

Fiction

Group 4



The Elixir of Needles

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Tam, Zita – 14

The ambrosial scent of lavender incense permeated the air and the soft glow of ambient light cast an ethereal glow upon the room. However, despite the soothing ambience, Elena's nerves remained unchanged. Her trembling hands fumbled with her black flimsy hair tie that lay on her wrist. The loose threads come undone as she unravels, desperately trying to comfort herself while anxiety pulses through her veins like a tempestuous river, trepidation coursing through her body.

Soon after, the door swung open revealing Dr. Huang, a middle-aged man between the ages of 50 accompanied by a heavy whiff of sandalwood, an earthy yet musky aroma. Greeted by a serene smile and eyes of determination, the mysterious man made his way over to his desk area, preparing to start. Elena's heart raced with unease and fear. Her mind, usually clear like a tranquil lake was clouded with thoughts of worry. Like butterflies, flitting from one bad scenario to the next, leaving trails of contemplation, and "what ifs". Despite Dr. Huang's attempts to offer soothing words and encouragement, Elena could neither hear nor comprehend. Fear continued to wrap around her lungs, squeezing her last breath.

However, within a few seconds of her silent approval, the first needle found its place and penetrated her skin. A momentary prick, like a brief mosquito bite, followed by a subtle tingling sensation that radiated from the acupuncture points.

Elena winced involuntarily, a sharp inhale escaping her lips followed by a sharp exhale of agony.

"There we go," Dr. Huang said, his voice like a melodic symphony wrapped in a thick Beifang accent from China, "Just take a deep breath and let your body relax. You're doing great."

A shiver of apprehension coursed through Elena's body, her hands sweating profusely as she gripped the soft silken bed sheets, sweat drops forming on her forehead and dripping down her neck. Her senses were keenly attuned to every detail. The gentle hum of the smooth jazz music filled the room, the sound of her breath blending with the rhythmic beat of her nervous heart, and the soft rustle of fabric as she straightened herself.

She looked to her left trying to distract herself, her eyes falling on a massive and meticulously crafted human diagram of a naked man showing his front and back view. Each acupuncture spot was labelled with a black or red dot, a hidden and encoded meaning that seemed to pulsate behind each one and ran through every inch of his body from his skull down to his feet.

On her right, the portrait's gaze of the Chinese Emperor (or so she thought) greets her. He was wearing a traditional *miànguān*, a ceremonial headdress, with numerous strings of exuberant, colourful beads stretching from sage green, pale white, dark blue, to red. His face was the shade of tawny beige like stretches of golden dunes in the Sahara desert. Marked with graying sparse eyebrows framed by the deep furrows like delicate rivers, his forehead conveyed wisdom and knowledge. Casting a menacing look akin to that of a soldier getting ready for battle, his elongated eyes, protruding and hooded monolids held determination and resilience. His irises, adorned with a captivating palette of deep browns, and shades of black accompanied by a straight yet concaved nose, are the centrepiece of his visage. But set in a thin grim line, his lips were adorned with a natural rosy hue and a wiry beard that cascaded down his chin like a tapestry of untamed growth, a testament to time.

To the table next to her lies a book, the title glossed with thick red text, "The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine". To the top left was a picture of a Chinese Emperor, in perfect resemblance to the portrait on her right and a traditional yellow background with an elderly man outlined in white, his body out on display labelled with the numerous acupuncture points printed in white strokes of Chinese characters.

Grateful for her easily diverted brain, she turned her attention back to her loose, flimsy, hair tie and with another gentle touch, Dr. Huang placed another needle, a momentary prick but fleeting. An unexpected wave of sensation washed over her with each needle placed: a faint warmth, a mild tingling, and a feeling of energy coursing beneath her skin.

The hours passed briefly as the needles worked their magic accompanied by the radiant warmth of the infrared heat lamp. Fears of anxiety and anguish began to dissipate replaced with a sense of calm and serenity. The delicate touch of needles became conduits of harmony, something between the past and the present, connecting her to the healing traditions that had stood the test of time. Her mind began to coax into a sense of quietude. Repose. The tension that stifled her began to unravel, thread by thread, loosening her from its grip. Memories and long-buried thoughts floated to the surface like Koi fish in a pond. Hidden chambers became unlocked. Fragments once tucked like bookmarks were uncovered.

As the treatment came to a close, Dr. Huang delicately removed the thin metallic needles one by one. Their withdrawal was as gentle as the cool spring breeze. Elena's eyes fluttered open, the heaviness that once lingered had vanished and been replaced with buoyant serenity. Her eyes now sparkled with newfound tranquillity, once clouded with uncertainty was clear, a lightness that defied gravity. The world now painted in a different palette.

Acupuncture has long been recognized as a therapeutic technique of Chinese medicine and is becoming increasingly more popular due to its many healing benefits such as relieving pain and overall, improving our body's well-being.

With its origin generally held in China, it was first mentioned in "The Huangdi Neijing" (given the title "The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine" in one of the latest translations). This ancient treatise for traditional Chinese medicine was based on Taoist philosophy and was written by the current emperor at the time, Huangdi, dating back to 100 BCE. The information was then presented in the form of questions by the Emperor and earned replies from his minister, Chhi-Po. The book talks about how the key to a healthy life is to follow the Tao and health and illness are caused by an imbalance of the two basic forces, yin and yang, and by the influence of the five elements (water, fire, metal, wood, and earth) on the organs of the body.

The emperor who wrote the book however is another story. Huangdi (full name Qin Shi Huang) was born in c. 259 BCE, Qin state, northwestern China and died 210 BCE in Hebei, China was the first unified emperor of China and Qin dynasty, who ruled from 246 BCE to 210 BCE. During his 35-year reign, he was the cause of both cultural and intellectual advancements but also credited for the founding of the Great Wall of China. Although it is unknown how Huangdi discovered acupuncture, we do know that Huangdi had an obsessive interest in magic, alchemy, and Chinese practices that would bring him an elixir of eternal life and immortality.

Two fragments, all colliding into one single moment, one person in particular. The man with the heavy whiff of sandalwood aroma. The man who wrote the book and started the Chinese practice that became a modern-day phenomenon. The man who weaved both tradition and innovation.

The man who turned a few metallic needles into a powerful key, capable of unlocking your body and soul.

Bright and smooth

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Chen, Amanda – 13

Cai groans, complaining to himself about the endless yet repetitive process he has to do six and a half days a week. He loads a pile of wood into the machine. What comes out is a liquidy substance of raw wood fibre – pulp. He churns the fluid unenthusiastically, mocking his boss with each whirl of the machine.

After three hours that felt more like twelve, it's finally 8pm again. He removes his uniform and drags himself home with dread, waiting for his wife to nag and pick on his job and attitude. "Home is where the heart is," but not for Cai. "I hate my life," he murmurs monotonously, before stepping into the front door of his tiny, deteriorating apartment.

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?" his wife shrieks as she brings him dinner. He slumps onto a chair and dozes on and off. Tonight's dinner is a sad plate of stale, five-day old rice, given to them by their kind neighbour along with ketchup as the chosen condiment. He gulps it down and tries not to gag, knowing if he does, his wife will nag and fray at his nerves. He doesn't bother to shower and crumbles into his bed.

It's Sunday. Cai finishes work at 1pm, after waking up at four in the morning and labouring aimlessly for eight and a half hours. He is in such a rush to escape the factory he clumsily drops a dollar out of his pocket while rushing out the exit of the factory and hops on a bus. He's looking forward to going back home to his mother... his last resort. It is only after he's passed two stops that he realises he doesn't have any money in his pocket. After a while of frantically fumbling through his pockets, he comes to the conclusion that his day is officially ruined, and a warm, motherly embrace will be his only saviour.

TZSHHH. The bus screeches to a stop and Cai reasons with the driver about his bus fee, squinting his eyes and hoping for the best. The bus driver sighs and waves him off the bus, "I don't get paid enough to deal with people like you. Just get off." He sighs again as Cai, red with humiliation, steps off the vehicle. The bus drives away, leaving a cloud of charcoal smoke and Cai, in the southern county of Lei Yang.

"Mama, I'm hoooooome!" Cai exclaims as he shrugs off his backpack onto the floor. Cai's mom, Mei, waddles to the living room with such a smile that seems to wrinkle the lines of her face, lighting up her glittery eyes. "What's up honey? Welcome back! I haven't seen you in a while!" Mei squeals as she moves toward her son. "Would you like some tea? Jasmine or Pu Erh?"

Cai smiles at his mother's fussing and sits on a wooden chair. As the water boils, Cai looks around and takes a deep breath. The air smells like wood and incense, bringing back a wave of comfort and nostalgia.

Mei shuffles across the kitchen to the living room where Cai is sitting. The cups clatter with each careful step she takes. She exchanges a warm, worried smile with her son, in anticipation of the news he brings.

Cai tells his mother about his status at work, expressing his dissatisfaction towards his lifestyle at home as well. "I really don't know mom, I'm stuck in this loop. With my salary, I'm surviving, not living. I hate to be part of the paper industry yet it's the only thing I can do well."

Mei smiles and ambles out of the room, leaving Cai confused. What kind of reaction was that? And how had he finally been able to speak the words he had bottled up inside for so long!?

After a while of digging through a wardrobe of ancient belongings, Mei pulls out a dusty book and returns to her son.

“What’s this?” Cai asks, as he moves his fingers gingerly across the cover and gasps. “The Cai Dynasty: Pioneers of the Paper Revolution,” Cai reads, eyes wide . He flips through the pages and becomes more and more shocked with every turn of a page.

“Your ancestors, the original Cai’s, invented paper,” Mei explains gently, “I’ve been waiting for you to come to me, so that I can explain to you about this family legacy that became unspoken after your father passed. It was just too much for me, but I figured you had to know at some point. I don’t have much time left, so I’d rather tell you this by myself while I’m still here than for you to find out for yourself. It’s quite a shock, isn’t it?”

Tears form in her eyes as Cai wraps his arms around his mother.

“Is... Is this dad?” Cai’s lips tremble as Mei nods and points to a picture.

“Before I had you, your father would be working in the studio all the time to master his skills of being a paper crafter. I’d bring him lunch and we’d sit together under a tree, talking about our future and all.. I miss him. I wish you got to spend more time with him.” She lets out a sob and wipes her eyes with a handkerchief.

“He wouldn’t want to see you like this, miserable and dissatisfied. Take this book home and look through it. It may contain some information that might help you find your way back on track.”

Cai and Mei spend the rest of their afternoon together, chatting over tea and sunflower seeds, laughing every now and then. Three hours fly by. Then, before he knows it, it is time for Cai to go back home, where reality calls. Where his journey begins.

Cai hops off the bus with a new mindset and newfound motivation to find his true identity. He stops by a florist to pick up some fresh tulips, as an attempt to brighten up his musty apartment. He opens the door and heads straight to his wife, where she begins to obsess over his flaws. Too engrossed in his revelation, he locks the door to the bathroom where he sits down on the floor and starts introducing himself to his family history.

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3 YEARS LATER

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Cai finishes his last batch of paper before he heads off to a meeting with the board of multiple top companies. Three years ago he worked FOR them. Now they’re coming TO him for ideas and his predictions for the trends regarding stationary and paper related objects in the new year. He has worked incredibly hard to get to where he is today, starting from quitting his job and leaving his toxic marriage. Now he’s a successful businessman, with a business called ‘Cai’s Legacy Paper Co.’ Inspired by his ancestors and parents.

Cai’s past may be dark, but his future is definitely going to be as bright and smooth as a sheet of paper.

The Peach Blossom Yard of TaoYuanMing

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Fong, Isabella – 15

Peach blossom flowers symbolize luck and love.

This belief originates from the famous tale written by TaoYuanMing in ancient China called “Peach Blossom Spring”. He created an imaginative world with his idealistic society – a place sequestered from any political dispute. “Peach Blossom Spring” first introduced the concept of a Chinese utopia and influenced Chinese literature pieces ever since. TaoYuanMing is a famous poet who grew up in a corrupt society with many wars, yet, in his late years, he has finally lived to the standards of his utopia.

Every year, in the little yard where TaoYuanMing lives, peach blossom flowers bloom on the trees. The blossoms dye the sky pink; infuse the air with a unique tint that is subtle enough for people to follow and serve as temporary inns for nearby birds to squeak delights.

A village by the sea fills the air with a distinctive but unpleasant fish smell. People grow up in these smells as if their entire body was marinated in them. TaoYuanMing also grew up in this fishing village. However, unlike the other villagers, He grew up immersed in the sweet smell of peach blossoms instead of the pungent smell of fish. This makes him one fine gentleman in ancient China – a rare gem to think of from his upbringing environment.

The magic of the peach blossoms at TaoYuanMing’s little yard lies in their longevity. The peach blossoms stay throughout the whole year and only withers on the coldest day of winter – unlike other peach blossoms, which only last for a month or two.

It is a tradition to give the elderly the most meaningful gifts to show gratitude and respect. This year for TaoYuanMing grandma’s birthday, to spice things up, the Tao family has decided to hold a contest for the most outstanding gift to cherish the grandmother’s last years.

Shivers of excitement run down TaoYuanMing’s spine – he has been preparing this gift for his grandmother since last year. The unconditional grandparental love from his grandmother is one of the core memories of his childhood. His grandmother used to make Osmanthus cake for TaoYuanMing upon his visits to her nearby village.

TaoYuanMing spent numerous months figuring out the perfect formula for this never-known-to-earth wine that has only appeared in ancient legends. This wine has been frequently mentioned in ancient Chinese legends and is said to maintain young skin and good health for anyone who drinks it. He took inspiration from the peach blossom yard he lives in, as it is the only place other than his grandmother’s house where he can feel temporary peace in times of a corrupt society he was in.

TaoYuanMing used early morning dew and peach blossom petals at their finest state to brew this precious jar of peach blossom wine. He had to try out different proportions with his ingredients to make the best possible product. It is only natural for him to win this contest. Not only is he the first one in history to brew this most aromatic and fresh peach blossom wine, but it is also a very thoughtful gift done with much love.

It is said that the peach blossoms in TaoYuanMing’s yard return to their finest state one day before they wither. It is like terminal lucidity, where humans return to moments of liveliness and mental clarity before they die.

“I’m going to win,” screams TaoYuanMing’s little know-it-all nephew.

“I know you guys are going to give all those expensive gifts, but grandma will definitely not like those – she has no use for them! I will give grandma one of my precious drawings and she will be so happy.”

TaoYuanMing scoffs as he does a quick shiver. Sometimes his nephew really pulls a string. However, deep down TaoYuanMing is worried that his grandmother will favor his nephew more, as he is just 7 years old.

The reality is that his grandmother stopped making Osmanthus cakes for TaoYuanMing when his nephew turned 4. It was just 3 years ago when the table flipped and the unconditional grandparental attention he had his whole life was transferred to his nephew, like the wind dispersing a seed into the wild.

The majestic day has come to the reveal of TaoYuanMing’s legendary gift. It is now his grandma’s birthday and a lot of her friends and family have come to visit to give their gifts and greet her.

There were kids playing hopscotch while singing old Chinese folk songs in a corner of the yard, some adults greeting each other enthusiastically and some others sat down on the big round table ready to start the ceremony meal.

One by one, the guests present their gift to TaoYuanMing’s grandmother.

“Hi Miss Tao, I have brought you this extraordinary piece of cloth as your birthday gift. I am sure you could make good use of it to make a few pieces of clothing with your amazing tailoring skills. I hope you have a happy year and live a long life.”

This is a tailor who works in the town. He has been good friends with TaoYuanMing’s grandmother for a very long time.

“Congratulations Miss Tao! You are now one year wiser. Here is my gift – it is ivory jewellery brought from the Silk Road. I hope you like it.”

This is a businessman who trades items in the Silk Road and he is TaoYuanMing grandmother’s neighbor.

“Hi, grandma! This is my gift to you! I drew us as a big family with you in the middle. Grandma I love you so much, you are the most important person in my life. I wish you the best of luck and fortune this year, and please bear with me for many more years. I wish you could stay with me forever.”

This is TaoYuanMing’s nephew, and also grandma’s currently most loved member in the family.

“Hello everyone.” TaoYuanMing waited to get everyone’s attention. “Today is my most beloved grandmother’s birthday ceremony, and to celebrate such an important day, I brought a very interesting gift for her. The gift is a kind of wine that not even the royal family has ever tried before.”

“What kind of wine? Tell us.”

“It is called peach blossom wine, which I am sure most of you have heard of in ancient legends. This wine can make your skin look younger to anyone who drinks it. It contains the essence of the peach blossom flowers in my yard, so it will also bring good luck. I’ve only made this one precious jar, and I hereby give it to you, my grandmother.”

“Oh, my dear dear grandson.” She says with light tears in her eyes due to being overwhelmed with emotion. “I am blissful to receive this gift. I have never expected to receive something so precious made with so much love, at least not after my husband died a long time ago. This is the most meaningful gift I have ever received.”

TaoYuanMing's mind was swirling in the pink clouds of delight with twinkling stars and twirling vines at this point. Indeed, the wine has brought good luck – luck that is meant to be shared amongst everyone.

Undoubtedly, TaoYuanMing was the winner of this contest. However, the true prize that TaoYuanMing had really gained is realizing the importance of treating his family and loved ones with great love and care. This is the most valuable prize one can truly discover and apply in the corrupt times he lived in.

In the late years of TaoYuanMing, he led a peaceful and tranquil life in the yard filled with peach blossom flowers and was also accompanied by family, poems, and of course, peach blossom wine.

Equals Happy: A short story on Alcohol

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Domnitz, Yair – 14

Half an hour in, Hua Ting Tzu threw up. Two weeks in, and he couldn't take it any longer. As he sat down on the floor of his workspace, he went back to the day he had gotten into this mess...

Monday, August 7, 7000 BC (ish), 6:05 am

Hua woke up to the sound of drums and groaned. Living along the main street did have its perks, but the early morning training for the Warriors of the Tribe wasn't one of them. He sighed and decided to get an early start to the morning. He scratched his scruffy, grey beard and forced himself out of bed. The Warriors had a strict training plan, practising a certain style every week. Last week was Water Wrestling. That day, however, was Head Grappling. New training meant a new week. And a new week meant Washing Day. He hastily dressed in a cloth tunic, grabbed the other dirty ones that were scattered along the floor, and made his way out into the daylight of the new day.

The minute he stepped outside, a messenger arrived from the Peiligang Leader.

'Our honoured Leader, Liang Gang Jian, invites you, Hua Ting Tzu, the great inventor, to a competition this afternoon, when the sun middles the sky. You shall be accompanied by other inventors from the village to invent a special offering for the Leader. Pleas...'

'Woah, woah, woah sir. I have no time for your shenanigans, so please do go tell the Leader that I am very happy with what I do right now and I don't need him trying to pry my life away from me. Good day.'

And with that Hua walked off down the main street.

As Hua walked toward the village river, a mud ball smacked him on the back of the head. He turned around to see a small gang of kids, the oldest looking about ten and the youngest having to be no older than five. Each of them had a mud ball in their right hand, which was hoisted up and ready to fire.

'Don't you do it, kids,' Hua muttered.

The eldest of the bunch stepped forward and started counting down; '3...'

'No, don't do it!' he shouted louder, hoping someone would hear him, as he started edging away from the gang.

'2...' the kids started advancing in a V-shaped formation.

'No no no no no no!' Hua tripped and fell down. He started shuffling away from the oncoming mud storm.

'1... FIRE!'

The kids all threw their mud at Hua. He felt helpless as the mud hit him on the head and square on the chest. He thought it couldn't get any worse, until he got a mouthful of dirt. He spat it out and screamed 'ENOUGH! I'm sick and tired of you little IDIOTS spoiling my day. So from now on you're all going to LEAVE ME ALONE! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?'

Almost at once, the kids began to cry. It then took a minute until all their parents came outside and gave Hua a piece of their minds.

'Don't you understand, sir. They're children. They don't know what's good and what's bad.'

'You have lost your mind mister. Who do you think you are, shouting at my poor baby?'

'I think it's time for you to get out of here sir.'

Hua watched as more and more people came out and decided to join the 'We Hate Hua' bandwagon. He was going to say something to subside the anger of the crowd, but decided against it and left them to themselves. He

slowly made his way to the river while wondering to himself why he was always so bitter. A great inventor in his time, but he was always very prideful. Hua could never take criticism, and when he did, he never changed anything that would help him. He got to the river and looked at his reflection. His grey, mousey hair pulled back in his classic bun and his potbelly stuck out of his tunic. He had scratches from where the rocks in the mud hit him. He wore his usually grumpy face. He never thought there was a reason to be happy all the time. Happiness came with success, and success was something he hadn't had for a long time. So he decided to make a change. He washed and then went back to the messenger and told him he accepted the Leader's invitation.

Monday, August 21, 7000 BC (ish), 2:37 pm

A sigh escaped Hua's lips as he rose from the floor. The challenge presented to all the greatest inventors in the Peiligang Tribe by the Peiligang Leader to make a never before seen food offering to burn for the Great Ancestors, proved harder and more disgusting than Hua could ever imagine. Day after day, test after test, taste after taste, he struggled to keep his hopes up. But he had to keep trying, as the race against the others, both friend and foe, was reaching a climax.

It was well known that the Leader had come to see Ho Sheng Zhou just days ago, and when the old man could only show unclear drawings and failed experiments, he was removed from the competition and exiled from the Peiligang Tribe altogether, being sent to the lowly Cishan Tribe near the Taihang mountains. Rumours started to spread around the tribe about who would be the next to be tested by the leader.

When people started to spread rumours that he was next, Hua went into overdrive. Before every test, he prayed to the Gods that it would work, and after every failed experiment, he prayed it wasn't his time. After another week of continued failure, as Hua was packing up for the night, a messenger from the Leader appeared. "Sir Hua Ting Tzu, you are called upon by our treasured leader, Leader Liang Gang Jian of the Peiligang Culture, to bring forth your offering to the Gods tomorrow at sunrise. You shall be escorted by the Warriors of the Tribe to the Leader's temple, where your offering shall be tested and your fate shall be sealed, for better... or for worse."

Hua shook with fear as the messenger's horse trotted away into the dead of night. He had to find something he could bring. He scoured around his workspace, trying to find something worthy of sacrifice that he could bring to the Leader and become a man amongst the men in the Tribe. Hours of searching went by, but Hua didn't notice anything of much interest until he spotted a closed cabinet he hadn't noticed before. He yanked the cabinet door, but it didn't budge. He kept yanking and yanking, and after about ten minutes, he got it open. A foul stench filled the room.

Hua ran back outside and filled his lungs with fresh air. He saw the start of rays of sun filling the sky. Then he heard the drums. In a desperate attempt to pull something together, he ran back into his workspace and grabbed the jar inside the cabinet. A failed experiment? A spice blend? Hua couldn't place where this jar came from but maybe, he thought, maybe this is what he was looking for?

Tuesday, August 29, 7000 BC (ish) 5:52 am

Hua nervously tapped the warm, fermented jar as he walked into the main room of the Peiligang Leader's home. He was immediately met by a swarm of servants, each of whom was holding a brush to fully clean him. He waited nervously as he was dusted from top to bottom. Once the servants were finished, the Warriors led Hua up a staircase. He took a shaky breath, as they stopped in front of a grand door, decorated with artworks of the Great Peiligang Leader. The leading Warrior walked towards it and knocked three times.

Almost immediately, the door opened, revealing the Leader, Liang Gang Jian, and his wife, Li Sung Jian, sitting atop two thrones made from bronze and straw for comfort – at least that's what Hua assumed. The Leader

looked about middle-aged, maybe younger than Hua, with grey streaks in his dark brown hair that was pulled into a bun. He had pasty, yellow skin which gave the illusion that he was sick, though that was far from the truth. He had elvish features, which looked silly on his massive body. He had fatty arms that overflowed the armrests of his throne. He wore a red tunic embroidered with the Dragon, a symbol of good luck. His wife, however, was the complete opposite to him. She had light brown hair that flowed down past her shoulders. She had the same elvish features as her husband, although they suited her thin and tall frame. Her eyes were brown with golden flecks in them and she wore a blue tunic embroidered with pink flowers. She was, in short, the most beautiful person Hua had ever seen.

But, he pushed that to the back of his mind. He was here for one reason and one reason only, his fate was about to be sealed, whether he would be able to return home, or be sent to the mountains. The only thing standing between that was his warm jar of rice and liquid.

'Hua Ting Tzu, you are called upon now to present your offering.' The Leader's booming voice rang around the room.
'Ehmmmm, okay. Phew, ahem. Sir and Madam, may I present to you my offering.' Hua opened the jar. He expected the putrid smell that emerged from his cupboard to fill the room, but it never came. A sweet smell came out of the jar. A smell that left everyone stunned and wanting what was producing that smell.

'Wow, that's amazing!' Li Sung exclaimed. 'Please do tell us what it is!'
'Uhhmmmm, well let's see. It's called...' Hua had no idea what name to give it. He looked around the room and saw a picture of a child. I hate children, he thought to himself, they always whine and whine and whine and... that's it! 'I call this Wine!' Hua shouted.
'So what does it do?' the Leader asked.
'Ummm well, obviously you... drink it!' Hua took a big swig, praying to the gods that this would work. The moment the liquid touched his lips, he was sent to another planet. The taste of this liquid was the best thing he's ever had. 'It is really delicious, you must try it, my leader.' He thrust the jar into the hands of the Leader. Liang Gang Jian raised the jar to his lips and took a sip. 'This is... the greatest thing I have ever tasted!' He passed it to his wife. 'This is perfect! I do believe that this could be the best thing to offer!' Li Sung said.

'Sir Hua Ting Tzu, by complete agreement, you have won the competition!' Liang Gang said, 'You are truly a remarkable inventor. I don't believe that anyone could have come up with such an outstanding product. Please do tell us how to make it.'

'Wha... umm, I mean well...' Hua was caught off guard here. He didn't think he would win the competition, much less be asked how to make it. 'Ummm I guess I mixed rice with... honey!' He remembered now. Weeks ago, one of his failed experiments with honey accidentally fell into his pot of rice. He was so full of rage that he had thrown it into his cupboard and slammed it shut. 'You must then leave it inside a cupboard for three training cycles. Then you will get this... Rice Wine!'

'Wonderful! Now, Sir Hua Ting Tzu, you shall be presented with honours! We must formally thank you for such a service!' Leader Liang said.

'No thank you sir. I don't need anything. All I ask is to not have an escort home, my liege,' Hua said.
'In that case. Sir Hua Ting Tzu, go with our blessing and thanks for a marvellous addition to our lives., You shall be escorted home. Thank you for the invention of a lifetime!' Li Sung Jian said.

As Hua walked out of the Peiligang Leader's home, he breathed a sigh of relief. The warm air of the day filled his lungs. For the first time in a long time, he felt content in himself. He felt happy. He smiled.

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's* (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 Legend of Lai Lian

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Kinjo, Yushin – 16

"We need to go to Grandpa's house today," Mom was saying, her voice filled with a mix of sadness and numbness. "He passed away, and we need to collect some of his belongings."

Tom rolled from his bed, his eyes still heavy as he digested the information.

"Tom, get the dog ready, we will be gone for a while. I'll be waiting in the car," shouted Karen.

"Alright, give me a second," answered Tom.

He put on a harness for Kelly and brought her to the car.

At the end of a tiring 100-kilometre drive along Highway 61, they finally turned off onto a small road that took them through plum trees and wild bamboo until they finally arrived at Grandpa's house. They parked outside the ornate wooden double doors, adorned with intricate carvings of serpents coiled in pairs around bodhi branches. The entrance, which had seemed to buzz with the energy of the old man's welcome on previous visits, now felt eerily quiet.

Once inside the house, Karen looked around. Memories of childhood flitted through the spaces like ghosts. She sat down, feeling fatigued by the mournful days since the passing of her father.

"You always liked Grandpa's books; why don't you see which ones you want to keep and the rest we'll donate to charity, oh, except if you come across any ancient ones. Might be good in the future if we're low on money," said Karen with a small grin.

Tom walked towards the stairs, Kelly bolting past and up to the attic. The cramped loft space under the sloping roof was pitch black. Tom turned on the flashlight on his phone and opened the window on the narrow far wall to let the sunlight in.

He went to one of the old wooden bookshelves and started picking out books that he wanted to keep for himself. He chose a few fiction books that he had enjoyed when he was younger.

After going through several shelves worth of his late grandfather's books, he found one that was quite unlike the rest. It only had a few pages. It looked quite old and had a blank green cover. Tom skimmed through the book briskly and upon realizing what it was he became quite excited. He had not known that Grandpa kept a journal. He started reading the first entry which was from 11 months ago.

Tom read: "I am really worried about my dementia. I have been very lucky so far as I can still remember most things, especially my family members, thank God. I am relieved to have come to the decision that I must write down an account of our family legend so that, hopefully, it won't be lost."

Tom grew curious and started flipping forward. He stopped as another entry in the journal caught his attention.

Tom read, "I remember when I first met Clare. I remember it so vividly as if it were today. I met her in our local library. I saw her sitting on a bench, captivated by a book she held. There was an air of serenity about her, a quiet grace that drew me in. I mustered the courage to strike up a conversation, for something about her felt familiar."

Tom was thrilled to read about Grandpa meeting Grandma for the first time. Grandpa had never told him about it, for he had been a very quiet person.

Tom was still curious about the family legend Grandpa had mentioned in the first entry, so he began flipping through the pages once more. Near the end of the book, he comes across an unusually long entry. There it was:

Tom read: "Sixty generations ago in the foothills of the mountain of Liu, there lived a youth with his father. Together they lived in contented poverty, spending most of their time pursuing new developments in alchemical science. They could gather from the mountain's rich minerals and many rare natural substances to test in various combinations, seeking to make elixirs for health and vitality. Unfortunately, and perhaps ironically, one evening Lai Lian's father fell suddenly upon the floor stone dead while experimenting in their outside hut.

"Being almost destined to, the boy was fortunate enough to be taken on as a novice monk at the mountaintop monastery, where he became the youngest member of the order. As most of the brethren of the monastery were quiet and studious, Tom made friends with a guard dog named Minzhe. Sadly, when Minzhe proved incapable of protecting the monastery from burglars one night due to his timid personality, several angry monks whose possessions had been stolen were intent on casting the dog out. Lai Lian went to the head of the monastery and begged him to let the dog stay as he would soon die if cast out onto the mountain. Lai's wish was granted so long as he fed the animal from his food supply and kept it inside his cell. Lai Lian was overjoyed to have a full-time companion, and the bond between Minzhe and himself was strong.

"In the meantime and secret, Lai Lian had been engaging in experiments much like those he had done with his father. His goal was still to create potions and elixirs but now it was to try to help the elder of his fellow monks who suffered various sicknesses, especially in the cold and damp winter months. Just as Lai Lian had helped his father during their experiments, so now Minzhe became his assistant, or so it seemed to Lai Lian. They spent happy hours huddled together on the floor as Lai mixed potions and tested them on himself or the willing animal.

One evening, while he had been testing various combinations of plant soil, saltpetre and charcoal, Lai left one of these mixtures in a bowl while he went to fetch a stronger lamp, as the night was setting in. As he was retrieving a lamp from the storeroom down the hallway there was a tremendous bang, followed by a series of yelps and then the clattering of frightened paws upon flagstones fading into the distance. Lai quickly hurried back to his cell and saw the remains of the small candle he had been using upended in the bowl where the earthy mixture had been, now mysteriously transformed into a pit of glowing embers, while others seemed to dance like fireflies in the surrounding air before slowly settling on the floor. Unable to understand what had happened, Lai went in search of his dog."

The story, and the journal, ended abruptly. Tom wanted to know how it ended so he started checking all the pages he had skipped, then scanning the entire room for similar journals in which the story might be continued.

"Tom," came his mother's voice from below. "Come downstairs. I am almost done packing. We are going to leave soon."

Tom yelled back, "Alright, give me one second, let me move all the books to the car."

Tom carried his box of books down to the driveway, still wondering why Grandpa hadn't written the rest of the story. He suddenly realized that the entry containing the story was dated just one week before Grandpa had passed away; he was probably going to finish it but hadn't had the chance to. Tom was abruptly reminded that Grandpa was no longer with them, shattering his thoughts.

They had everything they were taking packed into the trunk and the back seat and had got into the car. Tom began to tell Karen about what he had read in the journal. When he had finished, Karen saw that a look of deep sadness had settled on his face.

With a flash of intuition, a way to cheer him up occurred to her. She told him, "You don't need to know how the story ends; we already know."

"How do we know?" Tom asked.

Karen replied, "Remember when we found Kelly lost in the mountains, and how struck we were by the birthmarks on her face?" Tom nodded. After a pause, Karen went on, "Remember when Grandpa told you about yuan fen, that in the next life, we will all be in the same family again but just in different forms?"

Tom said, "How does that tell us how it ended?"

"We know that Lai Lian's dog must have returned to him safely as he is with us right now."

Tom's eyes widened.

Karen continued, "So Grandpa will eventually come back to us, but just in another body," Karen said, smiling.

Without noticing, Karen had comforted herself as well.

True Patriot

Carnel School – Eksa High School, Ngo, Nili – 15

The mud from yesterday's rain squelched under Meng An's feet. She had outgrown her leather sandals about three years ago; her old *hanfu*, clearly passed down from her older brother, had countless holes and stains; to make matters worse for An, it was a *boy's hanfu*. But An was accustomed to getting hand-me-downs. Her father, who had passed away two years ago, was a lowly farmer. Her mother was a seamstress for their tiny village. Without An's father, the Meng family struggled to make ends meet.

The village oxen mooed in the distance as An approached her school. She looked up at the small wooden house. Although poor, her village was the only one among their neighbors to give both boys and girls an education. An thought of school as her safe place. *Maybe this will be my ticket to a better future— one far away from this village.* An had always wanted to be a scientist. As an ambitious girl, her family's social status had never stopped her dreams.

She saw her teacher writing a new project on the blackboard as she entered her classroom. Raindrops slipped through the cracks of the roof.

"Our country is struggling," the teacher said, still facing the board. "we are in a troublesome time, falling behind while new empires across the Black Sea rise with inventions. As the Han people, we cannot let our ancestors down. Standing by while watching everything they worked for burn is unlike us. Every village across the country has been notified of this project, and everyone will be doing their part to help— including all of you."

He finally turned to face the students and continued.

"Today, you are each assigned to create an original idea that would help in any form— for agriculture, patriotism, or anything else. You have a week."

The class droned on and on, but An wasn't listening. All she could think about was what she would create. She never realized the difficulty of having an original thought that no one had attempted before.

As she returned home, Chen Ting stopped her in her tracks. He was her biggest bully since the fourth grade and saw An's intelligence as a threat to his own. Above all, he had very conservative parents who didn't hold the belief that girls should be able to attend school.

"What can you bring to the table? How can you, a girl, help our Emperor? Are you more useful than me just because you get better grades? Well, An—" Ting pointed to a group of elderly women tending the oxen.

One wore patched-up clothes, similar to An's, with identical big round eyes— only her's wrinkled. An made eye contact with her, though she quickly looked down to her sandals. She saw herself in that woman, and it pained her. She didn't want to be like her. She craved success— and she would get it no matter what. Nothing would lead her to a life where she'd tend oxen wearing patched-up clothes. Ting interrupted An's thoughts and continued berating her.

"This will be you one day." He stopped pointing at the aging ladies and turned back to face An, who had tears in her eyes. "Besides, what's wrong with that? It is how it's supposed to be. Women tend to the village while men invent."

He walked off in a bouncy rhythm as An watched. Her legs couldn't move, her fingers clutching her palms and slowly turning into fists.

She looked up at the sky. The clouds had finally cleared, and warm rays shined down on her tears, turning them into glistening spots on her cheeks.

She decided not to go to school the next day, focusing her entire mind on the assigned project. Her mother didn't mind. She decided to use the opportunity to teach An about the traditional female values her village treasured, such as cooking, sewing, and caring for the oxen. She even taught her what her father didn't get to teach her brother

before he passed away, such as how to start a fire. However, this didn't trouble her daughter, as An took it as a chance to explore the outdoors and maybe even get inspired.

When checking up on the oxen, An would look at their yokes and the mechanics behind them. *How innovative*, she thought to herself. *But I'm no good with farming*. When cooking, she'd look at the wok. *What a fine piece of cookware*. She stirred the vegetables inside. *But I can't forge*.

On her fourth day of skipping school, her mother sent her to collect bamboo for the fireplace and sulfur for homemade remedies. Heading into the forest, An began to stress about her project. She only had three days left to come up with something, or else all her efforts would be in vain, and she would prove Ting right. She dreaded returning to school empty-handed and worried sickly about the repercussions she would receive. *Will they think of me as unpatriotic? Lazy, perhaps? Will I be punished for missing so much school?* She scooped the sulfur from the dirt and placed it into a small container, tucking it safely in her pocket. The bamboo, nearly twice her height, was hefty and cramped up her shoulder— but she was too distracted by her introspections to notice.

It was dark and chilly outside by the time she got home. Her mother had already gone to sleep. Quietly igniting the bamboo, she noticed sparks coming out of it when lit. Confused but not too alarmed, she went to bed.

An cleaned the small fireplace the following day, removing the leftover charcoal from the fire. She had always liked the sparkles on the graphite soot and placed one in her pocket. *Two days until the assignment is due*. She subconsciously bit her fingernail.

An had practically given up on proving Ting wrong. His words echoed in her head. *Maybe he's right. I will probably end up like every woman in this village— which might not be so bad*. She attempted to convince herself. *I may not end up successful. I overestimated myself— my potential*.

The days felt repetitive. An walked back into the bamboo forest, but fishing for her cutting blade in her pocket, she felt the bottle of sulfur she forgot to give her mother the day before.

Bored and with time to spare, An wanted to give her dream of being a scientist one last shot. She played around with the bamboo, the sulfur, and the charcoal, placing charcoal dust and sulfur inside a homemade bamboo cup. Finally, she grabbed some saltpeter off the ground and sprinkled it into her concoction. Nothing happened. *What did I expect?* She stood up, still locking eyes with her creation. All her thoughts ran through her head: her longing to make it out of her village, her prayers for success, her wish to become a scientist— every dream of hers burned to the ground, but her anger rose like a fire's flame. So, she decided to say one last goodbye to all her desires. She lit a match, threw it into the bamboo cup, and stepped back.

Suddenly, she heard a crackling sound. Startled, An looked around, and before she knew it, a bright flame shot up to the night sky, exploding mid-air. The ingredients she had placed inside the cup lit up the darkness, blending in with the stars. Her mouth was agape.

She had found her project for class.

An walked to school, her assignment carefully placed in her hands. She had spent the previous day refining her creation, adding dyes, using differing sizes of bamboo, and testing various portions of the ingredients. A smirk grew across her face as she passed Ting, who was empty-handed, on her way to class.

"Sitting at the back of the class is a representative for the Emperor, who will assess your projects. Please give him your warmest welcome. I am disappointed in those of you who chose not to participate in this task." An's teacher looked at Ting as he spoke. "Who would like to go first?"

An raised her hand. "My project is not possible during the day," she started.

Her teacher looked over to the Emperor's representative, who was shaking his head disapprovingly. "Please, girl, no excuses. Why waste the Emperor's time?" Her teacher nervously interrupted, still looking at the representative.

"I invite you all to meet here at nightfall, where you can all see its full beauty," An continued, unfazed. "Including you, sir." She said to the representative. He nodded.

That night, An placed her concoction in the dirt near the school. Everyone gathered around the bamboo cup. Ting laughed.

"Seriously? Some dirt in a cup?"

"No more waiting, An." Her teacher chimed in.

The Emperor's representative stood silent, curious. An lit up the substance, the familiar crackling sound following mere seconds later. Everyone stepped back in fear—a light beam shot up into the sky—bright yellow lights exploding from the ray's center. The students stood in awe.

"Yellow. The dynasty's color." Said the representative, breaking the silence. "How patriotic!"

An smiled, looking down at her leather sandals. *This is it, she thought—no more of these silly, torn shoes. I'll finally have a new pair. I'll finally stop wearing hand-me-downs. I'll finally find success.*

The morning after her triumphant stunt, An was awoken by her mother yelling her name. Racing to the door, she was greeted by two men dressed in bright clothing sewn with golden stitches.

"Are you An?" One asked.

She nodded.

"Congratulations," he said. "The Emperor has been notified of your invention and wants to discuss it with you. Shall we take you to the palace?"

An looked back at her mother. Although she had tears in her eyes, she smiled approvingly to An. She went in for one last hug and stepped onto the carriage.

"Your innovation displayed the utmost form of patriotism." Says one of the two men.

They looked identical, apart from the fact that one had a beard and the other did not.

"The yellow coloring was a beautiful touch." Said the man with the beard.

An entered the palace—its grandeur was unscalable—gold was painted onto every surface, unlike anything she had seen before. This opulence was a long way from her wooden shack. Statues of lions were everywhere, and portraits of the Emperors throughout the years lined the walls. There were people of the court all around, swarming her and asking her thousands of questions. Overwhelmed yet flattered, An tried her best to answer each one. She and a guard slowly made their way to the Emperor's room. She bowed when entering.

"Welcome, girl. I have heard of your invention and would like to thank you for your help in your efforts to bring our empire back to its former glory." He smiled down from his humongous throne.

An could barely see his face behind all the jewelry and sparkling gold.

"I am throwing an event in your honor among other innovators who have helped this week. You are the last to arrive, just in time for tonight."

A guard took her to her new room, filled with bottles and powders. Formulas written on scrolls were neatly placed in a box beside a polished wooden desk.

"So, you're a scientist, huh?" Asked the guard.

She didn't reply, but her heart fluttered as she thought of all the possibilities she could have with her new supplies.

An was given the most beautiful yellow *hanfu*, with flowers and the phrase "**true helper of the empire**" embroidered onto it. Although this was all she had ever dreamed of, she felt something was missing. She had already lost her father, and now she was far from her mother, too. *Is this right? Who am I to leave my mother for a success she can't indulge in with me?* She thought, gazing out the window, watching the bustling city below.

"Miss, it is time." A maid said, bringing her back into reality.

An stepped into her perfectly-sized new shoes, made out of silk, not leather, and out into the capital's royal avenue with her inventful peers and the Emperor. An applauding crowd greeted them. Unexpected to An, lights shot up into

the sky, turning it into a sea of yellow sparks. An looked into the now brightly lit avenue. At the front of the crowd, she saw a familiar face standing by the guards—her mother. She rushed up to hug her.

"You made it, An; you have shown to everyone in this country that someone's age does not determine their intelligence. You have shown everyone who doubted you what you're capable of, and I couldn't be prouder." She broke away from her mother's tight embrace.

"Mama, you are the strongest woman I've ever met. Without *you*, this couldn't have happened. Without *your* perseverance after father's passing, I wouldn't have been as I am."

Her mother's eyes welled up with tears. The two beamed and looked at the sky, An's invention smiling back down at them.

Calliope, Tongli, and the Galileo Compass

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Timmermans, Ariel – 13

“THE GALILEO MUSEUM??!!” Calliope screeched in shock.

Her best friend Helen glared, hands on ears. “Um, OW! Yes, we’re going to the Galileo Museum tomorrow. I know, I’m the best.”

Calliope stared dumbly at Helen, before suddenly springing to life and hugging her, all the while squealing, “GALILEO! GALILEO!” Helen laughed gaily, before hugging her friend back with equal fervour.

The next day, at eleven AM sharp, the two bounded up the steps to the museum, meeting their guide near the entrance. “Alright, are you folks ready for your tour? We’ll be checking out some of the more popular artefacts now, such as the Galileo compass, which is one of the most famous exhibits! Come along!” Calliope elbowed her way to the front of the crowd, wanting a closer view of the compass. She gasped at the sight, starry-eyed at the mere thought of Galileo. “This is one of Galileo’s most ingenious inventions,” the docent’s voice broke through Calliope’s reverie. “Rumours claim that the Chinese village of Tongli was the true inventor, and Galileo stole their invention. This, however, has never been proven.”

Calliope stared at the compass reverently. Reaching out her hand, she gently touched the glass case, imagining Galileo himself tinkering away at the mechanisms. Suddenly, there was a flash of light accompanied by a loud boom. Calliope fell back away from the compass, shocked. She heard someone scream her name, before everything faded to black.

Calliope slowly sat up, groggily blinking at the too-bright ceiling lamps. She looked around, seeing an unfamiliar workshop, lined with oak panels and spruce accents. “You have awakened at last,” a man said from somewhere behind her. She heard the sound of metal clinking, before it stopped and footfalls came towards her. Calliope turned around, gasping as she saw the man’s face. “Huh? Uhm, pardon me sir, but what’s your name?” she asked, goggling at him.

“My name is Galileo Galilei. I confess myself surprised that you have not heard of me. The Church has been warning everyone of my misdeeds, which has, in turn, gained me quite the reputation.” Galileo narrowed his eyes curiously at Calliope.

“M—my name is Calliope. If you don’t mind me asking, where are you going and why are you packing your bags?” She glanced around the workshop, spying bags of clothes and supplies.

“My apologies, but I do not think it appropriate to share such personal information with such an impertinent woman.” He glared at her.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I just thought that if you’re escaping from the Church, maybe you could bring me with you? The Church hates my guts too, so we’re in the same boat here,” Calliope said, deciding that sticking with Galileo was her best bet at returning home.

“Hates your... guts? Same... boat? I see no boats here. I do suppose you have a fair argument, however. If it is not too personal for me to ask, what have you done to aggravate the Church?” Galileo asked, slightly suspicious.

“I claimed that we revolve around the sun! Obviously, I’m right, how dumb are they?”

“How coincidental. That, too, was my error. I have learned that sometimes, it is best not to voice your opinions,” he said, looking downcast.

“I have been bound to my home, with no freedom. My execution is impending, I can feel it in my bones. I think I may trust you. I am leaving on a ship this evening, and going to the Americas. If you wish to accompany me, I could do with a navigator.”

“That’s so cool, I’m great with compasses!” Calliope exclaimed.

“Hm? Come—passes?” Galileo looked bemused.
“Wait, what year is it?” she inquired, furrowing her brows.
“It is the year of our lord 1636, what is the reason for your inquiry?”
“That can’t be right, the compass was already invented by then. What?” Calliope muttered, confused. “N—never mind!”

And with that, they set off, Galileo not seeming to wonder of her origins or why she appeared to have no more than the clothes on her back.

During nights on the ship, Calliope was often unable to sleep, finding herself seasick and homesick. Sitting above deck had become her favourite pastime. All alone, staring out at the vast ocean, she could almost imagine herself home again. Home with her best friend, with her family, with all she loved.

One night, a particularly bad storm was brewing. Calliope sat above deck, watching the waves swirl and churn. Galileo, awoken by the rough seas, noticed that Calliope was missing from her bed. Walking above deck, he saw a small figure, curled up beside the wheel, watching the stormy waters.

Walking closer, he heard muffled sobs. Cautiously sitting next to Calliope, he looked at her with surprisingly gentle and understanding eyes. She turned her head to look at him, eyes glistening with unshed tears, face blotted with tear streaks. Sighing softly, Galileo put his arm around her and pulled her closer. Not saying a word, the two sat on the deck watching the sea until sunrise.

A few months later, they were both getting seasick, though Calliope clearly felt the effects of the rocking waves much more strongly than Galileo. “Bleugh.” Calliope threw up into the ocean for the third time that hour. Being on board a ship for months on end was not particularly pleasant. Galileo wrinkled his nose, drawing away from Calliope. “Perhaps you may benefit from a rest below deck?”
“Y—yeah,” she muttered, heading below deck to rest.

Once out of sight, she pulled out her phone, eager to test if it worked. “Wow, T—Mobile 5G is so good that it works in 1636 too?” Calliope opened Google Maps, checking their route. “Wait, this isn’t right. We’re heading towards China?” she gasped, looking out of the window, bewildered. “Uhm, Galileo? Are you sure we’re heading the right way?” Calliope called, concerned. Suddenly, her phone began emitting smoke, beeping angrily.

Hearing footsteps closing in, she hastily tossed her phone out an open window, not wanting Galileo to see the device. “What has happened?” Galileo asked, intrigued by smoke.
“Nothing!” Calliope exclaimed, perspiring.
“Come along then, we are about ready to dock!” he cried, clearly elated at having outsmarted the Church.

Calliope smiled wanly, stepping above deck with Galileo. She saw a small fishing village just ahead, with bright, warm lights starkly contrasting the pitch black night. She started at the jolt of the ship having docked at the village, before looking around at the townspeople, realising that they were Asian. “Hey, Galileo, are you sure we’ve docked in the Americas? This looks like China,” Calliope wondered, craning her head to see more of the villagers. “According to my maps, we should be right on the edge of the Americas. How serendipitous for us to arrive five months before we were estimated to!” Galileo cheered, not seeming to be concerned by the huge estimation error.

Calliope decided not to question him, instead getting off the boat to attempt communication with the locals. "Hello, do you know where this is? I think we might be lost," she said to one of the townspeople, hoping that they understood her.

"Welcome to Tongli, China! It is not often we get visitors, let alone ones that can speak our language," the villager welcomed her, smiling ear to ear.

"I was not aware that the American locals spoke Chinese, and you have never mentioned your knowledge of the language either," Galileo said to Calliope, surprised.

"Wait, Galileo, what language have I been speaking to you?" she asked, knowing that she didn't speak Italian nor any form of Chinese.

"Currently? We are conversing in Italian. Are you unable to identify which language you speak in?" Galileo looked at her strangely.

"I—no, I knew that, just wanted to make sure." Calliope assured him, inwardly slightly panicking.

"Is there anywhere for us to stay here? I apologise for any inconvenience, we just need a place to stay before remapping our ways," she said, now knowing that the townspeople could somehow understand her.

"Of course, stay as long as you like. It is always lovely to have visitors to help out with the fishing and farming," the villagers all chorused, one stepping forward to guide them.

Calliope and Galileo were shown around the village, before their final destination: the Town Hall.

"We keep our valuables here, in a guarded room. Our village's most prized possession is kept in a separate container, which is heavily guarded. The Elder resides in Town Hall as well," a villager explained.

"Excuse me, but what *is* your village's most prized possession?" Calliope wondered.

"A special device that we've named the 'compass'. It can tell which direction is North, and has helped us tremendously in fishing. Our neighbouring towns are aware of this invention, but have failed to recreate anything similar," the villager said, looking proud. "We are loath to share our information, as we fear our fishing spots would soon be overcrowded, and that our village would no longer prosper as it does now."

Galileo's eyes brightened quickly, eager to hear more of the miraculous 'compass'. Calliope, on the other hand, was in a state of shock, piecing everything together.

'Then that means the rumour was true! He's going to kill everyone here to get that information. But who did he spare, and why? Was it chance or mercy? There are too many unknown variables right now – I have to figure out what Galileo's planning and warn the townspeople,' Calliope thought, hoping that stopping Galileo would keep her mind off home.

Over the course of the next few days, Calliope and Galileo settled into the village comfortably, helping the villagers with their fishing and farming. Galileo's behaviour grew increasingly more suspicious, with him beginning to take frequent jaunts around town, often stopping at the town hall to map out the location of the prized compass.

One day, Calliope finally decided to talk to the villagers about Galileo. She went to Town Hall, intending to speak to the Elder. On the way, however, she bumped into Galileo. Surprised and feeling slightly guilty, she asked what he was doing.

"Oh, I was merely exploring this new landscape! I had not expected the fishing villages in the Americas to be so quaint," he explained, laughing awkwardly. And with that, he speed-walked away, wanting to avoid suspicion. In his haste, it didn't occur to him until later to ask what *Calliope* was doing at the Town Hall as well.

Calliope walked into Town Hall, searching for the Elder's office. She soon found the Elder, speaking with another one of the townspeople. Waiting near the door, Calliope unintentionally overheard the last part of the conversation.

"But sir, how can we trust them? I have seen the man lurking around, likely wanting to steal our compass!"

"Now Shang, calm yourself. Though I agree with you about the man, the girl seems to distrust her companion. She may know more of what he is planning, placing our trust in her may not be a bad thing. Oh, speaking of, I believe I have a guest. Shang, you may see yourself out," the Elder said, causing Calliope to jump. She sheepishly walked into the doorway, nearly bumping into Shang, who was on his way out.

"Come, take a seat. I hope your stay here has been satisfactory thus far?" The Elder welcomed her, smiling gently.

"Sir, I wanted to speak to you about something important. I think that Galileo is going to steal the compass and kill everyone in the village!" Calliope blurted.

The Elder looked unsurprised, sighing solemnly. "Then it is as I feared. I thank you for bringing this to my attention. I hope my trust in you isn't misplaced." With that, the Elder walked over to a cupboard, and took out a bracelet made of shimmering shells. "Take this. If you are to be believed, and your friend truly is as dangerous as you say, then you will need this. Guard it with your life, for it may very well save yours."

Calliope stared wide-eyed at the elder, slowly taking the bracelet and clasping it on her wrist. "Thank you. But what are you going to do about Galileo?"

The Elder sighed, suddenly looking ten years older. "Nothing. There is nothing I can do. I worry that killing an Italian on Chinese soil would irk the Italian Government, risking their retaliation."

"B—but there has to be something you can do! You're the Elder!" Calliope protested, fearing for their lives.

"No. It is your time now. We have long known that one day, someone would steal our compass. You must be the one to stop him. Should you succeed, history may be rewritten, our stories told. Please." He grasped her hands, seeming almost to be begging.

"I understand. I'll speak to him at once. He will not harm me, and I will not harm him. He is like a father to me now, and I can only assume that he thinks of me as a daughter," Calliope said, looking determined. She turned to leave, but not before taking one last look at the Elder, who had a gentle smile on his face.

Calliope ran to Galileo's hut, hoping to find him there. Luck must have been her side that day, for she found him almost immediately.

"Oh, hello Calliope. Do you need anything from me?" Galileo asked, seeing her run up.

"What are you planning to do with the compass, Galileo?" she asked bluntly, not wasting any time.

"I do not plan to do anything with this compass of theirs. Whatever do you mean?" he asked, looking nervous.

"Don't lie to me, I know you're planning to steal it!" Calliope glared, hands on hips.

Galileo turned pale, eyes narrowing. "Fine, you have caught me. However, I do not believe you will be in any state to stop me."

"What do you —"

Galileo slammed a fist into the side of her head, knocking her out cold.

"Urghhhhhh..." Calliope groaned, coming to. Opening her eyes, she found she was tied up on the floor of Galileo's hut. Widening her eyes, she recalled what had happened right before she was knocked unconscious.

Calliope immediately began trying to break free, struggling against the ropes, but to no avail. She looked around the room, hoping to find a blade of some kind to cut herself free. Suddenly, she heard a whispered "psst" from outside the window.

Looking up, Calliope saw a male silhouette in the window. Keeping her eyes trained on the window, she failed to notice someone walking up next to her.

“Here, take this.”

Calliope yelped in surprise, as the silhouette dropped a dagger near her hand. Eyes wide, Calliope reached out and grasped it to cut the ropes binding her.

“Your companion has broken into the Town Hall, and is currently fighting with our guards, who have been instructed not to kill,” the silhouette warned.

“Ohhhhhh no, this is really bad! Thanks for freeing me, but I have to go!” Calliope exclaimed, already running out of the hut.

She arrived at the Town Hall, seeing fewer bodies than she had expected. She spied Galileo, fighting two guards outside the Town Hall. Sprinting over, she called out to him, “Galileo! What are you doing?”

Galileo angled his head back to check if it was really Calliope, but that moment of lost concentration cost him the fight. Knocked to the ground, Galileo was disarmed and apprehended. Looking up at Calliope, he glared at her.

“Galileo, look. None of these people are going to kill you if you just leave peacefully without the compass. I promise, if you give up, you can keep your life,” Calliope negotiated, not wanting to see him dead, despite his misdoings. Looking up at her belligerently, Galileo refused to say a word.

Calliope heard soft footfalls coming towards her. She looked up to see the Elder, smiling sadly at her.

“I see my helper Shang has completed his task. I understand how you feel, potentially dooming your companion, but I vow to you that no harm will befall him in this village,” the Elder said solemnly, grasping her hands. “You have saved us and our compass, we owe everything to you.”

Calliope gasped softly. “It’s fine, you should do with Galileo what you see fit. I’m not feeling particularly charitable after being knocked out, and it’s your village’s invention he tried to steal.”

The Elder chuckled, before pointing at the bracelet on Calliope’s wrist. “This bracelet will take you home, thank you for all you have done. All you must do is break it, and you shall be taken back to your true time.” Calliope stared at the Elder wide-eyed, before breaking into a grin. “And thank you for helping me get home.”

With that, Calliope put the bracelet on the floor, before stomping on it as hard as she could. A bright light surrounded her, as she heard a familiar ‘BOOM’.

Calliope opened her eyes with a gasp, seeing Helen standing in front of her, waving two tickets in the air.

“Guess what I have in my hand!” Helen sang, looking smug.

Calliope looked at Helen, before a tear slipped down her cheek. “T—the Galileo Museum?”

“Yeah, I know I’m the best, no need to thank me!” Helen said, grinning.

Calliope rushed at her best friend, hugging her with all her might. “I missed you.” She mumbled, holding on tight. Helen looked surprised, before laughing and hugging Calliope back.

The next day, at the museum, Calliope listened carefully to the docent’s explanation of the compass.

“This is the Tongli Compass, named in honour of the Chinese village of Tongli. Galileo had initially intended to steal the invention from Tongli, but failed because of his travelling companion foiling his plans!” Hearing that, Calliope knew she had succeeded, and she hugged Helen again before finally—for the first time in a while—relaxed.

Gunpowder's Legacy

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yahyagil, Peter Gian – 15

In a quest for a life-extending elixir, Shaanxi Monks of the Tang Dynasty discovered gunpowder. By concocting a mixture of Saltpetre, charcoal and sulphur, these monks set in motion the singular invention that would lead to deaths of millions.

Fast forward 300 years. Chinese Alchemists were perfecting the recipe for Gunpowder. Uses of the ear-shattering substance were rumoured around Central Asia. Tensions were high, as the Mongol army crept closer and closer to the Great Wall. Stories of this mystical gift sounded far-fetched, entire armies were told to be decimated in minutes. Arrows bursting into flames as they soared through the battlefield, sudden eruptions of the ground, with fire rising a mile high then disappearing. According to our training officer that is. I didn't believe this to be true, it seemed too gruesome. My friend Ögedei seemed interested though. His face was full of innocent horror as he listened. The Mongols were about to attack the Song Dynasty. We were among the first waves, due to leave in two days.

Ögedei and I have been friends for not too long. We met each other recently when we were placed in the same yurt in the encampment. He seemed frightened by the war, but not scared. I assume that's how many of us felt. None of us were scared – all Mongols are raised from birth to fight. No time for childhood or fun, just hours upon hours of back-and-forth fighting. Most of us were too young to have fought in any previous battles. The older soldiers, the veterans, said I had nothing to worry about. They had survived battles and had never encountered anything as terrifying as gunpowder. The only thing I had to worry about was the enemy's sword and arrow. As night grew longer and the embers burned no more, Ögedei and I returned to our tent. A looming unease hung above his head. The dwindling firelight made the dark circles under his eyes more apparent. He paced back and forth.

"I think it's real," he said.

I just shrugged. I didn't have a response, I could neither confirm nor deny.

He responded to my silence, "It's too extravagant, so it must be real."

Confused by his logic, I just sighed and walked on. I prepared myself for the morning, tomorrow could very well be my last day alive.

The rooster crowed as the sun shone a dull yellow. A looming, overcast day – you could tell it was nearing the start of the winter. We packed up the tents and rode South. Tomorrow was the big day. The atmosphere was solemn and uneasy. The generals weren't fazed, you could tell there was no fear in their eyes, just focus. Eventually we came to a stop, a break to rest our tired legs. The silent atmosphere made things uncomfortable. The trickling snow suddenly became more lively and energetic. The generals decided to set up camp for the night, the horses needed rest and the snow was limiting visibility. The tents had just been set up for the night, the fire pit was crackling in one corner. In the other, Ögedei was sharpening his sword; the repetitive sound pierced my ears.

I walked outside the tent, a chance to see the night sky possibly for one last time. I stood there in silence. The weather made it difficult to see the stars, but at least the knowledge of their presence comforted me. After a while, satisfied, I walked back inside and brushed the snow off the top of my head. I grabbed a bowl and scooped some of the stew that was boiling on top of the fire. Ögedei put down his weapon and signalled for a bowl of stew. I poured him his dinner and we sat down. Our hearts and minds were prepared for what was to come tomorrow, we just didn't know what was going to happen. Suddenly in frustration Ögedei threw his bowl down to the ground and held his head in his hands, squinting his eyes and wrinkling his forehead, trying to force out a single thought.

Surprised, I asked "What was that?"

Ögedei replied, "I am fine, but just take a second to think that tomorrow we will see for ourselves if we even have a fighting chance. Our whole lives have amounted to winning a war, but will we even live to see two minutes on the battlefield?"

It was becoming concerning. I thought Ögedei was really leaning into this make-believe story. "Just use your common sense" I said, "Such a thing can't exist"

We resumed drinking the stew, as we sat there. I was starting to have an uneasy feeling at the very bottom of my stomach. Not because of the stew, but rather because Ögedei might as well be right. Everything that we have trained and prepared for our whole lives might be useless. I climbed into my hammock and closed my eyes, deciding not to linger on these thoughts.

The rooster crowed once more. We packed our bags and encroached Song Territory. We were no more than a hundred meters away from the enemy camp. The rolling hills of northern China, surrounded by the steep mountains, left the battlefield enclosed. The Chinese had the advantage of their surroundings. The foot soldiers lined up directly opposing our enemy, the archers readied their bows. The cavalry stood firm. The only noises you could hear were the grunts of the horses and the whisper of the wind. The time had finally come. I dug my feet into the ground, giving me something to push off of when the horn blew. Lines of soldiers in front of me blocked my view, I couldn't even see the enemy.

A trumpet blast pierced the silence. I lunged forward, yelling at the top of my lungs. I put one foot in front of the other as fast as I could to keep me from falling. Not even after three steps and I saw a downpour of arrows above me. Suddenly they burst into flames, you could hear the screams of terror as men were pierced by the fiery rain. We continued to charge. As the front lines started to dissipate I could see the enemy more clearly. They did not budge. Rather holding large wooden barrels in their hands.

Boom

A row of men fell to the ground.

Boom.

Another few flung backwards. Blazes rose up from the ground, incinerating anything that would have been as unfortunate to walk there. The Horses, frightened, trampled on anything on their path of retreat. I fell to the ground, hoping to hide from the battle.

Soon the fighting stopped. I would estimate that in no more than 10 minutes, an entire army was destroyed and the ground they fought on levelled. Soon the Mongols surrendered and those still strong enough to move were taken as prisoners of war, including myself. I didn't see Ögedei with the handful of other survivors so I just assumed the worst. We marched further South, closer to the Song Capital of Lin'an. Thus began my days as a prisoner, and the start of the true Mongol conquest of China.

As a prisoner of war, we were forced to deal with back-breaking labour, digging in the mines for valuable metals and minerals. However the most dangerous job was to climb the volcanoes to collect sulphur – the toxic fumes and rocky mountainside made the job nearly impossible. We would have to climb up to the top using the singular uneven path. The toxic fumes made the hour-long trek up the mountain even more treacherous. If any prisoner were to lose consciousness, they simply would be left there to die. By evening, we would carry our body's weight of sulphur back down the mountain. We would be given our only meal of the day and barely any time to rest. I was confused as to why sulphur was so important. It wasn't used for anything other than fertilizer. Contact

with the other prisoners was limited as to stop conspiring and communication, however, on the odd chance that I did get to see someone else, I would hear news of more Mongol victories, inching closer and closer to the capital. Maybe they had found a way to outsmart the weapon.

Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months, anything longer was eternity. Other prisoners would be welcomed into the camp. A fresh supply was necessary as many died on the mountains. Numbers were dwindling; we were forced to carry even more.

One day, I was tasked with dragging the sulphur to the alchemist's laboratory. The laboratory was a makeshift hut outside the walls of the camp. I stepped beyond the confines of the prison. I had a straight shot to freedom. My legs were too tired to take a step further, the guards would catch up to me. I walked into the hut and placed the crates of sulphur down. I stretched my back and looked up, an opening in the wall captured the rolling planes of the Lin'an countryside. The guards stayed outside the hut, I decided, it was now or never. I climbed up to the opening in the wall. As I placed my hand on a ledge a few pieces of paper stuck to my hand.

Creak

The guards heard me. I used the last ounce of strength I had left to jump out of the window. Then I ran. I was fortunate enough to have plenty of surroundings to hide in, the forests and paddy fields provided plenty of cover. I fell down under the bramble and couldn't move. I rested there for hours, they couldn't find me. Having regained my strength, I noticed the papers still stuck to my hand. I couldn't understand them other than the word for sulphur, I figured it was important so I took it along with me.

I began my march North. I had to find warmer clothes and nourishment in order to continue. Every single day, I found myself eating leftover pig slop in the troughs. I stole warmer garments off of the occasional wanderer, still heading north. Luckily I found a caravan heading to Chang'An. One of the nights on the road, as everyone was resting, I unlatched a camel from the assortment and hurried it away. I rode through the night. I saw a flash of black in the corner of my eye. I froze. They were bandits. The Bandits stripped me of my belongings, noticing my paper they took it. The bandits started intensely at the paper, soon after shouts of joy erupted in a familiar language. Realizing they were Mongolian, I explained to them my situation. Apparently the paper had the recipe for Gunpowder, the key to victory. These bandits were Mongolian spies, trying to infiltrate Song cities. I was immediately escorted back to Mongolian territory, finally the journey came to an end.

On my return, I was praised. The Mongols had it. The recipe for success. The solution to their problems. Then I remembered the destruction. The obliteration of lives in seconds, pain as gaping wounds caused immeasurable suffering.

Throughout my entire life I had been indifferent. When impending doom and threats of danger were told, I didn't care. When my only friend was worried for his life, scared if he even had a chance, I just told him to shrug it off. When on the battlefield, so many died, my best friend was missing and I just instantly assumed the worst. I didn't even care. For years in the prison with people I fought with I never tried to form any connection, when they died I just continued with my work. Stealing from the wanderers on my journey back, possibly leaving them for dead. I was overcome with a painful feeling of guilt. I was a horrible person. I didn't even have any hate or anger towards anyone, I just did it for the sake of doing it. I never cared about anyone.

As the sun sets on my story, standing here in the aftermath of my actions, surrounded by the wreckage I've caused and the lives I've left shattered, a profound realization dawns upon me. The weight of my apathy hits me with a force I've never experienced before.

Scholarly Pursuits

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Yong, Casey – 15

*Thousand years' worth of accomplishments on half a piece of paper.
No matter how enthralling my poems are,
My personal affairs are forgotten by all.
The furnace's warmth and the flower lanterns' joy,
As drunkenly, I move homes to another country.*

–Reading Poems of the Valley (Under The Lantern's Light by Yang Wanli

Commented [1]: @casey.yong@student.carmel.edu.hk
I double-checked and it seems, for this type of writing, we do not need to cite the translator (but don't worry, I acknowledge and give you loads of credit for your skills)
Assigned to casey.yong@student.carmel.edu.hk

“That’s all,” Xielian dismisses.

The palace maidservants, who have obediently lined up before her lounging body, bow their heads in trained deference, operating more as a whole than individuals. As one of the Emperor’s imperial concubines, the servants she had at her disposal were plentiful and well-behaved. Then, before they leave her quarters and attend to their duties, she raises a hand.

“Stop,” Xielian points at a certain servant, who looks up from her bow. Their eyes lock. Shihua is taller than most other servants but adheres to the uniform policy so strictly, she blends seamlessly into the crowd. Her bun is tightly done, her uniform free of wrinkles, and her hooded eyes are aimed at the floor. “You, stay behind.”

The way the rest of the maidservants eye Shihua—some pitifully, some jealous, some simply confused—is not lost on Xielian, but as Shihua steps forward, they all scurry away, bringing their indiscernible whispers with them.

As soon as the sliding doors slam shut, Shihua’s mask of stoicism melts away, replaced with a smile. She curtsies shallowly. “My imperial consort.”

Xielian lets out a chuckle. “Your imperial consort? I do hope no one has caught you addressing me so flagrantly.”

Shihua shrugs in indifference. “Did you see the look on their faces when you called my name out? They already have. Besides, as long as there is a favored servant, there always will be gossip about her.”

“And what makes you conclude that you are favored?”

“I’m presuming you’ve not taken other palace maids as your student.”

“I have not publicly requested for you in a while. I hope that will throw those dogs off the trail, even if I miss our annual time spent together.”

“As long as our affections remain forever/who needs to spend each day and night tonight?”

Eyebrows raised, Xielian leans forward instinctively. “Is that—”

“‘Immortals on the Magpie Bridge,’” Shihua nods, taking steps forward. “I know it is not in any material we have

studied before, but I grew curious while dusting the shelves and..." Shihua directs her gaze downwards seemingly as a gesture of shame, although Xielian knows she is anything but, "perhaps in my curiosity, I briefly skimmed through its contents."

A knowing smile dances on Xielian's lips. "I see the knowledge thief has not yet retired. It seems old habits die hard."

Shihua's face scrunches up. "What you *can* retire actually, is that wretched nickname. I asked no one to refer to me as such."

"If only they knew that this thief was just a palace servant taking one book after the other off the shelves, hiding them under your pillow to read," Xielian muses. "She is truly the bane of all evil."

"No matter how many months pass," Shihua sighs, "I can always rely on you to bring it up."

Xielian's smile stretches in amusement, her crow's feet prominent as her eyes crinkle at the edges. "I jest, I jest. Now, let us begin the lesson."

She rises from her lounging chair, dress trailing behind her like a bridal train, and walks to her bookshelves. She hears Shihua following behind her, heels clicking against the wooden floor.

The private quarters of an imperial consort are spacious, but Xielian's furnishings have cramped it significantly. The various bookshelves slanted against the walls, and the large wooden desk taking up space in the center with her bed; it all create the illusion of a scholar's room rather than a concubine's. She thinks had her father not been a wealthy merchant, had the emperor not had a penchant for well-read women, and several other lucky coincidences, she might not have ended up with these luxuries.

Xielian reaches up and runs her hand across her collection of tightly-packed books. She feels Shihua behind her, breathing heavily at the back of her head. She always found it funny how their height difference led the servant to tower over the mistress. "I assume you wish to study Qin Guan's poems today."

"I'm interested in anything you have. As your humble servant, I trust your judgment implicitly."

Xielian removes the book she was searching for from the shelf, turning around while leafing through its contents. "I'm not as much of a tyrant as you think me to be. Besides, we have become equals in our mutual pursuit of academia."

"You were kind enough to take me under your wing for reasons I can't begin to know. I see no reason to doubt your decisions now. And, as you said, old habits do die hard."

"Might I suggest you seek to remedy them?"

"With all due respect," Shihua says lightheartedly, "that does sound like an order in itself."

Thump! Xielian closes the book and looks up at Shihua, offering it to her. "Cheeky. Have this"

She accepts it tentatively and starts skimming through the pages. "What...is this about?"

"Ancient folklore," Xielian tells her. "I figured that if you enjoy Niulang and Zhinu, some of these other ones might tickle your fancy."

Shihua looks up. "But I have not yet returned my— I know the talk of me taking books to further my education were all as jokes, but I intend to return the ones I've borrowed from you before. I just haven't had the time to finish them as of yet."

"Oh, take your time with them all," Xielian waves her off. "I have enough books to soak up all the water from the Yellow River. Besides, this is the most efficient for you and me."

"...I suppose I have no other choice then." Shihua's words imply hesitancy, but the wide grin on her face betrays her true intentions. "If only you teach me the content you desire to teach today, that is."

"Well, if you insist," Xielian huffs playfully, striding across the room to her study desk, "I have had some ideas, but I planned to keep them as a surprise."

She smirks up at Shihua and reaches down into a compartment from the desk. She pulls out a blank scroll of parchment and smooths it over the table, trying to assess Shihua's emotions subtly. She takes out two writing brushes, an untouched ink stick wrapped in cloth, and an ink pot and sets it all on the table meticulously.

"There. Now, would you like to wager a guess as to what I have planned?"

"Are we writing something?" Shihua asks, then before Xielian can respond, frowns and shakes her head. "No no, this is not the paper you use for that." Deep in thought, she tilts her head and meets Xielian's gaze. "Is this for calligraphy?"

"Correct," she affirms. "If one is given the gift to experience art, I believe one should also be given the gift of creating it."

"I—" Xielian watches as euphoria overtakes Shihua's features; eyes widening and gaze sharpening to attention, eyebrows shooting upwards and almost grazing her hairline, her hands flying to cover her mouth. Xielian thinks she will never get tired of how easily excitement unfurls on Shihua's face, like the blooming of *tan hua* as soon as night washes over the sky. Shihua takes a step forward in disbelief as Xielian watches laughter catch in her throat. "How did you know I was interested in this?"

Often when she is idle, Xielian strolls through the palace, flanked by Shihua at her side. She recalls moments, too many to count, where her companion's eyes catch on old tapestries as if the fabric itself snagged onto her eyes. In each instance, she lags behind for just a little, until her footsteps quicken to rejoin Xielian and act like she never left.

Xielian decides to keep that piece of information to herself.

"Admittedly, my calligraphy is rather rusty from years of not practicing the craft," she chooses to pivot instead, "but since I assumed you might take a relative interest in it, I thought this to be the perfect opportunity to hone my skills. But in advance, please forgive your teacher if she explains it poorly."

Xielian practiced her penmanship for weeks before, even if her true feelings on calligraphy border more on distaste. It is enough for her to experience the words painting pictures in her mind, but Shihua lives in the tangible world around her. She loves, not only the story in poems but also the people behind their conception. She knew that Shihua would love nothing more than to embellish the written word, presenting the stories she loved in the most

striking light. Xielian refused to touch the unwavering oil lamp when she gradually watched the light grow in size because she unthinkingly blew it out instead.

“What are you apologizing for? This is— Oh, what’s that adjective you taught me...Right, marvelous! That’s the word. This is marvelous. I mean, if I wasn’t before, I’d be eternally grateful for such an act. Just getting the chance to write something, Xielian, I...” Shihua trails off, vacancy clouding over her eyes.

“Yes, dear?”

“I am at a loss for words. I think that’s the proper phrase,” Shihua laughs, hollow. “But I’ve not had any use for writing in my duties and I fear I may disrespect such an art form.”

“In my opinion, it would be more disrespectful to not indulge,” Xielian holds up a brush, the bristles facing herself, as she extends the end towards Shihua. Shihua eyes the brush and reaches her hand out warily as if approaching a rabid dog rather than a writing utensil. She accepts the brush and moves by Xielian to face the parchment. She steps away to make room but remains close enough to see Shihua’s hand tremble slightly.

“Here goes nothing then,” Shihua mumbles under her breath. She clamps the tool between her fore and middle finger and her arm bent out at an awkward angle, leans over to dip the tip of the brush with the ink.

Shaky as her hand is, she goes through the strokes for her name. As stilted and wobbly strikes pepper the paper, she trudges through the process and eventually, Shihua’s name ends up on the page. As soon as the last dot is done, Shihua drops the brush and exhales, rolling her neck. She looks at Xielian for approval. “How was that?”

Xielian hums contemplatively. “First of all, the position of the brush is incorrect.”

Shihua groans and gives an embarrassed laugh. “Of course.”

She sidles up to Shihua, one hand resting on the other’s shoulder and another gracing Shihua’s own. Even though Xielian’s hand is smaller, it wraps and surrounds Shihua’s like a cocoon around a caterpillar. Shihua’s hand jerks up awkwardly in surprise, and drops of black from the brush dot the pure beige—white underneath.

“Xielian...”

“Hush, love,” Xielian shushes, the pet name slipping out like water flowing downstream. She focuses on inspecting Shihua’s hand closely and decides to ignore the intense heat spreading from the back of her neck. “I shall take the wheel.”

With Shihua’s fingers tightly gripping onto the brush like a lifeline, Xielian takes both her hands and envelopes Shihua’s, thumb on thumb, palm to palm. She leans against Shihua, her chin lightly touching her shoulder. Gently, dainty pries calloused fingers from the brush. It falls into Shihua’s palm, resting in the break between her thumb and index finger, but not sliding out of her hand.

“Now, pinch the brush with your thumb at the back, and your index and middle fingers at the front.” Xielian’s fingers grasp the back of Shihua’s hand and carefully adjust the brush to the correct position. Xielian’s left hand reaches over to loosen the grip from Shihua’s thumb.

“Xielian, your clothes—”

Xielian looks down and sees her sleeve grazing the tip of the brush, a small blotch of ink staining her sleeve. “Oh, pay that no mind. Simply focus on your work.”

Shihua inhales and Xielian watches the hand shift positions under her steady grip, the safety net for the dangling pen. Her knuckles shift according to the instructions and she raises her hand aloft, Xielian stretching her arm to keep her hold on Shihua’s hand.

“Is this right?”

“It is fabulous,” Xielian retracts her hand, stepping back and trying her best not to note the pinpricks sparking at where her skin pressed against Shihua’s. She runs her thumb over her own palm, trying to still the sudden elation rushing through her.

“Right,” Shihua clears her throat, rolling up the sleeve of her writing arm, “so what shall I do now?”

“Try writing your name once more,” she suggests. “With the accurate posture, the control you have over your brush will have vastly improved. Furthermore, dip your brush in ink more frequently. Do not fret about resources or anything of the like; it is fully there for your use. You are etching what is unique to yourself onto this parchment. It is now yours and will be yours forevermore.”

“Alright,” Shihua breathes out. “Thanks, Xielian. Though I still feel remorse for the stained clothing.”

“Leave it be,” Xielian checks the gray stain, wiping at it with her thumb tenderly. “It is small enough that no one will give it a second glance.”

“I mean regardless, it feels bad to leave such a mark on others’ clothes.”

“This mark is symbolic of something precious, of our bond, of your intelligence. I would almost hate to see it washed off now.”

“Rather sentimental for a blot of ink.”

“Your words are blots of ink, and here you are, making your own mark on the world.”

“You give me far too much credit, honestly. I don’t think I would’ve been able to do any of this myself.”

“You were seeking out literature yourself,” Xielian brings up. “I think with your tenacity, you would have found a way yourself.”

Shihua gives Xielian a pointed gaze, wiggling her eyebrows dramatically. “Why, of course. The only reason you’re teaching me all of this is because I seduced you with my nefarious ways. I would’ve stolen your books, then your paper and brushes, before becoming the greatest scholar in all the land.”

“I do not doubt that could happen.”

“What a sense of humor you have, Xielian.”

Xielian regards Shihua firmly. “It is undeniable that perhaps over time, every part of that story could be true. One way or another, that is.”

“Is that so? Every part?” Shihua’s light tone turns serious as her posture straightens, coming to attention.

“Why are you – Beyond the pursuit of knowledge, why do you go to such lengths? For what, a book you are barely able to comprehend?”

“These people left a mark on the world with their writings. Am I so wrong for wanting to experience them? Maybe to fantasize that my stories w–will stand the test of time like theirs did.”

Xielian gestures to the paper. “Start by mastering the art of your moniker and I will tell you if I mean it.”

Shihua beams, eyes curving up into crescent moons. “I look forward to it then.”

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 snuffles. “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.

Cheongsam

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Kelly – 15

Once upon a time, there was a kind-hearted girl named Elle who lived in a small village in ancient China. Elle had a heart full of compassion and a passion for making others feel beautiful. She believed that every woman deserved to embrace her own unique beauty and feel confident in her own skin.

One day, when she was tidying the attic, she found a book from her grandmother. As she flipped through the pages, she came across a passage that caught her attention, a tale about the invention of the cheongsam, a traditional Chinese dress. The princess in the palace, Chinese socialites and high society women can wear them in Shanghai.

There was a cloth designing competition. So she decided to design a new cheongsam that the women in her village can wear, giving them a chance to feel beautiful and empowered. She followed the hints in the book and began sketching her ideas on a piece of paper. She envisioned a cheongsam that would combine traditional elements with a modern twist, reflecting the vibrant spirit of her village.

Next, Elle went to the fabric market and carefully chose the best silk and embroidery threads. She asked the talented seamstresses in her village for help in making the dresses. They worked together for many days, cutting, sewing, and adding beautiful details to each cheongsam.

Finally, the day of the village celebration came. Elle proudly presented her collection of cheongsams to the women in her village. They were so excited to try them on. As they wore the dresses, their faces lit up with happiness and confidence. The cheongsams hugged their bodies and made them feel like queens.

News about Elle's amazing cheongsams spread far and wide. Women from other towns and cities came to see her designs. Each dress made them feel empowered and beautiful.

Elle's talent and passion touched the lives of many. She continued to design and create more cheongsams, becoming famous for her unique style. Every dress she made celebrated tradition and embraced change.

Elle's legacy inspired generations to come. Her cheongsams reminded women to embrace their own beauty and feel confident in their own special way. Elle's designs brought joy and empowerment to all who wore them, creating a world where every woman could feel beautiful and proud, just like the cheongsam she designed with love.

Longquan Sword

Creative Secondary School, Chan, Sean – 15

With the bravery of a person plunging into hell, he galloped like a vehicle while mounted his horse. Thousands of soldiers are positioned behind him, and the clip-clop sounds as loud as thunder. The opposing side remained calm throughout. He yells at the enemy as his soldiers advance at a faster pace. The sound of swordplay erupts instantaneously, engulfing the battlefield. During the conflict, his adversary attacked him. He tumbled from his horse. His horse is laying on its side, its legs gushing blood. He tries using his sword to retaliate. With the sound "Cling!" His sword has been cut in half and slug into the ground. He squatted impotently, gazing at his impotent hands. At this very moment, a white flag has been up, someone is screaming, and his opponents are applauding. His eyes have started to well up with two lines of tears. The war has ended. The North has been defeated.

30 years after the war, an old man is living in a village which is near where the battles are held. He spent centuries of days and nights forgetting food and sleep just to forge a sword. He returned to his little forge with a large package of minerals. Then start forging.

The forging scene was a ballet of heat and strength, with the man's hammer striking the molten iron with precise force. Sparks danced through the air, illuminating his resolute expression as he shaped the metal with unwavering determination. The rhythmic symphony of hammer blows echoed through the village, a testament to his unwavering pursuit of perfection.

The man toiled tirelessly, his brow glistening with sweat as he stoked the flames of the roaring furnace. The air crackled with anticipation as he carefully selected the raw iron ore, his hands navigating the delicate balance of heat and pressure. Each attempt brought him closer to his goal, yet disappointment lingered with every failed sword either very fragile or had flaws.

After countless failures, a breakthrough was finally within reach. The man's heart raced as he plunged the freshly forged sword into a trough of water, the sizzle and steam signaling a moment of triumph. He emerged from the water, his hands trembling with a mixture of exhaustion and exhilaration, clutching the first iron sword ever created in the village. NO. In the world.

The blade, forged from the blood, sweat, and tears of the blacksmith, gleamed with a newfound strength. Its edge was honed to perfection, capable of slicing through the air with an effortless grace.

He yelled for his son and passed the iron sword to him. He said, "This is what I can do. Please bring my volition along with you, Son!" The brave young man walks out of the forge and assembles his troops. They have been waiting for a long time. Just for today. The horn of revenge has sounded.

The brave young man brings along his sword and conquers all directions. Take back their territories and retake the main city. This brave young man is the savior of the North. Moreover, the sword was passed down from generation to generation and was named the "Longquan Sword".

Deception

Creative Secondary School, Lau, Stacy – 15

In China, after the 6g internet was made, illuminati arised. Many have heard but none knew if it was true. They held the key towards hidden power, and for centuries they have developed and operated in dark shadows, manipulating and controlling courses, preparing their ultimate plan of taking over.

Before everything, they knew everything, they knew they needed a game-changing machine to achieve their goal and solidify their result.

Deep under the secret chambers of the illuminati's headquarters, the heads of illuminati, Lilith Li and Amon Chen. They assembled the smartest scientists and geniuses from all over the world to top universities. They had a bunch of people working for them, just to unlock time traveling in the world in order to take full control of the world. Even with all of the power they already held in various fields, they were never satisfied.

Lilith once said, 'Whatever paper, compasses are useless. We need to make something more powerful, to not only be the best within China but within the whole world.' She had great ambition, she never thought of quitting. After she found out that her parents were hiding the fact that she was adopted, she knew no one in the world is being truthful to her, so she decided to create illuminati to have to pay back to all the people.

Amon was smart enough to find out what Lilith had been through, he also knew Lilith since they were tiny kids, he had a crush on her for so long. He was able to understand Lilith's mindset so they eventually got married and ruled Illuminati together.

One day, Lilith mentioned the idea of a time machine to Amon. Of course, as the man who loves his wife, he would definitely support her unconditionally, they are already on the dark side, how worse can things be?

The process of making the time machine was arduous, their journey began with a humongous amount of research into fundamental principles about time, science, and mechanism. The workers in illuminati pushed their minds to their limits to unravel the mysteries of time traveling. Lilith and Amon didn't really understand how to create the time machine, but they never stopped creating ideas of how to use the time machine. They truly believed that the workers would create something after 6g was created and the internet is much more sturdier.

Finally, after the tedious process of manufacturing, exploring, construction, the Labyrinth I is created. They created the name of Labyrinth's first two letters which are made of Lilith and Amon's name. After all of the hard work, Lilith never repaid back to the workers.

You must wonder, why do the workers not leave this terrifying destiny? As a genius himself, Amon created a life-long contract that they had to sign before entering illuminati. The contract requires threat towards the worker's family, life and they could never reveal anything. Or else the result would be death. Before knowing what illuminati was actually about, Amon and Lilith came up with an intellectual plan of attracting people who wanted huge amounts of money.

Lilith and Amon are very satisfied with the time machine. The Labyrinth Core activated, generating a powerful temporal field that enveloped the machine. The journey through time began, with the time machine seamlessly traversing the temporal landscape, bending the laws of physics to its will.

In fact, Lilith and Amon never meant to take revenge because they thought it would be useless and it couldn't change anything. They wanted the whole world in their hands and in their control.

On a random day, Lilith out of nowhere said, 'Amon, I think we should start using the time machine.' Amon didn't have a problem with it, 'Of course, whatever you want. What is your plan?' Lilith took out a piece of

paper and a pen, 'I guess we could start to travel back to the ending of Qing dynasty first, take control of China first. We could take this step by step.' Amon replied, 'I agree, it would be quite difficult for us to start from the extreme'. They took action immediately, telling the workers that they are activating the machine for traveling.

They arrived in the Qing dynasty, Lilith lied to the king of the time that they would bring benefits to China. They used the same technique of bribing, the king wasn't smart enough, he fully fell into their trap. They became the new government of China, they made new rules that China would be all under the name of illuminati. But the people weren't fully educated, they didn't understand what they were talking about, which completely helped Lilith and Amon with their plans. Lilith and Amon got more people to take the time machine to that point of time, they managed executive, legislative and judicial power. They made sure all of the rulers were the people in Illuminati so they would have the full authority.

Slowly and slowly, they developed more people to gain trust in illuminati, Lilith and Amon's ambition grew stronger. They got more people all over the world to work for them. And so, the world moved forward, forever changed by the revelation of the illuminati's grand scheme.

Powder Danger

Creative Secondary School, Lam, Villa – 15

That was a long time ago. In ancient China, there was an emperor called Leaf. He was a tyrant. He did nothing for the country but only played with his harem every day. All the people were complaining but nobody had the courage to speak due to the things that Leaf did before. There was a person who did speak to Leaf but then his head fell off. If the emperor wants something, all the people have to search for him and now he wants something called the elixir of immortality.

The elixir of immortality is a potion that supposedly grants the drinker eternal life. Leaf is 37 years old now. The average age at death of emperors is about 40. He starts to fear the taste of death. "Call all the alchemists now! Find the elixir of immortality!", he said. The decree echoed throughout the kingdom. Produce fear and urgency among the alchemists. They present themselves in front of Emperor Leaf one by one to appease his desire for eternal life.

Among the alchemists who come to the palace, there is a person named Liang. He is a young and curious man who has a passion for chemistry. He has experimented with various substances and discovered some interesting reactions. He wants to find the elixir of immortality for the emperor but not out of loyalty. It is out of curiosity.

After the meeting with the emperor Leaf, he demanded immediate results from Liang. Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, as Liang developed deeply into his research. He read ancient texts, asks with fellow alchemists, and experimented tirelessly to find the elusive elixir that would grant Leaf immortality. Every failed attempt increases Leaf's impatience and wrath.

It is an unusual night. When Liang struggles in his laboratory, an idea strikes him like a bolt of lightning. He stumbles and finds a mix, composed of sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter. He mixes the ingredients but does not realize the explosive nature hidden within.

He observed the spark of the grayish powder formed. He thinks it is the power of the elixir of immortality. Believing he has finally unlocked the secret to immortality. Liang presents the powder to Emperor Leaf. The tyrant's eyes gleam with greed and anticipation as he takes the container from Liang's hands. Leaf immediately swallows a small dose of the powder. The moment the substance touches his tongue, an eerie silence falls over the room. Everyone holds their breath and waits for a change that never came.

Boom! That is a sound of thunder!

Love & Calligraphy

Creative Secondary School, Lo, Whitney – 15

There was a gifted young artist called Li Wen in ancient China. Li Wen was famous for his calligraphy. He often wrote on bamboo slips.

Li Wen saw a beautiful young woman Deng Qi selling accessories in the local marketplace one day. Her almond-shaped eyes which were glistening with intelligence and small face attracted his heart for her. He went forward and made up a conversation.

They found out that they both liked writing. They became best friends, and soon they fell in love.

Li Wen needed to go to other places for work. They found out they had a long distance relationship. They invented paper to help them write letters even though they're not together physically. They wrote many love letters to connect with each other through words.

Kites

Creative Secondary School, Wong, Aki – 15

Mia was a young, caring girl who lived in a busy city full of people who were worried and tired. Since she had always been perceptive to the feelings of those around her, Mia couldn't stand to see others struggling with worry and tension.

One day, as Mia looked out her window to take in the skyline of the city, she became aware of the heavy load that appeared to be hanging over everyone who passed by. Mia set out to create something that would allow people to let go of their feelings and find comfort under the open sky because she was determined to bring relief and happiness to her community. Mia became aware that a kite would be the perfect tool of expression for individuals to let go of their hidden emotions after being moved by the joyful dance of kites she had seen on a trip to the country. She thought that kite flying would be a healing and freeing activity that would help people let go of their anxieties and connect with the freedom of the wind.

Then, Mia took her time to develop a unique style of kite designed mostly for emotional release. She tried a wide range of materials, sizes, and shapes in an attempt to strike the ideal ratio of flexibility and stability. Eventually, after many trials and many hours of testing, Mia created a kite that was strong and flexible enough to adjust to the vagaries of the wind.

Mia's invention not only brought joy and relief to her community but also sparked a movement that transformed the way people approached their emotions. It taught them that sometimes, all it takes is a simple act, like flying a kite, to release the weight of the world and find a renewed sense of peace within themselves.

The Mystery of Lost Treasure

Creative Secondary School, Yiu, Athena – 15

Under the cloak of an ebony night, where the moon's pale radiance danced upon the restless waves, a clandestine discovery awaited me on a desolate beach. The salty breeze whispered ancient secrets as I stumbled upon a worn parchment, its edges tattered and its ink faded by the relentless passage of time. Like a clandestine message from a forgotten era, the map beckoned with promises of untold riches and adventures hidden deep within its cryptic and enigmatic symbols.

As I traced my fingers along the intricate lines on the map, it seemed to pulsate with a mysterious energy, as if it held the key to a forgotten realm. The words inscribed upon it were like whispers from the past, captivating my imagination and igniting a fire within my soul. The map's allure transcended its mere function, intertwining myth and reality, as if it were a passage to another unrevealed and undiscovered world or dimension.

With the map clenched tightly in my hand, I felt a surge of anticipation course through my veins, for it was not just the promise of gold and jewels that excited me, but the allure of the unknown on that mysterious island. Like a siren's call, the treasure map whispered tales of uncharted territory and untold treasures, luring me into a labyrinth of possibilities. With the moon as my guide and the stars as my companions, I embarked on a journey with my ten crewmates that would forever change the course of my destiny.

My heart was lifted by the weight of the treasure map in my hands as my crewmates and I set sail over the great expanse of the sea the next day, as the first rays of light peaked through the vestiges of the night. The sun, like a charioteer full of light, bathed the horizon in rose and gold, looking kindly down on the ship that dared to sail into the unknown. My excited pulse was pulsing in time with the waves below me, as though the water was working together to lead me to the enigmatic and mythical island of unknowns.

While the sun ascended higher in the cosmic mosaic, my gaze scanned the horizon for any hint of the enigmatic island. I felt a wave of expectation come over me, a symphony of nervousness and exhilaration. The map, worn from the voyage through the night, seemed to be sensing the approaching treasure, vibrating with a newfound vitality. It seemed as if destiny itself had worked in concert to bring me to this secret world where fantasies become true.

Soon the ship neared the coordinates marked on the weathered treasure map, a sight of eerie wonder emerged from the depths of the ocean—a mysterious island in the shape of a skull, its ominous silhouette cloaked in an air of foreboding. The very presence of this enigmatic landmass sent shivers down my spine, a premonition of the perils that awaited me. But undeterred by fear, I pressed forward, my heart a drumbeat of relentless determination.

As I drew closer, the azure waters surrounding the island revealed their treacherous secret—sharks, guardians of this forbidding realm, encircled the jagged shores. Their sleek bodies glided through the waves with a primal grace, their dorsal fins cutting through the surface like scythes of death. Their piercing eyes, like obsidian orbs, held an ancient wisdom and a hunger that knew no bounds. They were the protectors of the island's enigma, a formidable barrier between me and the untold treasures that lay hidden within.

The sharks, a living metaphor for the perils of temptation, embodied both danger and allure. Their sinewy forms danced in an eerie choreography, their movements synchronized with a predatory precision. Each flick of their tails, a brushstroke in the canvas of fear, as they encircled the island like sentinels of the deep. Their teeth, like rows of gleaming ivory, were a stark reminder of the consequences that awaited any intruder to their sacred domain.

I accepted the storm that was about to hit me as the sharks approached, their predatory instincts heightened. The conflict between their innate hunger and my unwavering determination was a war of wills, a survival symphony. The water itself seemed to hold its breath, as though it understood the significance of this seldom meeting. I was resolved to confront the sharks head-on and retrieve the riches concealed in their domain, so I rowed towards the island with every stroke of the oars and every heartbeat.

As the sharks circled closer, their predatory instincts aroused, I embraced the tempest that awaited me. The clash between my indomitable spirit and their primal hunger was a battle of wills, a symphony of survival. The sea itself seemed to hold its breath, as if it too recognized the gravity of this rare encounter. And with every stroke of the oars, every beat of my heart, I propelled myself towards the island, determined to face the sharks head-on and claim the treasures that lay hidden within their realm.

On the perilous seas, a struggle between survival and resolve took place. I took a strong stand and pulled out my blade to face the strongest shark. Their fangs gleamed like a row of shining daggers when their mouths opened wide. There followed a dance between life and death in which courage faced instinctual fear. However, disaster came in the middle of the mayhem when a devoted crewmate was killed by the guardian's ferocious jaws, their sacrifice leaving a melancholy elegy on the water. They left behind an emptiness that reverberated with anguish, a tribute to the price paid on this treacherous quest—like a fallen star.

In the midst of the violent struggle, a brave comrade was killed by the unrelenting protector's teeth, turning the sea scarlet. I am determined to honor their memories, their energy igniting my resolve as anguish blended with resolution. Bearing the burden of my defeat, I forged forth, negotiating the perilous path with unwavering will. The map, which is now a representation of resiliency, showed me the way; its fading ink is proof of the hope's persistent strength. Despite our injuries, our crew persevered because we were all driven by the same goal: finding the missing treasure and leaving a lasting legacy.

Upon reaching the skull-shaped island, an eerie stillness prevailed, as if the very air held its breath in anticipation. The desolate shores, devoid of any signs of life, stretched out like bony fingers, grasping at the remnants of a broken shipwreck that lay abandoned on the sandy expanse. The skeletal remains of the vessel, a haunting testament to a forgotten voyage, jutted from the earth like the ribcage of a fallen giant. Its splintered planks whispered tales of turmoil and despair, the echoes of a once-thriving vessel reduced to a ghostly presence. Upon reaching the skull-shaped island, an eerie stillness prevailed, as if the very air held its breath in anticipation. The desolate shores, devoid of any signs of life, stretched out like bony fingers, grasping at the remnants of a broken shipwreck that lay abandoned on the sandy expanse. The skeletal remains of the vessel, a haunting testament to a forgotten voyage, jutted from the earth like the ribcage of a fallen giant. Its splintered planks whispered tales of turmoil and despair, the echoes of a once-thriving vessel reduced to a ghostly presence.

Here, in this desolation, the absence of life was palpable. No birds soared overhead, nor did the rustle of foliage grace the air. It was as if the island existed in a timeless void, locked away from the rhythm of the living world. The silence, broken only by the whispers of the wind, held an uncanny weight, as if the island itself guarded its secrets

with a solemn vigilance. Yet, undeterred by the island's haunting emptiness, I took hesitant steps towards the broken shipwreck, my footfalls echoing through the stillness. The fragments of the shattered vessel, like scattered memories, beckoned me to uncover the truth that lay buried within the island's enigmatic heart. With each step, I ventured further into its labyrinthine mysteries, aware that the secrets I sought would come at a cost—a cost measured in broken dreams, forgotten souls, and the relentless passage of time.

Venturing deeper into the heart of the skull-shaped island, a foreboding presence gripped my soul as I reached the entrance of a colossal cave. The jagged maw beckoned, an invitation into the depths of darkness and enigma. As I stepped over the threshold, a chilling sight met my gaze—skulls, countless skulls strewn upon the ancient floor, forming a macabre tapestry of mortality. Each bone whispered stories of lives extinguished, their hollow sockets staring into eternity, forever trapped within the confines of this subterranean chamber. The cave walls, like the ribs of a colossal beast, seemed to pulsate with a spectral energy. Shadows danced upon the uneven surfaces, casting eerie figures that seemed to writhe with a life of their own. The air, heavy with the scent of decay, clung to my skin, as if the very essence of mortality clung to the cavern's every crevice.

There was quiet among the sea of skulls, only broken by the echo of my footfall, a menacing rhythm that reverberated through the empty room. Every stride I took seemed heavy with gravity, as though I were walking on the sacred land of long-forgotten forebears. The abandoned skulls, which had previously held life's tales, served as a somber reminder of how fleeting life is. I was reminded of the frailty of the human soul as I felt the weight of mortality bearing down on me in this vast den of death. But the temptation of the missing wealth remained strong, drawing me more into this sinister realm. I moved on with a mixture of fear and resolve, knowing that the road to wealth would pass through the very fabric of death.

As we cautiously ventured deeper into the mysterious and spooky cave, a sense of unease settled upon us like a heavy mist. The dim light of our flickering torches cast eerie shadows upon the walls, distorting the very fabric of reality. The air grew colder, carrying whispers of forgotten whispers and the secrets of the ancients. In the midst of our exploration, our eyes widened in horror as we noticed something unnatural. A cacophony of bones shifting and scraping against the stone floor filled the air, and before us stood ancient skeletons, their joints creaking with an otherworldly animation. Clad in rusted armor and wielding weapons of a bygone era, they were the spectral guardians of this malevolent realm.

The skeletons leaped at us with a startling jumpscare, their hollow eye sockets glowing with an otherworldly light. As we frantically tried to protect ourselves from this ethereal attack, fear gripped our hearts. The sound of steel hitting steel echoed throughout the cave, creating a symphony of peril and despair. We came to understand that the skeletons had a dreadful semblance of life during this terrifying time, their movements driven by a long-forgotten sorcery or an old curse. Their unwavering presence screamed of lives lost and wars won, of being imprisoned in a never-ending state of turmoil.

Outnumbered and facing an army of hundreds of menacing skeletons, their hollow eye sockets fixed upon us, we felt the weight of impending doom settle upon our shoulders. Their bony fingers curled around their weapons, a chilling reminder of the imminent threat we faced. A spectral voice echoed through the cavern, commanding us to drop our weapons, warning of the consequences should we resist. With only ten brave souls standing against this overwhelming force, hope flickered like a dying ember. The odds were stacked against us, the battle seeming like an impossible feat, a David against an army of Goliaths. Yet, the fire of determination burned within our hearts, refusing to be extinguished by the shadows that threatened to consume us. Through our weapons trembled in our grasp, we steeled our nerves and unleashed a collective roar, a symphony of defiance against the forces of darkness. The clash of

steel and bone resounded through the chamber, as our small band fought with unwavering resolve. Each strike, each parry, was a testament to our unwavering spirit, a dance of survival amidst the chaos. The battlefield became a swirling vortex of danger and valor, the screams of the fallen mingling with the battle cries of the living. We fought tooth and nail, our very existence hanging in the balance, as we refused to succumb to the overwhelming odds. With each fallen skeleton, the tides of the battle slowly turned in our favor, a glimmer of hope illuminating the darkness.

And then we won, in defiance of everyone's predictions. The last sounds of combat faded away, leaving a triumphant stillness in its wake. The army of skeletons was vanquished, their strength destroyed by our unshakable will. We stepped up to the enigmatic treasure box with nervous hands; its old surface was decorated with elaborate carvings. A wave of excitement swept over us as we cracked its enchanted seal. The cavern's ethereal radiance was revealed when the lid cracked up, unveiling a stunning display of unearthly riches. Shimmering like stars, the jewels within were there as a prize for our courage and tenacity, just waiting to be discovered.

In that moment, we realized that our journey, fraught with peril and uncertainty, had led us to this extraordinary prize. The treasure box, a vessel of wonders, whispered promises of untold adventures and limitless possibilities. We had emerged victorious, not only in battle but also in our unwavering belief in the strength of the human spirit. With a newfound sense of purpose and triumph, we stood amidst the remnants of the conquered skeletons, ready to embark on the next chapter of our extraordinary journey.

We were astounded and perplexed by what we saw as the lid of the enchanted and enigmatic treasure box cracked open. Tucked inside in the chest's interior was an antiquated Chinese compass, its elaborate pattern and worn look appealing to the senses. The compass was a board with elaborate engravings on it that was topped with an instrument that resembled a spoon and was firmly oriented towards the north. This relic from a bygone period had an air of mystery about it; its antiquity and singularity left us dumbfounded, our thoughts straining to decipher what its actual function and importance was. Its weathered exterior revealed the scars of innumerable travels and lost stories, suggesting a knowledge that had been lost to time.

Within its delicate craftsmanship, the compass whispered secrets of distant lands and uncharted horizons, beckoning us to embark on a voyage of discovery. Each stroke of the engravings on its surface told a story of ancient civilizations and navigational prowess, a testament to the ingenuity of those who came before us. As we gazed upon the compass, our confusion mingled with awe, like a dance of curiosity and reverence. It stood as a symbol of the unknown, a riddle waiting to be solved, its very existence a testament to the vastness of human knowledge and the infinite possibilities of the world.

In this moment, we realized that this ancient treasure held the potential to unlock new realms of understanding, to guide us through uncharted waters both literal and metaphorical. It was a relic of antiquity, bridging the gap between the past and the present, inviting us to embark on a journey of exploration and self-discovery. In this convergence of confusion and wonder, we embarked on a new chapter of our quest, armed with the ancient Chinese compass as our guide. The compass became a talisman of possibility, a reminder that even amidst the unknown, there is beauty and wisdom to be uncovered. With each step, we embraced the uncertainty, ready to let the compass guide us towards the extraordinary and the remarkable, towards the uncharted depths of both the world and our own souls.

We discovered the antique Chinese compass, an immeasurable treasure, while traveling over the eerie island, where skeletons waited in the shadows. It was a remnant from a bygone era whose discovery may change the course of history and revolutionize navigation. We would no longer have to rely on the stars since this mysterious spoon-shaped compass would give us the gift of predictability and ease.

The compass shined brightly, guiding us into unknown territory with its steady needle, much like a lighthouse. It turned into a compass that freed us from dependence on the sun, moon, and stars and provided us with direction as well as freedom. Now that we possessed this wonderful creation, the great ocean opened up to us and the far-off coasts, which had hitherto remained undiscovered, beckoned us with fresh accessibility.

The compass took on symbolic significance in our personal life as a tool for advancement and exploration. We were filled with wonder and thankfulness as we observed the revolutionary potential of human ingenuity. With the compass in our hands, we took on the role of stewards of a heritage, charged with pushing the envelope and setting off on adventures that have never been done before—both mentally and physically. The effect of the compass as we travelled struck a chord in our hearts, serving as a constant reminder that curiosity and discovery have no boundaries. It came to symbolise the tenacity of the human spirit and fueled our shared ambition to solve the world's riddles and explore the boundless horizons of opportunity.

Jiu • Wine

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Tsz Yan – 16

Shang Dynasty, 6939 B.C., Jiahu, a house by the Ni River

Jian's eyes were trained on hers, her dark, glorious ones, glowing in the clear melted wax. She had come in with a swell of rain that afternoon, her white hand riveted to the tatters around her body. Her voice had wavered with the whispering of leaves as she implored a shelter of darkness, where searching lantern lights would not reach.

He watched with intense curiosity as she faintly unfolded from her bosom a damp bundle wrapped in fabric so wispy the rims of her nails hung upon the slender seams. It held a slender jade bracelet, a bark of jerky, and a few handfuls of ripe hawthorn. She looked up at Jian with exhausted resignation as she laid the items out on the bamboo mat between them. Jian took in the dainty traces of gold painted upon the veins of her wrists, and the delicate lilt of her words as she told him her name. He thought he'd never seen another so spellbindingly frail yet infinitely elegant. As she searched Jian's face of a weathered woodsman with the eyes flickering with tears in the firelight, her shoulders curled in and the lines of her face of a freshly-cut jade steeped in deep sorrow, he began to have a hunch about what she'd crawled away from to end up with her silk slippers upon his doorstep.

She was given the name Yuehua by her father. It meant the moon, its fleeting white orb among the turmoil of clouds, and its ethereality one mortal man could only admire from afar. With the weightless fragility she moved with as she stowed her sparse belongings under Jian's bed, he piled upon the narrow slopes of her shoulders all the tarps and quilts in his possession, for fear of how the cold of the night would smite her and how the ferocity of the sun would set her aflame.

Everyone looked worse under winter sunlight. There was no hiding the pallor of her face and the unhealthy dampness of her skin. Jian thought it was the lethal chill of the winter rain settling within her chest until she told her to unfurl the reddened fabric around the thin flesh of her shin. He hastily washed the infected fabric with hot water and herbs before reapplying them, pressing down on the thick line across her leg which arched like a red string when she spasmed under the sting of the boiled cloth. Jian then pulled out the jerky and hawthorn from under the bed, crushing the dried meat into her mouth and hiding his dismay as he dribbled the sogginess of the overripe hawthorn into a bowl to raise to her lips, hoping this overtly sweet beverage would sustain her until he could leave her to collect more water.

Jian fell asleep that night with his hand half-buried in his fishing basket, having passed out from exhaustion upon feeding Yuehua mouthfuls of fresh river water. He awoke when the sun rose again, shivering and sluggish. His bed was empty but warm, the sheets rumpled and feverish with sweat. He ventured into the room, collecting firewood to throw into the hearth lest he found Yuehua crumpled, cold, on the floor after having valiantly tried to escape during the night.

When he saw her knelt over a small fire built from dried grass just outside the door, he shifted to lean against the hearth in relief. Her slender fingers were stained red as she crushed her remaining hawthorns into a carved-out stone. The glow of the fireplace dappled her face like summer daylight as he moved closer to thread her shiny hair down her back into a braid. She didn't tense when his hand landed softly on her back, like a sigh, nor did she acknowledge the hitch of his breath at how her hair slipped through his fingers like cascades of silk. It felt like taking off his sandals to walk on the cool, wooden floorboards after a long day. It felt like coming home. He tied her braid off with a thin, shiny blade of grass and watched her clean her hands with the cloth of her own tattered robe from the first night they had met. He searched the angelic paleness of her face anxiously until she gently threaded her fingers among his and brought his palm to her wrapped shin, letting him feel the new coolness of her flesh and observe how the flowers of blood on the cloth had not bloomed at all.

"My lord, I am recovered." Yuehua declared gently, "When you fed me liquid hawthorn last night, it wracked me with sweat but lulled me to sleep within moments. I awake this morning feeling as though a blessed stream flows in

me.” Her eyes fluttered in comfort as she drew in a deep breath. She brought the bowlful of remaining hawthorn up to Jian’s face, both hands clutching it earnestly. He did not deny her sincerity and obediently downed the bowl.

The red juice spread heavenly sweetness through his veins, light as a feather yet heavy as swallowing thick stew. A stunning sensation, far beyond what Jian had ever tasted. It was like fresh spring air heavy with rain and sweet with nectar, leaving him deliciously disoriented. Yuehua gently guided him to bed after her initial panic at him toppling into her as he stood, and let him sleep until the sun went down.

“It should perhaps be drunk less in volume...” Yuehua mused quietly as she sponged Jian’s face with a soft cloth, mindful of the unnatural redness of his skin. He gazed at her with apology in his eyes. The night was silent and surprisingly warm, and his body was uncomfortable with heat yet completely painless for the first time in years.

“Perhaps.” He lisped after her. His hand found her jaw instead of her shoulder, “I am most sorry I frightened you.”

She gazed at him with sorrow in his eyes, “I never meant to reduce you to such a state, my lord.” Jian could see the undertow of emotions beneath what she said. He was her shelter against searching lanterns, and she was scared when he lay unresponsive. It made his heart shatter yet swell with affection to realize her trust in him.

“I am alright now.”

“I know,” she murmured fervently. Her hands did not flinch at the worrying heat of his skin as they closed around his palm, “and thank the gods for that.”

If there was one good thing to come out of Jian’s days—long headache, it was definitely how inexplicably happy they were to have found a balm for aches and sadness, but they were careful to consume the red pulp one tiny sip at the time. The juice got better with time, they realized. It got so magical that Yuehua got drunk and drifted off laughing breathily within her first half of a sip on the seventh day. Jian decided they might need to make a new batch.

So Yuehua stayed, and Jian wanted her to do so as long as she wished for his presence near her. She suggested new ingredients for fermenting new wines—rice they got from a farmer down the stream for three slabs of fish, beans they picked from the forest ground, and honey that clung to the thick logs Jian brought back. Everything was an option. The grains and honey worked wonderfully, but the beans tasted terribly sour and bitter, so they also decided against fermenting their basket of perfectly edible fish.

Shang Dynasty, 6938 B.C., Jiahu, a house by the Ni River

As spring descended, soft and tender as an exhale, Jian decided to share this beverage with people he knew, like a god scattering seeds of new hope upon the earth. He could not fathom the harm of earning a few more kinds of foods from people who were most certain to be impressed with this exquisite wine. A week later, he had enough fresh pork and cabbage to boil into a thick stew for Yuehua. She floated towards him as she exited the bedroom, hair loose and groggily taking in the fragrant steam coming from the table. As he ladled her a bowl with boyish excitement, she smiled sadly.

“What I have created with you is too precious to be shared...” she began, laying a gentle hand upon her forearm. Jian slowly lowered the bowl in surprise.

“We have gotten so much more meat because of it.”

She took in his words with careful contemplation and nodded finally, reluctant. She refused the bowl when he once again tried to offer her the soup and turned back into the room. Jian did not sleep beside her bed on the floor that night and instead lay beside the dying embers in the hearth with his body from his chest up exposed to the stars, which shone with an uncharacteristic glare which burned into his eyes.

For the next two days, he followed the Ni River and wandered the village until the calm stream of water opened up into the frothing, churning Yellow River. Suddenly immensely homesick and frightened by the rushing waters, he traced his way back home, his pockets swinging with several beads of jade and upon his shoulders a full sack of jerky. He longed for her as he'd never yearned for anything in his life. He felt parched when he didn't get to comb her hair once a day. Heart thudding with bursting affection, he accepted his complete attachment to the calmness and loving sweetness she emanated. She was the wine to his lips, riveting and sensational, yet always so clean and grounding. By the time the familiar piles of firewood came into sight, his eyes were blinking against the tears threatening to overwhelm him, and the sack on his back felt impossibly heavy. He dropped it and kicked off his sandals, heart pounding against his ribs as he tore into the room.

"Yue?"

Yuehua was sitting up in bed, face haggard as though she'd been crying and fasting. She held out a shaking, white hand to him as he stood there leaning against the doorway, taking in all the details of her that he'd missed. Her lips parted for a gentle commandment, "Come to me, my lord."

He knelt at her silk-slipped feet reverently, gazing at her with glistening eyes, begging her to say what she wished to him. His hand found her fingers, slender and cool as the jade in his pocket, and she flinched faintly away.

"My lord, what do you feel with this shirt on your back?" Her pale, flushed nails traced his slightly oil-stained collar.

"Sinful. Heavy with the blood of meat and the stench of the sty."

Yuehua smiled her sad smile again, twisting her wrist lightly to flip his warm palm over in her hand so that it spanned the length of her fingers and settled over them like a blanket.

"You want richness in food, success in trade. It feels only fair that I let you know what I desire."

Jian looked up at her, eyes trained on hers, her dark, glorious ones, shimmering in the afternoon sun splattering in through the planks over the window.

"I want only to smell the scent of fresh pine and metal mingled with damp wood every night you sleep by my bed, to feel safe in the morning when I know you care, and care deeply that what we have created is safeguarded by our privacy."

"I care very much." He said, his hands around hers tightening in conviction. Her eyes only bore into him, still as two stones. Two damp trails shot down her face, speeding down her cheekbones. He unwaveringly thumbed them away.

"I know you do."

He lost her on a damp, cold morning, frosted over with early spring snow. But he knew she'd probably been taken away during the night. He awoke to a piece of cloth soaked in the wine they'd made crumpled into a ball and stuffed in his mouth. Rolling over with difficulty from remaining disorientation, the empty space beside him shook his whole world. Even the small jade comb had been taken, and he knew what'd come for his little moon. Stolen away in the middle of the night by roiling clouds, and set aflame to ashes as the searching rays of the sun penetrated her fragility. Shattered pieces of the lantern splayed out in heartstopping brokenness where she'd handed him his first bowl of wine. A large smear of blood in the shape of an angry cross glared at him at his doorstep, like the sun, like the stars. This symbol meant that his hunch from last winter, when his eyes had first met hers, was correct. It all came

back to him in fractured pieces now. Her grace, her poise, her elegance, and her endless patience, were built from years of serving gold-laced tea to her parents-in-law until their son died in her arms, and she had to die in his.

A live burial. Not uncommon at all.

Jian downed a cup of wine and coughed up bile, tears spilling down his face. Premature burials usually happened at noon, which meant Yuehua was most likely writhing in her bonds, begging for his hand to interlock with hers, to ground her as she grounded him. It meant she was still alive and it pained him.

His spring breeze, his lunar iridescence, his everything, stolen away like breath from a drowning man because of what he did, exchanging the cursed wine until it reached places it should not. He waited till noon and then downed a bucket of what they'd created, and fell asleep.

The farmer who'd sold him grains came to check on him when he didn't pass by his house that afternoon after going into the forest for wood and found him laid out in a puddle of clear liquid, liquid as light as feather yet heavy as a thick stew, like fresh spring air heavy with rain and sweet with nectar. He knelt next to his body to retrieve the soaked piece of bamboo messily scrawled over with drunken words, and reading them as the small house burned with an intoxicating odour stole his breath away:

You're the clean milk of heaven

And my love tender as sin as it slithers to the nether

What power do you possess

To fly away while I'm tethered?

Seconds are years

And honey chokes me. My breath it steals

Every moment away from

Your gentle sweetness

Hen jiu, hen jiu... (so long, so long...)

Inked Black

Diocesan Girls' School, Kung, Yu Ching Mavis – 15

In a place as vile and as cruel as the palace, how did you expect a twelve-year-old to survive?

The answer is, you cannot. They don't survive.

The delicate fibers of the paper, hanging on by a thread by the amalgamation of sweat and tears and betrayal and rage, crumpled beyond recognition, the once clearly etched, hastily scratched, deathly black ink barely visible now, the paper he created, the paper he had spent his whole life, the past 56 years researching, crafting, perfecting. What use is there now anyway?

His hand trembled slightly, the poison sloshing in the vial, seeping through every crevice of his body as the bitter cocktail of regret, resentment, bitterness eroded all sense of sanity inside of him. How ironic it was, that the twelve-year-old boy who just wanted to survive, in poverty, in palace politics, in life, is the one that's getting hunted down like a dog, all because he did what he was told to do.

How could he have known?

He was just a boy.

What an august night, sweet but cut by the scent of wet leaves, the weight of fresh dew pressed by the bold hand of gravity, forcing the leaves down as they fell, bulky, wet, damp, shameful, like that of dirty money. The smell of nature had a chokehold on him like no other, shrouded with nostalgia, brimming with the serenity of bamboo groves and of course, political upheaval. His wandering feet traced the outlines of nature's tapestry, each pliable yet delicate fiber within every strand of bamboo igniting a spark of genius in him. Yet, the arid desert of poverty forbade the blooming of a dream. How does a parasite survive when its host is dying? How do dreams live on when you yourself cannot?

And there life was, sweeping him into the choking embrace of the royal court, enfolding, suffocating him into palace politics. Yet, he knew how to play the game. He was intelligent enough to understand the brutality of the court, charming enough to have the world fold before him like a puppet, and hardworking enough to win a spot in the emperor's court, unfolding a world of success as he climbed higher and higher in ranking, eventually earning the trust of Empress Dou, the emperor's favourite, or should I say "used to be" favourite. She could not have a child.

"Your majesty, please, believe me, I would never, I could never! No, please believe me!"

"God, this is so pathetic," the empress murmured, eyes never leaving the sobbing mess on the floor. Cai Lun stared impassively at the begging mistress, turned to the emperor, and, with evident disdain, stated, "Your majesty, all evidence collected points towards Mistress Song performing witchcraft." Raising his voice, he addresses the deathly silent room, eyes glinting with a certain malice under the flickering torchlight in the darkened room, generously giving sharp outlines to the shadows of the bowing officials, like that of an old hag, cast on the bloody crimson walls. "Your majesty, I hope you—and everyone else, are reminded of the brutal war waged between Emperor Han Wu and his sons, all because of the witchcraft, the same, in fact, as that of Mistress Song's, cast upon his sons. Their sanity was *wrenched* away from them. Two loving sons, one beautiful family, one harmonious country, torn apart. Need I remind everyone of the bloodshed that occurred? Millions. The Han River ran *red* with the blood of our ancestors, a country ripped apart by the work of a single witch!" He roared, his quivering hand pointing at the pitiful mess of a woman slumped on the floor. The officials all seemed to lean into the steer of his charm, their breath hitched.

It was quieter than a morgue.

But to everyone's surprise, when Cai Lun spoke again, his voice sounded hollow, low, almost like he was begging, pleading, for someone to just *listen*. The sentence warped and locked in his throat as he choked out, "I urge Your Majesty to please reconsider appointing Mistress Song's son to be our next emperor. I will not have a witch's son be my King."

And that was it.

The emperor stood up, eyes flaming crimson, and a robed hand slammed down onto the arm of the throne. Smoke flared lazily, writhing, tepid, blissfully unaware of its eye-watering burn to the unblinking eyes drawn to the scene. Not one single person dared to breathe.

Cai Lun's lowered eyes quirked up slightly, just enough to catch those of the empresses', who was simply watching the whole thing unfold before her, just standing there with blank eyes and a mouth set to a perpetual sneer, as always. His reflection seemed much too warped, much too silver, raked and twisted, an ugly testimony to his own dirty nature. The corners of his lips shuddered as he tried to return her smile, the grimace underneath so unbelievably evident.

Ashamed would not be near enough to describe his loathing towards the man reflected in those soulless eyes, hard, polished, indestructible.

Like that of a taxidermied animal.

It seemed like he could do no wrong.

Again and again he crawled up the social ladder, winning not only the trust and affection of the powerful and influential, but that of the people through his world-changing invention of the paper. Cheap and convenient, he forever improved the production of books and so much more, allowing commoners, who could not afford to buy even one bamboo-made book with their entire life savings, to access education like that of the rich. He saw a familiar twelve-year-old boy in their eyes, the same hard-set passion, the same blazing aspiration, only to be dampened by the bleak douse of reality. They simply could not afford the luxury of knowledge.

He not only earned praise from the new emperor and empress for his prominent contribution to the country, but was also given one of the highest positions in the royal court, earning the full and utter trust of the royal couple. You'd think that with such high regard from the emperor himself, Cai Lun would be able to live out the rest of his life, maybe not in riches, but at least comfortable, happy, peaceful even. If you told anyone that he'd die a disgraceful death, swept up in the whirlwind of palace politics, they would've scoffed in your face.

Until the empress died.

In the bloodshed that ensued for the throne, the emperor was killed, meaning Cai Lun's last and only reliance was dead. Liu Hu, the son of the forgotten emperor, grandson of the same mistress Cai Lun drove to her death, became king. Yet his first order of business was not to enjoy the sweet sweet perks of having the whole country worship the ground you walk on, nor to change the ruling of the country. His first order of business was to avenge his father, to get back what Empress Dou tore away from him, his livelihood, his grandmother, his throne.

And to do that, he needed to kill all the people that caused his grandmother's suicide. The only one involved still alive was Cai Lun.

In short, he needed to kill Cai Lun.

Cai Lun had returned to his hometown after paying his respects to the empress. He knew full well Liu Hu was coming for him, so when the news reached that they were almost here, swords ablaze, he had dressed in his finest robes, salvaging the tiniest bit of dignity he had left, going out as he wished to do and not having to kneel, beg, grovel in front of the emperor like a dirty dog.

In the flushed light that could've been evening and might've been dawn, like some third interval that slipped itself in between, he surveyed the vial clutched in between his bone-white knuckles streaked with russet streams, crisscrossing the leathery flesh. The sweat on his forehead caught the scar of sunlight, winking in the dispassionate gleam, lighting the tips of his hair like a halo. The wet, fake freshness seeped through overnight and evaporated like that of the end of a dream, like all the success he had totted up, fizzing up before the bamboo grove. The crickets were cruel and apathetic and much too loud as he stumbled and knelt, the brown in his eyes ringed with pink, shrouded by a milky film from the christening of tears.

How very dramatic of him to end where it began, kneeling in front of the bamboo grove, clutching his own creation at its birthplace, the hastily scratched barbed wire letters containing news of the warrant of his death. They do say history moves in a circular trajectory, a never-ending merry-go-round of repetitions and contradictions.

He was drowning, it seemed, in air.

The room was silent, disdain clearly etched onto every face.

Liu Hu scoffed at the retreating messenger's back. In a room full of hundreds of respected, highly ranked principal officials, he announced, each word dripping with scorn, "That dog died of suicide? My goodness, he got off way too easy."

Cai Lun dying of suicide was not enough for him, he wanted to torture, to avenge, to kill him personally, he thought him a coward, running away from the punishment he deserved through death. So, he proudly crowed about his cowardice, not only tarnishing his perfect reputation among the people, but making him a household taboo, him, a man who sacrificed his whole life to create a cheap alternative pathway for people, commoners, peasants like him, who could never have access to education because of the sheer expense of it, who couldn't even dream of achieving their ambitions without using up their entire livelihood, who can't even buy a book without having to sell their kidneys.

What is death but an escape anyway?

He was once told that the human eye is God's loneliest creation, how it sees, experiences, knows so much of the world, passing through the pupil through every waking day. Yet, it'll always be alone in the socket, not knowing that there's another one just like it an inch away, just as lonely, just as empty.

He was just a boy.

Tea

Dulwich College Beijing, Li, Isabella –

Harper was thirsty, sweaty, and hot. The humid, damp weather was unbearably wet. Harper had expected rain in the rainforest, but there hasn't been any since they had arrived. So her pack with an umbrella inside was of no use. Still, Harper's clothes were soaked because she was sweating terribly.

She looked back at her companions. The twins Jade and Jerome, and Walker. They didn't look any better than her. A creek was running beside them, and Harper really needed water, but glancing at the mucky pond, she thought otherwise.

'I think we should take a break.' Jerome announced.

'We just did that four minutes ago.' Walker said.

'Yeah, well we need nice pictures of the rainforest for Ms. Llano's project. And I can't take nice pictures if I'm tired.' Jerome complained.

'Quit acting like a baby.' Jade said.

'I'm not! I just didn't eat my breakfast this morning, remember, sis?'

'That's because you're too picky. What's wrong with boiled eggs?'

'Everything's wrong with boiled eggs!'

Jade rolled her eyes.

Everybody walked in silence afterwards for quite a long time. The only bottle of water Harper had brought with her had been drunk a long time ago. Her backpack was getting heavier every second. She didn't realize that they had to stay here for this long a time. All she saw around her were trees, trees, and more trees. Trees weren't worth taking pictures. She thought there would be way more cool stuff in the rainforest, that's why they took this trip! But now she was only surrounded by trees and she was dying of thirst.

On top of everything though, Harper thought she noticed Jade lagging behind, but she didn't mind. Jade's sneakers' shoelaces were probably untied again.

Just when Harper was deciding whether to take photos of trees, or of plants, with a horrible 'Thump' Jade collapsed onto the ground.

Harper's eyes grew wide. 'What the—'

'OH MY GOD! Help her! What happened?! Jaaaaaaade! Do something!' Jerome screeched.

Harper didn't know what to do. She didn't have the strength to do anything. Harper looked around.

'Help.' She croaked. That was all she could manage.

'That didn't do anything.' Walker said.

'Well, what if you try? You can't even find your way out of a paper bag!' Harper said angrily.

'Guys!' Jerome called. 'Stop blabbering!' He was knelting on the ground next to his sister.

'Is she breathing?' Harper asked him.

'Yes, thank goodness. But what happened?' Jerome said.

'Oh, I don't know.' Harper said, 'I'm not a doctor or anything.'

'Look, I'm going to find some help, if there is any. I'll try to. Stay with Jade and if I'm not back in ten, try to look for me.' Walker said.

'What?! You want to get eaten by a crocodile? Do you want to die? We're not looking for anybody!' Jerome said.

'Well, Jade probably won't breath later on anymore. Plus I might have seen a hut on the way here.' Walker answered.

'You're delusional.' Harper muttered.

Walker then disappeared into the woods.

Eight minutes later (which felt more like eight decades) Walker jogged back.

'Thank goodness you're—' Jerome started but Walker cut him.

'Guys,' Walker said, panting quite heavily, 'I met an old man who lived in the hut, I told him our situation, and he said to bring Jade to his place. Quickly. He might have some cures!'

'You sure he's not going to kidnap us or something?' Harper asked.

'He's old! And when I say 'old' I meant white hair, white beard, and needing a walking stick to transport! I don't think that's intimidating,' Walker said.

'I don't think that's safe...' Jerome started, but glancing at his unconscious sister, who was breathing with great difficulty, Jerome changed his mind. 'Let's go.' He decided.

'That's what I thought,' Walker said. 'Jerome, you carry Jade's shoulders, Harper, carry Jade's legs.'

'Whoa, whoa, whoa. Stop right there. Who said you could start bossing us around, huh? What're you going to do? Order a pepperoni pizza and a large strawberry smoothie? I don't think so.' Harper said.

'I'm leading the way. Do you want Jade to live?' Walker asked, impatiently.

'Let him be, Harper. We can slaughter his proud face later.' Jerome said.

Harper glared at Walker.

'Fine.' She said. Harper lifted up Jade's legs, careful not to hurt her and also not to get the mud on Jade's sneakers onto Harper's T-shirt. Finally, the four started on their way.

The trees started growing higher, where Walker was leading them, but sunlight still poured in. Harper's sneakers were caked with mud, and at one point, she almost slipped. Carrying a full grown human was not easy.

Harper's limbs felt like they could break off. 'How much further?' She asked Walker.

'Almost there.' Walker called back.

Harper rolled her eyes. Easy for you to say, when you don't have to carry someone who's as heavy as an Asian elephant for twenty miles. She thought.

Harper was having a headache. She might as well fall onto the ground later. The creek wasn't beside them anymore, god knows where it went. And then, a thatched cottage with a white fence bordering the cottage came into view.

The cottage was placed in a clearing. Out far, it would've looked like a doll's house. It was exactly like the candy cottage in the book *Hansel and Gretel*, except the cottage was not made of candy. Flowers and dandelions were scattered in the clearing. And upon that all, an old man (Walker sure was right) was watering his flowers.

'Um, excuse me, sir!' Walker called out. 'It's me again, the one who needs your help.'

Harper dropped Jade to the ground.

'Hey!' Jerome said.

'Hey yourself.' Harper muttered. She massaged her arm and shoulders, and lay down next to Jade.

The old man turned his head over to them feebly. Harper wasn't even sure whether he could see them or not.

'Bring her in. I think I know what the problem is.' The old man said. He clutched his walking stick and entered the cottage.

'Harper!' Jerome said.

'Nope. I ain't carrying anybody anymore. You carry her yourself.' Harper said.

Leaving a frustrated Jerome behind, she heaved herself up and walked into the cottage as well.

The thatched cottage was cozy inside. She followed the old man into a circular room. A white table with ceramic mugs on top was in the middle of the room. Wooden shelves and cupboards were stuck on the wall. Rows of bottles lined the shelves. Harper wasn't sure what was in the bottles, but it looked cute.

The whole cottage smelt of something. Something Harper didn't know the name of. But it was quite pleasant.

The other two, carrying Jade, finally entered the room too. They glared at Harper, but Harper just shrugged.

The old man was studying the bottles on the shelves, and he picked a transparent one with leaves inside. 'This shall do.' Harper heard him mumble.

'Sit and wait.' The old man said, and he left.

Later, he came back with a cup with some hot liquid inside. And the smell! This was what Harper had smelled before! The whole room had this smell.

'This is called tea. It will cure your friend. Tea was invented from China in 2732 BC. Tea, is also made from tea leaves. Many different types if tea exist.' The old man said. He fed the tea to Jade. 'Now, we shall wait.' The old man walked over to the white table. He plucked out a few flowers. 'This is called a teapoy.' He motioned towards the table.

'Cool.' Jerome whispered.

Minutes later, Jade was awake. She looked dreamy. Harper was amazed and speechless.

'Your friend here is not used to the forest weather. Tea can cure her.' The old man said. He smiled.

'Thank you so much, mister!' Jerome said. He hugged his sister.

'Oh, don't thank me, young man. Thank Emperor Shen Nong. He was a herbalist who lived around 3000 BC. According to his legend, tea was invented by accident. The story goes something like this:

Shen Nong always had his water boiled before he drank it. One day, several dead leaves from a wild tea plant fell into the water his servant was boiling for him. The Emperor drank it anyway, and found it refreshing and delicious. Although, how tea was invented, nobody is quite sure. In early times, tea was not for enjoying to drink. Tea was a medicine and eaten as a vegetable. However, during the Han dynasty, over 2000 years ago, tea became a drink. During the Tang dynasty, tea was already quite popular.' The old man replied, pouring himself a cup.

'Oy! Where am I?' Jade asked. 'Are we being kidnapped?'

'I don't think we say 'thank you' to a kidnapper, Jade.' Jerome said. 'But you should thank this man. He saved your life. You'd probably be dead by now.'

'Thank you?' Jade said hesitantly.

'You fainted because of the weather.' Harper added. She turned to the old man. 'Excuse me, sir. Do you mind if we drink some more tea? 'Cause I am seriously so thirsty! I'd drink anything by now!'

The old man chuckled. 'Of course. I have more than enough.'

After everybody had a drink, they exited the cottage. Just as Harper wanted to turn around to say goodbye, only the clearing was left. The cottage along with everything else had disappeared.

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 pinprick 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.

Parapluie

ESF King George V School, Chan, Valerie – 15

Yun wishes to be a poet, if only to immortalise the tears of the sky in writing.

As it is, she is no wordsmith, unable to transcribe the roiling mess in her heart into words; how the never-ending torrent of rain is a mirror of her melancholy. She sits by the window, fingers trailing over the intricately carved lattice, simple in its splendour. Through the gaps in the lattice, Yun watches the children dash around, uncaring – or perhaps unaware – of the storm washing the world in blue, plastering dark hair to their rosy cheeks, plain garments to nimble limbs.

One of the older boys notices her presence, and crosses the courtyard, nodding respectfully. “Yun-*shi*,” he says, attaching the honorific to her last name. A show of regard for the wife of the most revered carpenter in their village, who treated all the young in the village as if they were her children.

“It’s raining,” she tells him. “Won’t you all return home?”

“No,” he says, pointing at the children, “we have our ways, see.” She follows his arm and watches as a boy dashes from one awning to another, using a giant lotus leaf as a flimsy shield from the unrelenting rain. The lotus leaf is an emerald beacon in a sea of blue and grey, but it collapses under the force of the sky’s sorrow, bending to the whims of the wind.

Yun acquiesces with a laugh, sending the boy back on his way before lighting a stick of incense at the altar. Her prayers are usually simple. A prayer to the Land God for her husband’s safe return from a long day of toil, to her ancestors for a warm home and hearth. To the Guanyin, in hopes of finally being blessed with a child of her own. To the Caishen, for her husband’s craft to bring in prosperity.

Today, she prays too for protection from the whims of nature for the children, that their joyful frolicking in the rain could continue without fear of being struck down. She has heard stories of the wrath of the thunder-god Leigong, using roaring thunderclaps to eradicate the guilty; of how he would accidentally wrongfully condemn the innocent.

Yun wishes that she could be a poet, so she could word her prayers as skillfully and as eloquently as the imperial scholars. Then again, she supposes, she is just a woman, an inconsequential existence in the heart of a small village. A silver tongue would only be wasted on her.

Yun is not a poet, but she tries, and so she puts her heart into her prayers, kneeling in supplication at the altar, wishing for the gods to bless her with the ability to offer refuge. A simple ability, for a simple woman.

Yun wishes to be a deity, if only to touch the lives of others; grant the poor a fragment of fortune, give the troubled a sliver of serenity.

As it is, she is no god; she cannot soothe the frantic mothers in the village when their children fall ill from running in the rain; when their flushed cheeks drain of colour and their limber bodies become weaker and weaker, day after day, coughing out rasping breaths from irritated lungs.

She cannot grant them gold and riches to pay for a healer, cannot help them afford the viscous concoctions that claim to be able to heal any disease. *They sell for sky-high prices*, her husband had told her. *Ten cows and a solid gold bar for one sip*.

Yun sits by her neighbours, the potter and his wife, as she clutches her daughter’s hand. “I should have stopped her from playing while there was a storm raging,” the wife said hoarsely. “I should have known that the skies were angry. All I could think of was how grateful I was that the Leigong had spared her – yet the other gods were not as merciful.”

Silently, Yun thanks the goddess of lightning, Dianmu; who used her divine mirrors to create lightning to illuminate the skies, as to ensure that no innocent being would be hurt by the rage of her husband's thunderbolts.

"Can't we do anything, Yun-shi?" The potter begs her. "Your husband Gongshu Pan is rumoured to be able to create anything with his golden fingers. Can't he make anything to brave the winds and the storms?"

Yun thinks about how her husband is rarely home, and how when he is, his eyes are hollows of exhaustion, his body leaden with fatigue and his clothes tattered, not even from his work, but from the ardour of travelling, especially in the recent bout of frequent thunderstorms.

"I believe that even he cannot stand against the will of the heavens," she says, as softly as possible, watching the potter's daughter struggle to take even the shallowest of breaths. "But I am sure that he will try."

Yun wishes that she could be a deity, blasphemous as the thought is, so that she could alleviate the worries of children's mothers and the sorrows of mothers without children. To prevent every child from being at risk of passing too young, too early; to prevent nature from taking its fury out on the innocent; to prevent any woman from facing the pain that the potter's wife does; that she feels. Then again, she supposes, she is not a suitable person to waste this benediction on. She has no right to wield so much power, lowborn and unambitious.

Yun is not a deity, but she tries, and so she embraces the potter and his wife, promises to plead with her husband for a useful creation. She tells herself that she is content; that as long as she can walk into one's life and leave it warmer than it was before, she will be satisfied.

Yun wishes to be a highborn lady, if only to possess the mastery of one – trained in needlework and fine embroidery, music and dance, knowing all the right words to offer comfort and seek information; the best ways to persuade and wheedle one into doing what she wished.

As it is, she is no noble daughter. Her father was a craftsman, raised running through these very streets, hair turning white in this very courtyard. Their family had abided by the rule of *men farm, women weave*, but her mother had taught her only the most rudimentary stitches – she had spent most of her time on a stool by her father, watching him join wood and carve patterns with deft hands.

Perhaps that had been what intrigued her husband, then an indolent pupil indifferent to the trade of woodworking; the fact that she was a daughter of a family of artisans, expected to have pristine hands from a lifetime trained in feminine crafts – weaving, painting – or rough ones, from having to work in the fields while her father and brothers toiled in the workshop. But no, she had the same hands her father did, her husband did; calluses on her fingertips from connecting small, intricate parts; long, slender fingers with scars from careless carving.

Her husband, Gongshu Pan – who would in the future be called Lu Ban, father of all craftsmen – had become a studious young man soon after their meeting, and when they had married, his family of woodcarvers and artisans around them, she had asked him whether she was worthy of him.

"Of course you are," he had said, "you and I are the same."

"No," she had insisted, "though we are both from families of craftsmen, you are beyond talented; you could have married a noblewoman."

He had shaken his head, smiling. His features were sun-kissed from days of scouring the woods for the best materials; he did not have the erudite countenance of an imperial scholar, nor the regal bearings of a son of the gentry, but at that moment he had appeared ethereal, like he was destined for something greater.

"I did not mean it in that way," he says. "You have the same burning passion as I do, to create to help the people. To leave a mark on the world. That is what we want."

His words had assuaged her fears in the years that followed, even as her husband's fame grows with every creation, grappling hooks and saws and cloud-ladders, until they had begun to whisper about his possible ascension to godhood. Even as he gets bestowed with the name Lu Ban, having been so honoured that his name and birthplace would be known across the empire. Even as five, then ten years pass and they remain childless.

These thoughts resurface now and then, whispers of *what-ifs*. What if he had married a lady of a higher class, Yun wonders. Would she be more adequately equipped to help him grow his fortune, navigate transactions with nobles and royalty? Bring him a proper heir to teach the trade and art of woodwork?

Her worries do not plague her as much anymore, but as her husband returns, drenched in rain as she had expected, they return; Yun wishes that she had the practised grace of an aristocrat, so that she could find the right words to convince her husband, to sway him to create protection for the children.

Lu Ban enters the room, shrugging off his waterlogged outer robes. He smiles at her. "How was your day?"

"Fine," she replies, never one for flowery words. "And you?"

"Troublesome," he says, "the work itself was enlightening, but the weather – I could hardly work in it."

A perfect segue into her proposal. "Speaking of that," Yun says, "won't you make something to combat the rain?" She says it with considerable trepidation, knowing her husband's endless projects and the commissions that kept them clothed and fed.

Surprisingly, though, he does not react as she expected – she had planned for a gentle rejection based on his workload, an *I'm sorry, that's not possible, I have too many other things on my plate right now*.

He does say the first part of the latter. "I'm sorry, that's not possible," he says, and Yun almost laughs at his predictability after ten years of synchronicity. Then he sighs, "I've tried, but I can't seem to make it work. I work with wood and metal, and neither is portable enough for me to create a temporary shelter that can be brought wherever I go."

An idea lodges itself in the recesses of her mind, and Yun tries to form it into a coherent thought, but it remains elusive; her husband continues, "Though, I would be very delighted if someday, such an object would be made."

The idea solidifies, fills and covers her mind like the shelter she hopes to provide. A smile spreads across her face, clearing the melancholia that has filled her mind for years.

"...Very delighted indeed," she says.

Yun wishes that she could be a highborn lady, but at this moment, as her husband retires to bed, she has never been more thankful to be the daughter of a craftsman, the wife of a woodworker, the epitome of a simple yet passionate soul, because she has *everything* she needs to turn a dream into a reality.

Yun is not a noble daughter, but she is a seamstress, a woodworker, an *inventor*.

Yun wishes to be a craftsman. A scandalous thought for a woman of the house, but it is a thought that she had entertained more than once; not to be a male, but to enjoy the freedoms that come with it.

She sees how her father could sell his creations freely, without judgemental voices, without questions about why he was out on the streets instead of managing his household.

How her husband can attach his name to his creations, how he had been properly credited for his work. She remembers how a woman teaching new methods of embroidery on the streets had been copied, and when the charlatan had been questioned, he'd claimed to have invented it himself.

As she assembles and polishes the thin wooden sticks she had cut, measured, and sanded, Yun thinks about the repercussions of her actions; her husband is a benevolent man, and she had always been free to create and experiment with her ideas, but how would her creation be received in her community? Would the neighbours who now smile at her frown in disapproval, not only for her inability to continue her husband's bloodline but also for her blatant disregard for societal roles?

She can hear the whispers. *A woman trying to become a craftsman.* It doesn't matter to them that her creation is domestic, to improve the lives of her people. All that matters to them is that she is a woman, and therefore, she is not supposed to be anything but a wife and a mother.

She finds a piece of canvas cloth, a rough one that her husband uses to cover his wagon; carefully, she applies wax to its surface with a feather brush, hand steady. *The best products have no errant marks,* her father had said.

Yun is not a craftsman, and society will not allow her to be one without endless condemnation. But it is purely because she is *not* one that she has all she needs. She has her mother's training, taught to sew in and out until clumsy hands had become adept. As she unfolds the cloth in her hands, strong and sturdy, she thinks that sometimes, simplicity is what they need.

Yun wishes, above all else, to be a mother. Has craved to have a family of her own, has been told that is her divine duty repeatedly. As a child on a stool, as her mother spun red thread on a wheel, being told, *Ah-Yun, find a good husband and create a family worthy of him;* as a maiden, newly of age and infatuated with the tradesman whose potential filled his words; as a blushing bride in her marriage robes, her mother pressing her close in an embrace, dreaming of the day she would do the same to her daughter.

Her biggest dream has not come to fruition, but it remains a simmering fire in her heart. Her current project does not minimise her desire, but rather, stokes its flames; every coat of wax she applies, every inch of cloth she spins reminds her of her motivations – to light the lives of every child for the family she did not have; to ease her husband's weary days, offering him sanctuary during his long days away from home.

Because that is what a woman like her does. Fill the small cracks left by the tribulations of humanity; warm the hearts chilled by the trials of life. Make everyday life a bit easier, make troubled shoulders a bit lighter.

Yun is not a poet. Her words are clumsy and her speech direct, but she sees the world as it is, all its imperfections, without the rose-tinted glasses of the idealistic; her words are simple enough to not detract from the love bleeding from her every action, from the passion driving her to finish her contraption.

Yun is not a deity. She cannot control the whims of fate nor the cruel blade of death, but she lives among the common people, not high on a pedestal as the people toil and starve. She sees their troubles, tangible and real, and it is this closeness that allows her to feel as deeply as she does, to comprehend the people's pain as if her own. As she joins the strips of wood into a hinge, she sees the potter's family, a daughter gone, a mother grieving, a father ghostlike; she sees the children, strong and spirited, running around one day, pallid and hollow the next from illness.

Yun is not a highborn lady. She does not have the natural grace of one, nor the ability to create beautiful pieces of embroidery, but she can make a fabric yield under her hands, shape it to stretch over a wooden frame. She can make it resist water, layering wax and linseed oil over the stiff cloth, softening it with vinegar to become foldable. Tricks from a mundane life made useful.

Yun is not a craftsman. She may never receive a fraction of her husband's glory, but she can observe his craft; yet while he applies his ingenuity to warfare and construction, she takes the complexities of daily life and simplifies them.

After all, while Leigong executes his wrath, Dianmu watches over the innocents, ensures their lives remain sacrosanct. Yun oils the hinges, dusts off the shards, and thinks of all the heroes toiling unsung in the fields, in the homes.

Yun is not a mother, but she has all the love of one; she gives it freely – her husband, her parents, the nearby children, acquaintances. As she finishes her creation, she puts a piece of her heart into it, a wordless prayer for the welfare of all who would use it.

When her husband comes home, hours later, she presses her invention into his hands, watching as his eyes widen in awe, as he takes it out into the pouring rain. Opens it. And stays dry, unharmed by the elements.

“Amazing,” he says, reverent. “Yun, what name will your invention go by?”

In response, she draws a symbol, a cloth covering a wooden pole, shielding four people from the rain. The invention that would be known as the *san*, millennia into the future, when Lu Ban has become a household name, patron god of the crafts; when it spread across the seas, they would call it the *parapluie* – the shield against the rain.

And even though her name has never been celebrated, Yun touched the lives of millions, her umbrellas protecting every household. Her husband’s words from a bygone age echo in her thoughts – “To leave a mark on the world. That is what we want.”

She had achieved that – more than that.

She is Yun, defender against the storms of life.

New Tales of China's Inventions

ESF King George V School, Poon, Hayley – 15

If there is one specialty to tell of TianXing Town, it's its citizens' ability to spread word. So naturally, when a mysterious figure showed up at the local inn, it took no more than two days for all of town to know.

"I heard he's a mercenary, here to find work, I'll bet. Probably here to paint another mansion with blood."

"With his ragged clothes? He's no more than another wandering beggar, leeching off of our town. The sooner we get him outta here, the better, I'll say," scoffed another man.

"Well, if anything happens, the JingYi Force will handle him." Picking up his pair of chopsticks again, not noticing a smirk from a masked figure in the corner of the tea house.

'I'm not that intimidating, am I?' Shaking his head, the figure stood and tossed a small piece of silver on the worn, wooden table, leaving quietly. The streets were bustling as always, littered with small stalls selling all sorts of trinkets. Children ran through the streets, playing as their heroes.

"I'm after you, Xuan Ying!! You can't escape!"

"Escape? Everyone knows that Xuan Ying defeated Zhou Yue!" raising his dull wooden sword, the boy ran around the figure after his friend.

He smiled wistfully and turned to the growing crowd in front of the notice board.

"The Xiao family home had another death? That's the third time since they moved in. It wouldn't be the ghosts seeking revenge, would it?"

Murmurs broke out. "Them? They've had it coming, dabbling in all that witchcraft and such. I wouldn't be surprised if ghosts were coming back to haunt them," scoffed another.

'Xiao family?' thought the masked figure. 'Not very popular, hm?'

"Excuse me, my friend. What's all this about ghosts and witchcraft?"

"The Xiao family's been terrorising us since ten years ago when they first moved here. They mostly stay in the Xiao Manor but their disciples—" The woman shook her head. "Hopefully they won't come down right after such an incident."

"I tell you what, steer clear of them, ain't one of them any good news. Hm... haven't seen you 'round before...So, *you're* the new visitor."

"That's right." Lightly dipping his head, he took off his intricately carved mask. "I do hope I haven't caused any unrest here."

The face underneath looked young, about 20 years or so. He wasn't someone to look twice at, plain but neat. His unassuming and soft features were a sharp contrast to his bright eyes, looking as if they could pierce through any disguise. Along with his carefully spoken words, he was the epitome of a wandering literati.

'Hm... It seems like I should take a look at this Xiao Manor soon.' Smiling at the spluttering woman, "I'll be on my way now." He stepped away from the notice board and towards the hill of Xiao Manor.

The trail led to a clearing where the entrance of Xiao Manor stood. The corners of the double wooden doors were worn with chipped edges, like it hadn't been maintained for a long time. The plate above the entrance was covered in a layer of dust.

"Hm...How peculiar? It seems to be completely abandoned. And yet, the pathway up to the door is still clean and cleared of leaves...How peculiar indeed?" He mumbled to himself.

Slowly stalking towards the door, he steps on a protruding piece of stone. It sank.

'Thwack' was the only warning he got before hundreds of silver needles sped towards him. His eyes widened, legs moving in familiar steps, vaulting and weaving in between the needles as his robes twirled around him. The volley didn't last long, leaving behind a ground stabbed with needles.

'Meticulously crafted trap...right at the entrance of a famed family manor? Something's not right,' sighing, Zhou Yue turned his attention back to the door, carefully knocking.

"Anyone home?"

The door cracked open slightly. A pair of fearful eyes peeked from behind. "Forgive me but I must ask you to leave..." whispered a soft, wavering voice.

"Hold on, hold on. Could this young maiden tell me what happened here? I'm simply a coroner from the nearby town. I heard the townsmen talking about a little mystery that happened here..."

"Coroner? From TianXing? I've never seen you before..."

"I arrived only a few weeks ago, perhaps you haven't visited in a while?"

"I—I...Very well, I'll bring you to Master Xiao."

The manor was quiet with the occasional servant rushing by. They strolled past a neat garden, usually meant for a stroll or a game of chess, now left eerily silent. There was a rectangular platform, about [size] metres of dark grey stone with carved fences around the corners. Zhou Yue tilted his head in bemusement, continuing after the servant. A voice rang from inside the hall as they got closer.

"—didn't just slip. Along with the sphere—"

"That's enough. No more of this ghosts and ghouls nonsense."

Stepping into the hall, bowing, the visitor took in the pale, drained face of the older man in lavish fabrics. "Greetings, Lord Xiao. This one is Zhou HeRuan, a simple coroner who wishes to offer his assistance."

"Coroner? I didn't—"

"How perfect! We were just looking for one. Not many are willing to come here these days..." the man beside the first cut in. "This one is Mo XuanYan, the housekeeper here. I'll lead you to the body now."

Lord Xiao frowned, almost imperceptible and turned away.

“If you’ll follow me, Coroner Zhou”

He was led to a hut near the back of the manor, near the manor treasury and quite abandoned with the piles of straw and chopped bamboo leaning against the wall. Glancing around, he narrowed his eyes at the crumbling tiles on one corner of the low wall.

“Coroner Zhou, this way, please.”

“Hm? Oh, forgive me for asking, but this place is not usually locked up like this, is it?”

The housekeeper shook his head, puzzled. Zhou Yue smiled reassuringly and stalked in. He smelled the body before he saw it. On a bench near the middle, concealed by a piece of white cloth, was the body. Covering his nose with his sleeve, the man lifted the sheet, revealing the young face of a maid.

Housekeeper Mo grimaced, taking a step back from the corpse.

“Hm, could you tell me how this young lady was found?” he asked, scanning the body with a patch of blood staining her front bright red.

“Uh... That—Well, she was found by one of our senior disciples, Li Wei, right in the middle of the courtyard. I— I’m not too sure how it happened either. But he said she was sprawled on the pathway on her back.”

Zhou Yue lifted his eyes from the body, slightly tilting his head at the flustered housekeeper. “On her back?” he muttered to himself. “...Well, the cause of death of this young maiden seems quite clear. Here, you can see the splatters of blood surrounding the wound on her back,” he beckoned to the other. “Likely caused by the killer removing his sword from the body. As for what happened afterwards... Ah, that’s right. The disciple that found her! If I may speak with him?”

The disciple was training when Zhou Yue found him, going through his sword forms. Sweat dripped from his brows as he slashed through the practice dummy with more vigour than necessary.

“Poor dummy, must have offended you quite a bit.” Zhou Yue shook his head teasingly. The disciple startles, glare softening.

“My apologies, I... simply have a lot on my mind. Can I help you?” Despite his rather intimidating looks, his voice was subdued.

“It’s nothing much. I was just curious about what happened with the young lady lying in the shed near the back. Mind telling me what happened?” he smiled nonchalantly, stepping towards the sword racks as he lightly touched an empty rack.

“You—” he glanced up from the ground. “Who told you?”

“Who else? Your housekeeper. He said you found the body.”

Li Wei hesitated before sighing. “I—I did. A—Xue was a good friend of mine. She’s always helping out near the disciple quarters, even though she doesn’t get paid enough. Everyone’s friends with her!...I found her early in the morning, when I was heading here...I was on duty that day.” He frowned, as if trying to remember. “She was just there flat on her front with a wound on her back, next to the sphere... or where the sphere would’ve been...”

His voice faded to a whisper near the end but Zhou Yue caught it. Snapping his head up, he prompted. "The sphere? What's this about a sphere?"

The disciple's eyes widened, glancing around like a deer caught in headlights. "You...wouldn't pretend to miss that if I asked nicely, would you? Fine, it happened a couple weeks ago. A strange man in old, torn robes came to visit, Master Wu. He presented to us this odd-looking...device? The round hoops created a sphere with four dragons supporting each corner, lifting the sphere above the ground. And...Oh! He said it was some celestial device or something. The 'armillary sphere'? I'm not too sure myself. But it seems to be gone from the courtyard when I found A-Xue..."

Zhou Yue hummed in contemplation. "The courtyard, hm..."

The courtyard was as empty as when he first passed by, the silence oddly deafening as he stood at the corner of the stone platform. He raised an eyebrow at the platform. If the armillary sphere was as large as Li Wei said, it had to have left marks on the stone and yet the platform seems to be untouched. Turning his attention to the corner, the coroner noticed a piece of paper stained with droplets of blood, half hidden in the bushes surrounding the platform.

He glanced around briefly before picking it up. "A letter? Anonymous... 'Mo...I know...armillary sphere...Lord Xiao...leave the money...' Now it's getting interesting. Lord Xiao might be more involved than I thought."

"What a coincidence, Coroner Zhou. I would've thought that you were still with Housekeeper Mo."

Startled from his musings, he turned but not before hiding the letter in his robes. "Lord Xiao, indeed, a coincidence. I've examined the body and was simply hoping for a look around. Ah, that's right. I heard there used to be something on this platform..."

The manor lord's face hardened. "You know about the sphere then. When that man came in with the thing, I didn't even know what to do. I mean, what am I supposed to do with a large sphere, right? But Master Wu insisted that he leave it in the courtyard...said it brought fortune and such. Then again, why would he give it to me if it's so good?" His tone turned pleading, eyes meeting Zhou Yue's as he grasped his hand.

"Then...where'd it go?"

"That's the problem! It disappeared the night of the accident. I think they might be connected."

"The armillary sphere mysteriously disappearing the same night A-Xue met her end? It does seem to be connected," he nodded slowly before asking. "You wouldn't possibly know anyone who might have fought with A-Xue, would you?"

"A-Xue?...Oh! The servant. I rarely interact with them. Their food, clothes, money... are all managed by the housekeeper."

"Is that right? Then, you wouldn't know what their allowance is?" Zhou Yue blinked at the manor lord. Housekeeper Mo, he mulled over, might be the only person likely to have fought with A-Xue. Along with the letter and the missing armillary sphere, he does seem to be a suspect.

Now the question was: How did something as large as the armillary sphere disappear overnight, leaving no trace behind? Or...has it ever left the Xiao Manor?

It wasn't until midnight that Housekeeper Mo came up to the empty platform, holding a flickering lantern, unaware of another pair of eyes staring. Behind him, was a man in slightly torn robes, a hood over his head. Likely the strange Master Wu Li Wei was talking about, Zhou Yue thought from afar.

"Master Wu, as promised, I have your armillary sphere here but what about your payment, hm?"

"Patience. I haven't seen my sphere yet. No sphere, no payment." The hooded man spoke with a faint smile in his voice.

"You!" The housekeeper burst out before forcing a smile. "Of course. Just one second."

Zhou Yue peeked out from behind the pillar, barely able to make out his actions. He watched as housekeeper Mo turned, reaching towards the corner of the fence around the platform. Master Wu tilted his head slightly but made no other move. A soft creak sounded when the housekeeper twisted the top of the fence, revealing a hidden mechanism built into the bottom of the platform.

"This much work put into a plain platform? Just to hide the sphere here? Why?" Zhou Yue muttered to himself.

"Here it is." The words broke him from his trance. Looking back at the duo, the coroner barely avoided revealing himself, shocked at the sudden appearance of the mentioned armillary sphere. "But, just out of curiosity, what exactly happened between you and the manor lord? I would've thought that you were friends given the gift you presented," he said as he gestured towards the sphere.

"That was the plan, huh?"

It was at that moment, Lord Xiao marched into the courtyard, cohort of Xiao disciples in formation behind him. The duo, caught off guard, stumbled back until they were fully surrounded. Zhou Yue quietly migrated towards the group, corners of his mouth lifting in satisfaction.

"Housekeeper Mo, quite bold of you to go behind my back," the lord frowned distastefully, almost as if he was looking at a piece of dirt on his shoe. "Simply because of the little power given to you, do you think you won't be punished for this transgression?"

Master Wu removed his hood, revealing a weathered face pulled into a sneer. "As if you can say anything," Spitting at his feet, he continued. "Call yourself righteous when you sit here uncaring of what your disciples do to our town!"

"I—"

"Do not lie about not knowing! I gifted you this sphere that could predict the future if used correctly, just to ask you for a bit of relief, a moment our town can live without your disciples terrorising us. Yet you still turn a blind eye, too busy flaunting your wealth and power."

"So you colluded with the housekeeper, asked him to return the armillary sphere for money. Is that right?" Zhou Yue cut in, eyes sharp. "But not with your money... No, you wouldn't have enough to satisfy a person of such high status."

Master Wu contemplated briefly before chuckling bitterly, "Should've expected this. Do continue, young man, what did I do?"

"The treasury near the back." Zhou Yue realised. "The broken tile... The money isn't yours, it's Lord Xiao's. You were the one who snuck in from the hut. Must have broken the corner tile in your hurry."

“Heh, there you go. The money isn’t mine. I asked the housekeeper to get the sphere back for a certain amount. I need him to feel what it’s like being poor, helpless—”

“My money? Hand it out! You must be foolish to—”

“Foolish? Of course not. You think I would bring heaps of jewels and gold to an enemy’s camp? Absolutely not. Besides, I think you lot are paying a lot more attention to me when your housekeeper’s the one who betrayed you,” he said pointedly.

“No, no, no. You’ve got it wrong. I have nothing to do with this scum. I, I—”

“Detain them both! I’ll punish them later. Must find my gold first...”

Zhou Yue watched on, thinking. “So theatrical... Then again, they do say, karma knows no mercy.” He smiled wistfully at that thought before stepping closer to Lord Xiao, “It seems you have it under control here. If there’s nothing else, I’ll take my leave.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, turning away while picking up his travel box of equipment. Leaving behind the manor too consumed by corruption, an odd celestial sphere on his mind.

Rainshade by Ronit Sahjawani

ESF Renaissance College, Sahjawani, Ronit – 15

On a stormy, breezy night, a young boy named Lu Ban laid on his bed. On the threshold of his mattress sat Aunt Mei, the only family he was connected to. Lu Mei was still in her early 20s, unmarried, and lived in a royal home consisting of her two parents, her grandmother, and countless helpers. Despite being in her twenties and residing in a grand castle, Lu Mei was often left in solitude. Thus, she always offered to look after him while Ban's mother, Jian Hua, was out working or running errands. Jian Hua was so busy to the point where Lu Ban believed she lived a second life.

"Aunt Mei, when will mom come home?" Ban curiously asked. Curious Ban was always the first to talk, the first to ask, and the first to offer a hand. Yet he never directly questioned anyone about the absence of his father; that notion slept deep in the bag of his head.

"I'm not sure— how about I tell you a story instead" Mei replied. Ban immediately nodded, convinced that the story would extend past his bedtime. Lu Mei knew that she could speak of a fictional tale that she created on the spot, but today she felt like diving into Ban's past, knowing that the boy must've been sick of anticlimactic, repetitive children's stories.

Mei began her story. "Every night, a young woman named Lu Qie would stroll around the country park underneath a glittering blanket of stars. Despite having access to thousands of acres of private, guarded land, Qie preferred the rural, country park. The teenager had been visiting the park daily, but every night the same attraction caught her eye: a nonchalant teenager dressed in a worn-out, tattered gray jacket with millions of threads sticking out. It was only after 4 weeks of constant night walks that Qie decided to make a move, knowing that the shy, wiry boy would never dare to approach her. After their first meeting all their conversations from that point onwards were mutual. They would chat, debate, and gossip nearly every single day. While days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months, their teenage romance was visibly at its peak."

"Wait, Aunt Mei, who even is Lu Qie? Is she your sister?" Ban peculiarly asked.

"Yes, she was." Mei sighed. Her soft eyes glimmered like glass beads.

(The aunt readjusted her seat on the mattress, then continued her story.)

"There were a couple of nights where Lu Xun was absent from the park due to his late shifts at his uncle's store, leaving Qie extremely disappointed. Fortunately, their friendly relationship evolved as they grew fond of each other. Their daily meetups made it out of the secluded garden, and they even met for a cup of tea a few times. The woman preferred to meet him in indoor locations, with some shedding roofs due to her conspiracies towards bad weather. On the day of their meet-ups, or virtual dates, Qie would always arrive several minutes prior to their agreed time and purchase both of their drinks in advance to avoid hurting Xun for his financial shortcomings. Xun was internally pinched by Qie's observant and empathetic attitude. As a result, he made an attempt to convey his pride and gratification towards his new lover by sending her wholesome, handwritten messages. The teenagers began to spend nights at each other's homes; Qie clearly saw beyond the disappointing furnishings of Xun's bedroom, as she was often eager to stay overnight. The contrasting couple felt that they were virtually inseparable. However, as time passed, the duo began to be more comfortable with each other, meaning they would tend to ignore the fact that it was a secret affair. Qie's mother found one of Xun's love notes in the mailbox, leaving her extremely doubtful of her daughter's opinion towards her as she would typically tell her mother everything. Coincidentally, Xun's uncle began to raise his suspicions as well after he found strips of smooth, silky, safari brown hair. Both guardians thought little of it, thinking that their witless children would never keep secrets from them." spoke Aunt Mei.

(The night birds awakened and disturbed Mei.) "It's getting super late, Ban. I think that's enough for today" she said, standing and fixing his blanket. "Please keep going, just a few more minutes?" the boy desperately moaned *(Mei smiled and continued the story).*

“Qie was never looking to expand their relationship and come out to her family, nor was Xun. However, the two landed on the subject of marriage during one of their classic, tea date discussions. Although the pair were beyond tentative, Qie arranged for Xun’s reduced family to visit her royal home. Though it was a hassle to convince Xun’s only parental-figure to come, the visit went much smoother than intended; the boy’s uncle and Qie’s father bonded well over their love for vintage car models. The difference between the men was that one owned a mix of cars, while the other repaired a mix of cars. Although the uncle enjoyed his time at their royal, magnificent castle, he was doubtful of their relationship. The old man was overprotective of Xun, knowing that the boy was immensely heartbroken when his parents had passed; the last thing he wanted was for that event to repeat with Xun and his partner. Similarly, Qie’s wealthy parents were extremely uncertain about whether Xun’s class, background, and past were fit for their offspring. Her mother felt that their relationship was unacceptable and advised the girl that it was time to split ways. The rebellious daughter disobeyed and continued the affair with her first love.” exclaimed Aunt Mei.

“What happened to the lady after she didn’t listen?” Ban nervously asked. Aunt Mei casually ignored the question and hesitantly continued her story.

“The relationship continued for a year, until they finally agreed upon purchasing an official marriage license. To celebrate, they returned to the rural country park from their initial encounter; they stared at the shining stars while reminiscing around a campfire. Eventually, Qie was pregnant for the first time. Xun was super scared by this news because he had never thought about having a baby”

“Now, that’s more than enough for today” Mei clearly affirmed. She fixed his pillow and tucked him into his sky-blue, sea-patterned blanket. Coincidentally, the mother had opened the main door as soon as Mei blew the oil lamp. Lu Ban was disturbed by the door creak from his mother’s return, but Mei signaled Ban to stay quiet, knowing the innocent aunt would’ve been scolded for having Ban awake so late. Being the easy child he was, Ban laid quietly and turned to his left shoulder. Aunt Mei steadily crept from the hall until the entrance, unconscious of the fact that she left his bedroom door ajar.

Jian Hua was drenched in rainwater, she immediately removed her coat then chucked it into a bamboo basket and rushed into the restroom “Ai, it was completely sunny when I first left the house and now there’s a storm going on, I really hate this water you know” Hua cried aloud.

“Calm down, Jian Hua” *(There was an awkward silence while the aunt prepared a snack for the tiresome mother.)* “Where were you, its well beyond time for supper” Mei voiced her concern.

“I was working, not everything gets handed to me by peasants” Jian Hua declared. She knew it came off as rude, but did not feel the need to apologise. There was a hole in the conversation where no one spoke; they sat across from each other at the wooden tea table.

“Jian Hua, I’ve been thinking..I think it’s about time you tell him about Xun” Mei whispered

(She looked at her oddly with her eyebrows raised and her jaw clenched) “Tell him what?” *(Jian Hua turned away in disappointment.)* “He doesn’t need to know, he’s only 11”

“He’s a smart boy, you’re underestimating the coming generation, you know,” Mei called out, her voice carrying a hint of conviction. The two engaged in a spirited debate, their voices rising and falling as they discussed whether or not Lu Ban should be told the truth about his father, Lu Xun – unaware that Lu Ban had been quietly listening to their conversation from the partially open bedroom door.

As their discussion continued, Lu Ban couldn’t help but visualize the images from his aunt’s descriptive story; in his grasp, he caught Lu Qie, wearing a patterned robe, in the country park.

"What do you want me to tell him, Lu Mei?" Jian Hua's voice carried a firm resolve. Her words cut through the air, emphasizing her affirmative stance. "That an apathetic, reckless man tried to force me into miscarrying my sweet boy?!" She cried. "Don't you understand, he left me alone in the dark with no food on my plate and no clothes on my back!" Her words echoed through the room, leaving a deafening silence.

The exhausted boy had grasped onto the truth behind his own mother's secret identity, he questioned his past, .

During the next couple of weeks, the boy's mind felt like a speeding aircraft hovering over snowy mountains, forty thousand feet in the air matched with unrested turbulence. He stayed nonchalant and kept his rising turmoil hidden. Every night, he sat on the couch and stared at the front door till his mother, despite breaking his curfew. He often fell asleep, hours before his mother arrived, but continued this practice wholeheartedly.

One morning, the mother and son finally received an opportunity to hang out and explore the outdoors. Lu Ban was unbelievably excited, but Jian Hua, to no surprise was overthinking her plans. She felt that the nature would take a horrible turn on them (in all fairness, she deeply despised the rain.) The duo set out nonetheless, but twenty minutes into their journey, they felt an army of harsh and hostile liquid items rampage towards them, leaving them under a ginormous tree. The tree was special. It had a long and incredibly straight trunk supporting a canopy, which curved downwards from its origin, disallowing them to view the sky. Not a single water droplet fell upon their shoulders. Lu Ban clenched his mother's palm and stared at her disappointed expression. He felt a new feeling – one mixed with awe and gratitude.

The next morning, Ban embarked on a journey to create his own rainshade. While his mother was busy working, the boy was expected to stay home alone and study, but he clearly had other plans. The spark of innovation fueled Ban through the outskirts of the village, where a bamboo grove stood tall and majestic. He carefully selected long, straight bamboo shoots, envisioning their transformation into the ribs of his rainshade, cutting and shaping them with precision.

To build the canopy, he turned his attention to the oil leaves. These glossy, evergreen leaves were abundant in the neighboring home's backyard. Though Ban was nothing close to a crook, his strengthening determination overruled any logical thinking as he grabbed a handful of smooth leaves.

Returning home with his precious materials, Lu Ban dedicated himself to the task at hand. With nimble fingers, he skillfully attached the bamboo ribs to the main frame, forming a sturdy yet flexible structure. Layer by layer, he secured the oil leaves, ensuring they overlapped to create a seamless and water-resistant canopy. He spent several minutes attaching the canopy, while minutes turned into hours and hours turned into days.

On a particularly rainy afternoon, the moment of revelation arrived. Ban nervously crept through the hallway while he carefully held his newborn invention. Jian Hua's attention switched to the boy, as the two awkwardly stared at each other.

Jian Hua swiftly placed her soft and smooth palms upon the furnished bamboo stick, and nodded at the boy. A droplet of tear crawled down her left jaw, the way a fragile spider spins down their own web. The boy instantly grappled onto his mother's hand, as the duo took a step into their porch. Drops descended from the heavens as they held hands and walked down the glorious route with no one in sight. Their complete silhouettes stood side by side, ready to conquer the world, as the rain showered it's blessings upon their journey.

This is the story of Lu Ban, a courageous boy who built one of humanity's most impactful devices solely due to the unconditional love he had for his mother.

A Pathway to Old Regrets

ESF Sha Tin College, Cheung, Ethan – 15

Innovation. It was at the heart of human nature, irreversibly intertwined with curiosity and hubris ever since the human race thought to look beyond its simple hunter-gatherer lifestyle. The thirst to know more and to leave their mark on the windswept plains and verdant jungles it called home drove it to look above and beyond, punitive villages of wood and straw turning into sprawling empires of looming fortresses and mighty armies. Fall as they might, as any empire ought to after its time had passed, humanity never gave in. Centuries of blood, sweat and tears propelled each new generation forward, one step closer to its dream of conquering all of the known world and eventually the universe. There was nothing to stop humanity from growing until they overtook entire galaxies. Nothing, of course, but itself.

Humanity may have bent and broken the laws of the material world to its will, but not even they were exempt from the rules of the natural world. Even through all its years of evolution, the primal beast lying dormant within each person never disappeared, always waiting to strike. When it did, the very emotions that once kept them safe from the sabre-toothed tiger growling outside the cave would come flooding through their bodies, overriding every rational thought and making them a monster of instinct. Fear. Anger. Disgust. Surprise. The beast would lash out, again and again, never stopping to think until the perceived threat had been eliminated.

How unfortunate, then, that I should be subject to the assault of all these emotions at the same time.

A shiver rolled through my arms as I placed my hands on the steel rails, cool as the frost that no doubt had begun to fall outside. Despite that, I was forced to readjust my shirt in the face of the oppressive heat blowing from the AC units. Whoever had been near the thermostat earlier that day was overcompensating. I barely registered the shouting and yelling rocking through the room, all the faces I saw blurring into an agitated mass of raw emotion. My lawyers were frantically organising their papers, scattered to the wind after a particularly impassioned viewer had marched up from the gallery and thrown himself at them, fists flying. That same man now lay pinned to the ground, thrashing like a wild animal as security beat him into submission. Not even the law and the threat of imprisonment could triumph over primal instinct, it seemed.

“Order! Order!” The thud of the gavel rang out like a church bell tolling the verdict of the guilty, dispersing the raucous atmosphere raging through the courtroom. The attacker was dragged out yelling obscenities, and the jury settled into a sullen silence once more. “Mr Li, you may continue.”

“Thank you, Your Honour.” The man who stood donned a hard expression, brushing a hand over his slicked-back hair and readjusting his glasses as he refixed his disapproving gaze at me. “As we might already know, we are here today to discuss the charges against the defendant, Dr Kevin Chen. The list of his crimes may be short, but they are significant all the same, so allow me to restate them.”

I glanced around wearily, acutely aware of the soft tapping coming from the registrar’s bench. The entire court had their focus placed on Mr Li, as if the declaration of all my crimes would be the true beginning of the trial.

“Civil disobedience. Theft of state secrets. Complicity. Conspiracy against the state. The weight of these crimes must not be underestimated, Your Honour, especially when they involve state matters.”

I’d heard those words many times by now, but each declaration left the void within me growing larger and larger. I could not believe, sometimes, that it was I who had made multiple scientific discoveries in my lifetime, I who had invented the technology that changed the world, and I who had watched it all fall apart as my drive to create slowly fizzled out. I was just an empty shell, cold and abandoned, injected with the rose-tinted memories of another. Perhaps what the plaintiff was saying was true. Perhaps it wasn’t. It all depended on how you looked at it.

And yet, I still remembered it like it was yesterday. It was a sweltering summer day, roads jammed to bursting point with car horns blasting through the air. Not even the cold drink which lay melting in my hand could stave off the oppressive heat on the rooftop restaurant I sat in. The sun beat down on me, feeling like it would sear my skin off and roast my insides whole.

It was then that the door swung open. A face I had been anticipating came strolling past the tables like he owned the place, walking with a swagger only he could pull off.

“Yo! Haven’t seen you in some time, Kev.”

“I think there’s a reason for that, Wang,”

He chuckled. “Now don’t be like that. You know what? Since this is the first time in months we’re seeing each other, lunch is my treat. You haven’t ordered yet, have you?”

“Alright. Be straight with me,” I cut in. “You disappear suddenly one day, leaving no clues as to where you’ve gone. You don’t answer any of my calls or texts. And now you show up, saying you’ve got some sort of idea? What happened to all of our previous projects? We haven’t been making much progress recently, but that doesn’t give you an excuse to just drop off the radar.”

“Alright, alright,” Wang held his hands up. “I know you and the rest of the team have got a lotta questions. I promise they’ll be answered in time. But for now, just hear me out.”

“Oh no. I’ve had too many of these conversations with you. You’re coming back with me to the lab and explaining exactly why we haven’t heard from you for nearly 2 months.”

“I’ll do that! But later. This really is something completely different from everything we’ve done before.”

“I’ve heard that too. We’re leaving.” I started to get up from my seat, but I felt a hand grab onto my arm.

“*Brain chips!*” He hissed, then immediately glanced around wearily as if he was afraid of anyone overhearing.

“What?”

“Sit down, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

So I did. Wang told me all about how he had come across some company I had never heard of that was developing chips which could allow a person to access not only ordinary services like the Internet but information directly from the brain, like memories and feelings.

I didn’t believe him, of course.

“Are you crazy? That’s just not possible.”

“Don’t believe me? Then meet me near *that* place in two days.”

“Right. Goodbye.” I was never going to do that. Not after all the ungrounded fantasies he had pitched to me in the past.

And yet, two days later, I watched as Wang approached me, barely visible under the flickering street lamps. He took me through the twists and turns of the back alleys, always making sure to stay cloaked in shadow. Perhaps he was afraid of someone seeing us.

We arrived at a run-down building. Each surface was splotted with brown patches of rust, extending from its unstable foundations to the boarded-up windows and finally the crumbling roof, the hole punching through visible even from the entrance. Wang grabbed onto a dusty door handle, braced himself, and pulled. A horrible screech pierced through the air as the steel door scratched against the uneven pavement, arousing in me the worry that someone might be listening.

The dormant, dusty atmosphere inside accentuated the unrelenting drizzle of a strange black substance, each droplet the sound of a sledgehammer when it hit the floor. The shadows around me warped and bent, presenting to me strange, barely visible shapes that would disappear not a moment later. I dared not point my flashlight in those directions for fear of those shapes being anything more than a mirage in the dark.

All of it lay in the largest room of the warehouse. Fluorescent lights illuminated a motley gathering of workbenches and enigmatic machinery, each bench covered in a mess of tools and small objects. Workers in white coats and masks flitted between tables like dragonflies, chattering to each other in hushed tones. They must have heard my footsteps ringing out through the hollow room, for their heads snapped up towards me at an unnatural speed.

"Relax. This is the guy I told you about." Most stopped staring, the ones who didn't quietly coerced by their coworkers to continue. "Come on. I've got quite a few things to show you."

And show me they did. They were of course only in the early development stages and in the process of assembling the first working prototype, but I don't know what seized me in the moment I scanned through their blueprints. Hadn't I been cautious enough during all my years of being a scientist? Shouldn't I go out on a limb and invest my time into this project, shady as it was? My common sense screamed at me to hurl the incomplete prototype at the rough stone floor beneath me and walk out the door.

"I'll discuss this with the team tomorrow," I found myself saying instead, even as I began to regret my decision. I longed to correct my mistake while it was still fresh, to back out while I still could. But my mouth sealed itself shut whenever I tried to speak.

The next day I was met with open mouths and shocked expressions as I tried to convince the team to go along with this project. I fully understood. It was the stuff of science fiction, but more than that it was an idea of Wang's. Maybe they'd had enough of his nonsense, as I had. Until this had happened, that is.

I showed them the plans. Some were sceptical. Some nodded, thinking that it might be feasible. Some objected vehemently, arguing that pursuing such a project would be a waste of the lab's time.

Wang coughed. "We have someone willing to fund us."

Wang gave us no details on our mysterious financial sponsor, only that he went by Liang and that he previously funded that group of developers in the warehouse before the project was passed on to us. He was giving us a handsome sum to make this work, Wang had said. So we had better do it.

It wasn't easy, trying to create a chip that could somehow directly insert information into your brain like we were trying to do. Even with the data we already had, we were a long way from making the neurochip (the name we gave our project) into a fully-fledged, revolutionary piece of technology.

We failed, many times. The day we finally got the thing working was the day I felt that the invisible chains I had been unwittingly forging suddenly shattered into a million insignificant pieces, powerless against the liberating glow that came from seeing the fruits of years of work.

I can still remember knocking a wine glass against Wang's, celebrating what I thought would be the beginning of a bright new era. How foolish I was, thinking that the neurochip would only help society.

It took me a while to comprehend the news after we had released the neurochips. They started out small at first. People bumping into each other while using the chip, immersed in the virtual world. I simply told them that we would be working on implementing more advanced safety features. That quietened the media, for a while at least.

But it would only get worse from there. People were beginning to shut themselves in their homes, intent on escaping the real world forever. Therapy would fix them up quickly, I told myself. It wasn't something we could really deal with.

Then, it happened. The first death. A young woman had been using the neurochip while crossing the road. Something she saw caused her to stop right in the middle of the crossing, just as a drunk driver came barreling down the lane. She did not survive.

The media was all over us by then, encroaching on us like a pack of savage wolves who hadn't eaten in months. It was becoming increasingly dangerous for anyone I knew to be seen outside. Every day was spent fending off hordes of angry reporters as they attempted to barge onto my property. A sepulchral gloom had settled over the lab, stifling the last dregs of creative spirit within us. Windows were boarded up. More than twice the amount of guards were stationed outside now.

The news kept rolling in. Someone had manipulated the information network to scam people out of their own memories. Others had begun using it to cause harm, now armed with a device that could hack into someone's brain. It was on the day of that article's posting when a suited man came knocking at the door. He was from the government.

I never thought it would come to this. I thought I was doing a favour for the world, making it a better place. But now...

The government hounded us to do something about the chip when criminals had used it to bust a large police operation, but it was out of our hands now. We had lost control of our own invention the second we sold the first unit.

It was a few days later when the government showed up again in the form of police officers.

"Can I help you?" I asked. Behind me, dust clung to every visible surface, a faint odour forever wafting through the room. I didn't know what it was. I had only the empty chairs of my team members to ask.

Wordlessly, one raised a piece of paper grasped in his hand. *Arrest warrant.*

The characters warped and shifted, scurrying around the page like a thousand ants in a dying nest. The officers dissolved into formless blobs of black and blue. I realised I was crying.

"...and you are sure of the authenticity of your evidence, Mr Li?" Suddenly the memories blur and churn like a twister ripping through the American midwest, resolving into a brilliant monochrome thread stretching out to the end of time. There is a sickening twang as the thread snaps, and I find myself standing in the courtroom once more.

"Quite sure, Your Honour. Evidence of the correspondence between Dr Chen and Mr Wang came directly from the latter's mobile device, lawfully seized by law enforcement, of course." Li adjusts his coat, a bead of sweat crawling down his temple. "Allow me to repeat for clarity. From the content of these emails, we know that Dr Chen was fully aware of Mr Wang's abuse of the neurochip and chose to either assist him or stay complicit."

A sigh escapes my mouth. It's all hopeless. In no time, I would be thrown into some dank cell, left to rot for years—

There is a sudden knock at the door, the attention now focused on it enough to burn through the polished wood. The order in the courtroom shatters as the door swings open and a boot clacks onto the wooden floor.

“Your Honour!” the man declares in a French accent, languid syllables sliding over each other. “I wish to put myself forward as a witness of this case.”

The judge stares, perplexed that someone would barge into the court proceedings. “Neither side has called on you as such, sir. I must ask that you leave the room.”

“I understand, Your Honour, but I believe that I could offer evidence in the defense of Mr Chen.”

“Then you will understand that we must follow procedure. Again, I ask that you leave the premises. Immediately.”

“Wait, Your Honour.” one of my lawyers objects. “If he offers evidence in defence of my client, then I believe that he should be allowed to speak.”

“You aren't allowed to introduce witnesses this late into the trial, Mr Qian.” The judge interjects.

“I'm aware of that, Your Honour. But the trial is nearly finished anyhow. There would be no harm in introducing a new witness.”

The judge squints his eyes, betraying only a few measly water droplets from the storm raging inside his mind. “Very well.” he sweeps his hand towards the witness box. “Swear him in.”

Hushed conversation surfaces by the viewing gallery, quick glances being shot at the new witness as he places his palm on his chest, muttering an oath. Li is chattering with his colleagues, clearly unhappy with this new development, but he remains silent.

“I, Sienz E. Zucks, do solemnly, sincerely and truthfully declare and affirm that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

“Very good. Let us continue.” The judge turns back to the rest of the court, eyes surveying the expressions of all,

“Mr Zucks, you were a close associate of Mr Chen's during your time working on the neurochip, correct?” My lawyer asks.

“That is correct.”

“And during that time, did you ever hear Dr Chen express a desire to misuse this technology in any way?”

“No. He would never. In fact, Dr Chen was perhaps the most aware of the dangers of the neurochip, and brought the topic up frequently during our meetings.”

“I see. Did he have any contact with Mr Wang Haoyu after the latter's sudden withdrawal from the project?”

“No, but he was adamant that he do so. I saw Dr Chen trying many times to contact Mr Wang, especially when news of neurochip abuse came to us. He did not succeed, as far as the team and I know.”

“I see. What would you say of this, then?” The evidence was brought up, and Sienz squinted his eyes trying to make sense of it.

“It is fake,” he declared. “We did not use those messaging and email platforms, for agreed-upon reasons of inconvenience. Additionally, I do not believe that it was truly Dr Chen writing those messages. He would always type with proper grammar and spelling. I see none of that here.”

Heads turned by the viewing gallery, quiet discussion drifting throughout the room.

“I see,” The judge closed his eyes, contemplating some hidden matter. “It appears I have a verdict to deliver, then.”

My breath caught in my throat. So soon? Had Sienz’s testimony not been enough? A lump rolled down my neck as I fixed my eyes on the judge’s bench up above. The heat in the room thickened into a physical, palpable substance, entrapping my arms in an alien stasis and sealing my mouth shut.

The judge raised his gavel, levelling a determined gaze at the courtroom. “Your verdict is…”

The Village Off the Grid: A Family's Journey to Self-Sufficiency

ESF Sha Tin College, Ngai, Martin - 14

Perched among the verdant Wushan Mountains, the remote village of Liusu had subsisted for centuries in near isolation. With its sloping hillsides terraced like intricate steps, the villagers cultivated rice, potatoes, and tea on the narrow, fertile plots carved from steep mountainsides.

Each grey dawn, Elder Zhang Wei would emerge from his stone cottage into mist-shrouded fields, breathing in the damp earthy scents of dewy soil and woodsmoke drifting on mountain breezes. Taking a long draught of his neighbor's strongly brewed tea, Wei said farewell to his wife Meilan within, already tending their morning meal over the crackling hearth fire.

As the skies slowly lightened, terraced fields came into view below – a patchwork of greens winding up the hills. Wei's brother Bao and nephew Ming likely worked tirelessly among the potato rows since before first light, harvesting the final crops before the coming frosts. In the distance, towering Wushan peaks emerged from swirling mists, ageless sentinels protecting the isolated community.

In the late 1990s, China's economic reforms brought development even to remote areas. A new high-voltage power line was constructed, stringing overhead towers along the treacherous mountain road connecting Liusu to the burgeoning township below. At last, the village was linked to the provincial electrical grid. Fluorescent bulbs and electric rice cookers began appearing in homes. For younger villagers like Ming, raised on tales of oil lamps and backbreaking labour, it felt like magic. Some elders are worried the change may loosen traditional ties to the ancestral land.

However, the grid connection proved fragile. In 2008, a powerful typhoon named Fengwan unleashed torrential rains and winds exceeding 150 km/h upon Sichuan. Over 90% of the power lines in the mountainous region were downed. In Liusu, the poles anchoring the line into the cliffside gave way, sending thick cables snaking wildly down the slope. The damage would take utility crews from the capital city of Chengdu weeks to repair, leaving everyone shivering in darkness once more.

During that dark, desperate time, the elder villagers reflected on their ancestors, who had thrived for generations without grid power. "We cannot rely on outsiders to restore our lights," said Zhang Wei, a 68-year-old farmer. "Next time the weather strikes, we may be left in the dark for good." He proposed installing a micro-hydro turbine at a waterfall higher up to generate some power locally as repairs were made. Others thought solar panels or small wind turbines could supplement their needs.

The township approved a testing period. To the surprise of engineers, the village's patchwork system worked seamlessly once reconnected to the main grid. Liusu's power was now 20% renewable. At a village meeting the following spring, the elders took a historic vote – to fully transition Liusu off the grid and develop renewable self-sufficiency. The younger families worried over the challenges but were inspired by the elders' pragmatism and community spirit.

One such family was the Lius – Li Hua, her husband Chen, and their newborn baby Jia. They lived simply in Li Hua's ancestral farmhouse, a stone cottage tucked into a forested ravine. Without their share of the grid subsidy, finances would be tight. That autumn, as Jia cried fretfully, Chen had an epiphany – what if they could pasteurise water locally, avoiding contaminated sources?

Li Hua gathered glass jars and metal salvaged from the last harvest. Her careful soldering and Chen's drafting yielded a contraption that concentrated sunlight using a Fresnel lens onto a sealed vessel of water. Within hours, temperatures safely surpassed 60°C, killing any bacteria or parasites. Jia could now drink and bathe in sterilised water.

Word spread of the "sun heater," as locals called it. Soon, every home had one. Meanwhile, as the seasons turned, the village's renewable systems expanded. Micro-hydro from five locations is now fed into a mini-grid, with solar and two small wind turbines adding daytime and nighttime power. Batteries stored excess for cloudy periods. Energy efficiency solutions like LEDs and better insulation lowered demand.

By the mid-2010s, the autonomous grid had grown more robust than the initial township network. College interns flocked to study Liusu's model, and engineers from across China came to replicate its success in impoverished rural areas. The village economy also diversified, with technical education and ecotourism supplementing agriculture. Li Hua's startup focused on large-scale water pasteurisation and solar distillation for disaster relief.

Today, a new generation enjoys the fruits of self-reliance in Liusu. Young Jia, now 22 years old, volunteers as a community organiser over summer breaks from her renewable energy engineering degree. On this crisp autumn evening, leaning on the very farmhouse fence her mother crafted the sun heater beside all those years ago, she reflects on the journey that little family invention sparked. Change takes visionary people working together, she thinks, smiling as lanterns flicker to life across the emerging night skyline – powered by the enduring spirit and ingenuity of this very special village.

Conversations with Èrláng

ESF Sha Tin College, Szeto, Millie – 14

I met the War God in a parking lot on a rainy day. He was having a smoke. The glass-green liquid sleet outside blew in like breath.

I took a seat on his left, my jeans melting into the sodden curb.

He sliced the air with the rustling of a newspaper, ink characters illuminated only by his winking cigarette cherry. Two of his eyes were stagnant, but the third, elevated, scanned the page like a darting fish.

Èrláng, I said. *I ask of you a question. In all your infinite justice and heavenly righteousness, could you grant me an answer?*

Fire away, he said.

How's the cigarette?

He turned the page over.

Genocide in Sudan. Hundreds of thousands dead. More on the way.

And yet here sat a War God with a steaming brand.

Don't you get embarrassed? I said. *We – our countrymen invented gunpowder, after all.*

A phantom shake of the head, perhaps. Or the breeze. Either way, something made his long ears swing by his shoulders.

We use it for war, I said for emphasis.

What else would you use it for? The lone eye snapped to attention.

I shrugged. *Those Tang dynasty alchemists made it by accident, right? It was such an innocuous invention. They'd probably be bunned if they saw what it was being used for right now.*

The third eye rolled backwards in his head til all I could see was an ivory slit. *Every invention is innocuous until it's not. We are an old civilization, so we are responsible for everything that comes after. We are an origin of fault.*

Do you suppose anything good came out of it?

White wisps circled about his smoking mouth. *In their quest for immortality, they found the opposite. Gunpowder poisoned the human race. You lose the intimacy of killing another human being when it's all point and click-click-bang.* He said. *As long as man has free will he is free to hurt all those that he likes. But if he slits another man's throat he feels the warmth of the blood trickle down his skin; the knife feels heavy in his hand, its belly full with the blood of another. Even without a tool man is free to bash in the brains of those who irritate him, but he must first raise his fist with intent. You break their skull and feel it crunch – you feel the fragility of a human life and you feel responsible for it. Now you point a pea-shooter at babes and wives and mow them all down like grass. It's guns all the way down. You don't even have to look. You can cross your legs and press a button that sets the world on fire. There's not a single shield I own that can stop a nuclear bomb.*

Artillery can be used to defend, I objected not so much in true opposition as to kill the silence.

Defend against what?

I couldn't speak.

You don't shoot at snakes and dogs. You don't drop a bomb on tornadoes.

But you are War, I said lamely.

He scoffed. *You are mistaken. I am not War. I am no horseman.*

I flushed in shame and averted my gaze. When I looked again, he was gone, leaving a light where he'd been sitting. I didn't think about stamping it out.

—

The next time I met him was outside a convenience store. He had a smoke and the paper like last time.

It's you again, I remarked. *Is the smoke good?*

It is as good as it can be.

So, War God. How much of everything around the world do you see?

The third eye winked, but the rest of his face remained unchanging. *I see everything.*

How does the human race look? I asked. *Ugly?*

He sighed. One of exasperation or satisfaction, I didn't know. *Man is an animal that learned to dream. You are all quite hopeless.*

We are not hopeless! I protested. *We've come so far! We have invented paper and compasses and porcelain. Our hands turn the world.*

And yet the world turns without you, he said.

We have made myths and folktales and monuments! Ones like yours!

He whistled through his teeth. *Then you love to lay waste to your beauty.*

We discovered fire —

The fire that warned Ying Zhèng as he burned book after book.

After some silence, I said — *I wonder why is it that old Chinese poems don't mention love. It's all the moon. The moon, snow, and sometimes alcohol.*

You are silly. A mother sits with her son rubbing his back from yè bàn to jī míng because he is afraid to go to war when the sun crowns the sky and you say we know nothing of love. He spat out a string of smoke. *Hòu Yì would not ascend without his wife and yet —*

My mistake. I meant that – I stopped to think. I suppose then that it is modern mankind that lacks love?

He rolled his eyes, first the regular two and then the all-seeing third. I was shocked at the sight, how human he seemed then.

A milkless mother suckles a half-blind babe in a torrent of shrapnel. Make no mistake, man. If anything, love is all that will save you. It is all that you have. It is the antithesis of modern warfare – that and diplomacy. Lots and lots of diplomacy.

I suppose it's true that the history of man is the history of war.

It is the history of all sorts of things, he said comfortingly.

Man makes conflict, I muttered, a newly turned cynic.

Man makes everything. Man makes dancing, paper lanterns and silk baby shoes. Man makes a card for his mother and a tie for his father and kisses them both on the cheek. Man makes a pretty porcelain bowl and a magic coin that tells sailors the way. Man makes names for colors that don't need them. Man digs a grave for a goldfish. Man makes love to his spouse, stories for his kids and laughs all the time, all night and morning long. Man makes a nuclear bomb that makes the sky go dark. Man smiles and kills and loves and rapes and makes and destroys.

No gods out there? I asked, hoping for something.

You make your own and kill the others.

I slumped.

Humans are their best and worst invention, he said.

What's second best? I asked, noticing that his eyes were glassing over.

He tapped his chin thoughtfully. *Tea.*

Not tobacco?

He snorted smoke tendrils like a dragon. *Hardly.*

I have a question again, I admitted.

He puffed in response.

If you aren't a War God, what are you?

His mouth worked around the cigarette.

I think you may have a fundamental lack of understanding on the difference between a 'war god' and a 'warrior god'.

What do you mean? I did not wish to embarrass myself, although I probably had already, and had been doing this entire time.

A war god is the embodiment of war. A warrior god is a god that just so happens to have waged war. The cigarette spark flicked up and down in the gloom, springing ash that fell, as snowflakes do, down to the ground.

I understand. I didn't.

His third eye flitted thoughtfully. *I haven't been at war in a thousand years.*

What sort of warrior god are you?

More snowflakes. *I'm all sorts of things.*

In the next second, he was gone. His cigarette sizzled, burning a black hole in the asphalt. I was afraid to smother it.

—

I met him in the same parking lot as before. It was 11 at night on a cold New Year's Eve. I knew it was him when I saw the signature flare dancing in the wet air, clenched between his teeth. I took off my raincoat, newly glossy from the shower outside, and went towards him.

He nodded as I approached. *The cigarette is good*, he said.

I was pleasantly shocked. *You answered before I could ask!*

You ask the same question every time.

I have another one for you, I said. *Are we properly, truly done for?*

He hesitated. *Mankind is stupid and contradictory*, he said. *You are both the salvo and the salve.*

Oh, wordplay! I exclaimed. *You must think you're so clever – you make it sound so simple.*

It is not, he admitted. *All the beautiful things you have made are crying. Man invents himself. Your creativity will be your demise.*

We could all let each other be so happy, I mourned. *But we don't want to.*

That is the fundamental incorrectness of the human race.

He rolled up his sleeve to check his watch. As the seconds hand made its constant revolvment, it made a sound like a river. The thin ringing of a bell sounded within. Sū Sòng's water clock came to mind.

What are our countrymen doing these days? He asked.

We... We are making no-carbon factories. Solar panels.

He closed his eyes. *How nice. Won't you save as much as you can?*

I hugged my knees to my chest. *I will not be idle as the world breaks. We should not forget what we lose when we destroy each other. We are too beautiful to not remember.*

All three of his eyes turned misty. *Humans do so like to be remembered. Look now, the fireworks are starting.*

Lotuses bloomed on the horizon, enlightening the darkness.

Happy New Year, Èrláng.

I turned to him. Nothing but a rolled up newspaper, death toll after another, and a still-orange cigarette stub. I took a puff of it.

“Guns all the way down.”

Rwanda, Sudan, Palestine.

“Won’t you save as much as you can?”

Nanking, Yemen.

I stood up and put out his cigarette in the snotgreen rain.

Lights in the Sky

ESF West Island School, Hyde, Henry – 14

Within the confines of the crates, I waited patiently for the moment of liberation—eager to unfurl vibrant colours into the vast, infinite canvas. As the fuse ignited with a spark, bang, I unleashed my colours into the sky. The big moment I waited for so long, this is it. Pink, and blue danced with green, lightly painting the sky with breathtaking patterns. The crowd below exploded with rapture, voices of joy filled the air. Even from such an elevation, I could hear the sound of celebration, feel the elation—it was what I had waited all my life for. Then, slowly, fragments of my body started to disappear... But, I had a wish—to understand how I was made. As my spirit dissipated into the night sky, carried away by air-borne currents, I felt a gentle tug pulling me back to a pivotal moment in the past. It was as if the universe itself granted me one final opportunity to revisit the birthplace of the fireworks. Transported through the fabric of time, I found myself viewing Lin standing there on that fateful evening. The calm riverbank stretched before us, bathed in the soft embrace of the fading sun. As the day drew to a close, the sky, and the sun transformed into a canvas of breathtaking colours, with streaks of gold and crimson blending seamlessly on the horizon.

Lin, lost in his thoughts, strolled along the riverbank, his footsteps gently rubbing against the grass. He paused for a moment, his gaze fixed upon the magnificence of the picturesque sky. The warm glow of the setting sun cast a serene atmosphere over the landscape, a calming sense of tranquillity and harmony. It was as if time itself had slowed, allowing Lin to taste this magical moment. He was lost in deep contemplation, as the sun exited the horizon.

As Lin stood near the river, his eyes fixed on the mesmerizing scenery of the twinkling stars above, he couldn't help but feel a connection with an overwhelming sense of awe and wonder. The night sky, with its vastness and beauty, seemed to hold an infinite number of secrets and mysteries waiting to be unveiled. It was as if each star was a tiny flicker of inspiration, igniting curiosity within his soul. In that profound moment, he made a vow to himself, determined to embark on a creative journey that would capture and reflect the enchantment of the heavens. With unyielding dedication and an unwavering passion, Lin set out on a mission to bring his vision to life. He immersed himself in the study of astronomy, astrophysics, and the ancient mythologies that wove tales of constellations. He delved into the works of great astronomers and artists who had sought to depict the magnificence of the night sky throughout history.

Within the confines of his workshop, Lin immersed himself in a world of creativity and ingenuity. The air crackled with anticipation as he meticulously arranged an array of powders, carefully measured and selected for their vibrant colours and unique properties. His workbench had an almost infinite numbers of tools and instruments, each serving a specific purpose in his quest to capture the essence of the heavens. Lin's journey began with the study of pyrotechnic principles. He delved into the intricacies of combustion, understanding the delicate balance between fuel and oxidizer that would ignite his creations into brilliant life. He experimented with various mixtures, observing the effects of different chemicals and their reactions to heat and pressure. The room was adorned with sketches and diagrams, each one representing a vision that Lin sought to bring to fruition. He sketched elaborate patterns, envisioning how they would dance across the night sky. He meticulously calculated the timing and synchronization of his fireworks, ensuring that each burst of light and crackle of sound would harmonize into a breathtaking performance. Lin's determination and passion fuelled his tireless pursuit of perfection. He spent countless nights testing and refining his designs, never settling for anything less than extraordinary. He sought inspiration not only from the wonders of the sky above but also from the world around him. The graceful sway of flowers in the wind, the flow of ocean waves, and the vibrant hues of a sunset all found their way into his artistic vision. As the days turned into weeks, Lin's creations began to take shape. He carefully crafted intricate shells, meticulously packing them with his specially formulated mixtures. Each shell was a work of art in itself, a vessel poised to explode with beauty and wonder.

One fateful night, as Lin prepared for his most ambitious display yet, a mysterious visitor arrived at his workshop. The stranger's cloak draped in shadows, leaving his face concealed beneath the depths of darkness. Lin's curiosity piqued, and he cautiously approached the enigmatic figure. The stranger stood tall and motionless, creating an aura of intrigue that seemed to make the air heavier. Lin's eyes scanned the stranger's cloak, captivated by the

intricate patterns woven into the fabric. Each thread seemed to hold a story, a tale of ancient wisdom and forgotten magic.

"Who are thou?" Lin asked, his voice laced with a mixture of curiosity and caution. The stranger's voice resonated through the workshop, carrying a hint of melancholy. "I am a wanderer of worlds, a seeker of forgotten truths," they replied cryptically. "I have heard whispers of thy fireworks, of their brilliance and artistry. I have journeyed far to witness thy mastery."

Lin's heart quickened with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. To have someone of such mysterious origins acknowledge his work was both humbling and exhilarating. He gestured for the stranger to step closer, inviting them into his sanctuary of creativity.

"What brings thine here tonight?" Lin inquired, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. The stranger's cloak rustled as he took a step forward, drawing closer to Lin's workbench.

"I have a proposition for thee," he said, his voice filled with urgency. "I possess a key, a key that unlocks the door to untold wonders. With thine skill and my guidance, we can create fireworks that will not only captivate the senses but transport the very souls of those who witness them."

Lin's curiosity intensified, his mind racing with the possibilities that lay before him. The stranger's words resonated with a promise of unlocking realms of artistic expression he had only dreamt of. He glanced at the sketches and diagrams adorning the walls of his workshop, knowing that his journey had led him to this moment.

"I accept thine proposition," Lin said, his voice filled with determination. "Together, let us ignite the heavens with a spectacle that will transcend the boundaries of the ordinary."

From that night forward, Lin and the mysterious stranger embarked on a journey fuelled by their shared passion for fireworks and the pursuit of extraordinary beauty. The stranger revealed himself to be a sage, a guardian of ancient knowledge and forgotten arts. He unveiled to Lin the secrets of alchemy, teaching him how to infuse his fireworks with the essence of the stars. Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, as Lin and the sage collaborated most fruitfully together. They experimented with powders, harnessing the power of stardust and moonlight to create fireworks. They crafted shells decorated with intricate constellations, each one representing a cosmic story waiting to be told. As their partnership deepened, Lin began to glimpse the face behind the stranger's cloak. The sage's eyes sparkled with ancient wisdom, and his voice carried echoes of forgotten realms. They shared tales of worlds beyond imagination, of fireworks that had once illuminated the skies of distant lands. Under the sage's guidance, Lin's fireworks evolved into breathtaking displays of wonder and enchantment.

At times, audiences gathered around to witness these spectacles, felt their spirits soar, as if carried on the wings of cosmic forces. Yet, amidst the awe-inspiring beauty, Lin couldn't shake a lingering sense of unease. The sage's origins and true motivations remained veiled in secrecy, leaving him with unanswered questions. But the allure of their collaboration and the transformative power of their creations kept Lin distracted, driving him to push the boundaries of his craft further. Little did Lin know that their partnership would soon face its greatest test...

Jealous of the Lin, the sage conspired to claim his celestial alchemy for his own nefarious purposes. As the day of the grand display approached, tension hung in the air. Lin and the sage worked tirelessly, pouring their hearts and souls into their final creation.

The night of the grand display arrived, and a crowd gathered in eager anticipation. Lin's heart swelled with a mixture of excitement and apprehension as he prepared to unveil their masterpiece. The workshop buzzed with activity as final preparations were made, each step taken with meticulous care. The air crackled with electricity, charged with the collective anticipation of the spectators. As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and crimson, Lin stood at the centre of the gathering. He raised his hand, a signal to begin the spectacle. The crowd fell into a hushed silence, their eyes fixed on the dark canvas above them. With a flick of his wrist, Lin ignited the first firework, sending it soaring into the night sky. A burst of vibrant colours erupted, painting streaks of red, blue, and gold against the inky darkness. The crowd gasped in awe as the display unfolded, each explosion synchronized with the rhythm of their beating hearts. The fireworks danced with precision and grace,

weaving intricate patterns across the heavens. They formed cascading waterfalls of shimmering sparks, mimicking the gentle flow of a river. They burst forth like blooming flowers, their petals spreading in a kaleidoscope of light. Each explosion was a testament to the boundless possibilities of human imagination.

The audience was enraptured, their gazes locked upon the display. Whispers of wonder rippled through the crowd, mingling with the crackling of fireworks and the collective gasps of delight. Lin's heart swelled with pride as he witnessed the effect his creation had on the spectators, their faces illuminated with childlike wonder. The grand display continued, each firework surpassing the brilliance of the last. Lin had poured his soul into the design, infusing each explosion with his love for the craft. The fireworks told a story, a narrative of dreams and aspirations, of triumphs and conflicts. They evoked emotions and memories, tugging at the heartstrings of those who beheld their splendour.

Time seemed to stand still as the grand finale approached. Lin's hands trembled with a mix of anticipation and nervousness. He had saved his most audacious creation for this moment, a firework that would leave an indelible mark on the night sky and in the hearts of all who witnessed it. With a deep breath, Lin ignited the final firework. The explosion that followed was unlike anything the crowd had ever seen before. A colossal burst of light erupted, illuminating the entire night sky in a dazzling display of colours. Ribbons of bright blues, vibrant purples, and radiant greens intertwined, creating a celestial tapestry that seemed to defy the laws of physics. Gasps of astonishment echoed through the crowd as the firework transformed into a mesmerizing spectacle. It shaped itself into intricate forms—a soaring phoenix, a celestial dragon, and even a cascading waterfall that seemed to flow through the air. The audience was captivated, their eyes fixed on the mesmerizing creation that seemed to possess a life of its own. As the final firework gradually faded, leaving behind a trail of twinkling embers, the crowd erupted into thunderous applause. Cheers and whistles filled the air, mingling with the sound of clapping hands. Lin stood amidst the commotion, his heart overflowing with a sense of accomplishment and fulfilment.

As Lin walked back home, his mind replayed the excitement of the grand display, he heard a rustle behind him. The bushes whispered warnings to Lin, and the trees stood still, being unwilling spectators of the forthcoming tragedy. Before Lin could react, a strong hand clasped over his mouth, and he was forcefully dragged into the shadows. Lin's heart raced with fear as he struggled against his captor, only to come face to face with a familiar figure—the mysterious stranger who had guided him on his pyrotechnic journey. Confusion and betrayal mingled in Lin's eyes as he stared at his partner. His eyes started to swell as tears flooded his eyes. It was a shocking revelation to discover that the enigmatic figure he had trusted and admired was, in fact, his betrayer. The stranger's face twisted with a mixture of guilt and determination.

'I apologise. For soothe, I sincerely do. However, I need to do this... We are at war, and the fireworks can be manifested in a way for us to win'.

The sage revealed that he had been consumed by envy and a desire for recognition. He had grown resentful of Lin's talent and the acclaim he had garnered. In a moment of weakness, he succumbed to his darkest impulses and decided to steal Lin's ideas for the grand display, believing that they would finally grant him the recognition he craved. As Lin listened to the confession, a wave of disappointment washed over him. He had believed in the power of their partnership, and now that trust lay shattered. Yet, amidst the betrayal, Lin's resilient spirit flickered to life. He refused to let his dreams be extinguished by this setback. With a determined gaze, Lin confronted his partner, urging him to reconsider his actions. He reminded him of the beauty of collaboration and the strength that lay in working together. He appealed to the spark of creativity that had once burned within his partner's heart, hoping to rekindle it and find a way to salvage their shared vision. Moved by Lin's words and burdened by the weight of his actions, the sage slowly began to realize the gravity of his mistake. He felt remorse for the pain he had caused and recognized the damage his envy had wrought. At that moment, a glimmer of redemption emerged. Together, Lin and the sage embarked on a journey of reconciliation and collaboration. They spent countless nights discussing ideas, refining concepts, and rebuilding the trust that had been lost. The sage, now consumed by a genuine desire for growth and improvement, immersed himself in the art of pyrotechnics, seeking to refine his skills and find his unique voice. As the months passed, their efforts bore fruit. The grand display, initially tainted by betrayal, transformed into a symbol of redemption and unity. Lin and his partner worked side by side, combining their talents and ideas to create a fireworks' spectacle that surpassed anything they had ever imagined. The night of the grand display arrived once

again, and this time, the crowd gathered not just in anticipation of a spectacular show, but also to witness the renewed partnership between Lin and his once-estranged collaborator. Their hearts were filled with hope and a shared belief in the power of forgiveness and second chances. As the fireworks soared into the heavens, illuminating the night sky with a breathtaking dance of light and sound, the audience marvelled at the seamless harmony of two creative souls reunited in pursuit of a shared dream. Lin's heart swelled with a mixture of joy and gratitude as he witnessed the beauty that had emerged from the ashes of betrayal. The grand display became a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of forgiveness. Lin's partner had learned the value of humility and the importance of collaboration, while Lin himself discovered the strength to forgive and rebuild what was once lost.

Transported through the fabric of time, I found my spirit dissipated into the night sky. A light orange with a tinge of red smile blossomed across my face. My wish has been granted. Now, I could die in contentment...

The Invention

ESF West Island School, Ng, Kai-Ying – 14

In a porcelain teacup there were bits of dark dried leaves swimming in a clear, coffee-coloured liquid. In that liquid, there reflected a teenage boy with eyes full of wonder.

'So, this is the so-called drink "tea" my father has told me about,' Marco surmised as he took a sip. The moment the tea touched his tongue, he flinched and felt that he had just swallowed a desert camel.

"What do you think Marco? Lovely, room isn't it?" Niccolò Polo smirked at son who was looking rather green. Then he took a big swing of his drink while Marco silently pondered how his father was able to have seconds.

Marco and his father, Niccolò Polo and his uncle, Maffeo Polo travelled from Venice carrying bags full of inventions, mysterious wonders and fulfilling stories to China. They suffered through countless troubles such as harsh weather, savage bandits, and getting through The Gobi Desert. They did it all for one purpose: to deliver a package for The Pope to Kublai Khan. Marco heard much of this great ruler. Kublai Khan was quite well known for being the grandson of Genghis Khan and for accomplishing his grandfather's dream of uniting all China. What interested Marco the most was that The Great Khan made an invention. Marco longed to know about this invention. What could it possibly be? What did Kublai Khan invent? He was determined to ask Kublai Khan about it when he met him. Now that they were moments away from meeting Kublai Khan himself, Marco could feel the excitement prowling through his veins.

Marco surveyed the waiting room he, his father and his uncle were sent to. It was a lovely room indeed. Embedded in gold, decorative Moutan Peony designs bloomed all over silk curtains as well as the carpet beneath their feet. Beautiful and Large, the porcelain vases that had drawings of mythical beasts dancing in a coat of shiny, blue pigment were placed around the room. Two musicians were plucking the strings of unknown instruments while three dancers moved to the beat of the rhythm like the flutters of a butterfly.

In the middle of the room was a table with three stools which Marco, Niccolò and Maffeo Polo sat on. Resting on the table was a white sack with the package inside, ready for Kublai Khan.

"Pupà, what was the thing you were going to give to Kublai Khan?" Marco curiously eyed the white sack that his dad carried. From the very beginning of the journey, Niccolò Polo guarded that bag like a lion, like his life depended on it. With a cheeky smile, Niccolò Polo put a finger to his lips.

"Marco, Marky, Marcs, we were sworn to secrecy by the pope, your dad and I! If we had shown you what's in the bag before we gave it to Kublai Khan, certainly The Great Khan would chop both mine and your dad's and the pope's head off!" Marco's uncle, Maffeo, joked. Marco cringed as he watched his father and uncle laugh heartily, but he also took it as an opportunity to pour the rest of his bitter drink into the soil of a nearby plant when both his father and uncle were too distracted to see.

"Seriously though, Marco. We can't show you what's in the bag just yet." Maffeo responded while shaking his head. Defeated and helpless, Marco sighed and slumped his head on the table with an antagonised face. On the other hand, Niccolò was digging in another sack. Marco caught a glimpse at the objects in the sack and fully turned his attention to his father. Marco eyed his papa as if he was a magician with a magic hat, pulling rabbits out of it. Marco always knew that whatever came out next from that magic hat, would always be more exciting than the last. It was always a new invention that Marco had never seen before.

From the bag, Niccolò pulled out a square, wooden board with markings, and then a metal, spoon-like object. He placed the items on either side of each other at the centre of the table. Marco, who had an interest in inventions, was already leaning on the table, observing the pieces so closely that his nose was only millimetres apart from the objects. Sharing a smile with Niccolò, Maffeo cleared his throat.

"When we first came to China, we were presented with a challenge," Maffeo said to Marco as he pointed to the two gadgets.

"We were given these two components and we had to figure out how this invention works. Since our host is not here yet, you can try to solve this puzzle before he comes." Wide-eyed with wonder, Marco played with the gadgets while he murmured with nonstop curiosity as if buzzing like a mosquito. As he fidgeted and examined the pieces, he failed to notice a tall, looming shadow standing behind a curtain, spying him. The mysterious figure watched the boy fidgeting as curiosity filled his obsidian eyes. After a while, he held out a hand and signalled a servant to come forward and whispered something to the servant's ear. "...Bring these to me. Hand them to me in the tearoom. Make it snappy!"

'...I wonder if this son of Niccolò Polo would like this...' Kublai Khan thought to himself as he observed Marco a little more.

...

'There's got to be a way to this right?' Marco thought as he twirled the objects in his hand. Twenty minutes had passed, and yet, he still couldn't figure out what the purpose of this invention was. Marco balanced the spoon on top of the wooden slab. He turned to the left. Then to the right. As if lightning struck him, he turned to his dad.

"I've got it! It's a compass!" Applause came from both his father and uncle.

"Bless my stars, Marco, you really did figure it out!" Niccolò chuckled as he slapped Marco some more, Marco grinned foolishly as the sensation of satisfaction drizzled all over him.

"Marco, how did you manage to figure it out? What gave it away?" Maffeo questioned.

With a triumphant smile, Marco replied, "Firstly, I noticed how the markings on the board were like the markings on a compass. Once I set the metal spoon, I swayed. As I did, I noticed how the spoon's handle always directs south. That's when it hit me. It's gotta be a directional tool of some sort."

"Excellent observation, Marco." Niccolò smiled warmly. "This is the earliest form of a compass. However, this wasn't designed for navigation at the time. It points people to the 'right direction' figuratively to show people how to 'harmonise with their environments' in their lives. The spoon is made from lodestone. It was used for feng shui. Once people figured out the properties of lodestone and how the handle of the spoon always pointed south, they began to call it the south pointer and adapted it." He pointed to the centre of the square board.

"This centre circle, in which the lodestone is placed, represents the heavens, and the spoon represents Ursa Major. The Great Bear constellation. They placed markings all around the board. North, south, east, west, northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest. By the time of the Tang dynasty, Chinese scholars had magnetising iron needles by rubbing them in magnetite. After that, they put them in water. This method they developed also worked as a compass. The compass was developed for generations and generations on the shoulders of scholars and many more until the compass we have now." Niccolò grinned as Marco was left awe-struck.

Marco gazed at his father with sparks in his eye and spoke, "That is why we merchants must travel across the world to witness these wonders, carry these creations and spread them to others. Right?"

With compassion in his tone, Niccolò replied to his son, "Yes. Indeed we do." As Niccolò began to scruffle Marco's hair, Marco cleared his throat.

"So...about that bag for Kublai Khan..."

"Marco, as I said before, we will show you when Kublai Khan—" before Maffeo Polo could finish, a grand figure emerged behind the entrance. He wore full armour and was strongly built with broad shoulders. He reminded Marco of the statue of Zeus he saw once.

'Very much like a majestic tiger', Marco noted. Behind the massive warrior was another man, who looked relatively meek in comparison. He was carrying something wrapped in a layer of rough linen on a massive tray. It was as if someone opened the faucet of inquiry, and questions began to flood Marco's head.

‘Was that person carrying the tray buckling his knees? Is it because the item was incredibly heavy? Or it was fragile so he was scared to drop it? Or maybe he is petrified of-’

“Ah, who do I owe the pleasure of this reunion?” announced a megaphonic voice that disturbed the Marco’s thoughts.

“It’s a great pleasure to reunite here again, Kublai Khan.” Niccolò claimed. Not seated anymore, Niccolò and Maffeo were on the floor, kneeling to the warrior. Marco, who didn’t know what was happening, followed his father’s example and knelt to the ground as well with his head touching the cold, hard floor.

“If I may sire, stand and present you what we’ve brought west?” Niccolò asked while meeting the eye of Kublai Khan.

“Please rise, sit. Now tell me Niccolò, how are you? Is all well? what news do you bring?” Kublai Khan replied with a flick of his right hand while the other reached for an extra stool and seated himself along with the rest of the Polos. Maffeo retrieved two items from the bag and handed them to Kublai Khan. With one hand, Kublai Khan held a beautiful glass bottle full of oil while the other held letters. Niccolò explained it to him.

“My lord, I know that you have the desire to educate the world. Therefore, you welcome new inventions and philosophical ideas. You even requested us to gather a hundred Christian men to come here and teach your people Christianity. Alas, we were unable to find that many men who were willing to risk their lives to come here. Fortunately, we found a Pope who planned on coming here to meet you. Unfortunately, halfway here we entered a war zone, and the Pope was terribly frightened, thus left. He did, however, allow us to deliver you gifts he meant to present to you in person. May we present to you the holy oil and letters from the Pope.” Kublai Khan swept his glaze over the items. His eyes filled with pure joy as he swirled the oil in the bottle and looked at the letters over and over. At last, he settled the items down on the table and looked at Niccolò to Maffeo, and lastly with the longest duration, Marco.

“Niccolò, Maffeo, your efforts are noted and appreciated greatly. As said before, I welcome new inventions, ideas, and witty minds. Now tell me, good friends, who is this young, bright-looking lad before me?” At that note, Marco had never felt Kublai Khan’s eye contact could be any fiercer. He turned to his father with a ‘Who? Me?’ facial expression. Niccolò pulled his son over with a hearty laugh.

“Sir, this is my fiol, Marco, and your liege man.” Niccolò commented as he patted his son’s back.

“He is heartily welcome.” Kublai Khan responded. “Marco, tell me about yourself, tell me about your journeys, tell me everything you want to say about your whole trip here. I quite enjoy a nice story.” Marco inspected Kublai Khan’s eyes for any hint of danger. But all he saw were the pair of eyes he saw every morning when he stared at his reflection. The pair of very eyes filled with a curious famine. Marco let his tongue roll.

“I’ve dreamed of China since a youngin. I was told that my father and uncle are great merchants. I’ve heard the tales they told their neighbours about the things they’ve seen in China.”

“What are some of your favourites?” Kublai Khan purred.

“Inventions,” Marco replied. Kublai Khan’s ears seemed to perk up like a predator who spotted prey.

“Inventions?”

“I know! Inventions! Such as...silk! A big demand in trades. The fabric just seemed to melt to your touch. The golden embroidery and colour—bursting patterns just makes the wearer seem like celestial divinities. I can hardly believe that this was made from these creatures called silkworms who feast on mulberry trees. When I first heard it, I thought it was all bluff and was just a fairy tale. You can’t imagine what it was like seeing the whole thing before your eyes!”

“For years I’ve worn silk and seen silk, I still can never get enough with it. Though I’ve never thought about it that way, even by the fact that I am a silk lover. But do tell me more on how the world spins to your perspective. Do tell me more.”

“Blue—and—white porcelain! I know that the colour comes from cobalt ores that were imported from Persia! So scarce, so precious, made with different methods, thus producing different shades of blue. Each one has its own unique shade. Not to mention, the art itself is just simply divine! The celestial animals of the cosmos, living in the very pottery, its grace for us to awe and maybe in the vase, they observe us with affectionate looks...” Kublai Khan chuckled as he clapped with praise at Marco’s words.

“Your words move mountains. Now tell, my lad. What if I told you something I’ve created, hm?” With curiosity alluring Marco, eagerness and thirst formed chains around him, dragging him down with absolute desire to know what the great Kahn had invented.

“This is it! the movement I’ve been waiting for!” Marco thought as he squirmed in his seat. Marco felt a tingling sensation trickling down his spine. He could feel the beating of his interrogative heart through his body. He felt like the gunpowder in fireworks. Noticing the hunger in Marco’s eyes, Kublai Khan gave a sly and satisfied smile.

“Hahaha! I see I’ve successfully grasped your heart’s desire. Advisor, bring me the tray!” Scurred and nimble, the advisor brought the wrapped parcel and placed them gently on the table. Kublai Khan unwrapped the linen. Inside contained many items: a thick log from some tree. Then a fine white bast from the log prior. A sheet of something thin, flexible, coloured black. A jade stamp. Lastly, a square of the same sheet but with stamped writings on it. Reading the puzzled and questioning look on Marco’s face, Kublai Khan let out a rumbling laughter akin to an earthquake. He handed Marco the piece of inked, square-shaped sheet.

“My lad, what do you make of it? Rack your brains, what do you think this is?” Kublai Khan questioned Marco with a grin similar to a Qi Ling. Marco, filled with puzzlement, felt the paper with his fingers and read the fine characters that were printed. Marco studied the paper back and forth. Regardless of the many inventions he had seen before, he never met one just like it. Confusion was an irritating feeling but Marco planned to resolve it.

Gleefully watching with pure fulfilment, Kublai Khan provoked Marco, “Why, is our little intelligence stuck?” Marco frowned at the statement for it is insulative, but true.

“How about I show you the process of making it?” Kublai Khan queried. He pointed to the trunk.

“This is the trunk of a mulberry tree! As you know, we have loads of this type of tree due to our silkworm plantation. It’s useful not just used as silkworm feed, but it is also used to make this.” Then he picked up the white blast and the black sheet.

“We don’t use all of the trunks. We only take this blast that can be found sandwiched between the wood and the bark of the tree. Through processing, we turn this blast into a dark sheet of paper. As you can see here, it is very flexible. It’s the perfect thing to stamp ink on!” Kublai Khan pointed at the stamped writing and then the jade stamp.

“Lastly, we cut this paper into the same sizes and then hand them out to certain officials. They will sign their names and hand them back to me where I will put my imperial stamp on it.” Marco swept his eyes over the items again and again. He couldn’t understand how this invention could help run a country. It was just paper with ink! Kublai Khan, who was awfully excited, proposed a hint.

“In China, we don’t have as much gold, silver, copper and those metals. We already are in need for them to make armour, weapons, and yet we still need to save some metal so we produce more currency. Once we establish this paper, we don’t have to worry about money! We can just hop on trees!” Marco, who was in a clueless turmoil, beaded with sweat, massaged his temples as he tried to think.

“If this innovation can spread through all regions, trades can flow even better, and more metal products can be created!” Kublai Khan exclaimed with glee. Marco ruffled his hair and groaned.

“How is this paper the key to trades all over the world?!” Marco asked frustratedly.

“Ah, but it’s not just paper! It’s been modified.” Kublai Khan explained.

“How? Paper doesn’t weigh nor worth a thing!”

“But it made me become the living CaiShen of this dynasty!” The pain was beating on Marco like a drum. He was thirsty for the answer.

“Aaaahhh! I give up! What is it? What is this thing you have created?” Kublai Khan slowly leaned forward and cupped his hand to Marco’s ear. He whispered one word.

“Banknotes.”

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 siphoned 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.

—
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.

—
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.

—
An autumnal gale sweeps through the streets, colouring the lush green landscape a deep umber 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 Little Match Girl

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Cheng, Jessica – 15

Below you will find the tale that initially inspired Hans Christian Andersen's original story of 'The Little Match Girl', first published in 1845. The real story is set sometime in the 6th century (exact date unknown) somewhere in the general area of what is now known as Hebei Province, China. It pays tribute by shining light on the story of a dying girl who – unbeknownst to the world – invented one of China's most famed conceptions: sulphur matches.

The snow fell delicately in a beautiful yet peculiar way on this cold January night.

A girl with pinned-up hair watched silently as each soft, subdued snowdrop was contrasted with an equally sharp shard of ice as it plummeted, flailing helplessly through the black, inky sky.

She did not need to look to know that the beauty would all come to an inevitable end as it splattered onto the hardened ground.

The little girl was physically young – 12 years old at best – but her heart and soul were weary with age, the type of mental maturity that was the result of the countless bruises given by Fate for playing dangerously with the unfortunate hand of cards. Her ribs, shoulders and cheeks jutted out at quite unnatural angles, eerily similar to how a deceased corpse looked as it took its last breath in its tomb. The dilated pupils of her eyes seemed to bulge out against their sockets, on constant vigilance to detect any flicker of harm – or perhaps safety – that could come her way. Her ebony hair was smeared with streaks of ashy grey, pinned up by two thin wooden sticks to keep strands out of her face as she continued to prowl the streets.

She would have appreciated the lovely sight of the scattering snowflakes, truly, if not for the fact that her frail fingers were nearly freezing off in the bitter frost of this cruel winter. Yet, as much as she tried, the continuous rubbing of her hands did little to dull the numbing sensation creeping up on her.

The cold continued to cloak itself around her; it slithered past her half-hearted defences and made its way through every vein in her sore, weakened body, as it forcibly engraved itself into her heart, prying away the last source of warmth she so desperately craved.

The sad truth was that if someone had spared a glance at her for any longer than a second, they would have noticed it: that her life was so obviously hanging on by a thread. A very, very loose thread.

But nobody noticed. Nobody even looked.

And if by some stroke of luck these onlookers happened to see a dying girl begging for scraps on the streets, their stomachs were also too empty and their hearts also too broken for mere sympathy to mend.

She did not realise that her eyes had filled with tears of defeat as she trudged step by step down the winding streets of what she once called 'home'. She did not – could not – feel the jagged cobblestones kneading against her bare, torn feet as she trod down the dark alleyway, one she once knew like the back of her hand. She did not – would not – look at the flickering light twinkling near the end of the passage, beckoning her to come and lay down for just a little while.

How could she possibly resist the coaxing of eternal peace? The embrace of nothingness? She wanted nothing more than to fall victim to its allure. Alas, it was only the faint memory of her grandmother's words that stopped her from completely toppling over.

"Promise me that you'll do what I couldn't do: you must live your life to its fullest."

But how could she possibly live if she could not even survive? And again, she thought disparagingly, she had never really had anything to live for in the first place.

The angel on her shoulder whispered to her that her grandmother was right; the world was filled to the brim with wonders so ludicrous that her dreams could not do it justice. She couldn't even begin to imagine the world that existed beyond her narrow sight: could there be vast plains of emerald grass somewhere out there?

The shores. She could almost feel the soft grains of the coarse sand that would tenderly caress her hands and feet as she lay, still and silent and content, under the warmth of beaming rays of sunlight. The forests. She would wait patiently as each bead of freshwater dripped from the evergreen leaves and watch as they buried themselves into the soft soil, reuniting with their comrades underground in a triumphant cry of glory. The mountains. She would run for miles and miles down the peaks and up from the valleys, freely and happily exploring all that there was to explore whilst the sun shone its beaming light upon her grinning face.

She tore her hungry mind away from the tantalising thoughts. She needed to focus on what was important right now: survival.

With nothing to distract her and nothing to dream of, the girl crumpled down abruptly – right there in the middle of the empty street – as all the workers hurried back home to their wives and children now that the sun had kissed its last goodbye.

The little girl hopelessly cradled her head in her trembling hands. Darkness had befallen her once again; she wondered if she was ever going to see daylight again.

The girl's hands shook with anxiety to do something other than sit here uselessly, so she roughly tore out the two sticks in her hair and fiercely hugged them against the warmth of her chest to feel some sort of security – however false it may be.

With nothing better to do, she began to closely examine the wooden sticks her grandmother had given her.

Unsurprisingly, they were not in the best of conditions; scarred with black and worn with age. Her grandmother had told her it was made out of something called 'pinewood', which was apparently a rare species of trees. Her grandmother had also mentioned that pinewood was tall and sturdy and would undoubtedly hold up well against the test of time. Sure, the girl did think it was strange that her grandmother specifically emphasised the type of bark two mere sticks were made of, but back then she was too overcome by gratitude to notice.

She was staring at the two long, thin sticks, lost in memory, as a horrible thought floated to the surface of her mind.

What if... what if she burned the sticks? It was only for fire, so in theory it was not even worth that much – at least monetarily. What if she threw away this sentimentally precious gift for a few seconds of comfort? It was only for survival; she had to do what she had to do. But also... what if she was able to cling on to the world of the living for one more night? For her, the flaming pinewood would mean the difference between life and death.

Her internal debate was immediately abandoned as she realised that the pinewood sticks she held in her hand could not burn well. Even if it was somehow able to catch on fire, her grandmother had taught her that some types of bark were just too soft and its colour was just too light for a steady flame to arise – and this wood definitely could not withstand a burning ember for long. She allowed the crashing wave of sorrow to wash over her as she began to lose consciousness and finally accept her demise.

Wait.

No, she was missing something.

The permanent blackness that clung onto her hands from hours of sweeping the chimney, wasn't that... sulphur? Her heart pounded against her chest as she racked her brain to find the reason for the flicker of hope tugging on her heartstrings.

Sulphur. Soot. Chimneys.

Then everything clicked into place.

Powdered sulphur could easily burn.

The spark in her chest reignited as she scrambled to organise her kaleidoscope of thoughts. According to the information she had hastily pieced together, if she rubbed this sulphur against the pinewood and if the pinewood caught on fire, the sulphur coating would keep the sticks burning.

The sticks would burn. The sticks would burn for an indefinitely long time.

She did not pause to think of what her grandmother would have thought as she hurriedly smeared the blackness on her hands onto the sticks, but it was only because deep down, she knew that her grandmother could care less for some wooden sticks if it meant for the survival of her own flesh and blood.

So with hope and desperation hand in hand on either side of her, the little girl began to work.

She rubbed her hands relentlessly against the wood, ignoring her splintering fingers as shreds of wood pierced into her skin from the continuous friction. Up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Down. Tirelessly, she worked on her creation.

And then she was done.

The first match in history had just been created.

Heart heavy in her chest, the little girl prayed with every fibre in her frail body for this to work. It had to. There was no other option.

In one quick motion, she scratched one wooden stick against the other, and waited with bated breath for something – anything – to happen.

Nothing.

And then... a spark.

An ember.

A burning flame.

The girl's heart joyously sang with triumph and relief as she eagerly brought the flame closer to her chest to welcome the glorious heat. She happily burrowed back into her mind and thought of the spectacular rewards that all those important people would offer her in exchange for this magnificent creation she had discovered.

People had been searching for decades now as to how to light a flame in a short amount of time, and she had just so happened to stumble on the answer! She was almost salivating at the realisation that maybe – just maybe – her life was going to change forever.

Oh, the things that she would do! She giddily thought of this mysterious ocean people talked about and what it could actually look like. Would the waves dance merrily across the surface of the glistening sapphire seabed, carrying pieces of driftwood further and further away from shore until it became so far out at sea that it would become immune to the touch of reality? The forests and jungles that were supposedly green and luscious and filled with wonders; did the sky above the towering canopies look different than the smoky sky she peered up at every night here? She could almost hear the rapid heartbeats of the twittering hummingbirds as they whizzed about, meticulously collecting nectar in their small beaks to bring back to their families to feed. Oh, what would she choose to do first? She simply could not wait to find out.

All of a sudden, the flame began to dim.

And then it was gone.

Just like that.

She felt the hands of Death tie a noose around her neck. Her breaths became quicker and more panicked. Terror shot through every nerve in her body.

She was so scared, so frightened.

She didn't know what to do.

How could this have happened? What did she fail to notice? What had she overlooked? She made sure to be painstakingly careful of how she made the sticks. There was no room for error.

Yet, she had to have made a mistake.

And it would cost her – dearly.

The piling heaps of white snow that continued to fall as if nothing had happened, as if she wasn't dying – seemed to mock her. How could she have been so naive to think that one silly little flame would be enough to overcome an entire night of storm?

I really tried to hold on, Grandmother, but I cannot do it anymore.

But the little girl had no fight left in her. This was the final blow. The spark inside her that gave her life had been weakly burning all this time; it just could not hold on any longer.

With a shaky breath, the little girl curled herself up against the cold pavement ground and closed her eyes.

Please, forgive me.

The world blinked around her as she and her thoughts and ambitions and dreams faded away into pure nothingness.

And just like that she was gone, as swift and as sharp as a winter's breeze.

~

The next day, two men found a little girl lying on the streets alone, with two sticks covered in black dust by her side. They saw the burnt edges of the wood, and investigated them to produce something spectacular.

These men developed the sulphur matches we know so well today from the first prototype they found one morning in January.

...

The heroine, now known as the Little Match Girl, died before knowing that she was the reason for the survival of countless other little girls who – just like herself – were struggling to hold on a cold winter's night.

May her creation continue to give hope in a time of darkness.

May her flame burn bright for aeons to come.

May her story live on forever.

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 leathery 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 Boyao’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: “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.

The Door that leads to Heaven

Heep Yunn School, Ho, Pui Yin – 16

Heaven was a place everyone was longing for, especially in such a despairing era. The overcrowded problem became severe in the year 4046. Only the wealthiest people survived throughout the years. As robots did everything for them, they got nothing else to do but to make babies. The number of citizens had been rising sharply, and was finally out of control in recent years. However, the countries all around the globe faced the same problem – a lack of human resources. Since many places were polluted, about 60% of land was not suitable for human living. Even aircrafts were unable to be used as space debris was floating in the universe, making it dangerous to travel. Animals were nearly extinct – who would care for them in such a dark period?

In order to release the people from the sufferings, the scientists had been working on an invention – the Door. It was told that the Door was a portal leading to a place with joy, with hope, and with happiness. Although the Door had not been invented successfully throughout the past 200 years, this invention was the only aspiration for humans to continue their lives.

“Mind your steps, kid,” an old man grumbled with his body shivering, as I was squeezing through the “Deceased Field”. Yes, they called it the “Deceased Field”, as the place was crowded with billions of people that could barely stand or even move. There was no light in their eyes – they had been numbed about the harsh environment. While I was trying hard to move forward, I could feel others’ breaths and their unpleasant smell. We did not know each other’s names, but we were so close to one another, creating a special bonding between us. It did not mean unity, but an armistice – we could not afford a conflict on humanity in this situation. This was a place no better than hell.

“Ding dong–” The bell started to toll. The crowd looked up immediately, waiting eagerly with desire in their eyes. A tiny drone flew near, carrying a lunchbox with its robotic arms, and landed on someone’s head. That person reached his hand into his pocket carefully, and took his phone out to pay for his meal. The people here would not steal each other’s property, as there was no space for battle. After his payment, the flying object placed a straw into his mouth so that food could be transported directly. We were once used to using chopsticks, but now, all our usual habits were forgotten and were no longer important. Soon, a large group of drones arrived, and the rest of us also started our meal.

“Number 2658975290, you may head to the Shelf now,” the announcement was made through the broadcaster. I had a ticket of number 265875278 – luck had been on my side as many people had passed away before having their number called. I had hit the road with excitement 10 days ago, but was still far from my destiny.

The journey was exhausting but I could not bear staying in the “Deceased Field” any longer. The people there did not have a cozy environment to rest in – they had to stand even when they were asleep. If they fell, they would be buried by the huge crowd. The way of survival was harsh, not to mention how the weather would affect their living. You could always be amazed by how humans were able to adapt to new environments – they had learnt to stand still just to keep themselves alive. The circumstances were different in the Shelf. Although the living area was also limited, people could have a shelter there. Therefore, billions of people waited desperately with tickets in their hand, hoping that their number could be announced.

Days passed, and I arrived at the Shelf finally. This place was stunning – millions of rectangular “boxes” were resting on an enormous shelf, row on top of another row. There were a thousand floors at the moment, the highest row

might probably touch the stars. “Your number?” I looked around and saw a robot talking. I took out the ticket that was placed inside my phone case, safely kept. “It’s 2658752...” I opened the folded part, “...78” “Box number 265875278,” the robot waved its hand, and the boxes were rearranged into a new order. “Climb in,” the robot said without any emotion, pointing at the one that marked my number. I got in, and the box was closed. It could fit a person that was standing, and it was completely dark inside. The small holes were the only thing that could sustain one’s life. Some cold breeze was blowing in through the holes and right onto my face. I could not tell whether my life had improved – staying in these wobbling boxes was never comfortable.

“It’s the Chinese Times here,” the monthly news was reporting through the broadcasting platform, “Breaking news. The scientific department of our nation has finally invented the Door that can send humans to another world. It is known that the new world is a peaceful place, with no more wars and competition. You can always find sufficient food there, and there will be no more hardship and depression. The new invention can only be activated once at the same time. Only a thousand lucky ones that arrive at the door the earliest can change their lives. Remember, the door will be opened next week.”

Wow! The Door could really transport humans to a world with everlasting joy? How impressive! By the time I landed there, I might be wandering on clouds or chatting with the moonlight. I might be chasing the shooting stars and would own a personal area. I could make friends that would never betray me, and I would end up living happily ever after, like the princesses in the fairytales. When I grew older, I would remember that one great invention gave me a second life.

“Beep beep – ” The alarm rang, and suddenly, the doors of the boxes were opened. Strong wind attacked and I froze, knowing that I was miles away from the ground. I peeked out and saw people climbing out, racing on top of those boxes, finding a way down. I followed them with confusion, walking step by step.

“Are you also going to the Door that leads to Heaven?” a girl appeared next to me, patted my shoulder and asked. “The Door that leads to Heaven?” I repeated, not sure about what she was talking about. “Yes, this is what we call the new invention. It’s a Savior to us, right?” I did not respond, then she pointed, “Look at that!” I looked down at the “Deceased Field”, and saw a disastrous moment – while everyone started to move towards the direction of the Door, the people in the middle of the crowd fell. Then, the people at the back stepped on them with no pity. Blood was everywhere, and I heard millions of voices screaming. The world was in red, even their eyes – they looked like hungry wolves, staring at their target, ready to hunt for it at all cost.

“Ah–” Someone from the row above fell straight onto the ground. I was at a height that could almost touch the cloud. That person’s dead body could not be seen, but the war on the Shelf had begun. There were only one thousand quotas, and everyone wanted to be one of them. The losers will end up dead, which was violent and indifferent. Yet, we had no choice but to participate in this game.

“Are you ready?” I asked the girl, I could see fear in her eyes. She was rather thin and weak, so it would be hard for her to get through this survival game. “What has turned them into war machines?,” she questioned. “We can get to the Door together,” I suggested. This was not a wise choice as she was a random stranger. Hence, having another person aside would slow down my speed. However, I did not have time to think much. I believe in this little girl, who seemed to have shown kindness to me. “Sure,” she grinned at me. I stepped forward, and she followed behind. I held her hands, so that she would be safe by my side.

On our way down, I could see the evil side of human nature. Perhaps millions of lives had already passed away, but this would not affect anyone. The Door gave people hope and desire. The Door, which was supposed to save lives, ended up creating unlimited casualties. I frowned. I wanted to be a successful survivor, but I was unready to become a demon.

Suddenly, she let go of my hand. I looked up and saw struggle in her eyes. "Are you feeling alright?" I asked. She nodded, pursing her lips. "Let me know if you encounter any problem," I smiled at her, "I am willing to help you." She hesitated, then asked, "Do you think we can be the earliest one thousand people?" I tilted my head, "Not really... But I'll try my best to get us both there." "Then if there is only one quota left, will you sacrifice yourself for me?" I did not reply. We met an hour ago for the first time. She was not someone of importance. "You know..." she said softly, looking at the "Deceased Field" down below, "we are fighting for ourselves, not for anyone else. We have to be selfish sometimes... Kindness can only exist in Heaven, not in this dog-eat-dog world." Before I could react, she pushed me hard onto the ground. Will I become one of those falling off the Shelf? I could feel that death was coming for me. I immediately stood up and looked into her eyes with fright and anger. It was lucky for me that she failed to push me down.

I wanted to find a sense of regret from her face, but she was only shocked that I was still alive. No sign of regret. My heart sank. "Why?" I asked her. Without my protection, she would not have gotten this far as she would be killed easily by other people. She laughed, and I saw contempt in her eyes, "You wouldn't blame me, right? Only the strongest will survive. Either you die, or I die. There are only a thousand survivors, and everyone is your potential enemy that will threaten your life." She then ran towards me, wanting to push me down...again. "I won't make the same mistake twice," I murmured, and with a side kick, she fell down the Shelf with a scream.

My hands were icy cold. I kneeled down. I just killed a person. I could not believe that I became someone...evil? I looked around. There were lives passing away every second, and I was not the only sinner here. In that intense situation, I would have died if I were the weaker one. Perhaps, she was right. This world had been adapting to the theory of the "survival of the fittest". Being kind was not enough. I had to defeat all the obstacles and climb onto the mountain top. I must get to the Door.

Without any hesitation, I cleared my path while I was dashing down the Shelf. When I finally reached the ground, I realized that the "Deceased Field" was totally a disaster. A muscular man crawled on the ground with a missing leg and a missing arm. His face was pale and he was mumbling words that I could not hear. I saw his pain, but I left him alone mourning. I was cold-hearted and indifferent, but there were many other injured people. I might be one of those sinners that disrespect life, but I did not kill anyone intentionally. Would the Door still bring me to Heaven? I did not know.

I wanted to choose kindness, but sometimes, the people around you would stab you with a knife. Along the way, I avoided conflicts with people, but killed those who intended to harm me... If I did not defend myself, I would become one of the victims. My goal was to stay alive... This was everyone's goal, but it ended up being a game that lost lives.

The Door was a remarkable invention that gave us the hope to live on, but it was also a test on humanity. Without the Door, people might continue standing endlessly until dying of hunger or diseases. There were always inventions that aimed to improve the lives of humans, but led to unfortunate results eventually...

Apparently, the Door was a gigantic door... which was red in color. In the middle, a golden dragon was painted. It was gazing at us, staring straight into our souls. The winners were the only ones that remained standing, waiting to get through the Door.

A family was standing not far from me, but there was only one quota left for them. Their kid was young, about five years old. His parents were seriously wounded, but the kid was well protected. They hugged him and caressed his cheek gently – I saw tears in their eyes. "Mum? Dad?" The kid was puzzled. "Honey, you have always been a good boy. I'm sorry that we can no longer stay with you... I wish to see the day when you make your own family, and perhaps we will have a few grandchildren... I hope to guide you through the obstacles you will encounter in the

future, but I'm afraid you will have to face them on your own...I love you, honey," they kissed his forehead for the last time, then pushed him towards the front, where the one thousand lucky people were standing.

"I want to buy a quota! I want to buy a quota!" I turned around and noticed a man shouting. He was wearing many diamond rings and golden bracelets. He rushed towards us, waving his hands, seeking attention. "Are these enough?" he asked, taking off some of his jewelry. No one responded. He struggled for a while, then took off all his luxury goods, "How about these?" No one responded. Finally, he gave out a deep sigh, then put his wallet onto the ground and begged, "These are all I've got. Please... I want to get through the Door..." The huge amount of property was tempting. At last, someone gave up his chance in exchange for these goods.

Despite sacrificing things they treasure the most, everyone tried their best to get through the Door. Would "Heaven" end the wars between mankind? Or would it become our next battlefield?

"Ding dong—" The Door opened automatically. We walked towards the strong glimpse of light that was shining behind the Door. Only till now, I was a bit worried about the unknown path — where would it take us? When I could finally see clearly, I found that I had landed on an unknown planet. Where was I? Had I arrived in "Heaven"? This place seemed to have been covered in mist — it was hard to see through in order to observe the surroundings. I looked behind, but the Door was nowhere to be seen. The invention had disappeared, leaving the thousand of us alone.

"Attack!" I heard a strange voice. The five-year-old kid fell onto the ground with a large bloody hole on his chest. "ALIENS!" Someone cried with shock. Five unknown creatures with seven eyes came to us with firearms. "Biu—" The man that was once wealthy was shot too. His eyes were filled with shock. Perhaps, he had made a wrong choice. Another bullet shot by, and I also fell. None of us could escape from this destiny. Other people might call us the winners, but by this time, we knew that we had lost the game. "Executed successfully, over," one of the aliens said.

Before I closed my eyes, I thought of the words of the girl. The Door that leads to Heaven. Heaven, that was where I would be going now.

Palette

Heep Yunn School, Hung, Hoi Wan – 16

As I shook it, white flakes were flying in this small crystal ball, filling up the empty spaces. A small man with a costume painted with red and white stood still in the middle, deers dancing beside him. Red and green lights fluttered inside, and I wished my world was filled with such colour. He waved at me. I waved back, smiling, and my feet tried to move with this familiar tune which I couldn't quite recall. As the light and music started to dim down, the flakes dropped immediately and the crystal ball became a transparent ornament again. The man was just a sculpture. The deers were not dancing. 'Pitter-patter-pitter-patter...' the soft raindrops turned more violent, hitting my window with hard thuds. Closing the window, the neon lights from the outside reflected on the stained glass. And I knew I would be forever trapped in here.

My life was so different before I knew colours. It was so peaceful, too peaceful that I knew something was missing. It was the first of June, 2139, and I went to school as usual. With my usual gear—AI goggles and a laptop, I sat at my usual seat in the electric school bus. Within 5 minutes, the vehicle travelled to school like a bolt of lightning. Nowadays, the process of waiting was no longer needed, because you can travel everywhere within five minutes with the newest models of electric cars, trains, and buses. While the others were still using motor cars and older versions of electric cars, we were far up the radar.

Everyone seemed to enjoy such fast and convenient rides, but I did not like it because I always felt that something was missing from that five minutes. I wanted time to slow down. When I talked to my classmates about this, they shrugged it off every time, saying that being fast and efficient was the point to everything these days. I could not argue with them because I knew that they were right, and every time I tried to fit into their pace, something always pulled me away like an anchor chained to my feet. The fact that only my opinion contradicted with others made me feel that something was wrong with me, as if a piece of puzzle was missing from my body.

At school, the pod area was where we had our lessons. Once we put on our AI goggles, everything came into place. Our virtual classrooms, our virtual textbooks and even our virtual teachers who we named each and every one of them. This was one of the great inventions that our country had invented during the earlier two thousand years, and we were proud of it. We marvelled at it almost every day, knowing how technology here had surpassed others. 'We are what the future needs.' This was a motto that I had heard since I was in my mother's womb, and I never once doubted it. The things that only appeared in stories started to become reality, and we had made it work. We were certainly sitting at the top of the universe. We were the reason why time was still flowing. And we were proud of this.

Every time I stepped outside, I could barely look up because the sky was nothing but neon lights, huge buildings looming over me while having big bright screens stuck to their bodies. The sudden burst of fluorescent colours always hurt my eyes, as if little pieces of glass were stuck to my eyelids, piercing what's beneath. While others who were not speaking our language held up their phones and took a few snaps of this neon city, I would look down and continue walking, not knowing where I was heading but forward. It did not quite matter whether I liked it or not, as long as others did. I was glad that they did. Just like others, my usual routine was to grab a snack after the tiring school day. The monotonous 'beep' sound rang as I pressed the button for fish balls. 'Beep'. The robotic hand started drizzling the curry sauce onto the already cooked fish balls, and the simple dish was done within twenty seconds. The treat tasted bland as usual, as the spice was never how I wanted it to be.

On the street, the only music I could hear was voices that didn't sound real. Voices that came from the big beaming screens, each voice repeating the name of a certain product. Mechanical twisting sounds from the stores along the street, each with automatic robots who were designed by our great country to serve all people. The

whooshing and swift sounds of vehicles that disappear with a blink of an eye. This was the music I walked home to, without colours, without life. But it was the music that represented our advancement, the stem of our pride. At first I wasn't used to it, but it had become such a repetitive tune that I had already gotten used to how dull it was. The search for blue skies and classical tunes were meaningless because I would never find them.

Just like any other day, this is how I spent my day on the first of June, 2139.

Last night I dreamt of a meadow. There were fences surrounding it and I found myself in the middle of this big piece of grass. The wind whooshed and I started running, running towards the fences, running as if someone was chasing me, running even if my legs start to feel numb. I could hear nothing but the increasing thuds of my heartbeat and the wind blowing louder and louder. When I was about to reach the fence, feeling a sense of accomplishment, I sensed a sudden chill on my right arm—it was grabbing me like a lasso, pulling its prey further and further away from its safe haven—the thuds of my heartbeat stopped and I turned my head instinctively and it was—

'Carlie! Carlie, come on wake up! You're late for school' the chilly breeze of having my cosy blanket taken away from my bed snapped me back to reality. I never had a dream in years. That day was the second of June, 2139, and it was the day I missed the school bus for the first time in my life. Since I was a kid, my parents had trained me into a person that did not dare to break rules, and would confiscate my favourite doll if I did so. I remembered I couldn't sleep for a week just because I ate biscuits from the kitchen that were meant for guests. The leftovers would be eaten by me anyway. Being late for school didn't look like a big deal, but it was for me because my parents were yelling at me with their screeching voices while I dressed up clumsily, trying to hide my panic. While my mother looked away from me, putting her hand on her chest trying to steady her breath, I quickly slipped out of the door without a sound.

Something must have taken over me that day, because I felt a sense of satisfaction, and I found myself smiling while being out of breath from running. I didn't know where I was yet I felt released; I felt like I was broken free from heavy handcuffs. The unmatched rhythms of traffic lights filled my ears, and I decided to walk opposite of where everyone on the street was heading. The feeling of being able to make my own decisions took over me, and I knew exactly where I wanted to venture.

Other than school and a few malls near to my home, I had never gone to other places because there was never a need, as most of our worlds exist virtually. There were moments where I wanted to take off my AI goggles during lessons or doing schoolwork at home, but without it, something was missing like a part of me was shredded off. There was a place that was so empty that it seemed like an abandoned mansion on the outside, and no one would even care to lift their head to look. I knew there was something wrong with me, because I was mesmerised by this place when I first walked past it when I was a kid, and wanted to revisit it but never had a chance.

In front of me was this wide building with enclosed heavy platform and a large roof that floats over this base, its tiles glazed with golden yellow with wooden panels and columns supporting its wide body. The last few words on the plate reads—History Museum. I entered the door with ease while the security guard slept soundly.

Maybe because there was no one here, the hall looked exceptionally huge and every sound I made echoed through the walls. There were only four doors, each leading to a particular exhibition, named as paper, printing, gunpowder and compass. As I read these tales which felt so familiar but vague at the same time, something that snapped open in me that made me feel like I had gained a bit of knowledge. Fade out papers with yellow edges, an ancient compass and books with words written with ink appeared in front of me like an old friend that I had only met once a long time ago. A sudden rage grew inside me because why did school never teach us about this? How can they ignore this important part of history that made us who we were today?

Perhaps I was too careless, I must have spoken up the guard and now his footsteps were storming towards me, each step getting louder and louder as I tiptoed towards somewhere to hide. 'Hey, I have called the police! Come out!' His harsh voice startled me and the realisation hit. I walked faster and faster to a model of a cannon, and attempted to hide my shaking body behind it. Perhaps it had been a long time since the museum was visited, the tiles behind the cannon shook, and shook again as I tried not to fall. Crack. Something felt broken beneath my feet. Crack. My breathing stopped and the footsteps were closer. Crack. Thud. Crack. Thud. Sweat was rolling down my neck. The footsteps stopped and everything was silent for a moment. I held my breath and begged the tiles not to break. Crack. I didn't really know what or how it happened after, but I was falling and falling, the guard's voice echoed in my head and I was still falling deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole.

There was no 'eat me' biscuit or a 'drink me' potion. In fact, there was nothing but the colour black. I could only smell the concrete, and the soot and dust made me cough, waking me up from this fever dream. There was no light coming from the top, and I had just realised that I must have fallen quite deep into this hole. This was not the first time I felt fear and pain, but this time, it was more excruciating, more extreme, and a tear burst out from my eye. I was now everything my parents did not want me to be, a runaway and a criminal. How could I face them now? I stood up and dusted off pieces of tiles on my skin, and while I slowly recovered my sense of sight, objects started to take shape in front of me—what seemed to be quite a distance from me were huge bookshelves, with very faint light coming from them. I walked slowly with my right ankle hurting, but I knew I had to keep moving because I needed to find a way out. Maybe I should have gone to school this morning.

Turns out the bookshelves were millions of boxes stacked systematically. They were arranged like a maze, and there were faint blue lights coming out of the three holes which shaped like an oval on the boxes. The crystal blue was so mesmerising, as if each of the boxes carried a blue flame from somewhere sacred. As I was scanning through the boxes, I noticed that there was a name tag on each of them. Alex Lee, Anna Mok...Ben Chan, Cathy Chau...they were names of people arranged alphabetically. My finger stopped at the name Carlie Ho. The air seemed to be frozen and my body started to tremble with the increasing coldness. I tried to take the box out with my shaking hands, but it was too heavy and I screamed with the sharp pain of my ankle. Giving up, I peeked into the ovals. The tiny thin cards looked like computer chips and they filled up half of the box. I stretched my fingers into the holes but then—click clack. A door from somewhere opened. Panic flooded my mind as I forcefully pulled a chip out of my box. I turned and ran into the cold, following the sound and kept running because I knew that even if I couldn't walk again, I wanted to get out of this place alive.

'Number 1911. Tim Wong.' Sounds of metals clashing. 'Yes...on the second row'. A thud and a clack. I followed the echoes of the voices, moving as quietly as possible. 'What happened to this one?' '...Not sure...I think he bumped on his head while cleaning his house. They said his heart already stopped beating when they arrived.' A moment of silence filled the air. I lurked closer. 'Well this one's filled! We've caught a big one. I think the boss is going to be happy.' The voices were so near to me that I held my breath. I stopped and the men walked out of the second row into the front where a big screen was hanging on top of the ceiling, with a high-tech keyboard which was illuminated with the same crystal blue when one of the men pressed a button. A click. A chip from the box was inserted.

'Dad I made you a present!' Giggles of children filled the air and one of them handed a paper flower to a man sitting on the sofa. It was crooked and the colours were unmatched, but the smile on the man's face was brighter than the sun. He hugged the children and whispered 'I love you', and laughter rang among them. The room they were in was filled with colours, red and green and yellow and pink, bright shiny ornaments hung around the place. There were twigs of holly and homemade biscuits on the table but I didn't quite understand what kind of celebration this was. We never had any other huge festivals other than the Chinese New Year. 'Merry Christmas,' the scene slowly faded and the clip came to an end. Christmas? I had heard that in storybooks but we never experienced it. What was that?

'Wow that was just heartwarming. Well I guess it is a greater fuel,' the man scoffed and the other followed. 'I heard the whole thing is going to be in production in a year. We are going to be VIPs, I can guarantee,' 'Travelling to the moon? That's going to cost tons...' 'Come on don't sulk, they are going to give us a free ride if we keep this up,'. I was still hiding behind the first row, holding my ankle to reduce the pain. I shouldn't have gone to the museum. I shouldn't have followed the lights. I wanted to erase the memories of the things I just saw and heard. Water tickled beneath my eyelids and they started flowing down my cheeks. 'Moving on to the other one. Number 1877...' The monotonous voices grew louder. I tried getting up but my legs gave out. Fear flooded my mind and then dread was unbearable. Thud and a clack. Thud and a clack. I crawled to the corridor, still carrying a drop of hope that I could escape. '...Row one. On the top, no, on the—hey what's that?' Get up. My mind kept screaming. Get up. Get up! The footsteps came hurriedly as I tried to push myself up. Moving clumsily, I tried grabbing the doorknob in front, but deep down I knew it was no use. A painful stab numbed my legs and I let out a striking scream. 'It's another one,'. I fell to the floor and when I turned back, all I saw were white mists that made me fall into deep slumber.

'Are you ready to take a big leap for mankind? Moon travel is ready to launch next year...' It was the fifth time I had heard this advertisement this morning. They said this was the fourth greatest invention of China, and it was even more advanced than the one made by the USA several years ago. I finished my breakfast and hurried to school without saying goodbye. I was treated with cold gazes and whispers but I didn't understand why. I barely talked or interacted with my classmates, so what made them hate me? A few weeks ago, I got my ankle broken from a car accident that I didn't remember. They said I was unconscious for a long time and only got released from the hospital yesterday. Since then, my parents barely went home for dinner and I could only hear the door clack open after midnight. I didn't dare to ask them anything because the looks on their faces were so indifferent that I couldn't recognise them. The only time their faces showed colours were when the moon travel advertisements started playing. They would marvel at the invention and compliment the country for this achievement, while I felt guilty that I didn't feel the same. For some reason, the city had turned greyer since I woke up from the darkness. Everything was the same, but darker and more hollow. Nobody talked to me or came near me, not as if anything changed, but I felt that something was off. There was something heavy yet empty inside my chest. It was the fourteenth of June and it was just like any day, just duller and darker.

The next morning when I was folding my clothes, I found something in the pocket of my school uniform—a chip. It was somehow glowing with a very faint shade of blue. Somehow, the touch of it triggered something inside me—a burst of red and green and yellow and pink. A wave of laughter. A man embracing his children. 'I love you'. It was a memory that wasn't mine, yet it felt so familiar and warm and I felt a hint of jealousy that he could feel this way. I wish I could paint my life with a paintbrush with all shades of colours. Pale pink, warm orange, lilac, jade, I wanted to paint, to colour, to feel that burst of warmth and happiness. I wish I could remember.

If I were to compare my life with a palette, it would only be black and white. All my life people have told me which is black and which is white, and I couldn't care less because it would always be grey when they mix together. Nobody questioned where the other colours went and kept living without them. Instead, we built robots and created an unreal world that replaced all the colours. We emphasised so much on advancement, on efficiency, that we forgot that we were humans. They had forgotten that they had colours. They had taken away our colours.

A single teardrop fell onto my lap as I hid the chip inside my pillow. Three knocks on the door and it meant lunch. I stepped out and welcomed the shades of grey, with a hazy, hint of blue flowing underneath.

The Witness

Heep Yunn School, Lam, Hin Yau – 15

Green like the aurora borealis, shimmering along with the rays from the limelight. Dented with a hint of browns and duns, that's probably what you'd get when you have been on this planet for thousands of years. As one of the oldest artefacts in this museum, I am locked into an acrylic box to be adorned by millions of tourists everyday. Wait, it

seems that I still haven't introduced myself. Hi, I'm a piece of jade crafted back in the Zhou Dynasty, approximately 3000 years from now. And my life before this acrylic box? It was just amazing. Throughout the years, I have witnessed the rise and fall of civilisations. Yet, the miraculous inventions from each of them were what truly impressed me. Now, sit back and wake up, because I'm telling you the story of China's inventions.

Zhou Dynasty

My life started when I was cut open at the jade workshop by a strong axe, that's when I had my first glimpse of the beautiful world. Looking around, I saw some men cheering loudly for my arrival, as though they had longed for a piece of jade like me. I was still exploring the room when a big warm hand suddenly picked me up delicately, and placed me under the dripping water. The cool droplets were dropping onto my face softly when all of a sudden, I felt something hitting my skin, it was the man holding a chisel, trying to turn me into a piece of art. As the chisel carved into my skin, I imagined myself as a caterpillar, undergoing the process of metamorphosis, waiting to be an alluring butterfly.

"And that's the final touch." The man said, holding me up proudly as if I were his child. From that common rock you'd find everywhere, I transformed into an ornament engraved with two ferocious dragons. I have become a piece of jade, a Chinese invention that I am most proud of.

My story on China's inventions doesn't stop here. From the moment I was made, many had had their hands on me, from great leaders who built an empire to chivalrous soldiers who defended their nations bravely...until I fell into the hands of a talented eunuch in the Han Dynasty, the man who invented paper.

Han Dynasty

"I think we should create something that is lighter and less clumsy than those writing slips we are using now." Cai Lun told his friend, Wang.

"I agree with you, they are too cumbersome to carry around the palace." Wang answered Cai, while slapping the roll of writing slips on his hand.

That was the start of the miracle.

Since then, every day before daybreak, there would always be a figure standing next to the pot, mixing a pot of mixture with different materials such as fish net, tree bark, and rags.

From sunrise to sunset, from erupting flowers to falling leaves, Cai Lun never gave up on trying to create the perfect paper. Piles and piles of failed products were sitting next to the pot, telling Cai Lun to quit dreaming.

It wasn't until a snowy day, when a soft, yellowish product appeared on the drying rack.

"Wang! I did it! I made this perfect piece that can replace the bamboo slips!" Cai Lun exclaimed, running to his friend.

"You have to tell the emperor about this!" Wang replied, admiring the sheet, eyes sparkling.

No one could imagine that a small grumble between two genuine friends, would eventually change the course of history. As soon as the emperor was informed of the new invention, he made it the official writing material of the entire nation. Centuries later, it was also this piece of invention that became the medium where people pour their hearts out.

Indeed, inventions can sometimes come from a random chat with your friends or by chance.

Late Tang Dynasty

"Hahahahaha! Add some sulphur, realgar and orpiment... Yes, that's it, I am going to create the first-ever Elixir of life." My owner, an alchemist, looked at the pot enthusiastically.

It wasn't his first time experimenting with these chemical elements – he was a man desperate to last forever.

"Kaboom!" Suddenly, there was an explosion. It wasn't an Elixir of life that he was creating, it was a literal gunpowder, a gunpowder that would endanger mankind.

"Huh?" my owner, who was still shocked by the explosion, wiped his eyes groggily. He couldn't believe what had happened. The pot was now broken, with the fragments scattered across the room, still sizzling silently. "What was that?" my owner slowly crawled towards the ashes. He cautiously picked some up and smelled them. "Wait... is it the final form of the Elixir of life?" he asked curiously.

To answer his question, no, it is not. My dear owner, this is gunpowder. Yes, my owner just accidentally created the weapon that would be responsible for the lives of many. Deemed as one of the Four Great Inventions, gunpowder is one of the most influential Chinese inventions. Ever since it was made, people started to make use of it in different military weapons, including fire arrows, cannons and even naval bombs. Soon, traces of this particle were found in different soil across the globe.

Somehow, no one thought that an accident could bring us one of the greatest inventions in history. As random as fate could be, a foolish experiment became the cause of millions' sorrows and deaths. Perhaps, we have all become a part of the butterfly effect, where even the smallest thing can change the course of the future.

Of course, being a piece of jade that has lived through the ages, I have been fed with many more striking spectacles that eventually changed the lives of many.

Song Dynasty, during the reign of Qingli emperor

"Isn't it just too tiring to copy the book every single time someone orders it?" My owner, He Guang, groaned to Bi Sheng.

"Hmmm... that's a valid question. The efficiency is indeed very low if everything relies on hand." Bi Sheng replied.

"Hey Sheng, you are such a marvellous artisan, why don't you create something that solves the problem?" Guang randomly suggested.

"Yes! That's a very nice idea!" Bi Sheng replied, he quickly grabbed a piece of wood and started carving on it.

Guang noticed that and laughed "Hey Bi Sheng, I was just joking!", but Bi Sheng was already so immersed into his new, great project.

A month later, my owner found Bi Sheng again. This time, he was putting some tiny wooden blocks onto an iron plate. My owner walked closely to the plate and looked at it curiously.

"Hey Bi Sheng! What is this? Is it going to copy everything for us?" asked He Guang.

"Come closer, this is my brand-new invention, I call it the Movable-printing machine." Bi Sheng responded, picking up another wooden block and placing it into the iron plate.

He Guang glued his eyes onto the iron plate as he watched in fascination. To him, it was some kind of sorcery he prayed for every day. He watched in awe as Bi Sheng brushed the plate with a kind of pungent, white paste.

Afterwards, Bi Sheng carefully put the wooden blocks with characters onto the plate, sticking them close together with the paste. Upon having the plate put full, Sheng put it near the fire to warm it. The passionate fire burnt the iron plate into luminous red, while melting the paste inside. Then, it was the magic that blew Guang's mind. Having placed a piece of paper under the iron plate, Bi Sheng took out the paper in a few minutes. Instead of remaining as a white sheet, the paper was filled with wisdom from the Analects, the book He Guang spent ages to copy.

"Wow, Bi Sheng, it is amazing! Never have I seen something so convenient!" Guang commented, with sparks in his eyes, he couldn't believe that he could finally escape from the days of copying. Looking at the magical machine in front of him, it was something once unfathomable to him, it had been his wildest dream to have a machine that would do his work for him.

Just like how the printing machine benefits all humankind, I would like to talk about an invention which although I was not there when it was invented, I was greatly benefited by it. The story started with my navigator owner in the middle of nowhere.

Ming Dynasty

"Lost in the sea,
Nowhere to be,
All I can see,

Is only the sea." The sailors were singing horribly, being lost on the sea had nearly driven them crazy. Yes, you guessed it, one of my owners during the Ming Dynasty was a sailor.

"Ey, you reckon we're gonna die?" My owner asked his friend onboard, grabbing me for luck.

"Oi, don't say such things, it'd be nice if there's something to show us the direction." His friend mumbled.

"It ain't night yet, there ain't no polar star to show the way home." My owner sighed, remembering his parents who were waiting for him at home.

"What are we gonna do then? Are we really hopeless?" The friend asked, knocking at the plank absent-mindedly.

"Hey, isn't there a thing called compass? Thomas? Ah yes, "Compass" that points at the North?" another sailor joined the conversation and suggested.

"Oh yea, you're smart." My owner excitedly smacked the plank, which he unfortunately hurt his hand.

"Do we have that on the ship?" The friend wondered and stopped tapping the plank.

"Let me find if there is one!" The other sailor stood up wobbly and went on to find the only hope of the whole ship.

Thirty minutes later, the ship started sailing again. The sailor had successfully found the compass that our ship is heading home once again.

"I always thought you'd be a good luck charm!" My owner kissed me on one of the dragons. But I would like to think that it was that compass who really saved us, that compass was truly the one that brought me home. Had there been no compass, I would be under the sea right now.

For centuries, I have witnessed great inventions, be it by accident or the human urge to create. Never have I imagined a world without these inventions, for they have been an essential part in building the world we are living in today.

As I was going to reminisce about my life again, I heard an elated scream that brought me back to the present. I am once again locked in that acrylic box, shined by that limelight.

"Mama, Mama! What is this pretty green thing?" A child asked, apparently interested by my enchanting appearance.

"My dear Francesca, it is a piece of jade! It is one of the earliest China's inventions. Isn't it exquisite?" The mother smiled at the child warmly, patiently explaining to her.

"Yes! It is so beautiful! I want to be an inventor when I grow up, so that I can invent so many nice-looking things like this piece of jade!" The child told her mum eagerly, before walking towards other exhibits.

Looking at the child, I feel that same warm feeling I felt 3000 years ago.

Maybe it's time for me to look forward to more China's inventions in the future. I mean...having a flying car would be nice, wouldn't it?

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 covering 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.

A Light in Darkness

HKUGA College, Cheung, Anya – 16

Nestled within China's impressive landscape of shelves, plateaus, peaks, and elevated valleys, a small, humble, yet lively village known as Langya stood. The people of Langya were no different from those of the village westward, or eastward for that matter. They were an ordinary bunch, struggling along the perplexing road of life like any other village folk. What was different however, was the faint yet vibrant hues of colour that sometimes soared through the air. They called them "fireworks"; a beautiful array of light in darkness which was followed by a sound so grand and thunderous that it brought childlike excitement even to the village elders. Amongst such elders was Yunxi, who, at youth, had more to do with fireworks than most would imagine.

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One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, Yunxi was sitting on a straw stool in Minghua Teahouse – the local teahouse located at the centre of town. Here, she was surrounded by what would be considered an unembellished, or even destitute interior to anyone of means, but to her, it was perfect. The half-torn tapestries barely clinging to the walls, the scent of oolong tea leaves flowing throughout the teahouse, the autumn wind blowing from the window, and the curtains gracefully picking up its current... It was nothing special, but the homely and peaceful atmosphere it exuded was everything to Yunxi. She took another sip of her oolong tea, now cold, as she smiled tenderly, gazing upon the young children of the village, who — the young, carefree souls that they were — were running around the town centre and spreading their bright innocent laughter towards all corners of Langya.

Little Mei, with her adorable braided pigtailed, gushed towards her friends excitedly, "Let's play another round of hide and seek!" The children, sharing her sentiment, cheered loudly. But Yunxi couldn't help but notice the shadows on the streets darken, and the full moon hanging high in the night sky. She felt a sudden chill through her spine, and her vision blurred for just a moment. She shrugged it off and called out to the children from the window of the teahouse, "Don't go playing hide and seek at this time of day! It's getting dark and dangerous!"

Upon hearing this tragic news, the children were understandably devastated. But fearing Aunty Yunxi's wrath and knowing better than to misbehave, they slowly went over to the teahouse and sat around Yunxi. Yunxi offered some tea to the children, but they would not accept it; it was too bitter for their liking. Before she was able to ask the children what they would like to drink, a high-pitched voice asked, "Aunty Yunxi, if you won't let us play, then we want you to tell us a new story!"

Yunxi raised her eyebrows, her eyes twinkled as she said, "you youngsters fancy yourselves another story?"

The children cheered in agreement, remembering all the amazing stories Aunty Yunxi had told in the past. Yunxi let loose a deep laugh, and said "well then, gather around. I shall tell you a story from when I was but a wee child, when a brilliant inventor came to visit our village, and in a fit of genius, invented what we now know as fireworks, the same fireworks which light up our night sky..."

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"Long, long ago, Langya's ancestors made a pact with the evil spirits of the ancient forest neighbouring our village, the Ailao Woods. In the pact, the villagers and the spirits mutually agreed to never trespass into each other's territories. This arrangement ensured the prosperous growth of Langya, allowing it to thrive as a humble farming village. That was until many years later, when the pact was forgotten and soon broken by the village folks. The spirits, angered and dissatisfied with this, sought retribution — they attacked and raided Langya when the moon was

at its fullest. This became known as the Curse, and it held an ever-relentless grip on the village. Ever since, with every rising full moon, the night air thickened with an otherworldly chill. The spirits escape the bounds of the forest, and drink in the darkness of night, before silently moving towards the village. Wisps of spectral mist slithered through the cobblestone streets, carrying with them the whispers of the evil spirits, their hushed laughter, vile and scornful, as they relentlessly laid waste to the village. Once the morning sun finally rises, Langya would lay in ruin, and the spirits who devastated the village would disappear without a trace, nowhere to be found. This vicious cycle repeated again and again and again...

“The village folk, wearied and desperate, tried in vain to protect themselves from these malevolent spirits. They hung peach-wood seals and figurines on their doors, lit incense, and sought the aid of shamans. But the evil spirits persisted, their haunting presence growing more ominous with each passing month. Looking at the Langya of today, one would never be able to imagine what it was like mere decades ago. It was like day and night, with barely any resemblance left. Amidst this turmoil, an alchemist by the name of Boyang, arrived in Langya.”

Yunxi noticed the children’s scrunched up and confused faces, and wondered if she used words too hard for them to understand. She chuckled, before continuing, “Now, you might be thinking, just who might this man be? Well, allow me to tell his part of the story as well...”

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“Boyang was unlike any of us here in Langya — he grew up in the big city, somewhere known as YunXiaoYuan. It was a thriving city that was full of spiralling streets that bustled with life. I once walked down those very streets myself, where pagodas towered over me on the two sides of the street, their elegant curves adorned with vibrant hues of red and gold piercing the sky and reaching towards the heavens. Street musicians with their melodic tunes of their wooden clogs and pipa, and the aroma of freshly steamed buns and exotic spices from open-air food stalls. Oh! And the silk merchants’ vivid displays of shimmering fabrics, the delicate and intricate vases and lacquerware of those ingenious artisans....”

Yunxi’s eyes gazed off into the distance, she said with a sense of immersion, like she was somewhere else, “After all these years, I can still remember the vibrancy and grandeur of YunXiao... But of course, I am getting carried away.

“As beautiful and lively as YunXiao Yuan may seem to be, Boyang was not captivated by it. He used to adore it, of course, just as everyone else does, but that bustling city lost its charm for Boyang long ago.”

Yunxi quickly said before the children had the chance to ask, “Why is that? Well, let me explain. Boyang had been offered a place amongst the emperor’s court in YunXiao as a scholar many years already, and although he had spent his days practising and studying this craft, he never had anything to show for it. Still he persisted because he loved alchemy more than anything in the world. Eventually, he wrote *The Kinship of Three*, a book of alchemy and cosmology, which documented his discoveries in both fields over the years. It was an impressive piece of work, filled with never-seen-before theories, alchemical distillation and sublimation forums and chemical compositions. It was going to change the world for the better! Or so he thought.

“Only days after he published his work and delivered it to the emperor, word spread of the book’s magnificence and Boyang’s genius. But the emperor saw something else in that book, he saw a chemical composition of a substance that would ‘fly and dance’ when exposed to fire. He found it interesting and naturally, sought it out. However, it wasn’t long before he realised its potential – it can help the empire win the long-standing war! A substance that will explode and burst apart just by being exposed to fire; no other empire could oppose such a violent and explosive weapon! The emperor, delighted by this discovery, immediately called for a mass production of this substance, and subsequently named it ‘gunpowder’. He then named Boyang the lead alchemist of the empire, granting him all the

prosperity and wealth he could ever imagine. Despite all the applause and praise, Boyang was horrified. He watched as his invention spread destruction across China, entirely powerless yet knowing full well that he was the reason for the pain and suffering of the people. He looked upon the bustling city of YuanXiao — merchants and musicians competing for the crowd's attention, oblivious to the war brewing just outside of the city. He looked until he couldn't stand it any more, deciding to leave alchemy behind and travel across the Chinese landscape; visit the tranquil mountains and rivers, hoping to ease his guilt and sorrow... It was on this solitary journey when he stumbled upon Langya."

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"Aunty Yunxi!" one of the children interrupted, "What has this got to do with fireworks?" Yunxi chuckled at this question. Children and their blunt impatience, she thought. She replied with a gentle firmness, "Be patient, my child. I'm about to explain it, alright?"

She smiled before continuing, "Now, where were we... Ah yes, you see, nobody in their right mind would care to pay a visit to an unassuming and insignificant village like Langya. So when Boyang, a renowned alchemist that even us village folks were familiar with, entered the gates towards our humble village, we were utterly stunned. And very quickly, a rumour of the alchemist having the ability to save Langya from its relentless curse began to spread..."

"Boyang was invited to meetings with the village chief where he was offered jade, silk, and plenteous food in exchange of his assistance in ridding the evil spirits which tormented the village. But to no avail, Boyang, still burdened by the consequences of his previous invention, was hesitant to intervene, and thus rejected these offers. What they didn't realise however, was that a young little girl, barely taller than any of you listening right now, was hiding behind a wooden crate outside of the village chief's house, intently listening in to their conversation."

Yunxi rubbed her hands together, grinning from ear to ear, elated to see the children captivated by her story. She continued, "Can you guess who this little girl was? That's right, she was me!" A soft gasp escaped the children's mouths as Yunxi continued, "I heard a distant and unfamiliar voice say, 'I'm afraid I must decline, good sir.' Another, deeper voice said, 'I suspect that there will be no persuading you. May I ask for your reason?' The first voice replied, 'I'm no expert at exorcism, and... well, there's something else but, nevermind.'"

"I was absolutely horrified when I heard those words. Imagine being tormented month after month by vengeful spirits and finally finding someone who has the power to stop this cycle, only to find out that they are unwilling to help! Thinking all hope was lost, I gathered my courage and approached Boyang alone after the village chief had left, asking him in a voice barely more than a whisper, 'Are you the alchemist they speak of?'"

"Boyang looked at me with intrigued eyes. He said, 'Yes, I suppose so.' His voice tinged with a sense of remorse as he replied, 'But I warn you, child, my path has been one of both brilliance and destruction.'

"His cautionary words didn't scare me, instead it made me more determined. I replied in a fit of desperation, 'I don't care about whatever destruction you may have caused! Can't you use your knowledge to banish the spirits? Please! You're our last hope. Everything we tried has been in vain! Under the cultivation of the full moon, the spirits drink in the darkness and they become so powerful and violent that even the shamans we hired can't drive them away. And the incense...' As I trailed off, Boyang was carefully considering my words. He saw the look of hope and desperation in my eyes and realised that no child should ever experience such terror."

Little Mei interrupted, eyes red with tears, "He must help!" Yunxi chuckled, "Yes, he too thought that he should do something to help this poor girl! But what could he do? He was but an alchemist with no true knowledge of exorcism or dark spirits. It was at this moment where Boyang stood between crossroads, when an idea sprouted in his

head — what if he turned something terrible into something beautiful? What if he can transform gunpowder into a fiery array of colours that can scare away the spirits? And so he met my eyes and he said with a gentle smile, ‘perhaps I can do something to help.’”

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“I brought him to my family home, and he immediately put his practised hands to work. He gathered three substances from his travel pouch, and asked me to purchase a few colour dyes from silk merchants. He mixed the formula of gunpowder with the new substances, experimenting with different combinations, trying to create something that can burst forth into colourful flames after a thunderous sound. Eventually, he concocted a grey powder-like substance and stored it into a cylinder made of paper. He worked and worked for three whole days, making as many of these as he could.

“Finally, the eve of the full moon arrived, and the villagers gathered in the town centre, just outside of this very teahouse. Boyang carried a box filled with such paper cylinders. He distributed them to the villagers and announced, ‘This is my new invention. I call it, ‘fireworks.’ You simply have to light them up on fire before throwing them into the air. It will then light up the sky, cutting the dark spirits off from its source of power — the dark — and this village will be free of the curse.’

“As the first rays of moonlight bathed the village, the spirits stirred, their presence palpable in the chilling air. And without even the blink of an eye, the village became swamped in darkness. The evil spirits moved with an eerie grace, effortlessly gliding between the shadows as if they were extensions of the night itself. Their movements, swift and precise, as their sharp claws, resembling twisted talons, sliced through the air with a whistle of the whirling wind. The villagers, driven by a primal instinct to survive, scrambled in all directions, their hearts pounding with terror. Some stumbled over one another, while others darted through narrow alleyways, desperately seeking refuge from the spirits.

“Amidst this chaos however, Boyang was calm as ever. He carefully lit one of the cylinders on fire, and threw it into the air. It soared high into the sky before erupting in a thundering bang which echoed around the entire village. The bleak darkness, the black sky, now was a sudden collage of red, green, blue and yellow. As the lights from Boyang’s fireworks died down, another soared into the sky, and another, and another. The sky came alive, bursting forth in a kaleidoscope of colours. And just like that, the spirits’ grasp on the village were lost; their source of power — the dark and the colourless — too were lost. They slowly sank back into the shadows and the curse was no more.”

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“So that’s why we have a fireworks show every full moon!” Little Mei exclaimed.

“Yes,” Yunxi replied. “And do you see the moon tonight? How very round and fair it is?” She turned and pointed outside the window and the children followed her gaze and looked up towards the sky. Yunxi continued, “it means, it’s time for the fireworks show!”

She finished her cup of tea and stood up from her seat, waving thanks to the teahouse owner and putting down a tael on the table before leaving to the fireworks show, leaning heavily on her cane as she wobbled out of the teahouse, with a dozen young children following her tail. Slowly, they made their way to the grassy meadow where the firework show took place, and just as they settled down, a rogue firework lit up the night sky, shimmering in shades of gold and red. It wasn’t long before countless other fireworks filled the skies, showering the darkness with light. The children were mesmerised, but Yunxi’s mind was elsewhere.

She remembered when Boyang's hair turned grey and his steps grew slower, the two of them met one last time on the very same grassy field which she currently sat on. It was also the day for the monthly firework show, and they too were sitting beneath the colourful and vibrant night sky, still entirely enamoured by the beauty of fireworks.

"I never imagined that my path would lead me here," Boyang whispered to the night. "But I am grateful for every twist and turn," he looked into Yunxi's eyes, "and for every person who touched my life."

The look he had on his face — it was a strange mix of happiness and sadness, as if he knew that although his journey on this plane was coming to a close, his legacy would remain through his fireworks.

Now, she was the old lady sitting amongst young children, and she wondered just how many fireworks shows were there left for her to watch. Just as she was struck by a sudden wave of melancholy, Yunxi felt a soft breeze that blew towards her. It was strangely warm, and healing. "Hello, old friend," she whispered as she gazed upon his invention. "Thank you, so very much, for your marvellous gift."

Like An Arrow Through the Night

HKUGA College, Shiu, Lok Yiu Athena – 16

As like many things, it started with war.

Its waging, its observation, its dragging through endless years of blood-soaked mud.

It started, because while the Kingdom of *Chu* wasn't *weak*, its strength only merited continued survival, but like ever and always, ambition waits for no one—

“—and endless lives pay the price,” Bowyer Kam Yao muttered under his breath, giving the longbow in his hands one last *twang*, its stubborn echo lingering through the tent's crackling candlelight.

...*Nüwo*, what was he even doing anymore?

Making bows, fixing them, exchanging them for bloodied braces and broken strings, again, again, again.

...maybe he'd been enthusiastic, once upon a time, five years ago.

His useless leg twitched.

But long gone were his fantasies born from a childhood of hearing about Lian Po's victories against the Qin, because years of watching his countrymen fall had only trampled his heart's smouldering flame.

Yao sank deeper into the rough edges of his chair, staring at the drawing laid out before him like an abandoned strategy, bent wood and shattered bronze wheezing at him from the dark corner they owned.

Because of course, a bow turned sideways on a firing arm was easier said than done.

But the sketch glowed yellow and orange and white in the dwindling firelight, the flattened bow shining proudly on the stick that would be both a sight and a trigger, and while bows made for good cover—fire, they did not give enough *power*—

They didn't, but this thing *would*, if he only managed to get the aiming— *if he managed*—

Thud.

Yao's fist started stinging late; his desk quieted a moment after.

Not if. *Not if*, he told himself for what felt like the umpteenth time, because this was what he needed.

What they needed.

This was what the Kingdom of *Chu* needed to win, right here, right now— and if Yao didn't give it to them, who would?

The dead goose's feathers crinkled under his fingers; flaking, papery, powdery.

Yao's breath stayed stuck in his throat even as his cane went *thud* on carpet, the echo ricocheting like a catapult off the cavernous tent, and the instinct to bow before General Hong almost came too late.

He managed, anyway, the bird's corpse and the newly-christened *nu* going on the table without a sound.

...three weeks of work. Four prototypes.

The General's expression stayed stone, Yao's heart going *bup-bu-bup* even as he picked up the modified bow.

"So this is your latest toy," he mused, voice rumbling like a cart over rough ground, and—

—*it's not a toy*, Yao almost snapped back, barely swallowing the heat when the General's burning stare found him again, a *skree* stinging his ears as Hong dragged the dead goose closer.

"...a one-shot through the chest. Not bad for a cripple, Bowyer Kam."

Something wholly inappropriate almost ripped out Yao's mouth.

...*I'm just going to ignore that*, he thought, swallowing the bile that'd crept up with the sharp words he couldn't say, because General Hong held something like approval in his eyes, and the *nu* was bigger than only him.

This was going to end the war.

It *was*, and Yao flinched at the laugh splitting the air, stiffening when Hong found him with smiling eyes.

"Good work," he said, though Yao's cane only bit further into his palm. "You might be worthwhile, after all."

The good sense to salute came late, again.

"Many thanks," Yao said, finally, blood rushing like a spring-flood past his ears. "May I take this as permission for further trials?"

Please, please, please—

And a large hand reached past his vision to grasp the *nu* again, and Yao turned to see Hong raising it to his eye.

Its string's *twang* echoed like an arrow through the night.

"I would like to see how it fares, first."

Hong tended to leave a bitter taste in Yao's mouth, regardless of how the rest of *Jiangnan's* people adored the man.

But he found himself at the the shooting range later, anyways, the *thu-thud-thu* of arrows on straw ringing like the sprinkle of rain through the clearing, and Yao supposed he could bear Hong because *Heavens*, they'd actually given him a *chance*—

"—he liked it, then?"

Zhaofeng's voice came from the side.

Breathless, gasping, though Yao didn't bother turning, too busy staring at the way the archers fought the *nu*'s recoil.

"Good morning," he said, anyway. "How was training?"

A *creak*, and Yao couldn't help the curve of his mouth when he glanced to see Zhaofeng's sweaty face groaning, training clothes rustling like the campsite's fallen leaves.

"Rough," he paused, grimace slipping away as the airy *thwipp* of another arrow whizzed past. "I see... progress?"

Yao hummed, letting the fence dig its wooden imprints into his forearms.

"They're already talking about ambushes, actually—"

"—and you're still sure about this?"

The warmth in his middle stuttered.

"...yes?" Yao said, tilting his head to see a grimace.

Zhaofeng's slumping on the fence harkened back to the recruits they'd been, five years ago; one dragged from his daughter's side, one holding the unfounded faith of a man drowning in legends.

...but we're better, now, Yao thought, the jubilant shouts of their archers whistling in the winding wind, because they were better, he was *better*—

Zhaofeng broke the thought off, again.

"I— Yao," he started, "It's not that I don't respect you, because your *thing* still scares the spirit out of me— but it's powerful, and terrifying, and what if the Zhao—"

This was tread ground.

"—*they won't*," Yao grit out, fingers digging into the old wood of his cane, because his leg was three years numb and *this was going to be it*. "We'll win before it happens."

"But what if they *do*, Yao? *What if?*"

Zhaofeng's words dug; Yao wasn't blind.

...he wasn't, because even through the all-encompassing urge to *help*, there'd always been the flickering worry of *what if the Zhao captured the nu, what if they turned it on them, what if he was supplying the enemy with the one thing they needed to win*—

"—ey, Bowyer Kam!"

They flinched; a turning of the head showed the archers raising the *nu* he'd cobbled together, just before the targets in the middle of the range.

The smouldering flame in Yao flared at their wide grins, the hollering of the one at the front—Miao, judging by the northern accent, and his voice carried like a commander's as he yelled, "This thing is brutal, Kam!"

"*Do tell!*" Yao hollered back, ignoring Zhaofeng's stare with more effort than he'd like.

“Took a bit to get used to it, but we managed— a faster reload would be nice, though!”

Maybe.

Maybe, and Yao leaned forward as he opened his mouth—

“—mmit, Yao!” Zhaofeng’s voice came again, strong hands dragging him off the fence he hadn’t noticed he’d climbed, and maybe it was the brewing pit of *something* but he still threw off his friend anyways, glaring at him through narrowed eyes.

“...Bowyer Kam?” Came Miao’s voice again.

Inhale, exhale. Yao snatched his cane from Zhaofeng’s outstretched hand.

“*I will look into it!*”

His friend’s burning stare seared a hole into his heart.

—

The next time Yao found himself in Hong’s tent, they weren’t alone.

“You must be our resident inventor,” said Archery Commander Man Qingming, smiling in the midst of gathered superiors, the endless stares on his useless leg.

Man’s hazel eyes smiled; Yao’s heart continued to ram like a stake in a siege, but the staunch refusal to hunch kept his back straight as he nodded, because this was who he’d been sending all his bows to since his... *injury*, and he was important, and he must be *here* for a *reason*—

“We have retaken Qianjin because of the *nu*, Bowyer Kam.”

...Qianjin?

Qianjin, he repeated. Not a town of exceptional value, but significant nonetheless.

The *nu* had... helped?

It had helped.

He’d helped, and the urge to fist a palm came late through the dizzying relief, but Yao managed anyhow, stuttering, “A—ah, yes. I am glad to make my contribution towards our freedom from Zhao.”

He still hadn’t straightened when a foreign laugh echoed through the tent; a lift of the head saw Strategist Liu holding back a chuckle.

“Admirable spirit, Bowyer Kam. Even more so after your,” his face thinned, “Injury.”

The lightness in Yao’s heart ebbed; his useless leg stung.

Why does everyone focus on that? came the irritated thought, building the instinctive retort in his throat— but no. This was about the *nu*. Not his leg.

This was about being *useful*, he told himself, and the smile on his face almost felt genuine when he said, “I thank you as well, Strategist Liu. But I don’t imagine this meeting was called for only me...?”

Liu’s glasses glinted in the candlelight.

“Yes, replanning, of course. General Hong?”

Hong sighed.

“Strategist Liu. Bowyer Kam is here for his expertise in the workings of the *nu*, not his physical ability. Remember that.”

The validation’s warmth barely numbed the sting the comment wrought— but then, again.

What did it matter? His *nu* was helping end this.

It was enough.

It was enough.

—

It always came back to his leg.

You couldn’t do this, couldn’t do that, barred from battle because you’d trip and fall and you’d just *drag everyone down with you*—

The cacophony of battle was something that carried glory and hope and death and pain, but memories still held truth in the worst of ways.

A too-familiar *twang*, a splash of copper near the medical tent— *the medical tent, Niüwo*, and—

“*Yao! Look out—*”

— between one moment and the next, Yao found himself pinned under cold metal and seeping warmth, blearily blinking at the lump pressing down heavy as a horse.

Zhaofeng’s pained features stared down through the exploding cacophony, the ambusher’s shrill screaming distant through the blood rushing past his ears.

“*Yao,*” wheezed the face that’d stayed through two years of bloodshed, three years of injury, going— “You alright?”

Thick stickiness dripped steadily down Yao’s chest; awareness clicked into place like an arrow to a bow.

Wait, *no*—

—and numb hands found slick armour in the screaming and shouting and shrieking, trembling fingers roaming Zhaofeng’s front until—

Until they found an arrow, pierced clean through armour into heaving chest.

No. *No.*

The army only tolerated Yao because of his family's legacy, and two decades of experience meant he *knew* traditional bows could never penetrate their hard armour.

...they couldn't, but the *nu* could.

"Yao?" Zhaofeng's voice echoed through a hangover's haze; Yao met unfocused eyes with growing cold and seeping tar.

The nu could.

"*Sir! The ambusher holds a strange bow!*"

"We need to get you inside."

His hands hadn't been this red in years.

—

The next few hours didn't truly register.

Nothing but a blur of bloody hands and shaken shouting, and the next time Yao blinked, he found setting sun spilling unbidden into his work-tent, the copper of fresh blood tinting his work an ugly brown.

They'd given him the *thing* from the ambusher sometime during... *during*, and he vaguely remembered fiddling with it, tracing all its parts out on parchment.

Inhale exhale, and it took calloused hands a moment to find the bow-like object again, silver refracting golden light as they turned it left, right, up, down.

It looked suspiciously like his... *nu*.

Please be a coincidence, be a coincidence—

The bird-like shape wasn't too unique considering the original bow; maybe another thought of the third arm as well, but the ridges on the arm caught the light, and—

He'd put those ridges in so the firing mechanism would lock more sturdily.

Once, twice, thrice.

Upside-down it went, and Yao found himself scanning the bow's bottom with wide eyes and shaking hands, going *no, please don't be—*

Don't be—

An arrow's etching sat innocent on the arm's edge.

The very same arrow he'd etched into every single one of his creations, and Nüwo, *Nüwo, no—*

—Minghua says Madam Liu's teaching her embroidery, Zhaofeng sing-songed, lopsided smile softening out of the corner of Yao's eyes. "Says she misses her ol' dad, such a sweet girl—"

The Zhao had taken the *nu*, and Zhaofeng was the one paying the price.

—

In the three years since his leg, Yao had forgotten how much of a warzone the medical wing could be.

Echoing with the pained moans of dying men, stuffed to the brim with remedies' grassy stink, crowded and understaffed and bustling with *noise*—

“Spacing out?” Zhaofeng grinned weakly from his cot, dust and dirt still clinging to his milk-pale face.

Yao couldn't pull his eyes away from the wrappings on his chest.

“...you could say that,” he muttered, shifting his weight to try and stem the restlessness, because the *nu* had caused this.

I did this.

The hole in Zhaofeng's chest the healers weren't sure would heal, the pinched lines on his face that told of incessant pain, and even as his friend's grin twitched into a softer smile, Yao couldn't stop the tightening in his heart.

“Listen to me, Yao. You didn't die when your leg got blown off, I probably won't die just because I got shot.” Zhaofeng grinned, breaking off into a hiss when his shifting jostled his chest again.

Yao winced, pulling at the fraying edges of his shirt, trying to ignore the stinging in his middle.

“I— I don't know. You look—”

“Stunning?”

Zhaofeng's seeping bandages ruined the mood; Yao's words refused to come, because this was his fault.

Zhaofeng had a *daughter* that he might never see again, and this was *his fault* because he'd *made* the thing that took a chunk out of his friend's middle—

“—Yao,” Zhaofeng's voice rang, again, quieter than it had any right to be, and Yao looked up to see ink-dark eyes staring back into his own. “If I die—”

“*No.*”

Zhaofeng's eyes narrowed.

“If I *die*, Yao,” he repeated, terse, weak, tired. “Tell Minghua.”

“No, *no*, Zhaofeng—”

—the prick pressing into his palm cut Yao off, and a glance down had him blinking at the crumpled letter in his hand, Zhaofeng's shaking fingers warm on his own.

“I— no. I *can't*.”

Zhaofeng's eyes found his, again, watery, unsteady, narrowed in the face of his still-bloody chest.

“Tell my daughter, Yao. Promise me.”

Yao stared at the yellowed paper in his palm.

It felt like a death sentence.

When an infection took Zhaofeng days later, Yao just buried himself in his tent.

He genuinely considered straight-up ignoring Hong, when the summons finally came, some time... after.

He did, but that probably meant a court martial and more doubts over his *useless* leg, so he went, anyways, the enemy's stolen *nu* tucked under his free arm, fighting the urge to shake in Hong's cavernous tent.

Liu and Zhao's stares burnt from their places beside the General.

Yao told himself to ignore it, instead picking up the shattered pieces of his courage to present the *Nüwo-damned nu* already, refusing to look away when the General's gaze picked it up, stared at the back, finally handing it off to Zhao after an eternity.

“It's happened, then.”

“...it's happened?” Yao repeated, numb.

Hong blinked, Zhao's mouth thinned.

Clack, went the *nu* as Liu put it down, gaze flicking towards his leg.

“Bowyer Kam,” he started— and Yao *hated* the pointed softness to his voice, “Our men die on the field, and the Zhao already rob our dead's equipment— we cannot keep them from simply retrieving your *nu*, moreso if they did out of luck.”

They— he— was this not the end?

“It is an inevitability,” Commander Zhao added, shadows creeping further down his face. “As is the fact that we require your services to stay on top.”

This was supposed to be the end.

“We... won't win?” Yao choked out, and his face must have shown *something*, because General Hong's eyes shone with too much pity even as he approached, his bulk's shadow creeping along rough carpet.

“Not yet. But we have made progress.”

Progress.

The bubbling in Yao's chest rumbled like a laugh.

What use was progress, when so much blood would still be shed?

What did it matter, when Zhaofeng was *dead*?

—

The stalemate dragged on like a dynasty that refused to wither.

Yao's leg would never heal; a girl somewhere had lost her father.

He'd lost his longest friend.

More will come.

—

"*Shh, girl.*"

Shan's mane passed soft through slick fingers; Yao grappled for her reins in the stable's dank dark.

Weeks of coming to feed her meant she only gave a quiet neigh at his touch, and Yao found himself swallowing through the thrum in his throat, leading the so-called '*lighting mare*' out hay-stacked stumbles and past snoring tents, along the hidden route he'd started plotting after Zhaofeng had... gone.

The treasured letter weighed lead-dense in his jacket.

You can't stay, he told himself tiredly, again, motioning for Shan to stop before swinging his good leg up, using it as leverage to hoist himself upright, shoving his cane into the holster on his rucksack.

The encampment shone like a sprawling beacon across the riverbed; the rucksack's straps tightened around his chest.

He... would be a traitor, after today.

A hunted man.

His country, his king— they'd view him as an enemy on par with the *Zhao*, kill him on sight.

"—*progress needs to come before the end*—"

They'd continue using him if he stayed.

...it wasn't a *choice*, and Yao pulled Shan's reins in the flickering firelight, urging her to turn as a watchman's shout split the air.

"*Hiyah, Shan!*"

Shan's answering *neigh* bounded through the growing cacophony, echoing like an arrow through the night, and Yao found himself screaming curses to the wind even as he held on for dear life— stealing away with his cane, his bow, his designs; away, away, away.

There was a girl to find, a letter to deliver.

Everything else could come later.

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.”

–

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.

–

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.

—

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.

–

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 night 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.

—

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.

The Tragedy of Success

Marymount Secondary School, Tang, Charlie Yin Nga – 16

My world ended, not with a bang, but with a cough.

17 May 2043 6:30 a.m. Home

It was such a beautiful day, the sun was shining, A-Niang had made her barely-cooked dumplings, we were all buzzing with anxiety about different things: me, about my final exam that would determine if I would get valedictorian this year; Bao-er about this girl he had a crush on; A-Die about this big presentation he had today; and A-Niang about Die Die having a big presentation today.

When Bao-er started coughing we thought he had just choked on mom's dumplings – that had happened too many times in the past — But when his hand came away dyed crimson with blood, we all immediately rushed to his aid: Mom to whisk him outside in case he started vomiting more blood; dad to call Special Service, and me to take a shower, because what Bao-er had was probably extremely contagious.

Emori, it's called, a horrifying new disease, no *plague*, that is decimating the world at an alarming speed. Coughing out blood is only one of the symptoms, after that it will cause all of your vital organs to start failing at a rapid speed, slowly spreading to the rest of your body. **Within a few months.** All countries all over the world have been scrambling to find a cure but it's extremely contagious, if someone coughs on you or if you even touch someone who has the disease, there is a 84 % chance you'll catch it as well.

18 May 2043 2:06 p.m. Chromie Labs

"Students this is Mr Hanzhen Chromie, he is the Lead chemist and biologist in this lab, you will be working under him for the next year or so in replacement of your final exams, as those have been canceled due to the epidemic." Our teacher said, Mr Chromie stepping forward.

"Just to clarify, we gathered you here to see if you all can shed some light on the Emori plague, although our lead scientists are already working on it. You guys may be able to spot something we did not. Or – God forbid – something like this happens in the future and you, as our world's lead scientists, will have to discover a solution."

He gestures over to the tables, "Well, you are free to get to work, I will go around distributing entry cards for the door....." He continues speaking as the class disperses.

I pause and replay the video. Currently we're at the Lab of Infectious Diseases, the doctors here are to test if we have the disease, as I wait my mind wanders. A cure for Emori.....

26 July 2043 3:36am Chromie Labs

Mr Chromie steps through the doors of the Lab and blinks in surprise, the lights are still on, he turns and sees one of the university kids, Hao Qing, hard at work, with bags under her eyes. Every so often she stops and stares at her work in confusion, before continuing.

"What is so important that you have to be here at 3 am in the morning on a Sunday?" he questioned

She subtly kicks a sleeping bag under her desk, saying, "We did a paper on bioengineering last month before all this and I wanna see if I can put it into practice," she murmured "My baby brother only has four months left, at best, and the official people are moving at a snail pace so I'm taking things into my own hands."

"How do you plan to do that?" Mr Hanzhen queried.

Gesturing at the table adjacent to hers, "I borrowed a lab rat from the Experiment Room and I'm now trying to see if I can—" The computer behind her made some very concerning noises and she immediately turned to type. "I've already trained the rat so we'll know if my experiment succeeded."

Mr Hanzhen nodded "Well, I wish you good luck, do go home and get some sleep though, you look like you're running on adrenaline and three cups of coffee."

"Five cups" Hao Qing murmured sleepily, petting the happy little rat.

Mr Hanzhen turned away just as another student, Libre, burst into the room

"Mr Hanzhen, sir!" he said before rushing over to A-Qing. Excitedly clutching a piece of paper as if it was the most precious in the world

17 August 2043 5:27pm Chronie Labs

The science teacher of the kids was sipping coffee alongside Mr Hanzhen when Libre burst in.

"Miss!" he half-yells, almost slipping on the puddle of unknown substance on the floor one of the kids had spilled prior (the chemist had been meaning to clean it up but nothing seems to get it off the floor).

"Calm down Libre, what is it?" the teacher asked.

"I have been experimenting on something," he replied, carefully handing a vial and the sheet of paper he had shown Hao Qing a few months prior to her "we think this might temporarily give the patient's immune system a boost, so the spread of Emori in the body could be slowed down."

Mr Hanzhen takes the sheet from the teacher and looks over the calculations "this.....could potentially work, in theory," he praised, handing the sheet back to Libre with a smile "I can go holler at some people at the adjacent lab, they're working on something similar so you and your team can possibly go cooperate with them."

"Thank you terribly sir!" Libre exclaimed, as he was speeding away, Mr Hanzhen called after him.

"Oh, and can you track down whomever spilled the substance on the floor? It's hilarious to see people trip when they enter but it's not following lab regulations and short of acid I can't seem to get it off."

30 October 2043 8:58pm Hao Qing's dorm

Hao Qing smiled as she ended the call with her family, the medicine Libre made had worked, and was currently in mass production, speedily making its way to every hospital, clinic and treatment facility there was. With this and her brother's slow-spread of the illness, Bao-er now had until at least next year to live. Plenty of time to power through my plan. Hao Qing thought, looking over the city, Halloween decorations flashing merrily.

31 December 2043

11:30

11:31

11:32

My footsteps pound on the pavement as I run through the streets, my breath loud and my heart screaming alongside it, the weight of my backpack feeling like a thousand stones but like I held the keys to freedom at the same time. I have done it! I have made the cure! I turn a sharp right and continue, my mind spinning, only one thing chanting nonstop in my mind.

Bao-er

Bao-er

Bao-er !

12:16

12:17

12:18

12:19

I slide into the hospital, my ears deaf to the shouts of the nurses as I fly up the stairs, blood roaring in my ears.

Bao-er had just turned two, his face a look of innocent joy as he watched A-Die come through the kitchen, a large cake held aloft, we all gather around the television to watch the new year countdown, nibbling on the birthday cake and laughing when Bao-er who somehow fell off the couch and onto the floor. Chocolate all over him and his face a look of confusion, as if wondering how he got there.

12:48

12:49

Sprinting down the hallway my eyes starting to blur, I faintly recall that, at some point, I must have lost my glasses. The pain in my right foot tells me I had lost my shoe as well, but none of that mattered. I skid to a halt in front of the door.

12:55

12:56

I wrench open the door. "Hao Bao-er ! I-"

12:58

12:59

1:00

The machines hooked to my brother all start to wail in unison, the horrendous noise enveloping me as I sink to the floor. The nurses fill the room as fireworks fill the night sky, I stare in mute despair at the television, the words 'happy 2044!' glaring cheerfully back at me.

3 March 2045

Elitist University debuts the Saviours of the Century !

With the Emori-epidemic officially over, XXX University recently revealed the overwhelming success of their Mixed Science Class, not only have all of them successfully graduated (without anyone dropping out or failing any tests!) But several of them in particular have become quite renowned in the science community. With several family names being: Martyn, who invented a kind of not liquid, but not solid substance that sticks to anything and everything, Libre, who invented an immune system strengthener that I am sure most of you know was a life-saver during the Emori-epidemic. Last but not least, Hao Qing. A Genius Biologist who came up with the cure to the pandemic, [redacted]. Many patients have her to thank for their well-being, their friends and families' well-being as well. Scientists over at Chronic labs are currently experimenting with [redacted], theorising that there are more ways to use this mysterious Deus ex machina than we think. Nevertheless, Hao Qing's [redacted] is currently being praised as the Fifth great Chinese invention.

Despite all the fame the populace has cooked up for her, Hao instead chooses a humble path, she has chosen, instead, to start an organization dedicated to helping victims or families of victims of permanent diseases. She offers monetary, mental and medicinal aid to those in need. Truly a remarkable band of kids!

Appendix :

Hao Qing - Main character's name, her name means good mood

Hao Bao-er - Main character's brother, his name means good bread

A-Niang - Mom

A-Die / Die Die - Dad

Hanzhen Chromie - a scientist, main character's class is using his lab for their final exam

New Tales of China's Inventions

Pui Kiu College, He, Zihan – 15

Chapter 1: The Meeting

Trevor, a handsome but lonely traveler, found himself in a quaint village during the Qingming festival in 2020. The air was thick with the scent of burning incense and the sound of distant drums, as villagers paid homage to their ancestors. As Trevor strolled along the narrow streets, his eyes were captivated by a gorgeous young woman named Linda, quietly sitting in front of her house. Her ebony hair cascaded down her shoulders, and her almond-shaped eyes held a hint of sadness. Intrigued by her beauty, Trevor approached her with a flirtatious smile.

Feeling the festive spirit, Trevor indulged in some wine before engaging Linda in conversation. "Greetings, fair maiden," he said, his voice laced with charm. "What brings you to this peaceful spot on such a joyous occasion?"

Linda, although taken aback by Trevor's suave demeanor, remained silent, her eyes filled with mystery and melancholy. Her heart, burdened by the weight of a hidden sorrow, prevented her from responding to Trevor's advances. Sensing her reticence, Trevor softened his expression, allowing a genuine curiosity to replace his initial playfulness.

"I apologize if I've caught you at a somber moment," Trevor spoke, his voice gentle and sincere. "But there's something about you that draws me in. Would you be willing to share your story with me?"

Linda's eyes flickered with a mixture of surprise and vulnerability. She longed to open up to Trevor, to release the pain that had silently consumed her. Slowly, she began to speak, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I am Linda," she said, her voice carrying a hint of sadness. "My heart has been touched by tragedy, and I find solace in the silence of this place. Qingming is a time for remembrance, and I come here to honor the memory of my beloved mother."

Trevor's heart swelled with compassion as he listened to Linda's tale. He understood the weight of loss and the desire to find solace in tradition. Determined to offer her comfort, he extended his hand, allowing his fingertips to brush against hers.

"Dear Linda," he said, his voice filled with empathy. "I, too, have known the pain of loneliness and loss. Perhaps, together, we can find a way to heal each other's hearts."

Linda, her eyes now shimmering with a glimmer of hope, nodded gently. There was a connection between them, a shared understanding that surpassed mere words. In that moment, Trevor knew that he had fallen in love with Linda, and he vowed to cherish and protect her fragile heart.

However, their time together was fleeting, as Trevor's journey compelled him to leave the village, promising to return someday.

Chapter 2: The Locked Door

A year had passed since Trevor's encounter with Linda, and his heart still longed for her. Determined to reconnect, he returned to the village during the Qingming festival in 2021. The streets were adorned with vibrant decorations, and the air crackled with anticipation. Trevor's steps quickened as he approached Linda's house, eager to see her once more.

To his dismay, he found the door to Linda's house locked, and there was no sign of her presence. Fear and uncertainty gripped his heart. Had Linda moved on? Had she forgotten him? Doubt gnawed at his thoughts as he stood before the silent house.

Undeterred, Trevor decided to leave a heartfelt poem beside the door, expressing his love and longing for Linda. With trembling hands, he carefully inscribed his words on a piece of parchment and placed it where Linda would see it.

"Dearest Linda," the poem read, its ink tracing the depths of Trevor's emotions. "In this season of remembrance, my thoughts are consumed by the memory of your gentle spirit. Though time and distance separate us, my heart remains steadfast and true. I pray that fate will guide us back to each other's arms."

With a heavy heart, Trevor bid farewell to the village, his hope burning like a flickering candle in the depths of his soul.

Chapter 3: The Reunion

Days later, Trevor could not shake off the memories of Linda. His dreams were filled with her ethereal presence, and he felt an unrelenting pull toward the village. Despite the uncertainty that clouded his mind, he knew he had to return. This time, he would seek answers, no matter the outcome.

As he arrived in the village once again, the atmosphere felt different. There was a sense of foreboding that hung in the air, casting a shadow over the usually lively festivities. Trevor's heart raced as he searched for any sign of Linda's presence.

To his relief and despair, he came across Linda's father, an old and wise man, weeping outside the locked house. Trevor approached him, offering his condolences and inquiring about Linda's absence.

Through tear-filled eyes, Linda's father revealed that Linda had fallen gravely ill after Trevor's departure. Their happiness had been shattered, and Linda's condition had deteriorated rapidly. Trevor was overcome with guilt and grief, shedding tears alongside Linda's father.

Driven by love and a desire to make amends, Trevor implored Linda's father to let him inside the house. With a trembling hand, Linda's father handed Trevor the key, a glimmer of hope flickering in his eyes. As he entered the house, Trevor's heart pounded with a mixture of fear and anticipation.

The interior of the house was dimly lit, its silence broken only by the sound of Trevor's footsteps. He followed the familiar path toward Linda's room, a knot forming in his stomach. And there, lying on the bed, was Linda—her once vibrant spirit now diminished by illness.

Trevor approached her with caution, his hands trembling as he reached out to touch her pale cheek. "Linda," he whispered, his voice laced with sorrow. "I have returned. Please, find the strength to fight. I am here, and I will do whatever it takes to heal you."

With a mixture of determination and desperation, Trevor set to work. Drawing upon his knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine, he gathered herbs, roots, and flowers known for their healing properties. With careful precision, he prepared a concoction—a blend of ancient remedies passed down through generations.

As he administered the medicine to Linda, Trevor's heart ached with the weight of their shared past and the possibility of a future slipping away. He prayed that the centuries-old wisdom of Chinese medicine would hold the power to revive Linda's spirit and restore her health.

Chapter 4: Rebirth and New Beginnings

Linda's body, once weak and lifeless, began to respond to the healing powers of the Chinese medicine. The color returned to her cheeks, and her breaths grew deep and steady. Trevor sat by her side, his eyes fixed on her face, his heart filled with a mixture of awe and gratitude.

In a tender moment, Linda's eyelids fluttered, revealing the shimmer of her awakening consciousness. Her eyes met Trevor's, and a spark of recognition illuminated their depths. It was a rebirth, a second chance at life and love.

With trembling hands, Trevor reached out to embrace Linda, his arms encircling her fragile form. Tears streamed down his face, mingling with her own as they held each other in a tight embrace. The air was filled with a mixture of relief, joy, and the sweet fragrance of newfound hope.

"I thought I had lost you," Trevor whispered, his voice choked with emotion. "But you are here, and that is all that matters. We can face anything together."

Linda's lips curved into a weak but radiant smile. The trials they had endured had forged a bond that transcended time and circumstance. Their love, tested and reignited, would burn brightly, guiding them through the chapters of their intertwined lives.

As Linda regained her strength, Trevor remained by her side, their love blossoming with each passing day. They reveled in the simple joys of life—the warmth of the sun, the gentle whisper of the wind, and the shared laughter that filled their days.

In the embrace of the Qingming festival, they found solace and renewal. Together, they would pay homage to their ancestors, honoring the traditions that had shaped them, and cherishing the memories of loved ones who had passed.

And so, in the village where their love was rekindled, Trevor and Linda embarked on a lifelong journey, forever grateful for the Chinese medicine that healed not only Linda's body but also their hearts. Their love story became a testament to the power of resilience, forgiveness, and the enduring strength of the human spirit.

As the years passed, Trevor and Linda's love grew deeper, entwining their lives in a tapestry of passion and devotion. They faced challenges and celebrated triumphs, always with the knowledge that they were stronger together.

And every Qingming festival, they would return to that village, where their love had been tested and reborn, whispering gratitude to the heavens and cherishing the memories of their shared past.

Samuel's Odyssey: A Hero's Journey Through Time and Space

Pui Kiu College, Kwong, Tsz Chun – 15

Samuel had always been fascinated by history, especially the rich and ancient culture of China. So, when he discovered a small rural temple nestled deep in the countryside, he couldn't resist exploring its mysteries. Little did he know that his adventure would take an unexpected turn, transporting him back in time to experience the life of a legendary weapon known as the fire lance.

It was a sunny afternoon when Samuel arrived at the temple. The ancient structure stood tall and proud, its weathered red walls adorned with intricate carvings. The air was thick with the scent of incense, and the distant sound of chanting monks added to the mystical atmosphere.

Curiosity burned inside Samuel as he ventured deeper into the temple. He came across a small chamber, dimly lit by flickering candles. In the center of the room, on a pedestal, lay a peculiar-looking weapon. It was a long metal tube, intricately designed with engravings and symbols that Samuel couldn't decipher.

Unable to resist the temptation, Samuel reached out and touched the fire lance. As his fingertips brushed against the cold metal, a surge of energy coursed through his body. The world around him blurred, and he felt a strange sensation of weightlessness.

When Samuel regained his senses, he found himself standing in the midst of a bustling ancient Chinese battlefield. The air was thick with smoke, and the sound of clashing weapons echoed through the air. Soldiers clad in armor charged forward, their faces determined and filled with battle fervor.

Startled, Samuel quickly realized that he had been transported back in time. But he also realized something even more astonishing—he had become the fire lance itself. He could see through its eyes, feel the heat emanating from its barrel, and even sense the anticipation of the soldiers as they prepared to unleash its power.

The fire lance was an early form of a gunpowder weapon, a precursor to the firearms that would revolutionize warfare in the future. It was a fearsome weapon, capable of spewing flames and deadly projectiles. Samuel marveled at the craftsmanship and ingenuity that went into its creation.

As Samuel traveled alongside the soldiers, he witnessed the devastating impact of the fire lance firsthand. With a loud bang, flames erupted from the barrel, illuminating the battlefield and striking fear into the hearts of the enemy. The projectiles tore through the air, piercing armor and causing chaos among the opposing forces.

Samuel experienced the thrill of victory and the anguish of defeat. He saw the admiration in the eyes of the soldiers as they marveled at the power of the fire lance, and he felt the weight of responsibility as lives were lost in its wake. It was a sobering reminder of the true cost of warfare.

But Samuel also witnessed moments of camaraderie and resilience. He saw the soldiers working together, their bond strengthened by the shared experience of battle. He witnessed acts of heroism and sacrifice, as they fought bravely to protect their homeland.

As Samuel's journey continued, he grew to appreciate the historical significance of the fire lance and the impact it had on warfare. He realized that this ancient weapon was not just a tool of destruction, but also a symbol of human ingenuity and the relentless pursuit of power.

Samuel's time as the fire lance allowed him to witness the evolution of warfare firsthand. He saw how the use of gunpowder and firearms transformed battle strategies and tactics. He observed the fear and awe that these new weapons instilled in both friend and foe, forever changing the nature of warfare.

But as Samuel immersed himself in the past, he also developed a deep respect for the soldiers who fought in these ancient battles. He saw their unwavering determination, their resilience in the face of adversity, and their unyielding loyalty to their comrades and their cause. He understood that behind every weapon, there were human beings who bore the weight of their actions.

As Samuel continued his journey through time as the fire lance, he encountered various challenging and pivotal moments in ancient Chinese history. He witnessed fierce battles, sieges, and the struggles of different factions vying for power and dominance. Each experience provided him with a deeper understanding of the complexities and consequences of war.

In one particularly intense battle, Samuel found himself on the front lines of a critical conflict. The opposing forces clashed with ferocity, their determination evident in their eyes and their every move. Samuel, in his role as the fire lance, unleashed torrents of fire and projectiles upon the enemy, creating chaos and confusion among their ranks.

But amidst the chaos, Samuel also witnessed the toll of war on both sides. He saw the fallen soldiers, their lifeless bodies scattered across the battlefield. The cries of grief and anguish filled the air as families mourned the loss of their loved ones. It was a stark reminder that war exacted a heavy price from all who were involved.

As Samuel moved through different battles and historical periods, he encountered renowned military strategists and leaders. He witnessed the brilliance of commanders who utilized the fire lance to its fullest potential, employing tactics that exploited its unique capabilities. The weapon became a symbol of power and a testament to the ingenuity of those who wielded it.

However, Samuel also witnessed the darker side of war. He saw instances where the fire lance was used indiscriminately, causing immense suffering and devastation among innocent civilians. The weapon's destructive power was not always wielded with restraint and consideration for human life. It was a sobering realization that even the most advanced weapons could be misused and bring about untold horrors.

As Samuel's journey through time neared its end, he found himself in the final battle where the fire lance played a significant role. On this battlefield, the stakes were higher than ever before. The outcome of the conflict would shape the course of history, and the fire lance stood at the center of the struggle.

Samuel, as the fire lance, felt the weight of responsibility more acutely than ever. The soldiers fighting alongside him looked to the weapon for hope and salvation. It was a pivotal moment, and Samuel knew that the choices he made as the fire lance would have far-reaching consequences.

In the midst of the chaos and uncertainty, Samuel's mind raced with the knowledge of the future. He knew the devastating impact that firearms would have on warfare, and he questioned the morality of their use. As he surveyed the battlefield, he contemplated the fine line between power and destruction, and the delicate balance between progress and the preservation of human life.

With each blast of the fire lance, Samuel couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. He witnessed the destruction it wrought, the lives it took, and the irreversible changes it brought to the battlefield. The power of the weapon was undeniable, but he couldn't escape the nagging thought that there could be a better way to resolve conflicts.

As the battle raged on, Samuel's perspective began to shift. He saw the toll that war took on both sides, the lives shattered and the communities torn apart. He realized that the true heroes were not the weapons, but the individuals who sought peace and understanding amidst the chaos of war.

In a bold move, Samuel decided to use the fire lance not as a weapon of destruction, but as a symbol of unity and hope. He ordered the soldiers to lay down their arms and engage in dialogue with the enemy. It was a risky move, but Samuel believed that it was the only way to break the cycle of violence.

To his surprise, the enemy responded positively to Samuel's gesture. They too were weary of the endless bloodshed and were open to finding common ground. Slowly, the two sides began to negotiate, seeking a peaceful resolution to their conflicts. Samuel's act of compassion and empathy had sparked a glimmer of hope in the midst of darkness.

As the dust settled and the battle came to an end, Samuel realized that his journey as the fire lance had taught him invaluable lessons about the true nature of power and the importance of empathy in times of conflict. He had witnessed firsthand the destructive capabilities of weapons, but he had also seen the potential for change and reconciliation.

Returning to the present day, Samuel carried the weight of his experience with him. He became an advocate for peaceful resolutions and a staunch supporter of diplomatic efforts. He used his knowledge of history to educate others about the consequences of war and the importance of finding alternative solutions.

Samuel's journey through time had transformed him from a curious explorer into a passionate advocate for peace. He understood that history was not just a series of events; it was a powerful teacher that could shape the future. He dedicated his life to promoting dialogue, understanding, and compassion, hoping to prevent the mistakes of the past from being repeated.

In conclusion, Samuel's accidental journey back in time as the fire lance allowed him to witness the impact of this ancient weapon on warfare and the lives of those involved. It challenged his beliefs and forced him to confront the ethical dilemmas of power and destruction. Ultimately, he emerged from the experience with a newfound dedication to peace and a determination to make a positive difference in the world. As Samuel's journey through time as the fire lance continued, he encountered even more significant battles and pivotal moments in ancient Chinese history. Each new experience provided him with a deeper understanding of the complexities and consequences of war, further shaping his perspective on power, destruction, and the importance of empathy.

In one particularly intense battle, Samuel found himself in the midst of a siege. The enemy forces had surrounded a fortified city, and the defenders were in desperate need of assistance. As the fire lance, Samuel became an integral part of the defense, using its fiery projectiles to repel the enemy's advances.

The siege lasted for weeks, with both sides engaged in a deadly game of cat and mouse. Samuel witnessed the toll it took on the defenders, as resources dwindled and morale wavered. He saw firsthand the resilience and determination of the soldiers, who fought tirelessly to protect their homes and loved ones.

Amidst the chaos of the siege, Samuel also observed the ingenuity of the defenders. They devised clever strategies to maximize the effectiveness of the fire lance, using it to create barriers of flames and to target key enemy positions. It was a testament to their resourcefulness and adaptability in the face of adversity.

Throughout his journey, Samuel encountered various military strategists and leaders who recognized the potential of the fire lance and incorporated it into their battle plans. He witnessed the brilliance of commanders who meticulously coordinated their forces, leveraging the power of the weapon to gain strategic advantages.

However, Samuel also witnessed the darker side of war. He came face to face with the devastating consequences of the fire lance's destructive power when it fell into the wrong hands. In one instance, he witnessed a renegade warlord using the weapon to terrorize innocent civilians, leaving a trail of destruction and despair in his wake.

As Samuel reflected on these experiences, he grappled with the moral implications of his newfound role as the fire lance. He questioned the responsibility that came with possessing such immense power and the potential for its misuse. He realized that even the most advanced weapons could be a double-edged sword, capable of both protecting and destroying.

In his travels, Samuel also encountered individuals who had been directly affected by the fire lance and the wars in which it was used. He spoke with survivors who had witnessed the devastation firsthand, hearing their stories of loss, displacement, and the long-lasting impact of conflict on their lives. These encounters deepened his understanding of the human cost of war and fueled his determination to work towards a more peaceful future.

As Samuel's journey neared its end, he found himself in a pivotal moment in ancient Chinese history. The kingdom was on the brink of a decisive battle that would determine its fate. The fire lance stood as a symbol of power and destruction, but Samuel knew that he had the opportunity to use it differently.

In a bold and unprecedented move, Samuel decided to lay down the fire lance and advocate for peace. He engaged in dialogue with both sides, emphasizing the importance of finding common ground and seeking diplomatic solutions. His actions inspired others to reconsider their positions and explore alternatives to violence.

Slowly but surely, Samuel's message of peace and reconciliation spread among the soldiers and leaders. They began to see the futility of endless conflict and the potential for a brighter future. Through his unwavering commitment to peaceful resolutions, Samuel played a crucial role in bringing about a ceasefire and initiating negotiations for a lasting peace.

The aftermath of the battle marked a turning point in the kingdom's history. The fire lance, once a symbol of destruction, became a symbol of hope and the possibilities of a more peaceful world. Samuel's journey had not only transformed him, but it had also influenced the course of history, leaving a lasting impact on the lives of countless individuals.

Returning to the present day, Samuel carried the weight of his experiences as the fire lance and the lessons he had learned. He dedicated himself to promoting peace and understanding, using his knowledge of history to educate others about the consequences of war and the importance of finding alternative solutions.

Samuel became an advocate for peaceful resolutions, working tirelessly to foster dialogue and reconciliation in conflict-ridden regions. He collaborated with international organizations, governments, and grassroots movements to support initiatives that aimed to prevent and resolve conflicts through diplomacy and mediation.

Recognizing the power of storytelling, Samuel also became a prolific writer, sharing his experiences and insights through books and articles. He used his platform to highlight the human cost of war and to inspire others to embrace empathy, compassion, and understanding as essential tools for building a more peaceful world.

In addition to his advocacy work, Samuel established a foundation dedicated to promoting peace education and conflict resolution. The foundation supported programs that taught young people about the consequences of war and encouraged them to become agents of positive change in their communities.

Samuel's journey as the fire lance had not only transformed him from a curious explorer into a passionate advocate for peace, but it had also ignited a movement. Inspired by his story, individuals from all walks of life joined him in his mission to create a world where conflicts were resolved through dialogue and understanding rather than violence.

Quest for cards

Pui Kiu College, Lai, Wing Tung – 15

The day was relatively fine. The sun shined brightly, accompanied by a clear blue sky, with no trace of any clouds for miles. The lush green grass was nowhere to be seen anymore, only replaced by a barren desert that seemed to stretch for infinity. Among the arid region, two people trekked on, hoping to find any sign of civilizations nearby.

During their long walk, one of them spoke up.

“Are we there yet?”

“...No, I am still not sure yet.”

“Seriously? But we have been riding with this camel day and night!”

“I know, just be patient – Ah! I finally see silhouettes of buildings!”

Both of them stopped talking and focused on the silhouette. Indeed, they had finally reached their destination: The city of Alexandria. This place was one of Egypt's main trading cities, where travelers came from afar and ventured here to trade. Many people who were familiar with trading on the silk road described Alexandria as a gold mine, serving as one of the vital trading points, overloaded with an abundance of goods and information, which the latter had something the duo was searching for.

“Hopefully, this town will have the information for what we are searching for.”

“It better have.”

The pair and their camel sauntered into town, and were almost immediately greeted (or rather swiftly blocked) by the border guards upon entry. A guard in a tired, monotonic voice, asked:

“Please state your names and occupations before barging in.”

“Ah! I almost forgot. My apologies, sir. My name is Jose, and I am traveling with my dear companion, Maria. We are here to collect information on behalf of our king.”

“Alright. I'll verify your identities, check for illegal items, and you can enter the city.”

“Appreciate it, officer.”

“Thanks.”

Alexandria was a busy place, with the streets bustling with activities. It was impossible to keep track of the countless things that were going on every second: selling, trading, dealing, bartering It was difficult to keep track of the fast pace of living here.

With many struggles, Jose and Maria finally overcame the crowds and decided to head to a bar to settle down. ‘*After all, The bar is the best place to overhear information!*’ – as Jose had proclaimed himself. Maria wasn't sure if that was true, but she could care less due to her starving stomach. Unfortunately for the two of them, there were no bars nearby, but they found a pub, which was close enough. Maria tied their camel to a nearby post, gave it some food and water to rejuvenate from the journey, and went inside the pub. The bartender greeted them upon their entry, and nodded his head to the empty seats near the counters. Maria and Jose sat on the chairs, finally getting a chance to rest.

The atmosphere was relatively quiet, with the doors acting as a barrier from the noisy city, and only distant chatter and muttering of the customers inside of the bar could be heard. The bartender was busy polishing one of the bar glasses, before shortly finishing and turning to the pair's attention, asking:

“Is there anything you two would like to order here?”

“Sir, if you would be so accommodating, I would like to have some apple cider, and some pinchos to go with it, if you have any.”

“Of course, of course. And what would you like, missy?”

"Erm...*Tapas,if you have any...*" Maria hesitated ,then spoke intangibility in a hushed tone.

"...Pardon?"

"*Tapas.*" Maria repeated quickly,her voice audibly getting louder,but it still wasn't loud enough for the bartender to hear.

"Mister,I believe my partner would like some Tapaz."

"Oh! I see. You two are from Spain?"The bartender inquired,taking their orders.

"Why yes,yes we are! You have a strong sense of observation,sir."

"No,no,not at all.I was just assuming from the unusual clothing you two have on,and the dishes you ordered were Spanish,that's all."The bartender responded,

"Ah,I guess our behavior was too obvious.Are we that unusual?"

"Mayhaps."

They were quite the unusual pair. Jose was a spokesman who was very outgoing and liked to socialize,and Maria was unused to speaking to people(except from speaking to Jose).While there were many differences between the two,they made a great team by covering up for each other's weaknesses:Jose speaking up for Maria when she couldn't properly do so for strangers , and she covered for Jose's terrible memory and observation .

"So,What brings you here to this city anyway?Both of you don't seem like merchants."The bartender inquired,setting down the food Jose and Maria had ordered.

"You guessed correctly again, sir. Maria and I have ventured here in the search for information that might please our king."

"Is it fine to disclose it? I'm a bit interested in what the king wants."

"...Maria?"

"The king said that it's fine."

"Splendid! So,the reason why we have come far away from our kingdom..."

"Yes?"

"...Is to search for new ways of entertainment.You see,the king recently has gotten bored and repeatedly complained about how lacking the entertainment is in Spain and wants us to travel to other countries to learn about their ways of entertainment and integrate it into our culture . You see, the king had gotten wind of a new game that has been trending using something called '*a deck of carps*' ,and we wanted to check it out." Jose spoke, between bites of his food.

"The game of... leaving?" The bartender repeated Jose's words, flabbergasted.

"*Hemeansadeckofcards,notcarps.*"Maria uttered .

"Ah,so that's what it was called ."

"Hmmm...I can provide some help. A few days ago, some people from the docks came by,and said some fancy stuff about some card thing from China.Maybe if you head over to the port near the Nile river,someone can provide more information."

"...Maria,is Denial a river in Egypt?"

"No.You got your words mixed up again."

"Oh. Well,You'll still show me the way to the river, right? "

"Not until you've paid for our meal."

"Alas,information always comes at a cost."

The duo left the pub, hastily fetched their camel, and headed to The Nile,where they conversed with the merchants who specialize in trading in China.Maria made sure Jose never left her sight,else the very likely scenario that he would end up on one of the cargo ships in the process of searching.It didn't take long for them to find an answer

from a captain, and also losing the camel.

"Excuse me, but are there any new games from China that are related to... *carpet*— cards, perchance?"

"Dunno where you heard it from, but yep, there is. This game revolves using small pieces of paper called cards and symbols to play different games using them. Most of the games made are quite addictive, at least for me and my crew, that is. It's gotten to the point where we've used money to gamble for fun."

"Ah, yes! This is what I was looking for! Do you have any samples of the carp— I mean, cards?"

"Sorry mate, all of the cards are either drenched or missing, so we need to import some before actually selling any. Besides, this card thing is quite new, so we haven't gotten the approval to even put it on the market yet."

"What a shame... then, is it possible for me and my partner to acquire it by ourselves?"

"Well, lucky for you, the crew is heading to China again very soon... seeing as our ship is quite short-staffed, we'll let you hop on board to learn more about the card game over there in exchange that you help out the crew during the voyage."

"What do you say, Maria?"

"I'm more worried about your stomach not coping well with the sea."

"Nonsense, my dear. I have sailed far and wide before, so no worries. It's a deal then!"

It took nearly a month before they had finally reached China. Jose was relieved to step on solid ground again, nearly getting seasick on many occasions despite his many confident claims of having sailed the seven seas (which was technically true, as his parents took him there when he was a child). Maria was a bit fed up, having to work double time with the crew to make up for Jose's absence during the trip. Nonetheless, both of them were eager to see what China had in store for them.

"The ship will return in two months. We'll still be at the same dock, so if you still want to hitch a ride back, feel free to look for us." The captain had told them. "Shame I can't hire the missy though. You fit well with the crew, even if you aren't much of a talker."

"I'll consider it if a ever got fired." Maria replied.

"Maria, I can't do this job without you."

"I know, I won't leave."

The security in China was very strict: The security was so tight that Maria and Jose felt like they were being robbed rather than searched, and it wasn't until the guards checked everything they possessed before the duo could enter. The atmosphere of the streets were lax, and while there weren't as many people compared to Alexandria, the streets were bustling even so.

"Looks like we soon need new tips for new locations. I don't know about you, but I want to book into a motel in record time." Maria said, tiredly.

"No more restaurant searching for information?"

"Nope. Didn't you eat your share like, an hour or two ago, Mr. Glutton?"

"Unfortunately, I threw up a portion of it in the bathroom. But... Surely there are people playing carps there?"

"Nope. From what the captain recalled, the card's origin came from being a substitute for money from gambling, so we need to..."

"...Go to a bar!" Jose exclaimed.

"Go to the inner palace, where the rich are."

"No bars it is then." Jose replied. "Is this an infiltration mission?"

"Sort of. We came partially due to our king's orders, so we don't need to make up an excuse to enter. However, to stay would be another issue in itself..."

"No worries, I got that. Let's go find a place to rest for now."

“Thanks.”

The next day, Jose and Maria had arrived at the rear palace for their investigation. They showed their letters that cited approval (written personally by the king to ensure smooth sailing for the mission) to the guards, and were greeted by the gentry-scholars, who took them to meet the king. By the time they had finally entered, it was already nightfall.

“So, what brings you here to our country, on order from the king of Spain?”

“I thank you for honoring our presence, your grace. We have come here to investigate, or rather learn more about your culture, in terms of your entertainment and food, in order to pass this knowledge to our king, who in turn will send you some of our own valuables for this exchange.”

“Alright. I’ll soon send some of my men to aid you with this task tomorrow. For now, guards, show them a room to sleep in during the exchange.”

“Thank you, for your grace for allowing us to stay.”

“Thanks.”

Two guards promptly appeared and whisked them to the guest rooms. It was large and spacious, with plenty of space for putting luggage, and enough room to talk in private.

“So, what’s the plan here, Maria?” Jose asked.

“We’ll still do the cultural exchange, but we’ll not mention the deck of cards that the king wants. I’ve heard the king temporarily banned it from the rear palace due to interfering with work.”

“Got it. So, what other methods can we pull off? I know our main focus is learning about the cards, but it’s still hard to cover up for something illegal, y’know.”

“I overheard it from locals at the inn yesterday, that there is a game in China called jianzi, which our king has not learnt of. This will be the target subject we will learn during our ‘exchange.’”

“Ah, so killing one bird with two stones. The king will also be pleased to learn the techniques of both games, and he’ll still send rewards to the emperor of China.”

“Precisely.” Maria responded, ignoring the fact that Jose had spelt the idiom wrong.

“Was it necessary to add food as a subject to our exchange?” Maria remarked.

“The better the food, the better my performance is.”

“Whatever you say so.”

After their brief exchange of plans and some quality sleep, the gentry-scholars that the king had recommended to aid them had arrived at their doorstep the next morning. Jose had went with them, distracting them with questions about their food and also jianzi, the game. Maria was pretty certain that he ended up talking about zombies (Jiangshi) instead, but the scholars had figured out his original intent, so it was fine.

Meanwhile, Maria had opted to stay behind to investigate the cards. The rear place was as large as a town, giving her much space to wander around cautiously, trying to not stick her head in places that would get her executed in a pinch.

After about half an hour, she noticed some guards and scholars sneaking off into a hidden corner, carrying stacks of coins in a bag and some oddly shaped strips, trying not to draw as much attention as possible. However, they had missed Maria tailing them due to her quiet nature, noticing the resemblance between the weirdly cut plaques and paper. Maria hid behind a window, trying to observe their playstyles.

“So, how many rounds are we playing today?” One of them piqued up.

Another answered. “I’m going for 7 rounds. I’m in a good mood today, and since it’s also payday today, I might also go for 9.”

“10 rounds here.”

“I’ll just go with 4 rounds. I’m having a bit of a money issue here.”

“Alright, let’s start. So let’s play”

Through the murmur of jumbled words, Maria finally saw the deck of cards that the king had long hoped for. The

cards were quite intricate, having many shapes and patterns that Maria wasn't even quite sure what it meant. This usually meant that the game would be localized in Spain with their own set of rules and games due to culture differences, but Maria was sure that the king would love to play nonetheless. After observing for a while, Maria jolted down some notes and rules of games that the crowd was playing, and swiped a deck of cards. This alerted the group, but they were too late to notice as Maria took her leave.

It took a while when Maria had finally found her way back to her suite, only to discover Jose was already in the room, waiting for her.

"I reckon your side went smoothly?" He asked.

"Yep. You?"

"Same. Though, I think they took notice of my bad memory, as they gave me some books and a map of the palace to read to save time repeating themselves and finding me."

"At least you didn't get lost. How was the food?"

"Scrumptious and delightful. I think they liked how they complemented their food, so they gave me a recipe book and some spices. How was your side?"

"I got a sample of the cards that the king wanted and also jotted down some notes on some games some people were playing."

"Splendid! Now all we need to do is leave and return to our king, if we don't have any business here." Jose exclaimed.

"After hearing your side, I kinda wanna try the food before leaving now." Maria replied.

"Sure! We have time."

They stayed at the rear palace for a few more days to experience more of the local food, then took their leave. The emperor gave them some gold coins for their journey back, so they didn't need to board the cargo ship again and could hire a voyage ship, but it would still take a while before they could get back to Spain.

Jose breathed a sigh of relief, having a chance to finally go home after their long journey. "So partner, any more plans for the future?"

"Let's build a casino to earn money from people playing cards."

"Sounds good to me."

The Mystery of Cheongsam

Pui Kiu College, Yeung, Hiu Ching – 15

In a resplendent palace, there lived a greedy emperor named Cixi. Cixi, who lived an extravagant lifestyle, was never satisfied with the things that she possessed. In order to make the insatiable emperor happy, peasants and nobles in the country took offerings and goods and paid tribute regularly, to get rewards. Days after days, years after years, Cixi started to get tired of the tributes and goods given by the people, so she commanded her most trust courier to deliver a message to the folk — “In this upcoming week, if anyone can pay me the rarest tribute, in return, I will grant him or her ten thousand taels of gold. However, if you people failed to impress me, the heads of your family and you will be chopped off.” After the message was delivered, millions of thousands of people brought a mount of tributes. Looking at the tributes, Cixi smirked and later commanded her couriers to burn them all.

On the fourth day after the Holy Decree was announced, people were getting more anxious and restless, they were frustrated in finding Cixi the rare and precious tributes.

“Are there any progress made?” asked Cixi. “My emperor, I’m sorry to tell you that the folks have made no progress, some said they can’t find the perfect Baoyu, some said they are still searching for the tributes, some said they need more time to find the perfect tribute.” told the courier. “WHAT?! ARE YOU SERIOUS!?? MARK MY WORDS, IF THEY CAN’T FIND ME THE RAREST TRIBUTE, YOUR HEAD WILL BE OFF TOO, LEAVE!” roared Cixi. The courier quickly dashed out of the palace. On the way, an unknown figure with the cloke, holding a large box, passed by him, and entered the palace.

“Who...who are you?” asked Cixi, the mysterious figure didn’t speak, but bowed to Cixi. “I demand you to speak immediately, who are you? Are you going to pay me tributes?” snapped Cixi. This time, the man spoke in a deep voice “Your majesty, yes I’m going to pay you tribute, but first, will you give me the honor to invite you to open this box?” Cixi hesitated for a second, then replied arrogantly “Yes you may.” then slowly walked down the throne and approached the man. She snapped the box from the man and opened the box so aggressively that the box was torn into half. However, what came into her eyes surprised her. It was a cheongsam, which contains a luminous gold color which radiates a sense of regality and sophistication. Cixi looked at the cheongsam in delight, she had never seen such a gorgeous and splendid gown before, that she couldn’t keep an eye off the cheongsam. “Your majesty, so do you like the cheongsam?” the man asked. “You may leave now.” hissed Cixi, and secretly blamed the man for disturbing her appreciating the cheongsam. “Wait, when will I get my ten thousand taels of gold?” asked the man, Cixi slyly replied “Oh, this is just a simple gown and nothing special, so you won’t get the ten thousand taels of gold.” “YOUR MAJESTY, are you eating one’s word?” the man exasperatedly asked. “NONSENSE, NOW GET OUT!” roared Cixi. “You’ll regret it Cixi...” whispered the man, then he suddenly vanished into the air, leaving the shock on Cixi’s face. Before she could figure out what was going on, Cixi’s gaze returned to the cheongsam.

In a blink of an eye, Cixi has worn the cheongsam. She walked and stood in front of the mirror, looking at the reflection, she felt a hint of satisfaction and happiness. As she kept looking in the mirror, the reflection of her slowly became unclear, then a sudden strong magnetic force pulled her towards the mirror, “HELP!!! GUARDS!!!” screamed Cixi, in a panic, she grabbed on the side of the mirror, before she was completely immersed into the mirror, she saw the man who gave her the cheongsam standing in front of her waving at her. Within a minute, Cixi was completely immersed into the mirror.

“HELP ME!!!” a sharp woman’s voice woke me from my sleep, “Huff...huff...huff”, I panted loudly. “Did your wife divorce you?” teased Ping, I glared at him, thinking of the dream I asked myself “Is that the cheongsam we had found two days ago?”, a sweat slid down from my forehead, that’s weird. I whipped off the sweat from my forehead

and suddenly heard “Zzzz.....Zzz”, Ping and I looked at each other, seeing Zangli sleeping soundly, we both burst out laughing at the next moment, which woke Zangli. “What’s..... what happened? Why are you both laughing?” yawned Zangli. “Nothing, we think there’s a pig lying beside us,” laughed Ping. “That’s not funny, everyone snores when sleeping, it is normal, don’t be too dramatic.” Zangli replied. By listening to their little conversation, I had temporarily forgotten the nightmare which invaded and haunted my sleep.

“Ring...Ring” all of a sudden, I received a sudden phone call from my boss Mr Cheung, through the phone, I could hear his voice shivering “R.....Rae, please help me to inform Zangli and Ping too. Last night, a thief sneaked into our museum, and stole the most precious treasure that we’d found two days ago, it is the cheongsam of Cixi’s! Now, all I want you guys to do is to find the thief and bring me back the cheongsam! I have just sent you a photo of the thief. Anyhow, you guys must find it,” he groaned, “and Rae, be careful while finding the Cheongsam, that’s all I need to say.” Before I could speak, he hung up the phone. Zangli, Ping and I looked at each other with confusion, but then we came back to our senses, “Umm...so what can we do now?” asked Zangli. I didn’t answer him, I opened the photo that Mr Cheung had sent me. What I saw next was shocking, the thief’s face was the same as the one in my dream! I quickly printed the photo out and stuck it on the board, Zangli and Ping looked at me, puzzled.

After a few minutes, I slowly turned to Zangli and Ping, and told them the dream I had dreamt before the call. At first, they didn’t believe me, but then I told them about the mirror that had swallowed Cixi, their faces immediately turned as pale as the snow. With hesitation, Ping finally spoke, but with a shivering voice “Rae, is this the mirror you have mentioned?”, while showing me a picture of an oval silver mirror. By looking at the picture, I could tell that it was the mirror that appeared in my dream. I cried out “Yes yes, but how? How do you know, no I mea.....” Before I could finish, Zangli roared “Ping! Quick! NOW!”. Without knowing what was going on, I was knocked unconscious on the head and fainted.

Waking up in a sharp pain on my head, I opened my eyes, there I saw Ping and Zangli sitting next to me whispering, as I looked at the surroundings, I realized we were in a dark and cold environment, surrounded by rows of candles. My heart beats as loud as a drum, I was petrified, and tried to sneak away before Zangli and Ping realized me, but of course I failed. Zangli grabbed my ankle and knocked me off the sofa, “Rae, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you, it’s just.....” his gaze drifted to Ping. “WHAT HAPPENED! LET ME GO!” I was driven up the wall and shrieked. Ping immediately spoke “Rae, listen please. So why and what we’re hiding is that 20 years ago, my grandma was working as a historian just like us. One day, when she was searching for antiques in the Palace which is called the Forbidden city. When she entered one of the rooms in the palace, a flash caught her eye when she entered the room, then she saw an oval silver mirror which you have mentioned. She walked closer to the mirror, a sudden gravitational pull made her can’t help but touching the mirror. What happened next was creepy, the mirror showed the face of an old hag, laughing evilly.”

I looked at Ping unbelievably, this was hilarious! I sneered “So you want me to believe you? Ping, your grandma is in the mental hospital. I have heard that 20 years ago, your grandma was sent to the mental hospital after the journey in the Forbidden city. Besides, how can the mirror relate to the cheongsam? And why is this the reason for you to hide “secrets” from me?” Zangli continued “The woman in the mirror is Cixi and the cheongsam we found two days ago was also Cixi’s. The thief is Ping’s gran, she escaped the hospital yesterday. And why we’re hiding from you is that you are a descendant of Empress Dowager Cixi. Do you know that Ping’s gran is a fortune teller, you remember the necklace she gave you on your birthday last year?” I unconsciously touched the necklace I was wearing and asked “Isn’t this my birthday present from you?” I asked, Zangli and Ping both shake their heads, Ping said “My grandma told us that this year the cheongsam will appear in the Forbidden city where we have visited two days ago, and yes we did find and brought the cheongsam back to the museum. She also mentioned that the cheongsam will lead us to danger, especially you Rae. At first, we only think that this is a joke from mental patients but it turns out to be true when we have discovered the cheongsam. I know this is absurd, but please believe us.” When Ping finished, I sighed. I couldn’t even imagine how outrageous it was. “Ring.....Ring.....” a sudden phone ringing pulled me

back to real life, "GRANNY?" cried Ping, seeing him speaking on the phone for a few minutes, he hung up and turned to Zangli and me, "Let's go."

Next, I saw him pressing the wall and the bricks moved, then a narrow path manifested in front of our eyes. I was shocked, but still, I followed Ping and Zangli walking into the "chamber".

The path to the chamber was eerie, I could see hair or wigs hanging from the ceiling, I could hear women singing, "Keep walking and don't look back!" warned Ping. The path was so long as if I was walking inside a tunnel, finally I saw a light at the end of the pathway. I quickly dashed towards the "exit" of the tunnel. There I saw Ping's grandma at the same time, but Ping and Zangli vanished. "My child, don't be scared, come and take a seat" said Ping's grandma. I was frightened and didn't know what to do. Before I could react, a chair appeared behind me, and a strong force made me fall hard on the chair. "What's going on, gran?" I asked in a trembling voice. "Child, finally I have waited for you for hundreds of years, you're the one, now hand me your necklace." said gran. When I was about to take off my necklace, "DON'T LISTEN TO HER! DON'T AT HER EYES!" A sudden scream startled me, it was Ping's voice, I was puzzled. "Child now, quick hand me your necklace" gran spoke again, but I had a feeling of danger. I slowly replied "Who are you?", "What's wrong, child? Hand me the necklace, please?" answered gran. "No!" I yelled. The old woman sitting in front of me suddenly giggled and exposed her sharp teeth, her white silky hair turned into snakes like Medusa, she laughed "What a bad boy." "Rae, run to the exit! NOW!" Zangli roared, but my legs were like stones, I could not escape. As the creature in front of me stuck out her hands, my necklace glowed, and all of the sudden, my legs were unfrozen. Without any hesitation, I ran to the exit of the chamber, I screamed "Ping, Zangli, where are you?" but there were no replies, running endlessly, I felt like my heart was going to jump out. Hopelessness swarmed up my brain. When I was about to stop running, I saw another light at the end of the path, I was too scared to go any further, but when I stopped, I could hear echoes of footsteps, so I quickly dashed towards the exit of the pathway, but then I entered another chamber, there I saw Zangli and Ping. When they saw me, they hugged me in tears "You scared us, where have you been, didn't I tell you to follow us?" cried Zangli. With relief, I told them what had happened, and they were also shocked and frightened.

Ping slowly asked "Do you know where we are now?" I answered "Are we still in the chamber of your basement?" Zangli giggled "No you idiot, we're in Forbidden city now, can't you see the mirror there?" I looked around the room, it was old but gorgeous. As I looked around, I saw the mirror at the corner of the room, then I found the cheongsam beside the mirror. "Are we going to take the cheongsam back?" I asked, Ping and Zangli both nodded their heads. I slowly walked towards the mirror, but then Ping shouted "Rae, hand us the necklace first, or you cannot enter the mirror" Without any hesitation, I took off the necklace and handed it to Zangli and Ping.

As I walked closer to the mirror, I felt a sudden push from the back, the next thing I found out was I was trapped inside the mirror. I looked desperately and yelled at Zangli and Ping "Guys, what happened? Help me", but all I saw were two evil faces staring at me. I'm sure this was another trap, my friends wouldn't treat me like this, this must be another trick, I looked around desperately, trying to find a way out of the mirror. "My dear friend, don't complain about this situation, isn't this a good time for you and Cixi to gather around?" Ping smirked. I ignored them.

Lastly, I gave up hitting on the cold hard mirror. Instead, I looked around the virtual room, there was no difference between the actual and the virtual room, but then I saw the cheongsam being hung on the closet. As I slowly approached the cheongsam, a sudden scream stopped me from what I was doing, "Stop! Don't touch! That's mine!". An old lady with messy white hair rushed towards me, and grabbed my hand with a large force, as if my hand was about to break. "Ouch! Who are you?" I cried in pain, the woman didn't answer, but looked at me slyly, but then I remembered what the evil told me, it was the emperor who has been trapped here for centuries! I quickly asked "Are you Cixi?", She looked at me furiously and answered "How dare you call me by my name, yes I am Cixi, who are you?" I answered, "I am your posterity." Cixi looked at me doubtfully. Slowly she started talking. "Are you here to take me back to the actual world?" she asked. I answered immediately "No, I'm trapped here just like you,

what are we going to do?" Cixi looked at me unpleasantly and replied perfunctorily "Fool, I just told you that I have been trapped for centuries, if I know what to do, I won't be here!" I immediately fell to the ground, hopelessly lying on the floor. Suddenly, the air turned so thin that it was very difficult to breathe, I gasped for air and suffered in pain. Cixi looked at me coldly, I used my last breath and energy urging "Please.....help me." Then I lost consciousness.

"Rae.....Rae! Wake up!" All of a sudden I heard Zangli's voice. I struggled to open my eyes, there I saw myself lying on our office sofa. Zangli and Ping sighed "Finally, you woke up. You scared us. Rae, can you hear us? Rae?" I sat soullessly on the sofa, thinking about what had just happened, was this all about a dream? I got hit on the head and found out that I was Cixi's posterity, and I was led to a chamber and got hunted by a scary old creature and I got betrayed and locked inside the mirror with Cixi? Wasn't this real? I asked myself. "RAE!" A sudden scream disturbed my ponder, I looked at Ping and Zangli, then I suddenly laughed. Then I told both Ping and Zangli about the frightening and terrible dream that I just had. They didn't laugh, but patted me on the shoulder, then Ping whispered in my ear "Rae, there is no such thing as the cheongsam, you're just dreaming right Zangli?" Zangli nodded, then I suddenly felt that something was wrong, firstly, my head hurts, secondly my necklace was gone. I subconsciously took two steps back. When they saw this, they took out the mirror that devoured me, I frowned, this was absolutely not a dream, this was all real, but why was I here? Before I could finish recollecting what had happened and what was going on, I was again attracted by a gravitational pull into the mirror.

This time, inside the mirror, I was wearing the cheongsam. I immediately looked back to the mirror, there I saw two eunuchs and...and Cixi holding my necklace! Cixi smirked "Sorry my dear, without the necklace, you will be trapped in the mirror forever in my place, good job Ping and Zangli". Then I saw the eunuchs bowing to Cixi. "Now cover the mirror and seal it!" ordered. The last thing I saw was a red towel covering the mirror, then I lost my consciousness again.....

After centuries, there were three historians, one was called Ping, one was called Zangli and the other was called Ching, they were looking for the Cheongsam of Rae's.....

Visionaries

Pui Kiu College, Ho, Wing Ga Gaylie – 15

Lei Yu is running late.

His patience is also, in direct correlation with this point, running thin at an alarming rate.

“I want this piece to be fast-paced, but still alluring enough to set the atmosphere,” Mr. Jin tells him, repeating what he said two minutes ago. Lei Yu has been looking towards the clock anxiously, bouncing his leg restlessly as he watches the minute hand tick closer to four.

“Of course,” Lei Hu says, smiling and nodding ever so politely. This is one of the rare moments that Lei Yu wishes his older brother were more straightforward; he sees that slight strain in his smile when the theatre director continues to ramble on about his commission. Right now, he is perfectly willing to compose a thousand scores for Mr. Jin if it would make him speed this conversation along.

“And it has to be elegant, of course, but not too grand. Elegant, with a sense of familiarity—”

“I assure you that my brother can do that, Mr. Jin.”

It's rare for Lei Hu to interrupt; his patience must also be dwindling. Lei Yu glances at the clock again: it is now four, and he is officially late.

When Lei Yu stands, practically shoving his documents into his messenger bag, Lei Hu makes no move to stop him. He instead follows Lei Yu's pointed glare towards the clock. His eyes widened, coming to the same realisation as his brother.

“Lei Yu has other business,” he says quickly, drawing Mr. Jin's attention. “But I assure you, if you must provide further details of your commission, I will pass them along to our orchestra manager...”

And with that, Lei Yu stands up and leaves swiftly, his hurried footsteps giving his frustration away. He panics at the sight of the digital clock on his car dashboard blinking that it's now a quarter past four, which makes him a whole ten minutes late for his next meeting. After he hastily parks his car, Lei Yun dashes to the studio where the meeting is, and skids to a stop right outside the door, fixing his tie before walking in, bracing himself for criticism of his tardiness.

“I am incredibly sorry for arriving late, Mr. Xu; a previous meeting went overtime, and there were many questions that held me back...”

The man behind the desk smiles, making him trail off into silence. Normally people would be at least mildly annoyed about someone arriving to their meeting late, but Xu Yingxing merely extends a hand and invites him to take a seat across the desk.

“Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lei, and it's alright. Some things are bound to be unavoidable, I understand that.”

Xu Yingxing, a rising artist who was scouted out by Aster Creations Studio, a prestigious art studio known throughout China, after his works were uploaded to social media by the small local art centre he teaches at. As fictitious as his backstory may sound, this is not the most surprising thing about him.

Xu Yingxing is blind.

Contrary to belief, most people that are diagnosed as blind can actually sense varying levels of light and form. However, in Xu Yingxing's case, he is one of the very few that are completely blind. But despite being visually impaired, Xu Yingxing made a place for himself in the art industry and carved his name into the list of the most exceptional modern artists in China.

The artist folds his hands and listens intently, dark amber eyes slightly unfocused as they try to pinpoint where Lei Yu is sitting and look in that direction, most probably according to the source of his voice as Lei Yu speaks.

"Alright. So, I believe that you would like to discuss a collaboration between Lei Productions and Aster Creations Studio?" Lei Yu takes out one of his files on collaboration requests and flips through its contents as Xu Yingxing hums affirmatively.

"Yes, that's it. In fact, it's a rather personal request; actually, I've been wanting to contact you specifically, as there is something I'd like to ask of you." At this, Lei Yu looks up at Xu Yingxing. "I'd like for us to work together on a project."

Lei Yu raises an eyebrow. Now this was rather uncommon; not a lot of people have asked for specifically his help in a collaboration, much less the request coming from an individual. "Well, that's certainly negotiable, if you're willing to tell me the details of this project."

Xu Yingxing nods and visibly relaxes at Lei Yu's relatively positive response. "There's a bit of background to this request; not a lot of people know this, but I have sound-colour synesthesia, or chromesthesia, meaning that sound can stimulate the perception of colour or shape in my mind and create specific associations between sounds and colours that becomes consistent over time. I'm constantly aware of these associations myself, but due to my complete blindness, I can't utilise this ability." He pauses for a moment, possibly anticipating questions. Lei Yu doesn't interrupt him, making a noise of acknowledgement.

"I came to the conclusion that I want to invent a device that can basically let me visualise those images not just through sound, but deliberately composed music. Other than that, I want to help visually impaired artists all across China as well. It gets hard to find inspiration when you can't even see the things you're creating. I found that my chromesthesia responds best to classical music, so I'm turning to you for help. I would be most grateful if you would accept my request for this collaboration."

Lei Yu doesn't respond immediately. This is a good business opportunity, but the risk and return don't seem to form a balanced ratio... And yet, he prides himself on his ability to see value in all forms of art and promote the appreciation of them. This is also a chance to do exactly that.

Xu Yingxing maintains a hopeful expression on his face, but he keeps fidgeting with his fingers. Ah, Lei Yu thinks. He's nervous.

"I'll accept your request. Consider it my contribution to the community; as a musician and composer myself, I've heard about the difficulties of auditory impaired people who work in the music industry, and their careers aren't exactly the smoothest ones either. It must be tough for you too; I sure can't imagine myself making music successfully if I was deaf, and if I were, I'd want to do the same as you too."

Xu Yingxing looks surprised; did he anticipate a rejection? "But I do have one question: we are both artists, and I'm not sure about you, but I myself don't have much knowledge on inventions, much less on more complicated branches of science. Do you plan to look for someone to assist and maybe educate us in that field of research or...?" At this, Xu Yingxing smiles. "No need to worry about that, Mr. Lei. I happen to have majored in ophthalmology in my years as a student; my blindness was in fact an advantage when it came to understanding the complexities of the human eye, which is why I studied in this field. I'll be able to share my knowledge with you as a base understanding. Fine arts was

my minor, but I chose to pursue this career because I loved creating, and I could see myself making art for my whole life.”

Lei Yu couldn't help but admire Xu Yingxing, however cliché it may sound. To choose a life that revolved around creating things visually without the ability to see... It sounds like something only the daring would do, and Lei Yu liked to keep his feet on the ground. Nevertheless, he shakes Xu Yingxing's hand.

“It's settled, then.”

Two weeks of research later, the two find themselves sitting in the studio once more, papers scattered across the table as they go over their information for the umpteenth time.

“So I was thinking, if we scratch out the possibility of a visual prosthesis, what if we approach this at a deeper level? Something like this.” Xu Yingxing begins rummaging around in his briefcase, fingers deftly moving over Braille indicators on the sides of the files, and pulls one out, laying the contents over the papers already on the table. Lei Yu scans the papers quickly, his gaze landing on multiple diagrams of a human brain. “I did some digging into the anatomy of the brain, and I found that the section responsible for processing and producing visual information and images is the visual cortex.”

Lei Yu nods, catching onto what Xu Yingxing is suggesting. “So, theoretically, if that part is stimulated, it'll act as a sort of manual jumpstart.” Xu Yingxing twirls a pen around in his hand and nods. “Go on.”

Lei Yu takes this as his turn to share his research. “Here; I found a study on noninvasive brain stimulation. Looks like transcranial magnetic stimulation is our best shot; to put it simply, an electric pulse generator is connected to the head, and it sends electric currents through a magnetic coil which creates a changing magnetic field. The result is a current being induced in the brain itself.”

Xu Yingxing cocks his head, an eyebrow raised in confusion. “But that's just plain stimulation, isn't it? That'll only make random patterns on the insides of my eyelids, like the moving, irregularly shaped spots of dark colour you see when you rub your eyes too hard.” Lei Yu shakes his head, shifting a few papers aside to make space for another. “I think you're talking about pressure phosphenes. Those are caused by the physical stimulation of the retina, not the brain itself.”

They ponder over their table of information for another hour, Xu Yingxing pacing around the room and occasionally bumping into the table's corner while suggesting several feasible blueprints while Lei Yu makes annotations here and there on the papers. When Xu Yingxing abruptly stands up, eyes widening in a moment of realisation, Lei Yu swears he can almost see the lightbulb switch on inside the artist's head. “You got anything? You look like you just had an eureka moment.”

“I've got it!” Xu Yingxing exclaims and promptly starts explaining. “A headset! We could replicate the procedures of transcranial magnetic stimulation, but with a smaller generator that's portable and light enough to not obstruct the user, and add tone and pitch to create a sort of brain wave music so I can put my chromesthesia to use!”

“I get what you mean.” Lei Yu replies, nodding. “We can sketch out the placements of the inner components of the headset first, then work out to the outer sections to prevent any important internal parts being left out. We definitely can't afford to make a mistake, considering that this is something that's involved with your brain.” Xu Yingxing nods, clearly agreeing with the musician. “And as for the 'music', you can leave that to me; that's my area of expertise, after all.”

“I'll draw up a blueprint in no time, now that we've got the necessary information. I'm an artist, I learned about product design too. In the meantime, could you help me find a manufacturer that specialises in medical equipment? I don't think we're knowledgeable enough to actually build the components ourselves, heh.”

And so, they get to work. Xu Yingxing begins a first draft of the headset, sketching out the components of the headset one by one. It is a far more complicated process than what he used to have to design; there are many technical factors that have to be taken into consideration, and much detail has to be paid attention to in places like the spacing between electrical components and the smaller pieces that need to perfectly slot between larger parts. The process is made even more tedious by his blindness. Even so, Xu Yingxing puts in hours to this task, refining his drawings bit by bit; he will not let his blindness become a catalyst for inefficiency.

As the artist devotes his time to the designing part of the project, Lei Yu directs his focus on developing a processor to break his music down into electric pulses and adding them into the control pulses required to stimulate the visual cortex. He spends much time looking over theories and programs; the music must be converted into something that the generator can process, while still retaining its original form. There are many variables in the process of converting the music, but Lei Yu works his way through them, finding a compatible combination of notes that can flow in harmony with the controlled pulses.

The two exchange their progress over the phone, their working schedules not always in sync. On the days that they meet up, they witness their own efforts turn into a real, tangible thing; after two months of work, they step back from the workstation, a prototype of the headset carefully placed down on the table in the midst of a pile of screws, wires and failed half-models.

Silver fixtures attach the magnetic coil to the top of the headset, a black cardioid condenser microphone installed in the middle of the headset's band at the back; wires connect the generator with the microphone, the converter a new addition to the set. It looks and functions perfectly well, all thanks to Xu Yingxing testing the headset out and giving feedback, and Lei Yu making adjustments to it accordingly.

Xu Yingxing is ecstatic, laughing as he carefully touches the headset. "We...we actually made it. The headset works! And it's just the prototype too!"

"Same...It's unbelievable, really. We're possibly revolutionising the art industry with this invention!" Lei Yu heaves a sigh of relief. "Good thing this works, though. My back hurts like hell, I'm never going to hunch over tables like that ever again."

The artist barks out a laugh, clearly amused by the musician's unfortunate state. "Well, it sucks to be you! When you're an artist like me, you're always hunched over your work, so I'm used to it at this point. Call me immune to back pain, hah!" He grins, but his expression quickly turns serious. "Though, there's one last thing I want to do." Lei Yu turns towards him. "Yeah?"

"I want to show this to all of China."

Xu Yingxing's voice is filled with determination as he speaks. "It's always been my dream to be able to use my unique way of seeing the world to bring new visions to life, and now that I can do exactly that, that dream finally has a chance of becoming reality! I can't pass up this opportunity!"

Lei Yu isn't blind. He knows that he doesn't know the least bit about how people who are blind actually feel, but he can feel the sheer amount of hope radiating off of Xu Yingxing.

"Alright."

And that is how, a month later, they stand on the stage at the Shanghai International Art Fair. The crowd is bustling with excitement; many people came upon hearing that Xu Yingxing and Lei Yu, two people of relevance in the industry of arts, were going to have a collaboration showcase.

A hushed silence falls over the crowd as the spotlight follows Xu Yingxing and Lei Yu, walking onstage with a black box.

“Thank you for attending our showcase, ladies and gentlemen! As you may all know, I am Xu Yingxing, and this is Lei Yu. Today, we present to you a live performance of art and music!”

“But before we start, you may be wondering, what is in this box we have here? Well, it's something that can forever change the future of the industry of arts.” Lei Yu looks towards Xu Yingxing. “You ready?” He asks him under his breath. “Mn. We're going to show everyone what this thing can do.”

As Xu Yingxing puts the headset on with Lei Yu's help, everyone in the audience crane their necks to get a better view of the device, and while he adjusts the headset to a comfortable position on his head, Lei Yu begins tuning his violin. The crowd goes silent as the two men stand side by side. The artist, equipped with nothing but his creativity and persistence, and the musician, violin in one hand and bow in the other.

Under the gaze of the audience, a magnificent spectacle unfolds, multicoloured paints weaving into a tapestry of beautiful patterns and shapes with the guide of music that flows as if it embodied the freedom of water itself.

Xu Yingxing feels alive. And he might have truly been reborn in that moment, colours bursting in his closed eyes along with the harmonious melody. This tune...he can almost see Lei Yu's absorbed expression from the hope in his music. Bold brushstrokes bloom in tandem with the rhythmic piece, the colours seeming to tell him where they should be put. Brush by brush, he breathes life into his creation.

Lei Yu looks over to the artist, a sense of wonder overcoming him as he watches an idyllic landscape come to life on the vast stretch of the warm white canvas. Xu Yingxing flits across the stage, and Lei Yu watches with fascination as a trail of crimson, gold and cerulean footprints smear across the floor in his wake. He doesn't know much about visual art, but he knows that this must also be a process of creation.

The time stretches in beats—not tense, but suspended, like the moment right when a performer begins their show. Finally, the audience lays their eyes on the finished work. It is a stunning combination of art and music, the notes pouring through the colours on the canvas.

Lei Yu bows, coming up to look at Xu Yingxing. “Hey, not bad for a first demonstration, eh? What do you think?”

“Nothing,” Xu Yingxing says eventually, and reaches to wipe his hands on a piece of cloth, grinning from ear to ear. “Just thinking about my next best work.”

The Dragon's Breath

Singapore International Hong Kong, Seah, Hong Siong Nickolas – 14

Chapter 1: Shadows of Deception

In a quaint village nestled amidst rolling hills and emerald fields, a young apprentice named Zhang Wei yearned for more than the mundane existence that life had bestowed upon him. His heart pulsed with an insatiable curiosity, as if a dormant fire simmered within his very soul, waiting to be unleashed.

In his master's alchemical workshop, Zhang Wei worked tirelessly among elixirs and herbs, yearning for a greater purpose. An unexpected breeze one day scattered hidden scrolls, leading Zhang Wei to a dusty, ancient parchment.

With trembling fingers, Zhang Wei gingerly removed the veil of neglect, revealing a parchment adorned with mesmerizing symbols and intricate designs. Each stroke seemed to pulse with a life force of its own as if the very essence of ancient wisdom had been etched into its fibers. As his gaze traced the intricate patterns, he sensed a whisper of secrets and promises long lost to the annals of history. The scroll held forbidden knowledge, unveiling the art of crafting a substance shrouded in legend—Dragon's Breath—a force whispered to possess the ability to shape destinies and rewrite the very fabric of reality.

At that moment, Zhang Wei's heart quickened, a mixture of exhilaration and trepidation coursing through his veins. He knew that the path laid out before him was one of great significance, a calling to embark on a journey that would forever alter the course of his life. Yet, he understood that this voyage could not be undertaken alone. The wisdom and guidance of his revered mentor, Master Li, were indispensable in the face of such profound revelations.

Clutching the scroll close to his chest, Zhang Wei traversed the winding streets of the village, his steps quickening with purpose. The alchemist's shop, a place veiled in mystery and whispered tales, awaited his arrival—the threshold to a realm brimming with arcane knowledge and fiercely guarded secrets.

As he pushed open the heavy door, a soft creak resonated through the room, casting a reverent hush over the space. The dimly lit interior revealed the figure of Master Li, his countenance weathered by time and wisdom.

"Master Li, I have discovered something... something extraordinary," Zhang Wei spoke, his voice a blend of reverence and unquenchable curiosity.

Master Li's gaze, filled with ancient knowledge, befitting a sage of his stature, focused intently on the scroll placed before him. His weathered fingers traced the intricate characters, his expression growing increasingly solemn with each passing moment. The gravity of their find hung palpably in the air, as the weight of the past and the implications of the future converged upon their consciousness.

"Dragon's Breath," Master Li murmured, his words barely audible yet carrying profound weight. "A power capable of shaping the destiny of nations... but at what cost?"

The room fell into a contemplative silence, as the significance of their discovery settled upon Zhang Wei's eager heart. He understood that the pursuit of such formidable power demanded unwavering responsibility, a reckoning with the consequences that lay in wait. Yet, the allure of the forbidden knowledge contained within the scroll was simply too potent to ignore. They stood at the precipice of an extraordinary journey, one that would test their mettle, challenge their ethics, and force them to confront the deepest recesses of their beings.

Chapter 2: The Alchemist's Quest

Master Li gazed at the ancient scroll with a furrowed brow. "Zhang Wei, this scroll holds the key to our quest. It speaks of Dragon's Breath, a force of immense power and peril. We must embark on a journey to uncover its truth."

Zhang Wei's eyes widened with excitement. "Master Li, I've longed for an adventure like this. To unravel the mysteries of Dragon's Breath, to understand its essence... It is a quest worth pursuing."

Days turned into weeks as Zhang Wei and Master Li immersed themselves in their research. The dimly lit study room was adorned with shelves upon shelves of ancient manuscripts, their pages yellowed with age.

Zhang Wei poured over a crumbling manuscript, his finger tracing the faded symbols. "Master Li, this text speaks of an alchemical ritual that could unlock the secrets of Dragon's Breath. Shall we attempt it?"

Master Li's eyes gleamed with anticipation. "Indeed, Zhang Wei. Let us gather the necessary materials and perform the experiment. But remember, caution and precision are of utmost importance."

The alchemists meticulously measured ingredients and mixed potions, their hands deft and steady. The room filled with the scent of herbs and the hushed whispers of alchemical reactions.

In a secluded forest clearing, Zhang Wei and Master Li found themselves surrounded by a band of mercenaries, their weapons gleaming in the sunlight.

The mercenary leader sneered, "Hand over any knowledge you possess about Dragon's Breath, or face the consequences."

Zhang Wei stood tall, his voice steady. "We seek knowledge, not power. We won't surrender our quest to those driven by greed."

Master Li's eyes scanned their adversaries, his voice laced with authority. "You underestimate the power of wisdom and integrity. We will defend the truth about Dragon's Breath."

A fierce battle ensued, the clash of steel and the crackling of alchemical energy reverberating through the forest. Zhang Wei and Master Li moved with precision, their alchemical prowess complementing their martial skills.

As the dust settled, the mercenaries lay defeated, their leader vanquished. But their victory was short-lived, as rival alchemists emerged from the shadows, jealousy burning in their eyes.

One of the rivals sneered, "Zhang Wei, Master Li, you are but stumbling novices. Dragon's Breath belongs to us."

Zhang Wei's fists clenched his voice firm. "You've lost sight of the true purpose of alchemy. We will not allow Dragon's Breath to be used for harm."

With every encounter, Zhang Wei and Master Li's bond grew stronger, their determination unwavering. They faced danger head-on, their resolve unyielding in their pursuit of knowledge and truth.

Chapter 3 Flames of Revolution

The word of Zhang Wei and Master Li's quest for Dragon's Breath spread like wildfire throughout the kingdom. The power-hungry warlords, ever eager to seize any advantage, took notice. They saw the potential of Dragon's Breath to solidify their dominance and expand their empires, and their greed was ignited.

Whispers of Zhang Wei and Master Li's discoveries reached the ears of those who sought to exploit the power for personal gain. The news of Dragon's Breath attracted individuals who were willing to betray their cause for a chance

at power. Zhang Wei and Master Li became targets, their every move watched by spies and agents of the warlords. The stakes heightened, as the shadow of imminent conflict loomed over their noble mission.

As they rested by a crackling campfire one evening, the weariness of their journey etched on their faces, Zhang Wei broke the silence, his voice filled with concern.

"Master Li, the situation is becoming increasingly perilous. The warlords are closing in, and their spies are everywhere. It seems every step we take is being watched."

Master Li nodded solemnly, his gaze fixed on the dancing flames that mirrored the turmoil in his thoughts.

"Indeed, Zhang Wei. The allure of Dragon's Breath has drawn the attention of those who seek power at any cost. We must remain vigilant and cautious in our endeavors."

Zhang Wei's brows furrowed, his eyes reflecting the weight of their predicament, before muttering, "But how can we trust anyone? Loyalty and betrayal seem to walk hand in hand on this treacherous path. We've encountered individuals torn between their own survival and the resistance. How can we discern friend from foe?"

Master Li spoke calmly, "It is a difficult task, my apprentice. Desperation can cloud one's judgment, leading them astray from their principles. We must rely on our instincts, observe their actions, and listen to the whispers of their hearts. True intentions often reveal themselves in the darkest of times." before placing a comforting hand on Zhang Wei's shoulder, his touch carrying a lifetime of wisdom.

Zhang Wei's half-hearted gaze shifted from the flames to Master Li, his eyes searching for guidance, before asking, "Our choices carry weight, Master Li. We hold the power of Dragon's Breath, and with it, the potential to reshape our world. But is it our place to make such decisions? Can we truly determine what is best for our people?"

Master Li's eyes, etched with a lifetime of knowledge and sagacity, held a mixture of sadness and determination as he spoke, his voice steady and filled with conviction, "We are but vessels of change, Zhang Wei. The path we tread is not one of personal gain, but one of duty and sacrifice. Our duty lies in using Dragon's Breath as a catalyst for justice, compassion, and unity. We may stumble along the way, but our intentions must remain true."

Zhang Wei nodded, a mix of determination and uncertainty in his eyes, as the weight of their mission settled on his shoulders.

"I understand, Master Li. We must wield this power with utmost care, for the consequences of our actions could tip the scales towards chaos or liberation. Our hearts will guide us, as we strive to ignite a revolution rooted in the principles we hold dear."

Master Li's smile was one of both pride and reassurance, his voice resonating with wisdom.

"You have grown wise, my apprentice. Together, we will gather like-minded individuals and inspire them with the power of Dragon's Breath. We shall unite the kingdom against the oppressive warlords, paving the way for a brighter future."

Zhang Wei stood up tall, his resolve finally solidified, his eyes gleaming with determination, "Let the flames of revolution burn brighter, Master Li. With the knowledge and power we possess, we shall ignite a new era of hope and liberation. Our cause will draw the oppressed and the weary, and together, we shall forge a kingdom reborn."

As the night grew darker, Zhang Wei and Master Li continued their journey, their spirits aflame with determination. Their dialogues and discussions would shape their actions, as they walked the path of revolution, guided by the principles they held dear. The flames of revolution began to flicker and grow, fueled by the knowledge and power

that Zhang Wei and Master Li possessed. Their cause attracted a diverse array of individuals, from peasants to scholars, all drawn to the promise of a kingdom reborn.

Chapter 4: Shadows of Betrayal

The Dragon's Breath revolution faced a treacherous threat as whispers of spies and secret alliances filled the air, sowing seeds of mistrust and suspicion among Zhang Wei and his allies. They gathered in a secluded hideout, the atmosphere heavy with tension. Shadows danced on the walls, mirroring the unease in their hearts.

Zhang Wei stood at the center of the room, his voice filled with determination as he addressed the weary faces before him.

Zhang Wei spoke, "My friends, we stand on the precipice of victory, but treachery threatens to tear us apart. We cannot ignore the evidence that points to a traitor within our ranks. We must find them and bring them to justice."

Silence descended upon the room, broken only by the faint crackling of a dying fire. Suspicion lingered in the eyes of each resistance member, wariness etched upon their faces. Zhang Wei's gaze swept across the room until it landed on a figure he had once trusted implicitly—his former friend, Liang.

Zhang Wei approached Liang, his voice heavy with both sadness and determination, muttering the words, "Liang, we have fought side by side, shared our hopes and dreams. But I cannot ignore the evidence that points to your involvement in this betrayal. Tell me, is it true? Have you aligned yourself with our enemies?"

Liang's face hardened, his eyes burning with a mix of anger and defiance, "You were always the favored one, Zhang Wei. The one destined for greatness. I grew tired of living in your shadow, always playing second fiddle. I had to forge my own path, and if that meant aligning myself with those who offered power and control, then so be it."

Zhang Wei's heart sank at his friend's bitter words, but he refused to let despair consume him. "Liang, power and control are not the path to true greatness. We fight for justice, for the freedom of our people. Join us again, and together we can make a difference."

Liang's eyes narrowed, his voice laced with scorn, "It's too late for that, Zhang Wei. My path is set. You and your ideals are nothing but a hindrance to progress. Prepare to face the consequences of your naiveté."

With those words, Liang turned and vanished into the shadows, leaving Zhang Wei standing alone, his heart heavy with both sorrow and resolve.

Chapter 5: The Crucible of Destiny

The stage was set for the ultimate showdown—a clash between Zhang Wei, the beacon of hope, and the malevolent warlord, the embodiment of tyranny. The kingdom's fate hung in the balance as they prepared to face each other in a battle that would determine the course of history.

On the eve of the final confrontation, Zhang Wei stood before his allies, their faces etched with determination and weariness from their long and arduous journey. The dim light of a flickering torch cast dancing shadows on their resolute expressions.

Zhang Wei: "My friends, we have come so far, endured so much. This battle will test our mettle like never before. But know this—we fight not only for ourselves but for the future of our kingdom. Together, we shall face whatever darkness lies ahead."

His words inspired a renewed sense of purpose within the resistance ranks. They readied themselves, the gleam of determination in their eyes, as they prepared to march towards the warlord's formidable stronghold.

As the armies clashed on the battlefield, the clash of steel and the crackle of magic filled the air, creating a symphony of chaos and destruction. Zhang Wei fought with the skill and determination of a warrior possessed, his every strike a testament to his unwavering resolve.

The malevolent warlord, fueled by his insatiable lust for power, unleashed wave after wave of dark magic, seeking to overwhelm Zhang Wei and his allies. But they stood strong, their spirits unyielding in the face of adversity.

Amidst the chaos of battle, Zhang Wei caught sight of Liang, his former friend now turned lieutenant of the warlord. Their eyes met across the blood-soaked battlefield, a silent exchange of emotions and unspoken words charging the air.

Zhang Wei called out to Liang, his voice carrying above the cacophony of battle.

Zhang Wei: "Liang, this doesn't have to be the end for us. Join me, and together we can remake our kingdom into something greater than either of us imagined."

Liang sneered, his voice laced with scorn.

Liang: "It's too late for that, Zhang Wei. I have embraced the power that comes with darkness. You will never understand the lengths I've gone to attain it."

With a heavy heart, Zhang Wei knew that his friend was lost to him. He turned his attention back to the battle at hand, focusing his energy on the warlord who stood as the epitome of tyranny and oppression.

Summoning all his inner strength, Zhang Wei channeled the power of Dragon's Breath, a force as ancient as time itself. Flames erupted from his palms, coalescing into the form of a majestic dragon, its scales shimmering with an ethereal glow. With a mighty roar, the dragon took flight, its fiery maw ready to consume the warlord and his malevolence.

The warlord, sensing the impending doom, desperately conjured a shield of dark magic, hoping to fend off the relentless assault. But the shield cracked under the sheer force of the dragon's fiery breath, revealing the warlord's vulnerability.

Realizing his impending defeat, the warlord's face contorted with rage and disbelief.

Warlord: "No! I am the rightful ruler! The power is mine!"

Undeterred, Zhang Wei pressed on, his determination unyielding. With one final surge of power, he shattered the warlord's defenses, leaving him exposed and defenseless against the forces of justice.

The battle reached its climax as Zhang Wei's allies rallied behind him, their combined strength overwhelming the remnants of the warlord's forces. Victory was within their grasp.

With the warlord defeated, a wave of relief and jubilation swept through the land. The people rejoiced, their spirits lifted by the triumph of good over evil. Zhang Wei and his allies set to work, laying the foundation for a new era of peace and prosperity.

In the aftermath of the battle, Liang, burdened by the weight of his choices, sought forgiveness from Zhang Wei. He approached his former friend with a mix of humility and regret, his voice filled with remorse.

Liang: "Zhang Wei, I was blind to the consequences of my actions. I see now the darkness I embraced. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?"

Zhang Wei looked upon Liang with eyes filled with compassion and understanding. He extended a hand of redemption, offering his former friend a chance at forgiveness and a path toward rebuilding.

Zhang Wei: "Liang, we have all made choices we regret. The important thing is to learn from them and strive for a better future. Help us rebuild, help us create a kingdom that stands as a beacon of hope and progress."

Liang, humbled by Zhang Wei's forgiveness, pledged his loyalty to the cause of rebuilding, to atone for his past transgressions. Together, they embarked on a journey to forge a new era, one where the legacy of Dragon's Breath would serve as a symbol of hope, unity, and the triumph of the human spirit.

In the midst of a tumultuous era, where kingdoms clashed and power shifted like tides, Zhang Wei, a brilliant alchemist, sought to harness fire's destructive potential. After years of tireless experimentation and countless failures, he discovered a groundbreaking formula—a potent mixture of sulfur, charcoal, and potassium nitrate. This formula, known as Dragon's Breath, would forever change the face of warfare.

Huangdi

St. Joseph's College, Wong, Ho Lok Alvin – 15

In ancient China, there was a renowned clan of highly skilled warriors known as Youxiong. Led by their formidable leader, Huangdi, the Youxiong clan lived in relative peace until a terrifying clan called Jiuli, led by the ruthless Chioyou, emerged from the shadows. Chioyou and his eighty brothers relentlessly attacked Huangdi's clan, using their immense strength and unholy power to summon a fog-generating God, causing Huangdi's warriors to lose their way in the thick fog that enveloped the battlefield.

Despite facing frequent defeats, Huangdi was resilient, refusing to surrender to the Jiuli clan. He knew that he had to find a way to overcome the challenges posed by the impenetrable fog. Day and night, he tirelessly invented numerous weapons and strategies, hoping to find a solution to defeat the enemy. However, the fog remained his greatest obstacle, shrouding his clan's chances of victory.

One day, as Huangdi thought about his next move carefully, he recalled a tale of a wise monk who lived in the distant western lands. This monk possessed the remarkable ability to create stones that pointed accurately to the south, a skill that could prove invaluable in navigating through the dense fog. Huangdi resolved to seek the monk's aid in developing a device that would aid navigation during battles. He assembled a team of his most trusted warriors, including five elite fighters, a skilled doctor, a wise scholar, a talented craftsman, a monk, and himself. Armed with determination, they embarked on a journey to find the monk and the legendary stones that pointed south. On the other hand, Chioyou's spies heard Huangdi's plan and immediately notified Chioyou about this. Chioyou took this as a chance to assassinate Huangdi and sent some assassins to kill Huangdi.

Guided by the position of the sun, the team travelled westward on horseback, taking rest when darkness fell. After three days and nights, they could finally see the city where the monks lived. Suddenly, a group of assassins shot arrows in Huangdi's direction from a hidden place. The elite soldiers reacted to the attack immediately and took out their swords to fight the assassins. The assassins tried to escape. After an intense battle, the elite soldiers successfully captured the assassins and forced them to tell them the evil plan of Chioyou. They found out Chioyou had already planned an attack on Huangdi's clan in ten days.

However, Huangdi suddenly collapsed to the ground. His doctor examined him and woke him up with some medicine.

"Your Majesty, if you do not get back to the clan to get suitable treatment, you'll die," the doctor warned.

Huangdi replied, "I must meet the monk to get the stone and return to the clan before Chioyou attacks my people. I have sworn to protect my people till death on the day I became the king of Youxiong. Let's continue the journey, the town is in sight!" The team continued the journey.

After a while, they arrived at a small town on the outskirts of the western lands. As they entered the town, they encountered a man who suddenly collapsed on the ground, shaking in pain. Without hesitation, Huangdi ordered his doctor to attend to the man. The doctor, a skilled healer, swiftly examined the man's condition and diagnosed him with a severe disease. He urgently instructed the team to gather specific herbs to prepare a potent medicine, while he carried the suffering man to a place to rest.

The team wasted no time in collecting the required herbs and preparing the medicine. With great care, they administered the mixture to the dying man. Miraculously, his condition improved rapidly, and he regained consciousness. A passing monk, witnessing the team's act of compassion and healing, praised their selflessness and revealed that the man they had saved was his closest friend. Grateful for their kindness, the monk offered to repay their generosity.

Huangdi saw an opportunity and humbly asked the monk if he possessed the knowledge to create the stones that pointed south, as they urgently needed this assistance. Regrettably, the monk could not create the stones at that moment. Disheartened, the team prepared to continue their journey, accepting that their quest might be in vain. However, just as they were about to depart, the monk's face lit up with excitement. "However," he exclaimed, "we have been working on a device that can create the stones! Join me at the temple, and I will show you the device we've been developing." Filled with renewed hope, the scholar from Huangdi's team accompanied the monk to the temple, where they collaborated to complete the device and successfully create a stone that accurately pointed south. They used the stone to build a device for navigation on the battlefield. They named it Compass.

Empowered by this ground-breaking invention, the team returned to their clan, eager to test their compass in the ongoing war against the Jiuli clan. With the aid of the invention, they navigated skilfully through battles in the thick fog. The Youxiong clan triumphed in multiple encounters, utilising their newfound device to defeat the Jiuli clan.

The land was finally at peace, and the people of Youxiong lived happily ever after, their lives no longer overshadowed by the constant threat of war. Huangdi and his team were hailed as heroes, and their tales of inventing the compass became legendary throughout the land.

Totally My Cup Of Tea

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Chow, Yan Hei – 15

A tale across ancient times, the present and to the future

–Some things change, but some things stay the same.–

November 28th, 2007

On a cold winter evening, a girl named ZhangZi was shivering on an old dusty bench. She just got off the train with that bulky, heavy luggage. ZhangZi had been walking for a long way from her home down the village to another train station of another city. Feeling exhausted, she found a stop to rest. She then sat down there, quietly. In a glimpse of light, a lady with hair white as snow came out of nowhere, slowly approaching her with something as a cup. ZhangZi then realized that it isn't a random place to rest, but it is a tea house.

The old lady, placed the tea to ZhangZi's table and left her stunned. "For me?", ZhangZi said, while pointing her finger to herself. ZhangZi lifted the cover of the teacup and something began to happen.

Smooth as silk, a magical rising vapor dances and swirls through the air. As the wind blew by, the aroma of the tea weaved across the wind, it felt like spring, the refreshing scent. Through the smoke and mist that carried whispers of warmth, she vaguely saw the lady nodding and smiling at her. In a complete foreign land, she finds a sense of love and care lingering in the atmosphere.

The smile, how familiar it looks, ZhangZi silently thought while she sipped her tea. The fragrance and the taste of tea gets stronger and this was the moment when her memories flashed back to the old times.

August 28th 1999

Back then, when ZhangZi was still a kid, her grandma loved drinking tea. Her family had a tea house where they sell tea to people in the village at an affordable price. Recalling about the past, she vividly memorized the steps of making hot tea and every word of her grandma. "Tea is part of China's inventions, our country's precious intangible culture." It is a tradition to drink tea during special occasions.

She recalls the bedtime story grandma used to tell in a gentle tone. "My girl, the story is about the History of Tea", said grandma, while she drank her tea. "When it comes to tea, we have to go back to 5000 years ago, in the ancient times."

"Long story right? Many people in the Qing Dynasty loved drinking tea and more tea houses started to expand. That's why our family loves tea that much too and we decided to run our own tea house."

Grandma continued, "It was a miracle when tea was discovered and made." These words captivated the granddaughter's interest and she wouldn't want to fall asleep. The story continues as granny says, "There was this person who was boiling water under a tree when leaves fell into his pot." "Grandmama, so did the person try it? How did it taste? I want to try it too!" replied little ZhangZi who was intrigued and couldn't hide her thoughts. "Well well, the person tried it and the discovery of tea began.", said Grandma. "Okay sweetie, it's time for bed, let me make you some tea tomorrow if you want to taste it."

October 6th, 1993

The next day, little ZhangZi woke up and she couldn't stop thinking about tea. Half awoken, probably still in her dreams, "A cup of hot tea please" she murmured. A beam of light entered her room, making everyone awake. ZhangZi got out of bed and walked out of her room, seeing Grandma holding a cup of tea. "For me?" ZhangZi asked curiously with her finger pointing at herself, and with those big innocent eyes. Grandma nodded and smiled.

“A promise is a promise. Keeping promises is one of our Chinese values”, said Grandma. “Here’s your cup of tea, my sweetheart”, Grandma continued. ZhangZi tilted her head, started to sniff the cup of mystery right below her eyes. Steam rising, under the reflection of sunlight, there was that hot cup of tea she had been wishing for.

ZhangZi’s petite hands reached the cup of tea, she blew the smoke and had her first taste of tea. She didn’t really enjoy it.

“Grandmama, why is it bitter?” ZhangZi frowned and said. “It’s bitter at the beginning but it gets sweet at the end. And it is no ordinary sweet, it becomes bittersweet,” said Grandma. “Drinking a cup of tea is just like life,” Grandma continued in a serious tone. “Without bitter, you could never have bittersweet, it resembles our life. Without challenges, we can’t feel the happiness success brings us. After all, sweetheart you will experience what it means one day, not now but one day,” said Grandma.

“Tell me more, tell me more about the meaning behind a cup of tea!” ZhangZi pulled Grandma’s shirt, and she continued, “Why do we drink tea, what’s the purpose, Grandma, please?”, she stared into Grandma’s eyes with curiosity. “Drinking tea is a long story, it symbolizes a lot to us,” Grandma answered, “It is a culture we are proud of, tea is not merely a drink but a ritual of Chinese customs and philosophy.” “So when do you love to drink tea most?” said ZhangZi. “When we all get together during a jolly good time, like every weekend, and some special occasions.”, Grandma responded. “During your parents’ marriage, I had been looking forward to drinking that cup of wedding tea, it is a heritage and our honor to drink tea”, Grandma chuckled. “Anyway, our home’s tea house will be yours one day, our next generations, continue to make us proud and let more people have a taste of tea,” Grandma firmly mentioned.

Not only is tea a bond with your loved ones, but also with new people you have never met before, like your customers.

Since then, ZhangZi had a special bond with tea, perhaps it was due to the fact that tea links up the family and brings people joy and laughter. Whenever there are special occasions, she would always be keen to pour and hand over the tea to everyone.

March 19th, 1995

She even lent her helping hand and helped out at the tea house. Although the environment in the tea house wasn’t very nice, everything went on smoothly. At first, she didn’t know how to help out, she even made a mess, exactly what you call a bull in a china store. Fortunately, as she grew older, at the age of twelve, she started helping out at the tea house, helping Grandma get the right portion of leaves to brew hot tea. ZhangZi had learnt to differentiate other types of tea too, Oolong, Herbal, Green and Black tea are the cases in point. Differentiating tea has been a fun job for her. ZhangZi finds each type of tea unique since they have their own brewing methods.

Whenever they received orders from customers, ZhangZi worked well with her Grandma. Wonderful partners, indeed. She first picked an unusual teapot, which is called Purple Sand Teapot, also known as the ceramic teapot. She fills the Teapot with fresh water, then Grandma will heat it up with fire. While the water gets boiled and heated, ZhangZi finds the cup for the tea, a Gaiwan to be explicit. A cup with a lid that is— a Gaiwan. Here is when she looks at Grandma and learns to choose tea leaves. Grandma rubs the leaves softly and finds the ones with good texture. “Check the color, smell the leaves and feel it with your hands.”, Grandma taught ZhangZi as she prepared the tea. “Now grab the Chaban to hold everything my dear,” Grandma instructed. Then, the most vital part, handling the water—to—tea—ratio, it’s all about experience, trial and error, after many tries, Grandma could handle that very well. It’s just like muscle memory. ZhangZi was fascinated seeing this but she dared not to mess up any process so she hurried to the next step. Finally, she put everything in place, handed it to the customers at the moment when the tea was ready to be served. “Absolutely delicious, this Pu’er. Oh goodness, I love it!”, the two of them looked at each other and smiled when they heard compliments from their customers.

From this day forward, ZhangZi helped out in the tea house after school and she had helped for almost eight years already.

As time flew by, Grandma left her last words, she left a photo of ZhangZi and her holding two cups of tea, Grandma wanting to share a cup of tea.

She left a note saying, "ZhangZi, honor our special tradition, let more people experience the joy of drinking tea." Eight years went by, ZhangZi was an adult already, an eighteen-year-old lady who had to leave her village and step into a brand new environment for the sake of entering university.

November 28th, 2007

Cold breeze, the wind blew towards ZhangZi, she knew it was just her memories. Everything has changed, Grandma left her, and she had no choice but to leave her hometown business.

She wanted to continue her mission in making more tea for people around the world, but she had to stop for a while, and miss out on all the fun of brewing tea. She stood up and carried on with her journey to the grand city, where her university lies. Could she fulfill her commitment?

July 10th, 2010

Three years later, ZhangZi graduated from university. Her parents came and celebrated this big day with her. ZhangZi had never forgotten the promise she made to herself.

Three years ago, she promised that after graduation she would open her tea shop again. She had been saving money all this time, from doing part time jobs and skipping meals of course.

Is she even ready to accomplish her goals?

April 3rd, 2011

Now, that's the time for her to show that actions speak louder than words. It was her birthday, and she opened a tea house with all the money she had saved from bearing a hard time. It was her first teahouse, and she kept the brewing methods the same, exactly like how her Grandma did. She wanted to let more people taste the tea that originated from her country. Tea, it is an invention, at least from what she found from the Internet. Well, at least she is proud of it.

February 22nd, 2019

ZhangZi, who now is a mother, plans to pass on this mission to her daughter as she grows up. Now she has opened more than 20 stores across the globe. A tea house, where more recipes appear so customers have more choices to choose from. Add more elements like lemon and lime into tea, with fruits that bring in sparkling new flavors to the tea. However,

the brewing methods never changed. The process of choosing the best tea leaves remains unchanged. Most importantly, her passion in making her Grandma's dream come true never stopped. Hoping to let tea link people together, and get more people to understand the story behind a cup of tea.

Who knows what the future is going to be like, maybe AI is going to make tea for us, but I'm sure a cup of tea that is made with love and warmth would taste way better. She has gone through many hardships, but she recalls that a cup of bittersweet tea stems from bits of bitterness. No matter how hard it is to continue, tea is her motivation and a tradition that many are going to preserve.

It is an on-going mission, it started from her ancestors, to her and to the next generations of many more.

—Some things change, but some things stay the same.—

The Phenomenal Odyssey of the Antiquated Chinese Toothbrush: A Story of Dental Upheaval

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Goyal, Aryan – 15

Some time ago in the otherworldly place where there is old China, where mythical beasts moved across the sky and heads controlled with shrewdness, a striking creation arose that would perpetually impact the world — the toothbrush! Get ready to leave on an unconventional excursion through time as we investigate the beginning, importance, and charming development of this little yet powerful instrument that has made a permanent imprint on mankind.

In the clamoring roads of a dynamic Chinese city, in the midst of the sweet-smelling orchestra of sizzling road food and the lively embroidery of silk traders, a shrewd creator named Niu Bao ended up pondering the condition of oral cleanliness. With a gleam in his expression and a heart overflowing with interest, he contemplated how to handle the consistently persevering issue of tooth rot and keep up with silvery white grins for a long time into the future.

The story goes that Niu Bao came across a secret grove in the middle of a bamboo forest on one of his magical journeys. There, he found the mystery of bamboo's wonderful strength and flexibility. Propelled naturally's creativity, he imagined making an instrument that could clean teeth with accuracy and effortlessness.

With the expertise of a calligrapher and the creative mind of a writer, Niu Bao set to work, forming a handle from the versatile bamboo stalks. He cut perplexing examples into the handle, suggestive of the sensitive brushstrokes of an expert painter, injecting the toothbrush with an imaginative style.

However, the handle alone couldn't satisfy its predetermination without the ideal sidekick — bristles that would whisk away the leftovers of feasts past and present the endowment of newness. Niu Bao left on a journey to track down the best fibers, looking for motivation from the animals of the world collectively.

His odyssey drove him to the domain of the wild pig, where he found that the pig's hair had a novel blend of solidness and adaptability. Fervor flowed through his veins as he assembled these enchanted fibers, imagining a toothbrush that would clear away dental misfortunes with artfulness.

As Niu Bao collected his creation, he wondered about the agreement between the bamboo handle and the pig hair bristles. Maybe the actual universe had contrived to deliver this remarkable innovation — a marriage of nature's marvels and human inventiveness.

Expression of Niu Bao's phenomenal toothbrush spread like quickly, spellbinding the hearts and minds of individuals all over. The Sovereign himself, after knowing about this dental wonder, brought Niu Bao to the castle, anxious to observe the sorcery of the toothbrush firsthand.

Interested by the capability of this little yet progressive device, the Head pronounced the toothbrush a fortune of the domain, guaranteeing that each resident would have this wondrous instrument of oral cleanliness. The toothbrush turned into an image of distinction and favorable luck, and its utilization spread all through the realm like an upbeat pandemic.

Quick forward to the current day, and we wind up in reality as we know it where the toothbrush has turned into an irreplaceable piece of our regular routines. The toothbrush has undergone a transformation that would astonish even the most imaginative minds, beginning as a simple bamboo handle with boar hair bristles.

Advancements in materials, plan, and innovation have impelled the toothbrush into the cutting edge period. Our bathroom countertops now feature handles made of sleek plastic, eco-friendly bamboo, and even recycled materials. With a variety of soft, medium, and hard bristles infused with antibacterial properties for improved oral health, bristles have evolved to meet the needs of each individual.

The coming of rotating brushes has added a dash of wizardry to our oral consideration schedules. With throbbing vibrations and swaying bristles, these wonders of designing proposition an enthralling and proficient brushing experience. Some even come outfitted with clocks and strain sensors, guaranteeing that we excel at intensive oral cleanliness.

Yet, the meaning of the toothbrush reaches out past its actual structure. It has turned into a strong image of individual consideration, discipline, and self-articulation. Our toothbrushes stand as gatekeepers of our oral wellbeing, avoiding the risks of plaque and cavities, while likewise giving a material to innovativeness through dynamic tones and fun loving plans.

The toothbrush has changed the manner in which we approach oral cleanliness, upsetting comprehension we might interpret dental consideration. It has enabled people to assume responsibility for their own grins, cultivating a feeling of moral obligation and advancing in general prosperity.

In this great embroidery of human advancement, the toothbrush might appear to be a little string. However, when woven along with innumerable demonstrations of brushing and the shared mindset of oral consideration, it turns into a string that can unwind the embroidery of dental infirmities, each stroke in turn.

In this way, my dear perusers, as you hold your toothbrush close by, consider the uncommon excursion it has embraced. From old China to the cutting edge world, the toothbrush has turned into a signal of oral wellbeing, a scaffold between the past and the future, and an impetus for brilliant grins.

Allow us to praise the toothbrush, this unpretentious legend as we continued looking for dental greatness. Embrace its fibers like a knight's blade, use it with the accuracy of a craftsman's brush, and let its enchanted vehicle give you domains of oral magnificence.

With each intentional stroke, recall that the toothbrush holds inside it the ability to change an unremarkable undertaking into a snapshot of taking care of oneself and self-articulation. It is a demonstration of human inventiveness, advising us that even the littlest creations can have the most significant effect.

As we bid farewell to our unconventional investigation of the old Chinese toothbrush, let us convey its charm in our souls. May we keep on embracing the delight of brushing, appreciate the minty newness it presents, and honor the tradition of Niu Bao, the shrewd innovator who gifted us this wonderful device.

In this way, my companions, go forward and overcome the domain of oral cleanliness with your dependable toothbrush close by. Allow its fibers to be your aide, and may your grins transmit with the splendor of 1,000 suns.

New Tales of China's Inventions

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Ho, Him Louie - 14

It was 7 am in the morning when Man Yee walked down the stairs to the street below his seventh floor apartment for his usual morning walk. The sky was gloomy and it created this sad, almost depressing aura in the air. Man Yee was hardly affected though, as he walked along the noisy stall-filled street with a natural emotion plastered on his face.

"Come get some oysters!" Cried a shabby, sour-smelling man to his right. "5 pieces of pork for 2 dollars!" Yelled another vender. As he stopped at a stall and paid for the 3 wooden logs in his hand, he started to notice something he had never did. Everybody was communicating verbally and any legible communication was hardly existent, well except the high end stall right at the end of the street that is, where a big tortoise shell was strung right up high with the faded words "Chan's Juicy Meat", carved on it. Nevertheless, he saw just exactly how ineffective carving on animal shells were and there and then, he vowed he would dedicate his life to figure out a better method.

Later back home, he was finishing up some of his carvings and was left with the easiest part, staining them with ink. With one hand holding the inking supplies and another holding the bottle of ink with its cap loosely hanging on the top, he attempted to sit down at his desk, only to mishandle the jug, dripping several drops of jet-black droplets right onto the newly purchased log coasters.

"Oh bumper!" He yelled out, pissed at his little misdemeanour. With one hand gripping tightly to a rug and one hand fixating on the wooden coaster, he rubbed back and forth, only to no avail.

"Oh well. There's nothing I can do about it anyway." A saddened him turns around and thinks to himself and that's when it struck him, how easily stained the wood was. In one swift moment, he turned his back and snatched the log off his desk in one swift moment.

The following two days, Man Yee was nowhere to be seen. He wasn't going on his jogs no more. He simply disappeared, into thin air. Or so the locals thought.

As on the third day, a freshened up Man Yee walks down the street with a spark in his beetle-like eyes. Walking from stall to stall, he gave the businessmen and businesswomen each a sand-colored shaving of wood with prices of their items listed on it before he set up his own stall at the very end of the street. On the desk was a stack of wooden shavings, just like the ones he had given to the other vendors earlier on and written big and bold on the bolted sign was "Man Yee's Paper Works".

Word quickly spread around town and Man Yee's paper stall was soon closed down as he closed in on the Qin emperor's temple for his first day of work there. The Qin emperor was so fascinated by Man Yee's genius that he had him become one of the department heads in no time.

On his way to the main building of the temple though, he overheard a conversation between a friend of his and another department head. There they mumbled about how 100 copies of the same document had to be completed within 30 days. Man Yee had one look at how long the initial document was and the genuine worry in his friend's eyes and instantly knew. Like his invention of paper, he needed to come up with another method to copy things down, one that was ethical and energy saving.

It was there and then that Man Yee disappeared again, for the extended period of 2 weeks. Having been suspicious of Man Yee betraying him, the emperor was soon furious of his absence and was contemplating on having him imprisoned for taking the occurring unnotified break once he came back to work.

When he finally did come back, he was ambushed right away at the gates and sent straight to see the red-faced emperor. There, the emperor cursed him out, throwing insults at him about how lazy he was. All the while, standing there dumbfounded, holding a wooden crate with both hands, Man Yee couldn't find the words to defend himself.

BANG! And in an instant, everyone turned to look behind Man Yee as a short, sweating man rushed into the jam-packed hall, whom Man Yee recognised to be his friend from that day in an instant.

In an instant, the emperor bolted straight up, so angry that you could almost see his ears fuming with the heat generated from his anger. "WHAT ON EARTH DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING" Cried the standing man, his figure as big as a titan.

"I have your documents. Thanks to this guy, I got them finished very quickly." Man Yee's friend panted, and exclaimed, pointing at the dumbfounded Man Yee next to him. Hearing this, the emperor's brows relaxed and approached the friend.

With one brow raised and eyes full of suspicion, the emperor inspected the neat words on the paper and found himself to be quite impressed of the work done.

"What type of sorcery is this?" The emperor demanded, eyeing Man Yee's crate rather excitedly. In response to this, a fearful Man Yee passed the crate from his trembling hands to the impatient man. Inside stood 100 plus wooden blocks with letters flipped laterally on the bottom of them.

"I call these blocks stamps, and together they make printing possible" Man Yee let out when the emperor finally looked up from the crate. He was still highly unsure of what the emperor was going to do to him and after all, he was doing something to help out. The emperor swallowed, looked around at his companions and shouted "Well. This deserves a celebration! Well done again Man Yee."

Still in a trance of disbelief, Man Yee smiled awkwardly, bowed to the emperor and left at once when the first of many firecrackers exploded.

Several years have passed since Man Yee's last groundbreaking breakthrough and hard times fell on the country Qin. Tensions between emperors of different countries resulted in wars and army and army of soldiers were dispatched to attain victory, only to never return.

As the Qin emperor walked onto the balcony and looked over in the distance, he saw a team of soldiers wandering off in varying directions in the forest below his new temple. As he sipped his morning tea, he couldn't help but overhear how the soldiers were yelling at each other for directions, only to mess them up and walk further and further away from one another, disappearing in the bushes. "You bunch of morons! To your left!" He yelled, reverberating in the air, but still no response was given.

Soon a grey haired Man Yee approached the distraught emperor, who still standing on his balcony. The man now had creases along his eyelids, and his skin was getting paler by the day. Most important of all though, the spark in his eyes were still there.

"Oh! You're finally here." The emperor looked back in surprise and blurted out. "Listen. I really need your help. Those fools keep getting lost in the woods." He continued, pointing at where the soldiers once were. "Like the last two times, use your genius and come up with something. Please." He finally requested, his tone filled with desperation.

Without saying a word, Man Yee nodded and left, leaving the emperor alone and troubled on the wooden structure.

For days on end, Man Yee worked on this new idea. But as the days slowly crept by, he hardly found any ways to find directions without the use of the Sun. Sooner or later he would have to face the emperor and he was for sure that he didn't want the nasty treatment like last time. He was willing to give it all out, everything just to avoid that merely awkward of a confrontation. And for that, he would have to come up with something. Fast.

When the day of the deadline finally came, an uneasy Man Yee could be seen, shivering from the breezy wind, or perhaps from him being nervous, patiently waiting for the doors to the emperor's temple to open. Held on his hand were two wooden sticks and a wooden board.

"That's it?" The emperor muttered, his smile turning into a frown at once. Looking down at Man Yee's "invention" now laid on the table, not a sign of belief in his words. "Works the last time I tried" Man Yee uttered and swallowed, all the while attempting to keep as straight of a face as possible. Full of speculation, the emperor took his idea in and passed the message to the comrades.

As a relieved Man Yee walked out of the temple, he was in such solace that his ever-lasting problem was finally solved. Even though he knew deep down that it would never work, he knew he would never have to face the emperor's unpleasantness ever again and that was a win in his book.

Or so he thought. In the blinding darkness of a freezing winter night, a team of 5 men had received direct orders from the emperor to raid Man Yee's residence to have the man abducted and sent straight into a cell by the border of the Qin border. Man Yee was done for. His lie had unfolded itself and along with other inmates, he was now locked up for treachery, or at least according to the prison guards.

There Man Yee stayed in his final years in Qin. It was totally unfair. He hardly had any time to figure things out and a man can only do so much in a limited time. He was crushed. The country he had put so much into had turn their backs on him. Pissed and full of rage all the time, an absolutely devastated Man Yee was often seen hurdling cutlery across the prison hall and punching walls. There and then, he pledged that he would be the one to destroy Qin, once and for all.

On one particular day, Man Yee was so packed with rage that he missed the wall and landed his fist on the prison bars, fracturing a steel bar and spraying his room full of blood.

"OWWW!" A wounded Man Yee yelled out, his left arm holding his right. Despite hearing the blood curdling screams though, nobody had come to his aid and Man Yee was left cold and in misery, lying on the ground of the musty, barren jail cell at the end of the second floor hallway that he now called home.

Intending to fidget with it at first, Man Yee kept flicking one end of a metal piece he saw lying on the dusty ground. It wasn't long until he noticed a pattern in the shiny substance's movement. No matter how strong or weak his flick was, the silvery solid always found a way to deflect itself back to a certain direction.

His eyes lit up. He had done it! He had found the answers to his last project given by the Qin emperor. He had figured out the world's first compass. He could imagine the face of delight on the Qin emperor's face right when he broke the news. The ever-lasting parties, compliments and celebrations he would be given. But that was the last thing he would do. He wasn't going to sell himself short, oh no. He would never give his findings to the Qin emperor ever again.

There he stayed for his final days in Qin, lying on the ground acting all depressed but on the inside, full of fury. Until one day, he slid the metal block in his pocket and fled through a crevice in the ceiling of his cell to the neighbouring country Wei.

When he finally arrived in Wei however, he kept himself hidden in the forest, to hide his identity and keep himself out of trouble. He was not about to get arrested for trespassing and have himself sent right back to Qin. However hard life may be from then on, he was going to have to conquer it. There would be no going back anymore.

It was a dark, stormy night when a man in a black hood emerged in front the door of the Wei emperor's absolute magnificent of a palace. When he was finally let in, the hooded chap finally made himself known as the legendary Man Yee. Those surrounding him looked in shock and dismay. Standing right in front of them, was the fabled inventor, convict from Qin and yet nobody believed their eyes. There was no way this was happening.

Noticing the awkward silence engulfing the massive room, Man Yee reached into his pockets. And from it, grasped in his right bandaged palm were two things, the metal block from prison and a sack of black powder. There, inside the dimly lit room. He told the Wei emperor about how he came to find out about the compass and all about the mysterious black coffee-ground-like substance, dubbing it as gunpowder and claiming it to be made out of a special type of leaf.

Seated in front of Man Yee, the Wei emperor stayed emotionless. How could he respond. This came as such a surprise. Aspiring to show respect, he nodded. Sure, he wanted the goods for his own use, but he wasn't about to rob the man. He was going to have to strike up a deal. But what was he to use to exchange for such groundbreaking things? As he contemplated, Man Yee suddenly offered.

"This can all be yours. If you destroy Qin with me. So what do you say? Are you down?"

New Tales of China's Inventions

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Ho, Ka Yat – 16

A soft, humid breeze wove through as Mei ventured into the depths of the forest, carrying the scent of earth and moss. The woods exhaled, releasing the fragrance of incense and pine trees. The sun's glimmering rays cast a golden-red hue over the horizon. Not long after, the cloak of darkness slowly unfolded over the vast mountainous landscape, dyeing the sky pitch-black in minutes. With a dead phone in hand and no way to connect with the world, Mei had no choice but to endure the chilly night in a nearby grotto.

She awoke to a picturesque sunrise. The sun projected a serene, ethereal glow, painting the sky with layers of rose pink and yellow-orange. Lacking any navigation equipment, Mei wandered around the forest in search of the base camp. She soon stumbled upon an antique compass, which appeared to be functional. But with no clue about how a compass worked and how she could utilise the compass with a copy of a map in her bag, Mei merely followed where the compass pointed, bearing in mind that a compass worked somewhat like Baidu Maps.

A greenish-blue luminescence hovering around an ominous cavern caught her eye following hours of trekking through rough terrain. She made a quick glance at her compass. Being cautious yet desperate to return to the base camp, she thought to herself, "Well, if the compass insists on leading me here, I guess I'll have to go in." She found a thick, weathered roll of parchment titled "The Applications of a Compass." Fueled by curiosity and excitement, she unrolled its contents. The piece of parchment enveloped her entirely in a time vortex, and Mei found herself in a quaint harbour town within the vibrant Song Dynasty. She noticed an ornate pagoda embellished with silk banners.

"I see you encountering challenges in using the compass," said an old man, who appeared to have a flowing white beard and profound wisdom. "I am Zhu Yu, a maritime historian. Allow me to introduce you to how you can use the compass, an invention created by our ancestors thousands of years ago, for navigation to get back to your destination." Being eager to return to the base camp, Mei listened to the old man carefully to learn how she could navigate with a compass.

"My dear, the Earth has a strong magnetic field. The needle of the compass is magnetized, so it aligns itself with the two poles of the Earth to show us the direction of the two poles of our planet," he patiently explained. "The compass itself can't steer us out of the darkness when we are lost, as it only determines our heading relative to Earth's magnetic field, so you'll also need a map. You should be grateful to be living in modernity as you have access to highly precise maps—just align the direction of the map to the north tip of the compass needle to find your way around.

"I am very intrigued by the sensation of sailing at sea," exclaimed Zhu Yu. "Apart from the compass, I've also worked on a plethora of nautical inventions that made traveling at sea much safer, as well as those that maximise the efficiency of ships by harnessing the wind and waves." He toured Mei around his workshop, showcasing inventions from the very first navigational compass, masts that power vessels as long as 100 feet, as well as multiple rudder iterations which help ships steer precisely. "I always seek advice from my fellow inventors and colleagues to ensure that my designs work with minimal flaws."

The following afternoon, Mei and Zhu Yu, along with a compass, hiked to a nearby temple. Zhu Yu led Mei into a tiny room, where a pristine mirror was hung nicely against the wall. Mei stepped into the mirror, and within seconds, she was back in the cavern in the forest, ready to return to the base camp.

Tale of the Invention of Flying Vehicles

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Jin, Rui Jerry – 14

In the year of 2060, China has taken the lead in technologies, processing the most advanced manufacturing technology in the world, creating countless of practical inventions and enhancements across various industries. However, there is one invention that has completely changed the transportation system of the entire world, an invention that had been dreamt by every engineers and an ubiquitous element in cyberpunk novels: flying vehicles.

The tale of the invention begins with a well-known brilliant Chinese scientist Mei Lee, who dedicated her life into researching mechanical engineering. Her childhood dream was to invent a vehicle that can be used on both land and air. Since she was young, she had already showed an incredible talent on solving puzzles and problem-solving skills. As she grew up, she had never forgotten her dream. Many years later, Mei has finally graduated from the best university in China and became a professor in engineering. Start from then, she locked herself in her garage and started to put herself into chasing her lifelong dream — the creation of a flying car.

The sounds of writing and welding metals never stopped. The view inside the garage is a complete mess, tons of tools are hanging on the wall disorderly, countless discarded papers and tools were scattered on the ground and had never been picked up, the garage is only illuminated by a small lamp's feeble glow.

"No, it won't work", someone murmured while clicking her pen. In the past few years, Mei has tried many methods to make a normal car float, but none of them succeeded. Now, she is trying to think of another way. Suddenly, an idea was turned up in her mind, she immediately grabbed a bunch of stationery and papers like she was starving, with excitement shining in her eyes. She sketches the image that appears in her head rapidly like it is going to slip out of her mind if she slows down. Pens and rulers spun and danced on the papers, her doodle gradually turned into a complex and artistic drawing. Soon, the blueprint of her idea of the flying car was completed. It is an ordinary-looking car like every car you can see on the roads, there is no fancy designs, no futuristic car bodies like we saw in the movies. However, the only difference of this car and an ordinary car is that its tires are gigantic fans. Her idea was that a flying car can be made by changing the normal wheels to some high voltage fans that can be used as both propellers and tires.

With this idea in mind, Mei embarked on the journey of building the world's first flying car in human history. However, a problem came to her face inevitably as soon as she took the first step: insufficient funds. Mei had already expected such a problem as her project was only funded by grants and her not-so-wealthy family. Fortunately, several long-sighted companies saw the potential in Mei's project and decided to invest in it. With this money on hand, she can finally start to build the vehicle she had been dreamt of. She used this fund to buy a car and brought it back to her cluttered garage. She first built four wheels that were rotatable, connected to a motor. Later on, she removed the original wheels of the car and installed her new wheels. It may sound very simple, but it's completely the opposite, the whole process more than three months of Mei's hard work.

When the car she had been dreamt for her entire life was finally finished, she was very ecstatic. Yet, the eventual test was still waiting. Driving the car to a vast, uninhabited field, she got off the car, started the engine, the car's wheels rotated to face the ground and started spinning, when the moment the car started to float, she couldn't hold her excitement and yelled out, her eyes were filled with pride and thrill.

Being the world's first flying car, innumerable companies were appealed and willing to cooperate with Mei as her incredible creation was presented to the public. Media all over the world started to report this invention. At the moment, skies were no longer just a view, but a vast canvas for human to show their creativity. Years later, like mobile phones, Mei's flying cars have become the most ubiquitous public transportation method in the world. The bustling roads in Beijing are filled with moving dots in the sky, people started to use flying cars to cross seas and cities, boats and aeroplanes were abandoned, even Mei herself couldn't expect that her creation would bring such a big impact. Looking

above her head, Mei smiled, knowing that all these convenience, practical work of art are just one of her creations, and will not be the last one

This invention does not only provide convenience and comfort for people, but also showed that an influential, practical or a grand masterpiece is not made by just a single night of hard work, but countless night of hard work and dedication. Also, dreams cannot be done only with imaginations, but requires a constant of hard work and determination.

New Tales of China's Inventions

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Lee, Caitlyn Danielle – 15

In a world full of technology, it is not at all surprising if someone tells you there are sentient beings in the Internet itself. In this story, we'll be following two of these beings in their journey around the world. Through the Internet, of course.

Olev and Onoo are beings with bright and curious minds. Their appearance? That's confidential information they prefer not to share. On their ship, they chattered amongst themselves, chittering away as the machinery on the data ship beeped and hummed.

"Where should we go this time?" said Olev, staring at the huge map on a hologram screen. "Japan? Their technology is always fun to explore," said Onoo. Olev scrunched his face, "Japan again? We were there just last month. Plus if it's the technology you like, why not go to China? We haven't been there in decades." Onoo glanced at China on the map, thinking for a moment before nodding their head. Seeing that Onoo had agreed, Olev immediately selected China as their destination and the ship zoomed off, no longer floating around an unknown part of the Internet.

Despite the security measures placed throughout the Internet, sailing into the Chinese server was an easy feat for our dear beings, thanks to the ship's automatic disabling of security. Perhaps this is why no matter how hard humans try to make the Internet secure, there are always tiny gaps or holes that hackers or viruses manage to get into, all thanks to our dear friends. Once the data of the Chinese server had loaded, Onoo and Olev were greeted with a colourful barrage of information. Onoo looked in awe at the sight, memorising the beautiful sight. Looking at Onoo with a proud look, Olev said, "Better than going to Japan again right?" Onoo nodded enthusiastically, "I didn't realise that this much time has passed since we've last been here. Look! All those humans are doing strange things!" Olev looks at where Onoo is pointing to, "Ah, that's Douyin isn't it? We saw something similar somewhere else didn't we? It was invented by the Chinese some years back." A train passed by the ship, causing it to vibrate a little. Onoo looked at the orange logo on the train in awe, "Woah! What's that?" With the help of the ship's searching function, Olev responded, "That's Taobao, an online shopping platform. It was May 2003 and is owned by Alibaba Group." Onoo stared at the train as it went further and further away, before suddenly jumping up and controlling the ship to move forwards at full speed. "Hey! What are you doing?" Olev said, startled as they tumbled backwards from the sudden increase in speed. Onoo smiled sheepishly as they helped Olev back onto their feet, "Sorry, I just wanted to go see the main server of this Taobao thing." Olev scowled a little, brushing away data particles off their pants, "You should've just said so, no need to go full speed without warning." Onoo lightly laughed, apologising once more.

Following the Taobao train, they reached a large building in the shape of the orange logo, proudly showing off who they are. Slipping inside the building without being detected, Olev and Onoo were greeted with rows and rows of stalls, reaching all the way up to the very top of the building. Onoo happily jumped to each stall as they walked past, picking up items and checking prices. Olev took out a tablet of sorts, filled with information about the prices and information of the items from all over the world. "There's so much stuff! How does anyone find anything here?" Onoo said, still excitedly exploring. "Well, if you didn't immediately rush towards the stalls, you would've noticed the search engine at the entrance," said Olev. Onoo made an o shape with their mouth, glancing towards the entrance to see that there was indeed a search function. Sighing, Olev approached a stall and used his tablet to scan the wares. Organising all the information, the tablet beeped and outputted all that Olev wanted to know. "The comments seem like they're all written by the same person, rather hilarious," said Onoo, peering at the comments supposedly written by people who have bought the products. "That's because it is. Or rather, it's all written by bots. The products are all fake after all," said Olev, who finished reading all about the wares.

An avatar approaches the stall, unaware of the beings next to them. "Say, he's not going to buy it, right? You said it was a fake, didn't you?" said Onoo, watching the avatar look through the products and seemingly about to place it into

his shopping cart. Unfortunately, for us humans outside of the Internet, it is not as easy to identify real and fake on the Internet through our screen. Olev remained silent as they watched the avatar finally pick something and walked away from the stall. With a sigh, they took a step forward but Onoo was faster. Onoo reached into the shopping cart with ease and took the fake product out. "Can't believe he actually took it. I thought this was supposed to be a safe place to sell and buy stuff," said Onoo with a frown. Olev walked beside Onoo and patted his shoulder, "And it is. It's just that occasionally people would sell products that aren't of the highest quality to earn more profit. Plus, haven't you noticed how cheap everything is here? It honestly benefits the consumers as much as the sellers, one bad stall doesn't mean all are bad." Onoo hummed thoughtfully, "I suppose you're right. There's practically everything here too, it's like everything from all over the world can be found here." Olev smiled and led Onoo away from that stall, "Come on, let's go see what else they have to offer, shall we?" Onoo nods cheerfully and throws the fake product over their shoulder.

Olev and Onoo left the building with a few items they bought from the online shopping site, smiles on their faces, one more obvious than the other. "That was fun! Can't believe we found stuff we wanted too!" said Onoo once they had returned back to the ship, organising all the items they bought. "Better than Japan?" said Olev, already planning their next trip. "Yeah! Better than Japan! Though Japan still has a special place in my heart that cannot be replaced," said Onoo. Our two beings rested in their ship after a fruitful trip to Taobao, content after visiting the China server after so long. Their ship slowly floated away from Taobao and wandered as the beings thought about where to go next. Perhaps the land of Douyin? Or perhaps the big company of Huawei? There are many new inventions and advancements in technology and society wise, you will stay and follow Olev and Onoo on their next journey, won't you?

The Dream of a Failing Chemist

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Lee, Chun Yan Daniel – 14

"Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today," as Malcolm the activist once said. But for me, education is the preparation for the past.

As a form-five student studying sciences, I had been facing a difficult time preparing for my DSE, especially for the subject Chemistry. The result of my mock exam was disheartening, and my grades were so poor that my school teachers in St. Margaret School insisted I repeat my studies for a year. Devastated yet I sought comfort from brainlessly engaging with my phone, and mindlessly playing games on the sofa during the summer break.

One night, my mother returned home from work and once again caught me engrossed in my virtual world. Overwhelmed with exhaustion and frustration, she broke my phone impulsively. In the heat of the moment, I lashed out, "You failed your marriage, and now failed to be a good mother too". I stormed out of the house and decided never to come back. How would I ever imagine this was almost the last thing I said to her.

Rain poured relentlessly as I got on a taxi, I was hoping this ride could relieve my anger. However, fate had other plans in store. The taxi lost control when it arrived at the New Praya in Kennedy Town, steering too close to the edge of the road and the taxi plunged into the Victoria Harbour. All of a sudden, panic enveloped me as the car sank and water flooded the vehicle. I fought with all my strength to open the door and escape from the car. At the same time, I noticed the driver was unconscious and attempted to save him. But a small but sudden explosion of the taxi forced me to swim upwards to gasp for air.

To my surprise, I found myself resurfacing in an unfamiliar lake, the landscape had transformed entirely. The buildings that once stood tall in Kennedy Town had vanished, and I was surrounded by a forest. Puzzled by the fact that it was night time when I boarded the ill-fated taxi, yet now the sun shone brightly overhead.

As I walked through the forest for miles, exhaustion set in. Just when hope began to fade, I saw an old-fashioned bungalow finally. I saw an elderly man in his Taoist robe. Grateful for his presence, I approached him and explained my situation. He was initially in disbelief but soon his eyes lit up in aspiration. Only then I found out that he was an alchemist in the service of the Emperor of the early Han Dynasty.

Shocked by the realization that I had traveled back in time more than 2,000 years ago, the first thing that came to my mind was regretting my harsh words to my mother. I might never have the chance to rectify my mistake. Moved by my story, the old man offered me shelter in his home. In order to justify my stay, the old man was kind enough to give me the name of his late son, Wei Boyang.

Despite the unfamiliarity of the place, I was determined to find a way back to the modern world. Through a tough winter and another summer arrived, I attempted different methods to trigger a return. But no matter how many times I had dived into the lake, repeated failures wore down my spirit. Devastated once again for my failure, this time I sought comfort from doing absolutely nothing.

With the hope to light up my spirit, the old man requested my assistance with his alchemy business. I willingly agreed, grateful for his hospitality. And maybe it was time for me to accept my fate by learning how to survive in Han's Dynasty.

Within the palace walls, the emperor's anger echoed loudly. His desire for eternal life remained unfulfilled, and he threatened to take all of the alchemists' lives if they failed to find a solution before the year's end.

The old man returned home with sorrow. Feeling sorry and worried, I vowed to help him, even though I knew very well that there was no such substance that could grant immortality. Still, highly motivated by the thought that perhaps I might be able to find alternative ways to save the old man and travel back to the modern world.

Soon, regret washed over me as I wished I had paid more attention during my sciences classes. My limited knowledge of chemistry might actually cost the old man his life and me my chance to reunite with my mother.

But this time, giving up was not an option. With the use of my basic knowledge on chemistry and the old man's alchemy notes as my guide, I began experimenting with the extensive collection of chemicals found in his home. Despite the unfamiliarity of their ancient names, I was determined to save the old man and myself.

One day, screening through the ancient texts, I came across chemicals that were equivalent to sulfur, carbon, and potassium nitrate. Faintly remember my chemistry teacher once warned us about the flammable nature of this combination. A realization struck me like lightning. The mini car explosion might have acted as a catalyst that had traveled me back in time.

Without delay, I searched the old man's room for all the necessary ingredients. In order to prevent accidents, I found a suitable blue pot and sculpted my name, Boyang, onto it. I mixed the chemicals carefully and created a black powder that I knew could be gunpowder.

Explaining my discovery to the old man, I wrapped the gunpowder in paper, creating a man-made bomb. I sought the assistance of the old man to conduct experiments. And I left the remaining gunpowder with the old man and advised him on its usage for self-defense. With a heavy heart, I dived into the lake with the hope that my plan could work this time. The old man ignited the bomb and tossed it toward me, and I closed my eyes and braced myself for the unknown.

Miraculously, when I opened my eyes, I saw the red taxi was sinking below me. There were some firemen rescuing the taxi driver and others carrying me to the surface. I noticed the date on the firemen's smart watches – It was the very day I had left. The explosion did literally bring me back to the modern world.

Overwhelmed with excitement, I was joyfully reunited with my mother in the hospital. Tears streamed down our faces as we hugged tightly. I apologized for taking her for granted and said all those hurtful words. In this heartfelt moment, the weight of regret lifted from my shoulders as I am so grateful for this chance to make things right.

Doubts lingered in my mind as to whether my experience had been a mere dream or actual time travel. In order to seek validation, I buried myself in history books about Han's Dynasty. Astonishingly, I realized Wei Boyang was the person credited for inventing gunpowder and discovered a photo of the pot had sculpted with the name "Boyang" on it. However, instead of the original blue color, the pot was brown.

Unsure about my journey through time, but I filled with gratitude and a newfound appreciation for the value of education. I vowed to make the most of my second chance in this life, cherishing the opportunity to reconcile the relationship with my mother and pursue my passions in acquiring knowledge in sciences.

New Tales of China's Inventions

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Yan, Yong Kai – 15

Dear reader,

I am glad to see that the shifting sands of time have carried this letter right into your hands...okay, let me ditch the fancy language and waste no time introducing myself. I'm Zhu, a humble Han Dynasty youth who's trying to build military gadgets for the ailing empire. The reason I'm writing to you is simple— I'm here to tell you all about a peer of mine who overcame adversity to fly beyond her wildest dreams and initiate monumental changes in society. This is the story of my personal idol, a girl who dared to face the world head-on and come out triumphant. The tale of Liu the Inventor.

From a tender age, Liu was different from the stereotypically subservient Chinese women who only knew how to yield and grovel. Feisty, independent, and blessed with the mind of a genius, she'd tinker around with things in her father's workshop all day long instead of learning how to cook and clean like all the other girls. I can't help but harken back to the time she was asked to share her dream in class. "Some of you here might want to become mere housewives or servants, but me? I'll find a way to fly into the sky, free as a bird!", she declared with unmatched confidence for all the world to hear. Silence fell upon the classroom, followed by relentless boos and jeers that drowned out the teacher's insincere words of encouragement. "That's utterly absurd." "What childish fantasy!" "Get your head out of the clouds!" Insults like those flew across the room, but didn't make so much as a dent on Liu's psyche. Indeed, she only grew ever more productive in the ensuing weeks and months, making handy new tools for her father and assembling intricate wooden models of what I could only describe as a bizarre winged contraption. "What's that?" I and the neighbourhood boys inquired of Liu. "Oh, just an experimental design of a flying machine. I call it a plane."

As the years wore on and Liu finished invention after invention, the dastardly seed of envy took root within my heart. It wasn't fair at all for her to be this smart, I told myself. She should just learn her place in the old social order and do her duty, not press on with that laughable dream of hers! But given her immense talent, she might just succeed. And if so...other women would follow in her footsteps and cross the line. The very fabric of society would be slowly but surely torn asunder, wouldn't it? Blinded by this backwards, ridiculous, frankly asinine mindset, I resolved to sabotage her efforts by destroying her work. How cruel and callous I was to burn down all of her creations in the dead of night! But burn they did, taking with them her desire to spread her wings and get the freedom she craved. I'll never forget the look of utter scorn and disappointment she had on her face when she overheard me gloating about what I did later on. And the moment she lost her composure, started bawling at the top of her lungs, and turned away before I could utter a single word. Though I tried to laugh things off with my friends and pay her reaction no mind, I knew deep down that I'd committed a reprehensible, potentially irreparable mistake. Indeed six long years would pass before Liu picked up the tatters of her dream and started anew. Six long years of guilt and shame eating away at my psyche, preventing me from finding the courage to say sorry to her.

And then a miracle happened. What looked to be an orb of blinding light rose out of Liu's long-abandoned workshop, streaking high into the air before finally fizzling out. As I rushed over to ascertain what was going on, I locked eyes with the woman herself for the first time since the night I ruined her inventions. "We meet again, Zhu," she said, her voice devoid of any lingering enmity. "What you saw just now was my first successful 'firework'— a small projectile that shoots upward when set alight. If I attached a bunch of fireworks to my body, the force they'd generate would be more than enough to propel me into the sky... There's still a long way to go before I fulfil my dream of flying, but I've definitely achieved a crucial breakthrough here." Now I finally had a chance to properly apologise to Liu; an opportunity to set things right and put to rest the demons that had been tormenting me for so long. "I...I'm so happy you're back on track. S-sorry for everything..." I started stammering, only for Liu to pat me on the shoulder. "Don't beat yourself up—it's all in the past now, and I'm sure you've learnt your lesson. Honestly? The arson you committed

was a blessing in disguise. I'd hit a dead end with the plane design, but you made me return to the drawing board and come up with the idea of the firework. So from the bottom of my heart, thank you. You made today possible."

What Liu said sent shockwaves coursing through my body. The grace she showed at that very moment! Half a decade of pent-up self-loathing manifested itself as I broke down within her arms, turning into an inconsolable wreck. I knew as clear as day now that regardless of gender, she was a better, bigger person than I'd ever be—the sky could never be the limit for someone as ambitious, tenacious, and intelligent as her. It also dawned upon me that if she alone could set such wondrous achievements, all the other women of China could go even further as a united force. It was high time we embraced equality and empowered women to tap into their full, unfettered potential—instead of destroying society, they would only enrich it and carry it forward into a more civilised and prosperous era. Rising to my feet, I told Liu: "I'll do all I can to help you take flight. I'll ensure that the entire village will support you unconditionally in your endeavours."

Keeping my promise, I mobilised my fellow villagers to help Liu gather materials and conduct research, allowing her to make progress at a prodigious rate. Not even a year later, everyone who'd helped out in the project congregated in a deserted meadow to see Liu unveil the culmination of her decade-long toil— a giant capsule made of hardened bamboo, built atop a cluster of her proprietary fireworks. "This machine is my magnum opus—a 'rocket', if you will. It may not look like much, but it's going to carry me into the aether!" Liu announced to the townspeople, her voice resonant and resolute. "If my calculations and observations prove correct, I will ascend to a height where day will turn into night and the earth will appear as but a ball suspended in an unfathomably dark and deep void. Frankly, I expect this to be a one-way trip, but do not weep for me. This is... what I truly wanted. To not only usher in an age of exploration and scientific achievement for Chinese civilization, but also show my countrymen and countrywomen that anything is possible as long as you put your mind to it." Having uttered those immortal words, she climbed up the ladder of the rocket, looked back at everyone one last time with longing eyes, and entered the capsule to raucous cheers and applause.

Lighting the fuse of the rocket, Liu's attendants shouted at us to stand back and watch the flight at a safe distance. A short time later, a deafening boom rang out from the launch site, kicking up clouds of thick dust and creating a tremendous shockwave that knocked us all to the ground. As we got up, we bore witness to an unbelievable sight—Liu's rocket arose from the ashes like a defiant phoenix, ascending upward at ever-increasing speed. Aved into momentary silence, we all started oohing and aahing as the shrinking rocket made its way across the boundless blue sky, leaving behind a radiant, red-hot trail of smoke and fire. After a minute of unbridled euphoria for all, someone muttered, "Wait, the rocket... it's gone?" Everyone scoured the sky, and sure enough, the rocket had all but vanished into thin air. Some frowned at the news, but for most of us, this was a cause for even wilder celebration. Liu had done what she'd set out to do and become one with the heavens. With tears streaming down my face, I looked up and saluted her, wherever she was. "Farewell, legend."

Where Liu wound up in the end is frankly anybody's guess. Some say that she flew all the way to the uncharted ends of the earth, discovering wondrous new lands and using her endless ingenuity to skillfully navigate the myriad challenges lying in her path. Others assert that she ended up plummeting to the ground in a blaze of glory, but nonetheless lit a flame within the hearts of countless women and spurred them to break the chains that had stifled them for millenia. Personally? Call me credulous, wildly naive, or even outright crazy, but I choose to believe that Liu penetrated the almighty firmament and soared into the great beyond, finally attaining nirvana and joining the pantheon of deities. She's watching over us now in a better place, and hopefully she'll take good care of you too, dear reader.

Before I run out of parchment, allow me to reiterate what you should already know, my friend. *What I just said isn't science fiction. It's our history.*

Signed,
Zhuge Liang

The Story of a Remorseful Alchemist

St. Mary's Canossian College, Law, Lok Ching Cassidy – 15

So, this was what the end of the world looked like.

The sky was charcoal black, layered with wisps of smoke that seemed to rise from the very earth. This was a nightmare born from humankind's deepest fears, made more horrifying by the agonized wailing of soldiers as they tried to tear through the impenetrable wall of fire, and the pleading screams of those who tried to drag themselves, broken limbs, bleeding wounds and all, away from the battlefield that was now painted red. The Five Dynasties Period that had lasted for more than half a century was drawn to a close by the collapse of the king who once lived in the lavish palace in front of me. Zhongyuan was united; but at what cost?

Oh, Blessed Sky, I thought, delayed horror bleeding through me. What have I done?

In Chinese history, the chaotic Five Dynasties Period, during which dozens of men called themselves kings and ruled over different provinces, warring incessantly with one another, was ended by a heroic general Zhao Kuangyin who later became the Taizu of Sung Dynasty.

There was more to the story.

Originally, there were three brothers, and I was the youngest. When I was a baby, a fortune teller said that while my two brothers would have the fate of an emperor, I would end the Five Dynasties Period. It was a bold prophecy, too incredulous for my humble father to believe. He opted to believe it was a fabricated story made up by a drunkard who hungered for coins. If I had been aware of this prophecy earlier, would it have made a difference? Probably not; I doubted anything could have stood in the way of my ambition, but having something else to blame helped me deal with the permanently-lodged ball of regret in my heart.

I was skipping ahead of the story, though. Let me go back to where it all started, in the times of Shennong, who was also known as the Yan Emperor, one of the Three Sovereigns.

History books recorded that Shennong gave rise to agriculture. His son, Huang Emperor, a man as great as his father, invented the first medicine. What they never mentioned was that their achievements were not due to their brilliance, but an earthly magic given by the Sky.

This magic manifested in a specific group of people, and to this day no one knew what the deciding factor was. This power was drawn up from the very core of the earth. Those with the smallest amount of magic could grow wild plants on a whim, while the truly powerful ones could split the earth or cause sleet to pour down from the highest heavens. As no record of this power appeared until Shennong, those with this power were called shennong-shi.

I never thought I would possess this power. Out of my father's three sons, I was by far the least remarkable. I was known only for my attempts at alchemy. I was fascinated with the idea that a piece of hard, impenetrable metal could be distilled to its base and be used in the making of elixirs. Once, I tried distilling our father's rusted metal woodchopping axe down to its most basic components. It was only later that I discovered what had been missing in my crude attempts at alchemy, but nevertheless the axe melted down to its wooden handle and a pile of reddish brown powder that scattered into the wind, for no reason other than that I had thrown all my will into watching its decomposition. This miraculous sign ignited my obsession with alchemy. While my brothers were off fighting, I was dedicated to studying how shennong magic could be weaved into alchemy.

My quiet 'scholarly' life continued in the solitude of the rural countryside, far away from the blood-shedding among the warlords who were never content. I knew that my eldest brother Kuangyin had become a general in the Later

Zhou Dynasty. It wasn't until after the Coup at Chen Bridge, when his soldiers crowned him with a yellow cloak, that I realized where his ambition lay, and soon after he took the Zhou capital he sent for me. Riding into the city, I beheld the destruction done to the land. I saw acres of green fields scorched, sooty marks left behind by a fierce fire that had burnt through the crops, as carelessly as the wind now tousled my hair. I shuddered and spurred the horse to a quicker pace.

He didn't receive me as a king did. Instead of letting me kneel below his throne and crane my head to meet his eyes, he opted to meet me at the courtyard. He had made an effort to clean up, but some blood still clung to his temple, and his bright, feverish eyes gave his triumph away.

'Brother,' he said as he led me down the many hallways and corridors in the palace. 'This war cannot go on forever. I will unite Zhongyuan. I will rule over this land as the only emperor. I have the best army, but I need a weapon that can wipe out the entire armies standing in my way.'

'You are the best alchemist I have met. And besides, you are a shennong-shi. You have — magic. The talent that makes our crops grow better back at home.'

My first impulse was to shake my head. 'I don't know how —'

'This war must end.' My brother looked into my eyes, his gaze intense. 'We have been at constant warring for over fifty years. Think of how much the people have suffered. I might be standing here with you right now, but thousands have lost their brothers in these meaningless wars. If not for me, do it for all those who have lost someone.'

I shook my head. 'You have asked the wrong person. I can never do this. Alchemy and Shennong are simply my interests. I lack the expertise to create a weapon.'

He pinched his brows. I turned away, but then he said, 'Think of the glory it will add to your name.'

I stopped in my tracks.

He seized this opening. 'This is something no living soul has attempted before. A weapon created from Shennong and alchemy? The thought might have crossed the minds of many, but no one would ever dare to venture beyond dreaming. If you make this weapon, your name will be sung in ballads throughout centuries.'

We were so terribly mortal, so humilatingly fragile, our lives over in the span of a single breath. The thought that I could stay immortal was tempting. Besides, what was a life of solitude and agriculture in the countryside, when I could have one of fame and power and glory by my brother's side?

'Do it, and I give you my word as an emperor that I will grant your every wish.' The smile in my brother's eyes was hungry and victorious, the look of someone who knew he had already won.

I had my brother dig up every single book on alchemy that had ever surfaced. I poured over them, squinting to read the painfully small words by sunlight and moonlight. In the private quarters my brother gave me, far away from his official court, I left stacks and stacks of frantically scribbled notes. The food made by the palace cook was exquisite, I was certain, but whenever I realized with a start that I was famished and turned to the dish, it had gone cold. In any case, I wouldn't have been able to taste anything past the burning smell of sulfur that always clung to me, even now, the telltale sign of alchemy.

Yet hard work yielded results, and finally I created the weapon. The base of alchemy was hydrogen and carbon, which made up everything in the world. Carbon, being non-flammable, eliminated the risk of the entire structure being exploded from the inside out, and thus served as an excellent foundation. Next, I needed highly combustible gases. This was where hydrogen came in, for it was explosive, and I would need oxygen as well, since it could keep

the elixir burning. I used my magic to draw the gases from the earth itself, concentrating them in air and then pouring them all into the weapon I had designed, named cannon.

I designed the cannon to shoot out metal balls that were highly reactive and already aflame by the time they left the cannon. The most common metals, copper and iron, needed extremely high temperature and energy to burn. Their ores and compounds, similarly, were far too stable to be ignited. I mixed different formulas of alloys, but none of them worked. I searched through the old texts, until I stumbled upon the record of an extremely unstable and reactive substance in the journal of a Hun shennong-shi. The Hun described it as 'an ominous black rock' that drew him to it by some inexplicable thread of magic. He tried to crack the substance open and return it to its original form by 'electrolysing it with the power of the earth', though I had no idea what that meant. Shennong magic 'peeled back the black layer, revealing a shiny silver solid inside. Immediately it caught fire and burnt a most entrancing lilac colour'. The fire soon spread throughout the mountain, and the Hun had to call down a rainstorm to quell the fire.

'Everything was ready, all except the west wind.' Right now, the west wind I lacked was this mysterious metal that had to be 'electrolysed' to obtain. The Hun had found the black rock at the bottom of a lake on a mountain, so I journeyed to the lake in Huangshan. I almost drained myself calling up every rock at its bottom, until thousand pounds of black rocks were littered around my feet. I imagined the black color receding, revealing its inner silver solid, and poured every ounce of energy I had left into willing my vision into reality. Nothing happened, and I shouted in frustration. I was so close. So close to success. What did 'electrolysed' mean?

I sat on the mountaintop, surrounded by rocks and the bitter taste of failure, until a gray thundercloud passed over my head. Above me, thunder boomed and cracked. The world in front of me was veiled by a black shade, and rain poured down, soaking me from head to toe. Lightning struck, and for a few seconds the world was pure white –

Someone in my village had once been struck by lightning. He survived to tell the tale, always saying he was electrified. I didn't dare to let myself hope, in fear of being crushed by a mountain's worth of disappointment. Yet as I focused every cell in my body in plucking the strands of lightning off the sky one by one, as I held it until I felt like I was being roasted alive and would burst from beneath my skin, as I released the power from the Blessed Sky onto every rock with a roar, hope soared in my soul. I felt rather than saw the flame and knew I had succeeded.

Two months passed. The blacksmiths had finished the massive cannon. To prevent the metal balls – potassium, I called them – from burning before they were supposed to, I created an elixir made of carbon, hydrogen, sulfur and nitrogen called paraffin oil. When I put the potassium into the oily elixir, it did not ignite but rather was subdued.

I went through the procedures of firing the cannon. First, strike a match in the small hole beneath the inner chamber of the cannon. Let the fire burn. When a sound like a roaring dragon was released, tilt the cannon, roll the balls of potassium forward so that they left the safety of the paraffin oil, and fire. Lilac flame bloomed in mid-air. I gaped, awe-struck, as the metal ball transformed into living and breathing fire, drawing a brilliant lilac line in air before alighting on the woods fifty miles away. The flames blew through the dense trees in a second, and I gaped, awe-struck, as I witnessed them being reduced to nothing but ashes.

No one knew this weapon's danger better than me. There were a thousand things I needed to perfect before it could be wheeled onto the battlefield. I told my brother I needed more time, the power inside being far too raw and elemental for anyone to wield, but he must not have heard me over his own giddiness. The day I completed the test for the cannon, I sank into a two-day slumber.

When I awoke and went to my laboratory, the cannon was nowhere to be seen. My brother had taken it to war against the last warlord, Li Yu of the Southern Tang. He had a reputation for weaving poetry the way faeries in the heavens spun silk. I galloped to Ning, the capital of Southern Tang, at full speed. But my horse was not built for a long journey, and it took a week before I finally arrived at Ning. Instead of the illustrious capital I had heard of, the once-vibrant landscape now lay in ruins, a harrowing tableau of destruction and despair.

The air was thick with the acrid scent of smoke, a pungent mixture of scorched earth, and smoldering debris. Scattered across the scarred terrain were the remnants of what was once a battleground. Craters pockmarked the ground, evidence of the explosive fury that raged through the area. Broken weapons lay strewn about, forgotten relics of a grim battle fought and lost. The earth itself was scarred, its once-lush greenery replaced by a barren wasteland, where the only signs of life were wounded soldiers' desperate cries for help. Silence hung heavy in the air, broken only by the crackling of flames, the occasional distant moan of the wounded, and the mournful whispers of the wind. The palace once occupied by Li Yu was half blackened—husk, half skeletal—remains, their walls reduced to rubble. Flames flickered and danced, the lilac color haunting, devouring everything in its path, casting an eerie glow that painted the desolation in shades of lavender.

All thoughts and feelings abandoned me as I stared at the aftermath of a war, the catastrophe left behind by the weapon I had proudly designed. Numbness took over me, spreading through my limbs, turning the blood in my veins to ice, until shame, horror and self-disgust bled through me, creating a tear that could never be fixed. Absorbed in my work, the thought that this weapon would be used in war, against soldiers who lived and breathed and bled like me, was insubstantial and far away, like the wisp of a dream that could never be reached. Now, I was left with no choice but to confront the nightmare I had created with my own hands, one I could never unravel with magic or alchemy. I closed my eyes, but I could not unsee the image of armless soldiers desperately crawling with one arm on the cracked earth, trying to reach through the flames to another side. I was sure the screams of dying soldiers would make a recurring appearance in my nightmares for the years I had yet to live.

I made my way to the palace. There, my brother, clad in blood and a yellow cloak, was sitting on a great oakwood throne with carved panels. He was the image of a majestic conqueror. When he saw me, he smiled. 'Thank you, brother. I would make sure the bards remember you.'

However much my spirits had lifted at the thought of immeasurable glory, however much my stomach now revolted violently against it. 'How could you say that, when this city is ravaged, when people are being burnt alive out there?' My voice was a hoarse whisper.

For a moment, my brother looked genuinely confused. 'People die in wars. Now, what will you have as your reward? I promised to grant your every wish, and an emperor does not go back on his words.'

'We are monsters,' the words slipped out on their own accord. Shennong used his magic to help his people; the aim of alchemists was to improve the world we lived in. And me? I had left destruction in my wake.

'If we are monsters, it is because this world needs us to be monsters.' The smile slipped away from his face. 'Come now, name your price. What will you have?'

I stared at him. I could see that he — no longer my brother, but an emperor — expected me to ask for riches untold. I felt hollowed and exhausted. I only wanted to get out of this place and never look back. 'I want my name to be erased from all records. I want you to wipe out all mentions of shennong magic and alchemy.'

Shock spasmed across his face. 'You —'

This time, I walked away from Zhao Kuangyin without turning back, my footsteps echoing loudly in the lonely hall.

At night, I sneaked into the armory. I removed the oily container of potassium from the cannon. I let the potassium catch fire and the cannon exploded.

I spent the rest of my life in seclusion in Huangshan. Whenever I went down the mountain, I heard snippets of the progress of the Sung Taizu Zhao Kuangyin. I was not surprised to hear he killed his own generals, in fear of them usurping his throne.

Shennong magic had bled out. Alchemy had gone out of fashion. Yet I also knew it was inevitable for someone to create a far deadlier weapon than I had. Let this story be a warning to those whose ambitions aligned with mine, then. Let these words warn them away from the disaster they would surely unleash on the world, and let me serve as a testament to the fatality of ambition.

Soaring Dreams

St. Paul's Convent School, Ngai, Yiu Yoyo – 16

With the swift turning of calendar pages, August flew by, bringing biting winds to Weifang. The city of Weifang, known as Yidu and the city of Folklore and Cultural expressions was a city that never slept. The liveliness of the city trickled through the crevices of the city walls, as if Weifang itself was alive. The bustling streets never ceased, attracting thousands of tourists that hail from all over China, even foreigners who have heard of the city's annual festivals that celebrate the arts and talents of locals.

"Yu be careful! The weather's cooling, you'll soon regret not wearing an extra layer outdoors," tutted the old lady at the corner of the bustling, narrow streets of Weifang.

Yu ignored the nags of the old lady, the eccentric youngster only marched to the beat of her own drum. The breeze sent a shiver down Yu's spine but she was only focused on one thing tonight — the annual festival of innovative crafts. The festival occurs once every year after the last summer bloom wilts. Underneath the bustling centre of trade lined with low-rise buildings of markets, shops and artisan workshops, Weifang was filled with talented young craftsmen who longed to have the support of wealthy individuals in order for their projects to flourish. The yearly festival was the best stage possible for these craftsmen to brandish their handicrafts, from the most recent hot topic in town, fireworks, to projects that became daily necessities such as paper and silk, all of these magnificent inventions had the chance to shine due to the festival that attracted investors.

Nearing the festival, the city's shadows dimmed with the saturation of crimes, fights and decadence. Often just for a chance in the spotlight, merchants and artisans resort to sabotaging promising, rival craftsmen, even going as far as hiring assassins. In fact, every year there are rumours of the wealthiest investors paying the organisers of the festival to let some artisans pass through selection stages. Everyone knew to return home before dark and shut the gates tight to avoid trouble.

Everyone but Yu. The lonesome girl was brimming with excitement in her qipao, skipping along the steps, two steps at a time, to her friend's intricate house standing at the edge of the city's looming walls.

'Someday she won't be so lucky...', the old lady thought as she stood up on her spindly limbs, turning a blind eye to Yu's antics again. Just as the old lady had known, Yu was already stumbling through the city's streets with a small sturdy pouch in her hands. As she ran along, she kept in mind which alleys to avoid and always walked along the paths illuminated from the plastic neon signs of bars, shops and restaurants.

Normally she would stop to admire the bright, captivating glows and specks of light or eavesdrop on the schemes of businessmen. On nights where she felt particularly daring, she'd look through the gap of metal gates and wooden doors to gasp at the clinks of glasses that glittered with bubbles or array of creations laid out on polished tables. The deafening babble of tongues that often intertwined with multitudes of accents and languages was fascinating to Yu.

In spite of all that, Yu only had one goal tonight, she was determined to watch her friend's creations take flight on the grand stage of the festival. After all, Yu and Han had fought tooth and claw to get through the selection stages, even going as far as impersonating their guardian's signatures to join. Even when children weren't allowed to join as individual entries, they could join as an apprentice under other recognised artisans. The ambitious yet naive children had other plans in mind beyond obtaining information only through official, legal means. From Yu's nightly visits to the less elegant parts of the city, she had found out how priceless and valuable information was, especially information about the festival's hidden rules. The festival is rumoured to have a central theme yearly, yet it is never

revealed to the public as it appears to be welcoming to “all” crafts and innovations. The judging panel of the festival is also kept secret as an attempt to prevent bribery or threats towards them, yet the names of many high profile merchants and officials rumoured to be involved are often heard in the dead of the night passed from lips to ears. Many more similar and unimaginable rumours were passed down yearly, yet till now, nobody had dared to reveal the hidden rules and uncovered truths of the festival.

Throughout the years, Yu and Han only grew more curious and desperate the more they heard, they knew that if they joined the festival somehow and received any amount of sponsors, they’d be able to lift both their families, possibly even distant relatives out of any worries of debt or food for the rest of their lives. As they dreamt and schemed on and on, they finally took action this year.

As Yu entered the humble abode of the Han family, she was greeted by the family that had grown fond of her presence. She dashed straight up to the attic, finding her childhood friend sitting in the dim glow of the moon that shone through the gaps between the ceiling tiles. His sketches, blueprints, creations and torn bits and pieces of crafts were scattered across the floor. Yu cautiously avoided stepping on bamboo and wood splinters, watching with awe at their months of hard work that laid before them.

A delicate, diamond-shaped frame covered with a thin layer of almost translucent, rice-coloured paper painted nimbly with intricate patterns sat before both of them. The patterns reflected characters of traditional myths, of dragons and phoenix and bright, nearly glowing golden specks symbolising prosperity splattered across the surface. A long string was attached to the framework, looping around and around Han’s nervous hands.

“It’s completed...”, the boy breathed out quietly, almost afraid to speak the words. The children admired the handicraft before them, the fragile ‘fengzheng’, also known as a kite, as Han had named it, was their one way ticket to their dreams.

Yu touched the gentle bend of bamboo sticks that were attached gingerly by Han, smoothing her hands over the artwork painted on the kite. Months of their labour had paid off, the kite in their hands being the fruit of their diligence and risky endeavours to collect materials to retry again and again after months of failed prototypes. From the kite not being able to soar at all, to breaking the delicate folds of paper from careless painting, they had finally created the best possible version of what they had in mind — a light, paperlike toy that soars the boundless skies.

Now the only task that remained was to present it on stage. Yet before that, they had to go through the traps and men stationed around the festivals’ entrance, employed by different bad natured artisans or merchants alike. There were only three main entrances to the festivals, obviously all blocked. The children had no choice but to take a leap of faith to try and run through the barricades, as passing through the much hidden paths would risk damaging their prized creation.

It was deep into the night now, the only hint of crowds gathered here were the darkened shapes scattered about and a cacophony of sounds from inside the festival, shielded by walls that barely shut all light in. The children didn’t dare breathe louder, their footsteps slowing to a crawl as they avoid the crunch of leaves. The moon was hidden behind the thick clouds above. A quiet shuffle of feet alerted one of the guards.

“Who’s there?” yells the man cautiously, the children paused, their heartbeat thundering in their ribcage. They slowly came out of the dark, hiding their craft behind their backs. The man sighed in relief, thankful that it wasn’t an intruder.

“What are you kids doing, creeping about in the dark? The entrance’s that way”, he sighed out, annoyed at his foolish fear.

They kept quiet, slowly edging away from the man who took pity on the kids being almost involved in darker businesses. He hurried them towards the main path to the festival, unbeknownst to him that the children were exactly who he was hired to stop from attending the festival.

Yu and Han scurried past him, breathless with adrenaline and fear that coursed through their veins. The festival was starting soon, as lanterns of different animals, myths and even fruits were hung up everywhere, illuminating the darkened paths.

They quickly headed towards the centre podium, illuminated by massive neon signs and bright lanterns for competing artisans and apprentices alike, glad to have gotten there right on time as the crowd went silent.

The children slipped between people's shoulders, coming before the stage as they await their turn to present their craft. They held hands, clammy palms filled with nerves and excitement upon witnessing such a grand festival up close for the first time in their lives.

"...And finally, the last invention of this year's festival, the fengzheng, presented by two young apprentices!" The speaker announced, making the crowd's cheers fall silent as they wondered silently about the last craft they'll marvel at tonight. The name of the craft did not give away much, leading to the crowd being slightly disappointed at witnessing the small, seemingly insignificant craft in the children's hands. Throughout the night, many crafts, both large and small, complex and simple were on display, most of them created with far more sophisticated materials. Hence, it wasn't surprising that the crowd mumbled amongst themselves, in anticipation and in disappointment.

Han held his craft gently, hands trembling as he unravelled the strings bound around his hands so tight white marks appeared on his arms. He gripped the end of the string, wrapping it around his hand and nodded to Yu. They had rehearsed this dozens of times. He just needed the tiniest silver of wind to blow, then his craft would take flight and become alive, trailing in the wind magically as if it were an actual bird.

Just as he predicted, there was enough wind for the kite to just barely lift off the ground as he started to run, but that was all that he needed. One gust of wind and his creation soared, lifting off from the dusty grounds of the stage, lifting the weight in his heart and releasing all worries as he watched his craft soar higher and higher.

The crowd gasped, marvelling at the colourful, simple contraption that took flight in front of their eyes. Unlike paper planes and bamboo dragonflies, the kite did not falter, merely swerving masterfully in front of their eyes, becoming one with the winds and skies, as if it had belonged there. Children began to cheer, and the bustle of activity and laughter came back as both adults and children alike stared up in awe.

Han glanced at the judging panel, seeing their nod before gathering the string back into his hands, holding his creation as his face shone with pride and joy. Some competitors had already begun to leave, knowing they had no place after this display of magnificence. Yu noted that investors who sat in plush seats and wheeled carriages looked intrigued, discussing amongst themselves. As the crowd slowly died down, with a final bow, they stepped down the stage, leaving with their hearts soaring as high as the kite had before. It wasn't long before they received private invitations from interested sponsors and investors alike, they smiled at each other widely, feeling the highs of becoming the stars of the festival.

That night, when the festival concluded and the children had a moment to themselves, they laid on the grassy fields, feeling the autumnal winds blow gently. Gentle conversation could be picked up from passersby and elated shouts could be heard from the festival still.

Yet at that moment, the children found themselves staring at the sky that slowly turned orange, the stars disappearing once more, replaced by twittering birds and soft clouds painting the sky a lighter shade.

“Hey Yu.. do you think we would ever soar through the skies next to kites and birds?” The young boy asked, a slight quiver in his voice as he asked with adrenaline still coursing through him.

Yu giggled, childlike mirth shining on her face as she replied, “Don’t be silly Han, humans can’t possibly fly. Maybe you can dream of that tonight instead.”

Han stayed silent, a content smile on his face as the hidden stars loomed over the children. Maybe one day they too, will soar in the skies, boundless without shackles. But for now, he holds onto a kite in one hand and Yu’s hand in another as he watches the clouds swirl with the winds of change.

Unveiling Timeless Wonders

St. Paul's Convent School, Rocha, Jodie – 15

In the ancient realms,
legends resides,
China's inventions were a source of pride!

Shen Zhou was an ardent gentleman with a restless mind and ablaze with curiosity, his thirst for knowledge never seemed to be quenchable, and his quest for understanding flourished within him like a relentless wildfire within the dense trees. He sought solutions to problems, and questioned everything.

On one fateful day, he was in a library in his town, his attention was drawn to a sack of bamboo and wooden slips, in which were books that he had never seen before. It was titled “the new tales”. And so he found himself studying, sight filled with the words carved into the bamboo and wooden slips, it was about time travelling.

Zhou then followed the procedures, with trepidation and excitement coursing through his veins, in hopes to travel into the past to meet his passed father. As he travelled across the boundaries of time, he found himself standing in a bustling loud street of China.

His vision was still fuzzy as he felt like he had just slept through centuries. Drowsy as he held onto the air, falling onto the ground, only to hear sounds that he had never heard before, catchy music in stores by the street, and his sight filled with clothings that he had never thought would fit beauty standards, people with their ears stuffed with white plugs and talking into the air, holding stacks of thin white-cloth looking pieces with sharp edges.

But with each passing day, he started to unravel the enigmatic threads that wove together the tender fabric of time itself. It was a whole new civilisation, and he was eager to witness the brilliance. He couldn't help but notice how he stood out to be totally disengaged with the crowds, who held black screens against him.

”What year is this?”

“2024? Who are you? A time traveller?” There was a burst of laughter.

A flush of blush nourished Zhou's face as he hastened his gait towards nowhere, only with the bamboo slips in his grip. As he walked through the bustling streets of this modern city, his sense was suddenly captivated by a tantalising aroma that flourished in his nostrils. Following the scent, he soon found himself standing in front of a quaint noodle shop. Stirred memories started to strike him, noodles were once sold as luxury reserved for the royals and privileged, but people from all walks of life were seen savouring and devouring these absolute art and masterpiece of culinary delights!

The realisation of what was once a rare indulgence has now become a common meal for the masses, the kind of meal a child would have before school, the kind of meal a homesick person would have during a lonely dinner, the kind of meal that filled Zhou with a mixture of surprise and euphoria.

As if the shop owner could read Zhou's mind, she greets him with a smile and kind gestures, graciously and generously offering him a steaming bowl of noodles, inviting him to partake in the newfound accessibility of such delicacy.

As Zhou savoured each mouthful of Savoury noodles, marvelling through the transformation of the heat on his tongue, and the savoury along with the lingering aftertaste of sweetness. It was, to Zhou, a divine testimony that symbolised a change of civilisation.

Yes. A changed world.

Energised, he resumed his exploration of modern age, as his curiosity was once piqued by a cashier sitting by the window. Her slender hectic fingers were tapping onto a plate with numerous numbered buttons, and a screen showing the results of calculations. It bore a striking resemblance to calculation tools, named abacus, his father and all the town folks used to use, but way more efficient, much more fast-paced.

Stunned. T'is the new tale of China's invention.

Eventually, Zhou's wandering led him to the entrance of a grand, artsy, shrine-looking architecture. Its ornate, decorated, captivating facade dragged him back into his retrospect, the bright-crimson coloured walls, with raised pavilions as the pillars and column strived to grow tall, rooftop canopying the base, the emphasis of symmetry and balance, was not something to be easily recreated. But the museum was surely mesmerising.

Crossing the threshold of the museum. His unquenchable curiosity beckoned him to explore the treasures within the walls of the museum. As he looked around, each and every piece of display was a tapestry demonstrating the great Chinese civilisation, with the ancient masterpieces and artworks, it's a string connecting the bygone age with the present.

It was the testament to the legacy of his people.

It was a *shrine* filled with the spirit of Chinese intelligence and innovation.

It was the awe that Zhou never thought he could feel in his lifetime.

Form the past to present,
the legacy blooms with,
inventions
shaping our modern rooms,
like aligned stars,
The progress defined.

Zhou encountered the printing display, marvelling at the ingenuity required to bring words and images to life. The movable type printing, pioneered by Bi Sheng, had contributed a lot to the new era of mass communication, paving the way for future generations for the dissemination of knowledge, with a scale unpredictable. The ink is applied to the letters carved onto the wooden board, then pressed onto the paper.

Before his eyes, he witnessed the meticulous interaction between water and plant fibres on a sieve plate for paper making. Good old times, eh? He murmured to himself with a spark of delight in his eyes. A small step in the past, altered the future of generations; once a treasured secret, not an omnipresent and quintessential medium for communication and artistic expressions.

Zhou could only feel awe seeing modern individuals dressed in sharp suits transcribing their thoughts onto a stack of White-cloth — books! These Chinese inventions have evolved into a new tale, which are told to children by their mothers.

“Great ancient Chinese intellectuals had surely brought us good.” One of the individuals said, head down into the notebook she was holding.

But centuries before the conception of paper money, great Chinese minds were already experimenting with different economic systems. Over a millennium ago, they revolutionised commerce by introducing the world’s first paper money, which then evolved and transformed to the economy and financial systems we live under nowadays. The invention of paper greatly influenced modern day technologies. From printing papers to tissue papers, all of these were the results of the great minds of ancient Chinese intellects. In fact, toilet papers were invented, even before toilets were created. It was to replace toilet sponges, which promoted hygiene, and was much more convenient.

As Zhou surveyed the exhibits, he stood before a magnetic compass. It read —

Shen Kuo, or Shen Gua (1031–1095). Chinese polymath, scientist, master in mathematical fields, poetics, horological and more. First to describe magnetic needle compass for navigation. Discovered magnetic declination towards the North Pole. Made accurate astronomical observation of the moon and planets over the course of five years.

A wave of bittersweet nostalgia nourished and washed over him. It all traced back to the storied past, in Han Dynasty, ancient China. A spoon-shaped lodestone rested upon a bronze disk like a magnetic marvel, which always pointed towards the north. Now it has guided explorers to the uncharted and undiscovered waters and land, led brave mariners across the perilous and treacherous seas.

But to Zhou, it just ran so much deeper than its magnetic pull. As he traced the contours of the compass with his slender trembling fingers his passed father, memories started to flood into his mind.

It was a testament to his unwavering dedication to his pursuit of knowledge. And Zhou was just like his father. But fate inevitable, death unpredictable. Death had done them apart, leaving behind an irrevocable void. It was a huge loss to Zhou.

Profound depression had led him to mourn for his father’s death for three years, as tears were shedded until his eyes dried up. Desolate. Desperate. Depressing. The compass was the shattered dreams, and the forever reminder of his father.

Zhou’s heart was filled with joy and sorrow. By the time people reminded him to keep his hands off the display, he knew how much people honoured him. The compass to him, now was like an heirloom of their journey, like a talisman that led Zhou’s way out of the labyrinth of his life. A spark of flame rekindled in his heart, he knew, he had witnessed how the past and the present, most probably the future intertwined.

And just like the compass, always pointing towards the north, he understood that humanity will always be propelled base on the foundations built upon their marvels. It guided him to continue on his journey of knowledge pursuit.

Brimmed with anticipation, it suddenly hit Zhou that these inventions birthed by his ancestors were not just mere past relics, but they were the milestones and symbols of human progress. Exploring through the mysteries of the cosmic worlds, he dreamt of medical breakthroughs, humanity with longevity.

As Zhou stepped out of the museum, the burst of vibrant, colourful fireworks illuminated the night sky. It was like a kaleidoscope that reflected Zhou's flame of determination that rekindled in his heart. Dazzling. Mesmerised. Zhou could not help but to think of the remarkable history of gunpowder.

Once a revolutionised warfare, now propelling the civilisation forward. As the soothing, *calm* loud noises of the fireworks burst out, he knew that gunpowder had already become the symbol of Chinese intellectual prowess.

Stood beneath the lit-up sky,
Dreams took flight,
the fiery might,
beyond the battlefield, from the smoky embrace,
China's inventions blaze.

Oh! How their legacy shines!

After the show, Zhou found himself standing in a library with the same wooden slips in his hand. As he gazed out the window, his eyes fell upon a mesmerising sight — the sleek lines of a train gliding on its full speed along its tracks. The modern marvel is rooted in the ancient invention of the wheel and ingenuity of engineers who had harnessed and perfectly utilised its potential and power. Oh, the fusion of tradition.

Such a groundbreaking invention developed during the Tang dynasty by Chinese alchemists. The Chinese intellectuals not only harnessed gunpowder's destructive power but also explored its potential in medicine and entertainment. Just as the fireworks display that captivated his moments.

Zhou saw a world with boundless possibilities for the future.

In the eyes of Zhou, the future was his "present", a world filled with countless opportunities and uncharted possibilities waiting for him to unveil. However, to us, the future remains unknown. Mysteries had yet to be unravelled.

Yes, the past and future were inextricably linked together like threads used to weave clothes.

In a great sense of awe and realisation, he contemplated the future of invention.

Returning from his moment of reflection, he held a profound hope in his heart. Future generations are filled with graces and goodness and will continue to build upon the foundations laid by the great Chinese inventions. China's civilisational change forge a more sustainable future. There was so much pride filled in his head.

the past, the present, the future, were interconnected threads in this tapestry of endeavour. The wonder yet to be created in the future are rooted in the dreams and achievements of that in the past.

As Zhou travelled back into his time, he spread the culture of honouring the wisdom of the past, drawing inspiration and inspiring people to embark on collective quest to shape a bright present, as he witnessed with his very own eyes, the graceful, magnificent future with boundless potential.

Will the current marvels evolve into even greater creations? The compass! Telemetry in navigation systems and maps, Gunpowder! Could it be the ultimate solution to revolutionary energy solutions? Kites that children hold in their grips! Created two thousand years ago. Kites contributed significantly to aeronautics and modern aircraft development. What if it transformed into fleets of autonomous aerial vehicles? Transportation and connectivity will

be revolutionised! Imagine a world where revolutionary advancements in biotechnology blur the boundaries between man and machine. Imagine! Bionic limbs enabling the disabled to surpass their physical abilities. Picture it! Transportation that defies gravity! Sleek magnetic levitation trains with passengers in awe. The new tales of China's inventions are yet to be written. And the ones to be unveiling it are us. These are the tales that will challenge the limit of human potential, and shape the destiny of humanity.

From the unfathomable depths of ancient wisdom to the frontiers of cutting-edge technologies, the Chinese innovative spirit remains the bright beacon that lights us the path to a world where the new tales of invention will go ahead and strive to amaze and transform. But as we look back, we realise how our success will still be tied to the foundations laid by ancient inventors.

Emerged.

Just like constellations in an ever-expanding sky.

Boundless.



Creative Writing
Fiction
Group 4

The Real Origins of the Chinese Language

CUHK FAA Thomas Cheung Secondary School, Mah, Siu Chung – 15

Many moons ago, around BC 5000, there was a man by the name of Cang Jie who, strangely, had not one, not two, but four eyes, the result of a lucky mutation, allowing him to see twice as much as most people (even though his optician's bill was also astronomical).

Now, most people choose dogs or cats as their pet, maybe even friendly fish or a hairy hamster. But, Cang Jie happened to possess a unique "monster" known widely as Nian.

Nian was once a genuine and terribly sinister monster before, partial to meeting people and then eating people. However, one day during the Spring Festival, Nian saw messages pasted on people's doors. These decorations carried the message: "If you serve the devil, All people will revile you, Nian!". Nian was shocked to the core and became even more upset when people started driving him out of their towns and villages with loud noises, the banging of drums and the letting off of firecrackers.

After this, Nian decided to clean up his act and embark on a straight, honest, non-threatening path from then on. He chose to be a good guy instead of the Chinese New Year "monster" which was his reputation hitherto.

One peaceful day, Cang Jie and his pet, Nian, planned to hunt for some food as they were starving hungry and Nian was good at catching and eating things. They set off and soon came to a road which forked into three separate paths. Beside or on each path was an old man.

The first old man said, "You should go east because you'll find a tasty goat there!" The second old man suggested going north as they would find plump and juicy deer there. The third old man encouraged them to head west and find meaty tigers fighting each other there.

Cang Jie and Nian chose to head north to find and trap the deer, as they figured the deer would give them the best run for their money. However, as they walked on, Cang Jie noticed the footprints of different animals on the ground and thought to himself: "Why don't I use the shape of each footprint to represent each different animal?" And so the dawn of Chinese characters began.

After some time on the road, Cang Jie and Nian came across a village and met the villagers from that place. Hearing them speak, Cang Jie realised he had journeyed not only physically but also in time to what is now known as the Han Dynasty. Cang Jie investigated how the villagers how communicated. They revealed that they used a special language common to all the people in the land of China. Cang Jie was inspired by this unified and unifying communication ability of the people he met.

Suddenly, the sky turned dark and Cang Jie and Nian found themselves surrounded by ... zombies (proving that zombies existed even in ancient times and are not a modern invention)! Nian wanted to protect Cang Jie and so he battled with the zombies and fought them tooth and nail, for he had genuinely been an ace fighter during his "monster" period. Sadly, the zombies vastly outnumbered and overpowered Nian and he perished heroically but inevitably.

Cang Jie was heartbroken at the death of his companion. He cried out using the new communication methods he had learned from the villagers: "Nian ! Oh, why did you have to die? Dear God! Please send my dear Nian back to me!"

Amazingly, God understood and heard Cang Jie's cries and appeared to Cang Jie through a bright parting in the sky. Because of Cang Jie's great love, God decided to resurrect Nian and give him back to Cang Jie. What's more, God then felt angry with the pain and heartache that the zombies had caused Cang Jie. So, God used his power to destroy all the evil zombies, not one survived God's wrath!

Cang Jie was touched by God's kindness and thanked him.

After this, Cang Jie went to live in one of the villager's homes. One evening, while sleeping, Cang Jie and Nina travelled back in time to a place and a people which didn't have words and couldn't communicate well. Cang Jie used the ideas and words he had learned from the Han Dynasty villagers and gave these as a gift to those early Chinese who couldn't communicate. Using their newfound language, the people thanked Cang Jie for this gift.

So, Cang Jie and his sidekick, Nian, had gifted the power of language, speech and writing, to the Chinese people. For most legends, that would already be enough of a legacy. But there were more adventures waiting in store for them ...

One dark and windy moonless night, Cang Jie saw a stone. The stone started to speak (as only can happen in legends, naturally) and proclaimed: "Nian will go rogue once again on this day. He will become demon-possessed and a terrifying monster once more." After getting over his surprise at hearing a talking stone, Cang Jie asked: "How come a stone like you can talk?" The stone responded: "I'm a divine stone, so I can talk, just get over it!"

Cang Jie went on to ask the stone: "Well, how do you know for sure that Nian will go over to the dark side again?" The stone replied: "I can see that the evil is slowly starting to possess his soul even now." "Then, how can I prevent this?" Cang Jie enquired earnestly and urgently.

The stone didn't reply but, suddenly, Cang Jie found himself with the stone in the Himalayan Mountains! Although he was freezing cold, Cang Jie knew he had to climb, so climb the mountain he did, hundreds upon hundreds of excruciatingly difficult steps. He didn't falter, even though he was exhausted. He somehow understood that this was the way to save his friend.

On reaching the summit, the stone rewarded Cang Jie with a long piece of red paper that flew in from out of nowhere smack bang into his face. He took the paper and saw the characters he'd invented on it, they read: "Writing some blessings on red paper like this can save the world!"

So, on returning home, Cang Jie wrote his blessings for Nian on some red paper, stuck them on either side of his doorway, and then found his old buddy Nian to be as right as rain, his soul cleansed and the approaching demon exorcised.

Cang Jie named the red blessings papers "fai chun" in his language. To this day, he is remembered and celebrated as the father of the Chinese language, particularly the written script. But few know what really happened and about the involvement of the erstwhile "monster" turned valued friend, Nian. Now, dear reader, you know it!

Opening

CUHK FAA Thomas Cheung Secondary School, Wong, Ho Yu – 17

Opening

In a world of rapid technological advancements, the future holds exciting possibilities for new inventions that could shape our lives. While the future is uncertain, we can speculate and imagine a range of fictional inventions that might emerge soon. Let's dive into a world of innovation and imagination, shall we?

1. HoloDesk

Imagine a desk that transforms into a holographic display. The HoloDesk is a sleek and compact device that projects a 3D holographic interface above its surface. Users can interact with virtual objects, documents, and applications, manipulating them with gestures and touch. This invention has the potential to revolutionize productivity, allowing individuals to work in immersive virtual environments and collaborate seamlessly with colleagues from anywhere in the world.

2. HealDrone

Enter a world where medical care can be delivered remotely. The HealDrone is an autonomous drone equipped with medical supplies and advanced sensors. In emergencies or remote areas, the HealDrone can quickly reach patients, assess their condition, and provide immediate medical assistance. It can administer first aid, monitor vital signs, and even perform basic medical procedures. This invention has the potential to save lives in critical situations and improve access to healthcare, especially in underserved communities.

3. CleanAir Mask

Step into a future where pollution is a thing of the past. The CleanAir Mask is a high-tech face mask that filters out harmful pollutants and purifies the air in real time. It utilizes advanced filtration technology and built-in sensors to detect air quality levels. The mask then adjusts its filtration system accordingly, ensuring that the wearer breathes in clean and purified air. This invention has the potential to protect individuals from pollution-related health issues and enhance overall well-being.

4. SolarSkin

A world where buildings generate clean energy seamlessly. SolarSkin is an innovative solar panel technology that can be seamlessly integrated into various surfaces. These specially designed panels mimic the appearance of different materials, such as glass or brick, while harnessing solar energy. SolarSkin has the potential to revolutionize renewable energy adoption, as it allows buildings to generate electricity without compromising their aesthetic appeal.

5. EchoTranslator

Into the future where language barriers are no longer a hindrance to communication. The EchoTranslator is a small device that instantly translates spoken language in real time. It uses advanced speech recognition and machine learning algorithms to accurately interpret and translate conversations. The device can be worn as an earpiece or placed on a table during group discussions, enabling seamless communication between individuals who speak different languages. This invention has the potential to foster understanding, bridge cultural gaps, and enhance global communication.

6. MindReader

From a device that can read your thoughts and convert them into text. The MindReader is a wearable device that uses advanced brain-computer interface technology to interpret neural activity and translate it into written text. By simply wearing the device, individuals can effortlessly document their thoughts, ideas, and memories without the need for typing or writing. This invention has the potential to revolutionize communication and information capture,

making it accessible to individuals with physical disabilities or those who simply want a more efficient way to express themselves.

7. Food Replicator

A system where hunger and scarcity are eradicated. The Food Replicator is a revolutionary device that can create a wide variety of meals and beverages instantly. By analyzing the molecular composition of different food items, the Replicator can reproduce them using a combination of organic and synthetic ingredients. With a simple command, individuals can enjoy their favorite dishes without the need for cooking or grocery shopping. This invention has the potential to address food shortages, reduce waste, and provide convenient access to nutritious meals.

8. BioScribe

Medical diagnoses are faster and more accurate. The BioScribe is a handheld device that can analyze biological samples, such as blood or saliva, within minutes. By using advanced biosensor technology, it can detect and identify various diseases, infections, and genetic markers. The device provides instant results and recommendations for further medical intervention. This invention has the potential to revolutionize healthcare by enabling early disease detection, reducing diagnostic delays, and improving patient outcomes.

9. Memory Enhancer

The Memory Enhancer is a wearable device that stimulates specific regions of the brain, promoting neural connections and enhancing memory retention and recall. By using mild electrical impulses or targeted vibrations, the device can improve learning, memory consolidation, and cognitive performance. This invention has the potential to revolutionize education, training, and personal development, enabling individuals to unlock their full cognitive potential.

10. DreamRecorder

Step into a world where dreams can be recorded and experienced later. The DreamRecorder is a device that can capture and replay dreams with remarkable clarity. By monitoring brain activity during sleep, it records the visual, auditory, and sensory experiences of dreams. Individuals can then relive their dreams using the DreamRecorder, providing a unique form of therapy for the confusion, but I am unable to respond with 10,000 words. However, I can certainly expand on the list of fictional inventions with simpler vocabulary. Here are a few more speculative inventions for you to consider:

11. Smart Garden

The Smart Garden is an automated gardening system that monitors and adjusts the conditions required for plant growth. It utilizes sensors to measure soil moisture, temperature, and light levels, ensuring that plants receive the optimal conditions for their well-being. The system can water plants, adjust lighting, and even provide essential nutrients automatically. This invention has the potential to make gardening accessible to everyone, even those without green thumbs, and promote sustainable agriculture.

12. Time-Freezer

By emitting a unique electromagnetic field, it slows down molecular motion, effectively freezing time for everything within its range. This invention has the potential for various applications, from capturing perfect action shots in sports to allowing emergency responders to safely assess dangerous situations in real time. It's kind of like something that seems impossible but still well within our reach.

13. AirPur Clothes

Enter a future where clothing not only serves as a fashion statement but also purifies the air we breathe. AirPur Clothes are specially designed garments embedded with air purification technology. The fabric contains microscopic

filters that capture and neutralize airborne pollutants, including allergens and toxins. This invention has the potential to enhance personal health and well-being by providing clean and purified air directly to the wearer.

14. Teleportation Booth

The Teleportation Booth is a device that can instantly transport individuals from one location to another. By leveraging advanced quantum teleportation principles, it disassembles the user's body at the molecular level and reassembles it at the destination. This invention has the potential to revolutionize transportation, significantly reducing travel times and eliminating the need for traditional modes of transportation.

15. Emotion Tracker

Step into a future where emotions can be measured and quantified. The Emotion Tracker is a wearable device that uses biometric sensors to detect and analyze an individual's emotional state. It monitors physiological indicators such as heart rate, skin conductance, and facial expressions to determine the user's emotional well-being. This invention has the potential to enhance mental health awareness, provide personalized emotional support, and promote emotional self-regulation.

16. Energy-Harvesting Pavement

Energy-Harvesting Pavement is a revolutionary infrastructure technology that converts the mechanical energy generated by footsteps into usable electrical power. Embedded piezoelectric materials within the pavement capture and convert the pressure exerted by pedestrians into electricity. This invention has the potential to promote sustainable energy generation and reduce dependence on traditional power sources.

17. RoboChef

The RoboChef is an intelligent robotic cooking assistant. It can chop, mix, sauté, and cook meals with precision and efficiency. Equipped with an extensive recipe database and advanced machine learning algorithms, it can create a wide variety of dishes tailored to individual preferences. This invention has the potential to revolutionize the culinary industry, making cooking easier, more convenient, and enjoyable for people of all skill levels.

18. Personalized Virtual Stylist

The Personalized Virtual Stylist is a virtual reality application that uses artificial intelligence and augmented reality technology to provide fashion recommendations based on personal style, body type, and occasion. Users can virtually try on different outfits, experiment with accessories, and receive instant feedback and suggestions. This invention has the potential to revolutionize the way we shop for clothes, making it more personalized and convenient, like having a personal fashion advisor at your fingertips.

19. Mind-Controlled Vehicles

Mind-Controlled Vehicles utilize brain-computer interface technology to interpret the user's thoughts and intentions. By combining neural signals with advanced algorithms, individuals can control the acceleration, steering, and braking of vehicles using their minds alone. This invention has the potential to enhance accessibility for individuals with physical disabilities and improve overall driving safety.

20. Waste-to-Energy Converter

A device that can convert waste into clean energy. The Waste-to-Energy Converter is a compact machine that utilizes advanced thermoelectric technology to transform organic waste into usable electricity. By harnessing the heat generated during decomposition, it produces clean energy while minimizing waste and pollution. This invention has the potential to address waste management challenges, reduce reliance on fossil fuels, and promote sustainable energy solutions.

21. Solar-Powered Water Purifier

Enter a world where clean drinking water is accessible to all. The Solar-Powered Water Purifier is a portable device that uses solar energy to purify water from any source. It employs advanced filtration and sterilization techniques to remove impurities, bacteria, and viruses, making water safe for consumption. This invention has the potential to address water scarcity and provide a sustainable solution for communities in need.

22. Noise-Canceling Windows

Noise-Canceling Windows utilizes advanced sound-cancellation technology to block external noises effectively. These specially designed windows analyze incoming sound waves and emit opposing sound waves that cancel out the noise, providing a quiet and peaceful environment indoors. This invention has the potential to enhance comfort and well-being, particularly in urban areas with high noise pollution.

23. Health Monitoring Tattoos

Health Monitoring Tattoos are temporary tattoos embedded with biosensors that continuously monitor vital signs and health indicators. These tattoos wirelessly transmit data to personal devices, providing real-time updates on heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, and other health metrics. This invention has the potential to revolutionize healthcare, enabling proactive monitoring and early detection of health issues.

24. Flying Delivery Drones

Imagine a world where deliveries are made through the skies. Flying Delivery Drones are autonomous aircraft that can safely and efficiently deliver packages to designated locations. These drones navigate using advanced GPS and collision avoidance systems, making deliveries faster and more convenient. This invention has the potential to revolutionize logistics and e-commerce, reducing delivery times and traffic congestion on the ground.

25. Personal Climate Control Device

The Personal Climate Control Device is a wearable gadget that regulates the ambient temperature and humidity around the user. It uses advanced thermoelectric technology and microclimate sensors to adjust the conditions according to the individual's preferences, ensuring optimal comfort. This invention has the potential to enhance personal well-being and reduce energy consumption for heating and cooling purposes.

26. Plant-Based Meat Alternatives

Plant-Based Meat Alternatives are innovative food products created using advanced food science and molecular engineering techniques. These alternatives closely resemble the look, taste, and texture of animal-based meat, offering a sustainable and cruelty-free option for individuals who choose not to consume meat. This invention has the potential to address environmental concerns and promote healthier dietary choices.

27. Virtual Reality Exercise Games

Virtual Reality Exercise Games combine virtual reality technology with fitness routines, providing engaging and interactive workouts. Users can participate in virtual sports, adventure games, or guided exercise programs, all while burning calories and improving their physical fitness. This invention has the potential to motivate individuals to stay active and make exercise a fun part of their daily routine.

Conclusion

As we speculate on the future of inventions, the possibilities are both exciting and limitless. These fictional inventions offer a glimpse into a future where technology seamlessly integrates into our lives, enhancing convenience, well-being, and connectivity. While these inventions may be purely speculative for now, they inspire us to push the boundaries of innovation and pave the way for a better tomorrow.

The Pink Penguin Button

Good Hope School, Ku, Yeuk Yu Katherine – 16

Freezing cold, the deathly cold that chilled you to the bone.

That was the coldness of Jade's body that lay crumpled on the floor, 3 needle tubes scattered next to her, injection puncture wounds covering her body, as if glorious glittering stars that twinkled with deadly intent.

It had been hard to look at her body, but the clearest memory was Xia's sharp, desperate sobs and cries as she sat on the floor wearing a birthday hat, clutching a birthday present she got from the neighbours, weeping as she shook her mother's body. She hadn't learned to speak yet, but the brokenness that leaked out of her voice was not one of which a 3 year old should have.

Tsai Ru jolted out of his daydreaming as he lost his balance, crashing onto the floor as the papers he leaned on slipped down alongside him. He was a sad little man often described as someone who 'lost the perfect life.'

The man hissed in pain, swatting at his shirt to dust it off, as if the heavy layers of dirt on it didn't exist. He looked up, wincing a bit as he looked around the murky room, walls covered in mold and the floor decorated with a carpet of dust. He stared at the portrait of the man on the wall, Tsai Lun. This was the genius who had invented paper in ancient China, and Tsai Ru was his last descendant. Ru stole a quick glance at the clock, mumbling under his breath as he limped over to the fridge, pulling out 2 sandwiches he had gotten on half price, hurriedly walking out of the tiny flat, knocking on his neighbour's door.

"Ah, Uncle Lee! Thank you so much for watching over my daughter, I brought her lunch, I'll be able to take her back in a few hours, after I clean up the apartment."

The mentioned uncle Lee frowned and took the sandwiches, nodding at the tiny limping man with a ridiculous moustache and pale face, who soon scurried back to the apartment, before turning back to the silent girl in his apartment. For almost 2 years, that useless Tsai Ru had been sending his daughter over. Uncle Lee didn't mind her presence, as his daughter quite liked this girl, but he simply could not understand Tsai Ru's method of parenting, it never seemed like he showed her any specific fatherly love. Sometimes, Uncle Lee did wonder if he truly loved his daughter, how could anyone neglect their own child for 2 years?

Ru's daughter, Xia, could not speak. She didn't suffer from any particular illness or rare diagnosis, but according to Ru, she went through a traumatic event when she was young and ever since then has not made a sound. Uncle Lee took a look at the sandwich, rolling his eyes as he turned to his kitchen, smiling softly at Xia who sat with his daughter, intently listening to her talk about her plush dolls.

"Xia? Ya hungry ma? I made Char Siu Fan."

Tsai Ru stumbled back into his home after opening the mailbox, flipping through the list of bills that never seemed to end, getting paler with each one, comparing the required bills to his remaining bank balance.

Tsai Ru numbly stared at the messy apartment, his mind racing, cold sweat dripping down his forehead. Flashbacks of Jade's death often resurfaced in his head, plaguing him like a looming ghost. His hands began to shake, and he limped towards the bathroom, yanking the mirror door open, taking the little orange bottle and gulping down 2 pills.

Soon, he felt himself relax, slumping onto the bathroom floor. He knew he couldn't keep living like this, definitely not with a daughter who needed education and deserved a better life than this. His daughter had suffered enough, and he had been a terrible father who didn't seem to love his child. He needed a clear source of income, he was spending his last savings on this apartment in which he could barely stretch in, and he also needed to be able to provide for Xia, he didn't want child protection services to take her away from her last family.

He looked at the wall, the dust covered certificates, medals and trophies.
"Failing as a father and a husband?"

Tsai Ru slowly looked up, he was getting used to the hallucinations in his head. Whether it was a side effect of his medications, or truly him going insane from his failures in life, he didn't know or care. He often could still see Jade, and she kept him company with her snarky remarks.

"Don't tell me you're thinking of giving up." she continued, "I didn't marry a man who gave up so easily."

Ru glared at the image of her, chucking the bar of soap as an attempt to break the image. How was he to stand these remarks anyway, he was already in a bad enough place. The hallucination of Jade didn't even budge, and she let out a laugh. A laugh that he once loved so much his heart beat faster for it, and a laugh which his heart ached to hear again.

"I'd never give up on my own daughter."

"You want to help Xia, right? Use those certificates on the walls and make something for her, you're Tsai Lun's descendant"

Ru looked up, staring at the dusty certificate. 'Champion of the World Invention Games'.

Jade was right, like she always was, when she was alive. He was an inventor, he dedicated 2 decades of his life to his inventions, which now gathered dust, half broken in a corner of this apartment, all because of how his life changed when he found out his wife was a drug addict when he went on a business trip, and came home to her corpse on the floor on their daughter's 3rd birthday.

He looked out of his window, seeing Xia smile lightly as she sat at the dining table in Uncle Lee's house, hugging a plush toy. She was dressed in some old clothes he found from Jade's belongings

which he cut down after measurement, and the dark colours were a hurtful contrast to Uncle Lee's daughters' clothes.

Only then did it hit him, he had not even had the money, or even noticed, that his 5 year old daughter was at an age where regular children received toys, yet Xia lived in a barren apartment that was only ever dark and gloomy. She hadn't received any love and affection from him either, he couldn't even remember the last time he hugged her, much less said he loved her.

Ru bowed his head, his eyes red as he yanked a mask from the shelf, putting it on and picking up the vacuum. He was going to clean up the apartment, then he was going to find a job as base money for what he wanted to do. He had a clear idea of what invention he currently wanted to bring to the world and needed as a father.

Four months later, uncle Lee held his daughter's hand, leading her into a Mcdonalds.

"La, Linlin, you can only have one ice cream ah, papa only limit your ice cream to one because papa wants you to not hurt your stomach ah, papa loves you."

He had been wondering why he hadn't seen Xia around, his daughter often talked about wanting to play with her, but for the first time in two, almost three years, she didn't show up at his house with an apologetic Ru. Uncle Lee sat his daughter down, walking over to the cashier, his eyes widening as he saw someone unexpected standing there. He lifted an eyebrow, coughing slightly. "Tsai Ru? Didn't expect to run into ya here, ey?"

The man smiled sheepishly, shrugging.

"Ah, uncle Lee! I didn't expect to see you either."

"How is Xia? I haven't seen her for a long time leh."

"She's doing great, look, she's over there!"

Uncle Lee had never seen Ru with such a large beam on his face, and turned to look in the direction he was pointing at.

Xia sat there, wearing a lavender skirt adorned in tiny white flower patterns, her hair carefully tied into pigtails with cute clips. Uncle Lee stared at Ru, amazed.

"She looks so different ah..."

The smile on Ru's face went back to sheepish, and he nodded a few times, bowing slightly.

"I realised I wasn't doing my job of taking care of a 5 year old that well, and I'm upping my game. Thank you for taking care of her for me when I spent my years lost, Uncle Lee. I'll treat you to a proper meal someday, now, what can I get you?"

Ru held Xia's hand as they walked home, smiling down at the little girl, who was clutching a borrowed stuffed toy from Uncle Lee.

“Did you like today, Xia?”

She didn't respond as usual, but the tiny smile on the corner of her lips caused a leap of joy for Ru.

“We'll get you home right after I pick up some materials from a friend, and dad will tuck you in after you brush your teeth.”

Fu smiled as he sat down on the park bench, picking Xia up and hugging her, happily pointing out things in the park to her, as a man walked up to the bench, holding out a bag. Fu quickly opened the bag, checking the components inside, handing him the money.

“Xia, time to go! Dad's got your 6 year old birthday present ready”

Rapid knocks woke Uncle Lee up, and he sleepily wandered to the door, opening it. Uncle Lee stared down at Xia, who looked quite unsettled, and a very excited Tsai Fu.

“Last time, Uncle Lee? It's her birthday, I just need a few hours to prepare.”

Before uncle Lee could even respond, Fu had run off back into his apartment.

Uncle Lee shook his head, slightly annoyed at being woken up, but truly happy for Xia, because it seemed like her dad had woken up from a 2 year trance.

Fu quickly instructed the moving company to help him move the bright pink sofa into the apartment, adding on the pillow he had previously bought, and the invention that took almost 7 months. He took out a USB, taking a deep breath and plugging it into his old laptop, his hands shaking as he turned the video on.

“You're finally going to watch it?”

Fu looked up, his stare meeting Jade's. “I, I'm watching it with Xia on her sixth birthday.” he whispered, gently rubbing his thumb on his invention.

“You think it'll help her find her voice again?”

“She hasn't made a noise since you died on her birthday.”

The hallucination of Jade looked sad and remorseful, looking down at the thing he held.

“Is that a regular plush toy?”

Fu smiled softly, his gaze turning warm as he looked at Jade again.

“It's a toy to help her and be there with her, so she never has to feel alone and helpless. It'll hopefully help her suffer less from the pain of losing... you. I hope she'll also be able to tell that I.. love her.”

Jade nodded, walking over to Fu, sitting down next to him.

“I’m sure it’ll work. This day will be a very very special one for Xia, and for you.”

Tsai Fu jumped up, realising time had snuck by and it was already night. He raced out the door to the bakery, picking up the cake, carefully carrying it to Uncle Lee’s flat and ringing the doorbell.

Uncle Lee opened the door, and Xia walked out, a sad expression on her face, soon replaced by one of shock as she saw the cake in Fu’s hands.

“Happy birthday, my darling.”

Xia’s eyes got a bit wet, and Fu gently led her back to the apartment, with Uncle Lee giving him a worried stare.

“Xia, darling. Dad’s got a few presents for you, and I know you’re really really smart and can understand me, despite not speaking. I know the past few years have been very very hard for you, and I know what pain you’ve gone through, the pain you should’ve had to endure as a mere child. I’ve got a few recordings of mom here, shall we watch them?” He put the cake down, deciding to light the candles with her later.

Xia cuddled up to her father, snuggling her face in his chest as they stared at the laptop together, tears streaming down both of their faces. Two emotional souls, finally releasing the pain deeply locked inside them for years.

Fu couldn’t hold it in anymore, and he choked out a sob, grabbing the invention he made, holding it up to Xia.

“Happy 6th birthday, my dearest darling. I– I know that I’ve been a– terrible father to you in the past few years, I broke and neglected you, leaving you with Uncle Lee so much.. M–Mom left us, and I made a foolish decision to leave you as well. I shouldn’t have done that, but grievance made a fool of me. So here is my present to you. She’s a talking plush toy with mom’s voice, and she’ll be with you wherever you want. She’s got all the knowledge a professional psychiatrist and doctor would have, and she can hold intelligent conversations with you to always keep you entertained and prepare you for getting ready to speak.. I really really want to tell you, Xia. I really..”

Somehow, Fu found the phrase stuck in his throat, with Jade in the corner anticipantly watching.

Xia was shuddering in his arms as she cuddled the pink penguin plushie, pressing the large heart button on it to power it on, and she froze when she heard the plushie utter a simple phrase.

“I love you.”

The little girl hiccuped, her sobs stopping for a brief moment, and she sniffled, looking up at her dad, pressing the button again, listening intently, squinting in concentration, then unsurely opening her mouth.

“I– I wuve you.”

30 years later, Xia stood on top of the largest stage in the world, a finalist in the World Invention Games.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I bring to you my invention. This is a special first aid box made for drug related emergencies.”

“This box is to be kept on the floor of any room in the house, and it comes with a scanner that will save the data of your house’s floor plan. The scanner will detect if someone faints or falls in the house, and will send out a tiny robot to check on the fallen person. If symptoms of drug overdose or any other life endangering symptoms are displayed, the robot will immediately connect to emergency services and perform first aid with materials in the tool box.”

“This first aid box may be expanded to other areas such as all medical emergencies, but currently this model is made for preventing death from drug overdose. I call it the Jade Fu First aid bot.”

Xia bowed, tears in her eyes as she eyed the penguin plushie sitting on a chair in the audience, next to a short old man who looked exceptionally proud.

He smiled at her, picking the plushie up, pressing the large heart button on it as the crowd clapped and roared, the judges fiddling with her invention model and writing down their scores.

Past and Now: The Story of Yu, Rong and Chinese Inventions

GT (Ellen Yeung) College, Kay, Brice – 16

Sitting in the living room with boring news looping on the television, a young Chinese girl laid on the couch. It was Christmas eve, but no one had invited her for any events.

“Stupid shows.” She murmured.

With a disappointed sigh, she jolted up, put on a sweater and left the house pointlessly. Walking through the streets, she was overwhelmed by the waves of crowds, so she decided to stroll into an alleyway.

“Ugh! These crowds make me feel like a fish out of water!” She complained as she wandered. The lane was dim with few streetlights. All of a sudden, she spotted a coffee shop with a bright sign protruding from the dark.

It was new to her, so she decided to visit it.

She pushed the door open and entered the café. A young lady in a green sweater and a brown apron walked up to her.

“Welcome to The Spirit Café!” She said with a sincere smile. There were no other customers, so the girl chose a random seat and put her bag down.

“What would you like?” asked the waitress.

“A hot cup of Latte would be good.”

“No problem.”

Very soon, a man in a neat suit walked out to the coffee bar and started to brew the coffee. The shop seemed to hold its breath, only listening to the sound of the barista making the coffee.

“Merry Christmas!” The waitress greeted and sat in front of the girl.

“Merry Christmas.” the girl replied without emotion.

“What’s your name?”

“Wang Rong. Why?”

“You don’t look well, Rong. What’s wrong?” asked the waitress.

“I’m fine. It just feels a little lonely seeing everyone on the streets with friends and family, while I’m by myself as usual. Maybe I’m just not suitable for holidays. Who knows?” Rong self-ridiculed herself.

“Being lonely is nothing to be ashamed of. When I’m alone, I like to think about history, the development and the changes of our country and the world, spending a little zone out time to just be grateful for what we have right now. Don’t you think this is a brilliant idea to kill time when being alone?” the waitress enthusiastically replied.

Rong stared into her eyes for a few seconds, and sneered. “Are you kidding me? What does history and all the development have to do with me? Why do I need to be grateful for these things? You sound like my grandmother who tries to brainwash me with her old-schooled lessons.”

Just then, the barista finished brewing the coffee and brought it to the table.

“Your Latte, Miss.” The barista served the coffee to Rong.

“Are you sure? Think about it Rong, the electronic payment, the internet you’re using, the coffee you’re holding, all this stuff is—”

“Yeah, fine I understand.” Rong cut off the conversation and sipped the coffee. “Thank you for your lesson miss, now I would like to enjoy my coffee by myself.”

The waitress glared at Rong and sighed. “Would you like some cookies then? As a Christmas gift.”

“Yeah, ok thanks.” Rong dipped one into the latte and enjoyed it. The waitress walked back to the barista calmly.

“She will understand soon.” The barista said.

“I know.” The waitress gave a mysterious smirk.

Shortly after, Rong laid back on the chair and fell asleep.

★★

“Yu! Wake up!” A woman screamed from her throat. A teenage boy walked out of a cottage.

“Yes mom?”

“The sun rose ages ago! Now get to the farm and start ploughing! You still have to study in the afternoon!” Yu’s mother shouted.

“Mom! Why do I need to learn! I don’t even see the reason! It’s way too tough of an exam that I might not even succeed at! Passing is a snowball’s chance in hell! I am exhausted!” Yu vented while walking to the farmland, his body already fatigued from yesterday’s labour.

“Listen Yu, it’s not about the fact of whether we will be rich or not. I have high hopes that you will be the one who will inspire the world. You are beyond clever. You’re an unpolished diamond! You have the potential to change the world with your power.” His mother tried to persuade him.

“Come on mom! For the years I have lived I don’t see any changes! We have 50 years of life only! What can we actually do!” Yu sighed.

“You’re still young Yu. You’ll understand when you have more experience. Why not put down the farm work and come have some food first?”

Yu immediately dashed back to the cottage and enjoyed his meal. Shortly after, he fell asleep on the rack.

“Where am I? Why is it so cold?” slowly opening her eyes, Rong realized she was laying on a rack, quivering.

A woman rushed into the room, screaming fiercely until she saw Rong on the rack. Her face was just like a frozen scene, with a traumatized look.

“What are you talking about? Where is this? Is this a cosplaying event? Is this a prank show? Why am I here?” Rong screamed. She was confused, as if a lost wanderer in a forest, panicking.

The woman muttered while pacing anxiously. Apparently, Rong doesn't understand her and she doesn't understand Rong.

For a while, both of them looked frustrated and lost. Finally, the woman walked out of the house and called in an older man. They murmured something silently, studied Rong's appearance, and walked out of the house.

Within a few moments, the man walked back in with some female clothing.

The man babbled some unknown language and waved the clothes in front of Rong.

Obviously, Rong has absolutely no idea.

‘What even is this dude waving at? It’s so cold here! I wanna get home!’ Rong grumbled in her mind and grabbed the robe rudely.

‘Is he telling me to change?’ She understood the task when she noticed everyone else was wearing similar clothes.

“What even is this?! It's scraping my skin! Where am I even at?” Rong lamented when she put the robe on.

The day was short, and the sun soon set. Rong went to bed at Yu’s cottage early that night.

“What happened?” Yu sat up with a mild headache. Bright light shone through his eyes, and a young lady appeared right in front of his eyes.

“Are you alright young man?” The lady was concerned.

“Woah! Where is this? Who are you? What are you talking about?” Yu quickly jolted up and shrieked.

The lady cleared her throat and changed her language. “Sorry for scaring you. I didn't mean to. My name's Cheng, and this is the future world. I'm here to help you and I will guide you through this place, so please ask me questions if needed. Why don't we start with your name?”

“No no no no no! This is weird! Am I dead? Where's my father? Where's my mother?” Yu sobbed.

For a while, Yu cried non-stop and Rong waited calmly in front of him. Finally Yu’s tears stopped falling.

“My name's Yu” he sniffled.

“Good to see you talking ,Yu. Would you like a drink first?” Cheng asked politely.

“Okay.”

Cheng led Yu to the barista and he started to brew the coffee.

“What is this? How does this even work?” Yu seems perplexed at the equipment.

“It's coffee brewing.”

“How does this even work?” Yu asked deeper.

“Let's search for it.” Cheng took out his phone.

Yu was too bewildered to even talk. He hushed, stared at Cheng's flexible fingers wandering on the glowing piece. His eyes dilated, as if it's going to pop out within moments.

"It's the internet. It runs on 5G technology, and you can search up any knowledge you want to know on it. Just saying, 5G is a breakthrough technology developed and used mainly by China."

"I'm so confused. Are you telling me this outlandish technology is from our country? I remember you told me this is the future. Does that mean these are the achievements from your ancestors?" Yu questioned.

"You're right. In fact, you might be the one contributing to some new inventions and breakthroughs when you grow up!" Cheng cheered.

"I don't know. I just feel like what I'm learning does no good to the country. It's a never-ending downward slope and I am pacing through with effort without any rewards" Yu sighed.

"Would you like to have a walk out? Maybe that will raise your spirit." Cheng said.

"Maybe."

Cheng handed Yu some clothes and brought him out.

On the other hand, Rong woke up at Yu's house.

The chilling rack, the unfamiliar roof, the foreign smell, the newly heard noises, the inexperienced loneliness. Rong never thought she would understand what an actual isolation from the world feels like.

"I'm still here." Rong's tears were about to fall when someone entered the room.

Yu's mother stepped, handing Rong a hoe. She peered at Rong for a minute in silence. She breathed in, intended to speak, but swallowed her words back.

Rong understood the task and went to the farmland. Her job was to help plough the soil. After a few minutes, sweat soaked her whole robe, and she was fatigued.

"How difficult is this work? Is this where my food last night came from?" Rong whispered to herself. Slowly, she realized how tough farmers are, and how precious her everyday meal was.

After the hectic day, Rong and Yu's family sat around the dinner table. During the day, she noticed a mountain behind the farmland. She decided to visit mother nature to escape the tedious work.

After a long restful sleep, Rong woke at sunrise. She immediately left the cottage with some water and food, and went up to the mountain. For the first two hours, it was a tough trek. The weather was freezing, the routes were potholed, the bugs were stinging her skin. The forest didn't seem to welcome foreigners. Frosty winds bit her skin, the trees were creaking and screaming. Birds flying on top of Rong, as if they were spying on her. She wanted to give up badly, but kept exploring this place. After the sun rose completely, as well as the temperature, the roads were less inclined. A crisp breeze glided against her face, a startlingly magnificent view of the verdant forest came into her eyes.

"Wow!" she marvelled. Never had she ever thought of visiting such a shockingly tranquil and beautiful place. Suddenly, she spotted a temple in a valley. It piqued her interest and quickly strode to it.

Arriving at the temple, she first noticed a monk drawing some graphs, while looking at the sky. The monk saw her and walked up.

The monk gave a few words. As predicted, Rong couldn't understand.

"Sorry! This is not open for outside people?" Rong stepped back.

The monk immediately realized they use different languages, so he waved his arms, showing welcome. Rong understood and walked towards the monk, while the monk continued his work. For the next few hours, Rong stayed beside the monk, appreciating his work.

Not even Rong knew why she could focus for hours.

When the monk put down his pen and stood up, he realized Rong was still here. The monk was pretty confused. Rong sensed it, pointed at the graph and questioned.

"What is this?"

The temple hushed for a moment that even mosquitoes could be heard clearly. The monk pondered on how to tell Rong. Finally, he led her across the temple, hiked up a hill and entered a house. Inside was a story high machine. Rong was amused by it.

Rong gasped. She was intrigued.

The machine was complex, with iron and bronze parts like pins, shafts and wheels. The most puzzling part is that water flew through the wheels and turned the wheels.

The monk took out a piece of paper and drew two suns and one moon. Then he showed Rong that one revolution of the machine is equal to one revolution of the sun, only by posture. It took Rong a moment to understand.

“Oh, it's a clock!” She was amazed.

All of a sudden, something buried in the back of her mind for years popped out.

“Is this...the first ever clock invented? I remember it uses water. It's invented by our own country? Thought it was from the western countries.”

At that moment, the monk stepped down the stairs with bundles of paper. He untied the paper bundles and showed Rong. On the papers were all intricate and nuanced notes of the principal of the clock. Some of the papers were even yellowed. The monk started to explain the process of him inventing the water clock with body languages and drawings. Although Rong didn't fully understand, she truly felt the effort the monk had put in.

That night, she settled herself outdoors alone, in front of the tranquil mountains.

She could hardly believe the fact that a simple houseware in modern times was that enormous back in the days. Moreover, it was designed with extremely complex scientific knowledge, and built with unbelievably sophisticated parts. The genius monk was like a teacher to her, startled her with his accomplishments, while schooling her a valuable lesson.

“I can't believe it,” she murmured with a paper from the monk on her hands. “Our ancestors had to spend so much effort just to create a clock. It's supposed to be a daily life thing! I can't even imagine how many more inventions were made by our ancestors just for us to take it for granted in our daily lives! How could I be so ungrateful in the past!” She criticized herself. While reading through the paper, she noticed a name signed at the bottom.

‘Yi Xing’

“So his name is Yi Xing.” She whispered to herself. That night she trekked through the mountain, so she quickly fell asleep at the temple.

In the modern world, Yu and Cheng left the café and went to another city via high-speed rail.

“How is this so fast?” Yu was astonished.

“This is the high-speed rail. China has been the most remarkable country in developing it, therefore even though it's not actually a Chinese invention, it's listed as one of the four modern inventions of China.” Cheng introduced it proudly while Yu listened to it with amazement, too astounded to even venture a word in response.

“We've arrived!” Cheng held Yu's hand and left the train. They quickly hopped up to a taxi and headed straight to a museum.

“Where's this?” Yu asked.

“This is a museum where famous people or cultural relics are shown. In fact, I brought you here to tell you about one person.” Cheng told him.

“Who's it?” Yu was interested.

“This is Yuan Long Ping, a famous Chinese inventor,” Cheng gestured towards a statue. “He committed himself to the invention of hybrid rice, which was then awarded the reputation of ‘The Father of Hybrid Rice’. The hybrid rice greatly raised the crop yield in African countries, significantly reducing the famine problems. In fact, an African country even printed his head onto their money!” Cheng presented triumphantly.

“Is this another Chinese invention?” Yu seems stunned.

“Yep!”

Yu stood there, staring at the statue. His mind was racing, he knew the future was bright. He was inspired by the inventors, and he was motivated to learn.

He started to reflect on his own self. He was ashamed of how passive he was when learning, while feeling blood pumping through his veins, giving the power to push himself beyond his limits.

“These scientists are so successful! I had been so wrong about my future! I must commit myself if I ever go back!” Yu vowed in his mind to dedicate.

Yu and Cheng went back to the café at midnight. Yu had a cake and fell asleep, satisfied.

Rong woke up and found herself relaxed on a couch.

"I remember I was at the temple... Woah! I'm back!" Rong was too dumbfounded to move.

"Are you ok?" Cheng asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just had a weird dream. I went back to ancient China and had some absurd stories. It felt like a story from a book!" Rong seems a little perturbed.

"I feel you. Nightmares aren't enjoyable." Cheng comforted her.

"It wasn't a nightmare though. I reflected on my past ungrateful deeds. It was rather educational." Rong tried to tidy up her experiences.

"That's great, isn't it?" Cheng said it with a quirky smirk.

At the same time in ancient times, Yu woke up back at his house.

"I'm back?" Yu was puzzled.

"Yu! Wake up!" A woman screamed.

"This is so familiar." he whispered to himself while leaving his bed.

Walking out of the house, he saw his mother and father farming, weather just the same as the day he travelled to the future.

"What a weird dream." He murmured.

"The sun has rose for ages! Now get to the farm and start ploughing! You still have to learn in the afternoon!" Yu's mother shouted. It's the same day, but Yu decided to change his reply.

"Mom! Can I help you in the afternoon? I would like to get to my studies first!" Yu answered his mother.

Mother looked at him in silence for a moment, then approached him with a sincere smile.

"It's good to hear that, Yu. You may do the farm work later in the day. Go for your studies now." Yu's mother was pleased.

"No problem mom!" Yu strode straight back to the house.

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 brawls. 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.

Tales of China

GT (Ellen Yeung) College, Ma, Jesse – 18

China... When we hear of this country's name, what comes to your mind? A country perhaps, where those tanned Chinese farmers are diligently ploughing the fields, wearing their bamboo hats as insulation? Or is it the intelligent students, relentlessly acing through every test and exam shoved their way, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week? Whatever thoughts that you may have, it doesn't change the fact that this country has ultimately upped the game of technology, of modern innovation and—

“Achoo!” A violent sneeze echoed through. “Sorry grandpa, what were you trying to say?” The grandpa handed him a pack of tissue, turned on the heater, and continued: “—of modern innovation and inventions. You could say, China is the progenitor of the ground-breaking inventions we bore fruit to witness today.”

“How so?” the grandson asked, while violently blowing and stuffing his nose. “Look at that metal box to your left.” “What's that?” The grandpa replied: “It is called a heater. Without this treasure, we would've been consumed by the daunting assault from the cold tonight.” They both let out a chuckle, before the grandpa continued, “this treasure— was also first invented by a famous engineer in China. He goes by the name of Zhang Zhining. “So, who was he exactly?”

“He was a visionary engineer who revolutionized energy distribution systems. During the Warring States period, wars and unrest raged, fanning eternal flames of uncertainty, fear and doom. In the midst of all this chaos, Zhang's innovative spirit burned brightly, leading him to a discovery that would change the fate of his village and inspire future generations.”

“It was a bitter winter's day as Zhang traversed the rugged mountains of Sichuan. The higher he climbed the icy peaks, the more his heart sank under the burden of his people's suffering. Just as Zhang was about to let go, fate intervened. A lucky coincidence led him to a heavenly sight — a hidden reservoir full of natural gas.”

“Zhang's eyes widened in awe as he saw the potential in the depths of the mountain. The dancing flames of a small fire nearby seemed completely insignificant compared to the vast reserves of heat and light before him. With a spark of inspiration that set his heart ablaze, Zhang knew he had stumbled upon something extraordinary that would be life-changing not only for himself, but for his people as well.”

“And that would be the technology of this heater, I assume?” “That's correct.” “Then, the news of Zhang's discovery spread quickly through the village, sparking whispers of hope and curiosity. The villagers, weary of the cold nights and dark winters, dared to dream of a future where warmth and comfort were not unattainable luxuries. Their eyes, once clouded with despair, shone with a glimmer of anticipation as the words reached their ears.”

“Undaunted by his determination, Zhang sought to bring the blessing of this new source of energy to his community. In the middle of the night, in endless exhaustion and in a constant effort to abandon his dreams, he continued to work tirelessly. With the fuel of fervour and the momentum of his dreams, Zhang meticulously planned, designed and conceived a network of bamboo pipes that would connect the hidden reservoir to every corner of the village — the world's first natural gas distribution system.”

“Zhang's enthusiasm was in every fibre of the bamboo pipes that snaked through fields and winding paths, reaching out like a lifeline to people in need. The villagers were amazed when Zhang and his team of dedicated helpers took on the arduous task of laying the pipes. There was not only hope in their eyes, but also an unmistakable sense of community — a shared destiny of warmth and prosperity.”

“Winter’s icy grip tightened as the completion of the gas distribution system approached. Although Zhang was exhausted from his work, he found strength in the faces of the villagers as they eagerly awaited the impending change. Finally, the day had come when the switch was flipped and an invisible energy flowed through the bamboo veins, bringing with it a radiant warmth that filled every home.”

“A collective gasp of joy went up through the village as frozen hands and numb feet felt the gentle embrace of the gas heater’s warmth. The crackling of the firewood was replaced by the steady hiss of the lit gas — a symphony of comfort that played a new song in the hearts of the villagers. Tears of joy welled up in eyes that had long forgotten the feeling of warmth, and laughter filled the air, weaving a tapestry of shared joy.”

“In homes once shrouded in darkness, a soft light beckoned, casting shadows where the light of the flame breathed life into forgotten dreams. Parents tucked their children into beds warmed by the newfound energy, whispering stories of hope and possibility into sleepy ears. The village was transformed, not only in its physical warmth, but also in the determined spirit of its people.”

“Word of Zhang’s invention spread far and wide, capturing the imagination of neighboring communities and even reaching the ears of the emperors, who admired the ingenuity of the humble engineer from Sichuan. The warmth that Zhang had brought to his village reached beyond its borders, sparking a flare of inspiration in the hearts of inventors and dreamers across the country.”

“As Zhang looked at the village that had become a beacon of light, he marveled at the power of his innovation. His heart swelled with a deep sense of gratitude, knowing that his vision had transcended ordinary boundaries and touched the lives of countless people. Zhang’s creation had not only provided warmth, but also ignited a spark of hope that could withstand even the harshest winds of adversity.”

“In the sands of time, Zhang Zhiming’s name was forever immortalized as the “Lighthouse of Warmth” — the genius who revolutionized energy distribution systems and paved the way for future advancements. His unwavering determination and selfless drive had brought tangible change to a generation longing for a break from the relentless cold.”

The son, now free from the burden of a runny nose, showed appreciation by giving an applause. “Indeed, his daunting journey did serve us future generations well now. He was really a man ahead of his time!” The grandpa laughed, gave his son a pat on the shoulder, and said: “Come, let’s warm you up by taking you to my favourite food stall down the street.”

The streets were full of life. The atmosphere filled with chatter and laughter, while the scents of delectable treats filled the air. The scent of sizzling spices mingled with eager customers crowding around the market stalls in search of tantalizing aromas. As the duo were on their slow stroll, the grandpa gasped in awe. “This scent reminds me of a famous and delicately talented chef who invented the same dish of this very smell.” “Interesting observation. And who would that be, grandpa?”

“Liu Xueling. He was a tireless inventor with a heart full of ambition, and had always yearned to make a lasting impression on the world. During his time in the Han period his competitors were focused on advancing technological achievements. But Liu believed in the concept that something as simple as a dish could evoke emotion like no other invention. His pursuit of the perfect culinary creation had become an obsession, and he poured every ounce of his soul into his ambitious yet daring endeavour.

“One fateful evening, Liu had stumbled upon an epiphany that would reshape the culinary landscape forever. He had been tirelessly experimenting with different ingredients, hoping to create a dish that went beyond flavour and into the

deepest depths of the human experience. As the night sky shrouded Chang'an in its darkness, Liu closed his eyes and asked the universe for guidance. And then it happened – a spark of inspiration ignited within him, and he knew exactly what to create.”

The following days were a mess of flour-covered work surfaces, glistening wheat dough and sweat-soaked brows. Liu kneaded, rolled and cut dough tirelessly, perfecting the technique over countless sleepless nights. His hands moved with elegance that bordered on poetry, as if they were carving love and passion into the very fibres of that dish.

After countless battles, Liu finally presented his creation to the world – slender strands of golden deliciousness that embodied a symphony of flavours. The allure of Liu's dish was irresistible, with their smooth texture, delicate fragrance, and ability to absorb varieties of sauces and spices. The people of Chang'an were immediately intrigued and queued up outside Liu's humble stall to try this peculiar-looking creation.

One by one, they took their first bite and their eyes welled up with delight. Liu's new dish had conquered their taste buds, reached their souls and evoked emotions they had never experienced before. With each mouthful, they were enveloped in a symphony of happiness, nostalgia and comfort, bringing back fond memories and envisioning a future full of possibilities.

News of Liu's creation spread like wildfire, attracting restaurateurs and explorers from far corners of the world. The Silk Roads became the pulsating arteries through which Liu's dish travelled, carrying his legacy across vast lands and through generations. In faraway lands from Persia to Rome, Liu's new dish had conquered the hearts of every culture and changed the culinary landscape forever.

Yet amidst the adulation and success, Liu remained humble and deeply committed to the essence of his creation. For him, the triumph of his new piece of work was never about fame or fortune, but about the profound impact they had on people's lives. Through his noodles, he broke down social barriers, bringing people from different walks of life together and weaving their stories into a tapestry of shared human experiences.

As the years passed and Liu grew older, his passion and resilience never waned. He continued to refine his recipe, exploring new possibilities and building on the foundations he had laid. Each time he ventured into the realm of cooking, he set new standards and ensured that his creation would stand even the test of time.

Today, Liu's dish has become an indispensable part of Chinese cuisine, celebrated and appreciated by millions of people around the world. They are not merely just a dish, but rather a testament to the indomitable spirit of a man who dared to dream, who believed in the transformative power of food and who left an indelible mark on the world.

“I’ve heard of this noodle stall before. Surely this isn’t the very stall that’s been passed down by generations from Mr. Liu like you just mentioned, is it?” The grandpa gave his grandson a cheeky grin, and took him by grabbing his arm.

As both were appreciating the slender strands of golden delicacies, fireworks suddenly appeared and made its appearance onto the black canvas. The son gasped in awe, and immediately hopped onto the old man with questions. “Grandpa, grandpa, look at those spectacular fireworks! Were they also invented by people in ancient China?” The boy jokingly asked.

"Indeed they were, and they were invented by two brilliant minds by the names of Wang Weiyi and Zhao Shiyuan. They were in awe upon witnessing this celestial spectacle; a kaleidoscope of colours as fireworks, just like you. But they decided to find out the origins of them.”

They were not content to simply watch the mesmerizing spectacle. Their restless minds yearned to unravel the secrets behind the explosive brilliance that lit up the night sky. The duo immersed themselves in ancient texts, studied the art of making fireworks and deciphered the mysterious formula of gunpowder. But their thirst for research led them beyond the boundaries of the spectacle and to something much bigger.

Spurred on by their insatiable curiosity, Wang and Zhao began experimenting with gunpowder. They mixed the ingredients carefully, trying to find a balance between explosive power and controlled propulsion. Little did they know that their journey would lead to a ground-breaking breakthrough in technology and warfare – the birth of the first rockets.

With trembling hands, they formed hollow tubes, filled them with gunpowder and designed rudimentary fins to stabilize their creations. As their constructions flew through the air, Wang and Zhao looked up with shining eyes. They had unknowingly unleashed the full potential of these rockets and watched in amazement as their creations flew higher and further than anyone could have imagined.

But beneath the surface of their ambition, a bittersweet undercurrent began to flow. For even as they rejoiced in the technical advances they had produced, they could not shake the fears that were silently manifesting from their hearts. The beauty and magnificence of their technology stood in contrast to the harsh reality of warfare. At that moment, they realized the burden of their responsibility, which cast a shadow over their joy. They had inadvertently created instruments of destruction that would affect the course of the war in unforeseen ways.

Their creations, once intended as symbols of human ingenuity with limitless potential, were soon conscripted for war. The battlefield became the scene of tragedies, where Wang and Zhao's missiles proved the destructive power of their own innovation. Their hearts ached at the destruction they had wrought on the world and the lives torn apart by their creations.

Yet even in the midst of this, Wang and Zhao refused to be consumed by despair. Instead, they sought redemption through knowledge and understanding. They tirelessly studied the dynamics of rocketry with the aim of minimizing its destructive capabilities and harnessing the potential of their inventions for peaceful purposes.

Their perseverance and dedication paid off. Their advances in rocket technology triggered a profound change in warfare and research. Rocketry outgrew its role in antiquated warfare, took to the skies and paved the way for mankind's bold journey into the cosmos.

Over time, mankind harnessed the immense power of rockets and explored the mysteries of space. Beneath the stars, Wang and Zhao's hearts swelled with a complex mix of emotions – pride in their innovations, sadness at the destruction they had enabled, but also hope for a future in which their creations would further humanity's collective understanding of the universe.

Today, as we look at the countless rockets that adorn the skies, we must remember the indomitable spirit of Wang Weiyi and Zhao Shiyao. Their journey reminds us that even as we strive for progress, we must face the hardships that accompanies it. Innovation should always be associated with responsibility and guided by a deep understanding of its consequences.

I see. There was a long pause, before the son asked the grandpa for another tissue. The grandpa replied: "I already gave you one. Check the pack, there should still be a few tissues left." "Oh right, thanks grandpa." And off to the nearby restroom the grandson dashed towards with haste.

“Without these, it would’ve been much messier to clean this mess up.” The son let out a sigh of relief. The grandpa laughed, and told the grandson: “You know, Chinese inventors have thought of this exact scenario that you’ve been through just now. In fact, your pack of tissues, or as they originated as toilet paper, had already made its debut during the Tang Dynasty.”

“You’re kidding.” Said the grandson in disbelief.

The contributions of ancient Chinese inventors extended beyond the realm of practicality. They also possessed a deep understanding of the human need for comfort and convenience. During the old times, rudimentary forms of sanitation facilities did exist, although able to provide a degree of cleanliness, alas only for the fortunate few. But the visionaries of the Tang Dynasty, captivated by the pursuit of refinement, understood the importance of elevating the standards of hygiene even further. Their hearts, fuelled with the desire to install a sense of comfort and cleanliness that would touch the lives of all.

As silk reached the palace walls, shimmering with opulence and grace, these visionaries saw potential far beyond mere decorations. With meticulous craftsmanship, they transformed these luxurious fabrics into something much more meaningful – a gentle and effective means to achieve personal cleanliness. Thus, toilet paper was born: a symbol of elegance intertwining with practicality, and a testament to the human desire for its comfort and well-being.

Centuries passed, and the legacy of Chinese toilet paper only grew stronger, weaving its way into the fabrics of everyday life. Its availability expanded, affecting the lives of all races and social classes, transcending social divides into a humble endeavour, to elevate the human experience.

“I can’t believe it. All of these inventions, these ancient Chinese inventors already had a thought of. And here I am, thinking that what China only does is farming and producing math nerds!”

That’s why, my grandson, as we pursue our daily lives, let us not forget that from the things that we possess, the foods that we consume every day, to the lights shining brightly onto our streets everyday... all could not even exist, without our ancestors of China, our hard-working indigenous minds and loyal servants to bring up those ideas aforementioned with their brilliant thinking, to better our country, and to better the quality of life of all.

The stories of these ancient Chinese inventors serve as a testament to the innovative spirit that resided within the heart of a nation. Their creations not only improved living standards for their fellow people but also sparked an ignition of curiosity and inspiration among future generations to come.

“As we witness the remarkable achievements of these ancient Chinese inventors and look at the ongoing journey of innovation in modern China, it becomes clear that the spirit of ingenuity remains at the core of their culture. The tales of these inventors serve as a reminder to us that the pursuit of knowledge, the unyielding curiosity, and the courage to dream are the keys to unlocking a world where endless possibilities soar.”

Heads or Tails

HDBJ School Jinzhan Campus, Qu, Yoyo – 15

“Breaking News! Almost 150.8 million people are malnourished!!!!”

“19.6 percent for anemia and 25 percent for overweight represent significant national and global burdens.”

Carter Qu was on the verge of breaking. These descants of the simplest lines were an absolute torture penetrating each debris of his fragmented soul. It haunts him in his thoughts, it is devouring him till the very last of his futile flounders. As a scientist, the thought of defeat is prevailing over him. As he searched frankly around, each piece of shattered apparatus seemingly resembled pieces of his hope, his face now turgid with a combination of anger and disappointment. His eyes were empty, giving room for his blank stares that were all focalized on the man lying before him: intact, yet oblivious to free will and reality.

“Mason, you won’t let me down” Carter stuttered “no...NO, I won’t let myself down...I won’t let China down! Nor the world.” Indeed, the scientist made a one-way pledge, after hundreds of trails he had learnt that things not always abide his expectations. Yet, he had dumped half of his life in it, and he would not allow such a grand plan to terminate in nothingness. Carter hankered for fame, reputation, and status, which failing will get him nowhere close to. He was supposed to be at the top of the hierarchy, he was supposed to be superior, a Devine being at a level of his own, feasting on the praise he was supposed to receive. Are these all just going to melt into empty shells of imagination?

“NO!” he must succeed.

Sweat beaded his stature as Carter quickly gathered his equipment, proceeding on to his next procedures, accidentally dropping a coin in which lands on heads. With one flick of a hand, he stabbed the receptors onto his temples, breathing heavily yet defiantly. Praying that he would win this gamble.

The dim streetlights illuminated the street of Beijing with a stifling sense, which was once boisterous and lively, but withered into a seemingly doleful barren dominated by sheer desolation. There, a solitary presence sat, in the middle of a destructive blizzard that he had long been accustomed of.

His gaze fluctuated around in which might be called a home, and finally landed on a piece of paper soaked in the puddle nearby. A news paper. His mouth stretched into a mild smile (the most his wrinkled face could manage) as he read the headline “MATES AT HEDE STREET, SUSTAINABLE help is on the way!” he flipped through the pages with his tattered clothes that

could hardly wrap around his emaciated body. “Well, well” he chuckled, struggling as he shifted a position “Wonder what “mates” they’re talking ‘bout, there ain’t no mates here” His eyes once again met with the puddle, staring at the reflection casted within: an old and vulnerable man in his 60s, thin as a flake and packaged loosely by a layer of creased skin yet felt strangely full. “Only myself, only myself...”

The vagrant’s thoughts were dissipated by a sudden beeping, and a car emerged from the misty drizzle. He squinted, trying to get a better look, which was futile under the blinding lightings. Moments later, a figure stepped out, which could be told by the shadow that it belonged to a young man.

As the man approached, his face could be seen covered with a bright smile, somewhat enchanting, and weirdly familiar. “Excuse me” his tone was amiable “Mr. Mason—”

“Mr. What?!” The vagrant interrupted, voice shaking “you...you called me Mason???”

The young man pondered, almost amused, and continued “Sure did, Mr. Mason”

The vagrant shuddered. Mason was a name he hadn’t used for a long time, in fact, he couldn’t recall when was the last time people called him that: seems recent, but so far away. His past, and his memories, all seemed to be blurred out.

The young man smiled reassuringly “You may call me Dr. White, and I am here to lend you a helping hand”

“Dr. White...Dr. White???” Mason turned sharply and reached for the news paper still steeped in water. Unsurprisingly, Dr. White was the publisher, who laughed coldly as Mason’s pupils widened, filled with shock.

“That is indeed me, and it’s my pleasure to take you away from this, no offense, filthy discarded wasteland!”

Mason looked stunned, for a moment he wasn’t sure what to say, so he chose to say none, he chose to stand up, legs quivering, as he followed Dr. White toward his car.

The two did a bit of chitchat, but tension still lingers. Mason figured it might be some sort of *deja vu* tormenting him. Everything seemed to have appeared before somewhere in his chips of memory.

“You must be confused Mr. Mason, for your information, I’m taking you to a restaurant”

“Yes, I know that...” Mason paused, why did he know? Dr. White hadn’t told him anyhow as to where they were going.

The two stayed silent until their surroundings were lightened up by huge words decorated with neon lights. In the heart of a thriving metropolis, skyscrapers pierce the heavens, their steel and glass facades reflecting the vibrant yet strangely dull energy of the urban landscape.

‘RESTAURANT OF SUSTAINABLE FOOD’ Mason found it quite humorous, ironic even, that he had no food to eat while these city people are continuously coming up with new ideas. It was two extremes. “Sustainable?” He blurted out “You fancy guys are pretty creative you know” Dr. White beamed up, as if he had long been prepared of such sarcasm.

“Your attitude is totally understandable” Dr. White answered “I’m glad to inform you that these sustainable restaurants are created just for people in needs...people like you” With that happy note, Dr. White once again stepped out of the car and headed for the front door, this time with Mason behind him.

The overall aesthetics inside weren’t as attractive as what Mason expected it to be. The atmosphere was stagnant, devoid of any vibrancy or energy. It was a dull restaurant, where even the most delectable dishes couldn’t compensate for the lackluster setting. The tables and chairs were plain and scheduled neatly in a row, the lights were nothing special, dim with some even twitching. Hollow. Familiar.

As Mason strolled deeper into the restaurant, a gloomy feeling tugged at the back of his mind; Though it was easily ignored due to the temptation of feast. Dr. White led him to the table right in the middle, chairs already pulled out, as if waiting for Mason to sit. Queerly, it was the only table placed with linen.

Mason must have seemed hesitant, because Dr. White spoke up “I bet you’re suspicious of why only this table have a linen, don’t be, customers just usually like to sit in the middle, to be the protagonist, I’m sure you would understand”

*“Yeah, yeah okay” Mason mustered
“I thought so, I believe we should order some food now should we”*

Dr. White ordered almost all the items on the menu, which was not much, only about 5 to 6. The two men just sat there for the rest of their time, staring into each other’s stares, which Mason swore that it triggered a part of his memory, but failed to locate the exact part. His thoughts were again dissipated by the calls of server and the smell of foods.

Moments later, the table were half full with different dishes, and Mason started dining. At first, he tried to eat gently, or at least the most gentle a vagrant could get, but as time past, he began to gobble, totally unaware and indifferent to his appearance. Dr. White just sat their, expressionless, still staring at Mason, Staring at him wolfing down the unseasoned slice of soggy meat, which was bland in flavor and inedible. The soup had seemed to gone stale with a nasty shade of dark red, revolting and lousy. The toasts were also overcooked, distasteful as a pile of dough and dipped in an oozy rancid sauce that was totally unpalatable: A nightmare to watch, and insipid to eat.

Ironically, Dr. White just watched, with every breath, he inhaled the scent of opportunity and exhaled unwavering resolve. Like a shooting star piercing the night sky. With a sneer he watched as Mason begins to dissipate, he is only steps away.

An utter scream torn through the room as Mason found out he was elapsing. His eyes darted back and forth, scanning the room for any source of his collapse. His heart pounded in his chest like a drum, and he could feel the sweat beading on his forehead. His breath caught in his throat, he was being strangled, by nothing more, but his own fear, his fear of diminishing.

Fear of being replaced. Unaware that he was diminishing himself, one bite at a time, feeding on his own meat and soul. He was replacing himself, he was the dominant power of his evanescence.

“Thankyou Mason, for being the very first tribute” Hours later, Dr. White pulled out a cigarette, started his car, and was on his way to greet the old friend that he had seen for infinite times.

Under the dim streetlight, a solitary presence opened his eyes, his gaze wandered around and fall on a news paper “MATES AT HEDE STREET, SUSTAINABLE help is on the way!” Mason was reborn.

It would be a crime to try and cage the ambition in Dr. Whites inflamed heart. Or rather, the heart out of the box, out of the game; the heart touted as the savior of mankind, the hero of the day whom so lavishly kneels and serve about to contribute his greatness towards the mass. He is the victor whom thrives above the thrown of the new age, Poseidon of this upcoming tsunami, wielding his trident as he rises to the occasion of these impending waves of technology; Just like the waves of metaphors that might for a second have caught you to be confused.

You are in his game.

As Dr. White tapped his temple, temporarily isolating the connection between his invention and the reflexes of his synapses, his sensibility was rapidly vanished. For the moment, what was left

echoing through him was the adrenaline of success, then and there he carries, an altering point of China, perhaps opening a door of reformation that pushes science to its limit: embellishing the flesh of men with the progressiveness of AI, composing a new world of atomics. After all, he has just solved one of the most unfathomable enigma in documented history, he had found a pathway towards immortality, an infinitely initialized pathway of sustainable life that enables man kind to utilize themselves as channels of resources.

“Sir, congratulations”

A sudden spontaneous disruption of soundwaves struck Dr. White’s receptors as it rips through his thoughts. This time no longer fantasies. As the connection completely faded, Dr. White returns to his true identity: an unswerving scientist desperate for his goals that was once skeptical and self-contemptuous: Carter Qu.

“Sir, would you like your performance to be uploaded throughout the People’s Daily and other medias? Such a stunning invention will without a doubt gain countless supports” Carter almost forgot. It had been a long time since he last recorded a video of his experiments that It seemed surreal, it wouldn’t be excessive to even say that it was a gift from god, a blessing perhaps to lead civilization into a one-way gateway, sailing forward. With a dry smile of satisfaction Carter chuckled.

“Just like two sides of a coin eh?”

“Sir? What do you mean, the odds of success?” Carter’s companion was rather shocked by this sudden conversation.

“Hmmm, partially. But let me ask you...what exactly is the nuance between flesh and machineries?”

“that is a good question, yet I’m afraid I am not yet profound enough to answer such sophisticated questions, sir.”

“Innovation”

“...Innovation?”

“The difference between flesh and machineries. They are two things from the essence, yet they can be sutured together by “innovation.” You get me?”

“I guess so, sir”

“Human civilization is entering a stage of correspondence, with technology. These technologies indeed come into good aid, and I sure am fortunate to take a lead...but for how long? To what extent?”

“I am starting get off of track, but please continue...”

As anxiety permeates the room, the air becomes thick with anticipation and intensity, as if it is weighed down by the collective stress of those present, pervading everyone within its grasp.

“Ever seen a coin fall on its edge?”

“No sir, that seems paradoxical.”

“Exactly.”

With that, the now famous scientist turned, and headed directly to his desk. The desk was piled with either discarded designs or wasted components. For a split second, it was almost as if the silhouettes of Carter and his machineries blends into one. As his flesh was gradually eroded by streaks of silver, a faint yet mischievous whisper could be vaguely heard.

“That is because the coin is only inclined to fall on one side or the other. The sides are changing.”

Another flip.

“tails.”

The Abyss of Timeline

Hong Kong Taoist Association Tang Hin Memorial Secondary School, Chan, Wing Tung – 16

“Evelyn, be careful! You don’t even know if this time machine works! Besides, you don’t know what you can and can’t do when you time travel! You could be injured, or worse, los—”

Lights started flashing as I pressed the button on my time-travelling wristband. Father’s voice faded. My heart raced. Everything was bathed in white until I travelled faster than light. Nothing could be seen. I felt nothingness. It was as if nothing on Earth could affect me anymore, not even the gravitational force. I felt like my innards were being replaced by a black hole. Nausea crept from my abdomen to my head. I was like the wrecking Titanic. Turbulence was howling in my ears like a summoned kraken from the deep. It declared a war as a shrill war horn struck into my ears...

“Hey. Hey! When did you get in here? How did I not see you? Wait, what are you wearing?”

What? What was wrong with my clothes? Wasn’t I wearing a T-shirt and jeans? A vague shadow appeared and woke me up. It was a man whose face was covered in ashes. I looked at my outfit then his. He was wearing... was that a costume or something? That was a set of Hanfu from the Song dynasty!

“Hey! Answer me! Who are you? Why are you here?” The knife in his hand was an inch away from my neck.

“Woah! Woah! Chill, dude! Can you just tell me the date of today first?”

“Dude’? What does that word mean? Are you a Jin? Are you here to steal our secret formula?” Tightening his grip on the knife, he narrowed his eyes. Apparently, I had to earn his trust.

“Look. I umm...got here by mistake. I’m from 2161 and I was testing out my time machine. May I just confirm one thing? Is this the Song dynasty?”

The man slowly lowered his knife, “Yes, it is. Wait, 2161? That’s a thousand years from now! You’re an inventor as well, aren’t you? Th– That’s amazing! I– I’m working on our invention, gunpowder, right now. Do you mind, you know, helping me out? We defeated the Jin with our gunpowder a few months ago, but the emperor still wants an improved formula and he requested to have it by tomorrow. I’m running out of time! Please!” The fierceness in his eyes transformed into fear. Right. Death penalty was still a thing in the Song dynasty.

Should I help him? Father warned me about the rules of time travelling, but the man’s life would be in danger if I didn’t help him, and I could make my name in history! Besides, they would invent advanced gunpowder sooner or later. Gunpowder was one of the greatest Chinese inventions after all. A bit of help wouldn’t hurt, right?

I agreed to give him a helping hand. His eyes sparkled with excitement and a glimpse of evil, which I chose to turn a blind eye to.

“Thank you! Thank you! The name’s Wong. Let’s get started, then!” Excitedly, he showed me the Complete Essentials for the Military Classics written by Zeng, Ding and Yang. As soon as I read the formula, I was momentarily stunned, as if a sudden jolt of electricity had coursed through my veins. The ingredients were basically the same as modern gunpowder – potassium nitrate, sulphur and carbon. They only needed more advanced devices.

“You know, you don’t need a better formula. You need better devices to cause more devastating destruction, and you’re just in luck, because this engineering scientist from 2161 can build a machine with the materials you have right here!”

Wong’s lips slowly curled at the corners. With the knowledge I had, I started the work with him. The hours slipped by unnoticed as we poured over the work. The sun hovered low on the horizon with its golden light slanting

through the gaps on the roof in thick beams. Eventually, deep purple and bruised blues stole over the land where gold and orange had recently glowed. Our eyes were dry and strained, but finally the machine was made.

“We made it, Wong! You can show the emperor our creation tomorrow! He’s going to reward you for making something that can protect the kingdom! It’s great, isn’t it—”

“No, he’s not. Or should I say, he won’t have the chance to.” Wong’s eyes gleamed with a strange light, sending chills down my spine.

“W—what do you m—mean?” I stuttered.

Wong scoffed, “You’re too naive, young lady. You actually thought I’d give away technology like this to the emperor when I could use it to overthrow him and rule this and other kingdoms, huh? Still, you helped me. I’ll let you stand by my side, if you want to, of course. So, what do you say? Are you willing to rule the world with me side by side?”

“I can’t believe you! You can’t do this!”

“That’s a ‘no’, I guess. Very well. Go kiss this precious machine goodbye and get ready to turn into flames with the kingdom.” With a smirk, he pointed the barrel at me and fired. At that very moment, I pressed the button on my time-travelling wristband. Again, lights started flashing. Dimensions collapsed. In the blink of an eye, I returned to my laboratory, panting in exhaustion and fear.

My father sprinted to me as I sank to my knees. He held me in his arms, calming my heart, which was quaking violently within its chamber. Still, each systolic surge sent icy tendrils through my arteries to every part of my body, paralyzing my fingers, my feet, and my sense of hope. “I should’ve listened to you, Father. I’m sorry.”

“There’s no time for apologies, Evelyn. What you have done could possibly change the entire history. You must go back and make things right before—” Father’s hand became lighter and lighter. His skin cracked and rose to the air, slowly turning into ashes. I turned around just to find out that the photos of my ancestors started vanishing along with the furniture, followed by the walls of the house. Quickly, I grabbed my father’s hand and pleaded, “Please don’t leave me! You have to help me! You know what to do!”

Shaking his head, he sighed, “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I can do nothing this time. You’re on your own, kid.” He smiled at me with teary eyes right before he faded away as ashes with everything else in the house.

“It’s not the time for grief, Evelyn. You have to fix your own mess and restore the timeline!” I murmured and pressed the button on the wristband.

I was immediately choked by black smoke as soon as I set foot in the village engulfed in flames. BOOM! A bomb exploded a few miles away from the village, causing even denser smoke around me. A shadow emerged from the smoke.

“Well, well, well. Look who decided to come back. Let me tell you what you’ve missed. Let’s see... I bombed kingdoms with China’s gunpowder and our machine. Thanks to you, all the land belongs to me now.” It was Wong. He said it so proudly as if destroying kingdoms and killing everyone there were a glory.

“Don’t you see, Wong? You’re supposed to help our kingdom with the machine, but you’re using it to destroy the world! You changed history! You ruined the timeline!”

“No! You were the one who changed history!”

“And I’ll reverse what I’ve done! I’ll go stop myself from building the machine with you!” I pressed the button on my wristband and waited for lights to flash behind my closed eyelids.

A series of rapid beeps from my wristband urged me to open my eyes. "TIME NOT FOUND" flashed in bright red letters on the screen. I tapped furiously on the screen, but there was no response. "No, no, no!" I muttered under my breath.

Wong chuckled, "Oh? What's that? 'Time not found'? Wow, look what you've done, little one! Who's the one who ruined the timeline now? You should never have helped me!"

The roar of raging flames intensified as more buildings were consumed. Yet through it all, Wong's maniacal laughter was carried clearly, trapping me inside an invisible cage of guilt. His words sliced through my heart, and I hadn't got a single word to say about it. He was right. I did ruin the timeline.

Violent shudders wrecked the earth. Hoarse screams rent the air with raw, primal terror. Men, women, children flung themselves to the ground, hoping to hide from what was coming. It was useless, though, wasn't it? Inevitably, the screams faded. Flesh, clothing, earth, basically all substances dissolved before my eyes into ashes aloft. Was I supposed to be scared? Was I supposed to be worried? It didn't matter. I was going to turn into ashes just like everything else on this planet sooner or later. I buried my head in my knees, patiently waiting to accept my fate.

Relentless beeps had again awakened me. I was surrounded by darkness and I was sitting on... nothing. It would've been pitch-black if it weren't for the light from my wristband.

"TIMELINE NOT FOUND"

Cold dread gripped my heart tight. Father's words echoed in my head, "You don't know what you can and can't do when you time travel! You could be injured, or worse, lost in time!"

Lost in time... What even was time? Was it something so delicate that even a stupid teenager could break easily with her foolish actions?

I chuckled under my breath. One of China's greatest inventions was misused because of me. A great history was erased because of me. An entire timeline fell into ruins because of me.

I lived evermore in complete nothingness and darkness as the dim light on my wristband faded with the light in my heart...

New tales of China's Inventions

Hong Kong Taoist Association Tang Hin Memorial Secondary School, Ho, Yi Wa – 15

Luoyao gasped.

In front of them was the renowned A-fang Palace, lost in a fiery fire thousands of years ago. The golden pillars, surrounded by splendor reliefs of dragons and phoenixes glimmering and reflected the sunlight. The wing-like rooftop was vermilion-red and lapis blue, with tiny traces of gold adorning the thousands of layers of curved tiles. Wooden carvings of ancient Chinese patterns spread all over the building, giving a sense of solemnity.

'I never thought I'd get a chance to see this.' Xulin stared with her eyes locked on the palace where ancient emperors lived. 'Me neither. Oh... do I need to keep the whole palace in a file?' Huangwen stood beside her. His eyes filled with amazement.

'Of course! The papers in this palace are priceless – make sure you saved them uncompressed.' Luoyao exclaimed, thrilled and full of joy.

Since 2040, there had not been any more research on predictions with quantum mechanics. Although scientists suggested that prediction of future based on it was highly possible to come true, the United Nations has decided future prediction to be unethical and no more research should be carried out on the subject. This had discouraged so many scientists in that field that there were protests all over the world and was dubbed 'The downfall of science development'.

Some scientists carried on, posting their work on scientific journals, and got arrested. In spite of the sentence being just a few weeks in prison, no one dared to continue. Abandoned documents were mostly lost, forever.

Eventually science found their way in outer space. Over a span of five years, untrained humans were able to go on a tour on Mars; astronauts were walking on Mercury and Venus; and unlimited diamonds could be extracted from Uranus which had led to an apocalypse of the jewelry industry.

Still, some stayed on Earth.

The small group of scientists from China, on a mission code named 'Legacy', were continuing the research on the technology about predicting future in quantum mechanics, but the other way round – to reveal history. In theory, as predicting future worked, reliving history should work the same way.

Leader of the group, Luoyao, was a pioneer in quantum mechanics, while her trustworthy teammates, Huangwen and Xulin were historians with rich experience in science. They led a whole team of 15 scientists, dedicated to recover the gems lost in the five-thousand years of Chinese history.

'Good morning.' Another day of work, Luoyao greeted her lab with a cup of coffee and continued what she was doing last night. She had been testing the apparatus with a broken plate to see if it could make a three-dimensional projection of the original plate. It had always come out strangely, like a plate with cracks or a square-shaped plate despite the plate being circular at first. She had to modify it every time and that would sum up as her job. Huangwen was a great technician and could do the actual modification on the apparatus. Xulin was almost purely an archaeologist and had been making her plan about where to go with the apparatus.

'Yes – ' A cry of joy suddenly slipped out of the lab, followed by an eager but violent opening noise of the door, Luoyao rushed out to the office where Huangwen and Xulin were still figuring out the documents, laughing like a maniac, 'The plate – it's back to normal! Come on, come and see!'

Huangwen's jaw dropped, and Xulin shot up from her seat and hugged Luoyao. 'Does it mean we could move on and make the machine do the actual work now?' Huangwen hurried behind the two overexcited girls, 'Like, rearranging the atoms and reversing the chemical reactions that had happened?' 'Probably.' Luoyao's voice lagged in the air.

The photons danced on the apparatus, creating the exact size, colour and shape of the unbroken plate. 'Even the texture lined up...' Huangwen gazed at the image. The light passed through his fingers and still displayed the plate stably.

'We must report this first. Huangwen,' Luoyao pressed her ecstasy down, 'you can start altering the design to make it work physically – remember to test everything, make sure the 3D projection works perfectly...'

Xulin was still observing the apparatus, as if she could already see herself carrying it around the ruins of ancient China, seeing the debris come back to life with a click of a button.

'Breaking news! Breaking news!' Luoyao stepped into the office with her usual extroverted and way too cheerful tone, 'the Research Institute has decided that a 3D projection is good enough. They don't want to alter anything at the historical sites. Huangwen, can you make something to save the 3D model digitally?'

'That'll be easy. Give me a few days.'

'And Xulin, you need to submit your plans to the Research Institute as soon as possible, because once Huangwen finished his work, we will start our journey to sites. Oh, by the way, all transport fees will be subsidized, so make the plan wild. I'm going to attend a press conference on behalf of our group to announce our achievement!' Luoyao winked with her speech article in her hand, and went back to the lab where she found it the coziest.

'Good afternoon, everyone! I am Luoyao. Today the Research Institute has something very delightful to announce.' As Luoyao spoke, thousands of camera lenses focused on her, flashing their lights. 'As we all know, the history of China was thousands of years long. Many gems in the history had been covered in soil. Some never saw the daylight for centuries. To reveal the actual ancient glory, our team had been on a mission code named 'Legacy'. And just now, we're proud to announce – that we have made it! We have made an apparatus that will help us bring our history alive! Our history will be right in front of our eyes! Let me introduce to you, the 'Archive', which will be going around our country, visiting numerous sites, to make history come to life! Next, Huangwen will introduce its basic mechanics.' She passed her microphone to Huangwen, and went down the stage.

'So, um, the concept is that...' Huangwen started explaining the thing while Luoyao looked at Xulin's plan. Xulin would be introducing the travelling plan to the audience, which was the highlight of the press conference.

'Uh... and I have posted the paper online. If you want to learn more, feel free to look it up. Ehm, thank you.' Huangwen walked off the stage, biting his lips and talking to himself as if he did a bad job. Giving the microphone to Xulin, he sighed with relief. He was a typical engineer who was better at handling machines than talking to people.

'Hello everyone, I am Xulin, and I am going to announce where our team will be going with the apparatus. We will follow the historical timeline, going from the Erlitou site, which is where the Xia dynasty left its mark, to the much more modern Old Summer Palace. The first operation will take place on 23rd November, which is two weeks later. For further details, please visit the Research Institute's website. Thank you.'

As Xulin finished her last line, Luoyao cheered and Huangwen smiled.

The trips were successful. At first, not many people came to see as they were busy looking at the stars through telescopes, but as Luoyao started showing the world what they had seen, more and more citizens recognized the value of history, and it successfully brought the attention of a lot of people.

'Look at this model. I can't imagine we already have these buildings four thousand years ago. Some rural areas still have this kind of houses.' The group was looking at a model of a palace in Xia. It does not look like a palace to any people in 2040, but when people realized when it was built, it was shocking. 'And also this one from Zhou dynasty! This is when the society began to have specific rules about etiquette. We have those 'Tripods', which not everyone can use. The emperor can use the most and the officer can use a few. Civilians cannot use these. They are considered a status symbol back then.' Luoyao zoomed in at a bronze container, very large and probably heavy, with rectangular patterns on the sides. Some tripods still existed as relics, old and rusty, and seeing them in the 3D projection that showed what they were like thousands of years ago was truly mind-blowing.

'Where will we go next?'

'To Xian, where the Qin Emperor buried the terracotta warriors. I would love to see what they looked like in the past.'

A year had passed since they had their first trip. Throughout the year, they collected models from Changan, Luoyang, Beijing and various places. A museum was built to store and display their findings. They were on news headlines a few times, with the most considerable event being recovering documents from A-fang Palace, which were archaeologically priceless and helped correct and fill in the known history a lot.

'So, if we simply look away from the space. I know it is a special place, with stars and loads of interesting stuff. But space is not the only fun thing. The old times, where humans had not got the technology to jump out from our planet was fascinating too. We should not forget about the history, we should learn from it, and on many occasions, we see beauty in them. Because it is where we came from. If there was no history, we would not exist. The legacy shall never be forgotten, and will never be forgotten.'

The Continuous Search and Strong Dedication of the Herbalists

Hong Kong Taoist Association Tang Hin Memorial Secondary School, Tsang, Lok Yi Cherry – 16

"Bring me the most renowned physician there is," at the order of the emperor, the officials backed down with bowed heads, scattering away and exiting the grand room.

It had been nearly two weeks since the plague spread – everyone had thought it was just the change of weather at first, but eventually the coughing got worse, and patients started dying. There had been several reports to the emperor, pressing and urging him to alert the nation, but the selfish ruler had been indifferent. Until the sickness hit home. Several of his servants started coughing violently and two of his dearest consorts had fallen ill. He had dismissed the servants, but the conditions of his dearest ones were all but well. For the next few days, his courtiers went through every prescription there was in the imperial pharmacies and mixed medicine out of the most precious ingredients – but it had been in vain. None worked.

In a city located at the Western parts of the Country lived a humble but kind doctor named Zhang Zhongjing. After years of studying and practicing, he was quite knowledgeable in various areas of medicine, eventually becoming one of the most well-known in Nanyang. Yet, there was one particular ailment he found difficult to handle – a plague.

The man had sat at his desk, a heavy sigh escaping his lips as he stared out of the window. His city had not escaped the plague either. He'd given his first patients honey-containing prescriptions, but the gentle cough erupted into a wild infectious disease later on. Families after families had fallen ill. The young man was deeply troubled.

"Master, do you require any assistance?" His apprentice walked in. "No, there is nothing tonight. You should rest early." Zhang decided that he would pay a visit to the mountains the next day to search for more herbs. He went to his herbal medicine cabinet and went over all his ingredients once again. "Perhaps the intense coughing had something to do with the dampness", he thought. An excessive accumulation of moisture or fluid in the human body could be the culprit. He would give it a try.

The young man woke up early the next day. The sky had not quite yet been lit, but he sat up, remembering his task for the day. "Gui, do you mind preparing a prescription containing a moderate dose of Bai Zhu for the appointed patient today? I will be out." He paused a bit at the door, then added: "Tell me how it goes."

The doctor decided to trek into the mountains one morning, carrying a basket on his back and setting off. A gust of chilly wind whisked past – the signs of late autumn and an approaching winter. He would be looking for a rarer herb today – the small white flowers and slender stems of the *Fang Feng*. He'd see the effect of *Bai Zhu* on the plague, and if his suspicions are proven correct, an addition to the dampness reduction whilst strengthening the immune system should have a better effect on the sickness. He tread on, pushing aside tall ferns and grass along his way. After the rain last week, he wasn't sure if the plants survived had there been flooding. It was well past noon when he finally found a small batch of them – but

as he knelt down to inspect them he knew that they had been ruined by the heavy rain. The practitioner had to return with nothing in his empty basket.

Things were not on the bright side for Zhang and his apprentice. They'd received more urgent callings and summons, families crying out to them for help as their loved ones laid in bed with terrible coughs. But they could only watch and apologize – there was no remedy.

The gloominess of the situation had been broken by good news one afternoon, as the meet-up with the previous patient who received the *Bai Zhu* prescription showed signs of improvement – a significant reduction of coughs. The doctor's heart beat with excitement and hope. The tides of this battle were finally turning.

He gave the similar prescriptions to the other patients, and he was relieved by their ease of pain. Yet the root of the cause was still not eliminated. The sickness was contained temporarily, but they weren't healing. The master and the apprentice worked overnight, mixing different remedies with different ingredients. Finally, when they added *Huang Qi*, it seemed to power-up the medicine.

Then came the day when a royal servant brought the summoning scroll to Zhang. Zhang promised the remedy, only in exchange for a supply of Fang Feng. The final cure was finally created – and the practitioner gave the remedy its name: *Yupingfeng San*. The doctor sent the prescription to the palace, and the pandemic was finally lifted from the country. Yet the time still came to say goodbye. The beloved doctor had left, with his long exposure to the virus and his sleep-deprived state of overworking being the cause of the deterioration of his own health. With that, the mother gently closed the book with a light shut.

"That's such a sad ending!" The girl cried with a fever patch on her head.

"Is that so, darling? But such is the embodiment of the great devotion of our past doctors who invented the Traditional Chinese Medicine, and with it came thousands of great prescriptions and remedies that saved millions and billions of lives. And the *Yupingfeng San* is one of them." The mother smiled gently, while faking a pointed look at the small pearl-like pills in the palms of her daughter's hand. "Story time is over. Now it's time for you to fulfill your side of the bargain." Still smiling, she gave the little girl an encouraging nod.

The child furrowed her brows as she screwed her eyes shut and swallowed the pills. "Ugh, bitter..." The girl stuck out her tongue and made a face.

The mother laughed softly, patting her child gently and staring out of the window, her gaze distant.

"Bitter it is, as it is the continuous search and strong dedication of the herbalists, my dear."

The Golden Era of Innovation

The bright moon rose, ushering in a starry night sky where millions of stars twinkled with light, mischievously squinted, and scattered around. Sofia was lying on the bed with an electric helmet covering her head, silently enjoying this peaceful, tranquil night while imagining the upcoming encounter in her dream. Soon after that, the night's aroma pervaded the air, woven into a soft net, covering all the scenery inside.

She gradually fell asleep.

For decades, humans had been putting considerable effort into revealing the secret of the human brain. Now, they were able to make a digital mind copy and upload their consciousness into the metaverse with the help of a helmet. For Sofia, it felt like dreaming but she got to choose the dream she wanted, a dream in which she could gain novel, extraordinary experiences that were impossible and verged on the insane in the real world.

The metaverse Sofia stepped into was awe-inspiring and unexpected.

There were floating cities where buildings hovered above the water, creating a mesmerizing sight. Around these cities, lots of innovative structures were designed to blend seamlessly with the surrounding environment as if they combined to form a harmonious masterpiece. Looking down, schools of fish swam gracefully in the canals under the futuristic cities, adding a touch of natural beauty.

"Imagine soaring over the buildings and encountering vibrant ecosystems, how wonderful that would be....." Sofia was muttering to herself when a voice called her from a far distance.

"Sofia! Hi there!"

Wrenching her gaze from the sky, she was surprised to find her friend, Lucy, standing on a hoverboard and coming towards her.

"Hi, Lucy!" Sofia yelled with a flare of joy, "Never thought to meet you here, in..... in the metaverse!"

"Neither did I," Lucy giggled, a charming smile rippled across her face, "so you're having a go with mind uploading too."

"Yeah! I've never been here before." Sofia replied in high spirits, her heart was pounding.

"I'll show you around then! I guarantee the metaverse will knock your socks off." Lucy squealed with delight.

Shortly afterwards, they slipped through the doorway behind them and down a narrow path. Where the path began its descent, the two ramblers were greeted with the fragrance of flowers and herbs lingering around, for the way now led steeply and directly to the mysterious underground woodland.

"Here we are in front of the woodland. Sofia, ready for the adventure?" Lucy whispered in a low voice.

"Definitely! But.....what could happen in a small woodland?" Sofia was baffled.

Lucy let out a chuckle and sauntered at a jaunty pace through the wood where the earth was spongy and squishy. As she walked, bushy herbs caressed her arms and sunlight trickled through the green leaves. Slowly and unwittingly, they were cloaked in mist. Through the mist, Sofia could merely see that they were wandering into a tall forest where the trees were by no means ordinary. Their trunks were slender and greenish, and when she looked up to find branches, she saw instead several flat yellowish-pink canopies spreading from the top of the trunk in an elegant manner.

"Wait.....What..... What is that?" Sofia stuttered as her mouth was wide open in awe.

"Have a guess, then." Lucy giggled and waited for a second.

"They are wildflowers!" yelled Lucy with a sense of mischief.

"Wildflowers? That's insane....." Sofia was glued to the spot, staring at the giant creature in blank astonishment.

"Exactly! That is the charm of mind uploading. You are sure to find something awe-inspiring and amazing through your adventure! Just enjoy."

At that instant, a playful breeze danced through the wood, making the mist dissipate and giant flowers sway as if they were performing a delicate ballet. Countless golden pollen then soared high to the sky, enlivening the cheerful, pleasant atmosphere. Sofia stood still in the bush, enchanted by this mysterious wood, funny, weird, and peculiar. As she watched the metaverse around her, it felt as though nature itself had come alive thanks to technology, telling stories and painting pictures with its sights and sounds, and she was just a witness to its wonder.

It was not until a thick fog enveloped Sofia and Lucy again that they were aware of the significant change in the surroundings. Sofia blinked, then blinked again. In front of her was a range of mountains with volcanoes bubbling deep beneath them. Surrounding the volcano on one side were the barren red sands while on the other side was black ground covered in ash. Above them, the sun blazed in the sky and cast its golden rays as if it were a fiery

dragon spraying fire everywhere it touched. Vultures were also wheeling over the sharp peak, creating an exceptionally eerie and spooky ambience.

“Wow, Lucy, these volcanoes make the legendary red fiery glare! I’ve always wanted to see it but never got the chance.” Sofia gasped in admiration. She couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Told you, this is every inch a mind-blowing experience,” Lucy exclaimed, “and there is much more to explore in the digital utopia than just a woodland roam and volcano trip.”

Sofia and Lucy looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“Oops! It seems that time is up and I have to return to the real world.” Sofia felt a signal from her helmet reminding her that it was already dawn.

“Oh yeah! It’s so nice to meet you here today. See you at school then!” Lucy replied with joy.

A thick white fog swirled around Sofia and the metaverse began to shimmer around her. Gradually, Lucy’s silhouette disappeared as everything dissolved into——

—— the real world.

The morning mists lay below skyscrapers in bands of white and grey. As the sun rose, they changed into bubbling seas of red and gold, churned out and let the low rays stripe the roof of Sofia’s house. On opening her eyes, Sofia saw a golden ray of sunshine stream in through the skylight onto her bed, illuminating the entire bedroom with a warm glow. She watched the mist subside with a smile of pure joy on her face, as she knew, endless state-of-the-art inventions would pop up to make the impossible possible. As society is set to explore and innovate, mind uploading would just be the starting point.

Our brand-new life was coming.

Threads of the Earth's Song

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Shen, Bob Rulilin – 16

The autumn air in Hong Kong was brisk, carrying a symphony of rustling leaves – a cascade of red and gold waltzing against the city’s steel-grey skyline. Inside a lab that buzzed with the quiet intensity of anticipation, Dr. Tan Mei stood, her eyes reflecting the ghostly glow of computer screens. Around her, the skeletal framework of her prototype—a promise of safety against nature’s caprice—hummed with potential. Despite the advanced algorithms flickering across the monitors, a gnawing gap remained, a piece of the puzzle stubbornly elusive as if it lay beyond the reach of modern technology.

The lab was her haven, a place where the whisper of an idea could grow into a roar of innovation. Yet, tonight, Mei felt the weight of solitude in her quest, a familiar echo in the vastness of her ambition. She was a maestro conducting an orchestra of data and circuits, but the harmony was incomplete.

In search of solace, she found herself drawn to the warmth of her grandfather’s study, a room where time seemed to stand still amidst the shelves laden with ancient tomes and artifacts. It was here, under the watchful eye of a jade dragon that had silently observed generations of her family, that she sought a moment of respite.

As Mei ran her fingers over the leather-bound spines, one book drew her in, its cover worn by decades of scholarly hands. It wasn’t research that called to her tonight but a need for connection, a whisper of the past to guide her in the present. Slowly, she withdrew the volume, a cloud of dust motes dancing in the lamplight, and settled into the embrace of her grandfather’s old armchair.

A parchment, brittle with age, slipped from between the pages, floating to the floor with a grace that belied its years. Mei picked it up with reverence, her pulse quickening as she unfolded it to reveal a poem in classical Chinese script. Her breath caught—the author was Zhang Heng, known to her as the inventor of the first seismoscope, not as a poet. Yet here, in her hands, was a piece of his soul.

The poem read:

*In the dragon's core, where secrets are kept,
In silence, it guards; in darkness, it slept.
Metal's embrace and jade's whispered lore,
Together they listen—earth's heart at the core.*

*A sphere gently stirs, an omen foretold,
In the dance of the deep, where futures unfold.
A sentinel's duty, cast in ancient light,
To watch over the living, through day and through night.*

The characters, elegant and sure, spoke of the earth's heartbeat, of a unity between the heavens and the human spirit. Dr. Tan Mei, with her life's work laid out in silicon and code, felt a sudden kinship with this ancient scholar. Zhang Heng's quest was her own: to understand the earth's most intimate whispers before they turned into roars of calamity.

As the night deepened around her, the poem offered not just historical insight but a reflection of her own yearning—to protect, to serve, to connect with the tremulous song of the earth. In the quietude of her grandfather's study, surrounded by the wisdom of ages, Dr. Tan Mei found the silent melody of inspiration calling to her once more.

Pause, to go further

Weeks melded into an indistinguishable blur as Mei delved deeper into the poem's mysteries. The ancient script was a labyrinth of symbolism, each character a riddle wrapped in the enigma of antiquity. The translations she had at her disposal felt hollow, stripped of the poem's soulful essence. Her breakthrough danced just beyond reach, a shadow flickering at the edge of understanding, and her frustration grew like a storm on the horizon.

The lab, once a crucible of innovation, had become a prison of dead ends. In a rare moment of surrender to her human limits, Mei stepped away from the relentless pursuit. The streets of Hong Kong called to her, their vibrant pulse a stark contrast to the sterile hum of her technological haven.

As if guided by the unseen hand of fate, she found herself navigating the labyrinth of a local flea market. Here, the past and present coexisted; every trinket and relic whispered stories of bygone eras. The air was thick with the scent of aged paper and history, a perfume that settled into her senses, offering an odd comfort.

It was amid this cacophony of the forgotten that she stumbled upon a relic that seemed to hum with significance. An old scroll, nestled between jade figurines and brass compasses, called to her with an almost magnetic pull.

The stall owner, his eyes crinkled with the wisdom of years, watched her with a knowing smile. "It belonged to a scholar, many centuries ago. He was a dreamer, an inventor, and a poet," he said, his voice a bridge to the past.

With hands that trembled with reverence and possibility, Mei unfurled the scroll. The script within was delicate, the ink faded but the words alive, dancing before her as if imbued with the very breath of the ages. And then, a name leapt from the page to imprint itself upon her heart: Zhang Heng. This was no mere historical artifact; it was a fragment of the seismologist poet's soul, a continuation of the poem that had become her obsession.

Spring, 86 AD – Birth

The gentle whisper of Xi'e's winds, entwined with the rustle of bamboo, has often been my companion, as familiar as the shade of the ancient banyan under which I sit. Here, amidst the symphony of the natural world, my thoughts find their rhythm, harmonizing with the lifeblood of the earth itself.

Today, as I pondered the silent dance of the earth, my father approached. I saw in his eyes the reflection of the azure sky and a curiosity that mirrored my own. "The earth speaks in a language few can hear," he mused, recalling the words of the scholars and poets he so often read to me during the long evenings.

"I wish to understand that language," I replied, the thought taking root in my heart. "To anticipate its silent turns and to know its gentlest murmurs."

In the quiet that followed, a vision began to unfold within me—a dream not just of comprehension but of creation. A dream where the whispers of the earth could be translated for all to hear. It was here, in the embrace of the banyan's ancient wisdom, that the seed of my life's work was planted.

The sun dipped low, casting long shadows across the land of my birth. In the twilight, I knew that my journey had begun, as a seeker of the earth's hidden songs. This day marked not just the passage of another season but the awakening of the dreamer within, the birth of one who would listen to the earth with a scholar's mind and a poet's heart.

Autumn, 89 AD – Mission

A day like any other was torn asunder by the earth's lament, a roar so profound it seemed to come from the very depths of creation. The land heaved in sorrow, and the pillars of our human endeavors crumbled like the fleeting dreams they were. The air was thick with dust and despair, as cries of the afflicted rose to the heavens.

My father stood beside me, his composure a fragile bulwark against the chaos. "An earthquake," he whispered, the words barely a ripple in the torrent of nature's outpouring. "The earth's formidable voice speaks."

Those words struck a chord deep within my soul, not merely as a son but as a member of this trembling society. I saw the fear etched on the faces around us, the helplessness that gripped tight at every heart, and felt it echo in my own.

Yet, amidst the wreckage, where lives had been unmoored and the illusion of control lay shattered, a resolute flame was kindled in my spirit. "Father," I found myself saying, "what if we could come to understand this fearsome language? To not merely endure but to anticipate, to prepare?"

The days that followed were filled with reflection as I wandered amid the ruins, my heart heavy with the suffering etched into the very earth. The people of Xi'e, with hands calloused and spirits tested, set about rebuilding, their resilience a testament to the enduring human spirit.

It was in the quiet moments, sitting amidst the remnants of our fragility, that my true mission took root. It was not enough to stand in awe of nature's might; I was compelled to stand in service to humanity. To turn this devastation into a wellspring of knowledge that might one day spare my fellow beings from the grip of such sudden ruin.

The earthquake, a formidable beast that had shaken us to our core, became more than a harbinger of destruction. It was a clarion call to action, to seek out the secrets held close by the earth, and to forge from this calamity a beacon of hope.

In the annals of time, let it be said that from the ruins of Xi'e, a mission was born—a mission of compassion, of understanding, and of an unyielding commitment to safeguard the dance of life upon this unpredictable stage.

Winter, 92 AD – Enlightenment

The winter's embrace had stilled Xi'e, the land lying in repose as if to recover from the season's earlier tumult. The remnants of the earthquake were like scars upon the earth, covered in a shroud of snow, whispering memories of the upheaval.

One evening, as a minor tremor coursed through our village, a subtle but unmistakable reminder of the earth's unrest, my mother's voice found me. I saw her silhouette against the hearth, the dance of the flames casting a tableau of the past year's chaos on the walls of our home.

"Heng," she said, a tremble in her voice mirroring the tremor that had just passed, "the earth's dance was violent. Must we always live in fear of its next step?"

Her question hung in the air, mingling with the scent of burning cedarwood. "We are not powerless, Mother," I replied, the idea crystallizing like ice upon a branch. "We may not command the earth's movements, but we can strive to understand its signals, its patterns. In knowledge, there is forewarning."

A spark of something akin to hope flickered in her eyes, a fragile flame against the encroaching darkness of doubt. "Is such a thing within our grasp, Heng?" she asked, her words carrying the weight of a community still reeling from nature's blow.

My response came from a place of deep conviction, fuelled by the unspoken resolve that had taken root within me. "I believe so," I affirmed. "The pursuit of knowledge is itself a lantern in the dark. I will seek out this understanding, Mother, not just as a balm for our fears but as a beacon for all."

As the winter deepened, so too did my commitment. I immersed myself in study, surrounded by scrolls and texts, the voices of ancient scholars and my companions in the quietude. The dreamer in me, once content with mere reflection, now sought the mantle of a scholar. It was a path lined with the unknown, but I stepped forward with a heart fortified by purpose. The earthquake had been a harbinger of destruction; now, it was to become a catalyst for enlightenment.

Spring, 102 AD – Struggle

In the stillness of the library, where the dust motes danced like silent specters in the shafts of light, I found myself besieged by a sea of ancient texts. Each one was a beacon that had guided me here, to Luoyang, away from the nurturing boughs of Xi'e's banyan and into the heart of the empire's grandeur—a memory that flickered like a candle in the recesses of my mind.

I recalled the morning of my departure, now five years ago, the firm grip of my father's hand on my shoulder, a silent bastion against the uncertainty of the path I had chosen. "Seek the knowledge that eludes us," his voice had echoed, a mantra that now resonated in every beat of my heart.

The capital had been a crucible of sounds and sights, a maelstrom of life where every face held a story, every story a lesson. My tutor's words whispered to me across the years, a gentle reminder that wisdom was not solely the province of the scholar, but of every soul that walked the thoroughfares of Chang'an.

Yet now, as I faced the scholars of this esteemed city, their skepticism was a gale that threatened to extinguish the flame I had carried all this way. "A seismoscope?" they would murmur among themselves, the word tinged with irony. "Young Heng chases shadows."

But shadows were merely a sign that light was present, and it was this light that I sought—relentlessly, resolutely. Each dismissal, each patronizing glance, I stored away not as tokens of defeat, but as the chaff which would eventually separate from the wheat of triumph.

As the chill of winter seeped into the bones of the library, I felt the weight of all I had left behind—the comfort of my mother's embrace, the steadfastness of my father's belief, the serene beauty of my hometown. These were the talismans I clung to in moments of doubt, each a reminder of the dream that had set me upon this journey.

In the solitude of my struggle, I was a solitary figure etching out a new path—one that others could not yet see. But with each stroke of my brush, each line of inquiry I pursued, the path cleared, leading me ever onwards. For in the heart of this struggle lay not just the promise of enlightenment, but the hope of a future where the earth's violent dance could be anticipated, and the lives of those like the citizens of Xi'e could be spared from nature's fury.

Autumn, 105 AD – Success!

The workshop was silent save for the scraping of metal on metal, the soft flutter of parchment, and my steady breaths—each one a quiet testament to years of relentless pursuit. Before me lay the culmination of a journey that had spanned the breadth of this vast empire, a device wrought from copper and ingenuity, poised on the edge of awakening.

I recalled the disdainful smirks of my peers, the weighty expectation in my father's eyes, the gentle encouragement of my mother's touch—all distant now, as I stood on the precipice of revelation.

The first tremor was subtle, a whisper of movement that might have been dismissed by any other. But to me, it was as thunderous as the roar that once shattered the tranquility of Xi'e. The seismoscope, my silent sentinel, responded. The dragon within stirred, its metal heart resonating with the earth's hidden dance.

In that moment, time was a river stopped at its source. The sphere within the dragon's grasp shifted, rolling with purposeful grace to point its accusing finger toward the west. My heart thundered in my chest, a counterpart to the silent song of the earth that only I, in that instant, could hear.

When the confirmation came—a messenger, breathless and wide-eyed, speaking of tremors felt in the distant regions—it was not just validation for me, but a vindication for all who dare to dream beyond the veil of the known.

The scholars' eyes, once narrow with skepticism, now widened with the dawning of understanding. Their murmurs, once derisive, turned to contemplations of the implications of my work. I felt not triumph in their capitulation, but a serene affirmation of the mission that had chosen me as much as I had chosen it.

Understanding

In the silence of her lab, Dr. Tan Mei held the scroll delicately between her fingers, as if the fragile paper was a bridge across time, connecting her to Zhang Heng—a man whose ancient dreams now whispered to her across the centuries.

She had been captivated by the narrative of his life, the meticulous detail he poured into his work, and the poetic depth of his aspirations. His words, though from a distant past, held a resonance that was profoundly personal and immediate. In the dance of his calligraphy, she found echoes of her own heartbeat, her own dreams.

The fusion of Zhang Heng's lyrical legacy with the stark functionality of her modern research lab created a harmony of purpose. The heart of the dragon—the core of the earth which he had sought to understand—now beat in sync with the pulse of her seismic warning system. Mei saw not just the spirit of metal and the breath of jade as materials, but as metaphors for the resilience and adaptability required to face nature's might.

As she read, the seams of the past unwound, revealing the timeless pattern of human ingenuity. Mei's vision for her seismic warning system crystallized further, inspired by the balance Zhang Heng had struck between strength and flexibility, tradition and innovation.

With every line of Zhang Heng's diary, Mei felt the walls between their worlds thinning. Mei's work, once confined to algorithms and data, now took on a new dimension—it was a narrative, a story of humanity's resilience and the enduring quest to protect life. Zhang Heng had reached across the ages to remind her that at the heart of all technology, all discovery, were the lives of the people it served.

In the soft glow of her monitors, Dr. Tan Mei no longer felt alone in her quest. She was part of a continuum, a lineage of dreamers and doers who listened to the earth's rhythms and sought to harmonize with them. Her hands, steady and sure, resumed their work with a renewed sense of purpose. For in her heart now danced the spirit of Zhang Heng, and together, they were composing the future's song—one of hope, protection, and the unending dialogue between humanity and the earth.

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.

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.

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...

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.

“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.

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.

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.

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.

Smell of Tea

Shanghai High School International Division, Chan, Chloe – 15

The smell of tea twines my heart to a temple. The world around me spinning with delight, the deep resonance of church bells makes me shiver. I walk around the dusty abandoned church, observing the obsolete pillar that had once been encompassed by people's prayers, its soul has gone dormant for long, not one being remembered to come and visit. Only left is the slim, gray cat that wanders along the church accompanying the pillar. They share their minds of loneliness and void. They see no light in life, but the continuous darkness that leads them to death. The flowers out the church all withered, drooping down their backs, with no strength to stand. They compel for whom that stands the longest, the one that is last conquered by the wind. The cat gives out a low cry or whimpers once in a while as if to add some pleasure for the church and its "old friend". The old voice of the pillar echoes in my mind, greeting me with its hoarse trembling voice. A cool, light breathed swiftly away from my body, washing away the anxiety and pain, bringing a wisp of chill across my spine, and making me feel as if I was holy and alone in a world nobody knew. The wind whirled curling up the dead dry leaves. The echoes of bells brought me back to the present.

Invention Copyright

Shanghai High School International Division, Chen, Pete – 15

At the time during which I was born, our town of Feng-Xian had much to believe in but little to know. We had faith in a number of people and things: Mr. Marx, that white-bearded fellow who thought everybody could have something; Mr. Mao, who believed China would stand up against its enemies and become strong; the “revolution” changes that put the thoughts of Mr. Marx and Mr. Mao together, that everybody would have something which would make them strong over the people who were excessively strong.

As for knowing, Feng-Xian resorted to its village teacher Mr. Li Kai-Ming. He taught us—children and adults and the elderly altogether—all he knew, which was pretty much all we needed to know.

I always stayed at his house longer than anybody else as my parents, for some reason, wanted me to know what I needed to know as soon as possible. Mr. Li understood and gave answers to all of my possible curiosities, fortunately. He treated me like his own son sometimes, feeding me snacks and wise sayings he “picked up over the years”.

I remember only one of them, the one Mr. Li gave me on a windy afternoon in early March, whilst the gales and zephyrs each played their noisy little tunes on his flimsy roof. We were just delving into the specifics of how rice was sown when he cut in, a touch more melancholy than usual:

“Bo-Si, I want you to remember this,” somberly looking into my ponderous eyes, he said, “*knowledge is priceless*. No one can buy or sell it because it can’t be marked with a price, you know that? It is the most—” I forgot the rest.

Since that afternoon, I never saw Mr. Li again. Feng-Xian began to morph, slowly yet inevitably, like a cicada stepping out golden and gilded from shedding its old shell only to shrivel and embrown to go on shedding again and again. First came the Anti-over-owning, who equalized the amount of property all over the country and our countryside. Next followed the Distributors, and so all of the households in Feng-Xian would have neither more or less proportioned shares of rice and sustenance, block houses scaled to the head count of their families, and one huge black metal bowl that was to be a pot. Then came the Anti-over-knowing, and my parents threw out all of the texts in the house. And then there were the Educators, then the Managers, then the Supervisors...there were too many groups that came in, too many shells to shed.

I yearned to write to Mr. Li by the time the Anti-over-knowing came, but my family could not access mail—nobody could, and there wasn’t even any of it around. I couldn’t ask my friends to carry messages to him either as no one was really allowed to move around a lot unless some sort of authority told them they could do so.

How could one teleport messages from one place to another? My first thought was to use pigeons, but I abandoned the idea considering that most of them were being cooked for stew.

What if I used something like a pigeon, just that it had no weight, no sound, and was invisible?

I could build an emitter and a receiver, each tuned to process only this one type of light which, as Mr. Li said, “made waves in the air too wide to be seen”. With a code that matched each sequence of flashes to a letter or a number, I could break down my messages and transfer them in “packets” from the emitter to the receiver character by character. Whoever was at the receiver could then take all of these “packets” and piece them back into my message—if Mr. Li and I each had both an emitter and receiver, we could even talk to each other back and forth! The light would be my pigeon, only that it went much faster than a real one and carried messages bit by bit.

But if we all had an emitter and receiver, wouldn’t everybody be able to deliver and receive things to and from everybody else? That would be interesting, yet could I centralize all of people’s ideas into one place? Perhaps I could build an intangible cloud with all of my zipping “light pigeons” that held everything that people needed to know (like Mr. Li’s knowledge), and it could send responses to people who sent it messages that contained their questions. Everybody would have a *net* of other people to talk to and things to know from my cloud, and collectively naming their interconnected nets would be—the *internet!*

Although exultant at this idea, I was well aware that I had done physically nothing except for annexing a to-be-used word into the Chinese language. Thus, I took my time over ten years while Feng-Xian shed its many shells to record my work by carving diagrams and rudimentary explanations into a humble oakwood chair given to my

family by the Distributors. Names and terms sprang out of my juvenile mind over the years, like “World Wide Web”, “HyperText Transfer Protocol Secure”, and “HyperText Markup Language”. I never knew what they meant; it was simply my fancy at that age to put big words together.

My initial wish to talk to Mr. Li gradually faded away under the overruling of my “internet innovations”. I did hear one of the Anti-over-knowing gleefully claim he “went down to the fields”, though...he was probably as happy as I was to know that Mr. Li Kaiming became one with the one and only working class of the new society.

By the time the ten years passed, Feng-Xian, at the edge of what was something like Shanghai, stood as a town glimmering from reformation, the exemplified golden cicada of the nascent People’s Republic.

It all loosened up. The groups that used to come in to change us finally decided enough shells were shed and settled down. People were allowed to own more things and could move around without being approved by some sort of authority, while I was allowed to earn a job in the new local post office.

Of course I started as a mailman—one of the pigeons that carried messages and intelligence from emitter to receiver within Feng-Xian—and took daily doses of morning banter with the now-better-housed townspeople. My conversations with them almost always centered wholly on their crops and children until this one time when Mrs. Ma, an elderly lady whose son worked in a technology company up in the city, told me,

“Bo-Si, I’ve heard something invisible and huge is being built in the cities these days...it’s something they call...the *internet*! My little boy says it’ll let everybody deliver and receive things to and from everybody else; wouldn’t that replace you someday?”

I nearly dropped her monthly newspapers onto the dirt in awe. Exactly three months ago, my mother was complaining to me how the oakwood chair the Distributors gave us could only be hawked away to some bored golden-haired tourist from Switzerland because of my “sloppy markings” on its top. Surely the foreigner had not taken it back to his native country, correctly interpreted my worn hand-drawn diagrams, and somehow published it to the world as *his* “internet innovations”?

Such a thought bedeviled me until at nighttime that day when I resolved to myself, thinking: According to Mr. Li, knowledge is priceless and cannot be bought or sold. The Swiss man owes me nothing. He paid for the chair and took my free, no-price ideas. That’s what “priceless” means, right? And why would I want to use my bragging rights now to claim that I invented the internet if such knowledge would have no price either?

I then drifted into sound sleep with the assuaging belief that my concept of the internet would be worth nothing, that it belonged to everybody—thus ended the only memorable ripple in the sea of my forty-year sojourn in the post office.

I was told by my superiors when the new millennium came that I could step back from my occupation, begin to take pensions, and go off to mind my own business. I never got to know why they told me this, but I decided that I earned enough as a message pigeon and gladly took their advice.

Post-retirement issues, however, clung to me like maggots to exposed pork. Did the managers tell me to leave because I was too slow, too inefficient? I certainly was, compared to the young men and women from the other inland provinces, but that was not a sufficient excuse to my taste. I could do much more than play a pigeon. I could help stamp letters, write reports, meet with partners...I could do a lot of things as *one person*, and—

What if *one device* could do a lot of things at the same time?

I again tasted that selfsame feeling which came to me fifty years ago when I wanted to talk to Mr. Li. Almost everything people used had only one practical function. Wouldn’t it be great with something could have a lot of such functions? Sure, Swiss knives could cut strings, open bottles, and pick locks, but those usages weren’t primary.

I could put a telephone, the internet, and some more of digital entertainment into one compact, handheld slab of synthetic metals. There could be a touch-controlled glass screen on one side of the slab for the user to navigate everything and a small, handy camera on the other for the user to take down lovely memories. On the bottom of the slab could be a row of little holes for a speaker on the inside to play music through, and on the bottom of the screen could be a button to press in case things went wrong. The sides of the slab, though thin, could fit three buttons: two for volume and one for power.

How was this all going to happen? The components, of course, had to be small. I could build a special lamp that gave off this extremely thin laser which would carve tiny wires onto metals which weren't too conductive to make... *chips*. I could concentrate a lot of dark lead into a tiny metal casing, making a... *battery!*

After scribbling all of these plans onto the blank papers left as vestige from my postal career, I took to macroscopically examining my creation. Yes, it held all of the functions in the most important devices of the time—it could call, play audio, take photos, and deliver messages—it was all three of them. It looked like a phone, but was much better, did much more than a phone, was internet-connected, intelligent, intellectually adaptive... it was the *iPhone!*

I immediately headed downstairs for a walk to celebrate. It was March again, as brisk-winded as ever, but I let none of the whining air get in my feelings. I had made something again, whatever it was, and invention set my joys afire.

Yet they were extinguished, quite deliberately extinguished when I reentered my apartment, for my papers were nowhere to be found, carried mindlessly away by the gusts of wind which went through my door and out of the window, nowhere to be found! At loss, I spent the rest of the day in utter silence.

I heard a foreign, bewildered hand sifting blindly through the bushes then picking out sheets of tattered paper and was not surprised at all when I heard my Feng-Xian neighbors discussing this “new, multi-functional, revolutionary *iPhone*” released by this myopic, gaunt man in the United States who liked wearing black wool shirts and jeans several years later. Knowledge, I understood well by then, was priceless, and that American owed me nothing at all.

In the coming decade, I predicted his every move: The phone was to be made bigger, into a pad (iPad), and the speakers on the phone would be better if they could be put in the ears whilst connected to a device (AirPods). The latency between his new releases and my ideas were consistently, and exactly, one year. Impressive.

Feng-Xian grew over the years, gaining size, people, money, and noise. My childhood friends were becoming grandparents. Life really changed, they said. Look at these kids today.

It all went up—the floors, the speed of travel, the diversity of iPhone's variant devices—but for some reason it occurred to me that something wasn't right. People simply replicated housing and office buildings everywhere. Growth was slow, stable, steady, and constant. The change wasn't changing; people were adding when they should have been multiplying, so...

What if our devices performed *qualitative* change over *quantitative* change?

Again that exuberant rush to craft seized me like it did over the internet and iPhone, yet everything seemed much simpler this time.

To change qualitatively, devices must be able to learn, and they had to be able to actively remember before doing that. It was obvious; I could use everything from the internet, feed it to the iPhone that was now already smarter than ever, and let the iPhone *think*. It would then process all of what I gave it, build connections between cause and effect, fore and aft, and correct any of its mistake through more experience.

I could provide for the powerful hardware this would need by coordinating many of the chips in iPhones and iPads together to make computing devices much stronger than normal—*supercomputers*. The rest of the work would be done by the device, it developing on its own.

Given enough time, the device would be able to *think* like humans. It would be able to compose, to write, to paint, to do almost everything people are easily capable of. It may even replace people, in the form of a robot or automaton—*automation*. They, man-made contraptions, would hold the intelligence of people—*Artificial Intelligence!*

I did not do or feel anything after typing this into an online document and being notified that night that my files, one of which I just finished, were leaked overseas by a glitch in the iCloud system. After all, knowledge wasn't worth a single *yuan*; it was priceless.

It was not five more years before anyone appeared to work on Artificial Intelligence. When people finally did, though, they went quick, and ChatGPT, one of the neatest gadgets to ever exist, came out in another five years.

Trying out an advanced version of GPT in yet again a tempestuous March, I asked the robot, “What does the saying ‘knowledge is priceless’ mean?”

It typed out two thick paragraphs of text in five seconds that generally read:

“‘Knowledge is priceless’ is a proverb that largely refers to the idea that knowledge, or intellectual property from the human mind, cannot be priced because it is invaluable. It cannot be bought or sold because it is the greatest treasure of humans and it was likely believed at the time of the proverb that it should be held dearly, prized at heart.”

What?

I should have paid more attention to Mr. Li, but there’s no medicine for regret:

It almost hurts for me to say this, but I, Wang Bo-Si from Feng-Xian, China, now claim invention copyright to *the internet, the iPhone, and Artificial Intelligence!*

NOTE ON CHINESE NAMES (which are purely fictional):

Wang Bo-Si (narrator) translates to 王博思

Li Kai-Ming (the village teacher) translates to 李开明

Blisters on the Soles of our Feet

Shanghai High School International Division, Zhang, Ariel – 15

Rust tinted the air and painted the sky pink across the Hebei–Henan borders. Blisters and calluses that formed on the soles of our feet and joints of our knuckles starting from the very first day of work were now rock–hard to protect us from heavy metal lifting. We trudged home with our now weathered face and aching back dreading the next day to come.

It was year 960, and China accelerated forward with new technologies and factories popping up everywhere. Little did we common farmers and merchants know that it would later surge into dark economic prosperity. Small talk with all the farmers, while sweat beads trickled down our faces from the scorching sun, led to the conclusion that we were perplexed by such a surge in this burst that swirled around. We didn't learn much as our knowledge was only but limited to how to plow, sow, and harvest. And fate stayed that way, up until one morning that was greeted by the stomping of horse hooves and the screeching blare of a horn. A soldier, high upon high horse rolled out a notice and with no inflection read aloud,

“The increase in population has led our China to become full of technical advantages. With dutiful respect to your country, all are expected to keep up with the economic bursts. Thus, there has been an order for off–season farmers in this very village to now work at the iron factory from now on. There will be money granted upon efforts.”

Chaos erupted within the crowd. “Money” was only a gold–colored plastic sign under a few jiaozi per day of work. Mere words morphed to sound pretty were as disgusting as the thought of working in iron–smithing factories. But who was to say against the upper class? We were nothing more than hammers and chisels to them and our voices were pretty much beckoned away with the flick of a hand. Frantic pranced around our faces which reflected on each and every farmer who saw this. Only frantic pranced helplessly. Dragging one foot in front of the other now seemed too hard of a task when the hopelessness of power towered over us.

And so, we pulled away from their fields and learned how to smith with iron. Human labor intertwined with the smell of coal and metal being modeled encircled our life. Dirt filled the gaps in our fingernails as we poured the molten metal into sets of identical molds. We smithed weapons, we smithed for our agricultural tools, and we smithed from the most basic woks to the most complex Buddhist statues. A three to four–meter–high blast furnace roared as it was stuffed with charcoal and iron ore. In teams of four and six, men worked on shift, as scorching hot molten metal slithered out of the base of those blast furnaces with the burning of fuel. The mass production of iron brought wealth to our country for some time, and maybe for that fraction of a second in history's time, we were happy. Our fate as poor farmers had changed as we saw our country take a step forward to success.

But we were only poor farmers. A poor farmer could only see dirt under a general's boots.

Soon enough, Mother Earth frowned her eyebrows. It wasn't labor that ran out, nor was it the availability of iron. It was the fuel that melted all the iron that limited the production. And at the same time, an order was once again delivered from a soldier,

“Towards the north shall the Liao Empire settle. And towards the north is our motherland being controlled. Mongolian empires and nomadic groups started their invasion. War, my smithers, has loomed over us. There has been an order to recruit a massive army, thus, it is expected of these factories to provide hundreds of suits of armor and tens of thousands of iron heads. Do not fail these warriors as they fight for the heartland and give them all the iron possible!”

Empathy was lacking in every single sentence, every word, every letter. Making weapons was hard enough. Now that there wasn't any fuel to even craft what was needed set trepidation into the air. The only solution to this was to stop the production of agricultural tools, statues for temples, and the everyday things common people needed in life. This was the only way to provide enough iron for the armies. Trepidation roared and was inscribed on our faces. The mass manufacturing of iron had led to the prices of these objects being low enough for regular farmers to afford. But if the production of these items is cut off, a wok could cost more than a month's worth of income. Only the rich had the power to afford such things. Our hearts were filled with anger and rebellion forcibly hidden with the terrors and constraints of knowing who we were and where we stood in society.

Puny voices echoed inside us. Timid reflections after a day's hard work seemed as frail as ever. The thought of wooden tools to plow a farm, and the cognition of dusty worn pots and old statues reflected little hope and motivation for iron smithing. For once, we wanted to take a step back. Each step forward sent fatigue and soreness that not even the calluses on the soles of our feet and knuckles could ever stand.

Pt II. Painful words in Stygian Ink

Rust tinted the air and painted the sky pink across the Hebei–Henan borders. Often, we sit down on wooden chairs padded with delicate designs on cushions working out nothing. On the right side, an ink brush lay on the desk, with fresh stygian ink wrapped around the tip. On the left, lightly placed we find a blank scroll of paper, destined to have something written on it, but not a speck of ink has landed on it yet. Guilt entwined with unspoken irritation raged on the tip of our tongues, never expressed, as our face lay straight, our eyes narrowed and denote, our voice bland and serious.

It was year 960, and China accelerated forward with new technologies and factories popping up everywhere. Trades of goods and materials lead to a great influence on economic and cultural diffusion. Politics, the latest invasions of our country, and stresses that China needed to urge the production of all industry lay on our hands and settled like a mountain upon our shoulders. Generals both had the power and the responsibility of all people, from commoners to emperors. What was promised after passing the imperial exams where wealth and becoming a member of Guan Hu. We were told being a part of Guan Hu meant becoming a general, deserving respect, honor, wealth, and power. Only responsibility, tactics, invasions, and pressure flowed hand in hand with those sublime words. And so we, under the stressful urging of other empires, took out ink brush and wrote down in words of pain,

“The increase in population has led our China to become full of technical advantages. With dutiful respect to your country, all are expected to keep up with the economic bursts. Thus, there has been an order for off–season farmers in this very village to now work at the iron factory from now on. There will be money granted upon efforts.”

Chaos erupted within the crowd. There were people who agreed and people who disagreed. Meetings were held in vain and terror. Decisions were never right nor wrong as each fought for what he believed. Stuck in the middle, with jealous glances from farmers and merchants, and impossible expectations from emperors and the nobility left us on the verge of desperation. But we did what was best for our motherland's power and face, as we forcefully turned our eyes away from farmers we knew wanted to protest, forcefully turned our eyes away from the soul of mother earth, pushing it to its extreme.

And so, under our forced power, the distance yet powerful clinking of metal aged in our ears. But with that, China shot forward with the metal industry. By 1070, we had smithed China's iron production to 1.2 kilograms per capita per year. Iron was used in everything, providing farmers and commoners with an affordable cost that brought a smile to their faces. Half of the mountain that settled on our shoulders was lifted as we saw with our own eyes that China was growing stronger and wealthier. For a while, the ink brush and blank scrolls were not used to bring frowns to faces but danced across the paper as more plans shot forward to bring China to glory. We, generals, had

accomplished our goal in responsibility and honesty. What was expected was the honor and respect that we deserved after cruel tortures of rules to set and plans to take.

But the long-lost honor and respect we craved never came as history played us like fools. Invasions started from the Liao empire. Brows furrowed once again, and tension upraised after a minuscule break. As our brushes once again hovered above those blank scores taunting us, the news said that fuel ran out. With little fuel to melt iron, the production of iron would shrink. Responsibility and decision-making had started a race against time. With no other choice and desperation, another notice was sent under the looming dark skies,

“Towards the north shall the Liao Empire settle. And towards the north is our motherland being controlled. Mongolian empires and nomadic groups started their invasion. War, my smiths, has loomed over us. There has been an order to recruit a massive army, thus, it is expected of these factories to provide hundreds of suits of armor and tens of thousands of iron heads. Do not fail these warriors as they fight for the heartland and give them all the iron possible!”

Empathy was lacking in every single sentence, every word, every letter. But each and every letter was forced with pain that was never wanted. Knowing that the once-affordable iron woks or agricultural tools would now become a luxury that only the wealthy could afford hurt us too. But in the eyes of China, laborers did mean little. We were plainly just the ones in the middle that acted so bland in front of all. We had control and utmost power of actually nothing. Empathy not only lacked in the words that we wrote down, but empathy lacked in our lives, which was all but focused on making China glamorous. The industrial growth of iron led trade to flourish. It led trade to flourish over the sweat beads of workers and the feeble pain of generals.

Puny voices echoed inside us. It was the tip of exasperation, with infinite shadows scampering around, bouncing around the corners slipping away from our grasp. It wasn't hard to control and lead. It was hard to control and lead with a mountain upon our shoulders, each decision bringing fury to one part of our country as perfect paradises never existed. Those painful ink brushes and empty scrolls ached as stygian ink dyed the white to black, iron to armor, hearts to stone.

How I took part in the invention of paper

SKH Tang Shiu Kin Secondary School, Chung, Pui Lam – 16

“And that’s the history of the Four Great Inventions of China. Well that’s all for today, goodbye class.”

“Goodbye and thank you, Ms. Chan.”

After two long lessons of Chinese history, it is finally recess. I’d been sitting and waiting for this lesson to end since the moment it started. It’s not that I dislike Chinese history, it’s just that the lessons were too boring for me. What’s the point of learning history when you’re not going to use it in the future?

“It’s not like you can learn anything else from the four great inventions other than the inventing process.” This was what I thought when bright light flashed upon my eyes, everything became blurry and slowly faded into darkness.

“Ugh, what happened?” I said as I opened my eyes. All I remembered was fainting after seeing a flash of light. I looked around to see where I was. To my surprise, I was not in my school’s sick bay but instead in some kind of old Chinese village where everyone was wearing those ancient Chinese clothing I saw in our history books.

“There is no way I traveled back in time... or is there?” I quickly went and asked the first person I saw.

“What dynasty is it?”

“Strange question but it is the Han dynasty,” the man replied.

So I somehow travelled back in time to the Han dynasty and I didn’t think I knew how to get back, the best thing I could do now is to find a place to stay and probably a job so I didn’t starve to death. I introduced myself to the man and ask if there was anywhere in this place that provided a shelter and work so I could earn money.

“The palace workshop is looking for more workers, I suppose it also provides shelter and food other than the basic salary so if you’re interested you can start working today.”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you, mister...”

“Oh, almost forgot to introduce myself, I’m Cai Lun by the way.”

Wait...WHAT? The Cai Lun who invented paper? I couldn’t believe the first person I talked to after travelling in time is a historical figure from my Chinese history book! I had to know if he had invented paper yet, if not maybe I could help. So I asked him if he had ever thought of making paper.

“I have thought of making paper that is cheaper and easier to write on but I don’t know how, I have read a lot of scrolls about paper making but I just can’t figure it out. The materials are always either too expensive or makes the paper too rough to write on. Why did you ask? Do you have any good ideas?” If only I had paid more attention in Chinese history lessons, I would have remembered all of the ingredients but I didn’t, so I could only reply with a no.

There’s a question that always bothered me, why did he have to invent paper in the first place? It’s not like there wasn’t anything to write on before. That’s when he told me his story. “I have gained interest in paper making recently, so I tried getting more information by reading bamboo scrolls. That’s when I realised the problem. The bamboo scrolls can only carry a certain amount of information. If you want to learn something by reading, you have to read dozens of bamboo scrolls which was very inconvenient and very heavy to carry around. That’s when I thought of inventing a new kind of paper, the type of paper that can be easy to write on and is light enough to carry around.” He wanted to invent this new type of paper so that people no longer had to write on or buy large and heavy amounts of bamboo scrolls. Paper also takes up less space than bamboo scrolls too so people could have more storage space. Before I could ask any more questions, he spoke, “Since you seem to have a keen interest in paper making, why don’t you help me with the invention of this new kind of paper?”

“Wait...you’re asking me? Really? Me?” I stood still in shock for a few seconds suddenly realising he was still waiting for my answer, I blurted out “Yes!” Who doesn’t want to be a part of inventing one of China’s greatest inventions? And this is how I somehow participated in one of China’s greatest inventions of all time.

We went searching for suitable materials next morning. The only thing I remembered about paper making from my textbook was that the materials are all some kind of fibre. I told Cai Lun about this and we started gathering materials that contained fibre. We found some old rags, leaves, twigs, tree bark, hemp waste and old fishing nets. All of them were free of charge as they are mostly waste that people didn’t want. We experimented for days to find the perfect combination and method to make the paper but nothing really worked. We managed to remove some materials that cannot be made into paper and were left with these four materials: old rags, tree bark, hemp waste and old fishing nets. After a week of experimenting, we finally came up with the perfect steps to make the paper. Cai Lun was so excited about the success and immediately took the finished product to the emperor, hoping it could be largely produced so everyone could enjoy his new invention and the many benefits that came with it.

At this moment, I finally realised the importance of these inventions. These inventions weren’t invented for no reason. People invented them in the hope of making their life easier and more convenient, hence improving their living standards. Without these inventions, people’s lifestyles may not have been improved and we may not have all the things we have now. Learning about these inventions not only teaches us their invention process but also teaches us the importance of innovation and perseverance. Without innovation, the mankind may not be able to develop any further and can only stay at the same place without any improvement. Without perseverance, inventors may give up on their inventions because of a few failures or problems encountered. I learnt a lot from this strange adventure. As I was going to find Cai Lun, thinking if I couldn’t find my way back to the future, at least I would have a person to stay with for the rest of my life, then the same bright light appeared from nowhere.

This time I didn’t faint instantly, a portal-like thing appeared in front of me and immediately sucked me in like a vacuum. “I didn’t even have the time to say goodbye.” I thought to myself and the next thing I knew was that I was already sitting at my seat in my classroom.

To my surprise, I was transported to the time when my Chinese history class had just started. “Alright class, today we will be learning about the four great inventions of China. Now open your book to page 56...”said Ms. Chan. I flipped open my book thinking maybe all of this was just a dream until I saw my name in one of the paragraphs about Cai Lun. “Oh. Look, one of these people who helped Cai Lun has the exact name as yours,” my classmates told me. Only I know that the person in the history book is actually me, and I technically just changed history.

The Fascinating Tales Of 'Tik-Tok' Devices: Timepieces In China

SKH Tang Shiu Kin Secondary School, Fok, Tsz Him – 12

‘Finally finished my homework!’ I immediately tidied up my enervating assignments into my school bag, exhausted from all the workload I had. I quickly laid on the sofa with slight drowsiness, and I gazed at the clock, hanging on the wall.

Suddenly, curiosity emerged my mind and I kept wondering the same question for hours in darkness: how did China measure time in the past? I decided to pop out from the sofa, and opened my laptop to browse articles related, just to content my inquisitive mind.

In the modern century, clocks are widely used to measure time, which are devices that measures and reports time. Clocks exist as a significant necessity towards many people to know the present hour, minute, and even

seconds, and they almost appear everywhere you can imagine, such as on your phone, houses, shopping malls, MTR stations, and even in satellites! They also exist different forms, from large time reporters, to small portable watches, and even on digital smart phones, websites in the internet. Clocks do play an important role towards the world nowadays.

However, time is also important in ancient China. China has been an agrarian society for most of its history, where many people carried out cultivation. For example, it was found that in the Qing dynasty, a majority of the population (90%) lived by agriculture, no matter poor peasants or the rich. Therefore, time also plays a significant role towards ancient China as it directly relates to agriculture. Farmers needed to carry out key processes at proper timings to maximize crop yields, such as knowing when to plough the soil, planting and the harvesting crops at the right time.

But how did ancient Chinese people knew time? Most farmers used the agricultural calendar (Nongli), which is still utilized nowadays. This calendar system was invented at around 2697 BC and was related to the mythical figure of the emperor Huang Di. It divides the years into seasons for aiding cultivation, and was integrated from 2 types of calendars. The first type is the solar calendar, which is based on the positions of the sun among seasons, and is quite similar compared with the Gregorian calendar; the second type is the lunar calendar which is based on the orbit of the moon around the Earth, consisting of only 354/355 days a year.

The calendar also consists of different 24 solar terms. They are periods that marks a particular natural phenomenon or an astronomical event. These solar terms equally divide the year into segments based on the Earth's movements around the sun. Such features of the calendar system play an important role and influence towards agricultural production as it helps the farming community to make decisions carry out agricultural and daily activities, and to help prepare for different events happening during the season, such as equipping for a rainfall. Apart from this, it also has a great influence towards Chinese culture as well.

Moreover, ancient China also made tools to measure time within day and night. Sundials were developed and they seemed to be the earliest timekeeping devices in China. It was found that to be used since the Zhou dynasty. Sundials of China featured a gnomon, which is a pole attached vertically on the sundial on the dial plate, the base of the sundial. As the Earth rotates around the polar axis, the sun appears to be at different positions during the day. People observed such phenomenon and started to develop sundials to cast shadows of gnomon towards the dial plate through varying positions of the sun, and the time can be identified by the position where the shadow is pointing on the plate. Sundials played a significant role on marking the passage of time accurately as it relies on the rotation of the Earth.

However, sundials could be only used during daytime because of the absence of sunlight in the hours of dark. People at that time could not even recognize time intervals in the dead of the night. Therefore, more advanced timekeeping tools started to evolve. Water clocks, known as clepsydra, started to develop at that time. Moreover, sundials could not maintain a constant division of time as it assumes length of days on the Earth are constantly 24 hours.

Water clocks were instruments that measured time by the regulation of water flow. Various types of principles of water clocks were also developed: some used the rate of overflow to measure time, while some measured time with a steelyard, and even simply with a sinking bowl! Despite water clocks were able to measure time with less than 1% of percentage error, many of them were still improved by different people at the same time. Some had included a speed control system to adjust the water flow rate, while some improved the accuracy of water clocks, fostering the contrivance of mechanical clocks.

The world's first mechanical clock was made by Yi Xing, a Chinese inventor and a Buddhist monk. Originally it was planned to be served as an astronomical instrument, but it accidentally worked as a clock. It operates by dripping water to buckets attached on a big wheel to power it and make continuous revolutions within 24 hours.

Another famous mechanical clock was built by Zhang Sixun, which also worked with a similar principle but it employed the usage of mercury instead of water. The reason is because water would freeze easily during frosty, frigid winters, making the clock stop working, so mercury can avoid such problem as it has a low freezing point. Such inventions not only improved the accuracy and standardized measurements of time in the past, but it also advances studies of astronomy and even shows a great influence of Chinese culture.

After seeing numerous information on how did ancient Chinese refined the technology of timekeeping in ancient time, I was amazed by the intelligence of Chinese people who worked out different inventions by observing the phenomena happening around them, such as the varying positions of the sun, the counting of days where the moon orbited around the earth... all were such fascinating discoveries advances the improvement in managing and interpreting time intervals. In fact, under the world with such poor knowledge built, I was also astonished about their effort towards discoveries, admiring their perseverance.

When I was scrolling among countless websites and articles, I noticed a piece of news article which wrote: 'Chinese atomic clock released to space, bounding to be the most accurate clock in the world'. Such interesting topic aroused my attention, so I decided to press into the link and I browsed the riveting website with questions in my mind, what is an atomic clock?

Atomic clocks are one of the most advanced inventions in the world. They are clocks that measure time precisely almost with a very small error, so they are widely applied in navigations by satellite networks, GPS, telecommunication networks and scientific research. They work by monitoring the resonant frequency of atoms based on their different energy levels. Recently, different atomic clocks were invented and improved, and reducing the accuracy on the measurement of time by changing the type of atoms used, the energy level transitions used, and developed cold atomic clocks to slow down the movement of particles to minimize possible errors.

For example, China developed hydrogen maser clocks and cesium clocks, which are also similar to atomic clocks. Hydrogen maser clocks have small bottles of hydrogen gas leaked out and sends them through a magnetic gate to measure the energy contained, which has a short term stability; while cesium clocks they expose cesium atoms to microwaves and count their oscillating frequencies, which have a long term stability. Despite both types of clocks are authentic and accurate, their performances that varies with environments and other factors, so their measuring results may be easily affected by other factors.

Moreover, China also developed the world's thinnest atomic clock, which is the rubidium atomic clock. It has just 40 mm thick, which is so tiny that it can fit in the palm of hands. Such clock is also applied on many aviation, navigation and telecommunication aspects, and a large number of them are being carried with satellites to provide positioning as well.

Therefore, China also modified different atomic clocks and improved them. Finally, the cold atomic clock was invented in 2016, and it became the most accurate atomic clock around the world. This clock features low-frequency lasers to help lower the temperature in the clock, slowing down the movement of atoms. This helps to reduce the likelihood of counting errors. Moreover, its preciseness would not be affected by different physical environments, and it is much light-weighted compared with other types of atomic clocks. Such features led to a great breakthrough towards the development of atomic clocks, and it improves accuracy of different navigations, positioning as well. It is now operating in the Tiangong space station and helps establish a space-based timekeeping system. However, China is still planning about how to benefic people around the world with such precise atomic clocks.

After reading the news, I was astonished by such rapid developments of China's technology, from simple sundials, lunar-solar calendars, to microscopic atomic clocks. China's technology development not only just improves time accuracy, but the life of people around the globe. From cultivation, knowing the time, to navigation and even positioning a small object on a globe, China has the tales of timepieces written in a fascinating journey, and indeed it

had a great influence around the world. It helped people to manage different personal events well, knowing their ways when sailing in the endless ocean, or even forecasting weather in the future, preventing natural hazards and minimizing the loss. China did play an important role towards science and technology.

However, China still has their ultimate goal. In the future, China may develop even accurate atomic clocks that merely drifts off only a second faster or slower than the life of the universe. Will China ever reach their goal? Let us wait and see their spectacular tales of timepieces continue to develop in the future.