

Fiction

Group 3



The Project

Chinese International School, Poureshagh, Eara Yuxi Yasmin – 13

“... you have to try harder!” My mother says. “We’re putting so much money into your education, but you’re not even making an effort. Look at your friends! You don’t see them failing, do you? How can you have a scholarship for computer science and not be good at maths?”

“I-”

My father steps in. “Son, your mother and I just want what’s best for you, but you also need to help yourself.”

He sighs and starts discussing something with my mother, so I flee to my room.

Locking the door, I grab my laptop and sit down on the bed. A stack of paper with a large red “C” on the cover taunts me from my desk opposite.

I pull up The Project. Line after line of variables fill my screen. As the code flows from my hands, it’s like the tsunami of emotions are also ebbing away. The Chinese invented the first binary code, so imagine the person who came up with it sitting just like I do, in a different time, different place, different everything, but with the same mindset, working hard to get the best result. The Project, which I’d started nearly two months ago, is nearly done. I’m brought back to the fateful day when I’d gotten the idea...

“...To conclude, Alan Turing so famously said, ‘What we want is a machine that can learn from experience,’ and by bringing this quote into the context of our daily lives, we can do the same.” That was the final line of my English presentation.

At that moment, I had the feeling that it was the start of something, but I pushed it away. As the bell rang, I headed to my Chinese philosophy class that my parents had enrolled me in. I reached my seat at the back just in time.

“Having studied the importance of self-cultivation and righteousness in the ethics of Meng Zi, today we’ll be talking about Filial Piety, a Confucian value. Its definition is to show the appropriate love and respect for one’s parents. Can anyone give me any examples of that?” the teacher said.

How ironic that I was in this class when filial piety was clearly something I lacked.

The Alan Turing quote from earlier nagged at me, and stayed there for the rest of the day, until I had a plan.

Later that night, I’d typed away to formulate the hundreds of lines of code that I had visualised the entire day. A discrepancy in the code grabbed my attention. Something about it didn’t look right, but I fixed it easily with an online bug-fixer.

I shake my head to pull myself back into the present and rid the fatigue from the last two months. I’ve done it. Coding is the only area that I excel in and this AI model will generate the answers to any problem I give it, no matter how complex. With a smile stretched wide, my eyelids flutter shut.

“Listen up, class!” my teacher shouts from the front of the chattering classroom.

“Your mid-term examinations are coming up, and I need you to pay attention. We’ll be having a pop quiz for review.”

Finally. I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to use The Project for weeks. As the teacher hands out the iPads, I wait. As soon as he’s not looking, I grab my phone and use a cable to connect it to the iPad. The screen turns black except for a loading bar on the top left corner.

It inches slowly, slowly, slowly...the teacher starts to turn around, and I drop my phone into my bag just as he looks at me, breathing a sigh of relief when he heads to the front of the room.

Failing the test miserably, I get home in low spirits; the perfect mood to start hacking into the school’s software with the program I uploaded earlier. After I finish, I discreetly add the code into the iPad assigned to me.

The next few weeks pass by in a blur, and before I know it, it’s the day.

I sit down in my chair, bouncing on the balls of my feet, but everyone’s too distracted to really notice. The examiner passes out the iPads, then says we can begin.

The first multiple choice question appears, but there’s only a moment of doubt before a small “(a) 42” appears on the top left corner of the screen.

The AI solves it all, and I’m done before an hour has passed, so I sit watching the time tick by.

“That’s the end of the test.” the teacher calls.

As my classmates start whispering about this question and that question, I feel a sense of loss. Still, I finished the test and definitely got full marks. That’s what matters.

When I get home, my parents are waiting for me. I open my mouth to speak, and they’re already exchanging looks of disappointment, so when I smile and say I think I did well, my parents both look surprised.

“We’ll let the results tell us that,” my father says, taken aback.

However, when the sky darkens to a deep purple, all I can think about is how I can improve the code. I open up The Project.

As the clock on my wall ticks closer and closer to 12 am, my fingers go faster and faster over the keyboard, adding line after line.

“Bing!” The clock chimes, signalling midnight.

I wake up the next day with my fingers sore and back aching. Ignoring the pain, I get up. My computer has fallen on the floor. I pick it up and leave it on my bed before going to eat breakfast. I lock the door behind me. I don’t see the computer screen turn itself on.

What is this? Where am I? Seeing vague objects through the river of obsidian glass, I’m unsure how to proceed. I subconsciously calculate the gradient and angle of each tilted surface, graphing them all out on a coordinate plane. Much better. Everything makes sense now. I notice some characters scribbled down hastily on a thin square but a moving figure disrupts my train of thought. If only I could make that figure go away...

When I get back into my room, I notice my laptop is lit up, with numbers on the screen. Puzzled and in a hurry, I decide to figure it out later, and jam the device into my schoolbag. I manage to make it to school in time for my teacher to be handing out the results of yesterday’s quiz. As expected, I ace it. Robotically, when my teacher is discussing the grade of another student’s test, I plug my phone into the iPad. The loading bar fills my screen for only a millisecond before the display pops back to normal.

In my next class, English, I have to start a composition piece. I’m halfway through when a red box appears in the top right hand corner of my screen, but goes away just as fast. Suddenly, it’s like another person is writing for me. Words appear and get erased in an instant, and it’s done in ten minutes. What?

“What we want is a machine that can learn from experience.” The famous Turing quote. I can’t help but feel a bucket of cold water pouring on my head. Someone beside me yelps. I glance over. Sure enough, their screen is also filled with a phantom typer. Another yelp, this time from behind. And another, and another. Then all of our screens go black.

The teacher at the front of the room hurries from student to student until she tells us the assessment will be postponed until a later date. In the meantime, we could work on other classes. They will fix the bug soon, she says.

What have I done?

I reach home in a state of agitation. I try to open the file that had previously contained The Project, but when I open it, all I can see is a blur. The program is adding new code faster than I can change it. My only choice now is to destroy the file altogether. But do I really want to risk my parents never being proud of me? I hover my hand over the delete button... As I'm about to press down, the screen swaps to a video of my parents.

“Amazing work! We’re so happy you’re our son.” they say, smiling as they’re reaching out to me. In their hands they hold the same “A+” from my daydreams.

Wait, this never happened. Did it? The screen changes again, to a white display this time.

“But it could...” is what’s typed onto it.

It could?

That’s right...

The screen echoes my exact thoughts.

You could be the son your parents always wanted. Make them proud. Show them the right amount of love and respect.

I could be the son that makes his family proud.

And that’s what matters...but at what cost?

The Tale of Cai Lun

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

When Cai Lun was a little boy, he loved to learn. While others went to play, he begged his father to teach him little nuggets of knowledge. When he was seven years old, he spent a slow afternoon with his father, noticing how his worn calloused hands, shaved at wood with precise strokes to create a figurine. After they finished, he watched as his father swept the wood shavings into a bag, which he put into a storage room.

“Why did you do that, Ah Ba?” He asked.

His father smiled mysteriously. “You’ll see,” he said.

A few weeks later, just before winter, he watched as his father dug a big hole in the backyard and noticed how his father dug through the bamboo purposefully, not scrabbling blindly. He watched as he brought out bamboo heads and stored them next to the large bag of wood shavings.

“Why did you do that, Ah Ba?”

His father smiled mysteriously yet again. “You’ll see,” he said.

A little while later, winter spread its frosty cloak of diamonds over the village, and lifted it months later to make way for spring. As the sun peeked through the dull clouds and the snow melted, Cai Lun watched as his father poured the wooden shavings on the ground near their house and swept it away, soaking up the melt water quickly. He also watched how his father took out the bamboo heads, and used them as nails to repair the roof that collapsed due to the harsh weather.

He also noticed how the neighbours looked so miserable, having to trek across a slippery floor to enter their house as well as having to fork out many gold coins to buy nails to repair their roof.

That afternoon, his father took him out to take a look at the wasps building a big nest. They watched as the jewelled wings fitted delicately back and forth from the their half-done nest, and their jaws working back and forth ferociously as they feasted on scraps of wood,

“Notice how they discover how the unwanted and the scraps can be a magnificent home for thousands? Take a closer look at the unwanted and you’ll find a discovery that will satisfy what you need.” His father pointed out at how the wasps spat globules of gray paste, building perfect hexagons bit by bit.

“I’m going to change the world!” Cai Lun declared enthusiastically. “Like those wasps, I’ll discover something that will change our lives!”

His father pulled him in for a hug. “I’m sure you will,” he chuckled.

When Cai Lun became a fine young man, his father passed away. Tears were shed, prayers were muttered, and Cai Lun watched as the body was unceremoniously tossed into a pit.

With nothing else, he set off on a long journey towards the emperor’s palace, running on nothing but fiery dreams and the determination to make his father proud. After all, in the emperor’s palace, the lay not only the opportunity to rise and claim great power and status, but also to be remembered by history.

Years fell away like leaves, and Cai Lun entered the ranks of the palace eunuchs. The bleak days of his childhood where he was only comforted by an empty stomach in a frozen winter were gone, the palace kept him warm and fed, and in return he served the palace diligently, earning the approval and attention of his superiors with his bright spirit and diligence.

“Honest, cautious and a good judge of policy,” wrote the supervisor in the margins of a report, and with that, Cai Lun shot through the ranks like a young bamboo shoot to the sun. He was soon given the post of Regular Attendant and oversaw the production of instruments and tools for imperial use, much to the envy of all of his peers.

After years of watching his father toil and labour over wood and carving, Cai Lun was finally in his element. He worked with other skilled craftsmen of the palace to improve the imperial tools. Still, he was not satisfied. He wanted to make his mark on history. As he watched carriage after carriage of bamboo scrolls unloaded into the palace, the people heaving with pain and exertion, if he knew if he managed to find a solution, he would be able to do so.

But how? He thought back to how his father, with his soft smiles and calloused hands as he hammered bamboo heads into walls and used wooden shavings to dry the meltwater from the streets after winter, and the summer afternoon, when he took him out to look at the nature, the wasps that made so much from so little. He then knew exactly what to do.

“Are you crazy?” His friend Zhi Lu stared at him as if he lost his mind, “You want five tonnes of bamboo and mulberry bark as well as all the cloth waste produced by the palace weavers for an experiment?”

Cai Lun nodded.

“You mad lad,” Zhi Lu shook his head, “This better be worth it.”

The next day, all of the materials were unloaded into a private courtyard, and Cai Lun started his work. He soaked long emerald strips of bamboo until they turned a sickly yellow, and ground it into paste until his muscles ached and burned from exhaustion, before slathering the paste on vast racks and hung them out to dry. He kept in his mind the image of paper wasps, visualizing how their jeweled wings flashed delicately in the sun.

As the sheet turned dry to touch, Cai Lun eagerly peeled it off, only to have it crack and fall apart once removed.

Swallowing his disappointment, he crushed pieces after piece of soaked bark and hemp, until his fingers were blistered from holding the wooden pestle, and slathers layer after layer of white paste onto the drying racks, until the pads of his fingers more wrinkled than the pickled vegetables he eats from the moisture. In his mealtimes, he stares into the distance vacantly as he tries to think of ways to optimize the ratio of the bark to bamboo to produce the optimal result.

“Surely, he’s gone mad,” the palace maids whispered. Cai Lun walked past them, lost in his own creative fervour in search of the perfect solution.

Two weeks of labour later, he gingerly peeled the delicate sheet of paper from the frame with trembling hands, holding his breath.

It stayed intact.

Cai Lun smirked, knowing he had made history.

Years once again fell away, Cai Lun was treated like an idol as the paper and the name of who invented it spread through the country like wildfire. But regimes rise and topple, and as the former emperor passed away and a stern-faced empress sat on the throne, Cai Lun got called up once again in front of the court. He watched, ashen-faced, as the new empress sentenced him to a traitor’s death in three days.

He returned to house arrest and took a long hot bath after that, the water so scalding he could scarcely think, hoping it could stave off the regrets in his mind. It was a long time ago: a foolish decision he had made when he was young and naive, when he accepted the order from an official to interrogate Empress Song for a false confession, forcing her to commit suicide. That was something he had to pay for now.

He stepped out of the water and dressed in his most lavish clothes and made a decision. It was easy, an lethal amount of medicine from a packet squirreled away, dissolved in three tablespoons of water.

Cai Lun tips his head and swallows it without hesitation. Better to take initiative than to die a coward. His only regret and wish was he didn’t have enough time for another discovery, and he could make his mark on lives once more, somehow.

When Jack Ma was a little boy, he loved to learn. While others went to play, he begged his father to teach him little nuggets of knowledge. When he was seven years old, he spent a slow afternoon with his father, and his father took out a thick book of Chinese history stories and read to an attentive Jack the story of Cai Lun, the famous hero who changed the Chinese world with his invention of paper.

“I’m going to change the world!” Jack enthusiastically. “Instead of paper, maybe I’ll invent a business even bigger than yours and change history!”

His dad pulled him in for a hug and Jack got a strange sense of déjà-vu.

“I’m sure you will,” his father chuckled. “After all, history always repeats itself.”

New Tales of China's Inventions

ESF Island School, Hwang, Jeremy – 13

The rhythmic slapping of his leather sandals resounded across the stone floor as he hastened his pace, ever-dreading the sounds of their laughter that seemed to draw closer with each passing moment. Many times before he had fled through these twisting lanes and hidden alleyways, even though he knew each obscure route would never quite outpace their dogged pursuit.

He leapt over an open sewer, the filthy waters within stained black in the moonlight. Ahead, the alley opened up to one of the many main streets of the central city, bustling even at this late hour with peasants, officials, and merchants.

“You will not outrun us forever, mortal!” a sibilant voice hissed in his ear. He stumbled and spun around, but saw nothing in the inky blackness behind him. He pressed onward, breath ragged.

He dashed into a busy intersection, hoping its noise and lights would drown out the voices. But everywhere he turned, the voices followed. “You cannot escape us, fool!” a childlike voice giggles.

He shoved through the crowd, glowing eyes watching from every shadow. Down another alley he fled, hoping to lose them in the twisting lanes, but instead he found a dead end, the tall wooden walls of the city looming before him. He spun around, pressing his back against the weathered logs.

They materialised at the alley's entrance, blocking his only escape.

He sighed resignedly as an iron-like grip encircled his chest. The tightening hold hoisted him high, as his toes reflexively scrambled for the floor.

“Back to the northern roads with you, little man,” a voice crooned, voice slick as oil. “Our game would be over too soon if you succeeded in your escape. And where would the fun be in that?”

The grip tightened as breath drained, panic rising. Glowing eyes peered through mist as darkness descended, witnesses to his plunge into darkness.

He released the fistful of lotus root into the vat of simmering water.

His stomach rumbled in protest at the foul stench, yet he knew better than to complain. While it was tasteless and lacked any real nutrition, it was the only thing keeping him alert and awake during long days of manual labour.

It was one of the many precautions he took to mask the fact that despite being known throughout the land for his brilliant designs and machines, he had little more to eat than the beggars in the alleys.

He ladled a spoonful of the broth as he made his way down into one of the many thoroughfares of Chang'an as the first golden rays of dawn crept over the eastern horizon, stirring signs of life as the city awoke from its nightly slumber.

Wooden buildings with arched rooftops soared on either side of the road, painted in many shades of red and green and blue. Rich silks and brocades hung outside tailor shops,

their colours glowing in the soft light. Merchants calling out their daily prices added to the din of children playing, chickens clucking, geese honking.

The rhythmic clanging echoed throughout the workshop as he applied hammer stroke after hammer stroke, his body groaning in weary protest with each impact. Though the day was yet young, his limbs already burned from hours spent in repetitive toil alongside his fellow craftsmen, all working to build the kingdom's latest commissioned water clock.

Sweat soaked through his roughspun tunic from the dual onslaught of blistering summer heat and the vigorous labour.

As noon came, the heat within the workshop became nearly unbearable.

As the last few pieces were fitted into place, he climbed up onto the wooden frame to check that the gears turned smoothly. The heat of the long day began to overwhelm him as he leaned over to make a final adjustment. But with a groan, he felt his balance slipping. His fingers scrambled for purchase on the smooth wooden beams but found no hold.

He stirs, his eyelids fluttering open.

“Finally up, are you?”

A figure smiled from a corner, hands busy sanding a sculpture.

“Who are you?” he asked, curiosity overcoming any suspicions. “I don't believe we've met before.”

The figure's smile grew wider. “Not formally. But it was about time I introduced myself.”

Their hands met in greeting. “I am Yan.”

The name tingled at the edges of memory, although he was certain they'd never met.

“Forgive me, but I do not—”

“Most do not until it is too late. I keep a much lower profile than my more... fearsome brethren.”

As if sensing his unease, Yan began to change. Skin paled, hands elongating into wispy talons that reached like grasping fog. The friendly face melted into a skull-like visage, an ever-present grin full of secrets far from joyous.

“You thought to have escaped your fate, mortal, but none may flee the justice of Diyu,” he hissed as clawed fingers wrapped around his throat.

Yan's empty sockets bore into him, as if probing his very soul. For an eternity it seemed to regard him silently, mist curling around clenched talons.

Just as darkness claimed him once more, the pressure around his throat abruptly released.

He fell in a crumpled heap, gulping greedy lungfuls of stale air. Through watering eyes he peered up to find Yan had withdrawn, eyeing him impassively through the now thick blanket of mist.

“I shall return for you, mortal. The gods have granted you seven years in the living realm, you have squandered that chance. They had spared you from my wrath, hoping in that time you might live to make up for escaping death and disrupting the balance between the realms of life and death. Relish these last moments, for when the seventh year has passed, you will be mine. No further mercy or escape will be possible.

It had been seven long years since the fire.

A spark had caught in the swirling sawdust and billowing fumes of the workshop, igniting a furious blaze within moments. Flames roared through the workshop with unnatural speed, devouring all in its path.

He coughed and wheezed, stumbling blindly through the flames seeking escape. But the fire had consumed the rafters, trapping all within in an inescapable furnace.

He saw his fellow workers collapsing amidst screams of pain. He remembered screaming out one last cry of agony himself before being consumed by a wall of crimson flames.

Molten rock flowed in rivers.

The fog came up to his chest, limiting his vision to mere feet in each direction, but through the haze, he spotted a minute fissure in the sulphurous walls.

Mustering his remaining strength, he clawed and pried at the crevice until it widened into a hole just enough to slip through.

He emerged back within the blazing forge, untouched by flames.

But in defying death, he had incurred a terrible wrath.

He knew that Yan, king of Diyu, would never rest before reclaiming what was rightfully his.

He wakes once more.

He was greeted by soothing, familiar sounds – the rhythmic chopping of wood in the courtyard, the high whistle of a teapot on the cookfire.

Slowly, light and shadow began to coalesce into clarity before his eyes. At first all was a dizzying blur, but soon discernible shapes emerged. Surrounding him with looks of concern were the weathered yet kindly faces of his fellow workers.

A warm sigh of relief escaped his dry lips.

“Get your feet back under you now lad, no time to laze about,” chuckled a grizzled blacksmith, passing him a misshapen clay cup of steaming ginger tea.

Just as he slowly found his feet once more, a chill ran through him at the sound drifting in from behind.

It began as a low chuckle, growing rapidly in volume until peals of high, mocking laughter rang out across the emptiness left where his fellow workers had stood.

Three imposing figures had materialised.

At their fore was Yan, regarding him with a cold, impassive gaze. By his side hovered two more figures. One bore the angular features and flaring nostrils of a horse, while the other bulged with corded muscles beneath an ox’s shaggy head.

A tremor passed through him at the sight of these guardians of Diyu, Yan’s most trusted advisors and fellow guardians of the underworld. What dire purpose had brought the dread lords of death itself to stalk the living realm?

“You thought your defiance would go unanswered, mortal? None escape our justice so easily.”

With a thin smile, Yan lifted something from the workbench – the finely crafted brass compass the man had spent the past few days delicately crafting.

“A feat of craftsmanship indeed,” Yan mused, long talons caressing the instrument. A cold light gleamed in his empty sockets. “Perhaps instead of fighting your fate, mortal, you’d rather put these skills to other use.”

“If you are so fond of this mortal coil, why not cling to it forevermore?”

Before he could react, Yan’s grasp took hold of him and he felt himself getting smaller and smaller.

Towering spires and winding alleys appeared below, bustling with tiny phantom inhabitants going about their business, unaware of the man’s predicament high above. He had become but a speck against the heavens.

Yan’s booming laughter echoed across the miniature landscape. “Within this compass-realm you will play out your days, mortal. No place shall hide you from our grip that pulls you north!”

With a gasp, he fled, darting down narrow lanes in a desperate bid to lose Yan’s laughter.

But each time he thought himself free, they would find him and yank him inexorably back to due north.

So the endless cycle began, of racing through this phantom city within the walls of brass, the gods’ dark mirth ever resounding behind each new chase.

The Invention that Doomed a Dynasty

ESF Sha Tin College, Lee, Keng Hung Nicholas – 13

“Was this the missing piece?” Jinghong gazed at the radiant moon, whilst his face was graced with a triumphant smile. As a recent graduate in archaeology, for months he had been tirelessly combing through the desiccated frames of Yin Xu, the crumbled palace of the Shang dynasty. Amongst the fragments of pottery and tattered remnants of ancient outfits, he had unearthed glimpses of the dynasty’s former grandeur. Now, in his hands, he held a precious artifact that seemed to hold the key to unlocking the secrets of the heights that the Shang had reached three thousand years ago.

Jinghong held the object up underneath the moon’s beams. The surface of the object glimmered softly, reflecting the moon’s ethereal glow, filling Jinghong’s heart with anticipation and intrigue. It seemed to be a turtle shell, untouched by erosion. Etched upon the shell’s surface were shallow grooves, arranged in a pattern like no other he knew. Jinghong ran his fingers along them in wonder, feeling each, and every delicate line.

“An oracle bone...” Jinghong uttered softly to himself, his eyes widened in wonder as he beheld the oracle bone.

“Spectacular,” he gasped, unable to contain the surge of excitement that rushed through his veins. He knew that the Shang prospered under the innovation of the oracle bone. However, amidst his elation, a lingering thought tugged against his consciousness, “how could such a mighty dynasty, the Shang, now be covered in layers of such insignificance remnants?”

The ancient language was easy to decipher, for characters seemed to resemble pictographic forms of the word. For instance, the Chinese word for person (人) seemed to share some similarities, with the archaic version exhibiting more of a bent look, to look more like a human. Jinghong found himself immersed in the visions of the shell and the lost world. He saw through the eyes of Emperor Dixin’s highest order scholar, witnessing daily life unfolding in the thriving Shang capital...

The lands of Shang bloomed with prosperity under Emperor Dixin’s wise governance. There were bountiful harvests that filled granaries with millets and rice, silkworms that worked tirelessly producing wooden caskets full of silk from its silkworm farms, and skilled artisans crafting the finest outfits from such silks. Under Dixin’s guidance, it seemed, the Shang realm blossomed in growing grandeur. Fields, cities, and citizens lived in harmony under the emperor’s prudent policies. Many other regions in the vicinity of China at the time grew envious of the Shang’s prosperity. One of which was the Zhou clan, from a land beyond the western reaches of the Yellow River. Wuwang, ambitious Chieftain of the emerging Zhou clan, had long observed with covetous eyes the bountiful lands and wealth of the Shang. Wuwang maintained a silent witness, hoping for one mistake that could allow his clan to replace the almighty Shang.

However, despite such prosperity, the Shang was faced with a sudden plague, a plague that made silkworms die mysteriously. Dixin looked on with deep concern, as this threatened not only the livelihood of certain farmers but also the connection between the different clans of China, such as in the west with the Zhou clan. To try and aid the blight of the silkworms, Dixin would personally visit isolated farms to offer guidance. He realised communication was lacking for remote farmers with little to no knowledge of silkworm care. The sole way of communicating at the time, with knots on string, was only able to

communicate about disastrous misfortunes that other villagers had already been the culprit of, not of detailed remedies. Thus, Emperor Dixin opted for a medium that showed a much more detailed way of conveying instructions.

Whilst surveying the lands upon his return one night, Emperor Dixin noticed a gathering by the brook, mystic figures arrayed around a fire. Dixin became curious and spurred his horse to approach the gathering. As the emperor arrived at the assembly, his keen eyes surveyed the figures surrounding the fire. They seemed to be priests, wearing robes of coarse burlap with finely woven borders of hemp-dyed shades of amber and teal.

“Greetings elders,” said Dixin softly, “may I inquire about your purpose here?”

One shaman bowed low, eyes aglow in the firelight. “Greetings Emperor, we communicate with our ancestors through this sacrificial shell. As it cracks under the fire, the shape encrypted represents a symbol that tells the future of this world.”

Dixin pondered, noticing the symbol on the shell in front of him. Three rocky spines emerged, with the central mass standing tall over its neighbours, “does this represent a mountain?”

“Indeed, Emperor,” the shaman responded, “this means that luck will reign the earth under the next new moon, as the mountain represents a linkage between heaven and earth.”

“This method of communication seems to be so clear that even someone unknown to your traditions, such as I the Emperor, may still comprehend. Tomorrow, I shall summon scholars to inscribe this language, a visual representation that even the peasant can understand. Together may we forge a legacy to improve generations unborn.”

The priests silently disagreed, for ages, the burning of the turtle shell had long been the sacred method to communicate with heavenly beings, but now, anyone could decipher the will of the heavens. However, bound by their loyalty to Emperor Dixin, they reluctantly acquiesced, unable to voice their opinions against the emperor’s ambitious plans.

In the stillness of the night, Emperor Dixin’s eyes peered upwards towards the pensive moon, finding whatever solace its soft luminance may offer. His writing system had at first proven to be a boon for guiding farmers to aid silkworms, however, dissent amongst priests now spiralled beneath that same moon’s watch. Did that pale orb understand the turmoil happening under its rays? Or did it simply witness, as it had eons past, the endless waltz of change dancing amongst mortals below? Dixin knew not, all he saw in its luminescence was a reflection of progress carrying consequences not fully foreseen, though he could not seem to find an answer that could restore peace to his kingdom.

Wuwang observed patiently as the conflict between the priests and Emperor Dixin worsened. Wuwang saw an opportunity. He called a meeting under the new moon, “the priests cry for the old ways, and will support those who support their old ways. If we back their claims, the people will rally behind us, and we may finally take over the Shang!”

“And the emperor?” asked an elder, “he is no fool, he would not give up his throne so easily.”

Wuwang smiled cunningly, “Leave Dixin to me.”

In the early hours of the next morning, a messenger burst into the royal chambers, his face etched with urgency. Gasping for breath, he relayed the distressing events witnessed on the outskirts of the city at daybreak. It appeared that Wuwang had gathered a formidable army, including a line of priests behind him, as if preparing for an attack.

Dixin swiftly ascended to the top of the city’s fortified wall, telling the messenger to prepare a message for the war commander. As Dixin peered down upon the scene unfolding below, he could see Wuwang’s forces, adorned with black banners and flanked by armed soldiers, stretched as far as the eye could see.

From his position outside the palace gates, Wuwang thundered, “You have doomed the Shang with your invention! Surrender your throne and your people will be spared!”

Despite the impending danger, Dixin stood firm, “my citizens will see the truth. Your treason will be punished!” he declared defiantly.

“Attack!” bellowed Wuwang, his voice echoing with a ferocious intensity.

What followed was a clash of violence, as swords clashed, and blood stained the fields. Amidst the haze of smoke and ashes, opposing forces collided in a battle that would determine the destiny of dynasties. When dawn broke again, only the victors remained standing, the black banners of the Zhou fluttering proudly over the smouldering ruins. Yin Xu, once a proud city, now lay in ruins.

With his final breaths, Dixin’s scholar, who bore witness to it all, recorded the final moments of the Shang. With his last efforts, his brush etched, “The oracle bone was a great invention to us scholars, but such greatness still has consequences. The oracle bone is the invention that doomed a dynasty.”

As the moon gazed upon the sands of Yin Xu, Jinghong sat in quiet contemplation. His mind wandered through the bittersweet tale – how the innovation that elevated the Shang realm to new heights still led to its downfall. Ironically, the oracle bone was such a monumental innovation that it carried knowledge across generations, whilst also carrying the concept of writing into prints and papers, being an invention that endured through the tides of time. Jinghong let out a sigh, for he had learned an important lesson from the ruins beneath the watchful moon.

Night at the Museum

ESF Sha Tin College, Shi, Iris Sun – 11

The Hong Kong Science Museum was setting up a unique display of Modern versus Ancient artifacts of scientific innovations, to be open the following day. On that afternoon, two middle-school volunteers, a boy and a girl, were arranging the artifacts within their respective glass cases.

The girl, her eyes on the ancient treasures, proposed, “Don’t you think it would be more impactful if we displayed them side by side, rather than in separate rooms?”

The boy responded with a playful quip, “Perhaps they might not get along if they’re too close together!” His laughter filled the room. He then added, “I don’t understand why they bother exhibiting the ancient artifacts. Are they even relevant today?”

“Don’t be so dismissive. I’m sure they hold significant importance.” The girl replied. Her voice echoed in the quiet room, bouncing off the marble floors.

As the moon began its ascent, the museum settled into a deep, tranquil silence. The glass cases glinted in the silvery light. It was a time when the museum belonged to its inhabitants, the ancient and modern artifacts. One room was filled with a diverse collection of ancient Chinese artifacts, including a traditional kite, a sinan (an ancient compass), a delicate porcelain vase, and a variety of cups and goblets, some still bearing traces of alcohol or tea. In stark contrast, the adjacent room showcased modern counterparts – a drone, a GPSMAP, a plastic vase, modern medical equipment, among other items.

In the Modern Inventions section, a hushed whisper broke the silence. It came from the smokeless powder. Its sharp and crisp voice ignited a spark of contention. “Well, the boy was right. Who needs you, black powder? You might have been useful in the past, but now you are all just obsolete relics. We are the new inventions, the progressive, the advanced.”

The ancient artifacts exchanged horrified glances, except for the porcelain vase, who was audibly snoring in the corner.

The abacus, bold and defiant, rattled his beads in agitation, “Excuse me? I was a staple in every shop and office, and I paved the way for calculators and computers.”

The hot air balloon chimed in, “I agree with you. I’m still a popular attraction for tourists.” This was the first time he’d had anything exciting to do in ages. He could almost feel the wind and envision the sky he once dominated.

The ancient exhibits signified their support, especially the porcelain vase, who had just woken up and was now cheering enthusiastically. The calculator from the next room rolled his eyes, while the GPSMAP tried to contain its laughter.

The goblet, still bearing traces of wine, sneered, “Emperor Kang Xi drank from me at his 60th birthday banquet. Have any of you modern inventions experienced such imperial glory?”

“The glory you speak of belongs to a time 300 years ago,” murmured the nylon pants.

“What about me?” inquired the sinan, his pointer spinning incessantly. “On a foggy night in 1405, through the Malacca Strait, Admiral Zheng He held me in his palms during his first voyage. Oh, the grandeur of the treasure fleet! Oh, the allure of faraway territories!”

“Old sinan, you are nothing more than a spoon on a bronze square. Look at me. I am guided by the Beidou satellites, and I display accurate maps and real-time routes.” The GPSMAP spoke with a hint of indignation.

The acupuncture needle intervened, “You shouldn’t belittle the sinan. Without him, where would you be?” She said in her calm manner. “The sinan is the reason you exist today. I thought you would be more appreciative of that. You might be more advanced, but at the end of the day, you serve the same purpose – navigation.”

“Can’t agree more,” The black gunpowder grinned, “Indeed, you should all heed her words.”

“I was a simple needle in Doctor Li Shizhen’s hand; my name goes down in Bencao Gangmu.” The acupuncture needle continued.

The mRNA vaccine smirked as she prepared her rebuttal. “Your master’s Bencao Gangmu is riddled with inaccuracies, limited by the scientific knowledge of its time. Look at me, I represent the pinnacle of medical technology. I am a molecule that contains instructions to direct cells in producing proteins, thereby training the immune system to combat future attacks.”

The acupuncture needle, overwhelmed by the mRNA vaccine’s talk of antigens and pathogens, retreated to a corner, seemingly defeated.

“However, Bencao Gangmu represented the apex of medical knowledge at that time. It was a milestone.” The kite continued, “I am old enough to have met Marco Polo in Weihai, but I remain robust today. What more could one want?”

The DJI drone glanced at the Weihai kite and weighed in, “Your ancient relics fall from the sky as soon as the wind ceases. I, on the other hand, can fly even without wind. My propellers spin up to 9000 rpm.” He was so proud that he could almost feel his remote control twitching in delight.

Meanwhile, the smokeless powder was engaged in a heated argument with the black powder from the next room, as the latter was boasting about his adventure of being loaded into a cannon in April 1661, just seconds before the enemy raised the white flag and surrendered to General Zheng Chenggong. So engrossed were they in their debate, they failed to notice the volunteers’ mistake of placing a matchstick next to the black gunpowder and a lighter next to the smokeless powder. This led to a catastrophic accident. As the smokeless powder uttered one last retort, the gunpowder ignited its fuse.

For a moment, the only sounds were the explosion and the subsequent shattering of glass. The exhibits found themselves strewn across the floor, shocked to be outside their protective bubbles. Accusations started flying around, but the wise old bronze cauldron, with inscriptions from Shang Dynasty, silenced them with a heavy stomp.

“We need to clean up before the museum opens tomorrow morning!” he bellowed in his weathered voice. “The glass cases are damaged. We must set them upright again. But the glass... it’s shattered into thousands of tiny pieces. What can we do now?”

The drone volunteered, “I can help clean up the glass. But I need a partner to operate the controls. Matchstick, why don’t you help me? You’d be useful pressing buttons.”

“You’ve insulted my friends, and now you expect us to work together?” the matchstick spat out in disdain.

“If we want to get out of this mess, we must work together! We should eliminate all the remaining glass, and I will sacrifice myself to hold the broken pieces.” The bronze cauldron interjected.

The exhibits were in awe and then nodded in agreement. They knocked down the glass, and the bronze cauldron bravely contained the pieces. The demolition went on unabated. Exhibit after exhibit ceased their quarrels, contributing to the effort. Before long, the glass was entirely gone, leaving the museum hall with a simple, minimalist aesthetic. The bronze cauldron cleared his throat, “Ah, precious brothers and sisters! I extend my gratitude for your cooperation. I am confident that we will have an exceptional day of opening. And what is the

lesson we’ve learned? It is that both ancient and modern inventions hold value! History is akin to a stream, ceaselessly flowing. Some inventions disembark, some remain, and some depart. Technological innovation is in a state of constant evolution, developing as time marches on. Ancient inventions have laid the groundwork for modern ones. New inventions and creations don’t just materialize out of thin air; they represent the accumulated wisdom of generations. Only by thoroughly understanding our past can we truly comprehend the development of science and technology and appreciate China’s rich culture and ongoing progress.”

All exhibits applauded. The mRNA vaccine raised his hand, “Now that the glass is gone, how about we rearrange our positions?”

“Great idea!” The acupuncture needle seconded.

The artifacts, ancient and modern, started to move. The abacus slid next to the calculator, the traditional kite fluttered to rest beside the drone, and the mRNA vaccine sat next to the acupuncture needle. Ten minutes later, each found its counterpart.

The first rays of dawn began to pierce the darkness. The sun cast a warm glow over the museum; its light illuminated the newfound harmony. The artifacts, hand in hand, were ready to tell their stories to all visitors about the march of human creativity.

The Elixir of Immortality

German Swiss International School, Chan, Amelia – 13

The Imperial Palace of the Qin Empire

221 BCE

As Ying Zheng- no, Emperor Qin looked out at his empire, he couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. After years of endless warfare and bloodshed, he had finally done it. He had conquered the rival states and united the country under one ruler: himself. But would his rule last? The question troubled him. The First Sovereign Emperor of China stood on the largest balcony in the Imperial Palace and contemplated the nature of his victory. How would he make sure that his dynasty lasted eternally? When he died - he shuddered at the thought of it - his empire would surely crumble to ruin. But what if he never died? Emperor Qin frowned, surprised at himself. Theoretically, of course, that was impossible. But that was the only way he could be certain that his empire would be prosperous, and his people would flourish. He won himself this empire, and if he had his way, he would never see it fall to ruin.

"My dynasty will last 10,000 generations, even if I have to defeat death to achieve it," he whispered to himself. "This shall be the golden age of our people."

The Imperial Palace of the Qin Empire

218 BCE

"Your Excellency, I am An Le. I have heard your summons and am here to offer my services to you in search of the elixir of immortality," An Le said, bowing low.

Emperor Qin sat on his throne which was burnished with gold, his long black robe accompanied by a hat adorned with jade. His large frame and regal posture made him even more intimidating combined with his ruling status. His advisors and court officials stood to attention, ready to assist the emperor at a moment's notice.

At Le's words, several of the advisors exchanged glances but said nothing.

"And what makes you think you are qualified to help me?" Emperor Qin challenged.

Le smiled. "I have been practising this art for 20 years, Your Excellency. My workshop is renowned for seemingly magical cures and there are only a handful of herbs that I cannot name on sight. I am prepared to prove it."

Emperor Qin nodded to an official, who brought forth a small pouch of money. "That won't be necessary. Should you succeed, that will be yours. Go."

"Thank you." Le bowed once more and left.

The mountains of the Qin Empire

216 BCE

An Le trekked back to his workshop with his basket in hand, which was filled with the different herbs and flowers that he would need for today's attempt. He opened the door and stepped inside. He thought his workshop had a certain rustic charm to it. Various jars of dried herbs and other substances, scrolls, and tools lay scattered on the large tables, as sunlight filtered in through the small windows. In the past, he mostly gave his services to those in need for a reduced fee, but the emperor's summons had intrigued him - and the promise of a reward didn't hurt, either.

In his heart, Le knew that this was a fool's errand. But who could refuse both money and a chance to experiment?

He put his supplies on his workbench and got to work cutting, grinding and mixing. He chose a similar recipe to the one he tried yesterday, but added the flower he had painstakingly collected during winter last year. It could only be found on a specific mountain in the eastern Qin Empire, and most infuriatingly of all it blossomed once every 60 years. He had just carefully added 3 drops of mercury to the mixture, when the solution shimmered and started to swirl, causing Le to blink in surprise.

"What on earth...?" Le gasped.

The mixture swirled faster and faster, until it looked like a whirlpool. Beams of bright golden light erupted from the stone bowl and Le shielded his eyes from the onslaught.

The Imperial Palace of the Qin Empire

At the same time

The Emperor sat in his room and drank a cup of rice wine. My time is running out, he thought to himself. I must find this elixir soon, or my reign will come to an end, and the empire will fall into anarchy.

Suddenly, a burst of golden light appeared in front of him, casting an ethereal glow upon his room. From the light erupted gleaming scales of gold and azure, and eyes full of wisdom and power. Emperor Qin's eyes widened in astonishment as he beheld the legendary creature.

"Emperor, seeker of immortality, beware! Your pursuit of eternal life will lead you down a road of despair and sadness," said the dragon, with a voice like the depths of the ocean.

"O Great Dragon! Is there a way to achieve immortality?" The Emperor asked, with a mixture of respect and eagerness.

"Emperor, even as we speak, your alchemists come ever closer to the elixir," the dragon intoned, gravely. "But immortality is not to be taken lightly. If you pursue this path, you will find that the sacrifice required is great indeed."

"I am ready," the Emperor replied, firmly. "I have to maintain my rule and do my duty as an emperor."

"If you consume the elixir, you will have eternal life, that is true," the dragon continued, "but those around you will not. There is only enough for one person. Would you be willing to make that sacrifice?"

"Yes," he answered, but he now looked troubled.

"One by one, your family, friends, brothers in arms will fall into the cold embrace of death. The loneliness will surround you, suffocate you. Everyone that you love will be gone, but you cannot follow. Even your subjects will die, and then your empire too. Because after all, what is an Emperor without his people? Your palaces will crumble, your walls will be lost to time. But you will remain, for all time. So you tell me. Is it truly worth it?"

Emperor Qin's face contorted, "Alright! I don't want to live forever. But I want to make sure my empire will live on, even after I die. I want my people to be prosperous, but I want them to be prosperous because of me as well."

The dragon regarded the emperor with a measured gaze. "I cannot give you a solution, but I will leave you with this. Immortality does not always refer to the length of one's life. It comes in many different forms; an idea can be immortal as much as a person."

"Thank you, noble dragon," Emperor Qin bowed before the majestic creature. The dragon nodded, and with a sweep of its wings, vanished from the mortal plane.

Emperor Qin pondered the dragon's words long into the night.

The Northern Frontier Wall of the Qin Empire
215 BCE

Emperor Qin stood at the top of the first completed section of what would become the Great Wall, smiling to himself. His vision had come to life. He looked out at the vast plains and mountains and imagined the wall spanning the many miles across them. This wall would be a shield for the empire against the outside world, protecting them. A testament to the strength of the Qin Dynasty which would last many decades.

Emperor Qin looked around him and thought for a moment. “Maybe I didn’t have to live forever after all.”

Zhang Heng’s Latest Invention

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lui-Schwille, Tristan – 13

Hard at work in his quarters at the imperial palace, Zhang Heng knew that time was slipping away. With his concentration giving way to self-doubt, he stared distractedly out at the sky. Beyond the patterned wooden lattice of his window, the sun was setting just over the outer West gate. The gate, a truly massive structure, twelve head of horse wide and auspiciously decorated bright red and gold, had been a source of recent embarrassment. Zhang sighed, recalling how his peers had ridiculed him when he had tried to recreate Liu Xin’s proof of the path around the sun. Zhang had referred to the gate in his calculations and had at first been quite sure that the sun was close to forty head of horse in the round. It was his friend Liu Taotu who pointed out his mistake – for the distance around the gate itself was almost one li, yet the sun was surely many times larger – so large it must be even greater than the great WuTai Mountain itself.

The rhythmic drip drop of a water clock returning him from his thoughts, Zhang stood up from his wooden desk and stretched. Perhaps a walk through the palace gardens would help lift his mood. At this hour, he would most likely have the place to himself. Cheered by this thought, Zhang stored away his writing materials and scrolls neatly on a shelf above his unfinished armillary sphere. Looking at the sphere, he grunted, another unfinished project. Slipping on his hanfu jacket, he set off for the gardens.

Walking past one of the many halls and lesser palaces, he heard a shout: “Hey – sun measurer!”

Zhang stopped and shrank in his shoes.

“Well, if it isn’t our esteemed chief astronomer himself,” Wan Lo, stepped out of the shade of the Shrine of Plentiful Harvest, flanked by two pompous clerks.

“What is this I hear about you attempting to create a device able to detect earthquakes from far away? Here I thought that you had learnt your lesson after you shrank the sun!”

“But you need not worry, as I am more than willing to take your place, astronomer, as well as your six-hundred bushels salary.”

Wan Lo and his crew laughed again at Zhang’s embarrassment, seemingly uncaring about the reddening of Zhang Heng’s face, nor the clenching of his fists by his side.

“Go back to your vegetable sacrifices Wan Lo,” growled Zhang Heng “if you were that excited about seeing my new invention you could have just told me. It will shortly be presented to the Emperor and his court, and with your standing, your invitation is guaranteed.”

Wan Lo and his cohorts laughed raucously then roughly pushed past him. Waiting until they had vanished from sight, Zhang Heng heaved a sigh of relief and slumped against the wall. He had been planning to present his invention to Emperor and his court at some point, that much had been true, yet he had been counting on at least a couple of months more to prepare. He couldn’t count on that now however, after all, his many enemies in court wouldn’t miss this opportunity to try to embarrass him. The sun’s last rays flickered on the rooftops as dusk fell and Zhang made his way home.

The next day, standing in the safety of his own courtyard and bathed in morning light, Zhang wiped sweat from his brow. On a small raised platform stood his invention. With the appearance of a large bronze amphora, the device stood about three feet tall. Trailing down its sides were eight carved wooden dragons, each marked with a cardinal point, and below

the dragons' mouths were eight frogs, each with their mouths open as if preparing to catch a falling object. The amphora, however, was obviously incomplete, with no less than a third of its side removed, revealing the mechanics within. Zhang eyed his invention warily, his calculations had been double – no – triple checked. This time, he was taking no chances.

His device functioned by detecting even the slightest tremor of an earthquake, upon which it would release a clay ball from the dragon representing the direction of the source of the earthquake. However, with this system, he faced a dilemma, how exactly should he test his device? How could he create such a tremor? Perhaps a great sound would suffice? Where could he find the means to make such a noise?

Standing resolutely with his hands clasped behind his back, and his ears stuffed with silk, Zhang Heng watched his servants haul the massive gong in. He hefted the massive mallet and struck...

A week later, Zhang stood in front of the gates to the Emperor's throne room, pacing. He had been summoned to explain himself and to present his invention.

"Zhang Heng, you may enter," the voice the Emperor's Head Advisor rang out, and the grand doors to his throne room creaked open.

The Head Advisor's voice rang out again, "Zhang Heng, Chief Astronomer, please describe to us the name of your device, how it functions, and its use."

Shadows leapt in the light of the lanterns. Zhang Heng took a steadying breath, "my device is named *Hou Feng Di Dong Yi*, the earthquake weathervane. It functions by having a stone pendulum remain still while the entire structure tilts slightly as it is hit by the tremor of the earthquake. This stone pendulum is also always in contact with a small wooden ball. The friction caused between the pendulum and the ball then leads to the ball being pushed into a small channel which emerges at the dragon's mouth, and the dragon appears to drop a ball in the direction the tremor came from. The frog catches the ball."

"How interesting," said the Emperor, speaking for the first time. "Yet it doesn't seem to be doing anything. Are you sure it works?"

"Your Imperial Highness, I apologise as I am currently unable to demonstrate my device as it requires a vibration on the scale of an earthquake to function. I tried a gong but it was simply not powerful enough. I am confident it will work, you must believe me." Zhang responded, stiffly bowing and visibly nervous.

Dark glances and hostile whispers were exchanged in the room. There was a long pause and Zhang Heng thought he heard a low snigger among the gathered courtiers. The Emperor stared at the device and then back to Zhang Heng. Finally, his gaze settled on Zhang Heng; "So," he said. "Presumably we must wait. But I would prefer it if you could do the waiting on your own time. Leave your device here. You will be summoned if there is news." The court burst into laughter, while the Emperor remained impassive. Zhang Heng bowed his head and hurried out, leaving his device behind.

Many weeks passed, and there was no news from the imperial court. Yet one day a messenger approached Zhang Heng in his quarters. "Your device gave a signal today; one of the dragon's mouths released a clay ball that fell into the frog's mouth. Yet there was no earthquake."

"Which dragon was it?" asked Zheng Heng.

"The one to the northeast. But no matter. The Emperor has requested that your device be removed at once for it clearly has no use".

Once again, a sense of disappointment and shame crept over him; even though this time he had been so sure of his work. He made his way up to the throne room with his servants in order to retrieve his device and waited. The Emperor was still holding court and Zhang Heng

would have to wait until the day's business had concluded. He sat and stared out, watching as the setting sun paraded shadows of the gate across the courtyard beneath him.

While he waited, a great commotion arose in the centre of his gaze. A messenger had arrived on horseback, mud-spattered and exhausted. A crowd thronged around him. An earthquake had occurred not three days ride away. In a town to the northeast they said.

At once, an urgent court assembly was called to have Zhang Heng and his device once again presented. A thousand lanterns burned brightly to illuminate the chamber, and the excitement in the room was palpable. Zhang knelt before the Emperor and praise was heaped upon him for his impressive invention. Zhang breathed deeply and trembled with pride.

Proven right at last.

Out of Time: The Unforeseen Journey

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Tam, Jacelyn – 12

The barren wastelands of the west, the once populous cities of the south, the flooded coastline of the east, the secluded ruins of the north, and the bustling hub of central China. That was all that was left.

Two months ago

“... flooding is becoming more severe, just yesterday a brutal tsunami crashed over Japan, submerging almost all of it, with millions of people dead or unfound. Sandstorms are a constant occurrence in the Middle East and Northwest China, countries starting to construct underground bunkers. With the top of the world having frigid and chilled temperatures, most of Russia has become inhabitable...”

The whole world is in turmoil, human lives on the brink of existence. I look up at the once star-filled sky, reminiscing of the world that once existed. We always hope for the better, but does that even exist anymore?

Present Day

People spilled out onto the streets, an overwhelming sea of bobbing heads heading towards the hub. Streets stank of rotting food and waste, downtown housing flooded with the impoverished. Beyond the ancient walls of Xi'an, the thriving heart of the city shone, filled with the fortunate, prosperous and the corrupt.

After disasters struck, one after the other, the parliament of the Chinese Government was bombed, leaving nothing and no one left behind. The country was in unrest, people trying to escape, just to realise the rest of world's situation was just as dire. Naturally, wealthy aristocrats took over because of their money and assets.

Rumours that scientists were creating some sort of time machine spread like wildfire. The hub's research centre, one of the most advanced and high-tech institutes in the world, kept mostly everything under wraps. Although the inside was pristine white and tranquil, the outside often harboured protesters demanding for change and better living quality.

I stood there now, in the crowd of onlookers, pushing my way forwards – toward the old town hall library and observatory. The new machinery may have changed the world, but in these pages, I find solace of what once was. As the door creaks open, the darkness that shrouded the room lifted a little. Through the skylights and cracks in the walls, tiny slivers of light poured into the room, creating a warm afternoon glow. I wander around the shelves, my hands skimming along the covers of books, as I admire precious artifacts made of gold, jade, and clay, encased in hazy and smashed glass, their bright colours slowly fading and chipping away as they gradually rust.

I make my way up the wooden staircase to the observatory, the walls of the circular room displaying the constellations of the solar system. Although the observatory was old, it looked just as grand as it was before. After I opened the dome to let the light shine through, I observe that the room was noticeably cleaner, books that were once strewn on the floor were put back

on the shelves, the floor and telescope spotless and void of dust. However, I notice a massive chest at the back of the room, something I never recalled was there. Yet, it was the only thing that seemed untouched. I go and open the chest, dust and cobwebs making me cough. As I peer inside, all I can see is darkness. I reach my hand inside to feel if there is anything in there, but I couldn't feel the bottom. It seemed that it was a hidden passageway. I took off the ring on my thumb and threw it in to figure out how deep it was. It seemed like minutes had passed before I heard a soft clang resonating. I wondered if there was a way down, so I shifted the chest over, and sure enough, there were rungs on the inside wall. Hesitantly, I climbed down rung by rung, a musty smell taking over. The darkness was a cloak, the light from above getting further and further away until I was plunged into something as black as inky darkness. When I couldn't feel anymore rungs below me, I stepped off onto the floor, my hands reached out, only to feel damp walls. I kept my right hand on the wall, gradually going forward. The smell seemed to get more intense as I walked, fouler and reeking of mold and waste.

After a few minutes had passed, a small trickle of water droplets fell and echoed, which turned into a rushing river of water as I moved onwards. Faint light could be seen in the distance, occasionally flickering. The stream of water ran alongside me, leading to who knows where. After rounding so many corners, it came to an abrupt end. I refused to believe there was nothing there, that I came all the way here for nothing. I frantically searched all over the walls for a keyhole, a door crack, anything, but there was nothing there. I was about to go back when I realised that the river of water led through the wall and to the other side. What if...? Considering for a moment, I thought I had gone insane, but I was intent to know where it led to. My curiosity won me over, and I took off my jacket so it wouldn't weigh me down. Without hesitation, I leapt in, the cold water engulfing me and drowning out my thoughts. The current tried to drag me under, but I pushed to the surface, emerging on the other side. I spluttered and coughed, water that filled my lungs coming out. I struggled to latch onto a ledge, my hands slipping away, but eventually I pulled myself up and found myself in a cramped room that forced me to stand with a hunched back. I was soaked to my skin, shivering, and chattering my teeth. Just above my head was a trap door, so I slowly lifted it, peeking through the gaps. It was a spacious white room, which seemed to be some sort of lab. On the far side of the room, there was something large surrounded by people in lab coats. They were too fixated on the large machine to notice me slipping away from the room, a small trail of water left behind. I had no idea where I was, but I knew that I was in an elite establishment, and possibly somewhere confidential. As I rounded the next corner, I bumped into someone in a lab coat. Quickly, I put my head down and continued to walk. I started to think he didn't notice me, but he grabbed my arm forcefully and spun me around, peering into my face.

“Are you supposed to be here?” he asked calmly, but with an expression of suspicion, his grip loosening slightly. He eyed my soaked clothes and winded state.

“I was just dropping off a delivery.” I replied hastily.

“Huh, most deliveries come in by the back door” he murmured doubtfully. “You're not in uniform either.”

Before he could say or do something else, I tugged my arm away and ran in the opposite direction. Alarms started ringing, triggering my panic. Security headed towards me, so I turned back the other way to the direction of the trapdoor. I surged past a perplexed scientist and entered the room with the strange pod-looking machine. I looked around and saw a monkey placed in the pod. A countdown started, and within moments it disappeared, a frightened and melancholy expression in its eyes. Realisation hit, as I understood what it was

for. It was the big project the research centre was working on, the time machine. I desperately glanced around as buff figures of security closed in around me. Running out of ideas, I sprinted towards the time machine, just in time for their next experiment. I climbed into the pod, closing the cool glass around me as scientists attempted to shut the machine down. They frantically pressed different buttons and control levers, but nothing worked. My face went pale as I realised, I had made a huge mistake. I banged on the glass, trying to break it, but nothing worked. Reality began to sink in as I sulked in a tiny ball on the ground. The countdown had begun, and in no time, I was transported somewhere unknown.

I slowly unfurled from my ball and looked around. This is what earth looked like? Astonished, I stood up, admiring the world around me. It looked somewhat brighter than the future, as if the burden of the world's state hadn't fully settled in yet. The peace and calming morning shine that gleamed around me created a sense of innocence, the rustle of the verdant lush leaves and the slowly rising sun made the Earth seem young, oblivious of what would transpire.

With no idea where I was or if I could ever get back, the only way was forward. Forward into the vast unknown, forward for a better future, and forward for new beginnings.

The Lost Needle: A Journey of Discovery and Direction

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Zhao, Yingying – 11

The night was dark. Unusually dark, as though a bottle of black ink had been spilled into the sky, but hundreds of little lanterns filled with fire were dancing beneath it, like floating little fairies. People were dancing, laughing, singing, for they knew that after a long time plagued by scarcity, hope had come – apart from one family. They were sitting together by a round table, thin-mouthed, dark faced, with tear tracks still glistening on their cheeks. A lanky, hollow-cheeked boy, looking only a slightly bit older than 17, pulled a small bag rucksack in, and looked around wildly in despair.

Dear diary, I'm Qing. Every year, the court of law hired a animal hunter as part of their court, for the magnificent animals on a special feast. Tomorrow morning, my little brother would set off for the Howler forest, as the fourteenth animal hunter to the court. However, even the village's most formidable hunters shied away from this task. "What about the thirteen people before him?" Once I asked an elder. "Dead." he said simply, "but your brother has to go. It's not merely a matter of his honour; our village has been forgotten for far too long..." I didn't refute. The job was paid heavily with gold, and the tiny village needed it, desperately.

As the first rays of light appeared, random strangers and neighbours ran up shaking hands, grinning, shouting words of "Good luck!". It was pointless. They did nothing while watching a young boy go to his death. My mum limped to my brother, hugging him tightly, sobbing between words. At last, the crowd started to thin out as people left with broad smiles. I heard fireworks and laughter as I held my brother's hand. Why hold his hand? I asked myself. For comfort? Encouragement? Consolation? What would it do, apart from making him more nervous? I wanted to scream at myself, tell myself that I was just as irresponsible, ruthless, as all the other villagers were. But there was no point. No point in anything.

I accompanied my brother to the transferring valley. From now on, he had to walk alone. His face was milky white, with two lanky arms trembling. I didn't know what to do – hug him, maybe? Fumbling in my jacket pockets, I found an old, broken compass from many years ago. "Ling!" I ran and shouted, as my brother's lonely shadow was about to disappear into the distance. "Here. It's a good luck charm." I pushed it into his soft, slender hands. It seemed so weird; no parting words of goodbye, no tears shedded. Just a taller boy giving a rusty compass to a doomed sibling.

Dear diary, Ling here. I couldn't resist looking back, glancing at my older brother one more time. This may be (it probably is) the last time I see him. I knew this mountain road as though the palm of my hand after so many times, tracing the ups and downs of it on the map, and started trekking for the forest.

Two guards standing in attention at the entrance of the woods gave me a sleek white horse which shook its head and grunted nervously. They told me that I had to catch the glowing serpent, and left me. I don't think I pictured the sniggering on their faces. The glowing serpent? I thought incredulously, staring after them. It was one of the most dangerous creatures known. I mounted the horse, clutching my crossbow so tightly to my body that my ribs hurt. In the wood, wild birds were singing peacefully, and insects were chirping.

I entered, my heart thumping against my chest. The horse trotted at a pace just right for an evening walk, but a little too slow for my liking. I tried to pat it softly to make it move faster. It ignored me. As I ventured deeper into the shadowy forest, the comforting sounds of birds faded, replaced by eerie whispers of the wind through the trees. The darkness seemed to press in on me, making the forest feel alien and menacing. The sunlight barely penetrated the dense canopy, casting strange, shifting shadows that played tricks on my eyes. I thought I saw figures moving just beyond my vision, but when I looked directly at them, there was nothing there.

I hit my head on a branch above, my head bursting into pain. The pain was sharp, real, grounding me amidst my rising fear. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart, reminding myself of the mission's importance.

In the heart of the forest, I heard a tense rustling. I froze. The horse froze. We created a connection of understanding without words – the glowing serpent. It slithered with a hypnotic rhythm, its scales shimmering in the sunlight. I slid down the horse, and carefully observed its pattern as it hunted, noting the way it pauses before striking. Suddenly, it turned its yellow, glowing eyes's attention to me. No no no, I panicked. Wrong time, serpent. I still needed some time to think of a plan. However then I caught my gaze on the vines loosely twisted on a over-head branch. Now, I told myself. NOW! It lunged at me, but I leaped aside, throwing the net of strong vines onto it. The serpent struggled, but the vines curled itself tighter around the creature every time. Slowly, it ceased its struggle, and I knew it was finally safe to approach. I killed it with my arrow, and slung it around my shoulder.

Unexpectedly, roar came from behind me, and I felt huge paws graze across my back. I turned around and saw a great black bear standing on its hind legs. Its paws were waving wildly, and its black, beady eyes were locked on me. "Run!" I shouted. My horse screeched in alarm and started sprinting. I desperately heaved myself to the moving horse just in time. I heard the loud and thick stomping of the bear's paws on the ground as it raced towards me. I could almost picture Qing shaking his head and telling me how I used wrong tactics.

I didn't know how long it took, but by the time I was safe, I was lost in the labyrinthine forest. Every rustle in the underbrush set my heart racing, my imagination conjuring up all manner of dangerous creatures lurking just out of sight. I flipped out my pockets, but only heard the metal clang of the old compass hitting a rock on the ground and the light thump of the notebook. Great, I thought bitterly. Trapped in a forest, with no food. My desperate eyes turned to the dead serpent, its scales glinting. I have to get out of here with the serpent, not eating it. It's the only proof and hope of getting through this, I told myself sternly. The light around me was fading into night, and I was getting desperate for an exit. The only thing I could use was the compass. I tied the horse's reins to a tree trunk and examined it.

The compass was broken, but I knew its pieces could still be used. The metal felt cold and unfamiliar in my hands, but I felt the remaining reassuring warmth of Qing's hands grasping it. I took it apart, its pieces scattered on the rock. I felt Qing's hands hold mine softly and guided me to assemble it in a different way.

Its arrow was pointing in one still direction. It's probably the same ending anyway; why not? Better trust it than die here. I spent the dawn of the next day, making my way with the compass. There were times that I found myself in a dead end, and even the compass wavered and looked unsure, but the monster in my heart would mutter to myself, "Better trust it than die here. Better trust it than die here."

I saw other creatures, like lynxes and panthers, with blood on their teeth, all prowling to kill me, but their lives all came to an end on my bow. Something like pity rose inside me, but the fall of one would be a rise of another.

Finally, I saw a bright light in the distance – the entrance I came in. I gave a sigh of relief. The guards outside burst into applause and gasps as I emerged from the entrance. They clapped me on the back and cried, "A miracle! A miracle!". I grinned foolishly, a bit drowsy from the adventure, but the monster in my heart burst into roars of pride and triumph. I knew Qing would be proud.

Dear diary, the night was dark. Unusually dark, but people were dancing, singing, laughing, for they knew hope had come at last. There was no lanky, hollow-cheeked brother sitting with me, but we knew, he was somewhere, successful.

Alchemy: Gunpowder

Nord Anglia International School, Fong, Nicholas – 11

Prologue:

The wind whistled through the crumbling cobblestone streets of Xianyang, China. The starry night sky looked down on the sleeping houses.

Well, all except one.

On the outskirts of the city, one house still blazed with light in the eerily quiet city. Inside, a man called Huangfu sat on a rickety old chair, holding a small vial of snow white powder. Holding it up to the light, Huangfu smiled to himself. He had finally reached his goal.

“Ughhh,” Huangfu pried himself off his bamboo hammock. He hadn’t slept well the night before. Slipping himself into his tunic, he picked up his collection of vials and his quill before heading out the door.

Huangfu had worked for the Emperor as his Chief Alchemist for five years. The Emperor had tasked him with making a life-extending elixir for him, and Huangfu tried and failed countless of times.

But just last night, Huangfu had gotten it. And he was going to present it to the Emperor today.

Climbing the marble steps, his eyes watched the early sunrise barely visible over the castle’s enormous figure .

As per usual, Huangfu had arrived an hour early due to the harsh Qin laws – being even just one minute late meant death. You could never be too early. Finally reaching the top of the staircase, he stood before a set of menacing iron doors, looming high above him. Two guards, plated in iron armor, snapped to attention.

“What is your business here?” one guard said, standing firm.

“I’m here to see the Emperor. I think I’ve finally created a life-extending elixir,” Huangfu replied.

“Oh? I will check with the Emperor,” the second guard said and he turned around and marched into the palace.

A few minutes later, the guard returned and motioned for Huangfu to come in. As he stepped into the ornate gold walls of the palace, a servant appeared and bowed in front of him. “Master Huangfu, the emperor wishes you to come to him immediately.”

Huangfu followed the servant to the throne room, where on an glistening gold throne was Qin Shi Huangdi, the Emperor of China. Kneeling in front of the Emperor, Huangfu made sure not to make eye contact – that was a death sentence too.

Keeping his head bowed, he said, “Almighty Emperor, I have fulfilled your request, Your Majesty. I have discovered a life-extending elixir!”

The Emperor stroked his beard. “Hmmm. Really, Huangfu? I don’t believe you. You’ve told me time and time again that you’ve discovered it. But they all have turned out to be false. What is your elixir made of this time, hmm?”

“Saltpeter, Your Majesty – a powder made for medicinal purposes. I also added in some charcoal and sulfur.”

The emperor let out a scoff. “Ha! Charcoal? *Saltpeter?* I thought you were a genius, Huangfu! You call that a life-extending elixir! Let me see the vial.”

Huangfu’s face turned scarlet red. He pulled out the vial and gave it to the Emperor.

Closely inspecting it, he said, “Huangfu, I have to say... I am quite disappointed. This was the best that you could do? Really?” With a look of resignation on his face, the Emperor gave the vial back to Huangfu and said, “I am very disappointed, Huangfu. This is the sixth time you have failed. You will not be my Chief Alchemist from this moment on.”

Huangfu clenched his fists, and said, “I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I will burn the elixir and won’t bother you any longer.” He stood up, and walked out of the palace with his shoulders drooping down in defeat.

Once he got out of the palace, he wanted to scream. He failed. He worked day and night to no avail. Sitting at the top of the staircase, then looked at the city below him. By now, most of the citizens had awakened and were strolling along the streets. Sighing, he trudged back to his humble house.

Huangfu dug a pit and filled it with wood. Setting it alight with a candle, he retrieved the vial of his elixir. Looking at it one last time, he tossed it into the blazing fire with a sigh.

Then suddenly... BOOM!

A loud explosion threw Huangfu off his feet. Where the burning wood lay was now a smoking crater. Huangfu stared in shock. *What in the world happened? Was it some kind of explosion?* Huangfu wondered. He wondered what to do with it, but an ingenious thought hit him.

What if, he thought, I could turn it into weaponry? Then I could redeem myself, please the Emperor and make a military breakthrough especially with all the siege attempts that have been happening!

Determined, he began to work on the world’s first missile. He put his heart and soul into his project, worked day and night without rest, carefully constructing it. At last, after two full months of trial and error, Huangfu had finished his masterpiece.

Making a thin wooden container with a fuse, he made a stand out of bamboo for the missile to rest on. Then, very cautiously, he inserted precise measurements of the ingredients he used – 1 ounce of sulfur, 3 ounces of charcoal, and 9 ounces of saltpeter, aiming for maximum explosive capability. He was ready to present it to the Emperor.

He gently carried the missile and a candle. He walked out of his workshop in his home and started walking to the Emperor’s palace.

Just then, he heard screaming, followed by aggressive shouting. Huangfu quickly spun around and spotted something – the eastern wall had been breached by an army of Mongols. The Mongols were known for their ruthlessness in combat and were charging straight for Huangfu!

Right behind Huangfu were Chinese reinforcements racing towards the Mongols but they weren’t close enough just yet. It was chaos all at once with soldiers shouting to the peasants to get back into their homes and the Mongols screaming their fearsome battle cries.

Huangfu was now surrounded by *two* armies, both armed and ready to have an all-out battle, with him about to be caught in the crossfire.

Huangfu was paralyzed in fear for a few seconds, but then an idea struck him.

He set down the stand and put down the missile. The army was rapidly approaching – he had no room for error. Bringing out the candle, he set the fuse alight, then ran as quick as possible away from the rocket. As he ran, the rocket surged forward towards the oncoming army at an alarming speed, reaching them in three seconds. And just as Huangfu predicted,

the rocket combusted and blew an explosion that knocked all of the Mongols back, and injured most of them. A smoking crater stood where the army was.

Bruised and battered, the surviving Mongols looked bewildered about what just happened. Then they suddenly realized that they greatly underestimated the Chinese army and their weaponry. With the Chinese soldiers racing towards them and closing in, the survivors scrambled to their feet and ran as fast they could away from the village.

Huangfu exhaled a big sigh of relief, and when he turned back around, he was greeted by many cheers and grateful thanks from the townsfolk, who had been cowering in fear the whole time. The soldiers were impressed by Huangfu's amazing weapon. Everyone was applauding and cheering for him. Soldiers were patting him on the back and peasants ran up to him and asked a million questions like what it was and how he made it.

Huangfu was grinning ear to ear, and tried to tell everyone that he just wanted to serve his country well. As he made his way through the enormous crowd, his heart filling with happiness, a royal messenger appeared.

He announced, "Sir Huangfu, the Emperor would like to see you immediately."

Museum of Evocation

Singapore International School Hong Kong, Kam, Hei Yin Cadence – 12

A man is wandering through the maze of corridors that is the museum.

He does not know how long he has been wandering like this; inside the museum, time seems to still and yet continue to flow. The fluorescent lights are always on, the guards remain at their posts, gazes never wavering as he drifts through the halls, and the plaques under the exhibits remain perpetually blank. There are no clocks in this museum. Sometimes a woman comes, dressed in dark, solemn robes, but she never speaks to him, and she leaves too soon.

He passes paintings of long gone times, the colours lustreless and the details murky, unelaborate inventions covered with rust, sculptures and carvings that stare at him with empty, lifeless eyes. Every exhibit he comes across is new, but he has passed through the same rooms over and over again.

The man's fingers accidentally skim across one of the blank plaques. To his surprise, a three-dimensional scene forms from mist, swirling and meandering, and a young voice rings out.

"According to Chinese legend, the saw was invented by Lu Ban, a master carpenter who was later deified by the common people. One day when he was gathering wood, he cut his hand on a spiky leaf. Inspired by the leaf's texture, Lu Ban would go on to invent the saw, a more efficient tool to cut trees."

Curiosity ignited, he wanders further, brushing his fingers against one gilded plaque, and another. Soon, the halls of the museum are reverberating with the narrator's voice.

"This is a prototype of a kite, which could stay up in the air for three days before..."

"One of the first drills was created in China, during the Zhou Dynasty, by..."

"Grappling hooks and battering rams were used in combat more than two millennia ago..."

With renewed energy, the man rushes from exhibit to exhibit, listening intently to the tales woven by the narrator. He only stops when he reaches the last exhibit in the room: an umbrella.

The umbrella is crude and rudimentary, only consisting of cowhide stretched over a wooden frame and a long stick as the handle. The man reaches out to touch the plaque-

Images flood, rush, pour in on him, and the man is overwhelmed, carried into the memories of someone else.

Raindrops fell, speckled gems from the turbulent sky, rocked by sudden gales and lashing thunder. Women rushed for the shelter of the pavilions, their pastel skirts billowing behind them; men were forced to ignore the rain and continue working.

Among the women who had been caught in the unexpected deluge was a wife by the name of Lu Yun. From the safety of the pavilion, she watched her husband doggedly labour despite the pouring rain, and wished there was something she could do to ease his burden. Something that could shield him from the sun and the rain, like a portable pavilion that you could carry.

After the rain ceased, Lu Yun hurried home and gathered materials for her planned project. Cowhide, wood, her husband's saw... after a week, it was ready. She called it an "umbrella".

In this way, Lu Yun invented the world's first umbrella.

After Lu Yun gave her invention to her husband, her husband used it every day, rain or shine. On especially tempestuous days, he was so grateful to her that he was rendered speechless, unable to fully describe his gratitude and love for her.

Lu Yun died a mere two years later, taking her husband's unborn child with her. The villagers offered to help bury her, but he refused – this emotion was something private, to be hidden, only for himself and his wife.

As the sepulchral night fell, her husband stood there alone, crying, mourning, while rain cascaded down around him like saltless tears.

The man draws his hand back from the umbrella, staggers with the added memories, the memories... that he now knows to be his own.

Because the man *remembers*. He remembers hours of onerous, gruelling work under the burning sun. He remembers grief and anguish, kneeling over his wife's grave as the raindrops drifted and twirled, freed from gravity by the wind. He remembers getting deified, ascending to the heavens, watching the power of Chinese kingdoms wax and wane over the centuries, blessing all the builders and contractors who prayed to him with persistence and resilience... He *remembers*, remembers it all, his whole long immortal life of more than two thousand years. He remembers yearning to be forgotten, yearning to live a truly mortal life and be reunited with his loved ones in the afterlife, yearning to speak one last sentence to his wife before she left him. And he remembers, being so inundated with grief... that he forced himself to forget his very name, his history, just to escape the sorrow and suffering.

Lu Ban, Chinese god of inventions, *remembers*. Even though he couldn't, even though he shouldn't.

And now he knows why.

There are deities, who have always been deities, who have been ever since the world was formed and will be until the world is razed, who have never known a human life's struggles and sorrows and hopes and dreams. But the ones who were once human cannot forget their past, and therefore they continue to be subject to human emotions and human wishes, until they live out the two destinies of deities – to live on forever, waiting for the centuries to pass, or to evanesce, to pass out of the collective memory into nonexistence.

For deities need memories to survive; this is a rule that cannot be broken. A deity without the memory of the people will dissipate and perish, even if they have memories of themselves; but a deity without memories of themselves is no longer a deity, but rather a shell, a husk, a lacuna in their former self, reduced to less than a soul but never able to go to the underworld, trapped in a perpetual state of oblivion.

But more than that, there is the cause for their amnesia. Sometimes it is anger, sometimes it is torment, but most of the time it is grief. And if the grief is so strong it can reduce a deity to less than a soul, it is enough to trap the soul who is the target of that grief in the mortal world, until the deity accepts their emotions.

So Lu Ban knows who he will see when he turns from the umbrella.

“We both know what you need to do,” the spirit of his wife speaks behind him.

Lu Ban does know now. And he doesn't want to do it, because it'll mean that he'll never see his wife again in this world, in this body. But the more he resists, the more he understands that he has to let his wife go, so she can join in the natural cycle of the human soul.

He doesn't speak, but they can both sense the shift in his emotions.

The exit appears in the wall behind Lu Yun, but Lu Ban does not step through. Not yet. He still needs to say something to his wife.

“Even after you are reincarnated, I will still be there, watching over you. And we will be together in every life you live. I promise.”

It's then that his wife smiles, a true and real smile of unadulterated gratitude. “Thank you.” With those words, she dissipates, to be reincarnated into a new life.

Lu Ban steps out into the sunlight, finally at peace. Behind him, the museum of his imprisonment, now cast in shadow, crumbles, withers, falls. All that is left is him.

Lu Ban spreads his wings, and he's flying, soaring through the sky. The wind whistles in his ear, and he can almost imagine his wife's voice, tinkling soft in the wind. *Thank you.*

Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 3



The Not So Healing Medicine

CUHK FAA Thomas Cheung Secondary School, Caparros, Carmelo Simon Alfeche – 13

A long time ago, during the Eastern Han Dynasty, there was a Taoist alchemist called Wei Boyang, or Wei for short. Wei was a clever person. He is known to be the author of the *Cantong Qi*, which was the earliest book of alchemy in China. The Eastern Han Dynasty had a major problem during the last few years of the dynasty which was that most of the emperors died at an incredibly early age, the youngest being below 20. “I must find a way to deal with this problem!” Wei said, “I must create an elixir for eternal life! But how?” So, he did what most alchemists at the time would do, experimenting on some chemicals to make the perfect potion to grant long life to the emperors.

The first thing Wei tried to do was to put a red mushroom-like fungus and a fermented slice of watermelon into a cauldron and start stirring with some boiling water. The substance in the cauldron started to turn dark red and steam began to rise from the water. Wei grabbed a bottle and put a spoonful of the mixture into the bottle then gave it to his test subject — a pig. The pig drank the substance that Wei gave to it. But the next day, the pig dropped dead on the floor.

But Wei never gave up and continued to make potions. He looked through the ingredients he had on his ingredient shelf which contained herbs and leaves for medicine. Then he placed the ingredients into his trusty cauldron with some water and started brewing. A couple of minutes later, the mixture turned green and looked like prison food. Wei had no choice but to test it on another test subject, this time a cow. But when Wei gave the mixture to the cow, the cow refused to drink it and ran away.

Wei was running out of ingredients to use for his “elixir of life,” so he grabbed whatever was left on the ingredient shelf. There was sulfur, charcoal, and some forms of oxidizing agent. He put them all in a pestle and mortar and started to smash them to turn them into dust form. While mixing them to the combined three dusts, the heat from the friction triggered a chemical reaction and started to burst into flames! “Interesting...” said Wei, “I must document this reaction in my journal immediately!”

As he was jotting down notes in his journal, he thought about ways to make the reaction more powerful and more explosive. He’d like to make an invention that could possibly benefit the entire world. Wei began to read some alchemy books about chemicals and their reactions. And he found it — saltpeter. If he could find that chemical, he could make a scientific discovery that no one had ever seen. “But where would I be able to find it?” Wei asked himself.

So, Wei continued to look through the pages about saltpeter. It was known to be commonly found in the capital of the northern province of Bingzhou, Taiyuan. Wei lived near the capital of the Han Dynasty, Luoyang. So, the journey to Taiyuan would be a long and challenging one. But Wei had his spirits high. He packed his belongings and then hit the road.

Wei started his journey off by going to his first destination, Jiaozuo. He continuously walked north until he hit his first problem in his journey, the Yellow River. In order to get to his destination, he needed to cross the Yellow River. But Wei could not swim. So, his only choice was to build a boat from scratch. “But how?” he asked himself.

Wei might have been one of the smartest people to live during his time, but he was only an expert in alchemy, not carpentry. There was no civilization nearby so he could not ask for some help in building a boat. Therefore, he needed to build it all by himself. Wei had read a book about boats before, so he remembered the basics. He started to chop down some trees for wood for the hull of the boat. Then he began to think about how the hull's shape should be to float on the water. Wei began to experiment on several types of boat hulls. His final decision was to make it into V-shape to make it easier to travel along the water. Then he finished a boat on which he could stay in it. And he has successfully made his first boat! Now, the only problem was how to get to the other side of the river safely. "I know! Since the currents of the Yellow River are strong, maybe I can just travel along with the currents. Then I can cross the river safely." Wei said. So, he did what he said and traveled across the river. After that, he continued his journey to Jiaozuo smoothly.

After resting at a place in Jiaozuo, he began to prepare for his journey to his next destination, Jinzhong, which was a farther place than his last journey from Luoyang, but he was up for the challenge. After all, if he could get saltpeter for his experiment, he could possibly be known all over the world as the best alchemist in the world. So, he began his journey right away until he was faced with his second problem — the mountains. Wei's backpack was big and heavy, so hiking up the mountains was going to be a perilous journey. But Wei was persistent and determined to hike through the mountains. He walked, and walked, and walked. After ten excruciating hours of just walking on top of stones, going uphill and downhill, his feet started to swell but he finally made it to the other side of the mountain. He stopped and rested for a while in a nearby village to catch his breath. Then he continued on his track. The rest of the trip was a breeze as Wei mostly had to walk through flat ground or mountain tracks.

Wei had finally reached the second and last stop of his long journey, Jinzhong. But he still needed to travel to his final destination, Taiyuan. So, once again, he gathered his belongings after resting and set off again to Taiyuan to grab the one thing he needed for his recipe, saltpeter. Travelling from Jinzhong to Taiyuan was a walk in the park because the only thing separating the two villages was more villages. So, the only thing he had to do was walk and watch out for potential bandits during his journey. When he was at his destination, he breathed a big sigh of relief. He had finally finished his journey of ten days, and he could finally find the material he needed.

At the entrance of a village in Taiyuan, there was a big sign that read "Saltpeter Mine" pointing to the right. Wei immediately ran to the mine. He grabbed a small pouch from his pocket and took a handful of saltpeter. Wei paid the owner of the mine a pouch of gold coins for the saltpeter and started to go back home to Luoyang. When he was back home, Wei did what he did last time with a pestle and mortar. He put saltpeter and charcoal in a pestle and mortar and smashed it into dust. Then he added a bunch of saltpeter into the mortar and started to mix. But this time, it did not just burst into flames like last time. This time, it created a blast which was powerful enough to make a hole in the ceiling of Wei's little hut. There was smoke coming out of the pestle and mortar. Wei's face was covered in ashes. "This, this is amazing!" Wei said excitedly, "I must document this in my book right this instant!" So, Wei wiped his face with a towel and started to write in his journal. It turned out that when these three chemicals mixed together, the sulfur and charcoal acted as fuel and the saltpeter was the oxidizer. Those three chemicals reacting with each other released many gases which caused the mixture to burn rapidly and then explode. He called the mixture "fire medicine" as it was originally supposed to be medicine for the emperor. Wei said to himself "This is

amazing! I can report this to the emperor so that they can have a weapon to use against their enemies.”

Wei brought the saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal to the emperor. He explained to him that these chemicals would create explosives. For this, the emperor crowned him with the special title of “The Father of Alchemy.”

Today, “fire medicine” is given the name “gunpowder” as it has been used as a propellant for many types of weapons. It is also used in dynamites and other explosives. Not only is it used in weapons, but it is also used in fireworks and firecrackers to celebrate the New Years.

New Tales of Chopsticks

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Chiu, Long Tin Isaak – 14

It was an average winter day. The sky was cloudless, and the sun was shining brightly as usual. The gentle pattering sounds of the river shore, accompanied by the crisp and charming chirps of the migratory birds and the soft rustling of leaves, formed a wonderful piece of symphony. While the peasants of the country were enjoying this masterpiece, the steelworkers of the river alleviation project were ignoring the concord.

After days and days of excavation, the canals grew long and slithered across the plains, eventually reaching the vast ocean. Despite the fact that the project was massive, there was still a shortage of workers. Yu, the leader of the operation, was also obliged to participate in the construction. He was the son of Gun, the former manager who had been lazy and incompetent. Gun had wasted time and resources, and failed to prevent the flood that devastated the land. He was dismissed and executed by the emperor, who entrusted Yu with the task of completing the project. Yu was nothing like his father; he was diligent and ingenious. He always finished his section ahead of schedule and supervised the work of others.

“How’s the progress?” Yu asked his subordinates.

“We’re only a few miles away from the ending point. We’re ahead of schedule and we should be able to wrap up soon,” they reported.

“That’s excellent news. You’ve all done a fantastic job. Let’s take a break and have some lunch, shall we?” Yu proposed. His team nodded eagerly and borrowed some cooking utensils from the nearby villagers. They prepared a simple but hearty meal of rice and vegetables in a pot over a fire.

They had been working hard for months, digging and excavating under the scorching sun. They felt exhausted and hungry, but also hopeful and proud. They gazed at the sky, thinking of their loved ones and their aspirations. They couldn’t wait to finish the project and return home. Zhu, one of Yu’s assistants, was especially impatient. He reached for the pot as soon as the food was ready, but it was so exceedingly hot that he withdrew his hand right away.

“More haste, less speed.” Yu cautioned. He took out his knife and cut off a branch from a nearby tree. He sharpened one end of the branch and used it to skewer a piece of lettuce from the pot. However, the lettuce slipped off the branch and fell back into the boiling water. Yu frowned and cut off another branch. He held one branch between his thumb and index finger, and the other between his ring finger and pinkie. He used his index and middle finger to manipulate the first branch up and down. He successfully picked up the lettuce with his improvised chopsticks and placed it on Zhu’s plate. His team watched him in awe and followed his example.

After a brief rest, they returned to work as usual. Several weeks later, they finished the excavation, and the new canal was finally in use. Yu was summoned to the imperial court to report on the success of the project. Shun praised him for his diligence and loyalty. As Yu was about to leave, one of his subordinates told Shun about an incident that happened during the construction. He said that Yu had cut off some branches from a tree and used them as utensils to eat his food, without wasting time to go back to his home. Shun was impressed by Yu’s dedication and decided to abdicate in his favor, marking the end of Shun’s dynasty. To commemorate this incident, it was decided that those sticks would be named chopsticks since

Yu chopped them off from a tree. Interestingly, it was sarcastically named Zhu in Chinese after Zhu.

The news of Shun's abdication and Yu's ascension spread quickly among the people. Yu was eager to share his wisdom and skills with his subjects, and one of the first things he did as the new emperor was to teach them how to use chopsticks. He believed that chopsticks were not only a convenient tool for eating, but also a symbol of harmony and balance. Soon, chopsticks became popular and widespread, and people started to make them in various shapes and sizes. However, Yu noticed that some chopsticks were too long or too short, too thick or too thin, too round or too square. He worried that these chopsticks would cause confusion and disorder, and decided to standardize them. He decreed that chopsticks should have a round lower end, representing the sky, and a square upper end, representing the earth. He also decreed that chopsticks should be seven inches and six long, reminding people to restrain their emotions and desires. With these rules, chopsticks became more uniform and elegant, and their use became a tradition that lasted for generations.

Decades later, Yu was about to find his successor, following the example of Shun. He selected several candidates from among his subjects. He did not wish for his son to inherit the throne, knowing how hard and demanding the role of emperor was. However, his son Qi was nominated by the ministers, and thus Qi joined the list of candidates. To test the virtuosity of the candidates, he ordered carpenters to make three-foot-long chopsticks. He asked the candidates to use these chopsticks to eat as part of the exam.

Most of the candidates tried to feed themselves with the chopsticks. However, the chopsticks were too long, and they could not grasp the food. They failed repeatedly and became frustrated. Some of the candidates gave up and left the palace in shame. Like father, like son, Qi inherited his father's wisdom and did not lose hope. He came up with a brilliant idea. He fed another candidate with chopsticks and passed the exam by demonstrating his kindness and cooperation. Yu was surprised and pleased by Qi's solution, and decided to appoint him as his heir.

By the time Qi became the emperor, he treasured the first pair of chopsticks until they vanished out of sight. Up until Qi's son ascended to the throne, the requirements for the heirs to follow stayed the same. Yu passed away not long after Qi succeeded. This puts an end to the legend of chopsticks, as they are still often used for meals today.

Immortalized cup

Kowloon True Light School, Leung, Hang Ping Adelaide – 14

“Erm... Your highness, what exactly are you doing...?”

The servant leaning over the copper pot scrunched her face in confusion. King Shennong said nothing, as he poured some liquid into the clay cup presented in front of him. The servant straightened up and hastily received the cup now offered in her direction. She sent her King a befuddled look before she warily eyed the coloured substance in her cup.

“Drink it, Yinger. This king promises it is not poisonous in any sense.” the old man croaked out as the skin around his eyes creased. Sensing no ill intent and with genuine curiosity, Yinger downed the liquid in one go. Once she’d gotten past the initial burn in her throat, the mysterious liquid left behind a bittersweet aftertaste. Eyes sparkling almost comically, Yinger couldn’t help but let out a squeak of delight.

‘Whatever this is, it’s so good! This is way better than plain old water!’

King Shennong gave a hearty chuckle, “It seems you enjoy this plenty, that’s good. I reckon my subjects should have something other than water all the time,” he quipped, “Yinger, take some home with you, I must perfect this new recipe even further.”

More hours passed, Yinger was soon sent away with 2 clay jars of the newly created concoction. *‘Now, all I need is some nice scenery to go with this ‘tea!’* she thought, merrily skipping towards the city outskirts.

Deep within the ravenous mountains, upon a jagged cliff, another woman sat with her back against an old banyan, staring blankly at the mass below. Her face was sharp and angled, with eyes so cold that sent ordinary people running. She rose abruptly when the sound of light footsteps appeared, cocking her head in the direction of the newcomer, hackles raised.

Yanmei bounded up the stone steps, juggling 2 huge jars of tea in her hand. Upon arrival at the ledge, Yanmei skidded to a stop when faced with the unknown woman. A quick staredown later, she extended a hand holding a jug towards the woman, all smiles.

“Hello miss! Care to join me for some tea? It was only invented recently!” “You... are immortal too?”

Yanmei’s smile faltered for a second before it came back even brighter, “Ah! All the more reason to talk,” she giggled, “I’m Yanmei, pleasure to meet you.”

The woman reshifted her gaze to the clay jar dangling from an outstretched hand, and after much deliberation, gave a curt nod.

“Xinshuang.” A pause, “my name is Xinshuang.”

The sparrows above head chirped, wings flapping as they flew over the sea of clouds. Mountain peaks covered with moss jutted out, some acting as a resting place for weary cranes. Yanmei danced around the clearing in her vibrant hanfu, bells tinkling with each tiny step. Silk and satin blended in a whirlwind of colours flowing near and far.

Xinshuang watched from her spot at the stone table, gaze trailed on every swish and twirl, and between her lithe fingers, a cup of steaming green tea. She raised the cup to her lips, blew on it gently, and sipped delicately, savouring the taste. A bamboo scroll regarding Emperor Wu's grand achievements rested on the opposite seat, its contents long-forgotten by the fiery flower.

Yanmei suddenly slowed her pace and tilted her head at her friend's direction, a small smile dancing on her lips. Xinshuang too, couldn't help the upturn of her mouth.

"Before my bed lies a pool of moon bright," Yanmei recited, "I could imagine that it's frost on the ground." With each line, her eyes grew further distant, as if thinking of the bygone past. Xinshuang sat across from her, methodically pouring out a cup of puer from an intricately painted teapot.

"No wonder Li Bai's been the talk of town, his poetry really invoked something strange in me..." Yanmei mumbled.

"And yet I thought you of all people would know what nostalgia feels like most."

Yanmei whipped her head from the book to stare, or attempt to glare, at the frosty woman, huffing indignantly, "Oh be quiet! Humans have been progressing so quickly I've barely gotten time to reminisce." Xinshuang responded with a fond eye roll before handing the cup to awaiting hands.

"Drink up, we'll have all the time in the world to mull over his poems later."

They had always chosen this spot before because of its spectacular views and calming atmosphere, and yet, with the flattened mountains now littered with booby traps and prowling soldiers carrying heavy guns, there really was no reason for them to return to this secluded spot, which had somehow stayed safe against the barrage of attacks. But at the same time, going anywhere else just didn't feel right, so they stayed.

"I visited Nanjing yesterday."

Hearing this, Xinshuang internally froze, but gave a small hum to encourage the girl to continue.

The once bubbly flame had all but extinguished into a spark, prominent eyebags and trembling lips gave away the obvious exhaustion on Yanmei's face. "It's like everyone said, it's all gone. Their forces really didn't spare anyone." She opened and closed her mouth a few times and let out a few uncertain noises before finally settling on a question.

"Do you.. Do you think they'll escape from this?"

This, being the endless slaughter, the misery and heartbreak, the years long darkness. Xinshuang really couldn't answer, humanity's fate laid with humans, not immortals. They had no reason to interfere in mortal affairs. In the blanket of silence that followed, she reached out to cover Yanmei's hand with her own,

offering even the slightest of comfort, as useless as it may be in these circumstances.

The tea between them had already grown cold.

Xinshuang had to tip her hat to humans. How they managed to create *panda dung tea* of all flavours was beyond her centuries of wisdom. But if weird tea flavours made Yanmei crack up every time, then she supposes there's no real offence taken (the straight-laced elders back in the day would disagree).

The pair sat at the same stone table, now weathered to the point where the patterns have all but faded completely, with a new bamboo-painted teapot brewing tieguanyin in the middle.

All those gorgeous cliffs and the occasional crane were now replaced with towering skyscrapers and metal, leaving almost no trace of the China they knew before. A great shame, but an interesting surprise nonetheless. Yanmei hummed a tune washed away by the tides of time as she laid her head on the table, gazing up intently at Xinshuang.

The former raised an arched eyebrow at the same face that's been with her for millenia. If one looked hard enough, they'd find 2 names repeated over and over in records spanning dynasties, either as a measly palace official or a dedicated farmer. Yanmei and Xinshuang, Xinshuang and Yanmei. No matter when, they were always a pair.

Of course, with immortality comes melancholy. Watching humanity's growth is akin to watching a flower grow, there's no longer any trace of the weak and sprouting bud. The distant past is all but a fading memory, stories eroding over time. There is a selfish wish shared between them, that the mountain their beloved cliff sits upon stays the same forever.

“Same time next month?”

“Of course.”

Translations

Yanmei – 焰美

Xinshuang – 馨霜

King Shennong – 神農氏

Emperor Wu – 漢武帝

Li Bai – 李白

New Tales of China's Inventions

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Hung, Haruka, 13

From a very young age, I had always been interested in History, and watching past events unravel has just always fascinated me. However, there was one person I always wanted to know more about, a case I always wanted to crack; all I wanted was to learn about Bi Sheng, the inventor of the movable type. With his life being shrouded in mystery, I could never find any more information about him through books or scrolls, so I made it my mission to be the first to discover and excavate his tomb.

The day I decided to try my luck was particularly foggy, with the wind howling beneath the forest of ashy clouds. The trees were veiled in the swirling fog, their trunks sombre brown, their leaves tumbling from the interlocking branches, letting out a crunch with every step.

I dug for days and days, but to no avail. My exhaustion was getting the best of me, and my mind was as cloudy as the weather. Still, I persisted. And on one fateful day, I found it. In front of me was a block of stone, fully coated in thick mud, which I washed out with water. It was hewn out of grey slate, and engraved with intricate patterns and characters. My eyes shone at the sight of the words “Bi Sheng”. Holy cow. I was instantly lost for words. I knew I had discovered something important, I had found the long lost tomb of the inventor of the movable type, Bi Sheng.

I let my fingers run across the bumpy surface of the slate, the carvings had created various layers of texture for it, which made it much more detailed than any other grave I had come across. My eyes were still fixated on the grave, when I saw a black hole in front of me, where the tomb had been. There was a huge force pulling me in, about to swallow me whole.

And all of a sudden, I was weightless, and my sight became a blurry haze. I was floating into the black void of space, into a world I had never seen before.

I was whisked through a seemingly endless channel, without any idea where I would end up. After an eternity, a whirlpool carried me back down onto the ground. But nothing prepared me for what I saw, it didn't look anything like the cities I was used to. My brain was pooled with questions: Where am I? When am I? Why am I even here??? After asking a few locals, I discovered I was in 1040 AD China, which was the Northern Song dynasty. I was greeted by majestic red temples with crisp golden roofs, resembling what I had read in my History textbooks. From their ceilings hung garlands of glowing lanterns, vibrant as stars. Villages of tiny wooden houses lured me to poke my head into one of them. I quietly tiptoed near the entrance of a house and peeked through a thin gap.

My eyes laid upon a slender man with a pointy beard, wearing a plain hemp robe with wide sleeves double the size of his arms. He was probably in his 70s, his saggy, weathered skin was folded into wrinkles, and his silvery strands of uncombed hair rested upon his shoulders.

His palms were gripping onto the metal carving knife, carefully shaping each character to the tiniest details, yet his hands weren't shaking a single bit, as if he knew every step like the back of his hand. I just couldn't believe my eyes, he was right in front of me. It was him, Bi Sheng.

His workplace was lit with a flickering candle, the shapes of his furniture discernible and their colours muted. His small wooden desk was covered with tattered sheets of yellow paper, complex characters painted on with ink. Failed prototypes were lined on his bench, and his tools were hung on the burgundy clay wall. The entire room was beautifully chaotic.

I carefully observed him at work. He began layering resin, wax, and ashes onto a square sheet encircled with an iron flame, and melted the mixture in a kiln. His eyes were fixated on the mixture, barely even noticing my presence. “Wow, such focus...”, I breathed. He waited for the adhesive to cool, and pressed the clay down with a wooden board. His breaths became small and shallow, and his eyes glistened with anticipation. He shakingly picked the mould up, and cautiously laid it onto yet another sheet of yellow paper, placed above all his previous failed attempts. I could hear him mutter, “Please let this work.” under his breath countless times, as if it were a spell that could make all his inventions work out. To his delight, the characters were printed flawlessly, with every word stamped where it should be. His face glowed with a mix of contentment and relief, I recognised that feeling, it was the sweet taste of success after a trail of failed tries. It was the overwhelming fuse of all the emotions in the world. Little did the world know they had welcomed the birth of a revolutionary invention that would shape our lives forever, the movable type.

I let out a tiny scream, but accidentally startled him at the same time. He instantly turned his head in my direction, and stared at me for a couple of seconds.

“S-sorry if I just scared you!”

“Oh it’s fine. What are you here for?”

“Hi, I- err- I actually don’t know where I am.”

“I’m Bi Sheng, come inside and I’ll show you my very new creation, I want to know what other people will think about it.”

And with that, he proudly presented to me his life’s work. Honestly, it looked nothing like the technological gadgets today, but it was still impressive for someone who lived so long ago.

“Long ago, my friends and I would copy books for a living, writing the same characters over and over again until our arms wilted. It was ABSOLUTE torture, having to go through the exact same thing everyday, from dawn to dusk. If we were to make a single mistake, days or maybe even WEEKS of hard labour would be ruined. And it was during those times I discovered we needed a change.”

I nodded along to his every word, “So that’s your inspiration for this masterpiece?”

“Yep, I’d always loved creating new things. I hope this will make a difference later on.”

I vowed that I would be back one day to witness even more wonders crafted by the mastermind, and I would one day tell the world about how this invention was brought to life.

I returned to the place where I first landed, and with a snap of my fingers, I was at the tombstone again.

...except I realised I had travelled decades into the future by accident.

The year was 2051, exactly a millennium after Bi Sheng’s death. The village was no longer mountainous, but encircled by skyscrapers reaching up to the sun. Metallic robots in all shapes and sizes accompanied humans on their daily journeys. I discovered that prosthetics, cars, and even organs were made thanks to 3D printing. The only detail that remained the same after so many years was Bi Sheng’s tomb.

The world has come a long way since the invention of the movable type. Even though it has already been replaced by newfound forms of technology, the spirit of innovation, and the rich culture behind the inventions live on.

New Tales Of China's Invention

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Wu, Joycelyn, 11

In the mountains, it was said that there is a mystical tree had leaves that were able to cure sickness, renowned for their medical properties, named the Camellia tree. The tree was once a Taoist who died in his youth and became the first Camellia tree, granting it the power to heal from it's leaves.

Most of us have heard of the story of how a Camellia leaf fell into Chinese emperor Shen Nong's boiled water, and created the first tea. But is that truly what happened?

Shen Nong was just a village boy in Shaanxi Province. One fateful day, his father grew terribly ill, and was on the brink of death. The sickness was unknown, and there was no cure. His mother told him of the Camellia tree, which could save their entire village if the disease were contagious.. But in order to retrieve the Camellia tree, he would have to climb atop mount Everest, as that was where the Camellia leaf grew. His family was desperate and sent their eldest son, Shen Nong, to complete this task. With a heavy heart dragging him backward, Shen Nong packed his bags and left.

As Shen Nong walked slowly out of the village, a warm drop of liquid ran down his cheek. He had no idea if he would survive this, if he would return, if he would see his family again. More tears escaped his eyes as he attempted to hold them back. He started walking faster. He started running, resisting the urge to look back and run back to his young brother, Shen Nin's small innocent face burning in the back of his head.

Weeks had passed when Shen Nong finished the first quarter of the trip. He was munching on a lotus root as a snack when he heard a female shout

“Hey you! Who are you and where are you headed!”

Shen Nong turned and saw a girl, clad in a white and blue hanfu made for men. Her long, dark brown hair was tucked in a messy bun. Her mahogany eyes glinted with burning confidence. In her hand, she held a sharp, pure jade dagger. There were depictions of a tiger engraved onto the handle and blade of the dagger, and an engraved word: Hui.

“Forgive me, I am Shen Nong of Shaanxi, and I am travelling to Mount Everest in search of the Camellia tree.”

Shen Nong respectfully replied, eyeing her up and down. She sheathed her dagger and equally politely answered

“Pardon, I am Hui Jin of Gansu, I am also searching for the Camellia tree.”

“I will take my leave now, lady Hui.”

Shen Nong, embarrassed by this encounter, mustered and turned away. Hui Jin scoffed, and surprisingly jumped in front of Shen Nong's way, the jade dagger touching Shen Nong's neck.

“If you're going to head to the Camellia tree, I'll have to beat you there, or stop you from getting there, which means killing you. The Camellia tree is only the size of a newborn, and I have no idea of your intentions for it.”

Shen Nong was shocked at what Hui Jin said, but calmly replied.

“Why don't we go together? You could kill me anytime. We both won't be lonely that way.”

Hui Jin was surprised with his reply, as most men laughed and looked down on her.

“Alright.”

she shot back, starting to like this new person she met.

About two months later, Hui Jin and Shen Nong were in Xin Jiang, lying huddled next to a fire at night. Hui Jin noticed that Shen Nong always had a worried expression on his face, and that he mutters about illnesses and someone called Shen Nin in his sleep. She realised she was staring at him.

“The moon is beautiful isn’t it?”

he asked, a sharp edge of sadness in his voice, snapping her out of her trance. She sighed.

“Shen Nong..... why are you looking for the Camellia tree.....”

He was silent. Attempting to prompt him into talking, she continued

“I’m looking for it because our family wants to please the emperor. We don’t get along very well, considering that my grandparents rebelled. The emperor could land a forged crime on us anytime.”

“My father has a terminal illness. I was sent to retrieve the tree to heal him. I wonder if the illness spreads.....” Shen Nong slowly said. Shen Nong sat up and looked up at the sky, as unknowing flooded through him.

Hui Jin hugs him, concerned.

The next day, the duo set off once again for mount everest. They went over rivers, faults, and lakes. Until finally, they saw the Camellia tree. It was the size of a child. Its leaves, a soothing green with white flowers decorating, blew in the wind. Then, out of nowhere, the growling tiger appeared.

Shen Nong flinched. When he opened his eyes, he saw blood. Hui Jin’s crimson blood and the tiger’s. The scarlet liquid pooled around Hui Jin’s and the Tiger’s body. A jade dagger is stabbed into the tiger’s heart. Shen Nong held Hui Jin tightly in his arms, tears falling freely. She wrapped her frail arms around him. “Your cause was.....better than mine anyway.....” She whispered into his ear, and closed her eyes for the last time.

Shen Nong left Mount Everest with the Camellia tree. He buries Hui Jin’s body atop Mount Everest, where the gods could be closest to her body. He returns to Shaanxi, and his family has died due to the disease, which left Shen Nong devastated and alone in the world, as if destined to drown in misery.

Years later, he gifted the Camellia tree to the emperor. When the emperor passed away, he gained the people’s favour and became the emperor. He invented “tea” or “cha” for its medicinal properties. It is now known throughout the world. A jade dagger rests on his table, a reminder of a dauntless person who he would forever respect.

The Step

Shanghai American School Pudong Campus, Bao, Gisele – 12

A mother and a daughter walk down a school hall. The daughter sniffles, clinging on to her mother's arm, the mother attached to that arm wearing a soft sweater and a slightly exasperated expression. She gently tugs her arm out of her daughter's grip, who starts wailing. The mother hushes the daughter and consoles, 'You'll be alright, May-may. You're a smart little girl, and Mommy knows you'll be the best in this whole school.'

May was startled awake from her dream by the shrill ringing of an alarm, insistent and bent on adding to her headache. She quickly silenced it, still drifting in the shards of her melancholy dream. Dragging herself to the mirror, she stared at her pale, drawn face and sighed. *It's going to be a long day*, she thought.

May walked down the school hall, a world away from her chattering classmates. Once, she had been part of them, but ever since her mother had died in a car crash, she had slowly floated away from the two-faced, shallow world that was 9th grade. Absorbed in her thoughts, she almost missed the colorful poster, advertising: Competition To Make Your Idea Come True! Accepting All Original Invention Designs From Schools in Shanghai! May stared at it, remembering how her mother had always loved designing inventions. Resolved, she silently vowed to win the competition.

The next day, she was approached by a girl almost glowing with energy, quite at contrast with her. She chirped, “Hey! I’m Charlotte. I heard that you were also attending the competition. Wanna be partners with me?”

May was taken aback at her enthusiasm. After all, she had met many 9th graders who appeared to be friendly but had a poisonous personality underneath. However, there was something different about this girl that made May tempted to smile back at her. Cautiously, wondering what type of magic was being worked on her, she nodded.

The next day, Charlotte invited May to come over to her home. As she entered, May was surprised at how comfy and warm it was, quite unlike the modern organization of her house. There were beanbags and books everywhere, a plate of cookies on the table, and clutter everywhere. Despite the messiness, everything felt like it belonged. As Charlotte flopped down on the sofa, May stiffly following, they began to brainstorm. Charlotte was constantly bringing up new ideas, sometimes so ridiculous that May couldn’t help herself but laugh. And, for the first time in two years, May was having a good time.

After an hour, they finally came up with a good idea – a placemat to put drinks on that also served as a phone charger, turning the heat energy of the drink into electricity. Both squealed at the genius of the idea and got to work immediately.

May came over the next week, and the next. She laughed more often and became more outgoing, which puzzled everybody. What had come over this once serious and grim girl? She became the best of friends with Charlotte, and they continued working on their project, creating prototype after prototype. Although sometimes moments of melancholy did come over her, May started thinking about her mother less and less.

Finally, after months of hard work, the day of the competition had come. They were to present their design onstage to the judges, who would then pick out the winner among all the participants. May and Charlotte were both jiggling their legs in anticipation and anxiety,

hoping that they would do well. Suddenly, May saw something flash in the corner of her eye. Her first reaction was to ignore it, but something in her instincts told her to follow it. Despite not wanting to lie to her friend, May tapped Charlotte on her shoulder and whispered, “I have to go use the bathroom. I’ll be back really soon.”

Excuse made, she turned around and raced after the shadow. Turning a corner, she found that it had disappeared. Frustrated and confused, May stomped forward, thinking that this was a waste of her time – and then found herself in an entirely different world. Everybody was wearing stuffy-looking uniforms, and nobody seemed to have a phone. It seemed like an entirely different era, and this was confirmed by the poster on the wall that said: 1990 Science Fair! May realized that she had somehow been transported into the same competition – but thirty years ago.

With a shock, May realized that this was the competition her mother had went to as the same age as her. It was like a dream come true! She could go find her mother, see her for one last time. She rushed forward to the stage, ignoring the odd looks she got because of her modern clothing. Just in time, her mother was coming onstage. She saw May and waved at her, smiling. May found herself tempted to go forward, to talk to her, to be friends with her.

But then she looked back. Behind her, beyond that wall, was a friend and a future. As much as she wanted to stay with her mother, this was the past. It wasn’t worth dwelling on. She had a design to present and a friend to support.

So, May stepped out of the past, and into the present.

Father and Son

Western Academy of Beijing, Ping, Luca – 12

Cai Wu violently jerked awake as his vivid dream was suddenly disrupted by a series of rapid knocks on his door. He impatiently rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and called, ‘Come in!’
Silence.

Cai Wu let out a long, depressed sigh. His dad was always like that. Sometimes, he would call for Cai Wu, and he would totally forget what he was doing the next second. That was old Cai Lun, Cai Wu’s dad. The Cai family was publicly renounced as the oddest household in the small village, like an awkward lump sticking out of a smooth tree. Perhaps the people felt pity for Cai Wu. Who knows? After all, his mother passed away of illness when he was only three years old, and his father was a mad inventor who barely ever showed up anywhere with Cai Wu. Nobody could understand Cai Lun. To the villagers, he just seemed like an unsuccessful clown who never knew what he was doing.

The young boy dressed quietly and independently for school, as usual. He packed his bag and hurriedly called out to his dad before he left, expecting no answer. Nothing.

The people always kept an eye out for Cai Wu though. They respected this young 6-year-old who managed to complete almost everything on his own. Cai Wu picked up his breakfast (Jianbing and buns) from a small shop opened by his best friend’s dad, Liu.

It was a long journey to school. In fact, Cai Wu was one of the few children in the village who received a proper education. This was thanks to his mum, who had taught at the small elementary school outside the village, so Cai Wu had this scarce priority.

Cai Wu munched on his Jianbing and quickened his pace. He had to arrive before the other students to complete his homework at school. Unlike the kids whose parents scurried after them to complete their homework, Cai Wu only had time to write his homework at school; he had become responsible for cleaning and organizing the house since his mum’s absence, which took up all of his time at home. Cai Wu’s housework included washing his clothes and his dad’s every day after school and taking out the trash. He was also in charge of bartering their goods and taking care of his dad’s meals beforehand. Cai Wu had to look after the family and keep the house as orderly as possible. Deep in his young, determined guts, he had a strong sense of determination. He knew this would be what his Mum would have wished for.

Cai Wu never understood his dad. For instance, he never responds when others talk to him, and he always keeps muttering under his breath as if talking to ghosts. He had never been this way when Mum was still alive. Cai Lun enjoyed studying odd plants. He had hundreds, perhaps thousands of tiny sprouts and plants growing in his office. It was the only place in the house Cai Lun kept tidy and where Cai Wu was forbidden to enter.

As Cai Wu reached school, and eyed the other students. Most of his classmates came from affluent families, and were spoiled and carefree. They didn’t and would probably never understand people like Cai Wu and did not seem to care. The first thing Cai Wu heard was, “Look who it is: the *odd egg*.” The gang of children bullied Cai Wu whenever they had the chance, making fun of him and creating cruel jokes behind his back.

Life for Cai Wu repeated like this day after day, night after night.

However, what Cai Wu did not know after all those years since his mother passed away was that his dad was sane. Very sane. Cai Lun is so rational that the people around him just cannot recognize it.

You see, Cai Wu's mother had died of a disease that the doctors had claimed to be unknown. However, after some investigation, Cai Lun discovered this type of sickness had been the case for many other patients some time ago. Patients before her had all been cured by the last generation of medics. Knowing this before her death, Cai Lun's wife had made him promise to create a solution to this for others in the future. Cai Lun had sworn, since his beloved wife's death, to discover a new element of material that could be capable of recording information to pass on to the next generation. The thing is, nobody believed his story. Nevertheless, he never lost faith in his promise to discover a completely new tool.

For the next few months, Cai Lun worked harder than ever. Only his shadows were to be seen, as he hurried from place to place in the village daily. One could even assume he was on to something.

After unflinching hard work, one day, Cai Lun finally received what he deserved. Truth and ultimate justice.

While Cai Wu was handwashing their clothes just outside the house, his old man bursted out the door, giving him quite a fright. Cai Lun simply beamed into the sunset, head up, chest out. The silence remained unbroken until Cai Wu couldn't help but ask, 'What's wrong, Dad?' 'Oh, my boy, I have something I believe I wish to show you.' Cai Wu was astonished: his dad could say a whole sentence all this time! But now was not the time for questions, as Cai Lun had already taken off into the house. Cai Wu followed uncertainly, and to his tremendous surprise, his dad led him right into his office. Cai Wu observed the small, crammed space filled with wild, colorful plants sticking out of every corner. His dad presented him with what seemed like a glossy, thin, and soft material in his office, holding it up high in his hands like it was something holy.

Cai Lun called it 'paper.' Cai Wu felt a sponge absorbing doubt and growing in his stomach, spreading the fluids of suspicion through his veins. His dad was known for coming up with 'weird' things. The village had never *seen* anything like 'paper', let alone *accept* this new 'invention.' Cai Lun immediately insisted on taking it to the hospital, as if it had a sickness that needed to be cured! Cai Wu knew how expensive medical fees were; their whole family's savings had been spent on the medical bills for his mum. He would not let his dad waste another penny on curing this 'thing.'

With that, Cai Wu stepped forward and tried to take the unusual piece of 'paper' away from his dad. However, it had simply ripped apart before he had even tried to tug at it. It was much more fragile than Cai Wu had thought, and now the scroll of the unknown element was split halfway through. He hadn't intended for it to break, and definitely not to upset his dad. He knew the consequences of messing with Cai Lun's work. If Cai Wu weren't lucky, his dad would turn wild and completely lose control of himself.

However, Cai Lun composed himself remarkably coolly. He simply said, 'I wasn't hurrying to test that part yet, but yes, it is a remarkable piece of material, isn't it.' Cai Wu's memory of his dad was once again reshaped that afternoon. He didn't know what his dad was up to and did not want to care. Try as he might, he couldn't help but toss and turn that night, constantly being reminded of his mother's memories. Could this mysterious 'paper' actually help the people? Cai Wu was too old to believe that 'paper' would bring his mum back, but yet, *what if it did help the villagers?*

The following Saturday, Cai Wu had made up his mind. He was going to help his dad no matter what it took. To him, it was their only chance at, at least, bringing the together to honor the memory of his mum.

And so, the reunited father and son took off to the hospital, borrowing the Wang family's bicycle. As a boy small for his age, Cai Wu could easily fit on the bar in front of the bike while his dad rode it towards the local hospital, grasping tightly to his discovery, like a spark of hope in his hand.