

Night of the Sevens

Night of the Sevens

A supplement for 'Rivers and Lakes' by Ben Wright

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Introduction

Night of the Sevens

(Qixi)

This is a supplement for the role-playing game *Rivers and Lakes*.

Its contents fall into four basic categories. The first category consists of more ideas for character background and locations and organisations in the world of your quest. This includes a very brief list of martial arts schools and other organisations that commonly feature in wuxia. The second is a brief selection of optional rules to add details and nuance to the basic rules. Further advice for the Game Master makes up the third kind. The fourth is a series of five linked quests tied to the legend behind the qixi festival.

The first chapter of the book is about extra detail in character creation and all the new (and optional, remember) rules. Chapter two consists of GM advice. Chapter three contains setting details which you may or may not want to include in your game. The last chapter is the quest book for the Night of the Sevens campaign.

Glossary

A quick reminder of terms used in *Rivers and Lakes*.

Game Master (GM) – The player who orchestrates the game.

Player Character (PC) – A character controlled by the other players.

Non-Player Character (NPC) – A character controlled by the Game Master

Jianghu – The setting of the game, and the genre of this kind of story.

Wulin – A skilled martial artist. Player Characters and some Non-Player Characters are wulin.

Xiá – A wandering martial artist. Players Characters are probably xiá.

Useful Links

<http://chthonic.I50m.com/rpg/riversandlakes.htm> – Rivers and Lakes web page.

http://www.lulu.com/chthonic_games – Other products by the same author.

<http://queex.livejournal.com> – Author's blog.



Scroll I: Blade and Fist

Additional Character Detail

The rules of *Rivers and Lakes* are pretty minimal- they cover the basics of skills, tasks and fights without introducing complicated rules for specific abilities. Similarly, the detailed histories of the xiá are left out of character creation so the players can elaborate on them during play and relate them to the events of the story. That's not to say that some specific details can't be worked out then, or once the game has begun- and here are some suggestions for additional detail you can flesh out a character with. These details should never be purely for the sake of character definition- they should be phrased such that the GM can use them to flesh out the quest or the world or draw on them for inspiration in introducing scenes. The details can be written on the back of the character sheet.

Training

Where did the xiá learn martial arts?

Orthodox - Apprenticeship - Informal - Evil

Established martial arts schools and monasteries that instill a sense of righteousness in their pupils are called '*orthodox*' schools. Famous schools likely to appear in jianghu stories are listed in a later section, and most orthodox schools have their roots in one of them, possibly even being a satellite school in a geographically distant location. Orthodox schools, despite often fierce rivalry, consider themselves the guardians of the secrets of martial arts, and band together against evil schools or other threats to the stability of the country. A character with this form of training is likely to encounter other students from his school or rival schools.

The secrets of kung fu can also be taught in a more direct master/apprentice manner. This often occurs when a master travels far from the school he was taught in and encounters a promising youngster. The *apprenticeship* is similar to the tutelage in martial arts schools, but often with greater emphasis on practical application as the master and student get into trouble as they travel. Xiá taught in a school environment may feel that apprentices lack discipline and a sense of greater loyalty to their fellow practitioners, and apprentices can have difficulty being accepted as equals by other students. A former apprentice is likely to have or have had a very close relationship with his master, to the point of inheriting enemies or allies the master made.



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Some martial artists develop their skills *informally* without any proper training. He might have developed his style from first principles, or peeked at students learning in a school and attempted to copy their actions without being taught directly. What such xiá lack in technique they often make up with raw talent, strength or energy. Informally trained characters may be snubbed by others, or have to work twice as hard to prove they are worthy of respect.

Schools that corrupt the teachings of orthodox martial arts schools, using them to gain power, fame or wealth at the expense of the greater good are called '*evil*' schools—by others if not by themselves. Some evil schools may even have developed their styles that no righteous school would consider— involving concealed weapons, poison or dark magic. A xiá trained in these suspect skills must have turned his back on his former masters and sought to use his strength for good, and that means other members of the school seek out the character with intent to kill or capture him. If it comes to light that the xiá is a practitioner of certain techniques, there may be a loss of honour or trust.



Photograph by gongfu_king

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/drnantu/2248185661/>

Styles

There are a great many historical styles of kung fu, and even more that have featured in fiction. Styles can be named for an animal they seek to imitate, a geographic region they originate from or for the master who created the style. Some are specific to a particular religious group or named after the famous school that developed them. The skills in *Rivers and Lakes* are not styles themselves; rather each skill should be considered a group of styles with similar attributes. Some styles may even fall into more than one skill in the game.



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In short, in this game styles are purely descriptive and you are free to use one you have heard of or make one up to suit you. For the lazy, a short list of real-world styles is given below. As with any aspect of the game, be steered more by the portrayal of styles in fiction than their reality.

Tiger Style	Leopard Style	Dragon Style
White Crane Style	Snake Style	Monkey Style
Mantis Style	Shaolin Style	Wudang Style
Emei Style	Kunlun Style	Eight Methods Style
Buddhist Palm Style	Tai Chi Chuan	Wing Chun

Pick one or more styles that the xiá is proficient in, and make a note of them. They don't have any concrete impact on the game, but you can talk about them in-character as if they do. A character can boast about his style, or explain a defeat in terms of one style being strong against another.

Rivals

It's entirely possible- nay, encouraged- for the players or the GM to create relationships with NPCs on the fly during the game. On the other hand, creating some interesting NPCs before play is no bad thing. Players can create up to three Rivals for their characters.

Each Rival needs a name and a reason for being a rival. Some Rivals have bitter histories with the xiá in question- accusations of betrayal or murder thrown in both directions. A Rival may be someone who bullied or humiliated the xiá, or someone who feels wronged by them enough to seek out revenge. Add as much detail as you like, but remember that the more details you define, the less opportunity there is to invent details in play.

Advanced Skills

All of the rules in this section are entirely optional- they add a little additional flavour to the basic rules but the GM should only play them if the players think they are worth the little extra complication.



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Mastery

If a xiá has a skill at 5, she is said to be a Master of that skill. When a Master is engaged in an Honour-based conflict with someone who is a junior, she gets a bonus die to roll in her pool. A junior is a character with at least 1 dot in the same skill but no more than 4. For NPCs, which do not have skills, the GM decides whether or not they count as a junior. This represents deference towards an acknowledged expert in a martial art a character practises.

If a xiá has a skill at 6, she is said to be a Grandmaster of that skill. A Grandmaster gets the same bonus die in Honour-based conflicts, but any character without at least one skill at 5 or better is considered a junior. The GM may decree that opponents who do not have formal training (such as animals or cheap foes) are not considered juniors.

Essentially, once a xiá has a skill at 5 or more, she is considered an equal by other Masters and Grandmasters. As many, if not most, PCs have a skill at 5 at character creation, they may already be in this select group, and have more success in social situations involving practitioners of their own skill.

Special Abilities

The skills in *Rivers and Lakes* are deliberately identical in combat. The limit on stunts is not a list of allowed manoeuvres but player imagination- and a good roll of the dice. However, breaking the symmetry slightly allows one skill to feel objectively different to the others and introduces elements that mean that a skill is associated in the rules with a particular fighting approach.

A character with at least 4 points in a skill gains the ability to use the special ability associated with that skill. This ability is 'always on', even if the xiá is currently fighting with another skill. NPCs do not have skills in the same way as characters, so have these special abilities at the discretion of the GM. Naturally, these abilities only come into play in fights, and not in other types of contest.

Rat - The Rat is a brilliant technical fighter. At any time, you can turn a 6 in your pool into a 5- reducing your spot count but potentially allowing you better opportunities to perform stunts.

Ox - The Ox has huge reserves of fortitude. You can keep fighting after you have received at least 10 points of damage, but only until the next time you receive damage, however much it is.

Tiger - The Tiger is powerful and merciless. Whenever you attack, and the target takes the damage, you may re-roll one of your remaining dice.

Rabbit - The Rabbit is the master of positioning and opportunity. Whenever you intercept an attack against an ally, you may re-roll one of your remaining dice.



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Dragon - The Dragon holds the virtue of the heavens and the strength of the earth. Your stunts deal an extra point of damage to the enemy.

Snake - The Snake knows how to strike quickly. You always have the initiative at the start of a fight (unless, of course, there are other skilled Snakes involved...)

Horse - The Horse is quick-witted and agile. Your stunts knock 2 cheap foes out of a fight instead of 1.

Ram - The Ram is direct. Your ordinary attacks (not stunts) deal an extra point of damage to the enemy.

Monkey - The Monkey is playful and mischievous. If you attack and your target reverses, re-roll one of your remaining dice.

Cockerel - The Cockerel is given to empty bravado. You can construct stunts using any dice, but if you do so they change to Is.

Dog - The Dog is loyal to his comrades. You can intercept an attack against an ally but matching the number, instead of needing to spend 2 dots more.

Pig - The Pig does not fear a large fight and is a born scrapper. Whenever you take damage, you can choose to take a random amount of damage, by rolling one die, instead of the attack's strength in damage.

Strengths and Weaknesses

A staple of kung-fu fiction is the idea that one style can have an inherent advantage over another. In *Rivers and Lakes*, this is mostly descriptive. When encountering an NPC with a high Threat value, the xiá may exclaim that he is at a disadvantage. Similarly, after a lost fight the character may explain that his style was weak against the one his opponent used. If you want a concrete system for working out these strengths and weaknesses, use the skills layout on the character sheet. When you use a skill in combat, it is 'strong' against the two styles clockwise from it, and 'weak' against the two styles anticlockwise from it.

Rat → *Ox* → *Tiger* → *Rabbit* → *Dragon* → *Snake* → *Horse*

Horse → *Ram* → *Monkey* → *Cockerel* → *Dog* → *Pig* → *Rat*

In a one-on-one fight with another character, if one style is strong against the other the xiá with the upper hand rolls 2 extra dice. Before the dice pools refresh for a further round of combat, either character can change which skill he is using (and roll dice appropriate to the new skill) if he wishes to. This means that sometimes it is to your advantage to use a skill other than your highest one in a fight, if it gives you an advantage over your opponent. Alternatively, you can take the precaution of studying a foe's style before engaging him.



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In a larger fight, where there may be a number of different skills being used, strengths and weaknesses do not normally come into play. The advantage only comes in a more orderly contest.

As NPCs do not have skills as such, the GM can decide whether or not a PC benefits from a strength or struggles with a weakness in a given fight. If she wishes to make it random, she can have the player roll a single die- 1 means the PC's skill is weak against the NPC, 6 means it is strong.

Master and Student

A common motif is the master/student relationship. A learned xiá may take on a pupil worthy to learn the secrets of martial arts. If two players agree that their PCs are a master and his student, then that's just a good piece of background information. If, on the other hand, a player wants his character to take on an NPC student as a side story and potential plot hook, then some thought needs to be given to how the master and student are played. Similarly, a player may ask the GM if his xiá can begin as a student of an NPC master.

Taking on a Pupil

In order to have a pupil, a xiá must have at least one skill at 5 or more. As long as he has an NPC pupil, he does not earn any dots of stats or skills as quest rewards. The pupil earns them instead.

An average NPC pupil has 10 points to spend on stats (no more than 5 on each) and 10 points to spend on skills (no more than 3 on each). The pupil also has One Good Thing and One Bad Thing as normal. The pupil's quest always begins as 'To learn from my Master', but in practical terms the pupil embarks on whatever quest his master does.

A pupil is considered ready to leave his master and find his own way in the world when his Honour is at least 3 and he has at least one skill at 4 or more. At the end of a quest, the master can inform a qualifying student that his apprenticeship is over. The Master need not do so, and may delay releasing the student if he feels that there is more he can be taught or that the student is not quite ready to become a true xiá. When a Master releases a student, the master receives 2 points of Honour (although Honour still can't be higher than 6).

Finding a Master

If you want your character to be a student of an NPC master, you should create a xiá without any skills higher than 3. To offset this limitation, your character may have higher overall stats than normal. At the GM's discretion, you have 12 points to spend on



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stats (no more than 5 on each) and 10 points to spend on skills (no more than 3 on each). This represents a character with greater than average natural gifts, but currently without proper training- exactly the sort of person a master seeks out as a pupil.

You earn bonus points as quest rewards as normal. Your master sets you awkward tasks as part of your training. Often these involve trying to use a skill you are rather poor at. If you are being obedient, and carrying out your master's instructions, you get a bonus die to add to your pool.

A typical NPC master has 10 points to spend on stats (no more than 6 on each, generally skewing to low Strength and high Wisdom) and 20 points to spend on skills (no more than 6 on each, at least one with 5 or more). They also have One Good Thing and One Bad Thing as normal, and a commitment to the same quest as the players.

Once you have at least one skill at 4 or more and an Honour of at least 3, your master may release you at the end of a quest. If he does so, you gain a point of Wisdom (not taking it above 6) on top of your usual quest reward.

Playing a Duo

Sometimes, the GM may ask you to play your NPC student or master in a scene instead of your usual character. This lets you flesh out the NPC with details you choose, and gives you a certain amount of ownership over the NPC, unlike other NPCs in the game.

However, the student/master relationship is not a way for you to get to play two characters at once. If the master is involved in a scene, the student is watching and learning from the side-lines. If the student is active in the scene, the master is just out of sight, offering advice but letting his charge learn by doing without undue interference. It is not a way to have access to two characters with different skill sets. You play your character most of the time.

As noted earlier, if both the master and the student are PCs, it is easier to not bother with any special rules and leave the relationship as a description. Both characters earn quest rewards as normal. You can create the student with the alternative number of points given here if the GM approves. You can even have the master release the student at the end of a quest, with the usual rewards for doing so. Of course, the student probably chooses to remain by his former master's side on the next quest...



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Founding a School

Xiá with 6 dots in a skill have reached such a level of proficiency that they can establish their own martial arts school or training academy. Doing so is not simply a matter of acquiring a building and putting up a shingle- the Grandmaster must engage the services of at least two other Masters to act as teachers and have some means of attracting a body of students. The school may be a satellite of a larger, more prestigious school such as the Shaolin Temple or a school dedicated to the Grandmaster's signature styles.

The tuition of the students is markedly different to that of a Master taking an individual student; although a Master at the school may take on a favoured student under the terms in the previous section. The main body of students are considered 'Cheap Foes', being technically proficient but not exceptional.

The school is as much a liability as an asset; the school suffers if the Grandmaster is away for a significant period of time (which may well be the case if he embarks on quests). The school may become a target for rivals or enemies of the Grandmaster, and the eternal struggle to keep the students in line sorely tries the patience of anyone. The establishment of a school may well be the act of a xiá intending to give up the travelling life and settle into something approximating a retirement.



Magic

Magic- at least in terms of of fireball slinging pyrotechnics- is not generally the order of the day in *Rivers and Lakes*. Even powerful evil sorcerers or demons generally show their strength with their sword arm rather than with arcane energy. However, even honourable xiá may know a trick or two they can use in a tight spot. It's still important to keep within tone with magic- the kind that xiá may perform is likely to be closely connected with their philosophy or religion. It is subtle, almost natural-seeming within their world-view.

In a rules context, magic does not make any difference to how hard a task is, or confer any benefit during a fight or other conflict. What magic does do, however, is make possible tasks that would otherwise be impossible, and open up avenues for quests that would otherwise not exist.

If the GM is willing to allow PCs access to magic on a regular basis, each player selects one of his skills to be tied to his use of magic. The xiá has a number of 'spells' equal to his rating in the skill.

Each of these spells must be for a specific, fairly narrow, task related in some way to the skill in question. The GM may allow some of these slots to be blank during character creation, and let the player fill them in with useful spells as needed during play. If the character's skill increases, then he gets an additional slot for a spell. Spells can be noted on the back of the character sheet- they are normally defined by a short phrase that describes what they do; how that may be beneficial in any given situation is up to the player to explain.

Attempting magic is a Wisdom roll, but the GM has authority to rule a task check an automatic success or failure. If the spell is being used in a way to advance the story or uncover an important piece of information, it automatically succeeds. If it is being used in a dishonourable way, or attempting to undercut the drama of the scene, it automatically fails.

Example Spells

The examples here are given cryptic names, you can interpret them in detail or let the GM rule on how they can be used on a case-by-case basis.

Rat: Carry the Load High – Create a Spark – Silver Tongue

Ox: Sleep While Waking – The Zhūshā of No Zhūshā – Bow Low

Tiger: A Trifle Disappears – The Key To All Locks – Passion Stoked

Rabbit: Prodigious Leap – Calm the Spirits – Forgotten Slight

Dragon: Remain Close to Death – Feel the Weight of the Seasons – Banish Spirits



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Snake: The Key to All – Eyes Never Seen – Hear the Spirits

Horse:

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ach Stride a League – Forge a Path – Whisper to the Spirits

Ram: Work Unworthy of a Back – Unnatural Sleep – False Coin

Monkey: Throw Far Away – Confound Writing – Not My Voice

Cockerel: Steed of Wind – No Lie Remains – Captivating Display

Dog: Breath of Forever – Follow the Scent – Lead the Spirits

Pig: Take the Pain Away – Attract Night's Hunters – Glutton's Feast

Alternative Quest Rewards

The simple system of awarding extra dots at the successful completion of a quest helps characters make back any injury they suffered or improve their abilities, but can sometimes feel hollow. Or, if a xiá has had a series of successful quests, his stats can be very strong while his skills are less impressive.

If you are playing with the magic rules above, a xiá can spend a reward dot to turn another of his skills into a magic skill, increasing the number and variety of spells he has at his disposal.

The GM may also award specific, special abilities to the character at the conclusion of a quest. These abilities function in a similar way to the One Good Thing—granting the character an automatic success at a task check. They do not need the One Bad Thing to be invoked first, but usually have a much narrower scope than the One Good Thing.

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ach such ability can only be used once per game session.

The GM can award different such abilities to different characters in the quest, depending on how they contributed. An award like this can be instead of the regular dot for a very short quest, or in addition to a normal dot for a long quest or to reward particularly imaginative play.

Some examples:

Eyes of the Master Hunter – when tracking wild or domestic animals, you always succeed.

Luck of Demons – when engaging in games of pure chance, you win as often as you need to.

The Smith of Smiths – you can perform any blacksmithing task, no matter how difficult.



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The Ear of Justice – you can always induce a confession from a criminal if you know their crime.

Deep and Blue – when diving, you can guarantee reaching what you need to reach on a single breath.



Scroll II: Wisdom of the Ages

This section consists of additional advice for the Game Master; but none of the information here needs to be withheld from other players.

Owning the Setting

Rivers and Lakes is mostly silent on what the game world is like. This is on purpose, so that you, as the GM, never have to think 'is there something like that near here?' or 'does such an organisation exist?' because the answer is always 'yes, if it makes the game better'. More than that, though, you can extend the same principle to your players. Encourage them to suggest additional details or encounters. To give the players opportunities to use the One Good and Bad Things, you'll try to introduce situations that cater to them- but if you let the players suggest ways that they can be brought into the current scene you have to do less work and can concentrate on other parts of the game. Think of the game as partly an exercise in joint world creation.

In a similar way, Player Characters are larger than the world they inhabit. A PC from one game can easily be moved into another, even if the setting is radically different. There are a great many tales about the folk hero Wong Fei Hong, and not all of them are consistent. The character is larger than the stories, and can be moved between them. You may have to make small alterations to a xiá's history to fit the new quest's setting, but such alterations don't affect the character of the warrior.

Picking the Roll

There are four ways that a PC action can be resolved, on a sliding scale of depth and detail. Decide which of them to use based on how long you want to spend resolving the action. Not necessarily based on the difficulty of the action or based on how dramatic the scene is, because time spent playing out a long resolution where the



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outcome is a foregone conclusion delays the story without necessarily adding anything. The exception is when how the action is resolved is interesting in its own right. For example a PC may have sufficient dice in his Cajole pool to persuade the local magistrate to allow him to pursue the thief by himself rather easily- but what arguments he uses and what concessions he makes in the process could be significant.

The simplest way of resolving an action is through **GM fiat**- the GM narrates what happens and the scene moves on. When the action is trivially easy, trivial given the skill of the xiá in question or flat out impossible, this is the way to go. You can also use this method if you anticipate a complicated or challenging encounter later on in the scene.

The next simplest way is through a **Skill Roll**. The player rolls the dice, and it's clear immediately whether the action is a success or failure.

A **Swift and Decisive** Fight takes longer, as both parties in the conflict may trade jabs until one gets through, but often this type of conflict hinges on whichever character had the largest set of dice available for a stunt in their first roll.

A full **Fight** is the longest method available, but gives full reign to describe every detail of the conflict.

Non-Player Characters

Every NPC is in the story to make it more interesting; but in many cases developing a complete history, even off the cuff, is going too far. The most practical way is to add little details to the NPC as the Player Characters spend more and more time interacting with them. There are some simple techniques you can use to give them depth right off the bat, and perhaps turn them into characters the players care about or seek out opportunities to have scenes with, and two ways appropriate to the jianghu genre are given here.

Introduce with a Question

When an NPC first appears, as an encounter on a lonely road or in a bustling town, you don't need to establish an agenda yourself. You can pick one of the players whose character is present and ask a question that immediately establishes some fact about the NPC. This gives the player an opportunity to influence the course of the scene (if, for example, he would like a short fight or a tense negotiation) and bring elements of his character's history into the spotlight. A list of leading questions is given below- but you can ask question appropriate to the situation at hand.



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The intention is not to put the player on the spot by demanding a complicated and interesting response; a simple answer is perfectly acceptable. If a player still struggles for inspiration, turn the question over to the other players for ideas or give some of your own suggestions.



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Why do you trust/distrust him?

Where have you met him before?

What relation is he to you?

Why does he despise/admire you?

How did he earn your respect/disgust many years ago?

Why is his appearance good/bad news?

What reason does he have to want to kill you?

Why does his appearance bring back unpleasant memories?

Why are you glad/unhappy to see him?

What secret does he know about you?

Why do you fear him?

How does his arrival make the quest easier/harder/more complicated?

What rumours have you heard about him?

Why are you now in extreme danger?

How did your last fight with this man end?

Why did you fight side-by-side with him once before?

What turned this some-time enemy into someone you would call a friend?

How did your friendship with him end in betrayal?

Why is this man known as 'Hui of the Green Axe'/'Three Knives Cho'/'Blade the Exile'/something else?

Why does this man carry the brand of a criminal?

There's something that doesn't feel quite right about him, what could it be?



Character Arcs

In a just world, a person's prosperity and influence reflects their personal spiritual development; their adherence to Buddhist or Taoist precepts. The jianghu is not always just, and defining an NPC in terms of how their circumstances and morality are changing is a very quick and easy way to give an NPC an agenda. The four possibilities are:

Spiritual and Mundane improvement (SM+): The NPC is improving her lot by improving herself; becoming more compassionate and wise. She is generous with her money and hospitality. Player Characters often feel the need to reinforce this state of affairs, or interfere to her benefit.

Spiritual and Mundane decay (SM-): The NPC is in a downward spiral. She is becoming poorer, less influential, more bitter and less righteous all at the same time. It may be impossible to work out which decay is causing the other. Player Characters may try to put her back on the right path, or may chide her for her laxity.

Spiritual improvement, Mundane decay (S+M-): The NPC remains righteous and admirable, but circumstances are dragging her down. Despite her stoic attitude things are going poorly for her, as a result of corruption in others or unkind fate. Player Characters will probably have a strong urge to halt the mundane decay and turn her into the first category.

Spiritual decay, Mundane improvement (S-M+): The NPC has turned her back on righteousness, but is prospering anyway. This may indicate corruption in government officials or a willingness to resort to dishonourable methods. The inherent injustice of the situation will almost certainly drive Player Characters to interfere. Whether this is by disrupting her cosy profiteering or encouraging her to reform depends on the PC.

You can have other players assign such arcs to Player Characters too, if you wish, although in practice a PC should not remain in a situation of spiritual decay for long. Wandering too far from the path of righteousness would make that xiá more like an NPC antagonist. A player can let his character become one, if he wishes, but like a sudden betrayal this is best done at the climax of a quest.

Returning NPCs

A good rule of thumb to follow is to never introduce a new NPC if one that has been encountered before fits the role. Wuxia fiction is full of improbably coincidences. If a Player Character needs to visit the market and haggle over the price of clothing, why not make that NPC the same suspicious merchant he encountered on the mountain pass? Naturally, NPC xiá can return time and time again, letting intense rivalries develop in play. If an NPC came off worse in his last encounter with a PC, he may try to tilt the odds in his favour somehow for the return bout- in this way grudges are born. Or maybe a new NPC is a friend or relation of a previously encountered NPC.



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Tough Opponents, as described in the original *Rivers and Lakes* book, are something of a special case. If the Player Characters can survive the first round, they almost certainly roll up the Tough Opponent in the second one. This is entirely in theme- as in fiction the heroes typically take a beating to begin with, but gain a second wind and go on to win. On the other hand, you can use round end as an excuse to have the foe escape- in a similar fashion to how a character can try to change the location of the fight between rounds. If you follow this method, then you can make the challenge of dealing with a Tough Opponent not winning, but winning in a single round to prevent the escape. It's one way of making a fight with a Tough Opponent a little different from previous fights.

An Example of Developing an NPC

The Player Characters are travelling through the countryside, and the GM wants a way for them to find out that an important bridge ahead has been washed away in a supernatural flood. He decides to introduce a farmer NPC to do so.

GM: "There's a man on the road ahead. He's dressed as a peasant, and is carrying two heavy sacks from a yoke across his back. Long, what is it about this man's appearance that puts you on your guard?"

Long: "Um. He has obvious sores on his face and neck. It could be something contagious, like that village we found last week."

The GM thinks for a moment. The principal villain of the quest infected the village, and the GM had decided that the flood was also his doing. Letting this be the same

disease is a subtle way of hinting that the villain is now causing problems in this area.

GM: "He's walking the other way down the road. If you carry on as you are, you'll all approach him. Is that what you want?"

Wei: "I still have some of the cure we made. I'll go on a head and speak to him."



Photograph by hsueh888tw

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/hsueh888tw/4422074812/>

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The GM decides that the cure hasn't run ahead of the PCs, as they have been travelling quickly. He picks the 'Spiritual improvement, Mundane decay' arc for the farmer. The farmer has been tirelessly working to feed those in his village with the disease who are too weak to look after themselves. This selflessness has made him stoic in the face of what he believes to be his imminent death.

GM: "Stay back! Are you blind? I carry the wasting disease!"

From here the PCs may pass on the cure they have, or relay assurances that the Emperor's agents are only a couple of days behind with larger quantities of it. If it comes out in conversation that the farmer has been caring for the other villagers, or he passes the cure onto the sickest ones before taking any for himself, the PCs probably think highly of him and go out of their way to help him. That creates a natural opportunity for the farmer to hear of their destination and warn them of the bridge.

What could have been a simple dump of information, possibly from a paper-thin NPC, instead has become an interesting short scene that brings in elements of both the previous game session and the current one.

Themes

There are a number of themes that feature time and time again in heroic fiction of all kinds- Duty, Honour, Love, Sacrifice, Vengeance, Betrayal and more. When you're devising a quest, you can pick a theme appropriate to its main purpose and find ways of working that theme into the story in other ways. If the theme is Vengeance, then you can make many of the NPCs have their own reason to seek revenge on others, even if only in small ways. Don't try to push the theme into everything that happens. Take the opportunity to explore the different possibilities of the theme in the side stories and histories of NPCs.

For example, if the quest is stop an evil sorcerer from enacting his diabolical plan, you may decide that the theme of the quest is sacrifice- both the human sacrifice at the height of the sorcerer's ritual and potentially a personal sacrifice by one of the xiá to stop him. The sacrificial element of the sorcerer's plan may not be known until near the end of the quest, but if during the course of the game there are many examples of people making sacrifices- sacrificing love for duty, sacrificing an ox for a good harvest, sacrificing their principles for political advancement- when the time comes for the final showdown the potential consequences of such sacrifices are already in the players' minds.

Player Themes

A similar idea is to have the Player Characters carry particular themes with them. If a xiá's history and actions in the game point to a particular, strong theme, then play up to it and allow further examples to enter the story when you can. If the theme of the



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quest matches the theme of one of the PCs, then you can see to it that the character in question is pushed into a more starring role than usual. Or you can turn the idea on its head and encourage the players to create characters with themes that match the one already established for the quest.

Mixing it Up

If your players are starting to become comfortable with the game and its mechanics, you can start playing games with the rules to handle quest-specific, unusual circumstances.

For example- if the quest centres around a mischievous and magically-inclined hermit, he may fight the xiá more than once only to disappear whenever he gets hurt. As he does so, he summons a number of ghosts to cover his escape. To create mechanics for this, you say that when he disappears his remaining dice are rolled again to make a new pool for the Cheap Foes he has created. For the final fight, you rule that every time he suffers damage, he creates a similar pool again (although this time keeping the dice in his own pool) to swell the ranks of the ghosts. After the first nasty surprise, the players probably cotton on that the best strategy is to defeat the Cheap Foes first, then attack the hermit until he creates some more.

A simpler example is if the villain of the piece has some sort of special protection that means the xiá can't harm him. Before any of their attacks become effective, they have to successfully complete a side action or two to remove the protection he has by destroying an artefact or erasing a magic circle he's drawn.

Example three- let's say you start the session with two Player Characters about to fight. Their players don't know why, but you want to keep flashing back from the fight to the events that led up to it. You run the fight as though it was a Swift and Decisive fight, but record the damage done when one of the characters scores a blow (or when the round ends without and damage being inflicted). After the first flashback scene, you cut back to the fight and run another Swift and Decisive battle- and so on. Once one of the characters has accrued 10 points of 'damage' from these short conflicts, there's a final flashback that finishes explaining how the fight started.

You do have to be rather careful when doing things like this. It's easy to accidentally overpower the PCs, so you should be prepared to adjust your quirky rules on the fly if you need to. These novelties are not there to become a regular feature of the game, or for you to show off your rules-making prowess- they are there to address specific, unusual circumstances and keep the players interested and on their toes.



Scroll III: A World Rich in History

As already mentioned, the setting for a Rivers and Lakes game is something you can and should make up as you go along. However, there are certain aspects to Jianghu that occur in many stories; either as significant plot elements or as background details. Many of these are at least partly historical details, although heavily fictionalised. They are useful specifics to drop into a game to emphasise the genre, or as a shorthand for a particular idea. If you mention the Shaolin Temple, it not only reinforces the wuxia setting conjures the image of righteous xiá from a bustling monastery.

It goes without saying that the version given here are designed to be useful to you as you play, rather than be historically accurate. Change any detail you wish to.

The Four Mountains

The most famous and respected schools of Martial Arts come from four mountain temples, but there are many other schools apart from those.

Shaolin Sect

Often heralded as the founding monastery of all martial arts, the Shaolin Sect is both the largest and most well-known school. It is a Buddhist organisation. It specialises in 'external styles'- formed from principles of leverage and movement in a practical way, although softer 'internal' styles are also taught and practised. The mountain itself is located in the east of China. It takes only male students and expects its monks to remain celibate.

Wudang Sect

The Wudang sect is a Taoist organisation that practises 'internal styles'- where energy flow and personal perfection are held to greatly influence martial ability. It is often considered the leader of all Taoist sects in the same way as Shaolin is considered the leader of all Buddhist sects. It sometimes allows women to train in its ways, but most of its practitioners are male. It is located in central China.



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Emei Sect

Although this sect is as old as Wudang, it is rather less well known. It is unusual in that its most senior members are almost exclusively women, and has a reputation for teaching styles that compensate for a lack of physical strength. It is another Buddhist temple, although it has no direct relation to Shaolin. Emei Mountain can be found in the west of China.

Kunlun Sect

Kunlun mountain itself is only one peak in the vast Kunlun mountain range, in the extreme north-west of China. Its remoteness means that its very existence is not well-known in the east. Although it has its roots in Taoism, it does not follow the religion so strictly any more. Like Wudang, its members can marry.

Other Sects

There are great many other sects throughout the world, some more righteous than others. Feel free to invent any you need, perhaps giving it a little history in relation to the major sects. There are a small but significant number of small schools that specialise in one particular, extremely powerful technique. Such techniques can defeat even the strongest xiá, unless he can study it and find a critical flaw.

Evil Cults

Evil schools often mix martial arts with sorcery, and are usually ruled by a single, dangerous fighter. They are natural antagonists, and you should create them to be the enemies that get destroyed- even if the leader escapes to found a new cult.

Organisations

Apart from martial arts schools, there are several other types of organisations at large in the world.

Imperial Army

All military power comes from the Emperor- at least in theory. If the land is in turmoil, there may be a number of rulers with an eye on Imperial power, each with their own army. Even local governors are appointed by the Emperor, and control armed forces only with his permission. Imperial Generals wield no small amount of political power, and have the ear of the Emperor, but ultimately are at his beck and call.



Escort Agencies

No, not that kind. Travelling can be dangerous, particularly for someone transporting valuable cargo, so skilled fighters with an entrepreneurial spirit establish or join escort agencies, taking money from people to keep them safe as they travel. Not only is this a suitable career for a xiá, but it can also serve as a great means of hooking a PC into the quest. More than once the desperate but virtuous have sold all their worldly goods and begged a discount from such an agency.

Mercenaries

Soldiers with no fixed allegiance, often from the fringes of the Empire, often seek work where they can. They are not necessarily without honour, just trained warriors at a loose end. Their army may have been defeated or disbanded, leaving them with little to do other than fight for money.

Assassins

Assassinations are not common enough for an organisation to make its money that way, but politically powerful figure may maintain a cadre of killers for his own use. Such an organisation is probably small and does its best to avoid being discovered, even if it can't be traced back to its sponsor. It may also contract out, if the price is right and the client has the right connections.



Photograph by Tauno Tõhk

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/toehk/4079286417/>

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Revolutionaries

There is no shortage of people dissatisfied with the current Empire. They might support a pretender from a different dynasty, or fight for their remote part of China to rule itself. They can make some of the most interesting antagonists, as their ultimate goal is not unequivocally selfish or evil. They can still be ruthless and merciless, and their well-meaning rebellion may well threaten the rule of law throughout China.

Foreign Powers

There have always been nomadic hordes at China's borders. Beyond them, and across the sea, there are other, lesser, nations who may have territorial ambitions. True foreigners are distrusted almost everywhere, and fully accepted nowhere. Raiders may come to pillage areas outside their own borders and avoid the censure that would come from attacking their own countrymen. None have the manpower or the organisation to truly challenge the Empire, but they are an ever-present threat in some areas.

Bandits

Bandits can all too easily be a drop in enemy or encounter. To avoid them becoming the lazy choice, consider how they fell to banditry. Perhaps they are a former mercenary force, out of jobs and taking what they can to survive. Maybe a corrupt governor has evicted blameless peasants who now have to choose between a criminal life and starvation. Perhaps they are from a now-disbanded army, foreigners or former Imperial troops who aren't too picky about how they make their money. By giving them more of a history, you prevent them being bland, uninteresting bogeymen.

The Five Punishments

These historical sentences are not the only means of enforcing the rule of law, but are reserved for serious matter to mark the criminal for life.

Mò - Tattooing of the face and/or forehead.

Yì - Cutting off of the nose.

Yuè - Amputation of one or both feet.

Gōng - Castration.

Dà Pì - Death.



Mythology

Traditional Chinese mythology is more than a collection of tales- most have a subtle (or not so subtle) ethical lesson to teach. Of course, sometimes the mythology is altered to match changes in prevailing political thought. The myths are not necessarily meant to be taken literally (although in the magic-infused Jianghu, they are often literally true) but to serve as memorable examples of ethical behaviour. The dominant mythology is a folk mythology, where aspects of Buddhist, Taoist, Legalist and Confucian thought are mingled with older, less structured ones. Like all traditional mythologies there is an extensive list of characters and an even larger list of stories. Naturally, only a few facets are covered here for brevity.

Jade Emperor

The Jade Emperor is the ruler of Heaven and all the realms below it. He is known mainly for his wisdom, and his great kindness and benevolence towards those that are suffering. His responsibility as Heavenly Grandfather means that he has to maintain good order in the heavens and the world below, where doing so would not cause



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greater hardship, and in ruling fairly he does not allow wrong-doers to escape the

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consequences of their folly. Although seldom tested, his strength of will and kung fu are unparalleled. One myth holds that when all the other gods together could not defeat a demon that was rampaging through Heaven, he was able to best it single-handedly.

Dragons

Chinese dragons are auspicious omens of power, strength and luck. The house of the Emperor uses dragons in its heraldry; five-clawed dragons can only be used by the Emperor himself. Dragons are closely related to water, often inhabiting remote or mystically significant bodies of water, and they can control rainfall and floods. Devastating floods are often claimed to have been caused by a dragon angered by a mortal. The four Dragon Kings are said to inhabit the East China Sea, the South China Sea, the West Sea (i.e. the Indian Ocean) and the North Sea (Lake Baikal). Although wise and powerful, dragons seldom interfere in mortal concerns.

Fenghuang

The significance of the fenghuang is second only to the dragon. Where the dragon is a symbol of power, the fenghuang is a symbol of grace. The females are known as huang, and the males feng. The union of both represents harmony between yin and yang. It is said to be easily seen at the dawning of a new era or during times of prosperity, and to hide when the land is in turmoil.

Demons

The demons of Chinese myth are superficially similar to demons in many other mythologies- preying upon or tempting mortals to sin. Most are considered corrupt animal spirits, or beings from Heaven that have been cast out because of their evil behaviour. Di Yu, the underworld, is a hell where the unrighteous are tortured to death repeatedly until it is time for them to reincarnate. Although thought of as cruel, Di Yu is a necessary part of the order of things and the Yama King that rules it was appointed by the Jade Emperor himself. It is tempting to make demons the root of evil within a quest, but introducing a cardboard cut-out enemy wastes an opportunity to have an enemy with history as to how he became evil.



Scroll IV: The Qixi Festival

Here is a series of five linked quests, each revolving around the themes of love and duty, building to dramatic climax that could change the cosmos.

If there's a chance that you might be a player in this campaign, it's probably best if you stop reading right now.

The inspiration for the quests is the traditional tale 'The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl', which gives rise to the Qixi festival- known as the Night of the Sevens. There are many versions of the legend- the one given here should be considered definitive for the purposes of the campaign, to avoid confusion.



The Legend

Niulang was a humble cowherd who lived near a lake. His only friend was a talking Ox, who he had befriended many years ago.

Zhinü was the youngest and most beautiful daughter of the Jade Emperor, tasked with weaving colourful clouds for Heaven.

One day, Zhinü and her six sisters came to Earth to bathe in the lake near where Niulang lived. They did not know that anyone lived there, and left their robes at the side of the lake. Niulang, searching for an animal lost from his herd, saw them bathing in the distance. He instantly fell in love with Zhinü. The Ox, a mischievous soul, persuaded him to steal their robes to see what would happen.

The sisters were in a bind- without their robes they could not return to Heaven. They elected Zhinü to go and retrieve them. She willingly did so, and when Niulang was told about the significance of the robes he did not hesitate to return them. Before she left, however, he overcame his shyness and asked her to marry him. Since he had seen her naked, and she could see he was an honest and caring person, she agreed. She took the other robes back to her sisters, but went to live with Niulang.

As the years went by, Zhinü proved to be a wonderful wife to Niulang, and he an equally wonderful husband to her. They had two children, a boy and a girl, and lived humble but happy lives.

Eventually, Zhinü's mother came to learn that one of her daughters was neglecting her duties. She was furious that a mere mortal could steal her away from Heaven, and ordered that Zhinü return to Heaven. Zhinü could not disobey her, and did so. When Niulang discovered she had gone, he was inconsolable. His oldest friend the Ox came to him as he wept, and told him that if he killed the Ox and wore its hide, he would be able to enter Heaven to be with his wife. Niulang, weeping now for the courage, loyalty and sacrifice of his friend, killed the Ox, put on its skin, and took his two children with him to find their mother.

The Jade Emperor saw Niulang sneak into Heaven, and could not let Zhinü's neglect of duty and Niulang's trespass go unpunished without threatening the order of Heaven and

Earth. He summoned a river to flow through the Heavens and keep them apart. Zhinü must spend her days weaving at her loom. Niulang watches her from across the river, taking care of their children.

The river is the Milky Way, Zhinü is the star Vega and Niulang the star Altair.



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On the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, all the magpies of the world take pity on the couple, and form a bridge across the Milky Way so the two can meet and share a night together before returning to their places.

The Campaign

You are the Game Master, right? And not a player sneaking a look?

Good.

Introduction

The quests are intended to be completed in order- the first deals with the mundane lives of ordinary people, and each introduces more mythic elements than the last. The final quest ends with a debate over the future of four people in front of the Jade Emperor himself. You can, however, play the first four in a different order if you wish.

E

ach quest can be its own session, or more than session, or you can compress more than one quest into a single session.

The quests are not fully-specified session plans; it is not possible to predict everything that players might do and the idea is that you can adapt the quests to your purposes. You should put extra elements in to play to the Player Characters' histories and build on their ideas to add detail, as much as is necessary to give the quests the length you want. The NPCs have a Threat rating and a brief description you can flesh out in play. Feel free to adjust Threat values if you think they are too low or too high for your xiá. The values assume there are 4 Player Characters in your game. In particular, the stated Threat values usually reflect a contest of strength or a fight, and you should increase or decrease them significantly for other types of contest. Special abilities are also listed, if you are using them in your game, and from those you can deduce which skill or skills the NPC is likely to fight with.

Read the story of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl out loud, or give them ample time to read it through before you start making characters; make it clear that the legend plays a key part in the game.

The first quest deals with original question of Love versus Duty. A farmer's daughter has fallen in love with a soldier. The Player Characters ultimately decide whether they elope or give up their love to fulfil their duties.



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The second quest pits two different Duties against one another, and two different Loves. A father is torn between needing to care for his family and a job assigned to him by the Emperor. His wife is torn between her love for her husband, and a new love who may be better able to care for her.

The third quest has Corruption against Duty. A local governor is running a scam involving a 'talking' ox. As dishonest as it is, his family will be destitute if he stops. The fact that there is a talking Ox in the town is beside the point.

The fourth quest revolves around Love and Jealousy. All the magpies in the world have gone missing. One of the Jade Emperor's daughters, envious of Zhinü, has stolen them in advance of the qixi festival.

The fifth quest begins with the Players Characters accused of helping Zhinü and Niulang leave Heaven. They are tricked by the Jade Emperor into bringing the couple back to Heaven, but then have an opportunity to plead the case of the lovers and, perhaps, overturn the Jade Emperor's previous judgement.

Player Characters

The campaign can be run with existing Player Characters, or ones created from scratch. In the latter case, make sure to give the players the Legend to read first (or read it to them) in the hope that it inspires them to create xiá with in-built hooks to tie them to the plot. A mysterious figure- The Voice- is on hand during the campaign to steer the xiá towards the next quest or offer advice and encouragement. The Voice is, in fact, the spirit of Niulang's Ox, wandering the world freely.

Themes

The main theme of the story is the conflict between Love and Duty. Those two elements play a strong role in all of the quests. Twisted versions of them, Jealousy and Corruption, also play an important role. If you can cast a PC's One Good Thing and One Bad Thing in terms related to the story, even better.

There are secondary themes- the number 7 features prominently and the idea of brief meetings crops up more than once.

Decisions

Each of the quests involves a key decision from the Player Characters- usually between favouring Love and favouring Duty. Try to arrange matters so that if one player takes the lead in the decision in one quest, a different player is given the bulk of the responsibility in the next. Keep track of how many times Duty is favoured- this total helps determine the overall outcome of the campaign. It's easy to think of the decisions



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as trivial, particular to our modern eyes, but try to encourage the players to see the question from the viewpoint of xiá used to an environment where duty is a sacred concept. Their decision is reflected in their actions, not necessarily in their words or intent. Almost certainly, when presented with a dichotomy, players attempt to find a compromise. Let them do so, but judge which out of Love and Duty the compromise is closest to.



Q1 - The Soldier and the Farmgirl

The Premise: The eponymous soldier and farmgirl have to choose between living up to the duties put upon them and following their nascent love.

The Decision: Ultimately, they look to the PCs for guidance on what to do. If the PCs steer them towards sticking with their respective duties, then score one for Duty.

Important Characters

Conscript Kang - Soldier

Threat: 6

Fights with a spear, using Ox techniques. S+M-

Kang is just into his twenties. He grew up in a crowded merchant town, third son of a labourer. He has little talent for business and joined the army as a way of getting away from the humdrum life of fetching and carrying surrounded by his more successful brothers. Naturally, he has dreams of glory, but he hasn't yet fought in any real battles. Although he has been deeply in love with Ling Cai since he met her, he is initially unwilling to leave the army. While the army has been camped near the town, he has been sneaking out at night to see her.

Ling Cai - Farmgirl

Threat: 6 (+Ram special ability)

Fights barehanded. S+M-

Cai is fifteen. Her father worked the farm with his brother until a year ago, when the uncle was killed in an accident. She has two elder brothers- one went to the city to become a scribe and the other works the farm. Cai's mother died when Cai was very young, so she hasn't had a female role model to speak of. Her father dislikes her working on the farm, but he needs the help too much to stop her. She loves Kang not because of his 'romantic' army position, but because he is the only person to take an interest in her as something other than a suitably pretty wife or an extra pair of hands on the farm.

General Gang - Career Tactician

Threat: Tough Opponent 7, 7 (+Tiger and Monkey special abilities)

Fights with a jian, using his Wudang training. SM+

Gang was born into privilege, but from an early age set his sights on being a renowned general. He learned what he could from teachers employed by his wealthy father, then left to study Wudangquan. He left his training early in order to find a mercenary company with which to make a name for himself. He never did find one, because he came to the attention of an Imperial General who made Gang his protégé. Gang is now a general in his own right. Gang's sole concern is the art of war, of winning battles and perfecting his knowledge of tactics. The General has his army with him, giving him an almost unlimited supply of Cheap Foes and a number of officers with up to Threat 10.

Captain Hui - Pole-climber

Threat: 9 (+Pig special ability)

Carries a guan dao. S-M+

Hui has one plan for advancement in the military-surviving enough important battles that he can retire into a cushy Imperial position in some small town somewhere. He's not lazy or cruel, but he keeps his eye on his goal and becomes very angry when someone else jeopardises his position. He's worked his way up to a captain so far, but has stalled. He wants to find some way of distinguishing himself so he can push further. Despite his ambition and position, he is not a very good leader of men. His subordinates, not counting Kang, add up to a Threat 10 collection of Cheap Foes.



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Ling Bo - Cai's father

Threat: 3

Fights with a working knife, if he has to. SM-

The Ling family has been working this farmland for generations. Recently, though, times have been hard. Bo is in debt to Tan Cai, and every harvest is a struggle to avoid having the old shopkeeper calling in the debt. Bo is as good a father as he can manage to be, but he has to work so hard he has time for little else. He disapproves of Cai's romantic interest in Kang, but out of concern for her should she marry someone in the army. The Ling family has lost a lot of its members to wars over the years.

Ling Feng - Cai's brother

Threat: 5

Uses whatever agricultural implements are to hand if trouble starts. SM-

Feng is kind soul, deeply protective of his sister and very loyal to his father. He has no ambition

money to engage a match-maker so he can marry and secure the farm's future. He does not know about the debt to Tan. Feng secretly supports Cai and Kang's relationship, recognising the depth of their love, but keeps his thoughts to himself so as not to go against his father's wishes.

Tan Cai - Lecherous Shopkeeper

Threat: 2

Prefers not to fight at all. S-M+

Old Man Tan was married once, to a much younger bride, but she died soon after. There are persistent rumours that he either killed her or she took her own life, but the simple fact is she had a weak heart. The shop is an apothecary, carrying a number of traditional remedies, but Tan himself knows no medicine. He is dead set on marrying Ling Cai, making much of the fact that their given names are similar, and is using the Ling family debt as a bargaining tool.



Photograph by George Lu <http://www.flickr.com/photos/gzlu/489868429/>

apart from to work the family farm, and is saving



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Tan Cheng - Town Governor

Threat: 3

Has men to fight for him. SM+

Tan Cai's younger brother entered politics. His career was crippled after an unfortunate slip of the tongue at an important meeting with the regional governor, and he chose to take the position of Town Governor of where he grew up as a sort of retirement. He does not much care for his older brother, but recognises the prosperity his business brings to the town. He is concerned by the arrival of the army, and the potential danger to the townsfolk from both the foreigners and the Imperial soldiers. He has nominal control of the town watch, which all told are a Threat 10 group of Cheap Foes.

Threat: Tough Opponent 9, 9 (+Dragon and Tiger special abilities)

Fights with butterfly swords or thrown darts. S-M+

The Red Blade is an important officer in the foreign army. Some time ago, he took a group of veteran soldiers with him deep into the forests of the area. He's been observing the area and tracking the movement of the Imperial Army. He evaded detection by being far further into enemy territory than General Gang expected. Now the foreign army is on the move, based on information the Red Blade passed to it, he's moving in position to strike at the supply caravans that feed the army and lower morale by attacking towns and villages nearby. His men are Threat 2 fighters individually, but together as Cheap Foes are Threat 14.

The Red Blade



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Starting the Quest

As this is the first quest of the set, you need to assemble the PCs. Establishing trust between them is easy if they have worked together before. Otherwise, it is worth introducing one or two scenes early on where the xiá size one another up, perhaps with good-natured sparring. It should not be difficult for xiá to recognise one another at a chance meeting. Gauging whether or not a stranger is righteous, however, is a serious matter. As for getting all of them to the town where the quest takes place, there are three approaches:

- **Business** - the PC has business in the area. Perhaps her school is nearby, or she has been engaged by the Emperor to travel with his army for a time. It may even be the case that her arrival is pure chance, on her way to somewhere else.
- **Prophecy** - PCs who are in communication with spirits, or who hold faith in signs of prophecy, may be steered to the town by portents. There is a great deal of interest in the town from the spirit world, and signs in the heavens that something of great significance is beginning at that very town.
- **Serendipity** - the PC just happens to be passing through. If she is not the sort of person to wander the land completely at random, she might be travelling to visit a distant friend or relative and arrive at the town while the army is camped nearby.

Once the PCs have had a chance to arrive and introduce themselves to each other (or at least most of them are in the same place), kick off the story proper with a scouting party blundering into them and a potential confrontation. The rest of the quest does not follow a series of set-piece scenes; instead the PCs can explore the town, meet the main players in this quest, and attempt to influence them if they wish. There are three key events that occur during the game which have their own sections later.

The Scouting Party

The Imperial army is in the area because of reliable reports of an encroaching foreign force. As part of the mission, regular scouting parties are sent into the surrounding wild areas to look for signs of enemy movement. This particular party has an ulterior motive, however- Captain Hui has concealed from his superiors the fact that one of his men- Kang- has gone missing overnight. Hui has diverted his patrol into the town in the hope that he can find Kang and return him to the army before anyone finds out. This is not altruism on Hui's part: he stand to lose face if it comes to light that he can't keep discipline in his men.

Wherever one or more of the Player Characters were gathered, the patrol arrives. They can tell immediately that Kang is not among them, but the presence of strangers is suspicious. Hui is in a bad mood, and accuses the PCs of being spies for the foreigners and demand they surrender themselves to him so they can be taken to the General for



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questioning. How the PCs react is up to them; unless one of them has rank in the Imperial army or some other authority vested in them by the Emperor, Hui technically has the law on his side. Of course, General Gang is a lot smarter than Hui, and almost certainly knows the reputation of at least one of the PCs. If they are taken to see him, he does not detain them any longer than it takes to ask them if they have seen anything suspicious in the area. This may be a good time to introduce PCs who are travelling with the army to the rest.

If the PCs resist, killing the Imperial soldiers puts them a lot of trouble with General Gang. If no survivors are left, Gang's assumption is that foreign agents are abroad and the patrols are sent out in greater numbers. It's entirely possible that the PCs successfully deny any knowledge of the fight, but doing so entails a loss of Honour for failing to admit to their mistake. If some of the soldiers are killed but others survive, the General pursues the PCs with all the force of his army he can spare- even if they are not foreign agents they are clearly a threat to order. Rather than execute any PCs he captures, he chooses to compel them to assist his army until the crisis is dealt with to replace his lost troops. Ever the pragmatist, he knows that even one xiá is more useful than a single patrol.

As for Kang, he is hiding in an outbuilding after sneaking away to see Cai. He had intended to be back at the camp before dawn, but some other soldiers were sent to keep an eye on the town so he hasn't had a chance to get away. If the PCs do not find him before noon, Old Man Tan discovers his hiding place and take great joy in having him hauled back to the army in disgrace.

Chasing Down Facts

The initial encounter probably establishes the next direction the PCs follow. It's likely that they fixate either on Kang being missing, or the threatening foreign army. In either case, you can steer them towards finding things out around town. The Red Blade's contingent goes unfound for now, although you can drop hints that at small group has been living off the land for a few weeks to foreshadow their eventual appearance. It's possible that the players consider the love story between Kang and Cai a sideshow to the main event of a foreign invasion- you can easily run it that way as the aspects of love and duty can be downplayed for now as they become all-important in the later quests.

You will probably have to adapt the specific scenes somewhat when the players do something unexpected.

Kang's Brush With Death

At some point, Conscript Kang sees real combat for the first time. By default, this is after he has been returned to the army. His patrol (including Captain Hui) cross swords with the Red Blade's contingent somewhere they expected to be safe. The



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General, presumably aware of Kang's conflicted loyalties, deliberately put them well away from the front and they blundered into trouble. Is this encounter happens without the PCs being present, only Kang escapes alive. Alternative scenarios are Hui's patrol being attacked while they are escorting Kang back to the army or Kang being attacked by the Red Blade's group while he is on his own.

Whatever happens the important thing is that the reality and brutality of war should have an immediate impact on Kang. Whereas before he felt his duty to the army was more important than his love for Cai, afterwards he sees no value in a duty that bloody and violent. With that revelation, he has no compunction deserting the army if he can get away with it.

Given the opportunity, Kang flees the army to hide at the Ling farm, relying on Cai to bring him food and other essentials. If discovered, he defiantly declares his intention to stay there. Captain Hui, without his unit, can't do much about Kang, and the General Gang is occupied with enemy manoeuvres. Bringing Kang back is exactly the sort of task he would assign to xiá indebted to him while the army is engaged. It doesn't matter whether Kang is brought back or not, because the next event should follow shortly.

Feng's Guilt

Old Man Tan is unhappy that Cai has another suitor- not least because he knows he can't compete with the younger man for her affections. He decides to try to force matters by letting the truth of the Ling family debt slip to Feng. His intention is for Feng to put pressure on his sister to accept Tan's advances, but of course Tan has misread Feng's attitude. Feng knocks Tan down, then runs to confront his father. If the PCs are nearby when this happens, so much the better. When Feng accuses his father, Ling Bo collapses.

Although Ling Bo survives, and seems to recover in just an hour or two, Feng feels a huge amount of guilt for shouting at his father- it goes against his respect for him, even if he felt justified at the time. The collapse scares Cai- enough that she feels a duty to stay and make sure her father is properly cared for. Feng won't be able to work on the farm and look after their father, and Cai is the natural choice to shoulder that responsibility; at least until she is married.

Old Man Tan also cajoles his brother into treating Feng lashing out in anger as a criminal matter. The Town Governor presides over a short trial, which would be an excellent opportunity for one of the PCs to step in and help out. Feng isn't able to defend himself ably.

If you've been keeping track, both Kang and Cai have reversed their positions with regard to Love versus Duty- Kang now wants to put Love above his Duty in the army and Cai no longer wants to elope. Where they go from here depends on the Player Characters' interference.



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The obvious solution would be to have Kang join the Ling family on the farm, but the complication of the farm debt makes it an insecure future, even before Old Man Tan does his best to take his bitterness out on the Lings. It's possible that the PCs find an Honourable way of settling the debt, leaving the way (almost) clear for Kang and Cai to marry.



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Final Confrontation

There are three possible final confrontations, depending on whether Kang leaves the army or not and where he ends up.

If Kang remains with the army...

The Red Blade's group attack the town. The PCs have to defend the Lings and the rest of the townsfolk from the dangerous foreigners. General Gang's forces are still tied up elsewhere, so there is no help forthcoming. The success or failure of the quest hinges on whether or not the Red Blade is defeated.

If Kang stays with Cai in the town...

The Red Blade's group attack the town. The PCs have to defend the Lings and the rest of the townsfolk from the dangerous foreigners. General Gang's forces are still tied up elsewhere, so there is no help forthcoming. The success or failure of the quest hinges on whether or not they still have a farm to work together when the attack is over.

If Kang absconds, with or without Cai...

A reprieve in the campaign frees up a unit General Gang can send to apprehend Kang. Somehow, the PCs are at the scene when it happens. The General has come with them himself; not because of any particular antagonism towards Kang but because he can't let a soldier desert without disastrous consequences for morale. He's prepared to make Kang a deal- Kang can nominate one of the PCs as a champion, and if the champion can defeat Gang in a duel, Kang is released from his obligations. If the PCs have made a good impression on Kang, he yields the first time his pool refreshes. Otherwise, he fights to the end. The success or failure of the quest hinges on whether or not Kang is allowed to leave the army.



Q2 - The Administrator and the Apothecary

Premise: A man pulled away from his family at the Emperor's bidding has to choose between duty to his liege or his family. His wife has to choose between her love for an absent husband or the promise of a better life with her lover.

Decision: The outcome of either of the decisions doesn't influence the campaign; what is important is which of the two problems the Player Characters expend the most effort dealing with.

Important Characters

Administrator Chao - Bureaucrat

Threat 13 (in debate, anyway)

Does not know any wushu. SM+

Chao displayed considerable acumen in an otherwise inconsequential government post. When the Emperor desperately needed someone to get to the bottom of a corrupt office in the nearby provincial capital, he was drafted in because of his honesty and skill. In the seven years since then, he has become an indispensable part of governance in the area. Unfortunately, part of the Imperial mandate forbade him to bring his family to live with him. He is tired of the post, but his requests to be released from his role have so far been rebuffed. He sends any money he does not need to live on to his wife.

Chan Jing - Apothecary

Threat 8

Fights with a concealed knife. S-M+

Jing has been married to Chao for nearly twenty-one years. Since he has been working at the capital, she has raised their two children by herself. Now that the sons are old enough to start making their own way in the world, she is no longer content with the life she has and has been pursuing a clandestine affair with Shun. It's only a matter of time before they are found out, but she cannot choose between her husband and her lover. She has always sent Chao's money back to him.

Wu Shun

Threat 9

Fights with a staff. S+M-

Shun is at best naive and at worst irresponsible. He makes no plans for the future, and takes every day as it comes. His most recent job is as a cook in a restaurant opposite Jing's apothecary. Since he has been with her, he has started to realise the merit in thinking of the future. He has worked hard at the restaurant, even buying books at his own expense to learn new recipes. Unfortunately, his boss Mr. Zhi fears that Shun is attempting to steal the shop from him, or set up a rival establishment nearby and has been treating Shun with increasing harshness. Shun desperately wants to make his relationship with Jing 'official', but knows it is her decision to make. He's prepared to wait, for the first time in his life.

The Voice

Threat 12 (although all he can do is talk)

This is the Voice of Niulang's Ox. The animal spirit has left the Heaven of Loyal Animals because of a series of visions he has seen. He knows that great trouble is soon to strike Niulang and his family, and has come to see what he can do for his old friend. He doesn't know exactly what form this trouble will take, but he knows where and when significant events are going to occur. The magic that has returned him to Earth also prevents him from saying who he is, or who his friend is, or anything that unequivocally links him to Niulang and Zhinü.



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Chan Xue - Chip off the old block

Threat 8 (if talking)

Believes the pen is mightier than the sword. SM+

Chao and Jing's eldest son is nearly eighteen. He has his father's eyes and instinct for administration. He doesn't get much opportunity to use this aptitude, but he has sent a letter to the office of governor in the adjacent province in the hope of being offered a position as a junior clerk. Jing has saved travelling money for him, should his application be successful. Xue resents his father. The fact that his job application's strongest element is his father's reputation does not help matters.

Chan Yu - Takes after his mother

Threat 5

Often carries a sharp knife. SM+

Yu learned medicine at his mother's knee. He is fifteen, but is fast becoming knowledgeable enough to rival his mother. He hopes to take on the apothecary business when his mother retires. Yu used to hate his father, spurred on by his brother, but as he has grown he has realised the honour and additional security that the post has brought the family. He has started to suspect that his mother and Shun may be more than good friends, but has yet to voice his suspicions.

Ma Xun - Assistant

Threat 14 (+Rat and Dragon special abilities)

Fights with wind-fire wheels, usually hidden in the wide sleeves of her robe. S+M-

Xun has been Chao assistant since he took up the post. All that time, she has harboured an unrequited love for him. She originally intended her tenure to be short; she had recently left the Plum Blossom Assassin group and needed to stay out of their reach. Her love for Chao led her to stay even though she believes he will never betray his wife. As it turned out, the position she held was an excellent disguise that lasted for years- but recently the assassins have located her and sent an agent to kill her.

Tan Qiang - Plum Blossom Assassin

Threat 14 (+Rat and Ram special abilities)

Fights with over-sized wind-fire wheels. S-M+

Qiang was Ma Xun's brightest student before she left the assassins. It became clear that her exit had been well-planned- every member that knew her face (except for Qiang) was found dead. She also passed a great deal of damaging information to the authorities, and many more of its members were arrested or slain. Naturally, Tan Qiang harbours something of a grudge against his former teacher. Now that the Plum Blossom group have tracked her down, he demanded to have the honour of killing her. He is just waiting for the moment to strike.

Mr. Zhi - Restaurant Owner

Threat 6

Fights with a cleaver. SM-

Zhi's restaurant has always a fixture in the town. It serves good food to locals and travellers alike. Unfortunately, Mr. Zhi himself (no-one seems to know his given name) has gradually become more and more dour at not being able to find himself a wife. Now that he is old enough that marriage is unlikely he's taken to drinking heavily after work; sometimes even closing the restaurant early if he can't wait. He is convinced that Shun is plotting to steal the restaurant out from under him, and has tried everything he can think of to make the job so unpleasant that Shun leaves of his own accord.



Starting the Quest

The quest begins with the xiá being addressed by a voice in the air- the Voice of the Ox, naturally. Spiritually-inclined characters don't not have any difficulty in identifying the voice as belonging to an animal spirit, although as per the limitations on the Voice they won't be able to learn who he is that way. The Voice, knowing that the town in the previous quest was important, arrived just after the Player Characters has got involved, and the Voice had watched them in silence. Seeing that they could be great allies in his mission to help Niulang and Zhinü, the Voice attempts to enlist their aid. If they refuse, he engages his most vocal opponent in a philosophical argument to try to change her mind. If she wins, then sooner or later events drag her and the other PCs back to the city and the town in the quest, but events may have moved on without them present. Even the strength of a xiá can't prevail against the flow of myth.

The Voice is as forthcoming as he can be- he can't reveal exactly what is going on but he can ask for their help in a quest of great mystical significance. He won't lie or tell half-truths, and he makes it very clear that all he asks is that the PCs travel to where his visions indicate something important is going on. What they do there is matter for their consciences, and he won't try to change their minds. The visions imply that events shall come to a head during the Qixi festival, just a few short weeks away. If they ever ask him for advice, he makes the suggestion that most seems to favour the Love option over duty- except perhaps where the Duty of friendship is concerned. He won't speak if anyone other than the PCs are around.

It's possible that the PCs work out who he is, and his mythological connection. He can't confirm their supposition, but if they find out it makes no difference to his goals. If they query how the events of the quest relate to events in Heaven, all the Voice can say is that the actions of a few righteous warriors can be reflected in Heavenly matters.

If the PCs follow the Voice's directions, he leads them to a crossroads between the city where Chao works, and the town where Jing lives. He is confused. His visions suggest that both locations are about to become significant. He recommends that the xiá split into two groups to make sure they don't miss anything important. Of course, a Player Character can argue with him if she disagrees.

Two Locations

The town and the city are far enough apart that travelling between them is non-trivial, but doesn't take more than a day or so. The intention is to prevent the PCs from flitting from one to another whenever they want to, so they have to decide if they've done everything they want to in one location before they go to the other. Another wrinkle it introduces is that the two groups might end up working against one another by accident. It's up to you whether the important events listed below occur when there



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is a PC at that location or not, although if a PC is in the area you should not have one of them occur without the PC being there to see it or intervene in it. You can also choose the order they happen in, or if they occur more-or-less simultaneously.

Assassination Attempt

At some point, Tan Qiang attempts to kill Ma Xun. Administrator Chao and possibly one of the PCs are present when he makes his move- in the corridors of the governor's mansion or in the marketplace. Of course, as Xun's past is unknown to anyone else, it is assumed that the assassin's true target was Chao. If no PC is present, Xun defeats Qiang, mortally wounding him, but is herself seriously injured. Xun won't admit to the truth when Imperial representatives are present (and certainly not in front of Chao), but a sympathetic PC might get the facts of the matter out of her. She left the Plum Blossom Assassins after discovering her conscience, and made sure to deal them as much damage as she could before she left. They would hunt her down anyway, and at the time she valued her life little. Her love for Chao, that has kept her by his side, has given her purpose- even if she has to content herself with being his assistant and nothing more. What the Player Characters do with this information is up to them.

Administrator Chao, whether or not he learns the truth about his assistant, has his confidence shaken. Before, he was clear in his mind that serving the Emperor is the right course of action. Even if he learns that he was not the intended target, his brush with death causes him to realise that he owes a duty to his family as well- it is not just his selfish desires that lead him to want to return home. Without outside help, he'll be paralysed in indecision.

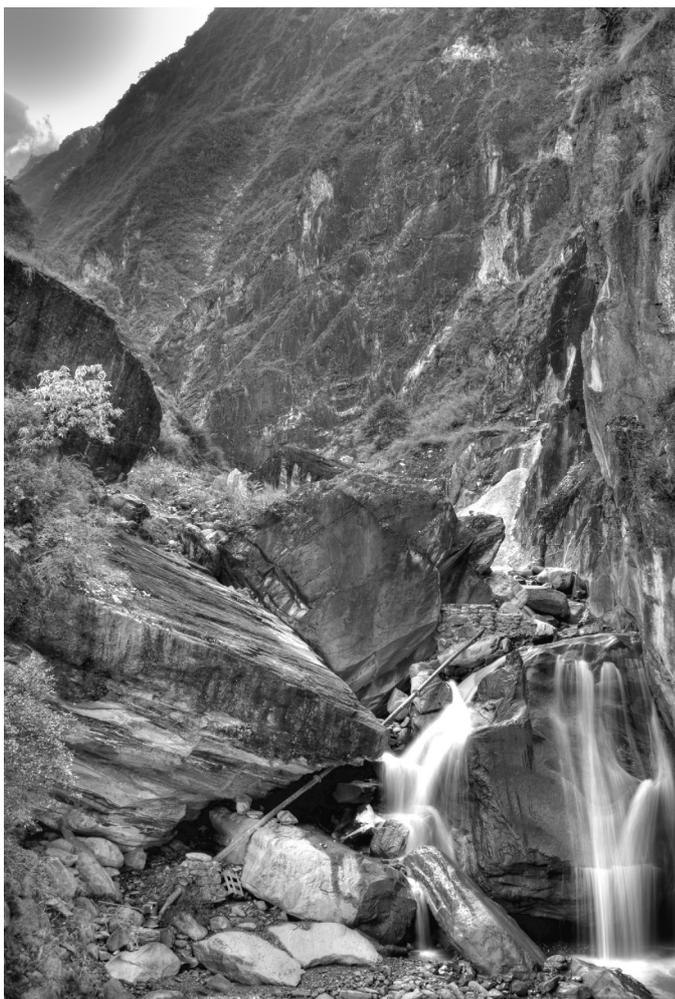
Shun's Secret Revealed

It's inevitable that Jing and Shun's secret comes to light. If an opportunity presents itself, have a Player Character see Shun leaving Jing's room just before dawn. This gives the players a chance to confront either of the two about the affair and find out their feelings on the matter. Shun's mind is made up- he wants to stay with Jing as long as he is able. Jing wants companionship, but she genuinely cannot decide between her husband and her lover. The former has been out of her daily life so long that their time together is hazy memory, but in her heart she knows that Shun, despite his availability, is second best. She needs help working out if it's worth waiting for Chao's retirement to have time with him again.

Before any advice the PCs give her can sink in, the matter is brought to a head by Mr. Zhi. Some days ago, he worked out that Shun was seeing Jing. The old drunk had planned to blackmail Shun, perhaps even force him to leave the town, but his bitterness gets the better of him and he accuses Shun in the middle of town. Shun almost strikes the old man, but realises too late that he's blown his chance of denying it credibly. He storms out of town, no destination in mind, just wanting to escape the humiliation for a



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while. Jing is equally upset, closing the apothecary for the day so she does not have to see anyone.

Chan Xue is angry with his mother- but mostly because he's worried that the scandal might end his career before it's properly began. Having always instinctively taken her side, he feels betrayed. Chan Yu is more philosophical, realising that the clues were there if either of them had bothered to notice them. He's concerned mostly about how the fuss affects his parents.

The public shame only makes Jing less prepared to make a decision one way or the other.

Resolution

Chao has to choose between two duties. Jing has to choose between two loves. The outcome of the quest, and the final confrontation, depends on which of the four combinations are reached. The details, particular with regards to what happens to the principle NPCs, should be adapted to fit how the PCs have handled the quest.

In any case, the PC's haven't heard the last of the Plum Blossom Assassins.

Chao chooses family, Jing chooses Chao...

Chao makes up his mind to return home; but that means abandoning his duty to the Emperor. To gain his release, he has to plead his case to the provincial governor. In a rye twist, the governor commands Chao to argue against his request, and choose someone to argue for it. Naturally, Chao picks a PC he has met who has impressed him with insightful argument.

If the PC wins, the quest is successful. Chao returns to live with Jing, and is given governorship of the village as a reward for his tireless service. Xun, heart-broken, takes on his role in the provincial capital. Xue is offered the position as a scribe, and Yu is just

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happy to have both his parents again. Shun, shamed and with nowhere in particular to go, leaves the town a broken man. If the PC loses, Chao leaves in disgrace, but at least he can return to his family and help Jing around the shop.

Chao chooses family, Jing chooses Shun...

As in the previous section, Chao has to choose someone to argue his case.

If the PC is successful, so is the quest. However, Chao returns to the town to find that Jing has eloped with Shun. The apothecary closes, but Chao can look after Yu in his new role as governor. Xue becomes a scribe, as before. Xun takes Chao old position. If the PC fails, Chao has no cushy job in the town, but he runs the apothecary as best he can, relying heavily on Yu.

Chao chooses the Emperor, Jing chooses Chao...

Jing is determined to join Chao in the city. To go against his contract, she has to argue before the provincial governor. Naturally, she chooses a PC to represent her, and Chao has to argue against his wife's wishes.

If the PC out-argues Chao, Jing can live in the city with him, and brings Xue and Yu with her. Xue gets a chance to learn his father's trade as one of Xun's subordinates. Shun continues working for Mr. Zhi and drowns his sorrows with his boss every evening. The quest is considered a success. If Chao wins the argument, the quest is considered a failure. Jing moves to a town closer to the city, abandoning the apothecary.

Chao chooses the Emperor, Jing chooses Shun...

Chao remains in the city, serving the Emperor. Jing openly invites Shun to live with her in the apothecary. Xue leaves his mother in disgust, looking to find employment as a scribe wherever he can. Yu stays with his mother, but takes an increasingly important role in running the shop.

Xun, however, can't forgive Jing and Shun for betraying the man she loves. The PCs learn that she has left the city, having sworn to kill Shun. Any PC who success at a Very Difficult 'Run' or 'Ride' test can reach the town before Xun strikes, and try to fight her off. If no-one gets there in time, or she overcomes every PC who does, she kills Shun and disappears- the quest is a failure. If she is defeated, the quest is a success, and she lets herself be taken into custody once her rage has subsided.



Q3 - The Governor and the Ox

Premise: A governor is using an ox, a concealed compartment and his daughter to scam people out of money. Things are getting out of control as criminal elements take an interest in the growing flow of pilgrims. The Player Characters can step in to stop the scam, but where does that leave the governor and his daughter?

Decision: The governor will probably be exposed, stripped of his office and possibly jailed- but the decision is how the PCs deal with his daughter. If she's allowed to keep some of the ill-gotten gain so she's not forced on the streets, duty is weak.

Important Characters

Governor Fu - Huckster

Threat: I0

Fights barehanded, although he is out of practice.
S-M+

Fu is not exactly a poor governor. He judges cases brought before him fairly and appoints capable people to important positions. His failing is embezzlement. He has been skimming money out of the city coffers at a modest but consistent rate for most of his time in charge. Unfortunately, he is also involved with a number of disreputable characters and has lost most of the money he has been stealing. In order to settle his debts with them, he's hatched his latest scheme.

Chun Fen - Daughter

Threat: II (+Horse special ability)

Fights with a staff. S+M-

Fen was nearly thirteen before she realised that the way her father made a living wasn't entirely honest. She didn't object then, as the profits made their lives more comfortable, and she doesn't object now out of respect for her father and fear of what might happen to them both if he is exposed. She's not entirely comfortable with her role in the scam, and would prefer it if her father brought it to a close somehow. As a somewhat spoiled child, she's never learned a skill or trade she could use to support herself.

The Broken Promise - Assassin

Threat: I5 (+Dragon, Tiger and Monkey special abilities)

Fights with a three-section staff. S-M+

The most dangerous debt Governor Fu owes is to the Plum Blossom Assassins. The Broken Promise was originally sent to the City of Seven Bridges in order to collect- or at least give Fu a compelling reason to borrow from someone else to pay off this debt. As it turned out, Fu had a full payment after his wildly successful ox scam. The Broken Promise does not realise it is a scam, and after communication with his senior, he has been told to bring the skin of the 'talking ox' to the order.

Farmer Hai - Con Victim

Threat: 7

Fights with agricultural tools. SM-

Hai was one of the first farmers in the city to witness the governor's talking ox. He asked it about his future, and the ox promised him that his fortune would take a dramatic turn for the better. Taking the prediction literally, Hai sold most of his livestock and took all the money he had to the nearest gambling den. He lost everything. He now only has the few animals that were too ill or old to sell, and nothing with which to rebuild his farm. He's not sure whether the talking ox lied to him to ruin him or he was scammed.



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Li - Hai's son

Threat: 2

S+M-

Li is a little too young to realise exactly how much trouble the family is in. All Li knows is that his father really, really hates the governor's talking ox, so Li has kept the fact that one of their oxen has started talking to himself.

Talking Ox

Threat: 5

S+M-

The ox doesn't know how he came to talk. All he knows is that Li looks after him well. He has no insights into the spirit world, cannot tell the future and just wants a quiet life with his young friend. He's heard about the other talking ox, but suspects that something is wrong and wants to steer well

Monk Lui - Holy Man

Threat: 10 (+Rabbit and Cockerel special abilities)

Fights with a monk's spade. SM+

Lui is the senior monk at the city's Bhuddist temple. He believes the talking ox to be some sort of scam, but has no proof. He saw it once, but only by persuading the governor to let him see it without charge in exchange for blessing the animal. Lui tried asking questions to try to trap any con-artist into a mistake, and was quickly hustled out of the ox's room. Until he finds some evidence one way or the other, he's remaining on the fence.



Photograph by George Lu <http://www.flickr.com/photos/gzlu/469814884/>
clear of the carnival surrounding it.

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Luong Ru - Would-be cult leader

Threat: 8 (+Dog special ability)

Fights with a staff. S-M+

Ro was once just another farmer, but since the 'talking ox' correctly predicted his future he's become a believer in its divinity. He has been arguing the the city square that the governor should turn the ox over to the people so that everyone can benefit from his wisdom, and his charismatic speeches have given him a small but vocal following. More than once he has tried to force access to the ox, only to be kept back by the guards. The only reason the governor hasn't put him in prison is because the governor fears what his followers may do in response. His followers are a Threat 10 mob of Cheap Foes.

Tax Assessor Heng - Unconvinced

Threat: 7

Fights with a ceremonial jian. SM+

Heng was sent to the city to investigate Fu's rather suspicious book-keeping. However, the fuss about the ox has caught him off-guard. He's pored over the accounts Fu keeps, but the governor covered the tracks of his embezzlement just well enough. Heng is sure there's some tax issue surrounding all the money Fu is making from the talking ox, but so far Fu has successfully argued that religious donations are outside Heng's perview. Heng does not care in the slightest about any talking oxen- he's just there for the tax assessment.

The City of Seven Bridges

Governor Fu holds his position in a vibrant city where one river joins another. Despite the name of the city there are in fact eight bridges- but the eighth joins two parts of the governor's estate and is not open to the public. There is wide farmland surrounding the city, and the marketplace is full of farmers and their agents selling produce that is carried across most of the country. It's prosperous, but only as a result of the rich agricultural land that surrounds it.

The talking ox, however, has transformed the city. Visitors from miles around are queuing up to enter the city, and every inn is letting the rooms out to three people at once just to keep up with demand. The better-prepared pilgrims brought tents with them, and a tent village has sprung up around the main road into the city. Seeing the ox is not cheap, which means that most people can only afford to see it once or twice. Those who cough up the money are allowed to join the queue, and given no more than a minute each to talk to the ox. Order in the queue is kept by the town guard.

The secret of the scam is quite simple. The room the ox is kept in is rather dark and small. Chun Fen is small and lithe enough to crawl into a void behind the wall near the ox's head. She throws her voice, and the darkness conceals the fact that ox's movements don't match what is being said well. It's explained that the ox talks with magic, its mouth does not move. To begin with, Chun Feng was a little incautious with what she has the ox say, but with practice has mastered the art of cold reading. She is careful to make sure she doesn't make too bold or too easily disproven predictions.



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As governor, Fu can call on the city guard if things get rough. A patrol is a Threat 6 group of Cheap Foes, and there are two Threat 8 captains. If trouble breaks out and the alarm is raised, assume a patrol arrives at the start of each sequence of fighting until you decide there are none left in the area of the trouble-makers manage to slip away unnoticed.

Arriving at the City

The Voice of the Ox directs them to the city as the next significant location, according to his visions. The tent village is plainly visible, and the excited atmosphere infectious. Once the Player Characters have asked someone what's going on and been filled in on the details, it is likely that they want to check out this talking ox for themselves. Meeting the other NPCs who have an iron in this particular fire probably happens afterwards. Although there are a lot of visitors to the city, renowned xiá are still a novelty, so it's likely that some of them, such as Monk Lui or Luong Ru, seek out the PCs once they learn of their presence.

Talking to the Ox

The audience with the ox should be stuffy, short and unsatisfying. The governor makes his money per head, so he has no interest in making the sessions worthwhile. He lets punters into the room personally, and has a pair of guards on hand if anyone tries to stay longer than he wants. Any predictions Fen makes are deliberately vague, and questions she can't answer are met with a 'the spirits ask me to remain silent on that matter'. It's entirely possible that if more than one PC sees the ox, the messages they get are contradictory. Making up plausible-sounding prophecies all day is a struggle for Fen.

Working out that Fen is throwing her voice is a Very Difficult Investigation check, or Moderate if the character specifically examines the wall while the ox is talking. An easy way to discover the trick is to ask the Voice of the Ox what he sees is going on. Naturally, as a spirit the Voice knows there is nothing unusual about the ox and can look behind the wall to find out the truth.

Confronting the Governor

If the PCs learn the truth, they may try to confront the governor. Fu immediately becomes defensive, outright accusing them of lying and making veiled threats that if they keep spouting such slander he shall have them arrested. If they push him far enough, he makes good on this threat. Player Characters probably won't have much difficulty avoiding being taken into custody, but openly defying local law entails a loss of Honour.



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If they confront Fen instead, she immediately spills her heart to them and begs them for them to find a way out of the situation for her and her father. She won't support any plan that ends in the governor's arrest (or hers!), but happily helps them bring the scam to an end if asked.

If the Player Characters go public with their accusations, then they incur the wrath of Luong Ru as well as risk arrest. Defusing such a volatile situation without violence and needless loss of life will not be easy.

Reactions to the Ox

While in the city, the obvious topic of conversation is the talking ox. This provides an excellent opportunity for the Player Characters to meet Hai, Monk Lui, Luong Ru and Assessor Heng, if they haven't already.

Very observant character may notice the Broken Promise, or have crossed swords with him in the past. One way or another, he avoids being waylaid for now.

Talking to the Other Ox

When there's a lull in events, have the Voice of the Ox approach one of the PCs and says 'You have got to see this'. The Voice of the Ox has discovered the genuine talking ox.

The ox is a little worried about all the attention, but as long as his friend Li is there, he'll bear with it. He can't make any prophecies or offer any insights. 'Some more grass would be nice.'

The Voice of the Ox points out that this is more evidence that something of mythic importance is in the works.

The Broken Promise Strikes

Having exhausted any means of taking the ox away alive, the Broken Promise decides to kill the animal, skin where it lies, and leave with the skin. This triggers the conclusion of the quest, but may happen early if it becomes generally known in the city that the talking ox is a scam. Because the Broken Promise won't attack the ox once he knows its phoney, he has to have already gone to the governor's estate with that aim in mind when the rumour starts spreading.

As soon as he runs the ox through, Fen starts screaming. The governor flees for his life, leaving the two guards to lose their lives trying to defend Fen and the ox. The scream should attract one or more Player Characters, who find themselves in a bitter fight in the dark with the Broken Promise. As soon as he can, the Broken Promise takes



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the fight to the street, knocking over a vendor's cart and setting fire to a building. As the decorations strung from the building catch light and flutter away to start other fires, the assassin deals with any potential enemy as best he can.

The fire is an ever-present danger. Every so often, roll a single die and says the fire has made that attack against someone in the street. Player Characters can intercept the attack as normal to save the unlucky civilian.

Luong Ru, fearing something has happened to the ox, wades into the fight, attacking the Broken Promise, the PCs, Fen or anyone else in the vicinity. His followers do the same, turning the fire and panic into a full scale riot.

It's likely that any thought of defeating the Broken Promise gives way to a simple desire to end the carnage before too many people are injured. In that case, call the quest a failure. Only if the Broken Promise is killed is the quest a success.

Aftermath

When the mayhem has subsided, Assessor Heng arrests the governor. The charge is tax evasion, because after everything that's gone on Heng is certain he'll find evidence if he searches hard enough. The 'talking' ox is dead. Without the governor, it falls to the Player Characters to try to restore order as best they can. How they manage the different NPCs interests, if at all, is up to them. Using some of the ill-gotten gains to make reparations to those who lost money during the scam is a good start.

The decision, however, rests with what happens to Fen. She is caught by one of the PCs or Heng trying to abscond with some of the governor's stashed money. She begs any sympathetic PC to let her go, with enough money that she isn't forced onto the streets. The money has all been taken from duped people, and some of it is probably due to the Emperor in tax. Heng is insistent that she can't take it, but won't actually prevent her from doing so if the PCs approve. If the money is confiscated, Duty is strong.



Q4 - The Bridge of Birds

Premise: All the magpies have disappeared. One of Zhinü's sisters, jealous of her beauty and of her husband's love, has stolen them.

Decision: The decision rests with whether the Player Character encourage the sister to confess her actions to the Jade Emperor or whether she keeps her role a secret. If the former, duty is strong.

Important Characters

Liúxīng - Daughter of the Jade Emperor

Threat: Tough Opponent 10, 10, 10, 10, 10 (+Rabbit, Dragon and Snake special abilities)

Fights with a meteor hammer. S-M+

Liúxīng, the Meteor Girl, is one of the daughters of the Jade Emperor who came to Earth with Zhinü on that fateful day. Her responsibility is for creating shooting stars, as omens and in celebration of important events. In time, she has come to resent the love that Niulang and Zhinü have for each other. She has stolen all the magpies in China, just a week before the Qixi festival. Without the magpies, the two lovers won't be able to meet each other.

Lo - The Bird Man

Threat: II

Fights bare-handed. SM+

Lo is an astrologer and ornithologist. As an old man, he has little use for festivals and the like. He lives happily alone, having done with his life everything he wanted to already. He has noted the disappearance of the magpies, and being a scholar of mythology he knows exactly what this means—no Qixi festival this year and bad luck for the whole country.

The Emperor

Threat: Tough Opponent 8, 8, 8 (+Dragon and Monkey special abilities)

Fights with a dao. SM+

The Emperor rules all of China. He is a venerable seventy-seven years old; not as strong or as limber as he was, but he rules wisely. Despite that, he is not aware of all that goes on in his palace, let alone the country. It's possible that one or more of the Player Characters has met the Emperor before, or is known to him. He has little patience for those who break the rules or do not know their place.

The Empress

Threat: Tough Opponent 7, 7, 7 (+Dragon and Ox special abilities)

Fights with an iron fan. SM+

The Empress has been the Emperor's consort for forty-nine years. She is seventy years of age, but has dedicated much of her life to the study of crafts and music. She seldom interferes in politics, but more than once has been a moderating influence on the Emperor when his insistence on order was misplaced.



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Advisor Cheng - Master of Assassins

Threat: Tough Opponent I2, I2, I2 (+uses dark magic)

Fights with his magic. S-M+

Advisor Cheng is the shadowy ruler of the Plum Blossom Assassin group. No-one in the organisation knows this, for he hides his identity and passes on his instructions through coded messages. He gently guides the Emperor's attention away from matters Cheng is involved in makes seemingly sensible suggestions that further his goals. He is not foolish enough to believe he can hoodwink the Emperor, but he can subtly arrange matters in his favour. There are no circumstances under which he will reveal himself as an assassin or a sorcerer, even if he is attacked. He feigns feebleness until help arrives.

General Gang - Career Tactician

Threat: Tough Opponent 8, 8 (+Tiger and Monkey special abilities)

Fights with a jian, using his Wudang training. SM+

General Gang's campaign against the foreigners has been successful, and he has reported to the Emperor in person. Much honour is accorded to him, and depending on his previous interaction with the PCs he is either friendly or frostily polite.

Captain Guo - Keeper of the Keys

Threat: I4 (+Dragon and Rabbit special abilities)

Fights with a spear. S+M-

Guo has responsibility for keeping the Imperial Palace secure. This includes holding a set of keys that can get a person into anywhere in the palace- a privilege only shared by the Emperor himself. Liúxīng has bewitched Guo, however, in order that she could gain access to the Tower of Regrets and imprison the magpies there.

The Bird Man

The Voice of the Ox leads the Player Characters to an unassuming shack on a hill- he says there is not time to lose as the qixi festival is only a week away. Smoke is coming from the chimney, and the glow of lamps shines through the windows. This is Lo's home.

Lo welcomes the xiá into his house, offer them some green tea, and ask them what brings them to visit him. Whether they tell him about their quest or not, he drops into the conversation that the magpies appear to have vanished. It's been preying on his mind, and he's itching to tell someone about it.

That should set some alarm bells ringing. Lo says that with no magpies to form the Bridge of Birds, the natural order of the Heavens is disturbed, which may have grave consequences. The Voice of the Ox, whispering so as not to be heard by Lo, is vehement that something has to be done before the festival.



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The Journey to the Capital

Finding where the magpies have gone is the important task. It's up to the players to come up with ideas. Magic may be used to gain a vision of where they are, or a lone magpie trapped and observed to find out which direction it wants to go in. Any good idea from a player should bear fruit; on a successful task check give them some additional useful information. If all else fails, Lo makes them a mirrored kite. They can fly it to see the light from the Tower of Regrets and, knowing that magpies are attracted to shiny objects, can make an educated guess that that is where they need to go.

Liúxīng is keeping the magpies imprisoned in the Tower of Regrets, in the Imperial Palace. It's a building seldom used except on very rare ceremonial occasions. Liúxīng scrambled the wits of Captain Guo to get the key to the tower. She uses her skill at creating shooting stars to make a shiny beacon so irresistible that it has attracted all of the magpies in China. Once they were at the tower, she caught them in nets and let them loose in the lower levels of the tower to keep them out of the way.

However the PCs track the magpies, they eventually end up in the Imperial Capital and at the gates of the palace itself, just the day before the festival is due to begin.

The Palace

The Palace is filled with activity at all times of the day and night; servant criss-cross the halls on errands, guard patrol the main thoroughfares and gardeners tend to the series of exquisite walled gardens that nearly every room looks out onto. The Emperor is currently playing host to General Gang, in celebration of his recent victory. Gaining access officially is not easy, but playing on their previous contact with Gang might be one way of managing it. Otherwise, appealing to the Emperor that they are on a quest of great importance could work, if only after a frustrating waiting period. Sneaking into the Palace is possible, with the right skill, but being caught results in a hasty audience with a rather unsympathetic Captain Guo.

Even once the PCs are in the Palace, getting into the Tower of Regrets is another matter. It can't be climbed, has no windows and only a single iron door with only two keys. One set used to be on Captain Guo's keyring, but is now in Liúxīng's possession. The other the Emperor keeps in a secret drawer in his chambers.

The Emperor's Advisor, Cheng, already knows of the Player Character's interference with his order of assassins. He won't move against them openly, but he may advise the Emperor in ways that make their task that much harder.

If there is a disturbance in the Palace, Cheap Foe guards come in groups with Threat 12 until someone more senior arrives with sufficient back-up to overcome even the Player Characters.



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The Key

There are two approaches to getting into the tower. The first is to persuade Captain Guo to allow them entry. This first requires someone to break the hold Liúxīng has over him, which may involve a ritual battle with him to restore his will. Once he realises he has been manipulated and the key stolen, he informs the Emperor that something is amiss, and recommends that the Emperor lend his key to the Player Characters so they can deal with the dangerous foe in the tower.

The second approach is to steal the key from the Emperor's chambers. As this is tantamount to staging a robbery of the Imperial treasury, the keys to both being on the same ring, it is not easy. If the attempt fails, have it fail by raising the alarm rather than by them not getting the key. Afterwards, it's a race against time to avoid the Palace guards and get into the tower itself.

Approaching the Emperor directly with a plea to be allowed access to the tower does not work. It is a breach of protocol that he will only countenance if it can be proved that something is amiss- the testimony of Advisor Cheng or Captain Guo is sufficient, but the former is not forthcoming and the latter is only after Guo has been broken out of Liúxīng's thrall.

The Tower of Regrets

The tower is the tallest building in the Palace. It has a top open to the sky, and a long winding staircase to its summit. There are no windows, but there is a succession of rooms the staircase runs through on its way to the top. Liúxīng chose this location for its height and the difficulty for others to interfere with her plan.

As soon as the Player Characters enter the tower, they are surrounded by agitated magpies. They are on the floor, every surface, flapping so much that feathers hang in the air and the noise is deafening. After a large number of such rooms, they reach the summit where Liúxīng is waiting to fight them off.

There are two trapdoors onto the roof- a small one a person can climb through and a large one (barred from the top) that the magpies have been sent down through. The twinkling star Liúxīng has made burns in a brazier in the centre of the tower top.

Fighting Liuxing

Liúxīng is a powerful opponent. The open top of the tower is distressingly easy to fall from, so the minimum risk the Player Characters can take in this fight is Injury.



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The goal of the fight is not to defeat her, but to let the magpies escape. This requires two successful side actions during the fight. Liúxīng attempts to block either, if she can, but of course if she has used up most or all of her dice a good time to perform them is before she takes enough damage to refresh her pool. Using stunts to perform the side actions may also blow through her defences.

The first is to open the large trapdoor. When this is done, the magpies come pouring out in a torrent, flying around the top of the tower madly and making it difficult to see.

The second is to destroy the star in the brazier. Breaking it directly is a Very Difficult task (Liúxīng won't bother to block attempts with insufficient dice to succeed). Pushing it off the tower is a lot easier. In the latter case, the star plunges to the ground and shatters, spreading its glow all over the city. Without the star to attract them, the magpies fly away to where they came from, ready for the Qixi festival.

If the star is destroyed first, then obviously the magpies fly away as soon as the trapdoor is opened.

If Liúxīng is still fighting when the magpies escape, her plans are in ruins anyway. As there's no point in continuing the battle, she surrenders.

Defeating her counts as a victory for the quest. If she overcomes the Player Characters, General Gang, Captain Guo or the Emperor himself arrive at the nick of time to free the magpies.

An Opportunity for Mercy

Once captured, Liúxīng reveals who she is and, if pressed, why she was stealing the magpies. All she wants now is to return to Heaven, but she has to explain her absence. She asks the Player Characters if they can persuade the Emperor to claim he invited her to the Palace to advise him on an omen he had seen- a fiction that spares her any repercussions from the Jade Emperor when she returns to Heaven.

If they agree, and persuade the Emperor (one Player Character arguing with him until he hits his first refresh should do it), Duty is weak. If they refuse to help her cover up her jealous actions, or persuade her to confess her actions to the Jade Emperor, Duty is strong.



Q5 - The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl

Premise: Niulang and Zhinü have fled Heaven. The Jade Emperor himself asks the Player Characters to track them down.

Decision: The PCs must argue the case for leniency for the lovers before the Jade Emperor himself.

Important Characters

Niulang - Cowherd

Threat: Tough Opponent I0, I0 (+Ox special ability)

Fights bare-handed. S+M-

Niulang, after untold centuries of yearning, has finally found a way to return to Earth with his bride and their children. He won't go back without a fight, and he won't be parted from Zhinü for anything. He came up with the idea of using the panicked magpies as a bridge back down to Earth.

Zhinü - Weaver Girl

Threat: Tough Opponent I2, I2 (+Dragon special ability)

Fights bare-handed. S+M-

Zhinü finally has an opportunity to stay with her love forever, and does not willingly give up that chance. She has been furiously weaving coloured clouds to obscure the Imperial Capital and the surrounding land so that those in Heaven cannot see where the two of them are.

The Jade Emperor

Threat: Tough Opponent 20, 20, 20, 20, 20 (+all special abilities)

Fights bare-handed. As if he needs a weapon! SM+

The Jade Emperor has decided to take a personal interest in matters. The chaos that Niulang and Zhinü are causing on Earth in their attempts to escape together are a grave threat to good order. Whatever his personal feelings on the matter, they have to be returned to Heaven. What fate awaits them the Jade Emperor has yet to decide.

Voice of the Ox

Threat: I2 (Assuming he's talking and not fighting)

S+M-

The Voice of the Ox has been discovered by the Jade Emperor. He is confined to the Jade Emperor's side until the matter of Niulang and Zhinü is resolved. There is no evidence that the Voice was complicit in their attempted escape, but the Jade Emperor is taking no chances.

General Gang - Career Tactician

Threat: Tough Opponent 8, 8 (+Tiger and Monkey special abilities)

Fights with a jian, using his Wudang training. SM+

General Gang is greatly concerned by the mist that has swallowed the city. He may not be versed in mystical matters, but he knows a logistical nightmare when he sees one. More to the point, he's uncomfortable with the fact that his army is not very useful in such conditions.



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Ma Xun - Burying Old Memories

Threat: 7 (+Rat and Dragon special abilities)

Fights with wind-fire wheels, usually hidden in the wide sleeves of her robe. S+M-

If Ma Xun didn't try to kill Jing in quest 2, she has heard information about the Plum Blossom Assassins that leads her to abandon her post and try to put her colourful past behind her once and for all. She has learned that someone close to the Emperor leads the group, and the leader has recalled all members of the group to the area around the capital. The desertion of her post has ramifications, but that's a problem for another day.

Monk Lui - Going Where he is Needed

Threat 10 (+Rabbit and Cockerel special abilities)

Fights with a monk's spade. SM+

The holy man had an inkling that some thing was amiss in the capital, based on his investigations of the Broken Promise's personal effects. He was not far behind the Player Characters and is staying at a temple in the capital. He can sense a disturbance in the world of spirits, but has no definite idea as to what can be causing it.

Advisor Cheng - Desperate for Immortality

Threat: Tough Opponent I2, I2, I2 (+uses dark magic)

Fights with his magic. S-M+

From the beginnings of his study of magic, Cheng had a single goal- immortality. The Plum Blossom Assassins were a means to an end, a way of securing a position that let him gather information from all over the country. When he discovered a sage or sorcerer who might have secret lore he desired, an assassin would be despatched to slay the learned man and bring his books to Cheng. Cheng grew older without making the breakthrough he wanted, but he did gather more rituals to expand his power. Eventually, his own researches reached a conclusion- the only practical way for him to achieve immortality was to use the skin of a talking ox to ascend directly into Heaven. Granted, he may then incur the wrath of the Jade Emperor- but Cheng is old and will take any divine punishment if it means he never dies.

The Mist

As soon as the Player Characters have finished quest 4, a sudden and mysterious mist descends on the capital. Not ordinary mist- it is coloured with reds, pinks and golds as though lit by the setting sun. The mist is everywhere, throughout the city and far beyond. The citizens are frightened, but have no idea what they can do about the problem. The shapes moving in the mist outside the city seem more of a threat than staying put.

There's not much time for the PCs to digest what's going on, because they are very swiftly summoned into the Jade Emperor's presence.

The Summons

The Jade Emperor sits on a simple wooden bench, in a grove of trees forever caught in blossom time. There's no mystery as to who he is- an air of serene wisdom and hidden power radiates from him. He gestures for the Player Characters to sit on a



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facing bench, and waits for them to do so. Beside him, just visible, is a shimmering in the air that resembles an Ox. That is the Voice, seen for the first time. The Jade Emperor speaks:

"I understand from the Ox here that you have been assisting him in following his visions. Unfortunately, your actions have, indirectly, caused a calamity to befall the Earth. No blame attaches to you, I assure you- you were not to know how your actions would be taken advantage of. Niulang and Zhinü have fled the Heavens and returned to Earth, against my express wishes. The place they have left in the Heavens threatens to damage the sky itself. The clouds Zhinü is weaving to obscure their hiding place are causing chaos, as you saw. I have no desire to interfere in a heavy-handed manner, but this situation requires a resolution.

"I turn to you. I give you the means to return my daughter and my son-in-law to Heaven, and ask you to persuade them to use it. No harsh punishment awaits them, by my word, but there must be a reckoning for their disobedience. Find them, and see to it that they return."

He hands them an old, worn ox skin cloak. The very skin that Niulang wore to first enter heaven, as it happens. He answers any questions, with slight disapproval, as if making the point that his time is valuable. When the PCs agree to shoulder the task (and given who is asking them, it should be a 'when

), they find themselves sitting comfortably at the capital's largest Buddhist temple.

The Search

Their arrival causes something of a stir for General Gang, Ma Xun and Monk Lui, who are also sitting in that area. Enlisting the aid of these three (or two, if Ma Xun is dead or in prison) is important. General Gang can assist by using his army to conduct an exhaustive search of the area, asking peasants if they have seen a couple travelling fast without many belongings. Naturally, the Player Characters don't have to fall back on Gang's help if they have a plan of their own.

The Ambush

In the swirling mist, the Plum Blossom Assassins strike. Cheng has instructed them to incapacitate the Player Characters so he can take the ox skin. He learned of it when casting a ritual to explain the meaning of the mist.

The mist favours the assassins. They are a Threat 20 mob of Cheap Foes, but there are special rules. When you make an attack for them, don't say how strong it is and keep the dice concealed from the other players. The players can try to defend as usual, but if the defence isn't strong enough the attack does damage as usual. To make matters



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worse, every time a Player Character makes an attack, he must yield initiative if he still has it after the attack. These rules mean that the assassins strike unexpectedly and without warning.

If Ma Xun is with the PCs, she can read the assassin's movements. She does not attack normally. Instead, every time a PC would take damage, she can intercept the attack using the normal rules. This offers a useful safety net against those unpredictable attacks.

General Gang and Monk Lui, if they are present, have their hands full fighting off their (separate) share of assassins and take no part in the main fight.

The Sorcerer

If the assassins are defeated, Advisor Cheng confronts the PCs. He uses the full force of his magic to take the skin by any means. He also has summoned some demon spirits to assist him, a Threat 10 group of Cheap Foes. General Gang and and of his men hold off a much larger army of demons to buy the PCs time to defeat Cheng. Monk Lui sits cross-legged on the ground, chanting a prayer that stop Cheng from summoning even more demons. Ma Xun, on the other hand, stands paralysed with fear by the sight of her old order's true master, revealed in all his hellish glory.

Cheng fights dirty. If a PC runs out of dice, Cheng concentrates his attacks on that xiá, forcing the others to defend him if they can. The mist is as much an obstacle to him as it is to the Player Characters, so no special rules are required. When defeated, Cheng's body explodes in a vortex of dark magic, his tainted soul dragged down to Di Yu where it belongs.

The Cave

Niulang, Zhinü and their two children have taken refuge in a cave behind a waterfall. Monk Lui is instrumental in finding them, using ancient Bhuddist teachings to avoid the mist making the entrance invisible. Of course, if the PCs come up with a plan of their own, use that instead.

The two lovers are defiant initially, but can be persuaded relatively easily if the Jade Emperor's promise is mentioned. They have nowhere to run to, and it really is only a matter of time until they are discovered by one of Heaven's representatives. They take the skin, then vanish.

Shortly afterwards, the Player Character are summoned back to the Jade Emperor's presence.

If Cheng was defeated, the quest is considered a success.



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It All Goes Wrong

If the assassins defeat the Player Characters, or Cheng gets the better of them, Cheng succeeds in getting the ox skin. If it works to get him into Heaven, and if he is found out once he arrives there, the PCs never discover. The Jade Emperor is forced to descend to Earth in person to take Niulang and Zhinü back to Heaven. Surviving Player Characters are summoned back into his presence once he has done so.

In this case, the quest is a failure, but proceed to the judgement anyway.

The Judgement

With Niulang and Zhinü back in Heaven, the Jade Emperor must pass judgement on them. He asks the xiá what they believe the best course of action is, bearing in mind the order of the Heavens and the necessity of obedience to a wiser force.

This is the real climax of the campaign. Milk it for all it's worth. The Jade Emperor asks questions of the xiá, needling them to expose the real reasons behind their opinion. The outcome of the decision is not as simple as a vote of a consensus, the Player Characters must be able to articulate their position convincingly for it to sway the Jade Emperor's decision.

After taking into account how many of the quest decisions favoured Duty and the result of the debate in front of the Jade Emperor, choose the most appropriate outcome from this list. If the result falls in the middle category, feel free to nudge it up or down by one step if the outcome better matches the PCs attitude during the campaign. Describe it in as much detail as you like; as this is the climax of the entire campaign, milk it for as much drama as you can. Have the Jade Emperor declare his ruling to all the assembled characters, then enact it swiftly before returning the xiá to Earth.

Duty 5 - As punishment for their recent disappearance, Zhinü and Niulang renounce their love forever. Zhinü remains in Heaven to weave, and Niulang returns to Earth to care for their children. Altair disappears from the sky, and Vega grows dim. The qixi festival is a thing of the past.

Duty 4 - They remain apart, but keep their love alive in their hearts. The Jade Emperor forbids the magpies or any other creatures from forming the bridge across the Milky Way. The qixi festival is no longer celebrated, and the Milky Way never dims.

Duty 2 or 3 - The status quo is maintained. The lovers are separated, but allowed to meet on the Bridge of Magpies, with the Jade Emperor's blessing, once a year as before. The qixi festival continues as it always has.



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Duty I - Their eternal love is recognised, and the Jade Emperor relents enough to allow them to be together. They are sent down to Earth, Zhinü now mortal, to live out a natural human span with each other and their children. Both of the stars disappear from the sky. The qixi festival is still held to toast their love.

Duty 0 - Even the Jade Emperor cannot hold fast against such a passion as theirs; his original judgement is overturned and the couple allowed to live together in Heaven. Zhinü weaves at her loom with her husband and children by her side forever. Altair moves to the other side of the Milky Way, alongside Vega, and the two stars shine more brightly than any other star in the sky. The qixi festival continues to celebrate the triumph of love over even the Jade Emperor's will.

Epilogue

Whatever the outcome of the campaign, the Voice of the Ox probably follows the xiá around on future quests, offering occasional advice or comment.

There are three special quest rewards you can give Player Characters at the conclusion of the campaign. Which one a player receives depends on which out of Love and Duty he fought for the most, or if he advocated compromise more than either. These special rewards are of the kind described in the first part of this book. As for whether the final quest is a success or a failure- that depends a lot on the perspective of the xiá themselves.

The Yoke of Duty (Duty) - You can guarantee a success when acting under valid orders from someone you defer to, or enforcing obedience on a troublemaker, but only if you can currently see the sky.

The Spirit of Romance (Love) - You can guarantee a success when flirting or dealing with matters of the heart in others, but only if you can currently see the sky.

Wisdom of the Jade Emperor (Balance) - You can guarantee a success in any legal context, but only if you can currently see the sky.

