

Winning Entries



HONG KONG YOUNG WRITER OF THE YEAR

Fiction – Group 3 Winner

Ascensions of Wang Jie

Singapore International School, Cheah, Wan En Christabel - 12

Twenty years ago. British Library, London.

Wang Jie, a ten-year-old boy, stares intensely at the vast Mogao collections, dozens of scrolls spread out in front of him on display.

“Your ancestors have passed down secrets and stories about these old manuscripts from the Mogao Caves. They even said there might be an undiscovered timeless cave that grants its discoverer the power of ascension,” his parents whisper in his ear.

“You think I can find that cave?” he asks excitedly, dreaming that he could one day appear on the front cover of the National Geographic magazine.

“You’re capable of anything if you free yourself. Learn from the past, and you will find your way,” they reply. Wang Jie’s eyes sparkle, a wide grin spreading across his face as he runs to hug his parents tightly.

Present day - May, 2022. Library Cave, the Mogao Grottoes.

Now a thirty-year-old professor of Archaeology and Ancient Languages, Wang Jie makes his way into the Library Cave of the Mogao Grottoes, yet again. He opens a worn out notebook. It is his father’s journal, containing Mogao maps and clues collected from visits to museums in Beijing, Paris and Berlin. A crinkled photo of young Wang Jie and his parents slips out of the notebook, and tears begin to roll down his face.

For the past seven years, Wang Jie has been away from his parents, pursuing his dream of finding the secret cave. But no matter how hard he has tried, he has not been able to find it. He starts to wonder if all his hard work has been worth it, if the cave even exists.

Wang Jie feels lost.

As he wipes away his tears, he refocuses his eyes on the wall painting in front of him. It is a large azure-coloured picture of Prince Siddhartha before his ascension to Nirvana. Wang Jie has seen this picture many times before, but this time, he feels a warm flow of calming assurance and hope, perhaps a divine connection guiding him. He then looks closer at the

fold of the Siddhartha's robe on the painting. Carefully brushing away layers of dust, Wang Jie spots a small engraved Chinese symbol that he never noticed before.

Flipping through the yellowed pages of his father's notebook, he finds the same symbol referencing a secret verse to access the timeless cave. Adrenaline beginning to rush through his veins, Wang Jie presses the symbol on the wall and begins to whisper that verse from the notebook:

"This fleeting world is like a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream."

He closes his eyes in anticipation, heart beating rapidly. The ding of a chime enters his ears, followed by the sound of sand falling. Wang Jie opens an eyelid. The wall has started to crumble away, its structure turning into sand as it cascades down. Mouth nearly dropping open, Wang Jie turns around only to see the floor and walls of the entire Library Cave collapsing. Having no other choice, he jumps onto the bridge that has somehow formed in front of him.

The scene evolves around him, a timeless world twisting and morphing. Wang Jie lets out a small gasp as the colours around him begin to swirl. The different hues are exuberant and lively, thousands of Buddhas dancing around him. They seem to smile at him, their robes glittering with the grand colour of gold. Apsaras and celestial musicians float around in the air, their cerulean gowns flowing behind them gracefully.

Wang Jie begins to ascend into the air, feather-soft clouds cradling his body, as he sees a panorama of palaces and pavilions form in front of him. Then, rays of golden sunlight appear, illuminating the new world below him.

Unknown Time. Unknown Area.

Wang Jie is gently let down from the cloud, as if a cupped hand from the sky has come to support him. Looking around, he realises that he is in an oasis. The sun is glowing brightly, water glittering in its brilliant light. Landscaped Bodhi trees around him seem to calm his soul and soothe his mind as their heart-shaped leaves flutter smoothly in the faint breeze. Outside the cool of the oasis, a desert lays there, the golden dunes snaking up and down over the horizon, almost like the scales of a great dragon that has fallen asleep for centuries.

In front of him, there is a five-storey cliff honeycombed with small caves on each level. These must be the Mogao Caves. But there is no tourist or guard in sight. Only a tranquil silence.

Slowly regaining his bearings, Wang Jie makes his way to the closest cave. His eyes widen at the smiling sculpture as he walks in. It is a two-storey structure of a calm, serene Buddha, cross legged, its pristine figure shining beautifully in the honeyed tones that the rays of ethereal golden sunlight bring. Its eyes are intricately detailed and seemingly full of understanding, as if it is trying to comfort Wang Jie.

Hearing faint sounds of mixed languages outside, Wang Jie walks out of the cave, spotting a large route ahead with people walking by. Perhaps he can ask them for help, and perhaps they know where he is. As Wang Jie gets closer, he recognises a line of Bactrian camels with two humps on their backs, usually found on the Silk Road.

He sees Asian long-nosed traders milling around with their floppy hats, wise Indian monks walking purposefully with their white robes, Persian travellers waving around their spices, and Chinese merchants heaving their goods on their backs.

Wang Jie hurries to the closest merchant and asks in Chinese,
 “Ex- excuse me, where are we right now?”
 “We’re at the Mogao Temples in the Dunhuang district,” replies the merchant in an
 obscure dialect.

Uncertain, Wang Jie asks again.

“Dunhuang district?”

“Yes, under the rule of Emperor Yizong of the Tang Empire.”

The Tang Dynasty.

May, 868. Mogao Temples.

One day, a decade after his arrival, a shabby Wang Jie passes by the Yueya Spring village near the Mogao Caves. His body has aged from years of futile endeavours trying to return to his own world. His face shows lines of despair - no one here would believe he came from another world, and no one back in his own world would know about his amazing discovery. His dream of being on the front cover of the National Geographic, and his hopes of ever seeing his parents again, are both long gone.

Wang Jie has never felt more lost than ever.

In the village, he comes across an ancient manuscript. As he curiously reads through it, his eyes widen as he sees the same secret verse he once used. This verse appeared ten years ago when he felt lost, and now appears again. As he reads on, Wang Jie discovers more teachings of wisdom, and spends hours reading them. He feels lighter. Free. He imagines his parents encouraging him with the words “*free yourself*” as he reads it.

Over time, that manuscript is like a diamond that cuts away all of Wang Jie’s despair and delusion. Deciding to freely share this manuscript with the world, Wang Jie uses his modern printing techniques, and one day prints and dates it with this personal note:

“Reverently made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents on the 15th of the 4th moon of the 9th year of Xiantong.”

During the remaining years of the Xiantong era, Wang Jie lives a simple life as a teacher of philosophy and languages in the village. With his students, he writes hundreds of manuscripts on various subjects, some with hidden clues to help people navigate the future.

In the remaining years of Wang Jie’s life, he is filled with contentment and freedom, and no longer desires ascension to fame or wealth. Yet, there is one unfulfilled longing. One night, as he stares at the sky for the last time, he dreams of reuniting with his parents.

May, 2002. British Library, London.

A child and his parents are visiting the British Library for their vacation. In front of them is the Diamond Sutra, displayed as the earliest dated printed book in the world. The child is staring at the manuscript, large eyes glittering with excitement.

“Mom, Dad! Look, the author of this book has the same name as me - Wang Jie!”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to do great things just like him, son. *You’re capable of anything if you free yourself. Learn from the past, and you will find your way,*” they reply, smiling.

The boy has a strange sense of *deja-vu*, and runs to hug his parents tightly, reunited.

HONG KONG YOUNG WRITER OF THE YEAR

Fiction – Group 5 Winner

Road to the Desert

ESF King George V School, Zhao, Ran - 16

The contents of Yang Zhigang's truck: Eight tonnes of lumber, a beat-up stereo blasting Mongolian rock music, and a seventy-year-old ex-tour-guide from Shaanxi History Museum who'd broken out of his nursing home to hitch a free ride to Dunhuang.

"You're telling me I'm harboring a fugitive?" Zhigang demands, swerving to the side of the highway and gaping at the old man in the passenger seat. He turns down the heavy metal and rubs his face, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "You could have said something before I picked you up at that gas station!"

Up close, Mr. Yu looks frailer than Zhigang thought. His back is bowed, and there's a faint quaver to his voice. When he runs his hands through his hair, his fingers shake. "I didn't need to escape," he says pragmatically. "I just walked through the front door. Besides, I left a note on my bed. I'm sure they'll understand."

"What about your family? What if they're worried about you?" Zhigang shakes his head incredulously. "What business do you have in Dunhuang anyways?"

Later, Zhigang will play that moment again and again in his mind—the dusty windows, the slight tremor to Mr. Yu's hands, the steadfast weight of his gaze. He'll wonder what stopped him from turning around and driving the old man straight back to his nursing home in Xi'an. "There's something I need to see," says Yu.

Zhigang scratches his ear and frowns. He's always considered himself a practical man: No questions, no fanciful thinking. He puts his head down, hauls his lumber, and stays out of trouble. But there's something in the old man's voice, something keen and unbound, like if Zhigang dropped him off at the side of the road, he'd walk straight to Dunhuang himself. Later, Zhigang will relieve this encounter again and again in his mind, but at the moment, there's not much going through his head. He looks the old man up and down, turns the stereo back to full volume, and shrugs. "Let's get going then," he says.

The days on the highway run together like streaks of rain, glimmering with yawning skies and distant mountain ranges. Despite his reservations, Zhigang has to admit he doesn't mind the company. As heavy metal blares in the background, Yu regales him with stories

of ancient Chinese relics—wooden horses, jade swords, and the Shang dynasty oracle bones he'd led tours on during his time at Shaanxi Museum. Most of all, the man loves the Mogao Grottoes. As the days pass, Zhigang gathers that he's traveling to Dunhuang to see them. Zhigang has heard of the grottoes, of course—everyone has—but he's never been sure why so many tourists flock to Dunhuang just to see a few dusty caves. It's not his problem, he supposes. If they're happy blowing their money, who's he to complain?

As Yu and Zhigang travel west, the trees and hills turn slowly to yellow plains. Zhigang takes Yu to Weihe River, then to his favorite noodle shop in Tianshui, then to the flame-colored mountains of Zhangye, their ribbons of strata like the whorls of oil paint. He doesn't know why—he still has that shipment of lumber to make—but there's something about the old man, the way he nods along to Zhigang's stereo and reminds him to keep warm, the weight of his hand on Zhigang's shoulder. Maybe Zhigang is just lonely.

On the road to Baoji, Yu tells Zhigang about a Daoist monk finding an abandoned temple in the Gobi Desert, its rafters wispy with cobwebs, its pillars half-buried in sand. He spent his days reshelving books, restoring paintings, and sweeping out the sand-filled halls. One day, following the drift of his cigarette smoke, he found a crack in the wall of a shrine. When he tapped on the stone, he found it was hollow.

"What was behind it?" Zhigang asks, intrigued despite himself. "A secret room?"

"Not just a room—an entire cave system. A library of stone. He found piles and piles of scrolls, stacked from floor to ceiling: Tibetan stories, Sanskrit mantras, manuscripts from every corner of the world. And when he held his candle to the walls, murals leapt to life before him: temples and gem-colored birds, bodhi trees wreathing the high ceilings. And in the alcoves, thousands of statues," Yu says. When his voice gets like this, you can't hear the tremor anymore. "Demons, fairies, gods. Some the size of your thumb, some more than thirty meters tall."

Zhigang shakes his head, whistling. If he found a room of treasures in his apartment, he could stop hauling lumber forever.

In Lanzhou, Zhigang stops at a farm to collect a shipment of nuts. That evening, he takes Yu to the night market on Zhengning Road, and they buy a grilled fish and two steaming bowls of milk pudding. Under the lantern lights, Yu tells Zhigang about the Daoist monk and the explorer who'd journeyed from the West in search of the grottoes' secrets. How they ate together by the fire each night and the explorer wheedled, then bribed, then begged for the monk to unlock the grotto doors. When the monk refused, the explorer returned to him with trunks of silver taels. When the monk raised his voice in desperation, the explorer told him stories of his journey through the Silk Road, of the wind-blasted mountains and wild desert dunes, how the path he'd traced was the same one the legendary monk Xuanzang had traversed on his holy pilgrimage to India. The explorer said that he was Xuanzang's spirit incarnate, that it was the monk's divine duty to bequeath him the sacred tomes. The monk spent a sleepless night beneath the painted eyes of the Buddhas, and in the morning, returned to the explorer's tent. In his hands was a manuscript by Xuanzang.

"The original volume?" Zhigang asks. "The one he wrote during his voyage?"

Yu sighs heavily, spitting a fishbone into the plastic container.

Zhigang shakes his head disbelievingly. "That filthy thief!" He's heard tales of Xuanzang, of course, from his parents and his school teachers, before his father died of lung cancer and he quit school to start laying bricks. But to think that he was a real person, that he laughed and bled and wrote books about his travels. It makes Zhigang's head spin, his ears buzz, like he's just downed a bottle of baijiu. Like he's driven his truck to the top of a mountain and stood there at its summit, gulping in lungfuls of cold midnight air.

At night, Zhigang reclines in the driver's seat and stares at the stars beyond the windshield. Yu is asleep in the small cabin behind him—Zhigang has insisted that the old man have the bed—and his quiet snores reverberate through the truck. It's strange, sharing this small, cramped space with someone else. Ordering two bowls of noodles instead of one. Pulling over to the roadside when the sun floods the grain fields gold, and asking Yu which poem it reminds him of. It's strange, but he thinks he could get used to it.

Qinqiang opera on the stereo today. As much as Zhigang wants to rib the old man for his taste in music, he has to admit that the clamor of woodblocks and string instruments does something for his spirits. A pickup truck swerves in front of them, and Zhigang mutters a string of curses—under his breath, of course, out of respect for the elderly. “And then?” he prompts as he turns onto the highway. “What happens next?”

Yu folds his hands, leaning back into his seat. “The monk spent a blustery night gathering the most valuable manuscripts and sealing them in a cavern, but he couldn't save them all. One by one, explorers from the East and West arrived with their caravans of camels and men. They combed through the scrolls and paintings he'd spent his life protecting, and left with their trunks filled with treasures. They offered the monk money, but what need did he have for money?”

Zhigang looks sideways, waiting for more, but Yu has fallen silent. He gazes out at the snow-capped mountains, their peaks like pale, unfinished brushstrokes against the sky. These days, the simple act of speaking takes more and more breath from him. He's going to catch a cold, Zhigang thinks, with all that wind from those open windows. Zhigang rolls them shut.

At the rest stop, Yu lays two slices of mutton on top of Zhigang's noodles. “You have my mutton,” he says. “Look at those strong arms. A young man needs his mutton.”

As the trees and buildings grow sparser, Mr. Yu gets quieter and quieter. When Zhigang points out the wild camels, he takes longer to lift his head. His breath comes in a frail rattle now, and when the truck tyres jolt against potholes, his rasping coughs grow more and more pronounced.

When Zhigang asks him, again, whether he wants to see a doctor about it, the old man only waves his hand lightly. “Too late for that, too late for that.”

He's dying, Zhigang realizes. *He's dying, and he wants to see the Mogao Grottoes up close before he dies.*

“When we get to the caves,” Yu says, “we need to go see the reclining Buddha.” Zhigang doesn't know when Yu decided he was coming along with him, but he's not about to complain. He might have lumber to deliver, but he's not letting the old man out of his sight. He looks like a stiff wind would blow him into the next county.

“The reclining Buddha?” Zhigang asks, glancing through his rearview mirror at Yu.

“You'll never forget it. The head alone is three meters long, but his face, there's such a stillness to it. Such a serenity. And I've heard that the view from the terraces is spectacular—the whole desert laid out before you. It's a long walk, but that should be nothing for a young, strong man like you.”

“Don't forget about yourself, old man,” Zhigang teases. “Aren't we walking there together?”

Yu lets out a laugh, which turns into a rasping cough. Zhigang pats him hard on the back until it subsides.

The next day, when Zhigang tries to rouse the old man for breakfast, his skin is cool. His

mouth is parted slightly, his face serene in the morning light. Zhigang sets down the plastic bag of congee and bread, a dull weight settling in his throat. “Old man,” he says quietly. “Wake up, old man.”

Outside, the sky is blue and yawning, the distant mountains like furrows raked into the ground by a god. Zhigang stands in the dry grass beside the highway, the desert air stinging his eyes. He feels formless: a flag in a windless sky, a hot air balloon tethered to nothing.

That night, Zhigang parks his truck in the outskirts of Dunhuang and orders a single bowl of noodles. He eats it at the folding table outside the noodle shop, the store sign casting its flickering light on the empty seat opposite him. The broth is good and hot, the mutton slices swimming in chili sauce and freshly cut spring onions. And suddenly Zhigang is crying. He sets down the chopsticks and buries his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking with the weight of the sobs. *Why didn't you tell me, old man?* he thinks bitterly. *Why didn't you tell me sooner?*

The next day, he drops off the lumber, asks his boss for a leave, and sets off for Dunhuang. He drives alone through the wind-tossed tussocks of grass, lights incense alone at the roadside temples, puts on Qinqiang opera for an audience of one. They were so close. Just one more day and they'd have reached the desert. He has to catch himself, now, making jokes to the empty air, pointing out the ridiculous things the tourists wear and realizing there's no one beside him to point them out to. Strange how easily the companionship had become routine, well-worn as a wagon's path in the dirt road of his days.

At the edge of the dunes, Zhigang parks his truck and takes the eight-dollar shuttle bus into the desert. The sandstone cliffs are just as majestic as Yu described, the sculptures like sleeping giants. He stands under the painted ceilings Yu described, their ridges twined with flowers and bodhi trees.

“Did you know that the world's first printed book was archived in these caves?” he finds himself saying to the family beside him. “It was a copy of the Diamond Sutra, a scripture translated from Sanskrit to Old Chinese.”

Soon, a small crowd has gathered to listen to him speak. His words don't weave the same spell as Yu's stories, but they flow out all the same, dredged out from some deep well inside him he didn't even know was even there. He finds himself smiling. Strange that he should be smiling, at such a time, such a place. But he is. And oh, night is falling. The fading sun wheels over the sleeping Buddhas, casts blue shadows over the flowers and bodhi trees, floods the desert gold. Zhigang's voice rises through the old halls, mingling with the rush of windblown sand. Echoing, echoing, echoing.

Fiction – Group 1

WINNER

Zhao and the Swallow Bird

St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Hung, Daphne - 9

Zhao pushed himself forward through the sandy expanse. He was exhausted, his stomach was growling, and there wasn't a cloud in sight to protect him from the raging sun. His mind flashed back to a memory of his mother's mouth-watering noodles.

His only companion was a swallow bird that he had been following for a few days now. Its company made Zhao feel calm during this uncertain time. The bird had directed him to an oasis where he had found shelter for a few days. As the sun rose, the swallow bird pecked Zhao's foot. Zhao woke to a kind face who offered food and water, which he snarfed down hungrily. Zhao told the monk that he was an orphan, the monk felt so sorry for him that he took him in. He introduced himself as Siddhartha and told Zhao about the caves that were around the corner.

The caves looked never ending. What he saw inside them was breathtaking. The drawings on the walls were very detailed and delicate. The choice of colours was bright and cheerful. There were reds, teals, and oranges blanketing the walls. It made him feel comfortable and happy. They were surrounded by sculptures of different Buddhas. They all looked blissful and it made Zhao feel at home for the first time in a very long time.

Over the years, the monk taught Zhao the art of mural-making, sculpting and meditation. One day, he was teaching some children how to mix paints when Siddhartha's daughter, Yan, came out with a cup of tea. They exchanged smiles and Zhao knew that she was the one he was searching for. "I love your art. You should show it to people." Zhao said he was too shy to do that, but Yan's kind words encouraged him, and she stayed with him in the caves as people continued to come and see his art. Zhao crafted two swallow birds for her to thank her, as her name was Yan. Their love blossomed and they had a child named Lei and lived in the caves.

Zhao and Yan created thousands of paintings and pieces of art. People started coming to see their art in the "cave museums". One day, there was a huge earthquake, Lei ran out of the cave as fast as she could. The cave began to shake, rocks rained down on those in the cave, and it collapsed! Lei was heartbroken as she saw her parents crushed under the rocks. Lei looked down to see the other swallow bird in her hands, she swore to herself never to lose it.

Present Day

"Dr. Huizhong, we finally found it!" Huizhong was part of an expedition to find the legendary caves from a thousand years ago. "Ancestor Lei, I kept your promise." He pulled out the swallow bird that Lei had protected for so long. Huizhong found, inside a collapsed cave, two skeletons that had cushioned a carving of a beautiful swallow bird. "Thank you Zhao."

Fiction – Group 2

WINNER

A Journey with the Nine-Coloured Deer

ESF Sha Tin Junior School, Shi, Iris Sun - 9

The deer was gone. We searched everywhere but failed to see the merest shadow of it. My younger brother Martin was heartbroken, while I eventually spotted a piece of bark with a sentence.

“If you miss me, stand under that oak.” Martin read aloud. “Let’s go, now!”

Within 10 seconds, Martin and I were under the oak. Something white flew out of the sky.

“Hello, friends,” the deer said affectionately, “Climb onto me.” It lowered the front half of its body.

“Are you the legendary nine-coloured deer?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes, I am the deer of nine colours. 2800 years ago, I promenaded on the bank of the Ganges. 1700 years ago, a painter brought me to my new home in the grottoes.” it muttered.

It flew like an angel, but with no wings. We felt puffs of air rising and falling. I gripped Martin’s waist tightly. Those incredible past few days flashed back into my head...

The Forest

Martin and I played in Midnight Forest until the sun was only a hazy orb going down. Suddenly, a small, saddening, desperate whimper echoed through the forest. It sounded like an animal weeping.

Before I processed the noise, Martin was already dashing into the forest like a crazed lightning bolt. When I ran deep into the wildness of the forest, Martin was crouching down, patting a deer and trying to feed it with a sandwich.

Martin made a hush sign, pointing at the deer’s right leg. It was bent at a strange angle, with a few drops of blood on the ground. Its eyes were wide with fear as it shuffled away. It was a unique deer with bright red, chrome yellow, lemon yellow, mint green, sap green, turquoise, sky blue, ultramarine, and violet spots on it.

“It is okay, little deer! We will help save you.” Martin raised his sweet baby voice. The deer did not appear to trust him. I stroked its back gently, and I was shocked by this deer’s soft, fuzzy, and silky coat.

In the following days, we were keen to go to the forest. Martin usually fed the deer with wild berries. I chatted with the deer to comfort it. It seemed to get more relaxed. On the fourth day, unexpectedly, it spoke.

“I’m sorry if I didn’t trust you at the beginning.” It said gently to not startle us.

“It can t-t-talk!” Martin shouted. I hushed him, taking notes. I used to bring a notebook everywhere with me.

“I once saved a drowning man. He swore to hide my whereabouts, but he broke his promise. His king chased me desperately, but I conjured my powers to wield off the sharp arrows. This encounter made me suspicious about humans.”

Then it whispered: “Thank you for taking loving care of me. I’ll show you the wonders of my caves.”

The Caves

After what seemed like a long ride on the deer’s back, we eventually arrived at the deer’s home. There were thousands of half-hidden caves on the cliff. They reminded me of termite holes, so cramped together. The place must have been Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang.

“Here it is. 60 years ago, my cave was named No. 257.” It declared. “Let’s go to Cave 428, home of my 240-year-younger self. People called me Prince Mahasattva at that time.”

Cave 428 was a marvellous place, with a meticulous, super-detailed roof, complete with flying apsaras. Inside of it, I saw tigers licking a pile of bones.

“Were Prince Mahasattva eaten by that starving tigress?” I asked.

“Well, the story was a twisted one. I went hunting with my brothers one day. We saw starving a tigress who was about to eat her own cubs. I offered myself in exchange. However, good intentions alone would not save a life. The tigress refused to eat me alive, so I sacrificed myself. The tigress, in tears, ingested my body.” the deer uttered.

“Wow!” cried Martin, staring at the deer for a trace of Prince Mahasattva, as I scrawled down notes on my notebook furiously.

A second later, we landed on Cave 285. It was as marvellous, with its intricate painting of gods and flying fairies. There was also a coffin-shaped ceiling.

“What happened?” Martin asked curiously.

“500 bandits who committed horrible crimes were captured by the King. They were sent on trial and were given the cruel punishment of having their eyes gouged out. They met me. Well, another 240 years after being Prince Mahasattva, I was incarnated again and this time named Siddhattha Gotama. My disciples called me buddha. I brushed the air, and the bandits had their new eyes back and received enlightenment.”

The deer clapped his hooves, and people and animals started to emerge from the walls. Martin and I stared at them with our mouths open! Apsaras flew and played sweet, joyful music, scattered colourful flowers. Some fluttered rainbow wings and swung on clouds, and some had chicken legs and cloud tails. They were so lively! Prince Mahasattva strode in a single, intact piece, and buddha opened his eyes and slowly sat up. The 500 bandits were chatting, with goblets of wine in their hands.

We joined the party. I danced in the air, as light as a feature. I played the Chinese lute gracefully, and Martin blew a panpipe, bringing jolly laughter. I heard hooves sound and saw Tang Sanzang riding a grey horse.

“Where’s the Monkey King?” Martin could hardly hide his excitement.

My watch abruptly beeped. Oh, it was already ten! Mom would be so worried about us! The deer understood and nodded. We rode on its back home. The deer glowed in the moonless night sky like a crystal radiating nine colours.

It was time to wave goodbye to the deer.

“Where have you been---?” cried Mom’s voice from behind.

The deer disappeared, leaving three small fragments of a lotus petal drifting in the air. Martin and I turned around and winked at each other.

Fiction – Group 4 WINNER

The Wind Full of Colors

St. Mary's Canossian College, Lau, Alicia - 16

I hold my hand steady, but it will not stop trembling. It could not, since the day I escaped. Not since the day arrived here, a silent, hidden place, grottoes, full of colourful paintings and murals. Not since last week, when I was handed a brush and ink for work.

Not now, when I sit down in my dark little cave, the walls thin and bare with nothing but shadows.

I will walk along the wind full of colours.

Colours. Where? There were none, not on this canvas. Not in anything I have ever drawn. After all, it's not that I could find any to draw with in the first place. Aunt's voice drifts, reverberating in my skull. I wish she were here to tell me.

I watched as the diluted blackness of liquid threatened to fall off the tip of the brush. It would stain the empty canvas, diffusing through, like tears would. I let it fall. It blooms through the paper, darkness spreading out.

Then I paint. I paint of my lost aunt, on her features a rare tilt of her crooked smile; the sister I had left behind, the rough calluses on her young hands; the wells of nothingness curling deep beneath my heart, coiling upwards to devour a little bit of me every day. I paint two monsters, monsters that look painstakingly like me. I feel them yanking on my hair and slapping me and kicking my ribs and shoving me into water and tearing my art and breaking my brushes and I hurt and hurt and hurt—

But no. My brush strokes halt. My chest heaves, and I clutch my brush so tight that it feels like it might break any moment. My right hand still trembles, and I drop the brush. "It's not real, I'm free, I survived," I whisper. My voice echoes from the dry walls of the sandy cave I am in.

Survive, survive, survive...

"I'm safe here. I survived them, I escaped marriage. I'm at the Mogao Grottoes, among monks and artists. I can live now." I say out loud, voice trembling and barely audible. Master Zhong said it would feel better like that. At least, I think that's what he said. I never managed to pay attention.

It doesn't, so I tear my art to pieces. Black shreds fall onto the sandy ground, and I don't bother to clean them up. The floor is filled with them, anyways.

They don't hurt when I step on the ground.

The floor is sandy and rocky and pricks my skin when we sit down cross legged. Alone I sit, among the shadows. Master Zhong is halfway through the class, but as usual, everything passes from my left ear to the right. My eyes stray to the walls of the cave we were in. It looks different from last week, somehow. I let my gaze wander, and I realise that it is the black

swirls at the edge of the cave entrance that is new. I cannot see what exactly it is, but I can tell that the strokes are full of untold stories. They stretch out through the height of the cave, as tall as three people: Unfinished linings of clouds I have never fully glimpsed, silhouettes of people dancing in silks, light streaming onto clouds floating in the sky...

The more I look, the more familiar they seem. In those strokes, I see my own. So similar, yet at the same time so different. I think of the painting last night, black and bleak.

Before I can do anything, Master Zhong stands up, and I know that it is the end of the lesson. I slink away, lest the master catch me for another inspirational talk. I don't want to waste his time. But I cannot help but take one more glance at the painting.

Night again. At least, that is what the sky outside tells me. The darkness outside seems to seep into the cracks and crevices of my cave. It engulfs me, so that I am void both inside and outside. The great, shadowy thing in me, baring its teeth, clawing towards my soul.

But it is so quiet. I am still not used to the odd absence of a constant fear— of my parents, of the thing of a life I had. And every night, I still imagine the last day at “home”.

“Zhen! The study is unclean, and there is ink on the table. What is it you have been doing in the house? Huh? We give you food and a roof above your head and this is how you repay us? You useless girl!” Mother hisses. She is careful not to scream, lest she wake up any of her fourteen perfect sons. They have to train and study well to serve the country well, she prides.

“We’re offering you something. To get married with Aunt’s husband. Your aunt disappeared five months ago, and her husband requests we send a younger and prettier girl. Sick of that witch, he is too.” So that is why I have not seen her. Father appears next to Mother, smirking, yet a hint of desperation in his tone.

He needs to keep the alliance for the drugs, but my mind is too sluggish to think straight.

“No,” I plead. My voice breaks, and I go onto my knees, as I always have. I cannot. I’ve seen Aunt, the despair and vacancy in her eyes the day after she was married. The one I see every time after her marriage. Mother slaps me, as if it is what she is programmed to do whenever I kneel. “No,” I continue pleading and begging, but I know it is useless. They don’t even bother to hit me anymore.

I am left there kneeling, hair uncombed, face streaked with red hot tears. The wedding is tomorrow, they said.

I don’t even get to live another day.

But the next day, they cannot find me. Someone showed up at my window, handing me a small strip of paper. ‘Follow me. I walk with the clouds, along the wind full of colours.’ It said. My heart had skipped a beat, because I know who that sentence came from.

“Aunt?” I whispered. But the figure did not reply, and I knew that the figure was too short to be her. So I had no choice but to follow her, through rivers and valleys, until we reached here. Then she disappeared. I never caught a glimpse of her face, obscured through weeks by her orange hood. But I knew that my aunt was part of it.

Something nags at my brain now. I think of the painting I saw on the cave walls, black and beautiful yet incomplete. I wanted to see it— I needed to see it. I think of the resemblance its technique holds with mine, the one which Aunt taught me.

I am sunken too deep into my own pits of darkness to bathe myself in another. But something takes hold of me, and I step out of the shadows of my cave. Silently, I glide along the corridor until I reach the cave where the artist is silhouetted against tiny candles. My heart drops when I realise that the silhouette is not thin and bony. No, it is not Aunt— foolish hopes. Yet disappointment is weakened and despair eliminated as my gaze drifts to what the artist is painting.

The brush strokes are no longer black. Rather than shadows, they act as frames for the beautiful images that lay on the cave walls.

That was what it seemed to be missing, I realised. Colours.

Then the artist shifts to the right, and her shadows part to reveal a splendid chroma. My breath catches when I see it.

It was as if the clouds and winds were leaping out of the dreary cave walls: I could see the azure clouds lined with gold, as if the Sun glowed behind it; the mountains and hills lush and green; and though the artist outlined no wind, I could see the hues of red and blue and shining gold peering through the patterns of silk and cloud, and the women in them walking between. I could see tale weaving: that of a simple woman, draped in expensive silks and garments and vacancy in her eyes, in a world full of riches she does not belong.

But it is not the beauty of the life it describes that captures my attention. It is the similarity I see between it and my Aunt's work. And I inhale when a piece of memory tugs at me— that of a tale of a woman that, through putting behind materialistic matter, discovered the way to ease suffering. To find more than survival in life, but life itself. "*She gave up riches and extravagance to walk among the clouds. She saw beyond it all— the pain and suffering, the endless loop of survival we put ourselves into. Where people feel nothing but the breeze and the shivers they bring when the wind blows, she sees the colors in the wind. She walks among the brilliant colors— among the wind full of colours.*", Aunt told me. I didn't understand, I replied. She only smiled, and told me that I would, one day. Somehow, I knew that this painting would let me understand.

Clank. The artist puts her brush into her tin can. She turns, and I dart to the side of the cave. I cannot get caught. I need to be hidden, even if there is no reason for me to be. In a split second decision, I scurry back along the path. I try to quench the whisper in me.

I will be back.

The next night, I cannot sleep, as a mixture of my usual darkness and a strange new combination of hues fill my head. I try to pick up my paper and ink, to paint out the monster in me. But it growls less today, and I do not feel like splashing ink again. Instead, I look out to the sky. A few more stars speckle it today. Before I know it, I am again at the entrance of the cave.

More is painted today. The woman is now complete, and her features are worry, pain, desperation. Next to it, another figure is painted. Another version of her, in another time, I think, finding her path. More serene. Next to her are no longer sparkling gold beads and bracelets, rather, her accessories diminished, silk wraps more simple. And the artist, looking the same as yesterday, works her magic, weaving my Aunt's tale.

I don't know how long I stood there, just that I did the same for five more days. And on the fifth day, when I sat down to draw in my own tiny room, I realised that I could not face the endless black mirroring my soul. I would not let the monster take hold. In my head are images of colour and life, and before me a wall of a dark, empty cave.

Winds full of colours. I needed to paint that, like my Aunt had always wanted to teach me to.

So this time, I glide to the caves, then into it. The artist is humming, as she had been whenever she draws. Like I do always, I keep my steps light, bowing my head as I go, my body curved inwards. Trying to keep to the shadows, until I reached the pots of brilliant vibrancy just within a few feet's reach. So close—

Clank.

I kept to the shadows, but the shadows would not keep to me. At the sound of my foot hitting a stone pot of paint, the artist turns. Her eyes widen at first, her lips parting in surprise. I could see her features clearly. I don't know her, but somehow, I feel like I do. My fingers curl into a fist, and I clench my teeth. Curving my body inwards, I prepare for whatever repercussion I have for whatever wrong thing I have done.

Yet to my surprise, she grins. And laughs. *Laughs.*

How long have I not heard laughter?

“So you’re the one who’s been creeping around lately!” She chuckles. “Just come in and say hi! I’ve always wanted some company. It gets boring, sometimes, you know. I mean, look at these drab walls. The air— so suffocating! And no greenery! Not animals! Not counting insects, of course. So many bugs! How do you all even stand it?” Then she catches a glance of me, disheveled and eyes wide. Should I open my mouth? Am I supposed to talk? Maybe I should run. But before I can, she grabs me by the arm, leaning close to inspect the black marks. Ink.

“Woah! You’re an artist too! Do you want to paint? Is that why you’ve been lurking around?” Her face is alight and her eyes sparkle eagerly. I open my mouth and close it. I try to think of a meaningful reply, something that would not end up offensive or rude.

“I’m Zhen,” I croak, my voice raw and cracked from disuse. My hands wave frantically, gesturing to the general direction of the pot of brushes in front of my feet. “I— Can I— May I—?”

The girl laughs.

“Okay, Zhen,” she smiles, and hands me a brush.

Paint drips from its tip, onto my steady hand. I don’t wait for it to fall before splashing it onto the canvas.

For a few weeks, every night, when I am free from lessons and work, I come to the cave. The girl is still there. Hired to paint the caves, she said. “Originally looked for my *Shifu*. Couldn’t come, though. She sent me instead.” She told me. I nodded along, preoccupied with the pots of paint that lay around me.

Every night, the girl, Sheng, talks to me. I sit by and listen as she paints, occasionally taking a brush and sneaking in a few strokes on the wall. She tells me of her journeys across mountains and valleys, evergreen trees and the shafts of sunlight through its canopy; of rivers and something called the ‘ocean’, vast and blue and boundless; of animals and critters and exotic things I have never seen. She tells me of myths and stories her *Shifu* tells her, of the archer who shot nine sons, the goddess who created the world, the woman who sought peace. I had never heard any of it. All of this— so beautiful, so brilliant, so full of life and colours. Every day my breath is taken away by not only the art she paints, but the stories she tells me. So different from the dark and musty shop I was trapped in all my life. A slave, a survivor, a girl with darkness, void of colour. I had never heard things so enthralling, seen things so alluring.

One day, I take a few brushes and paint to my own cave. I could feel my pulsating as I ran towards my cave, forcing back the blackness reaching for it. When I reach my cave, I dip my brush into the paint, first blue, then red and yellow.

I will walk with the clouds, along the wind full of colours.

Something doesn’t feel right.

My mind is vibrant and my heartbeat roaring in my ears. In front of me, I see black obscured by patches of red, yellow, blue, gold.

But only patches.

I did not see anything, I could not see anything. Shapes, colours, but how could I, when I have never seen anything? Hiding and hoping to survive all my life, bathed in darkness, inside and out. I had never seen the world; not the mountains as tall as the sky, not the birds trilling a song, not myths and stories of magical things; not people.

I had survived. I did not live.

I drop my brush. The sky is peppered with so many stars tonight. I sprint towards the cave, one last time. *I need to live.*

“I’m leaving with you.” I yell to Sheng, who is working on her finishing touches of her cave painting. “I have to get out. I want to see colours, real colours,” I tell her. I will find my aunt. I will save my sister. *I will live.*

Sheng grins. “I knew it,” she exclaimed. “You can’t possibly be a monk. Not yet, at least. You have so much to see, so much to offer.” I laugh. A carefree, heartened laugh.

And so I leave a note on the floor of the cave. I take one last glance at Sheng’s cave painting. Then I turn away, striding out. I will do this, someday, I tell myself. After I see. After I live.

I have nothing to take as I follow Sheng out the next morning. I have nothing, but I will have everything. I do not turn back, because there is so much in front of me. The colours overwhelm my sight, no longer dimmed and darkened by the shadows in me. They are there, lurking. But I will fight them, harder than I did. I will not only survive.

When I go out of the Grottoes, I see someone. *Shifu*, I hear Sheng cry. But the wind whistles in my ear, singing a tune of colour all too familiar. I blink at the thin and bony silhouette. I think of the figure that led me to the Grottoes, her voice oh so similar to that of Sheng’s. I think of Aunt’s five-month disappearance. I think of Sheng’s Shifu.

I see the rare tilt of her smile and thin crescent eyes.

The thin silhouette steps out of the shadows, and her features lay bare to me, as clear as the day. Her lips part, and somehow, I hear her over the wind. *Do you see now?*

Fiction – Group 6

WINNER

An Adventure at the Mogao Grottoes

Hong Kong Red Cross John F. Kennedy Centre, Shi, Peilan - 9

Palatia was travelling by camel and arrived at the oasis for water and supplies. She was an archeologist exploring rock shapes and fossils in China.

While she was digging for fossils, Palatia discovered an old treasure box. When she opened it, inside the box was an ancient scroll. Excitedly, she unrolled the scroll and she was surprised to find a treasure map to the Mogao Grottoes.

Palatia left for the Mogao Grottoes right away to find the treasure before someone else did. She had a feeling that someone else was following her and so she rode through the desert at night.

In the early morning, Palatia arrived at the Mogao Grottoes and started to search. She looked for days in many places and suddenly she found a box! Just as she opened it and unrolled a scroll, a knife was put against her back and she heard, “Drop it and put up your hands!” The scroll was taken by the two evil men and they kidnapped her in chains. Palatia tried to be brave but she fainted with fright.

When she woke up, she was in a dark cave lit by candles. The two men were there and she could hear them talking about how to get rid of her.

Palatia yelled, “I have to go to the bathroom!”

One man came over and angrily said, “No bathroom here. I’ll take you there, but don’t try to escape.”

While Palatia was alone there, she searched for ways to escape. Luckily she found a secret cave tunnel. She crawled through the tunnel to another room filled with stone coffins. She hid. Palatia held her breath as the men ran past the stone coffins and continued to look for her. She waited until night and sneaked into their camp. They were asleep! She started to walk towards the scroll. Suddenly, she heard a strange voice coming from a statue.

“The evil men want to steal the Mogao Grottoes’ treasure. We count on you to translate the ancient script on the scroll and save the treasure. Will you help us?” asked the statue. Palatia agreed. She unwrapped the scroll and saw an ancient script that looked like the Han Dynasty characters.

The statue said, “If you read the script, we will come to life to help you. Also, you will get the power to make people petrified when you point at them.” So Palatia read the script and magic happened! The statues became soldiers with swords.

One soldier said, “Follow me to the secret room where all the cultural relics are placed. Then you transport them to a safe place to avoid them from getting into bad people’s hands.”

They went to the secret room. Palatia was amazed by the scene of piles and piles of ancient treasure such as beautiful paintings, precious scripts and silk arts...

Just then, the two men broke in, waving knives in their hands: "These treasures are ours! Leave here at once!" The soldiers fought fiercely with the men. Cling! Clang! went their weapons. Oops! One soldier fell and was caught and made a hostage by the two men.

Palatia and the soldiers gasped. Suddenly an idea came to Palatia in a flash. She pointed at the two men and they became statues!

"You are brilliant!" said the soldiers.

They celebrated as the Mogao Grottoes' cultural treasure was saved by them. Then the soldiers returned to their caves and changed back to statues.

Then Palatia called the mayor's hotline and reported the whole matter. The mayor sent guards to protect the treasure. He shook Palatia's hand and praised her: "I am delighted to award you the Honoured Citizen of Dunhuang City. You are granted this permanent pass to visit our city for free, and no need to queue."

Fiction – Group 6

WINNER

The Adventure of the Magao Grottoes

International College of Hong Kong, Wong, Nathan - 13

It was 6:00pm. The explorer was walking in the desert. The sand was rough. He slowly trudged along the sand. On the horizon the sun was setting. Hank, the explorer, followed sandy footprints left in the desert. As he continued to walk through the desert he felt excited about the adventure ahead.

The Queen had set Hank the explorer the challenge to find the missing pearl. Hank knew it was deep inside the Mogao Grottoes but how was he going to find it?

Hank saw the blue sky as he walked towards the Mogao Grotto. It was giant. Outside the rock was very rough. The temple has 8 floors. Each floor had red windows. Under the windows was a red door. Hank walked towards the door.

He opened the huge door loudly and he plodded quickly in the corridor. The corridor looked like an enormous cave. He crept into the old, dirty cave. There was a door at the end of the corridor.

Hank opened the door cautiously and went upstairs to the temple.

As he entered the next room in alarm he looked around for the hidden pearl. He saw the mummies and huge statues. He heard the wind. The explorer suddenly found the missing pearl. He found the missing pearl and he was happy. It was hidden in the trees. The pearl looked like jewellery and it was golden, sparkling and bright.

“Oh no!” Hank said. The explorer dropped the jewellery down a hole.

He walked down towards the hole, sliding down a slide to get the treasure back. Hank thought about how to get back up. He needed to get the ladder and go back up. He found the ladder next to a cabinet deep in the hole and it was a tall one. He felt excited because he found the tall ladder. He started to climb back up it. He felt excited because he found the hidden pearl.

Hank the explorer had completed his mission to find the missing pearl. He walked back through the dark corridors. He reached the entrance to the grotto. The Queen would be so impressed that he has found the pearl for her. He could not wait to return it to her.

Fiction – Group 7 WINNER

The 6 Masters: Battle of the Mogao Grottoes

Korean International School Springboard, Wai, Ting Yat Kaden - 15

Chapter 1

Story of the Mogao Grottoes

In March 1945, there was a Gorgeous Mountain Range called the Mogao Grottoes. It was built by Emperor Leung and Empress Lei. The Grotto was a place of Buddhist Meditation and Worship. The both of them cared for their people and all who lived in the village called Mountain Village. Emperor Leung and Empress Wei had 2 siblings Baozhai and Chou. Both of them were twins but Baozhai was only one minute older. Thirty years later, Baozhai was chosen to be on the throne of the Grotto, which made Chou very jealous. So one night, he tried to kill Baozhai, but his parents eventually caught him one day and they were extremely shocked of what Chou was capable of. He was banished from the Grotto forever but Chou swore to get revenge against his sister and parents. And once he's done with that, he will make sure all of China will bow at his feet to show that he is the most powerful man in all of China. 5 years later, in 1980 he lived in a huge fort near a volcano where his henchmen worked all day and night creating weapons such as guns, cannons, crossbows, chariots, catapults and swords. The leader of the Chou's henchmen was named, Gen. He jumped up and said, "Everything's done Master Chou, but we ran out of supplies. "Search for more villages and find more supplies. Soon, everyone will see what being an Emperor really is." said Emperor Chou.

Chapter 2

Meet the 6 Masters

Inside a temple called the "Palace of Wang", located in Fo Shan, lived 6 masters of Martial Arts. They each had their own Martial Arts fighting style.

Master Li, the master of the Northern Praying Mantis,

Master Shaolin, the master of the Fujian White Crane,

Master Wei, the master of Eagle Claw,

Master Chi Hua, the master of Tai Chi,

Master Cheng, the master of Baguazhang,

And Master Zhang, the master of Wing Chun - the strongest master of them all.

These 6 Masters would do so much to help people in China or any other country. Every

one of their parents died when the Japanese invaded China and their parents sacrificed themselves to save them. So now each of them lives alone with Master Yang, who helps to discipline them.

Chapter 3

Master Yang's message

One day, when they were fighting for fun with each other, Master Yang, their teacher, came along. "I'm sending you all on a new mission", spoke Yang.

"What is it this time?" Master Zhang said angrily.

"There is a new threat to Foshan and the whole country of China. You might know the curse of the Mogao Grottoes, but this time, the curse is for real."

"Wait what?!" gasped Wei.

"Unless he is stopped, he could kill Baozhai and invade the rest of China." Said Yang firmly.

"Yes, Master!", everyone shouted.

So they traveled by vehicles and set off for an epic cross-country adventure. They traveled through snowy mountains, the Gobi Desert and the Silk Road. Traveling for many days and nights. As they continued on, they stopped in various towns to gather food and water to survive. Their journey lasted 8 days.

Chapter 4

Baozhai vs Emperor Chou

At the Grotto, Baozhai was waiting for Chou to arrive and take the throne.

As she walked to the entrance, Baozhai dodged the upcoming shuriken that was about to hit her. "Hmm...You've grown quite strong," Said Baozhai. "Ha-ha! What have we here? I didn't know you were gonna fight me yourself. I'd thought a hero would send his henchmen instead." said Chou. "Fool. Words have consequences." spoke Baozhai firmly. "Oh man... I was really going to kill the soldiers first. Whatever, I'll just kill you, bones and all!" shouted Chou. Baozhai took her double-bladed sword while Chou took his spear and chain whip out. Their battle began. Baozhai attacked Chou repeatedly but eventually she missed. Chou took his sword and tried to stab her in the back but Baozhai dodged it. Their battle continued for 1 hour until Chou made Baozhai tangled in his chain whip. He swung her around, threw her up in the air, and punched her face and stomach multiple times until her heart was stabbed when Chou landed and used his sword. Chou laughed sinisterly and said "Now I shall be ruler of the Mogao Grottoes!!" Gen and army arrived just in time. "Every soldier is defeated!" yelled Gen. "Baozhai is defeated at last! Now we shall claim her secrets as our own! Spread out! Search whatever precious thing you find and bring it to me!" ordered Chou "Yes Master!" the soldiers yelled.

Chapter 5

Trouble in Mountain Village

Meanwhile, the 6 masters just arrived in Mountain Village. They parked their car somewhere hidden near the village, and hid somewhere on the rooftops. "The Grotto is on the other side of the village." whispered Shaolin. "Alright, let's do it!" shouted Li. But Cheng

stopped him by pulling his foot back. “What are you doing? This place is crawling with Chou’s soldiers!” whispered Cheng. And she was right. Soldiers and the villagers were being bullied and their money and other valuable items had been stolen. “We need to sneak in and pass through the town without being caught.” whispered Chi Hua.

So they placed on various disguises and secretly walked through the village.

Somehow, Zhang dressed up kind of weird. He eventually wore a dress which made him look girly. “So that’s stealth mode, huh?” whispered Li.

“Let’s just be honest, okay? It’s not one of my best moves.” Said Zhang

But as they continued walking, the soldiers caught them wearing their disguises. “Stop those 6 people!” shouted Gen.

Now every one of them took off their disguises and fought side by side. Despite the soldiers’ effort at fighting, the 6 masters were too powerful. Eventually, Gen and his army surrendered, ran away and told Chou the news. Meanwhile, Chou was sitting on his throne ordering everyone to do whatever satisfied him. “Emperor Chou! I saw 6 Kung Fu masters! They each had their own fighting style. And also Master, uh...” said Gen. “Out with it. Speak.” said Chou softly. “Among the more powerful entrants was a mysterious Kung Fu master who managed to completely kill most of our army. It seems it was Zhang, sir.” spoke Gen. “What was that?” said Emperor Chou suspiciously. “Master, we are planning to capture Zhang and the other 5. I will notify you the instant that we know for sure.” said Gen. “Whether this is true or not, this information cannot leave this room.” said Emperor Chou. “Yes, Master.” yelled Gen. Then he ran out of the throne room, getting prepared to capture the 6 masters. The army stormed out carrying guns and swords.

Chapter 6

Captured by Gen’s Army

Meanwhile, the 6 masters were on their way to the Grotto, until they noticed the soldiers guarding the entrance to the Mogao Grottoes. “We need a plan to sneak in and not get caught by those soldiers.” whispered Wei.

“I suggest we create a diversion so that we can all sneak inside the Grotto. But as they’re about to take action, Gen’s soldiers attacked them, and tied them up with ropes.” “We got you now! Let’s take them inside the Grotto. Emperor Chou will be impressed to see them.” said Gen. Now the 6 masters were being taken inside the Mogao Grottoes. “You got a plan or two?” whispered Wei. “Well we need to stay close and look for a miracle. That’s all we can do.” whispered Zhang. But as the 6 masters were about to walk into the Grotto, they noticed Baozhai’s double-bladed sword was standing upright. As it turns out, this was the spot where Baozhai died. “Keep moving.” cackled Gen. At last, the 6 masters walked inside the Grotto only to discover that the Master Chou was waiting for them. “Well, well, well. What do we have here? It feels like these guys have the guts to stop me, huh?” said Chou. Gen and his army began laughing. “Look, just because you murdered Baozhai doesn’t mean you have to do this. Everyone in the Mountain Village is suffering from your stubbornness and pride!” shouted Lei. “And I heard that you kidnapped villagers who dared try to defy you!” shouted Cheng “Ha ha! That’s right. I kidnapped the villagers who dared to try to take down one of my army. There’s a dungeon underneath the Grotto. That’s where I captured the villagers. Now, kill them all!” shouted Chou. Luckily, Zhang broke the handcuffs and attacked Gen’s

army. They tried shooting Zhang with their guns but Zhang was too fast. Zhang broke every handcuff the rest of the masters had. Eventually, they escaped and ran out the Grotto. Chou growled and punched one of the soldier's face in anger. "Find those idiots! We can't let them escape. Not even one!" shouted Chou. So now Gen's soldiers took action and began the search for the 6 masters.

Chapter 7 The Plan

Meanwhile, the 6 masters were hiding in the village trying not to be found by the soldiers. "What do we do now? We can't hide from them forever!" Said Wei. "Well we need to come up with another plan. Not only to stop the Emperor, but we need to save the villagers as well." shouted Shaolin. "I say we devise another plan to sneak inside or take out every soldier first and then we bring Emperor Chou to justice," said Chi Hua. "Sounds good. We're the 6 Masters. And we're undefeatable. "We just need to dig into the caves of the Mogao Grottoes and trap the soldiers so that we can defeat the Emperor Chou." whispered Shaolin. "We just need to get some tools from the villagers." said Li. So they split up and gathered some tools for their next fight. One hour later, the 6 Masters finally gathered every tool they needed. "Alright, does everyone know the plan?" said Zhang. "YES!" everyone yelled.

Chapter 8 Sneaking into the Grotto

"Where is your search party? And did you find the 6 Masters?" Emperor Chou asked furiously. "We can't find them, sir." Emperor Chou sighed in disappointment. "I cannot overstate my supreme disappointment." Meanwhile, Wei and Chi Hua, dressed up in beautiful Chinese clothing, were walking towards the entrance to the Grotto. "Who the heck are you two?" asked a soldier. "We are two beautiful ladies who are going to perform at the Grotto!" said Chi Hua. "Yeah!" said Wei. But as they walked inside, one of the soldiers was confused "Hey, wait a second. Is this some kind of mistake? I didn't hear about hiring girls." said a Soldier. "The only mistake is you two not knowing when to shut up!" said Chi Hua and Wei. And they kicked the soldiers' face. "Ready for a little extra credit?" Chi Hua asked. "Yeah!" yelled Wei. Meanwhile, Shaolin, Li, Cheng and Zhang snuck in the Grotto to rescue the villagers. "Shaolin, Li, Cheng, you guys will rescue the villagers while I go fight Emperor Chou." said Chang. "Good luck." said Li. Meanwhile, Wei and Chi Hua were fighting the soldiers. Nearly every one of them has been defeated. At the dungeon, Gen was waiting for the 6 Masters to come down and fight him. "You guys go on ahead. I'll fight whoever dares try to stop me." said Gen. A few minutes later, Chang, Li and Shaolin finally found him and prepared to fight him. "Give it up, Gen! It's three against one!" shouted Shaolin. Gen laughed and prepared to fight. "It's on!!" shouted Li. Everyone attacked Gen but Gen was way too fast for Shaolin, Li and Cheng to fight or punch. "This guy's way too fast! And he has such high stamina!" yelled Chang. "We can't beat Gen, but we can be smarter than him." whispered Li.

Back with Zhang, he walked into the throne room, ready to fight Emperor Chou who was sitting on the throne with his sword.

Chapter 9
The Final Battle

“It seems that you have arrived, Zhang. Prepared to fight your worst enemy yet?” said Emperor Chou. He then took out his sword and tried to slice him but Zhang dodged it. Back with Cheng, Shaolin and Lei, they eventually managed to defeat Gen by beating him up. Just then, Wei and Chi Hua ran down and managed to find them. “Guys, where’s Zhang?” Chi Hua asked. “He’s fighting Emperor Chou, but we don’t know whether he’s okay or not.” said Shaolin. “We need to find him and fast.” said Li. Back with Zhang and Emperor Chou, they were still fighting against each other. “You can’t win, Emperor Chou!” shouted Zhang. “This is my Grotto! MY DESTINY!!” shouted Emperor Chou. They continued fighting until the 5 Masters came and saw him fighting. “There he is!” yelled Shaolin. Meanwhile, Emperor Chou blocked Zhang’s volley of punches with his sword until Zhang punched him in the face. Emperor Chou’s face turned red and he purposely hit Zhang’s face with his whip. Now a red mark was on his face. “Oh, Jesus.” said Shaolin. Emperor Chou laughed evilly and continued to fight. “There ain’t no way you can beat me.” said Emperor Chou. The both of them continued fighting until Zhang grabbed Chou’s whip and swung him around. Emperor Chou yelled until he became very dizzy. Zhang then punched him on the face and body until his face began to bleed. “It’s over, Emperor Chou.” said Zhang. “Zhang, please have mercy. I beg you. It was Gen and his army who were the real enemy. It was their fault.” said Emperor Chou. But he didn’t know that Gen and his army overheard them. They forced me to do all this.” said Emperor Chou weakly. They were so cross they walked out of the Grotto in anger. “Why should we believe you?!” shouted Wei. “You fooled your own army including Gen!” shouted Wang. “Well what are you going to do? You can’t kill me yet. Just tell me what to do.” “I order you to run away to Chaoshan and never return.” “Alright then, if that’s what you want, you FOOL!” shouted Zhang. He tried stabbing Zhang with his sword but Zhang caught it just in time. Then he grabbed Emperor Chou by the throat and threw him out, all the way to the front gate of the Grotto. Chou got up and realized that Gen and his army were waiting for him at the gate. “Oh, my army and Gen. I thought you were dead.” sighed Emperor Chou. “Army? I thought he said we were the real enemy.” said a soldier. “Yeah, that’s what I heard.” said another soldier. “Men, we finish this now.” said Gen. The army and Gen cornered him. “No l-l-let me explain, please! I didn’t mean to... No, no, no!” screamed Emperor Chou. Until every single soldier beat him to death. Cheng saw Emperor Chou get beaten at the top of the gate. “He’s dead.” said Cheng. “Good” said Chi Hua. “So what do we do now?” asked Shaolin. “I got an idea.” said Wei.

Chapter 10
A Mysterious Ending...

A few months later, Gen became the Emperor of the Mountain Village and the Mogao Grottoes. “Best idea you’ve ever had.” said Chi Hua. “Now everyone is finally happy living here with Gen being the Emperor.” said Cheng. The 6 Masters then walked to the Grotto where Gen was sitting. “Thanks, guys. It’s going great.” said Gen. “You’re welcome.” said Li. But then, 2 mysterious creatures known as the Chinese Oriental Dragon and the Wyvern flew above the village. The 2 dragons roared, which made the people scream and run for their lives. “Oh, my god. It’s the Wyvern and the Chinese Oriental Dragon!!!” The 6 Masters yelled, ending the story in fear. To Be Continued...

Fiction – Group 7

WINNER

The Mysterious Treasure

Hong Kong Red Cross John F. Kennedy Centre, De Groot, Leonardo - 16

Around 1500 years ago a monk was taking a walk in the desert and decided a massive rock should be his home. He started excavating it to make rooms and after some time some guests arrived and helped and lived there. After some more time, they started to create some art in the caves.

One day a weird person showed up and said she would like to stay overnight and if they said yes, after, she said she would give them a gift that no-one had ever seen before so they let her stay too.

The monk was very welcoming, but his helpers were not and so the monk asked her if she'd like a room of her own or would she like to share a room with one of them. She wanted to share a room with the monk, so they fixed the room up a bit more then let her in to see it. She was amazed that the room was so clean and asked where she was going to sleep.

The monk said, "If you want, you can sleep on my bed which is here, and I will just sleep over there...if you want that is."

"No, no," she said. "You can sleep here and I can sleep there. That should be fine."

"You are our guest so let me be over there. OK? Anyway, I think you might like some personal space."

"It's OK. Just come over here and sleep with me, I am a little scared of the dark anyway so you could comfort me during the night."

"OK, then I am coming over now. If you need to rest, that is easy. I will be always right next to you OK, so there is nothing to fear. Just wake me up if you need something."

"The next day she was gone and there was only (a huge pile of) gold where she had slept. The monk thought she was under the gold, but she was not.

Then he remembered that she told him that she would leave him with a gift so he said, "Thank you."

He left the caves in search of her. Legends say that he was still searching for her, even when he was no longer on earth.

Non-Fiction – Group 1 WINNER

Mogao Grottoes – Embrace Different Cultures

St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Cheung, Nga Ting Annette - 9

My interest in the Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, acclaimed as an “Encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages”, is induced by my love of “Journey to the West”, the Chinese novel following the journey of the Buddhist monk, Tang Sanzang, and his entourage, to Dunhuang and how the monk and the Monkey King were painted in one of the caves! If one extract from one wall painting relates to the great Chinese classical novel, what about other breathtaking secrets?

The Mogao Grottoes are located in Dunhuang, Gansu Province, People’s Republic of China. According to the International Council on Monuments and Sites of April 1987, the Mogao Grottoes comprise 492 cells, 200 Buddhist sculptures, and approximately 45,000 square meters of murals. They witness the civilisation of ancient China for more than 1,000 years from 366 A.D. for several dynasties, like the Tang, Song and Yuan Dynasties, as well as the transcontinental history and propagation of Buddhism in Asia. Trades, arts and communications were freely exchanged in this strategic area of the ancient Silk Road and Chinese, Tibetan, Hebrew and other manuscripts were found in this melting pot of cultures.

The Mogao Grottoes are justified in being on the World Heritage List of 1987 because they fulfil six of the ten World Heritage criteria. For example, they represent a masterpiece of human creative genius and a unique testimony to a civilization over a span of time. Amongst the brilliant works, I like the Dunhuang flying Apsaras, the symbol of Dunhuang murals, most. Their faces and artistic styles change over different periods to embrace the influences of China, India, Greece, Tibet and Mongolia. These flying Apsaras can dance freely in the sky with ribbons. If they joined the Olympics rhythmic gymnastics competitions, they would surely win the gold medals!

If the Mogao Grottoes were not rediscovered in 1900, I would not feel the pulse of the ancient Oriental cultures and the adventures in “Journey to the West”. However, since the opening of the Mogao Grottoes, the original internal ecology, including the murals, architecture, and painted sculptures, has deteriorated, discoloured, darkened or peeled off due to heat, carbon dioxide and humidity from excessive tourism. Its external ecological problems become more severe due to natural erosion from the encroaching Gobi Desert nearby and other natural disasters.

Luckily, besides restrictions on where visitors can enter and a recyclable water use method to relieve the ecological pressures, a three-dimensional “Digital Dunhuang” project capturing its heritage resources, at www.e-dunhuang.com, has been developed by the Dunhuang

Academy to help preserve and maintain the Grottoes by encouraging visitors to explore them online rather than in person.

The Mogao Grottoes' embracing of Buddhism and Chinese cultures, though different from those of other countries, touches and reminds me to understand any culture, religion or tradition, not only in an algebraic way through their symbols and scripts, but with a thorough understanding and respect of its origin, developments and interactions with various aspects of the world. Let's protect and treasure the Mogao Grottoes for our future generations!

Non-Fiction – Group 2 WINNER

An Amazing Trip to The Mogao Grottoes

Ching Chung Hau Po Woon Primary School, Huang, Yimiao - 10

The old saying goes, “Seeing is believing”. This Chinese proverb undoubtedly applied to my experience of joining a tour to the Mogao Grottoes in the Dunhuang district of Gansu with my family. The Mogao Grottoes are well-known as the Pearl of the oasis in the desert on the Silk Road, for they contain hundreds and thousands of the world’s finest and oldest paintings, sculptures, and literature. Although I had been told how magnificent the Mogao Grottoes are throughout my life, I could understand their magnificence only by visiting the grottoes in person.

“Now, we are standing in front of the murals of the Buddhas,” said the tour guide proudly and pointed at the murals. The murals showed different Buddhas and other deities dressing in blue robes and wearing different accessories like golden tiaras, silver necklaces and bracelets. Although the Buddhas and deities looked stern, tourists like me did not feel intimidated, but calm and peaceful. I was so obsessed with looking at the murals that I almost lost track of time and the introduction given by the tour guide.

“It is a world-famous art shrine integrating architecture, sculpture and painting.” The guide continued. “The grottoes are over 1,600 meters long from north to south, with five floors up and down, with the highest point of 50 meters. There are 492 existing caves, 45,000 square meters of murals, 2,415 painted sculptures and 4,000 flying sculptures. The Mogao Grottoes are large in scale, rich in content and have a long history.”

“Who dug the caves and painted the murals?” I asked out of curiosity. “More than one and half millennia ago, a monk discovered the caves when he was travelling on the Silk Road. He thought the caves were sacred because he could feel the presence of Buddhas there. Therefore throughout the centuries, hundreds and thousands of pilgrims came to dig more caves and create as many murals and sculptures as possible to pay respect to Buddhas and deities,” replied the guide.

It was a mystery that I found myself deeply mesmerized by the Mogao Grottoes. I could not take my eyes off the murals and sculptures for hours. I had a feeling that I had stayed there for a very long time before. It was like my old home. After I went back to my hotel home, I kept searching for a load of information on the Mogao Grottoes on the Internet about this cave until I fell asleep.

The sleep seemed to last for ages. All of a sudden, a cold breeze woke me up. I was not in my bright, comfy hotel room but a dark cave full of tunnels. Then I had a cold feeling inside my head. The moment I touched my head, I screamed like it was the end of the world, “Ahh!

My hair! Where's my hair? How come I became a bald man?" Then I looked at my clothes and exclaimed, "Oh my god! I am a monk in a torn cassock. I must have gone back to the past."

I ran into different tunnels, tried to find an escape route but with no success. When I was about to give up, I suddenly saw a myriad of golden rays in one of the tunnels. I was curious so I headed for those rays.

The tunnel was so damp and gloomy. It also gave a foul smell that made me almost vomit. While I was walking towards the golden rays, a group of bats flew towards me. I quickly squat down so that they could not attack me. At the end of the tunnel, there was a light so bright that I could not open my eyes for a minute. When I could finally open my eyes, I was amazed to see hundreds and thousands of monks painting the murals and making sculptures of different Buddhas and deities in an exceptionally large cave.

The cave was surrounded by the aura of dignity. It turned out that the cave was an altar set up to worship Buddha. The monks were painting the murals and making the sculptures of different Buddhas and deities transferring knowledge to commoners, teaching them to appreciate arts and improve their society. These murals and sculptures must be the precious treasure of our country, for they documented the art and history of the motherland. At that moment, I felt my life was content. I was delighted to spend my whole life studying the art and history of Buddhas, deities and human societies throughout the millennia.

Suddenly, I heard a sound from the sky. The sky said with a gentle voice, "My dear child, it's time for you to go home. I am delighted to know young children like you still appreciate our arts and culture. I hope you can encourage more people to do that."

As soon as the sky finished his saying, I heard my mum's voice, "Wake up, son! Look at the clock! It's 10 o'clock in the morning!" It was my mum. Everything was just a dream. But the dream was so real that I thought I could still sense the presence of the monks and artifacts.

After this amazing "adventure", I discovered how precious the Mogao Grottoes are as the historical heritage of our country. I will strive to encourage people close to me to appreciate this cultural treasure and spiritual wealth of mankind by sharing my experience of Mogao Grottoes.

Non-Fiction – Group 3 WINNER

The Mogao Grottoes, the Holy Place

Immaculate Heart of Mary College, Zhao, Kangru - 12

Ancient and legendary, enormous and wide,
The epitome of devotion, the way to a new life.

Some may call it a library, some may call it an exhibition, but some will call it home. Push away the doors of mystery, may only deep secrets roam.” The Mogao Grottoes, mystical and atavistic, famous for its stories, legends, is a well-known place of interest and relic in China. I read about it and its brief introduction inside an old history book in primary 4 with my mum. It specifically drew my attention abruptly when I read the story of the monk, who got strongly inspired after seeing a vision on top of a mountain and started excavating the caves. Since I have always been deeply invested in historical buildings ever since I was very young, I was curious and puzzled on the more abstruse historical facts and legends behind the Mogao Grottoes. To add up, my mum beside me kept giving me insistent encouragement on searching. With eagerness, I rushed to grab my laptop, then immediately searched up “Mogao Grottoes’ on the search bar. After some quick browsing, I ended up on the UNESCO World Heritage Site for more precise information about the majestic and spectacular Mogao Grottoes, which started my journey of research.

The Mogao Grottoes, also known as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes or Caves of the Thousand Buddha, is quite a complex system including an enormous number of 500 temples, famous for their statues and wall paintings, showing the beauty of glory, which has up to 1,000 years of Buddhist art. It’s 35.5 m high, located 25 km southeast of the centre of Dunhuang, an oasis located at a religious and ethnic crossroad on the Silk Road, in Gansu province, China. Besides, it is also considered as one of the most important antiques in the Buddhist economy. The ancient Mogao Grottoes was first excavated in the second year of Jianyuan in the pre Qin period, namely, 366 AD. The caves had indeed endured more than 1,000 years, including the Dynasties of Beiwei (386 AD – 534 AD), Beizhou (557 AD – 581 AD), Sui (581 AD – 618 AD), Song (960 AD – 1279 AD), Xixia (1038 AD – 1227 AD), Yuan (1271 AD – 1368 AD), etc. Moreover, it was first constructed by Northern Wei and Northern Zhou, who were the members of the ruling family at the time. As it reached the peak of the Tang Dynasty (618 to 906 AD), the number of caves rose from 500 to over a thousand, and it was then burgeoned during the short period of Sui Dynasty (581 to 618 AD). Ever since the Sui Dynasty and Tang Dynasty, the Mogao Grottoes had become a place for the people to pursue the inner piece of the material world.

Almost most tourists were impressed or had their breath taken away when they had seen the extravagant scenery of the Mogao Grottoes. On the cliffs of Dangquan River and Mingsha mountain in the East, there are 735 caves facing the direction of Sanwei mountain,

the branch of Qilian Mountain in the East. Also, there are 2,415 coloured sculptures and 45,000 square meter's murals in the cave. During the past decades, more than 50,000 ancient scriptures and documents in the Sutra cave were discovered and unveiled to the world. From some documents, we learn that the Mogao Grottoes were not used for living for the ordinary residents, for monks it is the ideal place to meditate, not just on the Buddhist structure, but to connect and completely immerse themselves, hoping to find a way to meditate on the scriptures and prayers.

There was a story about a monk named Yunzen, who was one of the most well-known and prominent stories among every Chinese family. The monk travelled to Dunhuang in 366 AD. As the sun was setting, he went to the foot of a mountain, and was absolutely struck by the sunray which came down to the top of the mountain, and in that vision, he saw a vision of a thousand Buddhas. The monk was then inspired and decided to dig a Buddha grotto on the cliff opposite the mountain, which became the first cave in Dunhuang. Later, with the development of Buddhist activities, the number of caves increased day by day, and the caves boomed and lasted for over 1,000 years. In addition to the scenery coincidence, during Buddhism's eastward spreading period, there were many Buddhists who preached Dharma among the merchants of the western regions who travelled along the Silk Road. The Buddhist monks from the West stopped here to spread Buddhism, translate Buddhist scriptures and build the temples. Therefore, Dunhuang had become a place where Buddhism was flourishing, which contributed to the construction and development of the ongrowing Mogao Grottoes.

However, time flies like the blink of an eye, and more than 1000 years later, travellers and tourists started to take other routes and lost their interest in Mogao Caves. Therefore, the Mogao Caves located in the Dunhuang district of Gansu province were totally forgotten as a lost legend. Later, during the 1900s, luckily, local and international school-explorers rediscovered the caves, finally unlocking its breathtaking and the hidden secrets - there were hundreds of caverns, storing up some of the world's finest paintings, sculpture work, and literature - including the oldest ones in the world.

"It was like a tunnel to a lost world in the past," said some of the scholars who visited there. In coincidence, around that time, a Taoist, named Wang Yanlu, also made a huge discovery - as he was clearing the sand of the Mogao Grottoes, he accidentally found a hoard of manuscripts in the main cave. This discovery attracted the attention of many archeologists like Aurel Stein and his group, bringing back the attention that Mogao Grottoes deserved. Later, a well-known scholar named Lou Zhengyu edited some of the manuscripts and was then published in 1909 as "Manuscripts of the Dunhuang Caves".

After reading all of the information I have found, I definitely think that I have learned a lot from the Mogao Grottoes' admirable background stories and facts. Sadly, due to the Coronavirus outbreak, I don't think that we would get a chance to experience what the Mogao Grottoes has offered us. However, we should always have faith and hope as the ancient glory did not fade, and the holy place, Mogao Grottoes, is always a holy place for us. Nowadays, we truly need a place, a sanctuary for refreshing our mind and strengthening ourselves to deal with future uncertainties.

Non-Fiction – Group 4 WINNER

The Treasure of the Mogao Grottoes

Pui Kiu College, Lau, Sik Nga Lucina - 16

Thousand Buddha Grottoes or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, form a system of 500 temples 25 km southeast of the center of Dunhuang, an oasis located at religious and cultural intersections on the Silk Road, in Gansu province, China. The caves also are known as the Dunhuang Caves; however, this term is also used as a united term to include other Buddhist cave sites in and around the Dunhuang area, such as the Western Thousand Buddha Caves, Eastern Thousand Buddha Caves, Yulin Caves, and Five Temple Caves. The caves contain some of the finest instances of Buddhist art spanning 1,000 years. The first caves were dug out in 366 AD as places for Buddhist meditation and adoration. The Mogao Caves are the best known of the Chinese Buddhist grottoes and, along with Longmen Grottoes and Yungang Grottoes, are one of the three famous historical Buddhist sculptural sites of China.

In the 1900s, local and transnational scholar-explorers rediscovered the caves. They gradually unlocked its breathtaking mysteries. There were hundreds of grottoes including some of the world's excellent portraits, statues, and literature—including the oldest dated, printed book in the world. It was like a passage to a lost realm in the past.

On July 10, the North Minutes Evening Post published an article that some archeologists have discovered some new research on the Mogao Cave, and they believe that the Mogao Grottoes are more ancient than what we are now expected to be. In this post, we'll explain what has reportedly happened, the history of the Mogao Grottoes, and provide some tips for traveling to the Mogao Grottoes.

On June 09, archeologists found a dead body in the library cave of Mogao Grottoes. After further research, they confirmed that the dead body belong to Liu Xi, the final emperor of the Xiongnu-led Chinese Han Zhao dynasty, one of the dominions of the sixteen kingdoms on July 09. It is believed that it is the most ancient dead body that is found in the world.

Liu Xi was Liu Yao's son by his first Empress Yang Xianrong. After he became emperor in 318 AD following Jin Zhun's coup against the emperor Liu Can, he created her empress in 319 AD and gave Liu Xi crown prince. However, She died in 322 AD.

Following to her death, a succession question came about. Liu Xi's older brother Liu Yin, Liu Yao's prior heir apparent, whom Liu Yao had assumed to have been killed in Jin Zhun's coup, had escaped but was taken as a slave by the Heiniyuju tribe. In 323 AD, Liu Yin revealed his identity to the chief of the tribe, who promptly delivered him back to his father. Liu Yao considered replacing Liu Xi with Liu Yin since Liu Yin was previously his heir, but Liu Yin's uncle Bu Tai and another official Han Guang spoke against it, and Liu Yin

himself personally declined to replace Liu Xi. Liu Yao let Liu Xi remain, crown prince while granting Liu Yin special honors, including requiring Liu Xi to yield to Liu Yin as an older brother in ceremonies, rather than for Liu Yin to yield to Liu Xi as the crown prince.

Around the new year of 329 AD, Liu Yao was captured in battle by Later Zhao forces. Liu Xi became effectively acting emperor, and after consulting with Liu Yin, he decided to withdraw from the capital Chang'an west to Shanggui, the capital of the mountainous Qin Province, considered more easily defensible. However, the withdrawal caused a panic, and all Han Zhao generals abandoned their positions and fled to Qin Province as well, easily yielding most of the remaining Han Zhao territory to Later Zhao.

In fall 329 AD, Han Zhao forces, under Liu Yin's command, tried to recapture Chang'an. Initially, he had some successes and recaptured much of the territory lost to Later Zhao. However, as he besieged Chang'an, the Later Zhao general Shi Hu arrived and defeated him. Liu Yin retreated toward Shanggui, and Shi Hu trailed him and defeated him again, capturing Shanggui. He forcibly relocated all other officials and the large clans of Qin and Yong Provinces to the Later Zhao capital Xiangguo, and massacred, in Luoyang, the members of the Xiongnu nobility. Han Zhao came to an end. He killed Liu Yin, along with all Han Zhao princes and high-level officials and generals, while Liu Xi was escaped before the defeated. No one knows where Liu Xi had been, and no one knows how Liu Xi is just before its dead body is found.

Some believes that Liu Xi tried to escape to Mogao Grottoes but failed lead to his death. Nevertheless, some archeologist is believe that Liu Xi had successfully escape to Mogao Grottoes and spent a wonderful time there. But no one knows the truth and it is open to question.

Mogao Grottoes was known built in the period of the Sixteen Kingdoms. In the second year of Jianyuan of the Qin Dynasty, a monk passed by this mountain and suddenly saw the golden light shine, so he dug the first cave in the rock wall. Since then, Zen Masters have continued to build caves here for meditation. They are called "Mogao Caves", which means "high places in the desert."

Williston Ho Pak Kiu, the head archeologist of the Mogao Grottoes research team, believed that there is more secret that is waiting for them to find out. "Mogao Grottoes has a history of more than two thousand years. although we have already found many paintings and sculptures, we are sure that there are many new things are waiting for us for further research." Liu Xi is the first dead body found in Mogao Grottoes, it is believed that there will be more dead bodies being found, and more stories behind history will surface.

During the Northern Wei, Western Wei, and Northern Zhou Dynasties, the rulers believed in Buddhism, and the construction of grottoes was supported by princes and nobles and developed rapidly. During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, with the prosperity of the Silk Road, Mogao Grottoes flourished, and there were more than a thousand caves in Wu Zetian. After the Anshi Rebellion, Dunhuang was successively occupied by Tubo and Guiyi troops, but the sculpture activities were not greatly affected. The Mogao Grottoes during the Uighur period developed to the largest peak in history. The famous or clear and complete portraits and Buddhist sculptures are seen so far were restored and newly built during this period. In the Northern Song, Xixia, and Yuan dynasties, Mogao Grottoes gradually declined, and only the former dynasty caves were rebuilt, with very few newly built caves. After the Yuan Dynasty, along with the abandonment of the Silk Road, the construction of Mogao Grottoes was stopped and gradually disappeared from the world's sight. It wasn't until forty years after Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty that people noticed this place again. However, in modern times, the Mogao Grottoes have suffered many man-made damages, a large number

of cultural relics have been lost, and their integrity has been severely damaged. In modern times, people usually call it the “Thousand-Buddha Cave”.

There are 735 caves from the Northern Wei Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty at Mogao Grottoes, which are divided into north and south areas. The southern part is the main body of the Mogao Grottoes. It is a place for monks to engage in religious activities. There are 487 caves, all with murals or statues. There are 248 caves in the north area, of which only 5 have frescoes or statues, while the others are places where monks practice, live, and bury them after death. There are *tukang*, stove, *Kang*, flue, alcove, table lamp, and other living facilities. There are a total of 492 caves in the two districts with murals and statues, including 45,000 square meters of murals, 2,415 clay sculptures, 5 wooden cliffs in the Tang and Song Dynasties, and thousands of lotus pillars and floor tiles.

Dunhuang was established as a frontier garrison outpost by the Han Dynasty Emperor Wudi to protect against the Xiongnu in 111 BC. It also became an important gateway to the West, a center of commerce along the Silk Road, as well as a meeting place of various people and religions such as Buddhism.

The construction of the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang is generally taken to have begun sometime in the fourth century AD. According to a book written during the reign of Tang Empress Wu, *Fokan Ji* by Li Junxiu, a Buddhist monk named Lè Zūn had a vision of a thousand Buddhas bathed in golden light at the site in 366 AD, inspiring him to build a cave here. The story is also found in other sources, such as in inscriptions on a stele in cave 332; an earlier date of 353 however was given in another document, *Shazhou Tujing*. He was later joined by a second monk Faliang, and the site gradually grew, by the time of the Northern Liang a small community of monks had formed at the site. The caves initially served only as a place of meditation for hermit monks but developed to serve the monasteries that sprang up nearby. Members of the ruling family of Northern Wei and Northern Zhou constructed many caves here, and it flourished in the short-lived Sui Dynasty. By the Tang Dynasty, the number of caves had reached over a thousand.

By the Sui and Tang dynasties, Mogao Caves had become a place of worship and pilgrimage for the public. From the 4th until the 14th century, caves were constructed by monks to serve as shrines with funds from donors. These caves were elaborately painted, the cave paintings and architecture serving as aids to meditation, as visual representations of the quest for enlightenment, as mnemonic devices, and as teaching tools to inform those illiterate about Buddhist beliefs and stories. The major caves were sponsored by patrons such as important clergy, the local ruling elite, foreign dignitaries, as well as Chinese emperors. Other caves may have been funded by merchants, military officers, and other local people such as women’s groups.

During the Tang Dynasty, Dunhuang became the main hub of commerce of the Silk Road and a major religious center. A large number of the caves were constructed at Mogao during this era, including the two large statues of Buddha at the site, the largest one constructed in 695 following an edict a year earlier by Tang Empress Wu Zetian to build giant statues across the country. The site escaped the persecution of Buddhists ordered by Emperor Wuzong in 845 as it was then under Tibetan control. As a frontier town, Dunhuang had been occupied at various times by other non-Han Chinese people.

After the Tang Dynasty, the site went into a gradual decline, and construction of new caves ceased entirely after the Yuan Dynasty. By then Islam had conquered much of Central Asia, and the Silk Road declined in importance when trading via sea-routes began to dominate Chinese trade with the outside world. During the Ming Dynasty, the Silk Road was finally officially abandoned, and Dunhuang slowly became depopulated and largely

forgotten by the outside world. Most of the Mogao caves were abandoned; the site, however, was still a place of pilgrimage and was used as a place of worship by local people at the beginning of the twentieth century when there was renewed interest in the site.

There are 735 caves from the Northern Wei Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty at Mogao Grottoes, which are divided into north and south areas. The southern part is the main body of the Mogao Grottoes. It is a place for monks to engage in religious activities. There are 487 caves, all with murals or statues. There are 248 caves in the north area, of which only 5 have frescoes or statues, while the others are places where monks practice, live, and bury them after death. There are *tukang*, stove, *Kang*, flue, alcove, table lamp, and other living facilities. There are a total of 492 caves in the two districts with murals and statues, including 45,000 square meters of murals, 2,415 clay sculptures, 5 wooden cliffs in the Tang and Song Dynasties, and thousands of lotus pillars and floor tiles. The Mogao Grottoes scenic spot consists of two parts: Mogao Grottoes Digital Exhibition Center and Mogao Grottoes. The Mogao Grottoes Digital Exhibition Center will show short films about Mogao Grottoes. The grotto has been excavated for thousands of years, and it has a large number of murals, grottoes, cultural relics, etc. It is a world-famous Buddhist art resort. The artistic characteristics of Gaokuo are mainly manifested in the ingenious combination of architecture, statues, and Dunhuang murals, which vividly and harmoniously express the artistic styles of multiple dynasties. Currently, there are more than 40 caves open to the public.

I have been to Mogao Grottoes once, in a hot August. My advice is to watch the two digital-themed movies in the digital center, then take the shuttle bus in the scenic area to enter the cave. “A Thousand Years of Mogao” and the dome film “Dream Buddha Palace”, both introduce the thousand-year history and the splendid culture of Mogao Grottoes. Thousand-year of history is all concentrated in hundreds of caves. The normal ticket is to provide eight caves, three of which are must-sees, and the other five are randomly selected by the tour guide. Groups of 20-30 people are equipped with full-time guides. Listening to the tour guide telling me the stories that I have never known before, and admiring the superb skills, the murals are too wonderful to be forgotten for a long time. To inherit and protect, Mogao Grottoes cannot take photos with a flashlight, and everyone is very conscious about it. In the exhibition center not far away, several cave paintings have been copied to make them look clearer. It is amazing to keep them for such a long time. After the normal tour, the instructor brought us to the souvenir bookstore in the library cave. Next to the Library cave, you can visit some historical pieces of information in the art gallery. Also, there are two special cave visits daily, 12:00 and 14:30. There are 8 special caves in total, the ticket price is 200 per person per cave. Each field can visit four caves. These special caves preserve more complete or special with higher historical value, in addition, the explainer will speak will more detailed information.

I have chosen cave 45 for my further destination, which is indeed better preserved. At that time, the tour guide told us that we should walk gently into each cave with a pious heart. When I walked into the cave, I was shocked at that moment, seeing the extremely exquisite murals on each wall the characters are lifelike, the colors are colorful, the soft posture of each statue, and the smile at the corners of the mouth are so faint and quiet, and there are the caves. The top of the is also decorated to be extremely gorgeous as if seeing the craftsman of a thousand years ago with the most religious heart, carefully portraying the holiest and most beautiful yearning in their heart.

In addition, there are several one-to-one re-enactment caves in the research institute to the direction of the shuttle bus. Several special caves have re-enactment versions here, but most of them are lonely because of the lack of commentators.

It is hoped that Mogao Grottoes is a tremendous place for all the tourists that are planning or already visit there. The paintings which are gorgeous and glamorous, the sculptures which are stunning and desirable, and other attractive cave and cultural relics. By giving some advice of the Mogao Grottoes visiting from my own experience, I wish that you all have an incredible visiting in there, which is fascinating and impressive.

Mogao Grottoes, our treasure of history, should be truly protected and cured. Due to the break out of Liu Xi's dead body in the news recently, we can believe that there will be more painting, sculptures, and even dead bodies will be found in the future and more history stories behind them will float on the surface. Protecting cultural relics play an important role in studying national culture and ensuring the continuity of a nation's culture. At the same time, the protection of cultural relics can also enhance the identity of the people of the nation with their own culture, enhance national pride, and improve cohesion. The protection and management of cultural relics and scientific research are of great significance for people to understand their history and creative power, reveal the objective laws of the development of human society, and recognize and promote the development of contemporary and future society. Conservation management and scientific research are interrelated, mutually reinforcing, and complementary, and are a systematic and comprehensive science. Cultural relics are relics and relics of historical, artistic, and scientific value leftover by human beings in social activities. It is a precious historical and cultural heritage of mankind. Therefore, we should protect the cultural heritage, especially the ones which are containing a large number of historical stories. To conserve them, we should be avoiding to touch or even damaging the ancestry. Also, many heritage cannot use flashlights or ever the blue light from their phones, so please regulate the rule in the destination. Although it is very difficult to change a group of people to protect the monuments, the accumulation of small amounts can make a big difference. As long as everyone makes small changes, it can make a big impact. So let's start protecting our heritage by making small differences.

POETRY – Group 1

WINNER

The Day the Empress Inspected the Town

The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Nakamura, Coco - 8

The black holes of the Mogao Grottos hit Cheng Zhao's eyes like dark stars
 Welcoming him to go inside
 The air got cold but strangely he still felt warm.
 As he came face to face with the treasures of the Library Room.

Welcoming him to go inside
 An ancient book lay open with a picture of the day Empress Wu Zetian inspected the town
 He sees one of the most important treasures of the library room close up.
 The page glows, slowly growing in brightness and Cheng Zhao suddenly feels a force pulling him inside.

The ancient open lay open with a picture of the Empress' visit
 And transports him back to when the town was alive.
 The page's glow and pulling force takes Cheng Zhao through a tunnel of stone Buddhas, tapestries and silk paintings that flash before his wide eyes.
 Where does the tunnel end? When will I get there? Cheng Zhao lands in the middle of the town square with merchants and monks and the smell of old all around.

Transported back to when the town was alive
 The caves look like cheese holes in the cliff, blinking with silk flags and tapestry banners
 The town is dressed and ready for the arrival of the Empress.
 In the busy, excited square the town's talk is only about one thing.

The cheese hole caves in the cliff blink their silk flags and tapestry banners
 Waving and cheering as the Empress rides by and inspects
 But in the busy square the town's excited talk quickly changes to fear
 The Empress's horse falls on an uneven stone.

The waves and cheers from the caves become silent as the Empress heads to the ground.
 Cheng Zhao sees the next few minutes in slow motion so he runs to her rescue,
 The horses fall on the uneven stone sees the Empress in danger with 100 horses behind her.
 Cheng Zhao stretches out his arms like an eagle to shield her from 100 falling domino horses.

In slow motion running to her rescue
The guards think Cheng Zhao wants to attack the Empress and seize Cheng Zhao.
With his arms stretched out like an eagle, shielding the Empress from the domino horses,
There is no escape for Cheng Zhao from the Guard's charge whose swords are raised in the
air ready to strike.

As the guards seize Cheng Zhao,
Cheng Zhao looks to the sky for help
Where a forest of swords point down to where he lays
But the swords quickly part revealing a cloud staircase that leads to the sky.

Cheng Zhao looked to the sky for help
And the sky responded with thanks
Cheng Zhao climbs the cloud staircase leading to the sky and the same Library room images
flash by his eyes
At the top of the stairs, Cheng Zhao is portalled back to the Library room face to face once
again with the glowing page of the day the Empress came to town.

The sky responded with thanks
And so did the Empress
Face to face with the same glowing page,
But this time the Empress' face now turns directly to Cheng Hao and bows long and low.

Poetry – Group 2 WINNER

The Heart of the Mogao Grottoes

ESF Quarry Bay School, Wong, Angie - 8

O! I open my craggy mouth to speak
of an underworld of things unheard,
unknown to man—

Listen! Listen!

Long long ago, a monk
heard me on the slopes:
stopped by my oasis of spittle,
peered through my stony lips,
passed my tongued stalagmites,
stalactites, and took shelter
in my throat.

He slept in the dark depths of me,
and in his sleep he heard, a voice—
that could be my own—singing
through the dark shapes of his mind.

As I swallowed his sleep,
as he rested where I felt
my vocal cords should be:
curled foetal as a baby.

In the morning he awoke,
and unleashed his knife, dazzling my eyes;
carving the face of Buddha, right on my chin,
carving Buddha's teachings, stroke by stroke,
carving his art deep into my skin,
carvings of inspiration to provoke
the others he would welcome in.

The monk proclaimed me as a sacred place:
and the people came and came,
tiptoeing over my petrified face,
creeping inside my gritted cheeks,
decorating my jagged teeth with trinkets,
offerings of food and flowers for me to eat.

Good! Good!

How lovely to have company!
How wonderful to be somebody!
My face lit up by their candles:
I adored their attention—
I adored being adored.

But then!
Sounds of crashing and smashing,
dust rising, polluting my air,
clogging my mouth, my breath,
making me choke,
voices coughing through my throat.

Workers' sweat dripping on my tongue:
salty taste overpowering my mouth,
making me wish I could vomit:

Sick! Sick!

Cracking colossal holes in my heart,
breaking me apart,
as a hammer shattering through glass,
banging and booming me over.

Shall pilgrims dig thousands of caves,
but fail to listen to the mystery I contain?

After a while the pilgrims became bored:
they failed to find the secret that I stored.
They stopped coming by.
They stopped bringing me gifts.
They stopped remembering my ancient face.
For centuries, now, I've been forgot,
left lonely and abandoned.

Would I be lost in the world forever, again?
Or could I rediscovered and made famous?
Visited for my greatness?

Look past your tower blocks,
your cars, your roads, concreteness, rigidity,
and come, come, come, to find me.
Pause your work,
your industry, technology,
and unlock my secretive theology.

Come! Come!

And hear my heart.

Poetry – Group 3 WINNER

The Search

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Yan, Yutong - 13

Slowly,
stepping,
luring.

Allowing the heat to consume him like a hungry beast scavenging for its next meal.

Draining away.

Fabricating under the ruthless sun.

Each step was slower than the last;

his feet heavy on the deceiving sand beneath him.

Days

weeks

months.

How long has he been here?

(15 years ago)

He had first heard of the caves

as a young boy

who would get into trouble for;

digging up his neighbours' garden

or

making faces when

he thought

the teacher wasn't looking

or

throwing tiny pebbles at his classmates

when they irritated him

like red rashes growing

on your skin when you've been

sweating too much.

On days like those

his mother

would tenderly tuck him in the stiff bed;

the only bed

they could afford.
She would gingerly brush
his tangled hair,
attempting to use her fingers to
comb out the knots.
She would
lovingly stroke his bruised face
and tell the story her mother had once told her,
of the caves,
the ones filled with extraordinary relics;
the treasures of those who came before.
Her words flowed out of her mouth
like a steady stream of water
that soothed his restless mind
and comforted his uneasy heart.
But he had long neglected those stories.
They're just myths
after all;
forgotten fairytales.

(Present day)

The cloudless blue sky
formed a dome around Yuanlu
and dried him up
empty and hollow
and
hollow and empty.
Nothing more than a shell of a person;
an uncoiled machine.
Holding his lips tight
he wanted to scream;
to scream all those thoughts,
those swarming thoughts
invading his numbed mind,
but his mouth
could no longer form words,
only a faint whisper managed to escape his chapped lips.
Finally,
his shaking knees gave out,
and he fell face-first onto the
caramel sand that seemed to stretch
so far.
So.Far.
So far it seemed to just fall down the side of the earth.

He didn't know what would consume him first,
the desert,
or the loneliness.
Loneliness.
It seems to have gotten heavier and heavier and heavier;
piling up like the dirt that had piled onto his skin.
Becoming thicker and thicker and thicker
with every vacant day he spent
and his hunger for human touch grew and grew and grew.
So he curled up into a tight ball
embracing himself
desperately trying to stimulate
any
sense of physical touch,
and fell into a deep
deep
slumber.

(5 years ago)
His mother had always expressed
her desire to experience the Mogao Caves for herself,
so when Yuanlu's mother passed,
he started to research about the caves;
desperate to fulfill his mother's
dying wish.
When he told others about it;
which he did plenty,
they would just laugh and shake his head
saying that those were just
fairy tales.
But when they started to realize
that this wasn't just a half-hearted
joke,
a look of concern
permanently painted itself on their
judging faces.
And all those faces;
hushed and still and staring.
so desperate to pursue his mother's last wish
Slowly, it started to become an obsession;
eating away at him little by little,
consumed by the accumulation of loose papers
and books.
Then finally,
after years of research,

with just the clothes on his body
and a rucksack on his back,
he was set to search for the
Mogao Caves;
in the memory of his beloved mother.

(Present day)

Yuanlu awoke
and through his half-opened eyes
he saw a swirling vision of
crimson reds and camel beiges.
A temple.
The temple stood alone
in front of the wall
that had previously obstructed Yuanlu's path.
Half engulfed in the rocky terrain.
There is no explanation for it,
a temple
an entrance to a cave
in the middle of the barren desert
that seems to stretch for miles in every direction.
There was no door
and even though the sun shone so mercilessly;
the temple seemed to swallow the light,
only eternal darkness;
a never-ending void.
Still half-awake,
Yuanlu rubbed his eyes
once,
twice,
three times.
But instead of dissolving into nothingness
like the mirage he expected,
the temple stood firm
as if its roots stretched far beneath the surface,
deep into the beating heart of the Earth.

A sudden desperation
took over of him;
Controlling him like a puppet,
and he ran towards the temple.
And as his frail,
blistered feet
stepped onto the ground for the first time,
he felt a wave of shock

overcome his body.
Had he been away so long that he'd
forgotten
how it felt to touch
of a solid surface?
He called out into the dark
and the only thing he was greeted back with,
was his own voice.
He reached into his frayed pocket
and took out a matchbox.
As he removed
a match
from the box,
a dazzling fire
blossomed in the murky darkness,
then watched the light
dance onto the barren walls of the cave.

Wandering through the labyrinth of caverns
the stillness of caves
created restlessness,
causing Yuanlu to be more paranoid
that there were other life present.
Something caught his eye;
in the coarse darkness
he could make out
human-like figures.
As he raised his tiny match
it suddenly explodes into a
mammoth bonfire,
soaking everything in its
brilliant light.
Yuanlu winced
as his eyes slowly adjusted to the dark,
and saw time-worn statues
looming over his trifling figure.
Deities frozen in time
unblinking eyes
that observed all that happened,
and for a moment,
Yuanlu forgot his agony,
he forgot his desolation
his aching body.
For a moment,
he forgot everything.
He forgot how to breathe.

Yuanlu stepped closer
to examine the artifacts.
The sandy palette
so soothing to the eye.
The murals on the walls so impossible intricate,
each stroke of the brush
so lovingly painted.
The lines curved and twisted
to form beautiful images,
and even though it has visibly faded with time,
it aged like fine wine;
each dent
each scratch
each mark
tells a story that has long been forgotten.

Tears filled Yuanlu's eyes
as the whole world turned into a blurry mess of colours,
with every beat of his heart
it grew louder and louder and louder.
He had finally found it,
all those doubts tearing him apart,
those glaring eyes
those restless nights.

His mother was right and so was he.

It wasn't just a forgotten fairy tale.
He could feel warm air by his cheek,
he could hear his mother's lips near his ear
"I'm proud of you Wang Yuanlu"
Tears started flowing down his face
like mighty rivers,
clearing his eyes of all the accumulated dust and sand.
He ran down through the maze of caverns;
paying no mind to his burning feet
and the deafening roar of his heartbeat,
he ran from grotto to grotto
in awe of the splendor and beauty
before him.
The fire lead him
From one cavern to another,
illuminating the pathway before him;
the flame so unpredictable,
as if taunting and provoking him.
Despite that,

he felt like an ecstatic child
on a treasure hunt;
a state of pure euphoria.

When he finally resurfaced
to the empty desert,
a group of travelers spotted
a sluggish speck on the horizon of the desert.
Too exhausted to talk,
the travelers
hauled Yuanlu onto the back of one of the laborious camels,
then offered him food and water;
ready to take him home.
And whilst his body
sat slumped on the back of a traveler's camel,
his mind
still lay in the eternal halls of the Mogao Caves.

POETRY – Group 4

WINNER

Timelessness

Heep Yunn School, Chan, Lok Yan Betty - 17

An oasis —
 in the desert cathay,
 chanced upon
 by a pious monk on a pilgrimage.
 Its sweet spring waters
 quenched the traveler's thirst.
 There I emerged:
 golden, glistening, glorious
 "Maitreya!" he gasped,
 "Splendiferous."

Into a scarp he carved such cave with
 ascending
 levels
 of
 prickly-red
 porches
 and lined the walls with works of art
 that imitate my proportions to
 replicate his vision.

Soon arrived the devout
 who sought to construct
 a place divine
 a beehive of grottoes
 for worship and meditation.
 A site christened — the Mogao Caves!
 None higher; none superior.
 There I sat:
 cross-ankled on a throne
 flanked by russet lions
 my copper-sculpted body round and rotund
 bare except for a clay-moulded skirt,

my lotus-bud eyes bespoke
serenity and solemnity.

Before me came men after men —
corrupted sinners, saintlike souls
unlettered folk, scholastic savants.
Their bodies are a miniature clone of mine.
Their faces are sunflowers
seeking nourishment
in every nook and cranny
under every eave, every niche of the caverns

to attain
Enlightenment —
elaborate murals of Buddha's renounce of the temptations offered by demon Mara
his right hand caressing the ground
the 'earth-touching' gesture
calling on the Earth Goddess to affirm his awakening

to learn
self-sacrifice —
scrolls in the Library Cave
recounting King Sivi's bloody thigh
in the talons of a hawk
in lieu of the dove
to understand
Samsara —
the endless cycle of birth and death
personified by sentient beings of Heaven
erected out of mud and reeds.

Worshippers pored over
the vast canvas of murals, sculptures, Jataka Tales,
an amalgamation of teachings and virtues

And then they leave.

Bodies light with cravings gone
eyes illuminated by the incandescent light
of *Wisdom*
And then more came.

There, deep in the caves, I observed:
the dawn of the Tang Empire.
I was the heart of a route to the West;
the axis merchants on camels spun around.
The teachings and virtues whispered

from the still lips of mine, the silent scrolls of time
to a pilgrim then his wife and then a merchant and then a marketplace for people of foreign
skin and tongue.
I felt the earth rumble, a breeze carrying the scent of freshly-dug soil —
the Mogao Caves multiplied.

The presence of deities was more palpable than ever.
It was the calm before the storm.

It presaged a long and trying time, and
there, I helplessly witnessed:
the persecution of my faithful worshippers.
A fuse, lit by the Emperor, that set our faith aflame
an accusation of social and religious disruption, raised by the dubious,
that almost left us in ruins.
Our monks and nuns stripped of their ordination
forced into laylife our generous patrons
confiscated of their wealth our shrines and temples
abolished
then
demolished.

All but the caves.
The caves were forsaken.

And
eventually
forgotten.

For what felt like centuries
I sat
cross-ankled on a cracked throne
flanked by discoloured lions
my copper-sculpted body tainted green
no longer bare but clad in a layer of dust.
Nonetheless, my lotus-bud eyes still bespoke
serenity and solemnity.

I listened to the incessant ticking of timeless time
the trickle of dried paint falling off the walls
like chapped skin peeled off by winter's wind
the tumble of perched scrolls that
my arms were too rigid to rearrange.

Still, my faith was ever-steady
my tranquility ever-present.
The paste used as paint had darkened

but eyes would forever brighten
when a beholder's glance
flit over the images portrayed.

And then...

At last!
After dynasties have
risen and fallen
risen and fallen again —
the Mogao Caves were discovered!
By Western wanderers with their laudable curiosity
enthralled by our array of historical gems and religious treasure
revive and preserve they did.

Now
flocks of people come before me
bringing rich paint,
flashing bright lights that go
“Snap!”
They replicate my proportions,
to demonstrate evolution
And in return to them
I grant utmost karmic merit.

The lessons and values disseminate
from my old cavernous home, the century-long heritage
to an artist then his wife and then a local and then an exhibition for people of foreign skin and
tongue.

A trove of art —
in the desert cathay,
is restored by ardent believers.
Its tales unfold
yet there are treasures untold.
There I reside:
the Mogao Caves
“Priceless!” They gasp.
No,
timeless.

Poetry – Group 5

WINNER

Graying Grottoes

Dulwich College Beijing, Zhao, Helena - 18

I have a thousand brothers and sisters,
 Yet I'm lost in the sea of whispers
 Of a forgotten past,
 Hauntingly, leaving me aghast.
 I'm right here, upholding militant, firmly.
 Though time — my mortal enemy — is deadly.
 Inside, I'm a rotting beauty.
 To be my bolster is now your duty,
 For I've kept a thousand lives and histories
 Within me — too long. I'm exploding memories,

 Which, in turn, mangle me.
 Open your eyes and see
 Past such temporary victories,
 For I'm full of invisible injuries.
 Save me, before time becomes your inescapable enemy.
 Understanding my anatomy is no blasphemy;
 On the contrary,
 It's quite visionary,
 For you are discovering mysteries
 Of ancient monasteries:

 My head is a ceiling of paintings;
 My body is covered with wondrous writings;
 My arms open wide to all humankind —
 Millennials ago you may find
 Sinners sitting by my side
 In lotus leaves, for I shall guide
 Them through tough times
 With my purifying, heavenly chimes;
 My feet, once prayed over, cleaned, and shined,
 Now have become slightly unrefined.

So, if you may please
Free me from the disease
Of negligence. I want to be free
But don't just let me be.
I need more than mere company —
I need yin-yang harmony
From the sunny moon
And moony sun at noon.
My enigmatic interior is covered
In tales-old secrets to be discovered.

Within me resides the lives of brazen hearts
Who've withstood sandstorms and devilish arts,
Trading their last breaths for so-called treasures,
Fulfilling their days with picturesque pleasures.
Though, if you look deeply into their souls
You may find lost smiles in abysmal holes.
Human beings — oh, such strange creatures,
Trying to find purpose via adventures,
When instead, here I reside,
Full of lessons to be learned inside:

There once was a prince so terribly kind,
Who fled his palace of jewels behind
With his parents upon a malicious murder attempt.
Days passed, ravenous for food, none are exempt
From the pains of hunger and destitute.
Yet, such circumstances did not alter his attitude,
For the prince offered his flesh to his parents,
In which they devoured relentlessly; remnants
Are left by the roadside, yet, unfortunately,
A hungry lion comes by. Naturally,

The prince, so generous and magnanimous,
Self-sacrificed his final remains. Felicitous
Deeds and a good heart all conquer ill fate,
And are given fruitful treats in trade,
For the lion is the mighty god Indra,
Who restored him and gave back extra.
You see, fortune is in your puny human hand,
Changeable upon our gracious command.
Serendipity is like a blooming Peach Blossom.
Water it with goodness for prosperity and wisdom.

I am the Mogao cave, full of narratives, stories
Of forgotten pasts, full of glories.
Yet I still worry I'm losing my sense of identity.
Who am I really? Is my existence a necessity?
If so, then why do I feel deeply dilapidated?
I'm exasperated, for I was once, oh, so sophisticated.
Now, my delicate face is marred by people
Who come not to pray or learn, but to scramble,
Babble, mingle, stumble, and treat me without care.
They pollute me inside out, toxifying my air

With trash, carbon dioxide, and humidity,
Deteriorating my dignity and divinity.
I think I need antioxidants, for my skin
Is wrinkling with cracks and human sin.
I, too, need to be loved and cherished.
I, too, need to be continuously nourished
With gems, courage, beliefs, wisdom.
My vast history can feed a kingdom,
So treat me like a king, with love and respect.
Let the past, present, and future reconnect.

Poetry – Group 6 WINNER

Creepy Dark Cave

Korean International School Springboard, Robin, Asher - 9

It was cold.
It was damp.
It was creepy and chilly and scary.
There is the Mogao Cave.

I stumble and I trip.
I tiptoe and I reach.
It's so quiet!

“Eek!”
WHAT IS THAT?
Here is a Buddha.
He is a stone.
He has a smile.
He is gentle and good and kind.
Here is the Mogao Cave.

Poetry – Group 7

WINNER

Mogao Caves

Korean International School Springboard, Chor, Damien - 14

Made from the mountains
Open heart for the world
Great historical moment
A long long time ago
Opening to the world

Giant leaves to explore
Rough Land
Over the mainland
Turn of the twentieth century
Tales of mystery
On the way
Eastern destination
Scattering places