

Rivers and Lakes

Rivers and Lakes

A role-playing game by Ben Wright

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Book I: The Living World

Rivers and Lakes

(Jianghu)

'Rivers and Lakes' is a literal translation of the Chinese term 'Jianghu'. It describes a world, superficially similar to historical China. In 'wuxia' stories, which concern honour, love and above all combat, the Jianghu is the setting for the story. This world does not correspond to any particular period in Chinese history, although the problems it has may echo those of the past or current events. It is a fantasy world, where practitioners of martial arts reach heights of ability that are simply impossible in the real world. Magic, whatever form it may take, is real. Figures from myth and legend may be present in the world and taking an active interest in events. The details vary from Jianghu to Jianghu, and usually no more than one work takes place in a particular world.

These stories are often about journeys, or feature people who live outside normal society. The events mostly take place in small villages, forests and other wild areas, or around fortresses and army camps. Cities, palaces or courts are generally distant; somewhere to travel to or to escape from. The country is almost always going through a period of turmoil- reflecting unstable periods from China's history- but the extent and type of turmoil varies. It is generally assumed that law and order has broken down to the extent that groups of bandits can operate largely free of interference. Some of the problems the country faces may be internal, the result of a change in dynasty or the legacy of a weak ruler. Some may be external, where China is undermined economically or militarily by an aggressive foreign power. This lawlessness creates many problems, particularly for those with little stake in the eventual outcome of the conflict but who cannot escape its influence. Corruption is endemic. Governors use their soldiers and the threat of the king's armies to keep the local populace in line. Warlords grab territory by force and oppress the peasants within it.

Morality is generally absolute in these stories. A person is either good or evil. Good people are honourable, humble, courageous, and generous. Evil people are mendacious, manipulative and self-serving. This does not mean that the story is an epic conflict between two utterly opposed sides. Two people who are 'good' can still be implacable enemies- generally because their individual conceptions of honour or good are so at odds. A man who believes that the country must be brought under military rule to restore the rule of law may fight with a woman who believes that the peasants should be left to live their lives without paying taxes to a distant ruler. Both may agree on what is right and wrong in theory, but may fight to the death over the best way to achieve what is right.



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Good people can also be bound by ties of loyalty to evil people- for example a noble captain may be subject to the orders of a corrupt general. Some people cross from one extreme to the other, often as a result of a major plot point. However, there are no principal characters in the story who live as a shade of grey between good and evil.

Historical accuracy should not be high on your list of priorities when playing this game. Little details can be used to help set the mood and add verisimilitude to the story, but the game should not be some sort of history test. Use as little or as much detail in the world as you like.

Martial Artists

(Wulin)

Within the Jianghu, there is a smaller set of people who are accomplished in 'wushu', or martial arts. The protagonists and major antagonists usually come from this group. These are the characters who can perform the breathtaking feats that are a staple of the wuxia genre. How inclusive this group is can vary. In some stories only a select few individuals have that level of ability. In others, practically every washer-woman has some training in martial arts. Even so, the main characters are generally among the most accomplished even within this select group. Characters within the wulin are more prone to flaws that mar an otherwise righteous character and merits that redeem otherwise evil people, but it is still unambiguous which side of the moral line a character falls. There are recognised styles of fighting within wulin, and clans or schools associated with them. Bitter rivalries between them can be a source of much conflict and enmity, particularly when one school eschews the righteous use of its skills in favour of evil.

Wandering Force

(Xia)

A xiá is an accomplished warrior who travels. The closest equivalent is the idea of a knight-errant from mediaeval Europe. They are thoroughly noble, by the standards of the day, but sufficiently restless that they are always travelling and looking for wrongs to right. They can be from any social background, from pauper to privileged scion, but they have all chosen to live the life of a wandering warrior rather than submit to a lord or settle down to a mundane life. Whether or not a xiá is 'good' is shown by how closely they adhere to the code of morality that underpins the world. They need not be loners, indeed many choose to travel in small groups, and in this game it is assumed that a number of xiá have assembled into a group to undertake some quest together- it is this quest that is the spine of the game.



This Game

This game is a role-playing game intended to emulate the drama and excitement of wuxia film and literature. To play, you need some paper (or photocopies of the character sheets in this book), pencils and a generous number of six-sided dice. One player takes the role of the Game Master (or GM), deciding the overall course of the story and playing the role of most of the characters in the world. The other players take on the role of a single xiá warrior as the story unfolds. The characters in the world are divided into Player Characters (PCs, those controlled by players other than the GM) and Non-Player Characters (NPCs, those controlled by the GM). The game is played as a series of scenes in which the players narrate what they want their character to do, and the GM narrates the consequences of their actions and what actions the other characters in the world take.



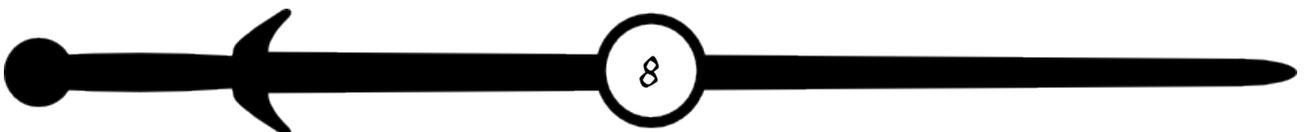
Book II: The Making of a Warrior

This chapter gives you all the information you need to create a character to play in this game. NPCs, controlled by the GM, are dealt with in the 'Foes and Follies' chapter.

The Quest

This game is centred around the quest that these wandering warriors have chosen to tackle. The first thing to do in any game is decide as a group what this quest should be. The only limit is your imagination. Bear in mind how long you want to play the game for, and whether you want to reach the conclusion of the quest in one session or many. The more complicated or difficult the quest, the longer it takes to reach completion. Some ideas are:

- ◆ A vulnerable young girl needs bodyguards so she can travel to a distant city. What is her secret and why do so many people want to kill her?
- ◆ A cruel warlord has kidnapped a merchant's child. He will only return the boy unharmed if someone can present him with his father's sword, lost to bandits some ten years ago.
- ◆ An evil cult has stolen the statue of the Buddha from a local temple as a gesture of contempt. The peaceful monks refuse to countenance violence to recover it, but surely no true xiá would let this situation stand?
- ◆ A village is caught in the middle of a war. It is not clear which is the greater danger, the foreign hordes or the callous Imperial army.
- ◆ A woman stands falsely accused of theft. The magistrate is sympathetic to arguments in her defence, but someone must bring the true culprit to the court before she can be released.
- ◆ An honoured martial arts school has been laid waste to by followers of a heretical cult. This cult must be destroyed before they commit their next atrocity.
- ◆ An artefact of terrible power has found its way into the hands of an evil sorcerer. He must be stopped before he becomes powerful enough to conquer all of China.
- ◆ A unruly youth has stolen a manual of martial arts techniques from a local master. He may have taken it to better himself rather than to abuse its knowledge, but in either case it must be returned to its rightful owner.



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- ◆ An ancient weapon, once used by a hero, must be taken to the monastery at the summit of Emei mountain before the new year, otherwise the world will end.
- ◆ The assassin who made an attempt on the Emperor's life is on the run. When confronted, she tells a shocking story that convinces her enemies to join forces with her.
- ◆ A fire has destroyed a village. Its people are starving, having lost everything, but the lord in the fortress nearby refuses to help.

Creating a Warrior

Each player, apart from the Game Master (or GM), needs to create a character to play. This character is a xiá beginning the quest the group has decided on. The first steps are to establish the basics of the character.

Name – The character's name should be chosen with care. There are numerous resources on-line for generating Chinese names. If the syllabic names seem a little unmemorable, another option is to make a name of the 'adjective noun', such as 'Golden Sparrow'. Foreigners are allowed, but care should be taken that they do not outnumber the locals. Foreigners would be limited to the area around China- Africans and Europeans are probably out of the question. If you want to play an outsider, remember that there are a number of different ethnic groups in China, and merely being a long way from home should be enough to get that outsider status.

Why join the Quest? – This important question can give a deep insight into the personality of the character. It's perfectly acceptable for the answer to be 'because'- after all, the characters are meant to be heroic and most quests are clearly noble. Even so, if a character has a deeper relationship to the story it can add a lot to the story. A personal stake in the quest makes a character more committed to succeeding at it. It's up to the player to create a character who is completely committed to the quest. The GM shouldn't have to introduce additional elements to keep the character on board- extras like that are good, but should not be made essential.

One good thing – One thing from the character's past that he is proud of, or is famous for, or shows him at his best.

One bad thing – One thing from the character's past that he is ashamed of, or wishes to atone for, or shows him at his worst. It may be a well-known failing, or a secret he keeps to himself.

The last two items can also link to the quest if you want, to provide a richer relationship between the character and his task. All of these details can be filled in on the



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character sheet (at the end of this book), as can the attributes of the character and the finishing touches in the following sections.

Stats

(Ch'i)

The traditional Chinese concept of ch'i is difficult to pin down to a pithy definition; 'energy flow' is as good as any but equally good cases could be made to translate it as 'breath' or 'stuff'. For the purposes of this game, ch'i refers the innate strengths of a character. It is broken down into three categories- Strength, Wisdom and Honour. Each of these is measured on a scale from 1 to 6- although Honour can reach also reach a value of 0. A new character has 10 points to split between them, but cannot spend more than 5 on a single category.

Strength - The main facet of strength is obvious. It also encompasses health. A character with a Strength of 1 is sickly, possibly even crippled or decrepit. A character with a Strength of 6 has legendary strength and vitality, with a reputation to match. Strength can only be improved at the end of a successful quest. Strength can be lost as a result of injury in combat.

Wisdom - Wisdom encompasses knowledge, insight and quick-thinking. No real distinction is made between education, lateral thinking or wise thoughts. A character who has been educated is expected to be wise or cunning, depending her morality. Characters with a Wisdom score of 1 are powerfully ignorant of the world and will easily fall prey to tricks. Characters with a Wisdom score of 6 are sages or monks whose opinions are sought after by many seeking enlightenment. Wisdom can only be improved at the end of a successful quest. Wisdom never decreases.

Honour - Honour does not just refer to how a character adheres to their own code of honour, but also to the reputation they have in the world at large. A person's honour is closely related to her sense of self-worth, so a lack of honour shows in her behaviour. A character with an Honour of 1 is considered contemptible and untrustworthy. A character with an Honour of 6 would be known to cleave to their code of honour without exception. High honour is not necessarily an indicator of a noble disposition. Honour is the most volatile of the stats, and can increase or decrease as a result of contests with dice and by character behaviour outside of them.

Because it is relatively easy to gain Honour during the game, it is tempting to concentrate on Strength and Wisdom and let Honour be low to start with. This is perfectly acceptable. It is entirely fitting that characters begin as competent but ill-thought-of outcasts, and earn a better reputation through their deeds. This lack of honour might even



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be related to their personal history. Be aware, though, that a character can lose all of his Honour, and the consequences of that are severe and quite difficult to overcome.

Skills

(Li)

Li is often translated as 'ritual' or 'custom', but it can also be thought of as including all forms of interaction with the world. In a role-playing the game the means by which a character interacts with the world is usually their list of skills, so here skills are also called li. There are 12 skills in total, each of which is named for one of the signs of the Chinese zodiac. Each of these skills is not a single ability; rather it describes a list of related abilities including physical, intellectual and social skills. As with Stats, each Skill is rated from 1 to 6. A new character has 15 points to split between them, but cannot spend than 5 on a single skill. Whenever a character attempts a task, the GM decides which skill is most appropriate.

Each skill comes with three example actions, one for each stat, but players are encouraged to try to think of the characters of the animals in the zodiac when deciding which skill should be used in a particular situation. Some liberties have been taken with the traditional representations of the animals in order to make the skills as balanced as possible. The examples given are generally used with the corresponding stat, but the GM may rule in some situations that another is more appropriate. When performing an task, a character uses whatever skill is most appropriate for it.

All skills can be used to fight with. Each represents a subtly different style of fighting. They do not necessarily correspond to the formal schools and styles in the Jianghu, but you can use the skill examples as a jumping off point for imagining what fighting using that skill is like. A character can only use one skill at a time, so the strongest skill is the style they fight in almost all of the time. Characters should generally have a favoured skill rated at 5, unless they are particularly strong and can offset the disadvantage of being a little unskilled in combat.

Rat

(Zi)

The Rat is diligent and can sustain effort for significant periods. This makes him an excellent craftsman and superb at physical tasks that require light effort over a prolonged period. His only drawback is his tendency to bend the truth.

Climb – Climbing cliffs, trees or buildings with rope or unassisted.

Craftsmanship – Being accomplished in any or all of a number of crafts- such as pottery, carpentry or blacksmithing.

Dissemble – The art of lying, for any reason.



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Ox

(Chou)

The Ox is a powerhouse of fortitude. Her great strength is mirrored in her politeness and humility. If she has a flaw, it is that her intricate work is often put to unworthy purposes.

Endure – Used when engaging in an activity where exhaustion is the main problem- such as long-distance running or holding onto a branch over a perilous drop.

Forge – Creating fake documents and coin- generally frowned upon but useful for dealing with inconvenient bureaucracies.

Show Etiquette – A very important skill in courts and palaces.

Tiger

(Yin)

The Tiger is personable and nimble in both mind and body. He delights in puzzles and tests of dexterity. He has been known to demonstrate a lack of judgement in dealings of the heart.

Prestidigitate – Tricks of quick hands, including picking pockets- if any tiger would stoop to that...

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Riddle – The creation and solving of riddles and puzzles.

Seduce – Can be useful to distract an enemy or gain access to him or his quarters without guards.

Rabbit

(Mao)

The Rabbit has her heart in the stars, and is peerless at pure expression of artistic feeling. Although she can be absent-minded, she is humble. She also has a talent for jumping.

Jump – Wuxia films are filled with improbable leaps, and Jump can be used to jump over chasms, fight in treetops or perform any number of balletic feats.

Artistry – This includes painting, calligraphy and weaving- making anything beautiful.

Apologise – A well-spoken and sincere apology can go beyond putting right the original transgression.

Dragon

(Chen)

The Dragon is a bastion of iron will and long-ranging thought. His sense of direction, given his heart is in the sky, is superb. The vitality embodied in him can both protect him and disturb others.

Survive – The ability to withstand some risk other than mortal combat that may cause injury, such as poison or exposure.

Navigate – Travelling long-distance in an environment without obvious signs and landmarks. Useful when staying off the roads for secrecy.

Intimidate – Imposing your will on another through threats.

Snake

(Si)

The Snake is known for her sneaking nature. Not that she's dishonourable; she only uses her talent for silent entry and mind games for a greater purpose.

Intrude – Getting into places you shouldn't be.

Stealth – Knowing how to avoid detected, often in places you shouldn't be.

Glean – Tricking others into revealing information they'd rather not reveal.

Horse

(Wu)

The Horse is strong and creative, and has a mastery of intellectual pursuits that shows in his knowledge of architecture. Although this finds use in siege-craft, he would prefer to talk his way in.



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Run – Not just for speed, but running over awkward terrain or even across the surface of water.

Engineering – Constructing houses or any other large-scale project, and also the knowledge of how to bring them down with the minimum (or maximum) or fuss.

Cajole – Coaxing a person into doing something that they wouldn't do off their own initiative.

Ram

(Wef)

Although the Ram is known as stubborn, it would be truer to say she can be single-minded and unstoppable. This single-mindedness makes her a formidable merchant, but she is also known for her mastery of herbs and powders.

Exert – Succeeding at any physical task that relies on brute strength, such as a tug-o'-war or holding a door closed.

Alchemy – This includes the practice of traditional medicine. Player characters may request medical attention, but it is not necessary for them to remain fighting fit. Medicine is more likely to find use in helping NPCs the players encounter.

Barter – Getting a good deal at the market.

Monkey

(Shen)

The Monkey is playful and mischievous, but not without a sense of fair play. His love of playing tricks extends into all of his endeavours, but he prides himself on being well-travelled and knowing about foreign peoples.

Tumble – Feats of acrobatics that involve rolling, jumping and swinging.

Languages – Reading and writing ancient tongues, and understanding the gabble of foreigners.

Impersonate – Passing yourself off as someone or something you are not.

Cockerel

(You)

The Cockerel is inquisitive and perceptive, but he still loves to perform at the slightest provocation.

Ride – Skilfully controlling a horse or other steed, in combat or not.

Investigate – Discovering clues in the grass, or inconsistencies in what people say.

Perform – The mastery of a musical instrument or the ability to sing beautifully.



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Dog

(Xu)

The dog is not just loyal, but the cause of loyalty in others. She can control the movements of units on the field of battle and fire them up well enough to fight without breaking.

Swim – Not just swimming, but also knowledge of how to steer boats on the water.

Tactics – Military knowledge of how to get the best from a body of troops, and how to fight wars effectively.

Inspire – The ability to bring out the best in people, be it to fight more fiercely or put aside their weapons in favour of peace.

Pig

(Hoi)

The Pig is often thought of as indolent and greedy, but in fact she simply has a greater capacity for discomfort than others, and knows to replenish her energy in case an emergency is just around the corner. Her love of nature find expression in knowledge about woodlands, plains and mountains- and she can find food for herself and others just about anywhere.

Resist Pain – The ability to simply ignore injuries or painful experiences that would normally prevent you from acting- such as running into a burning house to rescue someone.

Natural Lore – Deep knowledge of animals and plants, and ability to track animals or people in the wilderness.

Imbibe – Consuming prodigious quantities of food or drink with little effort and fewer consequences.

Finishing Touches

Now you know the important things about your character, you can add the finishing touches. You can decide on her appearance, manner, and what weapons she carries and fights with. All weapons are equal in this game, so it is purely a matter of style which weapon you choose for your character. Even fighting bare-handed levies no penalty. Ranged weapons can be used up close as easily as at a distance, and it is assumed that characters with mêlée weapons can close the gap to an enemy sufficiently easily that there is no penalty for having to do so. Your character may have a weapon of great personal significance, or simply seize whatever is to hand when trouble strikes.



Weapon List

For your edification, here is a (partial) list of Chinese weapons suitable for use in this game. Although common soldiers may be given a simple sword or spear, xiá are often proficient with even the most unusual of weapons.

Bow – The premier ranged weapon for centuries. A skilled user can fire far more quickly than any weapon until the revolver.

Butterfly swords – Pairs of very short swords, about the length of the forearm. They are used for very quick twists and strikes inside the arm as well as outside.

Chain whip – A sharp dart on the end of a linked series of metal rods. Notoriously tricky to use.

Chui – Also known as the melon hammer, this is a very simple weapon- just a heavy weight on a short handle. Generally considered an unworthy weapon for a skilled warrior.



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Crescent moon spade – A traditional monk's weapon. A long shaft with a spade-like blade at one end, and a metal crescent on the other. Buddhist monks would use one to dig a grave if they encountered a corpse in the road.

Crossbow – Easier to use than a bow, but generally slower. Unlikely to be used by a xiá, but may be used by soldiers or town guardsmen.

Dao – A sword. One of the most basic types of weapon, and available in a variety of sizes. A dao differs from a jian in that the blade is curved and only sharp down one edge.

Guan dao – Halfway between a sword and a staff, a guan dao has a short, wide blade mounted on the end of a staff. Similar to a halberd (or ji), but without the stabbing point.

Gun – A staff. Unassuming but very useful.

Hook sword – A sword where the end curves back on itself. Can be used to trip enemies or trap their weapons.

Ji – A Chinese halberd. Like a spear, it has a point, but it also has an axe-like blade just below the point.

Jian – A sword. One of the most basic types of weapon, available in a variety of sizes. A jian differs from a dao in that it is straight and double-edged.

Meteor hammer – Two weights on a length or rope of chain, used to entangle or deal direct blows with. Fire meteors are meteor hammers where the weights are bowls filled with fuel and set on fire.

Qiang – Chinese spears usually have a leaf-shaped blade and a red tassel just below it.

Rope dart – A dart on the end of a length of rope. Can be thrown and recovered, or used as a flail.

Sanjiegun – Or 'three-section staff'. Three moderate length metal or wooden rods linked by rings or rope. Useful for striking around an opponent's guard.

Tonfa – A wooden or metal baton with a side handle. Can be used in a large number of styles which can be switched between very quickly. Now associated with Japan, but it actually originated in China.

Wind and fire wheels – Circles of metal with a grip at one point, and three wavy blades pointing outwards spaced evenly along the rest. Generally used in pairs and very good for trapping opponents' weapons.



Book III: Starting a Fight

The Role of Combat

The Jianghu can be a very dangerous place. Lawlessness and corruption breed violence. Anyone travelling alone or in small groups must be capable of defending themselves or risk falling prey to robbers. Between competent martial artists, a brief fight is one way of greeting someone; testing their skill and trying to establish which school taught them and hence whether they should be considered an ally or enemy. Although violence is a fact of daily life, actual killings are generally rare. Killing a defenceless foe is a thoroughly evil act, and something a xiá would never do. They prefer to educate their enemies whenever possible, handing over to what passes for local legal authority or attempting to teach them the error of their ways. If this is not a practical option, or the enemies have demonstrated their evil nature, the warrior does not hesitate to kill. Even bandits prefer to let their victims go free, after taking everything of value they possess. Only truly terrible villains kill as a matter of course- the sort of villains that xiá often seem to encounter.

Assembling a Dice Pool

When attempting a task or fighting in a conflict, your character must assemble their dice pool for the action. The GM determines the most appropriate stat and skill for the action, and you take a number of six-sided dice equal to their sum. You then also add a number of dice depending on what you are prepared to risk in the action. The three possibilities are:

Risk failure – The only way to avoid risking failure is to not compete. For the lowest level of risk you add 1 die to your pool.

Risk injury – Serious injury has a long term impact on your character. If you lose the conflict or fail at the task, your character suffers a permanent loss. If the stat you used was physical, you lose a point of Strength to reflect a serious wound. Otherwise, you lose a point of Honour to reflect the loss of self-confidence and/or reputation. When you risk injury you add 3 dice to your pool.

Risk death – For the most important situations, a character prefers to die than fail. If you lose the conflict or fail the task attempt, your character dies. Taking on this great risk adds 5 dice to your pool.



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The GM may decree that a situation is not serious enough to merit risking death, or even injury, and cap the level of risk a player can choose. Similarly, in high-risk situations the GM may rule that risking mere failure is not an option. However, those situations should be the exception rather than the rule. The principle behind these risks is that a character should only be at risk of death if he player feels the task is worth the risk. Similarly, a character can only be seriously adversely affected by an injury if the player feels it is dramatically appropriate. Players are encouraged to balance their wish for their characters to survive with what is dramatically appropriate.

Simple Tasks

Where a character attempts an action that is not trivially easy, and not against another character (PC or NPC), a simple task roll is made. The GM assigns the task a difficulty, the player assembles the dice pool for the action. The difficulty should be based not only on the nominal challenge the task presents, but also any circumstances that affect how easy it should be to succeed. Tasks that are easy should not be rolled for- instead assume that the character succeeds. The possible categories are:

Moderate (3) – The task is difficult enough to merit a roll, but still simple to succeed at for someone particularly skilled.

Difficult (4) – The task is beyond the unskilled, and even the most skilled people sometimes fail.

Very Difficult (5) – The task is at the limits of ability for all but the most incredibly skilled.

Nigh Impossible (6) – The task is rarely completed, even by the most skilled people in the world.

The character rolls the dice in their pool, and works out which number was rolled the most times among the dice. The number of dice in this group is the result of the roll. To succeed, this result must equal or exceed the difficulty number of the task.

If the task is successful, the GM narrates how the character completes the task. Otherwise, the GM narrates the failure and the player takes any injury (or death) dictated by the what she risked when she assembled her dice pool.

If a task is failed, it cannot be attempted again by any player. By convention and good sense, a task is left to the character with the best chance of succeeding at it. If this fails, then it should be assumed that the task is simply beyond the character who attempted it, and naturally the other characters stand no chance either. Even so, the same



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problem can be solved by a different sort of check- for example climbing over a wall instead of picking the lock on the door.

Conflicts

A conflict is an extended contest between two or more characters. The most obvious conflict is a fight, but intellectual or social conflicts can also arise. A lot of the description of what takes place in a conflict will be couched in terms appropriate to combat, but it is important to remember that any situation that pits one character against another is a conflict. A conflict should occur whenever two characters compete in some way. Note that while the group of xiá on the quest may be staunch allies, there may be times when they argue or work at cross-purposes. When facing opponents, they will not necessarily intrude on the battles of their allies. This means that not every conflict needs to involve all the PCs, and gives a chance for them to shine individually from time to time.

The first step is for the GM to state what's at stake in the conflict. A group of attackers may wish to take the PCs prisoner, or a PC may wish to convince a corrupt governor to release a poor farmer. Often, there are only be 2 sides to the conflict, but in complicated situations there can be more. Each character gets a chance to state what she wants out of the conflict.

All characters involved assemble their dice pools as normal. They then roll all their dice and keep the results in front of them for reference. Everyone should be able to see these dice. During the conflict, they spend these dice. Spent dice are discarded. Each character also needs to keep a running total of the 'damage' she has suffered during this combat.

Initiative

In some games, PCs and NPCs take turns to act. While this is quite fair, it has a tendency to stop the battle from flowing nicely. This game aims to have battles flow like those in wuxia films. While there is an initiative order, this is only used to work out who starts the fight and who gets a chance to act next when a character passes. Characters get a chance to act in bursts, doing several things one after another until another character takes over.

In a Strength-based conflict, the Initiative order depends firstly on Wisdom scores, then on Honour, then on Strength. If there are still ties, break them randomly. Where there is an ambush, or characters are in a situation where it's logical that they should act early or late, the GM should push them to the top or bottom of the initiative order as appropriate.



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In Wisdom- and Honour-based conflicts, the GM should rule on the order in whatever way seems reasonable.

The character at the top of the list has the initiative at the start of the conflict.

Attackers' Choices

The character with the initiative is the attacker, and has four choices available to her.

Attack – The attacker selects one die from her pool. The value of the die represents how dangerous an attack it is. She also selects which other character she is attacking, and hence is the defender. There is no requirement for an attacking character to concentrate on a single opponent in successive attacks, but an attacker can only attack one opponent at a time. The defender then chooses how to deal with the attack. After the attack, the die is spent.

Stunt – A stunt is similar to an attack, but is more dangerous and flashy. The attacker selects a number of dice from her pool to create the stunt. The more dice, the more over-the-top and dramatic the stunt. These dice must, however, all have the same number. A character can never assemble a stunt with more dice than she has in the skill she is using in the conflict. Hence, a character needs a skill of 2 in order to perform any stunt at all. All of the dice used for the stunt are spent.

Side Action – The character also has the option of performing some side action which is not an attack. This should be an 'easy' action; that is, one that wouldn't normally have to be rolled for as a Simple Task, above. This could be opening a door to let allies in or slicing through manacles so some prisoners can escape while the character fights her captor. The character spends any die she wants to from her pool- the value of the die is irrelevant.

Pass – The character yields the initiative. The character nearest the top of the list who hasn't had the initiative yet (or has had the initiative the fewest times) then gets the initiative and can take one of these actions. No dice are spent. If a player is holding up the game by taking too long to decide what to do, then the GM should rule that the character passes. Conflicts should be fast.

Defenders' Choices

If an attack or stunt is made, the defending character can choose how to deal with the threat.

Take the Blow – The character simply lets the blow hit him, and takes the damage equal to the number on the dice used to attack him. Stunts do no more damage than a



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normal attack with single die showing that number, no matter how many dice were used. If the character cannot do either of the following actions, he must take this one. No dice are spent, and the attacking character can take another action.

Defend – The character can defend against the blow by spending dice with an equal total value to the attack. If the attack was an ordinary attack, he can spend a single die with the same value, or a number of dice that total the same as the die used to attack. If the attack was a stunt, he can only defend with a group of dice all showing the same number. This group must have at least as many dice in it as the attacking stunt, and add up to the same total as the attack (the most common defence against a stunt is simply the same dice). The number shown on the dice can be lower, but only if there are sufficiently more dice in the set to make the total meet that of the stunt attack. The defender can't use a group larger than his rating in the skill he is fighting with, as for attacking stunts. The dice used to defend with are spent, and the attacker can take another action.

Reverse – Very similar to defending, except that the total value of the defending dice must exceed the attacking dice rather than match them. With stunt attacks, it is often easier to create a stunt reversal than a stunt defence. The dice used to reverse the attack are spent, but the defender seizes the initiative and gets to take the next attackers' action.

Interception

A character who is neither the attacker nor the defender can attempt to intercept an attack. Doing so is functionally identical to the defender Reversing the attack, except that the interceptor must exceed the attack value by 2 points or more. If this is done, the defender need not spend any dice. The intercepting character spends the dice she used to intercept with, and then takes the initiative.

Stopping a Conflict

If all the characters in a conflict pass, one after the other, the conflict stops without resolution, if it can. This represents the characters choosing to stop fighting or arguing. This means that any encounter with a stranger can begin as a conflict, but may stop before too much blood is spilled. This can be used to generate tension and uncertainty. A conflict may also stop if one character decides he has staked too much on the result, and wishes to yield. Naturally, his opponent is not obliged to let him off so easily, but attacking an opponent who is trying to surrender may be an evil act, depending on the circumstances.



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End of Sequence

If there are no dice left for any character to spend, then the characters get to fight another sequence in the conflict. However, before this happens each character can elect to try to change the location of the conflict. Arguing ministers may storm through different rooms in the palace, a merchant trying to escape a smooth-tongued trickster may dodge through a busy market, or a warrior losing a fight may take it to the treetops to get an advantage. If any other characters follows them, the conflict usually continues. If not, then that character has escaped the conflict. It may even split the conflict into two separate conflicts, which the GM should resolve one after the other. Changing location can be used to make a retreat, but it can also be used to try to even the odds. Will your opponent pursue you somewhere where you have an advantage over her, or will she stop the conflict without winning?

Damage and Death

Characters take damage during a conflict. In a physical conflict they may be wounds, but none of them are serious. In other situations they are setbacks or mistakes made during the conflict.



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If a character ever gets 10 or more damage during a conflict, then he is knocked out of it. If he risked injury, then he suffers that injury at the same time. In a fight, this would be a much graver wound caused with that last blow taken. If a character risked death- the blow was fatal.

All damage is cleared at the end of a conflict (after any consequences for losing, naturally).

If a character is reduced to 0 Strength by an injury, this also leads to death. So, for a character with only 1 Strength going into combat, the only difference between risking injury and risking death is only the number of dice she gets to roll- so there is no reason for her not to risk death at that point.

If the risks were taken in a Wisdom or Honour conflict then injury is to Honour. If death was staked on the conflict, then loss presumably entails a sentence of death, possibly carried out immediately. Because the player had to be complicit in this fate by risking death, the GM should not necessarily allow the character a means of escape. However, the GM may decide that the other player characters can attempt a rescue, but naturally they must all risk death in the process.

Even if a character dies, death should not be instantaneous. There should be an opportunity after the conflict is over for the character to make a touching speech to the surviving characters, enemy or ally.

Once the only characters left in a conflict are all on the same side, the conflict ends.

Narrating Conflicts

If all that happened in a conflict was rolling and spending dice, it would be dull. The reason the system is designed as it is is to allow conflicts to flow from blow to blow, surging first one way then the other, all rich in description as to what is going on. The description is what makes the fights interesting. Simple attacks and defences should be described very briefly, along the lines of "I strike low with my dagger". Stunts, naturally, should be described in more detail- "I trap his sword arm behind me, then swing him round and smash his head into the stone table so hard the table breaks in two". Let your imagination run wild, and imagine the scene playing out in your mind's eye.

Wisdom or Honour conflicts don't revolve around violence, but the same principle implies. An attack might be a cunning argument or a fact that supports your position, a defence a rebuttal or an expression of disbelief. A stunt must involve some new fact, or involve some dramatic illustration of the point at hand. The distinction between an attack and a defence in these conflicts is not so easy to see, and players are encouraged to



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interpret the role of a statement generously. Narration in these conflicts is also generally wordier than describing physical attacks.

It can be a good idea as a GM to let the players play the first conflict with little or no narration, so they can get used to how the mechanics work, but the narration should never be skimmed on if you can avoid it.

Swift and Decisive Conflicts

Sometimes, the conflict isn't important enough to justify the time and effort of multiple sequences of dice rolling. Sometimes, time is a factor in the conflict and it needs to be resolved, one way or another, swiftly.

A swift and decisive conflict starts the same way as a normal conflict, but damage is not tracked. Instead, any time a character takes a blow, that character is knocked out of the conflict. This often means that the character with the biggest stunt or highest die wins straight away, making the resolution very quick. Being at the top of the initiative list is a very big advantage.

As a general rule, conflicts with a greater level of risk than the lowest level probably shouldn't be dealt with in swift and decisive conflicts.

Conflict Tactics

You may have noticed that total you roll on your dice is the single biggest factor in whether you win or lose a conflict. This may make you think that playing in a very miserly fashion, spending the minimum you have to and trying to force your opponents to spend more dots than they would like to, is the best way to go. Well, it's one way to go, but you'll have a lot more fun if you spend dice in a way that reflects your character's nature. He may start heavy, hitting with big stunts and large dice, hoping to overwhelm the opposition early on. He may start small, hoping to goad the enemy into spending a lot of dice at once. Emphasising how different characters fight in different ways makes the conflicts more interesting.

One tactic that is very efficient against single opponents is working out what dice you need to win the conflict, then contriving to keep those dice until you get a chance to use them in a way your opponent can't counter. In particular, if your opponent doesn't have enough points of attack left to eliminate you, but you do have enough to eliminate him, you can simply take all the blows he directs at you before wiping him out.



Symbolic Combat

Sometimes, a non-combat conflict may need to be resolved, but no-one can summon up much imagination for the description of such a wordy contest. It could be run as a swift and decisive conflict, but there might be too much at stake for that to be a satisfying solution. Instead, you can have the characters in the conflict participate in a symbolic combat scene. The dice pools are assembled exactly as they would be for the non-combat conflict, but the scene is played out as a combat scene. Attacks and defences can be mixed in with arguments, particularly during stunts.

Symbolic combat is also an excellent way of resolving differences between player characters. It's honourable, risks little and resolves arguments without leaving bad blood between the characters.

Optional Conflict Rules

These are optional because the GM may feel they add too much complication to the rules for too little benefit, or slow the game down. They are given here because some situations may arise where using them makes the game more interesting, or lets the GM handle an unusual situation.

Uneven Contests

If the GM wants to model a situation where one character has a significant advantage over another, he can give one character extra dice for their pool. It's best if this is only done for rather extreme circumstances- heroes of fiction are often little hampered by shackles or slippery ground. Introducing too many bonuses of this kind may let the game degenerate into an endless pursuit of small bonuses before each conflict.

Where extra dice are merited, the GM shouldn't give away more than 4 dice in total for any single conflict.

Increasing Risk

During the course of a conflict, a player may choose to have his character take a greater risk to win. At any point, a character can roll two dice and add them to his pool by choosing to increase the level of risk for himself by one step. He is still subject to the usual limits on how risky a conflict can be, but he can gamble on tipping the conflict in his favour.



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Unusual Battle Locations

In general, battles take place in fairly ordinary surroundings, and characters are free to choose any skill they want when they fight. However, sometimes the battle is in a peculiar place- such as in the canopy of a bamboo forest, halfway up a cliff face or underwater. In these situations, the GM may rule that only certain skills can be used to fight with. This can be used to give an advantage to one side or another, and serves as another way to give characters their individual moments to shine. It can also be used to keep the battles interesting if they risk becoming too similar to each other.

For example, a fight in the trees might require characters to use Rat, Rabbit or Monkey skills to fight with, relying on climbing, jumping and tumbling respectively.

Entering the Conflict Late

Sometimes, a character may not be present when a conflict begins but wishes to enter it while it is in progress. When a player expresses his intention to join the conflict, he has to wait until the initiative has changed hands three times. This can be easy to arrange if his allies stall for time by passing when they have the initiative. Once this requirement is met, he assembles his pool, but must reduce it in size so it is no larger than any other character's pool left in the conflict. If any character has no dice left, the newcomer arrives with no dice in his pool. Sometimes a character may not be able to join a conflict just by asking, but may have to wait for a character already fighting to give him an opportunity to join. He still has to wait for the initiative to pass three times.

Splitting Stunts

If a character wants to attack more than a single opponent at once, the character can split the dice used to assemble a stunt between targets. Each of these attacks counts as an attack, and the targets can defend as usual. Single die attacks constructed in this way count as ordinary attacks rather than stunt attacks. Multiple dice attacks are still stunts and can only be defended against or reversed by stunts with at least as many dice in them. If more than one defender reverses, the GM decides the most appropriate character to get the initiative.

Not-So-Simple Tasks

If a character wants to perform a side action for a task that would usually require a roll, then she can attempt to accumulate the dice she needs for the task one by one. In order to attempt this, the skill she would use for the task must have a rating at least as



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high as the difficulty of the task. Whenever she takes a side action, she can put the die to one side rather than discarding it totally. If this group of dice put aside ever accumulates enough dice of the same number to match the difficulty, this final side action completes the task. This group is emptied at the end of every sequence. The upshot is that the character needs a certain level of mastery in a skill to be able to complete it, and must compromise her position in the conflict to do so.

Blocking Side Actions

If a character wishes to prevent another from performing a side action, this can be done by spending a die with a higher value than the one used to take the side action. This does not affect how the initiative passes; it just negates the side action.

This might be used when two characters are fighting for possession of an important object or one character is trying to open a portcullis for his allies to pour through.

Shaved Stakes

If more than one character is risking something in the outcome of a conflict, but only one character is in a position to act in it, then the character acting for the group can get more dice. The number of dice gained for each additional character is based on the risk that character is running, as normal. The stats and skills of these additional character have no bearing on the conflict, but the consequences of failure do.



Example: Blades in the Night

The GM narrates what happens to character A, who is currently alone.

GM: "As you enter the room you've rented for the night, you drop your sword on the table. The curtains ripple in the wind. But just as you remember there is no wind tonight, a black-clad figure rushes you from the shadows."

This introduces the conflict rather than being an actual attack in it.

The GM explains that if the assassin wants to kill character A, but unless A's player is willing to risk injury or death, the only drawback will be delaying the players' journey while A is ministered to by a healer. A chooses as his goal 'not to get hurt'.

Character A has a Strength of 3 and a Skill of 4, and chooses to risk injury to give him 10 dice. The GM announces that the assassin also gets to roll 10 dice.

A rolls: 1, 1, 1, 2, 2, 3, 3, 4, 5, 6

The GM rolls: 2, 2, 2, 2, 3, 3, 4, 4, 5, 6

GM: "The assassin has the initiative. She stabs towards your face with her dagger." - attack with 4.

A: "I parry the blow with a metal tray from the table." - defend with 4

GM: "She drops low and tries to sweep your legs out from under you." - attack with 2.

A: "I stamp on her ankle." - reverse with 3.

A: "I kick at her body." - attack with 3.

GM: "She leans back, frees her ankle and rolls to her feet." - reverse with 4.

GM: "She throws a handful of throwing stars at you." - attack with 6.

A: "Er... I use the tray again and block them just in time." - reverse with a 2 and a 5.

A: "Seeing I might be in trouble, I call out, hoping to attract B's attention to come and help me." - simple task, spends a 2.

The GM decides to use the 'late arrival' optional rule here.

A: "I then stall for time." - pass.

GM: "The assassin stabs at your arm." - attack with 2.

A: "I cry out in pain and alarm." - takes 2 damage.

GM: "She then rushes towards you, hoping to force you out of the window." - stunt attack with 3, 3.



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A: "I can't stop that." - takes 3 damage.

An out of character comment, not that it matters.

GM: "You're not out of the window yet, just hanging over the edge. She tries to slip a garrotte wire around your neck." - attack with 5.

A: "I grab her wrist at a pressure point, and force her to drop it." - reverse with 6.

A: "Pass."

The third change of initiative, so B arrives at the scene, rolling only 2 dice as the assassin only has 2 left. B rolls 3, 3.

GM: "The assassin leaps into the rafters, then tries to drop down knee-first onto A's unprotected back." - stunt attack with 2, 2.

B: "I leap across the room, plucking the assassin out of the air so we both land on the far side of the room, breaking a load of chairs." - stunt interception with 3, 3.

B and the assassin have no dice left, so initiative passes to A.

A: "I grab my sword from the table, and flick the scabbard off the blade so the scabbard hits her in the face." - stunt attack with 1, 1, 1.

GM: "She can't dodge out of the way in time." - takes 1 damage.

A: "I then leap across to her and slash her across the leg." - attack with 6.

GM: "Ouch." - takes 6 damage.

At the end of this sequence, A has taken 5 damage and the assassin 7.

GM: "Seeing herself outnumbered, the assassin jumps from the window onto a balcony, and starts running. Do you follow?" - the assassin changes the location.

A: "We still need to meet that contact."

B: "We'll let her go, this time."

The conflict ends. Although the assassin didn't actually lose, A still achieved his goal of 'not get killed or injured'. Presumably the assassin will strike again some time in the future.



Example: The Head of the Valley

A is riding with a small army. The commander is not entirely sure he can trust the warrior, but is content to let him stay. A has just found out (from B, who is travelling ahead of the army) that the enemy knows their intended route and is planning to ambush them. A wants to persuade the commander to turn back and take another route, but the commanders' advisor advocates carrying on.

A has an Honour of 3 and a Horse skill of 3. Because of the gravity of the situation, he stakes some Honour on the outcome by risking injury. This gives him a total of 9 dice in his pool, and the GM says he has the initiative after requesting an audience with the commander. The advisor rolls 10 dice.

A rolls: 2, 2, 3, 3, 3, 4, 5, 6, 6

The GM rolls: 1, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 5, 6, 6, 6

A: "Commander! Grave news! I have heard from a woodsman that a great force is gathered in the valley, waiting to attack us!" - stunt attack with 6, 6.

GM: "And where exactly did this information come from? It is bad enough that we trusted this vagabond to accompany us, and now he spills lies into your presence to frighten us away from the just course. How do we know he hasn't been in contact with the enemy?" - stunt defence with 6, 6.

A: "Commander, you know very well that I have never been out of sight of your men. All I have done is greet a friend and hear what he has to say. If any of your men heard different around the camp-fire, let them speak out." - stunt attack with 3, 3, 3.

GM: "Bah!" - takes a blow of 3 damage.

A: "And you said yourself that the game has been scarce in the area. An enemy army might have scared the animals away, or hunted them itself before we got here." - stunt attack with 2, 2.

GM: "Fool! He tries to deceive you, my lord. You know as well as I that there is little game in these heights at this time of year. He is trying to make you afraid of shadows!" - stunt reversal with 5, 5.

GM: "He was against this campaign from the start. And yet he rode with us. Does that not imply he is an agent for the enemy?" - stunt attack with 1, 1, 1.

A: "I am not!" - takes a blow of 1 damage.

GM: "I will hear no more of this foolishness!" - attack with 3, A takes the damage.



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GM: "We have no choice but to make him our prisoner." - attack with 3, A takes the damage.

GM: "I cannot fault your ability to see good in everyone, my lord, but this has gone on long enough." - attack with 2, A takes the damage for a total of 9.

A: "What you should ask yourself, commander, is why your advisor is so certain I am wrong. He has not even suggested sending scouts to check." - attack with 4, the advisor has to take the damage.

A: "You can draw your own conclusions, but it will not be the first time his advice has led you wrong. Remember trying to cross the ford when the river was in spate?" - attack with 5, the advisor takes the damage for a total of 12.

The advisor has been beaten. The GM then narrates the commander's decision.

GM: "We lose little by exercising caution. So far the enemy has been suspiciously quiescent. Even if the scouts find no sign of the enemy, they will still spy out the land for us. Advisor, you should not judge people so harshly, particularly when they have shown themselves honourable time and time again."



Book IV: Honourable Conduct

Xiá are expected to behave nobly. This does not mean that they are fools, or that they always live up to the ideals of their role. During the course of the quest, a character's Honour may change considerably as they sacrifice some of his ideals for the quest or live up to his standards despite what it costs him.

Gaining and Losing Honour

Honour can be lost through injury in a conflict of Wisdom or Honour. Unlike Strength and Wisdom, Honour can also be lost and gained through a character's conduct. The GM may rule that a character deserves an increase of 1 point in Honour through her actions. This is not as simple as behaving well and in accordance with her principles- in order for Honour to increase a character must sacrifice something meaningful to her solely in order to uphold her ideals. Some examples:

- ◆ Letting her father's murderer escape in order to help a wounded man.
- ◆ Allowing herself to be imprisoned by a corrupt governor, merely to avoid eroding the rule of law in the region.
- ◆ Distancing herself from her lover, because the life she leads would put him in too much danger.
- ◆ Letting a hated foe live because he has a young son.
- ◆ Resisting torture, including losing fingers, without betraying a trust.

The general rule is that the higher the character's Honour, the more powerful a sacrifice must be made in order to increase it. Gaining that sixth point of honour should entail an extreme sacrifice. Honour can be improved at the successful completion of a quest, so sacrifices of this kind are not the only way to increase it.

Honour can also be lost. Characters should not lose Honour for not letting themselves be taken advantage of by the unscrupulous. Honour should only be lost when a character does something that erodes his reputation or sense of self-worth. Some examples:

- ◆ Becoming intoxicated and behaving in an appalling manner.
- ◆ Betraying a trust for personal gain.
- ◆ Taking advantage of an honest man for no good reason.



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- ◆ Killing an enemy who has surrendered, or killing without warning.
- ◆ Using poison, or some other form of trickery, to make a battle unfair.

As with gaining Honour, the lower a character's Honour is the more extreme the behaviour must be for it to drop further. Honour can even be dropped to 0 in this way.

Without Honour

A character can be reduced to 0 Honour, through his conduct or by losing a conflict. When a character reaches this state, he is a truly wretched individual indeed. The character cannot gain any points of Honour through his conduct. Further, any roll using Honour, by any PC, has one die removed from its pool before rolling. Merely being associated with such a person makes it difficult for someone to appear honourable. If more than one character has lost all his Honour, then rolls can lose multiple dice. A character always rolls at least 1 die, but that is small consolation.

Awarding Honour with Honour

Some of the circumstances in which Honour is awarded or taken away can be highly situational. The GM is the final arbiter of the loss and gain of Honour, sometimes the player and the GM have very different ideas as to the ramifications of a particular action. Because solving this at the time breaks the flow of play, players are encouraged to take the rough with the smooth in order to keep the game going. It may be that there is some secret fact they are not aware of that makes the action less Honourable than it might have been; they must trust the GM on this.

Between play sessions, if the GM feels he has been a little too harsh on one of these judgements, the best way to put it right is to give the player in question an easy opportunity to increase her Honour again.

The Best and Worst of Us

The One Good and One Bad Things a character has can also be invoked during the game. Each of these can only be invoked once per session, and the Good Thing can only be invoked if the Bad Thing has already been invoked that session.

When a player invokes the Bad Thing for his character, that character either falls prey to a vice, behaves in a dishonourable manner, or succumbs to incompetence in a particular field. This has one of two rules effects- the character may lose a point of Honour, or may

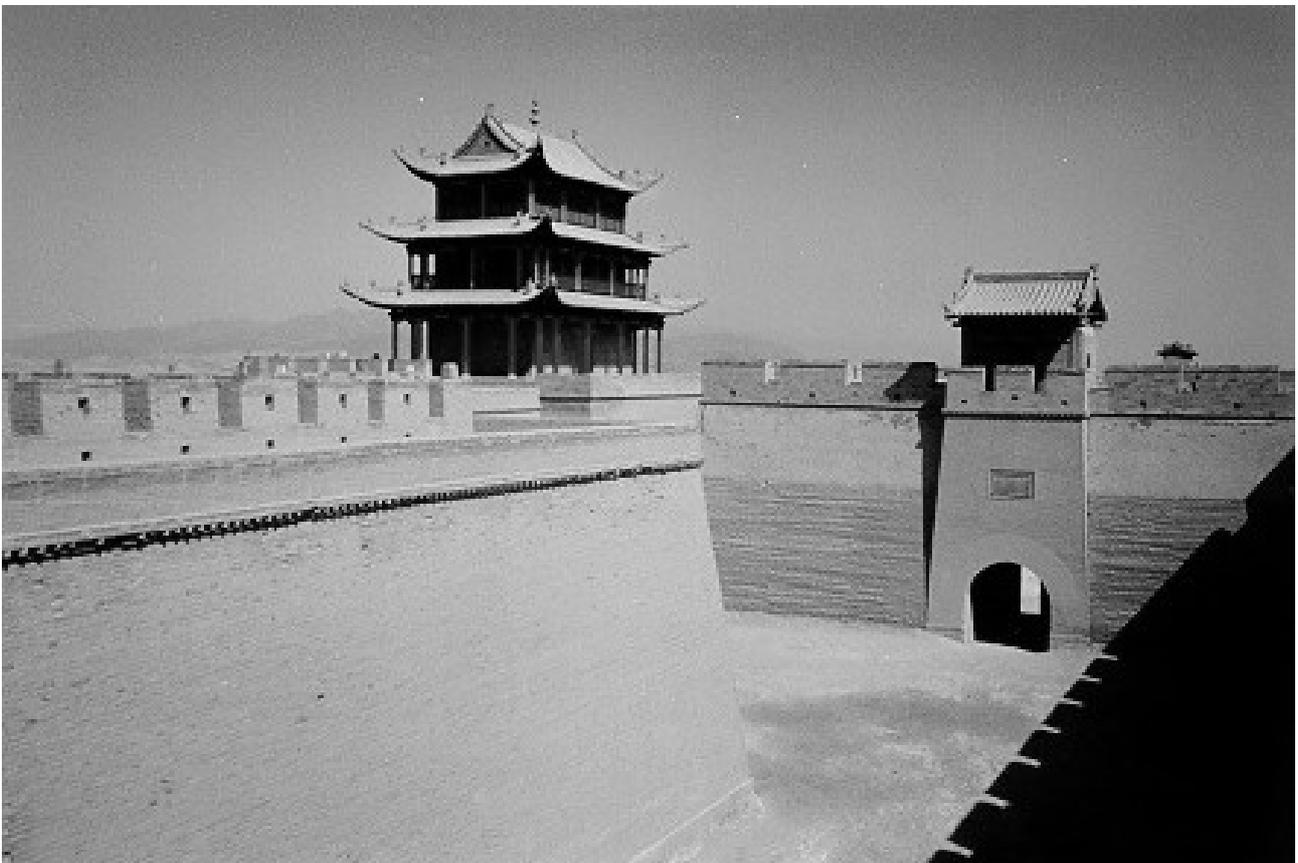


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automatically fail at a Simple Task where he risked at least injury. The two amount to pretty much the same thing, unless the conflict was a physical one.

When a player invokes the Good Thing for his character, that character either behaves in a particularly virtuous manner or musters great ability for one particular significant task. Again, this has two possible rules effects. The first is that the character gains a point of Honour. The second is that the character automatically succeeds at a Simple Task.

It may seem that what a character loses on the swings, she gains on the roundabouts, but this provides a concrete reason for a player to demonstrate a character's history and character. Being able to trade off a failure now for a success in the future can be an invaluable asset- or may permit a character to spend a point of Strength to gain a point of Honour. These rules do not affect conflicts. The reason for this is to avoid players letting their character suffer early in a session in order to gain extra dice (or whatever the additional benefit would be) for the final conflict. If they could do that, it would make it more difficult for the GM to balance conflicts and might result in what should have been a climactic contest becoming a damp squib.



Book V: Forbidden Rites

Magic plays an important role in the myth of the Jianghu world, but the extent you want it to play a part in this game can vary. Having abundant magic can lead to many problems being trivial to solve, making their pursuit uninteresting. Too much flashy magic can also erode the uniqueness and power of the xiá. It is a good idea for all the players to agree on how much magic they want in the game before they begin. Here are several ways magic can be dealt with, that are not mutually exclusive. The players should decide which of these types of magic they wish to be present in their world.

Legendary Magic

This magic is forever beyond the grasp of player character and the enemies they face. It may have made the world, or been involved in the creation of many powerful artefacts, but it not at the beck and call of mere mortals. Magic is something that happened long ago, at the will of gods, and hasn't been seen since. Some of its power may be left behind in certain places or artefacts, but they are more curiosities than anything useful.

Folk Magic

Magic is common, but only in certain areas and for mundane tasks. The medicine that doctors practice may rely on magic for its effectiveness, and the feats of acrobatics that warriors perform may require magic just in order to be possible, but this magic cannot be used to anything that could not be done by mundane means. It can however, let a character do something more effectively or spectacularly than mundane means would allow. Magic changes how things are done, not what things are done. It may not even be thought of as magic. Powerful warriors may even be able to manifest their ch'i in a form that can hurt enemies like a blow from a weapon.

Quest Magic

There is magic, but it is rare. It is bound in some way to the quest the PCs are on. Maybe the enemy they face has magic at his disposal or the temple they are heading to is a site of arcane significance. While this magic can be used by the characters, it can only be used in certain, tightly defined ways. Its effects can be discussed, and its use planned for, but the characters cannot simply create more magic to help them. The use of this magic may require extravagant preparations or rare ingredients, and is strictly for use as an ace in the hole rather than a reliable tool.



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Dishonourable Magic

Magic of many kinds can be freely practised by anyone with the patience and skill to learn it. However, it is irrevocably part of the dark path. Characters can learn spells or use forbidden rites whenever they choose, but every time a character does so she loses 2 points of Honour. Because of this, magic is generally only practised by those given over to evil.

Spells must be taught by a master (who generally extracts a terrible price for the knowledge) or learned from forbidden manuscripts. The GM should keep track of what dark magic is known by the characters. Even being suspected of using such magic can be grounds for imprisonment or execution. Because of the large Honour penalty for using it, the GM need not engineer situations where a character using gets into trouble, but it does mean that it must be conducted in secret.

Counter Magic

A form of magic is available to anyone who can learn it, but it is only effective at countering dark magic and dealing with monsters and demons. The traditional means of dealing with hopping vampires, for example, is writing scripture on a piece of paper and sticking it to the monster's forehead. Knowing what to write, and how to apply it could be considered a form of counter magic. Being able to deflect bolts of lightning spewed forth from a demon's fingertips would also qualify. Bear in mind that demons and sorcerers are just as vulnerable to old-fashioned violence as anyone else; but their machinations can be stopped much more effectively by counter magic. This form of magic is very narrow in its focus.

Sympathetic Magic

The power of the characters may be so great that magical effects spontaneously occur when they are using the full extent of their abilities. Weapons may glow with power when swung, or the weather change in response to the characters' moods. Like Folk Magic, this form of magic changes how things are done rather than what can be done.

Using Magic

If a character is allowed to use magic freely, then she should pick one skill she has and nominate that as her field of magic. She cannot perform any magic that is clearly more suited to another skill, but within her field she can use it to perform magic, in the same way as it would be used for other tasks. Of course, this is still subject to the limits imposed by the type of magic allowed in the Jianghu.



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All in all, magic is not meant to be the main point of interest in the game, and the GM should adjudicate its use in a way that it supplements the other parts of the game rather than smothering them.

Artefacts

Some stories hinge around a powerful artefact. The GM is free to specify how it works, but it is worth bearing in mind that even legendary artefacts, possessed of incredible power, can be of absolutely no benefit to the people carrying them around. Typically, the power comes from one particular thing it can do, at a certain time or place, rather than having an ability that can be used all the time. Artefacts may, however, afford their bearer some special resistance to magic of other kinds, if the GM feels it's appropriate.

If the players want magical weapons or tools that aren't part of a quest, then the GM should consider permitting them items which, while magical, grant no actual advantage in conflicts. They may be valuable, and have properties far beyond the normal, but in the hands of warriors as skilled as xiá it doesn't improve their prowess by a noticeable amount. A sword may be sharp enough to cut through other weapons with ease or a staff may be able to change length, and while such strengths may raise eyebrows a competent fighter will compensate.

One thing the GM should avoid, however, is any artefact that provides a cheap way of solving problems. An amulet that lets the wearer fly may sound interesting, but risks making any problem involving obstacles or travel trivial to solve, and thus boring.



Book VI: Foes and Follies

The NPCs that the you, the GM, control are not defined as rigorously as the player characters. In fact, many of them need no number definition at all. The steamed bun seller may be full of character and joking with the characters as he serves them, but he certainly doesn't need a complete set of stats and skills. Only NPCs that engage the PCs in conflicts need numerical definitions of their abilities.

Threat Level

When an NPC participates in a conflict, you only needs to assign him a single number- his Threat Level. This Threat Level is simply the size of the dice pool that character rolls- for anything. Of course, sometimes you may reduce the Threat Level; for example when a PC has engineered a situation to try to gain an advantage over the NPC. But for the most part, a single Threat Level makes it very easy to keep track of NPCs. You need only note the character's name and Threat Level for later reference. Another benefit to this system is that it keeps the players in the dark about the exact motives of the NPCs- the players won't know whether the character is attempting to Cajole or Dissemble, for example.

The maximum number of dice an NPC can have in a stunt is half his maximum pool, rounding down.

When deciding on the Threat Level of an NPC, it is easy to gauge how challenging he is by comparing his Threat to the pool the PCs that have to deal with him. A Threat Level of 10 is a good challenge for a single PC. If you have multiple NPCs in a conflict, the overall Threat of the encounter is simply the sum of their individual Threat Levels. In this way it is easy to set conflicts at the difficulty you want to. You also have the luxury of setting up a conflict with a single powerful opponent or a number of lesser foes.

You should avoid making a conflict harder just because the PC involved is particularly strong in that skill, because this undermines the benefit to the player of making their character strong in that regard.

Here's a simple chart with some sample Threat Levels to help you get a feel for setting up conflicts.



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Threat Level	Description
5	An easy challenge, except for very unskilled characters.
7	An easy challenge not good characters, or an even fight for weak ones.
10	A good challenge for an average PC.
15	An almost impossible challenge for an average PC, and a tall order even for a strong one. A credible opponent for two average PCs.

You can see that making conflicts for more than a couple of PCs challenging starts to require an impractical quantity of dice. There are two ways this can be alleviated. The first is to manage conflicts such that only 1 or 2 PCs are involved at a time. The second is to introduce 'Tough Opponents', described later.

Splitting conflicts such that only 1 or 2 PCs fight at a time is a good idea for several reasons. It prevents the conflicts from bogging down and gives each character a chance to show off their abilities. Because *xiá* are quite independent-minded, it should not be hard to persuade a player to have her character leave the group temporarily, where an ambush can be sprung. Any force, except perhaps an army, attempting to tackle a group of *xiá* head on should expect a thorough defeat.

Splitting is easier to justify for non-combat conflicts. It is only natural that the group picks a spokesperson for themselves.

Villain Losses

Player characters have to specify what they are willing to risk in a conflict, but the Threat Level system means that you don't have to do so with NPCs. Instead, you should wait until the end of the conflict and then decide the best way for the villain to suffer defeat. You should avoid having disposable enemies (unless they are mooks, below) and instead contrive to bring NPCs back into the story later on. NPCs that have a history with the PCs are much more interesting. You should not hesitate to make sure a villain escapes, even if the players are very determined to stop her from doing so. You may decide that the villain loses a point from her Threat Level as a result of a lost conflict, so she is weaker the next time she is encountered. You can also make NPCs stronger when they are encountered later on in the lot, the nearest NPC equivalent of taking greater risks.

However, it bears mentioning at this point that not every NPC is a villain. Some may just be honest people in a corrupt system, doing the best they can. Others may just have a



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different idea of what is right to the one the PCs have. In those cases, the PCs should be very reluctant to kill or seriously injure them (unless they like losing Honour).

The most tense confrontations are the ones where neither side really deserves to lose.

Cheap Foes

Cheap foes are low-quality enemies that typically attack in bulk. It only really makes sense to encounter them in battles, but the rules for them can be used in non-combat conflicts. A group of Cheap Foes is treated as a single character, and assigned a Threat Level. This group attack and defends as though it was a single person. Because they have the advantage of numbers, they generally have the initiative at the start of the conflict. Cheap foes can never perform stunts. When they spend a die, instead of discarding it they put it to one side. Instead of taking damage, every time they Take the Blow, discard one of the dice put aside. If there are no dice put aside, discard the lowest die in their pool. In future sequences, they only get to roll the dice remaining in their 'put aside' group. This means that after the first sequence, it is not uncommon for their pool to be so depleted that they simply run away.



Tough Opponents

Sometimes you may want to have an opponent who is tough enough to take on multiple PCs at once. Simply giving the NPC a huge number of dice is not very interesting. Instead, the opponent can be given a more modest pool (somewhere between 10 and 20) but have a special rule. When the NPC suffers damage that would normally put her out of the conflict, instead reset her damage to 0 and let her roll her pool again. This means that the PCs must defeat her multiple times. The number of times the NPC needs to be defeated is up to you, but you should consider the total dice the NPC gets to roll as the overall Threat Level for the battle.

Because it is quite likely that the PCs have used most of their pool by the time the villain refreshes hers, you should also rule that she can only attack a PC with no dice once a sequence- if she is forced to pass when she still has dice, simply start the next sequence. This attack is used up even if another character intercepted the attack.

The multiple 'deaths' of the opponent can also be used to reveal new plot points, new abilities, or to change location in a similar way to changing sequences. The threat of the NPC may even change. This provides a good way for the GM to adjust the difficulty of an encounter on the fly without making it obvious he is doing so.

Although tough opponents are a significant challenge, they should be used sparingly. The Player Characters are supposed to be amongst the most powerful warriors in the world. Continually throwing stronger opponents at them undermines that feeling.

Alternative Injuries

Sometimes, you might want a PC to risk something other than a simple injury in a conflict. If the character has forged a relationship with an NPC, you may wish to put that NPC's life at stake instead of losing a point of Strength of Honour. On one hand, this is a good deal for the player, as it gets them extra dice for the extra risk without the possibility of losing important stats. On the other, it can be a terrible blow to a character to lose someone she cares about, or have something she desperately wanted to avoid come to pass. Introducing these alternative injuries can help bring the story to life.

Building to the Climax

As the GM, you'll have some idea as to how close to completing the quest the players are. You should use this knowledge to keep winding up the tension, escalating the challenges the players face and raising the stakes of their actions to the point where they



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feel they have to stake a lot in conflicts. You can pull aspects of their history out of the bag to haunt them, letting returning NPCs dog their steps and you should have at least one shocking betrayal in the course of things. All of this is to drive the story onward to the final conflict of the quest, which should be the most dramatic points of the story.

Fudging Rolls

GM fudging is an important part of role-playing games. It is most usually done when the dice favour one side more than the other to the extent that the fun starts to go out of the session, or when the GM feels it would be much more dramatic to ignore what the dice said and pick the outcome instead.

For Simple Tasks, the GM should be quite prepared to deem an attempt a success or failure without rolling dice (or invoking One Good Thing or One Bad Thing) if it moves the game along or is particularly dramatically satisfying. The GM shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking that setting the difficulty as 'Nigh Impossible' will prevent the PCs from derailing the plot significantly. All it takes is one lucky roll at the wrong moment to derail it totally. Also, invoking One Good Thing may let a character succeed at a task that the GM would really rather he didn't.

In conflicts, the GM has a much more subtle tool available. By spending the dice sub-optimally, he can avoid overwhelming the PCs. He may find himself with sufficient dice available to knock a character out of the conflict. He can choose to do so or not based on what is at risk, whether killing or injuring the character would have a detrimental effect on the game, but most of all by what seems dramatically satisfying at the time.



Book VII: Setting and Downing Suns

The end of a quest is the most important part of it. Sacrifices have had to be made to get that far, and everything hinges on one final showdown. Because this is a story about warriors, the final is almost always a mighty battle.

Final Fight

This is an excellent opportunity to tie up loose ends by including all the recurring villains who haven't met their end so far. There should also be a principle villain, a Tough Opponent, to be the main opposition. All of the players should have a chance to get involved, so they get a piece of the grand finale.

Beyond that, it's up to the GM to make it as interesting as possible. The rules for Tough Opponents lend themselves to a running fight broken into stages, with shocking revelations between each one. It could be staged so that each player gets a round with either a bitter enemy or the principle bad guy, or instead be staged as one massive free-for-all. If a large cast of hostile NPCs needs to be dealt with, they are best introduced in small groups.

As with smaller fights, the main measure of difficulty is the total number of dice that get rolled by the NPCs. Although there's no reason why a friendly NPC couldn't fight on the side of the players, this might steal their thunder and in any case it gives the GM more to do when he already has a full plate.

Stand or Fall

There is no requirement for a wuxia story to end happily. Even if evil is defeated, it is often at a terrible cost. Failure should always be a possibility in the final conflict. As always, the player can specify exactly what they risk (although the GM should question the commitment of any warrior who only risks losing at the end of the quest). The success or failure of the quest, however, is a much graver affair. There are no rules for this, as it is likely to be beyond the scope of numbers, but it should have a significant impact on the world whether for good or ill.

The climax of a quest is the most dramatically appropriate moment for a character to die, so risking death should be encouraged. In fact, risking death may be necessary to have a realistic chance of succeeding.



Rank Betrayal

During the course of the game, one player may want to play the role of a traitor, only pursuing the quest in order to sabotage it at the last moment. The last moment is the most appropriate time for this to come to fruition, and the GM should sternly discourage any betrayal before that point, as it can undermine the story and make the game difficult to manage.

When the betrayal occurs at the end of the game, the traitor simply joins the NPC side (the GM may reduce the strength and number of characters on the villainous NPC side to compensate). Any attempt to side-step the final confrontation, or destroy any chance the players have of succeeding before or during the final confrontation (by destroying the essential artefact during the previous night, for example) should not be permitted by the GM.

If the other players realise that one player intends to betray the others this may undermine some of the tension in the final scene. One way to make this work to dramatic advantage is to give that character the opportunity to redeem herself- either as soon as her secret leaks out or during the final encounter.

Bright New Downs

If the quest is a success, each character gets a scene to describe his epilogue. If the character survived, this may tidy up loose ends with friendly NPCs or offer some redemption if the character has been able to put the ghosts of the past to rest. If the character died, the survivors describe their reactions to the death.

Each surviving character gets 1 point he can add to a stat. This cannot take any stat beyond the maximum of 6. If a character has been reduced to 0 Honour, then that character can raise his Honour to 2 instead of increasing Strength or Wisdom. If a character has suffered an injury to Strength during the quest, this is the only way to recover that lost point. Of course, if a character lost more than one point of strength only one of them can be regained hits way.

The GM may decide that particularly long quests merit the award of 2 stat points, but these cannot both be spent on the same stat.





Seasons of Dusk

Even if the quest ended badly, there may be surviving characters. The GM narrates the effect the failure has had on them, and on the world around them. Allied NPCs may come to a sticky end, love interests may pine for the fallen, and so on.

Each surviving character gets 1 point she can add to a skill. This represents the experience she has gained from the failed venture. No skill can be taken beyond the maximum of 6.

Even if the quest was particularly long, the GM shouldn't award an extra point, as for successful quests, because there has to be some penalty for failure. The GM may rule that the quest was a success for some characters, but a loss for others. This may be because a character was knocked out of the final conflict, or because their particular motivation for completing the quest was not fulfilled. Note that even if a character lost the final conflict, the GM may decide she still succeeded at the quest if the remaining PCs defeated the final enemy.

Endless Roads and Eternal Twilight

Although one quest is a self-contained story, the increases in stats and skills implies that the PCs can embark on a fresh quest, again decided on as a group. Maybe a different player will act as GM for the next quest. If your character did something particularly noteworthy during the last quest, good or bad, the 'good thing' or 'bad thing' on his character sheet may change.

However, even if a PC survived the player may decide to retire him. He may have suffered so many injuries that his questing days are effectively over, or he may have suffered a great personal loss that has sapped his will to fight. He may even have lost whatever drove him to a wandering life in the first place, at the completion of the quest or by a change in his outlook on life. If a player wishes to retire a character, she can do so. She simply creates a new character to join the group for the next quest. New characters should be given a generous opportunity to hog the limelight to begin with, as this cements their place in the group.

Retiring characters can have their departure dealt with as a scene, or simply slip away between quests. If you want to make more of a fuss about a retiring character's fate, you can use his final Honour stat as an indication of what happens to him. A character with no Honour at the quest's conclusion might turn his back on his friends and ideals and become thoroughly evil- maybe even a villainous NPC in future quests. A character who has reached 6 Honour becomes the source of many legends for the ages, and might even be privileged enough to be gifted with immortality by the Jade Emperor himself.

Where characters return for a series of quests, the length of each quest can act as a pacing device. If the characters lost quite a few points of their stats in a particularly long quest, the next might be much shorter to give them an easy opportunity to recover a point. If players struggle to make regular sessions, a series of single-session quests is a good way to work around that problem. Characters can drift in and out of the series of quests as needed.



Book VIII: Going Further

The rules in this game as presented are intended to be minimal. There are no rules for special abilities, signature moves or any complicated manoeuvres in combat. However, you are free to come up with some yourself, or expand on the simple skill system.

If you separate the skills into narrower fields, you probably need to increase the total skill points available for characters. You should also bear in mind that there will probably be larger gaps in ability between characters in any particular field.

Or, you could develop a small, specific bonus for each skill when used to fight- possibly an extra die in specific circumstances or a bonus to the damage a character takes before being eliminated from a conflict. An even more detailed system might have a specific move or ability associated with each point spent in the skill.

All of these are good choices you can make to create a more detailed system for Rivers and Lakes. The only caveat is that more detailed does not always equal better- you need to be sure that the players still concentrate on the story and description of the fights instead of the mechanics of it. Unless that's how you prefer to play- in which case go to town.



Afterword and Licence

Although I'm painting myself as an expert on all things wuxia, truth be told that's not exactly true. I've watched a lot of films, but not read any of the novels. That said, I think role-playing is often a better match to film than the written word, mostly because only the latter really gets into the secrets and emotions inside a character's head. In the first two, this has to come out in what the character says and does.

There have been quite a few role-playing games with an emphasis on over-the-top combat. Rivers and Lakes is intended to scratch a subtly different itch. I wanted to avoid tedious lists of abilities or a system where players are continually challenged to come up with description in order to be effective. The back-and-forth mechanic of conflicts was also a motivating consideration, as the round-robin style of almost all role-playing games is at odds with how action is best told.

I hope you enjoy it, anyway. That's what I write these things for.

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My website, which I hope to update properly once I've finished this, can be found at:

<http://chthonic.150m.com>

My blog, where the poll for the next 'rpg-in-a-month' I do will appear, is:

<http://queex.livejournal.com>

Although this game is available free of charge, if you have the free pdf please consider making a donation. The more donations I receive, the longer I'll probably go on writing these things. If you bought a physical copy, you are a shining example to us all and you should feel smug.

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