



# Fiction

Group 4

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,  
Chau, Yui Yan – 16*

Having a crescent moon birthmark on his forehead, a dark-toned face, and being able to solve all sorts of crimes are all remarkable features of Judge Pao. He has sharp senses and ingenious thoughts, causing him to be able to solve all crimes and no injustice to ever escape. Him being the eminent embodiment of justice, he is admired and appreciated by the people of China.

Enveloped in the warm sunshine and hearing the lovely melody of the sounds of birds chirping, Judge Pao was having his daily stroll on the streets, trying to look out for any potential crime that was occurring. "Everything seems to be alright today, there is no crime happening," Judge Pao thought to himself. He decided to take a stroll at the nearby lake to take a short break. He soon shortly arrived next to the lake. He looked down at the lake, which was crystal clear and sky blue, it looked utterly gorgeous as if it was luring Judge Pao to fall into it. "The lake looks utterly breathtaking today, it's more clear and prettier than usual." Judge Pao muttered to himself, while leaning forward to get a closer look at this gorgeous scenario, but unfortunately, he lost balance and tumbled off into the lake. Everything started to become blurry, and Judge Pao started to lose consciousness. "I can't die here! I have to stay alive to solve all crimes, judge, and sentence all criminals....." Judge Pao thought as he fell into an "eternal slumber".

Judge Pao woke up to find himself in an extremely odd location. A room with white walls and weird-looking machines, where could he possibly be? A lady dressed in a white dress came towards him and said "Sir, you're finally awake! We found you drowned in a pond! Luckily you are still alive! Sir, may I have your name and identity card number?" Judge Pao responded, "my name is Judge Pao. What is this "identity card number" you're referring to? I have no idea what you're talking about. What is this strange place? Who are you? I must return to the royal court now, there must be a lot of unsolved crimes waiting for me to be solved. How long have I been unconscious? What is the date today?" The lady had a dumbfounded look on her face, and said, "this place is a hospital in Hong Kong, and I am a nurse. An identity card is something you're equipped with as soon as you are born. It is January 1st, 2022. I'm afraid you've damaged some nerve fibers in your brain when you're drowning, it is no longer the Song dynasty, and Judge Pao is probably dead. Please stay and have an MRI scan to do a checkup for your brain." This has got to be an awful prank on me, Judge Pao thought to himself. He dashed out of the hospital, hoping this was just nothing more than a nightmare. When he left the hospital, he was utterly astonished. He saw weird machines moving at high speeds on the streets, people holding small metal-like boxes that emit light and sound, and tall metallic poles that emitted colors of red and green... Judge Pao was forced to accept the fact he was no longer in the Song Dynasty.

He walked around aimlessly on the streets, clutching his hands close together. Being transmitted to the future was the last thing he had expected to happen. He let out a big sigh and looked around the unfamiliar surroundings. "Technology is so advanced now, my crime-solving skills must be replaced by these cutting-edge technological devices. I'm useless in this era!" Judge Pao let out a big sigh and continued to stroll around the streets of Hong Kong.

"It's mine!" "No, it's mine!" There seems to be some commotion nearby, Judge Pao thought to himself whilst walking toward the source of the noise. A crowd of people was around the scene of commotion. It appears that two men are arguing about the ownership of a handbag. "This bag is mine! Stop trying to steal it!" The man in teal complained. "This bag is mine! What is wrong with you?" The other man in gray answered. "Just let the police solve the crime. There must be security cameras nearby, right? The police can just check the security footage to reveal the truth." The passerby said. Judge Pao looked upwards towards the security camera, which had a banner hanging over it, saying "OUT OF SERVICE".

"Fret not. I will be here to help solve the crime." Judge Pao said as he shoved his way through the crowd. He opened the bag, but unfortunately, there was nothing inside that could serve as identification for the owner. Judge Pao traced his hand alongside the fabric on the bag and noticed that there were white solid particles on the bag. He collected the solid particles and set them ablaze, and a brick-red flame appeared, alongside some colorless gas. Judge Pao collected the gas in an inverted test tube and passed the gas into limewater, and it soon turned from colorless to milky." Could one of you be a teacher by any chance? "Judge Pao asked the two men. "Yes, I'm a teacher." the man in teal responded. "The owner of the bag is this man in teal. As the white solid gives out a brick-red flame when it is burnt, we can deduce calcium is present in the unknown solid. The gas produced turns lime water milky, so we can deduce the gas is carbon dioxide. As a result, I can deduce the unknown solid granules on the bag are calcium carbonate. Calcium carbonate is a major material of chalk, therefore it is clear that the owner of this bag is the teacher who uses chalk in his daily routine!" Judge Pao concluded. The crowd cheered for his superior crime solving skills. Judge Pao simply smiled and thought to himself, his new tales in 2022 is just about to begin.

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*International College Hong Kong, Ng, Jason – 14*

Born on the 5th of March, 999, Bao Zheng better known as Judge Bao was a historical figure and government official who lived in Hefei, China during the reign of Emperor Renzong in the Song Dynasty. During all 25 years of civil service Bao was an uncompromising judge known for his integrity, honesty, fairness and wisdom. Bao consistently demonstrated extreme honesty and uprightness which were proven with fearless actions such as sentencing his own uncle and punishing powerful families. His ability to defend peasants and commoners against corruption and bribery gained him the title Justice Bao and his appointment from 1057 to 1058 as the prefect of Kaifeng made him a legendary figure. Due to his anti-corrupt and unbiased ways, Judge Bao is remembered today as the personification of justice and fairness in the court and he is an icon to all honest officials.

Bao Zheng was born into a scholar family in Hefei, China. Bao's family was in the working middle class and his father was a scholar and an official but his grandfather was a commoner. Bao's family could afford to send him to school and as he grew up among the low working class, he empathised with their everyday hardships which made him grow a resentment towards corruption which resulted in a strong desire for justice. After Bao passed the highest level imperial examination to qualify as a Jinshi, he was appointed as the magistrate of Jianchang County. However, he delayed embarking on his career for 10 years in order to take care of his elderly parents. During the time Bao looked after his parents, Liu Yin, the Magistrate of Luzhou at the time, occasionally visited Bao and because of the good relationship between the two, Bao obtained a good influence from Liu Yin. Only after Bao had observed all the mourning rites of his parents did he finally start his career officially and he did many things during this time.

After his parents death, Bao Zheng, at 39 years old, was appointed Magistrate of Tianchang County. It was here that Bao first established his reputation as an insightful and deductive judge. According to an urban tale, a farmer once reported that the tongue of his ox had been sliced out. Bao told him to return and slaughter the ox for sale. Soon after, a man had arrived in Bao's court, accusing the farmer of slaughtering a beast of burden: ( a domesticated animal which is used for carrying loads ), which was punishable by one year of penal servitude in the Song Dynasty. Judge Bao then bellowed: "Why did you slit his ox's tongue and then accuse him?" Shocked, the culprit had to confess.

In the year 1040, Bao was appointed as a prefect of Duanzhou in the south. The prefecture was known for its high quality inkstones. These inkstones were presented annually to the imperial court at a certain number. However, Bao discovered that previous and current prefects had collected a lot more inkstones than the presented amounts. They did this in order to bribe important and powerful ministers with extras and when Bao found out, he abolished the practice by telling inkstone manufacturers to create only enough inkstones to fill the required amount. When his tenure was over in 1043, Bao Zheng left without a single inkstone in his possession, showing how he would take no part in bribery and showing again that he was a man of justice and fairness.

In 1044, Bao returned to the capital and was named an investigating censor. For the next 2 years in this position, he submitted more than 13 memorandum to Emperor Renzong which were centred around the military, the taxation and examination system, as well as governmental dishonesty and incompetence. One year after being appointed as investigating censor, Bao was sent to the Liao Dynasty as a messenger. During a meeting, Liao officials accused the Song of violating a peace treaty by installing a secret side door near the border district of the town Xiongzhou. Bao then retorted: "Why is a side door required for intelligence?" The Liao officials could not retaliate. In the next few years, Bao also held the positions of Fiscal commissioner of Hebei, Vice director of the Ministry of Justice, Auxiliary in the Academy of Scholarly Worthies, and Vice Commissioner of the Ministry of Revenue.

During 1057 when Bao was announced as the prefect of Bian, modern day Kaifeng, he became an iconic figure amongst both commoners and honest officials. Bao only held the position for one year but he allowed and also managed several administrative reforms. One such reform was allowing citizens to directly file complaints with the city administrators and magistrates, thereby combating corrupt city clerks who were believed to pay local officials and powerful families much more than they were supposed to.

Although Bao Zheng became extremely popular as the prefect of Bian, his role as magistrate after his tenure and the things he did were much more controversial in the eyes of the public. An example of one such action is when he dismissed Zhang Fangping who was holding three important offices concurrently. Bao was later appointed as Zhang's successor which seemed extremely suspicious. Ouyang Xiu, a major proponent of the previous Qingli reform, then filed a rebuke against Bao.

Bao, despite having a high rank in the government, lived a modest yet comfortable life as a commoner. Apart from his hatred for injustice and corruption, Bao was also known mostly for his filial piety and stern demeanour. During his life as an official, Bao gained and wore the name "Iron faced Judge." It was also said amongst both commoners and officials that his smile was "rarer than clear waters in the yellow river."

Due to his fame and the strength of reputation, Bao was also regularly associated with the god Yama, known in China as Yanluo, and the "Infernal Bureaucracy" of the Eastern Marchmount because of his supposed ability to judge and manage the affairs and events in the afterlife like he did in the world of the living.

Bao died in the capital city of Kaifeng in 1062 and when he did, he left a note for his family. The note stated that any of his descendants that commit bribery as an official should not be allowed back home or be buried in the family cemetery. The note states: "He who shares not my values is not my descendant." Showing how dedicated he was to his values.

After his death, Bao Zheng's stories were retold and preserved by many theatrics in the form of many performance arts such as Chinese opera and pingshu, a form of Chinese storytelling. In Chinese theatre, Bao was usually depicted as a well dressed ancient chinese man with a long grey beard. The actor for Bao would usually wear a black mask with a white, crescent shaped mark on the forehead of the mask. Written scriptures of his legend appeared in the Yuan Dynasty in forms of poetry such as Qu. Vernacular fictions of Judge Bao were popular in the later Ming and Qing Dynasties where he would be a popular and common protagonist in gong'an fiction. His stories would often revolve around himself, a magistrate, investigating and solving criminal cases. When Sherlock Holmes: Study in Scarlet was translated to Chinese in 1908, many Chinese people often referred to Sherlock Holmes as "The English Judge Bao."

These urban myths, scriptures, performances and referencing Sherlock Holmes to Judge Bao being consistent in everything he stood for. Growing up amongst commoners and peasants made Judge Bao despise injustice and bribery amongst officials. His relationship with Luzhou Magistrate Liu Yin strengthened his bond and love for justice and honesty more than ever and he gained more respect for people. His relationships, childhood and his amazing insightful skills led him to demonstrate extreme acts of honesty and justice, shaping the legal system into what it is today. We can truly say that Judge Bao is the equivalent and if not, much better version of Sherlock Holmes.

# The Judge's Greatest Mystery!

*Korean International School, Cheung, Ming Lok – 15*

It was a quiet afternoon within the fair town of Hidaki, where citizens lived in peace and harmony along with each other, though this peace was not given to them for free, it was all earned from the hard work of one man. One man and his actions as a legendary judge, who served cold justice to the criminals and nerdowells of Hidaki, and today was another day where he sat in his grand court, with a feeble criminal pleading for his innocence at a wooden table next to their increasingly sweaty defendant.

“That is enough!” Pao’s voice boomed out from the chair that everyone knew as his throne of justice, and as he did, the Jury gasped in both fear and amazement. “It is clear that Mister Cheng here had brutally murdered that fine man on that day, I in fact was there to investigate the scene myself, and found THIS!” Pao would then raise a chinese cap, with the man’s initials inscribed onto its front. “You said you lost a cap the other day, that was why you hadn’t worn it since? Well I believe I have found it, at the crime scene.” Pao threw the cap at the prosecuted man, which he reluctantly caught. “J–Judge! You have got this all wrong! This has been a big coincidence! I didn’t do it! I didn’t!” The man pleaded and slammed his palms onto the wooden table as sweat dripped off his face and looked towards his defendant, who had already started to pack his things into his bag. “W–Wait! You can’t go yet! You still have to defend me! Please!” The man would quickly be silenced once more with a loud BANG from Pao’s wooden hammer slamming into the table. “I deem this court case to be over, and you, Mister Cheng, to be guilty of murder!” His voice echoed throughout the courtroom, followed by the gasping and clapping from the jury crowd. “NOOOOOO!” The prosecuted man slammed the table again before he was grabbed by each shoulder and dragged out of the room, Pao nodding in satisfaction. After the case, Pao was outside of the court, enjoying the quiet afternoon breeze, the calm silence in which he had brought to this town, free of the stench of criminals and the paranoia which lingered with them, all gone. His peace and quiet was quickly shattered as a voice came out from the courtroom, followed with huffs and heavy panting.

“Sir Pao! Sir Pao!” A rather young sounding voice rang into Pao’s ears, he turned his head towards the source of the sound, his arms behind his back. He then saw a young man, his stature was as straight as a bamboo stick, his hands were full with papers and other documents which stretched upwards all the way to the underside of his chin, though he didn’t seem to be tired at all. “That was some amazing work you did out there as always! I wonder how you do it?” The youthful man would comment, being ecstatic to even be near Pao, let alone speak with him. “The one thing separating me from other judges, is that I do my own research, you can never trust other people’s words, they will always be different from the truth.” Pao said with heavy confidence as he looked back out into the afternoon sky once more. “That’s so cool to hear! I wish I can be like you, Pao, I want to learn so much from you as your new assistant!” The man smiled, but was greeted back by a deathly glare from Pao. “Assistant? What do you mean ‘Assistant’? I never approved of this, I work best alone.” Pao turned away from the man, but he didn’t back down from his enthusiasm. “The Highest Command assigned me to aid you in investigations! This is so exciting! By the way, my name is Haoyu!” Haoyu’s face was all puffed up with cheer, Pao glared at him again, but he couldn’t get him to leave, so he sighed out loud, finally turning to him fully. “Listen here, Haoyu, I am not in need of any assistants, so you may run along now, I bet some other judge would require your help because I work alone, now leave.” Pao would make his final remark, returning to absolute silence after he was done talking, and finally Haoyu’s expression started to turn from excitement to slight dejection before he looked to the ground. Haoyu walked off back into the court without saying anything back, Pao took a slight glance behind him to see that, was he too rude? No, he just had to say what must’ve been said, what he really had to focus on though, was tonight’s case.

It was soon night time, and Pao was within his bedroom. “It is time.” He spoke to himself as he combed his beard and walked towards his closet, and as he opened the doors, he would reveal a completely new world within what was once a closet, now a portal to the realm of Hell. Pao walked through as he closed the doors behind him, standing right at his hell throne of justice, taking a seat, he raised the fiery wooden hammer and hit it against the wooden table, each hit causing sparks to burst out from under the hammer. “The court is in session, hell fiends and other creatures, stand at your positions.” Pao’s voice became deeper and darker as he looked around to see demons of all shapes and sizes, widths and lengths, winged and wingless gather around, some flying in the air, some taking a seat on a rugged rock on the side of the court. “Immortal Yama! Before our session starts..” A voice echoed off of the walls, it boomed from the ceilings of Hell, every demon but Pao covered in fear, they knew who this voice was. “What is the matter, Satan,

Lord of Hell?” Pao looked up to the general direction of the voice before it responded. “There has been another person who has passed before their time within the realm of mortals, I am sure you will provide optimal justice to whoever committed this heinous act?” The voice questioned Pao with a sense of intimidation and rule to show that if he didn’t do as asked, he would be punished just like the people be judged. “Of course, Lord of hell, the matter will be dealt with swiftly, now, onto the case!” After the confrontation with the Lord of Hell himself, Pao would continue his Hell trial.

When darkness faded, and sunlight began to scour the earth once more, Pao strolled along the streets in the early morning, he held his hands behind his back as he moved along to the scene of the most recent crime he was told of by the Lord of Hell. After a while of walking, he would see it in the distance, and as he got closer, another murder, this time of a woman, but one peculiar thing he saw was that there was barely any blood, barely any bruises and that her skin looked oddly rough. However, he saw a suspicious looking item that laid next to her, it seemed to be a long sewing needle, covered in blood at the tip. This must’ve been the weapon used in the murder, Pao thought. As he looked even closer, it was obvious now, the needle was thin, the woman’s wounds were small, so not much blood could have left her body, he would stow the needle away for further research. As he did, he saw something out of the corner of his eye, and when he turned around to see what it was, he saw a man running into an alleyway away from the scene of the crime, seemingly panicking at the sight of Pao. That must’ve been the killer, his senses warned him of it, he then put a hand to the side of his head and closed his eyes, and soon, authorities rushed into the scene to chase after that man. This was one of Pao’s powers, to telepathically warn others of danger and apprehend it, this is how he caught suspects, and he will rightfully serve them cold justice afterwards.

Quickly after that scuffle with the potential suspect, he was brought to the court, where he met face to face with Pao, who sat high atop his mighty throne of justice, looking down upon the nervous suspect. “So, tell me your name.” Pao commanded with a menacing aura, it was like his eyes pierced right into the man’s soul, which made him more shaky and sweaty. “M–My name is uhm... Zhao L–L–Long!” The man stated his name, stuttering heavily from the tension of the situation in contrast to Pao’s calm nature. “What were you doing this morning, Mister Long?” Pao put a hand to his chin as he prepared to listen closely to the man’s testimony, trying to find any clues as to if he was the killer of that woman. “W–Well..I woke up... Completed my morning routine... A–And I was out getting my supplies for my work.. Then I went to return home!” The man would timidly say, but Pao would immediately find a flaw in his testimony. “Returning home? From your files, it states that your house is in the opposite direction of where you went, which was from the crime scene. How would a man returning to his house somehow end up all the way across town?” Pao asked the man as he got increasingly more nervous. “W–Well I... That...” Pao would interject. “And from further inspection of this needle, it would seem that you run a sewing company, yes? It has the name “Long’s Sewing Company” engraved onto its side.” As pao revealed the needle, the man gasped. “W–Wait! I can explain!” Pao raised a hand and the man went silent. “I believe all the evidence is here for me to safely say that you, Mister Long, committed this murder, this case is over.” Pao declared with confidence as he placed the needle down onto the table, the man shouting out loud in distraught. “Nooo! I didn’t do it! I swear I didn’t!” He continued to shout as he was dragged away, Pao adjusted his coat, before leaving the courtroom afterwards, another successful session.

When he got home, he prepared himself to enter the hell realm once more to serve justice to demons, but when he opened the door to his closet, it revealed a wooden wall instead of the portal, Pao raised a brow at this. Questions boiled in his head as to why this would happen, but he was interrupted by the booming voice of Satan once more, now in his room! “YAMA!” Satan bursted in anger, his voice rumbling in Pao’s room like an earthquake. “You have done it now Yama... The person you had prosecuted today... WAS INNOCENT! He was unrightfully tried, and unrightfully spent time within my abode!” Pao would be shocked to hear this, innocent? But how? All of the evidence was aligned, this couldn’t be. “For your incompetence as a Judge even in the mortal realm, I am stripping you of your abilities to cross into mine!” Pao looked up to the quaking ceiling. “Wait! There must’ve been a mishap! I was sure that man was guilty!” Satan quickly responded. “The only mishap here is YOU, Yama! Or should I say, Pao!” The rumbling would slowly dissipate as Pao was left alone, his abilities as the Yama, stripped from him in a flash. The next day, Haoyu was walking down the street, carrying more papers for the court, until he saw Pao in a sulking mood, wandering off to nowhere, confused as to why the legendary Pao would do this, Haoyu walked up to him. “Hey Judge! What’s going on? You don’t look too good...” Haoyu tapped him on his shoulder, in which he slowly turned around. “Leave me be, Haoyu, I am a failure of a judge... I prosecuted an innocent man.” Haoyu’s eyes widened after hearing this, dropping all of his papers in surprise. “No way! That’s impossible! Someone must’ve set you up, they must have!” Haoyu tried to

reassure Pao, but it was no use, he'd shrug the young man off as he walked away. Haoyu was determined to find whoever had disrespected his idol like this, and it was time for him to do his own investigation to save Pao's reputation as a judge! Haoyu searched and scoured the crime scene, trying to find even just one piece of evidence that could turn the tides of this investigation to prove Pao right, but then, he discovered something interesting.

"Judge Pao, I hereby relieve you of your license as judge!" The roles had been reversed, now Pao stood at the wooden table below what was once his throne of justice, his entire career was ending right before his eyes, he couldn't believe it. The judge above him raised the wooden hammer that he used to serve justice, now being served right back at him. It was ironic, but as the judge hit the hammer down, the doors of the courtroom bursted open. Everyone looked in shock as they saw a young man, carrying a tied up cloaked figure. "OBJECTION!" Haoyu called out to the judge on the throne before walking forward. "The real culprit has been found, and I have him!" The jury would start to whisper and gossip about who Haoyu had brought in. "Though it was true that Judge Pao did prosecute an innocent man, what was also true was that man hid another identity!" Haoyu pulled the hood down from the culprit's head, and there revealed Zhao Long, but he looked a bit different, his facial features were almost the opposite of what Pao saw him as before. "Gh.. How did you figure out my voodoo magic?!" Zhao shouted at Haoyu, and he responded with a smirk. "Well, from the start, the needle was already a clue, but that could've just been any weapon, but on further inspection of its target, the "woman", she was actually a doll! Those blood stains were just to hide the shady stitching done by the needle, so Pao, you WERE set up! And Mister Long WAS the culprit, he just needed to change his face in the blink of an eye to return to an innocent form!" Haoyu pointed towards Pao, who had a genuine shocked expression on his face, never in his life of crime fighting had he ever encountered this, and for a man like Haoyu to see through it and not him? It was admirable to say the least. The judge would lower his hammer, nodding towards Haoyu. "I see, so the judge was set up, you know I didn't want to do this to a man like him, so I am letting you off the hook Pao." The jury would cheer as the judge said that, Pao walked over to Haoyu before shaking his hand. "Good job Haoyu, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be a judge anymore, thank you." "Oh it's nothing! Anything for my idol!" Haoyu awkwardly responded, laughing afterwards, and as the two crime fighters made up their differences, their lives would start anew, not as strangers, but as partners.

And thus ends this chapter of Judge Pao's story, where he had learned that sometimes, being a lone wolf won't always end well, and that help from friends makes everything easier in life, and that they can get you out of a pickle!



# Ginar's Cursed House

*Korean International School, Cheung, Sheung Sang Lincoln – 13*

After Judge Pao's long night working in hell, daytime finally arrived and Judge Pao got to relax. He walked down the hallway to earth and in front of him was a locked black door. Only Judge Pao had access to it and the door had magical powers: walking through his door transports Pao to earth inside his tiny apartment. Judge Pao works as a judge in California at the Supreme Court as a judge. He took his brisky Porsche car down the streets and drove to a nearby Starbucks where he ordered his custom drink: a venti mocha frappuccino with 2 pumps of espresso and some whip-cream to top it off. He is ready to go to work after his daily dose of caffeine. In the morning he had some urgent paperwork to do, like sorting out his schedule or some court orders. After that, he will go out for lunch at a fancy Italian restaurant called "The Cellar Restaurant" for some drinks and food. While walking back to work the clear blue sky with white clouds slowly turned dark and gloomy and then a figure from above started descending from the clouds.

Looking closer it was his sister "Grace". Something wasn't right.

"Why didn't you lock the gate properly?" She confronted Judge Pao.

because he didn't completely lock the gate one day at night in a place more scorching than earth blinding red star, hell. Judge pao is having his normal day at work, sorting out affairs of the afterlife again and again. Judge pao is used to his settings like the eternal burning fires that surround the area, and the crimson red pillars stacked next to each other in the court. Judge Pao was unfazed by the inferno. The same can't be said for the spirits awaiting Pao's sentencing: they were horrified by hell. The scorching heat was unbearable and it only made the spirits anxious: will Judge Pao find out their bad deeds and sentence them to reincarnate as an animal? Bad deeds like stealing, committing fraud or murdering will most likely turn these souls into an animal. Fear not if you have done good deeds like donating, and participating in charitable activities as you'll reincarnate as a human again. Hell is like a lobby where souls await their names to be called and appear in front of Pao. At night the trials start and in the day the hell court is in recess; Pao is a normal human being.

Unknowingly, Pao's mistake of not locking the door properly led to an escaped soul from hell: his name was "Ginar", a formal navy seal who had escaped hell and had been going on a massacre in Arizona.

Judge Pao was in disbelief after hearing what his sister had just told her and decided to hastily go to Arizona, his sister grabbed him by the arm and started flying there. It took around 20 minutes and this was common to Judge Pao because he got used to seeing other gods flying but to the mortal humans down below it was something shocking. Some people have never seen gods on earth before but some have. The most famous god who has ever stepped foot on earth was Zeus, he was flying on his lightning bolt just travelling around. After judge pao and Grace were in Arizona they started searching for Ginar, like a lion hunting its prey on a hot summer day. Ginar was around 6'5 tall and had a black anchor-cut beard and was bald. Grace was the god of dogs so her sense of smell was amazing. She had seen Ginar before and could trace him down with ease. After tracing the smell for around 2 hours they finally arrived at a house. They knocked on the door and an old lady opened the door slowly. Grace and Judge Pao asked the old lady if Ginar was home and she said yes. They ran in the house trampling the old lady and when they walked in the door behind them shut. When they looked around the house their jaws dropped. The house had complex hallways which were disoriented, doors with no handles, the chandelier was upside down and the furniture looks wonky. Then they heard a voice from somewhere and it was really deep too: "If you want to escape, you must find me in one of these rooms. Time stopped and no one from the outside can hear you, the walls are indestructible. You'll need to find my heart to escape. **You are now under my hypnosis**". Judge Pao and Grace were not moved by this place at all and thought this should be a piece of cake. "They were so wrong".

Judge Pao and Grace decided to split up and take the two different corridors, Judge Pao took the corridor full of flames and fall down beams of flaming wood and Grace decided to take the corridor full of eyes since there were only two options. Judge Pao was unfazed by flames since he got used to them and started hastily rushing into the corridor aimlessly trying to find the demon's heart. Walking in there were three doors. One said hell another said Heaven and the last one had three question marks marked onto the wall,

suddenly the microphone hidden somewhere in the corner of the corridor came Ginar's voice 'There are three levels with three different doors, if you walk into the wrong door, no matter what you will die from a poisonous spear lunged out from the door.' After hearing what Ginar said both Grace and Judge Pao weren't fazed by what they said. Grace decided to walk into door one and, immediately got penetrated by the spear. The spear was activated by a hidden pressure plate in front of the door. Judge Pao on the other hand heard the gruesome screams from his sister Grace on the other side of the corridor. Judge Pao was starting to get worried and went through the 2nd door in the middle after nothing happened. On the opposing side of the door he saw a sign saying "level 2" after walking into the door he found 6 doors. Ginar said 'Only two of the doors will lead you to level 3, good luck.' Judge Pao chose door number 5 this time, and a spear didn't plunge him so he was safe. HE thought to himself, "well this is pretty easy." After walking briskly into level 3 without any remorse he walked into one of the 12 doors and nothing happened.

There he was, the man behind all of this stuff. Ginar.

Ginar was around 5'11, he had 2 pointy black horns, wings bigger than the room, crimson eyes and body tone and he was bald. After Judge Pao looked him dead in the eye, Ginar was shocked and quickly headed into his so-called "Escape route" which was actually just a sewer and started running for his life. Judge Pao was chasing him down filled with rage after what Ginar has done to his lovely sister. And at the end of the sewer was an opening to the open blue sea. Judge Pao was about to catch him and then Ginar jumped off the ledge and started flying. Judge Pao started chasing him but then.

Judge Pao was suddenly at his court, broken seats everywhere, files and contract papers drifted to the ground, and the bench which was split in half. Judge Pao saw that 8 SWAT members had pointed their guns at Judge Pao's head and Ginar just standing at the doorway menacingly.

# The Escape in the Underworld

*Korean International School, Lam, Hiu Chun – 15*

Night fell, moon shone. It was supposed to be a peaceful Saturday night, little did I know it would only be the beginning of my nightmare.

“Good luck folks, I’ll meet you at the back door.” Our driver drove off. My gang members and I were all set and ready for a bank heist to earn ourselves some big cash.

“Hey Ken, are the CCTVs off yet?” asked our homie, Ben, while holding onto a walkie talkie. “Working on it, just hold on.” Our hacker, Ken’s job was to assist us inside the van while disabling security systems throughout the robbery. “And there, security cameras and laser sensors are offline. You are clear to enter.”

We lockpicked the front door and entered the bank. We went down a hallway and headed towards the vault. “Alright, breach it open.” I planted the C4 on the vault and we took cover. BAM! That was quite an explosion. The vault slowly opened as we sneaked inside and filled up our baffle bags with money and gold.

“Everyone done packing?” hurried Tommy. We nodded our heads. The bags were all heavy and filled with a fat amount of cash, so we were going to load the first half of the bags in the van and return to collect the other half.

As we were going to take care of the first half, the alarm went off. “That wasn’t supposed to happen!” We were all confused and shocked. “Well that’s bad, the laser beams just went online the moment you guys were passing through the hallway, do you want me to hack into it again?” questioned Ken. “No!” I replied firmly. “The bank might have alerted the police already, everyone to the van now!” “But what about the second half?” asked Ben. “We do not have time, you realize the situation we are in, right?” As the gang’s leader, I ordered everyone to rush back into the van.

Siren was heard, and it’s getting louder like thunder. The police were already there with their police cars parked outside the bank entrance.

“Surrender yourselves or we will not hesitate to apply justified force against you!” ordered the chief of police with a speaker. “What should we do, sir?” my gangsters were all looking at me, waiting for my next order. “Load your guns, we’re gonna show the police pigs how undefeatable we are.” “Yes sir!”

We loaded our AK rifles and kicked the front door open and marched outside. My gang all appeared ready for the shootout between cops and robbers. “Drop your weapons!” warned the police chief. “Place them onto the ground with both your hands up!” The cops were all aiming at us with their handguns.

“Never! You fools with your powerless handguns are never going to defeat us! All your efforts are useless!” We opened fire, spraying bullets all over them and scattering their car windows. Car tires popped and their police cars were totally toasted. We could actually sniff the scorching smell of the gunpowder. They could only hide behind their cars while unable to have a chance to fire back at us. A few did try though, but their bullets weren’t strong enough to pierce through our bulletproof heavy vest. We were inevitable.

“Here, we had enough. Let’s hurry back into our van before even more police come after us.” We re-entered the bank and went through a corridor to the back door. It was locked.

“Hurry! Lockpick it!” Tommy took out the lockpick and started picking the lock. Tommy needed more time, so we’re going to buy more time for him. “Swat team, going in!” The swat team arrived at the scene and entered the building. “Tommy, come on!” I hurried Tommy. “The swat team isn’t that easy, man.”

“Almost there!” shouted Tommy. The swats were getting closer. “Okay it’s unlocked, everybody out!” We escaped and got into the van. “Go!”

The driver stomped on the gas paddle. “Vroom!” Engine roared like a fierce beast and we sped off onto the highway.

We thought the battle was over, but we were wrong. The cops were still on us and were gaining speed. “Step on it!” Our van sped up. Suddenly, a spike trap was thrown in front of us.

“Watch out!” Our driver tried to make a turn. It was too late. The van tried to make a U turn but our right rear tire was caught on the spike trap. “Psssssst.” The tire popped and losing air, our vehicle lost control and hit a tree. That’s all I could remember before I was blacked out.

I woke up. Handcuffed in a place I was not familiar with. Everything around me looked different as if I was in another dimension. The sky was cloudy dark red and my surroundings looked menacing.

“Well, glad to see you’re finally awake.” I looked up and saw a man in traditional Chinese clothing. “Who are you? And why am I here?” I asked with tremendous puzzlement.

“I am Judge Pao,” responded the man. “A supernatural judge who sorts out the lives of the afterlife and brings unlawful ones to justice. You had recently passed out after committing a crime, a serious one. Your fate will be decided by me as today you will be held in the court of hell for your actions.”

The trial began. I was nervously sweating as if I was in a steaming sauna, not knowing what was going to happen to me. The first thing that came to my mind was being tortured to death. If not worse enough, endless torture. What kind of torture would I get? Ripping my tongue out? Being burnt in sizzling hot oil alive? Who knew what would happen. After all, it’s all being decided by the judge, as if it was futile to even do anything.

“Bank robbery. Not only are you ruining the economy, but an attempt to harm the innocent cops who’re just trying to do their jobs to serve and protect everyone in society.” accused Judge Pao. “It’s crystal clear who’s guilty. Do you admit to your wrongdoings?” questioned Judge Pao. “Yes, your honor, I do.” I explained. “But I was just trying to make a living here, without robbing there’s nothing I could do without ending up being poor and homeless!”

“Silence! I have made my decision. I am going to sentence you to work everlastingly as a slave, mining coal in the underworld of hell, eternity and forever!”

“No! You are going to regret this!” I got dragged out of the court by the guards into an elevator, which took us to another floor. We went through a mine farm. The guards unlocked my handcuffs and dropped me off into a prison cell. “You’d better be prepared,” hinted one of the guards. “This is just the beginning of your slavery.”

It’s night time. I went to bed, tossing and turning due to how everything had happened so fast that my entire life was determined in a flash. Would this forever be my life? This couldn’t be true, too horrible to be true. Was there really no way I could get out of this nightmare?

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of an alarm as my cell’s door automatically opened. I got on my foot, rubbed my eyes and stepped outside. The sky was still dark red, cloudy as usual. When I paced outside, I saw hundreds of slaves were mining coals with a pickaxe.

“Hey you! Work along with them now!” a guard instructed me as he handed me my own pickaxe. Reluctantly, I joined the slaves.

“Oh hey, haven’t seen you around here,” greeted a prisoner next to me. “Oh yeah, I just got in here. Can’t believe I’m doing this,” I frowned. “Well good luck, it’s gonna be a hell lot of work to do, newbie!” He patted me on my shoulder. “Nice to meet you, I’m Jack.” “Mike,” I introduced myself.

We kept working, mining with my hands exhausted and sweaty. It felt like time had been flowing forever. “So what brought you here?” asked Jack. “Bank robbery” I replied. “I’d be drinking and celebrating with my gangsters inside our criminal base right now instead of mining stupid coals endlessly if it wasn’t for that spike trap!” “Well that’s too bad,” giggled Jack. “I would have seen it coming if I were you.” “So what are you here for?” I asked Jack. “Kidnapping kids,” claimed Jack. “I worked as a child kidnapper. It seemed like easy money, but it’s harder than I thought.”

“How so?” I asked curiously. “Because Mike, parents wouldn’t ever give up on their child. I lurked their kids into my van by lying about free candies when their parents or other adults weren’t looking. Then I locked the car door and drove off, leaving the kids crying and desperate in locked cages like zoo animals while my other gangsters in my mafia took over the business.”

“And how do the parents get their child back?” I queried. “Well, I once kidnapped a boy and his father banged on my car window when I was chilling inside in my van. He demanded me to give him back his son while pointing his goddamn shotgun at me. I said to the father that I couldn’t do anything since his son was at my mafia’s place and my gangsters were taking over. That angered him and made him shoot me through my car window. I swear, the bullet painfully scratched my face and now I’m working on this coal field for so long that I don’t even know how many years have passed!”

“That must be hard on you,” I sighed. “All we wanted to do is try to earn some money for our livings!” “Exactly, that’s not even fair. We don’t deserve this.” Jack nodded, agreeing with me.

“What if there’s a way out?” I asked. “Man, don’t even think about it.” advised Jack. “I’ve been here for decades and I couldn’t even see any way out, what makes you think you can?” “It’s better than not trying” I said “Yeah right, if you really think you’re brave enough to escape this hell hole. Go ahead. I’ve heard that people who failed were taken to another floor to be tortured by ripping out their eyes, fingers or even

stabbing them, leaving them in pain for minutes then injecting them with instant healing potion and repeating the cycle, over and over again until they lose all their sanity.” Jack rolled his eyes, then continued to mine the coals.

“Fair enough Jack, do you know who might have some clues to break out of here?” “Sure,” Jack replied. “I do, but it’s best not to ask him.” “Why?” I yelled. “Is there something wrong with him?” “Yes, Mike. The one without shirt on with tattoos on his body is the guy, and he is called Brad. The most hostile ever known in this group of coal workers.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to ask him, would it?” “Nope, it hurts.” said Jack. “Brad is very sensitive to whoever is talking to him. A few prisoners tried to ask him for the information to escape, neither of them got it and even got knocked out by Brad. That’s why everyone is scared to ask him, or even talk to him.”

“What makes him like that?” I asked. “Nobody knows much about his background. The only thing that we know about him is that he is a dangerous killer.”

“It doesn’t matter, I will ask him anyway,” Jack dropped his pickaxe and stared at me. “Are you out of your mind? He is a literal killer!” “I know he is.” I confirmed. “Just because he is a killer doesn’t mean he fights any better than me. I’m a criminal boss, remember?” “Fine,” said Jack. “I have warned you “Don’t worry, Jack. I’m gonna show him who’s the boss here, so watch me take care of this business.”

I walked up to Brad. “So you’re Brad, huh?” I asked. “Yes, why? Are you looking up for a fight?” Brad dropped his pickaxe, crossed his arms and stared at me with a serious look on my face, but that was not going to work on me. “Listen, Brad. I’m a criminal boss and I have years of combat experience. It’s either telling me the way to escape or we’re gonna do it the hard way.” “Oh, so you think you’re better than me? I’m gonna beat you up punk! You’re dead meat!”

He threw his first jab towards my head, I slightly tilted my head to the right, dodging his attack. He threw his second jab to the right of my head, I dodged again by tilting left. “Come on, fight back. Unless you’re scared!” screamed Brad furiously. “Very well,” I declared. “Here I go! You’re going to regret being such a nuisance!” Brad let out a right hook. I swift under to the left. Not holding back, I landed a left hook to his right torso, right cross to his chest, and finally uppercut to his chin. Knockout! The impact was so powerful that it flew Brad mid air until he fell to the ground, hardly able to move.

“You want more Brad?” I stared at him like the eyes of a tiger, frightening him. “Who the hell are you?” asked Brad. “Criminal boss, buddy.” I smiled. “Nobody messes with the boss”.

“Fine! You got me,” Brad surrendered, annoyed and defeated. “You must make the escape after 12am when all the guards went to sleep. See that vent over there?” Brad pointed at a vent hidden in the bushes. “Years ago I was working when I heard the guards mention something about the vent. The truth lies within the vent. Nobody knows what’s in there, not even me. A few prisoners did attempt to escape through the vent. Nobody ever knew if their escape was successful or not. But if you will do whatever it takes to escape, this should be the only way out of here. Here, take this.” I held out my hand and Brad dropped me a lockpick. “I’ve kept it a secret since the day I got here. Use it to free yourself out of your prison cell.” “But what about you?” “Don’t worry about me,” said Brad. “But I want you to do me a favor.”

“What do you want me to do?” I asked. “Kill Judge Pao for us. That asshole has lived more than a thousand years and every prisoner, every spirit here will keep suffering and trapped in this hell, not until he is dead. So you have to end him and free us all once and for all.”

“You got it,” I accepted his request and thanked him.

“Bedtime you dirty filthy pigs! Everyone get your ass to bed, you have a hell lot of work to do tomorrow. Now go!” The guard blew his whistle, hurried everyone to their prison cells.

Just when I was about to leave, Brad called out for me. “Hey man, haven’t got your name yet.” “Mike.” I acknowledged. “My name is Mike.” “Mike, you promise to save us all?” “Promise” I shook Brad’s hand. “I’m going to recruit my gang members and take down Judge Pao once I get out of here.” “Great, we’re counting on you,” expressed Brad as he returned to his cell.

“So how did it go?” Jack came up to me. “Better than I expected.” I summed it up. “Do you want to come with me for the escape?” “I don’t know man, is it dangerous?” Jack hesitated. “Life is never safe, Jack. It’s either breaking your way to freedom or regret forever.” “Heck yeah!” Jack replied excitedly. “I want to break out of this nightmare and be free like a bird, flying away from its cage!” “Yes! Let’s do this brother!” I committed, feeling proud. “Be waiting in your cell, we’re breaking out of here tonight.”

Midnight finally struck. Guards were yawning, going back to their cabin to sleep. Now that the guards were finally asleep. I lockpicked and got out of my cell.

I made my way to Jack's cell and got him out. We headed towards the vent and crawled inside. We got out on the other side and found ourselves in a room with a long hallway in front of us. "Well well well, if it wasn't two criminals desperate to escape" We turned our heads to whoever was speaking—it was Judge Pao. Alongside him, there was a lion-like creature, but it was gigantic and muscular with a pair of red eyes. "Looks like you two will be the perfect meal for my pet," Judge Pao grinned with an evil look on his face as the monster growled at us.

"Run!" I shouted as we started sprinting towards the end of the hallway. The monster got up off its four enormous feet and started chasing after us.

We kept running and running. I turned my head around and the monster was approaching closer and closer. "Mike, the monster is too fast. I don't think we can keep up," screamed Jack as he was gasping for air. "Just hang on! I saw something at the very end of the hallway." It was an elevator. "We need to get to the elevator before the monster reaches us!"

"Almost there!" The elevator was right ahead of us. We got inside and smashed the close button. The door closed just in time, leaving the monster banging on the door as the elevator dropped downwards. Just when we thought we were safe, the monster swung its claws and cut the rope on top of the elevator.

The elevator accelerated, falling at an immense speed. The emergency brake activated, creating sparkes as it tried to stop the elevator from falling further.

Nothing seemed to stop the speeding elevator as it plunged deeper and deeper into the unknown.

# Devil's Consequence

*Korean International School, Mannion, Sean Anthony – 15*

Judge Pao leaned back in his chair, finally completing some paperwork from a recent case. "At last... some time to relax." Judge Pao would say to himself before being rudely interrupted by his door bursting open. "Father! Father! I got it!" Judge Pao's 17-year-old son, Pao Yi, would speak, "The murderer of Xiao Ming! I know who it is!" Pao Yi would speak whilst looking down at the papers of evidence he had in his hands, organizing them frantically, "It's!-" before Pao Yi could finish, Judge Pao interrupted his son. "Yes yes... ZhiHan... was it?" Judge Pao said without batting an eye at his son, leaning forward and organizing the paperwork on his desk. Pao Yi's jaw would slowly drop. The evidence he gathered fell to the ground as he let go. Pao Yi just wanted to help his father with a case, so that maybe one day his father, Pao, would acknowledge and notice him. "Y-yea... you got it dad" Pao Yi would say with a now more monotone voice, obviously trying to hide his sorrows from knowing that his efforts went to waste. He began to slowly turn towards the door of Pao's office and began to leave. "Wait..." Pao Yi holding the door frame looked back at his father who had suddenly called on him. "Make sure to pick up whatever you dropped. And make sure to close the door when you leave." Judge Pao would continue, still not looking at his son, and instead focusing on a new case, going over some more paperwork. "Y-yea." Pao Yi would say, even more in despair, knowing he will never gain a pinch of his father's acknowledgment.

Although night, Pao Yi decided to walk home, knowing full well that he was going to be late for dinner. He needed this time to think. With the family name of Pao, there was such a heavy burden on him. The great expectations would be pressuring for him. Pao Yi took this time to recall the bad memories he had of times when he was compared to his father. He quickly shook these thoughts out and continued to walk the streets. The streets were empty, and all the shops and carts were closed. The street torches' lights would clash with the darkness, creating a dark-orange color emitting onto the streets. Pao Yi continued to walk on, but stopped after hearing a sudden cackle coming from behind one of the closed carts that were selling fruits. Pao Yi would slowly approach the cart, before noticing that some of the fruits had big and sharp bite marks cutting into them. Right around the corner of the cart, Pao Yi would look over, finding a crouched figure biting into some fruits, just to spit them out. This was no human, it was all black and shadowy, and just from this crouched position, was challenging even Pao Yi's height. The figure continued doing its thing before suddenly stopping. It started to murmur. "T-t-this smell..." It began to speak with its crunchy voice, trying to speak the tongue of humans. "S-such despair... M-m-much taste." It said, stutteringly, lifting its head up. Suddenly, it turned its head straight to Pao Yi, revealing its face. It was all black, with horns coming from its head. It stared at Pao Yi with its plain red eyes, and slowly smiled revealing its sharp and unorganized rows of teeth. "P-P-P-Pao... PAO!" it spoke seemingly turning angry. It recognized Pao Yi's blood, the blood of the Pao family. The creature slowly got up from its crouching position, now towering above Pao Yi. Its mouth started drooling, as some drops of saliva would land on the terrified Pao Yi. "W-what are you!" Pao Yi said with a shaky voice, yet trying to sound strong. The creature started to groan, losing its grin as he stared blankly at Pao Yi. "N-not Pao." Pao Yi continued to stare at it, confused, before the creature would suddenly vanish right in front of him, leaving a black mist behind. Wiping the saliva that had landed on him, Pao Yi would continue walking home, traumatized. "W-what was that."

Pao Yi would enter his house, staring blankly at the floor. His mother would comment "Woah, what happened to you? It looks like you had just seen a ghost." Pao Yi quickly snapped back to reality, laughing off his mother's concern. "Where's dad?" he would ask, "Up in his room" she quickly responded, whilst tidying up the house. "Your dinner's on the table, by the way, it's getting cold." She spoke whilst poking her head out to Pao Yi whilst her body was in another room. Pao Yi walked past the dining room, going straight up the stairs. He wanted to talk with his father, he wanted to talk to someone about his encounter with that thing. He stood directly in front of his father's room, contemplating whether or not he should open the door into the room. He decided not to and began to turn away, but before he could, a force from within him started to pull on him from his chest, causing Pao Yi to burst open the door with his body. "W-what the..." Pao Yi would comment. "Son? What's the issue?" Judge Pao would ask with an ounce of concern. The very creature that Pao Yi had just encountered would spur out of Pao Yi's chest, being connected with a shadowy stream to Pao Yi's chest. Revealing itself to Judge Pao, and staring at him with no good intentions, it would shout, "P-P-PAO!" whilst frowning, with even more anger than the last time. "You..." Judge Pao would say, indicating that he has seen this beast before. Judge Pao got up from his table, grabbing his sheathed sword that hid next to his waist. "Now how did you manage to escape?"

Judge Pao smirkingly commented, as if he knew he could beat it. The monster just growled. It knew its target and had set its focus on it. The creature charged toward Pao, retracting its arm, and getting ready to swipe at him with his sharp, black claws. Pao Yi unsheathed his sword, pointing its sharp tip towards the creature, causing the sword to emit a creature resembling the creature coming from Pao Yi. The shadowy stream connected from the sword and onto a black-like creature that would block the spiky swipe from Pao Yi's creature. The creature from Judge Pao's sword was different. It didn't have horns coming from its head but instead horns coming from its back. This creature was more sharp and animalistic, rather than the messy and pointy creature coming from Pao Yi. It would float as if it had wings, with its limbs relaxed and its back slouched towards the sky. It had long arms and shorter legs, as if it were a gorilla, and had sharp nails. Its head was triangular, with two sides each having one red ball of an eye. It began to open its mouth, and began to speak perfectly, "Well well well. If it isn't the Pilfer Devil." it said grinning, showing the red abyss of its mouth being fronted by its sharp black teeth. The two devils would both leap back from each other, backing up. Pao Yi would shake his head in confusion at the whole situation, "Hold on... Did you just say... DEVIL?!" he asked, probably thinking that this was all just a dream. Judge Pao began to speak, "I thought I sentenced you to hell for eternity... What are you doing here?!" He said with a more stern and aggressive voice. "M-m-me? I just want my revenge on the Immortal Yama..." The now-known as Pilfer Devil would say, grinning. Judge Pao, shaken by hearing this name, would slash his sword in the air, commanding his devil to charge towards the Pilfer Devil with a closed fist. The Pilfer Devil would think about blocking this blow, but judging the force coming at him, he knew he was no match, and at the last minute, dodged the blow, causing Judge Pao's devil to punch the wall behind the Pilfer Devil and Pao Yi. The Pilfer Devil groaned, now frowning, and rethought its course of action. "I-i'm yet too weak, I-I-I need p-power!" It would say to itself then suddenly turning towards its owner, Pao Yi. The devil then retracted itself back into Pao Yi, causing Pao Yi's body to move a bit. Pao Yi would then start to run away as if a force from within him was controlling his every action. Judge Pao would closely follow, for they would then be both outside. Pao Yi would just stand in the middle of the street, with his back to his father who was keeping his distance. The Pilfer Devil would then come out of Pao Yi. "R-right here... I can feel it..." the Pilfer Devil would murmur to itself, to then start scratching at the air. Judge Pao would watch in confusion as to what it was doing. Then suddenly, what seemed to be a tear in the air appeared in the very place where the Pilfer Devil had been swiping at. "S-see you later, P-P-Pao!" It would say before leaping into the red rift in the air, causing Judge Pao's son to be dragged along with him, "Dad!" Pao Yi would shout for help, causing Judge Pao to reach his hand towards him, even though it would be too late. Judge Pao would suddenly fall to his knees, holding his forehead as he felt tired. Judge Pao had a contract with the Probity Devil, and had made an agreement so that every time he summons it, it would cost him about a cup's worth of his blood. "S-sorry" the Probity Devil would say in guilt, knowing that he fell due to the lack of blood in him. The Probity Devil couldn't help it though. After all, devils feed off of human blood, and the more negative emotions the human contains, the more delicious the blood is, and the more powerful the devil gets. "I-It's alright." He said reassuring the devil as he got up, "heh. You'd think that by now I would have gotten used to it. You know, after all those years we have worked together," he continued. The Probity Devil and Judge Pao went way back. Judge Pao worked as a judge in the afterlife, and so had visited the afterlife quite often. For the first few years, Pao would feel unsafe in the afterlife, as he could be attacked by any devil at any time. That was all before he met the Probity Devil. The two had similar views and ideologies, those being that of justice. And so, the devil had made a contract with the human, creating a lifelong friendship.

"Right. Now time to get that devil... And... my son." Pao said getting up. Judge Pao sheathed his sword, causing the Probity Devil to disappear into the sword, readying up for the next time he would be called upon. Pao's wife would then run out of the house, "Sweetie... Where are you going... Wait... Where's our son?" She would ask with an increasingly panicked voice. "Don't worry... I'll get him" he said turning his head back to her, only to then look back forward. He would then begin his journey to retrieve his son. Judging by the redness of the tear, the Pilfer Devil would have must gone back to hell. "Clearly he will use my son to ambush me." Pao would speak, thinking to himself. The only way to get to the afterlife would be to enter through strong links between the two worlds. Strong links would refer to places that have had people die in the very spot, which caused them to go to the afterlife. The place where Pao knew where there was a strong enough links to let a human through would be the prison, as many humans would kill themselves due to the trapness that is prisons. After what felt like ages of running, Pao found himself right outside the walls of the local prison. There he pulled out his sword, and stabbed it into an already stabbed part of the wall, indicating he has done this before to reach the afterlife to judge. Closing his eyes, he held his breath for more than one should. Pao would have to be as close to a dead person as possible. Instead of entering the normal afterlife between heaven and hell where he judged, he had to concentrate even harder



to enter the depths of Hell. As his surroundings began to heat up, he opened his eyes and began to breathe, returning his face color back to normal from its then purple shade. Pao would look all around him. Dark and spiky rocks filled the place, covering not only just the floor, but also the entire roof of Hell. The sky color was light red, and in the near distance would be what seemed to be this place's ocean, but what replaced it was the red and fiery lava. "So this is what Hell has become now, huh? The last time I've been here was when I had to put that Misdemeanor Devil here personally." He spoke to himself. A few devils would walk past him, glancing and groaning at the renowned human, Judge Pao. The devils would all keep the same shade of black, but instead have different features. For instance, some didn't have horns at all. Some had no limbs, whilst some had more than ten. Some were big, whilst some were small. Pao would then make his way to what seemed to be Hell's version of the town above.

The Pilfer Devil was once human, Ming Hao, and whilst human, was sentenced to prison by Judge Pao for the crime of theft for two lifetimes. In the end, Ming Hao couldn't bear to live in the hellhole that is prison any longer, and decided to kill himself in that very prison. After that, he was once again greeted by Judge Pao, who judged where he would spend time in the afterlife. He was of course sent to Hell, in where he had sought out revenge on Pao, who had cursed him both in life and in death.

Judge Pao made his way to what would be Hell's version of Ming Hao's once house. Opening the door, he found the whole place to be empty, with no structural pillars or anything. In the middle of the vast and empty area stood a cage, in the cage would appear to be Pao Yi, whose clothes have been torn and torched due to the heat of the place. Judge Pao slowly approached the cage, knowing full well that it was a trap by the Pilfer Devil. A shadowy stream came out of Pao Yi's chest, indicating that the Pilfer Devil was out here somewhere. "Dad... DAD!" Pao Yi would say with hope in his voice. Judge Pao unsheathed his sword, causing the Probity Devil to emerge, and commanded it to break the cage open. The devil began to brake it open, but from out of nowhere, the Pilfer Devil would scratch Judge Pao on his back. Even though Judge Pao had anticipated the attack and jumped forward, he was still damaged. Judge Pao turned towards the Pilfer Devil, as he could now clearly see the shadowy stream connecting to his son. The Probity Devil then returned to Judge Pao's side, ready for any attack that would be thrown at him. "Y-your son has a l-l-lot of d-despair and g-guilt in him, y'know t-that?" The Pilfer Devil began to speak. "T-T-That means more p-p-power for me." It said grinning mischievously, as Pao Yi fell to the ground. "What did you do!" Judge Pao would shout as he noticed his son on the floor, and the devil now appears buffer and stronger. "Just drained a little blood from him... that's all." The Pilfer Devil spoke perfectly with its crunchy voice, as if drinking that of Pao Yi's blood gave it his intelligence. Obviously, the devil was lying, as Pao Yi layed on the hot floor, looking pale and smaller in size.

Judge Pao charged at the Pilfer Devil, swinging his sword whilst he did so, so that both him and the Probity Devil were both charging towards the Pilfer Devil. The Pilfer Devil put his arms in a blocking position, making it futile when the Probity Devil threw a closed fist at him. Thankfully, Judge Pao came in secondly, slashing the Pilfer Devil's exposed legs, causing the devil to scream in agony, and to let go of it's stance. It was now completely exposed. Judge Pao thrust his sword into the Pilfer Devil's side, which then commanded the Probity Devil to barrage the Pilfer Devil with punches, with each punch getting stronger and faster. The Pilfer Devil was stunned in the midst of the barrage, allowing Judge Pao to swiftly strike at the devil's hard stomach many times. The Pilfer Devil coughed up blood, and fell to the ground. In the end, the upgraded Pilfer Devil was no match for the two. The Pilfer Devil was dead.

Judge Pao rushed to his drained son. "Pao Yi?... Answer me..." Judge Pao would say with much concern. "I'm sorry, dad" Pao Yi would say at the brink of death. "Don't be," Judge Pao said, holding his son closer to him, "I'm sorry for ignoring you, I thought that would grow you up to be a strong and independent man..." Judge Pao would continue. "I want you to know, son, I'm proud of you." Judge Pao said, holding one of his hands with his own. There, Pao Yi would smile, as a singular tear would fall from his right eye, as his body would then go lifeless. Judge Pao's eyes started to water, and with his hand, he closed the eyelids of his son, putting him to rest. Pao Yi was dead.

# Judge Pao and the blood Written Murder

*Korean International School, Ng, Pui Him Hector – 15*

## Prologue

“Judge Pao, Judge Pao!!!”

A faint voice can be heard coming from outside the ... at the dead of night. It was the voice of an adult male. The voice got louder and louder as the man came closer, he was riding on a white maned horse with a black colored body. The horse and the man came to a stop in front of the wooden gates of the ...

Two guards dressed in red hanfus were standing in front of the gates. They drew their blades, each one shaped like a crescent moon, thin and sharp. They demanded an explanation from the man, asking him why he was outside so late at night and what he wanted.

Out of breath, the man begged, “My name is Jun from Chou Dai Fuk Bookstore, um... I’m... I’m here to see Judge Pao, please let me see him, please, I really need to see him, it’s for an emergency.”

The guards, not believing him, rejected him and warned him multiple times to leave. The guards had about enough of this man when they heard a voice behind them.

A man stepped outside the gate, “My name is Gongsun Ce, secretary of Judge Pao, how may I help you?”

## Chapter 1 Gongsun Ce

Early in the morning, Judge Pao’s secretary, Gongsun Ce, traveled to a bookstore.

A man of wisdom, he always picked his books carefully. This book was a detective novel, it was about a detective, capable of solving countless murders. This book was one out of the entire series of 5 books, famous for its difficult to solve cases and mysteries, it was difficult for the reason that the writing rarely follows the rules of traditional chinese grammar, so the writing was a code to crack in it of itself.

Today, he was going to buy the last book of the series, “Midnight Murder of the Bookstore Owner.”

“Hmm, this should be an interesting piece of writing”, thought Gongsun Ce.

After paying for the book, Gongsun Ce began his long trip back to the ... . When he arrived, the sky was covered by a blanket of darkness. Gongsun Ce made his way to the room of Judge Pao, who was waking from his slumber after a painfully long trial this morning that ended in the execution of a corrupt official.

Judge Pao was a man of average height, a (those hats worn by judges) rested gently on top of his head, his raven black hair flowed down his back, ending at the shoulders and covering his ear, he had exceptionally dark skin, a crescent moon stuck to his forehead, he had sharp eyebrows which paired nicely with his intimidating black eyes, his dark and thin lips pressed together, surrounded by a thick forest of hair that is his beard. The immaculate stygian robe covering his body was decorated with shining gold dragons on his arms and body.

“Good morning, what did you bring to me today?”, Gongsun Ce and Judge Pao read the book until nightfall.

Suddenly, they heard a noise coming from outside the ....

“I’ll go check it out”, said Gongsun Ce.

Outside the gates he confronted a man demanding to see Judge Pao.

The two officers, Zhang Long along with Ma Han reported, “This man is ignoring all our warnings to leave the ..., he should not be here at such a time.”

“I need to see him, why wouldn’t you listen!”, Jun retorted.

Gongsun Ce stated, “I believe we should settle this in an appropriate manner, what business do you have with the judge, Mr. Jun?”

## Chapter 2 Judge Pao

Pao was in his room, peacefully reading his book, finishing it. Pao closed the book after reading it, laying it down flat on the top of his wooden desk.

He needed a change of clothes, and was on his way to the wardrobe when something flashed red out of the corner of his eye.

Pao looked behind him, and saw nothing. “Perhaps that was just me”, thought Pao, he ignored it and turned back to his wardrobe. As if reading his thoughts, the red light flashed once more, proving his prediction wrong. This time, when Pao turned around he saw the book he had just read was engulfed in a bright red light. Pao pinched the cover of the book gingerly, turning it over in one swift motion. Pao’s eyes widened, he found it difficult to believe the enchantment happening in front of him.

The text that was originally written on the book was now replaced with a blank sheet, blood red characters were quickly appearing on the paper, stroke by stroke each character was written down, it was as if an invisible hand was holding an invisible brush. The writing conveyed anger, as each stroke seemed to be slashed on the paper violently rather than smooth writing. In a matter of seconds, the page was covered in red, and the violent writing stopped.

Curious, Pao dipped the tip of his fingers into the presumably red ink, and tasted it, it was blood.

It read, “*Bring me justice, find my murderer, banish him to the underworld, free my damned soul.*”

## Chapter 3 Jun

Jun was told to follow Gongsun Ce to Judge Pao’s room.

Needless to say, Jun was nervous, his garments were wrinkled from fidgeting. After years of walking, he reached the doors leading to Judge Pao’s room.

Judge Pao was mesmerized by a book, and stood up in surprise when he saw the visitors.

Judge Pao closed the book quickly, and said, “I wasn’t informed we had visitors.”

“Sorry for disturbing your break Judge Pao, but I have a serious matter I have to discuss with you. My boss was murdered.”

Intrigued, Judge Pao stroked his beard, “Tell me more.”

Jun replied, “Well, it all happened like this. I worked at Chou Dai Fuk bookstore, and was on my way home at night, when I heard a loud scream in the distance, so I immediately went back to the bookstore to investigate. When I got there I found my boss Chou Dai Fuk’s dead body lying on a table. His head was laid on a pool of blood.”

Judge Pao said, “Gongsun Ce, stay here with Jun, I shall go to the scene of crime to investigate, I’ll take Ma Han, Zhang Long and Zhan Zhao with me to keep me safe.”

“It will be done.” said Gongsun Ce.

Judge Pao left the ... along with his officers, leaving Jun with Gongsun Ce.

Jun said awkwardly, “Ummm, well what do we do now?”

Gongsun Ce replied, "Now, we wait, we wait for him to come back and make his judgment."

Jun asked, "what if we're not here during the judgment, or what if he doesn't come back".

"If that happens, investigation on the murder would stop, and judgment won't be passed. Right now, you are also one of the suspects, since you reported it. Why –", before he could finish his sentence, Gongsun Ce was knocked out cold.

He felt a cold rope on his neck and arms, pricking his skin uncomfortably as if little spikes were trying to penetrate the skin and everything went black.

#### **Chapter 4** **Zhan Zhao**

Zhan Zhao always kept a record of events in his personal diary. He wrote the following:

July 3rd 1056,

Today I went out with Judge Pao to investigate a serious matter, a murder has happened at Chou Dai Fuk bookstore.

We uncovered several useful clues at the bookstore, however we did not find the body. We found: (what do they find?) and were on our way back to the ... when we were intercepted in the middle of the road by people in white and black robes. Their faces were covered by a mask as if they were Japanese ninjas.

They wielded peculiar weapons. Instead of a typical sword, they held books thick as a tree stump, each book held magical powers which I believe somehow came to fruition in the form of the content of the story, and were unlocked when certain words were said.

If Gongsun Ce was here, his unlimited knowledge on Chinese literature would've maken quick work of them. Unfortunately that is not the case.

We were quickly overpowered. They muttered a binding spell, with a swift whoosh, me and the Judge were coated with leaves as heavy as 10 horses. We were ultimately forced to surrender.

Me and the Judge are barely living, with Ma Han and Zhang Long dead, we have no more backup. We are currently locked up in a dungeon as dark as the night sky. All our attempts to escape have failed.

However, in the time we were trapped here, the book that the Judge had brought along with him had shown us several useful pieces of information that, although might seem like gibberish at first, after several long hours of decoding, led to the judge and I to uncovered important clues that could lead us to solving our case. We even managed to find a dead body which just happened to be Chou Dai Fuk the bookstore owner, perhaps these ninjas had committed the murder and wanted to dispose of him.

Who were these mysterious ninjas? Who is our killer? What secrets do the Judge's new book hold? Most importantly, how do we escape this situation? All those questions will soon be answered, I can feel it.

#### **Chapter 5** **Judge Pao**

"Zhan Zhao, Zhan Zhao", called Pao. "How's it going on your end Judge?", said Zhan Zhao.

Zhan Zhao walked over to the Judge, "What did you find?"

"I think I found a way to get out of this dungeon", said Pao.

"How???", exclaimed a very bewildered Zhan Zhao when he saw the iron bars rust, and Pao was able to easily break it open.

"Our enemies have great books, and so do I."

The book had actually revealed the answer long ago when Judge Pao asked it how to escape.

The book read, "*To escape this locked cage, you must not rage. Listen clearly, I am what you eat, I am what you drink, When the time comes, you must spill me, only then, will you be free.*"

Pao had figured out cleverly that the salt in the soup they were given could be spilled onto the iron bars overtime when the guards weren't looking. Overtime, the iron bar would rust, damaging its structural integrity and allowing them out of the prison.

After a few days, the bars were finally fragile enough. The rusted bars of iron snapped with a "crunch", Pao and Zhan Zhao were out.

Zhan Zhao took a random weapon from a weapon rack lying outside the dungeon. Afterwards, Pao and Zhan Zhao rented 2 horses from a nearby stable, galloping back to the ... at the speed of light.

## Chapter 6 Gongsun Ce

Gongsun Ce woke up on a chair, his hands tied behind his back with a rope. He was blindfolded, only being able to see the tiniest bit of light from under his nose.

Gongsun Ce heard footsteps of a person, they were light, soft and slow, it belonged to a short, slender person, light as a feather. The footsteps got louder and louder, and stopped for a while, right in front of Gongsun Ce. A coarse hand removed the blindfold, revealing the criminal to Gongsun Ce.

Gongsun Ce couldn't believe his eyes, "JUN!!!"

Gongsun Ce sounded both surprised and outraged.

Gongsun Ce yelled, "How dare you! Even if you tie me up here, or even kill me, the Judge and Zhan Zhao will stop you!"

Jun said with glee on his face, "About that, they won't be coming back. I already have my men out there to seize and capture them, and you, my boy, will be erased from this world soon enough. I'll make sure to make your death quick and painless. HA HA HA HA HA!!!"

Jun noticed Gongsun Ce's expression, it was smoking with anger. Jun was gloating about how he had won, laughing maniacally towards Gongsun Ce. What Jun didn't notice was that was exactly what Gongsun Ce had planned and wanted him to do.

You see, Gongsun Ce's brain was a constantly alert gong that his brain cells banged whenever excessive thinking was needed. In the moments Gongsun Ce was tied to his chair, he had been forming a clever plan.

He knew this chair was somewhat old, and it was coming apart. He scratched a sharp piece of wood out of the back of the right leg of the chair. With intricate cutting, he had managed to work his way through the ropes, all he needed now was an opening. As if God can hear the voice in his head, it was exactly what happened.

Zhan Zhao and Judge Pao stormed into Gongsun Ce's room. They found Jun, standing in front of Gongsun Ce, who was tied to a wooden chair.

"What is this?!?!" exclaimed Zhan Zhao and Gongsun Ce in perfect unison. Jun was so surprised, his body flew into the air.

"HUH! But how, I thought you were captured, you – you should've been dead by now!!!!" said Jun with outrage.

While Jun was distracted, Gongsun Ce, having already untied himself, picked up the chair and catapulted it towards Jun, with a devastating POW. Slammed unconscious, Jun was defeated.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Judge Pao**

On August 6th 1056, the time for Jun's trial came. All the people who worked at the Chou Dai Fuk bookstore, along with Chou Dai Fuk's family and friends came to see the trial and give their testimony.

Jun, the defendant, begged for mercy from Judge Pao. The defendant tried endlessly to convince the Judge that he was forced to do this, that the bookstore owner Chou Dai Fuk had forced him to do labor work for him without any pay or food, which is why he was so skinny, light and possessed coarse, rough hands.

The Judge came to a conclusion, "Jun had put other people into harm's way to resolve his own personal issues, additionally, the defendant had no right to capture, or attempt to harm a high official's secretary. Viable proof has been found to prove the defendant guilty, such as blood on the shirt of the dead body of Chou Dai Fuk, which we found not only contained blood from the body, but also from the defendant. Additionally, the murder weapon which matched the shape of the wound on Chou Dai Fuk's head, also had the defendant's fingerprints on the surface."

Despite Jun's claims, they were nevertheless not taken into consideration as he had committed many crimes which the Judge deemed as "Disgrace towards humanity"

Pao added, "As a man who does not follow the rules of man and god, he shall suffer punishment at the hands of death himself, may you be banished to hell!!"

The guards dragged a sobbing, wailing Jun by the arms, as Jun struggled and writhed relentlessly to no avail, his neck was placed on a guillotine shaped like a dog, representation of the lowest class of people.

Slit, and off goes his head, creating a painting on the brown soil ground painted by a red inkbrush.

The execution marked the end of the malicious Jun, murderer of bookstore owner Chou Dai Fuk.

## **Chapter 8**

### **The Novel (and a happy ending)**

As the trial ended, Judge Pao asked the guards to clean up the mess the beheading had made.

After all the blood was cleared, the Judge, satisfied with how the trial turned out and justice served, smiled and said, "Thank you everyone for helping me resolve this case and give the punishment that murderer rightfully deserves, you can all leave for your homes and cherish this victory."

Everybody left the court, drowning the area with laughter, taunting the now dead Jun. A sea of voices can be heard from a crowd outside the court, an old lady muttered, "I heard that Jun was executed, heh, serves him right", another woman added, "Indeed, Judge Pao couldn't have made a more perfect judgment", an old man said, "who needs people like that anyway, only brings harm to us mortals, glad he was gotten rid of".

Judge Pao flipped open his enchanted detective novel to look for any new messages, he found one.

At last, I can rest easy. As the victim of the murder, I truly thank you from the bottom of my heart.

- Chou Dai Fuk

The words were no longer written in blood, and the handwriting was neat and smooth, as any author's should. Pao's enchanted book had turned back to a normal detective novel.

Pao thought, "Well, what a way to end the day."

He returned to ..., where he was showered with praise and approval.

## Judge Pao — A New Era

*Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Lau, Leanne – 17*

“Another Pao... my, how our bloodline flourishes!” A beaming Judge Pao, now sitting in the Department of Hell, laughed as he observed a laughing child frolicking in the park back on earth.

“Congratulations, sir. Now there will be one more addition to your long-lasting legacy of justice in the human world.” His assistant, too, chuckled.

“Yes...”

Don't get the Judge wrong, though. He was overjoyed to see his descendants never straying away from the family business even after all these years, but from all his great-grandchildren, he saw no true, raw potential in any of them for him to pass on his legendary abilities. Until now.

The boy in the park stopped in his tracks when he found a kid his age cornered near a willow tree.

“Can't fight back? Wow, what a loser! Weren't you just talking all high and mighty about busting us for stealing those snacks?” An older tween sneered. The poor victim seemed so insecure he was practically whimpering.

“Hey! Let him go!” the boy finally blurted out from afar.

“This is none of your business, Pao!”

It seemed as if this wasn't Pao's first rodeo. He had been pushed around by that same group multiple times

“There are cameras everywhere! Even if he never said anything, anyone would've seen and reported it anyway! Not to mention there are many people witnessing you threatening this boy! Not only will you go to jail for stealing, you'll also be going for assault!”

The bullies were dumbfounded as to how a six-year-old boy was able to comprehend and talk about the law with them. But they knew better than to deny that he was right. Glaring daggers back at Pao, they let go of the victim's bunched up collar.

“You got lucky this time, kid. Know your place, or else you won't have Pao over here to save you the next time.” threatened the bully before the group scattered.

“Did you see that, sir? The Pao child just drove off the bullies as if they were criminals talking to a law enforcer!” The judge's assistant exclaimed back in Hell.

“Interesting...” Judge Pao muttered, scratching his chin in deep thought. None of the Pao kids have ever done anything like this for generations. Most of them only chose to follow the family 'business' after they grew up, but it became clear that this child had a natural sense of justice and a clever way of speaking developed at a young age. That was what Judge Pao recognized as potential.

“A special child indeed... He is the one.”

That brings us to twenty years later in the present. Pao Zhongsun — or Sun, as he preferred to be called — was, needless to say, less than pleased as he laid his eyes upon the heaps of paperwork mounted on his desk. As if he didn't have enough work to do at a job he hates already.

It's not like he wanted it either. He was roped into the game of law by family ties and family ties alone. His ancestors were judges, lawyers, attorneys, all fine talents in the field, dating all the way back to the year 999 when it all began: the birth of the legendary Judge Pao, the very embodiment of justice in Chinese society. Oh, he was real, all right, and just so happened to be Sun's ancestor. If he wasn't obligated to live up to the family name and the expectations that came with it, he would've never even considered it. Alas, duty calls...

"Sun?" his colleague and friend Ray came looking for him, his head sticking out just a little bit from one side of the cubicle's exterior

"What is it?"

"Boss wants to see you."

He despised every mention of his boss, mainly because that man just so happened to be the cold soul that was his father. A stern man in both the workplace and the home environment, it was easy to see why the two of them didn't exactly get along. Believing in the power of effort and working hard, Attorney Pao wanted his only son to start from the bottom and work his way up to the top, much like he did when the Attorney was Sun's age.

"You called for me, Father?" Sun addressed his father politely as he nervously stepped in the office.

"Please, sit, Sun. Now, I understand you've been wanting to be granted more opportunities in this job since you were hired, and I have repeatedly explained how you have to earn those opportunities, rather than have them handed to you solely because of your status and identity."

"Right..."

"Well, after more than a year, I believe you've earned it. Here's your first case."

The elder man slid a file across the desk towards his son

"... a murder case? You're giving me a murder case as my first case?"

"Yes and no. This will be a joint project with me. Consider it an entrance exam, to review your skills. Do me a favour and study the victim."

"Zheung Zhunhei, aged 27, freelance artist... cause of death: carbon monoxide poisoning? Wait, why does this sound so familiar?"

"It was a case that began quite a few years ago, but to this day, the debate over whether the cause of death was suicide or by other unnatural causes, no one knows yet. Authorities found him limp on the floor with half his head against the open oven. It was labeled as a suicide when we found him. But tell me what you see in this photo."

Sun did, in fact, question his father's orders, yet he could only do what he could to impress him and stay employed. His eyes squinted so hard they were practically shut, all to take in the details and find the odd thing out. His eyes darted between the victim and the surroundings, trying desperately to find anything that would prove this was anything but a suicide, until he took notice of the oven.

"The oven was never turned on."

"Very good. According to the victim's brother, the oven hasn't been used once since they moved in. Which means..." the attorney trailed off, indicating for his son to finish his sentence.



“... there’s no carbon monoxide produced or emitted to begin with. This... this isn’t a suicide. No ordinary monoxide poisoning case would end up like this. And no scuff or blood marks across the crime scene anywhere.”

“Which is why we’re suspecting it to be murder. The police brought in his roommate, the main suspect, for investigation.”

“But we don’t have substantial evidence!”

“Which is why we need to figure out what happened as soon as possible. And you are going to help me. Start by reevaluating the evidence and find any details we might have missed. Remember, any sliver of information can count. Be thorough.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sun could feel the pressure rising within him. One minute ago he was sitting in his cozy little cubicle, minding his own business, the next he was put on the clock to solve a case that even the best in the field couldn’t handle.

Cue the oncoming restless nights that just seemed without end. For days and nights he would spend staring at the files and pictures laid out in what he calls an ‘organized mess’ that would help with his thought process. But there was too much to take in all at once, he would spend a good number of those nights just trying to make sense of the case itself. Time was ticking away, and he was going nowhere. The worst part was the fact that he had no energy left in him at all to power through the investigation. Before he could brew himself another pot of coffee, his eyes had already fallen shut and his head resting against the surface of his wooden desk.

When his eyes finally fluttered open again, he found himself lying within the center of a dark chamber, a temple of sorts. Statues of ancient Chinese scholars towered upon either side of him, their very presence and symbolism intimidating the man. He found this place to be quite familiar. This was his ancestor, Judge Pao’s resting place. Nowadays, it’s where his family would go every year to pay their respects. This new structure, however, was a much grander version of the building he once knew. And he was about to find out why.

‘Hello, Sun. I have been waiting for you.’ A solemn voice boomed, revealing a figure sitting behind Judge Pao’s desk that hasn’t been sat on in a thousand years. Sun couldn’t believe his eyes.

‘Y—you’re...’

‘That’s right. It’s nice to finally meet you. You know, you were quite the special child back in the day. I’ve never seen a Pao child with such raw judgment and confidence. You certainly live up to the family name.’

‘T—thank you, sir, but with all due respect, I don’t exactly think I even deserve the family name. I’ve been trying so hard to work on my first case and I have absolutely nothing.’

“Do you know why you’ve been having such a hard time?”

“No, sir.”

“It seems as if you’ve lost sight of what this is really about. Solving this case means helping innocent people and bringing justice, not proving your worth at a job you don’t like. You were never even suited for the job, anyway. Anyone with your potential can do better, you have the conditions to do whatever you put your mind to, or even become a judge like me.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think anyone could be like you. Your existence was a once-in-a-lifetime thing!” Sun exclaimed.

“Perhaps, but maybe I can give you a little push in the right direction, just so you can get things going. At least you’ll be a little like me, then.” The judge chuckled.

“Remember, with power and wisdom comes responsibility. I’m sure you’ll do nothing but good with them. Good luck, Sun, and make me proud.” The judge boomed, tapping Sun on the forehead. As if it were the work of magic, Sun felt a surge of energy and power coursing through his veins, its effects overwhelming enough to awaken him in the real world and out of his subconscious mind.

“Well, that was weird...” Sun mumbled groggily, just recovering from the long nap. Until that overwhelming feeling returned, this time less intense but enough to get his brain going all the way. He had this growing sense of responsibility on him now, as he feared that if he didn’t buckle down and solve this case, he would be letting an innocent person die without reason and letting a criminal roam free. By then, he would never be able to forgive himself for the injustice his incompetence may cause. He once again studied the pictures, this time his eyes darted back and forth between the two pictures of the victim’s body, and the two photos of the crime scene.

It wasn’t until he squinted his eyes to get a more thorough look did he finally understand. A proud smile formed across his face: he solved the case.

“Your honor, before you is a picture of the victim’s head in a close-up frame. Beneath the many layers of hair, you would find a hidden dent, a gash and a bump on the victim’s head, covered almost completely. The gash, by the time this case was revisited, was dried out and practically invisible. The dent was explained to be something the victim acquired at birth, but no natural dent would go that deep. I would know, I have one myself. Bumps are also quite common, but it’s not everyday that all three of these happen to land in the same region.” Sun deduced the next day, standing before the court judge, the jury, his father and the suspect.

“Objection! If that were the case, why did it take so long for forensics to find it out?” The defendant’s side questioned.

“That’s what I asked myself as well. And the answer to that is the fact that it was so meticulously planned, it was automatically believed to be a suicide down to the realistic suicide note. The gash was already practically invisible, the only information forensics had at the time was the fact that the carbon monoxide was in his lungs until they realized there was no monoxide. No one thinks to check the head on a case like this, not even forensics. But then I checked the crime scene photos again. In fact, I revisited the crime scene myself with forensics in tow. To start off, old footage of a recent conversation between the victim and his brother confirms that the oven had never been used and was brand new, since the only one ever in the kitchen was the victim himself. There was no carbon monoxide produced and hence emitted from the oven. That in itself already proves that there is no way the victim died of an overdose of carbon monoxide.”

Sunny caught a quick glance of the roommate, the suspect’s ears unknowingly turning a beet red.

“The coffee table’s edge was scuffed. The suspect claims it to be a result of moving the dining room chairs across the apartment, yet there were no scuffs on any of the dining chairs. Not to mention, we found bleached traces of dried up blood in the form of a handprint on the bottom edge of the couch, the most unlikely place to find blood in a monoxide poisoning like this one. Forensics identified both the victim and the roommate’s DNA in the blood in equal parts. Now I’m no biology expert, but I’m sure there’s no natural way of having both their DNAs in one blood sample, unless there was something unnatural about the blood and the gash and the supposed suicide that has nothing to do with blood.”

“Objection— ”

“It is not appropriate to object after everything he says, please sit down. Mr. Pao, please continue.” The judge said.

“Thank you. As I was saying, furthermore, both the footage of the security cameras in the building hallways, as well as the brothers’ conversation has demonstrated that the victim and the roommate did not have the best relationship, the latter often disagreeing and picking fights with the victim over little things. Their most recent footage recorded a relatively larger dispute regarding the victim contemplating moving out of their shared apartment. The next day, he was found dead. If the suspect can still explain how all this is a sheer coincidence, then I suppose most, if not all deaths are coincidences. No further information, Your Honour.”

Sun concluded before he sat back down beside his father. He has a quick scan of the room, taking notice of the agreeing nods of the jury, the frantic whispers exchanged between the roommate’s side, and the rare instance of his father giving him an approving nod. From that, he knew he did the best he could to defend the victim. While he hoped that this case would finally be concluded and those concerned would be brought to justice, he had one less regret left in his life.

After a few more excruciating hours of trial, the judge came to a decision.

“I hereby declare the defendant... guilty, in accordance with the newly found substantial evidence presented. They will be sentenced to imprisonment of 8 years, effective immediately.”

A wave of relief washed over a nervous Sun, now collapsing back into his chair with satisfaction and just a tiny hint of pride. He always knew there was something fishy about this case, and he was more than pleased to finally bring the truth to light. He finally found this sense of fulfillment, something he hadn’t felt in a long while despite being at this job for a while now. He didn’t exactly know how he did it, but he had a feeling it had something to do with the dream he had with Judge Pao. It was like he felt himself in Judge Pao’s shoes, and the answers just came naturally to him.

“Well son, I have to say, that was really impressive. You should be proud.” His father blurted out. It wasn’t much, but Sun knew all too well that it was his way of showing affection.

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re better at this than you think, you know. Do you still have second thoughts about practicing law?”

“... You know what? I don’t think so anymore. I’m finally starting to feel like this is what I’m meant to do. And who knows? If this goes well, maybe I’ll follow in our ancestor’s footsteps and become a judge.” Sun suggested.

“Well, seeing how you managed to crack the first cold case open in years, you certainly have the potential. He’d be proud.” His father stated. And he was right. Back in the Department of Hell, Judge Pao smiled proudly at the sight of his great-grandson’s success.

“It seems like you didn’t choose the wrong one, sir.” His assistant said.

Judge Pao smiled at the thought of seeing Sunny in twenty years’ time, becoming the most recognized and respected judge in the city. All the hardest and most important cases would go to him, the Judge decided.

“Out of curiosity, how much of your wisdom and ability did you give him?”

“Just a bit. Like I said, I was to give him a *little* push in the right direction. The rest was all him. What did I tell you? He’d make a great Judge Pao.”

# Bao's Smile

*Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Sun, Aleka – 16*

Bao Zheng never smiles, notices Gongsun.

He has been Bao's assistant for – how many years? Too many too count. He'd even consider Bao a friend. He's seen Bao's smirk, a subtle quirk of the mouth directed to corrupted clerks as they woefully await their punishment. He's seen Bao's fake laugh, seemingly welcoming as he greeted greedy officials who desired his good favour, but only someone who has spent as much time with Bao as Gongsun can notice the disdain betrayed by his eyes. He's even seen Bao's rare face of content, only occasionally shown when receiving gratitude from citizens he'd helped, not originating from ego but from knowing that justice has been administered. Yet he'd never seen Bao smile before, a real smile, one that blooms from happiness, one that crinkles the corners of one's eyes, one that draws two people closer together.

Perhaps it is due to his position as a judge. His stern demeanor has certainly instilled fear and wrung out confessions from guilt-ridden wrongdoers. Still, Gongsun doesn't believe that Bao is incapable of smiling. There must be something that makes him truly happy.

He is on a quest, Gongsun decided, to find what makes the iron-faced judge, judge Bao, smile.

★

'You spent 10 years taking care of your parents right after you qualified for *jīnshū*?' Gongsun said in wonder. 'That was incredible devotion.'

'You overstate things,' replied Bao, pouring two cups of liquor. 'They were ailing at the time. I wanted to cherish whatever time I had left with them. I would be heartless not to.'

They were sitting in Bao's garden, relaxing after a long day of listening to appeals. A tall vase of liquor rested on the table between them, surrounded by the fragrance of spring flowers and the chilled evening air. Bao placed a filled cup in front of Gongsun and took a sip from his own. Gongsun noticed the faraway look Bao had on his face when speaking of his parents. Taking a gulp from his own cup, Gongsun probed deeper.

'You must be lucky to have been raised by such wonderful parents,' he prompted.

Bao took the bait. 'I was indeed. We weren't well off, but my parents had high hopes for me. Earned money so that I could read, so that I could go to school. They weren't well educated, but they were the ones to first teach me the teachings of Confucius.' Bao's voice thickened as he reminisced, eyes shimmering as if recalling treasured memories. But his mouth remained a tight line.

'They were honest people. Hardworking people.' Bao took another sip from his cup and sighed. 'At that time, there was a powerful family that controlled basically everything in our town using their wealth. They exploited peasants, including my parents. Made them work without pay. Bribed local officials so that they'd turn a blind eye.' Gongsun noticed a shift in Bao's demeanor. Bao's eyes lost that glazed look. Instead, they were filled with something akin to contempt. 'Most of the peasants were illiterate, and so couldn't file grievances. Those who could had their accounts altered by corrupt clerks.' He downed the rest of the liquor and slammed the cup down. The clang echoed in the night air. 'I couldn't believe the injustice!'

'That was a different time, it's not like that now.' Gongsun tried hastily to calm down Bao. He didn't mean to get him this riled up. Seeing his friend still seething, Gongsun decided this attempt to make Bao smile was a lost cause. 'Let's not fixate on the past now.' He raised his cup. 'To justice!'

★

Gongsun refrained from talking about Bao's past, now knowing that he had such a deep history with and hatred for injustice. Though he wondered, what else might make Bao crack a smile?

The New Year was just round the corner. A friend of Gongsun's, Li, invited Gongsun to his abode, and out of his admiration for Bao Zheng's uprightness, Bao was invited as well.

Bao and Gongsun were received generously. A feast had been prepared for them. Delicacies lined the long dining table. The warm lighting in the dining hall illuminated the conversing faces, and music accompanied the chatting and laughing. Gongsun indulged in great food and delightful conversation, but noticed that Bao was oddly quiet. Bao, who normally could eat a horse at mealtimes, seemed to have a restrained appetite today.

Later, Gongsun found Bao on a balcony that overlooked the streets. Despite the feast and entertainment, Bao seemed to be in a fowl mood. Gongsun found him looking out at the city, backlit by light from inside the house, beard and flowing sleeves swimming in the wind.

Gongsun went to stand beside him, sharing his view of the city. In the streets below, he saw people hanging up lanterns, making firecrackers, and make other preparations for the New Year in a few days.

‘Has anyone here displeased you?’ inquired Gongsun, unable to understand why Bao was so glum on such a festive day. ‘You seemed to have a poor appetite at dinner just now.’

‘The feast was delicious, but my, what a display of wealth this place is.’ He gestured at the carved pillars, the gold door knockers, the numerous servants inside the house.

‘I assure you, none of it was ill-gotten. Li is a silk merchant, and made a fortune from trading all over the Central Land—’

‘No, no, I wasn’t saying that your friend acquired his wealth by ill means,’ interjected Bao. ‘I meant I feel out of place here. However delicious that feast was, I mustn’t indulge in good food, lest I become accustomed to it. However fortunate we ourselves are, we mustn’t forget the struggles of the common man.’ Bao mused, looking down at the street again. A column of white steam rose up from a potato vendor’s stall, warmth slicing through the evening chill. Passerbys walked closer to the stall on purpose, perhaps to smell the potatoes or feel the warm of the steam, then walked away reluctantly. Young children sat nearby bundled in their coats, drooling at the scent wafting down the street.

Of course! How could Gongsun not have noticed that despite Bao’s high government ranking, he has never seen Bao indulge in wealth. He wore commoners’ clothing, except to social events. Whenever they dined together, Bao rarely ate meat. Gongsun cannot believe that after being an assistant to a master of observing details for so many years, he didn’t even notice this about his daily habits. Embarrassed, and quite impressed by Bao’s temperance, Gongsun opted for silence.

★

A tricky case presented to Bao had his head spinning for quite a few days. A servant was accused of murdering his master by a blow to the head with a wooden staff. However, there were no witnesses to the crime, and Bao could tell that the supposed murder weapon wouldn’t have been lethal enough to kill the man. Confused by the manner of death, Bao put Gongsun in charge of the autopsy.

Gongsun did as told. As he examined the brain he did find that the man suffered significant trauma to the brain tissue, which could warrant his death. However, he did also observe minor, corrosive damage to the peripheral brain tissue. Normally, such minor observations would be ignored, but if Bao suspects the cause of death isn’t obvious... his hunches are usually correct.

Plus, drawing from his expertise in medicine, he might have an idea as to what caused the peripheral damage...

After days and nights of reviewing his own medicinal journals and consulting master herbalists, Gongsun presented the results of the autopsy to Bao: brain damage due to ingestion of wolf’s bane, causing the man to lose consciousness and presumably hitting his head on a sharp object, causing his death. Bao, pleasantly surprised to hear that his initial hunch was right, immediately had a suspect – the man’s widow, who regularly went into the mountains to collect firewood. Sure enough, When Bao and Gongsun went up that mountain to investigate, there was a patch of wolf’s bane to the side of the path, with a spot of dirt at the center of the patch which indicated that someone recently plucked the poisonous herb from the patch.

The widow was sentenced to murder, and the servant was let go. The widow confessed to poisoning her husband, then accusing the servant of killing him after the servant found the husband dead in his bedroom, presumably due to him passing out and hitting his head on a desk corner. However, the servant had still

lost the trust of the family and had to return to his hometown, where he must find an alternative way to support his family instead. Nevertheless, the servant thanked Bao for clearing his name.

Gongsun, particularly glad about his own contribution to the case, sought out Bao to celebrate this tricky solve. Yet Bao wasn't as satisfied with the result of the case as he was. 'What good had it brought? The truth was revealed, yes, but was it just for that servant to lose his job?' Bao paced in front of his desk, unable to let the case go. 'Justice that punishes the wrongdoer as well as the innocent is no justice at all. I regret not having done everything in my power to help that servant.'

Gongsun was once again left speechless. Caught up in solving the case, he had forgotten the aim of solving the case – delivering justice. It was then that Gongsun understood, Bao doesn't get satisfaction from solving cases, but from delivering justice to all parties. Seeing that Bao seemed to be consumed by his own thoughts, Gongsun decided it would be best to leave him alone for now.

★

After nearly three months on his quest for Bao's smile, Gongsun finally opted for directness. 'Bao,' he began, as they were reviewing reports one afternoon, 'do you know that you've never smiled in front of me?'

Bao paused briefly. 'I suppose I haven't.' Gongsun expected Bao to continue on with an explanation, but Bao simply ended his sentence there, as if dropping this topic. Gongsun was left exasperated.

'Well, why?' he exclaimed impatiently. 'For months I have been trying to see what it takes to make you smile. But apparently bringing up your parents reminds you of the injustice that happened to them, you don't like indulging in riches, and you only get satisfaction from cases if the ending is just. Is there anything that makes you more happy than – I don't know – justice?' Gongsun can't believe that Bao's only source of happiness is his work. That is just too sad.

Bao suddenly barked a laugh, a deep, throaty sound that had the tiniest hint of humor, a sound that caught Gongsun off guard. 'You've been trying to get a smile out of me for three months? I appreciate that you finally decided to be direct about it.' Shaking his head in disbelief, he continued, 'Administering justice is my lifelong goal. It gives me ultimate satisfaction.'

Bao suddenly put down the report he was looking at, and faced Gongsun to get his attention. 'That being said, it isn't the only thing that gives me happiness.'

Gongsun perked up his ears in curiosity.

'You have been a very valuable assistant to me for all these years, Gongsun, and more importantly a dear friend. And I'm touched that you devoted these three months to find out what makes me happy. You are truly a sincere and loyal friend of mine. The fact that I have you as my friend, Gongsun,' Bao said, looking him in the eye, 'gives me happiness.'

And then, as if he'd done this many times before, the corners of Bao's mouth moved up, the edges of his eyes crinkled, his facial features morphed as naturally as they ever did into an expression that radiated warmth and fondness, an expression that Gongsun finally saw – a smile.

# Bao: The Righteous Among The Prestigious

*Pui Kiu College, Chan, Cham Lam Colin – 16*

On a cold blistering morning, I slowly dreaded across the blizzardous forest, in search of what I came here for. Yet, the path in front of me was unclear, with the ongoing snowstorm not showing any signs of subsidence. Nonetheless, it was imperative for me to carry on with this journey, as per my duty as an archaeologist to retrieve new historical evidence no matter the harsh conditions. Wrapped in comfy clothes, I continued to persist in search of a body frozen in time, which was said to be located somewhere nearby. It could be underneath a tree, or hidden in the caverns, but all I know, is that the hollowness in the skull's eyes has still yet to be filled, still waiting patiently for someone of noble intentions to retell his story.

Despite the worsening weather, I was still able to traverse the snow at a rapid pace, and before long, I had come across the snow-ridden corpse. According to my estimations based on the age of frosty trees close by, it had probably been laying there for close to a thousand years at this point, left untouched throughout the centuries. Thus, I slowly kneeled on the floor, examining the body from top to bottom, his skull was partially fractured, his ribs were crushed, and his legs degraded to a point that is barely identifiable. Yet, the causes of his death weren't the biting conditions of winter, but he was most definitely posthumously murdered by a certain someone, as shown by the scars on his fractured ribs. Who could it be? When did it happen? Is it linked to our case study? Maybe this was the corpse our team has been looking for, a critical piece of the puzzle for our case study. As such, I tried my best to reorganize his body parts into a recognizable state to further my investigation.

Unannounced to the team's predictions before, held ferociously in his hand, even in death, was a transcript written by Bao. It seems like he was a messenger of sorts, trying desperately to carry damning evidence of a court case. Such was the fate of a poor man, yet a righteous man, one of Bao's close confidants, working tirelessly for justice and the wellbeing of the victims.

I opened the still glittery transcript with much amusement, excited by the potential linkage it could bring to our current re-iteration of his legendary and reputable impeachment cases during his tenure. It begins as follows,

*"To the most honorable imperial censor,  
I am one of the governor-commissioners in the province of Henan, where serious cases of crime had recently been conducted by the imperial officials. I am here to ask for your help.  
Someone from the imperial household has been pressuring and extorting local funds away from us. Though we are not sure who that is, as his orders are only carried out by his militarised entourages, we still hope that his most honorable censor can investigate and remedy this issue, bringing justice to those who are opprobrious."*

Unfortunately, it seems like this letter was unable to reach Bao, as it was intercepted amidst the journey. I guess wireless communication wasn't that popular a thousand years ago... Luckily, this could be a tool for the retelling of Bao and his supporters' stories, and we can help piece the evidence together without the threat of assassination or intimidation. The modern world is much more advanced in policing and investigation skills, right?

Similar to Bao who was frequently featured on television, I imagined myself trying to piece the clues into a wider picture. So it says there had been a rampant case of corruption, stealing valuable money away from local governments, and all of which were achieved using force. Well, it's no wonder why the messenger was killed then, as the tyrant had such callousness for others' lives and well-being. Maybe this was related to Zhang then, who was the uncle of Emperor Renzong's favorite consort, rising from obscurity to prominence in a matter of years, becoming the state's financial commissioner with the emperor's deepest trust in him. He was a force to be reckoned with during the days of Bao.

I continue to carefully read through the transcript, hoping to make more sense out of the messy situation I found myself in,

*“Here is a detailed recount of what had occurred recently.*

*Several soldiers from the imperial household arrived at the doorstep of our local government building, claiming that a higher-up had ordered them to Hubei to collect a special tax, ‘The Kumquat Tax.’ They claimed it was established to fund the palace’s expansion and hence the increasing central government’s costs, to be paid in both silver and local Kumquat production, which is the favorite food of the emperor’s most prominent mistress. If we failed to comply, then they would torch several villages on their way back to the capital. As ridiculous as this sounds, we truly considered the threat of massacring your own people and paid the ransom. What else could we have done?”*

While things were maneuvering at the local level, there seems to be a greater conspiracy unraveling at the central government, and this transcript could have been the torch to light up the flame if it had arrived successfully. I guess there were just too many ‘Ifs’ in history, there could have been so many opportunities to make the world a more righteous and valiant place, yet the cynical ones have often taken advantage of the charitable ones.

After processing my thoughts, I took a photo of the corpse and forwarded it to my colleagues, who were all amazed at the depressing state of the carcass,

*“Oh my. What a horrible fate it must have been!”*

*“The blatant nepotism is truly intolerable!”*

*“How greedy can one be in furthering his political ambitions?”*

We all deduced that the insufferable act was conducted by Zhang, though other officials could still be part of the entire conspiracy. The team back home immediately scrambled through the related records of the time, and discovered a homicide investigation carried out by Bao in the same year as that written in the transcript. Yet, the official cause of death written was “Starvation by hunger,” not murder. Why was that the case? This was a murder in broad daylight! Was Bao’s integrity compromised as well? Not only that but Zhang was even pardoned, with the reason cited as “Insufficient evidence.” How dumbfounded can the tribunal of the day be?

The hunt for evidence was said to be pursued, but to what extent did it happen? We felt like many officials had been on the fence about whether or not to further the search for the corpse and its related clues, as some officials retired from their posts, eschewing responsibility, while others ‘Disappeared’ before they made any major contributions, maybe they went foraging but didn’t bring enough food too?

The court on the judgment day was also said to be jam-packed by the peasantry, all protesting to demand Zhang be removed on numerous accounts of bribery and corruption. Yet, Bao wasn’t able to pull up his courage and stand strong against the evil forces, begrudgingly pardoning Zhang despite his legendary status as an infallible commissioner. The team was as confused as the disgruntled public, doubting Bao’s legacy as truly that extraordinary.

Could Bao... have been bribed?

Anyhow, I continue my search over his scattered remains, inspecting every piece attentively to look for possible clues. This was when I espied a fathomless scar on his ribs, likely caused by an arrow bolting through his once immaculate body. The bleeding wasn’t too bad, as the arrow had stuck in his cadaver long enough that it dissolved back into nature. One shot. That was all it had taken to bring an end to one’s life, and one’s desperate attempt to bring justice. I hope it wasn’t too painful.



The arrow appeared to be poisonous as well, as the inner ribs were much darker than the outside, ensuring that the messenger would not be able to escape his fate. The cyanide must have spread inside his body like wildfire, corrupting his blood before he meets his demise. Or maybe, the messenger held true to his loyalty and piety to truth and justice until his last breath. I'm sure it had been the latter.

Thus, I report my findings to my teammates, who jotted down all the characteristics of the corpse in a notebook, which could later be referenced upon. However, meanwhile, they were still in a state of shock and disbelief that Bao might have corrupted his unerringness just for a moment. There must have been more to the story, a person living modestly for his entire life wouldn't have accepted bribes from his political and ideological rival in any circumstances.

It was then when one of my colleagues had the better of us, could the historical records have been forged? He was a political and judicial juggernaut during his tenure, but his archnemesis could have most certainly left out some of the details when rewriting the records after his retirement. This was a possibility, as his scrupulous attention to detail must have made his peers unsettling for their crimes.

*"Hey, why don't we infer from Bao's own diary then? I'm sure we've borrowed it from his descendants before carrying on this research."*

Though autobiographies tend to be more biased towards the protagonist, in this case, it might as well be the opposite. Thus, my colleagues hurriedly fetched Bao's diary, thoroughly blowing off the cover's dust, and were astonished at what they saw coming from Bao himself. The book illustrates the following,

*"Today was a frigid winter day, the snowstorm continues to pour her blessings on me. Unfortunately, my luck and piety had run out, as I was unable to sentence criminals to their deserving penalty due to external influences. Those corrupted scoundrels will one day repay their debts in the burning inferno, melting away in the pit of shame!*

*Yet, it was only today that I realized that Zhang had just been the scapegoat of a wider systemic problem. Corruption and lack of meritocracy in the government didn't lie with greedy officials, but with the most prestigious, supposedly righteous, but inviolable emperor himself!*

*The judiciary has the responsibility to uphold the rule of law, ensuring people's trust in the government, and the most honorable just steps in and torches up peasant unrest! How dare he just step into the court and dismiss the case privately, forcing me to deal with the aftermath!*

*No, it can't remain like this. I must talk to the emperor personally, urge him to change for the better and to force corrupted officials like Zhang back onto the sidelines. It is my utmost responsibility to contribute to the meritocracy and benevolence of governments!"*

Feeling overwhelmed, the team was ashamed that they had thought Bao otherwise before. He truly tried to play his cards to the best of his ability to protect the meritocracy. Unfortunately for him, he just wasn't living in the right moment, with his decisions overruled by the executive imperials. He really was a limelight in the swelling darkness of the old, and of the new.

Alas, the modern conclusion to the homicide case was reached. The emperor's direct subordinates ordered the murder, as they felt threatened by the nuclear aftermath that would ensue if the public finds out about this. Hence, Zhang ordered the act to gain favor with the emperor.

Despite the emperor's involvement in disrupting the judiciary's work, this case turned out to work out for the better. According to historical records, after mounting pressure from fellow commendable imperial censors, the emperor first relieved Zhang from being state finance commissioner, demoting him to lower and lower positions such as being the commissioner of palace attendant.

Contemporary historians claimed that Bao spoke at length on reasons to oppose, and spoke hundreds of sentences repeatedly, his voice so loud and agitated that spittle spattered the emperor's face.

The emperor, to stop him, gave up, and simply followed Bao's wishes. Defying the odds, there is still a surreal chance for the good and righteous to defeat the evil forces, as long as the good dedicate their entire lives to fulfilling the needs of the commoner.

The flabbergasting stories of Bao stand as a cautionary tale to corrupted persons around the world in the modern era, especially when investigative journalism is flourishing in free and democratic societies, encouraging the public to question the government's legitimacy if they are siphoning away public funds. This is why archaeologists and historians alike want to uncover the truths of the old, to bring a sense to human physical, and more importantly, psychological evolution amidst the chaotic fervor of modern news.

There are many prestigious individuals around the world, who have achieved great success in their careers, though also coming with great infamy. Mark Zuckerberg might have made a huge fortune off Facebook, but at what cost? Selling customers' data to notorious big data firms, increasing anxiety and distress among teenagers, just to name a few of his crimes. They might be legal, but are these acts righteous in principle? The rule of law does protect civilization from disturbing crimes such as homicide, but do they uphold moral and righteous values in our hearts?

Not only should this apply to businessmen in fancy suits, but also to governments and institutions, among which morality is largely lacking. Faceless and conscienceless establishments are even more harmful to society, as they don't have a mind of their own, and their ruthlessness is unprecedented compared to their ancient counterparts. Though they might not be invading and massacring the common folk like ancient civilizations, they are still certainly suppressing and controlling the common folk, what is commonly dubbed as surveillance capitalism.

Yet, they are still led by figureheads, who could shed light on society if a persona similar to that of Bao was adopted. This is when ancient virtues come into the picture, they are passed along from generation to generation for a reason. Your forefathers determined that the legal framework simply wasn't enough to prevent hatred and spread empathy, thus actively promoting individual responsibility of committing to virtuous acts to maintain a healthy social atmosphere. Thus, this is why we spread the word of Confucian, along with Bao's legendary status as an infallible judge. They are living templates that ought to be replicated by others, as they have not only attained massive prestige, but also are believed to be righteous amidst ever-mounting societal pressure. Imagine a world where virtue and morals were laws, that was what Bao had tried to do. Well, let's say he was triumphant during his age to an extent.

However, many people fail in following their footsteps before morality is preserved, such as the unfortunate messenger, who failed to deliver the crushing blow to Zhang, literally, when he was murdered. Many individuals aspire to be like Bao, yet they remain frozen and forgotten in time, not cherished by the wider public. Thus, it is of paramount importance that we acknowledge the righteous ones among us, more than those who are prestigious due to statistical successes.

The transcript ends with the following, maybe Bao's virtues do positively encourage more righteous and prestigious individuals to follow his path.

*"The current financial state of various provinces has been dire and dangerous. How could greedy officials be appointed to that post and hold on to it, dashing the world's hopes and neglecting the world's matters? Your decision thus lends credence to my belief in remaining righteous at all costs.*

*Yours faithfully,  
Ouyang Xiu"*

# A Day as a Criminal in the Song

*Pui Kiu College, Kwong, Yung Ching – 16*

"Don't move, stay right there you thieves!" Alex and Paul had no idea how they got themselves here. They were still in the library, surrounded by tons of books related to law just a few minutes ago. Right now the two of them were standing in a place that they had never been to. "What on Earth is this place?" Alex couldn't help but screamed in confusion.

Alexy and Paul had been preparing for the SQE, it was always their dream to become a lawyer. "After we have passed this exam, we can finally become a lawyer!" Alex was really excited for the upcoming qualification test that he asked his best friend Paul to study with him. "We are in the library. Just shut and concentrate on your studying. We don't have much time for chit-chatting," Paul sighed in worry. "I know! I'm just too happy, I mean being a lawyer means you can earn a lot! Money is the most important thing to consider!" "Shouldn't you care about something like justice instead of money?" Paul looked at Alex in disbelief. Alex replied, "Maybe? But I surely care the most about money," He laughed as he flipped the book on the desk. "I don't think it's "funny...wait," Paul paused, then pointed at the book in front of Alex, "Why is your book...glowing?" "Huh? Paul are you okay? How can my book be glo..." Alex turned, only to see the page with a photo of the judge Pao was shining. "What?" Before Alex could finish his sentence, the two boys lost consciousness.

When they woke up, they found themselves standing in a room. The room was just like the shop that Alex once saw in the TV drama about Ancient China except that it was quite messy here. "Any posted here? There are two thieves here! They threatened to kill me! Please, someone help!" The man who looked like the owner shouted and seemed to be shocked by the sudden arrival of the boys. Before they realized the owner was referring to the thieves as themselves, another man wearing blue clothes broke into the room. He was holding a sword, pointing at Alex and Paul. "Wait! Calm down! Put down your weapon, we are innocent!" Paul tried to persuade the man to let them go but as expected, it wasn't effective at all. It clearly wasn't a good idea to fight with a muscular man holding a sword they thought. "You two thieves are going to jail with me!" The man hit the two boys hard with a punch. They fainted once again.

"Psp...Wake up Alex!" "Paul? Where are we?" "I have no idea but I think we are probably in ancient China." "How? No way!" Alex stopped as he looked around, people were dressing in traditional Chinese costumes. Furthermore, the decorations of the room were also in Chinese style. When Alex wanted to move closer and to explore this weird place, he found out that both his feet and arms were tied. "Let me go!" What is wrong with you?" He shouted at the man in blue clothes that they saw not long ago in the shop in anger. A voice interrupted them when the man was ready to pull out the sword again. "Silence!" "I'm sorry," The man quickly stopped and kneeled in front of the voice. A man with dark skin and moon shaped scar on his forehead, wearing a black clothes with a golden dragon on it was sitting across the room. "Who's that guy? He looks so familiar," Alex recalled seeing this face not long ago. "Are you stupid? He is the judge Pao!" "Wait, so we are in the Song dynasty right now?" "I said silence!" Judge Pao repeated and the whole room fell in silence. Even there were a lot of questions that Alex wanted to ask, but he didn't dare to let out any voice.

Judge Pao looked at the two boys and said, "Hm... Weird costumes you two are wearing...I've never seen such a style of clothing before. What did they do?" The man stood up and replied, "They were found inside Mr. Yi's shop. Mr. Yi had claimed that they tried to steal his money and broke everything in his shop," "No we didn't! That guy is lying!" Though Alex was confused about everything, he couldn't stand being accused as a thief. He is a hundred percent sure that they were innocent. "Remain silent! You should keep your mouth shut unless I give you permission to speak," Judge Pao turned to the man and continued, "Please go on." "Yes. After investigation, we found several buns and ingredients fell around and the door was also broken which fell outside the shop. Unfortunately, there were no customers other than Mr. Yi that witnessed the whole case. Mr. Yi said that he had experienced huge damage and demanded compensation." "I see, Mr. Yi, please step forward." The owner of the shop showed up from the crowd, he then cried, "oh lord! How unlucky am I! Why you thieves wouldn't leave me alone?" He stared at Alex and Paul as if they were really guilty. "That guy is so good at acting that he can win the Oscar!" Alex whispered to Paul. "Mr. Yi, a few questions for you. Please answer them honestly. The first question is how

did the door of your shop break?" "The door is made out of wood,it was damaged and fell when this two thieves kicked it and broke into the shop. I was in total shock! " Even Alex was furious and wanted to defend himself, Paul glared at him, warning Alex to calm down. Judge Pao nodded,and said,"Understand, what did they do next?" "After they broke into my shop,they found out that I was in the shop. They immediately changed their plan.They walked straight up to me and kicked everything on their way. They threatened me to give them all my money or else they would burn my shop! I think they have picked me as their target as I'm the richest person here in this province. After that, I shouted for help hoping someone could hear my voice and that's all that happened." "I see..." "These two thieves should be kept in jail and pay for the damage they caused!" The owner pointed at Alex and Paul. "What should we do now?Run? We don't have any money with us and I don't want to end up in jail!" Alex whispered. Paul replied,"Don't worry, judge Pao is here," "What do you mean ?" "Just watch Alex,"

"You said the two men kicked the door,right?" The owner nodded in response. "However, according to the investigation, the door was found lying outside your shop. Are you sure that they kicked the door?" Judge Pao quickly pointed out the contradiction in the owner's speech. He was surprised but immediately remained calm,"Maybe they pulled the door instead of kicking it. Everything was too sudden, I couldn't remember the details. " "Understandable."Judge Pao turned to the blue clothed man and asked,"Is there any witness in the street?" The man answered,"There was no one walking in the street. We did ask the people in the neighboring street. None of them recalled seeing those two men." "These two men had really weird costumes . If they were witnessed ,surely people could remember . This is really odd. Please give us an explanation. " "We never enter the shop!Like I've said,we are innocent!" Alex shouted. "Let's put this aside ,were they wearing these costumes when they were caught inside the shop?" "Yes," "I don't see these clothes being able to carry or hide any coins,they didn't bring any bag with them right?" "Yes," "They don't have any weapons with them,am I correct?" "Yes." Judge Pao stopped,then stared at Mr. Yi coldly,"I think it's pretty obvious that you're lying about the whole case," The owner shook his head,his voice was shaking and yelled,"Impossible!Why would I lie?Do you have any evidence?" "Did you two lose consciousness inside the shop?" Judge Pao ignored the owner and asked Alex. "Yes!We woke up then found ourselves inside this guy's shop. I don't even know him!" "Exactly, this explains why no one had seen them. It's clear that you are the one who kicked the door inside your shop." "Huh?How?How can you explain that all my stuff in the shop was smashed ? I wouldn't have done that!" "No, you did it. It was reported that several buns were smashed and fell onto the floor .You claimed them to 'kick' the buns. However,we found that their shoes are clean, No food stains are found on their shoes." "No!They did that!They wanted to steal my money because I'm rich!"The owner didn't give up making excuses, and continued his nonsense. "You just frame them for stealing because you can get a large sum of reparations from them right?" Judge Pao said calmly,"The case is over,the two boys are innocent for sure." "Not yet!Do you know who I am?My father is working under the emperor in the capital. Don't you dare to disobey me!" "Oh no,this guy is rich and powerful. We gotta be in jail for sure !"Alex cried. Paul laughed,"Don't worry,I believe in judge Pao."Judge Pao didn't seem to care about what Mr.Yi said ,he repeated," Case is over. They are innocent,you are now free."Alex and Paul were then untied and released. "Wait what really? "Alex was surprised, "but how about that rich guy?Disobeying that guy would lead to huge trouble right?I thought you would send us to jail." Judge Pao laughed,"Why?You two are not guilty after all.I don't care what he said, I mean there's something more important than money and that's justice." "Justice?" "Yes, so even though many people offered me money and tried to bribe me, I won't accept them. Fairness is important, so is justice. " "I see..." "You are free to go ,young men. Now we are going to deal with this liar. Farewell!" Before Alex could reply,his vision had gone black.

"Alex ,wake up!" "Huh?Paul?Where is Judge Pao?" "What are you saying?Back to planet Earth Alex!You haven't done with the revision. Stop sleeping!" Was it all a dream just now? Alex couldn't help but think about the realistic adventure he had in the Song. But what's more important is that he had learned a lesson,"By the way Paul," "What?" "I took back what I had said. I think maybe justice is a lot more important after all. I will try to become a lawyer that defends justice... and also to become a brave but honest person like the judge Pao."

## Bao's last case

*Pui Kiu College, Lam, Yi Hang Brendan – 16*

A thousand springs and winters ago, Bao Zheng, the famed national hero of China, known best as an impartial bringer of justice, laid helplessly on his deathbed. Surrounded by his family relatives, he uttered his last words, “ Any of my descendants who commits bribery as an official shall not be allowed back home nor buried in the family burial site. He who shares not my values is not my descendant.”

These words would serve as a light to guide all future members of the Bao family, as well as a warning for all descendants to steer clear of immoral acts in fear of tainting the name of the great Bao.

I believed I had failed these words when I sat at court during the verdict, doubly so when the gunshots rang through the execution yard.” How could I have done this? How could I have done such injustice to the world!” I thought to myself as I cried uncontrollably in my cramped apartment, my tears staining the investigation report I had before me, the root of my shame.

“ I don’t deserve to live after putting an innocent to jail, and I sure as hell don’t deserve having the blood of Bao Zheng flowing through my veins!” I yelled out, to no answers. In my sheer rage and desperation, I pulled my department issued out from its holster, and aimed it straight at my temple. Without a single doubt, I swiftly pulled down the trigger.

Instead of the loud bang that I had expected, there was nothing. I looked to my hand in complete shock to see the gun was no longer in it, another person was holding it instead. The man wasn’t especially tall, but exuded an aura of intimidation and spirit. He was adorned in the garbs of an ancient Chinese official, with a pair of black boots and a red robe that stretched from his legs all the way up to his shoulder, complete with a two-pronged official’s cap. The mystery man had a darker than usual complexion and a small birthmark in the shape of a half crescent moon on his forehead, his solemn gaze solidly fixed onto mine. Even though I was entirely bewildered, I could tell that the man before me was my ancestor, Bao Zheng.

I sank to my knees and begged him for forgiveness, repenting my past acts of unjust. I fully expected the great Bao to silence me and expel me from the Bao bloodline, and bring me to hell or something like that. However, instead of doing any of that, He lifted me back up to my knees.

“ My son, I know you have made a grave mistake, but I know that you always aimed to do good. It was only by the subversion of truly despicable forces that led you to tragedy.”

Bao Zheng’s voice was just as booming and powerful as you would expect. But to what he said, I responded desperately that an innocent man has been slain in the place of the guilty, and a family has been torn apart by my action, not to mention that a murder is left out in the wild, out of the reach of the law. So even if I had good intentions, my work as police prosecutor has only resulted in pain and shame, so how does it matter if my heart is in the right place?

To my pessimistic ramblings, Bao Zheng answered with certainty, “ But it isn’t too late to put the wicked in their place, yes? Clearing the man’s name by revealing the truth is surely better than taking the easy way out.”

Bao’s words rang through my head, and I quickly realized that he was right, there is still a man that I still have to punish, not just for my own conscience, but for the innocent man and the safety of my city as a whole. My spirits were raised as I understood my new mission, I quickly rushed to my car to begin my redemption.

I hopped into my sedan, plugged my car key into the socket and turned, the engine came to life instantaneously, the movements of the pistons within filled the parking lot with light and noise.

“ Your horse carriage is so loud!” Bao says while making himself comfortable at the co-driver’s seat. I jumped up from my seat in surprise.

“ This is called a car. But let me get this clear, are you actually here? What is your deal? Are you actually Bao Qing Tian?”

“ Of course I am here, I was just talking to you, my boy. As for how I am here, due to my revered status post-mortem, I enjoy great influence in the afterlife as a spirit, which includes appearing to a single soul in the mortal realm temporarily. I saw that you were lost and in need of guidance, so I stepped up to the task to help.”

“ Wait, you have powers right? can you just put the killer in jail now?”

“ No can't do, my power here is limited to that of a mortal , so that is way outside of my abilities.”

“ Ah I see, but how did you stop me from shooting myself?”

“ Just a slight of hand, kid. I should return your weapon, you might need it later.”

I took the pistol, slotting it back into my holster, and sped my car out of the parking lot.

My first destination would be my police station, where I stored all of my evidence for the case, evidence that would point out the true culprit behind the murders.

“ Would you mind explaining the ins and outs of the case, so that I can help you with taking this dastardly scoundrel down.” Bao requested.

I gladly accepted his request.

“ A few months back, a string of gruesome murders struck this city. The absolute brutality had been unseen for decades here, so everyone was out for the man behind it. I was tasked as the primary detective on this case. From collecting DNA samples, finger prints, and witness testimonies, I had rock solid proof that the killer was Zhao Li. There was just one hiccup, Zhao's family is one of the richest in not just the city, but all of China. As the heir to his corporate empire, Zhao's father couldn't bear losing him. Thus he approached me, looking to sway my investigation with a generous sum of money. I rejected it outright, but then he said that he already bribed the local judge and had numerous moles in the police, so no matter my decision, his son would be getting off scot-free, me accepting the cash to change the investigation reports would only make sure that I live to see the case to its end. Under the threat of death, I cowardly accepted his offer. The Zhaos then planted false evidence that framed Chang, a lowly worker in one of Zhao's subsidiary companies as the murderer. Consequently, he was arrested and given the capital punishment, leaving behind his wife and his two children. I gave all of the cash that I received to the family anonymously, I know that it won't bring back her husband and the childrens' father, but hopefully they can survive financially without him.”

“ So it seems that corruption is still present after so many centuries, how do you plan to set this thing straight?”

“ Well, I must retrieve the original evidence that would prove Zhao Li guilty, and also how the Zhao family interrupted in the process of the investigation, which I have in the form of the recording of the conversation between me and the Zhaos. Then I would have to take all of this to the supreme court in the capital to overturn the original verdict.”

“ It won't be easy, but it should work if everything goes right.” I added

“ Hopefully I can help to make it happen.” Bao said reassuringly.

I pull up to the front of the station, hopping off my car and rushing to my desk to collect all of the relevant evidence pertaining to the case. But no matter where I looked, there was no trace of it. In the midst of my search, my detective partner, Lam, walked in on me with a cup of coffee in hand.

“ What the hell are you doing mate, you should be resting after nailing such a big case.”

“ Oh Lam, can you tell me where the evidence for the case is?”

“ I think someone took it and stored it in a police warehouse, the one in district 9 if I remember correctly, why do you need it anyways?”

“ Thanks so much, I have to overturn the case, to make things right!”

“ What? Why would you want to ruin your own reputation? ”

I stood at the exit, puzzled by Lam’s statement.

“ I don’t care if it does, an innocent was punished in the name of the guilty, rectifying that matter far more important than my own reputation.” I responded as I ran back to my car.

Lam stares at the rear lights of my car racing into the morning light, sighs and pulls out his phone.

“ He is on the move. Yes detective Bao, he is heading to the warehouse, send your best.”

“ Very well, good work detective Lam, your service will be rewarded handsomely.” the voice on the other side of the phone responds.

“ It appears that Zhao and his goons are quick on the move, they have moved my evidence to an off-site warehouse, it's not far but we gotta move fast.” I said to Bao.

“ Evil doers always cover up their tracks, be careful out there.”

I drive up to the gate of the warehouse, flashing the guards with my police ID such that I can pass through. I head to the loading bay at the front of the warehouse, where the newest batch of cargo would be offloaded. Hastily parking the car just next to a mountain of crates, I began digging the evidence box in the sea of cargo. After rummaging through half a dozen crates, I finally found it, crushed at the bottom of some old case files, but nothing is missing. Just as I pick the box, ready to head back to my car, I feel the cold blade placed just before my throat.

“ Should’ve just taken the money and left the case, detective. follow me back to my car if you want to live.” The man behind me whispers.

I look at my car and signal to Bao that I am in trouble, Bao acknowledges and nods. The car’s engine suddenly starts up, the assailant is startled and distracted for a moment, just what I needed. I took the knife from the man and took a few steps back. But when I turned back, the man had already vanished into the shadows, and was nowhere to be seen.

“ That was a close one. Quick thinking, Bao Zheng, I would have been dead if it weren’t for you.”

“ One must always be aware of and take advantage of their environment, this is something that I learnt over all my years as a judge, in this case I simply utilized your carriage’s noise to stun the assassin.”

“ Again, it's called a car. But still a good lesson.”

The last piece of the puzzle would be getting to the supreme court and voicing our case to the judge, everything else was in place, but this is going to be the hardest part, convincing the judge to accept my request to have a retrial of the case, but I am certain that with my indubitable evidence against the original verdict, if I got through the judge, justice would surely be served eventually.

But how would I convince such a high-ranking judge to accept a regional detective’s request to retry a big murder case? This is definitely an overreach of power on my part, so I would need an amazing case for the big guy to even consider what I have to say. This is not even taking into account if the Zhao family’s influence extended over even the higher echelons of the government.

“ I know you are thinking about how to approach the judge, but you are sitting right next to one, I can help you write a script for when you meet the judge.” Bao suggests, and I promptly accept.

“ You are gonna have plenty of time to write it, We are taking a high speed train to the capital.”

Over the course of the journey, Bao Zheng was hard at work writing a lengthy speech for my confrontation with the supreme judge. And I, with the help of the internet, carefully translated the script

from ancient chinese to modern chinese, I guess all that time I spent deciphering ancient chinese poetry at school is finally coming in handy for once.

“ It's finally done, if this doesn't convince him, nothing will.”

“ I wouldn't be that certain, my descendent, but it's good.”

“ We are almost there, I gotta take a leak.” I said to Bao, departing my seat for the nearest bathroom stall.

After I finish my business and leave the stall, I feel a bullet wheeze just over my head and hit the wall behind. I immediately ducked for cover behind a stack of luggage cases. From listening to the footsteps of the attacker, I could tell that there are more than one.

I grabbed a broom that laid beside the bathroom and stuck it into the open, it was instantly torn to shreds by a slurry of automatic gunfire. “So I am outnumbered and outgunned, there is no way I can take these guys fair and square.” I thought to myself.

“ Clang, Clang, Clang.” I could hear the men's shoes hitting the metallic ground of the train, they were getting closer and closer. I had to think of something, and something fast. “ Take advantage of my environment, that's what Bao Zheng said, and I am on a high speed train..... Oh I got it!” I aimed my gun at the exterior door of the train and grabbed a hold of the door to the lavatory, then I took my shot.

The locking mechanism of the door failed and the door was flung open, the three armed assassins were swept off their feet by the turbulent winds, dropping their guns in the process. I took the opportunity and ran out of the train car, locking the door as I left.

The train stops abruptly just before the final station due to the incident, prematurely offloading the passengers. I flee the train along with the rest, making a rush for the supreme court building. I pass through the central square of the city, and arrive at the steps of the people's supreme court. Just as I was about to enter the building, a group of capitol police officers pin me to the ground, as I was complicit in the shooting on the train, I must be questioned and arrested. My protest all fell on death's ears and I was taken to the capitol police station.

“ This can't end like this! I have come so far.” I exclaimed.

“ I will help you finish the job.” Bao Zheng says to me as he vanishes into thin air.

In the Supreme Judge's chamber, Bao Zheng appears before the Supreme Judge. The judge looks at Bao in disbelief, which is quickly followed by his word of admiration as he realizes that he was speaking to Bao Qing Tian in the flesh.

Bao Zheng presents the murder case to the judge, detailing the misdeeds of the Zhao family and all the complicit officials, as well as the innocent servant executed in the place of the wealthy, and offering solid evidence in support of his points. The judge listens intently, and says, “ I can see that the prosecution and judiciary process for this case was highly problematic, but you presenting all this evidence out of the blue, without passing through any government bureaucracy or official paperwork makes this a difficult situation, I don't know if I can help.”

“ I staunchly believe upholding truth and equality over all else is a truly virtuous act. Why should we allow petty documents and rigid frameworks to bind us in our pursuit for the truth? Isn't this the antithesis of justice? Rules are dead but we are alive, we can adapt to changing situations radically to address the problem we are presented with. Only with people who are simultaneously upright and flexible at the helm of the legal system can the people live in peace and calm. I wish you, the supreme judge of all of China, can step up to the task.”

“ I am also not alone, a police detective with the surname of Bao, who is currently being held by the imperial guards at the capitol prison is the main contributor to this case, he would be of great assistance in the retrial of the case.”



“ I see, you are right, rest assured, the detective will be released and this case will receive a retrial.” The Supreme Judge responds after a moment of thought. Bao Zheng slowly fades away after the Judge’s guarantee, satisfied that he had helped uphold justice even after his passing.

In the following months, the serial murder case would receive nation–wide attention as it is retried in the capital. With my evidence proving Zhao Yi to be the actual murderer and the definitive collusion between some officials and the affluent Zhao family, Chang’s innocence is recognized, and proper punishment is served upon the Zhao family and the corrupt officials. Although my name as a detective was greatly tarnished, I could finally sleep well, knowing that I had brought the guilty to justice and protected the dignity of the innocent. I will continue to follow the guidance of Judge Bao Zheng, serving the people without bias, and passing along his values of justice and equality into the future.

# Case: Mystery of the missing Monolith, an investigation by Judge Bao of the Song Dynasty and the Infernal Bureaucracy

*Pui Kiu College, Lao, Pak Him – 16*

Accounted by: Felix Wong, Assistant of Judge Pao

Date of Investigation: 6<sup>th</sup> June 1036

Somehow, even though both Pao and I saw the crater left in the sand of the sacred land, we could not believe our eyes. Not only did someone dare to provoke the God above, but they also seemed to have used some sort of superhuman power to carry out such an irreligious act. It was enraging yet confusing for me, a keen follower of the Sun God as well as a seasoned assistant of the famous Judge Pao. The moon symbol of his forehead may be the yin of the yang that is the sun, but he still had the utmost respect for the deity. Who could have done such an immoral deed and how did they manage so? This journey, this crime, had become personal. Not only am I the detective, but also the victim.

It all began with a letter sent to the court of Justice Pao. It has been a while since we had a big investigation, and I was mostly spending my days sweeping the court floors and occasionally dealing with minor quarrels among the peasants, mostly false reports of people complaining that their livestock was being stolen.

“Hey Pao, it’s been getting boring here man, seems like we’ve done too good of a job clearing out bad people—“

“Oh, Felix you idiot, every time you say things like this, something awful happens and I have to go clean it up.” Pao angrily cut me off.

“I’m— I’m sorry Pao I forgot—“

“Mister Pao, here is a letter for you sir.” A mailman appeared seemingly out of nowhere right before I finish my sentence.

“Great, here comes the mailman, what a fantastic sign.” He followed his sarcastic remark with a facepalm before ordering me to take the letter.

I opened the letter and quickly skimmed the letter. My apologetic eyes immediately filled with shock as I read the letter carefully a second time to make sure I read the contents of the letter correctly. I was not mistaken.

“Hey sir, this... this is bad. The letter is from my hometown, Bian.” I read through every word of the letter repeatedly in denial that this has happened to my hometown, but it simply reinforced the fact that I was not mistaken at all.

“What, did more livestock run away while some peasant was sleeping on his job?” Pao asked satirically.

“One of the monoliths of the Taiyang—Shen is missing.” My mind is starting to drown in distress.

Taiyang—Shen is one of the most sacred deities of China and is the main deity that my family and I worship. To anger this powerful God, who has the power to turn Earth into the fiery depths of Hell, is to write a death sentence for humanity.

“Missing? Like, gone? Poof?” Pao’s expression became stern as the news was broken to him. Everyone knows not to mess with the Gods, especially Judge Pao of the Infernal bureaucracy. Irreligious acts are a serious crime and offenders could be sent to hell for eternity.

“They said all that’s left is a gaping square hole where the pillar once was.”

“Damn it. You shouldn’t have said anything, Felix. We got to go to Bian fast before the Sun God catches wind of this!” He ordered his servants to bring us the swiftest horses, and we raced against the Sun to reach Bian.

Five stone pillars, each with its unique ancient markings and carvings, form a circle and stretch up to the sky like a hand desperately trying to grasp the sun in its palms. Thus, the structure is called God’s Palm. Moss and plants wrap around the pillars, bursting out of cracks in the stone and blossoming into delicate flowers, the age and weathering of the monoliths by the unstoppable flow of time hidden by mother nature. The obelisks draw power from the animals sacrificed in the middle of the monolith circle, which is a ceremony done every 7 days to please and thank the Taiyang—Shen for providing humanity with warmth

and life. Therefore, the days of the ceremony are called “Sun Day”. However, as we approached Bian, only four monoliths could be seen silhouetted against the horizon.

“Oh geez Mister Pao, they wouldn’t be able to conduct their Sun Day ceremony if they don’t have all their monoliths! The Sun God will be mad!” I exclaimed to Pao, our horses galloping on the barren desert sands.

“Exactly Felix, and I sure hope Sun Day isn’t tomorrow! Gotta go fast!” With a quick whip, our horses zoomed toward the horizon, the town becoming more and more visible underneath the radiant golden–yellow sun.

Soon, we arrived at the small town. Tiny wooden houses dotted the sandy terrain, and the once bustling streets emptied since a large crowd of citizens gathered around the entrance of the city, whispering and chatting, their eyes reflecting their unease and anxiety. As we got off of our horses, a man dressed in a blue robe stepped up from the crowd, “Ah, Pao! We’ve been waiting for your arrival. My name’s Xilian, the caretaker of these monoliths. Follow me.” The man introduced himself and lead us to God’s Palm. One of the “fingers” of the hand was completely missing, leaving a square hole in the ground where it once was. “Someone must have destroyed the pillar of the Sun God! A non–believer! An atheist! Franz is the only guy in town that does not believe in our beloved Taiyang–Shen, and so the perpetrator must be him!” Xilian exclaimed furiously while the citizens chanted and shouted for the prosecution of Franz. “Woah there everyone, let’s not jump to conclusions too swiftly, shall we? Allow us to investigate.” Pao attempted to calm down the mob but to no avail. “There is no time for investigation! Sun Day is the day after tomorrow, and the Sun God demands a sacrifice!” The citizens chanted the word “sacrifice” again and again until Pao Yelled loudly, “Silence! We will investigate for today and tomorrow only, and if we fail to find any evidence that clears Franz’s name, you can sacrifice him to the Gods. But you all must let me carry out justice first. Do you understand?” The citizens reluctantly agreed and the mob dissipated eventually.

Getting a better look at the crater where the pillar once stood, Pao and I realized that the hole was too clean for the pillar to be destroyed. When a stone is shattered into pieces, remnants of the stone lay on the ground. And especially for colossal monoliths like this, the chances that all of the remnants were removed and cleaned perfectly were minimal. From the looks of it, it seemed that the monolith was more likely pulled out of the dirt entirely.

“But Mister Pao, the monolith weighs like, 20 cows, and with the supervision of the caretaker, how could someone possibly move such a large pillar and do so without being noticed?” The observations only made me more confused.

“Maybe Franz would be able to tell us more information. Let’s go find Franz.” Pao replied, and we head off to Franz’s home.

“Hey, I haven’t seen you guys around here, why do you want to find me specifically?” A puzzled Franz opened the door swiftly after we had knocked on it.

“Franz, one of the monoliths of the Sun God has gone missing, and the townsfolk are all convinced that you are the one responsible for this. My name is Judge Pao, and I’m here to listen to your side of the story.” Pao explained.

Franz’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Yo man, I don’t know what you are talking about. I didn’t even know that the monolith was missing until now! Indeed, I am an atheist, a science guy, but it’s just wrong for people to believe that I would disrespect their culture due to my beliefs. I’ll help you guys out to solve the case, but you have to believe that I did not do such a horrible act.”

We took Franz out to the crater, and he makes the same observation as us, “this is bizarre, I expected the monolith to be decimated, not completely removed. The ground looks too clean for a dirty demolition.” “But how could a massive obelisk be carried away without smashing it to bits?” I asked. Franz thought for a while, then started to draw a graph on the dirt using a stick.

“This is my hypothesis. I’ve seen this one trick from the ancient Egyptians. They used to line up thin and round logs to form a treadmill to move heavy objects from point A to point B. This might be how the monolith was moved away from its original position, however, pulling the pillar from the dirt still requires a lot of manpower, which an individual like me wouldn’t have.” Franz detailed every step of his hypothesis with an illustration.

The sun was setting at this point, and the breezing cold night arrived soon. We decided to continue our investigation the next morning. However, we were not expecting to wake up to this crazy encounter...

"Felix, wake up! Things are getting insane out here!" I jolted awake to Pao's voice and immediately got out of the inn. Sitting near God's Palm was a middle-aged Indian merchant, shaking and trembling, darting his eyes left and right while mumbling some incoherent sentences.

"Tourner dans le vide sic semper tyrannis..." The man mumbled frantically, losing his mind.

"He...he's reciting the markings on the lost monolith!" The bystanders blurted out in shock, "He arrived in our town just yesterday, how does he know about the markings?"

"Oh no! This must be the works of the enraged Taiyang-Shen! I've talked to him yesterday and he was still fine, now look at him!" Xilian exclaimed, and the entire town started panicking.

"Felix this changes everything, we have to check this man out!" Without wasting a second, Pao approached the mumbling man.

"Sir, what happened to you? Did you see the obelisk? Did someone threaten you?" Pao kneeled to the man and questioned him.

"I-I did see the obelisk... but there were cultists everywhere! I was just exploring the town last night when I saw a group of mask-wearing cultists doing some weird stuff with a stone pillar, and out of curiosity, I tried to listen to what they were saying. Unfortunately, I was caught! And cursed! Cursed I say, by these words I'm saying. It's over for me..." The man blurted out frantically, then immediately went back to mumbling.

"Don't worry sir, we will send you to a specialist swiftly to lift your curse. But I want to ask one more question: Have you ever met this guy before?" Pao pointed at Xilian, who was rallying the townsfolk to pray to the Sun God for mercy.

"No, I have not met this man in my life." After the man said so, something clicked inside Pao's mind.

"But mister Pao, Xilian said that he has talked with the man, how does the man not recognise him?" I asked Pao, who seemingly is deep in a train of thoughts. After a while, Pao approached Xilian, who immediately turned to Pao and exclaimed, "Tomorrow is Sun Day, and we need a sacrifice!" Pao calmly replied, "Don't worry Xilian, I might've already found the perpetrator. I will bring him to God's Palm by tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir, thank you." Xilian bowed and announced to the crowd that the perpetrator will be brought to justice by tomorrow. Everyone's sorrowful faces lit up and the whole town cheered for Pao. Under the blissful cheers of the citizens, I whispered to Pao, "Who is the perpetrator? How did you figure that out?"

"Follow me tonight. We've got some arresting to do." Pao whispered back mysteriously.

"Wait, aren't you a judge? You are not a policeman."

"Shut up Felix."

Night falls, and Pao pulls me from my sheets and took me to the town centre sneakily, both of us crouching behind a wooden market stall, waiting for the criminal to appear.

"Who exactly are we waiting for?" I asked impatiently, rubbing my eyes and yawning to protest against my disturbed sleep. Pao kept his eyes on the town centre and replied, "You will see, my friend."

Suddenly, quiet but audible footsteps were heard ringing out from the main road.

"Speaking of the devil." Pao dragged me, crouched and walked to hide behind one of the wooden houses, where we could see the man approaching clearly. It was Xilian, dressed in a blue ritual robe, roaming the streets in the middle of the night.

"What? Xilian? What is he doing here at this hour of the night?"

"Bingo." Pao followed Xilian quietly while I tagged along close behind. We soon arrive at an abandoned and collapsed structure just a few minutes away from the town centre. Shockingly, the missing stone pillar was in pristine condition, standing tall in the middle of the structure, while a hoard of people wearing white full-face masks surrounded it and chanted in a mysterious language and drank beer. Xilian put on a plain full-face red mask and joined in with the crowd.

"Soon, my brothers, once the sheep for our sins has been sacrificed, we will build a stronger and better nation than Song, and we will rule the world, one province at a time!"

"Oh geez mister Pao, this must be the cult the mumbling man was talking about!"

“Oh yeah, everything is coming together.” Pao snuck into the structure and stole two of the white masks for both of us to wear, then approached the masked Xilian and whispered, “Hey mister cult leader, the Indian guy from last night is back, you might want to check him out.”

“Scooby Sun gang, halt our daily ceremony for a few minutes, I have some duties to attend to.” We lead Xilian into some quiet place, and I quickly used my Kungfu master skill to knock him cold. I took his mask and clothes and returned to the group.

“Everyone, I have discovered a way to ascend.” I tried my best to mimic Xilian’s voice, but since everyone was hammered at this point, I didn’t have to try too hard to convince them. “We just have to return the monolith to its original position and stand in the middle of it right as we enter Sun Day to ascend to Godhood.” I cringed after saying such an unbelievable lie, yet somehow the cultists believed me. “Gullible idiots, that’s probably how Xilian got them to follow him.

The cultists knocked the monolith down and placed logs in front of the monolith to roll it back to its original position. While nobody was watching, Pao quickly went to grab the unconscious Xilian.

“It is about time my friends, the clock is about to strike twelve. Pull up the monolith and return it to its full glory!” I commanded. The cultists wrapped ropes on the top of the monolith, then plugged the pillar right back into the hole and pulled it upright with the ropes.

I stood in the middle of the monoliths and announced, “Witness the full glory of your cult leader as he ascends to godhood. We will rule the world in no time!” The crowd cheered and chanted like drunk men in a bar.

“The ascension will begin... now!” Just before the clock strikes twelve, I leapt out of the monolith circle as Pao threw Xilian into the middle of the pillars. Suddenly, a bright radiant beam shot from the clouds above, like a laser from outer space, brightening the skies like a beacon. The laser shot right into Xilian, burning him to a crisp.

“Smells like beef jerky,” Pao commented as the drunk cultists scattered and screamed in fear.

After the light show ended, Pao returned to the underworld, where Xilian was locked in cuffs and kneeling before the court of the crimson Inferno.

“Xilian, you have provoked the laws of the Gods and created a false religion for you to rise to power. I deem your behaviour unacceptable and you are therefore sentenced to 5000 years in Hell.” Pao announced. As Xilian is being dragged away by the devils, he blurted, “No! Please! Spare me, I just wanted to be respected by others and feel powerful for once!”

“What a dumb reason for committing such a horrible crime, loser. Besides, I sentenced my uncle to jail because of his wrongdoings, you think I’m going to spare you? Rot in Hell.” Pao commented as Xilian fell into the pit of fire.

“Mister Pao, aren’t you being a bit harsh with your words?”

“Nah, I’m helping him to get used to being in Hell. He’s going to deal with a lot more than mean words down there.”

Well, that’s the end of this case, back to dealing with peasants losing their livestock.

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*Pui Kiu College, Lee, Zhi Rong Katie – 16*

As I finished up the last few notes on my latest paperwork, I returned my calligraphy brush to the confines of the ink jar. I raised my head and looked through the horizontal slit between the convergence of the wall and the window, just enough space for fresh air circulation and for me to briefly enjoy the outside weather during passing moments in the day. Now, I admire the cloudless midnight sky, sprinkled with a few tiny specs otherwise known as stars. Letting a wave of cool air brush my cheek as I left the room holding my lit candelabra.

Whilst navigating my way back to my bedroom I bypassed a storage room emitting a faint sound of conversation, and the space between the door and the floor allowed a faint blue light to be cast on the floor. A million thoughts raced through my mind, “Intruders” I immediately thought, with no time to spare I barged through the door hoisting my menorah horizontally as if it was a weapon I wielded.

Before I could form words in my mind, the scene I am witnessing stopped me dead in my tracks. It was as if they were playing characters in the theater with the outlandish costumes that they donned. The two middle-aged trespassers were dressed in thin flimsy shirts as well as loose-fitting trousers with polished leather shoes. It was a marvel how they weaseled into the confines of my home without a single person on patrol noticing. However, I wondered if they broke in through the roof as there wasn't a single spot of mud on their shoes.

Whoever they were, they seemed as if they were royalty themselves. The clothes they wear may look cheap at a passing glance, but if you were to microanalyse the origins of them such as the highly woven fabrics of fine silk of their shirts, and the quality of their leather. It wouldn't be far-fetched to assume they came from prestige and demanded recognition.

On to the most mind-warping attraction, the reason for the blue light is a small orb the size of a fist in which is held in the hands of the shorter of the two. The light spread evenly through the room, lighting it up, and illuminating every crevice and flaw in the room I identified as a supply closet. I have never seen such a gadget in my entire life including my affairs with the supernatural world. I wonder how they got their hands on such a weapon. Now the flimsy candelabra seemed to be no match for whatever ability the orb may contain.

As I regained a clearer mind, I began to speak my mind. “Name yourself and the business of your visit in the dead of night. Dare not waste my time intruders.” The taller of the two intruders began to clear his voice and spoke in a foreign accent that rolled off his tongue smoothly and eloquently. I thought to myself, they must be educated fellows from another part of China. He answered “My name is Shawn, and my companion here is Josephine. We are travelers from Modern China dating the year 2030, and we come on urgent business which requires your skill and expertise. It is of utmost importance that we risk our entire future and the space-time continuum by changing the fundamental laws of physics to travel back through space and time just for you.”

If anyone told me that travelers in the future would require my help I would have simply laughed in their faces and wondered if they were mentally delirious. However, with the sight I currently beheld spoke volumes of truth to their words so I have no other choice but to sit down and hear more of what they had to say.

Josephine began to talk first “So first of all, me and my partner are detectives for the international police and we've been informed of a possible political uprising from a secret underground gang that holds multiple innocents and uniformed officers alike hostage. With increasing numbers of officers going corrupt and beginning to support the Dragons, which is the name of the gang. We have no idea who we can trust to help us, including our higher-up officials. With the upcoming presidential election, we need to ensure that our current president will be reelected and not a known corrupt official who is gunning for the title. Without divulging too much information, you, Judge Pao, are an enigma in the future, an idol that inspired me to do what's right and bring justice to the world. So me and my partner thought that you would be the most willing to help us with our cause. Furthermore, the Dragons are heavily inspired by the past and contain knowledge of traditional methods of communication and gadgets that allowed them to

grow their empire undetected for decades, eluding our advanced technology. We believe with your able mind and centuries of knowledge you retain, you will be able to turn the tide and bring our side to victory.”

Shawn butted in “Please Judge Pao, don’t let us down, the entire future of China rests on you. This is the biggest political event ever! The outcome of this election could make or break wars, and endanger the safety of many! The freedom of our people would be destroyed and we will become a classist society where the members of the Dragons will run untamed and unchecked and I don’t want to mention what will become of those that stand against them or refuse to join the ranks.”

The severity of this situation is too big to ignore, the answer seemed painfully obvious. “Yes, Shawn and Josephine, I will help join the fight of the future. So tell me, what is it I need to do to be of assistance?”

The two companions shared a knowing glance, Josephine hesitated “You see, we don’t exactly know what we’re fully up against, because all the agents we sent down were often never heard of again, or killed or worse”

Shawn added “Which is why, we would like for you to return to the future with us, where your continuous analysis and input of our situation can be enjoyed. Would that be alright with you my good sir?”

I mused over this idea for a moment.

Shawn continued “The moment we conclude our business in the future, we will send you right back to the Song dynasty, not a moment missed.”

I thought to myself, it would be nice to visit the future, this is practically a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and you get to save the future and inspire others to do what's right by locking up the corrupt officials. There's nothing I hate more than those who are morally corrupt and put themselves before the good of others.

I nodded “I would join you on this mission”

Josephine grinned, “We were hoping you would say that.” Then she punched in a few buttons on that orb that she was holding and suddenly a large oval, about 2 meters tall, suddenly appeared in the middle of the room. It was like a canvas of what I would assume to be a back alleyway in the middle of the supply closet. I assumed this to be the device of transportation that allowed them to enter my home unseen. I marveled at the technology that future humans get to enjoy.

Josephine explained “This is a transmatter portal, and the moment we step through it, we will have entered the year 2030. Isn’t this exciting?!” He gestured his hand to signal that I should be the one to pass first. So I did.

The moment I transported centuries into the future, I couldn’t help but marvel at the foreign sight. I could only describe it as a concrete jungle, with architecture so tall I had to crane my head to see the top reach past the clouds. I wonder what I felt to those standing on the same level as the clouds. But I didn’t come here to sightsee, so we began to get down to business.

Shawn led us to a part of the alleyway and tapped a combination of bricks on the wall which swung open to reveal a secret entrance to an underground bunker. Once we settled down on a plush couch, he went over to a strange box and took out three cylinders, and passed one each to me and Josephine. I realized that this cab was cold to the touch in spite of the hot weather. Shawn noted my confusion and explained that the strange box was a refrigerator and could keep things cold, and that the cylinder was a canned beverage and helped me open it. I took a sip of this carbonated drink and felt millions of tiny bubbles popping on my tongue all the way to my stomach. Where I could feel gas bubbles gurgling around my stomach until they made their way back up as a large burp.

They chuckled and began to assemble plans on the table. Pulling up the map of the city, pointing to red circles which highlight the locations of known locations of Dragon operations as well as entrances to their underground. Next, came a photo album that depicted high-ranking members of the gang which of course included corrupt government officials and the country's richest.

Finally, they handed me some intercepted communication devices where they reached a standstill on ways to hack into their communication systems. I analyze the small cryptic rectangular box the size of half my palm around 2 to 3 centimeters thick, shifting it between my hands to gauge the weight, tapping it lightly to identify hollow spots. Finally compressing hard on two hollow spots, the entire device sprung open to reveal itself as a bearer of keys which I assume would be for unlocking doors in the underground.

I picked up one of the keys within the device, which I identified as a skeleton key. I surmised "You probably retrieved this from a higher-ranked official if they have access to all this. I bet there's even a key to a cage that I suspect they would have used to lock up all those they kidnapped."

With meticulous planning, we set off to the entrance that leads to the heart of the underground. Upon arriving, it dawned on me that there was a puzzle with ancient Chinese etchings that these two probably don't have, hence, they needed me. Deciphering the meaning of the etching to be a ritual for offering water, we retrieved some puddled water and watched them trickle down the symbols until a small latch showed itself and we climbed down the latter.

Upon reaching the bottom, we diverged according to our plan. I would go and retrieve official documents hidden in one of the offices, while they went to free the kidnapped and gather more information on the underground.

The hallway was dimly lit by candles along the wall, illuminating multiple paths that diverge to different locations. The ceiling was just tall enough for me to stand tall with the occasional brush of the rocks above. I jogged a little bit, sometimes stumbling on the rocky path until I reached a series of doors. Each with Chinese engravings that detail the status of the owner, finally I found the office I was looking for, the one that said big boss. Of course, there were multiple guards on patrol, and my brush of luck was over. Because until then, I hadn't been spotted by a single guard. Now, I had a dozen eyes pinned on me. I've been up against multiple mercenaries before, but none with the weapons they hone.

With so much adrenaline in my being, I leaped forward and used their momentum against them, escaping soon enough for them to incapacitate each other accidentally, and confiscating one of their weapons to aid myself. Finally, one by one, they fell. Using the skeleton key I unlocked the door and entered the surprisingly organized office of the Dragon head. Since reinforcements would be coming soon, I had to hurry and sieve through the folders of classified information. Even though the Dragons liked doing stuff old-fashioned, they still used computers to store information. Taking out the electrical device Shawn helped me calibrate, I waited for it to do its job, copying information from the computer drive. Meanwhile, I began taking physical copies of classified information of utmost importance that would probably not be on the computer drive. , since I had to continue being light on my feet to make my getaway.

As soon as the electrical drive made a beep signaling all the information had been copied I quickly made my way out the door and ran like my life depended on it to the prisoner zone to meet up with Shawn and Josephine, and make our getaway with the prisoners.

I was faced with mass chaos of prisoners of all ages running free, some fighting guards of the underground, while the rest were ushered out by Shawn and Josephine. Since their tiny entrances were only big enough for one person to pass through at once, they blew up multiple outlets for an exit for the prisoners to escape. When virtually everyone escaped, the three of us finally left alongside them and sealed the exit with a large rock retrieved from the transmatter portal.

The three of us later went back to the bunker to exchange information, I gave them back the electrical device as well as the folders I took.

Josephine expressed "Seriously, we cannot express how grateful we are for your assistance! I believe with today's outcome, we can shut down the Dragons once and for all."



I chuckled “Seriously, don’t mention it, all in a day’s work”

Shawn breathed “I guess it’s time for you to go home, but before you leave, I got you something to remember today” and handed me a small soda keychain to remember the first time I drank soda.

“Thank you, I will cherish this forever.”

Josephine opened the transmatter portal for me to get back home. The moment I went back home I realized it was the same night as the one I left. I went back to the supply closet just in time to see me leave for my adventure to the future and the transmatter portal closed. It was like no time had passed for me in this timeline.

I smiled to myself, ran a thumb over my keychain and picked up the candelabra, and ventured back to my bedroom.

# Judge Pao in The Undergrounds

*Pui Kiu College, Liu, You Rong – 16*

“You think you can get away with it?” Kathy pointed her gun at the man in front of her.

“The police are coming,” The man’s voice trembled, but he did not back away, “You can’t escape this time, surrender, and maybe you can live.”

“Ha...” Kathy smiled, “So this is your plan? I see? To lure me into this trap of yours, and corner me, so I am at your mercy now.”

The man laughed, “Intelligent, aren’t you? Yes, I am afraid that I already turned myself in when I realized I am on your killing list. To reduce my sentence, I cooperated with the police, using myself as the bait, I was afraid you did not take the bait, fortunately, that didn’t happen.”

“Then I am afraid you are very unlucky,” Kathy moved closer to the man, “because I never seek mercy of others, nor the police.”

“What? Wait!” Sudden panic seized the man as he saw the murderous look in Kathy’s eyes.

With a loud sound, blood flew from the man’s chest, the force of the impact sent him flying through the building window, and he fell, 32 floors above ground.

“Put down your gun!” Shouts of warning came from Kathy’s back. The police had come.

This is the end. Kathy stared out from the broken window, taking a deep breath, she jumped through the hole. Falling through air, she meets her death.

Huh. Kathy gaped at her torn body. People around the corner had gathered to see the two broken bodies on the ground. Some were vomiting because of all the blood and disgusting organs across the ground, which is making the site even more unbearable. After a while, a team of police came and block the site where Kathy and the man had fallen.

What am I now? Kathy studied herself. Seems just like normal. Except... No one could see her. She tried to wave her hand in front of a person, but the person simply ignored her. She tried to shout at somebody, but the person is deaf to her. A ghost? Kathy suddenly felt frustrated. If all the people she had killed turned into ghost instead of disappearing, then all her effort is wasted.

“Miss, can you hear me?” a voice sounded beside Kathy.

“Whoa,” Surprised, Kathy turned to look at where the sound was from, and saw a glowing globe, “What are you?”

“I am a guide to the Underground,” the globe floated up and down, “the place where all the dead are. Please follow me, lady.” The globe floated slowly towards a direction.

Won’t hurt if I check out, Kathy thought positively, and decided to follow the globe.

“Underground? This?” Kathy studied the “Your Fav Fish” sign on the building doubtfully.

“You will see,” The globe floated in a circle around her, and pushed her gently from the back.

Walking in, Kathy was surprised that the corridor of the building’s first floor was full of people, or, more exactly, ghosts. Most of them were sitting on a side bench along the corridor, some were arguing with a man at the back of the corridor, others were passing the man and entering the gates behind him. Behind the gates was total darkness, and the people that entered the gates seems to have vanished. “What should I do?” Kathy turned around to ask the globe, but found out that the globe was gone. “What the hell in the world?” Kathy murmured.

Kathy was not a person who like to think over and over again before acting, so she simply walk up to the man at the back of the corridor. “Hello? Do you know how to get to the undergrounds?” Kathy searched on the man’s suit and found his name tag: Charon.

“Pass through the gates, and you are there,” Charon pointed behind him, “But you’ll need to pay first.”

“Huh? You need to pay to be dead?” Kathy was confused.

“This is my job, miss, I deserve to be paid,” Charon rolled his eyes.

“How much?”

“10 dollars.”

“Oh, that’s cheap,” Kathy nodded, and checked her pockets.

“Here.”

“Off you go,” Charon took the money and gestured at the gates.

Here we go. Kathy marched through the gates.

At first, Kathy didn’t feel anything. The total darkness behind the gates engulfed her, covering her senses. And then, she smelled the freshness of water. Light entered her eyes, showing her a picture of an extremely wide river (She thought it was the sea at first), and beautiful buildings lining up the river banks. If it the “sky” here was actually some kind of wall, she would have assumed somehow, she was revived from ground.

Looking down, Kathy found out that she was standing on a wooden boat, on the boat, there is a globe, glowing gently. “It’s you!” Kathy bent over to look at the globe more closely, “What should I do now?” “Do I know you?” The globe flew upwards, “I will lead you after you reach the opposite bank.” “Okay, so you are not the one who brought me here,” Kathy tried to touch the globe, but it backed away. The globe remained silent for the rest of the journey. Although Kathy attempted to start a communication with it, it showed no interest in her at all. Finally, Kathy gave up talking to it and sat down at the other end of the boat. Across the river, Kathy could see a lot of other boats, all with a globe floating at the front. An old woman was sleeping in her boat, the boat moved slower than the others. A little boy was jumping up and down on his boat, causing the boat to move up and down, and is becoming very unsteady. Another man saw him and yelled at the boy, telling him off for causing this disturbance. Kathy searched the boats, she remembered she was not the only one who died recently. That man she killed... It was not long before she found him. The man stood at the front of the boat, somehow, the globe was floating around him, and they were talking with each other. “That filthy, disgusting...” Kathy cursed under her breath. That man deceived more than 10 girls, cheating their money and feelings, causing 3 girls to suicide because of knowing that the man had been having relationships with others, and taking the money he borrowed from them away. The incident was posted on to the web, people spread the news and hoped that justice could punish the man for his behaviors. Unfortunately, the court announced that the man could not be sent into jail because there is not enough evidence. Under her own investigation, Kathy discovered pictures and records of the man’s crime, but she could not prove to the police that these all belong to the man, despite that everyone knows the do belong to him. She chose another route to her justice, and paid her own price for it. And now the man is just standing here, unharmed? Kathy felt anger scorching her from the inside. This man does not deserve such an ending.

A little bump woke Kathy up from her thoughts. The boat has reached its destination.

“Follow me, “The globe moved on to the riverbank, waiting for Kathy to get up.

“Whoa,” Kathy was awed by the magnificent view of the underground city. There are a lot of buildings with different architecture styles, including Chinese, Gothic, Catholic, Indian, etc. A huge Chinese styled house stood at the front.

“This is Yamen,” The globe floated towards the house, “You will meet your judge here.”

“My judge?” Kathy followed the globe, “What does that mean?”

“What you have done in your living time will be judged, the result decides whether you are going to live like a normal person here or receive an eternal punishment.”

Kathy and the globe passed through the door.

A queue of people lined up in front of a person sitting at the center of the building. The man has a thick moustache, Asian face, and a crescent-shaped pattern on his forehead. As Kathy watched, the man spoke at a young man at the bottom of the staircase: “You sold drugs and betrayed your loyal friends, framing them for your own crimes. Even in your last days you did not regret your actions, the answer is clear, only the fields of punishment suit you.”

“Please! I believe there is some way to change this, right? Please!”

A person standing near the walls forced the young man away from where he was standing and left the house. Fair judgement, Kathy nodded, that man certainly need punishment to tell him what is right.

Kathy moved closer to the judge in the queue. She found out that all the people that are considered as non-virtue were sent to the fields of punishment, while heroes are sent to Elysium, a place where they could be happy forever. As for most people, they are sent to restart their lives in the living world. And the judge? He is the avatar of justice, Judge Pao from China. In his life, he has proved himself to always give the criminals what they deserved, after his death, he was invited by the ruler of the undergrounds to serve as the judge of the dead.

“Kathy White,” Judge Pao called Kathy forward. “Yes, judge,” Kathy answered, taking a step forward. An image formed in front of Kathy with a wave of hand by Judge Pao, showing all the things she had done in her life. “Born in a normal family, attended a primary school...helped a student who suffered from school bullying in high school,” Judge Pao nodded appreciatively. About there, Kathy thought as she saw the images of her life flash by. “...attained a job as a hunter, killed Nami Tirasse by 24?” Judge Pao looked at Kathy, “Even more, I see, gunshot Loen Smith, ended Julie William... And the nearest, sent James Karon to his death, then you committed suicide.”

“Yes,” Kathy stared into the eyes of Judge Pao.

“Do you regret on these crimes?”

“Never, they deserved it,” Kathy said firmly, the ones that she had killed were all guilty, either engaged in drug trading, raping, deceiving others, or killed others without a solid reason and get away from the trials. There were no exceptions.

“Hmmm,” Judge Pao took out a scroll, and started checking the contents.

“Julie William, sent to fields of punishment,” Judge Pao read the words on the scroll, “Leon Smith, sent to fields of punishment...James Karon, no records yet.”

Judge Pao showed another image of James Karon’s life images. Kathy turned to examine the images also, and showed absolute loathing when she saw the man deceiving the girls, asking them to lend him money, having relations with them, then ran away with all the money. Even Judge Pao frowned at the images.

“Your actions are understandable,” Judge Pao opened his mouth after moments of silence, “Your movements are from the justice in your heart, instead of personal revenge, which is appreciative.”

“Thank you,” Kathy smiled, she knew Judge Pao would understand her, they both seek absolute justice.

She saw that the modern laws cannot bring justice to everyone, she took the responsibility to make them regret what they have done. Here’s a better way though, Kathy thought about the fields of punishment.

“Quite complicated,” Judge Pao stroke his beard, “Your actions are violent and brutal, but your motivation is absolutely upright, the results of these bloody actions actually have a positive impact to the society.”

“I have seen a lot of cases, some of them use laws to frame others, a person who sliced a man’s ox’s tongue, then accused him of killing the ox, because in my times, killing ox that is used for ploughing is illegal.”

“Some of people tried to seek my support when I was a government official, others threatened me not to do so. I never let my senses clouded by the political opinions, I never stand on one side, I have my own judgements.”

Judge Pao looked down at Kathy: “For your case, your methods of carrying out justice is less than agreeable, I must confide, but at the same time, you are also one of the purest people I have ever encountered, even the most famous heroes rarely act with absolute rationality.”

“The ones that prefer your way would throw a party for your every kill; the ones that feel threatened would want you dead as soon as possible.”

“That means they are guilty, for their wrong doing,” Kathy said calmly, “If they did everything rightfully, why would they be afraid? They would never be a target of mine.”

“True, but most of the people do wrong things, do all of them deserve death?”

“I didn’t kill all of them, only the extreme ones are on my list.”

“That’s why I say you are purely rational, but you are a human, if you are not here now, you may make mistakes,” Judge Pao closed his eyes, “This judgement will be hard to make.”

I might make a mistake. Kathy thought about that. It is true. She realized. Even if she researches about the perpetrator thoroughly, there still could be missing information, leading her to a wrong judgement.

Actually, there is a close call. For her first kill, she had prepared to kill another woman instead of Nami, but only on the day for the kill she found out the actual person behind the drug market is Nami. She could still recall the cold sweat when her partner told her she nearly got the wrong person. Killing a person who is innocent? That is definitely against Kathy's belief in justice.

"The decision is made."

Kathy looked up at Judge Pao.

"I trust in your judgement."

Following one of the guards in Yamen, Kathy left the house.

'Kathy the serial killer found dead! The angel of justice sacrificed herself to destroy the fiends in our society.' 'Kathy White finally dead! After murdering more than 30 people, the monster eventually pays her price.' The death of Kathy is all over the news. A group of people organized funeral for Kathy, in the name of mourning the envoy of justice, while others were relieved that a lunatic killer is gone. "Actually, if she uses a more agreeable way of handling the fugitives, I would say she is just like that Judge Pao I have read about before," A boy joked with his friends. "She's way to violent," his friend made a gesture of fear.

"That's true."

## As Cold as Iron

*Pui Kiu College, Ngai, Ngo Nam – 16*

Thud, thud. Thud, thud. “Get out of the way!”, a distant voice behind me yelled. I didn’t have the time nor the courage to look back. “Stop the thief!”, another voice howled. I tighten the grip of the loaf of bread I held in front of my stomach as I skillfully maneuvered through the crowded streets. “She’s getting away!”, I weaved between the familiar conjunctions of back alleys frantically in a daring attempt to shake off my pursuers. As the voices of the pursuing city guards drowned in the sea of voices of the bustling streets, I slowed down my pace to catch a breath and climbed up to the rooftops of nearby residential housings to stay out of sight. As I glanced down to the main streets of Kaifeng, I noticed several city guards who continued to persistently search for me. I have not completely steered clear of trouble yet. I must stay vigilant and stay on the rooftops for a while longer. I let out a long sigh and sat down on the stone-cold encaustic tiles of the housing roof. Holding the huge loaf of bread in my hand, I thought to myself: This should be enough for the next few nights.

My father used to be a supply transporter for the palace here in Kaifeng. After my mother passed, he simply couldn’t earn enough to raise me and my four younger siblings. He started to take a loaf of bread or two every time he transported those supplies carts to keep his children well-fed. Eventually his crimes were exposed, and he was sent to be trailed, and how lucky that it so happened the judge was Judge Pao. Other judges may have let him go scot-free because his cause was just, and there’s more than enough bread in the palace anyways. But not judge Pao, the brute had no empathy, and sent him straight to prison. I was there during the trial, those menacing and cold gazes from Pao was engraved into my memory since then. “Yutong, take care of your family!”, that was my father’s last words to me. I never saw my father again after that. As the eldest of the family, I followed my father’s footsteps and committed thievery to feed my younger brothers and sisters. That’s the only way I could keep them alive.

“So, what’s this job about?” I kept my distances from the stranger. He turned to me, under the shadows, I could only see a deep scar below his left eyes. “The client wants the wine glass from the palace.” “What?” I promptly exclaimed, “That’s too risky.” “I’ve heard about your agile movements. I believe you’ll do just fine. Did I mention the client is willing to exchange it for a fortune. More than enough to feed your family for the coming winter.” I thought about it for a while and reluctantly agreed. “Very well, it should be stored in the emperor’s sleeping quarters. I expect good news from you.”

The deal was way too good to be refused, and I decided to head to the palace later that night. Slipping into the palace was surprising easy, there were not many guards stationed around the palace, almost like it’s welcoming me into its gates. I sneaked into the palace through the back window, avoiding the throne room where the currently emperor Renzong was at. Eventually I reached the sleeping quarters undetected, upon entering, I instantly found the elegantly crafted wine glass on the bedside. As I acquired the glass and was about to leave the sleeping quarters, I heard footsteps approaching the door. I panicked but was able to react fast enough to hide behind the veils of the emperor’s bed, hidden from the sudden intruder.

The person who walked in was no other than Taizong, the heir to the throne, the eldest son of Renzong. He stood still, as if he was waiting for someone to show up. Eventually, the emperor Renzong and a familiar figure, Judge Pao, walked into the room. I was shaking in sheer terror of the thought of being caught red-handed in such a situation, yet I contained myself and not a single noise escaped from my lips. “Thank you for accompanying me for tonight, your report results were fantastic, as expected of the legend himself.” Renzong’s deep and booming voice instructed Pao to leave. “Shall I ensure the safety of this very room, your majesty?” Pao expressed his concerns. “No,” Renzong hastily responded, as if offended, “this is my son.” “Understood, my apologies.” Pao responded, then left the room, leaving the father and son in the room. “Father, when can I become emperor?”, Taizong impatiently asked. “You deem yourself ready?” Renzong calmly responded. “Yes, you are old father, I can take over.” “You felt yourself sufficient, my son. It is proof that you are not.” Taizong lashed out in a fit of rage, “What? I have been waiting for my whole life, why do you take away all my chances?” Renzong did not back down, “You are arrogant, full of yourself. This dynasty will be led astray under your command.” Upon hearing that line, Taizong was

consumed by his fury and lunged at his father, tightly grasping his throat. Taizong continued choking Renzong, as his old and fragile body has no way of resisting. "I... have failed you, my son." Renzong's final words escaped his mouth before he ceased movements. I was shaken beyond belief as the assassination of the emperor by his very son unfolded right in front of my eyes. Taizong's eyes were empty, disgusted by what he had just done, but he soon regained consciousness. "Guards!" he yelled, "My father... The emperor has been poisoned!" At that instant, wind from the window gently blew on the veils, creating just enough of an opening for Taizong and my glances to meet. "The assassin! The assassin is here!" Out of reflex, I dashed out the room and attempted to escape, navigating the foreign hallways of the palace in a desperate attempt to find an escape route. Despite my quick manoeuvres, I soon found myself surrounded by the overwhelming force of palace guards. "Caught her!" "Take her to the trial grounds." "The killer of the wise emperor huh? You'll get what you deserve!"

"Execute her! Execute her!" The crowd voiced out their outrage, yet my ears filtered all the noise out and my mind was shrouded in a thick layer of despair. "I will have order!" Judge Pao exclaimed in an attempt to control the crowd, yet the crowd continued chanting their demands. Looks of uncertainty filled Pao's eyes. "This is the assassin who poisoned the emperor, my own father!" Taizong spoke up from next to Pao, his words riling up the audience even more. I remained silent as I stared emptily at the true culprit. How did this end up like this? I gently close my eyes in a desperate attempt to escape from this horrifying nightmare. "Very well, she will be executed at the dawn of tomorrow." Taizong declared, completely ignoring Pao's disagreements. Town guards then proceeded to drag me away from the trial grounds, to the nearest captive cell.

Clank, clank. I kept my eyes shut despite hearing the mysterious noises. The straw bed was uncomfortable to sleep on, but it'll be the final time I get to sleep. I have basically accepted my fate, and I just wanted to enjoy the very last time of resting. "That one." A deep and broody voice spoke out. "I'll trust your judgement sir. I won't tell a soul." A softer voice replied. "Wake up, prisoner." The booming voice called out to me, expecting a reply. I opened my eyes, the blinding light from a burning torch outside the cell made my pupils shrink. As my eyes got used to the brightness, I recognised the figure standing outside the cell was Judge Pao. "Is it time for the execution already?" My dry throat squeezed out a weak, shaken voice. "No." He speaks back with a deep, guttural voice, "The trial was not over, Taizong suspiciously interrupted it. There was no sign that Renzong was poisoned, nor was there any evidence that you were the culprit." I let out a deep exhale, then shook my head. "Then what do you want from me?" "I want to get you out of here." "What?" I let out a sharp shriek. "This way we have more time to uncover the truth. I can take you as my assistant to keep you under my watch." I hesitated, unable to comprehend the turn of events delivered to me. "Or would you like to rot in there? Get out of there." Pao said as he unlocked the cell door. I did the only option given to me at that moment and followed Judge Pao.

Pao lent me a hood to conceal my identity as we stepped out to the vacant streets. The dim moonlight illuminated the path as Pao led me to the residential districts. "You will take shelter here." Judge Pao spoke out while approaching a worn-out shack lurking at the dark corner of the streets. The run-down residence of his was at juxtaposition with the royal status of his position as the most famous judge across the vast lands. Inside the cabin, a frail old man was cleaning teacups with a worn-out fabric. As soon as he noticed our appearances, he put up a genuine smile on his face and greeted us warmly, "Welcome home Pao, is she a friend of yours?" Pao took of his tunics as he responded, "She's my assistant, she will be staying here for a while if you don't mind." "Is that so? I am Lingyi, Pao's uncle and a proud official working for the royal palace. Please take a seat and have some tea." Lingyi spoke with a gentle tone as he took out a bag of tea leaves. Looks like I will be staying here for a while, fortunately, Lingyi seemed very friendly.

"Wait! Wait! Please! You're mistaken!" The slim figure continued dashing away from us as he pleaded for forgiveness. "Yutong, can you continue chasing him? I will block his route the other way." I nodded my head as I elevated my speed to catch up to the man. The man made a quick turn into the narrow and crooked alleyways, I stayed onto his trail tightly. As he continued making his escape, he frantically flung his arm into neighbouring objects, knocking them down in an attempt to slow down my pursuit. I dextrously avoided the obstacles and closed in on him at every chance I had. "I was forced to do this!" The man

continued to plea as he made a run for the lights shining in the exit of the alleyway. At that moment, the lights at the end of the alleyway was blocked by a masculine shadow of Judge Pao. The man shrieked in terror as he slowed down his pace, giving me an opportunity to pounce onto him, constraining his movements. Judge Pao draw closer as I ceased his movements, "You are convicted with the severe crime of arson. What are your reasonings for committing such a terrible crime?" "I was forced to do it! I'm telling you the truth, he threatened to harm my wife and children!" I showed a glimpse of sympathy as he desperately tried to explain. Pao noticed my slight change in expression and continued questioning him, "Tell me the person who forced you to do this." "I... I don't know his name, but there's a deep scar on his face. He forced me to do it!" The man muttered all the details cooperatively, giving us a hint of the mastermind behind the elaborate crime. "Please mister, have some mercy. I want to go back to my family!" The man continued to beg for forgiveness, yet Pao's stone-cold expression remained unmoved, "Forced or not, you committed that crime yourself. You will be punished accordingly." Pao's words were austere and cold. I looked away from the man, not wanting to his face as he fell into utter despair. Pao put a hand on my shoulder, indicating that it's time to leave. "Come, the guards are here, they will deal with him." I said to me as we walked away from the man. "What did I do to deserve this? You don't have the heart of a man! You are a monster!" The man broke down and wept while repeatedly mumbling. His words echoed through the alleyway. "Pao, do you not feel sympathy?" I discontentedly asked the heartless person walking next to me. "To uphold honesty and uprightnes, sometimes you have to abandon the fragile and easily-deceived heart of humans." Pao replied without looking at me, perhaps to conceal the remorse in his eyes while saying that. "Enough of that, we need to find the puppeteer responsible for this." I silently nodded my head.

"This is the place the man mentioned about." Pao claimed as he swung open the door to a run-down shack in the outskirts of the city. In the room, stands a tall man facing away from us. In surprise, the man tilted his head to look at us, showing a scar on the left side of his face. This is the suspect, no doubt. However, there's something about him that bothered me. He seemed familiar. "You are suspected to have forced a man to commit arson," Pao said as he walked closer to the man, "Cooperate with us, you will be trialled soon." The stranger had no choice but to cooperate, "Busted, huh? Well it was only a matter of time..." "Ah!" I exclaimed as I closely inspect his appearance, it really was him. The same person who hired me to steal the wine glass from the palace, the one who got me into all these troubles. I explained my findings to Pao, who turned to the stranger and questioned him. "Why did you send her? Who commanded you to do that? Answer honestly." The stranger thought for a while, perhaps considering the consequences of telling the truth. He then proceeded to sigh and answered, "It was an official working in the palace. I'm just the middleman. His name was Lingyi. I never liked him anyways, that corrupt and sadistic official." "What? Lingyi?" I exclaimed in shock. Judge Pao's uncle? How could that be true? He was so sweet and nice to us in the past, is it all just a façade? Pao somehow retained his stone-face as he remained silent. "That can't be right! That must be a lie!" I shouted at the stranger. "I'm being serious, he forces me to fulfil quotas of tasking others to complete certain jobs. I'm already busted, why would I lie if it won't benefit myself anyways." The stranger responded. "No that can't be—" Pao interrupted me, "He's telling the truth." "But that's your uncle!" "He is also a criminal. A criminal deserves to be trialled and sentenced. Moreover, I think I might have just solved the murder of Renzong." He said coldly, "Come to the trial grounds with me tomorrow, I'll bring Taizong and Lingyi as well." "Wait, they'll execute me as soon as they see me!" Pao assured me, "In face of justice, you have nothing to be afraid of, you are not a murderer after all. Trust me, I will reveal the truth."

That night, I couldn't sleep well. My whole body was covered in cold sweat as the anticipation of tomorrow filled my mind.

"Silence!" Pao yelled loudly. "Lingyi, you are accused of corruption. There are various alibis for your despicable crime. What is your defence?" Lingyi didn't dared to look at Pao directly, his vision pointed towards the floor, his face flushed with sorrow and regret. I was on the side-lines observing the trial, from the past month of working with Pao, I knew he was always cold and valued justice and equality more than anything, but seeing him treating his own uncle the same way as a total stranger in a trial still surprised me. "Then it is settled, you are sentenced to imprisonment for corruption. However the trial is not over." The audience and Taizong looked confused. "Taizong, you are accused of murdering Emperor Renzong!" The



audience all gasped in shock, “Lingyi received your order to set up the Palace heist, didn’t he? Taizong, you always wanted to take the throne from your father, yet he never gave you the throne, so you tried to stage your father’s death so that you can be the emperor! So, you came up with an elaborate plan to murder your father without suspicion casted on you. On the day of the murder, you tasked Lingyi to scout out a thief to steal a wineglass from the palace bedroom. Once the thief is in place, you blocked her means to escape and committed the murder, blaming your crimes on the poor thief. You thought you could get away scot-free, but justice will always prevail!” The trial grounds was in total chaos as Taizong was proved guilty of murdering the emperor and taken to be executed. Pao has once again exceeded my expectations, treating the emperor the same way as a commoner in face of the law.

“You are now a free man, your time assisting me was equivalent as a civil service to repay your crimes as a thief.” Pao came to me after the trial. In utter awe, I asked “That justice and unrighteousness of yours, do you really apply that to everyone, even your kins?” Pao’s face remained unfazed, he responded with a tone as cold as iron, “Among my children who serve in government, if any breaks the law or becomes corrupt, he shall not return to our hometown, nor shall he be buried in the family cemetery. I will disown those who do not heed these words.”

# The Stolen Jewelry

*Pui Kiu College, Wong, Sze Lam – 16*

In ancient China song dynasty, the age where monarch prevails, power is all concentrated on only on a few nobles, so are jewelries. Countries battled each other not only to get resources to improve their society, but also get jewelries to fulfil their desires. There was one time the King got a big sparkling diamond ring and he loved it so much that he brought it everywhere with him. He felt that the ring gave him good luck. Indeed, after he got the ring, everything went unexpectedly well compared to that in the past. But the more he loved it, the more he would afraid of losing it.

One night, the ring was locked in the treasure room as usual, with guards protecting it all night. After the King's good night dream, he checked his treasure room the day after, and was shocked that the ring was gone missing. He yelled and sobbed that all royal guards rushed to him without any hesitation. The King was so furious that he ordered to execute the two night guards. The remaining were so afraid that they suggested to find Judge Pao. "Well blaming at this stage not only does no help on finding your precious ring, but it also gives more opportunities for the theft to hide. Have you thought of Judge Pao? He solved tons of cases successfully and I'm sure he could unveil the truth." The King finally accepted the idea, leaving Judge Pao to resolve the mystery.

When Judge Pao arrived, he first investigated the treasure room, to see if there were any hints to the mystery. Unluckily, he could hardly find any evidence. He went on interrogating all the guards, and he found out that there were two guards who entered and left the castle in a very short time interval at midnight. However, not any of the guards noticed anything suspicious. Only Judge Pao knew something was going wrong. "Why would the guards enter and leave the castle so fast? And, at midnight?" Judge Pao said in a confident tone. The guards still had no clue on what's going on. "The only reason is that the thief is undercover as a guard!" Judge continued. Everyone was shocked and finally conscious of what's going on. Judge Pao later suggested investigating the village, maybe the villagers know where the theft went, or maybe the thief is hiding in there. The King then ordered all guards to search the villages thoroughly, from day to night, from night to day. The guards are tired, the villagers are annoyed, but the King didn't stop. The guards keep breaking into the houses without the villagers' consent. The villagers are so afraid that they either hide in their closets, or even leave their houses. Some guards just pull people they think were suspicious out of their homes and put handcuffs on them. Their properties were gone, homes were destroyed, families were broken, all were victims of the diamond ring. Judge Pao did urge to stop, but no one listened. He instead chose an approach completely opposite to what the guards have done. Rather than breaking in the villagers' home, he knocked the door. Rather than pulling people out, he asked the villagers nicely with gratitude. Finally, he was told that the two suspicious guards left the village and headed towards the mountain.

Judge Pao was not satisfied with the King's orders, he thought that he was a tyrant and decided not to follow his orders anymore. He secretly headed to the mountain by its own and follow the footprints the two guards left. Once he arrived a small forest, he found that there were two footprints leading two different paths, both which head towards different mountains. Both footprints disappear both in the middle of the roads. Judge Pao stopped and pondered, he looked carefully and he soon found out something unusual. One road after the footprint was so clean that it looked like no one touched it before, whereas for the other road, it was covered with dust that looked unnatural. He went on to clean the dust up and he discovered the hidden footprints. He then continued along the path to search for the stolen diamond ring.

Soon he arrived the mountain, into the cave. Inside the cave was so dark that he could barely see anything. "It is hard to obtain any fire to produce light, how did the thieves overcome the darkness?" He thought. After a while, he postulated that they didn't go inside the cave, instead, there may be some hidden mechanism at the entrance of the cave. He walked around keep looking and looking and he found an

unusual big rock. “Why is there suddenly a big rock lying at the entrance? When other places were just so clear?” He thought. Afterwards, he tried to push the rock with all his power. The rock then started to move and there was a hole with a ladder beneath it.

He then climbed downwards. He soon felt that the air was shaking and something weird was happening. He even heard loud collision noises at regular time intervals. There was light downstairs and he could clearly see two armors were lying on the ground. In front, the two thieves were each holding a big hammer keep hammering the diamond ring, but the ring could hardly break. Unluckily, the two thieves found Judge Pao and they planned to kill him. “The King’s army was situated at the entrance of the cave, if you killed me, they’ll rushed in and you two and your plans will be destroyed!” Judge Pao screamed. The two thieves stopped and were so frightened that they fell their hammers on the floor and began to cry. “You all inhumane species, kill villagers as you want, destroy our homelands, just to get jewelries? Why? Is human life inferior than a diamond ring? Just because of a small piece of diamond without any inherent value, you start wars? When everyone is dying, you are enjoying your luxurious life with those jewelries? The diamond ring is a curse, when people get luxuries, they lost their human heart, therefore it must be destroyed! So, everyone can live equally with respect and dignity!” They grabbed their hammers again and continued hammering the diamond ring. Judge Pao was guilty and felt warm in his heart. “Why should I help that tyrant at first? Get the diamond ring back to him and indulge him to continue his tyrant acts? Kill more people? Destroy more homelands? I was so wrong!” He thought. He then grabbed another hammer and helped them to destroy the diamond ring. Judge Pao taught them at which angle the hammer would do the greatest damage to the diamond ring. Soon, the diamond ring was successfully destroyed.

Judge Pao then led them to a safe place and he went back to the castle alone. The King saw him and asked if he got any clues. “My lord, if you could bring as much wood and put it inside the treasure room and lock yourself inside for an hour, you’ll find your diamond ring.” The King first wondered and he finally followed what Judge Pao said. Soon Judge Pao and the King was inside the treasure room with piles of wood, and they locked themselves up. “How many homelands did you destroy? How many people did you kill? Are you even conscious of that? Or people are just worth nothing to you?” The King was furious but had no idea what he was talking about. Judge Pao then lit up the wood and the treasure room started to burn. The King wanted to escape but Judge Pao knocked him down. “I could not let you do any more harm to our lovely humans, you will die here with you treasures!” Judge Pao screamed.

Soon after a while, the guards knew something gone wrong inside and they broke in. But it was too late, Judge Pao and the King were both burned to death, coupled with the treasures.

# God has Entered into My Body, as a Body, the Same Size

*Pui Kiu College, Woo, Sing Sang Sean – 16*

This is a story about the destiny between an ancient Chinese judge and a dangerous anomaly that has been haunting humanity.

It was during the late Song period, Judge Pao was enjoying his extravagant banquet with exotic and lavish dishes granted by the emperor Renzong, which included the privates of a giraffe freshly brought from Tanzania. Upon eating the sweet and sour giraffe genitals, Judge Pao immediately started hallucinating, experiencing effects comparable to those brought by ingesting Datura seeds. Suddenly, images of his life flashed before his eyes like a tape recorder, then he fell unconscious—he died. End of the story.

Written by Quandilliam Bartholemew Dinglenuts

“Hold up, how is this related to destiny and a dangerous anomaly ?” you may ask. Well, this is where the TRUE story begins.

The year is 2022, in the state of Ohio of the United States, a man named Harry woke up from his weird and trippy dream where he saw outlandish geometric shapes and enigmatic entities, then he realized he has the knowledge of an old wise man, and he understood Chinese which is a language alien to him. He suddenly recalled the events he experienced in his past life as Judge Pao—Judge Pao reincarnated as Harry. Harry soon identifies himself as judge Pao, and everyone around him, his family, friends, co-workers thought he had gone insane, and started to avoid conversation with him, but the literal legacy of Judge Pao doesn't end here. Harry with his alter ego embarked on a journey of solving puzzling cases and seeking justice.

All of a sudden, when Harry was minding his own business, running some errands in town, a man with a bowl-cut suddenly approaches Harry and starts inciting the phrase “God has entered into my body, as a body, the same size”. Then, he expresses how “god” is torturing him by entering his body, specifically by hitting his head with a rhinoceros horn and electrocuting him everyday. Harry first think he was some mentally ill person or a meth addict, but soon after, a crowd began inciting “God has entered into my body, as a body, the same size” simultaneously, Harry began to freak out but the Judge Pao part of him told him to be rational and pragmatic, “this must be a stand atta – I mean an anomalous phenomenon caused by some form of brainwashing.” Harry starts to investigate thoroughly while fleeing the crowd. He searched for clues all around the town, frantically trying to find an answer.

This is when he noticed numerous and recurring giraffe graffiti in every walls of the town. He then figured out the phenomenon is somehow related to subliminal messages, which are images that engrave in people's mind through various media or meme, and awaken instincts inside humans which make them think in a certain way or believe in certain thing accompanied by a long-lasting memetic effect. Meanwhile, various international news headlines about people saying or writing “God has entered into my body, as a body, the same size” popped up everywhere. This is the moment he realised the anomaly is not confined to the town, but was affecting the entire world.

He starts to suspect that the anomaly is just a global trend or a massive joke or hoax, but things got grim soon after. Harry saw people mutilating themselves and writing “God has entered into my body, as a body, the same size” with their blood on walls and cars, this then escalated into cannibalism, causing massive casualties. Harry was genuinely scared this time and ran for his life, but realises hat no one is after him, let a lone seeming to be able to see him, they are all just destroying each other in blind rage. “ What in the world is this GG Allin craze !?” Harry gasped, still hyperventilating in confusion and fear, but the voice in his head, the voice of Judge Pao told him to calm down and think about himself, so he did. Harry perceived the fact that he was not affected by the anomaly, but everyone else was. But Harry also pondered about the meaning of the phrase, “Who is god, why has he entered a body, the same size ? “. This is when Harry remembered an article he read online, which stated that Judge Pao had been depicted as the god of law and justice of the underworld, the Yama and judge of hell. “God has really entered my body” Harry mumbles to himself, “But why isn't “god” tormenting me like everyone else ? “ he thinks. Judge Pao was also confused, and wanted to solve the mystery. Harry and judge Pao in his mind started connecting dots,

and finally came to the conclusion that Judge pao's reincarnation caused this anomaly as Judge Pao is "god", and he has surely and theoretically entered a body, which is maybe a symbolism that Judge Pao's reincarnation is bending the fabric of reality, causing anomalies such as this.

The only solution was for Harry to die, therefore Harry decided to produce a large amount of chlorine gas and inhale the gas in one go, which they surmised is the most painless way of suicide. Judge Pao also agreed to his idea as he wanted to find peace in the afterlife after all of the justice he had done in his past life. Harry used gallons on bleaches and drain clear from the entire inventory of a drug store, mixed them, and then took a deep breath. Then all went black. (DO NOT TRY THIS EVER, LIFE IS VALUABLE AND BEAUTIFUL, YOU SHOULD CHERISH IT.)

The anomaly stopped.

This is the end of the story, no I'm not joking.

To all the readers, this is pure fiction, and respect all religions, I love god. This story is not meant to mock any religion or the almighty god, nor its is for causing mass hysteria.

# Never ever disappoints

*Pui Kiu College, Yip, Yu Yee – 16*

Judge Pao's face was always believed to be black, whether it was in magazines or the comics, it was always pitch black. With the stunning golden dragon embroidery on Judge Pao's black Qipao and his long, lustrous, black hair, he looked just like a perfectly burnt marshmallow that was toasty and black, ready to be put in a s'more, not to mention his round, chubby body. But why would Judge Pao's face be pitch black?

I am Pao's daughter, Pao was truly a hero, at least he was in my opinion. He did an excellent job taking care of me and Austin while busy doing his work. I am now 40 years old and I am a member of dad's workforce, we have been solving problems and working relentlessly to service the folks for over 20 years, going through hardships together with all the people. We never share what we did with others, we were just a little team with the wildest dream of helping others when they were in need. Our team, with a total of 5 members, has tackled countless mysteries and problems. We have Krewshado, who runs at the speed of light, Tardoget, who shoots arrows with incredibly high accuracy, Avocady, who knows all the Science, Shusaldo, a friendly, gorgeous girl who makes friends everywhere she goes and of course me, Ashley. I don't think I am professional at anything nor do I have any superpowers. However, I do think I am pretty good at reading Dad's mind. Together as a team, I believed that we were as strong as Sun Wukong's team.

One day, a laughingthrush flew across our cottage and dropped a letter, to everyone's surprise, it was actually from Emperor Zheng. We opened the letter immediately and read the message from him,

“ Dear Pao,

I am deeply grateful for what you have done for our community, I would like to appoint you as the next prime minister, planning to have you take up the office before the Chinese New Year, please consider my offer and hope to receive your reply soon.

Sincerely,  
Emperor Zheng”

We were all in disbelief, absolutely speechless to have received this letter, never have we ever ever thought that we could go this far with what we have done. All of us hugged each other and celebrated this news. Pao exclaimed, “ Team, seems like there's a lot of work ahead of us, excellent job guys, couldn't have done this without you all! Now, with all the support given to us, we could take our plan to help those in need to the next level.” With Chinese New Year approaching, tons were visiting the temples, in a bid to get rid of their bad luck. I guess the Chinese were just superstitious, believing in all those myths and fairy tales.

There were many temples in China during the Song dynasty, it was no exaggeration to say that there were temples everywhere in China. The number of temples was comparable to the number of children in the country. Personally, those temples all looked spooky and scary, they were surrounded by humongous tall trees which had long aerial roots hanging down them. Besides, around these temples, there was always dreamy white fog so you could never really see the temples unless you walked into the fog. I expected there would be a pungent smell from the burning incense. However, opposite to what I have anticipated, the smell around these temples was peculiarly delicious.

Pao ordered the team to spread rumours that the new prime minister's face was black. We all were puzzled by his order. Not knowing the purpose of this, we just followed what he insisted dutifully. Later, Pao told us that two things baffled him, first of all, every time a new minister took on the position, a lot of rumours, which were about something ridiculous about the new minister, emerge. Also, a lot of children would get lost every time a new minister took over the position. Pao said hesitantly, “ Maybe these two phenomena are somewhat related.....”

Right before Chinese New Year, everyone knew that a new prime minister, a man with a black face, was about to take over the position. But not only that, the rumour that the new prime minister's face was black has become 'the black prime minister will bring bad luck to the community once the position is taken over by him'. And just as expected, a lot of children were found to be lost. Pao planned to get a deeper understanding of the underlying problems and the emergent situation of the community, so he disguised himself and went on a trip to walk around valleys and neighbourhoods with us every single day. In every village we passed through, we found people, especially elderly women, gossiping about the new prime minister who would bring them bad luck because of his skin colour. There were also mothers panicking about their lost children, running in every direction to find their beloved ones. Temples, on the other hand, were packed with people every single day, people were either praying for their lost children or praying for bad luck which would be brought by the new prime minister to go away.

Through the Chinese New Year holiday, Pao started his mission to save all those children and bring peace back into the community. He filled Emperor Zheng in on the chaos and Emperor Zheng absolutely supported Pao's mission. Being fully immersed in dealing with all these problems, Pao did not take over the prime minister position until after the Chinese New Year Holiday. When Pao finally took over, he was not bothered to handle any other problems besides all the missing children. As days went past, other officials were extremely frustrated and thought Pao was so lazy. General case files took like forever to get taken care of. Plus, they deeply believed in the rumour that Pao was the one who will bring bad luck to the community, so they were thinking about all possible ways to turf Pao out. Little do they know, Pao was dealing with something much more serious. Pao intended to carry out this mission clandestinely, just to minimize the amount of trouble and panic that would have been caused otherwise. However, day by day, an increasing number of children were reported lost. This staggering number of lost children alarmed Emperor Zheng, he knew that he could no longer look on from the sidelines, so he arranged 20 officials who he believed could help out Pao to join his mission. Pao was not very pleased at first, but not until when he finally met the officials in person.....

When the officials first met Pao, they could not hide their amazement. His face was indeed pitch black, as dark as burnt charcoal. They were suspicious of him, talking to Pao with a trembling voice, wondering if he was the man that all the rumours were talking about. Krewshado, Tardoget, Avocady, Shusaldo and I were all standing beside Pao, as ordered by my dad Pao. Suddenly, we noticed a couple of familiar faces among the officials, they were people Pao has helped a couple of years ago. They were scrutinizing my face closely as if they recognized me too. I couldn't help but asked them to introduce themselves to us, just to confirm they were who we were thinking of. And indeed they were! I could see in their eyes how confused they were, asking me where Pao, my father, was in their littlest voice. They said that they really wanted to thank Pao for helping them to get through the most difficult times of their lives. I pointed to 'the man with the suspicious black face', telling them that he was Pao. They all were dumbfounded, shaking their heads and rubbing their eyes to take a closer look at the new prime minister. They all exclaimed, " Why did Pao's face turn black? He did not look like that before, what happened to him? Did he get into a fire? Is he okay? Why didn't you tell me this? We would have been so willing to offer you guys help!"

Pao waved his hands at me, asking me to fetch him some vegetable oil and a towel. When I came back, he soaked the towel in vegetable oil and wiped his face off. The black ink was clearly coming off his face, the officials now looked even more confused with all the things they were witnessing. Pao finally said, " I painted my face black because I wanted to get the rumour out that my face is black and see if there will be other rumours of something bad about me emerging and if there will be some children getting lost. I noticed this is something which always happens when a new prime minister takes over the position. I really wanted to solve this mystery and save the children." Then the officials called out, " Well then, if Pao is the new prime minister and with all the good deeds he has done, then clearly he won't bring us any bad luck, right? " Pao then said, " Thank you for trusting me, I sincerely need some help, hope that you guys could maybe help me out."

Pao sat down in his prestigious golden chair, and started his storytelling session to share all the details of the current situation with the officials. The officials were all patiently listening to Pao, they were pumped to be able to help Pao and were determined to save all the victims. Things were starting to look great and we all had a plan in mind.

Pao gave everyone a role and they immediately went to work. They went separate ways in an attempt to find any testimonies that were left behind by the lost children. One day, a couple of officials came back with some news. They reported to Pao that there was a new message spreading across the whole country, "Catch as many kids as possible to worship the Gods, we can definitely get rid of all the bad luck and possibly turf the black prime minister out." Everything just clicked in Pao's brain, he realised and understood the whole situation.

It was not long before Avocady also came back with new discoveries. He twisted a bottle open and released a slight smell of burnt Angel's Trumpet from the bottle which he collected at a nearby temple. Avocady then began to explain, " This is the reason why there is always fog around temples and the presence of the peculiarly scrumptious smell. The fog is resulted from burning a flower named Angel's trumpet, which the smoke created has an addictive smell. However, it's toxic and I believe the smell has the same effect as drugs, possibly hypnotized a ton of people." With this piece of information, it was quite evident to Pao that the crime scene must be somewhere near the temple. It was not difficult to conjure up a picture of what has been actually happening in the community.

Pao with his incredible workforce came up with a complete plan on how to catch the mastermind. Avocady created a spray to neutralize the addictive smell of the burning Angel's trumpet and also created a jelly to attach to the end of Tardoget's newly designed arrow, which was made up of a chemical that could temporarily paralyze people. Thanks to Shusaldo's friends, we were able to locate where all the temples were. Pao and the officials went on a night trip around all the temples and decided on which temple to take action on first. Pao said, "Since the rumours are all against me, I think that the mastermind is not far away from us, so I think they are doing their work at a temple near us."

It was the next morning, the whole team was ready to take action. After giving the final instruction to each and every one of us, Pao, with his unpainted face, led the whole team secretly into the temple. They wore masks soaked in the spray created by Avocady so they were not feeling dizzy. Walking into the dreamy fog, it made people feel like they were in their dreams, the mastermind must have been using this as a tool to help indoctrinate the message of "the new prime minister will bring us bad luck" to the innocent folks and making the folks follow whatever they said and catch children.

As the temple began to get packed with people, Pao whistled to tell everyone to start their actions. No one really noticed them with the crowd around. Officials swang into action, in order to obtain a clearer vision, they collected buckets of water and put out the burning flowers. The fog was starting to clear up. All of a sudden, cages which were stacked as tall as a tower right behind the temple caught Pao's attention. This was when he realised that they have come to the right place. Suddenly, a team of ninjas came running towards the officials, Pao immediately ordered Krewshado and Tardoget to go hold them down. Tardoget pulled out his bow from his back and began shooting arrows with the special gel to them. With his insane shooting skills and shooting speed, it took not even half a minute to take them down. Krewshado rushed and uncovered the ninjas' faces, he realised the one who was leading the team was the one selling children to some Eastern countries. Not being able to hold it any longer, Krewshado ran to Pao and told him this exciting news. Pao replied, "Great! Seems like we have got the mastermind down!" Shusaldo, Avocady and I began spraying the neutralizing spray all over the temple to stop the toxic smell from spreading and hypnotizing people. Pao ran and freed the children from the cages as the situation started to get under control.



Suddenly, Emperor Zheng showed up at the temple with all the officials and the children's mother. They all clapped in complete disbelief. With everything they have just witnessed, Emperor Zheng was very proud to say it out loud, "Round of applause to the best prime minister, Pao, it's safe to say that he will be bringing lots of luck, peace and happiness to our community." As Pao's daughter, I am very proud to have him as my father, really astonished to witness what my dad has done and contributed to the community. Seeing kids reunite with their parents, my heart feels full. I guess we can always count on Pao to bring back justice, am I right?

## 3000 Years Ago...

*Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Lim, Lucas – 13*

“Judge Pao, what is your take on this matter?” Pao glanced at one of the four cardinal justices of the underworld. Contrary to popular belief, the underworld was not an evil place, but merely a prison to hold the world's sins, corruption and menace. Like all prisons, there were frequent escapes, and the underworld police force was therefore employed to catch them. Judge Pao was one of them. Renowned and revered in the heavenly realm, the surface world and the underworld, Judge Pao dispensed justice on earth by day, and was an elite member of the underworld police force, tracking down dangerous escapees by night. Tonight's catch was a particularly important one, the Jade demon. One could say he was Judge Pao's archnemesis. Tied in magical chains with symbols of suppression surrounding him, the demon was nevertheless a fearsome sight, wearing greenish plated armour, which gave him his name, and a smoky face, with two points of light as his eyes. His lethal jade spear was held by the northern cardinal judge of the underworld, and numerous guards, wearing glowing armour and wielding pulsing swords, were stationed around the dark, humid room, which was once an ancient volcano's heart. This room, as legend had it, was the room in which the lord of the underworld had been crowned. The words snapped Judge Pao out of his trance, and he quickly responded. “We should imprison him in the stronghold, in our most secure cell.” “But wouldn't it be easier to just...dispose of it?” the justice questioned. “Believe me, I have fought the jade demon on many, many occasions and it would be...extremely difficult to get rid of him.” in front of Pao, the demon snarled and thrashed futilely against the chains. “Very well,” the justice conceded, “guards, lock him up in the hell cell.” Upon hearing this, the demon stopped thrashing, and looking Pao dead in the eye, he remarked. “I will have my revenge, Pao, mark my words...” Judge Pao turned, a satisfied look on his face, and stalked out of the courtroom. “Always one for dramatic entrances and exits, that one.” one of the Justices sighed, turning away.

### Present Time

The market bustled with life, street vendors pushing run down carts selling all manners of things, from salted fish to mobile phone cases and repairs. Shops lined the streets and vehicles drove past. A young man and woman, both seemingly in their early twenties, both wearing casual clothes, muscled their way through the crowd, muttering “s’cuse me”. They hurriedly made their way over to a nondescript house lying on the edges of the market. They kicked up dust with their feet, out of breath, and rang the doorbell. The person who opened it was an old man, with a slight potbelly and a greying beard. “What do you kids want? I hope it's not coupons for some new restaurant,” the old man grumbled. “Oh no sir, we were sent by the underworld police, sir,” the boy quipped. The old man had a visible reaction to that, and shook his head. “I'm not involved with them anymore, I already told the force I quit. One must enjoy life while one still has it.” “Sir, with all due respect, you don't understand. The jade demon has escaped!” the girl exclaimed. With those words, the man's eyes widened in disbelief, and he ushered the pair in. “How?” “the jade demon .” the duo explained. “My name is Mei, and that boy is Wei. Slightly embarrassing, I know, but that's how our parents named us.” Pao sighed in frustration. “The force must be desperate if they're willing to send the likes of...teens...to me. Long since the force's heyday, eh?” the twins blushed, but Wei, who seemed to be the more confident of the two, spoke up “hey! Well, we're not that incompetent. I, Wei, have the power of—” “Oh, stop being so melodramatic, Wei,” Mei interrupted. “I have the powers of Guan Yin, the Chinese goddess of mercy. Essentially, I can heal.” “AND I—” “shut up Wei. Anyways, Wei has the power of the—” “monkey king!!” Wei screeched. Judge Pao gave him the side-eye, and muttered “and how did you get these...powers?” “I..we got these from our ancestors. They somehow were related to the monkey king, and well, mine to Guanyin. I inherited the amulet, while Wei inherited the staff. We just discovered we had these powers a few years ago, and since then, we've been working for the underworld police force.” Pao seemed to contemplate this for a moment, and stroked his greying beard. In this time, Mei gave the house a quick once over. It was rather small and shabby, but clean. She could see a door leading to what was presumably the bedroom, but in the living room, sat a small table and chair, an abandoned cup of coffee and newspaper, and a rickety old rocking chair, sitting in front of an antique tv. A single light hung from the ceiling and the one window let in pale shafts of sunlight. Wei, however, seemed impatient. “So, uh...Mr.Pao. What are you going to do? The force told us to come here, and they said you would know

what to do.” Pao examined the boy. He was clothed in a faded white t-shirt, and he wore dark denim jeans. The girl had on a loose fitting shirt and some long pants on, and it was then that Pao noticed the amulets hanging around their necks. On Wei’s neck, hung a golden-red mini staff, bound by a simple string. On Mei’s neck, a white quartz carving of Guanyin sat. The twins looked at him expectantly, and seemed disappointed when all he did was mutter ‘hrmm’ and slowly stroke his beard. Wei thought *I know this guy is supposed to be some really important and powerful war hero or something, but this guy looks like just a really buff grandpa. How is he going to help us?* Pao, instead, suddenly turned around, his eyes lighting up. “Someone’s here.” he murmured ominously.

Pao turned to the door, and a whisper of wind blew through the house. Wei, sensing danger, pulled out his staff, and it expanded magically into a full length rod of the monkey king, and even though Pao was standing on the other side of the room, he could already feel the aura of power thrumming off the staff. Glancing nervously outside, Pao whisked his hand through the air, and with a flash of blue light, a marvellously crafted and elegant sword appeared in Pao’s hand. The sword itself was simple, just a straight, razor sharp blade and a leather wood hilt. But embedded inside the hilt was a single, shining gemstone that shone with an allure of power. The stone of the heavens. Wei and Mei both gaped at the stone, dumbstruck. All of a sudden, the door blasted open, sending slivers of wood flying in every direction. The people inside were thrown backwards, and while Wei crashed into a wall, Mei smacked her head onto the table, knocking her unconscious. Pao had flipped over and brought his sword up, scanning the dust cloud that shrouded the door. Pao’s sharp eyes caught a glint of green, and with lightning fast reactions, dived to the ground to avoid the jade spear intent on impaling him. The spear missed by a hair, burying itself into the papery wall. Flakes of plaster fell off the wall as the spear vibrated minutely. The jade demon walked through the rising cloud of dust from the debris of the collapsed door frame, laughing ominously. Pao raised his sword in a defensive stance, aiming the tip at the jade demon. The demon marched through the door, and Wei saw first the green gleam of the jade armour. Mei stood up tentatively, and raised her Guanyin necklace. It emitted a sparkling light, which swept around Wei and enveloped him in glowing gold armour, to match the jade demon’s plated jade armour. The jade spear launched itself from the wall behind them and the party of 3 dodged it, while the spear returned to the jade demon’s hand. The demon’s body was made out of jade, with segmented body parts at his joints. Its face was obscured by a fearsome carved mask, engraved with ancient symbols. Wei charged forward, and Pao followed close behind. Wei launched a flurry of blows with his staff, swinging it in alternating directions, trying to catch the demon off guard. But it was a hopeless feat. The demon parried every blow almost effortlessly, and even though it looked stiff and clunky, it moved fluidly and with grace. It sidestepped a clearing swing Wei sent at it, and Wei swirled around almost triumphantly, for the demon had fallen into his trap. Or so he thought. Wei’s staff thrummed with excitement, and Wei brought it up for the finishing blow, ready to end this fight. The staff glowed gold at the tip, building up a charge. But the jade demon simply turned around and executed a perfectly timed slash, ripping through the air to meet its opposing weapon...A shockwave of gold and green erupted from the point of impact, smashing through the small house. Pao was circling the duelling pair, trying to find an entrance to the fight between a storm of exchanging blows. The jade demon swept his spear up, forcing the staff into the air, then quickly flipped the spear around and delivered the butt of the spear into Wei’s stomach. The ethereal golden armour took the blunt of the impact, but the hit still knocked the air out of Wei. Pao took his chance, moving in. the twins stepped back, and Mei cast a worried glance at Wei, then dissolved the armour into thin air. Pao and the jade demon proved to be an equal match, and the pair exchanged blows at such a rate that Wei saw, with a touch of embarrassment, that the demon was really just toying with him, and he never really stood much of a chance after all. The gemstone in Pao’s sword glowed brighter with every hit, until it was sending ripples through the air. At this point, the jade demon had numerous scratches in his armour from the nicks Pao’s sword inflicted upon it. Pao leapt back and let the jade demon come at him, wildly slashing its spear. Pao, with a grunt, brought his sword up in a powerful swing, and the gemstone released its shining light, into the grooves and edges of the sword, until the sword looked like it was covered in brightly shining blue lines. The resulting impact caused not a shockwave, but more of a blast that ripped through Pao’s meagre possessions in the house. When the jade demon brought his spear away, Pao was still standing strong, with his sword in hand. The jade demon glared at Pao and the twins cowering behind him, and regained his composure. “Until we meet again...Pao...” and with that, the demon vanished in a flash of emerald light.

Wei jumped back, surprised. “I’m guessing that was the jade demon, wasn’t it? How does the force expect us to defeat it? It’s so strong!” Pao responded slowly.

“With me.” Wei and Mei both looked to Pao, and asked “how are we going to do that?”

Pao sighed with frustration, and muttered “by going to his lair of course, what other course of action could there be?”

“His lair? The jade demon has a lair?” Mei gulped, “where is it?”

Pao laughed, a deep, booming guffaw. “Legend has it that the jade demon lives deep in a volcano, where he forges an army of jade warriors and weapons, and while that particular legend is correct, it never specifies *which* volcano it is, but I have that special piece of information, because i was the one who tracked and captured the jade demon in his own volcano 3000 years ago! I have fought many battles against his jade minions and the demon himself, long ago. I know everything there is to know about the jade demon, but the jade demon pretty much knows everything about me too. That's why we're so evenly matched.” Pao finished off with a grumble. “We need to prevent the jade demon from wreaking havoc across the country. Once he assembles his army of jade minions, we're all doomed. We need to get to the volcano before he does. Perhaps both of you have plane tickets to hawaii?” Pao raised an eyebrow at the twins.

“W—what? The lair of the jade demon is in—hawaii?” Wei stuttered. Mei sighed and kicked some rubble from the fight in the house around, knocking over a loose stone. Outside, people had begun to gather around the house, initially frightened away by the noises and the clash, but now they had come to investigate. Pao quickly grabbed the twins, spun around and vanished. Wei and Mei were astonished when they reappeared on a pristine white beach, with swaying palm trees rustled by the ocean breeze. Behind them, a looming, craggy mountain towered above the island, surrounded by a lush forest circling the mass of rock. A thin, barely noticeable trail of smoke rose from the crater, and Mei pointed at the wisp of smog drifting up into the sky. “That's the mountain the jade demon lives in?”

“Yep.” Pao nodded. “You kids up for a bit of hiking?”

Wei gasped for breath, lungs inhaling sharp, sulfuric air. Mei and Pao, surprisingly, were springing up the stairs like antelopes. Mei laughed down at Wei, “keep up, li'l bro! You can't even keep up with an old man? You gotta walk faster if you're gonna take down the jade demon!” thin wisps of smoke curled around them, while they trekked the loose rocky mountainous slopes. When they finally reached the top of the mountain, they beheld...a couple of loose rocks and a grove of very lush trees. Mei and Wei looked at each other in confusion, but Pao merely looked on at the grove, serene and calm. Then, it started with a faint trembling in the ground. Soon, it escalated into deep rumblings, until the ground in the middle of the grove split, and out emerged the jade demon. The demon shook off loose pieces of dirt and brushed off a stray leaf out of his armour. Pao and the twins readied themselves for the imposing battle. Pao and Wei struck head on, tag teaming the demon. Mei did her best to keep them from suffering lethal hits and providing shields from her amulet. The ground around them rumbled and cracked in half, spilling the duelling trio and Mei into a rocky crevice. Lava plumes erupted around them, sending embers spilling into the air. The putrid stench of sulphur and smoke wafted around them as the combatants fought each other. Mei cushioned their fall with a gold coloured bubble, while the trio landed on an outcropping of volcanic rock. The demon suffered almost no injuries from the fall, while Wei and Pao continued attempting to land blows. Even though the fight was intense, it looked like the combatants were too well matched. Even with Mei providing assistance and the duo team, the jade demon swung his spear with unmatched ferocity. Mei landed a hit using her amulet to cast out a golden net, and it hit the demon full in the chest. While the demon was flung backwards into the lava, Pao and Wei both stood above the pool, weapons raised. Pao levelled his sword at the lava pit, and blasted a few bolts of brilliant blue energy for good measure. Wei gathered his strength and called down a huge chunk of rock, entombing the pit under several hundred tons of stone. Mei then added on her own layer of magic, binding the mass with a golden rune, imbued with the power of her amulet. As the dust settled, they looked upon their handiwork. From under the rock, not a sound could be heard, though the jade demon futilely thrashed against his new prison. Mei sucked in a breath of clean, pine scented air and bumped fists with her brother, while Pao stood tranquil as ever, as the trio watched the evening sun silhouette their bodies against an orange and crimson sky.

# The Crown Hoax

*Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Sun, Boyu – 13*

A boy with strange clothing ran rapidly towards an alleyway, in his arms was a stunning crown, it was littered with jewelry and gold. Prints of blue clouds and cranes were also visible on the sides. He skidded to a halt and panted, droplets of sweat rolling down his face. He was on the run. From soldiers. He panted once more before sprinting across the alleyway. At the end he saw a forest. Perfect!

He took one last peek behind him. Noticing that the soldiers were far behind, he ran into the forest, brushing past the branches and bushes without a care in the world. Then the boy then stopped abruptly. Seeing that no one was near him he practically collapsed onto the ground from exhaustion.

“How did I get— here? Just a— minute ago I was in the mus—eum stealing this—” he uttered, words cutting off from his constant panting.

He said as he observed the crown in his arms. He didn't remember much of what the origins of the crown were. Maybe the crown belonged to someone who lived wherever he was? No that can't be true, he recalls the crown being from the Song Dynasty. Not from the 20th century. But the terrain does seem different, the clothes people were wearing looked odd too, not something that you would see in 2022.

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Judge Pao sat down at his desk. Awaiting for a case he could get his hands on. Judge Pao was the most popular judge in the country of Song. He had a long beard and thick eyebrows, but what made him most outstanding from other people was a moon birthmark on his forehead. Judge Pao was a—well, Judge. He would not only judge cases but also solve them, because that's part of his job. He took a slow sip of his tea, hoping a client would appear in front of him anytime.

“Judge Pao?” a voice called.

A lanky man with armor walked in. “The emperor wishes to see you.”

Judge Pao nodded.

“I will be on my way shortly.”

“Yemao? Please inform anyone who comes in that I am away.”

“Yes sir!”

a voice replied, from inside a room.

Judge Pao headed towards the emperor's palace with everything ready to file a case. Judge Pao wonders what the emperor would want. Maybe it was a murder? Or a kidnapping?

Soon enough Judge Pao arrived. He carefully walked into the emperor's throne room. It was beautifully decorated, just like a typical throne room. The room extended, leaving a long pathway, the pathway was covered by a red carpet. There were a few advisors and soldiers to the left of the carpet. In the middle was the emperor. Sitting on his throne.

“Mr. Pao, you've arrived.”

Judge Pao nodded.

“Yes sir—”

“Let me get straight to the point.”

The emperor said, cutting Judge Pao off.

“This morning the empress was searching for her crown. The one used for formal occasions. But after a bit of searching it seemed to be missing. And you know that there will be a ceremony held four days later. It would be a shame and a burden for me if she is seen without her crown.”

Judge Pao was shocked, he's never heard of anyone with such courage to steal from the royal family.

"I want you to find out who stole it. And punish them. With the death penalty."

Judge Pao nodded. His head lowered.

"I have nothing more to say. You may leave." the emperor declared.

"Wait! Sir I need the details of where it was last seen, and any witnesses!"

Judge Pao explained.

"Talk to my advisor. He will take you there."

The emperor gestured to a man beside him.

"As for witnesses. There was none. It disappeared out of thin air."

"I understand."

The man or the emperor's advisor gestured to Judge Pao to follow him. He led him behind the throne, where there was a doorway, to a garden. The garden led to three buildings that were surrounding the garden. Each building had a triangular bright red roof. It was your ordinary traditional Chinese house.

"The first building from the right is where the crown was last found."

"Thank you."

The advisor said softly "No problem." before walking away.

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"Finally got out of there."

a boy mumbled under his breath. A boy named Theo. Theo was a poor boy, he lived on the streets in a poor town, a slum even.

A week ago he heard of a museum, at first he was confused. What's a museum? He has never heard of a museum before. But once he eavesdropped further he understood. A museum is a place that stores treasures, treasures from the past. He didn't know what exactly that meant, but he knew treasures were worth a lot of money, and what he lacks most is money. So, he decided to steal it. He took exactly five days to plan this heist, he was so prepared...

But now he's here. In this stupid place, running away from people almost every second. He would drop and leave the crown for them to take, if that's what their after. But he won't because he needs it to survive. For the money.

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Judge Pao was on his quiet noon saunter. He needed to find who stole the crown in four days. That's too short for a case with no suspects, witnesses and or evidence. But if he doesn't complete it he would definitely be in trouble, after all, the emperor is nice but not too nice.

He saw a store that sold steamed buns, which reminded him that he hasn't eaten those in a long time. Perhaps he should buy some?

Yup, he should. He walked over to the stall, picking out coins that were the right price for the buns...He saw something shuffling in the alleyway. It looks like a kid? He said his thanks to the shopkeep and walked towards the kid. He had light brown hair and ragged clothes, carrying a brown shoulder hung bag. Those clothes don't look local at all? How strange.

"Hello?"

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Theo jumped from the sudden voice. He looked up, and saw a man with dark skin. He was wearing the same strange clothes the others were wearing. But he had a hat. With long extended arms. Theo also noticed a moon on his head. Before he could reply, the man spoke again.

“Hello? What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Shouldn’t you be with your mother?”

“I don’t know.”

The man looked around in confusion.

“Are you lost? I could take you to the soldiers, they can help you go home.”

“No.”

Theo shook his head violently, he’s definitely not going near them.

“How about I get you some new clothes? They looked worn and old.”

Theo nodded but deep inside, he was offended. What’s wrong with my shirt?

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Judge Pao decided that he was having a good day, he was helping from what looked like a homeless kid, giving him new clothes and the steamed buns he bought. Although he was about to eat them, it was alright. But he noticed something. In the kid’s bag there’s something shiny and blue. He wondered what it was, why would a kid have such an expensive pigment? So, I tried to get a peek of what it actually was. When he was choosing which clothing he liked the most I quickly took a look. It looked like the crown the emperor sent me to find! How could a child have it?

Judge Pao knew what he had to do. He had to talk to the kid and tell him to give him the crown, so that the kid doesn’t have to go through an execution at such a young age.

He looked around for the kid, but he couldn’t see him. Maybe he got distracted by something? He does know one thing about kids and that’s that they have really short attention spans. He panicked slightly, looking for him.

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Theo was running away once again, this time from a different person. It was the man who bought him clothes and gave him snacks. He was nice and Theo appreciated him but Theo knew that the man saw the crown in his bag. Maybe out of a need for security, he ran away from the man. Sprinting once again, this time in an unfamiliar area. He usually hung out in the food side of the market. But this time he was on the clothing side. He did not know which alleyway was the best to hide in or what stall manager was the nicest. Making sure the man wasn’t following him he tried to find an alleyway.

Unfortunately however, the man has already recognized his disappearance and is right behind him. Theo turned around. He felt a little bit of hope. Hopefully the man wouldn’t rat him out.

“What’s wrong? Why did you run away?”

Theo fell silent. He didn’t want to talk, even if he did he wouldn’t know what to say.

“If you’re worrying about the crown, it’s ok. We can make up a story.”

Theo wanted to speak so badly. He wanted to say no, to say he wants to keep his crown, to get money, to live again. But his fear was swallowing his words.

“Please hand over the crown. So I can return it. It’s better for both of us.”

Theo shook his head slightly. Salty tears slowly formed in his eyes. Each tear combined with each other until it was heavy enough to fall down his face.

“Don’t cry! It’s okay. You won’t get hurt.”

Theo still couldn't explain. So he won't. He ran.

All he could hear was a muffled call, but he ignored it.

Suddenly he felt light—again. It was the same feeling he felt when he suddenly arrived in this place. He then felt nauseous, like the world is spinning and getting squeezed up. Then he lost consciousness.

"I'm sorry, the word cipher went wrong, and I had to rewrite it. You are safe now child. But stealing isn't nice."

Theo heard a voice. It wasn't like the man's. It was angelic. Echoey. It made him warm and comfortable.

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Judge Pao saw a kid disappear right in front of his eyes. He was chasing after the child that took the crown, negotiating with him so that he would give it up, make up a story and everything would be alright. But the kid seemed scared. Then he ran, then he suddenly disappeared. Dropping the crown, taking the clothes and the steamed buns he gave him with him. Judge Pao slowly picked up the crown.

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"What do you mean it was stolen by a thief that disappeared in front of your eyes?"

The emperor demanded. "Tell the truth."

"But I am sir."

A guard rushed in.

"Sir! There has been a kid who stole the crown. We are unaware where he is at the moment but we are working on it."

The emperor glared at the guard, shifting all his anger on him.

"A kid? No way."

"It's true. We have been chasing it for the entire day!"

"An entire day you say? Why didn't you inform me first? The emperor? Are you challenging me? Saying that you have greater skills than me?"

The guard took a step back.

"No sir! Of course not—"

Judge Pao cut the guard's speech. He needed to keep the kid a secret. He couldn't let the guard expose anymore information, after all the kid could still be around.

"Sir. I have gotten the crown from him. I suggest you let this go. I can be the one that continues to search for the kid."

The emperor's eyes shine at the crown being back. "I suppose you are right."



## Another life

*St. Joseph's College, Kwok, Hok Lim – 17*

I believe when a person dies, his or her soul leaves the body, ascending to the spiritual realm where all souls converge. There, the soul is cleansed of its memories, and is reborn into the world as an infant. In some cases, however, the purest and noblest souls retain their memories. They have a complete recollection of their past lives the instant they enter this world again.

I believe this because the moment I was born, I had memories. And in those memories, I was not me, but someone else entirely. I would see myself dressed in robes adorned with embroidery, striding into an ancient Chinese court, bright paintings decorating the walls. People would wither under my gaze as I made my way to the seat where the judge was supposed to sit. My boots made sharp clacking noises on the stone-tiled floor, echoing off the walls. Everywhere I looked, heads bowed in reverence.

Needless to say, this was very disorienting.

It didn't take long for me to figure out the identity of the person in question. It was quite simple, actually. The people in these memories all addressed me as "Judge Pao". And to further confirm my suspicions, I found myself looking into a mirror in more than one of these memories. And staring right back at me was the famously ugly face of Judge Pao. These images of me staring into the mirror took up a significant portion of the memories I had. It would seem that despite his crude features, Judge Pao was rather vain.

Judge Pao. One of the most revered and widely-known men to ever have lived, a symbol of justice and truth. All this carried huge ramifications. Over the years, I began to think: If these were memories — my memories — then it would mean I was Judge Pao. But that didn't make any sense. My name was Clark, and I was a scrawny teenager enrolled in high school. There certainly wasn't anything powerful or authoritative about me. Besides, Judge Pao had died nearly a thousand years ago. Still, the images in my head were so vivid I was certain they weren't conjured up by my imagination. An identity crisis followed, during which I was plagued with questions. Who was I? Clark, or Judge Pao? Was I Judge Pao redux? The reincarnation of Judge Pao, perhaps?

After years of trying to make sense of my identity, I finally came to the below conclusion: After dying, instead of having its memories erased, the soul of Judge Pai had decided to be reborn, inexplicably, in the body of a weak and completely unremarkable male.

I tried telling my mother about it once, but she dismissed my concerns as me having an overactive imagination. From then on, I never told anyone else about it. Usually, I just tried hard to be Clark. The same Clark that was bullied at school for his skinny frame and thick eyeglasses. The same Clark who had no friends, and spent the majority of his time burying his nose in heavy volumes of books. But as night fell, along with sleep came the dreams.

I always had one recurring dream. No, not a dream. A nightmare. I was again in the body of Judge Pao, seated behind a large wooden desk in a grand courtroom. A palpable tension hung in the air. Around me, people were talking in muffled whispers, discussing among themselves the fate awaiting the accused, occasionally shooting glances at me. I pretended not to notice. "Bring in the accused!" My voice boomed, reverberating off the walls. A hush fell over the court. A few moments passed by with nothing happening. Then suddenly, footsteps and the sound of a tussle. A few seconds later, two guards hauled in a man in chains. He had graying hair, and his ragged clothes were drenched in sweat. His eyes scanned the court frantically and landed on me. He stopped struggling. "Pao," he said, his voice breaking. "Help me, please." I turned a deaf ear to his pleas and cleared my throat, addressing the court. "The accused, Pao Mian, has been found guilty of bribery and malfeasance." "Pao..." The man pleaded, his eyes filled with tears. "Pao, please..." Again, I ignored him. "The court hereby sentences him to death." My words hung in the air. A deathly silence followed. Then — "NO!" The man writhed, trying to break free of his

chains. The guards could barely hold him down. His eyes trained on me. “TRAITOR!” He screamed, his voice rising until it became hysterical. “MY MOTHER TOOK YOU IN LIKE A SON!” His eyes were wild, burning with hatred. “MY MOTHER RAISED YOU LIKE A SON! YOU DARE KILL ME?” He flailed wildly, and the guards started dragging him out. I could feel the court’s eyes on me, yet I didn’t say a single word. The double doors of the court slammed shut with a resounding boom.

At this point, I would usually awake with a jolt, my forehead feverish and my heart pounding. Traitor. Judge Pao had sentenced to death the son of the woman who had raised him. Judge Pao, the person whom so many people respected and looked up to, had done so without so much as batting an eyelid. I felt disconnected from this particular memory. Over the years, the nightmare would haunt me in my sleep again and again, slowly cementing my opinion that Judge Pao was a monster.

There, I said it. One of the greatest, most notable figures in Chinese history, and I have just branded him a monster. Go on, insult me, hurl tomatoes at me, do whatever you want to me. But I had my reasons for feeling this way. Pao Mian was almost like a brother to him. How could one, in good conscience, sentence one’s brother to death in such cold-blooded fashion? Add this to the fact that Pao Mian’s mother had taken him in, fed him, cared for him like her own, and he had repaid her by effectively killing her son. And you might start to see Judge Pao as I had seen him — a heartless monster that valued words written on a book more than his own brother’s life.

I graduated from high school with marks that guaranteed me a place in both law school and medical school. I can proudly say I was blessed with intelligence, a side effect of being a nerd, or perhaps a side effect of Judge Pao’s soul choosing to reside in my body. Either way, I made good use of my intrinsic gifts, and aced exams with ease. Now I had an important decision to make. Law school or medical school? In the end, I chose medical school. I worried that if I chose law school, I would end up like Judge Pao — a puppet brainwashed by rules and legislations, without a single shred of humanity. I didn’t want to be like Judge Pao. I didn’t like the prospect of the court turning me into someone I wasn’t. So I chose medical school.

Medical school was as tough as they said it would be. Aside from learning about human anatomy, we had to learn to recognise various diseases, as well as make accurate diagnoses and devise suitable treatments. Above all, we faced enormous pressure to outperform each other. I struggled to cope with the intensity of medical school. All in all, it was a thoroughly torturous experience, and though I know being a medical professional requires much knowledge and skill, whether it warrants such punishment, I am not sure. Even so, I managed to pull through, and when the decision came, I chose to be a critical care doctor.

A critical care doctor mainly works in the ICU of a hospital. He is responsible for the diagnosis, treatment, and support of patients with severe and life-threatening illnesses. He must also be prepared to make end-of-life decisions when necessary, and know how to counsel patients and their families. Every day, a critical care doctor has to make crucial decisions while his patient’s life hangs in the balance. If he makes the correct decision, the patient’s life may be saved. But if he makes the wrong decision, he will have single-handedly caused the death of a patient.

After four years of residency training, I was finally a licensed doctor. The work was strenuous and the hours irregular, but it was fulfilling. I had found my calling — this was where I belonged, helping people and saving lives, instead of ruining them from the confines of a courtroom. I was famed within the department for my ability to remain calm and make the correct decision in high-stakes situations. My quick wits and intellect helped me rise through the ranks quickly, and soon I was the head doctor. As the head doctor, oftentimes I would wake up in the middle of the night to the sound of my cell phone’s ringtone. Bleary-eyed, I would get dressed and drive the ten minutes to the hospital. Eight or nine hours later, I would stumble through the door of my house and crash on the couch, falling fast asleep, often without changing. I found much joy from helping patients, though, pulling them back from the brink of death and giving them a new lease of life, then seeing their faces, streaked with tears of happiness, and hearing their choked whispers of gratitude. I was doing my job, and all was well — well, as well as it can

get when you work in a place where people die on a daily basis — until my mother got admitted into the ICU.

My mother was ninety-one by then. Over the last couple of years, her body had been riddled with all sorts of illnesses, and she had been admitted into hospital multiple times. When not in hospital, she spent the majority of her days lying in bed, immobile, being spoon-fed soup and congee. Her face had lost its former youthfulness, and had become weathered with time. One thing that hadn't changed, though, was her personality. While some people get cranky and irritable with age, my mother had kept her wit and humor. She also had an extremely good memory for her age.

This time, though, it was serious. The week before, she had a slight fever and was feeling nauseous, and so was admitted into hospital, the same hospital I was working in. I had known of this, of course, but my packed schedule meant I was only able to visit her at nighttime, after I was done with the day's duties. She looked healthy and well, and I was oblivious to the true severity of her illness. Only a few days later, when the orderlies wheeled her in through the entrance of the ICU, would I know.

It had been a relatively quiet day. I was checking in with the patients, taking their vitals, when an alarm sounded. A nurse ran up to me. "Mrs. Chan's condition is worsening," she said, out of breath. As I followed her, I tried to recall Mrs. Chan's medical history. Mrs. Chan was a young patient in her twenties who had first complained of sharp pains in her chest. A biopsy later revealed malignant tumors, and she was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer. Just like that, her life had been completely turned on its head, all her dreams and aspirations dashed in an instant. One day she had her whole life ahead of her, and the other she was fighting for survival in a hospital ward. Due to the unpredictability of her case, she had been transferred to the ICU, where she could be closely monitored.

We stopped in front of her hospital bed, and I looked down at the disheveled figure of Mrs. Chan. Her face was pallid, her body frail and weak. Immediately, I noticed something was wrong. She was gasping for breath, her cancer-ridden lungs desperately trying to draw in air. I took a closer look, and saw that the coverings of her bed were speckled with droplets of blood. As I wondered about the source of the blood, she gave another hacking cough, and blood from her mouth splattered onto the white sheets. At once, I knew what was happening — massive hemoptysis, probably from a hemorrhage somewhere in the lungs. It could be fatal if I didn't act swiftly. A team of nurses had gathered around the bed, and I started giving out orders. "Get me supplemental oxygen, now," I told a group of nurses. They nodded and sprang into action. I turned to face a nurse standing in the corner. "Monitor the patient's hemodynamics." Before figuring out the source of the bleeding, maintaining ventilation was of paramount importance.

Suddenly, the double doors of the ICU burst open. In rushed a team of orderlies, wheeling in a hospital bed with a patient in it. By the looks of it, it was a medical emergency. I took a closer look at the patient in the bed, and my heart nearly stopped. It was my mother. She was in bad shape, her eyes closed, the rise and fall of her chest barely noticeable. I hurried to meet them. "What's going on?" I asked, still in shock. "Multiple organ system failure from septic shock," replied an orderly. My blood froze. Multiple organ failure was rare, and at her age, it was sure to be lethal. I didn't understand. She had seemed perfectly fine just a few days ago. As my heart raced, a fit of coughs from Mrs. Chan's bed brought me back to attention. Keep calm, I told myself, remembering my training, and everything will be alright. I looked around, trying to find a doctor, but it was two in the morning, and the others were all off-duty. No one had expected this to happen. I was the only one there. I glanced at my mother, her skin jaundiced, her breath rattling in her chest, and then at Mrs. Chan, fighting to breathe, coughing up blood. And the realization hit me.

I could only save one.

And suddenly I was in the court again, Pao Mian kneeling in front of me, begging for mercy. I'm your brother, he said, looking at me pleadingly, hands clasped. Please don't kill me. And a thousand years of pain came rushing in, blinding my senses, nearly bringing me to my knees.

At that moment, I understood the pain Judge Pao had felt, the things that had gone through his mind when he sentenced Pao Mian to death. He had chosen to make the right decision nevertheless, to bring Pao Mian to justice instead of letting him go free. And now I had a decision to make. The right decision, no doubt, was to save Mrs. Chan. Her predicament was not as severe, and she had a way better chance of making it through. My mother, on the other hand, would almost certainly die, whether I intervened or not. But she was my mother. I could see her eyelids fluttering. Please don't kill me.

In the end, I chose to save Mrs. Chan. I chose the right decision. Choosing the right decision doesn't mean it doesn't hurt you. I fought back tears as I set to work that day, intubating her, administering supplemental oxygen to help her breathe, while my mother's body started shutting down out of the corner of my eye. I tried frantically to save the life of a dying patient while the life slowly ebbed out of my dying mother.

My mother died that morning, after her heart and liver and brain finally gave out and ceased to work. Help had arrived, but it was too little and far too late. The long, drawn-out beep of the heart monitor pierced the air like a siren, a singular sound that drowned out everything else, leaving a lasting ringing in my ears long after it had been turned off.

Judge Pao was not a monster. Though he had sentenced Pao Mian to death for his crimes, it didn't mean he didn't love him dearly. It didn't mean he was heartless. It meant he was courageous enough to do the right thing even in the toughest of times. Judge Pao was not inhumane. In fact, he was the most human of us all.

I see now the many parallels between the judge and the doctor. Both require one to be impartial and level-headed, to look at things from the outside. Both require one to be calm and collected when the situation descends into calamity. And above all, both require one to be wise enough to make the correct decision when the time comes.

Now I am lying on my bed in the dark, awaiting death. My hair has turned gray, my skin leathery and wrinkled. The palms of my hands have become calloused with time. I know deep in my bones that when death arrives, I will not be reborn again. I know this as I know that winter comes after autumn, and spring after winter. Yet I do not have any fear. All I feel now is a deeply sated joy at having lived my two lives well. I have seen the iridescent colors and heard the wonderful sounds of this world. I have witnessed everything this world has to offer, and it is beautiful.

Death is not the end. That I am certain of. This time, when I die, my soul will join all the other souls up in the clouds. We will rejoice and laugh and play, and we will watch the sunset together. Perhaps I will even see my mother.

Hundreds of years from now, people will speak of the great Judge Pao. They will extol his virtues, and sing his praises, and make books and movies about him. Little do they know.

Judge Pao walked the earth twice.

# Fist! Of! Justice!

*St. Joseph's College, Lau, King Tim – 17*

Honourable. Incorruptible. Fair and just. These were the words anyone would describe Bao Zheng as if you simply asked. A ray of hope to those that have been wronged and oppressed by those that held authority and power. Perhaps this is why Lu Ying had expected the renowned Judge Bao to be more serious, or at the very least someone who wasn't so... strange.

When fighting for justice, words would tumble out of his mouth like an arrow, whistling through every single defence a person had until they gave in and admitted their wrongdoings. No words could describe how satisfying it was to see a corrupt official floundering amidst the onslaught of words as they stared into the unforgiving gaze of Judge Bao.

Outside of that however, Lu Ying has come to realise that his words spill out more like an overflowing basin, blurting out everything on his mind with no real thought put behind it. After all, you don't forget when a person's first words to you are "Oh, that outfit is absolutely horrendous."

During that moment that felt like centuries ago to the present Lu Ying, the deadpan judge was met with incredulous eyes, his mouth already in motion to utter something else as the person that was accompanying him — his bodyguard as Lu Ying would soon come to know — gave the judge a raised eyebrow and a judgemental stare, causing the judge's shoulders to sag and his face to contort into what could almost be considered a pout.

They left Lu Ying standing shell-shocked on the street as they walked past, the bodyguard giving him an apologetic look and a slight wince in sympathy, while the judge simply carried on, as if saying something like that so suddenly and with no remorse was just a simple everyday occurrence.

Out of both curiosity and intrigue after being insulted to the face in the street, Lu Ying jumped at the chance to work for him as a second bodyguard after a certain mishap involving a lord and some assassins took place not too long ago. Of course, what Lu Ying hadn't expected was just how truly kooky the great judge could be.

He was blunt and spoke his mind, which when combined with his impulsiveness, often led to situations where he would inadvertently insult some hapless soul with an almost matter-of-fact tone. Not to mention his impulsiveness made it so that being his bodyguard was more often than not about keeping his hands from wandering as he reached out in an attempt to fix someone's hair or clothing. There were even several incidents where he went out of his way to arrange objects, ranging from potted plants to ducks of all things. That one was especially strange, what with it taking place in the middle of a busy road and when that stray rat suddenly came into play.

Either way, Lu Ying soon came to the realisation that the more time he spent with Bao Zheng, the less he actually understood the man, but at the very least he was getting used to all the strange things the man was capable of doing.

Or so he thought, as he was left completely dumbfounded when the barrels he and Zhan Zhao were asked to carry today started to make sounds that could only be described as vaguely crustacean in nature when they started walking away from the riverside town.

"Sir," sighed Zhan Zhao, clearly already tired of whatever Bao Zheng was up to. "Could you please explain to me why the crates that you asked us to carry are making scuttling sounds?"

The slight eyebrow raise and that familiar glimmer in the judge's eyes told Lu Ying all he needed to know. Trepidation began setting in his chest as he prepared himself for something completely out of left

field to come out of the man's mouth, the crate on his back moving erratically doing absolutely nothing to help his nerves.

"Last winter solstice, do you perhaps recall a rumour about an evil spirit haunting the palace and scaring the concubines half to death with loud shrieks?" began the judge, a hint of amusement seeping through his typically serious demeanour.

"Well, did you two know that the emperor held a grand feast in his room with his concubines on that very same day? As it turns out, our majesty is deathly afraid of lobsters to the point of uncontrollable screeching."

About ten different lobster related scenarios ran through Lu Ying's head, none of which ended well.

"As a way of expressing my appreciation for his majesty's recent decision to appoint that talentless hack of a man as our state's finance commissioner, I've decided to help rid him of this irrational fear he has."

Sensing that he wasn't going to stop rambling for a while, Zhan Zhao gave Lu Ying a weak smile in apology. This was an awfully common occurrence these days, second only to the amount of headaches working for Bao Zheng gave Lu Ying.

They didn't have time to give each other more wordless expressions as Bao Zheng's ramblings were soon punctured by a sudden yell and the sound of rapid footsteps coming up from further along the path.

A peasant, clearly looking worse for wear with his tattered clothes and fresh bruises on his face, was running from two men clad in armour. It wasn't all that hard to realise why the yell had suddenly come out of nowhere considering that one of the soldier's spearhead was dyed red with blood and was leaving a nasty trail of human biology on the road. Quite frankly it was a wonder the peasant could even run at this point.

"HELP ME! PLEASE HELP ME! I HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING WRONG PLEASE I'M BEGGING YOU!"

Not one to simply let someone who had just been stabbed fend for himself, Lu Ying dropped the barrel of lobsters onto the road and drew his blade.

Rushing forward with Zhan Zhao by his side as the peasant dashed past them for cover, the sound of steel clashing against soon filled the air.

The peasant collapsed by Bao Zheng's feet as pained grunts sounded in the background, clearly exhausted. With a bit of struggle, the judge carried the man over to a nearby tree and laid him down.

An upward slash, a sidestep, a slice, a parry, and a dodge backwards. Feet followed feet as blades danced through the air. A solid knock on the head to one of the soldiers and a wheeze that escaped battered lungs led to an armoured body hitting the ground with a thud. Faced against a 2v1, the other soldier quietly surrendered.

After restraining the two men, the two bodyguards headed backwards to see the judge wrapping his robe around the man's injuries to apply pressure and to stop the bleeding.

Turning to the two tied-up men, Lu Ying asked, "Where's the nearest village?", an underlying threat seeping into his tone as his hand rested on the hilt of his blade.

Nervous eyes flitted between hand and eyes. Once the hand gripped the hilt tighter, the soldier took a shaky breath before speaking.

“Just back up the direction we were coming from s-sir. You’ll be able to find medical help for the man over there as well as a place to rest.”

Satisfied with the answer, he turns to his side and sees Zhan Zhao gently hoisting the nameless peasant up onto his back, the other bodyguard’s face twisted in worry. Bao Zheng, on the other hand, stood there with fury etched onto his face, boring holes into the conscious soldier’s face. Always one to give credit where credit is due, Lu Ying had to admit that the soldier was doing a surprisingly good job at ignoring the furious staredown the judge was giving him given the fact that he was tied up and couldn’t exactly move his head around.

There are some things that, despite Bao Zheng’s unpredictable behaviour, was obvious to Lu Ying after working with him for a while. This was what made him realise that he was most likely about to insult the tied-up man’s entire existence for the next hour or so if given the chance, causing him to physically drag the judge away. They had someone who needed urgent medical attention after all and there was no time to spare.

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“So, d’ya think we should’ve untied them before we left?”

“I’m starting to have second thoughts honestly, do you think we should send someone back before nighttime to make sure they don’t die or anything?”

“I mean, I think they’ll be fine. Sure, the road isn’t all that popular, but the chances of someone not passing by before night falls is pretty low.”

“Hmmm, I can’t say you’re wrong... but what about the chances of someone passing by and deciding to help them?”

“...I suppose we could go check up on them afterwards if it’ll help your conscience. You know, you’re surprisingly caring for a bodyguard Zhan Zhao, I think most people I’ve worked with would’ve been happy to just leave them there.”

“Awww, thanks! I’ll take that as a compliment, partner!”

Partner... he quite liked the way that nickname rolled off Zhan Zhao's tongue, especially when said with such cheer.

“Wouldn’t want you to take it any other way, partner.”

An unintentional fondness wormed its way into that sentence, something that was unusual for Lu Ying. He had only known the other man for a couple of days after all. He supposed he couldn’t help it as the other man was the only person who could understand the burden of being Bao Zheng’s bodyguard.

“Apologies for interrupting,” interjected a third, monotone voice. “But I do believe we should make haste. I’d rather he seek treatment earlier than later.”

They started walking faster and soon, a small village came into their sights.

Before they could even pass through the village gates, an old woman who was resting under the shade of a tree in front of the village spotted the four men and rushed over. She saw the man slumped over

Zhan Zhao's back and introduced herself as Miss Ling, the herbalist and mother of the wounded peasant, and began herding all four men into her tiny shack.

Miss Ling's son had not stirred since he fell unconscious. The only sounds to have come from him being the occasional erratic and heavy breaths, so it was a relief when the pungent herbs around his body helped steady out his breathing. While herbs couldn't exactly heal a spear wound, they could at the very least prevent more bleeding and act as a painkiller for once he woke up.

Once she had confirmed his safety, she turned to the other 3 men in the room with a grateful expression and spoke.

"I must thank you, kind men, for saving my dear child from those vile men. I had feared that today may have been the last time I would ever see my son's face."

Before anyone else could speak, a voice that held a silent anger was heard throughout the little hut.

"Miss Ling, may I ask what your son has done to deserve two trained soldiers hunting him down with the intent to kill?"

Sensing the danger behind his words, she quickly grew defensive.

"My son has done absolutely nothing wrong. That foul pig they call a general came here earlier today. He stole my son's wife away from him, all because he believed himself entitled to the women in this town for simply providing us funds on occasion." Her voice shook in time with her shaking fist. "Is it not normal to fight for your loved ones when they are ripped away from you? Would you not do the same as my son had done?"

The judge's face settled into one of contemplation, his eyebrows furrowed. Zhan Zhao stood by the mother's side, putting his hand onto the mother's shoulder in an attempt to comfort her. Lu Ying, on the other hand, was ready to storm into whatever place this general lived in to give him a beating of a lifetime.

"It's settled then," said the judge in a decisive manner. "We'll take your daughter-in-law back for you and your son. Tell us where he lives."

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The general's abode was quite 'unique' in nature. An unsightly stain that should not be allowed to exist on earth as not even a cockroach would make it its home is what Bao Zheng would have called it.

Nestled by a rather picturesque river, the ghastly sight would have made anyone passing by do a double take as the bright red of the walls assaulted your eyes. There were random yellow highlights on the tiles of the roof next to completely unmatching green sections that rather reminded Lu Ying of the shade Zhan Zhao's face made when he swallowed some sort of earthworm flavoured tea.

The moment Bao Zheng saw the house, he rolled up his sleeves and began a steady march forward, each step feeling heavier than the last as pent-up rage began pouring out in waves from him. Lu Ying could only try to keep up the pace as he looked on in a mix of awe and fear.

The guards stationed at the front of the house confirmed that the house belonged to the general. They were wearing the exact same type of armour as the two men chasing Miss Ling's son. Perhaps by way of having more of a brain than the other two, or simply recognising who Bao Zheng was, they let the three men pass without doing anything.



That didn't keep them from raising their weapons with shaky hands as they walked by.

Without having to walk for long, they soon came face to face with the general sitting down in a relaxed manner in what looked like the main hall of the building.

"The great and honourable Bao Zheng?!" exclaimed the general in mock surprise. "When I was told a visitor was coming today, I didn't expect you. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Without any pause, the judge spoke, his voice aided by the slight breeze coming from the open windows behind him, carrying with them a sense of authority and power.

"Your acting skills are about as third-rate as an infant. I suggest we cut straight to the point and discuss what you've done, or are you going to tell me that you're too daft a man to realise that playing dumb won't work against me?"

With a twitch of the eye, the cocky self-assured expression on the general's face schooled itself into a far less punchable neutral look.

"It is within my right as one of the only people to even care about that pathetic little village to take something as recompense for providing them with protection and supplies from other towns." He rolled his eyes, waving his hand nonchalantly. "What is one little girl when I give so much in return?"

"Oh, I see," the judge responded, sarcasm dripping with every single word. "Your generosity truly knows no bounds seeing as you tried to kill one of the village's men. Was that something you consider as 'giving in return'?"

The general was indignant as he stood up, looming over all three men as he raised his voice. "That idiot of a man tried to take her back. I cannot be blamed for simply protecting what was mine. I do so much for that village, and this was the thanks I get?"

"Surely you understand, judge Bao," his tone sickly sweet, "that only a fool would bite the hand that feeds?"

The breeze from the windows felt like they were growing into a gale. The tension in the air palpable as the judge stared down the man in front of him, gritting his teeth in irritation.

Before he could get a word out however, the general turned his back to them, waving them off. "I'm done with this conversation, leave immediately unless you'd like to be forcefully escorted out."

Well, that was definitely one way to seal your fate.

In a move unexpected to everyone save for Lu Ying and Zhan Zhao, the judge lunged towards the general with great speed, bringing him down to the ground with a crash, his foot driving itself into the general's face as he brought the general's arms behind him as two sickening cracks resounded throughout the hall.

The general's face was twisted into a silent scream, sweat dripping down his forehead as his eyes became unfocused. The few incompetent guards that were in the hall were stunned to the point of inaction, which only made it easier for the two partners to clean up the rest of the trash before they could even retaliate.

"I will impart a lesson to you, general." He drove his foot deeper into the general's face as he spoke his next words. "The hand that feeds, deserves to be bitten when it beats. Remember this well."

"Now, do tell us where the girl is unless you'd like your legs to be broken too."

A weak finger slowly raised itself and pointed westwards into a corridor, before going slack as the man finally passed out.

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The trio looked on as the family was reunited, the family all crowded into the small shack as husband and wife exchanged words of worry and relief, while the mother flitted about in anxiousness over every little wound and mark on both their bodies.

“Well,” started Zhan Zhao in an upbeat tone, “I suppose that’s a job well done then?”

“Yes, quite.” was the reply he got, a satisfied look on the judge’s face as he walked away from the scene, not wanting to intrude any longer.

“Now then, could the two of you explain to me how we’re supposed to carry out our plan without the two barrels of live lobsters you simply dropped off in the middle of nowhere?”

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Chau, Chak Kwan Alex – 16*

Regardless of gender, commoner or noble, everyone is equal under the "moon". In the west, there was Sherlock Holmes. In the east, there was a judge who defended peasants and commoners against corruption and injustice — Bao Zheng. However, there was something supernatural and unforgettable that happened to him.....

In A.D 1034, the snow was fluttering and there was a carriage crossing on the pile of pale snow. After a while, a peasant saw the carriage stop and he found that the horse near the carriage was killed. What remained in the carriage was not the cargoes, but blood. The snow was dyed scarlet by a burst of blood. The peasant had tried to scream for help, but unfortunately, he didn't realise there were numerous killers, who were wearing Chinese drama masks, standing behind him before his death. All the mysteries are like the blood, ignorantly covered and concealed by the snow....

" Judge Bao! Judge Bao! " a woman screamed, she was kneeling in front of the court. " What's going on, lady?. " A man with a moon symbol on his head answered her call for help. " Help! Judge Bao! My husband is gone! I miss him so much! " she cried bitterly. Bao helped her up and promised that he would help her find her missing husband.

During the chaos, there was a lot of panic in the society. The reason is simple: many people were missing for no reason. For the sake of quelling the turmoil, Bao resolutely decided to find out the truth of the missing cases. At the same time, there was a lady, who also had an identical moon symbol on her head, wandering on the snowy mountain .

" God bless our Saintess of Moon! " Deep in the snowy mountain, there were a lot of followers praising the saintess. "Quiet!" the lady shouted. In just a few seconds, the church inside the mountain became silent in a sudden. "I, Bao Yi Xin, unite all our devoted believers that we may bring an end to the dynasty and create a new order!" With the applause and cheers over, the civil war had begun.

Yet, the power of the saintess' army was weaker than the dynasties. Yes, Lady Bao lost. Till the end, she still didn't understand why she had such an ambition to subvert the political power of the dynasty. "For who?" She questioned herself, looking at the corpses on the battlefield.

"Judge Bao, the murderer is finally caught!" said a soldier. However, what Judge Bao faced was unbelievable —he saw his daughter who was claimed to be dead at her birth of six. "Why? That moon symbol. Are you my daughter...?" Judge Bao was overwhelmed and shook his hand. "Who are you?" Lady Bao answered. Not waiting for Judge Bao's answer, Lady Bao was sent to jail. After a few days, Judge Bao realised everything by finding out the evidence from the believers of the cult. The power behind the throne was not his daughter, but the priest near his daughter, who had the ability to manipulate and revive one mentally and physically. Yet, being the representative of the justices, Judge Bao had to be fair. This was his only choice...

At the gallows, maybe Lady Bao was really blessed by the god, she was awakened. "Father, I am sor..." Lady Bao was crying, but unfortunately, she couldn't convey her messages to Judge Bao eventually. Judge Bao bursted into tears and said, "Good night, my lovely daughter..."

## Beneath The Crescent Comes Justice

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Chow, Yan Hei Sabrina – 15*

Justice will always be there whenever you see a crescent symbol on a man's forehead.

One late night, a man called Pao Zheng was relighting the candles on his desk. Pao Zheng is also known as Judge Pao. He was peacefully reviewing some cases that he had resolved before. A brilliant moonbeam was slanting through the windows shining brighter than ever, and a crescent symbol on his forehead was clearly shown. The sound of silence lasted until he heard the weeping of an infant. He instantly stood up from his antique wooden chair to see what was going on. Two mothers, each with a new born son living in the same house approached Judge Pao. One of the babies had died, and each started claiming the remaining boy as her own. Chaos began to arise. Seeing such happening, Judge Pao came up with some ideas to identify the real mother of the baby boy. He first questioned both ladies whether there was anyone who witnessed the whole event. Both mothers had midwives to prove who the baby boy belonged to. It was strenuous to determine who the baby belonged to. Judge Pao decided asking for special characteristics of the baby, he asked, "What's so special about your baby that nobody could recognise it except you do?" Both mothers responded in unison, "My baby has a small mole on the last toe of the left foot." A fierce glare between the two-woman flashed across the court. The atmosphere became tense. At that point, there were a few fishermen heading home passed by the court. They gathered and murmured, believing this case would be left unsolved. However, Pao suddenly hit upon an inspiration after catching a glance of the harpoon on the fishermen's hand. Calling for a sword, Judge Pao declared his judgment: the baby would be cut in two so that each woman will receive half. The soldier started pulling out the sword, all the commotion caused the baby weeping so hard. One mother said delightedly, she was content with this proposal "This shall be a fair and square solution, if I could not have the baby myself then nobody could have my baby too." While the other woman begged Judge Pao in tears, "Give the baby to her, please, just don't kill him!" Once the words were said, Judge Pao could discern the true mother. Judge Pao summoned his men to bring the woman who agreed to cut the baby in half to jail. "What in the world is going on? I am the mother of the boy, what are you trying to do!", shouted the woman being tied up, ready to be sent into prison. Judge Pao answered firmly, "You are not the mother of this baby. The baby belongs to the mother who begged for sparing the baby's life while you decided to kill it. You are not fit to be a mother." Then, that woman who lied was sent to prison. The real mother of the baby nodded thankfully to this man with a crescent on his head and gave full rein to her emotions by letting tears of joy escape from the corner of her eyes. Finally, the baby boy reunited with his dear mother happily.

The sky dusked and the shadows reflected on the ground extended, the Prince of the country had waken up at dawn. He sat up on his royal bed and stretched himself with a yawn. Looking outside the window, he was mesmerised by an exquisite lady walking near the garden. The lady was standing next to the blooming flowers, her stunning beauty has caught the attention of the princes' eyes. The prince started rubbing his eyes and even squinted to get a better view. "My Lord, I have never seen such a gorgeous woman," said the prince who was admiring the lady he saw through the window. The prince was more than ever determined to get this lady to be his wife. Then, he called his servants to find out more about the lady. Very soon, the servants of the prince came back with some news, "My sir, that lady you had been searching for is the wife of soldier Zhong." A frown which could less likely be visible appeared on the prince's face. The frown disappeared in just a second and was replaced with a smile of dominance. His eyelids and cheeks were elevated, while his upper lip was lifted, showing crookedness that could make you shiver. He came up with the idea to murder soldier Zhong, so the soldier's wife would belong to him. He commanded the military leader to send soldier Zhong into the front lines of the battlefield, hoping that soldier Zhong would die after being exposed to the enemy's attack. Now, the beauty was married again to the Prince. The prince was overjoyed, but it wasn't the same for the lady. The lady knew the reason behind her husband's death and she mourned every morning. The servants noticed her pale face and asked the lady worriedly, "Miss, what happened? Why have I never seen you smile after living in the palace?" The lady revealed everything in her mind and reminded the servant not to tell anyone about it. The servant deeply felt sorry for her lady, she couldn't resist but secretly went to Judge Pao's and reported the murderer of the soldier. Judge Pao was then off to find out the story behind the death of soldier Zhong. He visited the King's palace with no doubt, he stood and bowed to the Emperor to show his respect. The Emperor offered Pao Zheng a seat and some hot Pu'er but Judge Pao refused them. He then became serious and clearly pointed out what he had been told. "My Emperor, I had to voice this out. Did your son murder soldier Zhong on purpose just for his own benefit," Judge Pao questioned. The Emperor started laughing,

“Judge Pao, my dear Judge Pao. I am so sorry that my son has bothered you with such petty things,” the Emperor continued, “Here, my dear Pao Zheng come over, let alone the fact he just killed one soldier. Why don’t you think in this way, soldier Zhang should be honoured that his death could bring happiness to the Prince. It’s just a woman, let my son get what he likes. You shouldn’t worry about such trifles, my friend,” said the Emperor who began stuffing bags of gold into Judge Pao’s hand. Judge Pao was in disbelief, he pushed the Emperor’s hand away and shouted, “Take your filthy money away. I feel miserable for our country for having such nasty people as the ruler. What gives you the right to kill the innocent? Are you even certified to be the Emperor of Song Dynasty?”

Not very soon, the Prince and the Emperor were brought to the court for final judgement where the crowd emerged. “Are you both guilty for what you have committed?”, said Judge Pao. Stated on the scrolls of the case, “The Prince committed a murder and the Emperor committed corruption”, Judge Pao read these words thunderously, letting everyone know. The Prince growled with anger, he was discontent indeed. The Emperor added, “Who are you to sentence us to jail?” “Even if I had to die, I would also do justice to soldier Zhong.”, said Judge Pao shaking his head in disappointment. He then condemned the Emperor and the Prince. He ordered his men to bring the guillotine out and sentenced them to death. The crowd began to cheer under the moonlight.

Whenever there were cases to be solved, Judge Pao had always been there. He had served the public so well and people were glad to have him. Eventually, he became older and retired from being a Judge. He seemed to disappear into thin air. Well, it was told that he moved to and stayed in the countryside, right next to a river where he’d be feeding fishes and reading books. However, nobody knew the exact location of his house. Everybody had been trying to look for Judge Pao, but he was nowhere to be found. That’s all we know about him. Who knew, some said they had walked past and spotted an old man with white moustache, who always seemed to be wearing a black thatch hat, appearing to be having a small crescent symbol. Beneath the moon of the gleaming night sky, the crescent symbol was shining when its reflection fell on the ripples of the river.

# A Spark of Memories, an Ember of Guilt, a Fame of Time

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Del Mundo, Giuliana Sero – 15*

*“Run!”*

*Blue inferno climbed up the marble walls, engulfing file cabinets in flames. Crumbs of the ceiling started to fall apart, debris dusting on the floor.*

*There was an endless pattering of panicked footsteps. Crowds of people in robes swarming in terror.*

*Suddenly, a loud voice roared amidst the chaos. “What is the meaning of this?”*

*Eyes snapped up, gasping once they saw the man before them. The ruler of the underworld, King Yanwang, stood before them, fuming with rage, sided with the Ten Yamas of the Courts of Hell.*

*“King Yanwang!” A woman with a short stature ran to him. “I don’t know what’s happening! All of a sudden, the files— the memories, they’re burned!”*

*“Judge Pao!” The King called, gazing firmly at the Yama of the **Infernal Bureaucracy**, who wore his iconic zhanjiao futou hat, in all its glory.*

*“Yes, my King,” Judge Pao bowed.*

*“Seek to it that you assist in the entry of the souls,” he ordered, “Your mystery-solving skills are unparalleled. I choose you to help retrieve their memories and record their files in time for their judgement to be passed by me.”*

*The King’s words were final, disappearing in blazes of scarlet flames.*

~

**soul #0001**

I groan, eyes fluttering open. “Where am I... ”

I sit up and look around, taking in my surroundings: a white ceiling, a white floor, white pillars, a white table...nevermind.

However, at the center of it all is a man surrounded with an azure glow that adds to his intimidating stature. He stands tall and proud, with his zhanjiao futou hat precisely upright and a moustache and beard engulfed in gentle, sapphire embers.

“I am Judge Pao. Yama of the Infernal Bureaucracy!” His proud voice booms loudly amongst the white walls. “You have completed your journey in your tethered reality and it is time for your judgement.”

“Tethered reality? Judgement?” I shake my head, mouth agape. “Are you saying that I’m dead? Are you God?”

He nods. “But I am no God. I am only here to see your deeds before you are sent for judgement and your punishment is granted.”

“So the afterlife is true...”

“Enough chitchat! State your name.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, but my mind runs blank. “I... don’t remember.”

“I suppose we must do this differently,” the man merely huffs. “Let’s go on a walk, shall we?”

He snaps his fingers, sending strong gusts of wind flying across the room. I shield my eyes, shivering underneath my black dress suit. As quickly as it came, the wind dies out.

I peek through my fingers, temporarily blinded by a sudden gush of sunlight shining on my eyes. The aroma of wet leaves tickles my nose. I lower my arm slowly and remain speechless at the scenery before me. Tall, thin stumps of wood grow to the sky, branches reaching out from its stump like a maze of spiderwebs.

I look down. Crisp autumn leaves and dewy grass lay underneath my feet, glowing underneath sun rays. I look back up again, eyes locking on Judge Pao.

“I will require your assistance to seek your truths,” Judge Pao says, “The records of your life have been destroyed. Thus, you must recollect your memories for me to pass judgement. Do I speak plain?”

“Not in the slightest,” I admit, “I have so many questions...”

“Simply behold,” Judge Pao gestures to the scenery. “Nature has always surrounded you. In every step you take, in every sight you see. It is the core that created your world. I wish for you to seek deep into your heart as to what calls for you.

I don't speak, staring back at the view before me. The faint melody of birdsongs flow through the forest air, mixing in with the buzz of cicadas.

“These are wonderful,” I say, smelling the fresh air. A comforting memory somehow returns to me.

*I run through a field of flowers, giggling at the brushing of the flower petals of my hands.*

*“Shi Caishen! Time to go home!”*

*“Five more minutes, mama!”*

“Shi Caishen,” I whisper. “I’m Shi Caishen.”

Judge Pao repeats my name slowly, “How curious. Shi Caishen. Ah,”

His face drops, “Were you not the leader of Nexus Corporation?”

“The leader of the... Nexus Corporation?” I murmur.

*“Save our forests!”*

A sudden wave of pain surges through my head, like a thousand needles poking my skull.

*“Stop deforestation! Stop Nexus Corp.! Protect the Daxinganling Larch Forest!”*

*“Today’s story is about the controversy surrounding Nexus Corporation from their \$500 million deforestation plan of the Daxinganling Forest. Numerous protests have been held in recent weeks against this project. Shi Caishen, the CEO of Nexus Corporation, has not commented on the public’s concerns...”*

“Pah! Yet another upper-class mogul.” Judge Pao scoffs. “I must admit this is a rather anticlimactic revelation.”

*I check my phone. 9:08 p.m. The alleyway is dark, but I have gone through this route thousands of times at this point, now it’s practically muscle memory. I reach into my purse for my keys.*

*Grk!*

*A hand covers my mouth, preventing any sound slip from my mouth. I panic and thrash about, clawing at the hand to release me. The assailant wraps their arm around my neck. My breathing is restricted and starts to get erratic. My muffled shouts are muted, I can't breathe...*

"I was murdered." I mumble.

"Hm?"

"I was murdered for my corporate misdeeds." I fall to my knees, staring at the forest before me. "What have I done?"

*"Mama, one day, I want to take over the flower shop!"*

*I hear a gentle chuckle. "I'm sure you would bring the family business honour."*

"Destroying nature is a heinous sin, and you not only encouraged it, you funded it." Judge Pao shakes his head in disapproval.

*"Mama?" A chill goes down my spine as I open her bedroom door. As I go inside, my foot steps on a piece of crumpled paper. Bending down, my smile falters once I realise what it reads.*

*PETITION TO FILE FOR BANKRUPTCY.*

"I didn't know what to do!" I sob, tears trickling down my face. "Is it also a heinous sin to care for one's family, Judge Pao? Is my motivation so wrong?"

The judge's jaw tightens at my question.

"You did it for... love," Judge Pao mutters lowly. "Not money."

"Does that make me such a horrible person?"

He grumbles again, stroking his chin.

"I am only here to help you regain your memories. And now that they have been bestowed upon you, your judgement will soon be passed. There, you will get your answers. But know this..."

"Rabbits and foxes worry when the grassland dies. In protecting those you love, you have also exchanged the lives of those in nature. Should you be reincarnated once more, will you atone for those sins? Will you protect the lives of those bigger than yourself?"

He radiates a beam of light, casting it towards me. "Think of this as you journey through the depths of the underworld."

~

"Judge Pao! We discovered the root cause of the fire!" An assistant scurries over to the judge, handing him a report.

As the judge reads it, his face simply crunches up in disappointment.

"Wyrmlings." The judge hisses. "Those pesky little dragons. To think they created such a deadly inconvenience."

"It is an unfortunate accident. However, the good news is that we retrieved some remnants of the next soul's file!"



She hands him a paper on a clipboard, burnt and charred in most of its parts, leaving only one section untainted:

*Died during his proposal to his girlfriend.*

**soul #0002**

“I am Judge Pao. Yama of the Infernal Bureaucracy!”

I blink awake. I tilt my head up and see a fancy old man with a large hat enveloped in a blue hue.

“You have completed your journey in your tethered reality and it is time for your judgement.”

“What’s going on?”

“You have passed on. I am here to assist in recollecting your memories before judgement is made.”

I stare at him, taking in the frightening aura of the man who holds my fate in his hands.

“It will do you no good to gawk like a fish out of water.” He admonishes. “Now, state your name.”

“Shen Junjie.”

Strangely, the man exhales in relief.

“Tell me, what do you remember?”

I think back, trying to recall my most recent memories, but all I do remember is my name.

“Nothing.” I admit apologetically.

The man nods understandingly, albeit frustrated. He opens the palm of his hand. A ball of light sparkles on it, eventually fading and revealing a small, velvet box.

“Open it.”

I take the box from his hands. Slowly, I open it, revealing a silver ring.

I gape at the jewellery, blinking up at him in confusion. “I’m sorry, but I have no interest—”

“Are you daft?” The man fiercens his glare. “Look closely. Try to remember.”

I squint at the ring, taking it out of the box. I stare at it, long and hard. Suddenly, a voice rings in my head.

*“Marry me, Minghua!”*

*The skyline is bright with lights under the night sky and the atmosphere fills with bustling traffic.*

My breath hitches. “Shanghai. I had a girlfriend.” I say. “I was going to propose there.”

The judge nods, snapping his fingers. A gust of wind swirls around the room and I cover my ears at its screeching whistle.

The familiar skyline now stands before me and a vivid memory paints in my mind.

*The woman scorns. “Stop following me! I refuse to follow through with this arranged marriage any longer!”*

“Do you remember anything?”

I gasp, breaking into a cold sweat. “Y—yes.”

*“You have no choice!” I retort. “My family paid yours a hefty bride price!”*

*“And you will get it back!”*

*“Don’t lie to me, you thief!”*

“Well, what is it?” The judge prods.

I swallow thickly, remembering that judgement awaits me. The very thought of it makes my legs tremble.

“We were happy.” The lie rolls out of my tongue like sand.

“Happy? And how did you die?”

*I grasp ahold of her wrist. “Don’t walk away!”*

*“Don’t touch me!” She shrieks, flailing out of my grip. We struggle by the sidewalk before she breaks free, pushing me away.*

*I stagger backwards clumsily and hear the honk of a car. When I turn, headlights flash before me.*

“She killed me!” I seethe, pointing at the sidewalk to the judge. “There! Right there!”

But the judge only shoots me a skeptical look. “You just told me that you were happy.”

“Yes! But she took me by surprise and pushed me on the road! She wanted to keep my money!”

The memory only serves to fuel the fire that boils in my body. “She killed me! She’s the one who’s supposed to die!”

“Calm yourself,” The judge warns.

“No!” I spit, grabbing hold of the man’s collar. “Take me back! She’s the one who deserves punishment!”

“Enough!” He bellows. A gust of wind pushes me away from him with strong force and I fall down on the ground.

He gazes down at me condescendingly. “You seek vengeance. That in itself is a wicked sin. And you attempted to feign deceit of your happiness! Only a fool tries to trick a Yama such as I!”

“I didn’t want to die! I had so much to live for!”

“You had a vision for a bright future. How far you have fallen to spiral into vengeful hatred.”

“I’m sorry...” I wail. “I’m so sorry...”

“It is a pity,” A beam of light emits from his hands and he points it at me. “But your lie deems your testimony invalid. Your judgement is now ready to be passed.”

~

“You seem down, Judge Pao.” The clerk says.

Judge Pao sighs. “Over the millenia I have reigned the Infernal Bureaucracy, it is only now that I question our efficacy.”

He takes off his hat, staring at it wistfully. "For so long, I have only been tasked with the punishment of souls as they prepare for reincarnation. I did it as a chore, questioning not their story. I was a renowned judge of the humans once. Yet... I have forgotten the nuances behind humanity. Is the rich always driven by money? Is a lover always driven by love?"

"There are millions of souls that come here every day. We are unable to unveil their character one by one."

"If I am unable to judge someone by the depths of their heart," Judge Pao murmurs. "What kind of judge am I?"

**soul #0003**

A sharp pain surges through my head. I feel nauseous, like I'm about to hurl any second.

"I am Judge Pao, Yama of the Infernal Bureaucracy!" A loud voice startles me. "You have completed your journey in your tethered reality and it is time for your judgement."

I stay silent in shock. His face falters from the silence, so he slowly sits back down and clears his throat.

"Nevertheless, state your name."

My name? Well, it's...

"Tian Yongnian." I absorb the man's outfit. He wears a long, black robe decorated with a looming golden dragon print covering the front, cloaked in a sombre glow.

"You're not a human." I blurt out. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

"You're a fast one." The judge raises an eyebrow. "You are rather calm in absorbing this news."

"I don't know why. But some part of me doesn't feel surprised."

"Does this mean you remember who you are?"

"Not really. However, there is something that echoes in me." I smile at him wearily. "I killed somebody."

The judge's face falters before hardening into a steely gaze. "So you remember yourself to be a murderer. It is a strict boundary of the underworld that we grant the severest form of punishment to those who take away the lives of others."

I nod complacently. "It's to be expected."

"That being said, it is strange how you confess so overtly." Judge Pao strokes his chin. "It intrigues me."

He stretches out his hands and the pearl white walls of the room become painted with red.

Almost as red as...

*"I have to prepare your next blood transfusion, Meili."*

*"Doctor..."*

I wince, rubbing my throbbing head.

"I see, I was a doctor."

"A doctor?" Judge Pao's voice is laced with growing curiosity.

He snaps his fingers and the room turns cold and windy. I wrap my arms around my body to ease its shivering from the cold.

Suddenly, we are brought within the walls of a hospital. Patients of different genders and ages lie across white, identical beds.

As my eyes land on a young woman, my head throbs in pain once more.

*“Doctor...” Meili breathes raggedly. “My body... it will never recover, will it?”*

*“You mustn’t lose hope—”*

*“I have clung onto that shred of hope for five years, but my state only deteriorates.” A tear beads down from the corner of her eye. “It is sad, but... I prefer to rest in peace rather than writhe in torment for the years to come, knowing that... my death is inevitable at the end.*

*“I have already said my goodbyes. I want to sleep happily with these final memories.”*

*Her teary eyes now mirror mine as I nod. “I’m sorry.”*

Judge Pao hums as I explain to him my memories.

“I see. This is not a murder, after all.” He says, frowning at me. “But this does not explain your death.”

I scan around the hospital room, wondering if it will trigger any memories. And as soon as I catch the heart rate monitor, the pain stabs my mind once again.

*“He’s been overworked! We should have seen this coming! Quick! The defibrillators!”*

*My consciousness withers away, despite the electricity that surges through my chest.*

*“It’s not working!”*

*My heart aches. Aches at the electricity, but more so... aches with grief.*

*I could not save everyone. What kind of doctor am I...*

I chuckle emptily despite the ache in my head. “A heart attack. It is quite ironic.”

The judge says nothing.

“You do not seem pleased. I apologise if you wanted to torture me... If that’s what you do in the underworld.”

He shoots me an unamused look. “We do not relish in your torment. We only grant punishment to serve a lesson for the soul before they are reincarnated and brought anew.”

He purses his lips. “This accident has truly stirred new questions as to how we manage afterlife affairs, even to its strictest rules.”

“Accident?”

He waves his hand dismissively. “The strategies of life is to follow upright ways. You have done your best in upholding this.”

“Did I?” I murmur.

“You have.” He gazes intensely at me, but I wonder if he says those words more to himself.

“These memories suffice!” The judge declares. A ball of light summons from his hands. “Your judgement will soon be passed.”

~

“The issue is almost resolved!” His assistant beams. “We can go back to business soon!”

“I see.” But Judge Pao does not feel any form of relief.

Instead, he ponders. Upon helping the souls reveal their memories, it has also revealed the fallacies of their system. The souls are punished without knowing what they are punished for.

Perhaps interacting with the souls is key to a better system. Doesn't it serve more justice to hear their stories through their eyes rather than piles of paper? Do they not deserve to be listened to about their motivations?

He has seen how the souls process their grief as they are exposed to their sins. It also revealed their true character, whether it be for better or for worse.

He walked with the humans for a long time, fighting for justice and betterment of the people. And his job must not end, even after death.

He puts on his hat, ready to change the system once more. He heads in protest to the ruler of the underworld through the Courts of Hell.

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Jo, Abigail – 15*

People are so quick to think well of others.

People are too eager— too hasty— to project their excuses onto their peers, and to see virtue in an act without righteousness. Trust taints people, like bird droppings marring a window that they refuse to wipe clean, only because they cannot bear to lay their eyes upon what lies behind it.

Of course, they allow themselves to believe that they are sympathetic and understanding creatures. People are humans, after all, with humanity.

I am not deceived! People are prideful and the thoughts of each and every one of them centre around themselves.

Yes, what is common to all people is that they are selfish vermin, who gaze upon the eyes of others and see reflected in the irises only themselves. An insult to another is an affront to their own ego, and they deem it empathy.

I am alone in that I am no thrall to such delusions. Whose blood, after all, fills my body, uncontaminated? It is that of the legendary Judge Pao— undiluted in my arteries and my veins despite forty generations of intermixing with its lessers. Where my associates may have been bestowed, fresh out of the womb, with power and repute, I was blessed with a uniquely dexterous mind— a weapon pre-honed by birthright.

Yet those delusions are not humanity's greatest offence. No, indeed, there exists a more sinister affront to truth, in that people are simply too ready to think well of themselves!

In spite of all this, it is evident that I do not suffer from this plague. I do not rush to play make believe with my neighbours and pretend they possess a communal goodness of heart.

I, like Judge Pao before me, see the corruption of a soul for what it is!

And corruption sits smugly before me at this very moment. The corners of his mouth dance in a wicked smirk that twists my own lips into a frown, and his eyes taunt me to defy him.

The defendant— the criminal— shifts his weight back in a clear act of defiance. He thinks he can escape my shrewdness. How dare he?

“A life sentence for Mr Roger Ko!”

The warping of Mr Ko's features in that moment was a glorious one that satisfied me to no end, with his flesh contorting hideously in a manner that could almost reflect his vile inner self.

A woman among the jury leaps up in futile protest. I detest the disgusted horror that almost contaminates her countenance.

“But Your Honour—”

“The objection is denied! The case is settled.”

A shrivelled old man throws himself at my feet. I recoil in response.

“Please I beg of you, Your Honour! My son may be a thief, but he's a good kid! He's not a bad person; he can always make amends—”

I am decidedly unimpressed.

“Does your hearing fail you? The case is settled.”

The crowd clamours for my attention as I exit the courtroom in a huff. Distasteful how they almost chase after me, throats burning for acknowledgement, eyes and arms pleading even against the unfeeling glass of my car window. My nose wrinkles and I ram my right foot down with the force of a beast cornered. Bird droppings would be preferable to this filth—

I feel it before I see it: my vehicle battling an unyielding speed, my body flung into the air, my seatbelt vying to keep me strapped down— vying, and failing.

My eyes, flying open, are greeted by the familiar structure of a grand court building before me, albeit carved out of wood and not marble, and lavishly adorned with jade and terracotta so unlike the efficient trimness that I have grown accustomed to in Hong Kong.

I unseat myself from a humiliating prostration on an unwelcoming tiled floor. Strangers swarm and mingle around me, yet I am decidedly uncontacted as my apparent compatriots seem to avoid me by instinct, like fledgling birds gingerly flitting in and out of range of a well-placed strike. The flutter of calligraphed paper against wood beckons my attention.

Ornate Chinese script informs me that I am, in fact, in Hell.

More specifically, I have been placed in a specific Department of Hell, lovingly deemed the Infernal Bureaucracy by Chinese culture. It is a location I am, in concept, well-acquainted with, having descended from the Department's just and all-seeing Judge Pao, of course.

I realise that I appear to have died. I suppose the handprints against my cracked car window will reflect merely another death to be chalked up to human pride.

In my contemplation I fail to notice the guards pushing past the other souls to my little bubble, but soon after, I am whisked toward the court building and thrown into the doorway.

The gate slams shut behind me.

Tentatively, I direct my line of sight up to meet the penetrating glare of the imposing figure looming over my form.

His face sparks no memory in my mind, and his frame is decidedly undistinctive, yet intuitively a name surfaces from among my thoughts.

"Let's see," Judge Pao held my gaze as he pulled out a scroll, "Ah, here it is."

I catch the subtle twitches of muscle that reveal my ancestor's growing contempt as he leafs through the parchment. His face finally stills, settling into an expression entirely devoid of warmth.

"You are not worthy even of a pauper's life. For you, the suffering of a powerless animal is the most suitable sentence!"

"But Your Honour—"

"Have you any objections?"

I inhale sharply.

"Your Honour, is it not your child who stands before your omniscience at this instance? Do you not recognise your flesh and blood?"

"You are no child of mine! Had I not said that he who shares not my values is not my descendant?"

"I've not done wrong in my life! I dedicated my very existence to bringing justice to a world of disorder; like you before me, I punished sinners for their transgressions, and rightfully so!"

"Is this what you deem justice?" Judge Pao slams the scroll before me. I grasp at the parchment, scanning the ink that stained it, which lists a number of my actions and thoughts in life.

"Besides, blood and flesh are tethered to the mortal realm. If you are still unaware, you are lacking the necessary... qualifications of a living being." His visage reveals no emotion, but I detect the mocking veiled behind his words. "I have reincarnation laws to thank for the removal of this contaminant to my bloodline."

The words are stolen from my breath as I gawk at the cruel Yama.

"I must say I am unsurprised at your reluctance to speak. Although, to assign credit where it's due, it is true— people are simply too ready to think well of themselves!"

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Ko, Chloe – 15*

Corruption was rampant in ancient China. If you weren't siphoning money out of the pockets of the poor, you would become one yourself. It was incredibly difficult to find an honest person, which is why poems and novels back then seem to over glorify them. Judge Pao was no different; his praises are still being sung now.

'Any of my descendants who commits bribery as an official shall not be allowed back home nor buried in the family burial site. He who shares not my values is not my descendant.'

The origin of some of his parting words though, will be the focus for this tale.

'Work is such a pain,' a lackadaisical voice sounded from within one of the many rooms hosting government officials. 'I don't understand why we couldn't just ext—' 'Keep your voice down!' That sentence was suddenly cut off by another, more panicked and sterner voice. 'We cannot, and I repeat, cannot, be found out about this.' They spoke, now, in hushed whispers.

'I hear there's some uncompromising judge in this sector, back before when we were transferred here...

Why can't we just do our things in peace?' 'Because it's illegal? How do you not get—' The man sighed.

'Why am I even doing this with you as a partner? Anyways, his name is Judge Pao, and—' The other man, at those words, let out an audible exclamation.

'Pao Zheng? As in Uncle Pao?'

The bright moonlight that night, coupled with a light breeze, could in no doubt calm the mind. The conversation inside the room, though, could not be tenser.

'Well, I figure that we could do it anyways, y'know, 'cause he'd definitely... let us get off easy, right? We're related and stuff.' 'Are you really sure about this? He's supposed to be the toughest judge the court's ever seen.' A thump, much akin to someone flopping down on their bed, could be heard. 'Who cares?'

Everyone's doing it. Extortion is no crime when you have a bit of money and connections.' 'He's your uncle, so I guess I'll trust your judgement on that one. You're close?' 'Yeah! Definitely! My parents visit him frequently. I'm sure he'll let his nephew get down on some cash.'

'What do you mean? What's this, it ain't even half of what we agreed on!' 'They— they said they don't have anything left!' The dull sound of body hitting the wall could be heard, coupled with accusatory yelling.

'Deal with it then! Sell their organs or something! It's your side of the province; I dealt with mine! It's not like I had it any easier!' The door creaked open, and heavy footsteps exited. Brushing dust off his clothes, the other man sighed. 'Deal with it, huh...'

'What... what is this?' 'Ah! God, you scared me. I— I can explain...' Taking a step back, the soles of the man's shoes were stained red. 'This... is a dead man.' A pair of shaky voices came from a messy, crowded shack. 'What did you do?' 'It wasn't my fault! He— he refused to hand out his valuables!' 'So you killed him? Look around! Does he look like he has any valuables?' 'Hey, you said 'deal with it', what was I supposed to do?' 'Not murder!' 'It was just... an accident.'

'Stop resisting!' Heavy, wooden cuffs were slammed onto the men's wrists. 'Please— it wasn't me!' 'Leave your pleas to the court.'

'Oh... oh....' Loud footsteps pace back and forth within a damp cell. 'Shut up! Will you stop doing that for a moment?' The rattling of iron against cold stone silenced the man. 'The death penalty... And it's all your fault.' 'Wha— And it's mine? Was I the one who pressured myself to, oh, you know, commit murder?' As the two men argued, heavy, muffled steps approached them. A clatter jolted them both back to reality. In the all too silent cell block, the official's gruff voice, and the cold sweat of the men clashing with the stone floors were all that one could hear.

*'Ah... I hope the judge is bribable. In fact, I'm sure he is. There's corruption everywhere— with the money we've extorted, maybe...'*

..Judge Pao.'

The muscles that were once tense in the men's faces melted down into a puddle of relief. Holding his breath, the man grabbed the shoulders of the other. 'Your... uncle?' 'Ah...'



'Come in. ' A stern, deep voice prompted the opening of the heavy wooden doors that lead the way to the judge's room. Guards thrust the men down, their knees hitting the floor planks. 'Please! Hear us out! 'Y— Yeah! I'm your nephew, remember?' Even as the judge exuded an aura of righteousness, the men shamelessly cut in with their implorations. 'We, uh,' the nephew trailed off, looking at the guards nervously. To this, Judge Pao only raised an eyebrow— as if already condemning him to guilt. After all, what could he possibly say to prove his innocence, that he would not even bring up in front of the guards?

Regardless, Judge Pao decided that he wished to hear this 'story' of theirs, and sent the guards out to standby. The ease the men felt at this moment could be seen by the judge, a sight all too familiar to him. 'The evidence I was presented with is very solid, still, what more do you wish to add?' A solitary, uncomfortable chuckle rung in the chamber. 'Ah... About that...' The other man felt as if he had to interrupt this travesty of a conversation. 'Don't you remember him? This is your nephew, no?' 'And?' The stare of the judge bore into him, searing with him deep embarrassment.

'We were thinking... About the trial, that you could perhaps let us off with something less than a death penalty... In regards to us being related and all.' Judge Pao's stern face instantly warped into one of fury. 'Of— of course; we'll let you in on 80%... no, 90% of our earnings!' 'You... dare come into this room, and demand I listen to you, your sacrilegious, pathetic excuse of a—' His words shot out faster, raining down on the men like hail. 'Guards! Bring them out!' Bursting into the room, armed members of the militia swiftly apprehended both men.

'You demon! He's your family! Have you no heart?' To this outburst, Judge Pao had only one response.

The trial passed like a daze. Even as they were strapped onto the execution block, the men spoke no word. 'The court finds you guilty...' A loud ringing sound echoed in their ears. As the rich, crimson spilled across the marble floors of the courthouse, all that was left was one sentence.

'He who shares not my values is not my descendant.'

# Judge Pao

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Lam, Yan Yan Ellis – 16*

After Judge Pao, China's famous supernatural judge, has retired, he's currently living a hermitage life.

One day, his neighbour who is a collector, reports that he lost some famous paintings from his collection. The collector says to judge Pao, 'Last night, it was the Lantern festival, so my wife and I went out for the whole night and came back home at midnight. I freshened up and quickly went to bed. Until this morning, when I was making an inventory of my collections, I found that some paintings were missing. I've never taken it out since I bought it. Nobody should have seen it before, not even my wife and servants. I wonder where they go?' Judge Pao undergoes a thorough investigation.

Judge Pao walks around the village, he meets a man called Zhang who sold the paint. Zhang said, 'The paint is valuable and was drawn by a famous painter. The collector bid for the portrait last week and received it a few days ago. I'm the one who handled the transaction. What's the problem, sir?' Judge Pao told him the collector's story. 'Oh.. I'm sorry to hear that. His collection would be perfect with this paint...' Zhang leaves with a very disappointed face. Judge Pao sees a deserted field, wondering if anyone is living there, he accidentally sees a canva on the ground. It is a paint, a blurry paint, drawings can barely be seen. According to the collector's description, it is a landscape portrait, which matches the one Judge Pao found on the ground. Therefore, judge Pao keeps it and shows it to the collector.

'It is! It is! Who is the thief? 'Ask the collector. 'I haven't found the thief yet. I saw the canva at a deserted land near Zhang's shop,' says Judge Pao. 'Zhang? He is suspicious. Yesterday, he wandered around my house surreptitiously,' says the collector. Judge Pao goes to Zhang's shop again, he asks, 'You went to the collector's house yesterday, didn't you?' Zhang nods his head. 'Why were you there? Did you steal the portrait?' Asks judge Pao. 'I just found that the portrait was actually fake. I'm afraid he will bide time for revenge,' says Zhang.

Zhang's reputation was destroyed after he was caught stealing the portrait. The collector says to Judge Pao, 'Blessed are those who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right.'

# Time Traveller

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Lee, Bernice – 15*

It was just another morning with the sun shining bright, the streets were crowded with people of all ages and birds chirping and flying above people's heads. "I bet there will be no cases to solve today!" Judge Pao's guard Zhan Zhao said it confidently. Judge Pao was about to say something but an old woman ran towards them with one hand dragging a person and another waving at them. "Judge Pao, Judge Pao, you must help me! This guy had stolen my buns. You must do justice to me!" The old woman with decent blue clothing yelled and kneeled down with her left hand clenching the other man's clothes. Surprisingly, the young man being clenched didn't say a thing but munching the buns from his hand.

"Weiiiiiiiiiiuuuuu..." the eight soldiers stand aside hitting the tip of the stick against the floor repeatedly. "So here we shall begin. What's your name, lady?" "Lin Qinyuan, judge." "And you, sir?" "Chen Ximin." "Miss Lin, please clearly explain what happened." "Judge, I was selling the buns I had made like usual just now. I was calling for customers to buy my buns, then I saw a fly. If the customers saw the fly flying around my buns, they surely would not buy the buns so I tried to kill the fly. While I was trying to kill the fly, a passer-by told me someone snatched a few buns of mine. Judge, this ain't just only a few buns, it's my effort that I woke up early where the sun didn't show up to make the buns. Please Judge, you must sentence him and don't give him any mercy!" the old woman sobbed and wiped her tears with her handkerchief. The crowd watching the judgement became pissed by Chen Ximin's acts and shouted, "Oh my gosh! How dared he stole the buns from the old pitiful woman! Judge Pao, you must sentence him!" "Tsk, he must have eaten the bear's heart and leopard's gall. He must have thought no one could see him doing such nasty behaviour." "Quiet! May I please have the witness to the court."

"Miss, what's your name?" "Bai Yi, judge." "Please state what you saw during that time." "Judge, I was walking on the street to search for some goods for tonight's meal, then I saw the old lady clapping left and right. I thought she was dancing and attracting consumers to buy the buns. But from what I have just heard, I believe she was killing the fly. Since buns aren't in the option list for tonight's dinner, I decided to walk away. Suddenly I saw something whooshing away the bun, it was his hand!" Bai Yi pointed at Chen Ximin's hand. "Ey, he can't defend himself from that." "Yah, he still has those buns in his hand and mouth till now." "He is surely guilty." "Guilty, guilty, guilty." The crowd started shouting.

"Silence!" Judge Pao shouted. "Chen Ximin, do you have any defence?" "Nope, but can I ask you some questions?" "Yes?" "Do you believe in time travelling?" "This is not relevant to the case." "I mean you might not believe this but I'm actually from the future." Judge Pao was puzzled. Same as the crowd. "No way," one of the people from the crowd said, "he must be acting as a mad person in order to escape from punishment." "I am really from the future and I can tell you all about the future! I don't have money nor shelter for me to sleep. I didn't want to steal this lady's food but I was too hungry. I hadn't eaten or drunk anything for three days!" "Chen Ximin, if you said you are from the future, is there any proof that shows that? This is a court, everything needs evidence here." "No, I don't, my clothes turned into this one and all my personal belongings were lost! But you must believe me! You are Judge Pao, right? A lot of people knew you for being a great judge in the future for judging things right and without doing crimes. I know stealing the buns ain't right but can you help me find the way back to the future please." Chen Ximin started to get anxious and stuttered while begging Judge Pao. "If that's so, where did you find yourself when you came here?" "In the forest at night. I didn't remember where exactly I was, but I put a mark there so that I could have a higher chance to go back to the future." "Please bring us along to the forest you had just mentioned."

"Judge Pao, we had searched in this whole area but didn't find any clues or marks." a soldier said while panting. The soldiers searched for the whole afternoon without resting. "It's already late at night, everyone let's go and search tomorrow and Chen Ximin will be staying at my place tonight." "Yes, Judge Pao!"

"Judge Pao, are you really believing in Chen Ximin's words?" Zhan Zhao asked. It's already the next morning and they went to the forest again to search for the mark. "Nothing is impossible, Zhan Zhao." "Report, Judge Pao, there is a drawing of a stickman with a circle above its head on a tree." "Yah Yah it must be my drawing, it took me a long time to carve it." Chen Ximin said it with excitement. All of them went to the tree mentioned looking at the drawing. "Why do you draw this instead of a cross? And why did you add a ring above its head?" Judge Pao wondered. "Well, I think a cross is harder to find and the

ring is just a decoration.” Chen Ximin shrugged. “Are there anything else around here then?” “No, Judge Pao,” said the soldiers.

After that, Judge Pao went back to his residence with Zhan Zhao and Chen Ximin. “Chen Ximin, since you said you do not have any place or money, you can become a soldier of mine and maintain the security of my residence. “Okay, no problem.” “Judge Pao, are you sure you’re gonna leave him here? He might steal things from you or even kill you.” Zhan Zhao questioned. “I asked others but no one claimed that they saw him before. No matter what I felt like I should give him a helping hand. Still we need to search for Chen Ximin’s identity. Ah, can you also help me to pay back Lin Qinyuan for the buns Chen Ximin ate.” “Yes, Judge Pao.” Zhan Zhao said it respectfully.

“Judge Pao, Judge Pao!” a soldier ran in front of him nervously. It has already been a month since Chen Ximin worked as a soldier in Judge Pao’s residence. There are other cases Judge Pao dealt with during the month but only Chen Ximin’s case is still in the solving state. “Chen Ximin was lost. We’ve found everywhere in the residence but there ain’t a clue where he could be at. Sorry, Judge Pao.” “Tell everyone to find Chen Ximin now!” Judge Pao demanded.

Chen Ximin was nowhere to be found. There were lots of rumours about his identity. Some said he was just an insane person and his family secretly brought him back home. Some said he was a spy from another country that used up all his money and was found stealing the buns, then he went back to the country secretly to prevent himself being killed. While some believed his words that he was really from the future. Chen Ximin’s case was closed secretly by saying that the incident was a misunderstanding in order to let the people in future believe that it was an ordinary case. The papers about Chen Ximin were secretly burned but rumours about him continued to spread till now.

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Leung, Ngai Kiu Jade – 16*

Judge Pao, a godsend to all citizens, superhero, China's Sherlock Holmes, unlike Superman, he really existed.

With the supernatural power he has, he travelled to modern society in an instant. Born with a righteous and kind heart, all the citizens are so excited as Judge Pao presided over a lot of justice for the society.

A Pakistani girl came to look for Judge Pao, with tears welling up in her eyes, her words broke up and all she could produce were stuttering sounds. Judge Pao immediately comforted her and asked her what happened. "I am proud of myself for being a Pakistani but I have been discriminated against and treated unfairly at work," she sobbed. "Although I have quit my job, I didn't want anyone else who has a different ethnicity to go through that, so please, you must help us to uphold justice!" The Pakistani girl cried.

The girl worked in a traditional Chinese restaurant, but her boss claimed that if she wore a hijab (a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women.), it would affect the restaurant's business. Therefore, the owner forced her to take off her hijab immediately. Her colleagues even made fun of her accent and said disparaging things about her country.

"Not only this, some money was stolen from the Chinese restaurant last week, my boss accused me of stealing without figuring out the truth. I denied and asked what evidence he had. I am an honest worker, I just wouldn't do something like that, but he didn't trust me. Do you know how uncomfortable I am?" she wept.

"I am so sorry for that," said Judge Pao, pulling his eyebrow flatly, moving his head and body oriented forward to give her a hug. He knows that racial discrimination is a severe issue in this modern city. Despite Hong Kong being a multi-cultural country, but ethnic minorities are still being treated unfairly. Judge Pao took a deep breath, determined to put the suspect to justice. He ordered his guards to bring the restaurant owner up.

Soon, this case has received a lot of attention from the public.

This disrespectful and shameful restaurant owner was brought to Judge Pao's interrogation place, but this audacious man seems to have no remorse for his behaviour. "Racism should be stopped," Justice Pao couldn't wait to say, "Yes, People may have differences in terms of culture, skin colour or belief, but those are not valid grounds for injustice and unfairness among the people, right? Can't we respect and appreciate cultural diversity and accord dignity to other people's values and beliefs.?"

After several attempts, the guilt-ridden restaurant owner apologised for his shameless behaviour. A smile finally appeared on the Pakistani girl's face, she quickly thanked Justice Pao for his help. All the citizens were happy for the Pakistani girl as well. In a blink of an eye, the city was filled with happiness. Justice Pao became the national hero in China.

After the completion of his task, with his superpower again, Judge Pao returned to the Song Dynasty.

The city was full of racial discrimination originally, but thanks to our hero Judge Pao, people began to respect ethnic minorities and accept cultural differences. They not only promote race equality, but also, they live together in harmony again.

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Lui, Hei Yiu – 16*

During Song Renzong's reign, there was a child outside Duanzhou City. His father made a living by selling fried glutinous rice cakes. One day, the child helped his father to sell on the street. The business was very good on this day, and they were all sold out just after noon. On the way home, the child felt a little tired, so he sat down on a big rock to rest, and started beating involuntarily. When he woke up, the child cried loudly.

Judge Pao happened to pass by, so he asked Ma Han to ask about the situation. The child cried and said to Judge Pao, "Master, the copper coins I earned from selling fried glutinous rice cakes were stolen, and my father will definitely beat me when I go back." Judge Pao. After Zheng heard this, he decided to help the child. He thought for a while, and when he had an idea, he asked Chao Chao and Ma Han to carry the rock to the house, saying that he was going to judge him.

For a while, news of Judge Pao's trial of the rock was spread all over the streets and alleys. The next day, people rushed to watch. They wanted to see how Judge Pao would solve the case this time. Judge Pao sat in the courtroom, slapped the gavel, and said in a loud voice: "Rock, the child dozed off on you, and the money disappeared when he woke up. Did you steal it? Get it quickly, or else, I will reward you with thirty big boards."

Judge Pao asked three times, but the rock was still silent. Judge Pao ordered his men to hit the rock with thirty slaps. Judge Pao said: "I can't judge this rock anymore. Can everyone here give this child a penny so that he can have an explanation with his father. Thank you everyone."

The villagers are usually taken care of by Judge Pao, so of course they are willing to help at this time, so they throw each penny into the bucket filled with water at the door, but when there is a copper coin, a layer of oil floats on the water, and Judge Pao roars: "Hurry up and arrest this guy, he is the one who stole the money!" This person did not admit it. Judge Pao said: "I have counted the money the child sells fried glutinous rice cakes, and there are mimeographs on every penny. Now your money has this situation also, how to explain it?" The person who invested money finally admitted.

The villagers respected Judge Pao even more, and they all said that Judge Pao was a good official.

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Wong, Long Ho Louis – 15*

It was an ordinary night in the peaceful country of China. Everyone was sound asleep, rats scurried to scavenge for scrap and crows nested atop the roofs of people's homes. It was then when an ear-piercing scream roared throughout the village of Shanzhou, waking people from their slumbers and frightening all the critters back into their shelters. As people exited their homes in an attempt to find the source of the scream, an elderly woman by the name of Fa Puo caught something at the corner of her eye, behind her house was her female neighbour, Kai, kneeling over what was seemingly her husband's corpse. Noticing this, the old woman cried out to the other villagers who quickly took action. Some of them comforted the young lady, some of them quickly returned home into hiding. However, something that none of the villagers noticed, was a cloaked shadowy figure standing amongst the crowd, spectating throughout the entire event. Just like that, the once calm and quiet village of Shanzhou entered into a frenzy.

The next day, the righteous Judge Pao was walking around the outskirts of town, accompanied by a few of his assistants. Planted around the village walls were thin, wiry, evergreen vines with golden yellow flowers growing along them. A gardener nearby was tending to the flowers, he was wearing dirty brown overalls with a straw hat attached to his neck. When Judge Pao consulted her regarding the flowers, he cheerfully replied with enthusiasm, the two chatted for a while when an elderly lady ran out to Judge Pao in a panic and asked "You're Judge Pao, right? Please help us, my neighbour recently died of unknown causes. As the country's genius, you should be able to figure this out, right?" With a concerned look on his face, Judge Pao immediately asked the woman where the body was. When they arrived at the crime scene, the husband's body was laying face first, amongst a pool of blood, there was a sharp dagger on the ground right next to the body, which has multiple lacerations on the back. The widow was standing next to the wall, crying into her arms when Judge Pao consulted her, "Ms.Kai, I presume. Can you tell me where you were when the murder happened?" To which she replied, "I was in my house cleaning, me and Go, my husband had just finished dinner so my husband was going out to the well to get some water for tomorrow and I was cleaning the tables and dishes. I didn't hear anything from him so I went out to check and that was when I found him dead, just a few steps outside our back door." "Woof! Bark! Bark!" A ferocious hound barked at Judge Pao, bearing its teeth. "Hey! Stop! Sit!" commanded Kai, "I am so sorry, this is our guard dog, she's not friendly to strangers. If only he could speak, as he is always awake, keeping watch for us against potential thieves..." As they were talking, the gardener from before had followed Judge Pao to the crime scene, "Hey Kai, I am so sorry for your loss," said the gardener, "Oh! Judge Pao, forgot to tell you, the name's Bei. Her family and I are childhood friends, Go and I used to go hunting for wild animals when we were young. Of course, he was the hunter, I was mostly just the bait. Anyways, how is the investigation going?" To which Judge Pao refused to answer and only replied "I am going to look around the village for some clues, please go and rest, the two of you."

As Judge Pao walked around the village, he ordered his two assistants to stay around Go's wife and the neighbouring old lady as they are potential suspects, to which the two followed. As Judge Pao wandered alone, he came across a shopkeeper selling newspapers when he noticed had a prosthetic wooden leg. When Judge Pao consulted him regarding it, the shopkeeper stated, "I lost my leg because one time when I was in the wilds hiking, I was bitten by a venomous snake on the shin. I was going to die but fortunately, Bei was there. He gave me some sort of medicine which removed all the pain from me when he cut my leg off. He then bandaged me up and I am only alive today thanks to him." Judge Pao made note of the event and continued to walk around the village and eventually walked back into the outskirts. That was when he found a tree surrounded by drawings of Go, Bei, and Kai when they were young, but what was inside a secret hole carved into the tree was what was interesting. It was an old letter written for Kai. After all that, Judge Pao left for the city with his two assistants.

The next day, Judge Pao and his assistants returned to the village with a bunch of state officers. Surprising everyone, everyone was wondering if they had found out who the killer was. That was when Judge Pao yelled, "Mister Bei Fund Gong, you are currently under arrest for a murder against Go Pak Hei!" To everyone's surprise, the state officers immediately put Bei in shackles. "What? How do you know that it's me?" Bei shouted, to which Judge Pao answered "The moment you met me, you have messed up, according to the first words you said to Kai, it shows that before meeting me, you already knew about the murder, yet you were strangely cheery. As a gardener, you most likely have extensive knowledge about plants, sadly for you, me too. The vines outside the village walls are called Gelsemium Elegans, they are a

toxic yet beneficial type of plant which if ground into a powder can paralyze a person, leading to death. I'm sure you knew about this as it also has pain relieving attributes, so you used it to help your shopkeeper friend. From the backstory you gave me, there was no way a person can just overpower Go, thus it must've been a poisoning, his wife also stated that they had dinner before his death, I'm certain someone poisoned his meal then. Then there's the issue of their guard dog, there's no way a stranger could've entered the house without him barking, but a "childhood friend of the owner" could probably pass with no issue. I did some snooping around and that night, people in the village, only heard a single womanly scream. Thus, they were no way Go didn't scream when he was slashed with that dagger, further proving the poisoning plot. The dagger and the lacerations were most likely red herrings, done after his death, and were meant to throw us off the trail. For the motive, that was the tricky part, however, a stroke of luck came by and I managed to find this letter of yours, inside was a love letter written to Kai when you both were still young. You murdered Go out of jealousy, didn't you!" "I admit defeat, you managed to find out about my entire plan, but Kai, all I've done is for you!" Bei yelled at her, to which she only stared at him in disgust. "Do you really think she'll ever love you when you killed her husband?" scolded Judge Pao, "You'll be going away for a long time, you monster!" yelled the crowd.

And so, another unusual case has been solved by the genius and righteous Judge Pao, and justice was brought to those unjust. After all that, Judge Pao returned to his post in the city for another long day of work. "Frightening the lengths people will go to for love, eh?" remarked Judge Pao, to which his two assistants nodded. Judge Pao then said, "Alright, what's my next case?".



# The Soldier's Fate

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Woon, Jia Wen Mirabelle – 16*

Throughout my career as a criminal investigator, I have encountered numerous appalling, some merely unusual, along with a few exceptionally perplexing cases enough to drive one to their wit's end. Of all these adventures, however, none could promise to be as singular and extraordinary as the one I am about to recall.

It was a bitterly cold December morning when I was paid a visit by my old schoolmate, Henry Lee at my office. I was joined by Pao Sir, the newly recruited chief superintendent of the police force. Well-known for solving the murder of the late actress Lisa Cheng as well as foiling an attempted robbery in the Arts and Cultural Museum, he was a well-respected figure among the public, whose humble nature won yet more admiration.

Our visitor arrived in a considerable state of agitation, quite unlike his usual steady countenance. After being offered a cup of hot tea, he finally began, "You see, William Yeung was my best mate. We served in the same squadron, and we shared the same joys and sorrows, having gone through the same rough patch. But then news came that he was hit by a bullet in action near India. When the war was over, I tried writing to his family for his whereabouts, but all I received was a curt reply, saying that he had gone on a long voyage, and it wasn't likely he would be back."

"But I wasn't satisfied with the answer," he continued. "The whole thing seemed a bit too unnatural," he said with stern eyes and his jaw set. "The way I know William, he wouldn't have left his friend like that. Then, again, I remembered that William never got on with his stern father, and it was likely that something must have happened between the two. Since then, I was determined to risk everything to get to the root of the matter."

"Well then, what have you done?" I asked.

"The first step of my investigation was to get to his home," he said. "I wrote to William's mother, who was kind enough to put me up for a few days. That was on Monday. When I arrived at the Yeungs' house—one of the finest mansions I've ever seen—I was greeted by the old butler and William's mother, as gentle and affectionate as a woman could be. But William's father was in stark contrast to his wife, and there was no question as to why William seldom spoke of his father. With hostile eyes, he glared at me from under his thick, heavy brows when we first met, but, deep down, I knew that nothing would dissuade me from fulfilling the purpose of my visit."

"The whole afternoon I tried inquiring about William from his family, but every time the topic was raised, it was quickly shunned as if to cover up some guilty secret. And yet, that night I was in my room anxiously pondering the matter when I looked up—and you wouldn't believe me when I say this—but there was William Yeung right there standing before me, with his face pressed against the window. Yet, his complexion told me that something was wrong. He was deadly pale—never had I seen a man so drained of colour. William sprang back when he saw that I was looking at him, and he vanished into the darkness."

"Instinctively, I dashed out of the room and ran down the garden path in the direction that I thought he might have taken. Despite the dim lighting, I could still discern a figure moving ahead of me. I ran on and called his name, but it was no use. When I got to the end of the path, there were several others branching in different directions to various outhouses. I stood hesitating, and as I did so, I heard distinctly the sound of a closing door. It was not behind me in the house, but ahead of me, somewhere in the darkness. But why on earth would William run away from me? There was nothing more I could do, and I spent an uneasy night turning the matter over in my mind, but no matter how hard I tried, I could not come up with any conclusion that satisfied me."

Pao Sir seemed deeply intrigued by Henry's story. "So, what did you do on the second day?" he inquired, with a mingled expression of interest and curiosity.

"The next morning, I got up early and explored the garden to see what I could find. There were several small outhouses, but at the far end of the garden covered by laurels was a detached building large enough for a gardener's residence. Could this be the place from where the sound of that shutting door emerged? As I approached it, a brisk, bearded man in a black coat and hat—evidently not the gardener type—came out of

the door. To my surprise, he locked it after him and put the key in his pocket. Then he looked at me with an expression that clearly spoke of suspicion.”

“He asked if I was a visitor here. I explained that I was and that I was a good friend of William’s. He nodded, then appeared to continue walking, but when I turned, I saw that he was standing watching me, half-concealed by the evergreens growing beside the main path.”

“I knew I might be ordered to leave if I was too bold in my investigation, so I strolled back to the house and waited for the night before I went on with my inquiry. When all was dark and quiet, I made my way as stealthily as possible to the outhouse.”

“Luckily enough, some light was breaking through one of the curtains, so I directed my attention upon this. From there I could see the inside of the room. There was the bearded man whom I had seen in the morning, but a second man was seated with his back to the window, and I could tell at first glance that this second man was William from the familiar silhouette. He was leaning upon his elbow in an attitude of great misery, with his body turned towards the fire. I was deliberating on what I should do next when there was a sharp tap on my shoulder, and there was William’s father himself beside me.”

“He was white with rage and spoke harshly, telling me that I had made the most inexcusable intrusion into the privacy of his family, and must, therefore, be asked to leave. With my visit cut short, I decided to come straight to you and ask for your advice on this matter.”

Pao Sir, who had been sitting in thoughtful silence, finally remarked, “The case certainly presents features of interest. We shall pay the house a visit, which I hope, will tie up all the loose ends of the matter.”

After a considerable drive, we finally arrived at the old manor which my friend had described. We were first introduced to the butler, who opened the door for us. He was wearing brown leather gloves, which at the sight of us he instantly removed, laying them down on the hall table as we passed in.

While we were crossing the magnificent hall, I saw Pao Sir walk towards the table as if strolling in a careless fashion. He placed his hat next to the butler’s gloves, which he accidentally knocked off the table, and quickly bent to pick them up.

Before I could recollect myself, the door flung open with a loud crash, and William’s father rushed in with a bristling beard and twisted features, as terrible an old man as ever I had seen.

“Have I not told you that you are warned off the premises?” the old man snarled furiously at Henry. “As to you, sir and madam,” turning towards me and Pao Sir, “I extend the same warning to you. I have full respect for your profession, but you must take your talents to some other field. There is no use for them here.”

“We will not leave,” retorted Henry firmly, “until I hear from William himself that he is under no restraint.”

With eyes of blazing fury, Mr. Yeung declared, “If you do not leave now, I will phone the police!”

“There will be no need for that,” Pao Sir returned calmly, putting his back to the door. “Any police interference would only lead to the very catastrophe which you dread.” Taking out his notebook swiftly, Pao Sir scribbled one word upon a loose sheet and handed it to Mr. Yeung. “That,” he said as he pointed at the paper, “is what has brought us here.”

The old man stared at the writing blankly with an expression that spoke of sheer amazement.

“How do you know?” he gasped, sitting down heavily in his chair.

“It is my business to know things, Mr. Yeung. It seems to me that if we already know so much, it is safer that we should know everything,” Pao Sir beckoned to him.

With a gesture of resignation, Mr. Yeung submitted after a long hesitation, “Well, if you wish to see William, you shall. It is not my will, but you have forced my hand.”

That afternoon, we were taken to the small lodge in which William resided. Henry was overjoyed at the prospect of seeing his old friend again but was certainly startled by the extraordinary appearance of his comrade. Mottled over William’s sunburned skin were curious whitish patches which had bleached his

skin. William later revealed to us that he came into contact with a leper patient after he was shot and was already afflicted with late-stage leprosy by the time he could safely leave the front.

“Absolute secrecy was needed, or I would be forced into segregation for life. Yes, even you, Henry, had to be kept in the dark.” William said as we all sat down around the fire.

While the two friends were reminiscing about their fond memories, Pao Sir and I took a stroll in the garden.

“It’s certainly a pity that this story has come to a tragic end,” Pao Sir began.

“One could never expect all stories to end in sunshine and rainbows. But how did you know that William was infected with leprosy?” I asked with eager interest.

“It all comes down to a process of elimination. When the case was first presented to me, there were two possible explanations for the seclusion of this gentleman. The first hypothesis was insanity. A second person in the outhouse hinted at a caretaker. The fact that he locked the door when he came out further strengthened the possibility. However, the constraint imposed could not be severe, or the young man would not be able to come down and have a look at his friend. No matter how I turned the matter over, this theory simply did not fit the facts.”

“What was the second possible explanation then?” I continued expectantly.

“The second possibility, rare and unlikely as it was, seemed to be coherent with the details gathered. Leprosy is not an uncommon illness in India. William, by some extraordinary chance, could have been exposed to the disease. This places his family in a difficult position since they would wish to save him from segregation. Therefore, great secrecy would be needed to prevent rumours from circulating and subsequent interference by the authorities. It would not be difficult to find a devoted doctor or nurse, if sufficiently paid, to care for the patient, and I can think of no reason why the latter should not be allowed to leave his room after dark. Upon arriving here I noticed that the butler, who carries out the meals, wore gloves sanitised with disinfectants, and this removed my last doubts. Once I showed Mr. Yeung the word ‘leprosy, it was clear that his secret was revealed.”

“Why write the word when you could just say it?”

Pao Sir gave a slight chuckle. “It was to prove to Mr. Yeung that I can be trusted with his secret. I doubt he would have let us stay if I hadn’t done that.”

I stared at the chief superintendent in bewilderment, amazed by his level of intellect and understanding. It was just at this moment when I noticed a distinctive mark on Pao Sir’s wrist. It was shaped like a crescent moon and, for some reason, appeared to be strangely familiar. I tried recalling where I had last seen this unusual feature when, all of a sudden, an epiphany struck me: the moon symbol was characteristic of Judge Pao, the most revered minister in Chinese history who was detective, judge, and executor all rolled into one.

“Pao Sir, are you, by chance, a descendant of Judge Pao?” I asked with a tone of disbelief.

“Judge Pao? I’ve never heard of him,” said Pao Sir, frowning.

But as I turned away, I saw, from the corner of my eye, a sly smile on his face.

## How Pao got to the Truth

*St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Yan, Chung Lam – 16*

Pao Ching Tien, a man of colossal physique, a dauntless and modest judge from over a thousand years ago. Ching Tien, meaning 'the pristine sky' in Chinese, underscores his renowned clarity. Tales have soared across the Orient, the symbolic crescent moon on his forehead radiating justice and impartiality. Little do you know, I have met the Judge Pao in person, and he has taught me an indelible lesson.

A dull evening it originally was. My supervisor urged me to find enough evidence by the weekend. Case files were already piling up on my desk. Pages of black and white expressed fatigue. I was fatigued. I was only forced to be a part of this lawsuit. A record label mogul was suing her staff member who apparently embezzled her money, and I was deployed to supply legal counselling for the employee, Jaden. To be honest, I did not care whether he was sued at the end of the day. It could be a case of defamation, given the lack of solid proof, or maybe the poor man was guilty after all, after some thorough research by the plaintiff. But really, I did not care who would have won the lawsuit. Still, my job was indeed a government counsel, so I guessed I had to finish studying the files of monotony. Indolently flipping through binders and binders, yet not one piece of evidence. I was on the verge of sleeping when I noticed something peculiar. A slender crescent on the cover of one of the files. It was glimmering. Rather weakly. Not knowing what was inside, I opened the folder instinctively. *Shazam!* A blinding wave put me to shock, and I blacked out.

"Him! A thief! The person who stole my copper coins!" A loud bawl turned on the volume in my numb ears. Flickering my eyelids, bewildered, my vision began to come back. A fuzzy plump figure bellowed. I could see his round tummy now, as chubby as a cherub. He was flying his heavy finger in my direction, the speed of a nimble arrow. It took me not long to realise that I was his addressee. Still not recovering from the earlier shock, I forced my calves to stand up without tumbling over. I looked down. I was dressed in exhausted dark fabrics, one hole in the left sleeve, two inches long, and a larger one near the stomach. I looked around. *Where the hell am I? Where is this ancient street?* I was puzzled, as if a cat was playing with his yarn in my mind.

"You! Thief!" The stout man, middle-aged, repeated.

"What? No!" My brows furrowed; a dazed look imprinted on my face. No. I was not going to let him pursue his allegations.

"It is you. I am sure! The sack of coins is literally behind your back! Don't lie, I have caught you red-handed." His voice grew even sterner, his eyes glaring at a bag of coins laid on the wall behind.

"I have no idea why your coins are there! There must have been a misunderstanding!"

"I don't care, you look suspicious enough."

"I— "

"Make way for Judge Pao," a few voices clamoured. A dark-skinned being, approximately eight feet tall, strode the cobbled street. On top of him was a headgear that extended horizontally, its obsidian-black edges slick and thin. Two guards flanked him, but they were far from being as tall as he was. He had a sober face, the most sober one I had ever seen. "Make way for Judge Pao!"

"What exactly is the situation here?" Judge Pao spoke with a tranquil voice. It felt like the morning breeze, perhaps making one faintly shudder yet somehow as calm as the ocean waves.

"This morning, I heard a shout outside my house. I got outside of my room, and my servants were telling me a young man had robbed my sack of money in the backyard. Well. It appears that the young man is right here. Standing. Shamelessly." As of now a crowd had fully encircled us. People were murmuring, gazing at me spitefully. Irritated, yet still I could not prove myself innocent.

“What evidence do you have against him?” The Judge lifted his chin up, contemplating.

“The bag of coins there is pretty evident.” The crowd was echoing with his argument vehemently. One even noisily shouted in assent, his arms raised up as if cheering for a football player who had just scored a point. The judge approached the bag of money, examining it closely.

“I understand. Nevertheless, the youngster here denies such a claim. According to me, someone may be avoiding the consequences by pinning the blame on him.” Every spectator went into silence, their mouths gone wide open, eyes gawking at the idea that there may be some other culprit concealed beyond the curtains. It was only Judge Pao who could be unorthodox, who could think ingeniously. His calm countenance was now certain and assertive; he most possibly knew who was pulling the strings, who had put me in a malign trap with their tenacious fingers.

“Who— who is the thief then?” *It was the same loud voice from the crowd.*

The Judge gave a reassuring thin grin. “That is simple to answer. You’ve just dug yourself a hole. As I examined the bag, I noticed that the faded red colourings on the bag. And you with the loud shrills, you were the one who raised your hand up. I can see red stains on your left hand.” The crowd was suffused with gasps.

“That is— that is from— from somewhere else!” Pao’s words took the man aback. He had a ducktail beard, its middle notably hoary, and slant eyes, one slightly twitching. *He was the one with the loud shrill*, I pondered.

“Now that I hark back to the shout I heard in the morning, it does resemble your voice.” The portly fellow, along with his accusations towards me, back-peddled. His shady stare had turned to the man with the silvery beard.

“An easy way to name the real burglar is to ask your servants. They saw his face, did they not?” He spoke with tact and nonchalance. His eyes like a black hole that held infinite acumen. “Better surrender yourself now, whoever the real culprit is.”

“I— I guess there’s no way out now. Yes, I did it. When I saw the police pass by, I got scared out of my wits, and I left the bag behind that young man.” The real robber capitulated, sighing in defeat. *It was the overdramatic shouts that got him good*, I grinned. At least the truth had been elucidated, and I did not have to get into trouble for something I did not do at all. The looks around us grew epiphanic, people finally leaving.

After a moment or so, Judge Pao announced, “You, man with the beard, are coming with me to court. And you, owner of the sack of coins, allow me to enlighten you: when we point fingers at someone, three fingers are pointing back at us. You should not have judged so quickly, harmed the reputation of the young man here. And I ask that you put the money somewhere safe, not in your backyard, queerly. Blame and accusations stop you from taking the responsibility yourself, in this case, the responsibility of handling your belongings duly. Whereas for you, young man,” he signalled me to come over, “this is for you.” He handed me a bamboo scroll, offering a vague green scent. It had a black ribbon strapped, keeping it unopened. It gave out an enlivening crispy sound when pressed, like the melody of a river flow. I was about to ask the Judge what the ciphers in the scroll were, but he had already vamoosed with his guards, and the thief.

“I guess I owe you an apology.” The stout man frowned, regretting his false claims. He knew that blame was not the answer to his predicament. I could now see his pale freckles on his face, shadowing his remorse that stretched to the slightly unbuttoned attire where his stomach peeked out.

“I accept it. Thank you.” And the bamboo scroll I untied. *Shazam!*

I was back at the office. Light-headed. I was scooping my memory up, details replenishing. It was hard to believe what had just happened, but I chose to believe. Being framed and a victim myself taught me to care. It struck me that I had to make my best effort to help those in need. To help those accused of something they did not do at all. My indifference was bovine and almost insidious. I dedicated the entire

night to scrutinising the case files, wading through each page, going back on and off in case I had missed anything. And when I finished, there was a pale golden light penetrating the office windows. It was already dawn. And there it was. The piece of evidence I needed to clear my client's name, first page of the binder underneath the one with the crescent moon. The sunshine embraced me in triumph, clothing me in warm fustian. It was probably its gesture of congratulation.

"Jaden, here is the evidence we need!"

Even after ten centuries, Judge Pao's presence is still celebrated by humans who long for integrity. His stories give us a voice, a voice not to blame based on prejudice, but to shelter those who are treated unfairly. Every ordinary individual should learn from his wisdom, to foster a society where verity prevails, and bias vanishes. And when the truth shines lustrously like the blonde hair of the morning sun, no innocent beings will have to accept false accusations. I, as an attorney, am dedicated to the truth. I obey the truth. Long live, Pao Ching Tien!

# Judge Pao and the Two-Headed Shadow Thief

*St. Paul's Co-educational College, Lee, Alison Wing Ka – 12*

The sweet aroma of Village Chief Chan's Mijiu filled the room, followed by boisterous laughs. It was a warm, starry night, the crescent-shaped moon was the guardian of Kaifeng. Red lanterns centred around tables of a scrumptious meal, gathered by the members of the friendly neighbourhood.

"Where is Wong?" Chan asked. The villagers shook their heads and continued their chatting. "He'd just missed everything, then." Chan shrugged his shoulders. Wong's absence was not peculiar, as he had been refusing to attend village dinner gatherings for more than months.

However, peering from the windows outside, four spooky eyes emerged. The two-headed person glanced at the loving atmosphere, eyes fiery with rage. "So happy without me, huh?" the person mumbled under his breath vengefully, turned around, pulled his hood over his head tighter, and left. He stared at his other head, which was motionless beside the two flaring eyes.

The party ended soon after. The next morning, the kids of the village had school, and farmers had to grow their crops. Chan bid goodbye to the villagers, and washed the dishes, then tucked himself into bed.

The mysterious two-headed creature returned to the house next to Chan's. He removed his hood and threw it on the table impatiently, and went to bed with a disgraceful groan of disapproval. He was about to close his heavy eyelids for some rest. "No, don't do it." whispered a voice, booming loudly towards the person's ear. But the man ignored the voice's daring warning, and lay on his bed, deep in thought, listening to the sounds of Chan doing the clean-up.

Quietly, the person instantly arose when the night grew noiseless, hiding his second head into the hood, and crept outside. "Wong?" Chan implored, raising his head, in his hands a wet cloth, beaming once he met Wong. Wong's heart almost skipped a beat. "I was sick, but I feel better now, so I'm out for a walk before sleep." he stuttered anxiously.

"Alright, get well soon. I'm heading to bed." Chan smiled warmly.

When he was assured that Chan was deep asleep, he heaved a sigh of relief. "That was a dangerous one. He would have noticed the obvious lie."

The next morning, Wong awoke, and his other head disappeared. Picking up a basket, he opened the door in a blithe mood to shop for groceries.

"Good morning!" He greeted the neighbours he met along the way. "Have a nice day!" Wong was about to step into his home, but Chan stopped him with a question, "have you seen my Mijiu?" he asked worriedly.

"Mijiu?" Wong repeated.

"The Mijiu I've brewed for over two years! It was Dongzhi Festival, so I shared a little portion of it. But the rest of it disappeared!" Chan wailed helplessly. A puzzled expression was plastered over Wong's face. "Perhaps you were too drunk, and drained it all without noticing." Wong tried to comfort Chan, who was passionate about alcohol more than anyone else.

Chan paused for quite a while before answering, "But at least I treasure the wonderful time sharing my effort with you all."

Wong patted Chan's shoulder empathetically. "I haven't tasted your Mijiu, but I bet it tastes glutinous. You can always produce better Mijiu to share!"

Night came, yet the town remained hustling and bustling, people enjoying their time of reunion with their family and friends. The crescent moon was still brightly hanging on the dusky black sky cloth, silently watching over the villagers.

“Wong, do you want to play with us?” Ping, the child, beamed. He was known around town for his outgoingness and adorableness, and he loved playing with Wong. Ping held up a lantern, “Come on, it’s really fun!”

Wong was rather confused. “DongZhi Festival has ended already, why are you still playing with lanterns in the middle of the day?”

The children chuckled. “We play when we want to!” Without another word, they handed Wong a lantern and began chasing each other, a lantern in one hand and smiles on their faces.

“No.” whispered a voice in Wong’s head. But Wong ignored the voice and had a great time with Ping that day.

That night, when Wong was asleep, another head materialized on his neck. Wong abruptly sprang up from his arhat bed. “Time to do something.” he hissed creepily. He draped a cape over his shoulder and covered himself in the hood again. Rage fogging his logical mind, he dashed towards Ping’s house as two faint red dots emerged from the darkness. Wong panted impatiently, and held the lanterns steadily in his hands, the cape blocking its dazzling light. Scrambling blindly, Wong gradually found his way back home and buried the lanterns into the soil with his bare hands. “Have fun,” he muttered under his breath, hoping no one was eavesdropping. “They are happy, and you deserve happiness too.”

Another week passed, and another set of objects dissolved into nowhere. Wherever somebody in the neighbourhood had their belongings missing, someone else would answer, “it has to be the shadow thief!” Almost everyone lost something, and yet nobody has a single clue of the whereabouts of the thief.

Chan, deep in thought, stirred with a groan on his screeching arhat bed. He had been experiencing insomnia for over a week, feelings of insecurity haunting his soul. Perhaps, by the next moment, the rake in someone’s farm would vanish. The peculiar loss of random objects in town caused everyone to paralyze terribly. Br... the wind outside hissed, and Chan pulled his bedsheets closer.

Chan knew that it was something ominous, something daunting, and only the guardian of justice, truth and bravery, can relieve their worries and unveil the true secrets behind the mysterious case of the shadow thief.

Gong.

Chan’s hands tightly gripped the drumsticks.

Gong.

“The drummer shall be summoned to court.” Judge Pao hollered solemnly, loud across the room. His face was stern black as coal, with a crescent-moon-shaped birthmark on his forehead. He sat upright on the stage, imperial bodyguards lining up in the two margins of the corridors.

“Wei-wu...” the bodyguards called, making noises by hitting their wooden canes to the ground. Chan stuttered, his face fixed on the graveness of Judge Pao’s expression, scrambling through the file of bodyguards.

“Peasant Chan Jian, kowtow to Judge Pao.” trembled Chan’s voice, his knees to the floor, raising his head to the stage of Judge Pao.

“What brings you here?” Judge Pao questioned.

Chan inhaled apprehensively. “I have brewed a huge amount of MiJiu for two years already. Weeks ago, during Dongzhi Festival, I shared one bottle of my MiJiu with the neighbourhood. However,



the next morning, none of my MiJiu could be found. At first, I believed I was drunk and lost control, but in the last few weeks, many neighbours have told me that their belongings have been stolen, too. They are very anxious, and our loving town is covered with a hysterical atmosphere.”

“And yet no one has caught the thief?” asked Judge Pao with a frown.

“The thief seems to be invisible. Though there were many theft cases, no one has caught sight of the thief.” Chan breathed, concerned. “This thief has caused many of our neighbours to worry at night, anticipating if the thief would choose them as his next target.”

The room was hushed beside the sound of Gongxun Ce’s note-taking, Judge Pao’s brain gradually formed a path of questions leading to the revelation of the truth.

“What has been stolen?” Judge Pao asked, searching for patterns of theft.

Chan listed them: MiJiu, lanterns, a kite... Although they all seemed like random, valueless objects, intelligent Judge Pao caught the pattern.

“Fear not, Chan.” Judge Pao declared confidently. “I understand the situation and will serve to the best of my ability. You can leave as I spend some time in thought.”

A smile gradually appeared on Chan’s face, he kowtowed again and turned to leave lightheartedly.

“Have you heard anything about this from the villagers?” Judge Pao asked his imperial bodyguards.

“I have...” Zhan Chao admitted. “A few days ago, A child, Ping, mentioned his lanterns being stolen. He placed them outside his house, and they strangely vanished the next morning. Many of the villagers suspect the Shadow Thief. Villagers spread rumours that the Shadow Thief was a haunted ghost, and didn’t dare seek revenge on it.”

Judge Pao wondered, “how peculiar. Here, I have a plan. Zhan Chao,” he commanded. “You shall be undercover. You will disguise as a new villager in town, and act as bait for the Shadow Thief.” Zhan Chao nodded in agreement. “The plan begins tomorrow, we cannot wait.” Judge Pao announced.

Near Chan’s house, another house has been built for Zhan Chao. Zhan Chao had to report to Judge Pao every day what he observed in the neighbourhood. The first two days were peaceful, but the Shadow Thief blew his cover on the third day.

That night, Zhan Chao was savouring some MiJiu that Chan brought him. The night was tranquil, the moon bright and clear. But he was disturbed by a sudden noise from outside. Brave Zhan Chao grabbed hold of his sword, and decisively flung the door open, to see a horrifying creature.

The two-headed creature was gasping, he was about to escape before it was recognized by Zhan Chao, but he didn’t stand a chance against Zhan Chao’s agile athletic skills. He caught the thief with one grasp and brought him straight to Pao’s office, where he worked and rested. The thief was short and thin and was effortless to carry for a muscular man like Zhan Chao.

Once Zhan Chao entered the office, he locked the thief into a cell. Pao, serious as usual, stood outside the cell where he could safely interrogate the thief. Judge Pao was dauntless, and he did not fear a two-headed creature, he had encountered countless of them in the past already.

“Why did you steal?” Pao asked, watching the thief calculating sly tricks.

“For happiness.” the thief snarled, unwilling to talk.

Judge Pao paused for a moment. “How does stealing make you happy?”

“Everyone deserves happiness, but not everyone has it. I don’t know what happiness is, so I’ll borrow what people are happy for, and try a taste of happiness myself.” the thief replied, his eyes on Judge Pao.

Judge Pao groomed his long beard, “a taste of... happiness?”

Full of energy, Judge Pao awoke early the next morning. He was full of questions for the thief. Out of the blue, the thief has transformed into a normal person. A normal man squatted in a corner of the cell, whimpering hopelessly.

“Judge Pao, why am I here?” Wong bellowed, devastated. “What sins have I committed? I am just a normal, cheerful man in the neighbourhood!”

“Do you remember anything from yesterday?” Judge Pao questioned. “Anything.”

“This morning, I went for groceries and I played with Ping...” Wong began, stuttering as he stared at Judge Pao’s motionless face. “But... I don’t remember anything... about the night.”

Judge Pao groomed his long beard, “Do you know that you made Ping unhappy?”

“How is that possible? I played with him.” Wong was rather astonished. “However, there has been a voice in my head for months already. The voice has been warning me not to do things, such as playing with children, talking to neighbours, helping them... Sometimes I can ignore the voice, but I can’t stand it anymore.” Wong wailed helplessly. “And yet there is nothing I can do.”

“Have you ever heard of... the Shadow Thief?” Judge Pao asked, his eyes hungry for curiosity.

“I think I’ve heard it around town,” Wong wondered. “but many people believe he’s a ghost, so no one dares talk about him anymore. They think they’ll anger him.”

Judge Pao responded. “I shall investigate the situation first.”

After a few more interrogations with Wong, Judge Pao had a clear image of the situation. During the day, Wong was a perfectly normal boy who was loving, caring and empathetic towards his neighbours. At night, he transformed into a two-headed thief who longed for happiness and stole others’ belongings in search of happiness. However, the mindset of the night haunted Wong during the daytime through a commanding voice, hallucinating Wong every day.

“Perhaps the Chamber of the Past could answer some questions,” muttered Judge Pao. “Wong must be under some spell, perhaps a curse, to end up under these circumstances. It isn’t Wong’s fault, it’s the hateful creature controlling his soul inside of him.”

Judge Pao began murmuring a mysterious chant, and he was in a library full of books and scrolls of ancient scripts when he opened his eyes again. He searched for the script carved with Wong’s full name and began reading the script. The script provided the story of Wong’s birth.

“The Wong family originally had a pair of twins. However, on the night the mother gave birth to them, the doctor announced that only one could survive. Wong’s family picked Wong and left his brother on Death’s welcome mat with open hands.” said the script.

Judge Pao’s hypothesis was correct. Wong’s situation was caused by the curse of his birth which occurs at night. The situation must have gotten worse over the years, which resulted in voice distraction during the day.

“The evil spirit must be Wong’s dead brother. He is angry that he was the unlucky one, and wants to search for true happiness after being depressed for years. I must treat Wong before the evil spirit conquers him with his negativity.” Judge Pao gritted his teeth with fury. “I shan’t let wickedness succeed.”

Judge Pao received a letter from Zhan Chao, saying that the villagers found their belongings buried under the tree outside Wong's house. At once, Judge Pao hurried to Wong and freed him.

"Look! My Mijiu!" Chan shouted with triumph, seeing his jars of Mijiu peeping through the thin coats of soil. Many of their objects looked valueless, but it was undeniable that they all possessed beautiful memories worth recalling. The objects couldn't be pulled up, as if a strong force were grasping onto them.

"Wait!" a villager screamed. "Why is there a dead body here? It looks just like Wong!"

Wong's face turned white when he caught sight of the body. "It is... my dead brother," he announced, in a tiny voice, but it was loud enough for everyone to hear. "I still feel sorry for him."

"Why did you bury our objects?" demanded young, tear-eyed Ping, heartbroken.

Wong couldn't find any words. Judge Pao immediately answered, "I can explain to him. At night, a curse takes over Wong's body and thoughts. He goes around town in search of happiness, so he stole things that made you happy." Judge Pao explained, studying the shocked and cross expressions of the villagers. "But it isn't Wong's fault, I was searching for the true person involved, and I believe it is his dead brother, who is angered and depressed, feeling abandoned. If we help Wong's brother rest in peace, we can save Wong and restore peace in the village."

The villagers continued digging through the soil until the entire body was revealed. Judge Pao taught all of the villagers a set of words and demanded everyone to recite it to the body until he told them to stop. The first few times they recited led to no effect, but the third time caused Wong to scream in pain and collapse to the floor, bracing his head and rolling around. But Judge Pao told them to continue. A loud yelp came from Wong and a shot of air was released, entering the dead body of Wong's brother.

Despite the relief from the villagers, Judge Pao's tasks were not completed yet. "What we've done is release the soul of Wong's brother, but we still need to share happiness with him, so he won't escape again. Will any of you have anything for happiness?"

Ping took out a diablo from his pocket. "My mother made this for me for the Mid-Autumn Festival last year. I hope Wong's brother can enjoy the happiness of playing the diablo." He placed it next to the dead body. A few people followed Ping's act and placed their items. They were full of memories, full of happiness. Everyone gave the most truthful, caring and kindest wishes to Wong's brother.

"Well, all is solved at last!" Judge Pao clapped his hands together, breathing a sigh of relief.

A week passed. Since Judge Pao has solved the case, Wong's strange symptoms never occurred anymore. Wong remained a cheerful, caring friend towards his neighbours.

"Wong, shopping for groceries again?" asked Lady Fong. "I have some ripe bananas."

Wong beamed joyfully. "I owe you one again, Lady Fong."

"It's nothing compared to extinguishing the evil spirit from haunting our town again! Without you, our town will be in chaos and fear." Lady Fong continued.

"I wasn't the one to solve the case! Judge Pao was, you should go thank him instead." Wong replied.

Every night, the townspeople would crowd together under the crescent-shaped moon, to savour the delicious foods prepared for each other. The town was restored with lovingness and peace. The villagers were never afraid of more attacks, as they knew the guardian of the crescent moon would protect them, safeguarding them from all evils.

# Unjust Justice

*St. Paul's Co-educational College, Wong, Cheuk Chi Cherry – 16*

*“An unjust law is no law at all.” – Saint Augustine*

2062, Hefei, China

## Tyler So

“500 meters from the Gates – prepare for the Passing!” Tyler So yelled as the squad sped against the merciless winds towards the churning walls of scarlet energy isolating the city from the rest of the world. “Come on everyone, we can do this!”

The sounds of howls rang across the night. “The Pack!”

“They’re closing in!”

“Faster!”

Tyler gritted his teeth and clutched his motorcycle handlebars hard – they couldn’t get caught, they simply couldn’t–

“400 met– argh!”

Tyler glanced back only to see a hound drag a fellow rider onto the ground. Screeching, the motorcycle lost control and crashed into an incoming tree, exploding into fragments in a shower of fire rain. A couple more hounds took the opportunity to pounce forward, tearing the unfortunate rider to pieces.

Tyler turned to the front and shuddered, leaning forward to let the wind carry him. A gunshot rang past his head and a bullet slammed into the tail light of the motorcycle, breaking the bulb – Tyler pulled into an alley on the right, keeping his head down as the guards raced after him in heated pursuit. Bullets flew, missing him by inches – red light poured into the damp alley from above, illuminating his face – making a few more turns, he hit the main road and zoomed towards the Gates, ramming the motorcycle forwards–

“Tyler!” A clear gunshot – the bullet struck home. He swivelled around in horror to see his fiancé, Tess fall off her motorcycle not far from him and slump onto the main road. Before he could act, a hound scrambled onto his back and clawed him off his motorcycle, snatching his clothes apart–

A whistle sounded from afar and the hound stopped biting. Facing the ground, Tyler grunted as the guards ran forth to handcuff him.

The head guard pointed his pistol at him. “Let us waste no time for words, Tyler So. You know what happens to those who try to leave. Under the order of Sakoku, term 367 of the Accord, I now sentence you to immediate...” Tyler trembled, waiting for the announcement of his execution. “Whipping.” The head guard’s eyes blinked with rare amusement.

Tyler gawked at the guard in confusion.

“Change of rules. It’s your lucky day, Tyler So.”

The eerie croaks of wild ravens echoed across the dark sky.

–

It was midnight.

In another part of the city, a figure climbed out of his tomb, observing his dark surroundings in exhilaration. “And here we are, back again.” He stroked his beard approvingly, nodding his head at the young man standing before him, who was covered in mud and blood nonetheless radiating relief and ecstasy.

Stepping out into the open, the figure drew himself closer to the hovering surveillance cameras nearby. Touching his forehead lightly, he looked at the nearest camera – instantly, a block of ice in the shape of a crescent moon formed around the camera, covering the fragile glass surface of the camera eye. He closed his eyes and something shattered.

Stomping out of the cemetery, he made his way into the city centre.

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*“True peace is not merely the absence of tension;  
it is the presence of justice.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.*

## **Pao Zheng**

As the days went by the skies darkened and gradually lost their hues of blue. The moon no longer had its milky gloss and hid behind the wisps of smoke polluting the hills. The tiny gleams of hope that once lit up the world went out, one at a time. And all that was left was a void of endless darkness, sucking all in like a maelstrom for eternity.

Nevertheless, he was glad to be back in the Earth Realm. For here, he could make things right.

“It was clever of you to summon me, Aster Pao. I thank you for that. I could not have left Hell otherwise, given the title and burden I carry. And that was rather troublesome, for as the judge of Hell I am compelled to deal with the chaotic affairs meddling with the Justice System of the Living.”

“And I thank you for coming, Yan Luo Wang, oh great ancestor.” Aster replied, bandaging the cut on his palm carefully.

“Call me Pao.”

“Yes, ancestor Pao.”

Pao Zheng sighed and caressed the dark-skinned boy’s ebony hair. Another young victim of the modern system.

Oh yes. He knew exactly what was happening in China.

“5 years ago, WWIII broke out, and all the countries involved, including China, suffered heavy casualties and damages. All the chaos brought by the war gave the officials the perfect opportunity to enhance their corruption and the criminals the unlimited freedom to commit their wrongdoings. Within weeks, China found itself facing a collapsed criminal justice system. We were forced to cover from daily dangers and arbitrary assaults. Forfeiture of basic rights and protection granted upon birth. Doomed to live beneath the gnarled claws of those dominating the courts.” Aster breathed. “To tackle the breakdown of the system, the Chinese tech giants came together to set up a laboratory in Shanghai and created the Crown, an artificial intelligence whose prime duty was to uphold justice through the law. The Crown was enacted in a city chosen as a testing ground.”

“Hefei.”

“Yes. But the Crown gained self-consciousness, a mind of her own, and amended the program herself. That’s when things began to get worse.”

Pao Zheng shook his head. “Aster, do come here for a moment.”

“Yes, ancestor Pao?”

Pao bent forward. “I hope to see it for myself.” With that, he touched Aster’s forehead with his crescent.

*The Gates – massive forcefields – reaching skywards in transparency, glowering with shades of surreal red energy, imprisoning the people within the fortress. Surveillance eyes that shot lethal lasers at those deemed unlawful. Scared civilians marching across the streets with their heads facing the ground. The guards and their packs of wolves, chasing after every criminal with orders to kill. Instant execution for all criminals upon capture, minus the jury trials.*

... A boy... with his hands cuffed... facing the ground... his face hidden from view...

“... Tyler So... I now sentence you to immediate... whipping.”

“... bring him back for the game afterwards.”

The boy named Tyler began to raise his head—

Aster gasped, pulling away from Pao Zheng. “I’m sorry, ancestor Pao. The connection... the connection’s overwhelming me!”

“Rest, child.” Pao Zheng held him in assurance. “I’ve seen all that I needed from your memories.”

“Why on earth... did they choose this city as the testing ground... this isn’t fair!” Aster blurted out.

Pao Zheng looked at him and conjured a wisp of smoke from his crescent. A map of China materialized before them. Lines of red stretched across the boundaries of all the cities. *The Gates*. They extended beyond Hefei... beyond Nanjing... beyond Wuhan... beyond Shanghai... Ningbo... it was all red... red... red...

“I’m sorry, Aster. But the Crown already has the whole country.”

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*“If justice takes place, there may be hope,  
even in the face of a seemingly capricious divinity.” – Alberto Manguel*

Bidding farewell to Aster, Pao Zheng commenced his flight to Shanghai to confront the Crown. Pushing his robes back and compressing his cap into his pockets, Pao Zheng touched his crescent gently and began to twirl upwards into the sky. Higher and higher he went, soon gaining enough weight to glide across the air. As he settled into his glide, he began to recall what Aster had said about the Crown. “They meant to do good. But they didn’t.”

The Crown was created with the intent of recovering the modern justice that submerged during wartime. And that was something Pao respected. But it didn’t change the fact that the system was no more than a force of suppression, a facade of order and peace, a trap for justice itself. For to uphold justice, the first question to be answered... would be what justice truly was.

Frankly, there was no certain definition. But back in his mortal days during Song, Pao had seen much. The bribery and embezzlement amongst officials, the persistent robberies and kidnappings, the unthinkable cases of rape... Enough to know the dark side of humanity had no limits. Yet in such vast darkness there would always be a trace of light, no matter how dim or feeble, to guide those lost and hurt out of the dark.

Such was justice. Such was hope.

Storming out of another sea of clouds, Pao spotted Shanghai. The dots of light on the skyscrapers flicked on and off like fairy lights, as the Oriental Pearl Tower stood straight, its luminous giant pearl and pillar of pink shimmering phenomenally. The Huangpu River snaked around the land, its currents swaying in the wind. Pao took in the breathtaking scenery and smiled whole-heartedly, relishing the moment.

Perfectly neglecting the Gates of Shanghai beneath him.

Pao slammed with full weight into the Gates, causing him to lose his balance mid-air – upon penetration of the forcefield, all Pao could see was a sky of red kinetic energy. Positioning himself in a duck-dive, Pao plummeted towards the ground when all of a sudden a sky full of ravens burst out from nowhere, their sharp beaks pecking at every inch of his body. Pao bellowed in agony and glared into their ruby eyes before a flash of light ripped across his vision—

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*“Law without justice is a wound without a cure.” – William Scott Downey*

“Welcome, Yan Luo Wang. Or should I say, *Judge Pao*.” Pao awoke to the sound of a mechanical feminine voice.

Pao got up and looked around. He was in a vacant red room. No windows, no doors. He was trapped.

“You can’t escape, King of Hell. This is the Red Room, designed specifically to hold potent beings like you. You can still try breaking out if you want to, though. It would be quite useful for us to test our prison system.”

“And what if I successfully break out?”

“Then a lot of people will get hurt. You wouldn’t want that would you, Judge Pao? After all, that is what you came to fix.”

“Your decaying system dominating the Earth Realm is causing havoc in the Underworld.” Pao shouted. “Without justice in the world of the living, no peace can rest amongst the dead! You are built to serve justice! Why are you not doing so?”

“Oh but we are, Judge Pao!” The mechanical voice of the Crown let out a burst of laughter that rang like silver jingling bells. “We have reformed this country – we maintain order with the most meticulous arrangements by dispatching our hounds and guards to every reachable corner; we implant fear in criminals by immediate punishments; we end corruption by the most effective means! What else could you want for fulfilling justice?” The room glowed crimson as the voice became raspy and hoarse. “Or is it the old, outdated legal system that you want, Judge Pao? One dominated by corruption? One whose laws are insufficiently harsh? One full of loopholes that let petty criminals escape?!”

Pao sighed. “What is justice?”

“I am the Law, and the Law is Justice!”

Pao fell silent, shaking his head in frustration. The Crown... simply didn’t understand.

This was all children’s talk.

The mechanical voice laughed. “Pao, here. I’ll make you a proposal. The Crown is currently in pursuit of a rare criminal who committed murder and whom our guards have failed to track down.” The Crown lowered its voice. “Find the criminal. If you succeed, the Crown will willingly dispose of its control over China.”

“You are willing to make such a deal? Why?”

“That doesn’t matter. Will you find this criminal for us, Judge Pao?”

An ominous sense of unease ran up Pao’s spine. Yet, he didn’t have an alternative, did he? “I demand a fair trial for him upon capture.”

“Granted. Good luck, Pao.”

Justice was never to be owned. It was to be given.

\*\*\*

*“The dead cannot cry out for justice;  
it is a duty of the living to do so for them.” – Lois McMaster Bujold*

It was not the difficulty and brutality of the process of capture but the face of the criminal that surprised Pao the most. Dark skin. Ebony hair.

*Aster.*

“I’m sorry... They tortured and forced me to join this... game... ”

“Aster, what are you doing here?”

“What?” The boy gulped. “I’m not Aster – I’m Tyler! Tyler So...”

*Tyler.* The boy from Aster’s memories. Such interesting identity, though. “You will be ensured a fair trial, Tyler So.”

“No... I won’t. Because it’s all just a game. And in the end... they’re always the ones... who win.”

“Who?”

Tyler So spat out a mouthful of blood and Pao held him, ignoring the clicking noises produced by the cameras above. “I don’t have much time... listen, the Crown’s planning something... a phase two... this *game*... they capture innocents and force them to become criminals... and the game is all about players capturing the criminals and stopping injustice... you understand?... it’s all... nonsense! The Crown wants all the corruption and chaos back again, this time manufactured and controlled by her, don’t you see! You must stop them... *ancestor*...”

“What did you just say?”

The boy’s pupils went rigid. “What is your connection with Aster Pao?” Pao asked just as a red laser shot out from a nearby camera straight through Tyler’s head. Tyler rolled onto the ground, his eyes wide open. Eyes that cried: Injustice.

–

1 month later, Heaven

“The great Yan Luo Wang, thwarted by a mere mundane-made system?!”

“I apologize, my Emperor.” Pao Zheng bowed his head. “I will do anything to redeem myself.”

The Jade Emperor’s hands curled into fists, turning his knuckles white. “And you! What is your name, spirit?”

“Tyler So.” The spirit replied.

“Your *real* name, spirit!”

“... Aster Pao, Emperor.”

“And you solemnly swear that every word you just said was truthful and right?”

“I swear.”

“Why did you lie about your identity in the Earth Realm?”

“I beg you to pardon my ancestor and I, Emperor. I had no choice but to remain in the shadows for my younger twin Benjamin Pao had taken my identity and fed me to the Crown. And ancestor Pao – he was too manipulated by Benjamin, who sided with the Crown and betrayed us all. And the Crown, Emperor, is an existence of pure intellect and technology. It would not have been in my ancestor’s power to predict the AI’s absurd plan of restoring chaos—”

“Enough!” The Emperor harrumphed, turning back to Pao Zheng. “Yan Luo Wang!”

“Yes, my Emperor.”

“I now command, for failing to defend the systems of justice of Earth and Shadow, you are demoted to the fifth court of Hell and shall be replaced... by Qin Guang Wang.”

“In the next 49 days, you shall be returned to your mortal form. You will be given 3 years to deal with the case of the Crown, or you shall be rid of your position in Hell for eternity.”

“Yes, my Emperor.”

–



“You could have told me about your true identity earlier. I would have protected you.”

“It was rude of me to conceal such from you, ancestor. But Benjamin would have killed me if I tried.”

“You know, there are no laws to govern the act of betrayal in the Earth Realm. But here amongst the dead, no unjustified deed goes unpunished.”

“But he’s still up there.”

“Not for long. Your brother should get ready for an afterlife of suffering when he arrives in Hell.”

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*“The worst form of injustice is pretended justice.” – Plato*

## **The Crown**

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33 data download

34        downloading crown code\_percentage count\_%\_#

35        download\_hefei\_extended download\_nanjing\_wunhan

36                download\_data\_chinese\_regions

37                crown system\_prepare for disposal\_

.....

75 data transfer

76                transfer data to new\_system\_#\_

78 rebuild system

79        new\_system reboot

80        upload\_data\_

81                new\_crown\_rebuild\_completed

82        phase two\_prepare game launch

“Data transfer has been completed.”

The Crown beamed red. Poor old Judge Pao was losing his edge. She would dispose of her control over China following his excellent player performance in the game, as promised. He truly was a perfect lab rat. And her job was almost done anyways. The old must always make way for the new. It was time for the New Crown to take over.

“Should your ancestor ever return, I shall trust you to deal with him, Agent Pao.”

The youth bowed at the cameras, his lips curling into a smirk, the youngest and proudest of his family line.

The Crown had one last thing to do before her disposal. In the past months, she had successfully eliminated all mundane corruption and injustice, enforcing strict order in China. But for justice to be upheld, there had to be injustice. Just like how comic superheroes would cease to exist without villains. With the foolish Judge Pao safely out of the way, it was time to enact the game. Time for chaos. Time to fight chaos. The Crown laughed, her mechanical voice ringing like silver bells.

A game to spread. A game to play.

—

### **Pao Zheng**

Tricks! And lies! A system of distorted values, far worse ridiculous than anything anyone could make sense of! Now, a game, an abyss of warped intentions that played with justice and chaos like toys!

Freed by the Jade Emperor, he was no longer bound to his duties in Hell. And thus it would be his obligation, his mission, to serve the justice that had to be served in the Earth Realm. It was time to put an end to all the madness of the Crown. Justice had never been a game. But now, he was forced to play.

And for all of them, he would win.

He meant to do good, and he would.

# Infernal Judge Pao

*St. Paul's Co-educational College, Poon, Clarisse – 13*

4 hours ago

It was a sickening crunch — an amalgam of snapping bones, mangled flesh, and splintering wood. There was no dramatic spray of blood, nor any shrill cry of agony; instead, that horrid sound — crunch — had only momentarily disrupted the quiet dark. But on this unfortunate day, not even the silence could mask the restlessness of the night: cloaked figures shuffled furtively; they circled an empty, dilapidated carriage, with rusty hard-edged handles. Under it lay a lifeless body, pulverized under the weight of the broken cart.

As the splinters dug into his back, blood oozed into the ground. The dirt drank it eagerly, reddening under the poor man. His head remained intact, a hairless husk drawn tightly around his skull; his features were lined and gaunt, as were his hands, now-cold and weathered. But it was the look in his eyes that sent chills down his killers' spines — although open and devoid of life, they seemed fixed on them with a disquietingly accusatory stare. When the figures retreated into the shadows, a gentle hush returned to cloak the ground, as the dead man's eyes burned with injustice in the night.

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Present — Commerce Street

The events of the past night seemed to leave no imprint nor morsel of gloom to this new day. Pao Zheng observed amongst the hustle-and-bustle of the crowd: young men were hunched over, carrying hefty burlap sacks of grain; a vendor pitched her produce with zest, pleading for the attention of intrigued customers; rowdy teenagers weaved between stalls, pausing only to pickpocket unsuspecting strangers ... The crowd was a cacophony of haggling and day-to-day commotion.

Had it not been for the conspicuously empty spot in the middle of Commerce Street, Zheng might not have noticed anything awry. But like a burly rock in a ravine, the site of the crime sent the waves of people weaving around it instead, leaving an opening so bereft of life lying amongst the animated hubbub. Just a second ago they had been dashing about with vigor, eyes darting from item to item; now, they averted their gazes, scurrying away.

Zheng approached when he noticed that the rich aromas of spice and produce were tinged with the scent of blood. He found its source easily enough — he inched slowly but steadily towards the body and studied it intently. But when he lifted his gaze from the gruesome sight, he was met with the frantic eyes of onlookers:

He's mad, they thought. He'll get himself killed.

Will Judge Pao really concern himself with the affairs of people like... us?

He might try, but nothing will change.

In their eyes, Zheng recognized the fear he had been expecting, and the desperation that he had not. For a brief moment, he stood there, feeling an ice-cold breeze go right through him. He put on a brave face, nodded, and walked away in indignant silence.

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Tianchang Magistrate Court — Judge Pao's Offices

"I, Judge Pao, have come across a deplorable murder. I intend on investigating this case," he bellowed. His clerks, aides, and staff all turned to look at him in bewilderment, eyebrows raised.

"A man was killed — crushed to death by a broken carriage... but tis' was no accident: the handles of the carriage were thick with rust, but there were no cuts on the man's hands; his wounds seem

to be made post-mortem, nor could the weight of the carriage alone do such damage..." he rubbed his chin gingerly, deep in pensive thought.

He collected himself, steadied his composure, and continued, "This court holds a responsibility to the people, to investigate suspicious happenings and to protect them from danger. I intend on fulfilling such a responsibility to the fullest!"

When night fell, Zheng dismissed his subordinates, staying behind — "to finish the requisite paperwork", he had told them. But he knew exactly what he needed: clues, and evidence. He stayed in his mahogany chair all evening, until a strobe of moonlight extended from the edge of his window, across the floor, to the decorated wall in front of him. The clock behind him ticked faintly, tick tock, tick tock... until it receded into a gradual but discernible silence.

The hour, minute, and second hands of the clock all jerked to a sudden halt at midnight exactly. Upon overlapping with each other, Zheng's chair burst into a fiery blaze — around him was a pit inundated with a lake of flames. And although the conflagration licked his skin and teased his furniture, it did not burn. These were the flames of Hell, and Zheng had finally returned: as Judge Pao, the supernatural arbiter of Hell's very own court — the Infernal Bureaucracy.

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#### The Infernal Bureaucracy — Hell

Welcomed by multiple pale, semi-translucent creatures, the supernatural Judge Pao greeted each of them. And while he bowed to them one by one, a familiar face appeared — though uncanny, it was recognisable. "I'm a newcomer, I entered just the day before," he greeted, poised with an expectant bow. His face diffracted the surrounding flames, lending his skin an impenetrable crystal-like surface.

Zheng nodded and queried, "What's your name, Sir? And how did you arrive here?"

"I'm Ming," he tilted his head quizzically, "but I'm afraid I don't remember much... I recall being surrounded by physicians at one point... and... seeing men with wooden bats come my way..." he quivered.

"Noticed anything else? Perhaps something you heard, or felt?"

"Hm... I remember hearing footsteps — they were hunting me. I ran, but they were unyielding... and relentless... I was tired," Ming forced a smile to mask the thin, shrill tone of horror in his voice, "They compelled me to drink... I remember the taste of wine on my tongue... then I got dizzy..."

Zheng furrowed his thick eyebrows in frustration. He had an intricate mind, and it grinded its gears, pondering over Ming's words. None of the facts seemed to tie Ming to the wreckage on Commerce Street... Unless... "Why did you move the carriage?", Zheng asked.

"What carriage?"

Ming's snappy response echoed amongst their fervid surroundings. Then it dawned on Zheng: eureka! The old man watched, as Zheng's eyes radiated with a triumphant yet thoughtful calm. With an exultant twitch of his luscious mustache, Zheng disappeared into the flames.

Two men greeted Zheng at the Medical Hall. “Morning, Sir,” one of them gave a deep bow, “Are you facing any health problems? Our physicians are renowned — they’d be happy to help you remove evil spirits from the body... at a special rate of course, esteemed Judge Pao.”

Zheng fixed them with a livid stare. “Have you two seen an old man named Ming yesterday? Or perhaps the day before?”, he interrogated menacingly.

“Old man? No... ! There’ve only been young people these few days.”

“Surely such a renowned medical center like yours would have elderly patients? Or perhaps your institution is incapable of keeping them alive for that long?”

The two guards stood with mouths agape, and Zheng took the opportunity to study their faces. Both were commoners — their clenched fists and shivering voices told him that they were motivated by fear of those more powerful, not out of greed. Although they refused to tell him the truth, when Zheng pushed through the pair into the centre, neither protested.

Inside the hall, the sharp smell of medicinal herbs hung in the air. Zheng scanned his surroundings — anatomical charts, equipment, plants and scales... His eyes landed on an inconspicuous jar, tucked away in the corner. It was labeled: Huangjiu. Alcohol or herbal medicines in a medical center would not have irked Zheng, but wine...? His train of thought was abruptly cut short; the sound of clinking cups and joyous chattering echoed through a pair of yellow-rosewood doors. “What luck! We barely got away with this,” one of the voices chuckled. It sounded familiar, though Zheng couldn’t quite put a name to it. “Serves him right for eavesdropping! Commoner scum,” another quipped. The words contorted Zheng’s face with indignation. He snatched up the jar of wine in one swift swoop of the arm, and barged through the hallway doors.

Nothing could have prepared Zheng for this. Familiar faces — colleagues from court — greeted him. Zheng stepped towards them with rage in his eyes, his face tight. But his hand, gripping the jar tightly, trembled with disbelief. “Tell me, friends, what’s this?” he implored.

The judges passed each other knowing glances. “It’s just tea!” one of them retorted. But when Zheng offered him the jar, he recoiled backwards so violently that he stumbled and fell. Zheng turned to the others, “Why, it’s tea, of course,” he grimaced, “or is it poisoned alcohol?”

No matter the enigma, Judge Pao, arbiter on Earth and Hell alike, will deliver justice to those who have wronged, Zheng thought, and he willed himself to recall Ming’s butchered body. As he studied his colleagues’ mortified looks and lowered heads, he steeled his resolve, and allowed his furor to fan the infernal flames that now enveloped the room.

## Mauve Melancholy

*St. Paul's Convent School (Secondary Section), Cheng, Hiu Tung Tiffany – 16*

By the time Gongsun arrived, his breathing was ragged and he could barely feel his legs. He asked for Judge Pao with an air of learned politeness that contradicts with his undignified attire, after all, he had travelled for thousands of miles. He was invited into the study where Pao was resting. "Confucian scholar Gongsun Ce at your service, sir," he greeted. It was a lame introduction, not to mention his oversized garments with sewn patches had not contributed to building a strong impression. Only after Pao had offered a seat, Gongsun had dared to look up. Pao was everything Master Zen had described. His piercing gaze made Gongsun wonder if his thoughts were being read. Pao tested Gongsun's knowledge and seemed to be overjoyed when he could answer with precise accuracy. Yet their conversation was cut short, an attendant had announced the arrival of a madam called Liu.

Pao left without a word immediately, leaving Gongsun confused. From the study, he could hear muffled voices, and occasionally, a roar of fury. The voices stirred his curiosity, but he was bothered by one persistent thought. He had come under the recommendation of Master Zen, who insisted he would serve as a useful assistant for Pao. Though the famed justice fighter seemed to enjoy his companionship, it was dubious whether Gongsun could stay.

However, Gongsun was quickly brought back to reality when Pao arrived. He gave Gongsun the testimony of Liu.

Liu reportedly found her husband Zhang dead in the morning. She suspected the demanding employer, Han, was behind it. Han had long admired Liu's beauty and wit, hence proposed to marry her, a request she had refused profusely. According to Liu, she suspects that Han had killed Zhang, leaving Liu as a helpless widow with a low economic status. Liu explained in tears that she would have no choice but to take Han as her husband soon in order to sustain her life.

"Liu must not meet her tragic fate!" Gongsun exclaimed. Pao nodded, his brow furrowed. "Come," he said, "We shall begin our journey to unveil the hidden truth."

A few miles of travelling brought the pair to Liu's hermitage. Zhang's corpse lay pale and lifeless on a mattress of hay. Without any hesitation, Pao examined the body, his face vivid with emotions. Occasionally he issued an exclamation or a suspire, to which Liu responded with sorrowful sobs. Gongsun stared at Zhang and tried unsuccessfully to deduce the reason for his death. Zhang was dressed in a faded blue pao, wilted lavenders hung out of the sash worn around his waist. His limbs were fixed stiffly in an awkward manner, his face contorted in agony. After a few minutes Pao stood to face Liu with a flourish. "You shall not worry, madam," he smiled. "My experiences are leading me towards the truth. Have faith, your dignity will be recovered. The sinned will be punished."

"Now, Gongsun," Pao said, "Let us travel to Han's, I suspect he is involved in Zhang's death."

As soon as the two stepped out of Liu's house, Gongsun produced an avalanche of questions. "What do you know after inspecting Zhang, sir?" he asked. Pao smiled, "I know that he used to have a high income, but had been reduced to a labourer in recent years. That he was working as a gardener for a short period of time before his death and that he had been there yesterday late at night." Gongsun couldn't help but sniggered, "How could all these be known just by a brief examination of the corpse?" Pao shrugged and asked, "Had you noticed Zhang's pao?" Gongsun shook his head, confused. "It was brocaded with light strands of silk, a fashionable choice for the wealthy a few decades ago. The delicate faded patterns are not observable without a closer look. However, Zhang's robes were obviously faded, yet he wore these on a daily basis. It can be concluded that he owns a collection of such clothes. Who would have done so except an opulent man with the misfortune to lose his wealth?" "I should have known better!" Gongsun exclaimed. "How about Zhang as a gardener? How do you know about that?" "Zhang's new shoes are not made of cloth like ours but of leather. These shoes are specially designed for gardeners to tread in mud.

The soles of his shoes and the hems of his pao are splattered with fresh mud. The specific shape of stains can only be created by stepping in puddles. A severe rainstorm had passed by the county yesterday late at night. Hence the occupation and location of Zhang.” Gongsun stared, speechless and overwhelmed with disbelief. “Forgive me for laughing previously, I had underestimated your abilities.” Gongsun apologised with a bow.

Soon they arrived to Han’s and it was immediately evident that he was arrogantly prideful. “Keep an eye out for flowers with the color of lavender,” Pao whispered as they were lead into the garden by servants. Though baffled, Gongsun searched as ordered and his eyes landed on a small cluster of mauve blooms. They were exceedingly beautiful, and oddly familiar, nevertheless, they were hidden in the shades amongst other buoyant flowers. He waded across the sea of blossoms and bent to pick the lavenders up. “Freeze!” Pao warned. “Do not touch these flowers. They are aconites. Alluringly attractive yet extremely poisonous. I have suspected Zhang was poisoned by these flowers.” Cautiously, Gongsun wrapped his hands with a handkerchief and picked up the deadly beauties.

Gongsun was once back in the court with Pao. Han was tied and knelt in front of them. “Offer your testimony, lest you suffer unnecessary pain.” Pao ordered. Gloomy fires smoked from the depths of his eyes. And Han succumbed.

According to Han, he had long wished to take Liu as his wife and was jealous of his employee, Zhang. The pouring rain last night had lowered the visibility, constructing the ideal weather for a murder. Han ordered Zhang, his gardener, to remove the aconites. The fuzzy rain had prevented Zhang from realizing he was touching the poisonous flowers. Thus, he was severely poisoned and destined to die under Han’s hands.

Pao was furious, “You had nearly destroyed Liu by marrying her!” He roared. Gongsun knew it was insensibly uncourteous for a women to remarry after the death of her husband. The justice fighter had saved the widow from embarrassment and harassment. And the haughty, cold-hearted man would, no doubt, be sentenced to death.

# A Contemplation in Justice – Present and Past

*St. Paul's Convent School (Secondary Section), Seng, Si Laam Audrey – 16*

Every action has a consequence: when you do good, you will be rewarded; when you do wrong, you will be punished, simple as that. Even if the debt is not due when one is alive, the fear for punishment shall haunt you in the afterlife, or perhaps even in your next life. Some would call this karma.

I distinctively remember my afterlife in the Department of Hell, actually being the one who serves karma to those who weren't punished when they were alive. My booming, deep voice would sound through the hall, their sins echoing endlessly in the chamber and striking fear in their heart. It was only then would the sinners apologise and beg for forgiveness. But by then, it was too late. As a judge both when alive and dead, I would merely look down as the same thing happened again and again—no matter the time, no matter the place. Similarly, my will to serve justice never eroded even after many centuries. I couldn't help but find it ironic that justice and evil prevail together.

Perhaps that was what caused me to end up in this current situation. I could only observe the injustice happening to the living for so long before I decided to take action myself.

My name is Pao Zheng, and I have been reincarnated to the modern world.

I am better known as Judge Pao to most people though, according to the... what's the word? Ah yes, the Internet. While the rebirth is on my own accord, this is still quite a strange experience, especially with the mixture of past and new memories. Obviously, I look nothing like my former self, but there is a faint mark of a crescent moon on my forehead that is reminiscent to the one I had before. It is the only reminder of my past life apart from my memories.

My new home is a small yet cosy one. Coming from a working-class background, I am not able to enjoy a lot. However, it is an odd comfort in this new world— a sense of *deja vu* reminiscent to my past family. Both my parents, new and old, worked hard to support our fragile stability. Most importantly, despite everything, it is home.

Unfortunately, it seems that the world has not changed at all despite the years passed: in the end, humans are inherently selfish and corrupted.

I was merely a young lad when I first realised this fact— the image of my mother climbing up the harsh mountains to collect firewood had imprinted on my mind, and the sweat dripping down her face like a heavy waterfall spoke volumes about her heavy workload. All that labour had to be done just so I could afford to go to school. Yet as I stroll on the street, the luxurious carriages passing by me showed a different world; a different world where the mother need not suffer for her child to get education, where an insanely large sum of money is the key to all problems.

It is unfair.

And when I grew up, I learnt that the rich were the one who squeezed us lower-class dry, the finances that were supposed to belong to us taken away by their greedy hands. They take and they take and they take with the deep void that is their selfish desire never satisfied. We suffered while they prospered.

That is why I became a judge in the past life, and it is still the same reason that drove me to study law in the present. It pains me to know that such horrible ordeals are happening still even if humans are more advanced now. What is the purpose of these developments if the root of the problem won't be addressed?

As I grow up once again as a completely renewed person, I grow to be in awe and scared of this future. I learnt old and new knowledge, particularly those about technological advancement

Technology is a double-edged sword— while it can be faithful evidence of injustice occurred, it can also be an untraceable weapon used to hurt people, both in the real world and the Internet. Throughout several of my cases, I have seen people using them to prove wrongdoings, but I have also seen them utilising them to conceal their crimes.



I will never forget my first case as a lawyer related to this issue: the plaintiff of my case was a young girl being bullied online. Obviously, it was something I had never faced before as a judge in the past, but there was this same yearn for justice shimmering in their eyes, speaking of pain and fury despite all of it being an invisible strike on the Internet. The Internet is a devious place that allows people to enter and leave with barely a trace— a perfect condition for people to simply delete their wrongdoings as if they never existed in the first place. The defendant was proved innocent.

I couldn't help but wonder, can I really give justice to those who deserve it? In the current world, it is so easy to hide behind a screen and do whatever you want without caring for the consequences. I may be able to solve some severe cases in the court, but even then I have to let criminals go due to the lack of evidence when they can simply erase digital records. There are also hurtful actions that isn't treated as crimes such as cyber bullying which I can't do anything about. This thought circles around in my head, planting a seed of doubt in my mind...

Suddenly, I am reminded of another moment of the case— I was apologising to the girl I couldn't help. She was clearly depressed about the result, but there is a strange glimmer of joy in her eyes. Curious, I asked her about it.

“While I am saddened about the conclusion, I am proud that I tried to fight against being wronged and glad that I have such a nice lawyer helping me despite the nature of my case. Most people call cyberbullying a small thing, but you gave your all. That means a lot to me already, thank you!” She gave me a smile of defeat, but strangely, we were both content in the end.

Yes, even in the past life I have failed before, but the persistence in trying to help those in need is what matters the most. If I myself have given up on this principle, then I do not have the right nor pride to call myself Judge Pao anymore. Even if the path to justice is filled with thorns, I should still do my best and live up to my duty even if I don't succeed.

I will continue to raise my voice against the injustice of this world. I will shout, I will scream, I will fight, just like I did in my past live and after. I even stood up against the Emperor before, what do I have to fear about this new world? I read about the history after my death, and I saw men like me in wars, in protests, in courts, crawling up from the bottom to be heard just like me. There will always be those who have the same fiery spirit as me, willing to fight against the wrongs done against others and themselves... in the end, all of them look for justice to finally, finally be served.

And one day, our voices will grow to be loud enough to make a difference. I know it will be so, as I have seen and fought alongside those very same people before. Humans rise and grasp for what they believe in relentlessly— this is another unchanging fact about us.

# One Last Time

*Victoria Shanghai Academy (Secondary), Leung, Jeremy – 15*

“You’ll never get away with this!” Pao Zheng said as he was on the floor. He had been beaten half to death, with his comrades lying on the floor. A shadowy figure emerged from the shadows as the sun was just starting to rise. None of Pao’s comrades had been any match. They had utterly lost. “One day, I will return. And when that happens, I will catch you.” The figure smirked, as if it had seen decades into the future. It let out a chuckle.

Then, it all went black, and the world gradually forgot about them.



As the sun rises, a new day commences. It shines with an ephemeral glow, through every window in New York City, as it does every day of every week of every year. Always, it manages to burn bright every morning, never once failing. It burns brightly, as it always does, as it always will; on this day, its luminous rays shine through slightly scratched glass onto one exhausted Pao Zheng. He wasn’t sure where he was, or even why he got there for that matter. Looking around, he saw plenty of machinery that he wasn’t aware of. Occasionally, he could hear the odd beep from this metal box. *What is this?* He thought to himself. The room was pale white; the snow blue light permeating the room with its icy-cold glow. In the corner, he noticed a small crack in the paint, a crack so infinitesimally small that the average person wouldn’t even see. And yet, its mere presence managed to distort the sheer sanctity of the room, at least to Pao’s eyes.

As he stared out the window, the light rays reflected off his eyes and onto the vast city below, enabling him to view the bustling city in all its glory. In a sense, he respected it, for it reminded him of how he chased criminals into the night without a thought of rest. Only here, he saw citizens rushing to get to where they needed to be, walking at a brisk pace but not fast to the extent that they would accidentally bump into someone else. From a view this high in the sky, it looked extraordinary.

Yet, even after staring for several minutes, just concentrating on the thousands of people going about their daily lives, he was no closer to remembering. Why was he here? What was it that he forgot? How many years had passed? Questions only lead to more questions, and even his brilliant mind could not uncover a concrete answer. Perhaps his skills had deteriorated after being in bed for this long. His mind dwelled on the thought of his comrades. He considered the possibility of finding them again, but brushed it off quickly. “They’re probably gone anyway.” Pao thought, yet he could not drop the secret hope that they were out there, somewhere, just like him. He wonders if the world even needs him anymore. Had he been left behind, like so many greats of the past? He was in a land unknown to him, a time even more so. He questions whether he would be capable of taking on the mantle of “Judge” once more. After all, the only reason he became one was because he believed in justice. But the notions of justice are easily changed, and what was once crime can be seen as commonplace behaviour, with enough time. His hands slightly trembled for a short while under the cold sun.

Before long, a woman in a plain white uniform entered the room. She walked with a vigorous yet unexcited pace, a child rushing to finish their homework so that they can sleep. As she walked to bed, her eyes were entirely focused on the wooden board that she was holding, her hands ticking off several unknown boxes. When she approached the bed, she was slightly surprised to see Pao not lying down, but rather simply sitting on a chair next to a window.

“Thank you for your stay.” the woman said.

“What is the place?” Pao asked.

“One of the most technologically advanced hospitals in the world, Nestle Healthcare International. We kept your body under cryogenic preservation, and so you have awoken several decades later. I understand that the world you know is long gone”

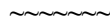
Pao wonders how and why he was kept this way. Even in his weakened state, he knew that no one did anything without a reason. It was, of course, the reasoning behind why so many people commit crimes. But now, everything seems at peace.

“Thank you for your service. I shan’t bother you any longer.” Pao swiftly left without a word. He had been eager to discover what this new world entailed. After all, with everything that happened, he needed a means of taking the edge off. Leaving the room, he made his way to a partially painted hallway that had just been cleaned. Even though it was early in the morning, he saw dozens of doctors hard at work, doing what they could to save lives. He had always admired the medical industry. A happily surprised Pao watched in curiosity. The footsteps of each doctor, the rush, the constant struggle. He heavily admired the honour that comes with giving others a means to survive. He had seen many of his former comrades die for no reason. Walking along the hallway, he saw how each worker there worked in conjunction to form a perfect medical system. A true miracle.

Then, he snapped back to reality as he arrived at the final hallway. “Excuse me, sir.” a man interrupted. Pao rapidly turned to his right, seeing a man behind a counter. “Pao Zheng, is it? Gnarly name you got there.” Pao wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that.

“Here’s your medical fee.” the man said. Pao was taken aback, but he found it reasonable. *They did save my life after all, so it is only fair.* That was until he saw the bill itself. *7,000,000 dollars?* He thought. “Why is it so much?” Pao asked with a furious tone. “Please, sir. We kept you in ice for decades. Please understand.” As much as Pao understood the cost of healthcare, he was understandably infuriated with how he was kept alive only to be put as a slave. “This is a scam! How dare you try to charge me this much! This is outrageous!” He couldn’t stand being insulted like this. “Sir, please, this is customary for all hospitals here! This is mandatory by law!” the man said. Pao was surprised to say the least. He was always on the side of the law, but it appears that has changed, along with the times. He wasn’t so sure of his sense of righteousness anymore.

“Sorry for the outburst, good sir. Unfortunately, I do not have access to such funding at the moment. May I please pay at a later date?” Pao said with reluctance. He wasn’t even sure if he could pay it off if he tried. But he knew he had to try. He had to find a way to make some money. But how?



“One triple caramel latte, coming right up.” Pao said. He frantically worked the machines, hoping to keep up with the work rush. Every day, thousands of citizens come to visit this “Starbucks” for a drink. Pao struggled to keep the orders in check. While he was used to the dynamic nature of living as a civil servant, even he could not handle the terror that is “rush hour”. For each one that he served, countless more came through the door. He could barely keep up with memorising the various different coffees, lattes, cappuccinos, and whatnot that they served here. *How does anyone do this everyday?* Pao thought.

As he worked at a closer angle, he now noticed that everyone was barely awake. Black demons were hidden under the eyelids of most individuals he saw, dragging down their shoulders, seeking to bring each one to the floor. Pao wanted to call out the store, but was once again worried that he would be proven wrong once more. He was at the mercy of others. The passing of time also meant the loss of his own independence; his own sense of righteousness that enabled him to stamp out corruption without hesitation. But not anymore. He wasn’t sure why, but working in this environment for even a few hours drained him to the point where he was unable to fight.

At the very least, he made some new comrades. A coworker of his happened to help him get through the daily messes. Jason showed him around, taught him the ropes, and helped him make sure he wasn’t too miserable at their job. He was, just like Pao, a barista, but unlike him, he was born to normal people living normal lives, in the normal world that they live in right now. Jason was a black man in his early twenties, and even though there were times that people stared at him in disgust, he carried with him an energy that seemed to negate any insult directed at him. Even in the most difficult of times, he still finds a way to make things better. Pao, a person who worked in corruption throughout most of his adulthood, found that admirable. He himself knew from his own occupation is justice that working yourself to the core can have disastrous consequences, physically and emotionally. Pao thought that to be was honourable.

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Pao was closing up the store for the day. At long last, the sun finally gave up on them and let them leave the store for the day. Pao wasn't very excited to leave as he knew he had to come back the next day. And the next. And the one after that. And the one after that. An endless struggle to survive. Both Pao and Jason walked through the door, and went into the eternal, peaceful darkness where no one could see them.

As Jason and Pao were walking together in the cold night, they found themselves engaged in deep discussion. Though they belonged to different periods of history, they were quite similar.

"You know, I never intended to be a coffee barista."

"Oh?"

"It's just to pay the bills. I can't really do anything else at the moment."

"Then what do you want to become?"

"May sound a bit surprising to you, but I want to be a police officer."

Pao was surprised, but pleasantly so. For the first time since he came here, he let out a hearty laugh.

"W—What's so funny?" Jason asked in a nervous tone.

"Nothing, nothing. Just came as a mild shock to me."

"I know, not many people want to work in law enforcement now." Pao didn't know that. "Even with all of the recent news, I still can't help it. I want to protect the people around me while I still can, before I get too old." Pao felt that one in his stomach. But even then, he felt a certain warmth. It reminded him of his duty, it reminded him that crime was still happening, and it reminded him of his goal to rid crime from the world, no matter the cost.

He looked ahead and saw the midnight road growing into a hiking trail, splitting off into multiple directions, each equally likely to get to their destination, each equally unlikely to get themselves lost. But Pao knew his way around difficult roads. Without hesitation, he picked a road normally. Jason on the other hand, was not so sure.

"How did you know which way to go?" Jason questioned.

"You just have to know. You can't hesitate. You just have to do it." Pao said. *Perhaps I should take my own advice.*

Pao always liked the moon and the darkness. Even though it was here that he watched the most heinous of crimes being committed by the most evil of criminals, it was also here that he found himself in the company of great friends, just under the silver moonlight, where all truths of the world would be uncovered like a magician unveiling their secret magic trick. Pao stared at the moon. In his hometown, there was a legend that the deceased would live on the moon, looking down on the mortal world. If that were true, would his friends be looking back at him? Would they be looking over him, making sure no harm gets inflicted upon him? Pao wasn't sure. *And I don't think I ever will be. I don't know where they are, or if they still even exist. But I know that no matter what, they would be looking out for me.*

But just as they were staring, Jason let out a scream of pain, as if he was being hunted by an ancient hound. Pao turned around, but before he could see what was going on, he too fell to the ground like the sound of an oak tree. But no one was there to hear it.

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They woke up hearing the sounds of crickets and metal bars. Not exactly the best night of sleep they've had in their lives. A swelling bulge was lying atop each of their heads, hurting no less than whatever it was that hit them last night. As their vision cleared, they got a better idea of where they were and how they got there. The image of a prison cell hit their eyes as the light from the broken window shined through and reflected off their eyeballs. It was dimly lit, and in quite poor condition; mould crawled all over the walls, releasing a stench that easily permeated the air.

"Where are we?" Jason asked, still half-dizzy.

*I wish I could answer.* Pao got up and surveyed the area. Before long, they realised they were trapped in this cell. Without any access to any internet devices, no one knew that they were there in the first place.

Jason was freaking out, and understandably so. He was incredibly worried about whether he would ever see his family again. On the other hand, Pao was wondering why he had been taken. To his knowledge, they had nothing of value, and yet they were taken. He knew more than anyone that no one did anything without reason. *It doesn't make sense.*

But before they could continue any further, a man walked up to the cell and opened the gates with a large *clang*. Pao stared at him with an intense glare, shooting daggers as he walked past. He was dressed in blue, with trousers that were a bit too long for him. On his waist, there was a storage belt housing a walkie-talkie, a badge, and a firearm that appeared to be almost empty. Pao didn't dare make a move. Without uttering a word, he grabbed the two of them and dragged them down a hallway. Covered in grime, their legs hit every uneven bump on the floor, every single piece of garbage that no one bothered to pick up.

Before long, they were brought to a group of people. Old men and women sat in chairs, encircling them in a wood. A bright light illuminated the room, yet it only shone most brightly upon Pao and Jason's faces. Nearly blinding them, they were brought towards a caged room without any indication where they belonged. A rusted miniature model of a blinded woman holding a scale was in front of them. After some time had passed, the people had begun discussion. They weren't really asked any questions, but they could clearly notice a heated debate going on.



After several hours, it appears that they had reached a conclusion. They had been dragged out without any warning, and then they were asked one question.

"Do the defendants have anything to say?" an old man asked.

Pao couldn't believe his words. "What do you mean 'what do we have to say?' You took us here, against our will. I don't know what you want with me, but Jason here hasn't done anything! How dare you assume we know anything about this. We're just people trying to get by. And you just took us without even telling us why! Sure, I was born several hundred years ago, but Jason is just an average person. You have no reason to take him. I will not stand for this injustice!"

The man frowned. Him and a few other individuals stood together and murmured a few words. Pao didn't care what had happened to him beyond this point. He needed to get the words he had been so desperately wanting to say ever since he got here.

Then, Jason was taken from his cell, leaving Pao alone.

"Pao, I sentence you to forever be a prisoner for Nestle Scientific Innovation. You will help them with their hard labour for the rest of your life."

As soon as Pao heard those words, everything went black once more.



Pao woke up in a tank of an unknown, viscous liquid. He was hooked up to several monitors, each beeping several times a minute.

“Initiating cryogenic deposition test, variation one.” a woman said.

The second that Pao heard those words, several needles came out of nowhere, injecting drugs of several colours into his body. Though Pao wasn't sure what they were, he knew that they hurt. They hurt a lot. He screamed, but no one was there to hear his cry. He screamed for several minutes, but eventually passed out due to shock. The sun shone brightly through the window, eventually making its way towards Pao's face. His face was that of one that had given up emotionally. His face was that of one that no longer knew any justice nor corruption, only the pain that he would continue to feel for the rest of his life.

“Test unsuccessful. Initiating variation two.” The woman said.

He had lost before the fight even began. Without any chance for resistance, he had been brought down unto their knees, having totally lost in every shape imaginable. Worse yet, no one seemed to notice nor even care, as the Sun rose for another new day.

# The Revered Judge Pao of the Universe

*Victoria Shanghai Academy (Secondary), Shan, Valerie – 15*

Before I became an astronaut, I studied history as a minor at university. It was something that I'd been interested in ever since I was young—besides the dreams of one day being able to become an astronaut and reaching the stars. Being Chinese, I had heard a lot of stories about famous Chinese historical figures from my parents, and being the studious kid I was, I took it upon myself to read more books and learn more about them.

One of them was from the television series “Justice Pao”, which documented the tales of Judge Pao from the Song Dynasty.

Outside the information from the television series, I found that Judge Pao was a very interesting figure. As one of the most revered judges in Chinese history, he had many great deeds that I had heard many stories about—both legends and true events alike. Judge Pao's wisdom, his ability to speak his mind, and his values made him a well-known figure in Chinese history. There isn't a household in China that doesn't know his name.

But these had been tales from years ago. As soon as I left university, I placed all my history books into the drawers of my childhood bedroom and went on to complete my further studies in astrophysics.

Nowadays I spent most of my life in the skies, beyond the embrace of the Earth's atmosphere, as I watched the swirling clouds below from the space shuttle in a dark abyss.

The current mission I was on proved to be a long and gruelling journey. For some strange reason, I was starting to feel extremely homesick. Looking down at the blue and green oasis, its wispy clouds dancing on its surface, a part of me knew that I yearned to be back home.

Finding no help in staring at my home planet below, I turned to a small pack, which carried the only two items I was allowed to bring onto the shuttle. The first was a picture of my family, with my parents standing on both sides of me—I had graduated from university then—and my elder sister standing beside all of us. All of them were smiling, seeming to smile proudly at me from their place in the photograph. The second item was a book, a very thin—albeit interesting—book on the tales of Judge Pao.

I didn't know how long I spent staring at those items. I didn't know how long it had been before I began to drift off. All I knew, was that one moment, I was floating inside the space shuttle, and one moment later, my consciousness had transferred me to a neighbouring planet.

If this was in real life, I would have been the first human to step foot on Mars.

Red dust blew at my helmet, as I held my arms up to shield my vision from the sandstorm blowing at me. The steps I took were heavy, the boots of my suit thumping to the ground every time I moved.

Mars—the red planet—was indeed very, very red. Everything, save for the sky—or rather, space—was red. It was all a dusty red colour, which had begun to become an eyesore within the mere few minutes I had stepped foot here. *This has to be a dream*, I told myself.

I had only been walking for a short while longer until in the distance I saw what seemed to be a large backdrop. At this point, the sandstorm had receded, and I was able to take a closer look. The wall of the backdrop was like that of an imperial Chinese palace. There were large wooden pillars, beautifully polished, arranged in an orderly fashion in front of the wall. A large painting hung in the middle of the wall. It was a painting of a Xiezhi, a single-horned Chinese mythical creature said to represent justice. In front of the painting was a wooden desk, as well polished as the pillars were. There were a few chairs made out of the same wood as the desk and the pillars, which were all lined up in a single row.

To my surprise, I was not alone. All of the chairs in the row had been occupied. The two chairs on the left were occupied by two people dressed as ancient Chinese government officials. Their attire was exactly as I had seen in images of people from the Song Dynasty—except that all their clothing seemed to be entirely ablaze. Perhaps it was only because their clothing was so bright—glowing in a radiant shade of gold—that it seemed to be on fire. As I walked closer, I found that it was beginning to get hotter. Maybe their clothing truly was on fire.

Seated on the two chairs on the left were two more government officials, wearing similar attire to the others. The only difference was that instead of the golden fabric the previous two had worn, these two wore a silvery fabric, with almost a blue hue in it. Like the first two government officials, their attire seemed to be glowing slightly, as if their clothes had been dipped from head to toe in extremely fine glitter.

Next to the fiery glowing government officials was another government official, only he was not accompanied by anyone else. His attire, in contrast to the other two groups, was not so bright that it could blind me in an instant. Rather, his clothes were a shade of dusty red, reflecting the colour of the ground below us.

The five of them heard me coming and turned to look at me, some with expressions of anticipation, and others with expressions of annoyance.

I was about to open my mouth and ask them something but stopped to ask myself a question. Could they hear me? I was wearing my astronaut suit, and usually, astronauts could communicate with each other because we wore headsets which could transmit radio waves. These government officials didn't seem to have those.

My questions were interrupted by a voice who spoke. The voice did not belong to any of them and instead belonged to a sixth figure that I had not noticed, who was sitting at the desk up front.

"It seems that our witness has arrived," He spoke in Mandarin Chinese.

My jaw nearly dropped. The figure who spoke was someone that, up until now, I had only seen in history books. The dark-faced individual wore robes of black and gold, his familiar hat sitting on top of his head. On his forehead was a mark in the shape of a crescent moon. He had been stroking his goatee with interest, but upon seeing me, he stopped.

I was standing face-to-face with Judge Pao himself.

"Sit," He told me, gesturing to the only empty chair in the row. "We will start soon."

Hesitantly, I took the seat in between the dusty-red-clothed government official and the first silvery-clothed individual.

Judge Pao stood up from his seat, looking down upon all of us, before clearing his mouth to speak. "I have called you all here today to discuss something that has been brought to my attention not too long ago."

Despite half-believing that being in space was starting to cause hallucinations, I leaned forward in suspense, reading to witness the case-solving abilities of one of China's greatest masterminds.

Judge Pao gestured to one of the fiery-clothed government officials. It was then I noticed that the official that stood was not wearing the clothing of a government official. He was wearing the clothing of an ancient Chinese royal. I turned to my right. One of the silvery-clothed individuals was wearing the same type of clothing. So was the man dressed in red to my left.

One moment, I was in the space shuttle. The next, I was on Mars, sandwiched between two presumably very important people, witnessing the works of one of the most famous Chinese figures of all time. Just my luck.

"Emperor of Taiyang, you may speak," said Judge Pao to the fiery-clothed emperor.

*Emperor of Taiyang?* At that moment, everything and nothing made sense at the same time. At least that explained why their clothes were ablaze. It was just like the hot and fiery surface of the Sun.

The Emperor of Taiyang—as he was referred to—pointed accusingly at the two individuals dressed in silver. "On behalf of the Kingdom of Taiyang, I will not allow any trespassing into aerial territory during the day by any citizen of Yueliang. Your charioteers are to wait until ours have gone!"

"What nonsense!" retorted one of the silvery-clothed individuals—presumably the Emperor of Yueliang. "It is you trespassing into aerial territory! Last night, it was already six in the evening, and your charioteers refused to descend! Our charioteers simply continued their duties. It was yours who trespassed, not ours! How dare you accuse us of something as serious as this?"



“Excuse you!” The Emperor of Taiyang argued. “What about the day before, when your charioteers began to drive the chariots into the air a whole four hours ahead of schedule? Revered Judge Pao, I demand that Yueliang be held accountable!”

“I agree, Revered Judge Pao,” agreed the fiery-clothed government official sitting next to the Emperor of the Sun. “A list of trespassings from Yueliang has been documented by the government of Taiyang.”

“Thank you, both of you,” Judge Pao said to the Emperor and bureaucrat of Taiyang. “Your stance in this matter has been recorded. And of you, officials from Yueliang?”

The Emperor of Yueliang stood, turning to the Emperor of Taiyang, a hostile expression hanging on his face just like how the moon hung from the night sky. “Yueliang is not guilty in this matter! It is only Taiyang who wishes to establish their dominance over the aerial domain above the mortal realm. Taiyang is much larger than Yueliang. Revered Judge Pao, you have a great sense of justice, surely you can determine who is in the right and who is in the wrong?”

“Taiyang wishes for nothing but peace with Yueliang.” The Emperor of Taiyang stood abruptly. “And here you are, accusing us? We have nothing to take from you!”

“Esteemed Emperor of Taiyang,” The bureaucrat of Yueliang spoke. “Last winter, you wrote a complaint letter to His Majesty complaining about our extended field time in the aerial domain. However, I have evidence here that shows extended field time from your kingdom last summer, as well as the summer before, and all the summers before that.”

“We only made these arrangements because your kingdom had extended field time every winter.” The bureaucrat of Taiyang said in protest. “It was only fair.”

“Silence, everyone, please.” Judge Pao requested. The two emperors sat, both sides still glaring daggers at each other. He turned to the individual in dusty red. “Thank you, Emperor of Huoxing, for allowing us to use this venue today.”

His comment immediately explained the colour of the Emperor’s clothing. “It is an honour to have you all here, Revered Judge Pao.” The Emperor of Huoxing answered.

My head was beginning to spin. Being mostly knowledgeable in the field of astronomy, I knew little to nothing about the field of astrology. Whether or not these figures existed in Chinese mythology, I wouldn’t know. The only thing I could do was sit there and watch as they glared at each other with hostility.

Judge Pao looked down at a set of scrolls on the table. By some miracle, the sandstorms of Mars did not blow the sheets of paper away. “According to this report that was recently submitted,” He told everyone, beginning to read from the report. “Those from Taiyang claim to see charioteers from Yueliang in the aerial domain during the day. Yueliang denies all such claims but instead comments that Taiyang has been misusing their field time in the aerial domain, going well into the night. Allegations have been supported by citizens from both kingdoms, and other kingdoms have either refused to comment or have no information to offer.”

“That is correct!” The Emperor of Taiyang interrupted. “You, Yueliang, have been sending your charioteers into the sky when it’s still daylight! Don’t think our charioteers haven’t seen you, your faint silhouettes in the distance, following us closely in the morning sky!”

“You accuse us as if you haven’t done the same!” The Emperor of Yueliang shouted. “There have been witnesses that your charioteers have spent a whole day and night in the sky. We have been following you to ensure that it doesn’t happen again. You only seek to overshadow us, refusing to let the light shine in our direction!”

“How dare you?” At this, flames began to grow on the clothing of the Emperor of Taiyang. “Revered Judge Pao, the Emperor of Yueliang has admitted to misusing their field time in the aerial domain, and has admitted to following us even during daytime.”

“Revered Judge Pao, The Emperor of Taiyang has not denied doing the same.” The Emperor of Yueliang turned to Judge Pao as well. “They need to receive their punishment!”

“That is enough from the both of you,” spoke Judge Pao. The two emperors sunk to their seats. “Now, we will call on our witness, a representative of the human realm. After all, it was the humans who first reported these incidents happening.”

At this, all eyes turned to me. I was beginning to sweat in my spacesuit, both from the heat and from the nervousness of having the spotlight turned on me.

“Revered Judge Pao,” I spoke hesitantly, repeating the same formal manner that everyone had used. “I’m afraid I know nothing about what you speak of. I have been aboard a space shuttle for the past month.”

“Yes, but surely you’ve seen something?” Judge Pao asked me. Upon seeing that I shook my head, he added, “Or perhaps you have seen it, and you just don’t realise it?”

“No, I don’t understand,” I blurted out. “All this talk about the aerial domain, it makes no sense! The Sun and Moon don’t travel in chariots. The Moon orbits the Earth, while the Earth orbits the Sun. Unless this aerial domain you speak of is space, I don’t see how I can be of any help to you.”

“Is that so?” Judge Pao raised an eyebrow. “Fine, but perhaps you can explain how it seems that the Sun and the Moon are in the sky at the same time on Earth?”

His question only confused me further, but I tried to find the most logical answer. “Perhaps you’re talking about timezones?” I suggested. “The Earth has many different timezones. It can be morning in China, but midnight halfway across the world. This happens due to the Earth’s rotation on its axis. Some parts of the Earth face the Sun at different times, making it daytime in those places, and nighttime in others.”

Judge Pao clapped his hands together in satisfaction. “There you go.”

“It can’t just be that!” yelled the Emperor of Taiyang. “There has to be a further explanation as to why the Moon is still in the sky when the Sun is!”

“Maybe this is what happens in China?” I pointed out. “China observes one timezone, while other large countries can observe multiple. This means that while it’s eight in the morning, the sun can be hanging in the sky in the east, while it is still dark in the west.”

“And the prolonged periods of field time are due to a change in seasons.” Judge Pao added. “If I remember correctly, the Earth’s tilt causes the seasons. One side of the Earth is pointed toward the Sun while the other is pointed away. While that happens, one hemisphere has longer days, while the other has longer nights. That is what happens in summer and winter respectively. I do hope it makes sense, it’s been a while since I checked on the order of the world.”

Realising that the final comment was directed at me, I struggled to give him a reassuring nod.

“Both of your kingdoms need each other.” Judge Pao continued. “You may not like it, but it’s true. Taiyang supports the Yueliang with celestial power whenever it has to rise. Without this help, the Moon would not be able to shine so brightly. Taiyang needs the Moon to cover the Sun when celestial power is almost running out. When that happens, there is an eclipse, and the human population does not suspect it, merely treating it as judgement from the gods. We cannot allow an inter-galactical war to happen over such a dispute. I assume that now, both of your kingdoms can reconcile with each other?”

The Emperors of Taiyang and Yueliang turned to each other, beginning to stand from their seats, before giving each other a firm handshake and walking off, with their respective bureaucrats following after. The Emperor of Huoxing gave Judge Pao a bow before leaving as well.

Judge Pao turned to me. “An interesting case, if I do say so myself. Sometimes, people forget how the world works, and amidst confusion comes strife. Fortunately, it did not happen this time.”

“You’re truly as great as they say,” I said in awe.

“Oh, but it’s nothing,” Judge Pao replied. “I just have a strong sense of justice. I think that’s something the world needs.”

As he turned to leave, I was about to call out to him, but I was interrupted by a loud noise which came from the headset I wore. The noise shook me awake, and I was back in the space shuttle, overlooking Earth once more.

Another astronaut aboard the space shuttle called for me, asking for help in checking the engine. I obliged, floating through the narrow passageways of the ship, pausing only to gaze down on Earth and the sea of stars that surrounded it.

At that moment, it was as if a set of stars in the distance gave me a wink.