



Winning Entries

The Song of the Silk Road

Anson Yui San Cheung, 14, Diocesan Girls' School

A string of caravans makes its way ponderously across the Karakum Desert. The weary thuds of the horses' hooves fall in time with the sleepy nods of the riders. Even the warriors – the ones paid to protect the merchants – are affected by the scorching heat. They are heading to the nearby oasis, hoping to reach it before nightfall.

They will never reach their destination.

The bandit leader is on the top of the sand dune, knowing that the travellers will not look up. Even if they do, it'll be too late.

He heads back and looks at his band. They are a motley crew, browned by the sun and hardened by their greed. On their necks lie gold chains, taken from previous victims. Clinking together, they weave a battle melody as the bandits prepare themselves. Tonight, more chains will join the song.

Horses thunder out from behind sand dunes. The warriors curse and scramble for their weapons. The merchants moan at their ill fortune. Their wives shrink into the corners of their caravans.

The war-cries of the bandits and the pleas of their victims fill the air. But the desert falls silent once more as the sands take in their bloody meal.

The bandit leader strides from caravan to caravan, inspecting the goods. He pays no attention to the corpses sprawled around him. The loot is the only thing that matters.

Upon opening a caravan door, he is surprised when a young girl leaps out at him, brandishing a knife. Unskilled, she is disarmed quickly. The bandit leader surveys her.

The girl cannot be more than nine summers old. Her hands are soft yet her fingertips have calluses, the rewards of playing a string instrument. There is no fear or grief in her eyes, only hatred. The girl is strong.

He decides to keep her.

Slinging her over his shoulder, he does not notice the blows that fall on his back nor the shrill squeals of indignity that break the desert's silence once more.

* * *

The bandit leader, along with the screaming girl and his band, soon reach the caves and haul the spoils inside. Even the girl is silenced – temporarily – by the amount of treasure that glitters inside the caves.

There are dates and nuts, taken from the merchants of Persia. Frankincense and myrrh lie on the right, snatched from the traders of Somalia. Logs of sandalwood are piled at the back, plundered from the foreigners of India. And there is silk, the cause of all these opportunities for fortune. It shimmers in the dim light, beckoning and cooing. Men have lost their lives to obtain these bolts of fabric. The cache hidden in the depths of the dark cave sparkles and purrs in harmony, whispering, “Come!” and few are the men who can resist its charms.

The bandit leader strides to his quarters and puts the girl down. She ignores him and instead inspects her surroundings. In the corner, a liuqin sits. It is of good quality – obviously ripped from some travelling musician’s hands. The girl picks up the lute. Shifting her hands so that the pear-shaped instrument is balanced, the girl gingerly strikes a note. A pure sound echoes up and down the caves.

Slowly at first, then picking up the pace, the girl lets her fingers fly over the strings, plucking a mournful song – a tune for the people who have died today.

The bandit leader listens to the melody with a slight pang in his heart. He has heard the song before and plays it often – he has lost companions too. The child is exceedingly good. He settles his chin on his hands and immerses himself in the heartbreaking harmony.

* * *

Every day, the girl plays a different tune for the bandit leader. Some are merry, others forlorn. Some are foreign to his ears, others remind him of his old life.

After she finishes, the bandit leader is subjected to her scrutiny. Every day, she sighs and turns away. When he asks why, she answers, “I wanted to see if you were ready to learn the Song of the Silk Road.”

* * *

Tonight, the bandit leader leans back against the wall of the cave and gestures for the girl to start.

Her hands in position, she starts to strum a well-known folk song. Her fingers pull and release with practised ease and send the chords resonating through the caves. Her hands dance up and down the lute and so, too, does the melody. It sails out, a net of happiness, and catches the bandit leader unawares. Yet something pricks the back of his mind, pushing a long-forgotten memory forward. He is sure he knows the tune ...

A village woman sits on a crudely fashioned bed, humming gently as she brushes her son’s hair. The boy’s eyes are half-closed, relishing the soft touch ...

The boy is running, feet slapping the ground in a fast tempo. Into the fields he flies, stopping only when he sees a muscled man. His father turns and roars in delight. They pad off home, singing boisterously ...

In the hut, the woman plays a liuqin, crooning in dulcet tones. The father joins in, a deep bass and their voices soar, twining around each other. The father gestures at his son and the boy lets his voice loose. The music spins around and around the hut, bouncing off the walls, surrounding the family, binding them together in the Song of Love ...

It is a long time before the bandit leader realises that the girl has stopped playing. He touches his face wonderingly and feels the wetness underneath his finger. He looks up at the girl. For the first time, she is smiling.

* * *

They sit on top of a sand dune. The bandit leader is puzzled as to why the girl insists that he must learn the Song of the Silk Road but tonight he has recovered a neglected song and is feeling amicable.

“Close your eyes ... listen ...”

The girl is already positioned, eyes shut off from the world but with her mind and her ears wide open, ready to receive the Song of the Silk Road.

The bandit leader is cautious as to closing his eyes; it goes against his most primary instincts. But in the end, he forces himself to relax and listen.

Nothing.

He can hear nothing.

Sitting there, he wonders how long they have sat already. Surely it has only been minutes but it feels like several summers. He can feel his mind settling, as if about to enter a deep sleep.

Shhhhhhaaaa ...

The wind rustles through the sand.

“Listen ...”

The bandit leader hears.

Shhhhhhaaaa ... woooooaaaooo ... rowrraaa ... sssssssss ...

The wind hums. The bird calls. The cat howls. The snake hisses.

Was this the Song of the Silk Road?

“No ...”

Shhing. Ahhhhhh!!!! Sliiiiiiiiiiiiiit. Splaaaa!!! AIEEEEE!!!!

“No!”

The bandit leader hears, his ears open to the Song of the Silk Road. In his mind, the swords unsheathe. The victims cry. The blades slash. The blood spurts. The bandits roar.

The bandit leader wants to open his eyes, and close his ears. He can do neither. He cannot tear himself away from the bloody images because he knows that he has lived this before.

The music changes suddenly, a river diverted from its true course, flowing from melody to melody.

Come ... touch us ... we can give you so much ... come ...

The silk croons. The scents tempt. The wood whispers. The silk murmurs again.

Come ... sing with us ...

The bandit leader forgets the other melody of the Silk Road. He can only hear the silk singing. Treasure. Wealth. Power. The words boom in his head.

“No ...”

As if she can sense the shift in his mind, the girl suddenly brings out the liuqin and plays on it a simple, familiar tune. The bandit leader stiffens.

A woman hums. Two people warble. Three people sing.

The Song of Love ... The Song of the Silk Road ...

A woman hums. Shhaaaa. Come. Splaaaa!!! Three voices soar. Come.

COME.

The bandit leader's eyes fly open. He is panting. Again, tears stain his cheeks. He buries his face in his hands. He has learned the Song of the Silk Road, or perhaps, he had learned the Song of the Silk Road long ago but had only just started understanding it. It is a tune so different from the Song of Love. Composed by greed and malice, its lyrics sing of blood and gore. Yet ...

Come ...

He stands up, not meeting the girl's eyes. The girl does not say anything. There is nothing to say.

He cannot give up the Song of the Silk Road.

* * *

A string of caravans makes its way ponderously across the Karakum Desert. A girl no more than ten summers old runs out from behind a sand dune, a liuqin strapped to her back. The caravans stop. The girl boards.

On top of the sand dune, the bandit leader looks down, knowing that the travellers will not look up.

The Special Chocolate

Annalise Wing Chung, 9, St. Margaret's Co-educational English Secondary School and Primary School

One day, mom gave me my New Year present. It was some special chocolate. She told me that if I ate it and made a wish, the wish would come true! When I was reading a book about the Silk Road, I decided to try out the chocolate at the same time.

Suddenly, a small tornado came out of the book and I felt faint for a short while. When I became conscious again and opened my eyes, the tornado had taken me to a strange place. But I remembered that I had seen this place before. Oh, I was on the Silk Road! It was unbelievably hot in the desert. The sun was shining above the sea of sands. I couldn't see any plants or anything green. There were travelling merchants with lots of camels that carried goods across the desert. Luckily, there was a small town nearby.

I saw a small child working very hard in a dusty restaurant. He was about nine years old and was serving customers, sweeping the floor and cleaning dishes. I asked him:

"Why do you need to work? Why don't you go to school?"

"I'm a slave because we don't have money. My mom sold me here to work," the boy answered tiredly.

"I will help you!" I cried and I thought I was so lucky to study at school and have friends there.

"Oh, that's really kind of you! I'm so grateful!" the boy replied.

Then I had an idea. If I sold my watch, I could make money. I decided to sell it to a merchant with lots of money, and I found a man who looked very rich. I told him I had a watch that could tell time accurately, although I didn't think anyone there really knew what a watch was. The man seemed very interested and he was willing to spend a lot. I asked him what his name was. He was Venetian and his name was Marco Polo. I had read many books about him!

Then I gave the money to the little boy and asked him to pay his master. He gave me a piece of fabric as a gift for thanks. When I touched the fabric, it was as smooth as silk! The boy could return to his family and looked very happy, which made me even happier. Marco Polo came to me and said, "You are such a nice girl, well done. What is your name?"

"My ... name ... is Ann ... Annalise ..." I stammered.

"Where are you from?"

"I am from Hong Kong," I said.

"Ah?! Hong Kong? Where is it?" Marco Polo asked with surprise.

"Oh – I'm from China. Sorry, it's very late, it's time for me to go back home! Bye!" I sighed.

Then I pulled out the chocolate, and when I took a bite, suddenly I was back at home. And the clock was still in the same position as when I had first eaten the chocolate!

New Tales of the Silk Road

Rachel Ho, 7, Kingston International School

East to China
West to Rome
Many routes between two big homes

Silk for silver
Spices for gold
We all share our myths and thoughts

Noodle vs. pasta
Pancake vs. pizza
More food becomes similar

Soft like cotton
Won't be rotten
The silk tie won't be forgotten

Two thousand years
Five thousand miles
Both worlds become one big smile!

The Lost Treasure of the Silk Road

Harvey Lap Shun Kong, 11, St. Margaret's Co-educational English Secondary and Primary School

It was a typical, sunny, New Salsa City morning. Well, it was actually quite grim for me. I was still asleep in my bed, when the phone rang. I dragged my sorry legs out of bed to answer it. As I was heading for the phone, tragedy struck. First, I stubbed my toe on the table, and then accidentally slipped on a piece of chocolate on the floor. I went straight into the door where I hit my nose. I then struggled to answer the phone. I mumbled, "Hello ... Daniel here."

A loud, angry voice screamed, "Daniel, you're late for work!" Oh no, it was my boss, Martin P. Earlybird.

I rushed into the bathroom and did everything in a rush. I changed faster than you can blink. I then rushed down the stairs and jumped into my car and drove like I have never driven before. I reached the news centre in minutes. I ran inside as fast as I could. When I reached there, my boss was waiting for me, and he said, "You're lucky this time, but next time you'll be fired."

I went into my office, sat down on my chair, grabbed a sandwich from my mini fridge and started eating.

Whoops! I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Daniel J. Rollout and I am a field reporter for the New Salsa News Network. I also have a cameraman who I've been friends with since kindergarten. His name is Jeremy and we both go to different places all over the world to get the perfect scoop.

I opened my laptop and checked for emails. One of them caught my eye. It was from my old friend, Lenny Lee; I opened it and started reading. It said, "Hi Daniel, I hope you're not busy but I need you to come to China. I made a discovery that you might be interested in. it's about the famous Silk Road; meet me at Beijing airport tomorrow."

After reading Lenny's email, I rushed out of my office and went home to pack my luggage. I told Jeremy that we were going on a trip and to meet me at the airport in one hour. Soon, we were on the plane.

Next morning, we arrived at Beijing. If there was ever a good time for a cup of coffee it was now. Because of the time difference, we were completely zonked. I saw Lenny waving to me from a distance. Thank goodness he had bought us coffee. He drove us away from the airport. On the way to the Forbidden City, Lenny and I had some time to catch up. Turns out, he was an archaeologist. I never knew.

We arrived at the famous Forbidden City. What a sight! I couldn't believe it. We then went in through the staff entrance where Lenny took us into the artefacts room. An ancient map was being analysed by archaeologists. Lenny told me, "This map was discovered when a guard tripped over a dent on the palace floor. When we studied the dent, we discovered that it was a trap door. Inside it was this map. We discovered that an ancient Chinese emperor had the habit of collecting treasures he received through trade along the Silk Road. For centuries he collected, and collected, until finally he had enough treasures to fill up an Egyptian pyramid. He then made a secret chamber to fit all the treasures. The map describes a place in Beijing where the treasure's located, but we don't know where it is."

Even though I didn't quite understand what Lenny had said, I replied, "Don't worry, I'll help you out." Lenny smiled and then took us into the palace, shutting the door behind us. He gave us a pair of gloves each and said, "See if you can find anything." Jeremy and I started searching. Then the unthinkable happened. Jeremy was leaning against the wall and it gave way, revealing a secret passage!

To make sure no one could come in, Lenny locked the palace doors. We all took out flashlights and went in. We took extra care to make sure we would not set off any booby traps, but I tripped on a stone and pressed a weird rock-shaped button. The walls started to close in on us. At that moment, my whole life flashed before my eyes. But I couldn't die now, how would I be able to finish this story if I died? So with all my strength, I climbed up on an overhanging vine with the others following close behind.

We could see a wall at the end of the path. The pathway started to get wider and wider and we soon reached the wall. It turned out to be a dead end. I sighed and said, "All this work for nothing and now we are trapped here!" Jeremy was leaning on another wall and again the wall opened onto a long pathway. I patted Jeremy on the shoulder and said, "You know what? I'm so lucky to have a friend like you." We followed the pathway down. Soon, we saw light at the end. I was so excited and ran towards the end so fast that the others could hardly catch up with me.

When they finally did, they saw me standing in an awkward position, mumbling, "It ... it ... it's the treasure ..." We moved in for a closer look. It was amazing. It was like winning the lottery ten times. I just couldn't believe it. Imagine that! A field reporter finding the ninth wonder of the world!

We saw an exit sign at the end of the room. We used the exit and came out into the emperor's bedroom. Even though we had found *the lost treasure of the Silk Road*, I didn't forget that I was still doing my job. I took out my phone, called the studio to set up a live television broadcast worldwide and went into the secret chamber to film everything.

And that wraps up a good story. Goodbye, and see you next time!

A Journey Down the Old Silk Road

*Amy Yeung, 11, St. Margaret's Co-educational English Secondary
and Primary School*

Do you want to come with me down to the old Silk Road? Well let's start our journey at Chang'an, the old capital of China. Then we will travel westward, through deserts and up icy mountains until at last we come to the splendid city of Samarkand. You are lucky that you are with me. You don't have to travel on a camel for months, getting thirsty and hungry, and fighting off robbers.

I am the spirit of the Silk Road and I'll whisk you along on my silken threads, faster than a flying dragon and lighter than a bird. They call silk "woven wind", and you will soon see why!

Are you ready to set off? I will tell you more about silk as we go. Do you see those trees over there? Those are mulberry trees and they have the only leaves that silkworms eat. Those women picking the leaves have to feed the silkworm every half an hour. After a month, each worm will be ten thousand times heavier than it was! Then it will spin itself a cocoon of silk thread, getting ready to turn itself into a moth. But before that can happen, each cocoon is dropped into boiling water and the silk thread is unravelled, ready for spinning and weaving.

They say silk fabric was first made in China about three thousand years ago. The Chinese guarded the secret of making silk very carefully. The Romans and the Parthians were fighting just to get the precious silk. Those people loved silk so much that they would choose it over gold! It was very expensive to buy, and only the well-off Romans could wear it.

People in the west tried to discover the secret of silk but it remained a mystery to them. At last, so the story goes, a Chinese princess, who was about to marry a foreign prince, managed to smuggle some silkworm eggs out of the country in her headdress. And so the secret escaped to the west.

As you can see in these villages we are passing through, making silk is usually women's work. In China the chief goddess of silk is called Lei Tsu or sometimes Hsi Ling. We have been told that she was the one who discovered silk threads one day when she accidentally dropped a silkworm's cocoon into a cup of hot tea!

But here is a story about another goddess of silk. It is about a bride with the head of a horse. In the story, a helpless mother weeps and promises to marry her daughter to whosoever will help free her husband from the robbers who took him prisoner while he was peacefully walking through his mulberry orchard. Her husband's favourite horse hears this and gallops over the wall to help rescue his owner! Likewise there are many other interesting tales of the Silk Road.

Getting tired? Well then let's stop somewhere around here. Do you see that map over there? It shows the path of the Silk Road and all of the different types of goods that were imported from each country. The path of the Silk Road was very long and very tough to go through. It wasn't the best path, but there was no other choice. The people that travelled along the Silk Road and managed to come back were very brave, and lucky, because unlike them, quite a lot of others never came back. The Silk Road has many mysteries hidden behind it, but I can't possibly tell you all of them here. Why don't you take an adventure to explore the amazing Silk Road?

The Unnamed Dragon

Clarissa Heng Chi Yung, 9, St. Paul's Convent School

Silk Road, Silk Road,
Where there's tons of stories told.
Here is a tale you ought to know;
So please listen and behold.

Once there was a dragon,
Mighty and magnificent.
Wicked was an evil magician,
Who dared it to be his servant.

Hoping to reach the greatest height,
Hastily drinking the magic potion in sight,
The dragon lost all its might,
And was too weak to even take flight.

Toiling under the most demanding boss,
It had to wash his stinky socks,
Serving at table, spoons and forks,
Living a life hard to adopt.

To escape from that hell,
The only way to cancel the spell,
It was a secret phoenix feather
hidden under its belt,
But nobody except the magician could tell.

While doing laundry on a usual day,
The dragon overheard the magician talking to
his mate,
Found the soft, silky phoenix feather under
the belt on its scales,
Changing back to the magnificent dragon on
its way.

The dragon is you and me,
Who can be as great as we wish to be,
By just unlocking the potential
we can't see,
With the key right inside thee.

China and the Silk Road

Jovian Ma, 13, French International School

As we all know, the Silk Road is not a road made of silk which led to Asia; it was not, and indeed never had been, made of silk at all. It was not even a single road, but was actually a network of roads, weaving through different countries until they reached Asia. When we think of the Silk Road, we think of Marco Polo, as he is undoubtedly the most famous traveller who journeyed on the Silk Road. Being in Hong Kong, rest assured that the country you are in has much to do with the Silk Road. China has made many contributions to this historic legend. However, let us start from the beginning of the story; it goes something like this ...

It all started a long, long time ago, in the times of Alexander the Great. He had always been a dreamer and a visionary, who stared at the stars, constantly trying to find new methods of expanding his gargantuan empire. He founded the city of “Alexandria the Furthest”, which would be a big trading post for the years of the Silk Road. Once his successors took over, they promoted trade all the way to India, Africa and other countries.

All the way back in the East, in China, during the Han Dynasty around 130 BC to 140 BC, the Huns continued their attacks on China, and Emperor Wudi wanted peace in his nation and additional military protection. In 138 BC, he called his ambassador, Zhang Qian, and gave him the greatest mission Zhang would have ever believed possible, to go across China and form a military alliance with the people in the centre of China, the Yuezhi, as the Chinese called them. It was a dangerous mission, as the savage Xiongnu tribe was everywhere, but Zhang accepted it with honour.

He was accompanied by a guide named Ganfu who was a Xiongnu who had been captured as a prisoner. Zhang had travelled all the way to modern Tajikistan when the Xiongnu captured them. They were enslaved for ten years, during which time he found a wife and earned the trust of the leader. Although he had almost settled down, he stayed true to his mission. He devised a plan of escape, and then fled with his wife and Ganfu. They had a long journey ahead, which took them around the northern edge of the Tarim Basin and around the Kunlun Mountains. He finally reached the land of the Yuezhi, which is modern Xinjiang.

Zhang Qian loved his time with the Yuezhi. They were an agricultural people and had many crops that he had never heard of. He saw horses stronger than he could ever have imagined. He loved nature, from the horses in the bright green plains to the bright warm sunlight and the breeze that gently tickled his face. Living with the Yuezhi, Zhang Qian realised that these were peaceful people, who only wanted to live peaceful lives. He was fascinated by the different religions, traditions and customs that were shared by these people.

He greatly admired this and accepted it. Slowly, he began to settle in with the peace-loving Yuezhi. He spent a year with them, documenting their culture and way of life.

As the days passed, Zhang Qian knew he eventually have to return to China and report to Emperor Wudi. Finally, he left the Yuezhi but on his return journey his luck ran out and the Xiongnu captured him again. They kept him for a further two years. His life was spared only because of their admiration for his sense of responsibility and his courage when confronted with death. Fortunately for Zhang, after those two long and agonising years, the leader of the Xiongnu died and chaos was let loose. The fighting and distractions allowed Zhang Qian to slip away without anybody noticing. In 125 BC, he returned to the emperor, reporting all of the things he had seen in more than a decade of travelling. Zhang told him that the Yuezhi were not military people. The information he had given to the emperor increased the amount of trading China was able to do.

Thus the Silk Road started to sprout. Like the roots of a tree, both the West and the East started to push their trading further in the opposite direction. The roots grew and grew, until they were a network of roads all sucking in the water they sought. It grew but in one main place. Not in the north, where there are the freezing regions known now as Siberia; not in the south, where stand the Himalayas, the tallest group of mountains in the world; not in the east where the only access point is the vast, uncharted waters of the Pacific, but in the west. Yet, people still lived in fear of the Xiongnu, who terrorized markets and slaughtered the innocent.

Back in China, in around 119 BC, the Emperor Wudi was still present, watching the Xiongnu terrorize China and its trade. He had had enough of them. He knew two great commanders, Huo Qubing and Wei Qing. They were sent to attack the Xiongnu, but both would fight extremely different battles. Wei Qing was on his way to a different post than Huo, but was ambushed by the Xiongnu, who fiercely attacked him and his men. Although Wei's group was outnumbered, he won as a result of his military skill. From another post, Huo Qubing was sent to the Xiongnu camp with an army that could easily outstrip the opposition. This meant the battle was very straightforward. This marked the end of the Xiongnu clan. Also, it opened up the Silk Road, as the merchants and traders had nothing to fear. Nonetheless, it was not over for the Chinese – the Xiongnu would eventually rise again from the ashes of defeat and terrorize the Silk Road once more.

One century later, the same problem arose. The Xiongnu were back and came back at the Chinese. Emperor Wu had died and China was under the reign of Emperor He. He sent great generals including one called Ban Chao on many battles against the Xiongnu. Ban Chao was a legendary general in Chinese history. After all his battles, Ban Chao decided he wanted China to go further than it has ever gone. He wanted to send someone to the great Roman Empire, which he had heard so much about. He found a Chinese ambassador whose name was Gan Ying and sent him on the longest mission anyone in China had ever been on.

He was sent to Rome, the most mysterious kingdom known to China, they themselves had never been there but had heard of its greatness. On the journey, he passed through mountains, many barren and sandy deserts such as the famous Gobi desert, crossed modern Iran and the Parthian Empire and finally reached the Persian Gulf. He saw Iran as a land packed full of people and beautiful women. It had an extraordinary number of small towns.

Gan Ying learned how important the Parthian Empire, or Anxi, was to the Silk Road. The Parthian merchants earned fortunes by selling Chinese silk and many other goods for a lot of money. At the markets, he inhaled the sweet and spicy smell of the brightly coloured spices that the traders were selling. He loved watching the traders, waddling around like little penguins ready to take their first swim, and the buyers, scuttling away like ants trying to hide their bounty. He observed that the architecture, which was very different from the architecture of his

own country, was elegant and beautiful. He noticed their monetary system, and learnt that the Roman emperors were elected and their status was not permanent. He noticed that everyone was very tall and honest. All of these many thoughts, he gathered in his mind and wrote down. However, the Parthian merchants feared they would lose their profits by allowing Gan Ying to proceed to Rome, and so they discouraged him by exaggerating the difficulties of travelling by sea. Gan Ying then returned to China as the Chinese man who had travelled the furthest to the West. He told his experiences to the emperor, which helped in the growth of the Silk Road.

And thanks to the country we are living in right now, the Silk Road continued to bloom until the great Marco Polo travelled upon it. The stories of his travels became the most famous occurrence in the history of the Silk Road. People eventually forgot the contributions China had made. Sea travel took over and travel by land slowed down. The Silk Road shrunk and shrunk, not only in size, but also in people's minds, until now, when it stands tall as a marvellous and exciting part of history that we all now know the origin of.

The Journey on the Silk Road

Lucita Ng, 15, Heep Yunn School

Flags unfurled, at the first ray of light,
Banishing the shadows of the night
To the back of the minds.
As the people awakened to a brand new day.

Thousands have trudged through this path,
Be it merchants from exotic places, bearing goods galore,
Caravans loaded with extravagant luxuries,
Heading for places that seem worlds away across the great desert.
Princes, kings, priests, soldiers have all travelled alike.

The sun setting 'neath the dunes,
Stains the sky to vivid bright shades.
The song of the nightingale in the distance,
Marks the end of yet another day,
Dwindling to a standstill as the light fades.

The lofty infinite sky,
Like a backdrop for the never-ending mountain range.
This vast wildness extending far beyond the horizon,
With only this lone path, this road,
Leading to countries far beyond imagination.

Through time and age,
Spanning countless empires,
Enduring the myriad wars of mankind.
It remains, witnessing the rise and fall of civilizations.
Alas, what remains now are ruins of great cities,
Mere shadows of their former splendour.

But still this fable intrigues and stirs hearts,
With the lingering airs of its old glamour.
How untold tales of travellers all have their own stories,
As told by Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*
Or Marco Polo in his *Travels*.

The Silk Road – the journey where it all began.

Window to the World

Nandita Seshadri, 16, South Island School

His memories came, but he did not come.

* * *

The sun beat mercilessly upon the young lookout, who was drenched in sweat, but determined all the same. He strained his eyes, but all he could see was the vast stretch of sand.

“Nǐ néng kàn dào tā ma (Can you see him)?” was the question that shook him out of his trance.

“Hái méi (Not yet!)” echoed the reply.

His friend gave an impatient exclamation and ran off to play with his friends. He knew that Yongrui would not budge from the spot until he caught sight of his long-awaited friend, the pedlar. Yongrui shook his head and continued his watch. Feeling hungry, he brought out the half-eaten apple, and munched on it. A crumpled piece of paper fell out of his pocket. His appetite disappeared, and with a smile on his face, he unfolded the piece of paper. A cheerful stick figure boy, standing in front of a huge city with his parents, smiled at him. A sudden longing threatened to loom near the surface, while he struggled to keep it down. His parents had died when he was a baby, and he now had his grandmother, but sometimes, the unfairness of his situation made him violent.

* * *

What’s taking him so long? – he wondered. He thought back to the time he had first met Saliman. He had been five years old, and to meet someone like Saliman was like having a father figure to look up to.

“Young boy, what’s your name?” Saliman had asked in their dialect, bending down to Yongrui’s level.

“I am Yongrui, who are you?” he replied, bashful but bold enough to venture this question.

“My name is Saliman, and I am a pedlar. Do you want to see my wares?” enquired Saliman, taking a fancy to this young boy, whose eyes shone with innocence and mutely begged for love.

“No, I have seen many traders in my village. What makes you any different from them?” demanded arrogant Yongrui.

“I have stories that you might have never heard. Want to listen?” smiled Saliman.

That night had been the best night of young Yongrui’s life. To have his dull, rough life filled with stories was something beyond his wildest dreams. He learned about Saliman, who traded along the Silk Road. On being asked about the Silk Road, Saliman scratched his head, and began.

“The Silk Road was not actually a road. It was not paved. It was not even a single route. The Silk Road was a name given to any route that led across China to Rome. It was a 4000-mile trip. At one end was China. At the other end was Rome.”

The next morning, Yongrui had woken up to find Saliman gone. He had waited for his return till nightfall, when the grocer said that Saliman had continued his journey to Nepal and was expected to be back in a month. That had been years ago. Yongrui shook himself out of his trance, and concentrated on the picture. Little did he know that the boy who sent that picture was having similar thoughts.

* * *

“You’re it!” panted the boy, slamming his fist on Dorje.

“No thanks, I would rather not play now,” said Dorje.

“Why? Are you chicken?” mocked the boy.

“No, I am not, it’s just that I have to go to the village centre to look for my friend,” answered Dorje.

“Yes, you are afraid. And what friend are you talking about? The one who visits you once in a few months? Him, the shady man who sells old things for a living? *That* is your friend?” ridiculed another boy, joining the first boy.

“He is not a shady man, he is Saliman the trader, my friend who visits me because he cares about me. He brings me something new each time he comes, and you have no right to talk bad about him!” finished Dorje, who had his fists clenched. He pushed his way out of the circle that had formed around him, and returned to his original position on the rooftop of the town centre, from where one could survey the entire village. *His memories came, but he did not come*, thought Dorje, as he thought about their first meeting, when he was being bullied by the older kids.

Facing the wall, the child standing across the road was a pathetic sight. He caught the eye of a man who was trying to sell his wares, and was shouting himself hoarse. On sighting the boy, the man stopped his caravan and glanced at the children playing along the road. They were all pointing and laughing at the poor kid. The man went over to the boy and asked him in a gentle voice: “What is your name, little fella?”

The boy spun around with his grubby face streaked with dirt, eyes full of fear, mouth quivering, and his hand raised above his head to ward off the blow he expected the pedlar to deliver. The child’s wide-eyed expression went straight to Saliman’s heart, and he wiped the boy’s tears away.

“Dorje.”

“Dorje? What a lovely name! Do you know what it means?” enquired Saliman. When Dorje shook his head, he continued: “‘Dorje’ means ‘thunderbolt, diamond’. It means you are very precious.”

“Me? A precious diamond? A thunderbolt? But I am only a little boy like everyone else, and am called a coward,” answered Dorje.

“Not anymore. You are a brave, unique boy. Do you want to see what I have got?” said Saliman, tactfully changing the topic.

Dorje's awe of Saliman grew tenfold when he set his eyes on the riches in the caravan. There were stacks of colourful, shiny bangles, rings, pendants and other jewellery. There were piles of woollen garments and robes. There were also a few stacks of wall hangings and other decorations he was unfamiliar with. He was unaware of the use of most of the items, but what caught his attention was a Chinese dragon embroidered on a silk shawl.

"Where did you get this from?"

"Some of this is from India, and some from the interiors of China. What do you like?"

"I would like the shawl with the dragon on it for my mother," replied Dorje.

A while later, the two of them were discussing the Silk Road. Saliman narrated its history to a very willing listener: "*Both China and Rome had something the other desired. Rome had gold, silver, and precious gems, very like you.*"

"Like me?" asked Dorje.

"Yes, like you. The Romans had been searching for the Silk People for a long time, and were very happy to have found them. They had discovered some scraps of silk from people they had conquered. They..."

"Conquered?" butt in Dorje in confusion.

"Conquered – as in 'to overcome'. If you have *this* pebble, and I take it away from you by force, it means that I have conquered you. Silk became very desired in Rome. However, there was not enough of it, and they did not know who made it."

Tring! The noise of the school bell startled Dorje out of his reminiscence, and he rushed to the classroom along with his other friends.

* * *

Friends were the last thing on Yongrui's mind. How ironic, he thought, that Saliman's memories came, but he did not come. The stories he would narrate would captivate his active mind. He thought about another time he saw Saliman. He had been a few years older then, and history being one of his favourite subjects, they had talked about the times Romans tried to hunt the Silk People.

"Were they very strong?" questioned an intrigued Yongrui.

"Yes they were, and they first tried to find the traders as they came into the towns and villages. But the traders hid from the Roman soldiers. They knew they had nothing to tell them. They did not know who was making the silk. They only traded for the silk. They travelled a short way along the Silk Road and traded with the people they found."

"And what did the Romans do?"

"The Romans were exasperated. They sent out armed search parties to follow the Silk Road, and find the inventors of this wonderful material. Most of the soldiers never returned. The few who did, confessed they were unable to find their way through the desert, and had to turn back. It was very unfortunate that they didn't have your luck."

"My luck?" asked Yongrui, taken aback.

"Yes, your luck. Don't you know your name means 'forever lucky'?"

As sweat trickled down the back of his neck, Yongrui hastily returned to the present, and wiped himself. Saliman was a sincere and pleasant man who always kept his word. Then what was the cause of his delay now?

* * *

His memories came, but he did not come. This was the only thought in Dorje's head, as he sat in school, trying to write the Hindi word 'kshatriya (warrior)', which was the most difficult one he had ever encountered. As he struggled with it, he was thinking about Saliman, who was supposed to have been there three days ago. He thought about another memorable meeting, when Saliman told him about how the new route that he took had taken him less time than the previous one.

"Why didn't you take that before?" asked Dorje.

"That's because it is incredibly dangerous to travel along the Silk Road. One faces desolate white-hot sand dunes in the desert, menacing mountains, savage winds, and venomous snakes. There is one nice section, called the Gansu Corridor, a comparatively fertile strip that runs along the base of one of the mountains. To reach this strip, you have to cross the desert or the mountains. And of course, there are always bandits and pirates," answered Saliman, smiling at Dorje's awed face.

"That sounds very dangerous. Have you faced any of them?" questioned Dorje, fearing for Saliman's safety.

"Not the bandits or the snakes, but I did encounter brutal winds and scorching sand dunes."

"So how did traders in those days make their trips?" wondered Dorje.

"No trader made the whole trip. They all worked in relays. Every trader would go a certain distance, exchange their goods for other goods, and hopefully return. The next one would move along the road, trade, and hopefully return. There were three main overland routes, and all were dangerous."

"What were they?"

"Wow, you ask a lot of questions. I know another boy just like you, who lives in Kashgar, China. He also likes these stories. His name is Yongrui. And -"

"Is he your son?" blurted Dorje.

A pained look entered Saliman's eyes. "No, he is not my son," he said slowly. "My son was younger than you when I left my home in Kashmir. I have not seen him in the last six years. You and Yongrui, the boy I was telling you about, remind me of my son. Anyway," he said abruptly, closing the topic, "the Northern route went westward to the Black Sea. The Central Route went westward to Persia, the Mediterranean Sea, and Rome. The Southern Route went to Iran and India. It is the Southern one I take, and after a few years, it might not be used at all."

"Why not? Will there be a landslide?" feared Dorje.

"No, but as overseas trade increases in popularity, overland routes might decline. Thus, in a few years, the Silk Route might become a legend for all," Saliman gloomily predicted.

As the bell rang, Dorje ran out of the classroom with his friends. He was glad to have gotten to know Yongrui through Saliman. Saliman was their window to the world. Over time, they had sent each other gifts through Saliman. Since Yongrui was uneducated, Dorje sent him crayons to draw pictures with.

* * *

"Yongrui! If you stay out any longer, you will miss dinner! And I have prepared your favourite dim-sum for you. Come in at once!" called a hoarse voice. Yongrui jumped up, alert, and rubbed his eyes. The sun had set, and he had fallen asleep at his post. How quick did time fly! He didn't want to miss Saliman's return, yet his grandmother's command couldn't be ignored. Reluctantly, he dragged his feet away from his checkpoint, feeling how apt the thought '*he didn't come, but his memories came*' was, as he remembered the last time he met his friend.

“So, how have you managed without me?” greeted Saliman.

“I have been waiting for so long now, thank you! What did Dorje say?” asked Yongrui.

“He has sent you something in exchange for your lucky marble collection. Look at this!” smiled Saliman, revealing the package.

With widened eyes, Yongrui delicately held the fragile box, and opened it carefully. The colourful crayons took his breath away. He felt in his pocket, and found a scrap piece of paper.

“I want to send him something that I made with these crayons. What shall I draw?” asked Yongrui, eager to repay the favour.

“How about a thunderbolt? ‘Dorje’ means ‘thunderbolt’,” answered Saliman, smiling at Yongrui’s enthusiasm.

Thus, the paper with a thunderbolt drawn on it had been Yongrui’s first gift to Dorje; the meaning of his name. However, Saliman had more stories about the Silk Road up his sleeve.

“So I know the Silk Road was built for trade, but what else did it do?” queried Yongrui.

“The Silk Road took caravans to the farthest extent of the Han Empire. Did you know that sections of the Great Wall were built along the northern side of the Gansu Corridor to try and prevent bandits from the north from harming the trade?”

“Really? Wow, so the Silk Road not only helped trade, but it also protected people!” exclaimed an impressed Yongrui.

“Yes, indeed. Over the centuries, the Silk Road has developed a civilization of its own. Where possible, the Silk Road has become lined with huge temples and booming cities. It has become far easier to travel the road. But it is never easy. There are still vast stretches of deserts and mountains to cross, with no city or water in sight,” sighed Saliman.

That had been the last time they had seen each other. Yongrui had been aching to listen to another one of his stories, another adventure, and wanted another look at his best friend. He was the only adult who treated him as an equal, and made him feel important despite his age. He remembered his own incredulity on learning that his name meant “forever lucky”, when he compared his life to others, to his friends who had their parents and a full family. But now when he reflected on it, he realised that he was far luckier than all of them, because he had found a friend, and another through him. Saliman was an angel in disguise, who had connected him to another kid his age. Saliman was truly his only window to the world.

* * *

His memories came, but he did not come.

Divine Pilgrims: The Transmission of Buddhist Iconography along the Silk Road

Elizabeth Lai Yin Cheung, 17, Diocesan Girls' School

Bamiyan, 300 A.D.

The valley of Bamiyan, about 250 km northwest of Kabul. It's a rugged area, with towering mountains that seem to stretch lazily across the sky. 'Who, us?' they seem to say, 'We will be here forever.'

But here stretch caravans of traders, with their noise of money and potential wealth. Pluto's wealth, for both vast fortunes and sudden deaths are all too easy here. Here in these inhospitable mountains lies Bamiyan, the convergence point for many cultures on the Silk Road.

But it is not only silk, jade and two-humped Bactrian camels that swap hands. Among protestations of avarice and the lust for gold is the calm smile of eternity; for along these mountain spines, Buddhism was transmitted.

Now up in a mountain, a pillar of the sky, men hack away, sending chunks of rock tumbling down. In the mountain cave they make, they are creating one of the greatest religious monuments the world has ever seen.

Bamiyan, 2001 A.D.

A hole in the ground and blasted rock. Around it, masses of rubble. Some men look on, approval in their smiles. Flecks of dirt and dried clay are still suspended in the air. The spent casings, shells of anti-aircraft missiles and rockets ...

A little further back. The cave is bigger now, and far more vacant. Heaps of rubble are strewn on the ground, and there they are – shattered statues of two Buddhas, their destroyed faces set in the rictus grin of Glasgow smiles.

Slip your feet into the leather sandals of pilgrims, and walk back two thousand years to Newar. The air of medieval Nepal is a breath of Himalayan chill that stretches over the distance into Bactria, awakening Buddhist art. The Enlightened One becomes a presence in human life, a space underneath a bodhi tree, emptiness that leaves footprints marked with Dharma-wheels. But for hundreds of years, fear of Mara deters artists from depicting Siddhartha Gautama in human form, and thus succumbing to earthly temptation. Buddha becomes more than air and less than human form; the lingering human presence of Siddhartha may only be seen in the footprint of Kusinara.

Then a new spirit wakes in Bactria, with the serene expression of Siddhartha. Gautama is carved from wood and stone. Slowly, statues of the Buddha appear in India – but are

still unknown in the world at large. To understand the mingling of cultures in Bamiyan is to remember the many empires that stretched along the Silk Road. Suddenly, the stirring of hooves, the marching beat of a vast army. Alexander the Great sweeps over Asia, into Bactria. Like a rising storm he gathers his troops and passes out, leaving Bactria subdued ... for a little while. Artisans remain who bring their dream of Hellas into Buddhist statues, enfolding nostalgic dreams of hope within this dream world. Nine centuries have passed since Siddhartha. Bactria is a stubborn country, one whose nature is as fleeting as solid bedrock. It remains independent.

Meanwhile, the Kushan Empire grows strong: the plump-faced traders that dealt in gold have honed their skill in iron. In the second century Emperor Kanishka becomes a reformed man – or so Buddhist tradition states. The Buddhist emperor sends his troops into the Tarim Basin, with Buddhist pilgrims in their wake. The monks travelling from India through the Karakorum must first overcome their religious principles of wearing cotton robes in the interest of self-preservation, and so Mahayana Buddhism prevails here. With them come the results of Greek artistic influence: the beginnings of Buddha in human form. From there on, Greco-Buddhist art enters China, and makes its way to Korea and Japan.

The modern inquirer will ask what all this has to do with the Buddhas of Bamiyan, and the answer is simple. Bactria was located in modern day Afghanistan, making the two Buddhas of Bamiyan not only the largest standing Buddhist carvings in the world, but two of the oldest examples of Greco-Buddhist art.

But to understand the mingling of cultures in Bamiyan is to remember the many empires that stretched along the Silk Road. The artisans who created the Buddhas were mostly descendants of the Greeks who were in the army of Alexander the Great, who had subdued Bactria (not very successfully) in his Central Asian campaign of about 320 B.C. Generations of Greek artisans laboured over the Buddhas, with their work culminating in the sixth century A.D.

Their work is spectacular even by modern standards, with the bulk of Vairocana and Sakyamuni hewn directly from the sandstone cliffs, as was the niche that sheltered them. Imagine how the forms slowly took shape in the solid rock, even as Ymir was formed of ice in Nordic legends. Then a compound of mud and straw that serves as plaster, creating the folds upon folds of their long robes and the complex hand gestures that denote Buddhist mudras. Then wooden casts are placed to form serene faces, and ...

It's done – the colossi in their caves tower over the humans who had carved them. From a long way off, travellers can see the bold carmine of Vairocana and earthly splendour of the Buddhas painted in gold and bedecked with ornaments.

Buddhism grows in strength, and the Golden Age of Buddhist Art rises in India: the Gupta Period, Buddhas with curled hair and drapery, downcast eyes that emanate spirituality. From 300 to 600 A.D., Gupta statues, made from gold, stone and cast bronze are taken all over India – and along the Silk Road, the seeds of yet again different branches of Buddhism.

The House of Silk – China and Buddhist Art

The dust of centuries accumulates at your feet and cakes the feet of pilgrims who are sent to bring China her Emperor's dream. In 67 B.C., the Dhammacakra mudra is held up in the gaze of Emperor Ming; stunning the emperor as he beholds his dream in the light of day. In Lo-Yang, temples are built to house the sutras, and statues of guardian Buddhas are built to guard them.

China grows stronger, and in the fourth century, Kushan falls to Chinese Jin emperor Fu Jian. But warlords must be held with fists of mail, and it is only in the fifth century that Emperor Yao Xing succeeds in consolidating the conquest.

Seventh-century China is in the beginning of the Tang dynasty. Tang emperors expand the horizons of China, adding empires and kingdoms to their vast dominions. Not for nothing were Chinese emperors termed the Sons of Heaven. And in 692 A.D., the monk Hsuan Tsang flees the fall of the Sui dynasty, intending to find true Light: the immortalised Journey to the West.

The dangers of the Silk Road cannot be emphasised enough. Other than the seductive mirages of gleaming water and the treacherous mountain paths (consisting of more hole than path, and definitely more snow), there are bandits, warring states and the sickly mottled grip of disease to contend with.

He returns more than a decade later, cautiously anticipating the challenge his return is to the Tang rule. But the emperor is gracious, and the monk is greeted with reverence; as are the texts he brings from India. It is thanks to this journey that many Buddhist texts were preserved, although many miles distant from their homeland, and that Chinese Buddhism stayed largely true to that of Shakya despite many centuries of isolation. Eager to learn the sophistication of the Tang court, envoys from the kingdoms of Korea and Nippon return home with Buddhist statues, monks and teachings. Buddhism buds, and grows in different branches in the neighbouring countries.

Relentless, history pulls the centuries into its arms. The wheel turns, tips to droughts, external war and internal chaos. The peasants rise and Tang falls. Hsuan Tsang's manuscripts and Buddhist art can no longer be secured in the monasteries of war-torn China. The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas become a refuge for the monks desperately seeking to preserve their faith. The delicate parchments and artwork are all sealed within an airtight room concealed in the mountain grottoes, so there is light for Buddhism even at the end of warring states and all things.

Back in Bactria (and the rest of the Middle East)

But even as the Buddhas are hoisted on the backs of men and camels into China, Korea and Japan, Buddhism is withering away in India. The old hearth gods of Hinduism reclaim their places by the heat of Agni. Shiva, Lakshmi and the Hindu pantheon regain their places in India.

And in Bactria? The disciples of Mohammed are no less eager to live and die for their faith than the soldiers of Asoka or Kanishka. A new faith is present, and its prophet becomes the foundation of a religion that pervades the Middle East. Upon the foundation of Persian infrastructure and administrative knowledge a centre of vast learning is built, resulting in an earlier and Middle Eastern Renaissance. In the great courts of cities such as Baghdad, masterpieces such as the quatrains of Omar Khayyam are written in equally fine calligraphy. Textiles have their places, such as the ever-present, ever-desired silk. However, the fine illumination of manuscripts in the great Arabian courts and religion, so often the taproot of inspiration, do not quite mesh: Allah forbids the depiction of all living creatures. Brightly coloured, intricate geometric patterns of traditional Moslem becomes the trademark of Islamic art, and Buddhist art takes a backseat not only in India, but its original birthplace of Bactria: quite aside from the unease of depicting figures, most artists realised that Buddhist art would qualify as idolatry, while they themselves would qualify for rather unpleasant consequences. Even during the reign of liberal rulers, the call of the Koran often rang out clearer as death drew near the royal bedchambers – or at least, the rulers' hearing improved.

And in religion, there are sects: it is a well known fact that in religion, most people believe themselves to be on 'the right side'. In and of themselves, the arguments over the succession of caliphs are not deadly. But when honed by the flame of fanaticism, steel-eyed men make their home in mountains ... of which their most famous refuge is Alamut.

The 11th century saw a wave of fear, centring on this eyrie of assassins. No rulers dared move against Alamut, not when the long mountain shadows ghosted into their military tents and left cold steel behind. The Old Man of the Mountain was the sort of bogeyman who sent living daggers, ones that worked for years and worked wormwood gall into the heart. Rumours abounded of strange religious rites involved the intoxicating smoke of marijuana. These rumours were perpetuated through the ages by historians and orientalists. Nowadays, *hashishins* are far more likely to be Woodstock attendees, and bear little to no resemblance to the assassins who dwelt in Alamut.

New Days

As we walk on the busy streets of Tokyo and in the serene mountain temples of Korea, the wind gods hold their weapons, guard their temples; it is only their guardian role that bears resemblance to the heroes they once were in ancient Hellas – the man dying in poisoned blood and fire, only to be reborn on Mount Olympus. These modern Herakles have skin as dark as fine-ground ink and look more like Indian Rakshasa than anything else. The Shinto god who hails from Hellas may still be seen in the Shinto shrines of Japan, fast food restaurants and cracked brick walls: such as the street graffiti in busy Shinjuku sprayed by pale youths high on hashish and their own hair gel.

Features have changed, warped by the slow seeping of time, of the world and gods and men. The Tarim Basin is drying, reclaimed by the wind and the relentless strength of Sol. The proud cities of Merv and Balkh, the empires of Khotan and Mongols are shifting heaps of sand, each and every one of them Ozymandias. The many-pillared temples of Khotan arched in their own shade and were poised only to fall to the Kushans, then to China, then to Moslem rulers. History is a relentless onslaught.

Age cast out its lonely hand, only to wither the great armies of Genghis Khan. All the dead cities in his wake, the heaps of dead and the streets in which dogs howled to the moon ... ghost cities that faded as quietly as they had once sprung in vibrancy from the sands.

Only fragments are left of earlier times until the 20th century finds a treasure trove within the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas. Hemp, silk, paper and statues, all come tumbling out to the delight of modern archaeologists.

In the separated states of Korea, I've walked in the southern half, travelled on the highways bopping my head to the music of Queen, walked up small paths to reach Buddhist temples.

Walking up the mountains there is noise but a kind of muted hush. It's not like the cities, with their noise and business deadlines. Taking in deep green-scented breaths already clears my head, before walking across sandy temple grounds and entering them. The complexes are carefully laid out, with paper lanterns sometimes floating above my head in rows. There are so many gold-leaf Buddhas, and dark wood interiors. Every time, I sit on the thin flat cushions before me and bow my head.

I've lived in a small temple room. For a week I sat and ate pickled vegetables, my young body then rejecting all food. It's a simple life. Perhaps, up there in the wind and trees and dark wood ceilings, it's easier to find serenity.

My closest moment is at a temple, high up on a cliff over the sea coast. I leaned over a hole in the floor and peered down at the waves. There was a moment when my body was the tide, falling onto the rocks below.

Years later, the temple was burned to the ground. But the Buddhist faith is one of impermanence, and something in me still remembers what it was like to be the tide.

And what of the the Great Buddhas? Kanishka ordered their construction, but Vairocana and Sakyamuni came into being four centuries after Kanishka returned to dust. The centuries-

long diligence of the artisans is rewarded; the deep hollowed niches and Afghanistan's dry climes preserve the statues through centuries. Even in later days, people stand and stare out across fields to marvel at the Buddhas. They are featured in documentaries, posted in flat pictures on the Web.

Then in March 2001, the Taliban destroy them. Slowly they wheel out anti-aircraft guns, heavy artillery. For days on end the Buddhas are fired at, stone shattering, old clay breaking. The niches are blasted wide open. The exposure is almost crushing, the dark and gently hidden niches suddenly ... no longer there. They are maimed, but do not die. Finally, men are lowered into the recesses. They gently place dynamite around the statues' base, before stepping away and pressing a few buttons. When the dust settles, the Buddhas are gone.

Looking back with photogrammetric reconstruction, we may still see the clasped fist of Vairocana against his robes, the light touch of Sakyamuni's fingers to his palms, forming symbols of guidance and teaching to the suffering. Holographic displays are being planned now that the Taliban is no longer in power – officially. But these somehow seem terribly impermanent; cast in the cold light of hindsight to me, the lines on my computer screen indicating depth and details are a poor substitution for the serene.

Narcotic State of Mind

Perhaps with a sort of desperate hope to put others' faith to the sword, the Taliban broke what they believed to be idols.

Bactria I can understand. Ancient rules, to conquer and feast. But Afghanistan ... that's a state born in an uneasy newness of mind, and one that might be fading fast in a field of poppy red. Hashish is popular, but opium is a lucrative trade for Afghan farmers, and in their rocky landscape filled with war unasked for, a trade filled with terrible seduction.

How can I blame them? I am in an upper-middle class family; I am not starving, threatened by rifles or stoning. The women of Afghanistan must fear the very stones will rise up against them if they flout the ancient code of Pashtunwali or the strictures of Islam, and the rich red poppy fields offer these farmers a good livelihood that is securing the lives of themselves and their families. Sneering at them is small and mean, something only people who can afford diets can equally afford to do. Somehow though, the Silk Road has changed. It's all airplanes, arms and drugs dealers, plus the addict spilled in an alleyway with the mangled flesh of needle tracks.

The Dhammacakra mudra seems a terribly futile gesture for the masses drunk on opium and pain. Too many years of suppression by the Taliban has led to the message of enlightenment being stifled by narcotic flowers. Bactria has been numbed to change; Afghanistan is on a knife edge and will topple even with that gentle extended gesture of teaching. Afghanistan is not a country that needs further division; it is a country that needs help, which is no longer Bactria, and the tide is dark and still.

Endless Journey

Ella Davidson, 14, Elsa High School

The sun beats down on my bare back
A long vast never-ending road stretches out before me
like a ribbon of silk
The mountains before me march like camels into the horizon
The sand as golden as the coins I hope to earn
I feel the sharp gravel gnawing at my feet
Loneliness chews at my weary old bones

Through the sweat and pain I feel the younger workers' questioning stares as I trudge by
Occasionally I inhale the sweet smell of the incense
That weighs down the pack on my back

What keeps me going?
Her photo as faded as her life has become
as she lies in the shack
I call home
Her warm brown eyes which used to sparkle
are now shriveled up in pain as they weep silent fears
Her happiness drained from all her features
As she has transformed into a living skeleton

Aidriano and the Mercenary

Christopher Lo Ting Ho, 10, Korean International School – Springboard

There was once a man named Aidriano who lived in Rome. He worked as a chef in a famous restaurant. He had a nice life and was paid handsomely for his job. The only problem was he was bored and dreamt of travelling the world and experiencing new things.

One day he decided to pursue his dream. He quit his job, sold his house and bought things he needed for the journey. Aidriano now had lots of money and was worried that he might get robbed and killed so he hired a mercenary. The mercenary was tough and mean looking. He was so mean that he wouldn't tell Aidriano his name. Before they set off, Aidriano bought a horse and named him Spike.

They went to Turkey on horseback and encountered some Turkish pikemen, but the mercenary killed them. As they made their way across the hot, dry desert they saw something that made Aidriano's blood turn cold. It was a caravan of travellers that had been set upon by bandits. Most were dead or dying; one of them called out to Aidriano and as his last dying act gave him a treasure map.

Aidriano and the mercenary took supplies and decided to follow the map. First they went through Iran where they were attacked by raiders, but again the mercenary killed them all, except one. This raider became a slave.

The trio carried on to China and towards the treasure. It took them eight months because the mercenary kept going the wrong way. Eventually they arrived in Shanghai and the place where the map said the treasure would be. Aidriano and the mercenary left the slave with the horses and went to the market to buy some Chinese weapons. Whilst they were there an army of soldiers captured them. They were tried and sentenced to be executed in the city square. Just as they were about to be beheaded the slave appeared and shot an arrow at the executioner. In all of the chaos, Aidriano and the mercenary escaped.

They disguised themselves as Chinese men, and went off to find the treasure. They found the treasure in a cave. A very old, weak man, who the mercenary struck down with one blow of his sword, was guarding it. There was so much treasure that they decided to split it into three. Aidriano bought a ship, silk and new weapons. He set the slave free, because he had helped save his life. Before Aidriano headed off to Rome he asked the mercenary one question and that was, "What is your name?" The mercenary answered that his name was Meanus Strongus Maximus, the greatest assassin in Rome. And with that, Aidriano set sail back to Italy.

To India and Back

Angel Ka Man Poon, 16, Korean International School - Springboard

Long ago there lived a young man named Jack; he sold fabric at a market in South China. He was 18 and wanted more from life than what he had.

One day he decided to see the world and went to the coast to catch a ship. He met lots of people as he was waiting for the ship to leave. One of the people he met was from India, who was also a fabric seller. He told Jack all about India and the fun things to do and the nice places to see. Jack and Taj, the Indian fabric seller, became good friends. Along the journey they talked about the fabric business and how Jack could make a fortune using his knowledge.

The small ship was filled with hundreds of people and it was difficult to move. Most of the people were going from China to India to visit family or to find work. Jack was a little bit scared because Taj told him the food in India was very spicy and Jack was not sure if he would enjoy that kind of food. Jack felt tired so he slept on the floor with a blanket that he'd made out of some fabric he was hoping to sell.

After seven days, the boat stopped in Thailand to get supplies. Then the boat got even busier and began to smell bad. For the next two weeks Jack lived on the boat and met lots of different people. The boat eventually stopped in Calcutta, India.

When Jack got off the boat he smelt smells that he had never imagined and was hit by how hot it was. There was so much to see in Calcutta. There were many markets that sold spices and fabrics and things that he had never seen before. It was difficult for him to find a job because no one spoke the same language as him.

After a while Jack began to feel homesick, he thought about his family and really began to miss them. He decided he must return to China, but first he needed to make some money. He took his last few coins and went to the nearest gambling centre and sat down. The place was full of dangerous looking people with broken teeth and scars on their faces. He started playing cards and began to win and win and win some more. He had won so much money that he could buy lots of fabric from the market.

When he returned to China he set up his own shop and all the people came to buy the wonderful fabric that he had brought back from his voyage to India.

The Tale of the Silk Road

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The longest, greatest gallery ever
The gallery passes through East and West
Itself is the greatest ever
This is the Silk Road

Silk and porcelain
Gold and silver
Tons of luxuries and metals went to the West
These luxuries from China became symbols of glory
This is only part of the Silk Road

Pepper and cucumber
Grape and pomegranate
Tons of foods and spices went to China
These foods from the West became food of daily use
But this is only part of the Silk Road

Paper and printing
Paper changes the way of sharing
Printing changes the way of how to share
Paper and printing changed the world
They led to the rapid sharing of information in the past
But this is still only part of the Silk Road

Buddhism and Mazdaism
Many religions pass through a long way to arrive into China
China doesn't have a state religion
As there are so many different religions
Their entry contributes to the modern China
But this is still not the entire Silk Road

What is the entire Silk Road?
Silk Road is a gallery full of products, cultures, religions and everything
Silk Road is the gallery that links up the East and the West
Is there a gallery that passes through boundaries and countries?
Yes, the Silk Road