

# Fiction

## Group 1

### A Triangle of Trust

*Kowloon Tong School (Primary Section), Chow, Sze Chai Jonathan – 10*

The Atlantic sky was pink. Sunrise crawled over the horizon. A little seaplane purred like a cat. Inside was Robert Walters, archaeologist. He flew towards Bermuda. But his real target was its Triangle.

Robert saw a little island that wasn't on his map. He had to land. He shimmied down to the crystal-clear water. Robert climbed onto the float of the seaplane, hopped onto a rock, and walked onto the soft beach.

All around him were palm trees and coconut trees.

Behind him, a rustle. Robert spun around as quick as lightning and grabbed his M4 carbine, its M203 grenade launcher attached. Silence, then—

A face. Peering out of the murky forest, flinching as Rob turned his gun's flashlight on. A Chinese, but... different. His clothes were ragged and stained with blood. His hair was messy and muddy. Tanned. And a pungent smell of wild game and berries.

But what really surprised Rob was that the man looked at his gun – not with fear, but with curiosity, like it was a metal tube. Then the man asked, “What is that?” Speaking in Chinese—but not the Mandarin Rob learnt in college. Old, warped Chinese.

Soon they stood in a jungle clearing, and Rob saw a feathery, viny log cabin, watching a campfire.

“How long you been here?”

“Fifty decades or more.”

This guy must be deranged, Robert thought. Or I'm about to win a Nobel Prize.

As if reading Rob's thoughts, the man said, “There's one magical thing here.”

They padded into a stone courtyard. At its center was a rotting junk.

But a junk with pipes. A steam engine bulging in its belly. Tiled roofs.

Giant wooden wings.

Isn't it Zheng He's fleet? Carrying thousands of seamen with all state-of-the-art navigation technology? Wasn't it the first reach Americas? Even before Columbus? Rob was greedy—for everyone to know, of course.

But first he needed an artifact— enough for me to carry it to the seaplane.

Rob carefully snapped off a piece. He tucked his prize—a roughly triangular, coral-like piece of boat, suitable for carbon dating—under a baggy shirt-sleeve.

His heart pounding, he marched towards the shadowy edges of the clearing. Then suddenly a figure rose out from the bushes. “Going somewhere?”

The Chinese!

Rob quickly turned around and said, “Nowhere.”

But his brown, leathery face advanced, unblinking. “You're right. We live here now.” He lifted Rob's carbine.

But before the old new face could shoot, Rob threw his prize at it. And, unfamiliar with his own prize, the Chinese pulled a trigger as he fell.

The rifle roared, and facing upwards, tore up his jaw.

He'd pulled the second trigger. The grenade launcher's. His ancient body exploded, scattering fragments of his linen shirt. Rob twisted and jumped away, blasted by hot metal shards.

And now, looking back, he saw his legs were black, bleeding and numb. Unmoving. Sweating, Rob twisted his head. The artifact laid behind. The plane laid ahead. ... crawl? Which way?

## Grandpa's Antique Chest

*St. Joseph's Primary School, Mak, Jayden Nathan – 8*

It was Grandpa's funeral.

James Cai was holding an antique chest, which was a gift from Grandpa. Grandpa once told James, "This is our family treasure, my dear. Do not open it until you're twelve years old." James would only be twelve next month. He could not resist the temptation to find out what the family treasure was. He whispered to himself, "I must take a peep at the chest after Grandpa's funeral."

The next day, James opened the chest. He peeped inside and was disappointed. There was only a piece of rotten paper. "Liar! No treasure, just trash." James started to cry until he was exhausted and fell asleep. With tears on his face, and of course, the paper in his hand.

In his dream, James was in ancient China. He saw a young man walking towards him, with a pile of bamboo slips. Suddenly, the young man fell down because the bamboos slips were too heavy.

"Are you okay?" asked James while he was helping the young man.

The young man replied, "I'm okay. Thanks, buddy!"

"Where're you going with such a big pile of bamboo slips? Are you a carpenter or panda caretaker?"

"Of course not! I'm going to school," the young man answered.

James asked, "Why don't you write on paper instead of such heavy materials?"

James forgot that he was in ancient China where paper did not exist. The young man was puzzled and asked, "What's paper? I've never heard about it!"

Until then James realised that he was in ancient China.

"Let me tell you what paper is. Paper is a material that you write on. It's light and easy to carry. Oh right! I got a piece of paper with me. Let me show you," James said.

The young man said, "It's amazing! Can you tell me how to make it?"

"As I learnt about the invention of paper from my primary science book, paper is made with plant fibres, fishing net and old rags. Not only can paper be used to make books, it can also be used as toilet paper, paper bags or even paper money. The importance of paper is more than what you imagined."

"That's wonderful! Unfortunately, I don't know how to make paper," the young man said disappointedly.

"As my Grandpa always said, 'success only comes to those who dare to attempt,'" James said.

"This is the family precept of our Cai's family too," the young man said. "I swear I will make my own paper one day!"

James was surprised and said, "Oh! I'm also from the Cai's family. My name is James."

"Nice to meet you, James. I'm Lun, Cai Lun," said the young man.

"What? You're the one who invented..." Before James finished his words, the sky became too bright that made him closed his eyes.

When James opened his eyes later, he found that he was on his bed, with that piece of rotten paper in his hand.

## New Tales of China's Inventions

*St. Joseph's Primary School, So, Ho Ming Hayden – 8*

One day after school, I went to the nearby public library to search for a book called “Amazing Inventions from China” because I had a presentation in the coming week. “The four great inventions are the compass, paper, gun powder and printing.” As I read, my head became heavier and heavier. The book seemed to be irritated and trembled violently. The ancient Chinese characters in the picture are like black ribbons, spinning around me. I looked at this inky tornado in shock.....

“Clippity clop.....clippity clop.....” the strange voice woke me up from what must have a nightmare. But I found myself in the strangest house, it looked like an antique museum. When I looked outside, the other houses looked like temples, the streets were crowded with horses, and people were wearing robes. I was about to rush out when an old man in a silky blue robe greeted me abruptly. “Master Fu is expecting you.”

“What are you talking about? Are you .....Fu?” I asked.

“No! Mister, I dare not,” he smiled apologetically, and led me down the stairs.

“Who is Fu?” I asked again.

“He invented the compass,” he said.

We got to a lacquered elm wood door with mahogany embossed word “Fu” and a lion’s head knocker, which the old man used to knock three times.

Master Fu opened the door, he had a ridiculously long beard. He didn’t speak; he simply stared at me. The silence was broken when I gathered my courage to ask a question.

“Did you invent the compass?” I asked.

His eyes sparkled like diamonds, “you mean this? This is not called a compass, it’s called a ‘Si nan’, or iron needle, South-pointer.”

“What.....which dynasty are we from?” I asked.

He replied “Han dynasty.”

“The one before the ‘three kingdoms?’” I exclaimed.

“Three kingdoms?” He looked confused.

“Soon China will split into three kingdoms.....”

“Hush! Hush!” he was looking around, as if the walls had ears, “we can’t say that. Now, back to my invention.”

“You’re such a genius,” I looked closer at this ancient Chinese compass, which looked like a wooden board with some Chinese characters written on it and had a magnet on it that looked like a spoon. “You invented something for navigation!”

“For navigation? This is for fortune telling.”

I remembered the ancient people used compasses for fortune telling. He went on to tell me all about his invention. He believed that the center of the compass represented Heaven and the square plate represented Earth.

I never thought that a compass could be so interesting. Master Fu went to his bookshelf to find a book. He took a book which was the same book I borrowed. He turned to the page about Si nan and the words flew into the air, forming a tornado. I returned to my house. It was a shame that my meeting with him was cut short. Luckily, the presentation was a success!

## The New Element

*St. Paul's Co-educational College Primary School, Chen, Sze Ying Sonia – 9*

China was head to head with America in the medical field, trying to find a new species or invent something new to be the most developed country, but there was nothing scientists found... until Xiaomei Zhang found a new element. Her brother had complicated diseases, so the family needed special medicine. Luckily, Xiaomei and her mother took part in the Infinity Antibiotics Challenge. Now, I’ll tell you the story of how China developed so quickly during that time.

Letting out a sigh, Xiaomei looked up at the towering mountains and imagined the ice forming into little eyes glaring at her. She had been wondering about the grand prize that lay before her, the Infinity antibiotics if she found an undiscovered species. But now, looking up at the mountain, she doubted if she had made the right choice. Her ma, Meier, was more enthusiastic; she had a Beijing hospital tattoo on her arm.

“Xiaomei, dear, cheer up! We’ll get a lot of Penadol!” Meier half-sang. “And nose allergy medicine...!”

Xiaomei droned out from her mother’s chant and started climbing. Meier followed Xiaomei up the mountain slowly and steadily, but there were still a few shaky moments when she slipped on the ice. Xiaomei’s eyelashes froze and she shivered. She tried to focus, but there was a snake of unease crawling around her. Her boots sank half a meter deep in the snow. Suddenly, sparks began flying around their bodies. They were vibrant red and shooting glowing particles out of small orbs. Xiaomei’s eyes widened like plates and she gasped.

“Ma!” She yelled. “What’s happening?” Meier beamed with excitement. “You know, I think you’ve discovered a new element!”

Meier was a chemist inspired by Huang Ti and Shen Nung, and had read the Pharmacopoeia. She had also been working on a mysterious, elusive element of the periodic table. Although the new element was not proven to exist, scientists called it Millenniamium.

Xiaomei’s fear mixed with her excitement. She would actually get the Infinity Antibiotics! Hope swelled inside her, but a question popped into her mind.

How was she going to retrieve it?

Meier put on chemistry goggles, gloves, and took a phial out of her pack and smoothed it across her skin. She was used to collecting chemicals, so she did it like eating breakfast. The Millenniamium slid into the bottle and fizzled out.

“Great!” Meier exclaimed. “Let’s bring it back to the lab, and here comes our prize!”

Back in Meier’s lab, Xiaomei poured Millenniamium into a test-tube and called the market. Meier blubbered excitedly when some soap mixed with Millenniamium. The soap absorbed the element and bubbled with a bright golden glow.

“Look! The soap’s healing my bruises! I think it needs some astatine in it! It could have the potential to heal cancer!” Meier exclaimed.

Now Xiaomei has grown up. She has become a biomedical doctor and uses Millenniamium to save cancer-suffering patient’s lives. As China’s representative, Xiaomei led other world doctors to make affordable and effective treatment for cancer.

## The Contest – A Tale of the Three Great Inventions

*St. Paul's Co-educational College Primary School, Sze, Pok Tin – 9*

One day, a box of gunpowder and a compass were bragging to each other. They were arguing about who is the greatest invention of China.

“I am the greatest! I help ships to navigate,” the compass bragged. “Without me, the people in the ship will get lost, they may even die!”

The box of gunpowder shook his head and disagreed. “No, I am greater than you!” he said arrogantly. “In wars, I help our army to blast fires!” Then, he poured some of his powder into his gun, a large fireball blasted out and hit a tall building. “See?” he said. “Who can do this better than me?”

Just then, a small humble piece of paper passed by. “Look at that poor piece of paper! He is light, thin and boring,” they laughed at him. “How can he do anything for this world? Hahaha!”

However, that piece of paper did not feel embarrassed. He calmly walked over to them and grinned. “You two are so wrong. I did a lot for this world, more than you can imagine!” he announced, as he took a pencil out of his pocket and started writing. “People use me to record knowledge. Then, we become books and read by people all over the world. Without me, knowledge cannot be spread!” he said proudly. “People need me to write letters and make greeting cards, sending love to others. People also need me to draw beautiful pictures and print photos on. I help them to record their beautiful memories. Also, I can turn into paper money to help them pay for their necessities. Who else can do so much for this world like me?”

Unfortunately, the box of gunpowder and the compass still refused to admit that paper is a greater invention, so they fought back, “But now we have electronic books, and we don’t need to print photos anymore. We can also use electronic payments instead of paper money. The world does not need you anymore! Hahahaha!!!”

Finally, the piece of paper cleared his throat and asked the compass, “Now look at yourself. Can you help the ships find their way only by yourself?”

“No, but I have my partner, the map!”

“And what is the map made of?”

“Um... paper? Oh! It’s you!”

Then, the piece of paper turned to the box of gunpowder. “Where do you live? What are your packing?”

“A plastic bag and a box.”

“And what is the box made of?”

“Um...um...p...paper? Oh, it’s you again!!!”

The piece of paper’s words left the two arrogant friends speechless. “Fine, you won the contest!” they finally admitted sadly.

“I won! I won! Yay!” shouted the piece of paper happily. In a blink of an eye, he folded himself and became a paper plane, flying high into the sky. The compass and the box of gunpowder were red-faced and learnt a lesson—never look down on others.

## The Magic Green Tree

*St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Cheung, Yat Lun Aiden – 6*

I live in Beijing, a bustling and hustling city with an infusion of over 3000-year history and modern skyscrapers. My father is a bioengineer working in Zhongguancun Life Science Park, a birthplace of many innovative ideas and companies. Despite of his unconditional love for me, he seldom plays with me – he’s been way too busy with his research and experiments.

One evening, he came home earlier than usual, brimming with a glow of joy and excitement, and brought with him a tree, like an emerald canopy.

“Aiden, come on, let me introduce Daphne!”

“Daphne? It doesn’t look like a Laurel Tree.”

“Right, it’s not the one in Greek mythology, but it is magical! It is genetically modified Ginkgo Biloba tree, native to China and famous for its resilience.”

My father, fervently adoring Chinese history and culture and its illustrious past, always teaches me the golden memories of China’s great inventions. He himself has been embracing a burning desire to contribute to the world in a way that would mirror the glory of his ancestors.

He is also constantly reminiscent of his good old days with clear skies and clean air. He usually frowns at the worsening situation of air pollution and the choking grey haze. He always tells me that we can’t just stand by and watch the city suffocate, but should invent and make a change, just as the great ancestors in Chinese history.

“Aiden, can you spot the magic of the tree?” my father’s question dragged me out of the thoughts and memories.

“Hmm, I don’t know, but the leaves are so radiantly green, sparkling like precious jade stones, such a sharp contrast to the grey and smoky air”.

“The real magic lies in its power of absorbing and breaking down pollutants in the air with the engineered nanostructures and enhanced photosynthesis!” thrilled my father, “it purifies the air at an extraordinary rate, and needs no electric energy or filter, which makes it a sustainable solution and far superior to ordinary air-purifiers as it saves the energy and protects the environment.”

Gazing at Daphne’s shimmering leaves, I know that his days and nights of hard work has finally paid off – the birth of Daphne is a testament to the indomitable spirit of mankind and a symbol of my father’s unwavering commitment to the city and its people.

I took a deep breath and, for the first time, I felt the freshness and sweetness of the air, and instantly, I knew the future would to be green, just like the leaves of Daphne.

## Serendipity

*St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Ho, Hin Yeung Austin – 8*

Yan boarded the ship with his father, Song, ready to sail across the vast ocean. Holding a rusty map in his hands, one dotted with sites of treasures along the Silk Route, Yan was excited for their adventure.

It was the 3rd century BC, and Song was a trader who needed to ferry his china to Europe. The plates, cups, bowls and vases were stacked high on the deck, making clanking noises as the ship bobbed over the waves beneath.

After a few hours at sea, thick, smoky clouds appeared. Rain began to pour furiously, and monstrous waves crashed like charging horses onto the ship. The merciless wind took down *everything* in its path.

Chaos, mess and despair ensued. “What are we going to do?” wailed Yan as his map got blown away. Soon enough, they found themselves stranded on a derelict island.

“Let me find some fish for dinner,” said Yan as he tried to be helpful.

They made a warm fire with logs and gathered the last remaining plates and cutlery that stayed intact from the storm. As they pondered what to do next, they felt utterly hopeless.

“DONG” dropped the spoon Yan was holding as he drifted into a cloud of thought. As it fell onto a metal plate, Yan picked up a little stone nearby and weighed the spoon down with it. Suddenly, the spoon began to spin! Intrigued, Yan repeated the step and found that the spoon handle ALWAYS pointed in the same direction.

“Look! I discovered magic!” yelled Yan in utter amazement.

Song ambled over and tried it out for himself. “Son, I think this might just save us! It looks like it’s a navigational tool that could replace our lost map!” said Song as a wave of excitement rippled through his body. “It must mean that the stone has some sort of magnetic quality that aligns with the Earth’s magnetic field. Now, as we set off south from our home, that means... we can figure out our direction back!”

As they eagerly reboarded their ship, Song shared the many ways people had relied on to find directions. “Sailors used familiar landmarks; Polynesians looked at waves and wind; Greeks and Italians developed maps based on memory and experience; and Vikings even studied birds. But son, what you discovered could be revolutionary!”

“But why, father?” questioned Yan.

“That’s because the other methods aren’t very accurate, and if you ever encountered an overcast sky or fog, or if there were no birds around you, let alone a storm, you’d be in trouble!” explained his father.

An hour or so later, they finally arrived back in familiar waters. As they disembarked the ship, they headed straight to a gemologist who explained that the stone was known as lodestone, a rare, naturally occurring magnet.

And just like that, a disaster turned into a discovery as Yan and Song accidentally invented the world’s first compass.

## Flying Chinese Inventions at Tiangong

*St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Lee, Yee Tak Caitlin – 6*

Once upon a time in New Stone Age of China, Silk came to birth. Silk said happily, “I want to know about Chinese inventions!”

A farmer came out of his house. He said gently, “I am Farmer Keung. I can help you, little Silk.”

“Thank you, Farmer Keung,” replied Silk.

In the blink of an eye, they went to the future. First, they arrived at the Shang Dynasty where they met Porcelain.

Porcelain said, “Nice to meet you guys. My name is Porcelain. What’s your name?”

“My name is Silk and he is Farmer Keung,” said Silk excitedly. “Where did you come from?”

“I came from China,” said Porcelain. “I’m made from clay. What are you made from?”

“I’m natural fiber made from silkworm cocoon and I’m used to make clothes and carpets, also used for painting and printing,” said Silk. “What are you used for?”

“I’m used to make cups, bowls and plates, also used to make sculptures and vases with beautiful patterns,” explained Porcelain with a smile.

Silk said, “Can I put some flowers in the porcelain vase?” Porcelain said, “Yes, sure.”

Silk said excitedly “Follow us to find out more about Chinese inventions!”

They decided to travel to Lu State in the Warring States Period where they met Kite.

Kite said, “Hi, nice to meet you. I’m Kite. What’s your name?”

“I’m Porcelain and they’re Silk and Farmer Keung,” said Porcelain. “What’s your job?”

“People made use of me to signal military troops to send a message. I can also be used to entertain adults and children,” said Kite.

“You are wonderful! Follow us!” said Porcelain.

“Thank you for allowing me to join you,” said Kite.

They arrived at the Han Dynasty where they met Paper.

“My name is Paper, made by rags and other plant fibers,” said Paper.

Kite said, “Come and join our adventure, Paper.”

Paper followed them.

They went to the Tang Dynasty. “Tang is such a prosperous dynasty,” exclaimed Porcelain.

They went to drink at a teahouse and saw some people reading poetry books. All of the words were printed with the woodblock printing.

Next, they arrived at the Song Dynasty. Farmer Keung disappeared suddenly. Luckily they met Compass who was used for navigation. So, Compass led the others to find Farmer Keung with his magical power.

After flying for one day, they found Farmer Keung at Tiangong Station!

Farmer announced, “Well done, kids! You have successfully discovered the Chinese inventions and found out my exact location. As a reward, I’ll turn you all into little magical fairies! I also want you to tour Tiangong with me.”

“This Tiangong Space Station was constructed by the Chinese in 2021. It is a base for space experiments and future inventions,” introduced Farmer Keung.

They were so surprised that they had travelled through 5,000 years! All were so happy for learning so much about Chinese inventions over the period. They decided to stay at Tiangong and looked forward to more new Chinese inventions in future.

## My Unforgettable Trip to Beijing

*Victoria Shanghai Academy, Tam, Avery – 8*

“This is the most boring place in the world!” I mumbled to myself as I strolled around in the Museum of Chinese History of Beijing. All I saw were displays of Chinese calligraphy, paintings, jades and ceramics. I tried to urge my Dad to walk faster but he was too busy explaining the complicated history to my curious brother.

My Mom noticed that I was impatient. So, she suggested a game to me, “Avery, find something interesting in this museum and tell me the story behind it. I will give you a present at the Universal Studio as a reward!”

All of a sudden, I felt energetic and hurried across the room as if I was playing a treasure hunt. Then, a humongous bronze barrel decorated with eight dragons facing down in eight directions caught my attention. The dragons’ mouths were wide-opened each with a small bronze ball in it. Right beneath the dragons, there were mouth wide-opened bronze toads facing upward at the dragons. Next to the barrel, the description said, “Earthquake detector invented by Zang Heng of the Han dynasty.”

Suddenly, there was a mysterious ray of light seeping out from behind a secret black curtain next to the earthquake detector. In curiosity, I wandered inside and in a blink of an eye, I was in a room that looked like the imperial court of the ancient Han dynasty! In front of me was Zhang Heng working concentratedly on what looked like the earthquake detector.

Next to Zhang Heng, a man wearing a Chinese Han costume stared sternly at me and snapped, “Shhhh! Be quiet! Don’t disturb my master. He is creating his latest invention.”

Then, I heard another man who dressed like a Chinese imperial official criticised, “This machine is not going to work. We all know that earthquakes happen because God wants to punish us for doing something wrong.”

“There are earthquakes because the tectonic plates of the Earth slide past each other creating friction and releasing energy in waves which makes the land vibrate!” I spoke proudly.

As I wished to explain more, the ground started to grumble and shake violently. Everybody in the room was terrified and running away. I immediately zoomed out of the room and to my surprise, I was back to the museum again. While my heart was still pounding, I ran to my mom and exclaimed, “Mom, I just went back in time!”

My mom chuckled, “Silly girl, that is China’s latest technology. A virtual reality room without using VR goggles! You just have too much imagination!”

I turned my head back and spotted the sign next to the black curtains: latest virtual reality experience – visiting Zhang Heng of the Han dynasty. My face turned red with embarrassment. After all, the museum tour was one of the most memorable visits of my trip.

# Creative Writing Fiction

## Group 1

## Chinese Medicine Philosophy

*Kowloon Rhenish School, Cheang, Wan Ki Angelina – 8*

Ming was in a lecture theatre talking to his pharmaceutical students, “I failed many times. I couldn’t think of any solution, but an idea from Chinese medicine helped me.”

“Your brother has lung cancer. Unfortunately, as you know, we have no medicine to cure him.” The doctor said sympathetically.

With no other options, Ming decided to invent a new medicine. Ming was trying to use different ingredients to formulate it, but he couldn’t find a combination that could work.

Ming tried lots of times, but he kept on failing. He had run out of ideas, just when he received a message from his brother, “Dear Ming, I know you haven’t successfully invented the medicine yet. I don’t want to give you pressure but I am so terrified. I think I am getting weaker every day. Maybe I can’t wait for your medicine much longer. I am sorry that I am so pessimistic.”

When Ming finished reading it, his eyes were full of tears. He was worried and anxious. He didn’t want to talk to anyone. He couldn’t stop crying. He rubbed his nose and sniffled loudly.

Just then, Ming’s friend came looking for him. He comforted him gently and gave him a book about Chinese Medicine.

“My dad is a Chinese medicine practitioner. This is one of the good books that I found on his shelves. There are many more at home. If you need them, I can lend them to you. I am sure you will succeed!”

Ming found the book very useful. It suggested that we could train our bodies to fight against diseases, instead of relying on Western medicines alone.

He brainstormed, “How can I make the body stronger? How can I make it strong enough to kill the cancer cells? What ingredients should I include to make it?”

Ming felt encouraged by the new idea. He thought to himself, “I need to keep going. My brother is waiting for me to help me. I am his only hope.”

After another round of attempts, Ming believed he had succeeded. Why? Because without the medicine, the white blood cells couldn’t kill the cancer cells. But with the medicine, the cancer cells could be destroyed.

Ming jumped up and down with excitement. He laughed, “I have done it! I need to submit the new medicine to The National Medical Products Administration (NMPA) as soon as possible. I hope they will approve it!”

Fortunately, he received the approval very soon. The doctor decided that his brother could try to use the new medicine.

Ming was excited but nervous. While he was waiting for the news about his brother, he kept walking back and forth along the hospital corridor. What if it made him worse? What if he died?

When the doctor came out, he was smiling and he said, “Your brother is alright now. He can go home a few days later if his condition is stable. Congratulations! Thank you for your medicine. It will bring hope to many patients.”

# The Big Leap of China's Invention in Traffic Automation

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Wong, Yik Hong – 8

“Adam, hurry up please! We may miss the car to the airport and even miss the flight!” mum howled.

“That’s fine, mum. It is all under our control!” Adam replied calmly.

The airport chauffeur arrived on time at 10 in the morning. Adam and parents finally got in the car at 10:20. Although they were being late, “the driver” did not make any complaint!

“Dad, just buckle up. No one is actually controlling the car!” Adam chuckled.

This is the latest Didi-Auto. It is the first time Adam tried this service. With the booming technology of chips which allows speedy computation, satellites which provide precise location and electric vehicles with superb batteries in China, the computerised car without a driver is made possible. China has made tremendous progress in its semiconductor, space, automotive and rechargeable batteries.

“Dad, China is not only famous for its high-tech invention, but also for its creativity in inventing a service with few matured technologies. The Didi-Auto is a great example,” Adam said.

“The Artificial Intelligent training and thousands of hours of road traffic data, plus the huge coverage of the BeiDou satellites allow for the most accurate performance of the Didi-Auto. The cameras and sensors on the car together with the super computation can avoid any kind of collision on the road,” Adam replied.

Adam and his family arrived at the airport. They scurried through the check-in service and were going to take the Didi-Air! The success of making its own civil aircraft has enabled some extent of pilotless flight.

There was no cockpit and aircrews on the plane. Adam’s parents saw some robotic arms helping to lift the small luggage. Meal serving became a self-help service in the in-cabin café. The voice recognition devices plus the robotic arms made the in-flight services become no different from that by human beings.

“Why is everything automated? That sounds scary! I cannot imagine a pilotless flight!” Dad looked anxious.

“The aircraft still needs a safety pilot who can disconnect the system to revert the aircraft to manual flying in some unpredictable situations,” Adam said, “Decades of industrial advancement in China has made the integration of robots into the flight easier. Small jets are operated from the ground with the back-up pilot like our case here. There are already fully pilotless cargo plane services.”

“That’s absolutely amazing! I could never imagine that China had taken such a big step in changing the world when I was at your age, Adam!” Dad chuckled.

Since the ancient invention of papermaking, compass, gunpowder and printing, China has been holding a leading position in its innovation and world civilization. Chinese are renowned for their quick-witted mindset and they are highly entrepreneurial. With the advancement of science and technology today, Chinese do not only invent sophisticated products in rechargeable batteries, semiconductors and automobiles, but also overlay with application services on top which truly discharge the benefits to all human beings.

# Our Cybernetic Future

SKH Lui Ming Choi Memorial Primary School, Szeto, Fai Justin – 11

I saw an accident today. When people get into accidents in the future, they will die. No surprise there. However, I’ve found a solution to this problem – introduce cybernetic parts. When your heart is failing, use a robotic one!

The cybernetic parts can help us in a variety of ways in our everyday life. It can even save our lives.

First, it can save you from an accident. So, you’ve gotten into an accident and the doctors are trying to save you. You are on the staircase to heaven but with the invention of cybernetics you can replace failing organs with robot parts.

The second use for cybernetics is it can make us have super human powers. If you use cybernetic parts in your legs or arms, they won’t get tired. Super strength is possible and your health will be better than ever. No need to wear out your original body parts. You just need to remember to recharge it every year or else you will die! And nobody wants that! People with poor health and those that don’t eat well can use cybernetic body parts to support their body systems.

Finally, in 2023, where I am originally from, everyone has a pet dog or cat. Everyone feels sad when their pet dies, but here in the future things are different. Lucky for you, we have got robot parts for pets too. Your pets will live forever thanks to cybernetics.

I think people will use cybernetics more and more in the future and it will help you in many different ways.

# Fiction

Group 2



# From Desperation to Innovation

*Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Chan, Cho Kiu Trinity – 10*

It was a humid early morning, a door clicked shut and hurried footsteps pounded on the gravel pathway as a man rushed out of his house. Lu-Ban, a renowned architect, was entrusted with an important building project: constructing a new luxurious holiday home for the royal family.

Unfortunately, heavy rainfall in the past few days had caused widespread flooding, so Lu-Ban rushed to the construction site to assess its condition. As soon as he brushed past the cloth covering the site entrance, he gasped in shock. He had anticipated to be greeted by the clamor of a bustling area filled with busy workers, the thumping noises of hammers and the scraping sounds of wood logs being dragged around. However, to his dismay, not a sound could be heard, and not a single worker was in sight – only soaked wood logs scattered across the empty site.

Suddenly, a call echoed across the site: “Master! I’m relieved to see you!” a worker exclaimed, depositing a fresh cart of wood logs.

“Oh Xiao-Zhang! Where’s everyone else?” Lu-Ban demanded.

“I beg your forgiveness, Master,” Zhang said apologetically, “but as you can probably tell, the heavy rainfall has caused damages to the site. We’ve been dismantling what we’ve built so far because rainwater seeped through the floor into the wooden house, destroying most of it. The workers are in the forest now, cutting more wood. But that’s not the worst part of the situation.” Zhang mumbled anxiously. “We’re told that an officer will visit us soon to inspect our progress.”

Lu-Ban was startled. “The emperor might get enraged if he discovers how little progress we’ve made,” he thought, but kept his mouth shut, not wanting to scare Zhang.

Soon, the two of them arrived at a dark and dim hollow, panting, surrounded by pine trees. The air carried an earthy and musky scent. They brushed through low-hanging, rough pine branches to the center of the hollow. The trees gave way to a clearing filled with sweating, red-faced workers swinging rusty and dull axes to chop down the trees. Despite exerting all their strength, they could barely cut one centimeter with each swing. They looked exhausted and stony-faced; their lips pressed together in endurance. Some grumbled under their breath:

*“I toil with my bare hands,  
No aid from all the lands,  
I exert my strength to earn little,  
Yet life shatters like a brittle riddle.”*

Hearing the grumbling, Lu-Ban’s heart sank, and he realized all their lives were at stake. The workers were innocent, merely seeking to earn enough for basic necessities with bare hands. They deserved respect. Yet, if the emperor was displeased about anything in the holiday home, even a tiny crack in a floorboard, he would execute all of them, including Lu-Ban himself. The weight of the workers’ lives pressed upon him, every action or decision he made could determine all their fates.

“I must find a way to expedite the construction, but what shall I do? What could I do?” Lu-Ban thought fiercely, for he felt a deep sense of responsibility. As he was wandering alone in the forest desperately, lost in thought, he suddenly felt a sharp pain sear his leg.

“Ouch!” Lu-Ban shouted. Brushing away the torn clothing covering his leg, he discovered a long, thin cut oozing blood. Just beside him grew a patch of tall, green, and lush grass.

“How could grasses make such a clean and neat cut?” Lu-Ban muttered. Abruptly, a lightbulb flashed in his head. “Could this be the key to our survival?” Without hesitation, he rapidly sliced off a strand of grass from the patch.

Back in his laboratory, Lu-Ban immediately pulled out a magnifying glass and carefully inspected the grass, not in the least caring about his bleeding wound. To his surprise, he discovered the edges of the grass strand were sharp and jagged, capable of cutting through hard objects. His heart raced with hope and excitement, fueling him with newfound determination. He began prototyping a tool that could harness the cutting power like the jagged grass.

With his mind whirling like a symphony of spinning gears, Lu-Ban grabbed a few sheets of metal and blocks of wood from his scrap materials, swiftly assembling them into a handheld tool with a sturdy wooden handle and a flexible metal blade capable of precision wood cutting.

Hours turned into days as Lu-Ban tirelessly refined his invention, making countless adjustments and iterations. He shut himself in his laboratory, working undisturbed, ignoring his servant who informed him of a guest’s arrival or dismissing his wife’s request for a meal. He also snapped at his son when the child pleaded for him to play. Without rest and food, after what felt like years, he finally held the finished tool, which would later be known as a saw, in his hands. It was a marvel of craftsmanship, a testament to Lu-Ban’s dedication and determination to invent this new tool.

With a sense of anticipation, Lu-Ban rushed back to the forest to demonstrate the use of the saw. He observed the weary expressions etched on the workers’ faces; their eyes filled with despair. He picked up a wooden plank and positioned the saw against its surface, effortlessly slicing it in half. The workers gasped in amazement and astonishment, applauding Lu-Ban with admiration. Tears welled up their eyes as they recognized the immense potential of this invention, their gratitude overflowing.

“This tool is a game-changer, Master!” Zhang exclaimed excitedly, and his bloodshot eyes filled with tears as he became overwhelmed with emotion.

Not wanting to waste a second, they promptly distributed the saws to everyone and commenced sawing the wood. Lu-Ban rolled up his sleeves and joined in the work with unwavering resolve. “Let’s make things happen!” they all bellowed.

The forest echoed with the screeching sounds of sawing, and the once seemingly annoying noise now brought consolation and renewed confidence to all of them. Together, they hoped to accomplish the construction work safely.

# The History of Printing, Retold

*Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Leong, Tsz Yan Bernice – 12*

Sitting at a worn desk, Bi Sheng was hunched over a wooden slab, carefully using a knife to engrave Chinese characters into the wood. This was the original printing technique used to make copies of the same document. It was time consuming and it didn't facilitate mass production— if even a small mistake was made, you would have to start engraving again.

Worry was palpable on his face and his features were scrunched in concentration. If you looked closer, you would see his fingers trembling and his eyes were bloodshot from the constant staring. It was obvious he had been working at the desk for a long time already.

Anxiously, he set his knife down onto the weathered table, eyes darting frantically to the door. Today was the summer solstice. At sunset, Bi Sheng would have to present his work to the emperor.

A fortnight ago, the emperor tasked Bi Sheng— who was talented in woodblock carving— with the mission of reprinting one of the most important documents ever recorded. Bi Sheng wanted to prove himself worthy and demonstrate his skills, so he accepted the task without a moment of thought, and was left with only fourteen days to produce seventy pages of documents. The task was impossible to complete within such a short time, and Bi Sheng soon realized the dire consequences he would have to suffer should he have failed the emperor.

Bi Sheng shook his head in disbelief as he saw the stack of pages he still had to work on. All of a sudden, an ominous knock sounded and the door was kicked open. Two imperial guards stood with all their might and glory, towering over the terrified Bi Sheng.

“There's no way,” he cried in despair, eyes bulging out of its sockets and sweat dripping off his face. “There's no way! It's impossible— impossible! Have mercy! Just ten more days. Please!”

“The emperor does not forgive. You've had your chance to prove yourself— that chance is gone now.”

His pleas meant nothing to the guards. They blindfolded him, chained him, and dragged him onto a cart, their faces impassive. Endless torrents of tears streamed down his face, soaking the blindfold.

Not long after, he was flung into a cell roughly, and the blindfold was removed. The lock clanked shut. Bi Sheng opened his eyes to bars surrounding him, and a lone table and a chair in the middle of the cell. Beside the table were a thick stack of paper and wooden slabs. A small toolbox was set on the old table. This was just like the workshop in his house.

A voice sounded above him. “In penance for your crimes, you are sentenced to work in the dungeons and produce those slabs of wood that you were unable to. Beside you are a thousand pages of documents to be reproduced into wooden slabs. Once you finish making those slabs, you shall be set free.”

Bi Sheng, defeated, sat down onto the chair and started working. Hours and hours he slaved away, carving and crafting, until he fell down in exhaustion and into the deep dark hole of oblivion.

“Wake up! This is not a place for you to rest!” Bi Sheng didn't respond. The angered guard swept Bi Sheng's slabs of wood onto the floor and kicked him. “Serves you right,” the guard said, stalking out of the prison door.

Pieces of wood laid on the floor, Bi Sheng's hard work was irreparably broken. There was a moment of deafening silence as Bi Sheng stared at the pieces of wood. Chinese characters broken apart, characters arranged in such a way that it seemed somehow, impossibly, forming a sentence.

Bi Sheng continued to gaze at the wooden pieces. The gears in his brain were whirring, formulating an idea in his mind, telling him—urging him— to understand. He bent down, picked up the pieces of broken wood, and pieced them together.

Gasping in wonder, he grabbed more pieces and gradually formed a sentence with them. He then took them apart again, arranging them in a way different from the last time, but then the characters, together, still held meaning. Looking at the pieces in his hand, an idea popped into his mind—a candle flickering to life.

“What if I made the characters separately? I could piece them together in different orders for different pages— it would be so much more efficient! Soon, I'll be free of this prison!” Smiling giddily to himself, he immediately started working on his project, all qualms about resting gone.

Bi Sheng took out a slab of wood and sat down once again at the table. Picking up the knife again, he sawed the wood into even pieces of the same size, and started engraving a character onto each of them. He took out another slab of wood, did some measurements, and created a tray. He then proceeded to put the characters neatly onto it, arranging them so that they all fit snugly. Finally, he took out the ink and painted it over the characters, and then flipped the tray over and pressed it onto a blank sheet of paper.

As he lifted the wooden tray, he was met by a beautiful piece of document, the words clear and defined. They were all arranged into neat, straight rows, without a single mistake. “This is a miracle!” Bi Sheng cried in astonishment and amazement, smoothing his hand over the piece of paper. “With this new technique, I'll be free from prison in no time at all!”

Bi Sheng continued to use his new way of printing, and in just a few months, he was able to present his work to the emperor and was finally free of the prison. Bi Sheng was rewarded, and received the recognition he deserved. More importantly, though, his invention of the movable type printing technique became well known and was spread across the world, allowing knowledge to be made common, changing the world as it was.

# Dream, Desire and Death

*Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Lo, Eilis – 12*

## **Spring 1040**

Shen Kuo, all bright eyes, nimble fingers, flickering intently through yellow, ageing tomes that were once his father's, was eager to soak in all the knowledge they held.

The young child trickled thin fingers across the black and white pictures of Yangtze: armies of trees guarding the falling and rising layers of mountains. Although the drawing was colourless, he could clearly imagine everything with his eyes closed: musical crunches of leaves under his feet, indistinct susurrations of the glass-clear lake, a soft breeze tangling his wispy curls-

A ragged cough from his father pulled him back to reality. Shen Kuo's guilt immediately snapped his eyes open. Biting his lip, the naive child attempted to articulate his dream.

"Pa..."

"Yes, dear Kuo?"

"I want...I wish to visit Yangtze, to draw inspiration from there.." his face as scarlet as a tomato, his eyes that were glowing not a second ago were now blinking owlishly, looking at anything but his father.

A long sigh escaped the dry, cracked lips of the older man, slicing the uncomfortable line of silence strangling them. "Kuo...you know we don't have the time and resources to do so. We're also moving to Xiamen next week." Laboriously, the old man slid back to his room and closed his door silently behind him, leaving his son behind.

## **Summer 1050**

"Yangtze..." Shen Kuo murmured as he twisted around on his mattress.

His father rested on an old wooden chair, gazing at where his son lay restlessly. "I do wish the best for you," the old man coughed. "But I'm afraid I can't go on with you. I'll leave you behind one day."

"Yangtze..." Shen Kuo mumbled.

## **Winter 1051**

The snow is as soft as a blanket, as beautiful as a flower, as cruel as a punishment. Shen Kuo was wrapped in layers of cloth from mouth to toe, soaking his icy tears and muffling the sobs that wracked through his figure as he stared at the still body of his late father.

"Pa, you've left me behind," Shen Kuo sobbed, holding the freezing, bony hand of his father.

Even amidst the suffocating grief of the family, Shen Kuo could clearly hear the hoarse voice of his father ringing in the frosty air.

"I will always support you. Go."

## **Autumn 1086**

Drenched in the silvery light of the crescent moon, the light scratching of quill against sheet drowned the silence.

"Kuo," Shen Kuo's second wife, Zhang Chu, glided across the chilly floor in her nightgown, then set a platter onto his table. "Still writing about directions and medicine? I've

prepared a drink for you.” He didn’t spare a single glance at her, fixated on the parchments in front of him.

“Night,” she whispered, leaving the room in her ghost-like steps. Without tearing his eyes away from the words that danced before him, Shen Kuo grabbed the cup and downed the wine at once.

“Father,” Shen Kuo exclaimed, his mind sentimental and hazy from the drink, “I’ve learned so much from you, but I wasted my chance by chasing Yangtze, didn’t I? I promise you, Father, to make it up to you. I will make it worth it.” Pouring another cup, he raised it to the moon; a toast to his father.

“I will.”

### **Spring 1090**

Bright light crept into the room, illuminating Shen Kuo pouring over another book about metallic compasses. “They invented the lodestone-spoon magnetic compass in 206 BC for divination. Interesting... I wonder if I can experiment with that.” He walked out of the room, in search of a lodestone spoon.

Shen Kuo pointed the tail of the spoon south and tossed it onto the metal board. The spoon spun quickly before slowing to a stop, its tail seemingly pointed towards south. Shen Kuo attempted this again and again, but noted amiss each time, but couldn’t put a finger to it. After countless tries, he found out that the spoon pointed towards the south-east direction instead of the exact south.

“Well, that has to be fixed.” Shen Kuo frowned.

After numerous weeks of experimenting with different metallic mechanisms, such as putting fish-sized magnets in a water-filled bowl, or re-inventing the south-pointing chariot, Shen Kuo concluded that the only way to correct the deviation was to use suspended magnetic needles that could determine the distance between north and south.

The long, tedious weeks of examination and observation had ultimately paid off with an accurate and functioning metal compass.

Cradling his newest invention like it was the world’s most valuable treasure, Shen Kuo trembled with excitement as he crowed out in joy.

“Yangtze, here I come!”

### **Winter 1093**

Once again, Shen Kuo stood grieving in the soft, beautiful and cruel snow.

“Ah, sorrow! Why do my loved ones leave me behind in this wretched season? Sorrow, indeed!” Shen Kuo raised his head to the white sky that snowed relentlessly on the body of his wife. As if sorrow was a parallel universe, Shen Kuo was once again wrapped in cloth from mouth to toe, shrouded in the veil of misery, this time mourning the death of his second wife, chugging on a gourd to stifle the bitter sadness throttling his heart.

“To you, my darling Zhang Chu; to you, my precious father!” Shen Kuo trekked backwards back to his abode, heart heavy with loneliness and despair, cheeks smeared with tears and drink, letting tipsiness and despair reign over him.

### **Spring 1094**

Sloshing his gourd while drunkenly following his compass, Shen Kuo finally reached the fairytale-like scenery of Yangtze after decades of dreaming. Reaching the edge of one of a thousand mountains next to the ever-flowing river, Shen Kuo stared down at it, depression

shaking through his weak body. Taking one final swig from the gourd, Shen Kuo tossed it away and leaned forward, letting the wind catch him like a soaring bird, a single word slipping through his wine-stained lips.

*“Goodbye.”*

# New Tales of China's Inventions

*Discovery Bay International School, Lee, Suhyoon – 11*

The villagers had seen a lot of things. They saw royalty who married peasants, cruel emperors, and even a number of gruesome executions. However, they had never in their dreams predicted that a poor teenage servant girl would invent something that would change the world forever...

Present

Moonlight washes over the silent village. I try to walk as stealthily as I can, dodging stones and broomsticks as I slowly open the bright red door of my dusty mudbrick home. I peek inside. The light is on, which means that my parents are awake. Before I know it, the door fully opens and mother is standing in front of me, furious. "Inside. Now." She orders.

Sunbeams filter through the thin ceiling. I groan. It's morning! I crawl out of bed and open my crooked cabinet, throwing back broken hair combs and crinkled tunics until I dig out a small black box. I cautiously start to open it, and at that exact moment mother bangs open the door. "Up to something, I see? At 6:00 in the morning?" She says. "I thought you had enough with your little 'adventure' yesterday night." I had forgotten. I quickly tuck the box away and smile at her. "Let's go, mother." I head to the toilet, my shoulder bumping against hers.

Our daily routine is simple: Pottery, all day long. It's very boring but today I'm looking forward to it. I have a plan to invent printing on paper, with clay blocks! How I got the idea was simple: I wanted to write stories. In my head, there are tales of fire-breathing dragons, charming warriors, and hidden temples. The only problem is that it is only in my head. Ideas bubbling, I jump to work and hi-five every woman in the room, humming to myself as I set up my workplace. I hear appreciative whispers behind me. Mother gives me an affirmative grunt and sets to work too.

While I work on pottery, I sneak a few clay blocks to make small cubes and scritch the basic characters onto them. I grin proudly, not noticing that mother is looking at me suspiciously.

We carry on grimly until the sky turns pink, which melts to a deep, starless black. My hands ache, my back hurts and my sight is blurry, but I picture my parents' proud faces when I show my invention to everyone. That keeps me going.

Suddenly, the door bursts open, and Mrs. Jing, the presumptuous village gossip, comes in, red faced and panting. "Mrs. Cai! I have news for Mrs. Cai and her daughter!" Everyone's eyes turn to us. Mother raises an eyebrow. "Your husband isn't-breathing!" Mother gasps, then faints on the spot.

The last few minutes were chaotic. We carry mother home, make sure Mrs. Jing isn't lying, and the women sighs and pats my shoulder as if I'd just fallen down, not lost my father forever. My eyes burn with tears but I'm not about to cry in front of all the people, no. I have to stay brave. Stay brave for mother. The news was like a sword slicing through my guts, and the more the time passed, the pain started to sink in. Finally, after all the craziness, I decide to donate the one precious bowl of rice to a sobbing and screaming mother. I figure things out in my head. We'll have to sell the porcelain bowl and the jade ring, the only treasures my parents had, in order to get proper white robes for the funeral. I'll have to sell my little black

box, too, which contained a small ruby I found in the street. I'm not sure if it's real, though. I get ready, and climb in bed. I probably won't sleep.

I must have slept, because it was daylight that flooded into my room, and sounds of children shouting and playing. I rub my head, still groggy. Mother is up, I can hear the sound of her sweeping the floor downstairs. When I come down, neither of us mention father. We work on the pottery as normal, trudge back home as normal, skip dinner, and go to sleep. That's how the last few weeks have been. I've been working on my invention lately. Today is the day when I test it! I prepare, paint the cubes in ink, and try it. When I find out it doesn't work, I throw everything against the wall. What a waste of time, of ink, of paper. What a waste of everything.

I feel so many emotions.

Disappointment.

Grief.

And rage.

So. Much. Rage.

Rage that roared through my blood and made me clench my fists, rage that made me turn away from everyone. Rage that stayed with me every moment of the day.

The gingko tree next to my home always calmed my rage. Recently, it was like it was telling me something. Something... "That's it!" I say, understanding. Wood would be strong. Perfect for carving blocks. I clap my hands. This is it! All hope was not lost! I asked the woodcarver to follow my instructions and make them for me. He looked surprised.

"This is such a wonderful invention, Jia!" He chuckled. "I knew you would go far some day, with that imagination of yours." My ears glowed. No one's ever complimented me before.

I brought the small black box home, now containing the printing blocks with the basic characters, because I gave the ruby to the woodcarver. I raced up to father's room, cleared some of the dust, and sat on the side of his creaky old bed. I breathed in the familiar scent of father. "How come you're always not here when I need you the most?" I ask, even though there is no one there to answer me. "I miss you so," I continued. "Please come back, father. Come back, even as a ghost." I wait. But all I hear is wind, and all I see is a room where I'm all alone.

# The Invention that changed the world

*ESF Sha Tin Junior School, Wang, Helena – 10*

Just another day of work. As his sweat dripped steadily into his congee, Cai Lun crossed off July sixteen on his calendar, counting down the days until his holiday, and just the thought of finally taking a day off excited him. As usual, he was in a hurry. Pushing away his thoughts about his holiday and the stone-cold congee, he recited his list of things that must be completed that day. As he hurried out the door, his stomach protesting at its emptiness, his wife reminded him to pick up the children after school. Cai Lun sighed, thinking aloud, “Such a long to-do list!” He rushed to the elaborately decorated palace doors just one minute before he would have been late, softly muttering the password to the guard before rushing towards his office.

He had completely forgotten the fact that the day before, the Empress had commanded him to pick up some fresh, meaty baozi (buns) from the royal chef on his way to the palace. Thoughts were crammed into his head, none of which had to do with the empress’s breakfast. He had just gotten to his office when the Empress’s manager stepped in front of him and blocked the door with his bulky figure.

“Where is the baozi you were supposed to bring to the Empress’s lounge for her breakfast!?” he thundered.

“Uh, um t...the ba...ozi i..is..uh,” Cai Lun stammered, while the manager glared at him.

Cold sweat dripped down his dirty unshaven cheeks. If looks could kill, passing people would see a pale body, whose eyes had rolled to the back of his head, and lying on the floor.

The manager threatened, “If this happens one more time, you will be fired. Understand?”

“Y...yes,” Cai Lun managed to say—another trouble to add to his long “Things that are overwhelming me” list.

Having a forgetful nature, this happened often, but he had never been threatened with being fired! If that happened, his family would run out of money, they would starve, and “all’s bad ends bad”. He couldn’t possibly write everything he had to do on bamboo slips, could he? That would be as heavy as a brick of iron! But... What if he could invent something that could replace bamboo slips and he, Cai Lun, would be in the history books as the famous inventor of paper? ‘Nah, stop your childish imagination, brain.’ he thought. Just then, a friendly reminder dinged in his mind that the manager had left him a task to order and file the Empress’s letters. Cai Lun sighed and headed off.

Soon, lunchtime came, and it was also the Empress’s ‘writing time’. His job was to carry a yoke of bamboo slips to the writing house, then come back for more, and so on. This was his first time doing it; and honestly, he was very nervous. He had seen workers faint from this exhausting job before, and especially now that it was the hottest month of the year, he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Time ticked by, and bamboo slips came and went. Cai Lun was sweating buckets, and no sooner had they finished the tenth yoke his partner turned white, his eyeballs only showed the whites, and he collapsed on the floor. Startled, Cai Lun dropped the carrying yoke, and the bamboo slips clattered to the floor. The sound jolted him out of his shock, and Cai Lun ran to the manager’s office to report this incident.

While he ran, he passed a paper wasp hive, and his thoughts dragged him back to his previous daydream about making paper. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that he could do it. He could “borrow” the idea of paper wasps building their hives and use that to try and conduct his idea of inventing paper. Later, he would be relieved that his childlike spark of imagination hadn’t abandoned him.

One day, he was strolling in the royal garden for inspiration when his eyes flickered towards a woodpecker hammering at a tree with its beak. Inspiration announced its arrival in his head. Why shouldn’t he use tree bark? It was easy to collect and contained fiber, which made paper sturdy. That afternoon, he decided to start his paper experiment.

He went through the paper-making process with tree bark, and the result came out perfect! When he was noting down the process, he found the total time needed was around sixty hours. Too long. What about the grass? Again, it was easy to collect, so it could be mass-produced. He tried again and again, hoping to one day have a free hour to play with his children. For the last time, he lifted the soggy piece of paper out of the tray and prayed for success.

Cai Lun brought his paper to the Royal Court, and the emperor promised him riches and a place for his children at the greatest school in China. When he was interviewed for the Royal newspaper, he described his process, his time and effort and most of all, his family who supported him. His nine-word summary was this- “Never give up, and you will never regret it.”

Not just another day of work. Cai Lun was relaxing in his comfy chair, reading the paper. Unusually, he was not in a hurry.

His wife joked, “I’m glad the emperor promised us riches and a stellar education for our children!”

Cai Lun chuckled and answered, “Of course, I just hope he seals his promise by writing it on paper!”

As he strolled out the door, his stomach sighing in pleasure as it digested a warm, comforting breakfast, Cai Lun inhaled the fresh morning air. He was well aware that he would be hard at work as soon as he stepped out the door, but he was glad he could spend precious family time in the morning before setting out for his busy day of work.

# The Boy, the Belt and the Banknote

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Hui, Miles – 10*

Carrying the heavy bag full of coins on his shoulder, the farmer walked out of Cai Lun's house with joy. He was glad he chose to believe Li, and now he sold his cow for fifteen yuan more than he would have.

Back inside the house, Cai Lun held the piece of paper in his hand, the paper that would be the first ever banknote in history.

One day earlier...

Li flipped through each crinkled page in his dusty notebook on his wooden desk. Looking back through each of his inventions that might just change the world. Redrawing each sketch in his mind and rereading each explanation meticulously.

“Wheelbarrow, made to make life easier, especially for the people working on the Great Wall. This device was made to carry large amounts of supplies which would be impossible to be done by hand.”

“Stirrup, made men less vulnerable to falling off a horse during battle, giving more strength to the Calvary and completely changing former tactics.”

“Kite, made not only to entertain but also for weather detection.”

Most of his inventions came from first-hand experience, experiences that told him what the world needs, to make everything and everyday life easier for people. He knew he had the ability to create what was in his imagination. He sat there for hours in his favourite corner of the house, flicking through pages after pages, hoping to get inspiration for what he would create next.

Li went to the shops to buy some new materials. He was in deep thoughts again as he was waiting his turn to pay: “These coins in my pocket are just so hard to manage and keep, since you couldn't hold many in your hand, pickpockets had it easy. There had to be an easier, safer way of carrying money around. On his way home, he thought of different ideas – wooden money, plastic money, leather money – but none of them seemed right.

Then he remembered his inventor friend, Cai Lun, who became famous for creating paper a few years back. Paper was still new and rare and only a few people owned it. He knew that to get his hands on some, he would have to pay Cai Lun a visit and share with him his world-changing idea.

“What do you mean my idea is far-fetched!” Li exclaimed.

“It's not worth it,” replied Cai Lun, “I can sell 10 sheets of paper for fifty yuan, and you want me to give 100 sheets for your social experiment?” Not in a million years!”

Discouraged, Li trudged home. On his way, he stopped by the river for some water. A boy with a horse strolled next to him and asked, “Hello Sir, I need to cross the river to pick up some medicine for my mother, but my horse can't swim. Can you look after him so I can quickly go and come back?” Li nodded but when he takes the horse, he saw a sign of hesitation on the boy's face.

Li chuckled, “You are worried that I might take the horse away, are you?” Li took off his belt and handed over to the boy. “Here, take this with you, I can't go anywhere without my belt!” The boy smiled and took the belt across. In no time, the boy came back with medicines in his hand. When the boy handed the belt back to Li in exchange for his horse, that was when the thought struck Li.

He jumped up, hugged the boy and ran off, leaving the boy in confusion. Li was in a rush with his plan. He went home, gathered every single coin he had in his house and counted a hundred yuan. The next day, he paid another visit to his friend. “Cai Lun, I am not here to ask for free paper,” Li explained, “Here is five yuan, I would like to buy a piece of paper from you.”

Li took the paper and continued, “By the way, can I keep the rest of my coins with you for a few hours. I need to hike over several hills to the farm. The coins here total ninety-five yuan and they are simply too heavy.” Li held out the piece of paper he just bought, “before I go, could you sign this piece of paper. Just so I have something to prove that I have ninety-five yuan with you, like a promissory note.” Cai Lun saw no harm and signed.

Li took off with the piece of paper, over the hills and to the farm. He spent some time there choosing the healthiest-looking cow. It was time to test his plan. He approached the farmer, took a deep breath and started, “I would like to take this cow.”

“Great choice my friend,” said the farmer, “that would be eighty yuan please.”

“Sorry I don’t have any money with me, but here, this piece of paper proves that Cai Lun owes me ninety-five yuan. If you take this paper to his house, he will pay you in full and you can keep the change.” The farmer hesitated but thinking that Li was not unknown to anyone with his recent inventions, and tempted by the extra fifteen yuan that he would get, he took the piece of paper in exchange for the cow.

The rest, is history.

# The Cherry Blossom Tea

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Wong, Arthur – 11*

Past a narrow, jagged valley weaved a dirt path enclosed by tall spruce trees. The path faded into the grey moving shadows of the trees. Around half a mile into the forest lied an opening. The red and orange sun-rays lit up the meadow.

There, stood a wooden house supported by three rows of four wooden beams. Behind the ladder which led up to the house, a thin, frail man bent down by a metal kettle as he boiled water. As the water bubbled, the man dropped a bunch of herbs that he picked from the forest. The man mixed the herbs with a hand carved wooden spoon that he then picked up to taste a sip of his herbal remedy. The man, Chang, expected the herbs would cure his bedridden wife, who laid upstairs. He climbed up to the house and handed his wife a cup of warm tea. She drank the cup of tea that he gave to her. But it did not work.

Her face remained pale.

The next morning, Chang trudged through the grey valley to his post at the imperial palace. The imperial palace was situated in Luoyang, about eleven and a quarter mile east from his home. The palace, ornamented with a shimmering of golden paint atop a cherry red backdrop, was the seat of the Chinese emperor, Shen Nong.

In the eastern wing of the palace, Chang was busy peeling potato skins when he heard the guard at the doorway to the servant's kitchen yell, 'Herbs! Herbs! Move 'em in.' As Chang stepped outside he saw his wife's poor face appear in the rainwater puddle beside the beige sacks of herb leaves. Back inside, he was busy picking away at the hay-rope that tied the sacks up. Upon opening the first sack, he smelt the gentle essence of the red and white Camellia flowers. Chang, desperate, imagined his wife's face. This time, it was a face sprung with happiness.

After having dragged the Camellia flowers to the servant's kitchen, he laid them on the wooden kitchen table for the cook, who would later make tea for the emperor. As the cook prepared tea for the emperor, Chang pinched some herb leaves from the sack. He then sat back down calmly without anyone having noticed his mischievous deed. He continued doing his job of peeling potato skins until the time was over for him to go home.

While he walked out of the palace, he hummed cheerfully as he thought of his beloved wife. He was happy knowing his wife would get better. He was proud of himself as he was able to steal the expensive herbs from the bag.

As the purple-red sunset disappeared over the horizon and the grey clouds loomed over him, Chang felt a sense of joy. He knew tonight his wife would take a sip of the glorious tea and get better. Little did he know her time was slowly trickling away.

When he reached back home, he heated the water inside the metal kettle and dropped some tea leaves inside. The water churned quietly. When it came to the boil, he took the wooden spoon and poured a cup of tea. He carefully climbed up the ladder and opened the creaky wooden door. There, Chang saw his ailing wife. He walked up to her and helped her take a small sip of tea.

'Thank you,' she whispered gently.

'You will wake up better tomorrow, I promise,' Chang insisted.

The next morning, Chang woke up to find his wife pale and motionless on the straw bed. It was too late. Too much time has past and there was nothing left for him but to weep. He laid

his head on her stone-cold chest. There was no thump - no sound to be heard coming from her heart. Outside, he heard a nightingale singing away softly the tune of sorrow and unimaginable pain. For Chang, the song of the nightingale felt like his wife's soul speaking to him.

He could hear her gentle whisper, 'My heart, plant a cherry blossom tree, where you will lay my body to rest. Pick it's petals, my love, and drink the tea of everlasting life.'

And so he did.

# The Rocket

*Singapore International School Hong Kong, Larard, Charles – 11*

*500 years before the Shenzhou and Chang e rockets*

*The bird lies, scarred and harmed,  
It slams itself on the heavy metal cage,  
Desperately wanting to take flight.  
It sings,  
Yet it is not a harmless carol,  
It is a prayer, a plea, to god.*

Wan Hu checked his poem one last time for any gaffes. Chuffed to not find any, he put the poem aside.

He had spent the vast majority of his life dreaming and envisioning to one day escape the cage-like realm he's been living in and feel ..... free

*28 years previously*

It had been a beautiful, clement afternoon, and seven year-old Wan Hu had just finished his lunch before kissing his mother goodbye, and striding off with his friends to the prairie to play with their kite. It had started off uneventfully, as there was unequivocally no wind at all. They tried to throw it in the air, but it simply got stuck in a tree. They tried to retrieve it but the tree was just too arduous to climb, and so, the other boys walked off.

Wan Hu didn't.

He climbed and fell, again and again and again. Bruised and cut, it took poor little Wan Hu five hours to retrieve the kite. High up in the tree, where the kite was stuck, he had the perfect vista of the moon. Wan Hu nearly fell out of the tree in astonishment. As it was getting late, the sun dipped below the horizon, and the moon became clearly visible. It was perfectly round and beautiful, like a shy little girl who came out only at night. Wan Hu foolishly reached for the moon, forgetting that it was 384,401 kilometres away. Chagrined at not being able to touch it, little Wan Hu slowly climbed down the tree to bathe in the moon's rays.

*I must become an inventor, he thought. I must invent something that can fly me to the moon.*

*500 years before the Shenzhou and Chang e rockets*

Wan Hu stared dreamily into the sky, thinking about the incident that had occurred 28 years ago. As a child, he had been talked out of being an inventor, and had become a carpenter and then poet in lieu.

That was 28 years ago, however.

He had been following his brain, and now he wanted to follow his heart.

He had every right to become an inventor and *nobody*, not even the *Emperor of China* could stop him.

Wan Hu knew that to get to the moon, he would need something to push him up, and there had been nothing, *nothing* in ancient China of this sort.

So he would need to do it unchaperoned.

It was not as unambiguous as going to a store and buying a jet pack, or hopping on the *Discovery* or the *Enterprise* or the *Saturn V* (although that may not be so simple). Wan Hu definitely had the brains and the genius, but he had no experience nor the technology to build such an item, and, most importantly, no team to help him. He knew it was risky, stupid, extremely dangerous, but Wan Hu had waited for 28 years.

That was long enough to drive a man crazy.

He started planning. Unfortunately, he got nowhere, and to refresh his brain, he walked out to the lantern party in the village.

The sight in front of him dumbfounded Wan Hu.

The villagers ignited the bottom of each lantern and they slowly rose up, disappearing high in the sky, possibly *reaching the moon*. The lanterns were whitish-yellow, each about the size of a human being.

*That's it, he thought, I can use fire*

At the speed of light, Wan Hu sped back to his house. He filled 47 cylindrical tubes with gunpowder, (which had just been invented by ancient Chinese alchemists) thinking that it would make him go faster. Poor Wan Hu didn't realise that when fire reached gunpowder, it would blow him up, and that this blood-curdling invention would be used by people for generations to come. Then, he attached ropes onto the top of the tubes, where the gunpowder was, and fixed all 47 of them to a chair. Afterwards, he got his servants to lift the chair, and bring it out onto the lawn. Finally, he brought out the old kite that had been stuck in the tree many faithful years ago and held tightly onto it.

*When I get back, I will call it a rocket*, Wan Hu thought. Of course, he didn't know that he wouldn't come back. Wan Hu looked up at the moon, and a thread of doubt crossed his mind.

*What if I don't make it to the moon?* But determination overcame him, like a tsunami over an ant, and he bravely walked up to the chair.

He signalled for his servants to ignite the rockets.

Nothing happened.

Then, suddenly, he took off, and the rocket raised a few metres off the ground.

That was it though.

The fuses were still burning though, and the fire reached the gunpowder.

Kaboom.

Wan Hu would never know that hundreds of years later, the Chinese adapted his invention and turned it into the *Chang e 3, 4, and 5*, which were unmanned spaceships which went to the moon, or the *Shenzhou* series, which carried a team of three to space.

It is good to pursue your dreams, but you *cannot* let your dreams overtake you. A good man follows his heart, but a wise man follows his heart *and* brain.

# Stories of the Silk Lady Retold

*Singapore International School Hong Kong, Liu, Siyao Emma – 11*

In a rural village, a little girl peeks out from amongst the thicket of mulberry trees and spots an old woman weaving silk. She curiously approaches the old woman's loom. "Need help, Silk Lady?"

The old woman pokes her head up. "A Qiao! Well, thank you for the offer. It's about time you learnt about silk making." She hobbles over to her bucket, pockets bulging with plucked mulberry leaves. "There's *plenty* to learn."

"Silkworm larvae eat only these leaves" she explained, as she evenly spread leaves amongst the silkworms which tore voraciously at the leaves.

"Where did you learn all this?" A Qiao asked, peeping over the Silk Lady's shoulder. A pause.

"Goodness knows how long," she answered simply, "The ladies in the Imperial Court taught me how to make silk when I was a child, and I've been doing that ever since". She seems at peace, reminiscing. "Here, help me with the cocoons".

"The Imperial Court?" A Qiao gasped, indrecolous. "You cultivated silkworms for the Emperor?"

"I was the Emperor's daughter."

The thick steam from the boiling water warped the air, as cocoons bobbed up and down in the water, as part of a steamy soup. The two ladle out the golden bright cocoons, still steaming, and start unraveling the silky bundles. The soaked cocoons unwinded into a single, fine thread, then carefully reeled and left to dry, before being strung onto the loom. The Silk Lady works the thread gently, but quickly, the individual fibers weaving into shape under her fingers.

"As his daughter, I lived there." She reached a hand into the basket of white, plump silkworms. "I hated it. The rules and traditions of the place." Her tone turned wry.

"The other princesses and I spent monotonous days trapped in the palace, life passing by barely. By Imperial customs I was expected to be pretty, prim and passive."

"Members of the Imperial Court fawned over silk as a status symbol. They made the process of silk making a tightly guarded state secret so that no one else could have it. That part of Imperial traditions I despised. But what made silk special for me," she continued, spooling the threads around her hand, "was the hard work and artistic skill needed to master it. The time spent perfecting my craft was my escape." She pushes on the pedals and the loom creaks in response.

"The moment I turned of age, the Emperor decreed to marry me off to the prince of Khotan." She paused. "That was when I realized I had to leave. I had no more freedom than before. So I escaped the palace, bringing with me my silkworms hidden in a bamboo cane, and a dream to live my own life." A flurry of wings rippled through the canopy overhead, as silkmths took flight from their branches, and for a fleeting moment, the sun glinting off their white bodies parted the dense leaves.

The years past softened the blow, but her blissful, euphoric smile faded, as reality crushed the Silk Lady, even now. "I couldn't stop moving from thereon, with the guards in active pursuit. So I went from village to village until I reached a village outside of the Emperor's authority."

She traced a finger around the creases in the fabric, outlining a path in her head. "I lost my status, my title; but I'd never felt so free. but still I continued to make silk." The Silk Lady

stared at the length in her hands, and smiled with genuine contentment. “You’d be surprised how comforting it was to find myself in this village, in the art of silk, was.”

“Why tell everyone the secret to making silk?” A Qiao asked.

“Why did I teach them the process of crafting silk? This impoverished village, out of all chose to let me stay. This was an active act of gratitude on my part. It was all I had to offer in return to these kind people. I taught them the skill of making silk.”

A Qiao opened her mouth, but no words came to her. Her unanswered question hung in the air. Are you done? Are you fulfilled? Are you satisfied with your work? Silence penetrated the fortress of mulberry trees, as the Silk Lady ran her hand across the rough wood of her loom.

“I have done what I can, all I can,” she mulled. “I’ve taught everyone what I know about silk, I’ve passed down the craft.” The Silk Lady stared thoughtfully over the treetops, where steam from the vats of boiling cocoons formed a hazy cloud far out over the horizon, distorting the distant figures of merchants and traders, loaded with swaths of silk, traversing across the known world. “It seems that my craft has traveled further than me.”

She paused, soaking in the view of the setting sun, before turning to her young student. “And you, A Qiao. Silk, through you, will continue to touch so many generations more lives yet.”

# A Message From The Sky

*Singapore International School Hong Kong, Yu, Yat Hong David – 11*

The golden sun shone brightly on the picturesque fields. Lu Ban, a short and skinny young boy, was taking a stroll with his father, Lu Feng, a burly royal guard from the palace who was off duty for the week. They ambled through the vibrant fields, exchanging warm greetings with the hardworking farmers. Suddenly, a gust of wind swept through the rice field, causing one farmer's hat to lift off his head. However, to their surprise, the hat was not blown away and simply hovered in mid-air.

The father and son stood amazed at the peculiar sight. The farmer laughed heartily, "Autumn is always so windy! I'm tired of my hats getting blown away so I decided to tie it to my head with a string!" Intrigued, Lu Feng commended the farmer's cleverness while Lu Ban's eyes sparkled with curiosity. "If the string was much longer, the hat could fly up into the clouds, just like a bird!" he blurted. "Father, let's try to make one ourselves!"

Back at home, they experimented making a "hat" with different materials, and finally came up with the perfect design: a piece of thick paper attached to a light wooden frame, crafted in the shape of a bird. Giggling excitedly, they ran outside to test it out. With a swift throw against the wind, their paper bird defied gravity and ascended high into the sky, fluttering majestically. Lu Ban could almost feel himself soaring through the sky, riding the winds like a bird.

Their blissful moment was interrupted when a messenger suddenly arrived, urgently summoning all off-duty soldiers to return to the palace. In the midst of chaos, Lu Ban followed his father to the palace as they did not have time to go home first. The moment they arrived they felt the tension in the air, the generals huddled together with grave expressions. News had arrived that after a year of peace, the barbarians were again charging from the north, threatening the empire, so it was crucial to move all troops to fend off the impending invasion. At the break of dawn, General Liu, the most fearsome warrior in the country with a long lush beard, led most of the soldiers up north. Meanwhile, Lu Feng and some remaining guards stayed behind to protect the Emperor at the palace.

A few hours had passed since the soldiers left, and urgent cries suddenly echoed from outside the palace walls. Startled, Lu Feng and the others rushed to investigate. A group of commoners, battered and out of breath, cried out, "We were travelling back from the West and on our way in we saw the barbarians! There were thousands of them, fully armed and charging towards the palace!" The guards were appalled, immediately realising that they were fooled by the diversion that the barbarians had created. "They must have stationed some of their army in the North to lure our soldiers away, but in fact their main battalion is attacking from the West!" Lu Feng gasped. "It would be too late to send a messenger out and summon the army to return, by the time he reaches General Liu it would already be night!"

Listening to the guards, Lu Ban sat quietly aside but his mind raced. Then, a spark of inspiration ignited within him. He recalled the powerful sight of their "hat" soaring high in the sky. Perhaps, he thought, the "hat" could serve a greater purpose. "Father! I have an idea!"

Lu Ban's plan was to use their "hat" to signal the soldiers to return. "This may work as the soldiers may see it immediately and retreat!" his father exclaimed. The guards created a huge "hat" with a gigantic word "RETURN!" written on it, and tied it to a string that could

extend up to a mile. With the assistance of the wind, they launched it into the air. As the “hat” soared high above the palace, its message was visible for all to see.

The “hat” flew for hours, but still General Liu and his men were nowhere in sight. The sun had set and the cloudy sky was now basalt-black and brooding. Suddenly, the barbarians appeared in front of the palace.

Trembling hands clasped their weapons as Lu Feng’s men gazed upon their foe. The cold wind whispered and drifted through both the battlefield and the souls of the men. “Our plan didn’t work!” Lu Feng gasped. “We can only fight with just the few men we have here in the palace!”

The vast number of barbarians swarmed and swayed like corn in a field, yet it seemed like there were more of them than a thousand bushels could hold. Lu Feng, standing amidst the remaining soldiers, held their proud pennant aloft in defiance. Suddenly, the leader of the barbarians cried out and they charged, their feet clapping off the ground like the rumbling of thunder.

In the moment of desperation, a familiar voice suddenly bellowed, “We got your message from the sky!” The clouds cleared as General Liu appeared, riding on his black stallion and holding his axe up high. All around him, his troops emerged, roaring and jumping head first into battle, immediately turning the tide of the battle in their favour. The air pulsed with electric energy as General Liu rode forward, his eyes molten red and slaughtering any barbarians that dared to cross his path.

The enemy fought valiantly but the sheer number of returning soldiers outnumbered them and soon, they had no choice but to surrender. The clashing of spears, clapping of hooves and battle cries had finally stopped.

The barbarians were defeated, and the empire was saved. Lu Ban and his father were hailed as heroes and awarded medals of honour by the Emperor. This invention of what subsequently became later known as the kite had not only saved the emperor but had also inspired many more inventions by Lu Ban, the legendary Chinese inventor, whose achievements are still celebrated to this present day.

# The Rise of the Other Sun

*St. Paul's Co-educational College Primary School, Chong, Tsz Lun – 12*

Speeding along the vast plains of China, the high speed rail travelled silently, without a sound of rattling wheels or billowing steam of traditional trains. The scenery of the plains flashed in front of the window, allowing me to catch glimpses of windmills, greenhouses, farming vehicles and the darkened sky. Swirls and patches of ink-black clouds filled the sky, lightning bolted and thunder boomed, while the train remained untroubled. Instantly, a streak of blinding lightning pierced the sky and struck the train. The train tilted dangerously, the light tubes on the ceiling went out consecutively with soft clicks barely heard over the screams and shrieks of panic from the passengers. However, my heart skipped a beat as I became aware that instead of slowing down to a halt, the damaged train accelerated to breakneck speed as the carriage plunged into darkness with a deafening crash.

Wondering how much time had passed, I realized that I was lying on a solid ground. Barely had I wished for light than warm, soothing rays filled the carriage. I glanced around, paralyzed in shock as I found myself in a different train! I peered out of the window, my jaw dropping — on the field, interlocking railways knitted a web on the farmlands, cars extending wings of planes soared in the blue sky... my gaze followed the cars to the sky and I nearly had a heart attack — there were two blazing suns! I muttered, “I must not stay on this mysterious train anymore.” Turning around a corner, I found a boy, about my age waiting on a platform and approached him. “How can I help?” He greeted me with a friendly wave. I stuttered, “Excuse me, I want to ask...” I had three questions: where I was, when I was and why on Earth there were two suns.” “Oh, You’re here in Chengdu, Sichuan, in Year 2045, and that—” he pointed to the suns, “—one of the suns was artificially created by the China Technology Development Department two years ago, and was launched into space to orbit the Earth. The excessive content of carbon dioxide and tritium in the atmosphere are converted into heat that can reach one hundred million degrees Celsius. My father was one of the lead directors of this project and explained to me that the purpose of the artificial sun is to stabilize sunlight supply to grow crops, while alleviating the severity of global warming caused by the imbalance of gases in the atmosphere.” I nodded and pondering what to do when he called, “Wait, who are you? You don’t seem to be around here... Did you accidentally time travel?” I turned and explained my situation that I came from year 2024. The boy grinned and offered, “I might be able to find someone who can help you. I’m Tony, by the way. You can be transported in time at the Beijing Laboratory, where I am going to visit my father.” “I’m Julian.” I introduced myself as a vactrain, a super speed train, arrived at the platform and we boarded the next-gen vehicle departing for Beijing.

The journey from Chengdu to Beijing took us only forty-five minutes by the vactrain, which was completely computer-controlled and travelled on magnetic forces in an enclosed vacuum tube to reduce air resistance. As the train whizzed past the farms, I noticed a bizarre sight: farms were divided into sections, and though they appear to grow under one sky, some of the crops were blown by powerful wind while others were spattered with rain, or stoked by a miniature flaming sun. A quizzical expression appeared on my face and I asked Tony, “That is the Ecosystem Independence Program,” he replied, “using saved up rainwater as man-caused rain, and solar panels are to start wind, creating a copy of different weather in

order to foster growth of crops, and therefore China will not face famine. My home has installed a miniscule version of this facility.” I gazed at the farms and wondered “How rapidly has China developed in twenty years?” The new inventions of China are utterly impressive and have solved numerous problems, taking the lead in different scopes in the world.

An hour or so later, the vehicle skidded to a stop in Beijing Station and we walked to the laboratory. We hovered, as skateboards like drones drifted around and carried pedestrians barely an inch above the ground. This method reduced the friction between skateboards and the ground, increasing the speed of skateboards, therefore cutting down energy usage. The air of the city was more refreshing and cleaner than I remembered, and no sooner had the question formed in my mind that a gigantic transparent orb filled with dense smog transferred to a tower through a tube, the smog was released through the tube and the pressure of the gas moved a windmill in the glass tower, while a panel on top showed the amount of electricity. The facility was obviously converting harmful air into useful energy by utilizing air pressure to generate electricity. We entered the laboratory, which was a towering, hulking structure. In the hall, there were a dozen narrow tubes that could fit only one person at a time. I stepped into the tube and instantly rocketed up. Tony landed next to me and I followed him as he dashed off to find his dad.

We soon found his father, who was setting up the time machine and expecting my arrival, “Julian, welcome to the China Technology Development Department — the core of all China’s inventions, but I unfortunately do not have time to show you around today. The other end of the time tunnel is your time dimension and thank you for accompanying my son. I wish you a fine journey back.” Tony and his dad waved goodbye. I stepped into the tunnel and Tony’s father exclaimed, “We will see each other again — one day, right here.” I plummeted into the abyss before having time to consider his words. A split second later, I fell down on my seat on a train, and for a second I feared the time travel had not succeeded. I clambered to the window, watching the clouds floating away and revealing one single dazzling sun. I heaved a sigh of relief.

Nine years later, in an early morning, I set off for the Beijing Laboratory to report to work by train. As I once again gazed at the single sun, imagining another hovering nearby. I understand what Tony’s father meant — I would join the project of “the Other Sun” at the laboratory and contribute to the technological achievement of China. Come to think of it, I was probably in the same department the first time I visited the laboratory. Isn’t this a miracle?

# Untying the Knot: Harmony

*Victoria Shanghai Academy, Liu, Sofia – 10*

It was the year 2050. Greenhouse gasses trapped heat like a blanket, and the Earth was boiling hot.

Grace Wei was watching the COP conference from her home in China. Year after year, the climate crisis got worse. She watched every year because she wanted to use her inventions to solve current problems. The president of the UN, Ronald Hyden, stepped up to the podium. “The Earth is in a grave situation. Most of us think it’s pretty much unsaveable. Let’s admit, humans don’t really cooperate with nature. So next year, we are going to be rolling out a new space travel program. We can’t live on Earth anymore.” Grace was in shock. Was he actually saying that it was a choice between Earth and leave? She was Daoist and believed that humans and nature could work together. She was very attached to that, as it was a part of her identity. Daoism was almost a lost culture, and she strived to change that. That statement thrown out by Ronald was opposite of her belief. She knew she had to invent something to stop that nonsense. Something that would save the Earth, and save humans.

Usually, Grace had a lot of ideas, but she was feeling a bit empty. She racked her brain for ideas. None. She thought back to her mother, telling her poems. Daodejing was one of them.

*The Way - cannot be told.*

*The Name - cannot be named.*

*The nameless is the Way of Heaven and Earth.*

*The named is Matrix of the Myriad Creatures.*

*Eliminate desire to find the Way.*

*Embrace desire to know the Creature.*

*The two are identical,*

*But differ in name as they arise.*

*Identical they are called mysterious,*

*Mystery on mystery,*

*The gate of many secrets.*

... ..

“The gate of many secrets.” She glanced out the window, hoping for more inspiration. She saw a lone robot, cleaning the street. He looked isolated. An idea clicked. She could invent a robot that cleaned the environment! That would show the UN that the Earth could be cleaned, and humans wouldn’t be affected! It would also halt that pesky environmental group saying Earth couldn’t be saved by humans.

Air pollution, water pollution, temperature rise. All because of greenhouse gasses, thought Grace. How to solve it? CO2 absorber, water purifier. That would solve the problem. A solar panel and wind turbine to power it, plus chargers sticking out of the side? Needed. People drained their batteries way too quickly. She got to work immediately.

Over the next three months, Grace took a group of around 15 scientists and inventors and split them up into a few groups. Ideating, designing, building and testing. They finally found

one design that stood out to them. It was unveiling time. Everyone had worked very hard on one or two parts of the project. Now, they were going to see it come together.

Grace lifted her creation out of a box. It looked like someone attached LED lights to a box full of liquid, making it glow rainbow. It was about as big as a few water bottles. There were smaller compartments on the side, hidden with a push of a button. “First of all, I got help from all of you. I couldn’t have done this without you. The liquid part is a liquid tree. It purifies the air. I took inspiration from liquid trees in Serbia, but made it smaller but three times more effective.” Grace said. She pushed a button, and a smaller version popped out of the side. “This one only has the liquid tree function, but it’s more portable.” she said, handing over the smaller version to the scientists. They passed it around, examining it. She pushed another button. Another device popped out. This one was bigger. It consisted of a cup and a metal cylinder. “I got help from everyone on this water purifier.” she said gratefully. People clapped and cheered. Grace smiled slightly. She slid the water filter back into its spot, then pushed yet another button. A solar panel. With a cable. Everyone was waiting. Another button. Wind turbine. Cable. Everyone was growing impatient. Without Grace’s permission, someone clicked the last button. Cables. Wires. Grace’s face lifted with something in between a smile and a smirk as that person’s hands got tangled. “There’s a passcode to unlock the charging cables, and it can be customized to become personal.” And with that, Grace whispered her passcode. “Harmony.” The cables loosened, and the person pulled their hands out of the trap. “Whoa! Show me if the chargers work!” everyone said. Grace connected her wristwatch to the charger. The wristwatch was charged. “All the energy comes from the solar panel and wind turbine. It is very sustainable, Plus, it is cheap and accessible.” Grace said. Everyone clapped and cheered. They had done it!

At the next COP, Grace had a speech to make. “I’ve invented this. It’s a climate change solver. I know a lot of people think that humans are the main cause of the climate crisis. That is true. But I also want to say that humans can also solve climate change. Through this air purifier, we are not only cleaning the environment, but also cleaning humans to become better earthlings.” she finished. Everyone was clapping. And Grace was in the spotlight.

A few years later, Grace was taking a walk. She was holding her portable mini purifier and observing all the changes in the neighborhood. She was also taking a break from being the CEO of the company HarmoniousNature. The air was now clean enough to not need a purifier, but most people still carried around a purifier because they were so used to it. She wasn’t used to taking walks; the environment used to be so dirty. Now, greenery lined every road, the water was clean enough to consume after a quick boil, and it wasn’t boiling hot. Grace smiled as she thought about the changes that she made to improve the environment. Climate change was once like a dead knot that got tighter if you pulled. Grace had found the password to untie the knot: harmony.

# Flight attendant

*Ying Wa Primary School, So, Yu Hang – 12*

Sprinting across the grass. Letting go. Straining to be free.

And falling.

I woke up with a splitting headache as if someone was pounding a nail into my head. Immediately I knew something was wrong as I looked around at the walls of gold and the tiles of bronze.

If only I were this rich.

It was then I realised that I was not alone as I saw a few people in red and white robes who all wore matching pointed military-design boots. I looked down and my casual clothes had morphed into the same outfit, which I guessed was the uniform worn by the Dynastic emperor's advisors. I was sure this wasn't 2023, because the price of the palace would have tripled Musk's fortune.

I looked back and saw a glistening throne and on it was an emperor whom I recognised from my history class, bearing the royal crown with dangling spheres on the ends.

He was speaking in Mandarin in a way that children would not do when talking to their mothers. 'If they are really telling the truth and going to tunnel across the land, we have no way of knowing when they will start or where they will be.'

An advisor whose facial features I remembered from my history class, Lu Ban spoke up. He stepped onto the dais and swept his hands up. 'We should create something to measure the length of both cities to see if they are telling the truth. If the distance is too long, then there is no way of tunnelling over without wasting a great deal of resources. In contrast, if it is short, then they will have numerous ways to come over, thus increasing their chances of winning; therefore we have to be prepared for anything.'

The emperor's eyes lit up and he nodded satisfactorily and smiled shrewdly. 'Work with Mo-Tse and create this invention.' Mo-Tse came forward, bowing low.

Lu Ban then spoke up, 'Your Majesty, this task might be taxing. Please grant my request for three people instead.'

The emperor nodded and pointed straight at me.

The emperor exited the room along with the rest of the generals and advisors. Lu Ban shut the door and looked at me skeptically but worriedly, 'You've risen through the ranks quite quickly, boy,' he said as he joined Mo-Tse on the dais, 'now is the time to prove yourself.'

'Maybe a hot-air balloon?' I suggested after a minute's time. It came to my mind on the spot as I was fascinated in a hot-air balloon.

'“Hot-air balloon”?' Mo asked.

'Well, a cloth should be stitched into a spherical, oval shape. Then fire should be lit at the base of the sphere. The reaction between the mixed temperatures should result in the balloon floating upwards. You could install a large cockpit so that you could sit in it and fly to the enemy base while riding on it and calculate the distance with the average speed of the balloon and the time needed.'

Mo and Lu stared at me blankly.

Suddenly Lu inhaled a sharp breath. 'You're not from this Dynasty, are you?' He looked at me thoughtfully. 'It defies all logic, but it should be true. Although the balloon

is impossible to make in a day's time, which means we have to think of another idea, your direction of thinking is definitely not from our era. '

'It just all seems like a strange dream to me,' I mumbled, 'but I maybe could help.' With Lu and Mo still shocked, I sat down on the dais with them and recalled how I got here. Sprinting across the grass. Letting go. Straining to be free.

And a sliver of an idea hit me.

Both of their eyes widened even more.

Mo and Lu instructed me to my quarters and started to work together on this contraption. I missed my family and was confused about my alternate lifeline, but I would not give up on such an important project.

Everyone was already in the backyard when I woke up and arrived in a rush to the court the next day. Lu handed a wooden kite, which I guessed was what the advisors had also been working on, to General Han Hsin, and he nodded his head at the emperor, indicating it was going to indeed work, and threw it in a large arc, controlling it with a string. He angled the kite towards the enemy base, looked at the calculations on the string and he broke into a mad grin.

'Well, from this distance, I'd say it's impossible to tunnel over.'

I wanted to hear more of the cheering, the laughter but the noise shut off and the corners of my eyes started to turn white. The only people I could see were Lu Ban and Mo Tse. Mo worriedly rushed forward, but Lu held him back and calmly said, 'I think your time in our dynasty is up,' he told me and the old me would have danced in joy.

But who gets to experience old dynasties every day?

My legs turned into wisps of smoke as Mo Tse also stepped forward. His usually furrowed brow loosened and he smiled. 'Keep alive,' he said, and that was the last thing I heard in 450 BC.

I sat up straight, on a patch of grassland with a kite next to me. I picked it up. Keep the bird alive. Kites were used for wars and science? Suddenly I was afraid to touch it as if it was a hydrogen bomb. But now the kite has been converted into a toy, to keep its traumatic memories alive by converting it into good ones. Keeping it alive, and the people who played with it were all history's attendants.

I let the kite soar again, unsure if it was a dream or not. It all seemed like a time-travel story cliché.

But was the history true?

In my diary's defence, it's new tales.

# A Character's Start

*YK Pao Primary School, Gong, Hanxin Rosie – 9*

In a time before WeChat or TikTok, in a time before cars or airplanes, in a time even before paper or printers had been invented, our story begins. In fact, this was a time before any words had ever been written.

Hidden within the mountains of eastern China, a kind-hearted girl called Yingzi Luo was born in a village that was too small to name. Used to their simple and predictable life, the villagers weren't ready for a mute girl who could only communicate through her smile.

Lonely and in search of friends, Yingzi snuck off every morning, where she made friends with animals in the woods. Though she couldn't communicate with people, she understood the animals, and they understood her. Yingzi created symbols for her bird, horse, and animal friends that she would scratch onto rocks. Eventually, she created new symbols for the trees, the sun, the mountains, and all of nature around her.

One year, hardship struck. As they watched their dear pond slowly dry up, the elders talked about how many full moons it had been since it last rained. Desperate groups of men searched for water, but they always returned empty-handed. As the last shrubs disappeared, Yingzi's animal friends also left to find food.

On one of Yingzi's morning walks to her circle of carved stones, a flock of birds flew by. When she called out and asked where they came from, they told her about a river they had found beyond the mountains.

Without waiting to hear more, she ran back to the village with the good news. They were saved!

Yingzi ran from house to house, pounding on each door. As her parents and the other townsfolk gathered, Yingzi grasped her mother's hand and gestured for the villagers to follow her.

By the time they reached her circle of stones, the birds were already gone. Thinking their long trek was only to see Yingzi's stone art, the villagers rolled their eyes. Some of them even started yelling angrily. Yingzi gestured beyond the mountains, but one by one they turned their backs and silently walked the dry, dusty path back to their village.

Tears came to her eyes. but as she looked towards the mountain peaks, her eyes shined with determination. That night, she quietly gathered her blanket, a little food, and her walking stick before setting out into the moonlight.

The journey was difficult. After winding up back in the same place, she started to mark her path by scratching symbols onto rocks as landmarks. When she came across a once lush forest that had lost all the leaves to the drought, she carved out her symbol for 'tree' on a boulder; when she came across a dried-up lake, she scraped her character for 'lake' on a stone near the now empty crater; at the base and peak of each mountain, she left a stone marked with her symbol for 'mountain'; and on she went.

On the fifth morning, as she peered above the final mountain peak, Yingzi felt the sun's rays on her face. The sound of birds chirping and a river flowing reached her ears. Shielding her eyes, she looked out and saw an open, grassy plain, scattered with trees. Right in the middle, there was a big river snaking through the plain. Overcome with excitement, she started running and tripped over a root, tumbling downward.

Limping the final distance to the river, Yingzi reached forward with cupped hands. Water had never tasted so sweet. Looking down at her scraped-up leg, she carefully washed the blood off. There was no way that she could travel all the way back to her village. How would she send the good news?

Yingzi peeled off some soft bark and crushed the juice out of some berries. She would use this to draw a map. Starting on the left, she wrote big characters to represent the mountains, the forest that she met, the dried-up lake, the sun to show where it would rise, and a final character to show the river.

Once she was ready, Yingzi called out to the nearby birds who quickly flew down to see what she needed. After carefully tying the rolled-up map with her necklace, the birds took it in their beaks, and off they went.

Arriving at the village, the birds circled overhead, their chirping drawing the attention of the villagers. They fluttered down, dropping the map before taking off again. Amid the elders' confused murmurs about what this meant, a child darted forward and picked up the tree bark. Tied to it was Yingzi's necklace.

Unrolling the bark, puzzled whispers filled the air.

"Those look like mountains!" one said.

"And that, a forest of trees," another pointed out.

"Isn't that the sun rising from the east?" a third mused.

The villagers stood divided, unsure whether to follow the strange symbols. Yingzi's mother stood up, "This is clearly a message from Yingzi! Who's coming with me?" she declared.

One by one, the villagers joined in, saying, "ME TOO!" With quickened steps, they gathered their sparse supplies and set out. Guided by Yingzi's map and the marked stones, they easily found their way across the mountain range.

As they crested the final mountain peak, smoke from Yingzi's fire came into view. Descending onto the lush grassy plain, gratitude filled their hearts.

The villagers worked swiftly to rebuild their homes. At the village entrance, they erected a sign with their new village name, symbolizing their new beginning. Each family asked Yingzi to create a unique family character, proudly displaying it above their doorways. Along the main street, large signs with characters showed directions to the river, farms, and other landmarks.

Life blossomed anew, and Yingzi found herself no longer alone but respected and cherished. However, each morning, she still ventured to a peaceful part of the river, sitting quietly with her animal friends, gazing into the clear waters that breathed life into their home.

# Creative Writing Fiction

## Group 2

## New Tales of China's Inventions

*Alliance Primary School Kowloon Tong, Law, Cheuk Wai – 10*

Li Yue woke up on a large merchant ship. The wooden planks creaked as the ship danced with the waves. He rubbed his eyes and stepped out onto the deck, where the salty sea breeze instantly refreshed him. The sun climbed up the sky and painted a path of gold on the water.

“Good morning, Li Yue!” called a fellow sailor, a friendly man named Ah Xia. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you, Ah Xia. You must be tired after keeping watch all night. Take some rest,” Li Yue replied while stretching.

“I’m too excited to rest now,” Ah Xia said with a wide grin. “We’re nearly there. Look ahead, and you’ll see the towering pagodas and lush jungles of the Srivijaya Empire. It’s one of the busiest ports on the Malay Peninsula!”

Li Yue was a young man during the Tang dynasty. Li Yue’s father had been a student of the legendary alchemist Sun Simiao and was both a doctor and an alchemist. Immersed in his quest for medicine for eternal life, he experimented with burning various substances. Tragically, during his last experiment, his pot exploded and fatally injured him. Soon after his father’s death, Li Yue’s mother also passed away. Becoming an orphan at the age of 13, Li Yue grieved for his parents but also felt that his father’s obsession had been foolish. To feed himself and satisfy his curiosity, he decided to do something more practical and became an apprentice to a merchant, Mr. Zhang, who frequently set sail for Southeast Asia.

Li Yue was diligent and eager to learn from Mr. Zhang, who treated him like a son. He taught Li Yue how to barter with the cunning traders and shared secrets of the monsoon winds that carried them across the sea.

One sunny morning, they set sail for the Srivijaya Empire. Their ship was full of the finest goods. Li Yue’s eyes widened with enthusiasm as they approached the port, where boats laden with exotic goods from across Asia were docked and merchants from different countries were discussing prices. Li Yue could see colourful textiles and smell the rich aromas of spices. Li Yue’s heart was pounding rapidly as this was his first visit to such a foreign bustling port.

In the sweltering heat, Mr. Zhang and Li Yue traded bolts of silk and delicate chinaware for aromatic resins, exotic spices, and gold. Mr. Zhang, thrilled with the significant profit he made, rewarded the sailors and apprentices with gold coins. Li Yue and Ah Xia purchased some fresh tropical fruits. That night, Li Yue showed Ah Xia a snow-like substance. Ah Xia, wide-eyed with curiosity, asked, “What is that?” Li Yue replied, “It’s saltpetre I inherited from my father. It’s what took his life, but it can be used to make ice to cool our fruits.”

However, their peace was abruptly disrupted when a gang of pirates, notorious for robbing and killing along the Malacca Strait, descended upon the harbour. The city was in panic.

Li Yue remembered his father’s alchemical experiments and had an idea. He rushed to his wooden chest and retrieved all the saltpetre. Ah Xia asked with a trembling voice, “What are you doing? Are you making ice for preserving our dead bodies?”

Li Yue said no words. He mixed saltpetre with sulphur powder and wood ash by following the steps he had seen his father perform countless times, though never for this purpose. Ah Xia watched, puzzled. “Aren’t those the ingredients alchemists use to seek eternal life?”

Li Yue remembered one of his father's notes that recorded a conversation with his teacher, Master Sun, about the combustive properties of sulfur, charcoal, and saltpetre.

"Yes, but my father may have discovered something else – something powerful," Li Yue admitted, feeling the weight of his father's legacy in his hands. "He sought immortality, but perhaps he found a different kind of power and overlooked its potential."

Li Yue and his fellows prepared the mixture and packed it into pots with makeshift fuses. Then they went to a coastal fort. "Light them and run away," Li Yue instructed with a steady voice despite the chaos around them. The fuses were lit, and with a tremendous roar and a series of blinding flashes, the pots exploded and sent smoke and terrifying echoes through the city.

Those arrogant pirates had never seen this power before and fled in terror because they believed the city had magical and mysterious weapons. Filled with relief, the citizens cheered. Li Yue's father had not found eternal life, but in that moment, his work had saved many people.

A Tang Dynasty ambassador, who was en route to the Srivijaya capital and had witnessed the event, was astounded by the power of Li Yue's "weapons." The ambassador approached Li Yue and said, "Your talents could contribute to our great Tang empire. Would you consider becoming a consultant for our military?"

Li Yue loved his country and felt honored, yet at the same time, he was conflicted. "Sir, my knowledge is a legacy from my father and his teacher, Master Sun Simiao. I hope to use it for defence and protection, not for conquest. But who can promise such things?" Li Yue replied, declining the offer respectfully.

The ambassador was a noble man. He understood Li Yue's choice and did not force him to accept the offer. However, he was concerned about the risk that other countries might learn this technique before them. The ambassador investigated the remains of the exploded pots and his eyes brightened with surprise.

As Li Yue's ship cut through the waves, he mulled over the enigmatic power hidden in those ordinary ingredients. The world seemed to be cheekily keeping its mysteries. Some, like Master Sun, had the luck to catch a glimpse, while others had paid a price. With a mix of fear and respect for the unknown, Li Yue continued on his voyage.

## Chopsticks

*Pui Ching Primary School, Fok, Ho Yee Kalie – 12*

"Wake up and get to work!"

There was a booming voice ringing in her ear as Jade dragged herself out of bed. It felt oddly rough like the bark of a tree. A cold gust of wind was blowing on her back. She swore she had shut the windows tight last night. Jade rubbed her eyes and realised she was in a stable! Shocked yet confused, she rushed out to see a palace full of bustling servants.

"Ah, there you are, new kid. Help me with this food. Be quick, the Emperor is getting impatient."

Jade looked up to see a tall and plump man staring at her. He pointed at a stove and a pair of chopsticks that were neatly placed next to it. Not knowing what to do, Jade grabbed the chopsticks and started to stir the soup.

*What is this place? Jade thought. Should I go to the market and ask? That would be stupid...*

Jade decided to go to the market once she finished the soup. She made an excuse that they were out of eggs and set off. People in Hanfus walked hurriedly around the busy streets, barely paying attention to Jade.

As Jade walked around, she realised this was Ancient China. She saw one of the stands with no customers and walked towards it. As she approached the stand, she caught a glimpse of the things the seller had. There were chopsticks of different sizes, some had weird sharp ends and some looked like twigs plucked from an old tree. It reminded her about the assignment she was supposed to do about China's history. She shivered at the thought of the face Ms. Johnson, her strict History teacher, would make if she didn't hand it in.

"Excuse me, sir. May I ask which year we are in?" Jade asked in a timid tone. Surprisingly, the seller laughed at her.

"Hahaha! You really took a hit in the head, haven't you?" teased the seller, "Haven't you looked in a mirror? Your clothes look so odd! Is that some kind of clown costume? Well, before you get changed, just to let you know, we're in the Han Dynasty since you are so curious." added the seller.

Sure enough, Jade looked down and realised she was wearing her pyjamas from last night! She tried to put on a confident tone as she spoke, "Er—these are some nice chopsticks you're selling... how'd you get the idea?"

"These are my special handmade chopsticks. I used some twigs and my chisel to make these exquisite shapes." replied the seller. Jade made a slight cough when she heard the word "exquisite" as she thought it was nowhere near. She finally thanked the seller for his time and left.

As she made her way to the palace, she thought about how she was going to write this assignment. Without realising it, she had arrived at the kitchens, which were still filled with people running around, preparing food for the emperor.

"Where were you, new kid? The emperor was furious when he didn't receive his breakfast. We're trying to make a feast for lunch to make it up to him. And we never run out of eggs! What did you go out for?" Shouted the head chef. His face was bright red like he was about to explode.

Jade panicked as she tried to help the chef. Seeing as the chef is calming down, she approached him once she finished her work.

“Pardon me, but can you tell me the history of chopsticks? I’ve been so fascinated with them lately.” asked Jade, batting her eyelashes.

“Well, you see, nobody knows who invented chopsticks. One person just took two twigs and started to eat food with it. We thought it was a good idea and soon, we started to use them. We assume that they dated over a thousand years ago as we are progressing so fast.” The chef added proudly. Jade wanted to say that now, in 2024, things are much better, but decided not to destroy the chef’s mood.

Wanting to start her assignment as she had learnt so many facts about chopsticks, she started to wonder how she would get home. Making her way back to the stable, deep in thought, she came across the emperor’s chamber, fiddling with his chopsticks. Jade took a quick glance at it and left. She strained her memory and saw that it was actually made of jade! Going back to the stable, she started to write her essay on the wall with a stick so she would remember the next day. Hours passed and Jade finally managed to carve her essay on the wall. Starting to feel tired, she decided to end the day. She gathered some hay from the horses and made a small bed, laid on the rough hay and dozed off.

“Jade, wake up! I know it’s the weekend, but it doesn’t mean you can sleep in!” Jade heard her mother’s voice and got out of bed. She stumbled across the hall, rubbing her eyes as she walked into the living room. There, she heard the TV playing the news.

“Next up, is some exciting archaeological news. They’ve found a piece of wood that contained a 500 word essay in China! Who knew, maybe Chinese people secretly learned English? Well, that piece of wood is now displayed in the National History Museum of China where you can admire it. Stay tuned, folks! After a quick ad break, we’ll be reading the weather report...” said the news reporter. Hearing this, Jade became wide awake and noticed the TV. She was home!

“Quite odd for someone to carve an entire essay on a piece of wood, isn’t it? That reminds me...have you done your assignment yet, Jade?” asked Jade’s father.

“Nope, but I finally know how to write it!” exclaimed Jade. She quickly ran into her room to grab her pencil and a piece of paper, writing about Ancient China’s chopsticks.

## The Dream of Paper

*Pui Ching Primary School, Yam, Po Sing Matthew – 11*

In ancient China, there were two kinds of paper: bamboo slips and silk. Bamboo slips are small thin bamboo stripes that are linked together by strings. They are very cheap but too heavy, and you can only write about a few hundred words on the bamboo strips. Silk is very light and easy to write on but too expensive. A piece of silk costs about 700 to 1000 Wuzhu (Currency back then)! This problem has been a huge problem for Emperors.

Professor Nolan Davison, Bryon Bell’s teacher, has just invented a time machine. It lets you dream a historical dream and whoever dreams back in time must be awakened by another person to wake up. He had the chance to see the piece of paper that changed the world with Professor Bell...

Professor Bryon Bell was at an archaeological site in China. A gigantic smile appeared on his face. He could not suppress his excitement. He was about to see the first paper in the world getting unearthed! However, there were some gibberish words written across this mysterious artifact. Professor Bell frowned and started to read the words. Just like magic, some purple particles formed a sphere. Professor Bell was surprised. He had never seen these incoherent words, not to mention the weird particles. He just can’t wait to research this paper. In the blink of an eye, he was sucked into a strange tunnel full of images of Chinese people. Suddenly, the only thing he could see was blackness...

When he woke up, the surroundings were poles apart from nowadays. Everyone was wearing loose clothes and had a small piece of jade hanging around their waist. Everyone was riding in chariots. There were no skyscrapers; only single-story houses. He has travelled back in time! He was transported to the palace, dressing like a servant. Phew! Luckily, I was dressed like a servant. Unless the Emperor might punish me, or even chop my head! Professor Bell thought.

“Cai Lun.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I have been worried about the problem of bamboo slips and clothes. Bamboo slips are not quite expensive but very heavy. On the other hand, clothes are light but very expensive. Can you think of a way to help the civilians?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I’ll do my best.”

Professor Bell was transferred to Cai Lun’s house. This time, he was dressed as an entourage and his clothes magically changed. Cai Lun’s house was a huge villa with a big garden and a huge balcony to observe the civilian life so that he could improve their life. He was sitting on the balcony and sighed, “I shouldn’t be accepting this huge mission. What a huge problem! How can I make new material to write on?”

Professor Bell spoke unconsciously, “Why don’t you go to the village and get some inspiration?”

“That’s a great idea! Tell the servants to get the sedan chair.”

“Yes.” Professor Bell spoke.

A few moments later.

“Hey! What are you doing with that white, thin stuff?” Cai Lun shouted to the women he saw across the river.

“We are people that do sericulture. We are getting silk from silkworms. These are the silk that failed the quality test. We usually use them to fix broken windows or wrap something up. My husband even uses them to practice calligraphy.”

It must be very light. If I can improve it, I might make new writing material! Cai Lun thought. He couldn't wait to go back and test it. “Return and try to make it from these silkworms.”

“Yes.”

Cai Lun got a few silkworms from those women and went back. Professor Bell was again sent forward to the future half an hour later. Now, he was a bush in the garden. He saw Cai Lun was collecting silk from silkworms. They collected the bad-quality silk intentionally. He mixed them with some waste wood and bamboo. He put it on a wooden frame with a cloth inside of it. When this mixture was dried, he found out that this material was very unstable: sometimes it was very fragile, and sometimes it was too tensile to write on. Sometimes it was not even writeable! After countless trials and errors, he finally found the perfect recipe: he used withered flowers, skins of trees and broken fishnets to mix with water, then boiled it, and put it on the wooden frame.

Cai Lun reported this to the Emperor. He tried calligraphy on it and it was perfect! It was just like an even cheaper and lighter version of bamboo slips, or a way cheaper version of silk. The Emperor decided to give Cai Lun a great reward. Cai Lun named this material “paper”.

Professor Bell noted all the history of the paper carefully, but he still couldn't go back to the present. Suddenly, he remembered the effect that whoever went back in time must be awakened by another person to come back to the present.

“ARGH! Please someone wake me up!” He screamed at the top of his lungs.

About a minute later, he saw the strange tunnel. He was travelling back in time. He woke up, back to reality.

“How was the experience? Did you see Cai Lun? A piece of paper accidentally slipped into the machine. That's why you dreamed about the history of paper. Sorry!” Prof. Nolan Davison said. “Oh, can I have a look at your notes?”

Professor Bell searched in his pocket. “I... I lost it!”

The next day.

“Archaeologists had unearthed an ancient notebook written with the details of Cai Lun's papermaking technology. It is estimated the time Cai Lun had discovered papermaking technology. Archaeologists are still discovering why there was a notebook at that time. That's all for News Today. Thanks for watching. Have a good night.”

How? Why is my notebook right there? Could it be... the dream really happened? Professor Bell was shocked.

## New Tales of China's Inventions

*St. Eugene de Mazenod Oblate Primary School, Wong, Trek – 11*

“Ring! Ring!” Fa's smartphone yelled at 8 o'clock in a peaceful morning. Sew and Fa, the renowned superpower cats, were boiling tomato soup, based on the special recipe of Fa's late mum. Fa grabbed her smartphone. There was a call from a hospital.

“Your father was stuck in a mine shaft. He was rescued right after the massive rock was blasted by dynamite. He is now with bandages all around his body. He wants to see you.” The nurse said in a worried tone.

Fa blurted. “Oh Dad! Here I come.”

Dynamite was invented by China in the late 19th century. Chinese are peacemakers who make firecrackers to scare the imaginary monster ‘Year’ and bless the villagers all year long. It is generally used for breaking apart rocks and demolishing buildings. Its contribution to urban planning and reconstruction cannot be underestimated.

Sew said, “Let's go as soon as possible!”

They left home in their pyjamas and dashed towards the city centre as fast as gales.

“How do we get there?” panted Sew.

“I don't know. Let's check the Internet.” Fa forced herself to be calm and decisive.

Charles K. Kao, a great Chinese scientist, contributed to the spread of the Internet. He devoted his whole life to the research of fibre optics which speed up the global connection. He sent optics technology as a precious gift to the whole world. Almost all knowledge and information can be obtained by just one click. No one can live without the Internet nowadays.

The phone chimed. Fa exclaimed, “The long-distance bus journey will take about four hours!”

Sew reassured hopefully. “Fret not! Let's take the high-speed train. The journey can be compressed to one hour.” Sew jerked to a stop and dragged Fa to the station.

Maglev technology enables train speed up to 400km/h. China created a faultless network covering almost the whole country. It increases labour mobility by creating many one-hour living circles in all First-tier Cities.

Sew heard an embarrassing grumble from her tummy. Sweet Fa was considerate of Sew, “I'm starving to death. Let's grab a thousand hotdogs there before we board the train!”

At the hotdog booth, the mouth-wateringly scrumptious hotdogs waved to them. Fa found desperately that she had left her purse at home. Sew jumped up. “Why don't we use WeChat Pay?” After scanning the QR code, feeling a soft vibration of the phone, they devoured all the hotdogs in front of them.

Wechat, which is described as the ‘app of everything’, became the world's largest standalone mobile app in 2018. Around 943 million users now send text and voice messages, play games, share videos as well as complete touchless mobile payments which saved many lives in the outbreak of COVID-19.

After one hour, they arrived at the hospital. Shockingly, they spotted Fa's father groaning in a ward with hundreds of tubings attached to his body. They bursted into tears and rushed towards him in no time.

“Dad! What is going on?” Shivered Fa. “I am sorry. Your father's wound is infected by an unknown virus. We are still figuring out how to help him.” The doctor explained.

Dad softly said, “My girl, it is too good to see you one last time,” He smiled. “I am so grateful to have you and your mum in my life. I miss her and will see her soon in heaven. One of the sweetest memories we shared was the tomato soup made by your mum.” “My boiling soup!” Gaspd Fa. She choked like the apocalypse came.

Sew pressed Fa’s shoulders firmly. “No mission is impossible in China.” Sew kept working on the phone and taking videos.

Suddenly, the familiar aroma of soup filled the air and Fa’s father was energised. A man wearing a jacket with the logo of ‘SF Express’ carried a box of ‘Alibaba’. Fa’s lips were quivering, “How can it be?”

Sew chuckled. “I turned off the stove and unlocked the door with smart home systems. I asked Kin, our blind neighbour who is one of the Alibaba suppliers, to send the soup and make a personalised delivery by SF Express. With Angeleye, the smart glasses, which allows blind people to navigate their world through the use of AI and sensors. They help Kin to detect objects, recognize money bank notes and read text messages. He now can overcome darkness and live like a normal person.”

Haier Smart Home came top of the Global Smart Home Invention Patent Rankings since 2020.

Alibaba contributed the next. It set up effective online trade and delivery systems. It runs warehouses with high technology robots. A man in Foshan received his package 13 minutes after he placed the order on Alibaba’s shopping site on 11th November, the most popular shopping festival in China!

Fa’s father was delighted with the soup. He whispered afterwards, “It’s my time to see your mum.” Fa sobbed, “No! Please don’t leave me.”

“Clack! Clack!” There was then an awkward silence after the sound of high heels. Here came a crew of professionals.

“We’ve watched your video on Tiktok. Millions of people were touched by your heartbreaking scene. They urged all the best doctors to work on the virus.” A doctor comforted Fa sympathetically.

TikTok was launched by Zhang Yiming and spread the personalised videos to 1 billion users worldwide.

A doctor extracted fluid from father’s wound and whispered, “Chinese medicine, like acupuncture and herbal medicine, has gained acceptance worldwide. China has invented three kinds of Covid-19 vaccine, including inactivated, mRNA and Cepharanthine-based vaccine which is plant-based and was found to have excellent anti-Covid-19 activity. We integrated Chinese and Western medicine with high technology and established a plant-based vaccine which is proven to be more powerful than Cepharanthine. Do you want to try?’ Fa’s father nodded confidently.

The bed was pushed into the surgery room. Fa and Sew saw a glimmer of hope shining from the door crack. China’s inventions are creating tales of hope and love for the next generation.

# 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.

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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.

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“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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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*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.*

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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.*

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*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 of 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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“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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.”

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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.

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"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."

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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.

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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.”

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#### 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.

# Fiction

## Group 4

### Lucky Charm

*Carmel School – Elsa High School, Jang-Abergel, Lili – 15*

“Leave Zhang Heng! Go to your mother!”

My father cried out to me as his body became limp underneath the crushing weight of the rubble. As hot tears streamed down my face, falling onto my torn clothing, I saw my mother in my peripheral, sobbing in my grandmother’s arms as they shoved their way through what had remained of our house to get to safety.

Every time I consider giving up, I remember that moment.

My father passed when I was only 10 years old, leaving me in the care of my mother and grandmother. Growing up, I didn’t really enjoy all the ‘typical’ things boys my age enjoyed; I spent most of my time trying to learn – not anything in particular, really; all I knew was that I was eager to understand how the world worked. My grandmother always told me I reminded her of my father when he was a boy; she never really told me why, but I knew it made her happy to see some of my father still in this world.

I left my city of Nanyang in the Henan province in the year 95 to study in the capitals of Chang’an and Luoyang; along the way, I spent time perfecting my fu poems. After several years of researching and meeting many notable people within the Taixue, I was offered many high-ranking positions within the government, including imperial secretary. Still, I knew that I was destined for something different. After my studies, I returned home with the title of ‘officer of merit’ and dedicated more time to my literary studies. I spent my time composing rhapsodies on the capital cities. Still, after a long time spent in the academic field and 30 years of my life later, I was eager to study verifiable things. Astronomy and mathematics is where I started, and I started publishing my work shortly after. My dedication and interest in mathematics and astronomy were evident to all those around me, and a mere 17 years later, I was named chief astronomer under Emperor An.

With that type of resume, you are probably thinking, what more could I want? I have spent all my life looking for a project that would finally fulfill me, where I could combine my desire to create and my appreciation for the facts. It finally came to me—it came to me when staying with my mother and grandmother back home, and I heard my mother’s silent cries while holding a crumpled letter riddled with minor stains from age and pilling from all the times she has cried while reading it. As a child, I tried to peek over her shoulder many times to see the contents of this seemingly heartbreaking letter, but my mother would give me an exasperated sigh and shoo me away. The only thing I knew about this letter was that it was written by my father, as I could see his tiny, inky signature that had since faded on the back of the page. Now, at the age of 36, you would probably assume I had enough self-control to contain my burning curiosity for the contents of that tattered letter.

I am sorry to disappoint you, but you thought wrong.

I knew exactly where my mother kept the letter, folded neatly in a small polished rosewood box she kept guarded safely in the dresser amid the hallway. I remember her leaving it in that exact spot as a child; I would peek around the corner as she attempted to turn the key as quietly as possible to maintain this level of secrecy she believed she possessed. For a few months after my father’s passing, she hadn’t even bothered to lock the dresser anymore as she found herself returning to that letter multiple times a day, clinging to the only words

he would ever ‘say’ to her again. But as I grew older and she began to heal, reading that letter became a once-a-week occurrence to a monthly one, and then it became something she’d do when she felt a particular moment of desolation. It is mid-day as I sit in my grandmother’s carefully tended garden; I can sense her slightly agitated demeanor as my right foot is on the verge of flattening her freshly planted amaranth. I lifted my foot above its reddish-rose-colored leaves and returned inside, where my mother had just finished securing her usual updo with the same Ji she had used since she was just a girl. She mindlessly slipped the jade clip into her hair and gave me the faintest smile; she was headed to the market to pick up more seeds for my grandmother’s garden.

At last, it was time to give in to my curiosity.

As soon as I heard the vague sound of the front door being closed, I walked guiltily towards the dresser, slightly disappointed in myself, considering I was scolded a great deal of times for attempting to pull off this exact scheme as a boy— but it was too late for that now. Somehow, I had convinced myself I was owed some connection with my father due to how limited my time was with him. That is what I kept repeating to myself as my hands neared closer to the key, which my mom had now just left in the lock; as I turned the key into the lock, my palms grew increasingly clammy, the bronze key nearly slipping from my fingers. The dresser let out a slight click sound, indicating that it was open; wiping my damp palms up and down the cloth of my pants, I allowed myself a moment to breathe before connecting my hands with the cold metal of the dresser knob. The creak and scrape of the dresser being opened seemed awfully louder than a dresser’s typically insignificant sounds; I warily pulled out the shiny rosewood box, making sure that I memorized everything about the scene in front of me as to not leave any hints of my snooping behind. I lifted the small box off the dresser and slowly walked it to my study. Placing the box neatly on my desk, I flip open the small hatch in the front to reveal what this box has been hiding for many years. When I picked it up, I realized it was significantly heavier than I had expected, but examining the contents, I understood why.

Inside the box lay two golden figures with open mouths, one dragon and one frog. I reach down in the box and run my index finger lightly over the small gold detailing along the dragon’s back. I pull both figures out of the box, slightly shocked as the weight revealed that both were solid gold; I silently lecture myself for getting so easily distracted.

As I carefully place the two gold animals on a folded cloth, I pull out the battered letter from the bottom of the box. The paper had become so weary that you could read the ink-written words from the back; a wave of nervousness overcame me as it felt like it might turn to ashes and fall through my fingers like sand. As I turned the paper around, a neatly written note had been scribed;

*My dear wife,*

*On this birthday of yours, I knew that getting you a simple shawl would simply not do. As we reached another joyous year of marriage, I was unsure what I should give you. This past year, you have given me more than I had ever imagined: a beautiful home, the wonderful gift of your love and companionship, and, indeed, the most glorious gift of all: a beautiful son. I thought for months about how it would even be possible to repay you in the slightest, but it is truly impossible to ever give you as much as you have given me.*

*Nevertheless, I did not want to leave you empty-handed. These two gold animals have been my ‘lucky charm’ since I was a boy; I am not kidding when I say I took these everywhere — I used to complain to my*

*mother that my pants didn’t fit when, in reality, the animals would weigh my pockets down so much that there was always a 50% chance that my pants might drop to my ankles. I lived a happy, somewhat lucky life and attributed all that good fortune to my two golden animals, but the moment I met you, I packed those two animals into this box because I knew I would never need them again. As long as I live and long afterward, you will always be the most valuable charm I have ever held. You are my lucky charm.*

*Sincerely,*

*Your husband, Kan, the second*

I softly folded the letter back into its shape, not even having to look at the paper as the creases in the folds were so worn out. My father was my number one role model; I looked to him for everything. I knew him to be a strict man, and I longed for his validation — so, understandably, hearing him speak in such a heartfelt emotional manner left me in complete and utter shock.

It has been two days since I read the letter and found the animals, but in those two days, I have finally decided what my next project will be; a part of me is eager to hold the objects again, feel the cold, heavy gold compared to the wrinkled, almost soft texture of paper.

So I go back; it is risky going back a second time, but again, I give myself the excuse that I need to examine it for research purposes. I make my way back to the ‘forbidden’ dresser, considerably less cautious compared to the last time, but as I soon find out, this would be a mistake.

I can feel my mother’s presence as the bronze key twists in the lock.

Even at 36, I’m sure everyone can agree that a mother’s face of disappointment is the biggest slap in the face. I braced myself, getting ready to take her harsh scolding, but she said nothing — a single tear rolled down her cheek. I suddenly feel very unsure of myself; removing my hands from the dresser, I step to the side, still silent. My mother inches closer to the dresser with the same carefulness I had felt the first time I had opened it. As she pulled out the rosewood box, I held my breath, my nails digging so far into my palms, creating little markings in the shape of crescent moons. My mother then lets out a strangled cry, “My letter is *gone*.” These four words are all I can make out as she sobs hysterically in the middle of our hallway.

I spoke to my mother, and after she had calmed down, I admitted to being the last one in the dresser, the last one that had held the letter. She understood why I wanted to find out more about who my father was and why I resorted to snooping around.

As we sat around the dinner table, my mother, grandmother, and I, eating in silence, my mother suddenly dropped her fork. She looks up from her plate, her eyes filled with urgency and fear; you can almost hear her heart beating. Before we could decipher that look on her face, we felt it, too. The ground began to shake lightly. I listened to a single book from my study drop to the ground, the water in our cups swaying and threatening to spill — but they never did.

My mother and grandmother had their hands intertwined with mine, taking us all back to the worst day of our lives.

Except it is different now, as I stare down at our hands, mine are significantly bigger than theirs, my grandmother’s hand feels notably frailer, and her veins seem much more prominent; I seem to not even recognize my mother’s hand as the strong hand that used to guide me through busy streets or scratch my head until I fell asleep isn’t there anymore, her hand is softer, with tiny dimples and wrinkles.

As soon as it started, it was over. I reassured my mother and grandmother it would be okay, and they headed to bed. I went to my study to continue working on my big project;

I decided it would be a gift to my mother since it was her birthday next week, and after the dresser incident, I was eager to make it up to her somehow. As I sat in my chair, I noticed the folded corner of a very familiar letter; there it was, tucked in the corner of my bookshelf was the letter with just my father's signature sticking out. I carefully lift the shelf as far as I can off the letter, careful not to let the weight of the shelf damage the letter any further, and slide it out until it is safely in my hands.

I wanted to run to my mother at that very moment, but I had a better idea.

In the final stages of my project, I created a machine, a contraption, whatever you'd like to call it, the seismoscope. This device was a large golden cylindrical vase with eight golden dragons circling the top of this vase and eight golden frogs circling the bottom. Like my father's lucky charms, each animal had their mouth open. Every dragon that perched atop the vase carried a golden ball in its mouth, so when an earthquake struck, the ball would drop from the dragon's mouth into the frogs, creating a loud gong-like sound to alert anyone in the *seismoscope*' (as I'm calling it) vicinity. I placed my project in a large box with my father's note tucked in the bottom.

It was the day of my mother's birthday. She hadn't enjoyed celebrating since my father passed, but my grandmother and I always insisted. As it neared the evening, I decided it was time to show my mother the creation, my project where I was able to combine all of the things I love, where I could be creative but still find a way to work in the numbers and most importantly, I found a new way to connect to my family. My invention was then passed on, improved upon, and used worldwide. It satisfies me to know that because of my creation, fewer people will have to go through what my family went through.

With glossy eyes, my mother pulls me closer and whispers in my ear, "You are my lucky charm, Hang Zheng."

## The Eight Dragons and the Eight Toads

*Carmel School – Elsa High School, Zagury, Annabelle – 15*

They say ideas come to you when you least expect them and in a way I guess that was true for me.

I was a 54-year-old man with no wife and no kids. I buried myself in work to avoid realizing that I was miserable. My job was to report auspicious days to the emperor. I had discovered a way to revolutionize cartography, I created a water-powered armillary sphere that depicted the stars and the heaven and yet I was stuck. When you are an inventor you are expected to keep on inventing, to keep coming up with new ideas but sometimes, like a writer, you have no ideas you are stuck and thoughtless.

The worst thing that you can do to a miserable person is make them more miserable but that was what the Gods decided to do to me.

The villagers of Xi'e have always been religious and righteous, allowing them to be spared from the wrath of the Gods. However one horrible day the sound of the horses hooves on the gravel woke me up in the dead of the night and thoughts started to flood my brain. I recalled I just heard the sound of the 'first shift gong' not too long ago. Why would I have a messenger at this time of the night? Will it be a message from the Emperor? The banging of the door knocker filled the house, the sound of someone walking up the stairs echoed through the hallways and the shimmering light of the candle moved along with the sound of the footsteps. The feeling of hurriedness and urgency has woken my mind. All of a sudden my bedroom door was thrown open and the dresser was standing there out of breath. He looked at me with a face of unease and distress.

"What has happened?" I asked with impatience in my voice.

"Sir, a messenger has arrived with news from the provinces" he blurted out with a roll of script in his hand. I quickly took it and unrolled it.

"What is it, what happened?" I said while I juggled with the roll.

"A heavenly disaster struck and destroyed millions of lives."

"We have to inform the emperor quickly" I demanded as I quickly reached for my robe and began to get dressed.

"Sir, the town that has been struck with a heavenly disaster is Xi'e. The whole village was destroyed. Millions of people lost their homes and families."

I paused for a minute and said "What about my mother? Any news?"

My messenger quickly kneeled, "Unfortunately your mother was not spared". He said with his face looking on the carpet not daring to look up at my face.

I went speechless, not having a word in my head or a plan. I began to question myself. As the Chief astronomer, how would I not know this is coming? I can predict auspicious events, my job was to help the people of the country and yet I could not save my mother. Pictures of my mother consumed my mind. I started to feel lightheaded and fell on the carpet. Servants rushed in trying to help me to get up.

"Go get the carriage ready, we must head back to Xi'e and I must see my mother," I said.

"Yes sir, I will immediately go and form the men," he said as he rushed out of the room.

The remaining servants quickly got my robes ready and dressed me for the voyage. Before I left, I quickly wrote a note and passed it to my messenger to inform the emperor of the disaster. I then got in my carriage and my men whipped the horses to urge the horses to gallop.

I fell asleep alone in my carriage with all these thoughts, when we arrived my men awoke me and helped me out of my carriage. I looked around and what I saw scared me. All the houses were destroyed. There were small fires everywhere. People were crying from any injuries they bore, screaming from the loss of their houses and homes, and wailing at the loss of their loved ones. Suddenly the handmaid from my childhood came running towards me, she bowed down at my feet and started to sob.

“Master Zheng Heng, the earthquake happened out of nowhere. It shook us awake” she said in between cries and sniffles. “I ran to help your mother outside to shelter but as I started to go up the stairs the entire floor collapsed I heard her scream and then nothing. I ran in the direction of the scream I had heard and then I found her. She was still in the bed with her duvet, I assumed the bed had fallen through the floor and she had just screamed from the shock but as I got closer I saw pieces of glass impaled in her leg and a piece of wood in her stomach, there was blood everywhere, Master, I panicked I climbed onto her bed and took her in my arms and began to shake begging her to wake up. Her eyes fluttered a little and slowly she regained consciousness. She looked at me seemingly very weakly and said ‘Tell him he was perfect’ and with that took her last breath and passed into my arms. I immediately reached for a quilt and scroll and had the messenger reach you with great haste.” she finished exhausted with tears streaming down her face.

I crouched down to her and lifted her face to look her in the eye and whispered “Thank you Li Xiang Jun for trying to save my mother and informing me, for that and all the love you have shown me in my childhood I will forever be in your debt.” I wiped the tears from my eyes and continued “Can you take me to see where my mother rests and the estate in which I grew up.” I followed Li Xiang Jun through the rubble and ruins until we reached the front gate of my childhood home.

Although the plague on the top of the door had fallen, looking at the dark red half-stand columns and the wrecked stone lions at the door still reminds me of all the memories I had in this house with my family. I still remember the day I left this house, farewell hugged my mother when I was only 17 years old. I am now in my fifties, successful, and working alongside the emperor, however, have I ever been able to share my success with my mother? I slowly stepped into the remaining ruins of the house and Li Xiang Jun showed me the exact location of where my mother was buried. I bowed down and sobbed. My servants all kneeled around me to join in the grieve. The next day, I was woken up by the crowing of the rooster. I went to collect my mother’s body, and thanks to Emperor An Ti’s special arrangement, I was able to quickly process the papers and bring her back to Xi’e and live with me forever. Li Xiang Jun came home with us.

After a long trip in the carriage, we were finally home. The whole town of Xi’e stood out quietly to watch our troops marching in through the town gate. They stayed quiet, and some were even sobbing. With the community’s help, they hung white cloths all over my house’s front door and helped organize the funeral. I am beyond thankful to my people however, I felt my words stuck inside my chest. My house remained quiet for the next few days, I locked myself in my room with the shutters closed mourning. Until one morning, the sound of the horse’s hooves returned. There was a knock at my door. “Master, the messenger from the palace is here,” my servant said through the locked door. I knew I had no choice but to step out and receive the royal order. I was asked to return to the palace immediately.

“My dear Zhang Heng, my condolences for your loss.” said the great emperor An’ti the moment I entered his office whilst he embraced me in his arms. “You have been a good soldier, you are smart, loyal, and kind to the people but my child you have suffered a grave loss and you act strong, although no one can be strong after what you have just suffered. You have lost your mother and a mother is undoubtedly the most important person someone will have. My child, I ask you to go home, sleep, and rest and when you return you use the pain you have suffered today to help your country because the people need you. They trust in you and believe in you to help them so go get your affairs to rest and I expect great things from you in the future because you are indeed great.” he finished whilst looking me in the eye and tightly holding my shoulder.

I returned to my workshop and paced back and forth thinking about Emperor An’ti’s words. He reminded me that there are still millions of people out there who are living under the fear of earthquakes. A heavenly disaster that only God would know when it will happen. I knew earthquakes were heaven’s response to immoral human behavior however, I had to save these people. Yet, we have to live under this fear day and night thinking will we ever be able to wake up the next day? I looked up at the night and gazed at the stars asking for a hint. Li Xiang Jun brought in a cup of tea and almost stumbled. “Sorry Master for my mistake, I am glad the tea did not spill on your precious scripts”, Li Xiang Jun said apologetically. I looked and smiled to show my sign of accepting her apology. I looked down at the tea cup and the ripples of the tea.

“Thank you! Thank you Li Xiang Jun! you are truly my savior!” I jumped, hugged her tightly, and said.

I immediately rolled out a big piece of paper on my table and asked Li Xiang Jun to stand on the side to grind ink for me. I drew and drew. Days and nights, scrunches of paper were covering the floor. Li Xiang Jun was napping on the table. It was another quiet night while I looked at my grand drawing plan and stepped back. I knew I had completed it. I shook Li Xiang Jun and woke her up. Told her to send this plan to the finest blacksmith in town.

After a week of waiting and anticipating, the blacksmith finally brought in a bronze cylindrical canister with eight dragons attached facing eight directions. Each open mouth of the dragons points to an opening mouth of a toad that lays underneath each dragon waiting to collect the balls that were placed inside each of the dragons’ mouths. We tested and altered the directions of the dragons and toads numerous times until they reached perfection. It was time to present to the emperor my greatest invention of all time.

“Chancellors of the Council of the great nation of China in our nation and history. We believe earthquakes to be a form of God’s punishing us for our sins and we have always lived in fear of not knowing when these punishments will occur or how lethal they will be. This fear has lingered in our hearts for centuries. Affecting generations of people. Hundreds and millions of civilians suffered from deaths and destruction. I understand that we should graciously accept that these are God’s punishment but it hurts my heart that we did not and cannot do anything to prevent it. Fellow Chancellors, please take a look at my newest invention. This is called a seismometer. This device can predict earthqu-” I was paused by ear the splitting clang of one of the eight bronze balls falling and entering the mouth of the corresponding bronze frog.

“Zhang Heng what in the name of everything holy was that?” asked the first Chancellor to regain his thoughts.

“My, my it works better than I could have ever expected. That gentleman was the sound of my seismograph detecting an earthquake approximately 450 kilometers northwest of our exact location.” I explained confidently.

“Now whatever you mean we have not felt any tremors of the Gods.” countered one of the Chancellors.

“Well, sir, that is because the earthquake was too far and not powerful enough to have been felt all the way here in our city. If my calculations are correct the Gods have just punished the city of Lung-Hsi.” I clarified.

“Zheng Heng I believe that this council has concluded,” said the leading Chancellor after reading the verdict of the other Chancellors. “We believe that you, Zheng Heng, are wrong and we do not believe in the integrity of this gimmick nor in its ability to do as you say it does. You are dismissed.”

The moments that followed felt like an out-of-body experience. I bowed before them, one of my servants took my seismograph and followed me to my carriage and I went home, lay in my bed, and allowed my thoughts to carry me.

A few days later, a messenger arrived with news of an earthquake in Lung-Hsi, which was 400 miles away from Luo-Yang. Chancellors and the Emperor were amazed at the mysterious power of my instrument. I was called into the palace again.

“Zhang Heng, I have no idea how your instrument works but it worked.” The Emperor announced. “I announce that we will reproduce this seismometer and distribute it around the country. Bless these dragons, in hoping they will save our lives as their descendants.” The Chancellors all bowed appropriately to the words of the Emperor.

## New Tales of China’s Inventions – Light-Bringing Slave

*ESF Island School, Wong, Jemie – 15*

In the dark, abandoned cellar, she crouches on the piss-stained floor. In her blistered hand she clutches a pitiful splinter of sulphur-dipped pinewood and scrapes it across the ground —

— and her hand erupts with light. Life dancing on her fingers. Immolation in her grasp.

Fei Ying thinks: there is nothing so lovely as the warmth of fire.

The maid runs up the stairs like she hasn’t in months now, the stench of sulphur hanging heavy around her — but who cares, when she is holding life in her hands? It is fire, the thing that sings on the breaths of dragons, the thing that kisses the lonely sun, the thing that might just make her lady smile.

Ying flings open the door to her lady’s room. It clatters against the wall and she winces. Too loud. Too harsh of a sound for her bereaved lady, who weeps at the slightest whisper.

Yet the moment stays serene. Pale sunlight streams through the window to illuminate the room where her lady shuts herself away. It plays in her xanthous-yellow hair as she turns her head slowly at the sound, weighed down by her elaborate headdress that is pure gold and cannot manage to gleam as she does. Ying feels something strange — perhaps reverence — as she stands in the doorway, dim and dull but for the thing in her hand.

“*Guangyou Shangpin*,” Ying greets, dipping her head. Suddenly it seems silly she’s run up to Lady Sun’s room, disturbed her, and for what? Some flimsy flame a gust away from going out? A sulphuric stench that smells of the battlefield? “I...I’ve invented something.” It’s not the right word. To ‘invent’ is something men with haughty expressions and grand robes do, not poor maid-pariahs. “A way to catch and carry fire easily. To cook or keep warm or...”

Lady Sun’s mouse-like, onyx-dark eyes reflect the pinpoint of light in Ying’s hands, glinting... dangerously. She stands up from her chair, limbs extending like a paper flower. “Say, who are you again?”

Ying bows, tendrils of hair brushing her burning neck. It is unsurprising she doesn’t recognize her. Yet it stings all the same. “Fei Ying, my lady.”

“It is quite a marvellous thing you have invented.” Lady Sun smiles, gold hair cradling the soft curve of her jaw. She is so beautiful Ying might cry. “May I hold it?”

Afraid the flame might go out, Ying shuffles towards her. Places the fragile splinter in her hand. Lady Sun holds it up to her unblinking eyes. “Such a tiny flame, and yet how long it has lasted.” She glances out the window at the bitter sky. “...It has been cold for too long. Was it difficult to invent?”

“Yes. It took me many nights.” Restless nights, of blisters and burns.

Lady Sun doesn’t press further. “Can you make more of its kind?”

Ying nods frantically before she even finishes the question. “Yes. Yes, I can. I can make as many as you like, so long as I have pine and sulphur.”

Outside, the wind howls and claws at the palace walls. Lady Sun smiles, and blows the fire out.

It goes without a whimper of protest.

“Perfect.”

Ying hadn't realised how revolutionary her invention was. After she'd talked to Lady Sun she'd felt foolish, wasting her lady's time with her useless whimsies. But the day after, she'd *personally bid* Ying make more, with the added requirement she dye and disguise the pine and sulphur. Make the pine splinters less a scientific marvel and more a proper miracle.

Now, the house is a hearth.

Ying hums as she walks down the halls. Lady Sun has been so kind to her, letting her serve her personally, giving her some time off to make more splinters. Secretly, Ying calls them *friends-of-fire*, a whimsical, silly, nonsensical name.

Even now there are a few tucked in her pockets, misshapen ones that didn't come out quite right but she can't bear to throw away. She's sure soon she will have to teach other servants how to make the *friends-of-fire*, but for now... She enjoys being special, being the only one nimble-handed and careful and clever enough, when really it is not so hard.

She strolls onward, heart singing.

The drawing room before her bustles with people: Lady Sun is entertaining guests for the first time in months. She's been far livelier lately, happier, warmer, like the fires that now dance around the palace, despite the tenseness the siege has brought. Nobles with delicate hands and elaborately coiffed hair chatter as though nothing is wrong, and Lady Sun's laughter rings as she describes... the *friends-of-fire*?

Ying creeps closer, hiding behind the door. It's wrong to eavesdrop, and her lady's business is none of hers, but...

"...nights ago I was cold, and invented a marvellous thing!" Lady Sun boasts. Ying hears the dramatic flick of her wrist, smells the stench of sulphur, hears a flurry of gasps. "Finally humanity has found a way to tame fire. At last, the miserable beast we have had coax will be at our beck and call. Because of my invention, we shall survive this siege."

*It's not yours.*

The thought comes unbidden in a tide of filthy fury. She clenches her jaw and brushes it away.

"Most impressive, *Shangpin* — or should I say saviour?" A man remarks. His voice is slippery, polished as a stone run smooth by the river, and velvet as the night. "Certainly very useful, especially in these turbulent times. Say, have you a name for this miraculous invention of yours?"

Ying can't help but peek around the corner. Lady Sun lounges on her grand chair, hair a golden crown, robes sunburst-yellow, eyes glimmering dewdrops. "Of course."

She smiles, sky-like, sun-like, snake-like.

*"Light-bringing slave."*

Ying rubs her eyes, stifling a yawn. Picks at the fresh blisters and cuts on her dye-stained fingers. Earlier in the day she'd chopped pinewood into sticks for hours. Then in her exhaustion she'd cut her finger when preparing lunch. Blood had welled on her skin, an incarnadine ruby, and Ying, transfixed, had watched it fall in raindrops towards the ground. The other maid had stared, but instead of yelling, chuckled good-naturedly.

The palace is washed in warmth and light now, even as the enemies march nearer — even now Ying works under comforting torchlight. The servants shiver no more, and no longer do they squabble and wail. The air tastes reassuringly of salt and smoke and sulphur. And hope, dusky and warm.

She hears the chink of the door opening, and Lady Sun sweeps in. She looks so out of place amongst the grime of the cellar, a creature made of sunlight distilled. Faint laughter streams through the doorway, and Ying's world, shrunken to the cellar, expands once again.

Ying forces herself upwards, legs aching, and bows. "*Guangyou Shangpin.*"

"*Chongde Furen,*" her lady corrects, almost fondly. Ying starts. She hadn't realised she'd ascended in rank. She'd been proud to serve an upper concubine; she's even prouder now to serve a madame.

"Apologies. Greetings, *Chongde Furen.*" After a few pregnant seconds, she dares look up. Her lady smiles at her, soft and sweet and predatory.

"How many have you made?"

"Two hundred, my lady."

"Good girl." She hitches up her dress and stoops down to pick up the *light-bringing slaves*. Ying grabs them all and hands them to her. She could never allow her lady to lower herself. Lady Sun smiles, firelight made flesh. "Thank you, Ying. Remember, three hundred more tomorrow."

She blows out the torchlight as she leaves. Closes the door. The sound of laughter peters out, and darkness snakes through the cellar. She is alone once more.

Too exhausted to leave, Ying holds herself tight and sleeps on the piss-stained floor.

"Can't you work harder, Ying?" Lady Sun scolds. "Everybody wants to get their hands on your little sticks. I've even relieved you from your other duties."

"Apologies, *Chongde Furen.*" Ying fiddles with the pine splinters in her hands, voice empty.

"*Zuo Zhaoyi,*" Lady Sun corrects tersely.

Ying dips her head. "Apologies, *Zuo Zhaoyi.* I'll do better." The days, devoid of sleep or nourishment, fall like ashes, and everyday Lady Sun needs more and more *light-bringing slaves*, and everyday Ying's own fire ebbs away.

"Yes. You will. And remember, tell nobody else anything." She stares down at Ying, eyes bottomless voids of black. Ying shivers. "If you do, I'll cut out your tongue." She tilts her head and beams: beautiful and bright and terrible. "I need a thousand by tomorrow. I trust you can get it done — else I'll have you whipped until you wish you were burning." She can't mean it. She can't. Ying waits for her to say something, but instead she sweeps out the room, steps soft and sweet. The tread of a predator.

*But I need more material,* Ying almost calls before she bites her tongue. It is Ying's duty to serve her lady, not make her lady serve her. The dye and sulphur will suffice if she uses them sparingly. But she needs more wood.

So Ying forces herself outside.

The lights sear her eyes, making it easier to ignore the stares at her mangled hands and unruly hair and empty eyes. At how the fire has melted all softness from her face.

Outside the sky cries, but men laugh as they haul barrels of precious food, and although the world is grey, the palace is gold with fire. Laughter chimes through the walls, unfettered by the news of bloodbaths. The maids sing as they used to before, and Ying remembers why it should be worth it. She should feel important, proud, that the palace is surviving the war.

Yet despair squeezes her burning heart.

*I will never be free, will I? There will always be another problem to leash me to. There will always be another reason to set things alight.*

...Getting pinewood is difficult, especially for a servant girl with no money and no suppliers. But Ying used to help her brothers chop trees back when the world loved her, and why should she care about her safety? Her dignity? Her mind? It's all burnt with the sulphur.

As though she's summoned it, an axe lies tiredly by the fence. Heedless of its owner, she clutches it and strides into the forest.

She hacks and hacks and hacks and hacks.

And hacks.

And hacks.

Mechanically, macabrely, maniacally.

The rains rust the axe's metal. Brushes away Ying's tears.

The sunset is pithy and the night stern. Ying drags logs one by one by one through the dark woods, through the garden, through to her self-made cage. She doesn't know how long passes. Doesn't care. Maybe no beasts attack her because she has become a beast herself: hands mutilated and splintered, eyes leaden, sopping wet. She wouldn't need the light-bringing slaves. Her breath alone could scorch the world.

When at last all the wood is gathered by the wall, she slumps by it and stares blankly.

Oh. It was all useless. Wet wood won't catch, and she is yet to dye it anyways.

It must be midnight already. Ying can't find it in herself to care. Let them whip her.

She's so tired. Can't it all just end already?

When she blinks, her eyes don't open again. Black, vast darkness falls towards a different darkness, and the charred earth welcomes her as she collapses.

The crack of a whip wakes her. Then a lash sears through her flesh.

Ying's nothing but nausea, nothing but pain, nothing but ashen lungs and dirty, repulsive suffering, the only real thing. Her mouth unhinges like a snake and she howls like the animal she is and the lightless world is agonisingly indifferent.

*I'll have you whipped until you wish you were burning.*

She writhes there on the floor, a moth that was too reckless. She'd thought herself a beast. She'd only ever been docile as a dog, a pliant plant pleased to be trodden. Fury rises; she swallows the flame and burns. Her teardrops are sparks. Her heart is wax and melts away. The whip cracks over and over and over again.

"Poor Ying," Lady Sun's silken voice sounds. Ying tries to force open her eyes but they're swollen shut, sealed by blood and pus and brine. So Ying imagines her, smiling her soft, sweet, terrible snake-smile. "Poor light-bringing slave."

Crack. Crack. Crack.

Oh, Ying burns. The light-bringing slave burns.

But there is no fire. Not yet.

She's in the cellar, quiet as sunlight. The floor cold. Two torches dying, their light pitifully illuminating the rain-torn logs. Her breath thick and caustic.

Ying crawls up the stairs. The door is locked, of course. She bangs against it with her broken arm and screams.

*Poor Ying. Poor light-bringing slave.*

She screams until her voice is hoarse, and then she screams and she mourns and she screams. She mourns what could've been, what won't be, what she can't save. She screams for what she can. But the world holds her hope by the throat, and the torchlight is dying away.

*Poor Ying. Poor light-bringing slave.*

"ZHAO—" She coughs and scarlet jewels batter the door. Oh. How that halcyon day seems an afterlife ago, that day when she cut her finger and heard her heart sing. "SUN!"

Miraculously footsteps come. Soft, sweet, the footsteps of a haughty, always-hungry predator. They pad close to her door and stop.

She's listening.

"Sun. You power-hungry snake." Ying growls. "You fool. In your greed to hoard knowledge and your laziness to never learn yourself... When I die here by my own hand, so will the secret of the *friends-of-fire*." She means it completely. She died when that whip hit her — no, she died soon as she found the fire, flew too close, spoke to Sun. Her death here will be a mere formality.

Her voice hitches on the syllables and she clenches her fists so hard her knuckles go bone-white. "I won't be your light-bringing slave any longer, and all will starve and suffer and die in this frigid, hungry war, and it'll be all your fault."

It is a monstrous thing to say. She tells herself it is not so bad, because surely somebody will manage to recreate the *friends-of-fire* before the palace falls — but she also knows aside from bidding Ying disguise the materials and forbidding her say a word Sun must've taken great means to ensure nobody else would ever figure it out, at least not until Sun snatched all the power she could.

But Ying cannot endure another day.

"You are the true inventor of the pine splinters, aren't you?"

Ying starts. It's not Sun, but the man from so long ago with the night-velvet voice.

It stings, somehow, that Sun hasn't come. But what did she expect? For her to grovel, beg Ying's forgiveness?

"Yes. I am."

"Then as an inventor, will you really be happy letting your invention be lost to time? Especially when it will harm so many? Especially when your fires are the only reason we survive the siege?"

"Well, what else could I do?" Only a noble would have the luxury of considering altruism. "To live would be torture. I'm not so selfless."

"You could teach me how to make the ... the *friends-of-fire*."

"You'd be just like Sun," Ying snaps. Her vision is blurry, the torchlight dimmer than ever.

"I am better than her. I will set you free."

"I'm not your servant, and she outranks you."

He sighs. "If the *Zuo Zhaoyi* were standing here, she would have you labour eternally, watched and imprisoned. If you wanted freedom, you should not have called for her."

He's right. It was sun-bright lunacy.

*Poor Ying. Poor light-bringing slave, light-bringing slave, light bringing slave —*

"Tell me your secret. I promise I will not hoard it. Then you can die however you want, and I will tell the story of the girl who befriended fire. Sun will lose her standing, and everyone will remain warm and well. Is that not what you want?"

The torchlight peters out.

In the end, Ying never could've refused him.

"Yes," she whispers. "But open the door."

It swings open. Ying's vision is too blurry for her to make the man before her's features, nor does she care to.

"Listen," she croaks out, and much to her surprise he sits on the grimy floor so their gazes meet easily. His eyes are flame-amber, so unlike Sun's bottomless black. Ying whispers into his ear. "They're splinters of pinewood, dipped in wet sulphur that's then allowed to dry. That's all. There's no secret. It's simple."

"...What a miracle then, that two such simple things can birth fire." He pauses, considering. "What is your name?"

“Ying. Fei Ying.” She laughs a tattered laugh, and there is nothing else left to say. “You said you’d tell my story, right? Make sure to tell them about this.”

From her torn dress she whips out a single misshapen *friend-of-fire*, hand shaking, heart a drum. The man says nothing.

She strikes the *friend-of-fire* against the ground, and it births a single, tiny, flickering flame.

“Goodbye, friend of fire,” he murmurs, and Ying realises she’s glad he’s here.

“Goodbye.”

Ying smiles wanly, and lights the way to oblivion.

Her bones are bundled for kindling. The flames caress her skin shyly, and she lets them embrace her completely.

As she burns the light in her eyes doesn’t dim, but rather burns brighter than it has in years. She is lit up from within, vein by vein by vein. Oh, how could she ever have thought her lady like the sun?

Perhaps death will be a field of blushing flowers blooming wild and beautiful. Perhaps it will be a false repose, another hell of pine and brimstone. Or perhaps it will be nothing at all.

She wets her lips. Smiles.

She is the moth no more, but the flame.

Fei Ying thinks: there is nothing so lovely as the warmth of fire.

## Echoes from a Flowing River

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Chen, Flora – 16*

Four months since cancer took my father’s life.

Four weeks since the funeral.

Four days since the last time I was told: it’s going to be okay.

This is the lie that has kept the pieces of me from falling apart. I have been choosing to live this lie for a year.

Wind rises, signaling the return of a cooler, less forgiving season. Summer foliage succumbs to this most undesirable cold, their green withering away as youth into old age. Leaves dance from their branches to the musical chill of autumn, finding new homes in the soil which would go to become their graves.

My feet tread careful steps as I hasten home. Wind tousles my hair, devoiding me of what little warmth the thin flannel shirt offers as it slices between my bare limbs. I continue my journey hunched over, seeking warmth, finding none.

The winding road soon comes to an end. The journey, though only a short ways between home and school, has syphoned me of my energy. As I address the house with weary eyes, I feel the knot in my chest tighten; soon, I’m not feeling at all.

‘Lya! You’ve been gone awhile.’ I can’t bear to look into my aunt’s smiling eyes, full of hopeful expectation I can’t satisfy. ‘Have you decided to take up my suggestion on joining an after-school club, after all?’

‘I-’

My tongue feels like sandpaper, my throat the sieve in which all semblances of cohesive speech are unstrung.

‘No. I- I’d gone to the wrong house.

‘You know... Dad’s.’

A pause. Then: ‘I think it’s time I returned something to you.’ She proceeds to reach for the paper shoebox that, for some reason, has been kept by her side since her brother’s passing. ‘I’d thought a reminder of him might have been too painful, but it seems now the only thing to assuage your grief.’

Alone in my room, curiosity gets the best of me and I extend my hand for the box. Flashes of past trauma threaten my conscience as I tear, with wild abandonment, the lid from its body.

What I’m greeted with could not have been more of a pleasant surprise.

To the untrained eye, the sight of moth-eaten paper would have seemed an extraordinary anticlimax, a story’s disappointing end to months of anticipation. But I, having been under my calligrapher father’s expert teachings since the age of six, knew treasure when I saw it.

Slowly, gently, I ease out the age-yellowed sheaf of crumbling parchment.

A ten metre long river and folded into the size of an A4 brochure: this was *xuan*, fine calligraphy paper formed from the smooth fibres of hemp and mulberry, regarded as a luxury since five thousand years ago and reserved for use in only the most refined of tapestries.

My mind is quickly becoming riddled with questions. I find myself pondering possibilities, to why my father, who always worked with cheap paper and regretted its lack of caliber, would have had such an heirloom in his possession; why, in all our years, months, weeks, days together he has made no mention of it to me.

Yet, I never once seek to lay the obvious answer out before me, nor spare my mind long enough a thoughtless recess to address the loosening knot in my chest.

There is no certainty to why I'd refused a look into the tapestry that day. Perhaps, it is as my aunt fears, that reminders this intense of his life would only lead me to further grieve his death; though even now, weeks later, I doubt that to have been the case. The hesitance came from an intrinsic place. I was afraid of what I would find, afraid of confrontation by the consequences of this half-life I've barely managed sustaining, afraid to feel again after wallowing in months of isolating numbness.

But also coming from within, is the desire to mend what has been broken.

Bracing for the tidal wave of emotion to come, I pick apart the *xuan* paper's fraying corners and spread the tapestry as far as the confines of my room allow it to unfold.

The next few hours coalesce into a supernova of memories, in which I am the imploding star.

My first day in primary school, dressed in frumpy second-hand clothes from some thrift store— shy, unconfident, hiding amongst the thick crowd, afraid to draw attention to myself.

My dad did his best in trying to raise my spirits, but nothing he said deterred my awareness of the fact that I was the only kid there with half the number of parents and none of the pretty toys, I think.

The days to follow, I was naive in my ignorance, pestering him with demands for an answer to why it seemed I was always one parent apart from the rest.

The time when I was seven, when I was deemed ready to learn Chinese calligraphy. My first dabbles had been most unsuccessful, when I'd shattered an ink stone and spilt fresh ink over his newest work of art.

He was livid. As he should have been. But I can't help the whispers of a smile now spreading across my face. The laughs we shared while cleaning up together were worth more than any tapestry.

Me, stood atop the first-place podium on a stage, arms laden with the accolades my calligraphy had won me.

'Good to see that ten years of tutoring from the world's finest did not go to waste on you,' my father said with a smirk.

I'm laughing now. It's so much like him to try and play it off cool. He'd been so proud of me that day.

Finally, our trip to Sichuan, China — it had been Chinese New Year's Eve, and I would be seeing my grandparents for the first time, my father, for the first time in twenty years. The well-meant force feeding, festivities, and trip to see the giant pandas had accounted for the happiest time of my life thus far.

All of this and more, chronicled in shocking detail with calligraphed sentences, captured in lifelike vividness through beautiful watercolour studies. Each sweeping stroke of a Chinese character and every shapeless splotch of paint is evidence of my father's legacy — that, prior to his incapacitation, he too had once been a living, breathing human, filled with quirks and passion and love for his daughter. Looking through this tapestry, I can almost hear his hearty chuckle, the humorously snide remarks he would make in his rough, accented cadence.

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I move to re-fold the parchment but am stopped when I notice a small square of paper pinned to its back, much too crisp to have been initially a part of the tapestry. Unsticking the note, I'm allowed a closer read of what it says:

*My dearest Lya,*

*As I write this, I'm afraid my time left here with you is limited. This tapestry is something I have kept since your birth. I had hoped that, by the time you came of age, I would've been able to gift this most treasured heirloom to you. But, seeing as that is now impossible, I wish for you to have it now, in hopes that it will remain your guiding light in the difficult times that are sure to trail in the wake of my inevitable leave.*

*Love always,*

*Dad*

All of a sudden, I feel as vulnerable and raw as I did on the day of his passing. Time slows to a snail's pace, and I am left undone on my bedroom floor as wave after wave of tearful emotion shakes my body.

There comes a point when I seem to have exhausted all my tears, and no despairing thought could trigger the flow of even just one more drop. It is at this point that something in me awakens: a passion, a desire, a longing to become more than I am, and live up to be worthy of my father's love.

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I make quick work of folding the tapestry back up — I replace it in its box, and set it gingerly over my nightstand, where I also keep a picture of my father and I on our trip.

From that point on, as if awoken from a year-long stupor, I slowly begin to regain control over my life.

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An autumnal gale sweeps through the streets, colouring the lush green landscape a deep amber that foretells the end of summer. For a split second, this nondescript suburb seems imbued with an unusual, artful beauty — a painted scene straight out of Dad's tapestries.

I'm in especially good spirits today, and there is a jump to every step I take as I navigate my way back home. The launch of my Shu Fa, or calligraphy society, was more successful than I could have hoped for.

It's only a small step, but I feel glad for any chance at sharing our passion, I whisper, though there is not a soul by me to hear. One day, I'll show your art to the world.

# The Unsung Requiem

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lin, Henry – 15*

The darkness shrouded over the night-time landscape, almost like a blanket. So thick, one couldn't see more than five steps ahead. The piercing wind did little to help, penetrating the mind with endless waves of banshee-like wails. The night was cold, reflected not only just in the physical discomfitures of the body, but in a far more subtle, yet far more agonizing tearing of the mind too.

The streets of Luoyang were empty, for it was too deep into the night for any activity other than indulging in the oblivion of sleep. Even the Imperial Palace, with all its regal colors during the day, had a layer of black splotched onto its surface. Not even the moon or the stars remained, devoured by the sea of black ink that is the celestial dome above the world.

There was a single source of brightness under the starless sky; only the dingy flame from the rusted oil lamp remained, a last beacon warding off the shadows. The faint spark could only illuminate the rough silhouette of an archaic hut. Its wooden walls have withered over the years, groaning and creaking with the crashing of gales against them. The air around it reeked of a vague, yet sickening stench: the stench of decay only found on the dying and the dead. The scent of death was absent, however, in any other corner of the soundless city, almost as if it didn't exist at all, almost as if it was from another world.

Time itself seemed to have abandoned the night, with only the ever-changing intersections between the dark wisps and the pale light an indication of its passing. Their intertwining sung an inaudible symphony; a silent requiem that seethed into any wandering souls and forced them into an eerie tranquility.

“It is time.”

As the voice rang, the wind fell silent. The source of the flame gradually started moving, until the door of the hut slowly opened.

Two humanoid creatures emerged from the hut. One, dressed in white robes, had an equally pale complexion. He was tall, almost three meters in height, and atop his head was a white hat, worn by high-rank officials in the Imperial Court. The creature was frail, too. His outstretched hand that grasped onto the handle of the rusted oil lamp was nothing more than bones enveloped by leathered skin. His grin threatened to split his face in two, and an obscenely long, blood-red tongue slid its way through his teeth, out of his mouth, and dangled limply near his waist. In where his eyes were supposed to be, there was nothing. Only two hollow sockets remained, piercing the surroundings with their non-existent gaze.

The one that followed the white creature was his opposite: a short, round silhouette dressed completely in black. He, too, wore an Imperial hat, painted to blend in with the night. His height stood at only half of the first creature, and the size of his scowl mirrored the first figure's smile. No tongue rolled out from his mouth, but his skin was the same shade of unnatural white as the one before him. His eyes, too, were replaced with the same hollow sockets.

“We have three hours.”

Another voice rang out. Strangely, neither figure had opened their mouths. The disembodied voices seemed to have no source, appearing only in one's mind.

Silence befell the two once again. Without another word needing to be said, they made their way to the east of the city, the flickering flame lighting their path. Although their

movements were swift, no sound escaped from their trail, and they left behind no trace. The scent of death stopped plaguing the hut, and briskly followed the two figures on their journey.

Moments later, the two found themselves in front of another house. The state of it was far better than the withering hut before. The walls were new, the air was fresh, and the house itself emitted a soothing aura. No light came from within the house, yet the two figures, although seemingly blind, could still sense the man within.

He was hunched over a table, the brush of his pen furiously dancing on the paper in front of him. It wrote, crossed out, and wrote more, as if it held within it some revolutionary scripture that must be recorded, lest it be forgotten. There was not a single pause in the man's hands, and the speed of his thoughts were immeasurable. His focus on the paper was so immense, that he had completely forgot about the bowl containing the failed alchemy products whose formula he was recording on his right.

Without any hesitation, the two figures rushed straight towards the walls of the building, passing through it as if it was nothing. They stopped only a few meters in front of the man and the table, and void-dark chains suddenly appeared on their hands.

The man stopped writing, and slowly turned his head to face the aggressors. He was an old man, considered almost an antique for his times; his hair, which fell to his shoulders, was bleached by the unrelenting cruelty of Time. The scythes of Age carved wrinkles into his face, and the fangs of Years have drained most, if not all his strength.

Yet it was such a man, who smiled at the heinous monsters before him.

“The Dark and White Wuchang, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

The old man spoke, his voice not sharing the weakness of other men his age, but a sense of power only found in men at their prime.

“Wei Boyang, come with us quietly, and all will be well.”

The first voice rang again, and still neither creature opened their mouths. Upon hearing this, the old man, Wei Boyang, merely shook his head, and turned to the creature dressed in white, referred by him as the White Wuchang. Evidently, it was the white figure who spoke. His gaze moved from the Wuchang's face, down to the oil lamp he was holding, and back up again. His eyes locked with the phantom's sockets, and the White Wuchang could almost see the raging fire within his pupils.

“And if I don't?”

Wei Boyang asked. His voice was soft, but brought with it a deadly edge.

“Your life should have ended two years ago, and it is only because of your pathetic alchemy that you are able to linger on for breath.” The second voice spat, as a look of disdain found its way onto the Dark Wuchang's face: “You've already committed a felony against the Celestial Mandate by prolonging your life, so you better come before you're sentenced to suffer in even more layers of Hell.”

Wei Boyang turned his vision sharply, studying the Dark Wuchang intently. The smile that he wore on his face has now vanished, replaced by a stoic wall that no malice could penetrate.

Softly, the old man spoke again.

“I am the master of my fate, and I am the captain of my soul.”

Two things happened at once: the sudden extension of the Wuchang's chains, attempting to skewer Wei Boyang's body, and the materialization of a wall of fire from thin air, incinerating the chains into ash. For the first time, the White Wuchang donned an expression of surprise.

“Your level of cultivation is impressive. Very few cultivators in your era could achieve this height. How did you do it?”

Only the cackling flame, and the conjuring of fiery spears answered him. The White Wuchang sighed, and summoned more chains to his aid. Without another word, the three engaged in another round of combat.

The battle raged on for several more minutes. Intriguingly, the bursts of fire, the clinking sound of chains, and the crashes of projectiles against wood did little to affect the neighboring houses. No alarm was raised in the nearby civilians, and no light escaped from the battlefield to the outside world. It was as though the house was sealed off from its surroundings, so that fighting as severe as this could be dismissed by the ordinary mortal.

At the end, both sides were in the verge of collapse. Wei Boyang's face was a hue of sickly white, and a line of blood slowly dripped from the corners of his mouth. The two Wuchang were not any better, either. Their originally solid apparitions have become translucent, a symbol of their weakening clutches onto the mortal realm. The battle had turned from one of skill and prowess, to one of endurance and attrition. All three were heavily wounded, and neither side dared to start another offensive, in fear of being the first to die.

“This is your last chance, Wei Boyang. Come with us, and all will be well.”

The voice of the White Wuchang rose again, this time significantly weaker.

“Never.”

In fear of losing his breath, Wei Boyang could only utter a single word as the answer.

Upon hearing this, the White Wuchang sighed: “Your qi channels are almost depleted. Stop this hopeless struggle immediately. Can you not see it is futile going against a God?”

In a final act of bravado, Wei Boyang grabbed the bowl of the failed products on his table, and hurled it at the White Wuchang, imbuing the last of his qi into it. The qi quickly burst into flames, like it has done before, and set the bowl alight right before its impact with the phantom.

For a second, all was silent. Until suddenly, a great thunderous roar was forced out from where the flaming bowl touched the failed alchemy products. The once dying fire rekindled with more strength than ever, and the White Wuchang's screams were suddenly cut off when the flame had burnt him into nothing. Only the rusted oil lamp remained, its flickering flame the only symbol of him ever existing at all.

Both Wei Boyang and the Dark Wuchang stood silent, appalled and awestruck by the scene that was just before them. Finally, the remaining phantom broke the silence:

“What... What was that?”

Wei Boyang, too astounded to lie about his efforts, replied: “F... failed products of alchemy, I was trying to make the elixir of immortality.”

The Dark Wuchang's face suddenly contorted with disbelief: “You dare call that a failed product? That substance has enough power as a dragon's breath!”

Before Wei Boyang could respond, the Dark Wuchang suddenly asked: “Wei Boyang, how much do you know about the War of Fengshen?”

Wei Boyang looked at him confusedly, and replied: “Isn't that the last war between the Gods supporting the Shang and Zhou Dynasties? What else is there to know?”

The Dark Wuchang forced out a pained laughter, as if mocking Wei Boyang for his ignorance: “No, there is much more.”

“See, in the beginning, there were three realms: the Heavens, the Earth, and the Underworld.

They used to be separate, each with their own ruler.

What you know today as the Fengshen War was not the famed overthrowing of the tyrannical Shang by the Zhou, but a despicable scheme by the one you call the Jade Emperor.”

The Dark Wuchang paused, and saw the horror in Wei Boyang's eyes. His face formed a faint grin, and continued:

“The War did nothing to help the Zhou Dynasty and only got rid of all the Gods standing in the Celestial Court's way. After the Fengshen, Earth and the Underworld were no longer autonomous, reduced to mere slaves to the new Sovereign of the Three Realms.

But you could change that, Wei Boyang.

Your invention, the Dragon's Breath, could arm the legions of your Han Dynasty, and provide them with the power to conquer this realm. The Underworld would receive an insurmountable influx of the dead, and our power would grow stronger than ever before.

Together, we could overthrow the oppressors of the Celestial Court, and be free once more!

All you need to do, is to show your invention to the Han Emperor tomorrow morning.

In exchange, the Underworld will wipe your name off the Slate of Life and Death, and you will be granted the eternal youth you desire.

The choice is yours, Wei Boyang.”

At the end of the Wuchang's speech, not even the steadfast mind of Wei Boyang could resist the temptation of the immortality he searched for his whole life. The old man turned around and grabbed the manuscripts he laid on his table. Yet just before he handed them to the Wuchang, Wei Boyang suddenly froze.

His soul exited his body.

It flew a day further, where he followed through with his promise, and presented the Dragon's Breath to his Emperor. He was awarded with great glory and honor, earning himself the place of Grand Duke of the Empire.

It flew three months further, when the structure of the first bomb was perfected, and used against the western invaders. He saw the brutality of his creation firsthand, and saw the decimation of innocent lives.

It flew two centuries further, when the formula for his invention, now called the gunpowder, was stolen by foreigners. He saw the Far West, where the power-hungry nations developed the art of slaughter to heights never seen before via his invention, and used it to build Empires forged in blood and bones.

It flew five centuries further, when the first firearms were built and filled by gunpowder. He saw the merciless slaughter of soldiers by enemies they could barely see, and the horrifying apathy that haunted the killers. After all, how could they feel remorse, if they haven't seen their victims?

It flew a millennium further, when all nations across the world knew of his invention. He saw the world enveloped in war, and the dead amount to millions over the course of mere months.

Was this the immortality he wanted?

Wei Boyang did not think so.

His consciousness returned to his body, and immediately a spark escaped from his fingers onto the manuscripts. They caught light instantly, burning into unrecognizable ash in seconds.

The Dark Wuchang's face flushed with rage. He opened his mouth to speak, but Wei Boyang was faster.

The balls in the bowl were only half the ones he made.

He reached down towards the ground, and picked up a floorboard with all the remaining strength he could muster. Inside, there laid a variety of gadgets, failed prototypes, and alchemy materials. His eyes darted from one pile to another, until he finally found the gunpowder balls identical to the ones he just threw. Without hesitation, he picked them up, set them alight with the last of his qi, and charged towards the Dark Wuchang.

Another thunderous roar occurred, and the Dark Wuchang was nowhere to be seen. Only Wei Boyang and the rusted oil lamp remained. There was a hole through his chest, and his right arm, which he held the gunpowder, was reduced to a charred stub.

He was dying.

In his last moments, the old inventor stumbled clumsily towards a nearby wall, seeking a last shred of support in his waning grip on the realm of the living. He collapsed onto the now broken floor, leaning against the wall to save what little strength he had left. Visage after visage passed before his eyes, showing him the life that he had lived. As quickly as they came into Wei Boyang's fleeting mind, they all left swiftly, fading silently into the fabric of night that enveloped the old man.

All but one.

It was the face of the Dark Wuchang, just before his defeat. His furious gaze locked with that of Wei Boyang, uttering one last vengeful curse at him. The Dark Wuchang's words were silent, yet the inventor understood him all the same.

“You insolent mortal! You cannot stop the inevitable! Your sacrifice is worthless!”

Was it worthless?

Suddenly, the figures of those who were supposed to be killed by his invention swirled before his eyes. To Wei Boyang, their numbers were as vast as the stars in the night sky, a number beyond human visualization. As if it had been rehearsed for countless times, they smiled at the old man, bowed in his direction, and silently dissipated.

Wei Boyang smiled, too.

The future might be inevitable, but he could delay it.

As darkness began consuming his mind, Wei Boyang's eyes somehow found their gaze on the rusted oil lamp, which sat atop the broken floor, unscathed from the intense battle between him and the Wuchang.

An instant after they did, the flame in the oil lamp extinguished, shrouding the room in darkness.

Before it died, however, the flame burnt brighter than ever.

Still smiling, the old man let out his last breath, and the darkness washed over him.

But his soul glowed brighter than ever.

## Fireworks

*Heep Yunn School, Wan, Hei Yiu Hailey – 17*

Bundled up in blankets with a cup of hot chocolate between my hands, I disapprovingly shake my head as my family sprints around like they're recreating a circus show. With a soft blow, the surface layer of whipped cream twirled off and into my brother's hair, who sprawled on the floor before me. “Hey! I did not spend an hour doing my hair just for you to mess it up! It has to be perfect in time for the fireworks!” He throws his arms around, rolling his eyes, exasperated. A loud snort reverberates across the living room as my mother attempts to stifle her laughter, which results in a pillow to the face. My father and I gasp involuntarily while awaiting the eventual pillow fight and I cover my ears due to the sensory overload from all the hysterics. Just as we brace ourselves for the imminent force of cushions, a boisterous cheer echoes through the air and we all turn our full attention to the television, watching in anticipation whilst the countdown begins. “10! 9! 8!” We shout along as the numbers tick down, “7! 6! 5!” I chuckle out, seeing my brother frantically ruffle his hair amidst counting, “4! 3! 2!” I subconsciously scoot closer to the edge of the couch, eager to see the multi-coloured firework display, “1! Happy New—”

*Han Dynasty, 142 B.C., Chang'an.*

“Wei Boyang, take it easy, you've been working on this for an entire day.” A soft-spoken lady utters dejectedly. The man, presumably Wei Boyang, continues to bury his nose in various chemicals and blatantly ignores her, disregarding her concern with a wave of a hand. “Emperor Wu Di will have my head if I don't create a miracle now.” He heaves a sigh, “He wants immortality and an eternal reign, who am I to deny the Emperor of his ambitious desires? Besides, imagine if I succeed, you and I would live comfortably, forever.” Wei Boyang reluctantly places his chemicals down and clasps the woman's hands, fondly carressing to provide reassurance which makes my heart flutter with warmth. A warmth that I currently lack due to the absence of my family. “Oh.” I croaked, thoughts of this unknown location and situation paired with my family's whereabouts muddle my mind, causing me to subconsciously fidget with my necklace which was a birthday present from my family. Having been too engrossed in the conversation between Wei Boyang and the lady, I failed to realize that I was no longer celebrating the New Year with my family, but watching the life of some person called Wei Boyang.

Boom! An abrupt explosion pulls me out of my inner turmoil and I snap my head toward the blast. The white and yellow powder that was on the table now scattered the room, covering the walls with specks of dust that resembled the fireworks I had hoped to see just a few moments ago. Wei Boyang jolts backward from the shock, then gapes with a mix of confusion and awe. Stepping out of the corner, I try to explain the phenomenon to Wei Boyang, yet he reaches for the chemicals and his arm passes through my body. I try to stay calm by clutching my necklace and tracing the delicate lines, processing the fact that a hand just went through my body like I was a mere ghost. I still have no idea why or how I am in ancient China, and the only feasible explanation is that I'm lucid dreaming... A dream too vivid and too real... “I knew sulfur and potassium nitrate would do the trick, perhaps this will be enough to satisfy the Emperor despite not being immortality.” Wei Boyang said under his breath while cleaning his desk, sweeping all items to the side which accidentally created another spark right in my face.

*Tang Dynasty, 718 A.D., Liuyang.*

After a mild headache, I mumble a string of curses directed at Wei Boyang, irritated that his explosions bear so much semblance to fireworks that I could not see as a consequence of this mystifying dream. Swerving my head around, I notice that I'm not in the cottage of Wei Boyang anymore, but am being shoved around in the bustling streets of a midnight Chinese parade. There is no sensible reasoning as to why I would be here, for me to be transported into another place and time. The feeling of dread weighs heavy on my body as I'm bumped on the crowded sidewalk and my heart aches for the warmth of my family. Yearning for a familiar sight, I raise my head in hopes of finding comfort in the starry sky, yet what lies before my eyes is something I have been raving for: fireworks. Unlike the usual vibrant, picturesque sparks I've seen on television, these fireworks, or should I say firecrackers, are what I imagine in my wildest dreams. Grandiose, extravagant, powerful, as if the scarlet sparks were lightning strikes descending from the heavens. Awestruck, my body weaves through the maze of giddy individuals, making my way to the nearest firecracker.

The salesperson's face lights up with a radiant grin when she sees me approaching with a few Kaiyuan Tongbao in my hand. How did these hefty coins emerge in my palm? I am as clueless as a fish out of water. However, I set aside the question in favour of returning a courteous nod, offering three coins in exchange for a single firecracker while I silently mourn the empty area on my left shoulder that is reserved for my father's rough, calloused hand when we shop together. The salesperson swiftly seizes hold of the money and thrusts ten firecrackers into my chest, his bright eyes narrow into a troubled wince. "Child, please take all my firecrackers, I feel the negative energy surrounding you, this horrible, horrible sha chi. These firecrackers will undoubtedly assist you in casting away the evil spirits that haunt you now, which will rid you of your worries and sorrows. May you and your loved ones stay joyful and prosperous all year round." Blushing profusely at his unexpected, yet sincere words of good fortune, I experience a fleeting sense of warmth course through my veins. "Your blessings are deeply appreciated, kind sir, but I simply can't accept your generous offer, not when I can't pay you what you deserve," I whisper in a hushed tone while I return the firecrackers. In an instance, the salesperson slaps my hand without delay and declares steadily, "Nonsense. As the inventor, I have plenty of profit and stock left. I insist you take the firecrackers and lead a serene life." The salesperson then nudges me away from his stand and into the open grassfield, though stops in his tracks without a moment's notice. "Oh, I apologize for my forgetfulness. My name is Li Tian" His laugh resonates around my ears, "If the evil spirits unfortunately continue bothering you, you know the right person to find. Now, quickly light these firecrackers." Li Tian remarks in a light-hearted and genuine voice which I'm sure will linger in my mind throughout the years to come.

Wandering around, I stumble across a secluded area, one where the night sky is laid bare in its full glory and thousands of lucent celestial bodies. In spite of the sublime view that I would never see in the city, I find myself wishing upon a shooting star to return me to the densely populated town and air-polluted sky with no stars in sight. A reunion with my family and the distant fireworks on television fireworks the next time I open my eyes. With my eyes still tightly closed, I light the firecrackers and graze the cool of my necklace, awaiting the sound of my brother's constant chatter.

*Yuan Dynasty, 1232 A.D., Kaifeng.*

Lightning-speed sparks penetrate the gloomy sky. I stagger backward and plummet to the ground in distress. A sheen of cold sweat appears on my neck as piercing howls of terror ring deafeningly in my ears which is then followed by an appalling stench of rust. Accidentally,

I drop a firecracker from the bundle wrapped up in my arms, setting off an explosion that protects me from incoming attacks for a brief moment. Scrabbling to collect my thoughts, I try to make sense of all that has happened. This is supposed to be a dream, but the gruelling shrieks sound too pained to be imaginary. My dreams have never felt so real...

With every new thought, I crawl quicker to the nearest ditch to take cover while copious amounts of smoke infiltrate my nostrils. Fatigue creeps up on me like a soundless tsunami, consecutive waves of cramps torment my abdomen and a serious throbbing headache furthers my urge to collapse. Another firecracker ignites from the friction of the dry grass and shoots up into the air, fending off the attackers near the ditch. An agonizing scream is all I hear before the soldier above me lurches forward with a firework aimed at my forehead. I desperately wriggle away and fist my necklace, wanting to feel the warmth of my family one last time before exploding.

"Soldier! What in tarnation are you doing? Get up and defend our country! Do you want us to be invaded by the malicious Mongols?" The sense of grave shame overrides the feeling of impending doom as my savior towered over me, shielding me from the gruesome battlefield. Shaking like a leaf, I carefully stumble out of the ditch and pat away the dirt stuck on my elbows. His veiny hand pats my back in a consoling way as a sympathetic smile greets his face. "I know you miss home and would rather not be here, I understand this feeling all too well. But as your lieutenant, I demand that you cease your daydreaming and pay full attention to your surroundings now." The lieutenant declares with assertion and leaves my side, along with the sense of short-lived solace.

On the ground, I spot a short tube of paper with a few crumpled areas on the head and tail. Curiosity gets the better of me as I squat down to acquire it, all the while keeping the remaining firecrackers tightly secure in my grasp. Once lifted, it becomes evident that the tube has some kind of material inside. Thus, I shake it vigorously, hoping to identify the substance by its sound. Unfortunately, a sharp hissing noise surrounds me before I could decipher this odd tube of paper, leading to my instant panic. I fling the paper tube as far away as I can and watch the tube detonate like a bomb. A blaring thunder shatters my ears once again and gunpowder residue disperses around me. Mortified by the destruction I inadvertently created, I bolt off in the opposite direction, squeeze my eyes shut and never look back.

*16.02.2007, Lunar New Year, Hong Kong.*

The unbearable ringing in my ear proceeds while my leg gives out, resulting in me falling face down on a cool, hard pavement. Not realizing the change of setting, I sit up and exclaim at the familiar view of Victoria Harbour. Rubbing my eyes to get a clearer view, I scan and match the skyscrapers within sight while comparing them to those in my memory. Ecstatic to have confirmed that this is my homeland, I flop onto the ground and heave a sigh of relief. At the same time, a loud bang sets off and triggers my traumatic memories of the recent past. Instinctively, I prepare myself for the worst, but to my surprise, red fireworks cover the sky followed by pink fireworks in the shape of cartoon pig noses. A rainbow of sparks paints the black background and various intricate patterns brighten the twilight sky. The fireworks display is simply breathtaking and may be the most spectacular thing I have ever laid my eyes on. Naturally, I expect myself to be over the moon when seeing these fireworks since I've been yearning for them the entire venture, yet the joy never comes. Instead, a hollowness manifests within me.

Laying on the empty, dimly lit sidewalk, I admire the fireworks while the void in my heart continuously expands. Out of the blue, the lone firecracker in my pocket falls out

and rolls down the slightest slope. I rush to retrieve it and accidentally bump into the baby stroller of a young couple. Embarrassed by my own clumsiness, I apologize profusely and bow my head several times. “It’s not a problem dear, I believe this is yours?” The lady says in a sweet tone as I raise my head to thank her. Yet, I was not prepared for the all too familiar faces that are in front of me. My parents.

I suck in a sharp breath as I constrain myself from leaping into their arms, sensing that something is different from the laughing ball of sunshine that is my mother and the father cowering behind the couch from a pillow fight. They look younger, more relaxed. Even so, the air of warmth they exude is still the same, lulling me to a sense of ease. As another flamboyant firework reaches the sky, I watch the younger version of my parents stroll off into the distance, with myself in the stroller, contently enjoying the coloured sparks dancing with the faraway stars.

A ray of gold and maroon sparks appear in the sky as I reminisce about my family. With regret and guilt consuming me, I wish in desperation for a way to leave this dream and turn back time, craving for the life where all I knew was warmth and love, when I took my family for granted.

31.12.2023, *New Year’s Eve, Home*

“—Year!” The voices of my family. The fluffy duvet. The scalding hot chocolate. Home. I’m home. I am home. Tears well up in my eyes as I take a moment to bask in the comforting scene. Seeing all my family members has never felt so relieving. The genuine laughter and once overwhelming chatter are music to my ears, like tranquil melodies and symphonies. My eyes crinkle with a fond smile whilst observing my family’s antics, snickering along to every dad joke, over the top laugh, and horrendously angled selfie.

“Ugh, how underwhelming.” My brother scowls in annoyance, “I stayed up till midnight for nothing, the picture isn’t even flattering nor impressive.” Confused by his reaction, I turn my gaze to the television screen. Sure enough, the sight is indeed underwhelming since the traditional fireworks are now replaced by light drones drawing simple patterns over and over. Be that as it may, I can’t bring myself to be disappointed. The horrible dream transported me away from this very moment for so long that I couldn’t bear letting a lackluster firework display dictate my enjoyment. Although the previous fireworks display I just saw was much more entertaining and pleasing to the eye, this firework show with my family in the foreground made all the difference. I intuitively reach for my necklace to fiddle. However, a sense of dread pours in as I feel several pointed edges lining the circle instead of my regular round-shaped necklace. Afraid of potential damage to the necklace, I promptly remove my prized possession and examine it. A firecracker. It has the same shape, same pattern, and same indent as the firecracker Li Tian gifted. How is this possible? The only explanation for this change in the necklace, as improbable as it sounds, might be that what happened in my supposed dreams was reality...

A pillow smacks my face and breaks my reverie. I simply huff a puff of air and raise a judgemental eyebrow at my father’s childish action, shaking my head as I ingrain this moment in my mind for keepsake. Caressing my firecracker necklace, I thank the creator of fireworks for protecting me throughout the journey, and for opening my eyes and heart to cherish what’s truly important when fireworks light up the night sky.

## Everything to Live For

*Hong Kong International School, Cheung, Vanessa – 14*

“Yuze.”

*Darkness claws at my eyes.*

“Yuze. Please.”

*I shift awake with a gasp. Barely noticeable, Māmā’s sickly hand stretches for me. I rise with weary feet from my place by her bedside. The candle hasn’t been lit, yet the paleness of her face glimmers like a beacon for the lost.*

“Māmā,” I whisper.

*“My child. The light strains ever closer.” She rattles in her sheets. “Don’t listen to those monks. They try to bring meaning to life with their heartless lies, but in the end to live is to suffer and death is the end to all suffering. Do you hear?”*

*I feel the trembling of her ribs, and I am afraid.*

*“They prolong life with their stories of reincarnation.” Māmā coughs up spurts of painful red. “They wish to instill suffering in us all.” Suddenly she sits up and takes hold of my sleeves. “My child, listen, my child! Refute them in my name!”*

“Māmā,” I murmur, and my voice shakes. “Go back to sleep.”

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Money runs out coin by coin. The onset of starvation edges closer.

Nighttime is especially hell. In my makeshift bed, I shudder from hunger and think of my mother’s death. It happened on a moonless night, swift and silent. In the two weeks following, my life was subsequently cut apart and tossed to swine.

My memories constantly wrench me from sleep. Tonight is no exception. Outside a storm howls. Between its thunderclaps I hear Māmā’s voice, healthy and a stab in the chest.

*“Do not fear the storm. Take refuge in my arms, dearest, and never feel threatened.”*

The wind kicks up. The walls creak, wooden beams vibrating. I light a lantern and leap from my mattress.

The ceiling shakes. My eyes widen— death is a doorway of light I do not dare cross through— so I draw up adrenaline like a drug and I rush out of the house to hover in the dirt road. Bursts of lightning and crystal rain punctuates the darkness of the storm.

My home, already worn from age, has a rather anticlimactic crumbling beneath the muscles of this angry maelstrom.

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The sun climbs over the moor two hours overdue and reveals The remnants of my home that lie damp behind me, hardwood planks and rugged earth.

I clutch the edges of my qipao and shake. Hunger has morphed into a beast that growls viciously within my stomach.

*To live is to suffer. To suffer is to live.* What difference separates the two?

I bury my face in my knees.

Suddenly, footsteps alert my attention, their volume growing as their owner nears.

A monk arrives. These venerable figures are easily recognisable, even to the poor, by their shaved heads and colored robes, light loads for traveling. This one is no exception. He blinks puzzledly at my haggard form.

“Child, are you well?” he asks. “You are the only human I’ve seen for miles.”

“No, I am not well.” I shuffle uncomfortably. “Everyone else in the village left. Growing crops on this land is not possible.”

“Why do you remain?” the monk continues. He looks at the pile of rubble that was my home. “Was that once your dwelling?”

I nod, rather pitifully. “I didn’t move because my mother was ill. And yes. Violent winds knocked our house down.”

The monk’s expression starts to morph into something akin to sympathy. “Your mother isn’t here, child. Have you no money? No more family to turn to?”

“No.”

He pauses, as if contemplating what to do with me, an orphaned girl with no food and no money to her name left to fend for herself. Worthless, no more than a stray dog.

“Would you like to come with me?”

I startle, running back his words. Monks could do such things as invite penniless children on their treks?

I weigh my options. Stay and perish where I was born, or follow a Buddhist monk with presumably enough coin to feed two mouths in his pockets.

Māmā’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. *Don’t listen to those monks. My child, listen, my dearest. They instill suffering in us all.*

I swallow down my regret. I loved my mother, and I still do, but the voice of starvation rings louder than hers.

After traveling with the monk for a handful of sunrises, I shall relieve him of my presence.

Māmā’s warning for monks. Baseless in its message, but true in its despair. My mother truly thought nothing of the world.

I draw myself up and begin the trek.

“What is your name?”

The sun beats heavily on my back. “Yuan Yuze.”

“A boy’s name, no? But a nice one nevertheless,” says the monk. “I am Shi Qinyang.”

We are closing in on the closest village, the monk informs me, where he will buy me food. I thank him profusely for his kindness, although I am aware such large debts cannot be repaid with gratitude alone.

The inn at the village serves sugary millet. I wolf down two bowls and revel in the sweet goodness.

That night we do not sleep in any establishment. Instead, we camp on the ground. The grass is a deep green, and the sky is wide and whole. It is unlike the barren fields I’d once lived, where both rain and shine thawed into sorrow.

“Where are you going?”

“To Xiangzhou,” Mister Shi says. He smooths out his bedroll. “A recently deceased public figure will have her funeral there, and I am to oversee the rites. They have given me the task of introducing a fresh means of making sure the dead are happy in the temporary afterlife before rebirth.”

“Have you thought up a new means, then?”

He nods. “Yes. Currency is vital to those who have stuck to society, and so I shall bring faux money to the funeral so the dead will have enough to fund their time in the afterlife. People should hang this money up during the burial so as to display their importance. Or they can toss it up in the air, perhaps to signify the money reaching the heavens.”

I thread grass through my fingers. “And what will this money be made from?”

“Why, bamboo, of course,” he responds instantly.

“That is uncommon in this province,” I say with a frown.

“Yes. But I will nevertheless hope for the best.”

Mister Shi glances toward me. “At Xiangzhou I shall find you some means of work, so you can support yourself. It is a big city. Would you be interested in learning how to create fine cloth?”

I haven’t thought much of my future outside of caring for Māmā. “I would not mind learning.”

Mister Shi nods in approval.

Silence falls. I reminisce. Once, as I was handing Māmā her medication, she fed me a tale of the largest bamboo plantation in the province.

*It was beautiful, Yuze. I went once as a child. Bamboo stretching toward the sky, full of life, acres of green. Every meter of it owned by the Xiangzhou Bamboo Company.*

I have decided. Unbeknownst to none, I will steal from verdant plains. In doing so, I will repay my debt.

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The next morning, I excuse myself as Mister Shi makes preparations for his morning prayer. Afterward, we have breakfast at the same inn, and continue the journey. An hour helpless from the sun’s wrath slips by before Mister Shi unfurls his map.

“We are here,” he tells me, pointing to a thin strip of darkened map. “By ten sunsets we should be at our destination.”

My eyes flit away from his finger. *Xiangzhou Bamboo Company* is written, in crisp writing, near the end of the strip.

With one foot after another across damp soil, we enter a village; in front of us lay groups of ridged roofs, and we can hear the calls of clusters of fowl. Before us unfolds the scene of life still being lived. Children chase after each other, shaking with peels of laughter. Elderly citizens hobble on crooked canes. Women hang laundry to dry.

“We can stop here.”

A food cart strolls around the village’s outskirts, operated by a good-humored man. He grins when we move to him; the distinct aroma of chicken baozi snakes from his cart.

When Mister Shi drops coins into his hand and asks for two baos, a small child peeks his head from behind the cart. I presume that he is the owner’s son— a round-faced boy with bright eyes and chubby hands. He looks at me curiously.

In response, I wave tentatively, and offer a grin.

His expression breaks into a large smile. Warmth fills me like fire on a wintry night.

I follow Mister Shi and sit with him by the edge of a wide field. Squinting through the haze of bright sunlight, I can see colors abounding.

“This is a flower meadow,” I say.

He nods. “It’s beautiful. You can smell the remnants of morning dew in the flowers.”

He hands me a bao, and I bite into it. Rich poultry fills my mouth.  
The wind threads fingers through my hair. I drop my chin onto my palm.  
“What was your life like?” Mister Shi asks.

I had run through life simple and dreary. “I was born in that mess of wood. I stayed with my mother there my entire existence. When she fell ill, I cared for her. Then she passed.”

Mister Shi looks ahead toward the horizon. He waits patiently for, perhaps, some sort of addendum that might indicate a sliver of positivity within my being. My silence says it all.

He sucks in a breath. “My life was one of peace, excluding my father’s demise. My mother supported my monkhood. My time at the monastery was serene. And now I find myself here.” He finally turns to me. “Our lives differ greatly, yet we are both here. Find peace in the grass and the dew.”

What strange words. I shift my gaze from him to the horizon.

Night falls and engulfs the wide blue yonder, bringing with it the moon that now swims in the dark night.

Mister Shi murmurs the last of his prayers, kneeling toward the sky.

My voice comes out stagnant. “My Māmā said— she said— that to live is to suffer.”

Mister Shi lets go of his bedroll, and a thoughtful look enters his eyes. “Life is an endless cycle of suffering and rebirth. But I suppose we, as mere humans, survive to find meaning in that suffering.”

The meaning of my life: feeding pills to an ill mother, witnessing a small boy’s smile, or witnessing light bear down on acres of red flowers on a fall morning? Is it all of them? Is it just some of them?

How confusing survival is.

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Xiangzhou is now four kilometers away; the bamboo farm is only one.

“Tonight we’ll sleep at a proper guest house,” Mister Shi says, and drops a handful of coins into my hand. “I’ll go find one somewhere along the road. Will you purchase lunch?”

I curl my fingers around the money. “Yes. I’ll be back.”

The nearest guest houses are a good distance away. If I am to find the plantation, it must be now.

The moment I feel the sensation of his gaze slipping completely off me, I begin sprinting. My sandals kick dust off the roadway as I race away into promises of freedom.

A bird cuts through the sky. Its plumage is as red and fierce as fire, and it trails light across the clouds. I keep my eyes locked on the creature in a rush of reverence. It soars into the distance until it is all but a dot, one that’s enkindling the heavens.

Something grabs at my arm and tugs me back.

“Are you trespassing on purpose?” a voice asks, lithe and murmuring.

I look to my right. A man scowls at me, his silk tunic scrawled with the word *bamboo*. His inky hair is tied up in a tight bun, a long-standing symbol of the upper echelons. The surname *Lian* is painted not far from *bamboo*.

Then I sneak a glance behind me. By my back is a large sign warning wanderers to keep from encroaching.

“No,” I say, and try my best to shield my heightened anxiety. “I was traveling to my grandmother’s house.”

“She doesn’t live with your family?” Lian questions, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “Such an old soul residing by herself?”

“She lives with my aunt,” I quickly cover. “We have a big family.”

His suspicion wanes, in all likelihood due to my unthreatening appearance— a young, peasant girl with dust-dirtied cheeks. “Leave.”

I nod quickly, and continue on.

The land owned by the Xiangzhou Bamboo Company stretches for miles. I clamber up the fence encircling the boundary, and wince as the aged wood creaks beneath my weight.

Tall shoots of bamboo, each many times my height, tower, casting green silhouettes across the wet soil below. Sunlight clamors above, straining to enter, blocked by the forest’s eaves. I slip into the darkness and stalk further in.

A jagged stone lodged in the ground becomes an impromptu knife. With it, I carve at the bamboo, taking chunks out of the tall, proud verdure.

Soon I have amassed a stack of bamboo bark. I load the strips into the folds of my tunic, cautiously tending to the plant material.

“I knew you were a thief,” hisses a familiar voice.

I whip around, and curse. Lian.

“So I followed you.” He smiles. In one smooth motion he lifts a handgun, stationed tight in his grasp. A warning bullet is fired; it ricochets off the ground. I can smell death in the smoke drifting from the weapon’s nozzle.

There is no other option but to run.

I weave between towering stalks with my heart pounding— the threat of pain is one of man’s greatest anxieties— slowed by the mountain of bamboo stowed by my ribs.

Lian shoots, shoots, and laughs. He doesn’t mean to murder me. He only wishes to scare me off and toss me back into the wild, as if I was a troubling animal.

The fence gets closer each bound I take. With one hand I balance myself and leap over it. Too slow. His bullet catches me in the side— it rips open a seam, and blood sprays from the cut.

His second takes me in the liver.

I crumple on the other end of the barrier, searing pain shooting up my chest, hacking up wishes of a painless adieu.

“Goodbye, girl,” Lian whispers. He melts back into the rows of bamboo.

I lie on my back, looking straight up. Eventually, my view of the sky is swallowed by a swollen cloud with an extended corner, little puffs protruding from its bottom— a dog. I laugh lightly, a sound pressured to the brim with forlorn pity for my present predicament.

With a groan, I tug my body upward, wobbling as I attempt to stand firm. The notion of throwing up grows more and more enticing.

I grimace as iron clutters my tongue; with such an injury, I’d only be retching waves of red.

I hobble along the path as it snakes forward, one hand clutched to the gaping wound on my right. Orange-pink creases the sky. Sunset glows and children slumber. The black of my hair, I notice, as strands are thrown across my face, has been lit a somber red.

I come to the realization that completing the staggering walk back to the town from the afternoon is a nigh impossible task.

I strip away the front layer of my tunic, leaving but a thin sheet of white cloth to shelter my torso. The stolen bamboo, every thin, messy sliver, is wrapped carefully.

Once, Yuze, after cutting myself on my knife as I slid it through a fish, I discovered that blood is indeed thicker than water. Māmā’s voice is soft and melodic and makes the whole world spin.

An especially large slice of bamboo is withdrawn, and with it I dab red characters onto its flesh. *Shi. Qin. Yang. Monk.* My vision blurs as my finger stutters.

I heave myself to my feet. Each ragged breath is a final grab for life. I don't make it past the closest shrub before I collapse.

In a stroke of luck, I am on my back once more. It's nearly dark now. Constellations are repopulating the sky.

Perhaps Mister Shi's paper invention could be used for my funeral to wish my postmortem journey luck. If I'd even get a funeral at all.

A feeble smile, a weary finality.

Oh, how beautiful this world is.

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A girl, no more than twelve years of age, strains to reach a packet over the counter.

The cashier notices quickly and passes her the item she desires. It's a wrapped pile of joss paper— faux money meant for festivals and funeral rites.

Outside, in the streets, people clamor, talking and laughing and lighting lanterns to fill the night. The night's annual Zhongyuan Festival in full swing, dedicated to honoring

"Is this paper for tonight?" the cashier asks. "Lots of customers are coming in just to get some in order to properly honor their ancestors. Are you planning to honor anyone?"

The girl stares up at him with wide eyes. "Oh, no. This is for my Māmā's funeral. It's today."

The cashier's face is sorrowful, and the sigh he lets out is low. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," the girl comforts. "The paper will help her soul in the heavens."

The cashier opens his mouth, wishing to reply, but a car's horn sounding outside the shop cuts him off. The girl turns to the noise, then back to the counter. "Sorry. My uncle's here."

In a blink she's out the doors, bounding towards a white Toyota. The driver's window rolls down, revealing a balding man who greets her with a smile.

Creative Writing  
**Fiction**

Group 4



# Paper – a Mixture of Old Rags, Noodles, and Bamboo

GT (Ellen Yeung) College, Lam, Athena – 16

Cai Lun woke to the cold yet familiar smell of sandalwood incense. He groaned, burying his bleary eyes under his sleeves. They were the standard eunuch robes: loose-fitting and just enough to keep one warm in the winter and cool in the summer, adorned with ornate embroidery interwoven with the finest gold threads.

Back in his hometown, Leiyang, clothes with intricate patterns fit for the imperial court could be found in every corner. Up until twelve, Cai Lun was raised in a small textile manufacturer under the name ‘Zhulin Bufang’, meaning Bamboo Forest mill. Silk robes were quite the luxury in 60CE and sold at a good price, but every day his father would return home with yet another debt. Their revenue was never enough to offset the costs, their clothes were never enough to keep them warm, and they were constantly on the lookout for errands. Like the rest of the province, the Cai household was barely scraping by.

Cai Lun despised himself for not being able to support his family, especially his poor mother, who had suffered the most but gained the least, enduring his pa’s ill temper and bouts of angry, filthy words one would expect to hear from an uneducated brute. Ever since five, Cai Lun was brought up knowing his way in and out of prosperous residences and striking deals with vendors. He mingled with beggars, scholars, and the occasional cultivator, all alike solely for the chance of a better living he could provide for his mother. He, unlike his father, was a smart, diligent youth who had never gotten a proper education, yet still managed to survive and adapt in an unlikely environment like a boulder in counter currents. Teaching himself how to write Han characters by himself from studying old, worn bamboo scrolls he had found in the cellar. But he could never quite master it, as bamboo and wooden slips were arduously ineffective and costly. A single piece could only allow him to write at most four characters, hindering his process.

Cai Lun would have never expected the great turn of events on his twelfth birthday: his father deemed him a waste of space and food. “That little brat is reaching manhood, and his appetite is growing with him.” His father had shot him a scornful glare. “We cannot live with an extra mouth to feed.” His mother didn’t dare to object, and that was how Cai Lun was kicked out of his house.

Wandering without a destination in mind, he drifted northward and reached Luoyang, where Emperor Ming resided at the sprawling imperial court. At this point, Cai Lun missed the smell of the sea dearly. While in Leiyang, the wind carried a pinch of sea salt accompanied by the never-ending rustling of fabric and rice stalks, Luoyang was bustling with haughty riches and hollering merchants. It was harsh and suffocating compared to his agricultural-based coastal hometown—unfamiliar with his bearings, he ended up joining a calligraphy contest for a handful of meat buns and ended up catching the Emperor’s eye. Due to his ability to read and write, he was quickly promoted to the Emperor’s chamberlain.

His daily routine starts by overseeing servants, from the palace’s one-hundred and seventy-five cooks to lowly maids who brush the shelves and sweep the floor, and ends with an abacus and a tabletop of scrolls. He woke at mao, when the first sliver of light could be

seen from the sun peeking out from the multi-layered clouds, and rested at hai, an hour before midnight. He was cold and unassuming, he was obedient and cultured, he was strict and serious, but underneath that was a human soul, suffering solitude in silence.

Cai Lun shook his head, reminded himself of his duties, and quickly composed himself, flattening his robes, and setting out.

“Nangong Jie.” He clasped his hands together in front of his face and bowed respectfully. “I am here to inquire about the latest expenses of the palace.” The woman in charge of the Tianlu pavilion, the imperial library, returned the gesture, slightly amused. Emperor Ming was an unconventional ruler indeed—he was one of the very first to employ a female officer in charge of the imperial library.

Her features carried a scholarly essence, with furrowed yet determined brows, slightly sunken cheeks, and pale lips that curved upwards when she replied: “Isn’t this Cai Lun? There’s no need for the formalities.” She turned around, her finger tracing shelves to locate the exact scroll of bamboo slip. “Is the emperor giving you a hard time again?” She asked after a deliberate pause.

Cai Lun remained impassive. “It is my duty.”

Nangong Jie sighed as she reached for a thick scroll and placed it firmly into his hands. “Here are the records for the past week. Take care, Cai Lun.”

Cai Lun dimmed at the sight of the scroll. He remembered that when he was young, his mom would sometimes pause sewing and drape a worn blanket over his shoulders while he was studying calligraphy on crudely made bamboo slips. The clothing his mother worked on was a rich fox pelt, complemented with golden hand-sewn patterns. A mouldy blanket was all the Cai household had for the winter.

Cai Lun sighed. “I miss home.” He blurted. He rarely let his true emotions show, but Nangong Jie was not surprised. “A break might do you good. Take your time and revisit your hometown.” She advised.

Cai Lun thanked her again with a bow. Little did he know that Nangong Jie shook her head in his direction when he left. He may fool others, but he couldn’t fool one of his oldest acquaintances in the imperial court. Nangong Jie knew he had no plans of returning to Leiyang. He was way too proud and adamant to listen since he learned that his parents had met their end in the hands of angry loaners shortly after Cai Lun was cast out.

Nangong Jie’s eyes followed his retreating figure until he grew smaller and smaller, eventually disappearing into the distance. “I hope he changes his mind one day.” She sighed.

After Cai Lun left the pavilion, he delivered the scroll to Emperor Ming directly. He contemplated before deciding not to bring up the topic of returning home. In a few years, Emperor Ming was no more, and in his place was Emperor Zhang. Cai Lun’s position rose, and now as a message relay, he delivered scrolls day to night. Others had offered their pity, but he found it enjoyable. Each scroll carried a different message, unspoken feelings, Cai Lun understood, and he found conveying messages between the sender and the receiver to be meaningful and almost magical, whether it was a surly business inquiry or a passionate love letter.

On a particular day, he had finished his morning duties and went to the servant’s hall for lunch. The receiver of the scrolls had given him a hard time, and he had completely exhausted himself. Depleted of energy, he hardly paid any attention to his surroundings when someone passed him his meal. He found himself staring at a bowl of way-too-familiar noodles. *Rice noodles*. They were common food for moderate households in Leiyang, but Cai Lun only had a few tastes of them on special occasions when his mother had saved enough to buy him some. He had watched the vendor ladle the spicy soup, then the thin noodles, and sprinkle a generous

amount of chopped onion. And then there were days when his mother couldn't afford a bowl, and they would stare from afar as bowls of noodles were ladled and served, imagining that they were the ones sitting in front of the table consuming the noodles in big gulps.

As the still-hot noodles steamed, Cai Lun felt tears stir in his eyes, and something he hadn't felt for so long surfaced like a ripple in still waters. It had been so long since Cai Lun felt hungry that the foreign sensation sent him smiling from ear to ear before he knew it. He wolfed down the bowl, etiquette forgotten. Then he asked for another.

Years passed in the blink of an eye after that. He had served two Emperors, and he was considered a veteran in the imperial court. Everyone treated him with the utmost respect, some going as far as to bow with their hands above their heads as he breezed past the corridors in his long silky blue robes, a gesture of courtesy. One could be pretty content—but not Cai Lun. He felt empty inside, he felt like he was never complete without seeing his hometown one last time. Yet he still refrained from asking, for he had many important matters to attend. Emperor Zhang had passed on, and the new Emperor, Emperor Ming, assigned him a workshop in charge of the production of weaponry and instruments. While Cai Lun was often praised for his youthful face, his age finally caught up to him, and he zoned out more often than he used to.

“You miss home, don't you?” A gentle, weathered voice snapped him out of his latest reverie. Only now did he realize that he had been staring at the bamboo shoots outside the window for some time.

“Madame Ping. This humble one offers his sincere apology.” Cai Lun, despite his bafflement and surprise, hurried to apologize. It has become more or less of a habit now that he had been doing it for years in the imperial court.

“I remember when you told me stories about your home. *Zhulin Bufang*, was it?” There was not a ripple of change in the lady's creased face or hunched back, but she stopped next to Cai Lun to peer out the window, hands clasped behind her back.

Cai Lun nodded, his gaze lowered in embarrassment. As usual, the old lady has seen through him.

“I will talk to A-Ming.” No one would have had the nerve to refer to Emperor Ming with endearment one would use to refer to their son, but Madame Ping was the Emperor's midwife – practically the Emperor's second mother.

He felt his heart clench. “Oh no, that's okay. It'd be too much trouble for you-”

Madame Ping cut him off. “Let me talk to A-Ming. You've worked hard for all these years, the least I could do is make sure you get the rest you deserve.” She was too petite to reach his shoulders, so she settled for a pat on his upper arm.

After an uneasy sleep, Cai Lun got consent from the Emperor. A few weeks later, he arrived in Leiyang. He was surprised to find everything was more or less the same. A strange emotion grasped him when he faced the wreckage that used to be his home. He wandered in a daze, noting the destruction of the braw. The loaners had miraculously spared the small bamboo garden at the back of the shabby house. *Bamboo...* Cai Lun mused, gazing at his hand, grazed and coarse from the labour he underwent years ago as a messenger, and before that, a chamberlain. He could almost feel the weight of a bamboo-and-wood scroll on his hands.

That was when inspiration struck. He got to work immediately, using the bamboo shoots growing in the yard where he used to play as a kid. All those days he spent delivering scrolls and nights he spent holed up at the weaponry workshop at night paid off as he chopped off the bamboo with ease, and instead of making them into slips like he had as a kid, he chopped them into smaller pieces—he had no idea what he was doing, and he was

trusting his instincts to guide him. Then, he soaked them into the pond in the yard. A glance and he could tell he was about to create something extraordinary, something that could turn Eastern Han upside down.

“Cai Lun? You're back already? I thought you wouldn't be back for another month!” Madame Ping was disappointed, but wind-swept Cai Lun, who had travelled nonstop for a week, hadn't had the time to explain. He brushed past her and went straight to the Emperor. The Emperor, a bit annoyed and put off by his request to return home, was already in a foul mood. Upon hearing Cai Lun's request, he was furious. He had requested the construction of a highly intricate structure, but he hadn't told him what it was for.

“Who do you think you are!” The Emperor roared.

Madame Ping scuttled into the room. Seeing her, the Emperor snarled. “See? Give him an inch and he'll take a mile.”

Madame Ping pursed her lips and did not speak.

Cai Lun continued without blinking an eye. “My lord, this...structure will not be futile. I cannot tell you what I'm planning to make just yet, but the results will be promising. I can swear on my workshop and my lowly life.” He joined his hands in front of him and bowed low, not daring to move an inch, until he felt ants crawling on his back and his legs numb.

The Emperor stroked his beard, three parts angry and seven parts thoughtful. “Fine. Do as you wish, but only if you keep your word.” Even so, the Emperor never brought up the incident again, much less pressured him about his passion project.

Having narrowly escaped death, he got to his workshop and instructed workers to construct a rectangular frame. Then, he told them to chop bamboo from the imperial garden and asked them to boil it. Workers had no clue of its significance, they only did what they were told and boiled the bamboo into a pulp. The result was a dry, sandy mesh.

Cai Lun had no time to be disappointed. He repeated his experiment, each time tweaking a bit of the process. First, he tried adding salt to the mixture. With that not succeeding, he remembered how fabric was dyed back in his childhood in Leiyang-inspired, he added water to the next batch, and voila! He created the perfect mushy pulp. He poured them in the rectangular screen he had asked the workers to construct, and workers were to press and dry the sheets of bamboo mush.

There were days when he worked until he fell ill in exhaustion, and there were days he was plagued and clouded by a failed experiment, but he never let them deter him. He would patiently try and try again until he got the right formula. He was often seen dozing off in his room with a worn blanket, confusing maids and bureaucrats all the same—only Cai Lun knew how precious the old rag was to him. Even when he was bedridden, this blanket from his hometown had kept him warm.

Of course, there were also days when he was immersed in joy after a successful experiment, days when a discovery could keep him up all night, and there were days he felt so content that he could forget his sorrows and burdens.

After three months he decided to publicly announce his creation. People came from everywhere just to hear his speech. As he scanned the crowd, he caught a glimpse of Nangong Jie, who arched her brow and folded her hands in front of her chest as a greeting. The Emperor was seated on the throne, laden with ripe fruits and gold. He now plopped a grape into his mouth, slowly chewing and revelling in the sweetness: “You can start whenever you like, Cai Lun.” He said languidly, lounging in his chair.

Cai Lun took a deep breath and started: “Welcome, everyone. It is my honour today to present a refined bamboo scroll.” He held up a needle-thin sheet.

Murmurs and whispers immediately drifted among the crowd. Some of them were intrigued. Some of them were uninterested. Most of them were doubtful. Cai Lun knew what they were thinking: just what can this nearly transparent sheet do? It was half the thickness of the bamboo slips, and twice the size.

At first, the Emperor was delighted – he had no doubt of Cai Lun’s ability. His brows furrowed as someone questioned the authenticity. “Silence. Let him finish.” He ordered.

Without batting an eye, he invited the Emperor to try writing on the bamboo sheets. The Emperor picked up a brush and found, in astonishment, that when he moved his brush, strokes of ink were as smooth as flowing water and he was able to write at least a hundred characters on one single sheet.

“...amazing.” Emperor Ming marvelled, shock and joy contorting his plump features. “We will have the imperial palace mass-produce these bamboo sheets...no, from this day onwards, they will be called paper!”

Word spread like a wildfire, and Cai Lun was soon known as the inventor of this miraculous thin sheet across the continent. He has been praised and worshiped up until this very day. His tale was passed on to many, who continued to share and spread this wonderful, life-changing story to future generations. But no one else except for Cai Lun and his closest companions understood the hardships he had gone through, the hard work that went behind that single piece of paper.

After the production of paper was stabilized and Eastern Han seemed to be headed towards a bright future, he visited his old household again. He stood in front of the ruins for a long time. Reminiscing the past, Cai Lun whispered a few words, words that were lost in the wind. It was a short toast. “I did it, mother.” His eyes reddened as he remembered his difficult journey. There was a bitter tang in the air, lodging into his throat when he inhaled: “I-” He hacked, coughing blood into his handkerchief. “I did it.”

He closed his eyes. He could almost feel his mother’s warm embrace, a blanket of warmth woven from bamboo, old rags and noodles.

## The Embers We Leave Behind

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Tong, Carrinna, 15

“And this goes here...”, Shih placed a matchstick next to a splintered piece of rope, the glow from the flames illuminating the unabashed pride on his face.

“There. Now, we run and hide behind that rock.” Pointing a finger to a large boulder obscured by night’s shadow, Shih smiled at Jing and grabbed her hand. They turned and crossed a thin flowing stream and hopped over pebbles, towards the faint flickering yellow aura from their home’s candlelight. The child waddled over the little bits of rock, tripping from time to time but never falling, always pulled upright by the big, warm hands she could unwaveringly trust.

Crouching behind the boulder, they waited. Giddy giggles bounced off the rock and the wooden planks of the house, obscuring the crackling of flames that burned closer and closer to the device...

Bang! Bright streams of light shot up from the mist and the night sky erupted into clouds of confetti.

Jing jumped, leaning back into his father’s torso. Shih wrapped his arms around her and hugged her close: they looked at each other, smiled, and directed their gaze to the night sky. Incandescent eruptions painted the darkness with streaks of fuschia, gold, ruby, and emerald. The air shook in the fire’s ebullience as the fiery torrents soared upwards, erupted, and flared; only then fading into a trail of fizzling smoke.

Shih’s face changed tinge with each crackling explosion, his eyes reflecting the dazzling spectacle of his own creation-- he had harnessed the power of nature and turned it into something nothing short of magical.

This was an inadvertent discovery, yes, a trivial side-product of his grand quest for scientific research and seeking the key to immortality. Yet, it was impossible to ignore the vibrant sparks that emanated from the powder when heated.

Sure enough, word, and sound, of this explosive spectacle spread across the Kingdom and bursts of colour were soon seen all across the night sky. Eventually, flowers and dragons were painted right above the grand palace.

“Shih...”, the emperor voiced:

“I am at a loss for words. This is an amazing invention, and we are proud to see such scientific progress in our land. We are truly amazed by these scintillating images. Thank you for giving me such an extravagant display on the day of my birth, it is such a symbol of prosperity and glory.”

*Prosperity and glory.* Shih’s heart pounded at these high-flown praises: years of experimentation and dedication to scientific research, finally culminating in recognition, finally enabling him to create something of use, something that leaves a mark on society: even if it just brings the most minute amounts of peace and joy. Finally-

“Shih, could you provide us with, say, ten boxes of these, ‘sky flowers’, five days later? Any colour would suffice. The nation would benefit very much from this.”

Shih did not appreciate this: ten boxes in five days, whilst he was the sole producer? Let alone giving away his own invention for no profit, no fame, no elevation in status, just for altruistic self-motivation? This did not sound appealing-- not to any rational person. But it

was the solemn tone that made this question a demand: this was the country, the government, the highest power. Shih could do nothing but oblige.

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Five days have passed since Shih reluctantly handed over days and nights of hard work to the emperor: ten wooden boxes, carefully sealed off, full of hand-crafted powder that became magic when ignited.

Three days have passed since the Huang Chao rebellion took a turn for the worse and civilians became harmed amidst the violence.

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Crouching behind the boulder, they hid. Rapid and muted breathing concealed itself from behind the rock whilst shouts of violence echoed all over the village, obscuring the crackling of flames that burned closer and closer to the device...

Bang! Bright balls of a blinding glow shot up from the trenches and the air erupted into another wave of raucous screaming.

Jing jumped, leaning back into his father's torso. Shih wrapped his arms around her and hugged her close.

"It's fine. It's fine. We will be fine, Jing... We just... We just need to run from this boulder, back into the house", Shih reassured.

*We will be fine.* This time, Shih did not let Jing run across the pebbles herself. He hoisted Jing onto his shoulder, and, finding the moment, sprinted towards the wooden plank door and flung it open.

*We will be fine.* Shih put Jing down on the floor, his eyes glazing over the stained wooden table and the flasks of chemicals perched innocently on the shelf above. A bottle of crimson lay at the edge. As if possessed by a demon, Shih walked over, staring at that bottle of red.

*Will we be fine?* The sound of this explosive was too familiar to suggest otherwise. The fizzling. The bangs.

*The bottle falls over the ledge, shattering into a pool of crimson that begins to seep into the irregular wooden grains.*

Shih's breathing became heavier: so did his heart. This wasn't his intention. He had hoped to bring joy and hope. This spectacle was a happy accident from his endeavours of science, of extending life. Yet, it had become the opposite: terror and bloodshed; abruptly ending the lives of breathing souls, tearing bodies into bits of flesh, only for it to splatter anonymously onto the already blood-washed ground. If life is so vulnerable, what is the purpose of trying to extend it?

*Red drips off the edge of the table onto the floor, the striking hue starting to spread to its surroundings like a symbiote, staining the chair the floor the air, Red.*

In his pursuit of Science, Shih did not ever stop to think about what Science is: all he had was his passion for it, his wish to leave a legacy behind. But as realisation came crashing down, Shih saw a part of Science that he so carelessly neglected, concealed by his relentless acceleration that left no room for contemplation of consequences. He had neglected the duality and the power of Science, and how dangerous this could be, when Science lands in the wrong hands.

This was not the legacy he wanted to leave behind... But it was already too late to salvage.

*The Red had already spread uncontrollably, colouring the entire room in a monochrome red.*

Jing stared at the back of Shih's head, now buried within his arms and rapidly heaving up and down.

Perhaps in an attempt to cheer him up, she asked in a weakly cheerful tone, "Daddy, are they all playing with our sky flowers outside? Can I join them? We haven't played in so long, pleeeeeease?"

*Join them? Join them and face death? Face the wrath of fire; the scorch of my own science?*

*The red grows, becoming more and more viscous... Until it starts to climb up Shih's feet, suffocating the Scientist...*

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Shih is in a barren land. He turns around, turns back, eyes desperately searching for his eight-year-old, searching, searching...

"Jing?"

"Jing!"

All he hears are echoes, voices that sneer and scorn at him when he realises that these sounds are from nothing but the manifestation of emptiness, not Jing.

"Jing?"

Shih starts to run, the dried, wilted grass crunching under every step he takes. He spins his head around, to the left, to the right, up, and down, catching sight of their bare skin patched with splatters of red and brown, catching sight of them, covered with shrivelled up pieces of guts-- intestines, livers, brains.

He tries to avoid them, but there are far too many. Clusters of them everywhere.

"Jing?"

Silence. Then a meek, struggling noise that somewhat resembles: "Dad--"

"Jing!"

Yet, relief instantaneously turns into terror. Jing's previously unblemished skin is covered with cuts and slashes and blood... As her eyes begin to droop.

Shih drops to his knees, scrambling for Jing's hands, shaking them vigorously.

"Jing- No, no no, stay with me!"

Jing lets out a faint mumble, a muffled sound, as her eyes close into a silent surrender.

*Bang!* The world flashes white.

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"Mister Shih, I am here by the name of the emperor. He demands to see you at the grand palace."

Shih turned around, oblivious to his surroundings. His head pounded as he was pulled back into reality.

*My daughter could die from this.*

"Mr Shih, I am here by the name of the emperor. He demands to see you at the grand palace." The guard enunciated every syllable.

*She could die from Science.*

Closing his eyes and shaking his head to bring himself back to the present, Shih mumbled, "Uhh.. Sorry, I didn't catch that. You said?" He struggled and crawled up from the ground, wiping away the tears on his face.

*Why is this happening?*

“The emperor demands to see you. Follow me.”

Timidly, Shih traced the steps of the guard. The cold man’s face was masked by the shadows of the towering palace, making it impossible for Shih to discern his true intentions.

The Emperor exclaimed once he saw Shih step foot into the uncannily barren palace, “Ahh, Shih. How much you have done for our country. I would like to thank you for your generous supply of sky flowers. It has been of great use: just look at how many battles we’ve won.”

Furrowing his eyebrows at Shih, who was silently looking down at the marble floor, so sterile it reflected his troubled face, the Emperor said nonchalantly, “You look dishevelled: has life treated you harshly? I hope you haven’t been bothered by the war. We could provide you with accommodation... If you require it.”

Shih looked up and stared blankly at the Emperor, the glint from his eyes gone: “Oh- No, no. I’m alright. Thank you for the... appreciation.”

“That is good to hear. Anyway, Shih, I understand how hard it can be to deal with science. I know there is a lack of funding, recognition and whatnot: so perhaps, it would be beneficial for both of us if you gave us the list of ingredients that are needed to make this sky flower. We can help you scale up your production, increase exposure... Whilst we, we... Could go on to win so many battles! Don’t you love this win-win situation?”

Shih took a deep breath. “I’m sorry... As much as I love science, I do not support our country’s use of violence. What my sky flowers have turned into wasn’t my intention and has caused much inconvenience, which is why I will have to say- ”

“Naïve morals don’t work in real life.” The Emperor’s voice seemed to lose some of its pompous undertone and morphed into a deep, unembellished rasp, “It is never this simple: sometimes, violence is justified. Violence is justified because we are not the ones who started it. Do you think we are going to condone this trampling of our land, this massacre of our citizens, this violation of the inherent rights we possess? Sacrifices have to be made. Those barbarian outsiders instigated this: we are merely defending our homeland. You call this unjustified?”

“I think I’ll have to refuse this time, your honour.”

The emperor’s eyes darkened into a menace. He glanced around the room as if searching for evidence that something had collapsed from the marble ceiling, something he had never thought would collapse. But the heavens did not give him an answer: so he gave himself one:

“If you say so... Death it is.”

A man, apprehensive, turned to the indignant emperor and said, “Your honour, are you sure you would like to kill him? The dead do not speak words.”

The Emperor whispered menacingly, “Insolent and insensible youth! Do you not see? Since he does not comply, just *kill* him. He is merely a pawn: it’s the ingredient list that matters. We will search his workshop afterwards.”

His eyes were now clouded by a dark grey murk.

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Farewell presents itself in the most unlikely corners: partings that would be unknowingly permanent. This parting, for the innocent child, is one concealed with forced smiles and haphazard excuses.

A soldier, more than a head taller than Shih, very roughly escorted him back to the once safe home, walking past them, the bloodshed, the screams... to allow Shih one last exchange with his daughter, as requested.

“Peasant, go spend time with your *precious*: be quick. Don’t you *dare* touch anything on your table. I’ll be watching.”

Shih crouched down and grabbed those small and soft hands, as he smiled and whispered, “Hey, Jing...”

“Papa and this uncle are on our way to find a new workshop for us to make... prettier sky flowers. You know, make more sky flowers for you...”

Had Jing been any older, she would have picked up on the carelessly constructed optimism Shih tried to display.

“Hooray, Papa!” Jing cheered; it was always her contagious smile that melted Shih’s heart.

“Shh... Well, mind helping me clean up our current workshop after Papa and the uncle leave? Just... dump all the things into the river. Don’t burn it, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Okay, Dad! See you soon. Love you!” This time, her smile melted Shih’s heart into a puddle of blood, Red.

Shih turned away, unable to look straight into those innocent eyes.

“I love you too, Jing.”

Standing upright again, Shih backed away from his daughter and looked around, desperate to capture the last frames of his quaint workshop, eyes squinting from the flasks of chemicals to the stained table and to Jing...

Until the guard scuffled Shih away from it all. He turned and allowed the lone drop of tear to fall from his eyes, as they walked away

Forever.

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The cold iron bars of prison contain the physical body but cannot prevent the spirit from hearing the strident sounds of the gunfire and explosions from outside. Shih’s eyes are closed, contemplating...

In what ways does he deserve this sense of security whilst people were out there suffering from his Science?

It is as if he is looking through a window, and finds that he is locked outside: so much he wants to do, but so little time and so little power...

Shih finally opens his eyes: they are filled with an unearthly glare.

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The next morning, there was no sun. Blue-black rain clouds loomed over the land as the guards escorted Shih from his cell to the execution grounds, tying him firmly to a boulder with splintered, coarse pieces of rope, as other hostile guards roughly threw hay around his legs. Shih watched the growing pile of tinder and the pieces of cotton rope: how often had similar piles fueled his firework displays?

As the torch was let down to ignite the mound, Shih breathed deeply of the smoke that so uncannily resembled the smell of fireworks. How he wished he could see the evanescent glory blossoming across the heavens one final time...

Yet, he had one more task. One last thing to do, one last mark to leave on humanity, voluntarily. Bending his wrist, he tugged on a pale yellow piece of paper: on it were priceless notes, words that unlocked a new realm of chemistry, lines that would otherwise have been the birth of death.

Closing his eyes, he let it go. The piece of paper drifted down, to the left, then right, left, right; ultimately touching the flames, its edges turning immediately into a dark, muted brown, shrivelling involuntarily, as it became smaller, smaller, smaller... Finally becoming embers that were soon consumed by the wrath of the fire.

While the flames became bigger, bigger, bigger. As the blazing red-orange closed in, so did science, lamenting the loss of a passionate soul. So did the ire of war, wailing for the loss of a could-be victim. And, as the flames crawled onto Shih's skin, he regained a long-gone sense of comfort and resolve. The fire was devouring his body, but with that, it was alleviating his guilt.

*I couldn't decide how my legacy started, but at least, I can decide how it ends. I've obliterated the only chance for the gunpowder to be produced: and so it ends, with me.*

*A small sacrifice for so much more...*

Least, Shih would never live to see the day, where another brilliant mind would tread his path again, pushing himself

Into the depths of suffering.

# Fiction

Group 5



# The Weaver's Tale

*St. Paul's Co-educational College, Cheung, Hau Yin Chloe- 14*

Sunlight trickled in through the canopy like liquid gold, heralding the start of a new day. Dewdrops glittered amongst the trees and bushes like little diamonds. The lotus flowers rested idly upon the lilypond, nestled between giant jade plates of lotus leaves, and goldfish sporting vibrant scales the colour of glowing embers could be seen frolicking beneath the crystal-clear depths. Melodious laughter like a chorus of tinkling bells floated into the picturesque palace gardens, as a procession of ladies entered, all of them members of the imperial court. The most striking of all was the lady at the front of the procession waited on by all the others, who were her maids. She had silky, raven hair woven into an elegant bun atop her head, with loose strands framing her delicate features. Her eyes, which rested appreciatively on every beautiful blossom in the garden, glowed with the lustre of black pearls. Her willowy figure made her look all the more regal – fitting for a woman of her stature.

Her maid-in-waiting, Yinsi, brought her a steaming cup of tea, bowing respectfully. “Your imperial highness, please have a drink.” The woman, Empress Leizu, accepted it, “Thank you, Yinsi.” She took a seat below a mulberry tree and raised the cup, breathing in its soothing herbal aroma, and raised the cup to her lips, taking a sip, closing her eyes and letting the earthy notes take over. Mornings like this were heavenly for her, as she took a break from her worldly duties and took a moment to unwind. Leizu was the wife of the Yellow Emperor, who ruled China from 2698 to 2598 BC. As the empress, she worked by the emperor’s side and had to attend many court rituals and ceremonies. It proved tiring occasionally, having to be perfectly poised all the time, but Leizu found solace in her inquisitive mind, and the gentle, familiar aroma wafting around her, diffusing into the morning air.

“Empress, Your Imperial Highness! there’s a cocoon in your tea!” Her maids’ startled cries jolted Leizu from her reverie. “Oh! There is!” Leizu watched the silkworm cocoon, which had tumbled down from the branches of the mulberry tree she was seated under, drifting around her tea. It bobbed about in the hot water. The Empress attempted to lift the cocoon from her tea. She fished around slightly clumsily, trying to get it out, while her maids panicked, worried about the hot tea scalding their empress’s hand. As she wrestled with the cocoon, she found it beginning to soften and unravel into a long smooth filament. The slender fibre felt soft to her touch. A sudden idea struck the ever-thinking Leizu, and her arm froze in mid-air, the thread suspended above her tea. She gazed thoughtfully at the thread, lost in a string of thoughts. She glanced at her maids’ garments – functional, but rough and not that comfortable – then at the fibre again. “What if...what if we used these fibres for weaving?” she murmured ponderously.

She took her idea to her husband in the evening when she was having tea with him. “Using worm cocoon strands to weave clothing?” the ruler furrowed his brow. The very idea seemed completely ludicrous. “Yes, I’m sure it’ll work somehow! It truly is the softest, smoothest thread I’ve ever touched.” Leizu gestured emphatically. The emperor had his doubts, but he was an inventive soul himself, with many inventions having been introduced under his reign, including carts, boats, writing and wooden houses. He sighed, “Well, how would you like me to help you?” “Just let me have a grove of mulberry trees. I’d like to learn more about these worms and the intriguing material they produce.” Leizu pleaded. The emperor agreed – the determined glint in Leizu’s eye was enough to convince him.

A couple of days spun by, and to Leizu’s utter delight, her mulberry grove was ready. Along with her maid-in-waiting Yinsi, she took her first stroll around the grove. “Excellent, there are many worms here!” she exclaimed rapturously. “Your imperial highness, these are ideal conditions for silkworms!” Yinsi remarked happily, lightly amused at the normally composed empress’s excitement, but pleased as well, for she also saw the potential in the silkworms and silk cultivating. “I must get started right away!” The empress declared, “I’m certain that my innovation will benefit the empire.”

Her heart ablaze with determination, the Empress set her sights on perfecting the silk production process and transforming it into a material. Instead of taking leisurely walks in the gardens, Leizu would head to her mulberry grove. At the break of dawn, when the just-awakened sun first casts its warm glow upon the earth, the empress could be seen in the grove peering into tree branches and walking from tree to tree, diligently observing the silkworms in the trees. She learnt to domesticate silkworms and experimented with making silk, collecting cocoons, and using different methods to obtain the silk from them. She spent her days absorbed in her task and earned valuable knowledge about the silkworm’s life cycle. She would trek in the grove, rain or shine or snow, till the last rays of sunlight faded away. Only then would she retire to her chambers, exhausted yet satisfied by her newfound knowledge, and note down her findings on rolls of bamboo strips. By the time she’d written down all she wanted to write, it would be deep into the night, with no soul save for the moon awake. Sometimes, she would be so exhausted by the end of the day, that she would fall asleep while writing and get scratched by the bamboo. Months later, she had amassed an extensive collection of notes, which were kept in her chambers, and shared only with those closest to her. Leizu soon found that collecting the cocoons and boiling them caused the threads to unravel. These wispy threads could be woven into a smooth fabric through methods carefully developed and perfected by the empress.

She also formed a hardworking team of people who helped her with this project. Most of them were devoted members of her court, along with some interested scholars in the imperial court. Her team enlisted the help of farmers to help them with rearing silkworms. The farmers worked in the mulberry grove, taking care of the mulberry trees and silkworms.

Meanwhile, news of the empress’s research spread like wildfire within the imperial court. Bitter courtiers, who bore petty grudges against Leizu, grew resentful of Leizu and her team’s work. They whispered behind her back, deviously plotting to improve their reputation with the emperor by bringing her down. They argued that the resources the emperor allocated to her team, such as the mulberry grove, were too much. They also stated that silk was too extravagant and impractical a material. They spun elaborate webs of lies, which they craftily fed to the emperor, hoping to tarnish Leizu’s reputation. “Empress Leizu is using that mulberry grove as a place for idle entertainment, wasting our precious resources, and she lounges around all day doing nothing...” “Empress Leizu is splurging on custom-made jewellery with the money the emperor granted her; soon enough, she shall plunge the imperial court into debt!” These deceitful whispers echoed endlessly within the palace walls. The courtiers also snuck into the mulberry grove when the empress and her workers were absent and would use swords to hack away the branches and leaves of the mulberry trees, harming many of the silkworms and cocoons, as well as the trees themselves. Leizu and her team were positively boiling with indignation at this, but as they didn’t have solid proof, they were forced to bear with it. The courtiers also tried to turn the maids on Leizu’s team against each other, goading them into squabbles about petty matters like stealing possessions, making it impossible to maintain healthy group dynamics. Yinsi often begged Leizu to punish the courtiers, as she was getting gossiped about too, “Your Highness, those courtiers have been

driving us all apart!” Despite this, Leizu, ever the diplomat, decided against acting on hot-headed impulse and devised a plan to cool tensions.

The empress decided to host a special banquet at the palace dining hall to unveil her now-perfected invention. She sent out invitations etched on ornately carved stone tablets, emphasising how much of a momentous occasion it would be. The emperor, high-ranking courtiers including the bitter ones, and even the highest-ranking ladies of her court were invited. At the high-profile banquet, she proudly presented her method of manufacturing silk fabric to the guests. Using a loom, a machine she had designed especially for weaving, she carefully wove silk threads into a smooth fabric and presented it to the emperor and his guests.

The emperor was enthralled, beaming like an enthusiastic schoolboy. “Well, I must say that this is the smoothest, glossiest, most luxurious fabric I have ever seen! The sheen, and the texture, show plenty of promise. Who would have known that worms could do such a miraculous thing?”

“I agree with his imperial majesty. Truly, this new textile is amazing!” Some of the courtiers nodded in agreement, “If I may suggest something, perhaps embroidery or dyes could be added to decorate these fabrics? Some colour, along with some intricate needlework, would work wonders.”

Leizu’s eyes shone with inspiration, “Yes! That would be a splendid addition, thank you for your input.” Other courtiers also expressed their ideas, which were carefully noted by Leizu’s team for later review.

However, the bitter courtiers took it upon themselves to drag the empress into the mud. “Your imperial majesty...” the ringleader of those courtiers simpered to the emperor, leaning towards him, “The empress’s success in making this material is astonishing — I’m sure none of us expected her and some lowly servants to finish the job; however, we have spotted various worrying problems regarding multiple aspects of the silk-making, and we felt that it is of utmost importance to raise it to your immediate attention.”

“Indeed, Your Imperial Majesty,” another courtier drawled. “A fact that deeply concerns us is Empress Leizu’s mulberry grove and her extravagant spending.”

“The sheer amount of money flowing out is staggering. Surely an entire grove along with her allowances is too much since all that is being done, if it’s even being done, is the questionable practice of...raising and boiling worms?” another courtier leered slyly, drawing venomous looks from Leizu’s team. Leizu’s lips were pressed together in a tight line as if to prevent a torrent of daggers from spilling out.

“Oh, do forgive me, your imperial Highness, but these practices seem more like witchcraft than weaving,” he added unctuously. At this, gasps came from the other guests, and some scandalised whispers of, “How dare you!” “The audacity!” escaped from those on Leizu’s side. The emperor glanced uncertainly at Leizu; his face conflicted – he did not want to be accused of meddling in black magic.

“Do permit me to clarify that the process of silk making is very time-consuming and meticulous. My team and I employ farmers to assist us in rearing the silkworms, who are paid workers. As for the mulberry grove, it is where we rear the silkworms. As for witchcraft, Minister – frankly, I’m afraid your imagination might be just slightly too vivid.” Leizu replied patiently.

“With all due respect, your imperial Highness, I can hardly see how it is time-consuming. Also, your proposed price for selling this material is so high, although it is a very impractical material requiring delicate upkeep. It’s a luxury that can hardly be afforded by the majority of the population, who work in agriculture and need functional clothes that can withstand wear and tear. What benefits then, may I ask, can they reap?”

“The silkworms are first cultivated in the mulberry grove. They consume mulberry leaves as they grow, and soon they get to the stage where they spin protective silk cocoons to pupate in. Then, we and our farmers harvest the cocoons once the pupation is complete. After that, we have to boil or steam the cocoons to soften the silk fibres and remove proteins. Then we unwind the silk filaments, a delicate process requiring a lot of care, and spin them into threads using a silk reel – another device I invented. After that, we interlace the silk threads on the loom and weave them together to create fabric. It’s all very labour-intensive.” Leizu explained.

“That may well be, although I believe that process is overcomplicated; but how is it supposed to benefit our economy? It’s not as if we can sell it to the commoners. They’ll never afford such an ostentatious thing,” a courtier scoffed sceptically.

“Allow me to explain this, Minister.” A scholar on Leizu’s team piped up, “This material her Imperial Majesty has invented, silk, is indeed expensive, but that is a benefit. It could be used to trade with other countries along with tea leaves and porcelain. We can keep the silk-making procedure a secret so that we’ll be the sole producers! It could rake in huge amounts of money.”

“Additionally, producing silk could provide job opportunities for many commoners! Our farmers are benefitting already, and many more could be employed. Women could also participate in the weaving process, so they can earn their income too.” Yinsi added.

“With such a complicated procedure to make as you described, how is it supposed to be mass-produced? It can’t possibly be mass-produced! Is Your Highness simply planning to keep it to yourself?” another courtier questioned snugly, thinking this would floor Leizu. She was not floored.

“As we just said, we will be employing more people to help us with mass production, and I’ll be improving the design of my loom and reel. You are welcome to help out with this procedure if you wish.” Leizu said pleasantly. The courtier grimaced. “No, your imperial Highness, I find worms unpleasant creatures, and working around them very unbecoming.” He retorted pointedly. At this, several of the maids opened their mouths, insulted, but Leizu silenced them with a look. Drawing herself up, she summoned up all her courage, and in her most regal manner, began to speak.

“Over the past months, my team and I have been toiling hard, and we’ve gleaned a vast web of enchanting knowledge of silk and its making,” she began, her dark eyes sparkling with genuine ardency. “Not all of you appreciate this new material, which is understandable; yet I hope in time you do recognise its potential. The way I see it, we must kindle innovation by harnessing the power of nature. The threads produced by these tiny, seemingly insignificant worms are untapped jade deposits; it’s a fact that’s impossible to disregard. We’re just scratching the surface of this vast abyss of natural wisdom. It is yet another way of living in harmony with nature. Regardless of what happens to my invention in the future, I want to try doing all I possibly can to develop silk. I know that now, it’s far from flawless, but with the invaluable support of the court, I’m sure that it shall metamorphose into something unimaginably spellbinding; something that will bring significant prosperity for centuries to come.”

The room fell silent. Heads swivelled, and the emperor found dozens of expectant eyes locked onto him. Those on Leizu’s team held their breaths, their hearts racing wildly, desperate to know what the emperor would make of her proclamation.

The emperor nodded approvingly, a smile breaking out across his amiable face. “Yes, I do hope it does. I shall look for ways to integrate silk into the court, and I shall find ways to let our people reap the benefits. It’s a tremendous invention, it is, and we ought to treat it as such.” Leizu’s team was in seventh heaven after hearing this, though they managed to compose themselves long enough to thank the emperor with profuse bows. The guests – some

earnestly, some with a begrudging reluctance – acquiesced to the emperor’s words, their heads bobbing up and down either vigorously or stiffly. Silk was soon introduced into court rituals and used for ceremonial purposes, and gradually worn by people. It was traded as a precious commodity to people all around the world, bringing prosperity to the Chinese Empire.

The noble art of silk-making soon spread throughout the Chinese Empire and weaved its way into human history. A tale of serendipity, ingenuity, and innovation, Leizu’s invention of this coveted fabric brought progress, knowledge, and power to people for centuries and continues to do so today. Seamlessly weaving together traditional skill and modern ingenuity, the invention of silk remains a testament to Leizu’s, and many other Chinese inventors’ innovative spirits.

## A Lesson in Flight

*St. Paul’s Co-educational College, Tso, Si Ling – 15*

You are made of wood in your first lifetime.

At the moment you are an uncarved piece of wood. You are laid flat on a carpenter’s workbench, heavy in your unshaved bark and unchipped features.

Fingers — calloused, telling of their power of creation -- run across your body and pausing on your midriff, as if in contemplation of the possibilities that they can spin out of you.

You cannot help but vibrate in anticipation, wondering what these hands will make of you.

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It takes the logician three years to complete your creation -- three years spent mooring over countless blueprints and designs, consulting other scholars of his calibre, and chipping away at the finest details.

You take shape slowly, but definitively.

Your wings, once flimsy attachments to your midriff, now extend past your sharply carved head as if they are outstretched arms. You are broad and flat, wide yet thin; day by day you come to resemble more and more of the birds that come and go by the branches next to the workshop’s window.

A friend of the logician once stopped by, curious to see the progress his friend had made thus far. Upon setting his eyes on you, he sighed deeply and left but one word.

Madness. A word that may have been a more accurate descriptor for some of the logician’s more outlandish blueprints, but it is accurate in its description of his vision for you still; a man-made invention capable of flight — a device capable of a function known to be exclusive to nature’s creations.

The logician is determined to prove himself capable of replicating miracles yet. *Wooden bird*, he calls you, the streamline of your head and the outstretch of your wings reflections of nature’s unfathomable forces in designing, yet products of his human ingenuity. *Wooden kite. Someday you will fly.*

*(Fly for me, is what goes unsaid.)*

His gaze drifts to the clouds, bringing with it your thoughts -- you want to soar, soar above the clouds, up and away from the workshop -- but a comet-like streak of yellow drags your stare back to ground-level.

A bird lands on the windowsill of the workshop, its claws flexing to clamp onto the wood, solid in its landing. The bird cocks its head at you.

*Poor thing, trapped inside a human’s workshop, it chirps. Your wings look practically unusable!*

Struck by its words, you are all at once aware of all the flaws present in your body; the weight of wood a heavy anchor to the earth, and your carved wooden boards but a facsimile of the bird’s beautiful, feathered wings.

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It was not long until you experienced your first flight.

The bird was right. Your wings are flawed, and to conclude the mishaps in your design with that one simple line is to scrape the tip of an iceberg. You were made to mount the winds, but it is the winds who push and pull at your flimsy, boarded body.

It is not impossible to make it to the sky at first — but of course. Even a simple leaf can experience a short period of flight if thrown with enough force into the air. What is impossible is to remain airborne, dragged down by the ever-present weight of your materials and the cutting resistance from the air.

As it turns out, all of your difficulties serve as a stark reminder of what remains as impossibility for those destined to dwell on the earth. The heaviness of wood pales in comparison to the weight of your creator's sadness as you spiral down, down, and down, as the peak of your altitude morphs into the limits of where human ingenuity could take him.

It had not been long since you experienced your first flight.

(It had not been not long since you experienced your last.)

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You are made of paper, in a later lifetime.

The memories of your first flight have lingered, and will always linger. You remember the first touch to the ground after failure — a strangely soft embrace from the earth; yet you also remember that there was no rebound, no recoil.

You are sure that you will never fly again — a belief solidified by your distrust in your new vessel. The hands that piece you together from a combination of paper, wood, and glue are not so calloused as your first creator, nor so experienced; hands that speak of handling fine materials, silk and paper; hands made smooth from the nurture of this more-developed society, where writing is no longer inscribed upon bones nor bamboo scrolls.

The eyes that follow those hands are sparkling with anticipation as they review their own blueprints. You catch a glimpse of versions of your old blueprints, scribbled and remarked upon with ink extensively. You wonder if it makes a difference, this revision and consolidation of an invention already proven a failure from lifetimes past.

In an instance, tools that were yet to exist before your first flight fill into your field of vision. You let these hands tailor your edges and smear glue onto your sides, all the while without an inkling of how the runny glue will cement your materials together.

All that you know is that you are paper-thin, large yet lightweight. Fragility upon fragility. How will you mount the winds if you cannot withstand even the slightest drafts, or the stronger breeze?

... You lie still on the workbench. There is nothing to anticipate when all that awaits must disappoint.

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The wind is mild near the workshop today.

*Paper bird, paper kite.* The young inventor ushers. *Fly!*

And with that, he lets go —

The first gust of wind catches you directly in the midriff. The thread tethering you to the spool in the inventor's hands loosens, before you ride into your newfound flexibility, mounting the wind as you would on waves in the ocean.

Your journey lasts more than a blink this time.

You wonder what the logician, the first to dream of a wooden bird, would think of this sight in the skies today. You wonder what he would think of the failed product of his dreams, now renewed into an invention that fulfills every expectation that has been placed upon its fragile body.

But for now you revel in the young inventor's joy, joy so overwhelming that it floods even your paper vessel, capsizing your body --

The reinvented thinness of your structure allows you to rebalance in the air.

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Birds take two wings to fly.

— For you, it takes two wings and two generations to fly.

You have been made of wood and paper, and you are made of dreams, each rendition of you painstakingly crafted with the intention to capture the beauty in nature's flight, time after time.

Legacy is passed from the experienced to the inexperienced, from the old to the young. Refinement after refinement is made across generations, until you finally take off and remain connected to the heavens,

resonating with the skies.

Remain airborne.

# Fiction

## Group 7

### The Crazy Danger

*Korean International School – Springboard, Lowther, Jessica – 17*

On a cold summer day In the forest of Canada, it was snowing heavily with some showers. There were two girls called Beanie, and Cynthia. While they were walking on the way to the mountain, they were chatting and taking photos of the scenery. Suddenly, Mali, and Walie emerge like a ghost and try to steal the two girl’s snack bags. The girls were shocked and their hearts were pounding. The bad guys successfully stole their snack bags and ran away quickly down into the forest. The girls got hungry when they were halfway to the mountain. They decided to explore the forest to find food to eat. They found bananas and apples on the top of a tree. Then, they jumped up high in the air and got the fruits. After they finished eating and were full of energy, they continued to walk towards the mountain. They discovered a lot of special plants and unique flowers that they had never ever seen. Plants like “Wild Rose Rosa Acicularis”, “Prairie Crocus”, “Pawpaw Tree”, and “Palm Tree”. They also saw bees and butterflies flying around.

# Paper invent love

*Korean International School – Springboard, So, Yan Tung – 18*

Once upon a time there was a handsome and intelligent young physicist man called Kingsley who was holding a professional equipment to measure the salty sea water level when he was hit by a speedy piece of cozy paper on his lips. He was wearing a black mix with a pearly suit with a light mix with an ebony shirt and he was standing in Victoria Harbor pier in the 1980s in Hong Kong.

Less than the second, there was the pretty and artistic young fashion designer named Karen, who was hit by the paper and she was wearing a violet mix with a beige dress . As the strong and cool wind came, it blew into Karen's face. Karen sensed there was the mixture of salty seawater and men's cologne, as accidentally left rosy lipsticks mugged on the same paper.

The breeze blew in the opposite direction, Kingsely attracted to Karen's beauty by the rosy lipstick mark. Kingsely was looking for Karen, but Karen waned from the crowd as she was getting on the Star Ferry. Kingsley looked at the ferry departing and he felt sad and heartbroken with the paper in his hand.

The next few days, Kingsley starred the rosy lipstick marked paper more than ten times per day, he forgot his physics project and kept riding the star ferry every morning. He kept folding paper airplanes from a stack of papers, throwing them out the star ferry one by one in countless attempts to recall her.

One of the paper planes was stuck to Karen's leather shoes and Karen picked up the paper plane. The scent of Kingsley's cologne attracted Karen and she unfolded the paper plane. Karen realized the rosy lipstick mark. When the Star Ferry arrived back at the pier, Karen saw Kingsley tossed paper planes one by one. Karen approached Kingsley with the rosy lipstick-marked paper. Karen bashfully asked Kingsley about his cologne and the smell of the salty sea water on the paper and Kingsley humbly questioned Karen about her rosy lip-stick mark on the paper. As the romantic paper gradually sparked the love, Kingsely requested something to Karen about whether he liked her and Karen wanted to request something too about whether she liked him too and they were replied the same answer and they tripped in love with each other and the cozy paper blew far from the Kingsely's and Karen's hand.