



Fiction

Group 1

The Magical Museum

Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Lui, Ching Yin Devon – 8

I leaned against the cold glass to peer at the vibrant robes embroidered with gold thread and pearls. The tiny writing on the panel caught my attention. I wiggled my way through the crowd and when I finally gripped the railing to read it, I felt a small gust of wind tugging my hair. Soon, I was playing tug of war with the wind which grew stronger by the second. I searched for help but I was too tiny for anyone to notice me. I tumbled into a flashing and swirling wormhole. Fuzzy images of a man with dark skin and a crescent-shaped scar on his forehead zipped past. Everything was topsy-turvy.

Thud. Thud. Thud. I opened my eyes to a man dressed in shiny armour who was beating me with a stick. Surprisingly, I felt no pain! I had never seen people dressing so strangely! Where am I?

A familiar stern-looking old man yelled in fury, "Beat this cunning rock until it confesses why it stole the boy's hard-earned money!" A tear-streaked young boy whimpered sadly as he clutched his basket of fried breadsticks. I tried to explain that I did not steal but I was speechless. My body felt stiff and cramped as if I were trapped in a box. Oh! I am the rock! That man must have gone cuckoo! Who would think a rock could move, let alone steal money?

Many people stopped to laugh at him. Even the crying boy smiled. However, the old man did not flinch and ordered his men to beat harder. I was petrified. Would I stay here forever? He whispered in a soldier's ear. They came back with basins of water.

I racked my brain to recall who the man was. It was then that I remembered I was at the Judge Pao exhibition and his portrait was hung at the exit. No wonder I had seen him before! His deep voice rumbled, "I know we all pity the boy for losing money which he uses to buy his mother's medicine. I urge you to drop a coin in the basins to support him through this difficult time."

Everyone eagerly placed their coins. When a suspicious man with twitching lips dropped in his, oil droplets appeared and formed a layer on the water. "Seize him!" Judge Pao thundered. No one understood him until he showed the bowl to the crowd. I finally realized that the rock beating was just to attract attention so that he could lure the crowd in and test whether their coins were drenched in the oil of the breadsticks. What a deviously clever man!

Whoosh! I felt as light as a cloud and was sucked back into the wormhole. "Rock!" I heard my mom shout, "We have been looking for you. Turns out you've dozed off here! Let's leave before the museum closes." As I walked out, I turned around to see the portrait of Judge Pao winking at me. I would never forget this adventure!

Tale of Two Brothers

German Swiss International School, Chadha, Ziya – 7

Once there were two stepbrothers, Ming-Tao Huang, and Zi Rui Wang, in the town of Nanjing. Over the years, they had several quarrels over the inheritance of their family property. Even though they lived next door to each other, they barely met each other.

One day Ming-Tao approached Zi Rui and said, "Let's forget our past differences and learn to live happily together. Come over to my home for some tea this evening." Zi Rui felt that his brother had taken an initiative to be friends, so he gladly accepted the invitation. Little did he know that Ming-Tao's intentions were not good.

In the evening, when Zi Rui arrived at Ming-Tao, they greeted each other happily. Ming-Tao asked his wife, Hui Ying, to get tea ready for them. Once it was ready, Ming-Tao excused himself and went to collect the tea from his wife. Both the brothers had an enjoyable evening and Zi Rui went home glad. But soon he started to feel uneasy and sick. His wife, Xiao Dan, called in the doctor. The doctor said, "I am afraid he has been poisoned and I cannot save him." Zi Rui passed away the same night.

In the morning, Xiao Dan, approached the Court of Judge Pao seeking justice for her husband and to imprison Ming-Tao Huang for his misdeed. Judge Pao called Ming-Tao to his court. Ming-Tao approached the court; his heart was thumping with fear.

Judge Pao asked him, "Have you poisoned Zi Rui Wang?"

Ming-Tao replied, "No. I did not. He met me in the evening for tea and was completely fine when leaving my home."

Judge Pao said, "Why did you unexpectedly call him for tea to your home after so many years of quarrelling?"

Ming-Tao said, "I had a change of heart and wanted to make amends for my past behaviour."

Judge Pao asked, "Why the sudden change of heart?"

Ming-Tao replied, "I wanted the relationship between our families to improve."

Judge Pao then said, "In that case, I believe that you had good intentions towards your brother and would be glad that I have decided to grant the ownership of the disputed property to Zi Rui Wang's family for their well-being."

Ming-Tao got scared at this announcement and questioned Judge Pao, "How can that happen? How can you do that? How can my brother's family get the share when he is not alive anymore?"

Judge Pao smiled, and realisation dawned on Ming-Tao that he had blurted out his own secret and had fallen into the trap that Judge Pao laid.

Judge Pao said, "In your greed, you confessed that it was your intention to kill your brother for the property. No matter how hard one tries, one cannot hide the truth forever. I order that Ming-Tao is imprisoned for his crime and the property in question is to be equally shared between the two families."

Everyone praised Judge Pao for his quick wit and justice.

Judge Pao and the Mysterious Flood

German Swiss International School, Ho, William – 7

The city of Hefei boasted a hero – Judge Pao. He stood 7 feet tall with a stern and intimidating look. He had downturned eyebrows and an extremely long goatee. Despite his appearance, he was one of the most intelligent and revered officials in Ancient China.

Resting in his courtyard, an ancient Confucius scroll resting gently on his lap the Judge was interrupted by panicked shrieks from the locals. “Everyone, run for your lives!” an anxious villager exclaimed as he bolted for his life. Judge Pao peered through the red doors of his house and witnessed the chaos. In the far distance, a torrent of water came surging down from the peak of Hefei’s tallest mountain, uprooting everything in its path. Thinking quickly, he climbed onto his green-tiled roof and reassured the surrounding civilians in a firm voice, “Stay calm, everyone! I will investigate!”

As the flood receded, Judge Pao donned his shimmering lamellar armour, the individual metal plates chinking gently. As the Judge began to move through the chaos, his black leather boots gripped the mud, and he tightly held his Zhuge crossbow. His investigation started by scouring the foot of the mountain for clues.

As Judge Pao combed through the area, he spotted a scrunched-up parchment. He unfolded it and revealed a blueprint for an illegal pavilion, the location astride the source of the flooded river.

“Aha! This must be what caused the flood!” he exclaimed. At the bottom of the parchment paper was a red seal from a prominent and influential family. Judge Pao was utterly stunned, but more than that, he was angry at the selfishness exhibited by the family.

Further up the mountain, he found weapons littered across the grass. “Very suspicious indeed ...” he whispered while stroking his beard, “this certainly implies that someone is guarding this place”.

He saw five flashes in the distance. He looked at the sky and watched several arrows rain down on him. Within seconds, four had missed, glancing off his armour.

“What is going on!” he bellowed, running resolutely towards the danger on the mountain’s summit. When he reached the top, he saw five ballistae lining the walls of an imposing imperial-style pavilion. A loud voice nearby yelled, “FIRE!” Quickly dodging the danger, Judge Pao returned fire, shooting arrows at the walls. He made footholds and ascended. Looking down at the pavilion, he realised he had to blow it up to restore the river’s natural course.

Judge Pao set gunpowder charges on the pavilion’s supports, lit the charges, and jumped into the water. With a “BOOM!” the pavilion vaporised, and the river rushed in, returning the landscape to normal.

Judge Pao arrived home with the arrogant family in chains for trial. All the villagers celebrated for five months and erected a golden statue of the Judge in the town centre. Centuries later, the statue still stands in the town square as a reminder to all who see it of the importance of justice, equity and the rule of law.

Trial of a Rock

St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Cheuk, Ching Yan – 7

My mother was busy all the time. She needed to do the housework, cook meals and take care of my little brother. I hoped I would do something to help my mum. One day, my brother lost his temper, mother was comforting him. I told my mum I could help her buy the food for tonight dinner. My mum appreciated the gesture and gave me some money.

I went to the market and bought some soy-sauce chicken and barbeque pork. The shopkeeper gave me a lot of oily change. Going back home, the path seemed a bit different to when I came before. I suddenly felt tired and sleepy. I thought it's still early. So, I leaned on the rock nearby and fell asleep. When I woke up, all my food and money was stolen. I cried loudly. A strong man with a dark face came up to me and asked, 'What happened, little child, why are you so sad?'

I was scared so I asked 'Who ...who are you?'

'I am Justice Pao!' he replied.

I told him what happened. He mused for a while. Then he asked Guard Zhan to move the rock, he said 'We will have a trial on it!' All the people wanted to see how to trial a rock, the court was full of citizens in a minute.

'Poor rock, the girl dozed off and lost coins on you, the thief must be you who told us the truth.' However, the rock kept silence. Justice Pao was irritated and shouted, 'You must be guilty, you will be beat with thirty planks!'

At the same time, Justice Pao asked the crowd, 'Should we help this poor girl, give her some coins, so she can buy some food and go home?' Justice Pao put a wooden bucket full of water in front of the door. He threw the first coin in the water and stood aside. Everyone followed but a dubious man who was reluctant to do so. Guard Zhan forced him to throw coins into the water. A layer of oil floated on the water. Justice Pao shouted loudly, 'You are the thief!' The man kneeled down immediately and said 'Sorry! Please forgive me!' Everyone was curious, how did Justice Pao know the man was the thief? He explained, 'The girl had oily change so when the coins were thrown in water, the oil must float up.' Everyone realized the trial of the rock is just the pretense to lure the real thief.

The thief gave back the money and said 'Sorry!'. I was upset, because there was no food I could take back home. Justice Pao shared some food with me. After a second, I opened my eyes, I was standing in front of my home. My mum and little brother welcomed me. They saw the food I brought and said 'How delicate is this food? Where did you buy it?' I was smiling, 'This is a secret!'

The Curious Case of the Missing Painting

St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Ho, Hin Yeung, Austin – 7

Judge Pao stood in the gleaming white halls of the M+ museum, studying the empty panels before him. His eyes were heavy with tiredness, it was 6:00am when he got called in to solve this bewildering mystery.

“Are you sure it was a small painting?” he asked the curator standing next to him.

“Yes, we have already checked the inventory. It’s strange, isn’t it?” the curator answered.

Judge Pao nodded in silence. The wall had been lightly scratched, but there was no other evidence to suggest any culprits. No windows were broken, no doors unhinged, and CCTV cameras only caught the thief’s back.

What’s most perplexing, is that the missing work of art was a small portrait of Queen Clare. It was easy to haul away for sure, but the painting was worth much less than the masterpieces by Monet, Cézanne and Van Gogh hanging intact in the very same room.

After a breakfast of fine toast and scrambled eggs, Judge Pao began his investigation interviewing all fifteen members of staff at the Museum. His mind whirled with different hypotheses; could there have been a hidden emerald in the canvas? By day end, he still had no suspects until he overheard a conversation.

“I am going to visit my daughter at the hospital. I took out some history books from the archives to share with her,” said conservator Albert.

“Well, I hope she finds our present day mystery exciting!” replied guard Liam.

Intrigued, Judge Pao headed down to the library and asked which books Albert had taken out. To his surprise, the scripts on loan were all about emperors! Content with his discovery, Judge Pao headed home and dived straight into bed.

The next morning, Judge Pao walked straight into the conservation studio. Head down and focused on restoring a painting, Albert hardly noticed his entrance.

“Albert. What were you doing yesterday morning and why did you borrow books on kings and queens? I have my suspicions that you stole the painting.” Judge Pao confronted Albert with a fishy look.

Taken aback, Albert jumped from his seat. “Um...er...ee...you see...” Albert stuttered, almost choking on his own words. “I went to visit my sick daughter, and she adores stories about kings and queens.”

Judge Pao cuts in, “So you stole the painting to gift her, in hopes that it will lift her spirits?”

Looking guilty and ashamed, Albert nodded. “I just wanted her to feel inspired, to have hope that she will get better and to see a smile on her face. I know I have to return it.”

Empathizing with Albert’s predicament, Judge Pao realised that although Albert had committed a crime, it was not out of malice. With that, he arranges for the painting to be returned to M+, and a framed print of it delivered to the hospital. Inviting Albert’s family to a special tour of the Museum, they resolve the mystery with grace and kindness.

The Cattle Slayer

St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Lai, Ka Kiu Kaye – 9

It was a busy day in Hoi Fung Fu, the imperial court of justice in the capital of Song Dynasty. A peasant, called Mr. Fung, rushed into the courtroom and asked for help from Judge Pao.

It was the strangest case that Judge Pao and his subordinates had ever heard of: Fung's cattle had had their tongues cut off!

Fung introduced himself to Judge Pao. He worked as a farmer and grew his crops on his own piece of land. Fung was not very rich but was regarded as better-off than the other farmers of the time.

During the medieval era, farmers utilized cattle for sowing, cultivation, harvesting and all sorts of difficult labor in the paddy fields. The Song government emphasized the importance of cattle in agricultural society by legislating laws forbidding anyone to kill cattle privately. Anyone who broke this law would be subject to one year of imprisonment.

Judge Pao realized that Fung had no reason to lie and break the law, because his cattle were his most valuable assets. If the cattle had lost their tongues, they would not be able to eat or work anymore. The owner would be forced to slaughter them. Pao pondered for a while and said to Fung,

“You can slay these cattle, dismantle them and sell their meat at the market.”

Whilst Fung worried this would be illegal, Pao promised that Fung was fully exempt in this case, as it was a crucial step in finding the culprit.

The next day, Fung carried the beef and sold it at the public market. Since the government prohibited anyone from killing cattle, beef was extremely scarce. However, the masses would not worry about where the meat had come from, because *purchasing* beef was not illegal. Therefore, within an hour, all the beef was sold out.

On the same day, a landlord named Mr. Yung ran into Judge Pao's court and wished to report the case that Mr. Fung had violated the cattle law. The culprit fell into his own trap. In the court, Yung and Fung recognized each other. Judge Pao sent his detectives to search for evidence in Mr. Yung's barn and found a sickle full of blood.

Yung began to confess to his crimes.

Fung and Yung were neighbors. They were also competitors of farm products and local farmlands. Their prolonged disputes developed into a hatred of each other. In order to get ahead, Yung set Fung up by cutting off the tongues of his cattle.

If Fung killed the cattle, Yung would report the case to the court and Fung would be punished. If Fung didn't kill them, his business would be hampered in any situation. However, Judge Pao traced the culprit by looking for the motive of committing this crime.

Justice descended upon Yung. He was fined ten taels of gold as compensation for Fung's cattle and was sentenced to two years of imprisonment for his crime of injuring the cattle. Fung was waived of any charges for slaughtering his cattle. The court case was broadly publicized as a lesson to society.

Who Stole my Time?

St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Wong, Hoi Wai Desmond – 7

Judge Pao, well known for his intelligence and calmness, faced many difficult cases during his time in civil service. However, there was a new tale of Judge Pao that had not been recorded before. It was about Pao and his friend, Li, who was lazy, and his habit was sleeping only.

Pao and Li were classmates while they were young. They lived next to each other in a village.

One day, Li went to visit Judge Pao because he found his time was stolen by someone. Pao asked, “What was going on?”

“When I was dozing on the bench in my courtyard yesterday, suddenly, something horrid appeared, a pale shadow popped out nearby and whispering in my ear.” Li said.

“Fetch me all your precious stuff that you own.” A shrill voice from the shadow.

“I was trembled, so I immediately woke up.” Told by Li.

“What did you lose then?” Pao wondered.

“I searched in the entire house already, including each room and garden, but nothing lose. Just the sky was turned into dark. I believed my time was stolen.” Li complained.

“It’s ridiculous. No worries, I will help you to find out the truth.” Pao promised.

Afterwards, Pao arrived at Li’s house and looking for proof. He asked Li’s parents whether they saw any stranger at that moment. They replied nothing unusual. Pao then trotted into every room and seek if there was any information left by the suspect. Unluckily, there was nothing can be traced.

In midnight, Pao pondered to visit Department of Hell and asked for Yama’s assist. “Young Pao, what can I do for you?” Yama asked solemnly.

“My friend, Li, who suspicious that his time was stolen while dozing by a pale awful stranger. Do you have any idea about that?” Pao answered.

Yama announced, “Um...I know exactly what’s happened on Li. In fact, he was in a dream, it’s not realistic. Time is the most valuable for people in the world, we cannot chase the time after it was past, therefore we ought to make good use of your time every day. Do you understand it now?”

The following day, Pao beckoned to Li and explained the reason in detail. “Time will not be stolen, only if you waste it.”

“Thank you, Pao. From now on, I know how to spend my time well.” Li realised.

Since then, Pao started to work hard and learned a lot of brilliant skills that led him to become a young detective and a successful judge in future.

The Mysterious Case of Bernard's Death

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Ching, Lauren – 8

A ghost of an old man stood behind two humongous glass doors. He was like a shivering kitten, lost in the rain.

The ghost, Bernard, took a glimpse of the sign stuck on the doors, it said: "Judge Pao – Yama of the Infernal Bureaucracy". He knocked twice.

"Enter." came a voice from inside.

Bernard shuffled in after shyly opening the door. Seated behind a desk was the famous detective, Judge Pao. He was scribbling in his notebook.

"Sir—" Bernard's voice drifted into the distance. "Sir—how—how"

Judge Pao had noticed Bernard, a little anxious. Judge Pao raised his eyebrows and set his pen down onto the table.

"H—Help, Judge Pao, I want to know h—how I died." Bernard spluttered.

"Everybody dies." Judge Pao answered.

"You're the world famous detective, will you help?" pleaded Bernard.

"Fine." bellowed Judge Pao, standing up and placing his notebook on his desk. *I know just the thing*, he thought as he strode towards a wooden drawer.

"Thank you!" he heard Bernard whisper gratefully.

Judge Pao pulled out a drawer and took out a glimmering sapphire.

"This is a time jewel, we're going back to the time of your death." explained Judge Pao. Bernard kept silent as the dead.

"Let's go." announced Judge Pao. "Back to the time of Bernard's death!" Judge Pao took Bernard's hand and the pair of them sank into a pale glittery mist.

Time whooshed by – Judge Pao saw many images flashing and vanishing like sparks from a lightning storm. Then slowly, the fog in his mind cleared like clouds after a rainstorm as they finally landed on solid ground.

They saw a younger, alive version of Bernard. He had the same white beard and glimmering green eyes and was stalking around the restaurant trying to find a free seat. The restaurant was very busy, it sounded like a zoo. Bernard, on the other hand, was silent as a mouse. Waiters and waitresses were hurrying back and forth, delivering meals. Chefs were shouting over each other in the kitchen. Suddenly, something happened.

THUD!

All was silent.

Everyone in the restaurant turned, including the chefs, who peeked through the kitchen window.

Someone screamed.

Bernard was lying on the floor. Some people stood frozen as if they were stuck in an ice block, some inched closer and crowded around Bernard.

The ghost of Bernard drifted out of the body, looking confused and upset then everything paused.

"*THAT'S IT?*" shrieked the ghost of Bernard.

Judge Pao kept silent.

"What?!" Bernard's mouth hung open so wide it almost reached the floor. "I just can't believe it." Bernard continued.

"You died of old age, Bernard. Dying is a part of life and you lived a full one." Judge Pao said.

Bernard's frown turned into a smile and he giggled in embarrassment. "You're right."

"Let's go, Bernard." Judge Pao said, waving. "Back to my office!" He reached into his pocket and pulled out the sapphire.

In Judge Pao's office, Bernard thanked Judge Pao for his help, he waved goodbye, then vanished.



Creative Writing
Fiction
Group 1

Irreplaceable Judge Pao

Kowloon Rhenish School, Lung, Yin Wang – 8

Once upon a time, there was a little town in China. In that town, there was Judge Pao. He always judged justly. Many people liked the way he judged and some people even pretended him to judge in court. This endangered Pao's fame and sometimes put Pao in a dangerous position.

One of the "fake Pao" was Peter. He had a dark face, dark mustache, long beard, and was of medium-height, like Judge Pao. He always judged recklessly and incompetently.

In a sunny afternoon, Peter saw an argument outside the court, so he looked into the case. It was about Mrs. Tse and Mrs. Cho claiming back their "son". In fact, that little boy belonged to either one of them. Peter checked the identity of the boy by dropping their blood in water. However, the bloods of the boy and the two women all matched. At that moment, Judge Pao was listening to court in casual wear and said, "Matching blood only means the same blood type, and different families can have the same blood type." He suggested that Mrs. Tse and Mrs. Cho to pull the son's feet and hands if they wanted to get their "son" back. "The lady who can get the boy can have her son back," said Pao. The crowd thought it was a ridiculous way to check the identity. First, the women pulled very hard and the boy's face turned red. At last, Mrs. Tse stopped pulling and cried. "Mrs. Tse is crying because she is afraid her son will be hurt. She is the mother of the boy," Pao announced. However, Peter thought Mrs. Cho could get the son and she was the mother instead. The crowd admired Pao and asked who he was. Pao showed his identity and sued Peter for pretending him.

After a week, Peter didn't admit his defeat, so he called his smart dad, Martin, for help. Martin pretended Pao to judge again. On a windy day, Martin saw a butcher and his customer argued in the shop and took them to the court. "What are you arguing about?" asked Martin. The butcher answered, "He went to my shop and stole my money." The customer exclaimed, "He is lying! Judge Pao." Martin questioned, "Can you prove these coins are yours?" They could not think of any evidence. After a while, the real Judge Pao passed by and said, "I have a way to find out the truth." Martin puzzled, "How?" Pao replied, "Please put these coins in a basin of water." Martin had no other methods but followed. They saw some oil floating on water surface. "The customer stole these coins because if the butcher touched the coins before, they should be oily," announced Pao. Next, Pao sued Martin for pretending him. The crowd in the court all applauded.

After that, more people in town admired Judge Pao because they knew more about his intelligence and fairness. However, nobody dared to pretend him again.

Lin's Corruption

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chung, Zhuo Feng Jayden – 9

In the year of 1046, in Kai Feng Province, there lived Judge Pao. He was a judge who solved all reported cases. This was one of the many cases that Judge Pao solved.

The greedy senior officer of the royal court, Officer Lin, wanted to ascend his rank to prime minister, so he bribed the current prime minister into promoting him to be his replacement, by giving him a lot of money. The prime minister accepted the offer, but at this point in time Officer Lin did not have the money he promised. To get the money, he threatened to sell the citizens' children unless they gave him their hard earned money. The citizens didn't know what to do because the money they save was supposed to be used to pay their taxes.

No one wanted their children sold, so they worked extremely hard and did what Officer Lin told them to. Mr. Wong was not an exception. He wanted to keep his children, so he started to work 20 hours a day and died of overworking as a result. Mrs. Wong and the children were all very sad, so Mrs. Wong reported the whole incident to Judge Pao. She told him how they had been threatened by the officer. Judge Pao raged, "Outrageous! Extremely selfish! I will have my men bring him here at once!"

One of Judge Pao's best fighters and a former palace guard, Zhan Zhao, was ordered to lead a team of men to arrest Officer Lin and have him brought to Judge Pao's court.

The Judge asked, "Will you confess to your crime?"

Lin lied, "I do not know what you are talking about as I have never committed a crime of any sort. I am just an innocent citizen and you have arrested the wrong man."

Mrs. Wong said, "He is lying! The senior officer has also threatened a lot of other villagers!"

Judge Pao said, "I am aware of this, and other villagers have already reported to me as well. I already have all the evidence on hand to prove Lin's guilt."

Pao then said to Lin, "The villagers was told to me how you treated them, so I decided to check if it was true. I sent Zhan Zhao to spy on you for a long time and he has gathered all evidence of your wrongdoings. So there is no way you can deny your crimes. Confess now!"

The officer said, "Yes, I committed those crimes but now that I have admitted what I have done, please do not punish me!"

Pao said, "You need to be punished for what you have done. I hereby sentence you to 30 years of prison!"

Mrs. Wong said, "Thank you Judge Pao for saving us and bringing Officer Lin to justice. It is lucky for us citizens of Kai Feng to have Judge Pao as our governor!"

Fiction

Group 2



The Disappearance of the Emperor's Vase

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Cheung, See Yan Deborah – 11

Judge Pao stretched lazily.

“Finally, a relaxing vacation. Away from the corruption of the emperor’s palace. Three whole days to just sit back and relax.”

Judge Pao sank back into his wooden chair and gazed thoughtfully out the window at the stunning view of the hotel he was staying in. Peacefully he closed his eyes, listening to the songbirds chirrup cheerfully, listening to the oak tree sway and its leaves rustle soothingly, listening to the muffled murmur of traffic and hawkers pushing their carts and hollering “fresh bread” and “cup-noodles”, listening...

“MASTER! There is a visitor wanting to see you!” A servant ran up the stairs, her shrill voice cutting through the harmonious atmosphere in an instant, like a sword slicing butter.

“Can it not wait?” Judge Pao asked sharply, he had been about to doze off when the servant girl burst in and he was deeply annoyed.

The girl shook her head frantically. Groaning inwardly, Judge Pao waved her away wearily. As he strode down the stairs purposefully, Judge Pao wondered who could be this important person, who had a case so urgent that not a moment could be wasted on anything else? Especially on my holiday, he thought bitterly. Then Judge Pao turned round the corner and stepped through the doorway.

What met his eye was a middle-aged man pacing nervously on the carpet, evidently distraught. Judge Pao immediately recognised him to be one of the Emperor's most trusted advisors, Da-fu. His face was lined with worry. When he saw Judge Pao his face seemed to brighten with relief as if a heavy load had been lifted from his shoulders. He motioned for everyone else to leave the room and closed the door.

“You must help me! Without it I will be ruined! I will lose everything!” Da-fu cried in despair, his hands were wringing the end of his cloak and the smooth silk fabric was becoming more and more crumpled.

Judge Pao placed a reassuring hand on Da-fu’s arm. “Tell me everything,” he said, firmly.

Da-fu drew a long shuddering breath, tried to compose himself and began:

“A month ago, the Imperial Emperor gave me a china vase as a reward for my accomplishments in spurring economic growth. When the vase arrived, I was dazzled by its beauty. In the sunlight that flooded in from the window, the vase looked so delicate and thin and it glowed in the light. However, the good luck did not last long. Yesterday, I found that my precious vase was missing!” Da-fu flung his hands in the air and flapped them helplessly like a bird in a tiny cage. “My army of servants searched everywhere, even the stables.” He paused for breath and continued, “And it gets worse! Tomorrow the Emperor will visit, he will think I do not value his gifts, and,” his voice lowered into a hoarse whisper. “I might be executed.”

Judge Pao realised the seriousness of the situation and nodded gravely. “We will set off right away.”

After a bumpy carriage ride to the lavish home of Da-fu. Da-fu brought Judge Pao to a room crammed with priceless artefacts and art. In the middle of the room on the carpet stood a lonely-looking pedestal. Judge Pao immediately started peering at the pedestal and carpet with a magnifying glass. Then, he asked, “May I have a look around?” Da-fu agreed. While Judge Pao wandered around the corridors, his eyes as sharp as a hawk’s, and in deep thought, muttering inaudible words to himself, Da-fu followed him anxiously behind him like a puppy, trying to gauge what was on his mind. Suddenly, he felt someone crash into himself and Da-fu landed with a bump on the floor. The person who had been knocked down—a small spry boy, scrambled to his feet. His vigilant beady eyes locked on Judge Pao, then Da-fu and a look of alarm came over his face and immediately he darted off into the maze of rooms without a word.

Da-fu shrugged Judge Pao’s curious look off dismissively. “That’s just my youngest son. He is six years old and too energetic, and he is always breaking things. He once disturbed me when I was at a meeting with the Finance

Minister! Nowadays he is very moody though and is always disappearing off, I really can't imagine why." Judge Pao pursed his lips together and furrowed his brow but said no more.

Judge Pao interviewed Da-fu's guards and servants, questioning them if they had seen anyone suspicious around. Finally, he announced, "The thief, and the vase are still in this house." A collective gasp went around the room. And murmurs of "Who is it?" could be heard. Avoiding the question, Judge Pao pulled an errand-boy aside and discreetly whispered in his ear. Then the errand boy ran out of the room. Moments later, he returned with...

"Son?!" demanded Da-Fu. The boy stared sullenly at the ground. Then seeing that every single pair of eyes were fixed on him in a steely glare, he explained, "Father was always too wrapped up in his work to spend time with me. That's why I started to break things to get his attention but that just made him annoyed with me. So I thought if I stole something then he would really start paying attention to me. Now I know I was wrong. Stealing is never the right answer. The vase is in my closet. Can you forgive me?" Da-fu nodded mutely and gave his son a hug.

After the commotion had died down, Da-fu asked Judge Pao how he had found out who stole the vase.

"Firstly, the pedestal was chipped slightly, a vase like yours would be too heavy for a small boy, so it was chipped when he lifted the vase. Also, there were scratch marks on the marble floor so I was even more sure that it was a small person who stole it—the scratch marks were made when he pushed it along the hallway."

"But how did you know it was my son?" persisted Da-fu.

"There were biscuit crumbs on the carpet beside the pedestal, and there were still crumbs on your son's face and shirt!" Judge Pao finished, his eyes twinkling.

And Da-fu marvelled at the perceptiveness of Judge Pao.

The Mysteries of Judge Pao's Afterlife

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Lo, Eilis – 11

White. That was all I saw. *Where am I?* As different shapes and colours started materialising in my vision and my thoughts flew back into order, recent memories came flooding back into my mind: A few other archaeologists and I went to Xiongzhou in hopes of unearthing some old relics. I had discovered a secret side door hidden in the ground, having opened it, I hopped into the empty voids of darkness without thinking and I'm now here.

Regaining my ability to see, I slowly sat up and looked around. Sitting on a dirt ground, there were trees surrounding me with crimson leaves that grew into the night sky, caressing the blood moon. Getting up to my feet, I was about to slip around the trees to explore when a low voice suddenly cut through my train of thought. "Who art thou, and how *in the name of heavenly gods* did thou appear?"

Spinning around, I found myself face-to-face with an old man. He wore a long blood-red robe that glowed against his ghost-white skin, and he had a dust grey hat plopped onto his head, akin to the ones people with high positions wore in Chinese folklore. With bushy eyebrows pinched together as he frowned at me, and a long but neatly trimmed beard dangling from his chin, he resembled a wise Chinese wizard. "Who...Art...Thou...?" he repeated as if I was hard of hearing.

I struggled to find my voice and replied in a sound equivalent to a mouse's squeak. "Anne." Returning the old man's stare, I asked. "Who are you? And why am I here?"

The man stroked his beard and nodded. He claimed to be the famous Judge Pao and this stunning place is The Department of Hell, where deceased people are judged based on their actions when they were alive. According to Bao Zheng legends, he bestowed justice as a human during the day, but at night, he became the immortal Yama of the Department of Hell and worked as a judge adjudicating the deceased. After death, he continued to advocate for justice. The secret door is the one the Song installed in the border prefecture of XiongZhou in the past and is now one of the doors of Hell.

Judge Pao offered to take me on a tour. Firstly, he led me to the place where they sentenced the deceased. He allowed me to stand near him while he judged one of the new arrivals. "Welcome to the Department of Hell. Tell me what happened to thou when thou were alive." He said warmly to the newcomer. The newcomer introduced himself and his background, which was quite intriguing. He insisted on being a rich silk merchant and was one of the wealthiest people in his day. As he spoke, Judge Pao's face changed from a welcoming expression into a pitiful face and held out a black basin. "The soul of thy victim called out to me. The riches thou carry is his, why is thou greedy and a liar? I detest injustice, so thou shall not enjoy heaven." Judge Pao drew out a sword with a dog head and sliced at the newcomer. I watched in horror as the spirit of the deceased person flew out from the neck and got thrown into a low pit, his screams echoing through the place and my mind. Judge Pao sighed, "Though it saddens me to see these folk wend into hell, injustice hast no place in heaven."

After I recovered from my shock, Judge Pao led me to another section with beautiful artwork aligned neatly against the wall. Even though the details of the art were elegant, the meaning behind all the layers of paint was not appealing. For example, one of the pictures showed a man being tossed into the burning flames of Hell, flames that looked like they would catch fire and burn the picture. But one of the pictures drew my attention. It was a picture of a girl's hand entering a scroll and travelling into the story. Then an idea struck me like lightning, "Judge Pao. If you have a library here, we can find this scroll and I can go home!" I gushed, feeling excitement for the first time since landing here.

"We do, it is located in the middle of this whole structure. Alas, it hath disappeared due to a... mistake." he said. Judge Pao seemed to be disappointed in my motivations for leaving, but eventually he said "We shall look for it." and thus started the mission of finding the library.

After a long walk, we halted in front of a pile of rubble. "The library should be under here." I said. "The scroll in the picture had swirly wooden patterns and a red seal." Without any further delay, we started digging, during the long process, we came across hundreds of different scrolls, none of them matching our description. Seemingly a decade later, Judge Pao called me over and showed me a scroll that was identical to the one in the picture.

'Art thou ready?' he asked and I nodded. Unfurling the scroll, I bent down and planted my palms on the wood. "Good luck, thou shall need it," whispered Judge Pao. Taking a deep breath, I pushed into the scroll with all my might and soon, my whole arm disappeared like the mist in the morning. Soon, Hell vanished from my sight and I was back where I found the secret door. With a crazy grin etched across my lips, I ran out to find my friends and tell them about my adventure.

My eyes landed on a small group of people and I bounded towards them, yelling. Weirdly, none of them responded or looked at me. Getting closer, and hearing what they were saying: “Where’s Anne?” “I don’t know, I looked everywhere!”

Frowning, I spoke again—no response. Looking down at my hands, I found myself staring at wisps of tenderly white smoke—I have transformed into a ghost.

The Curious Case of the Time–Traveller

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Pang, Yuet Wing – 11

I was strolling through the streets of Duanzhou when I noticed a crowd huddled around something, making a commotion.

I approached the horde and the crowd parted for me, and I peered down at...an unconscious man.

The man was wearing a strange costume. His torso was dressed in a plain, red coat that looked drab and dull compared to our patterned coats. There was an opening in the middle of the coat which revealed a pale blue garment that resembled a tunic except without the part that concealed the legs. The man's legs were covered with green trousers that looked like our pants, except that they were much baggier. Although the man was just dressed in odd-looking clothes, I got the feeling that this man did not belong here.

I ordered the people to move the strange man to the nearest house and waited for him to awaken. After a few hours, the man's eyes fluttered open. He instantly shot up and started speaking in a language I had never heard before. Based on his body language and facial expressions, I could tell that he was trying to ask me questions, but I couldn't understand a single word of what he was saying.

The man looked around frantically, wringing his hands, and his eyes lit up when he spotted some writing utensils lying on a desk. He dashed over to the desk and began to draw. First, he drew a simple man and pointed to himself. I understood what he meant. The strange man was the little man in the picture. He wrote some symbols underneath himself in the picture and said something that sounded like 'Harf'. I assumed that was his name. Using this kind of communication, he told me his tale. Harf had been living his normal life dozens, perhaps even hundreds of years after I did, and had teleported to the distant past, with no idea how to return home. It sounded like a made-up story, but all the pieces fit together: Harf's bizarre-looking clothes, the strange language. The future would mean advanced technology, which would surely enable people to travel through time. It was certainly possible.

Although I had no idea how to get Harf back to his time, I accepted the challenge, as I couldn't bear to abandon Harf in an unfamiliar world.

I began my investigation with a detailed interview. The language barrier was still a major issue, and a few hours and a lot of illustrations later, I gathered a sizeable amount of information.

Harf had been born a mind-blowing one-and-a-half thousand years after I died and was raised in Hong Kong. Recently, he had single-handedly invented the machine that enabled the user to travel through time. Unfortunately, he had been so eager to test out the revolutionary invention that he hadn't thought about how he would get back to his time, and ended up stuck in the past with no way to go home.

Just as I was wrapping up the interview, someone knocked urgently on the door. I opened the door. One of my friends burst in and shouted my name.

"Bao Zheng! Bao Zheng!"

He then informed me that a body had just been found at the bottom of a pond, and it was estimated that it had been there for about a week before it was discovered. The victim's throat had been slit before she was dumped into the pond to hide the evidence.

Behind me, Harf made a strangled noise and I whirled around to face him, asking if he knew anything about the murder, since he was from the future. He hastily shook his head, muttering something like 'can't interfere with history.' It was only after I threatened to use torture that he reluctantly revealed what he knew. (Apparently, he wasn't aware that I never resorted to torture.)

A week before, a man (Harf was unable to say his name, due to our language barrier) was forced to marry a woman he hated. He hated his wife so much that he plotted to kill her and disposed of her body in the pond after the deed was done.

It was at that time that I began to get suspicious. Why turn to murder instead of divorce? After all, divorcing was a lot less messy, and killing would very likely lead to execution, whereas divorce wouldn't. There was something else that was off about Harf. If he really was ingenious enough to create the time-travel machine all by himself, surely he would consider all the possibilities before he tested his invention? The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. What if Harf wasn't from the future at all? What if he had just made up the entire story to cover something up? Something like...an assassination?

I remembered 'Harf's' reaction to the news about the murder. If my suspicions were true, he could not be trusted. I looked up from my deep thoughts to study 'Harf' and advanced towards him.

Following an interrogation and some threats, he, at long last, cracked under the pressure and told me everything. He had, indeed, committed the murder, and I soon found out why. A year ago, he had lost his job and had to resort to stealing to make ends meet. Recently, his wife (whom he had recently married) had discovered his secret and 'Harf' had been forced to dispatch her in order to keep her mouth shut. He had concocted this elaborate plot in order to direct suspicion away from him, and it had worked, at least until I had discovered flaws in his story.

Then, things got even more shocking. After an investigation to find out 'Harf's' identity, I discovered that he was my daughter-in-law's brother! At that point, I was hesitant to apprehend him for a second. However, bearing justice in mind, I had no choice but to convict him of murder and sentence him to death.

Case closed.

New Tales of Judge Pao

ESF Kennedy School, Wu, Liam Emery – 10

One day I was sitting comfortably in my courtyard garden, immersed in the sounds of the pristine fountain gurgling nearby. The sun rested on my face as I enjoyed the pleasant surroundings. Suddenly, a chill burst of wind slammed the cosy garden gates against the courtyard wall, and I started with an irritable grunt.

“Who so rudely interrupted my relaxation?” I grumbled.

“I deeply apologise for the terrible inconvenience, ... Y–your Honour, J–judge Pao!” stuttered the obsequious bailiff, bowing deeply.

How typical! Bailiff Jao was always pretending to be an ideal servant with his excessively polite and unnecessary chatter. It was a complete waste of time.

“Yes, yes, yes. Please hurry and tell me WHY you disturbed me in the first place?” I demanded.

“Apologies, Your Honour! An attorney informed me there is a complaint by a petitioner who is desperate to meet you,” he whimpered sheepishly.

I leisurely proceeded to my chambers to put on the traditional silk robes necessary to hear this unfortunate petitioner’s case. Although I had not yet met him, he was beginning to arouse my sympathy. Why would he be in a rush to meet me?

As I returned to the courtyard through the front entryway, I noticed that Bailiff Jao was fidgeting and peering at the sundial next to the fountain. Realising the petitioner must be suffering greatly, I quickened my pace.

Upon entering the court building, I adjusted to its bustling activities. At the end of a long hall, I found several attorneys and scribes already waiting, numerous scrolls laid out meticulously on the tables in front of them. The petitioner was there as well, exhibiting a grim but determined expression.

“My wife was almost killed on the road by a vicious murderer. He is currently being detained. I beseech you to put him on trial to preserve the honour of my family,” he uttered gravely.

“Hmm,” murmured the attorneys, carefully stroking their lengthy beards.

“We will see what we can do,” I declared simply.

After gathering the basic facts of the case, I excused myself from the meeting and, accompanied by several personal guards, made my way to the petitioner’s home. A terrible stench of manure pervaded the atmosphere around the cottage, and I wrinkled my nose reflexively, repulsed and nauseated. Upon entering the house, I almost began to regret making this visit. Before me, lying in a small, soiled bed within a dark, damp room, was the young female. Although only in her early twenties, she had aged rapidly, and her once dark–brown hair was now streaked with grey. She filled the entire cramped house with horrendous groans.

Nearing the bedside, I saw her eyes were full of dread. “Hello, I am Judge Pao,” I informed her. “I have come to investigate this terrible incident on your husband’s behalf.” Strangely, her great pain seemed to subside while her face crumpled in despair. “May I please see your wound?” I inquired. Without uttering a word, she unfolded her collar, revealing the immense gash of a violent knife just below her shoulder. Maintaining a calm demeanour despite the shocking scene, I thanked her and quickly left to examine her alleged attacker.

After a short journey, my guards and I came upon the prison, a foreboding structure casting a dark shadow over the lush fields beside it. At the entrance, I asked the chief guard to see the prisoner; but for some inexplicable reason, he failed to recognize me – an unforgivable offence. Finally, having stared at my identification documents for a long time, he grudgingly let me in.

As I arrived at cell 5482, I glanced at the prisoner through the iron bars. He was unusually small, with a height that would barely reach my waist and very underdeveloped limbs. Obviously a poor peasant, he stood silently, staring

dismally at the floor. I glanced at the cell number again, wondering if I had come to the wrong location, but quickly verified that this was indeed the correct prisoner.

Concealing my thoughts, I gathered up my robes and headed to the nearest guard. "You must free the prisoner in cell 5482 and then follow me!" I demanded. The guard's eyes widened suspiciously; but then, unlike the unwise fellow I had met at the entrance, he quickly recognized who I was, and retrieved a massive set of keys. Fumbling with them a few long moments, he finally came upon the one for cell 5482. With atrocious screeching, the heavy, rusted door opened. Upon learning his fate, the inmate fell to his knees and bowed in gratitude.

I gestured to the guard and remarked, "Are you coming or not?"

"Of course!" he said quickly, gathering several other guards.

"I apologise for the intrusion, but you are under arrest for attempting to murder your wife!" I snarled. "The person you accused was not of sufficient height to stab your wife so violently. In fact, that poor man actually stopped you from killing your wife, and you called the authorities to have him arrested!"

Three months later:

I lethargically strolled around the neighbourhood's outer wall, surprised to find this ordinary pastime quite pleasurable. Having relaxed to my heart's content since closing the case of the murderous husband, I had become somewhat wearisome of the daily routine. As I turned a corner, Bailiff Jao unexpectedly rushed towards me in a cloud of dust, his face slick with sweat from the heavy sun.

"Excuse me, Y-your Honour!" he began rapidly. "I went to your house, but was told you had gone out. I want to inform you that a notorious criminal has been captured, and the police are demanding a trial!"

For once, I did not mind Bailiff Jao's foolish manner. A smile spread across my face. I was looking forward to serving justice.

A Theft in the Palace

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lui-Schwille, Maia – 10

The day started just like any other mid-autumn day in Kaifeng, a gentle breeze swaying the leaves of the ginkgo trees. Princess Fukang had finished her breakfast and returned to her room to admire her coronation crown and necklace.

She approached the secret compartment hidden in her wall, then briefly looked behind her to check no one was in the vicinity. She unfastened the invisible clasp, and the compartment door sprung open. Within, she saw that her jewellery was all in place. She reached out to take the necklace, but it slipped out of her hands! She gasped as the jade, pearls and diamonds shattered on the floor. As she knelt to inspect the fragments, she thought to herself, diamonds don't break when dropped and neither do pearls or jade. But how could this happen? She picked up a few pieces as evidence, then sprinted to her parents' bedroom. She called tentatively, "Father? I—it's important. Really important." A few moments later, the door opened and he said, "Come in." Princess Fukang was always enthralled whenever she entered her parents' bedroom – it was larger than any normal person's living and dining room combined, and was decorated with tapestries of previous dynasties. "What is it that is so important that you need to interrupt my meditation?" he questioned, "Y—yes father, I have come to you because something truly terrible has happened," Fukang stuttered nervously and explained everything. He gasped in horror, "That can't be! Real gems don't just break on impact. Those were specially crafted by the land's finest jeweller!" She showed him the pieces she'd picked up from her room. Her father took them with shaking hands, meticulously examining them. A few moments later, he said quietly, "My dear, this is an ingeniously fabricated glass replica of your beautiful pendant and circlet. We must call upon Judge Bao Qing Tian."

Bao was having a peaceful day walking around the park, surrounded by, maple, birch and larch trees with leaves of cardinal red and ginkgo trees with fluttering golden leaves. It was definitely not a day he expected to be summoned to the emperor's palace to solve a theft. The emperor's messenger knelt at his feet, "Lord Bao, you have been summoned to the palace by the emperor himself," he stuttered for a moment, "H—he says that his daughter's coronation jewellery has been stolen and replaced by glass fakes." "Interesting... I shall investigate." Bao took his carriage to the emperor's palace, and arrived at the princess's room to inspect the damaged jewels. Fukang opened the concealed compartment for Bao to inspect, explaining how she'd been checking on them every morning. Bao felt at the back of the compartment and announced, "This can be opened from the other side. What room is next to yours?" "The maids' rooms." replied Fukang. "Then until I find another clue, our prime suspects are your maids. May I have the names of the maids? I wish to interrogate them one by one." As Bao left the room, he spotted a something glinting in the sunlight. He decided his eyes were playing tricks on him, so he moved on.

From the interviews, Bao gained nothing. The next day, Bao came up with a brilliant solution. He unhesitatingly rushed to the emperor's palace to propose this idea. The emperor agreed and sent for arrangements to be made. The plan was to make up a story that the jade jewel in the centre of the pendant was actually a key to opening a chest of treasures, and that the chest was hidden in the Emperor's Great Hall. This wasn't true of course, but the emperor sent members of the nobility to spread the rumour far and wide. The chest was an ornate mahogany trunk with intricate carvings of old Chinese heroes. It was to be left unguarded in the Great Hall.

On the first night, Bao and two assistants concealed themselves behind the pillars. They heard soft footsteps coming through the doorway in front of them. They all tensed. There were two voices; one man and one woman. They scoured every corner of the hall for the chest until, finally, its silver glint caught their eyes, "There!" And they hurried towards it. The woman took out the necklace and tried unlocking the chest, "Why isn't it working?" she hissed. "I don't know..." the man whispered back. On Bao's signal, his subordinates swiftly and soundlessly moved towards the criminals and in one fell swoop, bound their hands behind their backs. The prisoners screamed and fought but they were no match against their captors. Bao glared icily at them, "Who are you? And why did you take the princess's coronation jewels?" They cowered at his feet, "I—I am Liu Fei and this is Shen Lun," the woman

replied, trembling, “We thought they would sell for a good price on the black market... We knew that Princess Fukang had a secret compartment, also that it could be opened from behind, so we made a plan to go into the maids’ room and open the compartment from the back to replace the real ones with our glass fakes,” Fei whimpered, “So I sneaked in at midnight, following the plan exactly, but as I was leaving one of the maids stirred so I darted out as quickly as possible, but a small stone fell to the floor and I didn’t have time to retrieve it so I left in a hurry.” Now Bao knew that the stone he’d spotted earlier hadn’t been a fake. “I will now sentence you. Five years of imprisonment and a fine of three hundred taels would be adequate wouldn’t it?” he looked at them, as if daring them to contradict. Shen Lun opened his mouth to argue but closed it when Liu Fei shot him a glowering look. As their captors took them away, Bao sighed in relief. This had been a long few days and with the princess’s coronation the next day, the case had finally been solved.

Bowing to the Future

Kowloon Tong School (Primary Section), Chow, Chi Wai Samantha – 9

1006 AD, Kaifeng, China.

Pao Hiren tiptoed through home, holding a hideous black cockroach. He slipped it into his dad's robe, at the nape of the neck, and giggled. Mr. Pao felt a tickle; he shook left and right; he jumped, he wiggled, until the bug flopped right into his cup of green tea.

“HIREN!” Mr. Pao roared, gripping his son's robe hard.

This was not the end of the story.

As Hiren was dragged through the village, townspeople giggled behind their sleeves. As fishermen sang coming into town, their catch glinted in the sunlight.

Finally, Mr. Pao dumped Hiren into a dry, dirty, square stone well. Hiren's head hit the bottom. His father turned away without a second look. Hiren slumped. His eyelids felt heavy. He let the light slip out from his eyelids...

Hiren sat up and rubbed his eyes. He squinted at the sky. It was light-blue, covered in sunlight, instead of the cloudless and grayness in the sky in his village. Is this paradise? He wondered, curiously.

He rose. Blue sky gave way to a row of pink buildings – the tallest and squarest he'd ever seen. Their sweet colours clashed surreally. Before him a Chinese crowd scurried about. But they kept babbling into little black boxes. And behind him were roaring metal chariots. The air was dusty, but it was an alien, metallic fug, not an earthy dust; he felt no red dust under his feet.

There was a sign in front of him, by a tunnel releasing a stream of faces – “Sung Wong Toi”. He peered closer. Chinese characters: “Fragrant Harbour.” Hong Kong. Hiren looked down. He was dressed in tattered robes, as if homeless. In a way, he now was. But he'd learn his heart was here.

A man dressed in shiny black came towards him, muttering. “Hey, kid! You look down on your luck. Wanna make some money?”

Hiren hid behind crates in a school's back alley, which smelled vaguely like old butter, and his eyes caught onto a girl older than him walking into it. She was chewing something, but didn't swallow it. Hiren quickly ran over to her and handed over his packet to her. “Hey, this is for you,” he said.

Here he was, a homeless person forced to sell stolen goods to survive. The girl shrugged, and suddenly grabbed it from him, even though Hiren was gripping it tightly. “Well, thanks anyway.” She grinned behind her mask, then pulled it down for just a moment, to take out a sticky, gluey thing and threw it. Hiren's jaw dropped. She looked like family. “Wait—”

But she then turned her back and put something in the box. “I've changed my mind; take the stash to him – Smith! Under the tree!” She pointed out of the alleyway, towards another truant in the schoolyard. Hiren blinked, startled.

He walked towards a boy under the tree, and said uneasily, “Hello, this is a package for you.” The boy took it and opened the lid. Then came a bloodcurdling scream. Inside laid a dead slug. Hiren's heart skipped a beat, and his face went white as a sheet.

“How dare you do this to me?” The boy screamed, terrified. His friendly smile now became a cold glare. “I paid for what I want, and you think you can—” Smith clenched his fists, and punched the boy in the stomach.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed Hiren. “What were you doing, Smith?” It was the girl. She took Hiren’s hand and they ran for their lives, passing street lamps and houses as tall as the sky. Hiren felt the breeze blow past his cheeks. A sea of faces swirled around them. They cut through them like a blade.

There was an aroma of jasmine, as the girl pulled him into a café and sat down. Newly invisible, they ordered a plate of what looked to Hiren like spongy flatbreads, topped with strange berries and cream. They proved perfect fortification for the coming chat.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t mean to endanger you. Can you forgive me?”

“It is not good to play pranks on others. You should know that.” Hiren shuffled on the chair, and recalled what he did to his father.

“Let me introduce myself again. I’m Pao Hui Qing, the great–great–great–granddaughter of Pao Qing Tian?”

“R... really? What do you think about me...I mean him?” Hiren blinked, startled.

“The greatest judge of all time. A Song Dynasty Solomon. A detective too. He feared nothing and nobody. When justice demanded it, he sentenced the guilty... my parents said he was our role model, to learn from.” Her face fell a little.

“I see...” Hiren was speechless, he dared not tell the truth; I am Pao Qing Tian.

“But my dad told me: Pao Qing Tian was naughty too when he was small. So alright, I’m just like him. Look where our shenanigans took both of us.”

“That’s not an excuse for you to be like that!” But Hiren wondered how – or if – he should influence his own descendants.

Hiren decided to make a change if he could. He scrambled to his feet and asked Hui Qing the way to Sung Wong Toi station. “C’mon! I have a lot of explaining to do ...”

They stood by the square well. It was lined with centuries of dust, but its meaning shone brightly.

Hui Qing was still puzzled by how magic worked. But she promised to rethink her life. The well felt like the law, or a black hole of shame, threatening to swallow her up, like Hiren.

They hugged and crossed their fingers.

He took a very deep breath, and dived, head down, into the well. “Bye...” he thought he heard Hui Qing’s once–defiant contralto behind him. He sighed, relieved his descendant wouldn’t be bad anymore. Is being a judge really my destiny? But before Hiren could think, there was a “THUMP!”, and all was blackness...

Meeting Judge Pao

Kowloon Tong School (Primary Section), Guo, Bing Xian Abraham – 11

When Henry woke up, he found himself lying in a dark, gloomy prison. The prison cell was full of gross hay. It was as silent as the grave. Feeling puzzled, Henry saw a man, whose face was as white as a sheet, sitting next to him, shaking mournfully. He murmured to the man, “Where are we? Where is this horrible and smelly place?” The man remained silent. Henry tried to break the silence. “What’s your name? Why are you here? What crime have you committed?” Henry asked him. Henry stared at the man, waiting for his reply, but the man didn’t give him any response.

Soon, some prison guards came and broke the silence. “Mr Wang, it’s your turn to see Judge Pao! Follow us!” one of the guards shouted at the man. Henry overheard them and remembered Judge Pao — the honest and upright judge with a black face and a crescent moon on his forehead! He learned about Judge Pao in his History class! Mr Chen, Henry’s History teacher, told them the stories about Judge Pao! Henry now realized that he was at the time of Song Dynasty. The guards were taking Wang to see Judge Pao.

After Wang left with the guards, Henry started considering himself, “Why am I in prison? What happened to me? Will I be the next one to see Judge Pao?” Although Henry jumped out of his skin and shook like a leaf, he kept telling himself, “Judge Pao is the most significant and legendary figure of justice and righteous. I am sure he can tell me what’s going on.”

Few hours later, the prison guards came again. “Mr Han, you are accused of a theft. Please follow us. You will be taken to Judge Pao for interrogation.” Henry was tied tightly that he could not move or run away but to follow the prison guards to walk slowly to the tribunal court where he met Mr Pao finally. He could not recognize Mr Pao at first as his face was not black at all! Mr Pao, who was about 50 years old then, had a crescent moon on his forehead! When Mr Pao saw Henry, he asked, “Why did you steal a kid’s coins?” Feeling puzzled, Henry questioned, “Your Honour, please may I know why am I the one who stole the coins?” Mr Pao replied, “Huh, that was because someone found you asleep on a rock next to the boy’s oil tank.” Henry remembered he heard this story before. He tried to recall his memory

When Henry tried to figure out what was happening, Mr Pao asked him, “You have to tell me why you slept on a rock next to the boy’s oil tank.” Fortunately, Henry came up with a brilliant idea. “Your Honour, I was exhausted when I was trying to help the boy find his coins, so I felt asleep next to his oil tank. Believe me please, Your Honour! I can help you search for the thief!

The next morning, Mr Pao told the villagers that he was going to interrogate the rock, which laid right next to the boy’s oil tank. The villagers were curious, so they gathered at the tribunal hall as they all wanted to know how Mr Pao interrogate the rock. Mr Pao asked the rock angrily, but the rock was still and made no responds. Mr Pao kept scolding the rock, “If you stay silent, I will beat you! Why don’t you just tell me the truth honestly?”

All the villagers were stunned and went gobsmacked. “Was Judge Pao mentally sick?” “Why was he talking to a rock?” “Did he expect the rock to speak to him?” “Oh my god! Poor Judge Pao!” Some villagers even burst into laughter which provoked Mr Pao, hence, he took a revenge and told the villagers, “How dare you laugh at me? You are not respecting me. I will punish you!” As a result, he ordered each villager to pay a fine of one dollar. The villagers were obedient and put a one-dollar coin into a water tank one by one. Suddenly, when a man put his one-dollar coin into the water, Mr Pao said, “You are the one we are looking for!” and asked his guards to arrest the man.

Mr Pao explained, “After you put in your coin, there was oil floating on top of the water surface. The little boy sells oil, so all his coins are always oily. That’s why I am waiting for an oily coin to find out who the thief is!” Mr Pao thanked Henry for giving him such a great idea to help him catch the thief easily. Henry was on cloud nine and felt Mr Pao’s taps on this shoulder...

Tap. Tap. Tap. Henry felt Mr Pao tapping on his shoulder happily. He woke up and said, “You are welcome, Your Honour...” and suddenly found his History teacher, Mr Chen, staring at him furiously. “I’m definitely NOT Your Honour, Mr Henry!” “I’m sorry, Mr Chen. I thought you were Mr Pao...” All his classmates cheered at this laugh-out-loud moment.

A New Tale of Judge Pao

Sacred Heart Canossian School, Cheng, Mandy – 12

I was dead. The emperor said so.

I sneaked into my funeral to see my son Shou for the last time. I felt guilty, as a kid at his age would need his father most. But I had no choice.

In Song, you could have as many wives as you wanted to, and having an affair with a maid or having an illegitimate child was not uncommon or unacceptable, particularly for the rich and people holding a high position in the Empire like me.

But I am Pao. Pao was an exception. People in Kaifeng and perhaps the whole Song regarded Pao as a saint. A saint should never do anything wrong. It was not allowed, and such an act, if known to the public, would bring the Empire's reputation into disrepute.

The emperor told me not to worry about this; he would take care of my family, including Shou when I was not around.

I was chosen for this secret mission for a reason. But it appeared to me more like a joke. I had spent my whole life fighting corruption, but the emperor asked me to bribe!

Back to the reason. The Northern side of Song had all along been a headache since the Shang Dynasty. It remained so even after Ying Zheng of Qin Dynasty built the Great Wall. Most of the troops were deployed to the North and more would be needed. It was quite a burden to the Empire.

But now the emperor was troubled by another reason, namely, the expansion of the Da Qin Kingdom and the Persian World from the West, which posed a new and imminent threat to Song. In recent years, the conflict had intensified, from fistfights between civilians to direct confrontation between the militaries, and Song was losing.

The emperor wanted to put a halt to it. He vowed to reassert control and reclaim the land lost in the Tang Dynasty, and more by his predecessors. He also wished to rejuvenate the Silk Road and the trade between the East and the West. But clearly the Da Qin Kingdom and the Persian World were a hurdle that he needed to jump over.

The emperor had an idea, which was easy to understand but difficult to implement. He wanted the Da Qin Kingdom to fight with the Persian World. But the question was – HOW? The emperor came up with an idea.

Zhan Zhao, my bodyguard, who was tall and muscular in built, had an important role to play. He would lead an army to the West without anyone noticing. The army would attack small villages of the Persian World and kill a few villagers if required. They would put the blame on Da Qin Kingdom. They would also smear Arabia, the God of Persian World, in order to provoke the Persians.

I also had a role to play, which was more important. I had a crescent scar on the forehead. It closely resembled the symbol that every Persian worshiped. With tanned skin, the emperor believed that I would blend into the Persians and gain their trust easily. I could also try to convince or bribe the Persians to invade Da Qin Kingdom. It would be ideal if they could wipe each other out from the Earth. If not, the Song could also take advantage if any of them lost an eye or a limb in the war. The plan sounded perfect and workable.

After a few months of preparation, we left Kaifeng for the West. We crossed the Hexi Corridor, Dunhuang and Tibetans and finally reached the land of the Persians. We bid each other farewell and joked to see each other in the battlefield. But we knew it was not necessarily a joke. If we were successful, he would fight for Da Qin Kingdom and I for the Persians.

But we never saw each other again. Many years later, I learnt from sources that Zhan Zhao did a great job in accomplishing the mission assigned to him by the emperor. With the benefit of my teaching back in Song, he became a renowned philosopher who taught people the principle of equality, the rule of law, presumption of innocence, etc. Most important of all, he successfully convinced the King of Da Qin Kingdom to invade the Persian World and liberate the Holy Land.

Believe it or not, I blended into the Persians without difficulty. People accepted me at once and worshiped me as a prophet when they saw me for the first time. I gained the trust of all tribal leaders and was well received by their members. I soon became the spiritual leader of the Persian World.

Like Zhan Zhao, I gave lectures to the Persians, not only on legal principles but also issues happening on the other side of the Earth. They found it very enlightening. When time passed by, some of them called me “the Messiah” or “the Messenger” from the above.

One day, I told my assistant that I might need “a small piece of land” for Arabia in my own dialect which was pronounced “xiao-di”. The tribal leaders overheard our conversation and assigned a piece of land, which was later known as “Saudi-Arabia”, to me without any hesitation. I did not know at that time that it was so big and there was oil underneath. But that is another story.

Was my mission accomplished? Of course! I was a man of honour and thus kept my own promise. As the spiritual leader for the Persians, I sent my troops to fight the invaders and they protected the Holy Land fearlessly. The holy war lasted for more than two centuries and people in Song were free from any trouble during that period.

I also told the Persians that people from the East were friends, and we should respect and be nice to them forever. That was how the Sino-Persian relationship was established.

A True Portrayal of Justice Bao

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Cheah, Zu Zheng Christopher – 11

“And...cut!”

Displayed on the clapperboard: ‘Scene 1. Take 6.’

“Let’s try again tomorrow!” French director Patrick Marty shouts to the production crew of ‘Crime, Corruption, and Justice’.

Based on Marty’s comic novels about Judge Bao, Season 1 was a Netflix sensation. Season 2, produced in Hong Kong, will cover Bao Zheng’s earlier days.

“Listen, Chen! Can you give me a *true* portrayal of Justice Bao?” Marty demands.

Chen Zheng, a thirteen-year old actor, with dark makeup and a crescent on his head, feels the pressure. “Yes,” he lies with a fake smile. *But I can’t*, he thinks. *I can never be true.*

Walking through a sea of skyscrapers, Chen sees it again below his housing complex. An unilluminated windowless office with four crimson Chinese characters and the letters ‘ICAC’.

His heart beats faster, reminded of a traumatic past. His last memory of his mother was at her funeral. Shortly after, he was watching his father dragged by the ICAC to prison on TV. That dreadful night, he cried at a foster home until the next morning, comforted only by the sun’s motherly, nurturing light.

Taking out a crumpled photograph from his wallet, Chen grits his teeth. He throws it, hard. But he picks it up from the ground, and *screams*. He wants to get rid of it forever. But it is his father. Chen cannot throw him away.

Reaching the fourth floor, he opens the apartment door. His father, out of prison a year ago, embraces him. “I’ve cooked dinner.”

They eat dumplings together.

“I know that look,” Chen’s father says. “What’s troubling you?”

“Acting...a true portrayal of Justice Bao, whatever that means.”

“You can do it. After all, we named you Zheng, *justice*.”

Chen scoffs, looking at a wall photo picturing rows of seated men, his grandfather and father front row centre. Above them is a triangle logo: the Chen clan. A triad criminal organization, originally from the Henan province.

“We’re the opposite of justice,” Chen laments, seeing himself as one of them.

Chen’s father does not respond.

“The ICAC, Justice Bao, I hate them all!”

Silence.

"I hate my name, Zheng!" Chen shouts. "I hate myself."

His father hesitates. "It's time I tell you more about our family. Follow me."

Standing on a desk, Chen's father reaches up above the ceiling, bringing down boxes layered with dust.

He opens one box to reveal an old portrait.

"This is Chen Shimei, fictional in Chinese operas. But he was a real person, our ancestor, 1000 years ago. Records of him were erased because he was a convicted senior official. Although favoured and pardoned by Emperor Renzong, he was executed by Bao Zheng."

"What's this got to do with us?"

"Shimei left two young children behind, whom Bao secretly supported. However, our ancestors continued to rely on Bao's money. Requests for money turned into demands and threats on Bao's descendants and businesses, for 29 generations. That's how our Chen clan became the largest triad network, from Kaifeng to Hong Kong, which your late grandfather headed."

Opening a second box, Chen's father pulls out a photograph of two smiling men, seated next to each other inside a Hong Kong ferry.

"This is your grandfather and Y.K. Pao, 29th grandchild of Bao Zheng. They became true friends, eventually."

"How could that be?"

"Your grandfather changed. He and I wanted a new start for our clan. No more crime and corruption. But it was difficult. Other triad clans wanted to take over. I refused. They threatened us. And..."

Chen's father pauses, faltering. "And they got your mother. It wasn't a car accident."

Tears start to well up in Chen's eyes. Then he feels a burst of anger, imagining revenge, *one day*.

"I wanted to fight back, which would have started a triad clan war. But your mother would have disapproved. Instead, I planned something else, the right way. A plan to dismantle the triads from the inside, to keep their suspicions off me, to keep you safe."

"What did you do?" Chen asks.

"I approached the ICAC, and worked undercover for them. Going to prison was staged."

Chen is stunned.

"You were in a guarded foster home, until it was safe. And now, it's safe."

Chen is speechless.

"We're going to be fine now," assures Chen's father, his protective arms wrapping tightly around him.

Chen hugs his father, something he has not done for a long time. He finally cries, all his emotions flooding the room, realising he was never abandoned but protected, and his father was not a criminal but fought for justice.

"Your mother's proud of you," says Chen's father, looking at her portrait.

Both imagine her smiling with them, crying with them.

"She's proud of you too, dad."

Chen feels his built-up bitterness recede, like a wave returning to the sea, and what remains in him is hope.

As Chen's father gazes outside, illuminated by the crescent moon, he recalls a story from his late father. "I still have one more secret for you. A story of Bao's childhood, told by Bao himself to our ancestors..."

A pale-faced young Bao is held down inside a cave in Hefei, by men in white robes of the Song dynasty. "Declare your allegiance to our clan! Or we'll scar you for life."

Bao refuses.

They push him towards a burning furnace. His face turns dark, his head scorched with a crescent moon. Bao screams as blood flows down, and shouts, "Justice will find you, one day! *One day!*"

"And...cut!"

Displayed on the clapperboard: 'Scene 1 *revised version*. Take 7.'

"Bravo! A true portrayal of Justice Bao!" director Marty salutes Chen. "Whatever your *inspiration* is, keep it with you."

Chen takes out that crumpled photo again, this time gently, this time with a different thought.

My father's life is a portrayal of a hero, a Bao Zheng.

And my life can now be true. I am Zheng, and I stand for Justice.

The Nail in the Coffin

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Kam, Hei Yin Cadence – 11

1016 A.D.

The wind blew through the branches of the nearby trees, rustling leaves concealed in shadow. The village down to the right was hidden in darkness, overcast by a cloud. High above it all, an erubescence pearl drifted in the dark waters of the night, casting a reddish glow on the earth.

All was silent and calm. Even the birds were asleep. But a flicker of movement could be seen down below.

A small crooked shadow, illuminated by the moonlight, crept across the ground and through the window, nimbly unlocking it and locking it behind her. A half-muffled scream erupted, but all was still moments after.

There were no neighbours. There was no one awake. Nobody to witness the deed but the moon, which shone just as it had, as if nothing had happened at all.

★★★

1018 A.D.

“Husband? Your breakfast is ready!” a woman moved through the house with a tray, pausing at the door of a room. She called, “I’m coming in now!” When no response was given, she entered, seeing a young man lying on his bed. She touched him softly to wake him up—and jerked back, shuddering.

He was stone dead.

★★★

The coroner moved carefully around the body, poking and prodding. Finally, he looked up. “No signs of injury. He died a natural death.”

“That cannot be right. He’s so young. No illnesses, too. It seems suspicious to me. You’re very sure?” Judge Pao asked.

“I’ve now conducted an autopsy. There’s no injury to the entire body at all.”

“Well, it still seems strange to me. If reports come that he died an unnatural death, you’ll be fired.” Judge Pao strode out of the room. The coroner stared after him, but after a few seconds, turned around and began to pack up his tools, all the while muttering under his breath.

★★★

“And he said that I would be fired if it was discovered that he died an unnatural death,” the coroner finished. He was sitting in his living room with his wife next to him, recounting the day’s events.

The only sound that could be heard for a long while was the birds chirping outside.

“I hate to say this, but... couldn’t someone force long metal nails into the brain without injuring the body? Maybe through the nose?” the wife whispered.

★★★

“Do you know why you have been arrested?” Judge Pao’s harsh voice echoed through the courtroom.

The widow gulped before speaking, “Yes. I know you have the evidence”—her eyes shot to the long nail still rusty with blood, sitting on a cushion in front of Judge Pao—“but hear my reasons. They may not help, but I want them to be known.

“My husband and I were never happy from the very start. My parents wanted me to marry into a rich household, even if it meant my being unhappy. He would go out drinking, taking drugs and gambling. At those times, he beat me with whatever was lying around the house and I was helpless.

“That night, we argued. I told him to stop drinking and he wouldn’t. I went to bed covered in bruises. It was the final nail in the coffin. The abuse, the beatings, and finally that argument...” she broke down into tears. “I couldn’t bear it any longer. Before I knew it, that very night, I had snuck into the bedroom with a long nail and he was dead.”

The harsh voice sounded again, “That cannot excuse you.”

The guillotine came down. Blood splattered everywhere.

★★★

After the trial, Judge Pao took the coroner’s wife aside. “What’s your name?”

“Chen Ding Dai Ti,” she replied.

“You must be a highly intelligent and creative woman. I would like to know whether this man—” he gestured to the coroner “—has hurt you in any way.”

“No, never. He always treats me well and never belittles me,” the words poured out of her easily and naturally, but Judge Pao noticed that there was a tiny hint of wariness about her.

“Have you ever had another name other than the one you have given me?”

“Yes, Li Ding Dai Ti. Li was the surname of my first husband,” she paused for a while, then continued. “Li Bi Lei died a natural death two years ago.”

“How old was he when he died?”

“He was eighty.”

Judge Pao frowned, but let her go.

After the coroner’s wife had left, Judge Pao turned to his servant, “Did the widow have any siblings?”

“She did. The coroner’s wife, Ding Dai Ti.”

“Well, then that’s the root of this mystery. Perhaps her first husband didn’t die naturally. I just need one more piece of evidence...” He called over two men and whispered to them. They nodded, then disappeared into the night.

★★★

The wind blew through the branches of the nearby trees, rustling leaves concealed in shadow. The village down to the right was hidden in darkness, overcast by a cloud not unlike the one two years before. But this time, there was no blood moon. Just plain moonlight.

And there was a grave in front of the little house atop a hill, now long abandoned.

They reached the top of the hill and looked down at the grave in front of them. The moonlight illuminated the characters written on the gravestone: “LI BI LEI”.

They dug. Down and down and down, until they struck it.

A coffin.

They opened the lid and the body of a young man lay resting inside. His features were cruel and twisted—during his life, he had enjoyed causing harm to everyone around him, and it showed in his face. But the two men had only one goal tonight. One reached into the coffin, delving into this man’s brain, until he found it.

The hand retracted, holding... a nail.

The nail in the coffin that was never expected.

The Case of the Widow's Ill Will

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Lin, Amanda – 11

“*I am so sorry,*” the teenager cried in tears. “I didn’t mean to!”

“My stepson is still in shock. He is not thinking clearly,” the woman defended as the boy continued to weep.

Judge Pao gave the boy a sympathetic look. “Present your testimony, Lady Li.”

“It was midnight. I was woken by sounds from the Grand Hall. I got up immediately to see what was going on. I then heard Li Junior screaming for help. By the time I arrived at the Grand Hall’s entrance, I saw my husband laying there in Li Junior’s arms,” she said, sniffing.

“Did you hear their conversation, Lady Li? Do you know why they were fighting?” asked Judge Pao.

“No, Your Honor, I didn’t,” said Lady Li. “Sir Li is a patient and loving father to Li Junior. Li Junior always respected Sir Li. I just don’t understand what happened.”

“Were there any other witnesses at the scene?” Judge Pao followed up with a question, narrowing his eyes.

“Yes, Butler Chen was also there,” said Lady Li.

Judge Pao gazed sternly at Butler Chen then asked, “Did you hear the conversation of Sir Li and Li Junior?”

Butler Chen timidly said, “No, your honor. I was in the kitchen next to the Grand Hall. When I heard the scream, I ran to the Grand Hall and saw Sir Li and Li Junior on the floor. Lady Li was on the side crying.”

Judge Pao seemed unsatisfied but declared, “I have heard all the witnesses today. I will give my final judgement three days from now.”

“*I am so sorry. I deserve to be in jail!*” Li Junior howled. Lady Li stared at Judge Pao pleadingly.

That night, Judge Pao visited Li Junior’s jail cell.

“Young man, now that you are calm, tell me what happened.” Judge Pao said quietly.

Li Junior let out a shaky breath. “I was so angry at my father. He only loved *her*.”

“What do you mean by that, Li Junior?”

“*His* will. My stepmother told me that my father was going to leave his estates and fortune to her. She was so kind and willing to support me until I take my scholar exam. I was angry and confronted my father. He lectured me about my wasteful ways. Angrily, I stormed toward the door. Father tried to stop me so I shoved him, hard. He fell and hit his head on the pavement,” Li Junior sobbed.

“So Lady Li told you that your father was to leave all his fortune to her and not you?”

Stricken and pained by his guilt, Li Junior could only nod weakly.

Next, Judge Pao walked into a small, dark room, ready to view Li's body. The only objects in the room was an opened coffin and bouquets of flowers given by the mourning villagers to honor him. Judge Pao bent down and picked up a flower.

A scroll next to the flowers read: Lord Li, thank you for your generosity and inspiration. You have led us out of poverty and we are eternally grateful. May you rest in peace in heaven.

"An honorable man," Judge Pao whispered, and set the flower down carefully.

Even in the dim lit room, Judge Pao could see a purple bump on top of Lord Li's forehead. Judge Pao gently prodded open Lord Li's mouth, and grimly confirmed his hypothesis. A black tongue. "Gotcha," he smiled.

Three days passed. The villagers crowded the court room hours before the final hearings began. They waited anxiously to hear Judge Pao's final ruling that would bring justice to their beloved Sir Li.

"Before I announce the verdict, I'd like to hear the autopsy report from Doctor Su."

A scrawny man, dressed most primly, stepped out of the shadows. "Your Honor. After inspecting the body, the victim did suffer a severe head injury and was knocked unconscious. But the blow should not be fatal. Your Honor, you were right, the victim was poisoned!" he exclaimed.

Surprised, everyone in the court room gasped in unison.

"*You!*" Lady Li said shakily, pointing a finger at Butler Chen. "You poisoned Sir Li!"

"I did not!" Butler Chen retorted. "I am wronged, Your Honor."

"*You* poisoned your own husband, Lady Li!" yelled Judge Pao as he slammed the gavel on the head table.

"*Me?* Oh! I am a wronged woman, Your Honor—

"I had my suspicion given the discrepancies between yours and Butler Chen's testimonies. First, Lady Li, the distance of your bedroom chamber and the Grand Hall did not allow a person to be awoken from deep sleep just by hearing some sounds. You arrived at the scene before Butler Chen, who was only one room away. This meant that you were already near the Grand Hall and not in your bedroom chamber when the incident happened.

He continued, "Finally, Sir Li was a generous man and beloved by all the villagers. I heard that he was going to donate most of his wealth to further build and benefit this village. Your disappointment in your husband's will was the true motive for such a heinous crime. Was it not? Your greed motivated you to poison your husband and frame your stepson. Are you guilty, Lady Li?" Judge Pao rose to his full height, pointing an accusatory finger at Lady Li.

Lady Li wailed, "I deserve his entire wealth! I helped him to build his entire fortune and treated his son as if he was my own. I sacrificed my entire life for him! He was just going to give it away. I couldn't accept that!"

Judge Pao shook his head. "Indeed, you shouldn't, Lady Li. But your actions have consequences. I now sentence you to a lifetime in prison!"

Judge Pao turned from his chair, shaking his head as he prepared to exit the court room.

"Judge Pao, wait!" Li Junior grabbed Judge Pao's arm. "I'd just like to say ... thank you."

"It's what I do, Li Junior. I'm Judge Pao. Remember my name."

Convictions of Barrister Chan

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Lye, Yuxin – 11

1964, Hong Kong.

Barrister Chan was facing the toughest case of his career. The press had given it much coverage as it involved the Kong family, the richest in the city. Lau Ping-Wai, Kongs' right-hand man, had been murdered. Tabloids speculated that Lau knew too much about the dealings of the Kongs, who were extremely influential and connected, such that Lau must be silenced. Mere speculation, of course, until proven. For now, Barrister Chan must defend his client – a fishmonger at the wet market, someone with absolutely no interaction with the Kongs, and as Chan believed, just happened to be at the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Chan always aspired to be a champion for the weak. He grew up in the Kowloon Walled City and was no stranger to the rampant vices and local triads. It was the novel, "Three Heroes and Five Gallants" – stories about the legendary Judge Pao and martial arts heroes who helped Judge Pao fight crimes and oppression – that inspired Chan to become who he was.

To Chan, Judge Pao was the embodiment of justice – unwavering and incorruptible. Regardless of the stature or connections of the culprit, crime must be punished, and innocents protected.

The courtroom was filled to the brim. The accused glanced at an old lady at the public gallery and lowered his head.

"Li Shang, you are on trial for the murder of Mr. Lau Ping-Wai," the judge announced, "Do you plead guilty or not?"

The room froze. The answer came forcefully but helplessly, "No, I am not guilty!"

April 1056, Kaifeng Prefecture.

"Kaifeng has no authority over this," the arrogant Chancellor Pang exclaimed, staying seated, without even facing Judge Pao.

Chancellor Pang was the tutor of the Song Emperor and held immense power.

"As you wish, Chancellor, you are welcomed to sit in, but I do have a case to preside over."

The guards shouted "Wai-Wu!", knocking their wooden sticks on the ground.

Qin Lan, a commoner, had sounded the court drums of Kaifeng. It was the last resort, but the only way to bypass the local magistrates who tended to side with the powerful.

"Announce your name and why you have come."

"Your honor, I am Qin Lan, from Taiyuan," Qin Lan sobbed, "Pang Long, son of the Imperial Tutor, killed my sister, Qin Shuang. The local magistrate refused to handle my case."

Monday 8th June, 1964.

The prosecution called upon their witness.

"Sergeant Shek, how did you find the body of the deceased?"

“I was patrolling the Wanchai wet market at night and saw a body, and dagger on the ground. There was someone beside the victim whom I gave chase.”

Shek pointed to Li Shang, who was seated by a court guard.

“Were there fingerprints on the dagger?”

“No, probably wiped clean.”

“Do you mean the accused tried to remove his fingerprints?”

“Objection, your honour! The prosecution is leading the witness.”

“Objection sustained.”

“Sergeant, would you say the murder of the deceased was pre-planned?”

“It seemed meticulously planned and definitely the most brutal murder I’ve ever come across!”

“Objection!” Barrister Chan stood up.

“I have no further questions.”

The Prosecutor returned to his seat triumphantly.

The old lady at the corner remained still throughout, yet her eyes never left Li.

Chan was deep in thoughts – he had received an anonymous letter the day before, threatening to kill his family if he did not “do the right thing”.

Chancellor Pang had grown nervous and quickly sent a note to Concubine Pang for help. The guards dragged out a well-dressed man in his twenties and forced him to kneel before Judge Pao.

“How dare you!” Chancellor Pang was about to step forward.

“I suggest you stay put,” Judge Pao knocked on the table loudly with the Shangfang Sword bestowed by the late Emperor. The Chancellor was taken aback.

“Pang Long, do you know this lady, Qin Lan, or her sister Qin Shuang?”

“I do not recall.”

“Very poor memory indeed, though you frequent their family teahouse and are widely known to have a liking for Qin Shuang, as Constable Zhan found out.”

“Your honour, Long tried to kidnap my sister and when she refused, pushed her down the stairs and killed her. Many witnessed that but he paid them all to keep quiet!” Lady Qin kneeled, anguished.

“Show me the proof, Pao, I didn’t know you trial cases without evidence,” Pang Long laughed sadistically.

“Will the defense please present the case?”

Sergeant Shek strutted to the stand.

“Sergeant, how did the accused behave when you first arrived at the scene?”

“I would say he was rather calm.”

“You reported that he had his back towards you and started running right away, Sergeant, you must have sixth sense to feel his calmness.”

The courtroom burst out in laughter. “Silence!” the judge called out.

“Maybe he was facing me, I don’t quite remember.”

“What is the truth then?”

Shek did not respond and glanced around with unease.

“So there was no concrete evidence that Li committed the crime.”

“He stood by the body, that is proof!”

“Pack of lies. Your honour, I have a new piece of evidence to present.

“Objection!”

“The evidence was just discovered but it is absolutely crucial!”

“What have you got to say, Pang Long? Your bribes, your family’s gold bestowed by the Emperor were found at Magistrate Zhao’s residence – he has confessed!” Judge Pao proclaimed.

Long screamed, “I am the Imperial Tutor’s son, I can do whatever I want! You have no right to sentence me.....”

“Bring the Dragon-Head Guillotine!”

Chancellor Pang leapt forward and fainted.

A suffocating silence filled the courtroom.

The judge would soon come to a verdict. Li stood trembling and the old lady finally broke down crying, unable to contain herself. Chan reached into his briefcase for the “Three Heroes and Five Gallants”. He held the book to his heart and closed his eyes, as he had always done before a verdict.

Oily Fingers

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Wu, Xin Ru Audrey – 11

I was strolling around the market to buy fresh radishes for some radish soup. So far, I hadn't had much luck. A group of youths were staring at me with their mouths agape, but I shrugged it off.

Suddenly, I heard a shout.

“Fresh radishes! Fresh radishes! Straight from the farm to the market!” bellowed the seller.

I ran towards him quicker than a cheetah. “Good morning, sir, could I have a fresh batch of those radishes?” I asked amiably.

His eyes widened. “Justice Pao! How lovely to see you! Yes, of course, a batch of radishes coming right up!”

“Thank you, sir!”

These days, I am used to being stared at in the streets. People are shocked to see me buying groceries in the market like a peasant, but I enjoy cooking, and it's good to live life as I always had from the start.

The seller carefully placed the radishes into my basket, and I walked off, ready to go home and prepare a delicious, delectable bowl of radish soup. Just then, I heard the sound of a young boy caterwauling.

“Oh no! Where did all my money go? I need that for my mother's medicine! I never should have fallen asleep on that rock! What will I do?” cried the boy as he collapsed into a heap in the midst of his wails.

I took a look at the large basket he had set on the floor in front of him. It contained a few ceramic containers filled to the brim with oil noodles. From strolling around in the market, I knew that everyone was selling fruits and vegetables except for the young boy.

I rolled up my sleeves and sat down next to him. “Dear boy, please stop crying. I will help you find out who stole your coins, so don't you worry!”

The boy stifled his tears and looked up at me with his solemn, red eyes. “But how? Just because you are Judge Pao doesn't mean you can solve every single case.”

“Listen. If we can't find the culprit, I'll give you enough money to help your mom. I understand how it feels, and I respect your initiative to fend for yourself and your mother. Now let's find that culprit!”

Just as I had hoped, the boy's solemn expression had turned determined.

“Judge Pao, tell me what I need to do!”

“Everyone, gather here in a circle!” I bellowed.

I could see everyone's head snapping around to look at me, but thankfully they turned around and formed a circle. Most of them looked confused and annoyed, which was expected, since I just interrupted their job. But I had to help this poor child.

“Could the man in the straw shirt please pass me a coin?” I asked, my voice clear as day.

“What for?” he asked.

“I would like to find the culprit who stole this young boy's coins which he has rightfully earned,” I explained.

“Well, alright then,” he begrudgingly agreed.

“Dear boy, could you fill a big bowl with water please?” I asked.

“Yes sir!” he exclaimed.

It was a slow, repeated cycle. Take the coins, drop them in the water and return them to the owner, who would be free to go. The young boy was beginning to lose hope. But I would not give up. Soon, we were down to a handful of people. A man standing behind everyone else was fidgeting and sweating. That’s suspicious, if you asked me.

“Could the man standing at the back pass me a coin?”, the boy timidly asked. It seemed we shared the same idea. That the man could be the culprit. Why else would he be so nervous?

The young boy took the coin and dropped it in the water. Everyone gathered around the bowl. As I had anticipated, an oil bloom appeared in the water.

“Sir, you have stolen from a young child! This is unacceptable!” I yelled.

His eyes darted around, looking for a way to escape, but the remaining few people had formed a circle around us. Seeing he couldn’t escape, he held out his supposed grocery basket and poured the coins into the bowl.

I sighed. Theft did not merit execution, but a few months in jail.

“Sir, you are very lucky not to be facing execution. Guards! Please escort this man to the town jail as he will serve one month in prison and also pay back what he stole,” I cried out.

The town guards nodded and immediately set to work.

I hadn’t expected going to the market to be a scenario to deliver justice, but here I was!

Case of the Missing Robe

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Yu, Yat Hong David – 10

The Emperor's birthday was due in three weeks and the entire kingdom was bustling with excitement. Everyone was running around busy preparing for the important celebration.

Suddenly, a group of serious-looking palace guards marched through the crowded streets and stopped abruptly in front of two tailor shops. "Attention! This is a message from the Emperor!" one of the palace guards shouted, holding up an enormous scroll. Wang Hao and Jiang Lin, owners of the two tailor shops came out and knelt with trembling knees whilst the guard continued the message. "You two are the finest tailors in town and have been selected to make a dragon robe for the Emperor's birthday. Whoever makes the most beautiful robe shall be rewarded with gold and gems and become one of the Emperor's personal tailors!"

Wang Hao was a chubby man who had inherited a fortune from his father. He often bought delicate, expensive silk and weaved them into beautiful clothes which he sold for a great deal of money. The other tailor, Jiang Lin, was a tall, skinny man who grew up poor, but made a name for himself as the clothes he designed were both affordable and stylish. Their shops were right next to each other and the rivalry between them had always been fierce.

Upon receiving the orders, Wang Hao and Jiang Lin both felt nervous yet excited as this would be the biggest opportunity in their lifetime. One of the guards stepped forward, opened a wooden chest, and took out two rolls of exquisite silk fabric. "Wang Hao, you will use the purple silk, and Jiang Lin, you will take the yellow silk." The two tailors touched the silk gingerly, and it was the smoothest material they had ever laid their hands on.

Once the guards had left, both the tailors sprinted back into their shops immediately with the beautiful silk in their arms, cradling it like a baby. They both closed their shops for business and worked tirelessly day and night, using a monumental amount of effort in the making of the robe.

Three days before the big celebration, at the crack of dawn, Judge Pao woke up to some shouting and screaming outside his house. "Judge Pao! Judge Pao! Open the door, open the door! Please help me!"

Judge Pao was well-admired throughout the kingdom as he was known for his utmost belief in honesty and uprightness. As he opened the antique wooden door of his house, he saw a devastated Wang Hao standing outside with tears flooding out of his eyes, "The robe is gone! Someone has stolen it while I was asleep!"

Judge Pao replied calmly, "Tell me what happened."

"I finished the robe last night and fell asleep whilst admiring my own work. This morning when I woke up it was gone! I searched everywhere and could not find it. It must be Jiang Lin who stole my robe. He did not want me to win!"

"Let's not waste time," replied Judge Pao. "Lead me to your shop!"

As they walked to the shop, the city began to wake up. Jiang Lin was just opening the doors looking happy and bright as they arrived.

"Jiang Lin!" Judge Pao bellowed. "Move aside! Let me search your workshop!"

"Wha-what did I do? Why?" stuttered Jiang Lin, his smile gone and now looking confused.

Judge Pao ignored him and stepped into his shop. Right near the doorstep, he spotted a few strands of delicate purple silk lying on the cold stone floor.

“Jiang Lin, how do you explain having such exquisite purple fabric at your shop? Only Wang Hao received purple silk from the Emperor!” questioned Judge Pao. “Where did you hide his robe?”

Jiang Lin cried out, “I did not steal his robe! I was busy working on mine and just completed it last night. My one was so beautiful I did not need to steal his robe to win!”

Wang Hao cried, pointing to his rival, “He has the motive, and we have the evidence! Judge Pao, please arrest him and bring justice to the case!”

Judge Pao comforted Wang Hao, “Don’t worry, there is an easy way to find out where the robe is hidden. The Emperor keeps the finest fabrics in a special warehouse with herbs imported from Persia. The silk would have absorbed the scent and unless it had been washed, the Emperor’s specially-trained dogs would be able to find it. We will have this arranged first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, that’s great, that’s great!” exclaimed Wang Hao.

That midnight, Judge Pao and two guards hid near the well and waited. A shadowy figure emerged from the darkness, took a large bucket of water from the well and started washing something desperately. The guards snuck up to the person and pinned him down. As the figure slowly turned around, his identity was revealed to Judge Pao. It was Wang Hao, grinding his teeth, holding on to his purple robe that was dripping with water.

“So it really was you, Wang Hao!” said Judge Pao.

Wang Hao burst into tears and confessed, “I had no other choice! I saw Jiang Lin’s robe last night and it was so beautiful. I knew I would lose if I did not do something! But... but how did you know it was me?”

“The part about the silk carrying the special scent from the herbs was fake,” replied Judge Pao. “I’ve suspected you all along because the purple silk left at Jiang Lin’s doorstep was too obvious. I’ve also seen the robe he made, and it was magnificent. He did not need to steal your robe to win.”

Wang Hao was arrested, and Jiang Lin eventually won the competition. In fact, the Emperor was so happy with the dragon robe that he made Jiang Lin his head tailor.

And with that, Judge Pao solved yet another mystery, the new case of the missing robe.

The General's Ink

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Zhu, Yutong Sophia – 11

I stared at him, at the unbelievably young general, unable to do anything, can't move, can't speak, can't think. When I turned my head to the Emperor, I realised his expression matched mine. It isn't, it couldn't be, could it?

It was so many years ago, when I was just a new and so-called "rookie" detective. I had been called to the capital Kaifeng to complete a time-consuming investigation. Coincidentally, it was during one of the most stressful times of the year for Chinese students – the final palatial exams, Dian Shi, hosted by the Emperor himself.

It was already dusk, the day before the exams. I was finishing off my investigation and calling it a day when suddenly I heard horses galloping and a loud knock at my door.

It was a message from the Emperor himself, calling me to the scene of the Imperial Study. I threw on some clothes that seemed formal enough and followed the messenger out of my house.

When we arrived at the scene, I immediately dropped to my knees as I recognized the Emperor. He didn't say a word, but he gestured to me to come closer.

"It seems we have a difficult situation here. I have been sent the exam papers for one final check today. And I had also scheduled a meeting with three of the contestants around the same time. The meeting should have been held in the room next to this one. Unfortunately, I was called to an urgent military meeting and therefore missed the meeting scheduled with the three students. By the time I got back it was quite obvious that the papers had been rummaged through. We must figure out whether the papers have been leaked and decide if tomorrow's exam can still be resumed," the Emperor said, with what seemed like a frown on his face. The exams must mean quite a lot to him.

I immediately started looking around the scene. The first of the important papers was on the floor, the second was turned to face the high window overlooking the front gate, and the third was left right where it was.

There was also a peculiar bottle of ink on the table, with a few drops spilled. But the smell of that was enough to tell that it was unique, and of supreme quality. The quill placed next to it was also one-of-a-kind, one I had never seen before.

Without me asking, the Emperor silently handed me a scroll containing information about the three students he was planning to meet. The first one was a quiet and short man from Guangdong, the second a sturdy, confident, and tall man from Sichuan, the third was of athletic build, a tall figure, and from An Hui.

An Hui.

The spilled ink.

The smell of it.

How familiar and uniquely fragrant it smells.

I tried to put the scene into my memory, picked up the quill and the bottle of ink, and turned to the Emperor, "Your majesty, I'm sorry that this might bother you, but I will go home and do my research. Hopefully my return is possible by the next morning."

"I have my utmost faith in you. Please return tomorrow, even if it is with the most unfortunate news," the Emperor said as he agreed to my request, and I left his palace knowing I did not have a lot of time to waste.

.....

The next morning when I arrived at the emperor's palace, I saw that he was a shambles. Although he agreed to my request, I could tell he had not slept that night.

Having done my research, I turned to the Emperor.

"Your majesty, the ink spilled was of incredible value and quality. There is no other city that has easy access to it other than An Hui. Can I request a meeting with the gentleman from there?"

"Yes, that will be possible," the Emperor replied, and a minute later, the man was brought over.

"Greetings, I am Judge Pao, and I have been asked to complete an investigation for the Emperor. I believe you are somewhat involved, would you like to explain the situation, or should I—" I started.

The man immediately fell to his knees and handed the Emperor a letter.

"Your Majesty, I'm convinced that you already know that I am the culprit. My carelessness of spilling the ink has certainly given me away. Even though I gained a huge advantage from copying the papers, I couldn't sleep last night knowing what I had done. So, I got up early to write this letter. In it, you will find that I'm willing to drop out from the exams and would like a chance as a soldier guarding the border. I'm terribly sorry for what I have done but would be immensely grateful if you could give me another chance." He was in tears as he begged the Emperor.

"Yes, I do believe you should be given a second chance for your courage in coming to admit your mistake," the Emperor generously agreed, "you will be sent to the border as a new soldier this afternoon. I hope that will help you realise your mistake and allow you to reach your full potential."

I, Judge Pao, was convinced this was the end to the case, yet a decade later, the Chinese border was attacked again, and a mysterious young general led an army of a few hundred cavalry into battle. They mounted nearly impossible charges, and finally drove the attacking force away.

The Emperor couldn't believe the courage of the young general. Just as I was about to tell him the results of one of my investigations for him, he called the young general into the palace. When the general's athletic build emerged from between the doors, the emperor's jaw fell to the floor. It was him.

Him.

The culprit.

The man from An Hui.

Where is Sherlock Holmes?

St. Stephen's College Preparatory School, Lai, Yuet Hei Hailey – 10

Judge Pao stroked his dark-coloured beard and furrowed his eyebrows. He was reading the daily newspaper, and this story was the strangest yet most captivating case he had ever seen. The headline read: “*British Detective from the future, Sherlock Holmes, held as a hostage in Kaifeng, China*”.

Judge Pao's assistant, Zhan Zhao, peered over his shoulder to take a look. Zhan Zhao was a bodyguard skilled in kung-fu, which would be useful if they decided to investigate the case.

Judge Pao was extremely doubtful. He was an intelligent, detailed and clear-minded man, so he thought a detective from the future could have never time-travelled. “That's just illogical,” he thought. His assistants thought the same – but there was a possibility that time travel had been invented in the future. Nevertheless, everything just seemed confusing and complicated, even for Judge Pao.

Later, everyone settled on further analysis and research. The officials and Judge Pao's assistants read newspapers and listened to radio broadcasts for weeks. It was the busiest and most time-consuming situation they had faced in a long time.

First step: General Information. The officials jotted down notes about this so-called “Sherlock Holmes”. He seemed very clever, but in the Song Dynasty, Pao was the smartest one known at that time. Sherlock Holmes was apparently famous for his excellent observation and amazing reasoning skills. Nothing could be perplexing to him.

Judge Pao raised an eyebrow about that.

Second step: Location. Of course, without investigating where Holmes was kidnapped, the whole thing wouldn't even be possible, right?

The officials formed a search party around Kaifeng, Judge Pao's hometown. The government put up posters around the town that invited citizens to join the search party. Lots of people were interested in finding out what had happened, so that made searching for evidence effortless and speedier.

One of the police officers found a trail of pairs of footsteps, a piece of cloth and a garbage bag. This could have belonged to anyone – but cloth and garbage bags were used frequently in abductions. Judge Pao found this evidence helpful, he assigned police officers to guard this area.

Another official found a crumpled piece of paper thrown in the depths of a forest. This could be anyone's trash, but the government declared that the search party should search for *anything* suspicious. There was a code on the paper: *EVITCETED NI DENODNABA ESUOH HTIW EULB ERIFPMAC*. At first, Judge Pao was quite bewildered, but once he cracked the code, things made sense. Hence the officials kept the paper in case it got into the wrong hands.

Gongsun Ce, Judge Pao's personal secretary, found out one more thing. There were wisps of smoke coming out of the dangerous part of the forest, where cobras, leopards and more lived. Most of the citizens of Kaifeng were too frightened and intimidated to search there, so there was only Judge Pao and the government.

Before the forest investigation, the search party went to get ready. Flashlights, ropes, and weapons were packed inside bags. First aid kits galore. Everything they needed was all ready and prepared.

This case was lengthy, but with Judge Pao there, it would be solved in no time.

Judge Pao and his crew were ready the next day. They gathered in the shallow part of the forest, where there were only fish and birds. There were fewer people to help, so most felt worried and nervous.

The birds tweeted a glorious melody, and the fish swam in crystal-clear ponds and creeks. It was a beautiful day, and the sun shone brightly, which did not match the mood, where there could be a chance that one or more of the search party could get attacked or ambushed, or worse – even killed.

They went from Stage 1 Forest into Stage 2. There were a few monkeys and foxes. Then Stage 3, where it started to get exciting. There was a pit of deadly piranhas, but luckily there was only one. And there were snapping turtles as well, which sank their sharp teeth into an official's hand.

Finally, the smoke was a few miles away. Shadows of leopards and cobras came and went, but most of the team was unscathed and managed to creep away silently. The smoke was coming from a campfire with blue fire. It was next to a shabby hut with wooden boards hammered against the windows. Judge Pao realised it was the note on the crumpled paper read backwards: *DETECTIVE IN ABANDONED HOUSE WITH BLUE CAMPFIRE*. Judge Pao told the officials to stay on guard while he and his assistants went inside.

The flimsy door creaked open when the judge opened it. Drops and puddles of blood were splattered around the planks, and it would definitely be scary if you had hemophobia. In the cellar, a silhouette was tied up with ropes and twine. Judge Pao tried to cut the rope with the knife he brought along in his satchel, but a mass of kidnappers kicked open the door and attacked them.

Instantly, Zhan Zhao whipped around and kicked and punched and beat up all the kidnappers. The four enforcers helped too. At last, ten people lay on the ground making weird gestures, with blood smeared in many corners. Once the bad guys were knocked out, Judge Pao cut all the rope and untied the figure.

“Sherlock Holmes!” everyone cried. It was him.

A week passed. The case was closed. Sherlock Holmes made friends with Judge Pao and agreed that he would visit him again, except if he got kidnapped again. But they were ready for it. He showed him how he time travelled. The machine had been invented. All you had to do was type in the year you wanted to go to and press a couple of buttons, and voilà!

Judge Pao was eager to try out time-travelling too. Another case closed. He was satisfied that the kidnappers were executed with his dog's head guillotine to serve justice.

Judge Pao smiled to himself. *Well done, Judge.*

Love and Loathing

The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Chan, Tin Hang Ethan – 12

Prologue:

That day, snow blanketed the landscape, the land, once lush and green with plants, was now barren and lifeless, and the harsh winter cold gnawed into the roots of the great tree which stood mightily in the centre of the city square. A man sat in his melancholy shed, as he plotted vengeance for one who he loved so greatly, and to exterminate one who he had a cold and bitter hatred for, as cold and bitter as the winter day itself. Exactly one year later, his wish has been fulfilled

The Death:

A metal dagger whizzed through the air, pinning the man's hand to the wall behind him, then another dagger was briskly aimed at the man's other hand, fully pinning him to the ground. "Who are thou?" The man's words tumbled out unevenly, and his lips shivered as he spoke. "Why do thou need to know?" A figure emerged from the shadows, revealing a well-built, robust figure with a fair face. "My name is not to be given to dishonourable fiends and murderers like thee." He did a gleeful jig in the darkness as he launched a dagger at the man, sending him to his demise.

He stepped forward to taunt his victim and to hear his last words. "Death is only the beginning, I will haunt thou to the end of thy life." As the man died and was sent on his way from the comforts of the living realm into the underworld, the figure dipped his finger into the victim's blood and smeared the walls with the words "Li min" in his Kaifung dialect "no one could read it, and I would probably get an alibi" he thought, and briskly left the room.

The Arrival of the God of detection:

Waitress Ye was weary. She woke up at first light for attendance, and had to serve breakfast to their hotel guests "ere first hint of dawn" as her senior said, because their guests are all "light sleepers". She was assigned to the toughest pleaser: Zhao Yan, uncle of the king and magistrate of the Yinchuan, where the Miao tribe established a settlement.

Drowsy and longing for a tranquil corner to sleep and rejuvenate her eyes, she knocked on Zhao Yan's door to realise it was open. "Most peculiar thing, I thought Master Zhao always valued his privacy. "Huh, who knows, the people who come to the Hefei hotel are always peculiar." She pushed open the magistrate's door to reveal the body of the dead magistrate.

As they sent for a detective, a figure stepped from the crowd of audiences. "I will solve this case."

The hotel manager smirked and desperately attempted to hide his prejudice towards peasants in a lower social class than he is. "What is thy name?" He asked politely.

"It is I, Bao Qing Tian, High judge of the royal court of justice."

The manager's disdain turned into admiration, and he frantically sent him to a private room to talk.

The evidence:

"May I survey the crime scene, good sir, I have many worthy assistants to help me. You are of wonderful service, dear manager."

Bao turned to the manager, and unhesitatingly the manager left.

"What do thou think of him?" Bao turned to his advisor, Gong Sun Ce.

"Almost impossible to be the criminal." The advisor replied to his senior. "As you, good master, can see, there are characters smeared onto the walls of the room, most likely to be in blood, irreversible damage to the wall. How, would a hotel manager destroy the walls of a hotel he paid so dearly to build?"

“It shall be as thou say.” Judge Bao made a final search for anything suspicious in the room and noticed the knives that pinned Zhao Yan to the wall.

They were Butcher’s knives, something one only with a butcher’s license would possess. “Awaken every client, tell them to cut each a strand of pork for dinner, each three inches wide.”

Gong Sun Ce obeyed, but he turned to face his master before he went out. “Wouldn’t the murderer have already escaped?” Bao shook his head unhesitatingly, and the advisor left. Bao was about to leave when he caught the words smeared in blood in the corner of his eye. It was written not in traditional Chinese, but in his mother tongue. It wrote: *Li Min*.

Moments later, Bao arrived at the kitchen to inspect the investigation being conducted. Before anyone starts, he beckoned his armed and flawlessly trained bodyguard Zhan Chao to be stationed at the entrance. The investigation commenced, one by one, clients were called up to cut the pork three inches wide, and cooks examined them. The fourth client cut the meat into exactly 3 inch pieces, and Bao beckoned him to come with him. “How did thee

Bao felt a searing pain his leg as the client launched a knife at him, and sped to the entrance, only to be stopped by Zhan Chao. The client, seeing no hope, resigned, and followed Bao into his compartment.

The Confession:

“Tell me,” the client said, breaking the silence, “how did thee know it was me?”

“It’s simple.” Bao explained. “The knives thee used to kill Zhao Yan were Butcher’s knives. Only butchers would have them, because of the recent disarmament policy. Therefore, the one with the best knife-work is the killer.”

“How do thee know it’s not one of the chefs?”

“We have checked all the knives and none are missing.” Bao’s tone softened to a soothing, charming voice. “Now, why did you kill Zhao Yan?”

“I killed him to avenge.....” the client began.

“Yes, Li Min.”

“How did thee know?”

“I was from Kaifeng.”

“Okay, Now, here it goes. My name is Yan Ming Li Min was my Fiancé. She was loving and charismatic, and I was promised her hand after I saved her and her father’s lives by fending off bandits who were attacking them. It was all so blissful until Zhao Yan came and threatened death to her and her father if she wasn’t promised to him. Desperate to save her daughter, her father agreed. A few days before the wedding, they were both killed by Zhao Yan, who left in pursuit of another maiden.

Later, my village doctor diagnosed me with blood poisoning, and there were reports saying Zhao Yan snuck into my room the day he left. I had two years to live. I killed Zhao Yan to avenge Li Min, her father and myself. After all the sins he had committed, isn’t he the one who deserved being punished?”

Bao hesitated before replying. “God has his sympathies for thee. I shall present the case to the royal court, and secure a verdict for you, and I would have the honor to retire from the case.....”

In Good Hands

Ying Wa Primary School, Lee, Sing Yu – 11

Think of all the people in your life that love to have money and power, the people who want everything at their fingertips, the people who want to be gods.

Now go to them and tell them they are making a bad decision in wanting to be a god.

Sure, the whole everything-you-could-ever-want thing is nice, but it gets boring. The duties are pretty horrible and the higher-ups are really strict. People who try shirking their duties, which I don't blame them for, go into the higher-ups' office and never come out the same way. Rumors fly, but I keep my head down and do my job.

This time, I was sent to monitor Pao Zheng. Again. I swear the higher-ups have some kind of vendetta against him, but I wasn't there to ask questions. I sighed as I let my mind wander free, turning my mental slate blank. The surrounding hustle faded and the colors around me coagulated into a shimmering iridescent sphere, a warping marble before my sealed eyes. Then, I focused hard on the vivid ruby-red walls, on them a painting of the sea and words of justice; the majestic marble lions outside, so lifelike they seemed ready to pounce at a moment's notice; even the three sacred guillotines, each imposing in their own rights. With a blow of air, the colorful orb scattered, filling my once-blank vision with bright palettes, taking up the empty canvas, spiring me to somewhere new.

As the all-too-familiar scene popped up around me, I smiled.

I was getting better at this.

I quickly morphed into my guard attire before looking at my objectives. "Same old, same old..." I muttered to myself, smirking as I ran off to my business. However, not long after, I heard something that made me stop in my tracks. I quickly hid behind a wall to eavesdrop on a heated argument.

Guard 1 argued, "I think Pao Zheng will get him out of it. He's his elder sister-in-law's only son. You know what Pao Zheng's elder sister-in-law helped him through? She raised him like a son! There's no way he wouldn't repay the favor!"

Guard 2 scoffed, "There's no way Pao Zheng would let him go free that easily! He's known to be unrelenting in the pursuit of justice! He's a symbol of justice, how could he let family stand in the way of a case?"

Guard 1 replied, "Come on, not even someone as strict as Judge Pao would execute their nephew, right?"

Well, this was certainly news.

Against my rational, rule-following mind screaming at me to report this, I decided to keep quiet and see where things went from here. I had a report to write on Pao Zheng after this and to say I was running out of material would be an understatement. So, I left the two of them to their bickering and waited for the summons to the courtroom. Sure enough, it came along before too much hassle, and before long I was standing in the imperial courtroom. As the incense wafted through the stuffy room, the criminal was dragged in by two beefy soldiers, a look of blank solemnity on their faces. "We have delivered the criminal to court," they uttered in a deep, booming voice that resonated in the room. They then turned around and marched out of the courtroom in synchronization, taking up their posts alongside the chiseled marble lions. Finally, Pao Zheng stepped into the courtroom, thickening the tension in the small lodgings. His already-white hair and goatee wafted lazily as a small breeze came rustling into the petite building. He was wearing his signature jet-black futou hat, as well as an impressive crimson robe, adorned with grandiose dragons flying, unaware they were frozen in time. His unwavering eyes paired with his stern,

wrinkled face gave away a menacing, intimidating aura as he stood behind his table, facing the man at fault — his nephew.

Then, all of a sudden, he spoke, and his voice was so loud it seemed a thousand more were echoing along with it. “Pao Mian, you have been accused of bribery and malfeasance. Do you have anything to say?” he thundered at the young man. Until now, I had never seen his face, but seeing as now was a good time, I stole a glance at him. He harbored some resemblance to his uncle, namely the hair, face and eyes, but his expression was of remorse and determination. Ultimately, determination won and he raised his head, saying to Pao Zheng, “I have nothing” — his voice broke — “Uncle.”

I quickly reverted my attention back to Pao Zheng. His eyes softened as he stepped forward, and his voice dropped to a whisper. “I am sorry that I cannot save you, Nephew, but I cannot fulfill both concepts of loyalty and filial piety. It is my duty to execute you. I am sorry.” Upon saying this, he took a shaky step back and took a deep breath. With a steady voice, he ordered, “Take the criminal to the dog-headed guillotine!”

As Pao Mian’s neck was pressed to the guillotine, I had my eyes on Pao Zheng. Now was his last chance to cancel the order, to lift the gleaming blade aloft, to save his nephew.

But the action never came.

As Pao Mian’s head was cut clean off, Pao Zheng only watched with tearful eyes. Through the blood, I stood in shock, reeling from the fact that this man killed his beloved nephew for the sake of justice. After that, everything was a blur up until the point where I scattered the ball of colors once more and returned to my regular duties. To this day, I have never decided if it was a good thing that Pao Zheng killed his nephew, but if a nation has a man so dedicated to justice he kills his family if they commit crimes...

I finished my report with a flourish:

“That nation is in good hands.”

New Tales of Judge Pao

YK Pao Primary School, Zhou, Jia Tong Emily – 10

Night settled on the city called Hefei as it fell asleep. Mr. Tao, the butcher was hurriedly running across the street with a huge burlap bag in his arm. The moon light shone on him as he ran into the woods.

A dozen soldiers are running behind him, each with a torch in their hand. They followed into the woods where Mr. Tao ran into. After the soldiers, a young boy called Hui snickered behind a tree. He slowly crept towards the house of the richest man in the village, Mr. Zhang. There had been a dozen soldiers at the door, but they had all gone after Mr. Tao, so the door was clear by now. Although there was a huge, golden lock at the door, it wasn't a big deal. Hui had always known how to pick lock in the rightest way. He had been stealing things and picking locks ever since his parents went to war and haven't come back and he had to take care of his young siblings. He had once stolen a flute, a ring, a chunk of cheese and an old man's golden tooth. Of course, all of these were sold out and turned into a cow that provides milk for the family.

Today, in Hefei, everyone had heard of the famous government official, Judge Pao. Everyone there was proud of him and admired him. They even set up some statues in memory of his influential goodness, wishing his spirit of wisdom and justice can spread and sustain for long. Everyone admired him a few hundred years ago, including Hui.....when he was even younger. At that time, he was a little boy who wasn't often noticed. That was why he wasn't caught when he crept into Judge Pao's room and peeked at him as he worked. At that time, he swore that when he grew up, he will become a man like Judge Pao, helping others around. However, his dream vanished since his parents left.

This time, he would rob an old treasure, from ten thousand years ago. If he sold that out in the black markets, then he and his siblings will never be poor again. He slowly pushed a piece of twig between the lock. Maybe the Empire would want him to work in the palace. The lock fell to the ground with a "Clang" and the door opened. He quickly checked that no one was heard the sound before he walked inside.

Suddenly, a few guarded men sprang out from inside, pointing at him with their spears. The Judge Pao walked out from the shadow and glared at him. Hui suddenly realized that it was all Judge Pao's trap. It was his idea to hide in Mr. Zhang's house and get him!

The next a day was Hui's trial. Judge Pao glared down at him and spoke. "Hui," he said, "I had heard that you are a poor young man. However, that is no reason you should go and steal other people's properties. You are a young man with a long future before you. But you just stole things and abandoned your future." As he spoke, Hui felt huge pressure hanging in his voice, but as he thought about it, it did make sense. A lot of sense. He was poor, but other people are poor too. The people he had robbed are once poor too, but they worked hard and became rich. He shouldn't take away other's hard work, but he should work hard himself. He has no reasons to wreck their life, even if his life was wrecked. If he worked hard, he could have a bright future. Now, he must die for his actions.

Judge Pao seemed to see his regret, for he said, "I wish there were other ways to take your crime but there weren't, eh?"

"No, sir." said Hui.

"Then I regret say that you must die."

"Wait! Mr. Tao is part of the plan as well! Why is he not dead?"

"There, young man, Mr. Tao is dead. The stones in his bag slowed him down as he ran. His head was taken down yesterday, as he was caught before you. I am sorry to say that although you are caught after him, you must die too."

He turned to executioner and signed before he said to them, "Kill him."

The sword was high in the sky before it fell, and the thin blade felt cold on his neck for a second. Hui saw his life flashed in front of him. And then, he remembered.....

That day ten years ago, when he crept into Judge Pao's room, when he saw Judge Pao work, and when he swore. He then saw that ten years later, he would steal and rob. At last, he saw a grave with the name "Hui" on the stone. It was different from any other stone. There were no flowers on the stones. Instead, people had thrown all sort of rotten food on it and there was a pungent odor coming from the cold stone. No one will respect him when he died. He was looking at his life when he heard Judge Pao shout, "Run!" He couldn't see anything as he did so.

When he finally opened his eyes, he was back on his bed. Is it just a dream? He looked down. The letter he was going to give to Mr. Tao to ask him to help attract the guards was in his hand. He stared at it for a moment, then he threw it into the fireplace. Fire danced around the letter, and he watched as Mr. Tao's name melted and the letter slowly turned into ash. He won't steal the treasure anymore, and he won't have Mr. Tao die for him.

From that day on, Hui became the most helpful young man in the village.



Creative Writing
Fiction
Group 2

New Tales of Judge Pao

CCC Wanchai Church Kei To Primary School, Wong, Ngai Chi – 10

Judge Pao was famous in Kaifeng as being a fair judge promoting legal justice. He was not afraid of power and would not allow unjustly imprisonment as well as bad guys getting away with punishments.

One day, a lady broke into the court while Judge Pao was dealing with a court case. Her act was considered committing a crime as in accordance with the law, nobody was allowed to enter the court without permission. The lady screamed and was caught up in hysteria. She yelled in the court, 'My husband Ah Fook was innocent! He should not be sentenced to death! He was framed by the son of a chief judge called Ah Keung!'

Judge Pao commanded the lady to leave the court as her act was disrupting the operation of the court violating the regulation of the court. She should be punished. Considering there might have some grievance behind, the lady was forgiven and was asked to wait outside. Judge Pao would privately talk to her.

Judge Pao met the lady in a meeting room and requested her to explain in details about the incident she raised. The lady said, "Ah Fook had been working for a chief judge for ten years. The chief judge was called Ah Kwok. Ah Fook never made a single mistake and was loyal during his ten-year service. One day, he heard a loud bang coming out from Ah Keung's room. When Ah Fook ran to his room, he saw a bloody man lying on the floor and while Ah Keung was sitting on a chair armed with a knife full of blood! Ah Fook was frightened and did not dare to make any noise, he ran back home and told me what he had seen. We discussed and decided to report the incident to the officials. Just as we left home, the officials came here and caught Ah Fook. Ah Fook was accused of murdering Ah Keung's friend --- Ah Leung. Judge Pao, Ah Fook is innocent! He could not be the murderer! He faints when he sees blood. Moreover, he is significantly weaker than Ah Leung who is a butcher." She cried throughout the conversation.

One annoying problem Judge Pao faced was that chief Judge Kwok was the senior of Judge Pao while the main suspect of the case seemed to be Ah Keung... Judge Pao went to see chief Judge Kwok and shared what the lady told him. Judge Pao wanted to see how chief Judge Kwok responded to the lady's statement.

To Judge Pao's surprise, senior Judge Kwok told Judge Pao to keep his hand off from the case and told him, "This case should have been concluded. No doubt Ah Fook is the murderer of the case. This case is NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS! There is no advantage for you to continue dealing with the case." He seemed to be threatening Judge Pao.

Judge Pao felt very uneasy about the conversation with senior Judge Kwok in his mind, the sole consideration is to ensure justice must be seen to be done. The threatening from chief Judge Kwok and his power is not at all any of his concern.

Judge Pao met up with the lady again to gather further details relating the case. He also interviewed all the servants and neighbors of Kwok's family. Furthermore, he called up few of Ah Leung's best friends for discussions. He also picked up the clothes and other objects attached to Ah Leung's body. Judge Pao tried to get a more comprehensive picture and background for the case.

With all the facts at hand, Judge Pao scrutinized every single detail and discovered the following:

Ah Leung never knew Ah Fook. There was no motivation for Ah Fook to kill Ah Leung.

A servant saw Ah Fook working in the garden when the loud bang was heard.

Ah Keung's hair and blood was found sticking on Ah Leung's body. However, none from Ah Fook could be found.

Judge Pao brought all the findings to the chief judge and requested for a retrial. Chief Judge Kwok was displeased and said, "I did ask you to stop dealing with this case, but you obviously disobey me. I warn you as the second time that you should give up processing this case, or else YOU WILL BE FIRED!" Chief Judge Kwok was apparently protecting his son --- Ah Keung.

It turned out to be a huge challenge to Judge Pao. If he continued to work on the case, he might get fired and never be able to fight for justice, for the people. However, if he gave up the case, compromising the interest of Ah Fook's fairness, how can he face his family and the masses? He was struggling...

In the end, Judge Pao decided to go to the emperor directly and presented to him the entire case, together with the threatening message from Chief Judge Kwok. Judge Pao politely asked the emperor, "How do you want to rule the country, justice or power? If you choose power, I would rather resign."

The emperor thought for a while and said, "Judge Pao, you can arrange for retrial for the case. You are now the sole judge of the case. Please ensure justice is properly done. Chief Judge Kwok will not be involved in this case by now."

After the retrial, Ah Keung was proved guilty and was sentenced to death. Chief Judge Kwok was demoted to a normal judge because he undermined the rule of law. Ah Fook was immediately released.

This was the other incident demonstrating how Judge Pao maintained justice, fairness for the society. These are no doubt the important values every citizen has been looking for. That was also the reason why Judge Pao was well respected and loved by all people.

New Tales of Judge Pao

Farm Road Government Primary School, Fong, Hei Man Lillian – 11

One thousand years ago, there were two women living in Kaifeng, the capital of ancient China's Song Dynasty. Mrs. Wong was the wife of a farmer, and Mrs. Chan was the wife of an owner of a restaurant. In the same year, both of them gave birth to their baby girls. They were very happy.

One day, Mrs. Wong finished her work with her husband on the farm. When they went back home, they could not find their baby girl. They were frightened. They went out of their home and ran to the main street of the city shouting. "Who has seen our one-year-old baby girl?" Mrs. Wong cried loudly, but no one on the street could answer her.

The next day, Mr. and Mrs. Wong went to the city center to find their baby. When they passed by the front door of Mr. Chan's restaurant, they heard the crying of a baby. Mrs. Wong shouted, "She's my baby!" They went into the restaurant immediately. They saw that Mrs. Chan was holding a baby.

"She's my baby!" cried Mrs. Wong angrily. "Give her back to me! Why did you kidnap her and bring her to your restaurant?" Then, she ran to Mrs. Chan to try to get back the baby.

Mrs. Chan said, "No! She is my baby! Don't try to hurt her!" Mr. Chan pushed Mrs. Wong hard and she fell down on the floor. Poor Mrs. Wong cried, "Give me back my baby, please!"

Frightened Mrs. Chan also cried loudly, "No! She is my baby, not yours!" Mr. Wong and Mr. Chan fought with each other.

An old lady was in the restaurant. She stopped eating and lifted up Mrs. Wong. She shouted, "Stop fighting, please! I have something to say."

Everyone looked at her, including Mr. Wong, Mr. Chan and Mrs. Chan, except for the baby girl who was crying very loudly now. The old lady turned to Mrs. Wong and asked, "What are the special characteristics of the appearance of the baby girl?"

"She has big eyes, a small nose and a small mouth," said Mrs. Wong.

The old lady looked at the baby and she saw exactly what Mrs. Wong had just mentioned. "Oh! She is actually Mrs. Wong's baby," said the old lady.

"No! Every single baby looks the same! This cannot prove that I am not her mother!" screamed Mrs. Chan.

The old lady was puzzled and could not say anything. The baby also screamed and cried more loudly.

At that moment, Zhan Zhao, the Imperial Guard of the Kaifeng Government, was leading a group of policemen past the front door of the restaurant and went in to see what was happening. Mrs. Wong and Mrs. Chan, who were both crying, told him the story.

Zhan Zhao said at once, "Both of you have to come to the police station with me. And you..." he said pointing at the old lady, "Please carry the baby girl for us."

They arrived at the police station and saw Judge Pao. Zhan Zhao briefly reported the case to Judge Pao who then asked the other people a few questions. Everyone reported to him one by one. Judge Pao asked a policeman to bring the baby to him. The baby was now sleeping quietly.

"Would this old lady please stay with us in the police station? We have a room for guests. Please help us to take care of the baby girl for a month. We will judge the case a month later," said Judge Pao. The old lady carried the baby and followed a policeman into the guest room and the other people returned home worriedly.

A month later, all the people went to the police station to see Judge Pao again. Judge Pao arrived and sat down. He looked at Mrs. Wong and Mrs. Chan and asked, "What is the baby's favourite food?"

At that time, most of the babies in China liked pumpkin congee, and it was one of the most popular dishes of Mr. Chan's restaurant. Mrs. Chan shouted immediately, "Pumpkin congee!"

But Mrs. Wong knew that her baby hated pumpkin congee very much and liked eating fish congee instead. She replied confidently without thinking, "Fish congee! She hates pumpkin congee."

Hence, Judge Pao asked a policeman to go to the market to buy pumpkin congee and fish congee. He noticed that Mrs. Chan looked worried.

About an hour later, the policeman returned to the police station with two bowls of congee. One was made with pumpkin, one with fish. Judge Pao came out from his office and ordered another policeman to ask the old lady to bring the baby out.

The old lady came out of the guest room with the baby girl. "Have you fed the baby this morning?" asked Judge Pao.

"No. Zhan Zhao told me not to feed her. He said that was your order," replied the old lady.

"Then please help me feed the baby with the congee on the table," said Judge Pao. "Feed her the pumpkin congee first."

The old lady fed the baby the pumpkin congee, but the baby wouldn't eat it even though she was quite hungry. Then, the old lady fed her the fish congee. This time, the baby ate all the fish congee!

"Now, you may know who the baby's mother is," said Judge Pao. "In the past month, the old lady told me that the baby had picky eating habits. Therefore, I thought of this idea to find her real mother."

"Forgive me, please!" cried Mrs. Chan. "I did this because my baby died a month before."

"But that's no excuse for you to do such a bad thing," said Judge Pao. "And you..." he continued, looking at Mrs. Wong, "You should teach your child not to be so picky with food anymore."

"Thank you, Judge Pao!" yelled Mrs. Wong and she hugged her baby with her husband and went home. Mrs. Chan was sent to jail by the policemen.

The Road Not Taken

Good Hope Primary School cum Kindergarten (Primary Section), Chan, Tsz Huen Evelyn – 12

Rumors of Judge Pao curl around the streets of China. Some say they are myths and madness, legends and lies. Ming was one of them.

A dim flicker of light meets Ming's eyes, arousing him from dreamless slumber. He wakes up in a daze, sullen eyes disoriented in a haze of color. Someone is calling, a curious sound that pulsates through his head...

Terror grips his chest, his head reeling for the thirst for sight. Finally, the mesh of images clear up miraculously. He breathes unsteadily before the shadows shroud his sight with impenetrable blackness, and the peculiar light burns out.

The distant voice rings again, louder. Ming's heart leaps with a yearning hope for a savior.

"Erase those dire hopes, child. Truthfully, I never thought I'd see one of my own here in the gateways to Hell."

Ming steps back, legs buckling from inescapable fear. Again, the fury of sudden flames ignites the barren floor in a circle, burning through the soles of his worn shoes. Pain sears through his bones and anguished cries strangle his throat. He looks up, the light of the fire ricocheting off the present surfaces. The stone walls are broken down, dusted with ash and soot, and traces of burnt-out fire are obvious to be acknowledged. Everywhere he looks is devoid of color, until he sets eyes on his true peril. A looming, tall figure sits on a throne of blood and bones.

It can't be, he thinks frantically, could the legends of his lineage be true?

"Are you...you...what they say?" he stammers, perspiration stringing beads on his forehead, tormented by the sweltering heat, "Judge Pao?"

"Indeed I am," the figure – Judge Pao, replies, breaking into peals of almost derisive laughter, "this is my duty after my long career of dueling crime."

He rises from his throne, and Ming gasps. The timely tales the elders spin, they were right. They always have been.

Time seems to slow, and a barrier of stillness sets between them.

"You're here, Ming," Judge Pao chuckles ruefully, piercing the silence, "because you didn't believe, didn't make the most out of your legacy. You could've done great things, yet you are cast aside. Now the roads lead you here."

The flames diminish, and Ming pants, eyes burning through the swathes of darkness.

"Wait...what?"

"I know it all, Ming, especially since you carry my blood," Judge Pao explains with a sigh. "I'm rather displeased with how you chose your path in life. Running away to create your own villainized identity, to steal and..."

He trails off, obviously not wanting to visualize that picture.

"You were young, innocent, and had no idea what you were stringing yourself along...but you chose to abandon your family's crime-corruption duties, which strove for the good of the world. Then, in the cruelest stroke of fate...your life ended in terms of the most twisted of ways. You sacrificed yourself to crimes."

Remnants of the past remain scattered in Ming's river of thought, and he desperately tries to remember. Until realization hits him like a tidal wave.

Ming died.

He remembers the scars from wicked swords that slashed his skin like paper until he took his last breath. They stung from the memory as he traced his fingers along those open, fresh wounds. His demise was at his own hands. He remembers his family's pain, and the look on his mother's face, forever embedded in his memory. He can only imagine how much she mourned him, despite it all. He lost her trust the night he left.

How the sky has cursed him to realize that only now, in the aftermath of everything he had ever set his mind on, just minutes before death lulls him to the other side.

And Ming remembers it all. He doesn't know what to say.

Judge Pao draws a breath, and it feels like the room is falling with an essence of somnolence as he stands warily from his throne. "Ming," Judge Pao says quietly, obsidian eyes gazing at him, "you ended up where fallen kingdoms now reside. Tyranny, bloodshed, and defeat. They all wanted glory, but glory is fleeting when the price of it all is hatred.

"Most people are like that, heedless to the power of their desires. So drunk on power and pain, they forget that no true hero can fabricate their legacy unless they truly earned it themselves."

Ming doesn't sneer at the remarks like he used to. He is not unfazed or unperturbed, like when he listens to endless warnings and cautions. Quite the opposite, he understands.

“It’s too late,” he whispers begrudgingly, “I was vindictive, angry, bitter. It seems my story has come to an end after all, and time has finally allowed the end to its shame. I won’t cause any more suffering, to anyone else.”

“Time, the most complex device in all of eternity. You can’t turn over its hourglass, yet it is always waiting for you, forevermore,” Judge Pao remarks, “your story isn’t over yet. You can go on the road not taken. The first step is to heal yourself.”

Ming turns away, tears glistening in his eyes. The expectations, the neglect, the claims of him knowing nothing in the cusp of his youth. He muses over the recollections, for a moment. *What could’ve been? What could he have done right?*

“Now, Ming,” Judge Pao says faintly, “I grant you something that the universe rarely allows me to do. The ability for you to cross back into reality, your one final chance.”

Somehow his voice is dissipating, no longer clear enough for Ming to fully comprehend. “Fight the good fight” is what Ming hears last. They reverberate incessantly, once again.

Judge Pao and the lessons he taught still ring true to many if not all. Many say they are tried and true, sound and sensible.

Ming will always believe in his wise words, no matter what.

New Tales of Judge Pao

HKCCCU Logos Academy, Sage, Elaine Lang-en – 10

As the pale light of a waxing moon sailing across the Hong Kong night sky shone down on her, the crescent moon-shaped birthmark on Judy Law's forehead suddenly began to tingle madly. Sometimes, she wished it wasn't there, and she wished that her classmates wouldn't make fun of her for it so much. Her vision blurred and she lost consciousness...

She awoke in a strange place, it was vast, white and endless. Before her, a translucent body appeared! It said, "Judy, blessings be upon you, dear child."

"Huh? Who are you?" she asked, confused. Then, she noticed a matching birthmark on the spirit's forehead! The spirit chuckled softly, "Why, I'm Judge Pao! You're my descendant. The first descendant to inherit my powers!"

"W-w-where am I? W-what powers? Why —" Judy stammered.

"Hush, I'm sure you have a lot of questions," he interrupted. "When I was your age, I discovered I could talk to the dead. This place between worlds is where the living and dead commune. I decided to help people solve murder mysteries with my powers. But I was poisoned by one of the murderers. At long last, I have a descendant with my powers! Although your surname isn't Pao, being descended from my granddaughter," he continued, smiling affectionately, "your birthmark proves your lineage."

He added, "You can call me Grandpa Pao."

Judy was dumbfounded. It was a lot to take in.

Smiling kindly, he went on. "There is a serial killer at large — and the murderer is none other than a descendant of the man who killed *me*. Your destiny is to use your powers to avenge me and all his victims. You'll become a magnificent crime-fighter and judge, renowned for your good deeds and sought out by everyone in need! I'll train you to master your powers, and you will be acknowledged as Judge Judy!" Judge Pao exclaimed, his translucent eyes shining with pride.

"Well... that does seem pretty exciting, and it *would* feel wonderful to have people *like* me, and it would also feel *great* to help people, but... I'm not sure about saving all of China from an evil murderer and bringing him to justice! I'm only thirteen!" Judy cried, a little flustered.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," Judge Pao soothed her. "I believe in you. Remember, I too was a mere child when I first began this journey." Judy sighed but nodded gratefully. She was overjoyed to have somebody who not only loved her and cared about her, but also had all the time in the world for her, unlike her loving but worn out single mother. She hugged him, although her arms went right through him. Just then, her birthmark tingled softly, the surrounding whiteness grew blindingly bright, and she found herself back in bed.

Every night after that, under Judge Pao's supportive guidance, Judy would hone her powers and talk to spirits in the white void. She became a master at investigating and solving mysteries, using her powers to question the serial killer's victims. One night, Judge Pao appeared before her. "You are ready," he declared solemnly. Breathing deeply, Judy smiled at her loving 'grandpa'. It was time to bring an evil man to justice.

Using her hard-saved pocket money, Judy bought a train ticket to Shenzhen, the scene of the last murder. Judge Pao had taught Judy to press hard on her birthmark with two fingers, thinking of him, and he would materialize as a hologram only Judy could see and hear. She was relieved to have him with her.

When in bustling Shenzhen, by pressing two fingers to her birthmark, Judy could hear spirits whispering to her and guiding her towards the murderer's location. She spotted a suspicious figure. His jacket hood fell back, revealing his head briefly before he put it up again. A wig and sunglasses disguised his brooding face, but Judy could never miss the monster she had seen through the victims' dead eyes. *You were born for this*. She reassured herself. Taking a deep breath, she stealthily pursued after him, Judge Pao following. He entered an old building, went to a flat and picked up the lock, pushing the door open. Watching intently, Judy called the police and reported where she had found the serial killer and that someone was in peril.

"Well, well, look who we have here," he rasped menacingly. A pretty young woman turned around to look at him. Recognizing her ex-boyfriend, she frowned, demanding, "What do *you* want?" With a grimacing smile, the

murderer drew a blade from his belt and advanced towards her. “To *kill* me?” the woman snorted, “Enjoy prison!” She spat at him. With a soft, harsh sneer, he lunged at her. Judy gasped, shouting “Stop!” just as he was about to plunge his knife into her chest.

The murderer whirled around, finding himself face to face with Judy’s smartphone. She had been recording and live streaming to a police website. He snarled through gritted teeth. Judy was scared. What if the police didn’t come in time? The murderer charged at Judy, knife in hand. Judge Pao instinctively stepped in front of her, protectively but in vain. Just then, several policemen rushed in, tackling the evil man to the ground. Judy and Judge Pao heaved sighs of relief. The police thanked Judy as they took the serial killer away in handcuffs.

Judy’s heart was still racing as she rode the train back home. Judge Pao floated alongside her, nodding his head with pride, confident that his legacy was secure in the hands of Judge Judy. It was long past midnight when she finally arrived home. Her mother was still up waiting frantically for her, having seen Judy on the news. Judy told her everything. “I’m so *proud* of you!” gushed Judy’s mother, embracing their newfound lineage. They hugged each other tightly, tears of love and joy welling from their eyes. For the first time in her life, Judge Judy felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

New Tales of the Judge Pao

Kowloon City Baptist Church Hay Nien Primary School, Wong, Yi Kwan – 12

One day, a woman who was in desperate need of help went to Kaifeng mansion to report a crime. The officials beat the floor with their rods while shouting ‘Wei...Wu...’. Then, a dignified man came out of the door gravely. His skin was as black as ink. On his forehead, there was a white crescent. His mustache reached all the way to his neck. He was Judge Pao.

Judge Pao sat down and asked the woman to narrate her case. ‘My name is He Nian’. In my village, there’s a rich man named Chen Fu who always pesters me by constantly telling me to be his wife. I courteously refused, however, he forcefully locked me in his house with chains. It was a miracle that I eventually escaped. The first thing I did was to run here for help.’ She said, while trying to hold back tears. ‘He Nian, relax! Go home first. I’ll help you fight for justice.’ Judge Pao replied. He then ordered Zhang Long, one of his guards, to take Chen Fu back for interrogation tomorrow.

The following day, Zhang Long arrived at Chen Fu’s house. When he entered the living room, he stood there stunned and speechless. Chen Fu was dead! His neck had obvious strangle marks and he’s still holding an antique vase. There was a crack on it. Weapons were nowhere to be found.

Zhang Long rushed outside to question the villagers there. An lady claimed that she heard He Nian and Chen Fu argued last night and He Nian indignantly shouted, ‘Back off, or I’ll kill you!’ Then, an obese man recalled, ‘Last night, I saw County Magistrate Wang and Chen Fu quarreling in a restaurant.’

Zhang Long brought both He Nian and County Magistrate Wang back to Kaifeng mansion. Judge Pao interrogated He Nian, ‘Last night, someone overheard you threatening to kill Chen Fu. Are you the murderer?’ ‘I admit I did say that but I swear I didn’t murder him. It was nothing but a threat!’ she cried agitatedly. At that moment, Judge Pao noticed the freshly scabbed wound on He Nian’s hand, and asked her, ‘When did you get that wound?’ ‘I got that when I was pulling Chen Fu.’ She replied.

Then, Judge Pao asked County Magistrate Wang, ‘Yesterday, somebody saw you and Chen Fu having a huge argument at a restaurant. Later on, he was murdered at home. Was this incident related to you?’ ‘No.’ County Magistrate Wang simply replied. Judge Pao found that County Magistrate Wang’s palm was bruised and there was also a wound on his forehead. ‘When did you get these wounds?’ Judge Pao asked. ‘The previous day, I got drunk with Chen Fu and accidentally fell to the floor and hurt myself.’ Wang replied.

Judge Pao thought for a while and said, ‘I have a method to find out who the real murderer is. In the murder scene, there were some blood stains on the antique beside Chen Fu. The blood was obviously from the murderer since no wounds were found at the dead body. I’ll drop each of your blood on this antique. If anyone’s blood can dissolve with the blood stains, then whoever that is, is the murderer. Now, you two can go home first. Tomorrow, I’ll send both of you to the scene of the crime for a blood test.’

Then, Judge Pao whispered something to his bodyguard’s ear.

At midnight, a person in black snuck into Chen Fu’s mansion. He was as sneaky as a black cat. As soon as that person found the vase, he instantaneously took out a wet towel from his pocket and started to wipe it. All of a sudden, the lights turned on. ‘County Magistrate Wang, you’re the murderer!’ said Zhan Zhao vociferously while pinning him down. Later, he was taken to the Kaifeng mansion.

Judge Pao asked County Magistrate Wang, ‘Why did you sneak into Chen Fu’s house at midnight?’ ‘Yesterday, you said that there was an antique vase at Chen Fu’s house. I am extremely fascinated with antique vases so I decided to go see for myself.’ Wang replied.

Judge Pao furiously said, ‘You wore black clothes and brought a wet cloth to break into a dead man’s house, just for taking a look at the antique vase? Actually, I didn’t mention what the antique is. How did you know it’s a vase? Your aim was to wipe the blood off the vase, wasn’t it? To be honest, the reason I deliberately told you there’s blood on

the antique is just to lure the culprit to show up. I bet the wound on your forehead was caused by Chen Fu hitting you with the vase during the fight while your palms were bruised when you strangled Chen Fu to death with a rope. I'm sure you're the murderer! Tell me, why did you kill him?

County Magistrate Wang lowered his head, 'You're right. Chen Fu was killed by me. I met him at the restaurant and requested him to sell his antique vase to me but he refused. I had no choice but to steal it from his house at midnight. However, I was found and a fight broke out. In a panic, I took a rope to strangle his neck but I really didn't want to kill him. He's dead because he's too weak...'

'Execute him immediately.' Judge Pao screamed.

County Magistrate Wang shouted loudly, 'My official position is much higher than yours. You don't have the right to exercise punishment at me!'

'No matter how high your position is. Whoever breaks the law, I will deal with in impartiality! Come on! Take out the Tiger-head guillotine!' Judge Pao bellowed. Finally, County Magistrate Wang was executed.

Due to Judge Pao's extreme honesty and uprightness, he gained the honorific title, Justice Pao. Up to now, he is still honored as the cultural symbol of justice in Chinese society.

Murder Mystery in the Mansion

Kowloon Rhenish School, To, Sum Yuet – 11

News had spread. The master of the Song Mansion was murdered last night, and the rumour was that one of his sons killed him.

It was the break of dawn, the sound of drums beating loudly at the front of the courthouse could already be heard. The person who beat the drums stepped inside and reported the case to Judge Pao.

‘I’ve been working as a maid in the Song Mansion for years... I just cannot believe that one of his sons could’ve murdered Master Song. But nobody else was in the mansion that time. It couldn’t be suicide either since he had planned to make his own will today, seeing that he’d die shortly from his sickness. He had discussed it with the family.’

Judge Pao had been listening carefully the last several minutes, then, rising from his seat, he said, ‘Very well, let’s head over to the mansion now.’

The maid led Judge Pao and Zhan Zhao to the mansion. They went to the primary bedroom – the crime scene – to investigate the death of Song.

In the middle of the bedroom was a wooden table. Song, the victim, was lying on the floor next to the table. On the table were a teapot, a goblet, and a pile of arsenic.

Judge Pao studied the pile of arsenic carefully. Then, looking into the goblet, he realised that there was some red powder – arsenic – left in the goblet and on its rim. Judge Pao showed this to the others.

‘Do you know anyone who buys arsenic in this mansion?’ he asked the maid. She nodded sadly and told Judge Pao that the youngest son, Jian had to take arsenic to cure this sickness he had from a young age.

‘The evidence here points to Jian. Do you think he might’ve done it?’ Zhan Zhao asked Judge Pao, who wasn’t sure himself.

Afterwards, Judge Pao invited the three suspects – Yi, Wen, and Jian – to have a chat in the dining room, to inspect their behaviour. Then, he told them about the arsenic he found in the bedroom.

‘I knew it! Jian was the one who killed Father!’ Wen shouted, pointing at Jian. Yi nodded in agreement. ‘Who else would be able to own arsenic themselves without suspicion?’

Jian looked aghast. ‘I only take arsenic as a medicine to cure my illness! Besides, there isn’t any remaining since last week and I’ve been meaning to buy it yesterday! And why would I even want to kill Father? How would that benefit me? Maybe you’re the murderer, blaming it on me before anyone uncovers the truth!’ he exclaimed. ‘Don’t forget, you were the one quarrelling with Father about borrowing money for gambling on the very same day!’

The two brothers continued arguing while Yi just stood there in the back watching them. His face was unreadable. It showed no anger or fear. Although he wasn’t smiling at all, Judge Pao swore, for one second, he could see a gleam of happiness on his face. But then, nobody else saw that.

‘– Look, if that’s it, why don’t you accuse Yi of murdering him to receive inheritance? We all know what Yi is. He might want to speed things up,’ Wen was saying. Yi widened his eyes in terror as he heard him. That didn’t go unnoticed. ‘Being the eldest son, of course, what else do you think I mean?’

Zhan Zhao leaned in closer and whispered to Judge Pao, ‘Who do you think is the murderer?’

‘Oh, I’m not sure about that. For what we know now, it can be anyone.’ Judge Pao looked at Zhan Zhao and asked, ‘Can you go to the local pharmacy and investigate? See who had bought arsenic to poison Song.’

He nodded and hurried off, leaving everyone else in the room.

Two hours later, Zhan Zhao returned to the dining room, and he had bought an old woman with him. ‘I’ve brought a guest.’ Judge Pao noticed Yi turned and dropped the goblet he was holding once he saw her. The woman saw him too and she looked scared. Even the maid looked appalled.

'She bought arsenic two days ago, and the only person besides her who bought it since last week was Jian,' Zhan Zhao informed Judge Pao.

Judge Pao asked Yi and the maid if they know the old woman. A went speechless and looked everywhere but into the eyes of Judge Pao. 'I met you twenty years ago. The night you gave your son to Master Song,' the maid addressed the woman, and turned to Yi.

'Why were you buying arsenic?' Judge Pao asked the woman. He could see Yi shaking his head frantically. He had already given himself away.

The old woman took a deep breath and said softly, 'Yi is my son, but I didn't have the ability to raise him. We were separated after sending him away. Anyways, we keep in contact, and Yi consistently seeks for my help. Last week, he told me to secretly buy arsenic for him, but I never thought he would do this.'

Yi stared at his mother in disbelief. However, he looked calm – even murderous – instead of fearful. 'Of course, I have underestimated your skills, Judge Pao. Very well, if you want the truth, here it is.' He looked angry for a second and continued, 'Song adopted me, which means I am not his blood-related son, that I couldn't receive his inheritance. I must kill him so that nobody will find out the truth, and as the eldest, I will get to inherit all his property. By using arsenic, I can blame it on Jian.'

Before anyone else could move, Zhan Zhao grabbed Yi to prevent him from escaping, and took him to the courthouse.

Judge Pao solved another case, and this, along with all the other ones he had solved before, will be heard by everyone through all generations.

Judge Pao Outsmarts the Murderer

Kowloon Rhenish School, Tse, Man Chun – 11

Two men were riding a carriage to Kaifeng City. Suddenly, their horse stopped. They felt strange so they went down to see. When they went down, there was a noise. It was footsteps. They can hear that the footsteps were getting closer and closer.

In Judge Pai's court, Judge Pao and his subordinates were all in their position to judge the next case. Instead of adults, a child came in. 'What seems to be the problem?' asked Judge Pao. The child answered, 'Lord Pao, today when I was walking back home from the market, I saw two dead bodies lied on the ground. I think they got killed by someone with a knife when they were going to Kaifeng City to find you.' Judge Pao's advisor Mr. Gongsun said, 'This isn't an easy case. We need to go to the crime scene to look for details and clues.'

When they arrived at the crime scene, there was a lot of people gathering around. Judge Pao went up to see if there are any clues. After he examined the two corpses, he gasped in terror. His bodyguard Zhan Zhao asked, 'Lord Pao, what seems to be the problem?' 'Over twenty cut wounds were found on the corpses and these two are the people who I invited to our court for a case of human trafficking. Despite they are not a good person, they have the right to life. The murderer needs to be punished by the justice of law!' cried Judge Pao. 'Well then, we need to start looking for more details and clues to find out who is behind all of this!' said Mr. Gongsun.

After a while, one of Judge Pao's bodyguard Ma Han found something. He shouted, 'Everybody come here, I found some footprints which might lead us to the murderer. We just needed to follow them. Judge Pao ordered everybody to follow the footprints.

The footprints lead to an old and abandoned warehouse. Everybody walked inside. There was spiderwebs everywhere. It was horrible inside. They all thought how could someone live or hide in such a place.

They started to search the place. The warehouse was huge. They need to spend a lot of time to search the whole place.

After a few hours, they still couldn't find a single person. When they all thought it was hopeless, Mr. Gongsun saw a deep line on the ground. They took all the things off it. It was a hidden door. They opened it and saw a ladder. They climbed down it slowly.

Inside was huge. There was a giant goat statue in the middle. Their eyes were all caught on the statue that they didn't notice two eyes were spotting them at the back in the darkness.

Then, the two eyes disappeared into the darkness. There were some words on the wall. It was written by ink – 'I have been baking bread for years and years. I am so angry..... I needed to.....They need to pay the penalty.....' Some words were blurred. 'I think the person who wrote this might be an old baker.' said Mr. Gongsun. 'We need to find him quickly.' said Judge Pao.

According to the track of carriage, Zhan Zhan led Judge Pao and the fellows to trace the murderer. Finally, they reached a cave. Judge Pao shouted, 'Anybody here?' An old man walked out slowly and said in a deep voice, 'What bread would you like, Judge Pao?' Judge Pao asked, 'No, I just want to know have you been to an old warehouse?' After Judge Pao asked, the man started to become nervous and his whole body was sweaty. 'Uh.....No.' the man said nervously.

Suddenly, he took one of his bread knife out and wanted to kill Judge Pao. Luckily, Zhan Zhao stopped him. They started to fight. Zhan Zhao defeated and seized him easily. The man was escorted to Judge Pao's court.

In the court, the man knelt on the ground and faced to Judge Pao. He disclosed his name was – Hao Shang. Judge Pao asked him, 'Any explanation at this moment?.' Then, Hao Shang began to tell his miserable story "Twenty years ago, I got married with a woman in Jing City. I worked as a baker and got rich. We had a child one day. My life was happy until the war started. That time, I was forty years old. One day, thousands soldiers charged into my

village. My wife and son died in the war. After the war, I didn't want to bake but two men said, 'Nobody can take your job, you must do it for us!' I asked, 'Well then, Can you give me an assistant?' The two men replied, 'Sorry, all bakers died in the war.' Afterward, the two men forced me to do with a sword. If I did not obeyed their order, they will kill me. Few months later, I found that the men sold my bread to the enemy for earning money, so I was extreme angry and got very mad. Then I started to train and built a hideout to get my revenge plan."

After, Judge Pao heard Hao Shang's story. He was very touched but also angry. He said, 'Even your story is touching, you can't just got revenge and kill anybody. They should be punished by law, not by you! Since you killed the gangsters, you must be sentenced to death. Wang Zhao and Ma Han, take out the Dog Guillotin!'

Wang Zhao and Ma Han took out the Dog Guillotine. Zhang Long and Zhao Hu put Hao Shang's head under the chopper. At this time, Hao Shang closed his eyes and found his wife and child waving hands to him. Judge Pao threw out the execution sign and the Dog Guillotine shut down with a loud bang. The guards shouted, 'Wei Wu.....'

Judge Pao Investigates

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lee, Charlotte – 10

No one else in the crowd had scanned the area for possible threats and suspects like he did. No one else had taken note of an absence of clues like he had. No one else in the crowd knew how to find out the truth. He was Pao Qing Tia and there wasn't a mystery he couldn't solve. And the murder of Jin Lihua and the missing coronation seal was no different.

Judge Pao was lounging in his armchair in the sitting-room in his dressing gown, reading the DiBao and sipping his morning cup of tea, as per usual, when he came upon a rather curious article. It was a day after Emperor Zhenzong had passed and the whole Song Dynasty was still in shock. The article read, 'Trusted servant and guardian of the Royal Seal found dead in room'. The Royal Jade Seal, to be used at Renzhong's coronation, was missing. A reward of 1,000,000 pieces of gold Yuanbao if found. "Hmm." "A bit odd, that this was to happen exactly the day before the coronation." Pao sat up from the armchair, "Since I do have a bit of spare time, I suppose it can't hurt to help out." He sent a post message to his assistant. "Zhen Zhao, we've got a case on our hands."

"Judge Pao, thank you for coming with us to investigate this case. We'd be happy to answer any questions you have." The police led Pao to the crime scene. "Jin Lihua was killed in this room, with the door locked and windows closed from the inside." Pao stood on the threshold, examining the scene. "When exactly, did this happen?" "We don't know as the door was locked. However, we discovered this at around eleven o'clock in the morning." "If it was locked, how did you know?" "We received a report at the police station by one of the court officials. I assume you're familiar with him — Li Qiang? He told us someone died inside the treasury." Pao nodded without saying anything. Li Qiang was a "bent" court official known for supposedly planting fake evidence in crime scenes, but never getting punished during trials. Of course, there was no real evidence whatsoever to support this, but just multiple coincidences were enough for people to conspire about where his loyalty lay. "Clues show that Jin Lihua was bludgeoned to death, but there's no weapon." Zhen Zhao explained. Scattered on the floor was a comb engraved with jade, a blue rubber band and muddy footprints leading to a wall. "Who'd you think did it?" Zhen Zhao asked. "Don't you find it peculiar that Li Qiang somehow automatically knew the seal was missing and Jin Lihua was murdered even though the room was completely locked so well that the police had to break open the door just to get in? And what about the blue rubber band next to the body? I saw one on Li Qiang's wrist the other day. "It is suspicious, indeed. But he's innocent until proven guilty. There's no direct evidence that points to him. Besides, it is unjust to accuse someone of committing a crime because you don't like them."

Rustle. A paper flyer blew in front of him, advertising waterproof paper, except that apart from the title, the paper was blank. Must be a trick, Pao thought. He grabbed a candle and held the piece of a paper above it, letting the flickering flames reveal a possible secret message. Faint letters spelled out, 'Meet me in the library at 1am'.

Judge Pao could feel that whoever the people here were, they knew that he was there. The room was as silent as a grave and both Pao and Zhen Zhao were too afraid to make any kind of sound, in hopes of remaining undiscovered while trying to "spy" on the suspicious-looking note writer. "Do you have it?" A disembodied, gravelly voice asked. "Yes. I even have a few others." The voice reminded him of Li Qiang — honeyed yet nasal. "Good. We have a buyer." "Who, may I ask?" "None of your business," they snapped.

Zhen Zhao sneezed and both of them instinctively drew in their breath. It's over now. They had been discovered by the plotters. Thump. One step. Two steps. Three, four and five... Li Qiang's footsteps echoed around loudly in the library. Pao Qing Tian could feel someone's breath on his neck.

Li Qiang gritted his teeth. "You'll never find the seal."
"I don't think so," Judge Pao whispered, leaning forward.

They both raised their guards as Pao and Li Qiang executed an overhand cut. Pao Qing Tian parried with lightning speed. Pao once more parried Li Qiang's swing from the opposing side. They continued until Pao began to recall his training from when he was little and realised he wasn't already dead. He started thinking and acting, as opposed to just responding. Li Qiang carried on making overhand cuts. The next time this happened, Pao raised his hands up high and aimed for Li Qiang's head. Despite missing his target by a few centimetres, Pao succeeded in lightly poking Li Qiang's forehead with his sword.

"I yield." Li Qiang muttered. "Good. Now confess. Where did you put the seal?" Zhen Zhao asked. "We never stole it in the first place. It's still in the room. We just pretended we did to cause a distraction." Pao sheathed his sword. "Alright then."

It had been a few weeks since they had spied on Li Qiang and his fellow plotter and Judge Pao was still trying to unravel the mystery of the seal. Still in the room... blue rubber band and muddy wall footprints... that's it! They created a secret trapdoor, then hid the seal inside with footprints as clues to discover!

5 days later, in the high court.

Judge Pao banged his gavel. "Li Qiang, I hereby sentence you to punishment by beating and 11 years in prison for past cases of fraud, robbery, murder and high treason."

At last, justice was served.

New Tales of the Judge Pao

W F Joseph Lee Primary School, Leung, Song – 10

In the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1122) there lived a government official who was honest and righteous to the utmost degree. His name was Bao Zheng and everyone called him Bao Gong (Lord Bao). He was the man with a long beard and a thick eye brown. He also has a mole that shape like the moon. When Bao Gong was in his late forties he was appointed Magistrate of Tian Chang country in An Hui province. During his term, he not only upheld the laws in a justice and strict way, he was also very good at solving many legal cases. Because of that, many evil people were punished and many innocent people in wrongfully mindset were changed from the justice. Unfortunately, Bao Zheng died inside his office at the age of sixty three. He was buried in Anhui Hefei province. His grave was 1200 meters square in area.

We had seen a lot of movies about Bao Zheng. They seemed farfetched and unreal. In real life, Bao Zheng trialed some case that is worth to reflect. Let me share some of them with you.

One time there was a woman who came into Bao Zheng's house and said, "Bao Zheng, Please help me! Last year, My husband and I went to Beijing to have an exam with our son in order to get a better job and have money to pay for the bills for our house. But my husband and son were killed by a man called uncle Guo after the exam. He is now trying to kill me. Please help me...please!" After hearing what the woman said, Bao Zheng was pitiful for that woman. So he let her stay in his house and told the guard keep everyone out. The next day, Bao Zheng went to uncle Guo's house and found that he has moved to another place. However, he found two dead bodies in the well and knew that the two bodies are the husband and son of that woman. Then Bao Zheng asked the people if they knew where Uncle Guo went. They said, "He went to a place called Guangzhou and he said he would never come back." Few days later, Bao Zheng packed his stuff and went on a trip to Guangzhou. He also brought his bodyguards and the woman. After few weeks of trip, they finally got to Uncle Guo's house. When they arrived, there was a man in a white shirt and he had a long beard. He looked very old. Then Bao Zheng asked the woman, "Is that Uncle Guo?" And the woman said, "Yes! That's him!" Then Bao Zheng asked his bodyguards to catch him. When they caught uncle Guo they asked him to go to Bao Zheng's court and arrested him as a murder case. When they arrived the court, Bao Zheng said, "You need to be honest about what you say next!" Then Bao asked, "Are you the killer?" Then uncle Guo said, "Of course not!" Then Bao said, "But we found two dead bodies in your old house." Then Guo said, "Really! But I didn't kill anyone! That means someone killed somebody there!" After that, Bao said, "But a woman said you killed her husband and her child. How can you prove that you didn't kill those people." Then Guo started to be scared and said, "No... I didn't, I don't know that woman." "But we found your fingerprints on the dead body. You can't say that you didn't kill them, right?" Guo said, "Sorry Bao Zheng, I know I was wrong. Please don't kill me!" Bao said "You are now a killer so we must use the death penalty. But because your terrible killing way, we will use the most painful death penalty. But we will send you to the jail first." Guo said, "no please no..."

The next day, Guo's brother came. He said, "Can I bail Guo please?" Then Bao said, "No, because it was a big case and we have already issued the death penalty. And he will die tomorrow. You may come tomorrow so that you can see him for the last time." Guo's brother cried, "No! No! I can't let my brother die. No!"

The next day the death penalty began. Before that, Uncle Guo's brother said, "Brother, I hope you can have a great life in the heaven and we will miss you forever. I came here because I want to see you for the last time. I love to be your brother and I hope that I can still be your brother or your family member in our next life. I love you brother." Uncle Guo was so touched and cried, "I love you too brother!" Then the executioner cut off uncle Guo's head. That next day, the town was very peaceful and there were no murder cases anymore. Everyone in that town was very grateful to Bao Zheng and he became a hero.

Bao Zheng was a sympathetic person. In the above case, you can see Bao Zheng was a brave person. He offended a lot of noble people. In the history, Bao Zheng was being poisoned by the king. Bao Zheng didn't have a noble life, but his honesty and integrity was respected by the posterity. Although he died so long ago, the kindness of his heart and spirit never wiped out. In the present, people visit his grave as a respect for Bao Zheng. Hope you guys learnt to be a justice person after reading this article.



Fiction

Group 3

The Ship

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pao...Pao...Judge Pao.

He froze.

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

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

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

He who shares not my values is not my descendant.

Don't leave your descendants with only embarrassment!

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

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

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

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

Knock-knock-knock.

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

"Father—"

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

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

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

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

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

And Pao took everything Sohmen had done into his heart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Just like Judge Pao.

Pao Yue-Kong smiles.

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

Judge Pao would be proud. Very proud.

The Case of the Dumplings

ESF Island School, Chan, Ella – 13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silence is not Judge Pao’s forte. Pao moved to the slit in the cabinet doors to observe the man’s movements.

Suddenly, there was a “Clunk!” next to him. He hurriedly lowered his gaze, as something landed in front of him. A pair of eyes stared back at Pao – blank, with black hair strands poking out, along with the human features of a face. Pao barely managed to stifle his gasp as he pushed the head deep into the cabinet. This movement was unfortunately heard by the man, whose face Pao can see right in front of the slit.

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

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

In the next few days, a lot happened. The butcher was, of course, beheaded by Judge Pao, and justice was at last returned to the unfortunate widow, but that was old news. From time to time Pao pondered – he constructed a logical evaluation of the murder case, however he couldn’t seem to explain the timely disappearance of the old, wizened lady, especially how she simply vanished down the street. Judge Pao thought she looked quite similar to the orphaned child he met before the murder case.

Repaying Good with Evil

ESF Island School, Lung, Vincy – 12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★ ★ ★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

New Tales of Judge Pao

ESF Island School, Yoon, Seung June – 12

This case was a hard one. No witnesses, no evidence, nothing to point to a culprit. But Pao Bao Zheng would do everything in his power to bring the truth to light. He smirked a knowing smile. After all, he had never failed once. Shielding his eyes from the harsh sun, he breathed in the musty odor rising from the ground below him. Excited greetings from the townspeople were met by a wry smile and a nod. It was always like this when he was in Bianjing. As he slipped into the welcoming shade of an alleyway, a sudden wave of nausea hit Pao. Bright colors flashed before his eyes as he struggled to maintain his balance.

Darkness.

Pao opened his eyes. Ashen ground stretched out into the horizon, soft beds of blood-red Bi An flowers forming a narrow clearing. Through the light fog, Pao saw the blurry figure of a man with a large head and shoulders as thin as reed. As he approached him, Pao could make out an oblivious smile that betrayed his white hair and stooped back.

“Come, we shall walk,” the man said. His smile hardened into a purse, wrinkles forming on his forehead. The transformation was so abrupt, so unnatural, that Pao understood at once that this “man” was not a man. Still, not knowing where else to turn, he followed.

The man turned to face him. “I am your guide in this realm,” he said. “And you shall follow me. We must hurry.”

Pao was not satisfied. “Where am I?” he demanded.

The man burrowed his thick eyebrows in a disappointed frown. “Were you not taught from young? Do you not know about Diyu?”

Pao was eleven again. He was alone in his room, a look of intense concentration on his small face. A single opened scroll lay on his wooden table. Sunlight bled through the linen curtains, tinting his world a soft yellow.

Diyu is the realm of the dead, where sinners suffer for their deeds and are reborn.

The strange world flashed before Pao’s eyes as waves of emotion pulsed through him. Fear, confusion, anger. As the two came to a stop, Pao assessed his surroundings. In front of him lay a grand door laden with exotic gems, embedded in a massive stone wall. The guide’s gray palm gently touched the surface. A dim light poured out from the corners, the secrets within yearning to escape. With a mighty creak, the doors slid open.

“Pao Bao Zheng is hereby sentenced to eternal rebirth for false accusation! This cycle will not be broken until enlightenment is reached. Guards, take him to the Room of Rebirth!” The judge’s voice resonated throughout the chamber.

Pao collapsed onto the ground, cold sweat dripping down his back. With a trembling voice, he begged for mercy, but the judge promptly turned his back. With an almighty groan, the walls of the room ground into a winding passageway.

As he walked past lantern after lantern in the underground passageway, his thoughts began to stray. He had never done anything wrong in his life—on the contrary, he was quite proud of his accomplishments. Magistrate at twenty-five, the king’s most trusted official at thirty, a national symbol of justice by sixty. Why was he here? Why was he surrounded by cold-eyed guards, treated as a common criminal?

Soon, he was in front of yet another old, bearded man. The room was dimly lit, the only object in it a wooden table. Two men stood defiantly beside the judge, one firmly holding a yellowed scroll.

“Pao Bao Zheng, your next life will be of suffering. You must learn the pain of the victims of your arrogance,” the Judge said. The scroll was quickly opened. “Coal miner,” it said. There was only a moment of dread before the darkness settled in.

Cold sweat dripped onto Pao's back. The magistrate descended upon him, his looming figure towering over Pao. Loud shouts of accusation came from his left. Three townspeople stood nearby with beady eyes, their bony fingers pointing at him. Fear swept over Pao, muffling the voices. Just minutes ago, he had poked his head out of his house at the loud commotion outside. Now, everyone had turned to look at him, exchanging silent whispers.

The cold, unbending gaze of the magistrate pierced through Pao. “Are you the man who's been leaching from the town storeroom for the last few weeks?” Pao opened his mouth to protest, but he could muster only coarse gibberish, the tang of metal in his mouth making him nauseous.

“Are you sure it was this man?” the magistrate turned backwards as he asked the apparent witnesses.

“Of course,” they replied with certainty. “The thief wore a gray shirt and long white pants, like him. Same hair, same height, too.”

Pao gasped. He remembered that earlier in the day, his son had raced towards him, pointing to the faraway fields. “Dad, I just saw someone that looked just like you!” he exclaimed, gasping for breath. “Even his clothes were the same!”

“It wasn't me!” he screeched as the guards swiftly pulled him away by his arms.

The guide stood silently, gazing at Pao. He motioned for Pao to follow him.

“It is a burden to be responsible for the fate of another. Your intent may be righteous, but your decision may not pass the test of time. No matter how hard you try, you can never know everything. Pao, you need to acknowledge that you cannot always be right. Learn from your mistakes,” said the guide.

The guide led him straight to the Room of Rebirth, where the Judge was waiting for him. “This is your chance to redeem yourself,” he said. Once again, the same official showed the same scroll. “Government official,” it read. Pao breathed in deeply.

Mayor Pao was certain. The circumstantial evidence alone was enough to condemn this murderer to death. Everything tied back to him. He had even confessed under interrogation. But as he opened his mouth, a sliver of doubt poked at his heart. What if he was wrong? There would always be new evidence, new opinions—all of which would do a dead man nothing.

Pao hesitated. Reconsidered. At last, he delivered the verdict. “I hereby sentence Huang Zidong to a life sentence! However, this case will remain open to further inspection upon the discovery of new evidence.”

The guide gave a slow nod of approval. “Come, follow me,” he said. “Well done.” They walked across a long drawbridge, Pao still reeling from his sudden return to Diyu. “You are a fast learner.” Pao remained silent, unsure of how to respond.

The two entered a maze-like passageway towards the Room of Rebirth, their feet clacking against the stone floor.

“In your past lives you have never received nor given true love. You must learn to love with your heart, not your head, whatever the circumstance,” the guide said.

As they neared the end of the passageway, cool air tickled Pao's chin. A look around showed a familiar room. Slowly, deliberately, the magistrate unraveled the scroll. "Dog," it said. Before Pao could cry out, his world turned black.

There was no food today. The pointed gravel sunk into Pao's paws, as he flinched with pain. He should have moved to the city. There were more scraps there—he might even find an owner.

As he turned a corner, he locked eyes with a human. The beggar greedily munched on a small piece of rice cake, the moon-white crumbs landing on his dust-caked rags. Pao bared his rotten teeth and prepared to fight for what would be his only meal of the week. Instead, the beggar reached out, handing him the last bite. Hunger taking over his confusion, Pao lunged at the rice cake and fled as fast as he could.

As he neared the miserable excuse of a home, a cascade of high, whimpering voices erupted in his ear. As he turned to face the source, he saw another dog. A squirming mess of living bodies lay under her. A mother. The pups' whines of hunger were left unanswered, as the mother gazed aimlessly into the distance. Pao relaxed his clenched jaw and watched as the hunk of rice cake slowly rolled towards the mother and her pups.

That night he was not hungry.

Light embraced Pao, a strange silence filling the air. Warm air brushed against his cheeks, gently lifting him upwards. Pao remembered. He remembered everything. Bone-aching hunger. The cruelty of the world. The understanding that he, Pao Bao Zheng, could be wrong.

"Pao Bao Zheng is hereby relieved of his punishment," came a deep voice.

A wave of energy pulsed through the space, jolting Pao back to consciousness. He was seated behind an elegantly carved wooden desk. A silky orange robe replaced his plain tunic. Fine gold lettering lined the edge of what was now his desk. "Pao Bao Zheng, 11th Magistrate of Diyu," it read.

It Began with a Cat

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ho, Vanessa – 13

My cat took one last shuddering breath and stilled: she was dead. It was a crisp Autumn morning, turning the tip of my nose crimson like the leaves on the trees. They dangled on the fingers of the branches. One little tug on the leaves and they would go plummeting down, then be swallowed by the other forlorn leaves – trapped. I was a leaf. My cat was too. And I was closer to letting go of the branch.

"Mei–mei, get ready for work and stop gazing out the window. If they catch you like this, it'll be the end of you!" My brother chuckled but staring into his hazelnut eyes – I could only see one thing: pure panic.

"Stop worrying. I've been doing this for eight years. Have more faith in me, ge–ge." Maybe I said that more to reassure myself.

"And every day, my hair grows whiter, and a chunk falls out." I tried to laugh at his attempt at a joke, but it didn't feel like the right time. Not when I was going to put myself in danger yet again. And my cat died.

I left the room shortly after and deftly pinned my locks of ink–black hair into a bun. It refused to behave today. Maybe I was less patient compared to the previous days. After losing the battle against my hair, I shoved my zhanjiao futou hat onto my head frustratedly, then deftly drew two dark swirls above my upper lip: a moustache. Then I hurried to work, feeling more weighed down than excited. I would usually be exhilarated to go to court. I could mock all the self–righteous airheads who had the nerve to call themselves my co–workers and keep my family from starvation so that we could live a life without worry. "Killing two birds with one stone!" I'd always say.

They heard the swish of my blood–stained silk robe skimming the marbled tiling and the soft thud of my shoes that were two sizes too big before they saw me. Not exactly me. I was not mei–mei anymore. Nor was I a leaf.

"Judge Pao has entered!" A flourish of movement greeted me; people stood up respectfully. I strode to the front of the room and plopped into my seat unceremoniously.

"My lord! Thank you for taking up this case!"

"You may address me as 'Your Honor'. I was irritated: disguised as a male, knowing they would not appreciate me like this if I came as a woman. I knew this. I always had. But for some reason, it bothered me more today.

"Opening statements." I intoned, pitching my voice an octave lower. They started rambling; their voices were drowned in desperateness, twisted with lies. I counted the time tick by, stretching and pulling at my already worn–out patience. This was useless. As if I was in a trance, I stood up and floated towards the entrance. I left. It was as if I froze time. I saw the surprise sneak up on them, wrapping their legs and arms to their chairs, leaving them unable to move. I ran with wings unfurled and an unruly grin splotched on my face. But, as fast as my escape was, chaos chased me faster.

"Judge Pao!" Many people called after me, finally snapping out of their confusion. Hurried footsteps thundered in my wake. My absence was against the court rules. It was seen to be close to treason, especially with the honour of being a judge held. Someone voiced my thoughts. "Judge Pao, you have gone against the law. You will be a judge no longer. You've already had two strikes!" Someone yelled. And just like that, the weight of my actions crashed down onto me, the horror of what I had done giving me an icy punch back to reality. I turned back and fled to the courtroom.

The desperation that was once in the eyes of the attorneys pleading their case was now mirrored in mine. My eyes were bulging. Fear choked me. It grabbed at me, clawed at me, strangled me. It left me bare, stripping me off all my disguises, all my protection until I was not a leaf, nor Judge Pao, or mei–mei. I was just me – plain, old me. I saw the anger in their eyes, hungry and devouring as they chased after me. I saw the dawning realization wash over them. I was not a man. Judge Pao was not a man. They ran after me. They ran with passion. They ran with defiance. Thump. Thump. Thump. Trepidation suffocated me like waves pulling boats under the murky depths of the unknown. But I could swim. I was not going to be their rabbit to their predator. I was not going to be weak or defenceless. I wanted to carve out those smug smirks tattooed onto their faces after seeing me – the real, candid me. I wanted to rip out their hair and show them I was not a damsel in distress. I wanted to bring them the suffering,

burning, festering hunger those of the lower class and middle class felt. Like my family felt. Like how my cat felt. My cat. My sweet, doe-eyed cat who died at the hands of famine. She died at the hands of the court for giving not giving me enough to provide for my family. And she died at the hands of me. I cracked. Guilt shot me like an arrow. I crumpled to the floor like porcelain—fragile and thin. The blood—red silk of my robe pooled around me like a blood bath as if I hurt myself. In a way, I did. I remained there closing my red-rimmed eyes and hugging myself. My cat. I needed revenge. I would take them down with me. "Kill them. Kill them. Kill them." Voices chanted around me, repeating it as if it was a mantra. Their voices rose to a crescendo and pounded my eardrums, dragging their hoarse voices down the nape of my neck. "Kill them," they said once more.

So, I did. Or that was what I thought. I was too consumed by rage and hatred to know what was happening. Was the room spinning? Was it silent, or were there wails for help? I did not know. My only wish was to kill them. But all I could see was black. And then the floor melted beneath me. I fell.

I was falling like a leaf. I felt the air scrape against my face. My hair, now wild, snaked around my unprotected face, twisting and curling around me, bringing tears to my clouded eyes. "Hello, Judge Pao." A man appeared. No, not a man. The devil himself. He had horns that towered over his bed of ruddy hair with eyes that were a contrasting white. Flecks of gold were splattered on the lids of his pupilless eyes, making him look supernatural. There was a plethora of scars scattered on his face that was etched so deep many needed stitches to close the gaping wounds. Emotionlessly, he enunciated, "You are in hell." I cackled. What kind of dream was this? I was feral. I was completely and utterly mad. I belched out another depressing laugh. He simply looked at me with disdain and carried on speaking. "Judge Pao, you have sinned greatly. Be thankful you aren't tortured with the others." As if on cue, the pleas for mercy rang out from the darkness around me. I cackled some more, voice hoarse. "You have two choices," He spoke over my laughter, "One: to suffer in the pits of fire like them, or two: to become bound to hell for eternity but bring justice to those in hell to repent for your sins." He grinned as if he had given me the best deal of the century.

"No one would follow a female judge. I would rather suffer in the pits than disguise myself again." I asserted, rolling my eyes in the process.

"Make them respect you. Those in hell do not have a choice whether to follow you. This offer is scarce—do not dismiss it so quickly."

I sighed. "I will choose—"

It is a crisp Autumn morning. I can feel the chill in the air, yet everything still looks the same dreadful red. No brother is here to coddle me this time. I get ready. I twist my locks of ink—black hair into two braids with an expert hand. I place my zhanjiao futou hat onto my head with carefulness and deftly paint my cheeks rouge. Then I leave for work.

They hear the swish of my snowy silk robe skimming the blood—infused concrete and the soft drumbeat of my cat's feet following my swift strides before they see me. Not exactly me. I am not mei—mei anymore. Nor am I a leaf.

"Hell's most renowned judge has blessed us with her presence. The Supernatural Judge Pao and her cat has entered!" I smirk.

The Dragon's Witness

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Huang, Ziyang – 14

“... And it ran. Sprinting, clawing, lurching forward into the abysmal darkness like an unruly animal. Nothing more than a nightmarish pretence of a dream, the helpless reality of a human's pathetic repentance was ultimately the catalyst of its own demise. Scrambling for a material substance, it mangled desperately in the blank space, drowning in the inky silence. Deficit of any breath, a soundless scream imploded through its bones, hands reaching for its throat – before crumbling into nothing more than a pallid pile of ashen detritus.

My blood seemed to freeze within my veins, the shock of such a monstrosity paralysing me. The reflexive urge to look away seized my mind, yet my sights refused to shift, eyes peeled against my own will. A glimpse of a shadow suddenly rose above the crippled corpse that lay on the barren ground. Dancing between vision and reality, the figure flickered like that of something otherworldly, the muffled flapping of their cape-like hood smattering violently in the wind. Bathed in the opaline moonlight, glints of gold scintillated in the shape of the imperial dragon, embroidered in golden thread under their black robe.

Was it a vision birthed from hysteria? Or simply a trick of the light? It seemed the thought had only just crossed my mind before the figure dissipated into the obscurity of the twilight, never to –”

The rickety will of the wooden table seemed to crumble as a cacophony of battered, calloused hands slammed against the surface like a shower of meteors falling toward the earth – accompanied by the boisterous, drunken laughter that escaped their mouths in unison. “Oh Fenhua, your stories never fail to lift my spirits. Certainly impressive!” Lingyun said, exasperated from the almost ceaseless laughter as he wiped away the last dribbles of white liquor with the back of his hand. The rest of the crowd seemed to feast on Fenhua's rising bewilderment written all over his face, faltering at his companions' truly genuine disbelief. Perhaps it was the sheer horror of witnessing such a scene, or the scarring, visceral reality he had thought to have perceived, that it failed to occur to him the mere outlandishness of his tale.

The mocking sneers and cackles of the listeners drowned out his desperate stammers of truth as he only wallowed deeper and deeper into the depths below.

The humid, redolent smell of the bland, soup-like substance seemed to have only brushed against the thin lines of comprehension before he heard the subtle pitter-patter of footsteps. Like raindrops, drumming in their soft, rhythmic dance before slicing through the air like bullets, pounding, beating, unleashed with nature's fury. More and more people seemed to appear out of nowhere, the crowd growing from a stream to flooding every inch and stone of the muddy village roads. The stampede rushed forward, pushing and shoving as if they had been restrained for time out of mind, the sheer thought of something to fill their acrid, empty stomachs, their wide eyes crazed with hunger and desperation.

The arrogant, the pompous, the sick, the weak, never had such a diversity of a community stood together so closely. Hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, shackled together by one thing: starvation.

The other soldiers struggled to keep the situation under control, but it their efforts were nothing more than trying to fence water with spears and sticks. In the commander's own words: “Humans without food were nothing more than stray dogs begging for scraps. Wild, beastly, and vicious” – the people surged, throwing their bodies forward, dozens more falling like meagre playing cards, one after the other, staggering as others trampled over them without a moment's hesitation.

The violence ensued. Shrieks for help began to echo through the mass, those left behind either bloodied and bruised or crushed from the impact of the falling bodies. But the pack paid no attention to the weak, setting its sights on the target ahead of them. They sprawled through the streets, surrounded their prey, ferociously gnashing their teeth and lunged violently towards it, claws outreached to scoop just a drop of this heavenly elixir –

BAM!

The metal bowl toppled to the ground, flung from its seat on the dilapidated stool and collided with none other than another devout follower of survival in its low trajectory – taking both their hollow, pale stick-of-a-body and their splintered consciousness down together. The bowl's cloudy, watery contents splattered all over the barren, hard-baked earth. Any remnants of the fragile, tenuous threads that held this catastrophe from descending into the depth of unreturnable calamity seemed to tear in that very instant.

It was undoubtedly a person that now lay as 'dead as a doornail' beneath the bowl, pulverised by its crushing weight and impact – yet the corpse that lay sprawled on the ground was spared nothing more than a fleeting glance nor second thought. Hundreds more swarmed around the scene like bees to a hive, scooping their cracked, dry hands through the lukewarm puddles of what was left from the ground – as if the porridge would evaporate within seconds. Scrambling for every last, tantalising drop, impetuously ignoring the granules of dirt and ash that swirled in streaks of black and grey, agonised at even the smallest particle slip through the narrow gaps between each ragged, bony finger.

“P–Please, help me!” she shrieked, the very last syllables of her words faltering as they morphed into a shattering cry of pure anguish. She screamed with all the fortitude her lungs and mouth could muster, tearing vigorously at the last wretched strands of her heart, only to produce a mangled sound no words could ever describe. Every inch of her body felt ablaze, scorching with the fervent heat seemed to run within her veins, scathing, torching, burning her alive. A liquid fire that seemed to disintegrate every muscle and cell that still remained remotely intact, paralysing as her body began to seize uncontrollably – possessed by the excruciating pain.

Tortured wails echoed through the night, a scream of the soul as each cry rippled through the air like knives, stabbing at his consciousness. He could feel a debilitating prick as pearls of tears began to pool at the corners of his eyes, their sheen and brightness glistening under the cold lustre of the moonlight. Preparatory to even let a vestige of speech susurrate through, he desolately attempted to cease the bitter onslaught of tears and sobs that racked soundlessly in his chest, holding his breath in rigid silence as he constrained the vigorous flood of emotions behind a concrete dam of tenacious will, unbending and unwavering resolve. Brick by brick, stone by stone, time and time again – firmer and stronger than ever before, lest even the slightest cracks even form.

The dragon commanded the divine will and imperial power, a creature that even the heavens submissively kneeled before. Revered above all else, hailed as the 'epitome of auspiciousness', an empyrean beacon which graced the mortal realm with the wisdom of the celestials, bestowing the gift of ethereal brilliance that illuminated even the most delinquent of alleyways, exposing the most nefarious of sins. Yet “*with every light, there hath shadow*”, and the blinding eminence that bathed the ones below only exacerbated the harsh barriers that divided those that savoured the glory of justice and triumph, and the inevitable delinquents that still remained undetected – but not for much longer.

Ebony blotches of ink seemed to swallow him up as they encircled his thoughts in a bewitching dance. Each stroke and flick seemed to leap across the endless plains of crinkled, burnished paper, pages inscribed with a palpable brush and ink – yet seemed to detail a story beyond imagination. The very idea of it astounded him, such world like those which belonged to man so demented they could no longer differentiate between dreams and reality. Yet the prickling stare emanating from Judge Pao's unnervingly still gaze seemed to drag those painstaking seconds into eternity, eating away at his consciousness with both dilatory pace and icy hostility.

He fidgeted with the stained and blemished apron that he wore and the belt, aligned with the most versatile range of medical apparatus and practical medical herbs, pills, and chemicals, all fastened so closely at the waist. The doctor inquired, his voice haunted by a fearful undertone:

“I don't understand. How is this possible? An entire village, mass starvation, citizens going missing, how did such a situation escalate like this...?”

Judge Pao's voice rang with a subtle fury, reminiscent of the quiet qualms of thunder that warned the world of an impending storm:

“Those arrogant fools who call themselves ‘governors’ and their blatant disregard for the common folk must be responsible, yet their pride and selfishness is only useless in the face of resolving this. That’s why I must take matters into my own hands.”

“B—but what else could have really caused all this?”

Silence, followed by the whispers of an exasperated sigh.

“Poison.”

The Case of the Absent Murderer

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lau, Levia – 13

Sunday, June 28th

7:00 pm

Mrs. Laurent was a stately woman, in all but height. Nonetheless it still felt like she towered over you, the glare from her eyes and the jewels she wore had a tendency to make you feel impossibly small. That night, even more diamonds were added to the arsenal of riches she displayed on her neck. They rattled and clinked as she strode to the doors, punctuated by her heels on the marble floor. Today, Mrs. Laurent has insisted on receiving every guest to the party herself, an honour reserved for her famously affluent parties.

Exhaling sharply and straightening her dress, she swung open the mahogany doors. She began her welcome speech about how grateful she was that they could attend and where to hang their coats when the faces of her visitors registered and she stopped abruptly. Silence, except the sound of a single wine glass scattered across the floor.

“Hello, mother.”

8:54 pm

A man trudged down the pavement, the streetlamps beside him barely kept the shadows at bay. He walked for a while, muttering to himself about the time and how he must hurry to return home, when something caught his eye. Just a few blocks in the distance, blue and red lights flashed, temporarily illuminating frantic figures rushing around. He caught a glimpse of police and paramedics. The man quickened his pace; his insistence about arriving home soon forgotten.

Nearing the scene, a police chief noticed his arrival, greeting him hastily: “Bao, you could not have come at a better time.” He guided Bao towards the house with a solemn nod.

Bao’s smile faded into a grimace: “Is everything all right? Has there been a break-in of some sort?”

The chief stopped, and turned to face him, his brow knitted with worry.

“Worse. There was a murder.”

9:18 pm

It was obvious they were in the middle of a luxurious party. Flutes of half-finished champagne, a table stacked with the finest delicacies. A few accessories discarded here and there, but otherwise no sign of incriminating evidence. The guests and staff all stood nervously in a group outside the house.

“Detective— Sir!” A young man rushed out from the crowd, running after Bao.

A butler, Bao thought, how unusual! Most of them would opt out of this mess for the sake of their jobs.

The butler caught up to Bao, took a few seconds to recover from the exertion before managing a few words. “I was the one that found the um... the body,” the butler stammered, “Mrs. Laurent, she said something to me, when I found her. She...she said ‘look behind the pictures’. At least, that’s what I think she said.”

Bao was about to reply, when the chief appeared from the crowd. “The main suspects are back at the station, ready for questioning.” He motioned for Bao to follow him to his car, and for the next ten minutes they drove in strained silence to the station.

Halfway there, Bao blurted out: “Hey Kenzie, tough night?” He winced at his attempt.

“Well, crimes like these are rare but I’ve seen my share of them.” The chief sighed, fatigue creasing his eyes as he kept them on the road. “How was your night, Bao?”

“I was having dinner just a few minutes earlier with this guy—Daniel—and it didn’t end well.” Bao said. “He received a call about a party. It was pretty bad because he practically sprinted out of the restaurant.”

“What a night for both of us, huh.”

The police car turned into the station and the two men headed inside. The steady humming of the ventilation in the police station grounded him, something he’d gotten used to in his years of working as a detective. Bao exhaled sharply, pushing his thoughts aside, leaving an empty workspace for the interrogation, the way he always handled it.

9:37 pm

“There must be some kind of mistake! I told you I wasn’t there!”

Bao opened the door and heard a strained voice, meaning that the person’s insistence had gone on for quite a while. Yet there was also something else about his voice. Something vaguely familiar.

Bao Zheng turned to face the suspect, even when the sinking feeling in his heart told him he already knew who it was.

“What on *earth* is going on, Daniel?”

12:03 pm

Back in his apartment, Bao sank into a well-worn armchair. He held his notepad—bursting with alibis and statements from the hours of questioning earlier—but stared at his ceiling. Apparently Daniel was Mrs. Laurent’s eldest son; a fact he managed to keep secret. Bao shut his eyes and recalled the past events of the interrogation.

Claire Laurent, the daughter: A quiet and unassuming girl, her head was lowered to her hands for most of the session. Despite this, Bao could not help but notice an air of agitation. Her hands picked apart her nails almost involuntarily, her words spoken close to a whisper. Claire mentioned how Daniel and Mother bickered often, but she couldn’t bring herself to say anything more. When Bao asked if Daniel had been seen at the party, she only said that she had seen him across the room talking to the other guests.

Bao sighed and rubbed his temples. Daniel was definitely at dinner with him, and it was impossible for Daniel to cover the distance between his house and the restaurant during the time of the murder.

Flynn Laurent, the brother: he entered the room and it was obvious he was Daniel’s brother. They looked almost identical, except for the chipped tooth that revealed itself whenever Flynn smiled. Flynn told the detective that Dan has been distant lately. However, he made no effort in hiding how much it pleased him. “Tired of being the ignored brother I suppose,” he said, half-joking.

Bao switched on the TV in defeat, and fished out some photos that were taken at the party. The photographer, who had insisted on being called Delilah, had pointed out the fabric of a suit in the background, which was confirmed as Daniel’s suit by some guests. If it wasn’t Daniel...then who was wearing it?

Eventually, Bao gave in to the heaviness of his eyelids and reluctantly went to bed.

This case was going to be a lot more complicated than I thought.

10:16 pm

“Look behind the picture.”

The following day, Bao sipped his morning coffee while he fiddled with an old camera. *What a load of gibberish, he thought. Mrs Laurent must’ve been in a lot of shock.* He held the camera up to his face, watching his faint reflection on the black screen. Sunken eyes stared back at him, the rest of his face drained with the same exhaustion, but it was smiling. *Maybe Mrs. Laurent was crazier than I thought.* Bao laughed with unfiltered excitement as he fumbled for his phone and dialled for the chief.

1:24 pm

The interrogation room was always colder than the rest of the station, but the murderer’s glare lowered the temperature by a few more degrees. Bao was almost sure that they committed the crime; if only he knew why.

“Why’d you do it?” Bao asked bluntly. Silence. The murder stared at him from across the table, their lips still stubbornly shut.

“I’ll tell you what I know. Someone alerted Daniel with the bad news before the police did, so he would appear at the house right before them. Someone also knew Mrs Laurent and the people at the party, enough not to cause suspicion. Someone wore Daniel’s suit during the party. Who fits the description perfectly? Flynn.”

Bao leaned forward but the murderer barely flinched.

“But no, Flynn wasn’t the killer.” Bao started again. “Him wearing the suit was just brotherly jealousy. The killer took advantage of this. *Look behind the picture*, were Mrs Laurent’s last words. And what is behind every single picture without fail? The photographer. Delilah Johnson. Or should I say, *Delilah Laurent?*”

She shuffled in her seat, but finally, Delilah spoke: “Allow me to explain my side of things. My mother wasn’t the magazine-perfect person the journalists write about constantly, she was anything but. By the time I could walk, there were locks on all our bedroom doors. She made Claire spend more time with makeup than books; Flynn had modelling classes all day; and I— never mind. All of us—” she glanced at the floor, “suffered under her tyranny. Only I was brave enough to do anything about it.

“Just a few years later, my father suddenly fell ill. It was... incurable. My mother took control of everything, and everyone. I had to leave. Days later, my name was removed from everything, like I never existed. I simply came here to claim what is rightfully mine, but things...” Delilah stopped when the emotion in her voice rose out of control.

“But no. I didn’t kill my mother, because I never had one.”

Suppressed Void

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Lui, Michelle – 14

Over a soothing cup of tea, he blew, watching as thin wisps of smoke vanished into the air. A wry smile crept across his face as the cup was brought to his lips, a burst of flavour filling his mouth like a sprouting seedling. The many folds of his crimson robe closely resembled his own face – wrinkled, fragile, peachy in colour. Judge Pao was always reminded of his triumphant past every time the taste of tea met his tongue. Tentatively, the judge began to lift the cup again, but the calming silence of the room was shattered by a knock on the door. His anthracite eyes glanced at the sliding door, which was thrust open by a soldier.

“Judge Pao, we’re planning on heading out soon. Captain wants you to be ready in five minutes.”

The judge smiled warmly. “Thank you.”

He patiently waited until the *click* of the sliding door indicated that he was alone in the room once more. A sigh escaped his mouth as his papery hands clasped the teacup tight, and he steals a stare at his reflection upon whatever slither of tea was left at the bottom of the cup.

But the face that gazed back into his soul didn’t belong to him.

Rather, it was the innocent face of a smiling young man, long before the burdens of old age took over.

Despite lacking in money, Judge Pao’s main goal wasn’t to secure a large sum of it. Time to him was the most precious thing, and he wanted to fill every last drop with unforgettable moments, whether it was seeing the giddy faces of children as he helped them scavenge for their lost possessions, or whether it was just spending time with his simple family.

The judge in his youth found himself admiring the scenery in a rural area, observing the faraway mountains under a cloudless sky. A rumbling of wheels and horse hooves approached from behind him, revealing themselves to be a fleet of traveling soldiers transporting a cart piled to the top with goods. Everything was in order.

But something didn’t sit quite right. The ringing silence didn’t come off as awkward immediately; the sounds of men chattering had masked the absence of Mother Nature’s own noises.

The cart stopped. Any laughter instantly died out. Horses stood still, shifting their hooves uncomfortably. Pao watched from a distance, sensing someone or something stirring within the shrubbery.

“Leave... *Leave!!*” Pao called out.

The men sprang into action, yanking the reins of the horses and driving them and the cart of resources backwards. Yet their attempt was unsuccessful.

Shadows leapt from their hiding places. Metal clashed against metal, wooden planks crumbled and all chaos ensued. Like a dying firework, the commotion ended, and the frenzied tango of black fabric was over. Whoever or whatever it was, they had pilfered the cart, and left not even a crumb behind to spare. The dazed men, including Pao, required several moments to process what had happened in the past ten seconds, sitting down and staring wide-eyed into the distance.

“Is this... Is this a normal occurrence?” Pao asked, his voice shaky.

One of the soldiers groggily pulled himself up, rummaging around among the broken planks to search for even a trace of the stolen possessions, before replying, “It’s been happening more frequently.”

Pao steadily came to his feet, indignant, grabbing his hands into fists. Whatever being chose to ambush the cart already revealed several things about their behaviour: lazy, indifferent and selfish. People like them didn’t belong in their wholesome community.

The young judge helped any soldiers who hadn’t the energy to sit themselves up to stand. To think that there were people who didn’t need these resources as much as Pao did, who had more money in their pockets than he did in his own house, who wielded blades for the purpose of ransacking peaceful transport teams, it only made Pao’s face redder by the second.

“Sir, are you alright? Please, don’t be worried by the situation! We will have all this under control!” The lead soldier laughed awkwardly, patting Pao’s back so as to comfort him.

Pao sighed. “Quit the act. You are all nervous wrecks.”

Silence.

“These people have no right to take from us. If they want something, they need to earn it. So, soldiers, what do you think about putting an end to their wicked schemes?”

★★★★

Piles of unread documents sat like towers upon Judge Pao's desk, looming above him as if they were secretly saying, 'stop sleeping and start reading me!'. A night of restlessness had left him completely befuddled and unable to complete work without his mind wandering off.

Judge Pao's loyal assistant, Zhang, lightly tapped him on the shoulder, giving him quite the awful shock.

"We have attack reports from the West, Judge. All victims described the situation similar to a blackout, and that one moment they were traveling with either resource-rich containers or simply a bag, and the next, all their belongings were gone."

Pao's eyes widened. The energy that he had been deprived of was returning to him. It had been years since he decided to become a judge, and also years since the first and last attack he had ever witnessed from who they nicknamed the 'Suppressed Void'.

"I know them. Zhang, round up all the soldiers. We may be able to find clues in the area."

Zhang scrunched up his face and walked away in a huff.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. He may be obedient, but he's a real piece of work when it comes to attitude, don't you think?"

The lead soldier, Jin, who followed Judge Pao the many years ago peeked out from behind the mountain of documents. Jin was always wary of Zhang, finding as many ways as he could to convince Pao that he needed to leave. The judge waved him off every time – as long as he had someone to help him lift his massive workload off his shoulders, their support would be accepted gratefully.

"You would've been sent away long ago if I cared about attitude," Pao murmured.

The little wandering troupe made their way to the sites of the attacks, asking locals questions as they went. Judge Pao glanced at Assistant Zhang, who was humming a gleeful tune. He fidgeted with his fingers. *There is a pattern occurring here, and I don't like it*, Pao thought.

He pulled Jin aside to a quieter corner. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Jin broke character, his smile wavering and eventually falling to a grave frown. "The timing and location of these attacks are too coincidental. Have you ever wondered why you've never been able to catch them, old friend?"

"When I was investigating in the South, they were in the North. When I was investigating in the East, I get a report about one from here. Someone must know about my plans."

They say, 'two heads are better than one', except Judge Pao's and Jin's brains combined couldn't come up with a potential suspect.

Judge Pao's ears perked up. An elderly woman appeared to be showing Zhang a half-empty bottle of what appeared to be alcohol found at the attack site. A fiery glint flashed in Jin's eyes. Perhaps they might have a new lead.

They arrived back to the village with slouching shoulders and weak knees, and Jin took the alcohol for testing the moment his feet were set on familiar soil.

Pao sat with a ringing headache far into the night, cycling through everyone he was close with. Nobody seemed likely to leave a knife in his back.

Jin returned, a smirk written upon his face, running with such vigour that one wouldn't have known it was three in the morning.

"Hear me out, Judge. Hear me out!" He pleaded.

Judge Pao sluggishly turned towards the soldier.

"The alcohol? It's just white wine," Jin panted like a mad dog. "But I'm sure you know what that means."

"Zhang's favourite wine," Judge Pao said, nodding his head slowly.

The two of them stayed still for a while, the absence of noise causing their ears to hear a high-pitched ringing.

"Search for him. Zhang needs to be guarded until proven innocent."

From outside the window, a series of footsteps drew away into the darkness of the village.

They chased the culprit into the bushes, hearing their heavy panting and swatting of leaves. Twigs snapped. Small mammals scampered away. No matter how fast they ran, they couldn't cover the fact that they were well and truly damned.

"Zhang," Pao growled.

The words dug into his skin, and Zhang was gripped by a strong hand.
Pao may never forget the hurt or betrayal that he expressed without words.

“Judge Pao.”

The old judge lifted his head, tidying up his tea. Five minutes was up. The feeling of the suppressed void within him remained strong.

“Are you alright?” The soldier asked, noticing Pao’s solemn face.

“I am fine. Let’s go.”

New Tales of Judge Pao

Heep Yunn School, Hui, Yau Kiu Isis – 14

The lavishly decorated bedroom, its floors polished ebony, its windows draped in silk curtains, was marred by pools of darkly crimson blood. And right in front of us was the corpse; the handsome man's palms were brutally pierced with daggers, pinning him to the wall. His neck was slashed upwards almost savagely.

Luo slid closer to me. 'Third murder this turn of the moon,' he whispered, 'wonder what he's going to do.'

I shrugged and tugged softly on my shift. 'You know who the victim is,' he continued; Luo was extraordinarily gossipy: a crime lord. He was never caught for his crimes, but there are rumors in the people about him. How he beats up women and children, even his wife. That one's a piece of work, all right.'

I tried to ignore him and watched Pao's figure as he darted here and there. Whenever he turned I saw his weathered, tanned face, his aquiline nose, and the outward jut of his chin. He knelt and scraped a tiny mound of powder off a wall onto a cloth. Then he gathered up the small bundles of specimens in his arms, shouldered his pack, and walked down the stairs briskly.

'Job's finished,' Pao said as we strode down the street. 'You know who the murderer is,' Luo said somewhat excitedly. I sighed inwardly. This enthusiasm was rather tiring, considering that I had been putting up with it for centuries.

Pao hesitated. 'Perhaps; I have but an inkling,' he said finally. 'But either way, this is not a case for our... mortal court.'

Luo whistled, and I sighed again. We both knew what that meant.

The three of us headed to the market. For the first time in some hundred years I felt curious; what could be found there? Yet Pao walked with a contagious surety, and I followed him.

We stopped at a stall; a familiar one at that. A smiling face looked up at us.

'Want some pork for dinner tonight, huh?' Lin said, her rouged lips curling up in a charming grin. She took out her knife and sharpened it almost intuitively without looking down. We had known her for some time, ever since we moved here, and she was good company.

Pao looked back at her, scanning her up and down. 'Yes,' he said smoothly, 'one serving, please. Minced.' Lin whistled as she worked, the strokes of her knife amazingly precise, her hands sure and strong. We settled into an awkward silence.

'So,' she began brightly, 'I trust that you are investigating the murder down the street. News of the town, that is.' She chuckled to herself. 'People are placing bets on who the murderer is. But we all know you are going to find that out pretty soon, Judge. Aren't you?'

'Wonder if a serial killer is a culprit.' Lin pulled out a larger knife and started dicing the meat into clumps. Her slender fingers were agile, fantastically so. 'Three murders in a month! And all of those rich men, too, were murdered in the most terrifying ways.

'First one wrapped in a curtain with shards of glass. The second one is bound to a cauldron filled with boiling water. The third one was pinned to a wall with knives. Terrible.' Lin smiled again.

Pao shifted. Lin was packing up the meat, wrapping the fine paste into brownish paper. He seemed uncomfortable, I realized, talking about the case with Lin. Rather uncharacteristic indeed. Pao was never flustered. Never.

He reached out to get the pack of meat and handed a handful of coins to Lin, who winked at him. Suddenly, he lashed out at the young woman, his tanned hand stark against Lin's snowy skin. I watched in horror, in disgust, as his nails scraped across her face, leaving red marks.

Lin cried out and clutched her face. Pao hid his hand in a pocket and caught her with the other. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'saw a fly on your face.'

Lin smiled weakly and dusted herself off. 'It's fine,' she said, 'it's okay.'

As we walked away, I felt my blood freeze, and a shiver crawled up my spine.

There was no fly there.

I looked at Pao and Luo grimaced, disgusted. We walked home silently, burdened with our thoughts. Pao worked in his study immediately, and moments later he threw open the door and ran out triumphantly. I jumped to my feet—it wasn't every day that you see this calm, steadfast man with his face so flushed.

Pao took my arm and smiled at me wolfishly.

'I found the evidence—we are going to hell.'

Diyu was the same as I had remembered it to be. Dark caverns stacked on top of each other, with stalactites hanging down from the ceilings like huge fangs. The three of us entered Pao's domain at once, and I shuddered as my muscular yet clumsy mortal form melted away and revealed my true body.

Pao sauntered forward, proud and somewhat hideous, his skin a crimson shade, his dark hair, falling to his waist, wreathed in fiery horns. He now stood more than a head taller than both Luo and me, and he strode to the throne at the end of the cavern.

He settled into the thorny chair as if it was coated with velvet instead of nails. 'Bring in the accused,' he boomed.

Luo and I took our places next to his throne. My companion had ditched his slender, handsome mortal form for his real one: a strong man with the head of a black stallion, his glossy mane flowing freely. He smiled.

The weight of my horns made me grow weary; too much time spent in the mortal realm, with my soft, squishy body, had made me unaccustomed to my true form—the form with the head of a mighty bull. My neck ached and I tried to focus. Two wraiths were bringing in the murderer.

I had to stifle a gasp. Beside me, I heard Luo choke.

The murderer was female.

Between the shadowy forms of the wraiths, the girl swayed, her face covered with a veil, her long arms, and legs, snowy white and unblemished, uncovered. I could see that she was beautiful, even with that veil on; her hair, the colour of raven wings, was oddly familiar.

She fell to her knees as the wraiths shoved her down, landing with a brutal crack. Her head was pressed onto the ground. Luo moaned pity.

No wonder Pao could not judge her in a mortal court. Women— Chinese women, with their soft, white hands, with their controlling husbands and strict household rules, committing such brutal murders?

I could still see how deep the knives were embedded in the wall. That took strength. The strength that I didn't believe a girl like this would have.

This case would shake the foundation of the mortals' strict society.

I glanced up at Pao. He was rigid, strangely so. But he couldn't be wrong, I thought, he has never been wrong. Suddenly, I realized that I wanted him to be. I didn't want this little girl condemned to the torture of hell.

Despite what she may have done, I wanted her to go away free.

Pao cleared his throat. 'The accused is Li Yuelin. You have committed murders, the brutal, almost bestial killing of three men. Thus I sentence you to a thousand years on the mountain of knives.'

Li Yuelin. The name struck a chord, and I glanced at Luo. He was stepping back, shaking his head, his brown eyes filled with disbelief.

Li Yuelin. Lin.

I remembered why that hair seemed familiar. We had just seen it, at the stall. On the head of a bright, young woman, talented with the knife and brimming with life and vigor.

The murderer was Lin.

I stared at the form on the floor, my mind blank. No. It could not be.

That pretty girl, brimming with life and joy. It could not be.

Pao stared at her and suddenly I hated him; did he have to expose her? Did he have to?

My mind flashed almost instantly to an image of Lin's fresh, pretty face marred by slashes of knives and bloodied, haggard by exhaustion and pain— like those ugly ghouls that were, even then, climbing their never-ending mountains.

Lin lifted her head; it seemed like she still hadn't lost her pride, her bravery. She ripped the veil off and threw it onto the ground; Luo shuddered very visibly. Beneath the cloth her face was already bruised, her lips stained with blood.

'Do whatever you want,' she spat, 'I have no regrets. The men I executed were demons and devils. I saved countless lives with theirs.' Her obsidian eyes blazed with a terrible fire; I thought that I had seen it before, that unearthly light.

Pao cocked his head at her, like a cat speculating on his prey. 'You should have waited,' he said gently, 'we are always watching. We would have handled those people. But by rashly killing them you have instead condemned yourself to hell.'

Lin took a deep breath, her cheeks colored. 'That was what I was supposed to do as I watched my friends, my neighbors die,' she said savagely, 'to wait for divine judgment.' She laughed, and Pao watched impassively.

'Where were you my whole life?' Lin asked, 'where were you when my sister was killed by one of these gangsters? Where were you when my friend's children were found mutilated under a bridge, their faces growing paler and paler as they nearly bled to death? I've seen enough and I've heard enough.' She took a deep breath and glared at Pao.

Suddenly something seemed to deflate inside her and her eyes welled with tears. 'I know it's not right,' she said brokenly, 'but are they any better than me?'

Pao looked at her, his eyes notably softer. 'I cannot change the Law,' he said sadly, 'you should not have broken it.'

'How did you find out that I'm the culprit, anyway,' she asked, 'I was careful. Extraordinarily careful.'

Pao smiled thinly. 'I saw how you killed that last man. A slash to the throat that started at the base of his neck but extended upwards; is clear evidence that the assailant is much shorter than the victim. Handy with a knife, too; how else would you have killed that man so precisely, so quickly?' He crossed his legs and stared down at Lin. 'But the one thing that exposed you was your scent and your makeup. Careful you were; it was very hard to stop the powder on your face from smudging onto the wall when you grapple with your victim, though. Hence that slap today to collect a sample.' Pao grimaced and gave an apologetic nod to Lin, who shrugged. 'It matched with the fine, pale powder on the wall. Most importantly the scent remaining in the room was familiar to me; took me some time to recognize, though.'

Lin grinned through her tears. 'A stroke of luck got me here,' she said, 'if I hadn't been so close to you all I would have never been caught.' I couldn't miss that sting; how could Pao do this to his— our— friend? And it hurt. A bit more than I realized it would.

'A stroke of luck got you here,' Pao echoed sympathetically. 'But still, it is time for your punishment.'

The wraiths took Lin by the arms again, yanking her to her feet. She offered no resistance, only stood up limply. My heart pounded with a pain that shook my body, but I had to keep up the façade.

As the wraiths dragged her away to her terrible, terrible fate, Lin spat on the floor. 'This is for you, my lord,' she hissed. Then she was gone, and I dreaded hearing her agonized scream amongst thousands of others.

I had never questioned Judge Pao. I was his servant, and it was not my place to judge my master. But as I looked at Lin, at her noble and beautiful motives, against the terrible souls of her supposed victims, I felt a hollowness opening up in my chest.

A pity that the Law takes everybody.

Judge Pao: Stolen Case in the Future

Heep Yunn School, Wong, Ching Yin – 13

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the M+ Museum!” The host’s voice reverberated around the museum. A massive crowd of people gathered around the stage where a vast object covered by a piece of red cloth was displayed. “Today is the opening ceremony of the exhibition of –” He flicked away the cloth. “The one and only ‘*Yan Ming Gong Zheng*’ wooden sign written by Judge Pao himself,” he announced proudly.

The host continued, “We have specially invited the descendant of Judge Pao, Mr. Jeffrey Pao, to participate in the ceremony as he has generously donated it to the museum.” Mr. Pao rose from his seat and waved politely at the crowd. People broke into rapturous applause immediately.

All of a sudden, the lights flickered and the whole museum was instantly plunged into darkness. Screams and shouts could be heard and as a police officer, I calmed everyone down but suddenly the lights went back on again. However, gasps and murmurs could be heard. As I looked at the stage, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The sign had disappeared without a trace.

Soon after, I walked onto the stage and inspected it intently. There was an openable roof at the top so the sign could have been lifted through the window and transported away. However, I was unable to locate any evidence. Finally, with no luck, I decided to speak to Mr. Pao hoping to get some clues.

Nevertheless, as I left the crime scene, a statue nearby caught my attention. It was just a plain stone statue of Judge Pao but somehow, I felt peculiarly familiar with it and there was an urge to touch the crescent moon mark on his forehead. A voice rang in my head.

“Touch it. Touch it.”

Unconsciously, my hand reached for the mark and the moment we connected, an ancient work office appeared in front of me. There was a quill and a piece of yellow paper on the desk next to me. It was so real that I seemed to be able to touch it. When I tried to walk towards it, my feet, however, wouldn’t budge.

Suddenly, a bright light flashed across my eyes and I was back in the museum, sitting on the floor. *What on earth just happened? I widened my eyes and ran my fingers through my hair. Whose office was that? Why did it look so old? Did I travel to another place?*

A thousand questions were running through my head. Besides, there was a tingling sensation on my elbow where my birthmark, similarly shaped like a crescent moon, was located. The feeling began to disperse as I rubbed it gently. *Could it be the birthmark or ... was I just imagining things?* I shook my head. *Never mind, perhaps it was just an illusion.* I cast my thoughts aside and headed toward Mr. Pao.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Pao. I am Officer Wong. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about the stolen wooden sign?”

“Definitely, please go ahead.” He sat up straight and his black eyes were filled with sorrow and devastation.

“Do you suspect anyone?” I inquired.

“I believe it's Mr. P, the billionaire who is notorious for his arrogance and greediness.” He answered. “He once saw the sign displayed in my home and bid me money to buy it but I rejected his offer. He was furious and hurled insults at me.”

“Oh wait — there was also an odd man who always waited at my house claiming to be writing a biography of Judge Pao. He always asked me whether there were any relics left by Judge Pao so I told him about the wooden sign which would be displayed on this day.” He furrowed his eyebrows.

“What did he look like and did he tell you his name?” I asked.

“He was bronzed with his hair fully covered by a hat, a bowler hat to be precise and he wore a camel coat and blue jeans. And if I am not mistaken, he did not tell me his name.” He replied.

“I see. Thank you for your cooperation.” We exchanged small smiles as we shook hands.

That night, I sat on my leather armchair looking at an online version of the wooden plank. *There were two suspects, Mr. P, and the odd man. The former had a slighter suspicion as he was currently in London attending a noble ball whereas the latter was fishier as he was always asking about artifacts that Mr. Pao had left. Hmm...* I narrowed my eyes and pursed my lips into a thin line. *But, the thief was extremely careful and didn't leave any trace of evidence at all, so how can I find him?* When I was lost in thought, without warning, a "pop" sounded next to me, bringing me back to reality and I jumped up from my seat. The moment I saw who it was, I was at a loss for words and blinked multiple times. *Oh. My. God.*

“J—Judge Pao?” I stammered.

He was wearing his iconic court clothes: a gown with broad sleeves made of black silk embellished with a vivid shade of golden and red embroidery. They have shaped like traditional Chinese patterns and the most striking part of his clothes was the majestic, golden-scale dragon in front of his chest twisting and swishing its barbed tail. A belt was fastened around his waist and a “Futou” was seated on top of his head. His mouth was slightly open and a frown creased his face.

“Hello? May I know where I am and why are you wearing such bizarre clothes?” He asked with his forehead crunched up.

Calm down. Taking a deep breath and regaining my composure, I told him about my encounter, the birthmark, and finally the wooden sign. After hearing my frustration, Judge Pao stroked his beard slowly and chuckled, “So, Officer Wong, you mentioned that there was no evidence at the crime scene but there are two suspects. How about...” He pointed at his clothes and I widened my eyes, the smile on my face stretched as he elaborated further on his idea.

The next day, it was announced by Mr. Pao that there was another valuable piece of relic left by Judge Pao: his court clothes. It would be placed in the museum tonight. Everything was going according to plan and it was time to see whether the thief would swallow the bait.

At last, when the clock struck twelve, a dark shadow moved on the screen in the van. I leaned forward from my seat as it moved quietly and swiftly toward the clothes. Once it was visible, I noticed that the person was dressed in black and his face was covered securely with a mask. He edged closer and closer to the clothes and as fast as a bullet, he snatched them triumphantly and bolted out of the museum. However, little did he know that a tiny sensor was hidden almost imperceptibly underneath the clothes. Soon, the police barged into his house and encircled him with their guns pointed at him. Before he could even react, I handcuffed him promptly. Looking straight at him in the eye, I smirked, “Gotcha.”

The next morning, I turned on the television to the news channel. The host announced, “... A suspect was caught in his house last midnight. Not long after, the “*Yan Ming Gong Zheng*” wooden sign was found at his place. After some thorough research, it is discovered that the thief is mentally ill and is Judge Pao's biggest fan. He adored him tremendously that he thought that he was Judge Pao and had a mission to get all the relics that Judge Pao had left. He's now receiving medical care in Castle Peak Psychiatric Hospital and is sentenced to jail for five years...” As I was watching, Judge Pao entered the living room wearing his court clothes, holding a plastic cup filled with water.

I stood up and said, “Thank you for helping me solve the case – oh, and lending your clothes as well. I must say it was a brilliant idea to lure the thief out with your clothes.”

“I am flattered. Besides, the reason I made this sign was hoping that people could understand the meaning of my words so that society could be more fair and just. Hence, I wouldn't want it to be lost.”

“Right – wait, how are you going to return to your world? You have already been here for three days.”

“I have no idea, but I hope it will be soon.” He sighed.

“Meanwhile, when you are still here, how about we — oh”

The place where Judge Pao had stood a second ago was left with only the plastic cup. I picked it up and shrugged, “That was fast. Have a safe trip!”

Whistling a joyful tune, I snuggled up happily against my armchair and wondered if anything like this would occur again.

What is Justice?

Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Leung, Junyi Beverley – 12

It is a cool spring day, scented with the perfume of peach blossoms. But I am too nervous to notice; sweat trickles down my neck into my heavy robes.

Guan, my mentor, strolls into the courtroom. He looks at ease in his zhanjiao hat, the tassels swinging rhythmically back and forth. “So, Pao, today, the Council will decide your ability to be a judge and judge fairly and wisely for the Emperor! Don’t mess this up.”

I look at Guan, who has always been a father to me. “I’ll try,” I reply shakily, but tendrils of self-doubt were already creeping into my voice. I rub tears of nervousness out of my eyes, worried they will be interpreted as a weakness.

Guan sighs. “Pao, you have potential. Remember, when you give a verdict, be ruthless. Better to give a sentence too harsh than too lenient.” He winks at me, then the expression on his face intensifies and his voice lowers to a clandestine whisper. “Pao. You always give such easy sentences when we practise. Don’t do it this time. Just this one time. Okay?”

I nod, too nervous to do anything else. But even in this action of agreement, I know: I don’t trust myself to give a harsh sentence. But I have to. I must. I set my teeth and walk into the courtroom.

~~~~~

I perch uncomfortably in an elaborate, high-backed chair with ornate carven designs, my eyes set straight ahead, yet looking at nothing. Suddenly, a roar of cruel laughter rises from the crowd. Beads of sweat pop out on my forehead, before I realise that the defendant had already entered, and had tripped on the floor, prompting the taunting cry from the viewers.

The guards force the man to kneel, barking in husky tones, “Remove your hood!”

The man grasps his hood and pulls it up. Long, ragged, matted hair tumbles out, slightly covering almond-shaped brown eyes set perfectly in a face of chapped skin. The whole courtroom gasps. The defendant is a girl.

~~~~~

Gathering my nerves, I stand. “Are there any witnesses in this house who will identify and accuse the defendant of a crime?”

A rotund man from the crowd, dressed in embroidered robes, rises. “Your Honour, this girl disguised herself as a boy and stole a sack of millet from my storehouse!” The crowd begins booing and heckling, making disparaging remarks. It is clear that the girl’s fate has already been sealed, that I’m only performing a useless ceremony here, just for show.

I turn to the complainant. “Ahh, landlord Sai. And who is this person?”

The landlord’s brow crinkles. “Your Honour, this... dog worked in my warehouse for two weeks, dressed as a boy. I don’t know her name, but I know her face.”

I glance at the defendant. “What is your name?”

Her chin tilts at a proud, haughty angle. “My name is Kui.”

“Kui, do you admit to stealing a sack of millet from this landlord’s storeroom?”

Her tone is still relentless, unbroken, her voice strong. “Yes.”

This girl stole. She’s a worthless thief. How can she still be so proud? I ask myself. Temporarily lost, I turn to find Guan in the audience for guidance. The victim usually does not plead guilty so soon. The crowd is aware of this, too, judging from the harsh sound of whispers filling the room.

Since it is clear that the crowd is against her, I desperately rack my brains for a question to ask which will make Kui look bad. “Have you been in trouble with the law before?”

She nods slowly. “Yes, Your Honour.” The words leave her lips with reluctance, and, looking at her, I see a person who knows there is little hope for herself.

“For what?”

She swallows. “Stealing rice, sentenced to two year of imprisonment, Your Honour.”

Shock fills my soul, squeezing the breath out of my lungs. Such a harsh sentence, just for stealing rice! Flustered, I say the first sentence which comes to mind, from my heart, not my papers. “Um, Kui, why did you do this?”

The murmuring stops abruptly. It was then that I realise no judge has probably ever asked this question before. I was supposed to be harsh and final. What have I done?

Kui is obviously shocked as well, but she gathers her thoughts quickly. “I... I stole to feed my family. I worked in a cookhouse, and I took the food that was thrown out to my brothers and sisters.”

“Your Honour, please, I beg you. Don’t sentence me to jail or execute me. My siblings depend on the money I earn for survival. They will die if I am not there to provide for them.” Her face is desperate.

The crowd murmurs disgustedly. “A girl, the breadwinner of her family?” “She should just have died with her parents.” First in a multitude of voices, then as a chant, the roar began. “GUILTY! GUILTY! GUILTY!”

I took a deep breath, then hit the table with my stick. Silence spreads like ripples in a pond throughout the ocean of people. “Court adjourned. I— I need some time to reach a sentence.”

~~~~~

I walk into the courtyard, my thoughts in a turmoil. This girl clearly did not deserve to die as the crowd thought. I couldn’t do this to her. Suddenly, Guan’s words sound in my ears. “Better to give a sentence too harsh than too lenient.”

I am training to be a judge. Someone who brought justice to courtrooms, who judged fairly. But it had been a 'judge' who gave Kui her unfair sentence. Suddenly, I realise; what I heard – that was not justice. Then it hits me. And I cannot do something like this. I am not right for this job. I could never do this, call myself Judge Pao when I had done this to be a judge, with the blood of innocents on my hands, knowing that I had killed a girl, ruined her brothers and sisters. I look at my robes, which seemed so fresh and white, but my eyes have already painted a pattern of crimson across them.

The birds were chirping, their song mingling with the scent of peach blossoms. I stare at the peach tree. How could its blossoms continue to bloom when such an injustice had been done?

~~~~~

A chant breaks the songbird's chorus, indiscernible to my ears at this distance. But I can hear the malice and sadism in the roar of voices. Alarm bells sound in my head. What could be happening?

It was the laughter that shocks me, the sprinkling of cheering voices in the midst of the uproar that truly alarms me. I turn and run, more frightened than I had ever been.

Guan met me halfway through the courtyard. "Pao! They've killed Kui."

The news took a few seconds to sink in. "Killed her," I repeat, dazedly. "They... they – the crowd killed her!" The realisation is like someone is suffocating me, choking me, preventing me from breathing.

My mentor lays a friendly hand on my arm. "Pao, you should have sentenced her earlier, you know. Then this whole fiasco would never have happened." His voice is relaxed, but I hear a shred of remonstrance in it.

I turn to him. "Did you not hear? The girl was starving! Her family depended on her! She was just trying to keep her siblings alive!" My voice rings off the walls of the courtyard. Tears trickle down my face, and this time, I don't try to wipe them away.

Guan looks at me oddly, as if alarmed at something in my words. "Pao, I know the judge who sentenced Kui. It was a just sentence; she was actually really lucky to have been let off so easily."

I am simmering with rage, and my anger scares me, like it is a beast about to consume my soul. But – this is no justice. Guan was not speaking the truth when he said that was justice. But if that isn't justice, what is?

I bite my tongue and walk away, tempted to shake Guan. He follows me rapidly. "Pao! Pao! What is wrong with you today?"

I turn and look at the man who had lied to me, telling me that it was better to be harsh than lenient, that this girl was 'lucky' to have been sentenced to a year for simply stealing millet. I grit my teeth. How can he stand there saying that was justice?

~~~~~

In the cool solace of my room, I sink into my bed, listless. Deep down, I know I have to do something about what I just saw. I have to rise above these wrongdoings and change the everyday lives of the poor. I

have to ensure Kui's story never happens again. I have to bring justice to China. I get out of bed and put on my robes and hat, and go out in the world to make a difference.

# The Library of Spirits

*Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Leung, Sze Wai Serene – 13*

The boy's face lit up with awe. He marveled at the show playing on his TV screen, immersed in every scene, every word spoken. *Justice Pao* told a story like no other. The legendary tale of a righteous man punishing the corrupt, Judge Pao defended the powerless against injustice, persecuted the immoral and gave commoners a fighting chance. He was an arbiter of justice. A hero.

"Xi, turn the TV off," his mother called. "It's late."

But his eyes remain glued to the screen.

"I want to be like Judge Pao," Xi said dreamily, a wide grin spreading across his face as he imagined himself standing in court, the centerpiece in the battle of good against evil.

His mother laughed, stroking his hair. "You can do *anything* you set your mind to."

★ ★ ★

Xi was exhausted.

The past decades have been more than he could handle. When his mother was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, he wasn't given much of a choice. In order to support her medical bills, he gave up his education in law school to juggle two jobs. Apparently, his efforts were futile, because she passed away months after.

*Gone. Just like that, everything had changed.*

He gazes into his teacup, his trembling reflection grim and weary. *He's older now*, he thinks to himself, sighing.

A teardrop fell off Xi's cheek and into the teacup. Years of hard work and late night studying have led him here. Every turning of a page, every papercut from a manuscript, every blister on his hand from constantly writing and writing. All for what? Becoming a hero? He certainly didn't *feel* like one.

Xi leaves the room, making his way to the building's fire escape. Fresh air. He needed to breathe. He shoved the window open and climbs onto the ledge, and he grips its cold metal bars to steady himself. Xi feels the wind blow on his face and push his hair back, and he feels like a child again, playing in the autumnal breeze amongst leaves of red and gold. The moon was beautiful that night. It was a lighthouse in the dark sea of the skyline, as if it were calling out, guiding lost spirits to a safe place.

Staring at the sky, he wondered how it would feel to be at peace again.

Heart pounding in his chest, Xi stepped off the ledge and jumped.

★ ★ ★

The haze was so pervasive that all Xi could see was a blur of gray, until slowly, his surroundings increased in clarity. He was standing on a path, and in front of him were red pillars the color of a dragon's scales. The vapor cleared, like ghosts being purged, and a lone pagoda emerged.

*What the heck was going on?*

He noticed something he hadn't spotted before. Standing by the entrance were three guillotines, each carved in the macabre form of an animal's head: a dragon, a tiger, and a dog. Xi had seen and read of these guillotines enough times to know what they were. Allegedly, Judge Pao himself had beheaded the powerful and corrupt with those very swords.

Somehow, this place was related to his childhood hero.

Maybe the interior would offer some semblance of an answer, Xi decides, as he walks in to the entrance. The place was library, a labyrinth of bookshelves that extended endlessly towards the sky that there was no way Xi was on Earth. No, he was in some pocket department of the afterlife.

Instead of books, books adorned the shelves, their covers all in reds of varying shades. They ranged from bright poppy to sangria to the color of spilt crimson blood. A chill crawled down Xi's spine.

He reached for a book on the nearest shelf. The leatherback cover was worn and mottled. As he began to flip the first page, he heard a voice from behind.

"Stop. Right this instant."

\*\*\*

The source of the voice was a man. He donned an archaic form of attire that would grant him looks on the street – a *fitou* hat, their wooden supports jutting out like antlers, and silk black robes, their intricate details crafted in gold. His eyes were piercing, like a glass fragment, reflecting back at Xi and showing him his motives, his flaws, his morals, some of which he didn't want to face.

He was so unmistakable, Xi recognized him instinctively.

"Judge Pao." He stares at the face of his childhood, eyes wide in a motion he can't identify. Happiness? Disbelief? Shame, that he never became the person he wanted to be?

Judge Pao smiled. "I've been anticipating your arrival for some time now."

Xi's gut wrenches. He tries to speak, but a strange feeling wells in his throat that prevents him from doing so, and he simply pauses to recollect himself.

"Where am I?"

The judge simply grins again. "You're in the afterlife, of course. A special department of the afterlife, in fact."

Xi frowned. "I don't – I don't understand – "

"I'm sure you're familiar with the Infernal Bureaucracy. This is a special library that only I and a few others have access to."

"Why?"

"Because of the contents of these books. They document the lives of every single individual ever lived."

Xi's eyes widened. "The myths are true. You are an immortal."

To his surprise, Judge Pao *laughed*, shattering Xi's perception of him as an austere and rigid man. "Yes, but that's not why we're here. Upon your arrival, I knew your case was special. So the Bureaucracy granted me the agency to settle this myself."

Xi glanced at the shelves. They were never-ending skyscrapers, shooting up to the sky like a beanstalk reaching for sunlight, constantly expanding to support the bringing of new spirits into the world. And every decision in his life, everything he'd done for this world, all amounted to a speck of dust in a raging sandstorm.

"I don't understand," he admitted. "There's so many people who are far more deserving of this opportunity than me." He pauses, a spasm of pain suddenly stabbing at his chest. "I... I'm basically a failure."

But Judge Pao shook his head.

"Quite the contrary. In you, I see opportunity."

He reached for a book, feeling the ridges of the page as he spoke. "Life is similar to writing a book. You can go back and reread the old chapters, but the story will never progress. You have the choice between writing something mediocre and writing a life you aspire to, a future you desire."

"Even if you think it's too late to change," he continued, "there are still pages left. And I want you to keep writing. Because there is still time."

When Xi thought about his life, he only thought about who he wasn't, what he never achieved, how he was no hero. In his eyes, he was worse than immoral. He was a coward. And no matter what he did, he was bound to that life.

But seeing the face of someone he'd admired for years for the first time in reality was so absurd that he wondered if everything was possible.

"Human lives are like sparks, just as fleeting and ephemeral. But they're promising, aren't they? They can either disappear just as fast or burst into raging flames. And as the Yama of the afterlife, I rule for you to return to the land of the living."

And with that, a flickering flame in Xi rekindles and erupts into a blazing fire.

\*\*\*

"Grandpa, was Judge Pao really real?"

A child looks at Xi, his eyes sparkling at his grandfather who sat across him, a children's storybook he'd written himself open on his lap.

"Yes, my boy." A doleful smile makes its way across Xi's face. The lines on his face indicate many, many stories, of a life well-lived. In the last decade of his life, Xi had retired from his position as the head of his law firm and passed it on to a younger subordinate who reminded him of his child self – hopeful, ambitious, undeterred. He'd written countless manuscripts on law and philosophy, answering fundamental questions about life and morality, garnering the attention of many illustrious scholars.

Xi stares longingly out of the window. A pale white moon illuminates the night sky, bathing in its ghostly glow. The last specks of sand would soon fall in the hourglass. He didn't have much time left.

But out of all the lives he could have lived, he decides this is his favorite.

Gazing at the moon, he would soon find himself in the Infernal Bureaucracy once more.



Creative Writing  
**Fiction**  
Group 3

# Blazing Fire

*Hong Kong Adventist Academy, Kang, Xiao Xuan David – 14*

The summer moon tonight was incredibly, eerily silent. On other nights it was filled with the noises of crows and the rattling of leaves, but tonight it felt like there was not a single living soul. A few minutes before midnight, before the guards were about to switch shifts, three men dressed in thin, white cloaks approached the walls of the Imperial Palace. They asked some strange questions. Then, one of them pulled out a silver blade with the words “Death will come soon” engraved on it. The sword was made with fine silver and a hilt of bronze, glistening under the silvery moonlight. They were going to fight.

The panic amongst the guards finally broke the silence. “Everyone, arm yourselves and go!” came the general's commanding voice. The soldiers rushed to the gates, attempting to catch the unwanted visitors. They marched through the palace gates, aiming to surround the men. However, they were already gone. Tired and empty-handed, the soldiers returned to the palace, sweat trickling down their necks. However, soon, they would realize this was the least of their worries. You see, the danger was never coming from outside; it came from within. For a very brief period of time, the castle had been left unguarded. This allowed the fourth man to slip under the radar.

Jiang's heart began to beat rapidly. He glanced around the palace corridors, his narrow eyes locked around his surroundings. “Time is limited,” he stressed as he opted to burn her palace down. He set a box of matches on fire, methodically kindling firewood as the fire danced around the inside of the walls. With the walls now set ablaze and the flames crackling, he swiftly left the scene, becoming one with the shadow.

The fire was first noticed by the unusual smoke that came from the Empress' Palace. Messengers reported the incident to the Emperor while the guards attempted to slow the fire with buckets of water.

The fire, hungry for oxygen, started devouring the fragile wood. It swept across the ceilings and overwhelmed the walls. Desperate attempts were made to slow the spread of the fire. After a long and hard-fought battle, the fire disappeared, bringing down most of the palace and leaving ashes in its place. This was not a welcome sight to the emperor, who immediately summoned Judge Pao to the scene.

The sounds of the chariots signified that Judge Pao was here. Judge Pao slowly examined the surroundings, often kneeling to study the ashes left behind by the fire. He slowly looked around, leaving every stone turned and performing regular searches around the crime scene. His eagle-like eyes were tense and focused, and he seemed deep in thought, questioning the guards and looking for contradictions. “Someone must have intentionally plotted to burn the palace down. The only way a fire can spread so quickly is if the culprit used things like firewood or oil in addition to the fire,” he concluded.

“We must ensure that such an event never happens again.” Turning to the servant, he said: “Go and summon all the architects in the city and tell them to rebuild the palace again. Add more soldiers to guard the imperial palace as well.” The Empress was permitted to live with the emperor for now.

The following day, Judge Pao gained permission from the emperor to send a decree out to everyone within the palaces, ordering them to evacuate their palaces immediately. Soldiers were sent into the palaces, looking for any evidence. Another group of soldiers started investigating and interrogating the servants.

Judge Pao paced back and forth in his room. Things felt unusual: If someone wanted to harm the Queen, why would they use fire? Wouldn't the Queen just be able to escape?

What was the motivation behind this?

After a few weeks of investigation, it seemed like the evidence would never come up. As the Emperor pondered this, the head guard came up to him and said: “Your majesty, we have some information on the case.” Upon hearing this, the emperor's eyes lit up. “Go ahead, say it.” The guard explained how he had been interrogating Concubine Tian's servants. He brought servant Xin, who confessed that she burned down the palace.

Knowing this, the emperor immediately raised from his seat. He wanted to arrest concubine Tian immediately. Judge Pao, however, seemed to be suspicious. “We can't confirm that concubine Tian would've done it. Only one of the servants admitted to this, which is not enough evidence to conclude anything. For all we know, she could've been bribed by someone to lie.”

Guards were placed in her palace with the decree to search for anomalies. Although the Emperor was partially convinced and agreed not to arrest her, he was still suspicious. "I will give you a week to prove otherwise. If you cannot do so, we will arrest Concubine Tian."

Judge Pao knew it wasn't concubine Tian, but he didn't have any conclusive evidence. In the following days, he was often seen alone in his room, pacing back and forth and pondering the case.

"Sir, we could not find anything in Concubine Tian's palace. What should we do next?" came the voice of the servants.

While the Emperor was deep in thought, Judge Pao came, accompanied by the distant sounds of the horses. After being granted permission, Judge Pao slowly walked in. He sighed, saying, "Your Majesty, the Empress intentionally burned down her palace."

The emperor, confused, asked Judge Pao to give conclusive evidence. Judge Pao replied: "Your Majesty. I was suspicious of why most of the valuable parts of the palace survived and how the Empress appeared calm when she heard the news." Then, he gestured to his servant, who brought a leaflet forward: "Your Majesty, here is a list of all exports and imports within the palace." "The Empress was the only one who asked for firewood, which was an odd request since we use coal in the courts for warmth. As for concubine Tian's servants, they were bribed by her to sabotage the fame that concubine Tian had," Judge Pao concluded.

This was a shocking statement. The emperor, with a frown, addressed the uncomfortable Empress, "Is this something you admit to doing?" With the Empress unable to defend herself, she was sentenced to be grounded inside her palace for two years as punishment. Judge Pao had once again solved the case.

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan, Charlotte – 12*

With a scrape and a clang, the massive mahogany doors were heaved apart as the delicate lilac and peach shades of dawn gave way to the brilliant sunlight that bathed the sky in golden light. Inside, there was a large chamber with a low, wooden table carved with intricate patterns of birds and flowers. Behind that table was a man, a man with a long beard, a long, blue robe and a face that was both stern and compassionate at the same time. He was no other than Judge Pao himself. In the day, throngs of people came to him, some to seek his help and advice, others to seek justice for themselves and others around him. At night, Judge Pao served as a source of justice for the wronged souls. He assessed claims of innocence or guilt just like how he gave advice – with impartiality, mercy and wisdom.

One day, a nearby town – Li–Jien was set abuzz with a case of theft. Not because thefts were uncommon, but because of the unusual nature of that particular theft. A family heirloom was stolen. Curiously, it was kept out of sentiment, not value. The victim was perplexed. The local officers were perplexed. So, Judge Pao was asked to help out.

“I will need the entire story. I will need all of the facts.” said Judge Pao, striding into the room. “What and who was burgled?” Fumbling, an officer took out a piece of paper.

“Zhang Xiangman, the magistrate of the town. A year ago, a jade pendant was stolen. Its value was approximately three taels of silver. There are a multitude of other thefts, but that one is different.”

“How so?” Judge Pao prompted.

The officer hesitated slightly, and said “Well – the pendant was locked away in a strong, bronze safe. Yet, the thief took his time to break it, while all the time in a room nearby was a wooden box with a lock extremely simple to pick, filled with gold bangles, jade hairpins and pearl earrings and such of the mistress. The value of all those combined would be at least twenty–one taels, maybe more. There was even a set of ivory mah–jong tiles in a box on the same table as the safe.”

Judge Pao nodded. “Less time, less value...” Judge Pao thought for a moment. “This Zhang Xiangman – he must be rich, then?”

“One would expect so. He is a high–ranking official. Of course there have been rumours...but then one can hardly trust rumours, can you?” The official gave a small, dismissive laugh.

“Hmm.” Judge Pao paused in thought. “I would like you to prepare a horse. I shall visit the victim.” “Yes, your Honour. Of course, your Honour.” murmured the officer, bowing submissively, going outside to prepare a carriage.

Meanwhile, Judge Pao paced up and down the chamber, muttering to himself. “Nothing else taken...could the thief have thought there was something valuable inside? No...he would have taken the other jewellery too...Why should the thief take the object most sentimentally valued rather than the object that would fetch the highest price on the market. A strange case...”

“Your carriage, your Honour,” announced the officer, reappearing on the steps to lead him down. Stepping into the carriage, Judge Pao asked “Where did the theft occur?” The official blinked multiple times. “Well – um – it disappeared near the market at the city centre. You can’t miss it – it has an emerald green roof.” Judge Pao contemplated the information for a moment and called out to the coachman, “Take me to the market at the city centre.” With the crack of a whip and the spirited whinnying of four sturdy horses, they were gone.

“Your Honour,” Zhang Xiangman was saying as Judge Pao swept in. “I am –” Judge Pao stopped him with a wave of his hand. “I would like a description of your missing pendant and to look at the room where the pendant was kept.” “But naturally. Shenyi, prepare some Longjing tea and bring it to the peony room. Bring me the mistress’s lacquer box.” The servant girl bowed and hurried out of the room.

Minutes later, Judge Pao was being served tea in a low, large chamber with panels of wood carved with delicate peonies. In the middle was a large table, on which was a beautiful lacquer box and a set of ivory mah–jong tiles, which appeared to be well thumbed. Selecting a jade pendant from a box, Zhang Xiangman placed it carefully

on the table. "This," he proclaimed, "belongs to my wife. It is of a very simple design – there are practically no carvings on it. It is very similar to the stolen pendant, with one difference – the stolen pendant was made of white jade – beautiful, but less expensive." "This pendant was kept in this lacquer box, I suppose?" Judge Pao remarked. "Yes, and as you can see, there is only a simple lock on the box." Xiangman replied.

"Who discovered the theft?" Judge Pao questioned, sternly.

"Shenyi – the servant girl you saw just now. She was dusting the rooms." Xiangman replied readily.

"In that case, I should like to interrogate the servants, primarily Shenyi." Judge Pao said, tersely. Xiangman frowned, very slightly irritated.

"I assure you they are all quite above suspicion. They are extremely faithful and have been serving us for at least five years." he said, slightly stiffly.

"Nevertheless," Judge Pao said in a placating tone, "the interrogations will prove to be most fruitful, I am sure." Reluctantly, Xiangman left the room.

"Your name is Shenyi and you have been working for the master for three years. Is that correct?" Judge Pao asked. "Yes, your Honour." Shenyi murmured deferentially. Asking her a series of questions, Judge Pao established what she said she knew. She had been cleaning the residence that day. She had finished cleaning the master's rooms and the mistress's rooms and was starting to clean the guest rooms and studies when she had discovered the theft. The theft happened in one of the master's study rooms. She had opened the door and discovered the missing safe. The master had been away on trade business and the mistress had been visiting her relatives. She had not seen anything out of the ordinary. After seeing the theft, she had reported it to the master's second secretary. There were about fifty servants in the residence, mostly household servants who did the cooking and cleaning as well as some personal maids and secretaries of the mistress and the master. Judge Pao noted these points down, and dismissed Shenyi. He repeated his questions with a few more servants. Then, he sat down once more, deep in contemplation. He selected the jade pendant from the box and examined it, fingering it gently. A startled look flitted onto his face. He brushed a hand over the mah-jong tiles, and frowned in thought. Then, he went out

Dressed in a plain linen robe, Judge Pao stopped at several points around town – the local tavern, the markets, the casino, various shady shops on the outskirts of the city – inquiring about Zhang Xiangman and his servants.

Some time later, he arrived back at Zhang Xiangman's house and within a few minutes he was once again in the peony room, sipping delicately from a cup of tea. He reclined in his seat, his eyes inscrutable.

"You've been gambling, Xiangman." Judge Pao said. "You've been gambling, and you're in debt. You took the jewellery to a discreet jeweller who made detailed copies of them. The family heirloom you took away with you, but before you could replace it with a copy, Shenyi discovered the theft. The mah-jong tiles, the local rumours...not very subtle. You didn't sell the jewellery publicly, because you knew that would cause a scandal." Xiangman's pupils were dilated, and his breathing came out in short, fast bursts.

"I do not know how other judges would treat an official," mused Judge Pao, "but I do know that to me, a person, whether peasant or prince, should be punished like all others. Officers!"

Judge Pao did not judge others' innocence or guilt by their wealth or social status, but rather by facts. Like many legal systems around the globe, Judge Pao thought that crimes were crimes, and independent of whether the perpetrator was influential or not.

Judge Pao may be dead, but his spirit and legacy, that of impartiality, still lives on.

# The Price of the Stage

*Wellington College International Shanghai, Temporini, Lucrezia – 11*

The nightmares flooded her dreams as the alarm clock pulled her back to reality which was no better than her dreams. She sluggishly dragged herself out of bed and looked around her room, her dark and damp room. If a stranger came in, they would immediately be able to understand how much she cared about it, no matter how simple and poor it might seem. She pulled her body to the bathroom and washed her face in the icy water. She lifted her head up and looked in the mirror. “Don’t worry” she said to herself “One day, the name Diana Odair will be as famous as Judge Pao”. She gave herself a tiny smile and then broke into tears. She could feel the anger and regret spread like fire through her body, feelings she couldn’t even explain to herself, let alone others.

As she waited for the bread for Judge Pao to finish baking, she picked up a book and went to her cozy corner in the back of the garage. She read her troubles away until the booming voice of Judge Pao snapped her awake. “Where are you useless thing! Bring me my breakfast, NOW!” “Yes sir” mumbled Diana. She walked up the stairs to his bedroom with a tray that must have weighed 10 kilos. She knocked on Judge Pao’s room and slowly opened the creaking door. The unimaginably large room filled with dust always made her sneeze. The old-fashioned wooden furniture had small carvings made from the most expensive wood Diana could find. It was a gigantic contrast to her room that only had one wardrobe and a bed and nothing else. She had asked him multiple times for some more furniture but the only furniture she gained was a bright purple bruise on her cheek. She went over to the switch and the crystal chandelier burst into fake flames. She walked over to her master and put the tray on his plush bed. He slowly sat up moaning “What took you so long?” He demanded “If you have been reading again, I swear I’ll burn all the books in this house! Do you understand?!” The young girl looked down at the aging and grumpy man “Yes sir.” She mumbled. “That’s what I like to hear, now LEAVE!” She sheepishly left the room and ran up the stairs to her room to hide the books again.

The phone rang through the house meaning only one thing. A new case to solve. She ran down the stairs as fast as she could and picked up the phone. After a short talk with the caller, she immediately dashed up to Judge Pao’s room knocked and quietly whispered “There is a new case for us. The bank manager, Festus Heavensbee, got kidnapped from the bank. They have asked us to track him down and rescue him.” Judge Pao blinked his eyes and turned his back to her “Sleep now, case later.” He mumbled. “Ok, well, I’ll meet you at the bank in three hours.” And with that she dashed out of his room.

She left the gigantic mansion and went to the nearest bus stop. After an hour, she finally pushed her way off that awful and crowded bus. She quickly walked to the bank and immediately started working. The room smelled of dry blood and a nauseating amount of perfume. The glass door and the windows were shattered. She thought that there weren’t any other clues and that she’d have to start working with what she had when she saw something fall in the corner. She slowly walked towards it and kneeled down to check what it was. The damp wallpaper smelled of extremely strong rose perfume, as if it was to hide the scent of the blood. The sound of footsteps stopped her in her tracks before she could touch anything. She ducked behind the table just in time and listened to the two men who had just came in. “Come on let’s just grab him and go!” said the gigantic and extremely muscular one. “No, we already took him, the boss said to get everything in this bank and meet him at the car park.” said the second one, who in contrast to the first one was tiny and basically just skin and bones. “On second thought, maybe he did say that” replied the first one. He sighed angrily “Do you ever pay attention to anything?” The two men grabbed everything they could find dashed out in haste. After a good minute or two, Diana peaked out of the table leg. She found a black tracksuit and put it on. Her plan was simple, she’d tell the two men she also worked for “the boss” and get in the van with them. Then once she arrived there, she would disappear call the police and arrest them. She dashed out and found the two men loading their van with the items they collected. “What are you two doing?” Diana boomed in the most commanding voice she could muster up. “We don’t answer to girls,” bellowed the first one “especially weak ones. It’s the girls that answer us.” “Well then I guess you’ll fail, and the boss will fire you.” She whispered. The two men were startled by Diana knowing who the boss was. “How do you know the boss.” The

second one said in a hushed and demanding tone. "I thought you be smart enough to understand." Diana laughed "I work for him as well and he asked me to come and make sure that you two don't mess up." The two men gestured for her to get into the van and Diana tried to suppress her excitement as she jumped in.

After about two hours, they finally arrived at their destination. "We have arrived at our destination, the abandoned car park behind the town theatre." The first man's voice brought her back from her daydreams as they parked and quietly slipped out. The car park's walls were full of graffiti, and they looked like they were going to crumble under their own weight. Then Diana remembered her plan and started running away before the second man called out to her and said "Where are you going young lady?" "I forgot to tell you that I don't only work for your boss but also for some other ones. One of them just called me and" the first man interrupted her "Whatever it is you should go, run, go." "Thank you" she whispered and with that she dashed out of the car park. She immediately picked up her phone and called the police. It took no time for the police to come. She quickly recapped everything that had happened and the police charged into the car park at full speed just as the two men came out of the boss's office. They arrested them and Diana ran into the boss's office to find Festus Heavensbee tied to a chair. She untied him and helped him up. "Thank you" snapped Festus. "Well, just doing my job." Diana snapped back.

After their bitter conversation, Diana and Festus came out just to find the interviewers already finishing the interview with Judge Pao. They packed up and walked to the theatre where they, actually only Judge Pao, would receive a medal from the mayor. Behind the curtains, Diana put on her sparkly black dress that trailed behind her when she walked. It had been given to her by her brother on her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday and it was one of the only things that reminded her of her family.

"Please welcome to the stage Judge Pao and his apprentice Diana Odair." The mayor voice happily rang through the theatre. The two came out and were welcomed by a warm round of applause. "Today we are here to congratulate Judge Pao for his amazing work and for solving 50 cases each year for 5 years in a row. That's 250 cases in 5 years." The crowd started cheering louder than ever but in Diana's head the worst was happening. "Oh no, 250 cases, he said he would stop his career as soon as he hit it. That means I'll lose my job and I'll become a babysitter for him, and my story will end like that before it even starts." The mayor gave Judge Pao his medal and asked, "Is there anything else that you would like to add Judge Pao?" he opened mouth to talk when "BANG!" Judge Pao collapsed on the floor and immediately Diana knew her story was far from over...

# A Revenge Murder

*Wellington College International Shanghai, Zhu, Matthew – 11*

It was a windy morning; the branches of a willow tree were beating. A tall broad-shouldered man with long thin eyes walked on the pavement to the court building. He was the famous Judge Pao, a detective who had solved many murder cases. He walked up the steps of the court to attend the daily meeting. A group of government officials had gathered in the court. He sat down in his chair. “Does he know?” They started to whisper. Judge Pao looked at them blankly. One of the officials stood up and said in a hurried voice, “The nephew of the emperor, Mr. Zhao, was murdered last night in his bedroom. He was poisoned. He asked for a bottle of wine and the new maid brought it up to him. The bottle of wine has no fingerprints on it other than Mr. Zhao’s. We found poison in the leftover wine. He was dead about midnight. The last person who saw him alive was his eldest son. He was reading a book to Mr. Zhao. He left the room at about 10 o’clock. No one knows who the murderer is.” Another man piped up and said, “But we know the suspects: his three sons or the new maid who lives in the house.” Judge Pao asked, “What about the other servants? And how can you be so sure that no one could enter the house?” The first man answered, “The door was bolt locked and none of the other servants lived in the house last night.” Judge Pao stood up, stroked his beard, and said slowly, “I would like to meet the suspects.”

All the members of government left, except a man who knew Mr. Zhao and his family well. He then started. “There is the eldest son, Xing. He isn’t the type to murder, but he is the only one to have the motivation. When his father is gone, he will inherit all the fortunes his father leaves him. Then there is the second son, Ling. He is good natured. Now, the youngest son Bing. He is a spoiled child, but he loves his father. I see no reason for him to murder his father. The maid is a new servant, I know nothing about her. But she gives me the impression that she was not a maid before.” Judge Pao now felt ready to meet the possible suspects.

Xing was a 25-year-old man. Judge Pao asked a series of questions in a calm voice, “Did you hear any unusual sound last night? What were you doing? Can you tell me about your brothers and the maid?” “I didn’t hear anything, I was sleeping. Well, my brother Bing, he likes father, but my brother Ling is an evil and horrible person. I wouldn’t be surprised if he has killed people. For the maid, I know nothing about her except that she lives in the house.”

Ling seemed quite different from what Xing had described. He was polite and friendly when Judge Pao interviewed him. “It serves him right. Father was bold, greedy, and selfish. He embezzled money that was meant for the troops protecting the borders. Xing is just like father. He looks innocent, but I know he has been longing for father’s fortunes and status.”

“What about Bing and the maid?” Asked Judge Pao.

“Bing? Father’s pet? He is weak. He can’t do anything like that. The maid? I don’t know anything about her.”

The interview with Bing supported what Ling said. “Well, I didn’t do it. Ling’s bedroom was next to mine. I was sure he stayed in his bedroom as the door squeaks when opened, which would wake me up. As for the maid, I don’t know why she would want to kill father. She just came. Xing is more likely.”

Finally, it was the maid’s turn for the interview. The maid was in her 20’s. Somehow her appearance and manners reminded Judge Pao of the three sons he just interviewed. She told him that Mr. Zhao asked her to stay in

the house that night. After bringing the wine, she went straight to sleep, because she didn't want to disturb Xing's reading to Mr. Zhao.

The room of Mr. Zhao looked uninteresting at first sight, but clues started to appear upon further examination. When Judge Pao lifted the rug up, he found a piece of paper. Tiny writing was on the paper which read, "I know what you did to my father. I will revenge for Zhao Ping."

The room grew tense. Judge Pao continued, "When I found this piece of paper, I knew who the murderer was. Zhao Ping was the little brother of Mr. Zhao. The two of them were supposed to split their father's fortunes. But Zhao Ping died mysteriously. All the money went to Mr. Zhao. There were rumors that Mr. Zhao planned his brother's death so that he could get all the money. This is a revenge murder planned by a person connected to Zhao Ping. Zhao Ping had one daughter, who is of the same age as the maid. When she entered the room just now, she reminded me of Mr. Zhao's sons. Now I know why. They are cousins. The maid planned the whole thing. She chose the right time to so that Xing was the suspect.

There was a silence in the room. People stared at the maid. The maid closed her eyes and said in a deep emotional voice which echoed in the room, "He ruined my life and my family. He is ruthless, cruel, cold-hearted, and merciless. He doesn't deserve to live, and if I had the chance, I would've had killed him a million times." With that, two guards took her away from the court. Judge Pao stood up and said in a relieved voice, "I guess now I can retire from this case." He walked out of the courthouse and stepped onto the pavement with swaying willow trees, where birds were singing.



# Fiction

Group 4

# When the Buzz of the Air Conditioner Stops

*ESF Island School, Ng, Cyrus – 15*

“So, how can we help you?” asked Zhang, my partner. The middle-aged Filipino lady reached across the dusty table and grabbed our hands. Under the fluorescent light, which blinked every few seconds, I saw a graceful beauty in the woman that natural aging and life’s troubles had eroded. Her skin was now a rough, barren desert, and her eyes were black holes.

“Please, good sirs, you have to help me. My name is Agila, and I am—was—the maid of Mr. Thompson Jr., the son of the venerable Mr. Thompson. I’ve been his loyal servant for decades, but he has sued me!” Agila’s grip on our hands tightened as she continued her explanation. It was as if she was afraid we would stand up and leave. “I’ve been to every law firm in Hong Kong, but when I told them who was taking action against me, they always put on their hollow, wretched smiles and shooed me away.”

“Agila, you don’t have to worry about that happening here,” I said reassuringly. Zhang darted me a look of tentativeness, and dare I say, for a good reason. Mr. Thompson owned a virtual monopoly over the energy supply of Hong Kong, and although the man stays incognito in public, rumors purport he owns half of all land in the city. On the other hand, his son, Mr. Thompson, Jr., is a fervent advocate for renewable energy, rights for immigrants, a fairer justice system, etc., and has been on television innumerable times. Although the general public believed the family’s outward saintliness, most law firms have studied their ruthless, Machiavellian journey to power, which often involved wiping their competition off the face of the earth. Whenever one went against the powerful family, there was always an underlying sense of legal, perhaps even personal, danger.

“Around this time last month, I woke up in the morning to see a terrifying sight,” Agila continued, “As I squinted my eyes in horror and disbelief, I saw it without a shadow of a doubt—one of my fellow servants, Roberto, laying dead in the garden.”

“How did you know he was dead?” asked Zhang as he raised his eyebrow.

“His face was pale, contrasting sharply with the lush greenery surrounding him. He was still as a rock—like a frozen artifact from a museum.” Agila caught her breath for a moment. “I’m sorry, Roberto was my only friend in the household. I still remember how he consoled me for hours whenever the boss yelled at me or beat me.”

Agila continued, “Anyhow, I dashed out of my room, pajamas still on, and rushed over next to Roberto. I hoped there was something I could do. I really did! Unfortunately, Mr. Thompson Jr. had spotted me and accused me of killing Roberto! But that’s all he has.”

Sensing her conflicted expression, I sighed and asked, “Agila, I know there’s something else. We need to know if we’re going to help you. What other evidence does he have?”

Agila looked uneasily at me, then at Zhang, and whispered, “He also has a video of me committing the murder.”

Zhang and I laid back in our chairs.

Sensing our doubt, Agila immediately followed up, “Well—well, it’s fake, of course. You have to believe me! Mr. Thompson Jr. has cameras trained across his villa, including one directly filming the garden. So when they tried to accuse me, they faked a video of me killing him!”

By now, tears were welling up in Agila’s eyes. She tried to suppress her emotions, but it was as effective as covering a geyser with a wooden plank.

Faking a film with artificial intelligence is certainly within the ability of the Thompson family, as they own numerous technology companies. But regardless, the case became arduous.

I looked at Zhang, and after thoughtfully closing his eyes for a second, he nodded. Looking back at Agila, I said in a serious tone, “We’re happy to help you, Agila. But one last concern—do you understand that our methods are...slightly unorthodox?”

“How so, if I may ask?”

“Well, it starts with our family history,” I continued as I lightly sighed. I had done this numerous times, but the pure absurdity of what I was about to say would often deter clients.

Sensing my doubt, Zhang explained, “We’re the descendants of Judge Pao, the ingenious, incorruptible Chinese judge. We’re able to solve cases because Jiang here,” he said as he patted me on the back, “can—how do I put this....”

Then, we explained all the specifics and glanced nervously at the dusty table.

To our surprise and relief, Agila simply smiled.

“That reassures me,” she said while wiping away a tear, “In the other law firms I’ve been to, they speak without wisdom. I’ve heard similar tales about my ancestors. It makes me feel secure knowing that I’m in good hands.”

“We will do anything we can to prove you innocent,” Zhang said, joyful that someone had not only accepted but embraced our methods.

Then, Agila dropped to her knees. Tears were now streaming down her face. “Oh, thank you, thank you! You have saved my family and me. Unfortunately, I have nothing to pay you now, but I will work the rest of my life to repay this massive debt!”

Hurriedly, I stood up and pulled her back to her seat. “There’s no need for that, Agila; it’s what we’re meant to do.”

After a few more passionate blessings and thanks, we extracted Agila’s testimony, and she left.

I exited the small room and went into the main part of our office. Admittedly, the space was a mess. In the past, we littered crumpled pieces of paper across the floor, stacked files like a mountain range on the tables, and let dust infect every corner of the room. In the ceiling was an air conditioner covered in grime, and it buzzed loudly regardless if it was on or off. Thus, every hour of work was like living in a factory, but its pure annoyance united us like a bright bonfire. Such was the consequence of our family business policy—we only charge those who can spare the money. My partners, other descendants of Judge Pao, consisted of five ragtag young men with thick glasses; once, when the air conditioner broke down, they proposed charging every person a fixed rat, but luckily I vetoed it.

“Everyone, be quiet!” Zhang exclaimed. “Let Jiang conduct his magic in silence.”

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and focused on the darkness which descended upon me like a blanket. The buzz of the air conditioner stopped. I was isolated, locked in the silence and emptiness of my mind. But suddenly, like a sun peeking above the bleak horizon, a flash of light filled the darkness. Another mind filled my head, one that was more illuminated.

“Hello, Jiang.” The words reverberated throughout my head. The voice was booming and gravelly. Strangely, the voice felt physical, as I could feel its mass. I recognized the voice. It was him, the one and only Judge Pao.

“Hello, forefather,” I replied. After the Judge’s brief tenure as an official during the Ming Dynasty, he returned to the supernatural underworld to become the infernal judge. Strangely enough, I held the ability to be “possessed” by him, while no one else in the firm did, despite them also being descendants. I once asked the Judge about this, to which he ominously replied, “time will soon tell, my son.”

I described, in detail, the situation as described by Agila while the Judge listened in silence. When I finished, a courtroom filled my vision. The walls were not palpable but an infinite plane of red and black, stretching as far as the eye could see. Standing before me was an exquisitely sculpted hardwood table inscribed with ancient Chinese characters and a vast open space. In the distance, barely perceptible, was a sea of faint specters that floated and glowed like glass jellyfish.

As I turned my head to the right, I could see a massive character thrice my size wearing a wise, long beard on his old, wise face and a heavy black futou on his bright, bald head. His robe was black and embroidered in shining red, yellow, and green. Although the courtroom was relatively dim, he was emitting a strong golden light, like the Sun in the darkness of space. It was the physical manifestation of the Judge, and even two meters away, I could feel his presence pulling me into orbit.

“Come forth, Roberto. Descendant of Alab III and the son of Honesto. The man wrongfully murdered in the garden.” the Judge’s voice boomed across the courtroom.

From the sea of specters, one glided into the open area. Another hologram suddenly flooded my mind.

Now, I was looking at a garden with a bright full moon in the sky. I could hear whistling from myself, with the buzz of cicadas in the background. In my hand was a heavy watering can. I realized what was happening—Roberto was showing what had happened that fateful night from his perspective, like a video on playback.

Suddenly, Roberto could hear footsteps from behind. Startled, he spun around to see Mr. Thompson Jr., a man with a face so skinny and pale its edges he was like a carcass. Unfortunately, the watering can in Roberto’s hand remained open, and Mr. Thompson Jr. was met with a splash of water on his expensive robe.

Realizing what he had done, Roberto fell to his knees and cried, “Please, sir! Have mercy! It was an accident—I swear!”

Mr. Thompson Jr. did not move. His face remained stoic, like a statue. For an entire minute, he did not speak, simply looking into Roberto’s eyes with a piercing stare. And then, a smile crept up on his face. Or rather, a more accurate description would be that the corners of his mouth moved up. In a sinister, soft voice, Mr. Thompson Jr. slowly said, emphasizing every word, “No worries, Roberto.”

Roberto breathed a sigh of relief, got up from his knees, and dusted himself off.

“Thank you, thank you, sir! Again, I am so—”

Unfortunately, that was when the hologram blacked out, and I was back in the infernal courtroom.

But a moment later, another hologram flooded my eyes. However, this time, my eyes told me it was not a playback but something occurring in real time.

I was in a room surrounded by huge glass panes, which were so clean that they glinted from the sparkling moon. In the distance, I could see Repulse Bay’s beaches and the silent ocean’s vast expanse. Stunning pieces of artwork were carefully placed around the room, even some hanging from the ceiling in a suspended dance. The floor was shining, hand-cut marble, and in the center of the room was a carpet made from a tiger’s skin. I smelled a pleasant incense and heard the faint reverberance of piano keys. It was as if someone was attempting to construct heaven on earth.

However, my heart skipped a beat as I saw who I was in the faint reflection of the shining glass. A demon with a crooked face and horns made of steel. A body of blood-red strips of muscle and hints of pale, bare bones, like a human without skin. A pair of eyes so piercing, they were comparable to bows loaded with lit arrows. Then it struck me—it was a reincarnation of the Judge. Our family history book states that he had once posed as a demon to scare a criminal into confessing to a heinous crime.

As the Judge walked through the hallway to another glassy room, the sound of the piano loudened. Yet, I could still hear the faint smushing of the Judge’s feet, like a piece of slime being dragged across the floor. Then, I saw the origin of the piano sounds. In front of me was a man in exquisite silk pajamas, playing a slow, quiet requiem with his bony hands. As he turned, I could see that it was the same man that Roberto was talking to before his death—Mr. Thompson Jr.

Mr. Thompson Jr.’s eyes, which first seemed tired, now burst wide. He jumped off his chair, picked it up with difficulty, and threw it at the Judge. It simply passed through him and broke into a dozen pieces.

Mr. Thompson Jr. went on his knees and cried, “Who—who are you? Please, if it is money you want, I will make you rich!”

The Judge croaked, “Confess.”

Mr. Thompson Jr. exclaimed, “I don’t understand what you are talking—”

“The murder!” the Judge boomed as he marched forward.

“Okay, okay! I confess! I killed the servant, but—” Mr. Thompson exclaimed in submission, now in tears.

The Judge replied, “I thought so. Now give me the real video footage so that justice can be served. Or else, you will have to deal with something much worse than prison.”

Mr. Thompson Jr. shakingly turned to his wooden desk, opened a hidden cupboard, and pulled out a hard drive. He then shakingly tossed it over to the Judge.

I felt my body shift as the Judge returned to his normal caricature. He laughed, “I’m just a ghost, my child—how could I hurt you”?

Suddenly, I blacked out and opened my eyes. The familiar buzz of a faulty air conditioner filled my ears.

Zhang asked, “You were out for a while. Got what you need?”

I looked down at my hand. A hard drive.

Preparing for the trial was tedious, particularly since we decided to countersue Mr. Thompson Jr., but with the real footage of the murder in hand, victory was in sight.

Agila was overjoyed, smiling at the sea of reporters as she entered the courtroom. Even Zhang, who espoused the importance of staying stoic, was suppressing a smirk. I initially shared a similar feeling, but when I saw the lawyer on the other side joking and laughing minutes before the trial, I admittedly felt a hint of nervousness. Perhaps they had found—or fabricated—another piece of evidence that proved Agila was guilty, and Mr. Thompson Jr. not?

The courtroom shook as people shuffled in. Everyone in the courtroom seemed excited—it was a classic David versus Goliath situation—except for the twelve jury members, who had bleak, nervous expressions on their faces.

“All rise for Judge Judy, “ announced the clerk.

Everyone behind us gasped with awe and disbelief as the truth unraveled along with the trial. Yet, Mr. Thompson Jr. and his band of lawyers did not appear to be perturbed in the slightest. On the contrary, a smile seemed to crawl up their faces as the trial concluded.

“...and therefore, it is clear that the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt!” I exclaimed.

“Thank you. The defendant may now make their closing argument”, said the Judge.

Mr. Thompson Jr.'s lawyer stood up, now grinning from ear to ear, and said, “we’ll pass on that.”

Gasps echoed throughout the courtroom, and the Judge stammered, “That—that is certainly a novelty. If you forfeit the chance to make a closing argument, the jury will vote now. Seeing the evidence the plaintiff possesses, I find it disfavorable for you to simply “pass” on this final opportunity.”

The lawyer chuckled and replied, “Your Honor, Mr. Thompson Jr. is a busy man; besides, we are quite confident about the result.”

“Very well, “ said the Judge, “The Jury has a week to consider their decision.”

To everyone’s surprise, the head jury member raised his shaking hand and said, “Your Honor, we have already decided.”

“I beg your pardon?” the Judge exclaimed in disbelief.

Then, I saw the jury’s faces. They weren’t expressions of nervousness but fear. Not expressions of anxiousness but guilt. I could see them fearfully eyeing Mr. Thompson Jr., who simply smirked. It was the expression one makes if the grim reaper was pacing toward them with an outstretched hand or if the shadow of a tsunami was upon them. Or when a criminal has a noose around his neck, with the stool under him about to be kicked away. Or simply when one has to kill a stranger to protect their family.

“So what is the jury’s decision?”

As I understood the situation, I shut my eyes. Yet I could not block out the crowd’s astonishment nor Agila’s cries.

Everyone was quiet as we somberly walked back to the office, half in shock and half in anger.

“We need to appeal the jury’s decision,” I said as I broke the silence.

“Are you mad?” Zhang looked at me in disbelief. “They’ll destroy us!”

Suddenly, a notification sounded.

We all received an email:

“We see the potential in your practice and are willing to hire all of you. You will continue to fight for justice, just from our perspective. You will have riches and prestige. If you are interested, reply, and we will give you further instructions. The choice is yours.

Sincerely,

Mr. Thompson Jr.”

When I came to work a week later, I was completely alone. All I could hear was the lonely buzz of the air conditioner.

I closed my eyes and heard a voice in my head. A familiar voice.

“This is why I chose you.”

“They all left; what can I do?”

“No matter how bad the situation may seem, justice will always prevail. If not in life, then in death.”

So, I emailed Mr. Thompson Jr. and his lawyers that I would fight, no matter how badly the odds were stacked against me.

I never got a response from them. A few days later, I heard a loud bang in the distance and the shattering of my window. The buzz of the air conditioner stopped.

When I came to, I was in a red-black courtroom. I wore a large black futou, with a faint golden light coming off my body. A sea of specters lay before me, all with different stories, yet, they were all identical in my eyes.

# Long Before

*ESF Island School, Wong, Jennie – 14*

Picture this.

Once upon a time, long before tales of midnight immortality:

Bao Zheng, not a lord or magistrate or justicous just yet, and certainly not an immortal judge; just an unfamed, unknown baby.

He's born to an unlikely pair. His father is an official and the son of officials, and his calloused commoner mother a woman who fought mountains for firewood even while her belly swelled with life.

It's this wood that burns as she heaves and groans; maybe it's this flame that tempers Bao Zheng's gilded, gallant soul?

She gasps one last time as finally her son escapes her weary womb. Immediately, she cradles him in her arms, marvelling at his smallness. But though the mother, still smeared with a patina of ash and blood, smiles at her newborn son, the father only stares for a second before his face shadows with scorn.

"Niang Zi, throw him away." He says it matter-of-factly. Too easily.

"*What?*" She chokes out. "Why?"

He glares at her in exasperation. "Just *look* at him. He'll ruin everything I've worked so hard for. Bring me to my knees. Turn our gold to dirt. Like the colour of his cursed flesh."

"But –"

"He'll ruin everything," he hisses. "Niang Zi, are you blind? Look at him. He's *cursed*. Tell me, dear, do you want this nice, comfortable life or not?"

She winces, barely holding back tears. Indeed, Bao Zheng's skin is black as the basin of his future ballads, his eyes small and starless, his mouth thin and crooked. In his father's scholar eyes, practised at picking out mistakes: he is ugly, unbearably so, to the point of damnation.

To the father, it is a simple problem with a simple solution. There is a curse born into his family, an incorrect stitch. An easy riddle, far below him. Undo the stitch before it ruins the tapestry. Let their lives stay blessed and blissful.

The baby stares back at his father, long and searching, but the father only glares back. The mother holds her baby tighter even as her arms falter. She kisses him on the moon on his forehead, ivory-like against his night-black skin. He stares back up at her, beautiful and unshakably innocent. She holds him like they'd fall apart.

He says it like it is easy, she thinks, but he didn't feel his soul go from a greenhouse to a cavernous, forsaken temple, empty but for her love and mocking it with its echos, all she's sacrificed alone and abandoned under the too-high ceilings.

But she is his wife, and a dutiful one at that.

Her steps are unsteady as never before as they walk outside. Seconds away from shattering. But still she lays down her then-nameless baby. Maybe no tears escape her eyes, and no words flit out her lips, but she bifurcates, cleaves into two, all while the father's lips curl upwards. Another problem solved. Another disaster averted. A life of lavishness untarnished.

And so they walk away, hand in hand, baby left behind, entrusted to wraiths and dogs and other such loves. He wails. And though the air seems barren, it exhales something out. Slow and soft and serene.

Yes, there it is, barely perceptible:

The promise of being found.

A minute passes. Two.

Then at long last, something appears from out of the shadows. But not a prowling monster, nor a grinning ghost.

A girl.

She glides gingerly towards him; she's barely more than a child herself. Unsure, fragile, stalk-slender – but her eyes are sharp and scrutinising.

Hands shivering, she traces the moon on his forehead. Wipes away the tears falling from his blistering eyes. She strokes the skin stretched over his sapling bones: the skin the same shade as hers.

She makes up her mind then.

Wu Miaozhen lifts her beautiful, breathing brother off the ground.

She blinks, and the years fall away like leaves.

Bao Zheng grows like a reed, dark and hale and healthy. Maybe it's his father that gives him his sharp mind, quick and steadfast and capable, and maybe it's from his mother where he gets his commoner blood that makes him parched for something better than this.

But it's the girl who raises him, his sister-in-law mother, that teaches him how to be kind. To direct his thirst to be for justice. To water the world.

Picture this.

Bao Zheng is but a young child of seven years old, sitting with his sister-in-law mother and nephew-brother Bao Mian at their worn dining table.

Four knocks on the door, sharp, quick, and miserable.

Wu Miaozhen stands up from the table where bowls of painstakingly distributed rice lay. She opens the door to see the old man who lives down the street, in a house more in tatters than even theirs.

He's skeletal, starving. His entire body shrinks into himself. Words slide tentatively out his mouth: "Sister Wu, may you spare your poor neighbour some congee?"

Bao Zheng gapes, and Bao Mian stifles a scoff. Does he think that their household, run by a widow supporting two sons, has much of anything to spare? Yes, his sister-in-law mother receives money from his father, but not much. She labours day and night to fill their bowls with rice instead of congee.

Yet Wu Miaozhen beams. "Of course."

"Thank you, Sister Wu – I will repay you tenfold, I swear—"

"There's no need." Gentle, but steadfast. She walks to the table and picks up her bowl of rice, steam still wafting from it, and hands it to the man.

Tears well up in his eyes. "Thank you, Sister Wu...Rice, not just congee..." He cradles the bowl close to his chest, the warmth of the bowl seeping through him. "I've been hungry since the new minister's taken over." He bows, head knocking against his knees. "I— I owe you my life."

She offers him another smile. "Those with the same illness commiserate with each other."

"Greed pays back with evil, but you will receive a world of riches in return for your kindness," he replies in turn.

Wu Miaozhen dips her head, lips pursed. As soon as the man leaves with a final word of thanks, she turns to her two sons. "Riches might ruin me," she tells them. "If you ever receive a world of riches, pray it does not poison you too."

"Why did you give him your rice, Sao Niang?" Bao Zheng asks. He doesn't mean it to be accusatory, but it comes out that way. "Now because of him we'll have less food."

Wu Miaozen sits back down. "It's not because of him. It's because of the taxes." She smiles reassuringly. "Fear not, Bao Zheng. You and Bao Mian won't have to eat less."

Bao Zheng blinks. "But then...?"

"I am a grown woman. You two are growing boys. You need it more than me. And so did that old man."

So Bao Zheng and Bao Mian eat. Guiltily but hungrily.

Bao Zheng pushes his bowl towards her a few times, but she doesn't take a single bite. He looks at the steadfast expression on her hunger-carved face, the thin line of her mouth curving into a wan smile, and etches this memory onto the membrane of his mind.

Picture this.

Bao Zheng, thirteen years old now, crouched over his papers. He's one of the few children in their village lucky enough to go to school, and he takes to academics like a fish to water – as in, he wonders how he lived before it. He enjoys the way his words give the paper meaning. He swipes his quill and watches, entranced, the way his thoughts become something tangible. Real.

His sister-in-law mother walks into the room, a rare weight to her footsteps. Even realer.

"Bao Zheng, I have a favour to ask of you."

"...Yes?" She rarely asks for things from him. A note of apprehension twinges.

"You know Yang and Hei, from down the street?"

Bao Zheng nods. He used to play with them a bit before he began going to school.

"I know this is a lot to ask, but it would be good for you to teach them how to read and write."

His first instinct is to refuse. He needs to devote all his time to his own academics, not to help the children down the street, but his sister-in-law mother continues on before he can open his mouth.

"They can't afford to go to school like you can, Bao Zheng. You're likely the only and best teacher they will ever be able to have." Her tone is soft but her words are firm, and he understands that there's really no choice being given.

Though at first he complains in his head as the two children are sat down across from him, and chafes at their incompetence, when they leave, waving and whooping in pride, a spark of satisfaction twinges in his heart.

Wu Miaozen smiles. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No. It wasn't," Bao Zheng replies. "The actual teaching wasn't fun at first, but..."

"But it feels good to give back to the community, no?" Wu Miaozen strokes his head. "It feels good to be kind. Help them. Teach them how to escape a life of toil."

"What's wrong with toil?" The air tenses, and his voice becomes taut, his words needles. His sister-in-law mother is the hardest worker he knows, and to him, she's perfect.

"There's nothing shameful in the act in of itself. But it's what it means." She licks her lips, as if to oil her words. "It means that even children labour day and night while the officials reap the rewards of their work."

"...Yes." He thinks of his scribbled papers. Then of Wu Miaozen's callouses. Of every time she told him to not help and to focus on his studies instead.

"You are so, so smart, Bao Zheng, and you are so, so clever. I have faith that you can do anything you put your mind to. " Her voice cracks for a split second. "You could become an official, definitely. But don't become like them." Her voice is the fiercest it's ever been, and it ignites a match inside him.

"I'm your son. I could never."

Wu Miaozen turns her gaze to the window, and watches the small figures of Yang and Hei ploughing and planting. So experienced despite their small age. Relentless, even though their eyes must be drooping and their minds exhausted from their lesson with Bao Zheng. "I hope one day it will be better for them. For us all."

"I – I'll make it better then." The words come out his mouth before he even registers them.

"You will?"

Bao Zheng grips her arms as he barrels on. Later she'd tell him his eyes were aflame. "I – I'll work hard, and I'll become an official, and I'll make it better, and I – I'll change the world."

He thinks of how Hei and Yang's money must disappear routinely into bottomless pockets, never to be seen again, making them toil at the tender age of nine. He thinks of the old man. He thinks of his sister-in-law mother, begging at an official's feet, pouring every last yen into his hands and him still finding it wanting.

"And I – I won't become like them. I won't become like the official that makes them labour. I won't become like the official that made that old man hungry."

And he wouldn't become like his father.

Wu Miaozen pauses, taken aback by his sudden conviction, before she smiles softly. "I believe in you. But you'd better work hard at it."

"I will," Bao Zheng vows.

For the children. For the old man.

For his sister-in-law mother.

Yes, he's the flesh and bone of his blood parents. They echo in his cheekbones, reflect in his build. Features freeing the more he grows older.

But it's his sister-in-law mother who greets him when he comes home from school, bone-tired. It's her who ladles out his congee, folds his clothes, smiles at his pride, and comforts him when he cries.

It's his her who he thinks of when he heads for his imperial test, after years of devotion. Despite himself, his palms are slick with sweat.

Bao Zheng thinks of her medicine-stained smile. Her already-lined face, her sunken but still dimpled cheeks. He thinks of the comfort of their little family, sitting around their rickety dinner table. Whole if not yet holy.

Throughout the entire test, whenever his heart begins to race just a bit too fast, he thinks of her.

When he receives the results a few weeks later, that he's been approved, that his dreams are coming to fruition, he jumps to his feet and hugs her tight. Later he's dubbed 'the iron-faced judge', but in that moment a grin splits his face wide open. Wu Miaozen smiles back at him. "I always knew you could do it."

Just as he's about to leave, the very next day, he finds his father and mother waiting outside. Their hair's streaked heavily with white, Bao Zheng notes, as they kowtow on their knees for forgiveness. His father's gaze bores into the ground instead of glaring at Bao Zheng's face.

"Bao Zheng... son... I beg for your forgiveness." He coughs, low and ailing. "I am sorry that we threw you away. I'm sorry. We were cruel, and too quick to judge. How could we have known you would go into the brilliant young man you are today? We are old now, and we would like to spend the last years of our lives reunited with you. Our long lost son."

Bao Zheng's face twists into a sneer. His eye twitches, and his foot strays to kick his 'father'. Send him shocked and reeling. But he catches Wu Miaozen's stern gaze in the corner of his eye.

So Bao Zheng breathes in and summons his kindness instead. "Okay. You hurt me, and you never raised me, but... I forgive you. I do."

And he means it, because Wu Miaozen smiles.

But even though they're now on good terms, and Bao Zheng does not scorn his father and mock his mother in his head at every turn, their interactions are still strangled. They wave to and greet each other, and share sips of tea, but he doesn't go to the man that threw him away for advice. Doesn't go to the woman that birthed him just to let him go to cry.

Instead he goes to the woman that shaped him. Raised him. Made him.

Steady, smiling Wu Miaozen, who does not pad her words with flattery but supports him regardless of everything. And really, is there anything as hallowed as a sister-in-law mother's love?

Ten years crawl by, and he begins to doubt whether he should be impatient for the time when he finally becomes an official, once both of them die. He's happy in his existence here, slow and sleepy but beloved.

He watches his father's mind deteriorate. He howls and barks out messy garbles meant only for the mad, far from his past succinct grace. His pale skin turns grey and palloured. His mother's face hollows with worry as his father shudders, hands twisted around the brushes he no longer needs, but cannot ever leave.

Would it be worth it?

When his father dies at long last – breath rattling against his throat, mouth devoid of words – first falling to his knees, like he only ever did once in life, and then sinking into the miry ground...

His mother cries, long and slow and heavy as the rain falls furiously. But Bao Zheng only stares and says nothing as the water runs down his skin in relentless rivulets, like mockeries of teardrops.

She falls not long after. Hearth-heart gone out without a flicker of a flame, leaving only ash and dust. He says nothing, feels nothing, even as his mother's body burns.

In the end it is when his sister-in-law mother dies that he collapses at long last.

A quiet affair, splayed out in her creaking bed. Sun-bleached knots fanned out around her head. Hungry hands holding each other. Dark eyes open but blank.

Bao Zheng cracks like glass. Crumples like the papers he's been fearing. Falls to his knees like his father.

And after all the rites, grander than her entire life, are finished, and the fires settle down, he hesitates yet again.

There's nothing holding him back from being an official and achieving his dream now. There's nothing left in this village left for him, now that his family is dead and Bao Mian is long gone.

But he's already waited a decade. Why not a few more?

He could be happy here for the rest of his life. Marry one of the girls down the street. Sire, raise, and love some children. Grow old content and carefree, unburdened of legacy, legends and such other poisons.

Does he really want to become his father, heaving and hardly breathing, callous and cruel?

Would he not rather be like his sister-in-law, humble but happy, who took his hands slowly so he wouldn't forget? Who kissed him on his forehead, chapped lips grazing the watery moon, as she wiped his tears away? Who died surrounded by the warmth of her long labour?

*The saddest words are always 'it might've been.' Humans always have regrets. All we can do is hope we end up with the right ones.*

Slow and soft and serene.

He can almost see the topography of her face again, almost reaches out to touch it. But of course, she isn't really there.

Bao Zheng grasps a breath in.

He embarks on his journey, builds a legacy that'll live far beyond him – for his sister-in-law mother above all else –

And he becomes a legend, a deity, justice made flesh, the subject of countless stories – but he never forgets his first tale.

The story of a baby left screaming...

And the girl who found him.

# The Common People

*ESF King George V School, Chan, Valerie – 14*

For deities, time passes differently.

Bang the gavel, bring down the guillotine. A day passes, then a hundred years. Time is lost amidst the banging of courtroom doors and subservient bows, weeks and months and a thousand years, but nothing changes.

*He* doesn't change, and neither does the afterlife, but that is what differentiates it from the world of the living, the *yang* — all that is breathing and breathtakingly bright; all that is everchanging.

The mortal world is everchanging. How many times has he said these exact words to desperate spirits, those who cling to his robes as they kowtow, as they beg?

“—*My son, Judge. Please just let me see him for the last time.*”

*“I’m begging you, Lord Pao, we’ve been married for a mere hundred days! Won’t you be merciful and give me a chance to bid goodbye?”*

It is not as if he isn't moved, as if he takes delight in watching them grovel. The contrary, really. He sees the spirits with nothing to their names and recalls his own family, his own son, tugging at his sleeves just as the spirits do.

It's just that he is Judge Pao. He is righteous. He is incorruptible. He is just. He cannot afford any pity for sinners. All he can do is to balance the scales, straighten his notes, and offer one last piece of advice — one that he learned the hard way.

“The mortal world is everchanging, and we are not.”

For deities, time passes differently.

It is an honour to ascend into paradise, and even more so to be deified, but it is one that you cannot question, nor refuse.

“Whoever would refuse to ascend? To leave your family, your sovereign, everything binding you to the mortal world?”

The statement echoes through the parlour for less than a moment before uproarious laughter and agreeable murmurs ring in the air.

*“Ganbei!”* Ten cups are lifted, but only nine clink against each other. Their owners all swivel towards the tenth. Pao Zheng, the newest entry to their ranks, tips back his cup of *baijiu* and drinks until there is nothing left; his cup hangs loosely between unmoving fingers before it crashes onto the floor, a shattered mess of porcelain.

“Lord Pao, did you mean what you said?” One of the lords chuckles disbelievingly. “I mean, you're one of us now, and you've just ascended to such a revered position. Of course, it's worth it.”

The drinking parlour falls silent; the remaining nine lords of the afterlife watch with caution as Pao Zheng rises from his seat, yellow robes rippling like molten gold, his crescent mark shining like liquid silver.

“Of course, it is worth it,” he echoes, waving a hand. The cup disappears from, and his fingers close around thin air. “I shall retire early for tonight. Please do enjoy the wine, my fellow lords.”

As a heavy curtain of darkness falls upon the sky, he looks upon the sloping mountains, the still waters that surround his place of judgement; the three glittering scythes hanging upon the wall, dangling by their handles — a golden dragon, a silver tiger, a bronze hound. He looks upon the Tower of Remembrance, standing tall.

The tower, he thinks, a smile flitting across his face. A rare moment where he allowed himself to act on his sympathy to the people. They had cried and pleaded, and he had tried to uphold his austere façade in front of his fellow lords,

but he had felt their longing as if it were his own. He had tried. But in the end, he conceded, anyway, and called for the construction of a tower for discontent spirits to see their home one last time.

How long had it been since *he* had last seen his home? He closes his eyes, and when they open, he's standing in the tower, memories around him. He sighs, a weary, hopeful breath, a wish and a prayer —

For deities, time passes differently.

They are everywhere, and they are nowhere. Time is just another construct they see through. Past and present and future are mere threads in the webs they weave with the snap of a finger and the twist of a hand, and they are therefore free from the constraints of time.

Pao Zheng had been mortal once, though. He knows how it feels to have time slip through his fingers like sand. He knows how it feels to watch as a child grows out of his embrace and takes his first steps, speak his first words, fall sick for the first time. Then watch, as the child is lowered into the ground before his hair had even turned grey.

He knows, he *knew* how it felt not to have enough time. But now, he has been deified, bestowed with a name of utmost honour. He is Pao Qing-tian. He and his name now stand for the salvation of the common people, the protection against all that is unjust and corrupt. He has all the time he would ever want — so why does he feel that deep, all-consuming yearning that should only plague those with numbered days?

Deities live on memories. Remember them, and they live on to bless, to curse, to judge, to listen. And as memories sustain them, deities collect memories, a fragile equilibrium of giving and taking, for they live on as amalgams of how they are remembered.

It also stands, as such, that deities can appear everywhere and anywhere they are remembered, where memories of them have not faded yet. It is with this thought that Pao Zheng visits Kaifeng, his hometown.

“Lady Dong,” he calls, looking around the empty manor house for a glimpse of the light pink dresses his wife favoured. “Ah-Yi?”

No answer. His ancestral home remains strangely silent, and yet, his favourite paintings still hang on the walls in pristine condition, and reports from his most prominent cases still line the tables.

*Just how long has it been?* He wonders as he wanders through the hallways, calling the names of his wife, his sons, but no one replies. The last rays of sunlight shine through the domed windows, casting golden light on the solitary marble plaque in his garden, and the joss sticks standing next to it.

Joss sticks? Pao Zheng blinked once, twice. His parents had been buried in his ancestral plot, and so had his son; channelling his energy, he reappears in the garden, looking up at the plaque —

For deities, time passes differently.

If the present hurts, then one must return to the past.

“*Baba*, how did the case go?” It is his son, his young Ah-Yi, running up to him and pulling at the sleeves of his robe, “My teacher told me that my writing has improved and that someday I’ll be as great of an official as you are!”

He smiles indulgently at his son. How could he not, when everything is going so well? When the emperor is satisfied with his performance and his duties are growing in importance; when his son is bright and healthy, and his household is prosperous; when he is upright and sleeps every night knowing that his character has not been corrupted. How could he not be happy?

“I’ll tell you about the case today, Ah-Yi,” he begins, “it began when a man showed up with an ox...”

*My Ah-Yi.*

The letter sits heavy on the wooden desk, delivered right after he had just lit his candle; the candle has burned down to the wick, crying its last tears, but the letter remains unopened.

Pao Zheng sits at his desk, hat askew, face flushed. The wave of elation from his audience with the emperor has not faded yet, nor has the grim pride he took from meting out justice to those who deserved it. "They've started to call you Justice Pao, the iron-faced judge," the emperor's favoured eunuch had told him, a hint of jealousy in his words. "Even the emperor wants you to serve in a better position — not that there's many better ones than being the imperial censor. Ah, heavens above, you should've seen his expression when he had to give up on the edict."

Pao Zheng had smiled, then, his first genuine one since the case had begun, more of a quick upward quirk of his lips than the fully-fledged one that none but his wife and son are privy to. *My Ah-Yi*, he thinks again, pressing his fingers to his temples, as if it could make the gods hear his fervent prayers.

He had impeached Yao-zuo, today; the corrupt man that was promoted on behalf of his familial ties with Concubine Zhang loved so. All the other censors had warned him not to continue pushing for fairness, and he knew the risks, but how could he, when tolerating one man's advances meant allowing more to follow in his footsteps?

"I have been honest, and I have been pious," he whispers, reaching for the letter with trembling hands, "I have not once accepted dirty money. I have done well by my parents. On account of all that, please..." The rest of his prayer goes unsaid, but as he rips it open and shakes out the contents, he can only whisper two words.

*"My son."*

There is only a slip of paper, short and succinct.

*Pao-gong,*

*Ah-Yi passed peacefully in his sleep. The malady ailing him faded before his last moments. We are in mourning here, but do not rush to return. He would not want you to toil yourself. Lady Dong urges me to remarry after the mourning period, but I shall stay and fulfil my promised duties. I will do so with a willing heart. My son is frail, as well, and I will devote myself to his care and Lady Dong.*

*Your humble daughter-in-law*

He falls to his knees. He has but one rightful son, Pao Yi, and though he knows of the illegitimate boy he may have fathered, Ah-Yi should have been his heir, his blood, his pride and joy.

"My son, why?"

*Have my prayers gone unanswered?*

For deities, time passes differently.

If the present hurts, then one can return to the past; but what if the past hurts, too, if not more?

One can turn to the future.

The first thing he sees, standing in the same place, is a woman, her hair tied in a bun, pointing at the placard on his desk. *The legacy of Judge Pao*, it reads, in brassy gold print. He winces at the use of the emperor's colour, and the smudges of small fingerprints, before he looks to his left and directly into the faces of a dozen children, peering curiously at the sign.

"Teacher, he was a *magistrate* of the capital," says a boy with narrowed eyes, "was he magical?"

"He was a magistrate, not magical," the girl next to him says, sniffing.

“But *I’m* descended from him, you know,” another girl says. “My dad says that I’m a thirty–fourth–generation descendant of his, and that one of my uncles is a really successful person!”

The two other children turn on her and glare. “If that’s true, then I’m descended from the emperor,” scoffs the boy, “Stop bragging please.”

“It says here that he disowns any descendants who committed bribery,” the girl says, “and we all know that you paid the school to get in, Yue–mei. You’re good at nothing.”

The girl flinches at the raucous laughter of her peers, and so does Pao Zheng, flushing red with anger. Does the name that he worked so hard to build mean nothing to these people? Is it not enough to protect his own descendants?

What have they become?

“*Mama*, what was your father like?” a girl sits on her mother’s lap, and it takes a few moments for Pao Zheng to recognise his own daughter, his En–qi. “Grandmother told me that he was a judge who served the emperor, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, dear, and he was also a magistrate for the capital city. He was a very good man, you see. When he was around, he would stop corrupt people and decide on the consequences of their actions. He was very stern, though, and people used to say that his smile was rarer than clear waters in the Yellow River.”

The girl nods seriously. “Then did he teach you words and make carvings with you, like *baba* does with me?”

A laugh, and En–qi shakes her head. Is that resignation? Bitterness? “Oh, no. I was betrothed to your *baba* by the time I was your age. And besides, he didn’t spend that much time with me, really —”

Pao Zheng frowns when En–qi whispers in her daughter’s ear, leaning in to hear.

“— after all, I’m a girl. He didn’t need me when he had your Uncle Yi. Boys are meant to shape history, you know. But it’s okay. You can be whatever you want.”

“Even if I’m a girl?”

“Even if you’re a girl.”

For deities, time passes differently.

Time passes differently, but they feel just as mortals do, if not with some detachment. Pao Zheng is in the Infernal Bureaucracy once more, but he feels the same sickly shame he did after a failed appeal.

His own daughter sees him... like that? Has he failed? He had thought that he was a good father to his children. A fair one, if not a fully present one, at the very least; but even his own daughter saw his favour for Ah–Yi.

“How can I judge others for their wrongs when I myself have much to atone for?” he whispers to himself, pacing in the empty courtroom. The flames cast long shadows on the walls, forming ominous patterns.

He sees the plaque in his garden in his mind’s eye, a marble monstrosity six feet tall, detailing his achievements and his life.

*The ancestry document detailing the lineage of Justice Pao has been destroyed, as has most statues and paintings of the famous judge. He has now been buried elsewhere, and a new gravestone has been erected for him elsewhere.*

He had not been able to stand being in there for another moment, to catch another glimpse of the description of how so many remnants of his legacy had been destroyed. Yet, both the past and the present hurt.

“It never stops hurting.”

The deity of memories stands by the doors, a knowing smile on her face. “Meng Po,” he addresses her, with a respectful bow. She pockets her ladle before entering. “What never stops hurting?”

“Memories. Weren’t you thinking about that?” She smiles knowingly at him. “Ah, we gods aren’t that different from mortals. Why do you think so many spirits are willing to drink the soup of forgetfulness? You may look back and regret your actions, but check on your descendants again, Judge. Sometimes, you must look forward and be proud of what you have, and not what you *should’ve* done.”

For deities, time passes differently.

But for mortals, a sliver of time is worth more than gold.

Pao Zheng appears at a harbour, docked full of ships and abuzz with chatter. He approaches the nearest dockhand, who merely raises his eyebrows at his eclectic form of dress.

“Young man, what is this place?”

“This is the port, sir. The boats all belong to my employer.”

“They *all* do? Who, pray tell, is your employer?”

The dockhand’s eyes widen, and he drops the boxes that he had been loading. “Are you not from here, sir? He owns the largest shipping company in the world. They call him Hong Kong’s first businessman of truly international stature.”

“And what name does he go by?”

“Sir Pao Yue-kong. He really saved us common people by opening so many job opportunities.”

In another corner of the country, a temple stands. By now, it is dark, but a melody floats in the quiet night.

“There is a Pao Qing-tian in Kaifeng, who is selfless in the world.”

Pao Zheng nears the temple, and finds four words etched into its doors —

*The Pao Ancestral Shrine*

Strangely, it’s empty, save for an old man, sweeping. As Pao Zheng nears, he looks up. “I’m sorry, sir, we’re closed for the night. If you’d like to pay your respects to Judge Pao, please return tomorrow.”

“Oh, no. I’m just passing by. Is this the shrine of the famous judge?”

“Yes, yes. I’m just taking care of it as a descendant of his should.”

“Ah, I thought a lot of his descendants would be here. I must have been mistaken.”

“It’s just me, I’m afraid. I do the best I can, in the hopes that he’ll see and be proud.”

Pao Zheng smiles as he turns to leave. “I’m sure he would be proud of you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

For deities, time passes differently, but as Pao Zheng returns to his chambers in the afterlife, he wishes, for the first time, that time would slow, and that he could watch his descendants grow.

Regret seems to follow him like persistent shadows.

He *would've* spent more time with his wife, his children, if he knew that their days together were so limited.

He *could've* done better by his loved ones, could've left more to them than a legacy that was more judge than parent.

He *should've* shown more compassion, more pity to the common people who had begged him for a sliver of mercy.

Would've, could've, should've. Meng Po was right — it doesn't do to dwell on memories and forget to live.

“Move on, and judge fairly without drowning in the past,” he wonders. “Is this what she wanted me to learn?”

As Pao Qing-tian, saviour of the people, shrugs on his heavy overcoat and prepares for a new day, he thinks about his descendant, sweeping all alone.

*Thank you. I'm proud of you.*

# The Lessons I've Learnt

*ESF King George V School, Zhao, Rou – 15*

*Hell, 2024*

My throat is sticky and sour when I open my eyes. I swirl my tongue against my cheeks, sample the indent beneath my tongue. Fear, desire and sorrow congealed so densely it clogs the base of my mouth.

I swallow — count off on my fingers, run out. My palms are open and flat and I suppose it's been centuries since I've woken up. There is a sort of bone-deep pleasure within being without living and feeling without thinking. A sort of juxtaposition, really, but justice always comes calling through. I suppose that's why I'm here.

*We really are slaves to our temptation*, I think to myself as I wet my lips, sample the air. It's ironic for an immortal judge, I know; I chase the tart, tangy smell of citrus and fear and yet again, I think to myself: I never did like hell much.

\*\*\*

Agony is an impression. It is a burning of heat and destruction that takes shape as the trembling, fractures of a volcanic eruption. Imperceptible, until it cleaves the sky into halves, then quarters, more if you will, and in a split second, torment is charring through eroding flesh and diffusing into blood cells, fusing with organs once pumping till you are stretched to your limit (muscles, limbs, tissue — taut) and so you are choking with pain.

But conceptualised agony is this: a mass of writhing bodies coalesced into an entity — it shudders. The tormented claw druggedly at each other, each tremor of a limb sending oscillations and vibrations that ripple languidly (push, fall, ebbs out). They see nothing much — do not know anything much save for their affliction, and so there is something so breathtakingly sad that comes with: my eyes (brown), an undulating sea of souls (black) — to watch them spill into the millions and back.

To be a human: intricately crafted organs ticking in tandem like clockwork, true and right. Amalgamation of thoughts and complexity defined through minute mathematical strands of snaking, whorling genetics. It is plain and simple beauty; an astronomical feat of precision to create such a masterpiece and for it to be stripped into a metaphor (the sea of the tormented is an ocean), the world must truly be an unjust place.

Perhaps sentenced to an eternity of damning agony, there is nothing I can do for them but listen, and so I hear:

I hear of a sickness — a malady that ebbs and flows like the current (it drowns).

I hear of a loss so sudden it snatches your breath away within the space of one heartbeat to the next.

I hear of an aching loneliness that settles into your bones like a long-lost friend, it is saying *hello there, I did not forget about you*.

Unmistakably, undeniably, the culprit: a God (rampant).

\*\*\*

I find him sitting languidly at a coffee shop, ankles crossed, bowler hat tipped low. He is holding a book and stirs a cup of coffee absentmindedly. There is a lantern drooping at the mouth of the shop; it sways slightly crooked, and I worry fleetingly that perhaps it will be toppled by the breath of an idle, wayward breeze.

He looks up at me then, closes his book and folds his palms neatly on his lap. "Judge Pao." I notice for the first time that he is not a man but a boy. "Your legend precedes you, why are you here?"

His words are humorous to me, and I almost smile. "You've heard of me, you must know why I've come."

The boy-God's eyes are impassive when they find mine — I am reminded of coal. It is sanded into globular beads (hooded), smooth and eerily still and he says to me. "With all due respect, Judge, I did what I had to do."

I feel the slide of a toneless laughter settle against my tongue — this call-and-response, so incessant it has become tedious:

I have seen people like you. Men who will look me in the eye (stand stagnant, solitary) in a field of dead bodies like open-mouthed roses. Do not cease their grasp twirled guiltless around the hilt of a serrated blade (see that it drips with viscous blood). Perhaps they might say that *who do you think I am, I am no murderer*, but then they are lucid beneath a falling, crimson sun and innards are strung as if they are fairy lights: twinkling, twinkling over reaching, reaching (ice-cold) fingers.

As if you had not been standing there all day, waiting to be found. There is no one for miles — not a single person but for you and I.

“Do you know of the disruption you have caused?” I know that you do not. “Do you know how many lives you have ended, because you have flooded the Afterlife with the tormented, and they will always be in agony now.”

“It’s not like that.” He says.

Look how the clock hand swings in perfect cadence despite itself; you cannot stop yourself from telling lies. When the time comes, I will look back to today and consider that look on your face: I suppose the question really is: are you excusing yourself to me, or are you excusing you to yourself? I find myself leaning forwards (you lean back) — I decide then, that I will take us away.

\*\*\*

To the left: a haphazard row of machines: stertorous and flickering in mechanical tandem. Their lights are dizzying, and against my eyes they pop like bubbles, bright and swollen.

To the right: a procession of hospital beds — they cram one beside the other beside the other beside the other. Wires and IV tubes fall like paper chains: crumpled, they are branching every which way.

“What is this?” the boy-God says. “Where are we?”

I watch as doctors clothed in blue hurry from one bed to another (it is going from one life to the next); gas particles set into motion — they are inevitably and unchangeably bound to collide and spin. Set off in opposite trajectories, to meet again at some other point in some other moment of some other time.

“Covid, is it?” the boy-God doesn’t reply — turns to watch as a nurse begins working deft fingers at a plastic bubble: it is distended and billowing disproportionately, unshapely with the promise of air. The apparatus is set up within moments and soon, the surface is clouding and misting. Fogged up with breath that is faint and bruising. The patient is breathing, though; at least there is that.

But a little girl dies on the next bed over.

I watched her heart contract — a tremulous, fluttering thing. It is not so much as the beating of a heart but a quiet throb that shivers against her ribcage. It stops then, and it is just like that.

She is clothed in wires that could not bring her miniscule body back to life. “Time of death: 1:12 pm.” I hear someone say, and I wonder how the absence of a noise can be quite so deafening.

There would be dead nerves and inflammatory cells where they should not have been — they will entangle themselves through her brain. You would find whitish-pink wads stuffed up and through her lungs like tawdry roses. They fill up empty spaces where the truth is, it really should have been air.

\*\*\*

Now we stand in a field. It meanders on, sunken and lovely.

Someone has decided to stick a flag into the sweet-smelling grass. Then another, another and another and another. “This is what your pandemic has taken,” I say, “one flag for each life.” The boy-God is crying now.

When the sun begins to rise: a crumpled paper bag, pink-cheeked flowers collected from the side of a road — to come here alone (morning dew softens trouser rims). To set down a flag, *I left him behind in a field of flowers*. It is beautiful, I would say. Poetic and lovely; if anything, it is heartbreaking.

To think that in the course of time all the flowers would bloom brilliant and wild one day. To think that there is not a thing in the world that could change: flags that do not (cannot) grow — ends of eras they mark, till the last moment they fall and die against the ground.

I listen to the flutter of cheap fabric. “Is this what you wanted?” I say. “You created a pandemic; did you do it for this?”

The boy-God shakes his head furiously.

\*\*\*

The truth is not always as beautiful as a field full of flowers.

Now we are in a parking lot. Its contents: metal trucks (precisely seven), a chain link fence. Beyond, I watch a horizon, clear-cut and unbound — it begins to unravel. “There came a point,” I say, “at the height of the pandemic where there was just not enough space for the dead. Morgues had become exhausted, hospitals exhausted of resources: there was death one after the other and it really did seem like they would never stop.

“Within the solution they found, bodies were swaddled in white and stored in refrigerated trucks. It was hoped they could prevent the fated decay of the human body, and they did; at least there is that.”

For a while, the boy-God does not speak, and when he does it is so soft I am unsure if it was the wind. “Judge Pao, I was so tired.” I wait for him to elaborate. “You’ve seen how they only look outside: material obsession for reputation, fame now, for glory next. To exhaust their bodies: squeeze it so dry as if they could last a lifetime. You know as well as I, they cannot.

“Judge Pao, do they not understand? I don’t suppose they do: we are all that we have, really. The constant within a perpetually fluctuating cosmos (forever impermanent): in the end, there is only nothing but ourselves.”

“The way they forsake themselves — I have not seen one person live completely for themselves, not even for one day. The decision to work: sun is up now, you are awake still. Memories have begun to erode (you know this because you searched it up the other night). A body and a brain drained from another night of sleep that you did not have — these are the people my virus will damage.

“To take their bodies for granted. Overwork it as if it were a tool for them to run, but in truth if there is no body but for you, there is no you but for your body.

“Can’t you see they have broken down (exhausted) already, every defense their own body has built. To damage themselves like this: all they needed to do was to take a little better care of themselves.”

I feel like crying now. “Silly boy,” perhaps in truth the boy-God did care more than I ever showed. “But children cannot look after themselves. Neither can toddlers nor newborn babies. No one’s fault is cancer — still, they have become victims to your sickness.”

We are both in tears now, and the boy-God looks up at me from where he has sunken to the ground. “What do I do, Judge Pao?”

\*\*\*

In the end, it is no one’s fault. It is the boy-God’s fault, and it is not because in the end, I do believe he got his message across. The child changed the world forever — there will come a time one day when it begins to recover.

It is also true that my legend precedes me: after all Justice Pao is not a name you receive quite so lightly.

And so when I kill the boy-God, I am afraid that there would never be an end to these tears.

# The Trials of Xin Yue

*HKUGA College, Choy, Hiu Chi Charis – 16*

## Part One

It was happening again.

Shadows were creeping at the periphery of her vision – dark tendrils forming eerie shapes. A familiar chill in her bones. Chaotic voices in her head grew louder and louder and louder, like a chorus of ravens that wouldn't stop screeching.

Xin Yue felt as if she was going to black out.

“Go away,” she half-shouted, swatting at the shadows with her arms. “Go AWAY!” A passing servant gave her a stare, which she ignored. *This isn't the time for hallucinations*, she thought. *Father is expecting me.*

Xin Yue dug her nails into her palms. She forced herself to focus. The shadows receded. She tore across the wooden corridors, leaving the shadows behind her.

It was dinner time at the Wen Mansion, where Xin Yue and her father lived. The mansion was a large, wooden house built around a central courtyard. The house had multiple carved stone doorways. Short flights of stone steps connected it to the courtyard. Fish tanks, filled with orange and white koi, glittered in the moonlight.

Xin Yue hurled herself into the dining room, panting. She was conscious of the eyes of her father and the numerous maids, which were fixed on her as she walked to the end of the room and took her seat at the far end of the dining table.

“You're late,” her father, Wen Ming, uttered disapprovingly, with a stern expression on his face. He was sitting at the other end of the large dining table, where plates and plates of steaming food had already been placed.

“I'm sorry, Father,” Xin Yue said, in a small voice, avoiding his gaze. Father hated it when she didn't follow the household routine. She looked away, so that his presence would be less real.

There was dark heavy furniture strung around the dining room — expensive Huanghuali wood — which had always seemed too grand to her. A flow of maids came in and out of the room, bringing new dishes from the kitchen area and then taking away empty bowls – expensive green celadon ceramics. Only the best ever satisfied Wen Ming.

*And that affected his expectations of his daughter as well.* Xin Yue remembered his reaction when he had first known that she had hallucinations...

It was her aunt, Li Yuet Hei, who had told Wen Ming about Xin Yue's hallucinations. Once, Xin Yue had tried to confide in her aunt about the shadows and the voices, but she only dismissed her concerns. Later that day, Wen Ming had pulled Xin Yue into her room and locked the door behind him as he left, saying that it would “calm her down”. Xin Yue had realized that her aunt had betrayed her trust, and that she had revealed everything to her father.

Wen Ming had locked Xin Yue in her room for a week, leaving her alone and isolated. Without anything to distract her, the voices only became louder, the shadows larger. No matter how much she begged to be let out, her requests were denied.

The brisk footsteps of a servant entering the room snapped her out of her thoughts. The servant walked to Wen Ming's side and whispered in his ear. Wen Ming stood up abruptly. “Your aunt has arrived. Eat your dinner. I will go out to greet her,” he said, giving one last stern look at Xin Yue before striding out of the room.

As soon as Wen Ming was out of sight, Xin Yue got up from the dining table, desperately wanting to get out of the suffocating place. The servants took no notice of her as she silently slipped out of the room.

---

Xin Yue walked out of the courtyard and into the street to the market area, hoping to clear her head.

The market was empty; the whole area was silent. The town people had all returned to their houses hours before. Where there was usually a bustle of people, fruit and vegetable vendors, rice shopkeepers, and tea merchants, now, all the stores were quiet.

Xin Yue looked up. The sky was pitch-black, like a dome looming over her. She shivered. The dark sky reminded her of the shadows in her hallucinations, threatening to consume her.

She hadn't always been like this. Xin Yue used to love the night sky when she was a little kid. Sitting on the grass, and holding on to her mother's hand while gazing up into the stars used to be her favorite pastime. She tried to do the same now, mentally striving to summon up some childhood memories. None would come. She closed her eyes and pictured her mother's warm smiling face, the only face that had ever brought her comfort.

Instead, her father's face, etched with lines of hate, appeared in her head. His eyes were filled with rage. Flinching, Xin Yue fought the urge to run away. The shadows began to re-emerge, twisting and morphing into monsters. The voices in her head grew louder, all jumbled up, and incomprehensible.

Then, a dizzying sensation came over her. *No*, she thought desperately, before the darkness dragged her down.

---

When Xin Yue came to her senses, she was lying in a narrow stone-paved alleyway.

The first thing she noticed was the fresh, sweet scent of tea leaves and the smell of fish and shrimp. Still lying on the ground, Xin Yue turned her head to the side, seeing a tea merchant's shop and a dried foods store come into view. Why was she there? She couldn't remember.

The next thing she realized was that her hands were covered with blood, and that in her right hand she was clutching an iron knife with a dark carved wooden handle. She immediately let go of the knife. It fell with a clatter onto the stone flags.

Confused, she sat up — and stared.

Two meters away, her aunt was lying on the ground, a dark red bloodstain spreading on her chest. She was still, making no movement or sound.

Xin Yue was horrified. She felt numb. For a second, she thought it was all just a dream, one of her hallucinations. But the cold sting of wind on her face and the stickiness of the blood on her hands were too real to be just a dream. She didn't touch her aunt. She took a few steps backwards, backing out of the alley. She broke into a wild run, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Xin Yue came to a halt in front of the town mayor's house. She hadn't intended to go there, but somehow her feet had brought her there of their own accord. Before she could stop herself, she knocked on the door.

The mayor opened it. Xin Yue saw his eyes widen and his expression turn to shock as he saw her hands covered with blood, and her eyes shining with tears. "I— I stabbed my aunt," she blurted out.

There was no going back now. Xin Yue knew this would be her death sentence.

---

Laying on a wooden couch, Xin Yue stared up at the ceiling.

The mayor had had her locked in a room like a holding cell. "It's for your own safety," he had told her, before rushing to her home to talk with her father.

Xin Yue could hear guards outside her door, whispering about what she had done. "*They all think I'm insane,*" she thought to herself bitterly, "*Maybe I am. I'm a murderer.*"

She could still feel the blood on her hands.

A creaking sound jerked Xin Yue's mind back into the room. The mayor opened the door with her father, who entered the room alone and looked at her for some time silently. He made her sit opposite him.

He then started to talk. About the legal matters, about how he was trying to prove her innocence.

It all felt forced. There was no affection. He didn't hold Xin Yue. She stayed silent, sitting stiffly on the wooden couch, listening to his words without truly paying attention.

“What’s the point?” she thought. “We both know that I’ll be hanged.”

## Part Two

The early rays of the sun poured through Pao’s window, illuminating the mounds of paper piled on top of his desk.

Case files that needed to be filled in with trial proceedings, reports of crimes that were waiting to be proofread, discharges that had to be authenticated...

There was much to do, and work was never over for the Judge of Kaifeng.

---

Pao heard the door open behind him. He turned to see one of his subordinates, Zhao Hu, entering the room. He had a tense look on his face.

“What is the matter, Zhao Hu?” Pao asked. It was rare for his subordinates to enter his study uninvited, and they only did it when something had gone terribly wrong.

“Did you hear about the recent murder case, Your Honor? The one about Wen Ming’s daughter killing her aunt?” Zhao Hu asked. Pao shook his head. Wen Ming... Pao remembered him as one of Keifeng’s government officials, one who had risen to power and had obtained riches in a very short amount of time. He had had his suspicions about Wen Ming giving — and taking — bribes, but there was never any evidence against him.

Pao remembered Wen Ming’s daughter as a laughing three-year-old, hanging onto her father’s sleeve. *She* was a murderer?

“Well, the girl, Wen Xin Yue, confessed that she had stabbed her aunt. She had a clear motive as well — her aunt had broken her trust in the past,” Zhao Hu described.

“A clear motive *and* a clear confession?” Pao thought. In his experience, murders were rarely this simple. There seemed to be something... off about this case, but Pao couldn’t explain what.

“Your Honor, it has been determined that Wen Xin Yue will be hanged tomorrow evening — without a trial,” Zhao Hu continued tightly.

Pao stiffened. *No*. What if the girl was innocent? He couldn’t let her receive the death sentence without a proper trial or an investigation. Death is too serious a punishment to dish out lightly, especially to a young girl.

“Zhao Hu, arrange a meeting with the mayor today. I will see to it that Wen Xin Yue receives a trial before any sentence is declared.”

---

“WEI— WU—”

The shout echoed through the courtroom, reverberating through the air like thunder. The girl in the middle of the courtroom flailed, falling to her knees, and began to shiver.

Pao raised his gavel, smooth and firm under his palm, then brought it slamming down onto the table. “Wen Xin Yue! What have you been accused of?” he boomed.

“Murder, Your Honor,” Xin Yue forced out.

“Did you kill Li Yuet Hei, your aunt?” he questioned.

Xin Yue lifted her head in his direction, taking a deep breath before answering.

“Yes. I stabbed her.” Her voice was distant, as if she was recalling a detail taught to her instead of a memory.

“What were your motivations to kill her?”

“I— I hated her. She broke my trust and told my father about my hallucinations,” she shuddered at the recollection. “He locked me in my room for a week because of that. But I didn’t want her *dead*. I *never* wanted any of this.” Her eyes were wide and pleading.

“You say you didn’t want to kill her. Then why did you stab her?”

“I— don’t know— I don’t remember anything that happened—”

Pao narrowed his eyes, leaning forward.

“Explain what you were doing on the night of the murder.”

Xin Yue started to shake.

“I was taking a walk... I was in the market when I passed out. I found myself in an alleyway when I woke up, holding a knife — there was blood. So much blood. My aunt was lying a few meters away. I think she was dead by then—” She broke off.

Pao stiffened. *So she was unconscious.*

“Did you remember carrying out the action of stabbing?” Pao asked, “Can you say for sure that you murdered your aunt?”

Xin Yue ducked her head.

“...I don’t remember stabbing her, or how I got the knife...” she faltered. “But it must have been me, right? How else could she have been killed?”

*Bang!* Pao slammed the gavel, the sound echoing through the stunned silence of the courtroom.

“Due to the defendant’s mental condition, it is impossible to determine her guilt in this matter,” Pao bellowed, eyes narrowing once more, “This court will carry out an investigation to follow up on this case.”

He raised his voice further.

“Court is adjourned!”

---

Pao decided to give a lot of his time to the girl. To protect his own reputation, he always met her in the presence of his own daughter.

Two scribes were told to sit behind a folding screen. Pao told them, “You must write down every word that you hear, even if they sound odd or even mad. You must write them all down.”

On the table Xin Yue sat at, Pao placed paper, inks, and brushes — so that she could write and doodle while they talked. He arranged for light foods, fruit, and water to be placed near the girl. The combination of her talking, her writing, and her doodles was very revealing. The environment had made Xinyue feel safe. She had no inhibitions.

In just a week, Xin Yue revealed everything she had observed about her father's character and actions. His multiple masks were identified, and irreparably damaged. Her absolute innocence became crystal clear.

With care, mental relaxation, adequate sleep, and nutritious food — Xin Yue's mental health quickly improved. The voices in her head ceased. She became coherent and logical. Soon, Xin Yue was Pao's ideal witness against her own father.

---

“WEI— WU—”

The shout echoed through the courtroom, reverberating through the air like thunder once more. However, this time, the person standing on the floor in front of Pao wasn't Wen Xin Yue.

Instead, it was her father, Wen Ming. He was held in place by two guards, one on either side of him, forcefully restraining him as he tried to get out of their hold.

*Boom!* Pao smashed his gavel against his table, silencing the court. “Wen Ming,” Pao hollered, “Do you know your crime?”

“I am guilty of nothing, Your Honour,” Wen Ming replied, his face impassive and his voice calm.

“Wen Ming, you are here on multiple charges, including bribery. Your acquisition of riches in a short amount of time raises suspicions, as does your rise to power.”

“You have no evidence to support that claim,” Wen Ming responded, in that same collected voice. “What you have heard are only rumors.”

“Your daughter has evidence.” Pao gestured at Xin Yue, who stood on the stage, ready to give evidence against her father. Her eyes were sharp and focused as she stepped forward to speak.

“I saw Father accept gifts and cash bribes from multiple people,” Xin Yue said, in a clear voice. Her face was white but determined.

“My daughter is insane! She doesn't know what she is saying!” began Wen Ming. His calm demeanor had disappeared, and he was starting to act more desperately. His face twisted as he struggled against the guards holding him in place.

“She is completely sane. With adequate care, her hallucinations have gone and she has recovered,” stated Pao, with a frown on his face.

*Bang!*

“*Explain yourself, Wen Ming!*”

“She is a *murderer*,” Wen Ming spat out, “It should be *her* trial instead of mine.”

Pao saw Xin Yue's expression turn to one of hurt, and he felt a sliver of rage towards Wen Ming. He fought to keep his face impassive.

“On that note,” Pao said, “I believe we have a witness that saw what happened on the night of the murder.” He gestured to a man standing on the side of the courtroom. “Explain what you saw.”

The man stepped forward. He was short and had a steely look in his eye. He wore a long, straight-cut jacket, one that merchants in the market wore.

“I am Zhang Han Yiu. I own the tea store next to the alleyway where the murder of Li Yuet Hei happened. On that night, I returned to my shop and witnessed the entire ordeal,” he said matter-of-factly. Wen Ming's face turned deathly pale. “I witnessed Wen Ming and Li Yuet Hei enter the alleyway. They appeared to be searching for Wen Xin Yue.”

“When Wen Ming saw his daughter unconscious on the floor, he stared for ten seconds, then proceeded to pull out a knife and stab Li Yuet Hei in the chest. I saw him put the knife in his daughter’s hand before leaving the scene.”

“LIES!” Wen Ming bellowed, “IT’S ALL LIES!”

Surprisingly, it was Xin Yue who spoke up next. “Why kill her?” she asked quietly.

“*Your* aunt kept extorting money from me!” yelled Wen Ming, his face turning red with rage. “She knew about my bribery, and kept dropping hints about what she wanted. I KNEW it would escalate,” Lost in his own fury, he seemed to have forgotten that he was in court.

Xin Yue’s face was pale. “So you wanted her gone. You wanted me gone too, and me falling unconscious gave you the perfect opportunity. You could have gotten rid of the blackmailing aunt and the mentally unstable daughter, and no one would have known.” Her last sentence came out as a whisper.

“YES! AND I WOULD HAVE SUCCEEDED TOO, IF NOT FOR HIM!” Wen Ming screamed, spit flying out of his mouth. He seemed to have lost all control of himself.

*Bang!* The impact of wood against wood sounded once more, reverberating through the astonished silence of the court. Wen Ming looked as if he had been hit.

*Finally, justice can be done.* Allowing himself to feel a twinge of triumph, Pao raised his voice once more.

“This court hereby finds Wen Ming guilty of murder and bribery, and sentences him to death by hanging!”

---

# Bao's Smile

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

Bao Zheng never smiles, notices Gongsun.

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

The widow was sentenced to murder, and the servant was let go. The widow confessed to poisoning her husband, then accusing the servant of killing him after the servant found the husband dead in his bedroom, presumably due to him passing out and hitting his head on a desk corner. However, the servant had still lost the trust of the family and had to return to his hometown, where he must find an alternative way to support his family instead. Nevertheless, the servant thanked Bao for clearing his name.

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

Gongsun perked up his ears in curiosity.

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

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



Creative Writing  
**Fiction**  
Group 4

# The Quarter Moon Disappearance

CCC Ming Yin College, Choy, Siu Long – 16

## *Another Day, Another Case*

“Lord Pao,” I said, “the suspect has been taken in.” He rested his pen on the inkstone, a familiar stern look on the man’s face. Lord Pao is a brilliant judge, enacting justice equal for all. For all his efforts cleansing the world of evil, the luxuries rightfully deserved, he sought none of it –except the truths behind the people’s actions, and the ends they deserved. The man about to be judged was a murderer –accused for the death of a farmer. Those who take the lives of others reap what they sow, and without a shadow of doubt he is the culprit. He deserves a quick exec –“We will hear what he has to say,” Pao said calmly, as if he peered into my soul, “take him in.” “Understood!” the guards swiftly left.

A young man in rags was brought in, his appearance a poor one. “It was not me! It was not me! I did not kill him! I would not kill– ”

“Silence.”

It wasn’t loud, yet his voice rang like thunder. The sheer authority stopped the man’s words.

“There is no rush. You shall speak. If it is what you say, what is your story?”

The hearing had been fruitless. For one, the man, Zi, couldn’t answer where he had been at the time of murder, and hesitantly claimed to be at the market, when it would’ve been closed then. Exhausting most options, Pao declared, “we shall hear more from you tomorrow. For the time being, you will be taken away. Should you be innocent, tell me the truth, and the eyes of heaven will bring justice.” As the guards take him to the cell, Zi stopped for a moment, before reluctantly leaving the court.

That night, layers of clouds masked the sky. Nevertheless, fragments of the moon shone brightly, and a resolve was murmured that only the heavens heard. *I can’t be arrested, not yet.*

## *Searching Fortune Market*

“The man, Zi –he escaped!” A guard shouted the moment he rushed into the court, gasping for air. I stood up baffled, “What?” “He’s not in his cell! The door was broken!” Not even the brawniest of soldiers could break the frame without trouble, so how? “Search for him,” Pao ordered the guard. He turned to me and said, “This case is peculiar. Let us head to the market Zi claimed to be at when the farmer perished.” “...Right!” I followed as Pao headed out.

Fortune Market was a place booming with people buying produce for the day. Merchants of different sorts had placed stalls at every corner. Lord Pao wore with much more mediocrity to avoid gathering attention of the public. “Fruits! Vegetables! Everything you’ll need! Fruits! Vegetables...” I approached the loud seller and asked, “Three of these, please. Have you heard of any things that happened here recently?” The man replied absent–mindlessly, “What’d you want me to say? There was a guy selling exotic fruit, someone wanted one, and when he went for his wallet the rich man bought out all the fruits! Lucky bastard, wish it had been me.” “Who’s so charitable?” “Landlord of the farmers around here, the Jin’s. Lucky streak for them recently, a farmer died and the land was given to them. No one knew if he had family.” *That’s a hit!* “Anything about the farmer?” “He gives me produce, and I pay him. Not my biggest source, but we’d have a chat or two. He had been under the weather for a while, before not showing up one day. He died!” “Who would do such a thing?” “Like I’d know,” he shrugs, shoving the produce to me, “here. Cherish them. Some hooligan has been stealing produce since god–knows–when, with the farmer dead, these are the last stock. *What do you need?*” The seller looks away to serve another person.

Pao overheard the conversation and commented, “Interesting individual, knows a lot about the market. Zi is a customer of the market, but not one with much attention, unlike the Jin Family. We shall have to question the family of Zi.”

## *One Piece of the Puzzle*

Leaving the bustling market, we headed towards to Sheng Estate. From Zi’s appearance, it was no surprise that he came from a poorer family. “Makes Sheng Zi all the more suspicious. Who else would kill if not the man with nothing to lose? For food, no less.” I formulated. Lord Pao says firmly, “Without any evidence, just as baseless as any claim. We will see in due time. First and foremost, Zi’s whereabouts.”

We arrive at what looks like primitive walls from another dynasty, and rural houses in between –Sheng Estate could hardly be called an “Estate”. “But the family inside is living proof this land is still their own,” Pao said, “for what reason would Zi resort to murder, to taint their name forever?” An old man came out and greeted us, “Welcome to Sheng Estate. There’s not much here, but please be comfortable. What brings you here?” “We would

like to ask you about Sheng Zi.” In a moment, the old man’s peaceful face changed to one of desperation. “Please help him!” he pleaded, grabbing Pao’s sleeve. My hand reached out to take hold of the man, but Pao stopped me and let him continue. “He’s innocent! He wouldn’t do such a thing!” “We understand. How can we believe you?” The old man spoke through tears, “Zi is a caring father! He works earnestly to feed his wife and son! Zi is a respectable and knowing man, he considers the estate’s well-being! We wouldn’t be here if Zi didn’t preserve our land!” Listening to the emotional old man, I could hear his sadness, and of his trust. Lord Pao put his hand on the old man, and said, “We are here to find the truth. If you believe in Zi, tell no lies; and if you believe in us, speak the truth.” When the old man calmed down, I spoke. “When had Zi been that day?” “He was tending to his farm, like usual. Nothing out of the ordinary happened! He went out to the market, and came back like normal!” “Does he have any quarrel with the farmer?” “We are neighbours, but he rarely is there, so we don’t talk much. He is always out to settle disputes, I hear.” Pao thanks the man, and says, “One more thing. Have Zi come by since his arrest?”

“All of Sheng believes in Zi,” the old man says.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” Pao leaves fulfilled, signing me to leave.

The road back to Fortune Market was a long one – there was much to talk about, yet the trip seemed endless. “I cannot believe the Sheng’s have to travel this... ‘path’ weekly.” “It says a lot about their character,” Pao said, “which further makes Zi’s case unbelievable. The fact is that Zi is avoiding trial, we will see to it. But there is a family I would like to visit.”

“The family that has influence over the city”

“the family that took over the farmer’s land”

“the family that bought out the market once”

The Jin’s.

### *Detour*

Walking past Fortune Alley, into another main district, we reached the building towering the other houses. “Jin Rong Tower. Some say the place is grander than palace residences,” Pao stands before the tower, and soon a man comes out. The burly man says, “what business do you have here?” “Palace Officials,” I interjected, showing a red Crest, and asked for the land owner. The man’s face became more annoyed, and with a changed tone, scowled, “in.”

The burly man sits us at the audience chamber and leaves, saying the man we were looking for will come once he has prepared. The door closes and I finally relax, sighing, “I have to say, Jing guards are intimidating.” “Be wary. Wealth is a mind killer, it clouds one’s vision. The Jin’s could very well be related to the case.” Then, a loud noise pierces the room as the door open. A man wearing blue luxury clothes sits opposite to us, his neck a silver jewel chain rests. “I am Jin Chen. What may you be interested in?” “We are deeply sorry for the recent loss.” Seeing Chen’s confused face, I continued, “the death of the farmer at your border. In this age of prosperity, we cannot believe a murder would happen.” Chen lays back and says, “oh, him. It’s alright, happens all the time. Who but the Song can keep the lands at peace for eternity?” “You sing our praises. We would like to give peace to the farmer. For that, we would like your assistance.”

Pao stated our business, and Chen didn’t seem to mind. “That man was a good man. Worked for me faithfully, and I shared my riches with them. A shame he passed, but it can’t be helped.” *This man didn’t even recall his death, yet he could be sorry for him?* “We have a suspect. One ‘Sheng Zi’. Do you know of the Sheng Family?” “Of course!” Chen replied without hesitation, “they always call trouble at my border. If you’re officials, deal with them!” “The Sheng is an earnest family. Why do you say?” “Evil people, I tell you! They have a grudge against the successful. I bet they are behind the murder.” Before I could interject, Pao rises from his seat, “we shall look into your complaints. Now then, we shall take our leave.” Before he leaves, the judge added, “Chen, I hope these luxuries will not steer you away from the straight true path.”

### *Light beneath the eyes*

As soon as the gates of Jin Rong Tower closed behind us, I muttered, “The nerve of that man! The lands are always at risk of danger, and Chen is unaware of any of it! Delusional!” Lord Pao wasn’t listening. His eyes were focused, deep in thought. I waited patiently – Judge Pao is working his magic, his Mind’s Eye. Pao said, “From when Zi was arrested to now I have heard much more info. It is without a doubt that Zi returned to his family at least once after escaping, the old man told me that, for what reason I cannot say, Still, I can harbor a guess. To escape arrest is a grave crime, punishable by death. Knowing the Sheng Family bond, Zi could be on the run to help his family, possibly one last time...”

“If that is the case...”

“Hurry, to the murder scene!”

The sky was night, the moon barely visible beneath the dark shadows. Night gale cuts through the streets of Fortune Market like blades, but we couldn't stop. When we arrived, the fields of corn swayed in the gust, brushing one another. Silence. I tread into the fields and advanced into the familiar spot, where we first found the farmer. On the floor lay the deceased, just like when the investigators and I first came. Yet the farmer's body has already been buried after the initial investigation,

“Zi...”

The rags of cloth was stained with blood, coloring the scene with a darker and sinister tone. I put my hands on the body, contorted into a ball, like an infant. Cold, but *not ice cold*. This had been recent, and couldn't have been earlier than 2 hours. Pao reaches down and opens Zi's hands. A piece of lapis lazuli, a luxury even among the wealthy. Pao gets up and says, “The Sheng truly have a heart of gold. To think one would taint themselves to let their kin prosper, that is noble.”

“Chen wore a silver necklace, the design is different than his robes. Have that investigated, he will see justice.”

#### He Who Illuminates, Crescent Moon

When Chen was arrested, he tried to leave, threatening the guards. However, when Lord Pao in his formal attire made his appearance, Chen could not move. After investigation, and questioning the Sheng Estate, as well as their neighbors, Jin Chen had been trying to take over the farmer's land for months to expand their business. When Chen had enough, he ordered the death of the farmer, and despising the Sheng's righteousness, put the blame on them. Zi had been at the market at the time, but we found out that Zi had long since lost his job due to pressure from the Jin's. Perhaps at that time, Zi had been stealing at the Market, but the truth will not be known. Nonetheless, Zi was the scapegoat for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. After the trail of condemning Jin Chen, Lord Pao rested on the palace gardens. I sat next to them, talking of the case. “Sheng Zi –A man who stained himself for his family. Yet no one will ever hear from him again. His family will be waiting for him forever. In the end, Justice was enacted, and peace has returned. How many more times, until such turmoil ends?”

The quarter moon has faded, and the clouds no more. The Crescent moon shone in the sky, its light basking the city below and the heavens above, shining.

# The Moon Rules the Night

*G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Ma, Jesse – 17*

The crowd chants in absolute satisfaction and joy, as they all lay their eyes bare to witness what's perhaps the most glorious moment in their lives; the gory execution of who was once the golden boy of the Song Dynasty; the beheading of who was once a high-profile magistrate, feared equally among by commoners and aristocrats alike. Chen Doe was once called "The Mighty Defender for Justice" – as he had always fought for those who faced unjust circumstances. Those who were pointed the finger at, those blamed for baseless accusations; he protects them all from the darkness of his era. Nothing stops him, and his passion to defend and even challenge the law itself – is his drive to continuously strive for fair treatment among every citizen and governor. But fate had other plans for Chen Doe.

Bao Zheng, a fellow magistrate, was following in Chen's footsteps into becoming a protector of the law and defender for the populace of his country. Bao had just returned to the government office, and landed his first government job after fulfilling his filial piety, after bidding his parents one last farewell, after their unexpected deaths.

Their corpses reeked of the smell of peaches. Oddly sweet peaches, which were only available back at the imperial palace. Bao was then recollected of this memory while he only served as a mere official before deciding to go with his filial piety to take utmost care of his parents, after he involuntarily sniffed the scent of the peaches. For the first week after their passing, that smell was unbearably irritating, as if Bao himself was drowning to death while being surrounded by air. But as time flew by and after he landed his job at the palace, the seemingly drug-related scent became much more tolerable for Bao.

A new life now has been awaiting for his arrival ever since his parents moved on, to the other side. Bao's journey was only beginning.

After months of his hard work, Bao was promoted into a magistrate, and his government allocated the urban legend Chen Dou to be his mentor during his first few years of duty, ensuring Bao Zheng receives the proper guidance to nurture a fully-fledged guardian of law and justice. The process was tough; but Bao made it all through. Now, his journey has only just begun. One day, as both Bao and Chen were taking a stroll in the palace's garden, a fellow magistrate hastily dashes towards Bao, and hands him a stack of heavy files, which usually indicate that the documents this thick are required to be used as evidence in court sessions. As Bao skims through the contents, he is utterly confused by the sudden chain of events – and rushes to ask the magistrate:

"Zhou! What happened? Why this sudden intrusion to transfer a case's worth of evidence to me?"

"This is an emergency. A protocol has been initiated, and I must join the inspection team to conduct an investigation on a high-profile aristocrat in their room. I do not have much time – the court hearing session will start soon. Please take care of this case for me – I am certain you will be able to solve it, with the help of your mentor."

With that rushed conversation, Zhou rushes out of the palace, as his shadow gets more and more shallow by the second. Zhou was a man who never disclosed his middle name to anyone, even to Bao. Chen calmly assures Bao:

"Do not fret, Bao. Perhaps fate has signalled this to be your first session. To defend those innocent, until proven guilty. I will guide you through your first turbulent trial in this case. Stay steady and strong."

Bao's first case concerns a peasant boy, who is accused of theft and murder. That disgruntled old hoot of a father figure stood menacingly towards Bao as he displayed himself, barely covered in a petty, dusty brown vest with visible punctured holes throughout his body, with a large, turquoise ragged cloth wrapped around his waist, with the cloth's length reaching to his toes. He yapped at Bao as he spewed distasteful mockery with the shallow vocabulary that he possessed:

"You filthy-looking cretin. I'll show you who's boss in court!" as he cackles and storms into the courtroom in a carefree manner, seemingly unfazed by the presence of the legendary Chen Dou, who was standing beside Bao Zheng during their unpleasant commute.

"An uneducated commoner's remarks are emptier than his own meaningless life. We must put this lowlife in his proper place, before he harms anyone else with his filthy hands." Such strong words, Bao thought.

"I shall return soon with the right resources to evict this lowly swine. Be still, and swing your sword firmly with precision. I am sure there is evidence here that will assist you in court."

As his shadow cuts deeper into the abyss, Bao uneasily walks into the courtroom. The court proceedings begin. As the time went on longer for the trial, the more unsettled Bao felt. Why were there more than five witnesses towards the boy? The boy seemed restless and tense with his duffle bags under his eyes, and witnesses accounts were all extremely vivid and meticulously detailed, it started to strike an unethically eerie feeling of desperation. The lingering feeling of doubt starts to swarm into Bao. Did the boy really try to steal that old man's cloth? Did the adolescent truly commit an unethical act of robbing the old man's wife? All of this information seemed too much for the new magistrate, who was vested with the power to judge whether the boy in front of him is guilty, or innocent.

Just as Bao was about to present a set of clues that could stall the trial's time, the judge of the court expressed his dissatisfaction and impatience with where the court's direction was going. "I've heard enough. Such vile actions are not condoned here, young man. If the defence has no more objections, I shall order an immediate execution for this young lad."

Fate toys with us all, Bao thought. The eleventh hour has commenced; the boy's life was in imminent danger, and both Bao and Chen could face penalties for defending a criminal if they failed to plead a non-guilty verdict for the youngster, or in the worst-case scenario, they share the same fate.

Amidst the chaos spiralling down in Bao's mind, Chen pats Bao on the shoulder, and says:

"The process does not matter, Bao."

Bao looked towards Chen, walking in, looking oddly relaxed while possessing dark bags under his eyes. Bao was confused as he did not understand what he just meant.

"What do you mean, Mister Chen?"

Chen replied: "The end always justifies the means. In this world, no matter how well-constructed your fabricated proof is... a single piece of real evidence causes their entire argument to collapse."

As he finishes his sentence, he yells towards the judge: "Your honour! I have two pieces of evidence here that can put all these people in jail."

The judge smirked, seemingly unimpressed with the assumption that Chen's confidence was no more than a bluff.

"Is that so? Well then, good riddance. Present these two pieces of evidence then, we shall put this trial to an end now."

With that, he indeed pulls out two damning pieces of evidence that debunks literally everything the witnesses and the old man's provided testimony; the autopsy for the deceased wife, and the old man's receipt for purchasing lethal drugs. As the judge's jaw dropped in amusement and the old man screeched in fear, while denying the evidence that Chen provided, the judge delivers a non-guilty verdict for the boy, and immediately addresses a brand new trial for the now-suspicious old man.

"That piece of paper is fake! He made it out of thin air! Damn you, Chen! First my son and wife, now this? You scornful troglodyte! You are a disgrace to our family name... see you on the other side. I'll be waiting." After delivering his spine-chilling message towards Chen, both Chen and Bao witnessed his beheading. The entire floorboard was splattered with blood, as the surrounding area received a brand new shade of red as the old yellow's replacement. Bao felt uneasy. Was the evidence actually faked? Did Chen really fabricate evidence just to spin this entire dilemma towards the old man instead? Did the boy really commit those terrible crimes? What did the old man mean when he said 'our family name'? Isn't Chen the only firstborn child? Many unanswered questions lingered in Bao's mind, as Chen reassures him with his calming voice: "Everything has been performed ethically with no strings attached. No gimmicks nor tricks. Just a sour old man who received death instead of an extra load of capital for his nugatory spendings. Do not fret, young one. You have my word for that." With that, Chen silently walks away from the flung-open doors of the courtroom, filled with absolute hollowness, as his echoing steps were getting coarser in sound. His suffocating stench of sweet peach fills the entire room. Something is wrong. Horribly wrong, Bao thought. But he couldn't raise a point of the 'why'.

Even after Chen's supposedly convincing comment, on the night after the trial, Bao couldn't sleep. There were too many discrepancies in the trial proceedings. It's almost impossible to hire five witnesses just to blatantly lie in face of the law, is it? So were they all telling the truth? If so, why would the son even murder his own mother? And how was Chen even able to produce such condemning evidence on such short notice? As Bao reaches the conclusion that Chen used fake evidence to fit his bidding, he feels dread. No wonder he always wins trial cases, he thought. Because he just showed me how he would deliver a scoring victory even if the evidence is faked! "So you found out just now too, didn't you, Bao?" A muffled voice echoes into Bao's left ear.

Bao turns his head to see his friend Zhou sitting down, hands down to his kneecaps, fingers interlocking each other with his head bowed down, seemingly as equally stressed as Bao himself. The moon glooms as bright as the sun itself in the dead of night, as its' ascension reaches the deep dark sky, triumphing over Zhou's head. What a resounding spectacle, he thought. Zhou sighed as he raised his head and informed him of the situation. "Remember that emergency protocol where my team and I needed to inspect an important person's room? Well, that room was Chen's." Bao suddenly understood Zhou's urgency to escort himself out of their sights back then. As Bao tried to process what had unfolded for the past few hours, Zhou continued to unravel his unexpected bombshell: "I couldn't tell you, my friend. Otherwise, us commoners shall also be cooked up and served in court by that monster. We are no heroes. But together we can take down his tyrannical and unholy rule if we play our cards right. The time is now." As Zhou pulled out a tiny sheet engraved with words of rich ink, Bao was mortified upon reading its contents. The exact same kind of evidence Chen has used that afternoon up his sleeve to forcefully halt the course for the boy to be executed.

A simplified receipt for purchasing drugs. And this time, there were two purchases visible in the official record, not one. And those two purchases were also coincidentally the exact same drug correlated to what Bao's parents reeked of upon their passing. "I also snuck into his room for the wife's autopsy report; she died due to intoxication, but that peachy scent's harmless for us at the young age, you know? Chen bluffed his way to victory with two completely different receipts. That's complete slander to our justice system. He HAS to be punished for what he has done."

There was a phrase in between the lines of what Zhou just said that made Bao completely uncomfortable. But Bao didn't know exactly what. But what Bao knows is that in order to incriminate Chen, that simplified sheet must be paired up with the original receipt in order to be represented in court, which bears the name of the purchaser for the drug, as well as the time and date of purchase. So that was exactly what Bao had proposed to Chen in hopes to put Chen behind bars for his actions. But this is where things start to go awry.

"Bao, my friend: there's no time to collect the original receipt. Chen at this rate has probably already picked up on what we're on about. Tomorrow, he will sue us, and when we get dumped in court, he will use all of his willpower to try and overturn this case on the top of its head. This sheet is more than enough to prove his guilt. If even THAT doesn't work, then I'll have my trump card ready." Bao felt uneasy, and in an attempt to sway his "friend", Zhou slipped up, and uttered: "He killed your parents, Bao Zheng! Won't you take revenge against your killer who robbed the lives of your loved ones? They should've died a naturally peaceful death, and yet off they went to the afterlife by the scent of peaches!"

This time, Bao knew exactly what was wrong.

How did Zhou even know of Bao's parents passing, when Bao himself has not uttered half a word to a single soul about his tragedy? The peachy stench that emitted from Chen, and from his own parents, and the eerie fact that Zhou knew everything, as if he had orchestrated this entire circus show from the very beginning... Now he knows the gist of the situation. That peach drug was splattered towards Chen, and towards Bao's father. He was in his 80s, while Chen was a promising young adult in his 20s. The reason for his death now becomes apparent.

Two pairs of intensely fixated eyes gape and stare towards each other as the sound of crickets and owls accompany their silence realizations as instruments. Both of them now knew the truth. Bao knows that Zhou has rigid plans for himself, and Zhou knows that Bao is dangerously in pace with the dire situation at hand. But unfortunately, Zhou had the upper hand, and splashed a cool liquid on Bao's face, which immediately transformed into a damning sea cesspool.

Bao couldn't breathe. Desperately gasping for air, yet to no avail. This suffocating sensation parallels those having one of their legs chained on the bottom of the ocean. They both share the same fate in the end, and the process is insufferably painful.

Zhou taunts Bao and cackles. "What's the matter, friend? Can't breathe? Look around you, why not scream for help? Oh right, you can't even speak..." As Zhou gives out a cold grin and a silent laugh, he leaves Bao's room, and as Bao watches his silhouette get smaller and smaller, he starts to feel his body shaking.

"This is it – I understand the situation now, but my body is about to rot..." As his final thoughts rushed into Bao's mind, he fell into a deep slumber.

A large volume of noise could be heard. Muffled, but still too loud. Bao groaned as he pulled himself up from a pool of dried blood from his mouth on the ground. Where am I? Why am I here, Bao thought. Suddenly, the noise was sharply raised, prompting Bao to collapse once more from the sudden intrusion of sound. The noise originated from a crowd, whom from the reactions given, Bao deduced that the crowd was full of satisfactory and joyful feelings, as if a glorious moment had just unfolded. Chen was beheaded.

Bao could not do anything, nor mumble a single word, as he stared with his blank, sober eyes towards what was considered his most traumatic sight from hell. He was mortified. What time is it? Am I having a fever dream? Why is the crowd chanting for the execution of such a respected figure? Suddenly, Bao remembers all that had happened before he fell unconscious.

“Zhou, and the original receipts! If I can rush into his room and find the evidence before he returns...!” Bao instinctively dashes out of his room, and goes directly to Zhou’s dorm. When he arrived, Bao started his own protocol and scrambled through Zhou’s room like a mad man. Because there is no time. Zhou probably still doesn't realize it yet, but that peach drug he used on Bao’s parents, allowed Bao to develop an immune system to the peach drug, as well as the toxin Zhou splashed onto Bao, resulting in his unprecedented survival.

The moon rules the night. As its silver crescent shines over a fatigued Bao hovering back to his room, he spots Zhou, sitting on a balcony beneath Bao’s floor, casually sipping a cup of tea as he observes the aftermath of Chen’s execution coated in complete darkness, his silhouette being barely visible for the naked eye. The very darkness Chen swore to protect against got the better of him. But now, the sun will rise again and triumph over the darkness. As Bao privately hands in the two receipts to the judge that accompanied him through his first trial amidst the chanting crowd, both sombrely stare at each other as they realize that the true killer had outplayed them with the cost of Chen’s life. But now, they shall exact revenge for Chen, and put in a fitting end for Bao’s parents’ deaths as well.

The receipts show the purchasing of a total of four containers, two of which are peach-scented drugs and two toxins, both bought by a man Bao once considered a friend: Zhou Fate, two days before the first trial for the toxins, and a week before his parents’ supposedly “natural passing” to the other side.

# The Moon and Her Flowers

*G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Tse, Zhena – 15*

It was an idle day at the office in Kaifeng. Bao Zheng – the legendary justice – had his legs slung over his table, documents covering his face as he leaned back on his chair. It had been weeks since his last interesting case, and although he genuinely wished for the peace of the country, he also wished for a change from this stalemate. Just as Bao Zheng was wallowing in his mindless mumble, a soft knock sounded from the door.

“A messenger from His Majesty the emperor came. He has requested your presence.”

Bao Zheng perked up from his slumped state almost immediately. “I’ll go right this instance, you’re dismissed.”

Bao Zheng soon arrived at the palace. He was escorted by a state slave to the Emperor’s room. He noticed how he did not flinch at his loud voice nor give any greetings, thus he concluded that he was deaf and mute. Bao Zheng steeled himself as he realized that this meeting might not be a simple one, seeing as it was held in the emperor’s own chambers, attended by a person who had no way of exchanging information. The heavy wooden doors closed with a soft ‘thud’ behind him, and Bao Zheng dropped to his knees in the presence of Emperor Renzong.

“Rise,” said Emperor Renzong with a pale face and shaky voice. “I’ve called you for a special reason.”

Bao Zheng listened silently as Emperor Renzong recalled his tale with his head in his hands. It turned out that Emperor Renzong’s favourite consort Ying Yue, had died in her room, alone, without any signs of illness or injuries. It was quite the headache for the medical officer, so they marked it as a natural death. However, Emperor Renzong wasn’t convinced at all, and went to demand the exact cause of her death to no avail. “I want you to investigate the details of her passing. I’m almost certain it wasn’t natural. I know her! She would never do this to herself! Why would heaven take her for no good reason?” The heartbroken emperor, from his formerly composed state, was now on the verge of tears. Bao Zheng’s curiosity and interest had now been piqued. “I’ll have the truth unveiled within three days your majesty. Please grant me permission to investigate the Southern Palace.”

Back when the Song Dynasty had a visit from foreign envoys, a particular young princess – Ying Yue, reflection of the moon – had caught his eye. She wasn’t extravagantly dressed in fancy garments like her sisters, nor was she the life of the party. No, it was her quiet, unassuming disposition, and eyes that were so clear and shining as if she could stare right into your very soul. The alluring gaze of the princess left His Majesty lusting for more.

Bao Zheng follows a maid into Consort Ying Yue’s room, a faint scent of sweet citruses greeting him. He lightly bows to the maid in thanks, then leisurely scans the room. It was quite the simple room for someone of her status, with copious watercolour paintings of flowers and plants decorating the wall and a filled bookshelf in the corner. Just as the emperor said, the room had no signs of disturbance or struggle, and the room was well kept even though there wasn’t a mistress. It was truly mind-boggling considering suicide wasn’t an option with the lack of weapons or drugs. He muttered a slight pardon under his breath, and began to poke around for any potential clues. Bao Zheng did not find anything particularly of interest or help, except a journal on botany with a brown brass key threaded through the green leather spine. A map to a greenhouse was slipped into the first pages of the leather journal, and Bao Zheng made a mental note to visit it later. For now, the interesting properties of different plants and herbs captivated his full attention.

In no time, Ying Yue became the favourite consort of Emperor Renzong. He visited her often during mealtime, to watch her dance and play music, the occasional night visits, and listen to her ramble on about all sorts of topics.

“Did you know? I had a huge glass dome back in my hometown with a wonderful sea view, where I tended to all sorts of flowers. I’ll bring you to see it one day, it’s my pride and joy!”

Renzong chuckles at her uncharacteristic burst of enthusiasm.

“Do you miss it? I can gift you as many glass domes as you like, one, two, or even a thousand. I can just use the treasury funds, no one can ever defy it if I say the word.”

Ying Yue’s face was a mix of happiness and guilt. “It’s the country’s funds. I cannot be as selfish as to use it for my own personal pleasure.”

“Hah! I’m the most powerful man in this country! What’s there to worry about? I’ll have it arranged by tomorrow morning.”

Bao Zheng took the key in his hand and inserted it into the lock of the glass dome. The lock sprang open with a little click, and the dusty door creaked open. He walked into the gleaming greenhouse, shining and refracting numerous light rays from the sun. The smell of lemons, citrus, and wood wafted by gently as he slowly took in the scene. Many colourful flowers of orange, pinks, and reds hung upside down from rows of the green leafy trees in the shape of a bell, with their skirts swaying merrily in the wind. As if possessed, he lost control of himself, the musky yet refreshing scent guiding him further and further into the maze of blooms. He walked along a small canopied path past rows and rows of trees, until he reached the end. At the end of the road, was a huge, oval-shaped pool, with the sound of water flowing in through a small stream somewhere. Occasionally a koi fish or two would leap out the water, scales glimmering in the sunlight. Bao Zheng sat on the edge of the pool for a while, enjoying the mesmerizing scenery and sunlight, lulling him to sleep.

The glass dome finished construction around a week later. It truly was grand, with sunlight filtering through the glass panels then fracturing into light rays, bathing the interior in an ethereal sheen. Ying Yue and Renzong sat on the edge of the pool enjoying the warmth. “I’d like to grow so many flowers and hang lanterns, so when they get reflected in the waters, it looks like a portal to heaven.” Ying Yue’s smile lit up her face like a delicate pale moon, happiness radiating into the air around her.

Bao Zheng woke up with a start, head pounding and dizzy. He was in an unfamiliar place, shocked by the sight he saw in front of him. The entire garden was glowing, as if tens of thousands of tiny lanterns were hung up on the trees. The sweet scent was also much heavier, the air could practically drip with perfume to the point it was sickening. After covering his face with a handkerchief to block out the smell, he stumbled out the greenhouse. He sat down and guzzled water until he felt his mind cleared for a bit. All of a sudden, something started to piece together in his mind. There were no sorts of lanterns nor candles when he strolled the garden, but when he woke up, it was like the Mid-autumn festival. An image flashed through in that second, spurring Bao Zheng’s hypothesis on this whole case. Hurriedly, he covered his nose and mouth with a cloth and went back in the glass dome. A closer look at the ‘lanterns’ proved his suspicions. The bell-like flowers had bloomed, and were lighting up from inside their little skirts, giving off a ghostly appearance. In that split second, the mystery had clicked together and solved itself for Bao Zheng.

However, these precious golden days didn't last long. Country affairs tied Renzong down, and visits and meetings decreased then ceased. It hurt, being forgotten by the likes of him, a person she had humiliatingly devoted her youth to. It was half a life gone and wasted. Ying Yue, who had no more visits to look forward to, endorsed herself in her glass dome of flowers, whose blooming buds were the only thing reciprocating her love in a cold hell.

The following night, Bao Zheng and Emperor Renzong stood before the glass dome. "Your Majesty, I've discovered the cause of Lady Ying Yue's death."

"I knew it! I knew it wasn't natural causes! Who is to be punished for taking away my beloved consort?" exclaimed the emperor, who was thrumming with both anticipation and anger. "I will explain it all in a moment. Please cover your nose and mouth before we enter the garden." Said Bao, handing him a piece of cloth. The door of the glass dome clicked once more, and the two men stepped in. "This place... is extremely deadly. This species of flower you see here, is known as the Angel's Trumpet. A very potent poison and hallucinogen that I've only read about in Lady Ying Yue's botany journal yesterday. If you inhale the scent of the flower too much, you can die." Said Bao Zheng, gesturing to the blooms hanging innocently on their branches. "The flowers are the most potent at night-time, when the scent is the heaviest to attract moths for pollination. However, the Angel's Trumpet contains the highest concentration of alkaloids, which give it its lethal and hallucinogenic properties. According to Lady Ying Yue's journal, she has been knowingly cultivating this species for quite a while, and the toxins accumulated in her body over time, causing her death."

"She did it knowingly...? But why? I gifted her this glass dome myself, she loved flowers too, why would she kill herself with it?" Emperor Renzong looked at Bao Zheng with a pleading expression.

"That I cannot answer your Majesty, a young lady's mind is extremely complex. Whatever I have in mind cannot be further from the truth. Only Lady Ying Yue herself will know the exact reason." Bao Zheng leaves the glass dome successfully closing a case, leaving the emperor to his own devices.

When the snows melt away, camellias of red, yellow and white bloomed throughout the garden. The bright splashes of colour displaying their owner's longing and love, waiting indefinitely. Soon, hydrangeas of pink, purple and blue took over, their beautiful blossoms perky with pride. However, the round bouquets withered after a short while, and were replaced by white egret flowers. The peculiar petals lingered in both her thoughts and dreams, no matter how she tried to forget about it, she couldn't in the end. To shut down the evasion of thoughts, she planted belladonnas, the silence and serenity finally putting a stop to the mental tug of war. Carnations and roses were attempted, yet they never came to fruition. She picks up a handful of seeds and scatters them around, planting the final flowers she saved for last.

Emperor Renzong looks over at the sea of angels, dancing silently with their glowing trumpets, carrying the ghost of a beautiful memory. He wonders if things could've turned out differently, a life where carnations and roses had a chance to bloom, a life where the pure, sweet reflection of the lovely moon he cherished did not cloud and dull.

The Angel's Trumpets were growing beautifully. The flower body was long and slim, blending out into a vibrant gradient at the bottom. Yet, no matter how elegant or colourful they were, they simply weren't alive. Ying Yue was in her deepest pits of despair. She knew it was time to give up and let go, but she also didn't want to die a quick death. All this time, she waited for him, chances were given, and he still didn't come back to her. It was meaningless to live life alone with regrets. She gladly gave up her remaining days to her precious flower garden, and smiled contentedly as she saw her blood and tears glow with life.



# Fiction

Group 5

# Shackled

*Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Chan, Yuk Lui Yaron - 15*

*Fortunes left on paper,  
a curl of time gone by,  
sinners at the crossroads.*

The eternally flaming doors of Hell cast an otherworldly glow on Yama's side profile, outlining the crescent moon on his forehead. He heaved a mighty sigh, unheard by the souls in line, so busily preoccupied with worrying about their afterlife. Whether they would be justly dealt with, in light of all the sins they have committed as a human.

*The souls' idea of justice is quite odd, muses Yama. They all have committed so many crimes in their lives. The only difference between souls is that some commit petty crimes, theft and dishonesty and the sort; while others are a little more serious, murder, adultery and such variations.*

*Yet, all of them expect to avoid any of the eighteen hells awaiting them – that is their concept of justice. I suppose they are as satisfied as they can be, with the most righteous judge of all eternity deciding their fate.*

\*\*\*

“Sir, good morning. Soul number 918237, Chen Shimei, awaiting your judgement.” The Horse Face Guardian read off a thick parchment scroll, gesturing to a wispy shackled figure behind him.

“Is there even morning in this hell?” came his muttered response.

“Convicted of infidelity, attempted murder, and dishonesty. Executed.”

“Identity.”

“Chinese.”

“Occupation.”

“Scholar.”

“Date of birth.”

“Undocumented.”

“Parents.”

“Undocumented.”

“Siblings.”

“Undocumented.”

*That doesn't sound right. No trace of his origins. Like he simply materialised out of nowhere. A frown drew Yama's brows together.*

He scanned through the documents, coming up short of any mention of Chen Shimei except for a brief sentence about his scholarly studies, and a detailed description of his crimes. In works of literature.

Unworldly silence descended upon the atrium. He did not care if the spectating spirits and creatures could see the scowl distorting his facial features.

“Fictional character.”

“Dismissed.”

The wispy shackled figure’s chains clanked onto the floor, the sound echoing in the stunned atrium – this has never happened before. The crowd stared, shocked, as the figure disintegrated into oblivion. As if he never existed.

He stormed out of the antechamber, sentries scattering his furious wake.

\*\*\*

He let his façade slip. The black complexion, crescent moon and gold-woven dragon robe vanished into thin air. A wispy shackled figure retreated to the Great Yama’s private quarters, head bowed and shoulders hunched.

His footsteps whispered across the yellow clay floor, bringing him to his library. It was a translucent duplicate of the Forbidden Library, expanding and crumbling in sync. Before his eyes, new shelves gracefully sprang up, filling with newly written scrolls on its own accord; there were cubbyholes littered with ancient codices, crumbling with age, becoming more gossamer-like by the second and slowly receding into the serpentine labyrinth of history. His eyes were involuntarily drawn to his own section, filled to the brim with literature dedicated to his legends. The gold-embossed titles still gleamed brightly, defiantly, against the tides of time.

He scoffed – the truth blended in so perfectly with gruesome hyperboles and fabricated tales of a later dynasty. People did not like him. They were merely in love with the concept of him – a fair judge, a master solver of mysteries, a superior Sherlock Holmes, a breath of fresh air in a corrupt palace. No one had ever known him as a person, at all.

People remembering, but not knowing.

He was preserved as a fictional character, a legend. But he was once a real person. No one recognised that.

The thin golden bands loosely encircling his wrist tightened, almost imperceptibly. As if he needed the reminder. The reminder of the incorporeal stories shackling his incorporeal soul to this incorporeal in-between realm

# For Justice

*Singapore International School (Hong Kong), Yuen, Lok Sum Sherrie – 15*

Justice.

Humans spit the word out, regurgitate fanciful, groundless ideas others shove directly down their throats about justice, daring to insult its holiness. Politicians, barristers, judges, the police, are a disgrace, self-perceived know-it-alls who are merely three-year-olds claiming to be Einstein and Edison.

There are two people in this world who understand justice. Judge Pao, and I, his devoted disciple.

Justice is not beautiful. Justice is not sweet. Justice is not flowers, chocolate or candy. Justice is not the facade, the false promise humans make to pursue their biased form of “fairness”.

Justice is real, so real. Justice is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. It is the debt imposed on humans who mistreat others and leave unscathed, paid with the currency of blood.

Justice is the system of pain, and pain is both pleasure and the punishment for pleasure. Mosquitoes drink human blood to their heart and stomach's content, but at the swift swat of the human hand, their exoskeletons are shattered. A child throwing a tantrum hurls spaghetti strands at his parents, enjoying their momentary disgust, but his father soon unlatches his belt, drags him off the chair and leaves a swollen red patch on his back. Serial killers are relished from the sight of innocent blood, but descend into the eternal flames of hell at my hands. Pleasure from punishment, punishment for pleasure, a cycle that had existed since the world began spinning about its axis.

And so I live for one sole purpose. Justice. To inflict it upon the entire world. Be the pillar of morality.

I can do wonders for this broken world.

I, Judge Pao.

## ***Officer Wong Yuet-King***

*Hong Kong Wan Chai Police Office, 26th July 9:17am*

“Target: Judge Pao, an anonymous serial killer responsible for three killings so far. Judge Lam Hui-Ming, housewife Tsui Yuen-Mei, ganglord Ma Tsz-Lok and a cryptic warning of more. Currently, we have no evidence pointing to his identity nor appearance. Nor any trace of him from the crime scene.”

I nod to the beat of officer Lai's monotonous articulations. Monotonous, but with weight. A serial killer let loose, in one of the world's most secure cities, a criminal by the alias Judge Pao, an unknown man playing with fire.

“Officer Wong Yuet-King, focus.”

“Yes, sir.”

Officer Lai swipes his fingers on the screen, revealing three photographs, each of blood letters painted on walls, lopsided and dripping, followed by a scruffy drawing of a crescent moon.

*“For justice – Judge Pao”*

The ominous declarations of justice never failed to send chills down my spine. A serial killer, I repeat, a serial killer, claiming to be just and righteous. In what world does this broken logic exist?

The man is a psychopath.

Lai swipes to the side again, this time, a shot of three adults lying limp on the cement floor of an alley in a peculiar shape. A tall man bent into a curved line, with a woman lying straight next to him, their heads and feet

touching. Another shorter man lay straight in a diagonal line, his head set on the woman's stomach. Their faces pale, their eyes closed, knives stabbed perpendicularly into their necks, red with overflowing crimson blood.

Crimson like the burning flames fueled by the gasoline of rage engulfing my brain, burning down to the embers of determination to catch this culprit. I draw in a short breath, appalled at this Judge Pao's ruthless measures.

"Our goals are direct but will be difficult to achieve. First, garner information and profile victims. Second, work out connections and the criminal's motive. Three, catch him before he strikes. Simple, but complicated."

Meeting over. We break into teams. Embark on the endless search and demand for autopsy reports, forensic reports, witnesses, victims' personal information, last whereabouts.

This man is unfolding a game of chess, with the perception that the police force are his frontline pawns.

Except, we are pawns that will snap his fingers off once he attempts to move us.

### ***Lam Hui-Ming***

*Restaurant, 15th July 2022, 1:30pm*

The sweet yet astringent aftertaste of Cabernet Sauvignon lingers in my mouth as I fork down a piece of porterhouse steak, feeding it into my eager mouth, letting the tender meat melt at the touch of my tongue.

This. This is what it feels to be rich. Humans live, breathe and desire for luxury. Money holds more weight than anything else in the world. More than conscience, kindness, honesty or justice. Humans can betray their conscience, humans can be cruel, humans can be liars, humans can be unfair. But humans cannot live without money.

And I am no exception.

And so when I received the call to come here today, right now. I had no hesitation. I saw an express route to luxury and I took it. With open hands.

Chan Man-Ho was offering a whopping 15 million HKD for essentially one single statement of acquittal. Anyone would jump at the chance. Even against conscience or justice.

"So Mr Lam, I believe we have a deal?" his secretary asked.

I reached to shake his hand.

*High Court, 18th July 2022, 3:13am*

"The Court hereby pronounces defendant Chan Man-Ho acquittal. Case closed."

I can feel the silent uproar of protest within the enclosed room, I will be slandered by the media, questioned by colleagues, perhaps even removed from the job.

But I'm achieving the ultimate meaning of life.

Who cares?

*Restaurant, 25th July 2022, 1:30pm*

"Thank you for your cooperation Mr Lam."

I hear his voice from behind, the secretary who had offered to treat me to yet another extravagant lunch. He claps me on the shoulder heartily.

I turn around, "it's my pleas..."

Darkness.  
***Tsui Yuen-Mei***

I could've had everything. A master degree in finance from arguably one of the most prestigious universities in the entire world. I could've been a wildly wealthy financier.

I was met with the devil of love. A devil disguised in the iridescent veil of bliss, one who ripped its disguise apart as soon as I got married and delivered our first child. One who deceived me into sacrifice, where I gave up on my future in business and reduced myself to a housewife.

A 27 year-old. Not even past 30. Washing dishes, doing laundry, vacuum-cleaning. I'm constantly drenched in sweat 30 hours a day, when I should be leaning back in an ergonomic chair in a perfectly cool office, coffee delivered to my desk at my beck and call. Serving an arrogant man who prides himself in believing he holds up a family at his own hands. Singlehandedly raising a 3-year old brat who believes the world revolves around him.

Any normal human would be driven crazy. Imagine holding a master degree and being enslaved to performing brainless household chores for the rest of your life.

Why does everyone sympathise with Cinderella but not me?

And so I do what I do. The high pressure steam bottled inside of me needs to be vented out. The pure loathing and rage I have for my life has to escape.

I realised I needed a vent for resentment.

A live punching bag that could take the pain away from me. A live punching bag that could scream and shriek and cry all the indignation and tears I couldn't.

It was pure coincidence and convenience that I had a 3-year-old.

And so I did what I needed to. For me to survive. I punched, I kicked, I banged him with rattan.

*Home, 25th July 4:56pm*

The sizzling sound of the iron on cotton, I push it round and round down the pant legs.

Darkness.

***Ma Tsz-Lok***

*Bar, 23rd July 1:27am*

"I'm sorry, boss, I won't..."

I smash an empty beer glass bottle against his head. Shards of green frosted glass lie motionless on the floor, innocently reflecting the dim light from the dark club. Droplets of red accompanied the shattered glass. Grave goods for the useless, weak dog lying dead on the floor.

I wipe my hands on the jacket of whoever was next to me.

"Clean up," I order.

I whip out a pack of cigarettes, light up one and stick it into my mouth. The intoxicating scent of smoke infiltrates my mouth as I strut out the club.

I open the door and make my way into the alley, looking left and right then back straight.

Darkness.

## *Wong Yuet-King*

I drag my footsteps back to our apartment in Kowloon. A whirlwind of thought clouds my mind. Judge corruption, child abuse, gang murder. Where's the correlation?

The connection lies in crime, lies in degraded morality, lies in injustice. Lies in the need for proper legal action and charges and imprisonment. Not for a man to barge in, stab knives into their throats, and claim he did it for justice. Justice is the quality of being fair, yes, but justice is forgiving, justice is realising humans make mistakes and a moral compass that guides them towards greater good.

Justice is not "resolving" crime with greater crime.

Lives can be changed. But lives can never be retrieved once taken away. Humans only have one life, do they not deserve chances to turn over a new leaf, to turn to justice?

I stick my key into the lock, twist the doorknob and push it wide open. A family dinner that I have no stomach to attend.

"Welcome home!" Dad exclaims, throwing his hands into the air. My relatives greet me warmly, until the commotion subdues to the ringing noises and thoughts in my head.

"Here", Dad shoves a glass of champagne through my intertwined, trembling fingers. "What maniac was it today?"

"Serial killer," I whisper back into his ear.

"Hey hey hey, Yuet-King, now's not the time to talk about work ah, family dinner time. Put everything else away at least for now ok?" My uncle, my main source of embarrassment, butts in.

"Let's talk about something more fun! Like how I decided your name." My uncle's smile etched across his face, one I desperately wanted to wipe off and duck-tape so he would stop bragging about it.

"Why haven't I heard that before? Yuet-King is such a pretty name, respect for the moon." My grandmother comments, she turns her head to face the open window, "isn't it beautiful tonight?"

She points at the crescent moon hanging sky, an alert guardian over the stars and night sky, she then cups her hand against my cheek, "just like my granddaughter."

I force out a small upturning of the corners of my lips.

"Beautiful..." my uncle stands up and breathes out in admiration, and I catch a glimpse of the tattoo of a crescent moon on his ankle, one he got and displayed in public on my 3rd birthday, which he proclaimed to be a symbol of his eternal support and love for his niece.

You see the reason behind my embarrassment?

That night, I bury myself under my blankets and embrace the darkness. But my mind refuses to submit to unconsciousness. Thoughts flow relentlessly through my head like a river running through the folds of my brain. I can't control them, overwhelming my head with thoughts on justice, murder, and the moon.

Judge Pao, the real Judge Pao, had the symbol of a moon imprinted on his forehead. A respectable man and symbol who's legacy of upholding justice continues to inspire, motivate and pump blood and life into modern society.

How can our morals be so distorted? How can we be such a disgrace to our ancestors who have set such an example?

*Hong Kong Wan Chai Police Office, 27th July 10:43am*

“Sir, from the reports we have received, all three knives seem to have the same logo carved onto them, that of local brand Leung Brothers. Currently, there is only one small scale shop located in Mong Kok.”

“Off we go.”

“Yes, sir.”

One step closer to locking handcuffs on this madman.

*Leung Brothers' Knife Shop, 27th July 10:43am*

We step into the narrow door of the shop, the bell rings and an old man pops out from behind the counter. “What do you want?” The old man asks indifferently, wiping his sweat off from his worn-out, yellowed T-shirt.

Officer Lai whips out his police warrant card and shoves it straight in front of the old man’s eyes.

“Police.”

The old man raises his hands in surrender and falls onto his knees, when he speaks, his voice is trembling, like a shabby, fragile piece of glass on the verge of shattering.

“I...I didn’t do... do anything sir. I run an honest...honest business.” He shakily enunciates, sweat dripping down his forehead.

“I never said you didn’t, we are here to seek your assistance in an investigation. Anything you say right now will potentially become court evidence, so if I were you I would be completely truthful. Has someone stocked a large number of knives with you before the 26th of July?”

The trembling old man hobbles back to his counter with difficulty, slips on his thin-rimmed glasses and reveals a thick catalogue book from under the counter. He flips through the pages, squinting through the dusted glass of his spectacles.

“26th July...there was a customer that bought exactly 10 knives of ours. People typically buy two to four...”

“Show me the model.”

“Yes, sir.” He hobbles directly to the shelf in his store, scrutinising quietly and eventually brandishing a long, pointed, butcher’s knife.

My brain begins whirring on its own, the knife I had seen in Officer Lai’s announcement, the knife I had seen in the report, the knife I was staring into now. Staring with contempt. At how this very knife had deprived humans of their right to live. Every human deserves to live, even criminals. Every human has a life. A life that cannot be retrieved once taken.

I hurl the knife at the ceramic floor. It clashes with the strident, ear-piercing clang of steel.

Every human deserves to live.

“Who was it,” I demand, my voice quivering ever so slightly. My eyes are steeled. I ignite the fuse of rage in myself, beginning with a spark, leading to a fatal explosion.

The man squints harder at the book.

The fire grows, inches closer to the bomb.

“Wong Man-Lok.”

The flames are extinguished instantly by the downpouring of water at a subzero temperature, incessantly overwhelmed by a drastically different emotion. One of shame, one of denial, one of fear.

I drag my footsteps back to our apartment in Kowloon. A whirlwind of thought clouds my mind. My name, his name, the moon. A petrifying correlation.

I stick my key into the lock, twist the doorknob and push it open narrowly.

Officer Lai shoots out from behind me, snapping handcuffs on Wong Man-Lok.

My uncle.

He thrashes in retaliation, curses at Officer Lai, spits profanities straight into my face, kicks straight into the shins of Lai.

I shut my eyes, wait for his denial to come, wait for the desperate plea and clarification. That it was not him. That he had nothing to do with it.

It never comes.

I hear footsteps, footsteps of compromise. I open my eyes again. His silhouette fading into the blinding light pouring in from the open door. So bright yet so dark.

All I can manage is stare. Stare at the tattoo of the crescent moon imprinted on his ankle. As innocent as pride for a niece.

Had it truly been for me?

Or an everlasting facade of perceived justice.

Justice is beautiful. Justice is sweet. Justice is the key to civilisation, the sacred promise humans uphold to vow to pursue inner virtue and morality.

Justice.



Creative Writing  
Fiction

Group 5

# Xiao

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Ko, Ian – 16*

Bit by bit, Arthur shoved past the dense crowd of weary workers. The train's ear-splitting screech reverberated around the terminal's scarlet walls; the deep rumble of the sleek, swift machine lightly quaked the ground. Like being crushed against the weight of a heavy blanket, the air in the congested hub was almost strangulating.

Eventually, Arthur managed to break through the horde of people. Free at last, he heaved a sigh of relief. An advertisement caught his eye as he continued trudging past the station hall. The poster announced a brand new opera performance taking place the next day, proudly displaying the date and time of the event in bolded letters beneath the face of the striking protagonist.

It was a figure Arthur could recognize anywhere. His face was as black as obsidian, a silvery crescent moon rested on his forehead, and the hallmark golden attire gave him a sense of regal magnificence. His silky smooth beard flowed like a calm river, current stable and unfluctuating as if reflecting his resolute sense of justice. His eyes were firm, unwavering, the steely gaze fixed on Arthur. Despite this, his arms were outstretched as if welcoming all interested to hear his tale.

The character was Judge Pao, globally hailed as the "Chinese Sherlock Holmes," known for his staunch adherence to Confucian values. Of all the characters in Chinese opera Arthur knew of, the one he knew best would be the revered judge. After all, it was his grandfather's favorite.

As an actor, Arthur's paternal grandfather was no stranger to the stories of old. He would narrate tales of Judge Pao's bravery and wit to young Arthur under the shade of the towering oak tree near their home. Wistful yearning flashed across Arthur's face as he remembered one such tale.

---

Suddenly, he was nine years old again. He sat in the verdant green park, shielded from the sunlight by the tree behind him and shielded from the harsh reality of adulthood by his grandfather beside him.

"How is school? Are you making friends?" his grandpa enquired.

"It's going great, but the teacher sends us to detention for the lamest things, like not handing in our homework for just a day!" Arthur whined, "it's not fair!"

"Is that so?" Arthur's grandfather mused, "well, this reminds me of a story. Want to hear it?"

"Yes, please," Arthur's eyes lit up, eager for his grandpa to launch into another immersive odyssey.

"Once upon a time," Arthur's grandpa began, "the sky turned gloomy gray. A disastrous typhoon hit China. Farmers hurriedly scrambled to protect their precious livestock from the ruthless tempest. Children desperately fled from the whirlwind's grasp to the safety of their homes. Fence posts were torn from the ground in a maleficent display of nature's wrath. Villages were flooded, farmland destroyed, houses leveled, and people killed.

In the midst of all this, the wealthy Zhang family hid in their mansion, an impenetrable stone fortress capable of defying the howling gales. There, they only had chess to pass the time, and the stunning mountain view was veiled by the mists of the storm.

The farmers broke into tears from their lost crops when the storm ended. They would not have enough to feed their families or pay taxes. As the Zhang family emerged from their secure abode, they also found their residence ravaged. Their tree, which had been with them for 20 years, had given into the winds.

The Zhang family was outraged. Upon closer inspection, they found that the tree had been chopped into two instead of uprooted. Furthermore, all the branches had snapped and mysteriously disappeared. Suspicious, Zhangxi, the head of the Zhang family, burst into their gardener's pathetically battered hut. He grabbed him by the arm and led him to the magistrate's office.

'Using the typhoon as an excuse, this peasant chopped down our prized tree and used the branches as firewood!' Zhangxi slammed on the clerk's desk.

'Excuse me, good sir,' the clerk timidly said, shrinking in intimidation, 'perhaps we can deal with this matter in a more civilized manner?'

'Fine,' Zhangxi crossed his arms and turned to the gardener, 'I'll see you in court.'

Over the next few days, the magistrate, Judge Pao, visits the Zhang residence personally to inspect the tree. Finally, it was time for the court hearing. Glaring at the farmer in disdain, Zhangxi explains the situation again to Judge Pao.

'If I am not mistaken, you claim Mr. Wangchen, the gardener, chopped down a tree during the typhoon for firewood to escape the cold?' Judge Pao clarified.

'Yes, your honor,' Zhangxi confirmed.

'Mr. Wangchen, how do you plead?' Judge Pao continued.

'I have been Master Zhangxi's loyal gardener for over 20 years. The tree in question was personally tended to by me, and I took no part in its destruction.' Wangchen bowed his head.

After pondering, Judge Pao came up with a solution. 'With your axe, duel my bodyguard, Zhanzhao. If you are triumphant, it signifies your innocence in the eyes of the gods, and you will be allowed to go free.'

Having no choice, Wangchen raised his axe to strike, but his form was poor, and his muscles were worn from old age. Despite the gardener's desperation, Zhanzhao sent Wangchen's axe flying with one swift blade flick. Seeing the quick victory of Zhanzhao, Zhangxi sneered.

Returning to the courtroom, Judge Pao prepared his verdict in front of Wangchen, whose head hung in shame.

'Wangchen's passionate strike was blocked by my bodyguard effortlessly. The tree Wangchen raised had such strong roots it was not ripped out by the full might of the hurricane. How could such a weak body chop down such a large tree? Instead, you have admitted to not providing your servants with adequate necessities in times of need. For your false accusation and lack of loyalty, your family shall be punished,' he addressed Zhangxi.

After the hearing, the Zhang family was lashed, and the gardener compensated."

"But what does this have to do with my teacher punishing us?" Arthur asked, breaking out of his immersion.

"Arthur, do you think the teacher suffers no consequences when you hand in your homework late? The teacher's schedule would have to be drastically shifted to meet your whimsical needs. Would that not be where the true unfairness lies?" Arthur's grandfather reasoned.

Understanding dawned on young Arthur. "I get it now, Gramps. Thanks!"

---

Escaping from the bittersweet memories of the past, Arthur mused about how much had happened in just a decade. His grandpa was long gone, succumbing to cancer when Arthur was 17. Life was no longer as carefree as before, and his burdens were no longer as trivial as detention.

Arthur's last remaining grandparent was his paternal grandmother. How long had it been since he last saw her? Arthur was too preoccupied with work to spend time with her. It wasn't his fault that the task list he dreaded to look at kept increasing in size. Yet, nowadays, like the incomplete moon on Judge Pao's forehead, Arthur felt something was missing. Dismissing his thoughts, Arthur jerked away from the gaze of Judge Pao and continued his walk home.

Before Arthur knew it, the sickle-shaped moon rose to its seat among the stars, reflecting on the serene ripples of the sea. Climbing into bed, he stared at the ceiling and contemplated his rediscovered memories.

For all these years, he had neglected his grandma. He cited his work as an excuse, but was it not his responsibility to manage work and life? For all these years, he never once considered himself in the wrong. But now, contrary to the tranquil ocean, his emotions hit him like a thrashing cyclone.

And just like in his grandfather's story, Arthur had to strengthen his roots to withstand the cyclone. Arthur had to reconcile with his grandma. He'd do it one day, he decided, but with piles of work on his plate, he didn't have the time for now. Pushing his thoughts away yet again, he drifted to sleep.

When Arthur woke up, instead of the comforting embrace of his bed, he was on his knees kneeling, with his hands tied awkwardly behind his back. The chilling feeling of metal touching his neck contrasted with the torrid heat of the room. Glancing to his side, Arthur found that the feel of metal came from two polearms locked around his neck. Holding the shafts were two muscular soldiers with human bodies. One had the head of an ox, and the other had the head of a horse.

Looking to his front, Arthur noticed that the room he was in mirrored the lavish throne rooms of the emperor shown in television shows. A panorama of a stunningly drawn mountainscape decorated the room, placed behind a golden throne and a wooden table covered by a royal red cloth.

His attention was quickly drawn to the man adorned in imperial robes sitting on the throne. The man wasn't human either. He had fiery red skin, a pointed beard that protruded from his face, and repulsive bulging eyes. Arthur would not have recognized the man without the crescent moon on his forehead.

"Judge Pao," Arthur breathed in surprise. He knew Judge Pao was thought to be Yama, the judge of the underworld, by many people. The two guards to his sides would be his assistants, Ox-Head and Horse-Face. But if he was in the underworld, it would mean...

"Here they call me Yama," Yama bellowed with a thunderous voice, "Sinner, do you know why you appear before me now?"

"Am I dead?" Arthur asked nervously.

"You are not yet deceased, but your behavior has sparked my attention and rage. Hence, I have brought you here to make you realize your shortcomings. Arthur Chan, you have demonstrated a severe lack of filial piety toward your elders for three years. At this rate, your accumulated karmic debt will surely lead to a painful afterlife. You should be deeply ashamed. Have you ever considered the grave consequences of your actions?" Yama demanded.

With Yama's pressing queries, Arthur had no time to be relieved about being alive. Sweat beads trickled down his forehead. "Y- yes, I realized just earlier. I'm extremely remorseful for my actions, I swear!" he stammered.

"Yet you do not seem to have taken action to repent," Yama noted.

Arthur hung his head in embarrassment. "I'm very sorry. I failed to realize the weight of my actions until today. I promise I will do better in the future," Arthur pleaded. In the condescending presence of Yama, Arthur's cheeks flushed in shame like a child caught stealing cookies.

Yama grunted in disapproval. "Come with me," he ordered, rising from his throne and walking towards the courtroom's exit. Before he could react, Yama's two guards dragged Arthur to his feet before escorting him toward the King of Hell.

They traversed the subterranean maze of Diyu, Chinese hell, for what seemed like an eternity. The torch held by Ox-Head gave the otherwise dark cave an eerie glow. Occasionally, Arthur could hear wails in the background. Other times, he swore he could make out whimpers.

The screams got louder and louder with every step they took. Eventually, Yama stopped walking. They had reached their destination, a large red gate decorated with golden cloud-like patterns. Pulling with all their strength, the two animal-faced guards towed open the doors, revealing a gruesome punishment chamber.

The ground was so hot it glowed bright red, and barefooted sinners ran around in agony, trying to navigate into one of the numerous straw huts for shelter. Whenever a person found brief consolation from the searing ground, the straw hut they entered would burst into flames. Crimson and blue ogres brandished whips with heated iron tips, lashing at anyone who dared stay in one place.

"Horse-Face, could you fetch Linxiao for me?" Yama requested.

Nodding in affirmation, Horse-Face entered the chamber and returned after a short while, dragging another man in tow. The man's state was terrible. His hair was shaggy, and his bare body was littered with scars. Though the look in his eyes was weak and weary, his expression still showed deep remorse.

"Linxiao, this is Arthur. He is not yet dead, but his transgressions are similar to yours. Tell him your story," Yama instructed.

Linxiao flashed a toothy grin of sympathy toward Arthur. "Is that so? I was just like you once, left home at the ripe young age of nineteen, I did. Went to become a doctor, and it took three long years, but I finally did it. I had completed my studies and could return home to earn my fortune. I was excited, I tell you, you couldn't even imagine how elated I was. Headed back to my village, ready to show my parents the result of my hard work. When I got back, they told me they were long gone."

Arthur swallowed his saliva in surprise, empathizing with the man. He thought of ways to show his compassion and questions to ask about his story, but in the end, the only word that escaped his mouth was a simple "why?"

"Starved of hunger in a drought, that's why. Soon, the guards apprehended me, and I was summoned to the magistrate's office. For failing to take care of my parents, Judge Pao, my judge, exiled me to the other side of the country. I remember his words like it was yesterday. 'In the relentless pursuit of your ambitions, you have forgotten what matters most. For the rest of your life, atone for your actions and regret your heinous crime.'"

"That's a bit harsh, isn't it?" Arthur commented.

"Nay, he was right. I ended up regretting my immature foolishness for the rest of my life. To be frank, being cursed to an eternity of torture is more like a grand reward. At least the pain distracts me from my eternal guilt," Linxiao grinned again as if trying to mask his self-pity, "say, Arthur, was it? How old are your relatives?"

"My grandma is 85," Arthur answered.

"Back in my day, 50 was considered ancient. Treasure your loved ones, young lad. True torture is the pain of knowing you failed them," Linxiao stated.

Deeming the conversation over, Yama nodded his head, and Linxiao was dragged back into the fiery field of punishment by Horse-Face.

The last thing Arthur heard before he lurched awake were Linxiao's shrieks of agony. It was just a dream, yet it stayed branded in his mind. His heart now throbbed in pain as if he had carried Diyu's flame to the real world.

Arthur recalled more of Judge Pao's epics, tales highlighting his admirable traits. He remembered that once, upon learning of a corrupted government official, Judge Pao campaigned for his removal from the role. However, the government official was the uncle of the king's favorite concubine and therefore escaped punishment. However, Judge Pao did not give up and wrote numerous referendums to the emperor until the corrupted official was finally removed from his post. Many other imperial censors had been punished for making such comments. Still, Judge Pao did not give up on upholding his moral ideals.

Judge Pao would risk his life for the sake of justice. Why am I unable to risk my dignity and reconcile with my grandmother? Arthur asked himself. Determined to take action, Arthur called his grandmother and asked if she could meet. After all, he knew just the place.

"Long time no see, Fok Yeung," Arthur's grandmother greeted him. Arthur hadn't heard his Chinese name used in a long time. Together, they entered the auditorium hall of the Hong Kong Cultural Center, eager to watch yet another new tale of Judge Pao.

# New Tales of Judge Pao

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Pang, Herman – 16*

'Am I ill?', he pondered. "I feel no pain, no suffering." He looked left, then right. All he saw was a blur of colors. He sat up, his bedsheets unmoving as he shifted, feet soundlessly touching the ground.

Bao strode down the corridor, almost weightlessly. The house, he discovered, was empty. No wives, no adults or children, family or visitors – no one.

"Is there an event scheduled today?", he mulled as he continued his passage. Everything seemed too neat, too orderly, too empty. Why had all the life from the house vanished?

"Good morning!" he called. "Good afternoon?". Silence.

Vision still fuzzy, he stumbled through his house. What did he have for dinner? He could not remember. His hands felt nothing as he held onto chairs and tables that seemed sturdier than he was, as he ventured towards the wide-open door.

Outside the door stood a procession of people. A funeral, he realised. He tried stepping forward to pay his respects, but stumbled, as if an invisible force was pulling him back, and he retreated apologetically, murmuring prayers for the newly deceased all the same.

As the crowd, clad in traditional mourning colours of snow white, slowly moved away, he stepped back inside the confines of the house, shakily guiding himself towards the garden in an effort to stabilise himself.

He could not help but notice how everything – the sky, the blanket of snow, the cold – mirrored the outfits of the mourners. Even the garden, once vibrant with the chirping of birds and light gusts of wind, was now desolate and empty, something frozen in time. Making his way to the small pool, he noticed a stray leaf from a nearby tree. Slowly fluttering, descending, onto the water's surface.

Ever the perfectionist, Bao made his way to the pool to fish it out, and that was where he noticed it. The distinct lack of a reflection.

As the funeral gongs groaned in the background, now all the more noticeable, Bao Zheng began to come to terms with his untimely demise.

That day, the sky seemed just a touch too white for Bao.

---

As the days passed, Bao had a seemingly infinite amount of time to reflect.

Why was he here? What could he do here?

For all his intellectual prowess and decision-making ability, he could not decipher the case of his afterlife.

Ironic.

Perhaps this was some divine punishment befalling him, after sentencing so many people in his court. The most powerful judge in the Song dynasty, sentenced by a divine power that outranked him.

He thought back to times when he sentenced those in power, recalling instances of their corruption, of their abuse of power. The time he executed a high ranking scholar, Chen Shimei, for marrying a princess, while discarding a budding family, trying to bury the secret along with their bodies.

More scenes bloomed. He remembered countless battles against entitled government officials, magistrates, and the like; willingly slandering himself, only to turn the tables by highlighting the immorality of their actions.

His power had made China a fairer place, he hoped.

In retrospect, Bao considered, he had not felt much during lifetime anyway. Yes, there were fleeting moments of happiness, rage, pleasure, or regret, but it all was overshadowed by his determination for justice.

Even his own family was not immune to this burning passion. When his brother, Bao Mian, was accused of bribery, he was prepared to paint his ceremonial knives with the blood of his own until innocence was proven. In another case, an uncle, if Bao could even call him that, was cast under his judgement for a deserved whipping – corruption was corruption, and justice was blind.

The moniker of the "Iron-Faced Judge" had certainly not come lightly.

It was worth it, he reasoned. His judgement proved right from wrong, black from white. The weight of his words improved the lives of the innocent and the poor.

He believed.

He hoped.

But if his pursuit for justice was right, why was he here to endure this torture?

---

As Bao thought, the river of time flowed on. His physical body had long since decayed, but his mind, his spirit, fuzzy but intact, lived on.

Year after year, Bao's thoughts reverberated in the echo chamber of his conscious, increasingly vengeful, then frustrated. Why was he here? Why couldn't he pass on?

It was in one of these years where Bao finally gained momentary clarity. He heard a voice calling out, just as he thought the world had given up on him.

"Anyone," it called, "please help me."

Mindlessly, numbly, he pursued the voice. Perhaps it was the desire for a shred of validation for the first time in decades that pushed him. He thought, nihilistically, that maybe this voice would finally bring him an escape from the confines of his existence. Salvation. Caution mattered not if you were dead. This thought was ephemeral, and he banished it – for the first time in eternity, someone had sought him out.

He reached the individual, two silhouettes reaching for one another.

"Are...are you Judge Bao? Bao Qingtian? The one we learn about in stories?"

Pleasantly surprised at the recognition, Bao nodded. "Yes. What is your business with me? Who are you?"

"My name is Ming. I am just a humble peasant, your honor." He paused. "I came for advice."

Bao's tenure made Ming's tale a familiar one – the local authorities were over-taxing, unjustly taking away resources from farmers like Ming, depriving them of money to feed their families.

Families with elders working to the bone to keep their families alive, only withered away as the rich got richer. Adults who toiled tirelessly to keep the ship afloat soon came to the bitter realisation that irreparable damage was caused by those in power. Children rotted away under a barrage of malnourishment and poverty, never actualising whatever potential they had.

Bao was infuriated. Greed that possessed people to take damaging amounts of what they wanted enraged him, regardless of how common this scenario was.

Had the world not changed? Was his quest for justice for naught?

"You should do something about it. Stand up to the authorities, do what is right! Gather your friends and learn from my stories – justice will always triumph. "

Ming was invigorated. He had come tentatively, but left with a steeled determination glinting in his eyes.

It did not take long for Ming to gather like-minded individuals – farmers, craftsmen, peasants, anyone slighted by the authorities soon flocked to him. It did not take long until his power exceeded that of the local authority.

Bao watched on approvingly, as Ming pointed out flaw after flaw in the government's actions. Finally, elders could rest, the adults were invigorated, and the children were given a chance to grow. All was well.

Though Bao had done little to guide Ming, pride was still felt. He may have passed on, but the future generations still upheld justice. He had never raised a protege, but Ming was the closest he had to one.

For the first time since his passing, Bao felt satisfaction.

Ming slowly progressed more and more. He redistributed land, forced the authorities to grow their own food, and created hope. It was utopian.

However, Bao soon came to a realisation. An utopia was never eternal.

Not in this world.

In the dead of night, Ming was killed. The authorities begged another province for assistance. Ming was dragged, kicking and struggling, to a guillotine. The blades flashed silver, and his head fell with a dull thud.

As a judge, jury and executioner, Bao was no stranger to execution, but his heart dropped at the sight. Never once had he done it to someone he deemed as right. This wasn't a warning to adhere to justice, this was a warning to fall into line. By the end of the day, dark crimson stained the streets, washed away only by the tears of residents who mourned Ming, and the loss of their freedom.

The death of Ming was the death of justice in Bao's eyes. With that, he fell into despair.

What good was justice if it could be reversed so easily?

---

More time passed. Years, decades, centuries.

His world was restored through the destruction of his world-view. Ming's death had restored his clarity with the bindings of cynicism, with observations of the injustices of the world.

The Opium War. Human lives, gone not in a flash of blades, but in rattling bangs of gunshot. Swirls of pungent, intoxicating smoke swirled around the city – Bao could only stare in perfect sobriety as the British Empire milked China dry.

It was around this time a second voice called out to him. Without thought, he turned towards it, nostalgic for times when his name was feared, heralded with respect and admiration.

Then, he stopped himself. That was centuries ago. He was just an aberration, alive for some unknown, obscene, infuriating, cruel reason. Why should he get involved? He longed to return to hazier times where nothing had happened, when he could find solace in his fantasies of justice.

And so, Bao ignored the voice.

Another day, the voice came. Another day of pestering.

Try as he might, the voices called out to him like the dredges of a long-forgotten addiction. Finally, at his wit's end, he dignified the voice with a response. Masking his annoyance, he moved to the silhouette where the voice awaited him. Another child.

"What."

"Judge Bao! Honor's mine! You see—"

"Get to it."

"Yes!" The figure recounted another typical experience. Something about corruption, about unpaid work, about his family not having enough to survive.

Bao remembered when he had a family. He had cared for them. This boy, he needed help – this family needed help. Justice needed to be served.

And Bao remembered justice. He remembered Ming, he remembered happiness, fleeting but wonderful, adding colour to monochrome lives.

But Bao also remembered the cruelty of justice. The same blossoming happiness had disappeared in one fell swoop. It was impossible for the proud tree of justice to regrow on tainted soil razed by Ming's blood.

Bao had not wished to remember this. Now, he felt too much. No one should have to feel what he felt. It wouldn't be right.

"So, Judge Bao, how can I help my family?"

"Do nothing."

"But...but why? Why not make a stand for justice? You've taught us that change is what is needed to make things right!" An impassioned reply, one Bao was obliged to counter.

"Justice is weak. It is fragile. Against strong opposition, it collapses. It is unwise, no, foolish, to announce your intentions to the authorities. I urge you to drop this notion at once."

"But—"

"That is my verdict. I lived in a time where justice was possible. Times change. You should too."

The voice, lit by a spark of hope, was now left extinguished. With a stiff smile and glassy eyes, the child left with slow trudges, despondent and betrayed.

Bao reconsidered. Was it worth smothering the dreams of this child, clipping their wings before they could really take flight?

Once upon a time, he, too, was hopeful and idealistic. He advocated for freedom, but now he acknowledged that his experiences were legends of a freer time. The world had now denounced it. After all, legends were meant to be fiction.

Besides, what he thought was right had been proved wrong centuries ago.

Bao turned to leave.

Time went on, and the child grew to become a man. Inside the man, the child persisted miserably, wailing about how they should have done more. His family had passed on, working themselves to death's door, leaving imperceptibly.

Soon, only the man and the child were left. The child cried, kicking and screaming, inside the barren desert of the man's conscience. There was no drive, only fading embers of a will to live a silent life, to simply blend into the background just as he was told. Times had changed, and he would resign to live life like such, for he knew no better.

As years passed, the child's wailing gradually eroded the fabric of his sanity. And the man wondered –

“Why won't it stop?”

A once rich tapestry was brought to ruination, delicate threads snapping piece by piece. Brief moments of respite were shadowed by depression and the mourning of a life that could have been.

So the man hunted for a remedy. Anything that could muffle the noise. And so, he drank a glass that turned to a bottle, which turned into more. In his inebriation, his tears were forgotten.

But then the wailing reached a rapid crescendo that only more drinking could silence. Soon, he resorted to opium, anything he could salvage. His life became a blur, substance polluting the work he was once enraptured by.

Through all of this, the Judge observed, but never intervened, for it was justice that had let this man down, and he was powerless to stop its whims.

He kept on watching as the man collapsed. The pallor body was retrieved before being crammed into an unmarked grave – remembered by few, and mourned by fewer.

The man's pained expression pierced him. The wrinkled features contorted into an eternal snarl, closed eyes glaring at nothing but the shame of a wasted life. Had he done good? Bao did not know.

It was there when Bao wondered about what justice truly was.

---

Ponder as he might, the world refused to wait for Bao, forcing the new millennium upon him. As time went on, his stories reached new heights, passed on and retold by parents, dramatists and showrunners alike, all snared by the long-stretching roots of his tales. In came a new legion of curious devotees who were gripped by his virtues. Hence, it did not take long before Bao had to answer to another hopeful.

The voice was no different from those before them. Spritely, struggling, a mere sapling in the vast garden that was the real world. He was the gardener, with the power to nurture this life with the right guidance. But what was *right*? Grow too large, and the plants would be pruned. He could not snip the buds too soon either.

Bao could have chosen to turn away, but something was compelling him. His own hubris? His desire to make a positive change? To make his afterlife worthwhile?

"Hello, Bao. I'd like your help, please," the voice vaguely stated, clouded in childlike innocence.

He decided to play along. "How can I be of assistance? I am merely an old judge; you still remain amongst the living."

"That's not an issue. I just want your help with homework!"

Bao blinked, somewhat dumbfounded.

The work was finished in less than an hour, and the voice – the girl, he noted, bid him adieu. The girl came back, day after day, discussing a plethora of mundane tasks. Regardless of intention, these nightly meetings allowed Bao a distraction from himself. He warmed up to the girl, Mei, learning her name, who had little company to talk to, outcast by other children who could be so cruel. He shared his past with her, and the two hurt souls found solace with one another.

However, with Mei's inquisitive nature, it did not take long for Mei to bring up a dreg of the recent past. "Bao," she implored.

"What is it, child?"

Mei scowled. "The children at school are being mean again."

Bao offered gentle words of comfort.

"Thank you, Bao," she sniffled. He could almost hear the wiping of tears, bringing a pang to his heart for the first time in years.

"I wish I could help more, Mei. But as a spirit, I feel I've done all that I could," he said with an air of melancholy.

Another sniff came before her voice steadied. "Could you maybe answer one more question? Please?"

An instant reply. "Yes, of course."

"What happens if I want to stop these actions? What if I wanted to do what you did? To speak up?"

Bao stiffened as memories of a time long gone resurfaced. Memories of Ming, of the boy he instructed to do nothing. What could he tell her? His advice had backfired twice in the past, and for once, he was at a loss for words.

"Mei..."

"I'm sorry for asking—"

"Don't worry, I'll think of something. Goodnight for now."

What a dilemma he faced. How his old adversaries would have laughed – the famous Judge Bao stuck on a moral dilemma of all things.

Was it truly a dichotomy with only right and wrong? Mulling over it, Bao began to see the flaw in this ideology. What had doomed those he had advised was that all-or-nothing approach. For his sake, and more importantly, Mei's, he simply could not afford to make that mistake again.

The correct response took months to develop, and the topic was gently breached.

"Mei, do what you think is right. At the same time, remember you will never be completely correct. And that is fine. The world operates on a scale of moderates, and I hope you understand that sooner than I did."

"Show the world what you can do, Mei. Goodnight."

There was no chirpy response, only a determined nod before Mei's voice faded. Bao saw a distant future of Mei going on to great accomplishments, for her future was set. Bao felt comfort, finally comfortable enough to close his eyes.

The translucent vision plaguing his eyes for so long glossed over, turning an ethereal white – he was almost free, he realised. Bao felt nothing over this release despite the long pursuit, only a sense of serenity, over his child that would do great things. He could rest with no worries.

Somewhere, a leaf fell gracefully, twirling through the air as it came to rest on the azure plane of a running river. It rippled imperceptibly, shimmering – a reflection of a life. The leaf drifted away, and there was nothing.