

Winning Entries



HONG KONG YOUNG WRITER OF THE YEAR

Fiction – Group 4 WINNER

fata morgana

Heep Yunn School, Tsui, Yu Hei Iris – 16

autumn, 1958

‘What the war did to dreamers.’

She looks up, all bright eyes and red hair. ‘I’m sorry?’

He hands her the photograph. ‘Look at this. The Yellow Mountains in Anhui, China.’

Her gaze flits over the image, wonder filling her eyes like golden liquor filling emerald-green bottles. ‘It’s like a fairy bridge,’ she whispers.

‘Over there, they dreamt just as we did.’ He sips red wine, feeling the alcohol hit his bloodstream in a rush of creative fervor. ‘They had poets in those mountains, including your favorite. Li Bai, isn’t it?’

‘The drunken poet who drowned trying to capture the moon’s reflection,’ she says wryly. ‘What a dreamer.’

‘We’re all dreamers,’ says Jack Kerouac. ‘Dreaming is what ties mankind together.’

She tilts her head back, downing champagne. He says, ‘Haven’t you had too much to drink?’

‘When the war has annihilated your ability to dream,’ she says, setting the bottle down with a thud, ‘alcohol is the antidote. We’re Beat Poets, Jack. Our words manifest upon spontaneous inspiration. That’s what makes our poetry...’

She pauses. His eyes trace her silhouette as she paces in some obsessive pursuit of creative insight, the lamplight an incandescent glow upon her fiery hair.

‘Perfect,’ she finishes.

Her room is drenched with moonlight. Her mind, hazy with drink, etches images on the blank canvas of the ceiling with a palette of grey shadow.

She dreams herself back to the winter in 1945, that disoriented fragment of time when a world war was brewing, when grey faces and grey silence and grey monotonous terror eclipsed all color. Grey was the color of the whispers about the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Grey was the hue of American glory when bombs decimated two cities in Japan. Grey was the shade

of the coat of the man who came to tell her that her father had gone to see her mother — in heaven.

That is the farthest the spirals of memory go before she resurfaces, gasping as if she has been drowning, wiping her tear-soaked face and gulping liquor to annihilate that treacherous territory of remembrance. When she sets the bottle down, her fingers catch on something. She lifts it to her face, the photograph Jack left behind emerging into clarity.

And suddenly the shadows are shifting again, rearranging themselves into a landscape painting composed only of whites and greys. A vision emerges — of the glittering prairies of a sea of clouds. The mist wafts upwards, assailing the craggy peaks, invading those vast and uncaring skies... it is as if the entire mountain was made of mist.

Fata morgana, she thinks, a mirage.

Her breath stirs the misty landscape of her dreams; it dissipates, congeals, reforms. She realises she is not alone, upon that sea of clouds.

Two figures arise from that sea, hazy like the figments of a half-forgotten dream, outlined in silvery plating against the dark curved ceiling of the night sky. The rag of a scarlet skirt bells out as its wearer spins, the vivid flare of color parting the mist. Behind her follows a ghostly phantom, cloaked in shadows, feet weaving patterns across the floor of the foamy sea. His cloak billows, a tempest of darkness; she trembles under his touch, recoils from his advances. Every throw of his arm, every thrust of her hip is an outburst of suppressed emotion — of rage and terror — of yearning and desire — a yearning for something without shape or name, for some unattainable state of perfection —

The moonlight trickles down, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

She gasps, resurfacing from the realm of imagination, drenched with exhaustion, as if she has struck some lonely chord of colossal victory. She gropes for her notebook, pencil scrawling across paper:

*On the bleakest of December nights —
A phantom stood before me.
His eyes were like my father's eyes —
Filled with stars I cannot see.
He sits with me in trenches
Where the bones of my father lie
And he brings with him the canvas
Of a grey and stormy sky*

*Fear
is of falling*

when there's nothing beneath but sky

Lost

*in no man's land,
in scarred and shifting landscapes*

RAGE
at a broken world
where your words hold
no meaning

She turns to the window, blowing out a frustrated breath. The wishing stone of a moon extends moonbeams towards her, offering a loom on which she can spin her dreams.

summer, 1961

Jack drives her to the airport on the day of her flight.

‘You sure you want to go?’ he says.

‘I’m sure.’ The glow of the streetlights flickers across her face, picking out the golden tones in her auburn tresses.

He sighs. ‘You’re sure going to a communist country two months after the Soviets shot down an American plane is a good idea?’

Her face is closed off, imperturbable.

‘That’s why I’m going there,’ she says. ‘To escape.’

autumn, 1961

Through the fiery gauze of her hair, she watches a young man approach her at the hotel bar, which sits on the shoulder of the Yellow Mountains.

‘You’re the American poet from the cover of *Poetry Review*,’ he says, ‘The one who’s been compared to Li Bai.’

She looks up. ‘I am. Did you like them?’

‘Not really,’ he says. ‘Too sentimental for me. And the themes were incoherent—your message got confused—’

His voice is a tolling war-bell in her ears, invasive in her mind. In her chest an echoing melody rises to meet it, a war-chant that reverberates down her spine, a deathly rhythm of rage and terror and self-loathing —

She interrupts him, desperate to break that pounding tune. ‘Does this mean you’re a poet?’

His coal-black eyes smolder, ready to leap into flame. ‘I was.’

She sits beside him on the stone steps overlooking the sea of clouds in the early blue-spun hours.

The clouds congeal and dissipate, networked with seething rafts of sea foam; she can almost hear the deep, subsonic roar of the sea. If she falls, she thinks, those shifting waters would catch her. She could drift upon that silent sea as the clouds roll on, indifferent to the petty quarrels of men, unmarred by the scars of war.

As the dawn breaks, a figure, crouched like a hermit, materialises out of the shifting mist.

‘The Stone Monkey,’ he breathes. ‘Legend has it that he fell in love with a beauty who was repulsed by his hideous looks. He sat on the cliffside in sacred vigil over her home. He sat there so long that his heart and flesh turned to stone.’

The sunlight hits the sea of clouds and sea-spray ricochets in droplets of spun gold. The weight of myth releases her shoulders, dissolving into the silence of the mountains.

She whispers, 'It's like the entire mountain is made of mist.'
He's silent, the golden daybreak reflected in his coal-black eyes.

winter, 1961

*The sweet-throated warblers pour out their battle songs
Into the glowing swelling spaces among the dying stars —
Vermillion azaleas bloodied by starbursts of bright gunfire;
I roll up my sleeves to see where the world gave me scars.*

*Fear
of seeing
a dark-eyed phantom in the night*

Lost

*When he
lets my demons out into the light*

*RAGE
at myself
that I can't ever be*

*what this world needs me to be...
what I need me to be...*

She does not see him again until the snow is falling. An argent cape swathes the mountainsides in pristine white and frost glitters on dark boughs. When the pale sunlight hits them, it glances off the brilliant fractals, until the mountains are aglow with blue fire.

'You've been here a year,' he says one night, as they lie staring up at the inky-black canopy. 'How's the poetry?'

She traces the river of stars with one finger. 'I can't stop writing.'

'Why?'

'I can write about the sun on new-fallen snow, dwell on the shoals of clouds as they swim across the sky, wonder why the wind doesn't move the moonlight,' she says. 'But nothing I write can bequeath its beauty to the reader.'

'And that is what all artists come to see,' he says wearily, his sigh a strand of mist in the frosty air. 'We offer readers a snapshot into our visions of the world, but the color they fill that snapshot with is never the same as our own hues.'

Her fingers trace the frozen patterns on the ground. Beneath her fingernails, the frost makes billions of tiny diadems, a lattice of dumbfounding complexity.

'Is that why you stopped writing?'

'Mm-hm.'

She shakes her head. ‘But didn’t you enjoy it? That feeling of your heart like a pendulum against your ribs. Your blood like a golden flow through your arteries. Didn’t you like that quest for perfection?’

‘You’re always talking about perfection,’ he replies. ‘What will you do once you achieve it?’

She looks at him. His pupils are filled with the milk of the galaxy they lie under. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘If you become as legendary a poet as Li Bai,’ he says, ‘and you achieve that momentary perfection as he did...what will you do with the rest of your life? Who are you if not for your poetry?’

Above them, the stars wheel and churn, soaking her with wet light.

She shakes her head. ‘I don’t understand.’

spring, 1962

The lamplight tints the white curtains with shades of rose. *Clair de Lune*, on the piano, a Chinese singer crooning in poorly articulated French as the syllables fall languidly like ash.

‘Wine, miss?’

She waves the waiter away. ‘Just water, please.’

The radio crackles, a broadcaster speaking in the breathy consonants of Mandarin.

She notices nothing at first. But then the lamps darken, the rosy glow fades, and the white curtains look like drowned hair. A clamour rises, a cacophony of panicked dismay.

The broadcast switches over to English.

Tensions rise between America and the Soviet Union. Experts warn that a major crisis could take place by the end of the year.

Suddenly she is six years old again, and the man with the face of a phantom and her father’s star-flooded gaze is kneeling before her, his withered grey hand brushing her cheek.

Your father has gone to see your mother — in heaven.

She blinks. When her vision refocuses, her knuckles are white on the edge of the table and the glass of water is in splinters on the floor.

The grey fog is gathering, suffocating her breath, obliterating the beauty of the mountains. Her vision soars over Europe, over the towering wall dividing the continent into two, over the trenches where the bones of her father lie.

When the waiter offers her champagne, she does not wave him away. As the ghostly chords spill over the piano, she raises a glass to the perfection of the silvery moon.

One drink turns into three. Then more, more, golden rivers of molten lava down her throat, until her mind is so hazy she cannot think. This happens, night after night, in her room.

She waits for the liquor to stir the creative ardour within her. But the words that spiral from the tip of her pencil are faded to her, as withered as fallen leaves, handfuls of crumpled stars. Beyond her window the moonglow is bloodied; her dreams of perfection disintegrate into dust.

Instead the alcohol stirs something else — a dragon that has been slumbering since the silence of the mountains lulled it to sleep. A ghostly phantom with her father’s eyes and a dark, shadowy cloak that conceals everything she has fought so hard to put away.

Sometimes she thinks he's possessing her — that when she reaches for more wine, it's his hand that brings the bottle to her lips. That when she writes, it's his words that spiral from her pencil.

*Our phantoms whirled and drifted in a dance across the floor
And you spun and spun me faster under the lamplight's revolving core.
I was breathless
You were merciless
My red satin dress was torn —
But the moonlight never pierced the shadows of the cloak you wore*

*And on midsummer's eve, you stood over a silenced world
You whispered
'Come, fata morgana.'*

summer, 1962

He sits down beside her on the stone steps, in the blue-spun hours of early morning. Her unbound hair whips around her face, loose tendrils of flame. He surveys her bloodshot eyes, devoid of the creative ardour that had bewitched him. The scent of alcohol stings his nostrils. When he puts his hand on her face, it is cold, so pale she could fade into the bleached white of the sea of clouds, leaving behind nothing but a dash of red fire. *Fata morgana*, he thinks. A mirage.

He says, 'I'm worried about you.'

'Why?' Her voice is raspy with drink.

'All this time in Huangshan,' he says, 'you've never had to rely on liquor for inspiration. But now —'

'Now,' she breathes, 'the world is teetering on a knife's edge. One wrong move and two superpowers collide.'

'What does it have to do with this?' he whispers.

'How long will Huangshan stand before a nuclear warhead obliterates all the beauty that has lurked in these mountains for a million years?' she says. 'How long before this timeless beauty must succumb to implacable change?'

They stare at each other, oblivious to the golden dawn. When she speaks, her voice is fey. 'Goodbye.'

She rises, stumbling down the stone steps. The fog swallows her in an instant, leaving him breathless, calling her name.

autumn, 1962

She returns to the stone steps at dusk to join the Stone Monkey in silent vigil.

The sea of clouds is shaded with muted blue and its underbelly shot through with pulsing amber. Around it the encircling mountains loom, its peaks plumes of black flame. The sun is a rotating lamp and the imperturbable shields that have held that grey twilight at bay have fallen, but heavens, how beautiful anyway.

Around her, tourists burst into applause, their laughter echoing in the crevices. She has not realised how she has starved of it, that pure, *human* sound of rapture, of childlike wonder, as if they are seeing the light for the first time.

She closes her eyes, tears leaking from beneath her eyelids. Oh God. How long until everything is perfect, and we can all go home?

She sits as if in a dream. Her vision soars over the divided nation they called the Reich; over the scarred and ever-shifting landscapes we call nations; over her father, lying in the trenches with his eyes filled with stars; over the glittering silhouette of Massachusetts, where Jack sits in a dimly-lit bar, hunched over a manuscript and downing bottle after bottle of wine; over the young man, coal-black eyes burning into her own; over the Yellow Mountains and its extraordinary beauty that exists in another current of time, a beauty that is ultimately doomed.

When she opens her eyes again, the mountains are deserted and she is alone in the darkness, the moon her only companion.

But is it? The wind sighs, blowing her fiery hair out of her eyes; the shadows interweave upon the blank canvas of the sea of clouds in a hauntingly familiar pattern, as if she has seen it in some old film before... A girl in a scarlet dress, driven and derided by anguish and terror, her every move dictated by the dark-cloaked phantom dancing by her side.

It takes her a moment to realise she is not alone.

Beside her glides the phantom, looking at her with tender eyes. She recoils from him.

‘You’ve got so much rage in you,’ he breathes. ‘Just let go.’

She trembles. In the pale moonglow, she feels weightless, ephemeral, made of air.

Fata morgana, she thinks, *a mirage*.

Her hand trembles; her notebook lies open in her lap. Her body is running on the fuel of creative ardour; her pencil works feverishly under the raw, impassioned moonglow.

She envisions that girl in the scarlet dress, dancing in the arms of a phantom who has her father’s eyes. But now the girl is struggling, writhing in the phantom’s grasp — and suddenly she breaks free — free! The shadows waver and recede, and she stands, poised, bathed in moonlight.

For a moment she is victorious — but the vivid scarlet of her dress is fading, the fire purged, and then she is dissolving, dissipating, into the silence of the mountains.

The phantom holds out his hand. ‘Come, *fata morgana*.’

She rises from the stone steps, notebook slipping from her lap. She steps towards the edge and lets the sea of clouds take her. And it rolls on, indifferently, as if it has never been disturbed.

autumn, 1962

Dear Mr. Kerouac,

I regret to be the bearer of sad news. Your friend, R. Cassidy, vanished from her hotel on October 22. Some, including myself, believe she was drunk upon her disappearance.

*She left behind one last poem, discovered upon the steps of Huangshan. If she attained the perfection she craved, she has given her life for it. Yet I find it unfitting to pronounce her... I would say she became *fata morgana* indeed — a mirage, dissipating into the silence of the Yellow Mountains.*

fata morgana

*We danced by the lake where the drunken poet drowned,
by the light of the silvery moon.*

*I saw my demons in the shadows of the billowing cloak you wore,
fear, loss and rage — I’ve known them all before.*

*I battled them with the fire of all my passing dreams,
so I didn't have to sit in trenches where my father's bones lie.
But now I'm engulfed in flames and I'm burning out too fast —
and you know it's in your arms that I die at last.*

*O phantom, I'm the girl you called fata morgana.
O phantom, it's in your arms that she died at last.*

HONG KONG YOUNG WRITER OF THE YEAR

Fiction – Group 4 WINNER

Immortals

ESF Island School, Lam, Charlie – 15

Huangshan. A mountain renowned for its unworldly features, each entwined with breathtaking tales. It's the motherland of ancient religions, the epitome natural beauty, the birthplace of mystifying legends. I have arrived.

Beads of sweat drip past my eyelashes, blurring the empty path ahead. Apathetic, regiments of bony trees cowardly shy away, exposing me to the sun's harsh glare. I kick the soil, angry at myself. I should've started earlier this morning. As if on cue, a thick layer of fog cloaks the mountain, shading it from the harsh daylight. Unfazed, my eyes refocus on the pearly clouds above, and I steadily hike towards the peak. Flecks of soil wrap around my aching toes, sinking my tattered sandals into the muddy earth. Still, I soldier forward, my mother's story ricocheting in my mind.

Mother told me about an elixir, a mystical extract nestled on the top of China's tallest mountain. Granting eternal life, the elixir allows the most worthy to transcend time and space. All the children in the village would listen to her stories, enchanted by the prospect of immortality. As time went on, most of my peers dismissed this as a mere folktale, laughing whenever it was mentioned. Yet, I'm undeniably sure it exists; the evidence is unmistakable.

It was many years ago, but the traveller's perplexing smile is still fresh in my mind. Known for being an impatient worrier, a neighbouring shopkeeper climbed Huangshan to relieve his stress. I remember seeing him after his journey, his eyes so calm yet so fulfilled. Despite the pain, suffering and misfortunes of the world, he was completely at peace. I suppose, with all the time in the universe, all kinds of worries would disappear. He left a few weeks later, to follow his dreams. I still think of him, many years later.

I have to get the elixir. The doctor said I'm running out of time.

I started my journey twelve days ago. Guided by a water compass, I hiked to Huangshan City, hundreds of miles away from my home province of Shanxi. I trekked, by foot, over acres of verdant forests, deserted plains and boundless fields. I stop to rest, realising that I'm mere days away from the coveted elixir.

In front of me, a Buddhist monk meditates, mumbling a rhythmic verse. Alarmed, I stare at the curious figure: legs crossed, hands turned upwards, as still as the rocks beside him. A crimson robe was draped neatly across his chest, with waves of creases elegantly cascading. He smiles as I walk past, pressing his lips into a thin crescent. He must've come from the Buddhist temples at the foot of the mountain. I remember passing by the stubby structures, each topped with a curved brick hat. Humbly built and proudly displayed, the temples are decorated by years of worship, devotion and history. Monks have roamed the side of the mountain since the Southern Dynasties, with a wealth of knowledge accumulated over countless generations.

"Need any help, boy?" he says kindly. The wind huffs loudly from behind the trees, but the monk's soft voice is crystal clear.

"Erm... I mean, yes. I need to go up the mountain, sir. I don't know the way there, and I really need some help. But I wouldn't want to bother you, of course."

"Don't worry about that, I have all the time in the world." The monk rises and beckons me to follow him. He begins hiking up the steep path without a twinge of hesitation. I was shocked by his casual willingness. Climbing Huangshan is a dangerous journey for even the most experienced athletes, let alone a barefoot monk. Deep wrinkles crease into his tanned skin, a natural display of his advanced age. Yet, he glides smoothly up the rocky trail, completely at ease. I wonder if he aged at will, perhaps as a result of the elixir.

"I'm Ping." I say, itching my dry throat. He stops and nods. Without a reply, he continues his ascent. Like a young duckling, I follow closely behind.

Step by step, we trek up the mountain. Cleanly shaved, the monk's bald head shows no sign of perspiration, but I'm already overwhelmed by pain and fatigue. Clawing my nimble fingers into soft soil, I heave myself up the slope's ancient steps, carved by centuries of humble footsteps. The wind mocks my woeful technique, spitting bursts of air onto my dry face. A thick, humid breath rushes into my nostrils, barring cool air from relieving my lungs. I grunt pitifully, trying to think about the blissful elixir instead.

Suddenly, a sharp rock slices the side of my ankle, inducing a fiery, acute pain.

"Ouch! These stupid, spiky rocks." I cry miserably.

The sensation is magnified by prickly ferns, tickling my raw skin and gifting it a pinkish hue. I persevere, forcing one leg in front of the other. Yet, the pain persists, festering like a rabid disease. More and more often, a jagged blade hungrily targets my chafed skin, mercilessly piercing towards my bone. Bending down to rub my leg, I trip, scraping both my knees.

The monk turns around, staring serenely at my injury. I follow his gaze. My skin becomes an abstract watercolour, dyed with glistening shades of red. Emotionless, the monk plucks an oily leaf from the ground. He hands it to me, and I rub it on my skin. I feel better.

"The rocks," he voices "are here to serve their purpose. They don't want to hurt you."

Nodding, I sigh. I guess when I become immortal, I'd be like that too, wiser and kinder. Remembering the elixir, my footsteps quicken, scurrying along the barren route.

The faint, buzzing tune of dragonflies are calmly constant. But the rocks are silent, and the sound of our pattering footsteps echo through the mountain.

A herd of golden monkeys stands stiffly on an adjacent cliff, ears twitching at the sound of rustling leaves. Their amber eyes are flushed with burning desire, the grating hunger seen in animals and humans alike. Greedily, their open mouths water at the sight of fresh fruits. After scampering up a stumpy tree, their bony fingers curl around juicy plums. They munch on the

fruits, spraying sugary juices all around. Watching them, a band of colourful butterflies skip elegantly over the uneaten plums, twirling in a choreographed routine.

Realising that I've stopped in front of the animals, I run to catch up with the monk. He has been waiting for me at a distance, allowing me some privacy when appreciating the wonders of Huangshan. Mumbling, I thank the monk. He doesn't turn around, but I can sense that he understands my gratefulness.

After hours of silent walking, we reach the heaven ladder ascending the Tiandu Peak. The aged wooden slabs lining the path are tied together by braided ropes; in between is a narrow path, barely wide enough to fit a single person. The monk ascends the ladder, drifting up the trail. The wind pushes the path's railings into a swinging rhythm, but the monk is undaunted. Majestically, the fog spreads, allowing me to see the breathtaking view surrounding the peak. Grotesque rock formations are layered into multi-tiered sculptures, minimalistically decorated with clusters of pine trees. The nasally creaks of the railings dare me to go forward, but the lowering sun holds me back.

As always, the monk strolls confidently. We haven't talked since the morning, but my faded footsteps made him turn around.

"One foot after the other. Chest up. Balance." the monk calls from the mountain's peak. His soothing voice travels with a soft breeze, finally reaching my nervous self. Still hesitant, I inch onto the pathway. Gradually, the ladder narrows; I realise I'm one misstep away from being swallowed up by the deep gorge.

Balance. The word echoes in my mind. My slow movements adapt to the quivering winds, mimicking the tranquil aura of a clouded leopard. The fog hinders my vision, but the sweet smell of pine keeps me going forward.

At last, we reach the Tiandu peak. The air is chilly, but a wave of joy keeps me warm. I must be near the elixir of immortality! According to legend, Emperor Xuanyan crafted the elixir from moraine stones, eroded over centuries by icy glaciers. The thin air reminds me that I'm almost at China's highest peak; I haven't felt this happy for a long while.

The sun descends over the horizon, and the navy sky triumphs over its yellow glow. In between, a timid olive hue blends the two colours, transitioning us from day to night. Still, guided by the shimmering stars, we continue the hike. Dark clouds twist and bend in front of the full moon, contorting into different shapes. A rooster playing a *dizi* flute, a mandarin duck slurping *chow mein*, a peacock performing a fan dance. I smile, I haven't wondered about the clouds since I was a young boy.

The atmosphere is quite cool now. A brisk breeze whisks the sweat off my forehead, and the dropping temperature makes me hope for snow. Eventually, a sheet of darkness submerges the mountain; we keep walking in complete darkness.

By then, I have gotten used to the repetitive steps, meticulously carved over a thousand years ago. Ahead of me is the monk's dark silhouette, progressing steadily up the slope. His quiet energy radiates around him, enabling me to follow him through the night. At last, the monk stops, signalling that we have arrived. I fall asleep under a metasequoia tree.

My eyes flutter open at the soft light of sunrise. Before me is a bewildering view. Clusters of porcelain clouds crown the mountain's peak, and I feel a mix of honour and awe. I can sense that I'm getting close to the elixir of immortality. I can feel it. Engrossed by the astounding scene, my mind can't begin to capture the mountain's boundless detail.

Silver pheasants flutter their inked wings, performing in a kaleidoscopic pattern. The dance continues, painting a moving calligraphy for just the monk and I. I pity those who have never had this experience.

The sea of clouds form a perfect heaven, one only present in myths and fairytales. No recreation, no matter how advanced, could ever challenge the hidden glory in the highest point of China. My mind flashes to the dull lines I've repeated in school, now enlivened by the mountain's view. Li Bai's poem, buried since primary school, resurfaces in my mind, and it is only now that I understand the beauty of Huangshan. Now that I have entered the *sky mountain world*, I finally understand Li Bai's deep admiration for it.

All that's left is to acquire the elixir.

Suddenly, I feel a pang of guilt. I have never told the monk the real reason I sought his help. I must've taken advantage of his goodwill. Shame reddens my wind streaked cheeks as I reluctantly approach the monk to explain myself. The monk is squatted, observing shallow streams of water. The delicate lagoons weave into round estuaries, crafting an intricate pattern of brush strokes, thick and thin. Taking a deep breath, I venture my first sentence.

"I... I never told you the reason I came here. I wanted, no, needed, the elixir of immortality, and... and you were there to guide me. I'm sorry I mislead you. I never meant to do it."

"I figured." says the monk, chuckling. "You're not the first one. Besides, there's no such thing as the elixir of immortality."

Shocked, my mouth hangs open, and my mind flashes to the doctor's frightful message from just a few weeks ago.

Last year, I started having pinching sensations in my head. I went to the village healer, who has always made my illnesses go away. But this time, my pain lingered for far too long. Upon my mother's urges, I reluctantly visited a hospital miles away, with almost half of my total savings.

One step into the building, a cacophony of mechanical sounds, anxious footsteps and beeping machines immediately overwhelmed me. Nervously, I went to register with an impatient nurse, who transferred me from room to room. Blinded by blaring hospital lights, I was jabbed with needles and syringes. I was tested with odd frequencies, asked questions I couldn't answer and screened with almost every machine in the hospital. Around me, doctors and nurses scribbled my data onto mono color clipboards; I couldn't understand a thing.

Finally, I was brought into a white chamber at the far end of the hospital. It was too quiet, too empty. I should have known. The doctor, completely covered by thick masks and white lab coats, sat me down and told me what was going on.

A brain tumour. The doctor continued droning on with my test results and reports, but all I could think about is my future disappearing. I had a life, a family, and so many hopes and dreams. I was not ready for the end of my life. My little sister just turned eleven, and I wanted to do so much with her.

"How much time do I have?" I blurted out, fearing the answer.

"I'm afraid there's no treatment for your illness. There is treatment to help with the pain, but it's not a cure. You have about four years left, eight maximum."

Eight years. I wouldn't be able to get through my sister's twentieth birthday. It was at that moment that I knew I had to hike Huangshan. I took some painkillers before leaving home the next morning.

My worries, which have been bubbling in my mind since I commenced the journey, spill from my cracked lips.

“But I need immortality. I want to be here, permanently. I want to see the village children fulfil their destinies, I want to take care of my parents as they enter the best years of their life, and I want to see the world, to see it flourishing and advancing. The doctor told me I only have a few years left. I didn’t want to tell you, but... but you already know, don’t you?” I stare at my dulling hands, veins becoming increasingly prominent.

“I knew,” the monk says simply. “Nothing is permanent, Ping. Take the mountain for instance. It looks permanent, undeterred by the jealous winds and pestering seas. But time changes it all the same. 50 million years ago, the whole mountain was submerged under sea water, surrounded by waltzing fishes and spiralling ammonites. Eons ago, dinosaurs flew all over the peak. Now, their egg fossils are sunk under the soil, covered by millennia of clay and dust.

“But the mountains are still here! They haven’t changed.”

“What is the mountain anyway? It’s just a collection of rocks, and they come and go according to nature’s commands. 400 million years ago, the mountain was just a little mound under the sea. The Lotus Peak, where we’re on right now, was formed many years after that. Sometimes the peaks existed, sometimes it didn’t. Even the mountain has never and will never be permanent. There’s just no point, Ping.”

I ponder upon the monk’s words. I think about the rocks that I was frustrated with just yesterday. Were they part of the imperious cliffs, gallantly framing the ocean? Were they at the highest peak of the highest mountain, staring down at the kingdom beneath it? Or are they going to be part of something greater, even unimaginable, in the future... The rocks never worry about being built up or torn down, but they form something beautiful all the same. I peek at my scarred ankle; the wounds are now sealed with a dusty scab. It wasn’t a big deal after all, was it?

“What is permanent,” the monk continues, “are the memories, shared by poets across China, influencing artists across the earth. Your interpretation of the mountain transcends its physical changes. The beauty and wisdom of the world is useless if you can’t appreciate it.”

I feel enlightened by the monk’s profound words. I realise I don’t need more time, I just need to spend it wisely. Looking down from the peak, I could spy some other travellers, sprinkled across the slope of the mountain. From above, humans are so small. There’s a joy in being a fleeting shadow in mankind’s history, so that the precious time devoted to loved ones is incomparably valuable.

Life isn’t about getting things, but enjoying it. Physical things don’t last forever; it’s the memories that persist.

The monk bends down and plucks lush leaves from a large tree, dropping them into a pitcher of water. Rubbing two wooden sticks, he lights a small fire under the pitcher, allowing the leaves’ colour to diffuse. He pours a cup of *Maofeng* tea for me, then another for himself. After enjoying a long sip of tea together, the monk gestures for me to go on. I think he wants to stay for a while, but I’d like to go home. I thank the monk for the journey, holding on to his wisdom. Life’s joyful surprises, meaningful connections and unforgettable journeys resurface in my mind; my eyes sparkle with peace and contentment.

I go down the mountain, with a taste of immortality.

Fiction – Group 1

WINNER

The Hungry Dragon

Canadian International School, Almeida, Siena – 8

High up in the mountains of China, in a magical land, a red dragon's mother went to hunt for food leaving the dragon Hong and his sister Xiao all alone. At the foot of the mountain, there was a village. A knight begged a wise old man who lived there to stop time so he could complete his quest of slaying a hideous sea snake that lived in the sparkling sea next to the village. The old man warned him that there would be consequences of distorting the laws of nature, but the knight insisted.

Hong waited for eternity for his mother to return with food but with time stopped, she was trapped in the outside realm. Finally, Hong could stand it no more. He ate Xiao in one snap of his jaws. But she could only fill a quarter of his big belly. Hong stomped out of his grotto and down to the village. On his way to the wise old man he met the knight, who was pondering how to slay the sea snake.

“Make the wise old man continue time”, Hong demanded. “Because of him I'm starving and was driven to eat my sister”.

“Only if you help me slay the sea snake”, the stubborn knight argued.

“Deal”, Hong agreed, shaking his head. “You're a stubborn little fellow. No wonder you were able to convince the wise old man to stop time.”

The knight's face turned red and he glared at the dragon. But he decided not to retort because Hong was much bigger and stronger than him.

“You could eat the sea snake”, the knight suggested.

“I can't”, Hong answered with a frown. “I'm allergic to snakes of any kind. But I could scare it...”

The next morning, the sea snake was enjoying a soak in the shallows. “Mmmmmmm!” Suddenly Hong interrupted the snake's bath by leaping out from behind a banyan tree. “Supper!” The sea snake nearly jumped out of his skin. He swam far out to sea but Hong's flight was faster than the snake's slithery swim. As Hong roared, fire came out of his mouth. It hit the sea snake directly on the head. The sea snake was well and truly fried, and slowly sank below the sea's surface. Before the dead snake disappeared completely, Hong swooped down and latched on with his talons, and his powerful wings carried the body back to the village square.

The wise man exclaimed delightedly that the sea snake would feed the villagers for a year and agreed to continue time once more. When Hong climbed back up the mountain cliff, he saw his mother was waiting for him at their grotto. “Set fire to Xiao's bones to bring her back”, she urged him. Hong did as he was told and sure enough Xiao appeared in a puff of smoke. He was overjoyed, but yet couldn't shake the grip of guilt as he wondered at the consequences of bending the natural laws.

Fiction – Group 2

WINNER

Heaven

Singapore International School, Fang, Xun Emma – 12

Five thousand years ago, the ancient ancestor of China, Huangdi himself once set foot on Huangshan to forge the elixir of immortality. It is said that when he succeeded, a dragon came and took him to heaven. The legend says that after thousands of years, the dragon still dwells here, in the mist of Huangshan, waiting to pick up the next person worthy of heaven...

Winter breeze brushed through her skin, as Yu gazed at the sunset absently. People around her shivered and began to pack up, and she was left alone. She's never troubled by low temperature; she was born at the coldest night everyone could remember; a midnight, the only night that snowed. They say her icy personality was due to the frost that had pierced through her on her first night on this world. Her name, Yu, means "white fire" in Chinese. She was too independent for a thirteen-year old, mainly caused by her parents. The two of them never loved her like they loved each other, both self-absorbed, wouldn't even realise it when they leave her behind, like they did just now.

Yu sat up abruptly, listening to the swishing of the wind. She thought she saw a figure flitted about in the fog, but it vanished in a blink of eyes. She frowned. Then a great shadow fell on her, the wind howled in her ears, as she shuddered and looked back. A boiling breeze touched her face, the blistering air seemed to pierce her skin, as she widened her eyes and gasped.

A breathtakingly beautiful creature stood before her, its gold eyes focused on her. It was snowy white, yet decorated with scarlet. It breathed heavily and lied down. The creature was at least eighty feet from its nose to the tip of its tail. The shape of it resembled an iceberg with icicles shooting out of it.

"Hi, I'm Yu." She whispered to the dragon.

"Crystal," She decided, her voice barely audible. "I'll call you Crystal. Can I touch you, Crystal?"

The dragon studied her, gold into brown. Then it lowered its head. She took one step closer, and touched its forehead with the tip of her fingers. The touching of it sent a shiver down her body; it was freezing cold. She stroked the dragon's scale gently, not showing any sense of fear.

Then a wonderful idea came to her mind.

"Can you give me a ride, Crystal?" Yu breathed.

It stood up, sending a tremble down the earth, and lowered its head. She climbed onto the dragon's back with difficulty. She bent down, and put her arms around Crystal's neck. The dragon growled, and shot into the air.

The flight was extraordinary. At first, she was nearly suffocated by the mounting air pressure. She grabbed hold of Crystal's neck as tightly as she could. The great pressure pressed

her down hard onto the dragon's back. After a moment or so, Crystal finally slowed down, and her curiosity overtook. She raised up her head with difficulty, squinting, and the most spectacular view Yu had ever seen shined before her eyes.

They were flying above the endless sea of clouds and mist. The sky was a shade of pure black, filled with sparkling, shimmering stars. It was as if someone had tossed a handful of diamond dust onto the seemingly smooth black velvet that draped over the sky. Yu teared her eyes away and looked down, through the thick layer of fog, she could see the faint picture of the peaks of Huangshan, peculiarly-shaped, revealing itself in glimpses. She saw a tiny spot of light coming from nowhere. She frowned.

Bewildered, she asked, "Crystal, fly closer to that source of light, please."

Crystal circled down and dropped Yu by a small hut. She crept toward the hut, careful not to make any sound, and peered through the window. The two parents and a little girl were singing a birthday song to a baby. There was nothing on the table except a tiny cupcake, badly cooked. The clothes of the family were ragged and shabby, yet the family were so happy, so grateful, that Yu asked herself why couldn't her family be as good as this one. She ran from the house, a tear forming in her eyes. She jumped onto the dragon's back and mounted into the air.

When they got back to the sky, Yu turned her attention back to the blue-white fog, trying to forget what she just saw. The mist seemed to be fighting among themselves, the two savage tidal waves rose and splashed each other, then fell and turned back in, like a wheel, and hit each other again.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Yu asked absently.

A little pause.

"Do you think my parents love me? I mean, they're usually kind of indifferent to me. But maybe I took things for granted and didn't notice them actually...caring. What do you think?" The dragon replied with a firm roar.

"Yeah, well..." Yu smiled, "Life isn't perfect. Now, where are you taking me anyway?"

Crystal growled and spiraled downwards. She gave a small shriek, grasping the Crystal's neck yet again. Then the dragon pulled up, and she saw a peculiar image before her. The two cliffs faced each other closely, with only one gap between them. From a distance, it seemed as if it was one enormous peak being split in half. But in the gap, it was plain white, even though the sky was still pitch black. Then she knew; she knew what that gap was for, why she had met Crystal, and the tales and stories she had heard from a child flooded into her head.

For a fraction of a second, Yu hesitated. Through that gap, she could gain everything she had ever wanted, everything she had dreamed of. Will she let go of that chance? But a moment later, she was sick of herself.

"Take me back, Crystal."

The dragon roared.

Fiction – Group 3

WINNER

Yin and Yang

Diocesan Girls' School, Kwok, Gianna – 13

The winter is a cold one. Li Bai feels it in his bones from the plummeting hail that coats every stretch of soil, from the cold that bites at his heels, the scathing, restricting arms of the North wind only choking him further and further. A thick sheen of fog lingers above the undulating ranges, faint splatters of dim red, yellow and blue tainting the white canvas, barely visible in the blinding sunlight. The flickering shards of iridescent light tattletale on the caves' inhabitants, dancing on the tip of a peeping tiger's muzzle or the dissipating wisps of tobacco smoke at times. But, despite the clamor and cheer that goes on above him, Li Bai's eyes remain stubbornly fixated on the scroll before him, unbudging and glaring.

An intent gaze continues to burn into the shreds of paper. He longs to weave braids into his wife's grayed hairs, longs to come home to two steaming bowls of dumplings, filled to the brim with scalding winter melon soup. But the ever-present cacophony of metal clanging against metal and the thunderous onslaught of galloping hooves, reminds him painfully of why he was forced to leave. He has heard rumors, all carrying the same dismal message, be it a slip of the mouth from a benign villager or the embellished flags streaking across the valley, the tails boasting the vibrant colours of "An Lushan", the metallic tang of spilt blood suffocating at this point. And so, he waits. Waits for this brittle winter to come to its end and for the melee, to abate. He clings onto the inkling of hope that he'll be able to feel the creases of his wife's face under his fingers, a map so intricate yet familiar to him, like the back of his hand.

But these days, it's been harder to wait. Despondent for any source of warmth, he fumbles for the mottled flask tucked neatly between the rags, and takes a bold swig. The tepid liquid trickles easily down his throat, leaving trails of artificial warmth gauged in his stomach. The kick surges within him, the taste long-lasting enough to ward off the tendrils of worry for now. The words unfurl from his mouth with ease, soon black streaks on the white scroll.

*To drown the old sorrows,
We drank a hundred jugs of wine,
There in the beautiful night.*

The reedy tune of the dizi resonates within the valley, a hollow and rare sound. With supplies so scarce around these parts, the raw bamboo, carved by skillful hands into a slim flute, catches Li Bai's attention. A swift hand skims across the small of his back, laden with gold trinkets, the gesture so light he could have mistaken it for the brush of a dove's wing. He doesn't falter to turn, and greets the newcomer with a mustered smile, his grip on the flask loosening.

"I haven't seen someone greet me so informally in ages."

The melodious tune skids to a halt, a low voice in its place. Li Bai only smiles back weakly in response, eyes unfocused yet wistful.

“Certainly, this is the wine’s doing. Or perhaps not. Who’s to say? It’s not like you meet Han Xiangzi everyday.”

“You are an interesting man, Li Bai. I have heard far-fetched tales, saying that you’ve become a lunatic of sorts, with the growing heaps of wine flasks. But all I see here is a man driven by grief.”

Li Bai lifts his head slightly, to look into Xiangzi’s glittering eyes. The man’s eyes are shadowed, though swaddled in robes spun from pure gold, they are of no help in concealing the wizened, dark truths that lurk beneath.

“Your mentality is imbalanced. Or, as some might say, you have lost the balance of Yin and Yang.”

“Perhaps,” he cocks his head. “But I have my reasons. I hail from the North, and my wife waits for my arrival with a heavy heart every passing day.”

“That is still no excuse for your loss of control,” Xiangzi replies, with his back a tad bit too rigid.

His lip twitches with annoyance, as one hand reaches into his robe pocket.

In Xiangzi’s grip lies a ripened pink fruit, as round as a baby’s bum. An aureate hue emanates from it, buzzing and humming.

“I am sure you realize what this is,” Xiangzi asserts.

A peach of immortality.

Throat suddenly dry, Li Bai only nods. The sheer possibilities that skim through his mind leave him breathless; living long enough to see the war cease, buying enough time to cross the province’s borders, and most importantly, making up for the lost time with his wife.

“Take my place at Her Highness Xiwangmu’s banquet, and you will be able to indulge to your heart’s content.”

He doesn’t even hesitate, gulping as he gropes for the fruit.

“Meet me by the stone steps when the moon is high, I will be here awaiting your return,” Xiangzi says with a smug smirk. And with that, he stares upwards into the seemingly hooded peaks, still and stoic like a statue.

“When will his eyes be opened? Not only to his fortunate surroundings, but also to his wrongdoings?” he mutters under his breath. But the words are not heard by Li Bai, and only hang in the wintry silence.

Before Li Bai knows it, the soil beneath his bare feet is no longer muddy, engulfing darkness in its place; his thin shawls now replaced by grandiose robes. He feels the dizi digging into his backside, a tell-tale sign of what happened.

“Han Xiangzi, you are rather late.”

A haughty voice cleaves through the deafening silence. Piercing ebony orbs amidst the suffocating darkness meet Li Bai’s, and unspoken schemes graze his ear.

Suppressing a shiver, he shuffles forward unsteadily, eyes downcast, while the figure emerges from the darkness. As he reaches to gather his robes, about to sweep into an apologetic bow, a slender hand grips his chiseled chin.

Xi Wangmu jerks his face upwards roughly and leans close. The honey-sweet aroma of peaches from her hot breath fanning him.

Her stone-cold eyes bore into his, lingering for a mere moment. Though it is fleeting, the familiar flame of mischief flickers behind those long eyelashes.

“You look....different.”

“It is no wonder, after all I haven’t had the chance to taste Her Highness’ fresh peaches in quite a while,” Li Bai shoots back defiantly.

Wangmu’s tight-lipped smirk stretches into a toothy smile, but the saccharine facade crumbles a bit, her glance lanced with daggers.

“Of course, it is my pleasure to serve and have you. Come, accept my offering to you,” she hisses, grip loosening and hands beckoning.

Li Bai hears the cold seething, sees the narrowing of her eyes. But above all that, he tastes the aroma of cloying peaches on the tip of his tongue, and the promises they hold. The sickeningly sweet songs that speak of peace and prosperity, wealth and fortune that are all-encompassing. And so, he stumbles towards her outstretched hand. Stumbles a bit further into the fantasies of perfected possibilities, and into the chasm of greed.

He staggers with an eager desire, but just as he grasps a hold of the sweet fruit, just as his fingers curl around the fresh flesh, it disappears before his sight.

Alike the peach, the gold trinkets too disappear from his knobbly fingers, his robes reduced once again to a barely adequate scarf.

Only the imprint of Wangmu’s last words to him, hurriedly snarled in his ear, remain engraved in his mind reverberating back and forth in his eardrums.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t notice, puny mortal? Deceit, greed, it doesn’t matter. You have fallen for the temptation of ephemeral bliss one too many times, regardless of it being in the form of peaches or wine. You have lost the balance of Yin and Yang- that is the biggest sin of all.”

Li Bai’s bare feet dig into the cold stretches of land, but his hand is cocooned by a warm grasp.

“See there?”

The very same gold-laden hand points upwards, towards the mountain ranges. Li Bai’s eyes follow Han Xiangzi’s trail, and they settle upon a dazzling myriad of colors.

Framed against the obsidian-black night sky, a thick layer of white mist unfurls with vibrant hues, a startling range from crimson red, daffodil yellow to azure blue.

“It’s been there all along- the Buddha’s Light. You didn’t notice it earlier, when it was in blinding daylight; yet when placed against the night sky, it shines with clarity and resplendence.”

Just like Yin and Yang.

For the first time in many winters, Han Xiangzi’s words bring a smile to his face.

For the first time in many years, Li Bai discards his mottled flask of rice wine, his dog-eared scrolls, and inhales the crisp winter air.

For the first time in many decades, Li Bai truly savours the beauty in the balance of Yin and Yang.

“I understand now.”

Fiction – Group 5 WINNER

The Colours of White

ESF King George V School, Ro, Trinity – 16

As a child, I loved watching the dewdrops of condensation race each other down the windows of my car, placing bets in my head on which would reach the bottom first. I was eight years old when we first made the winding car trip up the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor, and my mother scolded me for only watching the drops on the window instead of looking at the scenery that we had driven hours to see. What she in her hindered adult mind had failed to realise was that the thick blanket of mist that draped the jagged skyline only made it that much more entertaining to watch as the droplets fattened with consumption. I remember thinking that the moon seemed to endlessly follow us no matter how fast we drove, its featureless white face smiling down upon us.

After the hours of driving that had stretched into an eternity in my mind, we had arrived at the floating villages of the mountains only for Gumball to spring off my lap the second my feet touched the ground and bolt at the sight of an unsuspecting stray cat. Gumball was a mutt, an unwanted street dog with a debilitating fear of humans that nobody except a little girl would've wanted. I had begged and begged my parents to let me keep him after he followed me home one day after school, ignoring their arguments that he was dirty or dangerous. My very first real purchase with my pocket money had been for a blue dog collar and chew toy. I chased after him, my panicked breaths creating fleeting clouds in the cold and my ears deaf to the shouting of my parents. It wasn't long before I was blinded by the fog that seemed to curl around me like a snake, and my eyes grew blurry from the tears. There seemed to be neither a right nor a wrong way, all that existed in that moment was the glaring directionlessness of the colour white. Standing amongst the colossal expanses of the mountains, I was frozen in my fear and trembling against a wind that seemed intent on turning my cheeks red. It was right on the precipice of abandoning all help when I saw the familiar navy blue of Gumball's collar, and even though it stung to smile I couldn't help it. It was in that moment of pure elation and relief that I met her.

If it wasn't for Gumball, I don't think I ever would have noticed her. She had a wispy quality about her, as if the lines around her were blurred, and her skin held the same luminance as the fog that had previously suffocated me. But before I could thank her for bringing him back, the sound of my parents' voices had me running towards them without a second look back at her. The rest of our stay in the mountains, I held Gumball tightly to my chest and vowed to never let him out of my sight again. During the following winter holiday, my family again made the tedious drive up Huangshan. It was during this year that I heard her voice for the first time. I, being the curious child that I was, had wandered off from the rest of the family and was investigating the wood pattern on a piece of bark I had found when

I heard a voice that felt like honey and windchimes. She told me she was glad to see me again, and her cheerful smirk seemed to etch itself into my brain.

Even though I visited her winter after winter, she always refused to tell me her name. Bombarded by my questions, she would hide behind a giggle and a promise to tell me more once I got older. I found myself longing to see her, and the summers which I had previously loved started to feel like a bore. Even my parents had questioned my sudden enthusiasm to go up to the mountains, and when I excitedly told them of my new friend they laughed and wrote me off as having an overactive imagination. Although I grew and was no longer a child, she never seemed to age. Once I turned fifteen, I began to notice the ethereal beauty she possessed that I had neglected to notice as a child. Just the way she laughed made it feel as if the world was ours to conquer, and I found myself gazing at her in admiration and awe. Despite my desperate longing to, I could never bring myself to touch her. To me, she was something simply too pure and otherworldly to taint with my normalcy. I was sixteen when Gumball passed away, hit by a drunk driver on the intersection by my house. When I told her through sobs that racked my chest, she closed her eyes and with a tranquil smile told me that Gumball died without pain and was thankful for the life I gave him. I never questioned her on how she knew, as the comfort she had instilled in me was enough to give me peace.

One winter, I mentioned Li Bai's poetry. We had been studying his work in school, and my interest had piqued after discovering he lived in these mountains. The feeling that I could be walking amongst the same pine trees and breathing the same air as he once did millenia ago exhilarated me, and the romantic nature of his poetry reminded me of her. I soon realised why, as she laughed her usual teasing laugh upon the mention of his name and made the offhand comment that he always drank too much. I turned away, hoping she couldn't sense the twinges of jealousy that pulled at my heart the same reckless way a child plucks at the strings of a violin. I don't think she ever did, as she continued to boast on how he wrote most of his poetry for her. The shame felt like a crushing weight on my soul, and I angrily reprimanded myself in my head for daring to dream I could ever live up to those she has met in her lifetime. Throughout the thousands of years she has lived, how could I possibly compare to the geniuses and kings that have loved her as I have? I had no poetry or riches to give her, only the despairing adoration of somebody who knows no better. That night, in a blinding jealous rage, I tore up his poems and left them scattered around my room like fresh fallen snow. The teardrops made the ink run and the paper disintegrate into an unrecognizable mush, a monolith to my foolishness.

I was 22, the first time I ever touched her. But it was also the first time I ever wanted to hurt her. When the glimmer in her eyes seemed to fade over the years and her skin lost its radiance, I had miserably hoped it was because I had finally started to love her less. But after watching her body grow weak and seeing her stumble on paths she could have previously sprinted up, I finally understood that she was ill. The air in the mountains had become polluted, choked with the smog of oil-guzzling factories and a population that was growing faster than the land could maintain. It's a different kind of hurt watching somebody who owns your heart fade away because you know that when they do, they'll take it with them. You do anything in your power to not have to watch them leave, and in my case that meant losing all self respect and begging her to come with me to any place the air was better. I promised to be hers as long as I would live, to take care of her every day and to love her with every beating breath I'd take.

She refused. Told me she swore an oath to protect the mountain and all of its inhabitants, that she held an obligation to the place that had sheltered her across the decades. I couldn't

understand how she could stay and whither away in a place that was slowly killing her. It stung, hearing her say her love for Huangshan would always trump my love for her and it was in the moment she turned to leave that something inside of me broke. I grabbed her wrist to stop her from leaving, my fingernails leaving crescent-shaped marks on her skin. And that was it. The first time I ever touched her was born of anger and violence, instead of the tenderness I had harboured for years. I hated her, hated the way she meant the world to me yet I meant nothing to her, hated her self-centeredness and vanity, hated the way she had ensnared me into loving her more than I could ever love myself. But when I touched her, she was warm and soft instead of the reptilian cold I always pictured her being, the same warmth I felt when I first heard her voice at eight years old. And just like that, my anger and loathing dissipated just as quick as my breath did in the mountain air. It was too late. When she turned back, she looked at me as one looks at a stray hair in their food. Disgust, contempt, annoyance. I knew that despite her frail stature she was inhumanly strong, that in an instance she could with a flick of her wrist crush my bones like glass. A part of me wishes she did, anything that would have given me more of her attention, anything to live on borrowed time and exist in her life for just a couple memories longer. But instead she tore me off her, and left. I stood there, drowning in my own helplessness, watching her fade into the mist as abruptly as she once appeared. As I was again left alone in the mist, I felt just as small and insignificant as I did when Gumball disappeared. To this day, I believe that it is only in the moments when you are left alone and broken that you truly realise the painful isolation of the colour white.

I never saw her again. It took me a couple more years and a lot of pain to realise that she was a butterfly, a fleeting moment of beauty that would flutter away before ever belonging to anybody. The most you can ever hope for with a butterfly is to keep it in a jar for a while and admire the way sunlight reflects off its wings before letting the guilt consume you into letting it go. Too many butterflies have slowly died as their bodies were starved of oxygen by little children forgetting to poke holes into jars. In their hopeful naivety, they fail to see its suffering, distracted by the enthrallment of owning a creature this beautiful. The human desire to possess even at the expense of destroying the beauty they wish to own scares me because I have never wanted to hurt anybody as much as I wanted to hurt her. In the end, I could never blame her for how she is. Living past everybody she ever hoped to love, the pain of loss must scar her heart until it becomes as impenetrable as the mountain itself. It makes sense that the only thing that has room in her heart is something she knows will forever be there. I know that to her, my entire lifetime is nothing but a brief flicker in which she found amusement and shelter from the boredom that plagues an immortal's life. I was just one of many who fell to her feet. And I know that the lifetime I spent devoting myself to her means nothing more than a fling, a tiny insignificant fraction of her life. But the sad, pathetic portion of myself that I keep locked away still hopes that I am at least the tiny insignificant fraction that she smiles fondly upon remembering. And maybe in another lifetime, another decade, another time, my love will finally be enough.

For a while, I spent my winters wandering across the vast expanses of the mountains until I would pass the same pine tree seven or eight times. My exhaustion and sleep deprivation would leave me delirious, hallucinating that the trees were bending towards me and whispering me directions. It was around the fifth or sixth year when I stopped and realised she could not be found unless she wanted to. At the lowest points of my despair, I wondered if the pollution had gotten too much for her, that the mountain hadn't been enough to save her. But I could still feel her presence, see glimpses of who she was in the evergreen. The way the sunlight would reflect off the morning dew, the way the leaves would curl upwards towards

the sky, the way the roots of the trees would hold each other close. The wind no longer felt like it was lashing at me, but instead gently caressing my cheek. An atomic bomb could detonate the world, and it still wouldn't be enough to stop her from existing there.

I got married to a kind and soft spoken man when I was 28, and bore him two children. The sort of love I felt for him was different, a subdued and comforting love born out of societal expectation but a love nonetheless. He works hard to provide for our family, and I know I am to live out the rest of my days with him. In my children I see the same spark and hope I used to have, and I pray the world doesn't take that away too soon. Every winter, we go up to the mountains and make bets on which dewdrop we think will reach the bottom of the window. They whine about the cold, but when the sun dips below the horizon and the light bathes the land in hues of purple and pink I can see the flickers of a smile playing at their lips and I am reminded of the awe I felt when I first saw it too. What I would give to stand atop the mountains and feel no pain when I watch the sunset, to feel the simplicity of joy wash over me like waves wash over the shore. When I die, I hope to have my ashes cast upon the roots of the pine trees, to be able to return to the bare essence of who I am. Maybe then, I'll find the lifetime in which love is enough to make her stay.

Fiction – Group 6 WINNER

A Tale: China's Healing Mountains

Hong Kong Red Cross John F. Kennedy Centre, Chan, Isaac – 10

It was a beautiful, sunny day in the mountain village in Huangshan. Isaac was on his way to get water from the well. He saw the village bakery and could smell the tasty meadow buns that are baked every day. He had no money so he would go hungry this morning. Isaac, only 10 years old, was well-liked in his village. Suddenly, he heard a loud sound of someone calling his name. It was his best friend, Adiak. They always did everything together.

He was a brave boy and lived with his grandparents. He didn't want his grandparents to die and tried to help them. His friend Adiak heard that Huangshan has some special plants that can help people grow younger. They decided to go to Huangshan to find the plants. What they need is guarded by Antilus in another part of Huangshan, Yelloh Village. "How are we going to solve this problem?", thought Isaac.

One day, they started their trip. It was a beautiful, sunny day in their mountain village. There are many tall, green trees and colourful flowers. Isaac was on his way to find the plant that helps his grandparents grow younger when they saw the village. They saw a chocolate factory and could smell the tasty milk chocolate that is made every day. They tried one and he said, 'It's delicious.' Isaac bought a bag of chocolate for the journey.

Isaac and his friend, Adiak, leave the chocolate village. They started on the next part of the mission. He walks carefully on the way. Suddenly, they step on the tree branches and lose their balance. Isaac and Adiak fell to the ledge of the mountain trail below.

Both boys were injured and had to rest. They slept overnight and were woken up by strange noises. Adiak nervously woke Isaac from sleep and said, "Did you hear that?"

Isaac complained, "What's wrong with you?" Adiak whispered, "There's a dinosaur and it looks hungry?"

"Go back to sleep!", yelled Isaac!

On the second day, they were eating breakfast and heard a noise. They turned their head following the sound. They saw a tiny dinosaur in the bushes. It looked angry! They were so scared and hid in between the ledge. The dinosaur couldn't find them and started to smell them. It came closer to the ledge. Isaac started to shake and was scared. Adiak grabbed a piece of chocolate and threw it into the bushes. Then, the dinosaur ran after the chocolate and disappeared. They fell soon asleep on top of the ledge. After the scary journey they ate some tasty chocolate to replenish their energy. 'Yum! Yum! Yum!' and then they fell asleep again.

The flying dinosaur saw them again, and then breathed fire. They woke up and escaped from the fire and climbed up the tree. Soon the tree was burning and they were in danger. Suddenly, there was a thunderstorm coming and they could not leave. The rain put out the fire. Luckily, a monkey sees them and tries to help them. The monkey takes them to the

mountain cave and he said it was a safe place. Isaeac and his friend Adiak say thank you to the monkey.

The next day, they arrived at the Yellow Village. Isaeac and Adaik could see Antilus' army were protecting the plants and the important places. "There are the plants that will help Isaeac's grandparents become younger," thought Adaik. Adaik took his stun gun and sneaked behind the creatures. Suddenly, a creature behind Adaik grabbed him and said, "One move and you are dead!", he warned.

Isaeac rushed out of the woods and yells, "Take your hands off him". Isaeac pointed his stun gun at the creatures. Antilus quietly walked up to Isaeac and grabbed him. "Nice try, young one", laughed Antilus.

"Let me go!", yelled Isaeac.

"What's that delicious smell of chocolate?", asked Antilus. Adiak yells, "We have more chocolate if you trade us the plants for the chocolate and let us go."

"That's fair", said Isaeac.

Antilus agreed, took the chocolate and gave the two boys a bag of the plants.

Everyone got what they wanted and the boys rushed home with the plants.

Isaeac gave the plants to the grandparents and they became younger and younger.

Fiction – Group 7

WINNER



Non-Fiction – Group 1

WINNER

Mount Huangshan— Heritage for everyone

St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Cheung, Nga Ting Annette – 8

Once China eased coronavirus lockdown in 2020, numerous people crowded Mount Huangshan and the number of visitors soon reached its daily limit. Mr. Xu Xiake, a famous traveller in Ming Dynasty, opined that after visiting the Five Sacred Mountains, ordinary mountains are nothing. After his visit to Mount Huangshan, he believed that the Five Sacred Mountains are nothing. Why is Mount Huangshan so famous and attractive?

Mount Huangshan situates at Anhui Province, Southeast China. Its altitude ranges from 600 meters to 1,864 meters and the highest peak is Lotus Flower Peak. In 1990, Mount Huangshan was inscribed on the World Heritage List as a mixed natural and cultural world heritage site.

Every natural scenery, such as the legendary peaks, seas of cloud, beautifully shaped rocks, ancient pine trees, waterfalls, justifies Mount Huangshan as a natural world heritage site. It offers a dream habitat for thousands of wild animals and conserves many precious endemic plant species. I wonder if I could discover a unicorn there!

Mount Huangshan is also renowned throughout Chinese history for its cultural heritage, especially since Tang Dynasty. It attracts many visitors and inspires writers, poets and painters for famous poems, paintings (such as Chinese Shan Shui painting) and articles. Lots of temples were built on Mount Huangshan and facilitate the development of Taoism and Buddhism. My favourite poet, Mr. Li Bai, also visited Huangshan. There was a story about a peak, “Miàobǐ shēnghuā” which refers to fine essays, and him — When Mr. Li Bai wrote a poem for a monk, he was drunk and excited so that he threw away his Chinese brush which turned into the peak.

I plan to visit the Mount Huangshan to explore the scene, the culture and the heritage. How can I protect it so that more people can visit it?

In addition to the basic measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19, namely, wearing masks during the visit to Mount Huangshan and paying special attention to personal hygiene, I also read the Mount Huangshan — 2020 Conservation Outlook Assessment by the IUCN World Heritage Outlook to understand the threats to Mount Huangshan so that I could help as follows:

The huge amount of visits to Mount Huangshan has various impacts on it. I must not litter, create unnecessary waste and disturb lovely wildlife. To treasure all species is a respect to the nature and life. The shortage of water during dry season makes it difficult for forest

fire fighting. I would pay special attention to see if there is anyone smoke and report any fire danger to the management staff there.

Mount Huangshan is as beautiful and magical as Disneyland. After so many years, I google and, hopefully, soon stand right at the same place to enjoy the same scenery visited by Mr. Li Bai. He left us with all the beautiful poems and I would also like to protect and leave everything treasurable of Mount Huangshan for other people now and in future.

Non-Fiction – Group 2

WINNER

China's Magical Mountains, Huangshan

HKUGA Primary School, Liu, Yau Nam Justin – 11

Basic Information on Huangshan

Huangshan is a mountain range located in the southern part of Anhui province. It is renowned by his picturesque landscapes, jagged mountains and especially the Bridge of Immortals, which is dubbed as the tallest bridge in the world. There are multiple sightseeing spots, including the famous Stone Monkey Watching The Sea, which provides glamorous views of sunset and sunrise. Henceforth, Huangshan is a popular tourist destination. Although it is packed within the deep Anhui nature, tourists still flock each year to the mountains. Also, Huangshan is held in high esteem in China's history, especially since the Tang Dynasty. Poets and painters after visiting them extolled the scenery for inspiration of their work. In addition, it also had a great impact on the establishment of the influential Shanshui ("Mountain and Water") school of landscape painting.

Various Myths Of Huangshan

Huangshan, as an enchanting, hypnotizing range of mountains, lies overflowing histories and myths. Through ancient Chinese books, stories, or told word to word legends, we can slowly cultivate those myths.

Once upon a time, when humanity was not even recorded, monsters, dragons and mythical creatures ruled the vast Chinese land. For example, there was the nine-tailed fox, a mischievous creature who tricked other people conquering different parts and disguising into a beautiful woman. Another example is the hooved chimerical Qillin with its fangs facing up high, which legend noted that Qillins are said to appear with the imminent arrival of the new ruler.

Huangshan was full of those creatures. One of those, utterly special, is the ten-head dragon Dajiong. Its body is sleek and slender. However, his strengths include creating poetic vibes, blasting other creatures with his fire blowtorch and also flying and soaring into the horizons.

Humanity slowly developed and various myths were appearing. During the far ancient times, the mountain was called the Yellow Emperor, the mythological ancestor of the Chinese people, who went there and became a supernatural living there. In 747 BC, to remember the Yellow Emperor, the mountains were renamed into Huangshan.

Another myth is about a statue called Immortal Showing the Way. During the meeting of the eight immortals, Han Xiangzhi was the only one out. Zhang GuoLao, the knowledgeable and erudite Immortal, guessed that Han Xiangzhi was fascinated at the scenery of

Huangshan. As a result, he strode and flew in the sky to find Han. As he expected, Han was having a tour and therefore forgot about the gathering. Zhang commanded him strongly to leave but Han wasn't obeying his rules. Henceforth, Han turned a piece of random stone to a replica of himself as he would not misunderstand the route to Huangshan Mountain again. Zhang was rolling his eyes hysterically and for fear that Han would slip away and go sightseeing again, he rode his paranormal flying donkey backwards to keep Han close to him while appreciating the extravaganza of Huangshan.

As mentioned at the top of this guide, there is a sightseeing area called Stone Monkey Watching The Sea positioned near the middle of the Huangshan Travelling Area. But did you know that in the core of the spot's history engulfs an interesting story?

It is said that an intelligent monkey, whose muscles are as strong as metal smashing onto a tough surface, and whose mind is full of innovative thoughts, has been practicing Martial Arts for 3600 years. One fortunate day, he met a pretty girl from a nearby county and he was love at first sight. Therefore, he transformed to a charming young man called Sun and went to the pretty girl Zhangzhu's home to express his dearness and sincerity of getting married to Zhang's family. The Zhang family welcomed him. However, on their wedding day, Sun was alcoholic and morphed back into his real form while slumbering deeply. As a result, Zhangzhu was shocked and secretly went away. Moments later, Sun woke up, unsure about his surroundings, yet he didn't know, Zhang had left him and he was not at her home that particular moment. But through time, he knew about the whole thing and deeply sighed in regret. The monkey missed Zhang so much as he had nothing meaningful to do. Therefore, he stood there the whole time, gazing at Zhang's home but not doing anything. Slowly and slowly, he finally became the stone monkey we see today.

Other Knowledge about Huangshan

Other than the myths of the mountains, there are still other interesting and must-know facts about Huangshan.

Firstly, the Huangshan mountain range consists of 72 peaks, including 36 major peaks and 36 smaller peaks. Among them, Lotus Peak, Bright top, and Celestial Capital Peak are the most famous ones.

Secondly, Huangshan features a humid subtropical monsoon climate. Its rainfall is plenty, usually 180 days per year. Clouds and fogs appear frequently. However, although Huangshan is humid and gloomy, it can be visited all year since the weather is suitable and calm, usually about 10–20 degrees in exact. However, it is recommended to visit during mellow seasons, as in winter, some of the most special sightseeing spots, for example Lotus Peak, would be closed and you lose a lot of the fun there. To avoid the crazy crowds and the rowdy landscape without the fresh scent of nature, you can choose not to travel there during the Chinese Holidays or School Summer Holidays (Around July to August).

Thirdly, Huangshan was named China's National Geopark, Global Geopark and Top Ten Famous Mountains In China in 2002, 2004 and 2007 respectively. This shows that Huangshan gained recognition not even only locally in China, but internationally around the world, by multiple famous boards and sights.

Huangshan is such an interesting place with one of the most beautiful sceneries in the world. Hope that we can visit the Magical Mountains soon and discover even more about its deep history, culture and landscape!

Non-Fiction – Group 3

WINNER

Huangshan: China's Magical Mountains

St. Joseph's College, Poon, Tsz Yu – 12

The first time I saw Huangshan was in a Chinese art gallery. The awe-inspiring scenery on rice paper (Xuan Paper) resembled the descriptions of the epitomic setting in my all-time favourite Jin Yong martial art series. However, my mother, who is a Chinese teacher, said it was a pity that none of the martial arts schools in that famous series were named after Huangshan because the mountain was given its current name at a later time. She then told me an interesting legend about the naming of this well-known UNESCO World Heritage Site, located in the south of Anhui province of China.

Huangshan was originally named “Yishan”, which literally means a “black and shiny mountain”, referring to the colour of its peculiar granite rocks. Legend has it that Huangdi (also known as the Yellow Emperor) was attracted by the breathtaking grandeur of the mountain and decided to concoct his Elixir of Immortality there. Centuries later, Emperor Ming of Tang decided to rename Yishan “Huangshan”, in honour of this first ancient Chinese emperor, as well as a god from the Chinese folk legend. From then on, the place has become a magnet for artists and poets. Highly acclaimed in Chinese art and literature, Huangshan embodies an unmatched cultural heritage that stretches back over millennia and continues to this day.

The enchanting scenery of Huangshan has attracted millions of visitors flocking to climb to the peak every year. Surrounded by massive peaks, Huangshan is a seemingly endless mountain range. Some of the more remarkable ones include Lotus Peak (Lianhua Feng) which is 1,864 m high, Bright Peak (Guangming Ding) at 1,860 m, and Celestial Peak (Tiandu Feng) which is 1,829 m high. Geologists explained that approximately 100 million years ago, Huangshan emerged from an ancient sea that disappeared in the Quaternary Period due to crustal movements and was later shaped by the glaciers into its form today.

One summer, I finally stepped foot on this magical gem of China. I was first stunned by the gnarled pine trees standing out from the multitudinous flora and fauna atop of the mountain, visible even from a distance. My dad said that it is a rare species of pine that can only be found at high altitude like the Huangshan peaks. They outgrow the other plants by hanging from the rocky cliffs, giving the rocks a quirky look, as if vines were clipped to them. As we reached the peak, I was amazed by how these pine trees stuck out from the cracks in the rocks: a beautiful natural accessory for the legendary mountain.

Another feature that attracted my eye was the bewildering array of bizarre boulders scattered around the mountain tops. Through hundreds and thousands of years of weathering,

even the most common rocks on the mountain have been crafted into unique artifacts by the nimble fingers of Mother Nature. Looking over the forest of grotesque rocks, I wondered if some were actually petrified mystic creatures. There was a moment I even had a heated debate with my dad on whether a piece of rock we saw was a bird's egg or just a mischievous stone. No wonder my dad said these rocks were masters of disguise. Surely, they could easily deceive our eyes into thinking that they were secretive creatures living on the freezing mountain top.

Apart from the strangely-shaped vegetation and rocks, Huangshan is also renowned for its picturesque cloudscape, especially during sunrise. Dragging my sleepy body up Bright Peak at dawn, my jaw dropped as I looked up to the sky and saw the kaleidoscopic colour of clouds swirling above me. Lingered over the horizon afar, the slow-rising sun gently cast a pinkish orange trail on the panoramic sea of clouds. I took a deep breath of crisp, cool air and revelled in the peaceful moment of tranquility. From magenta to peach, rose to amber, the radiance of the sun gradually broke through the cloudy blanket and warmed up the morning air. Squinting through the glimmering rays, I waved goodbye to the most extraordinary vista of Huangshan and started to descend the endless stone stairs spiralling down the mountain.

On the way down, my walking-wikipedia dad was tirelessly telling me about the rich biodiversity of Huangshan. It may be no surprise to learn that Huangshan, occupying over 1,200 square kilometres, is home to several hundred special animal species, including 24 species of fish, 170 bird species, 38 amphibian species and 300 other vertebrate species. However, what is truly amazing is that many species are yet to be discovered. For instance, two species of shrew were newly identified by biologists in March of 2020. These two species take the appearance of a mouse but with exceedingly long and pointy noses, and were respectively named *Crocidura anhuiensis* and *Crocidura hwangshanensis*, in honour of the place where they were discovered. Other interesting species include white neck ravens, clouded leopards, and silver pheasants. Huangshan is really a mount of unlimited treasures!

When we finally hit the base of the mountain and returned to civilization, the last surprise awaiting was the Cinnabar Spring at the foot of Purple Rock Peak. Relaxing our sore feet and aching muscles from the gruelling mountain climb in the mineral-rich, geothermal water, we minded not the pungent sulfuric smell permeating our noses and steam clouding our glasses at all. My mum told us that it was recorded in Song Shengyou's Huangshan Map and Record that even Huangdi had taken a dip in the same pool. Unofficial records have it that the pool had magically made him appear younger, so the pool was then called the Pool of Youth. I was not sure if my dad was telling the truth or just pulling my leg but he said the spring water was so limpid that it might be drinkable and could even cure certain illnesses! Yet, the thought of drinking the same pool of water that we were soaking in was rather unimaginable.

From my first encounter with Huangshan in the Chinese gallery to my expedition to Bright Peak, I have put into practice the Chinese saying, "It is better to travel ten thousand miles than read ten thousand books." Now I understand why Huangshan is always listed as one of the bucket-list destinations by both Chinese and Western nature lovers. Its fabulous pines, spectacular rocks, astonishing cloudscape, and curative hot springs certainly warrant multiple visits. I believe everyone who has been there would agree that Huangshan is a feast for the eyes. So if you have not paid a visit to this majestic wonderland yet, then why not take a trip to witness the magic of this enchanting mountain?

Non-Fiction – Group 4 WINNER

Huangshan—The Mystical Paradise on Earth

Immaculate Heart of Mary College, Ou, Shu Hua – 19

*Over seventy summits, standing in the clouds, reaching the high heavens,
Many climb to the top of Huangshan, dreaming to be like birds that can fly,
Let your bodies and souls be immortals that live and never die.*

In China, there is a legend about a mysterious place where you can possess the magical power to be immortal and to live forever. Though how strange it might be to most of us, it is worthy to see such a numinous and occult place by paying Huangshan a visit.

Many people come here as tourists, and some of them, may be, dreamers who look for immortal life. They come here to feel what it is like being in Heaven, and usually, they end up finding their life more meaningful and energetic after seeing such a magnificent and remarkable view of Huangshan.

Huangshan is also called the Yellow Mountain, which is a mountain range in southern Anhui Province in eastern China. It was originally called “Yishan”, and it was renamed because of a legend—Emperor Xuanyuan (The Yellow Emperor). He once conducted alchemy at this mystical place, hoping to attain immortal life. Nobody knows if Emperor Xuanyuan had truly been here. According to some writers, the Xuanyuan clan was the leader of the tribal alliance. He was an intelligent man who taught our ancestors how to raise silkworms and make boats and carts.

As time flew, and the Yellow Emperor had reached old age but he still had countless things that he wanted to accomplish: rivers needed to be fixed, land needed to be cultivated, animals needed to be domesticated, and there was probably a long list to do. The Emperor’s wish to live forever was never something out of the blue or selfishness. He was a hero who only wanted to do more for his people. To fulfill his dream of serving his people continuously, he wanted to be immortal, so he sent Lord Fuqiu to find a place for him to conduct his alchemy for attaining immortal life.

Lord Fuqiu came back after three years and told the Emperor, “There is a group of high mountains in the south of the Yangtze River, and the mountains are mostly black rocks called Yishan. There, you can try to conduct your alchemy.” Therefore, Huangdi led Fuqiu Gong, Rong Chengzi and some servants to go to Yishan. They then built houses and alchemy furnaces. After that, they paid a lot of effort to gather the herbs for alchemy. As there are 72 steep peaks in Yishan, and in some places, it was difficult for him to go up, but Xuanyuan Huangdi stepped on every inch of the cliff. Later, when the food they prepared

was finished, they could only rely on picking wild fruits to feed themselves. Many people couldn't bear the hardship and ran away secretly. In the end, only Huangdi, Fuqiu Gong and Rong Chengzi stayed.

After nine years of endless hard work, they collected the herbs they needed, and their alchemy process started. Three years passed quickly. The firewood they had was about to be used up. The elixir had not yet been made. The trees nearby were all cut down by them. Fuqiu Gong and Rong Chengzi had to cut the firewood from a more distant place. Meanwhile, the Emperor Huang filled the last piece of pine wood into the hearth to survive but his counterparts had not returned yet. With almost no hope of success as the fire was getting smaller, Huangdi had no way but to put one of his legs into the furnace as firewood, and finally an elixir was made. At this time, Lord Fuqiu and Rong Chengzi also rushed back, and rescued Huangdi's leg from the fire. The three of them ate the elixir. Then, their dream came true, and they became immortals.

Though some may argue about the validity of the story, yet many people came to see this mystic place and its magic. Huangshan was formed approximately 100 million years ago and gained its unique rock formations in the Quaternary Glaciation. During the Qin Dynasty, Huangshan was known as Yishan (Mount Yi). In 747 AD, its name was changed to Huangshan (Mount Huang) in honor of Huang Di (the Yellow Emperor), a legendary Chinese emperor and the mythological ancestor of the Chinese.

One legend records that Huangshan was formed at the location where the Yellow Emperor ascended into Heaven. Another legend states that the Yellow Emperor "cultivated moral character and refined Pills of Immortality in the mountains, and that is the origin of the name of Huangshan (Yellow Mountains)".

The name "Huangshan" was first used by the famous Chinese poet, Li Bai. Huangshan was not well-known in ancient times, but its change of name in 747 AD drew more attention from the public. Since then, the area has been visited frequently and many temples were built by the faithful there. Huangshan is also best known for its stone steps, carved into the side of the mountain, of which there are probably more than 60,000 throughout the area. Over the years, many scenic spots and physical features on the mountain have been named, and each of them has quite a story to tell. For example, one legend is about a man who did not believe the tales of Huangshan's beauty and went to the mountain to see it; and immediately, he was shocked, speechless and overwhelmed.

In 1982, Huangshan was declared a "site of scenic beauty and historic interest" by the State Council of China. It was even named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1990 for its scenery and for its role as a habitat for rare and threatened species. In 2002, Huangshan was named the "sister mountain" of Jungfrau in Swiss Alps.

The area is enormously popular for its scenery, sunsets, peculiarly-shaped granite peaks, Huangshan pine trees, hot springs, winter snow and views of the clouds from above. The beauty of Huangshan also draws the attention of artists, and it is a frequent subject of traditional Chinese paintings and literature, as well as modern photography.

Huangshan straddles the four counties of Taiping (now Huangshan District), Shexian, Yixian and Xiuning. Its beauty consists of a large area with various natural landscapes such as peaks, rocks, pine, clouds and springs. The scenic spots are magnificent, strange, fantastic, dangerous and secluded, and each of its various poses exhibits its particular characteristics.

Huangshan offers us an amazing scenery with peaks as its body, with 36 large peaks and 36 small peaks. Lianhua Peak, Guangmingding Peak and Tiandu Peak are collectively called the three main peaks of Huangshan. Three peaks stand together, forming a beautiful

frame encircling the wonder of Huangshan scenery. Among the countless scenic spots in Huangshan, the most unique ones are the strange pine, strange rocks, sea of clouds and hot springs, which are called the “Four Wonders of Huangshan.”

First, Huangshan Pine trees are tenacious, peculiar and stunning. The trees are distributed in high mountains above 800 meters above sea, they are in fact stones and giant rock fissures. Huangshan pine needles are stubby, green and dense, possessing dry curly branches and various shapes. The pine shows different postures, and some are leaning against the bank, or standing alone, or hanging upside down on a cliff, or crown as flat as a cover, or as sharp as a sword.

Though Huangshan pine has a tough, arrogant but beautiful posture, its growing rate is very slow. A tall pine is often hundreds or even hundreds of years old; the roots are often several times longer than the trunk. The deep roots of Huangshan pine allow them to stand firmly on the rock, and the trees remain standing despite strong wind, frost and rain. In the past, someone compiled the “Famous Pine Tree”, and many Huangshan pine trees are on the list. There are hundreds of pine trees with names on record, and each tree demonstrates its own remarkable and elegant style.

Second, one of Huangshan’s “Four Wonders” is rocks, which are famous for their oddness and shapes. The shapes of rocks resemble people and things, birds and beasts. At different locations and weather, the Huangshan Rocks have very different but stunning appearances. Some people think that if the rocks are viewed horizontally, they are like ridges and peaks with different distances and heights. Huangshan is surrounded by thousands of rocks, and almost every peak has many magical and strange rocks.

The ravishing mountain was formed in ancient times. It was formed about 1 million years ago during the Quaternary Glacial Period. When you see the Huangshan from different angles, you can find different shapes. If you are standing in front of Banshan Temple, Huangshan stones and rocks look fantastic from different views. In front of Banshan Temple, a large rock on Wang Tiandu Peak is like a rooster spreading its wings and crowing, so people called it “Golden Rooster”. The view would be definitely different but amazing if you climb Long Papo and look back, as you will find this rooster is like five elderly people in fluttering robes, holding their shoulders hand in hand, and the other image the “Five Old Men in Heaven” is formed. In Huangshan, strange pine and strange stones, often in contrast to each other, are located in Beihai. There are more than 1,200 stones in that area, and all of them give different images like demonstrating various thoughts or movements of man. All these images are so charming that no tourist wants to leave this wonderland.

Third, since ancient times, Huangshan has become a sea of clouds and the hometown of clouds and mists. Its magnificent “cloud sea” is famous for its beauty, victory, wonder and fantasy. It can be seen throughout the year, especially in winter.

Flowing clouds plays a crucial role to contribute to such a fantastic natural world in Huangshan. When the wind is surging, the waves of clouds will then be rolling and rushing like tidal waves. When the breeze is blowing, the clouds in all directions are moving slowly and trickling, passing through the gaps between the peaks. People can imagine that they are fairies, enjoying such a spectacular and celestial scenery.

Fourth, one of the “Four Wonders” of Huangshan is hot springs. They are originated under the Ziyun Peak at an altitude of more than 850 meters. The wonderful landscape produces fresh and clean water. The water quality is pure and you can drink it or use it for a bath.

Legend tells us the Emperor Xuanyuan Huangdi bathed here for seven or forty-nine days to rejuvenate and rise, so it is also known as the “Lingquan”. Also, the high mountain

hot spring, Huangshan Hot Spring, has certain medical effects on some diseases related to digestion, nerve, cardiovascular, metabolism and skin.

No one could have imagined that there are actually 15 hot springs in Huangshan Mountain. The average temperature of the main spring of the hot spring is 42.5°C. The water temperature also changes with the changes of temperature and precipitation. It is truly a paradise for tourists, as they can enjoy a nice bath in the hot spring with one of the most fantastic view in the world.

The three famous waterfalls of Huangshan can elevate you to the next level of natural beauty. When it rains heavily, the waterfalls are like two giant dragons flying under the rock, giving us a breathtaking and extraordinary picture. One of the waterfalls is called Baizhangquan Falls. It runs vertically along the cliff of Baizhang, and the waterfall is flying horizontally above the waterfall with the waves splashing under the waterfall. Another waterfall, The Jiulong Waterfall, follows the broken rocks, when it folds down nine times, it is like nine white dragons descending from the sky, giving us an extremely spectacular view. If it is sunny and not raining for a long time, the waterfalls of Baizhang and Jiulong are like gossamer belts and trickling streams.

The peaks and forests of Huangshan are good habitats for animals and plants. The mountains are like the sea with abundant water due to rainfall. There are more than 1,500 kinds of plants in Huangshan, of which trees account for one-third, and there are more than 500 kinds of animals. Therefore, Huangshan is considered as an important place for the researches in Biology, and it is also known as the “Treasure House of East China’s Animals and Plants.”

The wonder of Huangshan is not just historical but incredible in many aspects. Its spectacular features stand out from other mountains and gives inner joy and peace to every tourist. With its stunning view, more than 20,000 poems were written about Huangshan from the Tang Dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty. Its beauty also transcends time limit, and the mountains also appear in modern works. Director James Cameron once said that Huangshan inspired him in making the film, *Avatar*, in 2009. The Chinese animated series *Stitch & Ai*, a spin-off of Disney’s *Lilo & Stitch* franchise, is also set in the Huangshan mountains.

Huangshan Mountain occupies an important position in Chinese culture, and it is undoubtedly one of the most famous places for paintings. The strange but fantastic and stunning landscape impresses everyone. Huangshan enjoys such a high reputation, thanks to the masters of the Huangshan School of Painting founded in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. These art masters opened up the treasure of Huangshan and showed to world its mystical and spectacular wonder.

Huangshan is a place where you can refresh your body and soul. It is also our source of solace, inspiration and delight. We, Chinese people, are truly blessed with all these ravishing and celestial views. We should remember the precious resources we have and be a more responsible user in our daily life, so we can preserve all these incredible natural resources for the next generation. Being thankful to what the Mother Earth offers us, we should be kind to Her in return.

Non-Fiction – Group 5

WINNER

Huangshan: A Land of Ancient Culture and History

ESF King George V School, Shah, Rishi – 17

With mountains over a thousand meters tall, two major waterfalls, home to over one thousand five hundred species of plants and animals and various geographic landscapes, the mountainous range of Huangshan is one of the most captivating wonders present in China. Throughout the last several centuries, the “Mountains of the Yellow Emperor” have played a key role in Chinese literature and art: with over 200,000 poems written about the mountain and schools of art dedicated to the mountain range, inspiring artwork internationally. As of 1990, it was declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO due to its long history, embedded culture, and unprecedented beauty. It attracts thousands of tourists every year and is ranked as one of the most recommended places to visit in China, among the Great Wall and the Terracotta Army. Despite its cultural significance, few are aware of the importance the mountain range has played in our understanding and appreciation of ancient Chinese history and culture.

Often described as the “loveliest mountain of China”, one of the most appealing features of Huangshan is its magnificent natural beauty. The natural hot springs, indigenous pine, emerging granite peaks and the sea of clouds form the four wonders of this region, creating a mysterious, phosphorescent, and serene landscape. The great Chinese geologist and philosopher, Xu Xiake, from the Ming dynasty, mentioned that “you do not need to see any more mountains after seeing *the Five Mountains*, and you do not need to see the other four mountains after seeing Huangshan”, insinuating that the beauty of these mountains is unparalleled.

The mountains have a deeply embedded history that has made the region a place of extreme importance. Our story of these mountains begins over a hundred million years ago when steaming magma rose to the Earth’s crust and solidified over time to form the material that comprises the mountains. A combination of weathering and erosion formed the serene rock formations we see today. Originally named Yishan, the mountain was renamed to Huangshan in 729 AD out of honour for emperor Shi Huangdi (also known as ‘the Yellow Emperor’). Hence, a large proportion of the history of Huangshan is associated with Emperor Huangdi. Legends have stated that the mountain range was the place in which the emperor sought the elixir of immortality using the indigenous herbs of the mountains. The hot springs of the mountains are also said to have made the emperor younger as he bathed in them; hence the name of ‘The Springs of Youth’. The cultural connection these mountains have to the first emperor that unified China illustrates the significance of the mountains in Chinese history.

The various travel accounts over the last millennium have further exemplified that immortality and heaven are associated with the mountain. Over the past hundred years, there have been several geologists and historians who have visited the mountain and presented their stories to the world. In 1268, an account by a local historian, from the Anhui province, climbed the mountain with two of his friends and spent three days there without any social contact. The historian described that he felt “immortal”, especially when he “peered over the sea of clouds and saw the vast abyss that followed”. Another famous travel account from 1340 infers Huangshan as the “home of gods and immortals”. It mentions monks stating that the most monumental peak was only accessible to herb gatherers, with the climb to the “Heavenly capital” lasting over three days. The continuous symbolism of immortality associated with the mountains thereby presents how paramount the conservation of this natural wonder is and how deeply rooted the mountain is to Chinese culture.

The mountain was not very well known until it was mentioned in Li Bai’s poetry. Li Bai was one of the great poets of the Tang Dynasty. His work was heavily based on the various places he had travelled to and specialised in the descriptions of nature and adventure. Li Bai’s poetry, in conjunction with the belief that the elixir of immortality was produced by the herbs in Huangshan, has resulted in a large influx of people visiting the mountain. Now, it is almost like a magnet to hermits, poets, landscape artists, painters, photographers and even directors across the globe. During the Ming dynasty (16th Century), the mountain quickly rose to become one of the favourite locations for artists specialised in landscape painting (known as Shanshui in Chinese culture), leading to the opening of the Shanshui (translating to mountain and water) school of paintings, which has inspired generations of poets, writers, and artists to continue to capture the mountain’s allure.

Huangshan is home to many villages, the two that represent the history and culture best are the Hongcun and Xidi villages. Built during the Song dynasty (1131 AD), the Hongcun village contains over 130 residencies that have maintained their architectural design and structure since the Ming dynasty. The ox-shaped community layout, half-moon pond and blossoming lotuses (in the summer) highlight the unique design of the village, attracting poets, photographers and even directors across the globe. Conversely, the Xidi village is home to 200 residencies, consisting of two rivers and a thousand years of history. The village is designed like a labyrinth that presents the story of the village since it was formed in the Song dynasty to how it is currently. As one walks through the narrow walls of the village, they can see the ancestral halls and archways decorated with the quintessential wooden and stone carvings. The Xidi village is similar to Hongcun in the sense that both originated during the same period and maintain the architectural design and customs derived from the Ming dynasty, making them one of the few places that retain the ancestry of Chinese civilisation.

One of the most integral parts of the lives of the villagers situated in Huangshan is the importance of tea. One of the best high aroma teas, Huangshan Mao Feng (also known as the “Queen of Fragrance”) tea originates from this mountain. Tea is essential to the residents, with some locals going as far as stating, “one can live without food, but not without tea.” Tea is consumed repeatedly in the everyday lives of the locals. Each time of the day serves a separate purpose for drinking tea; in the morning as a staple, in the afternoon it is consumed for better digestion and in the evening for relieving the sense of enervation after a hard day’s work. Particularly in the winter, locals would often sit in front of a fire drinking tea with loved ones. It is believed among locals that tea provides a sense of peace which has supposedly contributed to the artistic talent in the region. The importance of tea in the district portrays how unique the culture of Huangshan is and expands our knowledge of the complex, yet dazzling phenomenon that is Chinese culture.

Customs play a huge part in the lives of the villagers, each with versatile procedures and symbolism. The eighth of the twelfth day of the lunar month, in particular, has a significant cultural impact on those in the region. Residents of the mountain boil and smash eggs as a sacrifice to the gods to ask for protection. Laba Tofu, exclusive to Huangshan, is eaten on this day as a deed to ‘eat’ misfortune. Additionally, this is believed to be the ideal day for marriage in the year; one can see the vast number of young couples celebrating the happiest day of their lives. On the first day of the Lunar new year, alongside the traditional customs involved with this festival, the locals perform a ceremony of “calling in the year”, which involves the residents forming a long line and paying a new year call from door to door. For the last several centuries, customs similar to the ones mentioned have been upheld by the people of Huangshan as they are reminiscent in funerals, weddings, celebrations of the birth of babies, festivities, and religious events, illustrating the diversity of the customs and their importance in the daily lives of individuals.

Huangshan has a diverse range of delicacies and plays a large role in dictating the ingredients and cooking methods used in the Anhui cuisine overall. The history of this cuisine is almost as ancient as the mountain itself, originating from the Qin and Han dynasties. The various styles of Hui cuisine are dependent on its geographical location, with the Yellow Mountains behind the inspiration of Hui cuisine in the southern Anhui region. Many of the ingredients and methods used to cook Hui cuisine originate from Huangshan itself. Most of the vegetables and fungi used in Hui Cuisine are farmed from the mountains itself whereas fish is farmed from the Yangtze River. Some famous dishes include Mao tofu, Yellow crab shell cake and Luzhou Roast Duck.

Huangshan plays an important role in Chinese culture as it known as the land of the four treasures: paintbrush, ink, inkstone and paper. The four treasures of study in Chinese culture which have been used throughout the course of history. This can be seen throughout traditional Chinese paintings, as some of the best artwork in the country originates from Huangshan itself. Workshops and even schools of art have been inspired by the elegance and cultural significance of the mountains and continue to pass these ancient teachings from generation to generation, which can be seen in the art of the current day.

As discussed earlier, the art of landscape painting (*Shanshui*) is paramount to deepening our cultural understanding of these mountains. Considered to be at the upper end of the hierarchy of Chinese painting styles, landscape painting is very popular and is rooted with a refined scholarly taste. *Shanshui* is linked heavily to Taoist philosophy, which emphasizes harmony with the natural world and maintaining a balance (represented by the symbol of the Yin and Yang). The school has produced ‘masters’ of the art including Jian Jiang, Zha Shibiao, Mei Oing, Xugu, and Xue Zhuang. Because of the association with mountains and the pathway to heaven, landscape painting does not involve painting an accurate depiction of landscapes but rather imagined and idealised versions of them, hence, presenting the religious importance of Huangshan in Chinese culture.

Aside from *Shanshui*, the natural wonder of the mountains has had a global influence on art. In Chinese popular culture, the Yellow Mountains were the place where a large proportion of the blockbuster, *Crouching Tiger* was shot. The film was a major success in both foreign and domestic box offices and resulted in a large spike in tourism of these mountains. Some of the locations at which these scenes were shot were JiuLong Waterfall and Feixun Valley. Moreover, the film *Avatar* from 2009, the second highest-grossing movie of all time had some of the fictional locations inspired by Mount Huangshan. The fictional “Hallelujah Mountains” resemble Mount Huangshan the most. The use of the Yellow

Mountains in hyper-realistic scenarios further elucidate how sensational the mountain is, almost unreal. Ultimately, promoting the concept of heaven and immortality associated with the mountain.

Huangshan plays an important role in developing our understanding of Chinese religion and culture. There is evidence to support the claim of Huangshan becoming a Taoist sanctuary shortly after the change of the mountain's name by the imperial order of the Song dynasty. The *Huangshan Tujing* is the last piece of text and evidence to support the Taoist background of the mountains; entailing descriptions of dragon sightings, medicinal herbs, alchemy sites and auspicious healing as well as geomantic placing of each of the thirty-six peaks present on the mountain range. During the Yuan Dynasty (from 1271–1368), over sixty-four temples were built on the mountains and in 1606, the renowned monk Pumen came to Huangshan and built the Fahai Meditation temple. The heavy presence of religious structures on the mountains delineates the importance of the mountain to locals and those who visit the mountain.

In conclusion, the unequivocal geographical landscape, ancient history, and cultural heritage have allowed Huangshan to become the guide to heaven and the home of immortals. Its unique natural features are unlike anywhere on the planet, managing to surprise anyone fortunate enough to visit this area. Its impact on art, literature and even global popular culture has allowed it to remain as one of the most influential places on the planet. Its unique customs, lifestyle and religious significance have allowed us to better understand how varied Chinese culture is and enrich our appreciation of the world around it.

Poetry – Group 1

WINNER

The Yellow Mountain of China

St. Paul's Co-educational College Primary School, Ng, Sze Wah Ceres

In the stories they always say
That mountains are where magics begin,
But there has never been a place like the Yellow Mountain
That has so many mysteries within.

The Yellow Mountain got its name
From a story, not the colour,
Long ago, five thousand years back,
A legendary hero came into power.

His name was HuangDi
Also known as the Emperor of Yellow.
He is the ancestor of all Chinese
But sadly he was mortal.

He planned to create an elixir
To bring long life to his race.
All the ingredients were ready
Yet he needed a quiet place

So he chose the Yellow Mountain
Before then YiShan was its name.
When he finished making the pills
The mountain got its fame.

Since then more legends appear
Together with rocks of special shapes.
Each rock owns a unique story
Giving countless questions to the beautiful landscapes.

Were there two gods hanging their boots dry?
Was there indeed a monkey watching the seas?
Were there fairies pointing the travelers' way?
Or a pen turning into flowers and trees?
When I look down onto the clouds
From the mountain top, I imagine
Whether the supernatural led to rock formation
Or it was the rocks leading to the legend.

Poetry – Group 2

WINNER

The Never-Ending Legends of the Yellow Mountains

ESF Quarry Bay School, Hui, Emma – 9

I glided to a terrain so rare;
Under my spiralling wings, a blanket of mist filled the air.

The stunning sights caught my mind spellbound —
It was a mystical fairyland.

The mindful peaks sang a peaceful song;
The sea of cotton candy danced between the mountains.

Heads walked up the stone stairs, age-old and long;
Mysterious pines welcomed the pilgrims of admiration.

A native dragon whispered to me, ‘This was Huangshan,
Where ancient legends were told from generation to generation.’

The most famous legend of Huangshan was about Huangdi;
Dragon would tell in words as simple as can be.
The Yellow Emperor was the ancestor of all Chinese;
All the people loved him.
He was afraid of getting old;
And his solution was about to be told.
He ordered his subjects to collect precious herbs;
They gathered the herbs and boiled them nine times in a cauldron.
The herbs turned into an elixir of immortality;
Huangdi took the pill, hoping to live till eternity.
His hair and beard changed from silver to dark;
His body became so light, flying to the heavens.
This place used to be called Yishan, the Black Mountains;
From that day, it was named after Huangdi, becoming Huangshan, the Yellow Mountains.

There were two more tales to know;
This was about a monkey which did not stay low.

A fairy monkey in his cave had practised magic for 3,600 years;
He had the power to transform himself into 36 different kinds of objects, including humans.

He met a young girl called Zhangzhu in Taiping County;
She was like a pearl, kind and pretty.

He fell in love with her at first sight;
He transfigured himself into
A handsome, young man — Sun Junwu — in delight.

Sun proposed to Zhangzhu;
Zhangzhu and her parents agreed.

On the wedding day,
Everyone was overjoyed;
Sun was drunk and lost his magic,
Showing his furry head,
Furry body,
Furry legs,
And furry tail.

Zhangzhu was shocked and sad;
She escaped and was very mad.

The next morning,
Sun woke up and realised what had happened to him;
The chances of getting Zhangzhu back were slim.

He spent days and nights at a peak watching her home in Taiping;
Year in and year out, he became a rock above the sea of clouds weeping.

Don't worry — unlike the last story — this one would not make you cry;
This would just be about the genius of the poet Li Bai.

Li Bai happily visited Huangshan,
Invited by some monks to a wine party.

Dizzily drunk, he improvised a poem at the party;
Everyone was amazed by his poem and calligraphy —
They envied his ability.

In high spirits, Li Bai excitedly tossed his brush pen,
Which turned into a peak;
It looked very unique.

A pine at the peak looked like a flower on the tip of a brush pen;
That was why the peak was called the Blossoming Dreamed Pen.

Now I fell in love with Huangshan after listening to the legends.

‘Dragon, we should be friends in the Yellow Mountains.
We should be friends forever.’
Dragon agreed, ‘Follow me, Little Bird, into my cave.’
I saw to us a huge bird wave.

Dragon said, ‘This is Phoenix, my roommate.
To meet you she can’t wait.’
Phoenix was happy to have me as her new friend;
We all decided to live together.

Dragon asked me, ‘Have you realised the theme of each of the three legends?’

‘Yes, I have.
Huangdi wished for Immortality;
Monkey longed for Love;
People envied Li Bai’s Genius.’

I look forward to an endless friendship with my new friends;
We shall become a legend that never ends.

Poetry – Group 3 WINNER

The Interrogation

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Hon, Chryso – 13

No,
I didn't kill him.
You don't believe me?
Fine.
You can start the recording now.
I'll tell you what happened.

Why we were at Huangshan?
My, you're
nosy, aren't you?
We were visiting Huangshan because
we were on vacation.
Together
as an engaged couple.
This was meant to be a
celebration of
love,
of
voluntary sacrifice,
of
commitment.

We had been hiking up the karsts for hours,
trying to remain excited and
enthusiastic
when all that crossed our minds were
hunger and
exhaustion.
Our backs were sore and going
limp from the weights of our backpacks crushing our spines
and our hands were covered in blisters from all the
grabbing at the sharp rocks.
The only thing that didn't give out was
our feet attempting to grip and claw at the uneven ground,

to steady us both as we slowly and
persistently made our way up the vertically slanted giant of a rock.

After what seemed like decades
a little hut came into view,
provoking a spark of hope,
of victory,
of triumph.
of relief.

With most of our energy
sucked out of us
from the trails we had overcome,
we managed to stagger up the cliff,
constantly reminding ourselves that
if the one and only
Li Bai,
a poet whose words poured out of him like
salt drizzles out of a salt shaker,
made it up this miracle of nature
with his
knees aching,
and his
joints shaking
and his back in
unspeakable pain,
and also managed to cough up
words drowning in wisdom
then so could we.

As the hut appeared bigger and bigger,
and we got closer and closer
our footsteps quickened out of impatience and then
next thing you know,
we're here.
We
made
It.

The hut loomed over us and
gold letters, decorated with specks of rust and
chipped at the corners,
formed the nearly illegible words,
Fuhuo Temple

I stole a quick glance at him,
expecting his lips to mirror the grin I was conscious was visible on my face

like a reflection,
but instead,
only a hint of a smile formed on his face before it
fell
and before I knew it
so did mine,
as if I was the mirror,
copying his every movement.

I remember asking him,
What's wrong?

Then it was just
pin-drop silence.
Silence so deafening
my ears begged for it to stop.

I never realised just how important a role sound played in my life until it was
replaced with
the one conflicting thing it was designed to substitute.
Silence.

Doesn't that apply to everything in life?
You take everything for granted,
You barely notice or acknowledge the entities that shape your world until they're
no longer there and
that's when you realise
just how easily unappreciative you can be.

There appeared to be a void,
a
bottomless pit where the vibrations that defined sound once filled,
now
empty.
It was like a
fill-in-the-blanks activity,
the kind you are asked to complete in kindergarten.
the ones where you pray and
wish and
will for the
words to just
appear.

It was like that.
Needing him to just say something.

That was how much I valued his response.

This is where my sister was buried.

I instinctively let out a sigh of relief,
and realised that I had been unconsciously holding my breath the entire time.
That's what my life was like with him.

He was always so
unpredictable,
someone who left no
clues to what was on his mind,
no ideas,
no red herrings.
nothing.

He was so dubious and fragile,
life was like
walking a tightrope.
You know you have to tread lightly and slowly but you
don't know
how lightly or
how slowly.
What you do know, however, is that
one wrong move and
that's it.
there's no going back.

Is that why you wanted to come?

I remember looking at him,
hoping that I looked more sympathetic than
concerned,
silently willing him to look me in the eye and say he was fine,
but his shoes and the rocks they kicked at suddenly needed all of his immediate attention.

Yeah.

He shook his head as if dismissing all thoughts that had clouded his vision,
and we climbed up the stairs that lead to the temple,
hand in hand.

A musty mix of burning incense and dusty books wafted into my nose.
The smell was so pungent my eyes began to water uncontrollably.

Then he made the most sudden move at the
most arbitrary time.

I want to show you something.
His voice rang with determination and his
footsteps began to quicken.
His nimble baby steps transformed into
strides of purpose and confidence as his
fingers snaked around my wrist,
tugging me,
leading me to wherever it was he wanted to go.

It was a sequence of
zigzags and
turns and
running in circles before
the tugging stopped and
I nearly bumped into him.

A beam of fascination and
a pair of hopeful eyes
replaced the reflection of his face on the glass of the cabinet that stood in front of us.

Behind the glass was a vase,
littered with
lines of royal blue that met at every turn,
streaking across the smooth surface,
forming a series of patterns that were
splattered onto the porcelain.

That's where my sister's ashes are.

As if on cue,
my right shoulder was greeted with a few
light taps.

It was the light bouncing off her smooth head that caught my eye;
A dash of colour reflecting off the shiny surface that coated her skull and was known as her
scalp.

Then,
a polite smile and
a pair of twinkling eyes met mine.

Hello,
She said.
I'm aware you're here for a relative's resurrection?

A laugh escaped my mouth.
It was cruel and rude but

I couldn't help it.

I was about to object, to
declare her mistaken, when I saw
the words come out of his mouth before
I heard them.

Yes.

I turned to him,
my eyes widened with shock as I
blurted out words that dripped with derision,

You're not serious.

And then, a sentence I recognised had a challenging tone to it,
produced by a voice that was
hardened, like
wet acrylic paint that
dries on a canvas over time and
forms into lumpy bumps,
each individual one protected by a
crispy shell that when
broken,
cracks and causes
undiscovered wet paint to
ooze out,
whether intended or not.

What makes you think I'm not?

I remember the wave of shock and surprise that overcame me,
and then my
instant and
poor attempt at trying to
conceal it.

I remember the monk nodding and then.

Well, if I'm honest,
all of it was a blur.

Something about how in order for his sister to come back from the dead
he was going to have to
exchange a loved one's life for hers.

The next part,
well,

it's as clear as day.
It's something that will haunt me for the rest of my life,
even though I would give anything for it
not to.

There was a cliff to our right,
a cliff made up of jagged rocks and capricious greenery.

I remember her pointing to it,
saying,
A soul for a soul.

I had scoffed,
he'll obviously choose me.
That's simply axiomatic.

I waited for a
Yes,
a laugh of agreement,
a reassurance that of course, I was right,
that obviously I was
better than her,
that I was clearly
worth more than her.

But my ears were left ravenous,
my arrogant words still
ringing and
buzzing
against my eardrums,
the words I so badly longed to hear
within the radar of my vision but
out of arms reach,
taunting me,
mocking me.

I turned towards him abruptly,
tiny rocks crunching in protest under my feet,
my eyes searching,
scanning
his blank face desperately,
hungrily,
for
something,
anything.

But he was

so
so
stubborn.
He refused to give me a reaction.
I received
not a single movement,
not a single indicator of
what he was about to say,
of
what he was about to choose.

And when I was on the verge of answering for him through gritted teeth,
when I was naturally and instinctively giving him the benefit of the doubt,
my ears pricked up as they picked up a soft, raspy whisper,
barely audible,
barely noticeable,
but there.
Words soaked in guilt, in
apology, in
regret.

I want to see my sister again.

That's it,
I'm not telling you anymore.
Is it because I don't remember anything else that happened?
No,
I remember
everything.
I remember everything that was going on,
I remember every thought that ran through my head,
I remember the urge to scream, to
wail, to
howl in anger,
and how I managed to suppress it all.
I remember every feeling that took control over me despite my fight to stay
calm.
To stay forgiving,
To stay understanding.

I remember it all because how can you not when
you could feel every living cell in your body
deteriorating,
rotting,
dying?
How can you ever forget the time
you witnessed

life being sucked out of your living body,
as well as your will to live?
How can you move past it all
when the realisation hits you that everything you knew turned out to be a
lie?

I don't know if it was the
howling wind,
slamming against my face,
causing the muscles in my face to
tighten,
slowing my ability to blink,
or if it was the
fear of betrayal sinking in
that resulted in streams of salty tears and
mascara streaming down my face,
running down my dry skin like lakes,
ensuing my dry eyes to feel numb from having been widened for so long,
accompanied by my face deadened from the
pain,
from the
betrayal,
but it was all too much for me.

You killed me,
you
monster.
You stabbed me in the back with a
double-ended knife
and didn't know that
it would end up
piercing you as well.
I loved you and
swore to be there for you for the rest of my life.
I was ready to
change my surname to yours,
submit to your wants and needs.
I was ready to
be your wife
and yet you chose her over me

You have to understand.
He knew
the full capabilities of this temple,
He knew
the aptitude this temple possessed.
He knew the

true meaning of the temple's name.

Fuhuo temple?

Yeah.

Resurrection Temple.

He

knew.

And he didn't tell me.

So, you see,

I didn't kill him.

He killed me.

All I did was

push him off the cliff

before he could

push me.

Poetry – Group 4 WINNER

The Stories of the Guest-Greeting Pine

ESF Island School, Lam, Ady – 16

500 CE

the sharp peaks penetrate
the Sea of Clouds almost apologetically
as they don the shroud of mist upon their shoulders—
delicately diverting the vast ocean of floating
water droplets around their busts—
so the few
who journey laboriously, heaving and gasping to
the pinnacle
 where if you squint and reach out trustingly
 you can feel the blazing warmth of the
 field of stars that dance in the night sky

are met with but a virtuous sight;
pointed protrusions covered with cotton fluff that
hides the flourishing verdant ferns
 they say beauty lies in modesty—
 and the Sea of Clouds truly adorns the mountains
 magnificently, making for a mystical view

one of which:
a slim sapling, easily overlooked
begins to lean forward ever so slightly,
to look out at the world
watching the people
absorbing their stories
getting ready to tell its own

1000 CE

two men sit
at a table meticulously carved
from the lifeless body of her friend
Xiangzhi wood—
lifeless—
yet surprisingly luminous
as all children of Mother Nature are

the first man
wrinkles knitted tightly on his face
each a different yarn to spin for
the captivation of his eager descendants—
takes an unassuming sip of fragrant tea

She laughs; though the susurrations of her leaves
in the breeze sound to the people
nothing more than secretive whispers

Tea—
really just leaf water
yet the people revere it so

the second man
veins in a doomed battle to break free
from the shackles of his hands like
banyan roots engulfing the very soil that gives it life—
stares fiercely below at the flourishing tea farms; unblinking

She follows his gaze; his cataracts could be mistaken for time-faded eyes
yet her keen vision, no one would have guessed,
belonged to one
of a humble
five hundred years

She looks beyond the terraced hills,
greens of jade and jungle,
beyond the bobbing heads
which pointed caps adorn,
beyond the well-trodden path
where cows bask in the sun—
and there

A girl
eyes shining brightly with vitality
the same radiant ones as Veiny Hands Man—

She does not make assumptions
They might not be related in any sense at all;
Living several hundred years has taught her
that you never know anything when it comes to
humans and their relationships

lays on the grass and stares at the dark sky
never glancing away from the steady waltz of the stars
her fingers dancing along with them as she
points constellations out to the boy next to her

The boy
wearing a grin too wide for adult emotions like scepticism
beaming instead with youthful adoration and affection—
lays on the grass and stares at the girl
never glancing away from her sparkling eyes
his fingers dancing along with hers

She smiles

She may not be one for assumptions
but it would be a well-educated guess
which, mind you, is very different
from an assumption
that this was love
Parental, romantic— unconditional

The beating heart she lacks
But love she too feels
Love for the beauty of it all
and for the beauty of love itself

1500 CE

the day breaks
black ceramic shatters as the sun
unfurls its petals; it blooms on the horizon
with a golden glow; rosebud of clementine and apricot
rising in the sky, with it the aroma of a new beginning

She sighs, pleased,
Knowing this bliss will only last a second but
a second so beautiful; leaves rustling melodiously as
gusts of air twirl about her,
they swear they hear the whistling
of the dizi; a clear and graceful tune
to escort the regiments

And here they come again

the pilgrims
 some with a mane the shade of deep within a cave
 some with nose hair longer than the hair on their head
 some with the proper pronunciation of the North,
 some with the soft drawl of the South—

There are so many of them

they march in single file up the winding trail
 devoted to the Yellow Emperor.
 new recruits keep arriving without fail
 to retrace Huangdi's path every hour

sunrise to sundown
 they recreate His journey to Heaven
 though their behaviour less heavenly
 than one would expect—loud,
 boisterous, exasperating, all
 without fail,
 stopping by

Her

She'd been welcoming before:
 their gracious hostess,
 branches flung out for a warm embrace.
 Enthusiastic for more stories to collect
 for more love to gather; like a sweet bouquet of wildflowers
 unplanned vibrant beauty found fortuitously

Then she learnt
 From three hours of Herculean hiking
 Attached to each man the odour of a pigsty
 and to their underarms, foreheads and
 palms a dampness that made her bark
 peel, crippled; the thousands of clammy moist
 hands that gripped her trunk for good luck
 sickened her; skin scraping skin but only
 hers was being damaged

With age comes wisdom

She thought she'd hear stories
 from the pilgrims of the mind,
 body and soul—
 but it was nothing like the quiet observation of the old days.
 They touched her then left,
 heading up the mountain just to go down again,
 leaving behind only their sweaty handprint—

Shadows before they were real people
Hollow parading shells of themselves
when they chose not to tell their stories,
To show within them their substance,
significance, life, love

Branches cramped permanently in a misleading position;
It is so hard to remain
The hospitable hostess
When she never gets a chance to learn their names

“Inside every cynical person there is a disappointed idealist”

2020 CE

the rain falls
a curtain of silver is drawn bitterly across
the mountains; the soft rumbling crescendos to
battlecries from an army of
unabating soldiers; clouds weeping a
dull muted gloom; the country
colonised by grey

the paths are mostly empty today
the first time for centuries

even Xiaochun is elsewhere—bless
her Guardian and friend:
she used to be acquaintances with Death—
the curvature of his scythe still imprinted on
her heart; his crafty Cheshire cat smile haunted
her night and day; soulless eyes of cold steel that
searched for her when blizzards choked her blind;
when Mother Nature hurled typhoons during her tantrums

not every woman ages well

but her Guardians
prised her out of Death’s tight grip
Nineteen Florence Nightingales all taking
their turns to nurse her
back to health—
What a treasure humans can be at times!

the heavens pelt the hills with raindrops but
a burden is still lifted off the land’s shoulders;
the ever present thrum of man silent for once
without the chatter the air fills with
sweet tune— the feathered reclaiming their
soundscape, chirps harmonizing with the
euphonious whistling of the wind

She stretches upwards; the rain today her nourisher,
comforter, liberator from the
throngs of travellers all but save

a man and a woman
arms gripping each other's so
tightly it was hard to tell where one
ended and the other began—
are the only ones left in the torrential downpour

they seem to not notice the raging tempest;
instead speaking in a strange way
mouths moving to string syllables carelessly
together in tuneless discordance

She wishes they would come a bit closer
so she could peer inside their mouths,
tell them to open wide, examine the
insides because
What an incomprehensible tongue!

then
their tongue shifts
relentlessly beating back the new
following them around the world back to
the language of their past
singing the tones slightly off-key but
the same song nonetheless

We are back
her threadbare cardigan of a facade falls apart
mascara streaked by the streams on her face
tears escaping the crumbling constraints of her eyes
she trips over her reborn tongue; long ago
abandoned as a hindrance; plants left to wither and
die; roots shed hastily out of necessity

We have come home
the mountains sing along with his triumphant yell
a choir of thrushes praise his reclamation
the rediscovered tongue still a shock; believed to have
rot from negligence, a blind eye, fear of being
ostracised; life abroad of conformity rather than
unwanted attention

You find love where you least expect it
The people too
Love her homeland

The clouds part
Spools of grey yarn unravel to uncloak the
summer sun; amber rays donated from
heaven; cast in the colour of ripe
wheat, Her body shines so brilliantly—
you'd think she has luminous light bulbs for leaves
an ineffable incandescence

And in this moment she realises
too late given her age — that
everybody has their own stories
All the shadows from years of yore were
just people who chose to tell theirs elsewhere
To know a person's tale is a privilege earned.
But five hundred years ago she'd mistaken it for a birthright
O how at times the affluent are the least appreciative!

Love flows back into her vessels
Branches outstretched with
endearment once again
The tears of heaven still falling but she
stands tall and strong,
Hoping that her warmth will be enough
For the people to confide in her again
To tell their stories
And for her to listen

Poetry – Group 4

WINNER

Ling Shi

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Chow, Kei Yin Audrey – 16

I speak on behalf of the *Ling Shi* Society of Huangshan.
 There are many of us, I suppose.
 Concealed in the mysteries of home, but
 if you'd ever paid attention, you'd see,

Every once in a while,
 I am startled from my slumber —
 Man with an odd request
 for time beyond eternity.

If you wanted directions to the highest peak,
 If you wanted the tree with the best view of the sunrise,
 That I could help you with, maybe even give you a tip or two.
 (I even know how to brew the best wine!)

I cannot give you a passport to heaven.
 I cannot give you an extension of your time.
 I cannot give you what you want, sir,
 You cannot wish upon a rock.

Who, you ask, prayed so incessantly?
 Nowhere to be found
 I have never seen the man again
 But they say —

He has lifted the shackles of time and
 lulled the essence of humanity!
 Day bleeding into night but he breathes
 together with the mountains and with us.

Ling Shi! They call me.
There is *Xian Qi* from the blessings of the Gods!
Apparently I can grant you a wish?
I am a gift and a blessing.

They come in swarms now.
Hushes, murmurs, whispers of greed and hunger.
Buzzing about me with their excited cries.
No, no, I am just a rock.

Poetry – Group 5

WINNER

Permanence

International School of Beijing, Chen, Lynn – 16

Here,
 perched at the
 top and watching at the
 bare crag.
 Light flows down the mountain's
 bare flanks revealing sleeping houses,
 and prickly-green pagodas
 at the ticking of the clockwork sun;
 like the coiling and swollen mist,
 that is a grey river holding
 maximum moisture
 and softening the jagged peaks
 and steeping the village foot in a finer blur;
 also belltowers of contortionist limestone
 and brittle looking apartment flats bruised blue
 by shadows are washing against the grey foam and tide.

an ancient sea-level is restored,
 Atlantis at the other end of the world,
 A city of people turned petrified stone.

you realize everything's not the bright
 scenery we've been conditioned to see from waxy
 travel guides, and an inspiring image search on Google,
 but what's unfiltered once spoke to people here and perhaps
 the greys, browns, and beiges then reminded a certain
 ordinariness, and no matter what heights we go, we can't escape
 our dribbled poetry on the ground. We see it in their names of trees:

Love; *The Couple* pine and the "o" for the ring we fit on our fingers for love
 Hospitality; kindness for strangers like the *Greeting-guests* pine and *Seeing-out-guest* pine
 Fear; the *Black tiger* pine that broods low in the dark cavities of our chest
 Hope; a warmth to sustain long winters, a *Leading* pine to take us safely out all storms.

the old poets saw their poetry in these mountains and carved them down.
their skin will shrink and their bones will decompose, but the rocks will last.
But maybe they decided to live here permanently too.

and maybe that's why, perched at the same precipice
ages ago, when the first emperor that tried
to brew a potion for immortal life,
to steal what other's had for strife,
his skin turned stone, his head grew cold,
and a death fell upon him like a knife.

Poetry – Group 6
WINNER

Poetry – Group 7

WINNER

