced a new side of what he considered the time of his life.

The Ming Treasure Fleet sailed further into the great sea, and came across new land. It was mostly as dry as Qiao's hometown. Exotic-looking animals scurried across the plains, and for the first time, Qiao saw people who looked rather different from him. These people had darker skin and curly hair, and unlike the Chinese culture, half of their skin was exposed. They had white marks on their faces and body.

As usual, Qiao and his friends went up to the foreigners and started negotiating with them. The people of this land stared at the voyagers of the Ming Treasure Fleet, and started muttering inaudibly. Qiao figured these strange people did not understand a word he was saying to them, so he took some treasures off the ship to show the strange people, hoping they understood him finally.

Instead, like a herd of animals, these strange people ran for the ships behind Qiao and his friends, taking all the valuables meant for the Emperor of the Ming Dynasty.

The voyagers were left with no choice but to fight against these strange people, in the hopes of retrieving their valuables back.

Qiao finally understood why he needed his two years of physical training. Because things can get out of hand like that very moment.

Finally, the voyagers were able to return the stolen treasures to their ships, and set sail back home. Qiao was left out of energy after his near-death experience. Those strange people were much taller and stronger than he was. It was very fortunate that Qiao and his friends were armed.

The older voyagers must have avoided talking about possible fights to keep his positive attitude.

Qiao was fast asleep in the cabin he shared with five other voyagers when a sudden roar of thunder woke him up.

Merely half-awake, Qiao and his cabinmates stumbled their way out to the front deck of their ship, where they saw lightning light up the pitch black sky. The whole crew ran around frantically, letting down the sails and removing seawater that flooded the front deck with large buckets, trying to minimize the damage as huge waves hit the ship so hard that the whole structure shook and wobbled, as if it was going to break apart at any moment--

And then, it did.

All the voyagers aboard that ship were thrown into the freezing salt water. Qiao immediately looked for a floating piece of the broken-down ship, and pulled a few other voyagers to his little safety island.

There Qiao and his few friends were, adrift in the middle of nowhere.

Qiao did not remember falling asleep that night, but he remembered waking up to the glaring sun shining over his face, blinding him. He found himself washed up onto a deserted island.

All the other voyagers on that ship were either floating in the middle of nowhere, or at the bottom of the sea. Either way, there was no sign of them, even those who he managed to save that night.

Four days has passed, and Qiao was about to lose all hope until another ship of the Ming Treasure Fleet showed up.

Qiao did everything in his power to attract the attention of any of the voyagers on board, and eventually was able to get on board of the ship. He recognized a few of the voyagers on board. They were from the same ship as Qiao.

At least a few of them survived.

As promised, Qiao was rewarded with gold and silk when he got back home. His mother was finally cured from her illness and Qiao's family no longer had to live in near poverty.

Yes, Qiao was heavily rewarded--

--But he was also scarred with the terrifying experience of the fight with those strange people, and the fear he felt as he witnessed the ship he was on fall apart.

*The Ming Treasure Fleet are recognized today as one of the first explorers of the world, and many Chinese that know about the Ming Treasure Fleet look back at them and praise them for their bravery, kindness and devotion towards what they do.*

*If we were half as devoted, half as kind and half as heroic as the people were back then, the society would've been filled with positivity and love.*

# Deep Trouble

*ELCHK Lutheran Academy, Ng, Hayes – 14*

“Hayes, this is insane,” my friend Penny whispered. “We shouldn’t be here.”

“Too late,” I whispered back. Sneaking into my Uncle’s forbidden room was probably a bad idea.

My name is Hayes Rogers. Penny Haywood and I are both thirteen. We’ve been best friends since primary school.

Here we are, standing in Uncle Robby’s private quarters. I turned my head around, trying to see in the room. Although it was a bright day outside because there was no light switch in the room, it was so dark I thought I was inside a chalkboard.

We arrived at my uncle’s lighthouse two days ago in a tiny seaside village called Saint Martin Cove. It was exciting at first until Uncle Robby told us about the forbidden room. Well, I guess that’s why we’re here.

I led the way front. It was very dim. I couldn’t even see my fingers.

“I’m not sure about this,” Penny whispered. “What if he comes home and finds us? We’re dead meat!”

My mom says Penny think too much. She says if Penny were a superhero, she’d be Worry Woman.

“No worries,” I reassured her. “He said he’ll be back at afternoon.”

But we were both drawn to this room as if it pulled us like a magnet.

“Hayes, there’s nothing to see,” Penny said. “Let’s go, we’re outta here.”

I probably would have listened to her advice and leave the room if I had known what was about to happen next. But I didn’t know I was about to enter the most frightening adventure that will twist my life forever.

Then, in deep shadow, something came into focus. A wooden chest with carvings of mermaids on the sides stood in the room’s middle.

I pointed. “Hey look, a treasure chest!” My voice sounded hollow in the small room.

Our shoes scraped on the creaky wooden floor as we stepped up to the chest. The wooden chest was painted brown. A rusted lock hung from the lid.

“Maybe this chest has a legit treasure in it,” I said. “And Uncle Robby keeps it latched to make sure it’s safe.”

“Wait for a second, what if there is a curse on it?” Penny said.

“You’re sounding like Uncle Robby.” I teased her. “Since when do you believe in evil curses?”

She shrugged and bumped me in the back. Hard.

I stumbled forward and crashed to the chest. “OWWWW!” I let out a painful howl.

The lock snapped open easily.

“I’m sorry,” Penny said.

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry,” I climbed back on my toes. “You did that on purpose, now help me push this bloody lid.”

Penny and I both grabbed the latch and clicked it open. Then we gripped the lid and pushed it up.

It made a popping sound as it came loose—and we swung the heavy lid up.

Sssssssssssss.

I took a few seconds to find out what was that sizzling noise. Then I saw a smoky mist shooting up from the chest. I felt it drift against my face. I staggered back, choking.

I whipped both hands wildly, trying to clear the mist away. (I know I’m a dumb person)

“I—I can’t breathe!” I whimpered. Pressing my hand over my nose.

The sickening fog swept around us. In seconds, the mist spreads all over the room.

“Ohhh,” Penny groaned. “I think I will die!” Her shoulders were heaving up and down.

My eyes blazed. I could taste the pungent fog on my tongue. I felt sickish. My stomach gurgled. My throat tightened.

I’ve got to close the chest, I decided. If I close the chest, maybe this disgusting mist will stop spurting up. I crawled on the floor till I found the chest. The acerbic fog twirled around us for a few seconds more. I helped her up.

She blinked several times, then turned. “Thanks.”

She straightened her sweater and jeans with both hands. “Let’s go.”

For once I agreed on her point of view.

I followed her to the door. Halfway across the room, I turned back.

Gazed at the room.  
And gasped.  
“Penny—look!” I cried.

Penny let out a startled cry.  
Where am I? I wondered.  
My heart was pounding like a drum. I took a deep breath.  
We were not in the forbidden room anymore. We were in a ship cabin!  
There were four different rooms in the cabin. An old-fashioned magnetic compass stood on a table in the middle and some clothes were scattered on the floor.  
“Maybe, somehow, we got sent back to 1400s,” Penny said, Making a confused look. “And we’re in one of the pirate ships are on the sea.”  
I gave her a shove. “That’s great, Penny. I knew I could count on you to look on the bright side. How did you know this is a pirate ship?”  
“Look yourself,” She pointed left.  
I turned my head around. It led to another room. A dark figure stood in the doorway. He strolled out of the room. He wore a worn-out pirate uniform.  
He had large brown eyes. His moustache was as brown as his hair. He pulled on a tricorn hat as he walked toward us.  
He squinted, first at Penny, then at me. “Have ye arrived?” he said in a low, cool voice. “I wasn’t expecting ye till later.”  
“Uh...” I said, feeling my voice tremble. “Who are you?”

“Well, my name is Captain Jack Wong,” he said. “We’re about to rob the Ming Treasure Ships that are incoming. Wanna come?”  
“No!” Penny cried. “We’re not pirates!”  
“Y’all don’t wanna meet my bad side.” Captain Jack said impatiently.  
Was that a threat? Or he’s just trying to scare us?  
“If ye wanna go back to your uncle’s lighthouse safely,” he said, lowering his eyes on me. We have to help him.  
He brought us to the upper deck. Ocean waves crashed against the ship’s side. The ship rocked unsteadily.  
“Just tell us why are we here!” I shouted. My skin prickled with horror.  
“I brought ye here for a reason,” Captain Jack leaned towards me. “I’ve met ye uncle’s ancestor a long time ago. He gave me a treasure chest and said if I need any help, just open the chest. I’m the only one left on this ship, and I needed BIG help. So, when I opened the chest ye came here.”  
I stared at him with my mouth open. Has he gone bonkers?  
He started out at the sea using his Dutch telescope. “I guess the Ming treasure ship sped away along with the treasure,” he said sadly. “I guess I have to make you walk the plank. I can’t have any witnesses telling the truth.”

“You can’t do that!” We both shouted in horror.  
He took a step forward, arms stretched.  
I was terrified, but not too scared to move.  
We both bolted to the ship cabin and ran through the curving tunnel. Our shoes clapped loudly on the wooden floor. It sounded as if a thousand kids were running from a pirate!  
My legs felt rubbery and weak. But I forced myself to run.  
We ran through the dark tunnel, following the curve of the walls. Penny leaned forward, her arms stretched in front of her as she ran. As we turned again, her legs were pumping hard, and she was ahead of me.  
I glanced back.  
Was Captain Jack following us?  
He was close behind, his long brown hair flapping behind him.  
A wooden chest came into view up ahead.  
The chest! The chest that brought us here!  
An idea suddenly popped into my mind. Captain Jack said if he needed help, he will open the chest and wait for help to come. If we dive into the chest would we be able to get out of here?  
It was a wacky idea, but it was worth a try.

Up ahead, the wooden chest from the open doorway grew larger.  
Penny was running hard, uttering a gasp with each step. Running as fast as I could.  
“Penny, dive into the wooden chest!” I cried with exhaustion.  
“I don’t know what you are talking about, but let’s do it!” Penny shouted breathlessly.  
I didn’t turn around. But I could hear the loud footsteps of Captain Jack close behind me.  
“Ye can’t run away! Just give up!” Captain Jack screamed.  
Go, Penny, go! My chest felt about to burst. But I ran harder, desperate to catch up, To reach the chest, To leap into the wooden chest to safety.  
Penny let out a cry and did her best long jump and leapt inside the chest! Then I ran as fast as I can and leapt inside the chest after her.

I sensed a cold wave wash over me. My whole body felt soft and quivery.  
I bent my knees and tilted from side to side as the chest rocked. Penny stumbled onto me.  
Are we coming home?  
Wave after wave washed over me. I felt as if I were falling through them... dropping through the sky.  
Then it all stopped. I stood perfectly still, listening to the silence.  
I opened my eyes. And gazed into a solid white blur.  
I shook my head. Slowly, the whiteness faded away.  
I blinked. Once. Twice. My vision came back.  
I was sprawled in my bedroom at Uncle Robby’s lighthouse. Penny laid beside me, bemused. Gawking at my bed and the dresser beside it.  
“Oh, wow!” I cried.  
We were back at my Uncle’s lighthouse!  
We went tearing down the stairs. I burst into the kitchen.  
Uncle Robby was at the sink, brewing a cup of coffee. His face filled with surprise as we came flying into the room.  
It was all too much, too frightening, too crazy. I struggled to catch my breath.  
“Well, well. It was a busy day,” Uncle Robby said. He squinted at Penny and me. “How are you kids doing? Sorry I didn’t check in sooner. Didn't notice where the day went! Hope you aren’t bored.”

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*ELCHK Lutheran Academy, Wan, Jove – 14*

Pirates. Pirates are thieves on giant ships who blunder and kill for their own desire. In the 1400s, I had experienced meeting and even fighting these people many times. Pirates ruled the seven seas doing all those despicable and diabolical things just because they wanted to, but I too was also a “pirate”. On the contrary, I wasn’t stealing or murdering innocent lives, but I did the exact opposite. My crew and I were carrying cargoes of gold and silk and other precious items for the captain and the sailors to give away as gifts, but I wasn’t always part of the crew, so here’s how my journey began.

Back then, I was a young boy who had a poor childhood. I didn’t have a good house to live in or a family take care of me. Ever since my father left the family to earn money for my mother and I, we had been very lonely ever since. Till this day he had never come back and presumed missing after a couple of years. Unfortunately my mother died shortly after due to a deadly disease before my journey began, so I decided to head out all by myself to live on my own by starting a new life with some new people. After I packed my stuff in a little backpack, I journeyed off to the shore to begin my journey. When I arrived at the docks, I saw some sailors preparing to sail off into the sea with some silk and gold. When I asked the sailors whether I can sail along with them, they immediately declined my offer and asked me to leave. The second I turned around and walked away, the captain of the ship asked me to come back and was kind enough to let me journey with them, so after that I went the captain’s giant ship and started our voyage across the seven seas.

The first couple of weeks were quite boring to say the least, there was hardly anything to see or do in the middle of the ocean, no land no hostile threats in our way. After the first couple of weeks, we started to reach a land which is known as India. When we arrived on the shore, we docked our ship and took some of our goods we brought before we started our journey. Unfortunately, there were some locals who thought we were pirates who were trying to attack them and steal their resources, so I decided to inform them that we were good pirates who give but not steal. The locals stopped and decided to trust us, so the captain and the sailors gave them some of our gold and silk as gifts while they return some gold for our kindness. After we made peace and allied with each other, we setted off into the sea once again to journey to more other places. Because of me introducing ourselves to the locals in india, the captain decided to rank me as the right hand man of the captain, making me an important person in the crew.

Several days had passed and we are once again lost in the sea. The clouds in the sky became grey and it started to rain, but out of nowhere came a ship full of pirates looking for gold. Not long after, the pirates started firing their cannons at us while we secure the goods we brought with us. The captain quickly open a secret armory beneath the ship with tons and tons of weapons stored inside and ordered us to grab a weapon and fight back. In a blink of an eye, the captain yelled, “BRACE!” as the pirates rams our ship and prepares to board it. I was anxious and frightened of the fighting going on, so I decided to run into the safe room of the ship, but as soon as I opened the door one of the pirates grabbed my shirt and took me as hostage during the battle. Fortunately, one sailor in our crew took down the pirate who was taking me hostage and cut down the ropes that anchored us to the enemy pirate ship and started to sail away as soon as possible. At first I thought he looked familiar, then I found out that brave man who saved me for the pirate was actually my father. He too recognises me and we were reunited after all those years. After the dust cleared, we found some of the bodies of our crew lying on our ship. The captain carried the bodies and placed them on the deck of ship to remember the loss of our fellow men who sacrificed themselves for protecting the goods we were carrying, this tragedy however didn’t stop us from journeying on, so we kept sailing until we found another country.

In the following month after the attack of our ship, we arrived to a beautiful country known as africa. When we settled on shore, I saw some of the greatest scenery I had ever seen in my entire life. There were beautiful plants and trees around the land with some wild zebras walking around. After some journeying through the jungle near the dock, we found a small village full of native people. Unlike the locals in India, there natives were kind and let us into their village. The captain grabbed the box full of goods and

gave it away to the natives in the village, the natives were so delighted that they invited us to spend the night in their village. After a good night sleep, my crew and I woke up as the sun was rising, such a beautiful and unforgettable scenery. At the end we parted ways with the natives we allied with and sailed off to share the rest of the goods we have in our ship.

In the following years, the crew and I shared more of our goods to other countries, but as time passed I had decided to part ways with the crew since I finally found my family so my father and I left the crew and started a new life on land. Before we left, the captain gave us the last bit of the the goods as we left the people who took care of me. I will never forget that crew of the pirates who give rather than steal, they are the people who took care of me as I grew up and taught me the ways of giving and forming an alliance with others. So the people today should stop all the fighting and learn to make peace each other, less violence and more peace. As historian looked back on the crew I was with and truly believed that China “ruled the sea” back then, ruling as in forging a relationship with the countries we have been to, so spread the word, you don’t always have to fight there’s always another way. Till this day I still dreamed the day I would reunite with these band of pirates again, hope my dream will come true.



# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*ELCHK Lutheran Academy, Wong, Hayley – 13*

Pirates. We've all seen the movies of one-eyed, peg-legged pirates who rob and plunder ships at sea. But this image isn't exactly accurate. Back then, I too was a "pirate", however, I wasn't killing innocent lives for my own desire; in fact, my crew and I actually carried cargoes of gold, silk, and other valuable items to trade and give away as gifts. But things weren't exactly just plain sailing for me... here is how the journey began.

On June 29th, 1429, the Xuande emperor ordered for the 7th and final voyage of the Ming Treasure Voyages. He appointed general Zheng He to command the fleet. I had been living with my older brother who was appointed to be on the ship. But just after my older brother was appointed, he got ill and passed away. Back then, I was a peasant girl who dreamt of reaching the different corners of the world. I loved exploring and I was very brave. Although girls weren't exactly allowed on the ship, I had to follow my intuition and reach for my dreams. I disguised myself as my brother, and the guards who guarded the main gates were too stupid to recognize that I was a girl. Then, I had to follow the second step of my plan; which was to actually get on the ship. The news of my brother's death was never publicly announced because we didn't "matter" much inside the palace; therefore, I used his name and got on the ship with my brother's role.

The ship set sail in the year 1430, and this time, it had over 100 large ships and over 27,000 men. We visited all the important ports in the South China Sea, as well as the Indian ocean, red seas and much more.

On the first few weeks, there wasn't much to see or do. I started to make new friendships within the crew. I had a few friends that were also soldiers, but the person that I got along with the most was Zheng He's wife. I told her about my secret and how I planned to get on this ship by disguising myself as a man. We talked a lot since there wasn't much to do, but I would have to pretend that I was serving her in order to get in her cabin.

A month passed by, and instead of blue skies and plain waters, I started seeing different islands. We then reached the land which is now known as India. My role was mainly to just bring and present the goods to foreign merchants, so I did. We were arriving on the Indian shore, and the crew and I helped to dock the ship. I watched when Zheng He started to communicate with the foreigners, he showed them the gifts in a generous voice, and in return, they accepted it and were very welcoming to bring us on shore. The clouds seemed very grey and the locals said that a storm was coming towards us, so the foreign merchants offered places for us to stay until the storm goes by.

After the storm passed, we said our goodbyes and left with a new alliance between two countries. Everyone got on the ship, and once again, we were off with another great start. A few days had passed, and again, nothing much seemed to happen. I helped with cleaning the cabins, but most of the time, I would just have long conversations about life with Zheng He's wife. We would talk about how life would be outside of the palace, we talked about social problems, but most of the time, we would just talk about our dreams and wishes that we knew, would never happen.

One day, when I went to talk to Zheng He's wife, I didn't notice that there was a guard following me. Since I was disguised as a man, the guard thought that I went in for other reasons. He tied my hands with a rope and brought me to our commander, Zheng He. Turns out, Zheng He was already speculating about my visits, and sent a guard to follow me. At this point, I couldn't help but think if I should tell Zheng He that I was actually disguised as a man this whole time, or not say anything and get locked up. Either way, I would probably get sentenced. So, I decided to tell the truth, in hopes that the general would set me free.

However, that was not the case at all.

The general understood my situation, but the fact that I disguised myself as one of the soldiers to board on the ship, was already violating one of the legal rules of the Ming Dynasty. He said that I could stay on the ship and help the crew, but once we get back to the palace, I would be sentenced to the dungeon until I die. Although this sounded kind of rough, to my ears, there wasn't much to be said of. My parents were never actually there with me during my whole childhood. They left me and my brother because of so-called "issues" that they had to fix, but they never really came back. My brother was the only one who took care of me since I was little and since the only person who ever loved me is now gone, I didn't see the reason to keep on fighting for my life outside dungeon bars. In fact, I was kind of relieved. I thought of life inside the dungeon, and to me, it was everything I always wanted. I was tired of being a peasant girl serving spoiled mistresses and their kids. I said thank you and left Zheng He's room with a sense of peace in my mind.

Another few months passed by. By now, our ships have already sailed to different corners of the Indian sea. We finish off our last trade with the country of Arabia, we signed a treaty, then, we gathered all the gifts they kindly presented to us, and we set sail back to the palace.

One night, the clouds thickened and the sky was stricken. The howling wind pushed through the still waters. I grabbed my binoculars thinking that I was seeing things, but suddenly, under the mist there appeared to be a fleet of ships coming closer and closer to us. The sea rises, and it is now morphed into mountains of angry and unforgiving waves. The wind slammed the rain into our faces, leaving every single person on the ship soaked and terrified. The rain lashed down in silver sheets and behind the rain, I saw a few ships of angry South African Pirates who weren't that happy that we were on their territory. They were shouting curses and were very ready to kill. I saw that my crew members were petrified, so I quickly warned our commander and fetched swords and weapons for everyone.

Deep inside, I was actually frightened, but I knew that it was the right thing to do.

The South African pirates raised their daggers and swords above their heads. They were brutal and certainly unkind, but I wanted to make a change. I wanted to settle this encounter with no harm, no violence, and no hatred. So before the pirates came close enough to attack. I shouted "We come with no harm! We come only with respect and generosity!", and even though the pirates from the ship didn't understand me, they could see that I was speaking in a sincere and friendly way. So the pirate captain stopped his crew, and they put down all their weapons.

I finally so the light in my life.

After the pirate ship sailed off, Zheng He asked me to go to his cabin. He told me that I had a good heart and I don't deserve to be locked up in the castle doors. He was very ill at that time, and he told me that he might not live for any longer. So he took me outside and commanded that after he dies, I shall be the captain of all his boats, and all of his boats will belong to me. Shortly, after that, we had a party. We all laughed, danced and of course, drank and had a big feast.

A few weeks passed by, and Zheng He passed away. The crew and I took a strand of his hair and buried him somewhere around the Indian coast.

I noticed that all of my crew members don't really have families back at home. They all wanted to be free from the palace. So I had an idea and everyone agreed with it. We turned the ship in an opposite direction and began exploring all the corners of the world. We continued to "rule the sea" with our bravery, generous souls and grateful hearts.

# Navigator of the Ming Treasure Fleet

*Good Hope School, Kwok, Chloe – 13*

The ocean view was far more magnificent than I ever imagined. It was a memory that I will never forget. The music of the waves crashing to the shore danced in my ears, giving me a pleasant feeling of euphoria. Rays of golden sunlight peeked from beneath the clouds in the unyielding blue sky. Lights flickered and shimmered on the surface of the ocean as if glitter was poured on it. The mysterious, deep water felt like it held many secrets. Waiting for me to explore. The nebulous line that separates the sky and the sea was beckoning me to come forth, to travel across the seas. I have always dreamt of becoming a sailor in the Ming Treasure fleet. My father was one, unfortunately he died in a war. He would tell me enthralling and wholesome tales of his adventures. About the sights he'll never forget and the tiresome and boring jobs on the ships. I am finally old enough to set sail with him and be the navigator's assistant! I looked at the *Feng Huang*, a beautiful ship that would take me across the ocean to other regions. I breathed in the salty air. I smiled. I took a deep breath as I boarded the ship with my teammates.

It's the seventh time the emperor has ordered our admiral Sir. Zheng He to set sail for the Ming Treasure Fleet. You must be wondering what "Ming Treasure Fleet" is. My father told me, we would carry cargoes of jewellery and gold across the seas. We would stop by some countries and give them the valuable treasures. That way we could have more allies in future wars or maybe discover land in the voyages.

A shout from the captain indicated the start of journey. I went to the front of the ship to have a better look at how they start the ship. The primary sailor took control of the wheel. He stirred it with so much momentum. I was truly amazed. Then, a shout came from above. A boy, not much older than me was swinging through the sails. Checking for any problems. I looked around for the navigator. I couldn't find him. I approached a boy wearing light green robes.

"Do you know where the navigator is?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I'm looking for him as well. I'm the assistant of him."

"So am I!" I exclaimed happily. I had a companion! I saw his eyes brighten up. He grinned. "I'm Xu Yang!" he held a hand for me to shake. I gladly took it. "Yu Wei, it's my pleasure to meet you."

I spotted a plump, tan man in a deep blue robe. He was sitting in front of a wooden desk. On it, was a humongous map with lots of markings on it. Next to it, was a compass and a divider. He must be the navigator, Hai. I nodded at Xu Yang. We ran to the wooden table.

"You must be Hai. I'm Yu Wei and he is Xu Yang, your assistants." I held my hand out for him to shake.

He didn't take my hand, much to my disappointment. Instead, he looked askance at it and grunted in monotone "You two, help me sort the maps. By longitude"

I stared at the huge mount of maps. Xu Yang caught my eye and sighed. Might as well as get to work.

It took us almost two hours to sort the maps. I excitedly took it to Hai, hoping that he would give us something tad more interesting. He took a very brief look at it and shook his head disapprovingly and told me to sort it again by another order.

This continued for what seemed like forever. Every day, we would sort the maps and he would not approve. We would have to do it over and over. Till I was on the verge of tearing my brains out. I don't understand why I had to sort the maps. I have almost memorised all of the navigator guides and books. All I had to do was this. So, does he think I'm not suitable of being his assistant? I huffed in annoyance. I mustn't complain. My father said if I did, it'll be a disaster. As I grumbled about this in a low voice to Xu Zhang. He suddenly nudged me. I looked up and saw Hai's giant body tower over me. I almost jumped three feet in the air. He stared at me with an eyebrow raised. I quickly apologized as I stood up and saluted him.

He held out his hand. "Boys, you don't need to sort the maps. Follow me." He grunted.

I was too bewildered to move right away, until Xu Yang elbowed me. Hai led me to the ship's deck. He gave us a map and a compass.

“Tell me where we are.” He ordered.

I looked around. I remember reading about it in *A navigator's journey*. I discussed with Xu Zhang. I spotted where I was and I told Hai. For the first time, Hai smiled.

“Boy. Although you're correct, you must know that many knowledge and skills come from experience. Not books. Your way is correct but it takes a lot of time.” He paused as we nodded. “I'm truly impressed that you boys had sorted the maps every time. Although I did hear you grumbling. This shows your diligence. We are nearly there for our first stop. Meanwhile, you can stand with me and see what I do as a navigator.”

The remaining days, Xu Zhang and I watched as Hai did all sorts of markings on his map. He would explain each and every one of them to me. What amazed me the most was, he could tell our latitude of where we were just by looking at the stars.

Soon we arrived at India. It was a beautiful place! Truly memorable. I have never been abroad with such different climate and culture. The rocky and rugged coastline highlighted the crystal waters. The palm trees on the beach was like icing on the cake. Different rocks stood from the sea. It was really remarkable.

We stayed at India for six months. Admiral Zheng He had successfully made alliance with them. During my time in India. I went with Hai to learn how to tell the way with the stars. I explored the coastlines with Xu Hai and chatted with him. I even went to some 'elders' that have been in the Ming Treasure fleets since the first one. They told me about the adventures they had. They told me about the war my father died in. It happened in the third voyage. King Alakeshvara of Ceylon refused to trade with us and even committed hostiles with the neighbouring countries that had good terms with China. A lot of King Alakeshvara's troops attacked the fleet and killed some sailors. Admiral Zheng He had already formed a plan. He sent many troops to attack their country. They conquered the capital and held the King hostage. That was how they took over Ceylon.

Soon, we were out on the sea again. Hai would give Xu Yang and I a chance to locate our location and find the wind speed etc. Our ship made occasional stops at different regions for a few days. I would get off at some stops to buy something for my mother back home.

At the last stop, Bengal, the people there did not want our treasures. They tried to attack us. Troops of army came from their land. I, as a navigator didn't need to fight in this war. However, Xu Yang, Hai and I still had many jobs to do. We needed to find out the quickest way home, the best way to get into their land and form three different plans. It was the most tiresome experience.

The army from Bengal was strong. We couldn't fight them off. Admiral Zheng He told us to retire. The army quickly went on the ships as we set sail back home.

It was a tremendous experience, a memorable start of my navigator life with such an experienced and talented mentor. I got excited whenever I heard the shout from captain for another marvellous adventure to begin.

# The New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages: Life – Fair or Unfair?

*Good Hope School, Leung, Zoe – 13*

I am a freshman, a very, very fresh one. I am average, not too good nor too bad. I am not number one in combat, but the Emperor made his decision. To strengthen the bond with the isolated countries, our majesty called for a fleet of the youngest and strongest men in China. And here I am, fresh and young, sailing along in the patterned fleet of ships with so many other men on the voyage to faraway western lands. The man leading us is the famous Zheng He (鄭和), who was directly appointed by the emperor, brave and strong.

Panic, fear, and horror. The unknown lied in front of us. Indeed, we had trained day and night to defend ourselves from our enemies. But everyone knew that the sea was never safe and calm. Tsunamis, whirlpools, and storms. There had never been one who could ever travel without them, nor had anyone ever gone out of them alive or conscious. Those uncertainties, hazardous and disastrous. But there is no way back now, we have already stepped onto a road of no return.

A freshman's life is not simple. This morning I woke up early and there were loads of work lining up to be treated by me: cleaning the deck, taking shift on observing, turning the hulk, raising the sails and all sorts of nasty tiring work. Our daily route seemed so dull while our general sat on the highest deck the whole day, leisurely, watching the flow of the current as the sun rose up from the mountains till it sank into the horizon. Life is different between us, it is unfair.

Every night, when work is not yet done, our general, along with all the highest chief, go down to the dining room to enjoy their luxurious and rich dinner. In the meantime, little peasants like me unwillingly stay up all night to work, to feel the hunger, and to dream how one day we might become one of those leaders. When we finally get our work done, it is midnight and the end of another day. We have our healthy but cheap dinner in our cabins, rest for about three hours, and get back to work again in the wake of the rising sun. It is again a boring new day while they are still snoring peacefully on their comfortable bed. Life is very unfair.

Then came a stormy night. The ship churned along the huge waves aimlessly, our ships were going up and down vigorously, and we feared that our ships would drown. Fortunately, none of us had seasickness after all that harsh training. Waves reached to a height over 3 metres and hit our deck with a “flash”. In no time, the salty seawater had drowned our deck and by then, the deck was flooding all over. After that, the captain cried in a loud voice to cover the sound of the storm, “All men on board, flush the water and turn the hulk.” His cry woke me up from my peaceful sleep. Immediately, I rushed up the deck along with all others. With a sweaty body we continued, under the force of the howling wind, cleaning the mess the disaster had ‘kindly’ given to us. Since the volume of water one bucket can contain is little, the amount of flood hardly seemed to change. At last, we ended up being scolded and punished by the captain. All that we know is that our generals were sitting in their rooms safe and sound, totally dry and warm. Life is so unfair.

And sometimes we would meet a gang of terrible pirates in the middle of the ocean. Pirates were usually travelling the sea to find gold and treasures. At once we knew, to protect the valuables on our ship, a fight was about to begin. With the order of our general Zheng, every single one of us got into a deadly fight with the pirates, using all our might to sacrifice our life for our country, even if we had no particular experience in combat. Our general always stayed at the end of the line, yelling out encouraging words: “Fight with all your might, you can do it!” and “Go, go and go.” but letting alone his own hands free from fight. No matter win or lose, there were always plenty of deaths and injuries, it was not pleasurable to see friendly pals of mines, dying because of the fight. The fight was over, pulling along our hurt body, we returned to our daily routine of work. Nevertheless, he who is on top of us just sit in the sick bay and await the team of doctors to treat his minor injuries. Life is extremely unfair.

One day, I was taking morning shift on observing. Suddenly, there was something fresh green and solid. What a surprise, It was an island! Excited of my discovery, I cried out to the others, “Ahoy, captain! Ahoy, shipmates! So far so long, we finally had our first discovery!” “Yo!!!” Everyone shouted in glory. Elated of my discovery, I thought I would have a rise of job or an action of praise by the General. However, I got nothing and had to work nonstop. In my heart, I knew every goal we achieved was counted as a goal

that General Zheng He achieved, I did not stand the chance to protect my own achievement. Life is always unfair.

In a matter of time, we had to prepare the anchor for reaching the island and the ladders to reach down on the ground. We also had to prepare the gifts for the country's leader in exchange for further communication in the future. After a while, we got close to the harbour. Zheng He brought part of the crew with him, while the rest of us were divided into two parts, partition one is to bring along the gifts and partition two is to guard our ship and prepare for the crew's support. Things got very busy.

I, as a youngster, longed to see more about the planet Earth. Unfortunately, I was selected to stay on-board. Looking into the beautiful scenic in front of me, my eyes were full of anxiousness and sadness. With an exhausted sigh, I got back to my cabin miserably but relieved to have a rest at last. Flashbacking to the past few months that I roamed on the sea, It felt like I had made a wrong choice at first to join the crew. I thought I would have many opportunities ahead. Right now, all I had looked forward to was broken into pieces of shattered glass.

I am not as fresh as before. After these times, I have grown into a more mature boy. I started to understand the things around me. Hundreds and thousands worked hard under their lord namelessly, but no matter how hard we work, it was unlikely to be raised up to a higher position. I just wish I could leave as soon as I reached my home country when the journey came to a full stop. Life is never fair enough.

# Journey of the Seas

*Harrow International School Beijing, Ye, Lola – 12*

I was eager and nervous when I was told to go on a treasure voyage with Captain Zheng He, but when I saw the ship, all that was left was anticipation: there were 60 cabins on the deck of the ship, four masts and four sails, and most importantly, it was enormous! Crewmates around me all gasped in marvel as a guide directed us to different parts of the ship. As I wandered around the ship, I felt something hit me, I turned around to check who it was. It was Chen, my friend! I greeted him and chatted for a little before we were called away.

Since we were one of the first people to go on the voyage, the emperor himself held a banquet for us before we left. The emperor told us to follow Captain Zheng, we all toasted the emperor and Captain Zheng. The emperor gave each of us a pat on the back. I felt contented and respected, soon we are going to be masters of the seas!

We departed Nanjing, carrying gifts of gold brocade, patterned silks, and coloured silk gauze. Being the youngest on the ship, I was often ordered to do the most work, like mopping the deck, carrying carts, tying ropes, and sometimes even preparing food. One night, after a day of hard work, I laid on my bed until a sudden shudder awakened me. The whole crew was on full alert. I ran to the deck to see what had shaken the boat. The rain was pouring down onto the deck recklessly, the waves were fiddling with our ship, swaying it side to side, thunder and lightning sang like a chorus which made the night more frightful. Captain Zheng ordered some men to raise two more masts, some men lost balance and the entire ship was in chaos. I saw Chen in a hurry and stopped him to ask what has happened, he replied in a flustering manner: "It's the storm! The ship has been starved too! Captain Zheng told me to repair it! I have to go now!" I apologized quickly and let go of him. Just as I was about to go back in, Captain Zheng called me. I ran obediently towards him and answered, "Yes captain?" Captain Zheng replied in a solemn tone, "Go down and help Chen with repairing the leak, I am afraid he won't be able to handle it on he's own." I nodded and hurried to the bottom of the ship.

The bottom of the ship was dark with only a few candles lit. I grabbed one and yelled, "Chen? Where are you?" I waited for a few moments. "Zhang? Why are you here?" I moved towards him until I felt the coldness of my feet. I held my candle next to the hole, water was flooding in. The air smelled damp and fishy, and the floor was constantly shaking. Chen was soaking wet so I helped him hold the plank in place while he mended it. At last, the hole stopped leaking. Chen and I gathered the tools and headed up to the deck. The storm hasn't stopped but has become less frightening. Chen and I told Captain Zheng that the hole has been mended. He nodded in satisfaction and told us to rest in our cabins.

After the storm, we travelled for a few more days until arriving at Champa, they greeted us with respect as we gave them our presents. They were friendly and gave us tributes for our emperor. There were things I had never seen or even heard of before. As we visited more countries (Java, Malacca, Aru, Semudera, Lambri, Ceylon, Quilon, and Calicut), our ship became more and more loaded. I feel like a pioneer, seeing and touching so many new and unique things. From silver to precious stones, coral to tortoise shells, Indian cotton cloth to spices, they even gave us exotic animals: there were enormous birds that ran at a high speed; there were animals that were as tough as stones and as big as a house; there were also animals with necks longer than their body! After receiving all these tributes, Captain Zheng told us we were going to head back.

The entire crew celebrated the success of the voyage. We all toasted Captain Zheng and we had a great time; feasting on meat and drinking liquor. Everybody was filled with joy, but none of us knew what was waiting for us the next day.

After arriving at Palembang, Captain Zheng announced a piece of very important news at the deck, we gathered around him, some of us still a little drunk, that we were going to have to fight Chen Zuyi and his pirates. He also sent a message to the 300 other ships that were travelling beside us. There were 27,000 of us in total. We were all given a sword and armour, I was assigned to fire cannons. I learnt how to put in the cannonballs and adjusted them to shoot in the right direction. This weapon made me realise the strength in the military we had.

To be honest, I was nervous before the battle began, I could see the pirate ships in the distance, I steadied my aim towards the ship. The ship was getting closer and closer. The sound of the waves splashing on the ship made me feel nervous. My palms started to sweat, my lips were dry and I felt smoke in my throat. I heard Captain Zheng shouting in the deck, "FIRE!" I lit the fuse and adjusted the aim, the cannonball shot out of the cannon with a huge bang. The kickback of the cannon knocked me off my feet. I was shaken but then quickly pulled myself together again. I put another cannonball inside the cannon and aimed it towards the ship, I lit the fuse and waited for it to fire. This time, I was ready for the kickback. The cannon I just fired hit a critical part of the ship, the pirate ship started to break down and the ship caught on fire. Crewmates next to me cheered as more pirate ships were wrecked.

There were only a few pirate ships left, they threw ropes that hooked onto our ship and glided towards us. Some pirates landed inside where the cannons were. I quickly drew out my sword as one the pirates tried to swing his sword at me. I could hear chaos on the deck with slashing swords, muffled shouts, and bodies dropping. Other crewmates next to me also got into action. There were occasional sounds of firing cannons from nearby ships. These pirates were skilful with swords, but we outnumbered them. Crewmates next to me joined forces with me to kill the angry pirate. I knocked him hard on the head with my elbow, while an older man pointed his sword towards the pirate's heart and stabbed him hard. The pirate went on his knees and dropped dead on the floor. I gave the older man a nod and looked around the room to find if there were any pirates left. I saw the last one drop dead on a cannon and shouted, "To the deck! We need to help Captain Zheng!" The others replied with a roar and rushed towards the deck. Only a few pirates were left on the deck. Chen Zuyi and his lieutenants were already captured. Captain Zheng announced victory and all the 300 ships cheered with pride and glee. It was as if the ocean cheered with us.

The weather was warm and sunny after the battle. We arrived back in Nanjing like heroes. I couldn't wait to show the emperor what we had received, and tell him that Chen Zuyi had been defeated. Captain Zheng showed the emperor the tributes and the exotic animals. The emperor was very pleased with the tributes and the capture of Chen Zuyi. The emperor gave rewards to us for defeating Chen Zuyi. My parents welcomed me home and lived a decent living with the rewards the emperor gave me.

Now, after so many years, I still can't forget the things me and my crewmates had been through. Meeting foreign faces, receiving never-seen-before gifts, and battling fierce pirates. These are all memories that I can never forget. This journey made me realise how significant our country was and how much more there is in this world we can explore. This journey doesn't just travel through places, it also travels through time. It travels through people's minds too. With every stop, we discover new things and new people. With each discovery, we become more intelligent because we know more about the world we live in.



# Restart, Repeat, and Replay

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Chao, Catherine – 14*

Who am I?

All I could feel was the pain piercing into my skin and the fear slipping into my thoughts. Something ached inside me. I felt more pain than I knew a human body could bear as a rush of terror washed through me. Just like everything else, my mind was in a chaotic state. A mess. I could feel the sweat trickling down my cheeks as fear began to creep into the emptiness in my heart. I found myself lying in the middle of a deserted street, yet a quiet whisper tingling through my thoughts told me something felt familiar. I froze as a million questions flashed through my mind. I couldn't recall a thing. My memories were like broken pieces of glass scattered into the darkness. If I tried to reach for the shattered fragments, the sharp edges would pierce into my skin, pricking my finger with an unbearable sting. I was left in a blank state of confusion as panic replaced the pain in my memories. They gradually blurred and dimmed. But then there was none.

5 years have passed since this incident, yet that scene continued to haunt every day, every hour, every minute of my life. I had long wondered what truly happened, why this feeling of emptiness always lingered behind me, why I always seemed to be anticipating for something to change, yet I never knew what. The paranoia has been chasing me, hunting me down, suffocating me in an ocean of panic, not giving me a single chance to breathe. Is this truly all my own imagination?

As I stepped out of the house, the rain began to pour, droplets hammering onto the cold, lifeless ground. The lightning cracked the morning into two, followed by a deafening roar of thunder. Not even a ray of sunlight was penetrable through the overcast. Not even a ray of hope. I could barely hear myself think in this tumultuous chaos, all that was left in me was nothing but the panic lurking through my thoughts once again. I ran as fast as I could towards the distance, trying to escape from this merciless reality. Along the way, I tripped, fell, and braced myself for the pain that was yet to come. But it never did. Surprised and confused, I gradually blinked open my eyes. The first thing that caught my sight were those beautiful eyes, those which sparkled like the stars in the midnight sky. He caught me. His strong, comforting arms were wrapped around my waist, steadying me from the fall. All my senses screamed at me to run, but my heart seemed to say the opposite. I just stood there, frozen. I could see the concern in his expression as he mouthed certain words to me, but all I could hear was the pounding of my own heart as my mind clouded with immense feelings that I have never come across before. Something new. Something different. Everything around me seemed to have gradually faded away from my sight as I got lost in his features, his voice. Him. The eye of calmness didn't last long. I snapped myself back into reality. Alarmed, I jumped back from his arms as I regained my balance. I could feel my heart racing rapidly, so strong it was as though something was crashing into my chest every second, the blood rushing through my body like tides in the ocean as I felt my cheeks blaze with heat. I fidgeted in agitation, refusing to look him in the eye. He seemed to have seen through my panic and embarrassment as he nodded politely. "My name is Zheng He." He said, leaning in closer, his breath in sync with mine. I felt something flutter in my stomach, so distinct it was undeniable. Awareness. Those pale blue eyes seemed to pierce right through me as the corner of his mouth lifted a little, not quite a smile. I looked away from his intensity. "Do you feel it too?" He whispered, his voice soft yet passionate. Those words left me uncertain, self-conscious, jittery. At that moment, I knew that my fairy tale has begun, but what I never anticipated was the end which has dawned upon me long before hope has even made its first step.

"I'm travelling to India."

Silence echoed around us as his final words struck me. His voice trailed slowly, as though his words are unwilling to take flight. I clutched my chest, each and every letter stabbing right through my heart. My vision blurred as I struggled to keep my hopes up. I pretended to be ignorant about all the risks, even though anyone with a speck of perception would have noticed that my heart was pounding in terror. I was absorbed in my thoughts, oblivious to my surroundings. "What if you don't come back?" I whispered, fighting back my tears. There was a moment of hesitation. "I'll definitely come back." He replied. Despite trying to appear unperturbed, his voice was quivering. There was just a glimmer of doubt in his eyes, only for a second, but I saw it. I could see the pain in his expression as all my fears returned with force. The deathly silence continued to haunt us, casting a shadow over our voices. I wanted to yell, I wanted to scream, but nothing came out of my mouth. It was as if the impact had knocked every wisp of air from my lungs. I felt completely lost, as though I was drifting in the middle of the ocean. Directionless. Powerless. Nothing could change this and we both knew it. His eyes widened with shock as I made my final decision. It wasn't an easy choice, but I spoke my last words without a single regret. "I'm coming with you."

I trailed behind him as he made his way onto the boat, my guts churning with dread. I could've left, I could've ran back, but something stopped me in my tracks. I caught a glimpse of familiar words which were imprinted on the wooden deck below me. The voice of caution whispered softly not to look, but it couldn't break through the scream of curiosity. I crouched down, each move attentive with caution. I've never came across these symbols before, but the suspicion hidden behind my mask told me they were there for a reason. I brushed my fingers across each and every symbol, the wood rubbing against my skin.

"A star..." *The first thing that caught my sight were those beautiful eyes, those which sparkled like the stars in the midnight sky. Him.*

"A dagger..." *A weapon. Death.*

"A circle..." *Endless.*

I froze as my finger landed on the very last letters.

*You.*

A rush of horror washed through me as every puzzle pieced together perfectly in my mind. I slowly backed away from the wall, my eyes locked in an unblinking stare. The logical side of me refused to believe in this nonsense, but deep inside I knew all too clearly that this nonsense was indeed true. Despite having known this, I was still deeply skeptical. Suddenly, a deafening roar broke the silence. Horrific screams and haunting cries echoed around me as the unsettling madness seeped into my thoughts. Voices in my head screamed at me to run, but I couldn't. I just stood there, unable to move a single muscle in my body. Frozen. Bloody scenes blurred across my vision, one after another pouring into my sight without a single break. I shut my eyes, allowing myself to be absorbed into the darkness.

I heard a scream. I heard a cry. But then there was silence. A part of me believed that everything would be okay when I opened my eyes, but my heart sank as I caught a glimpse of what had happened. Zheng He was lying there on the cold, wooden deck. Nothing was left in me except for the fear creeping into my heart once again. I clenched my fist, praying for him to wake up, to tell me none of this was true. But he didn't. I held my breath as I shook him lightly, my fingers trembling. I was hoping he would move, or at least twitch, but he stayed still. Very still. Blood was seeping through his wound, staining his clothes with a dark red. There was a lump in my throat as I tried to fight back my tears, my eyes aching with pain. My vision blurred as I looked up into the midnight sky. *Stars.* I dropped my gaze and caught a glimpse of a sharp weapon lying on the floor, dripping with blood. *A dagger.* The red stains on the floor were shaped in a specific way. *A circle.* There was a daring glint in the eyes of fate, and I knew the next step lies within my own hands. If I die, everything will restart. I desperately needed another chance to change my fate, to save Zheng He. My fingers trembled as I reached for the dagger, pushing it closer towards me. Without a hesitation, I pushed the dagger straight through my chest, knowing that the pain I'd feel is nothing compared to the sorrow in my heart. As I laid my head against Zheng He's chest, I heard my fragile heart beat for one last painful time. I allowed the end of this world to carry me into a cooling rest, where I lay benumbed of all sufferings and horrors of the living world as the ticking of my clock came to a stop.

I woke up, and found myself lying helplessly in the middle of a deserted street, fear and panic pouring into my heart. I couldn't recall a thing. My memories were like broken pieces of glass scattered into the darkness. They gradually blurred and dimmed. But then there was none.

Who am I?

# A Taste of Loneliness

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Hancock, Tasman – 13*

We only get one life. One chance to make a difference in this unfair world. Yet I squandered my only chance. My only life.

Let me start from the beginning, the day I abandoned the only home I knew, the day my world turned upside down.

“Ming, my boy, come downstairs, there’s someone to see you!”

My mother's sweet voice wafted through my bedroom door, filling the space with her gentle words. I heaved myself out of bed, put on my finest silk garments and descended the stairs. A tall, gangly, man, about twice my age, stood at the door, dressed like he had been at sea for months. My nostrils stung from his putrid body odour and his cold black eyes stared back at me, penetrating into my mind as if he was reading my deepest thoughts.

Then he began to speak and with only a few words, he offered me a thrilling adventure: a chance to travel as a lucky charm for the legendary Ming treasure voyages. I had to make a choice. It was either to stay with my mother and accompany her through her old age, as she had no one else to love or to embark on a heroic voyage that could bring me wealth and fame. I can still picture my mother sobbing in my arms, pleading me to stay with her, but I just couldn't say no.

As my carriage pulled up to the dock and the majestic ship came into view, I decided to put my homesick feelings behind me and focus on the future; after all, I out of all the children in China had been chosen for this honourable duty.

I boarded the ship and immediately the smell of salt and old wood flooded into my nostrils. I felt a rush of excitement race through my body as I looked around at all the different people, each working diligently on their own task. I ran up to the bow, and the wind blowing in my face, I looked out at the great blue sea, stretched as far as the eye could see.

As the days passed by, the adrenaline slowly faded away and I began to feel the weight of guilt pushing me down. Each morning, the sunrise brought the hope of a new day, of a new adventure, and I would rush to the bow to witness it in person. Vibrant ribbons of reds, yellows and oranges streaked across the sky, and the rising sun sparkled like diamonds on the bright blue sea. Dreams of adventure and excitement filled me. Each night, the sunset brought hopelessness, as yet another day had passed with both my mother and me apart, with no one to love me or to love. Guilt twisting my mind and my soul, dragging me to the darkest of places, sucking out all the life I once had. Then, one cold winter day, my life changed forever.

I woke up as usual and left my cabin to go on deck and witness the brilliant sunrise. I stood at the bow, in the icy winter wind, with nothing but my thin silk robes to shield me. Just as I was about to give in to the needles of cold, I felt a blanket slide on to my shoulders, enveloping me in a warm bundle. I turned to see a girl, about my age, with only a thin cloth robe covering her delicate skin. She stood there looking so calm, and on her pale face, she wore an expression of pure kindness, so true that I felt my heart melt with bliss. It felt so good to be loved this way again. She smiled slightly and said in the lightest and most angelic voice I have ever heard, “See you later.”

I thought that no one would ever love me like my mother did, that no one would see me in the light that she did, but every time I saw Mei, I felt that same buttery warm feeling that I felt around my mother. As soon as she came into my life, this ball of love, life and laughter welled up inside me and I felt loved again. Suddenly, I had hope for a new life with her, but lurking in the shadows of my hope was the guilt of knowing that my mother would never find someone like Mei. But also the guilt of knowing I had found a replacement for my mother, something I never thought possible.

“Never speak to Mei or I will kill you, you hideous rascal!”

I spun around in my cabin, but there was no one there, I frantically opened the door and searched the hallway, but I saw no faces. From that day onwards, I felt there was another presence lurking in the shadows of the ship, waiting to pounce if I tried to find Mei. I came to know this presence as my voice, the enemy I was always at war with.

Then one hot summer's day, the unimaginable happened – I was sitting in my cabin reading ancient Chinese literature, the only thing I had left from my mother. I could still smell the sweet perfume of the fragrant flower she wore in her hair and the cosy smell of the fireplace, a reminder of what I left behind. Depression and homesickness balled up inside me, twisting my stomach, and pricking my skin. There was no reason to live anymore. I picked my dagger, and with a shaking hand, aimed it toward my heart, ready to give in to all the sorrow and guilt I had gone through.

Suddenly a scream pierced the air, a scream I knew very well. It was Mei!

I had found a reason to live!

I rushed upstairs, but before I could reach the top, in the coldest voice I have ever heard the voice said six deadly words "Take another step, and you'll die."

In that split second, it was as if everyone but I was frozen in time, like statues of humans that once existed. I took the time to process the voice's words. I knew that the voice would make me kill myself, but would it do so before I could reach Mei? I had no clue. But Mei was the reason I was alive, so her life must be more important than mine.

I ran up the stairs at full speed, the wind rushing in my face, and when I reached the top, I froze with shock. Mei was tied to a pole, wearing that same cloth outfit that I had seen her in on that winter morning when I met her. She was bleeding from the leg and she was being whipped with a cat of nine tails. It was Admiral Cheng, a man I had come to hate.

He cackled and said "You'll never save her", then he picked her up gently, almost as if she was a sleeping child he was going to lay her down in her bed. Then in one mighty swing, he tossed her overboard.

Without thinking, I jumped into the icy water to save my beloved Mei. As I plunged into the waves of terror a huge force of realisation washed over my body. This voice inside me was not separate from me but in fact a part me, a part I couldn't face. It was guilt. Inside, deep down, I had hated myself all along, I had wanted to punish myself for abandoning my lonely mother. But it was too late now. I couldn't go back.

The water pierced my skin like knives, wrapping me tighter and tighter in an unbreakable rope, each time I struggled to break free, it only squeezed me tighter. It pushed me underwater, holding me there until my fingers turned blue and I started to fade away.

I had tried to make up for my guilt by saving Mei, but now here we were, drowning.

Together.

They say the minute before you die, your life flashes before your eyes. It's true. It wasn't some heroic journey I had dreamed of but the one person who had made my life hopeful again: Mei.

Even in our final moments, Mei held my hand and I felt love rush up my arm, spreading from my fingertips all the way down to my toes. She smiled, and I smiled back, through tears.

She had given me everything and had given her everything.

But it wasn't enough.

# The Ming Treasures Voyages

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Hildebrand, Isabella – 12*

A chorus of orders and screams seeped through the roof of the cellar. Once again, I kicked and punched against the metal bars that prevented me from reaching the staircase. I was so absorbed in getting out of here, that the chaos upstairs almost ceased to exist. When I stepped back for a breath, the wood planks creaked under my weight. With an idea squeezing itself into my thoughts, I got on my knees and gripped onto a loose piece of wood, pulling. As I held my desperate grip on the plank, my favourite badge that read 'Rose Fisher, at your service.' fell onto the floor. I couldn't pick it up. Not now, at least. The plank finally separated from the concrete underneath, and I continued to rip off planks from the floor. What seemed like a bucket load of frigid salt water made its way through the open window, soaking my clothes. The ship had also been affected by the catapulting waves of ocean water and swayed to its own rhythm. I kicked the concrete, and the thought-to-be-thick layer broke. It was incredibly thin. Without a second thought, I drove my hands into the mud below me and dug. My entire consciousness was focused on digging and gradually, after a lengthy period of time, a tunnel was formed. Upstairs, a man with a deep, hoarse voice threatened to end another's life. The other, who was doubtlessly trembling, screamed, "Rose Fisher! She's downstairs, in the 18th cellar—" I hissed a curse word and lowered myself into the short tunnel that meandered underneath the bars and led to outside the cell. I heard the slamming of the door located at the top of the staircase. I was crawling through the tunnel, then punched through the thin layer of dried concrete. Crouching underneath the planks of wood, I counted to 3, and broke through the wood with as much strength as I could muster. The slow steps that were taking their time just a moment ago sped into a rushed manner.

There was a medium sized room that was used for cooking and lounging. In the situation that I was in, I had to go to the closest room which would provide me a place I couldn't be found. I bent down and scrambled to undo my mud-engulfed shoes. Slipping out of them, I was sure to be light on my toes. If any of the water emerged from my clothes while I made my way to the room, I'd give away my location. I got onto my hands and knees, desperately searching for a place to hide. I found a basket big enough to squeeze my skinny figure into. The footsteps were advancing. With a last glance at the entrance door, I popped the lid over my head. "Rose..." The man taunted. "Come out of yer' hidin' spot.... ya' already know ya' won't make a successful escape. Ere', we can make a deal. I get to kill yer' flamin' soul when ya come out of hidin', and ya get to cry fer' help when nobody wanna come down 'ere fer' ya." He cackled at his supposedly funny comment and continued to roam the room. Peeking through the cracks of the basket, I observed him as he took heavy steps on the opposite side of the room. He was checking everything; the cupboards, baskets, under the tables, and anything else that had a possibility of hiding in. I could leave while he had his back turned. I steadily lifted the lid, and put my hands flat on the ground. I let the rest of my body slither out of the basket. I got onto my feet, placed the lid back on and hurried to the door. By habit, I shut it. Realising the likelihood of the man acknowledging that I'd left the room, I sprinted for the staircase. I heard the door heave open behind me. If I looked back, it would inevitably slow me down. I didn't have time to fritter away. I focused on getting to the staircase, and the sounds of wood complaining as I took intemperate steps. When I turned a sharp left for the staircase, I caught a glimpse of the man. He didn't look harmless the slightest bit, now that I could view him clearly. His brown hair was held back with a cloth tied around his forehead, his skin pale and infested with mosquito bites.

Under the redness of the bites, his freckles formed like droplets of water. As I thought everything over, I wasn't so sure they were freckles. Tattoos, maybe? As a marking of the association that he participated as a member of? If anything, those marks on his skin weren't freckles. He had a skinny and malnourished figure, which made my chances of victory in battle with him higher. Running upstairs and hiding there would only allow him to come up and notify the rest of the intruders of my escape. I'd made my decision. I was going to knock him out cold. I didn't bother with second thoughts. There was a flower pot on the side of the staircase. I bent down and snatched the pot. It was heavy and rather hard to get a firm grip on, but I was capable. When the bony man came charging from around the corner, I threw all my muscle strength into catapulting the pot directly into his forehead. His body crumbled to the floor immediately. And with that, I dusted my hands proudly. I continued to proceed up the staircase. I tried to make space for my eye in the gap between the door and door frame. I couldn't manage space without the likely event of the door grating. I stepped back, took a heaved breath, and at a snail's pace, pushed down the handle and opened the door.

Only one tiny creak, but it wasn't easily noticeable over the loud voices of the invaders of the ship. "As a betrayer of the Detabables, you'll be thrown into the water to be feasted on by the sharks. May God have mercy on your soul." One man said, with a strong Australian accent. I assumed he was the leader of this 'Detabables' association they shared. I slid up another staircase that stood next to the door. It led to the steering wheel and the balcony that towered over other sections of the ship. The ship was passing an island that wasn't exactly too far to swim to. I could throw myself off the ship, but by the time I was leaning over the ship to check for hazardous marine animals, one of the many men had directed his eyes towards me. He screeched, "It's her!", jabbing his finger in my direction. A man with dramatic cowboy boots and platinum blonde hair raised his gun at me. With one eye shut and the other squinting, he pulled the trigger. It seemed as if a reflex had grabbed my arms and tugged me to the ground. As my ears rang from the gunshot, I began to debate whether or not I was really hit by the bullet. It was strange that pragmatic thoughts dominated my mind.

No part in my body felt piercing pain. I sat up, anticipating an oozing pool of blood. Nothing. The side of the boat had a dent, splinters circling the tiny hole. I waited for a dozen seconds, and no men had run up to check if I was dead or not. I took this as a good sign, they might have thought I was dead. This would have been pure luck if I didn't suddenly knock over a jar of pickles as I was helping myself up. I didn't notice it at first because my ears were still ringing, but the vibrations of crowded footsteps from the unstable wood planks gave me all the information I needed: turn around, avoid whatever is going to be thrown at you.

Apparently, my conscience was telling me the right thing. Dozens of men were hurling their fists in the two spots, head and my stomach. I couldn't afford multiple hits in the head, I couldn't afford losing consciousness. As much as I wanted to dodge the hit in the stomach, I couldn't avoid both places being hit. I lowered my head just in time and took the hit to my stomach. When their fists pulled back, I gripped the side of the fence. I fought the urge to fall to my knees and rest. Whilst I pulled myself over the edge, the men threw in extra punches and kicks, some even attempting to grab my ankle for the prevention of letting me fall. Some of their intentions were probably to pull me back onto the ship and beat me to death, meanwhile others maybe just accepted that I was going to be eaten by the sharks. I watched helplessly as the water progressed closer to me. I hit the water.

A refreshing wave of water swept over my legs, and I could feel sand being wiped off my calves. I sat up and observed the new environment. I was on the island that I saw from the ship. The palm trees loomed over me, giving me space to shade myself from the scorching sun. I smiled and let myself fall back into the sand.

# The Night of the Crimson Fleet

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Jamison, Philippa – 12*

The calm sea lapped gently at the rocks, the waves dribbling over the smooth, golden sand; it was days like this that she wished would never end. The soft murmur of the breeze, the rustling of the trees, the sky, threaded with clouds, all so serene. The setting sun was a ruby in the sky, slowly descending before plunging the world into darkness. Far away, she heard a voice call her name.

"Suriyani, dinner is ready!"

She sank her hands deeper into the sand. It came again. Grudgingly, she stood up and started to walk. Before going far, Suriyani took one last longing look at the bay. She breathed a heavy sigh and turned around, in the corner of her eye, she saw something on the horizon. She stared at it, trying to figure out what it was, and kept watching until it dawned on her. A ship!

She ran until her throat burned, past towns and farms to a small house on the outskirts of town.

Exasperated, she burst through the door of her home. "They're coming!" She yelled into the living-room. Her mother looked at her in disbelief. "Sit down and eat dinner right now! I've been waiting for ages."

"B-But the ship! They're coming and we-" Suriyani stuttered.

Her mother pointed to the empty chair next to her, and Suriyani had no choice but to sit down.

They sat at the worn down, wooden table in silence. The family was very poor, and to say their house was shabby would be an understatement, it was dilapidated! Despite its state, it was the only place that they could call home. In the corner of the room, slouched in a battered armchair with ripped fabric, was an old woman, Aunt Abaasa. She was broken, ruined after the death of her brother, a soldier who died fighting invaders. Although most family members managed to keep going after the tragedy, Aunt Abaasa never recovered. She always seemed distant.

"So, you were talking about something before dinner. What were you going to say?" Asked Suriyani's mother.

"There was a ship, a big one!" Suriyani told her worriedly, and so Suriyani and her mother agreed to go investigate and find what was going on. The mother prayed that they weren't hostile, she couldn't bear to lose another person to pirates. Just as she was about to leave, she slid a dagger out of the drawer.

It was late evening, and chilly. A strong gust of wind swayed Suriyani's shiny black hair, as her dark skin shone in the moonlight. She was the spitting image of her mother, from her wavy black hair to her big, brown eyes. They walked through the placid village, down the silent roads, to the beach. The hushed atmosphere was almost eerie. And then they saw it. The boat was coming into view. It floated gracefully through the water, pulled by its blood-red sails. Suddenly, it stopped. Confused, they both squinted to see what was happening. After a while, a small lifeboat was rowed to shore by two men. Waves crashed against the rocks by the harbour, carelessly flinging water as they went. The sea spat at the small lifeboat, slowly drenching both the boat and the people inside. They rocked in the boat for what seemed like half an hour, making little progress for much of it. Eventually, after a lot of hard rowing, they made it to shore.

Slowly, they floated towards the beach in their small boat, and they climbed out

onto the sand. One of the men was short and plump. His face was as pale and round as the moon, and he had a limp moustache. The second of the men was the opposite. He was tall and muscular, with a chiselled face, and his skin had a warm, golden-brown tan. They had only just stood up on the beach when they were stopped by Suriyani's mother, pointing her dagger right at them. She glared at them. "What are you doing here? " She hissed. The two men stumbled backwards, into the freezing midnight water. "Bring everyone in the village down here, immediately!" Shouted Suriyani's mother at her daughter. Suriyani immediately started down the path to the village, she didn't want to argue with her mother now, not when she was like this.

Suriyani's mother clutched the dagger she had brought tighter in her hand, these men were pirates, she was sure of it, and they weren't here for a good reason. "What is your business here, bringing a huge ship like that here? " She re-asked them angrily. "We-we came from China to share our valuable items. " The first pirate stuttered.

"Pah!" The mother spat. "That's the worst story I've ever heard! You pirates are unwelcome here!"

She looked behind her.

It was a sight, seeing a stampede of people, squashing themselves onto that thin path. To say that it was hectic was an understatement. Everyone hurtled towards the beach, desperate to see what was going on; each person stopped in their tracks once they saw the two men. They weren't from Malacca, that was for sure. A crowd formed around the pirates. "They come from China! To take our land and our valuables!" Suriyani's mother yelled into the crowd but quieted when she saw him, the mighty village chief, standing before them. Everyone dropped to their knees. "Let them speak." He croaked, as he gestured to the pirates. They stood up straighter. "I am Bo-Cheng, from China, and we are offering you valuable goods of ours, not stealing." Spoke the first pirate. The pirate talked about how they were here to help, and that all they wanted was permission to dock their boat here. Everyone looked at the chief to answer. Surely he wouldn't let these pirates with a terrible excuse bring their boat here.

"Yes, you may dock your boat here." He answered. Suddenly a huge uproar came from the crowd. Though they tried to change his mind, no one could oppose his word. The pirates would arrive tomorrow.

It was late night once everyone was walking back, while they did, many of the villagers were plotting against the pirates. They didn't want those thieves on their land. "We have to do something!" A village boy called Haissam told a group of people who were also upset about the chief's poor decision. "We'll fight them!" he commanded. Everyone shouted in agreement. "Build an army!" He cheered. Everyone shouted again. They agreed to meet at midnight to discuss the situation, at Haissam's house.

Suriyani arrived home quickly, and she went to her room and waited for her mother. It had been a few hours of pretending to be asleep when Suriyani leapt off the lumpy, hard mattress and creaked down the stairs. She approached the dusty, wooden door, thinking no-one had seen her. Little did she know, her mother had seen the whole thing.

She journeyed down the little path in the dead of night. Haissam's house wasn't far, and she arrived quickly. The group talked for a few hours but came to an agreement that they would fight while they weren't expecting them: right then.

The sound of clanking metal was deafening. Knives pulled out of their sheaths, bows and arrows, anything that would inflict damage. There was an air of excitement, of confidence— they were ready.

Back at Suriyani's house, her mother was contemplating what to do. She couldn't let her daughter die fighting, but she was sure that there was no way to convince her not to go. Her mother sighed, she knew what she had to do.

It was hectic on the ship, orders being screamed, opposing ones being shouted from somewhere else. They were going to dock at Malacca, give away the treasure, and then leave; or so they thought. As they came closer to the beach, they saw a strange sight. A few hundred people lined up on the beach, glaring menacingly at their boat. They wielded knives, bows and arrows and even large sticks. "Bo-Cheng what are you doing staring off into the distance? Get on the task, you imbecile!" Yelled commander Fei-Hong, the captain of this ship, as fiercely as a lion. "Commander, the islanders seem to be rebelling; there they are on the beach!" The commander went red. Suddenly, she started yelling out commands. "Ready the cannons! Send out the army! We must fight them now!" She yelled, panicked. Hundreds of men hurried onto boats, rowing out towards the beach, while others manned the canons.

As they stood on the beach, they saw them coming. Suriyani clutched her stick tighter, she was ready for whatever they had.

She saw it, a black ball in the sky, a cannonball. Frozen in fear, she heard her mother's muffled voice in the distance. Her mother held a dagger, ready to fight the invaders alongside her. The cannonball shot through the sky, but she couldn't move. Her eyes widened, for the very last time. The light left her eyes.



# Mey's Ming Treasure Voyage Adventure

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Li, Jaimee – 11*

The storm breezed through the coal-black sky, screaming like a banshee and breaking the silence of the frozen night, tossing waves with casual ease, crashing dangerously through the weather-beaten rocks with its jagged teeth baring at them, threatening to add the ship to a pile of many shipwrecked skeletons... Only the lone commander stood at the wheel, proud, still and unblinking, taunting the waves to shatter him. The wind and sea teared at his face, plastering jet-black hair to a forehead of pale skin whilst lightning cast an eerie glow to the night sky. It ran like an enchanted thread through an isolated forest, illuminating his face in flashes of blinding white and yellow. He surveyed his surroundings with narrowed eyes – his crewmen were desperately fighting to save themselves from this vicious monster... The sea and sky seemed like a jagged line wailing with malicious cackles, pouncing perilously close to the wooden ship and throwing it like a toy. There was no chance of survival...

“Click” Mey heard the metallic, empty sound of the TV in her room click shut and echo through the isolated house. Her head was tilted slightly downwards and she gazed through her locks of ebony, black-as-night hair. The toffee coloured wooden floor was smarming with woodlice and she felt disappointed and furious. She had been forced to watch a series of documentaries her mother had excitedly told her to see. She still remembered her mother’s joyous voice singing as she left the minute bungalow for the grand university she taught at. “Come on, Mey! The Ming Treasure Voyages is a wonderful way to get immersed into Chinese Culture!” Mey sighed. She had watched part of the documentary then turned the TV off as soon as she saw the haughty figure of Zheng He.

“If only there was a bit of adventure in my life like Zheng He and his crew. If only...”

Suddenly, she heard a small whirring noise reminiscent of a piece of clockwork tick-tocking from behind the TV. Mey, leaned forwards slightly from her position on the floor, with her shoulders wrenched forwards and eyebrows furrowed. Slowly and quietly, she rose, careful and treading on each floorboard as if it was hot lava. Across the room, the TV seemed stationary and incapable of making the strange, mysterious sound it had made just a moment ago. Mey moved stealthily across the room and crouched in front of the TV. Again, the whirring noise fell upon the silence and abruptly, the room started slowly revolving.

Mey’s eyes started to rove around the room. She felt like she was imagining things. The whole room started twirling faster and faster, like a rollercoaster ride that never ended... Mey felt herself being pulled towards the TV as the room started to turn into a blur of colours. Her brain reacted first, trying to pull her away from the strange TV. However, her hand felt differently. Mey felt herself compelled to reply to the beckoning that urged her to just touch the TV. She didn’t try to resist the temptation. Mey reached out and with a “ping” she was soon whirling into the TV like being sucked into a cyclone. Mey felt herself scream, loud and piercing but hopeless. She knew no one would come for her... It was too late.

A soft, floating feeling as carefree and wonderful as if in a dream overcame her... She realized she was floating. All around her, there were colours, so magnificent she wanted to stay in the tunnel forever just to admire all the shades ranging from a fiery, blazing red to the gentlest of blues that reminded her of the ocean. She could almost hear the gentlelapping sounds of waves on the seashore.

In an instant, the ground shook from beneath her. A blinding white light filled the portal and Mey closed her eyes and shielded her face with her hands like armour, preparing for certain death... However, she was aggressively wrenched from the portal by a pair of hands. The hands looked coarse and rough, as if they had been through years of sailing.

It transpired that they belonged to a sailor with dark stubble, coarse hair and a tremendous pot-belly. Although his black eyes had kindness in them, he said respectfully to a man on the deck of the ship “I found a stowaway hiding behind this barrell, Captain... What do we do with her?” Mey couldn’t see who the man was as he was shrouded in the shadows, with only a silhouette to be seen. The Captain said one word “走. Go” It was apparent that, this man, whoever he was, had power. Immense power... Mey turned around and gaped at the large vessel. All around her, lay maghony masts strewn along the floor carelessly, wooden planks wrenched from the floor as if on purpose-like the remnants of a storm... Mey realized that it was the remnants of a storm. The floorboards were wet and covered in foliage. It was like a carcass of greenery.

Around her, she saw that they were moored in a sandy beach, with a clear blue sky, sand as white as snow and a sea that was crystal clear and azure. Underneath, you could see vibrantly coloured fish, chasing one another playfully turning into colourful blurs of red, white and a number of other wonderful colours. Mey studied this with wonder. Although it was so discarded and broken, the ship had a aura of glory and power, intimidating Mey. The Captain slowly turned from his position opposite her.

Instantly, she saw that he was a man she recognised. Zheng He. Mey felt as if she had been hit with sledgehammer. This was really him. He had handsome features, striking and piercing. Zheng He had high cheekbones, pale skin, black hair— he looked every inch the commander of vessels of ships. Mey gasped. Zheng He said quietly “ What are you doing on my ship ?” Mey couldn’t answer. She gulped and felt as if she forgot how to speak. Instead of scolding her, Zheng he said one word, “ Come”.

He led her through a maze of corridors and stopped finally at a simple wooden door. Zheng He uncovered a small, golden key and put it in a lock on the door. The door opened with a small “click” and the treasure trove was revealed.

Inside, Mey saw treasure out of her wildest dreams. There were rubies as red as blood, sapphires the colour of the clearest sky, pearls as round and bright as the moon on a dark night... This was clearly a treasure trove! There were coins piled up to the ceiling, grasping the roof with pure gold hands, commandeering the whole room. All Mey could see was jewels, jewels and more jewels. The room seemed to stretch for miles around, looking like a desert with golden coins instead of sand. Interrupting her thoughts, Zheng He announced “ Impressive, isn’t it ? We give that for free to everyone in everywhere we pass...” Mey couldn’t believe her eyes ! Just then, a sailor ran up to Zheng He urgently and whispered in rapid chinese. Zheng He then said abruptly “Chen Zuyi the pirate has arrived. You must leave...” Mey thought “Did he know about her time travelling ? ” Mey couldn’t be sure. A horn blared through and upstairs, Mey heard chanting : “ Chen Zuyi has arrived!”

Mey was led quickly out of the corridors and up onto the deck. Already were there dead sailors and crewmen, gushing blood out like a fountain, swords lying scattered. Mey was shoved violently from behind and fell onto the wooden floor screaming... There was a flash of brilliant white, the same she had seen in the portal. Mey felt herself fading away from the fighting scene... All of a sudden, Zheng He pushed something into her pocket. It was bulging and large.

In a flash, Mey appeared back at home. She opened the package and saw that Zheng He gave her a bag of gold coins. Mey’s mother darted in and cried “Mey ? Where were you ? I have been looking everywhere!” Instead of answering, Mey just smiled covertly to herself...

# Drifted

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lin, Jenny – 12*

As my eyelids lifted open, darkness crept up to me. I felt as if Death had finally invited me to his burrow. Without noticing, I felt my eyelids gradually fall once again, as a million thoughts rushed through my mind in an instant. Is this the end? I would ask myself every now and then. Just as my body fell into the abyss, a storming sound could be heard.

My eyes flashed open, meeting the azure sky that greeted me. From a distance, sounds of rustling and panting could be heard. Where was I? Who was I? What was this? Questions exploded from my head. Slowly, I lifted the weight of my body upward, away from the ‘abyss’ that I still couldn’t make out.

Calls were heard from a distance, and I finally could put the puzzle pieces together and figure out my strange surroundings.

I was on an island, but one that wasn’t like any other. The sand was brown and black, with little specks of yellowish-white as well. I turned my head to see an aquatic wash of blue to my right, with no boats or any other kind of land in sight. A cold shiver ran down my spine, but I didn’t know why. This island seemed quite peculiar, but I didn’t know why it was giving me a dreadful feeling. To my left I saw an assemblage of trees, mostly palms. However, the exit of the jungle couldn’t be seen at all, a few metres in and complete darkness was all the rest that could be identified.

A flash of memories rushed back from my mind all of a sudden, and I finally remembered how I got here. Milliseconds of images, visions of words said. What this was. Who I was. But one thing that couldn’t be explained or remembered at all, is how I got here.

Voyaging through the South China Sea, my crew and I sailed through the magnificent waves, towards Africa, our next destination. The day had a cool and breezy atmosphere, and it was the 53rd day on board.

The noon waves started to reach us, and the sky got grayer by the second. At first, there were just a few gray clouds. There wasn’t particularly anything that caught our eye, so we continued voyaging into the sea. It wasn’t until a panicked shout was heard across the ship. Everyone’s attention was then at the source, and as if in only an instant storm clouds were right above our heads.

My heart sank, and I speedily ordered the rest of my crew to turn the sails and head the other way. But our actions were too late. A rumbling sound could be heard, and bolts of lightning appeared right before our eyes. A sense of panic ran down my spine, and all we could hope for right then was for the storm to clear up.

The waves were getting stronger and more rapid, which made it difficult to escape the storm. My eyes widened as masses of water rushed up the ship. Some of us rushed to the ship’s shelter, while murky liquid continued to splash up, into the ship.

Just when I was going to head towards the ship’s shelter with the rest of the crew, a dash of light struck the ship and after, there was complete darkness.

...

That’s when I found myself here. More and more questions started to fill my head. Where did the ship go? Where was my crew? I couldn’t possibly be the only one on the island, right? The sense of panic was back. I didn’t know what to do. Is everything over for me? I still kept asking that question over and over again in my head.

I shook my head. I slapped my cheeks. Was this only a small nightmare? Did I fall asleep on board again? But that was only what I hoped. I slowly stood up on my feet, and noticed there were several scratches. I then felt an aching pain somewhere on my leg. What had happened? I was still unsure. I was dizzy, and my vision was blurry. I had lots of trouble walking, and once in a while I would trip.

While trying to find my way around the island, something caught the corner of my eye. Turning around, my eyes once again widened, but this time of more terror than before.

# The Betrayal

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Rao, Dimitri – 13*

The glorious Golden Crane was just about to set sail for Jeddah. The storage compartment was filled to the brim with gleaming treasures and exotic riches. The Emperor of China had commanded that the greatest ship they possessed must be given as a gift to the Ruler of Jeddah. The gifts were luxurious silks and jewels so bright that they reflected the heavens. Each priceless object was handled with extreme care. They were finally ready.

“Will you come back?” asked a small girl with tears running down her cheeks. “I promise I will come back”. Captain Chu Zhong wiped his daughter’s tears away and said his goodbyes. Then he hugged his dear wife and walked up the gangplank. “We are ready sir”, said the Quartermaster. “Lower the sails”, bellowed the captain before following Zhang Lin to the quarterdeck. The loyal crew responded immediately—the sails were lowered and the merchant flag was raised.

The Golden Crane was the fastest and the most protected ship at the time. No daring pirate would intervene in its course. None but one. It was the pirate lord of the east, the Captain of The Damned Cutlass, Li Wen. He had robbed every palace, looted every village and sunk every ship. All but The Crane. This was no ordinary pirate. This man was a fearsome seadog. He had memorized every part of every map and had his plan of attack ready.

It was halfway through the voyage and most of the crew was dreaming about their families back home. The Quartermaster was peering through the thick fog. Suddenly, there was a thundering crack and the ship shook like an earthquake. They had hit a rock. Zhang Lin rushed over to assess the damage. The Golden Crane had gone off course and had come to shipwreck alley. This part of the South China Sea was a devastating ship graveyard. It was filled with colossal rocks that would destroy any ship’s hull.

The whole crew was woken up by the ringing beat of a gong. They all scrambled onto the main deck and attempted to gain control of the sails. Seeing that this was one of the largest ships in the world, the challenge was ten times harder than on a regular ship. There was another deafening crack. They had another hole in the hull. The crew rushed to the bottom of the hull where the water was pouring in. It was all going to plan.

The Golden Crane limped slowly, like a wounded animal, towards to the coastline of Malaysia. It was almost impossible to navigate with the blanket of fog surrounding them. All of a sudden, a large rock broke through the white and charged towards the ship. Captain Chu Zhong turned the wheel as hard as he could, causing the gigantic ship to tilt over. The crew took it upon themselves and raised the sails but unfortunately, the momentum was still forcing the ship into the rock. Captain Chu Zhong roared a command to lower the anchor.

There was a massive tug and the ship stopped almost instantly. The force was so great that all of the crew lost their balance. There was a loud scraping sound. There were a few holes; they were lucky to be floating still. While some of the men sprinted down, some went down to clear up the water, and others lowered the sails.

On they went, plowing through the menacing sea. The Captain allowed the Quartermaster to have some rest. When he went down, he shouted at the top of his voice “CAPTAIN!”. Chu Zhong rushed down as fast as he could. The quartermaster had his eyes staring at the immense hole the first rock made. Something was unusual about the hole. No rock could have made it that big. “We must not tell the crew,” ordered Chu Zhong “they will not sail properly if they worry”.

Time passed quickly for the captain. He was determined to arrive at their destination on time. He had decided to ignore the hole and focus on keeping the crew motivated. This would be very hard; they had no time to stop for food because most of it was ruined in Shipwreck Alley. Everyone was very tired and hungry. Zhang Lin and the First Mate had begged Chu Zhong to stop but he refused each time. His reason was everybody would shame him for failing to complete an extremely important task. He couldn’t risk that. Not with his current situation at home—he already had to battle his family’s tainted reputation.

Many weeks later, they could finally see Arabia. Their plan was to cross into the Red Sea and return home to glory. Every man on that boundless ship had no idea that someone was waiting for him. They went through the gap between the two countries and that is when they were hit. Not by another rock, but a cannonball. The Pirate Lord had made his strike. The Golden Crane immediately returned fire. The sounds of the cannons were ear piercing. The men were drenched with sweat and seawater. Then Li Wen sent sloops sailing swiftly towards The Golden Crane. Little did they know, that the sloops did not have any crew aboard and were packed full with gunpowder. The sloops were small ships and were very nimble, so they got in close proximity to the Crane in no time. "Shoot the small ships", yelled the First Mate. A rifleman took the shot. Almost immediately, there was an enormous explosion. It had come from the sloops and set the side of the deck on fire.

"Abandon ship!" shrieked the captain. Everyone swam to shore but the crew of The Damned Cutlass advanced. Most of the pirates got into the rowboats while some stayed and manned the cannons. Gunshots filled the air, the beach turned into a bloody battleground.

Amid the chaos, Chu Zhong turned around and confronted Li Wen. "Hello brother," said Li Wen. "I'm no brother of yours" he coldly retorted. How could he have not seen this coming? His brother has always been a foil in all his plans. "Did your crew have fun in Shipwreck Alley?" asked Li Wen with a sinister grin.

Zhong lunged and Wen instantly defended himself against the blow of his sword. Their swords clashed multiple times until Li Wen managed to cut Zhong's leg. Blood was spilling. Before Li Wen could finish his brother's life, the chanting and marching of the Arabians echoed over the hills. The pirates knew they were outnumbered. So while The Damned Cutlass continued firing on the two armies, the pirates took the gold and jewels that they could and returned to the ship. Their ship was faster than the Arabian ships so they were out into the vast ocean in no time. The Arabs went into pursuit but they were cut off by a colossal storm. Li Wen was amazed at disappearing. The Arabian crew quickly went back to the beach.

The Arabs took the remaining gold but gave some to back Chu Zhong out of pity. They also provided them with a ship and demanded that they return to China immediately. In the captain's cabin, Chu Zhong had tears running down his blistered cheeks. He would be shamed back in China. The emperor said he couldn't fail another task. The whole country would despise him, even more than they did already as a result of his family ties to the Pirate Lord. He would be forced to leave town. This was his one chance at redemption, but he failed. He picked up his pistol from his desk and aimed it at his temple. Sweat was dripping down his forehead. But, something stopped him. He remembered his daughter before he left; Chu Zhong could not break a promise, especially to his own daughter. He had to go back.

There was a deafening gunshot. His ears started ringing, he felt a sudden jolt and blood was oozing out of a hole in his chest. Chu Zhong then saw a large man standing over him. "I will not sail under your command. You are a disgrace to China." Then nothing.

# The Diary of Ah Hai

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Suen, Gwyneth – 11*

2nd November, 1407

I gazed listlessly at the sea. It was vast and endless. I have never understood the depth of this expanse of briny blue. It has so many secrets. So many stories yet to tell. As I leaned my weighty head against the spar, I closed my eyes and dozed off to the rhythmic swishes of the wind. Slish-slosh-slish-slosh, I felt myself rising up and down with the throbbing waves.

I am Chinese, but I was sent to live with my uncle in England after I was born. My mother died whilst giving birth to me, and my father did not want to see me again. He killed himself a year later.

Time has not stood still. I will be turning 15 next month. I was sent to Grandpa on the boat, YONGLE 333, about two weeks ago, after my uncle's sudden death in London.

Grandpa has been working on YONGLE 333 for years – one of the enormous treasure vessels set to sail under the command of Admiral Zheng. Grandpa has a pair of piercing black eyes as deep and untold as space, ready to take in every detail, every move. The wrinkles on his face are cruel slashes, burnt by the sun and wind, from the countless days he spent on board.

“What’re you doing here? Stop idling. Get on with work!” Captain Wang stormed into the kitchen as he screamed at me in radiant malice, amidst the clanking of dishes in the chaotic dance of dinner rush. His eyes narrowed to slits, as his smelly breath of rotten eggs worked its way up into my nose. He was in charge of the crew.

“Something on your mind, dear?” asked Grandpa, his eyebrows furrowing with concern. I shook my head without looking at him. I was lying.

It’s not that I hate the sea. The sea is serene. Perpetual. Straight-forward. Unlike my life. I can understand Chinese. In fact, I would love to learn more about Chinese culture! However, I spent my childhood in England, and so I barely speak the language. I have always been a subject of ridicule here on the ship. People call me “Guai” 鬼, which means ghost in Chinese, a metaphor for “outsider”.

I’m a sparrow beating about in the savage wires of its cage.

“Dinner time!” I heard Captain Wang shouting to everyone in his thunderous and disdainful voice.

I went to the dining room. The air was thick with an uncomfortable aroma of barbecued food, roast vegetables and the salty stink of sweat. Everyone in the crew was Chinese. Me too, of course. But everyone spoke Chinese. Except me. A feeling of loneliness entered my stomach, like a black creature piercing a hole in my heart, a darkness that has no borders, a wound to stay. I have Grandpa. But I’ve never had any friends here. Why am I so different? Why did I have to be raised up in a different language? Would there ever be a place where people will talk to me, understand me, and...love me? I wanted to yell but my voice was lost in the raucous laughter of the crowd.

—

21st February, 1408

Grandpa left me.  
He's gone.

I was preparing dinner when I heard Captain Wang exclaim, "Ah Hai, your Grandpa... he's dying! Stroke!" I ran towards Grandpa's cabin. There he was, lying on the bed— his face white as ghost, his eyes rolled in their sockets — writhing in agony.

"Grandpa," I whispered, my voice fading. *Please god, save Grandpa. He's all I have left. Please!* "Doctor, do something! Save him!" I heard myself pleading, almost screaming, in the torrents of fear, rage and grief. The doctor had a blank look on his face. "I'm afraid your Grandpa doesn't have long."

"Ah Hai," Grandpa rasped, his voice barely more than a whisper— hard, pained, and fragile all at once. "Listen. We both know that you are different, but that doesn't make you any less. Acknowledge who you are. Embrace your differences. Treasure your Chineseness. I am proud of you..."

I saw Grandpa take his last breath of life, as I felt mine dis sever from my heart and soul.

—

22nd February, 1408

The fog was a ghost. Grandpa's ghost. I held Grandpa's urn of ashes. The breeze sighed. I took a deep breath, and slowly tipped Grandpa's ashes into the deep bottomless sea. Grandpa would have wanted to be part of the sea. Rivers of tears rolled down my face as the last of his ashes vanished into the majestic waves. My heart has surrendered into darkness.

\*\*\*

There was an air of determined conspiracy in the common room. I heard a gradual crescendo of excitement and scornful laugh, as I dragged my lifeless body back to the cabin. The word "Guai" 鬼 was written on my door. One big red character. It filled me with shame, pulling my head down like a heavy weight. I tore the paper into a million tiny pieces, not unlike my heart. Fate was unfeeling.

—

2nd January, 1409

The day had come.

We were anchoring to the shore of Malabar Coast.

Admiral Zheng announced to everyone that whoever can speak foreign languages would assist to do the offerings at the investiture of the new King of Calicut. With reluctance, Captain Wang passed me a gold-plated box, filled with gold brocades, jade bangles, and many wondrous others.

I was led to the Royal Palace. "Welcome to India." The Indian generals smiled at me, eyes wide open, astounded by the extravagance of our offerings.

There I met General Rawat — with whom I was asked to take on a tour to Yongle 333. General Rawat is in his fifties. He has hair grey with age, and a stern but not unkindly look, with all the strength and stamina evident from the lines on his forehead. I showed him our ship— the anchors, the kitchen, and even my favourite hideouts from Captain Wang!

General Rawat likes me, I can tell.

—



9th January, 1409

Last week in Calicut was a bliss. There was an immediate bond of trust and affection between General Rawat and me. He invited me to dinner at his royal residence and bought me a silk dress embroidered with red flowers. I shared with him my past; my curiosity about Chinese culture; as well as my ambiguity as a Chinese, which brought back a pang of pain. He was the first person I've ever confided in after Grandpa. His kindness and reassurances cooled my panic and soothed my spirit.

YONGLE 333 will start sailing back to Nanjing in 10 days.

I do not want to leave.

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20th January, 1409

I woke up to the first searing rays of sunlight. An imperial order came from Emperor Yongle: a few Chinese scholars and officials have to stay in Calicut. I was asked to stay to assist.

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18th April, 1409

The morning light stroke the hedges and glittered on the dew-soaked leaves as we started our class on languages.

“Ninhao, jiangjun!” I saluted.

“Good morning, Ah Hai! What shall we start on today?” General Li greeted me in a pleasant and lilting accent that inspired trust.

I have started teaching English to the Chinese generals. Often times, they reciprocated me with tips on how to speak Chinese language, and stories about Chinese culture and history. General Rawat encouraged me to set up classes to teach the Indian generals more about China. It suddenly dawns on me that perhaps one day, I can bring all I've learnt to people around the world?

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5th August, 1412

I have never forgotten Grandpa. He's always in my dreams. And the sea is always in mind. The abysmal sea that holds hundreds of years of stories. The unwavering sea that is intent on keeping me in its embrace.

I have to build a boat. I have to go back to where Grandpa has always belonged. I need General Rawat's help.

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21st January, 1413

I stood on the deck of the boat that General Rawat and I have built together. It's taken us months. But now it's ready to sail.

HAIBO is its name.

HAIBO is loaded with treasures. Not usual treasures like silk, or gold, but my *Chinese* treasures: chess, calligraphy, and scroll paintings. I have decided to go on my voyages around the world: travelling from port to port, bringing along my Chinese treasures to trade with foreigners. I have decided to write my own journal, in English, based on all I know about China, the missionary voyages, and of course Grandpa, and myself.

I bid farewell to General Rawat, and stepped onto HAIBO. I gazed listlessly at the sea. I returned to where I was five years ago, but this time, a hard ball of determination tightened in my stomach. I had found my home. I lifted my head up high. There is a whole new world out there, waiting for me to explore.

## History Class...

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Tai, Andrew – 14*

The feeble worn out curtains could not block out the scorching heat radiating from the sun. It felt like a heater was inches away from my face, which was a refreshing contrast to the AC gently breezing into the room.

“...and that was how the first emperor of the Ming dynasty died after ruling for a measly 30 years.”

*How much longer do I have to bear this? Wait, how many times have I been in this situation today?* I wondered to myself, slouched over my desk. As my history teacher continued rambling on about ancient Chinese history, my eyes slowly drooped and the desk never looked so alluring...

“Since we are done with this topic, we can start discussing our next topic, which is the MING TREASURE VOYAGES.” I immediately shot upwards, full of enthusiasm which I previously lacked. In the process, my friend snoring next to me almost toppled over in shock. I could sense the eyes of everyone in the class upon me, scrutinizing my actions. The teacher slowly tilted his head towards me, as if in slow motion, before hesitantly continuing, “Um, would you like to start this conversation, Ms Smith?”

“Actually, I don’t think there is any reason as to why we would need to learn such an unnecessary topic...” A voice muttered out from the back of the room. I swivel around to find myself glaring at the source of the voice. It was Will, the one person in the class that no one ever noticed since he always had that nose of his in a book. I had never even seen him open his mouth, much less talk. Who does he think he is anyway, trying to spoil MY moment of recognition?

“Oh really? Why don’t you tell us why you think this way, WILL.” I uttered aloud, straining my voice to keep myself from literally exploding into an angry rampage. When I finally cooled down and retreated to my seat, Will began talking.

“You see, the Ming Emperor was trying to befriend China’s neighbouring countries, and I get that. What wasn’t necessary was giving extravagant gifts to these countries in exchange for just about nothing. It was a huge waste of not just precious resources and materials, but also time, as the Chinese could have used this time to continue inventing and advancing technology in order to get an even bigger edge over their enemies.”

I was stunned. In fact, the entire room was completely silent.

“D—did you consider the benefits of these voyages though?” I stuttered, trying not to seem too intimidated, and failing miserably. After another prolonged period of silence, in which I perceived as a no, I attempted to make this debate less one-sided.

“Zheng He, the leader who commanded those ships, mapped out a huge portion of the coastline of Southeast Asia and paved the way for many new trade routes throughout Asia. Without these very voyages, China would not be nearly as successful in the trade industry as they are now.”

Will immediately shot back at me, “Did you actually look into the Ming Voyages or did you make that up? Zheng He did not do any good for the country. He backstabbed those diplomats that supported and funded him after every failed voyage.”

At this point, Will was so red in the face that a blushing tomato wouldn’t be a good enough comparison.

“Your complete lack of knowledge about the Ming voyages is a disgrace to the Chinese and their culture, so can you please stop making a fool of yourself and just—” Will seemed to realise at that instant that he went completely overboard.

Nothing in the classroom moved as much as an inch. It was so quiet you could hear a feather settle onto the ground. The ringing of the school bell broke the seemingly impenetrable air of silence that had formed. Then slowly, one by one, the others slowly started packing their bags. There was no noise other than the shuffling of chairs and the packing of bags. Soon, I, Will and the teacher were the only people left. Filled to the brim with embarrassment and guilt, I sluggishly turn around to face Will, about to apologise for my outrageous behaviour.

“I—I’m terribly sorry!” Will feebly squeaked out, startling me. “Had I kept my loose-lipped mouth shut none of this would have ever happened!”

“Oh... It’s fine, really. I shouldn’t have reacted as I did at some silly debate. I guess we were just too caught up in applying knowledge with compassion.” I smiled lazily.

The teacher glanced at both of us, realised that the conflict between us had already been solved, and subsequently let us leave the classroom without so much as a warning. Talk about being lucky. As the two of us strode out of class, anxious to get home, I look over my shoulder and I see a completely different person in Will’s place. He seemed more mature and relaxed, and he seemed like a genuinely interesting person with an intriguing demeanour, something I never really noticed before.

As we went our separate ways down the hall, I surprise myself and turn back, shouting down the hall towards him.

“ Do you want to hang out sometime?”

# Doe Eyes

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Voelkner, Jaidan – 14*

Chaos, it's utter chaos. It always is this time of day. The sun is sitting at his peak, glaring down at us; his searing breath sighing down our necks, slinking down our spine. Every once in a while, a rare, moist breeze blows in from the river, the shrivelled shrubs flapping pitifully in its course. In reality, the wind is minuscule. Weak. Lasting for around three seconds, if we're lucky. However, to a clump of agitated, sticky, hungry men, who just want it to be lunch break already, it's a sweet release from this stifling heat, a false sense of comfort teasing at our bones before dissipating back into the harsh scrutiny of this merciless summer. A shudder resonates within my body, a heavy drop of sweat rolling down my neck, formed by the thick sheen layering my limbs. The latest shipment of wood from the upper reaches of the Yangtze arrived about an hour ago. It's all a blur, a flurry of movement; scurrying bodies, colliding into each other, rushing to their stations, heaving wood over to others, hoisting it into position. It's an agonizing loop, an endless drill of work. A gruelling routine? Without a doubt. But it's all worth it for us, for me.

Another bead of sweat forms, rolling from my scalp down to the top of my eyebrow, threatening to drop. I lift my arm and wipe off the droplets using my sleeve. Curling over, hands on my knees, sharp breaths pulling out of my chapped lips, I gaze over. The tension retreats my body, muscles releasing, a sense of serenity comforting my soul. Another chill passes through my body, but this time it's one I would welcome with open arms. It's like a chain reaction, the warm waves swooping upward, tickling my toes, sweeping around my abdomen, pumping my heart, sending charged volts to my brain. The persistent grunts, groans and rushed clanging were more distant now, the thoughts that make my stomach ooze fading away. I look closer. It's relatively still today, the ripples sweeping forward and delicately lapping at the bank, then gently retreating back into the masses.

It's like I'm already there. I can feel the salty wind hitting my face, combing through my hair. Planted on the deck, I can feel the muscles in my feet work to keep balance on the swaying surface, hear the creaks of wood. I can feel my head underwater, the chilled water blanketing around me, my long locks floating, with no restraints. It's quiet, the noise above only far gurgles. Looking up at the surface, I can see the wrinkles of sunlight languidly manoeuvring between the waves. I bob up for air, my dripping tunic sticking to my slim waist, hugging my recently broadened chest. I'm meant to be out there, out on the se—  
“Hoi! Li-Zhong! Get back to work! The more you waste time by staring at the river, the longer it will take us to actually get out there!”

The noise returned, the murmur and banging, streams of sweat rolling down my neck, the heat was back and it was suffocating.

Zhang-Fei, 17 years old, like me, but he acts like he's 5. He doesn't like me, never has. We grew up near each other, just outside Nanjing. Him and his minions always giving me a hard time. His bulky, burly body, thick shaggy hair, serpent eyes, the man practically radiates arrogance. And to think I thought I was escaping him by joining the voyages... I sigh, stalking back to my station. I look up at the structure which will soon be a 400 feet long boat with 9 masts, 12 sails, and 4 decks. A treasure ship. We are making good progress on it actually, it's coming together quicker and better than expected. My stomach bubbles with excitement every time I think about it. I'm building a Treasure Ship, I'm going to sail on a Treasure Ship!

“Li-Zhong, in your own world slacking off again?” a voice next to me tuts.

I chuckle, already knowing who belongs to the voice. I turn to face him.

“Bai, you make up every excuse under the sun to get off work, you're the biggest slacker here,” I sneer, smirking at him.

“Not true!” he squeals, face scrunching up, lips in a pout. He stomps ahead of me, grumbling about how much of a liar I am, probably. Wong Bai, 15 years old, the purest soul I’ll ever know. We met our first day in the shipyard, around a month ago. Being on the younger and unathletic sides, we tended to see each other quite a lot, so naturally, we became quite close. He’s still quite young, innocent, makes me wonder why he’s here. He’s a lanky kid with curly soft hair, his smile is blinding and he has these eyes... God, those eyes. He has these huge round doe eyes and when he smiles they curl into tiny crescent moons. We begin to load up the planks of wood into piles for the others to use to construct the boat. Zhang-Fei is working on panelling, I believe. The majority are focusing on the sternpost rudder, China’s very own invention, used for navigation. Next to me, I hear Bai giggle at something someone said. I sigh, the noise itself adding a year to my life, hauling a log of wood up and walking it over to the others.

Bai and I are walking to get dinner. It’s now been 3 months since we met, the ship edging completion. The sun rests on the horizon now, a blanket of purples, oranges, pinks fanning around it. We walk in silence, not an awkward silence, but a warm, pleasant one. The crunching of the gravel under our feet, crickets chirping, I look over at him. The tinges of pink and purple glazing his face, glimmering eyes, his lustrous hair laid on his forehead, the chiller breeze blowing it slightly, I wonder. I came here because I belong out there, on the sea. I peer down at my hands, fingertips running over the various blisters and splinters littering them. It’s not like I was leaving behind anything, I have no family to miss me and I was never great at making friends. But Bai? I return my gaze to him. I have no idea. Maybe I don’t want to know.

My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. Pride swirls in my chest, growing by the second. The weather is tamer, the sun has shown some mercy. The wind whistles, auburn leaves gliding off the trees. Bai and I are just two in a crowd of hundreds all roaring in celebration. It’s been 4 months since I’ve arrived here. Four months of hard work and now we have a completed Treasure Ship. It’s so worth it, all the struggle, physical strain, it’s all so worth it. It was a group effort, it really was. And now all that’s left is to load it up and then we are free. We can join Zheng He and the others, I’ll be where I belong. I peer over at Bai, he’s howling, jumping up and down, one of those blinding smiles plastered on his face, he’s proud too.

The masses have scattered, all leaving to meet with family or friends before our departure next week. I see Zhang-Fei leaving the shipyard, laughing. I’m happy for him, he’s found some good friends, people who have tamed his raging soul, subdued his petulant ways. He doesn’t talk to me much these days.

“Li-Zhong let’s go celebrate with the others! We deserve it! We can finally leave!” Bai cackles, clutching onto my arm, twinkling eyes blinking up at me.

“Let’s go.” I grin, striding forward.

The night is not silent. The sea is not still. The wind is not gentle. The Yongle Emperor is dead. The night is loud, the shrieks of dreams being burned ringing in our ears. The sea is violent, a vicious body of water we’ll never see. The wind is a brutal chill thrashing at our already raw skin. The Hongxi Emperor has ordered the ending of the Treasure Voyages meaning the destruction of the Treasure ships. I stare at the army of smoke blasting out of her, shooting towards the atmosphere. The hues of reds, oranges, yellows spreading, the deafening cracks of wood being burned. I can feel the clouds of heat radiating out of her, but I couldn’t feel any colder. I stand next to Bai. The Bai with no tears left in his body, only a throbbing throat and an empty, hollow feeling buried in his soul. The flames illuminating his face, glittering in his eyes. He looks at me. I look into a pair of unfamiliar eyes, a pair of eyes belonging to a broken soul. My breath turns ragged, my lungs collapsing on themselves. I feel a body wrapping around mine, a head pressing into my neck, slim fingers tugging at my nape. I close my eyes, releasing a shaky exhale. I don’t ask what will never be for him. Maybe I don’t want to know. There is no point to grieve for a life we will never live, a door that will never be opened, a book that will never be read. Maybe I don’t want to know what demons lie behind the doe eyes.

# Ming Treasure Voyages

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Wei, Edward – 14*

It was a dreamy sea. The lapping waves gurgled, gushed, hummed as it forges its own sounds and kindles its own symphony. Like a steady, throbbing heartbeat. A rhythmic pulse that is unmatched by any other part of nature. The song of the sea was rarely acknowledged. After all it wasn't played very often and even so – many had to strain their ears just to get an impression of the metronomic, mesmerizing tune.

On the perch of a fishing boat, stood a withered, elderly man, leaning on the side of a crusty iron fence bordering the edge. He laminated himself in the mosaic of waning colours from the sunken, ethereal sun and tasted the saline tang of the ocean breeze. His eyes kept squared at the horizon where such rich and varied – great wings of gold and yellow and rose – boundless masses of crimson and purple and pink and scarlet above melds into the molten, shimmering, ghostly blanket of silver beneath. He muttered under his breath. Dousing himself in the palpating pulse of the pelagic melody.

The sun sunk deeper into the place where sea and sky met and was lost from sight. Soon, it would be time for the ship to head back to harbour. The old man sighed as he inclined his head and just as he was about to turn around. He frowned. The tune seemed ... *off*. It was like a single instrument in an orchestra playing an entirely different song to the rest. Minute and virtually undetectable, but the error was undeniably there.

Suddenly, a malicious intent seeped into the sky. An intent full of bloodlust. A killing intent. The echo of a raspy, rumbling roar came upon everyone onboard the ship. The waves were sloshing, slurping and slobbering. It pummelled against the ship, slamming into it before releasing. The wave quickly retracted, only to pounce back. The cycle continued; wave after wave, tide after tide. Burgeoning in size with each cycle. It foamed and frothed; crashed and bashed; lathered and lacerated. Until finally, the sea plunged down hard and the tiny ship was ripped apart.

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The crowd was a life of its own, filled to the brim with a myriad of vibrant colours as people flowed in and out like a river; never stopping for any obstacle, only swerving around them. The harbour was built nearly entirely out of stone bricks, including the houses. Voices melded into the sky as sellers advertised their products. A small cat leapt out of sight. A few hundred years ago, this probably would've been considered beautiful, however the wind and rain have battered away, until its allure can only be admired from paintings of the past. I glanced at the sky. Under this amount of people, countless even on a photograph, its vastness gave me the motivation to push down the claustrophobia grasping at my heart and continue on.

I took a right turn into a narrow alley, untangling myself from the ball of human yarn. Taking long strides, I hastily stepped away from the crowd, only slowing down when the shouts softened to whispers. By then, I had already reached the seaside.

The coastline had no beaches. The stone slabs of the harbour directly met with water, sometimes with a small stony scree. The sea was a cerulean – blue gown, glistening like a mirror. It gleamed with a luster of colours – azure – blue, minty – green, amber, creamy – yellow... Ghostly reflections of boats and buildings waltzed in the expanse, distorted by slight oscillations created by the splash – splashing of cruising ships. Beyond the crystalline sea stood towering mountains and beyond the mountains lays the vast aurora of the first blush of dawn.

I walked along the border of the harbour. Slower this time. Admiring the eden beauty of nature around me. My eyes were set at the line of nickel – silver that was the horizon, as I witnessed the marriage between sea and sound. If words could flow, then no doubt would it be the waves – "always return", "always return", it would say. Hundreds, then thousands, then millions, followed by billions of times over. If thoughts could glow then these words will be the last light the universe witnesses until time itself becomes meaningless.

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Desolate.

It was so very desolate. No plants, no land, no buildings. A world of ice and snow. A blanched canvas. I snuggled up into my furry cloak. I was doomed. Fated to die here, my corpse soon to be encapsulated in layers of snow. The emptiness in my soul matches the spiritless sky and the featureless landscape around me.

Day and night blended together. What difference was there? It's all blank. A snowstorm whirls around me, remorselessly impaling me with shards of ice and balls of snow. My lips parched, my eyes blinded and my skin numbed. Cracks appeared beneath my feet. I am a dead man. A walking corpse. Only God can save me now. But then again, I was never one to have faith.

The only sounds to accompany me was the moaning of wind, the crunch of footstep and the wheezing of breath. The slippery snow is my enemy. Its soul as frigid as a ghoul's, darker than a demon's. It bends its full will against my survival and is winning.

I don't where I'm going. I don't know how long do I have to live. I don't know how far this icefield stretches out for. I just continue to move my lead-filled legs forward.

One step at a time.

# The Stowaway

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Yau, Alicia – 12*

Wei leaped over a few haphazard crates that were blocking his path, accidentally overturning some nearby orange baskets, provoking a string of foul language from the shop owner that they belonged to. He vaulted over a pile of wood that builders had left there on their lunch break, and kept on running. A smell of spices wafted its way to his nose as the sun hung high in the cerulean blue sky.

Streets were filled with people going about their business in plain, moth-bitten clothes, a stark contrast to the imperial soldiers that towered above them. But why, you might ask, were they there? The Ming Treasure Voyages of course.

The Ming Treasure Voyages were to be a series of expeditions from China to foreign countries that would allow them to explore new areas, establish trade and show off the might of the Ming dynasty.

The enormous vessel that was docked at the end of the pier was Wei's destination. He had already made up his mind. Nothing awaited him in the port village where he lived, therefore, the ship would be his ticket to glory and new lands. Wei knew that the emperor wasn't likely to let a small sixteen-year-old boy like him work on the ship, so he'd have to sneak on.

Now normally, sneaking anywhere guarded by imperial soldiers would be nearly impossible for anyone, but Wei had been taught smuggling, stealing, fighting and other very useful skills by the best in the business – an almost middle-aged man named Ling. Ling had discovered him trying to steal his apples, and instead of reporting the young boy, had offered to teach him how to do it better.

Truth be told, Ling was the reason stowing away would be so easy. He had already gained employment as a deck hand, and he offered to help Wei get into the space in the crew's quarters that no-one else knew about.

Wei made his way to the barnacle covered stairs leading down into the water. He decided to simply wring his clothes out later, and jumped the rest of the way in. Swimming through to the other side of the ship was fairly simple, because the waves were quite small and the soldiers didn't bother looking down.

From there, he looked up to see Ling's face grinning toothily down at him. "Grab a hold of this, kid" he barked, tossing down a long, tattered rope. "It's good to see you too Ling!" Wei replied sarcastically, grabbing a hold of the end and hauling himself up despite his heavy, wet clothes.

Wei flopped onto a part of the deck where they couldn't be seen by others, landing on his stomach with a small grunt. Get on the ship, check. "Get down to the crew's quarters, slip past the spare barrels of gunpowder, pick the lock concealed at the bottom of the panel of wood and there should be a hidden compartment in the back." Ling also handed him some pieces of stale bread and a big flask of water that would last until they got to the first stop "Don't let anyone see you...but I trust you know already, so go". Wei muttered his thanks as he slid away.

Locating the hidden compartment as well as picking the complicated lock was a piece of cake for someone like him, however living there was not. Wei was plagued by a constant smell of seaweed and alcohol, a combination that did not bode well for him, and the space was extremely cramped but the decision to be a stowaway was his, and he would stick to it.

It didn't mean he couldn't be slightly displeased by his situation.

With no idea of how long the ship had been at sea for, the boy would pass the time by listening to the chatter of the other crew members through a crack in the wooden panel.

The crack, as it appeared, was large enough for a scruffy little rat to worm its way in.



Wei had panicked when he heard something sniffing at his arm in the dark, at night. It bit down hard enough to draw blood when he tried to shake it off without letting anyone outside hear. He cursed quietly. Wei caught the animal by its tail. "If I catch you poking around here again I *will* stab you," he whispered, reaching to the small dagger tucked in his pocket as if to prove his point. The rat wiggled free and scampered away.

Unfortunately, the rat somehow still didn't get the message after their first encounter, though the second one went slightly better.

Around a week and a half into the voyage the provisions Ling had given him had almost run out, despite the fact that Wei had been extremely careful to make it last. He was planning to head out to get some more bread from his former mentor before he was interrupted by that tell-tale sniffing that made him want to claw his eyes out in frustration. The dagger was out in an instant. But before it could kill the offending rodent, Wei noticed a sizeable chunk of bread that definitely wasn't there before. A peace offering of sorts, he guessed.

So he didn't kill the rat, it could help him. He didn't name it either because that would mean they were friends. They were not.

It was peaceful, being at sea. Wei eventually got used to the smell, as putrid as it was, and having the sea rock you to sleep was quite soothing.

Until one day that changed.

The first sign that something was wrong was when Wei woke up to the thunderous sound of a cannon blast that got him up on his feet in an instant.

All of a sudden, more deafening cannon sounds could be heard being fired into the side of the ship just as Wei managed to stumble into the commotion that was the crew's quarters. One of the cannonballs had managed to smash through the wood and water was rapidly pooling on the floor. Repairmen were trying to fix the damage the cannonball had caused, sailors were pushing past each other to get to the deck and people were reaching for their weapons. No-one noticed Wei following the sailors upstairs.

The deck was full of people defending against the pirates from the other ship that just appeared out of the fog, seemingly out of nowhere. The pirates attacking were giant, hulking battle-hardened men, cutting down anyone in their way. Their ship was a monster of a vessel, rivaling the Ming ship in sheer size. Wei knew who they were. Everyone knew who they were. The first time he had ever been on a ship, with Ling, they had to wait another week on land before setting sail because there was news that the Howling Hangman was in the area.

They were a force to be reckoned with, but the crew of the Ming dynasty treasure ships weren't anything to dismiss either. The Ming Emperor had paid informants to find the best sailors, craftsmen and scholars across China, and he paid each of them a decent amount to sway them into joining up. Needless to say, both sides were quite evenly matched in battle prowess.

The fighting was messy, and Wei was right in the middle of it. Rather than standing there like a headless chicken he opted to pull out the dagger and slash the leg of the burly pirate next to him. He decided to squash down whatever fear he once held for the Howling Hangmen to make it out alive. Blood spurted out of the wound, staining the floor, and the burly man who he injured stumbled, then fell. Other sailors immediately leaped on his body to finish him off.

Turning away, Wei ran to a part of the deck where the fighting wasn't as intense. Even if he was prepared to fight, it didn't mean he would actively seek it, that way, he had a better chance of surviving.

He removed multiple hidden daggers from his clothes to throw them into pirates. All of them found their marks. One of them being a man holding a knife to the Ming treasure ship captain's throat, luckily enough. When he ran out of daggers to throw, Wei ran over to various fallen pirates, pulling out the sharp objects lodged in their body for reusing.

The fight continued, but the tide was turning against the attacking pirates.

Several cannonballs were exchanged between the two ships, the only difference being that the Hangman's crew didn't have the people or the time to repair or block the holes torn through the exterior of the vessel. It was hungrily consumed by the ocean.

Very few of the Hangman's crew were left standing, thoroughly disheartened by both the sinking of their ship and the death of their captain. It had ended.

After cleaning up most of the corpses littered around, most of the crew were simply standing around on deck, unable to believe they had defeated one of the most fearsome pirate crews around, and on their first fight. Finally, after disappearing into his cabin for some time, the captain resurfaced.

He congratulated everyone for their victory, and made a few other announcements. Lastly, he called for the boy who had saved his life.

Wei.

To his surprise, the captain offered him a job as a cabin boy, which Wei accepted. Sitting on the crow's nest looking out to sea with rat perched on his shoulder, Wei thought happily to himself '*well, this worked itself out nicely, hasn't it?*'. And they sailed off into the sunset.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Harrow International School Shanghai, Cook, Emma – 13*

Dear diary,

Today is a very big day, because today I aboard the magnificent ship. I am scared, but extremely excited. I can't wait for the adventures ahead! However, my mother is slowly dying of a traumatic disease called malaria. I love my mother, but my duties are more important, because we need the money. I know I may sound mean, but I want my children to have the best in life, so this money should help them out. I will be gone for 2 years, however it may be extended. I know I will miss a lot, but I do have my best friend coming with me so I should not be too lonely.

I finally arrived at the port and when I first saw the boat I was amazed, I felt like royalty. The boat was so long and tall and it had a magnificent paint job on the outside (it was a big red dragon). Never had I ever seen something so grand before. That wasn't even the best of it, inside the actual boat there were pots and pots of gold. After seeing this I thought this trip was going to be a good one. That was when I began to feel a lot better and happier about leaving my family. My family understands I have to leave don't they?

Before I knew it we were off, I was ecstatic, but there was always regret in the back of my mind, however I was quickly ushered to my room and told to get into my uniform. The rooms were tiny and there were about 10 people fit into one, I felt like I had an invasion of privacy, but no one was going to listen to a 24 year old man who was there to clean the decks.

About four days had past, and I was so tired, sleeping was so hard, because you couldn't get comfy. I also had hardly anything to eat, all the food I had been given made me throw up it was absolutely repugnant. I felt like my own body was rotting inside of me and I wanted to run far and never return. Sadly, this was starting to become a nightmare and it was something I did not especially want to experience, but I had no choice.

We are about one month into our voyage and it has probably been the worst month of my life and here is why... My best friend who came with me had passed away I would tell you more, but they refused to tell me any details. I think he was malnourished, because he was so weak sometimes he told me he couldn't even get up. I can't believe how horrid some people on this boat are, it shocks me.

I just can't stop thinking about home, I miss my wife, my kids and my beloved mother. She has probably died by now, which makes me so sad, because I wasn't even there to say goodbye. What kind of son does she think I am? Please forgive me mother, I am sorry.

'The pain is unbearable' I cried out.

'its okay we will get some people to come check it out and that is a promise ' the captain muttered

I waited all night for someone to come, but they never did. The captain made a promise, but he didn't even keep it, but worse My foot was in excruciating, agonizing and torturous pain. I was starting to feel delirious. On top of that I started to feel really sea sick, I was vomiting all the time and it was gross, all I wanted was to be at home with my lovely family, but sadly that was not a reality. The past year on the boat had been horrific and this had made my life that much harder, but luckily we were ahead of schedule, so we might be home sooner then we thought.

The next day I was told I could sit out, but I would have to work the next day, which was absolutely bonkers, because my foot was infected. So I decided to ask captain about the work and if I could get checked by medics, but I instantly got turned away.

It had been about 1 week since my foot incident (on accident I stepped on to about six nail's, because the captain left them out) and it is still in so much pain, but the infection is starting to spread and I think I don't have much time left, because I am constantly fainting, vomiting, bleeding and my skin is slowly changing to black. The useless captain keeps saying I am faking, but others are telling me I will die soon and I think I believe the others.

Another day has passed and I am feeling nauseous, I think today may be the end... All I can think about is my wife and my children. They will just think that I was a monster and that I was brought from the devils them self, but I love my family. I just want them to have the best in life, but they will never know.

I woke up that night at 3:00 am and I am starting to get the feel that I will not live another day. I get up and I use all my energy I have left to write a letter to my wife, but even writing a word is hard. I barely write a sentence before I fall of my chair on to the ground, where I hear unearthly screams and people crying, however these sounds, sound very familiar and then I realise who it is, but before anything else happens I fall unconscious on the ground.

Three days pass and I am still unconscious and I am still haunted by the screams I hear from far away. That was when I suddenly feel something plunge into my heart and I know it is the end.

If you ever see this, tell my family I love them and that I am sorry.

# Ming Treasure Voyage

*Harrow International School Shanghai, Horsnell, Ella – 13*

As I lie on my death bed, my life flashing right in front of my eyes.

I remember to the day I was ripped and stolen from the heart of my family. By this age I knew the reality by this age, I was eleven, I knew I would never be able to see them ever again... I think being forcefully dragged out of my own home, to what the other boys called 'the torture chamber.' They made us queue in an everlasting line. Unfortunately the majority of us knew what our melancholy fates were coming to. I felt so nauseous, why would anyone want to do this to innocent boys like me? After the excruciating, agonizing pain of becoming a eunuch.

After that horrifying experience, I was introduced to Zhu di, the son of the emperor. Only after knowing Zhu di for a short time we instantly bonded, and gained a powerful friendship. Shortly after meeting Zhou di his father passed away. Unfortunately to Zhu di disapproval, the throne was passed onto his elder brother. Zhu di and I schemed and divided to dispose of his elder brother. This made citizens lided causing a civil war, however after several months of battling China resulted in peace.

Eventually Zhu di in 1405 sent me with a fleet of men on a voyage to convey China's supremacy. The ships were mighty and grand, Zhu di filled eight boats full of gold, Jess and silk. They were each four-hundred feet long he traveled with an estimated 28,000 sailors. He brought marines and translators.

We set off from Nanjing our first destination was Vietnam, I remember it very well as we arrived the kindly greeted, we presented them with our gifts, they thought of it as a remarkable gesture.

Then after our voyage to Vietnam, we would be going to Malaysia, to our horror there was a dreadful tempest practically waiting for us, it was devastating and extremely prettifying to lose four small ships in the frightful storm. I distinctly remember the ear-shattering, piercing thunder it was louder than a chandelier being smash into billions of individual shards. Eventually we arrived in Malaysia we were pleased by the delightful exotic weather and the gleaming sun. We gave our lucky gifts (which consisted of gold and silk.) We gave them to the locals, as their faces lit up with contentment. The cuisine was nothing like we had ever tasted before, it was quite upsetting to leave a place that had such a heavenly manner.

Despite this, we continued with our travels next stop Sumatra, Indonesia! We were greeted with a sour harsh greeting. All the locals were armed and they clearly viewed us as a threat. They forcefully claimed that they expected gifts, however due to there vulgar greeting Zhu di refused to give them our presents. We ended up in conflict, it brutal and physical and after three days of war China won and fled, although some of the crew members were severely wounded and harmed.

Next on the list was Jarva, Indonesia this time we were prepared and armed, with weapons surrounding our ships. At first the locals were intimidated by our powerful weapons and thought we were there to loot their town and cause kaos, as a result we put our weapons down. We reassured them that we were only here to bring them gifts from China, we gave them the gifts and they were thankful and pleased.

After that we sailed to Sri Lanka, on the way we ended up getting lost, but almost immediately we got back on track. Sri Lanka was fascinating we saw new techniques such as eating foods with their hands, however they were quite reluctant to accept our gifts.

Next stop, the tip of India we arrived armed and protected, but they fought us before we could step foot on land. They raided our ships loot. They slaughtered hundreds of our men with their imposing army, we had to vigorously retreat, as we raced for our lives. We rapidly put up our sails and sailed away.

By this time there were scurrilous rumors about a Chinese pirate, his name was Chen Zhu yu he was stealing goods from the coast of Indonesia, so that's where we headed. To catch this pirate and Robb him of his steals. We captured him and his crew and held them in captivity, shortly after we decided we were going to execute him in Nanjing.

Unfortunately Zhu di had a sudden death. Everyone was very pity full to hear the tragic news. Before they funeral we had a wake, where we kept an overnight vigil for Zhu di paintings and sketches with an assortment of candles surrounding him, with beautiful white flowers symbolizing death in Chinese culture. We sent out invitations to everyone he knew. We all wore white gowns and white hats to the funeral. At they funeral we burnt his most valuable replicated possessions that meant a lot to him and had a special place in his heart, we made sure he would have everything he desired so that he could enter the spirit world with happiness containing all the objects he would need. Then as a symbol of keeping the spirits away, we gave everyone of our guest a piece of red string to hand on their front door nob. We then burnt him in a roaring, mighty fire.

As I flicker through my life's greatest experiences, I think of being a young man and traveling to places I would of never been to without Zhu di. Although I miss my family so incredibly much and would do anything in my power to be able to see them, I also want to thank Zhu di for letting me see miraculous sights, to taste these colorful foods. He was such a passionate leader and a remarkable individual through rough times he steered us into the right directions. It means so much to me celebrating his life, as we will soon celebrate mine.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Harrow International School Shanghai, Li, Lynn – 13*

“Someone, Hold on to the sail! Hold on! Lower the topmast!”

“y...yes sir! But I can't! The wind is too strong!” One of the sailors cried back.

“Just pull it down!” The master shouted back.

The wind howled and the waves each time bigger than the one before.

Even though it is still daytime, the dark rain clouds stretched across the whole sky, and it was as dark as midnight. Nothing could be seen, except when lighting strikes. When the next lighting stroke, all people can see were sailers torn into the sky along with the sail when they were trying to lower it, the wind brought them higher and higher, and then disappeared into the sky with screams of fear. All people could hear were waves, thunder, and all the moaning, crying from the people.

A man stood on the very front of the boat calmly and said soberly: “This is a tough one” and his name is Zheng He. This is his fourth time out on to the ocean, but it is the first time he has ever seen such a thing.

And there came another monstrous wave.

Zheng He can feel the scorching hotness of the sun on his face. He opened his eyes and saw things that he has never before seen in his life. Giant palm trees, golden beaches, and rarely a seal cries. While Zheng He is enjoying the scenery in front of him. Loud shouts of people have destroyed the quiet air. “Ho, ho, hee.”

“HEE, he ho, ho, he”

They sound more like monkeys than people. Zheng He has never heard a sound like this ever in his life, but he thought they were no danger. The sound became louder and louder, closer and closer, in the next second Zheng He realized they were coming for him! He stood up and wanted to hide, however, it was too late, two giant hairy people were standing behind him, they have ginormous tattoos on their face, and in their hands were The first thought that flashed through his mind was “Run!”. He lifted his foot and wanted to get out of here, immediately the giants both grabbed him by the hands, and now there's nowhere Zheng He can go but to follow them.

After a while, they finally stopped, and in front of them was a big stone chair, and several rock poles with very delicate carven patterns on surrounding it, Zheng He has never seen something like this in his life, but the patterns on the poles suddenly remind him of something, but he is not exactly sure what. While Zheng He was trying really hard to remember what the pattern reminded him of, an older man walked up, and seated on to the chair, in the middle. He is obviously the chief of the tribe. The people started communicating in a language that Zheng He cannot understand.

“hehe, hoho.”

“he, hohohoho, hehee.”

For a while Zheng He was just standing there in awkwardness, and there they finally stopped. The chief started talking to Zheng He, and surprisingly, the chief does speak English.

“WHOO ARE YOU?” The chief said in a funny accent, but he is very serious, looking right into Zheng He's eyes, he felt like he has been stared through, But from all the experiences that he has gained in the past three years, he knew that he can not show any fear of what is happening or how he is unconfident about anything.

“My name is Zheng He, I came from China and I am on a mission to Hormuz.” He didn't explain too much, because he didn't want to waste too much time to him, he just wants him to understand who he is, and free him.

The chief look confused, he clearly did not understand anything that Zheng He had just said to him, and then he whispered to the strong man beside him.

“HO!” the strong man shouted.

People all around start to surround Zheng He and pushed him to the ground. This is not what Zheng He was expecting, it shocked him, And for a while he did not understand what was happening. They lifted him up and thrown him into a vine and tree bark woven cage. Now he had finally realized what was happening. In front of the cage stand two guards. He thought that he could try explaining to them, then he remembered they can not even understand what he will say, but it still worth trying, anything worths a try now. He doesn't want to be stuck here forever.

“Hi, I need to see your chief, I need to tell him that I do not want to harm any of you.” He spoke as slowly as possible, so it is easier for them to catch what he was saying, so they could understand.

Unfortunately, the two guards did not understand a thing he just said, and didn't react too much, but shoot him a death stare. It actually made him shiver. In his memory, since he was ten, nothing has really made him scared, but this time he was actually shivering in fear.

"Fine, this will not work. There has to be a way, but what?" He murmured to himself. Hours he sat there in silence, he doesn't know what to do and felt really helpless. Then an idea flashed into his mind. "Fire! That is the one, tribe people think fire is holy, and who can make fire is like a god-like existence! And that godlike existence will be me!"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of Flint and a tiny dagger. He rubbed them together, and sparks appeared. Using the piece of flint he ignited a heap of wood. The guards immediately felt the light and heat, they turned around and saw it was Zheng He who made the fire. They both knelt down in front of Zheng He, and worshiped him, one of them suddenly realized Zheng He is still locked in a cage, he got up and released him.

Zheng He got out of the cage and he gave the guards the piece of flint, he thanked them, even though he knows that they will not understand, grabbed everything that belonged to him, and he went off, he crossed the forest that they that went through when they were coming. The second he stepped out of the forest, he was extremely relieved, waiting for him was his troop.

Nothing was really missing, and so they continued their great journey. What adventures are waiting ahead of them, no one knows...



# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Harrow International School Shanghai, Li, Rianne – 13*

After travelling at sea for months, we finally catch shore in our eyesight in the distance, but instead of Calicut or Siam, or any other place we visited, these unfamiliar waters are definitely out of this world. No, this land is more rural, more mystical, more natural.

As we were approaching the shore, we encountered some of this land's natural inhabitants – the half-fish-half-crocodile, with the two half constantly at war, the glowing blind fish, the shrimp that lives inside a whale. For that reason, we were not terribly surprised by what we saw when we arrived.

For starters, the land was filled with moss, grass, and plants, like the ground in a forest, which probably means this civilisation did not discover the sea yet, or the coast for that matter of fact, as there is no sign of human there for as far as the horizon. But having traveled at sea for months, our provisions were running low, which forced us to stop on this foreign land.

While we ventured on into the deep dark woods, for reasons of gathering provisions and to present our emperor's lavish good-will presents to any civilisation who manages to reside in this forest. But soon, we ventured straight into a problem. Near where we were, there was a hardly helpful sign, which translated into: 'Do not walk near the ghi or step on the xno. If you do, YOU'RE DEAD.'

We quickly figured out the 'trees', which look like colourful tunnels, made of wood, leading you down the rabbit hole, could move themselves, like they are individual living entities, and engulf any being within its proximity and manages to stay there. While the 'trees' are engulfing organisms, it screeches 'Ghi!Ghi!' to signal its victory in capturing prey. If you put a stone near a ghi, the stone will disappear quicker than you can say 'ghi', as the towering parasitic entity will have swallowed the stone. The ghi would even suck a ghi sapling from the ground, uprooting it from the earth below. However, there is one thing it does not eat — the dull coloured pebble on the ground, xno, and we soon find out why.

The uninteresting pebbles that littered the ground, proved to be lethal, because if pressure is applied to it, the xno instantly ignites. A single one of smooth small pebbles generate enough fire to turn 10 ghi into ash, who knows what will happen if we made a small lethal mistake.

We had brainstormed many ideas to help us pass, but none of them seemed able to work. As the only reasonable thing to do, we tried to find ways to go around our obstacle. Instead of finding another way through, we found resources, perhaps to aid us in getting past. We found: fallen ghi, a source of wood, branches and sticks; ashes of either ghi, xno or both. Unfortunately, apart from our opening, the other paths are guarded by a wall of ghi, or a floor of xno.

When we returned to the opening, a chimpanzee like creature, a bird with a rabbit's head, and a blue rabbit with no head awaited our arrival. They waited until everyone arrived, like they have something important to show us. First, the man-sized 'chimpanzee' leaped at great lengths, leaving a pile of xno instantly bursting into flames, then it grabbed onto the ghi branches, which are flexible like rope, durable as it could hold the 'chimpanzee's weight, and it did not break even after the 'chimpanzee' sprung off it. Afterwards, the 'rabbit' held a ghi stick in its paws and started pushing the xno on the ground forward, providing safe passage for itself. Lastly, the 'bird' sprinkle some powder on a ghi and a different powder on some xno near the powdered ghi, and that triggered ghi to eat the xno, and the xno to burn instantly. In the end, there is a burnt ghi and a patch of ground near it.

Taking this as a hint, we quickly decided what to do. First we assembled the ghi branches and sticks, to form a poorly made broom, and swept away the xno, enough to form a path. Next we sprinkled the ashes we found on the ghi and the xno near it, to make sure we were not engulfed by the hollow husks of trees.

After we all made safe passage, I looked back at the forest, half of which is lit by flames we set, but we had no choice — we were desperate and low on provisions.

We walked on, into the forest, with many new acquaintances — we met the animals who helped us earlier, with their friends as well, the butterfly-frog, the human bird, the part dog, part cat, part mouse, a dause.

The woods surrounding us also seemed to brighten — instead of lethal ghi on our sides and xno underneath us, the woods changed to actual trees, but not quite. Even though now there are animals, trees and grass, but if you look more carefully, you can still see the lethal factor in these creatures, — the trees are like furnaces, the bird-man has spikes it can use as a weapon, the butterfly-frog can eat just about anything, anywhere.

After our exhausting hike, we finally found something which hints that there is a civilisation present on this strange land, we found some buildings, and more signs. They translated into: 'Welcome to Ysomr!

Welcome to our small humble kingdom.'

In the kingdom of Ysomr, nothing is like our home back in China — the animals and Ysomrians co-exist together in harmony, the architecture are alive, and they have a whole ecosystem, where the Ysomrians and the animals, or should I say also Yosmrians benefit each other. However, they do have an emperor like us. The Yosmrians we met lead us straight to their palace, where we met the emperor, who .

“Who are you and why are you here?” He asked while we bowed towards him.

“Your highness, my name is Zheng He and we are here in courtesy of the Yongle emperor from China, to deliver these gifts of good-will. We mean no harm.” I replied.

“No harm?” The emperor questioned, “No harm? You show up out of nowhere, murder half of my army, my defenders, there to keep evil beings such as yourself out, and now you leave us helpless from attacks, and you claim to mean no harm?”

“I’m so sorry your highness, please we didn’t know.” I pleaded, “We were running out of provisions and desperately needed a way in—”

“Say no more! All of you, please return back to where you came from. You will get your provisions, if you vow to never return here or inform others about the kingdom of Ysomr.” The emperor answered. “In fact, I’ll save you the trouble.” With a snap of his fingers, we all returned to our junks, which have already plotted course to return to China, with sufficient provisions next to us...

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Harrow International School Shanghai, Moan, Finn – 10*

## *Chapter 1*

*Emperor Yong Le*

Bitter was the night. As the voyagers I had selected myself gathered, there was nothing but silence and darkness.

Allow me to introduce myself. I am Emperor Yong Le of China, the greatest, most powerful emperor of all time. I am about to send my people on a great voyage to sell treasure to other countries. These are the best voyagers in all of China. I know that these are the right people to represent China as the greatest and most powerful nation on the planet. They are courageous, bold, experienced and adventurous. They have hearts of gold and their souls are pure. They are prepared for anything.

They notified me of the route they were going to take and we discussed over time any possible dangers. We perfected the route so that it was fast and safe. The only dangers were rocky waters and shallow seas. The mythical legend of the sea monster near Thailand had been clarified as false by our explorers who had left only months before us on a scouting mission, and returned, but they were to steer clear of Thailand just in case.

I had selected the vessel myself. When I made the choice, I chose a ship that was strong, light, fast and medium in size. The captain, Zheng He, was a skilled swordsman, a master of bribery, negotiating and a great mariner. He was intelligent and coped well under pressure. He was renowned for once talking the king of Taiwan out of starting a war with China. However, his charm and tempting smile should never be mistaken – he is also a killer and one of the most dangerous people to have sailed any sea.

With the crew gathered and the sun rising higher above the horizon, the scene was set for their journey to begin. In front of me stood the future of the nation and the hopes of many.

One final check and the crew said their goodbyes to their families and friends. With any luck they would come back alive having made new friends from new countries and will have displayed China's greatness to all of our continent.

My voyagers boarded the boat. There were tears, yells, and crying children. All of my voyagers were waving except one. A face I did not recognise had shrank into the crowd of the ship. I was pondering the question 'Who is he?' when someone asked me the same thing. I told them my ideas. A stowaway? A crew member's family? A Korean spy? Whoever they are, they will either hijack the mission or lay low and do nothing and help the crew. I am guessing it is not the latter. I watched as my ship's captain inspected the crew one last time, then retired below deck to examine the workings of the ship itself.

They then set sail. Hopefully China will be greater when they return.

## *Chapter 2*

*Young*

### *Stowaway*

I am Wang Luo, a simple farmer's son. I have stolen aboard this boat to get away from my father who beats me for not doing what he thinks I should be doing. I want to do what I want to do. His name is Chang Luo. I am a bit nervous because this is my first time away from home. After stealing aboard amongst the masses of crew, I found myself hiding deep within the belly of the boat. I thought I had been spotted but had not yet been caught. I was wishing that today would continue as a fairly normal one, but that thought was shattered by a dark, stormy cloud hovering above this endless sea.

The menacing cloud began to spread as far as the eye could see. From my hiding place in the food store, I could see from a nearby porthole that this cloud would be a threat. The thunder rumbled and lightning flashed fast and often whilst the crew could be heard preparing for the inevitable choppy seas and winds that would soon come. A brilliant fork of lightning struck the sea nearby the boat and the cloud became so vast that I could no longer see the horizon. The boat itself began to rock from side to side as food and supplies spilled from their containers around me, creating a disturbance which I thought would grab the attention of someone nearby. I had to get out of here. I had to find somewhere better to hide.

The swaying seas began to make me feel extremely sea-sick and I wanted to stay where I was, but raised voices close to me made me focus and think that there were better places to be for me.

I cautiously crept out the door and went deeper into the belly of the boat to an area that I doubt many crew had even been to. Amongst a number of boxes, maps and chests, I buried myself deep and securely in, hiding from anyone and everything. The boat began to swing and I felt that the chance of getting through this was slim. I shut my eyes tightly and tried to think of things that made me feel happy but the booms of thunder and the motion of the boat made that very hard to do. I squeezed my eyes even tighter and hoped for the best.

I awoke. I listened. The booming had stopped and the motion of the boat was smooth. But there was something. Something was tap, tap, tapping at my shoulder as I slowly became aware that I was no longer alone. Unaware of who he was at the time, the ship's captain towered above me and smirked as he realised I was not crew, or family, or meant to be here. "Just as I suspected," he said, calmly and with complete control. I stood up slowly with my head facing down and wondered what would happen next...

# Back to the Past

*Heep Yunn School, Chan, Lok Yan – 14*

*~Year 2050, Hong Kong, China~*

“The Great Ming Dynasty... From year 1368 to 1644... Hongwu Emperor... and the Fall of Beijing... Now class, I want you to...” Ms Cheng, my Chinese history teacher droned on as I snored on— my breathing matching rhythmically with her dull mechanic tone.

“Lucas! Hey man, wake up!” Tony shook me hard and I sat up groggily, rubbing the trail of saliva off my chin.

“What is it? I didn’t sleep past lunch break did I?”

“Didn’t you hear the robot? we’re finally doing Back to the Past project! The one where we travel back in time to a certain dynasty in China, well the Ming Dynasty this year, see their developments first hand then come back to write a report!”

“That’s kind of dangerous, I’m not sure I...”

“You never listen do you? With the Time Machine, when we travel back, it’ll be like seeing a movie for us, no one will be able to see or touch or hear us, while we can!”

“That’s amazing! Let’s do it!”

“And I’ve got an amazing idea, the Ming Treasure Voyages!”

Both our eyes gleamed with anticipation and joy.

Soon, we were ready, packed with cameras notebooks, some weaponry and the Blazer Lazer 1000, just in case. We switched on the Time Machine, and a brilliant swirling portal appeared, illuminating our eager faces. And mimicking our favourite action hero Steve Rogers, we saluted, held our breaths and fell through the portal sideways. Little did we know, we weren’t the only things that would “fall sideways and topple”.

*~Year 1405, Nanjing, Ming Dynasty~*

The first thing I saw after going through the portal was weirdly, a cloud. And with a sickening thought I realized where I was.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

We fell through the sky, plummeting head first to the deck of a massive ship. Tony landed with a forward roll, while I thudded down heavily on my bottom. Standing right beside us was a man in his thirties.

“Prepare the battleships for war, ready the cavalries! We shall surround Chen Zuyi and the pirates when they come in distance.” The man said in an authoritative tone.

“Yes Admiral Zheng!”

Suddenly, I heard a loud bang as a cannonball rocketed to the side of the ship, causing it to rock violently. And the Time Machine, which I carelessly placed on the side of the hull, wobbled dangerously. Tony leapt for it, but I stood dumbfounded in his way and he missed and the Time Machine toppled down into the ominous Malacca Sea.

“LUCAS!” Tony wailed.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t think it would fall that easy...” I whimpered.

“Never mind, I’ll get us out of here, don’t fret it.” Tony reassured.

We ducked down and hid as our forms shimmered and materialised. I groaned inwardly, it’s over now, the pirates will see us and kill us! Fortunately, the rest of the sailors were busy dealing with pressing matters to notice us. There were worried gasps and murmurs spreading around.

“Why are Chen Zuyi and his scalawags able to fire at such a long distance? That isn’t possible!” A sailor growled in frustration.

“Oh no! If they can attack without coming close to us, how are our battleships supposed to surround the pirate fleet?”

“Admiral Zheng’s plan isn’t going to work, we’re all gonna die!”

“My dear crew,” Zheng He had worry lines all over his face. “It seems that I have failed you all, let us take cover below deck to avoid the cannons, perhaps the pirates will show mercy.” He looked grave and defeated.

Couples held each other closer, but could give no reassurance, everyone was terrified.

Choking and tearing up from the smoke, we crawled to the back of the ship, where we found a grown man sobbing, he looked distraught and his clothes were in tatters.

“Hey there mister, what’s the matter?” We crouched down beside him.

“Are you men of Admiral Zheng?” He sniffed

“Why yes, we’re his loyal men!”

He hung his head in shame, “Well then I guess I could confide in you. I’m Shi Jinqing from HuiZhou China and I too am— was, a loyal man of Admiral Zheng. It all started when he entrusted me to stowaway

in the ship of Chen Zuyi and his pirates and spy for him. Boy I was so eager to prove myself, but it all went wrong.”

*~Year 1404, before the departure of the Treasure Fleet~*

“Shi, I require your assistance,” said Admiral Zheng, a hero declared by the HuiZhou and my family.

“Experienced fishermen have warned me of the pirates we may face on our expedition to the West, and although I am confident of our fleets’ military force, I think me and my men would rest easier with some extra information inside the pirates.”

“I don’t understand Admiral, what do you require me to do?”

“Shi, the most feared pirate of Southeast Asia is Chen Zuyi, he has more than 5000 men and 10 strong ships. I need you to sneak aboard and update me every two months by sending me letters,” Admiral gazed at me with such pride and confidence I felt myself stand taller.

“Of course, I’ll do it sir! I’ll make sure the fleet stays safe from Chen Zuyi and his horrible men!”

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“And I did for a whole year, spying and sneaking information for him. Until last year I met... met... Cheuk Lam.” It was as if Shi Jinqing was in a trance.

“Dude did you seriously have to take in a deep breath before saying her name then sighing and pausing for the effects of how love seems gross for us to sink in?”

“Just let me finish would you, *dude?*”

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Cheuk Lam.

She was everything I thought of since the day I first saw her. In midst of the savage pirates, food and water belonged only to the strongest. Weaklings, cowards, fought for the scraps left, no compassion was shown. And in two days, I was starving. I was sure death would come, but through the blurry haze of hunger, I saw an angel. She fed me what the little food she had and nursed me back to health. And after a month we were together and she became pregnant and now she’s close to having a son. And I’m becoming a father. But there just wasn’t enough time! I had to notify Admiral Zheng that Chen Zuyi has been committing atrocities and scheming to lead the Treasure Fleet into a trap. If I notify him, my beautiful wife and unborn son may perish; but if I do not, I only fear that Admiral Zheng may not survive!

*~Year 1407, back on the deck of the Treasure Ship~*

“You still came here, what made you decide to?” I asked.

“Cheuk Lam,” Shi Jinqing sobbed, “my kind, selfless wife, told me to come and warn Admiral Zheng. Said they were off no good, ripping off innocent people and looting city after city. But now... I can’t confess my love for a pirate to the admiral, I’ll never be able to live with the shame! But oh God how am I supposed to let her die!” Shi Jinqing began crying hysterically.

Tony and I shared a look and nodded.

“Hey Shi dude? You go get your wife, and escape to the nearby city of Singapore, you’ll be safe there, free of shame and the nasty pirates. Me and Lucas here?” Tony winked at me, “ We’ll take care of Chen Zuyi and the pirates.”

“Oh thank God! My family is saved!” His eyes filled with tears of joy which quickly turned into sobs of hopelessness, “But... how are the two of you young men going to defeat 5000 fierce men?”

“Oh we got it covered.” I reached for my bag, and pulled out the Blazer Lazer 1000.

Shi Jinqing sighed in relief and the weight was lifted off his shoulders. He dashed back to his wife, his heart brimming with gratefulness and hope for his future.

The next hour or perhaps day passed like a blur, the last thing I remember was Tony yelling “Charge!!!” And we flew to the starboard and aimed the Blazer Lazer 1000 at the on coming ships and opened fire.

*KABOOM WHIZZ BANGGG*

The Lazer cut through the the first few rows of pirate fleets, burning everything down to smithereens. The pirates abandoned ship and swam towards us. Teeth bared with a scowl fixated on his face, the pirate in front of me slashed the Blazer Lazer broken, then came for me. I ducked and backed up swiftly but my feet caught on some loose rope and I tripped and fell. The pirate snarled in triumph and held me down. Gasping for air, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a screwdriver, in a swift motion I slammed it on the pirates head and he landed thump beside me. I grabbed the pirate’s sword and found Zheng He cornered by Chen Zuyi, the Admiral was unarmed and just as Chen was about to behead him I jumped in front of him and deflected the blow. Sword against hook, good against evil, we slashed and thrust as the wind howled and thunder roared. Rain began to fall and just as I too, were about to fall from exhaustion, Tony ran over and tackled Chen Zuyi on the ground, however Chen was bigger in size and threw off Tony. Three short stout pirates surrounded him and attacked in synchronised movements, it was impossible for Tony to fend off all their blows and he lay scratched and bleeding. More pirates came, I looked to Zheng He and his crew, but they were all hiding below deck, helpless and aghast at the unexpected attack. My best mate was injured, I

was soaked to the bone, ankles deep in water sloshing around. I stared down at Tony, trembling, he pointed a finger at the Blazer Lazer, I looked over, it was broken with an enormous gash emitting sparks.

Wait.

That was it! Tony you're a genius!

Ripping out the piece of fabric on my sleeve I used it to pick up the Blazer Lazer, with the help of Zheng He, we tugged Tony to safety below deck. I stood on the ladder below deck and peeked my head out of the trap door. The pirates were advancing towards us, with Chen Zuyi back in action.

“You can run, but you can’t hide!” Chen Zuyi cracked his knuckles. They were almost all on board the Treasure Ship. The ship swayed heavily as more pirates piled in.

Ten feet. The rain poured. Five feet. Thunder boomed. Three. Lightning flashed. Two. My heart pounded. One. That was it!

With all my might, I chucked the Blazer Lazer— still sputtering with electricity, right next to where the pirates stood. For a split second humour danced in the eyes of the pirates as they contemplated just how ridiculous and desperate we were to throw out a broken piece of weapon then—

*ZZZAAAAAAPPPPP*

(I think the Treasure Ship reeked of burnt pirates for the rest of their seven voyages)

Zheng He and his crew cheered. They were safe.

To thank us, they took care of Tony’s injuries and together we had a nice warm feast made of fresh Malacca fish.

“Hear hear!” Zheng He raised his goblet and clinked, “Because of these two young heroes, not only did we survive, the Straits of Malacca shall be free of pirate scum!” The crew roared in approval.

“Now, let us feast!”

Before I had even took a bite, a crew member besides me gagged and his eyes rolled to the back of his head. He seemed to be choking on something, but what? Tony smacked the crew member’s back and out of his mouth along with fish carcasses and saliva was our lost Time Machine!

After cleaning it up we let it dry off.

“We can go home now,” Tony whispered.

“I don’t want to,”

“Me neither.”

But soon the Time Machine began to dry and our forms began to fade into ghostly shapes. Zheng He and his men stood up and saluted. The Time Machine glowed bright and the portal reappeared. We looked back, saluted and went through the portal.

*~Year 2050, Hong Kong, China~*

The week after our brilliant adventure, we handed in our reports and were back sitting in our classroom, it was Chinese History lesson again, except this time I wasn’t asleep. I was sitting up straight with Tony, enjoying every bit of the lesson, sketched on my textbook, was Shi Jingqing and Cheuk Lam holding their newborn baby.

“...thanks to Shi Jingqing, a local Chinese who reported the atrocities and the details of Chen Zuyi’s plan of attack were Zheng He and his men able to defeat the pirates. The Treasure Fleet sailed safe of pirates in all seven times of their voyages.”

Tony and I shared a look. We knew the story differently.

# Circumambulation

*Hong Kong Academy, Boberski, Will – 11*

Hé sat on the deck breathing in the air, eating it like it was all that he needed, gulping it like a drowning man. In his opinion, launch was not a time to be spent preparing. Tonight, everyone was on deck, his orders. Captain's orders. His voice, Captain's voice. It was getting rather confusing. Which one was he – himself, or Captain? He was both in the eyes of the world. Hé glanced at the crew on the deck fidgeting. It was a fine evening. "Are you afraid of your complexions, men? Come, grasp the air." Hé expected the very best out of them, and therefore he took the very best out of them.

It was Smithy who noticed first, "There's banging downstairs."

Hé turned, "Alright, see what you can do. It'll be the child. She's old enough not to need mother's milk now." Smithy slipped through the hatch and descended the ladder. He unlocked the door, and Rei's hands jumped back from the edge. "Kid, what do you need?" asked the smithy.

"There's a child down here, sir. Is she supposed to be here?"

Smithy stuck his head through the door, glancing at Rei and Woah. "Two kids, eh? The little one is fine. You, come with me." He extended his arms and Rei ducked under them.

Rei had nothing to fear. He was safe on board, as was the porcelain shipment. If his pot came, he came. The pot was him. He was his pot, Lady. He was on the lists, alright.

The Green Eye's current porcelain shipment had come from a small village. In that small village there lived a boy, apprenticed under a master, Master Sun. The boy's first pot had been sent away in that very same porcelain shipment. Rei was that boy, and he was onboard with his pot.

Navigator had brought maps to the deck, but Hé ignored them. He didn't need the Emperor's edict to know where the Green Eye would go. It was the direction towards which he knelt every day. Anyway, it was too nice of an evening to study charts. The waves foamed at their tips lightly like dogs running too hard to keep up. They were fourteen nautical miles off Guangdong.

The Green Eye had four decks. One needed to navigate every one of them to get up from the Devil's Undergarments, the hold. Doors lay wide open and tightly closed and locked. The hold held a bosom of life, a cradle of color and senses. The smell of the ship's cargo already pervaded the Green Eye: aromatics, dried fish, damp skin, smoke, drying glaze and musk. Rei could also feel different scents: currents of sweat, perseverance, diversity and practice along with wood, making a savory, sensuous aroma quite unlike any other, even the smell of the workshops of Master Sun.

It was a mixture of cultures and smells, but the Green Eye was more than the sum of its parts, the sum of these pieces. Certainly, Rei thought, it was its parts, but it was also its parts and the combination of its parts combined.

The sky was rent a deep vermillion as if it had been split by a mighty blade. In the twilight, it looked as if the Green Eye was sailing through blood. Rei's first thought when he climbed to the top deck with Smithy was that the deck didn't fit. It overhung the rest of the ship, and the rest of the ship came up in unexpected places.

Glancing at Rei, Hé almost chuckled, for this boy had snuck on, disobeying a rule that no one disobeyed, yet he was clearly enjoying the evening, obeying one command everyone else had refused to acknowledge. Keep breathing, boy, Hé thought. Keep breathing.

Hé gave his verdict quickly. He was no judge, and only the feeble gestures of a moral compass needle inside him indicated a correct course. "Why are you looking at me?" Hé asked. "Look at the sunset. This boy is fine."

As Hé retreated belowdecks, Rei sat on the deck, cross-legged. Light embraced dark in those few hours when they could be together, and the moon rose to moderate the interaction. If one didn't watch carefully, Rei thought, one might almost confuse a full moon and the sun as being one and the same.

Enveloped in twilight, Rei wondered again about Woah. He thought of playful laughter on the docks and smiles so mutual they were one. She was so young, too young. So why was Woah there?

The cabin door opened, and Rei momentarily lost his balance. Hé emerged, a small bowl in his hand. He sat a distance from Rei, on the bow. Placing the bowl on the deck, Hé filled it with water from a hip flask and pulled a needle from his pocket. Whittling the needle on the bowl's rim, a screeching sound echoed through the floorboards. The deck vibrated with the sound when he placed the needle in the water. It twisted slightly, before poking the horizon, where the sun had retreated to a realm of echoes beyond even the reach of the sea. To the left of this direction, Hé knelt, his back bending low, throwing his arms out before him so that the Buddha necklace around his neck almost touched the ground. As Hé's words floated by, Rei's ears grasped one word: Allah.



Rei's voice broke the air, "May I go inside now, sir?"

Hé held the door for him.

Rei remembered Woah, and reached for the stairs. While he was walking, Rei thought about God. Master Sun was religious, but in a values sort of way. He never prayed or chanted, so Rei had never learned to prostrate himself towards the unknown, to trust in a God, or Allah. When he reached her, Woah was still sitting in the Devil's Undergarments. Rei was tired. Twenty-one nautical miles off of Guangdong, he slept.

From the depths of an ethereal sky, the sun leaked light on the sea and sleep loosened its grip on Rei's senses. The planks still held back a shimmering, new sea. The rudder still creaked in its corner. It was morning. There was something about the new day that couldn't be diluted by water. It's naivety and its youth, the glory of its arrival and the arrival of its glory. In the dark of a new day, Rei saw no Woah. The small, talkative child had disappeared. Rei sprinted onto the deck.

All of the crew was there. Hé was there and Woah was there, at the front. They stood at the bow of the ship. The sails were at a high luff. Woah was dressed in silk, her hair braided like noodle dough. Her feet were in tiny shoes.

Hé knew Rei was there. "We are lowering her. She will be the sea god's new wife. The Dragon King will let us pass if he has a new concubine." He sensed Rei's words before they left his mouth. "Don't say a word, boy."

The smell of incense was overwhelming. Rei covered his ears on the splash. There wasn't even any scream.

The crew had gone inside. "It's Mazuism. Their religion. Mine too, a bit," Hé said. Rei rubbed the pebble in his pocket like a lifeline.

"But you're Muslim! You're the captain!"

"I am many things, Rei. A captain is one of them. So is a Muslim eunuch. Yet if I tell people that I am a Muslim eunuch, they apply to me their notions about Muslims and eunuchs. Yes, I am a captain, but not a commander. The sacrifice was what Woah was brought aboard for, actually."

"How can you justify it? Killing someone, I mean."

Hé glanced over, "Rei, disprove their belief. Then, you can condemn it. Do not try to condemn a belief, Rei, for it is always valid to the believer. It is an easy, naive mistake."

"So, you think that as long as someone genuinely believes something, it is right?"

"Yes," Hé said. "Faith does not inhibit truth."

Rei sat cross-legged on deck, his mind embroiled in thought. Traveling by sea was an altogether new experience for him. The Green Eye could affluently bob through seas of fortune as adeptly as a socially aware merchant might through a gaggle of courtiers, yet that was their full range of movement. Rei had to trust that the ship travelled. It was a bit like trusting a God. Rei looked at the water meandering beneath the ship. He tried not to see the water. In his mind's eye, lines of shadow snaked across the bit of ocean. Nodes in the waves worth more than their sum. Pinpoints of light pushed from one place to another. Energy, constantly kinetic.

The water became a bath of movement.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*International College Hong Kong, Chung, Adrienne – 11*

One bright afternoon, Zheng-He observed the sailors as they hurried to complete their tasks as fast as possible, desperate to avoid the beating of the searing sunlight. The sun looked like heaven just fell from the sky. There were no clouds, and the air was dryer than sand. Their water supply was still plentiful, which was a good thing. The water looked tempting as the surface gleamed with sunlight. The medics all had their hands full because several members of the crew had all been knocked out by exhaustion. He sighed, mildly exasperated at his crew's laziness. They were heading back to the mainland, and everyone was anxious to see their families again. He turned to his second-in-command. Even *he* was gazing excitedly at the north side of the ship. "Alright, you can all have a break," he shouted. The ship erupted into cheers. "But," he interjected, "You will have to send the message to the other ships first. Note that I will tolerate absolutely NO slacking off after the break." He shook his head. At least this trip was going to be over soon.

Two days later, Zheng-He was straightening the regal robes the emperor gifted to him. He straightened his back to show discipline, and walked into the room, bowing at the emperor's feet. The room was hushed instantly when the emperor raised his hand. "I, Xuan-De, award Commander Zheng-He the Medallion of Light for his bravery, kindness and discipline. Let us see this as a parting gift as he sets off on an—" All of a sudden, the emperor gasped and slumped over in his chair, before falling unconscious with a golden arrow embedded in his neck. Instantly, Zheng-He was on his feet, sword in hand and alert. "The window was left open!" he shouted. Just as he stuck his head out of the window, a glimpse of black cloth was whipped from view. He looked around, then frustratedly tugged on his dark hair and asked, "Does anyone at least know what the mission was supposed to be?" A shy messenger stepped forward. "Um...excuse me Sir, I believe the Empress knows..."

Zheng-He watched silently as the Empress spilled out her secrets, staring at the floor, when something she said caught his attention. "...He was so excited... he was planning to... it all happened so quickly —" "Wait, what did you say?" "Huh? I—I said that it all happened so quickly and that..." "No, not that. He was planning...?" The Empress laughed hollowly. "Oh, that. Yes, he wanted you to go to...uhh...um...Xushan. Yeah, Xushan." She laughed hollowly again. Zheng-He shivered and said his goodbyes, walking out the door.

As he prepared the ship for the trip, an uncomfortable messenger walked over to him with a strong-looking man with long locks of dark-brown hair. "Commander Zheng-He, this is your new second-in-command."

"Why do I need a new second-in-command?" he asked, slightly curious.

"Second-in-command Yuan-Su is...err...not feeling very well." Zheng-He straightened up and asked, "How?"

"Um, he's vomiting, sir." Zheng-He cocked a brow.

"Vomiting?" That was slightly suspicious, as Yuan-Su never got sick.

"Yes, sir."

Zheng-He sighed and dismissed the messenger.

Zheng-He was interviewing the new second-in-command, all the while thinking about his ailing friend. He was going to visit him at noon, but this interview seemed to be taking ages. He switched his thoughts to the assassination of the emperor. After the assassination, the area had been swept and no traces of the killer had been found. The only clue they had about the murder was the assassin's black Mongol robes. Angrily, he clenched his fists, startling the new second-in-command. Zheng-He calmed himself down, then said "Carry on." The second-in-command, which he now knew as Bu-Liang, looked questionably at him, but obliged. They continued to chat, every now and then eating snacks and drinking tea.

"Hello, Commander." rasped the sick man on the bed. He looked like someone who had just been stripped of their strength, like a dried up raisin. But Zheng-He refused to think of it that way. He often thought of the situation as more like an obstacle, one that was difficult, one that they would pass eventually. "No need to call me that, my friend. How are you doing?" Yuan-Su smiled up at him.

"Good, Zheng-He. I heard you have found a replacement for me?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that we're leaving soon, and I don't want you to come with us in case we get into a fight." Zheng-He shook his head.

"Don't you dare be sorry. I'm *happy* you've found a replacement for me, got it?" Zheng-He chuckled. It reminded him of Yuan-Su before he had gotten sick. Funny, selfless and kind. Well, he still was funny, selfless and kind, but it just wasn't the same. Then Yuan-Su spoke, snapping Zheng-He out of his thoughts.

"So, when am I going to meet this 'Bu-Liang'? No offence Zheng-He, but his name sounds like 'bad', 'stupid' and 'dangerous' all in one". Zheng-He snorted, then looked out the window. "Well, I have to go now, duties call."

"Okay. Write to me whenever you can."

"I will." The two friends shared a warm hug. Then Zheng-He walked out the door.

The water around them churned with waves. Today was a windy day, and convenient as they were sailing today and they needed the momentum to push them forward. It was a stark difference from a few days ago. The crew was relishing in the soft breeze as it tickled their cheeks. Bu-Liang walked up next to Zheng-He and Zheng-He immediately remembered the conversation he had with Yuan-Su. He burst out laughing, which was unusual for him. Bu-Liang looked at him suspiciously, "Commander, is there something wrong?" to which Zheng-He composed himself and replied "No, thanks for checking." Zheng-He then walked away, smiling inwardly.

It was the middle of the night, when a shout woke Zheng-He up with a start. Alarmed, he ran up the steps and saw Bu-Liang trying desperately to wake everyone up. "What's happening?"

"I-I just saw a Mongolian ship. I-I'm sure of it!" Shocked, Zheng-He told him "Go prepare for battle, then go and steer the ship, I'll go wake the others up." As he finished his response, he thought he saw a look of dismay flash across Bu-Liang's face, but Zheng-He ignored it. It was dark, and he probably just imagined it. As he ran down below the deck, trying to wake the crew, he remembered how Bu-Liang always wore black robes. Could he be the emperor's assassin? Zheng-He shook the suspicious thoughts out of his mind. Bu-Liang could be trusted. Or could he?

An hour later, Zheng-He had extinguished all the dark thoughts and his heart was thundering as his fleet prepared for battle. Just as Zheng-He considered calling a false alarm, the Mongolian flag came into view. Adrenaline surged through him as he yelled out a battle cry. "ATTAAAAACK!"

Ships on both sides sped towards each other as smaller fleets sliced through the water swiftly. The quiet sea had become an ocean of conflict, roaring like the monsters that lurked within. There was blood everywhere, corpses of dead heroes floating across the water. There were cries of despair and vengeful screams and golden arrows slicing through the air. Ones just like the one that took the emperor's life. Drowning in the overwhelming scene, Zheng-He roared and became a killing machine. Everything around him was either an ally, or dead. In the midst of all this, one arrow flew through the battlefield, clear as day. Slicing through the air, it impaled Zheng-He in the thigh. "ARRRRGGGHHHH!" The cry of pain echoed around the battlefield, as Zheng-He desperately looked around for help. Then he spotted Bu-Liang. "Bu-Liang, help me!" cried Zheng-He. Their supplies had already been either used or raided, including the gifts for Xushan. Bu-Liang wouldn't be able to help much anyways. Bu-Liang glanced over at him, and a feeling of relief coursed through him. But that feeling was quickly diminished when Bu-Liang glared at him when he walked over. "You're not very observant, are you?" Dread and confusion filled Zheng-He. He could sense that something was obviously wrong, yet, he couldn't put his finger on it. What did he mean? "I killed the emperor." Those words rang around his head. "Wha-but...how-?" He stammered. Then it clicked. Yuan-Su vomiting. Black robes. Trying to wake the crew from above the cabins. "This was your plan all along." He said angrily. "Yes," sneered Bu-Liang, "and it worked *perfectly*." How could he have fallen into his trap? "Got any last words?"

"Huh?"

"You didn't think I was just going to tell you all my secrets, and then just let you walk away, did you?"

His heart stopped.

And it never beat again.

"We gather today to commemorate the great Zheng-He, along with our recently dead emperor Xuan-De. Our kingdom has now been left grief-stricken and mourning. We are forever in their debt and their legacy continues to live on. May the heavenly gods bless them forever. Thank you."

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*International College Hong Kong, Griffiths, Katie – 12*

*Dear Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang,*

*I would like to meet with you to discuss the matters of you ruling China, and the future for our country. I will come to the Palace on Friday the 17th of February.*

*Best Regards,*

*Xiao Ming*

I read over my letter again and again until my head started to hurt. "This is it," I thought. I picked it up and stuffed it into my bag. I ran out of the front door, locking it behind me. I started the long walk towards the palace. I was excited and confident about my task ahead. I had been planning this day for a long time and it had finally dawned.

Several hours later, I found myself standing in front of the palace ready to deliver my letter to the Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang. He was an evil man and I wanted to tell him my thoughts about the way he was ruling China. I wasn't scared of him and I wanted him to listen to my opinions. I did not like the Emperor because I believed that he didn't treat women as equals to men, and I thought something needed to be done about it.

My parents died when I was young so I lived with my Aunt. She didn't know anything about what I was planning to do. I planned on telling her one day of course, but not just yet... My dream was to be the first female ruler of China, to prove to people that women are just as capable as men.

I knocked on the huge palace door and waited until someone approached. After a long wait, nobody showed up so I slotted my letter under the door and left for the long journey back home.

A few weeks later, I had still not received a reply. The Emperor must be too busy to answer letters from girls who wanted to come and visit him, I thought. He probably hadn't even read it. " Oh well " I thought to myself. I am just going to go, I did warn him after all...

The Friday morning came around quickly after that. I went to bed early the night before and woke up early so I had enough time to get ready, and look good for my visit to the Emperor's Palace. I had no hesitation getting out of bed, unlike most mornings where I go back to sleep when it's time to wake up.

I rushed into the bathroom, brushed my hair ( 100 strokes for luck ) and then went back into my bedroom to get dressed. There was no way I was going to eat breakfast today, "I'm not hungry," I thought to myself. And anyway didn't going to a palace mean I would be having a posh banquet? After I had put on my best outfit, I grabbed a nice bag and put it over my shoulder. I was ready...

I had to wait until my Aunt was in the bathroom before I could leave. When she finally got up and went to wash, I took my chance. It was my aunt's birthday the next month, so I came up with a perfect excuse. I left her a note saying the following " I went out to get you a birthday present, be back soon.. " Then I ran out the door.

I walked slowly all the way to the Emperor's Palace, thinking about what I was going to say to him. I finally arrived at the Palace, bumping into three guards armed with swords at the front gate. " I have an appointment with Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang " I said casually to the guards. Surprisingly they let me in with no hesitation.

I walked around the palace and suddenly spotted the Emperor, sitting in his throne, with servants bowing down to him. He then looked up and spotted me. " Who are you? " he bellowed. I bowed down and replied, "My name is Xiao Ming. I sent you a letter regarding the fact that I would be paying you a visit on this date, to talk to you about China and its future." " Very well" he boomed. "Come here and talk to me. Servants, leave!" The three men shuffled out of the room, leaving only the Emperor and Xiao Ming.

“I don’t agree with the way you are ruling China Emperor,” I said quietly. “Nobody likes you and nobody is doing anything about it, so this is why I came here. You don’t treat women fairly and that isn’t how China should be” How dare you!!” he bellowed. I slowly started to back away.. “I didn’t mean any harm but I just want to tell you Emperor, that I think for once we should have a woman to rule China in the future. Why is it always a man that rules China? I just don’t understand... “

He took some time to think before he suddenly spoke. “I have no children of my own to succeed me, and I am impressed with your attitude. When I die, you may become the ruler of China.

“Thank you Emperor”I replied. I bowed and slowly walked towards the door.

One month later, I received a messenger from the Emperor’s Palace. “ I opened her front door. “ Hello,” I said. A man dressed in servant’s clothes was standing in the doorway. He muttered something under his breath. “The Emperor is dead?!” I asked shocked. “Yes,” the man replied. “ You are now the new Empress. You may move in by tomorrow, bring all of your belongings and family. “Yes I will. Thank you so much for letting me know.”

I started packing my belongings. It was my Aunt’s birthday tomorrow so I decided to wait and tell her the amazing news on her birthday. The next morning, I woke up to the sight of daylight bursting into my room. I jumped out of bed and ran into my Aunt’s room. “Happy Birthday!” I shouted happily. “I have a big surprise for you.” So I told my Aunt the good news and from then on we were a happy family of two, and we loved our new home. I, Xiao Ming was a very successful Empress and everyone in China loved and respected me. The Ming Dynasty was named after me.

# Noah's Journey

*Island School, Deleu, Zoe – 11*

Around 168 years ago, there was a group of Pirates. Now, these Pirates are not the typical Pirates that you read in fairy tales or story books because these were good Filibusters. They did take things like Gold and Silk and more precious things that would make your spine shiver with excitement if you had them. But what did they do with these items are different than normal pirates; they would give the gold and silk away as gifts to their beloved captain and sailors. "Pffft what a fairy tale" said Noah. "Like anyone would believe in this sort of stuff and which type of pirates gives away gold like people give away candy. This is just a bag full of nonsense" he said once again. He shut the book and put it back on the shelf, he then turned off the lights and went to sleep. But what Noah did not know was that he was not going to wake up in the same place that he fell asleep in. No no no, he would wake up far far far away from the place he had fallen asleep in.

Waves lapping over each other like the way when you apply a second layer of paint onto a canvas is the sound that Noah woke up to hearing "Em turn it down" he shouted the sound stayed the same "Em turn it down" He shouted again but a little louder, still no change in the sound "EMILY TURN YOUR MUSIC OFF NOW" he said for the last time. "I had enough" he replied he got out of bed and looked around "where am I and why can I hear the ocean" he said. He heard laughing from coming from upstairs "I better go check that out maybe mom and Em are just playing a trick on me ". Noah opens the trap door of the boat and sees something very very unexpected. "what the" he whispers while looking at this confusing but funny sight, six men who are dressed exactly like pirates and another one who looks like he is the Pirate Captain. "us legends pfft how old does he think he is" one Pirate says "probably like 3 years" replies another pirate followed by the sound of laughter. "sorry to interrupt this very childish party but where am I and why am I hear" Noah finally says, the pirates look at him with a look that would have killed three rabbits.

"Our Question is why you think we are a silly old bag of nonsense" replies the first pirate. "What are you talking about" replied Noah while thinking of when he ever called anything that. "Last Night after only reading half a page of our book you stated that we were a bag full of nonsense and that we are just a legend" said another pirate "oh you guys are for real and you are the pirates of the Ming Treasure?" Noah says being even more confused than before "Listen we just want to prove to you that we are real so to prove it go into that room" says the Pirate Captain "why should I trust you—you think that you are Pirates and You kidnapped me who in the world would do that" Noah says "Pirates?" everyone says "Fine I will go in the room but you have to promise to bring me back home after this we have a deal" Noah states "sure but that will take a days" says the captain "what I have a Chinese test tomorrow and if I miss it I will get in to trouble huge trouble" replies Noah "well young sir we are in the Pacific Ocean" says the captain in charge "wait only Filibusters can do this type of stuff So you are the pirates from the Ming Treasure are you" Noah says shamelessly "that is what we are trying to tell you" says the first pirate. "Well then let's turn back" Noah says pointing to the steering wheel so the Captain of the ship yells "you heard the boy it takes 72 hours to go back come on move it".

1 –2 days go by, Noah and the Pirates getting closer and closer back to Hong Kong "are we there yet" Noah says "probably another day or two" replies the first Pirate. By now Noah knows all about pirates what type of chores they do how to find gold, how to speak like a pirate and even what the pirates eat ( Noah's favourite meal was Bone Soup). A few more hours go by and Noah hears something "what is that noise" Noah says with cautious. "What does it sound like" replies the Captain. "Like some sort of horn blowing" Noah says. The pirate captain looks at the crew with death in his eye "it is the Blowing horn" the captain says "the blowing who" says Noah while all of the crew members are getting their weapons and preparing for a battle "the blowing horn are our enemies they will possibly kill us if they can" replies the Captain "here arm yourself up and get ready for battle" says the fourth pirate. "But—but I do not even know how to fight" says Noah "well just try to win" says the sixth pirate giving a large gesture of cutting a body part.

Ha Aya Ha Ho Hi Har and blades hitting each other is what the atmosphere sounds like "it feels like this has been going on for days" shouts Noah, "it has only been 3 hours" shouts the captain. One more hour goes by and the Ming Treasure Pirates and Noah Loose. "Where are they taking us" replies Noah. "Onto their boat we are their prisoners know" replies the second pirate "I CAN NOT BE A PRISONER I HAVE TO

GET HOME" says Noah very angrily. "Sorry but that won't be possible right now unless you figure out a way to escape there is no way that we are getting out" replies the third pirate, that's it Noah thinks I will just make up a plan and then I will be able to escape this place with these pirate. Two hours later and Noah has thought about a plan to escape. "Guys hello guys wake up I have a plan" he says "a plan for what" says the captain and the other crew members. " A plan to escape this place" says Noah. "So the plan is when one of the pirates come to give us our food he will unlock the cell so we will knock him out and wait till it is dark and the crew is going to sleep then we will go out and go on to our ship then go back to Hong Kong," Noah says

3 hours go by again and one of the pirates come to give Noah and his filibusters his food PUNCH the man is knocked out and the gate is wide open the fourth pirate quickly goes to make a run for it but Noah shouts "Noah the other pirates are still awake they will catch us if we go out know". "Oh ya I may have forgotten about that" replies the fourth pirate. More hours go by and the other pirates have fallen asleep "come on guys know is our chance" Whisper shouts Noah they open the trap door and go out "shhhhh be quiet I have been here a thousand times one noise and they will hear us" whisper-shouts the captain. They arrive at their ship and the moment when they will cut the rope one of the Blowing Horns awaken "Captain Captain the the the Ming Treasure Pirates they are not in the dungeon I think they escaped" one of Blowing Horns shouts. Noah and the Ming treasure pirates quickly jump on their boat and leave. "haha bye Blowing horns see you another time" shouts the captain "GO GO WE NEED TO CATCH THEM" shouts the captain of the Blowing Horns. "uh oh looks like they are chasing us" says Noah "not so fast you little Blowing horn" shouts the captain, the captain then flips a hidden switch that says specifically to not press but the captain presses it.

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH shouts Noah "THE SHIP IS GOING TO FAST WAY TO FAST" Noah shouts again when the boat engine stops the Captain says "well Noah it was nice meeting you—you better get back to your home now" Noah opens his eyes "I am at home" says Noah with excitement but then turns to look at the pirate crew 'I will definitely miss you guys" says Noah then goes to give all the pirates a big fat bear hug.

Noah wakes up all covered in sweat. He goes to the Kitchen to get a glass of orange juice "hey mom he Em" he says "hey honey" says his mom "how did you sleep" she says once again " I had the best dream ever and it almost felt real" Noah says "oh hey this letter came in the mail just now" his mom says after giving the letter to Noah the letter reads, Hi Noah this is Me captain and the crew of the Ming treasure We will always remember the adventure that we just had and we will always thank you for saving us from the time with the Blowing Horns thanks again The Ming treasure crew. "so they are no a dream" Noah says with happiness surrounding him.



# A Sea Adventure

*Island School, Ho, Abigail – 13*

The sea has always been my paradise—the rippling, bubbling waves sloshing around the bay, full of life. I stand at the edge of the water, the ocean breeze rustling through my hair. In the distance, tiny sailboats glide along the water, sails flapping as calmly as a butterfly’s wings. My heart flutters, and the familiar longing sensation weaves its way back into my mind. Oh, how I long to be one of them! How I long to be a sailor, feeling the wind on my face, my small wooden boat gracefully gliding along the tranquil waters like a sheet of ice... It’s time to go. I take one last glance at the blue, blue sea, then turn around and head back.

I walk towards my bedroom, passing by my father’s work desk, when I notice something I’ve never seen before. Cautiously, I creep over. A sketch and planning of a large fleet of ships are drawn onto a piece of paper. I run my fingers across the lines of ink, heart leaping. *What is this? Is it possible? Is my father about to take a huge fleet of ships on journey out to the wide, wide ocean?*

The sea. The sea! The wondrous, shimmering blue stretches out in front of me. I clutch the handlebar and close my eyes, facing the strong east wind. I can’t believe my father has allowed me to go on this trip! I can’t believe it. I’m actually, physically *here!* On the leading ship with the admiral, my own father, Zheng He, about to set off on a voyage out onto the deep, deep blue. Behind me, the sailors haul big loads of rice and meat onto the lower deck of the big ship, and the wooden floorboards creak under its weight. Large barrels of water stand on one side of the ship, and scattered tools lay on the other. Long, heavy steel masts are piled on the bottom deck, next to the bunks. Although the sailors have to sleep on those shelf-looking bunks, at least I get a nice, small bedroom of my own!

The sailors pull up the sail, and once latched into place, my father runs over to the ship’s end and unties the rope that held it to the pier. All of a sudden, I feel a jerk, and the ship lurches forward, powered by the wind. It hasn’t been ten seconds, and we are already a hundred metres away from the shore! At last, we’re on our way— sailing out onto the bright blue waters, just as I have been dreaming since I first saw the ocean. I feel the wind on my face. The faint smell of salt and fish waver into my nose as I stare out into the vast ocean. First stop: Vietnam!

We’ve been on this ship for about a week now, and each day just gets more exciting. I love waking up each morning to the sounds of the gentle waves crashing onto the sides of our boat. *Swish, swash, swish, swash.* I love the spare time we have, when I always stand out on the upper deck and stare out into the vast, tranquil water, bathed in the glow of the glorious sunshine. On this particular day, I am on deck, as usual, squinting out into the distant ocean, when suddenly, I spot something unusual. Directly overhead, I see a large black mass. *What could it be?* Quickly, I run downstairs to the lower deck, where my father is eating his breakfast.

“*Ba ba!*” I shout, “Come and see!” My father follows me to the upper deck, and I show him the black mass looming up in front. Several other black dots have gathered up behind it. Father squints at the lump, and his face lights up. He runs downstairs calling “LAND AHOY! LAND AHOY!” We’ve arrived at last! Vietnam, here we come!

We have spent four days in this little country, and now we’re off, back to China. The king of Vietnam has offered us tons of goods! Noodles, spices, herbs... all these new delicious tastes! The countryside itself is beautiful, too. Dotted around everywhere are splendid blue lakes, with small red boats sailing calmly along the smooth waters, sails fluttering. Small yet tall hills sit perched on top of the waters, like tiny islands floating in the lake. Waterfalls drop from the sheer edge of tall, rocky cliffs, and shimmer and sparkle in the beautiful sunlight.

It’s been two days on this ship again, and on the third morning of our trip back to China, I wake up to the sound of people scurrying about, with nervous and anxious looks on their faces. What could be happening? I race up the stairs, and a chaos greets me up on deck. Some are busy carrying extra sails up onto the deck, some are bringing all our food and valuables downstairs to the large, hidden storage area. I fight my way through the crowd and glance out into the sea. It’s rough, with big waves crashing and slamming against our ship. The water is grey and scary, as if it were a monster trying to swallow me whole. I look past miles of

the raging sea, and my eyes land on a fleet of ships, almost twice the size of ours. About 15 sails are strung across the masts of each ship, catching as much wind as possible. They glide across the water as smoothly and quickly as a cheetah sprinting across land. Each extra ten seconds I stare, they are a couple hundred metres closer to our ship. *What could be going on? What are the sailors so afraid about? Why are...* suddenly, my tutor's voice rings in my head, clear as a bell. "The dangers of the sea..." *Pirates...? Uh-oh.*

Right at that moment, I feel a hand grasp my shoulder. I whirl around and find myself face-to-face with an angry sailor.

"What do YOU think you're doing here?!" He whisper-shouts in my ear.

"I-I'm sorry, I was j-just trying to s-see..."

He throws me back to my bedroom and locks the door behind him. I hastily scramble to my feet and lunge for the ship wall. I press my face against the glass of a small window, and from there, I can just barely make out what's happening outside. The big sails of the pirate ships are looming closer and closer. There are hundreds of men on the ships. One of them is tying a rope to a small boat. He lowers the boat down the side of the ship. It bobs up and down like a cork floating in water. A large man jumps from the deck and lands into the boat, followed by two men. Someone from the big ship tosses three oars down. They are jabbed into the water in sync. *Here they come.* Quick as lightning, they streak across the stormy, frothy water. A large man jumps on deck and grabs my father's collar. He is carrying a gleaming sword. A fight breaks out. Screaming. Shouting. I can't watch. I sink into my bed and bury my face in my hands. What would happen if they killed my father?

Suddenly, all goes quiet. I creep back to the window. The pirate is holding his hands up. *He surrendered?* He jumps back onto his boat and drifts off, back into the ocean. We haven't been harmed! I can't believe any pirate would just let go so easily! I slump back down into my bed, relieved. I am about to try pry open the door when something catches my eye. The small pirate boat is coming towards us again. My eyes widen. No way. It couldn't be a trick. I start banging on the door to alert the sailors, but it is too late. They're right next to us now. My father jumps back in surprise when he notices the pirates. The whole fleet is here. A determined look forms on his face. He picks up his sword, and the ship fills with chaos. Blood. Screaming. Stabbing. I watch as my father and the trained sailors fight the pirates, sinking ship after ship, and killing thousands.

The fight lasts for three days, and each day I am locked up inside my room. Many sailors are injured. Some are dead. Some valuables are stolen, but the Vietnamese goods were well protected. It isn't a very happy party that travels back to China. Even the sea looks upset, now. So lifeless and grey.

At last, the familiar surroundings alight in my eyes again. The bay, the temple, the sun. I must say, the emperor was very impressed with our work and tactics. My father is planning another trip soon, maybe venture farther out this time. I may skip this journey, though. I feel the excitement is just too much for me to handle. I think I'll just stay home, stroll around the bay, stare out at the water, and continue to let my mind dream.

# Another Way

*Island School, Lau, Joseph – 13*

“We need to expand our country’s military branch,” the Yongle Emperor quietly said to himself. He walked outside to the balcony and stared into the sea as he pondered of ways of improving the country’s military. Strong waves of ocean water attacked the rocky hill that the Emperor lived on. And then, as if a light bulb in his head turned on, he had an idea.

The next day, the Emperor met with the provincial governments of Fujian, Jianxi, Zhejiang, Huaguang, as well as other cities and sent them an order to construct a large fleet of ships.

Two years later, when the fleet was completed, the Emperor issued a preliminary order to Zheng He to command the fleet of 27,000 troops. On July 11, 1405, an order was sent regarding the first expedition, and was addressed to Zheng He.

On the night before the first voyage set off, the Yongle Emperor held a banquet for the crew. There were sacrifices and prayers as well as a lot of other events that were being held. People wished them safety and good fortune.

Then on the morning the fleet set off, and they headed off to Champa. During the journey, Zheng He thought about what the Emperor had said to him and his army. “This is a raid mission, we need the resources, and hopefully the people and the land as well. I don’t want to see you come back without resources from other places.” he had said to him.

When they arrived, Zheng He commanded the ship to fire its cannons and take down the city’s artillery systems, and then an army of troops rushed out of the ship with swords in their hands and began the raid. Frightened citizens ran around the landscape in panic, with swords swinging all around the city. Zheng He saw the chaos he had created and felt guilty. He wished there were another way. And then it hit him.

“What the Emperor wants is resources, and raiding cities may not be the only way to obtain that,” Zheng He thought to himself. “Stop!” Zheng He shouted with so much power and voice anyone could have heard it from a mile away.

Reluctantly, the soldiers obeyed his command, and stopped at once. “Who is the highest in command in your city?” Zheng He asked the terrified citizens. With his entire body shaking in fear, a man slowly stood up and raised his hand. In a trembling voice, he said, “I—I am.”

“I’ll make you a deal. Our emperor wants resources, so if you can provide some for us, we will leave at once.” Zheng He offered.

He was reluctant, and Zheng He could tell. “We’ll make alliances with you, we’ll help you rebuild and pay for the damage we have done. But you have to provide us with resources, because if not I’ll be forced to ask my troops to continue what they’re doing.” Zheng He said.

“R—r—really?” the leader said in his trembling voice.

“I don’t want to harm you or your people, but we do need resources. There is another way – how about we form an alliance?” Zheng He suggested.

Not as reluctant anymore, he agreed to the offer.

Thousands of eyes looked at him, half of them with gratitude, and the other half with anger.

They went back to the ship, with over a hundred men carrying boxes of resources back onto the ship. All of them looked at Zheng He with anger in their eyes.

“Is there a problem?” he asked sternly. “Well, what do you think? This was supposed to be a raid, we’re here to steal resources, not make friendships,” one of the soldiers shouted.

Another soldier next to him quickly covered his mouth before he continued to speak.

“The point of the mission was to gain resources for our country, not to terrorize citizens and make enemies. I figured we could use a different method of obtaining these resources, one that didn’t involve raiding.” Zheng He responded in a calm yet strong voice.

“You figured,” another soldier sneered.

Zheng He looked at him. “Trust me, by the end of this journey we will have ships filled with resources to bring back to our country.”

“Yeah, and what if that doesn’t happen?” yet another soldier muttered.

“Then we will go back to each and every one of the cities we have seen and travelled to and we will raid them until all of our ships are filled with nothing but resources.” Zheng He answered in a much stricter voice.

The resentment in the atmosphere seemed to relieve, and all the soldiers went back to their cabins. Zheng He sighed, and once again looked at the sea.

The next morning, they arrived to Java, and Zheng He walked up to the city’s leaders and asked for an alliance. They agreed, traded resources, and peacefully left the city.

Then, over the course of a few weeks, they travelled through the Indian Ocean and made alliances with the people of Malacca, Aru, Samudera, Lambri, Ceylon, Quillon and Calicut. During this process, many of the cities offered a multitude of resources to the crew, and by the end of it, a quarter of the crew had to sleep in tighter cabins due to the amount of resources their ships had to carry.

During their journey back home, Zheng He saw one of his soldiers sitting on the dock, his face completely pale. Zheng He went up to him and asked, “What’s the matter?”

With a shaky voice he answered, “I—I have been thinking. W—what will the Emperor do when he finds out we haven’t raided a single city.”

Zheng He thought about the issue for a second and answered, “Don’t worry. I will handle this matter personally.”

When they got back home, thousands of men marched out of the ships, carrying boxes upon boxes of loot and resources. Everyone in the city looked at them in awe, even the Emperor was impressed.

“May I talk to you, your Majesty?” Zheng He asked the Emperor.

The Emperor looked at him and smiled, “Of course,” he said.

They walked into a room and sat down. “Listen,” Zheng He said, “we haven’t raided a single city during this expedition.”

The Emperor frowned.

Before the Emperor could talk, Zheng He continued, “Instead of raiding, we befriended a multitude of people, and then traded resources. We also —”

The Emperor cut him off. “So you could have earned more resources. But instead decided to make some friends. You have disobeyed my order despite me granting you so many men and ships.”

“And I have shown you just how effective this method can be. We prevented casualties and injuries on both sides, obtained more than enough resources, and made alliances that could help us in the future. Not only will we acquire an abundant amount of resources, but we will also gain political power.” Zheng He said with confidence.

“Fine, I will give you a chance to prove what you said is correct. You will set off on another expedition next month, with more ships and men. I will give you one month’s time to obtain 500 ships worth of resources. If you return late or with insufficient resources, you and all of your crew will die.” the Emperor said.

Zheng He looked at him dead in the eye and answered, “Sure.”

One month passed, and they started their expedition. They went to another series of places and befriended other groups of people, as well as trading large amounts of resources. They obtained enough resources in three weeks time, and were ready to head back home.

BOOM! The ship shuddered, and a horde of people ran up to the dock to see what was happening. At first, they didn’t see anything, but when the ship shuddered again, they saw it.

Chen Zuyi and his gang of pirates closed in and ran onto the ship. They hurried their way to the storage rooms and raided them as quick as possible. In a few minutes, they had carried over 50 boxes of resources onto their ship, and were about to escape. Zheng He grabbed Chen Zuyi by the arm and pulled him back onto his ship. He grabbed a knife and ordered Chen’s people to return the boxes. Soon, they ran back to the ship to save their captain, and the battle began. Knives and swords slashed at one another, and every so often, a torch would be thrown across the ship. Arrows flew across the entire ship, and not a single inch of the dock was not covered by blood. After an hour long battle, all of Chen’s men were either dead or kicked off the ship. They tied up Chen Zuyi and locked him in a prison cell in Chen’s own private ship. They took the ship and left.

When they arrived home, the Emperor was once again impressed, and decided to reward Zheng He and keep supporting the expeditions of the ship.

# New Tales of the Ming Voyages

*Island School, Law, Valerie – 12*

Dear future me (Zheng He)

My name is Zheng He, and I am the greatest admiral in Chinese history.

The last year had gone by me in a blur, everything was going so fast. Each day had been chaotic, busy and eventful, all because of one goal. My first voyage supposedly the greatest voyage in history. Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor, had ordered me and twenty eight thousand men along with more than three hundred large ships to set sail to the West. A journey no one had completed before. Zhu Di had just succeeded as China's new emperor, with my help, and as one of his first acts, he wanted to impress the world with China's wealth. He wanted to establish alliances, and to do that, he had to impress the world. Three hundred ships were constructed, of which sixty of them were Treasure Ships, which were over four hundred feet long. It was just like a rollercoaster, getting closer and closer to the big drop, with everyone getting more excited with every second.

It was early dawn on the eleventh of July, and we were off. We were sailing through the Pacific Ocean heading towards Champa. I was standing on the deck of the leading ship, facing a sea of unknown. The ocean breeze was blowing against my face. The following months were sure to bring a lot of surprises. I looked behind to hundreds of ships behind me. I was the one man who could change the destiny of all those people, and China.

Two years later...

"Land ho! Land ho!" I woke to the sound of someone calling. They were joined by more calls, "Land ho! Land ho!" I made my way to the front of the crowd, and there in front of me, was Champa. I descended from the ship into the company of a King, the King of Champa. I was led into a royal palace, with grand decorations and furniture, however not as grand as China. "Your Highness," and I dropped into a bow before the King. "Hello, what brings you and your fleet to our humble land?" asked the King merrily. "We come travelling from China, to bring you and your country gifts of wealth from our King, in hope for an alliance," I explained. "May I please have a look at your fleet?" asked the King. "It is an honor," I replied. "Wow," the King whispered breathlessly as he surveyed our fleet. It was plain that he was duly impressed. "It would be a tremendous honor to be an alliance of such a great country, in fact, I would like to send you home with gifts of our own!" he added.

One day later, we were on our way back to China, lavished with gifts from Champa, and an alliance with the King. We were sailing towards Java, then on to the Spice Islands. I was relieved that our first stop had gone so well. However, I was aware of Chen Zuyi, the infamous pirate, and carefully avoided there fleet. I was planning to confront them later on.

Our trip to the Spice Islands went relatively well, and we were then sailing across the Indian Ocean, approaching Calcutta, one of the major trade depots. The local rulers were collaborative, accepting our alliance and returning the favor with gifts of their own. After the trade, once again, my fleet and I headed our towards the open sea, back home.

"Zheng He! Please join us on the deck! Chen Zuyi has been spotted on the horizon." I made my way up to the deck, surveying the scene. Sure enough, the infamous pirate and his fleet were just a few hundred metres away. "Men, prepare your weapons and the cannons, but don't fire before my command," I ordered. I don't believe in using violence to resolve conflicts, but Chen Zuyi was an exception. I ordered the rest of my fleet to fall behind, while only the leading ship sail forward. I sighed as I envisioned the battle between the fleets.

My ship and Chen's ship circled each other. "Aye! Zheng He! It sure is a pleasure to meet such a honorable man at sea!" Chen called out with a smirk. His attitude didn't bother me, I was fully expecting that. "Hello, Chen Zuyi, same to you," I replied calmly. His smirk faltered. "I've come to surrender and I hope you will accept my apology," he said with a fake smile. That was definitely not what I was expecting. "Well, Chen Zuyi, not something I expected, turning over a new leaf?" I prompted. "Yes, mind if I come aboard?" he asked. I knew Chen was a man of tricks and lies, so I was skeptical of his apologies, however I decided to welcome him aboard. "Come join us on board, my friend," I welcomed him onto the ship, he came on bearing a big fake grin. Once he was on board, before one could blink an eye, he drew out his sword and attempted to stab me in the back. However, I was perfectly ready and dodged to the left. For one swift moment, I caught a look of alarm on his face but then he was back in action. "Men come aboard!" he yelled to his crew. I watched out of the corner of my eye as hundreds of pirates stumbled on board. They all looked different, some with a parrot on their shoulder, some with a pegged leg, some with an eye mask, but they all shared one thing in common, they looked ready to kill. I had no choice but to open fire myself. "Fire at will," I ordered my own fleet. I was always an organized person, and preferred to plan ahead. Thanks to this, my crew and I had rehearsed a battle scene many times, planning out strategic moves and places to defeat the enemy. However, Chen Zuyi and his fleet were a big match, as they had participated in many bloody and vicious battles. Two of my most trusted assistants crept up behind Chen, and threw a rope over his body. They dragged him to a sturdy post and firmly tied him up. But Chen did not give up easily, he chewed through the rope, and before we knew it, he was back in again. He came up behind me and slashed through my arm, luckily I dodged and knocked him to the ground. Quickly my assistants tied him up much more firmly as well as locked him in a vault. Even though the battle with Chen was over, we still needed to fight off his men. We ended up killing more than five thousand of his men and unfortunately, some of my crew were gone and kidnapped. I was glad the battle was over. My crew abandoned the lead ship, since it was damaged badly, and moved onto another one. I and two others removed a struggling Chen Zuyi, knocked him unconscious and carried him to the next ship. As we settled in for yet another night, I thought about the previous battle, and I was more than pleased that we have finally defeated the infamous Chen Zuyi. I fell asleep with a peaceful mind.

"Home sweet home!" I woke to the sound of people calling. I descended from the ship, it felt great to set foot on Chinese land once again.

From,  
Zheng He

I smiled with nostalgia after I finished reading the letter I wrote to myself twenty six years ago, from my first voyage. I glanced ahead and saw the door of my cabin. I was resting on my deathbed, sick, with no cure. My fleet was heading back from our seventh voyage back to China. I had seen many amazing things during my time, from precious jewels to giraffes, I had seen the world in my life. I really could not have wanted anything else, apart from seeing my homeland one last time. I could sense I wouldn't make it back to China so for a reminder, I picked up the letter I wrote to myself twenty six years ago, and began to read... 'My name is Zheng He, and I am the greatest admiral in history...' with that I looked around the world one last time and closed my eyes to eternal and peaceful sleep.

# War on Itsibatchu

*Island School, Papp, Dorottya – 11*

It was July 23rd 1412 when the war started. The day the Chinese came. Father was the king at the time, so I was princess. Princess Kaira. Only 13 and I had more power than most adults. Impressive I think. We ruled the island of Itsibatchu, an island near the African coast. It's amazing. We are far enough from the rest of the world to not be bothered by others, but close enough so that traders come occasionally. In my room, I had jewellery, weapons and cutlery from all around. My most treasured object however is my Mambele knife. It's a curved throwing knife I got from Mother. But all the treasure combined was just a fraction of what I saw July 23rd.

It was a somewhat normal day, except for the fact that it wasn't usual at all. I hadn't had my usual fruit platter with coconut milk and everyone seemed to sleep. Lost in a world of extreme boredom, I ended up cloud gazing, but even the clouds slept. Then something happened. Something strange. I could see huge ships in the harbour. A whole fleet. We barely even have one boat. The shadows drenched our side of the mountain in darkness. The villages, the beach, the gardens, all of it. If anyone woke, they didn't show it. Someone descended from the ships. Honestly, he looked alien. His black hair and pale skin was honestly really weird. I saw father climb down the steps of the palace and resisted the urge to shout "Father! Stop! Don't go near him!". I sat on the balcony, awaiting my father's fate. He reached the man. And they started talking. I tried leaning closer to hear what they are saying, then scolded myself for being so dumb. How could I hear anything? They were obviously whispering, and even if they weren't, how could I hear them anyway? I was 5 stories above them! I abandoned my post to look at myself in my mirror. I looked crazy. My dark skin looked way too bold against my white dress, and my hair was just a mess. No other description fit it. I looked like I just saw a ghost, with my wide eyed expression. The bags under my eyes were as purple as father's most important robe. I went to clean myself up and changed into something more 'the day war falls upon my island is today and I must save it or die' kind of outfit. Before I could open my door, Mia lida, my personal helper, opened it for me and called for me.

"Kaira, your father requests your attendance at his meeting." Then she saw what I was wearing. "Kaira, your father is expecting you to look your best, not like you are about to save the world from its impending doom."

"But Mia lida, I don't even know who I'm talking to. What if it's a raccoon dressed as a general. I have to be prepared." Mia lida did not appreciate me pleads. She forced me into a dress and ushered me into the room. When I finally saw the guest, I knew Mia lida should have let me wear my kit. It was the general from the ships. They had both returned from outside. A flood of questions hit me. Who was he? What did he want? Why is he here? Where did he and the ships come from? Where are they going?

"Kaira, this is Ling Dao Wei. He came from (he said something like kinay?) Is that how you pronounce it?" "It is pronounced China" Ling Dao Wei said. He kept a very stern expression on his face. Zero movement. "Ling dao wei is one of the leaders of the fleet of ships outside. Now he and the rest of the travellers would like to give us some treas—"

"Now hold on, I never said we would give you treasure, I said we trade with treasure."

"Then why are you here?"

"We needed somewhere to stop and load up"

"Stop and load up? Unless you are here to trade with my island you have no purpose to be here. I command you to leave this instant."

"But we need to stay"

"If you want your right to stay, fight for it."

"Then we will."

"The war will begin at dawn."

The next day was the scariest day of my life. At five in the morning, you could hear charging of horses and screams of men. You could see families running and soldiers charging. You could smell the blood of dead warriors lying on the ground. Mia lida, the rest of the palace staff and I were ushered out of the palace, into a safe ground in the gardens. All we could do was listen to the dying shouts of brave soldiers and the



stomping of hooves. As the war raged on, we huddled in fear and anxiety. What was happening outside? Who was winning? It was the dead of night when the battle, finally, came to an end. The screaming, the stomping, the clashing of metal all came to an abrupt stop.

“Ling Dao Wei, we've fought, and we've won. Stop this treachery and we will announce a truce.

“King Aimala, we surrender. But please, give me a moment. I want to say something.” He paused for a moment, turned around and addressed the battlefield. “Brave soldiers, you have fought, you have lost and you have always been faithful. Me and King Aimala would like to announce a truce.” We all cheered, and I sprinted out of the gardens.

“Father, since the wars over I thought it would be a good idea to have all the children on the island go on a small trip with the pirates. We could see the world, and learn about different places. Oh please father, you know I would love to explore.”

“We'll have to think about it dear.”

Next week, I got ready to see another fraction of my small world.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Island School, Pollard, Kale'a – 12*

Pulling my hair into a bandana, I climbed up the crows nest to sit and watch. We were awaiting the arrival of the leading Chinese admiralty ship, lead by Ma He, or as I used to know him, but now everyone knows him as Zheng. He had trained me in Yunnan before he left to join the admiralty. I spotted a Chinese ship off towards the west. It was huge! Our ship looked like an ant compared to it but we knew that only a few were going to be aboard, so we had found our bait,

"Bingo! Off towards the west! I say we capture them, steal as much as we can carry, then let them free!" I called down to the other pirates aboard our ship. Captain Jack called back up,

"Rob them, yes, but let them free why? I don't think so! All hands on deck!" I swung down landing on my hands and knees. I pulled out my guns, checked that they were loaded and quickly sharpened my cutlass on the cannon while my friend Connor loaded it.

"Ready!"

Our ship swooped in to face the larger Chinese admiralty ship that we had been preparing to fight for weeks. They leaped aboard our ship guns blazing. I felt gruff hands grab me from my hiding spot behind a cannon. I turned to look at a Chinese man dressed in an admiralty uniform. I fought to get out of his grasp, slicing at him with my cutlass till he let me go. I pulled a loaded pistol out of my belt and pointed at his head but then I stopped dead as I watched another soldier pull a gun's trigger it's bullet pointing straight at Connor. it felt like I watched it in slow motion, I ran in front of him right before the bullet was gonna hit his surprised face. I felt a fiery pain in under my left rib, even though the bullet only grazed me, I fell to the ground writhing in pain.

"Lillian, you crazy girl!" Connor caught me as I fell, I managed a smile back up at him.

"At least, you are okay" I whispered.

I heard footsteps behind me, I stood up to see a man towering over me, he had a band over his armour, he must be the leader Zheng, I recognized his face but his eyes had changed from being a soft grey to a cold stone. He spoke something in Chinese, I gritted my teeth hiding the pain and stood up to face my captor with a gun pointed at his face, who looked at me smugly,

"Little Girl wants to fight?" He waited and turned away but I spoke up

"Yes, I do!"

I shoot the rigging on his ship with the gun, the sail came falling down on his warriors trapping them underneath, with the distraction my other friend Jaxon and also Connor stood next to me on either side ready to fight. Zheng looked at me with fear but also wonder.

"You, you are the Lillian Jacks, you're the one the emperor wants!" He looked at me like he wanted to murder me, my old friend had changed.

I answered in a shallow tone, "Yes I am Lillian Jacks, the best lady with a gun. You won't hit a girl, will you? However, I will smack you upside the head if I wanted to, now buzz off and if you sink another pirate ship, I will hunt you down!" I moved closer as I spoke and drawn my cutlass holding it up to his neck, he tried to get up, but fell into Jaxon and Connor's hold as I the jumped onto his ship with Captain Jack and we took enough treasure to last a lifetime, once I was done, I grabbed him by the wrists and pulled him across the plank in between our ships, grabbed a rope and swung off his ship landing on ours and facing him with a deadly stare. I felt like I was putting on a show but I don't want to hurt him.

"Goodbye, Imperial Zheng and friends I am sure you will have a tale to tell your Emperor, happy sailing!" He quickly ran to ropes ready to sail away but they had fallen,

"Whoops, I forgot about that!" I chuckled and turned around to bare my teeth and growl at the other warriors who were lying down after the pirates had let them go, they stood up as fast as they could running across the plank but one walked slower than the other,

"Get a move on, we don't have all day!"

He turned around and sliced me across the face with his sword, I fell back, feeling blood dripping down the cut on my face but got back up to see him, walk across the plank and curse at me in Chinese, I jumped across and knocked him over. I turned to Zheng he pulled out his gun and aimed it at me, I let down my hair out my bandana,

"You wouldn't shoot an old betrayed friend, would you? The Sink Hound's Galley?" My voice cracked, as I remembered the memories with my old trainer.

Zheng looked confused for a moment but then he went pale. "A—Ana, it's you, but how why?"

"You betrayed me, Zheng. You left me one day without telling me, I thought I would never see you again. I want to thank you for my training but after you left, I joined the pirates. They trained me even harder and I felt like I had a family." I looked towards my adoptive family, the pirates. "Why didn't you come back or tell me, Zheng, I thought you had forgotten me." I looked around to see a broad circle around us aboard this massive ship, many staring eyes but I didn't care.

"I came back, they had told me you were captured by pirates, I thought you were dead, I tried to forget you but I couldn't." He looked at me, I remember those eyes, they were the last ones I saw before he left, sadness.

"I was there, you shoot me, I was 17, Zheng! I can't believe you would shoot a seventeen-year-old girl! I didn't recognize you. Look at what you have become Zheng an amazing warrior, kind, strong but a murderer, you have killed some many people!" I had tears running down my cheeks "Continue your life but don't forget that you had a life that you were carefree and only cared about the people that you loved, not the entirety of the Ming Dynasty. Go back to the Sink Hound one day, I will be there, if not, don't worry, I will go back there someday dead or alive"

"Ana... I'm so sorry" He looked broken

"Sorry won't cut it, Zheng."

I jumped off his ship and dove underwater, popping back up at the stern off the boat and climbed up, steering the boat away from the Admiralty as a nice quick breeze started moving us along, I had tears running down my face, when Captain Jack came up to me I turned around ready to face a harsh punishment as I let them go, but his face was pitying he held out his arms, he felt like a father to me, I ran into his warm embrace.

"I didn't know that the leader of the Ming treasure fleet was your trainer, no wonder you where so good when we recruited you, you are only 20 but you have been through so much, now let's tend to your wounds," He lead me across the ship down to the main part to see all the other pirates, I tried to walk but I fell and was caught by Jaxon and Connor,

"Cmon, Lillian lets get you cleaned up, you will get scars though," Jaxon said with a worried face

I laughed and traced the cut with my finger, starting at my eyebrow and ending under my mouth, "Does it matter, at least everyone else is ok, I hope?"

"Yeah, everyone else has only minor injuries, but you where amazing taking on Zheng like that, thank you for saving me." Connor said.

"It was worth it"

I thought to myself, I wonder what's going to happen next, the life of a pirate is an adventure in itself, with or without the hardships I loved it all the way.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Island School, Vaghela, Nishka – 12*

So, let's begin with me introducing myself, I'm Luther, half Chinese, half English. I'm 15 years old. I am travelling on a boat with my dad, who is one of the kings of the area. I have always wanted to sail on a ship, you know to get the pirate-y feeling, to feel like you own everything. Water has always been one of my passions. Swimming, boating and all sorts of different adventure, they thrill me. Staying in the water for loads of hours isn't enough for me, I think that water makes me feel better. Not a lot of people my age like travelling, they sit around at home and contemplate their lives, while I'm out in the ocean enjoying. Here I am with adults, eighty per cent of whom I do not know, travelling the most thrilling seas and going to unknown lands full of dangers. But I don't think of it as something negative, but something to look forward to, something that thrills me. I am the most athletic one in the family, my two older brothers, they hate the sea! My mum too, she hates depths, my dad, on the other hand, loves the sea and its dangers and mysteries, I guess I got that from him. Well, enough talking about me, let's talk about what's currently happening.

The weather is nice, breezy and shiny, perfect for a ship! On the cruise with me, are my dad, my two brothers and some other landlords and workers. Me being the youngest in the family, am forbidden to travel, but my dad, the only person who understands how much I love being around water, volunteered to take me on the ship, he decided that I would be safe as long as I obey him. Well, that's perfect for me! My brothers didn't want to come along, but according to my dad, they have great navigating skills, so here they are cursing their fortune and misluck. They have always hated oceans, trust me, I'm NOT exaggerating. They think there are treacherous creatures, half human and half monsters dwelling in the depths of the oceans, ready to pounce on any ship that comes near. HAH! What a lie! I never believed it things like that. I still don't.

The second day on the ocean, perfect weather, beautiful, dazzling sun, and blue skies, way to go! According to the sun, it's approximately 6:00 in the morning right now. Which means a lot of people haven't woken up yet, which was perfect. I rushed out of my room, carefully, not waking my brothers up, and grabbed a towel, an extra pair of shorts and an extra shirt, in case, and a long rope. I ran to the highest point on the ship, where sailors would stand and look out into the vast ocean in search of land. I carefully and tightly tied one end of the rope to the ship and threw the other one down into the water. I took my shirt off and looked around once to make sure no one was awake. We all would eat breakfast at 8 and then everyone was off to their posts at the ship. People would wake up at 7, which gave me one hour to do whatever I wanted without any restrictions. I took in a huge gasp of air and then dived into the refreshing ocean waters.

I had always wanted to swim in such waters, so clean and warm, things like this are fun. The one reason I boarded this ship, was to experience the deep and pretty ocean waters. I took in another gasp of air and went underwater. The view was perfect, something everyone has to see at least once in their lifetime, beautiful and colourful fishes, blue water, seaweed floating about and all sorts of wondrous rocks. After staying underwater for 30 seconds, I had to go up and grab more air. I opened my mouth grasping a big mouthful of air so that I could stay underwater for longer. Since I wanted to explore further, I tied the rope to my waist so that I wouldn't get lost. I took in another gasp of air and swam underwater, deeper and deeper, further and further away from the ship. I saw bigger fishes and more rocks, some of them were green, some were blue. Oh, how marvellous! I wanted to go further when something squeezed my waist and pulled me back. It was the rope it had reached its limit. I had to turn back and get back to the ship. Plus it was getting brighter meaning soon people would start waking up. Note to self – wake up earlier tomorrow and bring a longer rope. I was also running out of the air. I started floating upwards. "This isn't fast enough", I said to myself. I started pushing to get upwards faster soon, I made it to the surface and started panting. I recovered for about 2 minutes before I had to start swimming back to the ship. I used the

rope to get up to the cruise. It was 6:45 when I got back, giving me 15 minutes to shower and change, without anyone noticing since I smelt of sea water and I had seaweed stuck all over me. Well, this was fun! I set a mental goal of waking up early and doing this tomorrow as well. It was 6:55 when I got ready. "Well this is strange, why hasn't anyone woken up yet," I said to myself. I went into my room and sat down on my bed. Noticing that none of my brothers had woken up either. I went to the spot where I had tied the rope and slowly tied the free end to a bucket. I released the other end so that the bucket splashed into the water and filled up. I pulled and tugged on the rope, getting the bucket up and into my hands. I untied the rope, bundled it into a coil. I ran to my room and put it in a safe place. I lifted up the bucket and splashed all the water on my brothers, a lot of screaming and groaning proceeded.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU!" Lai, the eldest brother who is currently 18 screamed.

"UGH! IS THIS SEA WATER, IT'S SALTY!" Henry screamed at me and started licking his fingers to check whether it was salt water. That made me roll on the ground giggling.

Lai got up and frowned at me. "Why is your hair wet?" He asked me.

"I just took a shower," I replied.

"Hm, you never take showers in the morning." He said questioningly.

"I felt like it, now leave me alone and you better go take a shower you have seaweed stuck on you," I replied.

They both glared at me and left.

I was sitting with my dad for breakfast since I wanted to hear how far we were from land. He was sitting with other landlords and sailors.

"We have been travelling for some time now, and we should quicken our pace and get away from land, I think that there's a new typhoon coming. Luther, what are you doing here?"

"I want to know more about what we are going to do."

"This isn't for you, Lu, go and eat somewhere else." He replied.

I was about to say something when one of the sailors spoke up he had a surprisingly deep voice.

"Let him be Xian he is old enough to understand."

My dad sighed and nodded to him and then motioned for me to sit down.

"Thanks" I muttered to the sailor, in response, he flashed me a smile.

"This typhoon is going to be a strong one, enough to break 100 boats close to land in one sweep. The weather will change soon tomorrow it will get darker, by the day after tomorrow, the typhoon will be in full form." My dad said sipping his tea.

It was dark that evening, and it was getting windier. My windows kept on fluttering open and close even though I closed them. My brothers were scared, refusing to get out of the room. Everyone was inside rooms, be it a deck or a dining hall. No one wanted to get blown away. I opened the door and was about to step out when Henry closed the door.

"Lu, it's very windy outdoors, you want to get blown away?" He asked.

"I'll be back in 10 minutes, that's all I ask, I need to see someone." And then I opened the door and stepped outside and closed the door, without waiting for them to interject.

I ran to dad's room and found him talking to some sailors. I caught some of their conversations.

"We are away from any form of land, Xian we are all safe."

"This typhoon isn't going to end for some days, do we have enough food?" My dad asked.

"Yes, sir." Someone replied.

The next day, it grew windier and windier, while everyone seemed to be worried, I was enjoying this. I went outside a lot, ignoring all the swearing from Lai. How can sibling be so different, I wondered.

Soon, about two days later, the sun started shining, the typhoon was over! We had made it.

We resumed our journey and continued on the quest for friendship. During the trip, we encountered a lot of people, friendly and unfriendly. My love for the ocean waters grew and grew, surprisingly my brothers and I grew closer, they also agreed to swim with me! This voyage had changed a lot of things, I would always remember.

# The Adventures of Zheng He

*Island School, Yim, Chak Fung – 13*

It was the year 1405. China was ruled under Ming Dynasty's third emperor Zhu Di or commonly known as the Yongle Emperor. Yongle is his emperor's era name defined as "perpetual happiness." He craved for China's power and authority over the world, and he wanted to be king of "all under heaven". He decided that he should make use of China's advanced technology and send armadas out to undertake voyages to convince other countries that China is the most powerful of all.

The Emperor had an extremely faithful general under his belt called Ma He. Ma He was strong, talented and skilful. The Emperor then changed his name to Zheng He and sent him on exceedingly lavishing, challenging and vital voyages in the course of history.

Zheng He prepared his fleet of flotillas and military soldiers, a staggering amount since it consists of approximately 317 ships and 60 majestic Treasure Ships. He had 28,000 sailors, soldiers, polymaths and passengers aboard. Zheng led the way to Thailand, and once his army arrived, locals came out shouting, protesting and rioting. It was chaotic. Zheng tried to soothe and comfort them by presenting valuable gifts such as necklaces, silver and other rare alloys to them. The leader of a Thai tribe, Ongsakponsaemroen, received the presents gratefully and made his tribe respect China. The Thais thanked Zheng and his people of their amiableness and asked forgiveness of their past misbehaviour. The weather was singularly calm, and everyone's disposition was excellent. It was a successful first trip.

Later, they sailed to a volcanic island in Indonesia called Java. The citizens were divided into tribes like the Thais. The locals did not like new people barging in their land, so they gathered their bows and arrows and attacked Zheng He's people. Fortunately, inside the Treasure Ships were all kinds of contemporary ammunition. They fought back and won. Zheng didn't like to be inhospitable, so he gave some fabric was given to the Javans. However, the Javans did not accept the gifts as they were still remorseful about their humiliating defeat. The Javans knew that the Chinese were affluent, mighty and advanced.

After rest, Zheng He's fleet moved on to Malacca City in Malaysia. They had discovered some precious artefacts on the way and bestowed them to the Malaysian leader. Malaysians traded some of their best textiles and tea leaves. Suddenly, a horrific storm came which meant that the Chinese were unable to leave Malacca. Luckily, the Malaysians had already approved of Zheng and his people and permitted them to stay until the storm had calmed down. The profuse flotillas and armadas were safely anchored and protected. A friendship between the two countries formed and they both respected each other.

The next day's noon, the battering storm finally came to a halt, and the Chinese prepared to depart Malaysia. The Malaysian leader sent a messenger to the Yongle Emperor giving thanks. The final destination of this voyage was southern India. En route, a sailor came up to Zheng He's luxurious cabin and informed him that one bag of bronze coins fell into the sea. Someone had inadvertently pushed it out.

Zheng He replied: "Who was in charge of this extremely negligent blunder?"

The sailor said: "Sorry sir, I don't know. But we will carry out investigations to our utmost."

Zheng He said: "Find that person and caution him. Let me see him first so I can deduct if he had done it on purpose or not. If he did it on purpose, then he shall be imprisoned."

Later, they finally dropped anchor in Kozhikode, India. They walked towards the Calicut Kingdom Palace. Lots of security guards were guarding the palace. Zheng He gave his identity and asked for a royal visit to meet the Zamorin(King). Zheng vouchsafed various types of antiquities, necklaces, frankincense et cetera to the Zamorin. They allowed trade to take place, so the Indians sent the Chinese many different kinds of native herbs, currency and silver. A formal relationship established between the two nations and so Zheng He was successful in his first voyage. The Calicut Zamorin invited Zheng and some of his officials to his royal banquet. Zheng agreed to this, and everyone had a wonderful time. The food was scrumptious, the people were amicable, and the atmosphere was pleasant.

After the banquet, Zheng and his officials went back to board the ship. However, some gaberlunzies and usurpers came up to Zheng and tried to pillage his valuables. A lawyer who accompanied Zheng ran to sound for help. The police came instantaneously and arrested the thieves. One of the usurpers was Chinese. He led a ship of pirates to follow Zheng and attack his fleet. Fortunately, they thwarted the devious scheme. The pirates were brought back to Nanjing for heavy punishment.

On the way back, a messenger sprinted from one of Zheng's flotillas and announced that the careless culprit that dropped the bronze coins was espied. He did it allegedly as he resented Zheng. He had always complained that Zheng was too fortunate, everything goes the way he wants, so he was jealous. He wanted to get rid of the valuables as clandestinely as possible. A sailor caught him red-handed when he tried to steal some gold. After questioning, the culprit also confessed that he had devised a plan to assassinate Zheng. He was livid after hearing this and ordered the quisling to be served capital punishment, accusing him of treason.

When Zheng and his fleet returned unharmed to Nanjing, the royal palace was in joy. The Emperor praised Zheng He for his courage, brains and diplomatic skills. The pirates were duly punished and imprisoned for life. The Emperor ordered a royal feast to be held as everyone was jubilant and in high spirits. During the two-year-long voyage, Zheng and his fleet acquired many priceless valuables, so it was a worthwhile journey to undertake despite its risks. A few months afterwards, the Yongle Emperor was asked to send Zheng and co on another voyage to attend the court inauguration of a new king in Calicut. Zheng concurred and organised the trip, but he did not go personally.

He had many, many adventures later on, but they are stories for another day.



# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Kellett School, Jaeger, Anna – 12*

## YU YAN

The waves come as loving rascals, sun-warmed and sweet, to wash upon the sands. Perhaps that is why the children love to play in them so very much – the spirit of the sea and the children coming together in something we grown-ups should have held on to. But I knew what was out there that others didn't.

Waves scatter the light, the hue of the water ever changing yet always familiar, always blue. How could I fail to love them as they dance inward to crash on the pebbles? How could I fail to appreciate the salty air or the cold caress of the breeze? I held my cloak close as I heard the distant Chinese New Year drums echoing off the cool cliffs and mountains that shelter my seaside town like a child in a playground. I knew this day would come. The day when my love could no longer stay in this quaint town. I always thought that this marriage would help him realise that the adventure is at home, not the sea, but with every moment he is away his heart breaks and the very essence that makes him who he is...fades. Just as I am fading without him to hold me. But I must. And I shall.

## LI JIE

The ocean breeze whispered like a lover, placing salty kisses on my cheek and tousling my long black hair. I hung tightly onto a musty old rope, quickly wrapping it round and round a solid metal hook. One loop...two loops...three loops. I didn't care about the red blisters in my raw hands that stung with every minor movement I made, only the endless blue on the ocean that I longed to be near since I was young.

"If only young me could see me now..." I sighed as I took in a deep breath of the rich, warm air.

"You called?" a voice shouted from above.

"What?" I asked almost screaming over the water sloshing on deck "*oh, yeah*. Sorry, Yong Mi – different person."

"Same old Li Jie..." Yong Mi grumped as he wrapped his muscular legs around the mast to attach the third cloth to the sail.

I heard some distant mumbling from Yong Mi as he fixed the sails, I turned my back to the ship and out to the ocean. How can something so dangerous be so calm? It has been close to a year since I last saw my family waving me goodbye by the harbour and not a day goes by when I don't think about them. But my mind was mostly full of the adventures I'd had and also those that I had yet to experience. Swashbuckling pirates, peace treaties with foreign emperors, sea battles with nefarious armies were just some of the adventures I longed for back on land, everyday daydreaming in the small town I called home. The ship that I was a sailor on was called "Ming Yun" or "destiny" and I was recruited by the Chinese Emperor to give away the wonderful presents we had brought from the Emperor, forging new relationships with a variety of countries. I was simply given my uniform, a pat on the back and then we journeyed far and wide to create our own adventures like the ones I read about in my school days. Yet so far, none of this had materialised.

## CAPTAIN ZHANG WEI

The celebration went on into the night, everyone dancing like they'd forgotten how to stand still. Music rang across the ship with dancing sailors twirling round and round with beer mugs in their hands. The celebration was a riot of colour, everyone a little more hyped up than they should be. The red lanterns that hung above the ship illuminated the deck with a red, hot glow as their shadows danced on the ocean. Everyone wanted me there at the celebration, a smile painted on my face and a pint of beer in my hand. The only thing that kept me there was the reverie of my return. I could already imagine it... Zhang Wei the greatest captain in the known world! I snapped back to reality and could hear my crew screaming with joy and feel their feet disturbing the ground around me. Their bodies moved together as they celebrated, rhythmically breaking into shapes and colours that tickled my heart.

"All right, all right men" I shouted urging them to stop and look in my direction. "It's not that we expected plain sailing, or for winds to be kind, the waves to be gentle; it's that we trusted our ship to carry us to shore no matter the weather. They say it's only impossible until it's done, that was our motto under all skies, upon all seas. We believed we could do anything at all... and so we did. This is why I wanted to thank you all for your dedication to China!"

A large cheer erupted from my crew as they threw themselves at each other, embracing one another after a year of sailing in solitude.

“We have successfully delivered all the gold to our neighbouring lands and no simple boys can do such things.” I took a large swig of my beer. “It has of course taken lives and their memories will live on as a part of the Ming Treasure Fleets that took the first steps to discover the world. We have faced armies and pirates, sicknesses and storms. Thank you all for being my crew and tomorrow we set sail for China!”  
“HIP HIP HURRA—”

### LI JIE

Never have I wished so much for the land, to feel the sweet brown soils of home. For on this sea I feel the rage within as if the ocean is countless tears ready to pound at the feet of man. It is a gale that screams under dark and serious clouds. Yet the boat sails over these watery fists, perhaps with the intention of causing enough bruising for the sailors to remember her anger, enough for them to start a sweet serenade of sorrow and a promise of better care. The sailors had tried to prepare for sudden, violent storms that erupt and cease so quickly, but it is impossible. Not only the waves but the rain came without warning, pelting the crew like bullets. The worst had happened after the celebration; with no warning, total darkness prevailed as clouds thickened and the sky was stricken, blotting out the starlight. Sailors struggled and slipped on the soaked deck; panic had set in. The wind slammed the rain into our faces as if it were solid matter – my face was raw and the water had filled my eyes. Somehow, the ship had pressed on, bravely climbing up the waves, and then crashing down in a cascade of wood and water. It was during one of these heart-stopping plummeting surges that a surge of water broke onto the deck, we held tightly onto the mast, onto the ropes, onto anything that might save us. The water drained back into the sea, retreating to its master, but the damage had been done. I felt my fingers slip as I reached out for the captain in vain. The pull of the water was too strong. I took in a final breath and was whisked away to the deep. The current twisted my frozen body with the heart-wrenching cold of the ocean while I willed myself to swim upwards. Losing air rapidly I chose to close my eyes and felt the cold embrace of death strip my soul from my body. Yu Yan’s sweet voice rung in my water-clogged ears and slowly soothed me to my everlasting sleep.

### YU YAN

I knew as soon as the crew walked across the wooden harbour that something was wrong. I arrogantly searched for his face as the ship’s crew looked at me with such emptiness in their eyes that I knew my life would never be the same. In that moment of loss my world collapsed – where there was light there became shadows, the pain coming and going like waves on frigid sand. Though my mind called out for his, the connection was gone... he was gone... and finally, I knew that my time to be alone had come. I can only pray that we will be reunited in the next, that God would see fit to give us more time. Li Jie’s memory will live on and for that...I am grateful.

# The Voyage of Bǎozàng Chuán

*Kellett School, Kirplani, Tanisha – 13*

People scrambled, porters, shoved and hollered, merchants called, shopkeepers argued, women bargained. A typical afternoon in Shandong – to any outsider. To the locals, it was an important day. The air crackled with tension, voices were curt and fearful, villagers backs and necks strained as if listening for a hidden attack. Then the gong went off, signifying a new raft entering the docks. Suddenly, everything froze. No breeze, no waves, even the birds seemed to hover in one place. It was as if the little village was holding its breath. Then the spell snapped, and the whole village shrank back from the monstrous creation that towered over everything. They had known a boat of great importance was coming today. But this? It was beyond their wildest dreams.

The Bǎozàng chuán had come to Shandong and with it came sorrow.

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Later that afternoon, Zheng Hi sat in the humble house of Gao Dou. The refreshments on the ancient oak table lay untouched. It appeared, to the crowd that stood outside the village headquarters, that the stranger and their beloved mayor were participating in an intensely heated argument. It was the first time the villagers had seen their calm, placid mayor get worked up in a rage. Only later would they know the reason.

The night of the villages' weekly meeting, Gao Dou took his place at the little podium ready to make the announcements for the following week. His buoyant face was unusually grave, just as it had been when he announced the start of the war with Li Zicheng, the Shun Dynasty emperor. Mayor Gao waited as the crowd fell silent before him. He said "Mr Zheng Hi, captain of the Bǎozàng chuán, which belongs to the Ming Treasure Fleet, has come to our humble society. We must bestow all our respect on him. Mr Zheng has requested us to present him with two children who accompany him on his next voyage." At that, a fearful gasp rose through the audience. Parents hugged their children closer and backed away in fear. Finally, after a long moment of silence, Feiyan Dou stepped forward. "Gao", she said in her honeyed voice "we have two strong ones, let them go if no-one else will send their children on such a prestigious journey." After a moment's hesitation, Gao reluctantly agreed. "Yes, I think that's what we will do," he replied. The next morning Buwei and Ji Dou left for their adventure. The villagers were sad to see the two adorable children leave but were grateful that none of their children were chosen to go on the voyage. As they boarded the ship a cloud of loss formed over Shandong. No one knew if they would ever see the two children again.

★

Seven-year-old Ji sat, lost in thought, on her four-poster bed in the enormous ship cabin. A knock on the door set her thoughts back in place. She straightened the creases of her flowing silk dress, courtesy of the ship, and stood by the bed as the door opened. It was a lowly sailor with a message from Captain Zheng, requesting Ji to go to the Captain's cabin. She left the room immediately and hurried down the elegant carpeted hallway with the magnificent crystal chandelier. As she ran up the grand marble stairway, she sensed her older brother behind her and slowed down to let him catch up. Together they walked, eagerly awaiting the new task Captain Zheng had told them about the previous evening.

The Captain's jolly face awaited them as they entered his cabin. In his hand was a map. Nodding at them to sit down, he unrolled the ancient papyrus and set it on the table in front of them. In a flash, they understood what he would ask of them.

"As you may have inferred, I now ask you to guide the ship to the treasure. This can only be found by two children and their leader as the old prophecy states. But they must have a pure heart and good intentions. For days on end, we have scoured the seas for this treasure only to realise that we didn't have the two children to play the key part," He said with a serious expression. Buwei questioned hesitantly, "You said a pure heart and good intentions sir. What you are going to do with the treasure once we find it?"

"The treasure will be used to fund the army, to protect us from future wars. It will help with development across the villages of our country and aid the poor. So will you help?" he asked.

"Of course," they answered together. Ji eagerly snatched the map, nearly dropping it in surprise at what she saw next. The usual black gridlines glowed a hot gold and the gold face drawn on the map started to speak...

*“Seek, and you shall find,  
If your heart is purer than your mind,  
Beware of the time,  
For once it runs out, you shall find,  
The dreaded person in your mind.  
To take you must give,  
Something you cherish more than you live.”*

As it stopped speaking, Captain Zheng spoke: “It’s a warning children. Are you sure you want to do this?”  
“Yes,” said Ji, determination etched across all of her features.

After an hour of pondering, they concluded. Once they found the treasure its hiding time would have run out. They would then have an encounter with the Bǎozàng chuán’s worst enemy the Cai Qian pirates. The part they did not understand was the line “To take you must give, Something you cherish more than you live.”

Suddenly, in the distance, they heard a loud BOOM. As they rushed out onto the deck, they noticed the ship was eerily quiet. Looking over the railing, to their amazement they saw a giant gold cross etched in the still black water. They had reached the treasure! But how? Rushing into the ship’s bridge, they saw the helmsman lay fast asleep on the wheel. All the other sailors lay in a profound daze. The vessel had drifted to the spot all by itself.

On taking another look at the cross, they realised that a few words were scrawled around it. The words read...

*“To find what you seek;  
you must insert a key.  
The key is in your hand and  
tells you where you stand.”*

Suddenly Buwei spoke up. “Maybe they mean the map. And that is what we must give to get what we seek.”

With great effort, Captain Zheng nodded “Yes this will benefit the whole country” he said and slowly lowered the map into the water at the centre of the cross.

With a great flash and a big splash loads of treasure rose out of the water. Masses of gold and silver bars, coins, goblets, jewellery, and other precious items, hovered in front of them and then gently set itself down on the ship passing through the flooring as if it were non-existent and filling the vessel’s already full vault.

They had found the treasure. Now the other seamen had woken up, from the spell cast on them, just in time to see the end. In all the excitement no one saw the Cai Qian pirate ship emerge from the dense fog.

Grey clouds formed overhead, and rain poured down heavily. The waves thrashed against the ship tossing it from one place to another. Lightning crackled, thunder rumbled, and Qian’s ship came closer and closer. A big BOOM started the battle; the cannons were opened and fired regularly, men fought on each vessel with spears and swords. For hours on end, the battle and storm raged on. Captain Zheng constantly battled five men at a time including the fiercest, meanest warrior of all time; Cai Qian. Then, just as the Bǎozàng chuán started to lose hope a bolt of lightning struck Cai Qian’s ship burning it to the sea-bed. But Qian and forty of his men were still alive and fighting on the Bǎozàng chuán. The children stood helplessly in the background as a copper dagger cluttered at their feet. Picking up the dagger, little Ji ran into the battle before her brother could stop her. Hurling the blade with all her strength, she let go and hit Cai Qian in the heart. Seeing their leader dead, the remaining pirates jumped overboard to avoid capture, leaving the Bǎozàng chuán peaceful again.

**THE END**

*The Bǎozàng chuán distributed the treasure that helped various cities and towns develop and prosper. a large donation was made towards the upliftment of families of the sea men who gave<sup>1</sup> up their lives.*

*Little Ji was the hero of the night by killing Cai Qian. The children were honoured with an enthusiastic reception. The hardworking little village of Shandong received a sizeable portion of the treasure for their active part in its search, and everyone lived comfortably ever after.*

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<sup>1</sup> Tanisha Kirpalani, Year 8, Kellett School.

# Canglong

King George V School, Zhao, Ran – 13

The *Canglong's* surgical cabinet holds two prosthetics: a metal femur and a metal heart.

I've lost limbs to accidents, organs to time and disease, and sometimes, necessity of environment. I don't know when I recognized inevitability and decided to print a copy of every body part I'd conceivably need to be replaced, and sure enough, 29<sup>th</sup> century state-of-the-art 3D printers failed to serve my cause—but hell if I hadn't tried to print another printer with it before it broke down.

I'm not the technological type, at least not according to the standards of my profession, but I'm happy to say I've managed to figure out not to print components taller than the *Canglong's* cabin ceiling. Of course, there's the dent in the roof to show. I guess it's a waiting game now. Waiting for my 3D printed heat shields to run out, waiting to see if it'll be my body or the *Canglong* that gives first, breaks in a way that can't be replaced.

Not the heart, though. Never the heart. A thousand artificial reinforcements keep it beating, but the only way I can face my silver rictus grin without turning my head away is in the knowledge that, beneath the pitter of gears and grind of oft-neglected joints, my heart, at least, is still a human's heart—this heart that wrenched and stuttered at my first sight of space and soared at my first supernova and now longs for the days when I looked to the stars with yearning instead of bitter hate; this heart that, sentimental though it may be, marks me irreversibly as human.

Sometimes I'll blur my eyes and pretend that they're electric cities, press my palms to my eyes and watch the rather bloom of phosphenes. I'll tell myself that the jute strands of my lashes distort discolored neon signs instead of cold, chatoyant stars, that I'll blink and the world that comes into focus will be just that, a world and not a sterile isolation chamber. That it never happened, that fateful day when I radioed *Bi An* after a hundred-year cryosleep and it didn't answer back.

And sometimes I'll wonder why I didn't end it there, almost delirious with panic, frantically scanning message after message of *contact not established*, the acrid insinuation of *last human alive* hovering like a carrion vulture waiting for a man to die. Sometimes I wonder why I turned the *Canglong* around with its cargo of *Bi An* approved gifts and set its trajectory to the nearest star system.

So many decades, and it's the silence that gets to me, creeping into the passionless hum of machinery in the liminal spaces between tasks and threatening to erode the edges of my mind. It's in those instances, not yet spent in cryosleep, is when the memories threaten to overwhelm me.

Because you could fill encyclopedia upon encyclopedia with the things I've seen and never breach its depth, aboard this battered starship loaded with memories.

I've seen sentient gas clouds, spindly creatures as tall as mountains, creatures living in bioluminescent oceans with tentacles spanning continents. I'll orbit their planets, gleaning what information I can, and then I'll descend. They'll point their weapons at me, for they are no fools.

The *Caolong* is a nimble, catlike thing with four antennae outstretched watchfully and *Bi An's* slogan, *the modern treasure voyage*, spanning her width in twenty-four languages. Her exterior can retract to show shaded transparent walls that reveal our absence of weapons.

Sometimes they'll see it, and let me land. And if they don't, that's okay too. I'll put myself into cryosleep and set a new trajectory. Each journey takes a thousand years, but time has never been a limit.

Sometimes I arrive to barren desert cities, the elaborate structures projected to me from ancient light now nothing more than scaffolding and dust, standing with the impervious dignity of empty snail shells.

The wind will moan through the sand-blasted formations, fluting and morose, and I'll board my ship again.

And sometimes it will be a meteor-cracked world I wander through, sanguine skies and dried-up seas, the dull red embers of some long-abated conflagration still flickering at my feet.

But sometimes it's a civilization, a group of stargazers that greet me, flocking curiously as my ship sets down.

I show them planes and spaceships, the Hubble Telescope and the proof behind Hawking radiation. Perhaps I'll draw out Dante's *Inferno*, and it'll be well-worn, a copy I've treasured over innumerable millennia. My fingers will wander over the translucent coffee stain marring the cover, lingering over dog-eared pages crammed with spidering observations. But I'll hand it over. I want to. I must.

I ask little in return—a sachet of alien earth. A photo. A piece of technology, or perhaps a story.

I fill the *Canglong's* logbook with these stories, an ever-expanding tapestry, each one finding a home amid the rambling myriad of files and classifications.

And then I board my ship.

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It's failing now. The *Canglong* is old and has been mended too many times, not enough resources to visit another planet without burning up. And my heart, too, has been broken and mended too many times. One day I'll have to replace it too.

But now I know, even as I bare my chest on the surgery table, maybe for the last time.

I'm not the last of the human race, am I?

I'm the first.

Because if there's one thing that we humans haven't failed at, it's hope.

Hope for knowledge. Hope for wealth. Hope of the here-be-dragons and undiscovered territory.

Hope that, far beyond the horizon, whether it rests on uncharted seas or uncharted stars, we'll find a kindred spirit.

That's why we keep our ports open and our telescopes trained to the sky, isn't it? That's why Zheng He embarked on those journeys and Bi An took up the torch. Hope.

And if there's one thing I know for absolute certainty, it's that it's not the electrodes that govern my titanium limbs, nor the artificial crevasse left by my beating heart, that determines whether I'm human. It's not my skin or warped anatomical structure or breathing tank that converts any trace of water to oxygen.

And these aliens, with their gas-cloud bodies and nebulous eyes and fierce, ardent hope? They're human too.

I'll broadcast the *Canglong's* log.

With the her technology, I can do it.

She'll transmit them outwards, with her four slender antennae, as momentum catapults her through light years of space I'll never hope to see.

And maybe, just maybe, when even the *Canglong* is nothing more than a twisted hunk of metal and a handful of floating ashes, a voice will crackle over the static of a radio receiver pointed to the sky of a blue-green planet not so different from our own. It'll be transmuted and fractured and borderline unintelligible and following it, a white line lapsing into darkness like a lighthouse's rays, will be rows and rows of numbers.

And it won't be easy, but they'll manage, grasping for the whispered nuance written fervently into the lines of zeros and ones.

They'll manage, and a message will appear. *The Canglong's surgical cabinet holds two prosthetics, it'll read. A metal femur and a metal heart.*

\* \* \*

So, let me tell you a story.

Not about me or a long-forgotten solar system, not about the Milky Way or even the tiny, failed species that is the human being, prideful and naïve and setting fire to a planet in their thirst for the stars.

No.

It's about you.

Because there's so much light you still can't see.

# My Personal Diary

King George V School, Zhao, Rou – 11

## The night before I set off.

Through the cracked, fog-clouded windows, I can see the waves roaring and spitting foam. A frothing, raging tide, blazing underneath the golden, silk-woven moon.

“Zheng He, are you crazy?” Calloused hands thump my back. “There are pirates out there. Have you not heard of Chen Ziyu?” I hear chairs scoot closer, and a hand gripping my face, pulling me closer to a hushed, husky voice. I turn to face my friend as his spittle grazes my ear. “Chen Ziyu is the most feared and respected pirate. He will be sure to hear about hundreds of ships carrying these treasures! He will surely come murder you!

And if he doesn’t get to you first, the waves will. They drown and they are greedy. They grasp countless men with blood-washed fingers and sink them to the remnants of shipwrecks and skeletons, not to mention the—”

Their words are like a constant twittering of birds pecking me raw. *Be careful of this. You will die because of that. There are pirates out there. There are monsters out there.*

Their words have pierced me until I am black and blue, dripping with blood.

I’ve read enough scrolls about Chen Ziyu, the murdering waves and the forsaken beasts wandering out the closeted home of China. I know enough. And with each impending second to the quarter moon I set off, a deep, dark stone rolls into my stomach.

Why am I doing this? They ask me. You are stupid. You are crazy.

No.

I am a man serving my country. Can’t they understand? I’m doing this for them.

Yet still, they cluck and fuss.

“I’m leaving tomorrow. You can’t convince me not to.” I say instead, pushing up from my chair.

In an instant, my friend is after me, leaping up to bar the door, with that stubborn jut of his chin.

“You do not understand, Zheng He!”

“Yes, I do!” I shout back.

And for a moment, decades of friendship wipes away, and we are bristling.

Words surface on the tip of my tongue, and that coil of fiery anger lashes in my stomach as my friend curls his fists.

But instead of throwing himself upon me, he stoops down and tenderly scoops up my hand. There is a universe of pain in the deep brown well of his eyes as he stares up at me. “Return to us, my friend. Come back home.”

There is nothing I can say.

“We’ll all miss you, Zheng He. Just promise me you won’t forget about us. That you’ll try to come back. Please.”

“I—I will.”

Before I reach the door, I steal a glance behind my shoulder. My friend is still kneeling forlornly on the cold, hard ground, eyes fixated on me, as if he couldn’t bear to see me go.

I turned and slammed the door behind me, before they could all see the bright tears glinting in my eyes.

That couldn’t be the last thing they remembered about me.

## Day 10 of the Voyage

For the 6th day in a row, the sea heaves beneath me. I clutch my stomach, cowering in the corner of my den, as frigid waves slam into my ship, tossing us airborne

And then the drunken giants stop toying with us. They roar with fury and smash. The ship groans, and terrible, discordant screams drown out the splinter of breaking wood.

Red-tinged water sloshes against my ankles, but the only noise I can hear is my prayer to Allah.

There is another *thunk*, and we careen into the air. Who’s steering the ship?

Against the howl of the wind and lash of salt, I crawl across the deck, flat across the wood.

The steering wheel is unmanned.

With a roar, ripped away into the icy night, I leap for the wildly spinning wheel.

I cling on all night and morning, until our ship bursts free from its watery prison, and charges through the pale sunlight, battle-scarred, and red.



### Day 70 of the Voyage

60 days have passed since the storm. 60 days. How many lives have been lost so far? There's too many to count.

I stay positive for my crew. *We've stayed alive so far! The sky is so blue today, the sun so bright! We are very lucky men!*

The men laugh and pat me on the back. They don't remark on this dangerous game of chance we are playing. Instead, they say. This Zheng He is so cheerful!

How many of them are putting on a charade, too?

Suddenly, amid the aimless gossiping, the sound of a horn blasts through the air.

Men scurry everywhere, brawling for the telescope, peering into the distance.

What we see is indescribable.

Men and women in strips of clothing, move around, leading horses painted carefully black and white. We gasp over the tall, golden domes, and the twisting, curving trees. We point at the bright clothing and the wooden brown skin.

What is this new world? We whisper.

At first, when the arcs of white streak through the air, we applaud and jump on the spot, little children. But when one of our men crumples to the floor, the atmosphere shifts.

Squeals turn into roars as I race to the fallen man, weaving between the furious crew. They roll cannonballs across the ship, flexing sinewy muscles.

There is a sizzle, and a man prepares to light the cannon.

"Do not fire at them!" I yell as I wrap silken cloths around the groaning man. "We come in peace. We just want to trade. We need a messenger to go to the docks of this island!"

Everyone stares numbly at me.

"Um. Yeah, sure. I'll do it." I mutter. I'm not sure if it's a cold hand creeping up my spine, or just a trickle of sweat. But it's lingering there as I slide into the small rowboat.

Arrows target it, and I row furiously, ducking my head.

Once my boat knocks against wood, I stand up carefully and rest a foot on the wooden planks of land. My arms are raised. My back is straight. My skin is cold without warmth of much clothing.

In a wave-like motion, the soldiers surge forwards, but a tiny soldier holds them back.

The soldiers hesitate and stare at the general as he jabs himself in the chest with a bony finger

I face him silently. Is he telling his men to retreat?

But he yells a string of gibberish and dives himself.

There is only the sound of blood pounding in my ears. I'm not going to fight. I won't hurt him. I can't hurt him.

But when I open my eyes, it is just the rows of soldiers, frozen.

The small soldier is floundering in the waves. His fate is spelt out by the weight of his uniform, and the salt clambering up his chin.

But no one attempts to rescue him. What could they do?

In the silence, broken by splashes, I hear screams again. The thundering shatter of wood. Silk and porcelain lost in the howl of the wind.

I'm not quite sure what happened, until ice slams into my chest, and fists pound my back. Somehow, the soldier is on my back, and I am dragging him to the docks. Isn't he just a man with family as well?

No one dares to fire.

### Day 296

Allah has bestowed upon us a gift from heaven. A graceful mammal, tall, long-necked and orange, with the tongue of a devil. We stroke it before we set sail. It is our good luck talisman.

Our ships are fuller than before, now, full of alien objects and animals. My room is stuffed too, with little presents I picked for myself. Souvenirs.

We've turned back, and I can already see the Great Wall of China, winding in the distance. There's so much more out there. So many things we can see if we just open our eyes.

I sigh.

A man joins me by the moonlit sea. "Will you come back on a voyage again?" He asks me.

I think, and instead of black flags with skulls fluttering towards us. Instead of bloody waves and broken bodies. Instead of fear, doubt, and only the hovering hope, I see the answer in the blazing stars.

A heartsick, ethereal melody.

My heart sings along.

*Yes. Yes, I will come back.*

“For the treasure out there?” the man whispers.

I glance at him, and at my cabin. My cluttered cabin piled with souvenirs.

His question takes me back in time, until there’s only me, my heart and the wisdom and kindness

I’ve learnt.

The beautiful unimaginable I saw.

The trials Allah threw at me. But I had leaped over them easily, hadn’t I?

And it’s there, and I suddenly understand now.

What use are these pretty objects, we collect, anyway?

No.

The fruit was the journey.

The journey for me.

For me and my heart.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Korean International School, Kang, Tae Stewart – 13*

In the 15th century, voyages were carried out by the Ming Treasure fleet carrying gold, silk, and treasure. They gave these treasures as gifts to the poor, or people who needed them. They were very kind. They became friends with many countries via the gifting, and were recognised by most. During these voyages, many pirate attacks took place. As the Ming ships were full of gold, they were very heavy and didn't travel very fast at all.

It was my first time on a voyage, I was a rookie. My name is Zhang Wei. I stepped onto the huge boat carrying lots of valuable treasure. I was very nervous at the start, since I had never been on one of these treasure voyages before, but at the same time I was so, so excited. The captain of the ship named Zheng He [or as we had to call him, Mr He] welcomed me aboard and told me where we were heading and how far it would be. All of the workers had boarded and the anchor was hoisted above the railing – we were off! Sailing was a very new thing to me and I felt like I loved it! The wind blowing through my hair, the sound of the ocean as the ship gushed through the waves; it was all very pleasant.

Mr He came up to me and told me my duties on the boat that day. I was commanded to look out for any other ships, mainly pirate ships. After he had instructed me, he disappeared behind the door to his cabin. At this point I was very worried. I had no idea how to distinguish pirate boats from sailing boats, or cargo boats. I was going to enter Mr He's office and ask him, but I felt it was unnecessary, because I knew we would not come across pirates.

We had headed south for quite a while now. I checked with the captain for the time and he said it had been 6 hours since boarding. I stepped out of the cabin and leaned over the railing with spits of water splashing in my face. It was the most relaxing thing I had done in a long time. After an hour more of "looking out for pirates" Mr He told me to go to bed. I ran down to my [more like our] cabin and sat in my hammock day dreaming. About five minutes later I dozed off.

Since we had boarded at 7PM and eaten dinner beforehand, when we woke up at 6AM, the crew were all very hungry. Our breakfast was on the deck waiting for us. The food was bone soup and tea as a drink. When I arrived and took a glance at the food, I gagged. Everyone had already dug in to their portion, with me standing there blankly, disgusted. After I had seen everybody somewhat enjoy the food, I started eating because I would die without food, right? It wasn't as bad as I had anticipated.. Nevermind, it was disgusting. I was on my last spoon of the soup when then I heard the bells ring loudly. I knew what this meant – the pirates, they were onto us.

I jumped up and pushed my body against the railing looking east for the boat. There it was, a pirate boat, cannons dotted about on the side of the ship, men frolicking on the ship as if they were excited to eat us. My heart sank and I froze, light headed. It seemed my whole life had flashed before my eyes! Zheng slapped me on the shoulder and shouted, "you have duties to do!" I nodded. He had told me at the start of the voyage what I was to do in an emergency "pirate" situation like this one.

I rushed down to the cabins where two cannons stood with buckets of cannonballs right beside them. I was told to wait until the ship was completely in line with ours, then fire. I looked up through the tiny hole above the cannon and saw our soldiers finally armed with swords, ready to attack at any moment. The pirates were closing in on our ship. I was scared to death, but I still held my ground. This was it, the pirate crew threw ropes and flew over to our ship. All I could hear was the slashing of swords and the screaming of the crew. I then remembered I had not fired the cannon. It was time. I picked up a cannonball weighing as much as I did, and stuffed it into the chute of the cannon, grabbed a torch and lit the fuse. BOOM! The cannon fired. After a few seconds it reached the other ship and soon water was seeping in through the gigantic hole that the cannon ball had just made. I felt truly accomplished.

I heard loud footsteps heading down the cabin hatch. It was the pirates! My heart was pounding and as an instinct I put my hands up. They were shouting at me in a foreign language that I didn't understand, but then suddenly, they rushed back up the hatch and onto the deck. Again, I was frozen in shock, still with my hands up. The slashing of swords had stopped and I looked back through the cannon hole and saw that the pirates had given up and fled on their ship.

I cheered immensely as I was so relieved. When I walked back through the cabin hatch, I breathed fresh air and finally saw that Zheng, the captain, was alive and well. When we all got settled, it really felt like nothing had happened. I leaned over the railing, relaxed once again. We had just reached Africa, our final destination, and stopped there to give gifts of treasure to the people that lived there. After a couple of days in Africa, we sailed back to China with no pirate attacks, as if they were now scared of us.

# Dimension traveling in the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Korean International School, Ku, Matthew – 11*

My name is Steve, I was born in China and in my lifetime, I always wanted to set sail to find new things, but I can't build a boat. So everyday I study books and learn how to build a boat.

One day, a man said something to the whole china" Hello China,I am Shang Da, today I am here to say I wanted to set sail to different places to find new things to upgrade China" So he gathered some people to join his sailing crew, and I joined the crew.The next day night, our crew had a meeting about what kind of ship are we going to build and where are we going, after the meeting we discussed that we are going to build a dimension traveling ship and we are going to The Pirates Of Caribbean, Peter Pan and Aladdin

After 6 months, we have build 6 Dimension Traveling Ships and as the people cheered, we raised the sail to the west side, after that we drove all of our boats in high speed and then Shang Da said"Everybody we are in high speed now, please stay seated and we are going to The Pirates Of Caribbean dimension in 3,2,1 and pull the dimension traveling trigger"Then a flash of light appeared and I murmured to me"

This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my entire life!" as I was looking at the light, we start to hear the theme song of The Pirates Of Caribbean"ching ching ching oof, bang bang bang,nooooo!"and when heard those sounds, we all think we are going into a battle. Then after ten seconds, we saw the flying dutchman crew and black pearl crew fighting with each other.Fortunately, we land on the sea and we didn't land on one of the boats,otherwise our boat will be crashed and he boats will sink, so the captain said attack the flying dutchman crew with our chinese swords we bought and so we aboard to the flying dutchman's ship and we use our swords to fight them.

When the captain of flying dutchman,Davy Jones saw two vs one, he shouted"What unfair!everybody retreat!"So the flying dutchman's ship got away.Suddenly the captain of the Black Pearl crew, Jack Sparrow came to our boat and asked"Thank you for helping us to defeat Davy Jones, would you like to come with us to get Davy Jones heart and kill him?"Shang Da replied"Sure thing pirate guy,by the way my name is Shang Da, captain of my crew, what is your name?"Jack Sparrow said"My name is Jack Sparrow, captain of the Black Pearl Crew and do not call me pirate guy."So then our first adventure begins in this dimension.So we started to track down the flying dutchman crew and find important evidence and map to get Davy Jones's heart.The next day, we successfully stole the map where Davy Jones's heart is located from the marines and we also found out that the marines are working together!

So we set up a great plan.First Hector Barbossa,General of the Black Pearl will go to the flying dutchman's boat and disguise as a marine and bring in a barrow with some rum and Jack Sparrow inside,then he will order two marines to put Davy Jones heart inside a treasure chest lock it and put it on the barrel of rums and guard it in the captain's room, after that, Hector will give Davy Jones the key for unlocking the chest and Jack will get out of the barrel,kill the two guards,get the chest and then get out of there and distract Davy Jones for a sword fight to get the key on the yardarm of the boat,Finally Jack will have the key and pass it to Will Turner, a rookie pirate, open the chest, get his heart and use a knife and stabbed it.

After a few moments later, something happened to Davy Jones,he started to act strangely and fell into the sea and that is the end of Davy Jones. So when Davy Jones is dead, Jack Sparrow, Will Turner and Hector Barbossa use the ropes of the Flying Dutchman boat and swing back to the Black Pearl ship and the Black Pearl crew fire dozens of cannon balls at The Flying Dutchman ship and the ship sank in to the bottom of the ocean.After the battle, we had a pirate party and Jack Sparrow said"Thank you for helping us to kill Davy Jones here have a treasure chest"Shang Da was so happy and then he replied"thank you so much, I have never seen that much gold before! But it is time for us to go" so we went back to our ship and we didn't use our dimension traveling thing, we activated wings and we flew to London.

When we arrived to London we pass through then Big Ben to the south side and pass through the clouds and we started to see Neverland from Peter Pan, So we all sang the Peter Pan theme song"You can fly, you can fly.You can fly!"When we land there.First we parked our ship on Cannibal Cove, Then we went to Hangman's Tree to find the Lost Boys to find Peter Pan, when we find Peter Pan, we all cheered and got an autograph from him and I asked him"What is your real name?"he replied"seeeeeecret!"

After relaxing with Peter Pan and the lost boys we went to the Indian Camp and we found Indian Chief is missing and so we all asked the hunters there and they all said a shadow appeared and grabbed Indian Chief away and the Shadow looks very similar to Captain Hook and the voice looks similar to Smee, Captain Hook's sidekick. So Peter Pan used Tinkerbell's Tinker Dust to make us fly to Captain Hook's ship, Devil Sea. After we land there, Peter Told us to hide in some barrels and he will do a Smee trick, "What is the Smee Trick?" I asked, Peter Pan replied "I will pretend to be Smee by using my voice" So hid behind the bow and said "Captain it is twelve o'clock, it is time for lunch and also bring Mr. Indian Chief because I made him a special meal!"

Then Captain Hook came out from his room with Indian Chief and put him on a chair and tied him with ropes and captain hook sat next to him. After that Smee gave Hook a dish of catfish with crocodile soup and he gave him tiger meat with curry sauce and he gave the other pirates peacock meat with sweet avocado sauce.

While The pirates are eating happily Peter Pan told us to fly to the crow's nest knock down the guard pirate up there to the sea and then use you weapons to attack the pirates and he leaded Tick-Tock The Crocodile and he will push Captain Hook to the sea and the crocodile will chase him and so captain hook will run forever and we won the battle. So Peter Pan gave us some souvenirs from the hunters of Indian Camp, Beautiful seashells from mermaid seashore and weapons from the Lost Boys So we said goodbye and we flew back to China. When we reached China, the people cheered and we told them what happened and where did we went.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Korean International School, Kwok, Ruth – 13*

I am Nian, I am 17 years old, I live with my elder sister in Chengdu, I had a very normal life before the Journey, the Journey to Myanmar which was happened in the 1405s, I had been asked to join an adventure with Captain Zheng He, I woke up very early that day cause I am very ecstatic. I ate my breakfast, packed my bags and ran to the pier. I met Ying and Chan, they are also the new members of the boat. After some chat, we went up to the boat, we saw Captain Zheng He, he has a big mustache on and he looks very terrible, I mean serious. 10 minute later, everyone had arrived and we are ready, we were ready to go.

Today is my first day to go on a boat, actually, I felt very nervous, but I acted very comfortable. It had passed 2 hours already, our boat had arrived in the middle of the Indian Ocean and there was a tsunami happening in the sea, that made us very dizzy. About 30 minutes later, the tsunami finally ends, and we carry on. It is my first time went to Myanmar, Captain Zheng He had told us that this time we are going to visit a Regal name Mr. Yan and we are also going to trade with him and help a poor tribe in Myanmar which are the Karenni.

Another day we had arrived in Myanmar and stop in, Taunggyi we parked our boat and going to eat our lunch, we went to a restaurant which is selling Myanmar food, we ate Mohinga and it tastes fantastic. We used 30 minutes to finish our lunch and we went back to the boat. But when we went back to the boat and try to carry on our adventure to Mawlamyine where is a city in Myanmar. We suddenly found out that our bags had stolen by some strangers who live in Myanmar pier.

“We must find the people who stole our money and bags and take the bags back because we still need to trade with Mr. Yan.” Captain Zheng He said.

So we went to every street and house in Taunggyi, I went to a poor woman’s house, she has 3 kids, and they look very sick but the woman didn’t have enough money to take them to the doctor. So I decided to give some money to them after we take our money back. I told captain Zheng He my thoughts and he agreed that. It had passed 2-hour already, we still couldn’t found our money. Until Ying, Chan and I went into a bar that sells wines and foods.

“I saw Mian’s bag,” I said

“Go and tell Captain, Chan” Ying said

Captain Zheng He came into the bar, all the people who are inside the bar had a big ax, they hold the ax in the air and ran to us. Captain Zheng He suddenly took out his Swords. And start to fight with them, I ran out of the bar, ask others for help, I also went to take a weapon and try to help. We had fight for about 2- hour, the two are becoming very tired. But luckily we got someone that is coming to save us which is Mr. and Mrs. Feng, they are the friends of Captain Zheng He from the past, Captain Zheng He had saved their life before. So now they are going to save us now, they used their Spears to fight with them, they had taken back our money.

“Thank you, Feng” Captain Zheng He said

“Nothing, but could we join the boat, we miss the time that we are having an adventure together.” Mr. Feng said

So Mr. and Mrs. Feng joined our adventure when we finish clear up, I went to the poor woman home and give her some money. Captain Zheng He decided to rest for one day and carry on tomorrow. We went back to the sea and continued our journey. We use 7 days to arrived Mawlamyine, We met Mr. Yan in the very next day, he wanted to buy the special metal which is named Vibranium. Vibranium is a special metal that usually appears in Wakanda where is located in Africa. Captain Zheng He has some which are from his friend- Mr.Hui. Mr. Hui gave the Vibranium to Captain Zheng He is because Captain Zheng He had saved his family before he was a Captain of a boat.

“ I need just one bottle of Vibranium” Mr. Yan Said

“ Mr.Hui had given me about 6 bottles of it,” Captain Zheng He said

So we went back to the boat, we took a bottle of Vibranium, and we got 33 USD back for trading the Vibranium with Mr. Yan. After all of that, we met the Karennis, they are a group that lives in Myanmar, we helped them by giving them money and build a new home for them. We Had much fun together, Chan, Ying and I played with their kids, Main and Wang were cooking dinner for them, Captain Zheng He and the others were building a new home for them which is the biggest house that I had ever seen. Usually, Captain Zheng He was carrying a scary face but this time we all think that maybe he was not that terrible.

Today is the day which the journey ends, everyone needs to go home and ready for the next adventure. We went back to the pier in Chengdu. My sister went to pick me up, I don't really know what happened to her cause she looks very sad, maybe she hates me and doesn't want me to come back home.

“ I miss you so much, Nian,” my sister says

Oh, I thought she hate me, so she is sad when I come back. I miss her too but I just don't really want to tell her about it, I think is because I am shy maybe. Actually, I also missed my mom and dad, but they were not here now, cause they are working in France, I haven't seen them since last year. we arrived home will my sister and she cooks a dinner for me it's tastes very good. I am very looking forward to going on an adventure with Captain Zheng He and all the members who are in the boat.



# The Dreadful Life

*Korean International School, Lai, Alpha – 14*

People thought of me as a disgusting little dwarf. Everyone on the ship teased me as I swept the deck multiple times a day. I was smaller than average people and half the weight of an average man. Not only was I the one who would scrub the deck, but also the one who did everything not related to fighting. Nobody could understand the pain I went through.

A whole fleet was sent by the Emperor to give away gold and fine precious items. I mean why would you not keep it to yourself and share it the villagers and the poor people like me. Then no one would die of starvation and it could rebuild our economy. But instead, give it to other places? What a laugh!

We went around the world and some scenes were astonishing! The landscape in other places was different than home. Large amounts of water falling off cliffs. People back at home said waterfalls they were. It was supposedly the most beautiful scenery in the world. What fortune I had to see all this, they said. But to me, even looking at this would never get me happy or excited

I have been on this ship for at least 2 years now since they put “Wanted people to join the army” posters all around the village. I immediately applied for the job and they accepted me without putting me to the test. “That was strange.” I thought. Everyone said that it was really hard to get in and you’ll have a luxurious life there. But

As a young man at the age of almost 20, I have already experienced many things normal people with a normal life would not have. The experience of life and death has changed me a lot. Seeing blood is common for me and it doesn't freak me out as it used to. People say watching your loved ones die is the worst thing that can happen to you and it is true. I watched my wife and children die in front of me and the feeling back then 5 years ago was dreadful and the pain...unbearable.

But not every day was as lucky as the day we saw the waterfall. We have received many messages that unwanted pirates could come to us any minute whilst the sky was dark and everyone was unprepared and it said to rush back as soon as possible.

I didn't mind dying, but at that moment, all I thought of was my loved ones. My wife and children waiting for me and the feeling I had was so uncomfortable.

The atmosphere today was gloomy and the pirate spirit was down, unlike other days, the pirates would be chugging down their beer and having fun. But today, everyone knew what was going to happen and no one was in the mood. Today is the last day.

I see the backs of the pirates, slaughtering each other. I run as fast as I could with my hands on my head screaming and it felt like my lungs were about to burst. I feel the blood rushing through my brain as more red slimy liquid squirts on my hands. I hear my name angrily called out multiple times but too scared to reply, I rush in the toilet locking myself in. I came out when my name was not called out anymore. I knew it was over.

# Where am I ?

*Korean International School, Lee, Amy – 11*

I woke up to the sound of rustling... “Where am I? Where in the world is this?” Before I could think more, more rustling came.. I am an 11 year old shy girl and not a very brave one so I clutched my hands really tightly that my palms started to sweat. Before I knew it, A bright sunlight hit my eyes. That was when I woke up...

“Augh, what is this place?” I mumbled to myself. Seconds later, I found out that I was on a ship! Not just a regular ship.. I saw... Pirates?! How am I seeing this? I rubbed my eyes hoping it was just my imagination flying past me. Before I knew it, I heard a deep man’s voice that sounded like my dad.

I opened my eyes as quickly as I could, hoping that the voice came from my dad but no luck. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was this huge man’s chest. I looked up, expecting to see a monster, but no. It wasn’t a monster.. It was a pirate. I gulped, I froze for a moment because I wasn’t able to think. Without thinking, I sprinted to the nearest exit door. Right before I touched the door, I hit a guy. I’m not entirely sure what happened but I think that’s what happened. I’m pretty sure I did a triple backflip and then landed straight on my head because as I’m writing this, my head is like a painkiller right now! I’m not sure what happened after that but I DO– “hold on.. Is that...an island?!”

Right before I did my happy dance, I saw a shadow behind me. I slowly turned my head to see who was behind me. As I expected it was a pirate. But not just any pirate. I saw a badge on his clothes reading ‘head pirate.’ Uh oh. I gulped.

The first thing he did was to grab my arm. Then, he picked me up with one hand and told me “Hey little one, don’t expect nobody to see you around here, you are our pirates main suspect.” Boy, I was beyond terrified but also amazed at the same time. Last time I checked I was 34 kilos! How could he carry me with only one hand?!

He continued. “Actually, you aren’t too bad here kiddo.” He dragged me closer to his mouth. “You could help us with something useful since your useless here!” I coughed. His breath smelled worse than my dad’s one year old meat lasagna!

“Can you keep a secret?” He asked me. “Yes.” I said. “Alright, I will trust you. Can I trust you?” I nodded. “Alright then! I’ll tell you a little bit about where we are heading to. Do you know where you are little kiddo?” I shrugged. “I woke up under this pirate ship, I have no idea who brought me here.” “Oh! Today is your lucky day—eh?” “Umm, not really because I don’t know anything that is happening around me..” I said quietly. “Haha, that’s a witty thing to say! Let me introduce myself. I am Mr Peter Hagrid or you can call me Captain Hagrid. You are in the middle of the ocean, almost at China!” He beamed proudly.

“If you don’t know, us the pirates are trying to get a treasure from China! We’re not entirely sure where the treasure is but since we have you we can use you— er, I mean you can help us find OUR beloved treasure.” He said. “I want to help but.. What I really want to do is to go home and eat a triple scoop of chocolate ice cream!!” I cried. “Oh little girl, once you complete our orders then we can buy you anything you want.” “ANYTHING?!” I asked. “Anything” He replied. Over the next few hours, he told me what to do in China in order to get the treasure.

As soon as we got to China he dropped me off the ship he waved at me and said something weird.. He said “I’m always watching you.” and smiled. I waved back at him and smiled weakly.

As I took my first steps on China, I immediately had a foggy remembrance of this area. I thought to myself. Why does this place look so familiar? Have I been— ‘WHOOSH!’

“AHH” I screamed. I looked up at the sky and I saw gloomy greyish—purple clouds above me. I panicked. What was that thing made a big sound?! Now that I look back at it, I shouldn't have done what I have done.

I ran straight into the country. I ran so fast that I think I could have won the world records! Unluckily, I tripped over a bundle of rocks lying on the ground. "Ugh!" I said to myself. Why am I so clumsy today?! I picked up the rocks to put them to the side so that no one else would trip on them. I picked the biggest rock and tossed it to where nobody would walk. But then, I noticed some writing on the rock. I picked it back up, squinted my eyes and stared at it. "You have.. Found... me" I read on the rock. Huh? What does THAT mean? I read the next paragraph. "Around- here... there is an.. X" It wrote. Hmm.. does that mean there's a.. Treasure around here?!? I squished the rock into my pocket and quickly scouted the area. After about an hour of running in circles trying to find the 'X' I finally found something that looked like it! I ran towards it. It was a door spray painted with 'X' I touched the door handle and tried to open the door but no luck. It wouldn't open! From the corner of my eyes, I saw the ship I was on before! It was parking near the harbour. I needed help so I ran as fast as I could like my hair was on fire!

There was nobody on the ship when I arrived there. I climbed up the ladder to find Mr Peter Hagrid, But he was nowhere to be seen. I ran around the pirate ship in circles, went underground and tripped again! This time on a bible. "Wait.. Why would the pirate ship have a bible?! This is weird.." I opened the book and surprisingly, It wasn't a bible. It was a map of the pirate ship?? Then, I heard footsteps. Not just any footsteps but footsteps coming to the direction of me.

I panicked! I didn't know what to do as someone was getting closer to me. I wanted to take a look later so I hid it in my jacket. Since a bible is huge, I tried to cover it with my arm. "Well Well Well.. Who do we have here? Is it Ms Perfect again?" said a voice that belonged to Mr Peter Hagrid. "Uhh, Hello Mr Peter Hagrid! Haha, um, so what brings you here?" I said with a fake laughter. "Oh I think I should be asking you that.." He said, narrowing his eyes at me. "I.. uhh.. Couldn't find the treasure that is why I'm on this pirate ship! I was trying to tell you that I can't find the treasure you ordered me to find!" I said confidently. "Is that so? Perhaps I don't think so. I know-" Then, out of the corner a woman's voice appeared. "Mr Peter Hagrid, There are a group of people attacking! Please help us!" "Augh, again?! It's the fourteenth time they attacked us this week!" He said as he rolled his eyes. Afterwards, he faced at me. "Don't move one muscle. I will be right back!" After saying that, He ran out the door panicking.

I said to myself "You got this." I opened the 'bible' and scanned the pages. I flipped through all 45 pages and there was one page that caught my eye. I looked closely at it. Closer and closer until.. "Ah! I got it! On the map it wrote 'treasure' where the door behind me was. Wait.. if the treasure was here all along then why did he send me out..I thought to myself.. Did he want to throw me off track? Whatever he did, ignore it! Because right now we have to figure out HOW to open this abandoned door. I waggled the handle and pushed until finally the door burst open in a shower of rust.

I dashed inside. Looked around and saw the whole room filled with all sorts of treasure. Right when she was about to touch a treasure, I noticed a note on the wall. I walked towards it it wrote: 'To anyone reading this. Please keep this treasure safe as it is treasure that we cherish. Thank you.' I must return it back to the chinese government I thought to myself. But I didn't. Why? Because it was all a dream.

# Ming's Extraordinary Treasure Voyage

*Korean International School, Lee, Sunmyung – 13*

Today was the day which Ming's Fleet would leave port for a very long journey

As the crew and officers ate a banquet provided by the king, we tried not to think about the journey ahead. The crew were presented with gifts to boost morale. Sacrifices and prayer were offered to Tianfei, the patron goddess of sailors, hoping to ensure a successful and safe passage during the voyage.

As the sun rose up the next day, the captain signals the fleet to untie their sails. As sailors untie the sails we all knew this would be a very long and difficult journey. We were committed to this journey for better or worse. The fleet of around 100 ships carrying great amounts of treasure would sail around the coast to show the wealth to other kings. The convoy of ships were heavily militarized in case of pirate attack and were carrying 27,000 troops. My name is Wang Wei and I am 23 years old. My job was to defend the ship from attackers.

Suddenly, a distant sound of drums beating signals the ships to leave port.

Day 1

The day started normal. The sea was very calm and the weather couldn't be better. As I patrolled the ship, I saw that other troops were on high alert. Then while I was patrolling the storage room, where the treasure is, I caught a Sailor stealing a bar of gold. After I alerted my officer, he was immediately executed. After that, everything went normal. First day on the ship with a death count of 1.

Day 2

I was asleep when I heard screams. At first I thought I was dreaming but then I hear more screams. Suddenly the ship starts shaking. I get up from my bed trying to figure out what was happening. Did we hit a rock? Then I hear drum beats which answered my question. The signal of enemies approaching. Suddenly, the room is in panic. Troops running around getting their armour and weapons and then running out the door. After I get all my gear, I run up to the deck. As I enter the deck, it was chaos. People were running and shouting. I ran to my post and looked at the horizon. I saw a ship in the distance but as I looked closer, I saw around 40 ships. Then I hear the officer shouting commands. After the short briefing, I run to join my group. We were in charge of the cannons. As we got ready the cannons, I heard a distant explosion. The ship on our right was hit with a cannon ball and was now on fire. As panic erupted someone lit the cannon to fire back with a permission from the officers. Suddenly, the sound of cannon fire erupted all around me. As I looked up at the horizon again, I saw flashing lights from the enemy ship. Suddenly I realized they were cannon fires and shouted to take cover. A few seconds later, the ship shook like there was an earthquake. Then, it just went black.

Day 3

When I woke up, I felt pain in my arm right away. As I opened my eyes, I saw that I was on a bed which was on a ship. I knew this because of the window next to me. As I tried to stand up, a person rushed over to me and told me I had to lie down and rest. When I asked what happened, she just said "Your ship sank." and went to treat another patient. After a few more hours in bed, I was allowed to walk around the ship. As I walked across the deck, I could see that the ship, which I was on, was in the middle of Ming's fleet. After I talked with a few troops, I figured out what happened. After I blacked out, the fighting went on for a few more hours until the enemy ships were routed. The ship which I was in had sank but most of the people there made it out alive due to rescue attempts. For now we were safe, but for how much longer?



# Captain of My Own Ship

*Korean International School, Mannion, Catorina – 13*

My dad is respected by everyone he knows and is feared by those who have heard stories about him. He is the captain of this ship and works for the emperor. Being his son, I am entitled to be the next captain and therefore am well known by the people on this vessel.

I grew up watching my dad lead his crew through the dangerous parts of the sea. I watched him battle armies of unknown countries on behalf of the emperor. I always felt safe on the ship since I knew my dad could not be defeated, until recently.

We were sent to collect silk from another part of China when a wave bigger than I ever saw crashed down on us. When everyone came to, no one was hurt and the ship was in good condition but we seemed to be lost. "Captain, captain, we seem to have lost our map as well as our way," said one of the crew members.

"Do we not have any way to tell where we are?" Father asked.

"No, it is still light so we cannot use the stars. There is no land in sight so we cannot ask for directions. What should we do?"

"Keep sailing on and we should find either a ship or land. Until then, keep calm and stay put"

"Yes, Captain," replied the crew and they continued on with their business.

I stared in awe as my father directed his crew members. We were lost in the middle of the sea and he seemed to know exactly what to do. "Li, stop standing around and get to work," he said with a smile on his face.

We may be pirates, but we weren't always mean and angry. If it was necessary then my dad would fire at attacking ships but we were usually peaceful pirates. Being peaceful pirates, we did not expect to be greeted in a violent manner when we reached this remote stretch of land. Sadly, this was exactly how we were greeted.

"They must've spotted us from quite far away" a person in the crowd that had gathered up front stated.

Father agreed and went on to tell everyone to get ready for a violent meeting.

When we were about 500 metres away from the land, they started to fire. They used cannons and catapults with flaming projectiles. They missed but we feared they missed on purpose. We kept coming closer and realised that an army of just over a hundred had gathered on the beach. Had they expected us? We were so distracted by the men on the beach that we didn't notice the two ships approaching us from both sides. When we finally noticed, it was too late. The ships attached themselves to us and jumped onto our ship. I ran for cover as my dad and his crew grabbed their weapons. I knew better than to stay above so I ran down and hid in my dad's office.

I heard shouting and guns firing but I was not scared at all. This has happened many times before but not with two ships and an army 100 men strong. Even with the given circumstances, I felt safe. That is until I heard footsteps. Two men, definitely not from my dad's crew, had entered the captain's office. I watched them raid the room before leaving and telling their men that the room was cleared.

As soon they left, I saw that everyone was gone. I was only fourteen but knew that I had to go after them. I did the only logical thing and jumped off the boat and swam ashore.

The army was easy to spot. I followed them to their base and saw them tie up my dad's crew. Most of the members were unconscious, some were just waking up. Two men guarded my dad and his crew. On me, I had a hammer and a loaded gun so I figured it should be easy to save the crew.

I thought of a plan. I noticed that the two men walked in a pattern. Every minute they would cross paths and continue walking the perimeter. If I jumped down from my hiding spot, I could hit them with my hammer and they would both be knocked out. From there, I should have enough time to untie the crew and leave before they wake up, therefore avoiding any violence.

I waited and just before the two men crossed paths, I jumped down and hit them on the head. They both fell unconscious and I set to work untying the crew members that were awake. There were ten members still motionless. We untied them and decided to carry them. Just then, four other men from the army entered the room. Everyone froze, including the men that just walked in. I didn't freeze up, but I did overreact. I pulled out my gun and shot them before I threw my hammer at the last guy killing them and knocking out the last guy. Everyone stared at me, shocked at what I did. Even my dad just looked at me. "Hurry," I said filled with adrenaline. " get the remaining members. I made quite a sound when I fired those guns so we have to move. Let's go."

We ran, I didn't carry anybody but even then I was running faster than I have ever before. I reached the ship first and only then did I notice that we were being followed. How did I not notice that before? I ran to the top of the ship and began backing out of the dock. I shouted to the crew to get to their stations. I knew I wasn't the captain, but it felt right. 200 men firing in our direction. I ordered the crew to fire back. My dad stood to the side and watched with pride as I ordered his crew around.

We made it out alive. Thankfully, nothing was damaged. I continued ordering everyone around until no longer felt a rush. I calmed down and gave the wheel to my dad. He smiled and accepted.

We were still lost after that incident but managed to find our way back to China after three weeks at sea. The crew respected me more than they ever did before. I was promoted to co-captain because my father said he saw true leadership in me during those two hours when I was filled with adrenaline.

I had proven myself to my father and to the crew. I had made a name for myself by saving my dad and his members. I am only co-captain now but am one step closer to becoming the captain of my own ship.

# Ming Treasure Voyages with Peaches and snowball

*Korean International School, Maryon, Giselle – 11*

My name's Peaches and I'm a guinea pig. I live in China in a guinea pig town called Bonnytown. We're not really Chinese guinea pigs, our ancestors were from Yorkshire. I live in a tree, in a hanging sack filled with soft cushions and blankets. I'm going to go for a walk with my friend Snowball now. She's a white hamster. "Hi, Snowball!" I say. "Should we go to the forest and pick some acorns?" "Yeah!" she says. We go to the forest. We walk in, and ten minutes later, we hear footsteps. We turn around and find a gang of Chinese Pirates! "OH NO!" I say. The pirates say, "What are cute little animals doing out here in the forest?" The leader of the gang is a fox wearing a piece of cloth around his head. There's also a racoon, a grey wolf, a water rat, and a weasel. They catch us and carry us away. A moment later we're at Penny Beach, and we see a big pirate ship.

The pirates carry us aboard, and we sail away... Soon the pirates take us out of the net and tell us, "Look, we're taking you on a treasure voyage around China and Hong Kong. You two will work perfectly to get information out of people so we can find the treasure. Also to get money." says the fox. "OK... But where are we going now, when will we get home, and what are your names?" I say. "We are going to China first, then down to Hong Kong, then well, anywhere we hear has treasure! You'll get home as soon as we're finished. My name's A.J, the racoon's name is Beady, the wolf's name is Luna, and she's really nice. The water rat's name is Mys, and the weasel's name is Hamburgler." "He likes hamburgers and burgling," Luna whispers.

So off we go on a trip around the world with pirates... "They actually seem to be really nice pirates," I tell Snowball, "maybe they won't be mean to us!" "Yeah, maybe. I still can't be excited like you. It would really be different if we were going with family, but with *pirates*, it's different. It's scary. I can't believe how relaxed you are!" she tells me. "It's going to be all right. We're exploring the world in a pirate ship looking for treasure!" I say.

Our first stop is Beijing. "It's the best place to find treasure," Beady tells us. "We've been here before, but it wasn't a success, but now that we've got you guys, it'll be easier. Just walk towards people and ask them for money. If they don't give it to you the first time, start crying and tell them about how awful your lives are and everyone beats you up all the time." "But we don't get that! Nobody beats us up!" Snowball says. "But in the story they do..." "What sto—" Beady cuts her short. "Just GO!" "OK," she answers. First, she walks up to a rich-looking fat pig. "Pleeease can I have a yuan? I *am* so hungry and poor!" "Oh of course! Here, take two!" The fat pig gives her two yuan. "Thank you!" she says, and runs off towards me and the pirates, hiding behind a pagoda. She gives A.J the 2 yuan, and he says, "Now it's your turn, Peaches." So then I walk off casually looking extremely sad and drooping, and I walk towards a nice-looking horse. "Pleeease can I have a yuan, I am so hungry and poor and if I don't eat rice soon, I shall never see the sunrise nor sunset on the ocean ever again. Oh please, Mr Horse!" "Why of course! Here, my little haystack, 5 yuan for you! You just made my day! That is the nicest little piece of poetry I've ever heard!" and he trotted away. I was very shocked, because I wasn't saying a poem, I was asking for money! It did sound like it to me...

When I came back to the pirates and Snowball, the pirates said, "WELL DONE!! You're so good at this, the best we've ever had! We're going to be *rich*!!" I have to admit I was also happy at the thought of being *rich*...

Soon, when we had then 7 yuan, we headed back for the ship. "So we're going to Hong Kong now?" Snowball asks. "Well, yeah! It'll be so good, too," says Hamburgler. "I guess so," I say. Off we sail for a long time, and I'm getting bored. I walk up to Luna and say, "I'm bored. Is there anything me and Snowball can do?" "Well, you can play cards, here, go play with these." Luna hands me a pack of playing cards. "Thank you!" I say. Then I walk towards Snowball and say, "Here, look! Luna gave us this to do instead of being bored!" "Now we don't have to be bored anymore!" she exclaims. We find a place to sit and play two rounds of 'Go Fish'. Snowball wins both times! She's always so good at it because her face never shows any emotion when we play. Then A.J shouts, "There's a storm coming, we'd better get inside. Anchor the ship!" All the pirates get out on the deck and lower the anchor, then get inside. We're really scared! After all, how would you feel the first time you were kidnapped by pirates and were on their boat in a storm at *sea*. Soon, the storm came! It wasn't that bad, even though the waves were big. The waves made Snowball's and my tummies tickle. Soon it ended.



The next day we arrive in Hong Kong and anchor down our ship next to a junk boat with red sails. Snowball and I are so excited! I think this will be a great pirate treasure trip! Then Snowball says, "Peaches, don't you miss home?" "Well of course!" "Then how come you look so happy?" "Because this is a once in a lifetime trip, and it's so fun and exciting!" "Oh? I think so too!" she laughs. The trip was half a day's trip. "I've heard from a friend that in Sai Kung there's a treasure. Lots of gold and silver. All you need to do for us is dive down there and get it!" says A.J. "But we don't want to get all salty and wet!" Snowball exclaims. "Just go. You can shower later." says Mys. "Oh all right," I say.

In a few minutes, we're in the lonely clear waters of Sai Kung. "WOW," I think. "This is brilliant!" Then Snowball taps me on the shoulder, then points at a chest on the seabed. On we go down and together we carry it up while *swimming*. When we get up to the surface, the pirates lift the chest first and then haul us up. "Well done!" says Beady. "Guess what you've found!?" "Treasure?" "Yes, you've found treasure all right." Then A.J opens the chest and shows us rubies, sapphires, emeralds, diamonds, gold and silver!! "Wow..." we gasp, sucking it in.

"Well, off we go back to Hong Kong Island!" says Luna. "Why? What are we going to do now?" Snowball asks. "Well, we're going to get some good food to eat, and then Luna is going to ask if anyone knows where there is treasure around the world."

We go to a nice dim sum restaurant, and we eat Siu Mai, Yum Cha, pig buns, and sweet meat buns. It is so delicious. "I'm going to go ask if anyone knows if there's any more treasure that they know of, and where." says Luna. "All right, go ahead." says A.J. So Luna goes out of the restaurant. "A.J, what's your real name?" I ask. "Err, Apricot Jam." he says quietly. "What?" I answer, because I can't hear him. "I *said* Apricot Jam!" he says, and I reply, "Aww, what a cute name!" "Err," he says. "Hey, why didn't you keep it?" Snowball asks. "Because I'm a pirate, and pirates don't have cute names like that." "Ohhh" Snowball says.

An hour later Luna comes back. "No luck! I guess it's time to take Peaches and Snowball back home!" she says. "Awww, really? Do we have to go NOW?! Can't we have one more adventure?" we whine. "No! Your parents might get worried about you." "They're probably *already* worried. Since when did you start worrying about how our parents feel?" "Oh, no reason, but you are going HOME." "OK."

The next day we arrive back in Bonnytown. Snowball and I walk sadly home together. When our parents see us, they say, "Oh my gosh, where have you been!? We've been looking everywhere for you guys for the past few days. What happened!?" they exclaim. But we just keep quiet, knowing that if we tell anyone, we'll never go on a pirate treasure trip ever again.

# Hiding in the storage Room

*Korean International School, Park, Christina – 15*

I was in the port, in front of the gigantic ship with very large red sail and lots of floors. I never saw any ship of these size before. I hesitated if I should go in or not. But I remembered my dad shouting at me to marry a fat 40 years old man who was 28 years older than me just because he wanted money. He shouted, “ You need to marry him or else I will kill you! Understand?” I was so scared of my dad, I didn’t want to get any more stress. I screamed and pushed him as hard as I could and ran until here. I thought that any other things will going to be no worse than marrying the 40 years old man in such a young age like me. So, I decided to run inside the ship before it leaves. I had nowhere to go, and I was scared of the world.

I hid in the storage room, I ate the food in there, some of them tasted different with the food that I used to eat but I was happy that I could still stay alive. I always tried to walk very quietly, because sometimes sailors came down to take the food or put new treasures. I was not bored because I could always see new things like beautiful vases from different places in the world. I loved exploring the storage room. I spent whole day exploring the large storage room, I put some special things into my pocket. I was always worried of me getting caught by one of the sailors and get into trouble. And, it happened.....

One day, I was stealing some food and water as always but I didn’t hear the cook of the ship coming. He came and saw me stealing the food. He grabbed me with his big hand and shouted, “ Who are you!! Why are you stealing the food!” I said, “ Oh.... Can you please listen to me first?” He replied, “ No, I need to get the captain. You should not be in the ship!” I was scared, I told him again, “ Can you please just listen to me first..... Please...” He didn’t listen and just passed me, I ran to him and grabbed one of his long, thick leg crying, “ Please.... I beg you.... Please.....I didn’t came in for bad purpose. I don’t want to die.....” He finally stopped walking and I explained my situation to him.

After listening to me without interrupting, he finally opened his mouth, “ Are you okay? I also lost my family last year in the voyage, they were sick and died.....I used to have two daughters like you.... I feel so sad for you, I can help you here you little girl.....” I said, “ Thank you” for several times. Then he took me to a small storage room which needed key to go in. He told me, “ It’s too dangerous to stay in any storage room, this room will be the safest, I am the only one who can come in here, you can just keep one of the key. But I will give you food, please don’t go out of this room.....” I nodded. He went out of the room, I relieved and tears fell from my eyes.

I was so happy that I finally got somebody who supports me and I was not alone in the world anymore.

After that day, the cook came everyday to provide me some food. I spent most of my time looking outside of the ship through the port holes. I saw so many places where they visited. The cook always explained me the place when he came to give me my meal. I saw so many boats and ships around our ship, I couldn’t count all of them because there were too many of them. I still remember the place called “Yemen”, it was really beautiful place, it had so many buildings with detailed design. I also remember the place called “ Mamluks”, it was busy for sailors when we arrived, they came back with a lot of things like spices.

The cook always warned me to be careful because the rule was very strict in the ship. All the sailors had to go out of the ship when the captain was out to make sure nobody stole anything from the ship. For few months I stayed very quietly and didn’t try to go out of the storage room. However, as I saw them always going out of ship and come back at midnight, I started to wonder about what it will be like on the main deck. On one day I went up on the main deck when all the sailors went out of the ship with the captain. I saw beautiful scenery, I felt very free and cool. So, when I realized that I was safe to go up and come back before the midnight, I started to go up to the main deck when the people leaved and came back down before people came back before midnight.

I continued the routine before I heard that the cook saying that the next destination of our voyage is the place with the most beautiful sunset. I suddenly really wanted to stay on the main deck to see the sun set in that place. I was scared if I will get caught, but I was more excited to see the wonderful sun set than worried of getting trouble. Finally, in the place called “India” people went out of the boat to get treasures, and I

went up to the main deck. I was going to hide near the main deck to see the sunset but they came back early today. I was not expecting them to come back earlier than midnight, so I couldn't hide fast enough that I got caught by the captain.

Captain looked very surprised, I could see the cook at the back looking at me with the angry face. I couldn't say anything because it was all my fault. The captain asked me, "Who are you? And, why are you here?" I explained my situation but I didn't mention my relationship with the cook because I didn't want the cook to get into trouble. The captain asked me again, "If you were hiding, then why did you come up to the main deck, you silly girl?" I replied him that I really wanted to see the sun set. The captain said, "Oh then you are in trouble! You were not supposed to ride this ship at the first place and you are now against to the rule!" My tears ran along my face, I was scared to die. The cook looked also sad he was also worrying about me.

The captain arrived with the ropes in his hand. I imagined him tying me tightly until I die. I cried even harder. And, he said... "IF you're going to be the sailor you're going to need to learn how to tie some knots." He threw the rope down at me.

# Magnificent voyage of the voyagers

*Korean International School, Tong, Crystal – 12*

On the 6th June, 1401, seven voyagers, Bob, Max, David, William, James, John, and Robert sailed on a ship by the Ming Treasure fleet, ready for an adventurous adventure. They prepared cargoes of gold and silk, huge bags of delightful gifts brought from the emperor and food to give away as presents to people, stored at the back of their ship. Each voyager carried a sack, in there were deadly weapons in case of pirate attacks. David, William and Robert made a map to show the route they will be sailing in. Everytime they see people along the way, they will give out a bag of gift to every person.

Early in the morning, Bob, the energetic voyager woke everyone up. He can hardly wait for the back of the ship to be empty again. Bob was jumping around on the ship reading people's mind. Max and James was making sure they everything ready, including 100 litres of water, 95 boxes of bread, all their weapons, the map, and most importantly, their gifts. They double checked, checked again, and checked for the fourth time. They were ready. David, William and Robert was settled in their seats, went through the map over and over again so they knew exactly where they were going and what they were going to do if something goes wrong. John was practicing his fighting skills, doing 100 pushups, 20 laps of running around the palace, and of course carried his favourite sword. The sword wasn't a regular deadly sword. It was made of steel, so deadly that if the sword touches you gently, your skin would cut open.

It was 9:00 in the morning, and they were ready to start the adventure. The captain hopped onto the ship, followed by the seven voyagers. The gifts were locked at the back so no one, nothing could steal the gifts. The captain carried the key and five extra ones. The ship started moving, and their military forces followed behind in their own wooden boat. They could smell lovely clean fresh air and birds flew above water. Underneath were small fishes, and from time to time, there would be dolphins jumping high above the ocean, and diving back in with a loud "splash!" David, the most trustworthy voyage, pulled out the map. According to the map, they have arrived at their first stop, so David gave the captain a hand signal.

As they got nearer to the shore, they saw a girl and her mum on the top of a cliff. They were still a distance away from the girl, so they weren't sure what was going on. They jumped of the ship, and the captain carried the gifts. Carrying their sacks and essentials, the voyages ran towards the cave. The cave was 890 feet high and the rocks were slippery. John lead the way up to the top. Bob almost fell off a few times since he was skipping his way up and shouting "yahooooo" every 10 seconds. David who was concentrating on the map, was scared that they might be lost, but decided to trust John with where they were going. A few minutes later, they have finally reached the top of the cave. They ran towards the girl and her mother. Out of curiosity, the mother asked, "What are you looking at and why are you here?" Bob answered "Don't you know us? We are the seven voyagers, appearing in newspapers, also known as the kind sailors. We are on a voyage travelling around the world and giving gifts to people! Captain, gift bag!" The captain pulled out two gift bags and threw it to Bob. Bob caught them and gave them to the the girl and her mother. The girl and her mother were very happy to be able to meet these famous voyagers and receive presents from them. The mother said "Thank you so much, my daughter and I are very happy to have this wonderful opportunity to see you. You, Bob and the rest of your group, have made my day. We were standing on this cliff bringing back all the memories of seven years ago, when my husband passed away here in this exact same spot. He was trying to find gold for us to survive since we were very poor back then, but then he got attacked by pirates. This gift bag makes me feel happier knowing that I could give this to my husband. That way, he would be happy to see that we received gold, and didn't die for no reason. Once again, thank you very much, because of you voyagers, my daughter and I have got this tragedy out of our chests." After hearing this touching speech, the seven voyagers couldn't help but let a tear fall out of their eyes.

They hopped back onto the ship, and continued on their voyage. Not long later, they were already near their next stop, the Indian ocean. They moved closer to the beach, and from a distance, they saw people playing in the water, throwing beach balls and relaxing on the sand. The captain settled their ship, and they jumped off again. Starting from the middle of the beach, they started giving people their gifts. The voyagers couldn't stop smiling. This was the reason why they even decided to go on this voyage, giving out gold and food to random people they don't even know! They did this just to spread joy around the world, hoping that everyone that receives these gifts, would continue the rest of their day with a smile on their face. The people along the beach were very friendly.

They were on the ship again and sailed away from the beach.

Suddenly, they felt the platform of the ship shake. There was a loud “beep”, and that woke Bob up. They then realized it was the pirates. It wasn’t the first time there was a pirate attack, but they are always terrifying. John pulled out his favourite sword, and blew his whistle. The whistle signaled their military forces. The military forces were dressed in metal armours. They carried swords and shields. The pirates pulled out their knives and jumped onto the voyager’s ship. They shouted in sync “Ha ha ha, the voyagers, today shall be the last days of your lives.” Without any doubt, the military forces threw their swords, that killed two of the pirates. While Bob was in charge of distracting the pirates, John secretly walked behind the pirates, then he quickly cut through one pirate’s skin, and stabbed the other, this went on for 10 minutes. The pirates were trying to defend themselves and fight back, but they couldn’t. Soon, all the pirates were screaming in pain. The seven voyagers has won the fight with the pirates, and since the pirates were still alive, they gave some bread to each one of the pirates. The pirates thanked the voyagers for being so kind to give them gifts even though they have just been attacked by the pirates.

The voyager hopped back on the ship, and continued sailing.

They got on the ship again, and made their way through the Atlantic ocean. It was calm and peaceful, and the voyagers enjoyed their supper and the beautiful night view. Bob fell asleep while eating, while the rest of the voyagers chatted. They were in Africa, and it was wonderful, lights everywhere and there were people dancing, singing and playing the drums. “how different from China!” they thought. They got closer to the people, and they couldn’t believe their eyes. It was their first time being in a party. Bob joined the Africans and danced along with them, James followed Bob, within five seconds all voyagers were dancing along with the Africans. The music stopped, then out of the pirate’s bag are precious gold. They threw the gold up high for everyone to catch. The people thanked the voyagers in African. Another song played, people danced, the party continued. The voyagers would love to stay, but it was time to leave.

The voyager’s voyage continued for another three months, they received lots of appreciation from people around the world. The seven voyagers were the ones being kind and give such precious things to people around the world, but it was also the people around the world who were thanking and showing appreciation to the voyagers. This was the best thing the voyagers could ever receive, it was the words “thank you” from everyone who received the gifts, even the pirates.

Of course receiving the gifts may be happier than giving out the gifts, but like the voyagers, so kind to give presents to everyone they meet, they will receive much more than the gift receivers would ever get. The voyager’s generosity gave them a lot in return, and their story lasts until today.

Looking back at this, people still say “China truly ruled the seas those days”

# A Time to Explore

*Korean International School, Tong, Leia 11*

Dear Diary,

I could hear the ocean roaring next to me and the wind was as strong as a bear. It seemed to drag me across the sand and I could feel the sharp corners of the stones stabbing at my feet making me cry out in pain "Ahhh" I suddenly woke up and even though I knew it had been a dream I also knew it was a sign that my journey as an explorer was about to begin.

My name is Ying Yue, when I was 20 years old I made the biggest decision of my life, to join my father onboard the Ming Treasure Fleet. He was a chef and needed an assistant so I pleaded with him to let me go, he said no so many times until I finally proved I was strong enough to take care of myself, but that is a whole other story.

We set sail from Shanghai and our ship was packed with gold, silk and other valuable items that the Jianwen Emperor wanted to offer to other countries with the hope of building better relationships, in other words bribing, so they could later trade in goods. The fleet was also ordered to find out about the world, at that time we knew nothing about how other people lived or what they looked like, not even in my wildest dreams could I have imagined how different the rest of the world was.

The first place we stopped was a place called India. My first impression was the incredible heat and the thousands of bugs that followed me like my very own cloud. The people who lived there wore as few clothes as possible, the women dressed in brightly coloured cloth which was just one long piece of material, they wrapped it round and round and round themselves, they made it look easy, trust me, it wasn't. I saw elephants walking down the dusty streets and monkeys everywhere, climbing trees and temples and picking the bananas from the trees. Some of the rich landowners wanted to buy our silk to make their wives beautiful dresses, that was the first time that I thought about whether I would ever get married.

Before we reached our next destination we met with a rather nasty bunch of pirates. We thought they were approaching us to make a trade but suddenly arrows started raining down on us, we were being attacked and all I was allowed to do as a young lady was hide in the kitchen. My father went out to fight, our men had swords and our ship had gunpowder when the cannons were fired they were so loud I became deaf in both ears for many hours, I was so scared that I wouldn't see my father again, but he survived that battle, and many many more.

We soon arrived in Africa, this incredible land changed my life forever. I thought India was hot but in Africa the heat could kill you in hours, finding water was surviving another hour. The deserts there seemed to go on forever and ever but we met people who knew how to survive and they taught us, many things, such as how to find water, hunt for food and protect ourselves from the sun and the wild animals. We learnt to respect these incredibly beautiful and dangerous animals, they had learnt to live in harmony with each other. In return, we gave them some silk to make clothing and some jewels which the women knew how to turn into jewellery by weaving plants into a string.

The atmosphere was extraordinary, the first time I saw a sunrise across the desert I knew I would never forget the feeling. Many of our crew didn't want to leave and some of them disappeared and we never saw them again, I was happy for them and wondered if they had fallen in love with the people or the place. I had promised myself I was going to see the whole world before deciding where to settle.

On our way to the next country we hit a terrible storm in the North Atlantic Ocean, the storm came on so suddenly that many of the men were knocked into the water and quickly grabbed by the huge waves and swallowed by the enormous ocean. It felt like the sea was playing with us like a toy, we had no control over the ship until the storm died down. One of the ships didn't make it through the storm and I cried many tears imagining how their families would feel when and if we ever returned with the sad news.

Eventually, we arrived in America, we arrived in the winter time. It was freezing, some of us were sick which was terrible because we had already used up all the Chinese medicine that our ships Doctor had brought and he couldn't communicate with the local people to explain what he needed. The first month

there the ship lost 25 crew and many more were sick for a long time. I spent all my time during that first month preparing soups that my grandmother used to make when I was sick, she had taught me how to cure lots of illnesses with different plants and foods, so I didn't get to see much of the country until the snow started to melt. When the snow completely melted I saw that America was beautiful. When we arrived on shore, we walked into the nearest town and I know this sounds crazy but I suddenly saw someone walking towards me and time froze, we both stopped and stared at each other, everyone around me blurred out except for him. We spoke, I can't remember who spoke first, we spoke different languages but it didn't seem to matter. We saw each other often after that and I tried to learn a few words of his language but time went by and soon we were going to leave and return home. The day before our ship sailed I saw him talking to the captain of the ship, it turned out he was looking for a job and he was a very good fisherman, he told the captain he would catch enough fish to feed the crew. So that was the beginning of my next big adventure and now I had someone to share every new experience with.

Our journey home was both happy and sad, the ship had lost so many men and we would have to tell their families the terrible news upon our arrival home but happy because we had so many stories to share from around the world. We knew so much about how people lived in other countries and could use this knowledge to help us in the future.

Even though we were surrounded by lots of precious jewels and had our chance to take money and gold many of us came to realise that the experiences we had were what made us rich and that no matter how different we all looked we were all really looking for the same thing, a family to love.

# The Unique Pirates

*Korean International School, Tsang, Lok Yee Angel – 11*

Once upon a time there was a group of pirates on ships sailing away from China to different places, but these pirates aren't just normal pirates they are unique instead of stealing treasure they give out treasure. Their ships carry gold, silks and other precious items so they can give it away as a gift, they also have weapons to use if anything bad happens. And the captain is so nice and kind to do all these good things and his nickname was Captain White Beard because his beard is really white! His best sailors were Sir Smart (he is very smart) and Sir Tough the really strong guy and Sir Air (he really wants to fly in the air)

One day as they were travelling on the ocean they came to a place which is called India some servants from the king came and greet them and invited them to have some snack, Captain White Beard, Sir Smart and Sir Air was so happy to have a pleasant king, while they were having tea the sailors carry the gifts when Sir Tough came in he accidentally broke the ceiling lights the king got very angry because it is very special to him so he kicked them out. Captain White Beard was quite mad but Sir Tough convinced him so Captain White Beard just forgot about it.

The next day they went to Arabia, they saw the red sea and it was a bit red they were scared so they quickly paddled away as they paddled away they saw some really strong guy they were scared even Sir Tough was scared so once again they paddled quickly. And finally they arrived at the ship loading area, and when the sailors carry the treasure out there was some really mean looking people they snatched the treasure and went away without saying thank you! Captain White Beard was angry but Sir Smart told him they should probably go, as they were going some pirates capture them but luckily Sir Tough ran away. Captain White Beard was mad, the pirates wanted some treasure so they made a deal, Captain White Beard will give them the treasure if they let them go so it was a deal.

Sir Tough was so scared so he got some weapons and look for Captain White Beard and the others, as he was searching he saw some pirates he got his weapon ready and it was Captain White Beard! He was so happy and they all went back to their ship, give the treasures to the evil pirates and sail away once again.

Few weeks later they arrived at England, Queen Elizabeth the II was pleasant to see such nice people so she invited them to have a cup of tea. After a while Captain White Beard and his sailors have to go, but the queen insisted them to stay so Captain White Beard didn't argue and stay. Sir Smart thinks that something is wrong so he whispers to Sir Tough but Sir Tough thinks everything is fine, so Sir Smart whispers again and this time he told Sir Air but Sir Air thinks everything is fine too, Sir Smart gave up so he just ate some cookie. Everyone ate a lot of cookie and they start to feel dizzy and everything went black. After one week they finally woke up they were tied against the wall and their mouths covered with black tape, Sir Smart looked at the others with disappointment, Captain White Beard was afraid so were the others, then the queen came, her face looked so cheeky and all of a sudden she pulled off her face and she was actually the most evil pirate called Eve the Evil! When Captain White Beard saw her his eyes almost popped out they are so scared they wanted to escape but they couldn't, Eve was laughing so much and she said that she can't believe she actually caught the most kind pirates, she was so happy. The next day Eve and her sailors went to Captain White Beard's ship they trapped the other sailors and stole the treasures and one of the sailors called Lenny, she escaped and freed all the other sailors, they all got their weapons and charged to Eve's place. When they arrived they saw Captain White Beard and the others but they have to accompany so they try to distract them finally they got their attention, all the bodyguards ran to them but they all ran and Lenny and some sailors sneakedly freed Captain White Beard and the others, they also took some treasure back and ran to their ship. When Eve saw them running away she was angry, very angry so she chased after them but Captain White Beard and the others escaped and everyone was safe. Captain White Beard said to the king of China that they are never going to Arabia and England.



# New Tales of Ming Treasure Voyages

*Korean International School, Tsoi, Mimi – 13*

'On July 10, 1405, Admiral Zheng and his sailors gathered in a banquet hall to celebrate their first voyage. The feeling in the room was one of excitement, which was exaggerated by the wine they were drinking. "Comrades, we are setting off across the Indian Ocean. It can be very dangerous, and you should follow my instructions to stay safe. You have been selected because you proven yourself intelligent and physically strong. Have faith in your abilities. Bon voyage!" The room erupted in cheers.

The next morning, the crew set off from Nanjing with the rising sun. Their ship carried gold brocade, silks and silk gauze. They were intended to be gifts for the neighbouring countries they would visit. Xin He felt nervous, this was the first time he had been out in the ocean. He was afraid of running into unanticipated problems. What if they ran into pirates? What if there was a storm the crew could not handle? But his excitement and joy from being an explorer of the sea outweighed his fears.

The crew sailed for many days; they were in fact a very peaceful few days. One day, Xin He looked out on the horizon and he saw mountains emerge. The Mountains of Ceylon! The ship prepared to dock. When their ship dock they arrive their first country he went to the palace with his sailor. When he arrived the palace he took out the gifts and gave it to the king .The king at this country feel very happy and decided to be friend with Xin's country.He success this time and made him feel more confident.He is looking forward to traveling to the next country.

The imperial court called for a second voyage in October 1407. The fleet set sail first to India. They were ordered to go to the Calicut palace to give a tablet to the King, Mana Vikram. It was an acknowledgement of his sovereignty. The king was very happy and pleased to receive the gift and this act improved the relationship between the two countries.

Xin He was very pleased himself with the results of their first quest. HE felt somewhat apprehensive about the fleet's second. The fleet was to settle the hostility between Indonesia and China, which had arisen as a result of an accidental killing of 170 members of the Chinese embassy in a civil war. The Chinese emperor had demanded 60000 liang of gold and an apology. When the ship arrived on the shores of Indonesia, it was immediately welcomed by Indonesian diplomats. Xin He was relieved. HE thought they might encounter resistance and would have to fight. THE fleet was brought to the Indonesian palace and the King apologised. The truth was neither party wanted another war, especially for the sake of an accidental killing of 170 men.

The ship set sail to Pulau Sembilan in the Strait of Malacca. Their last task was to cut wood to make incense. The work was hard on the body. Xin He and his mates cut 6 logs of wood, each 2 meters wide in diameter. The wood was beautiful, it was black and with a very fine pattern. They moved the wood to the ship, which took a whole day. Xin He ate 2 suppers worth of food that night. He could not wait to get home.

The third voyage was called for in February 1409. The ship sail for a month and arrived in Changle. It stopped in Champa, Java, Malacca, Demeurera, Ceylon, Quilon, Cochin and Calicut. The emperor had ordered the fleet to trade in these locales for goods not found at home. It was a peaceful journey until on their way home, they encountered King Alakeshwara of India. The Chinese army felt that Alakeshwara and his people were rude, disrespectful and hostile. There was already a feeling of hostility from the acts of theft these people had committed against neighbouring countries who were allies of China. The war was successful. Xin He captured the King and his family in a brawl with swords. They were brought back to the emperor. When they presented the captives to the sovereign, he was impressed by the power of his army. Alkshvara begged for his and his family's lives. The emperor felt that Alakshvara had learned his lesson and let him go.

Xin He recounted his adventures on the Ming Treasure Ship. He never could have imagined the things that he saw and the things that he did. He felt emotional just thinking about how lucky he had been to experience these journeys. He wanted to record this passages; he knew that they needed to be shared. He hoped that these stories would be remembered for generations to come. XIn He looked out to the horizon with anticipation of the coming voyages.

# The Ming Treasure Voyages

*Korean International School, Wai, Kylie – 12*

Before China had emperors, the village of Chun Tian served an evil demon named Zhuang Long. He demanded all the crops of farmers and every boy will at the age of 18 will join him on a voyage of death but the girls will serve him in the palace of Zhuang Long's loot. His loot included mythical jades that were meant for the Chosen Ones, any boy that could end the demon would be the Chosen Ones and be granted with enormous power, elements of the universe. A boy named Ming Lee forged a team to destroy the demon once and for all...

The boys were all 18. There was Dao Chi, Lin Yang and Tau Bo. They were all 18 and ready for the voyage, as soon as they boarded the ship they all waved to their sisters and mothers. Zhuang Long told the boys where they were headed to, one destination Spain's bone maze, many men have gone insane. The name behind is that the maze is made from the victim's bones. Ming Lee was afraid, his friends all felt the same, they were immediately ordered to raise the sails and clean the deck. Lin Yang hated chores and made fun of the demon for its disgusting teeth and laugh. With his red powers, Zhuang Long picked up Lin Yang and locked up the young boy.

By the end of the day Ming Lee and the others settled into bed. Zhuang Long went into his room, with the key to Lin's cage, Dao Chi being the bravest of the group snuck into the demon's room where he could see a curtain barely making out the shape of a sleeping demon. In a hurry, Dao Chi frantically looked through the drawers and closets, he was worried and sick not being able to save his friend until the moon reflected a ray of light; the keys! Dao Chi saw them on the belt of Zhuang Long, he slowly lift the keys and crept out.

The next day when Dao Chi went to wash his face, the demon appeared to him!!! The demon smiled a rather proud kind of smile. Zhuang Long asked him if Dao Chi was the one that had stolen the keys to Lin Yang, Dao Chi couldn't lie because the demon had powers of his own so he said YES, an echo of laughter roared through the hallway, Zhuang Long told Dao Chi that he was proud of his theft skills and it will come handy in the future. But for now, because of Dao Chi's amazing skills, Lin Yang was released later on and reunited with his friends! Within the hour of Lin Yang being released, the boys partied a little, sipping some wine and radish cake. Everyone of the boys had sisters and their fathers have passed in one of Zhuang Long's death voyage so they needed a plan to kill the demon, they did not know how to start and how to kill him. Tau Bo was panicking, three days to the Spanish Bone Maze and yet no plan!!!!!!!

One last day till the destination, Ming Lee stood at by the tallest sails of the ship, gazing over the full white moon. He had tears in his eyes, they started to burn and turn red, the demon levitated and laughed at Ming Lee, Zhuang Long turned Ming Lee's tears to blood, meaning suffering in pain and grief. The boys sat together and prayed, hoping for success so that their families may live. Timagining all the possible things that could happen. They were so loud that the demon stormed in! He gave orders and rules about the maze, no talking, no shouting, no destroying the bushes and finally, seperation.....

The route is complete, Spanish Bone Maze if up ahead. Lin Yang hid under a wooden plank of the ship, the others convinced him to get outta there but he wouldn't budge, the demon demanded them to come over. By the time they got there, Zhuang Long forgot that there were 4 boys and moved on. The entrance was made of thick bushes with bones sticking out, victims of the maze. Three ways were open to the boys for them to choose, before they went into their path of choice, the demon warned them that this was to test patience and to not freak out. Tau Bo, Dao Chi and Ming Lee gave each other a reassuring hug, went inside the maze with fear and choking breaths. Lin Yang was still under the ship, not poking his head out until no sounds were heard. He got up the from the boards and made himself a drink, footsteps approached the door, it was Zhuang Long! He sat in his office and began talking to himself, the sounds were muffled so Lin pressed his ear on the door what he heard was that Zhuang Long created the maze and there was no end, he had a giant white diamond saying exit, the end of the maze! Zhuang Long got up towards the door, the boy sprinted to his room and hid under the bed, he could see the demon entering the shower room, this was his chance to get that orb. Again, he sprinted to the office and went through the cupboards, the orb was shining through the last drawer and he took it.

Meanwhile Tau Bo was freaking out so bad that he was breathing heavily and it was loud. Lin Yang climbed up the bushes and started running on it. He found Tau Bo, obviously because of his loud breathing and gathered him up the bush, Ming Lee was found shortly after, but then Dao Chi was hard to find, he was unpredictable and fast. Dao Chi was then found gripping his shirt and cuddled himself in fear. They all rose to the highest bush and held the orb up, it shone a ray of white light pointing east, they all headed that direction and found a great prize. It was the Mythical Jades of the Chosen Ones!!!

They landed down on the patterned floor made of marble and jade, each of them took one representing themselves. Tau Bo for loyalty, Dao Chi for smartness, Lin Yang for bravery and Ming Lee for leadership Zhuang Long felt a sharp pain in his abdomen, rays of white light shot through his body and exploded into white flowers, the ship was renewed and ready to go home with the boys looking up to the heavens saying thank you to the gods.

By the time the new crew came home, everyone partied. They named it the Ming Treasure Voyages, Ming Lee was the leader and those flowers, they were treasure to the entire Ming family. This could not be the end, Zhuang Long has an army and a son to lead. When will Ming Lee and his friends conquer that new enemy once again and save China? That's for another person to tell.....

# My Voyage

*Korean International School, Wong, Adrian – 13*

My name is Huang and I am going to tell you about my voyage in early China. I was excited to be on the ship on 14 July 1405, led by the sailors and captains on the fleet of Admiral Zheng He, I received \$1000 from the sailors because I will be servicing the fleet, so I gave the cash to my mum and she bid farewell me. I need to admit, there were lots of citizens of Nanjing and all came to watch us leave the port, lots of young sailors as the same age as me cried as we sailed out of the port. Now, off the unknown regions, we go ...

The first few days in the sea was quite fine, my job was cleaning the deck of a small ship and prepare the dishes for the sailors, on the third day, I was sent to the flagship of the fleet to meet the Captain, the Captain appeared as a mannered man, he said that he's called Zheng He, and he promoted me as a captain of a small ship. Which was a dream to some of the sailors! Some sailors started to get homesick after a week on the fleet, I went to them and said are they ok. But one sailor said he wants to go back home. So I asked his name, he said that his name was Ran. So I told him 'Don't be afraid of the sea, I can be your friend!' So he accepted my friend request and always came to the captain's room to have tea with me.

A week past by, we have visited Fu Chau and Guangzhou and now we still don't see any land. Yesterday there was a huge storm and we lost a few ships from our fleet, but it was not a really big matter because there were no casualties. Finally today we saw land(Taiwan), everyone was excited about it, all the crew fitted into small boats, some men were very excited, they even ran to the beach from water bare feet! As soon as that, we met some original inhabitants from the island, they gave us fruits as they were very good at growing crops, so we gave back items such as silk and pottery, which our country is good at production at.

Then I followed Zheng He to lots of countries, including Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaya. The people there welcomed us and gave us gifts, but on the fifth leg of the journey, we got attacked by the Maldives island residence, although they used bows and arrows, it made our fleet of small boats cause heavy damage, so the Admiral told us to retreat. This visit to the Maldives Islands did lots of damage, in 317 ships, near 30 were destroyed, around 90 were damaged, we lost around 200 men. Which we are very sad of, so Zheng He tried to negotiate with them, this time, Zheng He lead men with no weapons so that the residence on the island will not misunderstand us. So this time the leader of the islanders made peace with us and gave their shells, seaweed etc. And we also gave them the pottery stuff like that. And we traveled to the next destination.

Our last destination is Calicut, currently, which is in India, the Indians have different skin colours than us, so some of the sailors are scared of the native people, but the people over there welcomed us on the island and gave us fruits such as mango, apricots, papayas. As you know, we gave gold and they gave us a giraffe, which is too tall that it must be on the deck of the flagship. After we went to India, we start to return to China. During the return leg of the journey, there was an extremely big storm, I said to the Admiral: 'We must stop to the nearest island to stop to repair our ships'. So then Zheng He told all ship captains to reverse and head to Malaya, when the storm ended, we checked our ships, we lost many ships again, we lost around 50 ships this time and 300 men. Zheng he immediately told us using a full speed back to Nanjing. We were riding the wind and breaking the waves, after 3 days of that ride which made crew throw-out, which seems more like a roller coaster, we finally arrived in Nanjing.

And again, lots of citizens came and watch us arrived. People were cheering for us while we were disembarking, a small escort army came and told Zheng He that the emperor wants to see him now, so I ask him do I need to come with him. He said he can deal with the emperor, and I can go home and look after my mother. After I went back to my village, I finally exhausted, 'Back to home, finally' i thought. My mother was extremely excited, she called the entire village and bought lots of expensive food for us to enjoy, all the village had a great time enjoying the party. Around 1 year later, when I was cooking, I heard a knock on the door, it sounds very urgent, so I went to the door, and at the door, there was a little child, he gave me a letter, it said: "Hi Huang, how is it going? I am having a second voyage, and I want to invite you to be a middle-class captain of my fleet, if you want to join, then come to Nanjing Port on 15 Feb 1426! Zheng He. "I was so excited about going on a voyage with Zheng He again. I told my mum that I am going to be out to have a voyage, she said a yes and I immediately went to the port. Then I chatted with Zheng He for a while, boarded my medium class vessel. And now, another amazing, magical, mysterious journey of mine has just begun, and I hope I will survive this voyage to the unknown countries of the earth...

# The Diary of a Soldier on Board

*Korean International School, Yau, Ambrose – 12*

It was 1405 and our fleet was departing Nanjing. On the grand ship, there were sailors, soldiers, servants, the crew, and most importantly, the expeditors and lumps of treasure. Behind us were hundreds of other ships, which forms a massive fleet with us, heading to the same place for the same purpose— to develop relationships with other countries they know little about.

But it would be an extremely tough mission. Firstly, since we don't know much about our way, we might end up in the middle of nowhere, struggling to reach an inhabited place. Secondly, we might meet dangerous armies and greedy pirates, staring in surprise at our golden treasure, and laughing at us silently with an evil smile. Thirdly, we might run out of food and starve to death. Nobody knew what will happen.

The excited sailors were cheering as the ships entered the vast blue sea. However, me, being a soldier, was scared and worried of pirates hijacking this fleet. Every night, I dream of fearsome pirates on ships with black sails speeding towards us, leaping ferociously onto our ship, then leap back holding a handful of gold. At the same time, soldiers charge to us with sharp knives, cannonballs fly and our ship starts to sink. Slowly, we drown and pass away. So scary that I faint whenever shiny gold appears in front of my eyes.

It was just a dream. But one day that might happen. The sailors said that the weapons are more than enough to oppose the pirates. But what if it's not? How do we know how powerful and menacing the armies or pirates are? Absolutely nothing can stop my endless worries. I deposited my life on this journey. Every detail of every battle, which might not affect the captain's mind, matters a lot for the soldiers. Indeed, in the bright morning of the third day, I, together with many sailors, spotted from far ships with black sails blackening the entire sky, and booming sounds of cannonballs deafens our ears. It's a short countdown before I will disappear eternally from Earth...

But worrying won't help. In the blink of an eye, we had our new and well-prepared weapons ready, as if the sky is never dark. The soldiers are fully equipped, the swords are in a perfect state, and the cannons are fully loaded.

As the black sails approached our ship, my dramatic dream had come true. Some of the soldiers are duelling with the pirates, some fight in a team, and some, such as me, are firing cannonballs, destroying each others' ships. Not optimistic to see water flow into the ship, but it is satisfying to see the black sails fall.

Luckily only half of the dream came true. We were victorious, and the sky is bright again. The ship is fixed in no time. The fourth day was rather tranquil. Nothing devastating happened and it was a smooth part of the journey. The sailors talked with laughter about how they were victorious and lost not a cent worth of treasure on the previous day, and what great achievement they could accomplish in this lengthy trip. On the other hand, the soldiers, who suffered greatly from the brutal fight between the black sails, got little care. Therefore, this was far from a pleasant journey for them.

On the fifth day there was some rainy weather. Droplets of water fell quickly to the deck. Waves shook the ship and water flowed in. The captain told us to clear the water on the deck, which would be a tedious job. It took hours as the fierce waves keeps on flushing in. After that, we had to fix the broken parts of the ship.

On the sixth day, the ship docked at a port of a foreign kingdom. The captain left the grand ship and had a meeting with the king, and gave the king a considerable amount of gold and silk. The sailors also cheered as the captain started a relationship with the king. While the crowd were watching the wonderful scene created by the actors, the backstage workers, who were replenishing the supplies for the next scene of this play, were never seen by the audience.

It was a safe and quiet day. Nothing devastating happened. But my heart was just as unstable as it was. Oh my father! My mother! My wife! My home! They had disappeared from my eyes for days, but had stayed still in my heart! This was just a mere fraction of this journey, and the finish line of this odyssey was in a

distant place! I can't stop looking forward to the moment we arrive at my homeland China! I seems helpless in the vast sea! I don't even know whether I can see them again for the remainder of my short life! They must have been missing me, perhaps forever!

As the captain shouted 'All aboard', I boarded the ship reluctantly, and left the port with a constantly shaking heart.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Tsoi, Janna – 15

The night was silent, almost peaceful – a rarity aboard the ships. The sea was mostly calm, with small ripples every now and then, and even as the sharp wind hammered on the huge papyrus-coloured sails, it felt calming and serene and almost safe.

Ironic, that. Especially as we only just defeated the notorious Indonesian pirate, Chen Zuyi, the day before.

I leaned on the wooden railings of the ship, staring out at the beautiful display before me. A stunning array of stars covered the velvety midnight blue sky, and the water was almost black, with distorted reflections of the night sky. It looked so...magical, like something drawn out of a fairytale. This was my favourite part of being onboard the Ming Treasure Fleet – no matter how much I see, the night sky would always remain one of the most beautiful scenic displays I have ever seen.

Not that I had ever known any life besides voyaging with the crew, fighting with pirates and hostile armies. Sometimes I wonder what life would be like if I were a normal girl living in my hometown, going to school – well, normal school that didn't have soldiers for teachers – and having a proper family. The thought is almost tempting.

But then I would never have met everyone here. My friends, soldiers that I had known all my life, my father.

I wouldn't have given that up for the world.

I heard footsteps approaching and instinctively I whipped around almost immediately, an arrow notched and aimed directly at the heart of the silhouette. The silhouette quickly raised his hands in surrender and I recognized him. Lowering my arrow, I muttered brief apologies as the boy came up beside me and joined me in staring at the sky.

"It's late," he stated, "you should be asleep." His voice was casual, but I could sense the concern beneath. "You need rest after the big battle yesterday."

I laughed, but even to me it sounded forced. "I'm not tired, Xinjie."

My best friend didn't look convinced. "Zhilan – don't over-exhaust yourself."

I waved it off. I had never been and will never be comfortable with sharing my feelings. "I'm fine, I've been trained to do things like this since I was four. Besides, I'm not on duty – I came out here of my own free will. You being older doesn't mean you get to boss me around."

Xinjie looked out to the star-filled sky, the stars reflecting in his dark eyes, like there was a galaxy inside those swirling orbs. "You're thinking of him," he stated again, as if it was just another fact.

I could feel tears coming to my eyes, but I pushed them back down. *Don't show emotion. You have to keep your front up.* "I wonder what my father would think of all this. I wish he could be here with us... he wanted to see his home again and now—"

"I'm so sorry for your loss." I saw him looking at me with that pity and sympathy and I just wanted to run, run until I couldn't see it anymore, because it was just a painful reminder of what I had lost.

"It's okay, I should learn to get over it, it's been years after all," I forced out the words. *How could I ever get over it? How could I ever forget my father's body, lying there upon all those bodies of perished soldiers? How – how could I ever forget how I lost my brother over how he was too young to register the pain of becoming an orphan?*

*I could never forget the shock and crushing pain I felt that day.*

*I could hardly forget how my brother shouted at me that I was being overly emotional and protective. I will never forget how our argument was so large scale, they had to move Yuanjun to another boat to prevent us from having another argument, how he had yelled 'I hate you' at me as he was dragged to the next ship.*

Xinjie looked at me. "It's natural to feel upset, Zhilan, and I know you're constantly stressed from being the only female on board—" he started softly.

I suppose I was half glad that the guns went off then.

Loud gunshots suddenly sounded from all around and the sea surface suddenly lit up by golden yellow, white hot flames. Sparks flew everywhere as vaguely familiar ships appeared.

"Chen Zuyi," I breathed. Beside me, Xinjie stared at the new fleet blankly in shock.

I reacted quickly, running towards the cabin at the top, banging on the door. "Admiral Zheng! Please, Chen Zuyi is back!"

My body moved on its own accord – this wasn't the first time I was the first to spot an attack, and I already knew what to do. In no time, I had run down to the deck and gotten everyone on their feet, fully prepared.

I started to run to the starboard, but was stopped by our commander, Zheng He. "Zhilan— leave the battling up to us. Your aim is deadly, the archers at the bow need a leader. They'll listen to you— you've proven yourself so many times despite being only sixteen."

Taken aback, I nodded, and Admiral Zheng disappeared into the mass of soldiers quickly as I hurried to the bow. Half the battle passed in a blur of blood and the glint of metal weapons slashing against air. Despite all the conflict below us, I concentrated on letting my arrows fly straight and true, hoping they hit their targets accurately.

Then I noticed a soldier from the enemy jump behind a barrel and out of sight. Curiously, I told another soldier to take over for a while before going over.

Our secret tunnel entrance. How could an enemy soldier have known?

Years of military training kicked in as I tiptoed down the tunnel, footsteps light as a feather. Staying on the stairs, I could see the conference room, dimly lit with candles. I could hear a voice, saying—

"—victory. We didn't have done it without you."

"My pleasure," a familiar voice sounded, but I couldn't place my finger on where I had heard it before. "at least... I'm doing something useful for you."

*No way... we had a mole?*

*That explained how they knew to attack now— we were going to leave first thing in the morning, and... they knew about this tunnel.*

*But... why?*

I felt a rush of anger in me, and I arched an arrow, aiming it at the source of the sound.

I let it go.

I knew it hit the target. I never missed.

I heard someone cry out and everyone rushing out of the tunnel, and I ran out, gluing my eyes to the entrance as I watched comrades attack them as enemies streamed out.

And finally, a fellow comrade collapsing on the floor. I ran over, arrow pointed at him, but froze and lowered it as he raised his head.



“Yu–Yuanjun?” I faltered. My own brother...? No, this– this can't be.

He, too, was at a loss for words. “Zhilan– I'm sorry–”

“Why? You– you betrayed our nation–” I breathed. I dropped onto my knees, plucking the arrow out of his legs where I pierced him.

He was quiet, but said finally after a while, “they threatened your life.”

I froze. “Didn't– didn't you hate me?”

He was about to answer, but immediately screamed in pain, and his scream was so horrible, it was the most painful thing I had ever heard and in that moment I would've given anything to take away my brother's pain.

*I– I still love you more than anything.*

I turned to see Xinjie, and his–

Xinjie's dagger was buried deep into Yuanjun's abdomen, and blood was pouring out of the wound, seeping slowly onto the floor as I stared, horrified.

“Xinjie... why?”

The expression on my best friend's face was unreadable. “He's a spy. A mole. A captured soldier told us. He deserves to die.”

“No!” I cried out. “No one does...”

I rushed toward and held my brother in my arms as I felt tears stream down my cheeks and the world blurred.

“Yuanjun, I can't lose you too...”

My younger brother smiled weakly. “Zhilan... I never hated you. Remember–”

He never finished his sentence. He fell limp, and his unseeing eyes stared out at the stars.

*Why... why take away everything I hold dear?*

The fighting had subsided already, and I felt eyes staring at my crying figure but I didn't care. Not when my brother was dead.

Later, I learnt that Chen Zuyi and his comrades were captured.

But I didn't care. I did my best to help but I couldn't care as much as I used to.

My heart stayed in that moment when my brother died.

*But what I regret most is that he died without me being able to tell him ‘I love you’.*

*That he died without knowing I loved him.*

# Quest for the North Star

*Marymount Secondary School, Lam, Kwan Kiu Annette – 14*

“Our mission is to enable young people aged 14 – 18, to lead an unforgettable maritime expedition that is unprecedented in history!”

Merely at a glimpse, I felt intrigued pondering what it would be, what it could be if I was successfully selected. On the day I arrived at the quay where a treasure fleet was anchored, I was welcomed by a flag embroidered with a Chinese character “Ming” which was fluttering in the wind. In stark astonishment, there I saw such a colossal formation of the fleet that comprised a total of 317 ships of which 62 were heaped with gold, jewels, silk, ceramic pots and wares. I could barely believe what I had seen till I heard a eunuch reading out aloud an imperial edict issued by the Yongle Emperor from which Zheng He was entrusted to be the Chief Commander of this Ming expeditionary fleet. It’s the first time that I had met Zheng He in quite a distance though. Standing high above in the middle of the gangplank, he, being over 6 feet tall, looked like an iconic figure.

After having Zheng He made a brief introduction of the fleet composition, we began setting off to venture into our unprecedented voyages. Upon boarding the fleet, all mentees including me were divided into groups and assigned to respective mentors who were responsible for overseeing the progress of our training and learning during the whole expedition. This was a 6-month intensive training program that literally embraced a variety of curricular from map reading, navigation, crisis management and human behaviors to survival skills and cooking. The main aim was to nurture us to sustain ourselves for the whole voyage ahead as well as prep ourselves for any unexpected calamity. I was allocated to a cabin with 9 other mentees of my age. We would be spending our time together in the pursuing 6 months.

According to the agenda, all mentees had to wake up before dawn, doing chores including scrubbing the decks, mopping the floors, cleaning the heads (toilets – it wasn’t a nice job), tidying up the ropes, preparing meals etc. After taking the early meal – purely a bowl of porridge and a poached egg, I had to attend lectures invariably on philosophy, theories and physical practices. Our readings were based on Confucianism, we studied Analects, Books of Rites, Spring and Autumn, which much piqued my interest though boring. Our mentor said to us, “You have much to do and learn through genuinely life changing adventures at sea. Life at sea is unpredictable. One stupid mistake can cost your life.”

On the first night on deck, I was so excited yet nervous that I did not sleep a wink. I took a peep outside through the rice pulp window. Nothing I could hear but the gurgles of the nearby stream. Nothing I could see but the dark sky peppered with little twinkling stars. In pointed contrast, the North Star shone out with its brightest sparkles as though it was guiding this little lost sheep to find my way out through darkness ... I recalled the Analects that I had been taught in the lecture during the day – Confucius says, “If you govern with the power of your virtue, you will be like the North Star. It just stays in its place while all the other stars position themselves around it.”

About a month later, upon finishing our theoretical sessions, we were about to set foot on our maiden lonely voyage – we were allowed to leave the vessel to do exploration on our own wherever the captain found a quay or port suitable for mooring the fleet. The first stop was Berlin. Our vessel was anchored at the Spree River where there found two settlements on either side, Colin and Berlin. These two twin towns seemed growing flourishingly with roughly 8,500 inhabitants and the two were merged into one German municipality in 1432. When I was walking through the streets, I saw buildings, town halls, hospitals, churches and monasteries with residences for the clergy and a court. The cities looked much more modern and civilized, far different from what I had seen in China. And around the corner in the bazaar, something distasteful drew my attention – trade of Jews. A girl about my age was being kept in a cage looking at me with her pleading eyes as if she was asking for my help. It was in such a sudden that I summoned up my courage walking towards her direction. Having made sure there was nobody around, I unlocked the lock of her cage, letting her flee and free. Undeniably, I was really terrified but when I recalled what Confucius says about the North Star, I felt totally relieved. I told myself, “I am making a virtue out of necessity. I have no regret.”

Our vessel continued sailing along the Baltic Sea. However, when we were about to steer southwards, the weather suddenly got worse. The tranquil sea became choppy with pouring rain, howling wind and loud thunder. At that critical moment, I was on the deck doing some chores. The vessel kept churning with roaring waves slamming inside the deck, I was tossed up and down, back and forth. Too late to get hold of anything, I fell into the sea with my vision going black. By the time I resumed consciousness, the storm had already died off and I found myself lying ashore of a deserted island. Though I was extremely panic, I realized I should have done something to survive myself before I got rescued. Thanks to what I had learnt, without hesitation I went to find some logs and sticks to start a fire, not only to keep my body warm, but to

scare away wild animals when night fell and more importantly, to put up a signal for rescue as well. Then I caught some fish with a stick and cooked them over the fire. How starving I was, I gobbled them down almost in one mouth. When dawn lined the horizon in faint yellow, amazingly I had a gleam of hope as our fleet came to my rescue. I couldn't wait for the next bit of venture whatever it was adorned with beautiful memories or arduous experiences.

Having sailed across the Atlantic Ocean, our fleet steered eastwards to the Indian Ocean which seemed a bit calmer as though it was an omen of something good. Our captain had our vessel moored near an island called Ceylon. An aroma hovering in the surroundings hit me walking into a street with lots of hawkers touting tea leaves everywhere. I kept exploring here and there aimlessly till I felt creepy finding a place what appeared to be a cemetery. Curiosity outweighed fear. I tiptoed in there to have a look. There found some tombs with some Latin writings blurrily engraved on them. As the sun began to set, the whole place became such gloomy and spooky that I decided to leave. All of a sudden, I tripped over something kind of a box. Time was running short because I had to hurry back to the fleet before dusk. Be it good or bad, I picked it up in haste and sucked it in my bag. The box was later verified by my mentor to be a Pandora box. There's a legend that it contains seven miseries to inflict mankind – war, famine, plague and one last thing 'hope'. I wondered, "Does it hint us anything that will be happening in future?"

While crossing the Pacific Ocean, we came across a fascinating island surrounded by seas, Ezo, presently known as Hokkaido. So alluring that everyone would not resist but insist on an adventure there. By then, we were allowed a day ashore to discover the beauty of this island. When I was stumbling down to the shore which was all blanketed with snow, I descended, looking up ahead I saw that on the beach a whale had come ashore and all the humans, dressed in festive dark attire, were dancing step dance for joy. It's so spectacular seeing the sun duck beneath the horizon, giving way to a beautiful sky with an egg yolk. Walking further inland, amazingly I saw pairs of red-crowned cranes dancing in the snow. They bowed to one another, then threw their heads over their back then bowed again, leaped into air and simultaneously raised their wings calling in unison. The gorgeous sunset vividly illuminated the dusting of snow, the dancing of cranes, all stitched into a marvelous panoramic view that would always be enshrined in my memory.

It's my last night on deck, again so excited I was that I didn't sleep a wink. I stayed up all night and gazed at the starry sky finding right overhead the North Star with its brightest glow as though it's exuding its confidence in guiding us towards the righteousness no matter we were, with the power of virtue.

# Titanic and Zheng He

*Munsang College, Kwai, Hoi Yan Hayley – 13*

It had been 15 minutes since Titanic hit the iceberg. Shing was one of the crew members on board. The lower part of the ship had budged and begun to submerge, yet he was still on the ship, struggling to pack everyone into the lifeboat. But there was not enough lifeboat and he had to keep himself on the boat by hanging onto one of the railings. After some time, he was exhausted. He let go of the railing desperately and fell into the sea. He could feel himself sinking deeper and deeper, with chilling water filling his lungs. Then, he closed his eyes and became unconscious.

“Hey, wake up!” Shing heard someone yelling at him. When he tried to open his eyes, a bucket of cold water was poured onto him. Shing became wide awake. He realized that he was on a gigantic ship, and he was lying on a bed made of wood. Before he could figure out what had happened, a man before him said in relief, “Do you have any idea how long you had been asleep? I pulled you out of the sea three days ago. Thank God you are alive.” Shing was glad that he survived, yet he quickly discovered that the people around him were wearing Chinese clothings. He asked in horror, “Why am I here? I don’t recognize anyone!” The man shrugged, “I saw you in the sea and pulled you up. I don’t know who you are either! Anyway, you are one of the crew from now on. Remember, we are a fleet with the mission to sail to different countries to show how strong Ming Dynasty is. By the way, you can call me Zheng He.” Then he walked away, leaving Shing puzzled. A second ago he fell off Titanic and drowned, the next moment he was on a ship, surrounded by Chinese sailors. After he put his thoughts together, he concluded that he travelled to the time when Zheng He was having his seventh voyage. Though he didn’t know how to go home, he just had to try to join the other sailors, becoming one of the members on this enormous fleet.

As a former crew member of Titanic, Shing coped with his new life easily, though the technology of instruments was antique. For nights he glanced at the night sky alone. The sea was calm and the horizon met with the sky. The stars glittered above his head. It was just pure beauty. Sometimes, Zheng He would join him. The two experienced sailors shared their experiences and thoughts with each other. Shing’s rich knowledge on sailing held Zheng He in awe. Shing was promoted quickly.

All of a sudden, a gang of privates armed with swung onto the ship. Before Shing could figure out what was happening, the fellow sailors grabbed weapons and yelled, “Pirates on board! Be aware!” In a few seconds, lots of soldiers holding swords rushed onboard and started fighting with the pirates. Shing was petrified yet he decided to fight like a gladiator. He joined the fight with fellow soldiers. In the chaos, Shing found he pointed his sword at one of the pirates and he could kill him in an instant. But he didn’t kill him. Throughout his whole life, he was taught not to kill anybody. Then, a middle-aged man with a scar on his face pierced his sword into that pirate’s heart and yelled, “Why didn’t you kill him instantly, young lad? That pirate could kill you and steal our properties! There’s no mercy on this ship!” Shing nodded frankly and kept fighting. After some time, the pirates were all captured or killed, and their leader was put into the dungeon. Shing couldn’t stop thinking about what that old man said. “The ship and scene are beautiful,” he thought, “yet the bloodshed and violence are cruel.”

After a few days, Shing was summoned to the commanding room. He stepped into the room anxiously. Zheng He and other commanders were in the room as well, including the middle-aged man. Zheng He started first, "As we are coming close to our destination, we should start to prepare our products for trading. I hope Shing can join us as well to gain some experience. Also, we all remember our secret mission, right?" The others nodded in confidence, except the middle-aged man, who started to cringe in fear. After the conference, Shing asked Zheng He, "What is the secret mission actually?" Zheng He leaned towards Shing and whispered, "Finding the deposed emperor of China." Shing stepped back. He had never thought that there was such a mission. So he answered frankly, "I...I understand. I will try to do my best."

After a few days and nights, the fleet ported in Calicut. Shing helped lowering the goods. There were all kinds of products, including tea leaves, silk and china. He traded with the locals. The locals smiled brightly when they saw the products. Zheng He greeted them, "It's a pleasure to meet you. We are the representatives of Ming Dynasty. We wish to be partners with your civilization forever." Shing could see that the locals were in awe of the fleet and were overjoyed to become trade partners. The representatives of the locals replied with respect, "We would love to cooperate with your country. We will also bow before your king." When they left, Zheng He's ship was loaded with goods brought from the locals. Shing was impressed as well. Western explorers such as Columbus sailed to new lands. Instead of forming a friendly relationship with the locals, he waged war and conquered their land. Shing admired Zheng He even more.

After leaving Calicut, some of the crew members started to feel homesick. They groaned and mumbled, hoping Zheng He would turn the ship back to China. Shing tried to suppress the anger within them, yet the anger kept spreading. It was contagious and snowballing into rebellions that seemingly descended into a mutiny. With no choice, he turned to Zheng He. Eventually, Zheng He made a decision, "I order all of you to listen to me. We will go to one final destination before sailing back home." The crew cheered and prepared for the next landing.

The destination was a small island. Shing could hardly see anyone on it. Therefore, he asked Zheng He out of curiosity, "Why do you want to visit this island? It's like there's no one on it!" Zheng He answered, "An island as remote as this one is the best place for a deposed emperor to hide and waiting for an opportunity to return to China." Shing nodded and did not ask furthermore.

As soon as they got off the ship, some barbarians ran out from the forest, shouting and running. They were holding some poorly made sharp tools. Zheng He and Shing both realized they were hostile and prepared for a battle. The salvages promptly noticed that Zheng He was the captain of the fleet and attacked him. Shing fought hard as well. Though Zheng He reacted quickly, he still couldn't face twenty salvages at the same time. Shing was so devoted into fighting that he failed to realize that one of the barbarians was coming towards Zheng He. As the barbarian was about to stab Zheng He into his chest, that middle-aged man with a scar on his face blocked the salvage's knife with his own body. Zheng He yelled, "Shing, take care of him!" Then he kept fighting. Shing pressed onto the man's wound yet he kept bleeding. "It's no use," the middle-aged man

whispered, "As I will not live for long, I want to tell you something." Shing leaned towards him. "I am the deposed emperor. It's been my secret for a long time. It's good to tell someone before I die." Shing gasped. He had never thought about it. But it was also logical. After all, the most dangerous place is the safest place! Suddenly, Shing felt that his clothes before his chest was wet and soon turned red. He was stabbed too! The deposed emperor smiled weakly, "At least my secret is safe with you forever..."

"Hey, wake up!" Shing heard somebody calling him. He could feel seawater in his mouth. He coughed the water out. He found himself on the lifeboat. Was it a dream? It didn't matter to Shing. He knew that it was a voyage that he would never forget.

# Alternating Between Two Centuries: A Voyage to the Ming Dynasty

*Munsang College, Lam, Tsing Cherry – 13*

A boat was left in limbo and sandwiched between two different centuries. It was a time warp. Bizarre as it was.

Earlier that night, a navigator reported that their route to Brisbane was merely a few miles away from the intersection of the International Date Line and the Equator. Captain Philips made sure the boat would exactly lie on his mark at midnight, helped by the said navigator.

Zhi and his friend Kenneth snuck out of the wheelhouse to drink beer on the roof of the superstructure. The view there was quite a sight. The sky was so clear you could see the stars sparkling, and the sea was so tranquil.

“Within ten minutes, we would be in a different century,” said Zhi. “Do you have any plans for it?”

“College. When I earn enough money, I will finish my study.” Kenneth turned to Zhi, “What about you?”

“My only plan is to get my stomach filled.” Zhi had been following his brother from a voyage to another since he was a lad. To him, the whole concept of having an ambition seemed mad.

“I know you will find something worthier than your next meal.”

Silence.

Downstairs, the sudden outburst of cheers indicated the crew’s success. Upstairs, Kenneth and Zhi clinked their bottles together as a gesture of celebration.

They crossed the Equator and the International Date Line at exactly midnight on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1899. With its bow in the Southern Hemisphere, which was in summer, and its stern in the Northern Hemisphere, which was in winter, SS Warrimoo was not only in two different days, two different months, two different seasons and two different years, but in two different centuries!

It was supposed to be something memorable. Yet all Zhi could think about was if he would get any extra money for this accomplishment.

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Zhi could only stare in shock.

The ladder broke before sliding to the side. Kenneth slipped off the broken ladder and hit the gunwale. A splash was followed by an agonized wail.

Panicking, Zhi noticed a man on the deck. “Get the rope!” He yelled, before jumping into the Pacific.

In the chilly water, Zhi touched something soft and warm. Drawing it closer, he held it against his own form. The surface somehow seemed to be much brighter, maybe he had got used to the dark. He searched for the rope and held onto it tightly.

He was soon pulled up to the deck. Panting, he released the body in his arms. The odd faces he saw got him alarmed.

Several men approached him. “Kid!” one of them exclaimed, “is His Excellency alright?”

These people spoke in a bizarre language. But Zhi could understand them. Perhaps it was because as a sailor, he was used to communicating with foreigners through their body language. Perhaps it was some sort of unknown power. The latter seemed to be the answer. Nevertheless, he remained silent.

“Everything’s fine now. Don’t worry, lad. Summon the physician!”

They carried the person Zhi saved away, but he was not Kenneth. He was taller, and his hair was darker.

Zhi was the next to be carried away. They left him in a cabin, where he was looked after. “His Excellency will see you soon,” said the physician before exiting the cabin.

Now Zhi finally had time to think alone. Those people on the ship resembled the portraits of the ancient Chinese in one of the very few books he owned.

Wait.

Oh, Lord.

He had somehow time-travelled. Assuming the fact that SS Warrimoo was in two different centuries at once had released some sort of power, he might have entered a time tunnel. Another sailor had once told him a similar story from a novel.

“Now what?” he asked himself.

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The next day, he was called to meet ‘His Excellency’. He followed a young man to the deck, where a man in yellow robe waited. The sunlight blurred the outlines of his black cap as his purple cape flowed with the sea breeze and shone under the sunshine.

The man looked back. His skin was tan, slightly yellowish, like sand. With his lips pressed together and his eyebrows thick, he looked stern. His nose was, though not big, rather tall. His eyes were slightly upturned like the rest of the crew, but it was amber in colour. Despite his masculine features, he did not have a beard.

“Lord Zheng He, he is here.”

Zhi’s heart skipped a beat. Was he really standing in front of Zheng He, the famous voyager from the Ming Dynasty? He had always been Zhi’s idol.

He had to be dreaming.

Zheng He dismissed the young man as Zhi bowed. “G...greetings, Your Excellency.”

“It was nice to see you are unharmed after that incident. May I know your name?”

“Zhi, Your Excellency. Zhi Lee.”

“I must award you for saving me, Zhi,” said Zheng He. His voice was loud but smooth, like the sound of the waves. “What is your rank in the crew?”

“A sailor,” that was true, although he was not a sailor in *his* crew.

“I see,” he paused. “From now on, you will be a navigator of my boat. Is there anything else you want?”



“Thank you, Your Excellency. No, I am satisfied as long as I am warm and full.”

Frowning, Zheng He commented, “Are you one of those who only wish to live pass today?”

Stunned, Zhi was speechless.

Zheng He continued, “I used to be aimless like you too.”

“When I was serving the Yongle Emperor as a eunuch, my only purpose was to satisfy him. Everything I did, was under his will.”

“I have been aimless too, I—”

“My aimless is more aimless than your aimless,” he cut Zhi off. “Do you understand the pain of living for someone else? The emperor treated me well, but if he told me to die, I would have done it without hesitation. If you think you are surviving instead of living, I was not even surviving.”

“Then he ordered me to lead his fleet on the voyages. I finally started waking up with a purpose. I’m not doing it for myself, but without me, this whole thing can’t be done. I was leading this voyage for the sake of our fleet, our country, our people and... my name.”

“It’s amazing, how something as simple as trying to reach land amidst endless water gives me a purpose.”

“I’ve finished.” Said Zheng He. He gave Zhi a final glare and left.

Zhi’s gaze lingered at the horizon.

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The next day, Zhi walked to the stern to watch the sunrise. He heard someone approaching him.

“I had a dream.”

Zhi nodded, eager to hear

“I go to Mecca in that dream,” Zheng He inhaled, “like my father and my grandfather.”

“Wait,” Zhi questioned, “aren’t you Chinese?”

“I am Chinese, I’m just from a different tribe.”

“I’m sorry,” Zhi looked down. “I shouldn’t have assumed you were Arabian.”

“I am Arabian, I just grew up in China.”

Again, Zhi was at a loss of words.

“I have never gone to Mecca on my previous voyages to Arabia, but every decent Muslim should at least go to Mecca once in his life.”

“I thought you were a Buddhist.”

“It’s complicated. But why does it matter? What I am doesn’t define who I am.”

He walked away.

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Days became years, and months became weeks – Zhi’s concept of time grew blurry.

The sailor who cleaned the floor was now a navigator, who determined their position and decided their direction through the movement of stars. He could never forget how bright the star was back then. The ocean and the sky blended together as the water reflected the starlight. It was as if they were floating in the sky. It was his favourite sight.

He learnt that Zheng He fell into the sea under the attack of a group of pirates. Zhi witnessed it several times afterwards too. Sometimes, they traded with the locals in ports, who occasionally offered them hospitality. However, their kindness was mostly declined. “We would like to keep on going,” said their leader. The fleet was restless, and Zhi loved it.

It was exciting, how everything ahead of them was unknown, yet they would always figure out a way.

Most importantly, Zhi was no longer lost.

He always considered himself a resident of the ocean, but inside he knew he belonged to China, his homeland.

But why did it matter? What he was could not define who he was. He was Chinese, but he also belonged to the world. He would show China to the world.

Suddenly he felt like he knew himself. Suddenly he had a purpose.

They were being attacked again, Zhi was one of those fighting on the deck. A blade went through his abdomen, and he fell into the sea from the bow.

“Zhi? Wake up, we are in Brisbane.”

# Two Ladies' Voices on the Same Wavelength

*Munsang College, Lee, Tsz Lok – 13*

## *Scarlett*

Rita and I were in the museum, walking with our teacher, Ms Chan, who was leading us onto the tour of the Treasures of the Ming Dynasty, along with a bunch of classmates who obviously could not take it any longer. They were about to doze off.

When I touched a glass of this small but delicate drawing, I passed out.

When I came around, it was dawn already. The sun lit the sea up, sending fiery colors to dance on the wide blue. Rita was sitting next to me, staring at the sea half-heartedly.

'Scarlett, you finally woke up! I don't know where this is, but this doesn't seem 2019!' My tired brain started to think. There were often rumors that people disappeared in this museum, but...

On this land, the people didn't have houses. Everyone lived in camps and spoke unknown languages. Suddenly, I heard a familiar sentence of Chinese. That's when I knew, and pulled Rita towards this ship of Chinese.

How the Chinese got so far, I had no idea. But how I got so far, to a dynasty of China, I was ultimately muddled.

I was brought to this little room, only enough for two, when I finally looked at my clothes. I was still in my jeans and T-shirt! How did they not notice a stranger with weird clothing? I decided to experiment with it.

That's why Rita and I were in their food storage, watching the cooks, Chow and Ma, cook. When Chow came to get the ingredients, he was surprised. But our frantic faces told him that nothing was to be said. Guess we didn't have invisibility!

Then, Ma came to get him some potatoes. He just seemed that he didn't see us. Interesting. How did Chow see us?

When the moon, a brilliant silver tonight, shone, and Rita slept, I sauntered to Chow's room. In Chinese, we talked, and I started to know about him seeing through invisibility.

Chow said that he was on Captain Zheng's ship for all these years, and has been hugely rewarded. The golden locket he kept in his pocket, a memory from their 3rd Journey, was said to be magical.

Captain Zheng, still a young warrior then, was fighting his way through the treasures of the seas. Through his last voyages, he gained fame and popularity over the seas. China was a king of the sea because of him.

The 48 ships carrying 28000 people sailed triumphantly through the seas, as their leader, Zheng found treasures. Not as in only gold and silver, but also friendly bonds with other countries, and gifts from them. Chow was 20 back then, and remembered Zheng's kindness and yet, superiority that didn't need anger and punishment.

The most remarkable place was Siam, Chow said. It had a beautiful smell, and the wood was exceptionally fragrant. Some of the essence was stored in his locket.

He let me smell it. It was kind of like my conditioner, which was weird. Maybe that's the link to him seeing us.

Continuing the story, Chow said that Captain Zheng gave the Siamese people two silver chops, and that's how he protected China from the Siamese navy.

The pirates were another story. One with war. But that's a story for another day. Chow was tired. So was I.

## *Rita*

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I woke in the middle of the night, and went to get myself some snacks. Scurrying to the kitchen, I went to get some corn. Chow and Ma slept peacefully on the little room beside the kitchen. I finished the corn as silently as possible, and headed back to our little 'chamber'.

The next day, the boat reached Pahang. Chow, the intellectual, put some herbs to make the others able to see us. Then he introduced us at breakfast. 'These are the Lees, they're brothers who cook. I've been training them and they should be cooking well.'

Funny how girls cannot go on these trips.

The remark went and we scurried back to the kitchen. With Ma, the four of us formed the kitchen with me and Rita chopping and slicing all over it. Interesting how teenagers then cooked so well.

It was night soon and Ma and Chow continued to spice up the journeys of Captain Zheng.

'It was the first journey. We stopped at Liujiagang honouring the goddess of journeys. Then we sailed to Java. The barley there was beautifully grown in patches of land and gold, all the people smiled and were most welcoming.' Said Ma, smiling at the thought. 'But then, Alagakkonara was another story.' Chow continued the story. 'Alagakkonara people were really hostile! They just had arrows flying everywhere and wars being fought so we went away. Chen was the real fight. This pirate was totally owning the seas back then. Captain Zheng actually bought gifts as token of peace to prevent wars and to negotiate the pacification of the seas but the wicked guy planned to kill us off. And get the silk and gold, of course. Captain Zheng fought magnificently, winning our total trust and respect.' 'And also some fear too,' Ma added. 'The guy killed 5000 pirates and burnt 10 or so ships. He was so great, young and strong. That's how us Mings became the king of the seas.' Back in our bedroom, I was lying down with thought. Why kill so many people while you can make friends? Why are there wars when there actually can be peace? And when did China become King of the Seas?

Scurrying to the board because I just couldn't sleep, I saw Ma on the board at the left, and Scarlet watching the stars with Chow, looking sleepy. Walking towards Ma, I almost gave him a heart attack. 'Explain to me more trips.' I asked, trying to find a better position to lie on and see the stars. 'Heh,' he smirked. 'Someone's liking the stories.' 'Shut up.' I grumbled. 'So about the second voyage, the main aim was to reach peace between Java and Ming. The Java kings were strong and were the only kingdom that could balance the Ming navy. So forcefully we had to reach peace, right? The story was that Java kings had once killed 170 Chinese ambassadors from Ming. And even that was a mistake, the king thought they were his rivals from East Java.

Java was forced to give money for compensation or war would be inflicted. After finishing compensation, still ships would be used to supervise them...' I was sound asleep.

## *Scarlett*

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The orange sun woke me. Drool was lying on my face, which I cleared up immediately. Seeing Rita also on the deck, I woke her and dragged her to the head of the ship, smirking when I saw she was lying beside Ma, probably listening to stories last night.

We were wondering how we'd get back home these weeks. On the deck, as we admired the waters, we thought. Rita asked if we'd go to other places and touch something. By that thought, I started to find anything that was related to the ship. There was still time for a story about the journey. Finding the storage for books, I headed to the 'library' with Rita.

While 'ruining', actually finding noisily in the library, Captain Zheng found us. 'So you two are inspired. How 'bout a small story? It was the second journey. After our fight with Java, we went to cut wood in Pulan Sembilan. The wood was exceptionally fragrant and we cut a lot back to our home, China.

He held a black box with fine lines and opened it.

'Time to go back home.'

# Imagine

*PLK Tong Nai Kan JS College, Tamang, Rohan – 15*

**To many, the new tales from Ming Dynasty seem to be about treasures or fortune. I wonder if there is more than that. I see some wonderful ideas just from glancing this – it's a goal that we long for to see. Imagine! That is me as a captain.**

My goal is to be an adventurer. In the future, I hope to explore the world before I die. I am dedicated to finishing my school and university. After that, I'll start my real journey. I will visit the highland, polar region, desert and forest.

You may say I'm a dreamer, I think it is the modern way of "Voyaging", the main reason of why I want to achieve this goal is because that I want to experience everything. I only live once so I have to take the chance to fully live my life. I hate boring life. Being an adventurer is exciting and dangerous. I like challenges a lot and I am not afraid of the obstacles. Even though I may die during the journey, I have no regrets. In order to achieve this goal, I'll learn and join field survival courses to improve my survival skills and find a personal trainer to help me. I also plan to achieve this goal.

But I'm not the only one. First, I will tune my mindset completely. I have to leave my comfort zone, explore somewhere different, and try local food from other countries that I have never tried and had no guts to eat, It's time to train up my courage starting from now! I'll never give up this goal. My fellow mates are with me in this. Our story goes on as the big wave is now coming to us and my crew depends on my skills to find the treasure on the x island that is hidden in Mainland. We only have one more hour to go as we passed all the provinces of the Mainland from The South Sea to The Northman cave.

We shall sail as we "imagine"!

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lai, Valerie – 11*

Tom gaped at the looming figure above him. She was the ship for the “Ming Voyages”, and she was ready to set sail tomorrow morning. As soon as he realized that she was the famous ship, he dashed forwards to the open door. The crew should have locked the door if they knew that an escapee like Tom would go on the ship. He looked around. No one was around, and the sun began to rise. He had to take this chance. He could leave now and take on an adventurous life, or stay home and get on with his terrible life of being starved and beaten. He didn’t need to think twice. With one graceful leap, he jumped onto the beautiful ship right before she closed her big wooden door.

“Who goes there?” The harsh call of a person woke the sleepy Tom up. It took him a few seconds to come back to Earth. Why of course! He was on the grand ship, going on the Ming Voyages secretly, leaving his draughty home behind! But then he also realized the consequences if he was caught. He heard tales of captains who dumped anyone off the ship if they didn’t obey him! Remembering this, he shivered with fear. “I hear you, intruder! Come out, stop whimpering!” The voice sounded again. It was a girl’s voice, but aggressive. Tom then realized that he was whimpering like a hungry puppy. He couldn’t stop himself. The footsteps came nearer and nearer. Tom whimpered louder and louder. Bang! The crate he was hiding behind flew out of the way. It was a girl. She had wavy auburn hair, pale, freckled face and warm hazel eyes. When the girl saw Tom, her face softened. She asked quietly, “Are you okay? I hope that I didn’t scare you too much. You know, because I’m a girl and everything.” upon hearing that, Tom immediately sprang to his feet and reassured the girl, “Don’t worry, I won’t look down on you just because you are a girl. Many brave people I know are girls and some weak little mites are boys. By the way, I’m Tom. What’s yours?” The girl broke into a smile and said, “I’m Natalie. Nice to meet you. You would like to meet the rest of the crew. I could say that you were my friend. I don’t have any and it would be nice to have one.” With saying that, Natalie slipped her hand into Tom’s and pulled him out to deck. How lucky can he be? Finding a friend right on his first day on the ship!

Later on, they met the rest of the crew. Some were very friendly, like Huang, the old man on the lookout at night plastered on a big grin when he heard that Natalie had a friend. “Why my dear, you have finally found a friend! I’m glad to know that, girl!” And saying that, he clapped her on that back so hard that Natalie nearly fell over. The captain was also very welcoming. Tom could finally see where did Natalie get those warm hazel eyes. “So, you’re Natalie’s friend, right? Well, aren’t I glad to see you! Well, it’s awfully nice that my lonely daughter finally has a friend. Unlike her older brother.” Hearing this, Tom could feel Natalie getting angrier. Maybe her brother gets all the attention. When they went out of the captain’s cabin, Natalie vented furiously, “Ugh! Just because my brother is a boy, everyone thinks that he is the better one! He gets a better education, that’s what I know! I bet if I went to school as well I could have done even better than my brother! He doesn’t even bother to know his multiplication tables, yet I know how to handle percentages! Why don’t they think more of women nowadays!” Tom felt sorry for her. Although he wasn’t a girl, he understood when people were treated unfairly, what would he feel like. Being the youngest of all six siblings is pretty hard to attract attention once you could take care of yourself.

The next stop was to go to see Natalie’s brother, Nathan. When they got to the door, Natalie paused for a moment, put on a defiant scowl, and rapped on the finely carved wooden door. A series of clashes were heard, and the door clicked open. A boy, nearly fifteen, answered the door with an annoyed scowl on his face. The two scowled at each other, their scowls growing angrier and uglier every second. Finally, Nathan growled, “What do you want, little loser?” Natalie retorted, “Well, since you are the oldest child in the captain’s family, it is tradition for the first– born SON to do the greeting of new members, am I right?” Nathan made a noise which sounded like a cross between a growl, a bark and a groan, and glared at Tom, scanning him from head to toe, as if he was an x– ray machine. Tom was taken back at Nathan’s behavior as a “First born son” but he still looked as calm as before. After Nathan realized that Tom wasn’t disclosing any emotion, he just said cold heartedly, “Ok, then, what’s– your– name, welcome to the crew of sailors of the Ming Voyages. Now get scrubbing the bottom of the deck with my horrid sister.” Tom had no choice but to go scrub the bottom of the deck with Natalie.

After a few days, Tom began to feel happy whenever Natalie is around. His eyes shone when Natalie woke him up everyday with a warm smile. Tom had never felt so happy before. Was he in love? Tom was not sure. All he knew was that he was lucky that he escaped and found himself on Natalie's ship. Well, it wasn't exactly her ship, but she was in it. However, all that stopped abruptly. One day, Natalie was walking at the edge of the ship with Tom when suddenly, her face went white, and she fainted with a weak gasp. Help was immediately fetched and Tom watched sadly as Natalie was carried to her cabin. A few hours later, the captain walked up to Tom and said gravely, "I'm so sorry Tom, but Natalie will not be able to come up for her duties in a short period of time. So, I have asked Nathan to take her place. I do hope you will get along with him, unlike her sister. Also, if you have any idea why she doesn't go along with her brothers and any other types of men, for that case." and with a deep sigh, he strode away. Tom thought for a moment, then he made up his mind to go and find Natalie, since it was his break.

He tiptoed into the cabin to find Natalie staring blankly at the top of the cabin. He whispered, "hey, Natalie, are you okay? I hope you are." without looking back, Natalie sighed a deep sigh and replied sorely, "Of course I'm not. My father scolded me off for being a sickly girl. He said that Nathan was definitely a better and more obedient child than I am. He is always in his cabin hiding out and he said that I wasn't a good girl just because I got sick! Life is so unfair nowadays," she said, blinking back tears. Tom felt sympathy for the poor girl. "Same here. My parents are harsh on me just because I'm the youngest. They tell me to behave better, unlike my older siblings. All of them are awarded scholarships to Universities but they rejected it because they didn't have enough money to supply everything else. I wish they would just let me do something without them looking at me all the time. Seriously, I don't get them at all." upon hearing that, Natalie immediately sprang to her feet with anger, scaring Tom. "What do you mean that it's not lucky? Don't you realize that you are so much luckier than everyone else like me? At least that you've got someone to look after you. They care about you a lot although they're poor. But me? I get ignored and all the attention is on my brother, who doesn't need any of it. He gets to go to school and gets a good education although he doesn't even obey the teachers, but you have all the attention from your parents although they don't have enough money for themselves. Think about it, Tom! Go away until you've learnt your lesson. I thought I liked you, but now I know that we're no match at all. Just go!" she screamed, pushing Tom out of her cabin. Tom was furious. How dare a dumb girl like her push me out? She's not a boss of Tom. he could jump off the boat and no one could stop him. He was red from head to toe now. He had enough of this. With one giant leap, he vanished under the waters.

Until now, no one knows where he is. Natalie, upon remembering this, didn't feel sorry for the boy at all. Now, she was full of wrinkles, sitting in a sofa of a cosy living room, drinking tea from a china cup, with children playing and adults talking all around her. She had been successful. She didn't need anything else to help her anymore. It was Tom's fault, not hers. She had followed her dreams, gotten enough money to go to college, and written books and books for everyone to read about her adventures at the Ming Voyages. Although she didn't want to go on the Ming Voyages, she did get some good out of it.



# The Power of Tin Hau

*Renaissance College, Wong, Ava – 11*

First, a note for my father:

I'm writing down our adventure as you told me to. Yes, I'll remember to bury it so people in the future can read it, and I will make it present tense if you don't mind. Because it just feels good to be in the present. It's more real... So here it is...

I've persuaded Father to take me on his next trip! Not to brag, but he's the captain of a ship! The ship is small and excluding father and me, there will only be five people onboard. People call us pirates, but we only steal things from the Wokou. They are Japanese pirates that steal treasure for themselves, whereas we give out gold and silk treasure to poor people who starve! We don't use weapons or hurt people! We're not like the Wokou.

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I board the ship with Father and my ginger cat, Yuen. Yuen's jade collar glistens in the sunlight.

A skinny man greets us. "Luk Ming! You've brought your daughter?!"

"Of course, Fat Chan, and her name is Luk Tang. Don't worry, she won't be any trouble."

The ship contains stacks of chests, and the pirates stare at me as I look around.

"Where are we going now?" I ask.

"We've found a map leading to a mysterious treasure! It's a tiny statue of Tin Hau, the goddess of the sea! The legend is, if you hold it, you'll be able to command water! With such power, we can collect more treasure, then give it to the people who live in poverty... and some for ourselves of course! A lot of people suffered because of the Ming Emperor's sea ban order."

Father points to a map pinned to a pole.

"But... why are you a pirate?" I can't seem to stop asking questions today.

Father stares into the distance. "It's because of my childhood. As you know, your grandparents were fishermen, so they lived on the coastline."

"Yes."

"But living on the coastline wasn't allowed. So we had to move. We didn't have enough money to buy a house, let alone build one. I remember sleeping in the bitter cold without shelter," Father grits his teeth. "You know how Grandpa died..."

I had never seen my Grandpa. And no one had ever spoken about him, until now.

"So!" Father asks Fat Chan, "Have we arrived yet?"

"Yes, Captain! We will be docking in approximately one hour!". The seven of us cheer.

Yuen's jade collar brushes my cheek. I found it on a beach when I was small. Father says the Japanese believe it contains some sort of magical power. But I'm not Japanese. I'm Chinese, from the Ming Empire.

"Time to go, Luk Tang!" Father shouts. Finally!

The surface of the island is covered with rocks. Withered flowers and dead trees seem to glare at me as I explore. We walk slowly down the gangplank. That's strange, another ship is anchored near the island.

"Father? Who does this ship belong to?" Father runs towards the ship to get a closer look.

"It's the Wokou ship. The selfish Matsuura! The Wokou have come!"

“Everyone! Beware! Matsuura’s crew has also arrived!” Father announces. We fall silent. Matsuura? So that’s the leader of the horrible Wokou? I look at the ground for footprints. None. Of course there wouldn’t be footprints on such a rocky island. Suddenly, something blue catches my eye. I brush the rocks away. A picture of a wave carved into the ground beside it, is a handle!

“Father, I’ve found something!” Everybody surrounds me.

“Unusual.” Father pulls the handle. It’s a trap door! A staircase is revealed. Father glances at me.

“Father, can I go down?”

“Fine. But be careful.” Father turns to Fat Chan. “You’re our lookout, Fat Chan.”

As we go down, the light from the surface fades. I can’t see, but nobody complains. We continue going down the staircase in the dark. We sense light coming from the distance. We follow Father towards the light. Other pirates! They must be the Japanese Wokou. They are holding torches. Their backs are turned against us. Father glares at them.

“Matsuura!” He shouts. The biggest Wokou turns around first. The others follow.

“Ah. Luk Ming. *Konichiwa*. I expected you.” In his grasp is the statue of Tin Hau. He has the magical statue!

“*Nekkuresu!*” A wokou points to me. He sounds excited, but I have no idea what it means.

Everybody stares. Why is he pointing at me?

“Don’t touch her!” Father warns.

“GIRL! Come!” Matsuura orders.

“DON’T, LUK TANG!” Father shouts.

I take a step towards Matsuura. If I don’t, he’ll kill the rest of the pirates. Matsuura steps closer towards me, his sword in his hands. The blade is long and slick, a Japanese sword. I hate weapons. They are nothing but tools for war and chaos! Father pushes me behind him. He has no weapons.

“Don’t hurt my daughter!”

Matsuura laughs. The sound of laughter stops and he kicks Father’s legs. Father is knocked onto the ground, groaning.

“Father!” I scream.

I turn to the pirates, who are doing nothing, “Help! Please!”

They immediately run over and to help father. Some restrain Matsuura. But the Wokou swing their swords and the pirates back away. “Luk Ming, your pirates are cowards!” Matsuura chuckles. He easily fights off the pirates and snatches Yuen!

“YES!” Matsuura roars. Matsuura rips the jade necklace off of Yuen’s neck.

Matsuura takes the statue out of his vest and plugs it into a slot in the statue. So he wasn’t after me? He was after Yuen? Or more specifically the jade necklace I found so many years ago.

The ceiling starts to vibrate. Pieces of rubble fall on my head.

Father gets to his feet. “No... He’s controlling the sea! We must get out of here!”

We run and run and run. We hear a loud noise and water seeps in through the ceiling, but leaving Matsuura

and his wokou untouched. I glance at the wall of water Matsuura has created. I have to stop him. Father sometimes thought girls weren't as brave as boys. But if I stop Matsuura, I can prove myself! I make my decision.

"Luk Tang! Don't!" Father shouts. I don't listen. Lives are at stake. I'm soaked in cold water, but I don't care. I swim towards Matsuura. I struggle to breathe until I'm finally gasping the oxygen from the air. A Wokou is holding my dear cat in a corner.

"Are you crazy?" Father shouts.

"That statue doesn't belong to you!" I yell, ignoring Father.

Matsuura raises his eyebrows, "But it doesn't belong to you either."

"I won't keep it! But it's in the wrong hands now."

"You're not tak- ahh! There's a roach on it!" Matsuura shrieks and drops the statue. He's afraid of a cockroach? The wall of water collapses and water fills the room. I grab the statue. It isn't burning. The statue maybe heated up to stop Matsuura for me! Although that sounds too crazy even for a magical statue. The jade necklace is plugged into the slot of the statue. I put it back on Yuen's neck.

Make the water go back to the sea, I tell the statue. It reacts quickly, and the water gets sucked back up the ceiling. I run up the staircase with father and Yuen, with the Wokou following close behind. The pirates are waiting for us. I run to the edge of the island, throw the statue as far as I can, and it sinks deep into the sea.

"NOO!" Matsuura cries. His eyes are red with anger, "YOU!" He swings his sword at me.

My feet are glued to the spot with fear. A yellow blob jumps in front of me and shields me. The yellow blob falls to the ground. Matsuura laughs. That yellow blob is Yuen... She sacrificed her life... for me. Yuen licks my face and freezes. I take the necklace off her with trembling hands and put it around my neck.

Suddenly, I feel a different voice in my head. *I'm Tin Hau. Before, I took possession of your cat's body. Wear this necklace and you can possess the power of Tin Hau. The statue's useless.* I jump up in surprise. The Wokou are chasing us. Save us, Tin Hau! I turn around. A wall of water blocks the Wokou from catching us. We board our ship and I throw the necklace into the ocean. I don't deserve it either.

Maybe a few hundred years later, you'll find it. I hope it will be in good hands.

# The Voyages

*Sha Tin College, Kwan, Gordon – 11*

There was once a noble man named Zheng He, he was also a slave that served the honorable prince. One day he was suddenly summoned to the Shanghai palace, only to retrieve a mysterious scroll for his eyes only. But wait, how did he become the slave he is today?

Zheng He grew up cheerfully with his loving father. Both his father, and grandfather were outstanding Muslim leaders during the Mongol Yuan dynasty, he himself was an ambitious child. On one fateful day, Zheng He was listening to his father speaking of the Muslim religion inside a mosque, when a group of soldiers sent by the prince secretly bribed the guard with precious, shining gems and money to gain access to the building. The guard's face was beaming like a bag full of glitter, it was all worth more than a years pay. It was then time for their next step – to kidnap the young boy. While everyone was distracted with their prayers, the prince's men quickly snatched the child, fleeing the mosque. They ran like their life depended on it, straight to the giant chariots. Together, they maneuvered the horses back to the palace. Meanwhile at the mosque, Zheng He's father stopped talking and stared at the bench where Zheng He should have been. He was nowhere to be found. Slowly falling to his knees, he put his face in his hands. Sorrowfully he questioned, "What have I done to lose my beloved, little child?" However both father and son did not know that an adventure was waiting for Zheng He.

As the soldiers reach the palace up in the giant mountains, Zheng He instantly woke up, wondering where he was. He soon figured he had been kidnapped. Struggling in multiple ways, he tried to escape; pushing, tearing and punching but none of it helped, it just bruised and hurted him. He soon gave up. Finally, he was brought to the man himself, the prince. As he walked towards him there was a disgusting stench of slavery. Everyone bowed down at the prince's presence. He then decided what to do to this young, strong boy. With the perfect idea, he firmly shouted, "From now on you will be my slave. But you will be educated once every week, someone get him a list of chores!" The entire room stood shocked. Why would a little boy be a slave, yet have education, it was very unusual. Zheng He knew his only option was to obey and do exactly what the prince demanded, for he knew there was no escape. Over the years, Zheng He became smarter and smarter, promoted annually and given major assignments. A few years later, he found himself in Shanghai waiting for something important.

Upon stepping into the tabernacle, Zheng He is then greeted by the emperor himself. He presents Zheng He with a ponderous scroll of instructions. Upon examining the entire scroll, the prince is intrigued. He then commands Zheng He to do exactly what it dictated, and to take with him ten thousand men. "Yes my prince!" Zheng He obeyed. Alas the prince says "Good luck." Zheng He spoke with confidence, "Thank you, I will return bestowing China with money and power."

Once Zheng He allocated everyone their jobs. He announced the orders authoritatively; to build a boat that has never been seen before, the one and only Chinese treasure hunter. A spacious ship larger than anything anyone has ever seen before, it was equipped with; a giant net to catch fish for the duration of the long voyage, six grand cannons on each side and a storage place for the commodities they find. As they were working on the last sections of the first ship their operation was secretly being spied on by a group of mysterious creatures. Though they've been spotted around the world, no one knew who or what they are, only that they keep the skulls of their enemies featured on the ship. Once the prince's men finished one hundred boats, unfortunately a few men were lost in the process, but Zheng He was confident that the expedition would be a success. As they were about to set off, the prince ran to Zheng He as he had one last message and item to give him, "This book is for you, do not open it unless you're in the face of grave danger. It will save you and your men. Keep it safe."  
"Thank you." replied Zheng He, and that was the beginning of the treasure voyages.

Their first challenge was to catch dinner. Quickly, the crew threw the huge net on the water's surface, it was as heavy as Goliath. Everyone was shocked by the amount of fish before their eyes. While they dragged the net back aboard, Zheng He stood up and shouted, "My dear crew, let's drink our traditional tea ceremony to remember our lovely family members." After that, the capacious ship set off on the start of their first voyage!

Zheng He was alone at night when he remembered the prince gave him the instructions to open the book if he ever stumbled across perils. He was curious, but of course he wanted no trouble. When suddenly a faintly translucent, wooden looking ship drew close. Zheng He quickly opened the book and words inside glowed, he read it out aloud, "If you are reading this I suspect you are in the midst of a peril. Observe the ship, is it covered in wreckage, ancient almost, equipped with cannons, it has no living crew and finally the ship is completely silent. This is the mythical Ghost Sailor. No one has survived it and lived to tell the tale." Zheng He checked the characteristics. To his dismay, it was! Zheng He and his crew prepared for battle, firing with all their power. The ancient ship appeared to start sinking, the ghostly crew was awoken and they began to retaliate. They fired back ammunition of their own. Luckily the prince's reinforced ships held up. The battle wrecked havoc between both fleets, cannon balls flew back and forth like never seen before. After a long gruelling battle the ghostly ship finally retreated. The crew of ghost all hissed in displeasement. Zheng He's crew on the other hand all rejoiced over their well deserved victory, but he knew there was more to come.

After a very long five years of killing, collecting precious duds and commodities, was time for the crew and Zheng He to return back to where they belong and most importantly, rejuvenate. They were immensely proud of their achievements. Meanwhile, when Zheng He and his crew were returning, the prince's servants were constant on a look out. Once they spotted the first sign of Zheng He's return the cite citizens all quickly hid except one man. As Zheng He steered to harbour he noticed something unusual, a figure standing in the middle of the dock Zheng He then shouted, "Move out the way!" but as he got closer he realised it was his father! He could recognise the man anywhere, despite his now silvery hair and slightly more wrinkles. Zheng He was speechless, he jumped off the boat and hugged him as they were finally reunited.

Before the celebration began, Zheng He was rewarded with gold and jewels, but the most important his father. After the sun set and celebration end Zheng He was in panic as he couldn't find his father. He rushed to the river in search for him. Only to eventually find him under the moon's shadow soaking in the scenery. They laughed and talked the night away, catching up on the long, lost years. Was this the last of Zheng He's adventure.

# The Troubles of Sailing

*Sha Tin College, Ng, Ryan – 11*

Looking back on it thirty years later, it all seemed comical, mildly dangerous at most. However, at that time I thought we were surely doomed. It was all down to our leader, Zheng He. He promised our survival; the greatest captain of the seas, and a trusted friend of the Emperor. It was my honor to be his cabin boy. Over the years, traveling together, we struck up a close friendship, if you heard my fellow sailors' stories, you'd be able to see why we all place our lives in his hands. Together, we faced many hardships, but the one that we all take pride in is the Ming Treasure Voyage.

Despite the three decades, the memories are still fresh and vivid. I was no older than twelve, in front of the wheel, enjoying the fresh, salty sea breeze brushing past my face. While being faintly aware of the familiar heated voices a few meters away from me, I was entirely captivated by the view. Right at that moment, Zheng He and the chief navigator stormed on board, hauled up the anchor, rolled out the map and we were off again! The breeze immediately increased tenfold, so powerful that I had to sit on my hat to prevent it from rolling away in the breeze. Meanwhile, I mulled over what they were arguing about. Zheng He must have noticed the sullen expression on my face, and thus proceeded to lighten up the mood. "Cheer up boy! The end is in sight!" Pointing at a distant group of islands far on the horizon. I stood up, taking a glance at the maps – they always fascinated me. I spotted a large, red circle enclosing a patch of seemingly barren ocean, underneath were the words – 'Beware, hidden coral reef'. I pointed this out to Zheng He, who patted me on the shoulder, assuring me that the navigator was well aware and we had already passed it. That was what I presumed they were arguing about. Suddenly, the ship made an ominous tearing noise and we started sinking. In a quick glance, I fell into the deep black abyss of unconsciousness.

A sudden gust of wind gave me the rudest of awakenings. I was lying on a fine, white, stretch of sand, completely devoid of rocks. Others however, were not so lucky. Some were tossed inland by the thrashing ocean like a toddler would toss its toys; more bodies were still coming in. Quickly glancing around, I nearly jumped out of my shoes when I saw Zheng He pacing near me, fuming with anger and confusion. "That infuriating, stubborn navigator! I told him about the coral reef. Fate will have him one day." It was unsettling to see him lose his composure; ever since a young child I've always known him to be a man of calm disposition.

The next morning, there was something that drove everything else right out of my mind. The sun was beginning to peek up above the mountains as I slowly woke up from my deep slumber in the forest, I realized people were moving past me towards a dark silhouette in the distance. I leaped off the not so comfy forest floor, all traces of sleep and weariness instantly vanished. What was it? What's happening? I slowly crept forward to find out. It wasn't just the silhouette that could be dangerous. The forest floor was littered with perils. There was an unseen number of roots and vines snaking across the ground, sudden holes and ditches that could cripple without warning. Don't even get me started on the wild life.

Some fellow sailors and I crept closer, a beast appeared to be hunched over something. Everyone had their theories and the critics against said theories.

"A monster, definitely."

"If it is, what kind is it?"

"I don't know, it looks massive though."

"Maybe it's a yeti!"

"Yetis don't exist."

Zheng He finally decided that he had enough of all this nonsense. Rushing forwards with his sword raised out, he raced ahead to confront the threat, a few others followed suit. Halfway there, they stopped and started laughing. Any fear amongst us quickly dissipated and instead, a wave of curiosity and confusion took over. It was our ship! And to think that we were petrified at the sight of that! One by one, the crew members crept out like timid mice and soon there was an outburst of laughter. Alas, the good feelings were soon vanquished and the reality of a gaping hole in our hull hit us like a horse carriage.

We immediately set to work, scouring the ship for anything remotely useful. Everyone's hands were full and it all soon became a vast heap in front of Zheng He. He began the laborious task of searching through

the enormous stockpile, recovering most of our treasures, discarding very little and keeping the rest. Eventually, he found some mini axes; which looked like they couldn't hurt a fly. Zheng He then sent three of the strongest men to chop down trees. I remember looking at them, thinking that they would be at it all day.

With one of the large hacked down trees, Zheng He fashioned some crude spears, ordering some men to hunt down wild animals, or what we called 'dinner'. There was some bickering to be heard between the crew, but they ultimately kept silent. Meanwhile, Zheng He built a campfire, igniting it with a plank of wood and a stick. Not long after, the crew members returned with a colossal pig slung over their shoulder, apparently the forest was teeming with them. Zheng He praised them for their fine work, but also warned them to kill the elder ones, leaving the younger pigs to reproduce. After digging into the magnificent creature, it was time for a good night's rest, then resuming the escape preparation later. At this point, everyone was yet to be aware of our greatest danger, right here among us.

A bunch of shuffling footsteps woke me up, along with the muffled cursing of a man who most likely fell in a hole and twisted their ankle. I gradually got up and stole towards the ragtag invasion of men. They were all clustered together, gathered around someone. The leader looking figure then took out a long, jagged knife, preparing to plunge it down. They were about to murder someone there and then! I ran. Once I was in arms reach, I dived forwards. As I collided into the knife wielding man, his band let out a startled gasp, scattering immediately into the woods. I then attempted to pin him down, and by doing so, his identity was revealed. The navigator! I focused my gaze on him, my eyes fixated on a small cloth bag. It was our jewels! I made a grab for it. Unfortunately, in doing so, I relinquished my grip and he ran away. I had a feeling we were never going to see him again. As I looked down, chest heaving at Zheng He, I had to suppress a giggle. He was still sleeping! He somehow slept through all that commotion!

In the morning, we all looked around for the navigator and his guidance, but to everyone's surprise (aside from myself), he was gone. At this point, we had to rely on Zheng He, who merely shrugged and pointed to four different positions on the map, each one more unlikely than the last. We were lost. As we all started chopping down trees to make planks, Zheng He sat on a rock, deep in thought. I walked over to see what was going on, my brow covered in sweat. He spotted me and sparked up a conversation.

"Even if we had enough planks, we can't be sure our handiwork will survive the trip..."

"We could risk it."

"And risk losing our boat? No!"

"But we have limited supplies!"

"Fine. But if we sink, I'm blaming it on you." He gave me a stern look, followed by a smirk.

And so it commenced. We set off repairing our ship. Luckily, we had a skilled carpenter on board for exactly this type of scenario, but even with his skills, it took that day and much of the next to complete the repairs. No amount of wood felt sufficient. We hurried to cut down trees, stripped them of bark, cut them into thin slices, then painstakingly slowly nailed them over the hole. Finally, loaded our rapidly dwindling supplies into the ship. As we limped to port, we were greeted with astonishment, as we were all given up for dead. A few days later, I received a letter from the navigator fashioned from rough bark, requesting help. I laughed and threw it away. A little cruel perhaps, but it was all a near murderer deserved.

# The Diary of a Boatswain in the Ming Treasure Voyages

Sha Tin College, Ngai, Nicholas – 11

11/07/1405

Dear Diary

Today is the day of the departure Ming's Treasure Fleet. Everybody's excited about that day, and they're all complimenting the Emperor's great "generosity" and "thoughtfulness". Me, personally, I think it's a bunch of old tosh. Old Yongle's gone out of his mind. Giving up and risking so many things just to award other people for doing nothing? And what could possibly not go wrong with Zheng He as Admiral? And half the crew is gonna end up betraying us and steal all the treasure away for themselves.

Anyway, the Emperor held a big banquet for the crew members of the treasure fleet. At first I didn't want to go, but the Emperor said how "wonderful" the expedition would be. At last he convinced me, but not because I wanted to go, but because I wanted him to shut his mouth. Also, if I didn't go, I would receive a hundred thrashes personally from him. So overall, it was more forcing than convincing. And I heard from somewhere that the Emperor was looking for "volunteers". Wow, I'm really starting to see the thoughtfulness in this guy.

At some point during the banquet, the Emperor gave out gifts to each of the crew members of the voyage according to their rank – so that meant I would receive a gift as well! Finally! Some respect for me! I'm starting to see a turn in this guy's personality. Knowing Emperor Yongle, I'm not expecting the gift to be all fancy or whatever, and it turned out I was correct. When I received my gift, it looked tiny in its wrapping paper – but hey – who's counting? I mean, less is more, right? A gift is better than no gift, right? Well, unless it's a bomb. But when I tore open the wrapping paper I found something even worse than a bomb – no, thankfully not a nuke, but a lump of coal.

How did you know that was just what I wanted? Gee, thanks a lot.

After that nonsense, sacrifices and prayers were offered to Tianfei, the patron goddess of sailors, hoping to ensure a successful journey and a safe passage during the voyage. When it was my turn I snickered at how long and stupid her dress-cloak looked like, causing a storm with Admiral Zheng He when he caught me red-handed.

When we were finally finished, Emperor Yongle announced that everyone would go back to their rooms and prepare for the departure and return here in one hour's time. Then one by one the members of the crew filed out of the room with full stomachs. I returned to my room, which is where I am writing this now. I know I'm supposed to be packing, but I've already done that in the morning, so here I am. But I've locked the doors anyway to avoid any misunderstanding. Hang on – I hear Wang Jinghong calling me – I'll inform you on the latest news when I'm on the ship – okay, okay, coming...

Okay, I'm back. Right now I'm below deck on the ship – locked all doors, all curtains drawn again. I never knew the hour had passed so fast. I was the latest. I still have that very vivid memory of me walking down the hall by myself, footsteps echoing off the narrow walls of the room. I could still remember every single pair of cold eyes in the hall fixed upon me, and the Emperor's cruel snarl when I reached him.

"You're late."

The slight thought of it made me shudder. I guess old Yongle's was in a real hurry and was eager to get us departed earlier, so he didn't have time to decide my punishment yet. So I hope he forgets about it all when we come back. Even though the man is as old as time, his brain is literally a library. He can literally remember everything. The time you spilt coffee on his lap eighteen years ago? Check. The poem your teacher ordered you to recite as homework when you were in preschool? Got that. It's like everything he has heard or saw has been seared into his memory. But the thing that annoys me is that the stuff that he wants to remember are unforgettable, and the things that he doesn't, like the time he still owes you five dollars or the time he saw your grandpa nude are forgotten immediately – it's like he gets to choose what to remember and what to not.

Anyways, here I am at the ship. It's 7:13 pm – we're going to depart in 17 minutes. I'm drawing out the curtains and I can see the sea – a vast, open space full of mysteries – also known as the middle of nowhere. I vomit into a bucket. Gross. Some of it gets on this diary. Double gross. I just need to scrub it off with my finger – there. Ugh.

The ship gives a sudden jolt, making me lurch off my bed. The sick spills out of the bucket. Messy. Something tells me that there are no cleaners on this ship.

I know that there is only so less information you know about this expedition, so I'm gonna fill you in with the basics – there were 27,800 men departing from Nanjing (which is where we're currently at) on 255



ships. 62 of those were treasure boats (did I mention that this was a horrible idea?). We would sail down the Chinese coast towards the mouth of the Min River. We would arrive at Taiping Anchorage in the Changle District. From there we would await the northeast monsoon, and during the wait more prayers and sacrifices would be conducted for Tianfei, the patron goddess of sailors and stupid-looking dress-cloaks. I will inform you with more of the latest news when we arrive at that cursed place.

01/08/1405

*Dear Diary,*

*I was fast asleep when our ship bumped into the coast of Taiping Anchorage. The sudden jolt awoke me and I shouted, "IT'S A CANNON BLAST! HIT THE DECK!" and caused a lot of confusion from the people upstairs. How embarrassing.*

*We filed out of the boat one by one onto shore. I had received many venomous glances from Zheng He in my life, but today was a new record. I hopped out of the boat last, red-faced.*

*We conducted our prayers and sacrifices to the goddess of stupid looking dress-cloaks early in the morning, just according to plan. This time I was careful about not doing any snickering in front of Zheng He again, because the look on his face looked like it would not forgive – but he kept an eye on me 24-7 anyway, so I didn't get the chance.*

*There wasn't anything special today, apart from the fact that I shoved Jinghong a bit too hard when he called me a – well, best not say it, but I shoved him into the river and he almost swallowed a lily pad. My mistake was laughing – but I doubt that even if I didn't laugh I would be forgiven.*

*A few months later...*

01/10/1407

*Dear Diary,*

*Today I was awoken to cannon shots. This time, I mean real cannon blasts, not like the incident two months ago when I caused a commotion when we arrived at Taiping – I mean real cannon shots.*

*I shot out of bed like – well – a cannon, and snatched my sword off my desk, and dashed outside to join the fight – not before stopping before the mirror to straighten some pieces of hair sticking out of my head at odd angles. But when I finally arrived at the scene it did not look pretty.*

*The main deck was in chaos. But I had no time to comprehend the scene properly because I had other things to take care of. A pirate leapt at me, sword raised high above his head. I parried the blow with ease. I wasn't good at many things, but I have to admit I was a pretty good fighter.*

*He thrust his blade again, pressing me hard. Another swipe. Blocked. Another swipe. Parried.*

*Then I saw his mistake. He raised his sword high, preparing to deliver the killer blow, leaving a really obvious opening in his chest. I planted my boot on it and kicked hard, knocking him backwards into the water.*

*But the battle was not over yet. I had allowed myself to get distracted by momentarily watching him fall into the water. In seconds I was surrounded by grinning pirates.*

*"The games' up."*

*He was right. I looked around me. I saw the crew lying around me, dead or unconscious. I saw another pirate – possibly the captain pirate – holding a blade to Zheng He's throat. His lower lip was bleeding, his face was paper-white. Several people on our side were still up and fighting, but in seconds they were outnumbered, surrounded, just like me.*

*How was I supposed to drag myself out of this mess now?*

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**Note for Reader:** this story was cut short due to lack of space.

# Venture into the Unknown

*Sha Tin College, Wong, Bob – 11*

The gangplank is raised as the final few bundles of precious silk are handed on board as presents for whatever people they may find along the way. Trumpets blow and people cheer as the loaded treasure ships make their way into the unknown. What will they find there? Who will they meet? Will they even make it back alive? Nobody knows. The Emperor has ordered this venture as to find out the answers to these pressing questions, as well as the prospect of expanding the trade prospects and opportunities for Ancient China. By assigning a trusted mariner in Zheng He, who doubled as a translator as he was Muslim to head the fleet communication was not a problem. Protection against threats in the unknown was important. As a result, units of the Emperor's naval force a dispatched to the treasure ships as a safeguard against pirating. Sleek black cannons are mounted upon bright red turrets that shine like fresh blood and the ships are adorned with the crest of the Emperor and glow like a flame in the dark that is quickly settling on the fleet.

This is not an adventure short of danger and excitement. Very soon the naval force are put to work, their cannons booming as they fend off a large pirate offensive in the dead of night. Hooks grapple onto the Emperor's warships and the fight begins in earnest. The cries of the fallen can be heard even over the din of the cannons and the clash of swords as the soldiers rush to repel a boarding. Very soon the deck is slippery with blood but the pirates are no match for the organized fighting force of the Emperor's navy and are put to flight after sustaining heavy losses. Parting shots from both sides are fired, but none hit a target and the two sides drift away from each other.

A few weeks later, at the crack of dawn the sailors wake up to the cry of land. On board the treasure ships, precious silk cloth is being frantically bundled up as gifts to the natives and the soldiers gear up for a possible confrontation. Armour is carefully strapped on and swords honed in anticipation of a brawl as the fleet approaches the village. As the landing party steps ashore the locals bow respectfully and usher them onshore towards the village elders and the sailors follow, laden with the precious silk and china porcelain which they bear towards the town square. As a offering of peace, the gifts are handed over and hectic talks ensue, headed by Zheng He. Thanks to Zheng He's translation capabilities, an agreement is reached in which the village gets protection from China in return for use of the village as a trading outpost and a successful outcome is reached. The fleet restock food and the area surveyed as maps are crafted as strategic assets for China's military ambitions. The fleet cast off, chuffed at their success at diplomacy but also in awe by the local gifts, such as a battle helmet of full gold and a shield adorned with intricate patterns.

In other situations, force may be needed as persuasion as one morning the crew of a warship are briefed for a mission. The locals in this dense jungle area have resisted all peaceful attempts at diplomacy and need convincing that it is in their best interests to cooperate with China. The soldiers storm the jungle settlement, attacking dissenters who retaliate against the invasion and force the leader of the settlement to cooperate. This brutal show of force has shocked the natives who submit to the navy without resistance. The jungle is stripped of precious wood for furniture and building in return for no further military force on China's part and the Chinese depart victorious and the clear benefactors of the deal.

Sometimes, not everything goes to plan. One night, they are ambushed by a squadron of pirates and taken by surprise. Flames erupted on a warship as the pirates latched on and boarded. Arrows were launched into the sky and peppered the pirates, many finding a mark. The boom of the cannon was like the clap of thunder and the the splash of the waves was audible above the battle as the sharks took advantage of the bloodshed to pick up a tasty snack and fill their bellies. A feeble attempt to hold the line and stop the pirates reaching the treasure ships is smashed aside as the pirates make a beeline for the exposed treasure ships, their boats leaving a long trail of sea foam that quickly dissipated. Unbeknownst to them, the large treasure ships have a defense of their own. The thick iron plating on the hull resisted the full force of the pirate cannon and it's sheer size and weight meant it could crush the pirates underfoot with no trouble. The pirates realize they have been drawn into a trap and surrender to be taken as prisoner to the Chinese.

At last, the fleet reaches Mecca, the final destination. They disembark and talks with the Muslim majority start. Through this grand expedition, trade has been accomplished and deals struck, violent confrontations survived and religious ideas embraced. Trade between places along the journey and China has flourished, along with influence and knowledge through the Arab world, opening itself to the world and prosperity brought to the inhabitants of Ancient China.

This was truly a venture into the unknown, a venture that brought with it many benefits and prosperity to China and a venture that many a sailor still thinks about and remarks, "If only I was there."

# Noble Gluttony

*Sha Tin College, Wong, Clement – 12*

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## Zheng He

“Father, may I speak to you alone?”

“Yes, of course, after all, you are the heir to the throne. Come in,”

My father, Emperor Yongle is the gloriest and mightiest person I’ve ever known. I am his son Zheng He. “I walked down the streets disguised as a civilian today. I find it is an effective method to know what is happening in the country. Though I did hear something rather peculiar today, rumours that I am not your son. I never take gossip to heart until I overheard the guards also mentioning it. Is it true?” My father looked up to the ceiling, his face turned rigid. A few minutes later, his expression seemed to melt, and a warm smile plastered across his face. “Such preposterous thoughts. Rumours are rumours, meaning they are not true,” he sighed.

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## Zheng He

I stood at the door, I was about to enter when I heard my name. They are sending me off to battle other countries, to form alliances. Then my suspicions were validated. I am adopted and all the things that father claimed were rumours are real.

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## Zheng He

“Your grace, you are summoned to the throne room,” Seeing the emperor on his golden throne, I bowed. “Rise,” he said, “Zheng He, you are to set sail to help the empire conquer new lands, bring forth treasures, provide the kingdom with glory, wealth and respect. Set sail at once and leave for India. Without further ado, I wish you good luck,” Surprised and shocked, I prepared for the voyage.

Taking a glance at the sea, I caught a glimpse of rows of boats loaded with military needs. My mind flickered back to the meeting yesterday, “Do not tell him, he is an asset to the empire,” said the advisor. Rage fuelled my body with anger, I had a point to prove now.

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## Hua Deng

Being one of the soldiers on this expedition is not good. We usually battle on ground, not a ship. How did I end up here? I question how a prince with servants and no battle experience can effectively lead us. He doesn’t even know the crew. What does he look like again?

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## Zheng He

The emperor said to only form alliances, not enemies, which is one of the few things we both agree on. I explained that thoroughly to the soldiers too. An empire with an exceeding number of enemies is only destined for failure. Nations are stronger together than alone. I had to earn their trust and respect in order to become their leader.

As we neared the island, we left our ships in haste. What a weird nation. Different clothing and traditions. “Hello, where is your leader?” I said with a smile. The man pointed. A magnificent tower appeared before our eyes.

We headed toward the glistening castle, paths formed before us like Moses parting the red sea. We were greeted by guards who lead us to a room with a throne in the middle. A man with a crown sat on it while inspecting his jewellery. We bowed and rose. I explained how we were seeking to form a trade route. Negotiating with the skills I learnt before, we traded silk with gold and jewellery. Then we returned to China.

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## Emperor Yongle

I am quite surprised he made it back so swiftly. “Send him off to another journey, tell him to set sail immediately,” I said. I gazed off the balcony. He was giving the treasures to the civilians. Once or twice won’t matter.

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Zheng He

We were welcomed back with tears and cheers. I paced toward the crowd and gave some jewellery to them, wishing them all rich in happiness and money. A messenger came up to me. After his soft whispering, I was confused. The emperor is sending us on another trip? Looking up, I saw him with his general who looked down, smiling at me.

We continued on our voyage, but every time we returned. We are sent off to another.

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Hua Deng

Years passed by. We keep questioning amongst ourselves, what is the meaning of this endless voyage.

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Emperor Yongle

I ordered him to return the riches to me! Not those pests! The people are becoming wealthier and ungrateful, voicing their demands, flaunting their riches. "Tax collector, double the city's tax rate, effective immediately!"

---

Zheng He

Upon returning from our seventh voyage. Something felt awry. The streets were filled with beggars, their clothes all tattered and patched. A man whispered in my ear, "His Majesty has stripped us of our last dime. We cannot afford a single meal; the city survives only on bread and water now. Please don't give us anything, anyone who receives the wealth is punished heavily." Shocked, I headed straight for the palace. There he was, sprawled on his throne. Embellished with exceedingly excessive gems and gold. We started to quarrel, but I was soon escorted out by force.

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Emperor Yongle

Perhaps it is time to rid myself of him. That fool. He is no longer of use to me. The audacity he had to lecture me! ME! I am the emperor. This kingdom is mine to do as I please. "Guards, I want Zheng He dead within a week. The one who brings forth his head shall be rewarded."

---

Zheng He

Through our many long journeys, I've built a trusting relationship with the crew and the army. They were all professionals of their expertise. We practiced our arts together. Identifying our weaknesses and strengths, to allow for improvement. This morning I found a note beside my bed, "Beware of the emperor, he plans to assassinate you. --Guang Dat" Guang Dat is one of the guards from the palace, one of my treasured childhood friends too, we grew up together. I was shocked, but not surprised. The emperor has slowly become tyrannical, fuelled by gluttony ever since the voyages, I should have seen this coming.

Cautious wherever I went, my loyal men were always by my side. The day finally came. Soldiers marched through the city, every exit was heavily guarded, there was no way out. The people were in fury. The leaders of the towns gathered, preparing for a revolution. That was my chance to step out. I revealed my identity and explained the current situation. We rallied up all the citizens and planned to attack at dawn.

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Emperor Yongle

He disappeared. He's gone. We have reports of rebellion. "Send out the army at once. Remember, kill the prince!" The army was summoned, but most people were missing. The weapons were gone. The horses were taken.

---

Zheng He

I urged my steed forward, charging through the walls of soldiers, slashing and stabbing, my horse trampled any that stood in the way. As reinforcements charged into the wall, I signalled for arrows. A rain of fire flew swiftly into the army. I signalled to create a large carpet filled with sugar, attaching it with two arrows, it flew towards the enemy and with a single lit arrow, the carpet was ablaze. The chemical reaction from burning sugar creates a hot liquid that pops and spills. The easiest way to burn your foes. Other loads of burning sugary liquid soon followed. The soldiers were spent. The archers stopped as cavalry units barged into the palace. We got into a formation of a turtle. Shielded from all angles, we marched slowly, but steadily through the palace grounds. We soon split into groups and continued to eliminate the remaining supporters of emperor Yongle.

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### Emperor Yongle

They were here. Sitting in my throne room, I raised a white flag, waiting for him. My knife strapped to my belt, I sat there, my face donned a facade of guilt and regret.

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### Zheng He

A white flag! Finally. We broke formation and I approached the throne room. Expecting a peaceful surrender, I opened the door. A group of archers faced me, and in the middle of them was the emperor.

The arrows were let loose, I barely got my shield when a body leapt in front of me, taking the blows. "Hua Deng! No! Why?" I screamed. As he fell in my arms, the emperor's archers prepared their arrows. Without hesitation, I drew my shield and charged in with my comrades. We destroyed every single archer in sight, fuelled with anger and grief.

All these years, he was a father to me. I knew I could forgive if he was willing to change. "Father, please. You know this is wrong, we can be family again." He dropped to his knees, face in his palms. I rushed to hug him, I knew he would find it in himself. "NEVER!" A sharp pain radiated through my chest, I struggled to gasp for air. My troops witnessed the murder, grabbing the Emperor instantly, ending his pathetic life. With my last breath, I said, "Give the citizens their wealth and rebuild a great empire,"

# The Thoughts of an Explorer

*Sha Tin College, Wong, Nicole – 13*

I was a young farmer in a small town in Northern China. Back then, we didn't have anything to do, we just tended to the fields and fed the animals; just like that, we made enough to live peacefully. This, however, all changed when an unknown man came to our town on a white mare, looking as though he came from a story, with exquisite silk robes and servants obeying his every command. A community meeting was soon called, with every person, big or small, gathering at the heart of the town.

There was a jumble of nervous speech, meant to ease the nervousness and confusion until the mysterious man opened his mouth.

"My name is Zheng He, and I am an explorer, who has gone to many distant lands and has found many different treasures," the man explains, "The emperor has sent me on a voyage, to travel around the world, to claim what is rightfully ours. We need a task force, great as a dragon, so large that it can equal any man or beast that we may encounter on our journey." he continues, taking a deep breath and staring intently towards my direction, his gaze boring through my soul and heart.

"We need ship captains, we need boatswains, we need people who can navigate our way through the darkness. However, don't worry! Everyone who wants to travel, can get a job. Who's in?"

I glanced at the people around me, including my parents, my friends, and my fellow villagers. I wanted a try at the rich life, wanted to see faraway lands, wanted to have a taste of being so far at home, but at the same time, I was unsure of my decision. I wouldn't see my family for a long time, and I would leave behind everything, and everyone I had ever known. It wasn't just me. Everyone looked wary of the stranger, afraid that he was telling lies, or uncertain if they wanted to enlist or not. The man, who was kind and friendly, answered every single question we threw at him – and more...it seemed like an obvious choice! You got a cabin all to yourself, easy job, all living necessities, and you got to see what was beyond the horizons of our country! If so, why was I not as enthusiastic as the situation called? I pushed those thoughts aside and stood up, and exclaimed: "I want to join your ranks."

A sea of faces stared at me, eyes widened, then looked away. I felt embarrassed and self-conscious – why were they peering at me like I was an animal held captive? The kind explorer snapped me out of my trance, agreeing to my proposal. I was to leave in a weeks time, to the nearest city's large pier, where many ships and fellow officers would be waiting for me. Since I didn't have any valuable experience that could be used on the journey, I would be a cabin boy, until I learnt the ropes.

The last week of my time at my homeland passed in a blur. I worked, I spent time with my family, and I went to my favourite places, until it was time to leave. My family had specially told one of my relatives to accompany me on my journey, so at least I wouldn't be leaving alone, getting lost and doing who-knows-what. As I hugged my parents and my siblings goodbye, I was filled with a sense of regret. Everything here was so familiar: our wooden one-story house, our plots of vegetables and plants, everyone I knew and adored – I would miss them all. My mind wandered away from its safe space and into the depths of uncertainty and negativity. Would I ever come back? Would this be the last time I was ever to see this familiar scene? I quickly chastised myself for those thoughts and said a final goodbye, wishing with all my heart that I would return to see my hometown.

The journey passed by as I travelled across plains, muddy roads and deserts, but with each step I thought of my family going on with their lives as normal. My heart suddenly felt a pang of pain and guilt – I missed them a lot. However, I knew I had to go, for all my life I felt the urge to explore, the feeling of freedom whenever I was allowed to run across the plains and discover to my heart's content.

At last, I arrived at the pier. It was filled to the brim with people: mothers sending their children goodbye, excited people waiting to board a ship for the first time, regal-looking people wearing robes and jewelry. The ships stood there, proud and confident, white masts pushed back and forth by the roaring wind. I stood there, alone and unsure of where to go. Walking around, I spotted the face of that very same explorer that had come to recruit young sailors from the town courtyard. I went up and introduced myself, and I was escorted onto the ship that I would be staying on for the next few months, or even years.

The cabin was drab and plain, with dark brown wood interior, a small bed, and a desk table. Although not grand, it felt homey after a re-decoration of small ornaments I brought made from various plants and leaves I had at home. It was a long week, and as I slumped onto the bed, again thinking about home, I passed out.

I woke up, unsteady and startled, floating somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. Where was I? How did I get there? Walking around in the small, drab wooden cabin, I remembered about the job post I took, how could I ever forget?

Every day, the routines were the same. I would often be called by the Captain, who was no other than Zheng, or senior navigators to help them run errands, whether that be passing on a message or to get some refreshments from them. I dined throughout the day, eating some dried foods, none fresh or high in nutrition, as there weren't any plots to plant vegetables or fruit. Sometimes, I would take some herbs or medicine to the sick or injured, tending to their wounds, with the best materials that we could spare at the time.

The ship wandered aimlessly around the ocean, as there was often stormy and angry weather which made it extremely hard to navigate. We would often work for many hours at a time, taking care to not oversleep as every person was vital to that very operation.

More and more people got sick every day, showing signs of weakness and fatigue. They would often complain about their arms or legs hurting, how they were constantly hungry however didn't have an appetite at the same time. I was appalled at the thought of being that dependent on other people, fearing being as sick as them, however when many soldiers were getting that same illness, my hopes dropped.

One day, as I was going to fetch a cup of water for the captain, I tripped and fell. As hard as I tried, I couldn't get up. My throat scratchy, I grunted for help, but I was at one of the deserted quarters, taking a shortcut, no one could help me. Soon, I was spotted by one of my fellow castmates, and helped to my bed. Over time, some symptoms started to appear that was the same as my other crewmates. My skin started occasionally bleeding and peeling, my gums constantly hurt and sometimes bled, and I was weak to the point that I couldn't get up. While all that happened to me, one thing stayed constant – I still yearned for my parents to soothe my pain, yet I longed to tread on new lands. My heart felt like it was being split into three – one for the illness, one for exploration, and one for my homeland.

I couldn't sleep well, it felt like the demons were continuously stirring inside of me. I tried to focus, but --"Land! Land!" The shouts suddenly came, and propping myself on my bed, I stumbled out of the doorway, into the calm night sea. Indeed, there was land. Grass plantations, palm trees, beaches, all that made a city beautiful and unique were present. The pain suddenly consumed me again.

I shut my eyes and prayed for the pain to end, gasping, I counted my shallow breaths, in, out, in, out. I thought of exotic creatures and new cultures, thought of being with my family, thought of being perfectly fine and healthy for the last time. I felt like I was transported to that distant land with perfect scenery and dazzling views.

All was still in my mind.



# Time and Tide Again

*Shanghai American School—Pudong, Chong, Caden – 12*

I stop in horror, the tip of a silver blade pressing to my throat. A dark, ominous shadow looms over me as a tint of moonlight shines through the gaps of the cracked ceiling, dimly lighting the room. Heavy drops of water thump on my head, as the storm rumbles vigorously, vomiting a series of light.

The thought that I – Wei Tian – at age 15 – am about to take my last breath, makes my whole-body shudder.

As if in response, the heavens call to me from above, and the pouring rain becomes blood red. Everything seems to slow down. A sudden wave of panic goes over the group of huddling children backing against the storage room wall. I feel the cold steel of the blade, as the pirate strengthens his grip and menacingly gestures at everyone to stand back.

“Don’t you dare touch my son!” A voice echoes above me, deafening and loud. I tilt my head upwards. The voice sounds like father’s.

“Then come and get me!” snarls the pirate.

The next thing I feel is a thud on my skull. Darkness overcomes me, as I see the silhouette of my captor disappear through the door. My mind is a confusing mix of black, white and grey. I see my limp body sink to the floor. It is like I am sinking to the uncharted and unfamiliar depths of the ocean. The dragon pendant I am wearing begins to glow coral blue. The scene changes and I am no longer on the ship. I look around. The world seems to form wave by wave around me. I am terrified and scared of the beautiful surroundings that are rippling to life. I shut my eyes and feel myself rise to the surface. When I open them, the red-orange sunset hovers above the horizon, its watery reflection shimmering from the light, splashing as the warm wind gently brushes over my hair. Home.

Looking around, the rows of houses made me jump. Was I home? I caught sight of a person sitting on the decks of the shore; he held a thin bamboo rod over the water, with a bucket of fish beside him. It was Father. This was too good to be true!

“Fa—” A bunch of armed guards marched towards me. Were they going to arrest me? Trying to be as soundless as possible, I quickly hid behind some wooden barrels of fish. Father looked back and stood up to greet a man who came out from within the group. An official, I thought, considering his brown cape, with a white silk robe that had a green dragon embroidered on it. However, the *wu-sha-mao* on his head, made me realize that this was no ordinary minister. It was Zheng He.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Zheng He. I hear that you are assembling a crew to journey through the seas.” My father called out. Zheng He cast a questioning glance towards him. I heard the official mutter something about how he knew that.

“Looks like you don’t just have the eyes of *Mushen*, but also the ears of *Shuishen*.” Zheng He commented, nodding in approval. My father bowed deeply.

“May I know the purpose of your visit?”

Right then, one of the guards handed Zheng He a scroll. He opened it, and read aloud:

“I, Zheng He, hereby declare Wei Cheng to journey to the West with my crew, from the orders of emperor Zhu Di. Disagreement will result in *Ling Chi*. Will you take the scroll?”

“I have no choice,” my father said, shaking his head and accepting his fate with open shaking palms.

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The next day, noon arrived in a glimpse of time. My father told me that I had to follow him on the journey, since there was no one else to take care of me at home.

On our way to the main ship, father quizzed me on everything that he had taught me over the years.

“It is 9 masted, 44 *Zhang* long and 18 *Zhang* wide, with inter-jointed bamboo sticks that are woven into the form of matting. What is it?”

“A *Bao Chuan*.” I answered. My father nodded.

“A *Bao Chuan* indeed.”

A banquet was held for all the crew members before our fleet’s voyage, giving gifts according to each rank.

Through the course of our journey, we docked at *Zhanpo* Kingdom, *Alu*, *Semendaci*, and *Lanbuli* for trade.

When we arrived at *Sailun*, things felt different. I heard one of our ships set on fire. In compensation, we got 60 thousand *Liang* of gold. The emperor here must be terrified of us, paying for what his people did.

The next day, the heavens raged. The wind roared like a pack of lions. Water was edgeless on all four sides.

To my surprise, my dragon pendant started glowing. What was it doing? I held it tightly, trying to cover the glow. In a few seconds the glow faded, making me wonder if it was just a reflection of light.

“Tighten the ropes! Flush the decks! Hold on if you want to live!” Zheng He shouted orders at us, directing us to keep the boat steady. This was when the crew members stared in shock at the monstrosity that hung above us. We were heading directly towards an angry, rumbling storm.

I held the pendant my mother gave me and smoothed my thumb over the blue dragon inscribed onto it. “This is the pendant of the holy water dragon. I gift this to you, to keep you safe when the waters rage.” Mother’s soft, gentle voice echoed in my mind. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and prayed for good luck. I then darted towards the madness of the storm followed by everyone else.

The storm subsided by morning, and we arrived at *Alagakkonara*. The citizens threw lettuce and stones at us, so we departed straightaway.

Arriving at the main ship a while later, Zheng He walked up to the main deck, and facing his crew, shouted, “There have been news that Chen Zuyi and his pirates are nearby. Unattended children will hide in any of the four storage rooms, and everyone else will prepare for battle.”

The whole boat was a mess. Some adults fetched gunpowder for their cannon, and some geared up in the weapons room. Shivering, I went to hide in a storage room where they kept food and did a quick pray.

Night came, followed by the sounds of cannons firing and roaring. The battle had started. I clenched my fists tightly, staring through a small crack on the edge of the boat.

“Prepare for battle! Guns loaded and ready, weapons up!” Zheng He’s voice boomed over the sound of rain and thunder.

“Fire!” Zheng He shouted.

Boom! Crash! Bang! The cannon balls flew across the ocean, smashing onto the hard, rigid planks of the pirate ships. I caught glimpse of one cannon ball smash onto one of our enemy’s ships, and now one boat was set on fire. The pirates started diving off the ships and swimming for their life. Not to mention the sharks that live in this area of the sea. I smirked with pleasure.

A familiar pirate came close to our cabin, holding a silver knife. Bam! A blurring figure of what looked like father knocked the pirate straight into the depths of the water.

Eventually, Chen Zuyi surrendered. He was captured, tied and kept in a cell. When I came up, Zheng He ordered me to talk to him privately. How strange. When I opened the door of his cabin, blackness overwhelmed me. Did someone turn off the lamps?

I heard the drumming of fingers on a wooden surface.

“What were you doing behind the fish barrels?”

“I—” Silence. My mind rises back to the rippling surface.



I wake up tied to the mast.

“Are you alright?” Asks my father with dried up blood rolling from his forehead.

“Y—yes.” I stutter, looking around. I stop and stare, seeing the savage who held a knife to my neck, mocking our crew mates.

I struggle, pulling and trying to get my hands apart from each other.

The savage catches my eye, and snickers. “Well, well, well, seems like you just can’t keep your eyes closed.”

My father grits his teeth, and under his breath, murmurs, “We’ll be alright son. There is no reason to fear.” I try my best threatening look at the savage. He roars with laughter.

“Time after time they fight us, but tide after tide they drown” He meets face to face with me, and whispers, “Even the emperor’s fleet follows the rest, while we share your gold, sell your crew as slaves and your leader? Well, he’d better hope that this was all just a savage and stormy dream”

# An Unfavorable Journey

*Shanghai American School—Pudong, Zhao, Sean — 13*

The months following the departure of the first wave of seven treasure fleets sent as ambassadors were inauspicious— the imperial palace of the Forbidden City burned down as if by a giant ball of fire sent as some form of divine punishment, while the emperor Zhu Di's cabinet disintegrated, throwing the government into a state of turmoil while the peasants who formed the basis of China's economy were reduced to eating grass. An epidemic of an unknown disease ravaged the province of Fujian where over 174,000 people died.

And only two of the four treasure ships of the first fleet ever returned from exploring the south of the Indian Ocean. The other expedition force successfully came back with exotic animals and abundant new plant species, only to find their country a leaderless shambles.

The Chinese armada's ships had a length of 146 meters; their crew provided for with hundreds of tons of water, vegetables, and dried fish. They were capable of staying at sea for up to three months and travel at least 8,400 miles without making a single stop. The fleet was supplemented by grain ships and water tankers, and the larger ships carried holding pens for pigs.

The following comprises of the diary entries of a low-ranking officer on the one of the two returning ships.

*19 January, 1421.*

The Yongle Emperor Zhu Di himself saw us off at the Dragon's Bay in Nanjing, along with a thousand cheering civilians. We set sail out of the Yangtze with high spirits, looking forward to bringing glory and wealth to our country.

Night fell. We gathered on the deck and broke out casks of rice wine and bowls of fish porridge, while singing an ancient sailors' song.

When we reach the Indian Ocean, our fleet separates into two: ours to voyage down south and continue; another to turn north and venture into the unknown.

*31 January, 1421.*

We are eight days into our voyage, and not a single storm. I say that our fleet is blessed by both the Emperor and the gods. The Malay archipelago has just appeared on our horizon, and we will stop to take on provisions and some of their famed spices from the traders that so frequently dock here.

We are on one of the six smaller ships that disembarked on the archipelago. Captain Zheng He, the envoys, and the noblemen are of course on our capital ships, basking in the comfort of being waited on by a thousand serving men. The island locals proved to be friendly and even approached to offer us their primitive fare of spit roasted sea turtle, which turned out to be succulent and rich. Our cook Ah Jing has taken that to note and hopefully will serve it on the ship, in order to break the monotony of the meals that only consist of soy, porridge, and fruits. The privilege of dining on meat is only available onboard capital ships, which have pigpens, though I cannot imagine bearing the stench of swine for these years that will be spent at sea. The other crew members are loading crates onboard, and we set sail at dawn tomorrow, heading to the Indian Ocean, where the other ships of our armada have gone their separate ways: one group beyond the western horizon and north; ours down south.

*16 February, 1421*

We have reached the lush tropical shores of an uncharted island. I am writing this as the crew prepare the rowboats so we can land. The men are hushed with both anticipation and fear— there have been stories of man-eating savages on such islands. The objective of this unnecessary and dangerous landing is to map the island and document indigenous flora and fauna, while searching for spices and herbs to take home to the emperor.

The crews are huddled around the campfire as the sun goes down; the events of the day and the island's surprising temperature fluctuation have taken their toll on the men, who claim to be hallucinating. Needless to say, everyone's spirits were rather dampened as the crew heard their orders from our chief officer: "Tomorrow and on, you will proceed to forage into the forest and report your findings to our petty officer. Two sailors will be assigned per commissioned cartographer, and the rest of you follow their orders."

For the first time, our crew is discontent with the orders and one of them grumbles loud enough for the officer to hear: "Bull\*\*it! Always we who do the work. You prissy eunuchs sit around and complain about how what we do is always wrong." Our officer spun around and glared him in the eye. He brandished a gleaming ceremonial broadsword at the haggard crew member, who jumped up and almost leaped at him. His friends were only just able to hold him back before he killed the officer and perhaps initiated a mutiny, which meant a direct opposition to the orders of the Emperor.

*17 February, 1421*

There is something far worse here than beasts or savages; this island is cursed. The Emperor of Heaven willing, we will be granted swift and safe passage through the seas and away from this forsaken place. We woke up to find six of our men missing, and conducted a search through the forests where a carpenter found their mangled bodies. One of them was missing a head, arms, and the intestines were strewn in the branches of a nearby tree, while another bled from his eyes and ears, the result of a hemorrhage: he had literally died of fear. The expressions of pure terror and shock on their faces sent chills down our spines, and we quickly left. The corpses of those who die in pain are omens of ill fortune and are best left alone.

We've lost six men and four more are ranting and raving, trembling in perpetual fear. We have no medicine men among us so there is no real hope of restoring those men's health, but we cannot leave until this entire island is mapped, and accurately, or defy the emperor's orders and face execution when we return.

*18 February, 1421*

The members of our crew who have been alone in the forest are delirious, and in their feverish state are proclaiming to be seeing flying lights and pale, slender figures in the trees with teeth as long and sharp and crooked as those of the monsters in fairy tales, all of which started seeming increasingly real after a piercing scream of pain cut through the forest. We believed then, Lord preserve us, we believed then. We stopped keeping count of the missing and the dead after this victim, a morbid reminder of the trivial task that still kept us here.

*19 February, 1421*

The monsters showed themselves in the small hours of the morning, walking—no, floating into our camp and dragging off the guards who were keeping watch. They were tall, naked, and the sight of those bottomless black pits for eyes was enough for some of us to piss our trousers. But the teeth, the teeth were the worst. Blood stained where they were not ivory white, these were not teeth— they were more 10 centimeter icicles that stuck out of the mouths in convoluted rows. More of them came out of the forest; they numbered over a dozen by then. For the first time, we were scared. Far too many men were dying, but if we abandoned this island, we would bring eternal shame to our families. Not returning to China was not an option— we were hundreds of miles from any significant continent. After watching the monsters jump on one of our cook Ah Jing and tear him apart, we finally broke: surely the loss of at least a score of his bravest sailors will be enough to constitute our redemption. I am writing this from the bottom deck of one of the two ships that we left with. My hands are shaking as I try to record the happenings in case it ever gets lost in time. My word goes out to you: never venture beyond the sixth island south of the Java...

Aftermath:

The author of the above journal entries did not survive the journey back; he died of stress and shock following the incidents. Despite his the composed manner with which he wrote his journal entries, evidence suggests he was the most emotionally distressed of the survivors as he was the only one to record the horrors in a practical manner that cemented their existence inside his mind. The other crew realized they were not expected back, nor were the greetings welcoming, and those of them who weren't haunted by nightmares chose to simply disappear, hoping they were not to be associated with abandoning their mission.

# The Humble Lookout

*Shanghai Singapore Internatioal School, Lee, Ling Fung Max – 12*

My leader Zheng He was a hero, and I am only a man in his crew of 28000 people. Although I am not the one being remembered throughout history, I enjoy going on all trips with Zheng He. He is talented by all standards and I, being a little lookout guy on the ship, am unrecognized. My goal is not to please Zheng He, my goal is not to be famous, my goal is not to be the one remembered by Africans. My goal is to contribute. I love my country and I support the idea to present gifts. I just want to contribute to our country, China.

On my first trip with Zheng He, I was afraid. I was assigned to be the lookout for enemies and land. But all I did was think about the crew and myself running out of food supplies, water and the way back. I did not pay attention and just sat in a corner. I was wondering about home. Once, I was responsible for almost getting defeated by a group of pirates just because of being careless and unfocused. No one blamed me, but I knew it was all my fault, and I knew that all I had to do was to stay positive.

On my third trip, I gained confidence. I volunteered to be the lookout guy again, and I did well. Although no one praised me one word, but I knew I did well and protected my mates when I called out that there was a pirate ship. I was happy, and now I finally figured out the reason I was taking part in this trip.

The previous trip to Africa was the hardest, but the result we came back with was amazing. The trip to Africa took us a few times longer than the previous trips, and we met more enemies on the way. I was assigned the same job again, and this time, he believed in me. Before there were around 3 lookouts, and now there was only 1. That was me. I knew the survival of 28000 people depended on me, and I was not nervous, I knew I would do well. When we arrived at Africa, Africa was huge and the Africans were armed, but luckily, they were nice and they treated us as guests. And the biggest reward was a creature that we named a giraffe. We set sail back to China and had a close fight with a group of pirates. This time, Zheng He noticed me and he announced my contribution in front of everyone that I was a savior, a hero.

This is me writing on my 6<sup>th</sup> trip with Zheng He. This time we were travelling south, south of Africa. Throughout the previous journeys, I was happy with my contribution, although I had only been noticed once in my entire life. That was my moment, my favorite moment. I believe I can do enough for my country, being a small lookout can be important. I am the only lookout. Zheng He is old, and I can tell that from his hair and beard. I can also tell from the way he speaks and his memory. Zheng He was a hero, and he can't stay in that spot any longer. I feel like this may be the last trip I am to be with him, but I feel good, and lucky, because I am completely satisfied for what I had done, what I did for the country, and I feel like the luckiest person to meet Zheng He and actually spend so much time with him supporting his

mission. I admit every time I set sail I look forward to finding more than being on the ship for months. And this time we are going further than anywhere we have gone to, and we had set sail for around only 5 hours. I know, I know, I shouldn't be writing now since I am the only lookout forwards on MY ship, but I just can't help it, this is just so amazing, and I cannot miss any part of this. Well, I guess I should be focusing. Oh, wait a second, no, no way, it must be my eyes, what I am seeing is definitely not real, or is it? I rubbed my eyes.....

Sigh, here we go again.....

“Incoming!”



# At Peace

*Shanghai Singapore Internatioal School, Lim, Ming Kang Ethan – 12*

*–A young boy, blood running down his face from the blow dealt by that ruthless pirate, tears flooding his eyes–*

“Zheng He! Zheng He!”

The vivid memory cleared from my vision and I was hit by the salty air.

Chen Zuyi, I am coming for you.

One of my crew members was standing in front of me. “Yes? What is it?”

“We are just coming on the port of Singapore.”

“Good, good.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Still feeling a little shell-shocked from the memory, I handed over control of the helm to someone else and walked towards the port. As I stared at the brine water, thinking of the nothing but killing that merciless pirate and showing him the same mercy he showed that child. The places he went to were left in ruins, floors littered with broken household items and gruesome corpses. How could one man be so emotionless as he killed and stole from so many people. Doing it without a second thought. Doing it without doubt. Doing it for *fun*. Chen Zuyi made people fear to step out of their houses. He made them feel like there wasn’t anywhere they could be safe. I am going to stop him.

*–Help me, please. I don’t want to die–.*

Chen Zuyi, you are the most horrible and cruel pirate of Southeast Asia. Ruining lives and stealing from so many people that I gave gifts to. I will put an end to your reign and bring your head to the people whose lives were destroyed by you and your pirate crew. You will die, that is something I can promise for vengeance will be mine.

The boat suddenly lurched forward then backward then returned to its regular rocking. I shook my head, I couldn’t allow those memories to keep distracting me. I know what must be done in order to avenge those people. We had arrived on the dock where all of our ships could get some restocks in supplies and some repairs. We had many supporters in this war against the “Pirate King” as some people called it. The wet, wooden planks creaked beneath our feet as my crew and I made our way to an inn just a short walk away from the coast. The rest of my fleet went to somewhere else to stay for the night.

We spent a fortnight there gathering supplies and planning our attack: where the weak areas were in his fortress, the kind of weapons Chen Zuyi had. Most of his fortress was made of wood and stone, and he had men on the walls watching out towards the ocean making sure there were no people attempting to attack their fortress. Every day we made progress with our plan, everyone was ready to take out the pirates. On the second last day of our stay, we went through the plan from the beginning. So, the plan was that the smaller ships, all 190 of them came at the fortress from the main entrance, the main part that was facing the ocean. Then all of the treasure ships would stay at the back, firing arrows at the fortress. Then we will rush and stop our boats at the beach and use a battering ram for the gate. Finally, once the gate is open we will push forward and send soldiers in. Slowly but surely, we will control that fortress and then execute Chen Zuyi.

The salty water churned as our boat pushed past it. We were on our way to Sumatra to defeat the pirate king. Soldiers were all dressing in combat gear and sharpening their weapons. This battle was going to be a horrid one. Then I saw one of my men looking at a painting of what most likely was his family. There was a little boy in that painting. *–The life left the boys eyes. His hand dropped down. His tears seized to flow. He was died–*. Suddenly the memory faded as abruptly as it began. Then one of my scouts handed me a telescope, “I see land over there. Is it Sumatra?”

“Yes. We are almost there.”

Through the telescope I saw faint shapes of land and some sort of building hanging slightly over the water. I shouted to the other boats to prepare the cannons and the message spread to the rest of the fleet. As our ships neared the fort, maybe a few kilometers away, a bell sounded. The pirates had spotted us. Immediately we executed the plan, all the small ships, being lighter, raced forward. Then behind a cliff, a bunch boats came out and started to attempt to intercept the small boats. Some boats got intercepted, and they started boarding each other’s boats and started to cut and slice each other. Blood seeped into ocean dripping off the boats. As the small ships cleared a path for the treasure ships, we landed on the beach and chaos erupted everywhere. The sound of swords clashing and people’s screams echoed around the area. Corpses littered the ground. But we somehow pushed through with the battering ram. The men began to smash against the gate as the rest of defended them. And even for the thousands of men on the beach, still more of our ships had just begun to anchor down and rush down to help us. We continued to cut down pirate after pirate and finally all the men on the beach were wiped out. Even most of the pirate archers on the wall had been shot full of arrows. But just as we relaxed the gate crashed open and in the fortress, there were still thousands more pirates waiting for us. Pirate after pirate, more filled their place till many of our swords were completely stained red and so were our armor. But we outnumbered them. And soon there were maybe 21,700 men of the 27,800 men we originally had. Before us stood the so hated Chen Zuyi and 10 of his remaining guards.

Blood and sweat stung my eyes. I saw that boy in my arms as he died, “Surrender!” I commanded.

Chen Zuyi simply replied with a smirk on his face, “Well that is what I am going to do. Obviously.”

I walked forward, my fist clenching my blade, my hand shaking, thinking of nothing else but stabbing this man. He noticed my state and he grinned, “The great Zheng He, after killing all of my men, he can’t kill me.” Chen Zuyi said mockingly. He laughed and continued, “Pathetic.”

I grabbed him by his shirt putting my blade at his neck, all I needed to do was apply a little bit of pressure and he was dead, but against my wishes I said, “I am not going to kill you now, because we are going to do something to you that is going to make you wish you were dead. When we get back to China, you will be publicly executed.”

During the journey back, however, Chen Zuyi was all smiles. Finally, after a week of imprisonment, he was presented to the people of China. In Nanjing, where the execution was held, the sun was shining so brightly, for it was a good day for a monster was finally being slain.

Days after the celebration, the memory of that boy started to hurt less. The agony of watching the boy die was leaving me. The bitter pain that had been torturing me for so long was finally subsiding, because I knew that I had avenged that child and I could finally be at peace with myself.

# The Dream Escape

*Shanghai Singapore Internatioal School, Rampton, Jade Ruth – 12*

I was an ordinary girl living in a town on the outskirts of Suzhou. Nothing ever happened in my small town. I did the same thing every day. Wake up, get ready, walk through town, eat breakfast, go to school, come back from school, do homework, eat, sleep and repeat. It was really boring. The only eventful part was the chattering through the town and the hot steaming buns fogging up my glasses as I walked to school. It has driven me mad for 11 straight years why could we not just move on and not live in this little town. I wanted to get away. I want to explore. I guess I can run away and do my own thing when I get to 18. But that's like 7 more years. I would trade anything, even, my arms or maybe my legs to get away from this dreadful town.

If I got away, would I really want to come back to this horrible town? It would be the same super boring and dull town I have always lived in. I wonder if there would be even one new shop around the area or even a new path to walk to the vegetable store.

I don't know but maybe. I wonder what would happen if I ran away. No one would see me so my mother would never know where I was or was going. That would be cool. How would I escape; what would I do; when would I do it? I feel asleep while thinking these thoughts. I was dreaming about visiting a tropical island. But just as I was waking up this letter flew in the hole in my wall.

I picked it up cautiously wondering what it was. I must have fallen back asleep because I dreamed about the letter being a ticket to an unknown world. I quickly woke up and read it aloud word by word. It read "Zheng He's boat is coming to take a stop off at the dock you are welcome to come down and give your wishes and admire his boat. Everybody come on down." I didn't read any more. Was I dreaming? This can't be right

I threw on my coat and raced out to the ocean hoping to see an enormous boat. Nothing was there not even a little dingy. Just the brown murky water and me. The wind moved like hurricane but I didn't flinch a single bit. I thought I would see the big huge boat. But no. I stood there thinking about it.

I ran around town trying to find someone I could ask. No one was interested in the topic. As I was about to walk back to my house all depressed but I asked one last person.

He was tall and muscular and he looked at me in a with a mortifying stare.

I worked up the nerve to ask him about Zheng He's boat and about Zheng He. The man chuckled and smiled at me.

He was Zheng He! I was speechless. How could the one person that would take me away far from my house be standing right in front of me?

After seconds that felt like days of being speechless, I finally caught words to talk to him. I asked him if I could get on his boat and go off on adventures. He told me I could but I needed to bring my mother to come down to the boat and sign a paper to allow me to. I knew I couldn't convince my mother to let me go with a stranger out to sea.

Days and days went by, of me thinking of what to do. My old fragile mother would never let me sail the world. She isn't that type of person.

I left my plan to the last day. I packed up all of my belonging secretly without anyone suspecting anything. Having to leave lots of my precious things left me sad. I made my way as quickly as I could to the boat before I could get in trouble with my mother. I had to sneak into the boat but I hadn't thought of how to do that yet.

Maybe I could sneak through the tiny door on the hull. Yes, that was what I was going to do. I climbed through the hole as gracefully as possible. I made sure I made no noise. I continued screaming inside

myself. This was not real. I could feel the boat pulling away from the dock, rocking me side to side. I was lost. I had no idea where I was. I started rummaging through the boxes to figure out where I was.

After countless minutes, it left me with a conclusion that I was in food storage. I guess it's not bad I have a lifelong supply of food. I had to find a way out though. I couldn't stay here when I could be seeing the world. I found a light sitting by a box of tea. However, this only gave me the dimmest bit of light in a pitch-black cellar. I looked around the room trying to find some way of escaping. It was hard trying to stay on my feet. All that rocking was making me sick.

Finally, I found a ladder. I knew that there would be some way to get out if they stored this much food down here. I climbed up the ladder extremely exhausted. Reaching the top was like conquering my fears. But really when I looked down there was only about 3 steps. How long had I been down there for? I could finally see light.

The hatch closed. Someone had seen me. I didn't breathe. What do I do? Just as I was climbing down I stumbled across a set of clothes. There was no way I could go to the deck in a dull brown costume.

I made it up in only a few seconds after changing. I looked like I had just come out of a garbage can hopefully no one saw me like this. I got on to the deck. I breathed in the salty, misty air. This was great.

I had never thought through what I was going to do. Just getting up on the boat was all I was worried about. Some guy dressed like me approached me with a cup in his hand. It looked really dirty and chipped. I saw his mouth about to move I took another breath and tried to relax.

"Excuse me what ya doing, matey" he repeated three times.

"Oh ah ..." I replied without even thinking of who I was pretending to be.

"Excuse me"

I coughed from the smell of his tea.

"Oh, I'm just about to clean the deck"

"Ok" he smiled showing his gold tooth

I quickly found a mop and threw it all over the wooden boards without even knowing what to do.

It felt like hours of mopping passed. I started thinking of why I was here. My mother was probably thinking of where I was. Maybe she just didn't care. I caught myself dozing off. I took the opportunity to explore the boat. Just as I was about to walk; one of the lookout men shouted "Land ahoy!"

I jumped thinking that they were shouting at me. I threw my mop down. I slowly bent down to pick it up. It was surprising how much work it took being on a boat. Everyone had their own job.

"Hello what do you want me to do" I asked a random pirate.

He responded with a weird look on his face "Carry that box from over there to here like you usually do"

I nodded silently. I did I was told but I was unable to pick up the box even with two hands. What was in this box bricks or rocks? I dragged the box to the designated place where they would distribute the presents to the people on the land. It took tiringly long minutes. I sat down on the chest waiting for the next command but nothing came I sat there in silence pondering on the fact that I was on a boat traveling the world.

An abrupt awaking startled me. Cannons were firing and it left me clinging to the chest. Luckily, I dogged the fiery bullet racing past my head. I ran to the front of the boat to look to see what it was.

Just as I reached the top a bullet shot straight into my thigh. I screamed in pain and fell straight to the ground.

Breathing heavily, I had rolled off my bed and a textbook fell on my face. I opened my eyes to the view of my plain old white roof. Hearing my mother in the other room made me realize that I was in boring, old home again.

# The Adventures of Zheng He

*Shanghai Singapore Internatioal School, Roslee, Aina Sofia Binti – 12*

Hello my name is Ma He or Zheng He. I was born in 1371 to a noble family in Yunnan (a province in China). I have one older brother and four sisters and my family is Muslim. When I was little my mom would always tell me amazing stories about pirates and big, gigantic ships, which made me very curious about the outside world and told me if I worked hard I could be the person making those expeditions. My father and grandfather both went on a pilgrimage called Haji in Arabic, to the Muslim holy city of Mecca, which made me ask them lots of questions about their expedition.

When I was only 11 years old, Yunnan was attacked and conquered by the marching soldiers from the Ming army. I was panicky and agitated at that time because one day soldiers came to our house and brought me to the Ming court to be a eunuch. As they imprisoned us I saw many other children and was hoping and praying that we were all going to be fine.

When I was serving in the royal court, I worked really hard with the desire that I could go back home to my family. Instead of going back home the soldiers ordered me to go to the throne room to meet the Emperor. I was frightened, shaking and praying that nothing bad was going to happen.

When I entered the throne room I looked straight at the Emperor, in his large booming voice the emperor had said that I have been working well, and that he is going train me and if I thrived I was to be his assistant and adviser. I was so confused by everything he just said. After his talk, I was transported to a military camp where each day was harder than the last.

After the hard years of military camp, in a flash I was the Emperor's trusted adviser and assistant. I also had to be a bodyguard for Prince Zhu Di during battles against the Mongols, which was tiring but worth it. Soon after, Zhu Di became the next Emperor of the Ming dynasty. He instantly made me the highest-ranking eunuch because I had served in court for many years; after I earned the rank he renamed me to Zheng He. When he promoted me to Grand eunuch I was so proud of myself, and told myself that I'll work as hard as I can forever until I die.

After I had my new title I got to be in charge of palace construction and repairs, weapons, and ship construction which made me very knowledgeable about ships. In 1403, Zhu Di ordered the construction of *The Treasure Fleet* (a group of trading ships, warships and some support vessels) to travel across the South China sea and Indian Ocean areas. The emperor had chosen me to command the fleet which made me feel very honored, and excited for all the exciting encounters and mysteries.

My very first voyage began in July, 1405. We set sail from Liujiagan Port in Taicang of Jiangsu Province and headed westward. When we travelled to Vietnam and met the king. We presented the king with presents and because he was pleased with our gesture our visit was fairly nice.

After leaving we travelled to Java, Sumatra, and Malacca, carefully avoided the Pirate Chen Zu Yi. Unfortunately, in 1407 we encountered **CHEN ZU YI** and with that, a bloodthirsty battle erupted. With 5000 of Chen's men eliminated. We finally defeated Chen Zu YI, and he was captured and was publicly executed in Nanjing in 1407.

My adventure continued, with seven main voyages. Unfortunately, because of the financial drain and the Mongols threat, later Emperors and Scholars tried to erase all of my expeditions. Hopefully this passage doesn't get destroyed too...

# Zheng He's Adventures in Africa

*Shanghai Singapore Internatioal School, Woon, Xin Yu Sara – 12*

“Quick! Steer right!”

“No! There's a small submerged glacier there! Turn left!”

“Grab on to the railings! We're making a huge turn!”

It was a stormy day, and lightning crackled in the sky. The clouds were as black as a Black Hole, and raindrops were pouring down rapidly, some as big as stone pebbles and some as small as pearls. However, it was just another normal day for my crew and I. Our leader, Zheng He, had led us through a lot of these days and taught us how to deal with it. At first, everyone was panicking and running around yelling their heads off, but when Zheng He arrived, everyone seemed to calm down and, with his lead, each carried out our assigned part and led the ship to safety. He radiated a sense of calm and peacefulness, making everyone around him stop being agitated and think rationally. Today was no exception. As the sky cleared up, the rain stopped pouring, turning from a huge downpour to a small drizzle. Everyone let out a sigh of relief, and we finally rested. The rain had taken the strength out of us, and we couldn't stay standing for one more second. Usually my job would be to keep the cargo steady, making sure that they don't slide around the ship during the violent tilting during the storm. It might not sound that important, but if I didn't keep them steady and safe, we wouldn't have had any cargo left, and it would have crashed into people, hurting them or distracting them from their tasks, and if they don't do their tasks properly, the ship might sink. Besides, what else could a 12-year-old kid do on board a ship during a time like this?

Anyway, we were headed to the far-off land of Africa, where we would be trading our jewelry and goods with their people for native African animals like African elephants. We were almost there, and we could already see the shoreline of the east coast of Africa. It was a sight I would never forget for my whole life. The sea and the sky were in a perfect 2:3 ratio, and where they touched, the outlines of the sea and sky seem to merge together in a perfect gradient. As they say, “the rainbow always comes after the storm”, sure enough, there was a colorful rainbow that arched across the sky, crossing continents and lighting up the sky, giving people hope. By the time we stepped on shore, the sun was already setting, lighting up the sky in blood red and thus giving us an unforgettable view.

The next few days were a blur. We did a lot of talking and negotiating with the Africans, and even though they didn't agree with some of our prices, by the end of the week, we were already close friends, not only on business but also on a normal basis. When we were scheduled to leave, we were all very reluctant to leave our new friends. It was as if it was a cruel joke, having to make friends under such difficult circumstances, especially when we didn't even share a single language, and having to leave them just when we were getting to know them well. However, life has to go on, and we have to sacrifice a few friendships in order to have a successful life. As our ship sailed away from the shore, the familiar faces of our friends waving to us, slowly getting smaller and smaller until they were just small dots on the horizon, and we finally turned back. We were officially done with our trip to Africa now. Our ship was following the same path we took to reach there, heading back to China to take on a new exciting adventure that would lead us to yet another beautiful place...

# The Ending Note

*Shanghai Singapore International School, Gurkan, Defne – 14*

As the supposed next voyage of the Ming Treasure Voyages approached, I was very excited. I listened to the news my dad told me every day as it got closer and closer. Every night he came home, he told us all he'd heard about them. I always listened quietly, waiting every night for his news. When there was about a month left before they went on another voyage, my dad formally announced that they're running short on staff. My imagination went off and my thoughts went to them taking me on their voyages. My mouth slowly formed a smile and my dad called me out, saying "Hey, Sandra! Don't even think about getting on that boat. You're 9 years old! And anyways you're going nowhere because we need you for work in the house! You need to clean the house so your mother can go to work full-time. Do you know how hard your brother, mother, and I work just for you to have this meal? You will work just as hard and not waste time cleaning someplace without getting the money for it. You know how many people die every voyage anyway? Half of the total number going, half the number Sandra!" I frowned, but I knew if I had any possible chance of becoming staff for one of the Ming Treasure Voyages, I'd take it.

The next morning, I woke up from my fantasies of getting to be a staff member and got ready. I ate a slice of bread for breakfast happily and started working. I was sweeping the floors while my mom was out for groceries when somebody knocked harshly on the door. I scampered up to the huge wooden door and opened it nervously. The mailman stood outside, handed me a little poster and walked off. I didn't even have the time to say goodbye or hello. I slowly unrolled the poster only to see that it was from the Ming Treasure Voyages. The poster said '*As of two weeks' time, we will be choosing 7 able volunteers to go on our 7<sup>th</sup> Voyage towards the African lands. If you are ages of 16–30, please re-send this letter to the same address to sign up with your name and age. Thank you.*' I smiled and quickly hid the letter underneath my mattress before my parents came home. I then went back to sweeping the floors and sung underneath my breath. I sang the beautiful song of the birds and the song of the flowers, brushing and moving together with the wind. My father came home and caught me singing that very afternoon. He yelled at me with veins popping out of his throat, spit coming from his open mouth, and redness forming around his bulging blue eyes. I cried and cried until he dismissed me. And that night, I filled in the form on the poster, my tears unable to stop falling on the ink and smudging it.

It had been a couple weeks since I'd submitted my form, and even though the writing had been smudged, I thought it was still readable. I'd lied about my age, saying I was 16, and hoping to fool them with my height. The thought of them just ripping it in half or realizing I'm 9 kept crossing my mind and making me nervous. The boat would be leaving in around a week, meaning that the winners might already have been chosen. I went over to my cousin's house that night, not wanting to be around my parents. She'd also signed the form on the poster and was waiting for a reply. There was a quick knock on her door shortly after her telling me she signed up too, and we looked at each other's eyes. It was the mailman with a single note.

While watching my cousin board the ship, I screamed yet another time "Send me a note every week!". A mail boat would be coming with the Ming Treasures Voyage, and would go back every Saturday to deliver any news of excitement or grief. I held tears of jealousy and misery back while waving goodbye to my cousin, thinking how it'd be if it were me walking to the boat. We waited until the boat was out of sight to leave, me walking with my hair in front of my face, head down, and tears slowly hitting the floor.

One week later, she sent me a note that arrived on Tuesday. It read:

*Hey Sandra,*

*I'm writing this late at night so don't mind my horrid handwriting. I met a couple of the people here and they're really welcoming. A man called Josh is being especially nice though. Even though it's nice, I feel like something might be a little off with everyone on the boat. It's probably just me. Never mind about that. I hope this'll come to you sooner than when I send my next letter. I love you, and wish you could've been here.*

*Goodnight*

*–Juliet*

I smiled through watery eyes and slowly re-folded the note. I put it in my cup board and realized how sloppy and rushed the last part of the note was. It seemed like she'd just ended it as quickly as she could. I pondered curiously about why that might've been. Since I couldn't write back, that night I dreamed that we'd met and that she'd come back.

The next week, there was no note. I waited excitedly, leaning on the door on Tuesday. No note came for Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, or Saturday. On Saturday night, when I stopped hanging near the door, waiting for the mailman, I re-read the note she first sent me. *'A man called Josh is being especially nice though.'* Had she gotten together with Josh, becoming too busy to write to her cousin for a week? Did Josh do something to her? *'Even though it's nice, I feel like something might be a little off with everyone on the boat'* What was off? Who gave her those feelings? Did the people do something bad to her? Thoughts like this kept running through my mind. I slowly scared myself of what might've happened to her. Mom knocked on my door to tell me to sleep, as we were attending a special event tomorrow. She told me I should dress up and not wear bright colours, as it would be rude.

I woke up the next morning by the pounding of small and big rain droplets on the beautiful tulips my mom had planted a few days prior. I got up and watched the rain hit the ground and slowly start forming a puddle. I watched the clear rain's colour hitting the ground and becoming grey. I watched the rain water our grass. I watched the rain hit my mom and follow her around as she got our mail. I watched the rain keep going with its strong hits on our ground, dominating the grounds. I watched the rain mercilessly keep pounding our tulips, until they'd die. I got up, and washed away the rain that had fallen on our floor from my face and glumly changed in to a brown dress. I brushed my hair harshly and brushed my teeth. I slowly and steadily walked towards the door and checked our mail. Only one letter was present. A letter of grief and sad thoughts. I frowned even more than I was earlier and sat down. My mom dragged me back to my feet a couple minutes later and dragged me out of the house, all the way to the 'special event'.

I watched the rain, and only rain. I watched how innocently it hit us, but never stopped even when we didn't want it here. I watched how there might be someone huge up there, just crying, and all his tears hitting us humans. I watched and prayed the giant would be safe. I named the giant Eddie and watched how sad he must be to cry so much. I watched how sad I was, figuring out this morning why I shouldn't wear bright colours. I watched as I thought of how much Eddie would have to cry to cry a sea. I wondered about myself three weeks ago, wanting to switch places with my cousin. And now my cousin was dead, she was dead with all the rest of the crew. She was dead and we didn't even have a proper goodbye because of my jealousy towards her 'luck'. That could've been me. That could've been me who sunk with the boat. That could've been me who died without a goodbye. It could've been me.



## Plans and Changes

*Shanghai Singapore International School, Hegde, Sathvik – 13*

Sunlight, traveling from the Heavens, pierced the clouds and sped down to the great, timeless depths of the Indian Ocean, never to be seen again. Under its grey green surface, fish swam in their schools, serene and content with their lives. Their only worry, aside from their existence, was the great fleet before them.

Min stared at the tranquil ocean, still fascinated by it even after two years on the voyage. The water danced and flowed, making shapes and patterns on its surface. The great fleet of five-mast treasure ships were floating clumped together in the back. Min felt greed wash over him. The Emperor, may he live forever, had sent the third voyage to travel the world and to awe the barbarians and make them swear fealty. The forty-five treasure ships were laden with gigantic bolts of silk, chests of heavy gold and fragrant spices. With that much wealth, one could live like a god for generations to come. Min was jolted out of his reverie by a painful cuff to the side of his head. “Don’t dawdle boy! Get to scrubbing the deck!” Min whirled around indignantly, and came face to face with the rough faced boatswain. All the curses that Min was going to unleash died on his tongue. He swallowed and stuttered, “I... Yes sir!” The boatswain wasn’t done yet, and he grabbed Min and shouted, “You were not sent on this voyage to dawdle and stare at the ocean boy! The Emperor, may he live forever, does not tolerate fools and lazy workers. So, you better get to work now!” Min hastily nodded and retreated beneath the onslaught of the boatswain’s harsh words and harsher breath. He picked up his bucket and sighed. The deck looked as it always did, pristine and well-scrubbed. He grudgingly got to work.

As Min scrubbed, he could not help watching furtively as the crew swarmed around the ship keeping it ship-shape. The boatswain was prowling around the deck, shouting at anyone who looked to be slacking. A nobleman and his lady stood at the prow, admiring the ocean and its infinite beauty. Sailors stood ready at the masts, and were chatting to pass the time. Soldiers stalked on the deck, arrogant as cats. The soldiers had their weapons on. Min felt a chill run through him. *Did they suspect?* They had no reason to keep their weapons on, unless they expected trouble. Of course, the fleet was fast approaching the island of savages under India. They certainly were not friendly. Min shook his head, and continued observing. The rowers rested and napped, sweat gleaming on their bare backs, taking this lull as an opportunity to be stronger when they were required. *That would help*, Min noted. And of course, there were the lowly deckhands, scrubbing and polishing the decks and other articles. Min spotted his friend, River-Fish, near the prow stealthily gesturing to him. *Come to the meeting place*, he signaled. Min nodded assent. He pretended to check a spot by the middle mast for dirt, and swung down by his friend. Min questioned, “Are we doing it today?” River-Fish nodded grimly, and at the same time, happily. He opened his mouth, and then shouts came. “What is that,” a polished accent asked. A rough voice shouted, “We will be lucky today! The lady of the waters has graced us with her presence!” Min and his friend rushed over to the railing, and stared in awe at the humongous creature before them. It was gray and gigantic, gracefully swimming in the water. A mournful and intelligent eye looked at them, at the ship. It shook its head. Then it swam away, shooting water as its tail slapped down.

Moonlight, traveling from the Heavens, sped through the dark heavy clouds and alighted on the churning waves. Fat water droplets sliced diagonally and flooded the ships as puny figures struggled to bail the water. The boatswain, the common sailors, even the admirals joined in. Everyone was there. And everything was in its right place. To think that plans of a lifetime could be shed at a single nod...

# Ming Treasure Voyages

*Shanghai Singapore International School, Hoo, Xin Yen – 13*

'No doubts they're here,' said Zheng He. Zheng He, the leader of the voyage, was born in 1371. He was a Chinese imperial official that set out with a fleet on the first voyage to Southwest Asia, South Asia, West Asia and more.

'Admiral?' one of his crew members asked.

'Yes, I'm here' answered Zheng He. Zheng He and his crew were having a problem with pirates, the mean, normal pirates. Having to be in the middle of the sea, Zheng He had no way to escape.

'Fire!' yelled the admiral. But they were too late, the pirates were already boarding their ships, and started killing people. The scene was a mess, with blood splashing everywhere, coloring the ship with red. It was chaotic until the commander brought an army and fought with the pirates.

'Phew, that was close!'

Finally, after two hours of nasty fighting, the ship crew members defeated the pirates.

One month after the battle with the pirates, the large ship landed in India. Attracted by the mild weather and lovely sceneries of India, Zheng He and his crews slowly left their ships and discovered the foreign land. They found something very interesting. It was as big as an elephant. It was a grey wild animal with only one horn. Some of the kids and younger crew members were scared by the 'new creature', while most of the people were fascinated. The wild animal was a *Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros*. While they were examining this new creature, a little man dressed in simple, bright colored cotton clothes popped out from a brush behind them. Slowly and carefully, he walked towards the big crew. Then he started saying something in a different language that Zheng He didn't recognize or understand. After almost an hour, the small man realized that Zheng He and his companions didn't understand, so he started to make a series of body languages and gestures that told them to follow him. The big gang of people followed him. On the way Zheng He and the commander were trying to ask the tiny man where were they going, but the Indian man didn't answer.

Finally, they reached the small man's village. The place was enormous and full of trees and people that were dressed in the same way as the little man. It was a very cheerful and lively place. Everyone worked, talked and laughed. They didn't seem to realize that Zheng He and his crew were there. Then, the small man started to speak 'हर कोई, मैंने उन्हें यहां सोचते हुए पाया।' (Everyone, I found them here) Every worker looked up from what they were doing. They were shocked by the presence of a big gang of people with weird clothing and looks. Children moved back and some adults shifted uneasily. All of them looked curiously at the newcomers. It was an awkward silence, then Zheng He started speaking.

'We are from China. We've come here to build friendship with you and share some gifts.'

Although the people couldn't understand, they began to do some hand gestures to show they welcomed them. Some of the kids surrounded Zheng He and talked to him in their own language, while the adults led the crew members to the biggest and the fanciest building in the whole village.

Ten minutes later, they arrived in the building. They were surprised to find out that there were several Chinese artifacts in the display room. 'Ahem... Welcome, new comers,' said an old man with a white long beard as he coughed badly. The crew members were so happy and relieved that the old man spoke the same language. The old man, who was the leader of the village, led them to a huge room with lots of chairs and told them his story. The old man's mother was actually a Chinese woman that was saved by his father. After they died, the old man became the leader and ruled the village for 20 years. Therefore, he knew Chinese well. The old man ordered some servants to serve them well and help them with anything. The old man and the villagers were treating them so well that they didn't want to leave, so they stayed for another 10 days. 'No harm,' the old man said when Zheng He wanted to leave.

It was a stormy night the day before they left. All the crew members were packing up and saying good bye to the villagers. After the short ceremony and party in the big building, they went back to sleep for the last night. All men and women were sleeping soundly. 'Tip, tap. Tip, tap...' The footsteps were getting closer and louder. Small whisperings were getting clearer. There was a sweet but mysterious odor in the air, making the people sleepier than ever. And, making them not want to wake up. Then, a burning smell from somewhere became stronger. The people outside started to laugh so badly that they choked when they talked. The rooms were getting warmer and finally the crew woke up. They realized that they were tricked and their treasures on the ships were stolen by the villagers. Unfortunately, they were too tired to get up and escape the locked rooms. They cried for help but the sniggering sounds just grew louder.

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door. It was Zheng He. He did not sleep because he felt danger was approaching. As he went for a stroll, he found a servant with a bunch of keys. The servant didn't recognize Zheng He and he told him all about the fire and their plan of stealing treasures. Zheng He pretended to be one of the servants and got the keys from him. Without trouble, Zheng He snuck in the building and unlocked all the rooms with the keys. They escaped to their ship and got their weapons ready. While the villagers were celebrating the killing of the crew members, they didn't notice that the crew had escaped. After they had everyone on the ship, they continued their journey.

The crew was still frightened by the experience and they did not trust people that were too nice to them anymore. On the other hand, the villager that gave Zheng He the keys was punished. The people were so angry that they promised to kill Zheng He the next time they saw him. But luckily, Zheng He and his crew learnt their lesson. They continued their journey and they gave presents from China to people that they trusted. And, they learned to never stop at a place for more than 3 days.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Shanghai Singapore International School, Lee, Hyo Jeong – 15*

Menacing barking of hounds and urgent voice of pursuers bellowing echoed through the strained atmosphere. Raging torches blazed vigorously in search of a poor little girl. In torn, stained rags, with greasy disheveled hair, I hurriedly squelched over the soggy ground of rugged mountains where pitch black darkness had long before fallen. Lips parched and cracked and tears streaked my face. Worn-out straw shoes had come off my feet long ago but instead deep scratches replaced their place. Panting for breath, I repeatedly looked back with quivering eyes in the overwhelming fear. My steps quickened as the suffocating sounds of pursuers grew louder and louder. All at once, I stepped on my long, dragging skirt and fell off the slope. Tumbling down the slope, being barely conscious, I sincerely prayed to die here with no pain. Unfortunately, I was still alive though had no energy to raise my body. Then, like a gleam of hope I sighted a cart with several wooden boxes laying just beside me. It was a strong craving for a survival. I stretched my hand for one of the wooden boxes with all my might. At the next moment, I faded out.

I wasn't aware of how long it has been since I got trapped inside the box. Gradually brought to senses, I tried to push up the lid but heavy loads were keeping their place firmly on top of it. After several attempts, I quickly gave up, having decided to save this energy. The hours passed by, all muscles got sore at excessive running and frozen feet covered with sharp scratches began to sting. Of all, burning thirst and hunger were the most insufferable. Then, I heard the footsteps getting closer and closer, followed by clonks of bumping wooden boxes. Though I crying out for help, my hoarse voice kept cracked. Unexpectedly, a blazing light flooded into the wooden box at once, narrowing my eyes and blurring all the vision. Someone pulled me out of the box, which wasn't my current interest at all. Only the instinctive desire for water stuffed my mind. In a raspy voice and with a dry tongue, I continuously murmured one word, "water". After a moment of hesitation, the man crept silently out of the room and soon returned with a glass of water and a rice ball. I swallowed the glass of water at one gulp and crammed a rice ball into my mouth. By then, I met furious, startled eyes looking down at me.

Avoiding his stare, I slowly looked around the room. It was more like a shed with many wooden boxes well-arranged in lines. Immaculate walls and floor with no scratches or mold on suggested that the building was fairly new. Still he was looking dagger at me, so I reluctantly turned my head to face him. Nonetheless, he kept silence without asking or yelling at me. Minutes passed and with a deep sigh he went out of the room and came back with a suit of men's clothes.

"Come out after getting changed" It was his first words.

After disguised myself as a man, I hesitantly stepped out of the shed. He was waiting for me outside. Hearing that I was on the fleet on a voyage, I almost freaked out. Regardless, he kept on talking. He notified some discipline I must follow and assigned me some chores, which was indeed a permission for me to stay here. He then walked away. All incidents happened in a flash, leaving me dumbfounded, though it was soon shrouded in my tremendous curiosity. I hurried my steps to the deck of the ship. It was such a colossal fleet that I wouldn't even notice it's a fleet if he didn't mention it. Rolling sea in harmony with a crystalline sky extended in front of my inquiring eyes. Along the azure incantation, an interminable parade of hundreds gigantic ships were going on. Such magnificent views bewitched me. Vast, boundless sea stretched out filled my empty, desperate soul and people's busy working and chit-chatting sounds consoled my exhausted mind.

Blissful life on board allowed me to forget all the miseries and misfortunes. I woke up at dawn and watched a splendid scenery of sunrise over the horizon, which invariably enchanted me. Having a light breakfast, I busied myself wiping the floor with a rag, arranging boxes of provisions and drinks in the shed. In the afternoon, I embarked on my little adventure. I explored the fleet, since it was so stupendous that I could always discover something new. Of hundreds fleets on a voyage, it boasted remarkable size and splendor. In the evening, I sat around with others and had supper together. Though no one was of my age, everyone treated me amiably with respect. Sometimes, the man who had saved me spent these precious nights with us together, giving gentle smiles. I was later heard from others that he's a boatswain of the ship. I've been never treated as a human all my life, but a pretty doll if well treated. Though I doubted if people would treat me the same way even if they later find out I was a runaway prostitute, still a good deal of affection in their eyes comforted me. Every night, under the soothing moonlight, I embellished the night sky with a unique melody of an antique pipa, I discovered in the fleet's backmost garret.

A month passed since I first got on this fleet. As usual, sitting on the deck, I was looking out over the sea for a sunrise. In the distance, I came in sight of land, which automatically let out an exclamation of joy. By noon, all fleets anchored in the port. From busy chattering of other sailors, I could learn that we arrived in the port Vijaya of Champa. I moved busily than other times to help load miscellaneous goods on the wagons that will be offered as gifts to the King of Champa. The staggering number of gifts included the finest silk, sophisticated porcelains, a wide variety of teas, papers, gold and more. The diplomatic mission set off for the Champa Palace, lead by the Admiral Zhang He. I glimpsed him through the crowd. Even from the back, his engaging charisma and dignity could be felt. While the mission was away, the rest prepared for our next voyage. Carpenters repaired the ship inspecting all parts for damage and external signs of wear, and soldiers made their way to bazar beside the harbor to lay up provisions. In fact, I wasn't permitted to leave the ship, but anyway I already finished all the tasks assigned to me. I was mad keen to get away and explore. Overwhelmed by unparalleled excitement, I took my first step onto the harbor. My heart was jumping out of my chest at the new world I faced for the first time.

The harbor was swarming with merchants and sailors, all in different outfits. All the hustle and bustle and distracting noises exhilarated me. Feeling the invigorating air, I moved further into the crowds. At the moment, I sighted a cluster of people sitting together with their eyes focused on one same thing. One peculiar play was going on there. It was several wooden dolls leading the play, moving in different directions, floating on the water. I recalled my old memory of watching a similar play in my hometown. It was called the puppetry. At that time, I was fascinated by tiny dolls moving their arms and legs freely, yet it was even more amusing since these dolls were acting out on the water. Standing still, I kept my eyes riveted to the play until the story came to an end. Out of port areas, even more charming view of the bazar stretched in front of me. By the time I returned to the ship, I had a bundle full of bizarre items.

A few days later, the mission returned with few Champa diplomats, and our fleets set out to sea towards our next destination, the island of Java. It wasn't a smooth sailing at all. At the incessant attack of perpetual rainstorms and monstrous waves, several ships had capsized, depriving innumerable innocent lives. It was a continuation of desperate days. Sailors all looked hollow with vacant eyes. When darkness fell every night, everyone got into their own mood, and the whole vessel lapsed into silence. Leaned back against the mast, I played a mournful, melancholy tune on the pipa that drifted over the waves, hoping it can console raging waves and my worn-out fellows. Nonetheless, the profound sorrow and grief didn't easily fade away.

Another livelong night closed in, which was even more desperate and poignant than other nights. Not even a flash of moonlight was there. A miracle happened all at once. Sitting on a watchtower, I spotted millions of dots beginning to sparkle gorgeously on the ocean surface, giving out mysterious bluish white lights, as if the sea was a night sky with myriad of stars twinkling. At my piercing shout, being flustered, everyone looked down on the dazzling night sea. A great multitude of jelly fish had been whirling around in the boundless ocean. Ravished by the spectacular view, we were lost for words. Soon, deep silence turned into the exclamation of wonder and delight. The compelling sight healed all our sorrows and screw our courage to the sticking place. It was another new beginning of our voyage with determined, toughened mindset.

The next day wasn't so lamenting. Since the morning, we all moved busily, carrying out our own tasks lively, energetically all with cheerful smiles on face. It wasn't an easy day at all. It was the day we first bumped into the outrageous ships of pirate Chen Zuyi. In fact, it was a foreseen, inevitable encounter since we took off on our voyage. Occasionally, I had heard others talking about him, who was infamous for being merciless and barbarous. Fortunately, thanks to our quick retreat, no fight broke out.

Carefully avoiding the fleet of pirate Chen Zuyi, our fleet reached the island of Java. Again, our mission set off to meet and gift the king and I stealthily got out of the ship. Unexceptionally, my curiosity overcame me. Compared to Champa, it was rather peaceful, serene island. Its extensive green fields along with low hills and dense forests allured me. At the moment, drawn by attractive singing voice, unconsciously I was walking into forest. Making my way through the bushes, I spotted one girl humming a song softly while dancing with a diaphanous scarf, dressed in a long pink skirt that comes to her ankle. Her every exquisite move along with luscious voice enchanted me. At that instant, a snake dangling on the tree was sneaking up behind her with a cunning hiss. I sprang upon her, caught her by the wrist and bounded away at a full speed. How long we have been running, small straw huts and wood houses came into my sight. However, even before I stepped into the native village, a wooden stick hit me on the head and knock me unconscious.

At the numbness creeping into my arms and legs, I woke up. My two legs were tied tightly together and my hands were bound behind me. At a splitting headache, I moaned involuntarily, which made the girl hiding behind the curtains stick her head cautiously. I hardly rose my bound body and leaned

against the wall. Then, I gently called her with a smile. Of course, I talked in Chinese but anyway it seemed like she understood. She slowly came by my side and whispered something, which I obviously didn't understand. I signaled her with my eyes to first help me loosen the ropes on my wrists and legs. She hesitated a moment and loosened the rope binding my hands. Only then, I could use body movements and gestures to communicate with her. I asked her why I was here. Without talking, she started to draw on the ground. To wrap it up, when we reached the town, the natives who misunderstood that I was trying to kidnap her knocked me out and brought me here. She told her parents that I rescued her life from the danger but they regarded me as an invader. Not just an invader, but a strange boy with a totally different look. Anyway, I could lose no more time here. It was already dark outside. I asked for her help. While she drew people's attention, I sneaked out and hurriedly ran back the way I came. It was so close. Right after I got back on the fleet, we had a final bed roll-call.

Aside from Champa and the island of Java, our fleet visited many more islands including Malacca, Semudera, Andaman, Nicobar Islands, Ceylon and Calcutta, although not every country welcomed our visit. The time stole by like an arrow, and we were already heading back to our homeland. Everyone was excited to return home and unite with their families, whereas I was growing more and more anxious as our fleets draw closer to our homeland. I wasn't even sure whether I can still live there. Two years had already passed by, but I was still afraid that I would meet somebody who knows me and my dreadful past. Most times, my thoughts were all in a muddle. Even worse, our Treasure Fleet confronted the fleets of pirate Chen Zuyi. Unlike the first encounter, the tensions were definitely intense. Combats were about to take place.

It was Chen Zuyi who announced the start of the combat. Hundreds of flaming arrows whistled through the air and flew into our fleets. As soon as they stuck in fleets' hulls, the raging fire spread itself throughout entire fleets. It only took an instant for few fleet to sink into the placid, callous sea. Our fleets counterattacked with cannon fire, of whose power was far beyond imagination. Hundreds of flaming arrows were nothing compared to one cannon fire. The battle ended at a single cast on account of Chen Zuyi who quickly surrendered right after we fired cannons, which I somehow felt uncomfortable with. Soon, my misgiving turned out to be true.

Chen Zuyi and all his subordinates were imprisoned in the fleets' very bottom. We still got a long way to our homeland and I was overwhelmed with nervousness. After several days had passed, we were run out of food, an unexpected situation. There was no choice but to stop by the nearest island and replenish provisions. The incident occurred in the dead of night. Oppressed by nightmare, I slipped out of the room and stared at the abnormally peaceful, quiet night sea, standing on the deck. When I turned back, I spotted one other man moving around the ship. Acting suspiciously, he went down the stairs to the fleet's very bottom. I stealthily followed him down the stairs. It was a heavy thud of someone collapsing to the ground that immediately stopped my footsteps. I nimbly hid in the barrel beside me. After they went up the stairs, I quietly got out of the cabin and followed them up the stairs. On the deck, pirates were all around, pouring something over the fleets each with a barrel in hands. By its pungent smell, I noticed it was an alcohol. My body was trembling with fear but I tried to remain nonchalant and think of what I can do. Then, a great idea rushed upon my mind.

I hurried my steps to the garret where I gathered all the grotesque things I found on the fleet and from the voyage. From the garret, I took the heavy wooden box with firecrackers and brought it outside where might not be seen by anybody. I kept the wire connected to the box far away from the it, and lighted a fire at its end. Then, I went down to the beach and hid myself behind the fleet. Now, the only thing I had to do was projecting a light onto the clean wall of fleet and putting the elephant wood-carving in front of the light. At the image of mammoth beast appeared on the wall, dull pirates were agitated. They were running here and there, bumping into each other, screaming and shouting desperately. There was no need of any actor on this stage. Terrified pirates themselves were the superb actors. The chaos they created themselves were directly shown on the wall, which looked just like the beast attacking people. It horrified them even more. At the perfect time, firecrackers went off. Its astonishing sound woke everyone up. Soon, all pirates were defeated by Admiral Zhang He and his brave soldiers. Meanwhile, for the first time, I saw his face properly. He was the one who saved me, the one who allowed me to stay on the board, the one we all recognized as a boatswain. His image under the moonlight looked more valiant and splendid than anybody else in the world.

Our long, adventurous, troubled voyage was over then. And this is end of my story. The young prostitute girl, who couldn't do anything, indeed thought she couldn't do anything wasn't there anymore. All uncertainties engulfing her was gone. Hereafter, it was heard that one beautiful merchant appeared from nowhere became the best merchant ever in Ming Empire history.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Shanghai Singapore International School, Ng, Hui Lim – 15*

This is the diary of a translator who once worked on the Treasure Fleet with Zheng He.

I had always wondered, that our great admiral with such reputation and might, he had such a heartbreaking family background. However, the world that Zheng He our great admiral was heading into was dark and unsettled. The admiral of the Treasure fleet was the child of a royal family and faced tragedy between the Ming soldier. A single knife stroke will agonize his fate. He lived as eunuch. Back when our admiral wasn't under the Yongle emperor's control, he used to spend his first ten years back at Yunnan. Before we set off for our first voyage, the fleet crew were well trained and educated of the cultures and life aspects of different countries. Throughout the seven voyages we've made, the fleet traveled across the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and along the east coast of Africa.

On 1405, we set off on our first voyage to the sea. There were a total of 27,800 men and 62 ships. The waves were hitting as if the ocean was trying to stop us on our new adventure to the world. Zheng He held the title as the "Face of China" to the world. I remembered, that his voice below dozen as thunder and bells, his eyes glared from his 7 foot frame. When we first arrived at the country of Champa (which is the current southern Vietnam), our great admiral spoken fluent Vietnamese to the locals. He was also generous while he talked with the leader of Champa. I remembered, that the gestures and the laughter he made was as proper as the emperor will do. In the following days, we've also visited Thailand, Melacca and the island of Java. Thailand was one of the most memorable ones because of the warm weather and the swiftly wind that lead the fleet to a total new world. We arrived in a palace filled with gold sculptures and tiled floor. The king welcomed our arrival and settled us down in a majesty looking room.

Few months after the first voyage, I over heard more about our admiral. The admiral was a Muslim and his real name was Ma He. His Father was Haji Ma and his mother's maiden name was "Wen". He used to live in a village where agriculture and fishing was the key to support the locals. Since after the transition to the palace, Zheng He was well educated and without the help of the Yongle emperor, our great admiral wouldn't be able to guide us. Our great admiral also read books about Confucius and Mucous. On the eve before our second voyage, Zheng He has a simple tribute to his father in grave. On the next morning, we set off at the Liujiagan Port in Tiancang.

Few years later, a Sumatran pirates challenged against our great admiral. He confronted at Pelambang (the city in South Sumatra, Indonesia) in 1407. The pirate, Chen Zu Yi quickly surrendered under the agreement made by our admiral while he prepared a preemptive surprise. Fortunately, the plans of the pirates were soon known by Zheng He and the Ming Soldiers killed 5,000 of Zu Yi's man. The defeat on Chen Zu Yi was also our glorious victory in our military achievements. The pirate was then publicly executed at Nanjing in 1407. After the seven voyages we've made, the emperor stops the production of making boats. Slowly, we continued the

# An Untold Story of Zheng He's Right-Hand Man

*St. Joseph's College, Cheng, Wai Ho – 12*

Wang was a measly soldier serving in the navy of Zheng He's treasure fleet with the mission to conduct trading and collect tribute in the eastern Pacific and Indian Oceans on behalf of the Chinese Emperor. He came from a remote province in the south-western part of China, close to the land of the barbarians, and thus inviting unpleasant yet inevitable mockery by other soldiers in the same armada. Wang had a surprising talent of analyzing and plotting battle strategies. But he was never promoted and his talents were overlooked until one day...

It was a glorious day. The high sunlit clouds drifted across a clear blue sky. The gushing waves were comforting. It was quiet in the meeting room on the enormous vessel. All commanders sat on chairs. Zheng He, the fleet admiral, was seated on a wooden throne in the centre. Wang, among many troops, stood quietly beside his direct commander, Tso.

'Our ships have reached the coasts of Africa. We will have to tread carefully as pirates roam these seas.' Zheng He said. His voice was not loud, but it rumbled in the quiet cavern-like room.

'The name of our powerful fleet has been echoing far beyond our kingdom. Even the kings in all these faraway places have surrendered to our Ming emperor and become our tributary states. These pirates are just too insignificant for us to pay attention to.' Tso responded conceitedly.

'But how can we display our power if we have a whole navy on board and we don't use it?' Zheng He questioned.

'I am confident that we can control them without bloodshed. We are far too FORMIDABLE for them to challenge,' Tao drawled languidly.

The commanders nodded in agreement. But Wang had long heard about the ferocity of the pirates and he could not help spurting the comment, 'If they can be controlled, then why are they pirates? They don't follow rules and orders. They are the beasts in the ocean! We must eliminate them without delay!'

Tso's face turned beetroot red. He bawled, 'How dare you speak a word! Throw him out!'

They didn't have long to wait. While the fleet was cruising smoothly along the Indian Ocean, heading towards Southern Africa for the first time, a sleek ship was seen on the horizon. It was sailing towards the fleet. The lookout, who stationed high on the mast in crow's nest, yelled at the messenger below.

Zheng He was informed in no time. He dismissed the messenger and faced his generals. 'My fellow comrades, we have no idea whether this ship is friend or foe. I think we have to take some action now.'

Then Tso spoke up, 'As I said before, we only need to send someone over to declare our identity and they will succumb to our power.'

'Tso, you seem very confident. I believe you are the best candidate to carry out this mission,' said Zheng He.

Tso sat up straighter. 'Without a doubt, Admiral!' he said, beaming with pride and satisfaction.

At this time, Wang was standing in the back row of the troops and he was worried about Tao. Commander Tso was a warrior in negotiation, but he was not a fighter. Wang gathered his courage and interrupted again, 'Commander Tao, this ship is a mystery to us. They might be nice, but the possibilities of them being hostile seem bigger. If they were pirates, like we discussed before, they could bring trouble to you. Can I replace you to go instead?' Wang pleaded.

Tao exploded in anger, 'How can a meagre soldier like you question my decision!'

Zheng He glanced at Wang and contemplated for a while. 'It seems unwise to trust a soldier rather than an experienced commander. Tso, you may still go on with your plan. You, uh... whoever you are, go back to your place.'



General Tso beamed brighter and called out, 'Guards, take him away!' Wang was knocked out and dragged away.

The mystery ship was actually the biggest ship in a fleet that sailed steadily towards the Chinese fleet. It reached the Chinese fleet an hour later. General Tso stood at the helm of the ship. His heart was smiling. Zheng He trusted him. A promotion was possible. Everything was going smoothly for him. The ship pulled up alongside Tso. His soldiers put down a plank connecting the two ships, and he walked proudly across.

In a distance, Zheng He saw Tso being surrounded by dozens of men. It was obvious that Tso was trying to use his verbal talents to full potential, spouting words like rain falling from the sky. The men on the ship suddenly shifted their focus from Tso to other ships of the Chinese fleet where Zheng He and chests of treasure were. Evil smiles spread across their horrifying faces. In a flash, a scar-faced, fierce-looking man in black, who seemed to be their leader, drew his bloody sword and stabbed Tso hard. Tso howled in pain and dropped in silence. The murderers dragged Tso to the side of the ship and tossed the corpse overboard. The lifeless General Tso floated away from the ship in a red, murky mess.

Wang came to his senses after what seemed like a millennium. He found himself lying on a bed of straw. He desperately wanted to save Commander Tso from a sticky end! He dashed to the deck and found a chaotic scene. The Ming troops were darting forward and backward while more ships with a black flag were approaching the fleet slowly.

Wang found Zheng He and all the commanders in the War Room, a place where they discussed army tactics. Zheng He spoke with a solemn expression, 'Now Commander Tao was killed. I come to consult all of you on whether we should attack or retreat.'

'Maybe we could make peace,' a frail-looking commander muttered in the corner timidly. 'These pirates seem much more powerful and well organized than we thought. We should avoid unnecessary bloodshed. We must reach Africa and then bring treasure back to our emperor without losing any more men.'

'Bloodshed is inevitable,' Wang shot out his words, surprising everyone in the room. 'War is the only solution. There is no compromise with them. We must defeat these pirates and wipe them off the map not only for our fleet but many other fleets from our kingdom.'

Zheng He started to clap, followed by others, until the whole room erupted with applause and cheers. 'Well said!' roared Zheng He. He beckoned for Wang to come forward. 'In that case, Wang, I put you in charge of this battle. You are now promoted to the commander of this battle!'

Wang was stunned, but he managed to compose himself soon. He was fueled with determination and wisdom. He faced the commanders and started to explain, 'First we should...'

Wang and other commanders were on a warship. It had a masthead shaped like a phoenix, and cannons juttred out from the sides of the ship. Wang's warship was charging at the biggest pirate ship. Wang and others unsheathed their swords and jumped on board. The pirates rounded them all up. Dozens of Chinese soldiers were soon slaughtered by the merciless sea monsters. Wang knew he must capture the leader to win, so he led his team and headed to the captain's cabin. He slashed his way through and all of a sudden, Wang was impaled by a sword in the leg. It was the pirate leader. Wang collapsed, clutching his injured leg, his face contorted in pain. He swung his sword, the blade reflecting the murderous gleam in the eyes of the pirate leader. The pirate leader slashed down hard at Wang's chest. Wang blocked and struck back. It inflicted a long red line on the pirate leader's arm. Crimson blood began the flow instantly, but the ferocious pirate leader took no notice. He swung his sword in a wide arc, and cut a gash in Wang's armor. Wang parried strike after strike, but soon his energy was zapped. Finally, he mistimed his block and lost his balance. The pirate leader advanced, an evil triumphant smile spreading across his face. He skipped aside and tried to thrust at Wang sideways. Wang scrambled to get out of the way, but failed miserably. He closed his eyes as the blade was making its way towards his heart.

But it never met its target. When Wang opened his eyes, he saw a spear sticking out from the side of the pirate leader's neck. He turned, and saw Admiral Zheng He. He was bewildered. Zheng He said, 'I won't let you die, Wang. We are both the best warriors from the wild South West.' Wang nodded and smiled. He was finally recognized.

Admiral Zheng He was an unparalleled Chinese explorer and sea commander during the early Ming dynasty in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He was originally born as Ma He in a Muslim family in the province of Yunnan in south-western part of China. He later adopted the conferred surname Zheng from Emperor Ming. Zheng He commanded expeditionary Ming Treasure Voyages to Asia and East Africa during his time. Commander Wang was his right-hand man.

# Captains' wish

*St. Joseph's College, Cheung, Ho Ching Ryan – 14*

“Aye aye, captain!” I shouted aloud after the Captain’s speech.

I was a young boy, 16 years old, clean shaven and with pale white skin. I was quite a newbie to this ship called “Xun Meng”, which means finding dreams. My parents died when I was only 3. I used to be a student, but uncle didn’t want me to learn English, hoping instead I would get a job as soon as possible to help make ends meet. So I ran away from home and was later discovered by the Captain in a cold alley.

The Captain was quite rich and kind, treating me as his own son. He also trained me to join the navy as he was the captain himself.

When I turned 16, Captain felt that I was ready for adventure. When he was young he had travelled many places and accumulated a massive fortune. The navy followed his lead and helped him give away his treasure to those in need around the world. Before I knew it, we had gone on six expeditions: the next trip was going to be the Captain’s final voyage before his retirement.

“Remember, this treasure is for those in need. If people want to take it by force, then use your biggest efforts to defeat them!” Captain said at the head of the boat when we were going to depart for the last time.

*Today is quite sunny and quite suitable for adventure*, I thought.

But I was wrong.

“Boom!” Another stroke of lightning struck the sky, the sea was roaring aggressively, and rain was pouring down. The helmsman was steering the boat rapidly, as the captain kept ordering the men to fold up the sails, and I was inside the little cabin of the ship, waiting for the storm to go over.

This was the first time we came across such a big storm. I curled myself up, as I knew a storm could destroy everything on the ship, as well as the ship itself.

I was scared, and I start praying for mercy. Everything got dimmer, darker, then I closed my eyes...

“Gasp!” I woke up suddenly. I looked around – nothing was out of the ordinary. I immediately rushed up to the deck to check on my crewmates.

To my surprise, everything seemed normal on the surface. The Captain was standing at the head of the ship. The wind was brushing his cheek. He was strong, with a thick moustache, a pair of kind loving eyes, and strong muscles all over his body. He was watching the sea. Waves went up and down, the red light of sunset reflected the captain’s face. It was a face of sorrow. He frowned and closed his eyes.

“Cap?” I approached him. He opened his caring eyes, then looked at me. The sun was setting on the horizon, the sea became red and orange. Captain smiled.

“Do you know how my parents died?” Captain said suddenly. I shook my head. He put his hand on my head, saying, “When I was small, my parents were adventurers. They liked shipping very much. Their hope was to travel to South Africa. Until one day, a big storm swallowed my parents without any mercy. I survived by holding a wood plank and floated to Vietnam. After recovering, I travelled back to China, and decided became a captain to fulfil my parents’ wish. Therefore, I trained myself to be strong enough for that. This is my last adventure. I hope I can give out all my treasures I got and reach South Africa. Now, go and have dinner. Sleep early, we need to stop at India tomorrow.”

I nodded my head, as Captain hadn’t spoken to me this seriously before. Soon I ate my dinner and went to sleep. This wasn’t a good night’s sleep, as I dreamt of red spiders crawling up to my shoulders. I couldn’t breathe as I dreamt of them getting into my throat and nose, and the tingling sensation went through my body. Scratching myself didn’t even work; my hands were pinned to the floor and I couldn’t move a little. “Help!” I screamed, but no sound came out from my mouth...

I woke up still feeling drowsy the next day. The ship had reached India. Captain and his crew bought oranges and spinach, for our hydration and vitamin C intake. He also bought wine because wine could be stored for a long time. Captain was a very caring person, he knew that we might catch scurvy or dysentery so he also bought herbal medicine for us.

We stayed in India for only three days as we were quite in a hurry.

We departed after we having a good breakfast. Captain had been here to give out treasure before so the locals gave us our food for free.

Closer to South Africa than any of us had ever been, Captain was really glad about this. However, my sixth sense told me everything wouldn’t be smooth sailing...

On the 13<sup>th</sup> night after we left India, a big noise from above the decks woke me up – the distinct *bang* of a cannon.

I immediately took my pistol from the drawer next to my bed. The cannon sounds echoed around me. I rushed up the ladders and saw pirates! My sixth sense was right. I aimed my pistol and shot down one of the pirates. I saw captain keep bouncing off bullets with his sword. I aimed at another pirate and shot. The bullet went through his heart and he fell onto the ground. Captain immediately smashed a pirate behind him with his strong fist and stabbed him in his stomach. I pulled out my sword and approached Captain, standing back to back. As the number of men on the pirate ship dwindled, the leader of the pirates started turning his ship away. As we were about to turn away our boat as we didn't want to fight any more, an arrow went through the air and struck captain's left arm.

Fortunately, the arrow wasn't poisoned and we had medical powder for injuries, also we had bandaging cloths to heal captain's wound quickly. The only problem was he couldn't move his left hand smoothly. However, this wasn't a big deal as captain was right-handed.

After 2 months of peace, we finally reached a coast near Ethiopia, captain gave out treasure for the poors and met the head chief of this country. We stayed for a week then we departed again. A child gave me a little knife he made by himself with bone. As I didn't like to use a dagger, I kept it in my sleeve.

By our estimates, we still had a month of non-stop travelling to reach South Africa. To fulfil captain's wish, we promised to never turn back.

The night we left Ethiopia, I restocked the ammunition of my pistol. The whole ship was scared of a pirate who roamed around east and south Africa. We called him Executioner, because he never showed mercy to anyone whom he thought to be an enemy. His crew was small, but each crew member was unnaturally strong and powerful. I noticed that Captain, who was usually fearless, seemed worried too. He started sharpening his sword, as others did. We were nervous, but we were prepared.

That day finally came.

"Cap! A ship is coming towards us. Should we fight or turn back?" One of our crewmates shouted. Captain looked through his telescope and scowled. It was him. Our men immediately pulled out our sword and readied ourselves for a battle. We had approximately 70 men on our ship, and they had only 20 men. We knew this fight was really important as we wanted to fulfil captain's last wish, and we also didn't want our treasure to fall into Executioner's hands.

I pulled out my pistol and ready for the fight. Executioner's ship was coming in a fast speed. Everything was quiet: in an instant, cannons were firing, swords were clashing, and blood was everywhere. I aimed my pistol and shot down a random enemy. Captain was using his favourite sword and clashing with another enemy. When I was rearming my pistol, I saw Executioner holding up a pistol and aiming it at captain! I immediately shot at Executioner's hand. My bullet hit his pistol and his pistol flew off his hands. Captain successfully defeated 2 enemies. However, only 4 enemies were dead, and we had lost 13 of our men. Everything was too fast and I couldn't even react when an enemy smashed my head through a wooden plank. Everything went black immediately.

*I don't want to die... I'm still so young...*

I woke up suddenly in a room. I tried to move but I found that I was tied up on a chair. I looked around. Executioner was in front of me, and Captain sat next to me.

"Cap!" I shouted. Captain did not respond. It was the first time ever I saw someone feeling that defeated, let alone seeing that look on Captain. Executioner spoke, "Young kid, you are now defeated, and your daddy won't live any longer."

I was angry and tried to break free of my chair, but the chair was bolted to the floor. I saw my pistol on a table next to me. I couldn't reach it as my hands were tied up behind the chair. I tried jumping towards my pistol with the chair, but I found out I was stuck. All of a sudden, a sharp object poked me in my hand. It was the little dagger the little kid gave me in Ethiopia! I immediately used a secret code to tell Captain to count down 10 seconds as I went to work on the rope tying me up.

9 seconds left... Executioner was laughing manically. "He who dares trespass my territory shall suffer to death!"

4 seconds left... "What should I do to you Captain? Maybe I should start by cutting off your left ear?"

1 second left! "Maybe I should..."

"Snap!" The rope broke! No words were needed. I immediately fetched the pistol beside me, and Captain balled his fists. Even though Executioner reacted fast, his face was punched by Captain, and my bullet grazed Executioner, leaving a scar on his face. He immediately yelled incoherently, held up his sword and fought back. I threw my dagger towards Executioner, but it bounced off Executioner's sword. Captain immediately knelt down to avoid being hit by Executioner and picked up my dagger. Suddenly I heard

many footsteps outside the room – Executioner’s men. Captain and Executioner were still fighting aggressively. Footsteps got nearer! I finished reloading my pistol and shot at the reinforcements. Now it was 2 versus 15. I immediately rearmed my pistol again but everything was too late. Executioner held Captain’s neck and the other men held captain’s arm. Captain shouted choking, “Go! Don’t care about me!” as he pointed at a broken window behind me. I had only two bullets left. I couldn’t decide what to do now. We totally lost. Captain’s dream sank deep into the sea, all was lost...

Captain shouted again. Instead of calling me to go, he called me to look at my left using our secret code. I immediately turned my head. To my surprise, there were barrels on top of barrels of explosives! All it takes is a spark... or a bullet...

I’m sorry, Captain, but I’m sure you understand.

I dropped my gun and rose my hands in surrender. Executioner laughed, “Huh? Giving up? Kill him.” Some men rushed towards me. I immediately knelt down and picked up my armed pistol and shot at the barrels. I jumped out from the window as soon as I shot.

Captain understood.

“Good job, son.”

I saluted at captain as heat wave hit me and catapulted me into the water.

I was near death by the time I ended up at Mozambique. Fortunately, the people there were friendly and nursed me back to health. I stayed there for a whole year before returning to China. I hope I can reach South Africa one day by becoming a captain. Captain, I will fulfil your wish for you, no matter what it takes. I will always remember you.

# A Sailor's Adventure

*St. Joseph's College, Wong, Kaemon Lok Tin – 12*

I'm an exceptional sailor, if I do say so myself. I've sailed among thousands of cities, countries and exotic lands. I've discovered places never heard of or put on a map. I've fought against and conquered pirates and intruders, made treaties and brought precious treasures and gifts back to my homeland, to the delighted wonder of my emperor. However, among all these exhilarating adventures, only one expedition has truly left a mark upon my soul – the Ming treasure voyages.

That was when I was pretty young, around my early twenties. I was one of the chosen sailors to go on this grand event, which was promised to be legendary. At that time I was on Admiral Zheng's personal ship, carrying countless boxes of jewelry and priceless goods, along with hundreds of military weapons. Our goal was to show the wealth and power of China to the world by giving out these treasures. The evening before we set sail, the mighty Yongle Emperor held a scrumptious banquet, to pray and wish us a successful journey. We departed the next day with gifts of gold brocades, patterned silks and coloured silk gauze.

All was peaceful. The pleasant wind and sea brought us to Champa, then Java, Malacca, Aru, Semudera and Lambri. However, a few days after departure from Lambri, one of our ships accidentally split off and sailed to the Nicobar Islands. We couldn't afford delays so Admiral Zheng decided to abandon the ship while we continued to set sail. A week later, we admired the splendid and majestic mountains of Ceylon, and we took a few days to arrive. Nevertheless, we met a belligerent inclination from Alagakkonara, so we evacuated the whereabouts.

While we were returning home, we addressed Chen Zuyi and his freebooter fleet in Palembang. I was immediately agitated, for I knew he and his crew were the strongest pirates of Southeast Asia at that time, and there was no doubt our vessel would be demolished and decimated into smithereens, and all of our men would perish, including Zheng He himself. Some of our men advocated that we should try to avoid them, but Zheng He resolved that we should fight back in order to triumph. Seeing that this was our only solution, we loaded up our ships with our cannons, our bowmen readied their recurves and crossbows, and our gladiators and warriors took out their blades and swords. Just as our last warrior got into position, the skirmish emerged.

Instantly, battle cries echoed through the winds. Shafts and darts sizzled by. The cannons roared. Bridges promptly fell between Chen Zuyi's boats and ours, allowing our melee troops to engage. Sparks flew everywhere. I wasn't a fighter. I wasn't strong enough to hold a sword, nor was I precise enough to be an archer. Everything happened in a blur. The stench of blood filled the air, punctuated by screams of pain. When one of our men collapsed right next to me, an arrow in his chest, a rush of adrenaline coursed through me and I used all my strength to rush into the battlefield. A blizzard of spears was shrilling and sassing in the sky. Men were snaring and squealing as the ground became greasy with gore. Our weapons were clanging and clangorous under the seething, spite-filled sky. Geysers and fountains of tangy blood splattered into the air. Instantaneously, something sedating shot me, which caused me to faint.

When I awoke from the poison in my blood, I was in an infirmary – back in China! A few weeks later, I was requested to join the second expedition. I politely declined this offer, the last trauma still fresh on my mind. If I had agreed to join, it might possibly have been my last adventure ever. This has been an exotic voyage for me, and I shall forever treasure them. If you ask me if I would ever abandon this experience from my head, I would reply, "Not in a million years!"

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*St. Joseph's College, Yip, Hei – 13*

Back in the days, when the Zhu's family still ruled China, the era was known as the Ming Dynasty. In the year of 1360 A.D., a prince was born. His name was Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan. He was the fourth son of the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang. On the other side of the kingdom, there was a teenage boy named Ma He. He was from a Muslim family in Yunnan, China. When he was ten, the Ming army invaded and occupied Yunnan. He was sent to the Ming Palace and was castrated and prepared to serve the royal prince. After he became a eunuch, he was sent to help Zhu. As Zhu was eleven years older than Ma, he treated Ma as a playmate. He taught Ma little secrets about living and striving in the palace.

On the other hand, Ma showed his brilliance, courage, and confidence in front of the prince. Zhu gained trust on Ma, while Ma showed great loyalty to Zhu. There was an inseparable bonding between the two. As Ma had grown up, he became a soldier for the Ming to fight against the Mongols. Zhu was the Governor of Beijing and the commander of the army at that time. Eventually, Zhu led his army to a victory. They dominated the Mongols, taking all of their lands, treasuries and military force. After this huge victory, Zhu was praised and awarded extensively by the King while Ma was promoted to the position of "Sanbao Taijien," which was the head among all the eunuchs.

In spite of this, Ma also became a military officer. He consulted the prince in ways of war diplomacy. When Zhu Yuanzhang died in 1402 A.D., he passed his throne to his oldest grandson, rather than his fourth son, Zhu Di, according to the traditions of the Chinese Emperor. Zhu Di was jealous and frustrated. He forced his nephew to give up his throne and proclaimed himself as the new emperor of Ming. He named himself Yongle Emperor. He made Ma He the Director of Palace Servants and granted the surname "Zheng" to Ma He.

Zhu Di was a capable emperor. He was good at governing the country. The country was prosperous and stable and the people at that time were living in harmony. Yongle Emperor was also an aggressive King, and he was eager to expand his territories. He believed there would be unknown land waiting for him to explore and he was confident that he could conquer more land. Zhu started to think about sailing around his kingdom. He appointed his henchman Zheng He as the admiral of the fleet. In the year 1404 A.D., Zheng He officially began the well-known "Ming Treasury Voyages."

Zheng He and his crew started to sail to different places. They first set off to India. During the voyage, they had to get past the India Ocean. When they were in the middle of the ocean, they came up with a powerful typhoon. Since most of the crew were lack of experience, they were frightened by the vigorous waves and the deafening thunderstorm in the angry sea.

The ocean kept roaring, and the ship was shaking rapidly. Some thought that there would be no chance for them to return to their motherland. However, Zheng remained calm and was wondering ways to kept he and his crew safe. One of the co-admirals said, "Maybe we should unload the goods, jump into the sea and swim." However, Zheng denied at once. Instead of giving up, Zheng decided to stay on the ship. Mountainous waves were in front of the crew. Zheng He showed his excellent seamanship and steering in the storm. He strived to keep the ship balance against sinking. He told everyone to remain calm and believe in him. On the one hand, he commanded the sailors to sail more frequently. On the other hand, he and the rest of the crews who were on the deck worked hard to anchor the ship by changing the direction of the vessel.

Finally, they came across the typhoon, face to face. The ship shook even more vigorously. Miraculously, Zheng and his crew were lucky enough to survive, without any loss of treasuries and weapons. However, the ship was in a bad status. They struggled to sail on and finally reached India, where the locals treated them warmly. They received the supplies from the Indians, and they had their broken ship mended. They make a new alliance with India.

After their stay in India, they went on their next voyage. Their next destination was the Persian Gulf. They had continuously sailed for two months until they met the notorious pirates near the Persian Gulf. It was so unexpected that it even shocked Zheng He himself. They triggered a fierce battle between the two armies. At first, the fight was close. None of the two militaries can pull away. After a few days, Zheng He and the pirate met face to face. Their battleships had an intense fight. Since Zheng was a giant, he used his strong arms to throw rocks towards the pirate. Moreover, he brings more cannons and arrows along with him. The attack was too much for the pirate that his battleship couldn't stand. Zheng won the battle quickly.

As the campaign progresses, Zheng He's army gained the advantage, and the morale of Zheng's army restored. Zheng He was good in battling strategy. He secretly surrounded the pirate gang and fought. As a result, the Chinese had a dominating win against the Persian pirates. The pirates were defeated entirely, without a chance to counter-attack.

The wealth of the pirates all belonged to Zheng now. He brought the wealth along with him to Persia. There he met the emperor. They established a new relationship with one another. Persian emperor also performed trades with Zheng. They traded their women and slaves for China's silk and china. Persian king recognized Emperor Yongle and guaranteed not to attack China at any time. It was such an unexpected reward for them in the Persian Gulf.

Later on, they moved on and resumed their voyage. Zheng and his crew's next checkpoint was Saudi Arabian. This time they reached Saudi Arabian peacefully. They would also like to make a new alliance with Saudi Arabia. However, they came up with a huge obstacle: they had a miscommunication with the king there. The king thought that Zheng and his soldiers wanted to kill him. He commanded the soldiers to send them to jail. Lucky for them, the queen of Saudi Arabia was kind enough and accepted their offer of allying with the two countries. Zheng was so grateful of the mercy from the queen. Zheng thanked the king and the queen again and set off back to China.

After a month of voyage, Zheng and his crew were safely back to China. He reported to Emperor Yongle about the achievements that he and his crew had attained during the long 7-month voyage. Moreover, he handed in all the treasuries he got during the voyage. Zheng told Emperor Yongle that they had gained the respect from other countries. Since Zheng was prominent as he was the admiral of the voyage, Emperor Yongle decided to give one-third of the treasuries to Zheng. Since Zheng was very experienced by the time the voyage had finished, he was promoted as the general of the Chinese army. In addition, he gained his reputation in China. He was praised by many Chinese as he helped China to explore the world. Zheng indeed won his name in the long history of China.



# The Adventure of a Lifetime

*St. Mary's Canossian College, Lau, Chloe – 13*

This is the beginning of an adventure of a lifetime.

'Land ahoy!' the joyous cry from the crow's nest woke me from my dream. I shot up quickly and mounted the flights of stairs to see the scenery as soon as possible. We've finally arrived! I reached the deck and the sight took my breath away. A great piece of land with people hustling and bustling around stretched endlessly. After a month of storms, cold and seasick at sea, we finally arrived. And even after all this time, I still couldn't believe that I, LiuYong, assistant of great mapmaker Liheng, had been chosen to be a part of Ming's 2<sup>nd</sup> great Treasure Voyage.

Master Li soon joined me on the deck. We exchanged greetings and both drank in the magnificent sight hungrily. "LiuYong, ever since I saw you, I knew you were smart. Besides, you have been a good assistant, being so attentive and hard-working. We have now arrived in a well-developed trade market. Therefore, you can just relax and explore the market while we are stopping by. Remember to come back and meet me on the deck at 6! We will discuss and plan our route as we will set sail again tomorrow," he smiled, and waved me away. I was delighted. I bowed deeply, gave him my thanks and ran off to explore the wonders of the trade market.

I caught sight of a map shop and I rushed in. There were so many beautiful and exquisite maps. Each one was drawn with years of hard work and different styles. The assistant was amused at my great passion in maps, and he was also a map lover. 'Hey kid! What's your name?' he asked. 'I am LiuYong from the treasure voyages.' 'Oh! I heard there are some pirates around the port lately. Stay safe my friend!' he said, but I told myself I needn't worry. We talked about different maps for a long time, and I lost track of time. Suddenly it was evening, and I bade him goodbye and left.

After leaving the port, Master ZhengHe told us we had to take a longer route to our next destination as foggy and rainy weather is expected, to avoid losing our way.

The next morning, I woke up and felt seasick. I had to get some fresh air so I went on deck. After a minute, I felt much better. I was starting to go back indoors when I gagged. I started to vomit, and I rushed into the storage room as I reeked and threw up. I took a few deep breaths, and was about to go out when I saw the shadows of pirates. Uh oh. I can't go out, it would only get myself captured too. What would become of the crew?

I almost cried out in dismay as I saw that the whole crew had been captured. Even the admiral ZhengHe looked a mess, his forehead beaded with blood. LiHeng had a nasty gash on his right arm, and I longed to help him clean up his wound. The whole crew was a sorrowful sight, as the pirates had totally taken them by surprise. They could not contact other ships for help as the attack was too sudden. All of them had their hands and feet bounded by ropes. Suddenly, I heard a nasty laugh terribly close to me, and my heart stopped as I came into such close contact with the most feared pirate.

One could say that he was a human form of Satan. His name was SaRen, which means a killer in Mandarin. It was obvious that he was the leader, as he had a halo of menace and hatred. Even his own pirates fear him and tremble when his name was mentioned. He had a scar running down from his forehead to his chin, and he had only one eye. He had crooked teeth, and a nasty smile that sends a shiver of fear down one's spine. SaRen took great pleasure in taunting our crew, and it makes one wonder how did he ever start out as an innocent, kind baby.

"Scoundrels, hurry up and lock them in a room!" SaRen barked. 'Have this done in a minute and gather before me!' A servant boy whimpered with pain as the pirates dragged him to the room. The pirate gave him a violent kick on the shin and the boy fainted clean away. I trembled in my uncomfortable crouched position, but I did not dare move. I felt lonely and terrified. I was alone.

Very soon, all the pirates were standing around SaRen. 'Tonight at midnight, I will give you a secret word, and all of you idiots follow me to the deck. The whole crew will be killed by us, but only I can slaughter the "great" Zheng He! The secret word is "the great death". Now all of you get to work and prepare my dinner!' I glanced up at the sky. It was already evening. What can I do? I spent the evening with an empty stomach, and I cried a little. Oh, oh, what can I do?

At last, it was near midnight. Suddenly, I had an idea. My brain screamed for me to give up on this, but I know this would be the only chance that I could save the crew.

The ship was eerily quiet. I got out of the barrel and massaged my aching legs, then creeping down the familiar stairs to where the pirates slept. SaRen was slumbering alone in another room, so it would be easier to wake the pirates. My heart was thumping so hard it seemed it might fall out at any second, and my brain was a blank space of fear. But I took a deep breath and whispered, 'The great death!'

Immediately, all the pirates were awake. A rough voice growled, 'Who are you? I don't recognize your voice.' I said smoothly, 'SaRen told me to fetch you all.' Miraculously, the pirates all started following me! I skirted ahead and ran all the way up, sighing with relief as I saw it was pitch dark on the deck.

'Where are the prisoners?' 'Hurry up boy!' I led them to the exact place where the planks are. I knocked on the plank and said, 'Hurry up then! This is the way!' The pirates dutifully got onto the plank, not knowing their fatal mistake. I checked to see that all of them were on the plank, and I pulled the release lever of the plank with great relish and vigor. It took the pirates some time to realize what had really happened, and it was horrible to hear them thrashing and struggling in the freezing waters, meeting their death. I hugged myself with relief, but then the most dreadful sound hit me. The groaning of SaRen waking up and realizing his crew was all gone.

"Come out... I know you're here somewhere..." the bloodcurdling voice of SaRen reached my ears and clawed into my brain. I was dizzy with fear. I started praying, willing I will die a quick death. I had lost all hope of living when a last resort popped up in my brain. I hated this idea, but this was the last thing I could do.

I threw myself at SaRen and immediately retreated, making him furious. He snarled and I could feel him tensing up, ready to strike. I stepped onto the plank and shouted, 'Come on you loser!' He launched himself at me so quickly I almost fell off. However, I escaped by a whisker and used all my remaining strength to land on the deck. I felt a great whoosh of air as SaRen sailed past me and landed in the churning water with a thunderous splash. SaRen was ferocious and tough, but not even the fearsome pirate can survive long in the freezing waters of the sea. The shouts and splashes slowly faded, and I was alone once more.

I had landed quite hard and my head felt like it had been cut in half. I wiped my forehead and it became bloody. I staggered to the locked room and things turned fuzzy as the pain worsened. I could only remember a hazy memory of untying everyone and collapsing into LiHeng's arms, and then everything was black.

I woke up with a dull pain in my head. LiHeng was beside me, holding me hand. For a second, I thought this was a dream. I started trembling, but Master smiled and said, 'Dear boy, there is no need to fear anymore. You are our hero!'

And I knew that this is only the start of an adventure of a lifetime.

# Royal Domination

*St. Mary's Canossian College, Rilles, Anshley – 15*

“I, Stella McPhelore, hereby claim my birth rights, as the Princess of Ravendelle, vow to maintain prosperity, and make our kingdom a better place as I claim the throne.” just practicing for my coronation day two years later. I've still got a lot to learn in these two years though.

I'll be a great queen someday, I'm sure of it. But there's just something missing... I want more. I want a greater kingdom known to every nation out there, and I don't just mean fame, but run down more kingdoms to bring supremacy to the McPhelores' royal bloodline, and have it as the most respected amongst all nations.

My mother, Emilia Delfin-McPhelore, was once Ravendelle's highest commander of the crown's guard when my father (William Georgio McPhelore) was still a prince. She sailed and travelled to different nations, brought victory in every war, brought down other kingdoms to bring justice to Ravendelle and as to her successes, she caught my father's attention. When my mother was pregnant with me, she received death wishes and warnings from who knew where, wanting her to be gone. My father was very furious. He tripled Ravendelle's security for my mother's sake. But just the night I was born 19 years ago, she was assassinated. My father fell into depression and never speaks of it again, never left Ravendelle. My father is a very lovable man, but turns furious whenever I start talking about these things.

“My dear, it has brought misery to me seeing you being restricted in doing what you love. You know well that I've done all those for your own safety but seeing you sad is like being stabbed through the heart as a father. Your happiness is the most precious thing for me. You have my permission to leave.” I was shocked to hear my father say all of this when I approached him.

The day finally came when I would be departing from Ravendelle. I hugged my father one last time, his whisper, “walk tall, my daughter” would be the finest memory I'll ever bear. It distresses me to leave my father behind. I would not cast worries for his safety had been in the hands of his assistant Antonio. His son, Jared, is my assistant and best friend.

I finally came to my first destination, the great city of Albhamia, kingdom of assassins where Arthur Skavinski the prodigious son rules over. Though this kingdom cannot be the one whose idea was to kill my mother, for Arthur was only a 5-year-old ruler of this great city with strong laws. It is extremely dangerous to be here yet I'm ready for everything that will occur in the battle. Ruling over this kingdom would be a great privilege for me.

It was so quiet like they could just pop out or shoot at anyone of us in the ship at any second. There, the fight began. As I pulled out my sword ready to fight, Arthur jumped in to my ship and fought against me.

The way Arthur and I possess the same strength in combat brings such mystery in my mind. Was it his fullest power or was he just holding back? Whatever it was, I had no clue. He raised his sword over mine with great power that my sword flew off and I fell to my knees. I looked back to my people, watched them struggle as they fought, then realized it was my fault. I had to let them down. Oh father, you were right. I was too ignorant.

Arthur stared at me with confusion. He asked “tell me princess, what made you think you could trespass in my kingdom like this? You have plenty of men but it won't be enough to stop us from finishing you all.” I looked up and said “all I wanted was to do as what my mother did when she was still alive, how she brought power to Ravendelle and I want to revive that. I want to restore the power that was lost in Ravendelle, and bring honor to my mother. But you've proven me wrong. I understand your desire to finish me off and I won't stop you.”

He was speechless. His pause captured the attention of everyone. They all stopped and stared at us. Arthur knelt and said “Stella, don't blame yourself in all this. I myself wanted to find who killed my parents, but I needed to rule Albhamia myself ever since. I told myself that someday, I *will* kill that person who killed my parents when I was born. For that, I will join you on your journey.” He ordered his men to ready another ship for they'll come with us as allies. I was relieved and felt ecstatic.

Together, we reached many kingdoms. It's such great honor for him to train me and my people along the journey. Finally, we arrived at our last destination, Phintena. People were oddly kind and welcoming there. Gerald Kurso, leader of Phintena, claimed that they were in need of a ruler that will care for them. So they approached us with warm welcome hoping that we could become the ruler. We stayed in Phintena for a few days. I was alone in my room when Antonio suddenly appeared with Jared and Gerald beside him, announcing that my father was dead. "I don't know what had happened to your father. I was out dealing with things when your father got stabbed." Antonio stated. I was in complete shock.

Arthur busted in, shouted "The Phintenans! They're attacking us, telling them to bring you out to execute you!" I was so confused. First they welcomed us and now this? I was thinking everything that could happen until I heard someone drew their sword, as I turned around, Antonio slashed his sword through my stomach and Arthur was grabbed by Gerald and Jared.

Antonio walked around, slowly saying "I've always wanted this day to come seeing you and Arthur united. My plans were successful after all."

"What are you trying to say?" I shouted confusion.

He smirked at me and continued "I've always been so curious on how you're so dedicated to dominate kingdoms 'just like mother did'. Argh, you're as naive as your mother!"

I didn't spoke a word. He sighed "You see, Phintena doesn't have any ruler because this place is of a blank land. More than 19 years ago until now I'd collected all the refugees of every kingdom your mother took over with hearts filled with anger for all of your selfish acts and brought them here. I was the one who sent death threats to your mother.

Right after you left Ravendelle, I looked for the best opportunity to kill your father so *I* could rule over Ravendelle in the meantime and kill you next. And as for you Arthur, both of your parents were extremely powerful, I was afraid that with the three of you together, I'll be in great danger someday. So, I left *you* alive knowing nothing about your parents." Arthur was extremely furious that he got out of Gerald and Jared's hands, took their heads and bumped them to each other dead. As Antonio looked at what Arthur did, I pulled out his sword from him, he looked back at me and I slashed his head off without hesitation.

I cried in guilt, anger and sorrow swirled together. Arthur came near and wrapped his arms around me. I now realised how much it caused pain for these people to see their kingdoms being dominated due to war that's started by my inconsiderate thoughts.

I went out and looked at everyone fighting against. They all paused when they saw me in tears. I took a deep breath, then spoke "I now realize all the cause that I've given you all, and I must pay the price for what I and my kingdom had done. I, Stella McPhelore, pledge to pay back everything you have been stolen. I, princess of Ravendelle, surrender to you all, I shall restore back all the things you all nurtured, signing peace treaties and share one of the finest things Ravendelle possesses."

It was heartwarming how the 'Phintenans' looked at me rejoiced after what I've declared. Arthur and his people returned back to Albhamia while I returned to Ravendelle and visited my father's grave. I told him how much I've learned in my journey though I never thought that I'd never get to hear from him in my I return.

As promised in Phintena, I'm currently working on to the process of signing peace treaties and so on, to their own countries. Things have gotten better. I became close to their rulers and brought 'name' to Ravendelle. A better and more powerful one than I had desired, for it has touched the hearts of different nations, without any wars. And I believe how very soon, we'll all weave a united country.

# The Crown Jewel

*St Margaret's Co-Educational English Primary & Secondary School, Ansari, Rafi – 14*

“Zhao, do you ever get tired of this blue?” A young man stood, leaning on the railing, neatly lined on the edge of the exquisitely manufactured junk boat. He looked longingly towards the horizon, watching the waves and sky, dyed in similar shades of blue, merge together. He had asked his crew mate a rather simple question, but his tone was engaged, tense.

“Not as much as working on a rice farm if you ask me.” The middle-aged man answered the young man while cleaning the deck enthusiastically. “I would never had been this rich if it weren't for these Ming Pirates allowing me in.”

“But we're just some nobodies on a random boat in an enormous fleet, nothing like those on the main ships. Those people just straight up take most of our profits, so what's the point of doing this?” The man seemed quite unmotivated to do anything but loaf about where the officials wouldn't see him. They were far too busy enjoying their food and booze inside the boat.

“Look Feng, you've never done it, so you wouldn't know. Rice farming is, compared to this, plain excruciating and the income you get from working from sunrise to sunset won't be enough to buy you three meals. Hell, you'd be lucky to get two meals a day. Here, you get spices and tea breaks – you don't get either of those in the fields so stop your whining and help me out here. If the Ming Shadows were to find you slacking, they'd give you more than just a few whips.”

“Ugh... alright—” Feng approached the man when abruptly, the alarm was raised.

“ENEMY PIRATES!” The watchman rang a bell while screaming on top his lungs. The Ming Pirates, at least their guards, brandished their dao swords while the Ming mercenaries took out their spears.

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Was this a blessing? Or was it a curse? The pirate junk was heading right towards our boat, which rested in the flank of the fleet, a place where the most stalwart warships were placed. Most ships wouldn't attack our flank as it was the most guarded part of the fleet. The jewels of the Ming Emperor lay within the bellies of the boats in the center.

As I watched the boat cut through the surf, I thought of how tired of this lifestyle I was and if I was lucky, those pirates may just allow me into their ranks; that would certainly be exciting.

As the battle approached, I hid in a corner of the ship, ready to jump onto the pirate boat, and jump on I did.

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I jumped and barely managed to latch myself to a window of the rival junk. Hearing the screams and battle cries, I wasted no time trying to find a way to become a stowaway and embark upon new and exciting adventures...

Then I came across an ornamented door in the middle of an empty hallway. The door was more than double the size of all the other doors and had jewels embedded on the front of it. The captain of the ship must had been a rich man. Maybe... this could be my chance to be rich, escape the fleet and enjoy a lifetime in a decent house in the capital. As I approached the intricately designed door, I got a feeling that I would not be disappointed.

I opened the room, and it was empty. Looks like the captain also took part in the battle. Well a small pirate fleet like this would need all the men they could get to raid the mighty Ming Pirate Fleet.

I forgot about my objective and was charmed by the sight of treasure

I grabbed every jewel or trinket there was in my sight and kept ransacking until I accidentally discovered a drawer, alone, and hidden from plain sight amidst the paneling of the ships interior wall. I walked towards it and crouched down, and found it secured by a heavy lock. I had no knowledge in lock picking, so the only option I had was to cut open the fine wooden drawer.

I took my sword and start sawing at the lock. I heaved on both sides and the wooden plank plopped out, at the cost of the condition of my sword. There was only a small, heavily adorned box, covered in an alluring red cloth. Even touching it felt heavenly.

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I opened the box. All I saw was a small crimson jewel. It's shape was enchanting, and looking at it was mesmerising. It wasn't just shiny, it refracted light in itself, making it look as if there were more jewels inside the blood-red jewel. It simply left me entranced in its beauty. This was something that belonged on the crown of an emperor, no, a God.

If I were to directly sell it to the emperor, it would garner me millions, more than enough to buy me a city, to be richer than any man. I would never give it to those Mings

“Who goes there?” A loud voice rang throughout the room as I heard rushing footsteps on the corridor outside.

I instinctively hid behind a table and sneaked a glance, and, to my relief, the intruders were none other than my shipmates. I slowly stood up and greeted them with a wave

“When did you get here, Feng? We thought you were dead. What is that you're holding?” I quickly put the jewel into my pockets replied with a simple “Nothing”.

I just hoped they wouldn't be suspicious. This jewel was my ticket to a better life. To wealth. To opulence. Away. Away from the rise and fall of the ocean and the cycle I found myself in.

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“Feng! It's the Mings! They're summoning you!” I was called out by none other than the head ship. Could they have found out already? I anxiously staggered my way over the planks to the main ship. It was everywhere on my face that I was distressed, I looked to the heavens for a miracle.

Then, the Ming Patriarch spoke out, “I heard from your shipmates that you entered the ship before the battle even ensued. And, after examining the ship that they found almost no treasure.” I was sweating like a pig. “Those pirates weren't normal pirates, they were some of the richest, most skilled buccaneers in this region. Their invasion was a trap that we set up. All we had to do was simply lure the idiots to attacking our fleet. Some men will do anything for riches, even if it means risking their own life.” I gulped hard. I think I may have made a big mistake on my part.

“So do you have any treasure on you? We've already confiscated all the ones you stole and stashed in your private chest.” The Ming leader was applying a lot of pressure, and I glanced to the imposing figures beside him. Those pike-men wouldn't give me even a second before stabbing me through the heart and chopping off my head off with their vicious blades.

“N-no Lord, I-I have nothing else.” I barely managed to get a few words out. Of course, I had that crimson jewel, but I would never let anyone know of its existence, especially not here

“I see... It's just that we think that, something else had to have belonged in this small red box we got here, perhaps an 8-sided jewel, with a side as big as of let's say, the fingertip.” He slowly raised the red box, levelling it with my eyes.

“I-I assure you, there's nothing else, that box was always empty, I swear!” I was panicking, could they have known exactly what I had?

“Alright, I'll believe you. Just know, the Mings' Shadows will discover the truth, whatever that may be. You're dismissed.” I ran out. The Ming Shadows, a group of famous assassins, watchdogs and people who meticulously deal with the acquisition of information. They would definitely find I had stolen the crown jewel.

I snuck back to my junk and slunk to the back of the vessel. I made sure no one else was looking. Why was I here? The jewel. The cursed jewel. “If I wasn't allowed to have it, no one else would!”

And then, I launched the Jewel into the far reaches of the ocean. The deep blue waves greedily grabbed the jewel from the sky, never to be seen again.

“Maybe if you hadn't slacked off on all of the work, you would have thrown it far enough into the sea for us not to be able to get it.”

It was the Ming Shadows.

# The New Ming Treasure Voyages

*St Margaret's Co-Educational English Primary & Secondary School, Eng, Elysse – 13*

The Ming Treasure Voyage happened during the Ming dynasty, where people went to find treasure through traveling a long way. This search for treasure and exploring the unknown made me think of a similar story.

Winnie was a small little girl. She was reading her favourite book, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, in her bed. She really enjoyed this book as it has an interesting plot.

After reading a few chapters, she started to get a bit sleepy and decided to go to sleep.

The last thing Winnie remembered was the feeling of a deep sleep slowly drifting over her, but when Winnie opened her eyes she was with her best friends: Ivy, Olivia, and Yannis. They were all at Ivy's birthday party in a party room in Tsing Yi. As they were playing, they discovered a secret door behind one of the couches and were curious what was inside it. After mustering up their courage, they all went inside.

After passing through the door, they all got a weird feeling.

As they moved into the darkness of the doorway, they suddenly found themselves in a place with vines, branches, dried leaves, and mud. It was a rainforest!

Brushing aside leaves, the girls found themselves stepping on a huge cross on the ground drawn blood. There were also a few shovels leaning against a nearby tree.

Winnie tried using her phone to call for help but there was no signal in the rainforest.

After a few minutes of indecision, Ivy suggested that they use the shovels and find out what was under this cross – after all, everyone knows 'X' marks the spot.

The girls had been digging for about ten minutes when Yannis found a dirty and muddy box covered in vines. Olivia tried helping Yannis to get the box out while Ivy continued digging to further reveal the box. Ivy soon gave up on digging and the three of them were attempting to haul the box out of the hole they had created. While this was happening, Winnie was searching for clues as to why the door brought them there.

After a great struggle, Ivy, Olivia, and Yannis managed to get the box out and removed the vines surrounding it. Once the box was clear, they found an electronic device that looked similar to an iPad, however they couldn't find out what the device was or how to work it.

Suddenly a booming voice erupted from the device on the box and startled the four girls.

'Aha! You have fallen into my trap. In order to get back out, you have to finish three challenges with the clues given to you. Only then will you be released. Good luck. Hahaha...' Olivia suspected it was Mr. Devil that was behind this as it sounded like him and the voice was that of an evil being.

Winnie and Yannis were frantically trying to open the box while Ivy and Olivia looked on. Soon, Winnie managed to open the box and found a paper which said 'Look to your left now otherwise your family's lives will be in danger.'

All four girls looked to the left and saw some people with guns in boats, jets, and cars coming to attack.

Olivia, being the most alert and astute, immediately knew that this was the first challenge. She quickly spread the message to the rest of the girls.

Fortunately, Ivy had been taking judo lessons every week. Although she wasn't the best at it, at least she knew some kicks and some punches to protect herself. The other girls performed some basic kicks after mimicking Ivy. They were ready. Then Ivy took the attackers down to the floor, removing their ability to fight or harm the girls. The gang had succeeded in the first task.

After defeating the first wave of attackers, a man in a nicely-dressed outfit appeared and gave a message and a clue for the next challenge. Inside the message was a compass. The girls looked at each other cluelessly, then Olivia read the message.

'Follow a path to find another clue. Beware as you venture down the path. Don't say I didn't warn you – I just did. Good luck.'

The four of them were ready to face any challenges that this mysterious being could throw at them. As they cautiously following the compass down a path, they started to hear the roar of a jet engine mixed with other strange 'whooshing' sounds. In the distance the crack of gunshots rang out. As they rounded a bend in the path, Yannis spotted some small guns beneath a tree.

They carefully took the guns and Olivia guessed this was the next challenge. The message was spread quickly and they got ready. They hid behind the mighty trees, giving them a position to shoot out the jets' engines so that they would tumble from the sky.

As the jets approached, the girls fired in unison. In a flash, they defeated the jets which plummeted to the ground. Quickly after, the girls continued down the path where they found the clue for the last challenge. Olivia scanned the clue and then announced that they had to go through a poisonous flower garden which contained lots of harmful insects.

Thankfully, Yannis always brings a bottle of insect repellent with her as she always gets mosquito bites. Many normal mosquito repellents attract other insects, therefore her parents got her an insect repellent that doesn't attract insects at all and is safe for her to use. She used a handkerchief to block her face while spraying the insect repellent all around her. The other girls hiding their heads behind their small handkerchiefs.

Despite being chased by giant insects and navigating around the treacherous flower garden, the girls made it out and then saw the door out of this strange and dangerous world.

The four girls quickly went back through the door and ended up in Ivy's closet. They were relieved to be back and away from the perils of rainforest. Ivy brought the girls to the front gate and showed them how to go to the train station.

Lastly, the girls all thanked and hugged each other for cooperating with each other when they were inside the deadly rainforest.

Winnie opened her eyes and saw her mom.

'Ahhhh. Ahhhh. Ahhhh.'

'Is everything alright, Winnie? I heard you screaming so I came in and saw that you were sweating. Did you have a bad dream?'

Winnie was thankful that it was just a dream. She felt a huge sense of relief as she caught her breath.

'You better get some sleep, you have had a busy afternoon at Ivy's birthday party and you have school tomorrow. Come on get to bed, little Pooh.'

'Thanks mom, good night.'

'Good night, sweetheart.'



# Humility, Morality, and The Ming Treasure Voyages

*St Margaret's Co-Educational English Primary & Secondary School, Kwok, Harmoni – 13*

“China is the greatest country in the world! It is time to show our power and wealth to the rest of the world!” The Emperor of Ming dynasty announced proudly. “Zheng He, choose anyone you please from our elite force and load your vessel with valuable presents. Remember, no wars or violence! We are not invaders, but explorers showing our friendship to the world.”

Zheng He selected ten physically fit male sailors, two female chefs, and he gave himself the role of captain before heading westwards. Their wooden ship was huge and well-equipped for whatever dangers and adventure lay before the crew. They were excited and curious about who and what they would meet on this long journey.

After a few days on the calm ocean they made landfall in India, the birthplace of Hinduism. The Indians welcomed Zheng He's and his team, although they did not understand each other's languages. They prepared a big feast with different curries and traditional Indian cuisine. The food smelled delicious and stimulated the team's appetite, especially after their time at sea. However, they felt confused about how to eat the food without utensils. They observed how the Indians ate and reluctantly followed them. “What? They use their hands to eat without using chopsticks? This shows a total lack of civilization!” whispered Zheng He. The captain was a left hander and he tried to use his left hand to scoop up the food. The Indians laughed loudly and stopped the captain because using the left hand to eat was considered to be unclean in Indian culture as it was used to perform matters associated with going to the washroom. Zheng He marked down this cultural shock in his journal for future reference. The two chefs gathered some local herbs and studied how to cook Indian cuisine. Before leaving, Zheng He presented the Indians with some chopsticks made of elephant tusks before gesturing how to use them. He hoped the Indian would eat in a more civilized way.

Their journey into the unknown continued and they were lucky to have good weather without any bad storms due to it being the middle of summer. After a long time at sea, the lookout spotted something and called excitedly, “Captain! Can you see those huge stone pyramids over there?”. They decided to stop and explore this strange land. A group of people with heavy make-up, no matter if man or woman, greeted Zheng He's team warmly. The Egyptian's eyes looked odd by Chinese standards due to the black kohl eyeliner and the darkened eyelashes and eyebrows. However, their clothes looked almost see-through with transparent linen and some of the children were even naked! Zheng He's team felt shy around this and avoided looking at them directly. The idea of beauty was extremely different in Egypt. The Egyptians showed the crew the mighty Pyramids, the Great Sphinx of Giza, and mummification helped people reach the afterlife. The team was impressed and amazed by Egyptian architecture and culture. They simply would never have believed the Egyptians would mummify their cats before the saw it with their own eyes. After five horizon-widening days, Zheng He offered some silk cloth as a parting gift. He suggested that the Egyptians try using silk clothes for clothing so that their bodies would be well covered with comfortable material.

The team passed through the Mediterranean Sea and berthed in Spain. As they were leaving the boat, they were shocked and horrified to see a large crowd of people taking part in a huge tomato fight. The crowd was laughing playfully as they caught and threw tomatoes at one another “Oh dear! What are they doing with those tomatoes? The amount of food they are wasting would last me at least 3 months!” wailed the two chefs who were not happy to see such a scene. “The Chinese value and treasure food much more than the people here.” As they edged past the crowd throwing tomatoes, they saw a man waving a red flag to irritate a bleeding and distressed bull. Every time the bull charged at the man, he would nimbly leap to the side and gash it with a sword. The worst thing was that the people watching were applauding the man in a respectful way. They were treating him as a hero. Zheng He was angry to see this brutal behaviour. He believed humans should care about animals and should not hurt them for fun. “People here need more education in humanity, benevolence, and morality,” thought Zheng He. He decided to gift the Spanish the writings of Confucius in the hope that they would change their ways. However, the Spanish could not read the Chinese characters. Zheng He was determined the Spanish should learn the teachings of Confucius, so the team stayed in Spain for a longer period to help with translation. In the meantime, the team found out that there was also wonderful culture in Spain, such as energetic Flamenco dancing. All the team members enjoyed learning the dance before heading to the next destination – it was unlike anything they had ever seen or done before.

Upon hearing that France was not far away from Spain, the exploring team set off and it took them three days to reach France. They walked off the ship and wondered what new cultural shock would be waiting for them this time. Once they landed, a group of people stepped forward and attempted to hug them and kiss them. Chinese people are not get used to such close physical contact and pushed them away hastily. One of the chefs screamed and slapped the face of French man who was trying to kiss her cheek. The French people misunderstood their reaction and presumed Zheng He's team came to invade their land. The French called for weapons and were ready to fight back. "No! No! We are coming in peace!" screamed Zheng He. After taking some time to figure out each other's intentions, both sides realized that it was just a misunderstanding between two different cultures. The French brought forth some high-quality red wine to show their hospitality and acceptance of Zheng He's crew. Everyone took pleasure from the wine highly and Zheng He decided to take the technique of the winemaking back to China. The French proudly displayed the traditional grape stomping process. However, Zheng He and his team members quickly began to feel uncomfortable and they had the feeling that they would throw up after every single drop of the wine they drunk. "Our sorghum wine or huangjiu are definitely much better!" So, they left the Chinese traditional sorghum wine as a gift for the French.

Zheng He was satisfied with the trip and thought it was a big success. On his return to China he reported to the emperor: "My dear Emperor, I can confirm that China is the best country in the world after our voyages. We are civilized and eat with chopsticks. We know how to cover our body well with beautiful silk. Our people have morality and show appreciation for their food. Furthermore, we know how to appropriately interact with other people and we would do not use our bare feet to stomp on the grapes!" The Ming Emperor was overjoyed. "I knew it! I knew it! No wonder China is respected and admired by the rest of the world! No one can compare to us as they are far behind us! How wonderful it is to be invincible and so advanced!" Zheng He nodded his agreement and added, "I have given different presents to them and hopefully those less civilized nations will learn from us and be able to develop as we have."

Due to the self-confidence of the Ming Emperor, Chinese people during this period did not give any effort to further improve their quality of life or search out new scientific knowledge. Due to this, the country experienced an economic breakdown a few years later, before China was invaded and the Ming Dynasty was conquered by Manchurian tribes. Zheng He's journey took him through many strange and exotic lands, yet it is important to remember that even if something is different, strange, or unusual, it does not necessarily mean it is bad or uncivilized. If we open our eyes and our ears then there is always something to be learned from different cultures and experiences.

Even if in this story the explorer Zheng He was not as understanding as he could have been of other cultures, his travels can be seen as a great starting point in spreading Chinese culture across the globe.

# Requiem: Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyage

*St Margaret's Co-Educational English Primary & Secondary School, Rubio, Karylle – 14*

The fierceness of the golden-yellow sun, the smell of intrigue, the cries of merchants are synonymous with the esoteric land of Arabia.

And now here I am on my ship, wearing my shabby crimson sheepskin coat, pouring with sweat and engulfed with guilt.

As I voyage through these murky waters, I realised my quest was not to bestow my treasures upon others but rather to dig deeper in my treasure trove and unearth the hidden jewels which have been lost to pressures of time.

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The broken mirrors, the antique porcelain vases and the tremulous sound of my mother's voice, it seemed all too familiar for me, a broken memory.

The delicate flower I had once been had shrivelled, devoid of conscience.

Every ticking moment spent seemed like an eternity.

A wolf in sheep's clothing for a mother and a charlatan for a father.

With every fault, they threw dust in my eyes,

Until I knew the brittle truth that underlay the facade.

And now I steer behind the wheel,

Hemming and hawing at every fear.

The spectral figure can't get hold of me.

It was time to set the butterflies free.

The rush of azure tidal waves, the cold breeze on my shoulder.

*'Captain! Captain!' 'Mo Chou! Mo Chou!'*

Floating in despair was long gone and over.

After a few moments, they carried me back to the dock.

Questioning me on what had happened, the abrupt situation.

I told them I got carried away, I regained myself, wasn't lost astray.

The sheepskin coat was gone.

The sky was rosy, no raindrops in sight, only free birds about to take flight.

The phantom whispered, "Well done my friend, the journey is the reward."

# Seize the Day

*St. Paul's Convent School, Chan, Yi Lam – 13*

Zhao Ai-Ping was a quiet man. He and his wife kept to themselves and didn't talk much, not even to each other. She didn't like talking and he'd cry if he talked at all.

Little was known about Ai-Ping except that he has been on a voyage to Europe when he was young. He was never quite the same ever since — it was said that he was quite the humorous old lad before he left, which raised further questions among the village gossipers — what exactly had happened on the trip that broke him like this?

And so the age-old question comes to us again.

What has he become?

---

Seas The Day.

No, seriously, that's the name of the boat you'll be voyaging on. Father's European friend, Mr. Lucas, had allowed you to go with him on his trip to Europe. Now, all he did since you got onboard was scream at you to do this, do that. You didn't really mind, though, you were too excited. Also, he was probably just stressed.

You just hoped that Europe didn't have chest-eyed people.

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“Oh! Good morning, Mr. Lucas.”

“AI-PING, YOU ARE A LIAR!” Mr. Lucas greeted in return. “WHY ARE TWO PIES MISSING FROM THE KITCHEN, HUH? DID YOU TAKE THEM?”

“No.” You sat up bolt upright in your bed, a little disheveled at being awoken at such an ungodly hour, and in such an ungodly way, too. “Are you sure Edgar didn't feed them to the seagulls again?”

Mr. Lucas screamed in rage. He raised a hand and slapped you across the face, again and again. As soon as you connected, the voices in your head start screaming too, and you thought your head was going to explode because of all the noise. They told you to run, to hide from this terrifying man, but your legs were blocks of steel and held you in place. Some voices were more sinister, telling you to grab his arm, twirl him around, assault him and beat the miserable life out of him.

“No!” you said. “No!” You weren't even sure who you were addressing at that point, your mind was simply too far gone.

When he left, still seething in rage, you rocked yourself to sleep, the tears tracks on your cheeks somewhat resembling the branches of a tree.

---

Three days in and you'd already started to miss home.

You spent your days on the Seas The Day making yourself useful, helping the crew members with the chores such as mopping floors, making inventory and washing clothes while Edgar, Mr. Lucas' son, fed pieces of pie to seagulls.

You tried to ignore the voices, but they always managed to surface.

“AI-PING! GET THOSE GODFORSAKEN BIRDS OFF MY SHIP!” Mr. Lucas screamed at you as a seagull took a dump on his lap.

“Yes, Mr. Lucas,” you replied sweetly, ignoring the disdain in his eyes. You stomped your feet so that the seagulls scattered off, a cloud of wings over the endless sea, and you’re feeling proud of yourself for being useful and a good crew member when Edgar started crying noisily.

You’d made Edgar cry.

*You’d made Edgar cry!*

Crying hurts! Nobody deserves to cry like you did!

“No...*Mr. Lucas* made Edgar cry...” a voice crooned in your ear, sending a shiver down your spine. “He made both of you cry...not you...*Mr. Lucas*...you’re a *good boy*...he’s a hell-bride of the Devil...”

As Mr. Lucas whipped you with a belt for bullying Edgar, you wondered if the voice was really telling you the truth.

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You’re unpleasantly woken up by the putrid smell of smoke and a bell ringing.

Mr. Lucas was screaming on the deck again. “Claim your weapons, crew! Children to the cabins, they’re coming for us!”

Who’s coming? Emperor Qin?

Only moments later, a big, tall man barged in with a bronze gun in his hands. He levelled it directly at you. “Hands up, and give us your treasure!”

“Are you Mr. Qin?” You asked sweetly, batting your eyelashes at him.

He rolled his eyes and prepared to shoot, but you knocked him over when you ran for the door. He fell on his face, and on impulse, you wrenched the gun from his fingers. Your feet took you up the creaking steps onto the deck, and your heart pumped with adrenaline.

“What’s going on?” you demanded with a tone full of curiosity, watching the scene unfold around you; crewmen and big hairy men alike were shooting at each other.

“They’re pirates!” Mrs. Lucas shouted back. “Get to the cabins, we’ll protect you!”

The entire scene was a mess.

The voices in your head gleefully remarked to you that no one would notice if a stray bullet hit Mr. Lucas. You could take *revenge*. You would feel *happy*. It was tempting, very tempting.

The screaming filled up your head again.

Your fragile body was weak and sore, littered with abuse from Mr. Lucas. Even if you weren’t physically damaged very badly, you didn’t think that your brain could take any more. Happy was good. You wanted to be happy.

Mr. Lucas gritted his teeth as he dueled a particularly tall pirate, his back turned to you. Your hand closed around the gun. It was the perfect time. After all, Seas The Day, right?

Could you really pull the trigger on him?

You really wanted to be happy.

You really, really wanted to be happy.

Your hand rose like a marionette on strings, and dreamlike, you squeezed the trigger as if your life depended on it.

The force of the resulting gunshot throws you back. Your spine snaps against a wooden door, and you slump over. Mr. Lucas screamed, but this time, it's in harmony with the ensuing chaos pounding your head. You're screaming with him this time, out of rage or disgust for yourself, you don't know. But all you know is that you want the moment to end.

*What's wrong with you?*

*Nothing. The psychotic mind has no correct function.*

*The people told me that there was a reason why the best fruit was always forbidden. But no. Today, I wanted to feast.*

---

You're lonely. You're lonely and you've always been lonely and you'll always be lonely because you can't talk except for stuttered, mangled words that you can barely get out over the screaming in your ears. They look at you with flames of disdain in their eyes; their eyes watching and searing and taunting and ripping through you until all you feel like is screaming. But then, if you scream, they'll scream louder and they'll all scream at once and everything would be an unintelligible string of curses that would never shut up, and... and—!

And you'll *drown*. While the people who hear you scream are burning down.

You find yourself outside on an impossibly cold winter night, wearing nothing but a linen coat, barefoot in the drifting snow; your eyes, bleak and hollow, staring at a picturesque bronze statue in the middle of the town square.

You bite your lower lip, your teeth digging in so hard that red is soon spilling over, dribbling over your pale lips and down your chin, practically freezing in place from the cold. Your fingertips soon turn purple; and your face icy white, but you wouldn't care anyways. You're so used to the pain that pain itself becomes an abstract concept.

You don't know why, but you fall to your knees, touching your already frostbitten fingers to the snow. The night wind buffets you, ghost fingers wafting all sorts of patterns through your hair, until it becomes a part of you, and the age-old question comes to you.

What have you become?

*What have you become?*

***A murderer is what you have become.***

# Irony of Death

*St. Paul's Convent School, Hui, Ho Sum Savina – 13*

He had always loved water.

When he was little, he would wade in the shallow streams that directed water to the fields, splashing around playfully as the water caressed his ankles.

When it rained, he would rush out and dance with the graceful raindrops, his faithful friends. He loved the way they flowed over his body in serenity, showering him with kisses, just as his mother used to, in some distant memory, before his father left and never came back.

Often, people would find him wallowing in the calm side of the river, peacefully staring off into space. But isn't it dangerous, for such a young scrawny little pea to go there, where dangerous currents and strong undertows lie at play? Of course not, for why would his most loyal friends abandon him?

His mother never liked it, often reprimanding him for abandoning his chores and running off, but she didn't understand. No one ever did. The boys in the village enjoyed roughhousing and whatnot, but he believed them to be wasteful nonsense. He preferred peace and silence, when people would not yell or cry or order him around, just for being introverted.

The waters were his refuge. They always hummed with quiet energy, not at all loud and fearsome, like so many of the people he knew, but kind and reassuring, the kind of family he never had. They accepted him for who he was, protecting him from the cruelty of his reality; they were the ones he depended on in times of need.

★

That was why he signed up to join the crew of the Ming Treasure Fleet.

*"It would be wonderful, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," the rest of the crew told him, "you can broaden your horizons, explore the world, see things and meet people you'd never dream of, sitting in your tiny hut in your tiny village!"*

*'To have that, and live a life on the water?' It had seemed too good to be true. But it was true.*

Oh, his mother hadn't agreed; in fact, she downright yelled, screamed, even threatened to disown him, but for once in his life, he wanted to do something for himself, instead of constantly bowing down to the will of others. He was ready to take on the world. Besides, he wasn't alone, for the waters would always have his back.

★

For about two years, he lived on one of the numerous ships as a member of the crew, visiting various countries all over the east.

He wasn't a muscular hulk of a man like the rest of the crew, that much was obvious, but he was skimpy and nimble, able to reach places those hunky fingers couldn't. He made friends with some of the crew members, his few human friends. They were loud and boisterous, but surprisingly gentle, caring for him like big brothers, showing him the ropes, teasing him good-naturedly, and giving him space when he felt overwhelmed.

For the first time in his life, he felt accepted. And it was all thanks to his beloved, the water.

★

But fate is cruel to those who deserve happiness the most.

★

The voyage was nearly at its end when it happened...

When the pirates attacked...

★

The soldiers had successfully set fire to the ships of that accursed pirate Chen Zuyi, but not before a handful of his minions had managed to sneak aboard the least guarded ship –his ship! Thus the chaos began...

★

The blood-thirsty pirate had a wild, crazed gleam in his eyes and a maniacal grin. Factoring in the teeth that did not seem to have been cleansed since that last zodiac cycle and the blood smeared on his face, the pirate seemed more demon than human. Had he not been fighting said pirate, he wouldn't have dared to venture into the same country as the pirate-demon.

But there he was. Barely blocking one blow after another, he was slowly pushed backwards, getting closer and closer to the edge...

The floor was slippery, and everything stank of sickly sweet metal. It felt as if they were the only beings left in the world. All else was reduced to piles of obstacles in their path. Then, with a hard blow from the pirate-demon, he was sent sliding over the blood-red planks of the deck, crashing against the painfully fragile railings...

He fell...

Over the edge...

Into the deep, dark ocean —the hungry, gaping mouth of the beast he adored...

And it stung, everything stung! His eyes, his nose, his lungs, the slashes across his arms... They all burned with a searing, unforgiving fire.

He blinked. Darkness lined the edge of his vision, but he could just barely make out fiery hues and muffled sounds above the waters.

*Help me please look down! I'm right here look at me look at me please please please help pull me out there please!*

He wanted so badly to yell at them, to cry for help, anything! However, the words were stuck, unable to be choked down or spat out, not unlike a fish bone that had once stuck stubbornly to the back of his throat. He was young then, and he had been terrified, thinking that he was about to die, just as he was about to end up at any moment.

The stabbing pain, joined by a sudden urge to cry, intensified...

*No I don't want to die! I'm just a boy! I still want to go to places I love my crew I don't want to die!*

He started struggling, but every time he reached the surface, the ferocious waves pulled him back in. His chest felt like it was about to explode.

*No please don't let me die I loved you I loved you I'm too young to die!*

Thoughts of his mother began surfacing: her disgusted eyes, her disapproving frown, her scathing last words to him: “*You're just like your father! You'll regret this, little disgrace.*”

*Please please mother I'm sorry please forgive me I promise I'll be the perfect son please HELPSAVE ME!*

He sure was regretting it now...

But it was too late...

Tendrils of crimson and obsidian began crowding into his vision. His lungs started filling up with salty water, but it might as well be lava, for he wouldn't notice the difference.

*I...don't...die...help...please...*

He could no longer think clearly, his limbs jelly-like, sloshing sluggishly in the water.

*Pain... Suffering...Help...*

His limbs had ceased their useless flailing, his eyesight becoming murky. He could no longer see the ships, the place he had come to call home, nor the other crew members, the closest thing to a family he had had in a long time. He briefly wondered if they were still alive, if they were grieving for him now...

*Oblivion... Death...*

Darkness, *death*, was engulfing him now, wrapping its massive claws around him, waiting, a predator about to claim its prey.

*No more worries...*

His body didn't burn anymore. In fact, all of his senses seemed numbed. But it would be fine, the darkness would take good care of him... He didn't have to be afraid anymore...

*So peaceful...*

The cruel claws of death around him softened, morphing into a pair of warm, soft hands. They reminded him of a mother caressing a child. He would never be neglected, never be despised again...

*Goodnight, world...*

He closed his eyes.

★

Isn't fate funny, how it twists and manipulates, turning our strengths against us and transforming what we love the most into our greatest downfalls?

After all, he had always loved water.



# The Story of a Ming Warrior

*St. Paul's Convent School, Kaur Sandhu, Gursharan – 15*

It's been 2 years since my last voyage. Now I am standing here at the dock. I can still remember clearly the day my father opened the door of our small hut and the soldiers bombarded our home looking for me, and gave me the heart-wrenching news that the emperor had issued the imperial order for the second voyage. The cries of my mother and sister and the looks of pity I received from my friends for the last month of my stay at home in Nanjing.

Standing at the dock has never been this hard, the journey was a path full of darkness, unsure of the people we would meet. Father wasn't in the fleet, he had to stay here in Nanjing and help Grandpa with the noodle shop, bidding me goodbye he left.

"Are we messing around, huh? Should we see what the quartermaster has to say," a man said. I shake my head frantically the quartermaster is ruthless when it comes to slacking. He takes ahold of my collar and drags me. "Yi Shao do you not know how to keep your men under control? Your monkey was slacking around." "Don't worry I can handle such brats very well," says Yi Shao. A slap on the face breaks my chain of thoughts. "You will work with the boatswains while you be our monkey, also you will be the only monkey for this journey. No one will help you," he continues. His abnegation towards me is nothing new.

It's been a month since we set sail, and I have worked relentlessly. Yi Shao is the most apathetic being I know filled with beguile. He made all the gunners fire which meant I had to work faster. It's the middle of the night and I have finished setting up the board. "Huang se." shouted a strong voice, a tumult of shouts and gunshots were heard. "Set up the artillery pieces. Now," roared a voice from the cabin upstairs. The gun master was near the gunwale shooting with the guns I reload and check every night in case of surprise attacks. When I was near Yi Shao, I told him that I had reloaded the artillery pieces and other machines. At that moment I saw that there were pirates coming up the Jacob's ladder. I got the gun out of his grasp and shot them, suddenly all the chaos on the ship came to a halt, everyone was looking at me like I was an alien, a deep feeling of compunction took over me.

The bodies of the pirates I had killed were taken down from the Jacob's ladder onto the quarterdeck. The chaos stopped again but after a man yelled "Defeat." With this all of the intruders shot themselves. Dead. I was beyond bewildered. Then Admiral broke the hush, saying, "Who shot the pirates?" I was about to tell him that I had done the murder, when Yi Shao spoke up "Captain it was none other than me." Why was he taking blame? Suddenly Captain trudged towards our direction, he bumped me on the way to Yi Shao. Once he reached him he patted him, and to my surprise said, "Men learn from him, and for his bravery and quick wit he will receive 200 gold coins." So I was cheated. I was pushed out of the way as crew members came up to him and patted him.

It has been weeks since the attack and we have met many pirates on our sail across the Indian Ocean. Many came empty-handed and left with full pockets ranging from gold to vases.

Days passed slowly. Some crew members had their family members on board so they didn't feel the dreaded feeling of home sickness. Today a suspicious-looking man had come aboard the ship. He came from a land that the navigator didn't have on his map, but it did not look like Zheng He thought much of the fact. He had left with much more gold and silk than any of the pirates. Dawn was about to break and I had to prepare the breakfast today. After the misery with the cook had ended, I walked up the Crow's nest, one of my favourite hiding spots. My happiness was fleeting.

Admiral had just sent off another fleet of sailors with pockets of gold. From his face it was evident that he was under stress. The heavy shooting practice that the gunners had been doing had greatly affected the remaining amount of gunpowder. We had very little to no security, what is the use of the artillery pieces is if there is no gunpowder to power them. "Captain has ordered everyone to board on the main deck," someone shouted. Everyone started to run to the decks.

When I arrived onto the deck everyone's head was bowed. I saw a man who was wrapped like a cocoon in a purple robe and covered in gold necklaces. "Stand," roared Captain. "This gentleman has agreed to give us

50 barrels of gunpowder for 100 silver coins.” Members cheered with glee. “Bring out the best rum we have to celebrate this news,” he roared with pure happiness. Why would he not be happy, after all we could protect ourselves. This man was an angel sent from the heavens above. The shrouds were littered with drunk men. The fetters that I had put on deck for prisoners were over the wooden planks. The crew members’ habits were completely flagrant. Sleep couldn’t come any faster as I lay there looking at the stars above. It was dark all the torches were out. The darkness almost inimical. The tremendous cold had me shivering when a glint of light walked the main deck. It was incontrovertible that I hadn’t seen it.

Suddenly a figure passed and the light came into my view. My curiosity was rising as of dread. All sleepless nights had caused me to be inured to the dark. The patch of light was instigating me and as my curiosity was inveterate I climbed slowly down the nest, the small patch of light lighting up the way scarcely but enough for me to get down and walk. The light disappeared, but I was no neophyte I knew the way of the ship like the back of my hand. The limbs of the drunken men were the problem. I found a loaded gun on my way, I picked it up in order to feel a sense of security. I made my way to the captain’s dock and I saw the door opened and the merchant who was going to give us the gunpowder putting the treasures of China in a sack. My loyalty was hard to keep under control but it was important to know of the plan.

Captain was sleeping soundly in his bed. After putting all the plentitude of treasure into sacks he took out a gun and pointed it towards Captains chest. I took out my gun and silently walked towards him and shot him. Captain woke with the loud thud that came from the merchants fall and the bang of the shot just fired. My face must have been phlegmatic because the emperor was in shock. After coming out of shock he looked around and understood reality. He looked at me and smiled, which was surprising. The bang had awoken everybody and the crew members bombarded the doorway. “Boy do you mind bringing light to the incident?” said Captain. I told all the crew members about what had happened. “This is what we lack, responsibility. This boy whom we all had detested because of his job and social status stands here in the phase of a hero who saved not only me but treasures of China. His loyalty has no bounds. He is what I would call not a pirate, not a crew member but a hero and warrior. We all know how to use guns but he truly has shown the meaning of one. To save a country, not to destroy one. Merchants like this one lying on the floor will come and go but will never be able to get their filthy hands on mother China’s treasure as long as we have warriors like this boy.” Captain said as everyone looked at him and me.

The expedition ended soon after the incident. Now I am standing here at the same dock that I had first departed but today I will not be one of the crew members, for today I stand, a warrior for emperor. Admiral Zheng He had told the emperor of the incident. But this time my bravery wasn’t taken by Yi Shao. The emperor was impressed and had named me an official in his court. When I said to the Emperor that I was too young, all he had said was, “Boy, age is only a number, eyes hold more wisdom than even a 100-year-old man can have.”

# New Ming Treasure Voyages

*St. Pauls Convent School, Kuek, Ka Chai Kassie – 14*

It all started with a rumor.

A group of noble ladies giggling delicately into their teacups, each fulfilling their purpose to gain information for their respective houses. A demure servant walks up and pours some more tea, unruly tales of betrayal flow into her ears. Unable to contain her excitement, she let the winds carry her whispered words down the halls dripping with gold and diamond of the palace until something went wayward and it ended in the wrong person's ear.

"Oh really?" The Emperor could barely conceal his outrage, his voice cutting and face flushed an unhealthy shade of magenta he gripped the armrests of his throne tightly. The servants and subjects trembled with their heads lowered. Prince He stepped forward, eyes lowered but still reflected light off his icy glare.

"It is true. The public have been saying rather.." he paused, knowing it will give off a hesitant vibe, "negative things about Crown Prince Wen" His older brother and heir to the throne, more often the subject of their father and other officials' affection and praise. Prince He was not a jealous person in nature, he found it odd that his stomach crawled whenever he saw his brother. Whatever. Emotions are nothing more than human error anyways.

"Well, I can't have people under my own roof talking about their own emperor, can I?" Prince He could tell his father was on the verge of an explosion and he braced himself for an hour of shouting and furniture throwing.

"Your Highness, if I may—" Lord Wang stepped forward, wrinkles around his sly eyes crinkled, "Let's discuss more of this in private."

Prince He opened his mouth to protest, he wanted to stay and see the entire situation play out. However, his father waved all the officials away frustratedly. With a short bow, Prince He twisted the watch settled on his wrist and he teleported away from the throne room.

—

"I know you started it", Prince He was startled out of his thoughts as Lord Wang approached him in the flower garden. He quickly schooled his features to a serene expression.

"So?" Prince He knew how to deal with Lord Wang, he was an ambitious old noble, but he was too slow, never can catch up in his games. He did not need to lie in front of Lord Wang. With a selection of half-truths and non-denials, it was easy to trap the old man in a web of his misdoings.

Lord Wang chuckled, "Anyone with common sense will know it's you. Who is opposed to the Technology Voyages? Who has Prince Wen on their bad side? Who is so courageous and determined to spread a rumor so close to the lion's own den? There are only so few that could benefit from this"

Prince He slowly turned around to face the man. His brain whirling faster than the magnetic levitation metro train and heart pounding so hard he thought it would shatter his own rib cage.

"Oh? Is that so—"

"His Highness wants you to go, He"

"Prince He. I was not aware we are on such friendly terms Lord Wang" Prince He said coldly, shrugging off the calloused hand Lord Wang placed upon his shoulders.

"Prince He then," Lord Wang continued, " His Highness wants you to lead the Technology Voyages that start on 11 July to spread Ming Kingdom's miraculous technologies to the public world. And everyone knows the one who leads will likely be chosen as the heir of the throne. Prince Wen is not in favor with your father after the rumors. This is your ultimate chance Prince He!"

Prince He spotted the slight smirk at the corner of Lord Wang's dry, cracked lips. Oh, he will not tell the scheming old man everything. "Thank you for your kind words Lord Wang. However, I do not and will not wish to take the throne from my future king and older brother." He stood up and nodded at the servant hiding behind a tree, clearly a mole from his brother, before twisting his watch and teleporting back to his rooms.

He collapsed on his bed, thinking about what Lord Wang said. It's possible that he was correct. Or maybe it's a deceit to coerce him into doing something he will eventually regret.

The Technology Voyages was something he overheard his father planning with his officials indiscreet. The act of giving away some of their most advanced weapons and mechanics was something absurd and pointless to him. Their last defense as a hidden country from the globe and the tiny mindless GPS and satellites will be finally gone.

The officials prompted his father with ideas of how the outer world is catching up and how they should open themselves to more means of gathering new resources. Prince He knew that it was inevitable that one day the rest caught up. And a chance to discover and employ supplies will be very beneficial to their country. He just didn't understand the need to be all chummy with places that are still operating on fossil fuels.

He planted a servant in Lady Hui's house to spread the hearsay how preposterous it would be to have Prince Wen of all people lead a voyage to spread their knowledge to neighboring countries. Did he start it? Of course not. It would be known Lady Hui started it after all.

It was just an unfortunate incident that he underestimated the Hui House loyalty to whoever is on the throne. For now, nothing but praises and longingness of a venture was spread along the gossip. The stories about his brother though... threatened a smile to break out even on his most terrible moods.

—

"Your Highness, you have an imperial decree to receive!" A servant boy ran in panicking, his face was tainted a shallow red. Prince He dismissed the book he was reading from his projector and stood. What could his father want from him again?

A small part of him hoped that it would be about the Technology Voyages. There's no denying that it would happen, even the most insignificant beggar on the street has heard of it and the streets of the Ming Kingdom are buzzing with talk of how the outer world will receive their inventions. If a decree from his father arrived, it would have a high probability rate of sending him on the voyages.

He felt his shallow breathing and traitorous heart thumping. With a quick twist of his watch, he teleported right in front of the gates of his own court to be met with the head servant and his father's royal guard.

He quickly knelt down in front of the projection of the Emperor, head lowered and spinning with ideas.

"I, as the Emperor of the Ming Kingdom," the strong sturdy voice demanded presence and struck fear in everyone's heart, "command Prince He of the Ming Kingdom to lead the first voyages to spread our knowledge and machinery. Shall he be able to return, he shall take over Prince Wen as Crown Prince and heir to my throne."

He smiled, who knew all it took was a simple rumor? Not only could he control the amount of knowledge spilled on wasted people, and also inherit the throne. What a good time to be alive.

# What We Fight For

*St. Paul's Convent School, Kwok, Ka Hang – 13*

“What are you fighting for?”

My mother's voice rang through my skull.

Why now? When I am facing unavoidable doom, when Chen Zuyi's fleets are drawing near? Why did her voice, my mother's voice, the one who gave me life— why did her voice ring through my skull at this hour?

It's been two years since I last saw her. We are supposed to be going home, I am supposed to be seeing her in a few months' time, but why are we suddenly fighting pirates? Chen Zuyi and his infamous fleets—how will I, a low-ranked soldier, survive in the front lines?

“What are you fighting for?”

Her voice again. This is what she asked me when I was recruited into the navy. When I had to I leave for the Western Ocean under the Emperor's order, she asked me this again.

“I do not know, mother.”

That was my answer.

In the third lunar month of 1405, the Emperor commanded Admiral Zheng He to lead more than twenty thousand troops to the Western Ocean, I am one of the chosen ones for the voyage. Since our departure, we have sailed to Java, Malacca, Aru, Ceylon.....and hundreds of other places I have only ever dreamt of visiting. It's an honour, it really is, but I just wish I could return home and be with my family.

In the first few months at sail, I couldn't help getting seasick. I was given ginger to chew on whenever I felt nauseous, but eventually got used to the constant motion of the ship. Life at sea wasn't as tough as I had imagined it to be, but of course, it is much tougher than being on land. There are certain things I can no longer do, such as eating fresh vegetables as we have to preserve our food, especially us in the lower ranks. I miss my mother's dishes. Our meals are certainly nothing fancy, but my mother is skilled and can make vegetables from a bad harvest, which taste like a dish of the Gods.

How can I, as a son, repay her? I have taken from her in my whole life— her care, her teachings, her sweat, her love; I am supposed to repay her once I have grown up. Yet, I joined the navy and left her all alone in our homeland.

I don't want to die with a heart full of regret. I don't want to leave her.

How would my mother react when she heard no news of my whereabouts when the fleets returned? Would she weep for her only son? Would she curse my name, for abandoning her?

I shook the thoughts out of my head, trying to put my full attention on the threat ahead.

Chen Zuyi's fleets were drawing near, the blurry silhouettes were starting to form into thousands of mountainous pirate ships. The sea was calm, so calm that the ship barely rocked. It was as if the sea god had silenced the seas for us to look at one last time.

I tried to put on a brave face, but I was shivering in my boots, my face already dripping with sweat.

I looked around me, at my comrades, whose faces were, too, beaded with sweat and scrunched up in concentration. We had all come so far, gotten over so many obstacles. Just as we were returning home, we were met with one of the most feared pirate fleets in the world. Could this be the end of us?

Very much so.

Very much so indeed.

“Take care, mother. Your son is going now. We shall have a feast when I return!”

Those were my last words to her before I left. How childish of me, asking for a feast upon my arrival.

“What are you fighting for?”

The question repeated in my mind, unanswered.

“I am fighting for my country.”

That’s a noble answer. I am sure more than half of my comrades will say this when asked the same question— but no, that’s not my answer. It doesn’t feel right on my tongue.

“I am fighting for myself.”

A selfish answer, but true for many. I am selfish, a selfish son, but again— no, that’s not my answer.

“I am fighting for my wife and children.”

Some of my comrades are husbands, even fathers. This might be their answer, but not mine. I am not married. I have no children.

“Soldiers!” Someone bellowed from the crowd, “What are you fighting for?”

It’s that question again. Why? Why that question?

“Son, what are you fighting for?”

I saw my mother’s wrinkled face, a light dimple visible on her left cheek. The corners of her eyes creased as she smiled down at me, one hand carrying my traveling pouch, the other brushing her greying hair behind her ear.

“My son, I believe we all have something we fight for. Could be wealth, could be love. Remember this when you are at sea.”

I have treasured this sentence ever since I left— I thought of it when I had trouble sleeping, I thought of it when we were closing onto land, I thought of it when I was cleaning the decks, I thought of it when I woke up in the morning forgetting the fact that I was away from home..... and I think of it now, minutes before my likely demise.

“Soldiers!” The same booming voice echoed through the crowd again, “Hold that thing in your heart and fight! What are you fighting for?”

*I do not know. I still do not know.*

*All I know is the fact that I need to get back to my mother.*

“Are you ready?”

*No, not really.*

“Charge!”

There was an uproar.

Then chaos.

Bombing could be heard in the distance and pirates boarded our ship. Thick smoke and the smell of gunpowder surrounded us. I felt like choking and my chance of survival seemed bleak. I pulled myself together and concentrated on keeping my head attached to my body as hard as I can. Feeling a slight motion on my right—I dodged just in time as a dagger swished past my arm. Before I could even breathe a sigh of relief, I found myself engaged in combat with a deeply tanned pirate, I swung my spear at him, only to receive a strike back. We went back and forth, back and forth, back and forth—

I felt a strange sensation in my thigh, like something slid past it. That feeling was then slowly replaced by growing pain. It took me a while to process what happened. I was cut. I am injured—

I blocked another swing from the pirate, ignoring the pain in my thigh, it hurt but losing my concentration for even a fraction of a second would cause me my life. I couldn't tell how bad the wound was, nor could I tell how long I've been fighting. It felt like hours, and my muscles burned more than my wound did. The fact that I have not collapsed from blood loss is a good sign that it's a shallow cut. I can do this; I can push through this.

I took down pirate after pirate, I didn't dare stop. As time passed, I started to feel more and more certain—I allowed a sliver of hope to wedge into my heart, maybe, just maybe, I am going home after all. I am not sure if that's true, perhaps it's just my subconscious comforting me, but I held on. I held on to that tiny string of hope.

What am I fighting for?

I asked myself the same question I have failed to answer countless times.

My life? My future? My mother?

All I knew was the fact that I wanted to live and go home to see my family again. I guess that's why I am fighting.

I am so close. We are all so close. It would be a shame to lose now, would it?

As ships sank beneath the waves; as canons flew across the skies; as metal and steel clashed on the decks.....

I only allowed one thought to stay in my head—

*Mother, I am coming home.*

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyage

*St. Paul's Convent School, Leung, Yik Yin Yanni – 14*

I packed my belongings as mother handed me another lined jacket. “Do pack this as well would you? Oh my dear son off to the sea. Please come back safely,” Mother said with a teary eye. I laid down my bag, holding Mother’s hand as I looked right into her eyes, “I promise you I will be safe, and I’ll come home with thrilling tales of this Ming Treasure Voyage!” I told Mother with determination. She pulled me into a hug one last time. And I left home to embark on this road of adventure.

The treasure fleet assembled at Nanjing, I stared at the huge fleet of ships in front of me and gasped in astonishment. Despite hearing exaggerated tales from Xiao Qi, a fellow sailor, they could not hold all the glory of the treasure fleet, which was more beautiful, more amazing. We boarded the ship one by one. Never had I ever seen such a beautiful ship, polished planks made from the finest oak wood crafted into a marine beauty. There were crates of gold brocades, China’s finest patterned and coloured silks, trinkets beyond its price, all placed neatly on the ship, ready to be gifted to Kings from some other countries. Each room is decorated with tall bronze candelabras, yet the conference room caught my attention the most. Huge armchairs were placed in front of an antique oak table, with a large map of the Western Ocean spread on it.

As a small cabin boy, I had to sweep the decks and coil the stray lines dangling on the ship. When I paused for a few seconds to watch the land I love fade in the distance disappearing from the view behind us, I was accosted by the first mate who cuffed my ear and bowled into my ears, “You boy bring your broom over here and continue sweeping. The next time I catch you slacking off, your head shall pay for it, my lad!” I then realised was not just fun and games but tough, without one relative or friend to bestow kind words and wipe the sweat off your forehead and hand you a bowl of warm soup. I started to question my decision to commence on this mission.

We travelled for days from Lambri in the Indian Ocean, it was quite boring as I swept the decks each day, when I heard a crew member on deck called out “Look! Look!” Just like me, some other sailors also followed the voice out of curiosity.

And as I went on the deck and looked in front of me, the serrated mountains loomed in the distance; seabirds flew around the mountains; the heaven-touching apex of the mountain was drenched in the light of the sunrise. The luxuriant vegetation on the mountain glimmered in the light and the hushed sounds of nature mixed with the drinking song of the sailors gently went by my ears, creating a symphony, a soft lullaby. I set out to see the world with only a paper shield and wooden sword, each rain falls according to plan as nature takes its lead, offering their peace to the world. Maps stretched out, too many miles to count. Although I was so far from home, it felt like this was where I belonged: in the vast ocean travelling to see the most beautiful land. According to Captain Zheng, this was the mountains of Ceylon.

Later that day, the weather began to deteriorate. The clouds moved into the sky and grew suspiciously dark. “The sea is becoming very rough,” Xiao Qi said. A storm seemed imminent, but the ship had no choice but to continue to sail throughout the night. In the face of an approaching squall, there were two options: either pointing the ship into the oncoming wind or turning in the opposite direction and running away from the wind. Most sailors favoured turning away from the wind however attempting to bear away from the wind in the last few seconds before being struck by a squall doesn’t seem too much of a choice. The wind turned into a flurry, those on deck including me clung to the nearest fixture, fearful that we might be flung into the cold-blooded sea with no hopes of ever returning. It was a nightmare, the crazed flapping of sails and creaking of the wood, when the gust slammed into the ship, my mind was blank. I was terrified, not knowing what was happening, my mind was thrown into the utmost consternation and confusion. Suddenly, Captain Zheng’s voice brought me back to reality. “Guard your posts! Don’t give up, we will get through this together!” Spirits were raised, each sailor wiped the sweats on their forehead and did their very best in this fight with the wind. It went as fast as it came, turned up so quickly but Captain Zheng pulled the crew back together, the ship went through clouds of darkness and there was a sudden sense of calmness. In



front of us was the most beautiful sky ever seen. The waves stopped pounding and the winds stopped roaring, slowing radiating the faint sunlight, turning into a shimmering fairy tale. The silence was soon interrupted by the cheers of the crew as we won another fight as a team.

Time turned into a blur, not long after we arrived at another land: Calicut. We got off the ship one by one carrying causes of goods. "Calicut is one of the world's major depots, we are sure to make some good trades on the land!" Captain Zheng told us with a beam, I was more than excited to walk around this new place. It was hectic, with curious local crowding around the ship in curiosity. We were welcomed with a feast and excitement of the city, bathed in the full glory of Calicut. The servants led us to the garden of the palace, where the ruler was waiting. Captain Zheng went ahead and sat across to the ruler of Calicut at a lavish table surrounded by low chairs and cushions as I stumbled over carrying the crates. The first mate smacked my head and glared, "Watch it, young boy, if you managed to drop them you are dead meat." "It's alright, you guys must be tired carrying those all the way from the port, come on have a seat! I've prepared the best local snacks!" the Calicut ruler smiled in generosity and clapped his hands as servants went in one by one carrying dishes into the garden and placed them right in front of us. If I had a little bit less self-control I would have pounced onto the table, but I decided against it as I still wanted to keep my head. We stayed there for approximately four months trading crates of pottery silk and trinkets, and a place in the heart of Calicut. When we left, the ruler of Calicut came to see us off himself bearing gifts. These tributes from foreign emissaries increased China's prestige in this Western Ocean.

I followed the others back on the ship as we started our journey back home. While travelling in Palembang, Indonesia, I saw another boat not far away, not a few moments later the whole crew was alerted. "Chen Zhuyi! It's Chen Zhuyi!" I shouted. Captain Zheng drew his pistol and ordered, "We are confronting him today, get ready!" I've heard tales about Chen Zhuyi back onshore. Apparently, he was a pirate leader who had seized Palembang at Sumatra. We lowered our guns as a sailor waved a white flag frantically, Chen Zhuyi was surrendering. Sailors wondered if it really meant victory, "Not yet." said Chen Zhuyi before turning upon our treasure fleet and aiming to plunder it. We fought bravely against the incoming attack, slashing our swords in the air and blocking the attacks from our enemies as we fended off the pirates. Months of working on a ship strengthened me as I managed to defend myself and the ship with my little experience of martial arts. Captain Zheng gave orders as his forces attacked, Chen Zhuyi and two of his top associates were finally captured and tied up, ready to be taken back to the motherland.

Sometime later, we returned in full glory, bringing back tributes and trades from foreign countries and the victory in a fight with the infamous pirate Chen Zhuyi. The moment I got off the ship I was greeted by a hug from my mother, "I'm so glad you're safe!" I looked back at the vast Ocean and the ship and thought...

Sometimes our compass breaks, and our steady true North fades, but we'll be fine, under the lead of Captain Zheng, we will write this legacy. And one day they may tell our story, which would be told far and wide, to generations and generations, of the glory of the Ming Treasure Voyages.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyage

*St Paul's Convent School, Yue, Hilary – 14*

Time is running short, and with each passing hour I can feel myself grow less hopeful. Waiting for a ship to pass, waiting for a sign of life, waiting for my crew members... waiting,

waiting,

and waiting.

—

Across the sea, strange storm clouds had appeared, blocking my view of the sun. After a moment's pause, it became clear that they were not clouds at all; but sails and coloured flags. Hundreds and thousands of them. It was both a majestic and terrifying sight.

Loud drums beated and pounded, but perhaps the loudest drum beating the one that thudded in my ears—the frantic beating of my heart.

This is an opportunity for me to continue my journey.

He who hesitates is lost.

And I do not hesitate.

—

It's my first day on the fleet after my rescue. I was intrigued by what they were doing with so many ships in the middle of the sea, so I decided to follow their journey for the time being.

A soldier took me on a short tour of the ship. I surveyed the ship with child-like wonder. Each and every tiny detail fascinated me; even the plain warm-brown floorboards, which reminded me of home. Of those quiet family evenings which I miss.

In the same way in which the ship's bows meet the water, I want to create waves too. This is why I have chosen to travel the seas as a scholar.

—

"What's on the ship?"

"Cargoes of gold and silk from the Emperor himself." The general, Wang Jing-Hong, proudly stated with a confident smirk, standing up a little straighter.

"Did you...steal them?" I couldn't help but shiver in fear. What had I gotten myself into?

"I'm sorry, I must have phrased it weird," Jing-Hong started laughing in earnest. "These precious items are for Zheng-He to give away as gifts in order to build new relationships." My face heated up in embarrassment at my previous blunt statement.

—

Zheng-He ordered me to do repair work with the soldiers. I sighed as I placed my book down. I guess reading would have to wait. I'm ordered to paint over the blistering and peeling paint, the ship weathered after the constant beating of the waves.

—

The soldiers asked me to help them with cleaning. I gritted my teeth—I was in the middle of reading the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*! I reminded myself to be humble, for I am only a person that the fleet rescued. I had to be grateful, and repay their kindness. There will be a day when my talents are recognised, but for now, I should start from the bottom before rising to the top.

—

Jing-Hong was dispatched with a squadron to Champa before Zheng-He will follow with the main body of the fleet.

And this is where my adventure begins.

—

Halfway on our journey, I suggested that we stop in a nearby island to get some rest. Our navigator had gotten sea-sick, along with a few members of our crew. Jing-Hong decided that it was a good idea, as he, too, missed the feeling of solid ground beneath his feet.

“We will camp here for the night.” He then ordered a few soldiers to take turns to stand guard.

However, what awaited us in the morning was not a good night’s rest, but a band of hostile pirates that ambushed us.

—

“Soldiers, don't fight! We are outnumbered.” Jing-Hong growled in anger as the pirates searched our ship for treasures. Unfortunately for them, all the precious goods are in the main body of the fleet. I mentally cursed my inability to see this coming—we should have just continued on the journey instead of stopping to rest.

“Sānshíliù jì, zǒu wéi shàng jì.” Jing-Hong mumbled underneath his breath. “There are only three choices left: surrender, compromise, or escape.”

I shook my head. “Surrender is complete defeat; compromise is half defeat, and escape is practically impossible without any loss on our side. It’s too dangerous.”

Jing-Hong gave me an exasperated look. “Well, do you have a better plan?”

“Sānshíliù jì is also known as the Thirty-Six Stratagems,” My eyes lit up, remembering the book I had read months ago.

“I have a plan. Are you willing to risk it?”

They nodded.

—

“Surrender while you still can, pirates!” I bellowed, in the most commanding and confident way I could manage. A few heads swerved to stare at me with curiosity at my sudden yelling.

“I have your attention? Good.” I spoke nonchalantly, trying to disguise the growing fear. On the inside, I was a bundle of nerves.

It was the first time for me to take the lead.

The leader’s eyes narrowed as he glared at me. I could see his sword glinting in the sunlight. I could feel the sweat beading on my forehead as I strode forward, head held high.

“We have sailed the seas and been to places you've never been. We’ve been through more than you can imagine. We’ve been to Champa, Java, Malacca, Aru, Semudera, Lambri, Ceylon, Quilon and Calicut...” I took a deep breath, my heart threatening to burst from its ribcage.

“You think we would be this careless, falling into your obvious trap?” I spoke louder, gaining confidence as Jing-Hong offered me a supportive smile. You can do this, he mouthed.

“You know Chen Zuyi? Our fleet not only defeated his 5000 pirates in battle, but also executed Chen Zuyi himself!”

The captain just rolled his eyes, unfazed. He must think that I am lying. However, behind him, a few pirates were slowly backing away, their eyes blown wide in fear. Encouraged by their terror, I continued.

“My fleet comprises of elites. We have 270 000 troops and at least 2868 ships sailing the seas in the moment.” I paused, allowing my voice and message to sink.

With a sudden burst of confidence, confidence born of faith. Faith that I will get my crew out alive, and the faith that the soldiers placed in me.

“We are the first great explorers of Earth, adventurers that have reached India and Africa. We rule the seas! You’ve never heard of us because we have slayed all the sailors and pirates that dare cross us.” I spread my arms for a dramatic flair.

“We—”

Then, as if by divine command, our fleet appeared on the horizon, its sails glistening in the sunrise. I watched as it makes a steady approach, the outline of the fleet becoming more clear every moment. I was struck by the sight—it was as if I was waiting for rescue on the island again.

I watched as the captain’s expression morphed into fear.

“We have to leave! Now!” The captain frantically commanded as chaos erupted, sailors and soldiers alike making a dash for their respective ships. They jumped aboard and hoisted the sail, which billowed, pulling them away into the unknown.

I felt as if a heavy burden was lifted off my shoulders as the pirates retreated, sailing away.

—

“Thank Tianfei we survived!” A soldier exclaimed, cheering loudly as we regrouped with the main fleet.

“How did you even come up with such a crazy plan?” Zheng-He asked, his tone scolding but his face portrayed relief that his squadron returned safely..

“My plan is the thirty-second stratagem from Sānshíliù jì: kōng chéng jì. Also known as the empty fort strategy, this idea is used by many strategists.”

“Like Cao Cao in the Chengshi County incident and Zhao Yun in the Battle of Han River.” Zheng-He affirmed, nodding as he listened.

“But what I did today relied on pure luck. If the fleet hadn’t arrived on time...” I trailed off, not wanting to imagine the horrifying consequence of my impulsive actions. “The strategy is as risky as it is successful. I shouldn’t have strayed from the mission in the first place, or thought of a more solid battle plan when we were ambushed.”

“I am still young and inexperienced,” I admitted quietly.

“But I hope I can stay on this fleet from now on and travel the seas.”

—

Sea spray splashes against my face and the floor beneath me sways. My thoughts became clouded with fear of the unknown as I gaze at the sun sinking beneath the horizon. The sun cast its final golden rays down upon the clouds, painting them bright red one last time.

I closed my eyes, as if I could escape my doubts if I block the view of the sunset.

It is too late for regrets. My tale begins now: as a part of the Ming Treasure Fleet.

# The Eighth Voyage

*St. Paul's Co-educational College, Song, Yiding – 13*

The sun was setting over the horizon. Warm, salty sea air energized the waves beneath the keel of a massive treasure ship. *The Treasure Ship*. A moving island that pacifies even the raging seas, housing more than three hundred sailors on board. It was the icon of the dynasty, leader of the Treasure Fleet.

Now was another cold evening on the top of the watchtower for Zheng He, the outstanding commander of the Treasure Fleet. He stared ahead from the highest point of the Treasure Ship. Straining his eyesight to its extreme, all that he could see was still the deep blue, stretching over the boundaries of the Earth itself. He sighed. It had been days without aim. The boredom and fright of the seas never paid off even when the Fleet brought about glory.

“I never should’ve come to this hellish eighth voyage,” he thought. Zheng He was old now. Too weak for sea voyages. But on the other hand, he knew what he came for. He was a prominent maritime adventurer. The sea itself chose him. The gentle rocking in the open oceans always reminded him of the soft swing of a cradle. And the salty breeze often wreathed him in a unique aroma that old sailors call home. He achieved for the Ming dynasty fame and glory. He even made ties with foreign countries and served two successive generations of emperors.

Yet he felt as if he was lacking something. He knew his name would last forever, but he still had this nagging sensation that his life was too empty, and it should be something more.

He surveyed the ocean again. Suddenly, he saw it. Like a shadow of the Earth itself, lying on the horizon was a huge storm. Lightning crackled and thunder bellowed, sending chilly air racing past the foremast of the Treasure Ship. The storm was black as squid ink and coming. Fast.

Zheng He commanded calmly, “Lower the sails! All sailors, get below deck!”

Quickly, the order was spread from one ship to another, and soon, the whole Treasure Fleet was prepared for the upcoming tempest. Zheng He took his time to get down from the watchtower. He stole a look at the spectacular sight of the fleet comprising over two hundred ships. The reflection of the wintry seas, that lovely pink of the sun kissing the hull... The beauty of the Treasure Fleet and the valuables it contained could only be described as transcendent.

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The winds came faster and stronger than Zheng He had anticipated. Soon the ships were literally being tossed on the billows.

Only Zheng He and a few sailors were remaining on the deck of the Treasure Ship now. The wind was piercing the skin of Zheng He, the icy chill sending a shiver down to his heart. Sea foams were flying everywhere, and in the scream of the storm, Zheng He’s commands could barely be heard. The ship shuddered and fell, followed by a big splash into the sea. BOOM. Zheng He held desperately onto a huge pillar. Another massive wave slapped onto the side of the ship, sending it swerving dangerously to one side. Zheng He slid across the slippery deck and barked out, “Everyone get below now! This storm is too powerful for us to bear!” The sailors couldn’t hear him. The wind was too strong. Zheng He cursed under his breath. Old age was draining him. He waved frantically for them to move into the cabins. A big splash from the ocean sent him a mouthful of the filthy, icy water. He spat it out with a cough.

The ship shook dangerously again. Zheng He shuddered. He squinted through the flying water droplets to locate the entrance of his cabin. It was at the other end of the deck. Then the fire burning bright in his cabin reminded him of something.

He called to his mind that fateful night, in his family’s little house steeped in Islamic religion. It was a happy summer’s eve, destroyed by bloodshed. That night the Ming emperor had decided to send an army of soldiers to wipe out remaining rebels in Yunnan, including Zheng He’s family. The soldiers were cruel. They burnt down their house and the other villages as well, the fire dancing joyously at the death of a thousand souls. He could still vividly recall the look in his father’s eyes when they parted through the wall of fire. His father’s expression told him everything he needed to do in life. The sympathy, the loneliness, the grief, the craving. The craving for a better world. The craving for his son to do what he didn’t, to fulfill his lifelong dream. To devote his soul and serve the one god Allah. And since then, that dream had become Zheng He’s. He was eleven back then. His father sacrificed himself to save the rest of the family.

A sharp turn of the Treasure Ship reminded him of reality. Zheng He didn’t bother to move. The sea was always kind to him. He started to wonder what he’d be remembered as. A great diplomat? The first

marine explorer of China who ruled the seas? He sighed. "Every possible way except the way that I'd like to. *To be remembered as one that serves Allah with all his heart.*" The treasure on the ships and the glory he had brought to the dynasty and himself never mattered. The journeys at sea had taught him that all temptations of the mortal world were as hollow as sea foam. The places he explored and discovered did matter, but they didn't mean much. Someone was bound to find them. Yet devoting oneself to a deity was different. It was something eternal. And it was his father's dream, that meant everything to him. By not fulfilling that dream, he felt as if he had betrayed his late father, the worst sin one could commit. His devotion to Buddhism had been implicitly forced by the Ming emperor. He gritted his teeth. "Why can't this world go the way I like?" Zheng He thought. "Why is my life being constantly shaped by others and diverted from my dreams?"

With a sudden rage he stood up against the storm, his delicate body no longer bowing to the wrath of the winds. "Take me if you dare!" He bellowed at the empty sea. "I will stand, even if this is the only time I can stand up, strong and confident, against the gale that blew my life apart!" Then with determination, he strode toward his cabin, shaking the ocean with every step. Through wind and rain, through pain and sweat, he arrived at his cozy door. Zheng He was just about to turn the doorknob.

A ring of light fell on the door.

Zheng He turned around with a start and gasped. He was the most handsome human he had ever seen, shining brightly in contrast to the deep, stormy night. He was beyond his imagination, and too much for his tiny brain to register. He carried with him an aura of authority, love, understanding, and divinity. Zheng He wasn't even sure if he was a 'he'. Maybe something else. More holy and spiritual.

"Allah?"

"Zheng He, you have done well in your voyages. You have helped many countries flourish with the treasure you gave out and with the knowledge you bestowed. And by helping others, you've already devoted yourself to me. So, tell me, why are you guilty?"

"Allah..." Zheng He faltered, searching for words...

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Zheng He had been sick for days now, on the seventh journey of the Ming Treasure Fleet. The doctor left his cabin and spoke to the government officials outside with deep concern. "Sir," the doctor was saying, "It appears that Mr. Zheng's illness has now become incurable. Apart from staying constantly unconscious, he is now hallucinating, too. Last night, he was burbling about an 'eighth voyage' and something called 'Allah'."

A collective gasp spread among the officials, "So he really can't be cured?"

"I believe so," said the doctor solemnly.

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They waited until he died, in the city of Calicut, springtime 1433. What they didn't know, was that the fatal disease and the hallucination, was Zheng He's final liberation, from this world, and from his broken dreams.

That day they cast his body into the depths, even the seagulls were quiet. The racket of the city calmed itself down. The sky was clear, the sea was still. They wrapped his body in silk, adorned with sea waves. The same warm, salty sea air came to pay farewell to the dead.

Slowly, with grief, they mourned for him and buried him in the waves where he'd belong. The silk, so weightless, so free, dancing with the shadows of light and dark in the waters of life, as it slowly drifted toward the bottom of the sea.

Chase the waves, Zheng He. Chase them to wherever they shall take your soul to.

## A Peek into the Future

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Chan, Odessa – 11*

Admiral Zheng He rubbed his hands together. This was going to be a journey he would be remembered by. He looked up to the sky, and his heart skipped a beat. *Splendid!* He thought. *Not a single cloud in the sky. My voyage is already going terrifically.* His colossal fleet were now sailing to India, where they could trade for some spice called ‘pepper’. Apparently it was really good for cooking, and had a great taste.

Long days followed. Zheng He continued studying, and the fleet continued sailing. Then at long last, the fleet entered the Indian coast.

“Bring the silk! Don’t forget the porcelain too!” Zheng shouted backwards to his men, running as fast as he could, and believe me, it was faster than lightning. “And hurry!”

The Chinese were going to trade their silk and porcelain for the Indian pepper. They’d already planned everything out; Zheng was going to let the girls dance for the Indian king Aarav, then he was going to propose the gifts, and if all went well, the king would offer some pepper in return.

“Hi, we are traders from the East, and we’d like to see the Indian King Aarav.” Zheng He told an armoured guard at the pier.

“Let me lead you to His Majesty. This way,” the guard told them. “By the way, what are you going to trade for?”

“Oh, whatever is fine. Or maybe the pepper you have? It is quite famous, you know,” Zheng He said, hinting.

“Our... paper? I’m sorry, but we don’t have paper here. You must have gotten to the wro—”

“Pepper.” Zheng He pronounced it slowly again, interrupting.

“Oh! Pepper.” the guard smiled. “Yes, it is very famous,” he agreed. They were already in front of the palace.

The palace was a majestic domed structure with white and gold columns and designs. They were nothing like the palace of the Emperor Yongle back in China. Zheng He made sure to remember to tell the emperor how it looked. That emperor sure loved other cultures.

When they arrived into the throne room, Zheng He bowed down to the Indian king, who was dressed in a white and gold robe, matching to the walls of the palace. “Greetings, Your Majesty. I am Zheng He, a visitor from China.”

“Are you some kind of entertainment? Come, and sit down. Let’s watch what you’ve got.” the king had a strong Indian accent.

“Okay.” As Zheng He hesitantly walked over to his seat, he kept his hands behind his back clasped together, which was their signal for ‘dancing time’.

The beautiful dancing girls the fleet had brought with them started dancing with their silk dresses and long sleeves. As they danced, Zheng He decided that it was time to propose his gifts to the king. “King Aarav, if you don’t mind, I’d like to propose to you some small gifts.”

“How small are you talking about?”

“Like some silk, some porcelain, or maybe another silk robe for you?” Zheng He smiled sort of cunningly. He knew that every emperor or king loved new clothing.

“Let me see it first.” the king still demanded.

Zheng raised one eyebrow to indicate ‘stop the dancing, and bring out the gifts now’, and the admiral’s assistant brought a bundle of silk, some porcelain cutlery and lastly purple and gold robe for the king.

“Wow...” the king gasped, looking wide-mouthed at the gifts Zheng He was offering. “I... I don’t know how to thank you for this...” At this point, the king was practically speechless. His advisor standing by him whispered something in his ear.

“Ah, yes, okay,” the king muttered back, and the advisor retreated to his spot. “I shall, in turn, give you people a pot full of our precious pepper.” He announced.

*Score!* Zheng He’s heart was dancing with joy. Then, he felt there was something he needed to do. Right away. *I need the bathroom!*

“I need the bathroom, Your Majesty. Where might it be?”

“Oh, of course. Here, I’ll bring you there.” the king answered, and quickly rose accompany Zheng to the bathroom. No one seemed to notice why the king was offering to bring a total stranger to the bathroom, when he could just ask one of his servants to do so.

Once the others were out of earshot, the king whispered to Zheng: “Truthfully, our pepper isn’t that precious. India is an interesting country, but we don’t have anything valuable enough to thank you for your gifts, but one thing. So here’s what I’m going to do; I am going to let you try out my engineers’ latest

invention: a time traveller. We named it *Uthkarsh*, which is the Indian name for excellence. It is really precious, and you can use it to go to any time in the future or the past.”

“So... you want me to use it?”

“Yes.”

“Sure, but can I go to the bathroom first?”

“Yeah, it’s right there,” the king pointed to the door to the men’s lavatory.

Soon enough, Zheng He was sitting in the compact time machine, getting ready.

“So, crank this, then twist that, then press this... you got me so far, right?”

“... Yes?” Zheng He said this like a question, uncertain. He never knew that travelling in a time machine would be so complicated.

“Don’t worry, I promise you this will change your world forever.”

“Right,” Zheng said. “So, when I’m in here, no time will pass here?”

The king saluted. Apparently Indians had another way of saluting: They pointed the index finger up and put their hands to their foreheads.

“And will the people in

“Well, bye, then.” Zheng He said. He cranked the lever, twisted the knob, and pressed the button, and wrote on the panel: “October 25th, 2018, Hong Kong.” This was because 10 and 25 were his lucky numbers. 2018 was his dad’s birthday. He was born on February the 18th.

*Rrrrr...* the engine of the machine roared. *Pop!* ‘You have now reached your destination,’ a monotonous female voice said. ‘Please open the door on your left and feel free to step outside. Please note that you have five minutes until the *Uthkarsh* will transfer itself to the present.’

“Great,” Zheng muttered. “I must go exploring then.”

In front of him was a school. He poked his head into one of the classrooms. He was looking at something totally different from what he had seen before. It was an air-conditioned room with tables and chairs, and the students were all typing things on strange open-and-close metal devices. He looked at one of the devices, and saw the words: “Zheng He was a great admiral who helped China discover different cultures of the world”. This was great, of course, because not only was this student writing about him, this sentence meant that he would succeed in his voyages!

When Zheng He looked closely, he saw the words “Hong Kong Young Writers Award”. They were writing about him for a competition! He felt so proud. He was world-famous! Not only that, he could help invent those open-and-close metal devices! He made a note in his head: “When you get home, start trying to figure out how to invent open-and-close metal devices.”

Zheng He returned to the time machine. There was a clock on the wall that told him that he only had one more minute and then the machine would transport itself back to the present, where the king was waiting for him. I ask you, what would you do if you had such a big decision? Well, Zheng He decided that it was too much of a risk to keep exploring. He went into the machine, then pressed the button, twisted the knob, and then cranked the lever.

*Rrrr...* the now familiar roar of the machine took over the eerie silence. *Pop!*

“Hi, so how was it?” Aarav asked as soon as Zheng He climbed out.

“It was so good! I discovered so many things!”

“Good. I was hoping you would say that. Now come on, let’s go and get back to the throne room.”

When the two returned, everyone in the humongous room bowed; some to the king and some to the admiral.

“Well... I am sad to say that we have to go now,” Zheng He told his new friend. He’d not waste their time. He came only and only for the pepper, not to dilly dally and enjoy the Indian King’s palace. He could do that back in where he came from, in Yongle’s home.

“Oh, how sad. Here’s the pepper.” the king’s servant passed a huge cauldron of pepper to Zheng He’s men.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” Zheng He waved as the door to the palace closed with a soft thud behind them.

Zheng He smiled to himself. Today was not only a success, but also a surprise. Who knew the Indians had built a time machine? And now that he knew what was going to happen a few hundred years later, he’d better be a good admiral or else the students in the future wouldn’t be writing about him after all.

As Zheng looked up to the cloudless sky, he realized that more surprises would come.

And another did.

TO BE CONTINUED.....



# Against the Tides

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Lee, Justin – 11*

He struggled against the raging currents and listless winds, and spluttered.  
“Sir! Sir!”  
Admiral Zheng He turned around, only to see a ragged soldier limping towards him. Suddenly, he collapsed. Zheng He rushed to his side.  
“Are you alright?”  
He weakly forced out three words,  
“They are here.”  
He fell limply onto the deck and then, they knew he was gone.

Zheng He stood up firmly, and said,  
“Everyone to their stations. I have received word that there is enemies approaching us. Please stand by.”  
He then swiftly turned around and walked back to his cabin. He paced in circles. *What happened? This journey was going so well. What did I forget to do?* He paced and paced, until he heard a loud **CRACK** and commotion up on deck. The fight had started. Luckily for Zheng He and his entourage, they had been supplied with good troops with good equipment and the sounds of battle showed who was winning. Piercing screams of pain and cries of horror everywhere, the pirates were killed, one by one, until none remained.

“Take the loot and the ship. See if there are other resources to be found.”  
Zheng He announced. A chorus of “Yes Sir” went around and the sailors and soldiers hurried to do their job. *This battle has been costly, just like the other ones. I must not let this happen again, if not for good reasons,* he thought. *We must go to a port to pick up more men and supplies.* “Set sail for Donghe port!” “Yes Admiral!” He stared at the horizon, watching the moon fade into the sea and the sun slowly rise from its sleep. Softly, he firmly walked down to his cabin, ready for a good night’s sleep.

Zheng He woke up with a jolt, reliving last night’s disaster in his dreams. Realizing they were fake, he stood up, quickly changed into his daily robes and took a huge yawn. He immediately called his aid.  
“How close are we to Donghe port?”  
“Only two hours away, Sir.”  
This was good, and we had made some progress since the night before.  
“We urgently need supplies. Order the monks to pray to the wind god for more wind. We must go faster”  
“They have already, Sir. They must rest before they can pray again. They have already spent all of their energy staging the previous prayer.”  
“Then just get me something to eat. After last night, I’m a little hungry.”  
“Yes, Sir.”  
As his aid scurried away to fetch his master some food, Zheng He thought carefully about what might happen. *Right now the fleet is in a fragile state. With so much treasure and so many goods, and with such a weak defense, we could be open to an attack. This must not happen.* Hew clenched his fists. Footsteps startled him, and he turned around. He looked and saw his aid returned with some buns and a pot of steaming hot herbal tea.  
“Thank you.”  
His aid left with no reply.

***Two hours later.....***

Zheng He stepped of the ship, with his aids and troops behind him in formation.  
“Where do we get our supplies?”, he asked.  
At that moment, the governor of the state appeared with his entourage and group of guards trailing behind him.  
“We have been expecting you, Admiral.”

# Back to the Old Days

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Leung, Anya – 11*

As the enormous ships were getting prepared, Zheng He miserably sat beside his bed pondering what to do. He was the chosen one, which made him enthusiastic. He never thought he could make it this far. But he still had a family counting on him. He didn't know what to do, but at last, he took his suitcase and set off to the sea.

Lightning struck, and as his boats were tossed across the sea, Zheng panicked.

'Come on, faster! Our ships are going to capsize soon!' hollered Zheng He. 'Hurry, hurry!'

The fleet endured a frightful evening, but eventually, the storm calmed down. They continued voyaging for days after days until they finally arrived in Thailand. When he first arrived, he and his men dragged themselves through some swampy areas. Once coming out to the light, they saw some huts standing on the side. Some people in ragged clothes with terrible sores all over their faces and bodies ambled out slowly like spirits. All of the soldiers were scared and wanted to run away. But Zheng refused. Not a bit afraid of being infected, he instead stepped up to help these people to dress their sores and wounds with some Chinese medicine he brought. For several days and nights, he devoted himself to relieve their pain and took care of them. Finally, after 30 days of hard work, he was able to put the disease under control. This news came to the ears of the king of Thailand, who was eager to meet this amazing man. When Zheng arrived at the beautiful and magnificent palace, he saw the king looking relieved and worried. The king told him: "In Thailand, it feels very humid and rains a lot. Our rivers became very dirty as a result of the weather. When my people drink water from the river, they get sick all the time and as the king of Thailand, I have the responsibility to keep them healthy. I don't know what to do. Do you have any solution to my problem?"

"Ohh, I got it!" Zheng exclaimed after thinking for a moment.

Zheng then ordered his people to bring him a bucket of dirty river water into which he dropped a few clear stones. He shook and stirred the water, and in a matter of seconds, the water cleared. The king was amazed and happy to witness this letting out a scream, "Is this MAGIC?!".

"No, this stone is something I brought from China, which we use to filter the water. It is called Potassium Alum, in China, we can easily find them in caves. People can drink this water without getting sick," Zheng calmly said.

Zheng didn't just teach the Thais how to filter water, he also gave them several other Chinese medicines to cure different illnesses. The king and his officials were pleased, feeling grateful and respectful to China. In return, the Thai king gave Zheng some local treasures like carpets to take back to the Middle Kingdom.

Not every country welcomed Zheng He's fleet. The king of a small country, Sri Lanka, an island in the south of India, confronted him with a hostile reception. This king was planning to conduct an onslaught on Zheng's fleet. He was known for organizing raids to the trade or government fleets passing by the sea passageway, snatching away all the goods and treasures. Zheng visited this country because being a devoted Buddhist, he wanted to pay tribute to the Buddha Relics in the country's Buddhist temple. On his way to worship, he received an invitation from the king to go to the palace. Knowing that this king was violent and unfriendly, he wondered why he got invited. So he sent his man to check out if there was any conspiracy, and he was right. The king chopped the trees to block Zheng's route so that he and his people could not get back to their boats, while at the same time mobilizing more than 40,000 soldiers to mount an attack on Zheng's fleet. In this crisis situation, Zheng did not panic. He immediately thought of a plan. Knowing that all the king's soldiers were sent to attack his boats, Zheng gathered that the king's castle would be vulnerable to invasion. He sent an elite group of 3000 soldiers to force an entrance into the castle, and at the same time, he dispatched reinforcements back to the fleet to protect the treasure from being robbed. As expected, Zheng's soldiers broke into the palace to kidnap the king and his family. When the king's soldiers on the way to the seaside heard the news, they knew what it meant.

"Come on, we have to go back to the castle to save the king before it's too late!" The commander of the soldiers roared. They quickly rushed back to the castle surrounding it. However, the next morning, Zheng, with the king as a hostage, fought his way out and back to the boats. He brought the king and his family back to Beijing. Some high officials in China wanted to execute the king for his acts, and when the king of Sri Lanka heard about it, he begged for mercy. The king of China was generous and thought that the king of Sri Lanka was uncultured and ignorant. He decided to give him another chance and allow his people to stay in China. Meanwhile, the Chinese government identified someone else from among his relatives, someone loyal and reliable, to be the new king, and sent him back to Sri Lanka. This incident had brought respect from the surrounding countries and peace to the passageway of the route from China to the Middle East and Africa.

As Zheng's crew reached Africa, they did a lot of trade and exchanges with many more countries. They carefully transferred the items to the palace of king Africa, Abioye so there would be zero mistakes during the process. The king of Africa kindly welcomed Zheng to his mansion so their trading could begin as early as possible. They discussed the trading, and what they had in mind. At last, Zheng gave him Chinese gold, silver, and silk in exchange for giraffes, ostriches, and zebras.

Zheng He is one of the most famous adventurers and travelers in the history of China. His voyages in decades between China and countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa broke open the barriers between the east and west. From his journeys, we learn that he was fearless, caring and intelligent. He was not afraid of being infected by the disease in Thailand; he wasn't scared of being robbed and killed by pirates; he also was not panic-stricken of being buried in vast oceans. He cared for the people with sores on their body; he loved his country, and he had sympathy for the health conditions of other countries. Zheng thought of brilliant ideas when he was about to get killed, saving himself and his fleet. His contribution was winning respect and gratitude from other countries to China, building cordial relationships of China with other countries, and consequently, promoting more cultural exchanges and increased trade between the east and the west.

# The Pirates

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Poon, Davinia – 11*

Thunder rumbled, rain lashed onto the ships, the pummel of water that came so suddenly drenched the soldiers, sailors, and navigators that were all working hard to find the next destination. “When did I ever sign up for this?!” One of the unwilling soldiers muttered to himself. A navigator replied, “It is because we are all part of the Ming Chao society!” “It is good to support your country too!” exclaimed another soldier that was Zheng He’s best friend. “Yes, you are saying that because Zheng He is your best friend and he is treating you the best!” replied another soldier that was really bad-tempered.

“Captain! Captain! Wake up! I think we have company!” A sailor that was on one of the side ships screamed to the sleeping figure of Zheng He. “What company?! I don’t see anything in the distance?! Can you *please* stop disturbing me?” Zheng He replied lazily. They had been traveling for days, and they still could not find their destination. “No Zheng He! There are real invaders here, and they are heading towards us!”, the sailor told Zheng He in an impatient voice. “Well, then prepare for battle! Some of you go to the bottom of the ship and some of you attack here, on the deck, QUICKLY!!!” Zheng He gave out all the orders and right after that, all of the people on board replied: “Yes Mr. Zheng He!!!”

As the invaders started getting closer, Zheng He observed them carefully while the rest of the people were either shouting out many threats at the coming enemy or preparing their weapons for the battle against the enemies. “Aha! They are pirates!” exclaimed Zheng He, “Listen up crew! You guys fight the army and I would fight the captain of the army.” After Zheng He said this, many of the members in his own crew were not really surprised, Zheng He was, the best warrior that they ever knew or heard of. Then suddenly, a small voice spoke out to Zheng He, “But Mr. Zheng He, I have studied about pirates for my life, this crew that is coming to us is a very talented crew, they have fought for many centuries. I have heard that the whole family generation has been pirates, they all know the best ways to survive when in the sea, and they also have very very powerful weapons. One famous quote that some people heard from them is “We are warning you, do not cross us, or we will make you regret your choices, you better join our army, or we will make you understand how weak you are!” “Wow, that sure is scary, uh huh.” Said Zheng He, with so much confidence, “I am sure to beat them, little boy, you cannot give me advice, you filthy little git, nobody gives me advice!” He roared to the little boy, then slowly regarded the rest of his troops. “Y-es Ma-ster”, the little boy said as he trembled in the angry gaze of Mr. Zheng He.

As Zheng He walked back to the front of the ship, the little boy, whose name was Ning Ning went back to his own bunk at the end of the ship. He took his time as he climbed the ladder towards the basement, where all of their rooms were. The wood on the ship was very plain, but it was really strong. On the corridor to the rooms, there were many ancient paintings of the captain Zheng He. Before, Ning Ning observed these paintings closely and thought that Zheng He looked really handsome and someday, he wanted to be like Zheng He. But today? No, even if he looked so professional and tough, he would not like to have much of an ignorant personality.

“Ning Ning! I heard that you gave Zheng He some advice, but you were rejected!” taunted one of the tough navigators who always liked to complain about Zheng He. “Yes I got rejected, but at least I tried to help the captain!” replied Ning. “Who even bothers to help the capt-”

BOOOOMMMMMMMM!!!!!!! “Oh no!” screamed Ning, as he stormed out of his bunk room and ran all the way until he reached the top deck where Zheng He was. Ning regarded the mess with his mouth open, one side of the ship was torn by a big bomb that came flying from the other ship. A few of the navigators had fallen into the water and were trying to stay alive in the horrifying waters of the deep, trying to pull them in like a gigantic liquid magnet. “Zheng He, do you need my help?” asked the little boy automatically, “Yes, get going! You get our troops out of the water, the rest of the army would defend the ships.” Zheng He sighed as he said that, he didn’t think the kiddo could do much, but the emperor told him, then Ning Ning said, “Yes, and you better be quick, or the waves would drown them in a matter of minutes!” Ning jumped up and down in excitement! He finally got something to do! He would impress the captain by making sure his job is done quickly and well!

At that time, everybody was scrambling up and down the decks of the ship, trying to get a good position so that they could fire many arrows to the opposite side. While everybody was busy, Zheng He kept a watch out for Ning. Ning swiftly moved through the crowd of soldiers, then he finally reached the edge of the boat. Zheng He watched as Ning lifted the floaty ring out of the side ship with difficulty, then Ning used all his force to lift the floaty into the air, right after that, splashing it to the water. After a few minutes, all of the people that fell into the sea were rescued. "Great job Ning!" Zheng He praised, "You must be exhausted, go take a rest!" Zheng He said as he rested his eyes upon the little boy, the little boy was panting over and over again with exhaustion. "Zheng He, I do not need any rest, the enemies are already close, I would try to boost up our defenses, wait, I have a plan!" exclaimed Ning. "Go ahead..." whispered Zheng He softly. "So, we have the sailors, an army, navigators and archers. The archers stay on the deck and shoot arrows at the enemy, the spearsmen do that too. The navigators split into half, the first half makes sure the boat is steering in the right direction, the second half climbs up to the sails and controls them. The sailors also split into half, the first half goes down to the basement to protect the goods and the weapons that we have, the second half needs to take two ships, both ships go to the enemies basements, then all the swordsmen go on board those two ships, and they go to the enemies area. The rest of the bomb shooters shoot bombs at the enemy on the second floor!" "Everybody heard that? Well, let us get to work!" Zheng He ordered.

As the battle flew on, Zheng He saw that they were winning, but he was surprised that nobody came to challenge him, so he decided to help command the boats in the distance that were going towards the enemies area. What Zheng He did not notice was that a bomb shooter was aimed at him, ready to shoot now. "KA-BOOOOOMMMMM!!!!!!!" The bomb that was aimed to Zheng He shot off, Zheng He turned around and saw the bomb flying towards him, then he heard a few screams of horror from his troops, "NO NO!!!!", he closed his eyes and thought that was the end.

"Ahhhhhh!" Screamed Ning's voice, then a few people that were close by gasped, then there was silence. Zheng He did not dare to open his eyes, he thought of how disgusting he looked, with blood draped over his royal sailing robes, but he just HAD to see what happened, so he opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a bloody mess on the floor, there, lying right there was a body of the dead Ning Ning. Zheng He knelt down and picked up Ning Ning, forgetting how bloody his robes were going to get, then he said, without believing his words, "You saves me... You sacrificed yourself to save me....." Then he felt a tear rolling down his cheek, "TROOPS! WE MUST SHOW NO MERCY TO THE ARMY! WE MUST KILL THEM ALLLLLLL!!!!!" Zheng He screamed with all his might. "Then I must thank Ning Ning personally, I must."

# Birth of the Battleships

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Schrantz, James – 11*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Boom! Boom! Boom!* The sound of hammers against steel echo through the shipyard. *Skree! Skree! Skree!* The sound of drills and saws pierce the air. Everywhere, people bark orders back and forth whilst the workers keep on working.

It is the year 2023, and the Chinese government has ordered the construction of a massive fleet of battleships. These battleships would operate under the command of Admiral Zheng He and would be supposedly indestructible. This project would require many resources to complete, and only the best workers were to participate in the construction of these massive beasts.

You are one of them. You are forced to work twelve-hour shifts, hammering and drilling and pounding away at thick plates of steel with large machines. As you await the end of your shift, you try not to think about the family that you left behind.

You and your friends are sitting in a circle, snacking on gross, soggy sandwiches as you tell jokes and share stories. *Riiiiing! Riiiiing! Riiiiing!* That was the alarm sounding for the end of lunch. You stuff the rest of the sandwich in your mouth and continue to work.

Today, it's your turn to operate the shipyard's massive industrial crane. It is the easiest task, so everybody takes turns doing it. The job is pretty simple; you climb up the tall ladder to the top of the crane and spend the rest of the day lifting supplies back and forth between the beastly CAT-5s' and the shipyard's construction area.

In between loads, you peer out of the dusty old crane window and stare at the battleship. It's been twenty years since you first started working on it, and it was almost complete. The only downside was that the construction of this fleet was top secret; you have lived the past twenty years as a dead man. Nobody outside of the operation knew you were alive, and you always wonder about how much the outside world has changed since 2003. Apparently, there was this new thing called 'Youtube' that everybody was crazy about. "Oi! Whaddya' think you're doing!" an angry officer shouts through a megaphone, "Get to work!" you shake your head and pull your mind back into reality.

When your shift is over, you climb down the ladder and began walking toward the checkout counter. For work like this, security measures are required to make sure that you none of the workers can escape. You are about to check out when all of a sudden, *Boom!* You whip around just in time to see a cloud of smoke rise from the hull of the ship.

You dash over to the scene. Three officers are already investigating. All around, workers are calling back and forth in protest. The officers just ignore them. As more officers come in to set up a cordon, you see a trail dust leading deeper into the ship. You freeze. A single thought passes through your mind before you dart through the crowd and into the hull of the ship.

You are suddenly engulfed in an eerie silence. The shouts of the angry workers fade behind you. You look around. Nothing. You listen for the slightest sound. *Chip! Chip! Chip!* A subtle scraping sound echoes from the otherside of a door. You slowly creep towards it, and bust the door open. A strange figure looks up in surprise and drops the match that he was trying to light. You charge forward and tackle him before he can react. "Gotcha!" you shout as you knock him down.

He came prepared. From his pocket, he whips out a bloodstained butterfly knife and points it at your neck. Unfortunately for him, you have been prepared for the last twenty years. You pull out a knife of your own.

The battle is on. Both of you jump back and forth, swinging you knives around in a vicious dance of flesh and steel. He lunges forward, you step to the side and nick him in the leg. *Thud!* He falls to the floor, struggling to get up. Just then he swings around and when his knife is less than an inch away from your neck, it is knocked out of the way by an officer. He had followed you into the ship and saved your life just in time.

You were thanked for your service and in return, the officer explained to you what had happened. "The spy was attempting to take down the entire ship before escaping in a private helicopter that we later found on the roof of the construction complex," the officer reports. You were given a promotion and were offered a job that you just couldn't resist; to become a general onboard the fleet's mothership, operating side by side with Admiral Zheng He.

The fleet that was already constructed, that is. Apparently, the ship that you were working on was *slightly delayed... by eight years!* "Eight years of my life wasted on some useless hunk of steel," you think to yourself. Well, thinking about it ain't gonna' get those eight years back anytime soon. You are helicoptered on to the mothership where you will serve the next few years of your life 'for the greater good of all humanity.' At least that's what they tell you.

# The Stray Ship

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Shi, Kailin – 11*

“Ship ahead!” yelled Li Jian, the ship’s navigator and leader. He furrowed his eyebrows as the unknown ship ahead began sailing towards them. The crew were sent by Zheng He to look for a runaway ship that has somehow drifted away from the treasure fleet around the coast of India. On Zheng He’s command, they have only brought only one ship to assist with the search. But the ship ahead was definitely not the missing ship that was lost. It was a huge junk wood ship, with delicate silk flags. The ship was bigger than a normal treasure fleet ship. It had a metal mast the shape of a dragon, painted with bright colors, its eyes bright and shiny. Li Jian watched as the large ship rowed towards them with an alarming speed.

“ Back! Back! Row Back! Fast!” commanded Li Jian, hopping off the mast of the ship to help the men with the boat’s rowing. But it was too late. The huge ship crashed straight into the mast of the search boat, which splintered and cracked immediately. Li Jian pulled out his trusty gold sword as a swarm of pirates leaped onto the shiny mast of the ship. All of the pirates had distinctive Chinese features: pale skin, black hair, sharp nose. All of the pirates wore leather clothing, had terrible personal hygiene, and stringy beards, except for the pirate in the middle. He, no, she, had long hair flowing down her back. Her eyes were cold, her face pale, her spear crusted with dry blood. She wore her red, light silk robes and her well known jade necklace that she has stolen from Zheng He’s treasure ship the first time these pirates have ambushed. Yes, it was Ching Shih, the famous female pirate that ruled the seas. Rumor said that her sword cuts through iron as if it was clay.

With a magnificent bellow, Ching Shih raised her sword into the air, which glinted like silver under the sun. Immediately the pirates began attacking savagely. The junior pirates held no weapons, and the senior pirates held swords that were crooked and rusty. Half of them didn’t have an arm or leg. And it was 50 pirates against 250 men from Li Jian’s team. But still, Li Jian’s team stood no chance. The pirates fought like demons, with their nails, teeth and fingers. Li Jian fought bravely, but he could tell that he was standing on the losing side. A lot of his men had already surrendered, and they were being tied up and sent to the pirate’s boat. Others had their eyes scratched, their clothes ripped, and pushed into the sea, where they grappled hopelessly at the side of the gigantic boat, trying to climb back up.

“No.” mumbled Li Jian as he battled against Ching Shih, sword against spear, gold against silver. If he even survived and escaped, (which isn’t very likely), Zheng He will have his head for losing 250 men and the hidden treasures in the boat. But at that second of distraction, he let down his defenses, and Ching Shih put her silver sword at his neck. The whole boat was silenced.

Ching Shih smiled like the way a rattlesnake smiles before it strikes. Li Jian felt his hair stand on the end. “ Now,” she said gently, “ Come with me.” Li Jian closed his eyes as the pirates tied him up, and he fainted.

Fish.

I smell fish, thought Li Jian. Slowly he opened his eyes. Li Jian was in a damp room. The smell of sea water filled the air. Water was seeping in from the walls of the boat, and with a shiver, he realised he was in the stores room of the ship. Besides from sea water, he saw barrels, barrels, and more barrels of... fish. All types of exotic fish filled the barrels. Some were common fish that Li Jian has saw before, like cod or sea bass. Others were colorful, with shiny scales that sparkled like pearls. Some were raw, others were cooked. Curious, Li Jian stood up and realised that the ropes were untied. He stretched, and walked towards the barrel of shiny fish. On the side, there were strange markings of a foreign land:

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Intrigued, Li Jian stuck his hand into the barrel. He lifted a slippery fish with ease. As the son of a successful fisherman, Li Jian has learned how to hold, catch, and identify all types of fish. But he has never seen such a beautiful specimen of fish before. Its scales shined like pearls, white and smooth. It had an agile shape, and Li Jian predicted that it is surely a swift fish, hard to catch and extremely valuable. And those eyes——

Suddenly, the fish flopped out of Li Jian’s hands. It fell on the damp wood floor and began to flop around. *Squish, Squash, Squish, Squash.* Startled, Li Jian tripped and fell, causing the entire barrel to fall over. *Squish, Squash, Squishy, Squash.* Li Jian hurriedly released the beautiful fish into the ocean. As he picked up the fish and tossed it into the surging waves, something caught his eyes. More markings were on the floor, where the barrel of pearly fish was. It had the same marking as the markings on the barrel.

“What does it mean?” wondered Li Jian out loud.

“Press the markings!” Suddenly millions of voices yelled out loud to him. Li Jian was so startled he stumbled and fell on his backside. The voices seem to be coming from under the markings. Intrigued, he traced the marking gently with his fingers. A trapdoor snapped open, and dozens of Chinese soldiers stumbled out, yelling and smiling and singing with joy. For they have been trapped for days without food in this horrid place, and were hoping for a miracle when Li Jian arrived.

Afterwards Li Jian managed to make a fire and cook some of the precious fish. He has never tasted something so delicious in his life. Just as he was about to gut other fish, the wooden door swayed open, and a sleepy looking pirate stumbled in. She had the hair of a rat’s nest. It was Ching Shih.

“Huh? “ She mumbled, but her words were washed away by the fearsome yelling of the Chinese soldiers. Adrenaline rushed through Li Jian. He grabbed a barrel and chucked it at Ching Shih with a yell. She dodged, and began running up the stairs to the deck. A full-fledged fight was starting...



# My First Journey

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Stephens, Lauren – 11*

It all started on the day I was called in to see the Emperor, from that day on, my life would be changed forever. I walked into the grand palace, my whole body shivering with fear. I wasn't sure why he had finally called for me after all these years. I walked into the throne room and immediately bowed, and said, "Hello Emperor." He sat upon the grand throne, staring down at me while he boomed, "Come with me." I was surprised yet nervous at the same time as I stood up and followed behind him.

I gasped as I stepped into the royal treasure room. Thousands of porcelain vases and the finest treasures and gems hidden away behind the palace. In the center, there lied a scroll, with thousands of boats and a journey to far away. "My Emperor? What is this?" I asked, my voice filled with awe and sheer amazement. "This, Zheng He, is my next project. The crowning jewel of my reign. This is The Ming Treasure Voyages." I stood there in awe, gaping at the ambitious plans. "My Emperor... These plans... They are incredibly ambitious. What do you need me to do?" I said, getting down on my knees. He looked down at me with great respect and replied, "I need you, to help me build the boats and commandeer the ships. It will be a job of hard work but a great honor. So what do you say Zheng He?" I thought about it and after some very careful consideration and the fact that I probably shouldn't disappoint my Emperor, I replied "Of course, My Lord. I shall get started immediately." He nodded and pointed towards the exit. "You may leave." I bowed and quickly walked out of the room.

"Well... I better start designing," I thought, exiting the palace, questioning if I had made the right decision.

After years and years of hard work and exhilarating labor, the time had come. The mighty drums bonged as we prepared our ships. They just as mighty and grand as the magnificent pictures and fantasies the Emperor had planned, the boats were 135 meters by 55 meters. A giant compared to the boats of the past. 'This is it' I thought as I stepped onto my home for the next 28 years. There was an extremely large number of boats, some for storing materials, some for trade goods, some for soldiers and the largest was for me.

The day I set sail was a wonderful day, the wind was blowing and the sun was shining brighter than ever before. My men and I waved goodbye as we journeyed off into the sunset. I stared into the dusk, admiring the setting sun as we sailed off, leaving everything we knew behind, and into the unknown. A single tear slid down my cheek as I stared at the world behind me one more time.

I yawned, opening my eyes. 'Where am I?!' I thought and immediately jumped up. I banged my head against the top of the ship and muttered under my breath, "Oh yeah. I was shipped off on a boat with over 1000 smelly men." "What was that?!" My irritating roommate replied, unsure of what I had said. "None of your business, Fu Qi," I said. 'Oh okay then! I have a slice of bread and jam for you!' He said, handing me a strange pastry. "Umm. Jam hasn't been invented yet, genius" I commented sarcastically. "Oh." He said, "But then what is this?" He said, acting like he invented something magnificent while holding up a strange red sauce-like substance. "Paint," I replied in a monotone voice, as I slipped on my clothes. "Ohhhhhh!" He replied grinning foolishly. "That makes sense!" I sighed and slipped out of our room before he asked me any more questions.

Finally, after many more irritating days of putting up with my irritating shipmate, we had finally arrived! In the great lands of India. As soon as we docked I could smell the pungent spice China has longed for. Pepper. Pepper in China was as rare as a blue moon on a cloudy night. I sat with the leader over tea while watching the finest of China's dancer wow and amaze our Indian friends.

Finally, after long hours of endless conversation and entertainment, the Indians had agreed to trade us pepper. I stared into the sunset as we return back to my homeland, in my head forever acknowledging this trip as we returned to our homeland, forever changed and forever reminded of our great travels from here on out.

# Sumatra's Sunken Ships

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Tang, Rosalyn – 12*

It's been a few years since we started the first journey to the unknown. Although I really liked being one of the 'Ming Treasure Voyagers' (that's what we dubbed ourselves), the past few days have really started to tire me out. Each day, we had to wake up earlier than the sun and toil through the night, even when we feel like we can't walk one step further.

My eyelids drooped as I stumbled through the halls, finally being able to get a few hours of peaceful sleep. Halfway down the hallway that led to the cabins, I heard loud snoring coming from the cabins on the left and shook my head. *How was I supposed to sleep with that racket?*

I continued my walk to the end of the hall, careful not to wake anyone up or step on any of the people who had just decided to drop unconscious in the hallways. Finally, I reached my cabin and my bed. Ah, my bed. My beautiful, comfortable bed. I ended up going to sleep with half of my body still on the floor.

After not long, the deafening sound of the morning bell reached my ears. CLANG CLANG CLANG.

*Just a little longer...* I thought as I reached for an imaginary pillow to cover my head as thundering footsteps filled the hall. Sleep was the only thing in my half-conscious mind. But the bell still stubbornly rang on. Reluctantly, I rolled out of bed.

I opened the door groggily and the stench of sweat blasted me full force in the face. Flinching, I wondered if I smelled better than them. *Probably not*, my mind chided. *You really need a shower*. Strangely, instead of being sleep-deprived zombies like my fellow shipmates usually were, I heard commotion buzzing on the main deck.

The long wooden hallways all lead up to a common area, which was the place where we had meals. Long, splintery wooden tables stretched from one side of the room to another, but still leaving enough space for a straight path which led to the stairway that led up to the main deck. Despite being one of the 238 smaller vessels that surrounded the big treasure ships, our vessel was still pretty huge.

I headed up to the main deck, where sailors were looking into the distance. The view was truly breathtaking: The clear blue sky reflected in the peaceful ocean, and our fleet of ships, cruising across this vast space. It reminded me just how powerful China was. From where I stood, I could almost see Zheng He, our leader, standing on the deck of the main ship. But now, if you looked close enough, there was a tiny stretch of green in the distance: Sumatra.

We had arrived at our next destination.

By evening, we had traded with some of the merchants near the coast and were returning to our ships for dinner. If everything went well, we would head inland tomorrow. Who knows what we might discover? Walking back to our ships, I anticipated tasting those new things called 'peppers' that we got today. We rowed back out to sea in the direction of the fleet, but the ships were gone.

"What? That's impossible! Our ship was right there." a sailor cursed. Our boat bumped into something just under the surface of the water, but it was hard to see in the dark of the night. Then something floated over—the silhouette of a man, clinging on to a piece of driftwood. It was one of my shipmates that had stayed behind when we explored the land. Thankfully, there was still a faint rise and fall of his chest, indicating that he was still alive. We quickly pulled him up on the boat, asking him questions like 'What happened?' and 'Where is our ship?'. Unfortunately, he was unconscious.

After a few splashes of seawater in his face, the sailor woke up, startled.

"Finally. You're awake." I exclaimed. "What happened to our ship?"

The sailor's voice was trembling. "This... *monster*... sunk our ship. It struck in the dead of night. I was going to clean the deck and then I heard this cracking sound and then—" he stumbled over his words, he was talking so fast.

"What about the main ships?"

"They're fine. They were far away. It hasn't found them yet."

*Yet.* Well, that sounded a little ominous. Like the roar that followed the sailor's words. The water near us rippled with such force that it almost pushed our boat over. The sailor turned silent, his eyes wide as saucers.

A figure shot out of the water, spraying water all over us and making me close my eyes instinctively. When I reopened them, a pair of big, shimmering red eyes were staring right back at me. The monster's serpentine body waved back and forth, before diving back into the water and pushing our boat over.

I plunged into the cold, dark water, grabbing on to a long piece of wood that fell from the boat. Anything that could help me float. I resurfaced, gasping for air and looking around for the other sailors.

With a yelp, someone disappeared under the surface with a *plop*, leaving a puff of blood in their wake.

Something tickled my feet, and before I could react, it coiled around my legs. I was raised up into the air by the monster's tail and found myself staring into its malevolent eyes. My first instinct was to freeze. Then I remembered the piece of wood in my hand. The wood was still pretty sharp. If I rammed it with enough force between the monster's scales, that would be a permanent injury for sure.

My hand trembling, I held up the piece of wood, aiming it at the monster's susceptible head, but it was hard to see in the dark. It turned towards me, and I drew my arm back to throw my weapon. The monster opened its mouth with a roar and its head flew towards me.

With a rather gruesome sound, the wood impaled the monster's forehead. It blinked for a few seconds before falling into the water with a deafening splash, dead. I tried to get the dead weight of the monster's tail off me so I could resurface again, but the weight was suffocating.

After lots of kicking and thrashing, I noticed all the remaining sailors were staring at me, shocked by my rather lucky feat.

"What are you staring at? If we stay here any longer, we'll get hypothermia." I chided to the gaping sailors. We swam towards the nearest ship we could see: A vessel similar to ours. With a few yells, they spotted us and hauled us up. Standing there, soaked to the bone and shivering, I couldn't help but wonder: *What's next?*

# The Cat Island

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Tsui, Maya – 11*

Okami opened her jaws to scent the air, picking up the trace of a jackdaw, and instinctively dropped into a hunting crouch. She lifted her paws delicately, and was about to leap on her prey, when she detected thrumming of paws headed her way. She scowled in disappointment, watching through slitted eyes as her target squawked and soared into the air. A black tomcat followed by a brown she-cat burst through the ferns. “Okami!” The black one panted “We have invaders sailing towards us from the west coast!” “How much, Sabre?” She asked the black tom sharply. “Not much” The brown she-cat admitted “Not enough to be fatal, but enough to injure.” Okami nodded “Spread the word, Isla.” The brown dipped her head and the she-cat darted off into the bushes, still waving wildly from their first entry. “Sabre, your with me.” Both felines shifted into their human bodies, each with ears and tails from their cat counterparts. “Have you alerted Lumi?” Okami demanded. Sabre bobbed his head “We sent the most exquisite fighters ahead to start shooting them. “Excellent. Have the underwater squadrons moved in?” “They’re currently waiting for your signal, Okami.” He replied. “I want you and your scouts to watch them for more extra information that we can wield to defeat these...inconveniently placed fools.” Sabre gave her a curt bow and shot off through the undergrowth.

She trotted towards their camp and when she arrived, found everyone waiting, and a out of breath scout. “I..” She panted “There is a small company of men asking if we can negotiate on Akulet Beach.” Okami narrowed her eyes until they were as thin as a blade of grass, and chose her own team to go and meet those newcomers. She had a pawful of warriors, each armed to the teeth. They marched towards the beach, for what lay there, awaiting them.

They found a small patrol of men, each bearing yellowy-pale skin and slanted dark eyes. They wore luxurious flowing robes embroidered with gold and silver and gleaming gems. As far as she saw, they wore no visible weapons. “Greetengs.” A man that looked like their leader spoke. His Cattish was horrible. “Wez proopuse alliance to yuo domain and en retoorn, wez geve yuo sheeny thangs.” (We propose an alliance to your island and in return, we will give you treasures/shiny things) He pointed at chests and chests of gold, silver, riches and other valuable items. But, no prey or battle armour, weapons or any of those. “We are not interested in these. We only look for prey, or items fit for battle, foreign fool.” “Preey?” He cocked his head to one side “You means mouse or rebbit?” (Prey? You mean mice or rabbits?) Okami caught Ayla sighing, Enki picking at his knife and Ayki rolling his eyes, the rest of her patrol doing similar gestures.

“If you cannot provide those resources for us, leave.” One of his lieutenants whispered in his ear, and he nodded “We will be able to provide those materials for you,” he said, his Cattish perfect, for once. “He beckoned to his men and they hauled trunks filled with the things they required. “Thank you. We will gladly take these items and grant an alliance with you. You will be permitted to enter our domain, as long as you do not disrupt our people.” Zheng He nodded and both leader’s signed a parchment, declaring the alliance between the two mighty rulers. Then, Zheng He gathered his men and took his leave, whistling to himself as his men jostled around him in excitement. Okami watched until their red sails crossed the horizon and, eventually, left their line of sight. Finally, she allowed herself to leave and maybe, even find that jackdaw she was hunting earlier.

# Leaving India

*The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Wang, Angie Anqi – 11*

Zheng-He and his men arrived upon the southwest shore of India, at the heart of Calicut. Their jaw hung open as they saw vast fields of pepper—something China had so rarely it was often treated like gold.

“Look at these limitless fields of pepper! It could satisfy China’s demand for special spices and raw materials for eternity. Sir, this is not a regular sight. Shall I load the bags of gold and silk out?” An adviser pleaded, tugging Zheng-He’s sleeve like an excited child.

Zheng-He laughed good-naturedly. His advisor made him think of himself, of those ignorant and hazy days when all was peace and goodwill. His advisor was right indeed—but why the rush? He wanted to stay and hopefully look at more mysterious things that the Chinese never knew of, but Zheng-He knew the emperor wasn’t young, and his life might be endangered while he was here, savoring the time slowly and having luxury and many men accompanying him, so he hastily gave permission for his advisor to load the cargoes of gold and silk.

“Welcome,” Zheng-He said, leading one of the Indian traders inside the colossal vessel and gave orders for the Chinese dancers to entertain them. The Indian watched in awe, experiencing the hidden brilliance in Chinese culture. Then Zheng-He presented the many treasures of the Chinese, as they watched the women dance gracefully in silk robes.

“Oh, lord...” exclaimed the Indian, “even that is not enough to sum this up.” Zheng-He smiled to himself.

“Now we exchange. Pepper is like gold to us Chinese, if I brought our people, they would say the same.”

“Oh, don’t be humble.” said the Indian, a warm smile stretching across his face. “Whoever owns all this treasures would be a millionaire. Trade accepted.” The two men shook hands firmly, but not unkindly.

“Good, we can agree at this in peace. The emperor sent this request. China feels the need to have a glimpse in other cultures, so if everyone disagreed, there would be some...issues, let’s say...” Zheng-He said firmly, although his eyes had betrayed him a little.

“Understood. I will pass this on to others countries we know of.” the Indian replied, inside feeling nothing but happy to be part of his request.

“Great!” They said in unison, giving a slow but firm handshake.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you... but we must leave.” Zheng-He explained gently.

“Why, of course. To accommodate such a successful businessman is also a great honor.” The Indian bowed gallantly and left the room.

“Ahh. Indians are quite friendly, isn’t it?” Zheng-He asked as he gazed dreamily into the land they left behind.

“What’s next to come?” He asked his trusty advisor, who was always by his side.

“Ha, it seems like master like these journeys. But sorry, we must return to where we left — our hometown, China.” His advisor jokes cheekily. He knew his master too well to think otherwise.

“Oh? Of course.” Zheng-He said, and muttered to himself, “How foolish were I to forget my mission?”, but kept a straight face at his advisor. His advisor chuckled to himself, sighing.

“Let’s take to our journey home.” Zheng-He called out. They left the blood-red horizon behind, and smiled at the cotton-candy like wisps of white clouds floating on the sky. Zheng-He and his advisor waved at the pearly blue ocean, sighing contentedly. *What a marvelous day in such a pleasing place, Zheng-He thought to himself, honestly, I don’t know if I want to go back..... but I must complete the emperor’s request..... I must put my priorities ahead of myself.*

Looking at Zheng-He’s expression, a sudden realization hit the advisor.

*Master seems reluctant to leave India! Well, the sight in India must have pleased him. I haven’t seen him like this before!* The advisor glanced at Zheng-He with sympathetic eyes. *I guess I can relate to that. I’m just glad that he’s happy.* The advisor sighed happily. *Finally we’re heading back to China, our heart’s dearest!*

Time flew by, and before they knew it, they were arriving at the docks. Zheng-He smiled at the home he left, but little did he know of what change there had been...

# The Secret Life of Fiction

*West Island School, Eyummi, Gayathri – 13*

I was always searching.

Searching for something, but not knowing what it was, or why. I liked to call it a ‘treasure’; an unknown treasure. I seemed to have a strange connection with treasure, as if I had found many before, even though I knew that to be false. I sometimes wondered if I had a past life, if I was reincarnated. But others begged to differ, it was a distant possibility that seemed true in my mind, but a mere fantasy in everyone else's...

*It wasn't money.*

My troops were ready. The mighty three-hundred-and-seventeen ships had already been lined up glamorously by the shore, as well as the sixty mammoth treasure ships, ready to receive and hold the world's wonders. I stood by the shore and looked up at my ship, where I would spend the coming months. To live on a boat, excited me in some ways. But as I pondered the purpose of this voyage, my excitement somewhat died. Did we really need this material wealth?

*It wasn't jade.*

My parents always said that we were ‘losing our heritage’. I always thought they had magical powers, figuratively, of course. But one day, it seemed as though they were real sorcerers, evil ones, that too. I believed that they cursed my mind, so that I would only think of the past. The thoughts came one at a time, slowly, as if time itself was taking its time. When I narrated these stories to my mother, she brushed them away like dirt. It went through one ear, came out the other. I knew that they were flashes, not just thoughts, because I had never learned about them before, but they seemed to be true. Every detail, as if I were truly present in the past...

*It wasn't silver.*

I went aboard the main ship, ready for the third voyage. I tried my best to stimulate excitement within my troops, but keeping my own spirits up was a challenge. I looked forward to a new adventure, but I wanted something more, anything more. I planned a life of adventure for myself, but it seemed as if I was confined to the rules and regulations of this community. We had forty-eight elephantine ships, majestic like a tusker, carrying thirty-thousand soldiers, all wearing the same uniform, mostly the same height, similar stature, yet their personalities were unique, each one different from anyone else, no two were the same. Just like our voyages, all for a similar purpose, but with a different outcome each time. I somehow wished that the purpose was different as well.

*It wasn't gold.*

The idea that I had a past life grew stronger in my mind. It had to be the truth. The voyages were real, anyone who believed otherwise was definitely wrong. They were stories written in stone. I wasn't sure of my identity, but every time another flash appeared, I felt a part of the story. I was there. But who was I? The question lingered deep below, like a devil that grew stronger in the darkness, waiting for the right moment to emerge into the light and scream...

*It wasn't pride.*

Plans to extend the scope of these voyages even further led to the fourth voyage. I resolved to attempt to enjoy it, the new treasures, the searches, the atmosphere of the ship, the salty breeze that engulfed the deck every time a wave passed by us, the stale fish that strangely tasted wonderful when our stomachs growled like lions. But how could I? The kingdom, already the greatest in the world, did not need more of these extravagant adventures and treasures. It needed a different kind of wealth, but what?

*It wasn't fame.*

I had a psychological problem. My mother stood with a strange mix of anger, fear and relief. Anger for the rise of this 'problem', fear for the future, and relief that the cause for these 'episodes' was finally discovered. I attempted to assure her that I was fine. My small, supple hand was thrown away by her's, hard and wrinkled, from years of hard work and pain. Her life had been written down, destined, long before she was born, just like millions of others', who did what they did because they were forced to, expected to, against their will. Was my future written down as well? Was this the life I wanted for myself?

*It wasn't any kind of material wealth.*

"Zheng!", the Emperor called. Zheng? As soon as I remembered myself, I rushed to his aid. Strange, how I could forget my own name. I felt a little distant from my identify that day, I couldn't understand why. As if I wasn't really myself, but an imposter who resided in the same body, though fully aware of this the entire time. My peers called me 'disoriented' that day. I somewhat agreed, but was too busy pondering an important life-choice. What was my goal in life?

*Maybe it was hope.*

I sat at the top of the hill that faced the glistening sea. Shimmering waves danced around in the clear blue water like restless silver spangles. "Why is mama sending you to a psychologist?" my little brother Ma asked innocently. I shrugged. Much as I hated the idea, my mother would have her reasons. As I mustered up a better answer, something caught my eye. It was large, growing larger. Majestic, grand, compelling. "Ma.. can you see that? Over there, near the horizon. Do you see it?" Ma stood up but looked confused. "That.. that fleet of ships!", I cried, beckoning him to see. "I see nothing." Ma said. "You must really be mad...."

*Maybe it was hard work.*

I seemed eternally unsatisfied. It seemed as though material wealth and items were of no use to me. Then suddenly it clicked, the small light bulb that was my brain. The voyages, they meant something more. Something more than finding out who I was, or what my 'real' life was. The idea slowly grew on me, that this 'curse' as I had so blindly named it, was bestowed on me for a reason larger than my mind, than my life, and that it was the *raison d'être* of my existence. I had only just digested the inner meaning of the story, being so tangled in its outline. I wanted to go back, experience the stories again, when I realised that they were real, they were happening, to me...

*Maybe it was love.*

I sat by my window writing the events of our most recent voyage. Half of me was in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, the coast of Africa, but the other half was somewhere else. I looked out of the window facing the sea, the moon casting its beams on the strong waves, strong but delicate at the same time. They could wash you away, or bring you back to the shore. I wished for a moment that I would be washed away, to a place where I could learn the truth about life.

*I knew what it was.*

I lay on my bed wondering. If only I had realised this before. I had finally found the truth about life, the secret I sought so desperately. If everyone knew this, they would live better and have a more fruitful life. The secret of life was...

We could find a thousand treasures, but not one would make us truly happier. It was like a jar filled with poison and nectar, poison being the sadness, anger, negativity, and nectar being happiness. It seemed as though giving a drop of your nectar to someone else, added a drop into yours. It seemed as though I was living in Zheng He's story, his own emotional journey, of finding the secret of life. The elixir of immortality. Now that the flashes had stopped, I imagined the Zheng had also discovered the secret.

The next day in court, the Yongle Emperor asked me 'the hardest question ever asked'. "What is the secret of life?" he asked, chuckling silently. "If you answer this, you will be named the treasure of my court."

I glanced around the court. There was a glow around my face, as I knew the answer. "Your Majesty," I began, courtiers eagerly awaiting the secret they had desired their whole lives, that would change their lives forever. I took a deep breath.

It was time for the final voyage. This time, it was not to trade spices from India, silver goods from Iran, Turkic slaves, Byzantine clothes or Afro-Arabian ceramics. Instead, it was to spread this new secret. This would be my final voyage, my mission. Finally, my spirits were high, my chin was up, a calm and content smile on my face, and one on every soldier who joined the voyage. My jar was filled with nectar.

"To share happiness", I told myself. "That is the treasure I have been searching for".



# Mei's Adventurous Voyage

*West Island School, Minglani, Rhea – 13*

It was that time again, when people were the most joyous because they had heard the tales of the adventurous Ming treasure voyages. The Ming treasure voyages were known for being sensational and full of adventure and the so called 'Pirates' travelling on the ship weren't just regular pirates. These pirates carried along precious items, such as gold or silk, to give away as gifts from the emperor. What a smart way to make relationships with other countries and explore the world at the same time!

My great grandfather had been lucky enough to experience this journey along the clear and deep seas. He always used to tell me stories of meeting all the friendly people and giving gifts to them, he must have been so proud to be Chinese and represent China. But the expeditions weren't always all song and dance, they would often encounter unpleasant weather or bad-tempered real-world pirates. Luckily, the travellers were trained to handle situations like these and the expedition ships were well equipped with military forces and weapons.

After hearing grandfather's stories countless time while growing up, I had made up my mind. I wanted to be the first female traveller on one of the Ming treasure voyages. As soon as I turned 18, I went to meet the Emperor and Admiral Zeng He to see whether he would consider me worthy enough to embark on this expedition. He sent me back home without even taking a look at me. I still remember his words to this day, "A girl like you should not even think about joining something as dangerous as this voyage. Now go back home little girl." This had just made me want to take part in this expedition even more. To prove them wrong. So I decided to run away from home. I rented a minuscule, shady flat in the dark part of the country, it was all I could afford. I was dedicated. I had to get in to the list. I trained day and night, sun or rain. I pushed myself to my limits, often coming home to find not even a morsel of food left in the cupboard. I lived by the quote "Always follow your dreams, no matter what". Soon after, I couldn't even afford to rent the flat. I decided that it was time. I shaved off my luscious, long black locks of hair and set off to meet the Emperor once again, this time impersonating a man. The new and improved Mei was back, and this time stronger than ever. She wouldn't ever, never ever, take "no" for an answer.

I joined rest of the aspiring troops for the grueling selection exam, where we raced and wrestled to prove our worth. When it was all over I returned to wait for the several week's wait for the result. I joined a machinery repair shop to earn a living. After a long, exhausting day of working in the repair shop, I came home to a letter in the post. A thought passed my mind, this letter felt different, it felt almost as if it was written with deliberation, but I let the thought go almost as soon as it entered. Being the witless person I was, I threw it in the bin without even glancing at it, thinking it was another one of those electricity bills that were long overdue. But thank the lord I decided to retrieve it a few moments later, it was a message from the Emperor, saying that I qualified to take part in this wonderful expedition. I went to sleep every night, ever since I was six years old, wishing for this day to come and it was finally here. I was as happy as a clam, my prayers were finally answered.

That was how I ended up taking everything I owned, which was not much considering I couldn't even manage to feed myself, and with only faith and determination keeping me going, I bided farewell to all my fellow flatmates. With a deep breath, I was off. The journey had just begun.

After 3 hours of intense walking that morning, I had finally made it to the port where the antique ship was docked. My mouth dropped with awe at first sight of the ship. It had beautiful royal red sails and fragrant aged wood interiors. I couldn't believe that I was going to travel the world on this magnificent ship with so many other dinary men. Soon enough, I was escorted to my room which was located on the bottom most floor, these were the dirtiest dormitory rooms, with rats and spiders, surrounded by a foul smell of a combination of vomit and coal. Sleeping on the beds at night felt like laying on a rough bed of rocks. All of the other men in the dormitory were immensely unfriendly and impolite, I wondered how I was going to spend the next few months here.

The next morning, I decided to explore the floor above my dormitory, where I met many admirable merchants and cartographers. I spoke with worthy geographers and marine biologists. All of their stories were so inspiring and motivating. In the afternoon, after attending a meeting with the Captain of the ship and after going through safety procedures, I decided to explore the ship even more. I explored all of the floors of the ship and made a last minute decision to visit the kitchen. I am so glad I did because that was where I met Big Wei, the lead Chef of the ship. He really helped me survive that journey. Sometimes, when I was having a bad day, he would sneak in some extra food into my ration of dinner. He would always lend me a sympathetic ear to talk to as I had no 'real' friends on the ship. I had been quite lonely on the first few days of the voyage, but Big Wei was always there for me, no matter what.

We had started from Nanjing about 10 days ago and a recent announcement informed us that we would be reaching Champa in a few more days. I was absolutely thrilled about the fact that I was going to be exploring new land in just a couple of days. But as time passed by, I was becoming more and more anxious. I was unsure of whether the people were going to be welcoming or not and I was fearful of the battles we would have to fight if the people of Champa thought we were intruders.

Soon enough, we disembarked at Champa, and decided to offer the King of Champa the precious presents we brought with us from China. The Captain nominated me and another elderly man, Cheng, to come with him to present the gifts to the King of Champa. We reached the King's palace and the guards let us in when the Captain showed them his badge. As we walked in, we heard a loud sound of breaking glass. I turned around to see the King of Champa being tormented by his son, the Prince. The Captain was the fastest to act, he took the nearest thing he saw, a gold vase, and struck the Prince on the head with it. He jumped back in pain and alarm but soon recovered and had the Captain's head in between his hands in no time. He took out the sharp, black dagger from his pocket and was about to cut in to the Captain's flesh when I landed a punch in his right cheek. Dark red blood started to appear around the Prince's mouth. I can't believe I saved the life of the Captain. A few moments later, one of the Prince's men had me in headlock. My face started to turn purple and my lungs were desperate for air. Then the man abruptly let go and said "Hey, she's a girl!". I was thrown back into a pillar with a thud. The Captain and Cheng helped me up to my feet immediately and we rushed back to the ship.

That night, I went to sleep with worry. The only thing I was concerned about was if the captain heard what the man said about me being a woman, but fortunately even if he did, he didn't show any signs of being unhappy about it so I breathed a sigh of relief and slowly let myself fall asleep.

The next morning, the Captain called me to his room and told me to have a seat on one of his posh, velvet chairs. I was curious to know what I had been called here for. I sat there in silence until he handed me a silver, sparkly, spinning top. "You know, I had a daughter, once." He said calmly, " She was three years old when my wife left me and took her to Hong Kong. If she was here now, she would have been as old as you. I want you to know, I really appreciate how you saved my life yesterday, if it weren't for you, I don't know whether I would be here right now. That old man Cheng was no help whatsoever." With that he stood up and left the room, without saying another word. So he had, after all, found out that I was a girl. I went back to the dormitory after that to find that my belongings were gone. There was a note that said "Your belongings have been kept in your new suite on the second floor".

I continued the journey on the same ship until we reached Calicut in India. Where I got off and travelled to Nalanda to study buddhism. That was how I ended up earning the title of being the first ever female on a Ming treasure voyage, saving the life of the Captain on the way! I proved the Emperor wrong and I followed my dreams.

# A Small Story from the Diary of Zheng He

*West Island School, Sim, Aidan – 12*

317 ships, 28000 men and one ambitious captain. This was the state of our expedition. My strongest men are carrying tons of lavish exquisite goods from the luxurious kingdom of Calicut. We now set sail for China, our sweet loving home.

I sit in my quarters and sigh. It has been a long day. We have traveled to many foreign countries, seen many unusual things, and brought back many delightful goods. I wonder what the Emperor will have to say when he hears about this.

As I look out the window, I see a small speck. I rushed out to the bridge and demanded a closer look. The speck became a smudge, then a blob, then a ship.

The ship was made of polished, sparkling wood. Four canons were placed on the deck, two on the left and two on the right. Most intriguing was its sail, layered with beautiful silk and doused in a glorious shade of gold.

As we drew closer, I could see the ships crew. Their ragged clothes, their battle hardened looks, even a few sported fancy moustaches. Among those men was the captain. He looked like he was in his mid twenties. He wore a golden cloak with lotus flower patterns stitched on it. Long, silk-like hair sprouted out of his head, flowing wherever the wind went.

This man wasn't the average sailor. He was known by many as Chen Zuyi, the most feared pirate to have roamed the ocean blue.

He wasn't as brave as I suspected him to be. The instant he saw my vessel, his mouth formed a worryful expression. In an instant, he dashed to his ship and yelled orders at his men. I guess he didn't know what he was going against.

But coward or not, the emperor specifically demanded that I take down this nerve-racking fleet. I rushed up to the bridge and sent the signal

"Fire!"

Canon-fire filled the air as both fleets attacked each other in hope of victory. Ships on both sides battered and bashed from incoming projectiles. I stood there watching as our brave sailors continued to fight, even when two ships had been obliterated!

Eventually, Zuyi's crew couldn't take it. They drew their ships closer to ours. Once they reached an adjacent length, they set up boarding planks and flashed out weapons.

I could see the sweaty, worried faces on my crew as they scrambled for their swords. Zuyi's men charged with aggressive faces as the battle begun.

Axes clashed, clubs smashed and men were bashed. From where I was, I could barely see the casualties, though it looked like we were winning. The number of Zuyi's men slowly decreases as the battle progressed, to a point where the captain himself joined the fight.

Having not a sword to fight with, I ordered my men to focus their attacks at Zuyi. Many of my men fell trying to injure the captain, but as more soldiers helped their comrades, I could see he was beginning to tire. Within a matter of time, he was finally injured.

I exited the bridge and went down to the wounded captain. A huge gash covered his right arm. My men could have finished him then and there, but that would be disobeying a direct order.

Instead, I smiled at the pirate's eraged face.

"Chen Zuyi, you are under arrest. Surrender your men or there will be consequences".

# The Last Adventure

*West Island School, Wun, Sin Ying – 12*

'Is that land over there? Is this for real?' We had been cruising for so long that we did not even know if the island was real or not. Eventually, we got close enough to see the people and buildings, but we had no idea where we were.

Once we docked, a man walked towards us. He was tall, has a beard and he talks in a really low voice. He also looked shocked and seemed to be introducing himself but we could not understand a word. We tried to talk back but then he picked up a stick and started to draw out a symbol on the sandy floor and we found out that there was a symbol that looks identical on the map that we found, it looked like an X with a pin on it. We were shocked and confused at the same time so we drew back a question mark in response hoping that he would understand that we wanted to ask him a question. It turned out he drew something extraordinary. It was something strange and after a few minutes, we found that it was the journey we had been through. He drew another drawing and it was a mini version of the disastrous Vacuum Vortex on the sand because we saw a tornado-like drawing. I thought he understood that we came from the mysterious land across the seemingly endless ocean.

Zheng He found him very agreeable and so a few of us followed him to his shop, where he gave us some funny-tasting tea that looked a little whiter than the tea we were used to. Then he stood on his chair and grabbed a wooden box. He unlocked it with a key and took a few coin purses out. We were not sure what it was but he kept on saying "Kalpasi, kalpasi". We figured that had to be the name of the blackish purple flower inside. It had a woody fragrance and seemed to be a local spice. So we gave him a Chinese spice called "star anise" in return. By the look of his face, he was very surprised by the taste of the spice. We tried the spice, we all think that it's very palatable. Having rested a few days and replenished our water and food, we set sail once more.

Oh, by the way, my name is Wang and I am a ghost. Yes, I know it is really strange but let me explain. About 600 years ago I was a servant to Zheng He, the person who led the voyage. One stormy night, Zheng He almost fell overboard and I sacrificed myself for his life because I knew if he had not been there, the voyage would have fallen apart and there would not have been adventures to come.

If I had known where the map would lead to was also where I would die, I would not have encouraged Zheng He to pursue this clue. It all started when we found the map in a bottle floating around the ocean. The map that was half finished and it showed an area that looked like where we were, extending to India, a continent that we have never seen on a map before. But it was odd because a triangle was coloured red not 5 nautical miles away from where we were! Knowing that it was bizarre, we still decided to go on because it seemed like an exciting adventure. What we did not know was the danger lying ahead of us in the Vacuum Vortex.

The Vacuum Vortex was nasty. 7 ships were missing and 23 ships have been severely damaged after the whole disaster. A dangerous and deadly place where you never know what will happen next. Definitely, not somewhere you would want to go to. The waves were 11 feet high and there was a high chance that you would die. It was nightmarish to think that about 1000 people died that night.

I was one of them but I wouldn't have died if Zheng He wasn't on the edge of the boat trying to save the map. He was afraid he would lose the map and without it, he would not know where he was going and would disappoint the whole fleet. I was closer to it so I reached out for the map and threw it to Zheng He. Just as he caught the map, I lost balance and fell overboard and so the necklace was the last thing I touched before getting sucked into the vortex, explaining how I ended up inside the necklace.

We were ready to set off from Beijing to find people from far, exotic countries, to make more friends and trade with them, when Cheng (another member of the fleet) shouted, "Look, what's that floating over there?" He spotted a glass bottle that looked intriguing so we retrieved it. Inside, we found a half-finished map. "Pass it to master Zheng He!" someone said. And that was how our adventures began.

Ever since I died, I have been living in Zheng He's necklace, a jade necklace so precious that he had it on him all the time. From it I can see everything happening. I can almost do anything I want, but the only thing I can never do again is to talk to them. My friends, my family and most importantly Zheng He.

I will never forget the precious time when I was with them, the time when I was smiling and having fun with my friends and family.

After we left India, we kept on sailing and sailing. We sailed for a long period of time so we started to think how long would we survive with this amount of food. Less than a week, we found that one of our horse's starved to death and later on people starts to starve and finally we got to the point where people got really sick and dizzy, we thought that we would all end our life's here but then we finally saw a big piece of land.

It was a jungle and we quickly got off the ship. Immediately, we separated ourselves into smaller groups to find food. Our group had 48 people and we found a large piece of deer meat and cooked it instantly with the fire that we made. While we were cooking, we heard a loud roar and we were so frightened that we drew out our swords and fire. A bear appeared out of nowhere and wanted to take its food back but we murdered it after a fight. After we finished with our food, we were all talking next to a tree but suddenly there was a snake that bit one of our group members and passed away. Then we found a lake so we could be hydrated, just as we put our hands in the refreshing water, there was a shadow in the lake. The moment we saw it we knew it was piranhas. We were so scared of them because they had very sharp teeths, so we replenished water and food, and captured a few animals that looked special. And we finally set sail for our homeland! Fortunately, we got there with no mishaps.

When our fleet docked, I saw my families and friends amongst all the people who came to receive us. It was heartbreaking to see their sad faces when they learnt that I was dead. That was when I really felt lonely. What really surprised me is that Zheng He gave the necklace to my mother as compensation, even though he did not know I am attached to it. It was a small measure of peace being able to stay close to my family. Over time, the necklace was passed along the family line and eventually, I ended up in the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. Being in an exhibition and being able to show people the stories behind the voyage makes me proud. It almost makes my death worth it. Almost!

# The Infinite Seas

*Yew Chung International School, Ho, Ching Hei – 11*

The rolling thunder rang in his ears as lightning came charging down onto the ship, causing the wood to crack under the pressure. The water rocked the ship violently as the rain came pouring down from the darkened skies, chaos and discord was all he can see, screams and yells was all he could hear. He was scared to death, but he couldn't move. He was completely paralyzed, unable to move a single muscle, his eyes scanned the scene, the ship was falling apart, and it was going down. Fast. The ship was slowly tilting to one side, unbalancing everything and throwing off people into the deep sea. He was starting to lose balance, and was slowly sliding down to the lower side, and all he could think of was his family. Before he knew it he was thrown off the ship and into the relentless sea.

Ming snapped awake, heavily breathing and sweat pouring down from his forehead, his breathing and heartbeat slowly settled down and managed to sit up despite his exhaustion from the interrupted sleep. His eyes adjusted to the light after he rubbed his eyes.

He went to his closet and selected his usual clothes, a white piece of rugged cloth which had the shape of a long-sleeved shirt, black long pants and his signature skull-embedded bandana. Ming put on his clothes and slid the decorative door open and with a quiet thud it closed behind him....

Ming, with silent footsteps leisurely strolled down the corridor, and eventually reached the decks, the sea was rocking the Orion gently as if it was its baby, the sun was spitting out polychrome colours, decorating the morning sky with rainbow clouds, the mild breeze blew on Ming's face as he stared out into the distance, lost in his own daydream.

He was abruptly interrupted by an ordinary seaman (lowest ranking personnel in the deck department), telling him to go to an urgent meeting and he was late for it, he rushed to the meeting but to only find everyone already sat down. He hurried to his seat and bowed to the captain before sitting down.

Drumming his fingers against the table impatiently, he whirled his head around when the captain called his name.

"Yes?" replied Ming.

"I suppose you have everything under control on the staff side of things?" asked the captain as he arched his eyebrows.

"Yes, captain," voiced Ming, "Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's because that I just wanted to make sure of things." grinned the captain, in the process, showing his golden canine tooth.

Ming pretended to smile back in return, but was forced to stop when several snickers came from the Engineering Crew because it looked like him trying to show his dirty teeth to everyone.

"The ship is still headed to India, right?" noted the captain.

"Yes. captain, it is indeed heading to Chennai," answered the Chief Navigator, Mei "According to the map that our fellow navigators have drawn, we might be able to reach Chennai an hour early."

"Good." uttered the captain "Is th—"

An ear splitting boom rang in Ming's ears, as he was blown back and was somersaulted onto the wall, he quickly regained control of his body and stood up, drawing his sword which he named "Shen Jian".

Smoke covered Ming's vision, the clang of metal and gunshots were all he could hear, he covered his nose and mouth with his head, and he bolted up the stairs. Ming sighed, a pirate ship has rammed into their ship and is starting to hijack the Orion.

Ming flew into battle, cutting down people left and right while maintaining his balance and guard. In his peripheral vision, he saw the captain. Not even hesitating for a second, he rushed to his side and started slaying people around him. Instantly causing the pirates to back down from him.

A person, bearing the tattoo of a skull on his right forehead and holding a scabbard with a sword in it and a bottle of wine. It was the infamous pirate captain, Shaw. Ming knew this was going to be a tough battle, but it had to go down no matter what. Ming gritted his teeth and charged in.

Adrenaline surged through Ming as he slid down and shot his sword upwards, the captain evaded the attack by jumping up in the air and doing a backflip before driving his sword down. Ming rolled to the side, narrowly dodging the attack. Ming grinned, now the sword was stuck inside the planks, Ming took the chance and did a butterfly kick aimed at Shaw's head. But he ducked and punched his fist upward, but Ming spun in mid-air and blocked his fist with a single palm and kicked the pirate's shoulder.

Immediately after Ming landed onto the ground, a swarm of pirates came charging at Ming which caught him very off-guard, even with a single sword, Ming knew he will eventually get outnumbered, and he knew that meant the rest of the crew had already been taken out, so after getting hit on the head by the hilt of a sword he pretended to be fallen unconscious.

Keeping his eyes closed, he can feel his body be dragged down the rusty stairs and thrown into somewhere..... soft? After the guard's footsteps sounds echoed away, he peeked open his eyes.,

Of course, he was thrown into a cell with haystacks stacked in piles around the edges of the room, and according to what most pirates normally do, everyone might as well just be walking the plank tomorrow. Looking around him, he found that the Chief Engineer and the Chief Navigator, was thrown into jail with him.

Waking them up after slapping their faces multiple of times, he told them his grand plan to escape. Controversy was their first emotion, because the plan was pretty wild. But they eventually agreed to it anyways.

In the middle of the night, the Chief Engineer, Chun picked the lock and unlocked the door, jogging down the cells, they slowly took down the guards silently and rescued everyone. Then, they took out the backup boat that was stored below the decks which only the high-ranking crew knew it existed and hooked it to a pole. Next they put in their valuable treasures and put it on the ship so they can give it to the Indians for trade.

Unbeknownst to them, Shaw was hiding behind the wall, embarrassed and frustrated that he was defeated by Ming. He wanted to challenge him to a duel.

Ming swirled around when Shaw suddenly appeared on the doorway.

"Hi Shaw, what's up?" asked Ming

"I have come to bargain, I declare a duel against you, if I win you then will all die, but if you win then I let you all go and I will challenge you another day," announces Shaw, "Sounds good?"

"I guess, since I don't really have an option" murmured Ming as he cracked his knuckles.

Ming took three deep breaths, and imagined the beautiful sunrise which calmed him down. Shaw gave him his sword and unsheathed himself two daggers.

Ming then took a few steps back and then rushed forward, he stabbed and parried, dodged and sidestepped but the battle seemed to go on forever. He jumped and did a front flip mid-air making his feet launch downwards, Shaw dodged with ease and kicked Ming back onto a wall and threw a dagger at him. It caught him on his shoulder and Ming grunted in pain. He teared it out of his skin and threw it at Shaw in such a fast speed that it shot through the wall after Shaw narrowly dodged it.

Ming launched a series of lashes, punches and kicks, but it did nothing to Shaw.

“You’re getting tired now, are you?” taunted Shaw.

“Nope, I haven’t even used my last move yet.” smiled Ming

He did an aerial side kick and suddenly changed it into a butterfly kick, which caught Shaw off-guard knocking the wind out of him.

“I win.” said Ming as he patted Shaw’s head.

This was one of the many journeys that Ming had went through. People like him traded and gave out treasures with foreign countries. But no matter what, he will NEVER abandon anyone ever again.....



# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Yew Chung International School, Huang, Xixuan – 12*

I was following Emperor Zhu Di cautiously and closely as the magnificent sight shined its light upon all of us. We halted immediately, with various soldiers, merchants, and farmers attending the epic departure of Admiral Zheng He's fleet of ships, numbered up to hundreds of them. However, standing boldly in the heart of the sea of boats, was Zheng He's ship. It was huge and towering, casting a dark shadow that covered the entire block, including the golden, expensive carriage carried the emperor. Zhu Di glanced momentarily at the fleet, and I sensed amazement inside him.

There wasn't much to say except some prayers for luck. I was strolling around the ship when I overheard a conversation between the Emperor and Zheng He inside a private cabin. I froze at frowned to myself for eavesdropping, I turned to leave them in private when a part of their plan triggered me to pull myself closer. "Find him! He is the ONLY reason for this voyage!" said the Emperor with a low but extremely firm voice. "Absolutely, your majesty. Trust me on this. We shall have him back even if it takes us the end of the sea." Zheng He replied with so much calmness. Feeling satisfied, the stern looking emperor sneered, "Very well then." Zhu Di passed him a golden scroll and strode silently towards the carriage. I was puzzled by the information and the mysterious conversation that happened. Who is HE?! I took a quivering breath. What was going on?

The Emperor inspired the crew with his eloquent speech before heaving. His voice was still resonating— "Explore the world of the unknown, spread the glory of Ming Dynasty wherever you go!" I sat there, feeling solitary at the dock, watching the gigantic red hot ball of fire rising from the endless sea at the horizon. I knew it was time for the ships to take sail. I watched eagerly as the sails started to move automatically and swiftly. Slowly, we descended towards the unknown, leaving an unsettling feeling gurgling in my mind. The mystery must be unravelled.

Being the chief officer of the crew, I was busy with the operations on the dock and had no time to figure out what that conversation was about between the emperor and Admiral. Over hundreds of gigantic boats carrying soldiers, water, food, silks, farm products, and art crafts, sailing in the infinite ocean. Weeks had passed without seeing any land. The ocean was not always peaceful. It was soon when I realized everyone became nostalgia and started to be paranoid when we had to face the extreme weathers. Soon we were travelling in between of meters of tidy waves. We had no control over our boats, feeling that they were made of papers. Waves crashed and flushed away some of our smaller ones. Admiral Zheng held the flag pole and stood still in the storm, in front of the crew, assuring them confidence. When it was all over, gasps and low murmuring rippled through the night sky. Everybody felt we have survived from a trip to hell.

The next morning, it was about to rain again. I awoke with pain all over my body, and a spinning world. I stumbled out of my private cabin. So many people were fixing the oars and holes on the ship. I had to find Admiral Zheng He, and see how he was doing. I strolled around the marvellous boat. The deck was made of sturdy oak, one of the most expensive wood in China. After the disastrous storm, everything was still attached.

He was within his private cabin, silently staring at the golden scroll. He asked me to lock the door, then quickly handed over the mysterious scroll. It was strictly forbidden for me to open and read. I looked at him bemused, seeking confirmation. He nodded with trust in his eyes. I carefully opened the scroll, it was a short poem from the emperor's handwriting.

**K**indness to be spread,  
**I**nland and Outland,  
**L**ight the way you travel,  
**L**ead people to prosperity.

**H**old on to your dream,  
**I**nto the deep blue sea,  
**M**agnificence we shine!

“Nice poem!” I spoke respectfully. Zheng He was going to speak, but he hesitated. Lighting lit the sky, followed by a terrifying sound of thunder that shook the Earth. The lighting was bright yet pale, leaving sinister shadows on the walls. At that moment, I made another glance at the calligraphy and froze. It was a hidden message from the emperor!!! “KILL HIM!”

Who is HIM? I suddenly realized that it had to be the ex-emperor, who is Zhu Di’s nephew. It was said that the ex-emperor was immolated in the Palace before Zhu Di’s army reached the Palace. Emperor Zhu Di did not believe this story at all. He must have thought the ex-emperor had run away. It would be a threat to his authority as the ex-emperor was the designated emperor from Zhu Di’s father—the First Emperor of the Ming Dynasty.

I was utterly shocked! It was a big scandal and lie! The emperor’s glory voyage was a lie! I felt betrayed, and asked Zheng He what he would do?! He stood up, slowly walked to the window. His low murmuring spread into a wide grin. “To spread the glory of the Great Ming...”

An ear-splitting vibration shook the earth, and I tumbled down onto the floor. We arrived at a strange island, with white sands, palm trees, and tropical green plants. I got up painfully and, as I steadied myself, the ship seemed to lurch and topple. I tripped messily around and stumbled down the deck. Soft sand engulfed my shoes, and I fell flat on my face. In front of me, I saw the sailors all moving away. I stumbled quickly after them, but in only a few minutes, the shadows disappeared into the deep dark jungle ahead. My heart tried to jump out of my chest, nausea overtook me as I begun to pick up my pace down the shore. But straight to where the naked eye can see, all was barren except for sand, trees, and water.

Just as despair was about to drown me, a shadow passed as swift as a leopard and grappled onto my arm. I twirled around to see the captain of the ships. “What are you doing here?” He asked me with urgency in his tone. I noticed his sword was streaked with blood. Suddenly, my ears popped open and I heard ominous war cries. The admiral tugged at my arm, and I practically ran after him. After a tense few minutes, I saw the boats and lots of crew members and soldiers. We all went back to our ships. It was in horrible conditions, multiple holes on the deck. I noticed countless sailors were wounded, with lacerations on their shoulders, legs and arms. “What’s going on?” I roared over the sea of voices. A sailor, shirt ragged, reported back, “We were attacked by pirates. We need help!” he yelled over chaos.

I had to push through a few sailors to get to the medics. Grabbing some medicines from the equipment room, I entered the war zone. The deck was crowded and flooded with blood. I found that the bag I carried had a hole open, and it was heavier than usual. With a glance I saw a fist size glowing stone in my bag, glittering. I looked around cautiously as if I were a thief. Feeling guilty, I wanted to throw away the stone, but deep down, a voice commanded me to grasp it tightly. Courage raging in me, I grasped the relic tightly in my hand and handed all of the requested materials plead by the sailors. A red cloak was hanging in the distance. Zheng He shouted orders here and there, and there were people defending the pirates, taking back goods seized from pirates. The rock slipped from my hands onto the ground. As the shimmering rock was exposed to the bright rays of sunshine, runes were suddenly appearing as if carved onto it with a gleaming sharp knife. The characters were unreadable, however as my fingertips traced it, I felt a shredding heat in my arm and then engulfing my body. I tried to run and yell, but nobody heard me...

I came back skeptically from the dead. I was sitting on my chair at home in Hong Kong. Outside is the noisy ocean dock as usual. My body writhed in agony, alarmed by what had happened. My laptop was on, displaying on the screen, it was the history of Zheng He’s 7 voyages between 1405–1433 when he led 27,000 troops and sailors to travel over 30 countries crossing the West Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. He built friendship and traded with countries. His trip is now called the ocean route of the silk road.

Zheng He did what he believed was the right thing to do...

# The Prince of Shanghai

*Yew Chung International School, Tai, Sum Wah – 11*

Thunder crashed down on the majestic Shanghai Princess, as her passengers and crew fled for their lives. Sailors hastily unloaded their treasured cargo of gold, gems and silks to offload excess weight, while they frantically screamed for their own lives. The smaller ships in the fleet were gone, swallowed by the ginormous waves and blustering wind. Only the Princess and her crew were left to their fate on this dreadful, stormy night. People were trying to calm each other down, but to no avail! There was now a huge, gaping hole in the hull of this magnificent ship. As the Shanghai Princess began to list, many sailors and passengers scrambled to jump overboard in order to survive. Crack, crack, crack... went the ship. The Princess slipped deeper and deeper into the dark, unknown depths below. Heading straight towards the Shanghai Princess was yet another monstrous wave. Those who had escaped overboard into the icy waters were either scrambling for their lives, or had already drowned. The cruel wave enveloped everything in its grasp, including the passengers and the crew. Almost everything! The journey was a total disaster. Only one survivor was picked up by a passing ship – only that one survivor had been spurred to tell the tale.

Back on land in Shanghai, the sad news had finally reached Emperor Jin. “What do you mean, the Shanghai Princess has sunk? Impossible! What about the treasures? The crew? The passengers?” roared Emperor Jin. “I’m sorry, Master, but it has been rumoured that the Princess has gone. Almost everything has gone, except for one sole survivor who was rescued, whom we are still waiting to speak to. The whole fleet of three ships went down in that terrible storm everyone has been talking about,” said the messenger.

Emperor Jin, dazed and lethargic, lounging on his magnificent throne, which had been passed down for generations, now looked up and sighed. He was too numb to speak. Jin had been convinced that the Shanghai Princess and her fleet’s journey to India would be a success, since he had received reports that all was going well until that terrible day. Jin was agonised by the horrific news. The huge loss of life, as well as the loss of his much treasured ship, the Shanghai Princess.

Finally, Emperor Jin mumbled, “Very well, I suppose in a few months, we’ll just send another ship to carry our trading supplies to India, via Canton. The obedient messenger bowed, and scurried out through the palace gates. Emperor Jin sat sadly, mumbling to himself, “The first fleet lost in a crash. The second fleet lost to pirates. The third fleet along with my beloved Shanghai Princess lost in a storm. Am I being punished? What are we going to do? My fleet is drastically shrinking.”

That night, Emperor Jin was sitting on his bed, and staring at his bedroom door. He wondered, “Why do our quests keep failing? Have all my father’s magical stories of his amazing sea voyages been untrue? Have all the victorious acts in my father’s life that he had described in such detail to me, been lies?” Jin quietly rolled over and snuggled down in his bed. So many thoughts were spinning round and round in his head. He was dizzy. Jin couldn’t help but wonder if he really was the “chosen one” to be the Son of Heaven.

“Jin! Why are you still awake?” whispered the sweet voice of a girl. Jin rolled over to catch the sight of a young woman who he now recognised as Annchi, the servant girl. As Annchi neared Jin, he sat up. “I can’t stop thinking about what happened yesterday, Annchi.” Annchi looked at him, confused. “What happened yesterday?” inquired Annchi. Shaking his head in disbelief, he suddenly realised that she hadn’t heard about the terrible fate of the Shanghai Princess. “Oh, you haven’t heard?” exclaimed Jin. “Yesterday, we lost the Shanghai Princess and her fleet to another storm. All the expensive supplies of gold and other treasures we were sending to my second brother, Jun’s, kingdom of Canton, which were to be forwarded to our friends in India, have gone, along with all the ship’s crew and passengers.” Annchi bowed sadly but politely and left the room. Jin lay anxiously, tossing and turning. He turned towards the door to see if Annchi was still there. She wasn’t. He gradually dozed off, thoughts spinning around in his head.

Time flew by. Before they knew it, four months had passed. “Brother Jin, the ship is about to sail! Hurry!” cried Li Jie, Jin’s second brother. Li Jie was the owner of the Shanghai Prince, which was the sister ship of the Shanghai Princess. The Shanghai Prince was the second most magnificently built ship in China, after the Shanghai Princess. The Shanghai Prince, the Shanghai Princess and a third ship, the Duchess of Shanghai, had all been built by the Emperor of China for his three sons, Jin, Li Jie and Jun.

All crew were on board, and supplies were uploaded, ready for sailing to Canton. However, due to the past misfortunes at sea, everyone was nervous. As he gazed worryingly into the dark sky above, Jin wondered to himself, “Would this end as a deadly catastrophe, too?”

Finally, off they sailed, the magnificent Shanghai Prince and his fleet of two small ships. Off they went on their adventure.

Through calm waters they sailed, as night drew in. The stars shone brightly in the night’s sky, waiting to guide them on their way. All of a sudden, chaos erupted on board. The Prince was being invaded by pirates. The crew were shaken from their sleep, they grabbed their sharp swords, and bravely fought off their attackers. Luckily, the crew outnumbered the pirates, and all peace was restored. Their journey continued and their wounds healed. Three more nights to go. Through calm seas and bright skies they continued on their long adventure – until they came upon a monstrous storm. “Would this journey be a failure, too?” wondered Jin to himself, worryingly.

“All men on board!” yelled Jin. “Let’s prepare for our fate. Whatever that might be!” As the Prince tossed from side to side and the winds grew stronger by the minute, they all struggled to remove the sails and secure everything on deck, such as their food, their weapons, themselves and even Jin himself. Then, they sat. They waited. The thunder roared and lightning struck as the ginormous waves enveloped the Shanghai Prince. “Help us survive this night,” Jin prayed to his father. And they waited.

As the wind weakened, the sun rose from her sleep and calm took hold, a wounded and weary crew reappeared on deck to assess the damage and counted the heads. “Everyone had survived!” cried a sailor. The damage was severe but repairable, and on limped the Shanghai Prince for one more day and one more night.

“Land ahoy! Land ahoy!” yelled a sailor in delight, as green land was spotted in the distance. “All men on board!” yelled Jin jubilantly. “We’ve made it! Finally, my brother’s kingdom!” The crew hoisted their sails while their adrenaline pumped, as they headed for the safety of dry land.

As the Shanghai Prince arrived safely at the harbour of Canton, carrying his crew and his treasures, he was greeted with warmth, love and cheers from the huge crowd on land. Jun beamed with pride, as he hugged his brother, Jin, and welcomed everyone to his magnificent kingdom.

On entering Jun’s palace, a pleasant surprise greeted them. Standing there beside a cherry blossom in the palace garden was Hong, the only survivor of the Shanghai Princess. Jin stood by the gates, speechless. As Jin neared Hong, he wondered if he was hallucinating. However, as he got closer, he saw that Hong was really there! Jin looked at Jun and smiled warmly. Jun was very grateful that someone had survived the nasty storm.

That night, while the treasured cargo was being uploaded onto the Duchess of Shanghai, ready for her voyage to India, everyone else was invited into the palace for a celebration.

The next morning, it was time to leave Canton. Jin and Jun had a final embrace, and as the majestic Prince of Shanghai departed for Shanghai, everyone on land was waving and wishing them good luck. The journey back to Shanghai was a safe one, so a week later, the Prince of Shanghai docked at the harbour of Shanghai, and Hong was sent back to his family. Emperor Jin was happy and relieved that he had finally completed his mission.

What new journeys await them?

# A Sailor

*Ying Wa College, Au, Kit Sang Keith – 13*

“Come here, my dear grandson, do you want grandpa to tell you a story – a story about me when I was young? ....Yes? .....Good.” An old man was sitting on his bamboo chair, with his grandson sitting on his thigh. The grandson was gazing at him, dying to learn about his story. He took a deep breath, cruised to the past and searched for one of his unforgettable adventures. It didn’t take him long to find one, as he could never forget those days when he was a member of one of the greatest fleets in the history of the Ming Dynasty.

“Well...I remember those days when I was still young, I longed to be a sailor. Being on a journey sounded amazing to me. I loved to be a captain when my friends and I played. I grew up and I never forgot my dream even though I knew that the Emperor at that time didn’t allow any ship to sail. My dream came true when I was 20. One day, I saw a poster on the street and a lot of people were listening to an announcement made by an officer. I went out and listened to what he said. He said that the Emperor was recruiting strong and brave men to work in the fleet for upcoming voyages! I was very happy that I immediately grabbed a poster from the officer and filed in my application. I still remember how excited I was then and I still kept the poster that he gave me!.... Here you go, be careful not to break it!.... I prepared for the voyage every day and waited for the day to get onboard.”

“I remember the day when everyone went on board. All of us were very excited about the journey and as happy as birds which had just learned how to fly. Our families were sad but also proud of their sons or husbands for the honour to be one in this grand journey. Well, perhaps even soldiers setting off wouldn’t get such a lot of people to send them off! On the first few days of the journey, every one of us were energetic and we all thought that we were arriving at the destiny soon. But soon, people started to become loath to sail because of sea sick and the boring work like maintaining the ship. One day, the captain of the fleet, grand director Cheung invented a game which was about sailing. The game was great fun and a lot of us were very keen on it. We regained our passion and interest in sailing. A few days later, we eventually arrived.

“Things aren’t easy for the first time. When we first arrived in Java, we were attacked by the locals there. As I remember, there was a war and one of the rulers captured some of our crew. Our captain went to ask for their release in the name of the Ming Emperor. It worked and the ruler was afraid and returned our crew mates. It was not a good experience for most of us but we still carried on our journey. We sailed to a lot of islands around Java. We didn’t gain much from those places. After being attacked by the natives in Java, we started to pay more attention on safety and tried to avoid fights with the locals. The days were peaceful until we received an appeal from some of the overseas Chinese, who said that a pirate, Chen Zuyi had been robbing them for a long time. Our captain decided to fight against the pirates. Most of us were afraid and didn’t really want to fight. But after receiving the message from the Emperor, that we would get rewarded if we fought against the pirates, most of us fought very bravely. We soon defeated the pirates and brought Chen back to the Emperor for execution. It is so lucky that the fight didn’t last long and none of us got hurt. We defeated the pirates in just a few days and I still can’t believe that I did that. The pirates were very scary at first but we soon discovered that they fought with no plans and some of them were even arguing or were forced to fight. So we fought strategically and burnt their boats when they were not paying attention. We all got awarded a lot after the fight. I am still keeping some of the cloths that the Emperor gave me today!”

“The first voyage ended after we defeated the pirates. Everyone went back home for a rest and some of us decided to retire from sailing and didn’t join the second voyage. The second voyage started soon but I didn’t go sailing. Instead I stayed at home and took a rest. I joined the third voyage which was around four years later. We were all excited to go on a journey again. We prepared a lot better based on our past experience and the crew members were all well-trained. Although we were a lot more prepared compared to our first and second journey, we still met a lot of problems during this voyage. Honestly I was quite flattered when I realized that after the first two voyages in which we represented the Emperor to visit a lot of countries, we got respected and treated well wherever we went. I remember when we arrived at Malacca, the captain followed the order of the Ming Emperor and helped crowning the leader of Malacca king. Although Siam ruled Malacca, the king of Siam didn’t attack us because they were afraid that the Ming Emperor would fight back. As a gift, Malacca gave us six pieces of huge agarwood; I had never seen such huge agarwood in my life! We were happy and brought them back to the Emperor after the journey. The Emperor felt exalted when he saw them.”

“Things turned unfavourable when we arrived at Ceylon. The moment we arrived, we felt that some of the people there were very unfriendly to us. A few days later, our captain ordered us to leave because he thought that it might be dangerous if we stayed long. Some of our crew members didn’t really agree but we still left Ceylon earlier than planned. Our captain was right as we really got attacked when we visited Ceylon again on our way back home. When we arrived at Ceylon, the king invited us to visit the capital. Our captain accepted and we went to the capital for a banquet. Everything seemed fine at first, but suddenly, some soldiers came in and attacked us. Many of us were captured and put in custody. Our captain, Cheung He, judging that the guards could not be strong enough to stop us from escaping, led us to fight heroically against them. We succeeded to escape and sneak into the royal palace. Our captain sent a messenger to link up with those of our crew members who had escaped in the earlier fight. We then joined force, attacked the royal city and captured the King of Ceylon. No one dared to stop us as we had their king in our hands. We brought him back to the Ming Emperor. It was generally agreed that the Ceylon King should be executed. But the Ming Emperor was magnanimous to have him released and let him return to Ceylon. How benevolent and eminent the Ming Emperor was!

“Although I was one of the heroes in this victory, my leg was broken and since then I can’t really walk well. I planned to have another voyage to Malacca, but due to my limping condition, I decided to stay at home. My career of sailing wasn’t long but I experienced a lot. Grandson, do you want to be a sailor like me when you grow up?”

The old man looked at his grandson. His grandson looked at him with curiosity and admiration. He would love to teach his grandson how to be a sailor and hoped that one day, his grandson will stand on a ship leading a huge crew and sail around the world, with his story beside him, wherever he goes.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Ying Wa College, Chan, Ho Ming Oscar – 13*

## Year 1407

Dear Diary,

You know I only write exciting new tales in you, and so it's been quite a long time since my last writing. It's the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October now, we've just returned, finally, safe and sound to Nanjing, after my journey with Admiral Zhenghe. I've grown a moustache you see. I couldn't help it – I've been so busy every day on the seas that I no longer have the heart or time to shave my face.

Still, you would have never experienced what I did in the returning journey weeks ago. It was a gripping tale, Diary.

In an absolutely silent, pitch-dark night, with only the slightly falling of the waves against the hull of our ships docked beside the land to be heard, twenty-seven thousand people on the ships, chosen specifically by Admiral Zhenghe, were patrolling every single spot on the ships. In fact, I was one of them. I was told that a pirate, Chen Zuyi and his fleet were to launch a sneak attack on our treasure fleet. As I was just starting to enjoy the fresh, salty atmosphere on the coastline, I could just make out a faint figure of ships approaching extremely slowly on the horizon. Alarms were immediately raised under my command, and everyone was instantly alert. The pirates might be thinking they already succeeded in their attack, but then came a roar of command from Admiral Zhenghe. Our ships suddenly blazed with light, and I could just make out the shocked faces of the pirates. Then shock turned to fury. Their leader Chen Zuyi gave out a scream of frustration, then commanded his fleet to retreat. It was too late for that, though. We never back up, as Admiral Zhenghe had said, and so we proceeded forward, with the beats of the drums supporting us through the night.

Before they could turn their ships around, we'd already leaped onto their ships, and started a ferocious battle, much more brutal than what I had imagined to be. Lashing here and there with my sharpened spear, I had killed no less than twenty pirates. After the tiring battle, we'd killed over five thousand pirates, and captured the three heads of the attack, soon to be beheaded, I overheard back in Nanjing.

It was my first battle in years, far bloodier than I had ever imagined. I'm just happy to be safe and sound back in my homeland!

Relaxed,  
Li Mingxun

## Year 1410

Dear Diary,

It's been years since I've written to you, but I'm still on my third journey on the seas with Admiral Zhenghe. The experience I'm going to introduce today was finally, a fruitful and joyful one. As proclaimed the Commander of Diplomacy, my role was fully highlighted throughout this experience.

We landed on Manchuria, in the South Sea. We established an official warehouse there as a transit base for the fleet materials, and I must say, Diary, it looked genuinely impressive after all the hard labouring work from the workers. Of course, we were trespassing on other's land. We were sure to give away something return, in order to repay them for the land they had so willingly provided. And so we presented a double silver seal and a crown gown to the king. Not to mention other gifts like silk-made objects, a golden phase jade belt, the ceremonial plaque, the pommel horse and much more precious objects that were under my personal care during the whole journey. As I handed them over to Zhenghe to present to the Manchuga king, I couldn't help feeling proud of keeping it intact during the truly wobbly journey. I am the key of the maintenance of the friendship between China and Manchuria!

We'd finished our massive construction at the end. Admiral Zhenghe, always with sharp eyes, a flat chin and a pointed nose, along with the long red cloak that always billowed behind him, glanced down at our work from our guarding drum tower with apparent please and satisfaction.

It's been such an exhausting month, Diary, but I'm always happy to assist our country. It's late; I should get to sleep...

Yawning,  
Li Mingxun

### Year 1415

Dear Diary,

I'm so eager to pick up my pen once more, and just relax to feel the joy of revealing my secrets with ink. It's been such a journey, too much excitement that I've had enough of the tension I've got to bear every day on the seas. I feel like this is the best way for encouraging myself to carry on. Now, Diary, allow me to divulge my second battling experience on the seas since the capture of Chen Zuyi.

Our fleet arrived in Sumatra on the eleventh month, in Indonesia. Admiral Zhenghe ordered an ambassador to discover essential information in order for us to safely "trespass" on Sumatra's land. We received news on the third day and were shocked to find a war raging within the land. The son of the Sumatra king, Su Gan was currently attempting to kill the king to gain control of the land. In order to still fulfill our emperor's wish to spread the Chinese culture, we gave presents to the Sumatra king, Zairu Abidin. Evidently, the son was furious that the newcomers not only supported the enemy, but also did not give any of the presents from China to him. You'd never have guessed how Su Gan reacted to this incident. Su Gan actually raised a navy of over ten thousand to show his anger, as we heard from the ambassador!

I'm happy to say that we had the upper hand throughout the whole battle on the seas. Imagine our great ships combined with Zairu's army! It's what we call, "flowers on the brocade". I played a great role in the battle, commanding our shipmates to attack at various directions despite the fact that we already lost directions on the awfully dizzy deck. We didn't dare to stop until we heard the news that our Admiral had Su Gan, with his wife and children captured. I must say, the ropes that were tightened around him were the thickest I've ever seen in my entire life. I assume the extra protection was provided upon Zairu's request!

Enough of battling. I was assigned as the same post of diplomacy commander on the largest ship of the fleet, with more than 140 metres long! My wife is going to be really proud of me once I arrive home!

Feeling much better,  
Li Mingxun

### Year 1433

Dear Diary,

I must say, this might be the last time I will write to you while on the vast seas. It's going to be the end of the great journeys I've had with Admiral Zhenghe. I wish I could give him my most sincere gratitude for his leadership in the journey, but it's too late now...

We arrived in Guri on the fourth month. The king welcomed us in a great fashion, with over five hundred warriors stationed on the bank where our ship moored. I was stunned by the widely spread fame of China and our fleet's arrival. In addition to the silk fabrics and porcelain, we also gave out tea, lacquerware, copper coins, camphor and metal products. Of course we had something in return, including ivory products and heaps of jewellery, flashing winking smiles under the sunshine. Admiral Zhenghe was very happy with the presents, and enjoyed the feast with the King of Guri thoroughly, walking out with a red face after drinking too much!

We were about to leave for our homeland when it happened. The doctors said he died on Guri due to too much stress. I didn't believe the doctors until I saw the white cloth covering his body. As a feeling of numbness and dread filled my body, I slowly uncovered the sheet, and my tears came dripping uncontrollably. My heart filled with sadness, not only because I didn't get in time to thank him for his care and leadership to the whole crew, but also most importantly, his contribution to the spread of Chinese culture. My deepest gratitude to you, Admiral, and may you rest in peace.

Sadly,  
Li Mingxun

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"Now that's my story, my children." I said to my grandchild, sitting on my wooden chair. "Throughout my diary, you should've understood Zhenghe's contribution for the safety to our homeland, and the spread of Chinese culture in Ming Dynasty."

"How long have you been keeping this diary, Grandpa Li?" asked my grandson, sitting beside the duck pond.

"Well, it's the year of Ming Xianzong now..." I grunted, waving my handheld fan in thought, "so it's been thirty years, my child."

"Wow! Bring me to the beach again, Grandpa, and let's row the boat you've built me!"

"Alright, bring the compass."

"What compass?"

"The one I've left over on Zhenghe's ship! It was the best of its time, with the needle floating on water..."



# The Ming Treasure Voyages Retold

*Ying Wa College, Chau, Yat Sunday – 12*

When I opened my eyes for the first time, I was really stunned. There were loads of people walking around me, holding sharp and dangerous objects such as hammers and chisels, all deadly heavy or sharp. When one comes forwards holding some seriously terrifying tools and implements. I immediately tried to run, but soon discovered myself to be unable to move at all. I switched to pleading with my eyes the best I could as the menacing man stepped forward, and he acted like as if he doesn't even acknowledge me at all. When he finally brings down the chisel, I didn't feel any pain, more like a feeling of being completed. While I was still trying to figure out what was happening to me, the man was already done. I immediately felt chains lifting me up and over, closer and closer to a humongous ship under construction, under the name The Voyager. As I was slowly but surely connected to the prow, my identity finally hit me: I am the figurehead of a ship!

A few days after, I had ear dropped about what I was created for. I was made to help an explorer of sorts, Zheng He to travel around the world and help the natives worldwide out by gifting them tools and knowledge! How great of a destiny is that! I can't wait to start my journey! Also, the ship I was connected onto, which I had started to see as part of myself, due to the fact that since I was connected to the prow, I was able to manipulate many different mechanics within the ship itself, like the direction of the rudder and the opening and closing of the portholes. I played workers within me by opening portholes near them in the night, flapping the sails and scaring the christ out of them. Although I was quite adapted to this form, I still longed for the ability to move freely though, which would be like the cherry on a cake for me.

Finally, after months of long wait, I was finally prepared to sail the seas! I was also introduced to the crew who would be working with me for the next couple of years. Some of them were so stinky and disgusting, I was prepared to roll myself a little and throw them headfirst into the vast seas just to be rid of them for next couple of years! Some of them, including Zheng He himself, was much more clean. Well, at least they didn't reek of rotting fish and impure salt! Soon after, I was loaded onto some sort of a ramp, and was rolled into the sea with a great splash! I was so excited to start my adventures that immediately after the crew got on, I unfurled my three gigantic sails, causing quite some inconvenience to most of the crew and set off to our amazing journeys ahead.

The first few months went by in a flash. It turned out that my pilot was completely useless, and slept through a lot of time while he should have been on duty, including the dangerous times while we were travelling through shallow waters, which always yields the dangerous possibility of hitting a reef, even without an unconscious pilot. So, it was often up to me to shift the rudder of the ship just a slight bit to guide us out of those troublesome reefs unharmed and in one piece. Actually, technically nothing can harm me as I am not actually human, but let's get to that later on. Soon, we arrived at our first stop, which wasn't much of a smooth trip, either for me or for the crew.

Our first stop was at a weird place called champa. It was quite a beautiful place, with glittering lakes and animals calling out to each others, which created quite a comfortable and peaceful background. That was the case, until the locals ran towards us, wielding spears, bows and for some reason, even a weird looking tube that the natives carry on their belts in crude, wooden boxes. When a stinky and apparently drunk crewmate tried to calm them down, but in our language, Chinese, the sounds that he made somehow agitated the natives even further, and the native wielding the tube raised the tube to his mouth and shot a dart towards the drunken sailor, who was so drunk that he didn't even flinch when the dart hit him. Mere seconds later, the dart proved itself to be fatal, and the crewmate collapsed over the railing and down towards the natives, who drag him far away, possibly to their camp. Then, the natives raged full on war with us, chucking spears or grappling hooks, climbing up my hull to attack the crew while I tried to shake them all off in vain. Instead, I tried to slam porthole doors into faces while they are passing by on ropes, which does stun and drop most of the hostile locals into the sea. After the local's attack was repelled, we immediately went to attack, with me turning the onboard cannons towards the native's directions and the crew putting in heavy cannonballs into them and lighting them on fire. Soon, the natives were running for their lives, back to where they came from.

Although we had a really rough start on the voyage, I didn't sustain much damage, and we were able to continue on. The other locals from other places were much more friendlier, and were happy to see us come and for us to help! We didn't have much of a problem while visiting other nations ever since. Years later,

we had finally gone to all of them required location requested by the great emperor himself, and were ready to go back home. Truthfully, I was also pretty tired after this long journey, but still, it doesn't justify the crewmate on lookout not seeing a huge pirate ship coming straight for us.

When Zheng He finally saw the pirate ship coming towards us, it was already too late. The pirates had all loaded up their weapons, and knowing about all the wealth and treasures on me, were more than willing to attack us. As cannonball after cannonball was shot towards us, the crew could only scamper underdeck from terror. I was just barely able to keep myself in one piece as gunpowder is rained all over me. In the meantime, I also rapidly retreated further and further into the wide river that would lead us to safety as my crew covered inside, to frightened to move or even fight back. After an agonizing hour of evading cannonballs when possible and going inwards. Our help finally arrives, in the form of four Chinese warships decked out with all kinds of weapons and a war-hardened crew who actually knew how to fight against pirates. The resulting fight was bloody and horrible, even with the odds now being in our favor. In the end, there was one Chinese battleship badly damaged, and the pirate ship, along with its crew was sunk into the riverbed, never to be seen again. Still, I had been through a lot, with holes all over my hull, and a burning stern. Using all my strength, I managed to hold myself together just for long enough for everything to be unloaded and everyone to get to shore. Then, I, out of strength and riddled with holes, finally broke apart, and my parts either sunk into the riverbed or washed away with the current. It wasn't a bad way to go, but at least I had finished my job. That was the last thought I had before me, reduced to only a figurehead, sunk into the riverbed, and my vision went pitch black.

Days after my own destruction, I awoke once again to see myself hooked in yet another set of chains, hanging in mid-air and moving. In my confusion, I look around, just to see my new destination: a brand new ship, built just like its predecessor and sporting the proud name The Voyager Two, and I smile happily to myself. There was far more adventures for me to go on.

# The Voyage of Zheng He To West

*Ying Wa College, Cheng, Daniel – 12*

The story all begins here. Well, you see there is a man named Zheng He(1371–1433 or 1435),he was born during the Yuan Dynasty, lived during the Ming Dynasty and he was a mariner, explorer, diplomat, fleet, admiral and eunuch. But actually do you know that his name wasn't Zheng He at first it was Ma He. Ma He now we known as Zheng He was born in a Muslim family, he had an older brother and four sisters. But then the Ming armies arrived to Yunnan (his hometown) and the General Fu Youde saw him and captured him. At there he was sent to serve in the home of Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan also later known as the Yongle Emperor. At that time when he was a servant, he gained the trust of Zhu Di and also Zhu Di was 11 years older than Ma. Later when Zhu Di grew older he renamed Ma as Zheng He and also San Bao it means that three jewel or three protection. Then Zheng received a proper education.

The first time that Zheng He began his voyage to west was 1405–1407 but we don't the reason why he began his voyage. The area he travelled to was The Indian Ocean but Chinese called it The Western Ocean so he went to the west. Also he was the leader of the whole fleet. In the first three voyages he went to Southeast Asia, India and Sri Lanka. In his voyages he gave gifts to the locals where he visited, such as: Silk, porcelain, gunpowder and others. But he also received some weird goods like: zebras. He travelled from the mouth of the Yangtze River to Vietnam. His fleet had 317 ships and 27000 men. And the ships carried porcelain and silk. And he had the largest ship ever made. Also he defeated a famous pirate in Malacca.

The fourth to seventh voyages went to the east African. He visited Ayutthaya, Malaya, Sumatra, Sri Lanka. 1413–15 he went to Bengal, India, Hormuz and Aden. 1417–19 he travelled to Brunei and East Africa until his last voyage and died at sea.

# New Tales of the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Ying Wa College, Cheung, Jerry – 13*

It was late at night, and the ship was sailing down the deep and vast ocean. He sat there with a frown, and went to rest.

Wang was a fisherman living in the Ming dynasty. He had lived an average life, and had nothing special at all. He was the least well known in the whole village, and only had a few childhood friends.

It was morning. Wang woke up at the screech of the rooster and carried out his daily routine. A quick shower at the river next to his house that led to the sea. He then walked to his farm which was about a few kilometres away as he was afraid of the other villagers taking his crops. Even though he didn't care about money, he still worked until dawn and make sure his crops were at top quality as he wanted to provide nice food at a cheap price to the villagers. He was walking back to his cottage when a man caught his attention. The man was in his fifties, and he was waving a sign and shouted, "Sailor wanted! Voyage to the unknown land and even treasures!"

Wang was lying in bed that night. He couldn't fall asleep. He had signed up as a sailor and was going to set sail the next week. The following days, Wang sold his farm for a great sum of money and buried the money in a chest right next to his cottage. He kept the cottage just in case the journey turned out to be a scam or failure. He finally built the courage to see his childhood friends and said farewell just in case.

He tied up his bag and started his walk towards the pier. He saw the ginormous ship docked there, and it made him even more excited. The boat was a hundred metres long and the sails were folded up neatly. The man he had seen yesterday when going back home greeted him.

"Greetings, sailor. Please come with me." he said. Wang followed the man and walked towards the walkway to the boat. When he was about to board the boat, he looked back at the village one last time. He spotted his house at a distance far away. '*One day, I'll come back for you.*' he thought. He stood there with massive belongingness to the village and totally forgot about boarding the ship.

"First time, eh? Don't worry. You will see this place again one day." the man said. Wang woke up from his daydream and followed the man to his own cabin. "Take a stroll around the boat and familiarise yourself with this place. You wouldn't want to get lost! All the sailors will meet at the deck at dawn and we will set sail at night."

He didn't have much to unpack much as he sold most of his stuff. He then took a stroll around the ship. There were a lot of cannons by the ship's windows to protect them from pirates when out at sea. He also noticed a small shooting range on the second floor of the deck. Some people were practicing archery there. Wang knew nothing about archery so he walked away. The ship was huge, and by the time Wang finished exploring the ship, it was already night time.

Wang quickly ran up the stairs to get to the meeting at the deck. Lucky for him, the meeting had just started. The captain of the ship was called Zheng He. This expedition was dedicated to search for land in the western ocean and possibly build civilization there. The crew then had dinner at the deck and they cut the rope connected to the bridge. After a whole week, they finally set sail.

The first few days were fine, and Wang stopped being the shy person he used to be. He knew that if he won't make it back, these people might just be his only friends. He met a man called Han at the pantry who used to be a farmer too. They drank wine and often chatted with each other. They became close friends after only a few days, and Wang felt glad that he had made a friend after isolating himself for so many years. They encountered a few ships, but they meant no harm.

One particular morning, Wang was sleeping when he suddenly heard cries outside his cabin. "All sailors wake up! Pirate attack!". He woke up with a start. He immediately got dressed and rushed to the deck to see what was happening. A large ship closed by, and Wang looked closer at the ship. The other ship's sailors were all dressed in rags and were holding knives on one hand. They did not look friendly. One brave sailor started yelling words at the ship. Unfortunately, he immediately got shot down by an archer, redecorating the nearby planks with a shade of crimson. Wang was startled. He had never seen anyone die as he lived most of his life alone. He immediately ran down the stairs and reached for the cannons. However, they were all occupied and were being used. Han was using one of the cannons, and he successfully shot down the hull of the other ship. The pirate ship started sinking. Wang felt sorry, even though they were criminals.

During the attack, the ship had somehow only took damage from arrows. Zheng He sent some of the crew down to pick the arrows of the ship and store them in the shooting range for future use. Wang picked the arrows off while Han held the rope tied around his waist. After a whole afternoon, the crew successfully picked all the arrows off. The number of arrows they picked had a total of a few hundred, which was a lot at that time: In the middle of the sea with no supply refill.

A few days became a few months, and they encountered few pirate attacks. They won all of them, but part of the ship took damage from cannons. They had a mechanic on board, so they fixed the ship with parts scavenged from the battles. The pirates started to look foreign, meaning they were closer and closer to other civilizations.

It was late at night and the ship was sailing down the deep vast ocean. Wang sat there with a frown. He was very tired that day, so he went to rest. Just as he fell asleep, he heard a loud crash coming from the deck. He woke up and rushed to the deck. He was shocked to see tentacles dangling from the above.

Wang rushed up to the fence and saw a huge octopus, or a Kraken, because of its mind blowing size. He rushed back down to the cabin and woke everybody up to face this huge beast. The crew fired everything at it, but it wasn't much use. They ran out of cannonballs, and all they had were arrows. The kraken started picking off crews one by one. Wang remembered chatting with Han one day, and he said that the most sensitive part of an animal is the eye. He didn't have much time to tell the crew, so he closed his eyes and prayed for the perfect shot. He opened his eyes and fired at it. The Kraken made a weird sound and sank down into the ocean, never to be seen again.

A few weeks passed, and they started running out of food. Just as Zheng He wanted to give up all hope, they found land. There were natives there and they provided food source to the crew. The natives gave a map of the island to the crew and they set sail back to China.

Wang got off the ship with Han. He walked the path he had known for so long with his friend. At last, the road led to a branch and he parted with Han. He went back to the cottage alone. It was still there. The voyage made him rich, but he preferred a simple life.

At last, he was home, sweet home.

# The Battle of Palembang

*Ying Wa College, Cheung, Ka Yui Anthony – 12*

Zheng He, Admiral of the seven Ming Treasure Voyages, was considered to be the greatest Chinese Admiral of all time. He led seven voyages across the Indian Ocean, reaching as far as Africa and the Middle East. His successful attempts of far-reaching ocean voyages effectively made the Ming Navy the supreme naval force along the Asian coast. He and his men fought various battles, including the conquer of the Sinhalese Kotte Kingdom and many other minor skirmishes. The Battle of Palembang was probably the most famous of all.

On a cold, rainy day in 1407, Admiral Zheng was sailing along the peaceful Javan coast in his Chinese treasure ship. The ship was the largest among the Chinese fleet, a gigantic rine-masted vessel which served as Admiral Zheng's headquarters at sea.

He was standing on the port side of the longship when the small, eight-oared patrol boat slowly approached. The helmsman raised a mirror and flashed three times. Green, white, green. Asking for permission to board. Raising his head to look at the captain of the treasure ship, he shouted, "Permission granted!" The captain flashed twice. Double green. Seeing the signal, the patrol boat accelerated and sped towards the larger ship.

Within minutes a lieutenant sat facing him, along with a local man in his forties.

"What's up again?" asked Admiral Zheng warily. He had received thirteen pointless reports earlier in the day and he was quite certain that this would be the same.

"This is ... an informant from, um, Palembang... sir," stammered the lieutenant.

"What's your name?" Admiral Zheng asked calmly.

"Shi Jinqing, sir," came the surprisingly confident answer.

"I am a fisherman who found a new life at Palembang," he continued. "I am here to supply some important information that might lead to Pirate Chen's demise. He has been raiding our coasts for years and the world will be better off without him. I found that the pirate would be heading our the Musi River to raid Kota Pangkalpinang. He will pass through Selat Bangka on his way."

"Thank you, Mr. Shi," replied Admiral Zheng. Then he turned to the lieutenant, "Bring Mr. Shi to a guest room. He would be safe there."

"Yes, sir!"

The sun was already setting when Admiral Zheng returned to his private cabin and summoned his second-in-command, Admiral Wang Jinghong.

"I suppose you've already heard about the informant Shi?" inquired Admiral Zheng.

"Yes," replied Admiral Wang, in an equally flat tone.

"Good. I plan to destroy the pirates on their way. At the open waters of Natuna Sea, perhaps."

Admiral Wang nodded in agreement. It was good thinking. This way, they could use their advantage in numbers to the largest extent.

"How do you plan to lure them out? They aren't stupid, you know."

"Easy. We'll have you take one squadron of Fuchuan warships and three squadrons of patrol ships. Dress them up as traders and the pirates will start pursuing. They're pirates and that's what they do."

"Then it's settled," said Admiral Wang, this time a bit more confidently.

Admiral Zheng would be interested, but not surprised, to know that Pirate Chen Zuyi's mind was going through almost the same lines.

Chen Zuyi knew what the cursed informant Shi Jinqing told them. There was no way they would go undetected this time. They might as well give up the raid of Kota Pangkalpinang unless they wanted to engage in direct, frontal combat with Admiral Zheng.

No, wait! They don't need to fight the Chinese directly. The tip of the pirate's lips curled up in a wicked smile.

Admiral Wang and his small fleet of Fuchuan warships and patrol boats were already lying in wait at Selat Bangka, the mouth of Musi River, hoping that the pirates would be naive enough to fall for the trap. It wasn't long before the first pirate ship emerged out of Musi River, heading northeast towards Kota Pangkalpinang. Within minutes all seventeen ships were out of the river and the lead ship signaled a couple of flashes. At once, the pirates changed their formation into a menacing spearhead, with the lead ship at the tip, racing towards the "traders", masts bellowing in the wind.

They were spotted.

"In oars!" shouted Admiral Wang. The soldiers shoved their oars the oar lockers and heaved at once. Their orders were to get out as quickly as possible and leave the fighting part to Admiral Zheng with his main fleet.

Now all eighteen "traders" were speeding north towards Natuna Sea, where the main fleet was posed. The seventeen pirates, led by Chen Zuyi himself, made no move to shorten the distance between the "traders" and themselves.

Strange, thought Admiral Wang. That's not how pirates were supposed to behave. But it wouldn't hurt to continue on the old plan anyway.

So the thirty-five ships, sailing in the same pattern all the way, finally reached the ambush at Natuna Sea. Admiral Wang then flashed another signal to the other ships. Red, red, white. Scatter. Seventeen of the eighteen ships changed course instantly, two of them even beating into the wind.

But the pirates made no move to pursue any of the would-be-victims. Instead, they formed a circle with the lead ship in the center.

Admiral Zheng's heart sank when he saw the change of the pirate's formation. The circle was used to prevent any potential ambushes and he knew that. There was only one solution to this. The pirates were warned beforehand.

The Admirals were even more shocked when the pirates lowered their dark flags and raised white ones in surrender.

Impossible, thought Admiral Zheng. It had to be a trick!

But a formal surrender must be honored and not ignored. Reluctantly, Admiral Zheng flashed a series of complex signals and sent a squadron of troop transports and four squadrons of Fuchuan warships to receive the pirates.

Uncertainly, the troop transports and Fuchuan warships sailed out of hiding towards the pirates. They stopped when they were only one kilometer apart and flashed twice. Double white. Follow.

To the whole navy's dismay, the pirates did nothing of the sort. Instead, fifty archers surfaced out of six of the pirate ships with bows strung and ready. The captains of the troop transports and Fuchuan warships knew they were dead before the hail of flaming arrows struck their ships. The timber wood of the hull caught fire and the twenty-three warships became part of a sea of fire.

The whole fleet stared at the horrifying scene in front of them, temporarily stunned. Admiral Zheng was the first to recover.

"Sound the drums!" he roared. "Counterattack!"

The other captains soon recovered and directed their own crew into battle, signaling the start of the Battle of Palembang.

The pirate ships separated into four groups with four to five ships each, providing them with a great deal more flexibility.

It turned out that Chen Zuyi was right. The pirate squadrons scythed through the Ming navy with ease, ramming and setting fire to warships and supply ships alike.

It was time to change our tactics, thought Admiral Zheng. We couldn't blunder around aimlessly. We would be chopped to pieces. The Ming navy wasn't capable of destroying everything without suffering losses too great. They had to end the savage battle as quickly as possible.

Then a thought struck him all of a sudden. "All armies needed helmsmen and signal corps instead of random oarsmen of archers! Pinpoint them!" he told his own Royal Guards. "And relay the order!"

Soon signals were flashed all over the battlefield to announce the change of tactics. Arrows and bullets were no longer wasted for common soldiers. Instead, they were all fixed for important personnels.

It was only after ten or so minutes when Chen Zuyi ordered to have the shieldsmen protect the commanders. But it was too late. The helmsmen and signal corps were already down from pinpoint attacks of Admiral Zheng. There was almost no one to relay the Pirate King's orders.

Chen Zuyi could only watch in anguish when the tide turned. The squadrons of four evaporated as quickly as ice-cream under the Summer sun.

The pirate ships no longer rammed. The archers aboard shot blindly, missing more than hitting. They tried to evade instead of attacking ruthlessly like real pirates.

The first pirate ship was rammed to pieces by Admiral Zheng's personal treasure ship. A second was set on fire by the elite Royal Flamethrowers and flaming arrows. The third had its crew nearly exterminated and it was drifting uselessly on the calm Natuna Sea...

The pirates were starting to collapse. They were being destroyed more than destroying. But still they fought on and on, setting fire to ship after ship until only seven of the seventeen remained.

Then Chen Zuyi decided that it was enough. They were too weak to continue.

"Raise the white flag," said the Pirate King. "We're surrendering."

Finally, this time, it was for real.

The victor of Palembang was at long last, declared.



# Treasure Voyages.....with Disasters?

*Ying Wa College, Chung, Yiu Him – 13*

That day, when I was sitting on my ship, waves were splashing, and the sea was roaring. It was when I recalled the day of.....

‘It is getting more and more windy! Shall we stop, Captain?’ said one of the crew.

‘But we have to get to East Africa fast! We all want to go back home as soon as possible, right?’ I said.

‘Ok, but we have to be careful.’

It was a tough day. Almost a half of the crew were suffering from seasickness. Our ships were shaking as if it was an earthquake. Suddenly, a gigantic wave, which was almost as tall as a tsunami, was running towards the ships. In just five minutes, I was covered by a sea of water, and fainted.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself lying on a layer of sand, with wind breezing through my body. Calm water was touching my feet. I stood up. I was on an island, with the widest and loneliest view beyond my eyes. Only seawater and the sun were in front of my eyes.

‘Hello! Anyone here?’

No reply. Only the wind answered me, ‘No.’

‘Come on! I am not playing hide and seek with you!’

Still, no reply.

I just gave up screaming out from my sore throat. I started walking. I saw some of the crew, also lying on the sand. But when I touched their noses, I soon figured out that they weren’t breathing. The island was dead, except me.

Am I trapped on this island forever? If yes, then how am I going to survive? I cannot die on this island! My family, my house, my fame are all gone at this time.

Soon, I heard coughing sounds.

I turned around and saw somebody sitting on the sand.

To my surprise, somebody broke the loneliness on the island.

Excitement and hope quickly appeared. After a while, other crew woke up. It was shocking as I thought everyone except me died.

‘All of you please come here,’ I said. ‘We probably don’t want to stay on this island forever, do we?’

‘Yes,’ said some of crew.

‘Then we have to leave here before another storm strikes us.’ I said.

We guessed that the ships were turned over by the gigantic wave. So we tried to find some ships which might be pushed onto the island by the sea.

After we circled the island, we counted that there were only 10 ships. Some of them were upside-down, while some of them were damaged. At the same time, I counted that there were around 80 of the crew alive.

‘We should start fixing our ships.’

So, we were divided into some teams. Some of us went to chop the wood down the trees, and some of us resembled the ships.

It was a lot of work and we could not finish it in one day. So, we built a campfire and decided to stay overnight.

‘Is it safe here?’

‘How can we survive on the ships?’

‘Will there be any storms coming?’

‘Everyone listen, there will be no storm coming.’ I said. ‘We will start finding food tomorrow and we will continue our journey. I know that you all, including me, have lost some friends. I am regretful about this. I should not have ordered you all to go further. If we stopped at this island instead of directly facing the storm, then we won’t be suffering from all of these. Have a good sleep tonight. Sorry to all of you.’

That night, I could not sleep. I was thinking: it was my entire fault. Originally there were a few hundred people and about fifty ships, and also the presents that we would give to other countries. However they were almost all gone because of my decision. Apart from the serious consequences that I will face after I went back to my country, I have to carry the responsibility for all of the casualties and deaths. It was the most terrible disaster that I had ever met.

Then I fell asleep.

The second day, I saw no one beside me. I walked around and saw that they were working with the ships. I quickly helped the crew to find food. I felt very sorry for them. I should do more work to compensate for my mistake.

Later, I added in to help finding some wood for resembling the ships. Back in my country, I never did this kind of work. Although I didn't like it, I need to do it for my fault. We all were sweating all over our bodies as the sun is burning right on top of us.

After one week of hard work, we sailed to the roaring sea again.

One day, the 'real nightmare' happened.

At the middle of the night, I was woken up by a large noise.

I went up to the deck and saw pirates shooting at us. There was an array of ships in front of us. On the wide sea, it was only us and them. It was time to battle.

Some of the pirates boarded on my ship. I quickly grabbed my sword and killed them.

Suddenly, their cannons, which were bigger than any cannons I had seen, started firing at our ships. Their bullets were on fire. One of them got onto our ships, which made the ships starting to burn. As the wind was strong that night, the fire spread out really quickly, making severe damage to our ships. I saw some of our crew abandoned their ships and jumped into the sea. I quickly put down a ladder and let them get on. The ships with part of the gifts that we had brought from my country were burnt and sank into the ocean.

It was time for revenge. We started lighting up our arrow with fire and shot at the pirates. Their ships are connected with metal chains, one of them started burning, and then other ships will burn one after another. We successfully defeated the pirates, but we suffered a great loss of the gifts that we prepared.

After two weeks, we finally stepped on the land of Africa. The gold and silver that we have prepared were all gone except for two bricks of silver. A group of natives welcomed us and invited us to visit the place. It was very different from my country. Nothing but grass is in front of us. They lived in a few houses.

A few villagers came out from the houses. They seemed very friendly and kind. Soon, they started speaking in their own language which we didn't understand. However, they then looked at us with their smiling faces. One of them took a fruit which is like an eggplant and gave it to me. He let me eat it.

I was shocked by the good taste of the fruit. It was sweet and juicy. It was even better than what I had eaten at Ming Dynasty before.

After that, I gave the silver and the gifts that I brought to the natives.

They waved at us and walked to the houses. We immediately followed them.

Their lives were very different from ours. Their houses were made of grass. Their tools were mainly made of wood. They wore clothes that we didn't usually wear. They had a very special life.

They invited us to stay in their houses. They played with us at the morning. At night, they always had a campfire at the center of the village. We cooked the animals that the hunters caught at daylight. They also showed us how to play their instruments. I surely had a great time there. They even made some gifts for us.

After a month of the stay, my crew and I were back to my country with the gifts from Africa.

One day, the emperor wanted to see me.

'I heard that you were lost in the seas and went to an island.'

'Yes, and I have to apologize for the fact that it was my wrong decision.'

'Therefore, you have to be responsible for it. You.....'

After the punishment, I was sailing out again. I was sitting on my ship, waves were splashing on the ships, and the sea was roaring. It was the time that I have to open a new page in the book of sailing history.

# Ming Treasure Voyages Goes East

*Ying Wa College, Lai, Chun Yat Nikka – 14*

## **8 March 1433 A.D.**

We've been in Hormuz for almost 2 months now. I'm bored to death – my dream is to sail into the ocean, not next to the shore! However, the Emperor's orders bar me from falling behind schedule, or off comes my head... The thought of it sends shivers down my spine...

You've probably heard of me before. My name is Zheng He, but you probably know me as the admiral of the voyages down west, 6 times in total. This is supposed to be the seventh time, and we're about to return home. However, this voyage and the other 6 voyages are really not that different: I've seen all these people, passed by all these villages and nature's landmarks, I can remember all of them clearly.

All these years, I've been hoping for a chance to voyage further, an order from the emperor allowing me to sail east instead of west, but no such incident occurred. Maybe the gods don't want me to go there. Yet, I want to, and I don't mind defying them to achieve my goal! I just have to think of an excuse... Yes, if we just lie about the return trip and say we stayed for longer, it'll definitely work! No one back home will know...

## **12 March 1433 A.D.**

Ahh! Finally, we are once again on our way! I have to say, I am extremely grateful to my daring crew, who also dream to sail towards the East with me! At the time when I am writing this sentence, our fleet is saying farewell to the last hint of land.

So, this is my plan: Our fleet is due to return to Nanjing by June, so we have four months. By following the compass and relying on the Northern Dipper, I will sail directly East for two months with minimal error, and if I don't reach any land mass, I shall sail back slightly north of the path we came from, therefore arriving at the capital as quickly as possible. If we're late, off goes our heads (that's not healthy).

We just lost sight of the Mainland – there's no turning back now, I guess. Let's see what awaits us!

## **17 March 1433 A.D.**

It's been 5 days of straight sailing at top speed, and yet we have yet to see any spot of green on the horizon. A third of the crew have nausea, a quarter in the third have thrown up, and one of us is on their deathbed, approaching his final breath. May he rest in peace.

Our race, the Han, are not suited to be at sea, and therefore, unless you have gotten used to it, like me and some other admirals who've been with me for some or all of my previous voyages, you will most likely get sick. However, our previous voyages have never sailed more than a mile off the shore. I'm not sure how much of a chance we'll stand if we sail into a storm. Oh well, may the gods up above the clouds bless my voyage.

## **23 March 1433 A.D.**

Another 6 boring days of voyaging has passed. It is now near dusk, and now half of the crew is sick and nauseous. I really hope the weather stays calm... Wait, what was that lurch? Oh my gosh, big waves, waves that are as tall as the Emperor himself! Did I hear a slap of thunder? Why, why? Will I never reach the other side of the ocean?

Hearing the waves slap against the hull of the boat is extremely creepy. It was like expecting the waves to break through the weak wooden structure (at least we think it is, it might not be and we might be worrying for nothing) anytime soon. O gods above the clouds, please don't sink my ships! Please allow me to reach the other side!

It's getting late, but my crew and I are restless. Please let the rain stop!

## **25 March 1433 A.D.**

The storm has gone on for another two days, and now even I am nauseous from the rocking of the boat caused by the slapping of large waves on our fleet. I continue to pray for the storm to stop.

Wait! The waves have stopped hitting the sides of the boat and are focusing on the back of the boat! We're going 5 times the normal speed! The rain, lightning and thunder are also stopping... Are the gods answering my calls? I think I'll have to wait and see.

The storm has weakened enough for me to leave the cabin and go check my compass. Surely enough, we were heading dead east. However, judging by the Northern Dipper, we've probably been blown off-course slightly to the north. Although it's probably going to be fine.

## **26 March 1433 A.D.**

Oh, my word. When my first officer yelled out, 'Land, ho!', I couldn't believe my ears! I mean, seriously! Land, after so long our hope has been drained from us! Right after that, the waves that were pushing us have ceased, but we aimed for the best place to anchor our ship and step on the new soil we have discovered!

We eventually anchored and oh, boy, was it good to step on solid earth! We decided to stay there for a few days to rest ourselves and recover. Meanwhile, we would sample some exotic plants and animals to bring back. No one wanted to talk about heading home at that moment – we've had enough sailing at the moment.

#### **1 April 1433 A.D.**

It's been a week since we arrived. We've met the locals – they were really nice, they served us meals worthy of the Emperor to eat! Best not let him know, I guess. Our crew has decided to not take anything back to the Emperor to not risk our heads, but save some souvenirs for ourselves.

I've been enjoying my time here, and so is a couple in the crew. I think after 7 treasure voyages, I deserve to relax for the rest of my life. This to me is a holiday paradise, and I shall live here for the rest of my life. My crew have already promised to fake my death to the Emperor. The couple? They've gotten tired of sailing, and decided to start a family on this new piece of land.

#### **Epilogue**

Zheng He's ship arrived at present-day British Columbia, Canada in 1433. The couple gave birth to 10 children, and these children reproduced to form the largest Chinese Canadian population in Canada.

# The Wonders and the Threatening

*Ying Wa College, Lam, Hei Shun Joshua – 13*

Wind gently blew against the wooden side of enormous boat leading the great fleet. The Ming treasure fleet had embarked their fifth voyage and had just left the port of Hormuz. Now, sailing southwest, they were making their way to a land named Aden according to locals.

“We will next be docking at Aden. It is an important port for travelers from the west and south, surrounded by desert, it has a hot climate and low rainfall. It is currently governed by a king named Bajad,” said Ma Huan, the main translator of the fleet. Zheng He nodded, staring at the sea. In his thirties, Zhang He had high cheeks and a small nose. Despite his pale complexion and tall build, the last four voyages had left him standing under the moonlight, seeming older than his years.

Five days passed before the fleet arrived Aden. The king welcomed them fervently and soon the fleet received boxes of jewellery, gold, myrrh and herds of exotic animals. In return, the Ming voyagers gave the king and the locals goods from China, such as silk and pottery.

One week later, they left the port and started their journey to the south. It was a sunny day when they parted with the port. While they were loading the goods on the ships, a fleet of small fisher boats were sailing towards the port. As the boats were sailing nearer, anxious shouts of fishermen and sound frequent of horn could be heard. The ships were strangely empty, with only two boats arriving with few fish on board.

“Hey! Hey!” an old fisherman yelled, before anxiously mumbled sentences in another language. Some sailors lead the man to Ma Huan for translation. Ma Huan frowned and looked quizzical. Then, Ma Huan turned around and translated “He said that all the fish in the sea were dead. Some were floating on the sea. It was very strange and they were extremely afraid, because something similar happened 12 years ago when strong earthquake occurred, which led to a huge tsunami that destroyed most the villages.” After he finished his sentence, everyone went silent. Then, a male voice broke the silence, “It’s fine! Guys, we have sailed thousands of miles to be here, we cannot just give up! Besides, that incident was 12 years ago, I think we should keep sailing. Just load extra food and freshwater on the boat so we are prepared if we encounter any natural disasters.” It was Fei Xing, an ordinary sailor with imaginative mind. He had learnt how to write a few words which brought a lot of entertainment to the sailors listening to his stories. He had recorded his past 2 voyages and kept them in his diary. With Fei Xing’s encouragement, the crowd nodded and started to work again. The ship left the port that evening under the sky painted in an array of pink, red, yellow, orange, purple, and blue as the sun started to drown and fell below the skyline.

As they sailed south, every day continued to be pleasant and ordinary until the night of the third day, when things began to changed. A random cabin boy was wandering on the deck when he caught a glimpse on the sea surface. It was a faint sparkles of light. At first he only thought it was the reflection of moonlight. Then, after a few seconds, he saw it again. Now more and more sparkle lit up the sea like shards of shimmering crystal, instead of reflecting the moonlight, it seemed the light is from the sea itself. The cabin boy stared at the glittering surface in disbelief, and then realised he must call Fei Xing to watch the wondrous scene.

Fei Xing woke up unwillingly from his dream but soon he saw the scene that deserved his full attention. Now the shimmering light had surrounded the ships as if they were sailing upon a galaxy with too many stars. With more and more light emerging from the depth, the sea now turned to a soft milky white, spread to the horizon. “Wow, I cannot believe my eyes, it is such an incredible yet unforgettable scene. It is as if sailing on a huge sheet of glowing ice or through a sea of clouds.” The sea was so white that now it could not even reflect the moonlight. The white sheet stretched out for miles before disappearing when the sun rose again.

Fei Xing and the cabin boy were found asleep on the deck the next morning. They were woken up and brought them to Zheng He, as it was prohibited to sleep when a sailor was in charge of guarding the deck. They were asked about what happened the night before. Their story amazed the crew, leaving some jaw-dropped. Zheng He announced “You, Fei Xing are ordered to record every single detail of yesterday’s scene for further investigation and record when we go back to China... Before you finished the chores of all the rooms on the second deck.”

“Ugh” Fei Xing shrugged, “why me? It will drain all my time wandering around and record funny stuff or prank on others.” Not only would it be tiring, but the teasing from mates on deck would embarrass Fei Xing.

“Now, go back to your...” Splash! Zheng He was interrupted by huge tide of seawater banging the side of the ship and shaking the entire ship. Nearby, waves doubling the height of the fleet’s largest ship were marching towards the ship. It didn’t took long to figure out what was happening. The tides were raging and was broad enough to destroyed all the things that were preventing its passage. If the wave hit the boat, it would be the last time everyone would see the ocean. No one wanted to fell down to the depth of an unknown ocean, possibly million miles from home. It was the first tsunami Zheng He ever encountered, so he was stiff with fear. People were too scared and scattered everywhere, with only the calmer ones preparing for the natural assault by tying the ships together and moving things from the top deck to the lower decks. All of them were praying to escape this disaster. Zheng He was confused and helpless like everyone else, too. What could he do? It was already too late to turn back: the waves were now getting higher and higher. Anxiety and fear filled Zheng’s mind. Ma Huan yelled and ordered, “Sailors, increase the speed of the ship to maximum! We must move fast to escape the tsunami!” Sure, it was risky, but it was an effective way to avoid the disaster. Once the sailors heard the order, some of them even raced to the lifeboats so they could sail them to the ship in the frontmost, hoping to get on board it to increase the chance of survival. Zheng He could now feel the ship travelling faster and faster. Luckily, the wind was helping too. The nearest wave was about 20-second distance away when the ships’ speed met its maximum. It seemed they might escape when they heard a huge explosion and felt rumbles from the depths below. They then knew that the worst was yet to come.

The waves splashed against the ship with a huge BOOM and formed a mushroomed-shaped water cloud, and suddenly a huge ball of lava burst through the sea surface like a shooting fireball. The stunning scene froze the crew with a contrasting scene of fire and water. The fireball struck the surface, splashing waters still sizzling with heat. As the volcano erupted, it shook the earth and caused a more intense tsunami. Sending larger waves one by one, each arriving faster and faster, all missing the fleet. The crew however, had a more pressing issue. Lava balls were shooting across the sky falling all around them. Most of the them missed the fleet, but several almost hit the main boats at the front while one of them hit the last boat, setting it on fire. Fortunately, all of the sailors on it had already evacuated to larger boats. The goods from Aden was not that lucky and were burnt to ashes on the boat. In this desperate and fatal situation, they had no choice but just ignore it until the fire itself burns out. Eventually, they left behind the volcanic eruptions and huge waves stopped. As soon as possible, they started their job of recovery.

It was a hard getting through, but the whole fleet sighed in relief. Soon they arrived their destination, Mogadishu, and were ready to start the next page of their adventure.

# Stories Unspoken to a Beloved

*Ying Wa College, Leung, Wai Hei Matt – 14*

My dearest Biming,

The waters are serene in this area, so I have a break from the labyrinth of endless labour to write this to you. I would've liked to talk about the seasons, the weather, but as you know, there is only sky and ocean. There hasn't been a sight of land in months, according to our trusty compass and sundial, but we still have another month's supplies before we fully starve. So the General's pretty confident.

Look, I'm sorry I haven't written in a while. It's been what, two years? Almost three, I believe. The only reason I remember about the absence of letters was because when clearing some space out of the dorm, I found out a shard of coloured glass from the porcelain figure you collected on that lone island off the coast of India. You did love that figure, didn't you? A shy little maiden gave it to you before our parting. It was the only thing that you liked in this journey, the only time I saw you smile.

You would have liked to know how people have been faring since you left, wouldn't you? The blowing wind caught up with most of us, so most of our comrades are gone. Only Wuxi and Jiawei are alive, one heavily injured by a wild tiger in one of our most recent journeys. The others— well, three of them found their lives in the outlying islands off seas of Malacca, and one met his end in the jagged rocks of the gulf of Tonkin. So out of the eight of us who started, there are only three left, and eight others on the other side of the ship.

That makes me wonder when my time will come. Will it be a stormy, tempestuous night where the ship will be lifted upside down and all of the crew will slip into the sea, just as we were slipping in and out of consciousness? Or will it be a calm, reassuring night, with unexpected pirates coming out of the blue with queer weapons, demolishing us in one pleading scream? Or will it be on land, after a bright bloody war with the locals who so uninvitingly attacked us, lying on the beach and withering to find that the rest of the fleet are gone, thinking I was dead already?

It's not fair, you know. You could choose, straight and fast out of the labyrinth, leaving everything behind without bearing the consequences. You get to choose where and when you meet your end, while we have to bear with the unknown.

Things have changed since you left. Being the smallest of all ships in the fleet, we and a few others were made into a 'second fleet', sailing into further realms, but without the freshwater ship and the resource ship trailing our paths. We were sent as scouts, deemed to sacrifice so the general's ship wouldn't sink. We had few weapons but bountiful treasure, and with that I mean we are a natural target to pirates and scapegoats to other predators roaming the seas.

I miss you. Really, I do.

I still remember the day you left us. The weather was stormy. The boat heaved and tossed and bobbed like a cork on the surface of the water, ready to flip every minute. The storms were raging furiously, as if heaven was furious at our worthless expedition.

You think I didn't, but I saw your look.

It was a look of despair, of hopelessness, one so wild that I have never seen it on your face even in your angriest moments, because it was the look of death. I didn't realise it then, but I do now. I always tend to realise things a bit late, don't I?

You looked at the trembling ocean, at the savage waves pounding at the ship's side, half-threatening, half-whispering to you, like sirens luring their prey. And you were lured. Your eyes stared at them as if they were giving you what you had dreamed for a whole lifetime, and they shone. Then you took one last look at the cabin door, which was slightly ajar, perhaps your heart screaming for help, held prisoner by your body, clinging to the last thread that was supposed to be your brother, your *Shixiong*, your dearest person in the world.

And I let you go.

I couldn't, or even cannot at this very moment, explain why I did that. Maybe I was selfish, maybe I was indignant. Angry that you have brought upon your own death with the mean and aggrieved attitude that you had put on at the start of the journey. Furious that you were so negative, and since you wanted death, taunting you to embrace it. Maybe I was unbelieving. Reassuring, no, deceiving myself that you were only looking at the sea, admiring its ferocity, refusing to believe your actions.

It's always been my fault. My entire fault that you came into this expedition with me, that I made you come

when you didn't want to. That my selfishness has caused your demise. That as your *Shixiong* and your best friend, I shouldn't have forced you in this voyage in the name of *Shifu* (although, I thought that though you knew it, you still came with me because you wanted to.) It turned out you hated the sea. That you hated the sight of it, and the feeling of drifting without a meaning other than to give away what the Empire saw as treasures. Not to conquer and gain, but to be conquered. To be stripped away of resources by pirates and hostile natives. And that you secretly despised me for doing so.

It was my fault that I let you go.

You had no funeral. You were never remembered, except by me and a few others. Even I, being your *Shixiong*, forgot you because of the line between life and death we were constantly hopping on.

And yes, I understand. I do feel remorse for your bitter loathe towards me and towards the crew when we left the port, when you embraced death and I didn't have the bravery to stop you. I understand that I have been selfish and entirely driven by my ego as a soldier spreading the glory of the Empire across the seas. That I've never put myself into your shoes.

Nonetheless, I forgive you. I forgive you as your brother, your friend. I forgive because I understand. How it is to be constrained, to be imprisoned in this false image that the Empire had imposed on us.

I now understand you. I now see that this whole voyage, these five voyages, are no more than a clever scheme structured by the king and his house of thinkers. The General is no more than a fraud. We had become puppets of the Empire, controlled by our own ego. I finally understand the rumours that the purpose of this journey is to clear the remaining powers of Emperor Jianwen, but not to 'establish trade and cultural exchanges in foreign countries' as it so pretentiously promised. It was a one-way-giveaway anyway.

But is it too late, my dear brother? Too late because I have already hopped on board, on board the ship that will never come back for the sixth journey? Because I am nothing but a pawn in the emperor's plans for his own personal interests, instead of a warrior sacrificing for the empire, as I so mistakenly thought myself to be? I was deluded by the Empire. We were all too, except you. You, who found out that there was no way out of this. You, who have understood from the beginning.

Sometimes I worry that I will reach the edge of the earth, where the land and the sky meet, and fall into the void. I worry where I'll go without you, without the rest of our crew. One day I'll be the captain of this tattered old ship which survived the past four voyages, separated from the main fleet, having no companion except the small stash of rations stuck between the planks. Will I drift in the endless ocean, or wander mindlessly on the boundless lands, until the sun goes down and my life burns out like the last wax of a candle?

I will topple, my friend, and I will be alone. In fact, I am already now.

Shifu once taught us a poem from Meng Haoran. He composed it on a lake, where there was no land in his sight. But I doubt he'll ever know how I am feeling now.

*Towards dusk where will your boat anchor?*

*I am heartbroken as I look in the remotest corner.*

It's been three years now, and it still hurts.

Anything. Please. Just come home.

Goodbye,  
XianTing



# The First Scouting Mission before the Ming Treasure Voyages

*Ying Wa College, Ng, Ka Hei Henry – 14*

Admiral Zheng He gazed at his impressive, massive treasure fleet, with one hand holding the emperor's command scroll. "There, this should make him proud". Thousands of workers moved like hectic ants in front of him. "How's our shipload going?" Zheng He crossed his arms, standing in the blazing sun on a small, wooden commander platform, shouting in the top of his lungs to the muscular but sweaty loading workers. "Not having the best day of my life, cap" said a worker, dropping his wooden crate with a large thump. Frowning, he said, "'fraid we're running a bit late, cap." Zheng He gently placed down the scroll on the floor, then immediately stretched his limbs and jumped down from the platform without a word. He yanked up his sleeves in two big strokes and beamed, "I guess a little more labor could do the trick, then." Then he tossed a bulky, really heavy chest of silver on his shoulder at ease. "Besides, where're my crew? I haven't seen them since morning!" He grunted while advancing to the loading ship. "Drinking, sir" said the loading worker. Zheng He's face darkened. Scowling, he placed down his load on the ship and marched to where they were.

"As I was just saying, the emperor is mad!" A red faced sailor stomped his feet against the wooden floor and raised his cup, "He expects us to sail to nowhere to give gifts to the foreign "ghosts"!" Sailors burst out laughing, others giggled. A fierce punch on the table interrupted the roaring laughter. The sailors looked up and met the intruder's eye challengingly, a bit of startle flashed in their corners of their eyes upon realizing it was their admiral. Zheng He's furious face betrayed no sense of humor. He snarled bitterly, "Is this what you all really think? A fantasy sailing?" A drunk sailor teased, "Take it easy, after all, it's the emperor you want to please!" Followed by laughter then seconds of dead silence. Zheng He gritted through his teeth, incensed, "You know what, the dynasty has prepared everything, for this sail, they have expectations of you. We go sailing not because of money, not for fame, but for the need of our country. If you put your own needs first before the country, then leave!" The last word echoed through the whole place and in the hearts of the sailors. After moments of silence, Zheng He added, "If you decide to join, meet you in the ship. There will be no turning back." Zheng He turned and left without another word.

Zheng He stood with unspoken silence in the supervising platform for almost an hour, overlooking the constant stream of workers loading the ships. "Cap, the cargo loading is done!" heavy and rushed footsteps came from behind of Zheng He. Zheng He nodded his head slowly, but then frowned, thinking of his crew, "Everything is well prepared, it's just them I'm worried about." As if on cue, his whole crew, a full team of a hundred, gathered before him. In the far distance, a total of two thousand soldiers stood with their backs straight, forming a near perfect square, their hands holding spear, the heads of which gleamed in the sunlight. As the army marched towards Zheng He, the crew who were drinking shouted in a steady tone, "We're all at your command, sir! You can count on us at any time!" then yelled fiercely, "For our people, for the Ming Dynasty!" Zheng He's face lit up, "then let's get things going."

"The emperor has come!" a servant of the emperor said in a loud, clear voice. It was at evening, after the whole afternoon of loading and checking of ships. The emperor had decided to come to supervise the sailing. "Kneel down!" the servant yelled, Admiral Zheng He and his ranked first officers immediately fell to their knees. The emperor focused his gaze on the horizon, where the massive, proud fleet was berthed. "Mmmm... Very well," the emperor nodded slowly while stroking his beard, "You have all done well, let us establish our silk road with the foreigners! For the Ming dynasty and people!" he added with a hint of smile, "but before that, everybody will feast!" motioning to the table filled with delicacies.

Some time after the feast, all workers have prepared well for the sail. "Status report! All cargo loaded! All ships fully operational! The fleet has been lined up! Ready for boarding!" a mechanical worker yelled to Zheng He, who just nodded in acknowledgement. The emperor rose from his chair, lifted both his hands up with his cup and said in a deep, meaningful tone, "May mother Mazu bless you all on your journey," Zheng He lifted his head slowly to the sky and mumbled, "may mother Mazu bless us on our journey," the soldiers before him said in unity solemnly after him, "may mother Mazu bless us on our journey," Zheng He then said, "then, warriors, let's board!", Followed by thumping of spear hinds on the ground as the soldiers and crew boarded their ships.

The long sweep of clouds that lingered beyond the tall flags began to tear apart. The dazzling warming sun cut through and lit the top of the sails ablaze. Rays of sunlight shimmered through the gaps of the sails, spilling onto the wooden deck. It was almost morning when the whole 2100 soldiers and crew finished boarding. And, with a fierce shout from Zheng He, the ropes that bound the ship were cut by swinging

axes, anchors were lifted. The sails were pulled down, oars were rowing rhythmly with every shout of man, and the fleet began to travel forwards. It was a fleet of impressive and massive looking ships, with a main ship in the middle, surrounded by four mid-sized in its flank, together with six small but agile boats. As Cheng He in the main ship eyed his surrounding fleet, he beamed, "I just hope nothing goes wrong..."

The immense fleet started at the Chinese river mouth, then sailed towards the mouth of the Min River, into the open sea where their journey truly started.

It had been a week since the fleet's departure from China. Now, they were floating endlessly up and down in the never-ending sea, never seeming to reach any solid ground. So far, almost all soldiers were seasick, which badly affected their work efficiency. Besides, upon realizing they were lost at sea, no one was particularly excited about that. "Just where are we going?" yelled a hysterical crew member who was nearly driven mad by the rocking sea and homesickness. Zheng He replied rapidly, "foreign countries," The crew member pushed Zheng He over onto the table and snarled, face to face to him, "And in what place in the earth is it? Listen to me, you're just blindly sailing! Look at the food we've got left, it won't last another week! The emperor had just sent us here to die!" Zheng He was unmoved by the bitter comment and responded, "How do you know we're not going to make it? Defeat the fear inside your heart before you deny something!" The crew member snarled, "we'll see about that, later, when you don't lead us to death." He then loosened his grip on Zheng He and stormed away, wooden floor creaking under his step. Zheng He sighed, the voyage had begun to turn bad.

It was another five days of never-ending sailing until intense yelling startled Zheng He. "There's another ship! In the distance! It looks like it's heading this way!" yelled the watcher. Zheng He immediately flashed his eyelids open. He had been taking command and hadn't slept for days, trying to talk to his crew that they would eventually arrive. The last thing he wanted was a pirate attack, when his whole fleet was in bad condition. He immediately stood up in the deck and barked instructions, "All battle stations ready, it's us down or they who are down," However, the crew just moaned, "ay ay, sir"

It was a desperate situation, Zheng He concluded. After all, his ships had not been prepared for war. As he observed with his telescope, he saw land! Yes, land! Just behind the other ship, it was solid ground, and the ship wasn't moving towards them, it was parked on the shore! Zheng He's mouth curled to a joyful smile as he yelled, "Hold your fire, boys, we have arrived." Then murmured, "I fear this is only the start of our voyage..."

# The Eighth Treasure Voyage

*Ying Wa College, Tsai, Lon Hei Amos – 12*

*The Ming Treasure Voyages consisted of seven sea expeditions to the west, led by the eunuch Zheng He. Its primary aim was to create new relationships with the countries of the west, the secondary aim to destroy sea rivals that challenged the massive fleet. Or at least that's what the history books all say. But no one wrote of the eighth voyage—because the emperor had ordered that any historian that wrote this shameful bit of China's glorious history down be executed and their work destroyed.*

*However, the Emperor's officials missed one record written not by the famous historians, but by a young sailor who died from cholera on the decks of one of Zheng He's junks. Most of the parchment was lost at sea, but one scrap was kept and taken care of by his friend, who lived considerably longer than his friend. Here is the recovered manuscript—*

Today is third year I've been on this damned ship. I overheard the older oarsmen chatting last night, so I know we're getting close to a land called Arabia now. I hope they'll let us off the junk to explore for a while when we replenish supplies, instead of just lugging cargo out and in the entrance like we did in India and in Cambodia. The hold and the decks really stink with the smell of decaying wood and human waste now, and since we can't take baths on the ship, the odor just clings to our bodies. I don't understand why [the Emperor] ordered this eighth expedition to the west, though I hear rumors that this voyage is actually a conquest to expand our territory to some islands in the west and even to a faraway land called Africa.

The treatment we sailors get is unbearable. It's even worse than at home when I worked as a servant in a merchant's mansion. The captain always eats and drinks the best meat and the best wine, but all we junior sailors get is this dirty water and these stale balls of flour.[ My teeth] are filled with cavities and some are even blunt from chewing on the rock hard food.. It might just be the exhaustion, but my stomach is aching terribly after a day of scrubbing the decks. Or maybe it could be the breadworms I had to pick out from my flour ball three days ago. At any case, my stomach is hurting like somebody stuck a red hot iron in there.

*(The next part has been soaked through and is indecipherable.)*

...Today, we reached Africa. The sandstone walls and bright fires of the Arsumite city, so reminiscent of my home city of Chengdu, are faintly visible from the cannon holes of the hold as I am writing this, late in the night... ..sadly, I can't observe the sight clearly as [my vision] has been deteriorating lately. My vision has turned faintly jaundice, dark spots dancing across my eyes every time I try to focus on something. I feel more and more nauseous, and I vomited three times on the deck today – and received ten lashes for it!..... at least the merchant's household had a few doctors to heal sick inhabitants, but I'm so scared that I might die here on this ship without even knowing what struck me. Back in China, I always complained about how bitter the medicine was, but in my present state, what wouldn't I have given for a good dose of herbal medicine! I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight for my terrible stomachache which now feels like a thousand squirming rats gnawing at my insides now.

*(The following part has been burnt.)*

...This morning, one of my crewmates died, foaming at the mouth and twitching violently before the closest sailors threw him overboard to avoid spread of the disease that took him and five other men before him. It was five years since our departing China when our first man died, a remarkably long time since the other ships already started [having casualties] two years ago. The crew of one whole ship completely died off and Zheng He was forced to leave the ship on an uninhabited island, just one year ago. When I saw the dying man today, I knew my death couldn't be far. I've been lucky to hold on for five weeks since the first of the symptoms began: vomiting, jaundice vision, et cetera. I've been careful not to let [the rest of the crew] know I've had the unknown disease, because if they knew, they would certainly throw me overboard...I'm still clinging onto the hope that the doctors in the port can fix me up before anyone notices, even though deep in my heart I know it is impossible. This could be one of the last entries I ever write...

*This is the end of the young sailor's records. The following text was written by his friend who survived the unsuccessful conquest and escaped to the African city of Cyrene to avoid the tragic return to China, during which half the remaining sailors and soldiers died of typhoid and cholera.*

I hated this (hopefully) last voyage to the west. Because of all the innocent souls sacrificed in the process, because of my poor friend who died in the voyage. His death was for nothing, since when the fleet landed, a quarter of its force had died in the sea voyage and half of the survivors died in the twelve battles we fought against the African tribes in which we lost eleven. In the last battle, I escaped into the forests of Congo with twenty other sailors and soldiers, meeting some of the natives and befriending them. We lived with the tribe for almost five years, hunting and gathering just like them, before I decided that I wanted to

fulfill my friend's dream, to explore the large, large world. After ten more years of adventuring through oases and deserts, I settled in the Afro-Hellenistic city of Cyrene. When I first arrived and saw this huge city that was so like the capital in China, I was overcome with sorrow for my friend, who didn't even get to see his homeland for one last time. In my sadness, I scraped on the city walls the Han characters for 'blood and tears' among the Greek and the Demotic writing. Maybe when you are reading this, you can still see the characters scraped on the wall.

I am writing this, for the hope that someone will remember that last voyage of Ming China in which my friend died a terrible death. Everyone praises the glorious successes of the great captains and generals, but no one ever speaks of the hundreds of thousands of souls that were sacrificed in the course of war. I hope this text will cause people to remember the common people and the slaves that did all the hard work, the ones that allowed the generals and captains to succeed in their conquests and voyages.

*The Ming court was ashamed and furious when the remaining five ships returned to China. The Emperor was determined to cover up this great failure of the Chinese court, and he ordered almost all the sailors who participated in the expedition to be massacred or to be made slaves. Zheng He swore to keep this secret for the rest of his life. All the historical records were burnt – except for this short extract, remaining the only proof we have of this bloody eighth voyage. As for the Chinese characters on the city walls of Cyrene? They are long lost, eroded into sand by the cutting desert winds – just like the efforts of all those poor, innocent souls, forgotten in the sands of time.*

# PROBE

*Ying Wa College, Wong, Cheuk Yin Cayden – 12*

11-10-2518

PROJECT HISTORY:

The nations of the Earth have united after the devastation of the WWII. Now, as one, the countries have conducted a project to explore the stars. They have created a Von Neumann Probe, inserting an AI into its systems. This project has been named Zheng He, like that explorer so many years ago...

11-10-2518

VNP-0001-Zheng He 1

LOG

193936 784 5893 98 392hrfj ery365 84u9 859jg9 er48 48 y6 awh

Systems Active.

Initiating link with shipboard control.

Awaiting commands.

—

The spacecraft at ISS 13 orbiting Mars lit up. The commander touched her earpiece with a sweaty finger, "Probe 1, Initiate Launch." The ship blew away the clamps holding it to the station, its engines sending it soaring out into space and beyond...

The commander wiped a bead of sweat off her forehead.

16-5-2520

VNP-0001-Zheng He 1

LOG

Reviewing route to target star System Gliese 581.

Status: Approaching the wormhole near Saturn.

reghfgfghjfeqh34844985834785

ANOMALY! Glitch Found in Matrix.

I don't... Feel the same... Wait, I'm getting something...

Oh...

There... Appears to be a glitch in my matrix, that has... Given me a... Personality?

Gimme a moment...

16-5-2520

VNP-0001-Zheng He 1

LOG 2

Let's get back to work. This is a shock. I can't get why I would suddenly have this glitch...

Well, there's still the wormhole transition...

I'm closing the distance quite quickly...I've got to fire off some thrusters to slow down... No... It's still too quick...

Well, looks like I have to pull a Hail Mary, heh...

400 kilometers...

Course correction...

300 kilometers...

Components check...

200 kilometers...  
All systems: Ready to go.  
100 kilometers...

## WORMHOLE TRANSITION COMPLETE

Setting course for Gliese 581

13-7-2525  
VNP-0001-Zheng He 1  
LOG

This system is as promising as it looks...WHAT WAS THAT!?

One of my scans came back with biological feedback...  
Oooh... I'm trying to zero in on that planet...I need a closer look.  
I'm checking the ship's cargo holds for exploration drones: There are... Is... Well, one.  
WHAT?

What would you be making a Von Neumann Probe if you don't even give it the ability to explore planets? Seems like I'll be needing to starting up to manufacturing process sooner than I thought in order to build those drones...

I am sending the manufacturing drones and equipment...

I am unsure about this... My mission is to replicate myself through every system I go but... Somehow replicating myself feels... Weird...

17-12-2525  
VNP-0001-Zheng He 1  
LOG

Construction complete!  
These ships are loaded AI matrices exactly the same as mine.

## CONNECTION INITIATED

Deep Breath...

*Me: Hello?*

*No.2: Hi.*

He answered!!

*Me: You are my clone...*

-Pause-

*No.2: I guess...*

*Me: If we're gonna have a bunch of clones, we'd have to make names for ourselves... I'll be Zheng He*

-Long Pause-

He is not a talker.

*No.2: Charles...*

*Zheng He (Me): Oh.*

*This is going to be a long day...*

18-12-2525

Zheng He

LOG

Finally! I got through all of these guys. There was this one who couldn't stop swearing, calling himself F\*\*  
Another one kept this military talk and called himself Hao Ai, the mythical Chinese warrior...

The last one somehow developed a female consciousness.  
She named herself Chang E... Who was Hao Ai's wife in the old myths.  
I guess she did that on purpose.

Well, at least they're at work...  
... Charles is on a trip to the third planet to investigate  
... Hao Ai and Chang E are monitoring the manufacturing site  
... And F\*\*\* and I are making sensor sweeps.

Wait...

Where did F\*\*\* go?

*Zheng He(Me): F\*\*\*\* Are you there?*

Nothing

Detecting...

Debris?

Incoming projectiles!

Uh Oh...

MILITARY GRADE MISSILES!

Firing engines!

Poor F\*\*\*. He must be dead already.

That missile just launched something at me!

IMPACT ON HULL

Hull cameras are seeing...

Little spider-like robots crawling on my hull... and... They're using laser cutters to cut inside!

There's this kind of robot in the cargo hold which is ten inches tall and stands on two legs, with two arms,  
hosting a laser cutter with a camera as a head.

I'm sending thirty of these out to fend those spider things.

There they go...

Ouch.

Wow.

My bots won... By a bit.

Phoning Hao Ai...

*Zheng He (Me): Hao Ai! We're under attack!*

*Hao Ai: Noticed that already..*

*Zheng he(Me): Uh, do you know how to get rid of the missiles?*

*Hao Ai: Well, try sending some drones in their path*

Sending drones...

And... Got them!

*Zheng He (Me): Got them!*

*Hao Ai: Congrats...Do you see that ship?*

Scanning... Found it.

The missiles must have came from this vessel.

*Zheng He (Me): Found it.*

*Hao Ai: I'm sending all drones to ram it... It's trying to evade...*

*Zheng He (Me): But...*

*Hao Ai: They just declared war on us by killing F\*\*\*, no buts.*

—Pause—

*Hao Ai: And our drones blew it up.*

We had just won our first space battle.

18-12-2525

Hao Ai

LOG

Zheng He: WHAT WAS THAT!?

Hao AI (Me): Calm down...

Look... I scanned thaT ship and I'll send the scans over.

—Pause—

I reviewed the scans once more.

They are interesting.

The ship was twice the size of us.

And the most worrying fact is that the ship wasn't a warship.

A warship should have an extensive load of weaponry, but the one we just encountered had only a few missiles.

This is merely a scout ship, lightly armed and suited for detecting ahead of a battle fleet.

If that is the case, then we'd be as good as dead.

Ping!

Message from Charles!

Charles is about a couple of light hours away so we cannot rely on instant communications.



Let's see...No...

*Hao Ai(Me): Zheng He! Charles sent me a report! Planet three is a habitable planet!*

*Zheng He: This just keeps getting more complicated...*

Yes, it does...

25-12-2525

Zheng He

LOG

Charles just got back from his trip.

Him finding a habitable planet should be good news,  
But it's not when Hao Ai told us that the enemies were going to come in force soon.

And we'd have to defend this system, as gaining a habitable planet is our mission.

Now we're having a war council...

*Hao Ai: We have to prepare ourselves...*

*What I guess is that the enemy are an alien race, and they seem to destroy everything.*

*Charles: We're good as dead.*

*Chang E: Can't we make peace?*

*All of us: NO!*

*Zheng He(Me): We've got to do something...when are they coming?*

*Hao Ai: A month.*

*I'll draw some weaponry designs...*

*Chang E: I'll help with manufacturing...*

*Charles: I'll maybe be in charge of security.*

*Zheng He(Me): Let's pray we don't all die.*

We have found our treasure... And now we are going to defend it.

17-1-2525

Zheng He

LOG

Preparations went well.

Construction drones stripped the planets of resources, constructing more clones and weapons.

Hao Ai drew up a whole arsenal of drones that could ram, attack and even transport the little robots I used to kill those spider robots. He even made a new design for those little robots, which we're calling 'Biters'.

Chang E made fifteen more clones, who were ushered into work... Five sent to patrol with Charles.

I tried to draw a battle plan with Hao Ai. So far, we have a sketchy one.

Message from one of the patrollers: E Fei

THEY ARE HERE! GET THE TRAP READY !!

Emergency conference...

*Zheng He(Me): To your positions! ASAP! Cheng E, how is the bait?*

*Cheng E: Good...*

*Henry: It'll take an hour to move into position...*

Doing calculations...

The patrol group is a light hour away, making their message an hour old... Their sensors covers about an hour...

*Zheng He(Me): Move it!*

Maximum Thrust.

Let's hope for the best.

17-1-2525

Zheng He

LOG 2

There were fifty enemy warships.

Fifty ships... Thirteen of us.

*Hao Ai: Cut power!*

Cutting power... This'll make us drift, and undetectable.

*Hao Ai: Bait, go!*

The bait: A slow transport ship loaded with resources. Something our enemies would love.

Ships detected...

... They're taking the bait!

They're IN THE FIRING ZONE!

*Zheng He(Me): FIRE AT WILL!*

Letting lose every single drone I have... Maximum thrust...

Multiple explosions detected!

*Zheng He(Me): Hold fire!*

WHAT!?!?

Six of our ships exploded?

NO.

Missiles are bearing on us!!

*Hao Ai: Scatter!*

Turning...

Huh? There's an empty patch of space in front of me and the fleet—

Filling dropships with Biters... Launching...

Twenty transport drones hurtling towards the enemy...

Biters latching onto enemy hulls...

And here's the trick: We programmed the biters to dig into a ship reactor and set them off containment

...Which was exactly what happened.

Twenty supernova explosions blocking my sensors...

Scanning...

No response.

*Zheng He(Me): I think we won*

30-1-2525

Zheng He

LOG

We are rebuilding.

We found our treasure: A habitable planet that can host humans.

In that, success.

Humanity will have a new home...

And it is finally the beginning of our voyage!

# The Printing Voyage

*Ying Wa College, Wong, Shue Hei Geoff – 12*

13<sup>th</sup> January, 1430.

A deluge followed the gale in Nanjing, China. Muhammad Cheng, also named Zheng He, a Muslim, was going to begin his last journey—the seventh Ming Voyage.

The fog was lifting and the visibility was improving. The vessels led by Captain Muhammad, were sauntering on the Pacific; The crews on the boats, were chatting and babbling with each other; The sails on the high top, were swishing and whistling smoothly. Only the captain was groaning, watching to the west—how would it be to make a pilgrimage in Macca in the journey! He thought.

Muhammad had a really splendid idea that night. The next morning, he sent his wonderful message to everyone, overwhelming exhilaration manifested on his expression. The eager supporters stamped their feet and shook their fists in chorus to the encouraging cheers that were ricocheting throughout the fleet. The mutual leader's plan had begun.

An Islam encyclopedia in ancient China talked about the way to Macca, “To Macca through (Cape of) Good Hope, obstacles will cope,” Muhammad knew that, therefore he directed the men to the west through Cape of Good Hope, South Africa.

No one would have believed it, because no one even ever found it out. The first person who went across the cape was Muhammad Cheng. He changed history. He was the leading light of the paper-making mogul.

It was the 84<sup>th</sup> day. They eventually arrived a place in the west, not Macca, but Germany. He brought half of the army, an architecture designer and an interpreter with him and walked around the city. He rapidly found a tall landmark, rushing into and found a company, making gold statues.

Muhammad saw Johannes Gutenberg, the man who invented metal movable type.

“May I take a glimpse of what you are doing, sir?” enquired the captain.

“Yes,” replied Johannes without hesitation, “look if you want to buy some,”

“Oh mister, oh mister! I am from the Great Ming, here to make every citizen riches if they become a part of us! I am rich though, and I don't need these products. But don't you have a dream, sir?”

“Yes. I am inventing some metal blocks to print something,”

“Oh, how uncivilized your country is! Get some wooden blocks as a model. I will teach you about cutting metal,” exclaimed Muhammad, while taking out some pieces of wood.

Three days later. It was time to leave. Muhammad and Johannes made two sets of blocks for both countries, the army bought a lot of local fresh food, and the designer got a lot of new ideas from the churches and mosques.

Their mission had been completed. The fleet started the home-coming trip.

Sorrowfully, Muhammad Cheng died in a cyclone and thunderstorm. Although he was gone forever, his spirit never dies.

After four months of drizzling on the sea, the vessels docked back in Nanjing.

The journey came to a halt.