

Winning Entries



HONG KONG YOUNG WRITER OF THE YEAR

Fiction – Group 4 WINNER

The Sea's Song

Heep Yunn School, Tsui, Yu Hei Iris - 14

I believe that the sea can sing.

Sitting on the shore, I put my hand out into the water. The water tugs at my fingers, as if trying to pull me into the ocean's welcoming arms. The waves ripple, breaking the smooth surface of the ocean, crested with white foam that sparkles in the setting sun. The golden rays of light dance on them, caressing my cheeks gently.

I close my eyes, and everything recedes. The sea whispers, speaks in its haunting tongue; the ripples of the waves playing out its tune on its own silken strings. The notes rise and crash at my feet, and I am home.

~

"What do you think it is saying?" my father asked me once, when I was eight.

"I don't speak Ocean," I protested.

"One day you'll understand what it's saying."

"How do you know?" I asked without opening my eyes.

My father's hand ruffled my hair. "You were named after the great Mohamed, son," he said, "and you will discover Allah's greatest gift."

I can taste the salty sea spray on my tongue as the gulls swoop around me. "Tell me again about your last voyage," I said.

"Again?"

"It's my favorite story."

I could feel him heave a laugh, though there is something deeper, a reluctance to it.

"The day I went to Mecca was a fine summer day," he said. "The stars were my only guide, but they were enough - enough to guarantee a map in the skies, veiled by the clouds, wreathed by moonlight. Such beauty!"

"What did you do with that map?"

My father's smile waned. "With sheer power of memory I committed the map of the stars to paper. It will guide any seafarer who is of my blood. It tells of the routes of conquest - and

even more. It guarantees victory in battle to whoever can read it. If that map is in your hand, if you are worthy enough to decipher its wisdom – there is no war you cannot win. You have no idea – the map of the stars has power none can withstand; all men would flee before the wielder’s face, for his wrath would then become terrible to behold.”

“Where is it?” I asked, entranced.

“Gone,” said my father. “The new emperor of the Ming dynasty tried to take away my creation. He wanted conquest – he wanted to use it to conquer the lands beyond China. I told him that a wise warrior always avoids the battle but he didn’t listen. So, to keep it out of their reach – I placed it in the protection of Tianfei.”

“Where?” I said.

My father smiled. “The map tells of a treasure, a secret even deeper than the road to conquest written in the stars. A secret very few have ever come to possess.” he said. He paused. “I destroyed the map.”

“What?”

“Yes, son – I tore it into pieces – seven pieces. In that way, only a great seafarer of my blood will be able to find it, for it is protected by the power of the oceans. Scattered all over the seas, it awaits the day be put together again.”

~

TWO YEARS LATER

He is gone.

I try to smell the salty sea air that is miles away, try to feel the tremor of the ocean waters that is world away, try to see the rays of golden sunshine dancing on the waves. I am Ma He. I am the son of Ma Hajji. I am ten years old.

I am a son with no father.

Hands bound, eyes darkened, I keep reliving those last, terrible moments of my father.

I remember the clash of the Mongol and Ming armies. The shouts, the cold rings of steel in the air, the blood flowing – the rising of the red sun.

I remember glimpsing my father as he shouted aloud, his face glowing in the light of the rising sun, the fading stars wheeling above him, crowning his brow.

I remember the cold Ming blade that went into him, the blood that spilled from his stomach to the floor.

I remember my cry of anguish to the heavens.

And I know, in that instant, that the moment will always be branded into my mind. I can’t see the ocean waters. But I can hear them, whispering in my mind, a lament of torturing, a grief of no ends.

~

His name is Zhu Di. And I am his slave, named anew, by the name of Zheng He.

They told me what I was, why I was brought here. I remember the cold eyes of the Hongwu Emperor as he gazed down at me with hungry eyes – eyes that had no interest in me, only in the key I hold to obtaining my father’s treasure.

They told me what my father was: a traitor and a fool. He refused to serve the Ming dynasty, hid from them his creation when it could have served so many great purposes. For that he must die. And there is a reason they left me alive – because I alone have the greatest

potential to uncover my father's map.

I am a slave who gained my enemy's trust, became Zhu Di's confidant through a honeyed tongue. I repeated the respectful words, letting them flow like bitter cud from my mechanical lips, while underneath my heart seethed in fury.

I am a long way from the sea. Yet the waters still lash at my heart, the salty water against the wounds left behind my father's death. I can still hear the furious waves, sending blood throbbing through my veins, roaring in my ears, filling my mind with only one word discernible.

Revenge.

~

"Well, what do you think, my friend?" says Zhu Di, gesturing proudly to the magnificent structures that line the harbor.

My eyes rove over the great ships that bob gently on the seas, and they take my breath away. The oars are golden and the timber gleaming white, the sails as pale as the argent moon. They are larger than any ship I have ever seen; nine masts, what I would judge to be about a hundred and thirty meters long.

"You have done well, my liege," I say.

"What you see before you is only the tip of the iceberg," he says. "There're also troop transports, fuchuan warships, even more. This treasure ship, of course, is the best of them all – upon this boat you will be commander." He glances at me and a manic gleam seems to come to his eyes. "You will set foot upon the lands and the deeps untrodden, discover the towering mountains, green shores and the never-ending deserts wreathed in mists and shadows. You will be my hand, stretching out from China, to bring my rule to the world."

He steps closer to me, and I flinch as that hated breath caresses my face.

"You will find your father's greatest creation. Do you consent?" he whispers.

Unbidden, into my mind comes my father's last words to me, and I am transported back in time.

I am holding my father's limp body in my arms, and from my father's lips comes his last desire.

"I will avenge you," I vowed. "Tell me how."

"Revenge," he sighed, "is that what you want?"

"More than anything," I said.

"To take your revenge you must go..." he said.

"Go where?" I hear my ten-year-old voice from far away, a wandering phantom inside my soul, as the ocean waves rage inside me.

"The seven pieces of the map," he gasped. "The greatest treasure in history that lies in the depths of the sea."

He seized my hand with a force too strong for a dying man. "Find it," he whispered.

His grip slackened. His eyes softened. And I saw a trace of the father who told me the tale of the seas, told me that I would one day understand its strange tongue.

"Ma He," he whispered. "You are my greatest creation."

"Zheng He," says Zhu Di, drawing me back to the present. "Do you consent?"

Seven pieces of the map, scattered over the seas...

My father's dying wish.

I look into the eyes I loathe and answer, "I do."

~

They call me Zheng He. I am admiral, conqueror, and explorer. I am the hand of the emperor, roaming far to the corners of the world no one has seen. Yet the water of the seas does not satisfy my thirst – I thirst for blood.

I stand on the prow of my ship, journeying back to China. I refuse to call it *home*; home lies only on the seas.

Within the eyes of my crew I see the awe as they behold me, a seafarer with power in my hand and wisdom upon my brow, a lord of dignity and glory, eyes bright and keen as a dagger blade. I put my hand back in the water, feeling the tides turn.

Six pieces of the map are complete.

I can feel the ragged parchment beneath my armor. The first I found in Ceylon, the second in Java when we defeated the Majapahit king. The third was guarded by the Sinhalese until our troops defeated them. The fourth I extracted from Sekandar at Sumatra before his execution, the fifth from East Africa, the sixth from Malacca.

Six voyages, six pieces.

The waves have raged on my every voyage, rearing and leaping like a wild stallion: the white foam its streaming mane; the thunderous echoes of the waves are its pounding hooves striking the seabed, beating out a nightly rhythm that never ceases; the sea is my tireless steed that carries me, caught in the frenzy of my revenge –

One more to go.

“Sir?” calls a voice.

We’ve already arrived at the harbor. Looking down, I see a messenger.

“Sir, the emperor demands that you return to Nanjing immediately,” he says.

I am seized with a sudden fear. Has he found out?

“Why?” I ask.

“Haven’t you heard, sir?” The messenger’s face is drawn with sadness. “The Yongle Emperor is dead.”

~

They call me Zheng He.

I am no longer a seafarer. I fell before the prime of my glory. Why did my father tell me to wait, to seek the secret, before I killed Zhu Di? Why had I hesitated, why had I stayed my hand? I could have delivered the killing blow.

There’s a new emperor. I’m appointed defender of Nanjing, forbidden to return to the seas. I hear the sea’s song, mournful and frustrated, hammering against a locked door, unable to break the chain –

Of course. The chain of a slave. I was one when I came to the household of the son of the man who killed my father. I thought that when I was upon the seas, I was free. How ridiculous. Here I am, after the deaths of two emperors, serving a new one, but still – no matter how much I fight – I remained as a slave.

The Hongxi Emperor has made further treasure voyages forbidden. And here I stand, looking helplessly at the ocean I cannot reach, thirsting for revenge that is now impossible, now that Zhu Di is dead. I try to summon the ocean’s song in my heart, but it has gone silent.

~

“Zheng He?”

I turn at the approach of the new emperor. “Yes, my liege?”

“I would like you to return to the seas,” says the Xuande Emperor. “I wish to resurrect what my grandfather has done.”

The old hatred instantly returns.

“This is an order, Zheng He,” he says, perhaps seeing the momentary anger flash in my face. “Do you accept?”

I think of the six pieces of the map. My father’s last words to me. *Find it*. Dare I go beyond the horizon to seek for the seventh and last piece of the legendary map, although the one I swore to take revenge on is gone?

“I do,” I say, and am instantly reminded of the same words I said to Zhu Di, what seems like a lifetime ago.

~

This will be my last voyage. I can feel it as I set sail.

The legendary map will tell me how my revenge shall be taken.

I can feel it as I discover the last piece, at last, upon the great plains of Kenya. I trekked through the endless grasslands for over three days to find it at last, wedged in the hollow of a weather-beaten tree.

Panting with exhaustion, I slide down against the tree trunk. For a moment, I suppress the overwhelming triumph that fills my heart and threatens to make it explode. The joy, the ecstasy, the pure jubilation of it all! Allah, Tianfei, they have granted it all to me. I feel the urge to laugh, to run barefoot on the plains, suddenly dizzy with giddiness of victory.

From underneath my tunic, I draw out the other six pieces of the map and arrange them, like a puzzle. My heart throbs, pounding furiously, and I wait with bated breath as I put them all together.

When the final piece is in place, silvery lines begin to snake across the yellowed parchment. They crisscross and interweave, and I recognize my father’s handwriting. Stars, silvery stars, mapped out in great detail, fanning out to every corner of the map, and in the center of the parchment characters begin to ripple and float before my eyes.

Forgiveness is Allah’s greatest gift.

I’m dumbfounded. Five words... five words! All my life I’ve sought the completion of this map, and all it contains is five words! Five words, with completely no meaning! I sought revenge. I thought this map would tell me what to do, how to avenge my father upon the death of the ones I meant to take revenge on.

All is truly lost.

I dive for the pieces of the map, wring them into even smaller pieces, tearing them apart with a ferociousness I have never felt in all my life. The rage, the undying thirst, I curse my father’s soft-heartedness -

My father. He seems like a lifetime away, and at that moment I yearn for him, to hear his gentle voice, to hear his laughter like music in my ears.

Suddenly I am eight years old again, sitting beside the sea, listening to its song.

“One day you’ll understand what it’s saying,” my father said.

All my life I had been misguided. Staring at a goal far upon the horizon that had only ever been a mirage. Looking at death full in the face and trying to bring it upon the one person who had trusted me in my captivity, even though it was his people who had murdered

my father.

Zhu Di.

He thought me a brother to him, true in heart. All my life I have detested him for spilling my father's blood. Now I have lost all those times I could have stood shoulder to shoulder with him, free from my thirst for vengeance.

I should have forgiven him long ago.

I throw myself on the ground and weep for all that I have lost, and my tears fall like rain upon stones.

~

The seas are smooth today. My ship glides peacefully on the waters. We are sailing home. Back to China.

I lie, delirious, in bed, and I know that I am on my deathbed. As the ship bobs up and down on smooth waters, I think I hear an old lullaby. Soothing me to sleep.

The sea is singing its song.

“Sir?” comes a voice.

A sailor comes into my cabin, he looks frightened. I know what a state I must look, a dying man of sixty-two, weakened by the seven voyages of my life.

I reach beneath my tunic and draw out a small bag. I hold it out to the sailor.

“There is little chance that I will survive the journey back,” I say.

“Don't say that, sir,” whispers the sailor. I look at the young face, and I know it well.

This boy has served me well on my voyages, been most faithful. As he comes towards me I see in his gaze the haunted look that I experienced when I was ten years old.

“Do one thing for me,” I say. “when I die, I wish for my body to return to the ocean. My blood shall become the waters of the sea. The sea has been my life – and my body shall be my last tribute.”

The sailor is trembling, but I continue, holding out the bag which contains the last remnants of the map.

“When I die,” I say, “throw this into the sea with my body.”

The sailor takes it with shaking hands.

“What is it, sir?” he whispers.

I look at the sailor, smiling.

“A great treasure,” I answer, “with a magnificent tale behind it. My father forged it with knowledge that came from his time on the seas. It could serve great purposes – but it must return to the sea, where it belongs.”

The song of the sea fills my ears, lonely and haunting, but to me it is no longer that eerie, mysterious tongue. I can hear it, transporting me to the world beyond, one that even the greatest emperor cannot conquer.

“One day you will understand what it's saying,” my father whispers.

I can hear it clearly now, it's the only thing my age-weakened mind can comprehend.

Forgiveness is Allah's greatest gift.

Before my eyes I can see the faces of my father, my brother and sisters, Zhu Di, growing ever closer.

I am named after Mohamed. I am my father's greatest creation.

They call me Zheng He.

HONG KONG YOUNG WRITER OF THE YEAR

Fiction – Group 5 WINNER

Tale of a Thousand Suns

King George V School, Cheung, Geraldine – 16

Calicut, 1433

“I’m not dying.”

At first his question goes unanswered. With the sleeve of his robes pushed back past his elbow, Zheng He watches as the physician’s fingertips prod at his exposed forearm, pressing at his raised vein. Outside, the sun is going down, and shadows play and shift over the physician’s fingers as he frowns in concentration.

“I am unsure, Admiral.” Li Wei says at last, straightening up and shaking his head. Zheng He lowers his sleeve. “You understand, of course– that when one is ill at sea–”

In that moment Zheng He wants to reply that he does understand, but he doesn’t. For years his rule with ill sailors has been to abandon them on the shore to await death, so that the rest of the crew might not fall ill with the same sickness. It is a cruel rule, but necessary for the survival of the fleet. But now, when it is his turn to face such a fate, he is not so sure, and the hesitation scares him.

“Is this illness a certainty, doctor?” he asks Li Wei.

“Pardons, admiral, but if you were not ill I would not be here.”

“Perhaps you misunderstood me. Must I be put ashore?”

Li Wei rubs at the back of his neck. “May I speak freely, admiral?”

“If you must.”

“Well pardons, admiral, but you are not young.” Li Wei looks apologetic. “This illness may take you, or it may not. The best course of action–”

“I know.”

“It is for the good of the fleet, admiral. For six voyages the fleet has remained strong. It cannot be allowed to wane.”

“I know that too. But I want to wait until we are sure that this is true illness rather than something minor. But until then, do not put me ashore. That will be all, doctor. Dismissed.”

Li Wei nods and bows before exiting, and Zheng He sinks back onto the wicker mat bed. Outside, framed against the cold light, he can faintly see Li Wei’s dark silhouette, speaking with one of his colleagues– one of the 180 physicians aboard his several *baochuan*.

He does not want to meet his fate. For a week now the sickness and the coughing has persisted, and Li Wei seems to want to leave him behind on the shores of Calicut. In fourteen days the fleet will leave Calicut for Hormuz, and by then Zheng He will have to have made up his mind about staying and leaving.

“You are an admiral.” He mutters to himself. “You’ve sailed to over a hundred shores. You are not afraid. You’ll do your duty, and no less.”

But some part of him still refuses to. He chooses to push it from his mind.
Sleep is a long time coming that night.

Dian Lake, 1377

Ma He does not remember when they first began to play in the lake by the house. Perhaps it was his father who had led him there first, or perhaps his brother, Ma Wenming. Wenming is a year Ma He’s senior, and wherever Wenming goes, Ma He always follows.

Only today, he is not so sure. There is a limestone cliff near the house that overlooks the deep waters of the Dian Lake, easily some twenty *chi* in height from base to summit. When he was a boy he had witnessed Wenming ascend the cliff until he was a distant figure easily hidden by Ma He’s thumb, and had watched him leap from the summit into the lake below. As he fell he had become a blurred silhouette, bird-like and framed by sunlight, a brief laugh escaping his mouth before he’d plunged into the icy water with a spray of white foam.

And now Wenming has led Ma He to the cliff, and it is his turn to take the leap. The clear water below now looks like the mouth of a yawning chasm, mysterious and impossibly wide and a deep, pensive blue. And Wenming wants Ma He to hurl himself into it.

“Will I die?” He asks.

He is leaning against the wind, which is rippling the water of the lake and nudging Ma He towards the cliff’s edge.

Wenming folds his arms. “You saw me do it, Ma He. You should know.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Oh, come on, Ma He. Be brave.”

He inches forward. A quote from one of his books comes to mind— *Wisdom, compassion, and courage are the three universally recognized moral qualities of men.*

He decides to leap.

The wind whistles in his ears. A blur of white sunlight glances off the deep blue water below. Then there is a splash, a sudden shock of cold, and a wall of icy water erupts around him as he plunges downwards. The world around him is sapphire blue and still, and silver streams of sunlight light the depths.

Be brave, Wenming’s voice, saying it into his ear, but that is impossible. Ma Wenming died years ago.

And then Zheng He wakes up.

The next day, before sunrise, he summons Li Wei again.

“Have you rested, Admiral?”

“Rested? May I remind you, Li, that I have over a hundred ships to command?”

“Pardons, Admiral, but all night as well as all day?”

Zheng He presses his fingers to his eyelids. When he was younger, perhaps, the work the Emperor has given him was tiring at the most. But grey has begun to thread his hair, and everything he does seems to take a toll on him.

“Put me ashore.” He says, suddenly.

Li Wei’s eyebrows rise. “Admiral?”

“You heard what I said.”

“You have made up your mind?”

“Put me ashore. The fleet will sail to Hormuz without me.” He removes from his sleeve a sheet of paper. In the pre-dawn light it is thin and translucent as a moth’s wing. He has spent the early hours of the morning setting his brush to it, covering it with row upon row of carefully inked characters. “For when the fleet leaves for Hormuz.”

Li Wei takes it.

By the time Zheng He is settled on one of the white sand beaches that dot the shore the first rays of the sun have already coloured the sky a hesitant, faint blue, bathing his distant fleet in a myriad of shadow and light. As per Zheng He’s own rule, Li Wei leaves him with a crackling fire, and enough food and fresh water to last him three days, but no more than that. *Without water I have seven days.* Zheng He thinks. He swallows and nods Li Wei a farewell, choosing to watch the distant ships across the water as the rowboat the landing party has brought with them rows back without him.

Having nothing to do for once, the sun rises and sets over Calicut with astonishing speed. He does not touch the food, instead watching the stars begin to show overhead. He knows the names of every which one he can use to find his way, but either the dull thirst beginning to set in or his gnawing hunger has caused that knowledge to seep from his mind.

He does not know how long he remains awake. A fit of coughs racks him in the night, and in the morning he coughs and sees droplets of blood spattered on the white sand. For a long time he thinks that sleep will never overtake him, but eventually he does.

Calicut, 1407

The first voyage had been the worst.

The first night in his cabin, Zheng He had been unable to sleep. Eventually it had gotten so bad that he had had to rise and make his way above decks, the better to lean against the gunwale and feel the cold sea wind buffeting his face. Outside the distant stars, which had always calmed him down in past years, only seemed to agitate him more.

He places his hands a shoulder width apart on the gunwale and watches the dark sea in silence, lost in thought of storms and shipwrecks and impossibly high waves. It is a while before he realizes he is being spoken to.

“Ma He.”

He turns.

The man who has suddenly appeared beside him bears him an astonishing resemblance, although he has died long ago. Both men’s eyes are almond shaped and obsidian black, although Zheng He’s hair is still dark and his father’s has become streaked with grey. The latter approaches and leans beside him against the gunwale, dark eyes scanning the sea.

“You’re scared.” Says Ma Haji.

“Yes, Father.”

“You fear death.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Why?”

Zheng He swallows. “Perhaps because of what lies there.”

“Why fear it?”

“Father, this is the fear of the unknown.”

Ma Haji strokes the wooden railing beneath his arms with one finger. “Look around you, Ma He. Where are you going?”

“The ship is on course to Champa.”

“And after that?”

“Java. Malacca. Aru.”

“Afterwards?”

“After that I cannot say for sure.”

“And do you know what Champa is like?”

“No, Father.”

“Do you fear it?”

He thinks before answering. “No. I have been there. I have seen the sun rise there, and at Java, and Malacca, and above the mountains of Ceylon besides. Every journey brings another sunrise, and I have seen a thousand. I don’t think I fear it.”

Ma Haji smiles. “Precisely. Be brave, Ma He.”

At dawn, two days after the fleet has left for Hormuz, the crew scatters Zheng He’s ashes over the sea.

Li Wei stands at the stern of a *baochuan*, the revolving sail of one of the ship’s nine masts casting him in shade. The sheet of paper Zheng He has left him is clutched tightly in one hand.

He has not read it yet, but now he opens it, his eyes roving over the lines of clear writing, mouthing the words to himself as he reads.

In the course of a thousand sunrises and seven voyages we have traversed more than one hundred thousand li of immense water spaces, and have beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising sky-high. We have set eyes on barbarian regions far away hidden in a blue transparency of light vapours, while our sails, loftily unfurled like clouds, day and night continued their course with starry speed, breasting the savage waves as if we were treading a public thoroughfare.

The fleet now sails on to Hormuz without me- I am on my own voyage now. I know not where that may lead, and I know not how I will get there, but it is another voyage all the same. For what is another sunrise, except for a new day, and a new adventure?

- Calicut, written in the reign of the Xuande Emperor

Li Wei finishes reading and folds the paper closed, looking upwards as he does so.

The sun has risen above the horizon before him, lighting the sky with swashes of orange and gold. Another morning has come- it is a new day once more.

Fiction – Group 1

WINNER

A Lifetime Experience of the Ming Treasure Voyage

St Stephen's College Preparatory School, Wong, Leah – 8

“Leah! Come and see this gorgeous painting of Zheng He!” My mum called out in the China Historical Museum. I quickly darted to her and caught sight of an enormous painting. It showed Zheng He and one of his giant, nine-mastered “treasure ships” on which he made seven voyages around the Indian Ocean.

The painting was so vivid that I couldn't help myself by secretly touching that massive ship when no one was looking. Suddenly, a flash of lightning came out of it! I was so terrified that I shut my eyes. When I opened my eyes, I was on a stupendous ship with a pair of dragon eyes on it. Seconds later, someone shouted at me, “Dr. Wong! Please help! Someone is dying!!”

“Huh? Are you calling me?” I questioned.

“Yes! YOU! Dr. Wong!” he cried as he dragged me into a small room.

I was still confused about everything as my eyes couldn't believe what they were witnessing. I saw a sailor lying on the floor, he was very pale and weak, his teeth were bleeding and his body was shaking. The sick sailor said, “I can't move my arms and legs, my body is in pain. I have tried all kinds of herbs but they didn't work. Unfortunately, most of my sailor friends are suffering from the same disease...” He explained and his eyes started shutting. I felt helpless and I didn't know how to respond. I quickly ran out to seek help.

I was panicking and running around like a headless chicken. Suddenly, the air filled with a familiar smell. The smell led me to a tiny storage room filled with tributes from other countries. There were weird stones, species, furs and some plants. I surprisingly found a box of lemons labelled, “from Vietnam”. All of a sudden, I remembered that my science teacher had mentioned a type of disease called Scurvy. The best remedy to cure this disease were the lemons! I grabbed them and gave them to the sailors, I explained the benefits of eating lemons every day. I also suggested that they grow lemons on the ship. The sailors were so stunned by this discovery, but they decided to try it.

After a few days, all of the sailors recovered completely. They were extremely thankful for me. However, I was in deep thoughts worrying about my return home and started to feel homesick. My sailor friend, Ping, approached me and said, “Dr. Wong! Admiral Zheng He

wants to see you now!” I was overjoyed about finally meeting my hero, so I walked to his room immediately. Suddenly, a flash of lightning came out of the wall and I blacked out.

Seconds later, I found myself on the couch of the museum and my mum dashing towards me. “Where have you been?” she exclaimed.

“I guess...I was dreaming?” I replied.

Before we left, I admired the painting once again, I saw Zheng He grinning at me, as if to say thank you Dr. Wong!

Fiction – Group 2

WINNER

A True Hero

Chinese International School, Zhou, Hanyi - 8

It was a bright Sunday morning. The air was crisp and clean. I lay on my bed and opened the book *The Ming Voyages* for the hundredth time: “China’s sea ban policy, which was first issued by the Hongwu Emperor to defend China from pirates, was counterproductive. Fortunately, Zheng He, with the support of the visionary Yongle Emperor, embarked on seven voyages across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, traveled as far as to East Africa and covered a total distance equal to three times around the world.”

“Wow!” I stared at the page and sighed in admiration.

Suddenly, a blinding flash of light whirled into a tornado, turned bigger and stronger, and lifted me off my feet. I tried to pull myself down, but the tornado spun around and whisked me into nothingness.

I slowly opened my eyes, my whole body aching. I scanned my surroundings. Men with long hair and buns walked around on the streets, wearing beizi and strings of jingling coins on their silk belt. Neigh! A troop of soldiers paraded through the streets on horseback.

“Who are you? Where are you from?” a tall, old man with deep creases on his face leaned over and asked. His voice was kind but authoritative. I didn’t know what was happening. I didn’t know where I was. All I knew was that I was not where I was supposed to be.

I plucked up my courage and asked “Where am I?”

“Liu Jia Harbour” the old man replied with a brief puzzled frown.

“I—I’m Li-Ming. Uh-um, and who are you?” I asked hesitantly, still trying to figure out why the name of Liu Jia Harbour sounded so familiar. His reply pulled my eyebrows to the top of my head.

“I’m Zheng He.”

My jaw dropped. Zheng He? Liu Jia Harbour? How could it be??

“My men found you unconscious on the street. Looks like you are fine now. I gotta go.” Zheng He gave me a gentle but firm pat on the shoulder, smiled, and walked away.

Still in shock, I looked around. Red and yellow flags on the streets waved in the clear blue sky. People crowded the streets, cheering and grinning from ear to ear. In the distance was a fleet of huge wooden ships with staggered towering masts and bamboo-battened sails flapping in the early morning sea breeze. Sailors in white uniforms blew vibrant red conch shells in a ceremonial tune. A flag embroidered with the Chinese characters ‘Xuande’ rose higher than all the other ones.

Xuande. It rang a bell... *Xuande*.

Abruptly, I remembered Xuande was Yongle's grandson. He was the one who...

I instantly knew what was happening. Zheng He was about to embark on his seventh voyage. Seventh voyage... *Zheng He got seriously ill and died on his seventh voyage*. The line from the book flashed before my eyes. I couldn't let him go! I had to save him!

"Excuse me! Sorry! I need to get through!" I yelled as I shoved through the sea of citizens. I saw disapproving glances as I rushed through the crowd, but I kept on going.

At long last, I caught a glimpse of Zheng He.

"Zheng He!" I called out in desperation. "Don't go!"

Zheng He heard me. He stopped and strode towards me. "What is it, kid?"

I didn't know how to explain. How could Zheng He believe me? "You... can't go...! You... will die." I muttered.

Zheng He raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

I took a deep breath, gathered all my courage and said "I know it sounds bizarre, but I know what's going to happen. You will die on this voyage. You can't go!"

Zheng He seemed more amused than annoyed. "I know kids love making up stories, but this is not the time."

It was only then that a light bulb went off in my head. I remembered his name – *Ma He*, his real name before he served the emperor. "I have to persuade Zheng He not to go," I told myself. This may be my only chance of convincing him.

I screamed out the words: "Ma He. Don't go. Please, listen to me!"

Zheng He froze. He slowly turned back. "How did you know my real name? I... I've never told anyone. The emperor ordered me not to tell anyone when he gave me the new name."

I crossed my fingers, wishing Zheng He would believe me this time. "Ma He! I know this sounds absurd, but you will die on this voyage! You can't go!" I was half shouting, half pleading, hoping Zheng He would stay.

Zheng He peered at me with a curious look, chin propped on his hand, trying to make sense of everything I had just said.

After what it felt like an eternity, he slowly uttered the words "I have traveled enough to know strange things do exist. Maybe you know something I don't know. Maybe I will die on this voyage. But no matter what, I have to go. As long as I am still breathing, I have a purpose to serve — to spread the glory of China to the whole world." His chiseled face looked a bit tired and weather-worn, but his voice was firm and his eyes sparkled with hope. With that, he turned around and walked toward his ships, slowly but determinedly, each step putting another strain on his body.

I opened my eyes and found myself lying in the comfort of my own bed again, still grabbing tight to the book. The sight of Zheng He walking away stuck in my mind: An old man with a slightly hunched back, in an arduous gait, along with all the hardship that comes with years at sea. My tears came rolling down. Then I remembered a saying: *A true hero isn't measured by the size of his strength, but by the strength of his heart.*

Fiction – Group 3

WINNER

The Night of the Crimson Fleet

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Jamison, Philippa - 12

The calm sea lapped gently at the rocks, the waves dribbling over the smooth, golden sand; it was days like this that she wished would never end. The soft murmur of the breeze, the rustling of the trees, the sky, threaded with clouds, all so serene. The setting sun was a ruby in the sky, slowly descending before plunging the world into darkness. Far away, she heard a voice call her name.

“Suriyani, dinner is ready!”

She sank her hands deeper into the sand. It came again. Grudgingly, she stood up and started to walk. Before going far, Suriyani took one last longing look at the bay. She breathed a heavy sigh and turned around, in the corner of her eye, she saw something on the horizon. She stared at it, trying to figure out what it was, and kept watching until it dawned on her. A ship!

She ran until her throat burned, past towns and farms to a small house on the outskirts of town.

Exasperated, she burst through the door of her home. “They’re coming!” She yelled into the living-room. Her mother looked at her in disbelief. “Sit down and eat dinner right now! I’ve been waiting for ages.”

“B-But the ship! They’re coming and we-” Suriyani stuttered.

Her mother pointed to the empty chair next to her, and Suriyani had no choice but to sit down.

They sat at the worn down, wooden table in silence. The family was very poor, and to say their house was shabby would be an understatement, it was dilapidated! Despite its state, it was the only place that they could call home. In the corner of the room, slouched in a battered armchair with ripped fabric, was an old woman, Aunt Abaasa. She was broken, ruined after the death of her brother, a soldier who died fighting invaders. Although most family members managed to keep going after the tragedy, Aunt Abaasa never recovered. She always seemed distant.

“So, you were talking about something before dinner. What were you going to say?” Asked Suriyani’s mother.

“There was a ship, a big one!” Suriyani told her worriedly, and so Suriyani and her mother agreed to go investigate and find what was going on. The mother prayed that they weren’t hostile, she couldn’t bear to lose another person to pirates. Just as she was about to leave, she slid a dagger out of the drawer.

It was late evening, and chilly. A strong gust of wind swayed Suriyani’s shiny black hair, as her dark skin shone in the moonlight. She was the spitting image of her mother, from her wavy black hair to her big, brown eyes. They walked through the placid village, down the

silent roads, to the beach. The hushed atmosphere was almost eerie. And then they saw it. The boat was coming into view. It floated gracefully through the water, pulled by its blood-red sails. Suddenly, it stopped. Confused, they both squinted to see what was happening. After a while, a small lifeboat was rowed to shore by two men. Waves crashed against the rocks by the harbour, carelessly flinging water as they went. The sea spat at the small lifeboat, slowly drenching both the boat and the people inside. They rocked in the boat for what seemed like half an hour, making little progress for much of it. Eventually, after a lot of hard rowing, they made it to shore.

Slowly, they floated towards the beach in their small boat, and they climbed out onto the sand. One of the men was short and plump. His face was as pale and round as the moon, and he had a limp moustache. The second of the men was the opposite. He was tall and muscular, with a chiselled face, and his skin had a warm, golden-brown tan. They had only just stood up on the beach when they were stopped by Suriyani's mother, pointing her dagger right at them. She glared at them. "What are you doing here?" She hissed. The two men stumbled backwards, into the freezing midnight water. "Bring everyone in the village down here, immediately!" Shouted Suriyani's mother at her daughter. Suriyani immediately started down the path to the village, she didn't want to argue with her mother now, not when she was like this.

Suriyani's mother clutched the dagger she had brought tighter in her hand, these men were pirates, she was sure of it, and they weren't here for a good reason. "What is your business here, bringing a huge ship like that here?" She re-asked them angrily. "We-we came from China to share our valuable items." The first pirate stuttered.

"Pah!" The mother spat. "That's the worst story I've ever heard! You pirates are unwelcome here!"

She looked behind her.

It was a sight, seeing a stampede of people, squashing themselves onto that thin path. To say that it was hectic was an understatement. Everyone hurtled towards the beach, desperate to see what was going on; each person stopped in their tracks once they saw the two men. They weren't from Malacca, that was for sure. A crowd formed around the pirates. "They come from China! To take our land and our valuables!" Suriyani's mother yelled into the crowd but quieted when she saw him, the mighty village chief, standing before them. Everyone dropped to their knees. "Let them speak." He croaked, as he gestured to the pirates. They stood up straighter. "I am Bo-Cheng, from China, and we are offering you valuable goods of ours, not stealing." Spoke the first pirate. The pirate talked about how they were here to help, and that all they wanted was permission to dock their boat here. Everyone looked at the chief to answer. Surely he wouldn't let these pirates with a terrible excuse bring their boat here.

"Yes, you may dock your boat here." He answered. Suddenly a huge uproar came from the crowd. Though they tried to change his mind, no one could oppose his word. The pirates would arrive tomorrow.

It was late night once everyone was walking back, while they did, many of the villagers were plotting against the pirates. They didn't want those thieves on their land. "We have to do something!" A village boy called Haissam told a group of people who were also upset about the chief's poor decision. "We'll fight them!" he commanded. Everyone shouted in agreement. "Build an army!" He cheered. Everyone shouted again. They agreed to meet at midnight to discuss the situation, at Haissam's house.

Suriyani arrived home quickly, and she went to her room and waited for her mother.

It had been a few hours of pretending to be asleep when Suriyani leapt off the lumpy, hard mattress and creaked down the stairs. She approached the dusty, wooden door, thinking no one had seen her. Little did she know, her mother had seen the whole thing.

She journeyed down the little path in the dead of night. Haissam's house wasn't far, and she arrived quickly. The group talked for a few hours but came to an agreement that they would fight while they weren't expecting them: right then.

The sound of clanking metal was deafening. Knives pulled out of their sheaths, bows and arrows, anything that would inflict damage. There was an air of excitement, of confidence—they were ready.

Back at Suriyani's house, her mother was contemplating what to do. She couldn't let her daughter die fighting, but she was sure that there was no way to convince her not to go. Her mother sighed, she knew what she had to do.

It was hectic on the ship, orders being screamed, opposing ones being shouted from somewhere else. They were going to dock at Malacca, give away the treasure, and then leave; or so they thought. As they came closer to the beach, they saw a strange sight. A few hundred people lined up on the beach, glaring menacingly at their boat. They wielded knives, bows and arrows and even large sticks. "Bo-Cheng what are you doing staring off into the distance? Get on the task, you imbecile!" Yelled commander Fei-Hong, the captain of this ship, as fiercely as a lion. "Commander, the islanders seem to be rebelling; there they are on the beach!" The commander went red. Suddenly, she started yelling out commands. "Ready the cannons! Send out the army! We must fight them now!" She yelled, panicked. Hundreds of men hurried onto boats, rowing out towards the beach, while others manned the canons.

As they stood on the beach, they saw them coming. Suriyani clutched her stick tighter, she was ready for whatever they had.

She saw it, a black ball in the sky, a cannonball. Frozen in fear, she heard her mother's muffled voice in the distance. Her mother held a dagger, ready to fight the invaders alongside her. The cannonball shot through the sky, but she couldn't move. Her eyes widened, for the very last time. The light left her eyes.

Fiction – Group 6 WINNER

The Ming Treasure Voyage

Harrow International School Shanghai, Shen, Skye - 11

Hello and welcome to the history show. Today we will be talking about the Ming Treasure Voyages. It all happened from 1405 to 1433. The voyages were started by Zhu Di, The Yongle Emperor.

There are many important people involved in the voyages, one of who is the Yongle emperor, Zhu Di. He was a friend of Zheng He and also the emperor from 17 July 1402 to 12 August 1424. Zheng He was the main leader of the fleets. His dad, Ma He, was captured because he resisted the great Ming empire. He was then forced to be a servant, but his son, Zheng He and Zhu Di became friends and then Zheng He became one of Zhu Di's most trusted generals. Zheng He died on the way back to Nanjing on the seventh voyage. His body was buried in the ocean at Calicut, India. Then he was given an official tomb in Nanjing, although his body never made it there.

The seven voyages all happened from 1405 to 1433. The first one was from 1405 to 1407, featuring 27,000 troops and 317 ships. The fleet visited many places such as Champa (central Vietnam), Siam (today's Thailand), Island Java, Straits of Malacca, Cochin and the Kingdom of Calicut on the Southwestern coast of India. On his return, Zheng He put down a pirate uprising in Sumatra, bringing the pirate chief, an overseas Chinese, back to Nanjing for punishment. The second voyage was from 1407 to 1409, featuring 68 ships, traveling to Champa, Java, Siam, Cochin, Ceylon and Calicut. The third voyage was from 1409-1411, featuring 48 treasure ships, with 30,000 troops. Zheng He visited many of the same places from the first voyage but also traveled to Malacca on the Malay Peninsula and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). When fighting broke out between Zheng He's forces and those of a small kingdom, Zheng He put down the fighting, captured the king and brought him back to China where he was released by the emperor.

The fourth voyage was from 1413 to 1415, featuring 63 ships and 28,000 troops. It visited many of the same places, including Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. The fifth voyage was from 1417 to 1419. The main reason for this voyage was to return 17 tributes from South Asia. On this trip Zheng He ventured even further, first to Aden at the mouth of the Red Sea, and then on to the east coast of Africa, stopping at the city states of Mogadishu and Brawa (in today's Somalia), and Malindi (in present day Kenya). The sixth voyage was from 1421 to 1422, with 41 ships. Zheng He went to many of the previously visited Southeast Asia places and India's courts and stopped on the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the coast of Africa, mainly to return nineteen ambassadors to their homelands. Two years later on 12th August 1424, the Yongle emperor died. His successor, the Hongxi Emperor, put the voyages on a halt! Unfortunately, he died the very next year of a heart attack. The Hongxi emperor's successor,

Xuande Emperor, allowed one last voyage for Zheng He and his crew. The last, but not least voyage was the seventh voyage, from 1431 to 1433, with more than a hundred ships and over 27000 men! It was more like a farewell voyage than a treasure voyage like the other six voyages. Zheng He unfortunately died on the way back. After that the money and resources were shifted to build a big, powerful, strong, beautiful wall to keep the annoying neighbors (the Mongles) out.

There were many interesting things that the Chinese brought back from the voyages and once they brought back an actual living GIRAFFE! The Yongle Emperor He was extremely shocked because it looked very similar to a Chinese mythical beast, and when seeing it, it meant that the right emperor was on the throne.

China was impressive in building ships four times bigger than Marco Polo's ships and they also built a large quantity of them, as well as a great giant walls. The Chinese exploring spirit has helped human society progress.

Fiction – Group 7 WINNER

My Friend Zheng He

Korean International School Springboard, Mak, Arthur - 16

It is 1402, my 19th year and the beginning of my career as a sailor in the Emperor's Fleet. Our Emperor, Zhu Di, has ordered our admiral, Zheng He, to explore all the countries around China and beyond. Right now we are sailing to Indonesia to trade. Below the deck that I am standing on, our ship is crammed with treasures -- fine porcelain vases, bales of silk, gold and silver and many other things from our country to trade and give as gifts to the kings and important people of the countries we explore. We have been to Indonesia many times before, but Zheng He has explored countries much farther away. Some of the older sailors say that he has been to countries where people have black skin and there are strange animals with enormous ears and long twisting noses, and others with long legs and necks. Some sailors say they were on the ship that brought some of these strange creatures back to China as gifts to the Emperor from Zheng He.

Our emperor wants to know everything about the world and has entrusted Zheng He to go out and explore the countries that surround China. When Zheng He was a slave in Zhi Di's father's household, Zhu Di recognized how special Zheng He was. His name was not always Zheng He. He was born as Ma He in a Muslim family. Growing up, he dreamed of being an adventurer like his father and grandfather before him, so it was lucky for him that he was captured and taken as a slave to serve the emperor and that Prince Zhu Di recognized how special Ma He was, because when Zhu Di became emperor, he promoted Ma He to Admiral of the Fleet and changed his name to Zheng He. Zheng He's dream had come true, he could now explore the world.

I think Zheng He becomes popular with people in different countries. In our next journey, I have a map that I got from the pirates that we encountered. The map leads us to an island with huge treasures. Once we realize this, we all shout with huge excitement because we want to get our hands on these precious things. Of course, we can't stop thinking of the treasures. They are not just only for us, but they are also for our people in China as presents. Zheng He is right, we are supposed to share with our people first.

Non-Fiction – Group 1 WINNER

Life Journey of a Great Man

Regents Primary School of Shenzhen, Chiu, Long Kwan Isaac - 8

The story took place during the Ming Dynasty. Zheng He was an outstanding navigator and he was revered in the Chinese history. The purposes of the voyages were to establish trade and strengthen the relationship between China and other countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Middle East and Africa.

In Zheng's lifetime, he made 7 journeys and visited more than 30 countries and areas in the span of 28 years. He used compasses and ocean maps to help him. The farthest country he reached was Africa. He was able to break the ice between China and other foreign countries successfully, building up the relationship of the two nations, started the trade between the two places. Unfortunately he died in his last ocean journey and he never came back to China, but his contribution and stories never end...

Indeed, there are a lot of interesting and funny things we can share from the 7 ocean journeys made by Zheng. First, the fleets ranged from 48 to 317 ships, which was unimaginably massive in its scale in every journey. Every day, all the people ate, drank and slept together. They built up a good relationship with one another. During weekends, they had parties and they danced for fun too.

Second, in Zheng's every voyage, he drew detailed maps and gathered information like the local climate and cultures in the areas his fleet explored when he arrived at other countries and areas. When Zheng He first met the people from Africa, they found their skin colour intriguing and different. This sentiment, however, was echoed by the African, who thought the Chinese looked strange too. One thing they noticed was that although the skin of the Africans were all black, their palms and teeth were white. Another interesting story was their voyage to India. The Indians used their hands to eat, grabbed the food and put it directly into their mouths, which the Chinese found strange and unhygienic. But the most interesting thing was that they also brought back animals like giraffes and zebras that the Chinese had never seen before. When Zheng and his team saw the giraffes, they screamed loudly as they were very scared. There were also elephants, lions, snakes and leopards. In fact, there were a lot of different species of animals in Africa.

Third, during the 7 ocean journeys, Zheng's fleet had met pirate fleets a few times in the ocean. Luckily the soldiers on his fleet fought with them with their weapons and they were able to get back to China safely. I have seen some movies about pirates before, although the

story didn't mention anything about the victory of Zheng's fleet, I dreamed of it myself and seemed like seeing all the action taken place. I think it must be exciting and exhilarating, as they might use guns, or knives, or even Chinese Kung Fu.

I think Zheng He's ocean journeys are good stories and could demonstrate good examples to encourage us to broaden our horizon. Other than reading books, we can create the chances to experience different adventures in life. People should try to travel and learn about different cultures all over the world, too.

Non-Fiction – Group 2 WINNER

The Ming Dynasty Treasure Fleet- Know More About Zhang He

*Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary & Primary School,
Lai, Suet Ching - 10*

If you love Chinese history, you should definitely know about this mighty fleet admiral. Yes, it is Zhang He. He is famous for his amazing voyages, for showing how rich and grand is China, but surely some people hate him a lot.

So let's start with who is Zhang He. He was actually a mariner, explorer and diplomat. Which was quite a lot of job for one person! He was born in Yunnan, in a Muslim family was named "Ma He", later adopted by the conferred surname of Zhang from empire Yongle.

As was one of Yongle empire's favorite, Zhang He rose up to the top of imperial hierarchy and served as a commander of the southern capital. He then thought of a fabulous plan of showing how grand and rich China is, so he took a lot of valuable treasures from China, built a massive royal boat and loaded those jewelries and presents on to that boat. As Zhang He was Yongle empire's favorite and Zhang He's plan was good for China's sake, so Yongle empire agreed.

Zhang He's first fantastic voyage was held at 11th July ,1405, from Suzhou. Which was an enormous fleet containing 317 gigantic ships and held about 28,000 crew men. Hang He's fleets visited Brunei, Java, Thailand and Southeast Asia India, the horn of Africa, and Arabia, dispensing and receiving goods along the way. Zhang He presented gifts of gold, silver, and silk; in return, China received such novelties as ostriches, zebras, camels, and ivory from the Swahili. The giraffe he brought back from Malinda was named to be a *quilin* and taken as proof of the favor of heavens upon the administration. They loved the giraffe as it was their first time seeing this kind of creature, which had such a long neck

As others always boast about how spectacular and large Zhang He's ships were, I will now tell you how astounding the size could actually be. The largest ships in the fleet, the Chinese treasure ships described in Chinese chronicles, would have been many times larger than any other wooden ship. ever recorded in history, surpassing *Lorient*. 65 meters long, which was actually built in the late 18th century. The first ships to attain 126 m long were 19th century steamers with iron hulls. Some scholars argue that it is highly unlikely that Zheng He's ship was 450 feet (137.2 m) in length, some estimating that they were 390–408 feet (118.9–124.4 m) long and 160–166 feet (48.8–50.6 m) wide instead while others put them as minute as 200–250 feet (61.0–76.2 m) in length, which would make them smaller than the equine, supply, and troop ships in the fleet. His ship was really worth talking about.

Zhang He generally sought to attain his goals through diplomacy, and his large army awed most would-be enemies into submission. But a contemporary claimed that Zhang He “walked like a tiger” and did not shrink from horrid violence when he considered it very necessary to impress foreign peoples with China’s military might. He suppressed pirates who had long plagued Chinese and southeast Asian oceans that made t When Zhang He had his 7th voyage, he successfully visited the foreign countries, but we do wish we could say the same about his return to Beijing.

There were a lot of theories of Admiral Zhang He’s death. Some said the admiral died in 1433 (at age 61–62), which may have happened during or after the voyage. Another theory is that Zhang He continued to serve as the defender of Nanjing, dying in 1435. But we believe that he died in the return of their last voyage, which was a sad memory.

Zhang He died on the trip back to Beijing. He was wrapped with a few layers of white rags and was thrown in the Like most people known, he had defeated, one of the most water. A tomb was built for Zhang He at the southern slope hem horrid and foul. feared and strong respected pirate captains, in information the pirate captain was excellent on fighting. , won, and returned him back to China for execution. The pirate attack was quite sudden and horrifying. It all started when they were sailing, the pirates ship came and wanted to rob the jewelry and the gifts other foreign countries gave them. But of course, hang He this mighty, brave admirer won.

He also waged a land war against the Kingdom of Kotte on Ceylon, and he made displays of military force when local officials threatened his fleet in Arabia and East Africa. From his fourth voyage, he brought envoys from thirty states who traveled to China and paid their loyal, respects at the Ming court.

Admiral Zhang He is amazing, he is powerful and wealthy. The ideal life! Share this story and sob, giggle, and wow at Zhang He! He is a mighty historical admiral that we should all learn, admire from him. He should be highly respected by us, as he made other countries picture our beloved China grand and rich. Even though it was kind of a massive waste of money, but it’s totally worth it.

Non-Fiction – Group 3 WINNER

The Great Voyages of the Great Ming Dynasty

Immaculate Heart of Mary College, Chou, Cheuk Yan Ambrose - 12

The trace of the Great Chinese explorer, Zheng He, can be found everywhere in Asia. During last Christmas holiday, I travelled to Indonesia with my family. In the trip, I saw a statue of a Chinese man in the Sam Po Kong Temple, which is in Semarang, a city in Indonesia. Then, I found the words, “General Zheng He” below the statue. Who is Zheng He? How come he can attract so many tourists, or even Indonesians to pay a visit there? Later, our tour guide even told me that this city was actually named after him!

Zheng He, originally named Ma He, was born in a Muslim family in Kunming, Yunnan, China. It was not a great place or a capital like Nanjing. However, he was a well-educated man. He was also known as San Bao, which refers to the Three Jewels in Buddhism. As a eunuch serving the Ming Emperor, he once assisted the Yongle Emperor to ascend the throne and was given the surname ‘Zheng’, so he changed his name to ‘Zheng He’ afterwards.

Zheng He was well known as a navigator, but he was also an admiral diplomat. Despite he had a shining career in the Yongle Emperor’s court, he did have an unbearable past. Unfortunately, his father was killed in the wars between the Ming armies and Mongol forces.

Zheng He was captured by the Ming armies in Yunnan in 1381. In 1385, he was ordered to serve the young Zhu Di, who is the Yongle Emperor later. Therefore, Zheng He was one of the Yongle Emperor’s favorites in his court. Zheng He at first was only a soldier of Zhu Di in the war of 1402; however, after helping Zhu Di become the Yongle Emperor, Zheng He rose to the top of the imperial hierarchy and served as commander of the southern capital, Nanjing.

Later, the Yongle Emperor ordered him to sail to the west for the first time in 1405 because the emperor wanted to showcase the powerful Ming Dynasty to other countries. Also, he wanted to make friends with other Asian countries, and get more trading partners as well. The Yongle Emperor chose Zheng He because he knew lots of things about foreign countries, and Zheng was a well-trained diplomat. Zheng He had the total trust from the Emperor who believed that Zheng would never betray him.

Zheng He started his naval expeditions with 27 thousand people on board. There were six kinds of ships all together. They were: Chinese treasure ships, supply ships, troop transport, Fuchuan warships, patrol boats and water tankers. The Chinese treasure ships were the largest ships in the world. Zheng He started the voyage at Liu Jia port and went to more than 30 countries in Asia and Africa during his voyages.

During Zheng's voyages, he taught people from other countries the skills of farming and well-drilling, giving out silk in exchange for local goods to help the Yongle Emperor develop friendship with other Asian countries. There was, of course, cultural exchange between the Ming Emperor's court and Southeast Asian countries like India, the Medalees and Africa. Zheng introduced the worship of Mazu, the Chinese goddess of the sea, to different countries; so many temples were built for this traditional religion. In return, some countries offered China some special gifts like giraffes and camels. When Zheng He brought back these animals with him, the people of China were overjoyed to see all these new faces. They even sent someone to study these animals carefully. Though the Treasure Voyages were full of excitement, some people thought that the expeditions were used for searching for the Jianwen Emperor, as he disappeared after the victory of the Yongle Emperor in Nanjing. In 1424, when the Yongle Emperor passed away, Zheng He had completed his great missions, six voyages at that time.

Although China could attain a lot of lands, products and new technology from the countries or cities in Asia like Calicut, a city located on India's western coast. However, the six voyages drained a lot of money from the Ming government. The expenses of the voyages included the cost for making a ship and taking some special products from China in exchange for something good and exotic. After the death of the Yongle Emperor, his elder son, Zhu Gaozhi, became the Hongxi Emperor. During his nine-month reign, Zhu Gaozhi put an end to all the treasure fleet constructions and maintenance. Though everyone might find that was pity to stop all the voyages, but more money of the Ming government could be saved then because of having less expenses on the lavish and ambitious naval expeditions.

The Hongxi Emperor, a practical Confucian, preferred to spend money on fending off the Mongols in the north and feeding people in famine-ravaged provinces instead of having ambitious voyages which were too expensive to afford.

However, when the Hongxi Emperor died less than a year during his reign in 1426, his 26-year-old son became Xuande Emperor. The new Emperor was a happy man who had no worry about money at all, so he decided to commission Zheng He for a voyage again. Like his grandfather, the Yongle Emperor, the Xuande Emperor also showcased the power of the Great Ming Dynasty through travelling to other countries, and he thought that was also a good way to raise more income for the government revenue. He, according to some historical records, was an ambitious man who wanted more land and power, not for his country, but for his selfish desires.

In 1432, the 61-year-old Zheng He set out with his largest fleet ever for one final trip around the Indian Ocean, sailing all the way to Malindi on Kenya's east coast and stopping at trading ports along the way. On his return, as the fleet sailed east from Calicut, Zheng He died. He was buried at the sea, although legend says that the crew returned with a braid of his hair and his shoes for burial in Nanjing. He used 28 years to complete seven voyages by 1433.

In 1433-1436, Zheng He's companions, Ma Huan, Gong Zhen and Fei Xin published a book with the accounts of their travels to let everybody in China know about the great work Zheng He accomplished. His great achievement was indeed very important to Chinese history and Asia. To praise his great feat, a statue of Zheng He was made and erected at the Stadthuys Museum in Malacca City in Malaysia. In the opening ceremony of Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, China also had a performance to thank the great mission completed by Zheng He, our national hero.

Zheng's voyages have great impacts on today's China and the world. It bridged the trading between China and Asian countries. There are still a lot of people using his route to trade today. In fact, it could be possible that Xi Jinping got the inspiration of The Belt and Road Initiative from Zheng He's glorious sailing routes.

Zheng He is always a legend in Chinese history of navigation. His seven voyages are indeed the tests on Chinese strength and technology. It would be fantastic if we all could learn from our hero and his loyalty to his emperor in his missions. It is never too late to follow his footsteps to explore and to learn from our Asian neighbours.

Non-Fiction – Group 4 WINNER

Should America be renamed Zhengherica?

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Webb, Stephanie - 14

The year was 2001. A renowned lawyer and collector of maps by the name of Liu Gang stumbled across an ancient world map. He purchased it for 500 dollars from a small Shanghainese dealer, thinking it was probably just a modern fake. Little did he know that the map would fan the flames on a later debate surrounding the “1421 theory”.

The controversial “1421 theory” originated from the book “1421: The Year China discovered America” which was written in 2003 by Gavin Menzies, an amateur historian and former submariner in the British Royal Navy. In the book, Menzies asserted that it should be Zheng He, the great Chinese admiral, who should be credited with discovering America some 70 years before Columbus’ journey. He claimed that Zheng was the first to complete a circumnavigation of the world, stumbling across America on the way. Although many historians discarded Menzies’ theory, his book kindled a spark of debate among professionals, and later became a bestseller, along with his “1421” website.

Charged with a mission to impress foreign countries of China’s might by the Ming Emperor Yongle, Zheng He led multiple voyages around the world, establishing diplomatic relations with many nations and bringing back treasures from different cultures. His expeditions which sprawled from 1405 to 1435 were recorded in a book called “The Marvellous Visions of the Star Raft” which appeared in China around 1418. The significance of the world map that Liu had acquired was that not only did it support the descriptions of this book, but it also depicted the continents of the world including the Americas. Although Liu’s map was drawn in 1763, the copyist who drew it had imitated another map supposedly dated 1418. He made a distinction between what he himself had added and what was on the “1418 map”. After reading Menzies’ book, Liu was convinced that his map would help prove Menzies’ “1421” theory. Indeed, if it could be proven that the “1763 map” which Liu had bought was truly based on a “1418 map”, then the history of the world would have to be rewritten, but how authentic was this “1418 map”?

In the “1418 map”, the world was shown as a 3-dimensional sphere presented on a flat sheet of paper. In the top right hand corner, the message “a chart of the integrated world” was written in Chinese characters. Despite a few obvious errors, much of the world was shown in fairly accurate longitudes and latitudes. However, it is precisely the remarkable details of the map that drew criticism that the cartography was too anachronistic for it to be truly dating from the knowledge that had existed in 1418.

To start with, many critics of the “1418 map” suggested that Zheng He could not have known that the world was round at the time. However, Mr Robert Cribbs, of California state University argued that with the Chinese’ advance nautical knowledge, the royal geographers who charted Zheng He’s voyages would likely have postulated this. Nevertheless, even if they had known the world was round before Zheng He had set sail, opponents pointed out that the rendering technique of presenting a 3-dimensional world on a flat sheet was unknown in Ming Dynasty. Dr. Geoff Wade, a historian with the National University of Singapore suggested that this rendering technique was only adopted by the Chinese after the Europeans introduced it to them much later.

Instead of Liu’s map being based on a “1418 map”, Dr. Wade believed it was more likely to have been based on maps drawn by Jesuit missionaries in the 17th Century. He also pointed out that apart from them both mistakenly presenting California as an island, even a part of the text was a clear translation from Jesuit maps. Other historians also showed that China itself was poorly drawn which seems to contradict with the advance knowledge of the royal geographers, particularly regarding their own country.

Perhaps one of the most telling flaws of the “1418 map” is the precise representation of inland features such as the riverine systems and mountains. For example, the Himalayas were marked as the highest mountain range in the world; St Lawrence River and the Mississippi were both well represented. It is unfathomable how maritime sailors like Zheng He could have known the inland geography of the lands they travelled past with such accuracy.

Meanwhile, examination of Liu’s “1763 map” by experts confirmed that the vermin on the bamboo paper and the de-pigmentation of the ink did indeed date from over a hundred years ago. Unfortunately, this in no way bolsters the case that the “1763 map” was based on a “1418 map”. Besides taking the word of the copyist, how else can we verify Menzies’ 1421 theory?

If we were to analyse all the facts objectively from scratch, we should first ask: did Zheng He even have the capability to sail to America? The answer is yes, he definitely did. His flagship and other largest vessels dwarfed European ships of that century. It was 4 to 5 times bigger than Columbus’ flagship - the “Santa Maria”. Zheng He’s treasure ships were 400 feet long and 160 feet wide, carrying nine masts and twelve sails. With a double hull designed for stability and storage, they towered at several stories high, complete with lavish staterooms and opulent balconies.

In addition to having advanced vessels at their disposal, Zheng He’s team would have been skilled in numerous navigational techniques which would have allowed him to discover America. By the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, China’s naval technology was already far superior than any other nation’s. Not only could they rely on magnetic compasses, an invention dated some three hundred years prior, but they would also have been able to navigate by studying the positions of the stars. Since the 13th Century, the Chinese had printed manuals of star charts and compass bearings that allowed them to navigate in the middle of the night when the sky was clear.

Advanced navigational technology aside, favourable trade winds and currents in certain seasons could have easily carried Zheng He to the Americas. According to Menzies, “if you just go out in a plastic bathtub, the currents will just carry you there”. Perhaps the currents did indeed carry Zheng He and his 400 feet long treasure ships with fancy balconies to America.

Having established that America was within Zheng He’s reach, we should examine all the historical sources available. Unfortunately, many written records were destroyed as the political tide turned. Prompted by the depletion of treasury resulting from Emperor Yongle’s

extravagant spending on expeditions, infrastructure and defense, coupled with losses from natural disasters, the traditional Confucian court advisers who advocated frugality gained favour at the expense of the pro-expansionist Eunuch factions. Not only did this bring an abrupt end to China's golden era of exploration, but most of the records of Zheng's monumental expeditions, possibly including any evidence of excursion into the Americas, were also confiscated and destroyed.

The only written records of Zheng's expeditions still remaining today are the engraving from a stone pillar that was discovered in Fujian province and three written accounts by some of Zheng's crew members. The pillar was inscribed with descriptions of the voyages and a list of places they had visited such as Java, Sumatra, Vietnam, India, Yemen, Somalia among others but America was not one of them. Similarly, the first-hand accounts of the crew members described in detail the customs and cultures of the foreign countries they had visited as well as the souvenirs that were brought back to China, such as indigenous animals of Africa like lions and giraffes; spices from India and many more. However, there was no mention of America at all. If Zheng He had indeed reached America, why would any written record of America be missing when there are such detailed records of others?

Even if the written records of Zheng's trip to America had been destroyed, one would expect certain folklore describing Zheng's encounters with Native Americans should have survived in China, just like the Vikings had folklore recounting their interaction with Native Americans. While Menzies cited some indigenous folklore in America, such as how the Incan tribes of American were reportedly governed by Chinese admirals, he never managed to verify these. What was strange was that despite the absence of any written account of America, there was a Chinese commentary on the "1418 map" describing people with "black-red skin" and "feathers wrapped around their heads and waists" which clearly matched the appearance of Native Americans. This accurate description of the natives stands out as even more suspicious amidst a complete lack of other written evidence and could only further support the case that Liu's map was indeed based on 17th Century Jesuit maps.

If Zheng He and his crew had really landed in America, we would expect some evidence of their settlement, physical or otherwise. Indeed, in places such as Malacca and Java, many towns, caves and temples were named after Zheng He. According to Menzies and his supporters, eight different sites in America have uncovered Chinese coins and ornaments with purportedly Chinese beads. Artefacts of pre-Columbian Chinese jade have also been excavated from the sea floor in the Florida Keys and off the coast of California. However, the dates of these artefacts have not been ascertained so that they could have been from a later period while those that were found underwater could have been carried by currents from elsewhere. Importantly, if Zheng He did reach America, it seems incomprehensible that they did not leave any indelible marks anywhere in America. In contrast, the Vikings' stone outposts built by them during their brief settlement some 500 years before Columbus' discovery can still be seen today.

Apart from the lack of written and physical evidence, there was also no evidence of any exchange of gifts which would have been a customary gesture to build diplomacy whenever Zheng landed on foreign soil. The Chinese would offer their products such as silk and porcelains in exchange for local treasures such as spices, gems, medicinal herbs and even exotic animals. As such, it appears inconsistent that Zheng never brought back any exotic treasures from America such as corn from the Aztecs or gold from the Incas. Even the Europeans took back treasures such as maize, tomatoes and gold from America.

While evidence in support of “1421” theory seems to be somewhat lacking, we should consider what it would imply if Zheng He had really discovered America. Of course, history books would have to be rewritten; people would have to be re-educated and Zheng He would rise to universal fame.

However, history should not be just about labelling who discovered what in which year. Instead, history should help us understand the causes and effects of one’s actions as well as learn from people’s failures and accomplishments. In this case, the Europeans did not stop at “discovering” America but they also went on to exploit and develop the land so that America could become a superpower of the world. After all, America was not named after Columbus but rather, Amerigo Vespucci, the man who recognised the Americas as being two separate continents, later leading to exploitations of the land. Even if Zheng He had discovered America, the Chinese did not exploit the land commercially or politically. The overall course of history would therefore not have been much different.

Yet, for us to discuss the exploitation of America as if it was some great achievement just seems wrong to start with. It was the Native Americans who had been living there for thousands of years before the Europeans’ “discovery”. Many of the natives were wiped out by new diseases introduced by the Europeans or forced to surrender their lands after losing battles to the new settlers, while survivors were involuntarily moved to areas called reservations. The new European immigrants did not accord the respect the indigenous people deserved both in terms of their rights and their cultures until recent years. In contrast, if Zheng He had indeed “discovered” America, we would expect him to have extended diplomacy by an exchange of gifts with the natives instead of “conquering” a foreign people. In this scenario, America might still have retained its original name in the indigenous language rather than be named after Zheng.

Indeed, this sums up what made the Ming Treasure Voyages truly revolutionary and magnificent even if Zheng He was not the one who “discovered” America. The voyages started a new era of peaceful exchanges between nations and gave China and other places of the world a new perspective of different global cultures. They expanded the horizons for many without having one nation exploiting another for their own gains. Zheng He and his crew also conquered notorious pirates and helped sailors who had gone astray. Therefore, we should uphold the Ming Treasure Voyages as an inspiration for us to step out of our comfort zone and explore the world outside with a sense of adventure and curiosity, embracing others’ ideas without imposing our own on others. After all, you will never know what you might discover!

Non-Fiction – Group 5 WINNER

Tsz Yau Amber Chloe

Korean International School, Ting, Tsz Yau Amber Chloe - 16

In 1403 Nanjing, under the orders of Zhu Di or The Yongle Emperor, the early Ming Dynasty went through a militaristic expansion with voyages such as the seven treasure voyages. The Yongle Emperor was particularly aggressive and he wanted other countries to know how powerful China is and to perceive them as the strongest country. He decided that it is the time China should make use of the advanced technology and riches the state had to offer, for this special occasion he chose one of his most trusted general, a man he had known since he was young, Zheng He.

China had their connections, but to satisfy the demand for spices, medicinal herbs, and raw materials, Chinese merchants cooperated with Muslims and Indian traders to develop a network of trade that reached past the southeast Asian islands to the edges of the Indian Ocean. Coming from the East China ports was ginseng, celadon, lacquerware, gold and silver, horses and oxen from Korea and Japan. From the ports of southern China came hardwoods and other tree related products, ivory, rhinoceros horn, kingfisher feathers, ginger, sulfur and tin from Vietnam and Siam in the mainland Southeast Asia; cloves, nutmeg, batik fabrics, pearls, tree resins, and bird plumes from Sumatra, Java, and the Moluccas in the island southeast Asia. The Indian Ocean brought ships carrying cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, turmeric, and pepper from Calicut on the southwestern coast of India, gemstones from Ceylon (Sri Lanka), as well as woolens, carpets, and more precious stones from ports such as Hormuz on the Persian Gulf and Aden on the Red Sea.

The First Voyage, in the third lunar month of 1405, an order was issued for Zheng He and others to take command of 27,000 troops to the Western Ocean. An imperial edict, estimated date on 11th July 1405, was issued containing orders of an expedition. It was issued and addressed to Zheng He, Wang Jinghong, and others. The Yongle Emperor held a banquet for the crew on the evening before the first voyage, gifts were presented to the crew according to their rank. Sacrifices and prayers were offered to Tianfei, the indigenous goddess of the sea meant to protect fisherman and sailors. She has become a patron deity of Southern Chinese and East Asian persons. Autumn of 1405, they assembled at Qinhuai River where the shipyard was located, ready to depart from the city. The crew included sailors, builders, repairmen, soldiers, diplomatic specialists, medical personnels, astronomers and also scholars of foreign ways. According to the Taizong shilu 11th July 1405 entry about the dispatch of the fleet, Admiral Zheng He and the crew departed for the first expedition “bearing imperial letters of the countries of the Western Ocean and with gifts to their kings of gold brocade, patterned silks, and colored silk gauze, according to their status.” The treasure fleet made their first stop at Liujiagang, then the fleet was organized in squadrons, while the fleet’s crew honored the

goddess of sailors Tianfei with more prayers and sacrifices. Afterward, the fleet sailed down the Chinese coast, towards the entrance of the Min River located in Sichuan, traveling east where they awaited the northeast monsoon at the Taiping port located in Fujian. More prayers and sacrifices were then conducted for the Tianfei goddess by the crew during the wait for the northeast monsoon. The fleet then departed via the Wuhumen in Fujian.

The treasure fleet sailed to Champa, Java, Malacca, Aru, Sumatra, Lambri, Ceylon, Quilon, and Calicut. From Lambri the crew sailed straight through the Indian Ocean rather than following the Bay of Bengal coastline to Ceylon. Three days after the departure from Lambri, one of the ships split off and went to the Andaman and Nicobar Island. The treasure fleet saw the mountains of Ceylon after another six days and arrived at the western coast of Ceylon two days later. They were met with hostility from the Alagakkonara, which was a prominent feudal family that provided powerful ministers and military rulers during the medieval period in Sri Lanka, so the fleet left the place. Dreyer (2007) states that it is possible that Admiral Zheng He made port at Quilon, but there is no account confirming this because the King of Quilon was with the fleet when they returned to China in 1407. Mills (1970) states that the fleet may have had a four-month stay at Calicut. Around the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula, the fleet changed direction and began its returning journey back to China. While returning the fleet made port at Malacca again.

The Imperial order for the second voyage was issued in October 1407. The possible confusion of whether Zheng He embarked the second voyage stemmed from the fact that a Chinese envoy was dispatched before Zheng He had departed with the main body of the treasure fleet. The imperial decree for the third voyage was issued during the period of the second voyage whilst the treasure fleet was still in the Indian Ocean during that time, so either Zheng He was absent when the court issued the imperial order or he had not embarked on the second voyage. On 21st January 1409, a grand ceremony was held in honor of the goddess Tianfei. Duyvendak (1939) thinks that Zheng He could not have been on the second voyage because the ceremony was so important that Zheng He's presence was required. However, the author Fei Xin explicitly mentions Zheng He when describing the 1409 stop at the Pulau Sembilan, which strongly suggests that Zheng He had been on the second voyage according to Dreyer (2007).

The imperial order for the third voyage was issued during the first month of the seventh year of the Yongle reign. It was addressed to Zheng He, Wang Jinghong, and Hou Xian. Admiral Zheng He embarked for the third voyage in 1409, the fleet once again departed from Liujiajiang in the ninth month. They left Changle in the twelfth month for the seas, proceeding through the Wuhumen. Then making stops at Champa, Java, Malacca, Sumatra, Ceylon, Quilon, Cochin and Calicut. Traveling to Champa within 10 days, Wang Jinghong and Hou Xian making short stops at Siam, Malacca, Sumatra, and Ceylon during the detours, arriving at Ceylon in 1410. During the returning journey back to China in 1411, the fleet would engage in hostile confrontation with King Alakeshvara (Alagakkonara) of Ceylon. Alakeshvara posed a threat to the neighboring countries, the Chinese were overbearing of the Sinhalese, whom they resented and considered them disrespectful, rude and hostile. Resenting them for committing attack and piracy towards neighboring countries who had diplomatic relations with Ming China. Alakeshvara had lured Admiral Zheng He and his troops into the Kotte territory planning to launch an attack on them, Zheng He and his 2000 accompanying troops invaded Kotte, conquering its capital. They took Alakeshvara captive, his family and other high ranking officials. The Sinhalese army hastily surrounded the capital, but they were defeated in battle against the Chinese troops, meanwhile the opposing Sinhalese army was said to have

over 50,000 troops. The king and his family were taken captive to Nanjing. Admiral Zheng He returned to Nanjing in July 1411, presenting the Sinhalese captives to the Yongle Emperor. Eventually, the emperor set them free and returned them to their country. Kotte's previous legitimate dynasty had re-established themselves, from then on, the treasure fleet would experience no hostilities during visits to Ceylon on their voyages.

On December 1912, the Yongle Emperor ordered the fourth voyage, Admiral Zheng He and others were commanded to lead it. Admiral Zheng He's fleet left Nanjing in Autumn 1913. They set sail from Fujian during the 12th month of the 11th year in the Yongle reign. The fleet sailed to Champa, Kelantan, Pahang, Malacca, Palembang, Java, Lambra, Lide, Aru, Sumatra, Ceylon, Jiayile, Cochin, and Calicut. Then proceeded to Liushan, Bila, Sunla, and Hormuz. At Java, the treasure fleet delivered gifts from the Yongle Emperor, in return, the Javanese envoy arrived in China on April 1415, presenting tribute in the forms of western horses and local products while expressing their gratitude. In 1415, the treasure fleet made a stop at Sumatra during their returning journey from Hormuz, they would engage Sekandar at this point of the voyage. Sekandar was an autonomous ruler but was not recognized by the Chinese. Fei Xin described Sekandar as a false king who stole, robbed, and usurped the throne of Semudera from Zain al-'Albidin. Ma Huan twenty-five-year-old Muslim translator portrayed Sekandar as someone who attempted to overthrow the ruler, Ming Shilu noted Sekandar was the younger brother of the former king and plotted to assassinate the ruler. Admiral Zheng He had orders to launch an attack against Sekandar to restore Zain al-'Abidin as the rightful king of Semudera. Sekandar led his forces to attack the Ming forces but defeated ultimately. The Ming forces pursued Sekandar's forces to Lambri where they caught Sekandar and his whole family. King Zain al-'Abidin later expressed his gratitude by dispatching a tribute mission.

The Yongle Emperor bestowed gifts to princes, civil officials, military officers, and the ambassadors of the seventeen countries. The fifth voyage was primarily a return trip for seventeen heads of state from South Asia. They had made their way to China after Zheng He's visits to their homelands in order to present their tribute at the Ming Court. On this trip Zheng He ventured even further, first to Aden at the mouth of the Red Sea, and then on to the east coast of Africa, stopping at the city states of Mogadishu and Brawa, and Malindi. He was frequently met with hostility but this was easily subdued. Many ambassadors from the countries visited came back to China with him.

The sixth expedition of 41 ships sailed to many of the previously visited Southeast Asian and Indian courts and stops in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the coast of Africa, in order to return nineteen ambassadors to their homelands. Zheng He returned to China after less than a year, having sent his fleet onward to pursue several separate itineraries, with some ships going perhaps as far south as Sofala in present-day Mozambique.

The seventh and final voyage was sent out by the Yongle Emperor's successor, his grandson the Xuande Emperor. This expedition had more than one hundred large ships and over 27,000 men, and it visited all the important ports in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean as well as Aden and Hormuz. One auxiliary voyage traveled up the Red Sea to Jidda, only a few hundred miles from the cities of Mecca and Medina. It was on the return trip in 1433 that Zheng He died and was buried at sea, although his official grave still stands in Nanjing, China. Nearly forgotten in China until recently, he was immortalized among Chinese communities abroad, particularly in Southeast Asia where to this day he is celebrated and revered as a god. Zheng He died in 1433, either in Calicut, where he decided to stay during his 7th voyage due to failing health or on the return journey to China. Another

suggestion is that he managed to return to China, and died some years later. Immediately after Zheng He's death, the eunuch fell from favor, and most of the Chinese historical records about him and his voyages are said to have been destroyed. It may also be mentioned that the Yongle Emperor died in 1424 and that during the reign of his successor, the Hongxi Emperor, no voyages were undertaken.

The Ming court was divided into many factions, the pro-expansionist voices led by the powerful eunuch factions that had been responsible for the policies supporting Zheng Ho's voyages, and more traditional conservative Confucian court advisers who argued for frugality. When another sea voyage was suggested to the court in 1477 the vice president of the Ministry of War confiscated all of Zheng He's records in the archives, incriminating them as "deceitful exaggerations of bizarre things far removed from the testimony of people's eyes and ears." He argued that "the expeditions of San Bao the West Ocean wasted dozen of myriads money and grain and moreover the people who met their deaths may be counted in the myriads. Although he returned with wonderful precious things, what benefit was it to the state?"

Eunuch politics and wasteful policies, the voyages were over. With the Ming Dynasty ruling for 276 years from 1368 to 1644, the voyages lasting from 1405 to 1433 lasting 28 years. By the end of the century, ships could not be built with more than two masts, and in 1525 the government ordered the destruction of all oceangoing ships. The greatest navy in history, which once had 3,500 ships (the U.S. Navy today has only 480), was gone.

Poetry – Group 1 WINNER

In the Museum of China

St. Paul's Co-educational College Primary School, Lai, Cheuk Kiu Cheryl Trinity - 8

In the Museum of China, hidden in a dark corner;
There stored a hand-scribed poem, with tales by a **Sailor**.
On the description at the corner,
“Anonymous. Found in Gulf of Oman's border”.

*Sunrise and sunset - everyday is repeating;
Life and death – these episodes are revealing;
Brightness and darkness - never compromising;
Howling and prowling - only the Ocean is listening.*

The words of the poem were his last scream,
The dying embers of the **Sailor**'s dream.
All around the world he left them, it seemed,
Like whispers and musical notes under the moonbeam.

*As the fleet pulled away for its maiden sailing;
The skyline of Fujian and cheering crowds receding.
The vague ocean was opening;
To welcome the dreams and treasures the fleet was carrying.*

Found in Malacca, AC 1406.

*I was sixteen when I was brought to the sea expeditions;
The fleet was heavily weighed with ambitions.
I worked as the kitchen boy with harsh conditions;
From my cell I had no clue the big dreams was on commissions.*

Found in Ceylon, AC 1406.

*Admiral Zheng was kind and gentle but hard as steel;
The thousands of sails travelled two years under his wheel;
On our return some pirates were defeated on their kneel;
We proudly returned and rewarded with the Emperor's seal.*

Found in Calicut, AC 1407.

Weeks after months then years to tally;
 The Sailor spent days and nights in the ship's alley.
 Listening the splashes of waves, sobbing quietly;
 The **Sailor** was happy to be homeward bound finally.

*Found out his parents were gone forever;
 A eunuch like him had no one to stay together.
 The Sailor decided to part the Ocean never.
 He boarded on the fleet one more time in September.*

*The pinnacle of glory enthralled the Emperor;
 The second voyage was summoned immediately after;
 The second followed by the third until the seventh adventurer;
 Our maritime power extended farther.*

Found in India, AC 1432.

*The fleet sailed along in the Strait for defense,
 We set our foot on a shiny day on land immense.
 We were set to cut the wood and incense,
 The aroma was far-ranging and intense.*

Found in Mamacca, AC 1409

*Homeward back during the third journey,
 Our fleet was attacked by barbarians who were many,
 Harsh battles launched were worthy,
 Countless imperials were brought back to Nanjing finally.*

Found in Ceylon, AC 1420

The **Sailor** was promoted to officer and then an important staff;
 His ship pet transformed from rats to lions, ostriches and giraffe.
 He also worked with astrologers on graph;
 Sealed with all document with Zheng's monograph.

The light of the ships mirrored the stars in the sky,
 The fleet was a moving village away from home with supply.
 The Sailor admired the sky with dull and heavy eye.
 He recorded all the dates and itinerary of routes the fleets passed-by.

Lights in front of each ship were their only communication,
 The stars in the sky were their aviation.
 Imperial letters and gifts brought back were the fruition,
 Poems were the **Sailor's** attestation.

An imperial order was issued in 1430 for the seventh expedition.
 Admiral Zheng started coughing up blood with poor condition.
 The success in Ocean has also arose ruling elite's suspicion,
 The Ming Grand Voyages have then brought to a prohibition.

*Seven voyages over twenty-eight years;
Twenty-seven thousand troops with no fears;
Over two thousand ships without frontiers;
Countless monsoon and casualties never defeated Zheng and his peers.*

Found in Hormuz, AC 1433.

*Lonesome overwhelmed the troops in nightshade;
Desire captivated the Emperor to establish control over the maritime trade;
Generosity absorbed the Kingdom to project their power and foreign aid;
Glory bewildered our Ming Dynasty on the fleets we made.*

Found in Java, AC 1417

I was now old and alone.

*I failed to travel back to my parents' gravestone.
Admiral Zheng and the troop succeeded to conquer the seas unknown,
There were messages we carried all along.*

Found in Malindi, AC 1433

***Strength is not a weapon to defeat the weakness;
Numerous is not the same as meanness.
The world is shared by everyone;
Peace is the fortune for all, you are not the only one¹.***

Carved Inside Forbidden City Museum, China

Poetry – Group 2

WINNER

The Last Journey of the Greatest Explorer

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Ching, Helen - 10

Angry sea winds swallow us into the darkness.
 Mountain-high waves rock our ship to restlessness,
 Shaking the Swimming Dragon to the bottom of the gloominess.
 The raging lightning strikes our masts with no pity,
 Breaking the Dragon feet wickedly,
 Making it kneel with utmost anxiety.

Fear floods my soul, from head to toes.
 I'm frightened, but stand firmer than a boulder on a bumpy road.
 My almighty *Tianfei*, my Heavenly Princess,
 May our utmost sincerity shore up our valiant soul,
 Sweep the life-taking antagonists, again, off the road.
 I always stand by my master to his greatest loyal goal.

The holy incense lighted by my ignited heart.
 Billows of shiny smoke curling in the dark,
 Bittersweet smell of the burning wood awakens the thrilling stories.
 Icy rain and tears drip on my tired body.
 Blur my vision, the indelible memory of glory.
 We are valorous explorers and always defeat enemies.

Standing proudly on the deck of the Swimming Dragon,
 Five thousand fierce-looking pirates roared and screamed.
 Blood-thirsty arrows soared like lightning beats.
 The “whoosh” roared inches beside our ears.
 The powerful Ming Treasure Fleet will never retreat.
 Loyal soldiers stood firm and neat.

Panic flooded my body, from ears to soles.
I was scared, but stood firmer than big tree bole.
I charged forward with honor and spear,
Corpses and blood spattered on sea water.
Mercy to the Corpse Flowers, they almost drooped.
Our courageous soldiers restored peace.

We sailed to Sinhalese Kotte kingdom and offered harmony,
Welcomed by the hostile and given agony.
Lured into the land of overbearing enemies
Deadly weapons were waiting to pierce our motionless bodies.
We were outnumbered as minority,
Waiting for our wise master to deploy his brilliant strategy.

Anger flooded our crew – entirely.
I was agitated, and stood firmer than a tombstone in the cemetery.
We fought the rude and discourteous to the finality,
Infinite courage and wisdom was our weapon.
We captured the king before he knew what had happened.
We took him to Nanjing, a real wonderful heaven.

Beyond challenges, we voyaged through the Indian Ocean.
Friendships were built with ardent and colorful nations.
We shared the wisdom of our peaceful expeditions,
Delivered deluxe treasures of our kind dynasty.
The powerful Ming Treasure Fleet
Shipped back a mountain of eye-opening discoveries.

The charming shade of blue of Persia,
Bluer than sky and sea water.
The appealing color on the priceless china,
Always breathtaking for every admirer.

The fragrant agarwood of the Southeast Sea,
Enlighten the lost souls under the Bodhi Tree.
Precious sweet smoke of noble incense,
Guide the restless to the ultimate peace.

The black pepper of Southwestern India,
Tiny berries hotter than the burning chili powder,
Highly regarded condiment, more valuable than blazing gold.
Wow, the Black Gold can heal your stomach in just one go!

The magnificent long-necked creature in Africa,
Taller than four big soldiers standing on shoulders, one on the other.
Camouflage of scattered brown patches keep them safe from predators.
We found the legendary *Qilin*, our magical figure!

Noble horse in a black and white striped coat,
Dashing in African savannahs.
One for all and all for one when they were galloping together.
We found another *Qilin*! Our great future was prefigured.

Joy floods my whole body, from soul to toes.
I am pleased, and kneel humbly in front of the Heavenly Princess.
My sincere prayer is answered.
The shining stars sweep off the darkness.
Galaxy unveils her brightly eyes and witnesses
The victory of courage, wisdom and kindness.

Strength floods my whole body, from heart to fists.
I am honored, and stand proudly with the powerful Ming Treasure Fleet.
Tianfei sends Monsoon Winds as our company.
Swimming Dragon is riding on the tides of history.
The spirit of Zheng He will last for eternity.
I stand by my greatest master to complete his last royal journey.

Poetry – Group 3 WINNER

Friendship has the Word ‘End’ in it

Island School, Lam, Ady - 13

yī,
The pound of their feet
The stink of their belches
The laughs they direct at me,
a lowly swabbie

everyday it's the same,
wiping away their dirty footsteps
the mud left on the deck,
the stories of dark skinned men
with beautiful gems and colossal rocks
with waterfalls that stretch to God's heaven,

everyday it's the same
i never get to go along.
and i will never get to go along.

èr,
it's a bright day,
today,
the sun searing into my back,
the heat is
insufferable

until

shadows,
on my back.

they arrive;
a few cabin boys,
two carpenters,
one me.

sān,
i've never had a family
it's only ever been me
but with them
not anymore

a sense of belonging, is that what they call this?
i'm not just the swabbie anymore,
i'm
me.
Zhou Song.

with them i can fight all day
eat all day
talk all day

about how we're going to be captains of our own vessels
about how we're going to find beautiful women of our own
about how we're going to get out of here soon

sì,
the days pass

scrubbing decks is
more better now,
i don't even mind
when they come back with

their tales of
mesmerising women
valleys with no end
palaces of entrancing grandeur

because i have friends
(what a strange word, friend.
the word itself has end, yet,
you never want a friendship to end)

and they have their own tales:
dainty girls back home
pranks on their neighbours
stealing roosters, so the
cock-a-doodle-do doesn't
wake the town up-

but! when the men bring back
an egg, larger than

the size of my two hands;
clasped together when I
pray to God, asking
Him for safe travel
and for my friendship
to last,

all eyes are on it.
and they stay
on it.

wǔ,
night falls;
our voices
ring out
like the bell they ring,
from the crow's nest,
when they spot land.

he wants to take the egg, he says,
a cabin boy, a little taller than me.

it's beautiful, exotic,
nothing like it at home.
cabin boy says
amid nods and murmurs
of agreement

i want to argue against this,
*if we wanted beautiful or exotic
we could've just found ourselves
the enchanting Indian girls they speak of,
we don't need to steal*

i don't though, because,
well,
i don't know if we visited Africa or India
i'm only a swabbie after all
they don't tell me such things

the rest reach a general consensus.
tonight, when the lanterns are out
when the moon emerges
in all its glory,
when Chang E blesses us with
luck and good fortune in this quest,

we will steal it.

liù,

The cabin boy will head first,
he assures us of his way with locks.
After it's unlocked,
the carpenters will go
and find the egg.

The carpenter feels his stubble,
his eyes wondering, his voice steady but loud.

It's kept in Zheng He's own private room,
we won't make it.

We'll need someone to cover his mouth,
so if Admiral yells, no one will hear him.
cabin boy searches the room,
his eyes, wandering
searching,
but finally,
settling on me.

Zhou Song has thick hands
from all that scrubbing he does.

that's it. i'm chosen.
and i don't want to be a part of this,
friendship, who knew
friendship meant
stealing, crimes, sins?

if only God had come to
their towns too. they'd know
He said thou shalt not sin

qī,
they leave and yet,
I follow, like a lamb
to the slaughter

outside his room, we cover our faces,
with towels taken from the kitchen,
where Chef Ting cooks the food
that give the crewmates indigestion.

and it starts.

i run to Zheng He,
sleeping peacefully on his bed,
an intelligent, talented man,
the leader of so many others

my hands cover his mouth,
but not his nose, we don't want
him to awake,
g a s p i n g f o r a i r

the carpenters find the egg,
its grandness even more
awe-inspiring in our hands.

they whisper-call to me,
i take my hands off
i run
but
i look back once,
i pause.

are his eyes open? i do not know
i do not dare to wander up to him
to see if he was awake the whole time,
and just never said anything.

back in quarters,
the egg stuns even more.
how can God create this massive,
this powerful yet this delicate,
delicate thing?

stashed safely away,
we congratulate ourselves on the heist,
but I can't help thinking,
were we found?

i have the answer to my question tomorrow:
yes.

bā,
Zheng He comes around
to everybody's quarters
and feels their hands

sir, sir, with all due respect
what on earth are you doing?

we get back to China tomorrow
now is not the time for
fortune telling!

Zheng He smiles, one of
knowing, understanding.
He approaches us

cabin boy looks at me
his eyes full of the shared secret
too big for him to keep.
then he stops, admiral calls
for a new pair of hands.

cabin boy has passed.

carpenter one,
i do not know their names, i
only know them by
face and eyebrows,
his rough creased hands,
the colour of cropped wheat,
passes too

carpenter two,
the man who found the egg,
comes with such a straight
and steady posture, you'd
never think he was in on it.
lies roll off his tongue to keep
Admiral busy, though for what
i do not know.

he passes, and i go.

Zheng He traces the
lines on my palms,
my long life line,
my dry skin, my
long fingernails.

he presses my hand,
the warmth of his hand against mine
and he
knows

he steps back
nods to his comrade
a man with fierce looks
harsh eyes

the last thing i see is Zheng He's eyes
a mix of pity and understanding,
but also pure leadership,
intelligence i will never measure up to
because i am never given the chance

jiǔ,
pitch black
jet black
onyx black
raisin black
so many words to describe black
yet none fit this black,
the black that surrounds me
the black my head is inside

i hear them
the other pirates
what will we do with him
he betrayed our mother country
for this he must die!
a voice shrieks, above the
din of the crowd
yet this voice is the one of the boy
the cabin boy who wanted
to steal the egg in the first place!
traitor!

i try to scream, but
my mouth has been bound with
dry, tasteless rope
it hurts

i have grown so used to the
limitless, endless
constricting, restricting black
that when it's gone and
the blue of the sky,
the warmth of the sun's rays
the turquoise of the sea
return
i am disoriented for a while

i find myself
standing on the plank
a myth it is not
it is real and
i'm on it

i turn around,
screaming but the rope
is in my way again and
tears come out of
desperation but nobody
offers to help

instead they laugh
i see the cabin boy
his guffaw - unmistakable
but his eyes; another story.

pity resentment sorrow remorse contrition
self-reproach shame weak relief distress
anxiety hesitation doubt uncertainty

guilt.

we lock eyes
he runs.

Zheng He steps forward from the crowd
his head blocking the sun from shining on my face
his long shadow from his long frame
shades me for a while

he stops,
looks at me,
silent. the crowd has
stopped laughing
so silent, you could hear
a water droplet plop!
softly! on the floor!

he kneels down,
we're eye to eye
i see the wrinkles on his face
beginning to form from years
of travels taking their toll on him

it's a shame,
he says.
he stands up and
turns away.

that's it. he's gone. the crowd
they begin to laugh again
i writhe on the plank, nearly
falling into the sea,
but my arms are bound, too
much to risk.

suddenly
without any
warning,
i'm falling. a push
a kick, what did it matter
they drowned me

i'm dying.

i'm dying.

Poetry – Group 4

WINNER

#mingvoyages

Heep Yunn School, Chan, Wing Tung - 14

Long before the decadent, dissolute years
under the rule of opium and Manchu domination,
Was the birth of the name, august and renowned,
The Great Ming Empire.

Emperor Yongle decided to prove the Mongols wrong,
That he was anything but a doormat,
“Let the world dismiss the idea of declaring war on us,
Then we shall regain our sovereignty as Ruler of all under Heaven!”

And so he sent a monumental treasure fleet,
Seemingly sinkable with the heavy cargoes,
To convince their neighbours to pay tribute,
And to secretly chase down the lost treasure of the last Emperor.

Though unprecedented in history,
The voyages were blocked from doors of records and books
By crossbows and cannons of Christopher Columbus’ colonization
That disrupted peace in the unreached world.

The truth well hid from prying future eyes,
A tale was passed down for children to recite,
About the secret treasure that escaped with Jianwen,
And how Zheng He, the trusted admiral and Yongle’s playmate,
Plummeted to his death with guilt,
For its sinking.

“This is the tale of Sanbao’s voyage,
Whom the Dragon sent right after his commencement,
Bring back the lost treasure, sparkling, undamaged,
To decorously rule without the fear of seething resentment.

In 1405, carrying trunks of shimmering riches,
The vessels coursed the map the Dragon had drawn.
As the burgundy sails ripple and the compass twitches,
He reaches for the great unknown at dawn.

All along they chased Jianwen down his track,
Enduring an attack from the Kotte Kingdom.
Pirate Chen Zuyi stood against them on their way back,
Executing him returned Sanbao the ocean's masterdom.

Flooding the capital with lavish tribute,
Sanbao revealed the treasure map Chen was told to protect.
Gathering the royal navy and with an assured salute,
Ceylon was invaded, seized for revenge and respect.

In the hands of the Kotte King was a journal of clues,
He was reluctant to give away such fortune so he decided to shoot.
A gun at his head, the Kotte King could no longer refuse,
Had to hand over the journal and open some new trade routes.

The journal in hand, Sanbao reached unimagined lands,
Welcomed by Calicut, Hormuz even Mogadishu after an artillery sneak-peek.
He figured it out clue by clue, as the tribute list expands,
Going to Brava, Malindi, the farthest reaching Mozambique.

Heading back to realize the Dragon could no longer await his arrival,
Sanbao vowed to fulfill his last wish at all costs.
Barred from the seas he turned to scrutinize the journal,
And a red cross was marked on the map when someone knocks.

Not knowing it was his last salute,
Sanbao sailed directly to the marked cross:
No twists and turns, no stopping en route.
And there, gleaming as if about to burst, the awaited treasure was.

But on their way back was a storm,
And Sanbao watched helplessly as
one trunk... two trunks... *the* trunk...
Sank... sank... sank... to the bottom of the sea.

There was no firestorm, no one was informed
As Sanbao jumped and
Sank... sank... sank... to the bottom of the sea,
Heavy with guilt.”

Poetry – Group 5

WINNER

Blank Verse Ballad

Dulwich College Beijing, Zhou, Jennifer - 16

Come now, my old friends, come. Let us disturb
 The stillness of our idle lives. Let us discard
 The clocks that count our twilight hours, the bells
 Whose ceaseless tolls mete out our dwindling days.
 Come, let us beat our feet against the earth
 And once more shake the heavens with our voice,
 And let us howl with young men's lungs again
 Into the silence where we have grown old.
 Let us relive those distant days, my friends—
 When we drank deep from life, and not its dregs.

For we have lived much, known much, suffered much
 And seen much of the world. Our golden ships
 Bore us across the earth and to its ends—
 Where boundless mist swallows the land, where wild
 Wind moans among the barren trees, where tall
 And ancient pillars of the earth hold up
 The star-lit sky—and to the shores of men:
 The cities where the faithless raise their towers
 The jungles where the wild thrust up their spears
 Each just as proud, trying to graze the stars.

We set our ships on untamed sea and eyes
 On unmapped sky. We thought ourselves heroes:
 We who were of one dauntless heart and one
 Unconquered mind; we who saw our fates writ
 Across the heavens; we who fought, who sought
 And saw, who wandered, won, and witnessed all—
 We have grown old. Oh, to wander again.
 To tread that well-remembered path along
 The footsteps of the gods, and once more hear
 Among their hushed and hallowed names our own.

Come now, my old friends, come. For though we are
Worn down by time, made fearful by old age,
And heavy with the weight of stagnant dreams,
We stand strong still. Look there, our ship awaits:
The sail is puffed; the oars are raised; the prow
Points to the waves. My faithful companions,
Tis not too late. We can be heroes yet.
The time has come to leap across the gulf
Of years, become once more our former selves.
To see the endless wonders of the sea—
And carve our names upon eternity.

Poetry – Group 6 WINNER

A 13 Year Old's Quest

King George V School, Chew, Darrel - 14

Sprawling on the vibrant and colourful beaches in Los Angeles,
I'm about to start my miserable and boring voyage,
Wait!!! I've got something that will help and make this more exciting,
My remote control boat, YEEEEEEEEESSSSSSS!!!!!!
That means I don't need to ruin my \$10,000 clothing.
So I relax, in unbelievable joy,
Using my mystical controlling device,
On a quest for a rare and scarce treasure,
On a location that is more than 2,000 miles away from where my foot is,
This is going to be a thrilling time for myself,
My high tech boat will bring me my treasure from that metropolis
Come to me, you precious and sparkly beauties
or you will be lost forever.....

Poetry – Group 7 WINNER

The Treasure Junk

Korean International School Springboard, Tang, Adrienne - 14

With nine huge masts,
And cannons that blast.
It was as big as a football pitch
With treasure to make you rich.

There was room for hundreds of men.
And would probably fit Big Ben.
Its body was watertight
But it wasn't used to fight

Below deck there was a huge tank.
If you were bad, you'd have to walk the plank.
They kept cows, horses and fish,
which they could eat at their wish

Tons of treasure to be given away,
and traded in lands faraway.
Silk, treasure, silver and gold.
Making stories to be told and retold.