



Fiction
Group 1

The New Tales of the Silk Road

Karin Fong, 7, Kennedy School

Bang! The UFO landed very hard in Chang'an city centre. When all the smoke cleared, the alien Fatty cursed and stepped out of the spaceship. He stretched his four long arms and ten short legs as it has been a long journey from planet Nowhere. Fatty had read about the Silk Road being one of the most famous and important routes made by the human race. The road was said to have allowed humans from different countries to trade silk and other precious things for over 1500 years. Therefore, Fatty wanted to see the road for himself and wanted to start at the beginning.

Coming out of his thoughts, he noticed that all the Chinese people around him were shocked. Smiling at everyone, he teleported himself into the Imperial Han Palace of Emperor Wu Di who was talking to a bearded Chinese man, whom he referred to as Zhang Qian. Turning on his translator, he heard Emperor Wu instructing Zhang Qian to head west.

Zhang Qian's party headed out with a caravan of silk and started their very long journey west. Being very curious, Fatty transformed himself into a Chinese man and asked Zhang Qian where he was going. Zhang Qian responded that he was heading west to look for new civilisations along the ancient roads travelled by their ancestors. Fatty bid his farewells and left Zhang Qian on his journey west without telling him that he would be famous for setting up trading partnerships with the Roman Empire.

After he hid his spacecraft from the curious Chinese, he teleported to his next stop. When Fatty appeared again, he saw a crescent lake with a beautiful mountain in the background with the desert beyond the land he was on. A bald, lonely man was walking towards him deep in thought. Trying hard not to scare the man, Fatty (still looking like a Chinese man) asked the bald man where he was going. The monk introduced himself as Fa Xian and said he was heading south from Dunhuang to a country where the people believed they could become very smart by meditating a lot.

The conversation ended, as Fa Xian did not seem like he was interested in speaking more to Fatty. Little did Fa Xian know that he would be remembered as one of the first monks to introduce Buddhism to China from India.

Feeling ready to move on, he teleported himself once more and when he re-appeared, Fatty was freezing. He has teleported himself to the Pamir Mountains. Before he could enjoy the beautiful scenery surrounding the Roof of the World, he heard a thundering horde of horseback riders with funny hats and curved blades rushing at him. As Fatty opened his mouth to shout "help", he was overrun by the horsemen. Feeling rather lousy, he managed to pick himself up and found one of the horsemen carrying the banner of Genghis Khan, the Mongolian overlord who would create the largest land empire ever.

Finally, he decided to speed up his journey and teleported himself again. This time, he re-appeared in a prison cell with an Italian man. He recognised the man from his readings to be Marco Polo. After some small talk, Fatty asked Marco Polo how he found the Silk Road. Marco responded that it was a journey of a lifetime.

While taking off from planet Earth, Fatty learnt that the Silk Road was not only famous for trade between the civilisations in Europe and Asia but was also important for the spread of religions, wars and other important events in the history of the human race.



Fiction
Group 2

The Familiar Bowl

Alantha Zhang, 9, Clearwater Bay School

“It’s so boring to look at stone statues. I want to go home!” moaned Ashley, my five-year-old sister.

“Are you kidding?! These are Terracotta warriors, and every one of them is several thousand years old!” I couldn’t believe how anyone could be bored looking at these amazing figures. In addition to the Terracotta warriors, we also got to see small glass bowls, sparkly gems, gold coins, silver figures all found in two big jars in an exhibition room in the Shaanxi Province Museum.

One particular glass bowl suddenly attracted my attention, and it reminded me of an adventure that had taken place last Christmas when I wanted to give my mum a ruby as a present:

It all began when I bought a book about the Silk Road at the mall, and they were giving away a free time machine! I didn’t know that time machines existed, so I was completely out of words and gaped at the salesman.

The man seemed to have read my mind and chuckled, “It surely feels strange when you first see a time machine.”

After I managed to recover from the shock, I mumbled, “Thank you ...”

On the way home I was thinking of the time machine and was full of questions like, “Is it real?” and “Does it work?”

After dinner, I started reading the book. It was a great book with a lot of information about the society and the culture of the Tang Dynasty. I learned so much about the Silk Road, which connected the East and the West in ancient times. When I finished, I waited for everyone to sleep. I was itching to try the time machine and couldn’t keep still.

Finally I heard my mum and dad turning off the light in their room. So let my journey begin! I put two small glass bowls into my bag because I learnt from the book that glass was more valuable than anything else on the Silk Road, even gold and silver! Then I gently turned the bright blue pointer on the time machine to Tang Dynasty.

After hearing a soft humming sound, I found myself in a completely strange place. I saw people wearing robes like my own pajamas. Horses were pulling carts and wagons. There were rows of houses that seemed like shops and restaurants.

Some people passing by started staring at me and I felt really awkward. I soon realised my clothes were out of place, so I exchanged a glass bowl for some clothes in a shop. The old

lady selling the clothes was shocked at my pajamas and the beautiful glass bowl. Her eyes were twinkling with excitement when I gave her the bowl.

Fortunately, I speak both Chinese and English. It did not take long to find out that a group of caravans was leaving for some trading place today. As I walked around the corner I saw a bunch of caravans being loaded for trading along the Silk Road. I knew at once that these were the caravans leaving soon because some foreign-looking people were busy getting camels and horses ready. I sneaked into a caravan without a word.

After a while, my caravan started moving. The road was very bumpy. There were so many boxes in the caravan and I soon bumped into one. "Ouch!" I cried. The caravan stopped to a halt, suddenly the door jerked open and I found myself looking at Marco Polo! I knew he was Marco Polo because I remembered his face from the book I had just read.

Marco Polo came into the caravan and asked me, "How did you manage to get into the caravan and why?"

"I sneaked into the caravan when it was being loaded because I wanted to go to the trading place and find my mum a ruby as a Christmas present," I answered nervously. I thought he would be mad but he just started laughing. When he finally stopped, he said, "I can help you."

Then Marco Polo shut the door and went back to his car. I could still hear him giggling quietly to himself as he went outside.

It was almost lunchtime when we reached the trading place. All of the merchants started setting up stalls. I even set up my own stall!

At first they all just looked at the small glass bowl and walked away but in the end everyone wanted it and started fighting for it. I took it back and said, "The person who gives me the biggest ruby gets the bowl!" It was hard to see which was the biggest as all of them looked the same, but in the end I found the biggest ruby and exchanged it with my glass bowl. Immediately after I gave the merchant the glass bowl, his eyes got the same twinkle as the lady who sold me my clothes.

After the trading I told Marco Polo that I had the ruby and I had to get back home. He looked surprised but he helped me wrap the ruby and said goodbye. I ran into a caravan, put on my backpack and turned the pointer to the present time. There was the same humming sound and I found myself back at home. Amazingly, no time had passed! My only trouble was getting rid of the clothes and finding new pajamas.

In the museum, the closer we got to the glass bowl, the more nervous I got because I was afraid that my mum might find out what had happened last Christmas. When we passed the bowl, a puzzled and curious look swept over my mum's face, she looked at the bowl and opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something. But then she closed her mouth and walked off to the next bowl. Having an absent-minded mum is such a blessing!

The Best Friends' Journey

Alisha Daswani, 9, Glenealy School

“Mum! Lisa and Anne are here for our play date,” said Elizabeth. “Okay,” said mum. Lisa and Anne were Elizabeth’s best friends. Lisa was a girly type who liked to wear makeup. She was tall with black hair and brown eyes. Anne was a sporty type who enjoyed playing sports. She was also tall and had brown hair and brown eyes. All three girls were nine years old. Although they were really different, they were all still best friends.

“So what do we play first?” asked Lisa.

“Let’s make friendship bracelets,” said Anne.

“Okay,” said Lisa and Elizabeth together.

So Elizabeth, Lisa and Anne played and played, but while they were playing they did not realise that a few red-eyed demons, which were dressed in black, stormed through Elizabeth’s mum and dad’s bedroom window and kidnapped them both. They did not realise that Elizabeth’s parents had been kidnapped until they heard a loud “Aghhhhhhhh!” from Elizabeth’s mum and dad. By the time they got to the room it was too late, Elizabeth’s parents were gone. Anne went and looked through the window. While she was doing that Elizabeth and Lisa found a note. It said: *We got your parents. If you ever want to see them again, come to the old Silk Road. Signed, Demons.* Lisa and Elizabeth were shocked but they did not know that the only reason the demons had written that was as a trap so that they could capture the girls in addition to Elizabeth’s parents.

Suddenly something caught Anne’s eye by the window. It was the demons with Elizabeth’s parents, across the street. Anne heard one of the demons say, “Appear! Appear! Portal appear! Take us to the old Silk Road in Rome!” Suddenly, a portal appeared. The demons stepped through, then they and the portal disappeared. Anne screamed, “I know how to get your parents back. I just saw the demons across the street with your parents.” “Then let’s go get my parents back,” said Elizabeth, so the girls packed up their things and went across the street. Anne said, “Appear! Appear! Portal appear! Take us to the old Silk Road in Rome!”

So off they went through the portal and onto the old Silk Road in Rome. It was stunning! The girls could not believe their eyes. They saw people selling silk and there were signs in languages they did not know. Elizabeth had a picture of her parents in her pocket. She asked the locals if they had seen them and one of them said, “Yes, I have seen them. They are in a small building around the corner, but you better hurry because the demons that took them said that they were going to eat them.” So the girls ran and ran and ran through the door into the building. They raced in and came face to face with the

demons. The demons were happy to see that their plan had worked and they would have more dinner.

The girls held one another's hands and prayed. When they let go of each other, a big gust of wind suddenly came and pushed the demons down. But it did not hold the demons down for long, because right as the demons hit the floor they jumped back onto their feet. The girls were scared, but before a second could go by, the demons grabbed the girls and tied them with Elizabeth's parents. When the demons left and it seemed like all hope was lost, Elizabeth used all of her strength and broke the rope. Then Anne, Lisa, Elizabeth and her parents got away. All of them were so proud, happy, and amazed at what had happened that day. Elizabeth's mum and dad hugged all three girls and said, "We are so happy to see you!" All of them left the old Silk Road and went home and said they would always remember what had happened for the rest of their lives. When the demons got back, they figured out that love cannot be defeated.

A Dream Adventure

Anson Chan, 10, Diocesan Girls' Junior School

The Silk Road is an important trade route between China and the Mediterranean Sea, a place where the East and West meet. When we talk about the Silk Road, one of the names that surely pops into our minds is Marco Polo, who, in his teens, travelled from Europe to China with his father. But what you don't know is that during his travels on the Silk Road, he met me. Without my help, he wouldn't have become such a famous traveller in history. It all started like this ...

One morning, Miss Polo said to us enthusiastically, "Today, we shall learn about the adventures of a famous traveller of the Silk Road – Marco Polo." I thought – Oh no, not again! Miss Polo had made us wear weird ancient costumes and had been teaching us about the Silk Road, from the history, the culture to the route! If only I could go to the Silk Road and see for myself what it was like! Just at that moment, I felt some twirling and whirling and in the blink of an eye, I found myself in the middle of a desert, sitting on a camel!

In front of me were a bearded man and a teenage boy.

"Father, can we stop for a while? I'm exhausted!"

"No, son! It's midday already. We have to keep walking. There's no time to rest!"

Wait ... he looked familiar. I squinted to see better, and guess who it was? Marco Polo! I couldn't believe my eyes! Marco Polo, the great explorer Miss Polo had been talking about, was right in front of me! Like in the movie *Back to the Future*, I had travelled back to the past!

Just then, I saw a speck of dust and soon I could hear people's yells. Oh no! The bandits were coming! Quick as a flash, the bandits grabbed hold of Marco Polo and his father, and seized all their possessions. One of the bandits brandished his sword to intimidate Marco, and accidentally cut his leg. Marco howled in pain.

Oh no! I must help! I kicked hard on my camel's rear, making it completely ferocious. It screeched and charged forward, towards the bandits. The bandits' horses were taken aback by the sudden attack and all went wild. The situation was so chaotic that the bandits decided to hurry away. I managed to snatch the valuables back before they left.

"How can we possibly thank you, young lady?" Marco's father said gratefully.

"Yes, you saved our lives!" Marco smiled at me.

"It's my pleasure to help a famous person like you," I replied shyly. Marco was puzzled by my answer. Then Marco's father said, "Would you like to join us on our trip to China? I'm sure Marco will enjoy your company."

I gratefully accepted the offer. Perhaps I could gather some exclusive information about Marco Polo for my project.

“My name is Amanda. So where are you going?” I asked.

“We’re bringing a letter in reply from the new Pope Gregory X and some valuable gifts to Kublai Khan of the Mongolian Empire,” Marco’s father answered.

“Luckily you had wits enough to help us escape the bandits and reclaim the gifts, or else we would have nothing to give to the Khan,” Marco explained.

For days and nights we trekked along the desert. Sitting on our camels, Marco and I stared with our mouths wide open at the spectacular scenery. The sights were intriguing. I remembered how Aunt Lisa had once told us how much she enjoyed her trip to the Silk Road and bragged about how beautiful the views were. Now I knew she was not exaggerating.

Marco and I chatted a lot.

“Being born in a merchant family, I’ve been listening to the stories of my father’s and uncle’s travels. I’m really fascinated by the Chinese culture.”

“And so you would like to see for yourself what China is like.”

“Exactly! My dream is to write a book recording my travels in China so that the Europeans will know what an amazing place this is.”

“Don’t worry, your dream will come true. You’ll become one of the most famous explorers in history and your book will be widely published.”

“Thank you for your blessings. How about you? What’s your dream?”

I was embarrassed by Marco’s question, because all that concerned me were Cartoon Networks and my NDS games and I had no idea what my “dream” would be.

Just then, someone’s voice broke the silence.

“You are about to enter the summer palace of the Great Khan. Names, please.” In front of us was the palace guard. The Polos told the guard their names and said I was Marco’s cousin. I was relieved, as I really didn’t know how to explain my “identity”.

Learning that they had reached their destination, I knew it was time to say goodbye. Marco held my hand and said, “Here’s a present for you, to thank you for saving our lives. I hope you’ll like it!”

Taking the cross pendant Marco gave me, I told him I would always remember him as my friend. I wanted to get the ball pen in my pocket to give to Marco in return, but when I touched it, everything around me turned blurry and I fell unconscious.

When I woke up again, I saw Miss Polo standing beside me. She frowned at me and jeered, “Amanda Chan, you’re dozing off in class again! Now if you can’t answer my question, you shall stand in the corridor for the whole recess. In 1271, where did Marco Polo travel to?”

“China.”

“And who was he to see?”

“Kublai Khan.”

“What danger did they encounter on the journey?”

“They met some bandits?”

Miss Polo looked baffled, “Well, I guess you’ve been listening after all.”

I smiled to myself, and thought – how could I forget? I was there experiencing all these adventures with my dear friend, Marco Polo.

Ben and the Silk Road

Benjamin Teo, 12, Korean International School

Hi! I'm Ben, a photographer who works for the Ancient Monument Museum in Hong Kong. I have always been fascinated by the tales of the Silk Road. The Silk Road lies between China and goes all the way to Europe. People go through the Silk Road obviously to trade silk but here's something you don't know. Most of the people who go through the Silk Road disappear mysteriously. They say if you enter the triangular area formed by the three temples, you will never be able to get out ever again because the Silk Monster will swallow you. Some people call it the CBT (Chinese Bermuda Triangle). Pretty scary right? Who knew there was a Bermuda Triangle in China? Anyway, the desert is called the Taklamakan Desert. It is a very big desert located in the north of China and it usually has very few sandstorms.

Three days ago, my boss called and told me to take pictures of the temples and the Silk Monster. So I went home and packed my gear and clothes and headed for Chek Lap Kok Airport. On the plane I did some research on the cases of the missing people. I also read a report in which people found footprints of the Silk Monster and I fell asleep dreaming about the Silk Monster. When I landed in the desert, I rented a desert jeep and headed for my hotel. When I arrived, it was nothing like the hotels I've seen in Hong Kong. The hotel only had two stories and about fifteen rooms. I got up to my room and unpacked my clothes and gear and I also tested my camera to see if it was in good condition. Meanwhile my boss called and told me to meet his friends, who worked at the temples, the next morning. It was a sleepless night but still I woke up feeling very energetic and excited. I got dressed and packed my gear and left the hotel in my rented jeep.

When I met my boss' friends at the temple, I noticed that they had all carried guns, lasers, rockets, and bombs the size of bowling balls. When I asked them what all the weapons were for, they told me that my boss had ordered them to kill the Silk Monster. I was shocked because I didn't know my boss wanted to kill the monster – I thought he only wanted to take pictures of the monster. Feeling angry, I called my boss and told him I wasn't going to help kill the Silk Monster. He then told me to hand the phone to one of his friends. After that man had been on the phone for a few minutes he hung up and looked at me strangely. Then he pointed his finger at me and yelled, "Get him!" I didn't know what he meant but I knew I was in trouble.

Knowing these men were trying to catch me, I ran like crazy into a temple and hid behind a statue. They were holding guns and torches and the leader told three of his men to guard the entrance. I took a deep breath and started to count how many men were there. I tallied that there were fourteen men out there. There was no way I could leave the pyramid without being

caught or seen. I looked around and punched the wall in frustration. Then something amazing happened! A tunnel appeared out of nowhere in the dark. I quickly crawled into the tunnel. As I crawled into it, the entrance door of the tunnel shut slowly.

I ended up in a small room filled with coins, diamonds and weapons. All of a sudden, I saw out of the corner of my eye the Silk Monster – It was like a thirteen-foot tall cat with sharp teeth, pointy claws and acid spit. As I looked at it in fear, I realised that the Silk Monster was howling in despair. I wondered why a big, ferocious beast like that was crying so helplessly. I then saw the problem – the Silk Monster had a gunshot wound on its leg. Cautiously, I took out the bullet using the medical knowledge I had learned from my grandpa when I helped him put bandages on his leg as a kid. Soon, the monster and I became friends. I noticed that it could understand what I was saying by looking at my mouth. I told him that a nasty group of men were trying to kill him and he handed me an ancient book in which it was written that an emperor had built the temple to store all his treasure away from robbers. The Silk Monster also showed me a map of the temple. I immediately came up with a plan to scare these men away from the temple.

We proceeded as planned to find these men and located them in a treasure room collecting the treasure and celebrating their wealth. I created a diversion by showing myself in front of them. When they dashed towards me, the Silk Monster suddenly jumped out and grabbed two of the men and threw them onto the floor. Seeing that, all of them ran out of the temple and they were never seen again. The Silk Monster thanked me for helping him. After that we said goodbye to each other. Before I left, I asked him not to kill people anymore. He promised that he would not, and gave me a golden sword as a symbol of his promise.

And that was the story of how I met the Silk Monster and how we became friends. When I got back to Hong Kong I quit my job. Afterwards my boss' museum was shut down for not having enough new things on display. Well, I found out that he was never a lover of antiques anyway.

Tales of the Silk Road

Carissa Lee, 9, Glenealy School

It happened a long time ago in Dunhuang, when a boy called Lee was sitting on his desk, thinking. Besides being smart, he wanted to be adventurous. He also wanted something magical. Life was too easy for him. In school, he would always get praises, never a negative comment like, “Keep your voice down, Lee!” or “Lee, try thinking more.” The only thing that he loved to do was visit the school library. He always got his ideas from reading. He walked to the library, thinking about Dunhuang’s most risky areas like the dunes and the caves.

There were not many books in the school library, only a few very ancient books, and there was only one book left when he got there that day. It was about rare seeds and spices in the Dunhuang dunes. He picked the book up from the old, slightly broken table. Lee sat down on the dusty carpet and made himself comfortable. He was so excited; he opened the book and looked up the spices and flowers in order of their rarity. “Aha! The rarest seed and spice page,” he murmured. He learned that the most rarely seen seed grows inside a flower called lilatop, whose scientific name was *Limano Bydas*. In a legend, there was a boy called Chang Li who wanted to trade the special spice and seed with the emperor. But while he was travelling through the Dunhuang dunes, he slipped over a pebble, tripped and fell into the quicksand and was never seen again. Lee was interested by how the plant could grow in any climate, the deep quick sands in the desert, for example, or the wintry atmosphere of Antarctica. According to legend, it lay deep in the dunes of Dunhuang. Soon it was closing time at the library. Lee picked up the book in panic and ran off with the heavy book clutched in his arms.

He was full of excitement, hopping down the stairs. He decided to try something new like skipping a set of stairs. Unfortunately, he stumbled on a wobbly step on the library stairs and he fell into a hole. It was very dark there. The book fell on his head, then bounced towards the exit and landed on ... a carpet? It was furry and blue, certainly not for girls. “It’s nothing special,” Lee thought. But when he picked up the book and sat on the carpet, he felt something tingly down his spine. The carpet rose up off the ground, and he was soon flying through the sky. It was very hard to drive the carpet. He tried to head back home, but he flew in the opposite direction, towards the dunes. “Of course!” he remembered. He had wanted adventure! He approved of it and commanded the carpet to fly at top speed.

He soon landed on the dunes and the dunes were hot, hot, hot! His lips slowly turned sandy and parched. He found a backpack on the carpet, and there he found three fresh watermelons. Where did they come from? Magic, he thought. He gobbled them up in a flash and walked to a huge dune where he slid, fell into quicksand and struggled. He struggled three times and then the carpet yanked him out of the quicksand. He ran to the nearest pond to drink water, and then

climbed up the steep dunes. And on the top of the dune, he found a nice comfortable surface to sleep on, opened his backpack and found three bottles of fresh water. Lee was so relieved. He drank a few sips and fell asleep.

The next morning, he found a strange map lying on his carpet. Why would he receive an unconnected three-piece map? He followed the route on the map, and a huge shadow emerged. It was a Water Palace. He saw a boy, exactly like himself. He screamed in panic till he saw that it was his own reflection. He ran into the palace controlled by the power of water, and tripped over a rock that led into a secret golden chamber decorated with antiques. He saw a jade box with some symbols on it. He was so curious, and a magical power began to draw him towards the box. He opened it without thinking and stuck his head inside. There were pepper, carrots and curry packets. Mmm, he thought, was this for him? He dunked his whole head into the box and grabbed a handful of packets randomly. He pulled himself up and found that the powder he had pulled out had the most beautiful sparkle he had ever seen. He was so excited; he ran like a jet to the magic carpet to carry him back home.

Lee reached home very dehydrated, exhausted, and angry when he heard Miao's screeches of welcome. It was not really pleasant because Miao was fussing over him saying things like, "Oh, you are so muddy and sandy! Why did you miss dinner?" Miao was Lee's aunt. He went upstairs but he still did not realise that the powder he took home from the palace was not glitter! He decided to paint with his newly found 'glitter'. He started to get messy after drawing for a while, and accidentally put his finger on the glitter and licked it. He realised in shock that it was spice!

It tasted like curry, spice, salty, sour, bitter and sweet. All kinds of tastes! He definitely knew this was the one that was nature's secret spice. He planted the rare spice in the backyard to grow. It could grow in any climate and needed no watering or care. He shared the spices with his family for rice, carrots and other foodstuff. Finally, he ended up giving it to museums worldwide and to the poor people selling things in the bazaar in Dunhuang. He became world famous, not because of his wealth or power, but just because of how he had found the lost trading route's treasure.

New Tales of the Silk Road

Carol Lam, 8, Bradbury School

Alexis Bentley woke up exceptionally early. She felt excited as she was going to the Silk Road with her entire family today. Alexis was a nine-year old girl and she had beautiful, silky black hair and big eyes. She was an easy-going and smart girl.

She had packed her bags the day before and she was technically ready to go. Owen Bentley, her father, grinned at her. “Good thing you packed yesterday,” he remarked gruffly. “Your mum and I had to wake up at 3am to pack. You are smart for a child of your age.” Jill Bentley, her mother, tried to squish the bags into the boot of the car but there were too many bags. In the end, some of the bags had to go in the passenger compartment! “Mum, aren’t we supposed to travel in comfort and not be squished up with the bags? Coz’ it is really squished in here,” complained Alexis.

“I’m sorry, darling. There are so many bags,” sighed mum.

They took a plane to Northern China. On the plane, Alexis did loads of crossword puzzles and daydreamt about what the Silk Road would look like. She imagined meeting a famous person on the Silk Road and getting his autograph. That would be so exciting! When the plane landed, Alexis saw a lot of bright, colourful flowers. There was a variety of flowers lining the runways. Next, they hired a four-wheel-drive Ford. The road was bumpy and winding. “Hey! Remember our trip in Australia, the four-wheel-drive was rocking and rolling,” remarked Alexis with a smile. By the time they got to the Silk Road, it was already evening. They set up a base camp at the bottom of the first mountain they saw. It was hard because Alexis’s five-year-old brother kept messing things up. Next, they set up a fire and roasted chicken for dinner. They also roasted Camper’s Delight marshmallows for dessert. Lastly, they set up their sleeping bags and fell asleep as they were all very tired.

Things went like that for many days. But one night, Alexis was woken by a voice calling “Alexis, Alexis.” It sounded like a friendly child waiting to have a chat. “Who are you?” asked Alexis curiously.

“I am the biggest rock on the Silk Road. I have noticed that there are no traders on this road apart from the tourists and even they don’t come often. I have many questions to ask you: why are there no more silk traders on this road?” asked the rock.

“Well,” Alexis began, “Times have changed now. There is the Internet and people use websites for trading. Most people don’t use this old Silk Road now. They don’t come this way much anymore. In fact, with the Internet, they don’t need to walk at all to trade with other people or other countries. The Internet has made everything more convenient for people.”

“What is the Internet? What are websites?” the rock asked curiously.

“The Internet is a network of websites. You need an Internet connection to go on the Internet. Websites are like books – it’s just that they are electronic,” answered Alexis.

“Oh! I didn’t know that!” exclaimed the rock, “Tell me why tourists come to the Silk Road.”

“I think I can tell you that,” grinned Alexis, “tourists come because they want to go sightseeing. They like to see different places around the world. This Silk Road is a great place to do some sightseeing.”

“Great!” the rock smiled, “Please tell me why the Silk Road is so quiet sometimes. There are so few tourists around and I get lonely.”

“Sure!” Alexis said with a wink, “The Silk Road is far away from many people’s homes so it is inconvenient to travel there. The Silk Road is in the countryside. Also, they can use the Internet to see things like pictures and videos taken on the Silk Road so it doesn’t matter if they don’t come to the Silk Road; they can always see the Silk Road on the Internet!”

“Oh well!” sighed the rock, “I guess that’s the end of the era when the Silk Road was famous and everyone came to see it and marvelled at all its wonders.”

“Hey! Wait a minute!” cried Alexis, “Don’t be sad! My dad is a silk trader and he is planning to invest in another business.”

“What’s that got to do with the Silk Road?” the rock groaned impatiently, “What does your dad’s business have to do with me?”

“Remember how I told you about the Internet?” said Alexis, “My dad can start up a tour guide company and then loads of people will come and see the Silk Road!”

The rock brightened up immediately. “That would be great! Thanks a lot in advance!”

“Hey!” laughed Alexis, “It’s OK.”

A minute later, Alexis heard her younger brother Simon’s familiar wake-up call, “Wake up every day, sun is shining through, and it’s showing the way to a better day for you ... for you!”

“What!?” asked Alexis in shock, “Why are you waking me up?”

Simon grinned, “Daddy says it is yummy yummy breakfast time!”

At the breakfast table, Alexis told her whole story to her father. Everyone was amazed! Simon, and Jennifer, who was Alexis’s twin sister, bombarded her with questions.

A week later, Alexis’s father started the Silk Road Adventures tour agency. On its first day on the Internet, the Silk Road Adventures website was filled with bookings. Alexis found out that 10 tours could be filled that day. “Wow!” she said to herself, “This is going to be great!” Every day from then on, 10 to 20 tours could be filled every day. Alexis knew that it was going to be a success. And the great thing is: since then, the Silk Road has turned into a road that no one can forget.

The Silk Robe

Carys Kong, 9, Singapore International School

Once there was a poor silk tailor called Mr Li who was very old and lived in a little cottage. He had no relatives, and he only had one hobby – silk spinning. Once he was tired of silk-spinning, he could find nothing else to do. Mr Li was always feeling lonely.

Now, quite strangely, Mr Li could make whatever he wove magical. When he wove a robe, he did not know what magic he had put into the robe until he wore it. Everyone from every part of the world wanted one of those precious robes. But, even though the robes were popular, only some people could buy them because they cost a fortune. People from far and wide wanted to see them, so every day Mr Li had to cope with people screaming outside to see the robes. He was beginning to get fed up.

There were two men in town who wanted to steal one of the robes. They tried to think of ways to steal the robe day and night. But they could not think of many ways to do that, because they were clueless about how to get into Mr Li's house. They decided to go there pretending to be customers of Mr Li's and take notes about his house. "Tee hee!" the two men laughed as they thought about Mr Li fainting when he realised that his robe was stolen. They laughed all night, until their sides ached.

The next morning, the two men woke up extremely early and went to wait for Mr Li's shop to open. The two folks just could not wait to put their plan into action. One of them, called Mr Chong, distracted Mr Li by talking, while the other, Mr Chang, went and took notes about Mr Li's house. By the time the shop closed, Mr Chang had slipped out after his note-taking and Mr Chong and Mr Chang went back to their little house, whistling merrily. They combined all the details to make a plan. They were going to be rich at last.

One of the things the two men had learned about Mr Li's house was that the door was hardly ever locked. So, they could wait until Mr Li had gone to deliver his robes to other customers, then they could sneak in without Mr Li noticing them. They were eager to start putting their plan into action.

"Hmm ... Let's see, Ms Paddington ordered a special one, and Mr Lee, who lives next door," Mr Li said as he collected the robes to deliver them. Just as he was leaving, he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to lock the door. "Oh dear, now we can't put our plan into action!" Mr Chong whispered as Mr Li took a key from his pocket and carefully locked the door. "Yep, we sure can't," Mr Chang grumbled. He was in a foul mood now. Then it began to rain. "Oh great! First the plan failed and now this!" Mr Chang continued to complain. Mr Chong told Mr Chang to keep his spirits up while he desperately tried to think of a plan. Suddenly Mr Chong's eyes brightened. He had thought of a plan.

Lurking in the shadows very early in the morning, they tried to get into the house. Mr Chang soon opened a door and the two men quietly slipped in. They tied Mr Li with rope and put him in their truck next to all their treasures. They did not notice that Mr Li had brought a gadget he used to lock up his entire house. When the two tried to get back into Mr Li's house, they realised that Mr Li had locked every single possible way to get in the house. The two folks felt defeated. "Never mind, let us go persuade Mr Li to open the door for us," Mr Chong said. "He knows what will happen if he doesn't!" Mr Chang said, with a sneer on his face.

When the two got back to their truck, they looked inside and saw nothing except darkness. Mr Li had escaped and he had taken all their valuable possessions with him, all except for a pair of scissors. The two folks stared at each other, eyes wide open with shock. Then they stared at each other some more. "Is this true or am I imagining it?" the two folks asked each other. It was true. And to top it all, they had sold their own cottage before coming to Mr Li's house.

The two folks then went to search for Mr Li. They searched for quite a few days and they were starving when they found Mr Li. Their ribs showed and when they met Mr Li they pleaded with him to let them stay at his wonderful new house. Mr Li thought about it for a little while, and then agreed. He said that he was feeling rather lonely in his new house, he had no one to spend his time with and he was in need of help in his newly opened silk robe shop. The two men stared at each other, so shocked that they could not speak a single word.

Then, Mr Chang whispered in Mr Chong's ear, "But I thought he was our enemy!" Mr Chong nodded slightly to show that that was correct. Mr Chong then politely asked Mr Li why he agreed to take them in even though they had tried to steal his special robe. Mr Li explained that he always forgave people and let them do something for him if they wanted. Mr Chang then hastily said, "But we don't know how to spin silk!"

The Old Silk Road

Charlotte Cullinane, 11, Discovery Bay International School

I had heard of it before, but never thought I would be lost in the middle of the old Silk Road. It feels like it never ends, this old road. Well it's not really a road, it's just a sandy, muddy path. So, here I am, struck by starvation, cold and crying. Well this was my life from now on, and I longed for my old life.

I lived in a small house in the Gobi desert. It is a remote place to live and is especially hard to survive with six in your family. We lived on rice and water. Water was very hard to find in the Gobi so it was very expensive because of its vast demand. But it is a lot worse out here where I am now. There is hardly any food, only the scraps on the ground, probably dropped by people who were here before. The only thing I carry with me is a turquoise bracelet, similar to the one my mother has.

It is cold and miserable where I am now. But why am I here? Well, it all started like this.

It was a sunny day and I was not far from the house. I was trying not to remind myself about my thirst when I saw an old man with wrinkled hands and face. He said in a soft but croaky voice, "Dear child, are you thirsty?"

"Well yes, I am," I replied, a bit scared.

"Not to worry, there is a well ahead with clean water. Just follow the path and you will reach it," he said, pointing to a rocky pathway.

After a few minutes of walking along the path, it began to get misty. The day had already started to end, and it was getting colder and darker. I heard a scream, and running was the only thing I could think of; it was too dark and cold to concentrate. I was out of breath, too thirsty to even walk; I slept there the night not knowing where I was. The next day I tried to find my way back home but it was useless – I had no idea where I was. Now here I am, lost in the middle of the old Silk Road.

But not for much longer, I thought as I lifted myself off the ground, brushing the dirt off my bum. "Where to go? Left, right, backward or forward?" I said aloud, as I pointed to the different directions.

"I have no idea," I sighed and flopped my bum right back down on the dusty path. As I did, I thought about something my mother said, "When you think everything is wrong, it can only get better." A few minutes later, I found myself wandering off into the mist.

After what felt like days of walking, which was probably only two or three hours, I reached the ruins of a temple. It looked like no one was there; as I slowly walked up the dusty stairs I could still smell the incense. But I must have only been imagining it because they were all either unlit or burnt out. The temple inside was surrounded by rock with engravings. It was

hard to read them, as they were dull with age. As I walked out, I saw a small town not far from the temple.

As I walk to the small town I could see that it was like my home but there were a lot more of them. As I walked past the houses, I looked inside some of them, and all that I could see were children crouching next to a bed crying beside someone in a bed coughing.

When I walked around the town my thirst came back. I looked around for some water and from the corner of my eye I saw a girl who looked just like me but was a year or two younger. Slowly shuffling towards the little girl I asked, "Would you have some water that I could drink?" The words seemed to stumble out of my dry mouth.

"Why, of course you could have some," the little girl replied.

The girl welcomed me into her home. While I drank the water that she had given me, I noticed that there was no one else in the house. "Is anyone living with you?" I asked. "Well," she replied, "No there's not."

"Where are they?" I ask, confused.

Taking a deep breath the little girl answered, "They were here one day, and gone the next," she said, in a brave voice.

After I thanked the girl for her kindness, a familiar looking lady walked past the house. I noticed a glimmering turquoise shining on her wrist. As I looked at the bracelet on my own wrist, which had been with me through my entire journey, I realised that the only other person who had the exact same one was my mother. In an instant, my heart began to race as I sprinted up to her. I reached her and looked up into her piercing eyes. I felt a rush of indescribable emotions fill my body. Hot streams poured down my face as I looked up at the person who had given me life. Her eyes began to well up too. I tried to speak, but no sound came from my mouth. She embraced me tightly, and I hugged her as hard as I could.

Survivor

Emily Weinstein, 10, Discovery Bay International School

Three shapes were silhouetted against the blazing sunset: a girl, her father, and a donkey. They were travelling on the Silk Road, a collection of bridges, pathways and trails, not a proper road at all. But this family was different. The father, In Long, had been ordered by the Emperor of China to bring to Rome the most special silk and spices to trade, so they had to be extremely careful not to be robbed. The girl was called Jun Lan. She was a feisty, courageous 10-year-old with long black hair and sparkling black eyes. Her mother had died of a raging fever, so she was extremely protective of her father. In Long had a wrinkled face and was skinny and short. The donkey, Mu Mu, was strong and kind. The old grey mare carried a lot and endured it easily. While they were no match for full-fledged thieves, they kept to the most secret – and dangerous – paths.

The three of them had travelled thousands of miles, and had just left Baghdad, in Iraq. They had replenished their supplies and managed not to run into any thieves in the large city. Suddenly, Jun Lan had a longing for her small village in China. “Dad, I miss China and Meow Meow,” she told him, sadness in her gaze. Meow Meow was her beloved silver cat that they had to leave behind. “Me, too, but we have to obey the Emperor!” In Long replied. Mu Mu snorted in agreement. She was very understanding. They kept on walking in silence, sweating in the hot desert. When the freezing night came, they set up camp and In Long soon fell asleep in the warm tent. Jun Lan stayed awake, some of the spices and silk under her pillow. As she did every night, the girl sat up, kissed the ivory necklace her mother had given her, and fell into a restful slumber.

Jun Lan woke up to loud, harsh voices outside the tent. In Long was still sleeping. She dared to peek outside, and, shocked, saw five evil-looking men outside with sharp, deadly swords. They were leaving, sacks of stolen silk in their hands. She felt for the precious silk and spices under her pillow. Luckily, they were still there. She went to her father, trying to shake him awake, but he lay still, not opening his eyes. She realised that his blanket was covered in blood. She checked for a heartbeat. There was none. In Long was dead, and she was an orphan. Blinking back tears that could drown a city, she peered out of the tent warily. Thankfully, the rough bandits were gone. Suddenly she remembered that her father had the most valuable things to trade. She looked for them, but they had been stolen. She only had her goods, some food and Mu Mu. She buried her father in the sand that evening at dusk, reciting ancient blessings and covering him with the fragrance of sweet-smelling cactus fruits. She sobbed the whole night, wondering what to do. She decided to keep going to Rome, as she still had a map. She started on her way the next morning, riding on Mu Mu, on her way to an unfamiliar country.

A few days later, she was trotting along on her donkey, when she heard many footsteps. Praying that it wasn't bandits, she turned slowly around. She realised it was a family. A mother, a father, a little girl and a small black cat. She jumped off Mu Mu and ran to meet them. "H ... hello," she stuttered, trying to be friendly. "I come in peace. I'm travelling alone to Rome. My father died and my donkey is my only friend. Who are you?"

"My name is An Mi. These are my parents, Wei Chan and Ja Lao, and this is my cat, Mo Mo. We're going to Rome too!" the little girl told her, a big grin on her chubby face. She must have been only six or seven, and had very short black hair. "Mo Mo? Cute name!" Jun Lan giggled, the two girls instantly becoming friends. "Can I travel with you to Rome?" she asked the adults, pleading with all her might. She didn't want to be refused, because she *hated* being lonely. "Of course you can!" Ja Lao, the mother, laughed, sympathetic to the young orphan. "We would be honoured by your company."

As the family walked through the shifting sands, sweltering in the heat, Jun Lan thought about what life would be like if she and her father hadn't set foot on the Silk Road. Her father would be alive and happy, and she, In Long and Meow Meow could be playing safely in their Chinese village, happy as butterflies. But she thought over it one more time, and realised that she had been through many important life experiences. She would be starting a new, joyous life in a distant country and couldn't be more content with her "new family". Many deaths occurred on the Silk Road, coaxing people seeking money to their doom. But at least some people were happy. Though many died in the silk trade, hope glimmered, as some returned to their families with the riches of joy. And Jun Lan felt confident that she would not perish. She was a survivor.

The New Tail

Humphrey Hui, 10, Singapore International School

I sat on a rock in Rome, gazing at the never-ending road ahead of me. My grandfather had told me about this place when I was a little hatchling. “They call it the Silk Road, a place of wonders and miracles,” he used to say. “Many have travelled on it, only a few had come back. It is said that if you reach the end of this road, something amazing will happen to you.” That was when I decided to go on this incredible journey that might change my life forever.

After praying that I would survive, I started the journey. For weeks and months, I walked and walked, without seeing the end of the road. I ate insects for food and dug a small well for water. I hoped that my grandfather was telling the truth and this journey would not be in vain. In the second week of my journey, the first “transformation” happened.

“Must ... keep ... walking!” I told myself. It was mid-afternoon when suddenly, I heard the sound of noisy footsteps behind me. I turned around and saw a man giant stomping towards me. I ran as fast as my little legs could carry me. Unfortunately, it was not fast enough. I tripped and fell. The man giant was gaining on me so I ran off on all four of my limbs. I discovered that doing this was pretty useful and I escaped from the giant. Over a period of time, I got used to walking on four legs. It turned out that the giant was a man called King Mu of China and he was one of the first men to travel on the Silk Road. He also wrote a traveller’s account about the trip called *Mu Tian Zi Zhuan*. Did you know that this king lived until the ripe old age of 105 and reigned for 66 years?

Soon after, the second “transformation” occurred. Walking on all fours really helped as I could walk faster and got tired less easily. So, I could afford to take breaks. On one of my breaks, I saw a juicy looking fly hovering near me. I was about to snatch it with my tongue for lunch when out of the corner of my eye, I saw another equally juicy fly hovering in the air. I wanted to eat both of them and tried keeping track of their movements, one eye on each insect. Suddenly, I felt a splitting sensation in my head and I could move both of my eyes independently in different directions. I quickly snatched up those two flies and continued on my journey.

The next change soon came. The surprise was, I did not know it would come so naturally, as if I was born to do it. I was experimenting with my splitting eyes when another man giant came, this time riding a horse. His name was Marco Polo and he was on his way to meet the king of Mongolia, Kublai Khan. His uncle and father had also travelled along this route, and he was trying to follow in their footsteps. He was carrying some gifts for the king. The gifts were special china cups, crafted and painted by the best craftsmen in Italy. The man saw me and picked me up. I struggled around frantically, trying to free myself. All of a sudden, I fell to the

ground. I looked back. The man was holding my tail and it was still wriggling! He screamed, dropped the tail, got on his horse and rode off quickly. I was also shocked by the whole incident and quickly scampered away. Luckily, the stump where my tail used to be did not hurt at all. There was no blood, no pain, nothing! I was extremely worried as I would not be able to walk and run as fast as before. Would the tail grow back?

The very next day, there was a huge sandstorm. Sand whipped around and the wind roared like a monster. I knew I had to cling on to something to survive ... but what? Out of swirling sand, a rock landed at my feet and I grabbed on to it, hoping that our combined weight would prevent us from being blown away. I noticed that the rock was slightly slippery so I had to hold on to it very tightly. It once nearly slipped away but I did not lose hope and held on tighter. There was a popping sound and my limbs were suddenly firmly attached to it. Upon later examination of my feet, I discovered that they had something similar to suction pads on them, which were not there before.

On the last week of my journey, the last change happened. I was casually scampering along the road when another man giant appeared ahead of me. Since I had encountered many of them, I was no longer scared. What I was scared of was that nasty-looking cocked gun on his belt. I stopped dead and just watched him. Another man giant appeared and I overheard their conversation. The man with the gun was called Anthony Jenkinson and he worked for the Muscovy Company and was travelling on this route to explore Russia. This was his fourth and last time travelling on this route. He was going to meet Ivan the Terrible and start a trading relationship between England and Russia. Soon, the two men left and I relaxed. There was a funny tingling sensation on my skin so I looked at my body. To my surprise, it had turned into the colour of sand for camouflage!

My journey to China was over, and I had evolved into the lizard we know today. My grandfather was right: I had developed a lot of amazing survival skills and characteristics over this exciting journey. I also learnt never to give up under any circumstances. Oh, and the tail I lost? I grew it back – a new tail from the Silk Road.

The Very Special Explorers

Janice Wong, 9, Beacon Hill School

Once upon a time, there was a Camargue horse, her name was Sebastian. Her mother was called Silka and her father was Sunda. They lived in Camargue, in Southern France. One day, Silka said, “Hey! My dear daughter, do you want to come with me and dad to explore the world?” “Of course I want to!” Sebastian exclaimed happily. They helped each other to pack their saddlebags and finally, they were ready to go and explore the amazing world before them.

“Let’s explore China first!” Sebastian shouted. Then off they went to China. In China, they found a palace covered with intricate designs. They galloped closer to get a better look. There they saw an emperor watching over the country. The emperor was very kind so they asked him who he was. He introduced himself to them. “I am Horse Jintao, this country’s emperor. Are you new to this country?” The family replied, “Yes, we are.” Then Horse Jintao said, “I will show you around.” “Oh yes, thank you!” the family said politely.

“This palace is called the Silk Palace, named after the Silk Road. Between about 60 B.C. and the late A.D. 1400, trade was conducted over the Silk Road, which stretched from Eastern China to the Middle East.” He added as they walked through the palace, “The name Silk Road is somewhat misleading as the “road” is actually a system of various routes.” He explained that Europe was also part of the trade network linked to the Middle East and the Silk Road by a second system of routes.

He continued, “The Silk Road’s greatest importance lies in its role in the exchange of ideas and information, which transformed the civilisations of Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Come here, I’ve got something to show you. Here, this is a map of the Silk Road.” That was the first time Sebastian had seen a map that was made of Chinese silk. She stared at the map for a long time and said, “Look, the Silk Road passes through Rome, Venice, Constantinople, Ankara, Damascus, Baghdad, Tehran, Masha, Samarkand, Kashi, Dunhuang, Jiayuguan, Lanzhou and Xi’an.”

Sunda was very surprised and said, “It’s a really long journey from Rome to China. Hmm ... I think that this road must about 4,000 miles long.”

Sebastian yelled excitedly, “Wow! You are right! That’s really long. If I start a journey like that I wouldn’t even be able to finish it. Also, it would be really scary because remember Marco Polo? He travelled along the Silk Road and he had said that in the desert, there were voices that sounded like ghosts or evil spirits, and if you heard those voices, they would make you go in the wrong direction. That really scared me when Miss Olivia read to us from a book called *Marco Polo: Explorer of China* back at school.”

Then Horse Jintao said, “That’s OK, because I have some magic stones. If you have any problems, your family can ask the magic stones to help you right away. So do you want to go on the Silk Road with the magic stones?” Horse Jintao could not go with them as he needed to stay and take care of his country. He strongly advised the family, “If you are going, please remember not to give up easily. You can do it!”

Silka and Sunda said seriously, “We are going but we don’t know if Sebastian wants to come with us, since she is so young.”

Sebastian replied, “I’m going with you in case you need my help. but we still need the magic stone to give us extra power.”

Then off they went to start their Silk Road journey from Xi’an. Horse Jintao ordered his countrymen to shout out, “Good luck Sebastian, Silka and Sunda!”

Their adventure started when they were crossing the big, hot desert called Taklimakan. They suffered a lot in the middle of the desert because they ran out of water to drink.

Sebastian cried to her mum, “I am so tried and thirsty. I want to give up and go back home.” Sunda encouraged his daughter in a calm voice, “Sebastian, we can’t give up. We still have the magic stone to help us.”

Then they all said together, “Magic stone, please show us where to find fresh water.” In a minute, the stone started to glow and lifted itself up in the air. It led the way to a small valley where there was a small river.

Silka reminded Sebastian, “As brave explorers, we should have courage to overcome any difficulties.” Sebastian nodded her head and said, “Yes, if we don’t give up, we will succeed in the end.”

After about five years or so, they were back to see Horse Jintao. The very special family became the most famous horses in the world for their bravery, and they lived happily ever after.

The Gift

Joseph Lai, 11, Singapore International School

There is no silk along the Silk Road. In fact, there is not much along the Silk Road – just a dry, barren desert. The endless road stretches for miles, manoeuvring its way around countless countries. These roads bear the footsteps of the famous explorer, Marco Polo. It was these footsteps that led to people walking on the very same path centuries later.

The sun beat down on my sweaty back. The heat was unbearable, and by the middle of the day, I had even started to hallucinate. I wondered again why I had agreed to join the expedition. I had been convinced that the expedition would be scenic and beautiful, with lush grass and mountains towering towards the heavens. I had not realised that it would be a historical expedition. Since day one, the expedition had been far from perfect. Where were the majestic mountains that were supposed to line the Silk Road? And the lush greenery as we passed from town to town? There was nothing, just a dry wasteland barely used for trade. And the worst was yet to come.

A dark, grey cloud moved overhead. I looked up and prayed that it would cover the sun. We had been walking for two months and not a drop of rain had fallen. Suddenly, Jack, our expedition leader, stopped dead in his tracks. He stooped down and picked something off the ground. It was bulky and had a weird shape. Jack blew off the fine layer of dust that covered the object and two letters came into view ‘M P’. Marco Polo! Our expedition team shouted with joy. They had finally found a piece of history after weeks of searching through piles of rocks and dirt. Even I found it hard to control my excitement, though I never expected to feel happy that we finally found something. Then, the group proceeded to figure out what the object was. It had a needle pointing in a particular direction and had the letters ‘N’, ‘E’, ‘S’ and ‘W’ written on it. Almost instantly, we figured out that it was a compass. Jack tossed the compass to me and told me to hold on to it. However, despite our finding, Jack’s face was creased with worry and one look at the sky told us why. The dark cloud had covered the sun, casting a dark shadow over us. Lightning crackled from within the cloud. This was definitely more than I had bargained for.

The rain started beating down. Drip! Drip! I watched as the pale ground darkened and my heart raced. Thunder boomed overhead and soon, it was pouring. The rain came down at high speed, like needles shooting through the air, pounding on our backs as we continued making our way along the road. Jack turned around and suggested that we set up camp. We all agreed and before long, we had pitched our tents and were sitting inside, warming our hands on the fire we had built. However, the fire did not last long. It started to dim down and soon it was no more than a tiny orange glow. I offered to go look for firewood.

The minute I stepped out of the tent, I was battered by strong winds and rain. I shuddered every time thunder boomed in the sky. The clear sky was gone and was replaced with dark storm clouds. I staggered through the rain, using my windbreaker to cover my eyes. My eyes were just narrow slits as I tried to protect them from the dagger-like rain.

After walking for about fifteen minutes, I still had not found any logs. I decided to turn back and explain to the others. I was sure that they would understand. I turned around but I had not taken more than a few steps before I realised that I was lost. I had no idea which direction I had come from. I was totally clueless. I started to panic; my heart skipped a beat as I looked around in hope of getting a sense of direction, but alas, to no avail. My panic increased; my forehead was clammy with sweat. I thought, "I'm going to die out here! No one's going to find my body; this will be my grave forever." Soon I was oblivious to the rain and wind that slammed into me, as I recalled my childhood, the good times I had with my parents and how lucky I was to have such an understanding family. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I sat down on the moist ground, as life ebbed slowly out of my body.

Then, a thought struck me. I remembered that I had the compass in my bag. I thought back and recalled that when we were all staring wide-eyed at the compass, I had noticed that it was pointing west, and after that we had barely even moved before we had set up camp. I was ecstatic; I was not going to die out here after all. I whipped out the compass and immediately regained my sense of direction. I trudged through the rain for a while before I saw an orange glow in the distance. I ran the rest of the way, screaming, "I'm alive, I'm alive!"

The team was so relieved to see me unhurt that we embraced in a group hug and I felt gratitude surge through my body for the wonderful gift I had received. What was that gift? The gift of life!

The Journey

Katie Choi, 9, International Christian School

Next to Egypt’s bustling market and voices chattering in a quiet corner, a twelve-year old boy, Jeroh, scanned a history book about a lost treasure – the Madovie jewel. Jeroh’s family wasn’t wealthy. In fact, it was almost as poor as a beggar on a dirty street. Jeroh kept thinking about the Madovie jewel. He imagined finding the Madovie jewel and making his family rich, and decided to set off on the Silk Road. He took his donkey and some necessary items. He passed many traders who were trading silk, satin, slaves, musk, spices, jewellery, and rhubarb on the Silk Road. Jeroh kept searching but sadly, he never found anything resembling the lost treasure.

One day, Jeroh happened to pass by a company that had a sign in enormous bold letters, ‘TRADE FOR THE MADOVIE JEWEL’. Jeroh asked, “What will you trade ...” “The red spike,” interrupted the company’s boss. “Well, okay, but where will I find the red spike?” Jeroh questioned. “That’s exactly why you are here; to find the red spike on the Silk Trail, I mean Road,” the boss snapped. Jeroh wondered why the man was being so sharp with him when he had only just come in. He walked out, and again went past traders who asked him to trade something with them. As he walked on, he suddenly turned his head, and his heart stopped dead. At the end of the road, inside a dark cave, was the most beautiful golden tree he had ever seen. At the centre of the tree hung a single fruit. Jeroh immediately knew that the fruit was the red spike. Jeroh plucked the fruit from the tree and as he did, the fruit glowed. Words started to appear on the fruit. Shocked, Jeroh carefully read the words: ‘If you find me and get me, take care of me. Do you have any questions?’

“Yes,” said Jeroh. “Can I trade you with another person?” “Of course, Jeroh,” a voice chuckled behind him. Jeroh turned and gasped. It was one of the company’s employees, Jeroh remembered seeing him at the store. “Why are you here?” Jeroh asked. “Well,” the man started, “My boss told me to follow you so that he could know exactly where you found the fruit,” he explained. “Then let’s head back to the company. We can’t waste a second,” urged Jeroh. As they travelled, they passed many merchants who kept asking them to trade different things. Jeroh and the employee were tired of the merchants and the blazing sun shining on them. When they spotted the huge red building with the words ‘TRADE FOR THE MADOVIE JEWEL’, they whooped with delight. “Finally!” exclaimed the employee. They entered through the heavy black doors. When the boss saw the fruit in Jeroh’s hands, his eyes widened and his jaw dropped as he stared in awe. “At last,” said the boss as he took the silk bag. “All these years I have waited, no one has ever found the red spike before.” “So may I have the Madovie jewel?” Jeroh asked. “Of course, of course,” said the boss. The boss looked

lovingly at the Madovie jewel before handing it over. “But,” the boss warned, “You must promise to let me see the jewel every month. If you don’t, I will send some people to take it back. Understand?” Jeroh nodded real quick to show he understood. “Good,” the boss said.

All through the journey home, Jeroh wondered what his family’s reaction would be. There weren’t even that many traders pestering him any more. Back home, when his mom and dad saw the jewel, they turned to each other, too happy to talk. Then suddenly, his mom nearly screamed with delight. His dad was silent, so Jeroh ran to him and whispered, “Is everything okay, dad?” That almost made dad jump out of his skin. “Yes,” he replied, “it’s just that maybe we can renovate the house now, since we have the Madovie jewel.” “Well, why not!” Jeroh exclaimed. “We could put the sofa here and the kitchen could go over there. The dining table would go over there,” he said. “Whoa, whoa,” laughed dad. “You can be the architect.” So in the end, Jeroh fulfilled his dream and finally had what he had always wished for.

The Hidden Path

Kellie Ling, 10, Clearwater Bay School

“Is it done yet?” the master demanded.
 “Nearly, my lord,” his apprentice answered.
 “Good, Emperor Wu Di will confirm this ...” The master seemed satisfied.

* * *

Hi! My name is Kathleen Rennason, I am English, only 12 and I recently had the experience of falling into this enormous hole in the ground while I was hiking along The Silk Road with my parents. When I woke up, I was inside this cosy cave with a fire alight inside. Beside the fire, was a girl I had never seen before.

The girl was about 12 years old and dressed in a nature-made dress with black braided hair and a Chinese face. She studied me and then exclaimed, “Hi! So you finally woke up!”

I didn’t want to be rude, but I demanded, “Who are you and where am I?”

Her face suddenly turned grave, “Your parents abandoned you. They left you in the hole, just like my parents did to me. The answer to question one is ‘Addie Li’. Answer to question number two is ‘my temporary house inside the cave of a mountain next to the Silk Road’.”

Relieved, I spoke. “My name is Kathleen Rennason. How did you adapt so quickly?” She answered, “I don’t know, it seems that it’s a natural talent. I bet I could adapt to the North Pole before a fat person could do a chicken dance.” She had a proud look in her eyes.

“At least you have a sense of humour; I couldn’t live with a person with a face so straight it looked like a banana!” And with that, we both cracked up.

“We need to get you a weapon; you could not survive without one with all the weird stuff crawling around – for instance, bandits.”

I tried to keep a straight face. “Do you mean the bandits and their commander Elmo? Noooo one fears the mighty Elmo!” I smirked.

Addie suddenly jumped toward the bushes covered by willow leaves. “What is in there?” I wondered.

“Here, I have a set of twin daggers made out of diamond with a sapphire in the middle of the hilt,” she told me as she stepped out of the bushes.

We went out, and then she gave me the daggers and taught me some moves. She said I was

a quick learner and would get an 'A' in her informal lessons.

While we were heading home, Addie suddenly frowned. "I don't remember this trail! I am usually good at remembering the roads, but this road is definitely not the same. Besides, this is definitely not the Silk Road!"

"Let's just keep going in the opposite direction, I've got a feeling it's a good path," I decided.

So we carried on, and finally, after a long time, we found a place to rest.

* * *

Day 2 ...

Aw man! Did Addie have to wake me up with the news that there were bandits around us? I got up and got ready to fight.

The sound of swords filled the air. Without warning, one of the bandits cut a gash on my arm. I dodged his next attack and then cut open his loot bag. A map popped out with an ark at one end made with daggers that killed the bandit in an instant. Anyway, we beat those absurd bandits led by the mighty Elmo.

"Let's keep going," Addie pushed me while she was looking at the map. She continued, "You know what, Kathleen? This part of the road is not marked on the map of the Silk Road. Anyway, how did those bandits find us when this route is not part of the map?"

We kept on travelling.

* * *

It must have been a week since we had started. We smelled freshly cooked bacon in the air. We started hiking faster, thinking we could finally see someone.

Despite all the hard work, all we found was a big house. We knocked on the door to find a very ancient man. He had a long beard and his clothes were like the emperor's.

He murmured, "Come on in. I've been expecting you two."

We walked in obediently. Inside the big house, there was an elaborately decorated living room. There was no TV. Instead, there was an interactive whiteboard connected to a satellite. I think that was probably his, uh, "interactive TV".

He made us sit down and started to explain. "Tut tut, I am the Old Man of Destiny. You two were destined to meet me. Addie, your long lost brother is an apprentice of mine. You will meet him later."

My head was crammed with thoughts. Why did Addie not tell me about her brother? Maybe it is a painful subject.

Addie turned around and whispered, "Jackie's my brother, my parents left him on the doorstep with a letter requesting the lord to accept him."

"Jackie, come out! Your sister's here!" T.O.M.O.D. (The Old Man of Destiny) called.

In under a second, Jackie came out. He had jet black hair like Addie's, but cleaner. He also wore a long white robe. Must be younger than Addie by the looks of him, I thought. The two siblings embraced each other.

"And now, let's see ... ah yes! Long ago when I accepted Jackie, he made these threads and sewed them together to make the destiny of the Silk Road. Like you know, that destiny has been confirmed by Emperor Wu Di of Han Dynasty. Jackie has been adding to the main Silk Road thread to make some more paths – hidden paths no one can find except the destined ones. My job is to make destinies, so I know what will happen to everyone."

“How did the bandits find their way onto one of the hidden paths?” Addie asked.

“What bandits? I never let any bandits on the hidden paths! I must have done it accidentally during my sleep. You girls need a job, how about making the threads? I need them for a lot of things.”

“Perfect!” we shouted in unison.

Our voices were so loud, they echoed in the forest air.

The New Tales of the Silk Road

Kylie Tsang, 10, Glenealy School

Mother has decided that I need a few more dresses. So I am now on my way to the local tailor. This is at least my third time this year.

I sighed as we entered the door of the tailor. We were again surrounded by traditional things. I sat down next to the tailor and observed how he weaved his needle in and out of the silk, adding colourful patterns to it. I was so entranced by this that when mother called, I didn't hear her.

Knowing it might be a few more weeks before mother returns to the tailor, I had secretly hidden my folder of exotic dress designs in my shopping bag to show the tailor and ask him for advice and improvements. Designing dresses has been one of my great passions ever since I could draw. Unfortunately, he did not understand my dress designs because they were not Chinese traditional dresses – the dresses he was used to dealing with. He did, however, teach me a few rules about dressmaking. When Mother told me that it was time to go, with eight new dresses in her arms, I reluctantly said goodbye to him with a grateful smile.

* * *

I am so close to fulfilling my dream of becoming a dress designer! I have spent so many years of time and effort into my folder. I know that the only place the dress designs will shine is in Rome. And I know only one way to get to Rome.

“Father,” I exclaimed after dinner, “may I speak to you for a moment?” He nodded and put down the order form he was holding, which was from Rome Palace, a famous dress shop. Then he turned to me and I knew this sign meant that all his attention was on me. I immediately started talking.

“I recently realised that I haven't been spending enough time with you. I want to learn about Rome's culture too. Your silk cart isn't leaving until Tuesday, right? May I hop on and join you on your journey?”

After a lot of persuasion, my father reluctantly agreed. When I was in the privacy of my room, I pranced around with joy.

* * *

It is the day today, the day we're going to Rome!

Father hauled the supply of water and food for the journey onto the silk cart, then loaded our clothing, belongings, and, of course, the silk. Lastly, father carried me onto the cart. Thankfully, the rickety old cart was bigger on the inside than it looked on the outside. Mother said, "Dear darlings, I will be so lonely when you are gone! Make sure you keep each other safe."

Father smiled at mother, and jumped onto the cart, making gestures to the driver who flicked the reins fiercely. I sat at the back of the cart waving to mother, until she became a small speck on the dusty road. I was very excited but scared too, for I knew there were a lot of dangers on the Silk Road. On the long journey, we once came across a thief who jumped out of the bushes and tried to steal our silk. Luckily, our driver drove the cart faster, so we escaped just in time. But since the journey took a few months, it soon got boring.

* * *

It is early in the morning when we arrive at the shop. Father wakes me up with a gentle nudge. I blink my eyes open cautiously.

"Is there a problem, father?" I wondered aloud, realising the cart wasn't moving.

"No," he answered me, "we are here! Look out the cart!" I sat up straight, rubbing my eyes, and pulled the cloth that hung on the top of the cart to the side.

"Is that the shop? It's beautiful! It's so grand, so big!"

The exterior of the shop was about double the size of the tailor's store at home. I quickly jumped out of the cart excitedly and clutched my folder tightly, making sure father wouldn't see it. We went to the door and knocked, a plump man answered it. I assumed that this was the shop keeper. He looked rather friendly.

Father sat down with the dressmaker for a cup of tea and I went to play with his daughter. She looked about the same age as me, but had long fair hair. Her face was gentle and excited. She brought me up to her room. As we passed through the shop, I realised that the dresses on show were very similar to the ones in my folder. At first, we used hand gestures because she spoke English and I spoke Chinese, but we couldn't understand the more difficult words, so we drew pictures instead. I decided I liked her very much, so I showed her my designs. She gasped in amazement at every single one. I knew that she would like them because they were actually a lot like the fancy Roman dresses. She went downstairs and asked her father up to her room to see the dress designs and he was impressed too. I blushed. A famous dressmaker had just complimented me! I was really shocked when he offered to buy the whole folder for a very high price. I screamed with joy until I saw my father's stern face at the door. Seeing my anxious expression, his face softened and he spoke in a gentle voice, "I never knew you had such interest in dress designing!" I smiled, and there was a comfortable silence in the room. The dressmaker's daughter suddenly broke this tranquillity by jumping around gleefully and picking out her favourite designs from the folder to be hers.

* * *

I'm going back on the next silk cart. The suffering on the Silk Road was definitely worth it, for now, my dream is on the right track. I now know that in order to fulfil your dreams, you have to dare to dream big and persist.

Flying across the Silk Road

Layla Seaver, 10, The French International School

My master was once a great warrior. Now he is a silk merchant. He found me when I was just a little eaglet. My parents had been captured. My master took me to his home and treated me like one of his own. He trained me and made sure that I was healthy. Then one day we went on a journey travelling on the Silk Road.

We had been gone for a month and we were running low on supplies. My master told me to protect him and never abandon him. So I flew high up in the air to see if any danger was ahead of us. As I looked down, I felt peacefulness around me. The air was so dry and still. It was hard for me to travel in this habitat because I was not used to it. I could see miles ahead. The camels were getting tired so we stopped for the night.

Everyone fell asleep right away, even the night guard, but I stayed awake. Suddenly, I saw something in the distance. As they came closer, I realised they weren't friendly – I could sense it! They grabbed a bag of silk. I had to think quickly. I flew past and snatched back the bag of silk. Then one of the bandits turned around and swiped his knife at me. I quickly ducked and flew up in the air. What could I do? They had weapons and were trying to kill me. I could just fly away but I knew I had to protect my master. I stared at them, then I shrieked. I figured if I threatened to wake up the whole camp they would run away. They froze for a few seconds, then they ran away as quickly as they could. After what had happened, I did not want to fall asleep.

The next morning I waited silently for my master to wake up. I wished my master had seen what I had done last night but unfortunately no one had been awake. We continued on our journey. We still had quite a long way to go and we had little food and water supplies left. The next village we were meant to go to was another hundred miles away, and I needed to find water or my master would get very sick and weak. So I flew away from the group. I hoped my master did not think I was abandoning him. I looked back and he was staring at me, I was hoping he knew that I would never abandon him. I tried to look for water or food but there was no sign of either. I was beginning to think that this was the end when I finally saw something far away. It had many different shades of blue. I flew closer and realised that it was a pond. I swooped down even closer and saw fish swimming. I had to show this to my master!

The wind was starting to get really rough. This might be what a sandstorm is like, I thought to myself. My master had warned me about them. I knew I should find shelter but I had to see if my master was safe. I finally found him after hours of flying around. I was exhausted, and I could barely move. I suddenly fell to the ground. My master turned around and looked at

me for a moment, then he picked me up and told the group that we had to camp for the night.

We did not have dinner and I went to bed right away. I tried to stay awake but I was so tired.

The next morning I woke up lying on a camel. I looked at the rest of the group and I was not the only tired one, even the camels were falling to the ground. I suddenly remembered all about the little pond. I had to show my master before he was too tired to even stand up. I flew up high into the sky and saw the pond not too far away. We must have been travelling in the same direction as the pond. I pulled at my master's shirt, trying to show him the direction of the pond. It was just a little to the right of the path but I knew that if I did not show it to my master then he would miss it. I finally gave him one big nudge and he turned around and gasped. He told the other men and they went running to the pond. I did not care if I got to have any water at that moment, I just wanted to make sure my master had some. After a while, I tried catching some fish. The fish were really easy to catch because not many predators could find the pond. After everyone had food and water, we headed out again. I looked at my master and saw the proud smile on his face. His look gave me a great feeling that I had done all of my duties. I felt brave and proud to be at my master's side.

A few days later we arrived at our destination. And from that day on, I travelled everywhere with my master, fighting off bandits and finding water. The one thing I will always do is stay by my master's side for as long as I live.

The Silk Road

Lucy Harrow, 8, The French International School

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Sophie who was 10 years old. Sophie lived in a large house in Baghdad and was rather spoiled – whatever she asked for, her parents bought her! One day Sophie overheard her friends talking about a lady who could sew dresses that would bring eternal happiness to whoever wore them. This lady, Sophie learnt, lived somewhere on the Silk Road.

Sophie asked her parents if she could have one of these dresses for her next birthday. This time though, her parents shook their heads and said “no”. Sophie was furious – she wanted that dress. That evening, when her parents were asleep, Sophie packed her bag and left. She ran down to the stables and jumped on her horse and cantered away. After a little while she saw a big shady tree that had a rock under it. Sophie was tired, so she decided to stay the night under the tree. When the sun rose the next morning, she quickly packed up her bag and leapt back in the saddle. Later that day, Sophie rode into a town. When she got there she could only see rows of people carrying baskets loaded with silk and gold. She tied her horse to the nearest tree and walked through the crowds of people, passing stalls selling many strange-looking items and spices. Then Sophie saw some women selling silk dresses. She asked them if these were the dresses that brought eternal happiness. The women laughed and said no, but then one lady, standing at the entrance to a dark alley, waved to Sophie. Sophie walked slowly towards her. The lady pointed down the alley and told Sophie to keep following the Silk Road until it reached a faraway land called China.

Sophie went back for her horse and went down the alley. It was so dark and the walls were peeling – they looked as though they had not been painted in over 10,000 years. Sophie felt scared but she kept going. Eventually she saw a bright light. As she left the alley she found herself back in the countryside. In front of her were lots of mountains, their peaks like sharp points from a broken wine glass. Above the mountain peaks, the clouds were like animal-shaped pillows flying in the sky. Sophie felt very alone but she kicked her horse and said, “Trot on!”

The road snaked around the base of the mountains. At one sharp corner, Sophie suddenly spotted a golden puppy sitting silently as though it was waiting for its owner. However, as she rode past, the puppy suddenly started to follow her. After a while Sophie jumped down from her horse and went over to the puppy who began to wag its tail hesitantly. Sophie picked up the puppy and asked if it knew the way to the lady. The puppy barked and Sophie laughed. She didn’t believe that the puppy really knew where the dressmaker lived, but the puppy kept bounding backwards and forwards as though it wanted to show Sophie something. She decided to follow him.

Many days and nights followed. At one point they struggled for days through a desert. The sand blew on Sophie's face making her eyes sting with pain but she didn't give up. At night the puppy would come and cuddle up to Sophie and lick her face. Sophie was happy and as she looked up into the night sky she saw lots of beautiful stars, like crystals on fire in the sky. Eventually the scenery changed again and the land became green and then red as they passed fields of red poppies swaying gently in the breeze. Sophie had never seen anything like this and she smiled.

But Sophie was tired and hungry. Eventually she rode up to a house and knocked on the door. An old man opened the door and invited them in. Sophie asked him if he had heard about a dressmaker who made special dresses. The old man smiled wisely and nodded slowly. As he stroked the puppy's head, he told Sophie that the dressmaker lived in Chang'an, which was a day's journey away, and asked if she wanted to stay the night. Sophie said "thank you" and after sharing supper with the old man, slept deeply until the next morning.

As the sun rose, Sophie set off on her horse, the puppy still leading the way. After a few hours they approached a tiny village. It was very quiet. Then Sophie spotted a lady getting water from a river and asked if she knew the dressmaker. The lady pointed to a house at the edge of the village. Sophie began to feel very excited.

Sophie knocked on the door. A very old lady opened the door and smiled when she heard Sophie's question. She asked Sophie and the puppy to come inside. The old lady then went over to a cupboard and reached for a box. It was a very dusty box and looked very old. Sophie wondered what would be in it. As the lid was opened Sophie saw it contained a bright red dress. While it was very plain, it was beautiful. And then Sophie realised that the story was true, but it wasn't the dress that brought happiness but everything she had seen and done on the journey. It was the journey that made everything beautiful, she thought, and as she cuddled the puppy, Sophie smiled.

The Weird Dream

Madeline Lee, 9, The French International School

Dave and Jim walked slowly to the abandoned house, chatting happily.

They jumped over the fence and started to play, when Jim suddenly saw a shed with a sign taped on it. The sign read: 'Time Machine'.

"Hahahaha! A time machine, what a bunch of baloney! The person who lived here probably had kids," said Dave. "Let's see what's in there." Jim opened the door slowly and walked inside. Dave followed him but he tripped over a wheel barrow and pushed Jim into the wall. The wall suddenly slid open and there was a secret passage. When they took a look at the passage, they shivered with fear. "Shall we go through it?" asked Jim, half scared, half curious. "Ummmmm ... maybe ..." Dave hesitated but he pretended to be determined.

They sneaked into the passage without a word. The passage was like a narrow maze. They came to the end of the passage and saw a room with high-tech computers, controls, maps of the Silk Road, books about the Trail of Bones and a handwritten manual for the time machine. Jim and Dave stared in awe. After a few minutes, Jim managed to pull himself together and he took a tour around the room. He picked up the time machine manual and read a page. By the time he finished reading the second page, Dave shook himself and walked to Jim. "What are you reading?" asked Dave curiously. Jim shut the book and answered, "It says here that the time machine can take you to the Silk Road! Can you believe it?" Dave walked round to the computers and pressed a big red button ...

There was a rumble from above them. Dave looked up and saw rocks falling. "Run!" he shouted, "There's an avalanche!" They ran for their lives until they didn't hear any more rumbling. Then they found themselves surrounded by a huge pile of bones. They realised that those rocks weren't actually rocks, those were bones of humans and animals.

Jim and Dave tried very hard to push the bones off the path so they could stand up. They found themselves standing by the edge of a narrow path along the cliff. When they looked down the cliff, they were shocked to see a number of bones floating in the river.

Suddenly they heard someone shout, "What are you doing here? You're blocking the way." They turned around and saw a caravan heading towards them. Jim asked the merchant who had spoken to them, "Excuse me, where are we right now?" "You are in middle of the Trail of Bones! Be careful, or you will fall down the cliff and die," said the merchant. There were about fifty people in the caravan, dressed in ancient Chinese clothes. Some of them were merchants and some were workers. Each of them took care of one to two camels. The camels carried lots of heavy goods on their backs and walked very slowly in a line.

Then a camel carrying some heavy goods on its back passed by and accidentally pushed Jim and Dave off the path. Luckily, they managed to cling onto a rock. The merchants threw them a rope to pull them up. Jim and Dave were really grateful and thanked the merchant many times. The merchant stopped the caravan and gave them some water in a canteen and asked them if they wanted to travel with them. Jim and Dave were glad to go with the caravan.

Jim and Dave travelled through the desert for days with the caravan. The merchants gave them Chinese clothes and shoes, and also shared food and water with them. They finally arrived at a city. The merchant told them that it was the city of Samarkand. Suddenly, a group of Turkoman bandits attacked the caravan using swords and crossbows. The camels were frightened, jumping up and down making a huge racket. The merchants threw Jim and Dave a sword each and asked them to take care of themselves. The people of the caravan fought bravely and finally overpowered the bandits. The bandits gave up and left.

After the fierce battle, some members of the caravan were wounded. The merchants found that the bandits had escaped with a few camels. Jim and Dave saw silk, herbs, spices and some broken porcelain all over the place. The merchants told Jim and Dave that the area was dangerous because no government ruled the land, so the nomads who lived there would rob the caravans.

Jim and Dave followed the caravan to continue their journey in the desert. They finally reached a city called Dunhuang. Jim and Dave found the ancient Western Chinese city very interesting. There were many people in the market, a lot of ancient Chinese buildings, houses and temples along the road. The merchants took them to one of the temples and they saw a massive Buddha statue. They heard a big gong from the gigantic bell in the temple ...

Jim heard his alarm clock. He looked around and found himself in his own bedroom. "Phew, it was only a dream," he said to himself. He quickly got up, dressed and ran to school. That morning, Jim had a history lesson and the topic was the Silk Road. The teacher showed the class some pictures of ancient China and talked about the merchants who travelled from the West to the East or from the East to the West to trade goods. Jim felt amazed because he knew nothing about the Silk Road before he had the dream! Then Dave, who was sitting next to Jim, whispered to him, "I had a dream about the Silk Road last night!" "Me too!" whispered Jim. They both looked at each other in awe.

The Trip on the Silk Road

Navya Lodha, 9, Glenealy School

Early in the morning, when the sun was rising between two mountains, I once again stood there on the Silk Road, where just months ago a crowd of sobbing people had gathered. They had come to attend the funeral of Emperor Wu Di. The crowd was out to watch as the royal family led the emperor's long funeral procession going across the dangerous Silk Road. The Silk Road is full of pure beauty and danger. The sky shines a bright baby blue among the cities but in times of danger the sky seems to darken and dull and the blue fades away. The people still use the Silk Road to trade many items, mainly from Central Asia.

By the time I had joined the mourners on the left, the procession was already under way. Dowager Dou was our new empress. She was followed by other members of the royal family. Behind them walked a number of government officials. Then came the professional mourners, wailing and throwing dust into the air. Last was a long line of attendants carrying many things the emperor would need in the new world of the afterlife – his jewels, clothes, crown, and a lot of other things. This reminded me of all the items that were and even now are traded using the Silk Road.

After days and days the long procession had gone through all the cities along the Silk Road, but not everyone managed to make it to the end of the long journey. The journey contained danger – like wild animals and plants – and not just pure beauty. Some attendants had also died because of the Black Death, just as the king had, but they were not noticed and rotted away, not reaching the afterlife. Their families missed them as much as the emperor was missed.

At this point the wailing mourners had been left behind for miles and miles and were now no longer seen. Soon the priest conducted the final stages of the funeral. The attendants, priests, the royal family and the new emperor were now travelling safely back home. It took days and days for them to reach back home safely.

'Cultural diffusion' was the spread of religion and culture. One bad thing that was traded was disease. People got very sick, some even died, because of the diseases that travelled across the Silk Road. People did not notice that they were passing on diseases to other people until they started dying. The Black Death was one of the diseases that killed a lot of people, and this was one reason it spread.

On the way back, the group noticed the bodies of the attendants who had died on the way. They took them back to show their families what had happened. They couldn't be sure about what had happened but they thought it might be the Black Death that had caused this.

When they got back, they once again saw all the mourning and wailing people in the city. They told the attendants' families what had happened, which made them even more upset.

The people were still in desolation, especially the emperor's family, which had no child. But they still held their royal position, because they were related to the empress. The whole country knew the news by the next day, and just about everyone in China was crying and sobbing loudly. Their brave and beloved emperor was now no more and everyone knew that it was time everyone got along with the new empress, who was Dowager Dou, Wu Di's grandmother.

Within a few days, however, life went on as though nothing had happened and everyone moved on. Everyone was pretty normal now, no one was seen crying and it all seemed like a dream. People don't talk about it much now – it was already forgotten and not remembered anymore.

Still, it all flashed back in my memory as I stood still on the Silk Road, staring at the bright yellow sun in the orange sky.

New Tales of the Silk Road

Olivia Bray, 10, Glenealy School

A long time ago, in ancient China, there lived a young boy named Xiao Long, which means ‘Little Dragon’. He lived with two older brothers named Jin (‘Gold’) and Yu (‘Universe’) and a poor but desperate father. Every day he sent them out to beg and find food.

The family had a small patch of land about the size of an average backyard, on which the family used to grow and dry yams, and sell them on a dusty path that people used to get around the tiny village. Unfortunately, since dried yams were the most hated food in the entire village, usually no one bought any and most of the time the boys went home empty-handed and had to make do with no dinner.

One day, the boys’ father fell exceedingly ill. His sons tried everything they could to help him recover. They summoned a doctor, they made sure he drank plenty of water and that he didn’t eat too much or too little. They even tried making their own medicines, but all their efforts came to nothing. Three days after his sickness began he called his sons to his bedside. “The sickness won’t heal. My soul will begin its journey up to the heavenly kingdom soon,” he wheezed weakly.

“I know. I have prepared the funeral,” Jin sobbed.

“We need to decide who will get my property when I die. I will tell you how the owner of the land, house and property will be decided. You must go to Rome and collect as much gold as you can. I don’t care how you do it. If you get the most gold, then the house and land is yours.”

“But Rome is such a long way away! How will we get there?” asked Yun.

“Go by the Silk Road. It leads straight from here to Rome in Italy. It’s a long way but I’m sure you’ll manage,” the father answered.

“Thank you. We promise to bring home as much gold as we can.” said Xiao Long.

“Do not disappoint me,” the father said.

“How in the name of the Han Dynasty are we going to go along this Silk Road anyway? It’s a long way from here to Italy!” Jin panicked once they were out of the house. Both Jin and Xiao Long turned to Yun. He always knew what to say in times of trouble.

“The journey of a thousand miles must begin with one single step,” Yun answered.

Suddenly, an old lady came up to Xiao Long and grabbed some beads that were hanging from his jacket. “Little boy, that nice bead string! I give you three pieces of gold for lovely beads!”

Reluctantly, Xiao Long accepted the trade and handed one gold piece to each of his brothers. They realised that a lot of traders came to the Silk Road to trade their goods and that they could use this to their advantage. They’d trade their possessions for more valuable things

such as jewellery and spices and then trade those for gold pieces. That way, they could get a lot of gold even before they reached Rome!

The trouble was they didn't have much to trade. Jin, Yun and Xiao Long decided that it would be a lot easier if they just stayed on the Silk Road and tried making money there.

Something snapped inside Jin's mind that day. He started doing crazy things out of desperation. He started stealing money from rich traders! He used violence against anyone who resisted him. He ran away and although he ended up with the most money, he hadn't won it fairly.

"Jin shouldn't do this, Yun. He could go to jail! Or be executed!" Xiao Long worried.

"I agree, little brother. But maybe this is his destiny. And you can't trick destiny," Yun replied.

"Why is it that everything that comes out of your mouth sounds like it is a wise saying?" Xiao Long cheekily asked. His reward was a solid but light punch on the arm. They walked a few miles and then started arguing about how they were going to earn money. Yun thought they should try to trade with rich people but Xiao Long thought it would be better if they begged. They kept arguing until Yun came up with a plan.

"We will take some clothes from rich traders, pretend to have something to trade, take the victim's money and run!" Yun exclaimed, as if he had just found something that would save mankind.

"Yun, if you did that, you would be just as bad as Jin was!" Xiao Long cried.

"Shut up! The reward is mine!" replied Yun as he strode off.

Xiao Long decided that it would be best if he tried to help someone and ask for them to pay him. He asked a lot of people if they needed any help but most of them either said no or completely ignored him. But finally, an old man who was sick and tired said that he would pay Xiao Long some money if he got the old man a drink. Xiao Long didn't think that there was a water tap for drinking water nearby and decided to dig for it. He found a small patch of grass and started digging for water. While he did, he thought of his older brothers: Jin and his dark eyes that twinkled when he was happy, Yun and his wise words that made sense to no one but him. He eventually found some water, gave it to the old man and he was rewarded with two gold pieces. He didn't like this life, though. He wanted to go back home to his father. And that is just what he did.

Two weeks later, he got back home and was declared the new owner of his father's house. He had learned an important lesson: It's not about whether you get the prize or not, it's about *how* you get it.

Tom's Adventure

Ria Naidu, 9, St. Margaret's Co-educational English Secondary and Primary School

Tom, a 17-year old boy, lived with his poor family in Xian, China. Because his family was poor, they did not have enough money. The family begged for money until ... Tom got a job! But the job was very risky. Tom had to ride along the Silk Road to transport goods.

"NO, you can't go!" screamed mum.

"It's OK, I'll be fine, mum!" said Tom.

"Tom has to learn to be a strong and tough boy," added dad.

The next day, Tom was ready to set off on the Silk Road. His first destination was India to transport silk.

Mum said, "Tom, I hope you make it back safely!"

"Don't worry mum! I will be back soon," said Tom.

"Tom, I have a surprise for you," said mum as she led a lovely brown cow out of the garden. "This is a present for you," said mum. (She had saved up all her money to buy the cow for Tom.) Tom was speechless. "Wow! Thanks a lot mum!" he said.

Then they all said goodbye to each other and off Tom went to the Silk Road, marching proudly with his cow.

On the way, Tom met a girl named Kelsey. She was 16 years old. She too was going to transport silk from China to Europe through the Silk Road. She told Tom that the Silk Road had many dangers such as thieves. Tom was scared, as he feared some thieves might rob him.

Kelsey assured him. She said, "It's alright. I've been to the Silk Road many times and nothing has ever happened to me. If we stick together, we can ride through any difficulty."

Suddenly, someone tapped Kelsey on her back. Kelsey turned around. It was Chief Robinson (her boss). "Hi Chief! I'm surprised to see you here. Is everything fine?"

"Yes Kelsey, take it easy, nothing to worry about. I now want you to take the silk to Pakistan instead of Europe. The guy who was going to take it to Pakistan mistakenly took it to Europe," said Chief Robinson. "No worries Chief, that's absolutely fine!" said a delighted Kelsey. Chief Robinson disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

Kelsey told Tom what had happened. Tom was pleased. He said to Kelsey, "Now, we can stick together most of the way."

Tom and Kelsey both rode on Tom's cow and soon they reached Lanzhou. They spent the night there in a tent Kelsey had brought with her. Kelsey had brought some money along with some precious jewels. Tom had very little money and no valuables at all. Nevertheless, they both collected their money and jewels in a bag and dug a hole in a safe place within the tent.

They buried the bag in this hole and placed a carpet on top of it to cover up their secret hiding place.

They soon went to sleep. But Tom was actually pretending to sleep because he had a negative feeling in his mind that something bad would happen. Tom was right. Later that dark night, two thieves came to the tent to steal their money. Tom was scared but was brave enough to face the thieves. He screamed, “Hey! You guys, stop right there!”

“As if you have anything to stop us with!” retorted one of the thieves. The thief took out a very sharp knife. “*Do* you have anything to stop us with?” exclaimed the thief slyly.

“Help! Help!” shouted Tom. Kelsey heard Tom call for help and quickly rushed to his aid. When she saw the thieves, she sprang up and kicked both of them very hard in the stomach. This made them cry in pain and throw up. Quickly, Tom called the village guards and they arrested the two thieves.

Then she brought Tom to safety. “Wow! How did you do that?” asked Tom. “Oh, I forgot to tell you that I know kung fu,” replied Kelsey. “Wow! I am amazed!” said Tom.

The next morning, after having breakfast (they had bought some food with the money they had), Tom and Kelsey set off to the Himalayas.

The journey finally brought them to Tibet and it was extremely long so they were really tired. Once they reached Tibet it was night. They had their dinner, put up the tent and went to sleep.

The next day, they set out for their final destination.

It was very tiring; Tom and Kelsey had to go all the way to Mathura (near Delhi) in India. It was a very long journey. They took two-and-a-half days to reach Mathura. When they reached Mathura, Tom said, “Finally, we’re in India!” Tom gave the silk to its new owner in India and then he said goodbye to Kelsey, who left for Pakistan.

For bringing the merchandise in time for the Great Maharaja’s wedding, the minister rewarded Tom with 500 gold coins. He invited Tom to attend the royal wedding.

Tom was very happy to attend and witness a traditional Indian wedding. The wedding was very lavish and grand with lots of traditional rituals and formalities. Throughout the ceremony Tom could not help but think about Kelsey and the wonderful time they had together during their journey.

Finally, after the wedding was over, Tom thanked the minister for letting him attend the wedding. Going back was not a problem for Tom because he was extra cautious about any thieves trying to rob him.

When he returned to Xian, Tom went back to his house. There, everyone was very happy to see him. He had earned lots of money.

Tom started his own business buying and selling silk. The following year, guess who came to buy silk from Tom ...? It was Kelsey!

Journey through the Silk Road

Serena Ren, 10, Glenealy School

A long time ago during the Han Dynasty in China, there lived a young boy named Chen Gu. He lived with his big family in a crowded mud cottage in a small village. They were extremely poor and could only afford to eat one meal a day.

Han Dynasty was then ruled by Emperor Wuti. In his palace, Emperor Wuti was admiring the carpets from Herat. Emperor Wuti's merchants had travelled to the Middle East, traded silk with Herat's people and brought back the carpets. They called the trade routes from China to Rome the "Silk Road". Emperor Wuti was fascinated and he awarded his merchants each a bag of gold. The news of the Silk Road and the rewards spread like wildfire to every city, village and town in China. Soon merchants flocked from far to trade on this 'road'. Chen Gu and his sister, Chen Xiao were enthralled by the vivid stories the traders brought with them to their village. Chen Gu and Chen Xiao dreamed about travelling on the Silk Road and bringing back rewards for their family. They soon dismissed these fantasies, however, and thought that was the silliest idea they had ever had.

Chen Xiao sighed. "We're just children of a poor family."

A few years passed. Chen Gu's life remained the same everyday, just like clockwork. In the morning, he fed the animals; in the afternoons, he watered the crops; and in the evenings, he collected the eggs. One day, Chen Gu was flipping through his old diary, and memories of his childhood flashed back.

He thought again and again about those youthful ideas, then suddenly shouted, "Yes!" Chen Gu jumped up and rushed to tell his sister his decision. Then he hurried to tell his best friend, Li Jing, his plan. Li Jing was very excited to join him. Chen Gu planned to travel on the Silk Road like traders and to go all the way to Rome. They planned more details and soon started to pack supplies and selected antiques to trade on the Silk Road.

A few of their friends in the village heard the news and decided to join them. Finally they set off on a cool, breezy night.

Days passed and Chen Gu, Li Jing and their friends passed the city of Xi'an, the starting point of the Silk Road. Shortly they arrived at Dun Huang, the city of sand, and an important stop for traders. The streets bustled with people, everyone was shouting, all hoping to get a good trade. It was noisy and crowded.

Chen Gu glanced at the antiques they had brought and instructed his friends, "Okay, everyone take one antique and trade it for a treasure." Chen Gu's friends nodded and hurried off. That left Chen Gu with the boring job – guarding the supplies. Patiently, Chen Gu waited. After nearly three hours, Chen Gu's friends came rushing back with excitement. They brought

back antiques of all shapes and sizes. Chen Gu's jaw dropped upon seeing such marvellous items. Chen Gu and his friends carefully placed them in the baskets and resumed their journey.

Chen Gu and his team travelled and traded along the Silk Road and finally they reached the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Most of the traders from China stopped at the treacherous Taklamakan Desert and headed back. A legend said that it was impossible to cross; even if one survived, he would be haunted by demons. However, Chen Gu and his friends were determined to cross the perilous desert. They loaded their water bags, filled their baskets with food and began to cross the desert. The first few days were uneventful. But as days went on, the trek became harder. Days seemed like weeks and months, and worst of all, their water was running out. Li Jing became sick and dehydrated. He was very weak and started to have nightmares about bad spirits. Li Jing felt chills run up his spine every now and then. Chen Gu had to find a new water supply quickly. A day passed, and Li Jing got weaker and weaker. No oasis city was in sight. Next morning after a short rest, they began their hike. Suddenly the wind started blowing heavily. Somebody cried, "Sandstorm!"

Chen Gu shouted through the wind, "Cover your faces with cloth and stay close!" They struggled through the storm. After what seemed like an eternity, the sandstorm finally stopped. Chen Gu brushed the sand away from his face and looked for his team. He saw his friends, but Li Jing was missing.

"Li Jing is missing!" cried Chen Gu. The others nodded. They searched everywhere. There was not a glimpse of Li Jing. Finally, they gave up, thinking that Li Jing might have been captured by demons. It was not too long before they all became weak, famished for food and thirsty for water. They became desperate and prayed for God to keep the demons away. They struggled forward, knowing they had to continue, when out of the blue, they saw something in the distance. Chen Gu rushed forward and saw that it was a bag. He opened the bag and saw some food and several water bags still full of water.

"Hooray!" yelled everyone. Their prayers were answered. At last they had fresh water and food, for the first time in many days. Finally, with some good rest, they marched on. A few days later, through the land of sand, they saw dark shadows in the distance. There in front of their eyes was the city of Kashgar. Chen Gu and his team had successfully crossed the Taklamakan Desert.

Years passed before Chen Gu finally returned home. In all those years, Chen Gu and his friends traded wisely on the Silk Road and earned enough to buy some camels and rode back home. They presented the camels to Emperor Wuti, who was amazed by the camels and rewarded them with a bag of money. They returned home and lived happily afterwards as heroes in their village.

The Mystery of the Silk Road

Sophie Qi, 10, Clearwater Bay School

I am never in my whole, entire life going there. Never. I would be hot, bothered and worse, mum and dad will chat the whole time about the old, creaky Silk Road. In fact, when I was little, I thought the Silk Road was a long silky road that princesses walked on. I was surprised to hear that it was some old broken thing that a princess wouldn't even put a toe on. I think it's not fair, my friend Madeline is going to Paris, while I'm stuck at the Silk Road. I used to enjoy summer because there was no school or homework, but now, I'd rather go to school.

On the first day of the torture, we went to a museum about the history of the Silk Road. A particular room contained a bunch of ancient-looking bamboo slips in a glass case. Sound blasted out of the speakers, explaining that in 1907, Sir Aurel Stein found them, an undelivered stack of messages, that had been delayed since the Han dynasty. As we went into another room, my head was still spinning with thoughts about the message. Why wasn't it delivered? What did it say? Those questions kept me thinking the whole day.

At night, as the ceiling fan whirled, my brain churned. Suddenly, a swirl of smoke came from nowhere, and another.

When I opened my eyes, I was in the boiling hot desert, riding a camel, holding junk in my hands. Just as I was about to throw it, I saw what the junk was. This was no junk! These were the bamboo slips that Sir Aurel Stein had found! Without hesitation, I prepared to ride to the museum. Suddenly I stopped. I was in the middle of nowhere, completely lost, with no clue as to where the museum was. I decided to ride north, and see what was there.

I don't know how far I travelled, but after a long time, I found a city. It was strange, a city in the middle of nowhere. Still, I was tired, hungry, thirsty, and weak. As I went in, I noticed that people were dressed strangely. Then it hit me. I had gone back in time, all the way to the Han dynasty! As a gust of wind went by, the bamboo slips moved. Remembering them, I took a peek at the message. At first, it looked like scribbles. Then they formed a meaningful sentence. 'Caution! Robbers attacking!' it read. Realising that this city was in danger, I hurried to the palace. At first, the security guard wouldn't let me in, but when I showed him the notes, he called for someone to take me to the emperor.

The emperor looked stern, so I humbly bowed and presented the bamboo slips to him. He read for a moment, then, face turning pale, shouted out some Chinese commands. Not knowing what he wanted, I shook my head. The emperor pointed at a soldier, then a medical-looking sign, then at me. Then I realised. He wanted me to be a nurse! Keen to see what would happen next, I nodded. His face broke into a smile, and then he frowned. Afterwards, he led me to the "hospital".

I was given some food and water, while another person showed me around. Then, he left and I was alone. But not for long. Soon, a wounded soldier came in, followed by more sick people. Although it was gross, it was also exciting. The adventure of a lifetime.

Just as I was wrapping tea leaves around a soldier's injury, I heard a cheer. Well, more of a shout. Anyhow, a smiling emperor came in holding up a victory sign. Just as I was about to nod, I saw another robber. This one was covered in blood and holding a weapon that he was aiming at the emperor! Without thinking twice, I steered the emperor away. Just in time! An arrow flew forwards, just missing the emperor. But it was coming towards me! I had less time now. Much less. I couldn't dodge, and I was trapped. Nothing in my hands, except for a mirror. A bronze mirror! It was an arrow, it wouldn't break through. So I crouched, mirror in front of me like a shield. Thwack! The arrow fell, defeated by my shield. The robber was furious now, shooting as fast as he could, hoping to create a hole in the shield. After a few seconds, I heard an even louder thwack. Then, slower than a grandma, I looked out. There, lying in the middle of the ground was a dead robber. A proud soldier stood above him, along with a couple of other people, including the emperor. You can't imagine how happy he was to see me. To show his appreciation, he presented me with a real diamond. Then, another swirl of smoke came, and I closed my eyes ...

And found myself lying in bed, the same as before. I looked around for the diamond, but it wasn't there. Maybe it was just a dream.

The next day, we went to a souvenir shop. There were loads of interesting and valuable treasures like silk clothes, glass cups, gold sculptures and much, much more. After looking through all the goods at least ten times, I chose a tiny box of purple precious gems for Madeline. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a diamond exactly like the one the emperor had given me! Without thinking twice, I purchased it. Maybe my adventure was a real one! When I got back, I found out that Madeline had gotten me a sparkly keychain in the shape of the Eiffel tower!

On the rest of the trip, I learnt a lot about the Silk Road, but the most important thing I learnt was that the Silk Road can be much more mysterious and adventurous than Paris. A week's trip seemed like a minute. Before I knew it, I was at home, thinking about my adventure. I don't know about you, but next summer, I am definitely going there again!

Heavenly Horse on the Silk Road

Trevor Chow, 8, German Swiss International School

“**H**elp, help!” screamed Hua in extreme pain. He was struggling with a fierce, strong and vicious tiger. It seemed that the tiger was very hungry and wanted to swallow Hua in one big gulp!

Hua was a Chinese boy aged nine who lived in the time of the Tang Dynasty. His family and his tribe worked for the Emperor by raising silkworms and making silk. On that day, Hua had been catching crickets in the field near the forest, without noticing that a tiger was approaching. In an instant, the tiger pounced at him. He tried to run away but the tiger caught him with its big paws. Hua used all his might to kick the tiger but it was all in vain. His right arm was grabbed tightly and suddenly, the tiger gave a hard tug and ripped off his right arm!

Hua was bleeding severely but the tiger didn't stop attacking him. Hua thought he was going to die, but in the blink of an eye, a muscular and magnificent horse came charging towards the tiger and kicked it with its powerful legs. It leaped and slammed hard against the tiger, finally stomping on it and leaving it half-dead. The horse ran towards Hua and let its “blood-like” sweat drip onto Hua's bleeding wound. Surprisingly, the wound stopped bleeding immediately and it did not hurt anymore.

The horse was dun coloured with four dark stripes on its back. It had a big head, long ears, well-defined muscles and short legs. Hua recognised that this was a “Heavenly Horse”! It was the fastest kind of horse from Ferghana and was famous for its stamina. Blood-like sweat could be found on its body when it was working. The Emperor always wanted a lot of “Heavenly Horses” to strengthen his army cavalry.

Hua stared at the horse; it seemed that the horse was asking him, “Are you OK?” He was astonished; he believed the horse had come to protect him.

The horse followed Hua and stayed with him in his home. He named the horse Tianma since “Tian” meant heaven and “Ma” meant horse. Hua didn't want to go out because he was scared that people would laugh at him because of his missing arm. He played a lot with Tianma at home. He felt they could “talk” with each other through their minds. When he was sad, Tianma would comfort Hua and when he was happy, the horse would share Hua's happiness.

After staying at home for a few weeks, Hua decided to go out to have fun because it was the Chinese New Year. Just as he stepped out, a gang of kids saw him and teased him. “Come, have a look at the one-armed baby,” they shouted. Hua was angry and he came back home in anger and frustration. He “told” Tianma about his unhappiness and his desire to learn kung fu so that he could protect himself.

“I can teach you horse kung fu, only known to horses,” said Tianma.

“Really? Do you really know kung fu?” asked Hua excitedly.

“Yes, it’ll be our secret!”

“Okay!”

Hua started to learn kung fu from Tianma but couldn’t grasp the skills well. After some unsuccessful tries, Hua was frustrated and stopped practicing. Tianma dragged him to the field and Hua saw a bird with a shorter right wing, learning to fly. The bird tried and tried but didn’t succeed and fell to the ground many times. It didn’t give up and continued to try. After a few weeks, the bird could finally fly and it whistled a happy tune for its achievement.

“Through practice and more practice, you will gain experience and get better and better. If you give up easily, you will never achieve anything!” said Tianma. “Remember, practice makes improvement and achieves excellence!”

Inspired by the bird’s effort, Hua continued learning kung fu seriously from Tianma. And, with a lot of painstaking practice, he grasped many kung fu skills and his inner strength increased steadily. Hua mastered many amazing skills no one had even dreamed of! He could kick a tree and make it fall down, jump swiftly over a person and catch a flying bird easily. He even grasped “light skills” with which he could “walk” on water! Hua’s confidence was strengthened and he felt very safe and satisfied.

At that time, silk was popular not just in the Tang Dynasty, but also in the faraway Roman Empire. The Romans bought silk from Persian traders who sold it to the Romans at a very high price. The Romans wanted to get silkworms and make silk for themselves. They sent two Roman monks who stole silkworms from Hua’s tribe and fled. Many villagers from Hua’s tribe chased the monks but returned heavily injured. “They’re fierce and strong fighters,” said the villagers when they came back. “They’re tall, well-built and have red hair. They are strange!” The whole tribe was scared because the Emperor would punish them for losing the silkworms. But no one dared to fight the monks.

Hua plucked up all his courage and said, “I’ll go with Tianma and get the silkworms back!” He left instantly with the horse and in a very short time, he saw the monks. He jumped off his horse and kicked the monks with a triple-sweep kick. He hit one in the face and the monk fell down. Another monk tried to use his sword to attack him. Hua jumped over the monk and held the monk’s leg and flipped his body to the ground. They were frightened by Hua’s amazing kung fu skills. They gave back the silkworms and ran away.

Hua and Tianma went back with the silkworms. They received overwhelming applause from the tribe. Now everyone called Hua “Kung Fu Master on the Horse” and they believed Tianma was a gift from God.



Fiction
Group 3

New Tales of the Silk Road

Angel Kwok, 14, Heep Yunn School

“**S**tupid, *stupid* project!” groaned Rachel.

“Yeah!” agreed Haley, who had chestnut hair and big brown eyes.

“Will you please be quiet and concentrate? We’re already falling behind our schedule, hurry up!” said Katy, the girl with dark, curly hair.

Mrs Frost, the girls’ teacher, had given them a project on the topic ‘The Silk Road’. They had decided to stay at Rachel’s tonight to complete it. It was going to be a boring night. Well, at least that was what they thought.

They decided to take a break after two hours of hard work.

Rachel fell back onto the floor. She glanced under her bed, where lay a pink box. Her heartbeat became fast; it was dangerous, but it could really help with their project. Without a second thought, she pulled it out and her friends hurried over to look at what she was holding. A label on the box said: ‘The locket inside can take you wherever you want to go (on Earth). Use it carefully.’

“I found this on a table in a café years ago. Someone left it there and I took it. I’ve never used it before, but I think maybe it can help us with our project,” Rachel told her friends. They exchanged looks.

“Maybe we should give it a try,” said Katy.

* * *

The girls put their phones, cameras, pens, money and maps into their bags. Together, they held the locket and decided to start in Xian, the starting point of the Silk Road.

“Xi’an, China!” all of them said together.

Poof! Everything started to whirl around them. Things swivelled around so fast that they immediately felt dizzy. It all became a blur and soon they found themselves in a new location.

They tried to make out their surroundings. It was dark, but the sound of a bustling city came from not so far away. Rachel, Haley and Katy got to their feet and followed it.

Xian was not a quiet city, cars were everywhere and there were merchants selling food. “Let’s take a few pictures and go, we do not have forever,” said Haley. They snapped a dozen pictures and wrote down the stuff they found interesting. Katy led them to the nearest washrooms and they got ready for their next trip.

“Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, China!”

* * *

They arrived at what used to be the centre of cultural and economic exchange between the East and the West in the old days. Ancient art treasures could be seen everywhere. It was dark, but they managed to make out the beautiful shapes of vases and Buddhist art. Although the sun was already setting, some tourists were still around, sight-seeing. The strange thing was, they all wore old-fashioned clothes and looked like they had just walked out of the 80s.

Seriously, how long ago had those people read a fashion magazine?

“Anyway,” Katy thought, “we are not staying here long.” They snapped a few pictures and kept heading for the centre of Dunhuang.

On their way they stopped to look at the ruins of ancient Han and Tang Dynasty buildings and they got to see some once-grand building ruins. Katy couldn’t help thinking how things changed with time. The twilight was making her feel sadder as she thought all things were going to end one day. This hollow feeling was also making her feel a bit hungry.

“Do you guys want to eat before we head to the next stop?” asked Katy. Rachel and Haley were both hungry by now, so they decided to pick up some food at the Dunhuang market, but the man who was selling them food frowned at Katy’s RMB100 note, he seemed to find something wrong with it. “We do not accept kiddy toy money, girl!” he said with a heavy accent.

Kiddy toy money?! Katy did not remember when RMB had become some “toy money”.

“But I must say it is very well made, girl, look at this pretty, invisible stamp!” The man said, pointing at the watermark.

Katy rolled her eyes. “Whatever!” she thought as she snatched her money back, “some people just didn’t take children seriously.”

They went into a toilet cubicle, put their hands on the locket and said aloud the name of their next destination: Tehran in Iran.

* * *

Tehran was one of the oldest cities of the Persian Kingdom. Haley had learnt in history class that it was one of the greatest powers of the ancient world, but Persia had come to an end long ago and Iran had taken its place. Tehran was famous for its Islamic architecture and rock carvings dating back to more than 2000 years. The streets were crowded, but Haley could see camels carrying foreign goods walking through just like they would back when this was Persia.

There were hardly any women on the streets. People stared at them as they walked. Haley walked really fast. She didn’t even stop to take pictures but took them while she was walking. Rachel and Katy were out of breath when they finally caught up with her. She was taking pictures at the gate of a palace not so far away.

Haley thought a shadow was moving nearer, but she didn’t pay attention – smack! A mysterious hand slammed against her shoulder, that didn’t feel like Rachel or Katy’s, nor did the shadow of the hand-owner seemed friendly. What if ... Haley’s insides froze over, she was totally freaked out. However, she managed to turn around.

The fiercest-looking man Haley had ever seen in her life was standing before her. Her legs felt like they were melting. He looked weird, he looked so ... ancient, she thought. She felt like she was about to pass out. The man tied her hands with rope. “You,” the man said, “you tell me what is in your hand!” He pointed at the camera like it was an alien from Mars.

“It’s a... cam...camera, sir,” answered Haley.

“Camera? We have not traded this thing with the Chinese before. You shall not lie, girl, you wanted to blow up our palace with it?” the man waved and two of his companions came over. “Take her to the lord’s!” he told them.

Haley shot a *help* look at her friends, but they were as panicked as she was. She was scared, but she was able to wonder why a camera would surprise these people so much? Why? What if ...

Just at this moment Rachel and Katy rushed over. Rachel took out the locket. They then put their hands on it and said their next destination a second before the three men noticed. “Delhi, Indiaaaaaaa!!”

* * *

“Wow, that was close!” gasped Rachel.

Delhi looked just fine for a project-doing subject. Temples and mosques stood everywhere. However, there was one thing Rachel suspected. There were no cars on the road, and there was hardly any light in sight. It was already night-time. Hawkers were packing up their goods such as spice and jewellery. Groups of foreign merchants were crossing the road. Rachel saw one hawker packing up small transparent balls: light bulbs for sure, the sign said: ‘NEW invention from the West! Bright at night!’

What?!

Rachel looked at Haley and Katy, they were looking at the same thing, that’s when they realised something’s wrong.

“This is not good. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” asked Rachel.

“I think I am,” Haley answered. She was pale.

“Me too, I’m not having a great feeling,” Katy said, stuttering.

“I think while we were travelling to different places, we’ve also ...”

“Travelled back in time,” Haley finished Rachel’s sentence.

“So, this explains why the people in the Mogao Caves looked so 80s,” Katy said.

“That’s why the man at the Dunhuang market could not recognise your RMB note! Yes! And that’s why the fierce-looking man thought my camera was a bomb, because he had not seen a digital camera before!” Haley said.

“The light bulb finishes the whole story! That’s why! The more we travelled by this locket, the more we travelled back in time!” Rachel finished. “So, if we use it to travel back to Hong Kong, time would be alright!”

The three girls put their hands on the locket for the last time. After whirling and turning, they were back in Rachel’s room.

“What a project, what a night!” Rachel said.

“I wonder what it would be like in Tehran during the Persian time? You think ...” Katy laughed.

“*No way!*” Haley and Rachel yelled at her together.

They looked at the photos and notes they had taken, inhaling the clean air as they shared the rest of this magical night with their friends.

Memories of the Silk Road

Anabelle Barker, 13, Kellett School

As much as I hated to admit it, she was right. We had been searching for a lot longer than I had anticipated and were still no closer to finding him than we had been at the beginning of the trip. As we mounted the last few steps to the temple, Liz breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Come on Lizzie!” I yelled exasperatedly. “We won’t get there in time if you don’t keep up.” I knew I was being grouchy; but quite frankly, I was tired, hungry and in real need of a coffee. Travelling for three weeks along the ‘legendary Silk Road’ does that to you. My only hope was that it was worth it.

“Rachel,” Liz called from down the hill. “Wait up!”

“Well I want to get to this temple before lunchtime even if you don’t. Come on!” Beads of sweat dripped down the side of her face as she jogged up the remaining steps to join me.

“It shouldn’t take long to find out where he went missing. We should be back home in a couple of weeks! That’s what you said to me. Now, we have been here for three weeks, with absolutely no information on your stupid ancestor or what he was searching for and we have absolutely no idea where we are going!” she grumbled and muttered by my shoulder.

Collapsing onto the sandy ground and pulling a bottle of water out of her pack, she took a long noisy drink. I was too busy gazing up at what was in front of me to realise how thirsty I was too. It was massive; like a majestic lion, staring down at his subjects, guarding the secrets of the past. The huge pavilion or terrace on the first level was filled with ornate statues and sculptures were placed at each corner. Gold painted balustrades lined the stone carved balconies and the roof gleamed like freshly polished brass. The door itself was a magnificent arch of red painted wood and beneath it were benches where people left their shoes (a traditional Buddhist custom).

“Rachel, I spy a café!” Liz’s voice pulled me out of my trance. She started towards a free table gabbling away at thin air, thinking I was behind her and when she realised I hadn’t moved, rolled her eyes and grabbed me by the arm. “Come on Rach, you were the one saying you needed some caffeine to wake you up.”

“I’m going up,” I said, looking at her, a strange light in my eyes.

“Seriously Rach? Up there? Don’t be stupid, it’s about 50 feet high!”

“I’m still going up.” Heading off towards the entrance, Liz’s yells washed over me. I simply had to get up there. Don’t ask why. This was it; the place I had been searching for. He must have gone missing here, the man who I had heard so many stories about over granddad’s supper

table, who vanished without a trace along with his whole family's merchandise, leaving them poor and starving.

Reaching the door, I slipped off my shoes and stepped carefully into the temple. It looked a lot bigger on the inside. Pillars of red and gold patterns lined the walls down to a huge statue of the Buddha. Shutters let through chinks of light that littered the wooden panels of the floor, like leaves beneath a canopy of trees. Incense sticks burned on the windowsill, giving off a musky perfume that drifted in a haze around the room. The Buddha himself was enormous, but strangely calming. Huge earlobes hung down, framing his face while hands making traditional signs rested upon crossed legs. To the right of me, a winding staircase led up to the terrace and tower. Tiptoeing up the carpeted stairs so as to make no noise, I reached the top and, slightly out of breath, took in my surroundings in wonder.

I was in a little room at the very top of the tower and all that was there was a small statue of a dragon and a few worn praying mats. Unlike the ground floor, light flooded in through open windows that led onto a tiny stone balcony surrounding the room and I could hear birds from the trees around, twittering away to each other. The dragon was gold with emerald green eyes that stared up at me as though I was an intruder to the sacred temple. Behind the statue, I realised with a jump, was a man dressed only in a white loin cloth, meditating with his legs crossed and eyes closed. His sun-bronzed skin hung like a sack on him as though once he had been a great warrior but was now so old that he had shrunk in it. Wisps of hair drifted on his balding head and his beard fell down in a long white waterfall. I watched him in awe as he mouthed words to himself. Then he opened his eyes and I gasped in surprise. They were a bright amber orange and crackled with electricity and life, seeming to pierce right through me.

Suddenly, the room was spinning, distorting around me, but he never moved, his eyes constantly staring. My heart was racing in my chest as I heard the sounds of a market in the distance before ... whoosh! An image darted in front of me. It was a market; with carts of bleating and grunting animals and baskets overflowing with sumptuous fruit and vegetables. Smells of the spices stung my nostrils and shouts and cries of the stall owners and customers rang in my ears. Tents of animal skins sheltered the stores on precarious poles stuck in the sand and birds perched on the top of them, watching with beady eyes for the chance of food. I was just taking everything in before ... whoosh! Another image flew before my eyes. It was the same place, but barren and desolate. The smells of factories clogged my nose and gave me a headache. In the distance, huge chimneys of pollution-creating machines stuck up like protruding telegraph poles. Clouds of crude black smoke hung in the air and it was deathly silent apart from the wind blowing the sand up into my face, stinging my eyes. It was disgusting.

"Stop!" I screamed, "Get me out of here!" As though obeying my voice, I felt myself flying upwards, away from that industrialised hell hole. Thump! My feet slammed back onto the carpet, almost knocking the wind out of me. It was exactly the same day, exactly the same hour, exactly the same moment that I had left. He was still sitting there; as though nothing had happened. His eyes were still yellow but they looked more tired than before, no longer alive with electricity, as if he had exhausted himself from sending me those pictures. Wait. Rewind. He couldn't have made those images appear in my mind. The very thought was impossible. Stumbling backwards out of the room, I staggered down the stairs, desperate to find Liz and get out of this wretched temple. I grabbed my shoes and scanned the various shops and stalls looking for the ginger hair of Liz. There, in the café. Jogging up to her, I flung myself into a chair, panting.

"Well, someone has decided to return to civilisation," she said contemptuously, obviously annoyed that I had left her. "You know I had to argue with this little midget of a man for ten

minutes to move his bags before I could even sit down! Then when the waiter turned up he started gabbling in Tibetan and I don't even speak Tibetan! And don't even get me started on the ...” Her voice faded away as I thought of what I had seen. Who was that man? What did it mean? The market, the animals, the spices? Followed by an image of factories and pollution? Then it hit me. The market must have been what it was like before industry and production took over and destroyed what was left of the traditional village. I was filled with a sense of sadness as I thought of all that past, disappearing. And that man. Who was he? Was he a monk? A hermit? A thought flickered through my mind. Maybe he was my ancestor. Jumping up, I ran back to the temple, back up the stairs and back into the room, Liz hot on my heels. I gazed around the room. It was empty.

“That was smart!” Liz said at my shoulder. “We run all the way up a load of stairs to look at an empty room.” I turned on her.

“Look, long ago, there were no factories, no industry, no pollution. Look what we have done to this traditional route. We are destroying a historic culture!”

I spun on my heel and stalked out of the room, determined to make a difference and try to preserve what little of the true Silk Road still remained.

A Solid Foundation

Bernice Ho, 12, International Christian School

“Dig!” The current emperor was, in simple words, a bloodthirsty tyrant. Cries of the citizens emanated from within the 13-foot deep pit. The foremen, desperate to please his Majesty, shovelled dirt over the people and their possessions. The muffled screams of the people were constantly heard as they struggled for air.

After several more hours of exhausting labour, the foremen tiredly lay their shovels at the cruel emperor’s feet. In a mere 13 hours, the emperor had managed to completely destroy an entire village; the only trace of this village’s existence was the dirt, rough and disturbed under his Majesty’s wrath.

* * *

The chilly, crisp winter air flooded the remote countryside of Persia. Within the rolling hills, there was a tiny village. This winter morning, Jon, a young boy was going through his usual routine, collecting firewood. Stepping into the dry Persian air, Jon left behind the warmth of his hut. He strolled merrily into a shallow section of the vast forest that surrounded the village. He searched the snowy forest with meticulous care for usable material that would last his family several days. Focussed on finding firewood, Jon’s head remained down, although for a split second he thought he heard frantic screaming coming from the village itself. Ignoring the panicked noises, Jon continued his daily task. Minutes later, he had collected a sufficient amount of dry twigs and flammable sticks. Lifting the weighty basket upon his back, he skipped along, humming a joyous tune. Suddenly, a licking flame in the distance caught his eye. Jon instantly released his grip on the firewood basket and sprinted towards his beloved village.

As Jon neared the village, the screams and yelps of his fellow villagers grew obviously louder. Skidding to a halt, Jon’s heart pumped rapidly as he searched through the flames for his family. After desperate searching, Jon arrived at his family’s hut. His family members milled around, taking hold of whatever they thought was precious and necessary and putting it into bamboo baskets. Grabbing the nearest basket, Jon piled in it heaps of blankets and bundles of food as well as several boxes of easily lit matches.

As soon as Jon and his family were reunited with the remaining villagers, Jon dared to finally glance at his birthplace and childhood, now engulfed in vicious flames. Hefting along their belongings, the villagers each bid a final farewell to their beloved village.

Trekking along the snow-laden road, the surviving villagers trudged, their baskets weighing more like stones with every day that passed. Jon gently tugged at his frostbitten shoes stuck in the stubborn snow; the falling mounds of seemingly friendly fluff now dragged the villagers down, keeping them from moving swiftly. Over lofty mountains the nomadic group hiked; through harsh climate they persevered.

“Jon, look ahead!” Jon’s mother squealed with her remaining bit of energy. Jon lifted his chin and examined his surroundings. The exhausted villagers were still stiffly dragging their feet along, their faces marked with determination. Jon also realised that the relentless snow had ceased; replacing it was a gradual spread of lush, green trees. In the distance, Jon also spotted a wide clearing. Wreathed around the clearing were mighty trees and furry shrubs. Suddenly, like a dove taking flight, Jon’s spirits rose delightedly. Like their village in Persia, this area provided potential protection from intruders and offered a suitable living area.

Hours later, Jon heaved his portion of wood back to the clearing. He, like his friends and family, had received orders from their leader to establish the huts they were to live in. Hauling out the shovel from his basket, Jon began to dig a solid foundation for his family’s hut. Slowly and cautiously, he loosened the dirt around him with the tip of his shovel.

With his heavily blistered hand, Jon tenderly wiped off beads of sweat from his forehead. Now standing in a five-foot-deep hole, Jon widened his massive pit to an astounding seven feet. As he shoved his shovel into the nutrient-rich dirt, it made contact with a bunched up, bundled item. Some fabric of some sort, Jon guessed. He continued to laboriously dig his hole. Jon finally managed to unearth the fabric-like item. Now slathered with smudgy, squishy dirt, the spread of woven cloth took form of a wide robe, simply embroidered with silk patterns and ribbon-like material. Taking a tiny dab of water from the pail beside him, Jon lightly scrubbed the faded robe. Tints of the colour royal blue emerged from the dirt as Jon rinsed his discovery.

Jon examined his hard-earned find. Rubbing the cloth between his fingers, he perceived that the robe was once made out of precious materials. Hiding away his archaeological find, Jon slipped it into his bundle of necessities and strolled towards his family’s temporary hut for a long awaited breakfast.

A week had drifted by since Jon’s magnificent find. In the past few days, Jon had vigorously sifted through the dirt and discovered cracked ancient teapots, withered leather-bound books, matching ivory-coloured cutlery, and an impressive amount of rusty objects he could not identify. Each time one of these objects would reveal themselves, a look of glee and curiosity would blanket Jon’s face. These findings were wrapped in leaves and stowed away in Jon’s bundle. His heart yearned to share them with the rest of the world.

Crickets chirped energetically in the pitch-black yet starry night. Jon slipped on his pair of wearable shoes and grabbed his bundle of treasures. He hustled past his family’s toes, which protruded from their plain blankets. Huddling into his coat, Jon whisked along his beloved belongings and stumbled out of his family’s newly made hut.

By Jon’s approximate calculations, he had already travelled on foot for two tiring weeks. The nature around Jon had almost completely vanished except for occasional rows of lofty trees. The terrain became slightly more paved, a few road signs even caught Jon’s longing eye. He was heading into civilisation.

Squabbling in a foreign language gripped Jon’s wandering attention. Jon lifted his gaze and spied a group of tarps in the near distance. Clutching on to his bundle, Jon picked up his pace and scrambled hurriedly into the milling crowd of people.

Amid the constant screaming of the vendors, Jon picked up a few phrases spoken in Persian. Jon desperately glanced around, seeking for a fellow Persian who could assist him in this situation. Arriving at a Persian stall, Jon stuttered a few words of greeting and began

to spill out his story. As the vendor intently listened, Jon produced several of his treasures from his bundle. When Jon ended his tale, the vendor grinned delightedly and exclaimed in excitement. The vendor explained that a senior member of the government was present and he was touring the place. The merchant suggested that Jon was to meet this governor himself and explain about his journey. Jon agreed to this request as the vendor assisted him in this task. The governor strolled towards the Persian booth and noticed Jon's presence. Jon introduced himself in a mannerly way and laid his discoveries on the wooden countertop. He answered the governor's eager questions with the assistance of the Persian vendor who translated his responses for him. The governor was quite pleased with Jon's findings and he intended to put them on display for all the citizens.

With the money Jon received, he developed the village he was living in into a famed tourist attraction now located in Northeast China. Not only did Jon provide suitable living conditions for his village, this Persian boy also discovered one of today's prominent archaeological sites.

Magic Trees

Chantel Woo, 12, Discovery College

The wrinkled and dry hands of Ah Mei skilfully unravelled the brittle cocoon of the silkworm. Middle-aged Ah Mei and her loyal co-workers were working as silk producers, which require a secret only they knew about. Rome was seeking more silk but didn't know where to get it, and the secret of the silk was in the hands of China's weavers, working day and night to create the most beautiful and precious material of all. This was to be traded on the dangerous and forbidding Silk Road, where everyone is supposedly satisfied with their new trade, except for when the thirst for the scarce material throbs and throbs, as the amount of available material starts to run out like sand through your fingers.

"Everyone, please gather around!" spoke the scratchy voice of Li Lao Ban. "The Romans are after us. They are stronger than ever." Several soft groans and gasps could be heard from the gathering crowd of ladies who worked as silk producers. "But do not fret; you will be safe as long as you follow instructions. We must quickly escape deep enough into the valley."

A panting, scruffy looking messenger frantically ran up to Li Lao Ban. "Li Lao Ban! The traders are warning us that the Romans are almost here! They've braved the mountains and valleys and they'll get here very soon!" After dismissing the messenger boy, Li Lao Ban turned to the silk producers. "We are leaving now."

After climbing and walking with barely any rest for hours and hours, everyone gathered around a flat area in the valleys as Li Lao Ban asked for their attention. "We are making good progress." All the ladies exchanged smiles and cheered, in the hopes that they would be returning home soon. "But... the Romans are making better progress. They will soon catch up to us if we don't pick up the pace. So, we have a plan to make sure they'll never find us. We'll let them pass us without letting them see us."

Within a few hours, everything was gone. The tools, the noise, the slightest trace that people and yards of silk were even there. The only thing present at that moment seemed to be dead silence. Ah Mei's heart was pounding so hard that it could jump out of her chest any minute. *Click clack. Click clack.* The sound of horses? It was obvious: someone was there.

Li Lao Ban's voice lingered in Ah Mei's head: "Remember. Don't make a single noise. They must not know we are here." Suddenly, Ah Mei felt something tickle in her throat. Ah Mei tried to hold it in, but a soft sneeze came bursting out. She held her breath and prayed that she would go unnoticed, but she felt a tug on her arm and was dragged out from her hiding place. Before she could scream for help, she fell into a deep trance as she was thrown into a sack and carried onto a horse.

Ah Mei woke up in a large tent, and found herself stunned by everything around her. Everything was made of gold, including the armours that all the guards were wearing. Gold

ornaments were everywhere, and all the tables and chairs were made impeccably with intricate designs and detailed carving. This was the first time Ah Mei got a chance to look at the guards properly. They were big and tall with bushy beards, and their complexion was so tan their skin was literally burnt. One of the guards pushed her to the floor, and firmly instructed her to kneel down. Ah Mei was not afraid. Li Lao Ban had mentally prepared her for them – the Romans. She knew they were definitely going to ask her about the secret of silk, but she would never give it to them.

At this time, a man in gold armour entered the tent. He was followed by another man, who was dressed in a draped robe and didn't exactly look like one of 'them'.

The man in the robe looked at Ah Mei sympathetically and began to explain in Ah Mei's language, "I am a translator. Everything you say will be translated and could be held against you. I suggest you don't say any more than necessary."

Ah Mei nodded and said proudly, "I am ready to answer any questions you give me."

After listening to the translator, the other of the men smiled malevolently, and said something Ah Mei couldn't understand.

"The General said that if you give him the secret of silk, he'll set you free and give you a thousand bars of gold. And if you don't, he'll kill you and keep sending people back to your little camp site and capture all your co-workers, until one of them gives out the secret," the translator explained.

"Well ..." Ah Mei didn't know what to do. She didn't want her co-workers to die, and of course, she wouldn't want to be a traitor to her country by letting someone else know the precious secrets!

Suddenly, there was a twinkle in Ah Mei's eyes. Ah Mei knew exactly what to do.

She took a deep breath and spoke with a serious tone, "The truth is... silk comes from trees. Magical trees. But the thing is, only the Chinese have the power to make silk from these trees, because our ancestors live as spirits in the trees, and they allow only us to take from them. If someone else tries to take from these trees, there will be no silk – only webs."

The General's face crinkled in disbelief and shouted angrily to the translator.

"The General doesn't believe you. He wants you to demonstrate how you make silk from trees."

"Of course, I'll need the materials if you want me to prove it to you. Tell your General to send someone to get me a silkworm. Then we'll see what happens."

The next day, Ah Mei awoke to find several silk worms in a jar by her side. The translator as well as the General came by, and the translator quickly spoke.

"Here, five silkworms. Now, tell the General how to make silk!"

"There is a slight problem ... because the silkworms were harnessed by foreigners, they no longer possess the power to become silk!"

The sceptical General snatched a silkworm from the jar and tried to unravel it from its cocoon, and like Ah Mei predicted, there was nothing but a sticky web.

"See? Nothing but a web," Ah Mei slyly smiled.

The General remained quiet for a moment and had a look of dismay in his eyes. He turned to the translator and spoke in a defeated voice. When the translator spoke to Ah Mei, he had a sigh of relief on his face. "He believed you. Now, we'll send you back to your camp with your gold."

Ah Mei grinned as she thanked the translator and made her way to the horse waiting outside.

From then on, the Romans remained contented to simply trade silk with the Chinese. And as we all know, the Silk Road flourished.

A New Tale of the Silk Road

Chiu Ho Sing, 14, Shatin Pui Ying College

When I woke up, I found that I had been left right in the middle of the desert ... in a place known as the Silk Road. With a bullet wound in the leg ...

It was a sunny day, as always. And hot and dry like hell, like always. And now I was left behind by my brothers, the so-called brothers. The word 'hyenas' is more suitable for describing them.

I searched for my bag and all my things, but all I could find was a small compass ... Jesus Christ, this was gonna kill me.

So I needed to get myself out of there. At least get out of this no man's land. I don't know if I can make it or not, but I'm gonna give it a try.

I've spent most of my life here on the Silk Road. First half in the army, with the Rangers. And the second half with the hyenas, I mean the raiders. There's a long story behind it, though.

So here I am, following the compass in my pocket and walking west. Luckily after about an hour of walking I've found an abandoned town, a small town with some trash ... and a supply of food and water. But at least it has saved my life. And I have a place to spend the night.

This town seems to be a stop for traders. As you know, the Silk Road has been a route for trading goods for years, known as the road between the east and the west of the world, started in the Han dynasty according to Chinese history. That's many centuries ago. But nowadays there's still trading here ... and there are tourists sightseeing. So this place is like a paradise for raiders.

I am going to stay here tonight 'cause it's getting dark and it's cold in the night-time. Especially in the desert. Tired, I lie down and try to get some sleep. But in my mind there are scenes from my past ...

Many people think that I had a good childhood. Well that's true though. But not a good teenage life. Back in the days when I was in school, when I was still a student, I was a total screw-up in everybody's eyes. I was a scout back in those days, but all the scouts and leaders just looked down on me. Though I still became an eagle scout. To me, my early life was just terrible.

So after I finished high school, I joined the army, 'cause that seemed to be the most suitable job for me in this country.

Being a soldier was fine with me. I never got into trouble and had a pretty good life in the army. I finished my training without any big blunders. I was an accurate shooter and a good fighter, maybe these somehow related to my two interests, hunting and boxing. And these are the only two things that I have ever felt confident about doing in my life. Being a soldier, I was happy though, I had company there, and brothers – we called each other 'Brothers in Arms'.

After a few years, I joined the Rangers, a special force in the army. Let's skip the details. But I can tell ya, the training to be a Ranger isn't easy though ...

Now the sun rises after a long, lonely night ... and it's time to continue the journey.

After hours of walking, I finally reach a village, an abandoned one ... like the last one.

This village appears somewhere in my mind, 'cause this was the place I once fought in during my time as a soldier.

It was on a mission on the Silk Road ... it's been so long that I can't even remember how long ago it was. I can't even remember what my mission was. The only thing I can remember is that I killed there. But the details? No idea.

The village is abandoned, so I just walk about as I want to have a quick look around. I see a dog tag on the ground, with the name 'John' written on it. The name sounds a little bit familiar to me but I can't remember who he is.

It's about 5pm already, and I don't know where the next stop might be. So I drop my stuff on the floor and decide to stay here for a night, inside an abandoned house.

I take a look at the injury, where I was shot on the leg. Oh my God! The bullet wound is getting worse. I need to get some first aid, but there's nothing here.

When I was a little kid, ma would take care of my injuries, even a tiny little cut. But that's also the reason I never learnt, 'cause she just didn't let go, same as my dad. And that's the reason I left them. I wanted to grow up and be strong. I got a brother too, his name is Paul. But he was one of those big, strong guys, both mentally and physically. I was just a coward in his eyes. I kinda miss my parents now, although I don't remember much about them. But I swear, I would never go looking for that scumbag Paul, even if I am desperate ...

Another day has come, and it's time to leave this place and get some kind of treatment or else I will be dead. After hours of walking, I reach an ancient, abandoned town. It is full of markets and a history of trading going back to ancient times, like trading of silk and tea. And this place is also one of the most important places in my life, 'cause it was the place that changed me from a soldier to a raider.

Years ago, I was fighting here as a soldier. Fighting with some poor mutt I wouldn't even recognise today. And it was a nightmare 'cause we were running out of ammo and the enemies were coming in wave after wave. The last I can remember of that battle is being hit on the head and falling down on the floor. The situation was a total mess.

When I woke up, everybody from my team was dead, and I was dead on the record. Or maybe I never even existed on the record. Whatever. I kept calling out for help but no one answered. Until the raiders came ...

They kinda saved my life. And as a sort of thank-you, I became one of them.

The difference between them and the army was just the aim of the mission. For raiders, the objective is very simple, get the money and the goods. And that's not hard for a former Ranger – a piece of cake.

But then I found out it's actually not that good. I mean, it's a life of do-or-die. And soon, you become a guy with no mercy, no judgment about right and wrong. And you can't even remember your name or who you are. The life of a raider is like a drug addiction, you just can't

get rid of it. And they have no concept of 'home', they only have 'brothers'. And that's just like being an animal.

Now the sun is gone behind the hill, and I begin to feel kinda dizzy. Soon, I can't even feel my legs ... I think my time is up ...

A voice whispers in my ear, 'Time to go home now'.

But, where is my home?

A Silent Witness

Chloe Lai, 12, Island School

I sit on the road and watch as the latest tour coach roars past in a burst of dead-fish smell and burnt rubber, momentarily clouding my vision before thundering off into the distance. A few seconds, then the exhaust sweeps over the trodden grass. It droops.

This place used to be an oasis! There were trees, grass, little birds, lizards and ... bugs. There was even a small pond here! That was *before* the tour coaches. Now, I have my own personal Garden of Garbage.

My name is Peter; my job is being part of the scenery by the side of the carpark. I am a sedimentary rock, and I live at the (now tourist) city of Loulan (please note that most rocks actually *don't* have emotions and just spend their time looking petrified and stony-faced).

The first I saw of the world was when they hacked me out of the mine. At that time, the mine was quite new; all around me was blackness and silence. I was close to the entrance; I heard the voices and felt the pounding feet far below me. The noise started only as a faint clinking, growing slowly, increasing, getting closer, louder, closer, louder; blowing itself into a bubble, bigger and bigger until it burst – pop! – and I saw light for the first time.

Next, I was dumped in a basket, the basket was dumped in a box, the box was dumped in a cart and with the crack of a whip, I was on my merry way to the building site in the city. After a painful time consisting of a stonemason hitting me so many times with a chisel I'm surprised I remained intact, I finally got to the building site and was *chosen* to be a foundation stone for a fancy new house.

This was life for a few centuries, crushed by the weight of the building on my head. I saw so many people, coming, going: children chasing each other down the dusty streets, or playing with their little wooden toys; traders from faraway lands shouting for someone to buy their fine silk, or their glittering gold, or their tall tales; farmers driving complaining goats to market; shopkeepers asking passers-by to at least *consider* their glorious pottery; even the dogs barking and upsetting market stalls.

I made some new friends as well. The stone next to me was called Petro; he was situated near the front facade of the house, and therefore became a popular target for the local hounds. There was another one, Crim, rather grumpy; but he made good conversation. All three of us hated the floor above us; me and Petro, because every day we had a couple of tons of house squeezing us into the ground. Crim, he always complained that it would someday collapse on his head.

As the centuries passed, many changes happened to Loulan. The lake began to dry up, and with it, the city went. People began to move out, more and more, with all the dogs and horses

and camels and goats, and so did a lot of the wildlife. We lived in the desert, so sandstorms came once in a while; now, more and more frequently. With every sandstorm, another human left. Loulan was emptying itself.

One day, there was a big sandstorm, the kind of wind-tearing, ground-lashing hurricane that can bury an entire village under sand. It was impossible to see. I could hear pots smashing and dogs barking and camels groaning and horses bolting and market stalls collapsing and at one point there were even a few houses getting demolished. It was shocking, terrifying, to see the city unravelling like this.

Well, when everything settled down and the sand drifted back onto the dunes, only then did I realise that there was not one human left in the city.

They didn't come back. They were never coming back. I was lying in an abandoned city with a ruined house crushing its weight onto my head. Crim, the sadistic pebble, was very pleased with all the chaos and spent the next few decades being annoying, until the house *finally* fell on him, thank goodness. It was just me and Petro after that, Petro being very thankful that the dogs had left and therefore he would no longer be a public toilet. He was really great (better than Mr Pessimist, anyway) – helping me through the endless centuries, even managing to make me see the nearly impossible bright side of being used as a bed by a sunbathing snake!

But then one day I woke up and found that Petro was gone too. I looked for him everywhere, hoping to hear his voice, but there was nothing except the wind and the sand and the silence, and I don't think any of those are good company. I didn't understand at first, but now I realise that the wind must have shifted the sand, covering the interior of the crumbling house. It was lucky that I had been built right under the floorboards, or I would have been buried too!

Now I was all alone – just me and the desert and the swirling wind blowing sand uphill. At first, it wasn't too bad, but I began to miss my friends. How life had failed me. Nothing happened in this period of long waiting except ... waiting. A lizard dug a hole and used me as a roof. A bird ate a beetle and used me as a table. A cactus grew a flower and used me as a stand. A jackal had an itch and used me as a backscratcher. Things happened. The world changed. I was so lonely I could scream, cry, rant, but I'm a rock – I can't do anything. At times like this I would think back to when the house was new and the city was alive and I had a purpose in life.

At one point, I saw a small caravan cross the dunes in the distance. One of its members was wearing strange, colourful clothes and a floppy hat. I watched as it made its way across the desert; winding, dipping till it was lost to sight. And the waiting went on.

Sometime later, perhaps a few centuries or so, another expedition was sighted. At first, I couldn't recognise it as a local caravan; the clothes, the language, even the riding technique had changed so much. I thought it would just go past, avoid this place like all the others, but then it turned round and headed straight for the ruins. My first visitor in a long time!

They started by walking around and through the buildings and poking at the broken pottery. If I had lungs I would have been holding my breath. Would the strangers leave, or stay? Then suddenly everyone was rushing around and clambering up the crumbling stairs and shoving strange-looking contraptions through windows and looking very excited by human standards.

After a while, a camp was set up, and then a piece of paper – real, beautiful, colourfully illustrated *paper* – was brought out, and a message was scrawled messily all over the perfect map!

A few days later, another string of people filtered into the city. They snapped pictures and examined houses and took pottery shards with them when they left. More humans arrived, and

I began to get excited. Here was a chance for Loulan to live again! A hotel was built nearby, and the flood of people increased. It was wonderful! I had hoped and waited for what felt like a thousand years for this to happen! My wish was coming true! People, people and more people! There weren't as many as there used to be, but tourism was good enough for me!

But it changed after a while. After a few decades, people began to litter more, throwing garbage over the railing when they thought no-one was looking. But I was. Since no-one really cleaned out the rubbish, I spent my days (and nights) with slimy garbage. Oh, the joys of tourism.

To make things worse, people sometimes brought dogs (and occasionally camels) along. Now it was my turn to be the public toilet!

In the half-century since Loulan was found, part of the house sank into the sand. It was the front facade. Petro is gone, and there is nothing I can do but wait.

The tour coach with the lightning logo snaps its doors shut, wheels out of the parking lot and disappears. I watch as a pair of birds swoop down to fight over a bag of Traditional Ginger Candy. There's barely any left, but one sticks its head in and struggles for the melting sweets; getting its beak stuck and dancing madly across the carpark, suffocating in the clinging plastic. Its partner watches for a moment, then as the situation gets worse the other bird lunges, pecking hard into the bag, twisting the wrapping off. The two birds take to the sky.

Camels

Eleanor Yan Hun Yung, 14, St. Paul's Co-educational College

I watched the red disk slip behind the edge of the horizon. The vast, searing desert with its clouds of dust stretched endlessly before me as I stood at my post. I shifted uncomfortably. After a stifling day of baking in the oven-like heat and listening to my superiors quarrel, the last thing I wanted was to suffer the task of keeping the evening watch. Surely there wouldn't be any travellers hoping to cross the border at the moment.

Being a customs officer was a thankless job – and it certainly was the most undesirable of occupations in our region. This frontier brushed against the Silk Road, a trader's main path of commerce, and day and night we had to search all that passed by.

It also happened to be in the middle of a sandy, scorching wasteland.

Worst of all, we had to be on constant alert for smugglers. Did I hate them! They were the sole root of the foul job. I had to poke and pry into everybody's bags, receiving nothing but scorn from the innocent and resistance from the deceitful. Once I even had to search a pile of dung for contraband goods! Needless to say, it was not a particularly pleasant job, least of all coexisting with the Chief Customs Officer.

"You! Go out and stand on duty. You! You! And you! Dismissed!" he had barked out that evening. He never referred to anyone by their names, but to make things worse, he didn't even bother to point out which 'you' he was ticking off.

"Me?" I asked.

"Yes! You!" he bellowed, exactly like my mother's bad-tempered old bull. "Out! NOW!"

And so I stood, gazing wearily out towards the sunset sky, waiting for night to fall and the air to become frigid. Just then, I spotted a small figure silhouetted against the evening scene, probably someone riding a horse or camel. Quickly, I straightened and braced myself for an uneasy conversation. As the rider neared our station, I got a better view of this person. He was a young man, like myself, astride atop a muscular camel, with a couple of simple sackcloth bags dangling at the creature's sides.

"Halt!" I ordered, trying to sound authoritative. "What is your business here?"

"Just passing through," came the breezy reply.

"Well, we'll have to search you. Yussef!" I yelled, hoping the lazy old lout would come to help. He hardly ever did, usually whiling away the hours lying in the sun in a drunken stupor.

"Whasshup?" I heard his slurred murmur behind me, and soon the overwhelming reek of alcohol drifted over my back.

"We've got to search, right?"

"Yeah, whashtever."

This traveller, however, was unusually co-operative, and not even a hint of a suspicious item could be found.

“You come by often?” I asked.

“Sometimes,” he replied. “It’s a big trade route, and even those who aren’t going to sell goods use this road.”

And off he went, the camel’s shadow disappearing in the fading light.

This young man, I discovered, became a regular visitor to our frontier, making daily trips to and from Media, Persia and Bactria, usually with his faithful camel. “It has been a bother since I took up this job,” Hashim explained. “My dad told my uncles that I am not doing much work – my father runs a pottery shop, you see – so my uncles got me to do courier work, which means running back and forth till I drop.” He grinned, “And how did you get yourself into this job?”

I sighed, “An excellent question.”

“Well?”

“I was too weedy to farm properly or pull carts, and I couldn’t sell a thing to save my life! So my father got fed up and chucked me here. And I haven’t got an excuse for getting out.”

Soon, with our frequent conversations, I found that we had more in common with each other than I had previously thought – my superiors were boring, bossy and demanding; his uncles were boring, bossy and demanding. Both of us had to endure the burning sun and miles of wasteland everyday; neither thought highly of their job or their colleagues.

But the best outcome of our friendship was that I had someone to talk to. The other customs officers were either intoxicated or snobbish or both. The only informal conversation I had ever had before was with the sodden Yussef, and that was when I was telling him to get out of the way.

One day, I happened to ask Hashim, “So, what exactly do you do as a courier?”

He glanced around for a moment, and, seeming satisfied that none of my superiors were in sight, he grinned mischievously and replied, “I’m a smuggler.”

I laughed, “Good one, Hashim!” As if it was possible! Several of the customs officers, including myself, had searched him repeatedly over all these years, and nothing suspicious had ever been found.

Many years later, when I had retired, I ran into Hashim in a tavern. The years had taken a toll on him too, but his weather-beaten face crinkled into a smile when he spotted me.

“Over here, old friend!” he beckoned to me. “What fair wind blows you here?”

“Visiting some relatives,” I told him. “You?”

“Oh, I just saunter around here and there. It has been a mighty long time since I last saw you!”

As we were reminiscing over the ‘good old days’ when we had known each other, I remembered his joke and asked, “So then, what did you smuggle?”

There was a pause. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he gave his answer.

“Camels.”

A Romantic Journey

Hei Man Ng, 13, Shatin Pui Ying College

“Once upon a time, there was a handsome Roman called Assam. He started his adventure of being a merchant in faraway China with his friends Edward and Barney ...” said dad.

“Stop it, dad. I don’t want to listen to those boring stories again. I hate tales and stories. They aren’t true, are they? I’m not a little child, I’m already 13 now!” Stella complained.

“Trust me, Stella. I’m sure you’ll love it. It’s really a fantastic story!” explained dad.

“Anyway, I felt tired and I’m going to bed now. Good night,” said Stella. She put the book next to her bed and fell asleep.

It was midnight, but Stella couldn’t sleep well. She turned on the light and sat up in her bed. Suddenly, she saw the book was glowing with light, almost sparkling. Stella rubbed her eyes and looked at it again.

“Oh, what’s happening to the book?” wondered Stella. She opened the book very slowly and carefully, but light burst out and she felt like she was being sucked in! She saw many old things and she felt like she was in the past – then she realised that she was in the book!

“Why, I have to get out of here! But how can I go back to my home? Oh, I’m trapped!” she shouted out and started sobbing. At the moment, she heard a helpful voice.

“Excuse me, may I help you? It seems that you’re in trouble.”

Stella stopped crying when she saw this handsome gentleman.

“Yes, my name is Stella. Actually I’m not of this world. I got lost here and I don’t know how to go home!” Stella said disappointedly.

“Stella, that’s a beautiful name. I’m Assam and these are my friends. We plan to go on a trip, do you mind coming with us? I think we might be able to help you,” said Assam.

Stella decided to go on the trip with them, hoping to find her way home. They started their long journey to China by ship. Stella felt better now but she was still confused about the things that had happened. Unexpectedly, there was a great strong storm coming across the harbour, straight towards their ship.

“Quick, open the canvas and hide!” shouted John.

“Assam! Assam! Where are you?” asked Stella. Stella couldn’t find Assam but she could see some horrible monsters with no ears and one eye and big feet climbing onto the ship.

“Oh my God! Who are you? Don’t come close to me, you awful monster!” said Stella.

“Wow, what a beautiful lady! Don’t be afraid and come to me now,” said the leader of the monsters. The stinky body of the leader got closer and closer to Stella and she felt really uncomfortable with the smell of dead fish and marine algae.

Fortunately, Assam came running and knocked down the leader immediately. He was just in time to save Stella!

“Don’t touch the lady! She’s with us!” said Assam.

He used his unique gun and shot them with bullets that were made of soap.

“ARUGHHHH! Everyone, fight!” the leader ordered.

The group of monsters was ready to fight with the three Romans. The Romans were afraid of the monsters until they found out that their weapons were just some dead seafood and smelly seaweed. Then they brought them down easily and used ropes to wrap them up like presents and send them into the mouth of a big shark.

“Oh, thank you so much, Assam. You rescued me again,” said Stella.

“You’re my friend, right? I will always help you when you’re in trouble!” answered Assam.

After the messy fight between the monsters and the Romans, they finally arrived in China. There were shops and hostels everywhere. Stella was fascinated by the shiny gems and diamonds and pearls and lots and lots of other grand jewellery. She was surprised that China had all the things she liked and that there were silk clothes in ancient China.

Stella saw that her book was sparkling again and said, “Oh, I think it’s time for me to go home now. My book is glowing like it was before.”

Barney and Edward bought a little pearl ring for Stella as a gift and gave her a hug. They said, “It’s been really nice meeting you. You’re now our good friend.”

Stella thanked them again and she finally spoke to Assam, “Thanks for taking me to China and helping me so much. Now I’ve discovered that stories really are interesting,” said Stella.

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m sure we’ll all miss you,” he kissed Stella and said goodbye to her.

Light burst out of the book and she was sucked up once more. This time, she saw that she was in her room and holding a little pearl ring. Everything was still in her room, absolutely still.

An Unexpected Journey

Hayley Ip, 12, Island School

“**S**ilence! If I hear that noise again, Hayley, you will get into big trouble!” she exclaimed. It was the third time she had said that to us. I knew she was just a cranky librarian and she wouldn’t get students into trouble, so I kept on chatting with my friends Ben, Edmond, and Amy. Suddenly I saw something shimmering in the farthest corner of the library. I looked in the direction and found nothing but books. It was just probably my “Hayley-maginations” as my friends used to call me when I was daydreaming. Nevertheless that object shimmered again and again. I called Amy and she just murmured, “Hayley, just focus!” and she trailed off.

“I definitely saw that!” I told Ben and Edmond to look, and they stared in the same direction, where a book was sparkling on the shelf. We walked towards that shelf and I was the first one to pick the book off the shelf. Within seconds we were all surrounded by white fumes coming out from the shelf.

“AHHHHHHHHH, where in the world are we?” Ben shouted. He was the “scaredy cat” of the group. I realised we had been teleported from the library to someplace else. When we were finally on solid ground, we found the place really grimy, with all the furniture covered in dust. We strolled around and found hundreds of artefacts all with labels “Found By The IEC” and different dates. We didn’t know what IEC meant until we walked into a luxurious and astonishingly clean office. We found a middle-aged man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on a grand chair. By this time we all just wanted to be screeched at by the librarian again, we all wanted to go back to school, we all wanted to go back home, we all wanted to be in Hong Kong, we all wanted to ...

The middle-aged man said in a relaxed tone with a fairly strong Italian accent, “I am Alfonso, you’re all my guests here at the headquarters of the IEC, please sit down.”

“Sorry to disturb you sir, but what is IEC and where exactly are we?” Amy inquired.

“The IEC is the Italian Exploration Club, we are actually underneath Venice, just above us are the canals, gondolas and the grand Luna Hotel Baglioni. It is the best hotel in Venice. Do you want me to show you around?”

Edmond replied straight away, “No thanks, Mr Alfonso, we just want to know, why are we here?”

“I believe that one of you has opened that glittering book in your school library and it’s your curiosity that took you here. The person who took the book out has been granted magical powers, which would be used during the mission,” Alfonso explained.

“What are the magical powers and why am I the chosen one and why do we have to go?” I screeched. It was a huge shock when I heard that I was going on a mission. But Alfonso calmed me down and he said, “You were all chosen because you are able to cope with the mission, that’s why the book glowed and you were the first person to see the book. I can’t help you during the mission or tell you anything about your special powers but I can only tell you that a book in the 950 section of your school library would give you more information about the mission. I believe that you have to go now, but feel free to come here at any time. Just go to the shelf where you found the glowing book, and you will be brought back here,” Alfonso said.

Within seconds we were all back at the school library.

The next day came in the blink of an eye. My friends and I did what we were told at the IEC headquarters. We went to the shelf that said 950 and we saw just one book, with the title *Silk Road*.

I opened the book cautiously and flipped to the contents page. I skimmed through the old-fashioned writing on the faded page when I finally found the word I was looking for: ‘Mission’. I turned to that page and started to read aloud:

“Your mission is to travel through the Silk Road and find your destination, a Chinese temple, inside which you will find a monument where evil demons will be released on the 25 January 2011. If you don’t destroy the monument on time, all living creatures including you will be exterminated that day. You may pick two artefacts from the headquarters of the IEC to take on your mission. Your choice of artefacts is essential as they will affect your sustainability. One of you will have a kind of “special power”, which will be crucial. Turn over to find the map that will lead you to your destination. The mission starts once you put this book back on the shelf.”

I turned the page and found the map. Luckily, my phone had a camera and I took a picture of the map. Seconds after that we were sucked into the dark abyss and we lost consciousness.

When we woke up, we thought that we were lying on a soft and brown mattress, but it was actually a desert and I knew straight away – this was the start of the Silk Road. I shook my friends awake and they too were amazed at where they were – the Silk Road. Unfortunately, we only had the water bottles that we had brought to school. I wished that we could have more since we could easily get dehydrated in this great white desert under the blazing sun. Suddenly, four water bottles appeared in front of me and they were filled with water – it was like magic. All my friends asked me how I did that. Anyway, we started our journey.

When I took my first sip of water, we suddenly fell into a hole. After I had oriented myself, I saw millions of scorpions swarming around me, with my friends lying beside me. Just then I realised that we didn’t take anything from the headquarters. I just wished I had a magic potion that would make all the creatures disappear. Instantly a small bottle appeared on my palm. I poured the elixir all around me. Within seconds, everything including my friends disappeared! Then I knew something ghastly had happened. An anonymous voice spoke to me and said that my friends’ souls were encapsulated inside the monument. “I need to go to the temple and get my friends out!” I murmured. I realised that it was the 25th of January and if I didn’t get to that temple by the end of the day, we would all surely be dead. When I glanced up, I saw something that looked like an inverted filter funnel, and I knew it was the temple. A gush of excitement as well as nervousness trickled down my spine. Even though I was exhausted, I still ran slowly towards the temple. When I got there, the door was locked. I closed my eyes and made a wish but nothing happened. I focussed my mind, calmed myself down and wished again. This time the key appeared.

“Kid, it’s not that easy to get into the sacred temple!” a voice bellowed.

When I looked up, an obese and dumpy monster stood in front of me. I tried every possible way to get into the temple, but the monster blocked my way. An idea popped into my mind. I closed my eyes and wished for a jet-powered backpack. When I looked around, I was already up in the air and within two seconds, I was inside the temple. I soon found the monument and used my last bit of energy to wish that when the monument opened, the evil demons would be destroyed and we would all be back at school.

It worked! When I opened my eyes, a familiar sound rang. It was the school bell. I looked at my friends. They too were overwhelmed with joy.

I believe that all of you would like to believe that the curse in this new tale of the Silk Road has been put to rest eternally, but if it isn't, you may be the next one to see something glowing in the corner of your eye ...

The Silk Road

India Davies, 12, Kellett School

I needed to tell someone. Badly. And he seemed perfect; unintelligent, without the ability to question the obscene. As much as I hated to hear it, the majority of people back home thought the deserts had driven me mad. They almost had, but not quite. I really didn't need another person questioning my mental state. I studied him once more to be sure. His skinny figure, deprived of food for so long, was slumped against the cold stone wall and his hair, lacking the care of a wife, fell in a messy tangle over his calculating eyes. He seemed so familiar, a long lost friend, but that was impossible. I was a prisoner of war and so was he; that was the only thing we had in common. Slowly, he looked up. His thoughtful eyes bored into mine. Nothing lay below the surface. He was easier to read than I had hoped.

"So, what are you doing here?"

A perfect start. I bluffed a little bit about my background since everyone knew me in Rome as a liar, so I needed a different story for him to believe. If someone would believe! What a fantasy. The chances weren't great, but it was worth a try. It didn't look as if I was getting out any time soon.

"I was a ... traveller ... explorer you could say," I watched his reaction closely as I said the words. A delayed look of confusion crossed his face. Again his face scrunched up, digesting this information. He opened his mouth to say something, but closed his mouth again. He then seemed to decide on something to say. He sat up and asked,

"Where did you go exploring? Exotic places? The Roman Empire?" He laughed to himself, pleased with his little joke.

"No, no, no. Cathay. Kublai Khan's Empire? No, didn't think so." Two could play this game. Satisfied with my smug comment, I dared a glance at him. He was staring at me with a look of utter shock.

"Another empire? No! Impossible!" His naivety irritated me.

"Yes of course! The world is huge! There is another empire! It isn't just Rome!" I closed my eyes, exasperated. When I opened my eyes he was there, gazing at me. I wish I hadn't chosen such an idiot. Patience, patience. Calming myself, I took deep breaths. He got up the courage to speak.

"Didn't they kill you when you got there?" He was just so curious. I couldn't help myself.

The Great Khan was his name. Everywhere I visited, they would speak his name in a whisper, frightened someone would hear. Every now and then, that 'someone' did hear. The Cathayan would whimper in fright, and a creature only just identifiable as a man, would come and roar something inaudible at the small figure who cowered down in fright. A petrified

look was there, frozen on their poor face. It made me feel terrible. I had gotten them into such trouble. But what for? They were all from Cathay, all trying to find their place. Though they did look different. Strange, very strange. That happened only once, but it was enough to make me curious. The Great Khan was now a subject of research and hopefully discovery. My next aim. I guessed he was a leader or ruler in some way. Everyone feared him. Soon after this incident, when I had moved on to different towns, my first lead to the mystery Khan arrived ...

Muffled voices drifted towards my decaying cell, "... their army is strong ... don't know what to do ... can't afford to keep ... get rid of them ... Rome ..." I stopped talking, confused. I strained to hear more. Nothing came. What had that been about? I glanced round. The stranger was staring at me, eyes wide. He found his voice again,

"The lead?"

"Oh right yes, the lead." Glad he was interested, I carried on.

A fellow trader was the one who let me in on the Great Khan's whereabouts. I was told that he held his court in the nearby city of Beijing. That was all the information I needed. I set off at dawn, careful not to arouse too much suspicion. I hopped onto my camel and set off, leaving the small, delicate trading town in my wake. It didn't take long to find the city. Two weeks at most. It was small, but with great stone walls surrounding the palace. Mongol guards were there at every entrance. Stocky, strong and scary. I leapt off my camel and strode up to the entrance. I eyed them all, and picked the one with what seemed the least quantity of guards and the most stupidity between them.

I used the tiny bit of their language that I had learned, although it seemed to be enough. One turned in circles, the other opening the gate to get in. Seizing my chance, I sprinted in and ran straight for the door that looked most promising. I got to the door – though it didn't really count as a door, with no handles or locks or any mechanism to let me in – and I started banging furiously. Beads of sweat started trickling down my cheek as I glanced behind to see the Mongols, red with fury, about to reach the door. I faced them, ready for anything that was coming my way. I saw a fist, which was followed closely by a complete blackout.

I paused in the recounting of my tale. Raised voices were arguing upstairs. In the cell beside me, the man (still unnamed) put his head in his hands as if he did not want to hear what was going on. An almost unrecognisable flash of anger flared up in his eyes. It was gone as quickly as it came. He then seemed to acknowledge that I was there and that I had been in the middle of a great tale. He seemed to think so too, because he looked at me, expectantly, and I continued with my story.

I awoke, groggy. As I opened my eyes, I gasped. There he was. His aura seemed to make the others surrounding me bow. It had a similar effect on me. I felt obliged to kneel on one knee and gaze at the floor, studying the complex patterns on the magnificent carpet, making sure I avoided eye contact with this noble figure. In a tongue not familiar to me, he spoke to the others. His harsh voice seemed to echo around the huge room, a room full of golden gods, filled with the elusive smell of the calming incense I had grown to love.

"Rise, stranger." I flinched at the words spoken in my own dialect. The cold voice was now directed at me. The words were strangely accented and they were spoken in small, snappy phrases. As I stood, I could feel his eyes studying me, trying to figure out where I came from, who, (or more probably), what I was. The grip on my arms tightened and I clenched my teeth, trying to disguise the pain. I lifted my head to regard the Khan. Proudly sitting on his throne, lined with silk. The colour of his golden robe matched the gleam and ambition in his eye and he held himself with a haughtiness that suited him in a way I cannot describe. The features were etched on his face in harsh lines, but there was no mistaking the wisdom and eons of

knowledge that was there. He was a warrior, and I could see by the way his people feared him that he was the ruler of this land.

The great Khan's voice startled me out of my daydreaming. "I have heard about you. You make me curious. Come, great explorer."

I remembered with pleasure the way he had spoken about me with admiration and actual interest. He had ...

I was interrupted by the appearance of the prison guards. Was the war over? Was I no longer a prisoner? I hoped, wished for this to be true. I looked at my fellow inmate, who I was beginning to think of as a friend. He seemed fascinated by my story of the Khan and I was certain he believed it. Finally, I had someone who believed that I had actually ventured into the region of Cathay. The loud rattling of keys reminded me of the guards. I looked up, hopeful. They threw open the door of the stranger's cell and seized him by the shoulders. I stared on in horror.

"Marco Polo," he called out to me. He knew my name? No, surely not. I had given him a fake name, fake everything. How ...

"One last question."

I didn't reply. The guards uprooted him from his spot and dragged him outside. He murmured something in a strange language. The guards stopped suddenly and he was there outside my cell. I gawked at him. Gradually, he lifted his head, which had been bent towards the floor the whole time, to meet my eyes. The friendliness and intrigue were gone and in their place were harsh, angry pools of green. None of this made sense. I let out a sigh. At least he trusted me.

"Marco Polo, why are you lying?"

The Mending

Lawrence Zheng, 13, King George V School

‘In a time of battles and threats from western tribes, a road to the West was secretly built by soldiers over many years, and embedded with magic by a priest, following the orders of an ancient Chinese emperor. The power of the priest’s magic ran through the whole of the road, which was later named the Silk Road.

That strong magic tied the civilisations of the East and the West together in a friendly alliance, and, in many ways, prevented war from breaking out between them. The magic worked, and the people were happy.

For many years, the East and West lived in peaceful harmony. The Silk Road, famous for the peace it brought, became a popular trade route, and was even considered holy by many people, who would happily carry their goods along the hot deserts and towering mountains it wound through. The emperor even sent special warriors, who he called Guardians, to ensure that the magic remained strong.

But a being of chaos and evil, the Queen of Snakes, soon destroyed that peace. After defeating the Guardians in battle, she poisoned the very heart of the magic itself. The two cultures were soon thrown into war once again, and though it was eventually mended, the Silk Road was constantly in danger thereafter.’

* * *

Across the sea of sand, a cloaked figure hurried along the path until he reached his destination, a lonely, forgotten tomb, crumbling with decay, shining red in the face of sunset. He sat down next to the stone monument, avoiding the stinging heat that fell onto his skin.

What needed to be done had to be done. There was no choice for Zhen, the cursed Imperial Guardian.

* * *

As the last of the jet planes of doom finally left the horizon of Xi’an, China, a scared child in rags crawled out of the rubble and let out a scream at the sky so loud that the ground seemed to shake.

Just about an hour ago, the first bombings, from the U.S. Air Force, started. The sound of the explosion was deafening, and the screams of the people resonated around the doomed city. And the terror wasn’t over yet. The explosions that followed extinguished the lives of thousands

upon thousands of the city's inhabitants. By the time the buildings had finished collapsing on each other, the screams had been brought to an end. The city had been completely destroyed.

Now, the city's last survivor, an orphan boy, crept out of his refuge, his tears soaking the ground. And as a dark, cloaked figure walked closer towards him with every step, he was so weak he hardly cared.

The war had begun.

* * *

'In a time of battles and threats from western tribes, a road to the West was secretly built by soldiers over many years ...'

Having finished studying the story, the orphan boy lifted his head.

"How ... how does this explain the explosions? It's just a story," he said, slowly.

"Ah, but it's all true. War exists again between the East and West," answered Zhen, looking over the boy's shoulder.

"The *West* made the explosions?"

After a moment of awkward silence, the boy finally stood, determined. "That ... uh ... story said this happened before, and it must have been mended somehow. How?"

"That's what I'm trying to do. It's my job," Zhen said, pride burning inside his heart, "But everyone needs help. I will go there myself and destroy the Queen if I have to. What do you think?"

The cloaked man, Zhen, had a voice that was strangely soothing and persuasive.

The boy considered. He thought of how the bombings had ruined his life the second time after his mother died, and all of the corpses of the people he once knew, soaked in blood.

What was there to lose?

"Yes. I will help you," he said, determined.

"And... your name is?" Zhen asked, relieved at the answer.

"Ming. My name is Ming." the boy said, staring sorrowfully into space.

* * *

After leaving the camp, the strange duo got to Zhen's car, which he had left there. After a treacherous ten hours on the Xibao Expressway, now seeming strangely empty and desolate, they arrived at Lanzhou, the capital city of the Gansu province in China, where many had already fled, fearing another military move from the West. After all, the Chinese Dongfeng missiles had just been launched at New York.

Not wishing to waste any time at all, Zhen, who definitely knew what he was doing, quickly whisked Ming to the train station, where they got on a train to Urumqi, where they would take a transfer to Samarkand, the central city of the Silk Road.

* * *

Ming stared out of the train window. He had never seen anything so elegant and beautiful as the mountains, rising gracefully from the lonely sand.

He looked at Zhen's shining sword, stowed away beside Zhen's sleeping figure. Yesterday, Zhen had even let him swing the sword around a few times.

Ming smiled when he thought of Zhen, treasuring every moment he had with him. Zhen had stirred his soup when it was too hot, sung him songs when he couldn't sleep, and laughed

with him when they played games together. Ming had secretly wished that he could stay with him forever, travelling around like this.

Because, for the first time in his life, someone had been like a father to him.

* * *

After three days on the train, they finally arrived at Samarkand.

Samarkand was composed of small houses with colourful stone domes that spun brilliant waves of light on the floor tiles of the city. The ancient air was livened by the scent of perfume and spices. The centre of the city was the ancient Registan, a square of great arches looking down on its ancient town.

Zhen's eyes were blurred with tears, hiding his face from Ming as he dragged him through the alleyways. But it all came back too fast: the memories from the train flooded back: Ming laughing, Ming learning how to hold a sword, Ming telling him that he was like a father to him ...

Suddenly, a flash of red streaked through the air. It was an olive-skinned woman of Samarkand, but something was not right.

Her eyes were red. Possessed.

Quickly, they ran in fear, only to be cornered by three more of the possessed beings. They were surrounded.

Time was at once surprisingly fast and slow, as Zhen advanced at the creatures, only to be grabbed and bitten by their sharp fangs, as they all surrounded him to feed on his blood. The pain rushed through his veins, and there was no use resisting as he cried out in agony. He was poisoned.

Suddenly, Ming charged out, grabbing Zhen's fallen sword, and lunging at the enemy. Driven by the pain of his mother's death, the pain of the destruction of his home, the pain of Zhen's suffering, he slashed out ruthlessly, no longer holding everything he had held inside. Enemy blood gushed out. The remaining creatures fled, screaming expletives.

"Thank you. Help me up!" whispered Zhen, struggling to mouth the words.

It took forever, but Zhen finally managed to lead Ming to the Registan, biting his lip to hold back his suffering.

But someone was already there waiting for them, her sinister green eyes glaring and her pet serpents surrounding her. The Queen of Snakes.

"So you have come again, you fool," she spat at Zhen, in a horribly distorted voice.

Ming suddenly looked at Zhen, confused.

"Ah, yes. The subject!" she jeered at the orphan. "Do you realise what your traitorous friend was going to do with you, insolent brat? The Registan is an ancient execution ground for sacrifice, you know."

Ming looked startled for a moment, and then came to his senses, his anger rising up his throat.

"You wanted to sacrifice me!" he exclaimed at Zhen, whose cheeks were flushing red with guilt. "I had trusted you!!"

"Huh! Now you know, hah! Now, should I feed you to my snakes, brat? Or –"

"D-don't you dare touch Ming!"

With that, Zhen suddenly rose to his feet and lunged at the Queen of Snakes, much to the surprise of Ming, biting into the Queen's skin as hard as his teeth would allow him. Zhen was not thinking about sacrifice, his country, or his emperor, he was thinking only of Ming. And as

Zhen had done minutes ago, the Queen let out a cry as the fatal poison penetrated through her body.

And with his last breath, Zhen screamed out as hard as he could at the boy. “Run!”

And so Ming, still surprised, ran for his life, tears soaking into the ground, leaving Samarkand far behind him. A flash of light suddenly enveloped the whole world.

The Silk Road link had finally been properly mended, not by cruel sacrifice, but by an action done out of pure love.

Hunt for the Solution

Nicole Choi, 12, Hong Kong Academy

Some people say they're born with a destiny. That fate holds them in their hands, or vengeance in its chains. I'm not like that. I'm hungry. Hungry for the things I don't know. Hungry for the outside world. I do not thrive off curiosity; curiosity thrives off of me. I want answers. Who is my father? Why did he leave my mother? I only have a remote memory of a tall man in the distance, while being held by my mother. Both of them are shrouded in mystery, and I want to push it away, and see whatever lies behind. Nothing will stop me.

"Colette!" an excited voice greeted me as I walked down the stairs lugging my duffle behind me.

"Silvio!" I warmly replied, greeting the six-foot tall trader.

"Let me take that for you," he said, taking the handle of my duffle. Then he tossed it over his shoulder as if it weighed nothing – a bag of feathers.

"Hanna told me the good news. Welcome!" he bellowed. He gave me a huge grin as he showed me the way to the caravan.

"Here's your room. Rest up, and begin your work tomorrow," he said. He opened a door to my small room. There was a small closet and bed, and I settled in, falling asleep quickly.

When I woke up the next morning, I could hear the rumbling wheels beneath me. No, *feel*. I opened the small window in my room, gazing out into the distance. It was a long, dusty road, and the sunlight shone in my eyes. I quickly got dressed and stepped out into the main area of the caravan. The wood creaked under my feet, and I took in the simple dining room that consisted of a wooden table and a few stools. The kitchen was to the left, and I could hear the clop of the horses' hooves outside. The door to my side opened, and Silvio's large frame came through the doorway.

"I see you've woken up. It's a long ride and us boys are hungry. The kitchen is fully stocked; feel free to cook anything you like," Silvio came in and said, before hurriedly leaving, being in charge of the expedition. I strode out the room, tied on an apron and set to work.

After that, the chores became a distant thing. Every morning I woke up, cooked up a massive breakfast, and set to cleaning the caravan. The boys' dusty boots were forever leaving marks, and it was my job to mop it up before we all got sick. I would cook, lunch and dinner, and do the laundry twice a week. My anticipation was low during the monotonous weeks, but my mind as excited as ever. Amazing things were just a look out the window, and as the weeks passed by I was yet to be bored. Often when we gathered for dinner, we had massive discussions about things; plenty for my mind to be overflowing with distracting ideas. Recently, there had been rumours about robbers, ones who planned ahead to be the most efficient with their victims. We

dismissed the rumour as gossip, but were extra careful with the locks and bolts, just in case. Robbers would be a terrible thing for travelling merchants.

As I set the table for dinner, there was a loud bang followed by a cry up front, and I could hear the horses' shrill neighs of terror. Surprised, I looked out the window, and cried out. Robbers. What we had dismissed for gossip and rumours was true. Known for watching the roads, robbers were the worst thing for a merchant.

"Come out peacefully, and we will not hurt you. Or prepare to have the worst unleashed upon you!" growled one of the bandits, and he pounded his spear on the ground. Slowly, we all filed out, and were promptly bound, gagged and blindfolded by the robbers. I squirmed, and he poked me, telling me to be still. Before I knew it, we were thrown on the back of a cart, and taken off to an unknown destination.

It seemed like hours before the robbers stopped the cart, and took off our blindfolds. It felt as if I hadn't seen the sun for days and the brightness blinded my eyes.

"Bow before his majesty Kublai Khan and his honoured guests!" the robber announced, and afraid of being jabbed for real this time, I bowed, my chin touching my shivering knees. A cruel smile lit the 'Kublai Khan's' face, and he lifted our chins with his sword like he was inspecting cattle. As he lifted my chin, my necklace fell out, dangling before him. His eyes glinted as if he had found some treasure.

"Girl has a pretty necklace..." he said evilly, yanking the chain off my neck. I cried out in pain, the chain snapping against my neck. He tossed it towards his guests. "What do you think?" he asked, and his eyes danced malevolently. One of the guests appeared to pale, and he stood up.

"I hereby ask you to release this girl, so I may talk to her," he said, addressing the Kublai Khan. Khan frowned, stroking his beard. "Niccolo, that is a large favour you ask. But fine. I'll let the girl go. Guards! Take this mongrel to Niccolo's private chambers." I was confused by the fast-moving events, even as my bindings were removed. The guard prodded my back, and I realised he wanted me to follow.

"No, I won't leave without my friends!" I cried out, sitting back down. The Kublai Khan snorted, as if in disgust, and waved at Silvio and the boys. Their bindings were also unwrapped, and we were plodded down a hallway and up several flights of stairs. Eventually we were left in a luxurious room with the two guests; one of them I assumed to be Niccolo.

"You! Girl! Please. Come over here. I have need to talk to you," Niccolo ordered. I shuffled across the room to him. "Be not afraid. I won't hurt you." he said more softly, friendly creases around his eyes as he smiled. "I have a question. This necklace... Where did you find it?" he asked curiously.

"My ... my mother ... my mother... she gave it to me before passing away," I stuttered, still trembling.

"Maffeo! Maffeo, it's her!" he said excitedly, gesturing towards his companion. "Mia's child!" he added. He turned towards me, apologising.

"This must be confusing ... My name's Niccolo Polo. This is my brother Maffeo Polo. We are merchants, traveling from Venice. You ... You are my long lost daughter, daughter of Mia Travinsky, Colette Travinsky-Polo!" he cried out, shaking me by the shoulders.

I could not say anything, frozen in shock. Should I believe this man? He seemed almost crazy; announcing me as his daughter, just because of an old necklace? My suspicion and hesitation must've shown, and he continued to explain.

"This necklace was a gift from me; I told your mother that if anything ever happened to her, she must give this to her child. A way for me to recognise her. I had to leave Mia alone, as pressing business came upon me. Mia ..." he ended, a depressed look upon his face.

“How can I trust you? You ... you could be babbling lies and tricks! You’re associated with the man who *kidnapped* us!” I yelled, backing away.

“I would never allow you to be kidnapped, Colette. But think ... we would not have met if it were not this way!” he gently replied. I sobbed. The fatigue came crashing down in waves upon me, and I was too tired to argue.

“Tell me then ...” I whispered. “What was my mother like?” I asked. An understanding, warm look came over Niccolo’s face. He stroked my head, and I froze at first, but then quickly got used to the soothing rhythm.

“She was just like you. So eager to do, never stopped to rest. Headstrong and fiery, she wouldn’t take no for an answer. But Colette, you must rest. To live, you must rest. So sleep, and in the morning and the following days, weeks, months, years, I promise you that together we will find anything and everything about your Mother. I have a few connections with her family; perhaps you can stay with them there. I have pressing work; I cannot stop. But you are my daughter Colette, through blood and love. So rest,” he whispered, and my eyelids grew weary and the pillow was inviting. I fell into a deep sleep, anxiousness and curiosity overwhelming my mind wondering at the adventures to come. My hunger has been satiated, but my thirst hasn’t been quenched.

New Tales of the Silk Road

Queenie Fung, 14, Heep Yunn School

“Wow! So this is the train I am going to be on for the next twelve days!” I gasped under my breath. I stood on tiptoes, trying to peer through the crowd at the Beijing train station to get a good look at this famous Silk Road Express. It was nothing like what I had expected. All I could see was the glossy red paint sweating under the unforgiving sun. I must admit that it was quite a dazzling scene, but I was hoping for a traditional tour along the ancient Silk Road. This looked more like the MTR back home. I was hustled aboard with the crowd buzzing around me. I stiffened at the sight of the cabins. It was even more glamorous than a five-star Shangri-La Hotel! I followed a hostess through the glorious cabins to a small cosy room and there, I settled for my twelve-day trip along the Silk Road.

It was my third day on the train and we had arrived at Zhang Ye. The train had all that I could ask for, luxurious food, never-ending television programs and perfectly comfortable sofas and bed. You might think that I was stupid, but what I wanted most of all was not luxury, but a chance to go out into the wilderness and stretch my legs. I was sick of being always stuck on the train, only being able to admire the beautiful scenery but not having a chance to be a part of it. I leaned against the cool windows, staring longingly at the mysterious desert stretched out for miles ahead of me. I set my lips into a grim line, looking blankly at the horizon, but a trail of caravans soon caught my attention. I blinked, trying to clear the blurry scene and take a closer look at the men sitting on the camels. As they came nearer, one of them seemed to be smiling. I pressed my face against the cool glass. I wasn't imagining things – the man at the front was really smiling directly at me. It looked a bit like Mona Lisa's mysterious smile. He lifted his right hand, as if calling me to go over to him. Amused, my lips twitched with a faint smile and my eyelids drifted close as I fell asleep. I let myself escape from reality and dreamt about being in the middle of this never-ending desert.

I sat up abruptly as a gust of fierce wind swiped around me. Had the window of my cabin been pushed open? I thought it was air-conditioned. I blinked around groggily, trying to figure out where I was. I was still in the middle of the desert, but the unfriendly glass window seemed to have somehow vanished. I reached forward, expecting to bump against the icy cool glass, but instead, I grabbed a handful of sand. Riddled with curiosity I glanced down, but instead of the cozy red velvet sofa, what I saw was the amber fur on the back of a camel! I was so shocked by this realisation that I almost fell off the camel. Carefully, I perched myself up and anxiously took in my surroundings. There was absolutely nothing in sight, not to mention the Silk Road Express. All I could see was mountains of soft brown sand, without a single bit of greenness.

I peered over my shoulder, trying to fight against the sand that threatened its way into my eyes. There was a line of brightly coloured caravans behind me, along with a few men sitting on camels. I was so startled that my mouth fell open, only to get tons of dry sand in my mouth. "What ..." I sputtered, but ended up coughing out mouthfuls of sand. The men gave me a reproachful look and one of them spoke up gravely, "Um ... Master Zhang Qian, are we heading in the right direction?" With difficulty, I managed to spit out the last bit of sand caught in the back of my throat. So, I had actually travelled back to 138 B.C. and that's who I had become, Zhang Qian, the person who started the Silk Road. I gave them a questioning look and couldn't help wondering aloud, "Where are we supposed to be going?" Another man snapped at me impatiently, "Have you lost your mind? I really don't understand why Emperor Wu has made you our leader." My mouth opened and closed like a goldfish as I tried to remember what I had learnt about the Silk Road during my history lesson. "We are done. I wish Emperor Wu hadn't sent me here to die," another one grunted. Oh! How I wish I had been paying more attention in class. I thought the Silk Road Express must have passed the Xiongnu already. I guessed as long as we headed north towards Mongolia, we would probably soon get there. "Um ... we need to get past the Xiongnu, right? So ... we should go north." I glanced down, thankful I had my compass with me and said drily, "This way." Without a second glance, I turned my back at them and let my camel trot toward the northwest, with the caravans following right behind, praying to God that I wouldn't get lost in this maze of sand.

We had been walking for days, seeing absolutely nothing apart from a few poor villages. I wondered how they managed to survive in this deadly desert. The back of my throat felt like it was on fire with the sour taste of sticky sheep milk still lingering in my mouth. Beads of sweat were rushing down my forehead and complicated layers of traditional clothing stuck to my clammy skin. My eyelids were covered with layers of sand as we stood against the scorching heat and went on with our tough journey. There was no way out of it now. My dear Silk Road Express was nowhere in sight. How I wished I could sneak into the caravans and get some decent sleep. They must be filled to the brim with all sorts of goods and luxuries for trading. I should have enjoyed the luxury I had back on the Silk Road Express! I was just about to start barking a command at the other men to pause for another rest when I noticed a few small houses appearing at the horizon. "Is that the Xiongnu?" I asked myself. I hoped not, because that only meant more trouble. Eager to find out the answer, I hurried my camel forward and it broke into a gallop, with the rest of the caravans tailing behind me. I let myself relax and enjoyed this exciting ride with the sand flying behind me. Its hooves sank into the soft, smooth sand, leaving a trail behind. The wind howled and swirled around me, with mountains of sand dancing gracefully along.

All of a sudden, my camel came to an abrupt halt. It was quivering slightly and panting hard. I patted its head gently, trying to soothe it. Instead, it seemed to be even more frightened and continued shivering uncontrollably. It fixed its hooves into the sand and refused to move. I was just about to get down from the camel to tug at its reins when the ground started to shake beneath our feet. "Stay where you are, don't move an inch!" I yelled at no one in particular, just wishing that my companions would hear me over the angry roar of the wind. Animals came dashing out of the town, from cockroaches to cows, with thousands of birds fluttering above them, like a dark thunderous cloud. It was as if they were escaping from some sort of disaster. At that instant, behind the frantic crowds of animals, the entire city started to sink into the sand before my eyes. I simply gaped with amazement at this hideous natural disaster. The desperate cries of help and howls of people in the city rang in my ears. I was frozen but still, I managed to catch sight of the sign on the flag on top of the royal palace. It was the town of the Xiongnu. The whole city seemed to be folding itself back into the ground before my very

eyes. The sand dancing around elegantly made its way toward the spot where the city originally stood and spread itself like a blanket over it, as if it was burying a tomb in a graveyard. Within a few seconds, nobody could ever tell a town as strong and as wealthy as the Xiongnu's had once stood in this abandoned place in a wild desert.

I watched silently as the animals slowly and calmly retreated as if nothing had ever happened. My companions trotted over to me, their eyes twinkling with excitement. One of them blurted out, "Did you do all that?" "What do you mean?" I asked, puzzled. "Destroy that city! Were those the Xiongnu-nians?" He continued eagerly. I hesitated, then a wide grin spread across my face and I said cheekily, "Of course! I can do black magic. Now, there is no need for Emperor Wu to fight against those annoying Xiongnu-nians anymore." The others bowed their heads respectfully and nodded in agreement. Wow! What a miracle! That was actually the first time they had agreed with me since I had been here. I had finally become their true leader. "Now what will we do next?" asked another man. This time, I replied confidently, "Well... we should get back to Emperor Wu and report our findings. We can even suggest that we start trading with some of those poor villages along the way. Emperor Wu can even rule over them as well." The other men nodded and got ready to head back once I gave the commands.

I let out a huge sigh of relief. A huge weight had been lifted off my shoulder, being Zhang Qian was definitely not easy. At least, I hadn't ruined Emperor Wu's purpose on this journey. Suddenly, a thought struck me and plucked me back into reality. I have succeeded in travelling in the most traditional Silk Road ever walked by man. I am even rewriting history, the formation of the Silk Road. No, not only rewriting, I am actually living Zhang Qian's life in history. I stiffened; the question is whether I could go forward in time to read my new tale of the Silk Road.

An Unexpected Friend

Samantha Yu, 11, International College Hong Kong

“Careful with those boxes, Kai Ling!”
I just dropped a box of solar equipment whilst trying to load it on the truck. Dad is furious. Our destination seems so far. We’re transporting solar equipment to help a small town in the Taklimakan Desert produce steady electricity for their school. I would much rather celebrate my birthday with my mum instead of being on this trip. The only reason I agreed to go is to spend more time with my dad. I have a feeling this is going to be the worst birthday ever.

The Silk Road. What a nice name. This place is a dirty desert. It doesn’t deserve such a nice name. Dad tells me we are going to a town near the Tarim River. It sounds familiar. I probably heard it in history class. History is boring, and I can’t be bothered to listen. I wish I was back home in Beijing. Instead, I’m travelling on the Silk Road, sitting in a grubby truck, trying to get a signal on my phone. I wish I had a friend who could come with me. All the kids at my school have friends, except for me.

“Dad?” I ask.

“Yes?”

“How ...?” I stutter, not finding the right words in time.

“We get there when we get there, Kai Ling.”

“How do you make someone be your friend? What do you have to do to have a friend?”

The questions splutter out of me like a waterfall.

Dad sighs, making me think I’m going to have to brace myself for another lecture. “You can’t *make* people be your friends. The only way to have a friend is to be one,” he finally replies.

“You make friends wherever you go. How come I can’t?”

“If someone is uncomfortable with you, they won’t want to be with you,” he says.

I look out at the desert. It seems so endless. I feel dad’s hand on my knee.

“Kai Ling, get some rest.”

I sigh and fall asleep.

* * *

“SANDSTORM!”

I wake with a start. Still a little groggy, my only instinct is to look out the window. To the left, I see the sunset. To the right, my eyes try to take in an enormous brown, swirling cloud on the ground.

“SANDSTORM!”

People are running all around me. Dad scrambles in and we huddle together. A mixture of fear and curiosity descends on me as we watch the dark cloud approach. There is silence for a moment, then the wind hits like a bomb exploding. The truck rattles hard, tipping over some boxes. I want to scream. This is the most frightened I have ever been. Even though I know there are others in the car, I feel alone.

There is an eerie scream from the wind that makes me shudder. I can hear tiny sand particles hitting the truck. It shakes again, but this time more violently. I wonder if Dad has ever run into a sandstorm like this one on his previous journeys.

* * *

The ruthless winds keep attacking us until the next morning. I have moved beyond fear to anger.

“Take me home!” I scream.

Dad sighs heavily. “Calm down, Kai Ling. We are not going home until we finish this project.”

“This is all *your fault!* You drag me out here saying it is going to be a real treat coming here to this dirty desert! Now, we are stuck in the middle of nowhere melting away in the stupid sun!”

I know the sandstorm isn’t my Dad’s fault, but I’m so upset. I want to go home. Dad carries on ignoring my outburst.

I kick the sand angrily. “Stupid desert, stupid sandstorm, stupid everything!”

“Kai Ling, get in. We are leaving now!”

* * *

All the villagers eagerly greet my dad, like he’s some hero. I watch as his teammates unload and get organised. I stare at the old brick buildings covered with dirty sand. Everything is coated in the same ugly brown.

Suddenly, I see something white and furry dart into the corner. Too clean for this place, I think. Approaching slowly, I’m surprised to see a cat. I am slightly taken aback when I come face to face with a girl, about my age. She has long black hair and shiny brown eyes. She wears a very colourful dress sewn with beads arranged in a flower pattern.

“That’s my cat!” She looks at me as if embarrassed by her outburst. “Hi, I’m May,” she says shyly.

“I’m Kai Ling.” Her cat is purring in my arms and I’m reluctant to let go. Dad’s words ring in my mind. *The only way to have a friend is to be one.* I hand the cat to May.

I suddenly feel jealous of the pretty looking girl in front of me. “How on earth do you get any entertainment here? You’re stuck in the middle of nowhere. Bet you don’t even have Internet connection.”

“Internet?” May says, looking confused.

I stare at her. “What do you do for fun?”

“Play with my family.”

I shrug. “If you say so.”

“Are you Mr Lee’s daughter?”

I nod my head and do not volunteer any more information. Her intense gaze makes me feel uncomfortable. Then she smiles suddenly, making me feel better.

May holds out the cat for me to hold. “Come, Snow and I will show you our town.”

When we get to a small wall, May tells me to climb over it.

“But I’ve never climbed a wall before!” Now it is her turn to stare at me.

She grips the wall and quickly scrambles over. May holds out her hand and pulls me up.

We sit silently in the late afternoon sun looking out at her village. May starts to point to the ancient looking houses. They look like they’re about to collapse; nothing like my modern high rise apartment with a view of the city.

“That’s my house and that is the school.”

“I hate school.” I say angrily.

“Why?” She sounds surprised.

“I have no friends.” I say, unexpectedly feeling sad.

“I’ll be your friend.” May is smiling at me.

I look at her, lost for words. Happiness I have not felt before slowly seeps into my body.

“Thanks!” My wide grin spreads to my eyes. “How old are you? Do you have siblings? Do you have other pets?” I’m eager to find out everything about my new friend.

May laughs and tells me she’ll tell me everything inside her house. I’m so excited, I can’t believe I have a friend.

* * *

During my week-long stay, I discover many things.

May tells me about the importance of family. “The desert is a harsh place. Without family support and encouragement, life would be even harder.”

Beijing is nothing like this place, but I suddenly realise it is not so different.

“You would not be who you are without your family. I don’t know what I would do without my mine,” May says.

I learn history *can* be interesting.

“My mum told me our town used to be an oasis for ancient travellers on the Silk Road. They traded much more than their goods, Kai Ling. They also traded their traditions and beliefs,” May explains.

“Sounds like what we did this week.” We laugh at the comment.

“Kai Ling! Come pack your stuff!” I freeze. It’s my Dad. May and I look at each other. We both know this is goodbye. May grips my hand.

“I will miss you,” May manages to say.

Tears begin to fill my eyes. I try my best to hold them back. “You are the best friend I could ever have. You give me good advice, you are encouraging and nice ...” I pause for a moment, thinking about her words. “You’ve become part of my family. I’ll miss you very much. Remember my Dad’s lessons on the computer? Remember how to email? Write to me.”

“Of course I remember,” May says. “I’ll write everyday. Oh, don’t forget the importance of family.”

We’re both laughing and crying.

“Of course.” Slowly, I pick up my bag and reluctantly go to the truck.

May.

I will never forget that name. The name of my first friend.

Of course, I would have never met her if Dad didn’t bring me here. Suddenly, I understand

what she means by importance of family. I turn around and see May still standing there. I give her a grateful smile and wave goodbye.

I race to my dad and give him a big hug. “Thanks for bringing me with you.”

“Any time, Kai Ling.” We both laugh, as we climb into the truck.

I see May out the window and wave to her one last time. “Write to me!”

I see her smile and nod. Dad drives into the desert the setting sun behind us. I continue watching until May is a tiny dot on the smooth sand dunes.

Perhaps this is the best birthday ever.

The Creation of the Silk Road

Shannon Hu, 11, Yew Chung International School

A long, long time ago, an old woman sat in her rocking chair, remembering the last words her great-grandfather had said: “My dear, when you have grown up, do what your desires tell you to do. But remember, when you are no longer able to fulfil your own dreams, sit down and think: What can *you* do to make the world a better place for everyone?”

The old woman, named Rosemary, had fulfilled most of her dreams, and now she had to make the world a better place. But she was not filled with energy anymore. Not able to play games and do everything she wanted to. Her brain was working slower, so it could be difficult to think of how to make the world a better place. Then, to make things simple, Rosemary decided to organise her thinking: “What does the world need most? Hmmm ... maybe getting different products around,” she thought.

Many times people would meet up and trade, so Rosemary thought maybe she could make a special route for trading. Rosemary looked around her tattered house, wondering what materials she had for making a route. She thought: “Hmmm ... I have lots of silk in the closet, a spinning wheel ...” Then it hit her. She didn’t know what, but all of a sudden, she just needed to make the road with silk.

Day and night, Rosemary stitched the countless threads of silk together to make the road. In and out went the needle. To make things interesting, she weaved in many tales, fables and stories that would entertain the travellers. But there wasn’t much time; Rosemary could feel that she couldn’t hold on to life much longer, so there were many mistakes and places that the string was too thick or too thin in between.

When Rosemary was finally finished, she took a whole bucket full of cornstarch and sprinkled it over her Silk Road, setting it alive. But some places received more than others, so the landscape was not smooth. Then she lay down to rest and slowly left the world. But the Silk Road was the exact opposite. It sprang up and down and wiggled its toes: it was a newborn child. When all of it came to life, it set out on its journey to find the place it belonged.

When the Silk Road finally settled down in China and spread across to Rome, the parts where the string was too thin became green grass and plains, the parts where the string was too thick became marshy swamps and fast-flowing rivers, the parts that received less cornstarch became the grassy fields and valleys, and the parts that received more cornstarch became high mountains stretching to the sky and long deserts. The tales, fables, and stories were well sewn in and passed along easily. The mistakes in the weaving were where robberies occurred and where pirates lived. Every little detail Rosemary had put into the Silk Road turned into real life.

Many years passed and the Silk Road became a well-known trading route. Without the Silk Road, trading would be impossible for the Romans and Chinese people. The Romans wouldn't get silk from China and the Chinese wouldn't get gold from Rome. But the prices of the products were quite high because the Silk Road was very hard to travel on. Most of the time people would go only a small distance and trade with people there, who would in turn travel further along the route to trade, so that goods travelled far even though people didn't. Even during the small distance people travelled, they were in danger – the weather caused disasters like sandstorms and thunderstorms; thieves came and stole precious possessions from travellers. And so, nobody could ever make the 4000 mile-long trip from China to Rome.

Rosemary's relatives knew about how she had sewn together the entire Silk Road and they were sad she was not there on Earth to see of what great use her masterpiece had become to the world. But even though she wasn't here, that didn't mean she didn't see it. Rosemary was right there, in every living creature, organism and even in the plain air, floating, invisible, watching her masterpiece help the world. She was with her great-grandfather, who was very proud of her; but Rosemary was unhappy about her weaving mistakes. "If I had some more time," she thought, "I could have made it much safer." She felt as if it was her fault each time someone got robbed or killed travelling on the Silk Road. But Rosemary knew, deep in her heart, that she had helped the world, and she was happy, even though very few people knew that she had fulfilled one of the world's dreams.

The Daughter's Dream

Sunwoo Nam, 13, Discovery College

Everyone can tell a story. Everyone can share a moment or two. Everyone can take part in growing their stories into a precious music note of a whole, beautiful song that flows along with endless history. What if a road could speak? What if a long, winding path of trading, the thousands and thousands kilometres of journey, the journey through the boundless sandy sea of scorched desert to the picturesque oases and millions of mountain passes, the one and only Silk Road could reminisce about those that have travelled along it? It surely would recount hundreds of stories, but maybe just one would stand out above the rest. A story of magical love and beauty.

* * *

The hottest day of summer so far was drawing to a close, to the continuous, eternal rumbling noise coming from a loom in a small old mud-brick house in Suzhou, China. Inside the single room with its creaky charcoal floor made of dirt, were a mother and daughter, who were consumed in their task of weaving the silk perfectly. They had strikingly similar features. The mother quickly moved her hands with deftness while her young daughter, not wishing to distract her mother from work, quietly crouched next to the loom. A few beads of sweat formed on the young girl's brow but she paid no heed to them and continued to stare at her mother working. Her long raven black hair was tightly tied into two tidy braids but unlike her hair, she was wearing frayed and faded clothes. Despite her old clothes, her charming eyes stood out the most. It was the daughter's eyes that illuminated her; they were sparkling with curiosity, gleaming brighter than the candle glowing on the table behind her.

The night gradually captured the day as the lights in the village slowly disappeared one by one, leaving the moon glow alone in the waxing sky.

"Mama, is it done yet?" the daughter softly murmured as she slightly leaned forward to see the woven silk.

"Not yet my dear," the mother sighed as she finally took her dark-circled eyes off the loom and smiled a bony smile at her beloved daughter.

"Is this for me mama?"

The smile quickly disappeared from the mother's face. She wanted to do everything and anything for her daughter, but all the time, she felt useless. In her mind, she had already weaved millions of enchanting silk clothes for her daughter and yet in real life, she was too busy creating clothes for others. She knew that once her precious silk had left her it would be

safely carried along the Silk Road, destined to adorn the daughters of the wealthy. Maybe one day, the silk's destiny would change and the mother would be able to hold on to at least one of the many she had weaved and was yet to weave in her life.

"Not this one, my dear. But I promise I will make one for you soon."

"Okay. Why is the weaving taking so long mama?"

"My dear, weaving silk is like weaving your body and your soul onto a loom. You wouldn't want to waste the silkworms' hard work for nothing, would you? Every weave must be done with a delicacy and effort and that is the reason why it takes such a long time. But my dear, even if the process is long and boring, you must always remember, when it is, the outcome will be beautiful." When the silence seemed to cover the vacant room with only a few pieces of simple furniture, the cheerful young girl's voice broke through the air.

"Just as beautiful as I am mama?" the daughter said playfully. The mother stopped working and watched her daughter's pleasure at her own joke. The mother's hard-stiffened face, with permanent wrinkles reflecting the past of her life, seemed to be ironed on her, softened and broke into a wide smile. Had it been months or had it been years? It seemed so long since she has smiled with such joy she was feeling now. Slowly she opened her dry lips and softly whispered so that only the daughter could hear.

"Just as beautiful as you are my dear."

* * *

It felt like yesterday, the daughter watching her mother weaving the silk on this cold charcoal floor. But the reality was, it had been a lot longer than she thought it had been. For the past few years, the mother had been suffering from a rare skin disease. The doctors had been telling the daughter that there was not much to be done, but the daughter regularly worked hard to weave silk, to earn money and to try to save her mother's life with Chinese medicine. She was still getting beads of sweat on her forehead, still as enthusiastic about weaving silk, still the young playful girl of her past ... but before she knew it, she was starting to become not quite the same girl she used to be. Her fingertips were no longer a teenage girl's fingertips, her face was no longer full of a beaming sparkle, her eyes were no longer as bright as the candle glowing and most importantly, her mother was no longer the same.

Time seemed to sweep like the wind, faster than ever and yet the daughter didn't seem to notice, as the single light of her house still lit the whole village radiantly. Was it in her blood? The daughter now skilfully weaved the silk with speed; it was as if looking at the same old scene in the past except the hands were a lot smaller and a lot thicker than before. The time was getting closer to midnight but the daughter's time had now stopped with the silk thread. Remembering what her mother had once told her, she moved the loom as if she was playing a precious instrument and bit by bit, the loom was played, bringing out the most beautiful silk sound alive.

The silk the daughter weaved was usually sold to the merchant not for a very high rate but at a decent price. The daughter was still pleased with the results. In fact, she thought herself fortunate, lucky to be at least achieving this much. But of course, there were times when she felt she was facing a blocked wall in a long, tough maze. There were times when she felt she had fed the Silk Road for years with so much hard work and yet, she had received nothing in return except her mother's ailing health. She sighed, gazing at the loom, where the unfinished silk still laid intact. She straightened up her bent back and quickly glanced over at the corner of the room where her mother still lay. Somehow, her pale, emaciated face looked brighter today and it seemed like she was telling her something; she was passing on a surge of

encouragement, giving her heart some hope. Immediately the daughter felt an overwhelming sense of love and tenderness and her feelings of despondency evaporated. With the renewed feeling of enthusiasm, she stroked the silk she was weaving with her fingertip and it instantly fell down like it was lost in the air. Today, the silk that she had weaved for more than a few months looked like a luminous diamond that had the reflection of the village's lake shimmering in the sun. Her eyes welled up with warm tears. She somehow felt that she was one step closer to her long hoped for dream; the dream of seeing her mother smile again.

* * *

Later that day when she had sent the finished silk along the Silk Road, she dreamt of something special. The daughter was outside in a ravishing garden when the emersion of reddish-orange sunlight behind the trees seemed to kiss the calm sky while the soothing breeze tickled the flowers from east to west. But that wasn't all. She was wearing a stunningly and elegant hand-woven silk dress that lit up the whole place, and next to all that magnificence was her own dear mother.

"Oh mama!" She instantly ran to her mother and cuddled up as if she was a kindergarten child longing to stay with her mother when she's supposed to leave.

"Mama, where have you been?"

"What do you mean my dear? I've been here all along with you weaving your pink silk dress."

"Oh mama!" The daughter looked at her own dear mother who she would miss so much and was moved to tears. In that moment she felt like everything was back to the old dark evening in the mud-brick house and she smiled once again.

"Mama, is the dress as beautiful as I am?"

Before she even finished the sentence, the mother's face lit up. Slowly she opened her lips and softly whispered so that only the daughter could hear, "Just as beautiful as you are my dear." And she smiled.

A Hidden Secret

Vanessa Leigh, 14, St. Paul's Convent School

“Wake up, lazybones, you’ll never learn anything if you keep dozing off like that!” a strong voice commanded.

I woke up with a start. Even though the wind was howling fiercely and the cold bit through the layers of clothes I was huddled in, I was so tired that I could fall asleep while travelling in a wooden caravan that kept threatening to throw me off. My father was a tradesman, and he had been successful on a difficult trip to Rome from our luxurious home in Xi’an. It was his brilliant idea to train me, his eldest son, whom he treasured more than all the gold in the world, how to trade just like him.

His trip to Rome had taken him two and a half years. He had been hit with terrifying snowstorms, sandstorms and even run into snakes. He had been lucky to have only one encounter with bandits, who only got away with one chest of gold. This knowledge frightened me to the core, but I tried not to show how much of a weakling I truly was. In the eyes of my father, boys were supposed to be manly, even if they were only 14. Thanks to my father’s successful trip, we were rich and owned piles of gold, silver and precious gems from Rome.

I had long lost track of time, but I knew it had been a very long time ever since I left the comforts of home. Now, all we could do was hope that Mother Nature would help and guide us towards our destination safely.

I was pulled out of my deep thoughts when the caravan came to a sudden halt. Curious, I peeked out the window to catch a glimpse of what was happening. All I saw was a huge piece of glittering white land. My father ordered me to stay in the caravan in a gruff voice and hopped off. Minutes later, after a heated discussion between him and our driver, a man from our village, they seemed to come to an agreement and my father joined me.

“We will be stopping soon at a nearby village. There will be a huge snowstorm tonight and no travelling will be possible,” he informed me.

I nodded and went back to sleep.

When I woke up, I felt so warm that I thought for a moment that I must have died in the snowstorm and gone to heaven. My eyes opened slowly and I registered my surroundings. The fire leaped in the fireplace and I was so absorbed in seeing shapes in it that my father’s voice made me jump.

“You’ve slept again, son, and it’s almost daybreak. I hope we can set off once the sun rises, as these delays are very annoying,” he commented gently.

“Yes, Father. I would like to enquire about our location.”

“We are in Urumqi now. Another thing, son, I do not want to see you mingling with the street children outside. They have been begging for money ever since we arrived, and I cannot stand the sight of them.”

“Yes, Father.”

I decided to recite the poems my tutor had given me before the trip, so that I would not fall behind in my studies. My father seemed pleased when he noticed what I was doing. I decided then and there that my ambition in life was to please my father, and to always be his favourite son.

When the sun had risen far above the horizon, I stepped out for some fresh air. It was freezing outside, but somehow, the breeze felt good on my cheeks. I had not walked ten steps when I saw a girl from the local village closing in. Obviously, she was one of the children my father strongly disapproved of. She wore a thick, fur coat and I stepped back reflexively. Then she spoke my dialect, which caught me by surprise.

“Please don’t run away, I won’t hurt you. I just need help,” she pleaded.

I took a look at her. There was something very queer about her. Her skin was a shade lighter than the locals there, her hair a light brown, unlike the ebony black of her people. What surprised me most were her eyes. They were cerulean, and just by looking into them, I felt helpless, plunging in a deep ocean. I was so lost in their beautiful colour that I just nodded.

“I am not merely a beggar, but an orphan too. The local villagers do their best to help me, but they themselves are short of supplies as well. I do not ask for money, but knowledge from your homeland. My dearest wish is to learn but nobody here is educated enough,” she explained in a soft voice.

I was cautious since I had no idea what her real motive was. Did she want to kidnap me and ask for a ransom? However, her craving for knowledge was enough to tempt me to follow her. My tutor had sternly taught me that spreading knowledge is the most important thing in life.

She led me to her home, or rather, a shabby shed. It was dark and murky, and she only had haystacks and thin blankets inside. A huge surge of pity overcame me, and I felt helpless. I stood there, immobilised, while she got down to business immediately. One minute I was standing in a dirty, messy shed and the next, she sat down and motioned to me to do the same, eager to learn.

That day, I knew what true happiness was. I taught her one of the well-known poems that I knew by heart. My father was convinced I had gone hunting the entire day, and swallowed my lies when I told him I had offered that day’s catch to some poor villager when he saw me empty-handed. Thinking back, I think I saw a flicker of doubt in his eyes then.

The snowstorms in Urumqi were terrible. The next morning, my father walked out before the sun came up to check whether we could go on with our trip. I sneaked out to teach the girl a new poem. Surprisingly, she already knew that poem and recited it fluently.

Finally, I could no longer stand it and asked her, “How did you learn this poem? Why do you look different from the villagers here?”

“I thought you’d ask sooner or later,” she replied in a voice that sounded like golden chimes. “Yes, I am different. I have overheard enough to know that you are on your way to Rome, along the Silk Road. I strongly advise you to discontinue this dangerous trip. My homeland is Xi’an, which is yours too. My wealthy parents had set off to Rome with me but were killed around this area by bandits. The kind villagers led me here when they found me, and I easily learnt their dialect.”

That was the most fascinating story I had ever heard. She was called Dexiang, the same name as my youngest sister. The snowstorms lasted for two entire weeks. I used this time to

understand how similar our lives were in Xi'an. We soon realised we had been taught by the same master, and the same servants had worked for her. I dreaded the day we would have to leave, because I realised I had done something forbidden. I had befriended one of "the street children" and it was too late to turn back.

It took me just another day to figure out that she was a math genius. While we were strolling in the marketplace, she calculated the probability of all the rice being sold that day, rounding her answer off to five decimal places. I was shocked beyond words. This girl could grow up to become the most successful woman in the country.

When the snow had finally melted enough to give a clear path, my father wanted to set off immediately. I pleaded to stay in the village to teach Dexiang. He snorted in a funny way and said, "Let's go." When I repeated my request, this time, a bit louder, I saw how his face changed colour. In a space of two seconds it had turned to an extraordinary red filled with anger.

"You are no son of mine if you decide to stay in this poor village, with that dirty street child. It is your choice, I will give you one last chance," he threatened.

I felt nothing but resentment in my heart. All my former admiration for my father had flown away as his greed and selfishness showed. I stood my ground and said confidently, speaking each word slowly, "I am staying here. Dexiang is gifted beyond imagination, and I have every intention to help her reach her full potential and become a world leader." I turned around and walked away, not bothering to look back once.

I never set eyes on my father again.



Fiction
Group 4

Dreams

Brandon Lin, 14, Chinese International School

The realm was filled with darkness and evil. There were screeching strokes of the devil playing on its fiddle and sudden intervals of a woman screaming. I was jogging, then running, then sprinting. It was coming again. I could feel it. The evil clutches of the trees were closing in on me, the ocean was leaping across the horizon as if the tides were galloping knights with spears in their hands and the rocky dirt road was trembling. Suddenly, I tripped.

“No! No! Stop! Stop!”

“It is okay Kun! You were just dreaming, now go back to sleep.” I could see a blurry figure, but it was not the devil, the ocean or the trees. I pulled my blanket over my face to embrace myself. Then I felt a soft delicate hand fondle my face. This hand felt familiar. I took a peek from under my blanket and noticed it was mama. Outside my tent, the sky was pitch black and the surroundings made me feel like I was engulfed in a never-ending blanket of darkness. I must have been dreaming, dreaming of the horrendous past. Mama tucked me back into my blanket and soon I was dozing off into deep sleep again.

The sun was rising. The rays of the sun scattered among the clouds with shades of yellow, orange, violet – vibrant and dynamic colours. I sat up on my bed, pondering over yesterday’s dream. The chaotic scenes that ran through my mind reminded me of the magnitude 7.1 earthquake that struck Yushu in April. The epicentre was on the Tibetan Plateau and many of my friends and family had gotten hurt. Then a light bulb lit up in my head; I had had a similar dream before the Yushu earthquake. I started to have an ominous feeling about the events that would soon occur.

Just as I was going to set out for school, the clouds began subduing the blazing fireball. There were goosebumps on my arm, I felt my muscles clench in the solemn and melancholy atmosphere. Going to school was usually a very short walk along the Silk Road; today it took longer than usual. Each time I kicked a small pebble, it barely moved at all. The trees in the distance didn’t seem to get bigger as I approached them. What was happening? I must be hallucinating.

When I arrived at school, it was an atrocious sight. The playground was now a haunted house. The classrooms were trashed. There were crumbs all over the cafeteria floor and no one in sight. My instincts told me to turn back and run all the way home. I took a step back out of the school gate. “Boom, boom, boom!” Suddenly, lightning struck. The scene was coming back to me again. The trees were closing in on me, the rainwater was flooding the school and the playground apparatus seemed like it was going to collapse upon me. I ran as fast as I could

back onto the Silk Road. I ran until I saw a willow tree. In Chinese culture, the willow tree is believed to be tenacious and strong. It is seen to be a respectful tree. I sheltered under the tree hoping that it would use its strength and integrity to protect me. Exhausted and enervated, I lay upon a root of the tree.

“Tweet tweet, tweet tweet ...”

I was woken by the swallow nesting in the tree. Piercing the darkness, the glowing torch had risen from the hills lighting the bright scarlet of the morning. I rose and saw the beautiful silhouette of the majestic mountains. A cute grey-feathered swallow flew down; it pecked at my feet as if it wanted me to follow it. I got up and followed the swallow. Its tail swayed from side to side as it sauntered along the Silk Road. I followed every step the swallow took. Suddenly, it stopped and abruptly flew off in another direction. Up and up it flew, into the blue arena of mammoth clouds and white wisps. I watched it fly until I could only see a tiny dot in the distance. I looked in front of me. It was a famous Tibetan Buddhist temple. Why did the bird bring me here? Around the temple, it was very serene. There was only the mere sound of the breeze blowing and the ensemble of crickets chirping. Every once in a while there was the sound of the bell from the chant of the monks. The astonishing temple seemed very holy. I decided to go and have a look.

Once I stepped into the temple (avoiding the threshold, as it brings bad luck in Chinese culture), I saw that the walls were painted with ancient gods and creatures. Vivacious colours lit up the temple. There were sacred statues placed all around the temple. I really liked the one made of gold. I sat down in the corner to listen to the monks chant. It was an interesting sight, there were monks playing chimes, some playing trumpets and some just reciting the sutra. Once in a while, they bowed towards the holy gold statue. Suddenly, there was a decrescendo in the chants. The monks stopped chanting. They all sat down and started to meditate, “Ummmm ... ummmm ...” Lightning struck and the sky darkened. The statues on the wall came alive! They were all heading my way. There were ones with spears and some with swords. The temple started to shake and the paintings on the wall came alive. The monks stood up and came rampaging my way. I scrambled quickly to my feet and ran out of the temple. My heart was speeding faster than my legs were going, I did not look back. I could hear the stampede of monks. I saw a small pagoda and decided to hide there. I hid until there was no sound. I was finally safe.

“Kun! Kun! Get up! It’s time to get up! We’re going to move to another site on the Silk Road.” I slowly arose. The sun was still hiding behind the mountains. Papa was outside already taking the tent apart. I walked to his side to help him. I wanted to know if he had heard the swallows tweeting. “Hey papa, did you see the adorable grey-feathered bird on the willow tree yesterday?”

“What bird? Take this to the caravan.”

At that moment, nature started roaring. I heard the screech of the devil’s fiddle. Then, the ground cracked open and I was in midair, falling. “Aaaaahhhh!”

“Wake up! Wake up!” I heard someone shout. I opened my eyes and saw mama! She was standing to my right and my bed, which I had fallen out of, was to my left. “Not again!” I pinched myself to be certain that I was awake.

“Silly boy, you’re late for school!”

The Brightest Jewel in the World

Luke Kim, 14, South Island School

The grasshoppers that hid among the bushes sang the song of sorrow. They croaked as the night displayed darker visions of tomorrow. My father was under a crumpled cloth, suffocating from unbearable coughs. He was weary and emaciated, with no sense of vigour in his old wrinkled face. His eyes, filled with the pain of the plague, stared at us with a blank expression. Striving to fight against the fatigue, my father barely managed to clutch our hands. Air seeped into his dried lips and it came out powerlessly, “Journey the Silk Road ... and search for the brightest jewel in the world. It will be deep asleep among the steep sand dunes. This treasure had been revered and protected by our ancestors for centuries, but I decided to hide it deep in the desert in my youth in order to protect the jewel from bandits ... however, as I was setting off, an overpowering sandstorm swept the area, carrying off the luminous gem ... my sole wish now is to be informed that our family jewel is safe ...”

My heart was beating with tension infused with excitement. My brother, Zhang Wei, glared at me with eyes inflamed with passion. We both knew that an offer was going to be made by our father. An offer that would present my brother and I with an award worth risking our lives for. “If either one of you brings the treasure back home, I will specially award that person by bequeathing everything I have to him. The inheritance will make his life prosperous,” said our father. He seemed too tired to continue speaking, as his weary eyes closed and he breathed heavily out of exhaustion. Zhang Wei swiftly left the room and asked the peasant cleaning the yard to pack up his sack for a week’s journey. He appeared confident, his eyes were brimming with light and his mouth formed a contented smile. He was preparing to leave early next morning and he went back to his chamber to get sufficient sleep before commencing his great undertaking tomorrow.

Both of us had been waiting for this momentous time to approach in our lives. Our father was an opulent merchant who had already travelled the Silk Road multiple times. Ever since we were young, our father had told us of the peculiar tales of the Silk Road and had promised that he would take both of us on an expedition one day. However, our firm brotherhood started to deteriorate as we grew older and acquired more knowledge. We had to face the cold reality that only one of us would become the successor of the household and the other would inherit only a small portion of the whole property. Since then, my brother started to express his animosity towards me. I was the eldest son in the family, thus I was the child who was meant to inherit all the privileges. My brother felt like a character from a tragic play. He detested the fact that he was born the second child. Perhaps this was the cause for his aggressive behaviour towards everything he handled. Notwithstanding the violence and absurdity, he would not hesitate to

take part in any competition. After years of competition with him, my personality had been affected to the extent that I had become as brutal and reckless as him.

I felt that the night sky was turning black, as its darkness grew so thick that it even covered up the stars. The atmosphere was getting cold as well, but sleep was yet to come. As much as Zhang Wei wanted to overthrow me, I wanted to subdue him in this race. After all, it was a righteous deed for me to take over the household. Driven by this thought, I quickly lit a lantern and headed towards my father's chamber. Knocking on the door impudently, I bellowed out for him. There was a bustling movement in the room. I flung the door open without further notification and directly asked my frail father, "Father, why are you setting up this game in the first place? It is rightfully I who should receive the family property, treasures and heirlooms. Also, you have never specified anything explicit about the treasure that you have lost track of in the sands. How can we find such a small jewel in the vast desert ...?" My father answered sternly, "Go back to the room now! I am very tired of listening to both of your complaints and excuses. If you will not find the treasure for me, then leave me to die in sorrow and prepare to feel remorse for the rest of your life." My father slammed the door with what little strength he had left and coughed in agony.

Wei had left earlier than me. He seemed to be familiar with the routes, since one of the peasants informed me that Wei surreptitiously had a conversation with our father's companion who used to travel alongside him during big trades. Another peasant came along and stated that he had eavesdropped on the conversation. He told me that Wei was to take the northern route that eventually joined with Kashgar. On the way, father's companion advised Wei to search for the oasis in the desert, as there was a high possibility that father had hidden the treasure while he was relaxing under the cool shade of the trees. After hearing this news, anger raged inside me and I was determined to devastate Wei by first vanquishing him in the race and then by telling all the people living in the Chang' an province that Wei had cheated during a competition meant to be played fair.

I pursued Wei on horseback with incredible speed. I was fervently determined to obtain victory. On my way to the desert, I saw people pointing at me, shaking their heads to signify that I was going towards my own catastrophe. However, I paid no heed to their reactions and insults as my entire focus was on Wei alone.

The desert was stretched wide and imposed its menacing stature over me. I traded my horse for a camel at a stall near the desert. There were sand dunes of varying heights obstructing my path, but I kept moving forward. Fortunately, the weather was still mild and I had enough water in order to survive the boiling heat. I persisted, but it seemed as if I had made no progress. The water in my bottle was being consumed, but the desert was still wide and stretched in front of me. The monotonous patterns of the sloping sands and the tedious shades of brown made my eyes sore. Dizziness inundated my consciousness and I fell off the camel. As soon as I made contact with the sand, I felt the dazzling heat being conducted through my body. I instantaneously jumped up off the ground in surprise, and then I saw it coming. The chaotic hunter of the desert was coming towards me and it increased its force as it approached its prey. It was too close and too fast. There was no way out. I clutched on to the camel as hard as I could, yet I was knocked off by the ferocious grip of the sandstorm. It whirled around me and put sand into my jaws. With my eyes sore and my lungs short of air, I felt myself withering and dying.

When I woke up amongst the sand dunes, I realised that the day was at its hottest. The sun was blazing with pure wrath and the sand that was making contact with my cheek was sending immense heat through my body. I craved for my bottle of water and my camel. Barely able to stand up on my feet, I searched for my belongings and realised that most of them were

missing. My camel was standing in its place gazing at the dull patterns of the sand, barely noticing what had passed by. On the ground, a crossbow, two arrows and a piece of ragged cloak were scattered about. I picked them up feebly and climbed onto the camel. Logically, with no provisions available it seemed only sensible to turn back. However, the fire was still ignited in my heart. The sandstorm could only be the prelude of a story that would end with my impeccable victory. Furthermore, the fact that I still could not catch up with Wei irritated me.

I urged the camel to move forward.

Wei was not far away. I could see his relaxed figure over the two sand dunes ahead of me. The distance between us was approximately 500 metres. From what I observed from afar, Wei's camel was loaded with food and clothes, thus I had to conclude that he had not encountered the sandstorm. As I thought about it, the race was inarguably uneven. Ever since father announced his will, Wei had always had the advantage. I pulled out my crossbow and loaded the arrow. My pupils drifted to the middle and focussed directly on Wei's flat back. He was an easy target to terminate. I could end everything with just one pull of a finger. Just by exerting some force on the trigger, I would never have to see Wei's swagger again. I would not have to tolerate his repugnant attitude. Lastly, I could take over all the property for myself.

I was only inches away from shooting the arrow, when I saw groups of bandits suddenly emerging from behind the rocks to ambush Wei. I halted my camel and stared in shock. I had heard stories of bandits along the Silk Road from my father, but I had never known if they existed for real. For Wei and I, they were characters playing a part in one big fabrication. Wei was confused by the sudden ambush and he fell off his camel. A group of men rushed over and took Wei's camel along with the other belongings.

Then I saw Wei being slashed with a machete.

Although there was a considerable distance separating us, Wei's screams of anguish were clearly audible. I thought it was probably wise to leave the area as quickly as I could, but instinctively raised my crossbow and shot the arrow without hesitation. The arrow drifted through the air and pierced the bandit who was responsible for slashing my brother. Others who witnessed the surprise attack rushed off the scene, for fear that they would be the next victim. I held on tight as my camel spurted to the top of the sand dunes towards my brother, who was bleeding from his chest. I helped him up and tried to stop the bleeding with my cloak, which was partially torn off during the sandstorm attack. The cut was not fatal and Wei's bleeding stopped shortly after we started our journey home.

By the time we turned back, darkness was closing in, so we had to spend the night in the middle of the desert. With my provisions lost during the sandstorm and Wei's belongings looted by the bandits, we did not have any supply of food. Still, we were contented. We were neither thirsty nor hungry. We did not feel afraid. The night passed by quickly and we continued on our way back home. We did not say anything on our way back. Wei just clutched me around the stomach from his seat behind me on the camel.

When we arrived at our hometown, we headed straight back to our father. We sat down beside his bed and he laughed, asking what took us so long.

After that, everything went well. Both of us became the chiefs in organising father's trading business with merchants from different countries. Wei was always beside me during the hardships. I should have found this jewel earlier.

"There's no other love like the love for a brother. There's no other love like the love from a brother."

Sacrifice

Michael Lau, 14, Kiangsu Chekiang International School

Lee Dan was in the middle of a nightmare. His face was drenched with sweat and every few minutes, he tossed and turned. The moment he had surrendered himself to sleep, Lee Dan had arrived in the world of eternal damnation. All he cared about now was surviving an onslaught of demons from hell. Lee Dan wielded a scythe, slashing his way through the hordes of mutilated animals and humans, but it was soon clear that he had been overwhelmed from the start. Slowly, very slowly, hands began to wrap their fingers around his throat and squeeze, he was suffocating and he knew his oxygen-starved brain wouldn't last for another minute if he didn't do anything. But there was nothing he could do, he could feel the panic rising up his throat, and with all his strength, he ... screamed?

Lee Dan opened his eyes and found himself sitting up on his bed. He let out a sigh of relief. He was safe. Nevertheless, he felt agitated, for the dream had unnerved him. And he had a feeling that this was no ordinary dream, it was signalling to him that something distressing was about to happen. A bad omen. Too troubled to sleep, he got up, put on a jumper and went out of the house. It was just an hour past midnight; he had been asleep for only four hours. He took a deep breath and felt better immediately. The fresh air cleansed his mind and the sight of familiar surroundings calmed him down, he was finally at peace. But it was temporary; suddenly a piercing scream broke the silence of the night. Lee Dan spun around, eyes full of alertness, his ears trying to pick up the slightest sound of footsteps, his body poised in a self-defence position with fists raised high and feet apart. For a second, he stayed in that position. He could feel the hair on his arms and legs stand on end. In spite of that, nothing happened, there was no sign of movement on either side and Lee allowed himself to relax. Then the scream came again and Lee located the source of the cry. It was coming from his house!

Without waiting a moment longer, Lee sprinted to his house and up the stairs, and eventually stood in front of his mother's room. Desperately, he tried to turn the handle but it was locked. He backed up a few steps, then rammed into the door with all his strength. The door came off and what Lee saw traumatised him. His mother was lying on the ground, her features distorted with pain. Beside her was a pool of blood coming out from her mouth, she was weak and could barely move her limbs. Time seemed to slow down for Lee, he couldn't accept that all these years of his mother's guidance were coming to an end. Unable to accept his mother's fate, he rushed out his house and ran at full speed to the village, determined to seek a doctor.

* * *

The doctor, a petite woman in her thirties, was examining her patient on the bed. It was not looking good. In a few days or maybe in a week's time if the patient fought, she would be dead and there would be nothing she could do about it. Opposite her sat a handsome boy of sixteen, entering adulthood – he had jet-black hair, a fit and muscular body and serious black eyes that were trained on his mother, the patient.

It was morning and Lee's mother was getting worse. Lee knew the disease but refused to believe it – he had seen enough villagers die from it. All these years, he had helped his mother pick the harvest and plant the crops; they had lived a private life in their small cosy house next to the farm. Lee had put up with too much hardship to give up on her now.

Lee held his mother's hand delicately, as if she was a beautiful ornament, and tried to rub some warmth into the hand, but it remained cold as ice. Deciding to get out of the house for a while, he took a stroll down to the village. As he walked out of the house, villagers swarmed around him. They all offered him sympathetic glances and tried to help by adding soothing words.

"Don't worry Dan, your mother will get through this, just you wait."

"Boy, if you need anything, you can always come to my shop, I'll always try to help."

On and on the sentences came, and Lee replied with the occasional grunt. His life was ruined. As he walked down the road, a grave voice caught his attention. Lee looked up and saw the village's old storyteller addressing him to come closer.

"Young man, all is not lost," whispered the old man to Lee, "a trader once told me that there is a cure for such a disease, but ..."

"Just tell me where and what the blasted thing is and stop wasting my time as time is precious for my mother," Lee interrupted sharply.

The old man was surprised by Lee's outburst, but he understood his feelings and let it pass. "It's at a cave near the top of the Pamir Mountains. What you are looking for here is a rare herb, blue in colour, and there is only one of it. Though it may sound easy, it is not. The mountain itself is foul, it is home to thousands of deadly beasts and the terrain is murderous. Heed my advice, boy, if you truly are to set off on such a journey, you should not go alone, you will need all the help you can muster. Remember, to give up on hope is to give up on life, try your best and keep yourself in one piece." And with that, the old man walked away.

Lee was left weighing his options. He had heard plenty of stories concerning the Pamir Mountains, and none of them were pleasant. One thing was sure though, if he was to retrieve the herb, he would need all the help he could get.

* * *

It was early in the morning of the next day and Lee was anxious to get to the herb. He was shouldering a heavy backpack carrying all the food and water supplies, a rope, two pickaxes and a bow along with ten arrows. He was wearing a snug trader's outfit that protected him from the bitter cold and shoes that were spiked at the tip to give him a better grip when he climbed up the mountain. But most importantly, standing behind him were three companions. Yew Han, Yip Choi and Pau Ching. They were all the same age and the same height except for Yip who was on a bit on the miniature side. Yew was outstanding with a bow and could shoot a moving target 100 metres away. Yip was devastating with a slingshot, targeting the softer areas of his prey, then dispatching it with a hunting knife while it was distracted. Pau was an all-rounder, he was a good fighter and exceptional in using a spear. Lee himself was handy with a bow, but what he really excelled at was close combat. Using his two pickaxes, Lee was able to

kill a wild boar without even breaking into a sweat. The volunteers were all there for the same reason. Not to boast. Not to gossip. But here to save their parents.

After double-checking their equipment, they proceeded to the mountain. While walking, the four teenagers said little, they were too busy pondering their own future to care about anything else.

They had arrived at the base of the Pamir Mountains by late afternoon. The sight of the mountain sent a shiver down Lee's spine though he could not help feeling that all of this was worth the risk.

"Guys, I don't think it's a good idea to rush in and pick up the godforsaken plant or herb without a backup plan. It's too dangerous," said Yew.

"What do you suggest then? We ain't no tactical geniuses. I say we just take the chance, rush in, get the plant, get out, job done," Pau said.

"No, Yew has a point, taking the whole mountain by storm won't be a good idea. We need to come up with something in case things go wrong, which they usually do. A signal would be ideal," Lee explained.

Yip was silent throughout the conversation, though his eyes were as watchful as an eagle's. He did not care about whether his partners lived or died, so long as *he* was the one who got the herb for his wasting mother. When the time came, he would act accordingly and take possession of the herb, even if it meant killing the others.

"OK, here's what we do, if anyone encounters any trouble, send an arrow into the sky to show your position. And if we do have to split, go in pairs, it'll be safer than wandering alone," said Yew. "Anything to add?"

"Nope, come on, let's get going, we have to at least cover half the distance from the bottom to the top of this mountain before dark," Pau said cheerfully.

They gathered their belongings, took one last look at their village in the distance and continued their crusade to restore life back to their loved ones.

* * *

Nightfall approached, and the boys decided to set up camp. They spent the night recovering from the taxing expedition. Food was being rationed, so they controlled their appetites despite their growling stomachs. Lee had lit a fire from pre-gathered wood and a tinder box to battle the bone-chilling temperature; he curled up into a ball to preserve body heat. He laid out his light makeshift bed beside the fire.

"When we sleep, one of us should keep watch in case something comes wandering by," Yew suggested.

"Alright, we'll take turns to keep watch. Who's first?" asked Lee.

"I'll do it first," said Pau, "I'm not that tired anyway."

"Ok, wake us up if there's trouble," said Lee sleepily.

Lee slumped on his makeshift bed, pulled up his blanket and fell fast asleep ...

The world was shaking and Lee jumped up and braced for an earthquake.

"Relax, it's just me," Pau whispered.

"You scared the hell out of me, never shake me that hard again." Lee rubbed the sleep from his eyes, "Is it my turn to take watch?"

"Shhhhhhhh ... there's something over there by the right."

Lee turned and looked in the direction Pau was pointing at. He almost yelped with fright – not more than a few metres away was the biggest and most fearsome wolf he had ever seen. Luckily, the fire was still going and he was able to make out finer details. Strangely, the wolf's

eyes seemed to be red, as if filled with hatred. Carefully, little by little, Lee reached out for his pickaxes.

Not daring to take his eyes off the wolf, he reached down and grasped his pickaxes. It felt reassuring to have something to defend himself with; his next goal was to wake his companions, deep in slumber.

As he took a step, the wolf-like creature howled and pounced straight towards Lee. Without thinking, he dived in the direction where his comrades lay still in dreamland. He aimed a kick at Yew and woke him up with a jolt. Before he could wake Yip up too, the creature turned around and attacked again, and this time it found its target – the wolf's deadly claws hit Pau on the head and he was thrown backwards onto the ground. A split second later, the creature was on top of Pau with its mouth open, revealing giant fangs. Then it bit down.

“NO!!!!!!” cried Yew. He grabbed his bow and with practised ease, he drew an arrow and let it fly. A perfect shot, the arrow went straight into the creature's eye. While it was distracted, Lee held his pickaxe high, and with all his strength, he brought it down onto the creature's head.

A torrent of black blood erupted and the creature was dead once and for all. Lee wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve and stared at his pickaxe in amazement, not quite believing what he had done. He was still in a trance when a sob from Yew brought him back to reality. Lying beside the wolf was Pau. Lee took one look at him and knew Pau was gone. His throat had been ripped open and his eyes were empty. Not wanting to see anymore, Lee resigned himself to his makeshift bed. Unable to sleep, he looked at the dying embers of the fire.

* * *

They were trudging up a steep slope, it was midday, and the heat was at its peak. Even so, the higher they got, the cooler it became. Lee and Yew were weary-eyed from a mixture of weeping and lack of sleep. Only Yip was immune to the sorrow of Pau's death. In fact he was secretly glad – one obstacle had been removed.

* * *

Lee's legs were burning with agony. The snow did not help, every step he took he slid back a little, making the climb a lot more demanding than it really was. Time was against them – they had to retrieve the herb and return before their parents died. With almost a superhuman effort, they had nearly reached the top of the mountain. The temperature had dropped significantly, and the group was shivering like a tree in a storm. Lee looked around him and he realised that a heavy, dense fog surrounded them. It was impossible to see more than 50 metres ahead.

But they didn't need to – right in front of them was the cave. Lee peered into the cave, and what he saw made him take a step back. The ceiling was full of stalagmites – one false move and that could be the end of them.

“I think only one of us should go in, three people means thrice the chance of making mistakes,” recommended Yew.

“But who should go in?” asked Lee.

“Me and Yip shall guard the entrance, we're better at ranged weapons and should be able to ward off any unwanted attention.”

“Agreed. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” said Yew.

Lee took off his backpack and went into the cave cautiously. Inside, it was dark and cold, the light from the sun barely enough to illuminate the cave. Silent as a mouse, Lee advanced deeper into the cave. His progress was painstakingly slow, and it took all his concentration to keep his footsteps suppressed. At the end of the cave was something Lee had longed for from the very start of the quest – it was the herb, there was no mistaking the perfect tint of blue. Fingers trembling, Lee picked up the herb. Finally, he had it in his hands! He went back the way he came. Just as he was about to get out of the cave, Lee froze with fear. Yew was dead, his blood staining the snow like ink seeping through paper.

“Give me the damn herb,” hissed Yip.

“But why ...” Lee trailed off, too shocked by the sudden change of events.

“Do you think the curing powers of this herb would work once shared? Of course not, you fool. And even if it does work, I’m not taking the risk. So give me the herb before I make a racket and send you to your death with the stalagmites.”

Lee was thinking hard, and an idea came into his mind. He pretended to stumble and with one hand he grabbed a handful of dust and soot. As he held out the herb for Yip to take, he threw the dust into his face. Yip cried out as the dust blinded him. Quick as a snake, Lee launched himself out of the cave, turned around and pushed Yip into the cave. Yip’s face registered surprise as he felt the stalagmite spear right through his head.

Lee wasn’t proud of what he had done but he had acted in a moment of fury and Yip deserved to die for his betrayal. It wasn’t over yet though, the impact of thousands of stalagmites had been enough to set off an avalanche. Lee felt the earth shudder and he saw a huge wave of snow making its way towards him. Lee picked up his two pickaxes and ran as fast as he could. It was hopeless – he could never outrun an avalanche. As he ran down the slope he came across a shield buried in the snow. He yanked it out and against all his instincts, slid down the mountain on it. Lee was going so fast that he did not see the edge of the cliff and he slid right off it! He was soaring through the air, and his hands reached out to grab hold of the other side of the cliff, but the distance was too great. Allowing adrenaline to take hold of him, he pulled out his two pickaxes and using all his strength, he dug the axes into the side of the cliff.

Yes! He did done it. Lee was now hanging off the cliff with his pickaxes. Using the last reserves of his energy, he pulled himself up and headed back home.

* * *

A few months later, Lee was sitting beside his dozing mother. The herb had cured her but left her in a fragile state. It would be another few months before she returned to full fitness. Beginning to feel restless, Lee went to check on their garden. It was filled with an assortment of herbs and flowers – roses, sunflowers and poppies. However, there was one particular plant he wanted to check on. And there it was, right in the middle of the garden – there sat the herb that Lee had gone to so much trouble to get.

The Night He Lost Everything

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The full moon, hidden amongst a backdrop of twinkling stars, shone brightly in the mysterious, velvet sky, casting long shadows over the vast, lifeless Tehran desert. The occasional chirps of crickets interrupted the silence, as the crickets' high-pitched singing penetrated through the still air, rousing Bakhtiyar from his sleep. He lay motionless on the densely packed sand, its soft grains sticking to his sweat-coated body, as he gazed back into the sky's staring glare. He heard the faint whispers exchanged between his parents; their deep, rich voices swept along by the calm night breeze. At dawn, Bakhtiyar and his family had left their distant, impoverished village in the North of Persia, and journeyed to the East to visit distant relatives of *pedar's**. The arduous journey across the Tehran desert was not easy and it required many days of preparation.

At the tender age of seven, Bakhtiyar was easily distinguishable from his peers. He lacked the common, sturdy, muscular physique, as his fragile frame prevented him from working in the fields. His eyes were a deep brown colour, enhanced by an unexpected, startling blue outline, which revealed the beautiful soul beneath his feeble exterior. At first, *medar** was concerned that Bakhtiyar was not physically ready to travel with them, but *pedar* had reassured her – on numerous occasions – that Bakhtiyar was a fighter, who would view this journey as a valuable opportunity. The night his parents delivered the unexpected news to him, Bakhtiyar had made a promise to himself that he would prove to *pedar* – who Bakhtiyar regarded with outmost respect and admiration – that he was as brave and fearless as *pedar* himself. A delighted smile lit across his face, as he relived this moment in his mind; he was again overcome with delight and excitement. He beamed in the darkness, yawned and went back to sleep.

* * *

Bakhtiyar's eyes snapped open; he sat up; his large brown eyes searched the sweeping desert for any suspicious signs of life. He was not fooled by the seemingly tranquil view that lay before him. The silence felt out of place. The moon and the stars glowed dimly behind the gloomy, unwelcoming clouds, which had only appeared moments before. Perhaps it was going to rain.

Then he heard it: the sound that had intruded his peaceful sleep. The deafening sound of galloping horses thundering across the desert, destroying the tranquillity that was once present. Bakhtiyar's heart started to race and beads of sweat formed on his temples; he was rooted to the ground, overwhelmed by fear of imminent danger, of impending doom. His parents stirred,

disturbed by the barbaric screams that accompanied the threatening gallops of the demonic creatures in the distance. *Pedar* rummaged through the oversized sack and pulled out a sharpened knife. *Medar* pulled Baktiyar into her protective arms, as she breathed calming words into his ear. Her voice was sweet and gentle, but he could hear the underlying anxiety in her masked voice. Nevertheless, Baktiyar felt safe in her arms, as he knew that *medar* would protect him unconditionally, even if it meant sacrificing her life for him.

“*Medar?*” Baktiyar whispered softly, his voice shaking as he spoke.

“Yes? *Baceh**, do not worry. I promise nothing will happen to you,” replied *medar* in a comforting tone, as if she was reassuring not just Baktiyar but also herself. A lone tear rolled down her cheeks. She did not weep in fear or grief; the tears symbolised farewell to her beloved son.

“There! Capture them!” The commanding voice of a man bellowed across the desert; his voice seethed with hostility and hatred. A group of men who were riding horses surrounded them; they were armed with knives, swords and long pieces of rope. Menacing smiles spread across their faces and their eyes reflected immense cruelty and undeniable wickedness; they looked like villains out of Baktiyar’s picture books.

Two riders swiftly dismounted and landed on the ground with a forceful thud. One carried in his hand a piece of rope that had a loop tied at the end; the unusual instrument resembled a leash in Baktiyar’s eyes. *Pedar*, with a valiant look on his face, stepped in front of them, his right hand grasped tightly around his knife. His body trembled, yet his eyes, which displayed both undeterred courage and tender love, were fixed on the raiders that stood before him, unwilling to let them out of his sight.

“The boy. Hand the boy over and I will leave both you and your wife unharmed.” One of the raiders withdrew a sword from his back and violently thrust it in front of father, threatening him into accepting their offer.

“No.” *Pedar* raised his knife, only to be beaten by the raider’s speed and experience. He collapsed onto the ground. The raider’s sword had punctured his heart. His blood, which was a deep, rich colour, gushed out of his chest, staining the white cloth that was wrapped around his body. He continued to breathe, but each breath he took became more difficult as his breathing grew deeper and more unsteady, and after a moment, it subsided.

A loud sob escaped *medar*, her body shaking uncontrollably. She covered her mouth with one hand, while she clutched her heart with the other, but not once did she let go of Baktiyar, who was quietly crying in her arms. Their tears streamed down their faces, choking them with the agony of reality.

“The boy.” The leader of the raiders, who had remained on his horse all this time, ordered forcefully. His tone lacked sympathy and revealed no traces of humanity; he was a heartless beast. Baktiyar lifted his head to catch a better view of the men who had murdered his innocent *pedar*, who he loved so dearly. At first, he failed to understand the reason behind such rage, such loathing, such brutality, but then he realised that these men’s viciousness was driven by love. For some of them, joining an *alaman** was the only way they could provide for their families. The wounds that covered his angered soul slowly healed, as a look of sympathy shone through his forgiving eyes.

Medar tightened her arms around Baktiyar and shook her head, avoiding the raiders’ ice-cold gazes.

“Please, do not take my child from me. I will be left with nothing,” pleaded *medar* to the merciless humans, who stared back at her with no signs of emotion. They ignored her and took Baktiyar out of her arms. She struggled through their strong, forceful grip, unwilling to let go of her precious child; her love for her child knew no limits or bounds.

Baktiyar was carelessly dragged away by the leader; a rope tied tightly around his neck, strangling him in an unforgiving grip. Its rough, worn-out surface rubbed against his neck, leaving a large, open wound, which would later heal into a permanent scar. The scar would remind him of this very day; the day he was captured to be sold as a slave; the day he lost both his parents and became an orphan.

- * *pedar*: father
- * *medar*: mother
- * *baceh*: baby
- * *alaman*: a Turkoman raiding party

The Marauders

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Chang surveyed the route below him. Caravans filled with all sorts of commodities rolled along the dirt path below. Camel drivers looked at the cliffs, wary of thieves. This part of the Silk Road was considered the most dangerous. This was why Chang was here. He spotted a van in the distance, carefully making its way up the road. An evil smile crept upon his face. Fifty more gold coins were about to be his. His eyes glinted, and he took out his sword. He had a job to do, and when he was finished, there would be a very unhappy caravan owner.

Sanjay looked around, admiring the beauty of the mountain path ahead. However, he knew it would take luck and caution to make it out alive. He had been told of thieves, marauders, and other dangers of taking this shortcut. But the alternative route would take another two days, and he was prepared to take the risk. The spices he was carrying were not worth much, but they would bring him a good profit. His whole family was in the spice business: his brother grew spices, his father traded spices at the market, and now he travelled miles to trade spices with the Chinese and the Romans on the Silk Road. He saw that no other caravans were on the trail at the moment. It was dangerous. If he waited for another caravan to come, he could lose hours of precious time. But if he went alone, he would be an easy target. He decided to go. If he got to the Beijing market by morning, he would make much more money. He set his horse to a trot; the faster he got through the pass, the better it would be for him.

Hasim ordered his men to stop at the end of the pass. He didn't trust the man he had hired to do the job for him. That was why he had hired him. Soon, after this man was eliminated, his gang would be in firm control of the Talim Pass, the most treacherous of passes on the Silk Road. Hasim spotted a van coming towards their end of the road. Everything was going perfectly. His marauders would attack after Chang. They would take Chang and the caravan driver prisoner. And then, as quickly as they came, they would be gone, back into the hills. With no more competition in the area, Hasim's posse, The Black Death (they wore black robes when on raids), would profit immensely from robbing traders who dared to venture into Talim Pass. Hasim licked his lips at the thought of more gold. He ordered his men to move into position. The fun was about to begin.

Chang sensed something was wrong. He heard the sound of hooves hitting the dirt, and it was coming from about half a kilometre away. If it was the army, he would wait. His employer would not be pleased. But Chang was a mercenary; he could not afford to get caught. He put his sword away and climbed back onto his horse. He took one last survey of his surroundings. The spice trader was slowly moving, about 50 metres to Chang's south. 300 metres to the

north, a small group of horsemen was bearing down on Chang's position. Chang was filled with suspicion. The emperor's patrols were always in groups of three. But this was a group of at least five! Chang looked through his spyglass at the gang of riders. Abruptly, an arrow flew at him, grazing the top of his head. Chang realised what had happened. Betrayal! Chang immediately set off with his horse. He yelled to the merchant, "TURN BACK, TURN BACK! RUN AWAY!" If he ever got out of this alive, Chang vowed he would turn over a new leaf. He would operate on the right side of the law from now on. Life was just too dangerous on the other side.

Sanjay heard the man before he saw him. He was moving along with his caravan when a Chinese man burst out from behind the cliff, yelling, "TURN BACK, TURN BACK!" Sanjay saw a group of horseman less than 200 metres away. He realised he was being attacked. He abandoned his caravan, and got on his horse and followed the Chinese man. Hopefully the thieves would settle for the spices in the caravan. Chaos ensued around him, as he and the Chinese man tried to flee. The horse riders bore down on them, but stopped at the abandoned caravan. Sanjay and his horse kept heading south, following the Chinese man. In the confusion, the Chinese man fell off his horse. His horse kept riding on without him, fearful for its own life. Sanjay didn't have time to think about the consequences. He reacted on instinct, and picked up the Chinese man and put him on his horse. He couldn't just leave him. Sanjay managed to look behind them. Three riders had stopped and had begun to ransack his caravan. Two of them were still in pursuit. They seemed to be after the Chinese man. Sanjay kept going; if he could make it to the forest he could lose his pursuers. But the forest was a kilometre away, and with two pursuers following him, his hope was diminishing. Sanjay turned around to look at the Chinese man. He knew that the extra man was slowing his horse down. Sanjay just hoped he would make it.

Chang awoke with a start. He was on a different horse, in a different place. Everything was moving rapidly around him, and he tried to remember what was happening. He saw the Indian man in front of him, and it all came back. His face whipped around and he saw the two riders chasing them. He needed to act quickly. With professional skill, he picked up a stone from his pouch, and hit one of his pursuers right between the eyes. The man fell off his horse into the dirt. The horse immediately galloped off into the distance, leaving its former master facedown in the dirt. The other rider realised he was outgunned and outnumbered. He turned his horse around and went off to regroup. Chang realised he had won, but only for now. The Indian man noticed they were no longer being followed and stopped his horse. He turned towards Chang and breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you," he said, "My name is Sanjay." Chang replied, "Thank you as well. You saved my life. My name is Chang. Are you on your way to Beijing?" Sanjay replied, "Yes, if you are as well, we should travel together. We will be safer that way." Chang thought about the proposition, then agreed. "We should set up camp tonight and leave tomorrow. Beijing is only 30 kilometres away, we shall make it by tomorrow!"

Hasim was not in a pleasant mood. Not only had they failed to capture the mercenary, he had lost one of his men trying to do so. This was disgraceful. He called his men together. Instead of the usual five, there was only four. Four was not a lucky number. Things were beginning to get worse. "What happened today will not go unpunished!" Hasim reprimanded his men. "My orders were to capture Chang and rob the spice trader. You failed to capture Chang and to rob the trader. All we have are his spices, which are not worth much to us. All of you are docked in pay by fifty percent for this month! Even I will not get my share because of this failure. I hope this will never happen again!" Hasim stared each of his men in the eye. His men stared back, and a sense of understanding passed through them. If they failed once more, their jobs would no longer exist. They turned away, unable to focus on Hasim's stone-cold

eyes any longer. Hasim watched his men go back to the camp. He knew that if they failed once more, it would be the last time they ever failed.

Sanjay and Chang were in Beijing the next evening, finding their way to the local army headquarters to report Hasim's gang. After much searching, they managed to get in line to file their complaint. Behind them, they saw a European man talking to the guard. After a while, he also joined the line behind them. He asked them what they were reporting. Sanjay explained how he and Chang were attacked at the Talim Pass yesterday. The European man's eyes widened after hearing their story and he began to recount his tale. "I was also travelling through the Talim Pass, when I was attacked by a group of horsemen. I hear that they call themselves The Black Death, and are one of the most notorious marauder groups on all of the Silk Road. However, I was not as lucky as you, I only managed to escape alive. Everything I had is gone now. I must start a new life here in Beijing; I can't afford to go back to Rome. By the way, my name is Alexander, what are yours?" After listening to the whole ordeal Chang spoke up. "My name is Chang, and his name is Sanjay. He trades spices on the Silk Road, while I currently ... errr ... am unemployed. I believe the army should put a stop to these marauders terrorising traders on the silk routes. We should work together as a team to stop them!" Alexander responded, "I totally agree, but how?" However, he was cut short as they were called in to deliver their report to the army.

The guard listened quietly as Chang recounted their story. After that, Alexander told the guard his story as well. When he was finished, the guard went into his supervisor's office to discuss the matter further. While they were waiting, Alexander turned to Sanjay and Chang and started to talk. "If the army doesn't take action, we must take matters into our own hands. We can create a small militia to defeat these marauders. We simply can't let them continue to harass traders. I am sure people will agree that this must be stopped!" Sanjay and Chang contemplated the idea of taking up arms against The Black Death. Chang then replied, "I agree that they must be stopped. However, it will be dangerous. Shouldn't we let the law enforcement enforce the law?" Alexander immediately shot back, "You cannot be scared Chang! We must take risks in order to earn rewards. Traders like Sanjay cannot travel the silk routes knowing they are unsafe. Will you join me?" Sanjay, who was quiet for most of this time, immediately rose. "I agree with Alexander, we must free the Talim Pass of these wretched robbers. Hopefully the army will help us!" At that moment, the guard emerged from his supervisor's office. "There is good news and bad news," he announced, "the good news is that we will help you defeat these scoundrels, but the bad news is that we need help from you as well. Let us discuss the plan!"

Sanjay, Alexander, Chang, and Qing (the army sergeant who was helping them) all sat down to discuss their strategy. Qing outlined the main points, "Before we can attack them, we need to lure them out into the open where we can fight them. There is an area of plains about half a kilometre away from the southern end of Talim Pass. If you three lure them there, we should be able to overcome them. My men are well trained and better equipped than the marauders. However, we just cannot and will not fight them inside the pass." Chang and Alexander began to nod their heads in agreement, but Sanjay was not quite so sure. "What happens if they trap us and we cannot lure them to the plains? This plan involves a big risk, especially to us. Is there an alternative?" Qing shook his head gravely. "If we fight them on their own ground we will lose many men. If this plan works there will be fewer casualties. I cannot afford losses." Alexander also added, "If you want, you can stay out of this. We can work it out." Sanjay immediately rose. "I will not leave you. We'll do this together. All for one, and one for all!" he boomed. Qing stood up. "Alright then, tomorrow morning we must set out. Be prepared!"

Hasim stared at the stars, thinking about the future. With his original plan failing, he had to bounce back. Tomorrow, he would remind everyone about who they were. They were The Black Death, the most notorious marauders on the Silk Road, he thought. He formulated a new plan. He closed his eyes, and his mind began to fill with dreams of riches, power, and greed.

The next morning, even before the roosters began to crow, a small group of men congregated on the outskirts of Beijing. Qing spoke first. “I have brought seven of my best fighters. Overall, our people will outnumber them. But it all depends on whether you three can lure them out to our position. Remember, if you are trapped, simply blow the horn I have given you. If we hear it, we will try to help you. Good luck, men! Any last questions?” Sanjay, Chang, and Alexander nodded in agreement. Qing and his men set off. The three still had time. They were supposed to venture into the pass and attract as much attention as possible. When Hasim’s group came after them, they would exit as quickly as possible through the southern end of the pass. After that, Qing and his men would finish them off, and hopefully Hasim would be behind bars by the end of the day, and The Black Death would no longer be the scourge of the Talim Pass.

The three horses moved slowly and steadily, treading as if a tiger was nearby. The three riders glanced about them, looking for where they would be ambushed. Sanjay wondered if it was still called an ambush when whoever was going to be ambushed was expecting it. Chang spoke suddenly, fear diluting his words. “We must always be ready. Make sure you keep the southern exit in view at all times. That is our only escape.”

Hasim watched the three men through his spyglass. How fortunate that fate had brought him these people. He would love to get his revenge on them. However, they seemed to be expecting an attack. Hasim realised it would be hard to surprise them. He would just have to trap them. He called his men together. He instructed two of them to attack the group from the north. He and one other would block the southern exit. They would not make it out alive his time ...

Chang saw them first. The sound of hooves close by awakened his senses, making him alert and ready. He warned the other team members, and turned his horse around. If he left too early, they may not follow. If he left too late, he would be dead.

Alexander heard the thumping of hooves against the dirt as well. His horse’s muscles tensed. It was like a compressed spring, ready to shoot into action. He looked behind him and saw three horsemen appear a few hundred metres away. Alexander whipped the reins and his horse sprung into action. He saw Sanjay and Chang beside him. He hoped they would make it. He prayed to Mercury, the Roman god of speed. Speed was what he needed now. Speed to get away.

Sanjay saw the southern exit; it was getting closer and closer. Just at that moment, two riders emerged, blocking the exit. Sanjay realised that they were trapped with no way out. They were the prey, trapped by the hunter. Sanjay looked at Chang. Chang’s eyes were full of determination. He realised there was a way out. The two men blocking the exit weren’t expecting a fight. Well, Sanjay was going to give them a fight they would remember forever.

Hasim and his men saw them coming. He drew his sword, but he knew he wouldn’t need it. They would probably stop and realise they were cornered. But they just kept going. Why? “Stop!” yelled Hasim, “you are trapped!” Hasim’s partner drew out his sword as well. The horses kept running, bearing down on them. Hasim’s mind was swimming with thoughts, and suddenly waves of fear went through him. What was going to happen?

Chang knew what he was going to do. At the last possible second he leapt off his horse straight at a rider and crashed into him. Sanjay also dived at Hasim. They collided and flew to the ground. Sanjay and Chang recovered quickly, and got on their horses. They rode to the

rendezvous point and stopped. They looked behind them, hoping to be followed. They all breathed a sigh of relief. The Black Death had fallen right into their trap.

The next morning, Sanjay prepared to return to India. It was a long way home, but he had learned his lesson: never go alone.

The Trade

Rosa Chow, 16, St. Paul's Convent School

The history of the Silk Road began early in the Western Han Dynasty. It was a trade route for the exchange of goods, and is now a popular tourist spot. There were once many real, untold stories on this road. I am going to tell you one of them, about three young siblings, though their hair has long since turned grey.

A long time ago, the Leung family went on a journey to the Silk Road. The father was a trader, with two sons, Paul, 17, and Tom, 15, and their younger sister Jamie, only 10. The children's mother had just passed away from an incurable disease. The father wanted to start a new life with his children. He earned a living by trading silk and satin along the Silk Road. During the day, the father went out to work, while the children stayed at home. He entrusted Paul, the eldest son, to the good care of his brother and sister.

One day, the father went out to work as usual and the three stayed home. Paul was responsible and mature. He was like a father to the other two. He cleaned the house, washed the clothes, and cooked the meals. That day, after the meal, Paul took a long nap in the afternoon. When he woke up, his eyes nearly popped out in surprise: he could not believe what he saw! There were valuable jewels on the table. He had never seen such valuable things in his house before. Something wasn't right.

"Tom, why are these jewels here?"

"Brother, you know what? Our neighbours didn't close their window when they went out ..." Tom answered as he giggled.

Paul could not believe this, and said angrily, "It's a big crime to steal goods! And how could you steal from other traders? They will not forgive us! Please, I implore you to return the jewels to them right away."

"What's wrong with what I've done? They didn't close the window, and this is just a little punishment for them. Take it easy, my brother!"

While they were arguing about what to do with the jewels, their neighbours arrived home. Discovering that their jewels were missing, the traders went to the Leungs to see if they could help. Paul was frightened when he opened the door. The young men could not hide the truth from these wise traders. Paul promised to return all the jewels to them and tried to make excuses for his impulsive brother, but the traders did not accept. The only way they would let them off, was if Tom was given to their family as a slave.

Tom refused and said, "No! No! I don't want to be slave. Brother, help me!" He continued, "Boys are more important to my father. Will you take my sister instead of me?"

Paul said, "Are you crazy? Jamie is only 10! How could we be so selfish?"

“We can ask father for help when he returns and give them money a few days later to buy Jamie back.”

The traders looked at Jamie and thought, what a lovely little lass. They accepted the deal. Paul had no choice, and he went to get Jamie. She was seized and gagged, taken away forever. She left behind only tears with the brothers, and her father did not even get a chance to see her one last time.

I do not know how many years have passed since that trade – a little more than ten years, I think. The memory still returns to haunt me in my dreams, those faces like wolves ready to swallow me up. Far from loving me, my brothers had dumped me into these dirty hands to be maltreated.

A white-haired couple had been watching me from a distance. They could not have forgiven themselves, Mrs Flint told me later, had I been sold to those abominable traders. She said a lot of children were abducted in this manner, and the mere sight of it had disgusted her.

The Flints gave the traders gold in exchange for the girl. They said the girl was more precious than gold. Following the couple into their home, I found hope and understood the meaning of true family: one that never abandons you. They treated me like their child, not just giving me education, but caring for and loving me with all their hearts. They watched me grow up to become a lady, fair and unassuming. Old Mr Flint died peacefully when I was fifteen, and his departure reminded me somehow of my own from the Leung family.

I never asked to return to my father’s home. I despised Tom, who almost ruined my life. Nor did I want to tell them about my new life. Father must have been so upset about losing me, but I know that it must have lessened the burden of his work. Sometimes a hurtful love is the better option.

I took up Mr Flint’s business when I finished school. These days I have been helping out by taking five-day trips to the Silk Road. I sell silk, for the Flints have always been in the fabric business. Coincidentally, my father’s business has close ties to mine, like the blood in me that flows from my father. Will I meet him in a trade one day? No, no, how could this be possible? And yet, I am stunned when I hear these words: “Did you buy a girl ten years ago?” a Chinese man is inquiring next door. His round eyes and long ears could be none other than my brother Paul’s. His voice is coarse, but so sincere is his manner that I am drawn to him. I cannot believe it – my brother has come back for me.

Another man appears behind him. He looks rather furtive, he always did look so – my brother Tom. He throws in some words like “she cannot be alive” and with some despair he turns his head. How regretful he looks – and he should be! He has committed a great wrongdoing in his life.

“Did you buy a girl ten years ago?” Paul does not recognise me.

“Yes, she is in my house.”

“Oh! Is her name Jamie?”

“I cannot say that it isn’t.”

“I am her brother, Paul, and this is Tom, her other brother. We have come here ...”

I do not know how I come up with the question – but this is my proposal.

“Do you want to buy her back?” I propose.

“Yes! That is why we are here.”

“Good. We have been waiting for your family for ten years. Tell me your offer.”

“We have come with 500 silver coins.”

“Only?”

“We can pay at most 600.”

“What do you sell in your home town? Some type of milk?”

“No, we are the Leungs who sell silk.”

“Good. I will give you your sister in return for all your silver, your silk workhouse and its silkworms, and all your lands.”

“Never,” says Tom with a stern face. “Not one piece of silver will we give you. Let’s go.”

I forgive Tom, though he is making the wrong decision. Mrs Flint has taught me to give him a second chance. She had said, “He has punished himself already by having lost you.” I did not understand when I first heard those words, but now I understand what it must be like for him, to suffer all his days for one irreparable mistake. My hard heart softens and I understand his reluctance.

“Young man, so, how much do you think your sister is worth?”

He frowns. I have just put to him a question greater than any other question in the world.

“I will not sell my father’s business,” Tom replies.

“Yes, we will,” Paul says.

“No, we won’t.”

“So will you sell your brother?” I ask Tom.

“Nonsense. That is out of the question.”

I say, “Many a merchant comes to the Silk Road every day in search of a good trade: better wool, nicer food, smoother silk. Your brother seems like a good trade for your sister, who is a poor, ugly creature and the shame of our family. Will you sell your brother?”

“Madam, I will sell myself to you,” says Paul.

“No, Paul,” says Tom, “Our father will not be able to bear such a loss again. Madam, my sister is as precious to my family as silk, compared to her I am worthless. Take me in her place.”

The trade was made. It was an exchange of a brother for his sister, but also that of atonement for forgiveness. These siblings were finally home, home for a lost girl, and home for three broken hearts. This is the story of the two trades on the Silk Road.



Fiction
Group 6

The Legend of Stam Horn

Edward Mercer, 16, Korean International School – Springboard

Long ago there lived a boy named Stam Horn, who was very poor. Stam was a slave who worked for some very nasty people. They made him do lots of work and beat him with a big stick. Most days they didn't even give him food to eat, and he had to sleep on the floor with all the mice and cockroaches.

One day he was beaten so hard that he couldn't stand it anymore. Late that night he went into his master's bedroom and killed him. Stam felt scared but was happy that he was free from the people who had made his life so miserable. He travelled to the coast and got on a boat.

After 30 days of sailing the ocean, a pirate ship appeared. The pirates boarded the ship and took everyone hostage. The pirate captain said, "You have a choice, you can either become a pirate or be thrown over the side of the boat and be eaten by the sharks." Stam decided to become a pirate.

Over the next 10 years Stam had many adventures and rose through the pirate ranks. He became famous, so famous that there was a \$2000 price tag on his head for anyone who caught him dead or alive. Many people tried to kill him, but all failed because he was too clever for them.

Then a man named Captain Kay, who was not a very nice man and who hated pirates, decided to have a go at catching Stam. Captain Kay had been hired to protect the merchant ships travelling along the Silk Road from all the pirates wanting to steal their goods. Captain Kay came up with a plan to catch Stam, he disguised his war ship like a merchant ship and waited for the pirates to come. It didn't take long for Stam Horn and his pirate friends to come and try to steal the cargo. Their ship pulled up alongside the disguised ship and all of the pirates came onboard. Captain Kay was waiting with his soldiers and soon overpowered the pirates. Stam Horn was captured and sentenced to death. He was taken back to Italy, where he was to be executed in front of crowds of people.

As he sat in his cell, he thought about all the adventures he'd had and how he wasn't ready to die. He came up with a plan to escape. In his ring he carried a drop of powerful poison that when taken made it look like you were dead, but you weren't, and the effects would wear off after 12 hours. He took the poison and when the guards came, they thought that Stam was dead.

Stam was thrown in a pile along with other dead bodies and after 12 hours he got up and walked off. He decided that being a pirate was too dangerous and that he should probably do something less dangerous. He dug up the treasure that he had buried, bought a house with a beautiful view and lived there until he was an old man.