



GAMES 游戲



THIS GAME has deliberately been designed to be rather specific in its coverage. It is set at a particular time, in a particular place, and with player characters in the roles of outlaws, attempting to bring justice to a corrupt world. The game has been designed this way so that it presents specific, accurate details, and so that the systems can be tailored to a particular type of play. As referee, of course, you are by no means limited to this background. This chapter provides advice on how to start and run your game, and how to tailor it to your own requirements.

It also contains notes required by the referee on running certain aspects of the rules.

CENTRAL CONFLICT

There is an argument that says that any game should already have a central conflict written into it. Hence *DeD* came complete with 'alignments', *Call of Cthulhu* featured the desperate attempts of investigators to stop the Lovecraftian horrors from having their way, *Feng Shui* is set against the 'secret war' to control *feng shui* sites, and so on.

It is obvious from observing actual games, however, that such conflicts don't necessarily form the bulk of game activity. Rather, they are a backdrop against which things happen. When such conflicts interfere too much in the game they obstruct players' freedom to act. The most obvious form of 'interference' is in the rules.

There is an important 'central conflict' in the background of Song China. That conflict is between *chao* 廷 (town) and *ye* 野 (country).

In the town, the world is ordered, regulated, mechanistic. Everyone knows their place, and must dress and act accordingly. In this world, the scholar is supreme. Power derives from knowledge and influence.

In the country, the world is chaotic, anarchistic, dangerous and unpredictable. Only the resourceful, and those possessing great personal power, can survive in the wilds. This is the world of the Immortals, of monsters, of outlaws... of heroes.

This distinction is made in the character generation

rules, so that every character will have weaknesses to balance their strengths. You are at liberty to ignore it, and make the *whole* of China the kind of barbarian wasteland depicted in most fantasy. But I think you'd be missing a lot if you do.

You might wonder how this kind of central conflict could stimulate adventures. Well, it's the basis of the whole Water Margin legend, and many more legends besides. The outlaw heroes, from a position outside society, are challenging society itself. The conflict is a revolutionary one.

You can make as much or as little of this revolutionary message as you like. You can also make as much or as little of the ethical overtones. Most readings of the Water Margin legend are fairly conservative and idealistic. Good is on the side of the outlaws. They are upholders of justice against an Establishment which has abandoned it. Although they oppose society, they don't want to bring it down: they just want to renew it.

In Song China, there was a deep social conflict being conducted that mirrors this rift, though which has more ambiguous ethical overtones. It was the conflict *within* the bureaucracy between the reformers and the conservatives. Rather than having a simple conflict between Good and Evil (with capital letters, of course, to show that we're talking about abstract, unconnected ideas), I feel it's more productive to have a set of conflicts along more human lines. These conflicts can be related (in the same way as the town/country, conservative/reformer conflicts are related), and given whatever ethical overtones you want to examine.

Or you can have the Good outlaws fighting the Evil magistrates. It's just that, if we're talking *DeD* terms, I've always had more interest in Law vs Chaos myself.

Certainly the Water Margin heroes also fit squarely within a tradition of Chinese 'knight-errants' who live unconventionally, but spurn the safety and hypocrisy of society in favour of truth, justice, and, to be brutally frank, violence. It's this distinction, rather than any considerations of 'game balance', that forms the basis for the game's differentiation of 'heroes' from 'normal' people.

yamen of a district or prefecture, probably playing employees. Two distinct possibilities are available: one is that, as in the Judge Dee books, the player characters are the personal entourage of the Magistrate (and one player could play the Magistrate). They are therefore not permanent residents in the town, and part of their job will be dealing with the clerks and constables who are locals. Another alternative would be that the players could be the permanent staff of a *yamen*, or a local ward chief's friends and family, in which case they will have to deal with the foibles of the Magistrate assigned to them.

Activities would mainly include solving criminal cases and keeping law and order. There is scope for combat, negotiation, and even deception and infiltration, for example, to subdue a troublesome local bandit stronghold.

The central conflict here is pretty obvious: law vs crime, but it allows for a lot of variation and subtlety.

COURT GAME

The upper reaches of the Chinese Bureaucracy, and the Imperial Court, are a hotbed of plots, counterplots, intrigues and cliques. Players who favour a more political game may find this an engaging setting. They could play aristocrats, officials, eunuchs and even high class courtesans, involved in obtaining influence and the good graces of the Emperor.

There are any number of conflicts that will emerge in such a game, and complex power relationships should enable tension to be maintained. In such a game, the political struggle between the conservatives and the reformers will assume even greater proportions. Referees who fancy running this sort of game might benefit from a little research, especially into the career of Wang Anshi. Also, if you can by any chance get to see the Taiwanese television drama based on the life of *Empress Wu*, your efforts will be richly rewarded!

MILITARY GAME

In 1127 the Northern Song Dynasty was overthrown by the nomadic Jin. The Jin conquered the whole of north China, capturing both Hui Zong and Qin Zong, the son in whose favour he had abdicated. The Song Capital was removed to Hangzhou, and warfare between the two states continued sporadically for many years. The great hero of the times was Yue Fei, the general who finally managed to halt the Jin advance, and even roll them back a little. Many of Yue Fei's adventures are similar to events of the Water Margin, and in fact Water Margin heroes or their children play a part in some popular versions of his exploits.

Players who are interested in a military game should find this a perfect setting. It could even follow on from an Outlaw game in which the bandits are pardoned, and made generals in the face of the military emergency.

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is another famous work of Chinese popular literature, dealing with

the civil war which followed the collapse of the Han dynasty. For players who are especially interested in the prospect of all-out warfare, this would make a fine setting for a *Military Game*. These rules can be easily adapted to the Three Kingdoms. In the tradition of Chinese literature, you may simply accept the rules wholesale, ignoring historical anachronisms. Or you may wish to go through and remove the more obviously out of place features.

The beginning and the end

reach out hands to each other

STARTING A GAME

Although many aspects of this game are traditionally found in role-playing games, it may be a little exotic for some groups. In particular, the heavy emphasis on Chinese culture may be difficult to grasp at first. For this reason the way in which the game starts can be an essential way of establishing the atmosphere, and easing the players into their roles gently.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

Obviously, once you have read the rules, the first thing to do is to decide what kind of a game you want to play. At this stage it is essential for the referee to consult with the players. As written, **Outlaws** is historically based, but with a 'heroic' element (magic, and remarkable abilities) matching that of the original story. Some players, however, may prefer a purely historical campaign with a 'realistic' feel, while others may like an all-out high power flying swordsman style game.

Similarly, the background of the player characters as outlaws may not appeal. The alternatives described in the previous section may be more suitable, but will require more work by the referee, at least until I get round to writing a supplement!

Once you have settled on the basic type of game, you can leap in straight away, or you can do some preliminary research. As referee, you should think about which elements appeal to you, and whether you require more background in certain areas. The players can also do research, guided by the referee. They can be given background material to enable them to get a feel for the culture, people and events of the Water Margin. Ideally, this should be as entertaining as possible: movies, videos and novels provide the best source. Examples are provided in the bibliography, but the best for a standard game will be the *Water Margin* TV show (available on video and laser disc) and the books *The Broken Seals* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*.

Before you start the game, it's a good idea for the

just a little action, so that players learn gradually how the game works.

A sample adventure, set in Jinfang, the town described in the *China* chapter, is available. This is a rip-roarer involving detection and a large dose of the supernatural.

An alternative to the all-out adventure option is a relaxed 'get-to-know-each-other session'. For players who prize character interaction, the first session can be a chance for them to get accustomed to their characters by talking with the others. This would especially suit those starting methods in which the player characters don't already know each other. For example, they might be part of a newly formed military unit. Or the travellers crossing the river might have a lot of time to get to know each other before those pirates attack.

THE RULES

When you start the game it is likely that there will be occasional mistakes. There may be parts of the rules which are ambiguous, and you only realise what the true rule is after using the wrong one for a while (I know, I've done this with countless games!). To allow for this, I suggest you establish from the start, that whatever rules are used cannot be changed retroactively. If you find that you've been using the rules wrong, then *from that point on* use the correct rules. Nothing that has happened up to that point can be changed, however. If you get the players to agree to this at the beginning, you can forestall arguments!

*When you paint a portrait of a dragon
you paint only a portrait of his skin*

ATMOSPHERE

The aim of **Outlaws** is to recreate a Chinese setting. Your players should believe in the China their characters are living in. Different players will have different expectations. Some will have a deep knowledge of China, derived perhaps from having lived there, or having studied it, or a misspent youth watching kung fu movies. Others will know little more than the names of their favourite dishes from the local take-away. So how do you go about creating a feeling of Chinese culture?

LANGUAGE

The first way in which you can encourage players to leave their 20th century identities behind is through language. The old Chinese language was quite ornate, full of flowery language and terms of respect. It reflected a society in which relationships were usually vertical. All

relationships were modelled on the most important relationships: those within the family.

Thus, most players should try to get used to being a little more tactful than the average Westerner. There are exceptions to every rule, of course: in the Water Margin Li Kui is rarely hindered by any trace of tact, or indeed civilised behaviour of any kind. But even he expresses a deep respect for Song Jiang, and obeys him—if he can master his emotions for long enough. Li Kui refers to Song Jiang as Elder Brother, and this expresses a key element of the language. With the family being of such central importance, its influence permeates every cranny of society. Friends refer to each other using terms derived from the family. Players should be encouraged to use the terms Elder Brother/Sister and Younger Brother/Sister to address other players. If the characters' age difference is large, or if it is not so much a friendship as an acquaintance, then perhaps the terms Uncle and Nephew are used. Nevertheless such family terms are an important way of establishing the Chinese atmosphere.

Chinese politeness requires on the one hand that a speaker show humility when talking of himself or his household, and on the other hand that he be very protective of his reputation (his 'face'). To cause someone else to lose face is a serious business. But to boast loudly is unlikely to generate much respect.

Again, there are exceptions. A boxer at a local fair is unlikely to drum up much interest if he proclaims himself to be a 'merely competent' fighter. For more elevated persons, boasting without boasting becomes a sophisticated skill. Most of the generals who are sent by the Imperial Court to catch the outlaws of Liangshan Po proclaim that although they have little skill, thanks to the Emperor's patronage they will easily be able to suppress the bandits. Having been captured by the outlaws and offered a seat among the chieftains, they go through a similar story until, after protesting humbly, they accept their new position.

FAME

One of the consequences of being a hero is that you attract fame. This may or may not be a good thing, depending on your point of view.

Fame is not just **respect**. However, a character who gains a lot of **respect** will inevitably acquire some fame. Fame is fickle, however, and rarely under the control of the individual.

Fame is also relative. It depends on location, status and job. In the Eastern Capital, Bianliang, it is rather difficult to be famous unless you are exceptionally talented, rich or privileged. Out in the provinces, however, it can be easy to be a big fish in a little pool.

In the Water Margin, there is a stratum of society called the 'Brotherhood of Heroes' (more literally, the 'Rivers and Lakes Fraternity'). These are people who value chivalry and martial valour. They span the whole of society, from arms instructors of the Emperor's own guard, to outlaws eking out a meagre existence in the

recent run of bad luck, not the intervention of a curmudgeonly referee.

*If you have never done anything bad,
you shouldn't be worrying about
the devils knocking on your door*

BAD JOSS

Bad joss is a game mechanic designed to encourage players to adopt the superstitious attitude common among the people of the Song Dynasty. At the same time, it provides a means of curbing players' tendencies to be too greedy in using the rules to grab power for themselves, and it may even provide plot developments.

As referee, the way you use the bad joss rules will have an important effect on the game. It is easy to use rules such as these as a means of 'getting at' the players, using bad joss as a stick with which to beat them. This is a bit of a waste. As referee, you already have plenty of sticks. Instead you should try to use the bad joss rules impartially, so that the players view them as a part of the world rather than your whim. You should also make the most of the plot possibilities generated by the bad joss rules (explained below). In this way, while the characters will find their bad joss very uncomfortable, the players may find it adds a lot to the game.

ACQUIRING BAD JOSS

You should keep track of the running total of bad joss for each character. There are a number of ways in which player characters can acquire bad joss:

- ◇ When they claim points of motivation (explained in the *Action* chapter).
- ◇ When they fall under the influence of a baleful spirit (explained in the *Beliefs* chapter). This includes curses inflicted by sorcerers (explained in the *Magic* chapter).
- ◇ When they live in a place which has bad feng shui, or their ancestors suffer from bad feng shui (explained in the *Beliefs* chapter)
- ◇ When they linger in a place in which something terrible has happened: especially a suicide or drowning.
- ◇ When they break an oath: the player should roll one die and subtract one to find the number of points of bad joss acquired.

In most cases the number of points of bad joss acquired is specifically determined in the rules. In other cases the quantity is left to the referee's discretion. You should be careful to be impartial in these latter cases.

ALLEVIATING BAD JOSS

There are several ways of resisting bad joss, or reducing the accumulated total. The usual way in which a character's bad joss total is reduced is by suffering its effects through penalties to rolls, or bad joss rolls. This is explained in the next section.

It is possible to resist bad joss in other ways. Protection from bad joss may be gained by using Talismans or a Buddhist blessing (as explained in the *Magic* chapter). Some intercept bad joss when it is acquired, others reduce the stock of bad joss already acquired. The Buddhist spell of *Retribution* also enables a character to be purged of their bad joss, though this may be at the cost of **energy** and possibly **body**.

Bad joss may also be purged by a purification ritual. Both Taoism and Buddhism have rituals of purification. These differ slightly in details, but are broadly similar. They involve abstinence from drink, sex and certain types of food (meat in the case of Buddhists, grain for Taoists) over a period of at least a week. During the period of purification the character must remain completely untainted by bad joss, and spend each day observing religious rituals. Knowing the rituals requires a successful roll of ease 7 plus THEOLOGY and religious CEREMONY (both are required). A priest may be employed to do this.

At the end of each week the character rolls with an ease of the degree of success of the ritual roll. The degree of success is the number of points of bad joss removed by the ritual.

A pilgrimage to a holy mountain, combined with the purification ritual, will add a bonus of +3 to the purification roll.

Buddhist and Taoist priests may be reluctant to perform such rituals for the benefit of a character who is obviously bent on evil.

SUFFERING BAD JOSS

Characters suffer from the effects of bad joss in several ways. The two most common are penalties to rolls, and *bad joss rolls*.

PENALTIES TO ROLLS

Players worried about the consequences of a bad joss roll may try to keep their bad joss down by allowing the referee to use their bad joss against them. They should tell the referee how many points of bad joss they are willing to see used against them. *At any time* after this, when the player makes a roll, the referee may then announce that he is spending all or part of their bad joss. Each point of bad joss expended in this way counts as a -2 modifier to the player's roll. In addition, the roll will

Motivation is something to be used to make the game more interesting. While it exists partly to assist characters in improving their skills, its main purpose is so that players can express their characters' personalities clearly.

Zhuang Zi, the famous Taoist philosopher, relayed some comments by Daozhi, a famous bandit of the time of Confucius:

'One of Daozhi's followers once asked him: "Does the bandit have a Way?" Daozhi replied: "How could he get anywhere if he did not have a Way? Making shrewd guesses as to how much booty is stashed away in the room is sageliness; being the first one in is bravery; being the last one out is righteousness; knowing whether the job can be pulled off or not is wisdom; dividing up the loot fairly is benevolence. No one in the world ever succeeded in becoming a great bandit if he did not have all five!'