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New Tales from
the Mogao Grottoes



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SECRETS LOST FOR A THOUSAND YEARS

We gave students a location, and they dug up stories of remarkable people

EVERY YEAR, THE TEAM at the Hong Kong Young Writers' Award sets a harder challenge—and every year, we end up amazed at how well our youthful authors perform.

This year's theme was particularly difficult – by asking entrants to write about the caves of Dunhuang, we left them with a place in mind, but not specific characters. Furthermore, the caves were associated with art, religion, geography, and history: a tricky, intertwined series of themes.

Yet they knew what to do. Every story needs characters right? And even poetry and non-fiction pieces of writing need to tell us something about people rather than things.

We knew full well that there were some amazing people in the real life tale of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, and realized if students did some investigating, they would uncover some remarkable human stories.

And they did.

Young authors dug up the story of a monk named Le Zun, in 366 AD, who had a vision that caused him to carve a shrine into rocks at a stunningly beautiful crescent lake oasis in the desert. They learned that a second monk named Faliang joined him, and the shrine grew into a huge network of interlinked caves.

Then students found the tales of the travellers on the Silk Road, whose interest in the growing cave temple complex gave the project a huge amount of new energy, plus finance enough to make it expand. A mysterious young man named Wang Jie left a copy of a religious book he had had printed for his parents, with an intriguing dedication. Several students found that little story and imagined what that young man and his parents might be like.

But then our junior historians realized that the historical story came to a sudden halt in chronological terms. A little over a thousand years ago, one of the most important rooms in the cave was sealed off. The Library Cave's door was closed and locked and the literary treasures inside were forgotten.

They kept doing the research! A full 900 years later, students discovered that another group of fascinating characters emerged. There was the poor monk Wang Yuanlu, who appointed himself as guardian of the forgotten caves – and discovered the sealed room when he noticed that his cigarette smoke was being sucked towards a crack in the wall, as if there was a big space behind it.

Then there were archaeologists from the UK and France and the United States who arrived to take items from the caves for museums and collectors. One of them was a model for the Indian Jones character of movie fame. But where they robbers or heroes?

As several students said, there were no clear good guys or bad guys – some say Wang was tricked by them, others say he was greedy for cash. Some say the items ended up better preserved overseas, while others say they should have been kept in China.

But what everyone agrees upon was this: The caves of Dunhuang were found to house historical documents as important as the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls, or other momentous records of the ancient past.

And this cast of characters uncovered the Diamond Sutra, the volume that the young man had left for his parents – now believed by historians to be the oldest complete printed book in the world!

Another special thing about this topic was the fact that there were stories within stories – on the cave walls were found pictures that told tales – even multi-paneled stories that could be said to be the “world's oldest comic books”. Some students based their essays on those tales instead.

All in all, it turned out to be a rich “seam” for research-minded students to dig into. Judging by the energy and fun in the pieces of writing that we received, many students enjoyed the task as much as we enjoyed reading their works.

But there's a serious side to all this too. These days many of us have become aware of the amount of untrustworthy reports which circulate everywhere – not only on social media, or viral messages, but even popping up in much-used sources such as Wikipedia.

Our competition aims to encourage children to practice researching topics – reading and thinking and comparing sources and assembling facts that they feel they can depend on. These days, that's a vital skill to have. More than 90 per cent of the news that international readers receive about this part of the world comes from sources in the West, so there will naturally be mistakes and misconceptions there, especially about Asia, so far away and so different.

The skills associated with education and research are now not just nice things to have: they have become essential skills to create understanding.

Judging by the astonishingly good research skills of the students who entered this competition, the search for truth in the future is likely to be in safe hands.



Nury Vittachi
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