

Rite Publishing Presents

Heroes of the Jade Oath



By Frank Carr



Rite Publishing presents

Heroes of the Jade Oath

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*To my grandfather who showed me why we should respect the experience
and knowledge of our elders.*

To my father who lived as an example of loyalty, honor, and integrity.

To my mother who taught me the importance of family and our imaginations.

To my wife who shows me love and selflessness every day.

To my children who give me hope and show me why I must live every day to its fullest.

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Welcome to the Lands of the Jade Oath

Introduction

You are lucky, but the feng shui is inauspicious. Dare you to tread here? The Lands of the Jade Oath is a place forged by sanguine and insidious dragons, fallen gods, treacherous demons, immaculate spirits, and an all-powerful oath. Here, skillful warriors, sagacious monks, scheming eunuchs, beautiful courtesans, inscrutable immortals, and ancient societies vie for control of the greatest empire the world has ever seen. These lands are filled with unknowable danger, unfortunate events, righteous magic, sinister treachery, exotic cultures, and above all: exciting adventure.

The infernal dramojh rage and devise their revenge unceasingly in their spiritual prisons, while those charged with upholding the Jade Oath must simultaneously keep the dramojh from escaping and endure the dramojh curse laid upon the lands. However, the corrupt influence of the dramojh and their infernal allies seeps ever into the dark places of the world, where it can take hold and entrench its taint.

The powerful and privileged weave their plots and fight for their goals with a devotion and grace that is both immaculate and depraved. All the while, those who can work magic seek enlightenment or power while the politics of the various nations race along in an attempt to reign supreme. An incessant war rages at the Ghost-wall in the North between two different forces of undead, while many of those dispossessed by the conflict suffer from famine and disease. Daring bandit kings reap ill-gotten rewards from any who approach, while pilgrims and merchants return from seeking their fortunes as well as the ancient and holy homeland of their ancestors.

Xianguo, the greatest empire in all the lands, moves closer to civil war as a new and untested emperor of an uncertain bloodline takes the jade throne. Secret societies enact their centuries-old plans. Demon-hunters roam the lands searching for cursed artifacts and the infernal footmen of the coming apocalypse as they bind these horrid forces to the land itself to ensure its survival.

Many secrets, both ancient and new, lie undiscovered in these exotic lands. It is here that glorious adventure awaits both the honorable, yet untried hero and the unworthy, but lucky outlaw. Whether it is your destiny, enlightenment, or your fortune that you seek, you can find it in the Lands of the Jade Oath.

It has been a long journey on this jade road to a fantastic, far eastern realm. I grow weary, so allow me to share the story with you...

What this is...

This book creates a roleplaying game set in a fantasy version of Asia, complete as I can make it with fictional equivalents to the cultures and mythologies from that region. Why? Because I never found an Asian setting for the third edition of one of my favorite games, much less any that was designed for use with *Monte Cook's Arcana Evolved*. I wanted to play in a setting where stories and characters from literature, television, cinema, comics, and video games like *"A Chinese Ghost Story"*, *"Avatar"*, *"The Last Airbender"*,



"The Bride with White Hair", *"Bridge of Birds"*, *"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"*, *"Daughter of the Empire"*, *"Hero"*, *"Inu Yasha"*, *"Jade Empire"*, *"Journey to the West"*, *"Musa"*, *"Ninja Scroll"*, *"The Romance of the Three Kingdoms"*, *"Water Margin"*, *"Way of the Rat"*, *"Zorro - Warriors from the Magic Mountain"*, and many others. It evoked the feeling of playing in a fantastic world from the past.

I also wanted to play *Monte Cook's Arcana Evolved*. I saw many similarities between it and the tropes and concepts from Asian stories and myth. Where I didn't see similarities, I saw an opportunity to create something new, with a style and flavor that could mesh well with both. So, I chose to create my own ideal setting for it. I don't think that I was the only one who wanted such a setting. So, I was convinced to share my vision with you. The result is this first of three manuscripts that you see before you.

What this isn't...

I am not trying to create offense, humorous stereotypes or anything of the sort. While stereotypes are easy to fall back on, I think role-playing acknowledges the clichés and archetypes inherent in genres and stories while at the same time transcending them. So, as much as I could, I researched the stories, history, and mythologies of the cultures of Asia; since this is a fictional setting, a lot of creative license has gone into the creation as well.

Much of this project was also inspired by cinema and other media that can be fast and loose with historical and even cultural accuracy. This product may do much the same, though I tried to maintain cultural integrity and cohesiveness wherever I could. I do not have any special insight beyond my own experiences and research. However, I do have special insight into the fictional world I created. Please take this book as it is meant to be: entertainment with an eye towards the far eastern horizon of imagination and the adventures that lie beyond it.

A Note on Language

Because this is a fantasy setting, I was not as concerned with the correct transliterations of words or concepts as I was with actually creating the right sort of descriptions. There are two methods of transliteration for the Chinese to English. Neither are 100% accurate, but of the two (Pinyin and Yales), Pinyin is used more by most modern scholars and the People's Republic of China. In this work, some words in the same passage may be transliterations from Yales or from Pinyin or may even be transliterated from Cantonese rather than Mandarin. Where possible, I used Pinyin to find correct translations. My apologies for any confusion. I hope you can look past this to the fantastic vistas I hope to kindle in your imaginations.

Frank Carr

一國之非羽率折舊約





oryeo

Sea of Red Ice

Fushiyama

Nikonska

Steps to the Sea Road

Mu

Kyotara

Silchaeyo

City of the Autumn Gate

Wang Canal

Nka Lao

Seashadow

Heitze

Phangkong

Lam Trangh

Lao Phang

Nikong River

Kamojhea

Dragon Lake
Drakas Wat

Valley of Jars

River City of the Stone Gods

Nam Xang

Fortress in the Sky

Temple of the Tooth

Sri Merai

Sri Merai Ocean

Ho Ri Ocean

Sample file

R

CHAPTER 1 - THEMES & OVERVIEW

*Know yourself, know your enemy; your victory will be certain.
Know Heaven, know earth; your victory will be complete. – Sun Tzu*

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TRAITS

In the Lands of the Jade Oath, not everything is about exotic beauty, ancient customs, enlightenment, martial arts, bizarre beasts, and mystic secrets. The everyday person does not see these things. If she does, it is an uncommon event. Life is tough for most people; they must endure poverty and famine on a frequent basis, especially in the more remote regions. Some families even go so far as to sell their children in order to survive because they cannot afford to feed them, much less raise them in a world of petty warlords and monsters. Life in these places can be harsh, even when it is beautiful. To deal with the harsh realities of everyday life in a land of poverty, famine, despotic warlords, haughty nobles, cursed spirits, exotic mysticism, and monsters one must have a code of behavior that all can adhere to and rely upon. That is where *guanxi* come in.

The Ties That Bind

The social structure of the societies and cultures of the Lands of the Jade Oath is based on a concept known in the empire as “*guanxi*” (pronounced *gwan-chee*). Loosely translated, this means “connections” or “networks”. *Guanxi* is the glue that holds society together. It is the ties between people related by blood or marriage, who speak the same dialect or who come from the same region. The concept of *guanxi* makes it nearly impossible to refuse a request of any kind from a friend, acquaintance or family member. If you made a request in the past, you must honor a request in the future. If you cannot meet a request made by someone with whom you have a relationship, you must find someone who can.

A request for help often sets off a chain reaction, as each person who receives the request calls in a favor. Even cultures in the lands surrounding the Empire of Xianguo have an equivalent to *guanxi*. Links and favors stretch across the oceans, and are firmly based in a solemn code of honor. For those that originally hail from a culture with a *guanxi* social tradition, it can take precedence over newly adopted cultural traditions and/or laws.

Family and Clan Culture

Understanding the cultures of the region helps players fit to the Lands of the Jade Oath. Family is a very important concept, but family might not mean the same thing to a foreigner. In the communities of these lands, *guanxi* relationships are as strong as blood ties. The extended family - and the use of terms like brother or uncle - can stretch to include people not related in the strict sense of the word.

The Importance of Face

Face is a feeling of immense self-pride. The value of face is a result of thousands of years of history. For centuries, many communities in the Lands of the Jade Oath endured hardship. Many still do. No matter how hard people work, providing for their families is a constant struggle. The only thing many people own is pride. This pride assumes an importance equal to life itself. They learn the principle of face early. By the time a person reaches late adolescence, it is entrenched. People struggle to maintain it, and to ensure they constantly provide others with opportunities to maintain their own face. Causing someone else embarrassment is cause for personal and community shame. Losing face can be extremely humiliating. In extreme cases, suicide (*seppuku* in Nihonshu) is as a way out of shame.

Displaying negative emotions, such as fear, anger or sadness, is a sign of personal weakness that may disturb other people and cause them to lose face. Everyone makes an effort to present themselves as calm and collected. This can be misinterpreted as a lack of remorse, or as proof that an incident was not as serious as initially perceived. A reluctance to make eye contact with an important of-



ficial or a superior in society is a sign of respect. Speaking in hushed tones is a sign of respect.

Some suggestions for roleplaying:

- When developing a relationship, take your time.
 - Use two hands when passing anything to someone; using one hand can be interpreted as a sign of disrespect for the receiver. Shake hands with both hands, as well. This is also true when handling money between a vender and a customer.
 - “Never talk business before the third cup of tea.” If you are offered tea, accept it, and if you are not offered another cup, it is time to leave.
 - It is proper to show respect to any elders when you enter or leave a home or place of business.
 - Separate the actions from the person; “I don’t dislike you, but I cannot accept what you did.”
 - The actions of an individual affect the entire family. When trying to influence someone, involve the family of the subject as much as possible; “You may not be willing to talk about the shame you have brought upon your house by dealing with these creatures of the night, but I wonder how your family would feel if they were to find out?”
 - When speaking to someone involved in an incident, never interview him or her in front of family, friends, allies, superiors, servants, or underlings; they will hesitate to discuss anything that makes them look bad or that is embarrassing.
- Be straightforward and do not make any promises you cannot meet. Remember that all favors must be repaid and all promises must be kept. To do otherwise is to lose face. (If you are a scoundrel, this might not be a problem in your eyes.)

Life on the Street

The criminal element is alive and well. Organizations have had centuries to build their criminal structures. Prominent key factors

Samurai Honor and Seppuku

Samurai are only found on the islands of Nihonshu. Seppuku is actually a last resort for samurai who are either going to be executed or captured. If they do not wish to be executed by their enemies, or to face the dishonor of being ransomed, then the samurai has a choice to commit seppuku. Seppuku is not undertaken casually, nor is it seen in a casual manner by society. It is socially accepted in extreme circumstances as preferable to disgrace. It’s not something done lightly (i.e. death before dishonor). In honor of the fallen samurai, family and allies tout the act of seppuku as one that gained him honor and respect or regained honor and allowed his family to keep face. Privately they might tell you, however, that this is not something that any of them would have wished.

encourage criminal organizations: Certain cultural norms, propriety, tradition, station in society, and a sense of family. One must accept a station in society because that is the way it has always been and it will always be; or so many say. People do not speak of their problems unless they speak to family or to someone as trusted as a family member. Communities are very insular. It is no wonder that criminal organizations such as yakuza, tongs, and triads survive and thrive in such an environment.

Most organized crime is tied to a small number of carefully controlled gangs or triads. Organized gangs provide a stable and solid environment and a feeling of family - an important tie for some loosely organized and well-armed groups. Gangs are associated with the trafficking of illegal substances, prohibited items, prostitution, and violent crimes. They may identify themselves through tattoos or colored clothing. Gangs sometimes act as thugs, carrying out the dirty work at the street level for the large organized criminal enterprises, pocketing a small share of the proceeds. Those who join such groups find familiarity, support and a stable source of income in the midst of extremely difficult times.

Despite the problems that such organizations bring to a community, they can be the only source of authority. Some gangs keep things ordered and lawful in their areas and they enforce themselves. They can also be a source of prosperity in ailing communities as well as protection. People know that criminals can be a source of ongoing evil, but it is often better to deal with the demons you know than the demons you don't.

OVERVIEW

The Lands of the Jade Oath has the greatest concentration of people in the world. Several of its cultures are more than 3,000 years old. With such ancient civilizations come a great deal of history and tradition. These cultures (summarized below) and will be presented in greater detail in the forthcoming *Arts of the Jade Oath*. The following descriptions follow the ancient and traditional description of directions as Center, West, North, East and South.

Notable Locations, Prominent Sabhas, and Wu-lin Societies

There are many unusual and fantastic areas, so a brief description is given of the more renowned ones. More locales will be revealed in *Arts of the Jade Oath*.

Wu-lin societies are orders of adventurers, mages, and martial artists in Xianguo and the surrounding lands and nations. In Mandrasengal, Chokra, Java Sriya, and Sri Merai these societies are known as "sabhas". Wu-lin societies are not technically limited to national boundaries, though as a matter of survival they always curry favor with the kingdom where they place their village/headquarters. That usually requires a certain amount of loyalty and service to that kingdom in exchange for their freedom to operate within its boundaries.

Often, kingdoms attempt to influence these societies into serving them. Some kingdoms do outright control certain societies or at least have influence over them. Sometimes one of these societies has control over the kingdom. There are hundreds of wu-lin and sabha societies; the most notable, prominent, and powerful are mentioned below. The dominant races and five most common classes are also listed. Societies known throughout the Lands of the Jade Oath are described here:



Cloud Leopard Covenant: Eccentric and enigmatic to outsiders, this society lies on the western border of the Xianguo empire and the mountain kingdom, Tsixang. Their members are typically cryptic and noncommittal. It is filled with those who often study arcane and dangerous secrets of magic. Members might carry the titles of monks, by title and lifestyle choices only - not by class.

This society specializes in dealing with magical threats and in conducting arcane research. They run one of the preeminent magical academies in their mountain retreat at what is believed to be the

base of the fallen Pillar of Heaven. Rumors mention a secret base floating somewhere in the sky reached by riding upon the backs of cloud leopards. They place a strong emphasis on faith and religion and are staunch opponents to slavery and subjugation of any kind. This stance on slavery often places them at odds with the Kraken's Pearl.

This society is composed of mainly verrik, mandragorans, naga, and shenxue. Mage blades, magisters, runethanes, witches, and wu shih (greenbonds) are prominent in this society.



Forbidden Mantis: Female warriors rule this society. They champion the causes of women in society, and can be found anywhere in the empire, doing anything. They often hire out members as assassins and bodyguards, are wealthy and are something of a mystery, which is the way they like it. Well-known members trained at academies controlled by the Beautiful Silk Tigers. This society is composed of mainly bakemono, dahren, faen, human, mandragoran, and yueren. Kensai, mage blades, oathsworn, ritual warriors, and xia are prominent classes.



Ghost Tigers: This is a decentralized, nomadic group of demon hunters and undead slayers with a widely diverse racial membership and are the largest organized force of demon hunters. They are the largest organized force of demon hunters. A council of the oldest demon hunters from each of the five cardinal directions (North, South, East, West, and Center) leads the society. They elect an overall war leader by popular choice, which must be ratified by the elder council. This society also has the widest reach of any, but is less concentrated in any particular area. The Ghost Tigers are the most dedicated of any demon hunters; however, they are also known for their lack of discipline, lack of refinement and an unusually lax attitude concerning anything other than demon hunting. Those unused to the presence of the eccentric demon hunters greet them with fear and resentment... at least until they are needed. Demon hunters, monks, oathsworn, and xia are prominent classes in this society.

Center

At the center of the Lands of the Jade Oath is the glorious Empire of Xianguo, the Immortal Kingdom. Its influence is felt far and wide and it attempts to expand its power even further through exploration and trade.

THE EMPIRE OF XIANGUO

The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been. - Luo Guan Zhong

Geographically, culturally, and politically, the Empire of Xianguo has immense influence. Religions and philosophies in the region are strongly influenced by those from the empire, though the empire owes religious inspiration to influences from Mandrasengal. Its influence is as immense as the amount of land it controls. Nearly all the known races dwell here as indigenous peoples or as immigrants.

The land is geographically diverse with forests of many kinds, bamboo groves, taiga, jungles, mountains, rivers, lakes, swamps, plains, deserts, and even terrain with supernatural and magical features. It is a land well-known for its narrow and sharply rising limestone mountains, strong bamboo, colorful deserts, lush forests, long and bountiful rivers, tiered rice patties, and unique man-made structures. Though the empire is a powerful and great civilization, its wilderness is vast. Civilization exists in pockets scattered across

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Ministerial insignia for the Golden Coin, Iron Pen, Jade Pillar, Silver Axe and Steel Ki-Rin governmental ministries.

the country with few roads and rivers crisscrossing the land to connect them.

The culture and customs of the empire should not be confused with those of the peoples from other parts of the region. These peoples do not sit on the floors of homes built with bamboo and sliding, rice screen walls or in huts made from palm trees. They live in structures made of solid materials: bricks, thick wood, packed earth, and other types of masonry. Most structures are tall with 2 to 4 stories, walls, and tiled roofs. Balconies are common and even modest homes have a courtyard. Gates to courtyards or doors that serve as the primary entrance are circular to enhance the positive flow of feng shui and to ensure a harmonious environment. Neighborhoods tightly pack many homes together along winding streets.

The empire lasted for thousands of years under the rule of the giant dahren, since the ancient menace of the Gramjh were overthrown. That has all changed recently. The most recent ruler was strong, capable and popular, despite being a dowager. She vanished a year ago. After a series of bloody assassinations, murders, accidents, intrigue, and political power plays, the only viable heir is a human with a trace of the empress's blood in his bloodline. This unknown human now stands to rule an empire of giants; but, he does so at the sufferance of the dahren eunuchs and naga (some are counted among the eunuchs) that helped him to attain power. The next few years will show if he will make for a weak ruler controlled by the eunuchs, or if he can break free of their influence. If he does, will he become a strong, benevolent ruler or a tyrannical overlord?

One thing is certain – while the eunuchs are supposed to relinquish control to the newly appointed and untested emperor, they continue to consolidate their control while they shield the emperor from any who would seek an audience. They use barely-concealed political and military grabs for power at the expense of the mandarins and other noble vassals, appointed bureaucrats, and their houses and clans.

In the meantime, other troubles cropped up. The long awaited treasure fleet commissioned by the last dowager empress is finally ready to move. Bureaucratic red tape and suddenly, unexpectedly depleted funds stymie efforts to begin exploration towards the east and south over the Sea of Burning Stars. The island of Nha Lao and a small, independent, and rebellious part of the empire called Monmar seceded after the disappearance of the empress. Disparate groups of xia rebel against the new emperor and the eunuchs. The undead legions of the necrotic dragon Huo Sei Lung renew their attacks along the Ghostwall and seek other avenues of entry for their armies. The new eunuch ambassador to the kingdom of Kochoryeo botched his mission by promising war and found himself chased

out of that kingdom when the sanesaram of that land sided with the ambassador. Now skirmishes with that kingdom threaten to develop into an all-out war. Pirate activity has risen considerably over the last decade, threatening a great source of external revenue for the empire.

A great influx of foreign pilgrims spills into the empire from the far west. Many imperials feel that the newcomers bring sacrilegious ideologies in addition to their strange trade goods, magics, and technologies. It is the extremists of the land who threaten violence and cause trouble for many pilgrims, which gives the aggressive western governments a good excuse to make demands for land for trade space and to threaten military action.

Government Factions of Xianguo

The ministries of the government each have a grand mandarin in charge. Together they form the Grand Council, which acts as an advisory board to the emperor. The ministries are:

Ministry of the Golden Coin: The government's main source of revenue comes from taxation on land ownership supplemented by official monopolies on essential household items such as salt and tea. Thus, in the predominantly agrarian Empire, the 'household' is the basis of imperial finance. This department is charged with revenue collection and the financial management of the government. Taxes are collected from wu-lin societies on an annual basis.

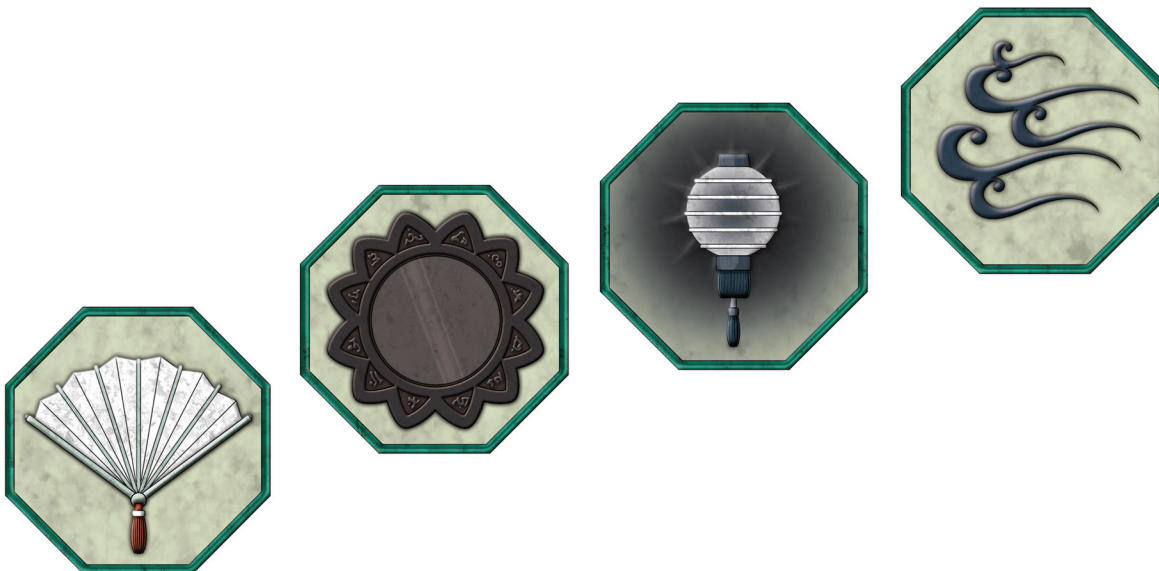
Ministry of the Iron Pen: This ministry handles the personnel administration of all civil officials, including appointments, evaluation, promotion, and dismissal. It is also in charge of the 'honors list'.

Ministry of the Jade Pillar: This ministry handles all governmental building projects, including palaces, temples and the repairs of waterways and flood canals. It is also in charge of minting coinage.

Ministry of the Silver Axe: This ministry has authority over the Green Standard Armies, which consist of the common troops of the empire. Its functions are mainly administrative; the Emperor directs campaigns and troop movements through the Grand Council and the generals of the armies.

Ministry of the Steel Ki-rin: This board of punishments and justice handles all legal matters, including the supervision of law courts and prisons. There is no separation of executive and legislative branches of government. The legal system can be inconsistent, and, at times, arbitrary, because the Emperor rules by decree and has final say on all judicial outcomes. Emperors can overturn judgments of lower courts from time to time.

Ministry of the Ivory Fan: This ministry is responsible for ceremonial rites and protocol at court, which includes the periodic



Ministerial Insignia for the Ivory Fan, Ebon Mirror, Dark Lantern and Black Wind governmental ministries.

worshiping of ancestors and various gods by the Emperor - in his capacity as the "Son of Heaven" - and looking after the welfare of visiting ambassadors from tributary nations. The concept of courtesy is considered an integral part of education. An intellectual is said to "know of books and courtesy (i.e. rites)". Thus, the ministry's other function oversees the nationwide civil examination system for entrance to the bureaucracy. Many see state-sponsored exams as the way to legitimize a regime by allowing the intelligentsia participation in an otherwise autocratic and unelected system. The other concern of this ministry is the regulation and monitoring of the wu-lin societies and supernatural creatures throughout the empire. Consequently, they oversee the Bureau of the Ebon Mirror.

Bureau of the Ebon Mirror: This bureau within the Ivory Fan Ministry monitors and polices magic, adventuring, and martial arts societies. All wu-lin societies, martial art schools and mystical fraternities not under the direct control of the government must register with this bureau and pay an annual tax for the right to adventure within the empire. The bureau works alongside the Ministry of the Golden Coin on such matters to keep records of what is owed. They tax any treasures discovered and it is this bureau's job to ensure that all societies are paying their due. Mystical orders operating within the empire must assist with government matters at the request of the Bureau of the Ebon Mirror. The bureau can also task the wu-lin societies with missions on behalf of the government as temporarily authorized agents, officially or unofficially.

Ministry of the Dark Lantern: This ministry is composed of Investigators, Inspectors, and Censors that act as an internal affairs office for the other ministries. The Dark Lantern oversees that there is no abuse of power within the imperial bureaucracy.

Black Wind: Though it is not a proper ministry or even a publicly recognized branch of the government, this is the Grand Council's intelligence and information-gathering arm.

Notable Information from the Empire of Xianguo

The Blood Desert: This northern part of Xianguo gets its name from bright red sand. Even the numerous rocks and mesas that compose this desert are bright red. At night, the light from the moon seems tainted by the bright red sand. Many dangerous creatures live in this inhospitable and alien, though beautiful, landscape. The Forest of Caves (see below) is within the Blood Desert. Floating tree-stones can be found more often here than anywhere else. Naturally, this means that when the sun bleaches the wind-buoyant, rock-like crystals of their precious energies, they come crashing to the earth. This introduces another hazard to this dangerous desert.



Celestial Lion: This was originally an organization of devout ruishishen that did not share disdain for the gods after the war with the dramojh. These ruishishen remained in the service of the empire and came to be joined by other rashidashen. Today, the Celestial Lions serve as guardians of important sites and bodyguards to important personages. Emperors of the past favored them. Certain ones

considered them as part of the emperor's personal guard, giving orders directly. While the most recent empress did not confer this unique privilege during her reign, she did show them great face. She honored them with employment as guards to many important government functionaries and sites of importance. Now that the empress is gone, the Celestial Lions suffer the jealous ire of the current eunuch-controlled bureaucracy.

This society is composed of mainly goushen, hushen, ruishishen, and shenxue. Kensai, oathsworn, runethanes, totem warriors, and warmains are prominent.

City of Dragon's Sacrifice: Ancient Yin-Lung lies in the center of a great plain near a dried up river. It was the giant's base of operations against the dramojh. Even though it looks like it was constructed from man-made materials, it is actually the long-dead body of a colossal dragon that coiled up and died there on the plain. It fossilized into its present form.

The city is in the shape of a giant ring with buildings built to hug all along the inside and outside of its massive, fossil stone coils. One story of the final dramojh war states that the last celestial dragon died protecting a small city that served as the resistance's base of operations. The ancient dragon encircled the city with its serpentine form. In its final moments of death, the body turned to stone where it remains today. The survivors renamed the city in honor of the dragon's last act.

Now the city has grown so large that the protective coils no longer contain it. The inner district of the city, the nobles' quarter and other important buildings lie within the coils. A gate fashioned from the open jaw roars in defiance of death. The interior is riddled with an intricate series of caves and passageways, some leading to an underground complex created long ago. Rumors mention an underground lake as well, though it is too dangerous to explore due to a number of subterranean monster lairs.

It is said that the most ancient parts of the city, those buildings within the coils of the dragon's body, are haunted by those who fell

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on both sides of that ancient conflict. The wealthy continue to live within the area. It is largely unpopulated due to the small supply of water. Legend says that there is gold somewhere in the belly of the dead dragon and that the spirit protects the gold.

City of the Autumn Gate: This largest of cities used the most advanced building materials and techniques in its architecture. It was the pet project of the son of a past emperor. The infrastructure and farmland of the surrounding region are not strong enough to support a population of more than half the city. It is the most confounding structure in the world. Its streets are extremely confusing and difficult to navigate. Visitors get lost after just a couple of turns. This is compounded by an unusual fog that always envelops the city, and a never-ending cloud cover in the sky. Four streets run straight to the city's center from each of the cardinal directions. These are the only streets one could not get easily lost on. They lead straight to a circular street around the central palace where the city's minister resides though no one ever finds him staying there when they actively search for the minister.

The most unusual piece of information about this city is that it has a secret portal to the land of the dead hidden in its labyrinthine and underpopulated streets. Many believe that the prince who built the city did so in order to hide the gate to the land of the dead after its discovery.

It is also a city widely believed to be ruled by a ghost. The imperial minister does not behave like a ghost, but there are several widely credible stories detailing his ability to appear and disappear anywhere within the city at will. (Though never when someone looks directly at him.) No one has been able to physically touch the minister and he is frightfully shy of being within reach of those who might try. He never seems to age, and the city has only had one minister. Some whisper that he is the ghost of the prince who built the city, who is ensuring that the gate is never found.



Fallen Dragons: This outlawed society operates out of the underground and inner wall ruins of the City of Dragon's Sacrifice. The Fallen Dragons are outlawed because of their rebellious activities. They openly defied the current regime since the last empress disappeared. They have proven to be nearly impossible to root out of their hidden base. They specialize in guerilla warfare, smuggling operations, and stealth missions. This society is composed of bakemono, humans, ruishishen, and sanesaram. Kusa, oathsworn, rogues, unfettered, and xia are prominent classes in this society.

The Fallen Pillar of Heaven: In the mythology of the region, the fallen pillar held up heaven. This was knocked over at the beginning of time when the gods fought on the earth and caused the great flood. Stones believed by scholars to be the remains of the fallen Pillar of Heaven lie broken and scattered across Xianguo. They stretch from the Heaven's Reach Mountains along the vicinity of the Ghostwall all the way to the Sea of Burning Stars. Undead fueled by negative energy find themselves in pain and are penalized when approaching larger pieces of the pillar. (Halve their movement when approaching it and the undead suffer a -2 penalty on all attack rolls, saving throws, ability and skill checks when within 60 ft.)

Those who live nearby believe that nothing that corrupts the remains of their ancestors could possibly have anything to do with Heaven. Those same scholars who believe that these large and unique stones are the fallen pillar also believe that the smaller fragments make up the magical stones used in the Ghostwall's construction. However, anyone who dies near one of these stones becomes one of the undead within a day.

Other unique and magical properties associated with these large stone fragments include mystical disappearances, traveling through time and space, ghostly possession, and horrifying transformations and mutations.

The Forest of Caves: This area of the Blood Desert is riddled with a series of complex, interconnected caves that run both above and below ground. An unusual red-colored crystal that composes these caves eventually becomes as light as air, though still rock hard. The

rock is often referred to as tree-stone. Tree-stones grow throughout the central plains. They are most numerous at the Forest of Caves and in the high plateaus of Tsixang. Tree-stones can become the size of small hills as they "grow" out of the earth. They rise until they end up supported by pillars that form numerous caves and cavern complexes. It is believed that hills and caverns are in the early stages of forming the famous floating mountains.

Ghostwall: Also called the Runewall or the Emperor's Wall, this giant wall is a series of stone and earthen fortifications traversing the continent from the Sea of Burning Stars in the east to the Heaven's Reach Mountains in the west. It is the largest structure made by mortal hands (though built to accommodate the large sized dahren) and it is also the most haunted. The name comes from a unique property of the stone along much of the wall's length. This property assures that the p'o soul, the bestial-like primal part of those that die along the wall, remains to guard it from any who would dare to cross it. These souls return as angry ghosts, or as zombies, skeletons, and other types of undead, despite the name of the wall.

The magic of the stones in the Ghostwall prevent any dying nearby from rising again in service to the undead dragon, Huo Sei Lung, as members of his undead armies. His undead armies in the neighboring land of Qahngol threaten to cross the Ghostwall into Xianguo to conquer it someday.

The wall was initially built with stones from pieces of the fallen pillar of heaven. At first, the builder's work forces were not aware of the special property of the stone that attracted undead. The stones were initially chosen because they glowed faintly in the moonlight and so the structure could heighten visibility at night. Laborers became aware of the magical property of these stones when those who died during their labors returned from the dead to plague the rest of the construction crews.

Eventually, the full properties of the stone were discovered. Those who died near the stones returned as undead because their p'o souls were bound to the stones. Then, those in power decided that the best way to defend the empire would be not just with the wall, but with a wall eternally manned by the undead. This proved problematic for further construction until the emperor dispatched necromancers to ensure the completion of the wall.

The armies of the Great Khan of the Qahngols managed to cross the wall by using magic masks enchanted to fool the undead into believing that the qahngol were also undead creatures. Today, though the Great Khan and his armies no longer threaten or rule the empire, the Jade Snow Fox wu-lin society maintains the wall with captured magical masks. The society developed special magical runes to inscribe upon the stones to improve their control over the undead denizens.

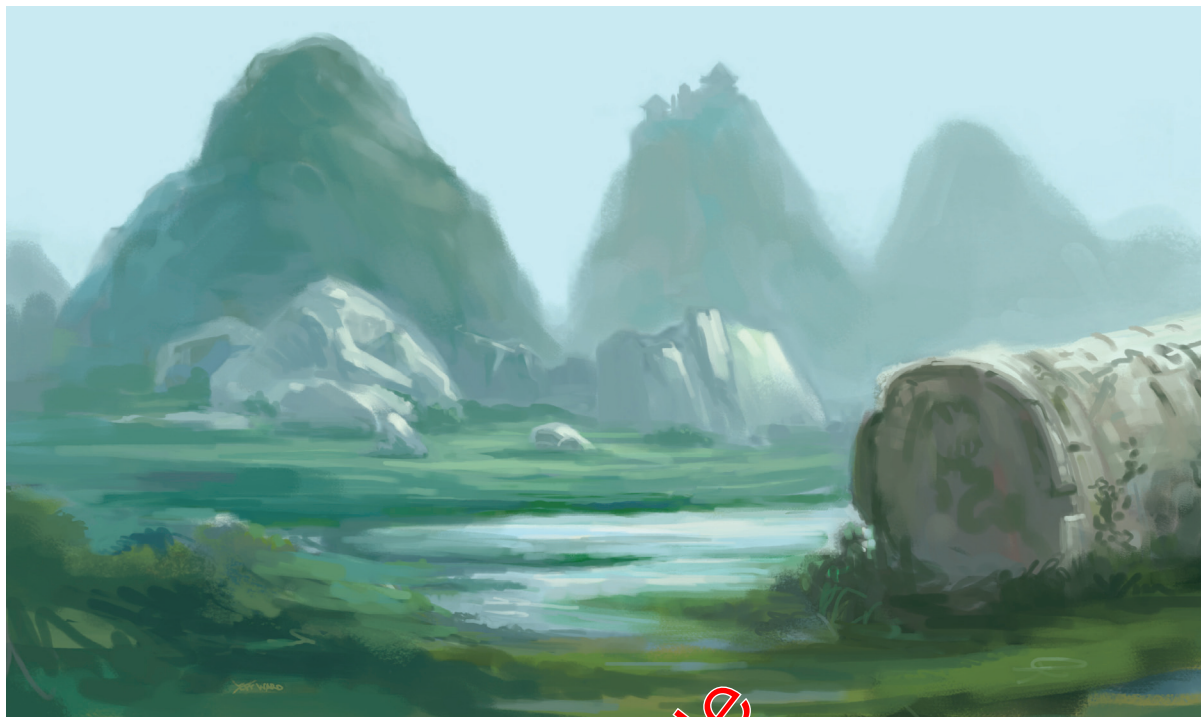


Jade Griffon Guard: This is the newest of the wu-lin societies, but it also has one of the most extensive and glorious histories of all. The Jade Griffon Guard formed from members of a Royal Guard Unit reduced to a secondary force around the emperor's city as well as couriers and messengers. They were frequently at odds with the eunuchs trying to steal power from the former empress.

When the empress disappeared and the eunuchs gained more power, they reduced the power of the Jade Griffon Guard. Without the empress or anyone else to protect them, the guards accepted forced concessions to keep from being disbanded.

While loyal, younger members of the unit kept it going, the old guard and a few others retired from service. They applied for, and were granted, a charter to be a recognized wu-lin society thanks to a few old contacts. The new society aggressively recruited members who exhibited strong loyalty to the former empress. The strong reputation of the society's leadership assured them of no end of eager recruits. Today, they secretly search for evidence of the former empress' existence or at least for evidence of her death.

The Jade Griffon Guard maintains a nominal connection with the still-active members of their former royal guard unit. They perform missions to make use of their specialty with aerial operations



A piece of the fallen Pillar of Heaven.

and inside knowledge of imperial politics.

This society is composed of mainly dahren, garuda, goushen, and yueren. Mage blades, oathsworn, ritual warriors, totem warriors, and xia are prominent classes in this society.

Jade Snow Fox: This northern multi-racial society has influence in the Ministry of the Golden Coin, the Ministry of the Jade Pillar, and many mortuaries and funeral homes. Consequently, they have a huge influence on the maintenance of the Ghostwall and the defenses. The families in this society work as tax collectors and physicians, which makes the Jade Snow Fox a well known society amongst the common populace. They are renowned

for their proficient use of necromantic magic, wealth, and connections with powerful members of the winter and autumn courts of the spirit world.

This society is composed of bakemono, dahren, goushen, humans, qahngol, ruishishen, sanesaram, shenxue, and verrik. Akashics, enlightened scholars, runethanes, and witches are prominent classes.



Kraken's Pearl: This society promotes exploration of the sea and expansion of the empire of Xianguo through exploration and sea trade. Centuries of tradition and a thirst for wealth, discovery, and adventure drive this wu-lin society. It has powerful connections in the imperial navy and a wealthy merchant fleet. Also, this society counted the only fit, remaining relative among its numbers.

As a result, Kraken's Pearl now has an emperor that views it favorably and many new, minor bureaucrats come from this society.

They are heavily involved in trade with foreign lands and are a significant player behind the slave markets. This society is composed of mainly bakemono, dahren, humans, mandragorans, naga,

and shenxue. Bards, rogues, totem warriors, unfettered, and witch- are prominent classes in this society.



Resplendent Phoenix: This human-controlled wu-lin society is a strong supporter of the current emperor due to his mostly human lineage. Members are noted patriots, striving to gain glory for the empire while being flamboyant and boisterous. Their fortunes often rise and fall in dramatic fashion. Some say this wu-lin society is too ambitious and decadent, a dangerous mix, and that they are due for a fall. This appears unlikely.

This society has been a major power in the region at least three times in its long and storied past, but it keeps falling to new lows due to foolish mistakes. Several national and human heroes come from its ranks. This society is composed of mainly dahren, goushen, humans, and yueren. Mage blades, unfettered, warmains, and xia are prominent classes in this society.



Thunderous Cricket: This small, but prosperous wu-lin society is based in Xinmar, a rich trade city in the Canyon of Kung Tai Chuan, located in the Heaven's Reach Mountains. This society specializes in acquiring goods and services for their clients and has a reputation for pulling through missions with impossible odds. Their numbers are few, but their standards are very high, which

leads to highly accomplished and professional adventurers who can accomplish missions with great efficiency.

Members of this society are often solemn and quiet. Do not mistake this demeanor for weakness or complacency. They are known to be gracious hosts. Many come to the shops of Xinmar to trade with the barbaric peoples of the west or for relaxation in the hot springs. However, they can be fiercely protective of their city and its clientele. This includes political and economic opponents, as well as military incursions from the rhodin or the forces of Huo Sei Lung.

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