

SOLVING MYSTERIES FROM TEN CENTURIES GO

Young writers had fun this year! We could tell by the tone of their writing and the humor that popped up often, delighting the judges. Thank you for making us smile!

Some years, we give writers a challenging task on the research front. Last year, they had to delve into history, back to the year 366 AD, and work with the real life tale of the discovery of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang. Probably some of the entrants, and any of their parents, were not familiar with the story at all. Yet students did a superb job.

This year, our assignment still had a tough research element – but it also had an easily recognizable story element. By asking young scribes to work on the story of Judge Pao (or Bao), a real life character who solved mysteries and fought for justice, there was a clear structure that they were already familiar with: the cops–and–robbers tale, or the standard story of detectives outwitting villains.

Yet we made it clear in our brief, that their work had to be rooted in the real story of the Chinese law enforcer – because, unlike Sherlock Holmes, Bao Zheng was not an imaginary character. The judge really existed, even if many of the fanciful tales that circulated about him are clearly fictional.

It was a difficult challenge – but students rose to face it. There were a record number of entries, with huge numbers of fictional tales, poems, and non–fiction essays.

DON'T SKIP THE RESEARCH!

Some young writers, sadly, fell into the trap of skipping the research. They simply made up a Sherlock Holmes type detective story, and substituted the name “Judge Pao” for Sherlock Holmes. Those were generally winnowed out of the pile at high speed and rejected, sorry.

Good pieces of writing usually have a sense of place and time. There needed to be some elements in the work that referenced at least some of the key facts of the real story behind the legend: first, the incidents being described are in China, not London’s Baker Street, the crime fighter is Chinese, not British, and the society is Kaifeng on or around the year 1050 AD, not Victorian England.

The majority of entrants recognized this and did some solid digging, creating prose or poetry, fiction or non–fiction, that enabled them to create a word picture of the judge and his work in Song Dynasty China.

Some took this to an impressive depth, producing works that carried details about his life and his connections, and telling the stories of some of his real–life cases.

Others did some research, but then took a creative turn, bringing Bao Zheng into modern life, with stories of time travel or such–like.

As always, some of the older students demonstrated a strong skill in writing their works using highly literary tools, with evocative language and experimental story structures.

TOO MANY GOOD ONES

And, as always, there were far too wonderful pieces of writing to choose from. We ended up wishing we had twice as many prizes to give out, because of the quality of the work. We did increase the number of prizes this year, and we also increased the number of “honorable mention” letters we sent out.

So although not everyone can win a title, we do hope that those of you who made a serious effort and produced great work, feel that their time was well spent. We certainly want to encourage you all to continue to write.

There's one other thing that makes this prize special. The western side of the planet has produced wonderful literary works for centuries, and their writings have been celebrated on the world stage since time immemorial.

In the east, it's different. People in Asia have also created wonderful written works for centuries, but they are far less likely to get onto any lists of the "world's best stories" and so on. That's not because Asians are not creative, but is just an accident of history. The industrial revolution happened in the west, and the modern book industry grew up on that side of the world.

Today, Asia is making its presence felt. We're creative too! We have great stories, and a wonderful storehouse of history of culture upon which we can call. We also have by far the largest audience for the stories or books or poems or movies or TV shows we create. Let's not forget: the population of Asia is larger than the populations of all the other regions of the world put together.

For this reason, creative young people are going to find themselves with a great many opportunities in the future. Harry Potter books are great, and some of the Hollywood movies are hugely enjoyable – but the greatest market in the world for the creative industries will be Asia.

Our young people are going to be well prepared to shine!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nury Vittachi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'N'.

Nury Vittachi
Hong Kong, March 2023