

Fiction

Group 3



The Diary of the Half-Blind Detective

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Chung, Abigail – 12

Dear Diary,

I have been summoned by the king today. When I met him, he seemed quite troubled, as his face had darkened.

“Your Justice, I have a very important case for you,” he stated.

“Very important case? Isn’t that what everybody tells me?” I thought. It always annoys me how people exaggerate their cases!

“As you see, there has been a rumor going around – a rumor about a spy in the imperial palace,” he continued. I nodded.

Rumors spread like wildfires in the palace.

“And I am anxious that the spy might find out about the secret weapon we are making,” he said.

“Now, your majesty, you shouldn’t jump to conclusions. After all, rumors can be started by naughty rogues who want to spread mischief and panic across the country,” I scolded. I knew the king, if I didn’t state my thoughts straight-forwardly, he would be very ignorant.

“I suppose you are right, rumors are rumors. But could you investigate the case if they were true?” he replied.

I halted my thoughts in reluctance. I had a secret. A big one. And the last thing I wanted was for it to get exposed during the investigation. But I couldn’t reject it.

“Yes your majesty, I will begin in 2 days,” I said.

“Good!” the king exclaimed.

I left the courtroom with newfound determination, the determination to find an apprentice.

Dear Diary,

Today consisted of a lot of roaming around and searching for an apprentice. It was difficult to find one but in the end, I got the job done. I found my apprentice on the streets, observing people with her melancholy brown eyes. I knew she was an orphan, as it was quite simple to identify them. At that moment, a person was rushing through the crowds, he was in a hurry and dropped his purse on the ground. The girl spotted it as I did.

“Sir! You dropped your purse!” she called as she raced to the man, clutching the purse.

“Why, thank you! You are a very considerate girl,” he replied.

I watched the scene with shining eyes. Surely, there was some goodness in this lawless generation. I briskly approached the girl.

“Excuse me, I’m sorry to disturb you, but I have the offer to make you,” I started.

The girl nodded. I could tell that she was surprised since she was getting an offer from one of the higher ranks.

“I am a detective. And since I am growing old, my eyesight has been failing me so I decided to train an apprentice. I observed that you are quite observant and have a good sense of justice,” I continued.

I knew that she knew what my offer was. Her eyes lit up when I explained the situation to her.

“Sure, I will take the offer. But, will I get a payment?” she asked.

“Yes, 100 Huizi per month,” I answered.

“You got yourself an apprentice here,” she responded.

“Very well, meet me at the gates of the imperial palace, tomorrow morning at daybreak. You shall then work on your first case,” I said.

“Yes sir, by the way, what is your name?” she added.

“The name’s Judge Pao, but you can call me master,” I replied.

“Yes sir, nice to meet you, I’m Min,” she said.

And after that, the girl walked away and vanished into the crowds.

Dear Diary,

Today was the day of the investigation. I was waiting at the palace gates before daybreak. Punctuality is important. After a few minutes, Min came running toward the palace gates.

“Good morning sir,” she said panting.

“Thank you for coming here today. I will explain the case to you as we go in,” I stated.

The palace guards were staring at us blankly. They knew me, but they didn’t know Min. They seemed to disapprove of her as they scowled in her direction. Min could feel the scowls. As we strolled through the gates she shot a death glare back at them, which made me want to double up with laughter. Thankfully all I got out was a soft chuckle.

“May I proceed?” I asked.

She gave me another one of her nods.

“So, the case is there was a rumor in the imperial palace and the king being the king started worrying about the rumor,” I explained.

“He sounds like an absolute idiot to me,” she interrupted.

I was surprised by her boldness. She had the air of a rebel!

“Don’t tell anyone, but I agree with you,” I whispered.

A surprised look spread across Min’s face. But in a few seconds, she sucked the information in.

“Anyway, I agreed to investigate the case, since the king was concerned that the spy would find out about the secret weapon we are making,” I continued.

“Are there any suspects?” Min questioned.

“Yes. There are 4 suspects. The new cook, an experienced eunuch, an official and even one of the emperor’s wives,” I mentioned.

As we were striding towards the investigation place, a servant scampered towards us.

“Your Justice, I have very urgent news! The king has been drugged!” he announced

I knew there was only one thing to do, run.

I darted towards the king’s room, Min at my heels. But when we got there, the king was not there! The room was dark, deserted. Was this a trick or was he kidnapped? Even though he annoyed me sometimes, he was still the king!

Min wasted no time investigating the scene. Min found a feast laid out on the table – half eaten. Yet the king was still not there.

“What did he have for dinner?” she pondered aloud.

I squinted to see the refreshments. It was right there, just in front of me, but it was all blurry. Thankfully, I could tell what he ate by the scent of the meal.

“He probably ate spicy duck meat, and it is definitely poisoned,” I stated.

Suddenly, I felt a cold hand from the darkness, sending chills up my back. And then I blacked-out.

Dear Diary,

I’m sorry I couldn’t write for a few days. As you can see, I blacked-out and when I gained consciousness, I was on a bed, and there were a lot of people staring down at me. Min was amongst the crowd of people.

Min briefly explained what happened. It appeared that all of the suspects were all spies and they were trying to steal the plans for the new weapon, an “eruptor”. She told me they were plotting to overthrow the king in rebellion. I was proud of my apprentice. Very proud.

Judge Pao 1918

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Kaffeman, Akira – 12

I wake up to a thunder nearby, I quickly get up and put on my robe as the floor shakes and creaks. I walk outside and I see my ship getting pulled left and right by the winds and the waves. I got splashed a little with water and I slipped down the stairs. Suddenly I see a bright light, I feel limp and vibrating all over my body.

I wake up on a cold wet stone floor in a street, as I look around while getting up I see many strange writings. “They must be new dialects of Chinese!” but then I realize that it looks nothing like our language. I walk down the street as I gaze through the new technologies there are. I see many metallic boxes that have wheels on them and they move around real fast without any horses carrying it. There are also many people dressed differently. They have funny hats and the ladies have big dresses with a lot of jewelry.

I walk around until a group of men walk up to me and they seem to have a different type of gun with them. They speak to me in a foreign language. “Hello sir, you seem to be lost. Is there any way we can get you help?”. I simply just stand there not knowing what to say. I say in Chinese “I’m sorry but I don’t understand what you are saying, if you have a translator please bring him to me”. They all stand there confused until one of them tells their leader something. They quickly gesture at me to get into the magical box with wheels and I get on. It moves fast and we reach a large building.

They bring me to a room and a person walks in. He comes down and sits on a chair next to me and he says in Chinese “Hello, my name is Zhong. I come from a foreign student exchange from China”. I turn my head surprised as I turn my head to see this young man. His face is in shock as I turn my head, he whispers to himself “What the”.

A soldier asks the young man “Are you okay?”, Zhong replies “Yes but this man here is Judge Bao!”. The soldiers replied “Judge Pao? Who even is that, a war lord?”. “He was a very famous judge and detective in ancient China,” says Zhong. “How is that possible?” says the soldier. “I certainly don’t know how and when this happened,” replied Zhong.

I spent a few hours with Zhong and other men talking about where I was, theories on how I got here and details about this time. It turns out I was in 1918! I was shocked, I traveled 868 years! They told me about the great war that ended this year and how the world association is having a court battle for who is guilty and what punishments leaders deserve for horrible crimes. Apparently there was no judge for the court and they need to find one person who is eligible for it soon.

I offered them to be a judge for the court since I am a supreme judge back in China. They happily accepted the offer and a few days later, I was taken to the court. The first case was with Mr Tsar Nicholas the second. He is charged with mistreatment of the civilians during the war. Mr Nicholas pleads not guilty, suddenly I use my powers of manipulation to make him speak more and more and eventually reveal the truth. “I’m sorry ok? I needed manpower and supplies for the military!” I caught him.

He is sentenced to 1 year of labor in heaven. Next case is with William the Second, He is charged with misuse and overuse of highly toxic gas against Soldiers, Animals and Civilians. He pleads not guilty but I make him tell the story twice about how he didn’t command the orders and he had a large amount of missing info in both of them. Aha, I caught you! I sentenced him to 4 years of being a servant of the Devil.

The final case is with Franz Joseph, He is charged with severe mistreatment of supply and government funds. He explains a lot about how it all was his generals fault but I use my Mind reading power to read his mind. “Haha, it seems like the judge fell for it!” I quickly took advantage of this knowledge and started making him come up with crazy lies that made no sense. I caught him too, I sentenced him to 2 years as the Janitor of Hell. After court, Zhong and a few men came to praise me for what I did. We decided to go celebrate back at the station but we had to walk in the rain. We took our umbrellas and walked in the rain until I saw a bright light all around me. I couldn’t see anything but the light, and then I suddenly woke up on a bed I recognized. Many people were around me wearing normal clothes from my era. “Have I made it back?” I asked what year it was and they said 1050. I sighed in relief and went back to bed.

Kaifeng, 1029

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Landau, Lev – 13

“Guilty!” The judge shouted, banging his fist on the table.

An uproar erupted in the room, men shouting, screaming, and crying.

Not a single emotion was absent from the room. Bao Zheng was one of them sitting in the back of the room, smiling,

“Silence!” The judge shouted, and the room quieted. Bao was already walking out of the room, with a grin on his face.

Jianchang, 1028

Bao was in mourning. Just last week, his dad passed away, in his sleep. His mother passed away a year ago. Most men would be crying, thinking of past opportunities and feeling sorry for themselves. But Bao was not like most men. He knew that his parents had complete and fulfilling lives, and was content with that knowledge.

Now was the time to focus on the future. Bao already knew what his future would be; justice.

Before taking care of his parents, Bao was an imperial Jinshi and the magistrate of Jianchang.

Only wanting good for the people, he went on a mission to stop corruption but ran afoul of a corrupt official, who was also a smuggling kingpin whose men threatened Bao’s family.

Rid of this hurdle, Bao now set out to stop corruption, and regain his position.

He left the funeral, brooding over how to bring the official to Justice.

His first stop was the town archives, to research how to bring him down.

The official's name was Wang Bian Li, and at the time of Bao’s fall from power, was the prefect of Huludao City. But since then, had enjoyed successive promotions until he was the magistrate of the Capital city, Kaifeng.

Bao threw the book in frustration, then got up and left.

On the walk home, Bao thought about what this meant for his future. As Magistrate of Kaifeng, Bian Li enjoyed a position of power close to the Emperor, who would naturally be distrustful of anyone who tried to discredit the magister of his city.

First, Bao needed his old job to provide credit for his accusations.

Still qualified as a Jinshi, he sent a letter to the Prefect’s office, to get his old job back as magister of Jianchang.

In the meantime, Bao needed evidence of wrongdoing on the official's part.

Since the official started his empire in the area, Bao reasoned that the smugglers would still have a warehouse in the area.

Using his old reputation, he found it, on the coast of the Yellow sea, in Liaodong Bay.

Bao immediately took off on his horse, to the warehouse.

The warehouse was a stone and wood barn on the beach, smack in the middle of the port.

Bao tied up his horse in a nearby stable, and Waiting until nightfall, found a crack in the wall of the barn,

Creeping through it, he came out into a dark, wood-floored space, filled with wooden crates.

He looked at some parchment, and took them, to read in the light.

“He asks for too much.” The first voice said. Bao was startled, and Froze was unsure of who was talking. “The boss won’t be happy.”

“He’s our only customer here.” The second voice reasoned.

Bao tried to look who was speaking, but whilst craning his neck around crates to look at the speakers, he cracked the floor.

“What was that? The original speaker queried.

His footsteps grew louder as Bao frantically looked for a place to hide. He jumped in between two crates, and just in time as a man with a lamp looked behind the crates.

“It’s Nothing. Just an old floorboard.”

“Good,” The other voice replied.

They continued talking for some time, but Bao wasn't listening.

Using the lantern that the man had left behind, Bao quietly read the parchments. They were invoices – shipments of silk from there to Dalian. This was nothing unusual, so Bao set them down and looked in one of the open crates. Inside was silk. He looked at others, and there was silk. If all of these crates are filled with silk, Bian Li was extremely rich. Bao pondered, But there was no evidence of wrongdoing. Bao continued this line of thought, thinking back to what he originally investigated Bian Li for. Smuggling and Corruption, he thought. Bao took the papers back, and read through them again. There were no tax papers! This means that all this silk is undocumented, and is being sold illegally to criminals.

As he was confirming this theory, Bao heard a commotion. He looked over the crates, and saw the two men leaving.

Bao got up, and rushed through the brack in the wall to his horse. He sprinted over to the mill, mounted his horse, and galloped off in pursuit of the two men.

He followed one to his house, and the other to the house of the local port official.

Tying up his horse, Bao climbed up the neighboring building, and looked through the house's windows. Inside, he saw the man fall asleep next to his wife.

It seemed that the man was there to bribe the official, but the man was the official. Bao asked around and found out the name of the official was Li Zhang Tu.

After returning to his home, it was already morning. On his doorstep, Bao found his reply from the prefect.

Inside, it detailed how the prefect was sorry Bao could not return to his old job.

However, after contacting another prefect, Bao would be appointed magister of Tianchang county.

Using his newfound credibility as a magister, Bao set off to the County Tax office, to prove that The warehouse was indeed owned by Bian Li, and was paying taxes.

He got there, and found the record of the property. It was owned by Bian Li, and was supposed to be filled with Furs and Art, with no mention of silk.

This was evidence enough of wrongdoing, but If the Imperial magistrate was bribing the official of a small port town, and a small warehouse was filled with contraband, then there must be more. Over the next couple of weeks, Bao Journeyed along the coast, to each of Bian Li's properties. In most cases, he found things that were not supposed to be there. From stolen artwork to silk, Bian Li was evading the Law at every turn.

After all of this Bao was finally satisfied that he had enough evidence, Bao returned home.

Arriving in his village, he greeted the locals, and rode home.

"Mr Bao!" His elderly neighbour Mrs. Xu called out, "There was a man looking for You!"

"Really?" Bao asked

"Yes! He said that you were to present yourself to the Emperor in Kaifeng, by the next moon."

"Thank you Mrs. Xu." Bao sighed, packed his bag, and rode off to the Capital.

It took him some time, but Bao got to the Imperial Palace.

"I am here to see his Excellency the Emperor." Bao Proclaimed

"Of course, a servant replied, but whom shall I announce?"

"Bao Zheng, Magistrate of Tianchang."

"The Emperor will see you Immediately." The servant took him through the palace, and into the imperial audience room.

"Imperial Excellency, you summoned Bao Zheng, Magistrate of Tianchang, and he has come." the servant announced, opening the door."

The audience chamber was a large, airy room with a throne of jade in the middle. A fine carpet led to the throne, flanked by guards in Purple and gold. Each one stood as still as a statue, spears and shields by their sides. A crowd of officials stood to the sides of the Emperor, whispering amongst themselves quietly.

“Do you know why you were summoned here, Magister?” The Emperor queried

“No, your Majesty”

“You were seen snooping around the magister of Kaifeng’s properties, who happens to be a friend of mine.”

“Yes, your majesty, however there is a good reason for this. I was Investigating the magister, who I had come to believe is corrupt, and the head of a smuggling ring.”

“He lies your majesty, I would neve—”

“Silence Wang Bian. As the Emperor, if I needed your input I would have asked for it. Do you have good evidence of what you claim?”

“Yes, your Exalted Excellence.”

“How did he get this evidence, without trespassing on my properties? This evidence is nullified!”

Wang Bian exclaimed, "He has no right to do such a thing.”

“As magister of a county, I have the right to investigate what is in my domain. When I saw what was there, I investigated elsewhere.” Bao explained, “Furthermore I recommend that Magister Wang Bian Li be removed from office, and arrested Immediately.”

The Emperor considered this for a moment, and agreed.

“I will see you at the trial. If what you have said is true, then you shall be promoted.”

“Thank You Emperor.”

“You are dismissed magisters.”

Judge Pao

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Ng, Xanthus – 12

Once upon a time, there was a Judge in China called Justice Pao, and everyone in the kingdom respected him. Every day, he would wake up at precisely 7 am and arrive at his court at 9 am, then his hard work would begin, case after case every day, he did his job so well that everyone wanted him to do their cases and respected him greatly.

But one early morning, he suddenly woke up to find that he was somewhere he didn't know, he was lying on a soft comfy bed in a pleasant and fancy room with a light breeze blowing on his face from an open window next to the bed and a nice warm blanket covering him, he stood up, and found everything he saw new to him, he walked over to the bathroom and saw a glass sink, he twisted the tap and warm water came gushing out, he then walked to the mini fridge and opened it, a gush of cold air came out and he took a bottle of water and drank, suddenly, the phone next to the refrigerator rang, Justice Pao cautiously picked it up and said hello, a voice answered: "Hello sir, thank you for staying at this hotel, your breakfast will be served now if you come down the cafeteria" "All right," Justice Pao said, then hung up.

Justice Pao quickly walked down to the cafeteria and had an enormous breakfast, after he was done, he got ready to go back to his room, but just then, the manager arrived and told him that he was needed at the high supreme court, he told Judge Pao the directions to the court and quickly left him.

Justice Pao walked out of the building and quickly arrived at the high court, as he sat down at the table where he was sitting, he looked around, he was fascinated by the stained windows, the sculptures on the chairs where he sat, and the architecture used into making the building so high and magnificent.

At long last, everyone arrived and sat down, the case started and Justice Pao was given a big stack of paper, he started to read through them, but he couldn't understand anything and thought it was very hard to do modern-day cases, but as he slowly started to figure out the steps to do the case, he found that it was very easy and more convenient to do the case more quickly. He announced the case open and tension filled the air as Judge Pao started talking

In the end of a few agonising hours, he announced the accused was guilty and everyone congratulated him on finishing the case so quickly, then as he headed back to his apartment, he thought of the case he had just now and thought of the cases he had back in his time, he noticed that the cases before was hard because he had no evidence except for the witnesses word and much more importantly, he didn't have the lawbook with him when he went to court back in his time.

The next day, as he woke up, he noticed something unusual, he was back in his old house and the familiar old bell on the courthouse was ringing at 7 o'clock. He walked to court and started to tell people to add some additional stuff to the law to let the courthouse run better. After that he was wrote down as a very important person in history and everyone knew who he was, the person who changed the way court ran.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Carmel School – Elsa High School, O, Sydney – 12

Ellie stepped on the cold, wet, cobblestone, small droplets of rain sprinkling onto both of her shoes. She rolled the sleeves of her jacket up and set forward. The rain kept on pattering onto the windows, and every single time, it went *peck peck*, like the rain was knocking on the windows, trying to get in. She could feel the puddles dancing as she walked by. The clouds overhead were gray, and gathering together. Ellie sighed as she started to change her walk into a slow jog, trying to get to the shed. And that jog turned into a run. The rain covered her glasses so much that she couldn't see clearly, but she didn't mind much. Luckily, when the rain began to fall heavier, Ellie had already reached the old, worn out shed. She shut the door, and water started dripping onto the dirty floor, making it slippery to walk on.

“Gosh, dad is gonna freak out if he sees that the floor is this much of a mess.” She looked around the shed and quickly grabbed a cloth and started wiping the floor.

“Right, where was I? Oh, yes, I have to find a rake.” Ellie desperately tried to find the small closet where her dad stored all the rakes. She started towards the dark brown closet a few inches away from her, but right when she started to walk, she could feel her foot sliding across the remaining small puddles of water and fell to the ground, and then, everything went black.

Ellie slowly opened her eyes, rubbing her temples. What had happened? Where was she? An ocean of these thoughts started swarming in her mind, and she bolted up. She was sitting in a bed, but it wasn't her bed. In fact, it wasn't really a bed after all. It was a..mattress of some sort? She looked around for her glasses and found them on the ground, but one of the lenses had shattered.

“Oh, good grief.” She sighed. Inspecting the broken glass. Nevertheless, she slid her glasses back on and gazed around the room she was in. There were a few windows, but they weren't that big, so she couldn't poke her head out if she wanted to, and the door looked uneasily old, like it would fall down if she tried to open it. There was a single desk in the corner of the room, and it had cobwebs and dust piles everywhere. Ellie gagged, wishing she wasn't here. She didn't even know where she was. What if this secretly was an alternate dimension and she physically had no way of getting out? Well, she wouldn't know that.

Ellie stood up and built up the courage to go outside and try to find her way back home. The door stood before her, and she covered her hand with her sleeve before opening it. The door made a sudden creaking sound, and she knew automatically that she was more scared than before. She peeked outside and was surprised to see curtains lining the walls, a small table in the middle of the room, and big windows, enough to let lots of sunshine in. She walked into the narrow corridor, and didn't see or hear anyone, until she heard a door open. Frantically, she tried to hide somewhere but was too late before the door swung open, and a man came out, looking around like there was a fire happening and he was trying to find the exit.

“I– Wher– Where am i?!” She managed to stammer, and she found the strange man walking up to her. She looked behind her, but the exiting door was on the other side of the corridor, and she definitely couldn't make it in time.

“There's no time for questions, I need your help.” And with that, Ellie was swung into another room.

“Why am I here?!” Ellie demanded, furious. This random man decided to bring her into his house and wouldn't even let her ask him anything? What was this?

Suddenly, Ellie's mind started whirring. Wait, wasn't this..Judge Pao? She had read about him at school, and she knew she would have recognised him, but why did he look so..tired and worn out?

“I’m—”

“Judge Pao. Right?” He looked at her, stunned, and nodded.

“Yes. But, how did you know?” He asked, confused. Ellie looked down at her hands and muttered, “We studied you in class. But..how am I in the same room as you right now? Didn’t— I mean, shouldn’t you be—”

“In a different time? Anywhere but here? Yes, you are correct.” Judge Pao chuckled, nodding his head lightly.

“Then, how—”

“That question, I’m afraid, will have to wait until later, Ellie. There’s something I need to discuss with you.” Ellie agreed and Judge Pao sighed, wringing his hands.

“Are you familiar with the unsolved case of the Watsons?” Judge Pao asked, his eyes softening. Ellie’s eyes widened and she nodded yes.

“Well, I’m here with you today to ask you if you could help me solve it. You see, I have been trying to solve this case for a while now, and I’ve found the perfect solution, but you must help me.” Ellie took a moment to breathe this all in. Judge Pao, one of the most well-known detectives and judges, wanted to work with her to solve a case? She was passionate about mysteries, and very smart, but she didn’t think she would be the one to help solve a case with him.

“I— I’m very confused but..yes, of course. It has always been my dream to be able to do this, but I’m just wondering, why me?”

“Well, Ellie, it wasn’t exactly my choice, but I’ll explain everything some time.”

“That makes sense. Okay.” Ellie finally said, after a bit of thinking and contemplating.

“Thank you, and now, follow me.” Judge Pao stood up and walked out, Ellie following him close behind.

They walked, not for a long time, and stopped at a nearby neighborhood that seemed very dim, since the street lights were turned off. “Isn’t this where..?” Ellie asked quietly, but Judge Pao already knew where she was going. “Where there was the murder, yes.” They walked on the sidewalk, inspecting everything. “There were footprints right over here. Bloody footprints, but nobody has been able to identify them. As you might know, the real murderer hasn’t been found yet, and in conclusion, we thought that someone else was the killer, which in reality, he was not.

The killer was wearing the other man’s shoes, though, which we all found weird, and that’s why we couldn’t figure this out.” Ellie muttered something under her breath, but shook it off, thinking it wasn’t a good idea, but decided to tell Judge Pao anyway.

“Well, do you know if the other man knew who the killer was? Or if they were close?” Judge Pao shook his head. “No, we haven’t figured that out yet.”

“Are the shoes still there? The ones that he wore? And do you have any pictures of the footprints?” Judge Pao nodded, and reached into his pocket and took out an old, torn, photo of a few footprints. Ellie took the photo and observed it curiously. “Can I see the shoes?”

“Yes, sure.” Judge Pao took out some keys in his other pocket and they both walked up to a house across from them. He unlocked the door and they stepped in. He pointed to a pair of black, leather shoes, and picked them

up, giving them to Ellie. She held them upright so she could see the bottom of the shoes, and matched them up with the photo.

“Wait..these footprints don’t match at all.” Judge Pao looked at her, confused, and took the shoes and the photo in each hand, holding them up. He looked back at the photo, and then the shoes. The photo, then the shoes.

“You’re right. It doesn’t match up. So then—”

“The real killer tricked you.”

“So who was it?” Ellie shook her head, sighing.”

“That, we’ll have to figure out.”

New Tales New Tales of Judge Pao

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Ohayon, Shahr – 13

1,000 years ago, there was a king in Hefei. Hefei is a province in Central China, about 300 kilometers west of Shanghai. King, Lee Xi, was the most wealthy in China, and maybe in the whole world, but he was very unhealthy, due to partying a lot, drinking on many occasions and eating unproportionally, making him weigh more than 150kg. He was probably the fattest king on earth.

One day King Lee invited all the high society of China to a big feast and a dance party in his Palace. All came with fancy carriages and a bunch of servants and bodyguards. In the palace there were more than a thousand people. In the palace main hall, there was a 50m table, and on it were the best food, from chicken with honey sauce, steaks made in bbq, salads with vast types of vegetables, desserts of exotic fruits and cakes of chocolate and vanilla. But the highlight was the alcoholic drink area, from Wine, Sake and Whisky coming from out of China to the famous Baiju, the most common alcoholic drink in China.

When they finished the feast they started the dance party. The dance ground was 10,000 square feet. In the party there was a giant stage where clowns and dancers were playing. A music band with local Chinese music played, people were dancing, and talking, it was an enjoyable party. While everyone was having fun the king of Hefei's bodyguard realized that King Lee Xi was missing. He told ten servants "start searching for the king everywhere throughout the palace."

The palace had 100 rooms. After one hour of searching for him, one of the servants found the king lying on the floor in the hallway of the third floor. The servant was nervous, not sure what to do, she asked him "Are you okay? What happened?" But there was no answer from the king. The servant panicked and ran to the king's right hand, asking him to call the doctor as the King was unconscious. When the doctor saw the king he touched his chest to check if his heart beat but there was no heartbeat. The Doctor started CPR and elevated his legs but the king still had no response. The doctor decided to take him to the medical room, thus the servant tried putting him on the stretcher but King Lee Xi was too heavy to be lifted so they had to call for help. The servant went back to the dance party and brought the king's bodyguard for help.

The Doctor said "3, 2, 1 pick him up!"

Knowing that the king is dead, the Doctor tried to understand the cause of the king's death. He took a look at the body "there is nothing I could see on the body but we can do an autopsy to find out if there is something inside the body."

The doctor called the nurse to start the autopsy. In the autopsy they saw nothing suspicious. The doctor looked at the body again and saw three purple points behind the king's ear. The Doctor didn't know if this was the cause of the death.

The doctor said to the king's bodyguard "I worked for the monarchy for 20 years but I never saw something this weird and suspicious."

Let's call Judge Pao, to investigate everyone in the palace. Please ensure no one leaves the Palace. The king's bodyguard commanded his soldiers to lock all the 150 doors in the palace "no one will be able to escape" he said.

Judge Pao was known for solving the most complicated situations, from murder mysteries to the biggest thieves. The bodyguard was on the way to Pey city in An Huy. He didn't know where Judge Pao lived. A few people helped him to find Judge Pao's house. The bodyguard knocked on the door and asked "are you Judge Pao? "Yes," he said. "We need help," the king's bodyguard said.

King Lee Xi is dead and we need help to find out who killed him.

"Ok, come in the house and explain me what happened" Judge Pao said

The bodyguard came in and told Judge Pao all he knew, including the three purple points behind the king's ear.

The bodyguard took Judge Pao to the carriage back to the palace. When they got to the entrance of the palace eight soldiers were waiting to open the massive golden door. Judge Pao immediately asked "please take me to the king? before I start my investigation".

They went in and Judge Pao asked the doctor “Why do you think he died?” I have no clue said the doctor. “We only found purple dots in the back of his ear”.

Judge Pao squeezed near the dots and purple liquid came out. I think it’s a poison.

Judge Pao asked to start investigating the people in the party. He started asking “Have you only been in the party hall?”

“Did you meet and talk to the King?”

“Have you given the King a present or something to eat?”

After investigating all the guests Judge Pao suspected the two princes, the one from Hefei, Prince Yau, and the one from Lu’An, Prince Yi. Judge Pao felt they were lying as they said they didn’t meet the King while the bodyguard said he saw them together minutes before the King disappeared.

Judge Pao separated the princes to two rooms. He said to Prince Yau that the King’s bodyguard saw them and that Prince Yi said he saw you as well. Then he went to the other room and said the same to Prince Yi, that the King’s bodyguard saw them and that Prince Yau said he saw you as well.

After a few hours Judge Pao entered the room again saying to Prince Yau that Prince Yi said that you stabbed the king in his chest. Prince Yi said he was lying as the King had no sign of blood on his body. Then Judge Pao asked Prince Yau how he knew there was no blood near the King. Prince Yau was shocked, he understood that Judge Pao tricked him.

The missing part to Judge Pao was how the King was poisoned. Prince Yau said “I am not willing to share the way I poisoned the King.”

“If you are not willing to tell us you have two options or we kill you or we exile you out of China”, said Judge Pao. What is your decision?

“I prefer to die”

An Ancient Chinese Murder Mystery

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Oser, Mira – 11

“Yes, we are looking for the murder of Qin Shi Huang!” Judge pao said, clearly quite annoyed, “Aiguo, you are not very smart, you know that, right” Aiguo nodded, clearly hurt by the harsh words just said by his boss, Judge pao. He isn’t as nice and great as the population says he is, “I know that, I’m just observing the situation of when we find the murder, like where and when he di—” Judge pao cut him off “SILENCE!” Roared Judge pao, “Aiguo, are you talking back to me?” questioned Judge Bao in a deadly sweet voice. “N—no Your Honor” Trembled Aiguo, frightened. “Go home Aiguo” Judge pao cocks his head in the direction of Aiguo’s house, “Ar—are you sure, Your Honor?” A trembled Aiguo asks, “I’m always sure” replied Judge pao providing a fake and believable slight smile. “Ok then” replied an exhausted Aiguo.

When Aiguo left there was a little bit of a scenario between Judge pao and the murderer of Qin Shi Huang (the same person) Judge pao asked himself if it was worth it killing him, as Qin Shi Huang kept on questioning him for money and was being a little rude. Judge pao checked if the body was still in the cupboard under the loose floorboard on the eighth floor and went home. Aiguo didn’t leave yet, he was suspicious about the sudden outburst by his boss. He was shocked to figure out that Judge pao is the killer of the one and only Qin Shi Huang of the Qin dynasty. Aiguo made sure he had his dagger with him and gripped it with his sweaty hands waiting outside Qin Shi Huang

Judge pao saw him, and he knew that Aiguo saw that he is the killer, but instead of running home and telling everybody, he decided to try and kill him he chuckled at his bravery, Judge pao made sure his sword was in its sheath and walked outside normally and saw Aiguo, he had the perfect idea of what to say, “Aiguo?” Judge pao asked, “What are you doing here, I told you that you could leave one candle ago” (They used candles to tell the time in ancient China so that would be one hour) Scared Aiguo was looking for an excuse, “I had to go back here, I forgot my Jade bracelet” Aiguo shamefully said because it wasn’t the truth. “That’s very expensive and rare, where did you get it from?” “My grandmother gave it to me when she died, she said to bring it with me everywhere, even work,” said Aiguo, when he looked up, he saw a sword pointing at him from Judge pao, he really wasn’t what people said he was, he was a mons—. The sharp sword sliced his head off in a matter of seconds and he was dead. Qin Shi Huang’s niece and nephew, Chao and Min saw that, their eyes widened the slightest bit. They ran home and told their Aunts, Uncles, Mother, Father, Cousins, Siblings, and Village and told them not to tell Judge pao that they knew Judge pao killed Aiguo and Qin Shi Huang.

Meanwhile, Judge pao pretended to be a victim like Aiguo was and ran to his family’s houses. “Aiguo was killed by a man in a mask and a red hair wig, he managed to save himself but it was too late for Aiguo, the sword plunged his heart already, and the sword is still in Aiguo’s neck. Come and see and we will have a moment of silence together” announced Judge pao. All of his family came to see the victim and had a moment of silence. But Judge pao forgot that the sword plunged into Aiguo’s neck had his family crest on it, he didn’t notice, of course, but Aiguo’s family members, well, they did and were not happy about it. There was a lot of whispering to one another and judging Judge pao. Aiguo’s family members agreed to do a family meeting in a huddle and told Judge pao, he replied with: “Ok, no problem, and again I am deeply sorry for your loss” The family huddled in a small corner and Aiguo’s older brother, Bolin which means elder brother rain mimicked Judge pao in a nasty, high pitched voice “I’m deeply sorry for your loss, that stupid man” Aiguo and Bolin’s mother, Xiu replied with “Bolin, that is extremely disrespectful and I do not tolerate that in my family, I mean our family” corrected Xiu after she saw her husband’s and mother in law’s look, Donghai and Ai. “So what should we do about it” asked Aiguo’s favourite cousin, Ya asked, “I mean we aren’t just going to sit around and wait for something to happen,” She said with more anger in her tone. “I was in town the other day and I saw Chao and Min telling everyone, including me, that they saw Judge pao kill Aiguo and suspect he killed Qin Shi Huang too” whispered a terrified Genghis, he was Aiguo and Bolin’s favourite uncle and often fought about playing with him first and Bolin won every time. “We must alert the village” whispered Donghai, “You alright over there?” Asked Judge pao, “Yes we are finished discussing,” said Ai in a harsh tone. “We are done discussing this,” said Feng who is: Ai’s husband, Aiguo and Bolin’s grandfather, Wa’s father, and Xiu’s father-in-law. “Thank you for bringing this to our attention,” said a terrified Genghis, he gets scared very easily.

They went home and told their village to spread the word, wherever they were, but to make sure that Judge pao never finds out that people know. It was soon brought to the emperor’s attention that Judge pao had killed Qin Shi Huang **and** Aiguo, he organized his best soldiers that are not related to Judge pao to catch him and

bring him to prison as soon as they find him.

3 days later the soldiers found him in hiding and brought him into the prison, they were all covered in dirt and their uniform was torn everywhere with leaves and twigs hanging by the uniform's threads. The date was July 2nd, 1062.

The next day he was sent to the beheading field and he knew the way because he used to execute people before he was caught. "How could I have been so foolish!" He muttered to himself in an angered tone. He was brought to the field with his arms and legs tied together, he saw the axe come down and his whole life flashed before his eyes, and he was dead with a sharp slice of the axe.

Four Found Dead in Suspected Murder on 初一★

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Pang, Preston – 14

Chen Shimei, a 20-year-old student in imperial custody after Shimei was suspected of having been involved in the fatal deaths of four Kaifeng Imperial university students (Wang Chen 17, Chan Zhong 18, Lam Chua 20, Xiu Bingtian 20).

Shimei is expected to return to the Bianjing Imperial capital city where he faces 4 accounts of first-degree murder. Shimei will remain in imperial custody until his trial, then his fate will be decided.

From one eyewitness account, the murder was suspected of having taken place in the school library at 3:00 am during New year's eve there were no accomplices. The following day, the suspect was found trying to hide the four dead bodies in a storehouse near the Kaifeng Imperial university campus, stated the school's headmaster.

Imperial authorities have not yet publicly confirmed the suspect's motive or if he had known the victims. The weapon used for the murder has not been located said, Inspector Ming.

According to a local official, Shimei's family stated that "there are no words that can express the sadness and grief we feel for the four families that lost their children." "We will continue to let the legal proceedings unfold and as a family, we will continue to support our son and brother."

Since the murder, imperial authorities have released limited details including the victim's activities leading up to the murder.

Senior Judge Bao Zheng released a royal decree that the murder trial of Chen Shimei is scheduled to take place on the next full moon. The imperial family will be in attendance. The trial will take place in the Bianjing royal palace.

—

What we know about Chen Shimei

Mr Shimei was a quiet person who liked to study and work alone but came across as smart said Bao Ying, a fellow classmate. Ying also pointed out that Shimei liked to spend most of his time outside of class in the library. "Shimei had a fond interest on the psychology of criminals." pointed out one of the librarians.

A timeline of events

In the hours before the killings, many students were out celebrating the lunar new year, following a fireworks show. All 4 students and Shimei were eating dinner together at the Zhongchai restaurant near the university campus. "They were all heavily drunk from drinking especially Shimei." "I remember that I overheard Shimei saying that he had a surprise for all 4 of them in the school library" explained the restaurant manager. "They all left at 2:30 am when the restaurant was about to close."

At about 2:45 am, The group was seen at the entrance of the school library. "I heard a series of muffled yells and screams at about 3:00 am." "I was at the library because I had to gather a couple of my personal belongings in the library." "Curious I went in the direction of the yells and screams but there was nothing to be seen, except a couple of drops of blood." "I am not sure how the murder got away," said the librarian.

The next day, Shimei was found trying to hide the dead bodies in a nearby storehouse.

The Lost Tale of the Pao's

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Schtorch, Ofek – 12

“Please! Food please!” I screeched. I haven’t eaten in days. I am lying on the dirty, wet concrete sidewalk. I’m sitting in the darkest place in town, waiting for morning to come. My back is aching and waiting for energy to stretch it out. But I can’t. “Help! Please food!”

My name is Thomas, and I’m 19 years old. Reading is my favorite thing to do. I would read every chance I get, which is not often. My parents and siblings died in a car crash a few years ago. After that happened and I moved into my grandfather’s house. My grandfather is a wise old man, who is 92 years old. He was born in Hong Kong in 1932. Eventually, my grandfather had to move into a retirement home because of a serious illness. Ever since then, I live on the streets with no one to support me.

The morning came, and so did the bright sun. I call the corner between two shops my home. McDonald's is open for 12 hours, I stay there during the day for shelter, and the sidewalk around my home is my couch. I place an old-rusty mug that I found in the trash the other day next to me. It's my way of panhandling for money to see my grandfather again.

I walk over to the 7-Eleven that is right across the street from McDonald's. I scooped toward the single-all-round window to get a view of something to eat. I check my mug to see how much money I have, and I find that unfortunately I only possess 50 cents. This can't get me anything, so I figure today, I eat no matter the price. I open the rectangular sliding door and go over to the food section. I grab a packet of Hong Kong Style Ramen and observe the cashier's movement and range of eyesight.

Quickly, I see that the cashier is helping a customer out, now is my chance. I hide the packet behind my back and walk at a fast pace out the door with the blinking store sign flashing behind my back. I jogged back over to my home, where I ate the ramen raw because boiling water is not something that can easily be found here.

As the long night approaches, I lie motionless on the ground. Imagining what life with money could be like. All from crazy luxuries, to having a roof over my head are what I dream of every night. With the bright, full moon staring at me, it's time to go to sleep.

All at once, I hear voices.

“This is not the way of the Paos!” the voice yelled. “My name is Bao Zheng. You have committed a sin, my child. You shall be cursed! You may not visit any one of your remaining family again. If you do, I shall make your life even more miserable.”

An image appeared in my head of what looked like an Ancient Chinese Leader, with a big black and red hat. The man slowly faded away from my vision and disappeared soon after.

“Grah!” I roared as I woke up in fear. “It’s just a dream,” I exclaimed in horror, “It’s just a dream.” I need to visit my grandfather! He’s the only person that supported me ever since my parents died. I sat down and thought to myself. “Bao Zheng” I mumbled. I am almost sure that I have heard that name before. I decided that I should go to the public library. It’s my favorite place to go to on a hot and humid day.

I started to walk toward the narrow street that lead to the silent library while thinking about what the man from the dream said. He called me his child. Is there a chance that we are related? The first step is to find information about “Bao Zheng.”

When I arrived at the well-equipped library, I made my way to the history section. I looked through all the books. There were amazing history books such as the Lifetime of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Reports on WW2, and what I was looking for today, a book about the Ancient Chinese Judge Bao Zheng.

I opened up the book coated in red and gold paint, and I started to flicker through the book. I found out that Judge Pao was a Chinese judge that lived in 11th-century China. He was an incredibly honored Judge. I read a few more pages about Bao's life, one page stood out. The page read a quote that Bao had said right before his death. "Any of my descendants who shall commit theft and commit sin shall be punished in my command." Wait, so does this mean I'm Bao Zheng's descendant? Is this the reason he was in my dream? Is it true? I could not believe it.

I took a seat on the wide couch and thought to myself. "Is there a way to reverse the curse? To allow me to see my grandfather again?" I looked through the book closely one more time and saw that there is a way to reverse it. The book mentioned that any descendant of Bao who has been hit by the curse can reverse it by "proving honesty and kindness to others." What does that mean? Could it mean apologizing to the 7-Eleven? Could it mean being nice and kind to others? I decided if I want to see my grandfather again, I have to try my best.

I rushed out of the great library in excitement and ran over to the 7-Eleven. I opened the sliding glass door and walked up to the cashier.

"Excuse me," I said.

"How can I help you?" The cashier asked.

"My name is Thomas, and I have stolen a Ramen Packet yesterday from this store," I answered. "I'm sorry for what I have done I have no money to pay for it."

"I appreciate your honesty." The cashier replied. "But it is not good what you have done."

"I understand what I did was wrong, is it possible that I can work here without payment as long as you want me to as a way of saying sorry?"

"Sure but you have to treat the customers nicely. You can start tomorrow morning." The cashier stated.

"Okay, I understand." I answered.

I left the store with the motivation to do something good.

In the following weeks, I spent my time in and around the store, helping customers out. Living a few meters away from the store was an elderly man who was a frequent customer. When he would come, I would help him take his groceries to his apartment and I would help him clean his house. He was very old and needed a lot of help with things. He reminded me of my grandfather. The least I could do for him was carry his groceries.

A few weeks passed and one night, I had another dream. I saw the figure of Bao Zheng again! "Thomas, you are a lucky man." The Judge said. "Your curse has been removed for understanding what you did wrong." I woke up again but this time in excitement! I could not believe that my curse has been removed! I decided that I should visit my grandfather.

I went over to the retirement house and I felt a bit nervous as I haven't seen my grandfather in months. The wonderful staff welcomed me and told me that my grandfather was in good health. I walked into my grandfather's room and gave him a big hug. I talked to him about our relation to the great Judge. My grandfather said it was true, and we were related. I explained to him how I figured it out and what had happened in my dream. My grandfather was proud of me for becoming a better person.

As life continued, I started working at the 7-Eleven with payment. I rented a house, I have food and friends. My friends said that cryptocurrencies are a new way of making money, so I tried it out, and it's pretty cool! So far my new life is good! I'm grateful to my ancestors for helping me realize my mistakes and to fix them. More importantly, I am now an honest member of the Bao family.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Wagner, Mabel – 12

“Fresh apples! Fresh oranges!” cried Zhan Zhao, a local food merchant in the city. He was so busy because he was the only one working the food stall that sunny morning. Just as he was about to have a lunch break, a group of boys approached the food stall. One of the boys called Gongsun Ce saw Zhan’s money purse on the table.

“Wow, look at all that money. I would have enough to feed my sick mother and little sister for weeks!” thought Gongsun.

Knowing that stealing was wrong, Gongsun snatched the purse and ran away, getting lost in the crowd.

After Gongsun stole the money, Zhan Zhao looked back at the table and there was less money on the table. Then he looked back and saw this young boy putting the money that he stole from the table and putting it in his pocket.

“Hey, that’s my money!” Zhan Zhao screamed.

Then the young boy looked back and Zhan Zhao said “You stole my money!” The young boy was terrified, so he ran even faster.

“Get that thief!” yelled Zhan Zhao. A passer-by heard his pleas for help, so he tackled Gongsun and held him until the police arrived.

“I’m sorry! Please forgive me! I only did it to help my family!” begged Gongsun.

“He’s only a child!” cried one of the people watching the scene. “Take him to Justice Bao! He’ll know what to do!”

Then the next day, Gongsun and Zhan Zhao went to court and presented their case before Justice Bao to settle the situation.

“This young boy stole my money! I am the only person working at my food stall, which makes it extremely difficult to keep track of things! This boy saw the chance to steal my money when I wasn’t looking!” Zhan Zhao hollered.

Then the young boy said, “I stole the money because of my family. Justice Bao, you see, I have a sick mom and a little sister who cannot attend school because we have no money. My family can’t afford it!”

Justice Bao noticed the boy’s appearance and believed what he said about his family. He replied, “I understand that you and your family are facing difficult times. But no matter how hard it is, you should never resort to stealing. I should put you in jail, but you’re too young to become a criminal for that will ruin your life. Instead, you will learn your lesson by returning the money to Zhan and working for him.

Zhan Zhao asked, “Why would I let a thief work for me?”

Justice Bao replied, “I see that you are a busy man and need an extra hand. This boy will be grateful because he will not be in jail so you can trust him, right Gongsun?”

“Yes sir,” thankfully replied the boy.

Over the next months, Gongsun earned Zhan's trust. His business grew, and they became close friends as well. When Zhan was too old to work, he handed the business over to Gongsun. Now his family has the money to afford medicine for his mother and education for his little sister. Both men will never forget what Justice Bao did for them that day.

A Question Never Answered

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yahyagil, Ayla – 13

A sudden ear-splitting clang caused a dreadful echo to flood Kaifeng Court. Many of the officials seated in the court abruptly turned their heads to see an old man at the entrance. The man stood between the two towering red pillars of the wooden door. In his hands was a hollow black basin, it was still vibrating from the ringing clang.

“What is so important that you must come to Kaifeng Court without invitation?” Bao Zheng asked – breaking the silence that started to hang in the eerie room.

The man began, “Liu Shichang, a silk merchant, needed a place to stay so he rested at the place of Zhao Da, the owner of a pottery kiln. Zhao, greedy for Liu’s riches, poisoned him and burnt his remains. He mixed the remains with clay and turned them into this very basin. Zhao owed me so I took the basin as payment. I, Zhang Biegu, have evidence Zhao killed Liu. His ghost spoke to me. He will speak to you too.”

When there was no response from the ghost, it sparked the skeptical murmurs of the officials. Just before Bao opened his mouth to calm things down, a hollow ghostly voice whispered,

“He is right. I was poisoned by Zhao Da and my remains were baked with clay to make this basin”.

Bao Zheng abruptly shot up, his eyes wide in disbelief. He scanned the council for a face to the voice but he wasn't satisfied.

“I believe that what he says is true,” an official, named Yuan, confirmed, “Liu Shichang was supposed to arrive in Kaifeng long ago.”

“Very well.” Bao decided, “We will bring Zhao Da to court tomorrow.”

The soldiers escorted Zhao with a bone-shattering grip, grasping both of his wrists. Zhao was tossed onto the floor in front of three pedestals; a dog, a tiger, and a dragon. Zhao knelt eye-to-eye with the carved dragon pedestal. It guarded a heavy unadorned blade that followed the arc of its scaly back. Its acute fangs curved back in contrast to the intricately carved head, with owl-like eyes looking up to the sky. Bao Zheng’s throne-like chair scraped across the gray tiles as he crossed the intently watching officials, waiting to see what he would do to Zhao.

“Only justice would bring righteousness.” Bao Zheng raised the heavy blade, gripping the handle. His eyes were drawn to the steel glinting in the little afternoon sunlight that shone through the red doors.

Bao’s attention was quickly diverted when he heard Zhao whisper, “Bao Zheng. Tell them. Forty-three.”

Those quiet words Zhao muttered under his breath were the last he ever spoke.

Even after Bao left the court, the words recited over and over like the never-ending buzzing of a bee. Around him, oxen and workers hauled carts, seas of people gathered around ancient storytellers, street vendors hollered at locals on horseback, and embroidered Han Fu splashed the bustling city streets with color. Yet Bao barely noticed where the path was leading him, the last words of Zhao seemed to drown the noisy city life. He only snapped back to reality when the words ‘Zhao Da’s Pottery Kiln’ were caught in the corner of his eye. Without hesitation, he walked into what must have been Zhao’s pottery kiln. As Bao opened the door and he was greeted by the smell of burning clay – sulfur mixed with wax. Around him, painted ceramic pots on shelves covered the entire surface of the wall.

“Can I help you?” A young-looking girl asked from behind a desk with papers and ink scattered across the surface. Her light ink-stained hands stacked the papers off to the side.

“Do you run this store?”

“Yes, but my father used to.” She looked down mournfully, “Can I help you?” She repeated, trying to get off topic.

“Forty-three,” Bao retold her father’s last words.

“Do you mean product model forty-three? We number our models to make them more organized.” She walked to the shelf in front of Bao, her simple blue and green dress skimming the floor. She lifted a polished black basin

off the shelf. The basin had the small characters '43' carved into the lid – it looked just like the basin Zhang Beigu brought to court.

"Thank you," His voice cracked saying those words. He was taught to feel ashamed when talking to people, and their families, who have done wrong.

The pagoda's jade roof had two slopes coming from the ridge in the middle, the red paneled walls stood out against the dark foliage behind it. A dreary silence followed the heavy knock on Yuan's door. The official must not have been home. Bao peered inside and figured it was condonable to look around if it was purely for an investigation. Papers were scattered across the floor; all that illuminated the room was the dim light from the crack in the door. It almost looked abandoned by Yuan. The thought sent a cold sharp shiver through his veins. Bao searched the desk covered in scrolls. In the corner of his eye, he caught the words 'Liu Sichang'. Bao immediately picked up the letter while squinting, trying to figure out calligraphy brushstrokes in the dark.

Liu Shichang, a silk merchant, missing for days: Has been found outside the city wall.

– Signed Emperor Renzong

Bao Zheng's eyes widened and the sudden realization sent a piercing arrow through his heart. Yuan was lying. The letter had been at his home the whole time. The basin was not made from ashes and... Bao had murdered an innocent man.

"No!" Bao Zheng slammed the letter on the desk causing the stacked papers to fly. He slumped to the ground shaking his head furiously, trying to convince himself not to jump to conclusions. He did *not* kill an innocent man.

"*Who's here?*" Yuan's voice suddenly roared from outside, causing a wave of shock to crash over Bao. The door bolted open and just as Yuan was ready to shout again, he realized that it was Bao, "Bao Zheng! I've been looking for you. I **just** found out that—"

"Liu Shichang is not dead," Bao finished after piecing the fractures of his knowledge together, "And that means Zhang has some explaining to do."

Bao never thought it would be this hard to find Zhang Beigu. He walked along the cobbled riverside path scanning each house he saw, yet none seemed to belong to Zhang. The river, one of four major canals, glistened in the blazing sunlight. With sailors clamoring across the deck, the colossal boat's hull plunged into the ribbon-like water, causing ripples to gallop across the surface of the river. The lively children bent over the railing of the bridge, gleefully waving to the sailors below. Bao Zheng took a long glance at the bridge and saw a familiar black Futou within the flock of people. Bao pushed his way through the cluster until he had the attention of Zhang Beigu.

"B—Bao Zheng. Do you need anything?" Zhang asked with a forced smile. The wrinkles in his skin creased as he smiled. Bao wondered if he should suspect a man so old.

"Liu Shichang is alive," Bao declared.

Zhang's stunned expression morphed into an offended one, "Zhao Da owed me anyways. He was always in debt. He would never be able to pay anybody if he was alive anyways."

"So you *made up* the case of Liu Shichang? How did the ghost speak?"

"You thought it was a ghost? I cannot believe I've fooled the very magistrate of Kaifeng! And for your information, he was not innocent. He was in debt to everybody I know. I could not accept such a ridiculous basin as payment!" Zhang scoffed.

"He didn't deserve to die! I had no right to kill him!" His booming voice was as loud as thunder.

"What is done is done." With that, Zhang swiftly turned around and disappeared into the clamoring people leaving Bao Zheng and his worries.

The fiery orange sky cast long shadows on the stone pavement. Bao walked past the court, the edges of its emerald roof curving upwards, almost asking to bathe in the golden blaze. He walked into the nearby forest. His

rapid breaths were eased by the tranquil song of birds. Bao was seated on the lush verdant grass watching rose-colored clouds drift along the horizon.

That was when he finally let his thoughts run free. The same pestering questions enveloped his mind. How could he do this? How could he let this happen? What would he do with his career? Bao Zheng would never forget it. Believing Zhang's trick. Killing a blameless man. Bao buried his head in his hands, letting agony spiral from his mouth. What was he going to do?

Many do not know that there was always one case he never solved. Even fewer know that the case he never solved was his own.

The Tales of Bao Zheng

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yahyagil, Peter – 14

The year 1038, the legendary Bao Zheng's parents had just passed on. Bao, 39 years old on this dreadful day was filled with anguish. He lost his sense, incomprehensibly muttering. He devoted his life to two things and only two, justice and his parents, though his parents always came first. Clouds formed on the day of the funeral. He didn't know what day it was, he lost his perception of time.

After his parents death he was appointed magistrate of Tianchang county. Though it was long after his parents death he was still not the same as he was. Before his parents death, at the age of 29, Bao Zheng had passed the highest level imperial examination and was appointed as magistrate of Jianchang county, but due to his parents failing health he decided to suspend his career progress. Bao Zheng was fiercely loyal to his beliefs and he stood strong with his patriotism, after countless hours of hard work he established his reputation as the "Sherlock Holmes" of Ancient China.

Bao Zheng was now promoted to the prefect of Duanzhou, a prefecture most well-known for producing ink stones. A certain number of the ink stones were presented to the imperial court, however previous prefects of Duanzhou would collect more inkstones than needed to present, to bribe officials, Bao Zheng lowered the quota to its normal amount and truly showed his desire for justice.

Bao Zheng lived a comfortable life, in which he had whatever he needed, being such a high ranking civil servant. However he was still tortured by the death of his parents, wondering how much of a coincidence they died at times quite close to each other. Bao Zheng went off to visit the Song Dynasty capital of Bianjing, still pondering the question of coincidence. At the capital he visited other officials, some he grew considerably close with. One of the officials named "Mi Fan" he viewed as his mentor. After some cheerful small talk with his friends, he went to consult Mi Fan, asking him the question that had been troubling him for many days, Mi Fan replied to Bao Zheng "If it was coincidence then let it be so, do not burden your heart with such troubles." Bao Zheng took this advice and slept soundly through the night. He finished his official business in the capital and returned to Duanzhou, as he arrived he learned that Mi Fan had died just hours after Bao Zheng had left, and he needed to immediately return to the capital.

Bao Zheng was utterly exhausted, completely devastated by the loss of his mentor, though he was glad he was able to see him one last time, he felt cursed he viewed what was happening was too coincidental, as if he was meant to stay in the city, Bao Zheng just dismissed the thoughts as hysterical. He heard a knock at the door, Bao Zheng slowly stood up and told the person to come in, it was a messenger holding a scroll meant for Bao Zheng, left to him by Mi Fan. The scroll read "You asked me a question today, whether your parents' deaths were coincidental, it was not." Bao Zheng was shocked, he did not know how to respond or act, he was filled with rage and sadness, his thoughts conflicting. If Mi Fan knew his parents were murdered why would he hide this, how would Mi Fan know, what was the purpose behind all of this?

The next day Bao Zheng attended Mi Fan's funeral, though Mi Fan was said to die of natural causes, to Bao Zheng it did not seem that way, though Bao Zheng felt too dejected to act upon his thoughts. Several days later Bao Zheng heard the news of an imperial official caught in Duanzhou, Bao Zheng would have to judge this official in a court case. The official had been accused of bribing other officials for inkstones. Bao Zheng sentenced the man to 3 years in prison for bribery. Though he was not fully himself after the court case he was starting to finally feel normal, his strive for justice had returned.

The official who had bribed other officials was found with incriminating evidence of illegal activity in the capital, during the years when Bao Zheng was taking care of his parents. With this new knowledge Bao Zheng was furious, but he had some sort of lead, maybe even an answer. As Bao Zheng further investigated this criminal he found out that he was linked to many murders of officials in the capital, all of which happened during the time Bao Zheng was away, taking care of his parents. He understood that this man who was in his custody wanted him busy, but not dead. Bao Zheng then asked the imprisoned official if he killed his parents. The official

stated that he did not want to share about Bao Zheng's parents and that Bao Zheng should stay out of this if he wanted to remain alive.

Bao Zheng was back where he was, square one. He was different from before, he had hope and was determined to bring justice, he still had many unanswered questions but he was sure that he would find out who was behind all of this. His attitude had completely changed he still was stuck with the same question, Why did this happen?

The Case of "Suicide"

Chinese International School, Chong, Rachel – 11

Boom! Boom! Immediately, the butler of Pao walked in. “A girl says she *has* to see you. She looks devastated. Apparently, it is extremely urgent.” The towering butler, Yang said impassively.

“Poor girl. Bring her in.” Pao declared magnificently. “Quick.” He added.

A pudgy girl walked in, trembling. She looked as if she was about to have a mental breakdown, so Pao ordered his butler to bring him some Ginkgo Biloba, which is a calming plant that made one feel as if they were relaxing in the Caribbean Islands.

“My sister... Jiejie... Murder...” The girl panted as if she had dashed up a mountain, seemingly unaffected by the calming draught.

“Can you please repeat yourself? I’m afraid I can’t understand you.” Pao said soothingly.

“Oh, I apologize... Of course... My sister was murdered. Knife right into the heart.” The girl’s eyes were wide with trauma, and she continued, “But I *do* think that I know who finished her, if that helps with your investigation.”

“Yes. It does. You must tell me all you know, do you understand?” Pao questioned urgently.

“Y—yes. I do.” The girl said. “By the way, I am Lady Lau. Father was the Lord Lau of the last Lau family. I inherited the title after my parents’ and my sister’s d—death.”

Pao was once acquainted with the Lau family. They were an extremely respectable family that everyone liked. Unfortunately, the mother and father passed away several years ago.

‘A point that one should definitely note.’ Pao thought to himself. ‘The title and fortune could have been tempting to anyone.’

“It was so, so dreadful when I first found out. I couldn’t believe it... why would someone want to — want to *murder* my sister? My darling sister?” Lady Lau took a handkerchief out of her pocket and dabbed her eyes gently with it.

“You seem very convinced it was murder. Chances might be that it wasn’t. It might’ve been a natural death. It might’ve been suicide.”

“Oh... I didn’t think it was a natural death... There was a knife stuck where her heart was. And I didn’t think it was suicide... She wasn’t the type of woman who would do that.” Lau said softly.

“No? She was a cheerful woman?” Pao asked gently, noting the position the victim had been stabbed. Death would’ve been instantaneous.

“Y—yes, she was. She was also very *loving*. I can’t imagine why she was killed.” Lady Lau sobbed uncontrollably. “She was such a hopeful, wonderful woman who was as vivid as life *itself*.”

“I see.” Pao observed wisely, his shrewd eyes not casting knowledge to his suspicions.

Lady Lau pulled a sheet of paper from her pocket. “One thing I almost forgot to mention – I found this sheet of paper on my sister’s desk. Perhaps this might shed some light on the identity of the blood–thirsty murder who ended my sister’s life?” She queried hopefully.

Judge Pao pried it away from her fingers gently. On the piece of rough parchment paper, it read:

ROSES ARE RED,
VIOLETS ARE BLUE,
I AM STANDING IN THE DARK,
WAITING, WAITING,
FOR A CHANCE TO SMOTHER YOU,
YOU WOULDN’T BE SO COMPLACENT,
AFTER I FINISH YOU.

“Interesting.” Pao muttered, handing the paper back to Lau. And so it was. He needed to find out more. “May I see the body?” Pao asked.

“Yes. But it is going to be sent to a hospital to be cremated.”

Pao’s left eyebrow lifted up in surprise as he asked cautiously. “Can I check on the body to see if they align with my thinking before it gets sent to the hospital though? And you still haven’t told me who you’re suspicious of.” Pao replied.

“Ah. Yes.” Lady Lau said solemnly. Lowering her voice, she whispered confidentially, “I think... It’s my cousin. She already murdered my sister. If *I* get murdered *too*, then the title and the money will go to her. Since, you know, she’s the next in line in our family. And she is staying over at sis–my place for a week, and we were the only ones in the house that night, and I *do* feel unsettled having a potential *murderer* in the house alone with me, especially at night.”

Pao considered for a moment. “Right. And I will head over to examine the body right now.”

Lau stood up elegantly. “I’ll lead you there.”

Not a few moments later, they arrived at the house. It was a large mansion, and its halls were dark and shadowy. An athletic–looking woman walked out and Lady Lau introduced her as her cousin.

‘So this is the “prime suspect”.’ Pao thought.

Lady Chen oozed out competence from her hair to the tips of her toes. She had a brisk air about her, as if she couldn’t afford to wait even a second, for anyone, or anything. She didn’t look like a particularly *violent* person, but one never knows. Some of the most dangerous serial killers that Pao had known over the years looked like an average human being. Some of them even had warm smiles and twinkling eyes – that is, until they are found out.

“He’s here for the... body.” Lau said stiffly.

“Yes, yes. But afterwards I would quite like to talk to Lady Chen as well.”

“Well... All right.” Lady Lau stammered dubiously, her face not giving away a single emotion. But the keen eyes of Judge Pao were trained to spot even the teeniest flicker of expression. Presently, he *knew* Lau was puzzled and slightly panicked.

Lady Lau led Pao into what appeared to be her sister's room. There was a body, which crumbled onto the ground, and a bloody, gaping hole pierced through her heart. A knife was dropped next to her body, as if she let go of as she passed away.

However, the position of her hand was suspicious. The weapon fell on her *left* side while the wound was tilted the other side, implying that whoever committed the crime was a left-handed person, and made a mistake while dropping the knife.

Pao knelt down. He knew he was alone in the room, and that Lau had left. "Speak to me, Judge Pao, about your knowledge on who the suspect is." Pao spoke, in his clear and dominating voice. He was rumored to have the ability of communicating with the supernatural. More specifically, the dead, mostly the victims.

An ethereal voice sounded about the room. "I don't know who it was. Someone put a blindfold on me, then a muffler, then the... the knife. That was how I died. Miserable and pathetic death, really. I would've preferred to die in a war. To die a hero."

It was evident that the sister knew more than she was letting on and was trying to distract him. "Tell me the truth. The *whole* truth." Pao intoned in a low voice.

"I swear, I know nothing but what I told you." The voice echoed.

"Very well. I'll go on questioning Lady Chen, then." Pao turned his heel but was stopped by a yell.

"Wait." The forcefulness of the voice rang out like a menacing shotgun. "It was my sister. It was her. They know. My cousins. Ask them."

"Your cousins." Pao emphasized on the "s". "I wasn't aware you had multiple."

"Yes, yes. Our other cousin lives across the street, and I believe she saw me get killed." The voice came abruptly. "She was in her room, which faces into *my* room, and so when I looked into her room, I saw her. Then I got killed. Go to them, they alone know the truth."

The voice faded into nothingness, and Pao headed up the stairs, in one of the rooms where Lady Chen was awaiting.

"You must act as a witness to the murder. I understand that Lady Lau is guilty." Pao remained stoic but managed to show just enough urgency to interest the latter.

"You won't." Lady Lau mocked. She had crept up the stairs stealthily while Pao was pleading with Lady Chen. "You won't get outta this *hellhole*. Alive." She held up a shotgun.

"You're wrong. We aren't as *naive* as your sister. We are more intelligent, more cunning. We will escape. In one piece."

"You're the one who's wrong." Lady Lau smirked evilly. "I can just *press* this little trigger, and... you'll *both* be dead."

"No. They won't. Put your hands up and surrender." A cold, low voice commanded. It was Pao's men! While he excused himself for the bathroom, he already shared his suspicions and planned ahead for what he was sure was going to come. Lady Lau knew her game was up. She raised her hands. "You'll be sorry." She hissed with venom dripping from her voice.

The Pao and the jury decided that the execution would be the day after. During the trial, the same airy voice spoke. “Thank you, Judge Pao. You really are ‘the Infernal Bureaucracy’. Incidentally, the anonymous letter was for my Halloween costume. Don’t worry about it.”

The Upright, Selfless And Impartial Bao Zheng

Chinese International School, Fung, Ching Yau Roselle – 11

BREAKING NEWS

One of the greatest archaeological find of the century!

An ancient scroll dating from around the 11th century was found in Kaifeng, the ancient capital city of the Northern Song Dynasty in Henan Province.

<p>Last month, the world-renowned archaeologist and Chinese History expert Dr. Roselle Fung and her team of experienced archaeologists from the University of Durham, U.K. discovered a scroll in Kaifeng, in Eastern Henan province.</p> <p>After detailed analysis with state-of-the-art technology, Dr. Fung and her team were able to ascertain that the scroll dated back to the mid-11th century, in the period of the Song Dynasty. It is further determined that the scroll-amounting to about 700 words-was penned by the historical figure Gong Xuan Zhen.</p> <p>The content of the discovered scroll is a eulogy written by Gong Xuan Zhen in honour</p>	<p>Last month, Dr. Fung and her research team were doing a dig with the aim of learning more about the Song Dynasty. They were overjoyed to find a chest made of green jade. The scroll and some ancient coins were found inside a valuable chest, and it was kept in excellent condition.</p> <p>“Our team and I have been investigating and studying the Song period in depth for the past four years. Finally, we had found a real scroll written in the Song dynasty by a famous legend, Justice Bao’s helper, Gong Xuan Zhen. He wrote about Bao’s experiences and everything we needed about the Song Dynasty. We would like to determine the truth value of the stories related to Justice Bao.” Commented Dr. Fung.</p>
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The eulogy by Gong Xuan Zhen:

The eulogy for my beloved Bao Zheng

My name is Gong Xuan Zheng, the governor of Lu Zhou. It is my most honor to be able to write the eulogy for Justice Bao, who was the most intelligent and loyal man I have known in my entire life.

Bao Zheng was born on 5th March, 999 and he died on 3rd July 1062 at the age of 63. During his lifetime, he has gained the reputation of the personification of justice. He was known throughout the land for his honesty, loyalty, and integrity. For this reason, people called him by many names. For example, Bao Gong, Bao Qing Tian, Bao Zheng, Bao Hai Zi, The legendary Bao, and many more! However, most people called him Justice Bao or Judge Bao as that was the role which he performed best in. At the later stage of his career, he was appointed the Prefect of Song’s capital city, Kaifeng. Being both a judge and a detective, his contributions benefited hundreds, thousands, and millions of people worldwide.

Due to his symbolic cultural image of justice, he gained the honorific title Justice Bao. I have known Justice Bao for many years. As the governor of Lu Zhou, I had the privilege to work with him in investigating and solving cases. The experience of solving cases with Justice Bao remains for me some of my most favorite memories. Bao had a sharp eye and a quick intellect. Nothing escaped his scrutinizing mind. He seemed to be able to solve cases in the blink of an eye and was able to notice details that escaped others.

One of Bao's symbols was a crescent moon on top of his forehead. His unwavering sense of fairness and integrity was so strong that once, he even judged and sentenced his own uncle guilty! This is an example of how he followed what is right instead of what is wrong and was never daunted by power or authority.

One of the most memorable and spectacular cases which a lot of people have heard before has to be the "Civet Cat Exchanged for Crown Prince" (狸貓換太子) case. Below is the story of the case:

There were once two princesses – Consort Li and Consort Liu – both were consorts to the King. The King was earnestly hoping he would have a son and announced that whichever princess could give birth to a baby boy first would be crowned Queen. Soon, Consort Li successfully gave birth to a baby boy and was announced to the King to see, but Consort Liu got envy of Consort Li becoming Queen, so she asked her own servant to exchange the prince for a civet cat when the servant of Consort Li is getting the prince ready by cleaning him dressing him up, then release the civet cat to kill the prince and tell the servant to keep it silent.

When the King saw the civet cat, he thought Consort Li was a monster and inhuman. Terrified, he put her in prison forever and never let her go until she dies. After that, he crowned her sister, Consort Liu as Queen. Then a fire happened in the castle, and everyone thought she was dead in the fire as no one found her and rescued her. However, Consort Li survived the fire because she had silently escaped from the castle, she was blind after the fire accident. No one knew that she survived and escaped as they didn't even check on the prisoners. After 20 years, Consort Li came back with a girl servant. She asked her to find and pray to the intelligent Bao Zheng, and bring her to him if he agrees to help her to find out the truth of what happened in the past because she was blind and couldn't find the famous Bao Zheng as there will be many people in the village in where Bao lives. Later, after solving and finding mysteries and clues, Bao Zheng finally found out that Consort Liu had exchanged the crown prince, and she had even let the civet cat kill the prince! Then he returned to the king and told him all about the truth. In the end, Consort Li became the Empress and lived with the Emperor in the palace once again, just like how it should have been in the past.

How can one not be in awe of Bao's courage and intelligence! No one would dare to take up a case like this which involved the King and his family! That's why Bao was a legendary figure revered for his intelligence to solve different cases, his loyalty, his honesty, and most importantly, his uprightness.

I am so proud of being one of his righteous and incorruptible team, working together with his skilled bodyguard, Zhan Zhao and the four royal enforcers, Wang Chao, Ma Han, Zhang Long and Zhao Hu. I always help him give up intelligent and useful ideas when he gets stuck while thinking sometimes. I love helping with this community. Also, other than the "Civet Cat Exchanged for Crown Prince" (狸貓換太子) case, Justice Bao also solved, judged and sentenced a lot of criminal cases in the Chinese society during his duties. The very significant cases including "Executing Chen Shimei" (陳世美案), "the Case of Black Basin" (烏盆記) and "The Two Nails" (雙釘記). From most of these famous cases, even the imperial family or the power holders intervened Bao with threats during his investigation, he still executed the criminals at the end. All of them would finally deserve to be judged by the strong Dog-Header Guillotine for the commoners, the violent Tiger-Headed Guillotine for guilty officials and the powerful Dragon-Header Guillotine to punish the relatives of the Chinese emperor and royal personages.

Due to his braveness and ability to defend the poor commoners and suffered peasants against the injustices and corruption, he was even be praised as the Astral God of Civil Arts.

This is the exceptional life of one of the greatest figures in our land. I am certain that his name and all his deeds will be remembered forever, supported, and talked about by future generations. I hope he will continue to be a role model in everyone's eyes.

Signed by:

Gong Xuan Zhen

Judge Pao and the Missing Vase

Chinese International School, Jiang, Clare – 11

Who hasn't heard of mystery stories? Who wouldn't want to join the detective and watch the mystery clearing up gradually before your eyes? All this seems like an unlikely fantasy, but never did I dream that I would be embarking on an adventure of my own.

If you don't know me, I am John and I am working as an assistant in Hong Kong. My boss is a police officer called Pao sir, but privately, I nicknamed him "The Black Boss". Not that I'm racist, but his face is actually charcoal black.

"There's so little interesting news," sighed Pao sir, prowling about in his consulting office. He reads the newspaper everyday and never ceases to complain about it. "Here, take the paper back." I skimmed through the paper. Nothing happened except for a common-place theft. Just as I put down the paper, a dark figure rushed into the office. I gazed at him inquiringly as Pao sir motioned the unexpected visitor to a chair. He was a middle aged man with grayish white hair and desperate dark eyes. His patched clothes told a life of poverty and hardship. He plopped down onto the chair and sat panting as I poured him a glass of water. He took a long drink and under our inquiring gaze, realized that he needed an explanation for his unceremonious entrance.

"I am sorry, Pao sir, but you really must help me! I'm in so much trouble and I can hardly stand it! I did nothing wrong and they are all accusing me!" The visitor broke into sobbing.

"I'm sorry, but may you please tell us your name?" Pao sir asked calmly.

"Well, I'm the unhappy Brian Zhang!" He said it in a way as if his name would explain his manner and visit, but soon realized by our unresponsive faces that he needed an explanation. With trembling hands, he handed a newspaper to my boss. The headlines said "Rare Ming Vase Stolen from Repulse Bay Villa, Suspect Found".

"The police suspect me of stealing my boss' vase but I didn't do it! Everybody thinks it's me because I am poor and I need money but I am wrongfully accused! They might arrest me at any moment!"

"Arrest —" Before I could finish my sentence, the office door slammed open, and a short stout man with white hair and golden glasses appeared in the doorway, with two bulky police officers standing behind him. "That's the one!" The short man pointed a chubby finger at our unfortunate visitor. "I knew you would steal the vase you thief! " He was bursting with rage and he would have beaten our visitor up if the officers hadn't stopped him. One of the officers put his hand on Zhang's shoulder. "Are you Mr. Brian Zhang?"

"Yes," he said, trembling.

"I will arrest you for the theft of the Ming vase." The officer led him away from the office. As they reached the door, Zhang gave Pao sir one last desperate look for help.

"What a case," my boss remarked as the men left. "I'll probably join our fellow officers and have a look at the situation. You can come too and have a look at the crime scene." I was overjoyed at having a real opportunity to assist him.

As we drove up to the crime scene, a huge villa loomed up before us. We stepped out of the taxi and Mr. Chan with another officer greeted us at the doorstep.

"Good afternoon Pao sir," Mr Chan smiled as he led the way into the house. "I am sure that this is a very clear case to you. The papers already have lots of evidence as to Brian's guilt. Is there anything in particular you would like to see?"

“I want to look around the house and see where the vase had been,” my boss replied.

“Who lives in the house?” he asked.

“Well, we have a large staff of 10 servants,” Mr. Chan answered. “For my family, I live with my wife and we have two children who are twelve and fifteen.” The house was large and luxurious, but the floor was covered in dust. We looked throughout the house, but my companion seemed to be lost in thought.

“Here is the place where we put the vase. You can see the little area where it stood over here. We put it in the corridor beside the stairs. I saw it last night when I went to bed at eleven. This morning, it was gone!”

“Does anyone go into your bedroom?” Asked my companion.

“No,” Mr. Chan seemed startled by the question. “No one is permitted to enter except for my wife and myself.”

“Thank you.”

“By the way,” Mr. Chan pulled a thick stack of cash from his pocket. “I know Brian did it, he’s had his eyes on the vase for a good long time. Please take the money for some gratitude upon my part—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Chan, but I can’t take the money. I have to solve the crime based on facts, not opinions.”

“But. . . Alright.” Mr. Chan seemed annoyed at this. “Well, I won’t retain you gentlemen any longer and you are also free to talk to the other constable.” With that, he walked off and left us to ourselves.

Half an hour later, Pao sir, the constable and I sat on the sofa of the living room, brooding over the case. He was muttering something to himself, and I could make out “There were marks, but how do I prove that the butler was not there?”

“Um, Pao sir, you can use security cameras though,” I ventured to remark. Shouldn't a police constable know how to use security cameras?

“We checked it, but there was nothing. It was too dark.” The constable remarked.

“What’s that?” Asked Pao sir, interested.

“You don’t know?” I cried, astonished. “They are cameras and they record what’s going on in your house.”

“That seems like a good idea.” Pao sir muttered to himself. “Where can I look at the footage? I want to check it myself.” He asked the housekeeper. She led us to a room where there were lots of screens lined up one by one. “How do you play the footage?” He asked.

“You press this button and you select the part of the clip you want to view. You can also switch clips taken by different CCTVs here.”

“Alright. Can you turn to the footage from last night at 11:00 pm that overlooks the vase?”

The video started playing. The house was dark and not a person was to be seen. It seemed to go on forever when suddenly, a dark silhouette slipped into view. It crept slowly along the corridor and towards the vase. We held

our breath as the figure lifted up the vase and crept back towards the open door of Mr. Chan's bedroom. "Aha!" My companion cried. "Let's go meet the constable downstairs."

We were all assembled in the living room: the constable, Mr. Chan, Pao sir and I. "I think," Pao sir said, "that the chain of events is quite clear. The real criminal is not Brian Zhang. In fact, there is no crime committed at all! So far as I can tell, last night at eleven thirty, Mr. Chan crept out of his bedroom and lifted the vase into his room. After that, he must have hidden it in his cupboard and then went back to sleep. In the morning, he called the police and made everyone suspect Brian with his own opinion because he was poor and might have wanted the vase. You may remember that there was an article in a tabloid on Mrs. Chan having a relationship with Zhang behind Mr. Chan's back, so naturally he would want to get rid of him. Am I correct, Mr. Chan?"

The rich man's face turned ghostly pale, then it set into an expression of anger. "Yes, that is true," he said. "No one messes with my wife! Brian deserves some punishment!"

"Constable," Pao sir said, "please guard Mr. Chan while he gets his vase later. Meanwhile, please see that Brian Zhang is released and tell him that the truth is known. As for you," he turned to Mr. Chan, "You have nearly got an innocent man jailed for life so now, I will arrest you for framing an innocent man and trying to bribe the police. Meanwhile, I think that I won't be needed here. Let's go, John." With that, we turned our heels on the marble house and stepped out into the sunshine beyond, looking forward to our next case.

Time To Go!

Chinese International School, Poureshagh, Eara Yuxi Yasmin – 12

I opened my eyes and the blinding sun greeted me. Looking down at my hands, I found them to be pearly and transparent. Around me I saw men and women dressed up in strange and, to me, ugly looking garments, mostly made of one piece covering their torso and the other their legs, while their feet were wrapped in even stranger footwear. This was nothing like what I was wearing: a red and gold tunic that started at my neck and fell all the way down to my luxurious silken sandals.

What? A feeling of confusion filled me, cold sweat dripping down my temple. Where was I?

The last thing I remembered was going to bed after a lavish banquet to celebrate another solved mystery with some friends, but now everything around me was unrecognisable. Nearby, a monstrous metal wheel, around two houses wide, stood tall, higher than any building I had ever seen. Attached to it were round, clear, giant pearls of some sort at intervals and the wheel was rotating slowly around its axis. How?

More importantly, why couldn't anyone see me? I tapped a man's shoulder to get his attention and my hand went right through his arm.

I took a few steps and looked around me. On one side, there was the ocean, and on the other side, a dizzying wall of buildings brushed the clouds. A lady shouted at passers-by from a stall, in the same unrecognisable language I heard from the people around me. A wide space, like a river, separated the two sides of the street, and there were enclosed carts moving in each direction, without the help of any mule, horse, or camel.

I kept moving along with the continuous stream of people, the majority of whom were looking down intently at rectangular reflective tablets on which they were tapping their fingers, or holding them to their ear while speaking loudly to no one in particular around them.

I felt fear rise again, as I struggled to make sense of this nonsensical world. My stomach was churning and I tried to stay calm, taking deep breaths, trying not to hyperventilate. I felt my heart rise up to my throat, pounding faster than any galloping horse, pushing out every other conscious thought. Suddenly, a voice interrupted my blind panic.

"*There* you are! I've been looking for you!" A familiar man waved at me as he waded through the crowd with a look of relief on his face.

Then I remembered. I had been getting ready for bed last night when this man, who introduced himself as Blasé, appeared out of nowhere. He had told me he was a time traveller from the future and how he had travelled back in time to ask for my help to solve a mystery in the future.

At first, I was extremely suspicious, convinced that this apparition was a demon, but as he showed me the contraption he called his "time machine" outside my home, I realised he might actually need my help. We got into the time machine, and it brought us.....here?

"Blasé!" I exclaimed. "What happened? Where are we?"

"I think that the most likely possibility is that the time machine malfunctioned. It brought us here, to Hong Kong, at the mouth of the Pearl River in the year 2023. We were supposed to go further in the future, which is why I've been trying to fix the machine." Blasé said.

As he was speaking, a tall banner behind him caught my attention. On it there were unrecognisable characters, but beneath the text was what looked like a depiction of my official robes. What was *that* doing here?

"What does that say?" I asked Blasé, who glanced at the banner behind him curiously.

"Oh! It's an exhibitionabout you!" he said.

“What exactly is an “exhibition”?” I asked.

“You can see for yourself! I’ll take you there – I don’t want you to have an accident. Then I’m going to have to come back to fix the machine” my friend said.

Hesitantly, I followed him to the edge of the street where there were black and white stripe markings on the ground. On each side of the street, there were tall poles topped with yellow, flashing orbs. When all the enclosed carts from earlier had cleared away, Blasé started to cross the road, with me following close behind.

He led me to a strange blocky stone building he called “City Hall”. Inside, after explaining where to go, pointing at a map on the wall, Blasé left me.

Moving staircases full of people led the way up to where I knew not where. Sorcery? I cautiously approached the moving staircases, then boldly stepped onto the.... contraption. I was stunned; like magic, it supported me and I moved up. Amazed, I looked around me at nonchalant people who were too engrossed in their black mirror-like tablets.

Soon, I had arrived at the end of the ride. I carefully gripped the handholds at the sides of the metal machine and as soon as the black platform had brought me to the upper floor level, I gingerly stepped off as those before me had done.

Marvelling at the amazing architecture and magical smokeless indoor lanterns on the way, I navigated my way to a set of wooden doors that were pushed back to let in and out dozens of people.

As I entered, I immediately felt my eyes widen in amazement.

There, before me, there were endless displays encasing what looked like my possessions.

I walked over to the first display that caught my eye, which contained the robes I had seen on the banner. So many people surrounded it, pointing and discussing in tongues that I couldn’t understand.....Suddenly, a realisation struck me: before he left me, Blasé had handed me what he called a “transcriber” so that I could listen to and understand what people were talking about. I took out the “earpiece”, as he had called it, and hesitantly slipped it onto my ear. Suddenly, everything anyone was saying around me was being translated into my dialect by a disembodied voice in my ear..

I focused on what a lady, who seemed to be explaining the history to a group of young people, was saying:

“This whole exhibition is about Bao Zheng, a judge in the Song dynasty. These are his official robes, provided to him by the emperor, Lizong, when he completed the highest level of imperial examination at the age of twenty-nine. As you can see, they are in the traditional red colour.”

I smiled proudly, glad they had gotten it right, and spent a few more minutes at that display, listening to other people talking about me and my life.

Looking around, another display piqued my interest.

I walked up to it and realised that this was a map of where I was born in Shexian, Hefei. I looked at the familiar landmarks, sensing a dose of nostalgia even though it felt like I had been there moments before.

Beside it was a painting of sorts, labelled: “Shexian, Hefei (2013)”

Surely that couldn’t be Shexian....

Where had all the familiar houses and landmarks gone? They had all been transformed into bright buildings, scraping the sky, similar to what I had seen outside. Standing there, I gazed at the map of home, contemplating wistfully at what the passing centuries had wrought on my hometown.

Displayed next to the map, there were some manuscripts, and to my surprise I could read them!

As I browsed through the texts, I realised one of them described my most famous case: [*Civet Cat Exchanged for Crown Prince*]. However, even as I was smiling at the manuscripts, my feelings of disorientation were growing. Despite my curiosity and hunger for knowledge, the future I was experiencing so far filled me with panic and dread. I thought about the display cabinets and the image of these strange people staring at objects so familiar to me that yet now felt so very distant and fought the now familiar feeling of dread. I shuffled uneasily outside, anxious to find Blasé.

Outdoors, the warm sun briefly calmed my anxiety, but soon my feelings of discomfort resurfaced at the sight of the strange bustling world around me. I ran across the road, praying the loud enclosed boxes with wheels wouldn't hit me, and spotted Blasé right away.

“Please can we leave?” I implored, “I don’t think the future suits me!”

“I just finished – you’ve arrived just in time! We better get going,” he said.

Stepping into the time machine, Blasé followed me in, shutting the door behind him. I braced myself as he mumbled some unintelligible commands. The rumbling started and it dawned on me that my journey wasn’t over.....

“Where are we going?” I shouted above the thunderous sound of the machine.

Blasé had been silent about our next destination...

He just smiled at me with a glint in his eye.

The Chronicles of Judge Bao

Chinese International School, So, Laine – 13

The rain was pouring outside yesterday. I was glad to have made the decision to stay at my fiancée Shan's house instead of making my way back to my hometown. I was awakened by the sound of my fiancée's father Zhou going for his morning stroll. It had been happening since I first visited Shan here, so I was used to being woken up at six in the morning. Shan's father didn't like me as I came from a middle-class family. He had planned for Shan to marry a rich official a decade older than her. I made myself breakfast and sat down in the hall to eat at half past six. However, not even five minutes had passed before Shan's maid rushed into the hall. I knew something was off before she said anything from the way her face had turned pale as snow. I grabbed her by the shoulders. "What happened?" "Shan-Shan is—" The maid suddenly collapsed in front of me. I held her wrist and tried to take her pulse. There was nothing. Frantically, I ran to Shan's room for help. Nothing could have prepared me for the sight that greeted me. Shan was sprawled on the floor with an agonised expression on her face. A gold hilted knife was embedded in her chest. I backed away in horror. Who did that knife belong to? Why would they harm Shan? Reality hit me, and I scrambled to Shan desperately. Holding her in my arms, I shouted for help, but no one came. I tried to pull the knife out of her chest. Wrapping my hands around the hilt, I pulled at it hesitantly. Just at that moment, I heard a voice roar behind me. "Hands in the air!" Startled, I raised my hands into the air. Shan's father stood with two guards at his side, both of their spears levelled at me. "I found Shan on the ground just now... we have to get help!" I looked at Zhou. He didn't look at me. One guard shackled my arms and the other picked up Shan roughly. "Don't touch her—" I was hoisted to my feet by the guard. There was something in the old man's eyes I couldn't read— fear? Sorrow? Guilt? It dawned on me who had murdered Shan. I charged Shan's father. The guards tried to restrain me, but I fought with all my might. The old man stepped away from me and left. Snarling with rage, I fell to the ground in despair and let the guards drag me away. He had had an argument with Shan about me yesterday, but it didn't make sense to me that he would kill his own daughter. Suddenly, I was dragged out of my thoughts by an announcement. "JUDGE PAO HAS COME!" As I was being led to a small wagon, I caught a glimpse of the legendary judge. Upon a vast face, two beady eyes were set. There was a hard glint in those eyes— as if just by looking at you, they could glean all the information from your brain. A fresh wave of hope hit me. Judge Pao was known for his justice and wisdom. If anyone could prove that the murderer was Shan's father, it was him.

"BRING THE SUSPECT, LI XIAN!" I was marched into the courtroom after hours of waiting. Shan's father Zhou was kneeling on the ground in front of Judge Pao. "Is this the murderer you spoke of?" said Pao. Zhou nodded. "And how do you know this?" Pao inquired. "I was coming back from my morning walk at around half past six when I saw the body of my daughter's maid on the floor. Upon reaching Shan's room, I was horrified to see him—" he jabbed a trembling finger at me "with both hands on the hilt of the knife, plunging it into my daughter's chest. The two guards with me saw it too!" "Liar!" I yelled. "Why would you have guards with you on a morning walk? You're making things up!" "ORDER IN THE COURT!" Pao banged his gavel. "If you continue to make commotions, you will be taken away from the courtroom!" he said to me. "However, this does raise a few questions. Why would you, Mr. Zhou, have two armed guards with you if you were just coming back from a morning stroll?" The old man looked afraid. He stuttered, "Our house always has servants on standby. I simply summoned the two security guards in our house to protect me, in case there was a dangerous man in the house. Sadly, I was correct." He turned to me with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "Is Zhou's information correct? Did you murder the maid and the victim?" Pao fixed me with a hard gaze. Desperate, I said, "No, sir, Zhou is providing false evidence. Security guards have never been in Shan's house. They have obviously been hired by Zhou as fake witnesses on the day of the murder." Zhou looked at the judge and fell on his knees. "Please, Judge, this man has murdered my only daughter! It is only fair for justice to be served." Pao looked unconvinced. "We shall hold court another time. Further investigation has yet to be done. Dismissed!" The old man got up in outrage and stormed out of court. I was getting up to go back to my cell when Judge Pao called for me. "Mr. Li, I have something to discuss with you." He leaned closer to me and asked, "Are you sure no one other than you witnessed the victim's death?" "Yes, sir— no one other than the

maid, but she has probably passed away from her injuries, which weren't caused by me," I clarified. Pao chuckled. I didn't understand the sudden display of humour, so I asked awkwardly if I could leave. He dismissed me with a wave of his hand. I returned to my cell and sat alone until night came and I fell into an uneasy slumber.

The next day, I was brought into court again. That wicked old man, Zhou, knelt next to me. It pained me to see Shan's murderer right next to me, but I was the one shackled in chains, while he was free to roam wherever he wished. That would soon change. Pao asked me if I had truly killed Shan. I replied no, and Zhou just knelt on the ground pleading for Bao to arrest me. His two 'security guards' were called in soon enough. When Pao asked them for information, they glanced at each other. "My name is Wang, sir. I saw with my own eyes this young man piercing a knife into the victim's chest," said one of them. With incredible patience, I resisted snapping at the guard. Pao then inquired to Zhou if anyone would have witnessed the murder aside from Zhou. Zhou replied that the maid would have seen it but that she was killed at my hands. What a liar. Just then, Bao did the unexpected.

"BRING THE MAID, CHEN!" A young lady stumbled into the court. Immediately, I recognized her as Shan's maid and confidante. I nearly fell over in shock. Shan's father and the guards were stunned and silent for many seconds. I thought Zhou would've been pleading on his knees for mercy now that the truth was about to be out, but he didn't even look scared. Rather, an earnest look set on his face, as if he couldn't wait for the maid to tell his crimes to the whole world. "Chen, are you the maid of the victim? Did you witness your mistress's death?" said Pao. The maid looked nervously at Zhou and his guards, then replied, "Yes, sir. I saw the death of my mistress, but I don't know who the man was." She looked close to tears. "Don't know?" Pao thundered. The maid trembled. "Sir! I'm telling the truth. I did not know the name of the man who killed Shan, but I can describe him to you." The frightened maid started to describe the killer. To my surprise, the description didn't match Zhou at all! Had Shan been murdered by a person she didn't even know? Just then, Zhou rose and said to Pao, "Sir, I know the identity of the murderer." He exhaled. "It's true I never come back from my morning walks so early. The reason I returned was because of a person who informed me of screams coming from my house. He was a member of the Emperor's family." Pao rose to his feet and banged his hand on the table. "How dare you accuse the Emperor or his family?" "It is true, sir. I can give you a letter for evidence. You will find that it is his handwriting. I also know how this man, Yang Zong, is related to our family. He was the man I wanted my daughter to marry. The night before her death, she had an argument with me and Yang Zong about Li Xian. I wanted her to marry into Yang Zong's family, where she would be blessed with riches for the rest of her life. However, she loved Li Xian too much and was unwilling to part with him for anything. Yang Zong left the house in a state of furiousness. In the morning, just a few minutes after I arrived at the usual trail I had my morning walks at, Yang Zong came to find me. He informed me that he had heard screams and the sounds of weapons being drawn in my house. I didn't find it suspicious that he had heard the sounds in my house in the morning as he liked to visit me often. I hurried back with some guards from Yang Zong to my house, just in time to see my daughter's lover with both hands on a knife that was plunged into her chest. I was blind to think that a person who loved my daughter so much would be the one to end her life," murmured Zhou. Pao looked deep in thought. Then he stood up and banged his gavel. "Summon Yang Zong to court. Zhou shall be punished for his crimes of concealing information from the court. Li Xian has been proven innocent! He shall be set free today. The maid shall be rewarded for her honesty. Court dismissed!" Pao got up and left.

Before I left court, I glanced at the mighty judge again. I now understood why everyone praised him for his justice. His devotion to finding the truth is something I will always admire.

Judge of the Guillotines

Chinese International School, Yu, Nicole – 12

The clanking of chains echoed through the courtroom, combined with the sounds of the hysterical prisoner. Everyone who witnessed the crime knew he was innocent, but they didn't dare defy the judge. If they made so much as a peep of objection, their heads would be rolling on the floor, stained with crimson.

'Please, please have mercy, I am innocent, as unlikely to kill as a monk!' he cried, while being forced into a kneeling position by the stone-faced guards. Tears slipped down his flushed cheeks as he spun his head so violently, as if it were on a swivel, his vision zooming through the onlookers, hoping at least one of them would step out and proclaim his innocence. Despairingly, the crowd stayed pin-drop silent, for fear of the consequences should one of them speak.

A man with a deadly presence entered the room. He was dressed in a simple brown tunic and black pants, his long black plait braided neatly. Clothes made for messes, dirt and stains.

The executioner.

A chill ran through the room as he walked over to the assortment of ornately carved guillotines displayed on the wall. Some may even call them beautiful, though that beauty is laced with scarlet, crime that is not spoken of, tragedies unshared, the souls of the wrongly condemned forever bewitching the polished, golden heads of tigers and dogs.

The kneeling man whimpered as the executioner put on a pair of white, silk gloves, and his vision spun as he brought out a sharpening block, picked a guillotine with the head of a dog cut onto it— representation of commoners— and with each scrape and whine of metal, black spots dotted his limited visibility. The color drained slowly from his face, nearing unconsciousness.

But the biggest horror of that night was yet to be present.

For a while, all was silent. The tension was so high, the moonlight retracted from the windows, fearful for what was about to come. Masses of clouds amassed in front of the stars, like parents shielding their children's eyes, protecting them from the terrifying scene that was yet to come.

The door to the judge's pedestal flew open, and two royal guards marched out and stood at attention. A figure stood in the dim behind the door, just a silhouette, but their air of authority could be felt throughout the cavernous court. The guards' stood tall, stiffened their posture. The onlooking civilians quietened and hushed their children. Even the prisoner became silent, and stared up at the pedestal with a mixture of fear and awe, tear tracks glistening in the grand chandelier's flickering light.

The silhouette gained shape and color with every thundering step it took. A deep, red velvet robe embroidered with twisting and somersaulting golden dragons flying in the crimson fabric, shiny black leather shoes polished to perfection, a neat crop of gray hair and a thin gray beard, scraggly from age. On his head he wore a black futou adorned with gold and emeralds. His eyebrows never raised, but were always pointing downwards, giving the impression of anger and irritation.

This was Judge Pao. The greatest judge to have ever entered the court by far, he was known for his fierceness, extreme honesty and uprightness. In the past, he has proven to be ruthless in court, sentencing his own uncle, prosecuting the Emperor's most beloved concubine, charging some of the most powerful and wealthiest families in the Dynasty. Clearly, all the onlookers knew of his merciless actions, and waves of sympathy flooded in the air towards the poor prisoner knelt on the cold floor. The prisoner seemingly caught on with the fear that was

directed towards him, for he fell into a trance, trembling from head to toe, cold sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

Judge Pao thundered toward his seat, followed by three court scribes, one holding stacks of records, another holding a paintbrush and an ink pot, the third holding blank pieces of paper. The first and latter hurriedly placed their items carefully onto the carved wooden pedestal, and obediently ran back towards their positions. The third took out a small paintbrush and sat on a tiny stool, looking up at Judge Pao attentively.

Judge Pao cleared his throat. 'Mr Kong, you have been charged with fraud, theft of livestock and valuable items, participating in the sales of the local black market, numerous second-degree murders, gambling, illegal trading and the dealing of violent objects. Do you plead guilty to these charges?'

The prisoner's face whitened with every charge that was listed. He gulped, and slowly opened his mouth, but no sound came out. With a sigh, he nodded a fraction of his head.

Judge Pao's expression darkened. 'Speak up, sir,' he thundered, with heavy emphasis and spacing between each word, his voice echoing off the walls. The prisoner stilled, apparently accepting his fate, and whispered, 'Yes,' as quiet as a breath but heard by all in the enormous room. A single tear trickled down his pale face, landing on the polished wood floor with a quiet plop.

Judge Pao's face contorted into an expression of triumph and satisfaction. 'Very well, then. Let us proceed with the execution.'

All that could be heard was the swish of the guillotine as it was brought upon the prisoner's neck.

Judge Pao grunted and with a wave of his hand, he dismissed the court. Easing out of his chair, he quickly made his way to the dark, foreboding woods surrounding the imperial palace. Embracing the new-moonlight, he absorbed the shadows quietly hovering nearby, using the inky darkness to draw a rune on the mossy floor. Instantly, he was portalled to an alternate dimension, into a capacious grand palace where he lived during the night. The palace was made entirely of raw obsidian and mirrored glass, housing over two thousand individuals. It also overlooked the two halves of the afterworld. One half was Shangri-La. A bustling city made entirely out of gold and precious jewels, it housed the people who passed the Test of Purity. Shangri-La granted all the desires of whoever set foot on it. Starvation and suffering were foreign concepts to all those who lived there.

The second half was Hell. This half was more populated than the other. It housed all those who failed the Test, which was most. This was a place of poverty and the dejected, for there was no gold here, no granted desires, and people often went hungry. Food was scarce and considered a privilege. The days were scorching, the nights sub-zero. The people there endured suffering and pain, and they constantly wondered what they did to deserve this fate.

Naturally, these thoughts led to rebellion.

The Modern Horseman of Justice

Diocesan Girls' School, Chan, Tsz Yau Astrid – 14

Natalie wonders if her cheeks are wet with rain or tears.

Neon colours of billboards are smeared across the pavement like glistening paint, the mixing hues only broken by her solitary silhouette. It's late to hail a taxi and all she wants to do is to burrow under her covers and pretend today never happened. Hands numb, she fumbles for her phone from her sodden uniform dress and opens the Uber app with trembling fingers.

She's thankful that she doesn't have to suffer in the downpour any longer when the car pulls up quickly. In the semi-darkness, the sinister gleam of street lights flicker like tongues of hellfire on the rickety hood. The heady whiff of incense ushers her in as she opens the door. It swings close by itself, unusual given the vintage car model.

"Sorry for the mess. I didn't bring an umbrella." She attempts to keep her voice steady.

"No problem." Came the gruff reply, laden in a thick mainland accent she can't quite put a finger on. In the dim light she can just make out a beard, the rest of his features are shrouded in shadow. The car revs to life, turning the corner and into the highway. As they soar along, Natalie feels the lump in her throat loosen a little and she has the urge to suddenly spill out the troubles of today. Strange. She is never one for small talk.

The words get pulled out of her like water to sponge. "There's a school fair tomorrow, and I'm in charge of setting up the stall, so I stayed until late at night. Everything was going well until the stash of products went missing. It's too late to do anything and I'm going to be killed by my classmates tomorrow." She buries her face in her hands.

"Do you have any clue who did it?" To her surprise, the driver is listening.

"I suspect that it's Clarissa from the other class who did it. She's jealous we have everything planned while she can't even keep track of who's ordering her products."

"Better late than never, I suppose. Try your best and everything will work out," comes the reply.

When she gets off at Tsim Sha Tsui, she has to admit that the clamour of string instruments and the rant does something for her spirits.

Jimmy staggers out in the dim street, feeling an urge to kneel on the pavement from exhaustion. His head pounds from hours of obsessive investigation, he can't quite bring himself to endure the din of the bus on the way home, so he presses a request for an Uber.

When the car arrives, he doesn't even notice it if not for the headlights, the ebony surface blending in perfectly with the darkness. He pries open the door and collapses onto the soft velvet seat. Vaguely, he registers a peppery whiff of incense and instrumental clanging that does nothing for his migraine.

Like on cue, the old driver turns a knob and the din fades to a bearable whisper. "Rough day?" A hoarse voice rings from the front.

Despite the haze of exhaustion, Jimmy pushes himself upright, smiling grimly. "You have no idea..." He trails off, expecting the driver to fill the silence. But he doesn't, and it turns a little too thick for his liking as the car whirs along.

However, when the stack of newspapers catches his eye, he can't stop himself. "Someone's gone missing two days ago as you know," he blurts out. "We've been working around the clock to figure out who it is. But there are no trails." The old man grunts in response and Jimmy continues, unable to cease the rush of words. "It's been

months since such a major event and the authorities are pushing us to solve it quickly. I've been running on caffeine for the past two days and I'm now on fumes." He continues, a tale of fruitless interrogating and rising tension in his department spilling from him, a never-ending spring of water triggered by a pressed button.

After a while, Jimmy pauses for breath and the old man speaks up. "Don't worry. Justice will always be served."

"Doesn't feel like it. Like they say, no body no crime. How many criminals have escaped the law because of lack of evidence?" Jimmy sighs. The old man doesn't argue further, but Jimmy gets the impression he isn't very convinced. Semi-silence once again suffuses the car, albeit rather companionable. Not a few moments later, Jimmy gets off, and the Uber vanishes around the corner just as abruptly as he had first seen it, leaving him standing in front of his apartment wondering if he's getting hallucinations. Yet he feels a little relieved.

The sun is still tentatively poking her head out when Natalie arrives at school, brimming with determination on fixing the mess despite the cold knot in her stomach. Since it's so early, she bides her time, keeping a keen eye on the classroom next door. When the other class's representative wanders off, she quickly runs over, rummaging through their lockers.

However, they are all stuffed with unrelated materials. As the number of lockers unchecked dwindles, numbing panic seeps in like ice water poured over her head. The only option left is the locked storeroom at the back. Rattling the lock, she frantically tries any combination she could think of. But it stays stubbornly stuck at each click. She doesn't even hear the footsteps behind her in her concentration.

She freezes, a deer in headlights. Knowing all too well how suspicious she looks, she turns slowly with an embarrassed smile to the girl behind her.

Instead of the expected anger, the girl looks conflicted, and even...guilty? "You might want to try 7463. Clarissa deserves the punishment," she mumbles before shuffling off.

Triumphantly, Natalie twists the lock to the number and pulls the door open, revealing the missing stash of products. Snapping a quick picture, she makes a quick trip to the headmistress's office. The paralysing anxiety she experienced last night is worth it at seeing Clarissa's smug smile getting wiped off when she's summoned upstairs.

Five hours feels like a snap of a finger, Jimmy prepares himself for another unfruitful day again. It's all ordinary until Laurel runs up to his desk, a smile edged with fatigue on her face.

"We have a possible lead. This is a drawing of what she made on the day the victim went missing." She hands him a sketch of a street, the scene the police visited like bees to honey the last two days. Nothing out of the ordinary except an ostentatiously blue Porsche is parked outside.

"The witness says the vehicle was parked there the whole day, but was missing around the time most people clock out," she pauses, then continues as an afterthought. "She didn't want to step up, but apparently she heard an invisible voice or something."

Jimmy is already running the database on possible matches before she finishes, fingers typing furiously with renewed vigour.

The rest runs together like wet paint, a blur of shouts and speeding vehicles, but Jimmy finds himself in front of the Porsche, feeling more satisfied than he has been his whole life. The war is far from over, but the suspects are handcuffed, and there are incriminating weapons that can wrap up the case nicely.

Two unrelated people in separate incidents, but later both of them briefly have the strangest urge to close their eyes, picture the driver last night, and whisper a thank you.

Just a coincidence, you say, but if you ever find yourself needing a ride late at night and have some injustice on your mind, request an Uber and wait for a beat-up black car that looks like it drove straight out of hell to pull up.

Your driver will be that elderly man, with the same whiff of incense and Chinese opera. As the car starts, the pent-up frustration gets unlocked and you let off a rant about your problems. The driver nods at the right places, assuring you everything will turn out right. You leave the car a lot lighter.

The next day, some fluke of luck allows you to serve justice and you believe the two tales because the same has happened to you. You assert it has to do with the ride yesterday, and muse about the mystery. But you move on eventually, like everyone.

If you had paid a little more attention during the ride, you would've noticed how the moonlight streamed through the curtains and landed on the driver's forehead in a slight crescent; or could've observed how the shadows darkened his skin; and should've noted how he never smiled. But you didn't.

Nobody ever does.

The Ship

Diocesan Girls' School, Chui, Cheuk Ying Kylie – 14

There will be long winds and waves sometimes, and the sails will be hung straight to help the sea.

He places his brush down and contemplates the Chinese calligraphy he has composed. *If I am the ship*, he ponders, *I must be still sailing across a sea unbeknownst to me, where the shore appears to be nowhere near in sight.*

Knitting his eyebrows in frustration, he heaves a sigh and jerks away from his work of calligraphy, and grasps tightly the medical papers that were once intact, though now slowly being crumpled up. His body cannot help but shake: *why, why now?*

Multiple thoughts and memories flow across his mind, but he cannot be bothered now – he has bigger fish to fry. He has to finish off everything, finish off everything his ancestors asseverated. He needs to make them proud. But alas, time and tide wait for no man, and he feels lost. Very lost.

He wishes to be the seagull that flew past his ship, drifting endlessly and freely across the oceans without feeling angst from many problems, but he cannot.

Pao Yue-kong was not the best son in his early days, after all. He can still vaguely remember the first time he decided to step into this sea freight industry, his parents forcefully opposed it, and his relatives were skeptical of his ability. “It’s a dog-eat-dog world in that industry,” they said, “And you are merely an outsider. Why spend the time torturing yourself?”

Despite the ramblings of Pao Yue-kong's elders, he still plucked up his courage to insist on following his dreams by resigning from his old quiescent job and becoming a self-made man.

But he is now struggling to keep his courage after that happened.

That happened only a year ago when Pao strolled through the streets of his beloved hometown—Ningpo and decided to check out an ancient library nearby. As he wandered across the mysterious place, the staff courteously handed him a book about the history of the Pao family, especially for him. Burning with curiosity, Pao flipped through the pages one by one. As he flicked through the work, familiar names appeared, catching his eye. But he could not quite put a finger on it.

Wait, is it...? A sudden click in his head caused ripples of excitement to flow up his mind. He ran his trembling fingers across the words on the tattered pages as gently as he could, trying to weave the venations of his family together.

Pao...Pao...Judge Pao.

He froze.

He, Pao Yue-kong, is Judge Pao's 29th-generation descendant.

Pao stared blankly at the book and shook his head. *It couldn't be.* He blinked his eyes thrice to make sure that he was fully awake, while his mind was in a state of euphoria and incredulity. The momentary lapse of uncovering the history of his ancestors was unforgettable, and he can now still recall the moment of truth held before his very own eyes. It seems so idyllic, so miraculous, like a dream.

Alas, dreams do not last long. The bubble of the great news of him being Judge Pao's descendant burst soon after. He knew quite well in his heart that being Judge Pao's descendant was not easy. Not only was Judge Pao stringent towards himself, but he was very strict with his family too, and under his influence, his children and descendants were also frugal. Judge Pao was very much devoted to education too and fought for youngsters' rights.

He who shares not my values is not my descendant.

Don't leave your descendants with only embarrassment!

Pao Yue-kong dwells upon these famous words spoken by his ancestor Judge Pao.

Do I share Judge Pao's values? These questions have been nagging him a lot recently. *Have I finished what Judge Pao hoped for us to do? How and what can I do better to make my ancestors proud with such a limited amount of time, where my days are already numbered? Why, why did I learn about this so late?*

These questions keep circling in his mind but are left unanswered.

He breathes a long withered sigh as he trudges across the room, still very much confused by the labyrinth of life.

Knock-knock-knock.

"Come in." Pao instantaneously shoves the medical papers of him having confirmed a case of cancer into his drawer as a middle-aged man hurriedly rushes in.

"Father—"

Pao interrupts Sohmen and waves his hand, gesturing to him to take a seat.

Sohmen sits, "Father, you— you defeated Khoo Teck Puat! We made a killing! ..."

Pao fixes his gaze on his son-in-law as he goes on speaking about the matter in effervescence. Sohmen's voice is etched with fatigue, but that does not seem to stop him from expressing his wild dreams and imaginations to Pao. Pao has little interest in knowing about this news for now though; instead, sudden memories overtake him.

So-h-men. His name, like himself, shows his diligence to strive in the shipping industry.

Sohmen was first like a diamond in the rough in this industry—just like himself. He knew nothing much about ships, but he tried very hard to do everything well—just like himself. He even gave up his law career simply to help Pao strive for even more in the industry. He always keeps his head down and dares not do anything risky—just like himself. Now, he has spread his wings—he shall be the future hope of this industry.

And Pao took everything Sohmen had done into his heart.

Pao Yue-kong can see himself in Sohmen. When he stepped into this sea freight industry, he also had a lot of dreams and imaginations. He is a self-made man, so the challenges he faced were undoubtedly hard, but he took pleasure and eventually got a grip on them. He made his utmost effort in the hope to make his father proud in the meanwhile, well aware that he had let his father down at first, not doing a job but instead going to another industry with a lot of unknowns. But Pao succeeded. He even built a restaurant in his hometown, naming it after his father. He knows very well that his father has always desired to leave a mark, even if it is a very small mark, in history. And Pao has fulfilled it.

Pao Yue-kong can see himself, endeavoring to help the younger generation receive a better education. He can vividly picture the days he sought books about the shipping industry, and was so absorbed in them that he neglected his sleep. That was why he succeeded. He was conscious that education is very crucial to everyone, especially young learners. That was the main reason he put in a such massive amount of effort and money simply to build a school in Ningpo.

Pao Yue-kong can see himself, first time stepping into Hong Kong, knowing that this would be a good place where he could stay and work. And now, Hong Kong, which has been placed in quite a high ranking for its national security law and judicial independence globally for consecutive years, doubtlessly holds one of the best legal systems in the world.

And these had already been done long before he knew that he was Judge Pao's 29th-generation descendant.

Pao Yue-kong has achieved what Judge Pao hoped his ancestors to do—to share his values. He adores and is devoted to his country, he has contributed a lot in providing education for the youngsters, lending a helping hand for them to become stars of the future, and honors his family. And he is more than sure that his children and future generations will also be able to attain Judge Pao's standards.

It has not been the denouement of Judge Pao yet, and will not be for the nonce.

"The moon today is abnormally bright," Pao notes as he heads toward the windowsill.

Sohmen, intrigued by Pao's words, moves next to Pao and looks up.

A crescent moon hangs up high, glowing tenderly but brightly like a chatoyant gem in the very dark sky. It shines in the darkness, sharing comfort and bringing hope to everyone.

Just like Judge Pao.

Pao Yue-Kong smiles.

If I am the ship, he ponders, then I am going to reach the terminal soon, reunited with Judge Pao. But there are still many ships sailing in the middle of the sea, fighting defiantly against the challenges to reach the terminal, leaving marks amid the vast sea.

Judge Pao would be proud. Very proud.

The Guardian's Tale

Diocesan Girls' School, Kee, Cheuk Yin Chloe – 14

Hands gripping the cylindrical wood, brush smeared with diluted blackness, filling in the space between his arms with serpentine entanglements of dots and lines he cannot understand. He presses on the copybook for reassurance, his father's map of strokes permeating through the parchment to guide him through the convoluted labyrinth.

The father inspects the seeds of ink unfurling into characters. They diffuse, bleeding across the page, darkness emanating from the words.

"*Diyu*," the father explains. "Inferno."

"What are the words saying?" the child asks during one of their lessons. Their desk is scattered with tattered tomes of politics in a cacophony of colour, like unruly wildflowers.

The father protests, glancing at the script his son is pointing at—*Diyu*, the curls entwined with fantastical tales he's deciphered for him myriad times. "The emperor's court desires serious scholars, not fairy tales. To shine in the imperial examinations, you must commit the Confucian philosophies to heart."

"It's my favourite story."

The father relents. "When a man perishes, his soul is extracted by the Heibai Wuchang, the Spirit Collectors, the black-and-white Hell Guards, subordinates of the netherworld king who escort souls to the afterlife."

"What's that?"

"Mazes sprawl across the subterranean realm, filled with chambers in which spirits atone for the sins they've committed, or are rewarded for their good deeds. The nine Yanwangs, formidable judges overseeing the souls' fates, sit within. Upon their scales they weigh only the untainted truth."

The stories spun from the loom of his father's tongue flood into his head, each word ricocheting like echoes within the chambers of his overheated imagination. Heart pulsating, he implores his father to regale him with more.

"Then what?" he asks, enthralled.

The father smiles, and the final thread is stitched into his tapestry of stories.

"When the Jade Emperor assigned the Yanwangs to their courts, one seat remained empty. Folklore says it'll be filled by a human of the Yanwangs' blood who'll uphold morality in his tribunal, a guardian of the people. A celestial hero among the mortal world, he awaits fulfilling his divine purpose."

He is a son with no father.

Bao Zheng longs to see the gentle tilt of his father's smile, to feel the warmth radiating from his silver eyes, to hear the stories that hit his bloodstream in rushes of fervent imagination.

Think about the good things, he tells himself over and over, split between desperation and determination.

But he doesn't.

Corroding silver eyes and red screams—he recalls the moment his father left him behind in the world. The memories are a resounding gong in his ears, invasive in his mind—the drunken fist, his wretched wails, his father's life draining into red puddles as the moon rolled on so peacefully, so *indifferently*.

They never jailed those who spilled his father's blood. They had gold to bargain for freedom, and continued indulging in ridiculously priced baijiu and exotic fruits.

Between loss and tears, he sees his mother's face—all shattered and vulnerable. Capitulating. From the ashes of his engulfing grief comes the flare of raging fire.

Where's the fight?

That moment, he promises himself this'll be his duty—fighting for what his father lost.

Justice.

“Bao Zheng?”

He’s kneeling before the Renzong Emperor, brow against the chrysoprase floor. “Your majesty.”

“You’ve impressed in the imperial examinations,” the emperor says. “My officials recognized your talent for politics, and you’ve been hand-picked from the millions to serve in court. Unto you I entrust the authority to wield the sword of justice over China, to reward and punish as you see fit.”

The emperor’s gaze fixes on Bao Zheng. “You’ll be my people’s guardian with the power of the law.”

A memory of his distraught mother resurfaces in the ocean of his mind, and he remembers that grim fragment of his childhood following his father’s death.

“Murderers shouldn’t go unpunished,” he seethed. “I’ll do Father justice. I’ll make them pay for what they’ve done.”

His mother responded with a sad smile, cheeks stained with tears that would never completely dry.

“That’s revenge, not justice. You cannot have both.”

He shrugged. It didn’t seem to make any difference then.

“It hasn’t only been your father,” she sighed. “Corruption runs rampant under Song rule. In the fights between personal gain and justice, justice always lost, and officials’ selfishness always prevailed. For those who have been left in the shadows, this is the burden we’ve had to labour under, the oppression we’ve had haunting our nightmares, like a grief of no ends.

“Become a servant of the court, a guardian of the people—that is my greatest desire for you. Use your bitterness as strength. Enforce justice and order in a broken world.”

A fierce brand of determination burns in Bao Zheng’s eyes.

“I consent.”

Someone’s knocking at his door. “Sir?” a voice inquires.

An assistant enters. Now vice director for justice, Bao Zheng sees the reverence in his eyes as he beholds him, a noble judge with a mind keen as the sword of justice, a hero of rectitude and wisdom, eyes seeing only the truth.

His entire career, Bao Zheng fought for his ambition of justice, condemning those who tried buying forgiveness for crimes. Yet, a darkness scourges his heart, a rancorous reminder of embittered childhood wounds, injustices and pain endured by peasants. He sees the books before him, volumes from his father’s collection, old fury rekindling.

“Sir,” his assistant repeats, “the ministry director’s commanded to see you. He’d like you to sentence a case about the late baron.”

Bao Zheng’s brow creases. His father’s blood was on the baron’s hands.

“The baron’s son has been murdered,” his assistant continues. “Your cousin delivered the killing blow.”

Starlight washes across his office.

Bao Zheng sits behind his desk, poring over affidavits. It’s hardly been a month since the trial, and yet it seems a lifetime ago. His face is weathered, with lines bespeaking exhaustion and torment. His mind is clouded, disoriented from the dissonance of conflicting voices within.

Memories of his cousin flash into his head—her sunlit laughter when he made her a menagerie from paper, her curious eyes gleaming as she pleaded him to regale her with stories, her silken hand clasped in his as they stole a melon from their uncle’s garden, partners in youthful shenanigans, together. He remembers the child he adored, cared for so, before her heart was plagued by inner demons, before her innocent eyes became jaded and disillusioned with a heartless world.

Someday her soul might heal, he hopes, though he knows he’s clutching at straws.

Anguish rises, bitter rhythms filling his head. Besides, he thinks spitefully, the baron’s family cheated their way out of the law. Did they deserve fairness, these people?

He gazes outside, where starshine trickles down from cerulean skies, ablaze with fleeting argent flames of stars.

Before him, the landscape begins stirring—stars rearranging, veiled by formless shadows. At first, he thinks it's merely a conjured apparition, his vision tricking his debilitated mind. Yet he watches them dance upon clouds, dissipating, converging, reforming, until two figures crystallize into constellations. Warriors. One white, the other obsidian—black as the sky save for its scintillating outline. The Heibai Wuchang.

A reverberating voice floods his mind, a divine connection, guiding him through the mazes of justice in earth and hell, as his father once did. “Bao Zheng, what do you desire?”

“Justice,” he replies unfalteringly. “I scorn upon temptation in the face of law.”

The voice hardens, retorting, “You haven’t fallen for riches, but haven’t your impulses hindered justice’s path—your thirst for vengeance, your love for family?”

“Their veins flow with murderer’s blood.” He retaliates, rage clenching him. “They’ve stripped Father of life and justice. Don’t they fairly deserve paying their debts?”

“Their past actions are irrelevant. Child, you hail from the impoverished villages of Hefei, you’ve witnessed the agonies people endure from the crimes of injustice. How do you differ from those you despise with such ferocity, if sentiments consume you before justice? This is your hardest trial. Transfigure bitterness to strength. Enforce justice in a broken world.”

Tears fight for space in his eyes as he realizes what he must do.

“I understand.”

This is the story of a hero who conquered inner demons of vengeance, who learned to choose justice over riches and his own blood, whose judgements brought rectitude over the corrupt dynasty for years that followed.

For serious imperial scholars, this story is over. Yet if the reader wishes to know what became of the fairy tales that forged the hero into who he was, I will present them one final scene from my infernal bureaucracy.

The Yanwangs’ last throne is filled—upon it sits a worthy judge who dispenses justice in inferno as he did alive. I hear his legacy glimmers resplendently, igniting souls to continue upholding justice. I hear they call him the wielder of the sword of justice, a guardian of the people.

They call him Bao Zheng.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Dulwich College Beijing, Li, Damien – Year 9

DONG! The bell struck in the royal courtyard, signaling Emperor Renzong's arrival to the palace in Kaifeng, the capital city of Song. The royal officials fell to their knees, keeping their eyes down. The emperor smiled benignly, and stated, "Get up, all of you. Today—"

Just then, a dozen men with black masks clambered into the palace; they rushed to the guards, engaging in combat with them. Arrows rained down upon the officials, causing pandemonium. As the clashes of steel and the cries of pain rang out throughout the courtyard, a figure rushed towards the emperor. Unnoticed, he bound and gagged the emperor, and dragged him to a horse carriage, which immediately galloped off at full speed.

An hour later, the palace was littered with corpses, broken weapons, and...

A banner bearing an emblem of a sword piercing a hide was flowing in the wind.

"It happened right here, Judge Pao. The attackers were skilled and our guards didn't manage to fend them off. During the brawl, the emperor vanished. We have left everything as is for you to investigate, sir. The most curious banner—"

An arrogant looking man dressed in finely woven silks interrupted him. With dark skin and creased eyebrows, he raised a hand silencing the guards. "Keep this scandal a secret," he whispered in a rough, hoarse voice, "Do NOT inform the public. It will cause panic. Shut down the city gates so that they can't take our emperor outside the city. Rest assured, we will have our emperor back in no time."

Judge Pao walked among the courtyard, pausing only to bend down and examine a clue. He remained silent with a constant frown on his face, but once he reached the banner, he let out a vehement exclamation. He knew this banner by heart.

This was the symbol of the group, the 'Iron Wielders'.

Judge Pao's mind began racing. This group had been in action for years; its main goal was to rid corrupt officials and to help civilians. Numerous corrupt officials had been kidnapped and forced to donate their wealth. Wherever they operated, they left this banner to warn greedy officials that the 'Iron Wielders' were still at large.

However, why would the group target such a merciful emperor? Emperor Renzong was considered the most benevolent ruler ever. He never harmed anyone that he could spare. When he found sand in his food, he forbade his maid to tell others in fear that the royal chef would be executed. When the gifted writer Su Zhe accused him of being a fatuous emperor, he not only spared him, but also gave him a high official position as he thought Su was talented.

But, who cared *why* the group was doing this. It just mattered that they *were* doing this? Judge Pao had made up his mind—he would capture their leader, demand that they hand the emperor back, and execute the leader. To harm such a compassionate emperor deserved an eternity in hell.

"How can I lure the snake out of its hole?" After a sleepless night, Judge Pao finally formulated a plan.

The next morning, gossip started to spread quietly in Kaifeng. An official, residing in the North parts of the city, had the reputation for being greedy and corrupt; he abused servants, tortured civilians for land, and bribed senior officials to avoid charges. He was the perfect trap for the Iron Wielders. Judge Pao knew that rumours spread like wildfire, and that they would soon be around every corner of the city.

Sure enough, two days later, a sentry came rushing into Judge Pao's quarters, "Sir, there seems to be a tussle going on there! Some people are trying to force their way into the mansion!"

"Alert our soldiers! Command them to ambush the group and capture the leader!" Judge Pao smiled. It was a grim, cold smile that did not reach his eyes. It was time to save the emperor! It was the time to serve out justice!

The elite guards, on Judge Pao's orders, rushed to the front gates of the empty mansion to confront the intruding group. The leader raised his hands and bowed, but before his eyes had even left the ground, the guards threw themselves onto the company, preferring to bind rather than harm them. It was a trap! It was an ambush! A few minutes later, all the members had been subdued.

Soon, Judge Pao forced out the location of the emperor: a dungeon nearby. Hours later, with tears of joy in his eyes, Judge Pao knelt down in front of the emperor and proclaimed, "Your majesty! I am sorry! We have come too late!"

The emperor looked much thinner and had dark shadows under his eyes. With a weary smile, he croaked, "I love my people. I work hard. I think I am a kindhearted emperor. But, they still hate me..." and he added as an afterthought, "Execute them, probably. But..."

DONG! The bell struck in the royal courtyard, signaling the trial of the Iron Wielders' leader. Judge Pao paced into the courtroom, a sneer on his face. The group leader was bound, kneeling on the ground. His hair and face were slick with mud and his eyes red were bloodshot. He shivered, from both the cold of the day and the fright of what was about to come. Guards surrounded him, brandishing their weapons threateningly at him.

"This man is being tried for treason. He captured the emperor and will pay for it!" The speaker scoffed at this, "He will prove a fine example to whoever challenges the might of the Song Dynasty!"

Judge Pao said, "Your actions deserve a death penalty. However, first, I would like to ask you a questions"

"The 'Iron Wielders' are a group that has been doing good all over the country. The emperor has done no wrong. Why would you want to kidnap such a good emperor? The convicted may speak."

"The emperor is one man, but one man cannot lift a mountain. He is a great emperor, but..." he spat these last few words out, "Why is it that the... millions of people in Song have to follow ONE MAN? Why does this man get to decide everything? Whether the world burns, or whether it thrives? Whether families live, or whether they die? Whether violence is supported, or discouraged?"

"His Majesty is a great emperor, but we are already suffering at the hands of him unintentionally. Don't you remember? You protested against that corrupted official Zhang Yaozuo three times, but every time our emperor found a way to promote him again. This is only because Zhang is the Imperial Concubine's uncle. How can His Majesty be sure that every decision he makes will benefit his people? How can he promise that his son, or his grandson, or great, great grandson is just as kindhearted and just as understanding? *Our* tiny lives don't matter to the *son of God*, does it?"

Suddenly, he raised his voice, and rasped, "And why? Why is it that everyone must obey the emperor's orders? Does anyone even have proof that the emperor is actually God's son? Everyone is equal! Is he born in heaven? No! Are we born in hell? No!"

His voice became steadier, "The most ideal solution would be to return to the system of Yao, Shun and Yu. If we uphold this system of civilians voting for the most suitable candidate, the world will not be thrust into this period of fire and war again. No more emperors, only elected leaders; no more inheritance, only voting. This is the only way to ensure that Song will be glorified once again!

"And, if you're worried about His Majesty, I swear to you that I have not touched him one bit."

Judge Pao's hands and lips started trembling. He blinked a few times, as if he was about to cry, but no tears came out. Instead, scowling, he looked at the ground. This man had done something bad, something illegal. He needed to be executed, but... did he? He had committed this heinous crime, to escape the withering flames that burned in the name of the emperor. He was also a valiant man; he fought to save other victims from the same fate.

For the first time, this strict and impartial judge hesitated in court. "Maybe he was correct?" Judge Pao murmured to himself. Judge Pao knew, this was an essential battle of the two principles he had held in esteem his entire life: his loyalty to the emperor and the welfare of the people. Which one was more important? Surely, this Iron Wielder broke the law and committed a crime, but could the laws be outdated?

As Judge Pao was lost in thought, the Iron Wielder whispered in a tiny voice, "See past the murky black, and the illusive white. See all the different shades of grey..."

New Tales of Judge Pao

Dulwich College Beijing, Yuan, Jonathan – Year 8

Judge Pao was sleeping when Mr. Wang came. He was lounging in a rocking chair, his fingers closed loosely on a scroll. On the other side of the room sat his assistant, who was sipping tea. The sun glittered through the silk curtains on the windows.

He was famous all through China... So far, he had not encountered a case that he could not solve. Little did he know that an upcoming case would test his judgement to the limit.

There came a loud banging at the door. The scroll fell out of Judge Pao's hand as he sat up. His assistant hurried to the door. A man, dressed in purple robes, was standing on the steps; his face a mask of anguish and fear. He looked as if he had run all the way to the judge's house.

"What brings you here?" he asked.

Without answering, the man staggered into the house and slumped onto a chair.

"I am Mr. Wang." He said, "my daughter has thrown herself into the river with no apparent reason." "I don't believe my daughter would ever do that. I searched up and down the riverbank with no clue to why she decided to jump into the river."

As Judge Pao inquired more about the situation, he learned that the Wang family was very close to the Chen family. The Wangs had one daughter and the Chens had a son. When they were born, both families agreed that they would be married once they came of age.

"Then one day, for no reason, the Chens turned down the wedding," continued Mr. Wang, "then they refused to speak to our family anymore." After hearing this, Judge Pao knew that this was no easy case.

The next day, Judge Pao went to the Chen's house to see what he could learn. The Chens didn't want to say anything about turning down the marriage, but after hearing that there was possible suicide involved, they quickly revealed the reason. "One of our servants used to work at the Wang's," said Ms. Chen, "he told us that their daughter is ugly, selfish, and rude. He said she wasn't fit to marry my son."

Judge Pao wasn't expecting a reply like this. This just made the case even more complicated. The servant was just passing by. "Can you be certain that what you said about the Wang's daughter was true?" Judge Pao asked him.

"Of course it's true," replied the servant, "why would I lie?"

"Where were you last night and what were you doing?" Judge Pao inquired.

"Nothing," said the servant "I was sleeping the whole night. I had nothing to do with the death of Mr. Wang's daughter."

Judge Pao then went to the river side where Mr. Wang's daughter had drowned. As he looked around the bank, he noticed a clean, white piece of paper sticking out of a bush. It was a note from Mr. Wang's daughter. The message proved that she had killed herself because she didn't want to marry the Chen's. Judge Pao now knew he had the answer. The case was closed. The Wang's daughter was killed by none other but herself.

Judge Pao went home. He lay back in his rocking chair and endeavoured to get a few hours of sleep. It was a useless attempt. Something nagged at him about the death of the Wang's daughter. He felt that things weren't what they seemed. He knew that justice must be done. Five days passed. Then one day, Judge Pao could not

bear it any longer. he returned to the Chen's house. He ordered the body of Mr. Wang's daughter to be fished out of the river. The coroner found that there was no water in the lungs and throat of the body. If she had drowned, her lungs should have been full of river water. This looked as if the daughter was killed by someone else and her body was tossed into the river.

"This shows that Mr. Wang's daughter was murdered," remarked Judge Pao.

"But who killed her then?" asked Mr. Wang.

"He did." said judge pao, pointing directly to the servant.

The servant looked as if someone had struck him across the face. Staggering back, he regained his posture and stammered, "How could it be me? Why would I kill her?"

"And the note?" Added Mr. Wang. "If she was killed by the servant why would she leave a note?"

"The note was put there by the servant," replied Judge Pao, "when you first told me you had searched the bank, you did not mention finding it. The note was in plain sight, so you would have seen it. Also, the note was clean and with no trace of dirt. It looked like it was placed there only a few minutes before I found it."

"Even if the note was fake, how come you know it was planted by me?" asked the servant.

"When I asked you what you were doing the night of the murder, you said you had nothing to do with the death of Mr. Wang's daughter, even though you weren't told that she had died" said Judge Pao confidently, "I deduced that you were secretly in love with Mr. Wang's daughter, as you said nasty things about her to the Chens, knowing they would cancel the marriage so you could have her to yourself. But when you wanted her to marry you, she would not listen. She thought you were a horrible man. In your anger, you killed her and threw her body into the river. You made it look like suicide."

The servant looked lost for words. He was immediately apprehended and taken away. The servant, seeing there was no way out, confessed to his crimes. Judge Pao had solved the mystery. At the end of the day, Mr. Wang went to see Judge Pao.

"I cannot find words to thank you," said Mr. Wang, "but I am not ungrateful for what you have done. your skills have exceeded what I have heard. Therefore, I would like to present you with this antique rocking chair."

Judge Pao was delighted.

The Family Birdcage

ESF Discovery College, Bhandari, Riya – 13

Part one:

He stood at the feet of the chair, begging, tears flowed down his face. "I'm being poisoned!" He threw himself on the floor. Swaying his head in a merciful way. If anyone saw the honourable Zhang Wei, a trusted government official beg at someone's feet, his family name would be forever slandered. Judge Pao frowned, "an important political figure like you should not bow your head!". It was nearly impossible for someone to have a grudge or motive to poison the honourable Zhang Wei, though he did have his fair share of scandals. From rumours of affairs to embezzlement of funds, and bribery, the most scandalous rumour surrounding Zhang Wei was that he was to choose another boy to be his heir, the second son Zhang Wei, the child of a lowly concubine. The only thing stopping the honourable Zhang Wei from being stripped from his title was his close friendship with the emperor and his long family line of honest nobles which the former emperors always relied on. Though they all were just rumours, Judge Pao has seen enough, he signalled to the door. "A disgraceful noble like you does not deserve to be in my presence, let alone get my help" he scowled. Zhang Wei swiftly stood up realising, no matter what he said could change judge Pao's mind. His soft eyes hardened into glare, "you'll regret this". Zhang Wei strutted to the door, before stopping in his tracks and reminding Judge Pao of his power. "Just wait, I can make everything you have disappear within a snap." within seconds he was out the door. Judge Pao sighed angrily "another ill-mannered noble."

The days soon turned into a nights, without hearing a single word from Zhang Wei...What if he has truly been poisoned and he had refused to help him? No. Judge Pao was in the right, nobles like Zhang Wei had been pampered by the emperor too much and always thought that everything revolve around them.

Part two:

The darkness swallowed everything, the only light in the sky was the bright moon which seemed to keep the world together. A faint flutter of wings... Owls, they sat perched on the white Chaenomeles and sang their cries of bad luck. The dark figure stood wearily in front of owls, "Owls a sign of bad luck, perched on top of white Chaenomeles." He sighed once more. Judge Pao knew all the signs were in front of him, he stood in his hanfu. He couldn't sleep when he knew that he had made the wrong decision. Zhang Wei words had troubled him deeply and now every second of the day was spent thinking and thinking if he was wrong for turning away someone in need... but now he knew he was wrong. The owls, the white flowers they could only mean one thing...someone had died. Judge Pao stood in the grass immersed in his thoughts, a faint whispering playing in his head. "Pao, Pao, Pao," it wouldn't stop. He was snapped out of his thoughts by muffled thumps and a sharp voice. "Judge Pao! Judge Pao!" Judge Pao whipped his head towards the direction of the cry. His eyes met a servant dressed in the colours of house Wei. "Honourable Judge Pao, forgive me for my behaviour. I come bearing news of my master." He said in a rushed voice before pausing. Judge Pao raised an eyebrow "well...? Tell me!". The servant made a soft squeal at the boom of his voice, he tried not to show his fear and shock on his face, but he just couldn't hide it. "The honourable Zhang Wei has died, he has left nothing in his will except a note..." the servant looked away as if looking for anyone eavesdropping. "Addressed to you.." he pulled out a roll of paper from behind his back, before taking a small bow and stretching the note before judge pao. Judge Pao grabbed the paper out of the servant's hands before opening the seal and reading the contents of the letter.

Dear Honourable Judge Pao,

Forgive me for my rash and unacceptable behaviour, I hope you can forgive me and respect my wishes. If you are reading this, that means I have passed on to a greater place. A few days ago i told you of my troubles, I believe someone has poisoned me, and know I think I have proof. Only you know the circumstances of my death, I—

Judge Pao looked up from the letter and glared at the servant. "Is this it?". The servant stuttered, "well master, Zhang Wei was unable to finish this letter addressed to the honourable, Judge Pao, as he was, unfortunately, bed

ridden and so weak he was unable to lift a finger.” The servant looked down, his face full of anguish and sorrow. Judge Pao, sighed “bring me to his quarters immediately. We have no time to waste!”

Part 3: The servant

The room was cold and empty, the furniture was worn and hollow. The air was dense and full of misfortune. The once lively quarters became a dull hole which devoured any colour or emotion. I once felt like I had a place here, it was warm, lively and bright, now all I could see was grey. I loved my master, the honourable Zhang Wei, it was a honor to be in presence. When I heard he had died, a gap in my heart had been created, longing to be filled with closure. When I was told to deliver the message to judge pao my heart skipped a beat. The closure I longed for was just out of reach. I softly walked down the hall towards master’s quarters, Judge Pao following me. The floorboards squeaked and we came to a halt. “What the stench?!” judge pao questioned. “We were told not to touch the body or anything in the room before you come” I whispered. The door made a screeching noise as i pulled it open, the stench was unbearable but the sight of my master's body covered in a white cloth was worse. I turned to judge pao, who frowned, “I want an autopsy done... now!” he boomed, I squealed in response before running off to get the doctor. I had never felt so good but so bad at the same time, I wished that my master was still alive to see the honourable judge pao in action.

Part 4: Judge Pao

The stench was unbearable, I looked around the room. Wilted flowers, ripped paper among many other things. The quarters looked as if someone had gone through everything as if looking for something. I stepped into the room, the floorboards felt like they were going to break under my weight. Everything was silent, I walked over to the pure gold birdcage, which had been strategically placed in the centre of the room. Inside lay a rare bird, dead, with its feet in the air. A bowl filled with a brownish–greyish liquid lay next to it. A similar liquid was was in a cup on Zhang Wei’s table, I frowned, all of a sudden the stench had gotten stronger. When I turned around, I was surprised to find Chun Hua, wife of the honourable Zhang Wei, and their son, Yuxuan Wei standing in front of me. Chun Hua wept small tears “are you here to find my husband's murderer?” she asked. Yuxan cut in, “yes please find who poisoned my father.” he said in a strong voice. Right on time the servant and what looked like a doctor had arrived. “Ah, shall we leave the room, to give the doctor some privacy to do the autopsy? Their faces almost immediately turned from sorrow to worry. After the autopsy he could confirm his suspicions, “we should all meet in the sitting room in around an hour, I will tell you the findings of my investigations,” I swiftly walked out the door before they could mutter another word.

Part 5: The results

Judge Pao sat upon a high chair, while the others looked up to him. All of the servants had gathered to see the result of the investigation. Judge pao took a deep breath before talking, “Yuxan and Chun Hua Wei will be stripped of their titles and sentenced to death for the murder of honourable Zhang Wei.” The entire room seemed to run out of air “WHAT!?” Chun Hua screamed before throwing herself to the floor and weeping. Yuxan seemed to not know what to feel and he seemed lost in many emotions.

Judge Pao sighed again before speaking, “Both of you had fed him mercury over the course of multiple days, I have confirmed with the doctor that he had died because of mercury poisoning. Not only that but you two were the only ones who knew that he was poisoned and murdered. It would make sense that you both wanted to kill him with the rumours of his affair and his hatred toward his son.” the servants immediately turned on their former masters and pinned them down before tying their hands. “ Zhang Wei knew he was being poisoned after he did an experiment on his bird, he came to me for help, but I turned him away. Knowing that I might help him you decide to up the percentage of mercury in his food killing him quicker.” Judge Pao raised his head before looking toward Chun Hua. “you scavenged through his room to find if he had informed me on what you were doing, and when you found that the letter was already delivered you tried to act innocent. IT’S DISGRACEFUL!” Judge Pao screamed. Yunxan lunged at Judge Pao but before he could touch him, Yunxan and Chun Hua were both dragged out of the room. Yunxan muttered under his breath “you’ll regret this”.

Judge Pao sighed, “Another day of spoilt nobles.”

The Case of the Dumplings

ESF Island School, Chan, Ella – 13

The streets bustled with the shouts of vendors and the sound of collision between the cobblestones and the wheels of rickshaws, as the imperial gongs from the Song Palace ringed synchronously.

Chen-Hua finished taking the order from table six, when the wizened old lady, a regular, shambled to a table right next to the door – one of her habits. She called for Chen-Hua, smiling, showing creases at the end of her eyes. The corners of Chen-Hua's lips tilted upwards in return as she strolled to the old lady's table and began chatting off.

Gong! Gong! Gong! The Imperial gong reverberates through the Pao Court of Appeal, as Judge Pao himself sits down on the elongated wooden carved armchair, with his elaborate black gauze futou intact and his golden-black robes brushing the floor. Next to his side stood his loyal advisors, Wang-Chao and Ma-Han, who assists Pao in his deductive reasoning. Just then, a guard rushes into the court, kneeling down on the velvet carpet extended from the armchair. The guard then stood up and with both hands, handed a yellowing scroll to one of the advisors, and bowed once more before taking his leave hurriedly.

With a sweeping motion, Judge Pao opens the scroll, only to gasp in shock. The blood red words wrote:

Ying-Li, widow with child, age of twenty-two, has gone missing for 10 days.
It is believed that she was murdered.

Pao recalls the day before, when a young child dressed in rags was tugging on his sleeve, with tears as large as crystals streaming down his face, begging him to find his mother, who has yet to return home from work.

Pao frowns as he sets the scroll on the wooden table before him and with shaking fists, orders his advisors to notify the guard that he would officially accept this petition.

Edging closer to the night, it was raining violently with streaks of lightning and thunder, causing the candlelight to flicker. Preparing to shut the front doors, Chen-Hua bidded her farewells to the last customers, and made her way out the store. That was when a man, burly and broad shouldered, forced his way into the closing doors. Chen-Hua and her Father attempted to explain that the opening hours of the tea house had elapsed. Completely antithetical to their well-mannered explanations, the man's face grew a bright, scarlet red, as he edged towards Chen-Hua's Father. Feeling alarmed, Chen-Hua's Father gestured for her to go to the kitchen. Precariously drawing one step at a time, Chen-Hua reluctantly followed, aware of the worrying look on her father's face, yet unable to help.

Not long after, her Father ended the dispute with the man and acted in accordance with the man's order. Telling Chen-Hua to prepare six dumplings, she complied with a scrutinising look towards the man. Just then, Chen-Hua heard something that made her stop in her tracks.

"What did you get your dumpling filling from?" The man asked, churlishly pointing his chopsticks towards Hua's Father.

"Why, just that meat shop down the street." Her Father replied, maintaining his calm posture with strenuous effort.

The rest of the night ended without further dispute. The next day, Chen-Hua went by the meat shop, and encountered the man again. As she approached the store, the man addressed her with a solid stare. Ten silent, deadly seconds passed, as he turned his gaze back to the wooden worktable. He resumed his work, scooping meat bits into the sack. After the sack was full, he slammed the sack onto the stained table – Wham! Chills ran down Chen-Hua's spine. She picked up the sack from the table and shook off her memory of the man, and scurried to work.

Weeks flew by, harmonious and tranquil. Until one spring morning.

The day started with sunshine and warmth. As Chen-Hua walked out of the kitchen, she came to a stop, fixating on the scene at hand – her Father was being held by the collar by a customer, whose frown was so deep that it is plausible to assume that it is deeper than the Mariana Trench. Judge Pao, who happened to be having a meal with fellow court officials, stood up and turned his attention to where the customer's finger was pointing. At first sight there seems to be nothing out of the ordinary, after all it's just a regular dumpling.

No, something is most definitely out of place. Pushing away from other bystanders, Judge Pao bent down to examine the dumpling, and froze. To his astonishment, there was a fingernail. Yellowed and grisly, it was one that clearly belonged to a human. It perched in the middle of the meat filling. How could this happen?

The quarrel was only solved, thanks to the proficient repartee of the regular, the wizened, old lady. Upon her departure, she commented, in a low voice only audible to Pao,

“It is simply absurd that this happened all coincidentally.”

Judge Pao answered “Yes, Indeed. Thank you for looking out for others, it was rather difficult to get a hand with a situation like that.” The old lady simply smiled, and disappeared into the street.

Throughout the following days, Judge Pao sent Wang-Chao and Ma-Han to retrieve information from civilians door to door on the unfortunate victim who was made into meat paste for dumpling filling. While his loyal advisers interviewed civilians, Pao spent tireless hours in the court constructing his theory by stringing events and clues found at the tea house together. In the end, he decided to pay an unannounced visit to the meat shop down the road, a dutiful endeavour that must be executed. Trodding silently past the iridescent glow radiating from the lanterns, Judge Pao headed to the meat shop, with the mission to unearth evidence to support his hypothesis. The heavy metal door opens with an “eek” as an unsettling feeling threatens to wash over Pao. Ignoring the tugging nudge at the back of his head, Pao took one last breath and stepped in, into the hands of the devil.

Judge Pao pinched the bridge of his nose, as the stench of raw meat engulfs his sense of smell. The omniscient gleam from the knives hanging by the counters warn Pao, as if instructing him to leave right away. Cautiously manoeuvring through the unfamiliar terrain, Judge Pao finds myself treading on a substance, similar to the texture of gelatin. He looked down, too stunned to speak. A pool of blood spreaded across the floor tiles, painting them the colour of stale red. Just as Pao looked back up, the wooden doors rattled. Swiftly, Pao swept his head towards the doors, only rattling with more and more vigour. With no choice, Pao scrambled to the nearest cabinet, just in time to shut the cabinet door before the doors opened with the same “eek”, and in came the behemoth of a man, confirming the sinister, inkling mood Judge Pao felt earlier.

Silence is not Judge Pao's forte. Pao moved to the slit in the cabinet doors to observe the man's movements. Suddenly, there was a “Clunk!” next to him. He hurriedly lowered his gaze, as something landed in front of him. A pair of eyes stared back at Pao – blank, with black hair strands poking out, along with the human features of a face. Pao barely managed to stifle his gasp as he pushed the head deep into the cabinet. This movement was unfortunately heard by the man, whose face Pao can see right in front of the slit.

Judge Pao, having experienced countless dangers, took to his astute reflexes.

With a rushed plan afoot, he kicked open the cabinet doors, slamming it into the man's nose. Making use of the time, Pao sprinted out of the meat shop with his racing heartbeat in sync. As the man followed in pursuit, Pao squeezed into the narrow alleyways, lush vines grappling him in the thin breadths of the in-betweens of buildings – rat and mouse would be the right way to describe this. Still heavily huffing from the close shave, Judge Pao closed the doors of his court, as Wang-Chao and Ma-Han listened to Judge Pao's exhilarating experience in retrospective.

In the next few days, a lot happened. The butcher was, of course, beheaded by Judge Pao, and justice was at last returned to the unfortunate widow, but that was old news. From time to time Pao pondered – he constructed a logical evaluation of the murder case, however he couldn't seem to explain the timely disappearance of the old,

wizened lady, especially how she simply vanished down the street. Judge Pao thought she looked quite similar to the orphaned child he met before the murder case.

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“A Knife in the Back”

ESF Island School, Flatt, Chloe – 11

It all started on a crisp winter morning, when a young lady was late for work. She hurtled around the corner, and suddenly her feet slipped from under her. She found herself flat on her back. For a second, she thought it was the ice that tripped her. However, as she pushed herself back up, she noticed that her hand was covered in blood, not ice. She shrieked a blood curdling scream. A shopkeeper dashed out to see what was going on and came to an abrupt stop for there was a dead body right in front of her. She pulled a sheet from her counter and threw it over the body.

Then, she ran to her uncle's house and called for help. Her uncle, Judge Pao, was a local prefect, who was famous for his belief in honesty and fairness. The shopkeeper told everything to her uncle. He calmly put on his cloak and set off to find the dead body on Middle Street.

Meanwhile, the young lady, Chan Hoi Yan, out of curiosity, decided to see where the blood was coming from. She followed the trail of blood and saw a hand sticking out from under the sheet. A chilly shiver ran down her spine as she realised, to her horror, that she recognized the ring on the hand. She came closer and saw two initials on the ring...IT WAS HER HUSBAND'S HAND and she fainted from pure shock.

At that point, Judge Pao arrived with his niece to see two bodies lying in the street. The niece said, "Ah! That was the lady who slipped in the blood!" The judge said, "Well, she probably just fainted. Let's wake her up and see what's happened." They went to her and used a damp cloth to wipe her face. Hoi Yan slowly opened her eyes and sat up saying, "Who are you?" The judge replied, "My name is Judge Pao. What's your name?" She said, "Hoi Yan", and pointing to her husband's body, "That is my husband's body and the person who killed him must be my father who always hated him." The judge responded calmly, "Don't worry, you have had a terrible shock. I will find out what has happened. Let's go to my niece's shop and have a cup of tea."

While they were having a cup of tea, Judge Pao decided to ask Hoi Yan, "So, what is the name of your husband and how do you know it was him?" Hoi Yan murmured in grief, "His name is Lau Ka Chong and I recognized the ring that I gave him on our wedding day." Pao said, "Oh, I am so sorry about that. But in order to help you, I need to ask you some questions. Is that alright?" She nodded sadly. "Could you tell me the names of your parents?" "My parents' names are Wu Cheuk Jing and Pang Si Hei." "Okay, so has your husband had any arguments with anyone recently?" "Well, he was arguing with my father about a piece of land and I know that my father didn't approve of our marriage." "Oh, thank you. That's very helpful. I will go and check the body now."

Pao proceeded out back into the street where the body lay. Carefully, he removed the sheet on the body and started his investigation. There was no evidence of injury on the front of the body. However, once Judge Pao turned the body over, there was a large knife lodged in Lau Ka Chong's back. Judge Pao noticed that the knife could only have been inserted by a left-handed person. Leaning over, Judge Pao took meticulous notes and did a detailed inspection of the whole body. Towards the end of the inspection, Judge Pao felt a crumpled letter in the victim's trousers. Using gloves, Pao removed the letter and discovered a handwritten note which threatened the victim if he didn't pay back the loan within 30 days. It was signed by Lam Lai Fong. Judge Pao mentally filed this detail as a clue which needed following up.

Judge Pao decided that the best way to identify the murderer would be to call a town meeting. In order to do that, he decided to create a poster giving the time and date of the meeting and stick copies of it all around the village.

A few days later, the whole village was talking excitedly while walking up the hill to the meeting hall. Red and gold banners were fluttering in the breeze and the sun was shining off the roof. Pao was standing at the entrance wearing a cape with golden embroidered dragons on it.

Judge Pao invited all the villagers into the hall and asked them to take their seats. The big doors closed with a clang and Judge Pao took his place at the podium. Beside him, there was a table with all the clues: the blooded knife, the crumpled letter and the jeweled ring.

He announced the purpose of the meeting, "Hello everyone, thank you for coming today. We are here to solve the mystery of the murder of Lau Ka Chong. We know the murdered man was Lau Ka Chong because this was the ring (picking up the ring from the table) he always wore with his and his wife's initials." Then with a flourish, he picked up the knife and said, "And this is the knife that killed him, the knife I found sticking out of his back." He continued, "Now we need to find out who had a motive to kill Lau Ka Chong. There are a few people in this room who have a motive. The first person is Wu Cheuk Jing, who has been accused by his daughter. Please come forward. Is it true that you disapprove of the marriage of your daughter to your son-in-law?" Wu Cheuk Jing replied, "Yes, I disapproved of the marriage. I would have preferred my daughter to marry Chau Chong Lam, her ex-boyfriend. But, I am not a violent man and would never kill anybody." Judge Pao asked, "Where were you on the evening of his death?" "I was attending a business meeting at that time." Judge Pao asked if anyone in the meeting hall had also been present at that meeting. An older man put up his hand and said he was there and that he saw Wu Cheuk Jing. Judge Pao said, "Thank you. Please take your seat."

Then he picked up the crumpled letter and asked Lam Lai Fong to come forward. "Lam Lai Fong, is it true that you lent money to the victim and then blackmailed him?" Lam Lai Fong, looking hesitant, said, "I did lend him money but he didn't pay me back! It wasn't the first time either!" "Ok, thank you for your honesty, but where were you on the evening of the murder?" "I was getting my nails done." Judge Pao turned to the audience and asked, "Did anybody see Lam Lai Fong getting her nails done?" A beautiful lady jumped up and said, "I was the one doing her nails." "Ok, thank you for that information."

Judge Pao was reviewing all the possible suspects in his mind and he remembered the father-in-law had mentioned an ex-boyfriend called Chau Chong Lam. Pao decided to call him up to the front. Pao asked him, "What is your relationship with the victim's wife?" He replied, "We used to be in a relationship, she was my girlfriend. I expected that we would get married." Pao questioned, "What was your relationship with the victim?" After some hesitation, he said, "Well, I didn't really know him, but I thought Chan Hoi Yan deserved a better husband."

With a deep sigh, Judge Pao concluded by summing up. The father-in-law, Wu Cheuk Jing, had a motive, but also an alibi. He could have slipped out of his meeting as it was nearby. Lam Lai Fong also had a motive because she was owed money. But, the appointment time of the manicure somewhat overlaps that of the murder. Then we have the ex-boyfriend who seemed jealous of the victim. Unfortunately, we have no witness of Chau Chong Lam at the scene of the crime.

Judge Pao had made notes of the suspects' statements. He asked them all to come up and sign. After they returned to their seats, Judge Pao stood up to his full height and said, "After much consideration, I proclaim that Chau Chong Lam is the murderer and should be arrested."

Everyone was shocked and said, "Why, when it could have been either of the other two?" Judge Pao announced with a wry smile, "I deduced that the murderer was left-handed by the way in which the knife had been inserted in the victim's back. We all saw him sign the document with his left hand just now." The crowd murmured in agreement and Chau Chong Lam was taken away to be arrested for the crime of murder.

The War of Injustice

ESF Island School, Gong, Stephanie – 11

I ran through the midst of despair, the world of destruction, the planets of violence... The war of coldness was still raging on while I ran across a layer of brave people who made sacrifices. Although this war is only the first one, it is already very bloody. I knew that there would be a second attack... It was the war between three worlds, Hell and Earth and Prosaxis. The fierce yet brutal war will have a shameful mark in history for all future generations to remember the selfishness the people once had among themselves.

I am Judge Pao. You probably heard of me before, how I righted wrongs, how I punished the bad, how I turned unfairness into equality by doing what was right to me. But you haven't heard the whole story, how I was banished, how I was considered cursed, how sending me to the underworld to become a leader changed my whole life... To start from the very beginning, I was very different from other folks because I was actually born from a flower. Yes, you heard it, a literal flower. It may have been a very peculiar incident but to be honest, it was a cursed flower that everybody believed was sent from the demons below. So everybody ever since considered me to be unlucky, cursed, ill-fated... however you can describe me. "Here comes the unlucky!" "Step away from him otherwise you will become a demon!" "I wonder how he even got here." People would whisper when I came into sight. But I tried not to have my heart break into pieces when others blamed me for horrible deeds I've never committed. The King was constantly receiving complaints about me, but one day... "Your majesty! The video cameras show full proof that Pao has stolen the almighty scepter of the Gods! This has gone way too far. All people hate him. Why don't you..." The guard felt a bit uncomfortable, "banish him?" The King was indeed very shocked, he always had a kind heart, tolerated and forgave people, but he still banished me... to the underworld. Prosaxis hated the underworld. They are always in war, arguments, and conflict. Even the king felt a little bit of guilt trigger inside of him when he announced that I would be exiled. It happened so quickly that I didn't even have enough time to react... All that booing, stomping sounds, anger, and madness were still ringing in my ears. I will never forget all that agony, sadness, and pain I felt right at that moment when I was exiled... forever... But if I wasn't banished, I would've never met the most important things in my life.

Now, I am where everybody thinks I should be... in the underworld. Honestly, it isn't as horrible as I thought it would be. I built trust with the devils and demons, and soon became the king of the underworld. "Don't worry about all those comments, don't let those hateful words bother you. We are whom we think we are, trust in ourselves. Be stable like a pillar and don't get triggered easily like water." I would comfort them when they received rude comments from the other worlds. And I punished bad deeds and praised the good and rightful actions when somebody stood up for themselves or when they helped the community. I was living a good life as a leader and someone that my people looked up to. But I constantly wondered how long this would last for me... There would be situations that nobody has ever dealt with coming my way... Everybody thinks of me as an honest and good-hearted hero in the underworld, but honestly, even I don't know who I am, and what I meant to be here for...

It was another long day where I felt as if everything was wrong, everything was bad, and everything was unfair. But as usual, I sent a guard to Earth to spy on humans so we can collect data and information in case they are planning a silent, stealthy attack on us. After years of trying to make peace, we always get rejected, "Please listen to me! The underworld people are innocent! Just—" I pleaded with the Prosaxis King. "FINE! I've heard enough! Get out you filthy demon! Guards!" I felt as if a slap just my face... I sent a guard that just earned his license to Earth. But, as bad luck always faces me, the guard messed up and people realized that they were being watched. But before all that chaos of people finding the guard I sent, he collected some valuable information that really came into use. I guess what I predicted was right! The countries on Earth held an important consultation and all the leaders agreed that they should attack the underworld before they attack Earth. But there was another twist... Earth decided to convince the nearby planet, Prosaxis, where I grew up as a child, to join the fight along with Earth in order to win a victory. I was both shocked and horrified that the people of Earth have become

so... self-centered and stubborn. The worry that was already inside of me has become fear, fear that both Earth and Prosaxis will succeed in destroying the underworld even when we have done nothing wrong. Although Earth may have weapons and bombs, and Prosaxis has skills in fighting, we have magic and power...

I knew that when the time comes for the war day, there won't be much gained, but there will be much lost, for all the three worlds...

For the next few months, I continuously trained my people, well, devils and demons. When all of us were ready, armed with confidence and bravery, I silently went to the mirror and looked at myself... I saw the fearful face of myself, the distraught face, but I also saw the brave one. "Who was I?" I whispered to myself. And then, I stood up. I knew that whether I was fearful or brave, I had to confidently lead my army to success. And then I heard lots of clashing, stomping and the scene was just like the one I once heard when I was ready to be exiled. I tried to stand up... but deep inside, I had a mixture of emotions, sadness and disappointment, fear and bravery, confidence and skepticism. The underworld soon won a quick but challenging victory. The scene that was left there was heart-breaking... Right at that moment, I knew that there was no turning back now. Blood ran through the floor, people moaned before having their last breath, swords were scattered, and bomb marks were everywhere. I sighed...

I had to get ready for the next battle. But the next stage of the war was very, and I mean very unexpected.

On the day of the war, I looked up at the sky, the clouds were gray, and it was raining as if the skies above were crying with pain. I gathered myself up and tried not to be discouraged by all the deaths and despair I had to go through in my life. Me and my army were waiting patiently for an attack but instead, nobody came. Instead, a bright thing was seen to be coming... I suddenly woke up, as if from a very deep dream. It was a missile. A missile that would kill all of us. I saw my army starting to back away... And soon, they were all panicking... Suddenly, a feeling of insanity got to me. What happened next happened so fast, I barely even had time to react. I remembered myself rushing towards the missile, without fear, without regret, but with bravery and confidence that I would bring a new future to the underworld. And suddenly, the missile exploded, and the light became so bright I closed my eyes and thought of a new future, both for me and Earth and Prosaxis, and the underworld.

Although I am not a Prosaxis alien, not a human nor a devil or demon, now I actually know who I am... a person who makes sacrifices, a leader with deep emotions of fear, bravery, confidence, and a leader that never regrets helping his people.

The Kind Judge, Judge Pao

ESF Island School, Lin, Kwan Ting Quentin – 11

Once upon a time in China, there was Judge Pao. No crime was too hard for him, as he solved a crime related to the president. He gave himself a goal because he was very confident, and that goal is to solve any crime or mystery in under 3 weeks.

One day, Judge Pao was in his court, and then a large group of people rushed into court and one of the people told Judge Pao, “There’s been a murder! We are the government, and our winning contestant, Abatus of the presidential election was murdered last night!” Another one of them said, “I suspect it was one of the jealous contestants, but we had over 300 contestants throughout the entire competition and election! So it will be very hard to find out who the murderer is.” Judge Pao remained calm and said, “Bring all of the contestants into my court, one by one and we will solve this quickly.” A few hours later, the contestants came. The bad news was, nobody admitted that they killed the winning contestant! Judge Pao went out to investigate for proof to make the culprit admit his crime. Judge Pao first went to the election place to investigate. He found a lot of suspicious materials, but none of them seemed to be related to the case. Just as he was about to lose hope, he realised he could check the CCTV cameras! He went to the security room and saw that contestant no. 258, Atlas killed Abatus in the evening yesterday when he went to the bathroom! He went back to court and told the government to send Atlas to court and he finally admitted his crime of murder and was sentenced to 40 years of imprisonment and hard labour. Atlas’ family apologised to the government as they had spoiled him in his childhood. The government thanked Judge Pao for solving the crime and gave him 1 million yuan! Judge Pao was very satisfied with his work.

A few weeks later, the government came to court again. They said: “We found out that Atlas was innocent! He didn’t mean to kill Abatus!” Judge Pao was shocked. His first thought was that somebody dressed up as Atlas and killed Abatus, because any murderer knows to disable or obstruct the cameras. He set out to find more clues to who actually killed Abatus. First, he went to QinCheng Prison to interrogate Atlas and Atlas said: “I won’t tell you anything.” But Judge Pao was desperate and asked him many times until Atlas finally gave up and said, “Someone hired me to kill Abatus but he never told me his or her name. I accepted the job because I was poor. That’s all I know. Get away from me.” Judge Pao then looked on Google to find people who hire for murdering and stumbled on a website called: BecomeaMurderer.com. He clicked on the website and saw the website maker was called Atticus. Judge Pao went to call the government to call Atticus to court. Atticus said, “It wasn’t me! My uncle, Bob, made this website in my name so he could get away with any murder!” Judge Pao asked, “Where does your uncle live?” Atticus told him the address and Judge Pao told the government to bring Bob to court. Surprisingly, Bob looked suspiciously alike to Atticus. Judge Pao decided to not jump to conclusions, maybe it was just a coincidence? Bob just said, “It wasn’t me. Somebody from the government just called me to tell one of my relatives to make a murdering website. I suspect one of the government members here is the imposter among us!” Judge Pao immediately saw through Bob’s disguise because the pompadour hair floated up for a split second and Bob caught it back before it was too obvious. Judge Pao just pretended to not notice the fact that Bob is actually Atticus in disguise. He then proceeded to pretend to interrogate the government. After that, he exposed Bob in the court just as Bob was about to leave innocent. He shouted, “Bob is Atticus with a wig! He is the true culprit!” The government was shocked by this news, as there wasn’t anything such as impersonation in this timeline. Judge Pao asked, “Why did you have to kill Abatus?” Atticus replied, “It was because Abatus once robbed our family of almost all our things, so I hired Atlas to murder him.” Judge Pao named this crime “impersonation” and arrested Atticus for impersonation and framing. Judge Pao deducted Atlas’ prison time and changed it to 10 years of imprisonment since he was still the one to kill Abatus. He also put Atticus in prison for 50 years. Judge Pao was very tired of solving an extended case and went back home for a good night’s rest.

About a month later, a shopkeeper with a 7-eleven Uniform ran into court and told Judge Pao, “Shoplifting! Shoplifting! Somebody stole almost all my goods in 7-Eleven last night! I checked the CCTV cameras, but it was so dark, I couldn’t see the face of the shoplifter. All I know is he isn’t from China and his skin is black and

brown.” Judge Pao contacted the government to bring all the people with black and brown skin into court. It took the government 4 hours to find all the people with black and brown skin as there are over 10 million people in this country. After the government brought all the people with black and brown skin, Judge Pao interrogated them. But they didn’t admit it just like in the last case. Judge Pao asked the shopkeeper to bring him to see the cameras. The shopkeeper was right. The cameras were blurry and the lighting was bad so it was very hard to see who the culprit was. Judge Pao was confused. He asked the shopkeeper, “Why is your CCTV’s FPS so low and why does it not have night vision? The shopkeeper replied, “I don’t know! This morning, the CCTV’s FPS was suddenly low. And the night vision was somehow disabled! How could someone sneak into the security room without a key and disable all the key functions to the CCTVs?”. But Judge Pao had a great idea. He went into the CCTV camera settings and increased the FPS of the camera and also gave the camera night vision. Then he asked the shopkeeper to buy food and supplies to refill the 7–eleven store. He went back home and waited until about 11pm. Since he also connected the cameras to his laptop, he can watch the shoplifter very clearly. He waited for a very long time, but finally, he saw the culprit! The culprit was the first person he interrogated, Hackeem! Judge Pao quickly opened his phone app and contacted the government to bring Hackeem to court the next morning at 8:30am. Next morning, Judge Pao rushed through his daily routine and ran all the way to his court and saw the government standing in court with Hackeem in chains. Judge Pao asked, “Why did you steal the food and supplies in 7–eleven? And why did you only steal the food and daily goods?” Hackeem nervously answered, “I have a family of ten and we are very poor. My parents were the poorest among all the beggars. Their names were Bharat and Sarvatia. They couldn’t get a job so every night, they break into stores to steal an unsuspecting amount of food and supplies to raise me and my sister, May. Now I have a family of ten and we cannot survive without any food and water so I had to steal a lot of food and supplies instead of a little. In case you were wondering, I hacked the CCTVs so I could change the settings in it. I’m very sorry. I will accept any punishment you give to me.” Judge Pao pitied them, so he kindly said, “Hackeem, I’m also sorry for not noticing you and your family’s need of food and resources. We will give you a fair amount of resources and money and also give you a job, but only after you go and do labour at the retirement home for a week.” Hackeem was delighted to hear this. “So you will help my family?” he asked. Judge Pao answered, “Yes, but promise you will not do anything bad in the future.” Hackeem said, “Thank you very much!”

After this case, Judge Pao was considered the smartest and kindest judge of all, and he vowed to take care of the country for the rest of his life.

Repaying Good with Evil

ESF Island School, Lung, Vincy – 12

I will always remember the note my ancestor, Judge Pao, left me— a prophecy that raised the hair on my arms, no matter how many times I read it: “When the crystal ball turns red, there will be a tsunami. Build a boat to save yourself.”

I have been checking the prophecy every day since I can remember. The prophecy was the famous crystal ball, a family heirloom Judge Pao passed down to us. I tried to warn the villagers that there would be a tsunami coming at a very young age, but no one believed me. To the villagers, I was just a child who could barely count to ten. Every day, my family and I worked on the boat and kept adding elements that we thought we needed, knowing how dangerous and destructive tsunamis could be.

One stormy afternoon, I came back from a walk in the garden and saw something peculiar happen—a splash of blood red colour was diffusing in the crystal ball. *Oh, no!* I panicked. *A tsunami is coming!* I quickly gathered and moved all the livestock and food we had onto the boat. Just as I moved the last bit of my belongings onto the boat, I collapsed from exhaustion, hands shaking and clammy.

Just as I suspected, after a few minutes, the river flowing through our village flooded its bank, and a splash of waves hit my boat. The boat, after bobbing back and forth a few times, floated on water, to my great relief. Just then, I heard a voice screaming, “Help!”

I looked around and saw a person in the water, splashing the water violently with his arms and struggling to stay afloat. The waves washed over him like a hungry beast devouring a tiny, powerless lamb. Just when he emerged from the water to take a breath, a series of extremely long waves pulled at him like a thousand arms, dragging him down to the deep blue abyss.

I squinted hard to see through the rain and waves, and finally I realized that the person was Ming, the villager who always teased me for believing a tsunami would hit. Ming almost drowned, but fortunately my boat was quick enough to catch him. I threw down a thick rope to Ming, and using every ounce of energy I had left, I pulled Ming out of the water. I gave him a towel to dry off and let him stay on my boat, but he did not bother to utter one word of gratitude. He sat there silently, looking cross with his brows knitted into a knot.

The second day, I saw him holding a sheet of paper in his hand, but I did not think much of it as I was busy steering the boat.

After some days, the tsunami calmed down, and we stayed in the boat for a while until the village was finished rebuilding.

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A few days later, I went to my house to check if it was still in good condition. The house looked as good as new but there was a peculiar sign on the front door. I walked closer and saw it was a “for rent” sign that Ming had put. I saw someone in the house living with her family and was confused.

“Hello, I am not sure I know you. What are you doing here?” I asked

“Hi, I just moved in and I heard you sold the house to your neighbour Ming. And he is renting this to me!” The woman answered.

She confidently presented the mortgage deed along with the company chop to me. I was in awe, and finally realised, the paper Ming stole was my company's chop and made a new deed.

Ming became rich and arrogant after the tsunami occurred. He started renting lands and became rich. He always demanded the villagers to help him do his housework or cook his meals. Ming moved out of this village and into a bigger house that he lives comfortably in. I couldn't believe he forgot the day I saved him in the tsunami. He took all that for granted and he forgot the person that saved his life. He even rented my land to other people. Right when I was telling the family to leave my house, I ran into Ming.

“Look who decided to come back because he had nowhere else to live!” Ming sneered.

“Who was the one that illegally rented my house? You forgot that I helped you!” I cried.

I strolled to the graveyard of Judge Pao and started crying, “If only you were here ancestor Pao, you could help me justify that you claimed the land thousands of years ago. You could help me overcome the obstacle. This person tried to kick the ladder away.”

Suddenly, a faded figure appeared. I could recognize that it was Judge Pao based on the facial features I saw on a painting of him.

“Judge Pao, you came at just the right time! I need you to save my house, our house!”

Judge Pao followed me to meet Ming to help me get my house back. He went up to Ming’s house and I told Judge Pao the story. Ming was embarrassed to be the villain of the story, so he gave Judge Pao some wine as a greeting. But instead of drinking the wine, Judge Pao served himself some water from the kettle.

Ming looked at him in disbelief and said, “Judge Pao, I am a rich and successful business man. How dare you throw away my precious wine and reject my round cheers! Are you trying to belittle me?”

Judge Pao smiled coldly and calmly replied, “How ungrate you are Ming. You drank tons of polluted water in the tsunami this year, but today this cup of water is forbidden to be drunk? Surely you think that if you become wealthy, you can forget whatever good deed a person has done to you in the past.”

After Judge Pao said that, Ming was irrefutable. He just hung his head low with the guilt of renting my house to other people. Ming was arrested for stealing and also imitating my signature and the

New Tales of Judge Pao

ESF Island School, Yoon, Seung June – 12

Chapter 1

It was a strangely quiet and peaceful morning. Judge Pao sat by the window and sipped his tea wondering how nicely he could spend this unusually relaxing time. Suddenly, the phone rang, breaking up his tranquillity. “Good morning Judge Pao. There is a case waiting by your office. It’s urgent, and very confidential! I think you should come and have a look” Judge Pao grumbled. “Great way to break up my morning!” He muttered sarcastically, flinging the front door open and walking down the steps. “Though, the weather is nice.” He smiled a little before going back to a frown.

Arriving at the office, his secretary Gongsun Ce passed him a briefcase. It was a sort of light beige colour and could be called Biscotti. He took the briefcase and thanked him, walking to his office room. Easefully, he sat down on his comfy chair and opened up the files.

“Reported crime: Red SandalWood Disappeared after prepared to ship”

– Reported by Mr Zhou Qi

This should be interesting. He thought flipping the pages roughly.

“Red sandalwood has fallen back to the endangered species. Since it is protected by laws, the price of Red Sandalwood products is soaring.” said Gongsun Ce.

“These are indicative values based on popular product prices!”

“Thank you for the extra information Gongsun Ce.” Judge Pao sincerely expressed his gratitude to him. Gongsun Ce smiled brightly and walked away.

“Red Sandalwood was designated as an endangered species, and everyone knows the government thoroughly restricts its import and export. They probably know they should take a great risk for this! Then, who on earth is brave enough to steal this? Are they really brave...or desperate?” Judge Pao became confused.

He walked back and forth thinking what to do next.

“Zhang Long!” He called. And just as he called his name, officer Zhang Long slammed the door open.

“What’s up Mr Pao?” He asked, grinning.

“I need you and your search team to dig up all the fingerprints and examine the sandalwood and the area that it had been found.”

“Sure thing Mr Pao!” He replied, shutting the door quietly and humming a very familiar tune outside.

Chapter 2

“Ma Han!! Zhao Hu! I need you both to start the engines to the harbour where the red sandalwood was. Examine the crime site thoroughly and then please try to collect all the evidence”, Officer Zhang Long commanded.

“YES SIR!” they replied, going off to fetch the tools.

They arrived at the dock and examined the place where the captain of the ship left the wood. “Sir, I think I have found something.” Officer Ma Han said, squinting at a small ring on the ground. It was metal and had carvings of initials onto it. “This has to be it! It has some red wood shavings on it!” Officer Zhao Hu cried happily.

“We aren’t sure of this yet, Officer Zhao Hu! We need to examine this more thoroughly in the lab.” said Officer Zhang Long.

“SIR! I think I have found something else. You need to see this! The lamp on the ceiling has some light scratches, and it seems to be scratched caused by an abrupt force in a certain direction. They may have left marks accidentally”, said Officer Liy Yueh Ti.

“Take some photos of it, and Officer Ma Han, could you examine the lamp’s surface whether there are any fingerprints on,” said Officer Zhang Long.

“YES SIR!” Ma Han replied, investigating the lamp closely, not even missing an inch of its cover from his scrutiny.

Chapter 3

In the meantime, in the office secretary Gongsun Ce seems very busy, but somehow very amused.

“Judge Pao, While I was waiting for the field team’s report, I actually checked several suspects’ backgrounds. You know .. just in case.. Here are some people that I have found, and something you may like.”

Mr Zhou Qi

- 24 years old
- Works in a car wash department, a friend of Mr Zhou Qi
- Didn't get proper education. Has a poor family background.
- Reported this case to the police for the first time.

Ms Ai Fang

- 40 years old
- Lawyer of the shipping and cargo company.
- Alleged that she has been in the relationship with Mr Zhou Qi

Mr Hao Yu

- 38 years old
- only son of the founder
- Inherited the shipping company and become the owner
- Recently had several arguments with employees for overdue salary.

'MR ZHOU QI?? I have heard his name multiple times but never knew that he took over his father's company. By the way, why did he have confrontations with his employees?' Judge Pao pondered.

Suddenly, the phone rang, breaking the quietest atmosphere of the office.

"MR PAO! WE JUST FOUND THE LOST RED WOOD IN THE SHIP. THERE WAS A HIDDEN GAP BETWEEN THE CEILING AND THE DECK. AND WE GOT THE RESULT OF FINGERPRINTS FROM THE LAB. THE PRINTS MATCHED WITH MR HAO YU!" Officer Wang Chao happily.

Everyone in the office was overjoyed after hearing this news over the speaker phone except Judge Pao. He thought that he couldn't be the one, since he wouldn't know the value of red wood, and most of all, he is not bold enough to design all of this and achieve it eventually. "Secretary Gongsun Ce, could you do me a favour? I wonder whether Mr Zhou Qi got any insurance on the red wood or his ship. Could you check the facts?"

"Of course, I will. No problem! I will be back in a jiffy." said Secretary Gongsun Ce.

Chapter 4

Mr Zhou Qi's car raced across the highway. He made a very loud noise, as if flexing off his own car when sneering past them. He looked back at the front, and screeched his car to a stop. There was a truck in front of him. A very big truck indeed. "NOOOOO!" He screamed, pulling the stolen car door to escape. "Too late," smirked Officer Wang Chao. He put Mr Zhou qi in handcuffs and pushed him into the car. "Do you really think you and your group of bandits can't stand a chance? We have all the information about you so you better start confessing at headquarters. Maybe half of the years of imprisonment you were supposed to be in could be worth it?" Officer Wang Chao asked. "NEVER. I AM NOT A BETRAYER TO MY OWN FAMILY." He said seriously. "Very well. Almost thought I was doing this the easy way..." Officer Wang Chao muttered.

Chapter 5

"Well done Officer Wang Chao." Judge Pao appreciated Officer Wang chao's efforts entering the interrogation room. In the room, Zhou Q crouched, grabbing his hair with his hands painfully.

"Zhou Qi! Did you have to get caught?" muttered Mr Hao Yu.

"How did you know it was me?" He asked.

"Well..." Judge Pao responded cheerfully.

"At first, I thought it might be an ordinary theft case that someone who found the value of Red Sandalwood planned and committed, looking for a lot of money. But we found your Red Sandalwood was such a high-quality product that only a few merchants and middlemen can deal with. So we did check your background and found out that even though you have a great debt, you have been paying an astronomical sum of insurance for the shipping and cargo along with your wife, Ms Ai Fang. That means, you are in the most favourite position in case you lose your cargo! I knew you had hid Red Sandalwood away from your own cargo, because in the market, you are one of a few people who know how to turn Red Sandalwood into fortune. But there is one thing I cannot understand here. Why did you assist Mr Hao Yu, Mr Zhou Q? You did this heist for money, for freedom, for

wealth, but why do this action when you can simply work hard to get a job? Care for your wife in your free time? Help others in exchange for others' help back?" Judge Pao questioned Mr Zhou Q.

"Judge pao, you don't know how this is. Life is unfair, and there are some things that you desire so much that you will sacrifice every penny, every organ in your body to receive it." Replied Mr Zhou Qi.

"I understand. It is hard. But faith is what lasts long. Accept your faith and move on. A brand new start. Mr Zhou Qi, I am giving you a chance. My administrator has already captured your colleagues, and it is time to give in to the higher authorities. We will discuss what shall become of you." Said Judge Pao.

"I shall accept my punishment, and anticipate how I can be good from now on." Said Mr Zhou Qi.

Judge Pao nodded and signalled the guards to take him away. Walking back to his office, he sat down and sighed. "Well that was some huge mystery solved. I will enjoy my cup of tea." Said Judge Pao feeling accomplished.

Judge Bao and the Mystery of the Beheadings

ESF Sha Tin College, Chen, Michael – 12

A man hit the ground running. He had a mission, he couldn't let the killer mess it up. He ran as fast as he could, but the killer was gaining on him, raising a dagger. He slipped. The killer slowly walked up to him and butchered the man with the dagger.

Twelve hours later, the police were informed of the murder and they rushed to the scene. They were not surprised to see it, however, as it was the sixth murder in two weeks. Forensics gathered the usual data. The victim had his head cut off, and the rest of his body was slashed with eleven cuts. His partner, called Tom, whispered to the detective, "Hey, Ethan, any idea what's going on?" The detective looked at Tom and shook his head. "Why would the killer go through all that trouble to remove their head? Maybe he didn't want us to identify the victim, but he didn't remove the fingerprints." The forensic scientist walked up to him, and said, "Victim is Robert Graham, age 31. He was slashed eleven times with a knife, then after he bled to death, the killer took out his head. This is obviously connected to the other murders, but the victims have no connection." "Then we are looking for a serial murderer." Ethan said, "Great."

Next day, Tom was reading the newspaper when a book caught his eye. It was called Bao Zheng. This particular book was originally his mother's, which had been given from his grandmother, and all the way up the family line. He had been given this book when he got promoted to a detective, which his parents had surprisingly been proud of, considering they wanted him to be a lawyer. There were many versions of Bao Zheng. Some talked about a man who was supposedly the first human, Yama, who was a detective by day, judge of the condemned by night. Kinda like Daredevil, he thought. His grandmother also used to tell him stories about this man, who was considered legendary and sacred throughout the entire family. *Read it if you are stuck on a mystery. It will help.* His grandmother said this during his first day as a detective. Wouldn't hurt to try, Tom thought. He picked up the book and began to read.

At the funeral, Ethan, Tom and their families all attended to pay their respects. Only two people attended. One was a woman about 40. She was quietly sobbing onto the shoulder of a man, who looked like he had not slept for the last week. They must be the family members, Ethan thought. A priest came and said prayers for the dead man as the coffin was slowly lowered into a rectangle-shaped hole in the dirt. After a while, the reception started. This time, more people attended. "So,", Tom's grandma said, "Sixth murder in a row?" Tom said, "Yes, grandma, as I have told you so many times." "This killer has to be brought to justice!" Grandma exclaimed. "And he will, but stop talking about this at a funeral!" he whispered. "I pray to Bao Zheng that he delivers us from this evil.", His grandma said, clapping both hands together towards the sky. Typical grandma, Tom thought. Always relying on faith.

Somewhere down in hell, Bao Zheng heard the prayer.

Bao Zheng looked around him in surprise. This was the first time he had heard a prayer in many centuries. Could it be a mistake? Surely the legend of Bao Zheng must have died out by now. Nevertheless, he decided to have a look at the world. 1937 was the last year that he had visited Earth. He suspected he might have accidentally caused the Sino-Japanese war when he was investigating lost supplies in their storehouse and telling a Japanese commander Kanichiro Tashirohe that the Chinese had stolen them. This was, of course, untrue. It turns out a Japanese soldier had been starving so he decided to take his chances on the food supplies. Bao Zheng had retreated quickly back to hell after the war started, where he decided to do his job as a judge in the Infernal Bureaucracy. He changed from his traditional robe into normal casual clothing and ascended up into the realm of humans.

He awoke on a park bench and felt like he had been sleeping for a week. His body felt heavy and he couldn't think straight. He found a teenager walking by, and groggily asked, "Where am I?" The teenager looked at him and asked, "You on drugs, man?" He continued walking. Bao groaned and looked around in surprise. He was in

a park, surrounded by a selection of trees and bushes, arranged along a neat path. Beyond that were a cluster of skyscrapers, each one taller than the other, as if having a competition. Off he went, walking towards the shiny buildings.

Tom was on his fourth coffee, trying to connect the clues. Six bodies...Heads chopped...Slashed with a dagger...His head felt overheated, he felt adrenaline pumping through his veins, he was— “TOM!” He dropped his mug and came into focus. “Yeah?” “We were calling for you. There’s something interesting.” They hurried to the briefing office. “Today, a group of police officers brought in a man that claimed he knew something about the murders. He was brought in for interrogation and here’s what’s interesting. The person claimed he was Bao Zheng, that he came from hell.” Ethan sniggered. “He must be on drugs or something.” Tom countered, “How can you be so sure?” “Because”, Ethan said, looking at him like he was mad, “He says he’s from hell. And then he says he’s Bao Zheng. Then he says his name isn’t Bao Zheng when we asked him a second time. He also said he’s not from hell, but from New Jersey. He doesn’t know who he is.” Tom nodded slowly. He did agree with Ethan. But he felt compelled to believe the crazy man. His grandma would kill him if didn’t take the chance to talk with him. She was a zealot who would believe anything even remotely related to this Bao person. “At least let me talk with him. I don’t know what a person from New Jersey is doing in New York but this case is driving the DA nuts. We’ve been on a dead end for 4 months now. If he is a madman, then we cart him off into a rehab center or something. If he does have valuable information, we should know. We gotta take any chance we have.” He said. “Fine. But he keeps rambling on, sometimes in English, sometimes in Chinese. Be prepared.” Ethan answered, exasperated.

“So”, Tom asked, as he was in the interrogation room with Ethan. “Who exactly are you?” The man looked at him with a knowing smile, as if they had been friends for a long time. “Do you not recognize me?” Tom racked his brains. “Hey Ethan, can you give me some privacy?” “Sure.” Ethan walked out the windowless room. “You look like my father. Are you his brother or something?” The man smiled. “I am more than that. I am Bao Zheng from the depths of hell.” Tom looked at him for a long time. “No, but seriously, WHAT’S YOUR NAME!” Tom slammed his fist on the table. He was starting to lose patience. Ethan was right, he thought. This man obviously needed serious help. And yet...could he be? He did look familiar...Tom shook his head. He was starting to go crazy. “There’s been a murder this week. A man with a curved sword was seen fleeing from the crime scene. A witness took a picture. The picture depicted a man wearing a hoodie, carrying a golden curved sword. Tom saw the emotions on the man’s face: confusion, realization, shock, outrage, then a mask of calm. “I know who that is.” Bao immediately stood up and went out of the door. “Hey! Come back!” Tom shouted. He chased after him.

Bao walked at a brisk pace. It couldn’t be. How could he have not been careful? Bao had tracked them for centuries. He couldn’t believe he had slipped.

“HELP!” A woman screamed, “HELP!” Bao ran and ran. He was too late. The woman’s head had already rolled away. Her body was full of slashes. The killer was running down the alley, with a very familiar golden sword. “Oh no you don’t.” Bao growled. He pursued the killer. After running for a while, the killer stopped to rest. He looked back. Bao was still running towards him. It was no use. Bao tackled the killer to the ground and ripped off his mask. The killer tried to struggle but Bao was too strong. As if on cue, three police vehicles sped towards them at full speed, their sirens blaring. Bao handed the man to the police, who gave him a strange look. Tom appeared, walking towards him. “Police station. Now. I want answers.”

— to be continued

Find That Light

ESF Sha Tin College, Tang, Jason – 13

An ardent detective, Pao-Kuo dedicated his life to public service, cracking the most elusive, puzzling cases. When foreign mercenaries infiltrated the very top of the Hong Kong establishment, Pao-Kuo cleansed corruption, and scared them all off. The frosty dawn breeze blew on Pao-Kuo pale face as he exited his shimmering Rolls Royce; the balmy air concealed in the interior made him terribly giddy. He closed his eyelids, and breathed the pristine mountainous air, but sirens blared from afar.

Pao-Kuo sighed, “Despite everything I’ve done, crime is still rampant. Justice needs to be served. This city mustn’t rot like the cities up north.”

Grandson to Sir. Patriarch Pao Yue-Kong, the man lived in a lavish, opulent residence on the Peak. He glanced at the yolky-orange sun, gradually rising above Hong Kong’s bustling streets, and verdant mountains. The scintillating luminescence of artificial lights swiftly disintegrated into this lambent glow of warmth. Beijing-styled lanterns that hung on the walls accentuated the sparkling blue limestone. Black-collared starlings coloured the sky, tweeting, and chirping as they glided by Pao-Kuo’s mansion. Pao-Kuo, who was exhausted after a day’s arduous work, pushed open the heavy oak door, and sprinted to his bed, leaping on instantly. The detective switched on the radio and closed his eyes.

“Hong Kong Authorities are relieved as detective Pao-Kuo solves yet another case; bribery, foreign interference, and money laundering all exposed. The Police Chief personally thanked the detective and honoured him with a—” the radio paused abruptly.

After a twitch, the radio resumed, “To our regret, our station can confirm that the Commissioner of the Police Department is in critical condition after an explosion outside the Police Headquarters; ten civilians, and four officers are in hospital. Inside sources claim Pao-Kuo was the intended target; the award-winning detective was scheduled for a meeting with...”

Aghast, he glared beside him at the radio with his alluring bottle of red wine still in his hands. He could not comprehend what he had just heard. *I’m not safe; I can’t trust anyone. I must leave this place; they’re coming for me next. My window of opportunity is fast shutting.*

Dusk was fast approaching. Pao-Kuo trotted down a narrow path away from the city centre. His distinct hook moustache and light-brown eyes were hidden under a cap.
hook

Who would do this? Why are they coming after me? These are all very pertinent questions to ask. In times of tragedy and difficult hardships, my grandfather would always visit Pao Temple. Maybe this is the right time.

The next day, the distracted detective glared in front of him, reminding him of the reason he came. Inches away, stood the august, all-mighty statue of Judge Pao. Judge Pao’s thick brows, and menacing eyes stared back at him. Pao-Kuo had arrived at Pao Temple, isolated in the centre of a jungle at an obscure part of Lantau Island. As distant waves hammered onto the shore, the scent of salt oozed around the temple gardens. A fragrant lychee tree danced under the moon’s luminescence. Gradually, Pao-Kuo entered the unlit, pitch-black temple. The ancient structure was painted in sapphire green and plated with delicate pieces of stained gold. Although the detective had encountered similar ominous scenes, a scintilla of trepidation still beat rapidly in his heart. Pao-Kuo grabbed an incense from his coat pocket and rekindled it using an oval lighter shaped like a snail’s shell. As he stepped in, the faces of ancient mythological creatures showed themselves. The statue of the one-horned Qilin beast sat in front of the second Judge Pao statue.

Pao-Kuo swiftly stuck the incense into the ash-filled soil in front of him, kneeled, and prayed. Pao-Kuo sensed something; something was not right. An aurora of sparkling blue, and virescent green danced under the moon’s glimmer.

“After centuries, my legacy remains. Hm,” a figure whispered.

Abruptly, Pao-Kuo turned around, and shouted, “Who’s there?”

Soon, the radiant aurora formed a swirl of white; that pure white luminescence gradually flowed into the temple and formed an august figure. Dressed in an opulent dragon robe, the spirit of Judge Pao awakened.

“Your grandfather would always visit this temple; he was a great man. Your life dangles on a filigree of precarious threads. Listen carefully, Pao-Kuo. When one feels wretchedly lost, and when not even a scintilla of hope remains, find that light, and never lose it. I am breaking the Eternal Emperor’s heavenly Imperial protocol to guide you. Bring justice to the fallen, and let tranquillity, prosperity, and egalitarianism rain across these lands once again!” Judge Pao spoke in his powerful tone.

Pao-Kuo rubbed his eyes and pinched his skin. His mind was whirling, spinning, while his eyes were blinking out of control; he couldn’t comprehend the supernatural sight. *Is this all happening in my head? Am I losing my mind?*

“Before you end up in their iron fist, solve this case before it’s too late and end this once in for all! You’re an intellectual prodigy. I have never doubted you, but you must find your light.” Judge Pao inched forward and whispered, “Listen carefully! Tomorrow at the dead of night, find that light! Two mighty, august lions sit at the gate, one which is difficult to penetrate. Find that light! Now, I must leave at once; Longwang, The Dragon King awaits his trial.”

Before vanishing, Judge Pao winked at Bao-Kuo; the apprehension and fear had vanished too. Pao-Kuo gazed at Judge Pao’s statue one last time before taking off into the woods.

Beside the pellucid harbour waves, and towering Peak mountains, Pao-Kuo took a moment to sow serenity into his cacophonous mind. Another dusk was fast approaching; he did not have much time, but for once in many years, he felt refreshed and energised. *At the dead of the night...find that light? What’s the allegory behind it? August...mighty lions sit at the gate? What gate?*

Pao-Kuo gazed across Victoria Harbour where towering skyscrapers shadowed the streets below. Amongst many, a gargantuan digital banner twitched and flashed on a tower: The Richardson Bank. *That’s right! Two bronze lions sit at the bank’s entry point. But what did he mean by ‘find the light’...? I guess I’ll have to find out.* With old-school detective gear like the ten-metre range pen recorder, the detective swiftly boarded a ferry on the shore nearby, steadily drifting towards the bank. As he gazed up, he noticed Judge Pao’s aurora sparkling under the shimmering stars, swirling, and illuminating the night sky like New Year fireworks.

The detective leapt out of the ferry, still honking, and oozing out smoke as it sailed towards Kowloon. Wary of the precariousness of the situation, he pulled his sunglasses out from his leather jacket. Soon, the jeers, jubilation, and screams of laughter that engulfed those Central streets disintegrated into an eerie silence. The dead of night was approaching.

Pao-Kuo arrived at the towering Richardson Bank, unlit and dim; the two bronze lions’ disdainful, cold eyes stared frighteningly back at him like they were stalking prey. Weak sparks of fulvous yellow illuminated the narrow stairways. The detective glared at his watch. Tick. Tick. Tick. There were two minutes before midnight crept in. *What did Judge Pao mean?* Abruptly a strong glittering glow shone out of the wide fourth floor window. *So, I suppose that’s where I’ll find some clues – and will eventually shed some light on the opaque, discombobulating mysteries.* Pao-Kuo pulled a handy key from his pocket that could morph and shape to fit any lock in the world. The path ahead was Herculean, but after searching, climbing, and wrecking the experienced detective entered the premises. The fulvous staircase lights led Pao-Kuo to the fourth floor, decorated with pots of blooming orchids; the lofty ceilings were scattered with shimmering chandeliers, interlaced with a filigree of extravagant gold. Although the lights were all on, seemingly not a soul was present.

But then, suddenly, Pao-Kuo heard distant mutters that originated from the private meeting room. Glasses of wine, and files were dispersed across an oak table.

“Has Pao-Kuo been found? That detective is an impeccable corruption-fighting detective. He’ll crack down on our money laundering – and what we did to the Police Chief. If the provenance of everything leaks, I’ll be doomed! My position as Secretary of Justice makes me hopelessly vulnerable!” a voice muttered.

“We’re still searching for him, but there are more pertinent matters on our hands. The money has been transferred...” another whispered.

Days later, Pao-Kuo appeared before a committee, detailing corruption, money laundering and the cause of the bombing. In conjunction with Richardson Bank, the Secretary of Treasury was found guilty of all charges. Pao-Kuo was awarded the Grand Bauhinia Medal for his unwavering bravery and dedication to justice.

The supernatural Judge Pao gazed down at Pao-Kuo from the heavenly skies.

“Pao-Kuo has finally found his light. The light of justice has been restored. The light of hope in him that once felt so lost has been restored,” Judge Pao smiled.

The Case of the Crystal

ESF Sha Tin College, Wong, Sharmaine – 12

The Case of the Black Basin is one the of the many stories about Justice Pao. It is about a silk merchant named Liu Shichang who decided to stay overnight at an inn owned by Zhao Da. Zhao kills Liu by poisoning his dinner, then burns his remains to make a black basin in order to destroy the evidence. A man named Zhang Biegu, soon took the basin from Zhao as an alternative to cash payment. He eventually encounters the ghost of Liu, and is told the story of the latter's cruel death at Zhao's hands. Determined to put the suspect to justice, Zhang soon brought the black basin to Bao Zheng's court and after several attempts, finally persuaded Liu's ghost to tell the judge everything. As a result, Zhao was finally arrested and executed for murder.

Xing was a successful businessman. He traveled around for work everyday to run his business. He traveled constantly as a consequence of having offices in almost each capital city around the world. He rarely saw his family as his international travel required him to live out of his suitcase and he stayed in hotels on most nights of the year. His multi-national business employed over thirty thousand people and proved very profitable. Xing had so much passion and determination to succeed that his work came before family. As a result, Xing worked day and night at meetings with all sorts of different people around the world yet he felt so isolated from the people who he loved most. Faced with loneliness and alienation, Xing immersed himself into his work and life was going well for him, at least, professionally.

Little did he know that his troubles would start during a business trip to Tokyo. Xing had traveled to Tokyo to sign a contract to finalize a business deal. Strolling along the streets in the labyrinth of alleyways away from the central business district of Tokyo, Xing was looking for a calming place to relax and have lunch. He noticed a traditional Japanese cafe with white bunting hanging above the windows. A welcome sign was hung on the wooden sliding door, he peered inside and a young Japanese lady with big doe eyes cheerfully welcomed him “Welcome to Neko no Jikan! Which means Cat’s Time in the Japanese language! This is a cat cafe!”

His eyes scanned the room, wooden tables, bar chairs, croissants, coffee and cats. Lanterns dangled above their heads giving the cafe a magical atmosphere. The cafe smelt wonderfully of lightly caramelized, chocolate cappuccinos. The soft whirring of the coffee machine accompanied by the clanging of cups and plates created a harmonious rhythm. Xing was delighted to have found this cafe. He looked around and was pleasantly surprised when a big fat orange coloured cat leapt up on the table and started to purr loudly right next to him.

“How can I help you? My name is Mariko.” she said courteously.

“My name is Xing and I’m looking for somewhere calming to take a break from work.” Xing replied with total honesty.

“Hello there. The table is ready for you Xing – san. The empty one in the far left corner.” She pointed to a polished wooden table with a padded seat tucked under it.

Mariko appeared to Xing to be nice and friendly. But behind her plastic smile, Xing felt that something was not quite right.

“It must be hard traveling alone all the time.” said Mariko placing two cups of coffee on the table

Xing was glad to know that someone understood the loneliness that he carried most of the time.

Something shiny caught Xing’s eye, it was a crystal. It was clear and geometrical. There was an arranged line of them coming from different shapes and sizes. Some were shaped like dogs, while some were shaped like rabbits.

“Excuse me, Mariko, I’m just wondering why there are crystals here in your cat cafe?”

“These aren’t just any ordinary crystals, Xing, they are special memorial crystals that are made from the ashes of pets that have passed away. We make them in the image of the pet so that the owners can remember them by.”

Taking one casually off the shelf, “This is Fluffy the rabbit, or shall I say this was Fluffy the rabbit, look how cute she is!”

“Wow, I didn’t know you could make crystals out of the ashes of animals. Maybe I could start a business for memorial crystals.” Said Xing

He took a sip of coffee, it tasted faintly of bitter almonds but he kept drinking it as he was tired and in need of a boost. Out of nowhere Xing landed on the wooden ground with a hard thud. His right hand, still holding the cup was twisted under his body, his legs doubled up on the floor. Mariko stood for a while, looking at the still body while holding a tea tray in her hands. She snapped back into reality and a slight grin spread across her face.

The next day, there was a new crystal on the shelf. It was a crystal shaped in the image of a small businessman carrying a miniature suitcase.

“Hello, welcome to Neko no Jikan! I’m Mariko, how can I help you?”

A lady wearing a navy blue suit stood at the entrance to the cafe, “My name is Mei, I’m looking for some pastries to celebrate my husband’s birthday.”

“Perhaps you would be interested in our macarons or eclairs?” Said Mariko, pointing to the display.

The lady gazed over to the direction of the pastries, small pyramids of macarons were stacked on top of each other, baguettes pointing towards the neatly arranged croissants. Something glittery caught her eye. There was a sign that read “Memorial Crystals. Make the memory of your pet last forever”. “Cremation crystals, these can be made from the ashes of passed pets. Why is there one crystal in the image of a businessman? What an uncanny resemblance. Looks a bit like my husband. ”

“Oh! What is this lonely figure doing among the crowd of pets? I wasn’t aware that it was here. Why don’t you take it home, it’s yours if you want it.”

Mei arrived home and placed the miniature figurine on a nearby table. She turned on a switch and the lights flickered on, the door slammed behind her, the curtains billowed in the fierce wind. Whispering sounds floated around the room in a soft chanting melody. Mei looked at the crystal businessman, a tight feeling in her gut sensing the presence of a lonely spirit that was yearning. It was a spirit that had been wronged. Her conscience prickled, a cold shiver ran through her body. Mei grabbed the crystal and rushed to the city center where the law courts were. She was seeking justice for the pained spirit.

Mei bursted into the silent courtroom, Justice Pao was seated at the judges bench, he had a small scar on his forehead in the shape of a crescent moon. Everyone around described him as the most respectful and impartial judge. He exuded an aura of fairness and kindness which reassured Mei that justice would be served. Outside, the rain pattered heavily on the windows and the wind howled between the trees.

Mei presented the figurine in front of Judge Pao, a tiny, crystal businessman with a shining suitcase grasped in its hand. Judge Pao carefully examined it and gently placed it on the bench. “I seek justice.” A voice echoed around the room.

Mei jumped, surprised and stared at the crystal businessman that stood on the table and looked back at Judge Pao who looked calm and collected. “I have been trapped in this cremation crystal by a cunning shop owner, she poisoned my coffee and burned my ashes.”

Mariko soon was brought into court, and it was finally revealed that she had killed Xing. “Yes, I did poison him, I cremated him and turned him into a crystal.”

Mariko got arrested and put in jail for the rest of her life. The supernatural judge had once again dispensed justice.

Back to the Future: Justice Pao's Adventure

ESF Sha Tin College, Wu, Jayden – 11

I appeared in an alley in a city full of tall objects. The street was quiet, so quiet that I could hear water trickle down the drains. The silence was occasionally broken by people passing by. Their clothes were different from mine. Most of them wore short-sleeved garments, with a picture on them. I looked around but could not see anything familiar to me. Horse-drawn carriages couldn't be found, only vehicles with four wheels that moved by themselves. One drove past me, with smelly gas blown to my face. Buildings reached the sky, with sunshine reflecting off them, making it look like there were twenty suns above me.

One of the only things I recognised was a small house reassembling my courtroom. I stepped inside. Smoke billowed from the ceiling. There was a statue with a tanned face, it had a crescent on its forehead. To my surprise, my name was on it, but it didn't look like me at all! Fresh fruits and burning incense sticks were placed in front of it. This was not any temple, it was my temple. It even had a miniature model of my tiger-head guillotine in the corner. It feels like someone knows me in this strange place. I awkwardly stood there, asking myself "Why am I here?" when it all came to me.

One millennium ago, I was in my large courtroom prosecuting the world's evilest villain, Jian Bi Zi. He has a long face, a sharp nose, bushy eyebrows, and a bold head. When I was talking, that evil villain zapped me out of my courtroom! "Take that!" He yelled as he transported me here.

I put this behind my mind for a while and decided to roam this strange city. I boarded a gigantic yellow moving object. There were lots of seats in it. Looking outside, I recognized the language used in this city. When I passed by "Zhong Huan", a lady was standing on a building, wearing a robe, and a blindfold over her eyes. She was holding a scale in one hand, and a sword in the other. She put down her scale and signalled me to come to her.

"Hello, Are you Justice Pao?" She asked.

"Yes, I am!" I exclaimed and was surprised that she knew me.

She introduced herself and told me that an association called "Not Suspicious INC." is tricking people into job scams, then trafficking and enslaving those people. She said she needs my help. I agreed and started our journey. We teleported to London using the "statues network" which is eye-opening to me. She told me that we could get help from the world-class detective, Sherlock Holmes. I heard the sound "Zap!" The next thing I knew, I was standing in the centre of London. We headed to his house at 221B Baker Street.

We knocked on the door. A middle-sized, heavily built man with a moustache and a black leather jacket answered the door. He presented himself as Dr Watson.

The house was dark with long passageways. We passed through a room full of bookshelves. At the end of the first floor, there was a fireplace. A skinny man wearing an ulster coat and a deerstalker hat sat next to it. He was smoking a tobacco pipe. Dr Watson introduced him as Sherlock Holmes.

"Have a seat, Judge Pao." Mr Holmes said in a notorious accent. "Thank you for your help." He continued, sipping his tea.

Sherlock Holmes's phone buzzed while we took a seat. It was an advertisement from social media that read: Office Assistant Wanted. Salary: \$1,000,000 per month. Skills needed: None. Contact the Not Suspicious INC for details. Job site: In East Malaysia, bus pickup from Kota Kinabalu Airport. Flight Cost Provided.

"That's the information we need!" Mr Holmes declared. "It's in Malaysia! We go to the airport and follow the bus!"

A lightbulb went off in my head. I added "I have a statue right here and also one in Malaysia. We can travel via the statues network." I learned that from Lady Justice.

In the blink of an eye, we were in Malaysia.

“Look! That’s the bus!” Lady Justice shouted. We followed the bus using our motorcycles. The bus stopped at a small campsite, but then the bus fled to a small road and disappeared in our sight.

We all sighed in disappointment and quickly started searching around for clues. First, I saw a nameplate hung on the wall that read: JBZ. I suddenly blurted out “It’s Jian Bi Zi!” I thought we had luck, but we couldn’t find anything except the nameplate.

We passed by a village and heard from the radio that five victims of a job scam escaped and have gone to Singapore.

We went to Singapore and met one of the escapees in a coffee shop. She was a young lady in her twenties. She was thin, with cuts and bruises all over her body. Sherlock Holmes interviewed her.

“Can you tell me everything that happened?” Sherlock asked.

She described this in an angry tone, “When we arrived, they grabbed our passports, starved us, and made us scam call other people, and those who refused to comply were beaten up or killed. After a month, I heard one of the gang members tell the others “Jian Bi Zi told us Lady Justice, Sherlock, and Justice Pao are coming and we need to pack things up quickly!” The rumour says that we would be transported to Myanmar. The night before they planned to move us away, the gang was busy loading the truck. During the chaos, my friends and I made a run for it and left.”

Sherlock Holmes looked at the map and figured out they would probably take a sea route. As Kawthoung in Myanmar is the closest seaside town to Malaysia, Sherlock Holmes suggested we go there. We tried to teleport from my temple in Singapore, but this time nothing happened. Lady Justice guessed that the temple in Myanmar has been destroyed.

“Now I can’t teleport,” I exclaimed. We took the Pan–Asian railway instead. After a long trip, we arrived at sunset. Hoping to catch the smugglers red–handed, Sherlock and Watson hid behind some bushes next to the beach. Lady Justice and I were at a lighthouse nearby. She was holding a pair of binoculars to monitor the bay.

The sky was eerie dark, even the moonlight was hiding behind the clouds. Suddenly there was a dim flashlight appearing in the sea. Lady Justice confirmed it was a small boat filled with lots of people. “Here they come,” I whispered. It was heading to the wooden pier nearby.

Shortly afterwards, we saw people going off the boat. Around thirty people with their hands tied up, forming a human chain were being led to the land. Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson rushed out of the bushes and arrested all gang members. There was a shadow sneaking toward a hut. I grabbed Lady Justice’s pair of binoculars and immediately recognized it was Jian Bi Zi. He stole a motorcycle. I ran down the lighthouse and rode a horse to chase after him. He sped into a mountain road with many sharp turns and curves. The narrow road and its surroundings were pitch black, making it almost impossible to see anything outside a five–metre radius. He twisted the throttle and faded away. “Bang!”. I heard a loud crashing sound. Turns out that he crashed in a quick U–Turn. He was handcuffed without encountering any resistance and went back to the pier.

We brought him inside the trial room. The doors slammed closed.

“Did you traffic slaves in the 21st century?” I sternly asked Jian Bi Zi.

“No, absolutely not!” He lied.

“Bring in the witness.” I hollered across the room.

She came in and explained that she was tricked into going there via a social media scam post, then was beaten and starved for a month until she made a run for it. “Jian Bi Zi was behind all of this,” She added.

“You can happily go home in 2023,” I told the witness.

“Thank you, Judge Pao,” She replied. She went through the portal and left.

“Did you do this?” I asked him again.

“No,” He denied again.

“Is your initials JBZ?”

“Yes,” He replied.

“Bring in the nameplate!” I hollered.

“The nameplate was at the site in Malaysia, where the slavery first took place.” “You still didn’t do it?” I curiously asked.

Jian Bi Zi was wordless. “Execute him!” I hollered.

The tiger-head guillotine was pulled out. He was put next to the guillotine. His head was placed inside. I threw the stick, signalling the execution to begin. The knife cut through his neck, with blood splattering everywhere. The skies became clear, and smiles on peoples’ faces started to show up for the first time in a decade.

Bao Zheng and the Murder of the Cauldron of Hell

ESF West Island School, Chan, Aniece – 14

A cascade of liquid gold scintillated through sunlit clouds over the central street, ringing with not only merchants and travellers from all across different lands, but also with farmers pushing bull-sized carts loaded with vegetables.

Everything suggested it was a seemingly ordinary day until the horrid stench of fresh blood dispersed to every nook and cranny. Looking within their vicinity to find the origin, it was not until a screech of a woman that they truly knew the horrors of it all. Collapsing on the ground with hands folded over her eyes, she let out a sorrowful cry as streams of tears poured from her eyelids. The citizens were quick to rush to her aid, only to realise there was a body. Long dead. It was in front of her store, his skin burned and completely ash-brown, flesh rotten as blood oozed out from the exposed organs to form a stream of crimson red. It was truly a gruesome sight.

Citizens watched in horror as they felt blood rush through their bones and hearts leap out of their chest. There was in fact a murder in town.

This infamous murder case soon caught the attention of Chinese politician and prefect of Kaifeng, Bao Zheng. Upon being ordered by the imperial order as the detective of the case, he steadily made his way to the murder site with assistant Peng Man Yin to further understand the situation.

Bao Zheng was eminent for bringing justice to the innocent and punishment for the deserved, which not only earned him praise and admiration from the Emperor, but from the general public.

“If you don’t mind, may I have a testimony from you?” questioned Peng Man Yin.

The woman nodded while guiding them into the store. The imperial guards evacuated the people and took the body to the palace for further examination.

The store was lined with shelves upon shelves of jars filled with soy sauce, each neatly placed and stored. The lady seated Bao Zheng and Peng Man Yin behind a dusty, wooden countertable, wiping her tears with the knuckle of her index finger.

“The victim of the murder is Luo Yan, and I am his wife, Zhong Tian Yu. I – I came home from the forest because we run a soy sauce store and we ran out of water, so I went out at night to the nearby river to collect some in this jar over here.” she explained while pointing to the jar beside the counter table, “The thought of bringing a torch just gushed out of my head.” she continued, “It was dark so I stayed near the river until dawn so I wouldn’t get lost, but when I came back... This happened.”

Listening attentively, Bao Zheng took down notes of the incident.

“Did anyone see you while you collected the water?”

“I think so, yes, our neighbour Yang Xin saw me when I was on my way.”

Managing to take control of her shivering arm, she immediately stood up and shrieked,

“It has to be Li Jian! It’s him! He was once a thief and stole from us, he killed my husband for revenge! There’s no doubt!”

“Please calm down, we will get to the bottom of this.” Peng Man Yin responded.

“Peng Man Yin, get a testimony from the neighbour to verify this with her.” Bao Zheng said while tapping his brush against the table.

As the two exited the shop, his shifty eyes scanned the room, which led him to notice the specs of oil on the counter table and the layer of grease that laid on the surface of the pot.

“Oil is needed for soy sauce so this is likely normal.” he murmured to himself.

“The testimony has been confirmed.” declared Peng Man Yin as Bao Zheng walked out of the store.

Leaving the store, Bao Zheng and Peng Man Yin questioned nearby residents and shop owners for more testimonies in order to collect clues.

“Luo Yan’s murder? I’ve heard, him and his wife have been running the soy sauce store for years, and Zhong Tian Yu loved her husband. I know for sure that Luo Yan is notorious for being a thief and beggar.” The local explained.

“Zhong Tian Yu especially is very religious and into Buddhism too. I heard a few months ago, Luo Yan attempted to steal money from the store but was caught instead.” Another added.

It had seemed as though the evidence was clear of who the murderer was, but to Zheng Pao, it felt as if that was only the tip of the iceberg.

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In need of more information, Bao Zheng reached prime suspect Li Jian’s jail cell, where he had been imprisoned after the testimonies of Zhong Tian Yu and the other neighbours.

“Why did you kill him?” asked Bao Zheng as he stood a metre away from the cell.

Upon hearing footsteps approaching, he immediately shook his head,

“I didn’t do it! Please believe me!” He exclaimed as runny teardrops ran down his cheeks.

Stepping forward, Bao Zheng placed his hands on the cell and asked,

“What do you know about the case?”

“It’s true I was once a thief, but during the time of this murder, I was out of town so there could’ve been no way I killed him. I also couldn’t have burned him as I have place to do so. I know that Luo Yan mentally abused Zhong Tian Yu.”

With the testimony of Li Jian, Bao Zheng knew what he had to do – put the evidence together and form a convincing statement.

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On the day of the trial, the judge was seated in the centre of the elevated stone platform, facing this were rows upon rows of commoners who had come to watch the trial of the recent murder. With thorough investigation of Li Jian, the prime suspect, it was found that Li Jian was in debt of 200 copper coins with several attempts of theft. The Judge’s hawk-like eyes pierced through Li Jian, bruised and full of slashes, ordering for the beheading of guilty Li Jian.

It was at this moment that Bao Zheng reached the court where he claimed he could provide evidence to clear Li Jian’s name, but first they had to reach the Yangtze river. Directing his gaze at the sobbing Zhong Tian Yu, she gulped and clenched her fists while wiping her sweaty palms against her cloak.

Although they were shocked and suspicious, the judge and the audience had no choice but to make their way to Yangtze river. To their surprise, the river has surprisingly been polluted with oil, which no one had seen before.

Taking a deep breath, Bao Zheng stated,

“This is the Yangtze river, which is now polluted with oil. After the examination report from the imperial order, it was confirmed that victim Luo Yan died due to burning, with signs of oil on his burnt skin. The only person who was confirmed to be heading to the river is Zhong Tian Yu.”

The audience gasped in chorus, all eyeing Zhong Tian Yu with questionable gazes. Zhong Tian Yu could no longer control her trembling arms any longer.

“Moreover, Zhong Tian Yu claimed to venture to this river at night to collect water for soy sauce production, but peculiarly, there were precisely 60 jars of premade soy sauce laid on the shelves, and also a total of 60 after

the murder. However, the jar you have claimed to collect water from was not only empty, but the countertable and jar were also greasy.”

Looking back at Zhong Tian Yu, Bao Zheng studied her for even a hint of remorse but continued,

“You also claimed to not bring a torch because you wanted to return home quickly, but it was most likely that you didn’t want to garner attention. You lied in the testimony that you needed water like I mentioned above, but your motive was to get rid of any evidence. Not only that, from a local’s testimony, you are a Buddhist. From the myth of 18 levels of hell, “Cauldron of Hell”, it was believed that abusers would be put into a boiling cauldron of boiling oil, the exact situation Luo Yan faced. From Li Jian’s testimony, you were mentally abused by your husband which suggests why you decided to kill him. Therefore, I conclude that the true murderer of this case is none other than Zhong Tian Yu.”

The judge, although in utter disbelief, could not come up with a counterargument.

Breaking into a wave of maniacal laughter, she chortled and fell to her knees.

“I did kill him! I had to put him through hell for what he had done to me!” She confessed, with a wide grin.

“Take her away!” Demanded the judge.

The audience broke into a wave of applause for Zheng Pao as once again, he brought justice to the innocent and was crowned, “Justice Pao”.

The Tragic Murder

ESF West Island School, Kavanagh, Addie – 13

Mr. Pao was a detective.

A jolly good one. He solved exactly 365 cases in one year. Never 364 or 366. He won the award for The Best Detective in a row 5 times. In other words, he was a legend.

Mr. Pao lived in China. He was very famous and very liked by the country. After all, there was a *lot* of crime in China. Mr. Pao was sitting in his office putting the last finishing touches on his last case. It was December 27th at 10:00 am in the morning. He was writing his report for his 364th case that year. He sighed and looked out the window. His secretary, Wai Po, bustled in with Mr. Pao's morning tea.

"Good morning Mr. Pao." Wai Po bowed and handed him his tea.

"Thank you Wai Po." Mr. Pao nodded his head in thanks as Wai Po started his morning routine telling the detective his daily case.

"There has been a murder in the Spike's residence sir. Helen Spikes reported her wife dead in the living room with a gunshot in her head. She claims that she was at the markets. She also said she was phoning Sofie's family and 2 of Sofie's closest friends." Wai Po said. Mr. Pao frowned. He sipped his tea.

Then without any warning, he stood up, grabbed his coat and umbrella and left his office. Mr. Pao stood out on the streets, waiting for a taxi. He hailed one and told the driver the address. He already knew the address because Sofie and Helen Spike were quite famous. They had a large estate on the top of the hill, across the bakery. The taxi drove to the estate and Mr. Pao took in his surroundings. The air smelled of wet grass. The birds were chirping. Everything seemed to be peaceful.

But it wouldn't stay peaceful for long.

Chapter 2

Mr. Pao opened the giant brass door to go into the house. It was very heavy and loud. He narrowed his eyes. As he walked inside, he heard some loud wailing coming from the room on his right. He guessed it was the living room. There was a magnificent window on the side of the wall, letting the sunshine in. The couch was against the wall facing the 6 inch tv. There was a beautiful chandelier hanging from the roof, which was painted white.

Mr. Pao turned to the wailing person.

"Good morning Mrs. Spike." He started

"*Ms.* Spike." A slim man turned to Mr. Pao and corrected him.

Ms. Spike started wailing again.

"Hi. I'm Mo Gui, Sofie's friend." The man said.

Mr. Pao turned to Ms. Spike.

"Please, call me Judge Pao. I am here because I heard that your wife was found dead here. Is that correct Ms. Spike?" Mr. Pao questioned her.

"Call.. call me Helen." Helen gasped for breath. Mr. Pao patted her on the back.

"So, you were at the markets from..." Mr. Pao said.

"8:30 am – 9:21. I wanted to get something special because Sofie... she just got promoted at work." Helen started crying again.

Mr. Pao stood up and examined Sofie. She was lying back on the couch with her head limp on her shoulder, the gunshot wound right at the side of her head. He looked around the room.

“Who was in this house?”

“Just the maid.” A posh haughty looking man came in, and clutching his arm was a small woman who looked like she was on the verge of fainting. Mr. Pao knew who they were. Sofie’s parents.

“Good morning. I’m....” Mr. Pao started.

“We know who you are.” The posh looking man interrupted. “I’m *Lord* Chang, Sofie’s father. This is my wife, Betti Chang.”

“Good morning.”

Mr. Pao looked around at everyone who was in the house. Helen Spike, Mo Gui, Lord Chang, Betti Chang, the maid (Ms. Sao), one man who just came in (Gut Chang, Sofie’s brother) and a large woman (Mrs. Zee, Sofie’s good friend).

The front door opened and sounds of police sirens rattled everyone inside the house.

“Good gravy! What are the police doing here?” Lord Chang cried.

“They might be here because of hmmm, maybe the murder.” Mo Gui sarcastically said, rolling his eyes.

The police barged in and handcuffed Ms. Sao.

“Ma Sao you are under arrest for the murder of Sofie Spike! You have the right to remain silent! Anything you do or say will be used against you in the court of law. You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one, one will be given for you.”

Ms. Sao gasped.

“Wait!” Mr. Pao cried, “I need to make a suspect list.”

Chapter 3

Mr. Pao made his suspect list.

Suspect List

Ms. Sao (Maid) Motive: None, Chance: Was the only one at home, Alibi: None

Helen Spike (Wife) Motive: None, Chance: None (checked), Alibi: Was at the markets

Lord Chang (Father) Motive: Didn’t want Sofie to marry a girl, Chance: None (checked), Alibi: Was in his home behind the mall with wife

Betti Chang (Mother) Motive: None, Chance: None (Checked), Alibi: Was in her home behind the mall with husband

Gut Chang (brother) Motive: Didn’t like sister, Chance: Could have snuck in, Alibi: None yet

Mo Gui (friend) Motive: Loved Sofie but she didn’t love him, Chance: Could have snuck in, Alibi: None yet

Mrs. Zee (Friend) Motive: None, Chance: Could have snuck in, Alibi: None yet.

RULED OUT = LIGHT YELLOW

“Ok. I’m done. Take Ms. Sao away.” Mr. Pao allowed the police to take her away. Mr. Pao didn’t think it was her. It was too obvious. So he went to check her alibi.

He hailed a taxi and it was a long ride. He guessed Ms. Sao had got through processing. He was right.

Ms. Sao was sitting on a bench, clutching her face and sobbing. Mr. Pao walked up to her and patted her back. She shrieked and snapped her head back in fright. Mr. Pao looked into her brown eyes.

“I need you to tell me what you were doing, because I know that you didn’t kill Sofie.” He ordered, quietly but sternly. Ms. Sao nodded. She took a deep breath.

“I was gambling.”

Whatever Mr. Pao expected, it wasn’t this.

“Where?” He urged her.

“Wai’s Gambling Place. Go there for proof. I didn’t KILL HER!” Ms. Sao then started sobbing again and Mr. Pao left.

He trusted her.

Chapter 4

Mr. Pao entered Wai’s Gambling Place.

It was chaos. People were running around, drunk, screaming their heads off. The place stank like mouldy alcohol. He held his breath and smartly walked up to the owner, you guessed it, Wai.

“Good morning.” Mr. Pao said to him.

“Hi.” He answered.

“I am Mr. Pao and I need you to answer me very truthfully because a woman’s life is on the line. Did someone called Ma Sao come here in the morning and gamble around 9?” He asked Wai.

“Yeah, she and I played a game of Blackjack. I obviously won.” Wai answered smarmily. Mr. Pao didn’t like him.

“Are you prepared to go through a lie detector test?” Mr. Pao asked him.

“Yeh.” He answered.

30 minutes later...

Mr. Pao left the lie detector place, knowingly.

He was right. Ms. Sao was innocent. He re-visited the crime scene, wanting to see Sofie again. Mrs. Zee was there.

“Good afternoon Mrs. Zee.” Mr. Pao said quietly.

“Hello sir.” She gulped. She was looking at Sofie sadly. Mr. Pao patted her back, comfortingly.

Suddenly, he knew.

He knew who the murderer was.

Chapter 5

Mr. Pao told everyone who was there at the start to meet in the living room. Once they were all there, he layed out the evidence.

“I know who killed Sofie.” He started dramatically.

Several people gasped. He led them to Sofie’s body.

“From where she is lying, the murderer must have shot her from here.” Mr. Pao led them to a cupboard next to the TV.

He opened the cupboard.

“Once I ruled out most of you, the people left were Mo, Gui and Mrs. Zee. Ms. Sao was gambling at the time of the murder. If you would please follow me.” Mr. Pao opened the back of the cupboard. There was a tunnel leading to an unknown place.

They walked in and came across a trapdoor above them. Mr. Pao opened it.

He lifted himself out and landed inside a house.

Mrs. Zee’s house.

Chapter 6

“IT WAS MRS. ZEE?! Several people cried out.

“Yes, it was.” Mr. Pao said, “She snuck down through the tunnel and killed her.”

“But why?” Gut looked confused.

“Mrs. Zee was Sofie’s sister.” Mr. Pao explained, “I remembered when I was looking through my notes, Mrs. Zee was in a different case.”

Helen glared at Mrs. Zee. “You killed my wife?” A fight broke out.

Just then, Mr. Pao woke up from his dream.

Judge Pao

ESF West Island School, Liao, Sofia – 13

Emily walked out of Shanghai Pudong International Airport, pulling her suitcase along and her neon pink backpack slung over her coat. Shanghai Pudong International Airport was a huge yet magnificent modern complex.

“Uncle Jack!” Emily shouted, giving him a big hug.

“Hey Emily!” Uncle Jack replied with a sunny smile, lifting Emily up in the air and making her laugh.

“Let’s enjoy the limousine and I shall give you the first tour guide of Shanghai City”, said Uncle Jack.

“How’s school going?” He asked Emily.

Uncle Jack, a world-reputable scholar in China history and mythology writer, invited Emily to visit China this summer holiday. Emily, a 12-year-old girl, was born and raised in Hong Kong and now studied at a British International school. Emily was keen on learning and reading but she barely knew much about China except from books.

“I got all straight A’s on my report card,” Emily replied confidently with her eyes busy feasting on those beautiful skyscrapers along the Huangpu River.

“That’s awesome! I am so proud of you!”, smiled Uncle Jack.

“How do you feel about Shanghai so far?” Uncle Jack asked in the limousine.

“The city is busy, and I like Shanghai for the first moment since I enjoy the chilly air that I breathe in because there is no real winter in Hong Kong”, Emily said contentedly.

At dinner, Emily was begging Uncle Jack to tell a story, since Uncle Jack was an exceptionally good storyteller. More importantly, Uncle’s stories always explain facts with lots of interesting history and fascinating mythology stories.

“You live in Kowloon Tong, right?” asked Uncle Jack.

“Yes, why?” Emily was puzzled.

“Do you know Kowloon in Chinese stands for nine dragons?”. “Nine dragons” is a mysterious icon for every emperor of China.

“Really?!” Emily exclaimed.

“So an emperor once lived in Kowloon Tong before?” Emily asked.

According to legend, a Son of Heaven went on patrol and came to Kowloon, Hong Kong. He looked around, but when he saw eight mountains surrounded by the deep blue ocean. After looking around, the Son of Heaven decided to name the place the "eight dragons".

His attendant reminded the Son of Heaven that he himself was the dragon among people, and it should be nine dragons, so the Son of Heaven named the place "Nine Dragons".

“That’s amazing! I had no idea that Kowloon Tong is associated with such a beautiful legend in history,” Emily remarked.

“This term, my Chinese teacher is lecturing about a man with a black face, named “Pao”. It’s so boring since I have absolutely no idea what the Chinese teacher is talking about. Based on what the teacher said, this old and ancient “Pao” has a special brain and eyes that can easily resolve every ridiculous crime case”, Emily suddenly mumbled.

“Judge Pao? Judge Pao was a real figure in history. Judge Pao's real name was Bao Zheng. He was a famous minister of the Song Dynasty and became a deputy envoy of the Privy Council, equivalent to the vice president of the Executive Yuan.

Judge Pao was reputable for his integrity, and intelligence, and dared to stand up for injustice. There are lots of stories about Judge Pao in fiction, videos, and movies. Now, people even worship him as a god in many temples in China.” Uncle Jack explained calmly.

“Tell me an interesting story about Judge Pao”, begged Emily.

“Let me tell you a fascinating story about how Judge Pao interrogated a bluestone slab and caught a thief”, said Uncle Jack

“Interrogate a bluestone slab? How come?”, Emily said, rapt in wonder.

Once, Judge Pao went out to run errands and passed by on a palanquin. A small child sat on a bluestone slab, whimpering and crying.

Judge Pao got off the sedan and asked the child: "Child! What happened to you?". The child said, "I sell fried cakes, and this morning, I earned two hundred cents and put it in a basket. After that, I stood on the bluestone slab and watched the street performance. When the performance finished, I found that the money was gone." Judge Pao said: "Officers! Bring this child and the bluestone slab to the county office, I want to judge the bluestone slab!" News about this unbelievable trial spread out quickly. Soon, many people curiously went to court to listen and watch how Judge Pao judged the bluestone slab.

Judge Pao began to examine the bluestone slab, and he shouted loudly at the bluestone slab: "Bluestone slab, you stole the child's money. If you don't tell the truth, you will be tortured!"

The bluestone slab didn't move at all, nor speak at all, so Judge Pao ordered the servants to beat the bluestone slab with wooden boards.

When the common people heard and watched this, they went laughing loudly.

Judge Pao said: "You people are so unruly, how dare you laugh at will in the lobby of my court. Servants, close the door, and don't let a person come in or go out." The common people quickly knelt down and begged for mercy.

Judge Pao asked a servant to bring a large water tank and told the people to take out some coins. The people threw the coins into the big water tank, just as Judge Pao had requested. Suddenly, a person threw coins into the water tank, and Judge Pao found a few pieces of oil grease floating on the surface of the water.

Judge Pao said to this person: "You thief, you stole the child's money!". The man was taken aback and trembled with fear. Judge Pao also called a public servant search. Sure enough, 199 dollars were found on the man. Together with the penny, he put in the tank, it was a total of two hundred dollars.

Judge Pao returned the 200 cents to the child who sold fried cakes, and Judge Pao told the servants to beat the thief who threw the money stolen and drove him out of the county gate.

Only then did these ordinary people who came to watch realized why Judge Pao tortured the bluestone slab, and they all admired Judge Pao in their hearts.

“How do you like the story about Judge Pao?” Uncle Jack asked Emily.

“I really like the story. Judge Pao was smarter than Sherlock Homes in a crime case!”, Emily exclaimed.

Uncle Jack continued to say, “In ancient China, local officials were a combination of administrative and judicial powers, and when the local officials held court, the officials on both sides held various torture instruments in their

hands, shouting slogans such as silence, and if the civilians were not recruited, they would be tortured and waited. The legal view of officials is the presumption of guilt.”

“Judge Pao was mythologized by popular fiction, and it could meet the needs of people's desires. Luckily, we now have competent scientific case-handling personnel and competent and impartial judges, and we no longer need Judge Pao's ways in court.” Uncle Jack concluded.

After dinner, they returned to Uncle Jack's mansion in Shanghai. Uncle Jack smiled mysteriously, and said, “Emily, I wonder if you wish to see the bluestone slab that Judge Pao trailed?”

“The bluestone slab? You have got to be kidding me!”, shouted Emily.

Uncle Jack carefully brought out an antique gift box, and opened it. “See this is it”, this is a special gift from one of my close friends in Hong Kong, who happened to be one of Judge Pao's direct descendants.

Uncle Jack took out a solid uneven green stone from the box, and showed it to Emily.

“See, there is an encryption at the bottom of the stone”, said Uncle Jack.

“Tell me what it read there?”, said Uncle Jack.

“It says, a stone can't speak, but it lives through history.” Emily read the line encrypted at the stone with ancient Chinese characters with a signature by “Pao Zheng”.

“Can I borrow this stone and bring it back to Hong Kong to show to my Chinese teacher and class? I can't wait to see their faces when they realise Judge Pao not only lived in the fiction but also in history.” Emily smiled mysteriously.

Mystery

ESF West Island School, Mohanty, Akshat – 13

It was a strange afternoon; a mysterious wind blew over the horizon just as a shadow spied on the Pao estate. This morning, astute Judge Pao arrived on a trip to visit his grandchildren. Hong kong, Hong kong behold bells clang announcing his arrival in the bright yellow sun. You could even hear the pleasant songs of the early birds and the quiet chatter of crowds. Through the parting fog, we see a junk boat with sails as red as wine out of season. The ship docked at the port, and a slight gathering formed as someone shouted, "Judge Pao, Look it, the famous Judge Pao". Waiting in front of the crowd were Judge Pao's two grandchildren, both of whom rushed to greet him, "Hello, grandpa, we missed you a lot". After a few heartfelt moments of reunion, they took a taxi to Yung Leung, where the Pao residence was located. "Grandpa let us help you move your stuff into the house," said the two children. After unpacking, resting and touring the house, the family finally sat for dinner. Little did Judge Pao know that things were just about to take a dark turn, "Ding dong," the doorbell rang. It was a dark, windy night, and hurriedly one of the chauffeurs rushed to unlock the door. Outside was a short old gentleman in a black coat and hat with glasses as misty as a storm cloud. To the surprise of everyone, he started to talk in a squeaky but haggard voice. He asked, "Please, sir, I beg you, help me find my son. He has gone missing, and although the Hong Kong police have been searching for him for days, they still haven't found him." Judge Pao asked to be excused for the dinner table, and lead the old man to the couch but for a strange reason, Judge Pao felt like he has seen this man somewhere before. "Please take a seat Mr...."

"James Gosling"

"Now slow down and tell me what happened" The following day, Judge Pao woke up at the crack of dawn and went for a walk. He thought hard about the perplexing new case he had landed with. He muttered aloud, "Hmm, what an interesting case, a teen has gone missing with no clues other than the item he left behind". "A school bag, some clothes, and his phone, It's almost like he was trying to run away" After another 30 or so minutes of exploring the countryside, Judge Pao decided to revisit Mr Gosling. Judge Pao went home, got a new change of clothes and headed to the older man's house. He rang the doorbell and exclaimed, "Hello, Mr Gosling, I need your assistance". After waiting a few minutes, Mr Gosling hobbled outside and enquired, "How can be of service Judge Pao". Judge Pao simply replied, "I was thinking about the case, and I have a theory I would like to test out, so first, I will ask you some questions about your son, then we can visit the last place he was seen". After a series of questions, the older man and Judge Pao went to the crime scene in Cape D'Agular. The kid's stuff was laid out on the rocks. The place was closed off to tourists as it was a crime scene, but after a round of observations, Judge Pao was sceptical about the crime scene. Soon after, he decided to continue the rest of the investigation tomorrow and headed home. As he made his way to his room, he noticed a tall shadow walking out of it with something held in its hands. Judge Pao thought it was bizarre that someone was coming out of his room, so he carefully walked in. At first, he thought everything was in order. However, to be cautious, he went to his safe to check it and was surprised to find that a few documents had been taken. Not just that, the missing document contained a list of criminals and corrupt officials he had encountered throughout his career. Judge Pao now thought to himself. This case must be part of a giant puzzle. First, someone goes missing just days before he arrives, and then someone steals those documents from him. Sitting down for dinner, he cast a weary eye on the household. He knew that someone here was not who they seemed. He mumbled under his breath, "I must get those papers back no matter what." The next day, a chilly breeze blew throughout the city and suddenly, there was a ringing sound from the landline phone in the living room. Judge Pao expecting it to be Mr Gosling, answered the phone. "Hello"

"Hello, Judge Pao, It's me, James Gosling. I just called to inform you that my son has returned."

"Excuse me?"

"He came back this morning, claimed he had run away but changed his mind and came back."

"It's a miracle. Thank you for your time."

"Mmm, no problem. I'm glad your son decided to come back."

Even after Mr Gosling hung up, Judge Pao felt something was wrong. Was it a coincidence that Mr Gosling's son returned just after his papers were stolen? Judge Pao's head was spinning with possibilities. Just then, something clicked. How could someone run away when they left all their essentials behind? It was like a light bulb went off inside Judge Pao's head. He knew what to do. He quickly rushed around the house. He needed to act soon if he planned to work. "Aha" he exclaimed as he rounded the corner to find a significantly burly figure, and clutched in his hand were the documents. "There is nowhere left to run. Give it up", Judge Pao panted. "Hand the documents over before someone gets hurt". The colossal figure lunged at Judge Pao, but he evaded the attack by rolling to the side. He rendered the big man unconscious with three quick hits around the neck and spine. Judge Pao snatched the paper from the chauffeur's hand with a huff of victory. Judge Pao sighed, "What am I supposed to do with you now" making sure not to alert anyone. He hauled the prominent figure to his room. Making sure to tightly tie the chauffeur's hands and legs to a chair, he waited for him to wake. It wasn't long before the big man woke up with a loud groan. When he saw Judge Pao, he scowled at him. "Tell me now, why did you steal this paper?"

The chauffeur just grunted so Judge Pao continued, "I have every piece of the puzzle except one who."

"Who hired to steal from me."

"Who told you how to get these documents."

"If I were you, I would start talking now. I mean, we are talking about a life sentence here."

"Although if you were to tell me some information, I could lighten your sentence. That's up to you."

Fear showed in the man's eyes, and his hands and feet started trembling

"Ok, Ok, please, I will tell you everything."

...

Walking at great speed with the Hong Kong police at his toes, Judge Pao led them to Mr Gosling's house. He busted open the front door and walked in. Inside, they saw Mr Gosling sitting on the couch next to someone who could only be his son. At the sight of the police, Mr Gosling panicked and questioned, "What's going on? Why are you busting in here, Mr Pao."

"Cut the crap Mr Gosling or should I call you Qian Chonglin."

"One of the many corrupt officials in china. I know all about your little plan."

"I knew we had met before. On my earlier trip to China, I had busted you for accepting bribes, and you have been out to get me ever since."

"I don't know what you're talking about, you have become delusional", Mr Chonglin said, although sweat lined his brow, and his legs were shaking.

"Officers, arrest him. He is making baseless accusations."

The Hong Kong police didn't budge an inch, and chuckling, Judge Pao replied, "So you want to do this the hard way. I thought it was odd that your son left things behind, like his phone and wallet."

"If he was trying to run away, he needs them for his journey. When I first saw the crime scene, I was sure it was staged. Firstly all the objects left behind were left in such neat order. Secondly, I found your lackey trying to take my documents, but he was sloppy as when I saw his shadow leaving my room, he was holding a duster. He must have been one of the house servants, judging from his shadow's height. It was easy to track him down. In the end, he sang like a canary and told me everything."

With a deep breath, Judge Pao said, "So you see I know your true intentions were to keep me occupied while you stole my documents and got rid of them, this is how I figured out your little master plan."

Judge Pao turned and announced to the cops, "Take him away, and Mr Chonglin so that you know the truth will always prevail".

The Billionaire's Secret

ESF West Island School, Meulenbeld, Anna – 12

Mr. Pao just wanted a break.

But no. Yet another case had come up. This time, a billionaire was suspected of murder. Mr. Pao was always wondering what drove rich people, who had almost everything, to commit murder. He supposed that they always held a dangerous secret very close and dear to them, and someone eventually found it out. Mr. Pao wondered what type of secret a *billionaire* would have in the first place. He sighed and started to sort the papers on his desk. Judge Pao knew from experience that most cases took *very* long.

“Mister?” Sara Chang, Judge Pao’s excellent secretary, poked her head in apprehensively. “Go ahead, Sara.” Mr. Pao sighed. “You have a new apprentice. Meet Mira Scotts.” Mr. Pao’s eyebrows shot up. It wasn’t everyday that he got a woman wanting to be a detective. It wasn’t that he thought women were feeble or unworthy, but he’d never taught a woman. But his eyebrows went even higher when he saw her.

A teenager. Putting herself in a possible fatal business. Mr. Pao was lucky. He had narrowly escaped death many, many times. Some of his apprentices hadn’t been so lucky. Many of his colleagues had been captured and murdered. What was she getting herself into? “I know what you’re thinking.” Mira glared at him. “You think that because I’m a woman, I’m incapable of being a detective.” Mr. Pao cleared his throat. “It’s not like that.” “Then you think I’m too young.” She tossed her gradient brown to blond hair over her shoulder. He sighed and turned away. This was going to be long.

Mira bent over the sheet, studying it carefully. “You’re not going to find anything useful,” Mr. Pao sighed. “I’ve already checked, and I know all of this. Don’t waste your time.”

Mira ignored him.

Mr. Pao sighed. This girl was too much for him. “Do you want to actually go outside and look?” She finally looked up. “Alright.” He noticed that she had a strong American accent. That would cause a lot of arguments.

“Isn’t that James Zesant, the billionaire’s son?” That startled Mr. Pao out of his annoying thoughts. “I– I think it is?” He meant it as a statement, but it came out as a question. Mr. Pao didn’t like that. She smiled. “Shall we go to him, then?” Mr. Pao took a closer look. The child looked very upset. He groaned. He hated unhappy people. They were very hard to interrogate. “Fine.” She smiled slightly and ran off towards the boy. She was clearly hoping for an easy interrogation. It was written all over her face.

“...and finally, who did your father attack?” Mira asked. “Benjamin Stewart, Hansin Lu, Asirah Nottis a– and Lewis Zheng.” The boy said. Mira paled, but still rubbed his back gently. “It’s alright, you can tell us.” “Lewis Zheng was my boyfriend.” James Zesant sobbed. Mr. Pao huffed under his breath. Interrogations were *never* this easy, especially in cases of murder. Plus, Mira was being *very* unprofessional. She shouldn’t have comforted him. He was a suspect too. Mr. Pao stepped in. “Get serious, Mira!” Mr. Pao scolded. “Who are you?” James asked. “Judge Pao.” He replied coldly. The boy’s face changed from slowly calming down to a definite paling of the face. Judge Pao sat down. “Why are you giving up this information so easily?” “Well, um–” “Because I told him to.” A voice came from the shadows.

Jordan Zesant.

Mira looked mad. Very mad. At James. “So you lied to us.” It wasn’t a question. “Y— yes.” He bowed his head. She then swiftly kicked his head, knocking him out instantly. Mr. Pao had to admit, he was impressed. He grabbed her hand and ran, with Jordan Zesant chasing them with an intent to kill.

Judge Pao and Mira shook Jordan off. Neither of them wanted to know how or why. It was suspicious. “Let’s investigate somewhere safer.” Mr. Pao said, not disguising his annoyance. Mira bowed her head. “I know that I messed up, okay? Save the ‘I told you so’s for another time.” He sighed. “Since you do know anyway.” He nodded at her. She gave him a tiny smile. “Thanks.” “You probably will become a good detective anyway.” He said encouragingly. She gave a little laugh. “If I work hard.” “Glad you know that.” She nodded. “Me too.”

“Do you have everything?” Yes, Mr. Pao and Mira decided to stop waiting for Jordan Zesant to come to them, and decided to look for him instead.

“Wait! I forgot my toothbrush!” Mr. Pao fumed. “This isn’t a week-long trip.” Mira stared at him. “How often do you brush your teeth?” Mr. Pao widened his eyes. “Excuse me?” “How—” “I heard you! But why would you ask that?” She rolled her eyes. “Duh. Anyway, before we go. Can I get chips?” “You mean crisps.” “No, chips.” Mr. Pao sighed. “Fine. Let’s just continue.” “*I’m Mr. Pao and I’m uptight!*” “My God! Stop being so immature!” Mira chuckled, skipping ahead of Judge Pao, leaving him to fume by himself. Insufferable girl.

“We’re traveling in a *truck*?” Mira’s grey eyes sparkled excitedly. “Wait, the back of the truck’s going to be split in half between us, right? With a partition?” Mr. Pao chuckled. “Yes, don’t worry.” She smiled. “I already want to live here forever!” “Mira, it’s just for tracking down Jordan Zesant. Don’t be dramatic. By this rate, you and the truck will be engaged by tomorrow.” Mira sighed dramatically. “It’s too late! I’m in love!” She fell onto the truck. “We’re already ballroom dancing!” Mr. Pao laughed. “Now I don’t want you to see the interior.” Mira promptly let go of the truck and fell on the ground. “Ow! Show me the interior now!” Mira demanded. “Your knees are bleeding.” Mr. Pao noted calmly. “I don’t care!” Mira exclaimed, tossing her hair. “Just show me the palace!” “God help me.” Mr. Pao muttered, allowing himself a chuckle.

“Oh. My. Gosh. This is amazing!” Mira squealed. She went into her part and started hugging everything. “Mira!” Mr. Pao exclaimed. “Yeah?” Mira looked up at him, not extracting her arms from around the toilet. “Sorry to burst your bubble, but please, *please* take this seriously.” “Alright.” She nodded.

Bang! “Right on target, Mira! Good job!” Mr. Pao said proudly. “Thanks!” Mira had hit the bullseye on the gun target. She definitely was handy with a shotgun. That was unusual. She sure was talented, though.

Mr. Pao slowed to a stop, quietly, carefully, and turned off the engine. Mira came out of her little ‘haven’, as she called it. “Why’ve we stopped?” “This is very close to where Jordan Zesant lives.” “Oh.” Mira nodded seriously. “Now, don’t be reckless when we go out. You need to be *very* quiet. Okay?” “Got it.” Mira nodded eagerly. Mr. Pao allowed himself a little smirk. “Let’s go.”

Mr. Pao and Mira froze. While it was dawn, and Hong Kong was awake, that didn’t mean they couldn’t be scared. Especially when they saw a suspicious silhouette that they were certain that Jordan Zesant belonged to.

“Hello.” Jordan Zesant smirked. Mr. Pao knew the only reason he wasn’t attacking them was because there were multiple bystanders. His wife, his son, and all the servants. Oh, and some early morning workers.

“Let’s cut to the chase, Zesant.” Mira growled. Mr. Zesant threw his head back and gave a hearty laugh. “What do you mean?” “We’re not *friends*. You put my mother in a *coma*.” Mira spat. Jordan looked unnerved. “I didn’t do that.” “You *did*.” “Proof?” “Well, let’s check the footage. Why did no one check it? Perhaps you hired some people to ‘check’ it for you?” Pao’s gears clicked into place. “Wait, your mother is Hansin Lu? Like, model, famous actress, attacked by... *him*?” “*I did not attack her!*” Jordan yelled. He slipped a gun out of his jacket.

One car screeched to a stop. The driver was staring openmouthed. Slowly but surely, other cars started to stop as well. Jordan smirked. “I was going to go to prison eventually, right? That means I can kill someone, because I’m still going to get a life sentence anyway, aren’t I?” He had a maniacal glint in his eye. Mr. Pao was scared, for the first time in his job as a detective.

He was right to be scared.

~~~~~

*Pain.*

*All Judge Pao felt was pain.*

*He heard doctors telling Mira and Sara that he wouldn’t make it.*

*He didn’t want to be the one to cause them pain.*

~~~~~

4 years later

“Oh my gosh, shut up!” Sara, Judge Pao’s wife, laughed. Judge Pao laughed with her. “Hey, Sara! Hi, Bao!” Mira burst into the room. “Look! Mum’s okay again!” Hansin Lu limped in. While her features were slightly disfigured, Sara and Bao had later agreed that she still looked beautiful. Everyone smiled at each other, and Judge Pao had never felt more at home.

The Case of the Missing Daughter

ESF West Island School, Pandey, Avani – 14

Zhang Jinhai, the pot bellied village chief of Xinye village stood with tears streaming down his face in front of Emperor Renzong and his court. “Your Highness, m—my daughter is missing! Please! Help me find her!” He pleaded through sobs.

“Slow down. What exactly happened?” the emperor questioned

“Yesterday evening, Ruoxi went for a walk and she never came back home. I waited till morning in case she decided to stay at a friend’s but it’s been a day and she still hasn’t come back, Your Majesty! Someone has kidnapped her, I’m sure of it!” The last sentence released a new wave of tears and Jinhai fell to his knees.

“Chief Zhang, be at ease, we will send the best to look into this case.” Emperor Renzong reassured and signalled for a scholar standing near him. The scholar immediately understood what he had to do. The fate of the village chief’s daughter rested on his hands. Emperor Renzong wasn’t the slightest bit worried, however, because the scholar was none other than the infamous Bao Zheng. Better known as Judge Pao because of his fair and virtuous character when faced with crime.

As Bao Zheng neared Xinye village, he took note of his surroundings. Jinhai’s house was lavish for such a small village. The exterior covered in pretty vines and flowers. The interior was no different, boasting various foreign souvenirs. Making himself comfortable on a mattress, Bao Zheng took out a notepad, ready to ask questions.

“Tea?” Jinhai offered, sitting on his own mattress in front of Bao Zheng.

“I’m fine. To find Ruoxi, I’ll need to know the exact details. Do you know anyone who might wish ill on her?”

The village chief considered this for a moment, “Now that you mention it, there’s this lousy fisherman who’s obsessed with my daughter. I think his name was Li Jie. That rascal even tried to marry my daughter once. Of course she rejected a peasant like him. With her beauty, she’s fit for the prince in the neighbouring kingdom.”

“I see. I’ll question him. Before I go, may I check her room?”

The village chief nodded pensively.

Surprisingly, Ruoxi’s room was quite plain compared to the rest of the house. Everything was kept neatly in its place except for a brush that had fallen on the floor and a thin black belt on the mattress. Despite searching the room thoroughly, not many clues were discovered. Bao Zheng decided to move on and interrogate his current number one suspect, Li Jie.

The fisherman was by the water, his fishing line hunting for prey. He noticed Bao Zheng approaching him and immediately tensed. “Rumour has it that the emperor has sent a detective to find Chief Zhang’s missing daughter. You must be him.”

A faint smile crossed Bao Zheng’s face, “Rumour sure does spread fast here. So you must also know that you’re Chief Zhang’s prime suspect?”

Upon hearing this, Li Jie turned swiftly, his fishing line almost whipping them both. “I would never do such a thing! He knows that! I would— I would never hurt Ruoxi.”

“I believe you. I just need proof to convince everyone else.”

“What if I helped you on the case?”

A silent agreement was made between them and without a second to waste, they began to look for their next clue.

What place would be better to gain information than the busy marketplace. Where unsuspecting villagers could be eavesdropped on. That’s exactly where Bao Zheng and Li Jie went, now that they were at point 0 again. With no clues or leads, they just had to hope for the best. As they advanced from market stall to stall, someone bumped into Bao Zheng. A little too forceful to be accidental. He tried to spot the person to no avail. It was too cramped and chaotic with villagers to know who it had been. They could’ve easily slipped through the crowd. Bao Zheng checked his coat pocket to make sure his money was still there and instead found something else. Bringing it up to his eyes, he realised it was a small slip of paper.

Grandma’s tea shop. Abandoned black house. Latch. Ruoxi.

“What is written,”— Li Jie peered over Bao Zheng’s shoulder— “in that paper?”

“Do you know where grandma’s tea shop is? I think we might just have our answer to the case.”

Brimming with hope, the pair ran for what seemed like eternity. Li Jie leading them to a destination that would not seem to get closer. They navigated a maze of alleys, ducked through people and carts until Li Jie halted at a tiny house. It was black like the paper said and obviously abandoned. You could tell by the lack of candles lit, though it was late into the evening. Bao Zheng marched onward, opening the door with a loud creak. The thumping of his boots echoed on the wooden floor. Except for a small corner of the house, where the sound was more hollow. He crept up on his knees and felt around for a grip to open the latch. Fortunately, the latch was unlocked and a ladder had been placed to get down.

“Li Jie, stay up there in case someone comes in. I’ll call if I need help” Without waiting for a response, he began climbing down. When the floor finally met his feet, he turned around.

Something was clearly not right. Firstly, Ruoxi was nowhere to be found and secondly, why was the entire room full of crops and money? From the floor up till the ceiling, there were sacks of rice and bronze coins. Had they come to the wrong place? This was merely a storage room. But that couldn’t be, Li Jie had said this was the only black house in the entire village.

“Was there really nothing down there?” Li Jie inquired as they exited the house.

“It must’ve been some prank, that room was used for nothing but storage”

“Did you check—?”

His sentence was interrupted by commotion nearby. They could vaguely hear the words ‘emperor’ and ‘taxes’. With a puzzled look at each other, they travelled towards the sound. A huge swarm had already collected there, attentively listening to the speech.

“THE EMPEROR DOUBLED THE TAXES BUT WE CAN’T DOUBLE OUR CROPS! HOW WILL WE FEED OUR FAMILIES?”

A protest against the emperor? Doubled taxes? Emperor Renzong hadn’t decreed a rule like that. All protestors were wearing the same cloaks and black belts. Black belts. Where had he seen that before? The same belt that was in Ruoxi’s room. Why would they have the same belt...except if the protestors kidnapped her. A sudden realisation hit him hard in the face. Sneaking behind a young female protestor, Bao Zheng tapped her on the shoulder and dragged her out of the circle. Li Jie was lost somewhere in the crowd and there was no time to wait for him because...

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Chief Zhang’s daughter. Ruoxi.” Bao Zheng gave a respectful bow to the girl.

“So you finally found me. Then I assume you must also know the truth?”

Bao Zheng nodded, “I have just one question still, why didn’t you tell him?”

“This knowledge would put him in danger,”— she gave a small, tentative smile— “I believe you can handle the rest. Please, don’t mention seeing me to anyone.”

“I understand.” He watched as Ruoxi slipped back into the crowd and took a deep breath. Everything had finally come together.

Jinhai opened the door to the sounds of knocking. He came face to face with Bao Zheng— and two imperial guards. “What’s this? Did you find my daughter?” Jinhai asked, confused.

“Chief Zhang Jinhai, you are under arrest for fraud and thievery. Your punishment will be decided at the court.” Bao Zheng stated simply as the two guards went to restrain Jinhai.

“But—but what did I do? Where’s your evidence? And what about my daughter?!”

“You have lied to your people and told them Emperor Renzong had doubled the tax prices, when in fact you took half the resources and stored them for your own selfish needs. This storage room is located in the black abandoned house, under a latch. As for your daughter, she was never kidnapped. She chose to leave you when she realised what you had been doing. But that wasn’t the only reason, was it?”

Cold sweat formed on Jinhai’s forehead, “Stop! STOP!”

“You said that she never loved Li Jie. That she wanted to marry royalty. No, that was your wish, not hers. She wrote to Li Jie every night, the letters well hidden in her room so you wouldn’t find out. And for that, she left you—”

Jinhai wrestled violently against the constraints.

“Take him to the palace, guards”

Maybe it was just his mind, but as the chariot raced away, Bao Zheng could hear a faint thank you coming from the young couple.

The Capture of the Confusing Criminal

ESF West Island School, Quek, Eann – 13

“Court is dismissed!”, a loud voice echoed through the Imperial courtroom as a man, with grimy black hair, wearing a shirt soaked with mud, and both hands handcuffed tightly, with a worn out expression on his face left the room as two palace guards, fully dressed in their armour which was polished, and gleaming with reflected light from the sun, armed with a bow and arrows, guarded the man as the blood-red door slammed shut. Judge Pao sighed, exhausted from the day’s work as he slowly trudged back to his bed. A few minutes later, after Judge Pao was in deep sleep, a man dressed in full black, opened the window next to Judge Pao’s bed, looked back around the street to make sure no one was noticing him, and carefully climbed in. He slowly tiptoed to Judge Pao’s work desk which was as brown as wood, and picked up all the important documents on the desk and put all of them in his sky-blue bag. He stealthily tip-toed back to the window and climbed back out, and walked casually back in the street, like nothing had happened.

When Judge Pao woke up the next morning, and had finished brushing his teeth and had eaten his breakfast, he went back to check the documents on his desk, and to his bewilderment, they were gone! Absolutely every one of the documents that was about an important criminal that had escaped from prison a month ago had disappeared. He frantically looked around his room for the documents, but his searching came to no avail. “I remember I put it here last night, where is it?!” Judge Pao was feeling bothered about the fact that he had lost the documents and that whoever possessed them now had a lot of important information about the criminals. “What can I do now?” Judge Pao always looked for the solution for the problem, instead of sulking and giving up, which was one of the traits that townspeople respected him so much for. “Could it be because the wind had blown it away? No that was not possible, as he checked the whole room many times already”. “Wait,” he thought. “The window was fully closed when I went to bed, but I remember that when I woke up, the window was slightly opened!”. “That must mean someone broke in, but did it very stealthily!” he thought. “But, who would be so low to even steal the papers? Probably a gang, involving the criminal that had broken out of jail”, he thought. But without the major details of the criminal, how could he catch him? He only knew the criminal’s name, Jacky Tan, and that was it. The documents included important information like the criminal’s address, and much more. “Aha!” Judge Pao thought. “I can disguise myself as a criminal in the midst of the gang, and find out how to catch Jacky Tan. Having caught many criminals that were involved in gangs before, Judge Pao mostly knew where and how to join the gang, nicknamed “The Great Black Dragon”, and that they held meetings mostly in an old temple at night.

A few hours later, Judge Pao, wearing a hoodie and a mask to cover his face, entered the temple, where a small group of people, wearing a black hoodie with a was already forming. The group of people started walking up the third floor of the temple, which had a large brown table, which was as brown as wood. Luckily, when Judge Pao had sat down at the table, no one recognized him and were busy talking to each other. “Silence!” a loud voice echoed around the room. Everyone in the room immediately stopped talking and looked at him. “Welcome everyone, to this week’s meeting. First, let us start with what happened this week. We have managed to smuggle Jacky Tan out of prison!” a man wearing sunglasses and a suit cried out happily. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a man wearing a ragged old prison shirt with a few holes in it, with dark circles under his eyes which made him look like a panda, stepped into the room. “I have arrived!” The man laughed madly, in a frenzy, with his eyes glinting with manic. Everyone in the room cheered gleefully while laughing, as people were shouting, “We did it!”. “So Jacky Tan had been smuggled out of prison by The Great Black Dragon gang”, Judge Pao thought. After all the cheering had died down, the man wearing a suit continued on with the other events that had happened during the week, but the other people at the table kept staring at Jacky Tan, who was trying he was listening to the man but could not keep resisting the amount of eyes on him and turned around frequently. At the end of the meeting, a bald man with a chipped tooth suspiciously looked at Judge Pao, “Hold on a second, I haven’t seen you before. Who are you?” he said sceptically. Luckily, Judge Pao had prepared for this kind of situation before, and replied composedly, “My name is Joshua Cheung. Nice to meet you” and stuck out his hand for a friendly handshake. The man narrowed his eyes, still unsure if he should believe a random new member of the gang, but in the end

he shook Judge Pao's hand and gave a smile. Judge Pao left the temple and walked back home, where he prepared his operation for the next day.

The next morning, Judge Pao woke up and went straight to the Imperial courtroom "Guards!" Judge Pao shouted, ordering the guards to come over to where he was standing. "Yes sir!" they shouted altogether, while saluting. Judge Pao explained his plan on how to capture Jacky Tan to them, while whispering quietly and looking around regularly to make sure that no one was secretly listening to their conversation. After Judge Pao had explained his plan, which consisted of breaking into a secret hideout where Jacky Tan was located, fighting the other criminals, and more risky acts, he and the guards changed into clothes which covered their face and made them less identifiable. They walked to the secret hideout, which was not far from the old temple where The Great Black Dragon gang held meetings at night. Once they reached the entrance of the secret hideout, which was an old black door, Judge Pao knocked on it three times, but no one answered. He checked to see if the door was left unlocked, but it was locked.

Out of nowhere, three men leapt out behind them, and each put a knife against Judge Pao and the two guards throats. "Take off your masks or else" the man who had his knife against Judge Pao ordered. They had no choice but to take off their masks, and the man loosened his grip on the knife. The second the man loosened his grip, Judge Pao immediately seized the knife from the man's hand and punched him in the face. The man could not withstand such a heavy blow and fell to the floor with a dazed expression on his face, and the other two guards fought back and pushed the other two men to the floor. "Are you guys ok?" Judge Pao asked the two other guards, as one of the guards had a cut to the face. "Yes sir, we are fine" they replied with no expression. They started emptying the pockets of the men and one of the guards found a key, and opened the door using the key. They went inside, which was a small house with covered windows and few household things. The house was as dark as coal, with no lights switched on, but fortunately Judge Pao had brought a torch. They slowly opened a sky blue door, where the man with sunglasses and Jacky Tan had swords in their hands pointed at them. "You really thought you could fool us, Judge Pao. Come on, we wouldn't be as ignorant as to ignore that you had attended our meeting yesterday night." the man with sunglasses chuckled. One of the guards immediately tackled the man with sunglasses, and he collapsed to the ground. "Help me!" he shouted angrily to Jacky Tan. Aware that it was time to attack, Judge Pao and the other guard cornered Jacky Tan, and punched him in the guts. Both men lay unconscious on the floor, as the guards handcuffed them. "Bring them to jail, and they are sentenced there for the rest of their life" Judge Pao ordered. The guards pulled the criminals away and left the house, and the crime had finally been solved. Judge Pao smiled as he looked around the house and left, satisfied with the amazing feeling of catching a criminal.

New Tales of Judge Pao

ESF West Island School, Tan, Clyth – 13

“Please. You’ve got to help me,” Mr Zhan begged the lawyer.

“I’m sorry, but there isn’t enough evidence to make a convincing case. The judge will not rule Billy guilty of causing your daughter’s suicide based on her diary entries.”

“Please read this,” Mr Zhan pleaded. “5 November. Billy just won’t leave me alone. He dumped my books into the trash bin and forced me to dive through the rubbish to retrieve them. He also damaged my laptop. Dad had to scrimp and save to buy this second-hand laptop for me. I’m tired of Billy’s bullying. I’m leaving this cruel world.”

The lawyer still shook her head apologetically.

Mr Zhan trudged out of the building; shoulders slumped. He had lost his beloved daughter, yet he could do nothing to redress her unjustified death. “How I wish legendary Justice Bao were here,” sobbed Mr Zhan. A bright light streaked across the night sky. Little did he know that it was a wishing star!

Bang! Mr Zhan shielded his eyes as a blinding light filled the street.

A figure stood up. He was dark-skinned, had a crescent moon mark on his forehead and dressed in Song dynasty robes. “Where am I? In my sleep, I heard someone calling out to me for help. Twink! And I wake up in this foreign land.”

For a moment, Mr Zhan stared at the figure in disbelief – and then he bowed respectfully. “Justice Bao, I am the man you’re looking for.” His wish had come true!

Back in his sub-divided flat, Mr Zhan shared with Justice Bao his deep sense of grievance against Billy, the school bully, whom he believed to have caused his daughter’s death. After the recount, Justice Bao’s face flushed with anger. “How could there be such injustice? Billy will have to pay for his crimes!”

Mr Zhan sighed, “It won’t be easy. Billy’s father is the chairman of the school board. The family is rich and powerful. We’ll be up against the best lawyers.”

Justice Bao patted Mr Zhan’s shoulder reassuringly. “Even though a thousand years have passed since the era I came from, one thing remains constant – Justice!”

“I am Lawyer Bao, and I am representing my client, Mr Zhan in filing a lawsuit against Billy Cheung for his role in leading to Mr Zhan’s daughter’s suicide.”

“Very well,” said the judge. “You may begin.”

“My client’s daughter, Elizabeth, has always been a diligent and sensible girl. She studied hard and earned a scholarship to study in a prestigious school. She started school with high hopes, knowing that a good education could lift her family out of poverty. However, her hopes were soon dashed. She became Billy’s target because she was different. She was poor. Billy constantly bullied her. Elizabeth’s diary provides the best incriminating evidence. I quote, “25 January. Billy stole my lunch money. I didn’t ask Dad for more allowance. He doesn’t earn much as a security guard. I’ll just have to bear with the hunger... 9 February. Billy snatched my laptop and forced me to kneel and beg him before he would return it... 5 May. I’m so miserable. I don’t belong here.... 5 November. I’m tired of Billy’s bullying. I’m leaving this cruel world...”

Justice Bao's eyes brimmed with tears as he read out Elizabeth's final entry. "Your honour, it is beyond a doubt that Billy's constant bullying pushed Elizabeth to a corner. Finally, she chose to end it all by taking her own life. Billy must pay for his wrongdoings. A life for a life! Execute him!"

Collective gasps from the court echoed throughout the room. The judge's face turned red as a beetroot. Mr Zhan was not sure if the ruddiness was due to anger or a desperate attempt to stifle his guffaws.

The defence lawyer was up next. He made strong arguments claiming that Billy's actions were just pranks that playful youngsters play on each other in school. These behaviours were commonplace and should not be viewed as bullying. It would be far-fetched to link Elizabeth's suicide to Billy's pranks.

Eventually, the judge decided to adjourn the hearing till further evidence was presented.

As Justice Bao and Mr Zhan were exiting the courtroom, Billy's dad strode up to them. "If you'll stop pursuing this case, I'll give you five million dollars. However, if you insist on going against me, you're going to learn the hard way, that includes losing your job as a security guard," Mr Cheung threatened.

Justice Bao stepped forward. With a steely glint in his eyes, he said, "We will never drop the case. Money cannot buy righteousness. We will fight on until justice is served!"

"Don't regret your decision," Billy's dad said brusquely.

Back home, Mr Zhan explained to Justice Bao that now in the 21st century, capital punishment has been abolished in many countries. "We believe in the right to live, free from torture or cruel treatment."

"Oh, where I came from, execution is a common punishment. I've never heard of the term 'human rights'. In my time, the accused were assumed guilty until evidence was found to prove their innocence. Sometimes, we would even torture them till they confessed to their crimes. Interestingly, one thousand years later, the legal system has transformed. Now, the accused are presumed innocent until proven guilty. These are interesting new ideas that I can bring back and propose to the emperor," Justice Bao mused.

The new boy was alone, eating rolls in a quiet part of the school. Billy swaggered towards him and pushed him against a wall. "Hey newbie! Too poor to have a proper lunch?" Billy taunted as he tossed Tom's bread to the ground.

Tom said shakily, "I'll tell on you."

"Oh yeah?" Billy mocked, "Well, you won't! My dad donates huge sums of money to the school. Even the principal has to listen to him. I can literally do whatever I want in school. Too bad, loser!" As Billy laughed maniacally, he failed to notice the red blinking light from Tim's shirt pocket. Tim was the bait Justice Bao planted.

Elizabeth's funeral service was planned to be a quiet affair, just a few family members and friends grieving together. Unexpectedly, a group of Elizabeth's ex-classmates turned up. After paying their respects, the classmates turned to Justice Bao, "Sir, may we have a word with you?"

"We are here today to continue the hearing of the case of Billy Cheung's role in Elizabeth Zhan's suicide. Lawyer Bao, do you have additional evidence to present?" the judge asked.

"Yes, I do. Your honour, allow me to play a video of Billy intimidating another student, Tim."

Gasps of disgust could be heard from the audience after the video was played.

Justice Bao continued, “I would now like to call on three witnesses who were Elizabeth’s classmates.”

“I swear that I will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I saw Billy doing nasty things to Elizabeth. Once, he... ..”

“I am ashamed that I did not stand up for Elizabeth as Billy threatened he would get me expelled... ..”

“I will not be a by-stander anymore. I will stand up to school bullies like Billy!”

After the three witnesses have given their testimonies, they got a standing ovation from the audience. The judge had to call for silence to restore order.

By now, Billy was ashen-faced. He knew he was beaten.

“Defendant, please stand. The court rules in favour of the plaintiff. This is an unfortunate case whereby your pranks had contributed to Elizabeth’s distress, causing her to commit suicide. You must learn from this incident, reflect and repent. This is the least you can do for Elizabeth. To aid your reform, I order you to offer a sincere apology to Mr Zhan, to proactively seek help from a psychologist to address your bullying tendencies, to commit 100 hours of community service and to bear all legal costs incurred by the plaintiff.”

Billy bowed his head in remorse.

“Well, my job here is done. Justice and righteousness have prevailed. It is time for me to leave,” announced Justice Bao.

Mr Zhan’s mind whirled. “Wait! Could you take me with you? With my daughter gone, there isn’t much meaning for me here. I wish to be your companion in upholding justice,” Mr Zhan asked pleadingly.

Just as Justice Bao was about to disappear in a flash of light, he grabbed on to Mr Zhan’s arm and the two friends teleported back to the Song dynasty.

“Justice Bao! Where have you been?”

“I have simply been...on a journey. I’ve learnt so much and I have great plans to reform the legal system here,” Justice Bao replied.

Turning to Mr Zhan, he asked, “How do you like being my personal bodyguard?”

“That would be perfect! I, Zhan Zhao, promise to protect you with my life!” Mr Zhan has finally found a sense of purpose and belonging. Zhan Zhao was home.

The Framed Thief

French International school, Au, Angie – 13

"Ms, why exactly have you sought my assistance?" asked the man sitting on the larger chair in the small room. His thick eyebrows were furrowed and his eyes seemed to be unfocused, his mind drifting. Not very obviously, of course. He held himself with the grace and posture of a respected authority figure (which he was) and knew better than to show unprofessionalism – or worse, *daydreaming* – to anyone.

Who was he?

Well, he was the famous Bao Zheng, known as Judge Pao. The very one who'd cracked so many cases, saved so many lives – and also sent so many criminals to prison. To those who committed a crime, he was threatening and intimidating; but to those in need of assistance, he was kind. That particular day, he was going to visit the Emperor's throne room to talk to the soldiers. But about an hour before he set out, a frail woman with thin black hair and teary doe eyes rushed to his back door and knocked rapidly. "Sir! Justice Pao, sir, please help me!" she'd pleaded desperately.

"Who's that, I wonder?" Pao had said aloud to himself. Hastily, he'd opened the door and let her in.

The woman's voice brought him back to the present. After looking around and shutting the door, she whispered, "I'm being accused of a crime. Everyone thinks I've stolen Empress Li's jewels." She whimpered. "But I *didn't* do it. *I'm not the one who did!*"

So, she's the infamous maid Zhao, who's on the run and suspected guilty for committing multiple thefts in the palace, Pao thought to himself. He would've reported her to the police, but then she broke down into sobs and he realised she wasn't lying. They were genuine tears, he could tell from his years of experience, drip – drip – dripping down her cheeks and clothes and onto the wood floorboards. Her sobs were filled with anguish, so sharp, like a dagger, and so real, he couldn't even bring himself to speak.

"Lady Zhao." He said gently, trying to comfort her. It would be impossible to try to get her to tell the full story if she was crying her eyes out. "Take a deep breath, sit down," he gestured to the pale wood stool next to the door, "and tell me your story from the start. I need every single detail of what happened."

"At 5:45, the guard with the skull tattoo visited me. He asked to see me in private. So we walked together to the closest balcony – which I found suspicious, but I didn't want to make him mad at me," she shivered. "From reputation, I knew he was a temperamental person. He'd yell so loudly and sometimes he'd throw things at the maids." said Lady Zhao, swallowing hard and fidgeting in her seat.

"He started telling me things that didn't make sense. I was so, so scared, but what could I do? I just kept following him."

"He led me into a room. The whole place gave me chills, but I kept going. Suddenly, he stopped to put something down. He pushed me onto the floor so hard I'd shrieked. My brain didn't comprehend that I was in trouble until I heard the *click* of the door locking from the outside," she whispered, her voice cracking.

Her appalling tale made Pao seethe with anger. This was what he hated. Injustice. This was the reason he'd become a judge. And unless he did something about it, Lady Zhao would be sent to prison.

So, of course, he decided that he would do something about it. "I'll help you," he declared.

After an hour of planning, they headed out through the back door in popular clothes and headwear that would make them look insignificant and blend in. They had their heads bent down, pretending to be tired after a long day so they could hide their faces without causing suspicion.

"This way," whispered Pao. "We're almost at the palace. Remember our cover story – I'm here with my newest assistant to debate with the Emperor about the case of the missing jewels. You will be dismissed for being incompetent, and I will tell him I'll send you home. Then, find your friends and interview them with this list of questions," he gestured at the paper in Lady Zhao's hands. "If they ask, tell them you're investigating the case to surprise me. Remember. You are Lady *Ling*, my assistant."

"Yes, sir."

The 30 feet tall palace was majestic and imposing, with beautiful red and gold colors everywhere. Even though Pao had been here many times before, he still felt chills go down his spine. It always surprised him how the outskirts of the palace were as big as a city.

Luckily, they had no problem passing the first entrance. He'd changed in a nearby public bathroom back to his usual attire and the guards had let them through without taking a second glance. Bao wasn't worried at all.

"Your name?" asked the first guard gruffly.

"Justice Pao and my assistant, Lady Ling," replied Pao smoothly.

"Oh, your new assistant looks very familiar. Have I seen her somewhere?" said the second guard slyly, he had some marks by his neck. Lady Zhao turned pale and began shaking, causing her accessories to tilt slightly and reveal her face.

"Wait a minute." paused the first soldier. He frowned. "She looks a lot like that maid on the run! Get her!"

Lady Zhao bolted out of fear before Pao could lie to the soldiers. Unluckily for her, she was cornered very, very quickly by the other guards and taken inside the palace.

"Sir, what were you doing with that criminal?" the first guard spat. "Did she trick you?"

"No, no, she didn't do anything to me. I was bringing her to the palace. You ruined it!" complained Bao.

The two soldiers bowed in apology. "We're sorry, sir." they mumbled. "At least she got caught."

"Well, I don't appreciate you two meddling in my business. Tell me your names." reprimanded Pao, "And is that a tattoo I see?"

"Yes, sir. Tattoos are allowed."

The first guard's name was insignificant to Pao, but he took great care to remember the second guard's name. He whispered it to himself again and again as he passed by.

Pao was struggling to think and was sitting alone in a corridor when he heard noises of someone sneaking around. It wasn't hard to spot them – the thief was quiet and clever, but it was easy to see their shadow in the corridor. Pao slipped behind a wall and peeked out discreetly, watching the thief sit down and take the shiny contents out of their sack.

Pao's jaw dropped as he realised the thief had stolen Empress Li's emerald pendant. It was *gigantic*. How in the world had they stolen something so precious to the Empress? Before knowing he'd stood up, he rushed across and skillfully restrained the thief. "You're under arrest." he yelled loudly.

Thankfully, there were a handful of soldiers who rushed to his aid. While they led the thief to the Emperor (along with what he stole) Pao noticed a tattoo on their neck.

A skull tattoo.

Bao grinned. He'd finally managed to arrest the guard who'd framed Lady Zhao, without even knowing that it was him. Finally, justice was served.

The following month was a headache for Lady Zhao. She'd been saved from a life sentence and was released almost immediately after the trial. The guard, Jiang, had been sent to prison for assault and theft. Thankfully, she'd been given back her former job at the palace and slowly recuperated from the trauma.

The Hero From A Thousand Years Ago

German Swiss International School, Ling, Sophia – 11

I paced into the Judge Pao temple located in Hefei, Judge Pao's hometown. Stone gargoyles guarded the entrance to the temple. I remembered the countless tales my mother, who had also been born in Hefei, had told me as a child as I gazed at the statue of the impartial Judge Pao. The sculpture stood seriously and grandly on its pedestal. Suddenly, a blazing gold radiance began to shimmer all around it. I gaped at it, scared, but also intrigued about what was going to happen next.

"Come to me," the figure spoke, "we have a vital mission to complete."

The sculpture of Judge Pao extended its hand out to me, and I reached up. I was immediately drawn to him by a powerful magnetic force as soon as I touched his fingers. I felt myself being sucked into the stone hand and then slammed into darkness. Thunder boomed around me, and when there was light, I was inside an unfamiliar room. I scanned the area. Behind a writing desk next to me was Judge Pao! He wore a judge's futou hat and there was a crescent moon birthmark on his forehead. He was dark-skinned and wore a serious expression on his face. He looked a formidable figure. I was wearing a follower's clothes; a pink tight-fitting blouse with an emerald green skirt adorned with flowers. Jasper hairpins held up my hair in a neat bun, and a large bow made of gold silk was fastened around my waist. It occurred to me that I had travelled back to the Song Dynasty, which was almost a thousand years ago, the time when Judge Pao had lived. I was still immersed in my thoughts, trying to make sense of what was happening when a bell rang loudly from outside. Then a villager entered the judge hall.

"All hail, Judge Pao! There is a major issue in the city! Many people in Kaifeng's more rural areas have become ill. This is not the first time this disease has spread so quickly in the city, and each time it kills many villagers, especially the young and old!" A villager cried in despair.

"Do not worry. I will come with you, and I shall help your village conquer this illness." As Judge Pao said this, he rose from his seat and motioned for me to follow him. I scrambled to my feet and left for the village along with the civilian and Judge Pao.

I followed the two through the city and out into the city's outskirts. It was noticeably different from what I had seen in the prosperous capital. There were barely any people on the streets and a sad, eerie atmosphere surrounded the place. The houses were shabby and dilapidated. There were no farms, only lifeless, infertile swaths of land. The villager told Judge Pao that most of the residents had contracted the illness, and pointed to the houses that contained the infected.

"Does no one know how to cure this illness?" Judge Pao inquired.

The villager told him that there was a man who claimed to have discovered a cure for the plague, but the villagers thought he was insane and refused to believe him. Judge Pao insisted on seeing the man, so the villager brought him to the man's residence. Judge Pao knocked on the door, and a grumpy, elderly man opened it. He was a hunched figure, with knotted, greasy hair. His eyes were dull and blank, and he frowned suspiciously at Judge Pao, but the judge smiled and greeted him warmly.

"What do you want from me?" grumbled the man irritably.

"I heard from a villager that you knew how to cure the illness. Is there any chance you could tell me about it?" Judge Pao inquired sincerely.

The man led us inside and explained to Judge Pao that he used to be a doctor, and he had indeed discovered the cure for the plague that had spread throughout the village. He also advised Judge Pao that in order to prevent the spread of the disease, he should quarantine the victims from the capital and implement protective measures. The doctor suggested using face-wear made of cloth to cover the nose and the mouth. He stated that his invention,

'masks,' could be worn by both victims and healthy villagers in order to reduce plague transmission. He also suggested that villagers maintain a 1.5 metre distance with each other.

"Only you have the authority to order the villagers to do such things. None of them believe me when I say I can heal the disease. I have prepared a box of masks for you to distribute to the villagers. You can also tell them about the quarantine measures and social distancing while I prepare the medicine," the doctor told Judge Pao, who set off to do just that.

I helped the doctor prepare the medicine. He directed me to fetch various herbs from his cupboard and he started mixing them together into a substance. He then boiled it and made another pot of the same thing. I was then sent off to look for Judge Pao. When I found him, he had already visited every family, handing out masks and food. I watched him as he told the last family to stay in their house and keep the masks on even in their own residence. I followed him to the gates that separated the village and the capital, where he handed me a flag to raise. It read 'Please do not enter or leave this village. It is now under quarantine.'

Two days later, all was ready. I assisted Judge Pao as he distributed the medicine to sick families and handed out more food, as most households had run out. When we finished, we returned to the doctor's house and studied the books with him. To my surprise, the doctor had an extensive collection of medical books in his house. After a while of studying a variety of these books, Judge Pao suddenly made an announcement.

"I understand now! I know why the plague persists! It is because of the rodents! A disease caused by rodent fleas has once been recorded in history. If we do some investigations, we shall find out whether or not this is the same plague!" Judge Pao declared excitedly.

After some initial investigations, it was discovered that most of the houses infected contained mice. Judge Pao concluded that since cats ate mice, the villagers should all adopt cats. He explained this to the residents, and from what I had learned in history class when I was a child, this was a huge contributing factor in eradicating the plague in the village.

Just as suddenly as it had come before, a flashing gold glow shone around me again, and I knew what was going to happen next.

"It is time to return," a voice spoke.

Within a second, I was back in the temple. I looked at my watch – 2:30 pm. I needed to hurry back to the office for my 3:00 pm meeting. Entering the government building, I climbed a flight of steps and entered the Department of Health conference room. Various ministers and government health officials were sitting around a large, oval oak table. I sat down in my seat marked 'Director of Health.'

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to outline my proposals regarding the current outbreak of the Coronavirus..."

Backstabbed

German Swiss International School, Ma, Hugo – 12

“It isn’t fair! It isn’t right!” screamed Cheung Sek as he was dragged across the hallway. “I demand a fair trial! I demand another judge! I am innocent!”.

The guards paid no mind to his ravings and Judge Chau repeated his verdict once again. “I declare citizen Cheung Sek the culprit behind the murder of Lao Sun!”

Cheung Sek protested, fighting and kicking in an attempt to deter the guards. His efforts were in vain and the crying man was dragged out of the Judge’s court, humiliated and beaten. His captors paid no mind to his screams, the Judge ignored his pleas, the world Cheung Sek had known was crumbling all before him. It was not long before his cries for a new judge to assess the case faded away.

Seven days ago...

“Your mouth spews lies at an increasing pace, Cheung Sek. Your debt is growing. The customers have no interest in late products. This goes two ways, young man. You either give us the traction trebuchets, or your family disappears into the wind. We aren’t exactly known for being sympathetic, so no sob stories.”

“Honourable Lao Sun, please give me one more week! The trebuchets are difficult to smuggle, it will obviously take more time than expected! Please! Leave my family out of this!” Cheung Sek begged.

“No sob stories, pest. We will give you two more days. Even my patience has limits, Cheung Sek. Two months without fulfilling your part of the deal has caused me to lose faith.” Lao Sun said smoothly. He walked out of the alley, leaving a stunned Cheung Sek kneeling in the dirt path.

Lao Sun made his way to the Lao residence, infuriated at the way things had gone. If Cheung Sun did not make his delivery soon, it would mean the end of his reputation as a trustworthy weapons salesman. He murmured to himself and chastised his foolishness for trusting a man who was known for being weeks late on weapons delivery and walked into the estate, mumbling to himself.

Servants and his son Lao Pak welcomed him. “Welcome home, Father. Did the man, whom I believe his name was Cheung, finally deliver?”

“Optimism, son. That nitwit made me wait years!”

Lao Pak then looked at the incense clock and said, “Anyway, I’ve prepared some wine and pork. Brother Seng has yet to arrive. I put a lot of effort into your dish, father. I hope you will enjoy it.” Lao Sun rushed to the dining table as soon as the words came out of his son’s mouth. He ravaged his plate full of high quality pork prepared by his darling sons and poured the wine straight down his mouth.. It had been a bad day, and Lao Sun fell onto his mattress.

The next Day, Lao Sun was completely refreshed. He put on formal clothes and decided to begin his day with a great breakfast. He walked into his favourite restaurant and ordered steamed buns, which to his dismay, was delivered at eight by Cheung Sek, the unreliable weapons dealer.

“You again, Cheung Sek? Your presence sickens me. Leave!” Lao Sun remarked.

“Please, Lao. I am just trying to make some money!” Cheung Sek protested.

Lao Sun ignored his reply and snatched the plate from the fool. He slowly ate one and felt something was off, but he continued eating. By the time he had finished the first steamed bun, he had a strong headache. His sight began getting blurry, and halfway through the second bun, Lao Sun collapsed onto the table. The infamous weapons salesman was dead!

Present Day

“All the signs point to you, Cheung Sek! Witnesses claimed that you delivered the food. The victim died after eating the bun! Figuring out the culprit is elementary! You have murdered Lao Sun! The punishment is death!” Judge Chau yelled at the man. “Guards! Throw him out! My time is wasted once again!”

Cheung Sek was dragged out at once by Judge Chau’s gigantic guards and sent straight to wait for his death in a jail cell. The trial was over in an instant.

Judge Pao sat in his cosy estate, cooling himself down with a fan. He stared at the short and ugly man called Lao Seng— son of Lao Sun. “You say Cheung Sek has been framed?”

Lao Seng replied in a heartbeat “Yes, Judge.” He thought of the consequences if Cheung Sek could not get the trebuchets due to him being imprisoned. A shudder ran through him, but he quickly regained composure. “I will look into this matter, Mr Lao. You may leave now.” Lao Seng sighed in relief from Judge Pao’s reply, and he left the estate with a newfound skip in his step.

Judge Pao began looking at the case files. He saw that Judge Chau had been the judge of the trial, and immediately knew something would be up. The corrupt and old judge had bugged him for many years, and every case the man had been the judge of, he had accused the wrong person of being the culprit and managed to only barely keep himself in his position with bribes. What made his verdict worse was that he had not investigated the alleged ‘Poison Buns’ with the plate of food being in the list of evidence that was not investigated.

Judge Pao immediately sent men to inspect the plate of food and commanded that a food tester be brought to test the food for poison. Two days after consumption, the tester had not died from any poison. In fact, the tester was incredibly healthy! Judge Pao seethed in frustration. The old fool Judge Chau had messed up another case again! He instantly sent out parties of his troops to discover when Lao Sun, the victim, had consumed an item into his body, and prepared himself mentally for a rabbit hole of a case.

Investigators hired by Judge Pao had fully probed over everything they could find which related to the victim Lao Sun consuming a poison of some sort. They searched far and wide for any trace of the food or drink that Lao Sun had before his death. The only remaining items were the wine, and his son Lao Pak’s handmade dinner. When they tested the leftovers on death row inmates, they made a shocking breakthrough. The inmates who had eaten the dinner scraps died in 12 hours, the exact time difference between Lao Sun’s death and the time he was given the food! Reports of the discovery made their way to Judge Pao, and soon enough, soldiers went on the hunt for the son.

Lao Pak grimaced in his cabin near the mountains. Everything had gone to plan, except the fool Lao Seng had gone to the most competent judge in the Song Dynasty! If only Lao Seng had gone with the results of the initial trial...

“No regretting the past, Lao Pak. It won’t change it,” he murmured to himself. He still had mercenaries of his employ, and while they could deter Judge Pao’s forces for a considerable amount of time, the troops would still catch up in the end. He had no choice. He would fight to the death. Lao Sun may have been a heartless coward and his incredible reputation was a hard feat to replicate, but Lao Pak was a warrior. He put on his armor, sheathed his spear and joined his hired mercenaries on the fortress his father had built.

The small force of two hundred soldiers marched up the mountain to the fortress of Lao Pak. Mercenary archers were spotted on the compound walls, and the soldiers split into three groups of attackers. Mercenaries knew that they could not use their money if they had died doing their jobs, which Judge Pao took full advantage of. His assault plan consisted of the first light group killing off some mercenaries, which would cause severe disruption in the force and cause full collapse. This would be followed up by a heavy assault on two sides by the other two forces. The troops split up, and the plan began execution.

War cries and screams fired up everywhere, and Lao Pak's bold attitude halted in its tracks. His mercenaries had deserted him within minutes, and the troops from the judge had begun the intrusion into the compound. He cried in fright and threw down his weapons. The "brave" Lao Pak was on the run, and before he could run into great mother nature and disappear, he was captured and bound by tight ropes at eight o'clock, the exact time his father had died.

It was time. Lao Pak, grasped by the cold touch of his binds faced his soon-to-be executioner. The guillotine, a signature classic of Judge Pao, a sign of fear in criminals, had a dog's head for his execution. He sighed in resignation. At eight o'clock, murderer and son of Lao Sun, Lao Pak, was decapitated by the Dog Guillotine. The mystery was over.

A Last Will

German Swiss International School, Ngai, Nicholas – 12

In the Hour of the Wolf, the darkest hour in the night, the entire city was roused by the cacophony of a thousand bells and gongs playing all at once. The night criers shouted “The Emperor is dead. May he rest in peace!” The citizens of the capital felt a strong sense of unease that they could neither explain or understand. Perhaps it had to do with the suddenness of the Emperor’s death, who was a hale—and—hearty warrior no more than thirty years old. The princes’ young age cast an uncertain shadow over the succession question. War and unrest would surely follow. Dread covered the city like a blanket. The wise citizens of the capital barred their doors and stayed out of public in anticipation of the coming conflict, unless the case could be resolved quickly, and a new heir announced to save the Empire.

Despite the long career of Justice Pao where he solved thousands of murder cases and witnessed bizarre deaths, he would always remember that dark, March night. The clouds were darker and more oppressive than usual and covered up completely any trace of moonlight. The wind howled through the city like the moaning of wraiths.

Many experienced detectives started searching the palace and questioning suspects. After hours of tirelessly trying to trace the murder back using evidence through physical clues, they finally caved in and summoned Judge Pao from his Kaifeng prefecture. The officials knew that he offered the last hope of stability and a quick resolution of the case.

Judge Pao immediately told the detectives not to investigate the citizens, as it would be quite improbable for any normal citizen to enter the Imperial Palace without arousing suspicion. His next order was to seal off the Imperial Palace. Anyone who was within the palace grounds on the night of the Emperor’s death would be detained. Finally, the most difficult mystery of all for him to solve was the fact that no one could say for certain how the emperor died. There were no visible wounds from the autopsy, and poison and suffocation could be the only feasible explanation. Yet, even under duress of torture, none of the cooks or serving eunuchs had confessed to the crime.

“In my line of work, the trick is to always identify a culprit with a real motive. Answer the simple question, who benefits? Then the case would solve itself;” Justice Pao mused to his deputy. This was the reason that he had asked everyone to search thoroughly the household of the late Emperor’s brother, Zhao Xin’s household.

Prince Zhao Xin was only 26—years old; ambitious and capable. He certainly seemed to have the most to gain from the Emperor’s untimely death. With the birth of the Emperor’s two sons, Prince Zhao had been relegated to third—in—line for the throne, and rumours circulated that he was not happy with the arrangement, believing that he was a more capable person than even the late Emperor. Now, even though his nephews were still alive, the realm would not accept children as the next Emperor. Even if one of the children were accepted as Emperor, Prince Zhao would most likely ascend to the position of Regent, ruling the Capital for his nephews, sating his own desires for power and recognition. Moreover, many unfortunate accidents could happen in the years before his nephews could grow up to take his throne from him.

“Pao Zhen! What’s the meaning of this? Under whose authority do you dare to search my house and harass my household?”

“I’m sorry Prince, I am just doing my due diligence, and I assure you, your good reputation has not been tarnished in the slightest. However, what would people say if I do not search your home rigorously?”

“Well keep it up then, I have nothing to hide!” Prince Zhao retorted sardonically.

Days melted into weeks, even Justice Pao started to sweat. He had some leads on Prince Zhao, such as the fact that the captain of the Imperial Guard was under his pay, and he had recently replaced the head Imperial Chef. The trouble was, Justice Pao could not figure out what type of poison it was.

While pacing frantically in the Imperial Garden, Justice Pao noticed a strange tree that did not seem indigenous to the capital. Justice Pao knew that the tree held the key to the murder. He had seen this tree in his youth while touring the northern Jurchen tribes.

The tree was a little bit more than a sapling. Justice Pao made a mental note to find out who had planted the trees. While the tree sprouted some greenish looking round fruits, they were distinctly different from the apple and lemon trees in the orchard.

He called over the chief gardener and questioned him, "How long has that tree been here?"

"Your Excellence, I must admit, I know little about that tree. One day, around six years ago, it just mysteriously appeared in my garden. I mostly left it alone because I didn't know how to care for it".

"The fruits of the tree show signs of having been recently harvested. You have to give me the list of people who frequent the place", Justice Pao ordered.

"I have not seen anyone harvesting the fruit, but I do know concubine Jing likes to frequent the gardens," the gardener replied.

Marching brusquely, Justice Pao went to the record room to check the background of all the handmaids, concubines and wives. Then he summoned the imperial coroner and the chief doctor, who had been tortured in order for a confession to be elicited.

Having spoken to them and spending about half an hour at the records room, Justice Pao summoned everyone to the Imperial Court where he would hold the position of Judge. All suspects, including Prince Zhao, must be present along with everyone who were in the palace at the time of the Emperor's death.

Three hundred men and women, royalty or otherwise, packed the court. The natural aura of authority Justice Pao has awed. Curiosity and apprehension pervaded through the room as everyone knew Justice Pao must have solved the case. Unlike ordinary courts, this court had no torturers present.

"Concubine Jing, please step forward!"

A ravishingly beautiful young woman stepped forward. Her demeanour and mannerism seemed different, as was her dress, which was lined with fur. Her confidence and defiance set her apart from all the other serving women. She did not demur or curtsy, but looked straight at Justice Pao.

"At your service", her voice showed a trace of unmistakable northern accent.

"Tell us how you ended in court," Pao commanded

Reluctantly with a long pause, Jing narrated her misfortunes for the court. She had been the princess of the Jurchen tribe that had been defeated by the Song armies in order to buy peace, her parents arranged the marriage for her, who was just a teen, to be sent to court as part of the tribute.

"So that was your motive, you viewed the Emperor as your enemy," Justice Pao asked.

"You cannot accuse me of that. I served him loyally."

Justice Pao produced a greenish orange-looking fruit. He then told the Imperial Doctor to explain to the court the fruit's significance, which was found in Jing's room.

The fruit was from the strychnine tree in the garden, which was native to the northern steppes, and not in the warmer climate to the south. Jing must have brought the sapling with her. The leaves and the fruit of the tree make deadly poison because they are odourless in drinks and not many are familiar with its effects. Most sinisterly, the Emperor's body showed its deadly effect in his bones, meaning that the poisoner must have administered the poison in tea over a long period of time, and that could only be accomplished by someone close to him who knows the poison and would not arouse suspicion.

“Ha, that ruled me out. I never have tea with the Emperor”, Prince Zhao laughed with a look of ecstasy etched on his face..

“Jing, what do you have to say for yourself? You are the only one with the knowledge, the motive, and the means to poison the Emperor! It may seem like an illness but it is not.”

Without a trace of fear, Jing laughed and lunged at a guard, pulled out his dao with the practised ease of a warrior and stabbed Prince Zhao before anyone could intervene.

“Coward, he promised me that my bondage would be over, and when he became the Regent, he would restore my tribe. Now I know this is all lies. You are all murderers, and I will haunt you all!” Jing sliced her own white neck with the weapon and lay in a pool of blood next to Prince Zhao.

The case was solved, yet Justice Pao’s face looked grim. He must now oversee the succession and make sure that justice, not revenge will prevail.

A Winter Surprise

German Swiss International School, Wong, Audrey – 12

Tuesday, December 22, 202x

Siyu sat on the edge of the seesaw and watched people pass by the playground. Most of them seemed to be rushing to work. She waited with dread. Finally, he appeared, clad in a black court gown, dark and tall, standing out from the others. She ran up to him, wondering if she could do it.

“Justice Pao! Do you have some time? May I tell you something?”

Pao did stop. He was surprised because people never approached him in private. He was too famous, too upright, too intimidating, too important, too ugly, too ancient... too much of everything that he couldn't recall the last time that he'd spoken with a child. He was secretly happy.

“Not really, but we can talk as we walk to the bus stop. I need to be on time for a trial,” Pao slowed his pace slightly as he answered. But he was not ready for Siyu's following words.

“I killed my baby brother. What would my sentence be?”

Pao's heart nearly dropped. He looked at her intently. The thin, frail girl was twirling her finger on the hem of her threadbare shirt but she seemed too fearless for what she had just said. He thought it must be a joke or a dare. He sighed with annoyance.

“Crimes should not be taken lightly, child,” he taught her with a very stern voice.

“But if it's true, will I be sent to a juvenile home, instead of a real prison? Since I am only twelve?”

At this, Pao stopped walking and examined the girl again. She was looking at him with a very sincere face. Was she turning herself in, just like this? She couldn't be.

“If it's some kind of homework, please use your computer. There's my bus now, excuse me,” saying so, he hopped on a small bus that said ‘Supreme Court’ on the front window.

“I don't have one!” was what he heard behind him.

Trial Notes:

Wednesday, December 23, 202x

The girl from yesterday was waiting for me again this morning. It was my off day so I go by as a regular old man. Without my dark makeup nor the cloak and the black platform shoes, she completely missed me.

The girl:

–Knows something about the law, but not enough.

–Serious, eager, almost desperate.

–Eyes, too innocent.

I followed her for a while and found out where she lives. Dressed up as a delivery man, I faked a grocery delivery and scrutinized what I could.

– Tiny hut. Hard to believe three people can live there.

– Evidently impoverished.

– Mum, devastated and scared.

–No baby, only diapers in the corner.

–No corpse or foul smell.

The girl's mum answered the door, and I sensed that something was off. She was uneasy and terrified of something and her wary eyes never once met mine. It seemed as if she was hiding something.

As she signed the receipt, I advised her to put away the dairy products in the fridge right away. I closed the flimsy board that served as the door and pretended to leave. I peered through the crack in the door, saw her open the fridge, and put the food inside. I confirmed that there was nothing suspicious in the refrigerator. I sighed with relief. What I've noticed since I was teleported to the modern times is that humans have become unbelievably ruthless and cunning. So it was good to check, just in case.

Thursday, December 24, 202x

In the shade, Siyu sat ensconced on a bench with her arms crossed and watched people pass by the park. Like the past two days, most of them seemed to be rushing to work. Determination ignited in her; this time, she wasn't going to let Justice Pao brush her off. It was only a moment before he appeared, attired in his black court gown, dark and tall, conspicuous even from a distance. She strode towards him, chin high and eyes set with determination.

"Why do you not believe me?" Siyu demanded. Justice Pao recognised the voice immediately. He stopped in his tracks and turned to look at the girl in the eye.

"Tell me where your brother's body is then." At this, Siyu lowered her gaze to the ground and stayed silent. She didn't know.

"Well, there's no body, so no case."

"But I'm not lying!" She insisted, her eyes lighting up again. "I did kill my baby brother!"

Why is this child so eager to confess this? Pao wondered. I always try to get a confession out of felons, but this girl starts off with one. There must be a reason.

"What's your name?"

"It's Siyu."

"Do your parents know about what you are telling me?"

"It's just my mum and me. But we don't need to tell her," she stated clearly. Justice Pao frowned.

"Alright then, tell me how you did it. If you really did it."

"I will only answer you if you answer my question first. What would be my sentence?"

"Well, since you are only twelve, you'd probably be tried at a juvenile court and be sent to a protection programme. But only after a serious investigation and a trial."

"That's not too bad, I can do it," she beamed, which was too strange in the Judge's eyes.

"This is no joke, Siyu. Now, let me help you. You should find a lawyer to talk to me."

"Lawyers are expensive. Can't you be my lawyer? Please, just take me. I can go with you right now. I brought my ID and everything," Siyu surprised him again. That's when he noticed a small tattered backpack tightly strapped onto her back.

"Don't get too ahead of yourself, Siyu. Answer me, please. How did it happen?"

"It was an accident. We were all sleeping tightly together and I—"

Judge Pao instantly thought of the room that he had seen the day before.

"It's alright. I think I can guess," he regretted asking her. Even after hundreds of brutal murder cases he had investigated in the past, he shuddered at this particular incident.

A few moments of silence passed and Judge Pao came to a decision.

"Meet me in this exact spot tomorrow night, at nine. Make sure to bring your mother with you. And don't tell anyone about this," he said in a reassuring voice.

Trial Notes:

Friday, December 25, 202x

This case is an exceptionally difficult one. The true nature of the crime is most likely that Siyu's mum accidentally suffocated the baby while sleeping and buried him somewhere. Siyu didn't want her mum to be convicted, so she feigned to be the felon herself. From my hundreds of years of experience, I have a strong hunch that it wasn't her mum who set her up for this.

Siyu's mum lost her baby and that is already a great sorrow for them. If her mum is sent away to prison, Siyu would be left all alone without a guardian. It's an extremely sad situation.

Siyu did try to tamper with the law so she needs to be taught a serious lesson. On the other hand, she did it in order to protect her mum. This shows her filial piety, which I have always valued. I think people like to call it "love" these days.

Tonight I must bring them to the deity of the underworld, who is far more sagacious than I am. He'd do the right thing for them.

Friday, December 25, 202x

Later that day...

Siyu and her mum huddled together in the cold, waiting for Justice Pao to take them away to the Supreme Court. All of a sudden, a sleek, white convertible pulled up in front of them. Rock music blasted from the speakers and reverberated around the empty park. It was Justice Pao sitting in the driver's seat, arm resting on the window sill and chic black sunglasses over his eyes even though it was nighttime.

"Come on board my teleporter! It's time for you to meet your father and someone else special," he said as he gestured for them to get in the car. He leaned into the navigation display screen and ordered, "Destination: the Underworld."

With that, they sped away into the darkness, leaving all their sorrows behind in this world.

Inspector Pao

German Swiss International School, Wong, Madelyn – 11

Inspector Pao was a famous detective long ago. When he died, he went to the underworld. There he worked as an inspector who helped ghosts and spirits that came for help. Every person that died could live again, but if they had requests or things they couldn't forget, Inspector Pao was the one responsible for them. He would finish the spirits' requests and let them live again in peace. He was always willing to help good people. If people were criminals or bad people but they had already realized their mistakes, their requests would be fulfilled. If not, their requests would not be finished as a punishment for what they did. He liked this job since he wanted to help the dead spirits.

The first person he met was a young thief, though he only stole once when he was young.

'Why did you steal when you were young?' Inspector Pao asked the spirit.

'I was ten, and my mother was terribly sick. I had no choice since we were poor. We couldn't afford any medicine, not even food. I took the medicine from the store and gave it to my mother. I told her to take it once a day, and she seemed to get better every day. However, a few days later, the pharmacist was outraged when he found out I stole his medicine. He was so angry that he killed me. She gradually recovered after taking the medicine, but I wasn't able to talk to her, not even when I got caught by the pharmacist. I miss her so much.' He said while crying.

Inspector Pao was deeply moved by this person's story. He was a good son and all he did was for his mother, trying to save her from suffering from illness. Inspector Pao said to him, 'Since you did that all for your mother and you already know it was wrong, what is your request?'

The man wished to see his mother for the last time. Inspector Pao nodded and held the man's hand and they appeared in the house where the old woman was living. The place looked like it was a few centuries old. On a shelf were pictures of the man, from when he was a baby to a grown-up. The man cried on the floor when he saw all the pictures. Then, an old woman shuffled into the room. It must have been the man's mother, because the man looked at the woman and his eyes went red. He said a lot about how sorry he was for leaving his mother alone because of what he did. Inspector Pao watched him silently and a tear slid down his face. He remembered his own family, his wife, his father and his sister. He remembered how he grew up with them, the good memories with them and got lost in thoughts.

'I'm ready to go now, Inspector.' The man spoke and woke Inspector Pao up from his deep thoughts. They went back to the underworld and the man left to live again, tears still streaming down his face but smiling. Next came a young woman, who told Inspector Pao her story. She had a husband and they loved each other a lot. One day she was driving with her husband at the back of the car and they were talking to each other. They forgot all about being in the middle of the road and driving. When she realized, it was already too late. They crashed into another car and their car flipped upside down due to the extremely strong force. The woman had covered the husband with her own body so her back was stabbed by pieces of glass from the windows but the man only got a few scratches. The husband screamed for help while the woman was unconscious next to him. When the ambulance finally came, the woman had already left the world. Inspector Pao thought the woman was brave and selfless to give up her life to save her husband. They must have loved each other deeply. The woman wanted to see how her husband was doing without her. They appeared at a funeral, the woman's funeral. They spotted the husband in the corner of the room and he was sitting on a chair with his head in his hand. He looked tired and stressed. He didn't cry. Perhaps he was too hurt to even cry but Inspector Pao could feel the pain and grief in the husband's heart. After the funeral, they appeared in the husband's house. The husband just came home. His eyelids were heavy and he lay on his bed, not even bothering to change and wash. The house was littered and messy: there was trash on the floor, bottles of wine on the table, wrinkly clothes on the bed...

He lay on the bed, muttering to himself, 'What shall I do without her? How will I live alone? Oh I miss her so much!' The woman walked in front of the man, put her hand on his face, let her hand pass through his face and

smiled. 'You'll do fine without me. I will be watching you,' she whispered. Inspector Pao didn't know how, but it seemed like the husband sensed that the woman was watching him, even though ghosts shouldn't be seen by living humans. This must be the power of love, Inspector Pao thought, grinning. When they went back, Inspector Pao said to the woman, 'You have a great heart full of love and bravery. I believe you will meet your husband again someday. You two are meant to be, and nothing will stop you.'

The woman smiled at the inspector's words, then she walked into the portal and disappeared into the light.

'Who is next?' he asked when he went back. A little girl walked in front of him, clutching her teddy bear, not even daring to look at the inspector. How did a girl at this age die already? The Inspector tried talking to the girl, but she was so frightened that she couldn't answer.

Then she said something Inspector Pao could not understand, 'Wo ist meine Mutter?' Inspector Pao had no idea what she was saying at all. He was thinking what he should do when he remembered he got a helper ghost who was a diplomat when he was alive, so he called for him. 'Mercury? Mercury, where are you boy? I need your help!'

Mercury appeared and said, 'You asked for my help, sir?' The inspector nodded and gestured at the girl. Mercury stared at the girl, who was still asking the question Inspector Pao didn't understand. Mercury started talking with the little girl, and eventually he turned and said, 'Sir, the girl was asking where her mother was. She was pushed into the sea and drowned. She saw who pushed her. It was...her father!'

Inspector Pao stared in shock. Then he wondered if it was because she's a girl. This happened when he was alive too, Inspector Pao thought. His parents wanted a boy because they thought boys would be more helpful. They never liked girls, because they thought girls could not help them with their work, or farming, and they thought girls should only stay at home and marry someone when they get older. Inspector Pao felt sorry for the little girl so he decided to help her as she wished to see what happened to her father after this.

They appeared at a house where police were surrounding. The father was brought into the car and went with the police. He looked regretful of what he did. Inspector Pao felt anger running through his veins, 'How could someone kill an innocent girl like this?' He hoped that in the future, this won't happen again. The little girl said when they were back, 'I never knew why, but my father never liked me. However, I forgive him, and I believe he will realize his mistake someday.' When Mercury translated her words and told Inspector Pao, he was agitated by her wise and generous terms. 'Next!' He shouted when he came back. 'This never ends, does it?' He thought.

It was a tiring job, but he enjoyed it. He learned so much in this job: 'Filial piety' by the young thief who stole for his mother, 'love' by the wife who saved her husband, 'equality' and 'forgiveness' by the little girl who got treated so unfairly but forgave her father for everything he did. He learned a lot from all the ghosts, and he felt happy for helping them. He looked at the next person, a soldier, and waited for him to start his story.

Blood, A Judge, and A Drop of Malice

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Chan, Annette – 12

Maroon silk cascaded around his ankles as he stalked to his seat. The long, wiry whiskers of his beard stood stiffly as his sharp, furrowed brows pierced the room. Sitting down, he seemed more intimidating than ever. Like an eagle glaring at its prey, his eyes met the defendant's. The audience whispered among themselves, speculating the results of this long-awaited trial. But none of that mattered. All he saw in the moment was the defendant. Aggravated by the defendant's constant avoiding of his eyes, he finally decided it was the last straw. With claws as sharp as ice, Judge Pao lifted the hammer and struck it onto the sounding block. Bang! The court echoed with silence.

It was a peaceful day, and the streets of Hong Kong were filled with a quiet murmur, whether it be the soft laughter of children or small talk with friends and family. The weather was ideal for hiking or going to the park, hence Mei and her best friend Aili's favourite department store was less busy than usual. According to them, sunny days meant the best days for shopping. "Aili, finish your red bean drink. Look at the ice, it's all melting! Besides, we won't be allowed into Zara with drinks," Mei quietly scolded her friend. Aili looked sideways at Mei, eyes scintillating with the glow of daggers. Scowling, she drowned the rest of her drink in one go and tossed it into the bin. She sashayed ahead, leaving Mei glowering after her. Muttering curses under her breath, Mei turned and strutted off the other way.

With a brisk walk, Mei went after her friend, sighing exasperatedly. As soon as she walked out of the mall, she heard a scream so loud and so desperate that it pierced through the air. Eyes wide, Mei threw a look behind her and sprinted toward the source of the noise. After turning innumerable corners running down dark alleyways, Mei arrived at last at the source of the noise. Blood pumped through her veins, rushing to her head so quickly she thought she might faint. This dark alleyway was no different, except for a large, looming shadow of a man in tears towering over a pool of crimson. Foam bubbled from a small section of the crimson pool. It seemed like the blood would never stop flowing, though it had already drenched every inch of the body. Looking closely, it was no regular dead person. It was the dead body of Aili.

Hand over her mouth, Mei took one last look at her dead friend and the familiar face of the man beside her, and ran. She ran without stopping for what felt like hours until the brightly lit, safe cradle of Judge Pao's office came into view.

"Silence, everyone. Li, jewellery store owner and defendant of the court case here today, your trial commences now. Do you have anything to say to plead your case?" In a hushed voice, the defendant whispered, "I didn't. I didn't do it. When I found Aili, she was already dead. Please, no. Have mercy. I am not a murderer. Please." All through the whispered allegations, Li's gaze was fixated solely on his left toe. "Meet my eyes, defendant. Who – if not yourself, are we to blame for this crime, then?" Shivering, Li stuttered, "I – I – I don't know," Buzzing voices came from the audience. "Mei, what do you have to say on the matter?" All eyes turned to Mei. Their gaze was so sharp it was almost as if they could pierce into the back of her skull. "It wasn't me." She narrowly squinted at the judge. "If you don't believe me then scout the evidence." Though even the audience winced at Judge Pao's scorching glare, Mei did not recoil.

Swift as a falcon, Judge Pao led the enforcement officers to the meeting room opposite the room for the court trial. The seven of them sat in silence, until Ma Han spoke up. "Judge, I remember a smear on the outside of Aili's handbag. It looked like sticky lipstick which isn't too suspicious, but I just thought that it might've been something more." Judge Pao stayed silent but bowed his head in thanks. His dreamy gaze looked like that of a mastermind contemplating newly acquired knowledge.

"Zhan Zhao, isn't Mei, best friend of Aili, your cousin?"

"Yes, sir. I don't want to jump to conclusions, but... They have been arguing for a few weeks now. Rumour has it that Aili once got drunk and smashed an empty wine glass against her ex's head at a party. He also happened to

be Mei's brother, Mao. The pain he endured was unbearably agonising, and the surgeon spent months to save him. He almost died twice during surgery. He is well now, but will be scarred forever."

Judge Pao did not utter a word, but his expression said it all. One word echoed through his mind: Revenge.

The next day, Judge Pao took the smeared handbag and blood tests from Aili's dead body to the laboratory. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, wringing his hands. What if he was wrong about Mei? He paced the floor, sweat droplets dripping from his forehead. "The results are out, Judge Pao." Half-paralyzed with nerves, he barely managed to whisper, "Is it positive for poison?" The forensic scientist smiled. "No."

"See, I told you it wasn't me! Anyways, I ordered two red bean drinks. If it was expired or whatnot, then wouldn't I be dead as well? How dare you convict an innocent victim and make a public spectacle of it!" Zhan Zhao bowed his head in remorse. "My deepest apologies, cousin. You are free to go." Mei let out an exaggerated sigh, then rolled her eyes twice before flouncing out of the room.

Brows furrowed in concentration, Pao clasped his hands tightly together, and made his way to the Starbucks that Mei had gotten the red bean drinks at. No... If it wasn't poison, it had to be something else. He strode to the store, head held high, fingers crossed.

Pao checked the CCTV footage of the root problem: the making of the red bean drink. It seemed to have been brewed by a man who looked about twenty. There was nothing suspicious, except that his facial features looked familiar. Oh, well. Lots of people had similar features, Pao thought. Next up, the digital receipt record. It was just as Mei had described: two red bean drinks with some add-ons for flavour.

Back at the crime scene, Aili looked no different. Her clothes were still drenched in crimson blood, yet it had all dried out. Time is a paradox – the best way to figure out what is happening in modern times is to look back at the past. Hence, Pao decided to dig out his phone and find Aili online. Luckily, she did have an active social media presence. Scrolling through her posts from the last 6 months, he found that she looked unnaturally skinny in all the photos. That was weird. Or... was it her dead body that was unnaturally fat?

"Gongsun Ce, I need your help. I'm going to dissect Aili's intestines to gain evidence on the case."

Less than an hour later, Judge Pao and Gongsun Ce were leaning over the insides of Aili's dead body. Her mysterious death was still unsolved. Poison would be likely – yet the tests said otherwise. Then Gongsun Ce spoke up. "What's wrong with her intestines? They're unnaturally huge!"

"It's not just that. It's exploded."

"Are you saying the red beans contained exploding chemical powder?"

"No. It was tested and nothing was found. I'm saying... it's not just the red bean drink. I'm saying it's the bubble tea add-ons for the drink. We never tested the bubbles."

It was another day, another trial. At the back of the auditorium, Mei plopped down next to the other members of the audience, wringing her hands. She crossed her legs and leaned forward with anticipation. If you looked closely, you would see the faintest trace of tears in the corner of her eye. Her eyes were bloodshot red and surrounded by drooping eyebags.

Judge Pao struck his hammer onto the sounding block once again. The ringing radiated across the room. Some of the audience winced, rubbing their ears. He cleared his throat, eyes scanning the room. They landed on a man sitting in the front row. His eyes grew wide and he started, seemingly ready to jump up and sprint at any given moment. His expression was blank, but gave off a threatening aura like that of a wounded animal. "We have concluded that Aili died from the bubbles in the red bean bubble tea she drank. The bubbles were filled with intestine-exploding powder, tailor made by a scarred chemist seeking revenge. Furthermore, the murderer is sitting right there in the front row. You know who you are."

The Moon Judge

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Chan, Evelyn – 12

Riding through the Mystic Mountain, his black Guizhou pushing through the tangling vines, Judge Pao finally found what he was searching for – the abandoned Chinese temple. Staring at the magnificent red roof and unsaddling from his horse, he summoned his courage and stepped inside. "There's no turning back now", thought Pao. "It's up to me to solve this case." It was just like he thought – the bloody corpses of the Royal family children, laid in the middle of the abandoned, wrecked room. Immediately panic flooded him and he longed to turn away and run for the exit. But something in his heart told him that he could not just abandon the case. Something in his heart told him that the people of his city needed him more than ever, and depended on him for their safety, and maybe even their survival.

It had already been 3 weeks since the Red Moon started terrorizing the city of Hefei. The Government had tried to put together information and clues to find out where the group's lair was located, but so far, they have had no luck. All they had were the 13 corpses, 2 from homeless people, 7 from a normal family and the others from the Royal family. But what every 'normal' person did not know, was that the Red Moon were not just terrorists. In fact, they were not humans at all, but evil, greedy sorcerers and beasts that wanted so badly to take revenge on especially the living, ever since they were banished by the Luohans and Yu Huang Da Di. They were originally sentenced to the Underworld prison forever, but had somehow managed to escape.

As Judge Pao carefully inspected the room for any useful clues, he noticed a shadow suddenly flashing behind him. A sinking feeling in his belly told him that what was behind him might be the very creature that murdered the innocent children mercilessly.

He whipped around swiftly and saw two calm amber eyes gleaming in the darkness. The creature let out a small, eerie howl. Suddenly, familiarity struck Pao like lightning and joy and surprise overwhelmed him. It was his friend, Fang! "After all those years, you've finally come back!", he exclaimed. Fang had been Pao's friend and companion for the past eighteen years, the two growing up together. When Fang was just a week old, his mother had abandoned him and let him freeze to death in a forest at winter. Fortunately, little 4-year-old Pao had found and rescued him. When Pao's family first discovered that Fang was a Huli Jing (when he accidentally revealed all his three tails), they had threatened to throw him out. But just in time Fang rescued Pao from a Sanzuwu, which made them let Pao keep the little fox. They had grown up together and did everything together, until one night Fang decided to escape. Now, they are both older and more mature, ready to overcome any challenges that awaited them.

Suddenly, Fang let out a high-pitched bark. Following his friend's gaze, judge Pao was shocked by what the fox had uncovered. At first, he did not understand what was so special about the bloodstained wall. Then Fang tentatively poked a paw through it, which sent ripples dancing around, as though the wall was water. Pao let out a small gasp. They had found a magical portal, their first clue! Courageously, they went through the portal together, and found themselves inside a huge cave. Pao's eyes widened in mixed feelings of shock, pity and anger. In front of them lay the cruellest scene they had ever seen – The innocent souls of thousands, locked behind rough iron bars, with molten magma flooding up to their necks. And whenever they tried to climb to the top to escape, they would fall back down, into the sea of screaming bodies, like flies trapped in a pitcher plant. Except they could not die, and had no body to offer. If no one was to rescue them, they would be stuck in this hell-like dungeon, until the end of time.

Out of nowhere, a bleak and evil shriek sounded, echoing all around. It was Taotie, the leader of the Red Moon! Fang's fur bristled and he bared his teeth, a low growl rumbling from his throat. In response, the Taotie raised its skull head and bellowed. Pao felt as though his ears were about to burst and stopped still for a moment. Without a second thought, Taotie took this opportunity and as quick as lightning, pinned Pao down with one of its massive, razor-sharp talons. Feeling its acrid breath and acidic saliva spray, Judge thought he was about to die.

Just then, he felt the beast's weight disappear. Dizzily opening his eyes, he realized what was going on. Fang was battling the monster, even though it was ten times bigger and more powerful than him. He had saved Pao again! Continuously scratching Taotie, Fang was slowly weakening it. But the fox also bore some wounds. Fresh blood

was dripping from bite scars and long scratches. Eventually, Fang collapsed onto the ground. He gave Pao a sad whine, and pain and distress glittered in his watery eyes. Celebrating Fang's defeat, Taotie chittered in laughter. Immediately, Pao regained consciousness, grabbed his dagger and jabbed it into one of Taotie's small yet sharp eyes. It screeched in pain, frantically trying to shake the dagger off. The blood stung its other eyes, blinding it completely. As a result of this, it crashed around in random directions and fell into one of the magma pits. Within seconds, its entire body burst into flames and all that was left of it were the small bubbles that slowly rose to the surface. The Red Moon had been defeated, yet it was not time to celebrate yet. Pao hurried to Fang's side, but it was too late. Tears dripped from a defeated, sadness—overwhelmed Pao. They had just met, but had to leave each other so soon, this time maybe forever. His friend lay on his side, a pool of scarlet blood next to him. Gathering all his remaining strength, Fang lifted his tail, showing that he was grateful for his best friend being by his side in his last moments.

And with that, he closed his eyes, as though drifting off into a peaceful sleep.

My Youthful Boy

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Cheng, Jessica – 14

Affection lingered in my eyes as I watched my perceptive yet naïve boy perched cross-legged on the narrow tree branch, leaning against the sturdy trunk, back towards the radiant sunrise, finding solace in the endless pages of valiant warriors and legendary heroes – something I knew he had the potential to be, if only he somehow never begins to give in to the lure in the darkness outside.

Watching the back of his head buried in a book, I couldn't help but grimace to myself; instead of sitting wide-eyed in a classroom, surrounded by a carefree yet studious ambient, here he was – resting composedly in my barren courtyard and flipping through worn-out pages – an obvious future prodigy, destined to pursue the privilege to battle against evil and ignite life into this bleak, desolate plain of a world. I know it will not be long until the inevitable fact: that he is better off somewhere else, somewhere that actually deserves him – finally dawns on him; all this time, he has been an oblivious prisoner trapped within the bounds of his own mind, unable to learn and flourish from the lessons of experience.

If he cannot experience the outside world, I will prepare him for the outside world – through the land of stories. He may grow tired of my ways of teaching soon, his natural instincts kicking in, wanting to be released from confinement with a sharp intake of breath into the fresh, crisp air of society. I do not care. I will do what is best for him. If his harsh hatred for me just so happens to keep his company in the dead of night for many nights to come, then so be it. But he must know that hell will likely freeze over if he thinks I will ever let him out into the world with no honest education. No matter how untraditional my methods are, nor does it matter how much he thinks his stories have already taught him all he has to know. As long as his inquisitive mind stays, my devotion and determination to share my knowledge will too.

As it turns out, my boy is a natural learner, finding the utmost joy playing the devil's advocate, constantly questioning everything, anything.

"Why?" he would ask indignantly, with a pout and a tip of his chin. "Why should she be the one getting punished for stealing? It's not like she did anything wrong... did she? Why then?"

I would answer his mystifying questions with a soft smile, keeping to myself the fact that this world was rarely fair, especially to those like myself: grief-ridden, empty widows wandering aimlessly down the streets of this desolate town.

I would often try to banish thoughts of the evils of the world into a corner of my mind, but soon enough, something else would start to infiltrate, and my kindling smile would gradually fade, knowing the time of learning and inquisitiveness for my boy would unavoidably fade away, leaving not even a whisper of smoke in its trail. Nevertheless, all the gold in the world could ever halt me from satisfying the ripe mind of my boy.

I tried to suppress the unwavering unnerve of my doubt. I had to think realistically; the most promising buds need enough love and care for it to blossom into beautiful flowers, and even then, it is impossible to guarantee its success against its many other competitors; so what will become of my boy when unleashed into the world of duplicity? As tranquil as he looked right now, I knew that one day he would ultimately be forced to hide a lifetime of bitterness under the shards of a placid facade, and to have to constantly feed the growing monster of desperate yearning for contrite answers.

Endless possibilities plague my mind. What if my boy succumbs to the grave influences of the outside world, changing from a full-of-potential boy to a resentful man, filled to the brim with hatred? What if my boy follows in the footsteps of the old adage: 'familiarity breeds contempt' and strays from his humble roots, slowly but surely drifting away from his beginning to look down on the many poor, lost souls beneath him? Or, what if my flame

of carefree, untroubled happiness suddenly dims into a mere flicker of uncertainty and hesitance, the once stubborn, fiery spark dampened by the hardships of exploitation in life?

As much as a jewel can try to stay hidden, trying to stay buried under heaps and heaps of suffocating specks of limestone. Alas, the effort is futile as it is only a matter of time until a thoughtless mercenary comes along to dig up every ounce of beauty from under this earth, watching it get bid for the highest prices imaginable, only to laugh, boasting to everyone they know: "I made a profit."

There are so many different possibilities, but only one outcome. So much room for error, but no place for fault. So many roads to choose, but only one path able to be taken. I wonder: what will happen? I will keep my boy hidden. I swear I will protect him with my life. Until he comes of age to make decisions for himself, I will never let him witness the dangers of the world.

For both his sake and mine, I really hope my boy will one day know the real worth of the most dazzling, brilliant in the world: him. I just know that he will one day escape from the finite bounds of the creations of mankind; his mind is unlike anything I could ever begin to imagine: something kindling with creativity, burning with passion, smouldering with the angst of confinement. What he will choose to be, is completely up to him. Even if his future career may appear to be quite ordinary, my boy will find a way to surpass all standards of the norm.

What will he choose to become?

Hm, a lawyer, maybe.

The Complete (and Uncensored) Tale of Judge Pao's Final Days in Office

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ho, Nga Kiu – 13

During the late Song Dynasty, there was a certain politician whose name was whispered up and down the streets of Kaifeng, a man who was rumoured to be seven feet tall, with a god-given crescent on his forehead marking the sign of his divine heritage, a ruthless warrior on both the political field and beyond.

This was Judge Pao: a middle-aged man with eyes well beyond his years, his most distinguishing feature bring a speck of cloudy white in the iris of his left eye. He carried himself with a knife-sharp spine and perfect poise that seemed to come naturally to him. Judge Pao bore the air and the mannerisms of a king, turning heads on the street even when he was wearing simple straw robes. Of course he was not seven feet tall, could not bring out evil spirits within criminals' souls with just a touch; these pieces of gossip and false promises were armour he wore carefully, for even rumours had some use. In the end, they built up his legend so completely that whenever trouble-makers in Kaifeng heard his name, they thought of his unflinching, merciless reputation and a shudder travelled through their spines.

This is the story of how the Legend of Judge Pao collapsed.

The year was 1050. Judge Pao had been an investigating censor for six years. On the day our story starts, he was sitting in an empty pavilion, swilling the dark, oversteeped dregs of his tea in a porcelain cup.

Footsteps pounded towards him. His secretary, Gongsun Ce, peeked through the pavilion door. Pao put down his newspaper with a sigh. "What is it?" He asked. Gongsun Ce put a hand to his chest, voice catching as he tried to catch his breath. "You asked me...to find any information I could..." he gasped out, "Zhang Yaozuo has been promoted to the State Finance Commissioner."

Judge Pao shot up, paper forgotten. "He was just a minor official two days ago!" His voice flooded through with disbelief. To watch Judge Pao's mind at work was a fascinating thing. His eyes blazed with fury and indignance, and Gongsun could almost hear the gears in his head ticking away.

Zhang Yaozuo was a minor official, a sleazy businessman with a weak disposition and a penchant for cheap-trick business ideas. It was no secret that the emperor favoured him. It was also no secret that Judge Pao loathed him.

"Gongsun. This isn't just one of the emperor's whims."

"No," Gongsun agreed.

"That's why we must figure this out."

When they got back to the emperor's palace, the emperor was sprawled on his throne, a goblet of strong wine in one hand, his other hand resting on the wrist of his favourite consort, Concubine Zhang Ruoxi. When she saw them, her lips pulled back in a snarl. Judge Pao did not flinch. "Fame like mine comes with its fair share of enemies," he had once told Gongsun.

The emperor lifted his eyes from his wine. "What are you here for?" His voice was bored.

Judge Pao stood his ground. "Your majesty, I would like to know why you appointed Zhang Yaozuo as the State Finance Commissioner. He has not done anything particularly spectacularly since coming to Kaifeng, and to promote him from such a low rank to such a high one suddenly seems rather...impulsive."

The emperor's eyes narrowed. Concubine Zhang's fingers curled around his arm. "Your majesty," she said in her soft, syrupy voice, "Mr Pao does not seem to be in his right mind. Why, Mr Yaozuo helped tremendously during the Nanjing Silk Case. Perhaps you should send him out and hear him out when he's calmed back down."

The emperor waved a hand at Judge Pao, attention already diverted. "You are dismissed. Go."

Judge Pao did not move. "Your esteemed majesty, how could you select such a mediocre, talentless man instead of considering one of the thousands of hopefuls who would line up in front of the palace doors just for a chance at this position? In prostration, time after time, I have seen the dynasty's founders painstakingly select intelligent ministers for appointments, even at times when our treasuries overflowed with coin. Our current financial state is dire. Dangers face us from every direction. How could you appoint such an...an *amateur* of lesser intellect and watch him dash the country's hopes and neglect all our matters?" He shook his head. "With all due respect, your subject feels awfully sorry that your majesty would be so easily beguiled."

The emperor's face had turned bright purple. "GET OUT!" He barked. "Get out right now and don't come back!" Spittle flew from his mouth as he slammed his goblet down. The last thing Judge Pao saw before the palace doors closed was the sight of Concubine Zhang running her long fingers over the emperor's arm reassuringly.

Gongsun glanced anxiously at Judge Pao. "Sir, what do we do now?"

Judge Pao spun around. His eyes were steely. "Find Zhan Zhao. Dig up anything about Zhang Yaozuo's past you can find. I want to know his favourite colour, his childhood pet, his nickname, everything."

"Something is up, and we must figure out what it is."

Two days later, they were gathered at the Wind Lily Pavilion, the estate where Zhang Yaozuo had grown up. When they finally reached Zhang Yaozuo's quarters, Judge Pao looked around imperiously, a sharp gleam in his eye. Judge Pao left no stone unturned, and he was determined to find evidence that Zhang Yaozuo's sudden promotion had been dishonest.

"Search everywhere," Judge Pao commanded. "The bureau, under the bed, even the floorboards. If you find anything at all, bring it to me."

Half the day passed. It was night when Zhan Zhao finally found something among the cobwebs and rat corpses.

"Sir," he said breathlessly, hair matted with sweat, "I found this hidden in the walls. Look!"

Judge Pao took it, eyes shining and wide. It was a small booklet, made up of thin sheets of wrinkled parchment bound tightly together with red string. "It's a diary," he said, amazed. He scanned the pages, flipping back and forth quickly. "It says here that his family had a plan, to promote one of their daughters—he calls her Xixi in this—to a concubine, where she can eventually win the emperor's favour and ensure the Zhang family a secure position in the dynasty." He looked up, tight-lipped. Zhan Zhao and Gongsun were aware Judge Pao hated schemes like these.

Judge Pao flipped to the back of the book. "Xixi...Xixi..." He stopped abruptly. His face had turned puce. "Zhang Ruoxi," he said, in a voice barely more than a whisper. "That's who Xixi was. Concubine Zhang Ruoxi. Zhang Yaozuo is her uncle. *She's* the reason Zhang Yaozuo got promoted."

Judge Pao was a man of his word. He visited the emperor's court every day after his discovery, and each time was thrown out of the palace hall. It was rumoured by the courtiers that frequented the palace that every time he addressed the king, he spoke at length of reasons to demote Zhang Yaozuo and repeated hundreds of sentences, his voice so loud and agitated that even the emperor was too stunned to speak. Concubine Zhang was at all the proceedings as well; her long fingers curling tightly around the emperor's embroidered sleeve, lip curling as if Judge Pao was merely a large cockroach on her doorstep.

Then one day, everything changed.

In a memorandum on December 27, Judge Pao issued a formal statement: that either Zhang Yaozuo would stay as the state finance commissioner and Judge Pao would resign, or Zhang Yaozuo would be removed from his post and Judge Pao would stay with the emperor.

After many days of careful consideration, the emperor made his decision.

Judge Pao packed his bags and left the palace.

Before he left Kaifeng, he stood on the palace stairs and issued his last ever speech:

“To the citizens of Kaifeng, even though I will not serve as your Justice anymore, I would like all of you to remember that even though I will be leaving, I left in the name of justice, and only because your emperor is fool enough to obey honeyed words and double-edged compliments, instead of listening to the cold, unshakeable ruling of absolute justice. I bid you all farewell.”

And that was how Judge Pao’s legend crumbled to the ground.

Months later, people walking down the streets would still wonder why Judge Pao didn’t just use his hidden, mystical powers; they still believed in his divine heritage, even though he had already left the city. Judge Pao heard of these musings from his loyal servants and friends—Gongsun Ce and Zhan Zhao—and only smiled knowingly, and said,

“Let them think what they want to think. Let them believe what they believe. In the end, it is still Judge Pao who solves the case.”

It Began with a Cat

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ho, Vanessa – 13

My cat took one last shuddering breath and stilled: she was dead. It was a crisp Autumn morning, turning the tip of my nose crimson like the leaves on the trees. They dangled on the fingers of the branches. One little tug on the leaves and they would go plummeting down, then be swallowed by the other forlorn leaves—trapped. I was a leaf. My cat was too. And I was closer to letting go of the branch.

"Mei—mei, get ready for work and stop gazing out the window. If they catch you like this, it'll be the end of you!" My brother chuckled but staring into his hazelnut eyes— I could only see one thing: pure panic.

"Stop worrying. I've been doing this for eight years. Have more faith in me, ge—ge." Maybe I said that more to reassure myself.

"And every day, my hair grows whiter, and a chunk falls out." I tried to laugh at his attempt at a joke, but it didn't feel like the right time. Not when I was going to put myself in danger yet again. And my cat died.

I left the room shortly after and deftly pinned my locks of ink—black hair into a bun. It refused to behave today. Maybe I was less patient compared to the previous days. After losing the battle against my hair, I shoved my zhanjiao futou hat onto my head frustratedly, then deftly drew two dark swirls above my upper lip: a moustache. Then I hurried to work, feeling more weighed down than excited. I would usually be exhilarated to go to court. I could mock all the self—righteous airheads who had the nerve to call themselves my co—workers and keep my family from starvation so that we could live a life without worry. "Killing two birds with one stone!" I'd always say.

They heard the swish of my blood—stained silk robe skimming the marbled tiling and the soft thud of my shoes that were two sizes too big before they saw me. Not exactly me. I was not mei—mei anymore. Nor was I a leaf.

"Judge Pao has entered!" A flourish of movement greeted me; people stood up respectfully. I strode to the front of the room and plopped into my seat unceremoniously.

"My lord! Thank you for taking up this case!"

"You may address me as 'Your Honor'. I was irritated: disguised as a male, knowing they would not appreciate me like this if I came as a woman. I knew this. I always had. But for some reason, it bothered me more today.

"Opening statements." I intoned, pitching my voice an octave lower. They started rambling; their voices were drowned in desperateness, twisted with lies. I counted the time tick by, stretching and pulling at my already worn—out patience. This was useless. As if I was in a trance, I stood up and floated towards the entrance. I left. It was as if I froze time. I saw the surprise sneak up on them, wrapping their legs and arms to their chairs, leaving them unable to move. I ran with wings unfurled and an unruly grin splotched on my face. But, as fast as my escape was, chaos chased me faster.

"Judge Pao!" Many people called after me, finally snapping out of their confusion. Hurried footsteps thundered in my wake. My absence was against the court rules. It was seen to be close to treason, especially with the honour of being a judge held. Someone voiced my thoughts. "Judge Pao, you have gone against the law. You will be a judge no longer. You've already had two strikes!" Someone yelled. And just like that, the weight of my actions crashed down onto me, the horror of what I had done giving me an icy punch back to reality. I turned back and fled to the courtroom.

The desperation that was once in the eyes of the attorneys pleading their case was now mirrored in mine. My eyes were bulging. Fear choked me. It grabbed at me, clawed at me, strangled me. It left me bare, stripping me off all my disguises, all my protection until I was not a leaf, nor Judge Pao, or mei—mei. I was just me— plain, old me. I saw the anger in their eyes, hungry and devouring as they chased after me. I saw the dawning realization wash over them. I was not a man. Judge Pao was not a man. They ran after me. They ran with passion. They ran with defiance. Thump. Thump. Thump. Trepidation suffocated me like waves pulling boats under the murky

depths of the unknown. But I could swim. I was not going to be their rabbit to their predator. I was not going to be weak or defenceless. I wanted to carve out those smug smirks tattooed onto their faces after seeing me— the real, candid me. I wanted to rip out their hair and show them I was not a damsel in distress. I wanted to bring them the suffering, burning, festering hunger those of the lower class and middle class felt. Like my family felt. Like how my cat felt. My cat. My sweet, doe-eyed cat who died at the hands of famine. She died at the hands of the court for giving not giving me enough to provide for my family. And she died at the hands of me. I cracked. Guilt shot me like an arrow. I crumpled to the floor like porcelain— fragile and thin. The blood—red silk of my robe pooled around me like a blood bath as if I hurt myself. In a way, I did. I remained there closing my red-rimmed eyes and hugging myself. My cat. I needed revenge. I would take them down with me. "Kill them. Kill them. Kill them." Voices chanted around me, repeating it as if it was a mantra. Their voices rose to a crescendo and pounded my eardrums, dragging their hoarse voices down the nape of my neck. "Kill them," they said once more.

So, I did. Or that was what I thought. I was too consumed by rage and hatred to know what was happening. Was the room spinning? Was it silent, or were there wails for help? I did not know. My only wish was to kill them. But all I could see was black. And then the floor melted beneath me. I fell.

I was falling like a leaf. I felt the air scrape against my face. My hair, now wild, snaked around my unprotected face, twisting and curling around me, bringing tears to my clouded eyes. "Hello, Judge Pao." A man appeared. No, not a man. The devil himself. He had horns that towered over his bed of ruddy hair with eyes that were a contrasting white. Flecks of gold were splattered on the lids of his pupilless eyes, making him look supernatural. There was a plethora of scars scattered on his face that was etched so deep many needed stitches to close the gaping wounds. Emotionlessly, he enunciated, "You are in hell." I cackled. What kind of dream was this? I was feral. I was completely and utterly mad. I belched out another depressing laugh. He simply looked at me with disdain and carried on speaking. "Judge Pao, you have sinned greatly. Be thankful you aren't tortured with the others." As if on cue, the pleas for mercy rang out from the darkness around me. I cackled some more, voice hoarse. "You have two choices," He spoke over my laughter, "One: to suffer in the pits of fire like them, or two: to become bound to hell for eternity but bring justice to those in hell to repent for your sins." He grinned as if he had given me the best deal of the century.

"No one would follow a female judge. I would rather suffer in the pits than disguise myself again." I asserted, rolling my eyes in the process.

"Make them respect you. Those in hell do not have a choice whether to follow you. This offer is scarce— do not dismiss it so quickly."

I sighed. "I will choose—"

It is a crisp Autumn morning. I can feel the chill in the air, yet everything still looks the same dreadful red. No brother is here to coddle me this time. I get ready. I twist my locks of ink—black hair into two braids with an expert hand. I place my zhanjiao futou hat onto my head with carefulness and deftly paint my cheeks rouge. Then I leave for work.

They hear the swish of my snowy silk robe skimming the blood—infused concrete and the soft drumbeat of my cat's feet following my swift strides before they see me. Not exactly me. I am not mei—mei anymore. Nor am I a leaf.

"Hell's most renowned judge has blessed us with her presence. The Supernatural Judge Pao and her cat has entered!" I smirk.

Judge Bao– Case #100

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ho, Venetia – 11

A misty cloud passed over the graveyard. A nearby lake shimmered in the eerie moonlight. A figure's reflection materialised on the surface of the water, projected at a middle-aged man sitting by the lake. He wore a long purple robe, delicately embroidered with dragons. On his middle finger, there was a golden ring covered with faces staring longingly at the world. Beside him laid a creature, with scales and small whiskers and even bluntly cut talons. Everyone called him Judge Bao.

The woman in the water spoke pleadingly.

"My uncle, his cursed soul haunts the land of the living, causing many horrible deaths, including me! Please find him and punish him!"

Hearing this frightening news, Bao rose and said, "I will investigate this."

With the help of his dragon friend, they ascended through the ceiling into the night sky. Peeping from the mountain top, I saw them coming. *Where should I hide this time, I thought. No one has ever been able to capture me.*

Judge Bao found the woman's home. It was a small hut at the edge of the clearing. He searched meticulously, careful not to disturb anything. Room after room, but still no clues. Day turned into night. This was the place the woman told him to search. If only she could guide him once more. The determined judge knelt by a tiny spring's shore, praying for the reappearance of the woman.

Suddenly the woman reappeared, shimmering on the surface of the water.

"There is a secret treasure under the floorboards," the woman spoke confidently and disappeared. *The floorboards! Why hadn't I remembered? I must stop Bao.* Bao dashed into the hut, inspecting every floorboard.

In a matter of seconds he would find it. I need...a distraction, yes, one that will lead him away from the hut and let me have enough time to sneak in and get it.

I went to the window in front of Bao, letting him see the glint of my knife. Just like I had thought, he stood up and tried to follow me. I climbed a nearby tree, leaving my knife there as bait. Bao ran out of the hut trying to find me. My knife caught his attention. He leaped onto his dragon and they flew up, up, up, among the treetops. *This is it, my only chance.*

Skillfully, I lifted the loose floorboard where I hid the scroll on which the locations of all my secret hideouts, names of every man and woman I killed, even my instructions were inscribed. I shoved the scroll in my coat pocket. *That was a close call.*

When I finally got up the steep mountain, I took a breath and looked over the land, taking it all in. I sat down and took out the scroll, this time, 2 words covered the page. It said, 'Kill Bao'. My final instructions.

Suddenly, a purple mist took over. I tried to yell out but my mouth was covered. Was I drowning? Suffocating? Spirits unwillingly choked me, locking my throat tightly. I couldn't see, but I heard a quiet voice in my head. I knew that voice too well.

"Melanie, What are you doing here?"

"Uncle, I am helping you, remember? This was all part of the plan."

"Oh yes, I was too distracted, too anxious, Bao has never failed."

"I would not have asked you to kill me if I didn't think our plan would work. I've got him wrapped around my finger."

The strange mist subsided, I could breathe again. I had to follow these orders. It didn't feel right though. Strange. I climbed back down and headed for the tree, somehow I knew Bao would be there waiting for me.

BANG! Before I could get any closer, a hand gripped my shoulder with as much gusto as the wind. It clenched harder and harder until my shoulder went numb. This was it. I couldn't hide anymore. I tried to turn around and face my fate but instead, Bao himself turned to face me. I reached for my knife, just to realise it wasn't there. I had left it in the tree and now I was weaponless.

My legs gave way under me. I sank to the floor, unable to get up again. Purple mist surrounded me once more, but this time, the spirits dragged me into their grasps, holding me just hard enough that I couldn't escape. This mist, it was odd. It made me feel like my voice was coming out of my mouth uncontrollably, yet at the same time my brain urged me not to tell Bao. Alas, there was nothing I could do. I told Bao about my victims, my tactics and even my sacred scroll. For some reason I never mentioned Melanie, not once.

I let out a howl as my soul longed to leave my body, as if it was a prison cell.

"That's enough, but tell me young man, why? Why all of this suffering and pain?" Bao spoke soothingly, tempting every part of me to tell him about Melanie, but I couldn't even remember our plan. If only I could recall our discussions. There was that tugging feeling, nagging at me. I needed to know.

"I – I – I don't know." I knelt at his feet.

"Please, help me remember. Aren't those rumours true? Look into my soul, find out for me. You're my last hope."

"Well I can do that" He stared into my eyes, probably wondering if this was a ruse. "It might damage you, but if that's what you desire, I shall proceed."

"Yes, yes. It feels right."

Bao knelt and put his hand on my forehead. His misty eyes stared through me. In no time we were surrounded by a supernatural glow of force. I felt like I was being consumed, but it felt more pleasant than whatever Melanie put me through. AAAH! I screamed in anguish as a beam of light passed through my mind. I lost consciousness.

When my vision started to focus, I saw Judge Bao's misty eyes. I always thought of Bao as my enemy. But now I can only express my gratitude. Bao said he pieced my mind back together. A force stronger than the darkest magic had shattered my memories and thoughts. An intuition that I had had all along finally resurfaced.

"I know who this sorcerer is. Her name is Melanie, my niece."

"I suspected as much," Bao said,

"It's her evil spirit. It screams death and violence. But I'm afraid I cannot help you now, not unless I free them."

"Who? Free who?"

"A long time ago, I captured many cursed souls, just like your niece's. Their spirits were bad but hers was worse. I tried many times to catch this demon but it cunningly infiltrated a person's soul, damaged it and left in split seconds. I had to do something so I asked the best sorcerers to help me contain the demon. Only one

sorcerer agreed, and using the power of the cursed souls, I trapped the demon inside the sorcerer's body, magically imprisoning it. I thought that a great sorcerer was enough to stop the demon from affecting the host's soul, but I was mistaken. From then on, the demon was able to travel through the bodies of the sorcerer's descendants. This, I fear, is what happened to Melanie. It is trapped there for now, but who knows what it could do?"

I tried to take all this in. It made sense, the strong magic, the mist, the cursed scroll. She was behind all this, controlling me and using me as a pawn for her dirty work. How could I be so naive? I knew it wasn't my fault but nevertheless, I felt guilty and ashamed.

"So what do we do now?"

"Free the spirits and let them unite and kill the demon once and for all. It is extremely dangerous, but this is our only chance to eradicate the demon."

We opened the scroll and with Bao's power, we summoned Melanie.

"You think you can stop me?"

"I can't," Bao spoke with confidence, "but the cursed spirits can."

With that, we aimed Judge Bao's ring at Melanie.

"Cursed spirits, hear my call. I hereby free you from your prison. If you don't want to be cursed again, you must kill the demon!"

A barrage of shrieks and excited yelps echoed around the world. After a short discussion, an excited spirit stepped forward.

"After many decades of being trapped, we want our freedom back!"

Suddenly, Melanie was bombarded with flashes and other supernatural phenomena. She fought back with spi and purple mist, but it didn't seem to affect the spirits. A shriek rang out and a cheer erupted from the spirits. We finally got rid of the demon. I felt freer and happier than I had ever been. Nothing was weighing me down, not even guilt.

Thank you, Judge Bao. You saved us all!

The Emperor and Me

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Huang, Liliana – 11

“The palace is forbidden to commoners,” a voice calmly whispered.

The shadow dropped a bowl on the floor, shattering it. Then, it scurried into the night without a word being said. The stern voice speaking was Bao, one of the most renowned judges in ancient China. Bao smiled faintly and with his blood-red silk robe swishing gently behind him, picked up a piece of the shattered glass. Strangely, he placed it in his pocket calmly. Then, he exited the room and disappeared into the dark, murderous night.

The emperor stood before Bao, a man of power, pride and dignity. Bao lowered his head and listened to his master go on for what felt like days talking about how lying was treacherous, resulting in immediate death. “The palace is like the back of my hand. I know that no one could ever enter even without my guards in silver armor,” the emperor retorted, losing the little patience he had.

Bao left after the emperor’s long rambling, solemnly not being able to convince him that there in fact was an intruder. Later in the evening, the emperor barged into the chambers of Bao, where he was speaking to the spirit of his late father. “Bao. I need your help. You were right. I should have believed you.” The emperor showed him the shards of glass he picked up from the ground. This had been why Bao only took one piece from the broken bowl. Bao knew that the shadow in the temple was from the village, because of his sunken eyes and limping leg – signs of the hard life from the farms. People were right to sense Bao was smart, but who really was Bao? A renowned, respectable judge? Or the opposite of everything he was known for?

Bao smiled with a gleam of wickedness in his eyes. The emperor, not noticing, sat on the floor next to him and started questioning Bao about whom the figure lurking in the palace was. Bao simply replied, “I do not know any of this, sire.” Then he turned away, narrowing eyes overlapping with his inaudible chuckle.

The next morning, rain slashed the windows of the royal palace. Bao lay in bed, pondering about what the emperor had mentioned yesterday. The next moment, a messenger burst into Bao’s quarters and started speaking calmly but with visible fear. “The king found that there is a prisoner on the loose—”

Bao gently released the handle of the tiny dagger, no expression on his face but a still, cold smile. He walked across the room and placed the slumped soldier on the edge where no one could see him. Bao then returned to his bed and laid down once again. He knew the messenger was named Lee Sungwei, because of his dark brown, wide-round eyes. Bao knew everyone in the palace by a quick glimpse. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door of the chamber. “Yes, come in,” Bao calmly smiled.

The emperor walked in, soaking in a wet robe from the pouring rain. “Bao did the messenger arrive yet?” he questioned, with hopeful eyes.

“Of course, sire. The news is...miserable. I cannot believe someone had the audacity to free a prisoner!” Bao replied, not fully thinking about his words.

“It is miserable news indeed. However, how did you know that someone let the prisoner free and something else did not happen to the prisoner?” the emperor asked, with knife-sharp eyes.

“Just an... educated guess,” Bao stuttered, lost for words.

“All right. I’ll leave you to rest now.” As the emperor left, his eyes glanced toward Bao quickly, then the door closed with a loud thud.

The next morning, the sun rose earlier than usual, a halo of reddish yellow rays surrounding the palace. Bao awoke before sunrise to meditate and watch the guards slowly fall into a daze then fall asleep. Bao rose from his seat, eyes glimmering with pure hatred. Then he took out a hidden scroll kept in his closet. Opening it, he glared at the words written on the paper: “Kill the emperor.” Bao sighed, staring at the large, cursive Chinese script written neatly on the paper. He stood in complete silence for a few minutes, then walked out of his chamber. He was going to do it.

As Bao was walking down the stone path, he wondered why they had commissioned him to assassinate the emperor. As if murdering a messenger was enough. Standing at the doors of the chamber, Bao quietly knocked with his left hand. He would need his right one to hold the dagger. Guards eyed Bao suspiciously, with large spears on hold. Bao walked majestically full of undeserved pride, ignoring the guards surrounding him. Holding his chin up, Bao confronted the emperor. This was his final mission. He could finally... "Bao! I am ashamed of you!" The emperor retorted, with eyes of fury and flaring nostrils.

"I...don't..know..what...you..mean, sire." Bao replied, with eyes of guilt darting around the room, but trying to remain calm. Then, among the sea of guards rose the figure that shattered the bowl in the temple. Only then did Bao see that he held a brooch, with the symbol of the secret sector that had ordered Bao to murder the emperor. Filled with horror and realisation, Bao recoiled from the man. He was the betrayer. A double snake that crumbled the establishment for Bao to be seized.

"Yes, he's the one who assassinated the messenger, sire." The man said, a smile forming on his face.

"Sire, he's lying! He was part of...He is the reason..."

"I don't want to hear anything from you, traitor! Take him to the dungeons!" The emperor shouted, with raging eyes and ears that were so red you could see the anger fuming.

Guards ruthlessly grabbed Bao by the wrists and dragged him to the dungeons. "You'll all regret this!" Bao cried, screaming helplessly.

There he lived for 20 years of his life, sunken deep and broken in the dungeons. That was the last 20 years of his life, for every day chewing on thoughts how his betrayal could have been undiscovered.

The Dragon's Witness

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Huang, Ziyang – 14

“... And it ran. Sprinting, clawing, lurching forward into the abysmal darkness like an unruly animal. Nothing more than a nightmarish pretence of a dream, the helpless reality of a human's pathetic repentance was ultimately the catalyst of its own demise. Scrambling for a material substance, it mangled desperately in the blank space, drowning in the inky silence. Deficit of any breath, a soundless scream imploded through its bones, hands reaching for its throat – before crumbling into nothing more than a pallid pile of ashen detritus.

My blood seemed to freeze within my veins, the shock of such a monstrosity paralysing me. The reflexive urge to look away seized my mind, yet my sights refused to shift, eyes peeled against my own will. A glimpse of a shadow suddenly rose above the crippled corpse that lay on the barren ground. Dancing between vision and reality, the figure flickered like that of something otherworldly, the muffled flapping of their cape-like hood smattering violently in the wind. Bathed in the opaline moonlight, glints of gold scintillated in the shape of the imperial dragon, embroidered in golden thread under their black robe.

Was it a vision birthed from hysteria? Or simply a trick of the light? It seemed the thought had only just crossed my mind before the figure dissipated into the obscurity of the twilight, never to –”

The rickety will of the wooden table seemed to crumble as a cacophony of battered, calloused hands slammed against the surface like a shower of meteors falling toward the earth – accompanied by the boisterous, drunken laughter that escaped their mouths in unison. “Oh Fenhua, your stories never fail to lift my spirits. Certainly impressive!” Lingyun said, exasperated from the almost ceaseless laughter as he wiped away the last dribbles of white liquor with the back of his hand. The rest of the crowd seemed to feast on Fenhua's rising bewilderment written all over his face, faltering at his companions' truly genuine disbelief. Perhaps it was the sheer horror of witnessing such a scene, or the scarring, visceral reality he had thought to have perceived, that it failed to occur to him the mere outlandishness of his tale.

The mocking sneers and cackles of the listeners drowned out his desperate stammers of truth as he only wallowed deeper and deeper into the depths below.

The humid, redolent smell of the bland, soup-like substance seemed to have only brushed against the thin lines of comprehension before he heard the subtle pitter-patter of footsteps. Like raindrops, drumming in their soft, rhythmic dance before slicing through the air like bullets, pounding, beating, unleashed with nature's fury. More and more people seemed to appear out of nowhere, the crowd growing from a stream to flooding every inch and stone of the muddy village roads. The stampede rushed forward, pushing and shoving as if they had been restrained for time out of mind, the sheer thought of something to fill their acrid, empty stomachs, their wide eyes crazed with hunger and desperation.

The arrogant, the pompous, the sick, the weak, never had such a diversity of a community stood together so closely. Hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, shackled together by one thing: starvation.

The other soldiers struggled to keep the situation under control, but it their efforts were nothing more than trying to fence water with spears and sticks. In the commander's own words: “Humans without food were nothing more than stray dogs begging for scraps. Wild, beastly, and vicious” – the people surged, throwing their bodies forward, dozens more falling like meagre playing cards, one after the other, staggering as others trampled over them without a moment's hesitation.

The violence ensued. Shrieks for help began to echo through the mass, those left behind either bloodied and bruised or crushed from the impact of the falling bodies. But the pack paid no attention to the weak, setting its sights on the target ahead of them. They sprawled through the streets, surrounded their prey, ferociously

gnashing their teeth and and lunged violently towards it, claws outreached to scoop just a drop of this heavenly elixir—

BAM!

The metal bowl toppled to the ground, flung from its seat on the dilapidated stool and collided with none other than another devout follower of survival in its low trajectory — taking both their hollow, pale stick-of-a-body and their splintered consciousness down together. The bowl's cloudy, watery contents splattered all over the barren, hard-baked earth. Any remnants of the fragile, tenuous threads that held this catastrophe from descending into the depth of unreturnable calamity seemed to tear in that very instant.

It was undoubtedly a person that now lay as 'dead as a doornail' beneath the bowl, pulverised by its crushing weight and impact — yet the corpse that lay sprawled on the ground was spared nothing more than a fleeting glance nor second thought. Hundreds more swarmed around the scene like bees to a hive, scooping their cracked, dry hands through the lukewarm puddles of what was left from the ground — as if the porridge would evaporate within seconds. Scrambling for every last, tantalising drop, impetuously ignoring the granules of dirt and ash that swirled in streaks of black and grey, agonised at even the smallest particle slip through the narrow gaps between each ragged, bony finger.

“P—Please, help me!” she shrieked, the very last syllables of her words faltering as they morphed into a shattering cry of pure anguish. She screamed with all the fortitude her lungs and mouth could muster, tearing vigorously at the last wretched strands of her heart, only to produce a mangled sound no words could ever describe. Every inch of her body felt ablaze, scorching with the fervent heat seemed to run within her veins, scathing, torching, burning her alive. A liquid fire that seemed to disintegrate every muscle and cell that still remained remotely intact, paralysing as her body began to seize uncontrollably — possessed by the excruciating pain.

Tortured wails echoed through the night, a scream of the soul as each cry rippled through the air like knives, stabbing at his consciousness. He could feel a debilitating prick as pearls of tears began to pool at the corners of his eyes, their sheen and brightness glistening under the cold lustre of the moonlight. Preparatory to even let a vestige of speech surrurate through, he desolately attempted to cease the bitter onslaught of tears and sobs that racked soundlessly in his chest, holding his breath in rigid silence as he constrained the vigorous flood of emotions behind a concrete dam of tenacious will, unbending and unwavering resolve. Brick by brick, stone by stone, time and time again — firmer and stronger than ever before, lest even the slightest cracks even form.

The dragon commanded the divine will and imperial power, a creature that even the heavens submissively kneeled before. Revered above all else, hailed as the 'epitome of auspiciousness', an empyrean beacon which graced the mortal realm with the wisdom of the celestials, bestowing the gift of ethereal brilliance that illuminated even the most delinquent of alleyways, exposing the most nefarious of sins. Yet “*with every light, there hath shadow*”, and the blinding eminence that bathed the ones below only exacerbated the harsh barriers that divided those that savoured the glory of justice and triumph, and the inevitable delinquents that still remained undetected — but not for much longer.

Ebony splotches of ink seemed to swallow him up as they encircled his thoughts in a bewitching dance. Each stroke and flick seemed to leap across the endless plains of crinkled, burnished paper, pages inscribed with a palpable brush and ink — yet seemed to detail a story beyond imagination. The very idea of it astounded him, such world like those which belonged to man so demented they could no longer differentiate between dreams and reality. Yet the prickling stare emanating from Judge Pao's unnervingly still gaze seemed to drag those painstaking seconds into eternity, eating away at his consciousness with both dilatory pace and icy hostility.

He fidgeted with the stained and blemished apron that he wore and the belt, aligned with the most versatile range of medical apparatus and practical medical herbs, pills, and chemicals, all fastened so closely at the waist. The doctor inquired, his voice haunted by a fearful undertone:

“I don’t understand. How is this possible? An entire village, mass starvation, citizens going missing, how did such a situation escalate like this...?”

Judge Pao’s voice rang with a subtle fury, reminiscent of the quiet qualms of thunder that warned the world of an impending storm:

“Those arrogant fools who call themselves ‘governors’ and their blatant disregard for the common folk must be responsible, yet their pride and selfishness is only useless in the face of resolving this. That’s why I must take matters into my own hands.”

“B—but what else could have really caused all this?”

Silence, followed by the whispers of an exasperated sigh.

“Poison.”

The Assassin

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Jiang, David – 13

The magistrate of Kaifeng, Bao Zheng, or 'Justice Bao' as he was known by his countrymen, was a man of little emotion. He was described as having unusually dark skin, a rugged countenance, and a stone-cold expression on his face most of the time. He made little acquaintances and spent time with no one save his family members and dealings at work. Perhaps his lack of passionate friends explained his favour of law and order over emotional connections. It was simply too brutal to experience the pain of prosecuting a friend. However, those who came across him felt an aura of sanity and protection in his vicinity. He certainly did not excite the emotions; instead, he was an ascetic, believing in taciturnity over pleasure.

It so happened one day in the autumn of 1061; Bao Zheng was reading clauses of law in his study and heard an extraordinary howling of the wind. It was violent and ear-piercing as a bagpipe. A phenomenal white dot materialised at the end of Bao's study room. This dot gradually increased in size and intensity and moulded into a silhouette, which morphed into a humanoid figure. The figure seemed to come straight from the underworld, with a face pale as moonlight, almost transparent and as reflective as a mirror, a clump of untidy hair flowing like a waterfall in all directions. This humanoid had permanently closed eyes, no feet and was in a position as if it were being hanged. Its lips were blood red, and it was over 6 feet tall. With it came a widespread feeling of fear and desolateness. The presence of such a creature could turn the most optimistic into one utterly devoid of all hope for man's redemption. The ghost was clothed in all-white attire and had the look of silk, extravagant and tasteful. The humanoid gave the look of a woman, but its voice rang like a blade scraping on ice, and even the undemonstrative Bao felt a coldness and panic spread through his body from head to toe. However, as usual, he maintained his confidence and suppressed the emotion.

The apparition howled like the winds of a tropical cyclone, but the sound that came out was muffled and indecipherable. Little made sense, even to the multilingual Bao. However, the ghoulish continued repeating the phrase: 'I was wronged,' pleading with a world without justice. Bao thought it beneficial to stay quiet and ignore the calls rather than attempt to solve a crime without context.

The days passed by, but the scene of the female ghost continued to torment Bao's mind. His life was built upon a belief in justice, and it disturbed him if a single soul was wronged. Like all great men of the time and age, Bao believed that it was unacceptable for corruption to go unsolved. He resolved a man of great honour, such as he, born to serve his life's purpose, would do anything in his power to ensure justice would be served, even posthumously.

Bao Zheng's photographic memory is to be noted, and he had already devised a vivid sketch of the figure within minutes. Then, with a jolt, he finally recognised her as the legendary, unnamed assassin seen around the empire assassinating influential political leaders in an attempted coup against the government in place, who suddenly disappeared from public view days ago. Bao Zheng's memory also happened to extend and incorporate the living quarters of every criminal ever committed in the central court and had travelled, disregarding all meetings and congregations, to the dwelling of the assassin dubbed 'satan's messenger.' Her body was found deep underneath the ground, and her bones, when tested, were found to contain high levels of deadly poison and drugs. Therefore it was light work for Bao to conclude that she was poisoned within the last 48 hours. Furthermore, a cheap but authentic jade seal of the Dowager Empress of Song China was buried with the body. He quickly deduced that the Dowager was directly involved in the execution.

Carrying the weight of this information, Justice Bao went on a tour of the country, visiting the homes of those who had been allegedly murdered by this assassin. He found a myriad of unique hints and clues, such as a compass that led towards the imperial palace and a sword belonging to a royal executioner. This was already quite incriminating, implying that these influential politicians died at the hands of the central government and not by the peasant's revolt or this assassin. At this point, Bao was almost certain that the actual murderer of politicians

was the Dowager, attempting to purge the opposition to the totalitarian state, but lacked the bedrock evidence for this.

For the next 3 months, Bao, in a relentless effort to rid the world of unfairness and to bring just and peace to all, sought groundbreaking, undeniable evidence of homicide committed by the Dowager on political opponents. One day, having followed his routine of searching officials' houses in secret, he came across the home of a particular deceased army officer, Su Guozhi, who died of unknown circumstances the previous year, and whose house now lay in a dilapidated state. Under the rubble, all that Bao could scavenge was a golden watch, a bottle of hemlock poison and an old, dirty note. The note read: 'I hear them now. I hear the men outside. I see them sneaking through the streets in the dead of night, and I hear screaming. Screaming emanating from every home unlucky enough to be in the way of this vicious purge. I am next. I will not die at the hands of the government scoundrels, each wielding a double-bladed sword and an Imperial search warrant. This war machine, without remorse, or sense, just the bitter resolve and orders it must follow...(words unable to make out.) ...I must go now. The sadistic, evil Dowager will not condone any sign of disloyalty. Heaven calls me. Let the good men of the world drink poison and die in opposition to the corrupt government.'

Bao almost screamed in a mix of joy and despair. He had finally found the undeniable evidence of homicide, incriminating the Dowager and the totalitarian state. At this moment, the Emperor could ultimately do away with the Dowager. This was the chance for justice to be restored and for the dynasty to redeem itself.

Bao mailed the letter directly to the Emperor that night in the highest spirits. He slept in contentment, pondering a just, optimistic Eutopia in which every person could live in complete fairness and harmony. 'That day is far from today,' Bao said as he closed his eyes in absolute contentedness. At this moment, he would never have guessed that this night would be his last.

At night, he was dealing with the regular, sorting affairs of the afterlife as the immortal Yama of the Infernal Bureaucracy. Then, after admitting many of the dead, he was shocked to see the Song Emperor in the crowd with a royal dagger stuck in his chest.

'Your Majesty, what has been done,' inquired the Intern Bao.

'You'll see,' was the reply.

The 63-year-old Bao Zheng woke with a painful jolt in a puddle of his own blood. The world Bao was in the previous day had flipped onto its head. The Dowager intercepted the letter he sent, who promptly murdered the Emperor and took to the throne. No human on this earth could now sentence or imprison the Dowager, who saw all and ruled all. More hurt inside than on the outside, Bao Zheng crept to his feet and crawled to the top of a nearby mountain, watching the world he had spent his entire life building and perfecting fall into ruin. He saw his life's work undone in an instant. Imperial soldiers were marching up the mountain in pursuit of Bao, the 'prime opposition to the state and the people.' At this moment, Bao only saw hate; he saw the thoroughly bad in this world. He carved his last words on the side of a rock: 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.' Seeing impending doom for humanity. In utter despair, the Immortal Yama of the Department of death, advisor of the Emperors for 25 years, saw no salvation or justice in man and downed a pint of hemlock.

'Being the good guy is never easy,' he thought, closing his eyes for the last time.

The Last Case

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Kwan, Maximilian – 12

On that evening, the calm red sun cast a red blanket of light over the mountains. On that evening, the blood-red ball of fire silently plunged into the ocean. On that evening, an elderly, weathered and exhausted man sat down and faced the fading red clouds to the west. The silence was only occasionally dotted with the cries of birds and the distant crash of waves on the cliff far below. The retired Judge Pao, disconnected from his former greatness, success and honour, gazed at the reflection on the water pond nearby as if he was reflecting over the good days – adventuring and combatting crime, fighting for justice, standing alongside his colleagues and friends. But he left behind those memories. He did not reminisce of those events. He did not cling on to his former glory. He lived a peaceful, bittersweet life of solitude.

Later that evening, Judge Pao felt a familiar presence. A few seconds later, there was a friendly rapping on the door. Pao sauntered downstairs and cautiously opened the door. Standing outside his house was Gongsun Ce, his personal secretary, trusted adviser and colleague for a long time. "Greetings, old friend!" Gongsun was delighted and energetic to meet his former colleague. Pao couldn't exactly say the same, with his faded red robes, slightly tattered belt, hat stained with tea and unkempt grey beard. Nevertheless he welcomed Gongsun in and brewed tea.

After sitting down at a table, the tone suddenly shifted to a dark, grim tone. After living in solitude for so long, Pao didn't know what to expect, but it couldn't have been his worst fear. The news was only the worst: Pao's archenemy, the subject of a case that had been left unresolved a few decades ago, was planning a return.

This case was the most deceiving, frustrating and mysterious case that Judge Pao had ever taken on. He had spent countless restless nights staring blankly over the evidence, fetching faded memories of the scenes, working out the correlation. The department didn't know the subject's name, origin or gender. The department didn't know the organisation, employers or incentive. They weren't even sure about the perpetrator's intention, which is valuably important in understanding a crime. They only knew that the criminal wielded double katanas, wasn't a very skilled problem solver but exceptional at parkour and athleticism. They wore a long-sleeve top, long trousers and mostly head-covering headwear, similar to the likes of a ninja suit. And perhaps, most importantly, they sought destruction of justice. This would be a difficult case.

The following day, at sunset, Judge Pao and his trusted second-in-command headed out. They hiked across the mountains, through the valleys, past the rivers, until they reached a gloomy rock, about the height of a normal person, in the middle of nowhere. Pao looked at the place, reminiscing the past when he used to travel here every night to fight for justice. He placed his palm on the rock and started chanting. Gongsun joined in, and a glowing aura started surrounding them. A geometrically round pattern about 10 metres in diameter started glowing red out of the ground and surrounded them. Suddenly, the moon flushed red and the ground rumbled. Gongsun leapt away as the rock flashed in a brilliant vertical beam of light, a cloud of smoke was released and an opening to the underworld appeared. As they did over 20 years ago, they jumped into the hole and plummeted down to the world under.

As they zoomed through the tunnel, they started accelerating and red characters streamed past them. In a flash, space and time stretched and they found themselves levitating about half a metre above the ground. They jumped down and landed in an empty room. It looked like an interrogation room, filled with nothing but air and blank white walls. Pao and Gongsun calmly strolled out the door and walked down the corridor.

All the employees who passed them stopped to turn at both of them, remembering the days when the head and deputy head used to lead the department. Their presence was well acknowledged by all who made way for them. Finally, after a few corridors and staircases, they approach a set of doors. This incited flashbacks in both of their minds, as they slowly opened the doors to behold what was inside.

They found themselves in a large room about the size of a typical classroom – Pao and Gongsun's old office. At the back of the room was a rotating seat surrounded by a curved desk, with another less luxurious chair to the right of it with a rectangular table in front of it. The rest of the room was filled with sofas and guest seats. The back wall was filled with windows looking out to a vast, endless space – the Underworld. The immensely

large cave was lined with red rocks, filled with the communal creatures and Justice Department officers in vehicles. The ground was easily hundreds of metres below. Somewhere out there, their enemy lurked in the darkness.

After readapting to their old base, the duo set out to find the culprit. Pao instantly sensed a presence when their vehicle left the bay door. They followed the presence and as they did, there was a growing sense of evil. Gongsun made a nervous face as he remembered the terrifying days of chasing this monster.

Finally, a dark silhouette could be discerned in the distance. Pao and Gongsun approached it, and the ninja-like human grew into view. They stopped the vehicle and hopped off.

"You still don't know who I am," the person shouted out. The voice was followed by an eerie, deafening silence.

"Well, I know what you've done, and it's enough to arrest you." Pao was determined to stop this once and for all.

"I'm the one person who you've always wanted to know. I've known you from the start. I've known you better than anybody's known you. And I know what you're thinking now." With a shock, Pao realised what this all was. It was his twin brother, whom he had rejected and hated since they were children. Out of sadness, his brother had fled the family, leaving Pao filled with guilt. He now contemplated his decisions, wondering why he had treated his close friend the way he did, thinking this was all his fault.

"I'm sorry about what I did," Pao finally blurted out. "I'm sorry I treated you that way. I'm sorry I never valued you as a family member, as a brother, as a good friend. I'm sorry about all of that. Please, stop this." But the expression of the subject's eyes was full of anger and hatred. Pao knew there was no stopping of this. As the source of all this sadness drew out his dual swords and charged, there was a blast and everything was pushed back.

When Gongsun and the ninja got to their feet, they couldn't believe their eyes. Pao was levitating above all of them, radiating an aura of order, righteousness and justice. A glowing red sphere surrounded him, a tornado of characters and ancient runes swirling around him in a flurry. Suddenly, his robes glowed a brilliant red, the faded characters and belt restoring to their original form, his tattered hat repairing itself. Pao suddenly looked a lot younger, with a brown moustache and beard, a taller and more muscular stature. It was a radiating light that shone with the power of a hundred suns, slicing through the darkness of the Underworld. As Pao's brother took one final breath and beheld the blinding beacon, Gongsun paralysed with both fear and awe, Pao collected all the mighty justice and brought it down on his brother. A flash that shook the world with the power of a thousand earthquakes, a blinding beacon of light that cut through the ground like paper and stretched to the edge of space, the essence of pure good and virtue.

Then silence.

The Case of the Absent Murderer

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lau, Levia – 13

Sunday, June 28th

7:00 pm

Mrs. Laurent was a stately woman, in all but height. Nonetheless it still felt like she towered over you, the glare from her eyes and the jewels she wore had a tendency to make you feel impossibly small. That night, even more diamonds were added to the arsenal of riches she displayed on her neck. They rattled and clinked as she strode to the doors, punctuated by her heels on the marble floor. Today, Mrs. Laurent has insisted on receiving every guest to the party herself, an honour reserved for her famously affluent parties.

Exhaling sharply and straightening her dress, she swung open the mahogany doors. She began her welcome speech about how grateful she was that they could attend and where to hang their coats when the faces of her visitors registered and she stopped abruptly. Silence, except the sound of a single wine glass scattered across the floor.

“Hello, mother.”

8:54 pm

A man trudged down the pavement, the streetlamps beside him barely kept the shadows at bay. He walked for a while, muttering to himself about the time and how he must hurry to return home, when something caught his eye. Just a few blocks in the distance, blue and red lights flashed, temporarily illuminating frantic figures rushing around. He caught a glimpse of police and paramedics. The man quickened his pace; his insistence about arriving home soon forgotten.

Nearing the scene, a police chief noticed his arrival, greeting him hastily: “Bao, you could not have come at a better time.” He guided Bao towards the house with a solemn nod.

Bao’s smile faded into a grimace: “Is everything all right? Has there been a break-in of some sort?”

The chief stopped, and turned to face him, his brow knitted with worry.

“Worse. There was a murder.”

9:18 pm

It was obvious they were in the middle of a luxurious party. Flutes of half-finished champagne, a table stacked with the finest delicacies. A few accessories discarded here and there, but otherwise no sign of incriminating evidence. The guests and staff all stood nervously in a group outside the house.

“Detective— Sir!” A young man rushed out from the crowd, running after Bao.

A butler, Bao thought, how unusual! Most of them would opt out of this mess for the sake of their jobs.

The butler caught up to Bao, took a few seconds to recover from the exertion before managing a few words. “I was the one that found the um... the body,” the butler stammered, “Mrs. Laurent, she said something to me, when I found her. She...she said ‘look behind the pictures’. At least, that’s what I think she said.”

Bao was about to reply, when the chief appeared from the crowd. “The main suspects are back at the station, ready for questioning.” He motioned for Bao to follow him to his car, and for the next ten minutes they drove in strained silence to the station.

Halfway there, Bao blurted out: “Hey Kenzie, tough night?” He winced at his attempt.

“Well, crimes like these are rare but I’ve seen my share of them.” The chief sighed, fatigue creasing his eyes as he kept them on the road. “How was your night, Bao?”

“I was having dinner just a few minutes earlier with this guy—Daniel—and it didn’t end well.” Bao said. “He received a call about a party. It was pretty bad because he practically sprinted out of the restaurant.”

“What a night for both of us, huh.”

The police car turned into the station and the two men headed inside. The steady humming of the ventilation in the police station grounded him, something he’d gotten used to in his years of working as a detective. Bao exhaled sharply, pushing his thoughts aside, leaving an empty workspace for the interrogation, the way he always handled it.

9:37 pm

“There must be some kind of mistake! I told you I wasn’t there!”

Bao opened the door and heard a strained voice, meaning that the person’s insistence had gone on for quite a while. Yet there was also something else about his voice. Something vaguely familiar.

Bao Zheng turned to face the suspect, even when the sinking feeling in his heart told him he already knew who it was.

“What on *earth* is going on, Daniel?”

12:03 pm

Back in his apartment, Bao sank into a well-worn armchair. He held his notepad—bursting with alibis and statements from the hours of questioning earlier—but stared at his ceiling. Apparently Daniel was Mrs. Laurent’s eldest son; a fact he managed to keep secret. Bao shut his eyes and recalled the past events of the interrogation.

Claire Laurent, the daughter: A quiet and unassuming girl, her head was lowered to her hands for most of the session. Despite this, Bao could not help but notice an air of agitation. Her hands picked apart her nails almost involuntarily, her words spoken close to a whisper. Claire mentioned how Daniel and Mother bickered often, but she couldn’t bring herself to say anything more. When Bao asked if Daniel had been seen at the party, she only said that she had seen him across the room talking to the other guests.

Bao sighed and rubbed his temples. Daniel was definitely at dinner with him, and it was impossible for Daniel to cover the distance between his house and the restaurant during the time of the murder.

Flynn Laurent, the brother: he entered the room and it was obvious he was Daniel’s brother. They looked almost identical, except for the chipped tooth that revealed itself whenever Flynn smiled. Flynn told the detective that Dan has been distant lately. However, he made no effort in hiding how much it pleased him. “Tired of being the ignored brother I suppose,” he said, half-joking.

Bao switched on the TV in defeat, and fished out some photos that were taken at the party. The photographer, who had insisted on being called Delilah, had pointed out the fabric of a suit in the background, which was confirmed as Daniel's suit by some guests. If it wasn't Daniel...then who was wearing it?

Eventually, Bao gave in to the heaviness of his eyelids and reluctantly went to bed.

This case was going to be a lot more complicated than I thought.

10:16 pm

"Look behind the picture."

The following day, Bao sipped his morning coffee while he fiddled with an old camera. *What a load of gibberish, he thought. Mrs Laurent must've been in a lot of shock.* He held the camera up to his face, watching his faint reflection on the black screen. Sunken eyes stared back at him, the rest of his face drained with the same exhaustion, but it was smiling. *Maybe Mrs. Laurent was crazier than I thought.* Bao laughed with unfiltered excitement as he fumbled for his phone and dialled for the chief.

1:24 pm

The interrogation room was always colder than the rest of the station, but the murderer's glare lowered the temperature by a few more degrees. Bao was almost sure that they committed the crime; if only he knew why.

"Why'd you do it?" Bao asked bluntly. Silence. The murder stared at him from across the table, their lips still stubbornly shut.

"I'll tell you what I know. Someone alerted Daniel with the bad news before the police did, so he would appear at the house right before them. Someone also knew Mrs Laurent and the people at the party, enough not to cause suspicion. Someone wore Daniel's suit during the party. Who fits the description perfectly? Flynn."

Bao leaned forward but the murderer barely flinched.

"But no, Flynn wasn't the killer." Bao started again. "Him wearing the suit was just brotherly jealousy. The killer took advantage of this. *Look behind the picture*, were Mrs Laurent's last words. And what is behind every single picture without fail? The photographer. Delilah Johnson. Or should I say, *Delilah Laurent*?"

She shuffled in her seat, but finally, Delilah spoke: "Allow me to explain my side of things. My mother wasn't the magazine—perfect person the journalists write about constantly, she was anything but. By the time I could walk, there were locks on all our bedroom doors. She made Claire spend more time with makeup than books; Flynn had modelling classes all day; and I— never mind. All of us—" she glanced at the floor, "suffered under her tyranny. Only I was brave enough to do anything about it.

"Just a few years later, my father suddenly fell ill. It was... incurable. My mother took control of everything, and everyone. I had to leave. Days later, my name was removed from everything, like I never existed. I simply came here to claim what is rightfully mine, but things..." Delilah stopped when the emotion in her voice rose out of control.

"But no. I didn't kill my mother, because I never had one."

The Three Guillotine Knives

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Li, Barton – 13

Judge Bao was a warrior; a scholar; a crusading figure. He lived from 999–1062 A.D in the Song Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Ren Zhong. He went from Shen Xiang to Hefei to Lu Zhou bringing justice. And more importantly, Judge Bao was a hero.

But before that, he was a thief.

1021 A.D Song Dynasty

A hand grasped a Wong, a food treasured among the rich. Instantly, the Wong shrivelled and decayed, crumbling into nothingness. The hand was from none other than Bao Gong, the infamous thief of Shen Xiang.

“Hey!” shouted the butcher, realising what happened to his prized Wong. Too late. Bao was long gone, leaving only footprints smeared with the tell-tale sign of thieves— specks of gold.

Bao came to a halt in the alleyway. He took a deep breath, swearing at his soot-covered hands. No one knew this, but he was born with a curse passed down from generations to generations, where every food he touched, turned to dust. Not long after, sirens started to wail, and beams of light started to scatter about, finding a certain someone.

Him. Damn.

Bao sprinted, jumping up the wall, scraping his hand and drawing a splash of blood. He landed on the other side with a sickening crunch, immediately overcome with a sense of nausea.

Soon, officers began swarming the area. A haze of dust began to settle. Seconds turned into minutes. Silence. The officer in charge— a big bulk of a man, began barrelling towards Bao. He handcuffed the now-delirious thief and began making his way towards his carriage. Bao began mumbling hysterically — “Guillotine... Wong... Gongsun...”

Hours later, Bao woke up in the Shen Xiang Prison Facility— the most safeguarded prison in the whole city. Bruises besieged his body. He was sore from head-to-toe. Officer Zhao Nong, the name tag read, lumbered towards him menacingly and jabbed his chubby fingers at Bao’s chest.

“I know what you did... the two people. You killed them! The peasant. The banker. I know you killed them, Bao!”

Bao cowered, whimpering, “I—I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“The Three Guillotine Knives?” Zhao Nong spat before ripping off a chunk of his lemon tart, “Don’t play dumb...”

“I swear I have nothing to do with this!”

“Fine. I’ll give you 24 hours to prove your innocence. Until then...”

“How!?” protested Bao, “I’m here in jail!”

It was no use— the officer was already gone, the sour scent of lemon tart accompanying Bao in the deafening silence.

A red shoe stuck out. Bao was still shivering, shrieking when he saw the shadow leaning towards him. He scampered away, fumbling for the monocles he stole this morning, "Who are you?"

A rag over his nose effectively quelled his protests.

Bao woke up, infuriated. He, the great Bao Gong of Shen Xiang, was tied up in the back of some carriage. The thief grumbled, until he realised something. The red shoes! The colour of a notorious criminal gang...

The carriage opened with a slam, and a figure, no more than three lengths of the great Guillotine knives squatted, harshly ripping off Bao's hood.

Bao grunted.

The figure strangled him by his collar, heftily lifting him. Dragged along, Bao and the figure began walking towards what appeared to be a house.

Soon, they arrived at the mansion. There was a speaker. A scratchy, ear-piercing sound came through, "Who's there?"

"Gongsun. Let me in."

"Answer these two questions first. What is my master's favourite cake?"

"Lemon tart."

"Correct. And lastly, would you like me to serve you tea, or milk?"

The figure thought for a moment, confused. Then he remembered, "Neither. Please serve me the Guillotine knives."

Shen Xiang Prison Facility

Zhao Nong hurtled towards Prison Cell 48. He was pleased to see the thief had gone. Rascals like him never stayed in one place for too long, especially since he had one of his assassins save Bao. His plan was set in motion. Specks of gold remained, as well as a letter.

Prisoner 48 was in the Shen Xiang Mansion.

Shen Xiang Mansion

A waiter appeared at the gate. Black haired, light-skinned and with high cheekbones. "Gongsun. I am pleased to see you. Who is this?" The waiter, nodding at Bao nonchalantly, who was now red-faced and breathing hard.

"Never mind that," hissed Gongsun impatiently. "Bring us to the knives."

The waiter led them towards a dark, unilluminated hallway. The steps creaked, with each second ticking past. Finally, they reached a door. Gongsun twisted the doorknob. And then, they entered.

Gold sparkled. Silver shone. The whole room was decorated with jewellery. It was a shrine for thieves. Bao felt as if an invisible force had hit him. He was overwhelmed with awe. Something took his breath away— the Guillotine knives. There were only two. But two was enough to make any thief who heard the knives die for them.

"I'm sure you have heard of the Three Guillotine knives," started Gongsun. "It was made long ago, by a craftsman with unparalleled skill. These Guillotine knives were passed down from generations to generations until

one day, the Jīn–Song War came, and the Guillotine Knives where never to be found again. Or so we thought.”

Bao stood breathless, as he marvelled at the knives. Gongsun carried on pointing to a prophecy across the room, “

*Adorn Hades’ knife,
Where the footprints
Of He Who Is Enlightened
Lives*

Now, only the last knife remains to be found. The Dragon Knife.”

There was a sudden bang. Shards of gold and silver scattered everywhere. Ancient manuscripts darted round. Both Gongsun and Bao were blown back by the sheer force.

Gongsun made a quick gesture at Bao to follow him. He pushed Bao into a tunnel, turning away to whisper something to the waiter who now lay crumpled in pain. Bao turned towards the darkness, not wanting to see what Gongsun would do to the waiter.

Both trudged for hours, not daring to let a single breath out. Finally, Bao couldn’t hold his curiosity any longer, “What does the ancient text mean?”

Gongsun didn’t answer. Still silent.

Bao thought for a moment. Adorn Hades’ knife. Knife. Dragon Head’s knife! It was an anagram! What about the rest of the prophecy? Who is He Who Is Enlightened? Emperor Taizu?

He remembered. He should have known earlier. After all, he was a Buddhist. The Siddharta was the given name of Buddha, and when translated from Sanskrit, it became “He Who Is Enlightened”. Finally, all seemed to piece together. The footprints were a name for the symbol of peace and prosperity— the Swastika. And the only place where the Siddharta lives, was the shrine— the Tao Tan Buddha.

In an instant, he told Gongsun what he found. “We need to go to the Tao Tan Buddha. Now.” But Gongsun still didn’t answer.

They trudged on.

They reached a dead end. On their right— a ladder laced with barnacles. They climbed up, still ignoring each other. Outside, there was a familiar odour of acrid burning. Bao looked around. They were near the Tao Tan Buddha— only a few blocks away.

He broke into a sprint. Brass plates. Golden scriptures. They had arrived.

Bao scrambled everywhere. His eyes searched every nook and cranny. He couldn’t find the Swastika. A bead of sweat rolled down his neck. Time was running out.

His breath quickened. If he couldn’t find it.... He gasped. The Dragon Knife. It was above the image of the Swastika! His fingers strained to it. He had finally succeeded!

“Put your hands up!”

Bao Gong whipped around to see Gongsun pointing a gun at his head. Zhao Nong emerged seemingly out of nowhere, nodding at Gongsun.

“Turn around and give me the knife. Now!”

Bao's pulse quickened.

"You know, I'll tell you a short story," snarled Zhao Nong, "A story of how I killed the peasant. A story of how I killed the banker. Now, all I need to do is kill you, Bao Gong. I'll kill you with the last Guillotine knife. The knife that kills only of royal blood. And then, the Guillotine knives will become mine."

Bao didn't know what to do. He threw the knife high up in the air. It gleamed with a hint of menace.

Time seemed to slow down.

Zhao Nong lunged for the knife. He let go of the gun. Gongsun pushed himself away. The knife hurtled down. Right down Zhao Nong's neck.

The last images of Nong's grotesque face were etched on his face.

He said his final prayer. *Lead us not from temptation; but deliver us from evil.* And at last, the life drained out of his eyes.

"Only descendants of Emperor Taizu can use the Three Guillotine Knives," revered Gongsun, "

*And on the drachma
Bloodshed
Death
The progeny Bao Gong."*

When Embers Die

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lin, Henry – 14

The night sky was a never-ending void, such that not even the brightest of stars could escape its wicked clutches. The harsh winter winds scraped across the land, piercing not only one's skin, but the deepest parts of their hearts, too, bringing back decrepit, sorrowful memories that they have tried so unfathomably hard to forget, only to suffer again with their resurfacing. The moon, with its white glow formerly a welcoming sign of the tranquil night, now only added to the chilling visage, shedding crimson red rays onto the barren earth.

It was at this moment, however, that one would feel a warm fire in their hearts, a soothing blaze that calmed weary souls and rested broken bodies. Inside this empyrean flame, one felt safe, protected, and secure. Their tense bodies would then relax, knowing that they are truly in good hands; after all, no forces of the dark would ever dare to approach Kaifeng, the residence of the Song Emperor, and his praetorian blade of order, Judge Pao.

Would they?

With the passage of time, the bustling streets of the Capital have slowly dwindled down to nothing. The city, bright with colourful lanterns and vibrant lights only no more than two hours ago, has blended in with its dark surroundings, as men and women laid in the mysterious realm of dreams. Soon, the only beacon of light in the dark was the glowing figure of a man, standing at the rooftop of Judge Pao, otherwise known as Pao Zheng's residence. The building was peculiar; its architecture didn't hint at elegant beauty as tradition, but rather of grandiose proportions and bold colours, a heritage from the days of the old Tang Dynasty. The people, however, did little to protest against its existence, as they found the residence an intriguing tunnel to the long forgotten past.

Pao Zheng cast his eyes onto the now empty streets below. Upon first glance, he was an ordinary old man. His hair coloured like the winter snow hung by the side of his head. His face was one that had witnessed the passage of many decades, as time carved deep wrinkles into his body. His age was seventy; a feat unheard of, as many died before half his life. His eyes, however, shone with a brilliant and sharp light which was unnatural for an elderly man like him. They were two enigmatic machines, gracing him with an aura of mystery. They were two stoic walls, where his true feelings were hidden behind.

Time after time, the old man has reflected on his past; the cases solved, the men imprisoned, and the bloodthirsty creatures of the night, executed without remorse. The scent of blood and death lingered around his nose, even long after his reminiscence of the memories. Confusion flashed subtly within his eyes, and dissipated as swiftly as it came. A sigh escaped Pao Zheng's mouth, and his face donned a complex expression. It is only after one witnessed the death of men, and the passing of decades, for a seemingly worthless cause, do they begin to really wonder:

What is justice?

The question imprinted deeply in the old man's mind, so much so, he realised with shock that it wasn't his thought, but a statement uttered by another. He snapped his head backwards, and was greeted by the silhouette of a humanoid figure, standing in the shadows of the night. The figure stepped out of the dark, he took the form of a young man, who was no older than twenty four. Not a single fault or imperfection was present on him; a painting of perfect proportions and divine features. It was such a beautiful mirage, in fact, that even the two pitch black horns protruding out of his skull seemed alarmingly normal at first glance.

"You came," Pao Zheng stated, his initial shock briskly fading, and his tone emotionless.

"Indeed," a hoarse voice responded, equally stoic.

The two men stared at each other, their silence as thick as a forest. The invisible tension between them slowly built up, as the rage and bloodlust they held boiled within their hearts, and their hatred consumed their souls. It slowly edged to an unbearable point, until finally, the younger man spoke.

"So," he paused, as if attempting to syphon his words carefully, and continued, "What is justice?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Pao Zheng replied, a cold edge now present in his voice. "To protect the oppressed from the oppressors, from butchers and murderers, the likes of your kind."

"Tell me, Protector of the Song Dynasty, you have spent half a century as the symbol of justice for your people, and you have led a thousand battles which ended in a thousand bloodbaths against mine. Has the sight of my brethren's blood ever caused a hint of disdain in your mind? Do the cries of mercy, never once accepted, not sicken you? Have you never even once considered what the word, which you strive to stand for, truly means?" The younger figure said, his voice growing louder with every passing second, until what was a whisper became a frenzied scream of madness. The fact that his mouth never moved once during the speech, and that his furious voice was only captured by the ears of Pao Zheng, only added to the eeriness of the night.

For a second, something hidden within the deepest corners of Pao Zheng's eyes cracked. As if a cog was thrown into the machines of his mind, and fractures appeared within his stoic walls. For a brief period, which passed so hastily one almost didn't believe it to be real, the old man's gaze shattered into a thousand pieces, as if to recall every moment of the past fifty years of his life at the same time. A blurry array of barren, bloody battlefields flashed past his eyes, and the screams of men long deceased plagued the corners of his ears.

In an instant, Pao Zheng recollected his roaming mind, and he was himself again. It was evident, however, that the short journey left a deep imprint on him, as his once tall figure became slightly hunched, and his appearance took the form of an old man a decade older than he really was.

"Justice," he began, and paused, as if to syphon his words carefully. Finally, he sighed, and continued, "Justice is to protect the weak, from the strong, who seek to exploit them."

The younger figure merely laughed, his hoarse voice echoing across the empty streets below. There was no joy in his tone; an endless symphony of mockery and an infinite collection of pity. After the passing of what seemed like an eternity, he finally stopped laughing, and replied.

"To protect the weak?" he mocked, his voice cold and dripping with sarcasm. "So where were you and your enforcers of justice, when my ancestors were treated like livestock, herded and caged, to be sent to the slaughter?"

Upon hearing this, the old man's face finally revealed emotion; a sudden look of realisation and horror distorted his features, as he found the culprit to the case he dedicated his life to solve; it was his own kind.

Ignoring the perplexity of Pao Zheng's face, the figure continued, his words becoming faster and faster. "My kind was weak," he said, "and formed the meat on your tables. Countless families broken, and countless lovers separated for life. My great-grandfather was a bull, and he was slaughtered by the very man before me. My kind lived in fear, until we were freed from our bondage, and took on the form which you know of today; the Yao."

"We realised, now, that you were just doing what all creatures in the world were supposed to do; to prey on the weak. Such was a universal law of the land, until we ascended in this hierarchy. It was our birth right to prey on the weak, and you hypocritical creatures still dared to put up a futile resistance, with your naïve beliefs of justice, not admitting your very actions even to this day contradict the sacred creed you swear to uphold."

He stopped, and laughed another hollow laughter. "I have no more words," he said, "let the war between us continue." With the last of his words uttered, his back protruded great wings, and he flew off into the night.

The cold winds blew, and the red moon glowed. The darkness that was night still clutched the light of the stars in its grasp, never letting them escape. In the quiet city, on the rooftop of its tallest building, stood a man. His figure was no longer proud and tall, as the meaningless decades have weighed on his back. His face lost the wisdom it carried, as a deep horror and guilt has rendered it unbearably grotesque. His eyes no longer shined with a sharp light, for there was no more life in them.

Pao Zheng, the praetorian blade, passed silently with the night.

Suppressed Void

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lui, Michelle – 14

Over a soothing cup of tea, he blew, watching as thin wisps of smoke vanished into the air. A wry smile crept across his face as the cup was brought to his lips, a burst of flavour filling his mouth like a sprouting seedling. The many folds of his crimson robe closely resembled his own face – wrinkled, fragile, peachy in colour. Judge Pao was always reminded of his triumphant past every time the taste of tea met his tongue. Tentatively, the judge began to lift the cup again, but the calming silence of the room was shattered by a knock on the door. His anthracite eyes glanced at the sliding door, which was thrust open by a soldier.

“Judge Pao, we’re planning on heading out soon. Captain wants you to be ready in five minutes.”

The judge smiled warmly. “Thank you.”

He patiently waited until the *click* of the sliding door indicated that he was alone in the room once more. A sigh escaped his mouth as his papery hands clasped the teacup tight, and he steals a stare at his reflection upon whatever slither of tea was left at the bottom of the cup.

But the face that gazed back into his soul didn’t belong to him.

Rather, it was the innocent face of a smiling young man, long before the burdens of old age took over.

Despite lacking in money, Judge Pao’s main goal wasn’t to secure a large sum of it. Time to him was the most precious thing, and he wanted to fill every last drop with unforgettable moments, whether it was seeing the giddy faces of children as he helped them scavenge for their lost possessions, or whether it was just spending time with his simple family.

The judge in his youth found himself admiring the scenery in a rural area, observing the faraway mountains under a cloudless sky. A rumbling of wheels and horse hooves approached from behind him, revealing themselves to be a fleet of traveling soldiers transporting a cart piled to the top with goods. Everything was in order.

But something didn’t sit quite right. The ringing silence didn’t come off as awkward immediately; the sounds of men chattering had masked the absence of Mother Nature’s own noises.

The cart stopped. Any laughter instantly died out. Horses stood still, shifting their hooves uncomfortably. Pao watched from a distance, sensing someone or something stirring within the shrubbery.

“Leave... *Leave!!*” Pao called out.

The men sprang into action, yanking the reins of the horses and driving them and the cart of resources backwards. Yet their attempt was unsuccessful.

Shadows leapt from their hiding places. Metal clashed against metal, wooden planks crumbled and all chaos ensued.

Like a dying firework, the commotion ended, and the frenzied tango of black fabric was over. Whoever or whatever it was, they had pilfered the cart, and left not even a crumb behind to spare. The dazed men, including Pao, required several moments to process what had happened in the past ten seconds, sitting down and staring wide-eyed into the distance.

“Is this... Is this a normal occurrence?” Pao asked, his voice shaky.

One of the soldiers groggily pulled himself up, rummaging around among the broken planks to search for even a trace of the stolen possessions, before replying, “It’s been happening more frequently.”

Pao steadily came to his feet, indignant, grabbing his hands into fists. Whatever being chose to ambush the cart already revealed several things about their behaviour: lazy, indifferent and selfish. People like them didn’t belong in their wholesome community.

The young judge helped any soldiers who hadn’t the energy to sit themselves up to stand. To think that there were people who didn’t need these resources as much as Pao did, who had more money in their pockets than he did in his own house, who wielded blades for the purpose of ransacking peaceful transport teams, it only made Pao’s face redder by the second.

“Sir, are you alright? Please, don’t be worried by the situation! We will have all this under control!” The lead soldier laughed awkwardly, patting Pao’s back so as to comfort him.

Pao sighed. “Quit the act. You are all nervous wrecks.”

Silence.

“These people have no right to take from us. If they want something, they need to earn it. So, soldiers, what do you think about putting an end to their wicked schemes?”

★★★★

Piles of unread documents sat like towers upon Judge Pao’s desk, looming above him as if they were secretly saying, ‘stop sleeping and start reading me!’. A night of restlessness had left him completely befuddled and unable to complete work without his mind wandering off.

Judge Pao’s loyal assistant, Zhang, lightly tapped him on the shoulder, giving him quite the awful shock.

“We have attack reports from the West, Judge. All victims described the situation similar to a blackout, and that one moment they were traveling with either resource-rich containers or simply a bag, and the next, all their belongings were gone.”

Pao’s eyes widened. The energy that he had been deprived of was returning to him. It had been years since he decided to become a judge, and also years since the first and last attack he had ever witnessed from who they nicknamed the ‘Suppressed Void’.

“I know them. Zhang, round up all the soldiers. We may be able to find clues in the area.”

Zhang scrunched up his face and walked away in a huff.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. He may be obedient, but he’s a real piece of work when it comes to attitude, don’t you think?”

The lead soldier, Jin, who followed Judge Pao the many years ago peeked out from behind the mountain of documents. Jin was always wary of Zhang, finding as many ways as he could to convince Pao that he needed to leave. The judge waved him off every time – as long as he had someone to help him lift his massive workload off his shoulders, their support would be accepted gratefully.

“You would’ve been sent away long ago if I cared about attitude,” Pao murmured.

The little wandering troupe made their way to the sites of the attacks, asking locals questions as they went. Judge Pao glanced at Assistant Zhang, who was humming a gleeful tune. He fidgeted with his fingers. *There is a pattern occurring here, and I don’t like it*, Pao thought.

He pulled Jin aside to a quieter corner. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Jin broke character, his smile wavering and eventually falling to a grave frown. “The timing and location of these attacks are too coincidental. Have you ever wondered why you’ve never been able to catch them, old friend?”

“When I was investigating in the South, they were in the North. When I was investigating in the East, I get a report about one from here. Someone must know about my plans.”

They say, ‘two heads are better than one’, except Judge Pao’s and Jin’s brains combined couldn’t come up with a potential suspect.

Judge Pao’s ears perked up. An elderly woman appeared to be showing Zhang a half-empty bottle of what appeared to be alcohol found at the attack site. A fiery glint flashed in Jin’s eyes. Perhaps they might have a new lead.

They arrived back to the village with slouching shoulders and weak knees, and Jin took the alcohol for testing the moment his feet were set on familiar soil.

Pao sat with a ringing headache far into the night, cycling through everyone he was close with. Nobody seemed likely to leave a knife in his back.

Jin returned, a smirk written upon his face, running with such vigour that one wouldn’t have known it was three in the morning.

“Hear me out, Judge. Hear me out!” He pleaded.

Judge Pao sluggishly turned towards the soldier.

“The alcohol? It’s just white wine,” Jin panted like a mad dog. “But I’m sure you know what that means.”

“Zhang’s favourite wine,” Judge Pao said, nodding his head slowly.

The two of them stayed still for a while, the absence of noise causing their ears to hear a high-pitched ringing.
“Search for him. Zhang needs to be guarded until proven innocent.”

From outside the window, a series of footsteps drew away into the darkness of the village.

They chased the culprit into the bushes, hearing their heavy panting and swatting of leaves. Twigs snapped. Small mammals scampered away. No matter how fast they ran, they couldn’t cover the fact that they were well and truly damned.

“Zhang,” Pao growled.

The words dug into his skin, and Zhang was gripped by a strong hand.

Pao may never forget the hurt or betrayal that he expressed without words.

★★★★

“Judge Pao.”

The old judge lifted his head, tidying up his tea. Five minutes was up. The feeling of the suppressed void within him remained strong.

“Are you alright?” The soldier asked, noticing Pao’s solemn face.

“I am fine. Let’s go.”

The Trial

Harrow International School Hong Kong, So, Katrina – 12

Zhan Zhao smeared the blood across his sharp jawline with his foxlike, feverish eyes as his gaze strengthened on the target, his hands tightly gripping the firearm. His iris moves left and right while his pupil enlarges from the blanket of darkness...

"Court!" The court clerk exclaimed, filling the whole courtroom, with his thick, deep voice, as Judge Pao entered the courtroom from his chambers. All the people rise and bow to Judge Pao while the court clerk calls the case number "WKCC134/2022". A middle-aged woman stood holding a new-born baby in the defendant's dock with a few pieces of grey hair in her hair making her look older than she is.

"Why, madam, are you carrying a baby to court, may I ask?" questioned Judge Pao with an eyebrow raised slightly.

"I had no other choice, your worship. I am homeless with nowhere to go," said the defendant in a frail, brittle voice while Judge Pao flipped through the documents on the Judge's bench.

The prosecution rose from their seat ready to deliver the opening statement: "Your worship the defendant has been charged with an offence of theft for stealing one tin of 'Mestle Baby Formula.' May plea be taken from the defendant."

Judge Pao turned to the defendant and asked, "How do you plead?" The defendant fiddled with her hands and fingers along with slightly trembling knees and said in a tiny voice: "Yes, I do plead guilty," a tear slowly sliding off her cheek.

"Do you have anything to say in mitigation?" asked Judge Pao

"Your worship, I am poor and widowed, I am rejected by society every day. I knew it was wrong to steal but I had no choice. My baby was starving. It is not fair!" cried the defendant.

"Madam, I do have sympathy for your predicament. However, if you violated the law, you must be punished," explained Judge Pao. When Judge Pao was about to pass the sentence, the baby cried loudly. At that juncture, Judge Pao hesitated and looked at the defendant again.

"45 hours (about 2 days) of community service order as for the defendant," pleads Judge Pao.

"Thank you, prosecution, for your service today. Court is adjourned," as the bang of his gavel touches the wooden sound block ending the case, Judge Pao strode off into his chambers again.

That night, Judge Pao sighed in sorrow thinking about the case he presided over, knew he had to uphold the law, but he did not know if he was just. He knew, on the one hand, he had to fulfil his duty as a Judge but, on the other hand, he has his moral duty too.

Ding! The ring from his phone had pulled him from his deep thoughts. The big fonts of the notifications on his lock screen caught his attention. It was an email from Zhan Zhao. **'WOMEN FROM CASE WKCC134/2022 SHOT DEAD'** Judge Pao swiftly grabbed his long coat still taking a whiff of his cologne from that morning and sprinted out the door into the stairway out the backdoor fetching the nearest taxi he could find. Knocking on the door, the driver who was still eating his char-siu fan out of the foam takeout box, was caught in shock to the sound of the knocking on the glass window, his voice muted from the taxi door.

Breathless Judge Pao said "Th... The... Um Portland Street....in Mong Kok. Quick!" as he swings open the taxi door.

The taxi driver choking on his grains of white rice with tiny leaves of bok choy in his mouth.

"Sorry, we not available," he stated in a thick Cantonese accent.

"Please I'll pay you extra," says Judge Pao.

The taxi drivers' eyes lit up and immediately said "Yes!" so he drove as fast as "lightspeed" but without exceeding the speed limit.

Thirty minutes later, they finally arrived at the crime scene. Sirens emerge as the barricade tape surrounds the area, with clattered guns and weaponry on the alleyway's ground. Judge Pao cannot help but notice the blood stains on the ground. Zhan Zhao meets up with Judge Pao and gives an analysis of the current situation.

Something in the corner of Judge Pao's eye caught his attention. It was something in the depths of the alleyway. He wanted to have a closer look. Followed by Zhan Zhao, Judge Pao enters the deepest, darkest part of the alleyway. To his surprise, it was a little boy sitting on a small stool.

"What are you doing here?" questioned Judge Pao. As soon as they made eye contact, the little boy ran away. Since it was too dark for Judge Pao to see anything, he could only rely on his sense of hearing. Dripping water of the sewage, and the rattling of the metal gates ringed in his ear. Suddenly, it stopped. The sound was replaced by a gun cock. Judge Pao knew that someone was pointing a gun at his head. By the time he realized, he was held at gunpoint.

It was a woman in a black jumpsuit with a hood over her head. She had the same pieces of grey hair as the defendant, weirdly. Her body figure looked familiar too, Judge Pao thought. He took a closer look at the woman's face, and it was.....the defendant. Judge Pao could hardly catch a breath because he was so surprised.

"I... I thought you were dead," stuttered Judge Pao.

"Me? You thought you could get rid of me so easily?" the defendant replied.

"W....what do you mean? I never got rid of you. Was it all fake? I could not believe I pitied you because of your situation," Judge Pao responded in rage.

Before he had a response – whack! A dark, lean figure appeared from the light. It was Zhan Zhao. He whacked the gun out of the defendant's hand. They were pushing and pulling in the blanket of darkness, each of them getting cuts and wounds from each other. Bang! A pistol shot straight into the sky immediately catching the police's attention. The defendant had eyes of panic knowing she would get caught. It was not long before a team of police officers huddled up and gripped their firearms. Zhan Zhao smeared the blood across his sharp jawline with his foxlike, feverish eyes as his gaze strengthened on the target, his hands tightly gripping the firearm. His iris moves left and right while his pupil enlarges from the blanket of darkness surrounding the defendant. Though Judge Pao was not held at gun point he slowly backed away into the sea of police officers, but she knew, the defendant knew, she had nowhere else to run and go. It was her only choice to turn herself in, so she did.

"Court!" The court clerk exclaimed, filling the whole courtroom, with his thick, deep voice, again. As Judge Pao entered the courtroom from his chambers like before, all the people rise and bow to Judge Pao while the court clerk calls the case number "WKFD367/2022". The same woman entered, but without a baby this time. Guilt was shown on her face. She pleaded for a lighter sentence. But this time Judge Pao had no mercy. This woman was the mastermind of a baby formula smuggling syndicate. The dark alleyway was where they shipped the illegal baby formula. This woman was sentenced to 4 years' imprisonment for smuggling of formula powder, and 4 years for assaulting Judge Pao. Judge Pao also ordered the sentences of both charges be run wholly consecutively.

The woman was never to be seen again.

The Greatest Sacrifice of Justice Bao

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Soh, Ethan – 14

Dark, forbidding clouds enveloped the sky, whilst grim drops of precipitation poured down on the city of Kaifeng; the forthcoming of a large storm. Along the streets, people scuttled hurriedly, desperately in search of shelter and refuge, away from the relentless storm. In spite of this, in a narrow alleyway stood a tall dark figure, dressed in plain robes. At first sight, he seemed like just any other person – he dressed and walked like everyone did. But there was something about him that just did not seem right: there was something conspicuous about the way he stood, about the way he moved – about the way he spoke.

Bao Zheng was once a bright and animated young boy, born into an impoverished family of eight in Hefei, Luzhong. Being the youngest of all eight children, his parents, although struggling financially, placed all their hopes and dreams on his shoulders, hoping and wishing that one day, he would not only be able to rise to a position of great respect, but also become a person of great honesty and morals. However, due to unknown and mysterious circumstances, both his parents suddenly passed away when he was still at a young age. Hence, he was sent to be raised by his elder sister-in-law, who, despite also living in poverty, treated him like her own son. She taught him about the utter importance of having strong and undisputable morals and distilled the beliefs of Confucianism and filial piety into his young mind. Being the bright and animated child that he was, Bao enthusiastically learnt from her teachings and began to develop his own set of morals and ethics, which he believed were essential for peace and stability. Gradually, morals and honesty became an indispensable part of his life. As he grew up in his elder sister-in-law's impoverished household, he saw countless amounts of other children living in poverty, who shared similar circumstances with him. Sometimes, he would see them continuously struggle from the lack of food; and at other times, he would see them cry at the loss of a loved one, from an easily treatable disease, due to a lack of healthcare. More often than not, he would find himself pitying them, and vowing that he would one day avenge and give justice to them...

Inspired by Bao, whom he had treated as his older brother his entire life, Bao's eldest sister-in-law's only son, Bao Mian, also followed him to become a magistrate of a major court.

Due to his strong desire for justice and keen sense of morals, Bao was eventually also chosen as a magistrate for the Tianchang County, a province, not far from his hometown. It was then that his reputation as an honest and fair judge, whose wisdom and voice could command the utmost respect, rapidly grew. Despite his authoritarian and respectable status, Bao decided to live and dress as a commoner, in solidarity with his past. As his distinct and unique qualities were noted from all around China, Bao eventually rose to the ranks of the Prefect of Kaifeng, where he remains until now.

Despite the increasingly heavy downpour, Justice Bao stood motionless in the dark alleyway adjacent to his court. His robes were drenched, and his hair was soaked, but with each drop of water which stained his robes, he thought about his past and about the case that he would face today: his nephew, Bao Mian, whom he had treated as a younger brother his whole life, had been convicted of corruption and malfeasance in his job as a magistrate and was awaiting trial today, at his court. Today, he was to be the judge at the trial and decide his loving nephew's fate, whom he had played with, learned with, and spent his life with. He felt lost.

He thought about the roots of his distinct and sophisticated set of morals, which ultimately trace back to the beliefs of Confucianism and filial piety, but yet he found himself in a predicament, conflicted between the two of his moral foundations. But when he set his gaze on the sight that lay in front of him, he saw dozens of impoverished families, who continue to suffer and live under dire conditions because of his nephew's intolerable actions and crimes. A sudden desire to seek justice for them arose once again; but, yet, he also thought about his beloved nephew, to whom he had owed so much to, and felt so indebted to... – "Justice Bao!", "Justice Bao!",

"The court is awaiting your presence! – What are you doing, standing in the heavy rain?"

Justice Bao swiveled around to find his personal secretary, Gongsun Ce, blatantly staring at him in shock.

"What are you doing?" Ce repeated once more.

"Tell the court I'll be there soon enough." Spoke Justice Bao, in a firm and confident tone. A slight tinge of irritation was evident in his voice as he spoke.

Without another word, Ce hurriedly retreated to the court.

Justice Bao looked up into the dark and ominous sky and prayed that he would make the right decision today. With that, he walked into his court.

Before him, stood his beloved nephew, who looked up at him with sorrowful eyes. Unsure how to react, he hesitated, and then called for all in the court to stand. Once more, he carefully reviewed and inspected each and every piece of evidence, desperately trying to find a piece of evidence, anything, which could suggest that his beloved nephew had not committed the horrid crimes and accusations. He quickly ruffled through the numerous pieces and desperately looked through them. Occasionally, he would look back down onto his nephew, as if to provide himself with motivation. But alas, he could find no piece of evidence, no matter how small, which suggested that his nephew had not committed his accused crimes.

Finally, the verdict was to be announced. Justice Bao's dried robes were now drenched again, except this time, in sweat. He despised this moment, but he knew he had to uphold his morals, and bring justice to the people.

"The final verdict has been obtained!" Justice Bao bellowed to the crowd, in a loud, confident, and seemingly unregretful tone. The crowd was tense, anxious to find out if Justice Bao would uphold justice, in sacrifice to filial piety and family. Justice Bao hesitated, he had prepared for this moment, but yet he felt sick.

At last, he spoke.

"Because of the horrible crimes committed by my nephew, Bao Mian, I shall continue to uphold justice by sentencing him to death by execution!" He hesitated once more and took a deep breath, "And as the Justice of this court, I, myself, shall oversee his execution.", his voice now trembling with great reluctance and regret. Without looking at his nephew, he left the courtroom. The sky was now cleared, and a bright sun now illuminated the entire sky. He knew he had made the right decision.

‘Inside the mind of China’s first crime–fighter: Judge Pao’

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Tam, Ashley – 14

Dear Diary:

Preface of Novel ‘Inside the mind of China’s first crime–fighter: Judge Pao’

As the last remaining blood relative of Judge Pao – esteemed Chinese detective and politician – the original manuscripts of his found diary were left in my care. I met with an amazing translator and interpreter who decoded the diary entries, and I collated them into a curation of entries written by such an inspiring person.

So many people for so long were intrigued by the sudden disappearance of Judge Pao towards the end of his life, and so was I. I wanted to exhibit this mystery of his, along with what a brilliant mind he had, and also show a side to him that many history books don’t touch upon: his vulnerability and loss. Judge Pao is an inspiration to me, and after this novel, I hope he is to you too.

- The Author (1962)

1060:

Dear Diary,

To those who find this, I am known to people of the present, and possible future, as Judge Pao; I am the figure of righteousness, speaker of true words in the name of justice, solver of countless fantastic crimes and am an idol to many. I am the epitome of success to all, and yet my heart is not willing to relish in these victories people so often remind me of. In fact, my heart feels empty, a mere organ throbbing day and night, cursing me with life.

The poison of loss clouded the cunning eyes I once used to call my own, the eyes that allowed me to achieve the magnitude of success I have today, the eyes of a youth who knew nothing but power, selfishness, and the will to give anything up just to accomplish it. After countless sleepless nights, staring at the loops and whorls in the wood on my ceiling, I understood what I missed. I reignited the long extinguished fire of passion in me and left my prison, the place I was bound to because of my fame and success.

Just like that, I left the enclosure that confined the dreams of my youth and set upon the journey to return to the place that used to accept me most: home.

More to be shared,
Judge Pao

Dear Diary,

It has been two long, treacherous days of continuous exploration through the divine mountaintops I once explored on my one–way journey to wealth years ago. I still recall the breathtaking sights at the peak of my exuberant journeys, surrounded by serenity and tranquillity that felt so foreign from the raucousness of my old neighbourhood. I would pause to gaze at the stunning summits, shrouded by wispy trails of fog, the faint rush of a waterfall flowing in the background. My eyes unwittingly fluttered shut to the familiar scent of nature, my nose filling with the crisp fragrance of pine, ears tickled from the chirping of the birds, singing songs of glory, love, happiness. I open my eyes to search the boundless sky for the composer of such resonant tunes, but flip my head to find nothing.

1061:

Dear Diary,

As I retire into the nook of another mountain, back pressed upon jutting edges of cold rock, hands bright in the light of a full moon, I am reminded of home: the home that sits at the side of a farm, shrouded in crunching noises of hay beneath the trods of the cows, basked in the moonlight reflecting sharply onto the side of the pond, tamed by the gentle whooshing of the crops in the fields outside my window. Home, where I reminisce of my father's faint snoring in the next room, his stress decomposing into dreams, the vague crackle of the fire outside, accompanying my sister and her weaving. I recollect the time when I could admire the scenery around me, disturbed by nothing but my own thoughts, and as much as I have tried to submerge these memories into wells of forgetfulness, it simply wills against it.

Goodnight,

Pao

Dear Diary,

Although I presume that no one will see this, to the possible few that might read these pages, I have realised that I am not the person that graces the titles of many famous crime cases, a wolf wandering aimlessly among lambs, devious and scheming like people often portray me as. I am not the person that prides himself for being heartless and sly, I am simply a man— No not even a man, a being, on this planet trying to heal the untouchable wounds I inflicted upon myself years ago. For years and years I sat in silence, tearing at the healing scars, making them deeper. I denied my regret because regret should never be alive in the presence of success, but I was wrong. Regret and despair only grows when it is denied and now, I cry on the dusty floors of this cave, pathetically longing for the life I tried so hard to escape from.

Till tomorrow,

Pao

1062:

Dear Diary,

Although it has already been two long, harrowing, years of constant expedition, I still have not yet reached the place I truly call home. A growing emptiness seems to gnaw away at my heart that has been suspended by resentment and regret, leaving physical aches as the claws of disappointment continue to tear me apart, my attenuated threads of hope, threads that are growing weaker, the only thing sewing the cracks together temporarily, before the monster strikes again.

Nightmares of absolute terror continue to captivate the attention of my mind, allowing images of billowing tendrils of smoke to slowly curl around the wrinkling skin of my neck. I can do nothing but wait. Other nights, fading depictions of my mother, father, sister, beguile my weak consciousness and terrorize and taunt me to the point where I am afraid of rest.

I am going insane, I am terrified of going insane. I scream and sob and lose all control of the emotions in my body, I feel hopeless and helpless and so wretchedly broken and torn. I feel contempt for those who have happiness and despise myself to a point of no return for the fact I can't achieve the same. I look at the sun during the day and the stars during the night and think of how exasperating they are for being able to function with such freedom. Hoarse, anguished, cries seems to be the only language I can speak now. The person who spoke such moral meaning: long gone. The intellectual who was the nation's hero: long dead, only the shell of such a puppet remains.

I suppose that this tangent has led me to realise that having a war with yourself is pointless, because you will lose no matter what. I bawl at the lost potential that is myself, at the regret of not being able to be constructed into something better, something more. I weep at the mistake of the legacy I left behind as Judge Pao, and the hidden facet of myself as Pao Zheng I was too ashamed to show anyone.

I loved, cared, learnt, understood, and accepted everything in my life too little, too late. I grew ignorant to the warnings, deceived myself of what I wanted, when I wanted it. I lived my whole life in fear and trepidation of the future, so much so that I never really lived.

So I won't take the chance to.

To this diary, and the possible others reading it, I thank you for accompanying me on this wandering journey that changed courses many times, too many to count. I bid farewell to this mystical odyssey that will now see its ending, for it has made me a pawn in a game I did not want to play.

Yours truly,
Pao Zheng

Author's Note of Novel 'Inside the mind of China's first crime-fighter: Judge Pao'

"I began to understand that suffering and disappointments and melancholy are there not to vex us or cheapen us or deprive us of our dignity but to mature and transfigure us." – Hermann Hesse

—

This novel is dedicated to those who suffer, which means I dedicate it to all of us. But don't be ashamed, because suffering is the process of change, and change is crucial to everything, never forget that.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Heep Yunn School, Hui, Yan Kiu Isis – 14

The lavishly decorated bedroom, its floors polished ebony, its windows draped in silk curtains, was marred by pools of darkly crimson blood. And right in front of us was the corpse; the handsome man's palms were brutally pierced with daggers, pinning him to the wall. His neck was slashed upwards almost savagely.

Luo slid closer to me. 'Third murder this turn of the moon,' he whispered, 'wonder what he's going to do.'

I shrugged and tugged softly on my shift. 'You know who the victim is,' he continued; Luo was extraordinarily gossipy: a crime lord. He was never caught for his crimes, but there are rumors in the people about him. How he beats up women and children, even his wife. That one's a piece of work, all right.'

I tried to ignore him and watched Pao's figure as he darted here and there. Whenever he turned I saw his weathered, tanned face, his aquiline nose, and the outward jut of his chin. He knelt and scraped a tiny mound of powder off a wall onto a cloth. Then he gathered up the small bundles of specimens in his arms, shouldered his pack, and walked down the stairs briskly.

'Job's finished,' Pao said as we strode down the street. 'You know who the murderer is,' Luo said somewhat excitedly. I sighed inwardly. This enthusiasm was rather tiring, considering that I had been putting up with it for centuries.

Pao hesitated. 'Perhaps; I have but an inkling,' he said finally. 'But either way, this is not a case for our... mortal court.'

Luo whistled, and I sighed again. We both knew what that meant.

The three of us headed to the market. For the first time in some hundred years I felt curious; what could be found there? Yet Pao walked with a contagious surety, and I followed him.

We stopped at a stall; a familiar one at that. A smiling face looked up at us.

'Want some pork for dinner tonight, huh?' Lin said, her rouged lips curling up in a charming grin. She took out her knife and sharpened it almost intuitively without looking down. We had known her for some time, ever since we moved here, and she was good company.

Pao looked back at her, scanning her up and down. 'Yes,' he said smoothly, 'one serving, please. Minced.' Lin whistled as she worked, the strokes of her knife amazingly precise, her hands sure and strong. We settled into an awkward silence.

'So,' she began brightly, 'I trust that you are investigating the murder down the street. News of the town, that is.' She chuckled to herself. 'People are placing bets on who the murderer is. But we all know you are going to find that out pretty soon, Judge. Aren't you?'

'Wonder if a serial killer is a culprit.' Lin pulled out a larger knife and started dicing the meat into clumps. Her slender fingers were agile, fantastically so. 'Three murders in a month! And all of those rich men, too, were murdered in the most terrifying ways.'

'First one wrapped in a curtain with shards of glass. The second one is bound to a cauldron filled with boiling water. The third one was pinned to a wall with knives. Terrible.' Lin smiled again.

Pao shifted. Lin was packing up the meat, wrapping the fine paste into brownish paper. He seemed uncomfortable, I realized, talking about the case with Lin. Rather uncharacteristic indeed. Pao was never flustered. Never.

He reached out to get the pack of meat and handed a handful of coins to Lin, who winked at him. Suddenly, he lashed out at the young woman, his tanned hand stark against Lin's snowy skin. I watched in horror, in disgust, as his nails scraped across her face, leaving red marks.

Lin cried out and clutched her face. Pao hid his hand in a pocket and caught her with the other. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'saw a fly on your face.'

Lin smiled weakly and dusted herself off. 'It's fine,' she said, 'it's okay.'

As we walked away, I felt my blood freeze, and a shiver crawled up my spine.

There was no fly there.

I looked at Pao and Luo grimaced, disgusted. We walked home silently, burdened with our thoughts. Pao worked in his study immediately, and moments later he threw open the door and ran out triumphantly. I jumped to my feet—it wasn't every day that you see this calm, steadfast man with his face so flushed.

Pao took my arm and smiled at me wolfishly.

'I found the evidence—we are going to hell.'

Diyu was the same as I had remembered it to be. Dark caverns stacked on top of each other, with stalactites hanging down from the ceilings like huge fangs. The three of us entered Pao's domain at once, and I shuddered as my muscular yet clumsy mortal form melted away and revealed my true body.

Pao sauntered forward, proud and somewhat hideous, his skin a crimson shade, his dark hair, falling to his waist, wreathed in fiery horns. He now stood more than a head taller than both Luo and me, and he strode to the throne at the end of the cavern.

He settled into the thorny chair as if it was coated with velvet instead of nails. 'Bring in the accused,' he boomed.

Luo and I took our places next to his throne. My companion had ditched his slender, handsome mortal form for his real one: a strong man with the head of a black stallion, his glossy mane flowing freely. He smiled.

The weight of my horns made me grow weary; too much time spent in the mortal realm, with my soft, squishy body, had made me unaccustomed to my true form—the form with the head of a mighty bull. My neck ached and I tried to focus. Two wraiths were bringing in the murderer.

I had to stifle a gasp. Beside me, I heard Luo choke.

The murderer was female.

Between the shadowy forms of the wraiths, the girl swayed, her face covered with a veil, her long arms, and legs, snowy white and unblemished, uncovered. I could see that she was beautiful, even with that veil on; her hair, the colour of raven wings, was oddly familiar.

She fell to her knees as the wraiths shoved her down, landing with a brutal crack. Her head was pressed onto the ground. Luo moaned pity.

No wonder Pao could not judge her in a mortal court. Women— Chinese women, with their soft, white hands, with their controlling husbands and strict household rules, committing such brutal murders?

I could still see how deep the knives were embedded in the wall. That took strength. The strength that I didn't believe a girl like this would have.

This case would shake the foundation of the mortals' strict society.

I glanced up at Pao. He was rigid, strangely so. But he couldn't be wrong, I thought, he has never been wrong. Suddenly, I realized that I wanted him to be. I didn't want this little girl condemned to the torture of hell.

Despite what she may have done, I wanted her to go away free.

Pao cleared his throat. 'The accused is Li Yuelin. You have committed murders, the brutal, almost bestial killing of three men. Thus I sentence you to a thousand years on the mountain of knives.'

Li Yuelin. The name struck a chord, and I glanced at Luo. He was stepping back, shaking his head, his brown eyes filled with disbelief.

Li Yuelin. Lin.

I remembered why that hair seemed familiar. We had just seen it, at the stall. On the head of a bright, young woman, talented with the knife and brimming with life and vigor.

The murderer was Lin.

I stared at the form on the floor, my mind blank. No. It could not be.

That pretty girl, brimming with life and joy. It could not be.

Pao stared at her and suddenly I hated him; did he have to expose her? Did he have to?

My mind flashed almost instantly to an image of Lin's fresh, pretty face marred by slashes of knives and bloodied, haggard by exhaustion and pain— like those ugly ghouls that were, even then, climbing their never-ending mountains.

Lin lifted her head; it seemed like she still hadn't lost her pride, her bravery. She ripped the veil off and threw it onto the ground; Luo shuddered very visibly. Beneath the cloth her face was already bruised, her lips stained with blood.

'Do whatever you want,' she spat, 'I have no regrets. The men I executed were demons and devils. I saved countless lives with theirs.' Her obsidian eyes blazed with a terrible fire; I thought that I had seen it before, that unearthly light.

Pao cocked his head at her, like a cat speculating on his prey. 'You should have waited,' he said gently, 'we are always watching. We would have handled those people. But by rashly killing them you have instead condemned yourself to hell.'

Lin took a deep breath, her cheeks colored. 'That was what I was supposed to do as I watched my friends, my neighbors die,' she said savagely, 'to wait for divine judgment.' She laughed, and Pao watched impassively.

‘Where were you my whole life?’ Lin asked, ‘where were you when my sister was killed by one of these gangsters? Where were you when my friend’s children were found mutilated under a bridge, their faces growing paler and paler as they nearly bled to death? I’ve seen enough and I’ve heard enough.’ She took a deep breath and glared at Pao.

Suddenly something seemed to deflate inside her and her eyes welled with tears. ‘I know it’s not right,’ she said brokenly, ‘but are they any better than me?’

Pao looked at her, his eyes notably softer. ‘I cannot change the Law,’ he said sadly, ‘you should not have broken it.’

‘How did you find out that I’m the culprit, anyway,’ she asked, ‘I was careful. Extraordinarily careful.’

Pao smiled thinly. ‘I saw how you killed that last man. A slash to the throat that started at the base of his neck but extended upwards; is clear evidence that the assailant is much shorter than the victim. Handy with a knife, too; how else would you have killed that man so precisely, so quickly?’ He crossed his legs and stared down at Lin. ‘But the one thing that exposed you was your scent and your makeup. Careful you were; it was very hard to stop the powder on your face from smudging onto the wall when you grapple with your victim, though. Hence that slap today to collect a sample.’ Pao grimaced and gave an apologetic nod to Lin, who shrugged. ‘It matched with the fine, pale powder on the wall. Most importantly the scent remaining in the room was familiar to me; took me some time to recognize, though.’

Lin grinned through her tears. ‘A stroke of luck got me here,’ she said, ‘if I hadn’t been so close to you all I would have never been caught.’ I couldn’t miss that sting; how could Pao do this to his— our— friend? And it hurt. A bit more than I realized it would.

‘A stroke of luck got you here,’ Pao echoed sympathetically. ‘But still, it is time for your punishment.’

The wraiths took Lin by the arms again, yanking her to her feet. She offered no resistance, only stood up limply. My heart pounded with a pain that shook my body, but I had to keep up the façade.

As the wraiths dragged her away to her terrible, terrible fate, Lin spat on the floor. ‘This is for you, my lord,’ she hissed. Then she was gone, and I dreaded hearing her agonized scream amongst thousands of others.

I had never questioned Judge Pao. I was his servant, and it was not my place to judge my master. But as I looked at Lin, at her noble and beautiful motives, against the terrible souls of her supposed victims, I felt a hollowness opening up in my chest.

A pity that the Law takes everybody.

Interrogation of a Rock

Heep Yunn School, Ung, Carissa – 12

Today is my sixth anniversary working at the palace, and I had been promoted by the royal family to be an assistant to the legendary Judge Pao the day before. If not for the prince and queen's persuading, I would have been executed by now. Tossing and turning for the whole night and overcome with disbelief, I did not get an ounce of sleep last night. By the time I awoke, hustling and bustling could be heard clearly from my room, as everyone in the palace was eager to gear up for another day. To kick start my brain, I decided it was best to finish a simple assignment. I was getting ready to head to my new working room when an overwhelming figure appeared behind me.

The figure had dark skin, and a crescent moon imprinted on his forehead. He held a scroll in his right hand, and a writing brush on his left. This must be my mentor, Lord Bao! He came up and greeted me warmly, "Good morning, my new assistant. Sir Gong, I presume? I look forward to collaborating with you and have a pleasant day!" I smiled awkwardly and responded, "Pleased to meet you, sir." My mentor chuckled and went about his own business. I marvelled at his modesty and politeness towards me and followed a female servant who led me to my working room.

The servant led me to a spectacular hallway, which led to a pair of magnificent doors. The doors swung open, and judging by the shining plaque on the wall, I would be sharing my working space with my mentor, Lord Bao! I eagerly scanned the room and realised that my mentor had quite the collection of ornamental pottery. Well-preserved, albeit ancient vases stood around the room. Several vases contained dried chrysanthemums, while one wall housed a shelf filled to the brim with even more vases. Sitting at the main desk at the centre of the room was Lord Bao. Tapping a brush on the table, Lord Bao looked up and greeted me with his warm smile. "Sir Gong, it's about time you started assisting me in solving cases." Absolutely dumbfounded, I protested, "L-Lord Bao, today is my first day working with you. I have not received any f-formal training from anyone yet, and I will become a burden to you in the case!" To my utter surprise, he ignored my pleas and started talking.

"Sir Gong, there is no need to be self-critical. Success is not final, failure is not fatal. I have received a case to interrogate and solve, so please listen carefully about the matter. While strolling in the market, a young boy came to me crying and told me about his problematic situation. The boy had just prior earned about one hundred copper coins, which he planned to use to buy medicine for his sick mother after selling oily foods in the market. He then took a nap on a boulder. When he awoke, the coins were gone. You know my methods, Sir Gong. We shall try our best to track down the culprit and make him pay dearly." Lord Bao's words made me feel slightly more motivated, which in turn pepped up my mind. I mused on the case. The boy has not seen the thief's face, there are no witnesses; how could anyone find the culprit? I glanced hopefully at my mentor, hoping to receive some ideas from him. Nothing at all. As I reached for a cup of water to clear my mind, an ear-piercing "Ha!" caught me off guard and brought me back to my senses. Looking up, Lord Bao was standing up with both palms pressed on the table and a giant smile on his face. I passed off my burst of laughter as a violent sneeze. Was this how he solved cases every day? Triumphantly, he announced, "I have found a solution! Thank you ever so much!" I hadn't done as much as drink some water. Why did he thank me abruptly?

Lord Bao led me to a gigantic outdoor courtroom and sat at the table on the stage. He summoned ten middle-aged villagers. These villagers were, according to Lord Bao, people who had been spotted by the boy after he woke up. Three other palace workers came grunting while rolling a huge stone to the centre of the courtroom. Banging a gold-embroidered mallet on the polished rosewood table, Lord Bao announced sternly to the rock, "Rock, do you plead guilty for stealing this boy's copper coins while he was sleeping?", pointing to the boy. I could not believe my ears. This must be a mistake, I thought. He might have gotten distracted by something. "Rock, did you steal the boy's coins?" I was certain that Lord Bao was indeed talking to the rock. I tapped his shoulder silently and tried my best to explain to him politely that a rock was an insentient object. He, however, ignored me a second time and directed his attention towards the villagers, who were jeering and pointing at Lord Bao. Whispers were heard and rude gestures were made. "I thought he was a qualified judge! Is he out of his

mind?” said an old lady, convulsed in laughter. “Look at his assistant. He looks as if he does not know whether to laugh or cry!” I opened my mouth to intervene when Lord Bao struck the table with his hammer again. “Silence!” he called. “It is against the law to disturb a judge during a trial. I will fine everyone here with one copper coin.” Annoyed muttering could be heard audibly as the villagers, all with brows furrowed and jaws clenched, hesitantly formed a line. A large water basin was brought to the front of the line, and the villagers dropped their coins into the basin by the piece. Strangely enough, Lord Bao was watching the basin hawk-eyed rather than interrogating the rock.

Out of the blue, Lord Bao hollered, “Halt! I have found the culprit!” Pointing at the man who had just dropped his coin inside the basin, he signalled for the guards to bind his hands with ropes. By this time, a mob of villagers had gathered around the courtroom, clamouring about how Lord Bao had convicted an innocent villager of the theft to save time, and that he took copper coins from the villagers for his own gain. “Listen!” Lord Bao shouted. “The moment this man threw his coin into the basin, a layer of oil floated to the surface of the water. If you do not believe me, another coin from this man’s pocket will be put in the water.” Sure enough, the moment the copper coin sank to the bottom of the basin, there was an oil blossom. “See? This boy was selling oily foods at the market, so naturally the coins earned will be oily. Since he was the only person selling oily foods at that time, the person whose coins are oily must be the culprit!”

The crowd’s noise seemed to die down slightly, and gradually come to a stop. My eyes fixed on the old lady who had previously insulted Lord Bao. Ha, I thought. Let’s see who has egg on their face now! Looking to my left, I realised that Lord Bao had gotten off the stage. He was now returning coins to the witnesses, who all bowed respectfully. As for the little boy, Lord Bao returned to his room and retrieved a large bag of golden coins for the boy. He had purposely told the boy that the coins inside the bag were from the culprit’s pockets. The little boy repeatedly thanked Lord Bao, then ran off to treat his sick mother. I felt a rush of warmth throughout my body and smiled as his silhouette faded off into the mellow sunset. “Job well done, Sir Gong”. A deep voice said behind me. “Well, besides probably inspiring you with the cup of water, I did virtually nothing to contribute to this case. I do have a lot to learn from you, Lord Bao.” My mentor shook with laughter and said, “You sure do, Sir Gong. You know, there is a reason why I chose you to be my assistant.”

Judge Pao: Stolen Case in the Future

Heep Yunn School, Wong, Ching Yin – 13

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the M+ Museum!” The host’s voice reverberated around the museum. A massive crowd of people gathered around the stage where a vast object covered by a piece of red cloth was displayed. “Today is the opening ceremony of the exhibition of —” He flicked away the cloth. “The one and only ‘*Yan Ming Gong Zheng*’ wooden sign written by Judge Pao himself,” he announced proudly.

The host continued, “We have specially invited the descendant of Judge Pao, Mr. Jeffrey Pao, to participate in the ceremony as he has generously donated it to the museum.” Mr. Pao rose from his seat and waved politely at the crowd. People broke into rapturous applause immediately.

All of a sudden, the lights flickered and the whole museum was instantly plunged into darkness. Screams and shouts could be heard and as a police officer, I calmed everyone down but suddenly the lights went back on again. However, gasps and murmurs could be heard. As I looked at the stage, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The sign had disappeared without a trace.

Soon after, I walked onto the stage and inspected it intently. There was an openable roof at the top so the sign could have been lifted through the window and transported away. However, I was unable to locate any evidence. Finally, with no luck, I decided to speak to Mr. Pao hoping to get some clues.

Nevertheless, as I left the crime scene, a statue nearby caught my attention. It was just a plain stone statue of Judge Pao but somehow, I felt peculiarly familiar with it and there was an urge to touch the crescent moon mark on his forehead. A voice rang in my head.

“Touch it. Touch it.”

Unconsciously, my hand reached for the mark and the moment we connected, an ancient work office appeared in front of me. There was a quill and a piece of yellow paper on the desk next to me. It was so real that I seemed to be able to touch it. When I tried to walk towards it, my feet, however, wouldn’t budge.

Suddenly, a bright light flashed across my eyes and I was back in the museum, sitting on the floor. *What on earth just happened?* I widened my eyes and ran my fingers through my hair. *Whose office was that? Why did it look so old? Did I travel to another place?*

A thousand questions were running through my head. Besides, there was a tingling sensation on my elbow where my birthmark, similarly shaped like a crescent moon, was located. The feeling began to disperse as I rubbed it gently. *Could it be the birthmark or ... was I just imagining things?* I shook my head. *Never mind, perhaps it was just an illusion.* I cast my thoughts aside and headed toward Mr. Pao.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Pao. I am Officer Wong. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about the stolen wooden sign?”

“Definitely, please go ahead.” He sat up straight and his black eyes were filled with sorrow and devastation.

“Do you suspect anyone?” I inquired.

“I believe it’s Mr. P, the billionaire who is notorious for his arrogance and greediness.” He answered. “He once saw the sign displayed in my home and bid me money to buy it but I rejected his offer. He was furious and hurled insults at me.”

“Oh wait — there was also an odd man who always waited at my house claiming to be writing a biography of Judge Pao. He always asked me whether there were any relics left by Judge Pao so I told him about the wooden sign which would be displayed on this day.” He furrowed his eyebrows.

“What did he look like and did he tell you his name?” I asked.

“He was bronzed with his hair fully covered by a hat, a bowler hat to be precise and he wore a camel coat and blue jeans. And if I am not mistaken, he did not tell me his name.” He replied.

“I see. Thank you for your cooperation.” We exchanged small smiles as we shook hands.

That night, I sat on my leather armchair looking at an online version of the wooden plank. *There were two suspects, Mr. P, and the odd man. The former had a slighter suspicion as he was currently in London attending a noble ball whereas the latter was fishier as he was always asking about artifacts that Mr. Pao had left.* Hmm... I narrowed my eyes and pursed my lips into a thin line. *But, the thief was extremely careful and didn't leave any trace of evidence at all, so how can I find him?* When I was lost in thought, without warning, a "pop" sounded next to me, bringing me back to reality and I jumped up from my seat. The moment I saw who it was, I was at a loss for words and blinked multiple times. *Oh. My. God.*

“J—Judge Pao?” I stammered.

He was wearing his iconic court clothes: a gown with broad sleeves made of black silk embellished with a vivid shade of golden and red embroidery. They have shaped like traditional Chinese patterns and the most striking part of his clothes was the majestic, golden-scale dragon in front of his chest twisting and swishing its barbed tail. A belt was fastened around his waist and a “Futou” was seated on top of his head. His mouth was slightly open and a frown creased his face.

“Hello? May I know where I am and why are you wearing such bizarre clothes?” He asked with his forehead scrunched up.

Calm down. Taking a deep breath and regaining my composure, I told him about my encounter, the birthmark, and finally the wooden sign. After hearing my frustration, Judge Pao stroked his beard slowly and chuckled, “So, Officer Wong, you mentioned that there was no evidence at the crime scene but there are two suspects. How about...” He pointed at his clothes and I widened my eyes, the smile on my face stretched as he elaborated further on his idea.

The next day, it was announced by Mr. Pao that there was another valuable piece of relic left by Judge Pao: his court clothes. It would be placed in the museum tonight. Everything was going according to plan and it was time to see whether the thief would swallow the bait.

At last, when the clock struck twelve, a dark shadow moved on the screen in the van. I leaned forward from my seat as it moved quietly and swiftly toward the clothes. Once it was visible, I noticed that the person was dressed in black and his face was covered securely with a mask. He edged closer and closer to the clothes and as fast as a bullet, he snatched them triumphantly and bolted out of the museum. However, little did he know that a tiny sensor was hidden almost imperceptibly underneath the clothes. Soon, the police barged into his house and encircled him with their guns pointed at him. Before he could even react, I handcuffed him promptly. Looking straight at him in the eye, I smirked, “Gotcha.”

The next morning, I turned on the television to the news channel. The host announced, “... A suspect was caught in his house last midnight. Not long after, the “*Yan Ming Gong Zheng*” wooden sign was found at his place. After some thorough research, it is discovered that the thief is mentally ill and is Judge Pao’s biggest fan. He adored him tremendously that he thought that he was Judge Pao and had a mission to get all the relics that Judge Pao had left. He’s now receiving medical care in Castle Peak Psychiatric Hospital and is sentenced to jail for five years...” As I was watching, Judge Pao entered the living room wearing his court clothes, holding a plastic cup filled with water.

I stood up and said, “Thank you for helping me solve the case – oh, and lending your clothes as well. I must say it was a brilliant idea to lure the thief out with your clothes.”

“I am flattered. Besides, the reason I made this sign was hoping that people could understand the meaning of my words so that society could be more fair and just. Hence, I wouldn't want it to be lost.”

“Right – wait, how are you going to return to your world? You have already been here for three days.”

“I have no idea, but I hope it will be soon.” He sighed.

“Meanwhile, when you are still here, how about we — oh”

The place where Judge Pao had stood a second ago was left with only the plastic cup. I picked it up and shrugged, “That was fast. Have a safe trip!”

Whistling a joyful tune, I snuggled up happily against my armchair and wondered if anything like this would occur again.

The Ying Yue Robe

Heep Yunn School, Wong, Lok Sun Charmine – 12

Arriving home, the brightly lit walls of my hut welcomed me as I sat down with my wife. On our padded floor, everything was peaceful and warm.

‘Tea, Haitao?’ she asked.

‘Good evening, Lipin’ I replied, receiving the tea, ‘Thank you.’

After a brief to-and-fro conversation, Cheng Lipin stood up, before heading into the other room to sew her new project.

At that moment, I heard someone knocking on our door. Opening it, I saw three guards towering over me.

‘May I help you...?’ I asked.

‘Wang Haitao, you have to follow us, you have been called for a trial.’ one of them responded.

I nodded. We crossed the busy roads of Song as we approached the court. Hand on the irregular pattern of the walls, I approached the courtroom, where I’d be the defendant for my ‘supposed’ crime of theft.

I had never been on trial before, such cases always turned for the worst, I have witnessed people getting executed for their crimes, in sanguinary and unimaginable ways. Yet, the lucky few who were let go could never speak up about their time in court.

Entering the court, I eyed the bare furniture of the place, before I was escorted to the judging panels by the guards. In front of Pao Zheng himself, I broke a cold sweat.

‘Wei...Wu...’ It marked the opening of the trial.

Opposite to me was the apparent ‘victim’, who was famously known as Fang Yan, the wife of a prominent official who had lost her beloved YingYue robe. She didn’t have any selfless act for the country, or the people, no. She was a snobby rich person who spent her husband’s wealth on ‘necessities’. Sure, as if your expenses on jewelry and extravagant headpieces were considered ‘necessary’.

‘Haitao deserves to be sent to prison! He stole my beloved robe...’

She went on and on about how I should be severely punished, the reason being she witnessed me steal it. How could I have stolen it if I was ploughing the fields the entire day? As I listened on, I couldn’t help but roll my eyes, what a load of rubbish she was speaking! She could barely list out the traits of the perpetrator, simply describing ‘specific’ features that could be found everywhere in a crowded street. Nevertheless, the solemn expressions of everyone else intimidated me enough to not say a word.

‘Silence!’ Pao Zheng shouted, it was enough to even make the fiercest of tigers stop roaring.

‘For what do you plead?’

‘I... am not the culprit you are looking for, your honor, for Madam Fang has little to no evidence to prove my g—guilt...’ I stammered. I could imagine how stupid I sounded.

Staring at the floor, I could feel Pao Zheng narrowing his eyes. Before being able to speak, however, Fang Yan started screeching about how I should be executed, although I was ploughing the fields during the incident.

Taking a deep breath, I looked at Pao Zheng. He was in a trance of deep thought, fair and just he is, who does not get swayed by temptations made. Really? All these rumors about Judge Pao seemed unreal but convincing... How could a judge not have a bias? Nonetheless, I suppose it wasn’t a good time to think about it now.

‘We will continue this case tomorrow unless more evidence is found.’ He announced.

The court had gone silent, as Fang Yan sneered at me. Pao Zheng then ended the court case at that moment.

'I don't know who you are, but my robe is still missing, and since you were the only one on the streets when it happened... I believe my point stands.' she scoffed.

Did she have anything against me? What did she even want? "Justice"? Obviously not.

Fang Yan left as I was escorted to a cell. It was damp and cold, a rather miserable place to stay for a day. Then again, the torches on the walls illuminated the place, at least I could tell that other people were also waiting for their trial to end, or spending their tedious hours waiting for their punishment to begin.

I missed my home, and I missed my wife, whom I could imagine was worried for my wellbeing: She didn't even know what was going on. Regardless, I missed the warm atmosphere of my cozy little hut, with the wonderful candles flickering as we had our evening tea.

I'd never expected that this is how I'd spend the next 12 hours before my next trial.

It made me feel pity for all the prisoners, the executed, and the wronged. Staring at the cold, blank wall, I prayed that everyone might find peace in their hearts.

The next day...

I had been tossing and turning all night, the absence of my lover seemed to have driven me mad. I missed the warmth of my house, oh how I wished the case could've been over with. I couldn't tell what time it was, with only the food informing me of the time passed.

Instead of falling asleep, I could only enter dream-like states, waking up randomly each time. The funny thing was – the only dreams I had were ones about Judge Pao... Could that have meant something? It couldn't have, how would a dream about Pao Zheng ascending into the clouds mean anything at all? It only confused me more.

I stared at one of the cell walls blankly, when I overheard a few officials discussing a case. My case.

'Hey, have you heard of the "YingYue robe" case?'

'Yeah, I can't believe that a commoner is trying to argue against an official's wife!'

'Pao Zheng always cares about fairness. Why don't we give Fang Yan some... "evidence"?'

One of the officials pulled out a ripped piece of clothing, almost identical to the robe stolen, then slipped it into my cell, as if I wasn't there.

I stared, both shocked and furious. How could a noble commit such an act? Picking up the piece of robe, I examined it closely. It had a very silky feel, as it glittered and sparkled in a mesmerizing way.

'Wait... could this have meant—'

Before I could react, however, a guard cuffed me and told me to follow him once again. As I was unwillingly following him down the monotonous cell walls, I tried hanging the fabric onto one of the cell's torches to get rid of the "evidence". Yet, the slightly charred fabric seamlessly flew back into my hands. Great. My attempts seemed futile, it was my life that felt like a plummeting plane, with no escape. Why must this have happened to me?

At that moment, I could hear Pao Zheng murmuring to himself, perhaps contemplating the trial at hand, my verdict... Then, I saw Fang Yan enter the room, she seemed a lot more confident than when I saw her last night.

'I have solid proof that he stole my robe, your honor!' Fang Yan announced proudly.

She laid down a torn version of the fabric she found in her house, before taking out one an official ‘apparently’ found in my cell. How many copies of the fabric were there? Nevertheless, I still didn’t appeal against her ‘standpoints’, status? I couldn’t answer myself, to be frank.

It didn’t seem to be identical to her iconic robe though. There was something about it that was off-putting. It was enough the raise suspicion in Pao Zheng, at least.

‘Are you certain that this is dome fabric from your “beloved robe”?’

‘I “witnessed” him do such and act, your honor, this is unfair!’ She pleaded.

‘It is decided, for every inch of fabric that was stolen, Wang’s wife shall sew another for you.’

‘But I could hear Fang Yan’s futile attempts to change Pao Zheng’s mind, as I chuckled to myself.

‘It is my final decision, and no further adjustments shall be made. You claim that he stole your robe, correct? Now I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt, and she’ll have to sew a brand new one for you.’

That left her dumbfounded, and she left without saying another word.

I thanked the judge profusely, as I was uncuffed and permitted to exit the courtroom.

Meeting Fang Yan outside the courtroom, she handed me a sketch of the robe, with a piece of fabric for reference.

‘Look, commoner, you may have gotten off this time. But you were the only one there when the theft happened. I know you stole it. So your wife’d better get my robe finished in a week, or I won’t hesitate to put you on trial, again,’

Watching her leave, I couldn’t help but laugh to myself.

‘We better get to work then!’ I exclaimed, loud enough for her to hear, before going back home.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,

Chan, Ho Him – 12

As Pao woke up in the morning fresh air, he could smell the faint trail of a most sinister crime. As he exited his house and locked the door, his black eyes opened with a determined look on his face. He swore he would bring justice to those who have been wrongly accused or to the most devious crimes of the day.

While walking along the street towards his Kaifeng to work, he saw a great many people standing at the doorstep, banging the door, shouting in anger and threatening to kick the wooden doors down if Pao did not open them to greet their pleas for justice. Irritated by all the commotion, he entered the Kaifeng from the back, took his gavel from the table and walked towards the straining doors trying to hold back the ground. He slammed the doors wide open and banged the gavel as hard as he could against the granite stone wall. The mass of people covered their ears and huddled together in terror as they could see small cracks form on the wall. No doubt the inside of the Kaifeng now had a giant scar on its fragile body. "I'll have order! I won't accept any pleas for justice till you all calm down and tell me what happened." Pao said, his cool eyes sweeping across the crowd before him. All at once, they simultaneously said, "The king has been murdered in cold blood along with his family! On his back were words engraved with blood. We beg of you to help us solve this mystery and prevent the assassin, whoever they might be, from attacking the people ourselves!"

Pao's eyes were wide with shock, his mouth gaping with surprise. He never imagined that the king could have been assassinated with 20 bodyguards guarding him in the dead of night; however, he put on a brave face and told the officials in the crowd to bring him to the scene of crime.

At the former king's bedroom, Pao scoured the room for anything the assassin must have left behind for evidence. Yet, there was nothing but perfectly undamaged bookshelves, furniture and a bloody bed which he had yet to take a look at. Looking suspiciously towards the bed, he tentatively reached out a hand and pulled the blanket onto the floor, finding a faint distinctive symbol right on top of the blanket. "The mark of the tiger clan." Pao breathed, eyes filled with surprise, "The tiger clan helps people in need and pledged themselves to the king to help in times of need. Why would they kill the king?" Pao muttered to himself in curiosity. He then told the guards to dispose of all things in the room, hand the blanket to him for evidence, and to replace all things intact in the room, for he planned to lay a trap to find the assassin.

Pao's followers doubted him, for even the other officials in the castle were unsuccessful in solving the case. But Pao continued with his plan on solving the case and quest to get justice for the dead former king. He placed a mannequin pieced together by pillows as a decoy under a fresh blanket, and laid traps of weapons, spikes and finally a hunting trap at the front of the bed as a last attempt to capture whoever decided to come and kill the "new" king.

As hours of time passed, Pao nearly grew restless and had a thought of giving up once or twice. Though no matter what, his will never faltered and Pao waited as long as he needed, until luck finally came on his side.

A shadow crossed the room, illuminating the person by the moonlight glow. He could see a figure clothed in black and with orange painted pauldrons attached to his shoulders. "The clansmen of the Tiger Clan," Pao thought, and concentrated on his view in the shadows of the room, losing hope as the figure nimbly evaded all the traps, and raised his sword on the decoy. He stabbed the "king", and instead cut into soft feathers. Only then did he realize the danger he had placed himself into, and attempted to run away, only to have his arm be snapped by the hunter trap and cause him to lose a piece of crucial armor. He scampered away with his tail between his legs, and Pao smirked and stared at the arm brace that the assassin had left behind.

Many days passed and Pao still hadn't made a move on what he would do next. Many forgot about the case eventually and continued living their lives as usual and having Judge Pao hand out justice to criminals and such. Until one fateful day, when the Tiger clan came to town for giving their respects to the former king. When Pao heard the news, he was surprised beyond belief! "Why would they come to pay their respects to the former king if they were the ones who killed him?" He thought, "Unless...only one among them is the true assassin and hater of the former king."

Judge Pao donned his finest robes, placed the arm brace in his pocket and proceeded to the city gates, ready to greet the Tiger Clan. He was eventually introduced to the Tiger clan leader, Shuang Fu and made an

acquaintance with him, briefly questioning about the clan's arm braces and how they were so unique. Shuang Fu answered, "Every person in the Tiger Clan wears a different arm brace, that way everyone is familiar with each other and easy to recognize." As Pao walked away, he smirked to himself with a look of determination, for he finally had the hint needed to catch the assassin once and for all.

The mourning of the Former King had begun, and as the Tiger Clan, officials and citizens of the imperial city engaged in the act once more, Pao had enacted a plan with the Prime Minister and the King in order to capture the murderer, but now they would have to play their part and wait for Pao's signal to capture the murderer.

The mourning festivities went on until it was finally time for a plentiful feast in the royal hall in the palace to celebrate the crowning of the new king. While everyone ate vigorously, Pao decided it was time to make his move.

Judge Pao stood up and clanked his spoon against the metal cup, only after he had everyone watching him attentively with curiosity then he spoke, "I'd like to give a toast to the new king! Cheers!" Everyone cheered with excitement and drank their wine, only to hear Pao's voice echoing around the room once more, "Excuse me, but I seem to have picked up this fallen arm brace from the ground, did any of you perhaps drop it?" And as everyone from the Tiger Clan came forward to examine the arm brace, and to hear a shout from the crowd, a Tiger Clan member named Aukurinari said, "Yes, thank you. This is my arm brace!" Pao's eyes grew cold and with a sneer on his face he yelled, "Guards, arrest him! What are you waiting for?"

"I'm innocent, I swear!" Aukurinari trembled in fear at the amount of guards who had surrounded him, "I haven't done anything to break the law in this city, I tell you!" Shuang Fu glowered with fury, "Is this some kind of sick joke?! Release him! Or else I will unleash the full wrath of my clan, massacre everyone here, and declare war on you!" Pao pulled out his sword, and spoke quietly, "Do you know your friend here was the assassin of the former king, don't you see the blood stains on the arm brace?" Everyone was gaping in shock, Aukurinari was as pale as a ghost and looked to have been gutted through the stomach. Shuang Fu was shocked, but he pulled himself together and sighed, "I'm sorry for my clan member's act of betrayal. He's yours to deal with."

Aukurinari was led away, crying in fear of what punishment he would be given, the officials were still stunned in silence. "Now come on, we solved the crime, shouldn't we be happy?" The king said, with a huge smile on his face at the fact that his father had been avenged, "Let's celebrate and continue this party!"

After the celebration until sunset, the Tiger Clan left, expressing their sorrow for the kingdom once more, and promised to make sure the act of betrayal would never happen again. Life resumed to normal and everyone went about their day, doing what they did for a living. And as for Pao? He continued bringing justice to those who were wrongly accused and solving crimes, and as the sun went down, he walked home with a smile blooming on his face, with the knowledge that though he had solved one crime, there are many more still to come.

New Tales of Judge Pao

*Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,
Chan, Kin Chung – 14*

“Judge Pao was a Chinese politician during the reign of Emperor Renzong in China's Song Dynasty. During his twenty-five years in civil service, Pao consistently demonstrated extreme honesty and uprightness, with actions such as sentencing his own uncle, impeaching an uncle of Emperor Renzong's favorite concubine and punishing powerful families”, the teacher closed her history book and continued, “This is the story of Judge Pao and the lesson ends, goodbye everyone.” The students, “Goodbye, Ms. Iris.”

By the time everyone leaves the classroom, the book starts to shine. A glimmer of light shone all over the book, it was shimmering and gleaming. Then, in a sudden, a man surrounded by a bright flame pops out from the book, falls down, and smashes the desk into pieces like a meteorite colliding with the Earth. The man walks out from the brightness and surprisingly, he is the mighty Judge Pao! “Where am I and why am I here?” Judge Pao questioned, with his ignorance of this modern world. He was feeling dizzy and suffering to think how he managed to be here now. Then he turned out of the classroom with his old Chinese coatings dressed. “Look, it's Judge Pao,” a student shouted. All the students were attracted and ran towards Pao. “Are you Judge Pao? Why are you here?” another student said. Pao replied, “I am Judge Pao, the most righteous man on Earth. I don't know why I am here too, but how may I help you?”

At the same time, two students ran out of the classroom. One of them got a pencil case in his hand, the other one is chasing the pencil case. “Give me back my pencil case!” Jason said. “No way, it is mine, why should I give it to you?” said Karsen. Listening to their argument, Judge Pao walked towards them and alleviated both of their emotions. “Calm down,” Judge Pao said, “Karsen, can you describe the appearance of your pencil case?” Karsen said, “It is a rectangular black pencil case with some white strips, which is the one in my hand now.” Judge Pao said, “Did you check your school bag?” Karsen replied, “No, but I'm sure that Jason got mine.” Judge Pao got Karsen's school bag which has his own name labeled on it. Pao puts his hand in the bag and grabs a rectangular black pencil case with some white strips out the bag. “Is this yours?” Judge Pao questioned. Karsen embarrassingly replied, “Yes.”

All the students cheer for Judge Pao for his intelligence to solve the case. Judge Pao requested, “Karsen, please kindly apologize to Jason and give the pencil case back to him.” Unfortunately, Karsen took his phone out, said, “No way, I won't apologize.” He swiped his phone and continued, “If you want the pencil case, then I'll send the photos of your nude body to everyone in this school!” Jason replied worriedly, “No don't...fine, I'll give you my pencil case.” “Why would you forgive him,” Judge Pao said angrily, “The pencil case is yours and this is the truth, you shouldn't let him go!” Jason whispered, “If I don't let him go, he'll come back and take revenge on me soon, fairness is gone in this world.” The other students also followed Karsen's side as they didn't want to be bullied by him. Judge Pao felt puzzled, asking himself how did the world change so quickly.

A few minutes later, Judge Pao moved on to solve other conflicts. He is now in Victoria Harbour in Hong Kong. A pedestrian walked past and threw a can of beer in the sea. Judge Pao stopped the pedestrian and said, “Throwing rubbish in the sea is illegal, you shouldn't do that and you should pay the penalty as a punishment.” The pedestrian said, “So what, how can you prove it?” Judge Pao said, “I saw it, and I believe the god saw it in heaven too.” The pedestrian felt ignored and replied, “You may tell what you just said to the police, I don't believe anyone would trust you.” Then he walked past Judge Pao, who felt confused again.

After that, Judge Pao goes on a train ride. A young lady went into the train and sat on the priority seat. Judge Pao shouted, “Madam, this seat is for people who are needed, not for you.” The woman said, “Come on, there aren't elderly or babies here, why can't I sit on the empty seat?” Judge Pao rebutted, “Yes, there aren't, but the people in need will not know where the priority seat is if you sit on it.” Then Judge Pao grabbed a phone from the passenger beside and record the woman sitting on the priority seat. He said, “As everyone sees, this healthy lady

sits on the priority seat which is providing troubles to the needy...” Abruptly, the lady collapsed, pretending to be ill. She said, “I’m feeling bad today so I just want a seat to comfort my body, but this man is pulling me off the seat!”

With the tears on her face, the passengers tended to believe her and pull Judge Pao away. Judge Pao was being pulled off the train, he argued, “No, she is pretending to be sick, don’t believe her, don’t...”

It was too late. The doors had closed and the train was gone. Judge Pao could just stand there and be bewildered again. He now understood justice, fairness and correctness were soon forgotten by all humans. The world was now covered with darkness. No one cared about the truth, they just wanted the answer which was different to others.

Judge Pao could only cast his mind back to the days he solved crises in the court, helped the victims and punished the villains, which would never happen again.

New Tales of Judge Pao

*Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,
Lee, Yan Wah – 14*

"Wanna hear a story about justice?" I was 8 the first time those words came out of his mouth.

In my young mind, I thought he looked exactly that – a living, breathing embodiment of justice. With his squared shoulders and easy grin, the sunlight from the living room window casted a golden halo upon the teenage boy. To my left, my friend Namie snorted. "My brother's always tryna sound cool." I continued to gape in awe.

His laughter reminded me of wind chimes. "Guess it's true you like stories!" He slid to my right, one leg propped on the couch. "Once upon a time, there was a boy named Bao Shi—" "You mean Judge Pao?" Namie interrupted. His grin was infectious. "Yeah, that's him grown. He made for a mighty figure, with his dark skin, cascading beard and crescent moon-shaped birthmark. His eyes were oh so piercing – they can see through lies the way knives slice through tofu. Legend says the imperial sword he held was cold and unyielding as justice itself."

There was something about the way he spoke, airy tone laced with conviction, that breathed magic into his tale. As I tilted my head, I could almost envision the fearsome figure silhouetted against the living room...

His voice jolted me back to reality. "Before that, he was just an ordinary boy who aspired to excel in the Imperial Examination. So he studied before the sun rose and long after the sky darkened."

"Soon came the day before the highest-level Imperial Examination. Like other examinees, Bao spent the night in a restaurant near the palace. He was munching Champa when he noticed a letter on a nearby table. It said: Meet me in our agreed venue at the time 'Ji-Ming'. As an official, I got wind of the Imperial Examination's writing topic, and will inform you for the agreed price."

Previously, I gazed at him intently. Now I glanced sideways and gritted my teeth, seething at the injustice. How could someone so callously disregard the others' efforts? It was just so...wrong.

In a heavy tone, he continued. "The unfairness enraged Bao. But how could he dispense justice, knowing neither the location mentioned nor the people involved?"

Upon hearing this, Namie started suspiciously, "Wait...didn't you just uncover your classmate's cheating? Is your story based on that?"

He only winked. "The odds were stacked against him, yet the yearning for justice fueled Bao. Refusing to succumb to unjustness, he thought hard."

"After long hours of persisting, a plan hatched. In close imitation of the letter's handwriting, Bao detailed the meetup to happen in a different location. At Ji-Ming, he arrived, wearing an official's clothing. Thanks to the night's gloom, the examinee believed Bao to be the official he bribed. Bao managed to fish the official's name out of his mouth, both of whom he reported."

His radiant grin was like the morning sun. "If one truly believes in justice, it'll be served." His sharp eyes burned. "None revered justice as much as Pao did. That's why Judge Pao always succeeds."

My widened eyes filled with wonder as they reflected the dappled sunlight. I echoed in a whisper. "Judge Pao always succeeds."

He and I became fast friends, he a natural storyteller, and I an avid listener. Unlike many, he never mocked my sensitiveness. He told many stories, but none entranced me as much as the tales he made up of Judge Pao. I called

him friend, but in truth, I worshiped him – to me, he will forever be the boy with the golden aura, the boy exuding confidence and ease.

Many a times I found solace in his words. Once so when I was 14, my parents found me, huddled in a dim corner of my room, sobs racking my fragile body. They tried consoling me, to no avail.

When he heard, he dropped all of his university work, and rushed over.

"You ok?" Through my tears, I saw him poised outside my room. Despite him being all smiles, I sensed the pulsing concern underneath.

What could I say? Their venomous laughter still echoed, dripping with malice.

Hours ago, my classmates circled a hunched-up me like vultures over carrion. One of them rolled their eyes. "You're too emotional!"

"Why are you such a drama queen?" Another snickered.

Never in my life had I felt so puny, so powerless. Disguising sobs, I fled the classroom, with its glaring LED lights and virulent inhabitants. When I finally arrived home, the only thing I craved was to never again speak.

With him though... I felt the words spill out of my mouth like tidal waves.

"Shi..." Murmuring, he shook his head and reached out to drape my shoulders.

When he spoke again, I noticed the deliberate optimism. "You know, Judge Pao faced a similar case. There was a small boy, chomping his fried dough sticks, when a gang of older boys snatched his food, cackling. They all darted away when Pao appeared, thinking they could evade justice."

"Of course, they were wrong. Pao soon located the houses with boys, and made each child submerge their hand in the basin of water he carried. If oil floated to the surface, Judge Pao would scold them until their heads drooped in shame."

He smiled at me, looking half a god. "No matter how strong some may seem. They can't evade justice. Remember? Judge Pao..."

"Always succeeds." I cracked a smile.

As the years breezed by, my encounters with him dwindled to none. Last I heard, he had become a police officer, extending the justice he so esteemed.

At 28, I became an author, my stories inspired by his. It's times like tonight, when I wandered around finding inspiration, that I realized how deeply etched his charismatic smile and enthralling tales were in my mind.

A bar distracted me. There was something about its grimy windows and peeling maroon sign that spoke of weariness, of long-gone glory. Intrigued, I stepped inside. It was devoid of clamor. I found it eerily beautiful, with its musty odor of cheap alcohol, the creaking floorboards hastily painted in malachite, and posters as faded as the fame of the people they depicted.

Distracted, I nearly missed him – his slouched figure blended in so well with the air of defeat. Under the flicker of lustreless lamps, he looked like a fallen god.

"Shi!" His voice was hoarse from the mountain of wine glass discarded on the splintering table.

"...Jace?" It felt wrong about directly calling his name, as wrong as the wrinkles lining his face.

"Come here!" He slurred. "Drink?"

"Nah—" I began, but he waved me down.

"A shot of whiskey!" He yowled.

I glanced at his blood-shot eyes and stooped frame. "How are you?" I inquired, masking unease.

Instead of answering, he drained his glass in huge gulps.

"Wanna hear a story about justice?" The words were so familiar, yet so strange.

I nodded. A spark of old humor rekindled in his eyes then, and he looked almost like himself.

"It was twenty years after Judge Pao uncovered the cheating in the Imperial Examination. He has become a widespread legend in China."

"That day, the news of a palace stableboy's death was brought to him. Again, the odds were stacked against Pao. How could he identify the murderer, among so many? How could he collect evidence?"

"Yet justice kept him determined. How could it not, with Pao having proven its victory immutable so many times? So he investigated thoroughly, conversing and examining."

"Soon the stark truth was unearthed. The stableboy discovered the corruption of China's highest-ranking minister. With the words of a few eyewitnesses, Judge Pao deemed the minister guilty."

"Judge Pao always wins." My smile hadn't changed.

In retrospect, it was my naïvety that blinded me from the way he barked a mirthless chuckle, the way he groped for more alcohol.

"Pao failed," he spat, "Despite the irrefutable evidence, the emperor refused the truth. Eyes smoldering, he berated Pao for his 'wrong accusation'. Pao lost his rank, and his world came crashing down."

He guzzled down yet another drink. The brooding silence was fitting as I mourned for the boy I worshiped.

When I spoke again, it was soft. "What's his name? The official who killed to hide his corruption and got you fired?"

He should've remained silent, would've normally, but bitterness and alcohol is as potent a drug as any.

"Sun Chuanfang."

Suddenly thirsty, I reached for my glass. The alcohol burned red-hot as it ran down my throat. As if in a trance, I whispered, "Judge Pao always succeeds."

Government Official Dead: Who is to Blame?

Government official Sun Chuanfang was found dead in his apartment at dawn today. Next to his corpse were the words, written in blood. 'As a human, Judge Pao may have failed to condemn you. At night, however, he turns into supernatural judge Yama, who works for the Afterworld.'

Judge Pao always succeeds'

New Tales of Judge Pao

*Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,
Leung, Yan Yuet – 12*

Judge Pao had been invited to a party, hosted by Chen-xin, a friend of his.

The Chen family was famous for their fruits, rumored to be absolutely delicious. It was sold in the market every day at a high price, and only the richest could afford them. As Judge Pao walked through the courtyard towards the house, he saw an orchard of fruit trees. Guards patrolled the perimeter of the orchard.

"Oh, Pao Gong!" exclaimed the woman who greeted him once he reached the house, wearing lavish clothes and tons of jewelry. The judge guessed that she was Mrs Chen, Chen-xin's wife. "Please, do come in," she said. The judge stepped into the hall.

The hall was well decorated, a humongous, extravagant chandelier hanging from the golden ceiling. Golden sunlight filtered through the open window, the shiny marble floor reflecting the sunlight and making the hall glow golden. Servants kept bringing food inside, setting it on the big table in the middle of the room.

"Ah, Judge Pao!" The father bellowed heartily, "Finally!" Judge Pao responded with a polite smile and a slight nod.

Chen-xin grinned and yelled, "Son, bring out the fruits you picked yesterday!" He then turned back to Judge Pao, saying, "I've been saving them just for this occasion, just for you only!"

Judge Pao turned to look at a teenage boy standing in the corner. The boy was presumably Chen-xin's son, Chen Kang, as he had the same handsome looks as his father. Upon his father's commands, he walked away into another hallway.

The boy came back, holding a platter full of fruit. Chen Kang set it down on the table carefully. Judge Pao turned his attention to the platter of fruit, as he looked appreciatively at the fruit; they were ripe and luscious, and his mouth watered just thinking of biting down at those juicy, yet crunchy snow pears.

"Brother!" someone yelled suddenly and loudly, making everyone in the room jump. A man strode confidently into the room, throwing one hand over Chen-xin's shoulder, and saying, "Sorry I'm late. I'm so hungry!" The man seemed to be very energetic still, and was no doubt Chen Yao Ming, Chen-xin's brother.

He dashed to the table, where he immediately snatched up a piece of fruit and stuffed it in his mouth. "Oh, this is great!" he exclaimed, quickly spearing another with his fork and eating it. All of a sudden, he swayed and crumpled to the floor.

"Yao Ming!" screamed Chen-xin, running to his side. Guests looked at the scene in horror. "What happened to him?" asked one of the guests.

Judge Pao rushed over immediately. Feeling his pulse, he gave his conclusion to the room, "He's... dead, unfortunately." "No! H-how?!" wailed Chen-xin, crying. He slumped over his brother's body, sobbing. His wife ran over, helping him up. She gently dragged him away from his brother.

Judge Pao inspected the fruit he was about to eat a minute ago. There seemed nothing wrong with it, and yet... he sniffed the pear. There was a faint, bitter odor.

"Poison," declared Judge Pao in a grim voice, standing up, "The fruit is poisoned!" Chen-xin gasped, "What?! But—" Mrs Chen yelled, "Chen Kang! What have you done! You have poisoned your own uncle!" All eyes darted towards the son, who looked petrified.

"I—I— didn't!" protested Chen Kang, "It's not me! I never— I would never do anything to my uncle!" "Save your words!" said a furious guest, "You disgrace! Killing your relative, with poison, too!" The crowd turned on the poor boy.

Kang was crying now, tears rolling down his face. Desperate, he shouted, "Judge Pao! Please, help me! I swear I didn't kill my uncle!"

The judge turned to the boy, his face expressionless. However, he had heard a sincerity in Chen Kang's voice that he had never heard in any murderer he'd encountered before.

"Wait," Judge Pao commanded, "Stop."

Chen Kang looked up, a glimmer of hope appearing before him.

The judge said, "I believe that Chen Kang isn't the murderer of his uncle." Protests rang out from the guests, who would it be if not the teenage boy?

"Listen to me, dear guests. We all know that poison has been administered into the fruit, then served. But to whom? To Chen Yao Ming? No. He rushed in, unexpectedly, eating the fruit before I could, and suffered the fate of dying from poison."

"How could the murderer know that Chen Yao Ming would eat the fruit? That poisoned fruit was meant for me. I was the one to eat the fruit, then die," concluded the judge.

There was a slight pause.

"From this point on, if you are not the killer—" the judge paused, observing each and every guest for any abnormal emotions. However, there was none. He continued, "Then you will speak up whenever you observe someone lying."

"Now then, let me proceed. When we consider the fact that the fruit was meant for me, that would make Chen Kang an unlikely suspect," Judge Pao said, "As Chen—xin has told me, the fruit was to be served specially for me."

Teenage boys are stubborn. If Kang had really hated me so much, for unknown reasons, so much that he would try to poison me, he would never have asked me for help. Judge Pao thought to himself. "But of course, perhaps he cares not for the loss of his dignity." He explained to the crowd.

"Now tell me, my dear friend, did you tell anyone else that you would be serving this plate of fruit only for me?" asked the judge. Chen—xin looked around, and unsteadily he rose to his feet, saying, "I... I didn't explicitly mention it to any person except for my son."

That ruled out the guests. If anyone here wanted to harm the judge, they could only have chosen another way, as they never knew about the fruit only being for him.

"Let's consider how the poison was administered," said Judge Pao, "When Chen Kang brought the fruit into the room, it must have already been poisoned." In front of so many guests, and the attentive eyes of Judge Pao, the murderer wouldn't dare poison the fruit in Kang's hands, no matter how stealthy they were.

"Yes, so that makes Chen Kang a likely suspect," one of the guests shouted out, clearly unconvinced of Kang's innocence in the matter.

"Yes," Judge Pao admitted, "Chen—xin, where are the fruits kept before this occasion?" The father seemed more steady now, not so shaken. He replied, "My fruits are precious, so I keep them in a room where the temperature is best for preserving the fruits as well as where no one could get in without permission from me."

"I assume you have the only key to the room?" "Yes, but—but I gave it to Chen Kang for the day... to prepare the fruit."

The judge narrowed his eyes, deep in thought. 'Chen-xin is naturally not the poisoner. He would not dare to risk any decrease in his business' reputation.' He thought, 'So that leaves Kang... and yet, I heard guilt in his voice. Chen-xin is keeping something from me.'

Judge Pao spoke, "Chen-xin, is there anyone else with access to the vault? Perhaps a spare key someone might be keeping?"

Chen-xin swallowed, finally confessing, "Fine! My wife has a spare key. But it's not her—" Cutting off the man mid-sentence, Judge Pao walked over to the woman, saying sternly, "Now, why didn't you speak up when he lied?" His wife said nothing, standing her ground.

Judge Pao turned away from the woman. This rules it down to the wife and the son, he thought. While it would be easy to assume Kang as the murderer, the experienced judge thought there was more to the case. He replayed the scene when Chen Yao Ming died over and over again in his head.

Suddenly, he realized it.

In many cases he had solved with the help of a mother's love, but this time, it would be the opposite. No mother would accuse their son so quickly.

"Mrs Chen," the judge said, turning to the wife, "You are the poisoner of the fruit." The woman looked shocked, before forcing out a scoff, "Excuse me?" "All along the intended victim wasn't me. It was your son," said the judge. "You didn't love him, so you decided to get rid of him."

"It didn't matter who died at the end, of the poisoned fruit— Kang would get the blame nevertheless," Judge Pao said. He continued, "When Chen Yao Ming died, you quickly yelled out how Chen Kang was the only one who could have poisoned the fruit to put the blame on him."

"However, of course, you had sneaked into the safe room beforehand and poisoned it."

The woman swallowed. "Fine! I poisoned the fruit!" She yelled, admitting defeat.

Thus, another solved case of Judge Pao's.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, Lu, Cindy – 13

I stormed out of the court, blood boiling. A child, brutally trampled by horses. The blood-watered ground seemed to rise and crumble hungrily in waves. An accident, the merchant had claimed. Maybe if he'd been looking at the road instead of at his lover—

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a child not more than six years of age bent over something on the ground. I walked closer, concerned. A bloodstained strip of torn ramie lay on the ground, discarded. He picked it up gently, holding it to his chest. “*Zeh-zeh?*” he asked hopefully, looking up at me with wide, wet brown eyes. I shook my head regretfully. He looked down and grasped the ramie tighter, as if afraid an occult hand was going to forcefully grab it and take it away from him. “*Zeh-zeh! Find zeh-zeh!*”

I started uncertainly. What was I to do, show the poor boy his sister's definitively dead and mutilated corpse? I cleared my throat awkwardly, at a loss of words. “Listen, your sister is in a better place now. She's with a man named Death. You'll be able to see her again one day.” Even I cringed at how ridiculous my words sounded. What sort of image was I painting? That the child was now frolicking through the flowers and gorging on sweets with Death himself?

He shook his head stubbornly, lip trembling. “She say play with me!” He sounded each word out carefully. “Pro-mise is a pro-mise! You! Find Death! Let me play with *zeh-zeh!*”

“I – okay.”

“Pro-mise?”

“Promise.”

A bead of sweat trickled down my neck, leading a mosquito to pounce on it. Almost four years ago, I'd informed the Emperor I would be taking an extended leave and was not certain of when I would return. I cursed under my breath at my past self for having promised something I knew was nigh impossible to achieve.

I was nearing the end of my time in this world, I knew. My hair was more white than black now, and wrinkles lined every crevice of my face. Three months ago, I woke up coughing blood. A village doctor gave me two years to live. If I was to fulfill my promise, I would have to do it fast.

A local schoolteacher had told me of an abandoned temple dedicated to Yanluo Wang up in the mountains. At the time, I'd barely been able to see the mountain at all – just a vague triangular shape in the far distance, its peak shrouded in clouds. Now, I was already almost at the peak. The air rapidly thinned as I continued to ascend the mountain. The fog, on the other hand, was so thick I could barely see two *chi* in front of me.

All of a sudden, the sickly-sweet aroma of burning incense began to waft through the air. Spurred on, I began to walk faster and faster, eventually breaking into a sprint. The closer I got to the temple, the stronger and more energised I felt. I pumped harder and harder, adrenaline coursing through my veins. I skid to a stop in front of the temple. The scent of burning incense was ten times stronger now. Swathes of monks dressed in fiery robes moved in and out of the temple, going about their daily tasks and routines. To my left, a group of monks sat cross-legged together, murmuring chants. Contrary to the schoolteacher's claims, the temple seemed to be bursting with life – ironic, considering it was dedicated to the god of death.

I stepped into the main hall cautiously. A large, broad-shouldered man with wine-coloured skin sat cross-legged in front of the altar serenely, seemingly meditating. Before I could even consider opening my mouth to utter a word, his bulging eyes flew open to fixate on me, as if penetrating my very soul. “Ah!” He smiled pleasantly. “You've arrived! Took you long enough.”

I prostrated myself in front of him. "It is an honour to meet you, King Yan. I have journeyed from afar for many a year to beg your favour. Where I came from, there was a little girl killed in an accident years ago—"

He put out his hand to stop me. "Rise. I know why you're here. I'm sorry, but it cannot be done," he said, shaking his head remorsefully.

I shook my head in turn. "I won't leave until you bring her back. Please, I beg you." I looked up at him in earnest, entreating: "A — a game. A game of chess. If I win, you bring her back to her brother. Please."

He stroked his beard thoughtfully, a spark of interest kindling in his eyes. "Well, I do like myself a game of chess... Alright." He held out both his fists. "Choose."

I forced open his left hand, revealing a black pawn.

"The colour of heaven. Fitting," he commented wryly. "Cannon to C5."

The Central Cannon Opening. I raised my eyebrows, not having expected him to use such an orthodox opening, being the god of death. "Chariot to I9."

"Pawn to E3."

Time seemed to slow down as we played, moving like flies through thick honey. Eventually, I found my general cornered by King Yan's horse.

"Check."

Desperately, I moved my general one space to the right. Only then did I realise my general was directly facing his.

"Checkmate."

I sat back, defeated. "Wait!" My voice caught in my throat. I threw myself to my knees. "Please, take me instead of her!" I cried out.

He looked back at me. "It is not yet your time, child."

"That's not fair!" I protested. "She — she had her whole life ahead of her — only nine years of age — did no harm to those around her — never hurt a fly — why must she be the one to go?"

He smiled, bemused. "Death is rarely fair." He paused. "If it brings you peace of mind, though... the boy is with her."

I blinked. "What?"

"Oh, yes. Fell in a well and drowned two years ago. I don't believe the body's been found yet."

I swallowed hard. In that period of silence, thousands of emperors both good and bad were born and had died, civilisations rose and fell in front of my eyes, entire worlds were destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed again and new ones created.

"Why did you allow me to play at all, then?"

He tilted his head inquisitively. "You were interesting. Many men have come to seek me out. Few have succeeded, but the ones that have, came for themselves. Most came for immortality. Some, for their loved ones. Orpheus, for his lover. Hermod, for his brother. But you were different. You had no connection to the girl before her death. I wanted to know why you toiled for so long to just have a chance at bringing back a little girl you did not know."

"I made her brother a promise. And how can I call myself a judge if I do not keep my word?"

A smile seemed to tug at King Yan's lips at that. "I look forward to seeing you soon, Judge Pao." With that, he disappeared.

I stood up slowly and walked out of the main hall. The previously buzzing temple was now covered in a thick layer of dust. A growing, hollow silence filled every corner and crevice of the place. A single monk's robe lay torn and discarded on the ground, forgotten by someone long ago. As I began my journey back, I wondered if the entire thing had happened at all, or if it had just been a figment of my imagination. All of a sudden, a heavy weight seemed to drop into my pocket. I reached in and pulled out a black pawn.

New Tales of Judge Pao

*Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,
Ren, Yuwen Eva – 12*

There is nothing more peaceful and soothing than a spring morning accompanied by the soft whistles of wind in the trees, and the sound of city merchants preparing products for the day, and the footsteps of people taking a stroll in the nearby market. "Sir!" A panting merchant suddenly runs into the palace, breaking the peaceful atmosphere. He had a wild look in his eyes, full of shock and disturbance. "What is it? Catch your breath and speak." Judge Pao stated.

"Murder! Two people were... walking together in an alleyway... one of them was hit from behind with a flying knife." blurted the merchant. "Whoever has done this can't be far," said the Judge, "Did you see who it was?"

"It must've been the person he was walking with."

"You said the knife was thrown at him. It would be hard to throw a knife forcefully at someone in the back who is walking right beside you."

"He might want to use it as a decoy."

This was quite an issue, as happenings in isolated places usually end up with one or no witnesses. "Where was the scene?" questioned Judge Pao. "Five streets left of the palace, one turn right, and another turn left." replied the merchant immediately. "Send out the guards!" commanded Judge Pao. Since the incident only occurred with one victim, only six guards should be enough for this case. It doesn't seem like it takes a long time to get to the scene, thought the Judge, best case scenario is if the wrongdoer is still at the scene the moment the guards get there.

The guards came back rather swiftly. "Not only was the perpetrator at the scene, he also assaulted us. One guard died a moment ago. We were not careful enough." announced the head guard. "Bring me the perpetrator." said Judge Pao. Two guards made way while the other two carried the criminal by the arms. He had a traumatized face and blue robes stained with blood. "Do you regret your wrongdoings?" asked Judge Pao.

"I have done nothing wrong, magistrate Pao." said the perpetrator in a pleading tone.

"I have witnesses, so you should speak the truth. Tell me, did you attack alone or with someone else?"

"Alone. But against my own will, sir."

"Who forced you to do this?"

"I cannot say his name or location, or else it will result in the death of my family and I. I know the blood is on my hands, but please forgive me for my actions, I planned none of this until this moment. If you are a rightful and proper judge, please spare me and punish those who are truly wrong!"

This "perpetrator" is the most major clue I have so far, thought Judge Pao. Whoever forced this man to murder could have planned this long since or seconds before the doing. It seems that the true enforcer might not be at the scene anymore. Although he is out of reach, I cannot force the "perpetrator" to reveal his name or location, as it wouldn't be just to sacrifice a guiltless civilian for another person's careless actions. Then again, he could be lying to sidetrack us and flee. "Your name is...?" questioned Judge Pao. "Yao Wencheng." said he. "Yao Wencheng, what can you promise to not make a break for it and run out of the palace?" asked the Judge. "I have no reason to do so, sir. If I do, I will allow my life to be taken." replied Yao solidly, although a drop of cold sweat rolled down his forehead. Judge Pao thought this was a rather plausible statement. After a while of consideration, he said, "You will be sent to a private room here to live until the case is solved. Before then, you are not allowed to go anywhere outside the area my assistants have provided. If you are proven guilty, you will be executed." "Thank you sir. Thank you!" Yao said with a great sense of relief, nearly unable to stay calm, and kowtowed.

"I suppose the next step to solving this is questioning the one in the incident. Guards, did you take in the man walking beside the victim as well?" said Judge Pao. "Yes, sir." said the head guard. In a moment, two guards brought him in. He is another suspect after all, so this is quite convenient. From a glance, Judge Pao could already tell that he was more nervous than Yao. He had a sincere look, but it was mixed with fear and anxiety.

"What is your name?"

"Dong Guowei."

"Tell me your version of this incident."

"I was walking with a friend in the streets for a stroll. We walked into a rather isolated road, and then a knife shot out from behind, barely missing me. To be honest, I think it was directed at me, and with the intention to kill."

Judge Pao thought about this for a moment. Suddenly, it came to him that there was something in this plot that could completely bring the truth to light. "Did the perpetrator use the same knife or two of them?" asked the Judge. "One, sir. He killed my friend, and before his body collapsed, he pulled out the knife and ran away." answered Dong. Judge Pao had begun to raise some suspicions. "If the murderer had been so close to you as to being able to pull out the knife from your friend's body, you must've seen his face or his body, right?"

"I was focused on my friend, sir."

"Your story has many flaws, Dong Guowei." said Judge Pao, unconvinced. It was Dong's first time calling him "sir", a subtle hint of desperation and time-buying. "I want you to tell me the truth." stated Pao, wanting to settle things down. "I am telling the very truth, sir!" pleaded Dong, now starting to look slowly lower his vision to the ground, "The... the attacker might've dressed in blue robes, and with a ponytail."

That was exactly the description of Yao, but it was what Judge Pao expected. "And what did he do while my guards were running there? I doubt he was only standing." he stated. "I'm not sure." said Dong, who seemed to be quite cornered in this situation. "You were only standing there as well?" Judge Pao asked again. "No, sir... I was looking around to call for help." Dong replied. "You were not. You hadn't come for help although the palace was only 50 meters away." said Judge Pao, becoming more and more sure of his suspicions. Dong didn't say anything.

"Speak up. You were the one who killed your own friend, then threatened a pedestrian to do your dirty deeds, I take it." concluded Judge Pao, "there is nothing more to be said."

"No. I did not kill my friend. Whoever did it is the one behind this!" Dong proclaimed, raising his voice and nearly shouting. His face was in complete frustration and defeat.

"You framed someone for murder, and you threatened them against his own will. That itself is a crime." said Judge Pao firmly. "There is no more to be said. Unless you can give more information about who killed your friend, you will soon be executed or sent to prison. Take him away!"

And so the guards did, followed by many muffled sounds of Dong Guowei saying things such as "No!" and "A true, rightful judge would not settle things here!" but it was too late. Judge Pao had already made his decision, and it was indeed the best decision to make in this situation.

This was a quick and rather simple case for Judge Pao. After all the noise was subdued, it almost felt as if nothing really happened. There were still soft whistles of wind in the trees, and the sound of city merchants selling products, and the footsteps of people walking. Yao Wencheng was released soon as well.

After the death of Dong Guowei, Qin Ruolan, his wife, has not stepped out of her house for days. People have said that sometimes she could be seen weeping near the garden of her house. It wasn't unusual to mourn the death of a loved one, after all.

Qin Ruolan quietly walked away from the garden, her eyes red and full of sorrow. When she steps into her room, the melancholic face disappears.

"If only they knew," she whispered softly to herself, "in the end, I got rid of him, one way or another."

New Tales of Judge Pao

*Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,
Wong, Cheuk Kiu – 12*

Long long time ago, before there was detective Pikachu, before there was Batman... There was Judge Pao...

‘Clang! Clang!’ Just as Judge Pao was about to go to bed, someone started banging on his door. “Oh come on! Not again!”, Pao murmured.

Pao woke up and read the description of the case, ‘A national treasure, Chuan Guo Yuxi, has been stolen by a thief in the museum, according to the security on duty. ‘Pao has been ordered to find out who was the thief that stole the national treasure Chuan Guo Yuxi.

One day, when Pao had no clue and idea about who stole the national treasure, suddenly, oh my god! Something is more serious than you’ve found dinosaurs! The sky appeared a light, is that an angel? Well it’s a person who came from the sky. That person ran to Pao and asked, ‘Where am I? What year is it? Who are you? What...’ he asked many many questions that Pao was still in shock by the scene that just happened. When Pao woke up from the shock, that person was still there. Pao asked, ‘Who are you? What is your name?’ That person replied, ‘I am Lee, the son of Leung (the king of the Tang Dynasty)’. ‘Pao is surprised and shocked, Pao asks him if he knows anything about the Chuan Guo Yuxi. He replied, ‘Yes, I know about it, that is my family treasure. ‘Oh!’ Pao was shocked.

A week later, Pao’s subdomains found the Chuan Guo Yuxi, everyone cheered for it, they found the Chuan Guo Yuxi! However, Lee said, ‘No, sorry, but you made a mistake. When I was a kid, I was so naughty, I drew a turtle on the Chuan Guo Yuxi, but as you can see, there isn’t a turtle on the Chuan Guo Yuxi, so I am sorry, this Chuan Guo Yuxi is fake.’ Pao was not surprised at all, he said ‘I am not surprised at all, not everything will happen that good, according to my experience.’

Week later, Pao arrested two suspects. They are called Jim and June. When Pao asked the visitors that day about whether they saw anyone suspicious on that day. Well the answer is yes, they saw someone suspicious that day. Suspect A said, ‘That day, I remember it was almost time for the museum to close. I saw a person, holding a telescope, staring at Chuan Guo Yuxi. I thought they were just obsessed with it so I didn’t feel something was wrong with them, but the next day, the news reported that the Chuan Guo Yuxi had been stolen. ‘Pao felt nothing special so he released suspect A. However, suspect A left a creepy smile when he left...

Pao called out the next one, the security on duty. He said, ‘That day, I didn’t see anyone looking suspicious though. That day, when the museum was about to close, since I felt nothing suspicious, I went to buy my dinner first, and then, the next thing I saw was that the Chuan Guo Yuxi had been stolen. It was empty in the box which is originally where the Chuan Guo Yuxi was put. ‘Pao wondered, ‘Why did you go to buy dinner that day? You are supposed to stay in your duty before the museum closes.’ The security said, ‘No, because there isn’t anyone in the museum when I go out, and also, I remember that I closed and locked the gate for entrance. ‘Pao said, ‘Are you sure that you actually locked the gate?’ The security replied, ‘Yes, I remember I did.’ Pao said, ‘Okay then, you may leave.’

Two weeks afterwards, Pao found a pry with the security’s fingerprint in the crime scene. ‘Oh no! He is related to this case! How could I let him go just like that!’ Pao said. Pao immediately ordered his subordinates to get the security back! But unfortunately, the security has already left the country. Pao murmured, ‘Oh! Come on! We lost our only lead!’

‘Master Pao! We’ve found where the security is! But he suicide himself already.’ ‘What! How!’ Judge Pao’s face was full of amazement and shock. ‘Well we lost all clues of this case, I don’t think I can solve it.’ said Pao.

However, when Pao was going to give up on the case, Lee said, ‘ Pao don’t give up, you’ve done a great job.’ Lee reminds Pao about why he wanted to be a judge when he was a child, he wants to help others, being fair and justice for everyone. Afterwards, Pao said, ‘ Okay, I would never give up, I am Pao the judge and I will never give up on any case.’ Ever since, Pao swore to work harder, he swore to solve this case starting from now.

Two weeks later, Pao found a sign left by the thief, the sign appeared with a few words ‘ CHUAN GUO YUXI IS WITH ME HAHA’ Pao was furious about what the thief did. So Pao swore that he was going to arrest the thief and get the treasure back. Again, Pao called suspect A to come back to help the investigation. Suspect A murmured, ‘ Why did you tell me to come back again? You said nothing is wrong with my testimony.’ Pao said, ‘ I am sorry, but I think we might have to reconsider whether your testimony is real or not. Suspect A murmured, ‘ Okay fine, this is the last time.’ Pao asks suspect A to say what happened on that day.

After suspect A told Pao the whole thing, Pao wondered, ‘ Wait, something is different from the testimony that you told us last time.’ Suspect A looked in another direction quickly and said, ‘ Uh, n....o..... no, it’s just because I am... am... no, because I realized something else that... day...’ Pao suddenly stood up and shouted at the suspect, ‘ What are you hiding! Tell me!’ suspect A said, ‘ I will keep silent until my loyer comes.’ Pao was furious,’ Alright then, guards! Send him to jail!’ Suddenly, suspect A said, ‘ No! Please no! I beg you ! Master Pao! Please let me go! Don’t send me to jail please! I will tell you what happened.’

Suspect A begins his long long speech, ‘ When the museum is almost closed, I bribe the security to help me open the gate of storing the Chuan Guo Yuxi, but the security wouldn’t, he tried to call the police but I stabbed him with a knife. After I stole the Chuan Guo Yuxi, I moved the security’s dead body, and pretended that he suicide himself.’ Pao asked, ‘ Where is the Chuan Guo Yuxi now! Tell me!’ The suspect A said, ‘ I sold it out in the black market to someone named “ Tyler “ in the black market.

Pao sent some subdominants to black market, trying to find the guy named “ Tyler “ but they couldn’t find him.

A week later, the subdominants of Judge Pao reported to Judge Pao that “ Tyler “ is going to sell the Chuan Guo Yuxi to someone who is named “ Charlie “, and they are going to meet in Yuen Song street. Pao immediately gathered all his subdominants and told them to arrest those people who were selling the Chuan Guo Yuxi. Finally, the national treasure, Chuan Guo Yuxi has been found eventually.

Wait! Somethings wrong! Lee had been missing for three weeks, without him, we will never know which Chuan Guo Yuxi is real ! Before Lee left, he left a note, ‘ Pao, I want to say thank you for taking care of me. However, you will never know if you have solved the case or not...’

New Tales of Judge Pao

*Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School,
Yau, Ka Chai – 12*

The sound of laughter filled the air of the Stone Village which was located in Hefei, Anhui Province of ancient China. The joy came from Wang Qiang (“Wang”) and Zhang Xiao Mei (“Mei”), a pair of young lovers who were classmates since childhood. Wang, aged 18, was a very handsome and tall stableman. He had been taking care of the horses in the Qian’s stable for 4 years. Despite Wang worked days and nights, he didn’t earn much. Mei, aged 16, had big eyes, long black hair and a beautiful voice. She was as pretty as a peach and was renowned as the prettiest person in the Stone Village. Since Mei was the only child, she became the apple of her parents’ eyes. Zhang parents operated a noodle restaurant in the village. During these years, their business was pretty good, and thus Zhang family was well off. It was always father Zhang’s wish that Mei could marry Qian Yi Shan (“Qian”), the richest businessman in Hefei. However, Mei thought otherwise because he was short and ugly. Her ideal husband was poor Wang, a person whom Zhang parents disagreed with. Having grown up together since childhood, Mei fell in love deeply with Wang. She hoped to get married to Wang one day, which was against the will of her parents.

One day, Qian was on his way home and stopped by Zhang’s noodle restaurant for a meal. Qian saw Mei and was absolutely fascinated by her beauty. He stared at Mei with his mouth agape, experiencing love at first sight. Without hesitation, he decided to propose marriage to Mei’s parents on the spot. Zhang parents were very surprised and excited because Qian was the wealthiest person in Hefei. Nonetheless, Mei rejected the proposal because she wholeheartedly wanted to marry Wang, resulting in a difficult situation faced by Zhang parents.

A week later, with a strong intention of changing Mei’s mind, Zhang parents decided to collude with Qian. They made up some fake stories about Wang, slandering him as a playboy who was unfaithful in love. Initially, Mei didn’t believe those rumours. However, she finally got convinced by abundant falsified evidence that was created by Qian. Mei was heartbroken and cried sadly all night. In fear of Mei finding out about their conspiracy, Zhang parents did everything in their power to stop Wang from meeting Mei. In the meantime, Qian comforted Mei and took good care of her feelings. At last, Mei accepted Qian’s marriage proposal and got married in a month.

One day, when Wang was working in the Qian’s stables listlessly, he heard some light footsteps. He turned around and saw something that made his jaws drop. It was Mei who appeared in front of him in elegant clothing. Both of them stood there speechless. Their eyes met, and tears started dripping down Mei’s cheeks as time ticked away. It seemed that nothing had changed except the identity of Mei. She was no longer Wang’s lover. Mei was now Madame Qian. Finally, words started pouring out of Wang’s mouth. They continued the dialogue calmly. At this juncture, Wang and Mei both came to the realisation that they had been deceived by Qian and Zhang parents. They were furious at Qian. The seed of hate sow.

Once Zhao Lao Ban (“Zhao”) caught wind of the story of Wang and Mei, Zhao took the initiative to approach Wang. Zhao was well known as the second-richest businessman in Hefei. He used to be the business partner of Qian. They broke up because of the conflict in a land deal. As a result, Zhao ended up with a huge loss so he was extremely angry at Qian. He told Wang that he too hated Qian. Therefore, Zhao would like to team up with Wang to devise a plan for revenge. In return, Zhao promised Wang that he would give him a thousand taels of gold so that he could elope with Mei freely and start a new life. Wang nodded with a smile.

Spending an entire week plotting with Wang against Qian, Zhao had all the details about the murder plan. The next day, Qian was about to go on a trip on his horse. Wang was instructed to prepare the horse for riding. Making use of this golden opportunity, Wang fed the horse with poisonous fodder. Wang also served Qian a cup of tea to which he added a kind of medicine powder that made him feel dizzy. Qian set off on his trip after drinking the tea. The horse cantered and the entire journey went smoothly until it reached the steep cliff. The

poison started to take effect. The horse suddenly stumbled and fell, causing giddy Qian to fall off the horse and down the cliff. Subsequently, the horse sat on all four legs and died of poisoning. Without any news of Qian for a long time, his family members started to worry. They reported the case to the local magistrate ('yamen'). A day later, Qian's dead body was found in the trough. However, Qian's mother found this case suspicious since Qian was very good at horse riding. She suspected his death was related to Wang. Judge Bao thought the same. Therefore, he sent his captor Zhan Zhao ('Zhan') to investigate the case. Zhan found the dead horse on the cliff. He examined the mouth of the horse and found that the tongue was black in colour, indicating it must have been poisoned. According to his experience, Zhan recognized the smell belonged to a kind of rare poisonous herb. Zhan believed that it was not an accident but a murder. Therefore, Zhan inquired the owner of every drugstore in town about the list of things customers had bought in the past week. As expected, he discovered that Qian's rival, Zhao had sneakily bought the medicine powder causing dizziness and the kind of rare poisonous herb a week ago. Upon the findings, Zhan galloped his horse to yamen.

Zhan reported his findings to Judge Bao in detail. Judge Bao strode across the room with his head drooping. Deep in thought, Judge Bao asked two key questions collectedly. Zhan provided him with answers. Judge Bao and Zhan discussed for a while and then reached a conclusion that both Wang and Zhao were the prime suspects. Judge Bao accused them of murder and sent Captor Zhan to arrest them. Led by Captor Zhan, a troop of constables ('Yacha') set off to capture Zhao and Wang. Zhao was caught red-handed in his house. However, Wang was nowhere to be seen.

Zhao kneeled down before Judge Bao in a large hall in Yamen. Two rows of six Yacha, each holding a wooden stick, were standing on the sides opposite each other while Captor Zhan, with a sword in hand, stood in the corner of the Yamen. Judge Bao sat behind a desk with his scribe standing next to him. A big wooden plaque with four characters meaning justice was hanging up above Judge Bao.

In the presence of Qian's family members including Mei and Qian's mother, Judge Bao started to interrogate Zhao by asking him some key questions. Zhao looked down with his hands shivering, knowing that he had no hope of getting away. His face paled and he looked as if he might faint. He didn't answer any questions Judge Bao asked because he understood very well that Judge Bao must have had some concrete evidence on hand. After a while of dead silence, Zhao finally looked up and confessed that he and Wang joined forces to kill Qian. He decided to plead guilty in exchange for a lighter penalty. Judge Bao confirmed that Wang was another accomplice afterwards.

At this very moment, Mei shouted out loudly to reaffirm that Wang was innocent. Everyone looked puzzled, turning to stare at her. Judge Bao flicked Mei a glance and smiled. Although Wang had fled, Judge Bao announced that he already knew where Wang was and would successfully arrest him shortly. Judge Bao publicly proclaimed the manhunt would commence in an hour. He also leaned over and whispered in Zhan's ears, requesting him to follow Mei discreetly. As Judge Bao predicted, Mei immediately rushed to warn Wang. Sure enough, Captor Zhan caught Wang in a boat docked on a pier with all of his luggage and the thousand taels of gold. Zhan escorted Wang to Judge Bao and both Wang and Zhao were sentenced to life imprisonment. At last, justice was served.

The next day, Mei went to visit Wang and Zhao in jail. She wickedly revealed that she had made use of them to kill Qian, making her the richest person upon heritage of his wealth. She betrayed Wang because she no longer believed in love. Then Mei turned to leave with an evil grin. Their conversation was overheard by Judge Bao who stood at the entrance of the jail. Bao sighed with disappointment because he failed to bring Mei to justice.

Quite A Character

Hong Kong International School, Ho, Jeremy – 13

I lay in bed, shaken by the events of the day. The first day of middle school was supposed to be taxing, but today felt... different. It felt like part of me had been stolen, that I wasn't myself anymore. Starting from that morning, I had become this fake dude who "had changed," as many of my old friends reminded me. My mom also brought this to my attention, saying at dinner: "Where's my sweet sixth-grader from last year?" I had responded with a snort, thinking I was all grown up already. I knew that wasn't true, and I knew it was wrong. I didn't feel like apologizing now though.

From my bedroom, I could hear the living room sofa exhale as my mom plopped onto it, and her fumbling with the remote to try to find the right channel. Mom had a thing for old shows, especially rewatching those that she had watched as a young girl. It was about a judge from ancient China called Judge Pao, an astute nobleman known for his fair verdicts.

The triumphant introduction—music started, a little too energized for my taste. I yawned. Just as my eyelids started to get heavy, I could hear my mom shouting.

"Hey!" She sounded alarmed. "Where did it go?" I could hear her furiously punching the remote, to no avail.

All of a sudden, a wide figure with a fancy hat encrusted with jewels, a long black mustache, and a long black robe with orange and yellow dragons appeared in my room. I recognized him: it was Judge Pao. I chuckled. *What a wild dream.*

He brushed invisible motes of dust off his robe. "I've been trying to get to you," he said, almost sounding relieved. "I couldn't talk to people since they stopped airing my show in 1994. I had to tear out the cable to the wi-fi to get your mom to stop watching." I hesitated a moment. His voice sounded clearer than what I usually heard in dreams. I slapped my own face and pinched my arm, trying to see if it was a dream or not. "Don't do that," he commanded. "You're hurt enough inside. Don't try to hurt yourself on the outside too."

"H...how do you know about that?" I grimaced.

"I just do. I'm here for you, so, ask me anything." *He was all business.*

"Before I ask you something, I've always been curious. What's the deal with your forehead? Is it a scar or something?" On TV, Judge Pao always had a tiny, banana-shaped bulge on his forehead.

"Oh, that thing. It was just something the stupid directors added to make me more interesting. Hate it. It's like they've run out of ideas." He brushed at the thing, as if trying to make it go away.

"Ah, I see." I couldn't help but chuckle. "From your last remark, it seems you already know what I've been through." I sighed, and collapsed onto the bed. The springs underneath the mattress groaned.

"I can sense that you've had a bad day, but I don't exactly understand young people of your generation... for example, why do they keep saying 'your mom?' Have moms done something to upset them?" His face scrunched up, while I was struggling to keep from laughing.

"That's just something..." I couldn't even finish my sentence as I burst into giggles. "It's just... it's just something we say to insult each other. Hee hee hee!" I started laughing.

"Oh. How strange. It doesn't really make sense to me, but I guess it's just how you youngsters speak..." He didn't get to finish.

"To be fair, I can't understand how people from your era speak, either..." He cut me off as well.

“Hey! It was very rude how you interrupted me!” There was slight anger in his voice. I was taken aback. I guess the emphasis on manners and respecting your elders remained, even though all those centuries had passed.

“Sorry!” I raised my hands in mock surrender. He seemed to calm down. “So did you actually want to discuss something? Don’t tell me I came here for nothing.” He wasn’t angry at me anymore, but I could still sense mild annoyance and disapproval.

“It’s just... everyone seems so different. My mom has suddenly become this control freak, and my friends all think I’m a weirdo.”

“You’re exaggerating.” This was not said as an educated guess, but as a statement.

“No, I’m not!” Now I was the one who was becoming frustrated. “My mom was perfectly fine last year!”

“Yes, you are. Over the summer holidays, your mother didn’t just go from being a caring and loving mom to the annoying person whom you hate.” *I found his logic annoying.*

“I get that, but she sееееems different.”

“No. I’ve observed her for a long time, my boy, and your mother hasn’t changed much; although she has been a bit worried for you lately... She hasn’t changed, Jeremy. You’ve changed.” His last two words hit me like a thousand bricks. I have never really thought about this before, but now when actually confronted with it, it felt like I had done something gravely wrong.

“How? I haven’t changed at all!” I countered defensively, but I had a nagging feeling that he was right.

“You have, Jeremy. You have to accept that, one way or another.” I could see on his face that he really cared for me. “You have to see this from her perspective, my boy.”

I had gotten over feeling bad; now I felt frustrated. “Ugh, the whole ‘*seeing the situation from the other person’s point of view*’ lecture. I’ve heard this one before!”

“Everything your loving mother does is for your own good, my boy...” I started to protest, but he signaled for me to be quiet. “No matter how much you disagree, it’s true. Your poor mother asked you 7 times about your first day of school, Jeremy, and she still didn’t get an answer! She just wants to help you, and you’ve been nothing but blunt and dismissive. Even sending you to all those classes is for your own good. Your mother wants you to improve in your academics. You are reaally terrible at fractions. She loves you every bit as much as last year, but you’re different. You weren’t like that before!”

I had to admit, he had a point, but I didn’t want to reveal this yet. “You sound like an angrier version of my school counselor. Like my ancient Chinese therapist.” I mumbled this last bit, as I was worried he would take it as an insult. To my surprise, he laughed.

“Ha! That’s quite funny. Do you understand what I’m saying, my boy?”

“Yes, yes. I know what you mean.” Contentedness pushed my anger away. A day of emotions had just unlocked. It was like I was blindfolded in front of a door, with the key somewhere on the floor, but I couldn’t find it. Judge Pao had helped me remove my blindfold.

“I wish I was like you. Then I wouldn’t be so depressed all the time.”

“You can’t be like me. I’m not really real, even though most people believe I am. I’m just

a character, whether from that TV show that your mother watches, or the books that you read. Authors and script writers created me, my boy.”

Watching Judge Pao, who normally looked so serious on TV say something so meaningful and sincere was as absurd as seeing a tiger barking.

“You mean... you’re not really real? Then how are you here? How are you so wise?”

“Literature is a powerful thing, Jeremy. Good characters, like me dare I say, can live for thousands of years. We don’t get old. We don’t die. You can’t become me, my boy, but you can write good characters. Together with a good story, your great–great–great–great grandchildren might be reading your books at school.” He was starting to sound a bit like some of those inspirational videos that our teachers showed us at school, but I liked his message.

“Hmm...” I didn’t know what to say, but I didn’t want to say anything, either. I wanted him to keep talking. I wanted to learn.

“Everyone says that I’m perfectly fair, and that I look at everything with an open mind. That is true, but that’s only because I’m not real. No one can be as perfect as a character. When you’re stuck, think about how I would look at the problem, not your momentarily worked–up emotional self.”

Suddenly, my mom started stirring on the sofa, sitting up while the sofa breathed a sigh of relief. A look of worry appeared on Judge Pao’s composed face. “I have to go,” he said, turning towards the door.

“No, wait! I have more things to ask you!” I couldn’t believe this was ending so soon.

“You are quite a character, Jeremy.”

“So are you, Judge Pao.”

Just like that, he was gone.

Judge Pao Travels in time to Nowaday China and Tries to Solve Today's Mysteries

Hong Kong International School, Huang, Jiahao – 13

I would never have thought that the world would evolve this quickly and strangely. In one thousand years, a lot could have happened. Someone with a good imagination could think of trillions of different outcomes of what humanity would become. Maybe the sky would fall down, and crush us all, or maybe the sky would break again and the horrors of the heavens would come flooding through, but this time we didn't have a magical goddess to save us. I would never have expected that humans would be walking around, more like sulking around, with their heads practically sucked into their smartphones, while furiously typing at a person possibly thousands of kilometers away. People wore layers of clothes, one on top of the other, with bright colors and flashy logos, the material feeling toxic and rough, unlike the silk that I used to wear in the Song dynasty. The SONG dynasty! where I could sit back, relax, and do my job. The most important job in Kaifeng. The judge, the person who puts justice in evil, who lights up the shadows. The one who saves the innocent, and punishes the evil. I am Judge Pao. but I could solve no mysteries, not even cross the street, in Henan. The city was buzzing with different sounds, smells and colors. It gives you a headache if you stay still too long. So how did I somehow travel in time from 1,000 years ago? No idea. Not even the top judge could solve this riddle. Not even all the scientists in the world combined could solve how I traveled in time.

With my feet in slippers, I set off in search of a place to stay for the night. As I walked by pedestrians, they gave me the tolerance of glancing up from their phones momentarily, making sure that I wasn't a serial killer or a superstar, then looking back down at their social media, then processing what they just saw and looking back at me. I guess to them, I looked just like a person who traveled back in time from a 1000 year song dynasty. Which was technically true. After they acknowledged that I was probably a cosplayer for a movie, they looked back down at their phone again, only to realize that they missed something else. I got that look a lot even back in the Song dynasty. People looked at me like I was a monkey or something, that something was wrong with my skin color. I mean when someone gets a dark tan, they don't get laughed at. But when you're born pitch black, darker than the sky, or the soil, people think that it's contagious and don't want to get near you or touch you. At least other people didn't have a birthmark on their forehead in the shape of a crescent moon. After walking into what seemed to be a traditional chinese restaurant, with decorations from who knows when, I sat down on a well polished chair that in song dynasty would be the chair the emperor would sit on. I attempted to read the menu, but failed miserably because the words were different from the *normal* way of writing. The words were so complex, and so square, that I questioned how the person carved the printing block so neatly. A person wearing neat tight fitting clothing came up to me and started talking. I could barely understand, but I could still make out what she was saying.

“Would you like to order, sir? By the way I like your clothes, they look a lot like the song dynasty tv show that I love to watch.”

I squirmed nervously. I didn't know what to say. “Um, sorry, I would like some more time to think.” I stammered unsurely.

“That's ok, I'll come back later.” she replied cheerfully, as she turned around to another customer's raised hand. There were so many questions I had, from what the different foods on the menu were to how I was supposed to get out of this mess. I had to get out of here, find a forest, maybe somewhere deserted, too uninhabitable by the lazy humans today, and survive until I grow old. I had decent survival skills, I was pretty smart. At this pace, I could probably build a house with a farm. I wasn't the hard working type, “better work smarter than harder” was my motto, but this was tough times. I knew when to quit when I knew my limit. Even if I tried my hardest for the rest of my life, I would probably only be able to figure out what the miniature blinking green man fast walking on a pole meant. The restaurant was filling up fast, and the door was crowded with people, so I looked for a back exit, like every restaurant in the Song dynasty had. There was a door with a neon green light on it that said something in blocky letters, definitely not any version of chinese, probably a sign

that meant backdoor. As I tried to open the door, the only thing that moved was my body, as I got flung back by my own strength to open the door. As I realized it was locked, I saw a person in a uniform pressing some buttons on a key panel on the side of the door. As they pressed the fourth button, the door hissed open, showing a corridor with lots of boxes, and a door leading outside. I thought that this was just another fancy thing in the new world, and that the code was probably on the menu. After watching another person press the code, I remembered the sequence of the buttons. After the person left, I pressed those buttons in order, and got in the door. I quickly walked out the other door, (thankfully it wasn't locked) and out into the chilly winter air. As I looked around my surroundings, I realized that I probably ended up in the poorer parts of nowadays Song dynasty. There were shiny black bags that smelled of rotten eggs, and people huddled up on the floor on brown hard paper material. (cardboard as I later realized).

Suddenly, a child's voice rang out. "Hey! That's my hat!"

Then it was joined in by others "no, it's mine! I've had it since I was a baby!"

The first child again, "you're lying through your teeth, I bought that hat from the shop with my own money!"

My instincts made me walk over to the bickering. Back in the Song dynasty, whenever I heard there was a problem, I immediately took up the challenge of breaking it up and finding the truth of things. I saw two figures in clean short sleeved shirts, arguing over a round hat with a semicircle of fabric on the front.

"Hey, hey, hey." I firmly announced.

Two pairs of eyes stared back at me.

"I don't know whose hat that is, but can you each tell me why you think it is yours?"

"Um..." the kid holding the hat said.

"It's ok, tell me."

"Um..."

"Common, I don't have all the time in the world."

"Um..."

Were kids as dumb as the adults these days? Kids should respect adults, and do whatever I tell them to do! Is he just acting dumb? This is really getting on my nerves. After thinking about it, I had to take action. I snatched the hat out of the kid's hands.

"What?" I didn't say that because the hat looked weird. I said that because of what dropped out of the hat. The shiny glint of the knife caught the light shining from the open light two stories up.

"What is this!?" I murmured. Before I could react, the other kid started wailing.

"Ah! Ah! That's a knife! Why was there a knife in the hat Billy? That's not my hat!"

Before I could react, a piercing siren filled the air. Blue and red lights lit up the brick walls, blinding me momentarily. Put your hands in the air! Someone with a giant voice yelled. My hand gripped around the handle of the knife tightly, not processing what to do. My mind was full of weird echoes of the man's voice, that I did not know what to do. Suddenly, a loud bang filled the air, echoing around the alley.

"That was a warning shot, please put the knife down. I repeat, please put the knife down NOW."

I realized the bang came from a bent piece of metal, and something shooting out of it. I looked around frantically, not sure of what the thing was. When I finally saw the finger sized hole in the wall, it was too late. BAM

Everything went dark.

To be continued...

Judge Pao

Hong Kong International School, Lu, Rochelle – 12

The celestial body overshadowed the alleys, contributing light to the darkening skies. All you could hear was the sound of the rustling trees dancing along with the wind and the slight skittering of living creatures, striving to survive. In the midst of all this beauty, an exhausted Cheng Bei was running for his life. He knew somebody was following him, with the rustling leaves and whoosh of the wind. The follower's disappearing footsteps in the distance signaled that the unknown enemy was losing the path of where he currently was. Cheng Bei began to slow down, taking his time to catch his breath. How had he come to this? He was just having tea and discussing politics with Judge Pao. Suddenly, a dagger flew from the darkened trees in front of Bei, piercing his forehead. Bei lost all consciousness and flopped onto the ground, dead. The unknown assassin stepped out into the moonlight, blocking the body from the prying eyes, and placed a white woolen cloth on his face, and instantaneously, the body was transported to a secret chamber.

Days flew past without anyone noticing the man's disappearance. It was like he never existed. But that would be impossible, Chang Bei was an extremely important man, an accomplice of the world-famous Judge Pao.

A month later, still, no one paid any attention to the death. It was already jolly winter time. The cold crisp air was supposed to bring a happy, fulfilling mood to both children and adults, but instead, everyone felt damp, depressed, and confused. They couldn't help it. Something was bothering the citizens. It seemed like they were all confused. What had happened to them, could it be a curse? The lower-end government officials all noticed this strange instance and decided to bring it to the higher-ups, preferably the world-class detective, Judge Pao.

After they got consent from the higher up's they scheduled a conference and off they went, to meet the Judge. Once they arrived, they told the guards what they were there for and they let them in. Immediately after they stepped in, they gaped at the wonderful view, and they were speechless. The Judge owned a gigantic temple and it was extremely alluring. The outside was a red sign. It said four Chinese words "明光大正". The way you are supposed to read it is from the back to the front. These words come from the "Zhu Wengong Collected Works, Volume 38, Answering Zhou Yigong" written by Zhu Xi, a great master in the Song Dynasty: "If you have the heart of Fan Gong, you will be upright and bright, and you will have no old grievances, and the righteousness of the scorpion is really the country." It means frankness of heart, words, and deeds upright. The officials felt refreshed and confident by the sign, knowing that they were doing good deeds, and knocked on the door. The door was connected with another one, and together, they were so big they could have let a tank in with no difficulty. They stepped in, unaware that someone else, an entity snuck in, attempting to demolish their advance, to stop them from seeking the Judge.

"Sorry sirs! The Judge has to rest now, he just finished another case and is awfully tired. Please come back tomorrow.", the officials left due to the issue given by the black-eyed, funky-smelling secretary and planned to come by the day after.

During that night, there was a killing. Official Zhong Bei was reported as missing until someone found a pool of blood and Zhong Bei was pronounced missing and possibly dead.

As the news of the mysterious disappearance of the official spread far and wide, Judge Bao heard of it and recognized Zhong Bei's name from the conference planning list and was willing to go and try and uncover it. He was particularly suspicious of the connection, it seemed like someone was trying to stop Zhong from meeting Judge Pao.

Once the Judge reached the crime scene, he immediately met with the official he was told to meet the day before. The official took the chance and reported the problem about the citizens and started discussing the death of the official. All of a sudden, there was a noise behind the door, it seemed like someone was hiding, being an uninvited guest. The person behind the door noticed that they had stopped talking and panicked, scared that they had found out, and pulled out a sword, and was ready to attack. Little did the person know, the Judge was with Gongsun Ce and Zhan Zhao, one specialized in strength and bodyguarding, and the other one specialized

in plans and development. As the enemy pounced, Zhan Zhao grabbed him and held him in a chokehold. “Were you the one that caused this chaos?” the enemy desperately shook his head, “n–no let me go!”, Zhan Zhao softened his grip but Gongsun Ce told him “No! Do not do that! He is an essential piece to get information, he definitely is involved in this.”.

As Zhan Zhao followed what Gongsun Ce told him to do, the enemy started suffocating and had no choice but to tell the Judge. “A–alright... fine. I’ll t–tell you. So let me go! There is a–an organization who m–manages organ t–trade, a–and they ord–ordered me to k–kill your accomplice Cheng Bei and Zhong Bei...” the judge responded by saying “Well, then where is your manager, the organiser of this?” “I–i’m not sure... no one told me, they just promised me m–money if I could get my job d–done, b–but...” “yes?” “b–but.. I overheard that they were in your i–inside circle of informants...”

The Judge made use of the information given by the assassin and called up his higher–up assistants to question them. He summoned the lower official as well to give him some information. “Which official allowed you to organise a conference with me to converse about the problem with the citizens?” He pointed to the official standing the furthest from the Judge. And then he spoke to the higher–up officials. “Thank you all for joining me today. Today, we gather to discuss the murder of Cheng Bei and Zhong Bei. Our suspect is currently among us and shall be sentenced to death. Now, tell me the dream you had last night, official Sheng, furthest from me. **(injustices in the show announce themselves through dreams, whirlwinds, by the behaviour of animals.)**. The suspect Sheng felt targeted. He panicked and felt trapped. He knew of Judge Pao’s ways to interpret dreams, and he couldn’t tell the truth, because it would surely expose him and his ways, and as he was trying to lie, he nervously stumbled upon his words and ended up confessing his sins and was sentenced to death.

The Underground

Hong Kong International School, Mei, Yufan – 14

Room 3 is dark and smells faintly of secondhand cigarette smoke. I don't come here often, and it's calmingly silent except for the occasional sloshing of water as a layer of tears lines the floor. A thin stream of white light comes through the barred and shuttered window, giving the eerie feel of a liminal prison cell— yet this room is anything but small. It stretches half the size of a regular football field and has a ceiling which stretches higher than most ancient Roman buildings. A fellow Thinker sits in a fetal position in the far corner, rocking back and forth.

“Been here a while?” I call out, walking towards him.

He doesn't respond. From what I can see, he's a young man: perhaps 20 years old, maybe a bit older.

“When's your Sorting?” I ask.

The Thinker stops rocking and lifts his head up slightly, tilting it so I can see the top half of his face. He has sharp and piercing blue eyes, ones that meet mine for a second before they flick back to the water on the ground.

“Soon,” he replies simply.

Another Thinker, this one a middle-aged lady, drags her feet into the room. Ripples of water course through as she takes each step, creating semicircles which expand and eventually fade away into nothingness. She leans against the wall opposite the door and closes her eyes.

“This isn't happening. This isn't happening. This isn't happening,” she murmurs to herself. “I need a lighter, a fire. A fire. Burning bright, a fire, burning, I need a lighter.”

Her words slip into incomprehensible whispers as she slides down the wall, covering her worn and worried face with her fragile hands. It's sad how any sense of self can slowly escape the body of a Thinker, leaving them empty and hopeless. Each day there are 13 Thinkers awaiting their Sorting, and today I am one of those unlucky few— however, I force myself not to succumb to anxiety tugging at my mind.

My slow steps slice through the water as I leave the room, echoes of the lady's murmuring still ringing in my ears.

Room 4 is strangely far from Room 3. The Underground is laid out like this:

Room 4	Room 2
Hallway	Door
Room 1	Room 3

There is only one way into the Underground, and you can't ever exit unless you're a Thinker. Judge Pao keeps it this way so there's some level of suspense, as well as a feeling of exclusivity for the Thinkers who unexpectedly get drawn each day for their Sortings. I've always been fascinated by the idea of what lies behind the ordinary wooden door, but today that curiosity fades into an impending doom, as the realization that I am leaving the Underground swallows me whole.

I don't let it show.

Room 4 is dry and much warmer, though the tranquility of Room 3 has been exchanged for a loud atmosphere. The kids come here the most; in our section of the Underground, we have about 11 kids below the age of 16. They've barely seen enough of the world to know where they are. All they see is the playground in the middle of the room: with swings, a slide, and a seesaw. Cruel tactics of faith and inevitable destinies dropped *kids* into this cursed land, including the youngest—Elena, a 1 year old in a car accident. Her hands fit into my palm and she can barely walk, yet here she is, in this hell, where she probably knows the other dead people more than her own parents.

Besides the children, people in their 30s wander here as well. I think part of it is because of the kids themselves. So many of these men and women are parents—no, *were* parents. They've lost their families, and the sunny mood of Room 4 reminds them of what happiness once felt like as they sit on the park benches. At least, this is what I gather after months of observation. There seems to be no other legitimate reason to stay in this psychological asylum. Such a happily lit place, with echoes of laughter and conversation, and an ordinary playground for the young ones. Yet something feels off.

In fact, standing just in the entrance of the room, I feel an ache of despair. Watching the children on the forever-moving seesaw, flying off the swings, and mindlessly repeating trips down the slide, I can't help but think about how much they don't know. How they don't know they've died before they could begin to live, how they don't know that soon, they will be sorted away from this one-dimensional illusion of utopia, and how they don't know that there was still so much of the world that they hadn't gotten to see. Heck, almost 18 years out with the living and I've missed out on a lot. The simplicity of their innocent, immature knowledge pains me in ways I can't explain. But at least it saves them the incessant suffering that older dwellers go through once they walk through the Gates.

"June! June!"

I whip my head around to see 8-year old Sebastian running towards me.

"Hey, Seb," I say.

He glances around quickly and beckons me closer, so I crouch down near him.

"I heard you got selected today," he whispers harshly, "is it true?"

I force a reassuring smile and nod. "Yeah, it is. But don't worry about me, kid. I'll be just fine."

He stares at me with a mixture of shock and emotions I can't read. "June, good luck. I don't know how I'm going to deal with not having you here."

A genuine smile forms on my face and I chuckle. "Thanks. I'll see you in a few years, alright? Just enjoy your time here and we'll see each other soon enough."

I sigh and stand up, turning to leave, when Sebastian grabs me and hugs me tight.

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I’m not leaving. Not forever. I’ll see you again, I promise.”

He nods and slowly lets go, waving solemnly. I wave back and quickly walk out before he can see the hint of a tear welling up in my eyes. My vision is blurred as I stumble down the hallway, but instead of turning into another room to say my goodbyes, I grasp the doorknob at the end and open the door to my fate.

Judge Pao

Hong Kong International School, Yau, Hoi Ning Kate – 13

It was Dress Up as Historical Character Day, so everyone had dressed alike, with some people with carefully crafted costumes, but most looked like they were cobbled together at the last minute.

Harry had dressed up as his baseball idol, Babe Ruth, with an ordinary baseball kit, his favourite baseball team shirt with the name “Boston Red Sox” and a name tag that showed “Babe Ruth” on his chest, and that was the extent of the costume. Graham stood next to Harry, beside their lockers. Graham was wearing the same exact baseball kit as Harry, except he had a name tag that said ‘Ted Williams’. “Great minds think alike.” They said at the same time.

In contrast, his best friend, Adrian looked impressive with long and fake, yet realistic-looking facial hair, and a fake and ancient-looking crown, fully built from a painted cap, with long gold flower patterns stuck on his cape. This time, he dressed up as his favourite character, Judge Pao.

Right when they were in the middle of talking, Harry was called to see the principal by a very stern-looking Mr Jesse, the baseball coach. Harry first thought Mr Jesse was coming to look for his son, Graham. A boy in a Ronaldo jersey overheard their conversation. He shouted, “Looks like someone got caught cheating again”. Aldrich was not a fan of Harry by any means. They had previously stopped being friends at school.

Harry and his coach walked into the principal's office. Harry wondered why Mr Jesse was looking so serious. Surely he hadn't done anything wrong? He had performed well in the baseball trials last week.

The principal, Mr Deary, wasted no time after slamming the door shut.

“You tested positive for steroids.”

This was the last thing Harry expected. What would this mean to his college journey?

“I—” Harry sounded shaky, he didn't know what to say. “I didn't do it, Mr—”

“Don't lie. I am so disappointed in you. Do you know the consequences of taking drugs at this school?”

“You will receive a suspension from school for the next three weeks. I will discuss the situation with the board of governors, but just know that there will be consequences for what you did.”

Mr Jesse had his hands on his hips, looking displeased.

Harry couldn't believe it. He walked out of the room, thinking about what he could do to end this nightmare. This had to be a mistake. There was no way he would take drugs, especially in the year that the results of acceptance from colleges came.

When he came home, in a blind rage, he scattered all of his things on his desk and threw everything on the ground. Even his favourite video game DVD, Fortnite, was kneed with both hands. It was on the floor, broken right in half. It looked like a cyclone had landed in his house, except it was only in his room. Next to his empty bed, was the ripped and crumpled assignment that he had worked so hard on for the past few weeks. It seemed pointless.

His life was a mess. He was on his own. His mother passed away years ago in a car accident, and his father was struggling mentally and physically since her death. He didn't know who to trust anymore. He was an innocent boy that just wanted to achieve his dream of being a baseball figure and make his late mother proud.

This made him rethink his whole life and future. All he could think of was that his whole baseball career was on the line. He turned to look at the words on the wall of his bedroom, the encouraging and ingenious words that his mother had always said to him.

If you ever fall behind, run even faster. Never give up, and rise up against the odds.

There was only one answer.

He wasted no time and got straight to work. He remembered his most trustworthy friend at school, Adrian, who always looked up to a fictional detective character named Judge Pao, from a TV show he would always watch in his free time.

He quickly explained the situation in an email to Adrian. He also explained to him what happened and why he was suspended from school at the moment.

Adrian replied almost immediately and they discussed Harry's situation for the next two hours.

Adrian and Harry thought through all the possibilities and settled to the conclusion that Coach Jesse was the one who had the most to gain from framing Harry, and this is how Judge Pao would have started. Mr Jesse started gambling this year, and he probably doesn't have enough money for Graham's college funds. The school could only choose one player in the school that can take UCLA's baseball scholarship and must have done something to Harry's drug test, so he would have the biggest chance of getting it. With his son's help, he could have switched samples to make it look like Harry had tested positive for drugs. Adrian used Judge Pao's trickery skills and discovered that if Harry tried to get Mr Jesse to confess, he would not truthfully reveal what he did because he wouldn't trust a student. Instead, Adrian decided to fake a principal's letter and send it to Mr Jesse, and hope that he revealed something that could prove that Harry's sample was either switched or was inaccurate.

Adrian typed up the letter.

Dear Mr Jesse, I have been speaking to the board of governors and we thank you kindly for your help with being in charge of the drug tests of the baseball team. We are currently discussing Harry Johnson's drug test case. As you know, Harry has been suspended from our school for three weeks. Harry Johnson has sent an email to me today in which he proves his innocence and a negative drug test result that he had personally done himself. Harry Johnson suspects that you had swapped someone's sample with him, which is a serious allegation. We have decided that a discussion should take place to see what you and Harry have to say about his case. We will further investigate this case, and after the results are determined, there will be huge consequences for either side who has been lying to our school. This school has a strict policy about honesty, especially on this serious topic of drugs. If you have anything to say about this case, we would advise you to reach out before Sunday, as there will be even bigger consequences if we find out that what Harry Johnson said to us was true, and that you have been lying to a student. The discussion will take place this Sunday at 2 pm outside of our school office.

Yours sincerely,
Principal Deary

Coach Jesse wasted no time in replying.

Dear Principal Deary,

I have received your letter. I understand that Harry wants to prove his innocence, but it is wrong for him to blame his positive test result on me. As his coach, I would want nothing but the best for Harry. However, I suggest that we shouldn't do the discussion about Harry Johnson's drug test, as I am sure that the drug test that he did at school last week was accurate. I am also busy at that time this Sunday, so I cannot attend the discussion

on Sunday. I hope you understand that the retest of Harry Johnson is unnecessary and that I won't be able to attend the discussion this Sunday.

Thank you for your time,
Coach Jesse

Now all Adrian and Harry had to do is to was to get the footage from the training day before Harry's drug test to get all their information to prove Harry's innocence to the school of governors and Principal Deary.

On that day, Adrian went to the library after school to 'finish his homework'. The I.T. room steps away from the library was just where he needed to go to find the footage of all the spaces in Greenville High.

Adrian plugged the USB drive into the computer and got all the information he needed from the empty I.T. room. He looked at the clock, it was 4:59.

Principal Deary had announced to Harry and Mr Jesse that they would meet in the second-floor common room at five o'clock today instead, because of Mr Jesse's busy schedule.

Adrian was Harry's substitute and would be Harry's "student lawyer".

Adrian plugged the USB drive into the computer...

The result was as expected, but was enough to prove to Principal Deary that Mr Jesse and Graham were in trouble, while Harry's drug result was sabotaged by them while being at risk of the end of his baseball career because of them.

Five minutes later, the police knocked on the door. The police pointed a pistol at Mr Jesse, and he was told to kneel down with his hands raised. Handcuffs were then put around Mr Jesse's wrists.

The New Tales of Judge Pao

Korean International School, Cheng, King Ying Isla – 11

Kaifeng was prosperous and bustling, for the peace and stability were paid off by the sacrifice of the courageous and selfless soldiers who were guarding at the borders. The Jin, the Mongols and the Western Xia had been stirring the borders, eyeing the territories of the Song Dynasty. They were jealous about the calm weather and the rich resources of the central plains. Never had these aliens stopped invading the land. However, the Song was one of the best dynasties in Chinese history, with Emperor Renzong being great at assigning the best General and soldiers guarding his land.

General Li was one of the most respectable among all. Not only was he ambitious and courageous in battling against invaders who had never stopped causing nuisance at the borders, but he was also humble and loyal to Emperor Renzong. No one had ever imagined that he would fraternise with the Mongols and betray the Emperor. And yet, he was imprisoned for the charge of treachery.

One mid-summer night, a young woman banged on the drum outside the court in the capital Kaifeng. “Judge Pao, my husband has been wronged. Please help him,” cried the woman. Streaks of sweat and tears trickling down her face. The army had just lost an ugly battle to the Mongols, thousands of soldiers died and many were severely injured. The Emperor was enraged to know his armies had been defeated so painfully. Military support had never been lacking, thus Renzong was infuriated when he heard the rumour about General Li failing to provide the soldiers with adequate food and weapons.

Judge Pao heard the cries of the woman and let her in. Knowing that the lady was the wife of General Li, Pao knew instantly why she was here as the news of General Li being imprisoned by Emperor Renzong had been spread throughout the town. Pao recalled having met Li previously, the young General had given the judge a good impression. The judge frowned as he listened to the story that Madam Li was telling. Though he found the case sceptical, very little could be done. He felt he was in a dilemma, for if he helped Li, he would dishonour the Emperor, but if he ignored Li, a brave warrior and an innocent life could be sacrificed. Judge Pao was undecided, he hesitated to challenge the Emperor’s verdict. “Judge Pao, you’re our last and only straw of hope, please help us. My husband is innocent,” Madam Li knelt at the judge, pleading for his help.

The officers gathered to discuss after Madam Li was settled. Gongsun Ce, the secretary of Pao, raised the possible doubts and carefully addressed them one by one. Eventually, Pao decided to take up the case. The judge ordered his four major officers, Wang Chao, Ma Han, Zhang Long and Zhao Hu, to visit the barracks and General Li’s mansion and interview different people for information and further investigation. He secretly summoned Zhan Zhao, the Royal Cat who was one of the top imperial guards, to sneak into the barracks for any deepest secrets. He would spot any potential suspects and eavesdrop on their suspicious communication. Everything had to be done secretly and gingerly. Pao himself and his secretary, Gongsun Ce, would be departing the next day for the Imperial Palace to meet Emperor Renzong. He had to explain to the emperor the flaws in the case and appealed for General Li.

Renzong was thrilled to meet Judge Pao as he had been struggling and losing sleep for having made the decision of prosecuting his favourite General. Prepared as Pao, he led the discussion to General Li and stated the Li family had been courageous, selfless, and devoted warriors, protecting the country and the empire for generations. Pao explained that he did not see any justified reasons for General Li to betray his country and Renzhong. Renzong pondered and nodded. Pao further pleaded for Renzong’s permission to appeal the case in case General Li was a victim to have been framed. However, Renzong refused because he had already announced his verdict and it was impossible for an Emperor’s decision to be changed. Pao raised his doubt that for a great ruler as loving and kind as Renzong, he would not let an innocent man be killed. Eventually, Renzong agreed to let Judge Pao re-open the case.

Meanwhile, Zhan Zhao and the four officers also gained rewarding information about the case. The Imperial Guard sneaked behind the barracks, checking for any fishy personnel and related illegal activities as well as eavesdropping on suspicious conversations. Wang Chao and Ma Han paid a visit to General Li’s mansion and

learned from his family and servants about the mysterious loot. Zhang Long and Zhao Fu patrolled around the neighbourhood, talking to the locals around the area. No one could hide their query for the patriotic man to have been framed.

Zhan Zhao eventually spotted a few men who were dressed all in black. They sneaked into the prime barrack one night after a thorough checking before entering. The Royal Cat was agile enough to follow the gang without being noticed. He swept up the roof of the tent to eavesdrop on the conversation of the suspicious gang. Zhan Zhao carefully listened to the conversation, his ears twitched as he recognised a familiar voice. "Now that the scapegoat is securely grounded, all we have to do is to wait patiently. Judge Pao is now examining the case, we'll all be in great trouble if anyone acts rashly and impulsively," the man said. They whispered for a while and left one after the other. Zhan Zhao followed the leader, to his surprise, the man was heading to Liu's Mansion, which belonged to the prominent brother of the Empress dowager. He flew up to the roof and saw the man report to Empress Liu's uncle, the dear brother of Emperor Renzong's mother.

Wang Chao and Ma Han went to General Li's mansion. While Ma Han interviewed his family and servants in detail one by one, Wang Chao searched the house thoroughly. The old parents led the two officers to a room where boxes of gold and silver were placed. The parents cried miserably for the innocence of General Li. "My son is innocent, none of us knows anything about the treasures here. We dare not even touch them," cried the parents.

Days passed and the four officers gathered back to report to Judge Pao. Zhang Long and Zhao Fu reported that General Li had recently been visited by a rough and uncivilised gang. People saw General Li come out to greet the gang in person despite their disrespectful manner. Wang Chao and Ma Han retold a statement from a servant that she had accidentally heard a man bellow at General Li at night, threatening him to follow the order for the security of his family. The girl trembled when recalling the fierce man who was named Chen Chun. The Royal Cat was astonished to hear the same of Chen Chun. Apparently, the case should be related to the powerful uncle of Emperor Renzong, Uncle Liu.

Zhan Zhao spent days following the crony and found the man visited Liu's mansion regularly in the middle of the night. He also checked on the suppliers for the military uniforms and weapons, many of them told the guard that they had initially received the orders from General Li, but then Li cancelled the orders. The owners were flabbergasted as Li scolded them for the delayed delivery. It seemed that Li had suddenly forgotten everything. Then, rumours filled the city, saying General Li was charged with corruption and treachery, and was imprisoned for prosecution. Zhan Zhao realised that a number of cronies and henchmen of Uncle Liu had been working for him behind and General Li should be the scapegoat from all the incidents behind.

The officers gathered in the court, figuring a solution to kill two birds with one stone. They wanted to save General Li from prosecution as well as to capture the villains. They set Uncle Liu up with Zhan Zhao disguised as one of the suppliers and visited Uncle Liu one day. He told Uncle Liu that his plot had been revealed and blackmailed him for a fortune in order to keep silent to the judge and the emperor. Uncle Liu was in rage. He bellowed at the disguised man and threatened to kill him and his family. Uncle Liu simply admitted to having done all the nasty dirty work. General Li was indeed innocent. Just at that moment, Zhan Zhao revealed his true identity. To Uncle Liu's surprise, Judge Pao and Emperor Renzong pried open the door and went in. Uncle Liu had no way to deny and escape. He was caught red-handed.

Though Empress Liu tried every means to save her dear brother, the greedy Uncle Liu was finally prosecuted with the Tiger head Guillotine knife. General Li was released.

The New Tales of Judge Pao

Korean International School, Nair, Vihaan Vinod – 12

It starts with a man named Pao who was a judge in a local court. Most people refer to him as Judge Pao. But on trial one person became suspicious about him. What is he hiding, let's find out? He was in a trial with a rich and wealthy businessman that was called Jayden Khan and they were on trial for fraud. The defendant won taking 1000000\$ from Jayden Khan. Jayden Khan became filled with anger and annoyed at the judge saying it was rigged and I was framed. Later Judge Pao went to his basement and reality was warping simple shapes turned to blob and few seconds later he was in a fiery place also known as hell. He kept walking through the hell and talking to demons on the way and suddenly stopped at a building that read *Hell's official court room* and he went in. He got fitted with his red, orange and yellow suit and went to court and as the judge.

After a long day of work he emerged from his basement and let on like nothing happened. The next day he had another court duty with Jayden Khan again and of course the other person won and took 100000\$ from Jayden Khan and now he was fuming. He was freaking out. Jayden Khan swore that he would get revenge. Later that day he went back to his basement except Jayden Khan was watching him. He waited and waited for him to come back from the basement. Finally Judge Pao emerged from the basement and he was wearing a red, orange and yellow god-like clothes blinding to the look. Then the Jayden Khan knew something was afoot.

The next day this time Jayden Khan challenged the judge to a trial. If Judge Pao wins, Jayden Khan won't break the law any more. But if Jayden Khan wins Judge Pao gets arrested and has to tell everybody his deepest darkest secret. After a long and hard and excruciating trial, unfortunately Judge Pao lost and is now under arrest. He told everyone that he works for hell as a judge and has to serve a life sentence because people back then hated the demon or supernatural activity.

He is now in his cell waiting for lunch break and when lunch came around the corner he saw the food he lost his appetite immediately but he had to survive and he ate it. He felt so sick he almost fainted. After he finished five men who looked so strong they could lift ten. Judge Pao's surrounded him and he recognized all those people, those were the people he made go to jail after the quick, very painful and traumatizing beat up. He went back to his cell with a black eye, multiple contusions and many sprains. He prayed and prayed and prayed even more. But he wasn't praying to god or Jesus. He was praying to the devil himself, Satan, to help him get out of this prison. But the Satan had other plans. He showed him glimpses from past, present and future of the world and Judge Pao it saw raining fire, people becoming slaves and the biggest statue of the devil. He wanted to change that and started praying again but this time to Jesus and the god and he said that "I will be a better man, a nicer man, A more forgiving man and I will never turn to the devil. Thankfully God is very forgiving and gave him a second chance so he was out of jail and fled to the countryside and went into hiding for the next few years.

When he came back he saw the visions but this time in real life right in front of him a demon suddenly looked his way but the demon could see nothing because he quickly leaped in the bush next to him and the demon just continued on. In the bush he met with an old acquaintance. His name Jayden Khan. In the bush crying his eyes out saying what is happening, who did this, why to me then he suddenly looked at me. He said you, you did this and you will pay for it. He pounced on me like a tiger and we fought and fought until Pao said stop. He said we shouldn't be fighting and we should be finding a way to fix this. I have devoted my life to fulfill God's wishes and wants to beat the devil. They planned the greatest plan ever. Pao repeated it again to Jayden Khan "Ok so first we make a distraction to get the security demon out of its post so we can make an announcement to all demons to meet at the court and then free all the humans and go to the castle to take on the Satan and after we beat him we take on the demon's one by one got it." And Jayden Khan said "Yep, one hundred percent."

Then they make the plan in action first they made a small boom sound and accidentally took out a demon and called all demons to the castle and in less than a few minutes every single demon waiting for instructions then they went to a dungeon and swooped the keys of the guard demon and freed everybody and killed that demon. But suddenly the alarm sounded and ran to a place far away coming back when they're ready.

Three months later, they were all armored up and with weapons in their hands and they ambushed the demon king. They put thousands of arrows in its back, scraps on his knees just as he was about to be killed. He used some

of Satan's power and fully regenerated himself and got a sword that was 1000 degrees hot So they put more than triple the arrows, cut although out its body and there were bodies of their fallen people everywhere and when he was one hit away he swung his sword at Judge Pao But Jayden Khan came in the middle and took the hit. Leaving Jayden disappeared into ashes and blew away in the wind. Judge Pao filled with rage losing someone he hated at first but became one of Judge Pao best and only friends. So he did a clean cut through the demon in and split him in half and beat the demon king but there was one thing left to do to beat the remaining demons.

So they started killing the normal demons. Sadly some of the people got killed, next the guards demons, after that chief demons then, lastly the stealth demons but when there was only one demon left it stabbed Judge Pao right through the heart after they killed it they buried Judge Pao got the biggest funeral. And Passed the story on for generations to come but that wasn't the end of the story. Judge Pao at the gates of heaven or Hell The usual gate keeper wasn't there but instead It was God when it was his turn God Said "Pao you have greatly changed your ways and dedicated your life to me so now I know you are loyal so you are now the new gate keeper and can decided to bring any one person out of hell to heaven." Pao said gratefully "Thank you God you have blessed me with responsibility and don't know that I can keep it but I will try my best to do whatever I can do with my power to make you proud. One last Question Where is Jayden Khan.?"

An Important Journey

Marymount Secondary School, Ip, Nga Chi Agnes – 12

“During the Northern Song Dynasty in the year nine hundred and ninety-nine, approximately one thousand and twenty-three years ago, Bao Zheng, also known as Judge Pao by the world, was born near Shexian, now near Hefei...” The teacher blabbered whilst motioning the students to flip open their books. Angie dozed off silently after the teacher started talking, she absolutely hated the subject Chinese History. She never knew how to memorize all the information in time for the tests and would always end up failing them, not to mention, the teacher always despised her. No matter how hard she tried, the test results would always be in a single digit.

A nudge came from her shoulder, whispering, “Wake up... Miss Smith is looking at you...” Whispered her seat mate and her twin, Amelia. Angie yawned aloud, looking drowsy and her classmates responded with judgemental stares. “Miss Dawson, so nice of you to join us finally!” Miss Smith mocked with a high-pitched voice. “Do you want to fail the sixth time in a test? If not, please pay attention!” She said, slamming the textbook onto the desk before continuing her boring lecture. “As I was saying, Bao Zheng was also known to be the one who was rumored to be a supernatural judge by sorting affairs in the Afterlife, becoming the immortal Yama of a department called the Infernal Bureaucracy...”

Finally, after a long period of time, her tedious talk fortunately came to an end. “Now, I want you to be paired up with the one sitting next to you, and work on an at least one hundred and fifty words long essay about the life of Judge Pao for thirty minutes, the word count should be no problem for all of you. Angie, since you probably know so much from listening to me, how about you and Amelia start first later?” Miss Smith said sarcastically. After Miss Smith set the timer to thirty minutes and started it, everyone in the class went into chaos and clamor, only Angie and Amelia remained silent.

Though the two seat mates were twins, they were like apples and oranges. A few minutes had passed, and Amelia spoke, “Any ideas on how to write the essay?” A single “Nope” was heard from the other, who was still grumbling about the mistreatment of Miss Smith to her. Just then, something sharp pricked Angie’s pocket. She let out a small squeak and rummaged through her pockets until she found a weird looking fan that had miraculously fit in. She brought it out, and the two inspected it carefully and touched on it cautiously together. Just then, a gust of wind came by from the windows and they were gone in a blink of an eye, without the knowledge of their classmates.

They fell through portals and loopholes and landed in a garden that had a palace behind it. “Where in the world are we...?” Amelia murmured, putting the fan on a bench absentmindedly. Angie looked around, somehow the surroundings look suspiciously alike to the ancient palaces of The Northern Song Dynasty in her Chinese History textbook. Suddenly, a man wearing a judge’s zhanjiao futou hat with a monotonous expression and a homogenous crescent moon shape on his temple. He looked stern and yet mysterious in a lot of different ways, like the dark side of the Moon.

“Who are you? Why are you here?” The man spoke, looking at the twins carefully and warily, his eyebrows arching up, yet his facial expressions showed no signs of changing. “We are—” “Xiang Ling and Wen Ling! We are commoners from the city of Chenliu, we have come to pay homage to the emperor and visit family.” Amelia cut off Angie, her hands wringing nervously behind her back, beads of sweat that had appeared on her head could be seen if you looked carefully. “Ah, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am Bao Zheng. You don’t look from Chenliu.” He said with a hint of dubiousness, crossing his arms and walking away. “May the rest of your days be peaceful.”

“Well, that was polite.” Angie commented while rolling her eyes. Amelia didn’t make a sound, and simply stared off to the direction where Judge Bao went in amazement and astonishment, and immediately ran to follow him. Angie, startled by Amelia’s actions, hurriedly tried to catch up. When they had arrived at where he was heading, they found out that they were in Judge Pao’s home in Kaifeng! It was a wonder to see it, especially as they were learning about him.

The house wasn’t unpretentious nor elaborate, it was like your own simplified dream house. Angie and Amelia crept silently and quietly to the windows. From the outside, they could hear Judge Pao’s voice from the inside. “Gather all, as I have a very important warning for all of you.” He coughed while warning his family

gravely, venom laced under his gruff voice. “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.” His family murmured mournfully, knowing exactly why he has chosen this time of his whole life to say these words to them. And with that, the honorable, wise, dispenser of justice took one final breath and moved on to the Afterlife of the world.

His family cried mournfully, each knowing how hard he tried to get rid of the corruption in the world and goodness towards everyone. Outside, Amelia had tears running down her pink cheeks and was practically crying inaudibly while Angie just remained unfazed and was just trying to drag her sister to find back to the fan and see if they would be able to return back to the classroom. After a while, Amelia finally stopped crying and Angie ultimately dragged her to the gardens where they first arrived, the fan was nowhere to be seen on the bench! So they started looking around frantically, the fan could be anywhere if it was able to fit inside Angie’s small pocket in her jacket. From the top of the trees to the small holes in statues, they searched the whole area from top to bottom. They subsequently realized that it was lying underneath the feet of a sculpture, and Angie had mentally facepalmed herself for not recognizing the fan there as she only thought it was an ornament while partially checking it.

They tried holding the fan tightly and thinking hard of the classroom in hopes it would take them back to their era of time, and thankfully it did. It had just been a few moments in reality, but to the Dawson Twins, the journey was a mixture of clumped up memories. Then, they worked on the essay intently, referring to a lot of information about Judge Pao with their Chinese History textbooks. While they were writing about his death, they wrote their own experience in seeing the famous judge die without stating that they were actually present during his death. Of course there were a few occasional bickering just like sisters do, they still managed to finish the short essay in time and write a whopping 240 words!

“Time’s up! Angie and Amelia, let’s see your work. Stand in front of the blackboard and read out your essay.” Miss Smith announced, looking coldly over to Angie. Annoyed by Miss Smith’s constant scornful comments, Angie remembered how Judge Pao despite living in a culture where thoughts expressed too frankly to people that were in power could cause calamity, he still decided to speak up for what he thinks is right and let the society not be corrupted. Even when he died, he still hung on to his thoughts and made his family vow to follow his values, so she decided to boldly walk out to the front of the classroom, hand in hand with Amelia and bravely started to read the essay out first.

After they had finished their very well-written story, the whole class was silent, looking at them as if they were the Wikipedia Page of Judge Pao. A round of applause broke the silence and everyone smiled brilliantly at them. Even Miss Smith looked awed at how they were able to write so much and exclaimed. “I would have to say, that was rather a fantastic essay, with enough detailing and information yet grammar and language usage are spot on. I would never in a million years think I would say this to you, Angie. But you and Amelia have surpassed my expectations and have done exceptionally well!” Amelia beamed at her twin, proud that she had finally passed an assignment, even if she had also helped with it. But the happiest thing of all, was how they knew the importance of Judge Pao’s last words and how he still tried to keep justice in the society despite passing away.

Coffee Shop

Marymount Secondary School, Ng, Wing Lam Alison – 13

My theory is proven when I turn up at the coffee shop. I'd hoped last night had been a one-off but the moment I strolled up, I could see him through the store window.

I paused with my hand on the doorknob. He's sitting comfortably in the same patchwork armchair as yesterday, only with two coffee cups in front of him – one no doubt empty – and clutching the book he was reading at lunch. The fireplace behind him steadily cackles away, casting a faint yellow glow across his cheeks.

The warmth of the coffee shop calls me. Maybe it's because it's colder outside than it was this morning, but the lure of the fireplace and a hot cup of coffee in such a place was almost too tempting. But the thought of facing him again was enough to make me want to leave.

A gust of wind suddenly whipped up my hair, sending flecks of ice into my eyes. I gritted my teeth and opened the shop door, welcomed by a wave of hot air. My body tingles as I scan the coffee house, praying that he won't notice me, but maybe it was too late...

As soon as I make my way to order my coffee, Harley, or the guy sitting in the patchwork armchair, looked at me. Because of the sudden change in temperature, I thought it was all just my imagination, him staring at me, but it just felt so real. Shaking my head, I looked over Lila's direction and gave her my biggest smile.

She must be in an amazing mood, because for the first time in human history, she smiled back, "What can I get you, babe?"

I inspected their black chalkboard like I might order something different, but not the black coffee I'd been drinking for three months straight every day. I noticed they added some new options with Christmas in the corner, like Caramel latte with marshmallows. For a moment, I might have really wanted to order that instead of a black coffee.

"Just a black coffee," I said.

Lila smirked, "I thought you might surprise me by ordering something new."

Rolling my eyes away from hers, I slowly started to study the counter, silently praying that when I turn, Harley will be gone.

When my coffee was finally ready, I grabbed a paper straw from the counter and put it in my cup, then slowly headed over to my usual spot. Praying must be fake, because Harley was still sitting there, in the patchwork armchair, totally judging me. I ignored him and tried to settle into my usual routine: unzipping the bag, retrieving the sketchbook, and drawing. To be absolutely honest, getting comfortable with someone watching you is very hard.

I sip at my coffee, focusing on sketching the nightmare from this morning while listening to the calming music playing in the shop. I was so concentrated that when I finally look up to stretch my back and see Harley sitting opposite me, I jumped and shrieked.

He studied me intently from over his cup. His face is more chiseled up close, jawline narrow, chin pronounced, his eyes seem to balance out his features, leaving him looking youthful and ethereal.

"You drink too much coffee," he points out.

I just blink at him, surprised and feeling a bit cocky, "At least better than constantly drinking whiskey."

He flashes a smile, "I wasn't aware they were the only two options."

I rolled my eyes and carried on sketching, hoping he'll get the hint, but he didn't even move a muscle. Finally, I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry, but do you need anything?"

"Nope, I'm just enjoying my coffee," he leans in closer like he's trying to catch a peek, "what are you sketching?"

By reflex, I turned my sketchbook towards me further. “Nothing,” I say, “You’re just breaking coffee house rules.”

He raised an eyebrow, “Rules?”

“Yes, rules.” I’m not trying to be mean, but it’s hard not to remember the countless times I’ve seen the famous Harley Curry get his way, he’s the school’s star quarterback, which means he doesn’t seem to have to follow the same rule as the rest of us. Hasn’t done his homework? It’s okay. Late to school? He needs his rest. Absent again? He just needs to recover.

Harley scanned his ocean-blue eyes through the shop before facing me, “What are these rules you’re talking about? I don’t see them anywhere.”

I sigh impatiently, “That’s because they’re not written anywhere. They’re unspoken rules that we as customers all follow to ensure maximum experience and comfort.”

Harley leaned forward, looking amused, “Well, by all means,” he smirked, “Please do enlighten me.”

I rolled my eyes and started speaking, “First, you don’t sit near people in coffee shops, and you definitely, under no circumstances, sit at the same table as them. It’s simple etiquette.

He processed the new information before folding his arms across his chest, “What if the place is busy?”

“It’s one in the morning, it’s never busy at this time. Rule number two, you do not speak to anyone inside of this shop except for Lila.”

I saw his eyebrows furrow, “And who’s that?”

“The waitress at the counter,” I turned to the counter to point at Lila and turned back, “Even then, please do keep it short and snappy, she’s not really a person for a conversation.”

Harley let out an expanse of air, but his eyes still shone back with amusement, “I didn’t realize ordering a cup of coffee came with so many rules.”

“The reason people love this place is because they get to blend into the background, they want to be near other people but not have to talk to them; they want to enjoy their coffee next to a roaring fireplace. And if that’s not you—”

“It is me,” he insisted, holding up his hands defensively. “How about this? I solemnly swear that from this day forth, I’ll follow those rules. And in fact, I’ll just sit here sipping my coffee.”

“Well good,” I faltered and say, lowering my sketchbook. I’m about to pick up my pencil again when he went and ruined the mood again.

“You come here a lot, you know.”

“With your astounding observational skills, it’s too bad you can’t follow simple rules.”

He flashed me his smile again, “I thought about it, but following rules ain’t my thing.”

“Neither is getting the hint.” I said in heavy sarcasm.

He leaned forward slightly, not the least bit disheartened. “You know, I get the impression you don’t like me a lot.”

I joked, “Hard to believe, right?”

“Well yeah,” He continues, “I don’t know about you, but I don’t make a habit of going around hating people I don’t know.”

For some reason, him calling me ‘unreasonable’, hit me hard, “I know you’re used to getting whatever you want, and I know you’re not usually caught dead talking to girls like me, which leads me to the question: What do you actually want, Harley Curry?”

The tiniest form of smile tugged at his lips. "Fine. I want to know something about you too, believe it or not. You're really smart, Faith. I want to make you an offer."

"Thanks, but I'm not for sale."

"I don't mean it like that," his eyes softened, "I mean, you're very cute, and you got that smart thing going for you. But it doesn't really do it for me."

My jaw dropped, "I'm glad we've cleared that up," I cleared my throat, "Are you going to get to your point?"

He leaned forward in his seat, voice dropping to a whisper. "I'm failing mathematics. Well, everything actually. Coach says I can't finish the season if they are like this."

I don't even bother to look up, "Sucks to be you."

Before I know it, Harley pulled the sketchbook from me, "I want you to tutor me."

I might have spat out my coffee if I had been drinking it. So, this was Harley Curry's game all along. Here it is, the cosmic imbalance I knew had to exist.

"Sorry, but I refuse."

He looks at me with his ridiculously handsome face, "Please?"

"Does that usually work on girls?"

He smiled, "Nine times out of ten."

"Consider this the tenth."

He sighed a little, "Come on, Faith. What can you even lose?"

I shook my head, "How much are you paying?"

He stayed quiet for a moment, "Well, I thought you might do it out of the goodness of your heart."

What a joke.

"I don't have a heart."

"Look, I know you dislike me, but if anyone can get my grades up, it's you. I'll pay you for it, all right? Think of all that money stacking up in front of you."

I fiddled with my hair, but he pauses and says, "Please."

If it weren't for his desperation, I would've walked out, "Fine, I'm in."

And that's how our love story started.

Judge Pao's Final Case

Marymount Secondary School, Wong, Hei Cheng Courtney – 12

Inside the lavish meeting chamber in Shangqiu, eleven advisors sit on their lavish chairs, while one of them, wearing commoner's clothes, stands in front of the Governor of Song.

The governor looks down at the man. "Very well, then," he says, "You have done well in your duties and served the state loyally. I don't see why your proposal shouldn't be accepted."

"Thank you, governor," the man sits down. Suddenly, a woman bursts into the meeting chamber, wearing all white, the color of mourning.

"My lords, please, you must help me!" she cries, her voice ringing throughout the chamber. She opens her mouth to speak, but stops abruptly under the glare of the governor, "Soldiers, take her away!"

As she is dragged away by the soldiers, she screams, but not for her life. Her hysterical screams shake the soldiers, but they are duty bound to listen to their governor. Her tears fall to the chamber's grounds, leaving behind a dark stain.

The man stands up and steps towards the woman, his long robes swishing elegantly around his legs as he walks.

"Soldiers, let her go," he says, sternly. Fearing his wrath, they back away discreetly, trying as hard as they can not to make a sound.

As he steps closer, the woman recognizes him, "Y—you're Judge Pao!" she cries in delight. "Please, you must help my family! My eldest son, Li Guang, has been killed!"

Judge Pao glances up at the governor, who smiles, "If this has piqued your interest, Judge Pao, then you are excused."

Judge Pao nods in gratitude, then gazes at the woman with a sympathetic look, "Lead me to the scene of the murder."

She smiles warmly, "Thank you so much, Sir."

They set off to the nearby village of Huaxia without another word. The journey isn't easy, and the woman is already exhausted, but she keeps going, eager to avenge her son. Soon, they arrive at a small hut made of mudbricks at the edge of the village. A roof made of dried grass and straw covers the sole room of the house, and the people inside it. Fortunately, a well stands outside the hut, likely serving as their main source of water. A pungent smell came from the inside of the house, getting worse as they got closer.

The woman leads Judge Pao inside, where Li Guang's unmoving body lay. While examining the corpse, he asks the woman a number of questions.

"Did your son have any enemies?"

"No, I don't believe so. Li Guang was a kind and just boy. I don't think he'd make any enemies, at least not of his own accord," she says, "Now that I think of it, though...I believe a fellow classmate of his disliked him quite a lot."

"What was this classmate's name?" As he speaks, he keeps investigating the body, never looking up at her even once.

“His name was Chen Lin, I believe. Dong Zhi taught them both,” Judge Pao nods. “What else do you know about Chen Lin?” he asks.

She stares off into space for a moment, “My son doesn’t speak of him much, but while I was heading to the shared field to help with the harvest, I overheard Chen Lin’s father bragging about their family treasure – a sword. According to him, the blade was made of pure bronze, and it was passed down to him from his great-grandfather, who was a warrior,” her face crumples in sorrow. She didn’t say it out loud, but Judge Pao knows what she is thinking, “*They must’ve killed my son.*” However, her emotions could not sway him. His face remains as aloof as ever.

As if he was bored of talking, he swiftly turns his gaze back to the body.

The victim had been stabbed with a sharp blade of some kind. The blade angle suggests that he had been stabbed while laying down. Seeing as his corpse is on his bed, it is likely that he had been killed while asleep. There is also more than one wound, suggesting that the killer might have wanted to cause the victim pain or was weak in strength.

He pauses and examines the stab wounds closely.

The wounds are no more than a Cun deep, and the placements of the wounds were nowhere near the heart. It is likely that the cause of death was blood loss. However, he should’ve been in great pain before his death. How did they not hear him?

“Where were you when this happened?” he asks.

“I went to mourn my mother,” she answers, her gaze drifting onto the ground, “She had recently been claimed by a fever.”

Judge Pao nods, while pity fills his heart. How could the skies be so cruel as to kill off two of her relatives?

“Where does Chen Lin live?” he asks.

“Head straight, and when you reach the fork in the path, turn left. His house is the third one on the right,” she says, then pauses, “Please, help avenge my son.”

He nods, “I will.” Without another word, he walks out of the door. He follows her instructions, finding himself in front of another wooden hut. It was a bit bigger than Li Guang and his mother’s, but with two rooms. It was safe to assume that they were relatively well-off.

Judge Pao knocks on the door, and a woman dressed in red and black garments opens it. She recognizes him instantly, “Ah, it’s Judge Pao!” she says, surprised. “Come in, come in! I’ll pour you a cup of tea. Sadly, my husband is away in the fields, and my son is studying. However, I can relay a message to them, if you’d like.” The sounds of her cane echoes onto the floor, a sure sign that she was from a noble family. The Chen family must be rather rich to afford such a well-mannered bride.

“Thank you for your help, madam. I wanted to as–” Judge Pao is interrupted by the sound of a door slamming open violently, “Wife, where is Chen Lin?! We can’t have him running around everywhere!” He turned his head to look at her and flinched at the sight of Judge Pao. “O–oh! My honorable guest, what can we do for you?” he said, his fury disappearing in an instant.

“Ah, so you are Chen Lin’s father? I have only one request,” he says, calmly, while his wife rushes to boil some tea, “Sir, may I see your family’s treasure – that knife, made of pure bronze?” The man looks confused, but he accepts.

“Of course, sir. And please, call me Chen Xiang,” with that, he disappears into the other room.

When he came back, Judge Pao was elegantly sipping the tea Chen Xiang’s wife had made for him, “I’m not sure what you want with this,” he says, “but please, do be careful with it. It’s quite fragile.”

“Fragile?” Judge Pao responds.

“Indeed, sir.” he says nonchalantly, “It was passed down to me from my great–great–grandfather, who used it in battle. Now, it is but an ornament.”

Looking at the blade, Judge Pao confirms that he was correct. This cracked and worn blade would have no way of piercing a boy’s chest. Something was missing.

“Do you know anything about Li Guang?” Judge Pao asks, “He is a student who studies alongside your son, Chen Lin.”

“Ah, not much,” he replies, “Chen Lin has talked to him a few times before, but they’re not particularly close, I hear.”

Suddenly, a voice rings out from the other room. “Not to disturb you, Xiang, but do be careful when walking around. I think I dropped a needle somewhere.”

The wheels in Judge Pao’s mind started turning. *When a needle turns black...*

He rushes into the other room hurriedly to borrow a needle. Then, he rushes back to Li Guang’s hut, where he sticks the needle in his stomach. When he pulled the needle out, the tip had turned pitch black. “So my hunch was right...it was arsenic poison!” Judge Pao exclaims.

Hearing his voice, the woman rushes to him, “Judge Pao, what happened to my son?!” she cries, nervously. He didn’t respond. Instead, he walks to the wok, lifting it. A bottle, with silver–gray liquid inside, rests underneath it. He turns back, looking at her in the eyes, “You killed your son, didn’t you?”

The woman doesn’t respond. Instead, her irises expand, and her eyes glow orange. Her body twists and turns strangely, and a glowing fox appears in front of his eyes, in the place of the woman he was talking to. “A fox spirit!” Judge Pao shouts.

The spirit grew and grew, until it was twice his size. After its transformation, it looked down at the tiny man. The temperature drops abruptly.

Suddenly, a voice speaks in Judge Pao’s head.

“You may have been able to solve this case, but you cannot solve your own.”

Tales of Justice Pao

Nord Anglia International School, Chan, Brady – 11

There is darkness. This is what he has always expected. Complete and total darkness. Soon he would be consumed by it and lose consciousness, perhaps forever. A wave of concern and slight fear struck him. What would happen now? He told himself that it would be just like falling asleep, but the thought did little to console him. “Just like falling asleep,” he said out loud to himself, “Just like falling asleep.”

“Order!” the booming command echoed all throughout the massive room they seemed to be in reverberating painfully in the man’s ears. He opened his eyes. Before him stood two massive steel gates. The one on his left was open and behind it was what could not have been described as anything less than heaven itself. A golden paradise, rich with nature and growth but with no lack of palaces and gold. This beautiful world stretched far beyond the eye could see. People and animals coexisted peacefully and desires that could never be fulfilled in life were fulfilled in this golden land. Instinctively looking to the right, the man saw the polar opposite of the paradise he had just seen. It was hell. In this fiery netherworld, the floor was jagged rock, and no sky could be seen through the haze that clouded the air. A horrible, endless sound came from the land itself and nowhere behind the gate was safe from the flames. He wanted to look back at heaven but couldn’t take his gaze from the ghastly sight in front of him. A small voice brought him back to reality, “Thank you, Judge Pao,” someone was about to go through the gate to heaven. Nodding respectfully, he disappeared through the gate. Wait. He was a ghost! Looking down at his own transparent hands, he noticed the great gates closing. Before he could follow the spirit, the same powerful voice he had heard earlier hailed him, making him freeze. “Halt, spirit. For you have yet to be judged.” Looking up, he saw a towering man, dressed with long flowing robes marked with traditional Chinese characters on them. He wore a hat, covering the top of his head. His clothes were studded with rubies and gold. He was clearly a very powerful person. “Stand before the jury,” he ordered. Hesitantly, the man obeyed. This judge had a commanding atmosphere. “Now speak, tell me of your life in your own words, but don’t think I haven’t seen it already. Convince me you deserve your place in heaven.” For the first time, the man noticed the people clinging onto the gate to hell from their side. Grotesque, barely humanoid figures, terribly burned and scarred from the flames of hell, but unable to die a second time. They desperately clung to the gate with nowhere else to go, crying out to the judge who had sent them to burn, begging with all their hearts to be free. They screamed and writhed agony as they went up in smoke, never again to see the light.

“You’re free to go,” Judge Pao brough his hammer down as the gates to heaven slowly opened. Light flooded in, illuminating the room with its brilliant rays. He looked at the judge’s face. He saw his honesty and justice, his wisdom and experience, but he saw something else. Regret? What had he to regret? He knew he should go on, but something held him back. He knew he couldn’t bring himself to ask about the judge’s past – could he? Confusion and doubt flooded his mind and, without thinking, he suddenly blurted out, “Why do you mourn?” As soon as he’d said it he regreted it, but to the man’s surprise, the judge’s eyes are sad, “I knew there was more to you than meets the eye,” the judge said gently, “But believe me, you too would mourn if you knew what I knew.” As the silence stretched on, the judge continued, “You’ve told me your story, as all spirits have, but none have ever cared to learn mine. Time works differently here. In the real world, decades have passed since your death. Every time a close my eyes I think of what new problems will arise for the world. And I must reside here for all eternity. My children and my children’s children have all long passed. And yet I remain. I close my eyes for but a moment and everyone I’ve ever known is dead. I grow acquainted to the new world every time a new era comes, but it’s always over too quickly. And I feel regret every time I punish someone. But if you truly want to know why I mourn, it is because I was forced to banish my grandson to the mercy of hell.”

“Allow me to tell you a story,” the judge said as the man’s eyes widened in horror, “I lived life, just as you did, I was born into a scholar family and we lived in the middle class. During my early life I loathed corruption and

how the ego of those above me always outweighed their humility. I vowed to bring justice one day. I qualified as a Jinshi at a young age and, after my parents passed away, justice could finally come. I became a magistrate not far from my hometown and from there, I went on to become a noble judge. My children all grew to be men and women who I could be proud of, but my daughter's son, Bao Xiu was related to me only by blood, nothing more. He was a smart child and became a Jinshi at an even younger age than I. But greed consumed him as he followed in my footsteps. You see, as a fair and honest judge I was respected by many as one who stood up for those who could not stand up for themselves. But I would not hesitate to punish someone who had done wrong. And I made as many enemies as friends, my uncle was one of them. Earlier in time, I had to imprison my uncle for his greediness and wrongdoing. When he left prison, I'd hoped he would be better for it. But it only seemed to worsen his desperate hunger for power. He started to pass these traits along to young Bao Xiu who was a talented young man on his way to begin what could have been a bright and successful career. I had tried to put a stop to it, but my uncle had a way with words, and, by the time he passed away, Bao Xiu was a different person. I told him he didn't have to follow his uncle, but his mind was set and the damage was done. While I delivered justice, Bao Xiu did quite the opposite, opposing me several times and winning the favor of the people more than once. He had many followers, all too poor or too stupid to do it themselves, who he promised their fair share of the riches his corruption would get him. And it was not long before he found the perfect opportunity to strike. A very wealthy and equally corrupt man was looking to win a case against a former friend of his. He was willing to pay very well for someone like Bao Xiu but was not willing to pay unless he won the case. And Bao Xiu accepted knowing someone would only pay him so much if I were to judge the case. And when he walked into the courtroom and delivered his captivating speech, I knew, as I looked into the eyes of the crowd gathered to see this massive case play out, that I would have to face my grandson in one final showdown. It was the hardest moment of my life, but, in the end, I was victorious. Unable to contain his rage, Bao Xiu tried to expose me in ways I never imagined him capable of. But thankfully, nobody believed him and ultimately, he ended up accidentally exposing himself. He was sent to prison and justice was dealt. We lived in peace for many years. I died in the year 1062 and experienced something very different than you. I stood in this very room as a spirit. But the gods had judged me, I was told, I was to deliver justice in death as I had in life. I gracefully accepted the offer, but when my grandson walked into this room..." a single tear welled in Judge Pao's eye.

The man bowed respectfully, "You have expanded my vision of the world and I thank you for what you have done for me,"

"Farewell, spirit," the judge responded, "Perhaps I will see you in the afterlife, after the next great judge of your time comes to replace me," Judge Pao gave a rare smile as the gates to heaven began to close, pulling him in. And then the light engulfed everything.

Bao Zheng and The Case of The Black Basin

Nord Anglia International School, Fall, Nia – 12

This case, as all good ones do, starts with murder. A silk merchant, Liu Shichang decides he should find cover from the raging storm. It is midnight and the streets are deserted. Shades of black and grey dominate the sky, twisting and turning like two soldiers at war. The falling rain is wild, the thunder and hail coming down at lightning speed, and muddy distorted footsteps pierce the air around his path. His thoughts hang over him like cumulonimbus clouds, pleading with him to find shelter overnight.

A short way off stood a minuscule tulou with its roof of aging clay dripping onto the soil, the dirt resembling a garden, and the chambers lit by red and maroon lights were the only sign of life amongst the chaos. As he got closer, heat enveloped him in the darkness, urging him into the house, whispering promises of warmth and rest. Liu Shichang's body moved closer to the closed door, and his knuckles struck the wood in rhapsody. As the door opened to divulge the home, the blares of thumping rain and gale were muffled by the door scraping against the resisting earth, revealing a beggarly-looking man known as Zhao Da.

Liu Shichang's skin prickled with goosebumps as the man's eyes fell upon him with judgment. He needed to ask for shelter for one measly night. As Liu Shichang felt his clothes stick to him like honey and the frigidity of the horrible weather sting him like bees, Zhao Da grudgingly opened the door and let him inside. He was met with a warm meal, but an austere face kept watch over him; it looked almost bored like it was waiting for a turn of events. A remarkable aspect of this particular case is that the person it concerns, Zhao Da, was as poor as winter. His only source of income was a broken pottery kiln; still, a fortune could always appear on your doorstep by way of a miracle. Zhao Da's eyes glistened as he eyed Liu Shichang. Hungry as a dog, Liu Shichang gulped down his meal though slowly, awkwardly, felt his throat tighten, clog, and gag. His pupils turned grey, blurring and closing as he tried to fight sleep. Sleep, was it? Maybe not. Definitely not. A typical, undermining use of poison was what it was. His ears were oblivious to the ongoing storm. His tongue felt the taste of a sweet meal turn sour; acid choked his oesophagus. One last gust of air piled into his dying body.

Zhao Da's face was painted with smug pride. Knowing what was to come, he yanked the blue-grey, lifeless body across the floor, dragging it to the kiln. The clay and his remains would easily ignite, charring his corpse into a pitch-black basin. He lit the kiln, crinkling fire, red and orange lighting the room turned to blood red, and the body started shifting into the sleek form. All evidence leading to the easy and undemanding murder was imprinted on the object. How a man can sleep with a burden looming over him for hours on end is beyond my knowledge. However, Zhao Da did not get the pleasure of sleep but rather the displeasure of debt knocking loudly at the door. As penniless as Zhao Da appeared, he held gargantuan sums of money to satisfy the man behind the ripping noise at the door. He knew when he sold the basin, he would make a fortune. Despite this, he was powerless.

Raging, an old man came bursting through the door, leaving dirty footprints across the old wood. Crashing through the home at bull-like speed, I remembered well the words recited by Liu Shichang's ghost about his deafening shouting for his money but more on how I uncovered this tragedy later. Yelling and screaming followed, ripping through his weak, harsh, and grating voice. Faint-hearted, feverish, and frightened Zhao Da insisted that he had no more money to give nor to spare, and the waning Zhang Biegu did not take it lightly as he proceeded to smash an abundance of Zhao Da's precious objects. 'Clank' went the pottery, 'crack' the shanzhai china, 'swish swing' the lanterns filled with dragons, mocking Zhao Da as he tumbled to the ground in fear. By chance, Zhang Biegu turned to find what he considered to be a picturesque basin. "Ample payment" he purred in his haste. More precious than designer silks, real china, or precious metals. Zhao Da felt tears as he witnessed his prized possession snatched into the clutches of his creditors. His chance at riches was squandered, and he was reduced to rags, but he had also lost Liu Shichang's dying spirit, something he hadn't realized in his greedy state.

In contrast to the piping yellow covering his face, Zhang Biegu hiked home through the raging storm, the greys, blacks, and all shades in between trailing him. The repetition of the pulsating downpour pierced his ears, yet his grin never faded. The basin rocked in his hand, drenched in the rain though its everlasting colour peeked through, beginning to throb with action. As Zhang Beigu's pupils laid eyes on the piece, blue mist started to swim out, forming a miscellaneous figure, creating the eyes, nose, and lips of the deceased Liu Shichang. Stunned, Zhang Biegu fell to the floor, feeling a tightening grip around his neck and frame, holding him in place. His ears shivered as he felt a swampy, wet, cold haze run along his face. It breathed, murmured and told the secrets of the murderer, Zhao Da.

When his bones shook, his body stiffened with the effort to breathe, he was retold the story behind the past of his loved possession. Panting and wheezing, his breathing became faster and faster, as the ghost spoke, it told him all about greed and want. His ears tingled as he listened to how much it had hurt in morbid detail, a breathy voice droning on endlessly until, it seemed to disappear, well not exactly, it seemed to be running away...

The ghost sank into the horizon, its blue mist changing into the colours of the sunrise. Bright tangerines, peaches, apricots. Zhang Biegu followed behind in a desperate attempt to catch up, the ghost holding the key to unlocking Liu Shichang's justice. Very little hope was left in his body until amidst the wintry stone he fell upon the small town of Hefei, Anhui. Feeling the presence of people and hearing the long-awaited sound of chat, Zhang Biegu sensed a small bearing of hope, then felt a hand upon him. That was me, Bao Zheng. Walking quickly, he pleaded weakly for me to help him. With the ghost's departing body at a distance, we ran together. While we fought his shrivelled body, we remembered the feeling of the dead finally being laid to rest, it gave us the reason to run. We felt brave knowing we were doing the honourable thing.

Meanwhile, a hazy mist floated across the busy metropolis of the rich. I watched intently as it engulfed the wealthy crowd and showed us what greed and want looked like, at least from Zhao Da's point of view. Our legs suffering the punishment of the run, we ran in hope of bringing impartiality to Liu Shichang's spirit. Straining, we edged closer, and closer, and closer, bringing the justice he deserved. Its figure disentangling itself from the mob acting as an audience for our tiring chase. The hue was blinding, drawing us closer, and closer, and closer. My hand grasped the vapor, clutching it with an ungodly amount of effort. I felt my skin itch in anticipation. "All I want is a moment", I pleaded breathlessly.

It wasn't much longer before we found ourselves sitting in the courtroom of Kaifeng. Walls of stone and pillars of wood, familiar but vague after my explorations. His voice choked me as I watched him recite the tale of Liu Shichang's demise, once and for all. His words wounded, every sentence stung. As the ghost was finishing his tale, he transformed into his earlier form, the hideous black basin. With the tale told, Zhao Da was left to be executed for his crimes. All that remained were two scarred men, Zhang Biegu and I, a disgusting act of greed and a repellent, repulsive, repugnant black basin.

The Glorious Judge Pao and The Mystery of Villainous Bao

Nord Anglia International School, Gan, Ho Chuen – 11

Li Jing Bao sat on his chair staring into space. Earlier he had shattered his windows and the neighbour's one too, with his bare fist. He was known for being moody, so no one dared go near him or even talk to him. Bao's temper flared up like a volcano most unexpectedly and no one understood why.

The Song Dynasty was a powerful dynasty like many others. Under the reign of Emperor Renzong, the dynasty flourished, and they even brought in the great Justice Pao! What? You don't know who Justice Pao is? Well, he was also a high-ranking official in the town and was known for his acts of justice, extreme honesty and uprightness, Pao was the highest-ranking official under Renzong. Li Jing Bao was right under him.

Bao was thinking of a secret plan, for what you might ask? To kill Justice Pao of course. Bao hated Pao defending the peasants since he himself laughed and beat them up when Justice Pao wasn't watching. He did it behind Pao's back since Judge Pao had the power to sentence anyone to death without emperor Renzong's permission. Bao was jealous that Pao was the highest ranking official and these thoughts caused him constant anguish, like a worm burrowing through his brain. Judge Pao was also very popular and respected by the people for his acts of justice while Li Jing Bao was not.

In the morning routine when people kowtowed to the emperor [kowtow is an act of respect], Bao walked up to emperor Renzong and had some words with him. Renzong's face immediately lit up and accepted this odd-looking tablet that said 4 words '长生不老' which means live forever. Judge Pao started seeing this every day and it seemed that Renzong looked somehow hypnotized and acted weirdly to Pao. But what could Pao do? Take the emperor to a doctor? Execute Bao? What if Renzong felt disrespected and executed Justice Pao? What if the tablets Li Jing Bao gave were a drug that made you ill or hypnotized? Was the emperor obeying Bao's Commands? What if Bao was innocent? Pao knew Li Jing Bao was jealous of him... did Li Jing Bao want him dead? The usual energetic Pao looked so distressed that no one would recognize him.

Pao was correct, a week ago, while Judge Pao was sentencing his uncle (which really happened!), Li Jing Bao was a mad scientist creating his plan once and for all to kill Justice Pao. He made friends with a drug dealer who had special drugs for hypnotizing people, then he went on and found gangsters selling a kind of command obeying drug. Li Jing Bao, as told earlier, was very moody and easily got into fights, the gangsters tried to steal Bao's money and poked the beast... Bao then stole all their tablets and left them standing in awe.

Bao immediately set to work, work what you may ask? Make and mix his deadly tablet to give to the emperor. Soon after, Li Jing Bao started spreading rumours about Justice Pao wanting to rule the world and destroy the fauna and flora to have a dull, colourless world. Bao also added that Judge Pao wanted to kill the emperor and his officials too! People did respect the king of justice but why would he want to turn the world upside down and become a murderer? The Song dynasty people were all caught off guard by some nonsense and didn't go near Pao because they thought he was mad. Justice Pao answered by spreading his own rumours about Li Jing Bao, but it just made things worse. No one trusted him, not even his own family.

The future of the song dynasty looked foggy and dark, unclear yet gloomy. This was what people who committed suicide felt... Nightmares of Pao himself getting buried alive and Li Jing Bao becoming emperor started to fill Justice Pao's mind, he couldn't cope with the harsh consequences. The great Justice Pao gave up; he didn't want to go through the immense pain and sadness that awaited him. Why try to save the world when no one cares? What can I even do? End this once and for all... Pao wanted to commit suicide. At the dawn of the next day, Justice Pao walked over to a cliff surveying the sea, he then said a prayer to the Huangdi, or (Yellow Emperor) who was one of the legendary gods in China. Justice Pao hoped the future of the Song dynasty would be safe and standing without him. He then closed his eyes and jumped...

Luckily the Yellow Emperor heard Pao's prayers and saved Justice Pao's life and led him back up into the town! With his booming voice that sounded like thunder, Huangdi told Pao that he was the only one who could save the dynasty and the future would be miserable for everyone without him. The Yellow emperor then created a

portal out of thin air and brought Judge Pao in. It looked like no one was able to hear Huangdi speak except Pao. The Yellow emperor showed Pao the demon world that the Song dynasty would become without Justice Pao, this was the year 1049— Pao's 1st death anniversary if he had committed suicide earlier. Justice Pao now really thought committing suicide was a huge mistake; he was so thankful that the yellow emperor had saved his life!

Pao looked around; the legendary god had just disappeared into the mist. Judge Pao then gazed ahead and spotted his own tomb under an apple tree, it stood there alone, like someone had carelessly put it there off the edge of the town. The town didn't look anything like the one he was used to; it was colourless and dim, like someone took all the colour away and made it stone-like. The sun looked scared in the sky and moved around always covered by clouds like they were its guards.

Justice Pao never thought his impact on the town was this big! He always thought even colour and sunlight would blossom and never give away... But without Pao, they were taken out. Boom! Judge Pao turned around and found that an apple had just fallen from the tree and landed right next to him. When Pao tried to take it, the apple immediately rotted away. He stared at the spot dumbfounded.

Suddenly, Justice Pao heard some footsteps approaching him, he quickly hid behind the apple tree and watched to see who it was. It was... Li Jing Bao. He wore a mianguan, a type of crown that emperors wore, and a dull grey robe. Bao was smirking at the tomb, and whispered: "I am the emperor, the ruler of the dynasty, and without you blocking my way I have triumphed! You and that Renzong are both gone and will never set foot in this world ever again! I shall have a big celebration of this that no one will ever forget, the Renzong and Pao death day anniversary. I have defeated you way too easily and I, emperor Li Jing Bao, created this wonderful world without colour, without sunlight, and without Pao and Renzong!" He laughed cruelly that left all the apples on the tree rot away, then he walked off into the distance...

Judge Pao racked his brain and since he was the king of justice, he thought of a brilliant idea. I'll teach you a lesson... Under the apple tree, there were lots of dried leaves and twigs, so Pao gathered them together and used them to create a fire. The flames gradually got bigger, and smoke rose to the air, luckily it blended in with the grey clouds and no one noticed it. Justice Pao then took some of the twigs that had the ferocious flames on them and threw it onto the emperor's palace, he then kept on taking and throwing the lion-like flames and soon enough, the whole of the palace's roof was burned off. The flames were lions, and the palace was their prey as Justice Pao moved onto the next step of the plan.

Even though Pao wasn't his young self, he was still able to climb trees, so he climbed up the apple tree and with a loud thunderous voice, roared: "Li Jing Bao!" All the people gazed up into the sky like the voice was from the heavens. "Where is my temple? Where is the food in my honor? You dare not..."

"Yyyyes master Huangdi, sorry I forgot..." Bao had run out of the palace and on the street wide-eyed. He ordered his servants to bring in all the food they had. Justice Pao laughed, he boomed: "Too late, you have broken heaven law 1! The Consequence is death! I shall now..."

Bao had already fled the town.

Murder on the Oriental Express

Nord Anglia International School, Heydolph, Peneloper – 13

Chapter 3

Directly after discovering this, Bao Zheng rushed past some passengers – apologizing sincerely for the ruckus he was creating. He halted and stood before a wooden sliding door. Bao composed himself, wiping away the thin film of sweat which was clinging to his upper lip. Was this what they needed?

Upon entering the large but seemingly empty lounge compartment, he figured his uncharacteristic liveliness must have frightened his partner into hiding. He looked around the stylish room with its couches and settees, and his eyes landed on a sparsely lit corner.

"You may emerge." Serenity filled his voice.

"Oh. It is you. Good evening."

"How I yearn to bring justice to the one who killed him. For how long must we suffer? What I would give to see his face again. Why would the Gods let such malice go unpunished? Who would do a thing as such and with what motive?" Bao whispered and dropped his unflustered mask.

"The point of this silly outburst was...?" An eyeroll accompanied the snappy response.

"Careful, you forget yourself. We bear the same weights, there is no excuse."

Silence followed.

Times were rough – he understood.

"What for was the flurry in the corridor?"

"I discovered a loose end."

Bao received a puzzled look.

"A loose end from the knotted ball of yarn we call the death of Bao Yi."

"I am intrigued." Another eyeroll.

"Don't be so dismayed – though your sarcasm amuses me. I know what happened previously, but thi—"

"So, enlighten me."

"Well, I was walking past different train compartments to head up towards the dining car for some refreshments when I stumbled across our dear companion Liu Yun. He was unaware of my presence and was making polite conversation with a Ms. Anh, who originates from Vietnam. I also observed a fairly young gentleman whose glance shifted continually. He seemed terribly preoccupied – that is until the words 'poor kid', 'upsetting' and 'suspicious' left Liu's lips. The boy could have hardly known they were talking about Bao Yi; however, he froze momentarily and stared me dead in the eye." Bao shuddered at the memory. As such an honest soul he could hardly stand the piercing look of guilt that had flickered in the youngling's eyes. "The oddity of the situation struck me, and I instinctively asked Liu whether he knew in what cabin the boy was housed. After a brief interaction – surprisingly without the expected astonishment to see me – I entered compartment 136 and found a picture of Bao Yi with *the date*. The date he died. 10th of October 1953."

A gasp escaped his wife's mouth. "We must investigate for our poor child's sake. But first we should leave and join Liu for some refreshments. After all he is our good friend, and I must eat something while I stomach this news."

"Of course, my dear Lady Dong."

After walking along the corridor to his friend's chamber, the trio entered the dining cart and took seat. Light-hearted jokes were made, and food was ordered. Slowly the cart filled with chatter as more and more people joined for dinner.

"So, old friend, what brings you to this corner of China? Was it the appeal of its delicious dim sum? I acutely remember your great love of Cha Siu Bao," Bao remarked.

"Well, indeed I came to enjoy the tropical weather and my favourite delicacies."

"Ah so you are on your annual leave – I expect?"

"Yes, it is so – though this trip from Henan to Hong Kong hasn't been as enjoyable as intentioned."

"If I may ask, why not?"

"Well, your wife has not exactly made my stay relaxing, what with all her plaguing questions about Khulan."

"Oh, who might that be?"

"The forlorn boy you previously asked about. We occupy room 136 together and, since I spent the time immediately after my arrival in the first-class diner, I only made his acquaintance this morning. Funny story. At first he spoke 普通话 (Mandarin) with a heavy accent – however he quickly grasped that I spoke English fluently."

"Intere–"

"Pardon the interruption but I'm having a slight emergency and am not feeling well – would you excuse my husband and I for a minute?" Dong said with slight desperation in her voice, beckoning Bao to come.

Bao followed while apologizing "I'm sorry. I shall be back once my wife is well accommodated for."

During the silent trip to their quarters, Dong swiftly pulled him into a small nook whereupon Bao was extremely confused.

"Have you no thought of propriety in your head?!"

"Sorry, but are you quite sure your friend is sane?"

"Naturally! Why would you doubt his sanity?!"

"Alright, before our conversation earlier I was not notified about Liu's presence aboard the train – let alone have I spoken to him about another passenger. Who has he been talking to? He knows both your wives personally so he can't possibly have been fooled by an impersonator!"

"I must say you keep surprising me. I believe there is quite a simple way to find the answer to satisfy your curious mind. Trust me. I will bring you to the safety of our room and there you shall stay until my return – upon which I will inform you in detail about what I found. In the meantime, ask one of your maids to search through Khulan's property for anything odd."

On his return, Liu Yun ordered one glass of wine and an oolong tea. They each leaned back and drank for a while, until Liu broke the silence.

"I do hope your wife is recovering well in her room?"

"Certainly. I accompanied her there to ensure she gets some rest.

"I am glad to hear. Goodness is it truly half past eleven? My, I should get in some sleep before the arrival at dawn. I hope you have a good night's rest." He got up and begun advancing to the exit.

"Please do wait. Just give me a minute and I shall be done. About what you mentioned earlier regarding my wife—"

"Oh, look here 妻子 (wife) Zhang is waiting. Come on in, I was just leaving."

Attentively Bao Zheng shifted his eyes to the small figure beside his friend and cocked his head in disbelief. "Zhang! How delightful. Though I am led to wonder... Are you following me?"

She shook her head violently. "How could you ever think that? There is no need to mind why my father — the governor — sent me on this vacation, I had no idea of this unfortunate timing."

"Indeed, let us not bother with such topics such as travel arrangements. Although, next time when you leave Kaifeng for such a trip, I would prefer being notified."

Zhang leaned in, eagerly nodding her head. Succeeding this there were a few tense moments, until she strode around the dining table and sat beside him. A violet object was removed from inside her sleeve by those delicate hands covered in beautiful gloves. He thought that she must have received them as a present from her father's voyages to Europe. "This is a beautiful flower I found which reminded me of you. I was planning on surprising you with it when we saw each other next."

Thrice she offered. He hesitated, before accepting the present at last and stuffing it into his jacket rather awkwardly — not without peering at it for a while. "I am sorry to say I'm incredibly drained; I hope you can forgive me, but I shall leave now."

Once back in his wife's room, he presented her the gift and begun explaining everything. The maid had only found a peculiar blank scroll. They then both went to bed.

With a sudden jolt, her eyes sprung open. Wolfsbane. The bright violet. That flower had just reeked of evil. That woman was despicable. What were the effects of it again? Ah yes. Slowing down the heart, ending lives through heart-attack like symptoms.

"You," she hissed through her panting. She knew she should have run slower.

After getting the cabin number from the officer, she had rushed over.

"Yes?" a rough voice said.

"It was before me all this time. I knew something was off. Bao Yi never had heart problems — it was too sudden."

"It's been 29 years — how could you possibly prove my guilt?" Zhang murmured.

"Why else do you carry his most valuable possession to which he clung with his life — his golden jade rooster? It was given to my ancestors in 1033 at the birth of a healthy small boy. It has been passed on for generations since."

"I hear no actual proof," Zhang said with a sneer.

"The wolfsbane you just gave Bao."

Zhang's face remained calm.

"I will tell him," she said, although swayed by the lack of response.

"You can't. I know you were unfaithful. He does not tolerate deception."

Juvenile Thefts

Nord Anglia International School, Lam, Gigi – 11

Prologue

The rumors have widely spread in a similar style as an uncontrollable virus, and now everyone has heard and is making theories about it. Since people read devastating headline of the Daily Prophets, every citizen had been alerted of this “orphan who turned into a thief.” It was the early 1800s, and now no one visited any bars at late midnight nor strolled on any London streets although no curfew was made. He was the hero to all convicts, the desire of black society; the target of the police squad, the highest rewards of Wanted Lists. Yet, every time the police came close, he would slip away under their noses.

“Hereby listed are all the burglaries of this unknown orphan; the king’s crown, a lady’s hat, a musketeer’s sword...” The mayor further rolled down the 2–feet long scroll, “the second–largest bank’s money, a container ship’s supplies, the feast of a royal blanket... He also sabotaged the engineering of a castle, the life of his own orphanage master, the...” The speech carried on for hours as the civilians slowly backed away to their homes. They got the idea the mayor was trying to give. They had to be cautious and aware of their surroundings all the time.

For a few months, the anonymous orphan was the breaking headlines and the largest reward the Wanted list could afford. He greatly motivated the interested, but no one could catch him red–handed. Finally, the despondent mayor decided, “It’s time to wake Judge Pao.”

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After centuries of hibernation, Judge Pao sprang up from his coffin and immediately accepted this case. He immediately started with no delay.

As he got familiar with the technology and leafed through the files, he learnt about the orphan’s story. He mysteriously disappeared from his original orphanage about half a year ago and never returned until two months ago, when he masterfully snatched a priceless jewel from a well–fortified palace in Greenwich. He had a tragic background where his entire family perished in a house fire; it was suspected he was stealing for revenge or for a master. Gossips have surrounded the topic that he was unstoppable and could steal whatever he wanted. Still, he never killed anyone in his tracks and left a note where he apologized every time.

“There is an Italian–based and carnival at this evening, where the pen of a world–famous physician would be the price of a lot of gambling. Would you care to join?” His agent reminded him.

Judge Pao leapt to his feet. “Then that is exactly where the orphan is going to be.”

Allowing his own sniffer dog to take note of the smell of a recent crime scene, Judge Pao was ready. He was disguised under a fake chicken mask and in a patched, poorly decorated cloak, with his dog constantly sniffing the ground silently. No one would suspect him; some people would bring dogs along to the carnival. With the help of the police, the fair judge had painted the shown part of the face quickly and carelessly into a children’s favourite book character. The other police imitated his style, appearing as meek and fully–grown book worms. They softly discussed their precious plan to each other in a huddled circle of mature adults before heading onto their exquisite car.

By the time they arrived at the carnival, the gambling had already begun. There were rows of wooden stools waiting to be sat on by those surviving. Rock music had no effect on the players as the singer howled into the microphone. They were too focused. Confetti and candy flashed around the outdoor fields, landing heavily onto the players as they motionlessly continued their thoughts. Food was served to everyone, though most of them had great difficulty tasting it as they had full masks. Wild noises hung midair, the squishes of cards, the screaming of the singer, the shouting of salespeople, the racing of footsteps.

“Everyone, take a map of this park. Be ready in position. Keep an eye on that pen and spread out to search the area. Contact us on the walkie-talkie once you spot someone attempting to grab it. For now, my dear dog Hades will sniff around for any hints of his location.” Judge Pao dismissed everyone as he struggled through the dancing crowds.

Scanning the mountains of people, Judge Pao noticed no suspicious actions. He gazed around repeatedly while Hades attempted tracking the case. All of a sudden, he started barking with alert and excitement. Judge Pao immediately followed his dog with difficulty as the dog slipped through the feet of the others. He contacted each other as he chased his frenzied dog. They jogged away from the roaring carnival, heading off to the countryside and towards a forgotten graveyard. Half a block in front of them, careful footsteps rang quickly.

When Judge Pao and Hades arrived at the graveyard, he immediately spotted the orphan bending over two tombs. Judge Pao beckoned Hades to be silent. Hades dutifully obeyed. They silently crept closer and noticed that the orphan was placing all his thefts and prizes at the tomb. He said a few prayers to the tombs (which Judge Pao presumed to be his parents’) and the orphan simply walked away, abandoning everything he had stolen in his life.

Fortunately, Judge Pao had his police backing him up. As soon as the orphan walked away and was not cautious, they clapped a hand over his mouth, taped it and locked his hands with a satisfying click. The agents forced him to the back of the police car as Judge Pao stood guard behind a bush, relieved that the backup was there.

A few minutes later, a man arrived quietly, picked up the bag of thievery and left. However, the police took on him and arrested that man in no time.

The orphan and the man struggled wildly at the bind ropes, but each time they did, the grip only tightened. After hours of the same movement, they finally gazed and acknowledged each other; their neighbour in their future prison cell.

A day later, in the English Prison

“Why did you commit such crimes?” A training police with the nametag ‘Lenny’ nervously questioned the orphan, his hands shuddering when he held the papers.

“It got this opportunity ever since I lost my parents, who died almost after I was born in a fire. I had been trapped in that orphanage for years and suddenly my master” he pointed at the man who picked up the bag yesterday “appeared and said that he could reincarnate my parents after I steal these objects for him. I was naïve. I believed him and stole everything he wanted. I handed it over in front of my parent’s grave as I promised. He was about to start reincarnating them when you police came and confronted both of us!”

Outraged, he rattled the bars of the prison cell.

Judge Pao whispered a few quick and inaudible words to the police, who took the orphan by their two rough hands and escorted him to the police car.

“What would happen to the orphan from now on?” Lenny inquired curiously.

“He would have to contribute to society by volunteering in public activities, repay for everything he had stolen and eventually be sent back to his original orphanage. However, I had requested for the orphanages to be much more sanitized and satisfying than those horrid situations from before. There would be improved environment, education and health care and an organization will check every few months. That way, the odds of a child turning evil would dramatically decrease.”

The amateur police nodded in agreement as he turned back to typing on his computer.

The Black Tower Mystery

Nord Anglia International School, Lam, Hazel – 12

15th Century

"It will be ours if he isn't there. We can have it without him. Without him, our fate will be determined!" 13 people were seated at Xiqing Park in China; wearing black robes and sporting the killer's cross on the top of a crimson circle on their robes. The circle of Judge Pao, their enemy, was in the center of the circle in which they were seated. One raised her hand and touched it. Ladies, sing after me, she commanded. She removed her robe. The others followed suit while maintaining hand contact. "On this blood moon night, during midnight. Set us free on this night where evil rises! Let us be when crime goes high! Her white face was painted with a witchy grin as her blood-red lips curled strangely. "Now it shall crumble, centuries hence, we run, capture the power, transfer, give, force the power, so be it!" rising, the coven raised their arms. The commander walked forward and groped for the moonstone affixed to her brow. She smashed it and made a bone-chilling cackle in the darkness. "Our fate is sealed!" She was unaware that she had awakened the dead— fate would change indeed...

21st century

It was 500 years later at midnight. Clouds moved mysteriously, whispering the unusualness of tonight. It was dead and quiet. It always was – nonetheless, in the tilt of moonlight, a mere slither of a shadow could be seen in the corner of a temple, with light. It was faint, but the harsh light and shape was breath catching. It grew and shifted until it shone directly upon the statue. It flickered once, twice, and extinguished. The moon faded away slowly, and dawn came. When the first beams of light hit the land, judge pao, the justice hero of the Song dynasty, awoke.

Two slithers of eyes opened. Bao Zheng skimmed the place. It was empty. Dark stone walls surrounded him. He went towards the door and peered from the gap of the door and floor. It was a normal day, with the sun shining and clouds floating. What was happening was *not* normal. People were shouting, fighting, and beating each other up. Bao Zheng shook his head. The conduct was ridiculous. But before worrying about that, he felt confused. Didn't he die a hundred years ago? He remembered dying, yet it seemed like a dream, and today was just like waking up from any normal nights of sleep. He walked out.

People didn't seem to know him at all! That means he *did* die. Was he a ghost? Or did he rebirth? Cautiously, he went to a tame-looking citizen. "Excuse me, what year is it?" He wanted the year. He died in the year 1062, so if it is not 1062, then this must be something supernatural or metaphysical. The old woman looked at him. "Why! It is the year 2000." Unable to control his shock, Bao Zheng gasped out loud. Almost a thousand years has passes since he died! "Well, then would you care to direct me to the mayor's office? I would like to speak to him. This town is felonious, lawless, and criminal acts." She nodded, follow the path out of the park, and turn right then head straight. I wish you the best of luck to bring justice back for this town. We are all suffering." She hobbled away.

Bao Zheng went in the office. "Good morning, how may I help you?" The mayor was a smiling, short, and timid black-haired man. "Hello. I am Bao Zheng. You must be the mayor, Mr.li. I am here to discuss about a very important matter. When I walked in your streets there is fighting, robbing, and a lady told me murders have been ignored. It is not acceptable. There is no justice. I command you to do something about it." The mayor nodded. "Very sorry, sir. I can make you head of justice court and give the punishment power to you. Come back again tomorrow and I can sign the forms. Thank you for coming." The shook hands, and Bao Zheng set off to the streets, never knowing ladies was watching.

The next day he went to the mayors again. But when he got there, he immediately noticed something wrong. There are no guards there and the doors were wide open. Bao Zheng went inside. The mayor was not there, and the desk was messy. In the center of the room are three things: a piece of parchment with something written on it, a pair of dancing shoes, and a cut out shirt sleeve. He immediately suspected that the mayor was in danger, and these were the clues.

He looked at the piece of parchment. Written were the words "Behold in the topmost cabinet; thee shall seek what thee wants". He was about to search when something caught his eye. A single drop of blood was spilled in the *top left corner*. It shouldn't be an attack, he thought, since if it was then it wouldn't be spilled so carefully. Maybe it is to mark where it is located, or a warning of a violent attack. He went to the top cabinet, "This might come in useful," he said, putting it in a folder.

Then he went to the pair of dancing shoes, they were peacock blue and symbols like the chart, Bao Zheng began to translate. "The symbols on the right read *adieva* – help in Latin! The one on the left read *me*. Aha! This is proof of seeking help." A minute later, Bao Zheng traced his finger in a swirl of patterns, and muttered, "and this look like a person with a knife, it must be the killer or kidnapper, he has a hat and cloak. Again, we have found clues." He walked over to the cut shirt sleeve, it was black. "It might indicate that the building is black, or that the killer lost limbs." he noted. "But it doesn't feel right. This hypothesis doesn't have enough proof." He paced. "Aha! Maybe someone would be waving an arm out of the window. I must seek a tall black tower where a hand is waving out at the top left corner."

Bao Zheng set off to the shop for preparations. He needs to be very careful. He went to the old woman from earlier. "Listen, if I'm not heard in 2 days, the mayor's house you'll find a letter explaining everything. Tell the police. Thank you. Using the mayor's money, he brought a knife, sword, a rope, and a gun. Then he looked up. Most buildings were short storied, but one stood out: a tall black building with a hand waving out at the top – marched straight in and zoomed to the roof. Carefully, he climbed into the right room, revealing a particular sight. The mayor was sitting in the center of the room, unchained, the guard against the wall. "Why are you here, mayor?" Bao Zheng inquired. "A group of strange women took me up here without explanation, locked the door, and out. We tried to give you clues." Bao Zheng nodded, we must get out of here, I have a rope, let's climb the roof and down by lift." He began to tie it around the window. "Quick, this is dangerous." Suddenly, a cold voice drawled behind them. "Not so fast." 12 women stood behind them. "Stay put.", her voice whispered. Her cat eyes hungry for blood, scarlet lips curling. "Bao Zheng. After centuries, we meet again. I meant no harm, but you came and ruin it." In honeyed tones, her smile widened. Bao Zheng's face contorted. "Sephora, you think I forgot how you once put the world in danger? Why did you take the mayor?" Sephora laughed. "I'm not letting you ruin my plan. I'm ruining China, starting from Xiqing park. When you said about being head of justice, I kept him away." Bao Zheng's face was angered. "I demand you release the innocent and stop your plan!" the witch cackled, "No. Now, let's finish you off." She began cursing. Bao Zheng shot another witch's temple, and other witches came over and fought him off. A bolt of dark magic stubbled Bao Zheng. "we are a coven, opposite of heaven, use our power, send you to death." They raised their hands. But suddenly the door burst open. The woman from the market, "stand there." She moves her arms and legs slowly, hypnotizing them, and leads them away. Then she kicked them to the floor. "I am lily, the thousandth descendants of Bao Zheng. Get past the ancient dragon to fight us." The witches laughed. "we can beat you, anytime." Her cackle was leveled with a fierce roar the old woman. "Your curses are no match for us. Good always emerges from evil in stories. Now reality will too. Moving her arms swiftly, she pinned them to the ground, chaining them. "You see – give poison out, get poison back." And she was locked in there, haunting the black tower, but they might come out again someday – the black tower still remains a mystery...

New Tales of Judge Pao

Nord Anglia International School, Sachi, Sachleen – 12

Judge Pao is known and remembered to be a stern justice giver. However, little is known of the internal struggles he had to go through while delivering such tough justice. The following three tales offer a glimpse of this internal strife.

Tale #1: Return of the younger brother

Very little was known of Judge Pao's younger brother— Chen. The two were separated nearly 25 years ago, when the younger one ventured out with the aim of establishing his own business. Since the start of his business, he had lots of competition with other traders; his biggest competitor was Mr. Wong. Chen was the traditional leader in that trading space with Mr. Wong being the newest entrant with a better product. Unsurprisingly, market share losses to his younger competitor were not handled in good stride by Chen. On an unfortunate day, Henry's biggest client abandoned him for Chen. At that very moment, he thought that the only way to save his business from dying was to get his competitor out of the way. Chen, not thinking straight, thought removing the competitor – not the competition – was the solution. Chen invited Mr. Wong for a late-night party at his house and poisoned his wine, thereby murdering him. However, Mr. Wong represented Pao's kingdom and was on a business trip to this other kingdom. Word spread around that Mr. Wong was missing. Rumours gathered a voice that Mr. Wong did not return from his business trip, and some had even spotted him heading to Chen's home on the fateful night. At one of his public hearings, Judge Pao was alerted of this alleged incident and people implored him to investigate. Immediately, he instructed his law enforcement team to get to the crux of the issue. The accused was presented in-front of the court after a few days. Judge Pao didn't give it out in his expressions, but his heart sank on seeing the alleged criminal. On the other hand, Chen was elated to see his elder brother as the judge of his destiny. The hearing kicked off with a key eye witnesses accusing Chen of murdering Mr. Wong after laying a well-thought out plan. They even saw him burying the corpse in his backyard. As all the eyewitnesses spoke against Chen, he was sent to prison till the next hearing. Judge Pao announced that the next hearing would be held 3 days later, and a team was asked to dig up Chen's backyard. During those 3 days, Chen knew that Judge Pao would definitely come to meet him, and he was absolutely correct. One day before the court hearing, Judge Pao came to the jail to meet his younger brother. Chen took full advantage of this situation and started banging his head against the wall as his brother entered the cell. Chen showed immense remorse and begged for forgiveness. Speechless, with a heavy heart and a silent mouth, Judge Pao left the cell. As he was going to sleep that night, Chen's voice kept haunting his mind. He loved his brother a lot and didn't want him to die. After a lot of effort, he finally managed to get some sleep and had a dream that showed him the right path. In the dream was his father, who reminded him to not stray from the path of justice irrespective of the consequence. Next morning, the judge entered the court confidently. His team had found the corpse and Mr. Wong was identified as the deceased. Judge Pao handed the guilty sentence to his brother and was doomed to be hanged to death.

Tale #2: The greedy merchant

Judge Pao did not recognise him by his name, but his face rang a bell. Something told him that he had met this person before, and he didn't seem to like him that much. Nonetheless, the case was presented that he had swindled a relatively sum of money from many peasants and there was an apparent hue and cry. The case had several loose ends but given the number of people involved, Judge Pao had a feeling that this was not one giant lie. He asked his sub-ordinates to investigate. He went through his daily chores, but at night while he was resting, he couldn't help but think of this case. Not because this was the largest merchant in the kingdom, and the king had to be alerted, but because he had a bad feeling about that person. Next morning, on the way to the king's mansion, he saw an angry man who had smashed a person's fruit stall. As the owner of the fruit stall was very poor and that stall was the only source of income for his family, it was obvious why he was that furious. He started arguing with the rich man, but the rich man threw his weight around and tried to threaten the poor person. Scared and frightened, anxious yet depressed, the fruit stall owner was feeling suppressed. At that moment, Judge Pao's eyes lit up on seeing him, as he remembered that the merchant from yesterday had also cheated him of his savings many years ago. He visited the king who advised him to go light on the merchant

given his importance to the kingdom's trade. As soon as he left, he got informed that the investigating team verified that the merchant was guilty as his books did not match. After he heard this, he was happy that the person who had betrayed him would go to jail now. However, he was torn between a harsh judgement and light one. Just like any other day, he went to the temple to pray. Just as he was leaving the temple, he saw a poster in the temple saying "God is an impartial judge" in Chinese. He understood that it was a message from God, to deliver the right amount of punishment, neither light as the king would like it, not harsh as he personally would love. That afternoon, he delivered justice to the peasants and sent the merchant to jail for 3 years. Further, he also ordered the merchant's business to return the peasants' money.

Tale #3: The General with two faces

Confusion took over Judge Pao's mind for the third time. This time, it wasn't his problem or the King's problem, it was the whole kingdom's problem. Security of the kingdom was very important but was justice more important, was the key question. Could the General of the army be offered impunity for his crime only because he's the General and there was a war coming up? In this case the General of the kingdom's feared army was accused of misusing his power. As usual, the judge needed some evidence to prove this accusation. Hence, off went his investigating team to get to the heart of this matter. This proved to be one of his most challenging cases. Neither his team, nor he could find any evidence against the General. But something in him told the judge that there was something fishy about the General. He decided to play stealthily. He told his team that they were dropping the case and relayed the message to the king too. However, secretly the judge and one of his most trusted aides kept on investigating. Finally, they achieved a breakthrough. They solved the murder mystery where the husband died first, and the wife was killed one day later. They pursued the case and got to know that the deceased male was the General's close servant and heard rumors that the General had killed him out of rage. However, all this was not enough. The judge needed hard evidence. During the investigation, they got a tip, that the maid in his house knew of the crime. After asking the neighbors, about her whereabouts they finally found the maid. They asked the maid if she knew anything about the murder. Obviously, she denied it and said that she was out of town at that time. They threatened her that if they find out later that she was lying, then it would be bad for her legally. Hearing this, she told them the truth and agreed to be an eyewitness in the court. Before going to the court, Judge Pao knew that he had to convince the king to send the accused to jail and he did exactly that. He convinced him that being projected as a just ruler is much more important than winning the next war. After a lot of convincing, the king finally agreed. The next morning, in the court, the General was sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment, as all the evidence spoke against him.

Lessons learnt

Through his experiences we learn the key lessons of life, that: (1) It is important to perform the right action, without caring too much about the result of those actions; and (2) Life would throw challenges at us, but we should follow the path of truth.

The Untold Tale of Judge Pao

Pui Kiu College, Li, Tsz Ching Purple – 13

24th June 1031. In a city, music was playing, there was a theater shining like a star in the universe. On the stage, there was a beautiful dancer, she wore a beautiful gown and shiny accessories. She had lots of make-up, light pink powder on her cheeks, red lipstick, and a white powder covering her face. She was well-known, a famous performer named Wei Ching.

Everything was going well, the crowd was cheering, and the event was going smoothly as planned, but all of a sudden, a sound of a rope snapped, and the prop hanging on the ceiling of the theater fell on top of the unaware Wei Ching. A loud bang was heard, the crowds stood there a moment of shock, then screaming, some ran away and some continued to stand there frozen, horrified, and in shock. Just like that, the famous Wei Ching was murdered. Is this a freak accident? Or could it be an assassination?

“Hello? Is Mr. Pao here? I have an urgent matter to speak to you about.”

Judge Pao looked up and took a look at the citizen. He had gray hair and a long beard, around 40 to 50 years old.

He then questioned, “What’s the urgent matter, may I ask?”

“My name is Han Wan, I’m the famous dancer, Wei Ching’s manager. Yesterday, a prop fell and crushed Wei Ching. But I don’t think it’s a ‘freak’ accident, it’s a murder I think.” Han Wan answered. You could see the sorrow in his eyes.

Han Wan continued, “I hope you will be able to help me solve the case before the timer runs out.”

Judge Pao interrupted, “Sorry to interrupt, but what do you mean by ‘before the timer runs out’?”

Han Wan reached into his pocket and handed Judge Pao a crumpled piece of paper. It read, “Your associate Wei Ching has been murdered by me, you are next, better sleep with one eye open.”

“An assassination I see...” Judge Pao stood up from his chair and continued, “Han Wan, may you please bring me to the scene?”

“Of course Judge Pao, thank you for helping me.” Han Wan gratefully spoke. He then led Judge Pao to the theater, the scene of Wei Ching’s murder.

The theater was enormous, there were lots of tables, each with 3 to 8 seats. There were guards around the place as well.

“Hello Mr. Pao, we were sent by the king to assist you and to escort the murderer as soon as you figure out who it is. This is where the prop fell on top of the victim.” one of the soldiers reported.

“Hmm...” Judge Pao mumbled to himself. “It was quite a dangerous task to pull off for the assassin because they had to climb up and cut the rope and climb back down...”

Judge Pao then questioned Han Wan, “Do you have the broken rope?”

“Yes we do.” Han Wan said and hurried backstage. He returned with the rope and brought out 7 suspects.

“Here’s the rope, and I’d like to give you a quick description of these fellow suspects. They’re Mo Junjie and Qian Mei, the prop makers. Here are Meng Han, Yi Mingli, and Lin Zhen, the setting makers and Kang Chonglin is the writer of the story.” Han Wan said to Judge Pao.

“And who is this gentleman?” Judge Pao reminded Han Wan.

Han Wan sighed and spoke quietly, “He’s Wei Ching’s sugar daddy, Tan Xi. He’s here because we saw him minutes before the accident occurred.”

Judge Pao blinked his eyes in acknowledgment.

Judge Pao tugged the broken rope and observed it. "It's been cleanly cut off, so it is a murder, Han Wan's speculation is correct. If I'm correct, it's cut off by scissors or a machete."

Judge Pao then went straight to backstage.

"Miss Qian, while I'm searching this room, please tell me what everyone was doing, alibi and suspect? You seem to be popular among the workers." Judge Pao spoke plainly.

"Got it, Mo Junjie and I were sitting together at that table and watching the performance. I swear that we measured the prop weight before letting the setting makers hang the prop!" Qian Mei started. "Meng Han and Yi Mingli were preparing to move the props for the next scene."

While Qian Mei was speaking, Judge Pao found a pair of scissors, there was a brown string and when Judge Pao tried to cut something with it, it was very weak. "This is probably the scissor that was used to cut the rope." Judge Pao murmured to himself.

Then Qian Mei led Judge Pao to the props room.

As they were walking there, Judge Pao walked past the worker's desk and noticed a thick note on Wei Ching's desk, he then swiftly swiped the note into his clothing to hide it.

In the prop room, as Qian Mei continued to recall what happened, Judge Pao secretly took a peek at the note and checked the prop room for clues.

"Kang Chonglin is good friends with Lin Zhen, he brought him home and even drank wine together to celebrate Chonglin's birthday and Han Wan, his wife Su Jing said he was with one of the VIP customers, so it couldn't be him. So, we suspect Tan Xi." Qian Mei continued.

Judge Pao noticed an odd glove which had orange and yellow paint on it.

"Qian Mei, may you come here and take a look? Can you tell me where this paint came from?" Judge Pao spoke in a serious tone.

Qian Mei replied in astonishment, "Oh! This is the paint of one of the props!"

"Which prop?" Judge Pao asked anxiously.

"I believe it's one of the props supposed to hang on the ceiling." Qian Mei replied.

Judge Pao walked out of the props room, towards the stage where everyone was at.

"I know who is the killer!" Judge Pao exclaimed, grabbing everyone's attention.

"Who killed Wei Ching?" Han Wan questioned, anxious and angry.

"It was Tan Xi." Judge Pao spoke.

"How could it be me? There is no way it could be me!" Tan Xi objected to Judge Pao's statement.

"I saw this letter on the way to the prop room, a letter full of cash." Judge Pao yelled.

"I found a note inside, I believe, written by Wei Ching herself. It said she wanted to end the relationship, when you went backstage and saw the letter, you were in rage, and planned to assassinate her. Therefore, you're the killer!" Judge Pao continued his deduction.

Everyone was looking at Tan Xi, yet he stood there silent, a drop of tear rolled down his face.

"How..." Tan Xi stuttered, he was frozen in place because what Judge Pao told was the truth.

"Take him away, guards!" Judge Pao yelled, and the soldiers went and took Tan Xi away.

After Tan Xi was taken away, things quieted down. But Judge Pao felt like something was wrong, days went by and he decided to take a stroll around the theater to clear his mind. He went behind the theater and saw a ladder. There was no way Tan Xi would be able to climb up without someone holding the ladder to stabilize it, by then, it hit him. Tan Xi was just one of the murderers, there was another. Well, who could it be? Judge Pao stood there confused and kept thinking, and thinking. It couldn't be any of the members, they all had an alibi. But who didn't? Su Jing, Han Wan were cleared because she saw him with the another VIP, but how could she know? Because she was there.

Judge Pao ran to look for the king, and requested soldiers to make another arrest, he remembered that Han Wan was about to go to a pavilion near a fish pond with his wife, he knew it was only a nick of time for him to stop it before Su Jing made her move. But when they arrived, it was too late! Han Wan was lying unconscious on the ground. Su Jing just ran into the forest and the soldiers chased after her. Judge Pao felt destroyed, he was disappointed that he couldn't save a civilian. He brought Han Wan to a hospital, but the poison had taken effect and he passed away shortly after.

Han Wan's assassination was announced to the workers and they were confused about how Su Jing could do such a thing.

"Han Wan was a gentle soul, why would she commit such an act?" They all pondered.

Su Jing confessed all her doings in court.

"I assassinated Han Wan and Wei Ching. I swear, I loved that man until I found out about his affairs with Wei Ching. Since I was Han Wan's wife, I got to go backstage, that's where I took the glove, and scissors, and found the letter, to manipulate Tan Xi to help me with this dirty work." Su Jing confessed, then she and Tan Xi were sent to execution.

Justice was served, but it would not get the victims back to life, or remove Judge Pao's guilt for not being able to find out the accomplice, this mistake he made, was supposed to go through suspension or so, but it was never disclosed to the public since it would destroy the government's reputation. Judge Pao decided to write down his emotions about this incident and the mistakes that were made. He learned a valuable lesson from this incident though, "never to just assume, must acquire more evidence before obtaining the answer." This little lesson made him one of the best detectives that lived 1000 years ago, he continued to fight crimes and clean up the land, and this tale became the untold tale of Judge Pao.

New Tales of Judge Pao, The Concert Tragedy

Pui Kiu College, Li, Yu Yin Icy – 14

It was a chilly evening in Hefei. Roadsides were piled up with muddy snow. Horses were puffing out rings of white, foggy breaths as they trotted down the streets. Judge Pao, and Zhan were all in a hurry to a concert.

"What? She didn't die falling down from the hanger! Is that true, Mr. Pao?" said Zhan.

"She would've died if the backstage staff weren't quick to the draw. However, Jenny's spine was badly hurt and she would likely stay in a persistent vegetative state for the rest of her life," elaborate Judge Pao.

"Oh ... " gasped Zhan with his hand covering his mouth. "That's horrible."

"Yes, " nodded Pao. "So if the accident were in fact caused by any misdeeds, I must give her back the justice! And we must come tonight because it is the last performance of Tom Smith. After tonight, he will study abroad, and may never come back."

Just when Zhan was about to reply to Pao, a tall guy held up a megaphone and announced, "Hello ladies and gentlemen, the moment that you've been dreaming of is finally here! Let's welcome the World's Most Outstanding Singer, Tom Smith!"

"Whoa!" The crowd applauded and screamed in exhilaration as soon as they heard those words. The cheering was so loud that the entire venue was vibrating!

A few minutes later, captivating music began to play and a group of dancers appeared on the tall platforms on the left and right sides. Tom Smith standing on the right platform took the microphone in his hand and then sang in a moving voice. On the left platform, The male dancers extended their arms forward to swing powerfully towards the right platform with a whoosh.

"Hmm?" muttered Pao as he cringed his eyebrows.

One of the dancer's bodies appeared to lose his balance and dropped straight down to the ground. Then, a deafening boom resonated in the air like an explosion. The male dancer was now lying on the ground with his face down. He seemed to have lost his breath!

Stunned speechless, everyone in the concert was now staring blankly at the stage.

"Oh my God! There's an accident!" The astounding silence was finally broken.

"Can someone please help?"

"He is dead! He is dead!"

Waves of cries and shrieks began to fill the venue as the audience was thrown into disarray.

Just when Zhan was about to dive into his thinking, Pao leaned over to Zhan's ear and whispered, "Please go inform the police and make sure the dead body was safe."

"Ah... Obviously, it's an accident! Calling an ambulance should be a more suitable act compared to disturbing the police on this freezing night!" police Y gave his head a slap and said, "Let's leave, I don't think we can do anything helpful."

"Please stay tuned. I can't say for sure yet but this incident may not be an accident but a murder." said Pao all of a sudden.

"A murder?" asked the police X as though Pao's words had struck a nerve.

"That's because during the show, his body suddenly cramped for a second, then he appeared to have lost all strength in his entire body before he fell. It did not look like a fumble at all. "

"How could you be so certain with just watching the show? " challenged police Y.

"Of course, I've already inspected the cup that the victim had used backstage and discovered something significant."

"Oh? " gasped the policeman again. " Did you find traces of poison in his cup? Could his cramping be the poison taking effect? "

"Precisely," said Pao. "But I didn't find any poison."

"What are you saying? So how could the victim be poisoned if there was no poison?" asked the perplexed police X.

"Yes, Mr. Pao! Stop acting all mysterious and tell us frankly," said police Y impatiently.

A chilly glimmer flashed across Pao's eyes before he revealed, " I found bits of tobacco in the victim's cup. "

"What?" The policemen turned to look at each other, both not understanding what Pao was talking about.

"So what if you found bits of tobacco in the cup? " asked police X. " What's so weird about that?"

Police Y also chimed in, " Tobacco isn't poisonous. Even if some tobacco strands were mixed into his coffee, would that really poison the trapeze artist?"

Pao let out a shrewd chuckle and began to explain. "People usually don't get poisoned even if they were to smoke 3 boxes of tobacco every day. That's why tobacco is often mistaken as being non-toxic. But actually, one cigarette is enough to take a life."

"Smoking is the inhalation of the smoke generated from burning tobacco. The toxicity is very mild, so smoking cigarettes isn't enough to poison the smoker," explained Pao. "However, ingesting an entire cigarette is very dangerous. Majority of us definitely won't survive!"

"Tobacco contains nicotine which is highly toxic. If tobacco were infused in water, the nicotine in the tobacco would dissolve into the water. And if the concentration level of nicotine were high enough, that toxic liquid could be used to kill a person."

"Em..." police X thought for a moment then asked, " Is this nicotine-infused liquid colorless and odorless? Wouldn't the victim notice his cup of chocolate was poisoned? "

"The people in the concert said the victim liked to drink very strong chocolate, so it's possible that the chocolate concealed the smell of the nicotine."

"What if the victim was a smoker?" chimed in police Y suddenly in disagreement. "Then those tobacco may have passed from his lips to the cup when he drank his chocolate. "

"Police Y has a point. Have you checked whether the victim was a smoker or not? " asked police X.

"He is a smoker, " replied Pao.

"Then this discussion is just a waste of time, " grumbled police X. "There's nothing dubious about it."

"No," said Pao firmly.

"Why?"

"Because several packets of cigarettes had been stolen the day before!"

"What?" exclaimed the policemen in surprise as though they were struck by a bolt of lightning. They could not help but agree with Pao's poisoning theory now. It was truly impressive for Pao to gather so much important information in such a short period.

"Then who poisoned the coffee? Do you have any clue?" asked police Y after regaining his composure.

"...Tom Smith"

Feeling a chill run down his spine, Zhan gasped a breath of horror and whispered, "How...How could it be..."

"Mr. Pao, I brought him here"

"Hey policeman, did you bring me, the world's top singer, at will? You actually suspect that I killed someone. Do you have any evidence? This is obviously an accident!"

"I'm sorry to have startled you, Mr. Tom. We don't mean any harm," said Pao as he opened up his two empty hands to show that he was unarmed. You're the one who poured the hot chocolate, and that cup just happened to find something poisonous..."

"So what! I'm not the only one who touched that cup! Didn't the police also do a fingerprint investigation? There are other people's fingerprints on it too!" interrupted Tom.

"So your fingerprints should be there?"

"Yes, of course."

"Oh, then why there's not?"

Only when Tom was fired with such questions did he realize that his reaction had shown his cloven hoof. In a nervous stammer, he said, "Maybe other's fingerprints covered mine..."

Zhan finally understood the whole picture. If Tom's reaction were normal, then he was not suspicious. Otherwise, it would prove that Tom was the killer.

"No, Mr. Tom!" reprimanded Pao. "No proof is the proof, you just wiped your fingerprints off with a towel! You're the only one who brought a towel these few days according to the CCTV!"

"Oh!" Tom began to cry hysterically after hearing those words. "I am not doing it on purpose! What I just found absolutely unforgivable was the fact that he tried to kill Jenny! She's his sister, and my best friend too, how could he be so heartless?"

"How did you know that the first accident was masterminded by Chris?"

"I had speculated Chris was the one who caused Jenny's accident all along. I vowed to myself that if it really was Chris's doing, I would give him a piece of my mind. After I learned the truth from Jenny, I...I..." At this point, Tom suddenly began to shudder uncontrollably. His eyes welling with tears, Tom was too beside himself to continue speaking.

After the whole truth was revealed, Pao and Zhan stepped out of the concert with heavy hearts. Pao let out a deep sigh and said, "The price of evil is imminent doom indeed. A concert was originally a place to bring joy to the public. Who would have imagined that it would become the stage for two murders? The most regrettable part was just how Mr. Tom had chosen to punish his friend in a way that was absolutely inexcusable by law."

"Yes..."

New Tales of Judge Pao

Pui Kiu College, Wong, Wing Lam Angel – 13

Judge Pao was a famous in the town. One day, it was a dark moon night, Judge Pao was sitting in his office, playing chess leisurely, talking slowly to the worker, 'What happened that made you run like a mess to me.' The worker answered worriedly, 'Family Lee's one and only son had died!' Family Lee was one of the richest families in the Ming Dynasty, and that's why the worker was very panic. Judge Pao stood up and said 'Calm down boy, take me to the crime scene.'

Family Lee was the merchant about the bank in the past. He owned the biggest bank in town. So, everyone in his family has a bodyguard at any time. Anyone who wanted to come closed to them was really hard.

Judge Pao asked everyone in his family and office. Judge Pao interviewed with them one by one. Mr Lee was really panic since he lost his lovely son. The victim was his elder son who helped him in bank in the daily operation. Mr Lee wanted to hang over his family business to him after he retired. Mr. Lee got three sons and two daughters.

Even guessed the younger son maybe the murder because he jealous his brother. Besides, if his brother died, he might take over his position and the family property. However, his younger brother was not in town when the case happened. He and his wife were in the business trip to the another town. So, Judge Pao said his young brother and his wife got the fact that they were not in town.

How about the second son? His second brother also may be the murder. So, judge Pao examined his second brother. However, because the countryside the house was broken, So Master Lee sent his second son to there and fixed the old house in the countryside. So his second brother also was not in the town when the case happened.

How about the two sisters? In the past, girl can't take over the family property after she married. Both his two sister got married few years ago, and lived with their husbands in another town. So, Judge Pao said, those two sisters would not be the murders.

Judge Pao told the other all the workers and bodyguards to sit down and introduced themselves and explained their timeline yesterday.

One of the workers who worked in bank called Kit Ming. He had some argument with the elder brother last week. He may take revenge since the elder brother insulted him in front of the whole office, and fired him yesterday. So, Judge Pao asked Kit Ming about his time evidence yesterday. He was in the hospital with his mother since his mother was really sick. So, he got the evidence that he was in the hospital at that time. So, he could not be the murder.

A housekeeper was called Wong Ming, forty years old. He said 'After master's family had eaten their dinner at eight, then I went back to my room and ate dinner at eight-fifteen. After I finished my dinner at half past nine, I put the dishes and bowls I used in the kitchen sink. At ten, I went back to my room and bath and slept at half past eleven.' The chef was called Ling Ling, thirty five years old. She said 'After cooking dinner at six o'clock. I delivered the dishes at seven to the Lee family. I cleaned up the table and bowls, then brought the bowls and dishes to the kitchen for washing at nine. At ten, I started to wash the bowls and dishes and finished at ten-fifteen. At half-past ten, after working I went bath and slept.' The bodyguard of Lee's son is called Hong Chi, thirty-two years old. He said 'After eating dinner with Lee's family at eight, I accompanied him back to his room at eight-fifteen. Then I went back to my room, bath at half past eight, slept at nine-fifteen.' Judge Pao after hearing their timeline, walked to their rooms and investigate, asking other workers in the mansion about their relationship with Lee's son.

The worker knocked on the door, and then an old man came out and looked at Judge Pao surprisingly. Judge Pao said 'I am Judge Pao, to help Master Tong solve the case.' The old man understood his words, and then

took him and his worker to the crime scene. They arrived at the son's room. Master Lee was comforting his wife they both seem sad, and then master Lee looked at Judge Pao his eyes were like telling Judge Pao to find the truth about his son. Judge Pao nodded and walked to his son's bed, checking his cause of death. Judge Pao put on his gloves, checked on his clothes, and then he opened his mouth, smelling any chemicals in his mouth or he had drunk. After he had checked the cause of death, he took off his gloves and carefully observed the surrounding of the room. 'Although your son's valuables were gone, but the windows had closed no trace of being broken in this room. Also, he died on his bed the murder killed him when he was sleeping at night, and the incident must be at night. So, the murder must be inside these three suspects.' He said to master Lee. 'The murder weapon is an axe in the kitchen, so the chef is one of the suspects.' 'Secondly, the murder must grasp the victim's daily itinerary. So this old man that brought us to the crime scene must be the housekeeper, this strong man that stood beside master Lee, telling him the current situation must be the bodyguard of Lee's son. They are the suspects that murdered Mr Lee's son.' Judge Pao explained the case in detail. 'The murder must be between you three !' He pointed at them.

Judge Pao organized the evidences and observed and the information he heard. He smiles confidently, and said ' I know who is the murder that kill master Lee's son !' Everyone looked at Judge Pao he said ' A person that has a strong killing intent, knows about his habits. That's you , the guard , Hong Chi, ''!' Hong Chi responded to him with a provocative smile and said ' Do you have any evidence ?' Judge replied ' You just plunged the axe into his heart but did not make his blood everywhere. The evidence is the axe and put it into the kitchen. You thought that the chicken's blood would cover the victim's blood, but look at the victim's clothes, there's a circle drawn by blood dots which surrounded the lethal position, which perfectly matches the basket edge. This is the evidence you wanted.' Hong Chi knelt in despair, crying bitterly his eyes full of hatred and disgust, and said ' He always impolite to me and shocked at me !' Everyone looked surprised, but not Judge Pao he said ' He complained about my hunting skill and shooting skill. You drew a big cross on Lee's son's face. Hong Chi stood up and said thank you to Judge Pao with his tears. He felt regretted. Judge Pao solved this case and everyone admired his talent.

An Inspection in Jade

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Chew, Ashley – 12

Though he was gone and the world felt empty, the wind still blew and wildflowers danced. An old saying slowly surfaced in my mind. “You can not teach a man anything. You can only help them discover it within themselves.”

This saying was proven right when—

“Intruder!”

A little boy came crashing into my back garden. I heard the chains clanking and feet shuffling. I knew it was the guards before I saw them. The boy was chained up and held firmly. His little face hidden in the shadows. For a second, I pitied him.

“Why have you brought this boy here?” If only I was not that sympathetic...

“Sir, he asked to see you!” The guard tightened his grip around the boy’s shoulders. I could see the boy wince ever so slightly. The boy dropped to his knees, unable to bear the force on his shoulders.

“Why?” I questioned. What did this boy want with me?

“I don’t think he’s from around here, sir. I have never seen him in this area, sir.”

The guard tilted the boy’s head back. The hood fell off, exposing the boy’s face entirely. Everyone in the room gasped. Murmurs exploded everywhere as the boy’s face was revealed. He had light brown hair and brown eyes. I tried to disguise my surprise.

I waved my hand and the guard stepped back. How? Why? Why did a western boy, not even over 10, come to China? I motioned for the crowd to be dispersed, this could not be discussed in public.

The court was cleared. The boy and I were left standing silently. I studied the boy. The boy visibly shrunk. He glanced away. I could tell he felt scared based on his collapsed posture.

“Do you have any family here?” I asked, knowing well before it would be hopeless. He licked his lips and hid his hands behind his back, but eventually, my patience paid off. His lips twitched and words escaped from his mouth.

“No, I don’t know what happened. Can you help me?” He whispered.

“Come with me,” I stepped back and brought him into the back garden. I turned around when I reached the garden and sat on the bench.

“Sit,” a singular command came out of my mouth.

He sat down and looked around.

“What’s your name and who sent you here?” I asked, gentle but firmly.

He squirmed around, fidgeting on the seat.

“My name is Arthur, and I—I don’t know what happened... Please help me”

I studied him. Could this be a trick? But what if this child was truly innocent, I couldn’t send him to his death...

“You may stay here, under my care, but you must follow my orders and obey the rules.”

He smiled an awkward smile and nodded vigorously.

Seeing his smile, I knew I would teach him to be a responsible, reliable, knowledgeable person, no matter what.

Time flew by a second.

“Mr. Pao! Look! Look over here!” Arthur exclaimed excitedly, smiling his awkward smile which was growing on me. He was pointing to a large blooming yellow chrysanthemum.

I smiled. It had been 5 years since Arthur came and the whole town loved him. He was very curious but did not know much about our culture. However, he was willing to learn.

Dong! Dong!

I heard the banging of the drums, meaning someone was requesting an audience.

“Sir! Sir! We need your help!” A guard ran towards me, breathing heavily. He bowed deeply.

Arthur turned around, alarmed.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Someone has been murdered, sir! They are requesting your help,” The guard frowned.

“Can I come watch? I would love to see you at work Mr. Pao,” Arthur politely requested.

I nodded before heading towards the entrance.

We walked on the streets, the guard leading us. Finally, we reached an empty house at the end of a buzzing road. There was one other guard at the entrance, waiting for us. There were many clues, some helpful and some not, I could feel Arthur’s considering gaze. There were horse hoofprints and human footprints in the front yard. However, the horror we found inside could not be compared. On the floor, laid a male human body. There were no scratch marks on him and from that we deduced that he was poisoned, he was not robbed either. On the white walls, we could see a singular word, written in blood, “REVENGE”. Arthur frowned in horror.

I told the guards to remove the body away but not to bury it as we might need it to examine it for more clues later.

A single jade medallion fell and hit the floor. Everyone stared at the jade coin like it was cursed. I picked it up and pocketed it.

I pondered for a while before returning to the court.

“Did you hear about the jade coin? Apparently it was taken by someone,” Whispers exploded around me as I walked on.

That person must have been looking for the jade coin and maybe even poisoned the victim for it!

I hurriedly told the guards to get a replica of the jade medallion, it had to be exactly the same.

“What are you planning on doing?” Arthur asked, curious about my plans.

I stroked my beard.

“Patience, my dear boy...”

As soon as they got the replica, I told the guards to post a pronouncement about the medallion saying “This medallion was found by a civilian. If you own this ring, please come pick it up at Judge Bao’s KaiFeng Courthouse”

“Oh! You are trying to draw the murderer out of hiding by placing that for the murderer to see?” Arthur had come to a sudden realisation.

I nodded, slightly amused by this quick-witted boy.

Soon, there was a knock on the door. A woman not over 30 walked in, claiming that the medallion was hers. I turned to the guards and they brought the jade medallion to her and placed it in her hand. She thanked us, then left hurriedly.

The guards followed her and arrested her but alas, it was too late, the woman ran into a sprint as soon as she discovered she was being tailed. She headed towards the alleyways. The guards tried their best but to no avail. The woman was too agile. The woman is the accomplice of the murder, another was that the murder hired her to retrieve it. I sank back into my chair, deep in my thoughts. A couple of days passed.

The guard burst into the court.

“Sir! The victim’s brother has been murdered!”

Arthur and I leapt out of our seats.

When we got to the brother’s house, we saw the body near the window. There was a sword stabbed through the body’s heart and above it was written in blood, “REVENGE”. On the table lay two cups of wine.

I tested it on an old cow with an incurable disease. The first wine had no effect while the second wine killed the cow almost instantly. Arthur gasped in shock.

So it was poison... But why?

Over the few days, I struggled trying to put together the case’s missing pieces, but with Arthur by my side, I knew I could do it. Finally, we managed to figure out the murderer.

Soon, I had the murderer standing before me, kneeling.

“My Lord! Please redress my case. I have been wronged. He took my wife from me. She ended up dying from heartsickness so I swore to take revenge for her...”

“You have committed murder! Although it was for revenge, you have no right to do that!” I couldn’t let him get off the hook, I had to be just and enforce the law.

“I...I understand...” Those were his last words before the broadsword fell onto his head. Arthur turned around, not wanting to see the gore.

A few years later, Arthur was a grown up boy, he left for his homeland and to chase his dreams.

And so, he was gone. However, he would still visit from time to time and tell me all about his travels and accomplishments. He even wrote a book based on our last adventure called “A Study in Scarlet” which he called a “best seller”. He said he told everyone about how he based the story’s main character off someone called JB. Everyone thought it was someone called Joseph Bell. However, let me tell you a little secret... My name is Justice Bao and the character Sherlock Holmes was based off me...

Judge Pao Presides

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Lee, Caitlin – 12

Judge Pao stared at the sketches of four people in front of him. They looked like your average group of individuals. However, being suspects in a case of theft, they were not trustworthy. Judge Pao closed his eyes and recalled the incident. A middle-aged man, Wong Xin, reported that his family dog, a honey-colored mongrel and the dog in the sketch, had gone missing and suspected that it had been killed or kidnapped, as he had trained the dog to come home by itself. The dog had been missing for more than a week already. After carefully investigating the mystery, Judge Pao gathered four possible suspects: Zheng Yunshen, a merchant; Chen Shengbai, the wife of a wealthy nobleman; Li Zhan, a farmer; and Huang Luohua, a young girl, who was also the last one to see the dog.

Suddenly, an assistant burst through the door.

“Judge Pao! Sir, sir – something was found near Huang Luohua’s house that might help the investigation, sir!” The assistant exclaimed, breathless and looking apprehensive.

Judge Pao stood up abruptly.

“Show me,” he said.

The assistant led Judge Pao to Huang Luohua’s house. Seeing something red on the floor, Judge Pao knelt to get a closer look. Light glinted off the small bright red puddle on the dull gray stone path in front of the house. Judge Pao’s eyes traced the dots of red to a couple of marks on the floor. He lowered his hand and touched the marks gently. *Pawprints.*

Judge Pao stood up and headed back with the assistant, head swimming with thoughts. *Huang Luohua loves dogs... she couldn’t have possibly... she’s just a young girl...*

Over the next few days, more and more of the puzzle was uncovered. Near Huang Luohua’s house, tufts of black fur were found and pawprints leading to Chen Shengbai’s house were seen. However, all of the suspects denied having anything to do with Wong Xin’s dog when asked. One day, while trying to solve the case, Judge Pao went out for a stroll to clear his head. His eyesight was getting foggy and he could not think straight. While walking, he focused on his surroundings, trying to relieve his stress. In front of one of the houses, a vase with scratch marks on it held scarlet flowers stood proudly ahead of the doors. Beside that mansion, a chorus of happy barking could be heard at one of Judge Pao’s friend’s house. *I thought he only had one dog. Perhaps he bought or adopted another one.* The savory smell of fried meat wafted in the air. The next house had a rope that was torn and ripped up into pieces on the path leading to the doors. Judge Pao continued his walk for a few minutes before he decided to go back to his work.

Stretching, he sat back down on his chair and sifted through the pile of notes sprawled messily on his desk. And slowly, slowly, the pieces of the puzzle clicked into place. Suddenly, an assistant burst through the doors into the room.

“Judge Pao, sir! We have found the suspect! The other officials are completely sure of it!” The assistant exclaimed.

“What? Who is it?” Judge Pao asked, surprised.

The assistant led Judge Pao out of the room, where two guards were holding onto a little girl.

“Huang Luohua?” Judge Pao asked.

“This girl is guilty! There was blood in front of her house, and next to it, pawprints. And we found some tufts of fur near her house as well!” An official declared.

Huang Luohua shook her head and cried, “My parents finally let me take care of a dog! They got me a dog last week. The tufts of fur and pawprints belong to it!”

“But how do you explain the blood?” The official questioned.

"I scratched my knee when I was coming home from the market. Please, please, believe me! I am innocent!" Huang Luohua exclaimed.

Judge Pao stared at the young girl. "Release her," he ordered.

Everyone in the courtroom stared at him with surprise.

"I said, *release her*." Judge Pao glared at the guards. They quickly obeyed. Huang Luohua dropped to her knees, overcome with gratitude and relief.

"This girl," Judge Pao announced, "is not guilty. She is not the thief!"

There was a pause.

"Er... ahem... Judge Pao, then who is, sir?" The assistant asked timidly.

"No one is. At least, not intentionally," he replied. Seeing confusion written on everyone's faces, Judge Pao stood up and headed for the door, then beckoned the assistant and the official to follow him. Judge Pao led them onto the streets and headed toward Wong Xin's house and asked him to come with them. He quickly agreed and minutes later, they arrived in front of Judge Pao's friend, Cheng Junzhen's house.

Judge Pao knocked on the door. After a while, the door opened and there stood a man. He greeted Judge Pao warmly and invited him to go inside. As soon as the small group walked inside, a white dog ran towards them, barking happily.

"I walked past your house just a while ago, and I heard a couple of barks from more than one dog. Would you care to let me look at your other dogs?" Judge Pao asked, sounding sincere.

His friend nodded and led them into a room. There, in a medium-sized cage, sat a honey-colored mongrel.

"My dog!" Wong Xin exclaimed, surprised.

Junzhen looked baffled. "This dog came into my house more than a week ago... I assumed it was a stray so I started taking care of it," he said.

Judge Pao started to explain how he had solved this case. The tufts of fur found near Huang Luohua's house were black, but Wong Xin's dog was honey-colored. While he was taking a walk, Judge Pao noticed that the vase of flowers next to a house was scratched. Wong Xin's dog had done that while exploring the streets. Then he came across this house and could smell fried meat. A week ago, when someone in Junzhen's house was cooking meat, Wong Xin's dog followed the smell to his house, where Junzhen thought it was a stray dog and started caring for it.

Everyone was shocked. Junzhen quickly released Wong Xin's dog from the cage. It ran toward Wong Xin, jumping onto him and almost knocking him over. After thanking Junzhen for his time, Judge Pao led everyone out of the house and told Wong Xin that he could go back now that the mystery was solved. Wong Xin thanked Judge Pao profusely and headed home, with his dog trailing him.

Judge Pao headed back to his office with the assistant and the official. There, he explained everything to everyone, and Huang Luohua was declared not guilty. Everyone else was amazed at how the judge had figured everything so quickly. Truly, Judge Pao's detective skills were incredible.

What is Justice?

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Leung, Junyi Beverly – 12

It is a cool spring day, scented with the perfume of peach blossoms. But I am too nervous to notice; sweat trickles down my neck into my heavy robes.

Guan, my mentor, strolls into the courtroom. He looks at ease in his zhanjiao hat, the tassels swinging rhythmically back and forth. “So, Pao, today, the Council will decide your ability to be a judge and judge fairly and wisely for the Emperor! Don’t mess this up.”

I look at Guan, who has always been a father to me. “I’ll try,” I reply shakily, but tendrils of self-doubt were already creeping into my voice. I rub tears of nervousness out of my eyes, worried they will be interpreted as a weakness.

Guan sighs. “Pao, you have potential. Remember, when you give a verdict, be ruthless. Better to give a sentence too harsh than too lenient.” He winks at me, then the expression on his face intensifies and his voice lowers to a clandestine whisper. “Pao. You always give such easy sentences when we practise. Don’t do it this time. Just this one time. Okay?”

I nod, too nervous to do anything else. But even in this action of agreement, I know: I don’t trust myself to give a harsh sentence. But I have to. I must. I set my teeth and walk into the courtroom.

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I perch uncomfortably in an elaborate, high-backed chair with ornate carven designs, my eyes set straight ahead, yet looking at nothing. Suddenly, a roar of cruel laughter rises from the crowd. Beads of sweat pop out on my forehead, before I realise that the defendant had already entered, and had tripped on the floor, prompting the taunting cry from the viewers.

The guards force the man to kneel, barking in husky tones, “Remove your hood!”

The man grasps his hood and pulls it up. Long, ragged, matted hair tumbles out, slightly covering almond-shaped brown eyes set perfectly in a face of chapped skin. The whole courtroom gasps. The defendant is a *girl*.

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Gathering my nerves, I stand. “Are there any witnesses in this house who will identify and accuse the defendant of a crime?”

A rotund man from the crowd, dressed in embroidered robes, rises. “Your Honour, this girl disguised herself as a boy and stole a sack of millet from my storehouse!” The crowd begins booing and heckling, making disparaging remarks. It is clear that the girl’s fate has already been sealed, that I’m only performing a useless ceremony here, just for show.

I turn to the complainant. “Ahh, landlord Sai. And who is this person?”

The landlord’s brow crinkles. “Your Honour, this... dog worked in my warehouse for two weeks, dressed as a boy. I don’t know her name, but I know her face.”

I glance at the defendant. “What is your name?”

Her chin tilts at a proud, haughty angle. “My name is Kui.”

“Kui, do you admit to stealing a sack of millet from this landlord’s storeroom?”

Her tone is still relentless, unbroken, her voice strong. “Yes.”

This girl stole. She’s a worthless thief. How can she still be so proud? I ask myself. Temporarily lost, I turn to find Guan in the audience for guidance. The victim usually does not plead guilty so soon. The crowd is aware of this, too, judging from the harsh sound of whispers filling the room.

Since it is clear that the crowd is against her, I desperately rack my brains for a question to ask which will make Kui look bad. “Have you been in trouble with the law before?”

She nods slowly. “Yes, Your Honour.” The words leave her lips with reluctance, and, looking at her, I see a person who knows there is little hope for herself.

“For what?”

She swallows. “Stealing rice, sentenced to two year of imprisonment, Your Honour.”

Shock fills my soul, squeezing the breath out of my lungs. Such a harsh sentence, just for stealing rice! Flustered, I say the first sentence which comes to mind, from my heart, not my papers. “Um, Kui, why did you do this?”

The murmuring stops abruptly. It was then that I realise no judge has probably ever asked this question before. I was supposed to be harsh and final. What have I done?

Kui is obviously shocked as well, but she gathers her thoughts quickly. “I... I stole to feed my family. I worked in a cookhouse, and I took the food that was thrown out to my brothers and sisters.”

“Your Honour, please, I beg you. Don’t sentence me to jail or execute me. My siblings depend on the money I earn for survival. They will die if I am not there to provide for them.” Her face is desperate.

The crowd murmurs disgustedly. “A girl, the breadwinner of her family?” “She should just have died with her parents.” First in a multitude of voices, then as a chant, the roar began. “GUILTY! GUILTY! GUILTY!”

I took a deep breath, then hit the table with my stick. Silence spreads like ripples in a pond throughout the ocean of people. “Court adjourned. I— I need some time to reach a sentence.”

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I walk into the courtyard, my thoughts in a turmoil. This girl clearly did not deserve to die as the crowd thought. I couldn’t do this to her. Suddenly, Guan’s words sound in my ears. “*Better to give a sentence too harsh than too lenient.*”

I am training to be a judge. Someone who brought justice to courtrooms, who judged fairly. But it had been a ‘judge’ who gave Kui her unfair sentence. Suddenly, I realise; what I heard— that was not justice. Then it hits me. And I cannot do something like this. I am not right for this job. I could never do this, call myself Judge Pao when I had done this to be a judge, with the blood of innocents on my hands, knowing that I had killed a girl, ruined her brothers and sisters. I look at my robes, which seemed so fresh and white, but my eyes have already painted a pattern of crimson across them.

The birds were chirping, their song mingling with the scent of peach blossoms. I stare at the peach tree. How could its blossoms continue to bloom when such an injustice had been done?

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A chant breaks the songbird’s chorus, indiscernible to my ears at this distance. But I can hear the malice and sadism in the roar of voices. Alarm bells sound in my head. What could be happening?

It was the laughter that shocks me, the sprinkling of cheering voices in the midst of the uproar that truly alarms me. I turn and run, more frightened than I had ever been.

Guan met me halfway through the courtyard. "Pao! They've killed Kui."

The news took a few seconds to sink in. "Killed her," I repeat, dazedly. "They... they— the crowd killed her!" The realisation is like someone is suffocating me, choking me, preventing me from breathing.

My mentor lays a friendly hand on my arm. "Pao, you should have sentenced her earlier, you know. Then this whole fiasco would never have happened." His voice is relaxed, but I hear a shred of remonstrance in it.

I turn to him. "Did you not hear? The girl was starving! Her family depended on her! She was just trying to keep her siblings alive!" My voice rings off the walls of the courtyard. Tears trickle down my face, and this time, I don't try to wipe them away.

Guan looks at me oddly, as if alarmed at something in my words. "Pao, I know the judge who sentenced Kui. It was a just sentence; she was actually really lucky to have been let off so easily."

I am simmering with rage, and my anger scares me, like it is a beast about to consume my soul. But— this is no justice. Guan was not speaking the truth when he said that was justice. But if that isn't justice, what is?

I bite my tongue and walk away, tempted to shake Guan. He follows me rapidly. "Pao! Pao! What is wrong with you today?"

I turn and look at the man who had lied to me, telling me that it was better to be harsh than lenient, that this girl was 'lucky' to have been sentenced to a year for simply stealing millet. I grit my teeth. How can he stand there saying that was justice?



In the cool solace of my room, I sink into my bed, listless. Deep down, I know I have to do something about what I just saw. I have to rise above these wrongdoings and change the everyday lives of the poor. I have to ensure Kui's story never happens again. I have to bring justice to China. I get out of bed and put on my robes and hat, and go out in the world to make a difference.

The Library of Spirits

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Leung, Sze Wai Serene – 13

The boy's face lit up with awe. He marveled at the show playing on his TV screen, immersed in every scene, every word spoken. *Justice Pao* told a story like no other. The legendary tale of a righteous man punishing the corrupt, Judge Pao defended the powerless against injustice, persecuted the immoral and gave commoners a fighting chance. He was an arbiter of justice. A hero.

"Xi, turn the TV off," his mother called. "It's late."

But his eyes remain glued to the screen.

"I want to be like Judge Pao," Xi said dreamily, a wide grin spreading across his face as he imagined himself standing in court, the centerpiece in the battle of good against evil.

His mother laughed, stroking his hair. "You can do *anything* you set your mind to."

Xi was exhausted.

The past decades have been more than he could handle. When his mother was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, he wasn't given much of a choice. In order to support her medical bills, he gave up his education in law school to juggle two jobs. Apparently, his efforts were futile, because she passed away months after.

Gone. Just like that, everything had changed.

He gazes into his teacup, his trembling reflection grim and weary. *He's older now*, he thinks to himself, sighing.

A teardrop fell off Xi's cheek and into the teacup. Years of hard work and late night studying have led him here. Every turning of a page, every papercut from a manuscript, every blister on his hand from constantly writing and writing. All for what? Becoming a hero? He certainly didn't *feel* like one.

Xi leaves the room, making his way to the building's fire escape. Fresh air. He needed to breathe. He shoved the window open and climbs onto the ledge, and he grips its cold metal bars to steady himself. Xi feels the wind blow on his face and push his hair back, and he feels like a child again, playing in the autumnal breeze amongst leaves of red and gold. The moon was beautiful that night. It was a lighthouse in the dark sea of the skyline, as if it were calling out, guiding lost spirits to a safe place.

Staring at the sky, he wondered how it would feel to be at peace again.

Heart pounding in his chest, Xi stepped off the ledge and jumped.

The haze was so pervasive that all Xi could see was a blur of gray, until slowly, his surroundings increased in clarity. He was standing on a path, and in front of him were red pillars the color of a dragon's scales. The vapor cleared, like ghosts being purged, and a lone pagoda emerged.

What the heck was going on?

He noticed something he hadn't spotted before. Standing by the entrance were three guillotines, each carved in the macabre form of an animal's head: a dragon, a tiger, and a dog. Xi had seen and read of these guillotines enough times to know what they were. Allegedly, Judge Pao himself had beheaded the powerful and corrupt with those very swords.

Somehow, this place was related to his childhood hero.

Maybe the interior would offer some semblance of an answer, Xi decides, as he walks in to the entrance. The place was library, a labyrinth of bookshelves that extended endlessly towards the sky that there was no way Xi was on Earth. No, he was in some pocket department of the afterlife.

Instead of books, books adorned the shelves, their covers all in reds of varying shades. They ranged from bright poppy to sangria to the color of spilt crimson blood. A chill crawled down Xi's spine.

He reached for a book on the nearest shelf. The leatherback cover was worn and mottled. As he began to flip the first page, he heard a voice from behind.

"Stop. Right this instant."

The source of the voice was a man. He donned an archaic form of attire that would grant him looks on the street – a *fitou* hat, their wooden supports jutting out like antlers, and silk black robes, their intricate details

crafted in gold. His eyes were piercing, like a glass fragment, reflecting back at Xi and showing him his motives, his flaws, his morals, some of which he didn't want to face.

He was so unmistakable, Xi recognized him instinctively.

"Judge Pao." He stares at the face of his childhood, eyes wide in a motion he can't identify. Happiness? Disbelief? Shame, that he never became the person he wanted to be?

Judge Pao smiled. "I've been anticipating your arrival for some time now."

Xi's gut wrenches. He tries to speak, but a strange feeling wells in his throat that prevents him from doing so, and he simply pauses to recollect himself.

"Where am I?"

The judge simply grins again. "You're in the afterlife, of course. A special department of the afterlife, in fact."

Xi frowned. "I don't – I don't understand – "

"I'm sure you're familiar with the Infernal Bureaucracy. This is a special library that only I and a few others have access to."

"Why?"

"Because of the contents of these books. They document the lives of every single individual ever lived."

Xi's eyes widened. "The myths are true. You are an immortal."

To his surprise, Judge Pao *laughed*, shattering Xi's perception of him as an austere and rigid man. "Yes, but that's not why we're here. Upon your arrival, I knew your case was special. So the Bureaucracy granted me the agency to settle this myself."

Xi glanced at the shelves. They were never-ending skyscrapers, shooting up to the sky like a beanstalk reaching for sunlight, constantly expanding to support the bringing of new spirits into the world. And every decision in his life, everything he'd done for this world, all amounted to a speck of dust in a raging sandstorm.

"I don't understand," he admitted. "There's so many people who are far more deserving of this opportunity than me." He pauses, a spasm of pain suddenly stabbing at his chest. "I... I'm basically a failure."

But Judge Pao shook his head.

"Quite the contrary. In you, I see opportunity."

He reached for a book, feeling the ridges of the page as he spoke. "Life is similar to writing a book. You can go back and reread the old chapters, but the story will never progress. You have the choice between writing something mediocre and writing a life you aspire to, a future you desire."

"Even if you think it's too late to change," he continued, "there are still pages left. And I want you to keep writing. Because there is still time."

When Xi thought about his life, he only thought about who he wasn't, what he never achieved, how he was no hero. In his eyes, he was worse than immoral. He was a coward. And no matter what he did, he was bound to that life.

But seeing the face of someone he'd admired for years for the first time in reality was so absurd that he wondered if everything was possible.

"Human lives are like sparks, just as fleeting and ephemeral. But they're promising, aren't they? They can either disappear just as fast or burst into raging flames. And as the Yama of the afterlife, I rule for you to return to the land of the living."

And with that, a flickering flame in Xi rekindles and erupts into a blazing fire.

★ ★ ★

"Grandpa, was Judge Pao really real?"

A child looks at Xi, his eyes sparkling at his grandfather who sat across him, a children's storybook he'd written himself open on his lap.

"Yes, my boy." A doleful smile makes its way across Xi's face. The lines on his face indicate many, many stories, of a life well-lived. In the last decade of his life, Xi had retired from his position as the head of his law firm and passed it on to a younger subordinate who reminded him of his child self – hopeful, ambitious, undeterred. He'd written countless manuscripts on law and philosophy, answering fundamental questions about life and morality, garnering the attention of many illustrious scholars.

Xi stares longingly out of the window. A pale white moon illuminates the night sky, bathing in its ghostly glow. The last specks of sand would soon fall in the hourglass. He didn't have much time left.

But out of all the lives he could have lived, he decides this is his favorite.

Gazing at the moon, he would soon find himself in the Infernal Bureaucracy once more.

Brining Justice to the People

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Seah, Hong Gua Isaac – 12

It was a dark and stormy night in China. The villages were empty, no one was to be seen. Only one house was lit up by candles, and that house belonged to a detective—by the name of Bao Zheng. “Well, this isn’t good,” he said to himself. “I need to find him quickly.” He was in search of clues to find a deadly murderer who has slaughtered nearly hundreds. Bao had already gathered some clues of the murderer, such as where he lived, his looks and his family members. With all this information, he was on his way to find the murderer.

As Bao Zheng did not know where the criminal was yet, his first destination was to seek out his family. After a few days of walking and resting, Bao finally arrived at the murderer’s house, where his family lived. The first thing he saw was an old lady wearing a blue blouse, sitting on a stool weaving silk. He recognized it was the murderer’s mother, so he slowly and silently approached her. He managed to get close to her without her noticing.

Just as Bao was about to reach her to ask her something, the old lady lifted her head and dropped her loom. She was traumatized to see the well-known detective standing right in front of her. She got up from her stool and backed away. She knew that Bao Zheng would do anything for justice, and knowing that her son is a criminal, she predicted that the detective was here to talk about her son. “Hello Mrs. Hua,” Bao Zheng said calmly, “I suppose you know why I’m here to talk to you.” The old lady wasn’t too happy about guessing correctly and reluctantly nodded her head. Bao continued to inform her of the crimes her son had committed and warned her that if she did not help him find her son, her family would be exiled. Worried about where they would live and the conditions, the old lady sighed and invited Bao Zheng inside her house(sihyuan) to continue the conversation.

In her house(sihyuan), she served some tea to the detective to welcome him for being her guest. They sat down and sipped their tea while talking about the crimes of the old lady’s son. In the end, all those crimes he committed resulted in a death penalty. Upon hearing this, the old lady tried many times to persuade Bao Zheng to not punish her son, but he did not listen and after sobbing for a while, the old lady finally caved in and accepted her son’s fate. She spilled the beans to Bao Zheng about the location of her son’s whereabouts and Bao Zheng immediately prepared for his long journey to apprehend the criminal and to put an end to the chaos he had caused .

On the way, Bao Zheng was contacted by the emperor himself, Emperor Renzong. He was told to quickly capture the murderer before he kills anyone else. Following the emperor’s orders, he hastened his journey to the other side of China. Along the way, he managed to catch other criminals and put them behind bars to avoid them from committing more crimes.

Once he finally arrived at the location, the place was completely destroyed. Apparently, the criminal was already well aware of Bao Zheng so he trashed the place and prepared multiple baits to stop Bao Zheng from catching him. Luckily, Bao Zheng had brought his bodyguards to assist him in capturing the criminal. Once spotting the criminal, his bodyguards chased after him with lightning speed, but the crafty assailant using trickery, the criminal managed to fool them and make one of the body guards fall inside a hole. Although the guard wasn’t dead, he was mortally wounded. As the other bodyguards continued to chase the criminal, Bao Zheng realized what was happening and he called off the attack. Bao Zheng gathered his remaining bodyguards and told them not to fall for the trap. They had to stay close together in order to catch the criminal.

Seeing that Bao Zheng had ruined his plans, the criminal’s face dropped and he decided to take his own life. He grabbed his knife and held the blade to his chest, and just as he was about to end his life, his mother suddenly appeared out of the blue and appealed to his son to not do it. Everyone, including Bao Zheng, was surprised to find the old lady who traveled the entire way across China by herself. Her son looked at her mother for one last time and he closed his eyes as tears flowed down his cheeks. He muttered something that seemed like an apology and pierced the blade straight into his heart.

Heartbroken, her mother called out his son's name as he vomited blood. She rushed to his side and held his hands tightly. She was crying for her son and before his last breath, the criminal managed to whisper "Sorry, ma." Those were his final words. The old lady mourned for her son's death and Bao Zheng stood by her. After all those murders the criminal has committed, he still felt sorry for the old lady's loss. The bodyguards went to help their other friend who fell inside the hole. They managed to find a perfect long and strong rope to bring him back up.

After a while, the bodyguards managed to escort them to a place where they could rest. Over there, the emperor contacted Bao Zheng and complimented him for his service. He personally brought back the old lady to her house (siheyuan) and stayed there until he made sure that she had recovered from her son's loss.

After that journey, Bao Zheng solved many other crimes and mysteries and he managed to become one of the most famous detectives today. He has inspired many others from his stories and has brought justice to China during his days in the Song Dynasty. Legend has it, after he died, he became the immortal Yama of a Department of Hell known as "the Infernal Bureaucracy" and worked as a supernatural judge sorting out the affairs of the Afterlife.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Seah, Hong Siong Nickolas – 13

The autumnal morning breeze played in up-tempo gusts and gentle lulls as rays of brilliance streaked through from the patient sun. Misty dew coats the surface of the Hefei fields as a young Bao Zheng, just eight years of age, ambles through the tall grass with his parents on his way to school.

“Mum, *I want to grow up to be a judge one day and fight against criminals for the people of my country!*” exclaimed Bao Zheng as his chubby cheeks glowed with excitement.

His mum scoffed at first, but looking at her son’s sheer determination, she replied thoughtfully, “*My son, I’m sure you will achieve the heights of success one day. Believe you can and you will.*”

Bao Zheng chuckled as he continued walking with a heart full of ambition. He was destined for greatness.

Time flew like an arrow, as Bao Zheng rose through the ranks, becoming known for his crime-solving savior faire. He could finally return home to where it all started— in his hometown of Luzhou, Hefei.

Assassination Mystery

A howling winter gale swooshed through the town of Hefei.

Yet another case of murder had risen recently as local investigators scrambled into the Siheyuan to investigate the assassination of an old officer, whose decapitated head lay quiescently frozen on the stone flooring, surrounded by the bodies of motionless servants. The room was reeking with a rank, and pungent odor as they explored the crime scene for any remnants left behind in a tearing hurry.

Hours passed, and hopelessness just grew and grew. The investigation was then terminated and marked as a failure because there were no traces of the criminal's belongings.

However, as everyone sighed in despair, heads bowed in disappointment, a hoarse humming tune was getting closer and closer. The man was nearing his 50s but was beaming with shrewdness like a prideful eagle as he approached the Siheyuan with a smoking pipe in one hand and a walking stick in the other. Everyone’s jaws dropped in accordance as they realized who he was. It was none other than Judge Pao. *The epitome of crime-solving.*

“How’s everything going on?” Judge Pao spoke with enthusiasm, which didn’t exemplify the state of misery of the investigators. “I’m here to rid your troubles by personally coming here to investigate myself.”

Judge Pao carefully examined the decaying corpse as he cast about for hints. He got it! It was the fur coat hanging on the untouched chair. Judge Pao squinted at the fabric as he felt its smooth, silky texture. He nodded to himself in assurance.

“This piece of cloth must have been left by the criminal. It has no blood marks that resemble the clothes worn by the victim.” Judge Pao articulated before concluding, “it must be made of cashmere from a mountain goat. The only person wealthy enough to own such fancy clothing was Lord Lin himself. Ugh! That guy always gets on my nerves, and this time he is not escaping justice.”

Righteous Justice

A midday crisp wind weaved through the mansion as Lord Lin, a corpulent official, sat on a rocking chair, sensuously smoking his pipe while staring at the distant town from his marble mansion. The chair groaned under his immense weight as he let out a cunning grin. He tilted his head backward, as he stood up and strolled around his balcony before letting out a breath of smoke.

Suddenly, Lord Lin heard shuffling boots crunching in the blanket of snow. He shuddered upon witnessing an army of soldiers breaching the gates to his mansion before apprehending his outnumbered guards. They began marching in unison toward the estate. Lord Lin began to panic as he staggered indoors, attempting to escape. But it was too late.

A platoon of soldiers stood bellicosely with shiny swords, their heartless stone faces staring menacingly at Lord Lin like a swarm of bees, ready to sting the hostile intruder. You could cut the air with a knife. Lord Lin's shuffling footsteps came to a halt as a sharp gush of wind swerved through the room.

"How dare you guys trespass here without authority?!" yelled Lord Lin as his fist hit the table in indignation before continuing, "This is treason! I will have you all executed if everyone does not leave at once!"

The soldiers were unruffled by his threats, standing their ground. Judge Pao walked in with a flounce, confronting Lord Lin with a shield of soldiers that encircled his presence. Lord Lin dropped his smoking pipe; his teeth clattered irresistibly, and his stout body quivered in fear.

"Lord Lin! How dare you assassinate a senior officer of the imperial court and murder the lives of the servants?" roared Judge Pao as he held up the fur coat, expecting a response in retaliation.

"What are you going to do about it? You have no right to arrest me! Those people that I killed were just mere peasants in society. They are beyond your control, Bao Zheng." Lord Lin said angrily, taking a step backward and folding his arms.

"You have abused your power and slaughtered people. Under imperial law, you are to be punished immediately," proclaimed Judge Pao, before ordering, "Guards! Take this criminal away."

The guards nodded subserviently before handcuffing Lord Lin.

Lord Lin's temper reached its boiling point; his eyes bloodshot red as he screamed, "This is treason, I will have everyone here tortured to —" Judge Pao swiftly approached him and mugged him at knifepoint. Lord Lin didn't move a muscle; his pale face frowned as he saw the blade held only whiskers away from his throat.

"You have tormented and killed enough people. I will make sure you never do such things again to the innocent souls of the town that you used to govern," Judge Pao spoke with seriousness before commanding, "Guards! Take him outside."

Lord Lin was promptly escorted as his muffled defiance screams became softer and softer. Outside the gates, a rowdy crowd of spectators was clambering onto the metal gates like a pack of ravenous dogs, deeply infuriated by their oppressor's acts of murder.

The crowd corralled like pigeons in a playpen as waves of ridicule rained down with thunderous force on Lord Lin's anguished torso and resentful jeers erupted in pockets around the perimeter. Many banged on the gates violently, cursing at Lord Lin.

"You tyrant! You deserve an execution!" growled a townsman tempestuously.

Ensuingly, this spark ignited the crowd's flames, as the clamoring chant, "Kill the tyrant! Slice his throat! Bash him in!" At the drop of a hat, everyone held their fists up in the air in unison, all in support of Lord Lin's execution. All eyes filled with a loathing burn as they scowled ferociously at the defenseless lord that had tormented them.

Lord Lin fell onto his knees. Judge Pao stood like an unfazed general, radiating brightness for all to admire, outclassing the already crumpling Lord Lin, who knelt shamefully like a tattered soldier, surrendering his arms, hopelessly awaiting his impending doom. Tears of angst trickled down his diminished cheeks like a stream of water as he looked up at the towering Judge Pao, hoping to be offered another lifeline.

“Please, Judge Pao! I won’t do anything wrong,” begged Lord Lin at the top of his lungs, before blurting out, “I will give you all the riches you desire if you could pardon me for my crime. Please!”

There was a deafening silence as the crowd stood impatiently in anticipation with bated breath.

Judge Pao announced, “Justice is worth much more than gold; neither can be bought nor sold. You shall face execution at once!”

The executioner nodded absently at Judge Pao’s order before taking a pent-up breath, his eyes focusing on his blade.

Swoosh! The blade sliced Lord Lin’s throat, and his head rolled away on the grass, leaving a bloodied path with blood gushing out of his neck. His body surrendered itself, from kneeling to completely lying down, never to rise again. He was dead. A rip-roaring cheer of joy ensued.

Once again, Justice Pao served his country with impartiality. He was indeed *the epitome of crime-solving*.

Present-day Inspiration

A child and his parents decided to visit a bookstore during their vacation in Hefei. The young child soon comes across a book about Judge Pao, titled, “Judge Pao and the Rule of Law,” written by Wilt L. Idema.

The child was filled with excitement, his eyes glistening with fascination.

“Mum, Dad! Look at this book about Judge Pao!” shouted the child, ambitiously exclaiming, “I want to be just like him! *I want to grow up to be a judge one day and fight against criminals for the people of my country!*”

His mother caressed her son’s hair, saying, “*My son, I’m sure you will achieve the heights of success one day. Believe you can and you will.*”

The young child was flooded with determination as he held the book tightly in his chest, approaching the cashier with it.

My Message To My Descendants

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Sim, Chee Kang Joshua – 13

I, Justice Pao, have seen generations come and generations go, yet the world of injustice and deception never fails to influence the souls of many that toil under the sun.

I had my time on earth, and fortunately I was blessed with an exceptional mind – using it purposefully to shatter the works of the spirits – Pride, Greed, Desperation, and above all, Deception, where their physical bodies ceased to exist, pushing their aptitude beyond the unimaginable – sickening the lives of many innocent individuals, whom they could have left this world fulfilled, rather to be burned into ashes for their meaningless toils.

As this world continues to evolve, proportionally so do the news that articulate my presence in sight within the daylight, for which it claimed – a judge sorting out the affairs in the afterlife at night...so much so that people were brought to believe I am a mythical figure. Indeed, I was able to accomplish every single wish I had cried for – bringing my family out of poverty, serving justice where justice was due, and most importantly, formally addressing the real truth behind every fallacious notion that trickery raconteurs tried so desperately to deceive.

In every street I went, I never failed to witness spirits – invisible to the mortal eyes, lurking behind unsuspecting individuals under the fuming light of the sun – and yet they were unaware of their influences.

On and on shall these spirits continue to stride, deceive, bring upon great severity, long for eternity. History always repeats itself – for the spirits' influences will persist – until a greater power puts an end to it.

For now, nothing changes under the sun.

The First Encounter: The Figure Beside The Man.

A knock on the door. Pounding immensely. Under the daylight.

Hairs that bent, shivers that trickled down like snakes slithering all over me. An unprecedented surprise.

“Who is that!?” my mother shouted, from the kitchen where the smell of steamed buns overwhelmed me.

My mother came running out of the kitchen all burned up, pushing the handle open till the door creaked wide. A man greeted – appeared cranky, sullenly-ill, ceased the prior dress code to even crystallize his facial appearance...all humps and hollows, and another, a dark figure, next to him.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” my mother asked.

He remained silent for the next few moments – his eyes began tormenting ours with great severity, till mother shook, in sight must seek help. His partner beside him then whispered to his ear...muffling in a tune that at noon could not hear.

I found it apparently odd. Before I was about to inquire about his intentions, the man suddenly spoke, breaking the silence.

“Congratulations to your son for his outstanding performance in the imperial examination! My son took part but unfortunately got second place after your son. I am willing to offer ten thousand coins to you if he gives up the imperial scholarship.”

“By when?”

“By tomorrow.”

He then slammed shut the door. I looked towards my mother, face all frail and pale, transfixed on the magnitude of coins the man was willing to offer...but who was the unknown figure beside the sulky man?

The Next Day:

There he returned back to our front door – a banging coming from outside. I glided towards the door without hesitation.

A man dressed identically from the one before. He came back for our final decision, but...there stood another partner beside him, grinning sarcastically. Holding a bag full of coins, insisting they were real, he proceeded to pass one to my mother for her to feel – with eyes glimmering gold, blood veins going too cold, high wishes for an abundance of prosperity...again, his partner whispered to the man.

“So what is your final decision?” he asked.

Before my mother’s lips unzipped, I took a coin and weighed it with my own hands – a shockwave of an uncomfortable feeling electrified me...a little lighter, I said. A little too light.

I turned towards my mother, seeing his partner now whispering to her.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

She looked at me with utmost confusion.

“I am afraid we will decline the offer.” she gradually said.

Then they left – swift as sound.

Asking my mother once and for all: I wondered what his partner said to him and to you?

“What partner?”

A sudden realization that struck and changed my understanding of the realities since: the unseen influencing the seen.

Passing on the Unseen Warning:

The First Encounter forever changed how I understood the influences of the unseen on the seen. This truth has to be faithfully passed down to every descendent of mine. A simple principle that can be followed; avoid at all cost – the paths that lead to realms of influences of the unseen.

Wise or foolish, unconstrained greed will corrupt the heart into a sunken soul that dwells in grief and wickedness. I am glad my mother did not incline her ears to the dark figure...

A future that could not be told, a fate that no one ever knows.

Wherever you go, even in a realm of justice: wickedness was there.

The Yue-Kong Pao Interview:

Standing from a distance, a little boy peered into a television of 1986 witnessing the interview of the just-retired Sir Yue-Kong Pao.

“You have spent all your life building a world class business in Hong Kong, what is the secret to your consistent success?” the reporter asked, while flashes flicked from sparkling cameras in the background.

For a moment, Sir Yue-Kong Pao stood idling in silence, all deep thoughts of every preaching and blessing he had, poured into his mind.

“Work with someone not influenced,” he replied.

“And how were you able to distinguish between the wise and the folly?”

“Through a blessing that was passed down to his descendants.”

“And who is he?” the reporter questioned.

“Pao.”

The Elites and the Outsiders

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Tsai, Caitlin – 12

Before the great war of the two districts, Elites and Outsiders coexisted together in the world. Until Outsiders wanted to achieve immortality, like Elites. Thus, Outsiders resulted in corruption and bribery, by invading Elite's territory and stealing immortality pills. They disrupted the peace between the two districts, and this imbalance caused the Earth to split into two halves, forming the Elite and Outsider districts.

Elites were celestial angels, enchanting fairies, virtuous gods, and all the "good" people in the world. On the other hand, Outsiders were the complete opposites. They were all the duplicitous thieves, atrocious witches, cunning devils, and all the "bad" people in the world. The two halves of the Earth were also drastically different. The Elites half was bright and sunny, with plants growing on every surface and animals roaming freely. Their houses were all made of gold and silver, glitter and sparkles rained down, and laughter filled the air. The Outcasts half was dark and gloomy, with insects littering all surfaces, dead snakes and acid rained from the sky. They lived in prison cells, and cackles filled the air.

When Bao Zheng was born, he was "welcomed" to the Outcasts District by being tossed in a pile of dusty hay, while his parents complained about how annoyingly painful it was to have a baby. When Chen Shimei was born, he was welcomed into the Elites District by being swaddled in the softest silk blanket, getting kissed and hugged by his parents, while he lay in his luxurious golden crib.

Ever since he was a child, Bao Zheng knew he was destined to be an Elite. He hated Outcasts, and was often bullied by the other children. His only dream was to become an Elite. However, to become an Elite, it required Outcasts above the age of 15 to go through a series of challenging tests, each testing your bravery, kindness, wisdom, integrity, and selflessness. Only candidates with the perfect criteria could become an Elite. While Bao Zheng thought this was extremely unfair, he made it his goal to complete these impossible tests, and to shut down the prejudiced operation when he became an Elite.

The instant he met the required age, Bao Zheng swiftly signed up for the gruelling test. While going through the various tests, Bao Zheng met another Elite who was assisting with the tests, Chen Shimei. They became fast friends and were very close. Chen Shimei helped Bao Zheng prepare for the tests earnestly, and they spent all their time hip to hip.

After many exhausting months of tests, Bao Zheng successfully completed them and finally became an Elite. He was granted the name Immortal Yama, and was given the unique ability to travel between the two districts as he wished. This was a sacred ability, and only his bloodline could travel between the districts, no one else.

When Immortal Yama started serving his duties as an Elite, he had a chance encounter with Lady Zhang. She was known as the most beautiful and talented Elite and was admired by many. Surprisingly, she was also an Outcast before, and only became an Elite a few years earlier.

Born into a poor family, aside from his intelligence and integrity, Immortal Yama was a very plain person. Born into a rich family, Chen Shimei was not only intelligent, but also very charming and handsome. Chen Shimei and many other Elites spent years chasing after Lady Zhang, but got rejected every time.

However, when she met Immortal Yama, it was love at first sight. Without any ulterior motives, Immortal Yama even bent the rules and snuck her into the Outcasts District so that she could visit her family – his compassion made Lady Zhang feel truly understood and loved as a person, not just for her beauty.

Thus, Lady Zhang married Immortal Yama,

Upon their wedding, Chen Shimei's jealousy overtook him, and he started to resent Immortal Yama. While he still acted as Immortal Yama's good friend, Chen Shimei secretly plotted against him behind his back. Immortal Yama was oblivious to this, and treated him as a brother.

Chen Shimei was infatuated with Lady Zhang, and tried to do everything to win her attention. However, she only loved Immortal Yama, so Chen Shimei resorted to shameless measures to win her over.

Chen Shimei kidnapped Lady Zhang and hid her in a faraway place, where Immortal Yama could never find her. Chen Shimei was an immortal with the ability of hypnosis and was able to use his powers to control people's minds. He used a spell on Lady Zhang to make her believe Immortal Yama abandoned her, causing her to resent Immortal Yama. In his desperation to find Lady Zhang, Immortal Yama ventured to every corner of the world, but he still didn't succeed in finding her. As a last resort, Immortal Yama went to the treacherous sand dunes, whom no Elite would dare go to, just to search for his wife. When Immortal Yama stumbled into a hidden cave deep in the sand dunes, he found his wife inside, trapped to the stone walls with titanium chains. She was sickly, paralyzed with fear and shivering all over. But the walls were too strong, and while Immortal Yama struggled with the thick chains, Chen Shimei showed up, whisking her away. "Noooooooo!" Immortal Yama cried, heavy, wet droplets of tears falling from his eyes. At that moment, something changed. Immortal Yama was no longer the bright and compassionate Bao Zheng anymore; he had experienced heartbreak, and from then on, he became distant, silent, and lifeless. After traveling all over the districts and searching for his wife for ages, he returned home, empty-handed and crestfallen, coming to the conclusion that she had perished.

A few months passed, and Immortal Yama was still heartbroken over his wife. Chen Shimei married Lady Zhang by using his mind controlling magic. However, it turned out she was pregnant. Chen Shimei celebrated this joyfully, thinking the baby was in his own bloodline, when in fact, the baby was Immortal Yama's. Both Chen Shimei and Immortal Yama were oblivious to this fact, and Chen Shimei raised Immortal Yama's son Bao Yi as his own. Chen Shimei made Lady Zhang and Bao Yi hate Immortal Yama, and started training Bao Yi as a weapon he could use to hopefully eliminate Immortal Yama.

Years later, Chen Shimei and the now grown up Bao Yi invaded Immortal Yama's home in hopes of killing him. In order to escape, Immortal Yama teleported to the Outcast's District, thinking they wouldn't be able to follow him. However, to both Immortal Yama and Chen Shimei's surprise, Bao Yi followed him into the Outcast's District.

Gasping in shock, Immortal Yama whispered "But that means, that means this boy is my son?" "No! He is my son! Lady Zhang is my wife! You don't deserve her!" Chen Shimei bellowed frustratedly.

The second he heard his wife was alive, it was like life had re-entered his soul, and energy and brightness returned to him. But that moment was soon destroyed by the pang of overwhelming anger he felt. "Not only did you steal my wife from me, and lied straight to my face, but you also stole my son from me!" Immortal Yama shrieked, his hands balling into tight fists. His face erupted like an active volcano, a blaze of fire-red anger.

However, before he let his anger get the best of him, Immortal Yama realized that this scandal was the perfect opportunity to achieve what he always wanted.

"Everybody! Listen!" Immortal Yama clamoured, standing in front of every Elite, holding Chen Shimei captive. "This man, this so-called 'virtuous Elite', kidnapped and bewitched my wife, stole my son, and still calls himself an Elite! Is this what Elites are? Jealous, selfish, vicious creatures? If anything, Outcasts may be more righteous than Elites! While we Outcasts are forced to live in the worst conditions, and can only hope to possibly become an Elite, what are you Elites doing? You've become indolent and spoiled with your riches and power, you've completely forgotten why you Elites were Elites in the first place! You don't understand what it's like to struggle, to be powerless! You are all not worthy of being called Elites!" Immortal Yama bellowed furiously. Murmurs began to spread amongst the crowd that had gathered. "We must take this completely atrocious system and shut

it down! Elites and Outcasts should be able to live together in this world that we share! Sure, we once separated due to the selfish desires of Outcasts, but look at us all now! Outcasts have their own problems, however Elites do too! Outcasts aren't pure evil, and Elites definitely aren't pure goodness!"

While Immortal Yama's words only lasted for a minute or so, their effect lasted for centuries after. Elites and Outcasts no longer stayed in their separate districts, and advancement in the world became one based on meritocracy, rather than birth right.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Wong, Harold – 13

Pao looked at the warm orange light slowly shining out from the horizon. Seeing the judge with the day shift trot over, eyes still half opened from sleep, Judge Pao turned and trudged towards the door leading towards the overworld. As he walked past the long lines of people waiting to be judged, He heard mutters, “That’s the Judge Pao.” eyes met him with respect, and some with fear, hearing tales of the mighty and fair Judge.

There was recently a royal who was giving him quite some trouble. He was told that he had been sneaking out of the palace during the night, clearly up to something. Therefore, he decided to ask his friends who were experienced at fighting, to track him. This day, as he walked through the door, he was met with his friends.

“We’ve found him going towards the North, going at a decently fast speed,” said one of his friends.

“Alright, let’s not talk about this elsewhere. He is a well-respected royal, but we still need to check out what he’s doing,” Pao told them.

The next day, it was dark at night, and Pao and his fighters managed to track Hui Chao all the way to where he was going. The place happened to be the nearby palace of the big country, Liao. They had recently built up a large army and had been constantly annoying Song by challenging them for land and money recently, due to their confidence that they could win. What could he be doing here? Could he be giving away information?

“Fight...Hard...You...Give...Information?” asked the warrior.

“Yes...What...Get?” said Hui Chao.

“Will...give...money.” answered the warrior.

Pao and his friends went back to the palace, thinking about how to show everyone that this well-respected royal was giving information to Liao.

Pao started a meeting immediately the next day, and announced that they were going to launch a small attack on Liao, and Pao saw that Hui Chao was already thinking about something else, clearly finding a way to deliver this information to Liao.

“Hui Chao! Do you get me?” exclaimed Pao.

“Oh yes... yes I do.” said Hui Chao.

“Alright, the attack will be tomorrow morning, and we will set off immediately after everyone is ready.” Pao said.

Right after the meeting, Pao went to find the general.

“We’re not actually going to surprise attack Liao, It’s used to see if there is a royal who is giving away information.”

The general agreed, and said he would get ready after 10 minutes. After some time, Pao and the general waited beside the palace, waiting for Hui Chao. Hui Chao walked out of the palace, glancing around anxiously and running towards the village. Pao and the general followed Hui Chao for a long time, but Hui Chao veered off course from the North, and rode towards the South.

“Let’s keep going,” said Pao.

They both agreed as they sped up and saw Hui Chao again, and Pao thought something didn't make sense. Shouldn't Hui Chao be going to Liao to inform them as soon as possible? Does he think there are officials following him? How? Keeping those thoughts aside, Pao saw Hui Chao had gotten off his horse, and Pao followed, and yelled, "Hui Chao! What are you doing here!"

"I'm not doing anything! I just came here for a walk!" Exclaimed Hui Chao.

"Follow us then, back to the palace and let's get a decent explanation." Pao said.

Pao tried to push him towards the horse. However as soon as he did that, he felt a hard shove and stumbled forward. He turned around and was met face to face against Hui Chao and the general. te

"What are you doing?" yelled Pao.

Both Hui Chao and the general just glared at Pao, and got ready to fight. Pao knew what happened. The general. He was not on his side. Pao would have to find a way to face both of them in a fight. The general barreled at Pao, knocking him off balance, while Hui Chao followed, trying to kick Pao. Pao threw a punch to Hui Chao's stomach, and knocked the general in the face with his elbow. However, Pao immediately felt a pain in his jaw and at his stomach. Before Pao could even put his guard up, three blows flew at his shoulders. Pao staggered as the pain of the punch landed and he felt his shoulders were numb. Pao grabbed the general and slammed him in the face with a kick, but before he could land a punch, the general had already punched him in the stomach. Staggering back, Pao hunched over while holding his stomach, trying to relieve the pain. This was going to be a hard fight. The general and Hui Chao would try to show that they found him giving away information. While Pao was fighting the general and Hui Chao, he heard a familiar voice yell out, "Pao!". The general and Hui Chao immediately ran towards the Liao palace, and Pao yelled back, "I'm here! We're going back to the palace!" His friends came to sight as they ran towards him. Seeing Pao bruised and battered, they figured that he had been beaten.

"Let's go back first before we decide what to do." one of his friends told Pao.

Pao was angry that he did not manage to catch Hui Chao, and was angry that the general had sided with Hui Chao. As they rode back to the palace, Pao was already thinking of another way to find out that Hui Chao was giving information.

The next day, Pao told the officials that the attack was canceled, as it seemed like the weather was going to be bad. After the meeting, Pao was resting and walking around, talking to some other officials, when he saw a person walking hurriedly, with a letter that had the big words, "Hui Chao" on it. Pao decided that the letter had to be important.

"Let me deliver this letter for you," offered Pao.

"No it's fine, I can deliver this letter to him, and you can rest." The person said.

"As one of the higher officials, I think I can deliver this letter to a royal. You are not allowed here anyways." Pao told the person.

Pao took the letter and turned to walk back to his workplace to read the letter. He saw that the person walked towards the exit, but turned and started walking towards the direction of where Hui Chao and the other royals stayed. Pao saw what the letter was about.

"Thank you for telling us the Song's attacking plan, we will send the money to you after some time, after we have prepared."

At the bottom, it was signed by the Liao leader and stamped to show it was official. Pao took the letter and immediately walked towards the main palace, where the most trusted and highest positioned royal, the

advisor, stayed. Pao arrived at the main palace after some time, but it seemed like the general and Hui Chao had already arrived first. Pao tried to walk past hiding the letter behind his back, as though he was hurrying. However, Hui Chao and the general were not fooled easily. They tried to snatch the letter away, but just as Pao thought they were going to take the letter away, an old crinkly hand grabbed the letter and yanked it away from them. Pao looked up and saw the angry advisor.

“Open it and read it! It’s important!” Yelled Pao.

Confused, but still angry, the advisor opened the letter. He looked at the letter repeatedly, before looking at the general.

“Is it true that you have given information about Song’s attacking plan to Liao?” Yelled the advisor.

“No, it isn’t us! That must be faked!” Exclaimed Hui Chao, who had just arrived and was panting.

“Trust me, I’ve seen this signature and stamp enough times, and no fake stamp maker would make a fake stamp of the Liao leader, you two follow me.” The advisor asked them to be brought to the prison, and the advisor asked Pao, “ I really don’t get, as such a highly positioned official, why would you think you would not be able to argue over them? Why do you always find solid information before you come to your conclusion?”

“Well, as two of the most trusted officials and royals, it would be hard to believe that they would give information away. Every judging appeal requires sufficient research to come to a fair conclusion.” Explained Pao.

“Well, no wonder you are such a trusted official. Thank you for telling us this.” said the advisor.

“No problem,” answered Pao.

As Pao walked out of the main palace, he looked at the time, realizing he had to get ready for his night shift. He hummed a happy tune as another fair judging had been accomplished by the royal judge of the Song.