

Fiction

Group 1

New Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Scott, Su Yifei - 8

It was late in the middle of Dunhuang. The only sound I could hear was my own panting. I was visiting the Mogao Grottoes with my parents. But I wandered off and lost sight of them!

Finally, there was a cave. I decided to go in for a rest. This cave was so shabby as compared with the bigger ones I saw earlier. The paintings on the wall were fading and there were stones everywhere. Even a mouse wouldn't want to live here. But I was too tired to walk. It was nice to sit down and get some rest.

I almost fell asleep when I vaguely heard some chatter. Who were talking in this cave? I looked around but saw no one. I looked again – there were two flying apsaras (Feitians) on the wall, dressed in Tang Dynasty robes, talking to each other! One complained her dress was old and the other said the strings on her Pipa were broken. They had been turned away from the heavenly parties for a thousand years.

Seriously? A thousand years? I could not believe my ears. I took out my paint palette from the backpack. I brushed some dark coral red color on the Feitian's long dress. It was a perfect match of her style. The train of her long dress began to wave in the breeze. I added a few simple strokes to the other Feitian's Pipa strings. The Feitian plucked the strings with her fingernails to make a wonderful sound. They were happy.

Suddenly, the doors painted on the wall opened. I could see multiple layers of murals behind. Magically I walked through the doors and met other Feitians. They started playing wonderful music, as sweet as honey newly gathered from honeycombs. The sound flew over the sky and the moon and seemed to spread everywhere. Some instruments stood out more: pan flute, Ruan, Zheng, and most of all, Pipa. Another Feitian boy was playing flute on top of a giant phoenix with turquoise wings and tail feathers made of fire. The phoenix's beautiful eyes seemed to burn in the sea. I overheard two ladies fighting over how to hold a Pipa, vertically or horizontally. The thousand-armed Buddha walked over and said: "Ladies! Both are correct. The difference is that you were from different eras. Now leave your debate alone and let's just enjoy music." I also saw a Feitian girl playing harp and asked whether I could try. She giggled and told me that was a Konghou, not harp.

"Scotty, thank God, you are here." I woke up and saw daddy and mommy. "I must have been in a dream", I thought. But when I looked up on the wall, I noticed a Feitian boy holding a paint pallet and a brush in the painting.

"Mom, I want to do my next study report on ancient Chinese music." "Really?" my mom smiled. "Yeah, it is fascinating". I took a last look at the Feitian boy and walked out.

A Tunnel to the Lost World in the Past

Creative Primary School, Wong, Hei Nam Sophie - 8

History is something from or created by people in the past. Have you ever imagined that you are creating a “History” somehow?

One day, Tsz-Man, a ten-year-old boy, was visiting the Mogao Grottoes with his family in Dunhuang. It is a massive group of caves filled with Buddhist statues and imagery. The art and objects found at Mogao reflected the meeting of cultures along the Silk Road and the collection of trade routes that for centuries linked China, Central Asia, and Europe.

When Tsz-Man was admiring one of the world’s largest Buddha statues, it suddenly came to life and said, “Help! A monk named Wai stole my key and has escaped. It is an extremely powerful key which could be dangerous if misused. He just entered that tunnel, please help catch him back!”

Tsz-Man’s caring nature took over as he agreed and scurried into the tunnel.

After Tsz-Man came out of the tunnel, he saw Wai-the-thief and dashed to seize him. With a flash of light, Wai transformed himself into a Buddha and made multiple clones of himself, dancing under the glowing sunlight.

“Come and catch me!” bellowed Wai.

Tsz-Man was stunned with hesitation. He tried but he kept grabbing the wrong one. He was exhausted and dazed at the sight of thousands of Buddhas. All of a sudden, Wai vanished in the air! Upon searching for Wai, he encountered another monk.

“Did you see another monk passing by?” inquired Tsz-Man.

“I am Yuezun and yes, I did see a monk rushing there.” replied the monk pointing to a tunnel.

Tsz-Man hurried through the tunnel. He spotted Wai in a distance and hollered, “Stop, thief!” The yelling noise alarmed a monk named Wang Yuanlu, who was smoking a cigarette nearby. Everyone chased after Wai to a large cave. Out of the blue, an opening emerged on the back wall which closed right after Wai and Tsz-Man entered. Wang Yuanlu was left alone in the cave, startled.

When Tsz-Man exited the tunnel, he saw that the Buddha get hold of Wai.

“Thanks for creating the history with Wai!” exclaimed the Buddha gratefully.

“What do you mean?” asked Tsz-Man confused.

“I will explain more.” said the Buddha, “With my key, you two just traveled back to the past. Remember Monk Yuezun? After seeing the thousand radiant Buddhas made by Wai, he was inspired to build the first cave here in the Mogao Grottoes. Remember Wang Yuanlu, the Taoist monk? He examined the wall meticulously after the tunnel closed. He noticed his cigarette smoke wafting toward the wall. Inquisitively, he knocked down the wall, and unearthed a mountain of valuable documents. That’s how our famous Library Cave was discovered.”

Tsz-Man could not believe his ears. He had just created the history! No wonder people said the grottoes were like tunnels to the lost world in the past!

Never underestimate yourself, we are all creating the history of our future selves!

Thousand Memories of Mogao Grottoes

ESF Quarry Bay School, Desai, Ishaani - 6

Maria crossed Central Park on her way home on a Friday evening after ending work. A scarf on display in a shop caught her eye as she walked along Seventh Avenue. As Maria gazed at the beautiful scarf, Mrs. Wang, an elderly woman from the shop, greeted her with a grin. Mrs. Wang was the owner of the Chinese silk clothing store. She noticed Maria’s fascination with the scarf and explained that it was made of silk from China, with a floral print inspired by paintings in the Mogao Grottoes. “What are Mogao Grottoes?” Maria inquired. Mrs. Wang invited Maria inside a shop and began reciting her Mogao caves stories. “In the fourth century, a Buddhist monk named Lè Zūn was on his long journey to Western Paradise,” she explained. He rested on the Sanwai Mountain in Dunhuang after crossing the Gobi Desert, where he saw a vision of a thousand Buddhas. Mesmerized by the brilliance of the mountain, Lè Zūn began painting on cave walls to recreate his vision. The legends quickly traveled across the globe, and other monks began making pilgrimages to the Mogao caves.”

Mrs. Wang displayed a selection of scarves with Buddhist murals and unique floral patterns. “Many Buddhist monks and artists visited Mogao caves over centuries and filled them with many Buddhist murals, sculptures, and paintings,” she continued. Mrs. Wang’s tales piqued Maria’s interest in the Mogao caves. “I was born in Dunhuang and spent up admiring Mogao caverns,” Mrs. Wang explained. These scarves are a way for me to share my life-changing memories of Mogao Caves with the rest of the world.” Maria purchased a scarf after being inspired by Mrs. Wang’s story and thanked her for her generosity. As the days passed by, Maria read more and more about the history and art of the Mogao Grottoes.

The following summer, Maria went on a cultural trip in China. She flew to Dunhuang after touring China extensively. At the airport, she bought a map of the ancient Mogao Grottoes. Because it was written in Chinese, Maria couldn’t read it. Fortunately, on the flight she met Myla, a Chinese-speaking arts student. The next morning, Maria and Myla bought tickets at the exhibition center, followed the map, and arrived at the Mogao caves. Over the next few days, they visited 492 caves, and saw over 2,000 paintings and sculptures. Everywhere they went, they saw fusions of civilizations, architecture, and ancient languages such as Tibetan, Uighur, Sanskrit, Sogdian, and Khotanese. Maria spent several hours in caves, admiring the spectacular artwork and culture. During the evenings, they talked about the history of the caves with other arts students in Myla’s group, ordered dumplings for dinner, and watched movies related to the Mogao caves. Maria realized at the end of her journey that her visit to Mrs. Wang’s shop had now turned into thousands of inspiring memories, just as Lè Zūn’s visit to Mogao caves had turned into a vision of thousand Buddhas.

New Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lee, Jun Ya Sophie - 8

Nadia held her grandfather's hand by his sickbed, sobbing sadly knowing her grandfather would go to heaven soon. In his soft and broken voice, he said, "Nadia...you...must find...the secret...door..." He was then led to heaven by his guardian angel.

Nadia kept these last words in mind until one day she got back to her grandfather's mansion for his memorial service. She left her family and disappeared into the study room where her grandfather spent most of his life reading there. After half a day of searching for this secret door, she found one of the bookshelves that could be pushed slowly showing a dark hallway.

She took a flashlight out from her grandfather's drawer, carefully she navigated herself down this secret path wondering where this would lead her to. To her astonishment, she saw on the walls some magnificent ancient Chinese artwork which her grandfather once fond of. Suddenly, her flashlight started flashing and the whole place went pitch dark. Nadia continued to move forward with courage until she reached a dead end. When she thought this was it, she felt something at her tiptoes. She knelt and felt a candle with a box of matches next to it. She lit up the candle and saw "Enter Through Here" marked on a huge stone in front of her. She gathered all her strength to push the stone and felt the golden sun shining on her face.

What a complete new sight! She was up on a high mountain with caves all over. Buddhas with different postures surrounding her. A gentle voice behind saying, "Welcome to Mogao Grottoes, home to thousands of Buddha. I am Monk Le Zun and I have been expecting your presence, Ms. Nadia." Nadia was shocked and couldn't quite respond. Monk Le Zun told Nadia that her grandfather was once a monk as he led her to the very first cave. It was a magnificent Buddhist sculptural site which Nadia later found out it was first dug up in AD 366. After that, they went into the "Library Cave" where a large number of manuscripts were bundled up and left on the floor. Monk Le Zun brought over an incense which Nadia remembered the smell from a Chinese temple at where she lived. Monk Le Zun patiently explained the Dunhuang manuscripts, the textiles, and figurines inside the cave. Nadia was listening with interest but slowly she felt very relaxed with the smell of the incense, the voice of Monk Le Zun drifted away and her vision went blur.

When she regained her consciousness, she was back in her grandfather's study room with a broken miniature Buddha in her palm. She quickly dashed out of the room and to her surprise, no one knew she went missing. During her school break, she went to the British Museum to explore more on the Silk Roads and Dunhuang manuscripts while she kept this precious adventure that her beloved late grandfather left for her at the bottom of her heart.

Mysterious Power of the Mogao Grottoes

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Wu, Cheuk Yiu Charlotte - 7

Have you ever been to the Mogao Grottoes in DunHuang? Have you seen an ancient wall painting having a modern girl there? Do you believe everything has been arranged? I am going to tell you a story, my own story about this mysterious place!

Some years ago, my family and I went to the Mogao Grottoes. I first came to a grotto that didn't have many visitors. There was a Buddhist statue and some paintings on the wall and the ceiling. I was attracted by a painting that was about 2 fairies dancing in the sky. Suddenly, a beam of light shone on me, one of the fairies jumped out and grabbed my hand flying through the ceiling.

Didn't know how long it was, I found myself lying in a rice field. I was wet all over with mud and water. At that moment, a pale girl, called Xia, in strange costume came to me and said, "You seemed like a foreigner. Do you mind coming to my home to change your clothes?" I was so thankful for her to relieve my embarrassment.

After getting to her home, Xia gave me her clean clothes. Surprisingly, it fit me well. But suddenly, she fainted on the ground. Her mom told me that Xia had been feeling unwell for some days and the medicine from the village doctor didn't work. She sobbed and was afraid that Xia would pass away soon. I found that Xia seemed like having a cold with fever only. Actually, I had some medicine with me that my mom gave me for the trip. Although I was still worrying where I was and how I could get back home, Xia was more important at that moment. So, I decided to give her the medicine. After that, she slept for some time and her temperature seemed going down. Next morning, Xia felt a lot better. Her mom thanked me a lot. As we were chatting in the backyard, suddenly, there was a strong wind blowing followed by the appearance of the fairy. She took me to the air again. After a short while, I fell on the ground and found myself in the grotto again!

My parents came to me and told me that they had been looking for me for long time. I didn't explain as they would not believe me and neither would I believe myself, so I just gave some nonsense excuses to comfort them. As I looked back, I saw the fairy in the painting winked to me. I was terribly shocked. I rubbed my eyes and looked back again. The fairy disappeared and just left one there. Something more unbelievable was that I found one of the paintings on the wall having a scene of a modern girl standing next to an ancient girl in bed. My mind got blank.

Is this the mysterious power of the Mogao Grottoes? Did it foretell my visit thousand years ago?

Fiction

Group 2

An Adventure in the Mogao Grottoes

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Hadi, Zayna - 10

Startled, Lilly sprang back, scrambling for her torch. The Buddha stared at her. In the half-darkness, Lilly stared back apprehensively. Had the Buddha just moved a moment ago when she stumbled and fell against it? Yes, she was sure of it. She peered around in the darkness – but everything in the Library Cave seemed still.

The Library Cave was one of the most famous of the Mogao Grottoes, the ancient caves on the edge of the Gobi Desert that had been an important Buddhist pilgrimage site along the Silk Road. In the fifteenth century, as the Silk Road fell out of use, the caves were forgotten and lost in the desert, until their rediscovery in the early 1900s. A student of archeology, Lilly, had been studying the manuscripts found there in cave number 17, also known as the Library Cave. Lilly had long dreamed of visiting the site where the manuscripts were found. As she had approached the mystical caves in the scorching sun that afternoon, she had stared in awe and amazement. At the entrance, a tall structure seven stories high was held up by slender red pillars. Jutting out of the sandy rock, the roofs of each level were like Chinese pagodas.

When Lilly had walked in, she had seen the many Buddhas lined up against the walls, and numerous pieces of Buddhist artwork. The Buddhas had calm and peaceful expressions, as if meditating. Colourful Buddhist paintings covered the rocky walls. She had headed straight for the Library Cave, knowing her way around after all the hours she had spent poring over the maps of the grottoes during her studies.

Distracted by her thoughts, Lilly did not notice her untied shoelaces. As she stepped into the seventeenth cave, her shoelaces suddenly caught beneath her hiking boots, causing her to trip. Dropping her torch, Lilly stretched her arms out to break her fall, crashing into the largest of the Buddhas in the cave. It was then that she had felt the Buddha move.

Curious, Lilly placed her hands on the Buddha's knee and pushed. Nothing. Planting her feet firmly on the ground, she pushed again with all her might. This time, it moved, sliding to the left. Where the Buddha had originally stood, Lilly saw a handle, but the rest of the area was embedded with spiderwebs. Gingerly, she placed her hand on it and brushed them away. Once all the cobwebs were gone, it made more sense. It was a trapdoor! Lilly lifted it up, and saw a narrow chute sloping downwards. Afraid but intrigued, Lilly cautiously climbed into it to get a better look with her torch. But the chute was slippery, and she started to slide down the cold, damp passageway, unable to stop. Terrified, her mind raced through horrifying possibilities of what she might find, but an adventurer at heart, Lilly didn't let her thoughts stop her from feeling excited.

Eventually, she landed with a loud “thud!” onto a hard wooden floor, wincing in pain. She stood up, and looked around the large yet crowded room. There was a shelf full of ancient Chinese books and paintings of Buddhas filled the spacious area. On a desk-like platform were creased scrolls and a bottle of dried ink. Mesmerized by the ancient but well-kept items, she realized something. All this had probably belonged to Yuezun, the monk who had a vision of a thousand Buddhas, and was the first to start building the Mogao Caves. But how come no one has found it yet? Surely archeologists would know, she thought. Looking around some more,

she saw a wooden knob jutting out of one of the walls. Thinking it was a door, Lilly walked over and tried it. Surprisingly, it opened with ease, not even making the slightest creak.

Entering a room with a high ceiling, she saw stone and sculpting materials. This space must have been for sculpting the Buddha statues. Except for the tools that hung on rusty iron nails, the rocky walls were completely bare. Something caught her eye on the dusty floor – it seemed to be a scroll. Picking it up, she examined the sketch on it. It looked strangely familiar. Suddenly, she recognised one of the drawings. It was a map of the Mogao Caves, but was drawn upside down compared to her books. If all this belonged to Yuezun, this had to be his design. Perfect! Now I can figure out how to get out of here by looking at the map, she thought.

Except there was a problem. The map didn't show an exit or entrance; instead there was a large blot of ink where the chute should have been. Without another choice, she decided to climb up the chute. Lilly placed her hands on the dirty and cold edges of the slide, and tried climbing up. Clenching her teeth, she started to climb. Losing her grip, her sweaty palms let go of the slide, and she tumbled back down. Not ready to give up, Lilly tried again. Once again, she failed. She tried again and again, yet kept failing repeatedly. Finally, Lilly gripped the edges of the damp chute so tightly her knuckles turned white, her face full of concentration; she succeeded.

Panting heavily after the long climb, Lilly clambered out, carefully shutting the trapdoor. Remembering how she had first gone into the chute, she groaned when she realized she would have to push the large Buddha back into place. To her astonishment, however, as Lilly looked up she saw the Buddha where she had first found it. Feeling excited about her magical adventure, she smiled to herself as she headed out of the caves. How impressed would her professors be when she told them about her discovery? Stepping out into the cool desert evening, Lilly took one last look at the Mogao Grottos and thought They might even name this cave after me!

A Mysterious Date with The Buddha

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Chow, Cherlin - 10

Darkness settled over the dunes, with the stillness that accompanies silence. A spirited wind coursed through the Mogao caves, leaving sand in its wake. Millennia passed. Over time, sand filled every crevice, and the wind howled no more.

Until the year 1900, the caves were well-buried. It was thus pure luck when a monk named Xijin rediscovered them. On this night, Xijin was left behind by his peers as they traipsed over dunes, towards a warm fire and hearty supper. Although Xijin was a monk, his heart belonged to archaeology. On this trek, he was determined to find hidden caves in the region. Legend said the caves had been visited by Buddha himself!

Clutching his belongings, he squeezed himself through a promising gap between two rocks.

As he stepped into the space, the entrance collapsed, leaving him in darkness. Briefly bewildered, his instincts kicked in and he rummaged in his bag. Coughing, he lit his torch and gasped in amazement. Slowly, he traced the light along walls covered in magnificent Buddhist artwork that had not been seen in millennia. The walls were covered in intricate murals. They told vivid stories of ancient times when people worshipped the Buddha. The vibrant images brought history to life.

With a start, Xijin remembered that he was trapped in the cave with few supplies. He could not remember his last meal. Suddenly, his stomach lurched, but not from hunger. An earthquake shook the walls of the cave. Rocks tumbled down and one particularly large one struck him on the head. Xijin fell to the ground in a crumpled heap, unconscious.

Groaning, Xijin opened his eyes. He could not see! His breath quickened. He realised that his head was sore, his vision blurred, and his torch had long-since flickered out. Over the sound of his heart drumming in his chest, threatening to break through his ribs, he gingerly squeezed his way out from under the stones that had fallen.

A shimmering, indistinct light appeared in his vision, and he heard a voice say, "Xijin, The Great Buddha wants to see you. Begin walking West, towards the light. You will find what you seek in that direction."

Xijin gasped at the voice, which washed over him like icy water, chilling his bones. Was he hallucinating? He touched the painful lump on his head thoughtfully and winced. Standing on shaky legs, he decided he had nothing to lose. Despite barely being able to see, he followed the fuzzy glow. He often stumbled and fell, grabbing the walls to support and guide him. Following the light became a meditation in and of itself. Nothing else mattered, except reaching the destination.

Abruptly, the twinkling light began to fade, and panic set in. Blinking in puzzlement, his heart slowed when he realised the surroundings had not darkened. His eyes widened when he realised that the temple was lit by the Great Buddha's body, himself! Xijin stood, dumbfounded, with his mouth hanging open. He pinched his arm and the Great Buddha smiled benignly at his astonishment. Then, he spoke.

"Xijin, I bestow upon you the honour of being the one to tell the world about these caves. You, my special one, have discovered the Mogao Caves, filled with long-lost art and precious literature. You will spread the word to worshippers, to appreciate the history of

Buddhism, and to provide a place where the previous generations' hard work and talents will receive respect forevermore. Do as I say, and you shall be rewarded.”

Xijin stared at the Buddha, and replied, his voice quavering, “Great Buddha, I will do as you command me. However, I am but a mere monk, and I have lost my vision. Oh, what I would not do to be able to see your divine presence!” Xijin’s eyes filled with tears. When he wiped them away, his vision had miraculously returned! He thanked Buddha profusely for his benevolence.

Xijin, now able to see, could not stop staring at his surroundings. He stood at the feet of a colossal Buddha figure, larger than any he had ever seen. Xijin trembled in awe as he paused at its base, staring at the marvellous workmanship. He moved further into the holy space, admiring the fine architectural details that covered the ceiling and walls of this sacred temple.

All around, there were life-sized sculptures of Buddhas and monks, each exquisitely carved from their eyebrows right down to their toenails. Their expressions, too, were delicate, each one different from the next. Xijin could not stop admiring the divine craftsmanship that had created these splendid masterpieces.

He lowered his torch and uttered a cry of delight, spotting piles of ancient books, documents and literature scattered around the room. Reaching down, Xijin was soon engrossed in the long-lost manuscripts. He smiled at the fluttering pages, imagining the faces of his peers when he told them of his discoveries. With a jolt, he realised he had turned his back to The Great Buddha. He stood quickly and noted the Buddha patiently watching him uncover the caves’ marvels. With joy, Xijin said, “Oh, Great One, I will do as you command, and spread the word about these wondrous caves and their treasures within!”

The Great Buddha nodded and declared, “For honouring this place, you shall be granted the power of levitation.” Xijin stared at The Great Buddha with incredulity. He felt his body lighten. His view drifted downwards to see his feet lifting off the dusty floor. He was, indeed, levitating! His eyelids fluttered, and Xijin fainted from shock.

A bright, dusty band of sunlight shone through the window onto Xijin, revealing that he was no longer in the cave. He was safe in his room, surrounded by a myriad of hushed voices. As he regained consciousness, his memories floated hazily to the forefront of his mind, causing him to come alert. He looked down and saw that he lay, floating, above his bed.

It had not been a dream after all.

Travelling to the Past and Beyond

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Lit, Chloe - 11

As darkness settled upon the tired city, people were hurrying onto the last trains and rushing home to make it just in time for dinner. The whole city was falling into slumber, except for one sitting in the library, absorbing the magnificent light of books. This one was an enthusiastic monk, who was sitting on a chair in the corner of the library, reading about Buddhist culture. He was a curious monk who had always wanted to get to know more about his culture. Currently, this monk was reading about the Mogao Grottoes, a group of caves which were built in the times of 366 AD, the caves that are currently home to Buddhist art. These caves are located in Dunhuang, China – a place the monk dreamt to go when he was given the opportunity to.

The monk was so absorbed into his book, he didn’t even notice his surroundings. In front of the focused monk appeared a spectacular blinding light. Once the light slowly faded out, a dark figure could be made out, one dressed in clothing that looked from the Northern and Southern dynasties in the 4 to 14th centuries. “Where am I?” The figure coughed to catch some attention from the monk. Slowly, the monk looked up, staring at the dark figure who had interrupted his reading session.

“Who are you? Why are you in the library at this hour?” The monk said, as he got off his chair.

“I could ask the same. Why am I here?”

“I’m not sure, but you seem to be from the era I’m reading about.”

“Oh, that’s odd. What are you reading about?”

“The Mogao Grottoes. You look like you might know lots about it, do you?”

The ancient man furrowed his brows. “Hmm, that doesn’t make sense. When I went to see it yesterday, it was just half built. Is this some sort of trick, or have I time traveled into the future? What year is it, for you don’t look like anyone from my era?”

“Wait, the only way this could have happened was if you time traveled, but I thought that only exists in books? Well, I guess weird things do happen, it’s the year 2021 by the way.”

Just then, the ancient man saw something sparkling in the corner of his eye. As he crouched down to take a closer look at the object, it disappeared. The ancient man stood up again, only to see a big portal in front of him. This portal will lead you to the Mogao Grottoes in the period of time where it was still under construction, step in? The two looked at each other before stepping into the portal together at the same time.

A light flashed in front of the pair’s eyes, and in a second they were exposed to the work-in-progress Mogao Grottoes. A mechanical voice greeted them, *I see you have time traveled, what would you like to know about the Mogao Grottoes?*

The ancient man took this opportunity to talk about the Mogao Grottoes. “How about I show you around? After all, I know quite a bit about this.”

The monk considered for a moment, he said, “Alright then, lead the way!”

The pair walked for a while, as the monk noticed something.

“If you don’t mind, I have a question. Why are the caves built on a cliff?”

“Oh, that’s because the Mogao Grottoes serve as a temple for Buddhism activities.

Temples are a place of worship, which is why the environment is to be kept quiet and clean, free from the interference of secular life.”

The ancient man walked in through the entrance of a structure and the pair ended up in a big empty space. The workers were busy setting down the statues, so they didn't quite pay attention to the two of them.

“Here, as you can see there are statues in the Mogao Grottoes. Currently, the most famous one should be the Buddha statue. If you look at the walls, wall paintings are what you see. Mogao Grottoes is actually a group of caves, 492 caves to be exact. I believe we are in an art cave, which is why there are statues and paintings. Of course, along the journey, what you see isn't the end of it. The caves are not complete, so there's more to come. There are also different texts and manuscripts in the library cave, we could visit it quickly if you like.”

The two left the art cave and went into the library cave. As they walked past manuscripts filled with texts of different languages, the monk asked, “There's so many different manuscripts here, are they all Buddhism texts?”

The ancient man stopped in his tracks, he thought for a second before answering, “Ranging from Christian to Zoroastrian texts, some of the texts from those cultures are also kept here.”

The two were about to go towards a third cave, but a metallic voice stopped them. *The portal is ready, step in to time travel back into the present. I hope you learnt more about the Mogao Grottoes.*

The monk took one last glance at the work-in-progress Mogao Grottoes before stepping closer to the portal. Of course, he didn't forget to wave at the ancient man who stumbled into the present by accident, if it wasn't for him, the monk could've never had this meaningful journey into the past. The monk knew he shouldn't bother the ones in the past, so he bravely stepped into the portal. A gust of wind hit the monk's face before he was transported back to the library. He stood there stunned for a second, before the book he was previously reading gave a small “bonk!” when it hit the monk's head. The monk rubbed his head, feeling embarrassed.

“Not only was I able to travel into the past, but also to learn what's beyond the printed text on books. This really is a journey *travelling into the past and beyond.*”

Memories of a Manuscript

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Tung, Wing Kiu Elizabeth - 9

I looked up and saw lots of humans staring down at me. I remember thinking ‘What are these strange moving creatures?’, but now I know. They are a nefarious, inventive and wonderfully interesting species. And they are my creators, the ones that breathed life into me.

When I was created, I did not understand people at all. I was surrounded by people talking in Chinese and I was so young that I thought that everyone in the world would talk in the same language. Eventually, I had learned enough of the spoken language to understand this species. And from then on I knew lots of things about this particular place named China. I thought China was a weird name for any place.

One day, I overheard that they were going to take my friends, the other books and I to different places. Some of the books moaned and complained. Some of them wept. Some of them were ecstatic. We all felt differently. But one thing was for sure, we would be separated from one another.

Early the next morning, the humans were very excited and were all smiles. Along with some of my fellow books Gung Ho, Xiao Ming and Zi Tong, the gigantic creatures forced us into an extremely stuffy sack. The sack was tied to a camel that was not only exceedingly sweaty, but also tremendously smelly. “Phew!” exclaimed Xiao Ming, “I have never smelt anything this retched and it's even making my pages curl”. “This is nothing” said Zi Tong, “I used to live next to a pig farm, on a summers day the smell would turn my pages yellow”. My travelling companions and I swapped stories as our bumpy journey continued.

Eventually, the humans forcefully pulled us out of our small sack, our journey next to the insanitary, putrid camel was finally at an end. I heaved a huge sigh of relief, it had not been a pleasant experience being stuck in a tiny stuffy bag for a week and my friends and I were happy to be in the fresh air at last. I opened my eyes and the crimson sun shone down on me. I had expected that I would be taken to a different place, but not as different and exotic as this.

After a good night's sleep I awake in a cool dry cave surrounded by many other books and scrolls. I asked the book to my left where I was but received no answer as the book was snoring and deep in sleep. I turned to the right and repeated my question but the scroll sharply rebuked me and told me that ignorance was bliss so I should stop asking questions. I was very frightened but after being told off I did not dare ask any more questions for the rest of the day.

The next day I talked to the bookshelf, it sounded really old but wasn't as grumpy as the scroll. It told me that I was in one of the most beautiful caves in northern China. She said that I was very lucky that I was not one of her kind, when a bookshelf rots it will be dragged out and broken up for fire wood. I felt sorry for her and told her that I hoped that she would not rot so early.

Occasionally, some people would come to the cave and admire my friends and enemies. First of all, there were the rocks. They looked like people and were very colourful, but they were not real people. I mistook them for real humans, but then when I tried to talk to them in Chinese, they thought I was just showing off my language skills and they felt very offended. “Who do you think you are talking to, Book!” demanded one of the statues, “I have been here for more than a century, show some respect”.

Devastated, I left them to complain about me to the metal statues. This was a mistake, soon the metal statues hated me too. Fortunately, I was on a bookshelf with lots of other books and I managed to hide from their prying eyes.

After a while I had made some good friends and a couple of enemies with the other books on the bookshelf.

As time passed less and less humans would come to visit us in the library until the trickle of visitors dried up completely. I felt so alone with only the sounds of the other books snoring and the wind whistling through the caves. One day the sound of crashes and screams reverberated in the air and then they stopped as quickly as they had started. The time passed in endless darkness.

Light! suddenly a beam of light shot from the doorway and roused me from my dreams. For the first time, after what seemed like an eternity, I could hear the sounds of human voices. Rapidly the beam of light opened up to reveal a group of strangely dressed human being. They inspected all the books in the cave and I soon found myself in a yet another sack.

I was swiftly transferred from the sack to a strange looking oblong box surrounded by papers and strange black tubes. My journey away from the caves was just a bumpy and rocky as my original journey but had the advantage of being far less smelly.

Finally I arrived at my current home. I was respectfully unpacked by a man wearing white gloves and was housed in my own small room made from glass. My room was one of many in an enormous man made cave. Every day visitors would come to visit me, the Diamond Sutra, but I remained undisturbed behind the walls of glass.

Surrounded by foreigners my soul aches to return home. I wish to hear the melody of my own language and to be surrounded by a civilisation of 5,000 years. Most of all I miss my friends Gung Ho, Xiao Ming and Zi Tong.

Curse of the Abbot

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Zhu, Ethan - 10

The Abbot

He had been travelling for ages in search of the perfect place for literature. Envisioned with the image of a thousand Buddhas bathed in shining golden light, yet with no place suitable to display them. And the fact the emperor had justified the means of building underground. A meaningless action to stop the spread of so-called mysticism when they concocted those themselves! Digging the caves, one hand at a time filled everything with elaborate masterpieces. He printed books and, most importantly, had a thousand gold buddhas in gold in the vicinity. The area became a monastery, and a grant from the ruling families raised the cave count to a thousand. But he could not stop there, this was his creation! Of all shares, he would be the sole owner of this wonder! The History Books! Printed with his name everywhere and anywhere! Desperate for some glory, he took a drastic measure and left.

As everyone was starting to leave for the last time, he gathered all the white sand he had collected from the Gobi Desert that had blown here and started to seal up the caves with the power of the Wind and Water helping, cursing anybody who dared to enter again. As the light started to set on the world, the next time it would encounter light would only be a few thousand years. As the red hue gradually faded over the horizon, the Abbot slipped and fell to his death.

The Middleman

A day in Tokyo started as usual for people, but Otani Kuzui was not a normal person. And he was not in Tokyo either, he was in the conquered territory of the enemy, exploring recently discovered caves filled with literature, art and porcelain. He was just entering with his group when the doors slammed shut. The air was filled with a cloud of musty dust.

The light disappeared.

Otani Kuzui was not a coward but rather the risk-taker, he was always the one who led the group and took chances. The maze-like corridors were unforgiving and twisted into complex patterns of levels. The treasures distracted everybody, having everyone wander in different directions.

He found himself, no group, no companionship, in front of a glowing door with serpentine patterns. The hole in the door gazed at him as if expecting this day. It was a creepy sight, but curiosity got the better of him. Upon entering, he saw gold, jade and opal pottery shatter before his eyes. The impact blinded him. But he could not stop from a minor injury.

Hobbling back into the outside, he slipped on a rock and fell over the cliff. The last thing he would ever experience was a blinding pain all over his body, intense heat roasting him from all sides for a split second before everything turned black.

The Explorer

A mote of dust that may have sat for a century floated down and sparkled as it contacted burning flames. Howls of the night echoed through the intricate chambers as a small light weaved itself through the corridors and hallways. The Daedalian paths made every step

treacherous, yet the magnificent carvings and statues urged at it, invited it, even dared it to venture deeper.

As the burning flame started up a flight of stairs, he could no longer hold in its excitement. Footsteps reflected onto the walls at a rushing pace as it raced up and up, ghosts and spirits seemed to stir and darkness took hold, but it seemed not to care, it kept going and going. Running with such determination, he didn't notice the burnt torch.

Finally, he stopped, wheezing and panting like a pug. The atmosphere was off, it seemed as if something had placed a magnet inside of the hall. As he checked the walls, he noticed a sealed-off door. Red light glinted in the intricate patterns and arrangements, but one small detail escaped his attention, a hole, ominously staring at him.

The door swung open.

The room was stuffed with the most exquisite and astounding art and porcelain he'd ever seen. There were treasures everywhere. Gold, Jade, Opal and much more were scattered around, but it seemed unusual. It was unnatural. There was a decayed mess in front of him pierced with gems. Glancing again, he realised to his utmost horror everything he was looking at was destroyed, looted and razed to the ground.

The burning hope that had kept rising in his heart extinguished seeing the destruction that had presented itself so abruptly. His knees fell and shoulders slackened as his heart stopped mid-beat, and the one thing that had kept him carrying along shattered. As he turned to leave the room, he saw the one thing that had not been touched, a book, dismayed, he dropped the manuscript and left the room untouched.

As he retraced his steps through the corridors, he felt his empty heart slide between his ribs. His muscles ached as the tiring steps seeped the strength out of him. As he fought his way up the pathways, he saw the exit. With a final nudge, he was in the open, the breeze billowed as the light fought its way through the darkness. The smoke in the distance marked the campfire, returning, he fell straight into a cliffside and tumbled down to his death.

Discovery of the Mogao Grottoes

Island Christian Academy, Omoto, Yuna - 10

Marc Aruel Stein — a young, determined explorer — knew he had to be the first one to discover the Mogao Grottoes. Although many feared searching for it, he was filled with confidence. He had heard about the mystical legends; massive, golden-hued body buddhas; and the beautiful, ancient paintings on the wall with history hidden inside it. Even though many did not think of going there for thousands of years, he had made up his mind. He chose to go. He chose to go because he knew... He knew that there were many exquisite treasures of a time long forgotten longing to be uncovered...

The mellow sun rose over the horizon heating up the Gobi desert. The heat made sweat run down Stein's body. Wind blew against his face as he rode his camel along the barren desert in search of the Mogao Grottoes. Ferocious wind blew day and night causing a storm of sand. Yet Stein had a beaming smile on his face.

The cave was nowhere to be found. Everything around him were dunes and huge cliffs of sand. There was nothing. Since it was too dark to go back, he chose to stay in the desert. He covered himself in a large, warm blanket, opened his mouth wide in a gaping yawn and dozed off.

The next morning when he was wandering around the desert, which shimmered in the blazing heat, he heard some mysterious voice. "Who's there? What's up? Why are you here?" The voice got louder and louder as the mysterious creature got closer every single second.

Stein's throat was dry and tight; cold sweat poured down his body. He was almost paralyzed with fear. "Who are you? Do you know where the Mogao Caves are?" he asked cautiously- a shiver ran down his spine.

"I am Wang Yuanlu," replied the man, "The Mogao Caves... Since nobody entered it for thousands of years, it may be covered in sand. But if you keep digging, you may find it."

"That is the information I was looking for this whole entire time! Thank you so much for telling me. I hope you will have an amazing day!" Stein thanked him and Wang Yuanlu walked away. Whilst the wind, which formed a tempest of sand, blew day and night, Stein kept digging and digging. The sand was shining as if it were washed by gold. Although the wind covered what he had dug, he didn't think of giving up. He kept digging. Nothing was going to stop him now.

After a few days of digging, he finally found the entrance to the cave. His face lit up in a huge, broad grin. First, he took a time to stroll around the cave. On the walls, there were ancient paintings everywhere. Although the color of the paintings had faded, it was still magnificent. There were over a thousand hand carved buddhas. It shined in the sunlight that entered from the windows on the wall. When he entered one of the rooms, there were buddhas that were about twenty meters tall, standing tall and proud. He inspected the art and the buddhas for hours to find out the history and story each piece told. He chose to take some of the small, lightest, traditional painted buddhas, which were easy to carry, back to his home country, England, to show it to everyone.

A couple of days later when he was smoking where it seemed that no caves were at the back, the black smoke made a tiny hole in the sand. He put his eye near the hole to find out what was behind it. It took him a moment or two to realize that he found a brand new

cave, which had been abandoned for thousands of years. He removed the sand away from the mysterious cave. When he got into the grotto, he worked out that it was a cave like a library. There were thousands of documents and forgotten scrolls. In addition, there were few beautiful painted buddhas, ancient manuscripts, huge, color faded silk banners, colorful embroidery and other rare textiles, which no one had ever seen. He found one document that he found that it was one of the oldest written documents in the world: the Diamond Sutra. He studied all the documents very carefully and held it gently so that they wouldn't be ruined. He took almost all of the documents, cautiously putting them inside his bag.

When it was time to say goodbye and travel back to Europe, tears welled up in his eyes. He felt like he wanted to stay in the Mogao Grottoes forever. But there was no choice. But instead, he's face was lit up in a wide smile, very exhilarated to show his great discovery of the Mogao Grottoes and to show the amazing hand-carved buddhas, scrolls and documents. He carried his bag, which was filled with treasures and looked back at the grottoes, which showed him the most amazing thing he had ever seen. He hopped on his camel. Slowly, the camel started walking on the golden sand. Stein had left the Gobi desert.

Currently, the scroll, documents and a few small buddhas, that Stein found, are shown in the British Museum. People from everywhere in the world come to the museum to see the great discovery of Stein. However some people believe that those treasures should have remained in the Mogao Grottoes and question Stein's choice to take them. What do you think about it?

The Adventures of Mogao Caves: Apsara

Kau Yan School (Primary), Hom, Hang Tung Audrey - 11

“We got to go in and check this out,” Grace yells to his brother Greg and runs into the small ancient-like Chinese temple. Incense is burning next to Buddha figures and a monk approaches them. “Hello. We're new to the neighborhood and wanted to visit your temple,” Grace says to the monk.

“Welcome. I sense that you are here on a special journey,” replies the monk.

“Are you from China? In Chinese history class, we just read about the Mogao Grottoes. It's so interesting. It began in 366 AD along the Silk Road and they called it the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas, spanning over many dynasties, including the Sui, Tang and Song. I've never been to Dunhuang, Gansu but they say it was the heart of trade, religion, and culture. Mogao, or 'the high place of the desert', continued for a thousand years with about 500 painted caves or grottoes, over 2,000 painted sculptures and over 50,000 cultural relics. It was a center of Buddhist art with influences of the East and West. It showed us so much about the beliefs, culture, arts and daily life of the Chinese people at that time. It's a time capsule and treasure all in one,” Grace says in excitement and intrigue, sounding like her teacher.

The monk kindly answers, “Yes, I've traveled a far way. Indeed, Mogao carries many wonders and secrets yet to be discovered... 'Om Mani Padme Hum'. Feel free to explore.”

Greg, being naughty as usual, runs off into the next room as Grace chases after him, “Wait for me!”

“This is cool! We can play hide and seek here and I bet you'll never find me here. Tagged, you're it!” yelled Greg as he gives Grace a shove and runs off. He barges into a room with doors of golden lotus on it.

“Got you!” as Grace jumps out and grabs Greg's hoodie. He grabs onto the small table and a porcelain jar hits the ground, sending up a cloud of golden dust. “Look what you did now! We better let the monk know and clean this up.” They cleaned up the broken vase and headed out but could not find the monk. Outside they heard galloping horses and went out to see. “What was that?”

At the door of the temple, they looked out and were shocked. The city street was gone and they saw a big desert with an oasis in the far distance. The horse galloping sounds got louder and louder.

“Quickly follow me, now” said a lovely voice. Grace and Greg follow the lady going back inside the temple and go down a dark secret corridor and come out after a short walk.

“You're beautiful and your outfit is like the one I saw in my Chinese history book. What is happening? Where are we? How did we get here?” asked Grace. Greg is frightened and stays close behind Grace.

“I am one of the fairies called Apsara or you can call me Feitian. You are safe as we are in the Mogao Cave and they are gone. Those were raiders from the evil lord MingTai. They are looking for the sacred vase of the 1000 Hand Buddha. I sense that you are sent here from the Heavens,” explained Feitian. “Oh no, they've stolen the vase! We must get it back if we are to send you back to heaven.”

Grace and Greg, still a bit in disbelief, have so many questions, “Mogao Cave! This must be a dream! Okay, we’ll help as we want to wake up and be back home before it gets too late. Who built this cave? Why does it have so many drawings and statues?”

“In 366 AD a monk named Le Zun came here at the cliffs of Mingsha Mountain and when the heavens showed him the image of a thousand Buddhas through the light of the sun, he decided to build the first grotto here as a place to cultivate himself according to the teachings of Buddha. Over a thousand years, Buddhism flourished in this area as more monks came to cultivate themselves and to preach Dharma to the merchants who passed through the Silk Road. The statues, fresco murals, and manuscripts all show Buddhist thoughts and philosophy in bright colors and details,” Feitian explains.

Grace takes a close look at the paintings in the wall and recognizes, “Feitian, I see you in so many of the pictures. You are so beautiful, graceful and you can fly and play music! I can see you being helpful, bringing pleasure through music and accompanying Buddha and so many people.”

“Yes, we must go now and get the vase. I have a plan,” Feitian says. They came to where the raiders were resting under a tree. Feitian plays her musical instrument to get the attention of raiders and in no time the music puts them asleep. Grace quietly approaches the raiders and finds the vase. Greg trips and wakes up the raiders and they chase after them.

Feitian springs to the sky, flying above the raiders and showers them with a lotus flower with a mysterious smell. They all fall asleep onto the ground while Grace and Greg race back to the cave. “That was close and thank-you for saving us,” says Grace.

“You two have been brave. Thank-you for helping to get the vase back.” Feitian plays a soft tone and Grace and Greg fall asleep.

“Om Mani Padme Hum...Wake up. Time to go home,” said the monk. Grace and Greg woke up and started heading home.

“I had the strangest dream,” says Greg. They arrive home tired. Grace opens her bag and finds a white vase with a lotus flower in it. She cannot stop thinking about Feitian and the bravery that she gave her to act, all the while protecting them; we must act with grace and bravery. Feitian and Mogao Caves were a true wonder.

The Mogao Grottoes

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Wang, Zoi Sum Serena - 10

Zhang Tai scooped up water and splashed it on the clay. Zhang Tai, a monk of the Mogao Grottoes, was part of the duty to create art and statues for the Buddha. Every day, he returned to the Caves to create more and more shrines as a place of worship. Gently, he plastered clumps of clay onto the reed-padded frames. A skilled sculptor, every movement felt all-natural to him, precisely smoothing and cutting the clay with quick cuts of his hand. This was his life. Every day, every moment. If Zhang Tai wasn’t resting, he’d be continuing or starting statues. His life was a never-ending loop of modelling, and he enjoyed it. If anything were to happen that would prevent him from the wonders of constructing, he would not know how his life could continue.

He felt his fingers run through the clay, finding dry lumps and crumpling them. Zhang Tai dabbed his finger into the clay, scooping up as much as he could. He loved the feeling of clay. The simplicity of such material, yet creating great statues. His hand felt blessed as he put clay on the padded base of the statue. With ease, he smoothed the clay. He brushed his hands along the statue’s clay clothing, creating small creases in the cloth, putting depth into the body. All the glorious visions he had for this one, all the ways it could shine in the eyes of others, though he knew no one would see its greatness.

Nobody seemed to understand Zhang Tai, and he didn’t understand how they didn’t. The other statues may look good, but he felt no soul in them. The others may have great designs for their statues, but Zhang Tai didn’t feel connected with them. It did not feel as if the statue had life, had soul, had existence. A monk should feel in sync with the Buddha, but Zhang Tai did not see the way others saw the Buddha. He believed a Buddha should give hope and a feeling of gratitude, not of how many garments or gems they had. He believed the soul of the Buddha should be more important than the looks it had.

Zhang Tai did not like the face he sculpted. He decided to gently pull off the clay and try again. The face felt too...unreal. He supposed he’d try a different face this time, a face with a gentler smile, one with radiance to it. Scooping up clay and plastering it on, he worked his hands with small movements, making eyes for the statue. While his hands built the face in front of him, he started thinking of his other statues. They faced scorn, and dislike, but that thought simply passed him by. He did not care for the opinions of others, only the way the Buddha truly was.

Zhang Tai remembered his greatest pride, his most beautiful statue of all. The face bore a beautiful shine, and it looked like the Buddha himself. More statues surrounded the Buddha, an artistic wonder to Zhang Tai’s eyes. He knew it would go down in greatness. In his brain, all of his successful sculptures shone a yellow light, nature gently curling around it, a strong but gentle radiating glow on the palm of the Buddha. Zhang Tai’s thoughts continued to wander as his hands moved on to the highlights and the creases of the face. He thought of new sculptures, perhaps a throne to the wondrous Buddha, and a draping over the hand. It would be a statue worth working on, and he’d continue planning the statue in his head if his hands had not already finished the current face. He shook off his thoughts. The face before him bore quite a lovely smile, and so he moved on from the face, down to the neck.

The statue planned in his head remained. He had almost everything worked out, but he could not figure out the face. A few weeks had passed, and the figure he had been working on was finished from head to toe. It was pretty, and he felt life in its core, so he decided to move on. A sudden pang hit his head. Another headache, perhaps the 3rd or 4th this week. He found it hard to sleep with the bright vision of the planned statue still lingering. This time, though, Zhang Tai fell asleep quickly. In his dream, the statue he had been planning was being built. Then he moved to the face. He could not remember the face. What was it? Panic flooded him. If the face couldn't be made, he'd have to scrap the whole statue. A light dimly lit up the blank face. Zhang Tai saw...

...Faces. Beautiful ones, cycling through the lighted area. Zhang Tai saw a radiating face. It slowed its pace and landed on the blank area above the neck of the statue. Zhang Tai felt as if he saw the Buddha himself. Creating clay out of his bare hands, he worked even quicker than he'd ever seen. He finished at an astounding speed. As it suddenly glowed bright white, Zhang Tai woke from the dream. The face was now placed in his plan, etched in like a scratch to a stone. His eyes burned bright white, and he had no other urge to sleep. Another headache hit him as he set off early, earlier than the morning birds who chirp, earlier than the sunrise that signed the day. He shook off his thoughts and ran to the next building site, the starlit vision of the Buddha himself, more realistic than ever could have been made by man, running in his head, pacing through his mind.

The Treasures of the Mogao Grottoes

Renaissance College, Wong, Ella - 10

Treasure. The thought ploughed through Richard's mind as he wandered through the museum. He was looking for the new exhibit about the Mogao Grottoes. Treasure. Yes, he told himself, he'd get to treasure soon. The museum had announced that it had unearthed priceless treasures in the Mogao Caves, and Richard loved treasure. What could it be? He wondered. Gleaming gold coins, or shiny round jewels? Costly bolts of silk, or animal skins?

He quickly glanced around. The lights were all off, the world pitch black, illuminated only by the frail beam of his torchlight. His footsteps echoed eerily on the marble floor tiles. Richard loved treasure, yes, and he'd go to extraordinary lengths to get it. The new exhibit wasn't due to open to the public until tomorrow. Richard simply couldn't wait that long. Excitement sent chills snaking down his spine, and tension buzzed in the air. Richard was greedy, he couldn't deny it. And he wanted the museum's treasure, even though he knew it was wrong. Richard was a thief with a liking for money—and whatever he could sell for some.

Heart pounding, he pushed open the polished oak doors that led to the new exhibit. A bright yellow banner strung above the doorway proudly proclaimed, *Mogao Grottoes Exhibit. Discover the wonders of the past!*

The room was large and circular, and the walls—gleaming with mosaic tiles arranged into pictures of monks shrouded in their vibrant, amber-orange robes, as if they were wrapped in molten sunlight, meditating with peaceful smiles on their faces—were lined with shelves. Richard shone his torchlight onto the shelves. Half of them carried small stone statues and bright painted icons, all of a smiling Buddha. On the other half, hundreds of scrolls rested on the shelves, each one emblazoned with words in flowing black ink. There were poems and stories and quotes of wisdom, but Richard didn't care about that. He shook his head in disgust and his gaze fell on the glass box in the middle of the room.

The glass box's bottom was embedded with white lights that would shine dazzlingly when the museum opened, throwing its treasure into a beam of brilliant light. Richard swallowed. His breathing quickened; his heart went so fast and so hard he was certain it was going to burst out of his chest. He wondered that it didn't give him away; surely someone must have heard it?

Slowly, he shone his torch into the glass box... For a moment he didn't dare breathe. He looked, and looked again. His eyes stared disbelievingly, and confusion furrowed his brow. Was this a joke? Inside the glass box lay a wrinkled piece of paper, yellowed by age, the edges charred and black. It looked like a decaying tooth. Richard wanted to splutter in shock, but he clenched his teeth. The slightest sound and he'd give himself away. Words danced across the seemingly worthless paper, written in ink as black as night.

Richard leaned forwards. This isn't treasure! His mind screamed, but his heart told him to read it. His gaze roving over the yellowed paper, he began to read the coal-coloured words.

Be grateful for what you have.

That was it?

Richard's mind churned, trying to explain how this useless piece of paper was treasure. Slowly, it dawned on him that what the paper said actually made...sense. Lots of sense.

He thought about what he had. He had a family who loved him and who had no idea what he was doing now. Guilt twisted his heart into knots. He had enough money to live for a month, and after that he could easily find a decent job. He remembered quitting two years ago, convinced his salary wasn't enough, and turning to a life of crime. More guilt; it stole his breath, made his stomach churn, clogged up his throat. He had so much compared to people who had so little; some people had no home and no money and no food or water to drink, and here he was—he had all that and still he wanted more.

How could he have been so greedy, so selfish? More importantly, what was he doing at this time, taking the treasure before others could enjoy it? Everyone had a right to learn from this paper and its benevolent wisdom.

In that moment, Richard made a silent vow to himself. He wouldn't do this again. He couldn't. All his life he'd been chasing after money and jewels and things he could sell, but what good had his money ever done him? It hadn't given him any happiness at all. Instead, the more riches he accumulated, the bigger the yawning hole in him stretched: the chasm that hungered for even more money, and yet grew bigger and greedier with each coin that fell into it.

Everything was crystal clear now. Silently, he thanked the infinite wisdom and the incredible insight the paper held—its true treasure, he realised—and slipped away to walk home.

Moonlight washed his steps in beams whiter than milk and the stars winked down at him from above. As he looked at them, Richard felt a sense of wonder that he'd never felt before. He'd always taken the sky for granted, but maybe he shouldn't. He was lucky to have been born a human, on Earth. Richard thought for a while, bouncing with happiness. He already had all the treasures in the world. His family loved him more than anything, he was perfectly healthy, and now he understood what he had, every inch of him was filled to the brim with joy and gratitude.

The future might rob him of all of that, but right now, in this moment, Richard knew only how to be thankful.

And he understood that what he had was priceless; more expensive than any amount of gold.

Sophie & the Long Lost Secret of the Mogao Grottoes

Singapore International School, Arrowsmith, Lucia - 10

The primitive paintbrush swept gently across the carvings on the wall. The carvings were intricate and complex and the paint was unique; it could last for, as the inscriber intended, millennia and at least until the future inhabitants of Earth would be ready. Just then, the low rumble of a spacecraft preparing to launch, swept through the cave. It's time to go. The paintbrush fell to the floor with a clatter, the sound echoing off the walls of what later inhabitants of the planet would know as, the Mogao caves.

Sophie sat on the edge of her bed, enjoying a mug of hot cocoa with extra marshmallows, as the rain tapped lightly against her window. Her chestnut brown eyes were covered by long eyelashes. Purple rimmed glasses perched on the end of her nose with her dark hair tied neatly in a bun. She wore a light blue t-shirt and navy denim jeans and a silver necklace handed down to her by her grandmother.

In recent years, the weather had become increasingly unpredictable, due to rapid climate change. On some days, it was so hot you couldn't stay outside for longer than a few minutes before melting; on others, it was so cold you had to wear four layers of clothing before venturing out. As well as the extreme weather, the greenhouse effect had irreparably polluted the Earth's atmosphere, making it difficult to breathe. Consequently, Sophie barely went out anymore. In fact, the situation was so bad that the very existence of humankind was at risk of becoming lost.

Sophie had a special gift. She was only 11 years old but already fluent in more than a dozen languages and had a unique ability to decipher and understand ancient scripts and symbols. Sophie was unlike any normal child. Even the teams of scientists who worked with Sophie struggled to keep up. For this reason she had been invited to help crack ancient codes that had led to some incredible new discoveries.

Sophie had always been happy to help the scientists as she felt satisfied after deciphering an ancient code. She hadn't cracked a code for them in a while. I hope I will be able to decipher something soon, something of great significance, she thought.

Just then, Sophie's phone buzzed and she took it from her pocket. She had been sent some images, along with a message from Dr Li, who she worked with: "Dear Sophie, how are you? We've made a recent discovery at Mogao Grottoes - some highly unusual carvings were found in one of the caves - they look like ancient runes, possibly containing some hidden message. Are you able to decipher what it says from the photos we sent you?"

Sophie looked at the images but they were fuzzy and unclear. She could just make out the carved symbols and shapes which looked different to the normal scripts she was used to decrypting. In fact they looked like nothing she had ever seen before. She quickly typed back a message: "The photos are a bit unclear so I will need to get a closer look. Can you arrange for me to visit the site? Thank you. -Sophie."

Before she knew it, Sophie was packing her bag, preparing to travel to the Mogao Grottoes, located in Dunhuang, China. Of course, Sophie packed her precious magnifying glass. It was hightech and magnified any object so much you could see the most intricate of

details. It was a present from the Scientists at Ancient Discovery Lab 256; a thank you for the many discoveries Sophie had helped them make. She also packed her lighting equipment to help her see the runes more clearly.

As she stared out of the airplane window, she recalled her knowledge of the Mogao Grottoes. She remembered reading somewhere that they contained nearly 492 existing cave-temples. She knew the caves were carved by hand over a period spanning 1,000 years, from AD366. Since being discovered, they had been studied extensively. The caves contain Buddha art such as sculptures, architecture and mural paintings. The art and objects found at Mogao reflected the meeting of cultures along the Silk Road and changes in religious beliefs and rituals at the pilgrim site. Dr Li had explained by telephone that the new carvings had been discovered when a freak earthquake, caused by the extreme climate change, revealed a new cave. What did these carvings depict? They were so different from anything else at the site.

Sophie stood outside the opening of the newly discovered cave. She took a deep breath and stepped inside. She lit a torch with a match and the flickering light from the flame danced across the walls of the cave. Sophie's eyes began to adjust to the light and she caught a first glimpse of the unique inscriptions on the wall. Sophie took out her magnifying glass and inspected one of the symbols. Hmm, she thought, these must have been created many centuries ago, yet the unusual, bright paint made them look as if they were left just yesterday. How is that possible?

She took out her lighting equipment and began to set it up across the back of the cave. With the wall now fully illuminated Sophie could see much more clearly. She took a step back and scanned the whole wall, taking in the full picture. It was certainly unique and whilst Sophie had never seen anything like it before, she began to recognise a pattern.

Just then, she gasped. Taking a deep, shaky breath Sophie inspected the wall again, this time more closely. After some time she whispered to herself, "Can this really be possible? Who could have written this?" Finally the true meaning of the message struck her, "Is there a chance this could actually help save the human race?"

Sophie's eyes glistened as she stood gazing at the inscription. Awestruck, she could barely utter a single word. Finally, she smiled to herself and an expression of wonder spread across her face.

New Tales of the Mogao Grottoes

Singapore International School, Lo Ka Wai Jaymee - 10

Coldness gripped me tight, forcing me to choke. I wrapped my cloak tighter around myself as the cold continued to creep up on me. The sky seemed to stretch on to infinity, with the stars glinting, and the pale crescent moon, piercing the darkness like a blade. All I had was the glow of the stars to guide me through. Last chance, and I had nothing to lose.

My whole life had been consumed by the studies of a mysterious place filled with hidden treasures, gold and jewels and riches galore. I thought back to those days, where I had no one to guide me, no one to help me, and I felt that familiar pang of loneliness. It was like a sinking feeling in my stomach, I had wallowed in it for far too long, and now it was a feeling that trapped me. Trapped me in a box which forced me to show them. Show them that I wasn't that useless person, that weak person that they thought I was. I had decided. Now was the time. I slid my gloved hand under my cloak, and brought out a little black mask. It completely hid my face from view. Excellent.

Again, I lay there under the starry night sky, as I had done months ago. I smiled. For the first time ever, I had smiled. The stars seemed to flash grins at me from all over the dark sky. I fished the key out of my pocket. Good, it was still there. I smiled grimly. I was going to need it. I flipped through the maps I had brought, my eyes flitting around as I scanned the pages. There were places I had marked. Places I needed to find. Yet I hadn't found anything. I had come out all empty handed. I was starting to feel that desperation, clawing at me from inside. I was starting to make mistakes. Mistakes that could cost me my life. There was now just one place left on the list. It would most likely be a useless search, but I wasn't about to give up. Not yet. I sighed as I continued to trudge through the dark and lonely winter night. There were still miles left to walk. My feet ached from all the walking and I resisted the urge to turn around and head home. Sweat dripped down my back as the morning sun cast long shadows on the ground. The slanting rays of the rising sun gave a warm orange tinge to the sky. By mid-afternoon, my face was on fire, and the sky was ablaze with the intense fire of the sun. Even in this supposed time of darkness, the light had still managed to shine through.

Soon, I was standing far away from where I had begun. The site I was to excavate was only a little farther from here. All of a sudden, I heard a low rumbling noise. I cautiously stepped back as huge chunks of rock the size of elephants crashed down from the mountains. The rocks gave way and tumbled down onto the ground, landing heavily, sending vibrations throughout the land. The ground under my feet shook as I took another step backwards. The monstrous rocks continued to plummet down, sending bits of sand and grit flying through the air. Rocks dangerously close to me started to give way, forcing me to run for shelter. I tripped over a small rock and rolled down into a ditch. I turned around and started running as fast as I could. I was kicking up dirt as I ran. I shielded my ears from the thunderous thudding of the stones and winced as the rocks rained down everywhere. Before I knew it, I had reached the end of the ditch. I crawled out and cursed inwardly as I realised that I was far from my destination. My ears throbbed as I heard my heart thumping in my chest. I turned around and saw something. No, it couldn't be. I glanced at my map and back again. I had found the legendary Mogao Grottoes.

I stepped into the cave and peered around in awe. Sculptures as tall as me stood proudly, guarding the grotto. So, this was it. The Mogao Caves. They had been discovered by a Daoist monk, Wang Yuanlu in the 1900s. The grotto was completely dark. I fished my torch out of my pocket and switched it on. It illuminated only part of the cave. I gazed around, awestruck, then I smiled. Of course. Why hadn't I seen it? Keys were for locks, right? I thought back to that time my cousin had told me about these caves.

"There is a secret room," he had told me mysteriously, "only one person has ever found the key. Many believe that the room is a historical treasure trove, with multiple ancient relics and historical artifacts. No one knows for sure though."

Wang Yuanlu had discovered the "Library Cave", which contained thousands of manuscripts dating back thousands of years. He was also the "Guardian of the Mogao Caves". Who else would have discovered it, but him? I crept in quietly. The shadows spilled over me and concealed me from prying eyes. My only light source started to dim. No worries. I had almost finished my job. There was a little box in the room, just as I thought there would be. I slid the key in and turned it. Just then, a voice rang out from the darkness.

"Who's there?"

My hand quivered slightly as I dropped the torch. It shattered on the ground. Great. Now whoever was there would know they weren't alone.

The figure stepped out of the darkness, revealing himself. He had a crooked smile and a scar running down his cheek.

"Agent Taylor, and your name is?"

"I have no name." I said, "I'm no one." Then I ran for it, treasure in hand.

The Discovery: The True Meaning of Hope Revealed in Mogao Caves

Singapore International School, Han, Zi Wei Elaine - 11

"Could you please spare me money?"

"Sorry, I don't have any money on me," said the passer-by, as they blended back into the crowd once again.

Kai shook his head, feeling defeated; his knees were tired and numb and the lines between the objects he saw became more faded and blurred. His mind had held on to images of the crowd, everyone with different faces and statures, but there was only one similar feature that he could spot: Even if they said sorry, Kai knew that they didn't care. Their eyes had been filled with an unsympathetic indifference, not with a single ounce of pity spared at the sight of his struggles. Kai had begun to realise the true extent of the cruelty of reality; since then, his begging to the villagers had slowly evolved into prayers to god.

Suddenly, Kai glimpsed a man in the corner of his eyes. He had been proudly flaunting his magnificent ancient art pieces while being surrounded by a large crowd, shoving piles of money in his face as offerings. However, his clothes still seemed to be ragged and dirty. Kai suddenly had the urge to get up and shoved through the large crowd; with a sudden tug, he had successfully gotten the man's attention.

"Where did you get that?"

"Kid, you should get a job first. This type of stuff isn't for teens who can't even handle stuff in the village."

"Please, I need this." Kai pleaded in tired desperation. The man's eyes suddenly turned sympathetic, brimming with uncontained pity for the poor boy before him.

"I completed a quest. Go to the Mogao Grottoes, and don't tell anybody."

Kai left with nothing on his hands, as he went to go get the treasures. He stood in front of the village sign one last time, took a deep breath, and stepped out.

He was relentless, walking through the rocks and sand with bare feet and still managed to get going. Even with no water, he was still able to keep going, even if his stomach had ached and his feet were badly bruised, and it finally was after two whole days of his persevering walking that he finally saw the cave. His lifeless eyes had suddenly brightened up as he started running towards the cave. The mysterious cave had the number 190 on it, and his eyes had rested in satisfaction when he saw the opening of it when suddenly, he saw it. In front of the entrance, many footprints had been there already. His eyes shifted to the right as he saw a blurry and what seemed to be a never-ending trail. As he looked back and forth, he finally set his mind to conclude that even though cave 190 was more easy to access, it was more likely that cave 275 would contain his questions and more riches. Grimacing, he stepped forward onto the blurry road.

Cave 275. The last out of the trail. The faint footsteps that Kai had been following had made a U-turn and led back home, but Kai refused to give up as easily. He stepped curiously into Cave 249 and suddenly froze in amazement.

The cave was small, but it told a lot. It shined with a golden aura, and it was as if Kai was inside another magnificent world, and its interior contained many majestic ancient artifacts.

In the middle, there was a colossal Buddha statue, and beside it were paintings representing many stories that told the different traits of Buddha, and on the sides were many esthetical paintings stuck on the walls, and were a variety of scrolls placed on the tables in front of the paintings. Suddenly, a scroll caught the eye of Kai. It was a painting that drew two vivid pictures, with each image revealing a different story. Large letters with fine black ink wrote “Four Encounters”. In realization, Kai strolled quietly in front of the ginormous statue and kneeled respectfully to Buddha, before the collapse of the cave 275.

“Hello?”

Sarah, an archaeologist who had just immigrated from England, had come searching for the artefacts of different Mogao caves and has been the first person who set foot in here in 4 years since the cave had been demolished due to the heavy winds and shifting sands.

Suddenly, she felt a movement in the stones underneath the ground close to her. As her eyes widened in surprise, she quickly dug the sand away to find a man that had been perfectly unimpacted from the cave.

The Four encounters. Prince Siddhartha encounters an old man, a sick person, a corpse, and a mendicant monk. The two pictures in the scroll are simply written to represent them all, and it is the first and last scene. The first three encounters are when Prince Siddhartha becomes aware that life causes suffering, while the last sets out a path for liberation.

As Kai returned to the village, he searched for the spot. There sat a boy, nine years old, holding his hand out for any little bit of change. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. 11 years ago, Kai had been like him...

“Spare change, please. Spare change, please,” whispered Kai, with tears streaming down his cheeks. He had been nine years old again, still traumatized by the death of his parents and learning about the world’s cruelty. As everyone continued to walk past and ignore him, he felt his hope being eaten out bit by bit.

“Spare change, please. Spare change, please.”

Returning to his senses, Kai looked at the kid with his eyes glimmering with hope again. He cautiously approached the kid, reached for his bag, and took out one of the ancient treasures Sarah had given to him. The Four encounters, in large words, were written on it.

Uncover, Discover, Recover

St. Paul’s Co-educational College Primary School, Wong, Christian Jake - 11

Dune after endless dune, mountain after endless mountain...

The vastness of the Gobi Desert was immeasurable, even infinite. Ancient secrets were buried beneath the thick layer of powdery yellow sand, waiting to be uncovered...

It was undeniably an odd sight.

In the middle of the Gobi Desert, near the city of Dunhuang, Gansu Province, an old monk, clad in ragged, worn robes clung onto the back of a flea-bitten, scraggly donkey, who groaned with every step. The monk squinted up at the blazing sun that hung in the sky, mercilessly bathing him in its heat. He was sweating profusely, with enormous pearls rolling down his forehead. His donkey stopped in the middle of the path. Its limbs quivered slightly, before it collapsed to the ground in a heap of skin and bones, unconscious. The monk sighed, and, hoisting the animal’s limb body onto his shoulders, continued his lengthy journey.

After trotting along for hours, he stopped. Could his eyes be deceiving him? At the foot of a mountain was a small oasis, more beautiful than any he had ever seen before. He immediately thanked Buddha before rushing towards it, scooping up some of the clear, blue water. The sweet liquid trickled down his throat, and he felt more rejuvenated than ever. He fed some to his donkey, who regained its strength soon after.

Suddenly, the mountain glowed, ablaze with flames. The old monk fell back, startled. Thousands of fiery figures appeared on the mountain’s peaks, each in a different position. Some had their hands to their chests, some were touching the earth, some were praying. But all had the same calm, serene expressions on their faces. They were one- the Gautama Buddha. As the sun set, the visions slowly vanished, leaving the monk and his donkey alone in the desert. The monk was stunned. He started rummaging through his satchel, and his hand emerged, holding a small dagger. To honour Gautama Buddha, he carved a shrine into the base of the mountain.

This monk was Lezun. Unbeknownst to him, he had just created the very first of the Mogao Grottoes.

After Lezun had created the very first grotto in 366AD, he was joined by another monk named Faliang, who helped him develop the site. What Lezun originally planned to be a simple place of meditation for hermits had developed into a gathering place for monks from all over China. Monasteries and temples quickly sprang up around the mountains, and by the early 400s AD, a Buddhist community had formed at the foot of the mountain, with seven grottoes in total.

News of this meeting place for monks soon reached the ears of the Wei royals, who commissioned the construction of twenty more caves, with the preceding Zhou, Sui and Tang Dynasties following suit. The grottoes became officially known as Mogao, which meant “none higher” or “peerless”. The caverns certainly lived up to their name, as the construction of the Mogao Grottoes had reached its height in the Tang Dynasty. Many rich patrons donated large sums to the monks, hoping to achieve enlightenment by helping build the temples. With their financial support, the number of caves quickly rose to over a thousand. Unlike the older, more simple shrines, the grottoes constructed in the Tang Dynasty were elaborately decorated with 2,000 sculptures and 45,000 square meters of murals of gods

(including the notorious the Monkey King) and monks, and with a more sophisticated architectural design as well. Through visual representation, they were meant to educate illiterates about Buddhist beliefs and stories, including the famous “Five Hundred Bandits” story depicted in Cave 258. The grottoes were no longer exclusive for monks, but a religious centre for the public, as well as the home of 1,400 monks and nuns and countless artists.

Although the Mogao Grottoes were flourishing, Turkish lords had seized land around the western part of the Silk Road, which sealed off Mogao from the rest of the world. As less people came, Dunhuang slowly became depopulated. The site went into decline, and by the Ming Dynasty, the Mogao Grottoes were sadly abandoned.

Lost to the mists of time, the Mogao Grottoes sat, untouched, unknown, for nearly 500 years. However, this would not be its permanent fate: a re-ignited interest in the Silk Road during the late 19th century led to Western explorers discovering an ancient stele that was erected in 1348 to commemorate the sponsors of a temple in Mogao.

A Taoist abbot named Wong Yuanlu had discovered some Mogao temples at the turn of the century and became a self-appointed guardian for them, attempting to raise funds to repair some statues. In 1900, he accidentally stumbled across an old cave, (what would be later known as the Library Grotto,) and discovered an enormous collection of manuscripts, ranging from about history and mathematics to folk songs. However, Yuanlu was ordered to close the caverns under the orders of the governor of Gansu, who was concerned about the cost of transporting the artifacts.

Luckily, Yuanlu’s discoveries caught the eye of Hungarian archaeologist Marc Stein, who bargained with the abbot, asking for the manuscripts in exchange for a donation to repair the statues. Wong agreed to this deal, causing foreign explorers to go on expeditions to Mogao for its precious documents. The rest of the ancient texts were sent to Beijing for scholars to study.

Conservation efforts made by the government helped restore the grottoes to its former majesty. The International Dunhuang Project helped do research on the Dunhuang manuscripts and uncover many secrets of ancient China. Nowadays, the Mogao Caves are a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as well as a popular tourist destination. A milestone in art, literature and religion, the Mogao Grottoes have affected the course of history, and will continue to, for evermore.

The Mogao Grottoes,
Peerless, and acclaimed world-wide.
Buddharupas nine xun* high,
Statues tall, they kiss the sky,
Holy days, joyous and blithe.

– Zhao Puchu

*Nine xun is equal to about 3.34 m

A Story in a Story in a Story

St. Stephen’s College Preparatory School, Ting, Paige - 11

“Grandma, can you tell us another story?” asks Meg, jumping up from under her blanket.

“Only if you go to bed straight after,” I say to my grandchildren. “Or else your parents will get angry when they come home. And do stop jumping around like that. You’ll hit the ceiling, which is why Will should have taken the top bunk.”

Will also climbs out of his covers and switches his bedside lamp back on as he sits up. I take a seat in the cozy armchair next to the window, the spot where I’ve told them many fairy tales. Meg climbs down the ladder and takes a seat next to Will. And so I begin...

Once there was a girl called Hui who lived in a small town in Gansu. For as long as she could remember, she would follow her older brothers to school. She was too small to be noticed, so she never got caught. Sometimes her brothers teased her when they rode together in the donkey wagon, jabbing at her small body hidden in the hay bale, “Why don’t you just stay home and learn cooking and cleaning like a normal girl?” But mostly they felt curious that a girl would be interested in school.

One day, Hui took her normal spot in the big tree next to the window of the schoolroom, soaking up everything her brothers were learning in the room where girls were not allowed to be. Perched on the tree, she looked out into the horizon beyond the schoolhouse, and saw something in the hazy desert that she’d never seen before. A temple? Why was it merged into a cliff? Hui scampered down onto the gravelly path and suddenly her bare feet felt the hot, golden sand. When she reached the temple, she felt willed to go inside. She found strange statues and questionable paintings, and what seemed like hundreds of Buddhas.

The marble floors were cold against her dirty feet, and a spooky wind rushed through the cavern. The walls were so dusty that everything in the room seemed a little greyer. But Hui was curious so she continued into the cave. As she walked deeper and deeper into dimness, she laid eyes on a magnificent book. She flipped it open and started to read the words printed among many illustrations of brave warriors that curiously looked like women.

“Here is our history book. Once we were ruled by strong empresses who ruled the land and they welcomed all types of people.”

What? A place ruled by women? Hui was certain that her brothers never learned this in school. She knew that she had to get home soon, or her parents would wonder what happened to her, so she quickly read some more.

“Our city fought and won many battles against invaders. However, we fear that men may eventually take over, and if they do, our empire’s history will be erased.”

“Grandma?” Will interrupts, “I think I hear someone knocking at our door.”

I fling open the curtain next to me and see two women standing on the porch, but they are dressed like ancient soldiers. “Well, that must be your parents and they forgot the house key. Go to bed now and I’ll open the door for them,” I lie.

I go outside and quietly close the front door behind me. “We have come from Gansu to find you because you were the one who first found our history book,” one of the soldiers announces.

“The imperial army has won your battle. You asked us to report back to you, and now you shall come with us to be our chieftain,” the other one explains.

At first I’m confused, but then I remember that, before leaving for university 45 years ago, I slipped a note into the secret shrine. It said:

Dear whoever finds this:

I am Hui and I am leaving for university today. I found this cave when I was a child. I’ve picked a fight with some friends about women’s rights, they said I can’t study and they were wrong. I need someone to continue fighting for women’s rights. Please report back when we win.

~Hui

I quickly go inside the house, scribble something on a notepad, rip out the piece of paper, fold it up and hand it to the soldiers.

“Please give this to your empress,” I say, holding out the note, which said:

Dear Empress:

I am Hui and I’m now living peacefully in Canada. I have a son, a daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. I’m sorry but I don’t want to come back and become one of your chieftains.

I’m proud of what you’ve accomplished and I support women’s rights, but I’m too old. Hope you understand.

Best regards, Hui

I watch as the soldiers nod like they understand, and they disappear into the night.

I go back upstairs and tuck the kids in once more. “It wasn’t your parents. Anyway, go to bed, and for real this time,” I say as I pull the blanket over Will. Meg looks down from the top bunk and says goodnight to us.

“But Grandma?” Will begins. “Is this story real?”

I smile and look away. “Well...”

Value

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Sze, Yuen Hei Kristen - 11

My feet sank under the sand, well beneath what I could see, with every step that I took. Every second, my journey got harder. I had run out of water a long time ago, and my lips were cracking and bleeding. Dehydration made the world spin. My brain screamed at me to stop, to give up, to pass into a blissful, endless sleep. I refused. I was nearly there, the treasures in the Mogao Grottoes so close I could practically feel their presence, calling me, inviting me in. Just a few more steps.

I fell against a wall, legs buckling from exhaustion. My eyes closed and I took a few deep breaths. My map had been blown away, and I wasn’t sure if this was the correct spot. If it was, then lucky me. If it wasn’t, I’d just have to continue the next day, assuming I survived until then. Curling into a comfortable position, I ignored the small pebbles falling onto me and the grainy sand grinding against my skin. Sleep didn’t come easily, but when it did I was incredibly thankful.

I dreamt about being in the rain, which was a nice change from the harsh heat of the desert, until the small droplets of water started to hurt, striking me hard. My eyes flew open and I snapped back to reality. Pebbles were falling everywhere, dislodging from the fragile wall, and they were rapidly getting larger in size.

I ran away from the wall, but something caught my eye. I saw something glint near a nearby rock. It was risky, I knew, but I couldn’t resist checking it out. The treasures promised in the Mogao Grottoes was temptation sweet as honey, and I couldn’t stop myself from sprinting back to them.

Just as I thought, there was a hole in the wall that the fallen stones had covered. It was so small that my underfed body could just fit through. As soon as I had wriggled through, I gasped. The cavern was massive, and sitting in front of me was a Buddha statue with years worth of dirt and grime covering the surface in layers. I didn’t understand. The legend of the Mogao Grottoes told of treasures beyond compare. When I made the journey out here to the desert, I was expecting diamonds, rubies, gold, jewelry, all of that and more! Was I in the wrong place?

I ran my hand along the cavern wall and some dirt came off, allowing me to see beneath the earthy layer. Pictures and scriptures covered most of where I touched. The wall paintings had probably been there for very long and were preserved quite well, but I didn’t see why they were important. Some pictures depicted various versions of Buddha, dressed in elegant outfits from ancient times, hands held together sitting on clouds. As I moved further into the cavern, I realized the wall paintings were neverending and extended towards the inner chambers. I didn’t know why but a sense of calm and tranquility was building up within my heart as I moved closer to the inner chamber. My thirst for treasure was somehow dampened.

One would think that it would be completely dark within the cave, but there was natural light filtering in through from somewhere above illuminating the dark space. For a minute, I thought it might have been the halo of the Buddhas around me, guiding me. I reached the inner chamber, closing my eyes as I entered, certain that this was where the treasure was. All the suffering I had been through would be worth it. I opened my eyes slowly, ready to be dazzled with shining treasures. But what I saw was not treasure.

Laying in an untidy pile were well-preserved scrolls lightly scented with the typical ceremonial incense among other religious instruments. I passed a big statue of a sleeping Buddha and unconsciously sat next to it. I was surprised, not by the fact that there was no treasure, but that I wasn't disappointed. Yesterday, I would have considered the sleeping Buddha a useless piece of rock, but looking at it more closely, I felt unexpectedly calm and an indescribable feeling of fulfillment filled my heart. To me right now, this statue was a masterpiece. Over time, the statue had clearly aged, but at this moment, I felt the craftsmen's sincerity and couldn't deny my admiration. I had an urge to join the statue, to just lay on the ground next to it.

As I laid down, I pondered why I came here in the first place. Blinded by greed, I lived a life of decadence. I was hungry and thirsty, and my greed would be the cause of my demise, stuck in this cave for eternity.

Something caught my eye. One of the Sleeping Buddha's fingers was missing: it must have broken off over the years. I saw it lying near me. It was pointing towards the wall within the inner cave. I instinctively got up and headed towards that area.

There was a small opening in the wall and the stones were loose. Removing the rocks, I entered another corridor. It wasn't long until I reached an exit. In front of me outside of the cave was an oasis, with crystal clear water and lush vegetation. The evening light of the sun shone down onto the lake, only to reflect back at me, the surface of the water glittering.

Thank you, Buddha, I thought, You've taught me that the art pieces and scrolls can teach me a lot about history, and the importance of history and culture. I've realized that the knowledge we can gain from those, from the Mogao Grottoes and its library on the walls, was the real treasure here.

My eyes fluttered open and I pushed myself up. My arms had been laying on a textbook, flipped open to a page in the middle.

Value

noun. the importance, worth, or usefulness of something.

Fiction

Group 3



The Blind Leading the Blind

Carmel School - Elsa High School, Kinjo, Yushin - 14

Micky was standing near the main entrance of the Mogao caves when he heard from behind the approach of brisk footsteps. Beside him, Kauai quietly shuffled his feet.

“Mr Chen?” came the expected voice. Micky turned and nodded.

“You are a bit earlier than expected... but that’s not a problem of course. And this must be your special friend, Kauai.”

Kauai gave a soft, guttural bark of agreement.

“Pleased to meet you too, Kauai! And of course you, Mr Chen. My name is Oscar, I’m your guide,” he said, extending a hand that Micky immediately clasped.

“Wow, that’s amazing!” Oscar exclaimed. “Naturally, we have obtained permission for your guide dog to accompany you into the caves, and I’m thrilled to tell you that we have also authorized you to touch the exhibits.”

Over the next ten minutes, several more people showed up. Including Kuai, there were 9 people in the group. When they finally entered the Mogao caves, the cool, musty air heightened their excitement. Oscar began to speak in a loud clear tone about the majestic artworks – Buddhist statues, colourful etchings and murals – that now surrounded them, his voice punctuated by the reverberating tip-tap-tapping of Micky’s white cane.

Presently, a middle-aged woman and her docile husband came over to Micky.

“Hello,” said the woman, who had a sharp voice. “I couldn’t help but hear your stick. What brings you here? Can you really enjoy all this beautiful ancient art while being blind?”

“Well yes. But I use different senses. For example, my stick – as you say – helps me understand the layout because the sound bounces off the surroundings. It’s kind of like how a bat uses echolocation,” he chuckled.

The woman pulled a sour face. She was about to reply but was interrupted by Oscar inviting Micky and Kauai to approach a sculpture that the rest of the group had just been gasping over. Micky approached the exhibit with Kauai, laid a hand on it and began to walk around it, feeling and absorbing the form and texture of what he quickly perceived to be a sitting Buddha.

Micky heard the woman muttering to her husband. Then she began to loudly quiz Oscar. “Won’t he damage it? Can I touch the sculptures as well?”

Oscar said, “I’m afraid not, Mrs Lau. It’s a special dispensation for Mr Chen.”

Mrs Lau tutted rudely and stomped to the back of the group, dragging her husband with her.

After a few hours of exploring, Oscar’s narration had dwindled to just a few quiet comments here and there. But now he interrupted their reveries with an announcement.

“Sadly this tour has to end here. If you want more information about the Mogao caves after we exit, feel free to...”

At that moment, Kauai started to bark tumultuously. Micky knew something was wrong but before he could react Kauai wrenched free of his leash, dragging Micky to the rough stone floor. Kauai was now running around the cavern. Mrs Lau started to squeal, which distressed Kauai even more. Oscar ordered them to stand still while he tried to calm Kauai down.

Eventually, Kauai got tired and Oscar fetched him back to Micky, who was back on his feet, unhurt but feeling somewhat dazed.

Suddenly, everyone froze as a great hissing sound started up high above them. Tilting their heads upward slowly, the stricken tourists saw the cavern’s roof undulating, before it slowly began to descend like a vast black carpet. Sensing their rising panic and quickly assessing the danger it posed, Micky calmly shouted, “Everybody be calm! It’s just bats. They are not dangerous. Something has startled them, that’s all.”

The dense cloud of shrieking creatures streamed away into the unlit recesses of the rear of the chamber until everything was eerily still. It was a brief respite for then the ground started to shake violently, the lights flickered and stones from the ceiling began tumbling down. Everyone instinctively covered their heads, but it was over in a couple of seconds. They were in near darkness, but for a couple of lamps that flickered near the entrance, which was blocked. Someone in the group began to sob.

“We’re trapped!” exclaimed Mrs Lau. “If it wasn’t for that dog we wouldn’t be in this mess,” she continued vehemently.

“How is it his fault?” asked a tall man who had been silent and preoccupied during the tour.

“If his poorly trained mutt hadn’t started running around the place we would be above ground already.”

Micky interjected defensively, “My dog would never do something like that normally. Kauai must have sensed something was wrong.”

Ms Lau was disgruntled but stayed silent. Oscar seized this chance to gain control of the worsening situation. “Let’s not blame each other; instead we should figure out a way out of this cavern.”

The group seemed to agree with this. They started to give their opinions on what to do next, coming up with various ideas like digging out of the cave, shouting for help or trying to clear the stones that were blocking the entrance. While they were debating, Micky stood there quietly.

“Hey, blind man! Are you awake? Why aren’t you trying to help us think of ways to get out?” Mrs Lau demanded bitterly.

Micky calmly put his finger to his lips.

“Don’t you shush me you, half-wit!”

“I was just trying to listen to the echos, to hear if there might be another way out.”

Mrs Lau scoffed and walked away as Micky tapped his white cane. Meanwhile, some of the group were trying to remove stones from the entrance. A few others were starting to get annoyed by the lack of help from Micky and voicing their agreement with Mrs Lau that Micky had somehow gotten them trapped; in fact, everything Micky had done and said was now abhorrent to them.

It was now evening. They knew this because the tall man had some battery left on his phone. The rest had already drained their batteries trying desperately to get a signal. Mr Lau reflected gloomily that they wouldn’t have to spend long in the dark caves before any sense of time deserted them. Everyone was fatigued from moving stones. Their hopes were getting lower as not a dent had been made on the mountain of fallen rocks. They all looked woebegone, but they had no choice but to continue.

As another of the big stones was being lifted, a snake slithered out and attempted to bite one of the tourists, but Kauai pounced and bit it, immobilizing the beast. After this, Kauai was praised for his bravery and thought highly of. “Maybe your dog isn’t that bad after all,” said one tourist to Micky.

Suddenly the tapping of the cane stopped. “I think I’ve found another way out of this cavern.”

Kaui may now have been a hero, but the group were still dubious about his master. “We have no choice but to listen to Micky. Let’s just give it a try,” reasoned Oscar.

Micky started walking, tapping his cane once more. The group followed reluctantly, for he was leading them into the dim rear of the cavern, where the walls rapidly closed in until they were in a twisting series of passageways like a mine. After they had turned in different directions a few times, Mrs Lau shouted, “Why did we trust him in the first place?” No one answered, which enraged her, but she had no choice but to follow. Micky eventually stopped at a dead end.

“What are you doing?”

“The exit is here,” said Micky.

Mrs Lau blurted out, “What did I say? I knew we shouldn’t trust a blind man!”

There were loud sighs and some turned away, while Kaui set to digging at the wall. All eyes turned upon the dim figure as he dug away with feverish paws. A chink of light appeared, then another. Oscar crouched beside Kaui and began tearing handfuls of rubble out, uncovering more inviting rays of light. Several others joined in and soon they had dug out an archway, rugged yet beautiful, for it glowed and thus promised the way to civilization. The weary 9 tunnel rats plus Kaui scurried through the opening before anything else bad could happen.

Once through, they saw they were in a well-lit wide corridor. They all celebrated in merriment.

Then Micky heard a hush descend on the group. Someone cleared their throat. “We are so remorseful for what we said earlier. We hope you can accept our apology,” said Mrs Lau. Some of the other tourists agreed vigorously, adding, “Sorry, sorry!”

It was finally time to leave. Some said their goodbyes while others went away subdued, still recovering from the stress they had suffered, but all of them were grateful that they made it out of the cave. As they were all leaving one by one, Oscar tapped Micky on the shoulder and quietly remarked, “Out of everyone here, you are the only person with their eyes open.”

A Tale From the Mogao Grottoes

Carmel School - Elsa High School, Yahyagil, Ayla - 11

fall, 1929

The orange blazing glow of light sank into the horizon leaving a trail of coral tinted clouds behind. Within minutes, the sky flooded with stars and the moon shone its silver on the desert before me. The ground was covered in a thick blanket of sand and all that could be heard was the slow cry of the wind blowing against my still body. As the winds blew harder, the cold slowly crept into my body and froze around me. I shoved my hands deeper into my pockets and I turned my face away from the sharp wind. I dug a small hole in the sand just big enough to fit me and I crawled into it, just like any other night. Suddenly, I heard the shriek of a crow. I stayed where I was and tried to ignore it but soon enough I felt the sand above me collapse. I scurried out and ran. My legs were burning and I gasped each breath I took. My body grew numb and I slumped lifelessly to the ground.

I woke. My skin grated against the grains of sand and the warmth of the sun was shining on me in a dry unpleasant way. I longed for water; my throat was dry like the barren desert around me. Looking for shade, I dragged myself to a cave and dropped on the floor. I almost thought I saw huge stone statues glaring at me but I reassured myself they were not real. I looked around me and noticed the paintings on the ceiling. As I pressed my face against the cool rock, I heard a clattering noise. Now there were shards scattered on the ground. I wanted to hide everything and run away, but I just sat there, too tired to move. In the corner of my eye, I saw an old shadowy figure walk into the room. He had long robes that almost touched the ground and a kind yet stern glance.

“What happened?” I dazedly asked.

“I should be asking you that,” He replied, motioning to the fragmented vase that rested on the ground. “I am Wang Yuanlu, guardian of the Mogao Grottoes,” he paused and looked at me as if I was a wild animal, “you may call me Sir.”

“I am in need of an apprentice and you have the perfect opportunity. You may work to repay the damage you did,” he said as if he was in charge of me.

“What is your name, boy?” he asked in a slightly demanding way.

“Cheng.”

“I’ll tell you what Cheng. I provide for you and you work for me. Then I let you go.”

“Deal,” I answered firmly.

spring 1930

The cold has lost its grip on Dunhuang and I can finally step outside back into the warmth of the sun. The blinding rays of light shone on the sand-coloured cliffs and it dried the desolate earth. Wang has let me stay at the temple for shelter and he provides what I need. Although, I have been here for too long.

“May I leave sir,” I begged him, “I have served my purpose and all my work has been done.”

“No, you may not leave until I say so. It is for your own good,” he murmured.

“How! All I’ve ever done is to your advantage. Maybe you just want to use me to get all your work done. I know you are old and you want somebody to take care of the caves but can’t you let me be free!?”

“Listen, you are just a child and you do not understand what danger you have been put into,” he replied with his voice raising each moment, “You are roaming on dangerous parts of the desert and there are legends of the most deadly creatures to ever live. When I found you, there was a marking on your back and that means he is after you. The Firebird is after you.”

There was a pause and I took everything in slowly.

“You hid that from me? Anyways, I don’t believe some legend.” I said that as bravely as I could but there was a quiver and a lie in my voice – I knew I disturbed the bird. I ran off. The robes I was given were dragging behind me in the dirt. The words that Wang spoke devoured my mind.

Suddenly, My vision blurred and I found myself in a different place. A place in the past.

“Hurry up!” I shouted to Li Wing, who was my best friend at the orphanage. I saw myself as a carefree child skipping into a cave and exploring.

“Is it safe here?” My friend asked as she scanned the cave.

Around me, The rock walls surrounded me and they met at a high point. There were small hills within the cave, they were covered with lush green grass. Ahead, was the nest of a bird lying on the grass. The nest was big enough to fit me and it was made of thick dark twigs.

“I’m leaving,” I heard Li Wing say, “Ms Ming told us to be back by dusk.”

I walked deeper into the cave without my friend. I remembered touching the nest of the bird and I snatched the fiery orb that rested in the middle of the nest. I felt its warmth seep through my hands as I held it close to me. Its orange and yellow glow reflected onto my face and I stared at it in awe.

It was only at night in my bed I realized what I had done. Something or someone was after me and I knew it. I looked at the orb next to me on the floor and I threw it as far away as I could. Then I knew I had to run and leave everything. That night, I snuck across the orphanage and gathered supplies to last me a while. I creaked the door open and I noticed faces surrounding me as I left. It was Ms Ming and other children that had woken up. I looked up at Ms Ming’s face with guilt and to Li Wing in shame.

“Where do you think you are going?” Ms Ming sternly asked.

“Something is after me and you are in danger if you come near me.”

“That is still no good reason for running away,” Li Wing commented.

“That can’t stop me from leaving.”

By now a crowd of half-asleep kids were watching me leave the orphanage. As I walked away, I heard Ms Ming mumble, “Good, less mouths to feed.”

I woke to the noise of trickling water rushing over rocks. That can’t be true in the middle of a desert. I found myself leaning on some boulders and I looked over to see somebody kneeling over a burbling river to drink. She looked up and saw me. Between gasping breaths she managed to spit out: “It’s near! – The bird – it’s coming.”

I recognized her. It was Li Wing. Her dark hair had grown long and it covered her face messily. Her thin sandals were worn out and covered in a layer of sand.

“How did you get here?” I wondered

“After you left, a bird twice the size of any human destroyed the orphanage and forced me to run. I came after you to give you something you dropped,” she held out the fiery orb “I found this. I thought you might need it.”

Suddenly, I saw a blur of black and I quickly turned my head. I saw The Firebird. His eyes were like a burning furnace they seemed to pierce through you. His gray claws scratched the earth when he stood. His slick, dark feathers were embedded with gold, slowly fluttering down with every beat his broad wings made. He came towards me, glaring at me with his flaming eyes but instead he turned to Li Wing. He held her high above a cliff and seized the orb from her hands as she tried to wriggle free of his powerful grasp.

“You think you can’t be defeated,” the bird dropped her and whispered, “But you can.”

He turned to me and I started shaking. I hesitantly ran to the edge of the cliff and climbed down. To my surprise, I saw Li Wing sitting on a small ledge trying to not be noticed by the bird. The bird looked over the cliff.

“I have no time for your games. I will be back to finish the job.”

With that he flapped his giant feathers and glided away.

I was left on the ledge with Li Wing and I was amazed by how we were still alive.

“We have to tell Wang,” I said.

“Who’s Wang?” Li Wing asked.

“I’ll tell you on the way,”

“To where?”

“To the Mogao caves.”

Chasers of the Golden Light

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Chung Miu Bethany - 14

She wanted to be a poem.

She wanted to be beautiful, like distilled moonlight on a rippling lake, like the sparkle of a diamond among pebbles. She wanted to watch herself be crystallised in time, a buried gemstone that people from centuries after would dust off and marvel at. She wanted to be something worth thinking about, something that resurfaced in minds from time to time. Something adored, worshipped even. A gentle ray of light, a perfectly pitched note, a poem recited in the night with a crystalline voice.

She was the dreamer, and her brother was the thinker, she'd always been told, but it was fine; she was female, after all. But she'd been brought here, by her brother, seeking the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, and suddenly it was the two of them, both dreamers, chasers of the golden light. Perhaps she could leave her legacy. A diamond, a pearl, perhaps even just a flower's seed that might sprout. (But she was female, after all.)

They were chasers of the golden light, the two of them. That's what her brother had said. His was a hand she could hold onto in the nights when she was young, when the night terrors made her run shrieking in fear. He used to be her anchor, her refuge, keeping her afloat when she was about to drown in a sea of her own tears. Now she is not as sure.

The two of them walk, and she watches their footprints blow away in the murmuring breeze. Soft, light, infinitesimal, in the golden sand. She wonders: if she fell, would she blow away too? Her own identity is slipping past her fingertips, and she cannot do anything to stop it. The heat blisters and boils at her, and sand blows into her eyes from the blasts of sweltering heat thrown at her. It prickles at her. She tries to blink it away.

"Keep up," wafts past her ears, and it echoes with a resonance that makes her feel like her brother is miles away, in a dream. And he is, isn't he? He is a chaser of the golden light, after all. He spends his whole life in a dream. If they find the golden light— what then? They will not be remembered, she knows, as their footprints are lifted away by a gust of wind. The golden light is but a mirage, the thousand Buddhas a desperate illusion. The caves will be forgotten, abandoned, the fabled "mythical art and literature" dissolved to dust, sand, cobwebs by the incessant passage of time. The flowers planted there wilted, reduced to shrivelled dreams amongst a tangle of weeds. She laughs bitterly, and her brother looks at her in confusion. She shrugs it off, but it takes the force of moving mountains. The world heaves under her as she tells herself it is insignificant. Turbulence, turbulence that will toss her off as though she weighs nothing.

Small steps, small steps. She is stepping into oblivion; in pursuit of an identity, she can make for herself. She had a poem written, tucked under her sash, from when she was innocent and free and joyful and all those things she'd lost. And perhaps she could— perhaps! She taunts herself. "Perhaps" never meant anything. "Perhaps" is what the lazy say, what the useless say when they have nothing, when they know nothing of what reality holds. Because reality is harsh, isn't it? Reality, descending on her like a flock of crows, smothering her.

She wonders if her brother is having second thoughts, but he saunters on with a swagger only the self-assured can pull off.

He was a dreamer— he was flame.

He was hungry. He'd been born hungry for something, hungry to be something. He wanted to shatter the earth itself. So, he was drawn to the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, like a moth to blazing flame. Myths, legends: they were all opportunities. He wanted to be treasure. He wanted to be part of something— some legacy.

Didn't they all, though? And could anyone, really?

He breathed in the tangy air, spiced with adventure and possibilities and dreams, and exhaled, still tasting gold and wine and stardust and fire on the breeze. "You can see it in his eyes," they'd said when he was a child, "that one's going to shine."

And shine he would. Shine he *had* to.

He was going to be a legend. He was going to shatter the earth. But doubt prickled at him like sand he could not brush away: it spread through time, spread through the years of his journey. He'd held onto hope for a while, but the journey grew steadily longer, more endless— and he'd wanted to be great. Oh yes, he'd wanted to. Was he leading his sister astray? He shuddered to think of it — was he leading his sister on a futile journey? (He wants to apologise; but for what?)

She'd asked him once, when they were both intoxicated on their own dreams of glimmering silk, all flaming brightness and gold— "What are you without hope?" Oh, he could recall that scene. He sees it in his sleep, those candles that flickered orange by the window, smelling of ash and spice, almost hypnotic. Candles that are puddles of wax now, but he can smell them— he smells them even in his sleep, the incense and the ash and the rising smoke.

What is he without hope? What is he without the golden light? What is a moth without its tantalising flame to circle? (Sometimes he thinks the flame is his sanctuary. Sometimes he thinks he can only be safe with what is familiar— the heady rush of adventure, of dreams, of great things to come. Just like a drug, flowing and coursing through his veins; he is an addict, and what is he without that?) He can still smell the flame from the ashes he sifts through, and oh, how he mourns.

He is fragmented, he is a shell of what he tries to be and he is his sister's big brother, her anchor, her guide, but who is he? Who is he, if not a hapless little child, lost in the place he calls home? He stumbles blindly around in the dark, searching vainly for the golden light. Golden light. He is an optimist, he is insane, he is a dreamer, he is delusional, he has died—

Hope, where is his hope?

Small steps, small steps, keep up his image. He is hopeful, he can be hopeful. He can be an optimist, but oh, how the facade is shattering, just like his hope. March on. March on, don't let the cracks show. No regrets now.

she chased beauty / he pursued greatness

"What are we here for?"

He can hear the exhaustion rolling off her voice, an exhaustion he himself was trying to hide. What are they there for? (Buried treasure, hidden gems. Discovery. Adventure. Creation. That is what he has tried to convince himself for so long.)

“Does it matter?”

It is a weary response, a lazy response, a response absolutely devoid of hope, and she knows this. She sits still, fidgeting ever so slightly with the hem of her sash. (There is starlight and the moon’s reflection on the rippling lake under it.)

“Remember when you said you were looking for greatness? And when I said I was looking for beauty?” she continues.

He remembers. The caves, the caves! Treasures, literature, creation— golden light.

“Remember what you’re here for. That’s how I keep myself afloat.”

And the sun rises, and they stand watching it, drenching themselves in the golden light. It is like molten gold, like honey, like wine, like spices, like everything they’d been chasing all this time—

Because what is greater than that which chases away the darkness? And what is more beautiful than a beginning— the beginning?

They were chasers of the golden light; and they had found, right at their fingertips.

The two are silhouettes against the golden light that washes across the walls, pouring like the richest milk. One of them raises a glass, his self-assured laughter ringing throughout the room, dripping with light. The sound is like gold, the other thinks; it is like molten gold, and it flows like honey.

The silhouettes bend against the light; they intertwine; they dance across the wall behind them. There is a faint, celebratory tune arising from both of them, a hum that seems to promise, even, the sun.

The girl takes a sip from her glass, and the wine goes down like water would, except it courses through her with a dull glow.

The two— one a poem, the other a dreamer— sway slightly, soaked in starshine, and for a moment, they feel as though they could do anything.

The Statue’s Tale

ESF Island School, Chan, Kate - 12

The Buddha statue lays back, stretched out across its ancient stone bed, patiently waiting for nirvana as it has done for over 600 years. The once rich and bright painted murals spanning all across the walls are faded with age and leached of colour, blotted out by a thick layer of gray chalky dust. The once bright red of the stone pedestal is now an ashen dark gray. The stone walls of the cave are choked in cobwebs, the surface of the rock is pockmarked with crumbling chunks of stone and riddled with cracks and dents. The Buddha remembers each day long past, memories swimming in every corner of the once-vibrant room, memories of joy and laughter, of sorrow and fear. Salvation is near. The end is near. It can sense it.

The Buddha remembers when it was first carved from stone, under the careful hand of a sculptor. It remembers what the caves were like before, bustling with life and activity. The Buddha statue remembers the monks that would come each day to meditate and can picture it still, the monks all sitting in line, hands clasped in their laps, surrounded by candles and incense. Their maroon robes spill around them like pools of serene water, identical shaved heads gleaming in the low lamplight. The oldest monks with their white, wispy brows, and gnarled frame at the front of the room, the wrinkles in their skin like dried-up rivers, each mark a sign of wisdom and experience. The youngest, some children, sit at the back. Most of them orphaned or abandoned, grown up at the nearby monastery. Their life is filled with strict timetables, meditation, and Buddhist teachings. A few— the newest ones, fidget, struggling to keep still and focus. The Buddha remembers them fondly, the closest thing to a family the statue can picture.

The buddha remembers when the pilgrims started coming. The visitors’ numbers had grown with each day as more and more sculptures and paintings and murals adorned the walls, monks filling the caves with beautiful illustrations depicting Buddhist teachings. Pictures of parts of the quest for enlightenment had stretched across the walls. Some vibrant depictions of buddhas and gods, others mnemonic devices or colourful, vivid images that taught Buddhist teachings for the illiterate that came to worship in the sacred grottoes. The monks had constructed new caves as shrines for the new Buddhist followers, relying on donations and funds from the pilgrims, merchants, and military officers that visited. Those days, the grottoes were filled with life, new faces, new stories. The Buddha remembers it all with longing, missing the days when it was always meeting new people, learning their stories, living adventures through their tales.

The Buddha statue remembers the day everyone left. It remembers the weeks leading up to it, vacant of its usual thrill. The visitors and monks who had once seemed an ever-present aspect of the Buddha’s life were suddenly gone, replaced by strangers. They came sometimes several times a day, other times only once a week, always bringing with them scrolls and texts and books piled high in their arms. They would disappear into one of the chambers and come out empty-handed, hurrying away from the cave as quickly as they had come. And so the days passed, the sun rising and setting just as before. One day though, something was different. The library cave was sealed. Rocks were piled high, blocking out every crack and crevice, stopping every ray of sunlight from reaching in. The lamps burned out. The candles melted. And finally, the cave of books was plunged into infinite darkness. After a week passed, and

not a single person had returned, the buddha had started to worry. And when the weeks had turned to months and then the months to years, the statue had finally understood. They weren't coming back.

The Buddha remembers when the cave was found. It remembers the years living in isolation, and the day the men arrived. Pale- almost white-skinned people had climbed in, leaping over boulders. They had gazed at the walls and the floor and at the statue itself in awe and wonder. And in moments, they were everywhere in the grottoes, examining the murals, leafing through books, scanning scrolls. Then they left.

The Buddha remembers when the strange men tore apart the caves. They had returned one day with metal tools and strange objects. They had grabbed scrolls from the library cave and carried them away. They had carved away sections of paintings from the walls and cut out parts of murals. The Buddha gazes at the chamber now, each blank section of wall a stab of pain in the statue's stone heart and a harsh reminder of the day. The day they left. The day they took it all away.

The Buddha lies in silence, exhausted from it all. Each moment relived, each experience reflected. Because the Buddha remembers it all.

And then the stifling, suffocating darkness is suddenly broken by a loud, bone-rattling crunch. In the wall, the rocks start to slide, dislodged by some unseen outer force. A shout and then a second startling crack and the wall caves in on itself. The rocks tumble to the ground, hitting the floor with a crash. Boulders scatter every which way as a cloud of centuries-old dust rises into the air. The wall gives way, revealing a crowd of people. The lost caves have been found.

A Different Form of Magic

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Tse, Laila - 13

761 Tang Dynasty

A cross. A cross on my left cheek. It sizzles hot at the slight touch. The two onyx lines meet at a centre point...The place where I cried the most tears, the place where my face wrinkles when a sense of misfortune comes my way. The two lines carry the burden of my past, the aching grief and utmost expectations I was destined to meet. It's torn me apart.

My older brother Chang carries a single tear on his cheek, never falling, never leaving. It stays there, a part of him. Its single drop of ink bears his tragic past, the family he's lost, the silence in the dark, cold-blooded night.

Born or Bred.

I was born to carry the weight of my father's doings on my torn shoulders. My father was one of the top men involved in the Ānshī zhī Luàn rebellion which automatically meant I would be too. Even before I became of age, I was immensely woven into their secrets, plans and attacks, so tight, the moment you cut the string it would break. I hated it. I hated how people stared, how people whispered to their friends, if only they knew I could hear every syllable, every hatred remark and every insult they muttered. So I ran, ran far away from the chains of power and duty. I fled to the southeast. More specifically the Dunhuang oasis. That's where I met my brothers.

My brothers were all limply shuffling across the vast silk desert. Broken and shattered beyond repair. I could see it in them, sorrow leaking from their sullen eyes. Hurt. Aching deeply, further, than any scar could go.

My brothers were all bred to be who they are today, all changed by their eerie past, the things they've seen and the things they did. No matter how hard you try, they affect you like tiny dots of watercolour on a clean, pure white canvas.

It's a symbol of our past and a daunting reminder of who we were and are today.

5 years since we fled from our prisons. We fell into hiding. In the deep, inexplicable Mogao caves.

The spiralling paint strokes seemed to curve up somewhere else, the lines never-ending, never starting. Their hands twirled into each other, indulging in a life of their own. The coral diamonds flowed in a wavy pattern, they stretched up, pointing towards the bright blue hidden sky. It is a firmament, a sacred place, so holy and out of this world, we don't dare ruin the silence. My hands lightly trace the spiral patterns across the cold stone wall, my body instinctively follows my hand still fixated on the golden rimmed cerulean colours splashed across the wall. This goes on until I reach the final spiral, my hand then falls limply to my side as my eyes roam somewhere else.

The petal-like caves towered over the gods, the paintings telling a story, so deep no one can understand them. Below the layer of dust lies memories that are too precious to lose.

It's still silent. It has always been. Do not underestimate her. Over the years I learnt silence was loud. Deafening. I think maybe I spent my whole life trying to avoid it. When you have silence, everything you neglect gets in. She is still and quiet; the reins of destruction and havoc. She's a monster, the worst of all.

I slowly sit down, my body relaxing as I hit the stone floor. My heart jumps, once then twice. My eyes are barely open. My head is heavy, too lumbered with my thoughts. My brothers have fallen deep into slumber, their own dreams playing in their minds. I feel the reticent walls acknowledging our agony, their bright smiles barely visible as they pierce through the thin gap between my eyelids. They understand and I know, in my heart we are safe.

My head spins back to our accomplishment: 1801 days. 1801 days we have survived. My eyes slowly close as I hear my unconscious voice echoing in my head. *"One more day to go."*

Deserted Fruit

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Zhuo, Chloe - 13

366 BC

I first witnessed the boy sitting on the steps outside his house, where the sun benignly gazed down, and fixed upon it a wistful glow. He had gotten into a fight before coming outside- not with the kind of bloodthirsty violence so many men are guilty of, but of the more innocent sort that manifested in badly-thrown punches and weak yanks of the hair; he was very young, no more than 6 years of age, slight in build, and had sullenly rooted his gaze to the ground. As he leans forward and scowls with resentment, a passerby mistakes him for a beggar and lopes ahead hastily.

The boy begins to sketch a portrait of a woman into the sand- albeit unflattering, it is detailed and thoughtfully structured. There! He begins to laugh, and what a lovely sound that is. When he flourishes his last stroke, the sun has quietly tumbled down, and he runs back home for dinner. Now, I was not in any sort of urgency then, so I bided my time and waited for his talents to develop. Over the years I learned more about the young boy who keenly drew and created. He liked the sweet taste of ripe peaches in spring whilst attending to menial tasks, the chorus of warmth that rang in the air after a toilsome winter, and the greeting of dragonflies after it rained. Humans, who grow more dissatisfied with each blessing of industrial development, have long since disregarded nature. Yes, I am fully aware they are meant to go about in all aspects of life- but as the deity of art, I was dispirited to watch the artistic world crumble, and watched the boy blossoming through his enjoyment of creativity.

It seems like my plans should have all continued smoothly, doesn't it? But as the boy's drawings began to display a kind of mastery only achieved from years of practice, his mother died.

The peaches he picked that new year in spring bore putrid smells only he could detect, and the heat of the sun was a bitter nuisance to the growing demands of his deadbeat father in summer. For what devilish gift would be born than the stifled tumour of mourning; void of tears and emotion, but bearing a pain just as extreme as a sea of dramatic heartbreak?

372 BC

It has been many human years since I last saw the boy, not regarded as a child anymore but as a young adult tackling the throes of new responsibilities.

Frankly, I had expected him to grow out of his forlorn ways by the time he became an adult. In many ways he had matured, taking a job at his uncle's farm and labouring until his hands bristled with calluses, but remained the village outcast, who shirked from familial gatherings and looked at the world with a gaze of utter contempt. It was not the grief of losing his mother, who died so long ago, but rather a repressed feeling that resented its status as prisoner.

When I finally decided to visit, I found him trekking through the vast nothingness of the desert, the sand blurring in fields of white and orange. I do not know why the boy had run away, but I cleverly took advantage of his situation. With careful deliberation, I concocted a plan to revive the creative world, which had suffered damage only reparable by the most fortunate circumstance.

I did, unfortunately, overestimate the manpower of one teenaged boy, as he failed to travel the distance I keenly expected of him. In only a few days he had fallen victim to the blinding, unforgiving glare of the sun. Torn clothes clung on to him like the final decaying layer of flesh from a corpse, and as his packed food rotted and his trembling legs grew weary without the support of his abandoning mule, the boy figured he was the only thing that had survived the suffocating desolation of the desert. He had run out of water by then. His lips cracked as he drew his mouth open with each dying pant, and the feeling of his wounded feet crackling under stray pebbles seared into his mind like the shriek of an injured lamb. Helplessly the boy fell victim to the torments of the sun, the heat and the desert, and sank deep into the sand, awaiting the inevitable. Only then had the boy noticed the wind's croons, not just a noise to fill the empty space but a warning, like the shake of a rattlesnake's tail when it shies upon a predator.

Obviously, I would not allow the boy to die at that particular moment. I had invested far too much time and energy to watch everything crumble away. It took only what humans call divine intervention, and what I call jerking one's heart from a deep sleep back into its wakeful position, for my plan to continue.

I disguised myself as a traveller bearing the gift of a wooden carriage, and offered a trip to the nearest shelter, a series of caves inhabited by Buddhist monks.

The next day we had arrived, and the erratic slew of the carriage slowed as I sent the boy off. Of course I was still watching him then, and quietly anticipating the unravelling of my plan.

The boy gazes upon the unseemly sight, a block of sandstone colossal in size and punctured at the bottom. He walks inside, nose tickling from the sting of incense, as lamps flicker to swaddle him in warmth. He finds a room decked with swathes of murals, and gapes in quiet amazement of the sight it beholds. Its paintings are arrestingly beautiful in their rare sheen of gold and jade green, as ornate patterns and subdued lines scatter throughout the portrait to form tales of women in musical play, a deity swathed in glistening robes, and a demanding emperor with hordes of followers at his side. These garishly elaborate images cover the room in its entirety, and the boy closes his eyes to prevent the shock of vivid technicolour from seeping in.

The boy lumbers on, drowsy with the rich sights, and wanders through a series of hollowed-out tunnels, the flickering light of daybreak finding its way through the cracks in the coarse walls. There are few rooms left, but each is stocked to the brim with various works of art and literature depicting divine events. Finally they reach the last one, where monks erect a sculpture of the Maitreya Buddha, vision-devouring in its magnitude, and bathed in the decorations of floating deities against auburn light. The boy feels like the workings of his heart have been laid bare against the silken clay, and a strange feeling of fulfilment bubbles from within.

One of the monks takes notice of the newcomer, and watches him wistfully. "In the caves' years of creation, we've never had a single visitor. I'm fine meditating and living on my own, but the gnawing thought that our work remains unnoticed by everyone around us places me in a state of great distress. The paintings and sculptures have brought us a great deal of peace and healing, I am sure others would feel the same. But we have no forms of transport, the nearest monastery is far away, so effectively we are stranded here."

373 BC

The sound of hammers against hardened clay ripples through the air when the boy steps out of the cave opening and stares at the sun. It has been a year since he tirelessly made the

trip on foot back to his old village, encouraging those swept in a state of apathy and bleakness to visit the sandstone caves, and delighted to find many have chosen to stay. He had set up a transport system, started a farm bearing rich produce, and the isolated land soon grew into a communal grounds for those seeking reassurance and faith.

The boy soon began work on a cave of his own, his emotions finally expressed through the mark of his efforts painted in glorious murals. In that glistening heaven; under the new-born sky that left complete peace in its wake, through the untethered bliss of artistic expression, his wounded calibre began to heal.

He watches the desert, molded into gentle slopes below the firm resoluteness of the sky, the light blanket feeling as humidity collects around him, and bites into the flesh of a peach, fresh from the recent harvest.

Redemption

HKCCCU Logos Academy Campus 2, Chan, Bo Wen - 13

He groans, the sound barely escaping his parched, scratchy throat. The sun beats down relentlessly, burning his sweat-drenched back. Golden yellow sand stretches as far as the eye can see, a seemingly endless sea of gold grains glittering in the glare of the sun. Cacti stick up in his peripheral vision, reminding his hazy mind of fingers reaching for something unattainable.

Visions of his life before this torturous agony swim across his eyes: celebrating wildly with his colleagues after unearthing century-old relics in the Sahara Desert, kissing his wife goodbye, celebrating his child's (Clarissa? Carrie? Carly?) birthday..... They all seem an eternity away now, as if he was watching somebody else's life flick by from afar; yet another mirage of an unreachable haven. For a minute, he ponders whether to just relent to the inevitable, looming grasp of Death and let the vultures take him —

No.

He had been searching for something. What was it? Perhaps his car keys? Letting out a high-pitched giggle, he pulls himself forward in this scorching golden land. He remembers the rumbling of a van and the receding lights of a city; the weight of a bag of tools long since dropped; the delicious taste of greed he'd savored as he had trekked through this very same desert.

An involuntary shiver passes through his body like a ghostly phantom, for the sun was nearing the horizon – and when the sun vanished, the cold came. The bone-chilling, punishing, ruthless cold, which lashed against his frail body like cat-o'-nine-tails.

He had to seek sanctuary.

Fueled with fear, he hauls his listless body through the flat landscape, finding somewhere, anywhere, where he could take shelter against the cold. Going as fast as his water-deprived body can manage, he advances through this painful domain of gritty sand. Time passes, only felt through the impossibly fast descent of the sun and the steady cooling of the arid environment. Panic sets in, a lead-weighted blanket on his frayed nerves. His breaths coming in short, shallow puffs, his eyes almost pass entirely over the oasis in the distance. His breath catches, gaze fastening on the sparkling sapphire crescent on the dusky skyline, winking at him in lieu of the sunlight. Surrounded by lush trees and backed by a multi-storied pagoda, it was too good to be true.

Which meant it probably was. Even so, he braves forward resiliently, trying to brush away the worry that it would be a mirage – albeit an extremely detailed one. He crawls closer and closer, until truly towering in front of him were the dense trees, backed by the imposing pagoda. Distracted by the beauty of the sight before him, he doesn't realize he's getting overly close to the crescent lake until it's too late. Not even being able to utter a sound, he plunges full tilt into the sapphire lake.

Closing his eyes, his last coherent thought is that drowning in a picturesque lake is at least better than perishing of thirst in a scorching desert.

But then.

He opens his eyes, blinking blearily, his thoughts incohesive and muddled. *Is this heaven?* He thinks. *If so, it's more Buddhist than I thought.* Colossal walls completely awash with

Buddhist art surround him, depicting medieval scenes of culture, religion and arts. Directly in front of him is a vibrant polychrome sculpture group on a raised dais, looking so lively it's as if they are about to step off. Footsteps interrupt his train of thought and he stands up, surprised at the strength his legs seemed to have regained. Just as he turns around, a monk steps through the archway set into the wall facing the group of sculptures.

The monk smiles kindly, the crow's feet around his eyes crinkling. "Ah," he remarks. "You have awoken." His words are tinted with a heavy accent which the man cannot place. Startled, he bows hastily to the monk. The monk smiles again, inclining his head. "I have been treating you for the past few days. You must have a lot of questions, and they will be answered in due time. But first, please drink this water." Handing him a wooden bowl filled to the brim with sparkling water, his mood turns serious.

"I have glimpsed your ways of life, and they have not been satisfactory, archaeologist. You have been dishonest and greedy, disregarding your family and colleagues. With your consent, I will lead you on a cleansing period to teach you a more satisfactory way of life, much like drinking this refreshing water to flush out toxins."

He chokes on the water, half of it slopping down his front. "Wait, wait, wait. Slow down and dial back to the 'glimpsing' part. How were you even able to do that?"

"My visions. They have shown me how you planned to excavate a region in this desert, alone, to claim the artefacts found and sell them to the highest bidder; in the process abandoning and betraying your colleagues, dismissing their efforts – when it was them who figured out that there were artefacts to be found in that region, to begin with. Furthermore, you have neglected your wife and young child, favouring greed and deceit over their love and care. You —"

"Okaaaay, you can stop now. Who are you to accuse me of anything, anyway? I don't know you, and you don't know me. Why don't we just forget this encounter entirely and I'll be on my way. Thank you for the water and offer of 'cleansing', but I'll have to bid you goodbye."

And with that, he steps through the archway and into the dimly-lit space beyond.

"You'll just get lost again, you know," The monk says mildly. "I was just like you once, a stubborn, selfish village boy named Yuezun."

The archaeologist pauses, a hand clasping the stone doorway. "Okay, let's say, hypothetically, that I accept your help. What would be in it for me?"

Yuezun, as we now know, pauses and seems to think for a moment. "Enlightenment. Redemption, self-discipline. Inner peace and balance. Need I say more?"

The hand on the archway releases its grip and drops down. "Alright then," the archaeologist sighs. "Teach me your wise ways, Brother Yuezun. But first, you have to answer me how you transported me here through the scorching desert."

Yuezen allows him only a mysterious smile.

And so begins the cleansing. The day after, Yuezun wakes the archaeologist with a singing bowl, giving him a dhonka not unlike his own.

"Put this on," he commands. "And follow me."

He obliges, slipping it on over his underclothes, and follows in the monk's footsteps. They go up a seemingly endless flight of stairs, leaving the archaeologist huffing and puffing in the wake of the monk's billowing tunic. At long last, they arrive at a precipice overlooking the desert, at which the monk promptly sits down and closes his eyes; he keeps balance on the craggy rocks as if he had been there for centuries, unshifting in the face of the dusty wind. The man scoffs in disbelief and immediately refuses.

The monk lets out a huff, saying, “To change your ways, you must first adjust your mindset to accept change itself. What seems impossible is only improbable — fear and doubt will only hold you back from your true aspirations.”

The archaeologist only grunts in response, but duly positions himself next to the monk. He tries his best to achieve a state of zen, swiping away the fear that clouds his mind. Eventually, he attains a mind clear of clutter, succeeding in detaching himself from external distractions. Of course, that’s when the monk rouses him, leading him back down the stairway to a secluded, comfortable chamber. He sits crossed-legged and invites the archaeologist to do the same. Without waiting for him to comply, he begins bestowing wisdom upon him, lecturing him on redemption and self-improvement. After the cliff-top incident, the archaeologist has learned to trust this venerable figure. As if he were a child eager to learn, he mimics the monk’s position, turning his face up to the wrinkled benevolence before him.

As time goes on, this routine becomes the usual for this unusual pair. However, ultimately, Yuezun the archaeologist up earlier than usual and gives him a melancholy smile. “I am afraid I have taught you all I can, archaeologist. May all your journeys be fruitful.” With that, he claps his hands together.

The archaeologist awakens in a cool van. His colleague is watching over him wearily, but his eyes widen when he sees him regain consciousness. “Thank goodness you’re awake! We found you about a mile south of our campground; where have you been?”

“I-”

“And what was the pendant around your neck? When we inspected it closer, it turned out to be an artefact from the Tang Dynasty. How did you end up with it?”

But the archaeologist only gives him a mysterious smile, a mirror of the one that Yuezun gave him what now seems so long ago.

The First Grotto

Shanghai American School - Pudong, Lai, Charlotte - 13

The blazing sun shines bright like a medallion in the sky. Le Zun wipes a line of sweat off his face as he shifts his focus to the journey ahead. Numerous days have passed since his arrival at the Gobi Desert and the trip has only gotten harder with his increasing fatigue. So, in order to distract himself from his sweat-drenched robes and aching body, Le Zun begins to think about the destination that he longs to reach – the Western Paradise.

Like the countless monks before him, Le Zun embarked on his journey to set foot on this blissful land and get reborn into peace and plenty. Just like that, thinking about his wonderful destination, Le Zun quickly loses himself in his imagination.

Angelic music sounding from the sky, trees glowing with precious fruit, ravishing images of the Western Paradise flashes in Le Zun’s head. He’s deep in his thoughts when a cold breeze suddenly brushes against his face, pulling him back into reality. With the cooling temperature and the sun’s changed location in the sky, it occurs to Le Zun that a lot of time must have passed while he immersed himself in his fantasies.

“Well, it looks like I should find somewhere to settle for the night. It indeed is getting colder with every minute” Le Zun tells himself. If he doesn’t want to get stuck in middle of the desert, he knows that he should pick up the pace and make it to the mountains before dusk. And as the sun slowly begins to set, the temperature drops. Without the intense heat of the sun, this journey that was deemed exhausting to him doesn’t seem so bad after all. In not much time, Le Zun reaches the mountains.

As he makes his way up, a spring in the distance catches his eye. With his mind preoccupied with the tireless imaginations, Le Zun had almost forgotten how thirsty he is. And now, with the serendipitous appearance of this spring, he simply couldn’t have been more delighted to quench his thirst in its flowing waters. Under the exhaustion of his journey and the approaching night, Le Zun decides to make camp near the spring and lay down to rest.

Soon, it becomes dusk. Le Zun lies drowsily in his camp, admiring the sunset. Suddenly, just when he’s getting ready to rest for the night, the mountains begin to glow. In his disbelief, he raises his head and an image of the glorious golden Maitreya Buddha appears floating out from the mountains and into the sky. Le Zun is quickly astonished by this heavenly sight. And before he knows it, a thousand glowing Buddhas emerge, lighting up the sky. Sparkling fairies follow by flying out and surrounding them, performing delightful music that’s simply a joy to hear.

Le Zun remains dazed in this breathtaking sight when the buddhas and fairies are suddenly retreating back into the mountains. Just a blink of an eye later, they are all gone, as if none of it ever happened. Le Zun rubs his eyes and regains himself a little.

“Oh, I must have dozed off without even knowing it!” Le Zun mutters somnolently to himself. “That’s probably just all a dream, but at least it was a beautiful one.”

But suddenly, something occurs to him. What if he wasn’t dreaming? What if all the buddhas and fairies and music hadn’t just been an illusion? Perhaps the scene he saw was a vision!

“I was just completely transfixed by that radiant scene! But if it really was a vision, I should stay and celebrate it; maybe I can even recreate it for more people to see!” Le Zun

excitedly exclaims. With this new idea, all his drowsiness seems to fade away in an instant.

Lifting his head, he takes a glance at the sky. With everything happening, Le Zun didn't even realize how much time has passed. The sun has descended into the mountains and the moon appears in the sky, gently peeking out from the clouds. The night sky is like a dark, velvet cloak covered in shimmering sequins. The moon shines brightly in the middle, casting down its light that glimmers on the fields around him. Now, being in such a pleasant and serene setting and feeling content with his plans with the vision, Le Zun finally tries to calm himself and settle for the night.

It's early the next day when he wakes up; the rose-pink light of dawn has just started to appear. He rubs his eyes, regaining enthusiasm for his ideas from yesterday. Oh, how wonderful that scene had been! And how blessed have he been to be the one to witness it! However, though wishing to enjoy himself and take his time, Le Zun knows that he must hurry in order to recreate the scene and not waste too much time on the journey. Just like that, he quickly sinks into his thoughts.

Le Zun's had plenty of experiences with art in his life, so recreating the scene wouldn't be too challenging. But of course, he knows that he can't just paint or sculpt out in the open like this. What he needs is a place to create and store his art – a shelter. Suddenly, an idea pops into his mind.

“With the tools that I have, I can create a grotto. This way, the art I make will have somewhere to go!” Le Zun declares while looking around at the various mountains surrounding him. “It shall be right on the sandy cliff walls in between these mountains, right below where the glorious scene appeared.”

Inspired by this new idea, Le Zun immediately set off to work at the cliff wall. It was arduous work. But in the great mood that he's in, he didn't really complain. Just like that, a small cave was dug out on the cliff walls in no time. Then, with the inspiration and motivation the vision gave him, Le Zun begins to work inside the grotto – creating murals and sculptures to represent the breathtaking scene from last night. Finally, he wraps up the hard work and stands from afar, admiring the beautiful cave.

“It looks like that little idea of mine has certainly gone a long way,” Le Zun exclaims with a big smile plastered on his face. “Well, I guess it's time for me to move on. I still have a lengthy journey to complete.”

After packing up his belongings, Le Zun takes one last longing look at his work. He would love to stay at this site longer. However, time is passing by and he knows that he needs to get going. Le Zun pushes himself away from the spring where he so cheerfully quenched his thirst, down the mountains where he's peacefully spent the night, and ultimately away from the sight of his grotto. As he stepped out into the opening away from the shade of the mountains, the heat of the desert embraces him. Though unlike yesterday, Le Zun isn't tired or annoyed anymore. This vision has filled him up with energy. And as he continues his long journey to the Western Paradise, he cannot help but think of the grotto that he's left behind.

In several years from now, maybe another monk will arrive at this spot. Maybe they will have the exact same visions like he had. And maybe the little grotto filled with his art, words, and story will be discovered and they will appreciate it just as much as he did. Le Zun can't help but smile at the thought of this.

This concludes the story of the entrancing legend behind the first grotto of a tremendous treasure house full of stories and possibilities. Although Le Zun's story is only a local legend with no proof of accuracy, we don't really have another explanation either. When thinking about it, everything started with just a simple vision of one monk. Yet it was with this vision

of his that continued to change and impact the world even today. Little did Le Zun know that through the course of one thousand or so years, his simple vision would have turned into a pilgrimage site for travelers all over the country, a flourish of creativity, art, and innovation, and an exceptional representation of medieval art, culture, and religion. Just like that, Le Zun's one single grotto, with the contributions of the thousands of monks that came, expanded to a considerable number of 492. And for us today, these 492 grottoes also became a popular and enchanting tourist attraction. People all around the world came to Dunhuang, Gansu to journey through this dazzling tunnel and discover the fascinating world from the past. And just like that, an ordinary spot on the route of the Silk Road, through the course of a thousand or so years, became the extraordinary Mogao Grottoes – the great treasury of Buddhist art that we have come to know and love today.

The Harmonies of the Sun

Shanghai American School - Pudong, Zhou, Madison - 13

“The history of the past interests us only in so far as it illuminates the history of the present.”
-Ernest Dimnet

366 AD

The setting sun descends with a harmony of red and yellow, leaving a symphony of shades that reflect over the endless eminence of the desert, humming a mellow tune that echoes across the land. It retreats, absconding into the dark shelters of the mountains.

He takes another step forward, eyes squinting at the distant horizon, his feet sinking into the roasted sand. His shaven head fails to shield itself from the heat, and his wide, orange sleeves flutter at the whistles of the wind.

The sun leaves passages of resplendent radiances across the jagged surfaces of the mountains.

And suddenly, on the rocky surface of the hill, a blurred scenery gradually awakens. Beams of gold scan the mountains, contouring the thousands of silhouettes that incandesce under glints of light. The distinct manner of their majestic positions glow with vestiges of rose firelight; their muted features are traced by radiating halos of lambency—

A sudden blinding of the sun—and the silhouettes are gone, leaving behind no traces save the rays of light, revolving ever so silently.

He blinks, arising from the realm of reveries, his mind blank yet tainted with one thought: *that vision—it’s a message, an appeal—one that demands a response.*

866 AD

The sharp, crisp sound of porcelain on stone and paint pots on uneven ground betoken the morning of another sunrise, bedecked by indistinct chatters. The golden specie—a bloom of brilliance—peeks from the horizon, sending messages of copper onto the ground and into the hollows of the hill.

Those hollows each chronicle a stage in the process of creativity. Shadows are printed on the rocky ground, rotating in correlating directions with the sun. The diverse hues of pigments in pots scintillate under beams of sunshine.

The *Jiangs*¹ robes are stained with the slightest traces of those vivid tinctures. They dip the brushes in paint and sweep off the excess, creating thin streaks of pigment that idly slide down the sides of the pot, like raindrops gliding down leaves on a spring morning. Then, the paintbrush tips are on stone, the elixirs of beauty creating copious landscapes where floral patterns bloom and apsaras flit across walls—where the scenery breathes along with the euphonious melody of the sun. Every mural is a memento—of not just the stories...

Voices in the grottoes:

“Yue Zun, wasn’t it, the monk who saw a thousand buddhas?” a *boshi*² turns to a nearby *duliao*³.

“I believe so.” the *duliao* replies, turning his head and averting his gaze from the accumulation of caves.

“Have you ever considered the authenticity of the vision, its accuracy? How can we ensure that all this work will not be for nothing?”

The *duliao* blinks at his straightforwardness and sighs, “We cannot ensure that, young *boshi*. Yet the flaw of the belief—the acceptance of it—gives us the vitality to act. And in doing so, we’ll all eventually be able to find a meaning to this.” he stops, as if lost in thought. The *boshi* stares at him, all perplexity and anticipation.

“And the meaning itself can have sundry meanings; its significance will range greatly—or remain unfound.” the *duliao* concludes.

The *boshi* gapes at him, overwhelmed with confusion; he pivots and heads into the interior of the grotto. The *duliao* watches his receding figure disappear into the shadows, then turns to the sun, uttering a whisper: “But my greatest fear is of the value being found, then lost.”

As he walks back, the footsteps he prints into the sand are immediately wiped out by his robes, leaving only the placid sand, ever so smooth—leaving the sea of sand to devour all marks.

1400 AD

He was indeed right—the sea of sand swallowed it all: 735 grottoes of art, a legion of history...lost.

The sun rises again from the edges of vision, sending muted beams of honeycomb-yellow sunlight to survey the mouths and interiors of the caves. They flit over antiquity for a fraction of a second—and then darkness again.

The intricacy of the portrayals fade, becoming shades paler by every day—even those dabs of gold powder have ceased to twinkle; the statuettes are locked in realms where time is only extant on their appearance; the layers of dust over bundles of sutra and manuscripts have obscured the ink—the messages.

The roaring silence completes the space, filling up the crevices in the corners, muffling the voices of the past. Under the shelters of shadows, the ancient artifacts dim, gradually blending into dullness. Thin webs of silver cling to the nooks of the caves, attempting to catch the fragile memories—to preserve what had been neglected by their own creators.

The rays of amber sunlight sing a melancholy tune:

The mournful sunlight *retreats,*
leaving the lonely hill—

A hill with dimples

but no smile—

to be enveloped

by the sea of gold.

Into the bottomless sea

it sinks,

unfathomable like its tenor.

Deep.
To long—and it will be
Out of reach

1900 AD

The muffled sounds of straw on stone disturb the silence of a spring morning. The broomstick's bearer peeks into the shadows of the grotto, then steps into the chamber, footsteps adding edgy clicks to the silence. His vision skims over the faded murals, weaves through the miraculous statues, and sets on a section of a wall.

With a scrutinizing perspective, he forms a hazy cognization, running his palms over the surface and tracing its floral patterns, as if searching for an unidentified subject—

Then there it is, a slim slab to the right: it pops open with a slight push, as if it had been waiting forever for that minute force.

The 'wall' creaks. And withdraws in—a hidden chamber.

He gasps, coming to register the surroundings. Dropping his battered broomstick, he gingerly steps in. His eyes survey the landscape: thousands of scrolls, piled in mountains, parallel to the wall. The narrow beams of sunlight embroider the dust-covered papyruses with amber dashes.

He reaches abruptly and his fingers grasp the end of a sheet; tugging it out and rolling open the delicate parchment, his eyes reflect his wonder, dust and sand dancing around him. He finds countless peculiar characters staring back at him, the faded ink almost breathing across the paper—

—the paper that felt like dry leaves, yet also like silk.

Voices in China:

"Discovery is crucial. And the study of history is, too. What Wang Yuanlu did—it's remarkable."

"Nonsense. He sold China's ancient artifacts, unlatched the passage for countless harms that are being inflicted on them."

"Yet, what he did shed light on those once-neglected treasures, bestowed them with new value..."

"His actions..."

And the debate perpetuates...

Today

The setting sun descends—a golden coin slipping through the fingers of wind, absconding into the mists of the clouds.

The natural light sends rays of amber into the golden landscape below, bringing harmless flames to the dimples on the hill—tracing its smile. The portrayals are encapsulated in the legion of grottoes, dimmed by the obstruction of light, dimmed to preserve their beauty—what could have been done years earlier.

These objects of virtu are exceptional. They alter and reorient, a novel style and technique in every grotto; they are a testament to the sophistication and advancement of civilization, its culture, religion, and intellectual awareness. They capture their history through countless aspects—almost all aspects of humanity.

The footsteps of tourists are drowned by their voices, clustered just like the countless caves on that golden hill, but unable to amalgamate into a scene of beauty.

Voices in the grottoes:

"They built these grottoes—only because a monk encountered a vision?" he asks.

"Partially. They used the vision as a vitality to understand the significance," she replies.

"Yet still, after time, they were forgotten. Some view it as merely art."

"That's because many could not comprehend a meaning that was in-depth enough; it was found, then lost. And now found again. They are much more than art. These grottoes themselves are a branch of learning. There are copious reasons that fabricate its meaning."

Her next words roll off her tongue naturally, with a spontaneous feeling of déjà vu, "*And the meaning itself can have sundry meanings.*"

The receding sun sends melodies of colors—a thousand harmonies, just like a thousand meanings of history.

"History is not a burden on the memory but an illumination of the soul."

—John Dalberg-Acton

¹Jiang: the predominance of the artisans who undertook the standard work.

²Boshi: senior artisans ranked second-highest in the artisan's hierarchy, who executed relatively challenging work.

³Duliao: the most skilled and highly-ranked artificers who supervised the process and performed complicated aspects.

The Confession of a Monk (A Hoax)

St. Joseph's College, Tse, Lap Wo Liam - 13

DUNHUANG, China (AP) — Workers unearthed a letter that shed light on the controversies surrounding the loss of the ‘Mogao Scrolls’. The letter was purportedly signed by Wang Yuanlu, Taoist monk and caretaker of the Mogao Grottoes near Dunhuang in Gansu Province, China, in early twentieth century. It was discovered during restoration work after the pagoda, which commemorated the monk, was found tilted due to subsidence. Below is a full translation of the letter:-

I am Wang Yuanlu. This is a statement about my life and the events leading to and following the discovery of the library cave in the Mogao Grottoes.

I was born in a rural area in Hubei province. My family was in extreme poverty. The land was barren, and I had many siblings. I left home to join a military regiment for food and accommodation, but soon felt I wanted something more, and different. I followed a Taoist master to learn about The Way. The master died, and I started wandering about in the northern provinces, seeking a place to belong to.

I was almost forty when, in 1897, I stumbled upon the Mogao Caves. I could still recall the first, breathtaking sight of Mount Sanwei. It was a vast canvas, golden by the rays of the setting sun and decorated only by the shades of its folds; atop its range were silhouettes of gods overlooking the serene valley with permanent grace. The golden light reflected on the thousand caves, built by generations of pilgrims along an escarpment on this side of the valley. Inside the caves, stunning murals told the stories of Buddha and the deities of many other religions, alongside those of secular subjects. It was dazzling.

There were temples at three levels of the escarpment. The highest and the middle levels were inhabited by Buddhist monks. The lowest level was vacant and seemed neglected for a long time. The entrance was submerged in sand, making it impossible to see the interior of the temple. Staring at the pile of sand, a surge of determination flowed through my mind in an instant – that I had to clear it up to uncover the beauty of its interior.

I gathered up a group of believers to salvage the wreck. We discovered more wall paintings, sculptures and figurines made of wood, metal, ceramic and clay, and all sort of paraphernalia. After mending the first few sculptures, we felt a sheer sense of accomplishment. However, the caves were over a mile across and there were loads to be fixed. Our task was enormous, so was the resources needed. We developed this routine of travelling fifteen miles to Dunhuang, the nearest town, once every two months to raise funds.

On June 22, 1900, when my pupils and I were clearing the sand in the sixteenth grotto, I noticed a crack on one of the walls. I tapped on it gently and it gave a hollow, crisp sound. I immediately asked one of the pupils to dig through the crack. A section of the wall crumbled. My eyes flickered in astonishment as an immense heap of manuscripts, scrolls and silk paintings appeared in sight. They were packed so intact and stacked up so high, that they should amount to tens of thousands.

“This must be valuable,” I muttered to myself. I consulted the village elders at once, and they advised me to keep them in place for the time being. Next, I reported the discovery to the town magistrate and sought his instructions, but he was so preoccupied with the

problem of collecting taxes in his domain that he could not spare a single second for me. Two years later, still not able to resolve the tax problem, the magistrate was replaced. I raised the matter again with his successor, Wang Zonghan. Wang was a caring person, and he seemed genuinely concerned. Although he was very busy, he promised to discuss the matter with a province professor. I had not heard back since. I did not want to give up, so I travelled 800 miles with two caskets of manuscripts to see Yan Dong, the chief of my former regiment, who had since been made Daotai of Gansu Reserve Army. Yan, a calligrapher himself, was not impressed by the artistic quality of the manuscripts, but he was moved by my effort and wrote to the provincial government to propose transferring the treasure to Lanzhou, the provincial capital, for safekeeping. When the official reply finally came in 1904, it was disheartening. Due to the long distance between Dunhuang and Lanzhou, the cost of transportation would be very high, and since funding was not available, an order was granted that the scrolls be kept at the same place, and I was to guard them.

The new responsibility, being an addition to my ordinary duties to raise alms, maintain the tenements and conserve the artworks, was too much for me to bear. I prayed for the mercy of Buddha to have the burden lifted from my frail shoulders.

On May 15, 1907, I had my fateful meeting with Aurel Stein. I had been notified of the impending visit of a very senior official from the United Kingdom, some minister of education. Even with that knowledge, I was surprised by the grand formality of his approach. He was accompanied by a dozen soldiers, sent by the commander of the Shazhou Battalion, as well as a translator named Jiang and a few assistants.

I had returned from an alms round, in time for the annual temple festival. Stein had been waiting for me. Apparently, he had learnt about the location of the cavern and was even shown a sample of the scrolls.

The meeting was set up by Jiang. Its purpose was clear: the scrolls. The day that I had dreaded about had finally arrived. My emergency letters to the authorities were unanswered. With the help of my most trusted pupil, Zhao Mingyu, I hurriedly bricked up the entrance to the cavern. Obviously, it was noticed by Stein. At the meeting, he beat about the bush and pretended not to focus on the cavern and its contents. Jiang asked for a few specimens of the manuscripts. When they were handed to Stein, he could hardly withhold his beam of delight.

Having seen the real articles, they had their mind set. It was an ordeal trying to fend off their persistent requests, which went on for weeks. In the end, I gave in. Yes, they offered me money, and Stein in his most desperate moment even resorted to fabrications about him being the envoy of Tang Sanzang! As I dealt more with Stein, I came to feel that he was a rather ‘pure’ person having a genuine interest in his research. Plus, he promised to keep the scrolls with care. Forty horseshoes of silver were not something that I could easily turn down, considering the dire conditions of the caves and the sculptures waiting to be repaired and the daily needs of my crew. What if I refused? Those people were quite capable of taking things they want by force.

It was a big gamble, but did I have any better choices? And I knew Stein was not to be the last to come.

Ten months after Stein left, Paul Pelliot from France came, with the same objective. He was an Orientalist and spoke fluent Chinese. I had done it once; I was not inhibited anymore. Rather, having an appreciative buyer for the artefacts gave me a sinful kind of relief. What I did not expect was his incomprehensible decision to showcase his new purchases in Peking, which prompted the Ministry of Culture to order removal of all the remaining scrolls to the Capital Library. That was what I had advocated for, in vain, to the Qing Government earlier

that year. Ironically, when the transfer finally happened, it did not turn out in a way it was meant to be.

So, there were further transactions with a Japanese, and then a Russian. When Langdon Warner, an American, came in 1924, there was nothing left for him to buy. We were all busy with the renovation works. If we had known his evil plan, Warner would not have been left alone. By the time it was found out, Warner had peeled off some 26 fragments of ancient murals with glue, causing irreparable damage not just to the relics, but also my reputation.

No more foreigners would come to ask me for anything. I could finally focus on the service to the temples. I had tried my best in light of the circumstances. I feel obliged, given my involvements, to state my version of the story. I entrust this letter to my beloved Mingyu who will preserve it till time deems it appropriate to be revealed.

Yuanlu Wang
Winter, 1930

Vesper's Choice

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Li, Ming Yan Emily - 14

It was dawn when I arrived — my dizziness from the flight and last night's hangover hadn't dissipated. The three-storey house, located in an abandoned area of Venice, was constructed in the 16th century. Its grandeur was by then dusted with emptiness. My Italian grandmother, Vivianna, was the family's last descendant; since she had crossed the ocean, no one else had lived there.

Vivianna was a professor and archeologist who specialised in Dunhuang studies. My love for literature grew under her nurturing: the gleam in her eyes when she told me fantastical adventure stories lit up my otherwise dim childhood. The joy we shared before she passed away, I hadn't felt since.

I wandered in the forlorn house, rather a museum, but all I felt was void. Deep down I longed for the slightest sign that her spirit had visited here, that she had left clues to show me what to do with my life. But nothing had changed— even the pungent medicinal smell remained.

The silence was abruptly interrupted as my phone started ringing. *Isn't it 9 pm in Seattle already?* I reached for my phone in my pocket. Predictably it was my mother calling.

“So have you made up your mind? Please don't tell me you're going to Moscow for that literature programme— you're one year away from getting your M.D. ...”

“Go to bed, Mum.”

“Vesper, face reality, yo—” I promptly hung up and switched off the phone.

Vivianna's bedroom was on the third floor. Everything there was so familiar and strange at the same time. I imagined what it would be like when my ancestors were still living here. My fingers lingered on her bed, her wardrobe, eventually pausing at the antique drawer. I realized I had never opened it. A feeling of excitement washed over me. With a trembling hand, I pulled it open.

A rectangular, yellowed manuscript lay before me as I felt my breath accelerating. I took it out from the drawer and held it in my hands carefully. The fading ink and ragged texture revealed its age.

I sat on the bed and began reading.

A monologue found in Cavern No.493, 1936

By Dr. Vivianna Rosso, department head of Dunhuang study

Unpublished

It was late summer when he came to the Grottoes. He had beautiful eyes, innocent and calm like the sea. He was from Italy, a country I had only read about in books. I had never been outside of the Grottoes as the Grandmaster said the Grottoes were blessed. Marsilio told the Grandmaster he was only in Dunhuang to record and learn for a few months— according to his king's secret order. Master was reluctant to let him stay, but his understandable Chinese and manners guaranteed sincerity, and I insisted— I imagine like in China, failing a royal

mission could get you into fatal trouble. Master sighed and yielded, but forbade me from talking to him.

Yet my curiosity resisted obeying—you mustn't condemn me for that. At dusk, I found him in the middle of the desert— his silhouette was almost devoured by the boundless desert. Naturally, we introduced ourselves; I think he noticed how I couldn't be a monk with my haired head, so I told him my story.

“Adopted... here?”

“Yes. The Grandmaster is like a father to me and everyone here.”

A chime halted our conversation, followed by two more shortly afterwards. When the grottoes' bell rang I was to get my chores done.

“I have to go. Golden-haired boy, I'll see you tomorrow.”

He nodded and coyly grinned.

2.

A few days later, I showed Marsilio some of our grottoes' collections. “And here we are, cave no. 259. Look at that...”

At the back of the cave stood an enormous, life-like Buddha.

“It rivals Michelangelo's... Such a pity that I can't show you what art is like in my hometown.” Marsilio noticed how my eyes dimmed and asked, “So, there're 492 caves in total?” “Actually,” I tilted my eyebrow, “there's one more.”

We sneaked into cave no.96 (the highest one) at night. I walked towards the buddha and gently pressed my hand against its face. A chilling breeze made all the paintings flutter as a narrow tunnel emerged. Marsilio gasped in astonishment.

“And that's cave No. 493. ” I whispered, “Our top secret. Master says it's magic- Isn't it fascinating?”

Marsilio stood rooted to the ground. “Perhaps Galileo had been going the wrong way,” he exclaimed. I chuckled, “Not everything can be justified with logic- it's about faith. ”

4.

Since then, we had been discreetly meeting in the Grottoes almost every night. He introduced me to western culture, science and philosophy while I told him secrets of the Grottoes that the monks refused to divulge. We discussed and debated everything. Gradually, I could picture the mysterious nation Marsilio built with words in my imagination.

One night, I almost got caught when I slipped out of my bed. The Grandmaster accepted my flimsy explanation but I could not ignore his scrutinizing eyes.

5.

However, It was that starry night, when my world turned upside down. We had already been to every cavern so we decided to stroll along the oasis.

“Wan Zhu... Your name means evening star, right? Vesper means the same.”

“I guess I have an Italian name now.” We giggled.

“Some say stars guide you to where you belong.”

“Really?”

“Vesper, if I'm allowed to call you that...”

“Yes?”

“I'm going *home* next week.”

“What?”

I froze. I felt as if the world was spinning— At that moment, the desert was the sky and the sky was the ground I was walking on.

He's going back.

No.

I'm going back. To reality. To our rituals and traditions.

But what exactly was I expecting? I knew this day would come.

He looked away and muttered, “I...”

“Are you willing to come with me?”

“I know it's an impossible thing to ask... but wouldn't you like to go see the world with me?”

I didn't speak. I looked him in the eyes— his eyes, luminous like the stars. I knew instantly where they would guide me.

6.

Knock, knock, knock. I took a deep breath.

“Xiaowan. Come in, please.” *He knew it was me.*

“Grandmaster.” My voice was shaking.

“I know why you're here.” The grandmaster smiled at me cryptically as the wrinkles on his face deepened— I never realised he had aged this much.

“I wish,” I inhaled, “to leave.”

He didn't respond.

“I'm leaving with Marsilio.”

There were no signs of shock on his face: He saw it coming.

“You cannot find what you want in the far west. Only God could grant you the peace of mind.”

“But I long for something... different.”

“I provided you with food and the finest education one could receive, because I knew you were chosen to witness God. Do you know how many have tried but failed?”

“I'm sorry. ”

“You don't even speak that westerner's language.”

“But he's my friend— my first and my only. Mogao— peerless. I'm not a monk! Is a free and normal life too much to ask?”

Silence took place again as the Grandmaster stopped talking. He sighed and stared at me— for so long, it felt like a century.

“Fine... If that's what you want.”

The wooden doors of his chamber were then shut once and for all. I never saw him again.

6.

“If you're sur—”

A sudden peal almost covered his voice but I understood him perfectly. Leaving with Marsilio meant I would never come back ever again.

I raised my head: in the endless amber sky, the crimson sun shone amidst white opaque clouds. Where else could you find this scene? Wouldn't you believe Dunhuang was truly divine?

But leaving here also meant adventure and the unknown. *It's the only way to freedom.*

So I took Marsilio's hand and got on the horse. I was unchained, for the very first time.

My yearning for the grottoes wasted away as our children grew up.

As soon as I finished reading, I realised all the mysteries had unveiled themselves:

My rare Italian name-

This ancient manor in *Venice*-

My grandmother's untraceable devotion for *Dunhuang*-

It all made sense now.

I looked out the window. The sky was still yellow and the rising sun was turning crimson. An oceanic feeling overwhelmed me: I had never believed in God, but I could feel someone was watching over me. I felt an ineffable need to kneel before the windows-I remembered *Vivianna* once told me the altar is wherever you kneel.

As I prayed, I heard a voice: my own voice, mumbling- *If your ancestor was brave enough to trudge through the continents, why won't you follow your heart?*

A bell clanged upon my heart. I finally made a decision.

On the train to the east, I had a dream about my grandmother, in which I was still a child and she was reading me a lovely story about the desert.

New Tales from the Mogao Grottoes

Wellington College, Shanghai, Mazzacurati-Newman, Daisy-Mae - 14

1.

'I'm nervous,' I whispered. Nigel chuckled beside me.

'Of course you are, my boy,' He said. 'Everyone's like that at their first auction. But trust me, you have nothing to worry about. Your work is brilliant.'

I forced a smile.

'Truly,' he continued. 'Vibrant, unique—all the things a person is looking for in artwork. They'll sell for thousands.'

'Thanks.' I replied quietly. Nigel gave me a brief nod, tucked his hands behind his back and strode off to greet the small group of people who had just come through the door. I sighed shakily.

The string quartet plucked elegantly at their instruments. The waiters circled the guests and silently offered them light snacks and champagne. Wide, crinkled eyes stared at my paintings.

I found myself amazed at the scene, amazed at Nigel's ability to transform my studio. The peeling green wallpaper had vanished, replaced by sharp white paint. Where the collection of tarnished wooden planks I called a floor had once been was now a tiled surface polished as though it were a ballroom. Gone entirely were the mismatched chairs, leaving a vast space to roam freely. The walls were adorned with each and every one of the pieces I had painted in the Mogao Grottoes, my signature prominent in the bottom right-hand corner. Nigel insisted that he pay for the renovations, and that was when I realised how much faith my agent put in me.

I took two slices of bread and cream cheese from a nearby waiter to satisfy the rumble in my stomach. Nigel raised his eyebrows at me from across the room and mouthed a question: ready? I bobbed my head. He grinned, lifting a hand to signal to the string quartet. They ceased their playing and balanced their instruments sideways against the floor, waiting.

'Greetings, all.' Nigel said loudly. 'The auction is about to begin. Please assemble near the platform.' I approached it, but lingered near the back of the crowd; there was nothing worse than an arrogant artist. Nigel stepped up onto the stage, stood behind the stand, and smiled diamonds.

Nigel's assistant, whose name was either Jennifer or Jane – I could not remember for the life of me – weaved through the clusters of people, placing numbered cards in each of their hands. When she'd finished, Nigel waved her over rather vigorously, and hissed something into her ear. Even as the warm light blossoming from the ceiling cast us golden, the way she flushed crimson was obvious. She retreated quickly to her post at the entrance of the room. I wondered what she'd done wrong.

The auctioneer, a short, bland-looking man with thinning grey hair, took Nigel's place at the stand, gripping the gavel tightly. Nigel came towards me.

'That girl cannot follow orders.' He clucked, at a volume low enough so that no one but me could hear. 'I asked her to hand out those cards as people entered the room, not just before the auction! How disorganised we must look.' He shook his head. 'As soon as the auction's over, she fired, don't you worry.'

‘It’s fine,’ I responded. ‘It was just a little mistake, that’s all. I’m sure it won’t happen again.’
 ‘Matthias, this isn’t the first time she’s made a fool of me.’ He glared in her direction.
 ‘She’s constantly spilling coffee and stuttering and losing valuable documents.’
 I began to protest, but he interrupted. ‘It’s final. She’s fired. Elizabeth is fired.’
 Her name was Elizabeth. I must have worse memory than I thought.
 ‘Let’s forget about it for now and enjoy the auction.’ Nigel cleared his throat. ‘I’m telling you, they’ll sell for thousands.’ He said again.

The auctioneer clasped his hands together, a sheet of paper tucked between his forefingers. He waited for the first painting to be put on display. I recognised the piece instantly. It was the *lamproptera curius* – the White Dragontail. It was one of the first I painted and one of the most rare butterflies to be found in Hong Kong. The wings were easy to paint – transparent, outlined in inky black – but the true challenge lay in its legs. They were like needles, so thin I had to pluck a single hair from my paintbrush to illustrate them. Incredibly difficult, but I’d managed it.

The man unfolded the paper and read: ‘The Hidden Butterflies of the Mogao Grottoes: The White Dragontail, Matthias Haden.’ His voice was gritty and deep, not at all pleasant to listen to. ‘Bidding starts at £300. Do I have £300?’

Two people raised their cards, a man and a woman, numbers 247 and 53. They looked at each other and the woman said quickly, ‘£350.’

‘£400.’ The man responded.

‘£500.’ Number 53 countered, and the man remained silent.

The auctioneer thrust his gavel against the wooden sound block. ‘Sold for £500. Congratulations.’ The woman smiled tightly and the painting was carried off the stage. Gentle clapping filled the silence.

Nigel patted me on the back. ‘No one ever gets a particularly high bid on the first painting.’ He said to me, though I wasn’t feeling reassured. £500 was not concerning, but I sincerely hoped it wouldn’t be the highest bid for the night. If it were, perhaps those renovation bills would come back into the conversation. ‘I think everyone’s feeling a little timid. But don’t stress, Matthias. £500 is only the beginning.’

‘Next!’ The auctioneer said. The second piece that was brought in was my favourite: the Red Lacewing, also known as the *cethosia biblis*. It was not as uncommon as the White Dragontail, but in my opinion, it was more beautiful. The butterfly was the colour of a ripe pumpkin, lined with dots and smudges of black near the edges that made me think of smoke. The tips of its wings looked like pointed teeth.

Once again, the auctioneer announced the title of the piece, and once again set the starting bid to £300.

This time – to my relief – four bidders brought up their cards, the numbers 41, 9, 101, and 56. A man said, ‘£450.’

Another man claimed, ‘£500.’

Number 41, this time a woman, said, ‘£650.’

Number 101 said confidently, ‘£800.’

When no one challenged that figure, the auctioneer announced, ‘Sold!’ The clapping sounded, and my throat loosened.

‘Not bad.’ Nigel breathed with a laugh. ‘Not bad at all.’

2.

Nigel slid a return ticket, a wad of cash and a bottle of mosquito repellent onto the desk. ‘We need more.’

‘More what?’ I asked, my hands tentative as they grasped the items. The ticket caught my eye: a business class flight to Hong Kong.

‘Why, Matthias! We need more paintings!’ Nigel exclaimed. ‘You saw how much they all sold for the other night, why not entertain this opportunity?’

‘I—’

‘Matthias, you must listen to me. I know what I’m doing; I’ve been at this job for 13 years—’ He sipped his steaming coffee, fixing his beady eyes on mine. ‘You said yourself that there are hundreds of butterflies you found in the Grottoes that you haven’t yet painted. Don’t let this pass you by, son.’

I remained silent, pondering. It didn’t help that his office was intimidating: the blinds closed, the mahogany desk and chair glinting darkly, the way he pressed his elbows against the waxed wood. There was no way I could say no. Without him, I wouldn’t have been able to become anything more than a struggling artist. Without him, I wouldn’t be—

‘Fine. I’ll go.’ I said sharply.

‘Don’t look at me like that,’ Nigel tilted his head, again bringing his mug to his lips. ‘It’s for your own good. You can’t keep all that potential locked away inside you.’

Tucking the ticket, the cash and the repellent into my satchel, I nodded and said, ‘Thank you.’

Nigel smiled. ‘You’re most welcome.’

3.

The warm air surrounded me, sticking to my face, tousling my hair. It wasn’t the most enjoyable experience – in fact, it was rather awful compared to the plane. There were no fans in the Mogao Grottoes, so I was left to wipe away the sweat trickling down my jawline and neck with my sleeve.

It hadn’t been difficult to find the right cave – I’d just needed to pay for a ticket, take a left and walk into the first one I saw, just as I’d done the last time I was here. Of course, I hadn’t known what I was looking for then, but now I did. Behind the reclining Buddha was a very large crack in the wall; so large it could even be called a hole. I wondered why no one had ever noticed it before. I retrieved the small plastic net I’d bought at the gift shop – meant for capturing frogs and the like – from my satchel. I placed it through the hole, my wrist brushing crumbling stone and—

Snatch!

I retracted the net, dragging it along the dusty ground. It was the White Dragontail, a butterfly I’d already painted. I cupped it in my hands and put it through the hole again. Shoving my net back into the wall, I tried to capture another one. I couldn’t see very much – the net’s rod had a wide diameter – but once I felt that I had one, I withdrew it.

This one was not a White Dragontail. It was a Common Birdwing. Excitement tightened my chest. I left the creature for a moment as I searched through my bag for my tools. As soon as I had my sketchbook in one hand and a cotton swab in the other, I lifted the net slightly and pressed two fingers on the edges of the butterfly’s wings to stop it from moving. It felt like feathers, delicate and soft. I opened the sketchbook to a fresh page and swiped at the bottom of the wings gently. Colourful, yellow powder spoiled the clean cotton and I dabbed it onto

the page. I did this several times until the colour was vivid. I rubbed at the dark grey that consumed the upper half of its wings with another cotton swab and pressed it onto the paper.

I quickly sketched the butterfly, the small splotches of black, and the flicks of white against the dark grey.

Beautiful.

I watched as the Common Birdwing fluttered half-heartedly into the hole, helping it along with the pads of my fingers. I smiled: I had my first design.

Beautiful.