

Fiction

Group 3



Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Chinese International School, Cheung, Charlotte – 12

Reports to finish, graphs to make, emails to reply. John exhaled heavily, as he flopped his head into his pile of printed materials. A third empty cup of coffee rested next to him, his drowsiness hinting at the necessity of a fourth or a fifth. His breath reeked of a disconcertingly stinky mix of coffee beans, the extremely faint flavor of mint mouthwash and saliva in general. In search of a break from the totality of pressure and frustration in life, the next morning, he headed up to Huangshan.

He looked up to the sky — the sun was yawning but he was up anyway. The Chinese characters announced solemnly, his arrival at the “Front Gate”. He began his stride up to the cable car station, but he froze in his tracks — his brows furrowed, eyes widening.

Something was amiss.

Gone was the iconic magic and beauty of Huangshan — instead, the uninvited noise from tourists loudly squabbling to each other banished the sacred serenity. A vocal bargaining between stall owners and the tourists about the price of an ice drink pricked his ears, like the unrelenting buzzing bees.

Completely exasperated, here he was to experience the search of a gone silence, yearning even more for the peace that was always absent from his daily life. Where was the mesmerising beauty of Huangshan that enticed generations of poets and artists? He wondered. While the walk up to the zenith seemed to be infinite, the remix of multiple languages and dialects of tourists became the background tone, setting the mood of his journey. The Baizhang Spring and the A-shaped Waterfall were simply close by, but John could not see anything more than what met the eyes. The Baizhang Spring failed to dazzle him, the cascading silky waterfall was no more than a source of bitingly cold splashes.

As he popped into a cable car, he was only hoping that the peace would come upon him. Now, the unclosable windows made him feel more claustrophobic than ever, the noise poured in through the gap, smashing his eardrums like a pie was being thrown at his face — and he could not jump out of the cable car. The closer he was to the blue sky, the muddier and unappealing the brown trails became.

He buried his face in his hands, gritting his teeth. Why was this happening? He came here to escape from chaos, and all he found was more chaos! “Oh, this is enough chaos for one lifetime,” he thought. Huangshan used to be that paradise where crowds were nowhere to be found, the peace and beauty prevailing above all else — however, he now found the crowd utterly unavoidable. Had he known all this would be harassing his eardrums, wreaking havoc with his psyches, he would have stayed at his office desk to continue with reports, graphs and emails. Even the suffocating working life his boss psychopathically put him through would be better, better than seeing his dreamy portrait of Huangshan smudged before him. They, the ruthless tourists, contributing dabs and strokes that nobody asked for.

“You have arrived at the Greeting Pine,” a pre-recorded voice commanded. John followed like a robot, walking towards the Greeting Pine with no expectations. Here they

were, freely dancing in the wind. The pines were waving with enthusiasm, eagerness and energy, standing in their old age as trees.

John boarded another cable car, and the Stone Flown From Afar caught his eyes. The stone reached the sky, gently penetrating and dipping into the clouds with its tip, like a Chinese pen dipping lightly into a bottle of ink. He dazed at the ethereal structure.

After another little ride in the car, he had arrived at the Cooling Platform. Walking to the center of the platform, he felt the wind blowing towards his face, ruffling his hair, and brushing his legs, a cooling sensation sweeping across his whole body. He didn't even mind his shirt flapping against his chest.

Another cable car trip later, the Begin-to-Believe Peak almost made his eyes pop out. He couldn't believe it! How did these — how did these rocks hold together, in a straight fashion, when they were almost floating, hovering over each other? It was almost as if levitation had allowed the rocks to defy gravity!

He went higher and higher and higher, and the cable car doors opened at last. As he stepped out of the car, the biggest, tallest, most grand of them all was revealed — the Lotus Peak.

He had been missing out. The wind greeted him and brushed his cheeks lightly as he watched the waves of clouds soar smoothly through the air — looking next to him at the “Greeting Pine” and below him to the little staircases, the imposing peaks and those trees that nobody cared for but managed to flourish with their own inner strength, witnessing the changing of times in its ancient history. He felt like he was atop the entire world, a godly feeling empowering his mind, like he could do anything —

The fog was engulfed by a gentle but sudden whoosh of cold wind, just as he had wished for the fog to disappear from his sight, leaving a collection of peaks in its wake. John felt awash by a void, the sense of nothingness and emptiness—as he stood speechless and with a serene feeling.

He peered down at the scenery below his feet, the green of the lush grass, the brown of the peaks, the white of the clouds and the black of the granite staircases. Another light gust of wind breezed past his face, and he felt...reborn, like a wave had just washed his soul, and the pressure of the documents and reports on his shoulders just wafted away like a cloud of smoke. Looking out of the cable car he was in, John opened up the window and let the birds settle on the edge while chirping. Brown birds, black birds, and white birds all flew away from their cables, and came to join John on his cable car, while they sang their joyful songs. He thought of it—he used to hate birds chirping. He thought they were nuisances, creations of nature that had voices to bring disruption and unhappiness to people. But now, it was a kind of naturally created music, that he had learnt to listen more closely to, and he slowly appreciated it.

On the way to the airport, he reflected upon the power that being atop the Lotus Peak had given him. The imposing peaks, the persistent trees, the steamy springs — they had survived the harsh wind and rain, the freezing snow and hail, and the ferocious sun. After tens of thousands of years, they still stood confidently, not withered by the tests of time or the tests of whatever disaster nature threw their way. They all toughed it out, despite what was going on around them, and learnt to find the peace in their inner selves.

Drifting into a deep slumber, a poem about another mountain his mother read to him when he was little spoke to him, quietly and gently:

*“Since I cannot be born again,
on days when my heart grows grim, I leave my quiet house,
and go away to the mountains.*

*On the day I return from a nameless hill,
in house and the village,
I am reborn.”*

The next morning, John awoke with a spring in his step. A first cup of coffee rested next to him — its emptiness didn't hint at the necessity of a second, instead it hinted at his energy. His breath smelled of fresh apples, refreshing mint mouthwash and a good granola bar. “All clouds float, don't they?” John smiled to himself in his office, looking at a picture of him in Huangshan on his desk. Thinking of going back to Huangshan again, he felt that serenity wasn't far, but it was close to his heart despite all those daily nuisances.

Escape from Jiuhua Shan

Chinese International School, Liu, Sarah – 14

A thick mist swirled around Jiuhua Shan. The mountain was the highest among all the Yellow Mountains and the most sacred to the Buddhist faith. The pine-covered peaks seemed to stretch upwards to the sky, sheltering the ancient monastery nestled against the side of the mountain, seemingly abandoned by its former inhabitants. Dense clumps of pine trees clung precariously to the rocky slopes, almost obliterating the narrow pathway that man had built several centuries ago leading up to the monastery. Parts of the path were almost impassible to human beings.

Huang Rongxi lay slumped against an old tree trunk, exhausted from his steep climb. His right arm hung limply by his side, blood seeping through the bandages covering the faded grey of his imperial uniform. Huang had walked for days without food, the pain from his wound growing ever worse as the days passed. The slaughter during the battle against the Tang army had been so intense that Huang saw no chance of surviving the onslaught against his own depleted unit. One moonless night, he slipped out of the camp and crawled into the dense undergrowth at the base of the mountain. For two days, Huang slowly climbed higher and higher into the Yellow Mountains, evading any paths which might be used by any imperial troops. He was convinced that by now, any search party would have given up the hunt for a deserted soldier and began to gradually slow his pace.

On the third day of his escape, Huang decided to take shelter in a low cave, almost hidden in the midst of the silent forest. As night fell, he closed his eyes and tried to block out the numbing pain in his arm. The next day, Huang woke up early, disturbed by the sound of rustling leaves outside of the cave. He immediately moved to draw his knife from its sheath, but instead of an imperial soldier, he saw the face of a young boy, standing at the entrance of the cave. “My name is Hao Jingcheng.” said the boy in a gentle voice.. I live on the mountain and I know somebody who can help you.” “Go away boy, I don’t need any help. Just leave me alone.” Huang grunted. But the boy persisted. “But you are bleeding through your bandage, and you won’t last more than a couple of days on the mountain.” “I already told you to leave me alone.” Hao continued to badger the man. “I’m going to take you to the monastery at the top of the mountain. There is an old monk that lives there who can tend your wounds.” Ignoring Huang’s protests, Hao began to lift the soldier by his good arm. Eventually, Huang gave up the fight and limped out of the cave, supported by his young rescuer.

Towards evening, Huang and his new companion reached the top of Mount Jiuhua. As the sun began to set, tiny snowflakes fell from the sky, gradually forming a white blanket across the mountain. The rays of the sun had painted the sky deep shades of red and pink, forming a backdrop to the ancient Shaolin Monastery which clung precariously to the edge of the mountainside. By the time the pair reached the foot of the stairs leading up to the main gate of the monastery, Huang was on the brink of collapsing. Suddenly, a tall figure of an elderly man emerged from the gate. “Who is this soldier, Hao?” asked the figure. “And why have you brought him here?” “I found him hiding in a cave alone. His arm is badly injured, we need to help him.” Hao pleaded with the monk. Shi Liangxin looked warily at the injured soldier. His saffron robes billowed in the cool evening breeze. “Do you realize that

imperial troops are roaming around the mountains searching for deserters? We must hide him in the monastery, so I can fix up his wound.” ordered the monk.

The next morning, Huang opened his eyes and gazed at the sight of an enormous golden buddha which seemed to stare down at him with pitying eyes. All around him were piles of fruit and other offerings. The scent of incense penetrated his nostrils when suddenly the old monk entered the room with a bowl of steaming hot chicken soup. Huang tried to sit up, but the throbbing pain in his arm forced him back down again. Shi said in a gentle voice, “Try not to move your arm, it needs time to heal. But we can’t stop long in the monastery since the imperial soldiers are climbing up the mountain. If they find you, they will kill you, and kill me for helping you.”

Two days later, Shi quietly slipped into the room where Huang was fast asleep. Gently shaking the soldier’s arm, Shi said, “Wake up! We have to leave now! The soldiers are close, and there is no time to spare! Follow me to the temple. Hao is waiting for us there.” Huang reluctantly got out of the bed and shuffled towards the door of the tiny room. Hao beckoned the soldier from the temple steps, urging him to hurry. Shi followed closely behind, carrying a few small bags of food over the shoulder of his wiry frame. Within moments, all three figures had passed through the broken down rear gate of the monastery. They had barely walked a kilometer when they suddenly heard the yelling of soldiers from the monastery. As the monk stole a glance behind him, Hao clenched Huang’s hand tightly signaling his wounded friend to move faster. Huang smiled at the boy and picked up his pace as the sun began to sink behind the Jiuhua Shan. The dying rays of the sun seemed to illuminate the whole mountain, casting the three lonely figures in deep shadow. As darkness fell, Shi motioned his companions to stop and rest, “It’s getting dark now, we should take cover somewhere and eat some food, but we can’t light a fire. Let’s rest under that rocky ledge and later try to get some sleep.” The three desperate figures ate quickly and tried to snatch a few hours of sleep under the watching stars of the night sky.

When Huang opened his eyes the next morning, his vision focused on the figure of Shi praying to Buddha in the cold morning air. It was early and the mist gently swirled among the peaks of the opposite mountain. Hao was already awake, packing the few little belongings ready for the journey ahead. Shi’s prayers were suddenly interrupted by the sound of pebbles falling down onto the ledge. Hao signalled to Shi, his finger pointing upwards. Before any of the three companions could make a move, a tall figure dressed in imperial uniform emerged, carrying a long sword of the officer rank. Huang immediately recognized the officer from his own regiment. Captain Lu was infamous for his brutality towards the common soldier. Lu looked at Shi with menacing eyes, “Monk, your status will not protect you for helping a deserter to escape from the army. The penalty is the same for both of you — death.” Lu moved towards Huang, the sword raised above his head. As Huang pressed his body against the rockface of the ledge, Hao suddenly launched a sharp rock towards the Captain, and just as Lu turned to face his young assailant, Shi grabbed Lu’s wrist and wrenched the sword from his hand. A furious Lu struck the monk heavily on his head, pushing the old monk towards the edge of the precipice. “Let your precious Buddha save you now, monk!” yelled Lu. But, the Captain was ignorant of Shi’s training as a Shaolin monk, and in a moment, Lu was hanging over the ledge. Lu grabbed Shi’s long sleeve, but it was too late, his grip loosened and his body slipped over the ledge.

“We must leave now!” Shi quietly exclaimed. Hao peered over the precipice and suddenly turned to his companions. “My uncle’s village is beyond the next mountain.

We can reach it in two days if we hurry and take a shortcut through the forest path.” Shi nodded and motioned his companions to set off along the forest path. By nightfall, they had reached WaiTong Shan and spent a few hours resting before continuing their journey to the top of the mountain. The next morning, the sun rose early, casting a long shadow across the valley below. By late afternoon, just as the sun began to sink over the horizon, they finally reached the top of the mountain. With a gesture of his hand, Hao pointed to a collection of small, ramshackle farmhouses in the distance. “My uncle’s village!” said Hao in an excited voice. Shi smiled, “It looks like a place where we might be safe from the war and people like Lu.” Huang let out a sigh of relief, “Maybe at last all of us found a home in the Yellow Mountains.”

Two Lines Away

Diocesan Girls' School, Chan, Tsz Kiu Rella – 13

This can't be happening again, I thought as I glanced outside the window. Why does writer's block keep happening to me?

I sighed and tilted my head upwards, staring at the drifting clouds that would pass through my head if I wasn't inside a cable car. The closely-packed mountains came into view, sharp edges protruding on all sides as trees lined up on a perfectly vertical axis. I glanced down; the foot of the mountain was nowhere in sight as thin mist did its purpose like a blusher. Staring at the scenery before me, I felt alarming tranquility for a brief moment; everything was so surreal, so ethereal. My pessimistic self almost seemed despicable compared to the serenity of the surroundings.

My friend told me to take a day off and 'stay away from urban areas at all costs', saying that it would inspire me and help me get unstuck. That was how I ended up alone inside a cable car, travelling up the seemingly endless mountains in the city of Huangshan.

The cable car rose and travelled alongside the clouds. I fished my phone out of my back pocket, about to demand an explanation from my friend for wasting my time when I should be at my desk working on my laptop. When I looked up from my text of complaint, the sky was dark and —

Wait. The sky was dark? It was midday just a minute ago.

Turning on the flashlight on my phone, I realised that I was stranded on the peak of a mountain, all alone save for occasional chirps in the dark. My claustrophobic nature took over and I yanked the door open, scanning the surroundings as much as my eyes would let me. My heart involuntarily beat faster as I recalled news about women walking alone in the streets after midnight and they were never seen or heard from again.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I whirled around, startled, thinking that I really was going to get kidnapped when that person let out a yelp.

"Sir, would you please turn off the light? It's even brighter than the moon,"

Realising that I just shone my 'flashlight' straight into his eyes, I muttered an apology before stuffing it back into my pocket. I still kept a fair distance from him though, but his polite and somehow innocent tone made me lower my guard just a bit.

"Who are you?" I asked, squinting my eyes. He had long hair, and from what I could observe in the pale moonlight, it was silver — almost white.

He puffed his chest out and held his head up high as he answered, "My name's Li Bai, a Chinese poet."

Right. And I am a time traveller coming from the year 3050.

"No really, who are you?" I asked, expecting him to burst out laughing and say that it was all a joke.

He looked at me like I just lost all my brain cells. Maybe I did.

"I just told you," he raised an eyebrow.

Stubborn, I thought, but decided to play along.

"Do you want to stay at my place for now? Dawn won't come for a while,"

As much as I was unwilling to follow a stranger, I had nowhere to go and a shelter was better than nothing. After what seemed like an hour, we arrived at his household and I

stumbled in, craving the feeling of sitting. I glanced around while he was busy lighting up the candles: it was a one-room wooden house with a table, a chair, and a bed, but that was it. Rows of sheets lined the walls and I inspected them, eyes travelling from piece to piece until it landed on one on the table.

‘Thoughts In The Silent Night,’ it read.

My eyes widened in realisation and I glanced at the man pacing in front of me, my thoughts all over the place. How could he be alive? I thought he was dead.

“It’s unfinished,” he remarked, looking at his work. “I lost inspiration,”

I chuckled. “Looks like we both are in the same situation then,”

“You write as well?” he asked, his mouth stretching into a grin. “Can you help me with it? I really want to finish it but I have no idea how to continue,”

I pursed my lips, remembering the exact words that followed, but held myself back from spitting them all out. “What was it that made you want to write this poem?” I asked instead.

“Family,” he replied, almost immediately. “And friends. I was exiled back then because I was an advisor for the enemy of the Emperor. I haven’t seen them for so long...” he stared out the window.

Seeing him like this, guilt blossomed in my chest. I recounted the days when I locked myself in my room, cancelling plans I made with my family at the last minute just so I could focus on work. It soon turned into heartache as I remembered how they were always the ones who stuck with me whenever my friends turned out to be not what they seemed.

Sure, no family was perfect. We argued, we fought. We even stopped talking to each other at times, but in the end...family was family, and the love would always be there.

Speechless, I fiddled with the hem of my shirt, a fresh wave of realisation knocking me over.

“That’s why I came here,” he continued, looking at me. “I guess I wanted some peace and quiet. It’s beautiful, don’t you think? And if you look close enough, you can see the stars at night, which just brings out the moon even more. In a way, it’s like a sea — except it’s shiny.” He said, pointing out a window.

A full moon was present that night; a symbol of family reunion in Chinese traditions.

I nodded, shifting my gaze back at the half-written scroll. “You can express your feelings,” I suggested, motioning to his work. “You said you miss your family, right? Write it. Tell them what you think. How you feel.”

He scrunched up his face. “It won’t be popular if it’s the same writing style every time,”

Oh, you’re going to be popular all right. “It’s not about popularity,” I crossed my arms. “Every writer wants to be successful — who doesn’t? But why do we write? Because we love writing. And why do we love writing? Because words express our feelings that we can’t normally express during a normal conversation.”

“But — ”

“Nope. No ‘but’s.” I interjected, dragging him to his chair. “Don’t write for anyone else. Write for yourself and yourself only,” I handed him a brush. “Amaze me.”

He sighed overdramatically, but still took the brush from my hand. I stepped back, not wanting to pressurize him too much. He pondered for a moment, then finally lifted his brush to write.

I glanced at the paper over his shoulder and sure enough, there were the two sentences that I remembered so vividly from the textbook. I smiled, and so did he.

“Well!” I clapped his shoulder. “There you have it, big boy.”

“I guess,” he agreed.

I looked outside the window and my face fell. The moon wasn’t the only source of light

anymore and I still had no idea how I had gotten here in the first place. As encouraging as it was to be able to help a famous poet on his way to fame, I couldn't help but worry that I would never be able to apologise for my negligence towards my family.

"Listen," I started, my voice low. "This might sound crazy, but I'm not supposed to be here. I don't know if I'm hallucinating or something, but —"

I was about to say 'but you are supposed to be dead', but that would surely dampen his spirits and whirl us into a state of panic and confusion.

So instead I said, " — I have to go."

He nodded, and if he found me suspicious, he didn't say anything. "I will see you again, right?" He asked, standing up and opening the door for me.

A light smile tugged at my lips. "If you're lucky,"

Of course, we never saw each other again. But when I stepped back into the cable car and it started moving downwards until it touched the ground — my world's ground, I thanked every holy thing I could think of that one, I wasn't trapped in whatever that place was above the clouds; two, seeing him finishing his work with such enthusiasm and passion reminded me of why I started my book in the first place; three, he reminded me of what mattered most.

So as I exited the city of Huangshan, I took my phone out and sent a quick text, saying that I would be home for dinner tonight.

No more cancelled plans. No more missed calls.

Legends of Miracles

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Bethany – 13

“Once upon a time there lived an old woman in the mountains of China, near the village of Wang, who no one had seen for the last six hundred years. She had an herb that could cure any illness, from the worst fevers to the most subtle of tremors. Up, up, up on the highest peak, near the clear mountain stream, legend says you’ll see her picking this very herb, which has leaves of shimmering amber and veins of the brightest sapphire.”

The rain fell as she climbed.

Pale hands against slippery gray rock. Hauling herself up, up, up. Grabbing, searching for a handhold, a way to pull herself up to the next ledge—and as she found one her foot slipped again, and she pulled herself up by the root of an old, gnarled tree that spanned the desolate slope, hands slick with sweat and rainwater. Her tiny hummingbird (she named it Yin) hovered beside her, trilling its sweet song into her ear.

All this way for something that might not exist. All this way to chase a faint wisp, a cobweb, a story passed on from mouth to mouth until the details were blurred and embellished, over and over until two things remained: there was an old woman on this mountain (who hadn’t been seen for the last six hundred years and was almost certainly dead); and she had an herb that could cure any illness.

It was only for her brother that she kept on climbing, that she kept chasing that insubstantial wisp of hope, that she still clutched at the thin straw that there *might be a hope for him*. For baby Kang (who used to giggle so when she made him small toys of twigs and branches) that she hauled herself up rocks and roots, leaving bleeding cuts and scratches and blisters and bruises on her hands (once delicate and soft like petals on a flower). For her brother in the makeshift crib in the tiny hut, wheezing and sputtering, choking and coughing up blood as her mother wept beside the crib (rivulets of tears like rainwater down the slope) that she dared climb through the damp mist, up the mountain where the old woman lived.

Up and up she climbed.

Tiny rocks dislodged, sending avalanches of pebbles and gravel down the mountain. Yin squawked (more of a squeak, for a hummingbird). She clambered up boulders and trekked up winding, snake-like paths and mossy steps where she didn’t have to depend on all four limbs (blessing of blessings). Picked berries for food and sipped rainwater from conveniently shaped rocks. Sometimes she’d pass grinning skulls leering at her with their empty eyes and shudder. That could be her if she didn’t succeed.

She’d always wanted to come to the mountains, though. They’d been portrayed by an infinite number of poets through the ages, sketched by ever so many acclaimed artists, stood near her village like mighty giants protecting them from war (though if they did, why had her father have to leave for war, leaving her with mere memories of his voice?) There’d been long, epic tales of people going on quests in the mountains. Some succeeded. Some failed. Some no one knew of but had likely joined one of the skulls on the ground. (No one had succeeded in finding the old woman in six hundred years; of that she was certain.)

She’d never dreamt that her first—and most important—visit of the mountains would be for this. For going on the exact quest so many thought impossible.

As she climbed, Yin sang its song. Chirping and humming, a simple tune, really. Five

notes, maybe less. Chirp, chirp. On and on. The one thing that never changed about her journey. Yin was always there. Singing its song. Telling her it would be alright.

Higher and higher. As she climbed, rain blurred her vision. The rain, pelting down on her. Like tears, like sorrow, beating down on her. The sadness from home, weighing her down. Grief.

“The hope that he’ll survive... It’s a very small chance. All we can hope for is a miracle.”

“I’m sorry, but at this rate...”

She blinked the raindrops away. No use feeling hopeless now. Prove them wrong. Stay strong, don’t cry.

Out of nowhere, rocks started falling. Pelting, roaring, crashing. Down, down, down. Knocking her over, sending her tumbling down. Sending her crashing onto rocks. She lifted her head up to continue her climb; a rock crashed down again. Plummeting.

She climbed and fell and climbed and fell and when the rocks seemed to stop falling she couldn’t keep her eyes open and she was about to fall asleep—

In her dreams she fell too, but it was endlessly this time, down a dark, dark pit.

Falling down, falling down. Hopeless. There was no herb, no hope. She couldn’t get back up, could she? Couldn’t stand, couldn’t move; was she even alive? Could she ever climb back up? Did she even want to get up? Could she find the strength to even move an inch anymore?

Somewhere inside her head she heard screaming. A baby, yelling their head off, shrieks punctuated by long retches and chokes. A baby—her brother. Kang. Death’s grim shadow loomed over him, and she knew she had to move. She had to wake up. Wake up. Keep on climbing. Don’t stop. Stay strong.

Suddenly she heard Yin singing its cheery tune above her head, pecking at her hair (“Would you stop that!”) and she decided.

She would climb the rest of the mountain. Even if she had to battle an army of demons and tigers to get there. She would get a cure for her brother. She had to. As a sister—if it wasn’t an obligation, it was something she’d do of her own free will. No one wanted their sibling to die.

When she finally—finally!—got onto that last ledge, got to the top and saw no old woman, no hut, no telltale golden glint of the herb (an herb no one alive had ever seen, probably)—she started feeling actually helpless.

She stood next to the clear, crystalline stream, Yin’s abysmally optimistic tune in her ears. Looked up at the billowing clouds. It looked like success. But there was no old woman, was there? No herb, no miracle cure, no help.

There had been an infinitesimal chance of success anyways. It had always been a cobweb, a wisp, a feather just out of her grasp. A straw she could grab at, a chance that she took that he could live. And there she was, watching the feather float away. Waiting for the miracle. Waiting for the feather, the feather floating away into the gray, solemn sky, to drop into her hands.

She let the tears fall. Let it all out. What good was staying strong, anyways, when there was no hope left? What good was it? What good was bravery, strength, hope if it was all for nothing? Feathers, ha. They were all gone now.

Somewhere Yin let out a chirp, sharper than anything she’d heard from it.

“Shush.”

Yin let out another cry, crystal clear and bright.

“Shush. Don’t you know? None of this was worth it after all.”

Then she saw it.

Sparkling amber, almost gold, with a glossy sheen that seemed almost artificial, with veins of the brightest blue she could imagine. There it was, lying below the undergrowth.
The leaf.
The miracle.

When she grew up, she'd tell her children an old legend, of the leaf of amber and sapphire. Every time she told them the tale of the mountains; details got blurred and embellished.

But it always ended like this.

“The old woman had died, but the leaf sprouted from a seed; a seed planted by the old woman—the guardian of the mountain—six hundred years ago. A seed that would only grow at the tears of someone who came with bravery and strength and hope.

And most of all, love.

Diary of a Poet

ESF Island School, Narayanan, Vijay Sathappan – 12

January 4th, 1947

The sun shines its golden rays on the mountains ahead. Around me, air is so fragile, like a baby, yet it is heavy with my dreams and aspirations. Huge waterfalls dribble down, the crashing sounds on the stone echoes across the huge land, breaking the silence of the morning. As the sun looms from the mountains, so the people of the land. They embark from their village houses, their views looking like tiny ants from my humble abode. With their small vessels, they wade through the seas, their ever-sharp eyes looking out for salmon and trout.

After my daily dose of herbal tea, I jump down, the wind whistling in my ears. I dive down in the crystal water, it is time to take my routine daily bath. After swimming for a few meters, I spot my friend, Loi-Wei.

He calls me up into his tiny fishing boat and I readily jump on, seeking some warmth. He passes me one of fishing rods, asking me to fish. I take it wearily. The Government has started cutting down land, and the rivers are getting smaller. All the fishermen in the village rely on one another to fish and feed the village. That is what I like about Huangshan. It is a community, not divided, not survival of the fittest. I bade goodbye to Loi-Wei and race across the branches and vines, back to my humble abode.

I strolled through the market today, my daily poem completed. Li-Jien, the butcher pulled me aside and told me that he saw a few white men.

“I think that they will soon invade our land, Li-Bai!” he says, with an air of frenzy, *“You must be careful!”* But then smiling he says *“But, maybe they do not want to harm us.”* Stopping to take a breath, he further continues in his preamble. *“I have seen one of them is a poet”* *“Who knows, perhaps you may like them.”*

This reminded me of my quest in finding an apprentice. With a spring in my step, I climb up the mountains. As I climb, I see a fire burning nearby. The Burnings of the New Year has started. A festival to burn the old things and start a new year. We have to burn the old things in our house, to create space for new things. The festival is largely celebrated here, especially on top of the DuZhu Mountain, a mountain known for its religious symbolism. Legend has it that the God of Light, Ma Zhi, defeated the God of Death, Tu Ren, from destroying the world on the same mountain. Till date, DuZhu is used for the Burnings of the New year, to mark the coming of light over darkness, or new over old. I must hurry up to my hut and change for the festival. I hope I notice the white men there as well.

January 31st, 1947

I have waited a long time for my fabled ‘white poet’. I must find him. I need one person to pass down my knowledge. In a changing world, where poetry is a dying art, somebody needs my knowledge. It is fine for Du Fu, he has his son. But me? The villagers, although they respect my art, do not want to learn it. They think that their day-to-day jobs are much more profitable. Poetry takes a lot of time to learn, like any other art, practice makes perfect. They enjoy reading the poem, but do not want to learn it. I asked around, but people either shut their doors when they see me, or make an excuse. It is hard, being a poet.

My father used to say that soldiers in the army had to learn poetry. It was important that a soldier knew how to stay calm during times of war. For that, poetry was needed. I used to be fascinated by my father's teaching. By day, he taught the soldiers, and by night, he taught me. He was an excellent poet, that is, until he was killed by the Japanese.

I have heard that the white man is a poet. He will be the perfect apprentice for me.

Each day passes in the same, dull manner, a repetitive routine. I draw men in the wet mud, my inspiration for poetry having completely gone. Li-Jien says he has not seen the monsters for days. I even tried asking my rival, Du Fu for help. But the vile idiot refused, shutting his door on me.

I hope that he will come soon. Only if he comes, can I pass my vast knowledge on to someone. Poetry is a dying art, a treasure that only few possess. I have heard that the Government is planning to cut down villages in China and transform them into pesticide factories.

Imagine that! The beautiful village of Huangshan into a pesticide factory! It breaks my heart to imagine that the beautiful rivers of Huangshan will soon be a black death, floating with the corpses of innocent animals.

I look out the horizon, seeing the beautiful rays of the sun, keeping the tiny flicker of hope safely inside my heart.

March 4th, 1947

I have lost all hope in the comings of the white poet. It has been two months since I last heard of him. I have restarted my poetry. Du Fu has taken advantage of my lethargy, and started writing more and more, making more money, yes, but more importantly, winning the trust of the villagers.

I, once considered the god of poetry, am now reduced to a poor man. I begin writing, but I am devoid of inspiration and each poem ends up being worse than the last. My friends have ignored me and the village has disregarded me. I try to earn back their trust, but in vain. I know it is wrong to be like this. But my brain is failing me, and I need an heir to my knowledge.

That is all for today. My failures today have made me lethargic to even write a proper diary entry.

March 5th, 1947

The white poet has arrived today. My dreams have come true. I regretted not learning English years back, my laziness now showing its consequences. I could only barely keep up with the white's speed of language. But my writing proficiency is exemplary, and I showed him my poems. He then started speaking in Chinese, a huge relief for me. As we chatted, I realized I did not know my guest's name.

He introduced himself as Jack Keroauc. His poems mainly consisted of surreal events, full of crazy dreams and sightings. His poems are amazing, heavily contrasting with my poems, which tell of the usual happenings in life.

We continued chatting for a long time, until he shared one of his poems, which he translated into Chinese. It was breathtakingly beautiful, so amazing, that I cannot find the proper words to describe it. I begged him to remain here for a few days. He readily accepted, leaving me for a short time to get his supplies. When he came back, I cooked a meal of boiled rice and chicken meat. Under the moonlight, we shared stories and ideas. I hope, diary, that

we, together, can help each other out. Me with my inspiration and him with his consistency. His poems are good, but it does not have the same style throughout. His collection is a mess, with everything all over the place. I look forward to teaching him.

March 5th, 2000

It has been a long, long time since Jack left. The once peaceful village of Huangshan has now turned into a war zone, the screeching sound of cars and motorbikes becoming common on streets. Nobody here has respect for poetry anymore. Children tease me on streets, even dogs turn away when I have come. I have turned old, the effects of living for over a hundred years can do something to a man. My end is near, I can feel it in my bones. I cannot even write properly, even the smallest sentences can wear me out.

I can only write one more sentence, I feel as if I will soon meet Death....

March 7th, 2013 (Jack Kerouac's Diary)

I have come back to visit my dear friend in China. I cross streets and climb steep branches to reach my friend's humble hut.

I come in, a scene of grotesque horror meets me. My friend is sprawled on the bamboo mat, a piece of scrap paper, eaten by dust lying near him.

I cross my friend's body, holding back tears. Has nobody bothered to take his body out. But strangely, there is no scent from him. No flies are present above him, the hut smelling of the usual violet flowers. A serene look is over his face, his forgotten body lying in a changed world. I pick up the paper near him. On the paper is written one word

'Bloom'

Immortality

ESF West Island School, Ng, Megan – 13

All the myths pointed me here, to these craggy mountains. Alchemists making pills and emperors ascending. After all these years of waiting, I'm finally going to do it.

This is where I'm going to become immortal.

Everything I've wanted is here. The stone staircase I stand on will bring me there. All of it's just how I imagined, too—crooked pines rooted in the rock, the foggy peaks up in the distance.

My left leg begins to ache, and I ignore it. This is where I'm meant to be, and I'm not going to let some old injury stop me from gaining eternal life.

The atmosphere here is strange. Not quite silent. Twice I hear whispers behind me, and when I turn there's nothing there except the steps I've left behind. The trees and bushes on either side of me grow thicker, and I'm uncomfortably aware of the fact that, besides a vague grasp of some Huangshan myths, I've got no idea how to set about accomplishing my goal.

All that's left is to keep moving, because I've got this strange sense that whatever I want to find will be at the top. A herb, to make magical pills—it's been done before in myths. A spring that a legendary emperor bathed in before gaining eternal life. My plan hinges on me recognising whatever it is the moment I find it.

Mist curls between the pines. The pain in my leg has swelled, and my pace is slowed—I have to stop every few minutes to rest.

There's the sound of quiet laughter next to me and I swing around to empty mist.

I force myself to climb a few more stairs. There's a rough wooden railing here, and I cling to it like a lifeline. Climbing is better than thinking—if I stop too long, the past will catch up with me. Already I can feel the old panic, hot under my skin.

I've got to keep moving. The stairs have gotten wider, not steeper, and the trees are flimsy and stick-thin.

A voice to my right, and I look quickly. This one seems to have come from the rocks itself. I run up the next few steps and tell myself it's because I'm so eager to get to the top. Not because I'm scared.

I dash up the first few steps without incident and am just regaining my confidence when my left leg buckles under me and I fall.

The panic feels like it's about to burst through me. The last time I was trapped on the ground like this was when—

Don't stop to think. I've got to keep moving forward. I've got to keep searching for immortality, because I am not going to die here, alone on this mountain. I am not going to die at all. Stand up and swing your left leg in front of you, come on.

I lean back on my hands and try to move my left leg. Nothing happens.

The sky above me is covered in the reaching arms of the trees, and it's white as paper. I stare at this and try not to scream, because the terror is shooting through me and the mountain is still so high, and I'm not even halfway done. I'm not even halfway done.

I hold my backpack to my chest and sob. How could I be so stupid as to believe in immortality? This was always going to happen sooner or later. If not now, then when I got to the top and found nothing. Nobody can stop death.

Someone is speaking very faintly behind me. The voices, they're back again.

Are they real, or am I just going crazy? I wouldn't be surprised if I were—this entire trip was crazy. The one non-mythological emperor who tried to find immortality died *because* of his search, and I'm exactly the same. I'll die here, surrounded by fevered hallucinations. I'll die here, and it'll be because of my own reckless decisions.

Reckless decisions, I think, and suddenly we're walking to the car together under an umbrella, our footsteps splashing, and I'm asking her if we should maybe make the trip another day—

Something very close to me is whispering in a language I don't know, and I whirl around and tell the voices to go away.

I scream at them, at the moss-covered stone beneath me, at the mountains themselves, but they don't leave—I can feel them hovering around. Almost like they're waiting for me to start talking. So I do.

"I didn't want everything to turn out like this," I say, looking around at the rockface. "I never used to be scared of death."

Nobody answers, but I can feel something listening.

Something listening. Voices in the rock. I've heard about this before. Where?

The voices feel like they're leaving, so I keep talking. Anything to get them to come back.

"It began when she died, I guess."

All my memories of her are stained by that last one. Where I am crawling out of the wreckage on that terrible rain-slicked road and screaming at her to wake up, wake up.

The voices lean closer. Did something just move?

There was a legend about the rocks on Huangshan being living. They're in strange positions, upright pillars and sitting monkeys. Is this what's happening? Some of them were even said to have been real people who became stone.

I've always hated that myth. To be trapped on a mountain forever, unable to move or call for help, locked into place as you were slowly forgotten by everyone else—it sounded worse than dying.

"After that, I was constantly scared of death, of making some mistake that would end up getting me killed. I did my research and came here to prevent it."

I can feel the panic rushing back.

"And it's not going to work, is it? They're just myths. Nobody can actually become immortal."

She wouldn't have done this if she were the one who had lived. She wouldn't have gone crazy on this mountain worlds away from home.

The voices are more solid now, and I feel hands on my shoulders. Slowly, with their help, I stand.

We walk up together.

As they guide me up the mountain—flights of stairs that are almost vertical, paths beaten through thin forests, terrifying ridges that cling to the rock—I tell them about her. How she was never scared of anything. How she'd wake me up early and drag me to hiking trails. How a simple drive through the rain could change everything so suddenly.

She would have loved Huangshan, I realise. She would be happy if she knew I was here. And the hands squeeze my shoulders in agreement.

We continue the walk, higher and higher. The pain is gone—all that's there is the almost-white sky and the sound of my voice, telling our story.

I understand why Huangshan was loved by so many poets. It's beautiful, really. Immortality might not be up here, but peace certainly is.

The hands have stopped moving me. I'm sitting on a ledge, legs dangling down into a steep drop. How did I get here? The stairs are nowhere to be found. I hear the voices again, and they're almost singing.

It's as if I'm in a painting. Perfect clouds across the sky, the crooked trees streaking the mountains with green. She would have wanted this for me, I realise. Immortality wouldn't have brought her back, wouldn't have helped me. It's here, on this mountain, where I can feel her closest.

Here, the memory of the accident is so far away. Here, she's alive in every plant, every rock. I miss you, I say to her.

And I'm about to tell her I'm sorry, that I should have stepped in and stopped us the second it began to rain. But I know deep down that it wasn't my fault. She's driven in worse weather before. How could I have predicted it?

Instead, I tell her that I love her. I tell her about my travels, and my research, and how it all worked up to this moment. I've never felt so purposeful.

Huangshan's hands tighten around me, and I realise that I've found immortality after all, right at the moment when I had stopped looking. It's here where the people in the myths became part of the mountain. It's here where the emperor ascended and found peace.

As I sink into the ledge and join the spirits of Huangshan, I realise that turning to stone wasn't death, as I thought it would be. Instead, it's eternal life.

It's immortality.

Kismet

HKUGA College, Chan, Wing Tsun Valerie – 12

To be honest, I had never expected my first month in China to end up like this.

But here I was, perched precariously on a flat marble slab, with nothing to defend myself against the harsh winter winds except for a flimsy windbreaker. This... wasn't exactly a typical Christmas Eve.

Really, this wasn't even close to what Christmas Eve should be like, but well, I couldn't really stay at home. It wasn't even a home to me, when I couldn't understand what everyone was talking about most of the time.

And besides, I still didn't understand why we had to come to China. Father's apothecary was doing wonderfully in London and life was better than ever when he announced two months ago that we would be going back to his hometown in Huangshan City to have more 'business opportunities', apparently. The whole family had to emigrate to this rural town where the only appeal was the picturesque landmarks—which, for your information, weren't what they looked like on the web.

So the only logical solution was to run away, and since for some reason, I had been drawn to Huangshan Mountain since day one, I had naturally resolved to spend a week on Lotus Peak. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? The fresh air—and my disappearance—would probably make my family change their minds and bring me home.

I sat there for what seemed like forever, wallowing in self-pity and mindlessly kicking my legs against the circular marble slab I was sitting on. I had been walking for hours and on several occasions climbing over small landslides until I reached a rather flat area, strangely devoid of trees and barren except for the slab that she was sitting on, inscribed with Chinese characters that I had never even seen before.

The stone was cool against my touch, and I figured that it was as good a place as any other to rest tonight, and as I idly doodled on my diary, I swept my fingers across the carved characters, covered in a thin layer of dust and slightly warm to the touch.

As I tried to speak the characters out loud, stumbling over many unknown words, the carvings grew hotter under my palms until a glow started emanating from inside the marble. My eyes widened in alarm and I warily backed away, but it was too late.

A silhouette had materialized and started to take the shape of a person with long limbs and a lean body. I couldn't bear to look, in fear of it being one of the shapeshifters that the superstitious elders had kept going on about. But still, curiosity overtook my common sense and I opened my eyes slightly to see... a boy.

He had dark floppy hair that covered almond shaped brown eyes and looked around in confusion. His movements were easy and elegant and reminded me of ancient nobility in the novels that I read, and as he registered my presence, the boy bowed slightly and spoke in a dialect that I didn't comprehend.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak fluent Chinese," I apologized, hoping that he would understand what I was trying to say. "I'm Harper, and you are...?"

A look of comprehension dawned on his face and he started speaking in English. "Oh, good day, Miss Harper," He greeted me with smooth English. "My name is—" He paused, then said, "Edward."

I couldn't think of anything to say that didn't border along the lines of 'how did you suddenly appear', but the boy didn't say anything either, so we sat there on the rock in quiet, albeit slightly awkward silence.

I stared morosely into the darkness in front of me, tall, willowy trees wailing the vehement force of the glacial winds, small specks of snow brightening the dark, dense clouds that obscured almost everything from view, calling to mind the tale I had read of the two lovers who had jumped off the cliffside of Huangshan together instead of being sentenced to severe punishment for their forbidden love, much like the story of Romeo and Juliet.

The boy suddenly spoke, jolting my mind back to the present. "Are you a... tourist?" He asked hesitantly, as if he was unsure of the term.

"I'm not a *tourist*," I snapped frostily before I realized the huge mistake that I had just made. "I mean... I live here in Huangshan City, yes, but it's not permanent—" I cut off abruptly. What if this boy was some... ancient, vengeful spirit trying to punish me for wanting to go home? "What about you?" I tried to sound pleasant and failed miserably.

He arched a brow at me. "Do you want to know?" He replied cryptically, and for some reason I couldn't understand, I nodded, and Edward placed a pale, cold hand on my wrist. Before I could jerk away, everything in front of me seemed to be wiped away in a blur of white.

I found myself alone and on the same slab that I had been sitting on, only with a small rock outcrop sheltering me from the merciless storm that was drenching everything within visibility. The dim hubbub of voices made me turn, and I could then see three middle-aged men crouched over a crudely fashioned bowl that they held over a small flame, chanting some kind of poem together.

In the corner, a slim young boy was leaning against the walls, with shadowed eyes and a downcast expression. He was... Edward?

The plumpest of the men looked up in his direction. "Edward," he beckoned to the boy, who hesitantly walked over with reluctance. "But Father—Emperor—" The man, who was apparently a king—which meant that Edward was royalty—didn't even look in his direction, forcefully grabbed him by the arm and cruelly dunked his head into the murky, bubbling concoction he was brewing, a twisted smile appearing on his face. "This is for my own good, son," he said, and as the scene faded away, Edward limp and lifeless in the king's grip, I was left staring in horror at the boy sitting next to me.

"Who even says 'this is for *my* own good'?" I quipped, trying to lighten the mood. Edward didn't speak for a long while, and when he did, his tone was grave.

"My father was Huangdi," he started. "The great 'Father of China'. He came to the mountain in search of immortality, but in order to live forever he had to sacrifice me." A bitter expression flitted over his face. "He did it. No hesitations. But what he didn't know was that he had unwittingly condemned me to an eternity of being trapped in this marble, never to be freed unless someone read out the inscription."

I was speechless, but even if I had said something, it wouldn't have mattered anyway. I bit my lip and quietly touched his arm. "Harper." Edward said carefully, "I think you should go home." I didn't answer him, but I knew he was right. The first colors of dawn were starting to appear on the horizon, splashes of golden yellow and orange brightening up the sky. Edward didn't say anything else and I hugged him.

No words were needed, but he understood and smiled sadly at my earnest face.

I had to go home. To be completely truthful, I had no idea what even possessed me to run away. I mean... true, London would always be my home, but well, those were my parents, and deep down I knew that this place wasn't bad.

“Thank you,” I told him quietly and started sprinting down the cobbled stone steps, slick with snow. Edward stood there motionless, his expression not betraying anything and devoid of emotion. “Would you... want to come with me? Leave the mountain?”

Edward finally spoke, “No, Harper, I can’t... this is the last piece of me left,” He said, his knuckles grazing the marble slab. “I cannot leave.”

“Please,” I begged. Yes, he was a total stranger. Yes, he was probably from eons ago. But he was still a child deep down, and I did owe him for making me realize that I belonged with my family. Edward disappeared and materialized in front of me, his gaze softening as he kissed the back of my hand.

And then, he faded.

“Edward?” I screamed. But he was gone. All that remained was a small whisper, over and over again in the back of my head. And as a thick mist started to surround me, a single tear dropped from my eyes.

Now here I was, alone on the bus, my notebook spread on my lap. The driver smiled at me, his eyes crinkling. “Up so early, lassie? Merry Christmas.”

I replied politely. “Merry Christmas.” My mind raced with unspoken thoughts, but as I picked up the pen, I could only write one sentence.

‘I found out the true meaning of kismet on Christmas Eve. Or should I say, kismet found me.’

A Tale From China's Magical Yellow Mountains

Hong Kong Red Cross John F. Kennedy Centre, Chan Man-Li, Cecili – 16

Today my friend Alex and I went hiking on Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's tallest peak and something magical and unbelievable happened to me.

First, we took a bus to the car park near the top and from there we went up to the peak where you can get the best view.

"Hey, Dennis," I said. "Look over there. How wonderful the view is!"

I walked toward the cliff to get a better look but suddenly, I fell down a hole.

"Oh! Help me!" I screamed. "I can't see anything." Everything was dark. It was frightening, terrible and horrifying.

Luckily, I didn't die. I had slipped through a time gate and passed back through time into the period of the Tang dynasty and had found that I had become a government officer. I had a lot of money, elegant clothes and priceless treasure... However, I was not happy at all. I saw many corrupt officials paying bribes to a corrupt warlord called An Lushan to buy themselves higher ranking positions. Corruption prevailed in the imperial court. I heard that An Lushan's wealth was even greater than the government's, and his ambition was getting bigger and bigger. He hoped to become Emperor.

One day, when I went out of town to the market, I saw many people starving, and dying on the ground. This sight made me realize the meaning of the poem written by Du Fu:

"Behind the red lacquered gates, wine is left to sour, meat to rot. Outside the gates lie the bones of the frozen and the starved."

I felt ashamed. Because even as an official, I couldn't help them with anything.

I walked on sadly until finally I came across a temple. I opened the door and there I saw the pathway to The Yellow Mountains and nearby where Du Fu and Li Bai were playing chess.

I said to them, "Why do you just sit here playing games and don't think about how to help the hungry people? Are you just careless idlers?"

They said "We have been practicing our magic in The Yellow Mountains for many years trying to call a future man to help us change the fate of our country. Finally, you have come. Welcome. All this hunger has been caused by An Lushan, who is destroying The Yellow Mountains to collect the magical stones of power that lie buried underneath."

In a great panic I said "What! You made me come back to the Tang Dynasty? Send me back quickly."

They said "No, you have a power that we don't have. The power that can change the world. If you can't solve this problem, the world will become chaotic and it will end. There is no future for you without us. You can't go back to your world. You must stay here with us."

"Let me tell you about an old legend," continued Li Bai. "A long long time ago, Bai Di created The Yellow Mountains, which is as wonderful as a fairyland. Many different immortals are living up there on top in a small village among the clouds. They were responsible for creating the clouds, the animals and even the dinosaurs. Three great stones of power are hidden underneath the mountains and they are the source of life for this whole land. If someone collects these three magical stones, he will have the power to rule the world

and become a god. Without its magical stones, The Yellow Mountains will lose the gods' protection, the land will become barren, humans will starve and all living things will become extinct. I hope you can help us to prevent An Lushan from getting to the magical stones.”

I said “OK! I will help you.”

We secretly recruited warriors to fight against An Lushan and communicated by hiding our messages in egg yolk pastries. In less than two months, 100,000 people had participated in our secret organization. An Lushan knew I wanted to stop him from getting the magical stones so he summoned me to see him in his palace.

I saw there were different collections around An Lushan's great house, such as roses presented by ambassadors, large pearls on the bookshelf and a thousand year old ginseng.

I thought, “An Lushan is a wealthy man. He even has some things that the Emperor hasn't got...”

An Lushan said to me “You are very capable, but you have chosen the wrong enemy. I think you would have won long ago if you hadn't. I have one of the magical stones. If you cooperate with me to get the other two magical stones and help me create my empire then I will make you my prime minister. Help me to find the magical stones and we can enjoy inexhaustible wealth and top social status. Hahaha...”

“Is it really good to rule an empty city?” I asked him. “Being a monarch will be just a hollow and meaningless honor without any responsibility” I said with disappointment in my voice.

At this, An Lushan suddenly became angry. “You'd better follow my orders while I am still being nice,” he shouted. “Seize him, guards!”

I was grabbed by his soldiers. I was completely overpowered and I could not resist. I was locked in a secret room in his garden and surrounded by darkness.

When Li Bai and Du Fu realized that something was wrong, they pretended to be An Lushan's guards and sneaked into An Lushan's palace that night. They overheard the Captain of the guards say to the soldiers, “Remember to guard the southern room strictly. Go there now to take him some food.”

Li Bai and Du Fu walked slowly as they followed the other soldiers. After the soldiers put down the meal and left, Li Bai and Du Fu broke down the door. They whispered, “Brother, come quickly.”

In silence, we made our escape but suddenly, Li Bai rushed into one of An Lushan's rooms. He said, “Aaaahh. nice wine! I want to drink a cup of it before we go.”

Du Fu and I stopped him but before we could, from the window of An Lushan's bedroom, we saw a person who had turned into a small figure. It was a tiny creature with two horns on its head and a tail on its body.

Then we heard a sound, “squeak, squeak...” We were surprised. Du Fu said, “Is this some kind of rat devil?” We knew that it was dangerous and we couldn't defeat this beast, so as not to be discovered by it, we crouched down and backed quietly away.

After returning to The Yellow Mountains, we discussed how to fight with An Lushan. We became more and more depressed because we all knew that humans are unable to confront humans who have been selfish and turned into such rat devils as the one we saw. This has been true since ancient times. Realizing that we were unable to confront An Lushan on our own, I climbed to the highest peak of The Yellow Mountains to ask Bai Di for help.

I called out to him from morning until evening for three days, “Bai Di, please help me to confront An Lushan.” However, no one answered me.

As I finally turned away, a kind voice said to me “This is the destiny of humans. I can't help you. Unity is the only way you can change your destiny.”

After that, I went back to Li Bai's and Du Fu's home. Du Fu said, "I found a magical book about how to deal with a rat devil. According to the book, we must capture the rat devil and take it to The Yellow Mountains. Then we need to draw a magical circle to open the entrance of the underworld. After that, we must lead the rat devil into the magic circle to purify his soul and send it back to where it belongs."

To make this happen, I went to see An Lushan pretending that I'd changed my mind and because of his greedy desire, he believed me when I promised him I would go to The Yellow Mountains to help him search for the two remaining magical stones.

In the meantime, Du Fu and Li Bai summoned all the warriors to hide in The Yellow Mountains. After An Lushan arrived in the mountains, all the warriors immediately captured him and led him to the magic circle.

An Lushan said "Do you think I can be defeated so easily? Soldiers, go!" he commanded. Suddenly, another blue army, a supernatural force, emerged from the forest. Our warriors were surprised and scared.

I implored them, "Don't you want to be reunited with your families and children?" At this, the warriors' spirits seemed to lift.

"Go ahead!" I urged them. "You cannot fail. You can only succeed."

I said it with all the power, my voice could command and with that, our warriors took heart, engaged in the battle and defeated the blue army. I pushed An Lushan into the magic circle and Du Fu and Li Bai began to cast their spells. However, to stop An Lushan from escaping from the magical circle, I had to go to the underworld with him.

Du Fu and Li Bai said anxiously, "Leave the magic circle quickly or you will die."

I said to them "I'm glad I met you both. It was my honor to help save the world. Goodbye, my brothers." And tears of great sadness were falling from my eyes as I spoke these final words to them.

After this fight we were victorious. Du Fu and Li Bai took the magical stones back to The Yellow Mountains and China regained its vitality. People had clean water again and enough food and no one would die from hunger. Li Bai and Du Fu set up schools in the capital to promote Confucianism, all was well and society was restored once again.

I opened my eyes and found myself lying on a hospital bed. My friends and family were there by my side and someone said to me, "Thank God! You've finally woken up."

Soon after I was discharged from the hospital, I wrote a book about my experience in the Tang Dynasty called "A Tale from China's Magical Mountains." On the cover of the book it says, "Thanks to the unity of the people, we can all now live in a prosperous and peaceful society."

Wonderland

Marymount Secondary School, Ng, Cherie – 12

I hadn't done enough homework to understand how hazardous the Celestial Capital Peak was. As a seasoned backpacker from the City that Never Sleeps, I didn't need a tour guide whose accented English I wouldn't understand anyway. But thanks to my severe lack of coordination, my blonde hair and blue eyes weren't the only thing separating me from the crowd—I felt like a fish out of water, and I hated standing out.

I stared enviously at the local tourists boarding the gondola lifts, wincing at my aching muscles. Soon I was holding an internal debate, with the motion being whether I should head back to the mountain base and rethink my route. I gritted my teeth and balled my hands into fists, determined to reach my final destination without help from aerial transportation. I believed firmly in the quote “dreams don't work unless you do”, and my dream was only...1313 metres away.

I was a college student majoring in classical languages, and I'd spent hours in Literary Chinese class daydreaming about Huangshan. It was common knowledge that not even the most skilled photographer could encapsulate the mysticality of nature, but images taken of the Yellow Mountains at sunset were the definition of breathtaking. The sky would become a palette of rich and varied colours at 5 o'clock, blending together to create a serenely beautiful skyline.

Banishing all my fantasies of the resplendent horizon, I drew myself back to reality. The fog had turned Huangshan into a brilliant white page, obscuring my sight until I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. Suddenly, my foot was unable to locate solid ground and my surroundings blurred like a poorly shot action photograph. I braced myself for my head colliding hard rock, but no such impact occurred.

I was falling into eternal blackness, and the infinite depth of the hole made me feel small and insignificant. A strange sense of calamity dulled my senses, my “fight-or-flight” instinct abandoning me completely. I was going to die as a cliché—Alice falling down the rabbit hole. I blamed my mother for my sudden death, which could've been evitable if she'd enrolled me in ballet classes when I was a child.

One moment I was falling through a dark abyss, and then I was lying on a soft bed of autumn leaves as speckles of red, orange and yellow were delicately blown off tree branches, fluttering down to the ground like colourful rain.

My knuckles scraped the earthen floor as I cast my eyes forward. The silence was so deep I became conscious of every breath I took, and soon my own steady rhythm coming from within could be heard. The silence caressed my skin like a fall breeze, smoothening my soul, taking away my jagged edges. Huangshan was beautiful, but it lacked the quietude and repose I so desperately needed. The perspiring delivery men dressed in torn undershirts hauling food up the mountain ruined the “haven of tranquility” vibes.

I quietly surveyed my surroundings—the sunlight was cascading down a gap of clouds into a lake that could've been mistaken for a mirror. In reflective blues and greens, it brought its own artistic watercolour effect to the daytime. I wondered if all bodies of water were this pure before human pollution contaminated wildlife. I'd always wanted to bathe in cliffside pools, to feel the saline water rush over my skin and lashes.

I impulsively decided to make my way down to the lake, navigating past the boulders covered with moss and lichen. I expected my gracelessness to resurface any second, but there wasn't a single minor disturbance on the mountain path. No jagged rocks stood out and threatened to send me stumbling, no pinecones spontaneously detached themselves from the conifer trees to grant me a minor concussion. This alternate reality was as perfect as a fairytale.

Maybe I had more in common with Alice than I'd thought—we'd both discovered Wonderland.

I passed cave mouths leading into impenetrable tenebrosity I normally would have investigated, but the only one obsessive thought in my mind was diving into the tiny glass pieces that formed the crystal-clear lake. I barely noticed when nightfall came with a whisper of black accompanied by a comforting chorus of stars. I found the darkness strange—in New York City, light pollution ensured that there my bedroom was always illuminated by a billboard advertisement.

I approached the lake with the same mannerisms a child would have when approaching a candy store—completely blind and oblivious to the dangers and risks the uncommonly clear water brought. The stars that glistened and shone in the heavens were dull in comparison to the mother of the sky—because the moon in its deep silver was a phenomenon.

The lethally dark water had lost its turquoise to the night, but in the moonlight the ripples twisted. I stared at my own reflection; the edges of my face slightly ruffled where the wind blew on the water. Startled by the clarity of the image, I made a mistake gazing into the water for a second too long.

All of a sudden, my reflection dissolved into broken and irregular memories that began to materialize in the water. It was as if the lake had switched to the “home movie channel”, and flashbacks rippled across the surface of nature's only projection screen. Echoes of those I'd loved, broken promises which used to haunt my sleepless nights...nostalgia came down on me like an avalanche as my most intimate feelings surfaced.

Words like ambition, longing, reminisce would be defined differently by every individual, but the lake seemed to know my demons inside out. I dipped my fingers into the water as I watched it caress my hand coolly, eddying in its wake. My fingertips dripped with the transparent and opaque water as the images intensified into high-resolution, 4D pictures.

Fate was the last page of everyone's story, and knowing your own was enough to make you a lunatic. With each fragment of my destiny disclosed to me, my subconscious craved for more information. The burning sensation the water produced numbed my hand, as if flames were licking my skin and scorching my flesh. But shards of my future only uncovered themselves to me when I made physical contact with the water, and I was so tempted...

I let myself drown.

Drowning, in movies, was a dramatic act and a vociferous dogfight where the main character fought tooth and nail to evade death. But my arms flailed against the icy water that stole heat from every inch of my skin, bringing me dangerously close to hypothermia. My body was begging for air, and I could feel my consciousness faltering as my vision began to blur. Clawing through the liquid that threatened to invade my lungs, my lack of oxygen sent jets of pain through my body.

Drowning was a silent battle, but I wasn't going to suffocate in my hopes and dreams before I had the chance to make them come true. But I could barely form a coherent thought when the crescent moon became visible to me one last time—mere seconds before I was enveloped by the indigo water once more.

A sense of weightlessness numbed all my senses instead, followed by the darkness that lures you into the depths of unconsciousness inevitable landing becomes. I was no neurosurgeon, but I did know that the brain could block traumatising memories in a process called dissociation. While I would be able to recite my encounter with the lake to my grandchildren decades later, I was spared the agony of staying conscious during the fall that drew me back to reality.

I was sitting on a boulder, and the fanny-pack wielding Russian tourists next to me confirmed that I was standing on the summit of present-day Huangshan. Stars shone like sugar spilled over black marble as my heart sank in disappointment—I'd completely missed sunset. The one thing I'd been dreaming of had slipped through my fingers... My thoughts became a hurricane and adrenaline coursed through my veins, generating more panic than energy. My head was pounding and my heart was hammering in my chest. The panic attack was stealing every morsel of control I'd previously had over my own body, and I wasn't able to regulate my breathing until a single thought entered my mind.

Sometimes we are taken into troubled waters not to drown, but to be cleansed.

The familiar thirst for adventure and beauty made my skin tingle and the constellations, each secretly holding its own legend, drew my eyes to the heavens. Nobody on Facebook had mentioned how mesmerizing the Celestial Capital Peak was at night, but I soon became obsessed with its consistency—it would fade in dawn's first light with the promise to return twelve hours later.

And I could swear the moon was a slender crescent.

Patience of Trees

Shanghai American School - Pudong Campus, Mei, Michelle – 12

The tree stands dragon like, the silent observer of the rocky mountains buried by the sea of clouds. The wind calls, howling through the branches of harp pine, brushing a blanket of snow to the ground. The clouds swim amongst the steep ridges and peaks, as the radiant light covers Huangshan with many coats of colour. Mountains peek above the rosy clouds, appearing like islands before the cottony layers float away as the sun reclaims the sky.

The young girl climbs towards home, exhausted by the effort of carrying bamboo for the villagers. She was so tired. Tired of living with her grandfather. Tired of mountains and trees. The snow crunched beneath Qin's straw shoes as she hurried back in the icy cold to retrieve more bamboo.

Her grandfather was bent almost double from a life of carrying baskets on poles up and down the mountains —his hands were rough and cracked— not like the not at all like the gentle hands Qin remembers from her mother's touch. Although she dearly loved her grandfather, who did his best to raise Qin, she often dreamed of her mother's touch. She dearly missed her mother who had gone to look for work in Hefei five years ago. Even though Qin was only 8 at that time, her mother gone felt like what you could call a sense of hollowness emanating from her chest. The sadness drained through Qin rather than skating over her skin. It travelled through every cell to reach the ground. And yet strangely enough, it was her crumbled soul she had to bear.

The village of Xidi was on a barren hill in a range of many barren hills near the Black Tiger Pine. Throughout winter, it was waist deep in snow and blasted by bitter winds. In the summer, the temperature was so hot it was like breathing in flames. Qin's grandfather Xi would often times tell her stories of how his father had built small round homes into the ground in this faraway village so that others would see how vast the mountains were. Unfortunately, because it was so far from civilization, few people ever saw it. Yet it was all Qin ever saw. It was her whole world.

Qin wore trousers that were patched at the knees and too long for her, and a baggy faded jacket she had mended many times. Although this was not her only jacket, it was her most prized possession. It had also been her mother's favorite, one of the few things she left behind for Qin. Every birthday, when her grandfather asked her for her wish for the upcoming year, she stated that she only wished to see her mother. Seeing her mother's empty seat at the dinner table left Qin desperate.

As heavy snow began to fall, Qin clutched the freshly cut bamboo sticks and hurried home. She knew Grandfather would be worried sick if she were still out in the cold. She could see him through the window of their small house, rubbing his sore back.

Walking inside, she tried to look away from her Grandfather, knowing that if she looked at him, he would be able to read her mind.

The handwritten card Qin had left on her mother's seat was still there from yesterday, untouched. Qin had often left something on her mother's seat ever since she could remember. "Yeye, when is mother coming back?" Qin blurted out.

Grandfather sighed. He stared out at the falling snow, seeking the right words. He opened his mouth, but then hesitantly closed it.

“Qin, you know this. We have gone over this countless times. Your mother went to the city to find work.”

“But it has been more than five years,” Qin grumbled. She reached into the worn leather pouch that hung from her waist, suspended from a length of braided rope. Along with the rusty blade Grandfather gave her when she first started helping in the forest, the pouch contained only a piece of weathered wood carved into the shape of a bird – the only other thing she had that had been her mother’s.

“Patience, little one. The trees on the mountains live for thousands of years. The dragons have been here for even longer. Five years is not a very long time. Be like the trees. Be patient.”

Grandfather paused, then spoke softly. “You sometimes remind me of your mother, so determined to get things done and also very stubborn,” he chuckled. “You see that knife I gave you? Before I could use this blade to carve the bird, I had to sharpen it. You are like that blade. You are growing up, but you are not yet grown. It will take time and patience to sharpen you, but until a blade is sharp, it is foolish to try to carve anything with it.”

“Don’t you even miss mother? Don’t you want to see her?” She tried to convince herself that she was not the only one who missed her mother; otherwise, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was being too childish. Grandfather never mentioned mother or showed that he missed her.

“Of course, I do. But our life is here, on the mountain. You have a role, a purpose in the village. And your mother has her role. Don’t worry, little one. I am sure one day she will come back to us.”

Tears filled Qin’s eyes as she gazed out at the darkness. “That’s what you say every time. But mother is still not back!”

“Remember last year, when Unity Pine was struck by lightning? The tree’s bark was burnt and one of its limbs became a dead branch. But hidden under that skeleton was a force that sent a single shot of green out into the world. The rest of the tree stayed together. It didn’t send out one limb to look for the lost one. When they stayed together, they were able to accomplish more. And we need to stay strong and together too.” Grandfather stood up. Clutching the wall, he slowly shuffled towards Qin.

Patting her back, Grandfather smiled, “You think I don’t know what it feels like to live without someone I love? You know, before you were born your grandmother fell really ill and passed away. It felt like my soul was a piece of paper that had been crumbled and would never again be smoothed out. Those years, your mother and I were both dejected. But we stayed strong and more importantly had each other as support.”

Qin restrained herself, but inside she was boiling. Qin had enough of her grandfather’s talks. They were just words, ancient folk tales of dragons and magic. They were not what she missed the most – her mother’s voice, her mother’s touch.

That night, after Grandfather went to sleep, buried under the warmth of a blanket, Qin quietly got dressed in the darkness. She put the blade and the bird in her pouch, put on her mother’s old jacket and a pair of sturdy boots. She forced the door open, pushing against the biting wind that was trying to keep it shut.

The night was dark. No stars penetrated the heavy snow clouds.

Qin knew the path well from all her trips through the bamboo forest. Wrapping her jacket around her, tucking her hands inside the pockets, she trudged slowly down the mountain. After an hour or so, Qin was no longer so sure of the way, and the heavy snow made it difficult to see the path. Suddenly, her foot slipped out from under her, and she began

falling, sliding and banging down into a deep ravine. Her consciousness faded as she lay at the bottom. The heavy snow covered her.

When she awoke, she tried to brush the snow off of her face, but only one arm was able to respond. Her heart raced, blood pounding in her temples. She knew she had to move, to get up and try to find a way back to the path. She struggled to roll over, but she felt buried by the snow. She shivered.

Just when she felt her tears freezing her eyelids, she heard a voice calling her name.

“Qin, my darling little bird. Be calm. I am here.”

It was her mother’s voice. Qin blinked hard to clear her eyes. Where was this voice coming from? In the blinding snow fall, Qin saw two red dots, and as the dots came closer, she saw what appeared to be a head of a large dragon. As it opened its mouth, Qin again heard her mother’s voice.

“Qin, do not be afraid. I am here, and we will always be together. Nothing can ever separate us again.”

The dragon’s breath was like a warm caress, and Qin felt herself relax into memories of summer and flowers and her mother’s gentle touch.

She felt her crumpled soul finally returning to its original form.

I Believe in Dragons

St. Mark's School, Leung, Yin Tung Andrea – 14

When I was younger, my aunt used to tell me stories.

“Once upon a time, there were Eight Immortals,” she’d say in a soft, mysterious voice. “They lived on the island Penglai, where it was never winter, and had trees that bore enchanted fruit healing every ailment.”

Auntie was obsessed with the mythology and folklore of our Asian heritage.

She’d tell me tales of the Dragon King, the Ten Suns, how Pangu created the universe.

And I’d listen with shining eyes, gasping at all these mysterious moments.

“Sister!” It was my mum. “Are you done telling her those ridiculous tales?”

“Just a moment, *Jie Jie!*”

I winced. My mum wasn’t exactly the biggest fan of fantasy, which was unsurprising, given her lack of imagination.

She had always somewhat disapproved of my aunt, who was dreamy and whimsical, her polar opposite.

My aunt was the most wonderful storyteller. She’d tell me about the story of Longnu and Han Xiangzi like she’d been there herself, and talk about dragons as if they were real.

“Their scales glittered like polished jade, their eyes orbs of gold, claws sharp as a hawk’s,” she said, her eyes animated, bright as though they were orbs of gold themselves.

She loved the myths of the Yellow Mountains the most.

“Legend says, our ancestor Yellow Emperor descended from Huangshan, and that dragons lived on its cloudy peaks.”

The Emperor must’ve looked ridiculous in all-yellow attire.

“Li Bai himself visited the Yellow Mountains,” Auntie said, smiling wistfully. “He got tons of inspiration for his poems. If only I could get the same amount of inspiration he’d found in dreary Wyoming.”

She was an aspiring writer, talented, who had only one tiny problem—she couldn’t finish a single book. I knew she tried, but it was never enough.

Things got even harder when Uncle left.

I could still see the stacks of half-written drafts piled up in the corners of her tiny apartment, gathering dust. Stories that would never be discovered, characters that would never come to life.

She held on to her book of Chinese mythology, held on to the legends of shimmering dragons and towering mountains from which yellow emperors originated.

“One day,” she said. “One day I’ll go to Huangshan like all the great poets did, and find out what on that mountain gives them their knowledge and inspiration.”

She always wore a pearl pendant that seemed to glint like it was aflame. Her eyes reflected its light, so it seemed like she had twin stars in her pupils.

“And I’ll write a bestselling series, and we’ll be rich and move to California!” She lifted me up in her arms, and I giggled, grinning at the happiness on her face.

“Auntie,” I would say, after she’d put me down, “is it real? Everything you said?”

And she would reply—

“Yes.” Her eyes were faraway, like she was looking at something miles and miles away.

“But—” I avoided her gaze. My voice was timid. “Aren’t they just stories?”

And she would reply—

“They’re real, Fei Xiang. Never stop believing that.” She stroked my hair. “They thrive on belief. If you stop believing, they will no longer exist.”

“Oh! Does that mean I can see a dragon when I’m older?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I’ll show you one day.”

And we talked, laughed, and dreamed.

The cold hard truth would come later, but at that moment, it was real.

I was a kid then. Now, I was fifteen, and we were standing at the foot of the Yellow Mountains, having been offered the chance of a lifetime—a free tour to Huangshan.

Even after my childhood had come and gone, Auntie kept telling me her tales.

I’d long stopped believing her.

My mum’s voice echoed in my ears. *“There is no such thing! Stop holding your head up in the clouds!”*

“Your aunt was a fool, and if you believe in her absurdity, then so are you. The world has no place for dreamers.

I knew what she said was true. But yet some part, deep inside of me, still held onto these stories. They soothed me, made me feel like Auntie was right beside me.

Something about Auntie made me want to believe her, no matter how ludicrous it all seemed.

The awe of finally seeing the majestic mountains took away my breath; it was as stunning as my aunt described it—the rolling ocean of clouds that seemed to stretch on endlessly, the sculpted peaks reaching beyond the sky.

Auntie stood there, quiet, taking in the magnificent view. “How beautiful,” she murmured.

The pearl she wore seemed to glow in the mist. Like it was lit with a golden flame.

We hiked up the stone steps that were carved into the mountainside.

The higher we got, the more we saw, from misshapen trees that covered the rock like an emerald silk cloak to the lakes set deep in the valleys like jades adorning a crown. Clusters of villages were nestled in the mountains.

“Legend says,” Auntie started. “This was where Huangdi ascended into heaven.”

I smiled half-heartedly. “Sure.” I was tired, sweaty, and not in the mood for her stories. But she seemed undeterred. Her smile was as wide as ever.

She didn’t seem like someone who had just climbed up the Lotus Peak, the highest summit in the mountains.

The view was spectacular, but my knees were buckling a little, because just *maybe*, I had a tiny fear of heights.

Still, I felt like an eagle soaring above Huangshan, seeing the mountains from all the way up here.

The clouds were beneath us, obscuring the base, but we could see the other peaks stretching up to the sky, their unique silhouettes clear from this vantage point.

With their tips clawing towards heaven, rising above the clouds, they seemed like islands floating amongst a sea of billowing mist.

I turned away when my knees started to wobble a bit too much for my liking.

In front of us was a pool of water, as clear as a mirror.

“The Moon Pool,” my Aunt said, stepping forward dazedly.

Before I could stop her, she reached her hand into the pool.

“Auntie—“ I was trying to find a polite way to say ‘are you crazy?’ when she lifted a single gleaming object from the water. It was pill-like, and glowing faintly.

She walked towards the edge in a trance. My heart plummeted down a peak almost as tall as the one we stood on as I grabbed her arm. “Ah-Yi?”

She was looking up. I followed her gaze and I saw—

The shimmering forms of dragons swimming through the clouds. The sky was cracked open, like an egg, and the yolk was a radiant ball of light.

My jaw dropped.

“It is true,” she breathed, her eyes fixed on the sky. “See?”

I pinched myself just to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.

I wasn’t dreaming.

My aunt faced me. Her eyes were orbs of fiery gold. “My time has come. Please, keep our memory alive. Do not forget.”

Her skin rippled with jade-green scales. She smiled. “You are a remarkable girl. And you will grow into a remarkable woman. Thank you.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

“Remember,” she whispered. Before I could comprehend her words, she popped the pill into her mouth and stepped off the edge of the cliff.

Moments later, a coil of emerald green shot to the clouds above, joining the other dragons.

I thought I heard a cry of joy, reverberating through the mountains, echoing in my ears.

Then the hole started to knit itself back together, and the streaks of colors melted into the ball of light.

The crack in the sky closed up seamlessly, like it was never even there.

I blinked. Auntie had disappeared along with it.

On the ground was a necklace with a gleaming pearl pendant.

I picked it up and clasped it around my neck. It was an ember of warmth against my skin.

When I went down the mountain that day, the people in the tour would deny ever meeting a woman named Fei Lung. Everyone back home would carry on as if she had never existed at all.

Auntie had vanished into thin air, every proof of her existence gone from the face of the earth.

“Aunt?” Mum said, an eyebrow cocked. “Ah-yi disappeared a year ago, remember? I understand you miss her, but you have to face reality.”

Reality.

Her eyes darkened. “She’s gone.”

Reality.

The only thing left was her necklace.

But I remember more.

I’ve kept her book of mythology, and remember her stories.

I remember her smile and her eyes.

Her memory lives on in me, and the stories my ancestors had told, they all continue to live on in me.

I will never forget.

Some people believe in aliens. Others believe in Bigfoot, or even the Loch Ness Monster.

I believe in dragons. Do you?

Forgotten

St. Paul's Convent School, Lee, Chloe – 14

Why is Huangshan so captivating? When you gaze at the endless wall of rocks, what do you think of? How time, no matter how fluid, solidifies and merges the modern age with Ancient China? How the soil you tread on has once been an inspiration for Chinese poets? How the fragrant air makes you understand the praises Li Bai once wrote for this mountain? For me, it's the overnight K46 rushing beneath a canopy of stars through the city of Fuzhou.

With Hong Kong miles behind me and a blanket wrapped around my drowsy self, the train sails onto the bridge, drifts over the rail, glides on air, soars out of the tunnel and reveals the chartreuse plains of the land of dragons. The most thrilling ride in China indeed! Screams explode as carriages tumble into another black shroud. My window shatters to the rattle of metal wind chimes, and like Icarus, I plummet out of the twisted cage.

At the end of the portal lies pain as I hit the ground, but also a mesmerising scene. The Greeting-Guest Pine bows, its arm, jade and emerald outstretched and pointing to the heavens. I stagger towards the light and see a sage standing amidst its roots. With a bearded face and knobby hands stroking the thinning hair, he directs his radiant smile towards the rising sun, as if challenging the stars to shine brighter. "Ah!" he cries. "The sparrows told me you would arrive." He turns around and his silver grey robe twirls in the wind. "Come, I know the perfect place to have lunch." If nature predicted my arrival, then let this be my fate.

Huangshan's mountainous landscape is harder to climb than I thought. Its sides are jagged and the sparse trees cover its barren body in patches like rags. All around us were mountains, mountains and mountains, their gorges dipping far below the fog and their proud crests braving the elements. I imagine that the gods pulled up piles of mud, draped them in random mismatching cloaks and set them on the far prettier stairway to their holy empire, to let them gaze on humans trudging on hills and plateaus. Suddenly I hear a whisper in my ear: "Oh child, that's not for you." The sage leads me, and I follow. Panting like a dog I finally reach the top of the peak and remind myself that I must exercise more in the future.

"Let me introduce myself" he announces to ease the growing tension. "I'm Yiwang, a poet-in-training. I come to these mountains to seek inspiration. Why are you here?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I fell through a portal?" I answer meekly.

He tilts his head. "A portal? It must be the work of the gods. They have given me inspiration!" His eyes glimmer as he proclaims "Thanks be to Huangdi! My work will soar beyond excellency!" I do not understand his ecstasy, but am glad to be the source of it.

We pass the Lotus Peak, climb up the Hundred Ladders, stroll by the Haixin Pavillion, and arrive at Bu Xian Qiao, the famous fairy bridge. Stationed in a crevice, its immense height adds to the feeling of flight. Between cloud and sky we lay out fruit, rice and leeks, and sup until noon. The sun beams at us mortal fairies, warming our cheeks as we chat and eat.

"Where are you from, my friend?"

"The South, sir." I reply.

He clutches his peach and bursts into peals of laughter, the sweet juices running down his fingers as he chuckles, his black irises disappearing behind the slits of his heavy eyelids. “The South! There’s no need to be humble; you fell out from the sky.” Smirking, he glances up at the fog and stops guffawing. “We should get going. We have to arrive at the camp before sunset.”

We continue trekking along the summits for 6 hours, Yiwang belting a merry tune or two to hasten our pace. His booming voice echoing in the heights, intense and passionate, round and round. “Chant the female part!” I, with my coarse howling, belt out his song. He doesn’t seem to mind my cawing though. I wish my music teachers were also like him.

Slowly the sun leaves us to our own company as we arrive at our destination under Flying Over Rock. “Bai Jiu is a treasure in my village. Only the best is reserved for guests.” He uncaps a wide jar shaped like a Greek aryballos flask, and pours out the transparent liquid. “I figure that we would wine and dine as I tell you more about a poet’s life,” he says mid sip.

“You must have heard of Li Bai and Du Fu. They write such amazing poems about nature. See, I aspire to be famous like Li Bai, and I know that anyone can achieve their goals as long as they have the right beginning. I have tried hard to wake up my talents inside. I sojourned to rural villages, stopped by every city, and wandered around the countryside, in the hope that I would be stimulated to write something that would be marvelled at for ages to come. I constantly dream that after I die, scholars would pick up my work and be proud that they hold the original manuscript, like a precious piece of art. But nothing seems to motivate my pen to spill a single word. Nothing flows out like the Eastern wind. Nothing seems to sound right.” I nod in understanding, having gone through the pains of writing an English poem myself. I asked Wendi, the patron god of poets for help so my writing could be realistic, enthralling and memorable. And you came!” He takes another swig of the liquor, furrows his brow and stares into the distance. “My name is of bad fortune, it sounds like the word ‘forgotten’. I don’t want to be buried in an unmarked grave. I want my story to be told, my legacy to be my sensational poems. But first I must write one.” He empties his cup, stands up and hands me a writing brush. “You bring me promise, potential seen in none other. Quick, write before the candle runs out!” I swallow the savoury wine and grin at my partner.

What would otherwise be a boring night with Netflix becomes a flurry of ideas, imagination, images translated through ink. We delve into the depths of heart and mind, summoning every ounce of energy, channelling excellency into each stroke, infusing every page with power and pride, pouring out a masterpiece while gulping down spirits. We compose drunkenly, but passionately.

By sunrise, we unroll the scroll which Yiwang deems “Perfect!” The rays of the rising sun shines on the crests of Huangshan. “Look! Huangdi has shone his light on me! I see a glorious future, people lining up for commissions, waiting as I unlock the mysteries of Huangshan.” I laugh hesitantly, knowing that I have done nothing to change his fate.

All of a sudden, flames engulf the pinnacles of the dragon and the sky swallows Yiwang in the middle of his speech. “Wait! Our composition isn’t finished yet...” I shake my head helplessly. What can I do? I am no longer a welcome guest of this century. The clouds, like a pair of claws lift me from the ground. “Don’t! I have so much more to write!” The heavens transported me here, and now they will return me to my city. They harden against my pleas and place me back in 2021. I reappear in Kong Kong, with its cars honking and dogs barking, as if my expedition to Anhui never happened.

While Li Bai and Du Fu went on to be acclaimed as the greatest poets of their time, I never heard of Yiwang ever again. It was as if Huangdi removed him from history, because he cheated on Calliope with a friend from another country. Or did he wake from his drunken dream, leaving his scroll in the labyrinth of time, ultimately fulfilling the prophecy of his name?

Our cups raised to the mighty Huangshan,

Flora and fauna crown my friend divine.

I care not when she would depart,

Creations with the muses will always shine.

Huangshan gave Yiwang the spark for his flame and took everything else away from him. Likewise, the misty mountains embraced me in their magic, but blurred my mourning eyes from the mystical scenes.

Fiction

Group 4



Earthly Fairytales 1: The Child, The Mule, and The Dog

Carmel School—Elsa High School, Tang, Liana – 15

On the day of the annual gathering of the Eight Immortals, seven of them arrived on time and waited for Han Xiangzi, the only one who hadn't appeared. Elder Zhang Guolao flew into the sky to look for him. Just as Zhang expected, Han was sightseeing on Huangshan Mountain. He enjoyed himself so much that he forgot the gathering. Zhang tried every possible way to persuade Han to leave. Reluctant to go, Han turned a stone into a replica of himself, in case he forgot the way to Huangshan Mountain the next time. The stone therefore was named Immortal Showing the Way. Zhang, for fear that Han would slip away again, rode backward on his mule to keep him in sight, wondering why Han was entranced.

It was a peaceful morning. The lake inside Hongcun Ancient village at the foot of the mountain was indistinguishable from the sky, smooth as a bright mirror. The creeping darkness around the hills slowly retreated, unveiling patchworks of white walls and grey-tiled roofs, their silhouettes flickering in the river tinged with dark green.

A yell sliced the soothing silence as the boy scampered around the village with a blossoming blister on his finger, leaving a trail of tightly-woven curses.

“Ow, ow,” He sputtered. When the boy reached the edges of the cobblestone road, Ah-Gum quickly bent down and dipped his finger in the water, watching the blood trickling away. Stupid dog, he thought bitterly.

Everyone in the village knew about Yiong-Yueng's clever puppy, Hsi-Long. It takes a normal dog three years to learn all sorts of complex tricks: churning rice, swimming in water with a boy on his back, or going door to door with a basket, begging rice and money for his master. Even then, his training wouldn't be complete until he could hunt the gibbon, the mouse-deer, and other animals, which would take two more years. But Hsi-Long learned all this in a few months, so all the boys in the country admired him.

Just now when Ah-gum sneaked out, he saw Hsi-Long guarding Yiong-Yueng's family door. Ah-gum patted his thighs, barking “Here, Hsi-Long! Come here,” but the dog didn't move. When the boy pulled his tail, Hsi-Long still wouldn't obey, and chewed on his finger.

Ah-gum pursed his lips as tears ran down his cheek, before stomping his foot on the ground. “This isn't fair, this isn't fair,” he cried.

Just then, Ah-gum heard faint clippings against the roughness of cobblestone. The boy recognised the rhythm of everyone's footsteps in the community—how else would he slink around unnoticed? It was a new sound, and that made his heart sink.

“Are you alright, little brother?” A voice spoke from behind, steady and low.

Ah-gum swiveled, and he gawped at the white mule carrying a strange man that sat facing backwards. The man was a collection of hard lines and tailored edges—sharp jaw, lean build, and a wool coat snug across his shoulders. His dark hair would glint in the rising sunlight if it weren't for the straw hat nestled on his head. A leather satchel hung loosely at his side.

“I’m fine, thank you very much.” Ah-gum answered, brushing off the dirt on his disheveled clothes. He had to look somewhat presentable in front of a stranger. “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

The man laughed. “My name always changes, like a leaf on the trees during the four seasons. I have come to visit my master and his friend on the peak of Huangshan mountain, but I must first accomplish a task.”

Ah-gum waved dismissively as he stooped near the pond, staring at his gloomy reflection. “I don’t want to talk right now, okay? I wanted to play with this dog, who would kneel and bow and do all these tricks for Yiong-Yueng. Instead, he bit me.”

“Is Yiong-Yueng his owner?” The man asked.

Ah-gum nodded.

He continued. “Have you ever done anything for the dog? Did you ever give him anything to eat or drink?”

The boy shook his head.

The traveler muttered something under his breath, opening his leather satchel and retrieving a kernel of corn. “Take this and give it to the dog. Speak kindly to him. Do this two or three times, and he will surely trust you. Then he will do for you all he knows how to do.”

Ah-gum snatched the kernel of corn from the man’s hand, inspecting it like it’s some form of trick. “What do you want from me in exchange? My family doesn’t have much money, nor food for one more person.”

“Guess you could say I just wanted to help,” he winked.

Despite Ah-gum’s doubts, he did as the traveler instructed, placing the newly received food in front of the dog, and spat the words “sorry.” When he returned minutes later, the dog no longer growled in his presence.

It works!

Ah-gum sprinted back to the edges of the cobblestone road to share his gratitude, but only the usual weeds waved in the wind where the man and his mule had stood.

Earthly Fairytales 2: The Rise of Zhongyong

In his youth, Han Xiang Zi was known for his obstreperous disposition. Although he, like all well-off boys of Tang, was educated in the rites and five Confucian classics, Han had no intention of entering government service. He simply desired to explore the surrounding mountain, play his flute, and commune with nature. When his uncle criticized his pursuit, Han simply replied, “You and I have different ideas of study.”

The sun was at its full glare as birds chirped in the background. A young teen wiped the sheen of sweat beading on his forehead, as he sat under the shade of the Guest-Greeting Pine with a bottle of ink, a paintbrush and parchment. The umbrella-like tree was shaped like a gentle old man stretching one of his arms out, welcoming honored visitors, and Zhongyong needed that psychological reassurance for his latest poem—he hadn’t been able to write for days since his grandfather’s harsh critique.

Born to a family of farmers, Zhongyong never saw stationary until a sudden impulse arose one day. His father lacked the resources to buy it himself, so he borrowed from a neighbor. Zhongyong wrote a poem on the spot and signed his name. From then on, his work received

many compliments, and word of his literary talent spread across the entire district. People started to treat his father with respect, and even paid money to buy more of Zhongyong's poems. Instead of sending the boy to school, his father seized the opportunity and took him to visit the town's people every day.

A couple of years later, Zhongyong was fifteen when Wang Anshi returned to his hometown. One night, he requested a simple task from Zhongyong—to write a poem for his mother's unfortunate passing. But it was almost as if his hand refused to capture the feelings stirring inside his mind, resulting in sentimental refrains and cliché metaphors. His grandfather's eyes darted across his work, skimming lightly before putting the paper down. "I'm afraid you don't live up to your reputation," he spoke in a cold voice.

Grunting, Zhongyong crushed the paper into a ball and flung it with all his strength, only to have it land pathetically a few feet in front of him. His heart winced at the gesture, but maybe it was a sign to start working in the fields again.

Just then, Zhongyong heard the sound of faint clippings against stone. He whirled, and saw a man seated on a white mule, facing backwards, with a straw hat and a leather satchel.

The man hopped from his seat and picked up the ball of crumpled paper. "Is this yours, young man?"

"Yes, sorry," Zhongyong replied quickly, his cheeks flushing pink. "Or at least, it should be."

The man cocked his head, asking him to speak.

Zhongyong sighed. "I used to have a skill weaving words, creating stories that brought life to the quiet village. Mostly, it made my father happy. But I'm afraid time has come and ate up my talent."

He paused briefly, before forcing himself to say the fated words. "I am uneducated. Perhaps I have been in denial for too long, and I will have nothing but a wrenched future as a farmer."

Instead of responding, the man retrieved from his satchel a long and slender piece of bamboo with dried fish skin stretched over one end. Zhongyong immediately recognized it as a fish drum—an emblem of Elder Zhang Guo, one of the eight immortals spoken from folklore. His head snapped up, surprised, but this man didn't look nearly half as old or plump. Come to think of it, where did he get the white mule from?

"I want you to shake the drum," the man interjected suddenly, handing him the percussion instrument. "A small sound will do."

Despite Zhongyong's protests, he rattled the castanets as the noise reverberated throughout the valleys. Suddenly, his vision clouded with patches of wavering shadows. Panicking, the teen briskly brushed his hands against the darkness, revealing a small crack of light. It slowly expanded to a moving landscape illuminated with dull colours of grey and black, before it consumed him.

Zhongyong woke up on an origami boat, oarless. The sky was heavy with fog. There was a cool drizzle, but the rain did not reach the surface of the water, which remained as smooth as a mirror. Despite the lack of wind, the boat sailed toward an orb of light in the horizon.

When the poet nearly reached land, he could make out the light gaining shape. The smell of damp ground and wet pebbles wafted in the air.

On the shore, there sat two tombstones covered with moss. The only difference between the two gravestones was that a straw hat perched on one, while quills and parchment

accompanied the other. When he gently wiped the dust away, careful of its fragile state, his heart sank for a moment. The name Zhongyong was engraved on each.

The teen felt his head spinning. He tripped over the gunwale of the boat and plummeted into the ocean as layers of cool liquid submerged him. When he opened his eyes, Zhongyong was transported back into the mountains.

The man spoke quietly. “Death is the North that every compass points to. No matter where you sail, ultimately, you must turn toward it. Even if you are reborn, you might not have the same chances in your next life. Do you still wish to waste the entirety of this one farming?”

Zhongyong swallowed, his shoulders hunching. It took its toll, whatever that was.

“No,” he said firmly.

“You have your answer, then.”

As the traveler reclaimed the fish drum and returned Zhongyong’s crumpled sheet of paper, a question lingered on Zhongyong’s mind. “Who are you?” he asked.

The man smiled. “I’m just a regular, mortal apprentice.”

Earthy Fairytales 3: The Mortal Apprentice

After Han’s uncle spoke against the emperor’s pro-Buddhist policies, he was publicly criticized and re-assigned as the postmaster of a distant rural outpost. As he trekked through the Qin mountains en route to this new posting, he was caught in a sudden blizzard, which caused his horse to falter. Near death and losing hope, he became aware of a figure approaching him through the whirling winds. To his bafflement, the figure was none other than his nephew, Han Xiang Zi. Using his magical powers, Han cleared a path through the snow and led his uncle to the safety of a local inn. As the two sat down for a cup of wine, the immortal reassured his uncle that his fortunes would be reinstated and that he simply needed to be patient. The next morning, after bidding a fond farewell to his uncle, Han Xiang Zi vanished into the sky and returned to the company of the other Immortals.

The sun lingered above the hills, painting the sky with fresh strokes of orange and pink. A chilly wind blew against the pine trees, but the apprentice had more pressing concerns than lack of warm attire in mind. He carefully followed Elder Zhang Guo Lao’s instructions on folding the white mule into the size of his pocket, a jarring trick that was always disorienting to witness. Weirdness must be an inherent trait of becoming immortal, the man thought, then laughed at his joke. It was a blessing that nobody was around to notice his shenanigans.

Or a sad curse.

Once he packed away the mule, the man began a long journey toward the peak on foot. A long time ago, the apprentice voiced his protest against the idea, but Han firmly insisted. He said that as the mule belonged to Zhang Guo Lao, it could easily locate his master, but the apprentice will learn nothing. If he truly wanted to find the way, he would come through.

The man stopped under the overcast layer of thick, undulating waves of fog. Dark mountains occasionally poked through before being submerged again. He heaved a heavy sigh, and delved into the sea of clouds.

Many years before, the apprentice had constantly been praised for his quick wit and intellect. However, cleverness had not been enough to bring him success. When time came, he failed the imperial exam and his business never took off. He felt like a disgrace to

his family, and became a recluse, before finally departing to the Yellow Mountains to find immortals for inspiration. But he could not find anyone, and got lost instead.

The man swept at puffs of water vapour to gain a better view of his surroundings, but it was no use. The clouds soaked many of the mountains and roads, turning it into the lonely isles of the sea.

The traveler remembered his legs aching a year ago, after days of climbing as darkness tipped over the edges of his vision. When he woke up, two people hovered over him, holding bundles of fruits, asking him to go home. On his way down the mountains, he suddenly concluded that the two men must be immortals, and went back to ask them to “point the way.”

The man kowtowed, begging to become an immortal after his life was a failure. When he looked up, one offered to show him the way if he became an apprentice.

All he needed to do was to deduce why Han was entranced with the mountain.

So the apprentice set out on one more expedition, now equipped with new tricks, new clothes and a mule. The only requirement was that he returned with an answer on the night the Earth completes one full revolution around the sun.

The man stopped, panting heavily in the mist. Only the crickets chirped in the distance.

But what on this mountain would an immortal admire that was not present in others? The scenery was breath-taking, but there were many places that were even more beautiful around the world. Was it the community then? But people were like grains of sand on the beach, easily swallowed by the ocean as wave after wave rose to claim them.

If he was an immortal, what would he see?

As the man continued to mount the hard, granite stairs, the sea of clouds slowly parted. A small domed building was perched on the peak, from which a rich shrill echoed inside.

Alas, his mentors were waiting.

Bamboo groves lined both sides of the road where Zhang Guo Lao and Han welcomed him. They crossed a wooden bridge, and the pair showed him into the parlor. It was decorated in a pure Eastern style, full of sunlight and wide openings in the four walls so that the space resembled a pavilion.

“I’m glad you showed up,” Han said, putting down his flute and gesturing to the floor. “Take a seat.”

As the man sat on his knees, he spoke. “I’m afraid I’m too unwise to have the correct answer.”

“What if you recounted what you learnt on the journey? Perhaps that would help,” Zhang Guo Lao suggested.

The man conjured the memory of offering food to the boy with a bitten finger, and helping the aspiring poet on the verge of giving up. But when he shuffled through his memories about his own life, he was at a loss.

“I don’t understand. I’ve failed.”

“If you truly failed in life, why did you try to help others?” Han refuted.

Because I knew I wouldn’t last forever, the apprentice bitterly thought, until he had an epiphany.

The man suddenly stood up, but bowed quickly. “Thank you for your hospitality, but I’m afraid I need to return to the mortal realm. There’s still so much I could do.” He retrieved

from his pocket and gave back the mule to Zhang Guo Lao, and gently placed the leather satchel on the table.

For the first time, both immortals smiled. “You have your answer, then.”

“Oh, and thank you for returning the mule,” Zhang Guo Lao voice trailed off as the man sprinted away from the abode and down into the mountains, careful of steep cliffs and steps, until he found the Fairyland Bridge again. It was a stone bridge, ornately carved, suspended between two adjacent mountains above a narrow gorge. The pale crescent moon shone brightly in the night sky.

The man thought briefly of the life he was going to give up. He could perpetually bask in the luxury of overbrimming time, drinking with the company of wiser gods. He wouldn't need to work a day in his life anymore, rotting away needlessly, and planting seeds that may ultimately shrivel and die.

But doesn't one generation plant the trees, so the next could enjoy the shade?

The apprentice took one step, then another. As he scampered across the bridge, the man did not look back, for he had found his way.

A View of Heaven

Creative Secondary School, Barlow Qing, William Robert – 15

“Lu Shen? Do you see that point at the peak?” Lu Shen’s father asked, guiding Lu Shen’s eyes towards a point on the mountain, hidden beyond the sea off clouds.

Lu Shen paused and squinted at the clouds, his eyes willing them to part, “Father, I have told you many times, I can’t see anything.” he muttered frustratedly.

“Don’t worry my boy, eventually both of us will see the summit, it’s the gateway to heaven after wall.”

Lu Shen’s father replied, smiling at his son’s desperate glaring at the clouds.

“But for now, let’s get logging.” His father continued “I want you to show me your single-slice tree felling stroke.”

Lu Shen felt his fathers hand rest upon his shoulder then leave as his father continued walking, and he was instilled with a sudden feeling of warmth and pride. All of a sudden bright light seemed to overpower him.

He struggled with the light for a moment before finally he gave up, sat up and was immediately handed a bowl of steaming congee by Grandma Li. Lu Shen ate wordlessly, his eyes entirely occupied by the small urn that sat in the dark corner of the room, tears began to well up, as realisation battered him.

“Lu-Shen? Another nightmare?” Grandma Li asked, expressing clear concern.

“No, this time it wasn’t—it was the last moments we shared together before the accident” Lu Shen replied, having to pause several times to hold in the tears. “He was proud of me that day.”

Grandma Li saw what was coming and a calming hand on his shoulder. Then she spoke, her voice breaking slightly as she spoke, “Lu Shen- dear child, please remember that father’s spirit remains with us, contained in those ashes.”

Lu Shen contemplated her words for a moment, and stared at the warm steam rising from his congee.

Lu Shen turned to glare at his grandma, a sudden coldness gripping him, he shuddered. “If fathers spirit is truly free and with us why are his ashes being kept in this dark, lonely corner of the room, in this old piece of pot?!”

“Lu Shen!” Grandmother cried out in shock.

“Father wouldn’t want to remain chained to this pot, he would want to be in heaven, at the top of the mountain.” Lu Shen cried out uncontrollably, his eyes leaking with tears, ignoring the hurt he could see in his grandma’s eyes.

Without another word, Lu-Shen seized his hand axe and ran out of the house, leaving his Grandma to weep silently.

Lu-Shen returned home at sunset, freshly cut wood clutched between his arm, his eyes still puffy from the tears. He entered the hut sullenly, and Grandma Li turned and gave him a long stare.

“Lu Shen please understand, it is tradition that the ashes remain with the family” Grandma spoke and paused as she saw the unmistakable rage in Lu Shen’s eyes. “Lu, please, it is impossible to even bring him to the summit, I am far too old and you are too young.” she implored.

Lu did not reply. Both sat down and ate in silence.

It was much later, when Grandma Li had fallen asleep, when Lu-Shen made the final decision to take his father to the summit. Lu-Shen lay in his bed for a moment, considering that if he died, Grandma would have no one to take care of her. No, he had to go, his father's last words had been promising that both of them would reach the mountain, he would honour that promise.

He glanced over at his sleeping grandmother for a moment, apologised to her, teary eyed, and stood up, walked over to where the urn sat and poured the ashes from it into a hollow gourd. He then took the gourd and axe, slung both over his shoulder, and began to run.

He ran for what seemed like hours or days, overcome by raw sadness, he forced himself up vast slopes, through dark, misty forests and over rocks shaped like grotesque monstrous forms. Eventually he fell to the ground, asleep his mind and body drained and exhausted. He dreamt of steel and of the hand that had once ruffled his hair, lying, bloodied. He awoke suddenly, a ruin of a child and began to scream into the empty darkness, before finally losing his voice and falling back into restless sleep.

When dawn came, he began the ascent with renewed vigour. He clambered up over huge monoliths of mossy stone and passed vast patches of exotic flowers, which glimmered like jewels, he moved past trees full of singing birds whose voices rang seductively through the air. However he remained totally oblivious to the beautiful sights he passed, instead he was held utterly by memories of a happier time and was dominated totally by darkness.

Eventually night fell once more, and with it came the biting cold of the north wind. Ice tickled his form as he continued to climb, higher and higher, the gourd hanging by his side. His eyes were never once dry, they seemed to leak like water from a crack in a dam. His voice had long grown hoarse from the desperate screams that left his mouth whenever he took time to nap.

After another nap, Lu Shen sat, again rendered dumbstruck by the horror of his dream and the memories that clung to him like skeletal fingers. He lay there in the corner, crying like a dog that had lost its owner. Then he spied the gourd, lying next to him in that lonely mountain cave. The tears continued to pour from his eyes, but this time he gritted his teeth, and taking the gourd began the ascent once again. As he climbed, his form clinging and clambering up boulders, he passed by mountain springs and clusters of emerald green bamboo. Sometimes he paused to quench his thirst, or to eat berries from a mountain bush, but other than for necessities, he continued up.

Eventually he came to the summit of a particularly steep hill and found himself looking over a deep chasm, with a stone bridge crossing over it to another hill. The bridge was inlaid with ancient words of scripture and philosophy, but more than that, In the centre of the bridge sat a hermit. He was dressed in simple brown robes, a simple straw hat sat on his clean shaven head and in his hands a necklace made of prayer beads. He was meditating, his face scrunched up in deep focus.

Lu Shen watched him for a moment, and then attempted to move carefully and quietly around the hermit so as not to disturb him, and had almost crossed the bridge when he heard a voice behind him speak, making him jump.

“Wait, young man.” the hermit called, standing up.

Lu paused, eyeing the monk warily.

“Young man, might I ask where you are going? Traveling alone up this mountain like a madman?” The hermit asked.

“I...” he paused, again feeling a familiar swell of sadness overtake him. “I am going to give my father the burial he deserves, at the top of this mountain.” He replied, barely holding back the clutch of tears in his eyelids.

The hermit contemplated his words for a moment, and then strode over to him. He knelt down next to Lu, and spoke to him in hushed tones. Lu was reminded of his father, who had also knelt before him and spoken as such, to teach him the basic principles of woodcutting.

“I understand completely how you must feel, for I, being a hermit, was forced to forsake my family for spiritual enlightenment, but now is the time to give up sadness and rejoice.” He looked up into Lu’s eyes and smiled.

Lu Shen paused, and spoke with a shaky reply “How can you ignore the loss of family, how can you live past it?”

“Do you know the legends this mountain speaks of? This is the home of the heavenly kings and their greatest treasure, the pills of immortality!” The hermit shouted, his voice rife with excitement.

“Pills of immortality? ”

“Yes the pills of immortality, small pellets that, when ingested grant the bearer eternal life. For this reason, I gave up all mortal vestiges, and traveled here, for only a member of spiritual society can gain access to the abode of the kings!” the Hermit stood up and turned, seeming to address an imaginary audience.

Lu Shen merely stood in silence, beginning to put two and two together.

“But... I will permit you, young boy, to travel with me to the abode of the immortals! Now forsake your sadness as we will soon obtain the greatest gift! Everlasting life!” the hermit raved, turning back to Lu Shen.

Lu Shen looked at the monk, and gave him a hard glare, tears fleeing unhindered from his eyes like a gushing waterfall.

“Don’t tell me to forget my pain, don’t even tell me you understand it at all! You gave up your own family, for the sake of searching for myths!” Lu Shen roared, his gathered bitterness and anger flowing through him. The hermit stepped back stricken.

“How can you offer me eternal life, when I have lost half my life already when my father died?” Lu continued, his voice like a hurricane.

The hermit growled “You’re a fool, you will never reach the summit, you will die cold and alone, and you will regret not taking my offer.”

But the hermits’ words fell on deaf ears, as Lu had already turned and left the monk. He was bombarded by memories of the golden age lost to him, his father and he, playing a game of hide and go seek in the woods, running through the forest. He hurtled up the mountain, as he turned tight corners around the edge of the mountain. He thought nothing of danger as he forced himself to climb over treacherous and sheer cliff faces and walked along pathways as thin as paper.

As he climbed, higher and higher, his soul empty but for the climb, he came to a flat area, where a set of naturally formed stairs led higher. He paused for a breath, felt the adrenaline from the encounter with the monk and his body’s natural energy finally and totally spent and collapsed to the ground.

He breathed in the thin air with harsh gulps, his body was wracked with exhaustion and drowsiness. He wretched up a thin, clear bile, evidence of the fact that he hadn’t eaten a full meal in days. The cold began to set in on his skin, and finally a sense of futility overcame him. He had been too hasty, and now he had robbed his grandma of not only her only memoir of her lost son but also the only capable worker in the household. He sobbed weakly as he felt himself beginning to black out.

“So this is how it ends?” a thin, vicious voice rang from above. “Fine with me.”

Still deathly weak, he looked up, towards where the voice was coming from. At the top

of the staircase, was a wolf. It was large, far larger than any that he had ever seen, it sat on a piece of grotesque rock, jutting out of the rocks landing, watching him with piercing grey eyes. He met its gaze, and fought back the urge to scream.

There, sitting in its grey-blue eyes was oblivion and the purest form of self destruction. He stared at it, too weak to gasp. The thing was not just a simple wolf, it was his mirror. It was something that dwelled alone, abandoned from the pack, hungry, tragically thin.

The creature, this wolf with a pelt of silver blue, leapt down the staircase onto the snow next to him. Lu silently regarded the beast, it would kill him then eat him, but he couldn't even raise an arm in protest. The beast moved towards him slowly, he was weak, a single strike would kill him, it could take its time.

The wolf strutted towards his shivering form. It raised its paw, and struck him across the face, its powerful claws making deep scratches across his cheek, he gasped and closed his eyes. The blow was like the axe, the axe that had hewn the wrist of his father. The wrist that had once sat on his shoulder, urging him on.

Then he felt it, a glowing presence near him. Father! he thought, overwhelmed, once again tears welled in him. I have wasted my life, he thought.

“No, you haven't.” The presence spoke gently, its voice matching his father. “Let go of me, my boy, you must accept it, and let it go. Don't let him win, my boy”

Lu gasped with tears, but the presence released him, No, don't leave me! He cried aloud.

Then he paused, unable to feel the presence anymore, but strangely he accepted it, his father was gone, but the warmth was still present. He stopped crying.

Blood spewed from his mouth and Lu shouted to the elements, he would not, consumed by this beast of darkness! The wolf paused, unsure, even scared of this burst of power. Lu looked at it, and it cowered back, shocked by the strength in his eyes. Lu took his axe and struck it, right in the head, felling the beast in a single strike.

He fell with a smile, even if he would never see the summit above the clouds, he could rest easier now, knowing he had overcome that he had finally managed to let it go. As he rested in the snow, his face looking out towards the sky beyond the mountain, he saw a gleam in the air. It shimmered in front of him, and expanded into a vast shape, twisting and curling in the air. It radiated orange fire and gleamed like the gold of the emperors, the dragon spiralled and danced before him.

It was majesty in its purest form, a creature of the sky alone: Its scales red like the magma that spewed from deep within mountains, its teeth were a blinding white, and its horns were those of a deer. The creature wordlessly, floated down and took Lu in its talons. Then it looked to the sea of clouds, far above it, and with great speed, it shot upwards, holding Lu tightly against its chest.

It burst out of the foamy clouds, and Lu watched in breathless, wordless excitement as he gazed upon the highest peak, the summit of the mountain, the seventh gate of heaven itself. It was everything that he had wanted to see: the pines stood taller and mightier here, ice and thick snow blanketed everything, giant stones of a long forgotten age jutted out from the body of the great mountain. The dragon's body spiralled and it torpedoed forwards towards the peak, then as it reached the flattest point of the summit, it floated down. It paused still hovering above the ground, and dropped him.

He landed with a grunt, and looked up at his saviour, who had already disappeared. He gazed across the summit, and looked across at the view. It was stunning. Above the clouds and the vast expanse of blue was a sea of littered stones, and pine trees, and the peaks of the other, monolithic mountains. There were giant pieces of ice that slowly melted, and clusters

of beautiful exotic flowers. At last he could see them all for himself, Lu thought, and then he remembered the gourd. He took the gourd from his side, and opened its lid. He poured the grey, silky ashes into his hands, and paused taking another long look.

He then discarded the ashes into the air, letting them carry off into the wind, free at last on the summit. Lu fell to his knees, weeping, not with sadness, but joy, he had done it. From far above as he lay weakly on the mountain side, he saw a staircase of gold trailing down from the sky, and he saw from further above, a gate of steel. He closed his eyes once more, and as he fell into a dream, and once again he felt the hand of his father on his shoulder, proud.

The Emperor's Wife

Dulwich College Beijing, Rhyu, Suah – 14

I am dead.

I swallow my fear and look at you. You that once was is no more; this is you now. Your hand is loose in mine, your mouth parted like a toddler's. Your eyes are glassy and wide open.

I give your hand a squeeze.

You are beautiful, I think. Our god. My god.

Gone.

Behind me, there are a million people, but they are all silent at your form. I am the only one kneeled at your side, cradling your hand in mine. The silk is soft under the back of my hand.

Gone.

There are whispers. I reach forwards and with hesitant fingers, slide your eyes shut. You look more peaceful now, and I reach over to close your mouth gently.

Gone.

I can hear someone crying behind me. You were a good master; they do not want you dead. I do not want you dead either, but what I want is not important.

So many people are watching you. Your hair is streaked with age, and I knew it was your time, but I do not favor it any more than you do. The neat hair that I once tangled my hands in is now flat and colorless.

The bed we once shared is large, large enough for both of us. I watched as the light leaves your body, and I watched as your firm mouth lost its smile. The beautiful death that the priests had promised is not there; but no one dares cross you, and I do not blame them. Instead, you gasped like a fish out of water and struggled for the final strand of life that exited you.

This is no longer our marriage bed.

The bamboo is bent from the weight that it endured over the ages, and I trace it with my other finger, the silk catching in the grooves and ripping. I pay it no mind.

You are still in front of me, and although you seem real you are just a husk, a bottle without a cap. Why is your hand still in mine? I drop it.

The crying behind me is just like white noise, and I find it sad that you were not here to see. What you did to those that loved you, that trusted you, that thought you good. You are selfish and I hate you.

No, I love you.

I close my eyes and your arms are around me, but that is a dream.

You left everything behind, and now we are weak. I ought to blame you but I don't. You make everything look like there is no sense, and I long to see you smile again.

I reach forwards and press a final kiss against your forehead. It is cold.

I am dead.

There are elders, around the table. My hand is still buzzing with iciness, but I hide it under the table. My robes flourish around me and I leave your chair empty.

There are also hushed whispers, whispers that I hardly listen to. The sky is bright and

happy but bleaker than ever, and the shunnus don't seem concerned.

You laugh at me for hating them and I hate you for laughing at me.

I open my eyes. The elders are staring at me, and I ask them what is wrong.

– Where should he go? They ask me. This is the only time they ask me; all others were decided by them. All the preparations.

They know I knew you better than anyone else; they hated me because of it. Now they will fulfill their hate, because that is who they are.

I purse my lips but do not answer. There is nowhere you liked to be. That is what I believe and that is what I will tell them. It is not untrue and I will tell them that.

– My lady.

I look up. That is what they call me, always. I am their lady.

– We must decide.

I do not know. You were a man of many endeavors but of little liking. You were kind but firm. I do not know.

The council is restless. No one can fill the gap you once inhabited, with your thundering laughs and your firm gaze. Your straight mouth that kissed me in the dark.

Outside, your *shen* plays. I watch as he laughs. How can you leave this all behind?

I do not know anything, and I do not know where you must be final. This is important but I do not know any of it.

The elders are laughing at me. I do not care and I will not tell anyone, because this is my last secret and I will carry it to the grave. The grave—that makes me even sadder.

I need to choose and it is up to me, but the truth is that I know. You left me unhappy, and I want to leave you unhappy.

I know where you want to lie, but I do not want you to lie there.

My smile is a mask. I run my finger along the table, the table of gold and wood that is the same material as your body's home. I used to joke that you would buy everything yellow, everything *huang*, but now I do not joke because your coffin is yellow too.

I will not tell.

But in the distance they are folding their hands, touching their foreheads. They want to be with you as much as I do. I must tell the truth. I will not.

In the distance, I can see the city, and behind the city, huge mountains. I smile at the gods because they smile at me. They beckon to you and I feel a weight dragging me down. I look down and you are holding on to my hand, kissing my leg. I will not tell but I will.

My eyes close and open again. You smile at me.

– There. I say, and my finger points. – You lie there.

You lie where you wanted to, and you smile.

No huge monument, just a mountain. You seem happier than you'd ever been.

My best robes are set out for me by the slaves.

I smile at you, who seem to be with me all the time now. Outside the window, I can see the boy playing. I watch him play for a few more minutes, and besides me, you watch too.

My best robes, the ceremonial ones. The ones you'd bought for me. I feel the soft silk under my fingertips, just as it'd felt under yours. There is a certain type of *something* I cannot distinguish about it, that makes me wish to bury my painted face in its creases. Instead, I undress quietly.

The citizens had loved you too. I can see the mountains far off in the distance, and I smile at them, but they don't smile back anymore. They only ever smiled at you.

The mountains are beautiful, and I cannot argue against that; the robes are, too. Colors of the mountain, red of autumn, blue of spring, green of its summers. It is so many colors and so beautiful.

I put it on, slowly.

It is at this point that I know what exactly makes me this so, and there seems to be no argument as to that.

Outside are the mountains, loved by you, and they look greener than ever; inside, there is me, and I am weathered away, soon to be gone.

– Come on. I tell him. – Just a little more.

He is tired, and so am I. The boy is dressed in his best robes, those that make him look like you, and as I watch him I cannot help but think of you. He is your *shen*, and I think of you.

I smile, albeit this, because they watch. I am a good empress and a good wife. In front of us, in front of the boy and I, your coffin is being held on six shoulders, the laborers strenuously walking under the weight. They think it is an honor to hold you, and so do I. So *did I*.

Just a little more.

Does this ever have to end, I wonder, and did this ever have to start? All this, all this for your crow's-feet eyes and your lined but just face and everything that was in between. The boy whines but he knows it is his duty to keep silent; and that is what he does. I would not blame him if he went home and cried.

I just wish I could comfort him.

Inside my palm, grasped firmly between fingers that had held yours, is your *shanzi*. Your fan is light, made from the grandest of oaks, lined with gold. Your touch is all over it, and when I squeeze it gently, you smile and take my hand. I hate you but I don't.

– *Mama*. The boy—the *shen*—says. – How much further?

The onlookers don't hear. They never hear, the civilians that you'd loved with so much passion, but they know you are over and they hate you as much as I do for it. The boy is the spitting image of you and instead, they stare ravenously at him; I do not want him to be seen by any, but soon he will be seen by all.

They believed you were a god. They believe he is a god, too.

It is your fault, I think, but my mind betrays me, for its hand squeezes the fan tighter. I can hear the cool winds around me, around the fan, around you.

– Almost there. I reply. My free hand strokes his raven hair. – Just a bit further.

– My legs hurt.

The fan had been filled with natural winds and with your love. The finest painters in all of the kingdom, spraying black ink onto the thin white to create mountains and valleys and rivers: the ones you loved.

– I know. Just a little further.

My legs hurt too. I cover my head with the veil, like I am expected to, and bow my head in mourning.

The shunus of your mountain bow their heads towards you.

The coffin is dark ebony upon my fingertips, cold and lifeless as your body that lies within. My lips murmur prayers upon your still hands and kiss your brows; furrowed, even in death.

I pray to everyone possible. This is my duty. To the women of heaven, the *shunnu* watching over him. To the kings of heaven, their hands cast downwards to praise. To my gods and yours, even the ones I barely believe in.

My lips, still young as three decades, run over you, just like yours used to do when you were with me; my hands soft under yours, and your eyes locked onto mine. Now, your hand is on my shoulder, almost as in comfort. You don't say anything, because that was how you were. It is better but worse at the same time.

Your skin was as soft as a *baozi*, and your eyes as piercing as a sharpened *jian*, an arrow. I remember everything about you and I pray for you.

– I gave you what you wanted, I say. – I hope you are happy.

You nod. Our child stares, the future king, the one who will rule. His gaze wavers as he looks up at me and I know he feels at least some kind of emotion: so unlike you. We were never like you. That was why you loved me, because I was there, and I was cold but warm.

Like two opposite sides. Why am I thinking about this?

Maybe this—maybe this is—my last chance.

You are staring at both our child and I with a face that is stony, but hides something underneath, even if it's just a crack. What are you thinking? I never knew, and I never know.

Behind me, I can hear everything of nothing. The shuffled feet and the splatter of mud and the wind, the rocks, the *ziranfengguang* of so much nature that you cherished.

This place is so beautiful, and finally, I see what you see.

– It was him you loved, I whisper. No more than that; nigh a whisper. – It was him.

The winds laugh. The rocks quiver in humor. The rivers patter against the walls of the mountains—everything, laughing. Laughing, laughing, laughing.

The *Huangdi's* favourite. My whole life, I had thought it would be me, the one they referred to as the favourite, the best, the closest.

But no. It was the mountain. It was always the mountain, and you smile at me, at my face. At the face that had thought was the one. I was never the empress, just the lady, the concubine; it is the mountain. The mountain was your empress, your first love, your beauty. The One that watched over you for so long. I was not your wife: how can someone who knows so little about you be so? How-

How could I have been so foolish as to think it is *me*?

Of course, I think. The mountain. *Your* mountain.

Your empress.

– My lady. A voice comes from behind me, and I turn. Our son's hand is clutching mine. – It is time.

Yes, it is time. The stone steps, and the candle, and the darkness. The wife to dutifully follow her husband to the grave; to be buried alive, and to stay by your side for the rest of the afterlife. You kiss the top of my head, and I let you. The child watches me and I do the same to him, turning him away, towards the men who wait.

Their eyes watch. I was not a bad master, I think? Yes, I decide. Not bad at all. Not a bad ending, for not a bad master. The lady and her man.

One of your servants hand me a candle. I step down. *One*.

The others watch. *Two*.

I breathe, into that last air. That earth. That shan.

I am afraid. For the last time, I admit that. I am afraid; one emotion never allowed; I am afraid, and a royal face is not one of fear.

But I can be afraid. I am not empress.

Love him. My lips give back to the wind, one last time. *Love him, Empress.*

Love him like I never could.

I step down.

Three.

The tomb clangs shut, and as I hold up the candle, dirt pours upon me.

Goddess of the mountains, Empress of land and life... is that You?

I did not know You loved him so.

Two Identities, Two Generations

ESF Island School, Hui, Tsz Hin – 15

“You’re going on your own, idiot! No one likes you!” Xuanmin and Guanche shoved me onto the ground and started running away. When I stood up, they were long gone.

It was pure mayhem on the Yellow Mountain. Crowds scurried and pushed each other as they all sought to catch a glimpse of the Mountain’s marvellous views at its observation deck. Enormous shadows of the clouds and the mountain cast themselves upon the landscape and effortlessly roamed over the ridges and valleys like silky waves merging imperceptibly into the distant horizon. But I wasn’t here for the views. I was here on a field trip, to collect data with Xuanmin and Guanche—the class’ worst bullies—for a group Chinese history project about the Yellow Emperor.

They never liked me. Since the start of the school year, they’ve always told others that I was an ‘idiot’—and together they ganged up on me—they drew on my exercise books, stole my homework, and left me out on purpose. I was reluctant to tell anyone about the situation—I could not risk getting bullied even more.

A gust of furious northern wind raged on the peak and pulled me out of my thoughts, unleashing its merciless raindrops rapidly like bullets onto the ground. In a blink of an eye, mist had shrouded the summit entirely. Sunshine was blown away, and the gorgeous view was gone. An unnatural streak of lightning illuminated the grim sky, followed by a deafening boom of thunder. Concerned that it was going to rain heavily soon, the crowds immediately hurried towards the cable car station. Soon, I was one of the only few left.

Getting increasingly difficult to navigate my way around the mountain, I gave up looking for the two. My clothes were thoroughly soaked—it was freezing. I rushed towards the cable car station, but it was nowhere to be seen. I had lost my way in the mist. Exhausted from all of the running, I was desperate to seek shelter from the heavy rain. Shaking from the cold, I saw a small trail emerging from the mist as I glanced ahead. The path led to a mysteriously looking cave.

Seeing that it was the only shelter around, I slowly stepped in. A stream of cold air rushed past me, as an alarming chill crept up my spine. The cave was pitch-black. I couldn’t see a thing. I started to sweat, tremble, my heart beating faster.

Within seconds, massive rocks toppled down obstructing the entrance to the cave. I was trapped! I shouted, “Help, help!” But there was not a single soul around. Suddenly, my surroundings started to spin faster and faster. I vaguely remember what happened next—I felt myself falling into a bottomless pit for an indescribable period. As I plummeted into a void of no return, it almost felt like time itself had ceased to exist.

After what felt like an eternity, I was woken up by the bright sunlight. The stones that once concealed the cave were miraculously gone! I immediately rushed out of the cave, entering a wondrously clear daybreak. It was bizarre—the air was very fresh, there were many more trees everywhere, and despite being the same, recognisable landscape—everything just seemed out of place.

“Oh no! I’m going to be late! I’ve got to go now!” I immediately hurried towards the cable car station, but it had disappeared. I headed towards the observation deck, wanting to see whether I could find any hints of what had happened. But there was no observation deck. All of the busy crowds were gone. The high-rises that once stood proudly before the mountain had vanished, only to be replaced by crude wooden shelters scattered around the landscape.

I heard voices behind me. “Hey, do you know where Prince Xuanyuan went?”

Who is the Prince? I wondered.

The voices came from dozens of weird-looking figures, who all stared at me, and then at each other. Nodding their heads, they suddenly fell to their knees, shouting, “All hail Prince Xuanyuan! All hail the Yanhuang Tribe!”

“I’m not the Prince. Who are you? Is this a movie or something?” I asked confusingly. Who was the Prince? Why were they calling me this way?

One of them replied, “Prince, we are your guards. You were hunting just now, but your horse went wild suddenly and knocked you off the cliff. We finally found you! Please follow us as we escort you back to the village.”

I was bewildered by all of this. *Hunting?* I thought. *Wasn’t this banned on the Yellow Mountain as it was named a ‘Natural Artefact’ years ago?*

“Where am I? What’s happening?” I asked.

“Prince, you probably may have lost your memory from your fall, so please let us tell you. Remember life was once enjoyable?” another of the guards exclaimed. “That was until Chiyou—the new Chief of the Jiuli Tribe—decided to invade us, the Yanhuang Tribe. That devil has four eyes and six arms, and kills people without even blinking an eye. Under his command, the Jiuli soldiers destroyed every town they entered and slaughtered every citizen they saw on the way. Those who dared resist—including my aunt’s family—were set on fire alive.”

His eyes welled up. “The Jiuli Tribe’s ultimate goal is to take over China, and anyone obstructing their path would be cleared mercilessly. Most of our allies are already gone, and the very few remaining—including us and our neighbour, the Xuannü Tribe, are on the brink of collapse. Prince, with your intelligence and strength, we are sure you can counter Chiyou and those Jiuli devils. We all have faith in you!” His tears broke into a smile.

“Why are you telling me all this? Let me go! I’ve got to get back to class!” I exclaimed.

The soldiers looked at each other and sighed. “The Chief has ordered us to bring you back to the Tribe. Perhaps you’ll remember what happened when you get back.” I reluctantly followed the soldiers as they continued to chat about their encounters with the Jiuli.

That night, I sat in my shelter, pondering all that had happened to me during this uncanny day. Deep inside, I realized—this was not the modern era. The mountain was a mysterious linking point between two time periods. I was sometime in history. But why was I the chosen one? When was I? I regretted not listening more in History class—perhaps I would know a lot more if I did! Eventually, I fell asleep, with my confusion still lingering in my brain.

“Prince, Prince!” I heard muffled shouts from someone. “Wake up! Wake up!” It was one of my newly assigned guards, shaking me and grabbing me up.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. “It’s the middle of the night. What happened?”

“Our food supply has been raided. Chiyou had his troops burn most of our stock. We’ve only got around two—three days left of supply before we all go hungry. The battle—it’s now or never.”

I shuddered. “Then ... then go tell whoever the General or the Chief is. Why are you telling me this?”

“Prince Xuanyuan ... I regret to tell you that Chief Shaodian ... has just passed away ... in the raid,” said an old man who rushed into my shelter. He was a shrivelled toothless creature, feeble and walked with a cane. He had visible scars, and deep red fresh cuts on his skin. He nodded towards the guard, who slowly backed out from the shelter. He was breathing heavily, “I’m so sorry for your loss ... but now is not a time for grief.” He wiped away his tears. “Prince, you will become the next Chief of our Yanhuang tribe—the Yellow Emperor.”

The Yellow Emperor? This name sounded quite familiar. Wasn’t this some guy who lived thousands of years ago? What am I doing here? “Who are you?” I exclaimed. “I’m not whoever you call the Yellow Emperor. Let me go!”

“Let me reintroduce myself. I’m Fengbo, the former Chief’s senior advisor. I think we’ve met once or twice before? My new Chief, look at everyone here!” He pulled me out of my shelter, and I saw dozens of peasants kneeling before me. “Look at all of them. Most of their family members have been killed by Chiyou. The people of our Tribe need you.” He clenched his fist. “You’re our only hope to defend our tribe from Chiyou”. He took out a large, wooden stick, and passed it onto me. “This is the Royal Staff, symbolising power in our tribe. Chief Shaodian asked me to pass this onto you before he passed away.”

Time was ticking—I had to make up my mind. My History teacher just had a lesson on the Yellow Emperor—if only I had listened!

Why did I become the leader of the Tribe in all of a sudden? I thought. I’m just an ordinary high school student. I can’t save them from the petrifying Chiyou. Where was the real Xuanyuan? Where did he go after hunting?

Respect and honour. It was the first time people looked at me this way. I was not despised by anyone finally. I realized—the mountain had chosen me to prove myself—to prove that I’m not what Xuanmin and Guanche label me as. No, I’m not weak and subservient. I’m not worthless. I’m not a piece of scum who had no friends. I must not become what they think of me.

Forcefully eliminating all of my fear of the unknown, I wanted to grasp this moment to prove my true qualities. *The mountain chose me for a reason. There’s no other way to go anyways. I’ve got to take this position. I’m not a scaredy-cat, am I?*

A surge of confidence suddenly emerged in my body, and the words gabbled out of my mouth, “Thank you for entrusting me with this position. I shall be the Chief of our glorious Yanhuang Tribe.” Fengbo passed on the Royal Staff to me. I was elated for finally making a decision but worried that I was incompetent. The sound of the applause reverberated on the rostrum and throughout the valley the whole night.

My hands sweated with fear and anxiety as the officials reported progress. The burdens of being the Chief weighed heavily on me. Any wrong decision I make could potentially lead to a disaster.

Fengbo asked, “Chiyou’s only got two ways to attack us, according to the map. One would be to head for Zhuolu, our border settlement, by water, and another would be to go for our capital by land. We’ve not got sufficient soldiers to defend both of the settlements—we’ve got to choose one out of the two. Also, we’ve heard rumours that our only ally left, the Xuannü Tribe, has surrendered to Chiyou and the Jiuli. We might be on our own now.

Prince, this is a matter of life and death. Only the Chief has the authority to decide where we position the troops. Where should we go?”

I looked blankly at Fengbo, not knowing what to answer. It was the first time I realized History was so important. I hoped I didn't hate this subject as much. Even if I did pay attention slightly, my life would be much better now. I struggled to recall anything about the Yellow Emperor!

Looking at the map, I noticed that the Jiuli Tribe was situated in the Eastern part of China. As most of China's rivers and waterways are in the East, this meant Chiyou's soldiers would be experienced in water. He would want to use this to his advantage. Somewhere along the Yellow River would be ideal for him. Looking at the map, I saw Zhuolu—lying right beside the Yellow River.

I stammered, “I ... I think the only way for Chiyou and the Jiuli Tribe to attack us will be through our border settlement in Zhuolu.”

Fengbo stepped up, “Let's go for Zhuolu then. It's an important settlement as it is positioned strategically. Whoever wins this battle wins China. Currently, most of it is Xuannü-owned territory, with some being ours. If the Xuannü surrendered, we might suffer casualties from the ambushes and raids we might face—they know a lot more of their own land than we do. Let's pray to God that we're still allies!”

In Zhuolu, thick, heavy fog engulfed any possible hint of a view. As we descended deeper within the landscape, the decaying air and stifling atmosphere was suffocating. The wind slashed furiously against the trees, which lashed and crashed against each other, warning us of the dangers that lay ahead. Bewailing sounds ghosted through the trees. Dense shadows flashed in the woods as if we were being watched ...

What if Chiyou forayed to the capital? What if his troops were more experienced by land? What if the Xuannü did surrender to Chiyou? The amount of uncertainties that lay ahead worried me. Despite the cold weather, I broke into a sweat. My heart pounded, and my hand began to feel clammy against my bouncing knee. I began to pace back and forth, stomping my feet impatiently on my chariot. The very act of watching the battle progress was hurting my eyes, and my heart was still threatening to burst forth from my ribcage.

As the fog became heavier, we lost our way in the forest. Looking for anything that might help, I felt a hard, circular object in my pocket. I didn't know I brought a compass with me the whole time! A thought struck me: *Why not use it to navigate our way through the forest?* I stationed it on my chariot, and immediately it pointed north. We soon found our way through.

Gradually, noises emerged from the other end. The sound of fierce, well-trained and equipped warriors, to be exact. Then we saw—they were the soldiers of the Xuannü Tribe, marching orderly towards us. Their bodies were stiff and erect as if they were possessed like a puppet of a skilful manipulator.

The rumours were true. I thought. We've been abandoned. There's no hope anymore. We're doomed. I am an unworthy leader—I wasn't able to save the Yanhuang Tribe from Chiyou. I've not been able to protect those who had faith in me. I'm a failure. Gradually, I lost faith in myself. Scenes of how I was bullied by Xuanmin and Guanche reappeared. At the moment, I accepted that I was subservient to everyone else, of being too scared to fight back the bullies. I've lost the only chance to prove my qualities to myself. If I couldn't change the fate of the Yanhuang Tribe, how could I change my own?

Suddenly, the Xuannü troops sped up and ran with their swords pointed towards us. However, they came to a halt, standing right in front of us. Their backs slowly turned, and suddenly the sounds of horns and drums reverberated across the battlefield—blood started rushing through everyone’s veins. They shouted in uniform, “Once an ally, forever an ally! Let’s fight the Jiuli devils with the Yanhuang Tribe!” All of the soldiers roared. I wiped away my tears, with my faith in the future resuscitated. I proudly waved the flag of the Yanhuang Tribe, as one of the most significant battles in history—the Battle of Zhuolu—began right in front of my eyes.

The hope I had once lost had now been restored in me. I immediately shouted, “It’s now or never!” The Yanhuang and Xuannü troops immediately rushed towards the Jiuli troops. Suddenly, more and more Xuannü troops emerged on the mountains, shooting fire arrows and throwing rocks at their opponents. They shouted, “Chiyou, get out of our Tribe!” The once fearless, ferocious Jiuli troops shouted in agony, scurrying to escape the battlefield. They immediately descended into chaos.

The rest soon surrendered. The only one remaining was Chiyou himself, who wielded terrible sharp weapons in his six arms. He was more of a savage beast than of a human. With his super-human strength, he made his way across the soldiers and stood right in front of me. With dirt and blood stains smeared across his cheek and forehead, the majority of his face was covered with a thick armour. He roared, “Xuanyuan, it’s all over!” Just as he was about to stab me, numerous arrows flew across the sky. Blood spilt out of his mouth, and just before he fell to his demise, he gave me a harrowing stare—one that I could never forget.

Suddenly, my vision started to fade out. From afar, I saw something like a helicopter. I rubbed my eyes—it wasn’t a helicopter—it was alive. A large golden phoenix gently picked me up, and I was tucked onto its comfortable warmth. My body began to relax as the clouds zipped by under the phoenix’s hooves. Things started to blur out—my thoughts of the past and present all swirled together. I started to fall through my memories. Scenes of me being bullied by Xuanmin and Guanhe, stumbling into the mysterious cave in Yellow Mountain, my adventure through time, the epic Battle of Zhuolu all reappeared and rushed past my head. A faint voice echoed in my head, saying, “Now you know the importance of History, right?”

I found myself back in the cave, resting on a rock. As I woke up, I heard people calling my name. As I walked out of my cave, everyone immediately shouted, “He’s back! We found him!”

My history teacher shouted, “Here you are! What have you been doing here the whole time?”

As I was about to reply, I noticed a stick lying around to the right.

No, it isn’t an ordinary stick. I thought. Looking more closely, I knew what it was—it was the Royal Staff.

I smiled, I realised I was going to ace that history project!

The Emperor's Poet

ESF Island School, Yuen, Nicole – 15

I was eighteen, my grandfather's hand resting gently on my shoulder. My hands rested at my stomach, tight with nervousness. My gaze followed the outstretched crimson carpet in front of me, the metallic soldiers on either side, and finally the glorious throne that stood tall on the other end. On top of it sat Emperor Huang, his face not yet reddened, his belly not yet sagging like it is today.

"Master Chen, what is your request?"

His voice was unwavering and firm. He was perfectly courteous and respectful, but his addressing my grandfather had caused me to shrink further than I already had. My grandfather, however, held his head high and spoke.

"The honourable Emperor Huang may view this as an unusual request, but should you fulfill it, there will not be a day where you regret doing so."

The emperor raised his eyebrows. "Name it."

"I ask that you instil my granddaughter as your court poet."

Armour clattered as the soldiers drew their spears. It was a blasphemous request, even I understood that. Girls were things that were meant to be seen, whether in bed or at the arm of the king, and not heard.

The emperor dismissed the spears with a wave of his hand, but his brows furrowed in disbelief.

"Master Chen, I have much respect for you, but have you gone mad? You expect me to appoint a mere girl to my courts? Can she even read?"

"Your Majesty, I have educated her just as I educated you."

A hush ascended over the throne room. What over, I was unsure. I did not know which part was more astonishing, the claim that a girl had been educated at all, that a man had taken the time to waste his knowledge on a girl, or that there was someone who received education that rivaled the emperor's own.

The emperor remained unshaken. "That is a bold claim, Master, but because you have taught me to this standard, I will entertain you. What is your granddaughter's name?"

At this point, my grandfather squeezed my hand and nudged me forward. "Go on."

I wobbled forward, my clammy hands clasped together at my stomach. "Honourable Emperor Huang, I am Chen Bao An. It is an honour to be on your court today." My voice tinged with unconfidence.

Emperor Huang's severe face did not change. "Read one of your poems for me."

I stopped short. I did not prepare more. I had not expected to even have to introduce myself, let alone to have my poetry be heard. Truthfully, I had not expected to be here this long, still alive and still unseized. I looked back slightly, not knowing what to do. My grandfather looked back at me, his eyes smiling, his nod encouraging.

I inhaled deeply and began. My words spun tales of the evergreen Huangshan Mountains, the ones this very palace ruled. I sang of their ever-viridescent valleys, rolling endlessly into the horizon. I spoke of the melodic harmony crafted by the rustling leaves and whistling forests. I described the villagers, my neighbours, and their sincerity and ceaseless perseverance. I had not written down anything prior, yet when I tried to articulate the love

and pride I held for this land, the words filled my mouth and spilled out, like a song pours out of a bird.

When I finished, I bowed. There was no clapping; there was no praise. But when I stood upright, the emperor no longer held prejudice and doubt in his eyes; instead, there was a scintillating warmth in his eyes, one that promised more than a mere dismissal from his courts.

“Your lexical choice was sloppy.” he said. My heart dropped. Had I been wrong? “But you show far more promise than any man your age, maybe even more so than men older than yourself.”

The iron-clad soldiers bristled. I myself knew the impossibility of this occurrence. Never before had a woman been spoken of more highly than a man. Both pride and fear inflated in my chest, and gratitude for my grandfather’s belief in me tripled tenfold.

“Very well, Master Chen. Your granddaughter has proven herself to be worthy of a position in my courts as a scholar. She will learn from the greatest intellectuals alongside the other boys, and one day, she will be our nation’s greatest poet.”

I spent my first years as an adult as a student in the Huangshan Courts. I woke up before the sky cleared into light azure. I walked around the court, the rich hues of the royal grounds greeting me at every turn, with my quill and scroll grasped tightly between my fingers. When the dawn broke, I began my so-called ‘lessons’ with Master Li, who had lacked the impartiality and wisdom my grandfather held. He would usually read what I wrote, wave it off, and go to teach the other boys. They, in turn, snickered and laughed. I was not bothered in the slightest. They had been ordered not to touch me, and I was able to learn from a much better teacher. After Master Li dismissed us, the boys would frolick off to play *sanguoqi*. I, on the other hand, snuck away to my grandfather’s quarters, where he would read over my poetry, tut at what he thought was written badly, and make corrections with me until he deemed the poem adequate. I would then tiptoe back to my own quarters, the beautiful poem worked on by my grandfather and myself rolled up tightly in my arms, and read it over and over again until it was time for dinner. I think back now, and I am completely and utterly sure that those were the best years of my life.

Emperor Huang evaluated us every full moon. We would present our best poems before him, and he would hear them, before deciding who was no longer worthy of their title as a royal scholar. Master Li did his best to allow his students to shine, however his teachings, no matter how focused he was on the boys, fell short in comparison to my grandfather’s. After five years of seeing my male counterparts diminish before my eyes, I was the last poetry scholar.

“I was right.” Emperor Huang said at the end of my last evaluation. “There will be no finer poet in all the land.”

I blushed profusely, bowing my head low to hide the deep crimson that bloomed on my face. “Thank you, your Majesty.”

“I think it is time.” Emperor Huang said.

“What for, your Majesty?”

“That you are named the Emperor’s Poet.”

Even though I was the last one in that room, even though there could physically be no one else, the proposal still shocked me.

“B-but your Majesty, I am a girl, and I am still young-”

“And yet you are already the nation’s most brilliant poet. I cannot begin to imagine how

well you will nurture your skill as you mature. And as for your gender, it is time that girls in Huangshan are given a chance.”

I stood there, open-mouthed, gaping like a fish. Emperor Huang ignored it.

“Chen Bao An, you are an extraordinary poet. You will do this nation proud. I hereby name you the official Emperor’s Poet.”

Almost immediately, my good fortune was plagued.

I had begun weaving tales of waterlilies and sparrows, of clouds and skies. The Huangshan I depicted was the truest form of it, the vibrant hues of it painting my words and poems. I would share these with my grandfather, who scrutinised them just as closely as he had when I was a scholar. When I told him I was the Emperor’s Poet, he only said ‘And I knew you would be.’

Unfortunately, the omnipresent war was looming closer. This time, it was Wanling that threatened to spill over our tranquil mountains with their spikes and swords. I knew close to nothing about Wanling and their kingdom, but their coming tinted my Huangshan with dark and murky colours, and it darkened Emperor Huang’s mood even more so.

It was a slow descent into insanity. It started as a glass of *huangjiu* during the evenings where he would call me into the throne room to deliver a new poem. He would swirl it elegantly, the brown fracturing into different shades of cedar and hickory. As the clip-clop of the Wanling horses grew closer, Emperor Huang was responsible for developing more and more war strategies. Every war meeting with the army generals called for alcohol, some stronger than others. By the time I joined their meetings when they wanted a break, the emperor and the army generals were often already red-faced and oblivious.

When the Wanling soldiers began flooding into Huangshan, Emperor Huang grew unpredictable and erratic. He had two jugs in his throne room, one to hold the *huangjiu* he was currently drinking, the other to shove in the hands of a servant as he barked at them to go fetch more alcohol. I would then open my mouth to begin, only to instantly have my poetry be criticised. His drunk comments were often lewd, unnecessary, and most of all, completely unlike the just emperor I knew only ten months prior.

“Come on, why is today’s poem so boring? I didn’t make a girl my poet just for it to amount to nothing.”

“You should just tear that one apart. Why are you so useless?”

And the one that stung most of all, “I should have just bedded you when I had the chance.”

It was painful, seeing a man who had once only needed a wave of his hand to command an entire group of soldiers, who had seen through the prejudices of the world, who had made history by choosing talent over tradition, bow down to alcohol’s tyranny. I ached, and I often expressed this to my grandfather.

One night, after an especially alarming night, I meekly tip-toed to my grandfather’s room. He lit a candle, and invited me onto the floor with him.

“Come, sit, Bao An. What do you want to talk about?”

I blushed, abashed. “I’m still worried about Emperor Huang.”

My grandfather chuckled. His eyes crinkled at the sides, like leaves during autumn. “Why?”

“I understand he’s probably just drunk out of his mind but... I don’t know, he says he should’ve just slept with me when he had the chance.”

The kindness in my grandfather's eyes blazed alight into fury. "What did he say now?"

I retreated slightly. "It's nothing—"

My grandfather, in his aged state, had risen to his feet. "That won't do. I'll have to talk to him."

"Please don't—"

It was futile. He had already lifted the paper screen, and was headed in the direction of the throne room.

I wish I had stopped him.

I waited in that room, my skin prickling. Emperor Huang had been drinking immensely. It was the kind of drinking that made him egotistic and easily agitated all at once. I was unsure so as to whether I wanted time to go slower so I would not have to see what happened or whether I wanted it to go faster so I would not have to be tortured like this.

When the moon had risen high in the hard black sky, Emperor Huang called me to the throne room. With knocking knees, I stood up and trembled all the way to the room. It was the most treacherous journey I had ever taken. I just needed to know that my grandfather was safe, that he had not harmed my grandfather in his alcoholic state.

I heard him before I saw him. I still hear him now.

The guttural moaning echoed into the courtyard. I recognised the sounds of my grandfather's agony, each scream burrowing deeper and deeper into my skin. I quickened my pace. I had to see if he was okay. I had to.

I arrived too late.

My grandfather was on the floor, a cross cut into his stomach, the emperor standing on top of him with a red-glistening knife in his hand. My grandfather wrapped a hand around the wound, still groaning and choking. His mouth foamed with crimson.

But when he saw me, his eyes still lit up.

"Grandfather!"

"Don't come closer." Emperor Huang warned, pointing the dagger at me. "I heard you were complaining about me."

I felt my cheeks becoming wet, though I did not remember crying. "Yes, it's true, I was complaining, kill me, kill me and not him, I beg you."

My grandfather choked out three words: "Don't. You. Dare."

The emperor pointed the weapon back at my grandfather. "Shut up." he hissed, kicking my grandfather in the back. "Old man trying to accuse me of treating a girl badly. Like I don't have the right to."

"Please, stop." I got on my knees, the bloody floor staining my purple tunic. "Please."

His head was flushed. With alcohol or rage? Probably both. "You need to learn your place, little girl. It is under me. You work to entertain ME!" he roared, the words reverberating all around me.

I nodded, my vision going blurry. "Yes, yes! I pledge allegiance to you, and to you only!" I sobbed. Anything, anything that would let him leave my grandfather alone long enough for me to be able to carry him to my room.

For a second I thought that he might step away and be reasonable. There was a look, of sobriety, of logic, of remorse. I prayed for it to last. I stayed on my knees, looking up at him through glassy tears.

"Too late. I need to teach you a lesson." he snarled.

The silver glinted, and then disappeared into my grandfather's stomach.

I wailed. The emperor collapsed in his throne, the alcohol probably giving way to his

fainting. I rushed to my grandfather's side, clutching his dying hand in my own bloody one, the tears coursing down my cheeks. He grasped my hand with what strength he could muster, and coughed. Burgundy streamed out of his mouth.

"It's not your fault. I love you, Bao An. I always will."

I sobbed and sobbed, holding on as my grandfather slipped through my fingertips.

I do not know how long I was on the floor for. I think I remember getting jostled back to my room by two guards. I am not sure.

I was numb. The emperor called me to his throne room the next day, as if nothing happened. He was still drunk. I delivered my poem, my voice void of emotion. He slung his list of crude insults at me. I went back to my quarters.

I remained in that state for months. The war worsened around me. I watched as girls younger than I had been when I first came begin to enter the king's chambers, frightened and anxious, and leaving numb and void of emotion. I watched as the emperor boasted about his conquests, both murderous and sexual. I did nothing. I could do nothing.

A period of time passed. I had been preparing to deliver that day's poem. It was the classic the-trees-are-green-and-the-flowers-are-pink poem. The same thing I had been doing for months. I wrote, my brush's wishy-washy strokes meaning nothing to me.

"Your poetry is so beautiful."

I was startled, and then I was angry. "Who are you?"

I turned fully around, and instantly regretted my actions. I recognise now that was the first emotion I had properly felt since my grandfather's death. "You're one of Emperor Huang's... Yes, I'm sorry, I didn't realise."

The girl looked ashamed. "Sorry- my eunuch just abandoned me for a second so I wanted to come see."

I looked properly at her. Her face was young. Even through the horrific things she endured, a naive and curious glow still remained in her eyes. She still held hope in her small, youthful hands, and she still looked forward to a brighter future.

"Thank you. It means a lot. Please, come visit me anytime you want."

That night, I went out to be under the moonlight, my scroll and brush clutched in my hands like they were many years ago. I sat on the ground, my scroll on a slab of rock. I began to write.

I allowed myself to feel it. I felt the loss of my grandfather trickle from my heart, to my hand, to my brush. I felt my own guilt gush out onto the paper. Most of all, I let the fury, the anger, the hatred I felt towards the emperor out onto the scroll. I called him a swine, I called him a degenerate, I called him stupid. It was risky and grounds for execution. But when I finished, I rolled it up and clasped it to my chest, silently crying tears of relief.

I am not finished. But I know what I am. I am not just a girl. I am not the Emperor's Poet. I am my own person. I am Chen Bao An.

... AND MAGIC

ESF West Island School, Eyunni, Gayathri – 15

2020 CE

4 words.

Only 4 words. Once upon a time. A day spent sitting on my old chair with a thin cushion for support, staring at my bright computer screen, resulted in just 4 words. It was a start, well not really. More like a generic opening to a story, set in some fantastical land that I was yet to conjure. It was not that I was unwilling to find ideas, I couldn't. Usually my imagination soared through the vast skies, showering ideas like rain. But today, I was blank. An empty book that could not be written in.

I never wanted to be a writer. In fact, for most of my life, I thought writing was the most strenuous and tedious task to have ever been created. How could one sit and write word after word, without exhausting themselves? It never appealed to me. Yet I would find myself sitting on that chair—with one leg shorter than the others, that rocked back and forth with every minute movement of my hand or leg—in front of the desk that my mother got from a neighbour who wanted to discard it, writing. Writing word after word, getting exhausted, to a point where many years later I finally gave in to this painful activity and somehow made a living out of it.

I needed to write this story. A story that transcended time and evolved over more than 2000 years. It wasn't just a story, it was a mystery, about something more valuable than gold. Many people had attempted to claim this story as their own. But I had something they didn't...

The rocks. Differently shaped, each one. Each had its own story to tell. The monkey watching the sea, the immortal pointing the way. The large ones like tall towers, guarding the area with their strength and might. Some were animals, coexisting in this fantastical kingdom. Who was the leader, and who was just another bystander witnessing the events that would unfold?

215 BCE

“It’s too dangerous.” The words echoed in my head, as I cautiously walked down the stone stairs, “They cannot find out.”

My long flowing robes held many pockets and compartments, which I pressed against my shaking body protectively. The nip in the air felt cold against my tense perspiration. My slippers were hanging off my only two free fingers, my feet bare on the cold floor. I walked fast enough to reach the bottom of the large, spiralling staircase, but slow enough to be silent. Once I reached the bottom, I slipped swiftly into the small room, rushing to a dark corner as there was no door to give me privacy. Once I was convinced that I was alone, I removed the contents of my pockets and placed them in a box that my hands sought from memory, mostly flowers, herbs and twigs from special trees that I had found myself. Soon all the items were safely inside for me to work with later. All except one. I left it in the pocket of my robe, the pocket that had a small button my mother had sewn for valuables. I felt around the pocket to make sure the item was still there, and quickly left the room, hurrying back up the stairs.

The sun had just begun to set as I made my way up the seemingly never-ending path to the peak. The air was cool, and a light mist filled the scene, hiding what was ahead, beckoning me to come forward. I clutched the pocket of my robe tightly; so tightly that I thought the item may break. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath, and looked around the destination I had reached. The tall trees stood majestically against the darkening sky, the clouds floated gently, delicate ferns coexisted with large, hard rocks. My eyes were reluctant to let go, but I had a task at hand. My ferns would have to wait. I walked through the trees and slowly found the opening to the small cave. I looked up at the tall pines one last time before carefully stepping into the darkness. I felt my way along the walls until I reached the end of the cave, where I quickly removed the item from my pocket. I was running out of time and had to be quick. I dragged my fingers along the uneven wall, as I had done many times before, counting the tiny depressions until I reached nine, where my finger sought a small hole. Suddenly I saw a flicker of light from the corner of my eye. I wasn’t alone. Quickly and hastily I pushed the item into the hole, and covered it with some dirt I found on the floor. Whatever happened now, the item was safe, I told myself.

Elixir.

2020 CE

200 words

What can you do when the only place you feel safe is darkness? Where reality pauses just for a moment, and reduces to nothing. Where you can hide from the future, dwelling in nonentity. Some consider that darkness turns reality into a game, where everything becomes

unexpected, like a piece of radioactive substance, and every step you take could be your last. But I'd like to differ. Darkness to me is like light to someone who is lost. I find a sense of hope in emptiness. For those few moments, when all I see is nothing, everything seems to fall in place, until the lights are turned on again...

The pines were a sight to behold. They didn't grow on earth like other members of their species, but instead defied regular traditions and grew on steep ravines, cliffs and peaks. They searched for light amidst the mountains' shifting shadows, twisting together. One could learn more lessons from these extraordinary entities than any book. But we are too blinded by our distorted sense of superiority to ever take a moment to forget ourselves and become one with our surroundings.

760 AD

I had to know if the rumours were true. The journey would be arduous and intense. Still, the reward would make it worth it.. I had discovered the note a few months ago, while on an excursion with my father—an important man in our village—to see the legendary Huangshan. The story was old, and people knew it from generations—it was placed in a crevice under a large magical rock at the peak. The rock was apparently inscribed with the word 'peace'. I didn't believe it at first, but as I walked the area, I became more and more aware of the rock as if it were seeking me rather than me trying to find a fabled rock in the wilderness. Until I actually found it. The note described an item that had been hidden in a cave somewhere on the peak of a mountain. No one had ever discovered the elusive item, and if I found it, who knows what I could do with it?

I left my house just before the sun rose, so that I would reach just before the sun set. As I reached the top, I couldn't help but notice the beauty of my surroundings. I looked down a small stream and noticed my shaking reflection. I quickly turned and started my search for the cave. The note had given me a vague description, and I didn't think I would find it. But somehow, I was drawn to one particular cave that my instincts forced me to enter. Once I reached the end, I remembered what the note said and felt for 9 depressions, and finally found the hole that I was looking for. My hand quivered as I reached inside to retrieve the item that I had left the comfort and safety of my home to find. And there it was. The tube was small and smooth, rounded at the bottom. I carefully pulled it out, unable to contain my excitement, only to realise... it was a fake. My excitement started to turn into anger, and I wanted to scream, run, do anything. But before I could, I saw a flicker of light from the corner of my eye. I wasn't alone. I pulled out the note from my pocket and quickly shoved it into the hole. I would have to write my own one for someone else to find.

Of.

2020 CE

500 words.

Imagination. A world that we create for ourselves in our minds, where anything and everything is possible. A parallel universe, where we can steer the course of our own destiny. The only danger is the one that we create. The only rules are the ones we create. No need to wait for buildings to be built, trees to grow, everything appears in the split of a second. A place where we can escape from reality, and enter a world where everything is perfect.

The most mystical part of the mountains were the clouds. The floating clouds that fell below the peaks when it rained, making them look like islands in the ocean. The feeling of bliss and serenity as one stood above the clouds—the clouds that quenched the world of its thirst—was the driving force to reach the top. And once you were there, even the sky wasn't the limit...

1430 CE

My village was situated within the mighty mountains. People came from far and wide to witness the pointed peaks, tall pines and stunning scenery. I had met many people here, from young children who came to run around, to the old and dying who came here to take their last breath in the serenity of this magical place. Most people just came and went, but one day I saw something strange.

That day I was walking around my village, as I usually did in the afternoons. In the morning a group of about five people had gone up to the peak, and now I could see them coming down. All but one person. I wondered where that man was, but didn't think much about it until I went up later in the evening to visit my cave. My cave. A small cave I had found a few years ago, where I often went to have time to myself, and where I kept my valuables that I was too scared of losing. The walk up to the cave was not a long one, but the steep path often found me gasping as I breathed in the cool air. Once I reached, I walked the familiar path to the cave, through the tall trees, past the narrow stream of crystal clear water, along the delicate ferns to the opening, when I saw a shadow.

My heart started to beat rapidly and my head was throbbing; this was the first time anyone had ever entered my cave. My cave. I cautiously walked along the side of the cave until I reached a second opening, the shortcut into the back of the cave. I quickly slipped in and remained in the darkness, trying to hide myself behind a curtain of ferns and get a glimpse of the intruder at the same time. I saw the feet first, large with hard, worn sandals that had thick leather straps. As I slowly looked up, I realised that this was the man who had gone up with the group earlier in the morning, but hadn't come down. I wanted to run out and tell him to leave, but a sense of fear clouded my ambition. The man looked tall and strong, he could easily take me down. I stayed in the comfort of my fern shielded corner as

the man slowly approached the back of the cave. I held my breath and prayed that I would not give myself away. I wondered what he was going to do, when I saw him running his fingers along the wall. How peculiar, I thought. Then suddenly, I heard a loud bang coming from the front of the cave. I almost flinched, but I kept still as the intruder was still here. He must have gotten scared, as he suddenly ran out of the cave. Once I was convinced that I was alone, I slowly emerged from my corner and went to the wall where he had run his fingers. I could not decipher what he was trying to do, and wondered why he had come here. I sat there and pondered over this until no more light entered the cave and it was time to return.

As I left the cave, I found a small piece of paper on the floor near the opening. As I bent down to pick it up, I noticed the frayed edges and the creases from many folds. The man must have dropped it here as he ran out. I picked it up and carefully unfolded it. A short poem was written on it.

Immortality.

2020 CE

1000 words.

Destiny. We cannot steer the course of what happens next. Fate is inevitable. But is our future really written in stone? Has everything about our lives been decided before we were born? Does anything we do today make any difference to what occurs tomorrow?

One would not believe in magic until they saw the magic of the mountains. One minute it was a peaceful sanctuary, then before you could take a breath the sky was a raging monster spewing shades of red, orange and yellow. But before you could make sense of this sudden explosion, it is replaced with showers, cooling the rage that the mountain had felt not long before. The mist slowly closed in on your senses, and peace was restored. This, was true magic.

1927 CE

It had been almost 500 years since it was discovered. Inside the small cave up on the peak of the mountain. The magical mountain. Where it had been hidden for hundreds of years. But not anymore. It had a new home now. A village near the cave. A village which no longer had any inhabitants, but the relics of the life before still remained. As I trekked up the mountain and the first glimpses of the village caught my eye, I wondered what life would

have been like all those years ago. The slanting roof tops, the children playing, the cold air, it all came to life as I took in the scene. I entered the grounds and looked around. I wasn't sure exactly how I would find what I was looking for, but I would find a way.

The legend said that the last person to have found it had left two words as a clue to its new location. Many people had pursued and persisted, but had failed. What made me think I would find it? An uninitiated young person who was yet to experience the world? But I was not unpracticed by my history. For generations my family had sought this treasure. Every ancestor got closer to finding it, but some obstacle always prevented the final possession. My father too had embarked on the same journey as me, exactly 10 years ago. Now it was my turn.

Only two words. Black fern. At first I thought this was describing a species of fern which was naturally black in colour. But after a few hours of searching, I found none. I had heard and remembered that the person who left the clue had a thing for riddles, ...and couldn't help but wonder...

I found the grave not long after I realised what the words meant. I now understood why no one had been able to find this before; they had not solved the riddle, the two word riddle. It was quite simple when I thought about it, but it was very well crafted, so well crafted that not everyone would be able to find the answer. The area around the grave was not well kept, with weeds growing in every direction and moss covering the dirty stone. But it was here—the treasure—I just had to be patient. I lifted the grave-stone knowing that it wasn't a real one. Everything had been placed so smartly, as if it were a puzzle, waiting to be solved. Underneath the 'grave' was a small box. My heart leaped as I slowly opened the box. At that second, I felt something creeping up behind me. Legend stated that spirits lurked between the trees and came out as the sun began to set. Whether this was a spirit or not, I would never know. Before I ran, I quickly picked up the box and replaced it with the piece of paper I had been holding with me the entire journey. The game was not over.

And.

2020 CE

2000 words

I now had all the pieces. Just a few more paragraphs.

I laid out the four pieces of paper in a neat row. A note, a poem, a riddle and an image. My own paper had finished printing and I took a long look at what I had created. A story. I had sewn together these accounts from various times in history into one entity that

transcended time. As I kept the pieces together, I hoped that someone would read my story and solve the mystery of the magical item. The 2000 year old unsolved mystery. I hoped that they would look at the pieces and find something I couldn't. After all, I was only playing my part as the messenger carrying forward something I myself could not understand. And that was the beauty of stories. That someone else may understand something I wrote better than I could. I hoped one day someone would go back up to the mountain and find the treasure.

Magic.

Find my clue, link the words.

The Clouds of Huangshan

German Swiss International School, Huang, Yuhan – 14

The snow shone a powdery white. Bare, arching branches of plum blossom trees were embroidered into the bleak sky, illuminated by the slumbering sun that sojourned somewhere behind the mountains tethered in the distance. With each running step, the crunch of brittle ice under Fan's slippers was pitched off short in the vast dawn, as if there were no room amidst so many glittering sights for sound to intrude.

This is folly. Folly, folly, The girl thought, the words an anthem to her marching heart. The guards will hunt me down with the ferocity of a pack of wolves, their sharp spears glinting in their eyes, and what on earth will I do then—mustn't ever return, barely managed to sneak out as is! The Siheyuan's high walls and tiny windows do well at barricading outsiders from entering, but not so much for its inhabitants from exiting, —who would have anticipated that one of their own would leave—so easy to slip out—

A shout in the distance, taken up by another in rapid succession. Fan didn't need to look back to know that they had found her.

Perhaps if it were not for her rushing thoughts, or the clamouring of guards in the distance, Fan would have noticed the empty space breaking off from the steady incline of earth beneath her doggedly climbing feet, and doubled back, relieved to have lived to see another day. Alas, the deities had other plans for this highborn girl turned renegade.

As Fan toppled into the ravine, head over heels, and felt herself dropping headfirst into the unknown—she saw for one suspended moment the grotesquely shaped black peaks that jutted out like the topknots of immortals. The scarce breath that had been trapped in her lungs evaporated the instant Fan plunged through the clouds that blanketed the fringes of the peaks.

Fan never knew she would die so soon after this tantalising brush with freedom. She had still wanted to know what it felt like to see for herself the slums where a runaway girl could be a nobody, be irrevocably free. After a lifetime of being boarded up in her family's mansion, hidden away from the elements, was it too much for her to ask?

But Fan was not one to go screaming and kicking. If she should die, she might as well do so with honour and without fear. And in that suspended moment, with the mist tenderly combing through the gaps of her fingers, gently covering her eyes, as if shielding her from her new horrifying reality, Fan closed her eyes and went slack, allowing the winds to wash over her, her curtain of hair to whip at her cheeks.

"At least in death, I'll be free like never before," she told herself, voice quivering. Perhaps it was the wind manipulating her breath, determined to detract from the gravity of her last moments of defiance.

Somehow, her frozen limbs became even colder. It could have been the condensation from the mist seeping into her skin, or something else. Then for no discernable reason, Fan felt resplendent. It felt as though her body, up to that instant, was simply lazy, and all her earthly scrapes and aches were simply imagined. It happened in one glorious second: her lungs swelled with sweet air, cooling her pounding head, and she could feel the weight in her stomach buoyed up, up into the air.

Fan's eyes snapped open. She had broken through the cloud cover, and was hurtling towards a jagged tumbling outcropping of rocks.

Time passed oddly. Between one moment and the next, she had been safely deposited on a smooth surface with her limbs sprawled out underneath her. She only registered the other person's presence when a shadow crossed her face.

Fingers encircled her wrist and pulled her to a sitting position so quickly Fan experienced whiplash.

“Well, hello human,” the person said.

Fan was suddenly hyper aware of her precarious position perched on the mountainside. Behind her, the sun's rays were draped over her back, for the first time in her life, although she would not know it at the time. Just below her was a yawning chasm. Fan could still feel its pull.

The woman was sitting in a graceful lotus position, meditating, that is, before Fan had crash-landed into her meditation space.

“The Gods have not sent someone to accompany me in a long time,” the woman continued, eyes sparkling. “You are quite young, aren't you, girl, to already have thoughts of... departure?”

Fan gulped. There was something curiously refined about the woman looming over her, that made Fan instantly gravitate towards her. Her smooth, dryad-like features and her brisk, efficient movements contrasted with her abnormally piercing gaze. Before she knew it, the words were tumbling out of her mouth in a jargoned mess.

“Yes—well, no. You see, I have been locked away in a house for all my life, and I do not wish to ever return to my village. I barely escaped. If the guards found me, my head would be on the chopping block for desertion. Wait... do you mean departure as in... no, I don't have a death wish— at least, I don't think so? Although I must confess that it felt so *right* when I fell off a cliff—”

The woman chuckled. Fan tittered along deliriously—the residual ecstasy from her fall still swirling in her brain.

“My dear, you never fell. You *ascended*.”

Fan's bowels turned into water. Now she knew why she had felt so weightless and happy. She wasn't a human anymore. It was no secret that the sacred mountains were the bridge between the heavens and the mortal world, because of the peaks' proximity to the sky and its heavy population of spirits. Fan somehow had gotten herself caught in the middle of this mess.

The woman—no, spirit—went on, indifferent to Fan's horror, “In your last moments of life, you no longer felt the need to stay in your mortal world—in fact, your wish for inner freedom was greater than your wish for life. As a result, your heart became lighter. While most other mortals would have plunged to their deaths, you crossed the barrier into the spirit world. You now exist in limbo as neither spirit nor human. You are neither in the material world, nor in the spirits' realm.”

Fan nodded. She picked her next words carefully. “O spirit, would you be so kind as to show me back to the realm where I hail from?”

The spirit's kindly face turned sorrowful. “I am confused. Why would you wish to go back to the people below, who are so distanced from the heavens and spirits? They are sedentary and corrupt to their core. They are forever doomed to repeat the same mistakes of their ancestors, restricting the freedom of their own kind in their spite,” the spirit looked at Fan meaningfully at her last statement. “You might as well stay in the mountains, where you can experience what the Gods experience when you look down from the peaks. Where no one will be able to find you and entrap you in their backward ways. Where you are so close to the skies that if you just reach up, you will be able to access the knowledge of the heavens.”

Fan looked at the view beneath her and saw with her own eyes what the spirit meant. The splendor of the mountains was on full display. The sea of clouds was floating around as listlessly as ever, fanning in and out the peaks, teasing out strange shapes in the rock. The craggy cliffs were warming up, emanating a golden glow. The pines, a mosaic of jade and orange, peppered the crevices in soaring layers, rising and falling with the inhales and exhales of the wind. It was beautiful, serene, and isolated. It was everything Fan had always wanted.

Or was it? Could she really spend eternity here?

The spirit had started grinding away at an ink stone. The ink, enhanced by the sooty particles from the stone, welled up like blood. Fan cleared her throat. The woman looked up expectantly.

“Thank you for your offer. I have thought about the merits of staying in Huangshan, living as a hermit. All the same, my heart lies at the base of the mountains, not in them. I know of a place where freedom rings from the smallest molehill to the greatest forests, where I may live out the rest of my days happily. I am not the person who wishes to live forever. The beauty of life lies in its grand finity.”

The woman’s left eye twitched imperceptibly. Then she sighed. “I feared that it would be like this. Alas,”

Fan perked up, eager to ask her for the directions out of the mountains. Before she could say anything, the woman trained her piercing eyes onto Fan’s, brimming with emotion.

“I must confess that my lifestyle as a wandering nomad can become lonely at times.” The spirit whisked up a brush and dipped it lightly in the ink, drawing it out reverently, the brush tip hovering above the paper.

“But would you be so kind as to keep a lonely soul company? I would like to give you a painting as a parting gift, at least. I have wandered this Earth for ten thousand years, and have seen half as many mortals. But I paint every day.”

Fan looked upon this woman and nodded, heart brimming with sympathy for this restless spirit.

The woman grinned—a razor sharp thing. Then she painted a black streak on the paper. Fan watched in awe as the mountains materialised on the bone white paper. The woman splayed out the bristles of the brush and scraped it, creating splashes of rough cliff here and there in one, singular swipe, before finishing off with a meaningful flourish, a dip and a turn. The peaks were as sharp as knives, and despite the spirit’s simplistic brush strokes, the amount of detailed crevices were uncanny. The black of the land, and the pure white of the skies, contrasted with each other yet intertwined at the same time. The clouds were painted in the traditional swirling, rectangular pattern. She teased out strange details in the frolicking clouds, paying each one unwavering attention.

The spirit stroked her chin, gazing down at her drawing in faux consideration.

“What should I add to complete this? Oh—a cloud. I can never get enough of them!”

She looked at Fan strangely, as if analysing her features, then turned back to her canvas and drew a small lone cloud in the corner of the drawing. Fan gazed at it. It was... strangely lifelike.

After a while, Fan tore her gaze away from the painting to see that the spirit, with a graceful leg swung over a lap, had brewed a cup of ginseng tea. She proffered it to Fan.

Fan glanced down at the steaming china cup, its curling tracks of sweet aroma tickling the tip of her nose. It felt like she was holding in her clasped hands a warm, beating heart.

“Ginseng from Huangshan is a delicate contraption that was planted by the spirit of the mountains himself, to replenish the hungering souls of weary gods and godlings, even mortals. It took thousands of years for me to master the blend, to balance the sweet and sour, to maintain

the right temperature so the ginseng is scorched just right. It was bitter going, but it makes the final product all the more sweeter, does it not?”

Fan did not drink.

“You have to understand, Fan. If you drink this, you will know the taste of true freedom. Freedom from your prison of your wretched humanity, the freedom to wander these mountains. It will make you into a being of mythical proportions—you will be forever the bridge between the Earth and the sky, the all-knowing. Just like me. You always had a thirst for knowledge, didn’t you?”

The woman was right. In the shelter of night’s darkness, Fan would creep into the mansion’s library and spend countless hours poring over columns of characters, memorizing each stroke until they were burned into her mind. She took pride in how worldly she was as a result, having discovered the nature of agricultural exports from Mukeng, how to navigate on a seafaring voyage, and the like. She watched the regal way that the spirit dipped her brush into the pot of water and flung a careless hand into the air, like life was an elaborate, unrestrained dance, so different from the demure way that the women in the mansion shuffled their bound feet back and forth and tucked their lily white hands into their sleeves.

Fan knocked back the tea.

The liquid *burned* her throat on the way in. Fan vaguely thought that she should have cooled the tea to a more reasonable temperature, but the thought was overshadowed by the sudden weightlessness she felt.

A wind picked up from the gorge below, whistling through the boughs of pines and openings in the peaks.

Trembling with trepidation, Fan set down the cup, and her heart sank into her stomach. Her fingertips were turning transparent. No... vaporizing. The wind whistled in her ears, and the distant yowling of the monkeys stopped. When she looked up, the spirit’s eyes smouldered with what Fan now knew was cruel treachery.

“What did you do to me,” Fan rasped. The clouds were closing in on all sides—she now could see that the strange shapes she had seen in the painting were not the trick of the mind, rather they were a sunken eyehole, a wailing mouth, dishevelled hair... faces of lost souls. Of the humans that had dared to play with a spirit. Fan blinked, and by then the spirits had drawn so close that she could make out what they looked like. If she reached out she would have grazed the cheek of a young plum faced boy, and felt the musty breath of an old woman.

The spirit laughed trilly. “You mortals disgust me. You dare enter a sacred place of spirits and taint it with your earthly sins?” The transparency was spreading past her wrists now. Gods, it was working fast. “To cleanse the heavens of the grime of mortals—that is my mission. That is why I resigned myself to these mountains so long ago. You would be an excellent addition to my collection. I have not seen someone with such hunger for life.”

Tears began to well up in her eyes. The vapour from her dissolved arms were spiralling around her, clinging to her with the same wetness she had felt when she had plunged through the clouds, what seemed a lifetime ago. Fan knew with a terrifying conviction that she was turning into a cloud, forever doomed to stalk the ends of the earth, and circulate around the peaks in an infinite dance.

Suddenly, she looked at the tea, half drunk. If the tea had made her start to disappear... An idea formed in her mind—crazy, yet still worth a try.

She kicked at the cup, causing it to tip over and spill the tea onto the painting, which lay, forgotten on the ground. One look at the spirit’s horror-stricken face, and she knew she had done the right thing.

The ink started bleeding together in the water, the beetle-black fading into a serene grey. The inky faces started emerging from the clouds—spirits, how had Fan not noticed them earlier—and the ink was trailing up the paper into the wash of pale grey that represented the heavens. Before her eyes, the ink rearranged themselves into the forms of human bodies. The little cloud was the last to be liberated—it clung to the paper, but morphed into a girl with a wide, expressive face. Instead of rising to the heavens, it remained where it was, on a cliff overlooking the mountains.

Whatever curse the spirit had placed on the paper had been broken up by the ginseng's healing qualities. The spirit screeched. All around them, the clouds were opening up, and fat raindrops, some as wide as Fan's arm, fell from the heavens. Some landed on Fan's skin, sizzling. Her colour returned.

"I rejected your offer, and I reject it once again. I now know that freedom cannot be achieved by merely drinking a cup of tea. It needs to be earned in good faith, with hard work. The final product becomes so much sweeter, *does it not?*"

The spirit growled.

"I hope you grow to realise that your mission of entrapping humans and neutralising them in an attempt to cleanse the world of our supposed filth, is not freedom. It is a product of you being enslaved by your desperate attempt to make innocent people share in your suffering."

And with that, Fan, girl no more, human once again, started her trek down the cliff, off to make a better world.

The Embrace of the Sky

Good Hope School, Ng, Pollia – 15

Run. *Run*. The words pounded in my head, echoing with the rhythmic crunch of the gravel beneath my feet.

The tattered flag of red left dangling on an abandoned watchtower. The haze of smoke enshrouding the blur of figures darting. The defiant sky aflame with fumes and smog. All pointing to the signs of a failed rebellion.

The ominous thundering of many, but one grew louder and louder, as the looming words of *treason* threatened to envelop my whole existence.

My eyes searched frantically for an escape. Until they landed on a fallen servant of the palace. Splayed on the ground, its blood stained the white marble of the sidewalk red. I stripped the body of its tethered rags and slipped in it, deserting the elaborate silk chest raqun hanfu. The rough linen scratched against my skin, but stirrings of a familiar nostalgia rouse.

Then I ran. And ran. Blending in with the rest of the servants fleeing the fallen palace. I drank in the sight of the open, thin plywood doors, the taste of freedom fresh on my tongue.

But a hard body rammed against me, my vision turned to the dark, hard earth as the sight of the open space disappeared. The metallic taste of blood invaded the depths of my mouth, completely drenching the promise of freedom away.

As the throbbing of my vision amplified, the world swirled with my arms swiveled around in a tight grip. I caught a glimpse of the soldier manhandling me, his eyes turned towards the ground as I threw an accusing glare to his direction.

“I see that you are once again a servant, princess.” The taunting voice of my cousin hissed, searching for a reaction, a flinch, a grimace, a wince. His lanky figure came into sight. The rich, thick Yellow Gold silk hung on his shoulders, making him to appear to be a child dressing up in his Grandmother’s garments. “Never could shake off who you really are, could you?”

I fixated my eyes on the red sun and kept mum, letting my red-hot rage simmer under the surface.

“You were always too weak to be like Empress Grandmother.” He let out a hollow laugh and turned to the army standing behind, masking what I knew to be a front for his insecurity and fear.

I cowered like a punished puppy, as my body heaved with painful sobs. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the soldier’s face softening. “Please...” I let my voice croak with desperation. “I’m just a girl.” I gently tilted my head towards him. The beads of tears balanced on my lashes, until they fell from my soft, pleading eyes and slid gracefully down my powdered cheeks. I felt the grip on my arms loosen.

“Treason!” My cousin declared. “For acting against Emperor LiZhou. Immediate execution!” My face fell. A stream of tears flowed freely to the earth, no longer an act. There is no out.

Looking up at the red sun, I silently begged Empress Grandmother for forgiveness on my humiliation. But a glint of gold caught my eye, flashing against the haze of the smoke and the backdrop of the scarlet sky. The glare grew bigger and bigger, until the faint outline of a giant bird emerged as a flaming fireball. Golden light enveloped the whole of the land. The glare

so bright, that the army scattered in in fear of it burning them. Upon the heavy beating of wings, the majestic form of the ZhuQue took shape.

Its fiery eyes beckoned me, drawing me so close that I seemed to be looking into its eyes; looking outside of its eyes. The wind swooping down my feathered back, combing down the stray hairs that arose in the course of my travels. The power that my beating wings delivered to the currents of the wind, sending particles coming my way in reverse. The cry released from my screeching throat, thundering for miles and miles. It sent a surge of cool breeze through my body, flooding my nerves with the burn of chill, until my fingertips become alive with the promise of magic and excitement.

The panicking yowls of my cousin woke me up from my trance-like state. I teared my eyes away from the magnetic pull of the ZhuQue. Sensing the weak grip and momentary lapse of shock of the soldier behind me, I forced a strength foreign to me and broke free of my arms. No one attempted to recapture me as I stumbled like mad towards the bird.

But in the blur of the next second, I felt my body fly on to a plane of soft feathers as the whizz of an arrow flew just inches away from my ear.

It knocked the breath out of me. My body rolled on to a warm, vast back and I held on for my dear life. Coming to a realization that I escaped, I put the uneasiness of mounting on a flying beast behind my mind and leaned to the direction of the ever shrinking faces beneath.

“I will take my place. Long Live Empress AnLe!” I cried with rigor. The scornful face of my cousin paled into a cold sweat and slowly faded into a small dot. A warm feeling enveloped my heart with the thought of becoming Empress Grandmother. I could finally prove my heritage as a strong princess.

The tear-streaked face, the dirty linen, and the thought of grandmother was forgotten as the ZhuQue soared in a smooth, sweeping flight across the sky. The fresh, brisk wind greeted me, tickling my face. And a foreign, shrill laugh burst out of my chest. I froze. The abrupt noise hung like a suspended note on the serene air. A far cry from the usual timid, sweet giggles that covered the silence like pasty sugar. A feminine weapon to coax people. I spread my arms open, welcoming the embrace of the limitless sky. Leaving behind the burdens of what the fiery, red sky signified.

The vast, beating wings of the ZhuQue sliced through the crisp sliver-lining of the clouds. It had a mind of their own, swerving and weaving its way through the blue dome. The flexing of the muscles beneath me served to remind me of the hidden strength the taut flesh subdued. Against the stretching swirling blue canvas, the swift dashes of the ZhuQue flicked popping, bright red splashes across, marking it as the reigning beast of the skies.

The vitality of the ZhuQue only did to solidify my young fantasies of magical creatures, pulling the flimsy threads of unreality together.

—and it rose from the flames of the South and vanquished its foes with a fiery breath.” Aiyi’s hands curled to imitate talons and she pounced with a huff, fire dancing in her eyes. I relished the magic of the myth, transfixed on the surreal powers beyond this village.

“What else? What else?” I asked eagerly. “No more for today, child. It’s time for you to get back to dig out the crops.” I grumbled, not happy at the prospect of getting my hands in the dirt.

As I hiked back to the hut, I thirsted for the sweet, sweet escape of the magical realm.

The wind breathed a whisper—*whoosh* into my ear. And the most magnificent scene I would ever have the pleasure of setting my eyes upon came together right before my very eyes.

The jagged tips of rocks jutted out like spears, curving up towards the wispy mist, swirling softly, grazing the edge of the sky. The rich green enveloped the descent like a blanket, rustling with a restless abandon. The air vibrated with the screeches and howls of all

things wild, thrumming with danger. My eyes widened in alarm as a brown, flimsy thing slammed right on my face. I choked up some loose fur. But I let my eyes linger in wonder as the monkey cackled away *flying*.

Yet, despite the primitive quality, a stillness enfolded the hearth of the mountain. Much like an inanimate landscape splashed on by the strokes of a dashing brush. It was hard, yet soft; gentle, yet unyielding; tranquil, yet *wild*.

But the glare of the sun glowered down, my face hardened with the reminder of my ultimate mission. What would Empress *Grandmother* say? *An embarrassment, I thought.* Forgetting my responsibilities and enjoying myself.

Grandmother would always say, "Remember. I was the one who saved you out of the hellhole you were in." during my droughts of daydreaming in etiquette lessons. Saying the word "myth" was unspeakably forbidden.

Indeed she did. The moment she announced her decision to revoke my father of his title as Prince, I became a Princess, leaving behind my life as an irrelevant servant. I remember the whiff of the rich aromas in feasts, the heavenly feel of the silks, the vast space of the room I could call my own.

It was an honour, I always told myself. It is an honour.

The ZhuQue began its descent downwards. A gust of wind blew against my face. Landing on the plane of the mountain, the ground shook. My vision tilted back to normal.

With difficulty, I climbed down the back of the ZhuQue. Averting my eyes, I came up to the bird and bowed my head with respect. "Connections are everything. There will come a time when you need to use it, so keep your private distracting little thoughts away. " The cold voice of my grandmother trailed after my ear. I contemplated the possibility of acquiring powerful allies, ones with such power and vigour as... the ZhuQue.

If such a creature as the ZhuQue exists, then others with must exist as well. With the revelation fresh on my mind, suddenly, my ears unfurled to the beck and bellows emerging from within the forest. The mist twisting and mangling in the air tingled with unfulfilled promise, veiling the strength of lurking beasts.

My eyes met with the ZhuQue's. I scanned its form hungrily, gobbling up the razor-sharp beak and spiked talons.

"Where am I?" I asked the bird, attempting to elicit a spoken response.

"Buzhou Shan," an alluring, deep voice replied. The air surrounding trembled with anticipation, waiting for the speaker to claim her words.

A beautiful figure emerged from the dark woods, clad in flowing silk, rippling and fluttering like a river of wind. She was glowing with youthful exuberance, flowing with a grace only a goddess could have. Her eyes peered out through an inky sheen, two shining spheres, capable of seeing beyond the barriers of the physical earth. Under her upper body, a thick, smooth, scaly tail slithered about. *Half-human, half-dragon.*

"Nuwa." I gasped in wonder. *The original creator of human kind.*

"Child." Her voice came out as a low, thrilling whisper, reverberating around the forest walls. "You have been through too much for a person to bear, let alone a child."

"*I am not a child! I am as capable as any adult like my grandmother or my cousin.*" The exhaustion of the day caught up with me. My seething anger lashed out like a whip, but alas, the murmurs of my grandmother sealed my lips.

"For that, I would bestow upon you an honour. One that not one mortal should have ever received in the existence of the world."

An honour? Would it be a legendary artifact? A mystical creature? Magical powers? I smiled,

excited at the prospect of fulfilling Empress Grandmother's legacy.

Her slender hands curved to form a circling gesture. And the darkness of the forest vanished. In its place, is the vast open sky, no barriers withholding the might of the wild. On the North, South, East and West, sang the autumn wind, sending the wispy mist on a dancing fanfair. I stood over the edge of the precipice, yet no fear washed over me.

The rocky cliff stretched out into a sea of pink blossoms, bursting with the bloom of spring. Tiny houses dotted the slope of the valley, basking in the glow of the afternoon sun. The villagers milled about, their faces animated with the words exchanged. No crowds. No screaming. No disdain. Just... quiet harmony. As though the valley was suspended in time, away from the petty squabbles of the world beyond the mountains.

"The Peach Blossom Spring." Nuwa spoke of my thoughts. "A paradise for anyone who seeks refuge from the ravages of destruction." The thoughts of stepping foot into the ethereal realm invaded my mind, weaving its way in and out. Waking up to the fresh scent of blossoms. Bathing in the warmth of the sun. Laughing along with the people. I could do with that.

But a glare of the sun temporarily blinded me, obstructing my view of the Peach Blossom Spring. Guilt flamed from the fuel of my fantasies. *What am I doing? Betraying Grandmother's love. No. What I want is to become Empress.*

"Why are you showing me this?" I asked Nuwa accusingly.

"I thought you would like to settle down here. Wasn't it your dream back then?" She questioned curiously.

"I..." My head started spinning. *Grandmother. Magic. Grandmother. Magic. Grandmother. Magic.* "No! My dream is to become the Empress of China, just like my Grandmother." The doubt casted on my decision to pursue the throne vanished. I ignored the nagging feeling gnawing at my heart.

"There is no time for silly dreaming. Can you provide the means for me to conduct a second rebellion?" I asked, Nuwa looked unbothered. "Your Grace." I added.

"Is it your will to reign the earth, or your Grandmother's?"

I sputtered. "Why? Am I not capable to do so? Just because I was not born a princess, I am destined to suffer the mundane life of an ordinary peasant? No. I have royal blood coursing through my veins and I will claim the throne as my Grandmother did."

"But do you want to take over the Kingdom? Tell me: does your heart desire it?" A trace of a whisper called out from my heart. But I was in too deep to acknowledge it.

"After all Grandmother has done for me, I cannot fail her. I *will not* fail her." I intentionally cracked my voice. Fresh tears sprung from my eyes, framing the mask I put on of an emotionally broken girl.

"I see that your determination on the path to become Empress cannot be deterred. I can only leave you to find your own path. One piece of advice: remember the legends of Nuwa, the Queen of Wa; the creator of mankind; the repairer of the Heavens." Nuwa took off into the sky and faded into a golden speckle.

The repairer of Heavens. NuWa. BuZhou Shan. Her words ran through my head wildly. For a second, I abandoned the notion of conquering the throne and dug deep into my memories for an answer. *Come on. Come on.* An idea rushed to my head like a speeding carriage.

In olden times, the world fell into chaos. But taking pity on the suffering of humankind, Nuwa killed a giant turtle and used its legs as giant pillars to hold up the fallen sky. Legend dictates: Buzhou Shan to be a pillar can reach up into the Heavens.

The distance between the edge of Buzhou Shan and the tip of the mortal world remains ever so daunting, but the thought of Empress Grandmother propelled me to make

a declaration loud and clear to the Heavens, in hopes that my interpretation of Nuwa's hint would prove to be correct.

“Tian Di. I, Princess AnLe seeks entrance to the heavenly gates of Tian. Please grant the destined Empress the honour of the Heavens, in hopes of claiming the throne with aid by her side.”

For several seconds, silence hung on the whipping air, unmoving. A strange sense of relief began to overtake my senses. But suddenly, golden steps materialised in front of me, shaping into a twisting, curving staircase leading up to a point in the sky. I stepped on the first step, expecting some sort of applause or cheering to occur. *Would Grandmother look down from above and see what I've accomplished?* But the only answer I got is cold silence.

I ran. *The faster I reach the Heavens, the better.* Running up a few thousand steps, my lungs began to burn with an intense need to breath. Air. I need fresh air. But the fire ignited failed to erase the unrelenting question burning in my mind. *Tell me: does your heart desire it?*

Only a few hundred steps left until the Heavens, it should have been a godsend for me. But the thought of the complicated, drawn-out affairs I would have to deal with had me break down into painful sobs. I collapsed on the steps, heaving sobs racking through my throat. *I'm sorry Grandmother.*

A gentle breeze with all the aromas of spring blossoms caressed my tear-streaked face, dousing the fire burning through my lungs. And brought forth an answer to Nuwa's question.

No. My heart desires to live in this realm, where I can be whatever I want to be. Not a servant. Not a Princess. Not the Empress. Just... AnLe.

Wakened with a renewed vigour, I shouted with pure joy, “ZhuQue!” The dash of red streaking through the horizon made my heart tumble and jump. I mounted the ZhuQue's back, delving into its warmth. *Home. It feels like home.*

“Take me to the Peach Blossom Spring.” And I welcomed the embrace of the limitless sky.

Immortal Satisfaction

Heep Yunn School, Chu, Sui Lam – 16

Nightfall, the perfect disguise for the undesired wanderers. Tiptoeing past the threatening eyes of patrols, camouflaging his presence against the intertwined rows of crooked pine trees and vandalised rock columns, Zhang Hui leaves the slight trace of his wanderlust on a frosted blanket suffocating the rocks. An aspiring pharmacist, with ambitions greater than peaks of the Yellow Mountain, first set foot on these ridges two years ago, photographing various plant species and recording the encroaching vegetation throughout the cycle of seasons. This visit, however, is a far cry from the logical and hunter-gatherer-like aspects of his work, or the findings of his predecessors documented in the treasure troves of ‘Proceedings of the Chinese Geological Society’ and ‘Geographical Journal’. His eyes stray away from the thousands of shrubbery begging for a place in his ever-growing logbook, but towards the waterfalls gushing downwards with crystal clear liquid mirroring the celestial ivory orb. The volatile rhythm of the splashes and splashes from above breaks the silence of twilight, serving as Zhang Hui’s audio guide for the much acclaimed springs.

One of which would, hopefully, contain the Elixir of Immortality.

As he saunters the illuminated trail reflecting the lustre of the moon, the familiar silhouettes of spiked leaves lingers on his journey. Intermingled Masson pine form menacing beasts of tigers and dragons, with gnarled roots invading the snowy path like the claws of a phoenix, cautioning the trespassing traveller of his unwanted presence in his uncanny mission. The peering eyes of grotesque rock statues loom over every footstep Zhang Hui leaves and scrutinises every piece of geological history that may or may not have been tampered. A palm-shaped rock appears in the distance, having the air of being all too similar to the red-and-white plastic ‘STOP’ sign imprinted in his memory from the many years of dealing with traffic as a regular citizen. Is the brain convincing him to abandon his goal built upon tales of eternal living? Yet, he fears none of such illusive omens. For him, it is merely flipping through the photo collections in his logbook, occasionally dotted with unauthorised plucked ferns and tea leaves hastily stuck on, not to mention the myriad of sticky notes adhered to pages of parchment bleeding with rollerball ink.

However extensive and lengthy his geological research is, Zhang Hui has reminded himself to save several pages at the very end of the logbook for a desire of his—keeping an account of the discovery, properties and effects of consumption of the Elixir of Immortality. Centuries of rumors passed down from one generation to another, of naive wanderers, hoping to taste the specialty of the water in the Yellow Mountain, ended up with a blessing of never being near Death’s door at the price of vanishing from the conventional human civilisation like decomposing corpses. ‘A small sacrifice to be made for unlimited opportunities for happiness and success,’ he has always thought to himself, eternal life would provide him with ample time to reach prosperity in his career and personal affairs. This yearning of triumph has instilled, within his mindset, a seemingly unrealistic mission to unravel the location of this enticing potion. Carrying along with him numerous empty vials to be filled with every type of springwater flowing from the heath of the mountain, he paves his way through the pine forests dangling from baseless ravines of bizarre rock columns for his venture.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches a glimpse of a speck of white light appearing on the black backdrop of an extra-terrestrial stage, stealing the spotlight from the evening sun. He stops to admire the performance. In the blink of an eye, the speck of light fills up the canvas with its blinding light, revealing it to be a shooting star. Before the blazing white comet trails away, he makes a wish, despite his mindset of reason telling him otherwise.

‘I wish I could gain the Elixir of Immortality.’

As soon as he lets loose of the earnest clasping of his hands, a low murmur of unintelligible Chinese disrupts the falling commotion of waterfalls. Realising he’s not the only sign of life concealed amongst the peaks, he surveilles the ominous environment for protection in case of security patrols. He spots a cave with ingrown rock clinging pines; a suitable place to cover up his presence. Without second thoughts, he dashes towards his newfound hiding spot.

Little does he know, as his footsteps quicken, the ghastly voice grows louder and more distinct in context of rambling.

‘O dear shadow and O fine pine, dance with me under radiant monelight!’

It’s spoken in an unusual dialect, ‘definitely not the Mandarin we know of today, nor the voice of a security guard’, Zhang Hui mumbles. It’s almost like Cantonese, but somehow contains a harmonic and fluent assonance lacking in said modern-day language, quite like poetry. It has an alluring quality, like the songs of the sirens, to attract the curiosity of passersby, but also undertones of desperation, like an elaborate invitation beseeching them to join the lonely ball its owner has created for oneself. A pitiful plight the holder of such a singsong voice has, only able to find solace in the haunting beauty of the Yellow Mountain.

Eventually, he finds himself drawn to the mysterious voice and its poor owner as much as he is to the elixir. Accepting the invitation with hopes to confront the stranger possessing the melodic voice, he treads upon the frosty blanket cautiously, following the echo of a summoning to nature, like an audio guide, to its source—the very cave that caught his eye. He enters as the feathery snowflakes begin showering the mountain.

‘I drinken to thy warm mylky glow, O sweet monel!’

The rebounding sound of the stranger’s poetic, and rather unique declaration of admiration hushes the burbling ripples in the hot springs and the cascading of waterfalls. Here it is, the centrestage of a peculiar performance starring an actor speaking in bizarre gibberish, while hiding behind the curtains of luscious evergreen pine leaves. Determined to unveil the silhouette of the ‘Stranger With a Weird Dialect’, Zhang Hui threads his way through the cluster of greenery, as if he is peeling off the skin of an orange little by little to reach the saccharinity of its core. The more the rustling of the spiral needles of pine leaves against stone cold cave walls overlaps the soliloquy of the hidden individual, the more his anticipation grows to identifying the owner of the mystical voice. Dodging under the trunk of the last ingrown pine tree, his eyes finally meet the ones of the other sign of life thousands of metres above sea level.

Except, those eyes are looking at him lifelessly. In fact, the ‘Stranger With a Weird Dialect’ is nothing but a pale spectre of a disheveled man cloaked in a monochromatic turban, fashioning a messy bun and a tangled beard. His entire body is translucent with a tint of whiteness, with much resemblance to a spirit. In his right hand, he carries a jug of supposedly wine, judging from the ghost’s comparatively higher concentration of tint on his cheeks, apparently drunk.

‘Blink twice,’ Zhang Hui utters shortly before taking action, ‘no I’m not seeing things, he’s still here.’ No prior memories of dissecting rats in biology class could prepare him for the

fright of his life. Before his eyes is the embodiment of the origins of horror stories. His mind and body are at war; the brain is sending signals of multiple escape plans through the nervous system of the body, but human anatomy has malfunctioned from numbness of fear, leaving Zhang Hui quaking under his knees, his face frozen in shock. Entranced by the spell of fear, he is only woken up by the same accented voice he has heard previously.

‘Who art thou?’

There is no running away now that the spirit of a drunkard has taken notice of his presence, he must answer. But nowhere in his mind could he comprehend the Cantonese-like dialect.

‘I don’t speak Cantonese, sir.’

To his surprise, the drunk ghost, suddenly alerted, switches his dialect to the familiar Mandarin language.

‘So you are one of those, what I call, modern mortals. There’s no need to call me sir, but do say your name.’

Zhang Hui hesitates before answering, a ghost.

‘I’m Zhang Hui, I’ve come to find the Elixir of Immortality.’

The spirit chuckles incredulously, accidentally spilling some of his liquor before questioning the dumbfounded traveller.

‘Are you a Taoist practicing alchemy, Mr Zhang, or are you a businessman trying to sell poison to the public?’

‘No sir, my intentions are purely academic.’

Zhang Hui proceeds to present his logbook to the poet. Spectating the faded hand breeze through the crisp pages of his perseverance, he reflects on his intent of foraging the elixir. It has been a lifelong dream of his to document his findings and publish them as stepping stones for his worldwide recognition as a pharmacist, but then wouldn’t he become the ‘businessman’ selling poison to the public? That is, if the elixir could even be considered a threat to mankind. How could a remedy for human dissatisfaction, an antidote to the cruel passage of time be a tool of harm? He would gladly take a sip of the potent draught and spend his eternal youth gathering as much success as he could, indulging in opulence in infinitude. He would be reigning over his destiny, grasping the Sceptre of Control in one hand and the Sovereign’s Orb of Affluence in the other. His thoughts on immortality cease abruptly upon noticing the poet has finished reading.

‘Nice journal you have created, though I don’t approve of stealing pieces of vegetation and taping it to your notebook; nature should not be disturbed by human activity. Seeing your dedication and my need for company, I’ve decided to join your little conquest.’ Catching sight of Zhang Hui’s raised eyebrows, he reassures him, ‘I know these ridges well, you’ll find me useful, except perhaps my tendency to rejoice nature and drink excessively. But I swear on the beauty of the Yellow Mountain I shall lead to the Elixir of Immortality.’

A ghost for a guide, but not just any ghost, the spirit of Li Bai, the Immortal Poet who visited the Yellow Mountain for its picturesque beauty in his time of living. Despite him possibly being knowledgeable of every peak in the Yellow Mountain, the unsettling thoughts of acquainting with a supernatural being baffles Zhang Hui. Who would he credit in his findings in publications, the absolutely existent ghost of the great poet Li Bai? Before Zhang Hui could raise further objection, the curtains of pine leaves sway in synchronised motions from the gloating of the spectre, ushering him to go along with the poet’s spontaneity.

Stepping on the powdery white trail, he observes that the recent snowdrift has enveloped the once forest green pine needles with a sheet of white gold, with remnants of needle tips basking under the dim moonbeam like glimmering emeralds. The flexible

branches of these pinaceae have withheld the blustery blow like bars of bronze; no traces of trauma could be engraved in the bark by the blades of wind. The full moon, however, like a glistening pearl, conceals itself in the nacre of the mollusk of pale snow clouds for protection from the mortals' eye.

'The immortals have stolen my precious white jade plate!' Li Bai laments to the heavens above, proceeding with a gulp of alcohol to calm his nerves.

Ignoring the blabbering of his intoxicated companion about how 'mountains are the conduits of gods', he sees a calligraphy brush-like rock monument takes shape on the landing of a cliff, with orchids flourishing from the blank sheet of snow-like paper at the tip of the 'brush', as if the writing utensil has sprouted blossoms and petals from the mighty power of a pen. A rather relieving omen for an individual who wishes to publish a book on his findings in the Yellow Mountain – the factual and the fantasy.

About an hour on the tiresome journey, Li Bai motions to stop a series of ancient houses. 'But there's no time for accommodation issues,' Zhang Hui protests initially, but on second glance he realises the 'houses' are actually Taoist temples. Symmetrical halls of tarnished red walls, wooden pillars and herbal gardens decorates the frosted terrain, housing a populace of religious devotees. The pungent scent of burning joss sticks escapes the walls of the temple and greets their arrival, to which Li Bai takes great delight in sniffing with a guilty grin. A faint steady ringing of bells echoes from the chambers within. The solemn chimes in adagio are interrupted with sighs of nostalgia from the poet.

'I was once a Taoist, and for years I had written poems for guidance to the secrets of the elixir. I was still living and breathing the air of immaturity back then, believing immortality was the route for achieving ecstasy.'

'But wouldn't having an eternal heartbeat fuelling your journey of fame and fortune be satisfying?' Zhang Hui points out in defense of his own beliefs. The pale cheeks of Li Bai rapidly lose more colour, turning almost transparent, as a realisation dawns upon him.

'Dear gods not another mortal misinterpreting the meaning of immortality in Chinese culture! I thought you were a scholar Mr Zhang?'

'Not exactly.'

Under the spectre's gaze of ridicule, Zhang Hui makes his confession.

'I am simply an aspiring pharmacist hoping to publish my logbook.'

'So you are a businessman trying to sell poison to the public, what a shame. Dishonour!'

'No, I am not an entrepreneur! Plus, what's so dreadful about immortality when you could receive infinite chances for success? I could make an astronomical amount of fortune by collecting medicinal herbs here alone till the end of time!'

'For the last time, immortality does not equate to becoming imperishable in Taoism! It's a method of achieving ecstasy through alchemy. Some enlightened ancestors decided that ingesting cinnabar, a mineral that synthesises mercury, would grant the consumer ascension to heaven and immortal life. Generations of Taoists have fallen for the myth and unwittingly cut their lives short by drinking good-for-nothing poison,' the angered spirit inhales the scent of joss sticks before continuing his venting, 'I don't need more ghosts joining me, so you can forget about putting that Elixir of Immortality in your book, or rip out a single weed from this mountain!'

Li Bai, opaque in the face, swiftly floats away from the stunned human before suddenly snapping his head back in disgust.

'Curse me for swearing on the beauty of this mountain to bring you to that spring! A promise is a promise for an honourable man, now move!'

Ushered by the unsettling breeze the speeding spirit creates, Zhang Hui quickens his pace with great difficulty from numbed feet, proceeding to jog along the path of bleakness to a toxic spring. Without the casual humour of Li Bai, the overbearing tension stabs his face with the chilling blows of his companion's cold shoulder, that he would have thrown himself off the Bridge of Immortals if it were not the determination to complete his goal.

The gradual surge of rippling gurgles from the reddish brown liquid and the pungent scent of sulphur signals the arrival of their destination, the Cinnabar hot spring. The deep crimson stains the white slush of melting snow, incriminating the scene of murder. Who knows how many cases of manslaughter have befallen on travellers like Zhang Hui himself? The vicious bubbling of the spring cackles at him for his late discovery, mocking him for his idealised beliefs. Cautiously avoiding being seen by Li Bai, he fills a vial with the hazardous elixir ironically representing vitality and immortality. In an attempt to break the silence, he raises a suggestion.

‘What if I debunk the myths of immortality in my logbook?’

‘Suit yourself, nature should not be disturbed.’ the spirit turns around, appearing much paler than before, to face Zhang Hui. ‘It’s almost the dawning of a new day, I must retreat to my cave. You may want to stay for the sea of clouds though, I remain in awe for my daily viewing.’ As soundless as the morning breeze, Li Bai floats away before farewells could be said.

The first ray of light graces the horizon moments later, revealing the extent of the hazy veil masking the civilisations below. The indigo sky is splashed with streaks of salmon pink and champagne gold, as the sunbeams refract the colours onto the brume, transforming the undyed silk chiffon into Joseph’s Coat of Many Colours. The rising orb of fire steadily ignites the ether with tangerine flames, blazing the stratus clouds with hues of apricot orange. Time softens its pace as Zhang Hui gazes at the art of nature while pondering about the concepts of immortality. With no Elixir of Immortality to take control of his fate and fortune, or create an undying legacy, the disillusionment invades the precarious goals he has withheld in mind, attempting to shatter remnants of plausible ideals like stained glass in church windows. He recalls parts of a poem on his journey from Li Bai.

‘What is there to prize in life’s vaporous glory?’

Standing in the fragments of his broken dream, among the chaos he reaches an epiphany. Centuries old pine have stood their ground from sturdy roots, lifelong dreams of his have stemmed from memories of a tale. Under the sea of clouds are millions of chances to forge new memories and aspirations, all he has to do is—what was it that Li Bai had quoted on the journey?

Oh yes, ‘carpe diem, seize the day’.