

MIST-ROBED GATE

BY SHREYAS SAMPAT

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咒印 CURSED SEAL EDITION

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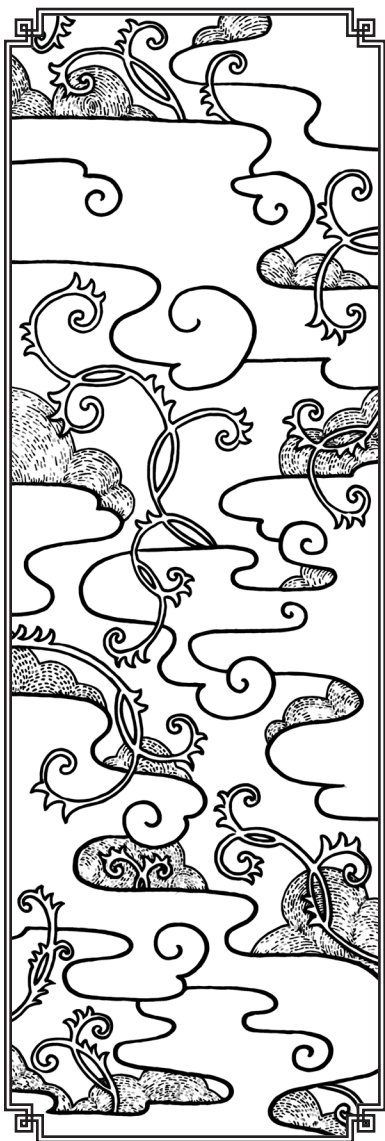
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緒言 INTRODUCTION

The key to emotionally tempestuous arthaus wuxia is that, sometimes, your emotions are more important than your life. You allow yourself to be hurt in pursuit of the object of your desire, and when you're caught between conflicting feelings, you manufacture crises in order to make impossible decisions. The action and emotion of *Mist-Robed Gate* runs in the same vein as such movies as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *House of Flying Daggers*, and *Hero*. (If you'd like more movie recommendations, see the filmography in the back of the book.)

To play *Mist-Robed Gate*, you need several players. The game works well with up to a dozen players, but the minimum is four. You will also need the following:

- Copies of the character sheet, the set card, and the prop card: one of each per player
- Red and white poker chips, and a bag to put them in
- A beautiful cloth large enough to cover a knife with
- A dull knife you don't mind cutting paper with: it should fold up or have a sheath
- A table you don't mind stabbing: the table is optional, but the stabbing is not.

In a less-than-best-case scenario, you can downgrade your tools and props. I leave it to you to determine how best to do that, given your resources.

準備 PREPARING TO PLAY

Before you start, make sure your group has tea and snacks. Personally, I like to have fried dumplings and jasmine tea, but you can have sushi and sake if you've planned a Japanese-styled game, and so on. The refreshments don't have to be fancy, but make sure that no one's cranky from hunger while you're playing, and that everyone is happy. Spectators are an important part of the game, so it's best to not wander off and make a sandwich during someone else's scene.

LAYING PLANS

After snacks have been made available, talk a little about what kind of game your group wants to play. You might have picked up this book and thought, "Hey! I want to play a game like *Iron Monkey!*" So ask yourself: what is it about this inspiration that I want to re-create? Is it something about the father-son relationship, or is it a class struggle? Maybe it's the style of the action sequences that appeals to you, or the music. If your group is strongly familiar with this style of cinema, you might find it is useful to talk about the style of a director you enjoy: Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou make very different movies, for example.

Talk about the nationality of the characters, the visual style of the martial arts. You can even discuss the special effects budget! You can probably talk about this for a half hour or longer. Do that! You have snacks and tea. Take the time to get everyone on the same page about what you're setting out to do.

WAGING WAR

The next step in the process is to divide up the social landscape into factions. At the start of the game, no one lives in social isolation. Situate characters so that they naturally turn inward for conflict—look at the cast of *House of Flying Daggers*, for example: the two major groups are the policeman in the Imperial service, and the prostitutes of the Peony Pavillion, who later turn out to be the Flying Daggers rebels. Clearly, police-



THE KNIFE RITUAL

During play, you'll be uncovering, unsheathing, passing, and using a knife to stab through a character sheet. You can replace the knife with a different pointed object, but only after you've read about and discussed the knife ritual together. Regardless of your comfort level, I don't recommend playing *Mist-Robed Gate* with younger players, due to the violence inherent in the fiction. And, no matter what you decide to do with the materials in this book, I'm not responsible for your actions; you are. Play responsibly: the author of this book is not responsible for any harm, physical or emotional, real or imagined, inflicted by people using or misusing the rules of this text.

men don't always get along with sex workers, and the government never gets along with rebels. Don't rely on external forces for conflict—each character should be a member of a social circle that is in conflict with another group.

You can set groups in conflict along lines of agenda as well as identity—for instance, a group of Korean soldiers might be trying to sail home from China, and some pirates want to take their ship. There might be other ships, but they want that one!

Within these factions, name influential people. These will be the main characters, the ones that the players portray during the game. They have to have reasons to come into direct contact with one another pretty frequently. The Emperor of Qin and the slave who sweeps the floor at night are unlikely to have intersecting social spheres, so if you've got both of them in your game, come up with a reason for them to actively seek each other out frequently—maybe they're in love, or the servant is the Emperor's twin brother, or something.

CHARACTERS & DISPLAYS

Each player should choose a character they want to play from the influential faction members, and then fill out a character card for her. You'll see on the card that characters have three Displays: a signature Color, distinctive Weather, and a Quirk. Quirks can be personality-based—the character might be a drunk, or she may be blind, or overly legalistic—or superficial—she might keep a calligraphy brush in her hair, or always wear iron gloves.

Color and Weather are mood-setting tools: think about the movie *Hero*. When there is a large swath of a character's signature Color in a scene, it shows the character's influence over the events that take place. What does it mean to have weather? That means that when a character is the focus of a scene, the heavens respond in a physical manner, bringing down ice or rain or sunshine. I'll talk more about this later. Finally, Quirks exist to let the audience know that these are the characters the movie is about.

Finally, each character has Loyalties. I'll explain these in more detail later, but in short, they are things that the characters care about intensely. Initially, all characters are loyal to their own factions. You can also throw in loyalties to particular characters, goals or ideals; however, those sorts of things should cross faction lines, and create conflicting loyalties.

SETS & PROPS

Mist-Robed Gate is a cinematic game, and we manipulate the physical world with the tools of cinema. That means that there are only a certain number of places you can film—the sets—and only so many cool things for the characters to handle and carry around, which are the props. At the start of the game, everyone gets one character card, one prop card, and one set card. You fill out the character card before the game begins, and as play proceeds, you'll fill out the rest.

Defining the scope of a set can be difficult. A set is a continuous location, such as a building or landscape, or a continuous visual idea—if you're playing a game in which the characters make pilgrimages to thirty-three Buddhist temples, for instance, you might want to use the same set for the less important ones, and only make individual sets for destinations of special importance. “One visual idea” can also mean flashbacks, stories, imaginary events, or dreams. As you develop sets in play, you should describe them: every time you have a scene in a set, describe the set in a new way.

A set card asks important things about the set, such as:

- What does it look like? The description is suggestive, not definitive, but it should give a couple of good details and perhaps a default color scheme, which can be affected by the characters present in the scene. The description can also contain extras that don't leave the scene, such as the calligraphy students in Hero.
- How big is it? Sets vary in size, and therefore, in the number of characters who can be present at once.

WHAT IS A PROP?

Props can be anything that is not a set or a player's character; they do not have to be physical objects, merely things that can be controlled, traded, lost, fought over, or destroyed. Example props include: your father, the Emperor's favor, Amaterasu's Mirror.

An Intimate set may contain only two characters. A Small set can contain up to four. A Spacious set can contain up to seven, and an Infinite set has no limit on capacity. Aside from these limits, each set can also contain a sensible amount of extras. If you like, you can also make more complex restrictions on sets: "One character, or two characters if they fight."

- Theme music? If you bother to make soundtracks, you might have certain songs associated with certain sets.

On a prop card, you only need to name and describe the prop. When important, the card can also state where the prop can be found; props begin the game in a character's possession, or else have a designated resting space on a particular set. When a prop is in a set, it can be taken by any character present on the set. When a character has a prop, it may be given freely, or it may be demanded using the Knife Ritual, but it cannot be taken by any other means. A character may also leave props resting on a set, if the character is present on that set.

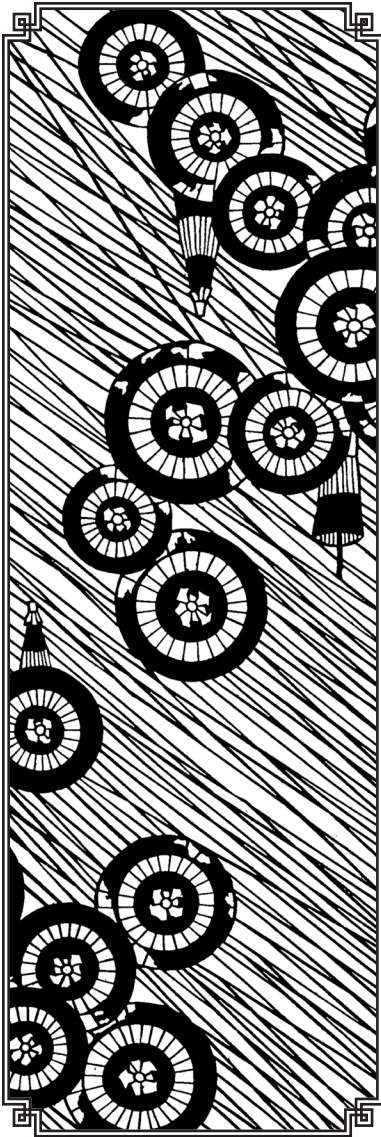
You don't need prop cards for every object the characters interact with; if it's something that might reasonably be in a set and not go outside of it, like teacups in a restaurant, then don't use a prop card for it. If it's something unique or special, doesn't belong on a set (like calligraphy tools in a torture chamber), or you need to move something from one set to another, that means it's important enough to put on a prop card. This includes portable extras and non-player characters.

LOYALTY

What does Loyalty mean in the context of *Mist-Robed Gate*? A Loyalty is something you care for without compromise. Having Loyalties means that you also have agendas: if you're loyal to something, that means that there is something you want from it, and pursuing your Loyalty means doing things which advance your agenda. Review your loyalties and make sure that they come into conflict with each other.

The defining characteristic of Loyalty is that it is something you would die for-- something that comes before anything else in your life. You may find yourself instinctively resisting Loyalties which might endanger your character; however, the whole idea of this genre is that no person exists in a vacuum. Characters in this game are ruled-- and often destroyed-- by their passions. Loyalty is the expression of those passions.

Characters may have Loyalties to other characters, or to props. Having a Loyalty to a prop generally means that a character requires certain things of the person who possesses.



玩戲 PLAY

Well, that's the end of the homework. There's just one thing left to do: lay out the table. Give everyone their two blank cards—one prop, one set—and make sure they have their character cards. Put the knife on the table, folded or sheathed, and cover it with the cloth. Give everyone a handful of red and white poker chips. Once that's done, play can begin in earnest.

This game proceeds in distinct scenes. You get to say what your character says and does, and if you have a prop, you get to say what it says and does, too. Similarly, if you framed the scene, you get to say what the set is like, filling out a card if necessary, and how the set's extras behave. Defined set cards are placed in the middle of the table at the end of every scene, so that the next person who frames a scene can choose whichever set they like. Blank set cards remain the property of each player until they are defined.

Take turns setting scenes. You may set a scene with any characters you wish; you may even set scenes where your character is not present. Just think about which characters you'd most like to see interacting, and where. When you're setting a scene, you specify certain things: what set the scene is on, which characters are present, and what they are up to. If you feel like it, you can describe some of the more cinematic details of a scene, too—the camera angles, how it's lit, mood music, any special effects not on the set card, and so on. Even though everyone knows what the sets look like, as you're setting each scene, you should briefly describe the set in a new way. The set doesn't have to change, but don't repeat the same canned description every time. If there are any props present on the set, mention them as well.

Scenes go on as long as they need to be in order for something interesting to happen. For this particular genre, this means that one of the following things probably occurs:

- Some previously unknown fact about a character comes to light. This may make other characters in the scene re-evaluate how they feel about her.
- Events cause a character to change his loyalty from one faction to another.
- Someone makes a terrible demand of another character, through use of the Knife Ritual.
- There is a Wirework sequence.
- Someone makes an important decision that affects his future actions and the way others treat him.

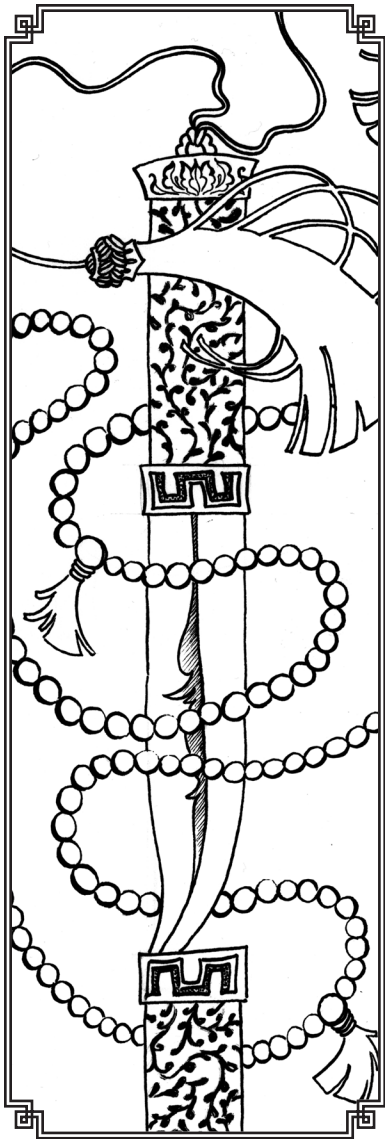
I'll talk more about the Knife Ritual and Wirework later.

Once one interesting thing has happened, you might be at a good place to cut to the next scene. Usually you should do this as soon as a scene comes to a natural breaking point, but in some cases you may want to carry on, if someone still has an interesting thing they need to do in the same scene.

If it's the first scene, the person setting the scene must fill out her set card, to give the scene a place to occur. Similarly, if a prop is called for during a scene, fill out the prop card.

SHARING LOYALTIES

It is possible to share Loyalties with other characters; the agenda you have for your Loyalty, however, should differ. In the movie *Curse of the Golden Flower*, the two eldest sons both had Loyalties to their step-mother; however, Crown Prince Wan's agenda was wrapped up in the illicit affair he was having with her, and Prince Jai's agenda is to aid her in overthrowing her husband, the Emperor. Characters can share Loyalties to props as well, and have different agendas regarding that prop: think about how the Green Destiny was used in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. For more examples, see the filmography in the back of this book.



刀法 THE KNIFE RITUAL

When changing loyalties, making decisions, and revealing secret knowledge about your character doesn't solve problems, you can pick a fight using the knife on the table. The Knife Ritual is concerned with the giving and receiving of threats. In the story, it means that a character does an act of emotional violence to someone else. The knife starts the game on the table, and when it's on the table, anyone may pick it up in order to start the ritual. The Knife Ritual has four states of escalation, and you can tell which state the knife is in by looking at it.

- **Covered:** The knife is covered. Any player may uncover the knife if needed. While the knife is covered, it can't be picked up—this is important later, in the Wirework chapter.
- **Sheathed:** The knife is sheathed. When the knife is sheathed, demands cannot be made directly; they must be communicated silently, through innuendo and facial expression. Escalate by unfolding or unsheathing the knife.
- **Unsheathed:** The knife is unsheathed. You can communicate your demands directly, with words. Escalate by stabbing another player's character sheet.
- **Bloodied:** The knife is stuck in someone's character sheet. This means that someone's character has done an act of physical violence, and implicit in any demand made by bloodying the knife is this: "And you die sometime before or at the end of the scene."

There are special things you can do with the knife in each of these states, which I'll discuss later. There are also four things you can always do when someone hands you the knife and makes a demand:

- **Accept:** You do what was asked of you. Put down the knife.

- Deflect: You pass the knife to a third party; the escalation does not change. Whatever demand was made of you, you pass on to a third party; you can alter the demand by adding to or constraining it, as long as the new demand will still satisfy the original requirements. For example: if the demand is “I must marry a daughter of the Li family,” then you could change the demand to “He must marry the youngest daughter of the Li family and inherit as its sole heir,” but not “He must marry a son of the Li family.”
- Escalate: You pass the knife back to the person who gave it to you, and it goes to the next state of escalation. You make a counterdemand; if they agree to satisfy your demand, you agree to satisfy theirs.
- Wirework: Settle the demand with Wirework.

SHEATHED & BLOODIED

When you accept a demand while the knife is sheathed, you cannot be sure that you’ve fulfilled the demand, because the demand was unspoken. Pass the knife back; you are making a counterdemand, but its nature is known: “Show me that I have satisfied you.” The character can then put down the knife, which indicates acceptance and that you satisfied his initial demand, or perform any of the knife actions as usual.

When the knife is bloodied and stuck in your character sheet, your options change:

- Acceptance: your character dies, and you make a demand of the world. You state some prediction or wish for the future, and as long as this wish doesn’t demand that any player’s character takes a specific action, it comes true. You still have to do what was demanded of you, however.
- Escalation: You wrench the knife from your character sheet and hold it against your killer’s skin. For

ON SCREEN / OFF - SCREEN

Since this is a cinematic game, characters are aware of what the characters know, even when players are not. Offscreen action is perfectly permissible; you can do things that involve no other characters without needing to put it in a scene. Just as characters are not always aware of information that has been revealed to the audience or the players, there is plenty of room in *Mist-Robed Gate* for surprise twists. Feel free to say what your character is doing, but it’s not always necessary to say why.

ACCEPTANCE & LIES

What kind of response satisfies a demand? Who decides? I say, “The characters know what the characters know,” which means, your effort to satisfy a demand is good enough if it satisfies it to the *best of the instigator’s knowledge*, and the instigator is free to correct your behavior if you act based on information inferior to his, or not correct it, whichever is his preference.

safety’s sake, do not touch another player with the sharp edge of the knife, and only on the hand. If you’re uncomfortable touching another person with the knife, touch their character sheet with the knife instead, and if any players are uncomfortable with being touched by the knife, they should say so before play begins. Touching someone with the knife issues an ultimatum; the character must satisfy the demand or else immediately be killed. Whichever happens, the knife gets put down after they respond.

- Wirework: If the knife is calmed as the result of Wirework, you don’t actually die at the end of the scene. Pull the knife out of your character sheet.

飛俠 WIREWORK

Any kind of action sequence that happens in the game is called Wirework. It can be a rooftop chase, a kung-fu battle, a dance performance, a giant epic war, or anything else that feels like action. The purpose of Wirework is to diffuse and relieve the pressure put on characters by knife-motivated decisionmaking. In short, Wirework is a less violent way to make important decisions and solve minor problems.

In the game, Wirework is always a contest between two people; if it feels like more than two people should be involved in Wirework, choose a representative to speak for each side. Other people can become involved, but only the two people who started the fight can participate in it mechanically.

In order to start a Wirework sequence, hand the empty bag to the player you want to contend with. You can start a Wirework sequence as a response to being given the knife, or you can start one during a regular scene in an attempt to take the knife. Before Wirework begins, specify a reward from the list below, and tell everyone what you're fighting for; first, the person who started the Wirework, and then the person who is defending himself. Both players cannot choose the same reward.

The rewards are:

- Soothe the knife: The knife goes down one level on the escalation scale.
- Take the knife: If you take the knife, you get to respond as though you were given it by the person you just did Wirework with.
- Take a card from the other player: it can be a blank prop or set, or a prop that the character is in possession of.
- Make a demand that the other character must satisfy.



Remember, when the knife is covered, you cannot pick it up; therefore, when the knife is covered, taking or soothing the knife is not an option.

During Wirework, both participants take turns describing what their characters say and do in interesting and impressive ways. Meanwhile, the rest of the players act as an audience—I'll talk more about that later. Each audience member should be holding a red poker chip and a white poker chip; red represents the aggressor, and white represents the defender. When one of the audience members decides who he thinks should win the fight, he drops the appropriate coin into the bag, without letting anyone see which he chose.

Participants are not allowed to vote, but each participant can cast coins in their favor by incorporating things from the following list. Each participant can claim one coin per item, for a maximum of three:

- Your Weather appears in your description—either of the fight or of the scene.
- Your Color appears in your description.
- You display your Quirk.
- A prop you have comes to your aid.
- You are in a set you own.

Once all the votes are cast, the sequence ends, and the defender blindly picks a single coin out of the bag. The color of the coin indicates the winner. If you win the Wirework sequence, you get the reward you chose. At the end of Wirework, unless the winner took the knife, it goes back on the table.

觀衆 THE AUDIENCE

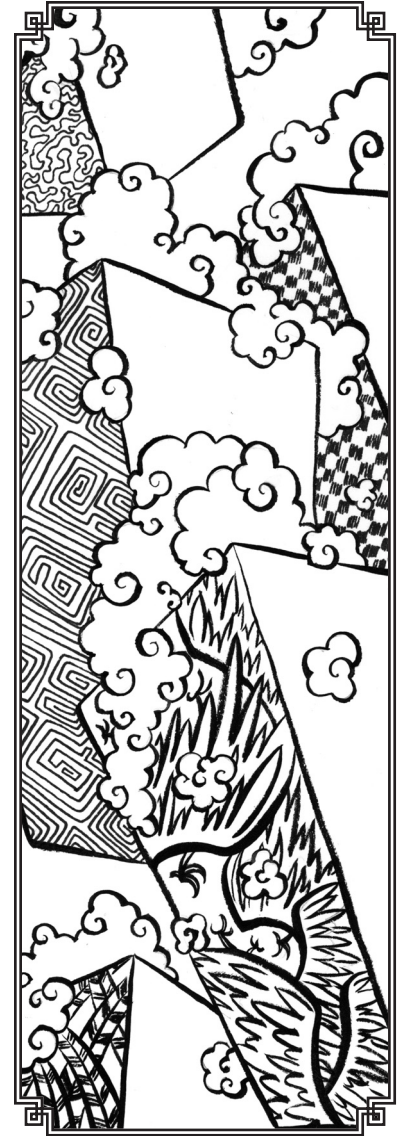
It's likely that your character will not appear in every scene of your game, or every Wirework sequence. If you play *Mist-Robed Gate* the way I do, there are going to be a lot of things happening that not everyone is involved in, but every player needs to pay attention to in order to keep up with the plot. So, how do you stay in touch when it's not your scene? How do you include players whose characters aren't present?

BEING THE AUDIENCE

When you're not in a scene, I encourage you to act like you're watching a movie at home with your friends. Feel free to munch on your dumplings, shout advice at the actors, throw popcorn at the screen, root for one of the characters, or whisper commentary to your neighbors. You're not expected to sit quietly. Even when you're not playing a character, you're participating in the experience. Audience time also gives you a chance to catch up and plan. Check with others about what you missed after a bathroom break. You can also think about what you want to see happen the next time it's your turn to frame a scene.

What you should do when you're in the audience:

- Pay attention! It's good to bring up and elaborate on the small details that happen in other scenes, the way that the Empress's medicine in *Curse of the Golden Flower* evolves into a subplot as the movie goes on, and draws in additional characters.
- Keep track of who has what props, in case you want to steal one later.
- During Wirework, think about when you want to cast your vote. Everyone has to keep fighting until you do! So, you can extend a Wirework sequence by holding onto your chips, but don't exhaust the par-



ticipants or the rest of the audience; they only have so much energy and patience.

- Tend to your bodily needs! This is a good time to have a snack, drink, or whatever. Try to stay in ear-shot unless you're in the bathroom.

What you should not do:

- Be too disruptive. You can certainly talk, but don't drown out the scene or start a heated debate with somebody.
- Throw anything other than popcorn. Poker chips can hurt, and throwing dumplings will get very messy very fast. Trust me on this one.
- Over-plan. If you get too wrapped up in what you want to happen next, you're likely to miss what's happening now, which is likely to lead to your setting scenes that don't make sense. Likewise, if you get too attached to your plans, and someone unwittingly thwarts them, that's no fun for you.
- Complain about how funny-looking the actors are. We already know this movie would be better if Gong Li were in it, but we work with what we've got.
- Wander away for long periods of time. You're free to ask for short recaps, but if you miss too much, nobody is going to want to explain it all to you.

PLAYING TO AN AUDIENCE

When you're in a scene, it's important to remember that you're performing for a group of people watching you, and your job is to entertain them. The best ways to entertain an audience are to involve them in what you're doing, and to do things that make the audience care about what's happening

onscreen. Some of the things you can do to involve the audience members are:

- Listen. The audience are going to make comments about what's going on, and they might throw you a cool idea if you're paying attention to them.
- Give them something to do. If you need some extras or a supporting character for a scene, you can ask an audience member to portray those characters.
- Pander to your viewers. This is especially important when you're doing Wirework, because it increases your chances of winning. If you know what the audience wants to see and give it to them, you're more likely to get what you want out of the bargain.
- Don't waste your screen time. There's a time and a place for slow, thoughtful conversations; sometimes, having those is integral to the plot. Make sure not to have them too often though—sharing the spotlight is important, and you don't want to shut out other players too much with scenes of that kind. It might cost you during Wirework scenes.

赤旗幟高高飄揚 - 臨場動態

FLY THE CRIMSON BANNER

GUIDELINES FOR LIVE-ACTION PLAY

To play *Fly the Crimson Banner*, you will need:

- A large space to play in, preferably with multiple rooms
- Interesting props to use
- Three scarves for each play area: one white, one yellow, and one red
- A facilitator, who does not play a character, but does participate as an audience member
- A whiteboard, to keep track of the order of scene framing and where the players are
- A gong
- Snacks and tea for the central meeting area.

Setup is identical to the tabletop rules presented earlier in the book: discuss the kind of game you want to play, divide the social landscape into factions, and fill out your character sheets. If you know what it will be ahead of time, you should also come dressed up in your character's signature color, so that it is always present. If not, the facilitator can provide an assortment of brightly-colored accessories for use by the players.

Play is similar to *Mist-Robed Gate's* normal rules, but the facilitator has some special duties in order to make the game go more smoothly. Whenever you get to the end of a scene, you should come back to see the facilitator, get a recap of what scenes happened while you were away, deliver your own recap, and then see who's at the top of the 'scene frame' list. That person gets to frame a scene immediately with whoever's present, or you can wait a small amount of time for another scene to end, if you need a character that's somewhere else and it looks like they'll be done soon. You're also free to go act as audience in other scenes that are going on; just be sure that the facilitator knows where to find you in case you're needed for a scene.



Every time a player frames a scene, move their name from the top of the scene framing list to the bottom. You don't necessarily have to go in strict order if scene length isn't permitting you to do so, but make sure that no one feels cheated out of the opportunity to frame scenes. When you leave base to play in a scene, remember to update your location on the whiteboard.

You don't have cards for props and sets. Instead, you should play in a place with several distinct rooms, and you have a supply of physical objects that you're allowed to use as props. When you need a new set, you assign the set to an unused room, and when you need a new prop, you assign it to a physical object. You own props by carrying them on your person, so you need to think a little about this; if you use a real replica sword without a hanger as a sword prop, you'll need to keep it in your hand, whereas if you use a pocketknife, you can stick it in your pocket.

You don't use a real knife for the knife. Instead, each set has a color-coded scarf, called a banner; when the knife is covered, there are no banners. When the knife is uncovered, the facilitator hangs white banners in every set. When the knife is drawn, the banners are changed to yellow, and when it is bloodied for the first time, they are changed to red. If you don't have scarves, you can use sheets of construction paper or something.

To show that you have the knife, make the 'sword finger' gesture: Extend your second and middle fingers together, and curl up the thumb, ring, and pinkie. Point the sword finger at the person you are passing the knife to. To signal acceptance, kneel and touch the sword finger to the ground. To stab a person, touch them against the throat or collarbone with your sword finger.

When Wirework begins, ring a gong to summon all the players so they can watch and vote. Before you play, everyone needs to discuss how to handle Wirework. You always have the option of just describing your characters doing what they do, if you're not comfortable acting those things out physi-

WHAT IS LIVE-ACTION?

Sometimes called larping, live-action roleplaying involves the players acting out the story that the group is telling together. While in *Mist-Robed Gate*, players say everything that their characters say and do, in *Fly the Crimson Banner*, players act out everything their character says and does. This does not mean that you should try to flying jump-kick each other during Wirework or anything; stay safe and use your best judgment.



cally. If your group does choose to act out Wirework, you need to talk about the following things and tailor them to your group's needs:

- Props: Are you allowed to physically incorporate them into Wirework, or simply pantomime them? If you can use them in Wirework, what are the rules for their use?
- Contact: Are you going to touch each other, or just pantomime without making physical contact? If you decide to touch, what body parts are off-limits?
- Exceptions: Are there individual people who are uncomfortable with some of the group agreements? Does anyone have special requests for their Wirework scenes? Is there anyone who wants to opt out of acting out Wirework entirely?
- What happens if someone breaks the rules? No one should ever break the rules, because safety is of utmost importance. Sometimes, however, players get excited or become purposefully problematic. What does the group feel to be a fair way to handle these situations? The final call in any individual case is always up to the facilitator, but the facilitator should keep in mind the group's general wishes when handling a breach of etiquette.

If you choose to act out Wirework, there are four important commands which both players can call out at any time:

- Slow: This brings the action into a slow-motion sequence. A player can call this out to signal to their partner that they're going into slow motion, or the partner can call it out when they feel action is moving too quickly. All complex moves should be done in slow motion, as should anything which will result in physical contact.
- Repeat: This means that a sequence should be done again. A player can call this out to signal to their partner that they're trying the same move twice, or

the partner can call it out when they want a do-over. Repeating a move allows both players to develop techniques and defenses which feel comfortable for them.

- Hold: This pauses the action. Either player can call it out when they need a momentary break.
- Stop: This stops the action until rules are renegotiated. Stop should be used whenever any player is uncomfortable with the action sequence, or when rules have been violated. The facilitator can also call for stopping at any time.



快樂家庭 HAPPY FAMILY

Usually when I play *Mist-Robed Gate* at home, I like to make it into a little dinner party. It adds a touch of gravitas to the occasion, and it helps me be sure that everyone's happy and comfortable. In this chapter, I explain how I go about doing that, in case you want to do the same.

TEA

Tea is my favorite beverage to serve with Chinese food. There is a wide variety of teas that you can buy at your local supermarket, Asian grocery, or specialty tea shop, and I have a lot of fun matching teas to the meal and the season.

I'm sure you're all familiar with how you prepare Western black tea—drop a teabag into a cup, add water, allow it to steep for several minutes. That's the basic process we use for all teas, combining water, temperature, and time, but different varieties have different steeping times and temperatures.

Among 'true' teas—those brewed from the leaves of *Camellia sinensis*—there are three major categories that you'll find in a supermarket: black, oolong, and green. At a specialty shop, you might also see some other kinds, which I'll cover a little later. I'll also get around to talking about herbal teas.

Black tea tends to have assertive flavors that go well with cream and sugar. The manufacturing process for black tea has an additional step, compared to green tea; the leaves are allowed to oxidize before they are dried, which makes the leaves change colour and develop different flavors. It may have bitter or astringent notes, or distinct caramel or woody elements. A lot of the black tea that's available in the United States is from India or Sri Lanka rather than farther east, because the growing conditions in those regions favor the production of black tea.

Each region has a distinctive style of tea. There is a range of flavors in every region, but, like wine, the land affects

what sort of tea it's possible to produce in a particular place. Assam and Ceylon teas tend to be quite assertive and astringent. For some of them, a bitter flavor is considered desirable. I usually don't like to drink these teas without cream, sugar, or lemon in them; their unadulterated flavors are too strong for my taste. Come to think of it, it's weird to drink dairy tea with Chinese food, with the debatable exception of bubble tea, so don't use these kinds of tea for *Mist-Robed Gate*. Darjeeling produces lighter, fragrant teas with floral and fruity tendencies. Nilgiri teas are hard to obtain, but they're some of my favorites. They are sweet and complex, with butterscotch, sandalwood, peach, and other round, golden flavors. You can generally drink a good Darjeeling or Nilgiri straight, or lightly sweetened. I wouldn't put cream in most of them. If you can get your hands on them, Darjeeling Jungpana and Nilgiri Tiger Hill are really beautiful.

Black teas generally call for just-boiling water (large bubbles) and the longest steeping times, in the neighborhood of 5 minutes. Never steep any tea in water raised to a rolling boil (large, violent bubbles). If the temperature of the water is too high, you'll 'burn' the tea, which means you'll extract bitter off-flavors that aren't pleasant to drink, as well as destroying some of the more delicate aromatic compounds that give each tea its distinctive flavor.

Green tea has grassy and herbal flavors; it's generally lighter than black tea and its fragrance is more delicate. The tea cultivars that make good green tea don't grow in India, so most of the green tea you can get is from China or Japan.

China has less emphasis on growing regions, and more on specific plantations with their particular environments and manufacturing techniques. High-end green teas from China often have a special leaf shape that results from their processing. Longjing, or dragon well, is one of those high-end teas; its leaves have a flat shape that results from their being pressed against the side of a pan as they are being dried. It tastes very green. Gunpowder, another Chinese style of tea, is actually named after its shape; the tea buds are rolled into irregular balls that unfurl as they are steeped. In general,

FLAVORED TEA

Tea makers add flavors to teas in a number of different ways: curing the tea leaves among fragrant materials, adding extracts or oils, or even mixing the tea leaves with other sorts of plant matter. I know that lots of tea aficionados look on scented and flavored teas as adulterated or otherwise déclassé, but I don't really care. As with anything, tons of flavored teas are not very good, but there are also plenty that are delicious.

Flavored black tea is pretty easy to find, and it comes in a wide range of options. Lapsang souchong is a Chinese black tea that's dried over burning pine, which gives it a woodsmoke flavor that's nice to drink in winter. Earl Grey is flavored with oil of bergamot, a kind of perfumey citrus fruit. It's rather nice with beef. Black teas also go well with vanilla and red fruits, and those blends are generally easy to find in stores. Black tea with jasmine or rose is very difficult to find, but wonderful in a kind of opulent way. Try them out if you have the opportunity.

A few sorts of flavored green teas are very traditional in their places of origin, and they're

increasingly easy to find in grocery stores and so on now that tea is so food-trendy. Green mint is a nice summer tea, and in the Asian store you can usually find green jasmine and green osmanthus; osmanthus is a Chinese plant whose scent reminds me of orange blossoms. You can also find green Earl Grey, but for goodness' sake don't drink that! The bergamot tends to overwhelm the tea. If you're lucky enough to find it, green with cherry blossoms and rose is wonderful.

Thai iced tea, that lovely neon-orange beverage, is another flavored tea, although it remains a mystery to me what exactly it's flavored with. It might be vanilla or star anise. It turns out you can buy Thai tea in large bags at the Asian store. It's really easy to make—simply measure out tea and water to your taste and refrigerate overnight to infuse. You don't even need hot water! The next day, strain it, and serve on ice with sweetened half-and-half or milk. You *can* use something denser like cream or sweetened condensed milk, but it's pretty rich that way, and verges on overwhelming. To get the pretty multicolored Thai restaurant look, fill a glass two-thirds of the way or so with crushed ice, add the tea,

green teas don't get along with cream, and many of them are mild or naturally sweet so they don't need any added sweetener. I always taste a green tea before I add anything to it.

Japanese green teas come in a few different forms. There's less emphasis yet again on plantation or region; instead, tea shops have their own blends, and will maybe blend teas to a customer's taste, but there is a certain remove between the grower and the drinker. Instead, the teas in Japan are described mostly by their style of growing and manufacture. Many of them are different grades of leaf tea, but a few exceptions merit special mention. Matcha is a high-quality green tea ground to an extremely fine powder; you can use it by simply mixing it with a liquid. Matcha in milk is nice. Houjicha is a strong tea that's roasted and has a smoky taste. Genmaicha has toasted rice in it, which gives it a sweet, malty taste. Another grain-based tea from Japan, mugicha, is made from roasted barley. It doesn't contain tea leaves. Mugicha's a traditional summer beverage.

Green teas need cooler water than black; still, steaming water is about the right temperature. They also brew faster, from 30 seconds to 2 minutes. Good-quality greens, particularly in the Chinese style, can be steeped several times. If you're doing this, the first steeping should be quite brief, 30 seconds maybe, and each subsequent infusion should be a bit longer than the one before. Use less water than you think you should. A tea that's meant to be served this way will display a slow progression of subtly changing flavors until the tea is spent.

Oolong tea is made by interrupting the oxidization process that turns tea black. Different styles of oolong start with different sources and can vary in the extent of their oxidization and the technique used to stop it, so it's much harder to generalize over them than it is over black and green. The range of flavors is very wide. For that reason I'm not going to go on too long about them; it's better to just ask your tea merchant about the particular teas that they have available.

Oolong teas in the Chinese style, like greens, can be steeped multiple times. In my experience, oolongs will yield more infusions before giving out. The process is the same. The temperature may vary—again, check on the package or ask your tea seller.

Tea leaves can be processed to produce a few other styles, such as white tea, yellow tea, and pu-erh tea. These aren't widely available, although white tea is becoming increasingly accessible, so let's move on.

Herbal infusions are also worth taking note of. Mint tea is pretty nice in summer, either taken straight or Moroccan-style, mixed with gunpowder tea. I'm not a big fan of it myself, but apparently rooibos is considered very tasty by some people. It seems to go well with round bakery flavors like vanilla, almond, and dried fruit. Maybe I'd pair rooibos with mild biscuits and serve it with cream, English-style. My girlfriend says rooibos with cream is gross, so try it both ways to ensure domestic harmony.

Hibiscus and rosehip brew to dramatic shades of red-pink, which is nice for visual effect, and their acidic flavors are good for cutting through a rich, fatty meal. That's not all the good stuff that exists in the herbal tea world, but to go on would be outside the scope of this chapter. Go explore!

Iced tea is maybe my favorite thing to make with tea. Especially for party situations, it's really good to simply have a beverage in the refrigerator that you can simply pull out and pour without having to do any additional prep. It makes you look clever and effortless.

Most teas are good iced, but I generally steer away from those that have a lot of astringency, like Assams or any English-style black tea, or generally speaking any tea that's too harsh to drink without cream. These will get cloudy when chilled, because some of their flavor components aren't fully soluble in cold water. It doesn't affect the flavor at all, but it ruins your presentation.

and then gently pour the sweet cream on top. The ice keeps the ingredients from mixing until they're stirred.

MORE WAYS TO DRINK TEA

If you're really interested in tea, you might find it interesting to explore other ways people consume it across the world. Whenever I visit friends in Bombay, we share a cup of Indian spiced *chai*, made with scalded milk, ginger, and cardamom. Farther north, the Kashmiris make green tea scented with saffron and almonds, and in Tibet, strong black tea is mixed with butter to make *po cha*.

The most fun thing about iced tea is adding neat garnishes. I'm sure you know about bubble tea. It's kind of a hassle to make tapioca pearls at home, but the idea extends to other cool stuff: chunks of fresh fruit, for example, add sweetness and flavor to iced tea. Simply toss them in when you brew the tea and chill overnight. The next day when the tea is ready to serve, the flavors will have blended nicely. If you're worried about the fruit getting watery, which might happen if you're using a really strongly flavored fruit and a more delicate tea, then you can brew and sweeten the tea as a concentrate, at double or triple strength, put the fruit in the day before, and then dilute it just before serving.

Wheels of citrus fruits (peel and all) can be added only a short time before serving, too; it doesn't take them long to perfume the tea. Avoid frozen fruits. They'll get mushy and unappetizing. Delicate berries like raspberries will do this if left in the tea too long as well, but like citrus fruits, you can add them an hour or two before serving instead of overnight.

One combination that I especially love is mango-rose green tea with halved cherries. The cherries get nice and plump in the tea, and the tea takes up a pretty red color from the fruit. Another nice combo is jasmine or honeysuckle tea with honeydew melon. This is pretty delicate and you'll want to serve it with something light like shumai or cold noodles. Black tea with slices of orange and ginger is also great, and it'll stand up to a meal with strong flavors like beef. Smack the ginger slices with the side of a heavy knife before putting them in the tea; bruising them a little helps them infuse.

PREPARED FOOD

Prepared food isn't a sin! Takeout and frozen things are an essential part of the effortless entertaining experience. It's important to me that, when I'm hosting, I'm not doing too much in the kitchen; I want to be available to my guests and friends and have time for me to enjoy their company. There are a lot of foods that you can get in the freezer section that you can make at home, but to do so would be laborious in

the extreme, or requires skills that you may not have the time or inclination to develop. These are the kind of thing that I encourage you to outsource.

You can find *jiaozi*, Chinese dumplings, in a wide variety. They have all sorts of fillings, from meats to seafood to different combinations of vegetables. Once or twice I've even run across "dessert dumplings" with fruit or bean-paste filling. Experiment with different brands and flavors; they vary widely in quality and deliciousness. You can steam dumplings or pan-fry them. Really don't microwave them. The package might tell you you can do this, but they'll get rubbery and have soggy bottoms. There's nothing grosser than soggy bottoms.

To steam dumplings, line a steamer basket with cabbage leaves or pieces of waxed paper. Make sure there are a few gaps for the steam to pass through the lining. Place the dumplings on top of the lining with a little bit of space between them; if they touch they will stick. Once the steam is going, they need about 15 minutes, but you have a bit of freedom here. They're hard to overcook, and you can safely leave them in the steamer for a while after they're done. Simply turn off the heat and leave the steamer closed until you're ready. It'll probably stay at serving temperature for a good half hour.

To pan-fry dumplings, warm up a nonstick pan to medium-low heat with a little oil. Use a pan with a close-fitting lid. Arrange the dumplings in the pan, seam up. The side opposite the seam is usually the flattest; this ensures that you get the maximum crunchy browned bits, without having to carefully turn every dumpling so it browns on every side. Once the dumplings are heated up a bit and they've started to sizzle, add about half a cup of water to the pan—enough to evenly cover the bottom. It will boil up immediately. Cover the pan, lower the heat, and leave it there for about five minutes. Then loosen the lid so steam can escape, and wait for the water to boil off and the sound to change to sizzling again. They're ready to serve as soon as they've started sizzling and they are browned to the extent you prefer. The

OTHER DUMPLINGS

Korean *mandu* and Japanese *gyoza* cook like *jiaozi*. They sometimes differ slightly in shape (my favorite brand of *mandu* are shaped into a circle, tortellini-like) and come with different fillings. It seems like *gyoza* tend to have a higher proportion of meat in their fillings than *jiaozi* do, and *mandu* sometimes include such things as kimchi (delicious) or glass noodles. Regardless of where they came from, I like to serve dumplings with a simple dipping sauce: two parts soy sauce to one part rice vinegar or balsamic vinegar for a sweeter, intenser dip, and a little chunk of freshly grated ginger. Drizzle a tiny bit of toasted sesame oil over the top of that if you're feeling fancy.

Be careful when you're shopping for dumplings. The sort labelled *shuijiao* or *sui gyoza* are meant to be boiled and served in soup, and their wrappers are rather thicker and doughier than the non-soup kind. They don't really come out well when fried or steamed. Cantonese-style *gau* have a delicate, translucent wrapper that reveals their filling. Usually these are sold frozen in neat divided trays. You can recognize them because

they're very white when raw, and have a tight, plump shape. Their seams have many pleats. They are very beautiful, but don't fry them! No one knows what will happen if you do.

INGREDIENTS AT A GLANCE

HUNANESE SALTED CHILES

- » 1/2 pound hot red chiles
- » 1/2 pound sweet red peppers
- » 1/4 cup coarse salt

steaming step ensures that the wrapper is cooked all the way through and the filling evenly warmed. You can also add flavors during steaming, by mixing the water with soy sauce, for instance, or adding whole cloves of garlic or ginger slices. The flavors will gently permeate the dumpling wrappers.

Bao, steamed buns, also come with all sorts of different fillings, but my favorite are roast pork buns. They're tender and chewy and warm, and the best ones are simultaneously yeasty and sweet. I love them. Steam them like dumplings, and be careful when you're eating them! They are hot. They don't need a dipping sauce.

Noodles are another thing it's not worth making at home. I'm not going to bore you with a long essay about noodle eating, but I do want to say, whenever I'm making Asian noodles, after boiling them I always drain them and plunge them into icy cold water and agitate them for a while. This washes off the starch on the surface of the noodles, which keeps them from sticking to each other, and stiffens them up a little; once they're washed you can stir-fry them or add them to soup or whatever you need to do. To reheat, simply immerse the cooked noodles in hot water for like half a minute.

RECIPES

Here are some things I like to eat! The recipes that follow are from many different places on the globe. I know the wuxia genre is really a natively Chinese thing, but my kitchen doesn't have borders. It's friendlier that way. I'm going to assume you are comfortable in a kitchen here.

Hunanese salted chiles are a great thing to keep in your pantry. They're hot and salty and a tiny bit sour, and unlike most commercial hot sauces, they aren't cooked so they have a real freshness of flavor. This recipe's adapted from Fuschia Dunlop, *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook*, but made less spicy so that it can be used as a hot condiment as well as a burst of concentrated heat to add while cooking.

Get half a pound of sweet red peppers and half a pound of hot red peppers. Thai bird chiles are my preference. They have a nice, fiery, in-your-face hotness. Wash and trim both kinds of peppers, removing the stems. Also remove the gills if the peppers in question are particularly large and this seems like a reasonable amount of effort. Now put all the peppers in the food processor and mince them quite finely. Be *very careful* that none of the chopped pepper goes in your eye or anything like that, and when you open the processor keep your face away and don't inhale too deeply. At this point the whole processor is full of tiny airborne droplets of bird-chile juice. Get ¼ cup of coarse, non-iodized salt. Stir salt into the chiles until the salt stops dissolving in the released juice and it clumps in pink-tinted bits around the chopped peppers. Pack it into jars and pour the remaining salt on to cover, so the tops are uniformly white, and then close the jars and allow to pickle for at least two weeks. In this time the chiles will take care of themselves—it's too salty in there for anything to start growing, really—but once you've opened them, you might want to keep them in the refrigerator anyway. This'll maybe last you half a year. It keeps longer than that, but you'll run out.

Tom kha kai is a relatively uncomplicated Thai soup. It's also pretty fast to make, but be prepared to be busy just cooking while you're working on it. It's not the kind of soup you can wander away from. Remove the dry outer leaves from one stalk of lemongrass and peel about an inch of ginger. Then cut them into big chunks, large enough that they can be easily fished out later. Using a knife or vegetable peeler, zest half a lime in big strips. Use a couple of Thai lime leaves instead of the zest if you can get your hands on them; just rip each leaf in half. Pour three cups of chicken stock into a pot with the lemongrass, ginger, and lime zest. Bring this to a boil over medium-high heat and let it boil for about a minute. While you're waiting for it to boil, cut a pound of skinless, boneless chicken breast into bite-size strips and prepare some dried shiitake mushrooms: pour hot water over a bowl full of dried mushrooms, enough to cover, and then cover the bowl with some kind of lid. Set this aside. After the stock has boiled for about a minute, add

TOM KHA KAI

- » 1 stalk lemongrass
- » 1 inch ginger
- » zest of half a lime, or 2 lime leaves
- » 3 cups chicken stock
- » 1 pound chicken breast
- » handful dried shiitakes
- » 2 cans coconut milk
- » juice of above lime
- » salted chiles
- » 1 tablespoon sugar
- » 1 tablespoon fish sauce
- » lime wedges & cilantro to garnish

two 14-ounce cans of unsweetened coconut milk. I find that Chaokoh is the tastiest brand I can get my hands on.

Let this come back to a boil and add the chicken. Bring back to a boil again, and add the juice of the lime you zested earlier, some salted chiles, a tablespoon of sugar (light brown, preferably), and a tablespoon of fish sauce. Stir until the sugar dissolves, then add the mushrooms, discarding the soaking liquid. Simmer for a minute or two, just so the chicken is cooked and the mushrooms are tender. Garnish with cilantro. I like to serve this with more wedges of lime on the side. You should probably have wedges of lime on your table anyway, because lime juice is good on everything. Before serving, either warn your guests or fish out the ginger, lemongrass, and lime zest. This recipe serves 4 as a main dish or like 6 if it's on the side of something more substantial.

SPRING ROLLS

- » 1 cup celery crescents
- » 1 cup scallion pieces
- » 1 cup reconstituted dried shiitake, strips
- » garlic
- » toasted sesame oil
- » salted chiles
- » glass noodles
- » spring roll wrappers

Spring rolls are a lot of work, you might think! Why am I giving you a recipe, instead of telling you to buy them? I'll tell you why! Commercial spring rolls are almost always filled mostly with shredded cabbage, which is all right and everything but it's not really very flavorful. You can do better, and it's way easier than you might think. This particular recipe is one we made at a party when we ran out of the ones we had made beforehand, with just whatever we had lying around. They turned out to be a big hit.

Bring a *dry* pan to medium-high heat. Chop up a few stalks of celery into little crescents, maybe 1/4 inch thick, as it's heating up. When the pan is hot, throw in the celery and let some of the moisture evaporate. When they change color, becoming darker green, add the same amount of scallions, green and white parts, cut into short pieces, and about the same amount again of reconstituted shiitake mushrooms. We would have used bacon in the place of the mushrooms, but we were cooking for vegetarians. Try the bacon variation for me, tell me how it goes. Add some garlic, a splash of toasted sesame oil, and salted chiles, and stir-fry. Use seriously as many salted chiles as you can stand.

Meanwhile, soak a small package of Korean glass noodles in hot water. Or have your assistant do that. When the noodles are soft, drain, and toss them together with the other filling ingredients. Taste for seasoning and then stir-fry them some more so the noodles absorb some tastiness from their neighbors. This is your spring roll filling.

Now you need to wrap them up! This is fun, and you'll probably mess it up the first time or two. I did. Get out the spring roll wrappers you've been keeping in the fridge. Take one and put it in front of you with one corner facing you, and put some filling on it about a third of the way up in a narrow strip. Don't use too much filling or you won't be able to wrap it up. Bring the two corners at your left and right to the center and then lift up the bottom corner to cover the filling like an envelope. Moisten the edges of the last corner with water, and then roll the filled part onto the corner and press it down gently to seal. Voilà! You made a spring roll!

Fry these in a pan with a little bit of oil until they're crunchy on all sides. You'll end up with between 20 and a dozen depending on the size of your wrappers and how generously you fill them.

Cold sesame noodles in a Japanese idiom are what I make when I'm lazy and hungry and want something slippery and cold. Prepare one bundle of udon noodles (Japanese noodles sometimes come packaged in these neat sheaves that make it easy to portion them) and just keep them immersed in ice water as you work on the dressing. Drain them just as the dressing is ready.

Combine a tablespoon of miso paste, a tablespoon or three of peanut butter (I like mine chunky), the juice of half a lime, a splash of soy sauce, a teaspoon of toasted sesame oil, and as much freshly cracked pepper as you like. Taste and adjust. I often find that a small amount of sugar helps round out the flavor. You can change around the flavor of this by using vinegar instead of lime, fish sauce instead of soy, leaving out the miso (if you do this, use more soy-or-other-

COLD SESAME NOODLES

- » 1 bundle udon
- » 1 tablespoon miso paste
- » 1-3 tablespoons
peanut butter
- » soy sauce
- » toasted sesame oil
- » cracked pepper
- » green things
- » steak, optional
- » white sesame seeds
to garnish

BLACK BEAN TOFU

- » 1 cube firmest tofu
- » handful dried shiitake
- » 2 cups green stuff
- » circa 4 scallions
- » soy sauce
- » 1-2 cloves garlic
- » shaoxing wine
- » black beans
- » salted chiles
- » stock, optional

The pressing-and-frying technique used with the tofu here is basically the only way I enjoy tofu these days; some people like it moist and beany-tasting, but I like it sizzling and chewy like this. As a bonus, you can also serve fried tofu triangles with a light dipping sauce as an appetizer. Salt them as they come out of the fryer.

salty-thing), or stirring in some Thai curry paste. If you want a creamy effect, add a tablespoon of mayonnaise. My girlfriend thinks the mayo variation is super-gross but I love it. Chop up something green and herby, or something watery and crunchy, like cilantro or mint or shiso or celery or bean sprouts or daikon, into small bits or interesting strips, and combine the dressing with the noodles and vegetable. This serves one or two as a salad, or a larger group as a thing-on-the-side. Adding a thinly-sliced grilled steak on top turns it into a hearty, summery meal. The meat drippings really add a special dimension to the noodles. It's pretty but unnecessary to garnish with white sesame seeds.

Tofu with black bean sauce is my go-to Chinese-style entrée. It's (optionally) vegetarian-friendly, which might be useful to you, and super tasty. To start with, you need a cube of tofu, the firmest that you can lay your hands on. Cut it into bite-size slices about half an inch thick and lay them out on a cookie sheet lined with clean tea towels or a couple layers of paper towels. Cover with more towels and another cookie sheet, put something heavy like a cast iron frying pan on top, and let that sit for at least half an hour while you're getting everything else ready. Pressing the tofu this way gets rid of some of the liquid in it, which makes it easier to handle and allows it to absorb some of the tasty sauce. Prepare some mushrooms as in the *tom kha kai* recipe above.

Cut up some green, stalky vegetable. Chinese broccoli works. So do broccolini, bok choy, asparagus, even Brussels sprouts. In a pinch, celery, bell peppers, or Chinese long beans will do. If it's a more bitey vegetable, go for bite-sized pieces. If it's more leafy and tender, they can be longer, but don't make them too bulky, so they are still comfortable to hold in your chopsticks. Also chop up the white and green parts (separately) of a few scallions, or a couple of shallots, if you want.

Gather the things you need for your black bean sauce: soy sauce, a clove or two of garlic, the same amount of grated ginger, some shaoxing wine, and some fermented black beans. Also grab your salted chiles if you have them,

and otherwise red pepper flakes. You can't really substitute anything for the black beans, but a dry white wine or tequila will substitute for the shaoxing. They will give you different flavors, but they are all uniquely delicious. You might also need some chicken or vegetable stock if you've got that on hand. The black beans come two ways: either in a plastic bag, mostly dry (they are sort of moist and crumbly), or in a jar, packed in oil and bean paste. Either works fine. If you want to include some meat, a quarter-pound of ground whatever.

Now heat up some oil in a large, deep pan, enough to come halfway up the sides of the tofu. Working in batches, fry the tofu pieces until they're evenly golden brown on all sides. You'll need to turn them halfway through the process, and take care that they don't touch each other for the first 30 seconds or so of cooking, or they will stick together. Drain them on racks lined with paper towels. Fish the rehydrated shiitakes out of the liquid, reserving it, and cut them also into chopstick-size strips. Set them aside with the tofu and strain any grit out of the soaking liquid.

Now get rid of most of that oil; leave a couple of tablespoons in the pan to cook the vegetables. Add the garlic, ginger, and chiles. If you're using scallions whites or shallots, put those in now and let everything brown a little. Don't burn the garlic! If you're using meat, add it now and brown it well. Then add the greens. With cabbagey greens like sprouts or bok choy, I walk away for a minute or two to allow them to brown a little before I start pushing them around. When those are cooked to your satisfaction, add a splash of your alcohol and a tablespoon or two of black beans. Stir it up and mash the beans a little bit to distribute their flavor. Add the mushroom water, soy sauce, and tofu. Stir around to coat and absorb, and keep poking until there isn't too much liquid in the pan. Adjust the seasoning with additional soy sauce, sugar, or rice vinegar. Serve immediately, before the tofu gets soggy. This will serve between 2 and 4 depending on how quickly the third and fourth get to the table. There won't be leftovers.



參考影片 FILMOGRAPHY

Films telling tragic, comedic and above all melodramatic narratives with martial arts action have been made in China since the 1930s, with the majority of the classic films screened in the United States originating from British-controlled Hong Kong between 1965 and the late 1990s. The contemporary wuxia films that are familiar to everyone such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero* are in fact the fusion of multiple different movements in Chinese cinema over the decades, encompassing the tripartite heritage of low-budget kung fu movies like *Wong Fei Hung Bravely*, *Crushing the Fire Formation* and *Five Deadly Venoms*, fantastical tales of magic and flying heroes like *The Six-Fingered Lord of the Lute*, and Huangmei Opera musical melodramas like *The Love Eterne* and *The Blue and the Black*. In this essay, we use the term *wuxia* to refer to this entire tradition of filmmaking.

The lists below represent an attempt to organize this vast filmic trove into several distinct tones of play for *Mist-Robed Gate*. While there is much stylistic and generic overlap between the films, their separation into the three main categories of Epic Wuxia, Martial Arts Wuxia and Fantastical Wuxia is intended to help your player group develop a “feel” for your *Mist-Robed Gate* games by drawing on concrete variations in the Chinese film tradition. Your dramatic and cinematic imaginations will ultimately determine what your game “looks” and “feels” like, from “a Zhang Yimou-style family drama set in the mountains” to “an alternative 19th Century China where steampunk inventors rub shoulders with humanoid dragons and paranoid, lustful fire spirits.” Let these lists open your imaginations (as well as increase your Chinese film literacy)!

EPIC WUXIA

These are films classified as absolute staples of the epic wuxia that the *Mist-Robed Gate* system is intended to simulate.

The Emperor and the Assassin (Jing ke ci qin wang, 1998)

Kaige Chen's *The Emperor and the Assassin* is an early specimen of the epic wuxia genre without much of the wuxia—flying people would be combined with the film's brand of historical drama only with Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Nevertheless, its lavish costumes (lovingly designed by Mo Xiaomin over the course of four years), large army sequences, and suspensefully intimate scenes between Gong Li, Fengyi Zhan and Ding Haifeng are more than a match for the likes of later films of this genre. Taking place in the 3rd Century B.C., the film revolves around the intrigue of the King (Haifeng) sending off his childhood sweetheart (Li) to recruit an assassin from a rival kingdom to provide a pretext for an empire-unifying war. Of course, Li falls in love with the assassin, the Emperor descends into madness, and bloody, morally horrific conflict is the result. Although the film is a little long, it provides a stunning psychological portrait of its three main characters, realistic factional conflict, and a climactic assassination scene that masterfully combines character-related suspense with the banality of trying to kill a real human being.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Wo hu cang long, 2000)

Ang Lee's modern classic *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* defines the epic wuxia genre in its current form. It follows two very different romances, intertwined by their relationship with the heirloom sword Green Destiny: that of Yu Xiulian (Michelle Yeoh) and Li Mubai (Chow Yun-Fat), and that between Yu Jiaolong (Zhang Ziyi) and the Xinjiang bandit Luo Xiaohu (Chang Chen). While both of these relationships are outside the bounds of propriety for various reasons, Xiulian and Mubai quietly accept this and spend the movie quietly longing for one another, while Jiaolong sees her liaison with Xiaohu as a way to escape from the distasteful strictures of her social position, which she has already been rebelling against in secret, studying martial arts under the tutelage of the infamous criminal Jade Fox (Cheng Pei-Pei). Set against this backdrop and Tan Dun's award-winning score, Yuen Woo-Ping's martial arts choreography sparkles. Xiulian and Jiaolong's fights, particularly,

EPIC WUXIA TROPES

- » Intricately woven plotlines involving at least two morally ambiguous factions and the resultant character deaths of most, if not all, of the protagonists.
- » Gorgeous cinematography that emphasizes sweeping landscapes, brilliantly tapestried palaces and characters in elegant robes, as well as their appropriate colors.
- » High-powered actors such as Gong Li, Tony Leung, Ziyi Zhang, and Chow Yun-Fat playing characters filled with angst and pathos.
- » Kung fu sequences with specific—often sexual—passionate undertones.
- » Supernatural phenomena appearing in characters' abilities to defy gravity, but otherwise not particularly overt
- » Weeping violin soundtracks for slower sequences combined with thunderous drums for fight sequences
- » Sweeping extreme long-shots cut together with close-ups and extreme close-ups of small gestures, raindrops and natural details to emphasize the simultaneously epic and intimate nature of the story's action

CLASSICS & MORE INSPIRATION

Though we will not elaborate on these in detail, this pot-pourri selection of films and television will further inspire the kung fu and/or the mutually inclusive emotional and physical destruction of *Mist-Robed Gate* games to come.

The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple (Huo shao hong lian si, 1928)

The Love Eterne (Liang Shan Bo yu Zhu Ying Tai, 1963)

The Six-Fingered Lord of the Lute (Liu zhi qin mo, 1965)

The Blue and the Black (Lan yu hei (Shang), 1966)

The One-Armed Swordsman (Dubei dao, 1967)

Wong Fei Hung Bravely Crushing the Fire Formation (Huang Fei-hong yong po lie huo zhen, 1970)

A Touch of Zen (Xia nu, 1971)

Chinese Gods (Pang shen feng, 1976)

Five Deadly Venoms (Wu du, 1978)

Raise the Red Lantern (Da hong deng long gao gao gua, 1991)

are beautiful studies of age and skill vs. youthful energy and determination, which only underline the sad situation of Jade Fox, whose inferior talents leave her second even to her student Jiaolong.

Hero (Ying xiong, 2002)

Setting aside the political overtones of Zhang Yimou's film, it is a visual masterpiece and a perfect example of how a *Mist-Robed Gate* game should go, if every player chooses to bloody the knife at every opportunity. With its intense colour schemes, balletic action sequences, and pro-unification leanings, it's an interesting counterpoint to the much more grounded approach of *The Emperor and the Assassin*.

While both chronicle attempts on Qin Shihuang's life, *Hero* paints a picture of a very different Emperor. Rather than a conqueror driving himself to madness, *Hero's* Emperor is an eminently reasonable man, persuaded by his assassin's wisdom and nobility, but forced to execute him regardless, to uphold the laws of his nation "under heaven." Bizarrely, Zhang Ziyi appears on the American posters for this movie alongside Jet Li, both holding Japanese weapons, but don't be fooled! She plays a mere supporting character, and no one is anachronistically armed at all.

House of Flying Daggers (Shi mian mai fu, 2004)

More of Zhang Yimou's work, this film takes a more romantic turn. It looks in on the relationship between two police captains, Leo (Andy Lau) and Jin (Takeshi Kaneshiro), and the things that go on between them when Jin falls in love with Xiaomei (Zhang Ziyi again! This time she's important!) the woman Leo has secretly been longing for. Their struggle unfolds amidst a confounding atmosphere of deceit and doubt, as characters repeatedly reveal layers of false identity. At last when all falsehood is stripped away, no one remains but Leo, Xiaomei, and Jin, and the final decision is given to Xiaomei: If you save this man's life, you will die. Is it worth it? Its use of color is subdued in comparison to *Hero's*, but it retains Yimou's signature bold style. Emi

Wada's lush, award-winning costume designs are framed by equally rich set design in a palette of luminous pastels.

The Promise (Wu ji, 2005)

Chen Kaige's *The Promise* takes the genre in a decidedly fantastical direction, with prophetic goddesses, improbable suits of armor, magic cloaks, and time-travelling slaves. As the movie opens, Qingcheng, a starving, grief-stricken child makes a bargain with a goddess: she will have all the food she wants, the most beautiful garments, the hearts of every man, but she will never be able to hold on to love; every man she loves, she will lose. Later, the adult Qingcheng (Cecilia Cheung) becomes involved with General Guangming (Hiroyuki Sanada), believing that he rescued her from the King, when in fact it was Guangming's slave Kunlun (Jang Dong-Gun). Guangming's bitter rivalry with the Duke Wuhuan (Nicholas Tse), along with this case of mistaken identity, slowly tear their love apart, and Qingcheng finally comes to regret her bargain. While this movie's plot is somewhat shaky, it's worth watching for visual inspiration and its striking action scenes, whose acrobatic violence stands out in a field of martial ballets.

Curse of the Golden Flower (Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia 2006)

Gold, incest and poison drive Zhang Yimou's latest costume epic, a T'ang Dynasty tragedy about the dark secrets lurking underneath a royal family. This film exhibits an acute materialist fetishism: flowers are meticulously arranged, medicine painstakingly mixed, clothing and hair carefully attended to, and swords ground against each other with slow, erotic friction. The ordered and repressed environment formed by the Emperor's (Chow Yun-Fat) pre-determination of the Empress' (Gong Li) world is precisely the principal point of tension in the film, and ultimately leads to madness, chaos and the restoration of order through beautifully ruthless means. In *Mist-Robed Gate* terms, the film also shows that one can certainly be stabbed by the knife and yet still be allowed to live... albeit allowed to experience a fate worse than death. The strangeness of the film's ending aside, *Curse*

Farewell, My Concubine (Ba wang bie ji, 1993)

Ninja Scroll (Jûbei ninpûchô, 1993)

Ashes of Time (Dung che sai duk, 1994)

Titus (2000)

Shaolin Soccer (Siu lam juk kau, 2001)

X/1999 (2001)

Seven Swords (Chat gim, 2005)

Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005)

of the Golden Flower is a wonderfully claustrophobic wuxia film that proves intra-family relations themselves can be the most alienating and engrossing of all.

Legend of the Black Scorpion (Ye yan, 2006)

This bloody adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* demonstrates how enterprising *Mist-Robed Gate* players may twist classics of Western and/or Eastern literature to provide starting player characters and motivations for ultimately tragic wuxia action. Starring Ziyi Zhang and elegantly choreographed by Yuen Woo-Ping, *Legend of the Black Scorpion* depicts a 904 A.D. China under the T'ang Dynasty wracked with internal strife and violence: Empress Wan (Zhang) has agreed to marry the murdered Emperor's brother-in-law Lu in exchange for power and passionate sex, but her step-son Prince Wu Luan escapes their assassins and returns to court looking for answers and revenge. The palace in this film is particularly sinister, with dark corners and forbidding armored guardsmen creating an aura of extreme vulnerability and danger. Masked dance sequences and heavy whispered words amidst great periods of silence counterbalance the furious action sequences and excessive on-screen brutality.

The Warlords (Tau ming chong, 2007)

This anti-war epic may not be all swords, blood and exotically colored cloth—the film's chief color is gray and its weather pattern is the kicked-up dust of battle under the scorching sun—but it still contains the seeds of a *Mist-Robed Gate* game. Three brothers played by Jet Li, Andy Lau and Takeshi Kaneshiro get caught up on different sides of a deadly political conflict in late 18th Century China, when riflemen are able to (melodramatically) gun down the traditional sword-wielding warriors with ease. Amidst the carnage comes the loyalty-shifting politics of men whose self-interest and blind obedience wax and wane with each new crisis situation, eventually destroying them all in a morally ambiguous epic battle that will leave your ears ringing.

MARTIAL ARTS WUXIA

For those players of *Mist-Robed Gate* more interested in wirework and kung fu fighting, there are thankfully hundreds of great films from China featuring such visual feasts of physicality to choose from.

Drunken Master (Jui kuen, 1978)

For any players who want to incorporate drunken-style kung fu into their *Mist-Robed Gate* characters (and inevitably, there will be one), the *Drunken Master* series of films are required viewing. The brilliant stunt prowess of Siu Tien Yuen and young Jackie Chan meets the action choreography of Yuen Woo-Ping to produce an artful action-comedy that ends in a particularly grand final fight against Hwang Jang Lee. Clearly, one of Wong Fei-Hung's (Chan) in-game Loyalties was to "Liquor... lots of it." See also *Dance of the Drunken Mantis* and *The Legend of the Drunken Master*.

Dance of the Drunken Mantis (Nan bei zui quan, 1979)

Although sparse on plot, Yuen Woo-Ping's personal follow-up to *Drunken Master* contains many excellent, if a little bizarre, fight sequences that take a set piece and explore its full range of possibilities for usage in a kung fu fight. For example, the restaurant fight scene between Sam Seed (Siu Tien Yuen) and his enemy is a meditation on how a table, chairs, cups and liquor bottles can be used for attack and defense. You as *Mist-Robed Gate* players should keep in mind that many of the best fight scenes revolve around the possession or obstruction of a single object, and that object can focus the fight scene in many interesting ways.

Wheels on Meals (Kuai can che, 1984)

The cooperation of superstars Jackie Chan, Yuen Biao and Sammo Hung on one film provides an excellent mix of fight choreography and silliness in a martial arts-version of a European intrigue. Without a doubt, the centerpiece of the film is the bout between Chan and aptly named "Thug 1" played by the kickboxing champion Benny "the Jet" Urquidez. This

MARTIAL ARTS TROPES

- » Relatively simplistic plotlines usually revolving around an unambiguously evil faction and a plucky good faction
- » Cinematography that puts the viewer right in the action to witness the ballet of maneuvers executed
- » Athletic actors such as Jackie Chan, Donnie Yen, Jet Li, Michelle Yeoh, or Sammo Hung playing characters with their tongue firmly planted in their cheek.
- » Kung fu sequences can have emotional undertones, but they more frequently generate suspense by setting them in dramatic and marginally silly locales such as rooftops, rat glue factories, on the heads of a crowd, etc.
- » Supernatural phenomena appearing in characters' abilities to defy gravity and fight, but usually remain minimal in favor of the fight choreography
- » Souped-up Chinese music with some additional action guitar, techno drum kicks and 80s synthesizers—these soundtracks aren't necessarily things

of beauty, but get the job done.

- » Long shots revealing martial arts during fight sequences; talking sequences use boring shot-reverse-shot until it seems like two guys are going to square off and fight, which then incorporates the ever-dramatic rapid zoom shot on their face.

fight is extremely intense and soundly demonstrates the various stages of character development that can be introduced in a longer, brutal fight sequence.

Peking Opera Blues (Do ma daan, 1986)

Tsui Hark's action epic set in rough-and-tumble 1920s Beijing is not exactly a standard kung fu film, but certainly contains amazing fight scenes set against the backdrop of politics, crime and the theater. The stories of three women from different social locations—a general's daughter, a street musician, and a cross-dressed theater performer—guide us through the film, as do age-old conflicts of Chinese traditions pitted against contemporary political movements. A must-see for those who wish to see spectacular dance choreography paired off with great fight choreography.

Once Upon a Time in China (Wong Fei Hung, 1991)

Tsui Hark, Yuen Woo-Ping Yuen Biao and Jet Li's famous collaboration, *Once Upon a Time in China*, has become an action classic not only because of its remarkable fight scenes but also due to its elegant telling of kung fu legend Wong Fei-Hung's story. Fei-Hung was a martial-artist/physician from the Guangzhou province whose unsurpassed prowess at the end of the 19th Century has become the stuff of more screen portrayals than can be named. The pathos of such an adept martial artist being pitted against Western colonial practices and (more importantly) Western guns is thoroughly ripe for a late 19th Century *Mist-Robed Gate* game.

New Dragon Gate Inn (Xin long men ke zhan, 1992)

A Tsui Hark re-make about megalomaniacal eunuch Tsao Siu Yan's (Donnie Yen) foiled plot to exert total control over his province, *New Dragon Gate Inn* contains just about everything a good *Mist-Robed Gate* martial arts-focused game needs: an ostensibly evil faction with lots of minions and resources, a troubled rebel faction, a predatory criminal faction, vicious sword battles in inclement weather, gender-bending disguises, and a bandit outpost known as the

Dragon Gate Inn where the fatter guests are served up as food to the others.

Twin Warriors (Tai ji: Zhang San Feng, 1993)

A simple story of two Buddhist monks who become like brothers in the monastery and, when kicked out of the monastery on a technicality, then take diametrically opposed lifepaths. Starring Jet Li and Michelle Yeoh, this film features amazingly silly-yet-dramatic kung fu sequences and a very clear-cut Loyalty conflict that plays out violently in the end. The intricately choreographed wooden tower fight scene alone is worth seeing, and the training montage in which Li truly becomes the Tai Chi Master features a memorable usage of a ball resting in a pool of water.

The Legend (Fong Sai Yuk, 1993)

A Jet Li action-comedy with few parallels, *The Legend* is a cinematic exercise in crazy wirework that incorporates shrewd physical comedy into a bewilderingly labyrinthine plotline. Sound intriguing? You need only see the scene where Fong Sai Yuk (Li) fights his mother-in-disguise Miu Chui-Fa (Josephine Siao) on the heads of the startled on-lookers to be truly inspired by the combined editing and fight choreography of this film. The evil Emperor's downfall has been foretold by the Red Lotus Flower Society, which is why the Emperor has sent his men to track down the secret list with all the names of the Society's members, a list that Fong Sai Yuk finds himself defending with his life. *Mist-Robed Gate* players would do well to take note of the film's fast pacing coupled with its steady diet of mistaken identities, hidden assassins, ambitious merchants, and constantly shifting lines of conflict.

Iron Monkey (Siu nin Wong Fei Hung ji: Tit Ma Lau, 1993)

Directed by Yuen Woo-Ping, *Iron Monkey* tells a Robin Hood-esque tale of mild-mannered Dr. Yang (Rongguang Yu), who leads a double life as the mysterious folk hero Iron Monkey, and the challenge that he levels against Governor Chang (James Wong) and his corrupt government. His

exploits later prove to be influential to the young hero Wong Fei-Hung (Sze-Man Tsang), whose prowess is showcased in so many other films under the martial arts sub-genre. The film features loads of wirework, inspirational quarterstaff fighting, Wong Kei-Ying's (Donnie Yen) picture-perfect snap kick, and a death-defying fight on top of a series of wooden poles over a pit of flame. Fei-Hung even gets in a few fights as a young child martial arts prodigy. Though fundamentally silly on many levels, this film has nevertheless proven inspirational to the likes of Quentin Tarantino (*Kill Bill*) and the Wachowski Brothers (*The Matrix Trilogy*) in its usage of over-the-top wuxia combined with superheroic tropes. *Mist-Robed Gate* players looking to deal with super-hero alter-ego intrigue, seek no further.

The Legend of the Drunken Master (Jui kuen II, 1994)

Mist-Robed Gate players who have somehow missed Jackie Chan's *The Legend of the Drunken Master* need to put it in their online movie rental queue or bicycle down to the nearest rental store immediately in order to witness a masterful kung fu feature film that never misses a beat. Whereas most of the earlier entries in the *Drunken Master* series (*Drunken Master*, *Dance of the Drunken Mantis*) can safely be classified as "chop-socky" or B-movies, *The Legend of the Drunken Master* transcends its humble origins to become a full-fledged martial arts feature accessible by just about any audience. Chan plays Wong Fei-Hung, the oft-featured kung fu legend whose historical style of choice was actually Hung Gar rather than Drunken Boxing, in a comedic reinterpretation of the classic story of his rebellion against the Western imperialists, who are this time smuggling ancient Chinese artifacts out of the country. Fei-Hung accidentally becomes embroiled in the smugglers' affairs and, in order to beat them, must come to terms with both his Loyalties to his father and the bottle. The final fight scene perfectly meshes slapstick with seriously damaging drunken kung fu, and the fight scene against the Ax Gang is so original that it has been copied many times (see Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle*, for one example). Kung fu film novices and aficionados alike may sit back and enjoy this one.

Fist of Legend (Jing wu ying xiong, 1994)

Based on a true story and on Bruce Lee's *Chinese Connection* (1974), *Fist of Legend* recreates the bitter conflict between the Japanese and the Chinese in 1937 China. Master Huo is killed in a dubious fight against the Japanese General "Supreme Killer" Fujita (Billy Chow). His student, Chen Zhen (Jet Li), returns to Shanghai to restore his master's honor and take vengeance on those responsible. Avoiding the characteristic wirework of his films, action choreographer Yuen Woo-Ping utilizes Li's significant martial arts prowess on the ground to create some of the most intense mook battle sequences in cinema history. "Yes," one must reassure first-time viewers of the film. "He's actually moving that fast." Joints crack and legs buckle as Zhen plows through hordes of Japanese henchman until he (briefly) meets his match the final showdown with the relentless katana-wielding Fujita. Issues of age-old Chinese-Japanese enmity are semi-reasonably distilled into a simplistic good-vs.-evil plot, but *Mist-Robed Gate* players should be watching this film for all the fight choreography that Western imitators could not hope to match.

Kung Fu Hustle (Gong fu, 2004)

Charismatic actor/director/writer/producer Stephen Chow's world-famous entry into the kung fu genre *Kung Fu Hustle* provides a crowd-pleasing blend of Yuen Woo-Ping-choreographed martial arts action, spaghetti western showdowns, special effects wizardry, and *Looney Tunes*-inspired slapstick humor to audiences clamoring for such multi-genre spectacle. This talk of audience pleasure is not unimportant: as of 2008, it is still the highest-grossing Hong Kong film ever. Sing (Chow) is a failed kung fu artist and wannabe gangster on the streets of 1940s Shanghai looking to join the ruthless Axe Gang. Unfortunately for that aspiration, Sing's hi-jinks in a tenant complex reveal the remarkable kung fu talents residing there, as well as eventually unlocking his own powers. *Mist-Robed Gate* players will be entertained by the overly ridiculous and often absurd kung fu maneuvers exhibited in this film. Perhaps more importantly, one should note how the Loyalties of the kung fu masters within the

FANTASTICAL TROPES

- » Confusing, bizarre plotlines typically revolving around mystic artifacts and/or the love-that-cannot-be-between-a-supernatural-being-and-a-mystically-capable-mortal-being, then spiraling out of control from there.
- » Canted angles, sinuous tracking shots along the ground, and frightening close-ups of the eyes are mixed in with the usual long shots of characters flying and fighting
- » Cute actors such as Leslie Cheung, Brigitte Lin, Maggie Cheung and Yuen Biao allow a viewer to sympathize with their often bizarre emotional struggles
- » Kung fu scenes that involve lots of unnecessarily twirling and which are fought by unreal weaponry (e.g., extended hair, tongues, sleeves, snake swords, etc.) Sorcery and kung fu are frequently paired off against each other.
- » Supernatural phenomena are commonplace, with multiple supernatural characters (spirits, demons, sorcerers) even playing major roles in the plotline

tenant complex are gradually brought around to the defense of the complex and then to higher ideals.

Fearless (Huo Yuan Jia, 2006)

Fearless is Jet Li's take on the biography of Huo Yuan Jia, one of China's most famous kung fu fighters around the turn of the Century and the founder of the esteemed Jingwu Athletic Association—one of the first public martial arts schools in China. The film takes us through the life of the kung fu master, from the bullying he received in his childhood to his final showdown against fighters representing the foreign powers in China at the time: a Japanese martial artist, a Belgian soldier, a Spanish swordsman, and a British boxing champion. Beautifully shot for a kung fu film and mostly devoid of the sometimes banal humor that one finds in Li's usual productions, *Fearless* is perhaps a landmark in its martial arts entertainment value and respect accorded to distinct cultural histories. In a chronological ordering of the Martial Arts Wuxia films, it is fitting that *Fearless* be placed last, for it represents the Epic Wuxia's direct influence on the genre in terms of its homage to national history and maturity of form.

FANTASTICAL WUXIA

There are those *Mist-Robed Gate* groups that would like to incorporate elements of the supernatural—ghosts, magic, sorcerers, hopping vampires, 1000-year old Hellspawn, etc.—into their stories. Many argue that the wuxia films of today originated from their fantastical iteration, in fact, justifying the ability of legendary warriors and spirits to fly through the air with Chi-based magic. The producer and director Tsui Hark has almost single-handedly defined this sub-genre of Chinese cinema in the 1980s and 90s.

Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain (1982)

Tsui Hark's *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain* is a good-vs-evil supernatural adventure story that could fittingly be described as the Chinese response to Oliver Stone's *Conan*

the Barbarian (1982) and other world fantasy films that appeared at the time. What these other fantasy films didn't have were sword-slinging, fireball-flinging, flying kung fu masters bent on saving the world from the Evil Blood Demon by uniting a green magic sword with a purple magic sword. The story is set in 5th century China, where civil and military strife divides the various clans (delineated in this movie by their costume colors). Yuen Biao plays Ti Ming Chi, a disillusioned warrior who allies with his grumbling sifu Ting-Yin (Adam Cheng) to save the world. Along the way, they meet the ravishing and mysterious Countess of the Jade Pool Fairy Fortress (played by Brigitte Lin, whose character owns an awesome personal Set lined with golden statues) and the wise Long Brow (Sammo Hung) who give them guidance. Simplistic in plot but absolutely stunning in terms of special effects and non-stop action, *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain* did naught but inspire two generations of filmmakers to introduce more ridiculous flying and kung fu special effects into their films, inaugurating the modern wuxia genre.

Big Trouble in Little China (1986)

John Carpenter's brilliant derivative of Hark's *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain* features Jack Burton (Kurt Russell), hapless truck driver of the Pork Chop Express who's in way over his head, and his struggle against an ancient Chinese plot to resurrect a thousand-year-old sorcerer through the capture of two lovely women. While the testosterone level of the film may be cranked a little high (Sample quote: "Like I told my last wife, I says, "Honey, I never drive faster than I can see. Besides that, it's all in the reflexes."), the film has more than enough wild ideas to fuel your *Mist-Robed Gate* Fantasy Wuxia scenario.

A Chinese Ghost Story (1987)

A Chinese Ghost Story II (1990)

A Chinese Ghost Story III (1991)

The Chinese Ghost Story trilogy is an irresistible wuxia horror-romantic comedy series directed by Tsui Hark revolving around a series of human-ghost love relationships in 19th

- » A soundtrack of dramatic synthesized strings and trumpets coupled with appropriate female vocalists. There are usually several sad songs done with traditional Chinese stringed instruments as well.
- » Rapid cuts to hide the special effects
- » Most of the film is set inexplicably at night, usually with lots of mist present

century China. Though the sequels may have flying-sword-surfing and erotic hair-whipping, the true masterpiece is the original film, starring Leslie Cheung as Ning the Bumbling Tax Collector who falls in love with Nie (Joey Wong), an attractive ghost whose soul is held captive by a 1,000 year-old tree demon. Ning's amorous adventures begin when he is bold enough to stay at the murderous haunted temple at the edge of town, where he meets the crazy Buddhist Swordsman Yin Chek Hsia (Ma Wu) and a host of seductive spirits who try to distract them so as to have their innards sucked out by a giant tongue. For all Ning's slapstick and Yin's superheroic bravado—"Come scholar, for it appears we must storm Hell!"—the movie reserves an affectionate eye for its characters while putting them in sometimes truly horrifying situations. Yin's short dance number in the middle of the film, "The Way," is a welcome addition and should be considered for any light-hearted *Mist-Robed Gate* game.

Swordsman (Xiao ao jiang hu, 1990)

Swordsman II (Xiao ao jiang hu zhi: Dong Fang Bu Bai, 1992)

Based on a popular wuxia novel series, the *Swordsman* films produced by Tsui Hark offer classic *Mist-Robed Gate* action: many factions such as the black-magic-using hillfolk and Japanese samurai with opposing personal and institutional goals, catchy traditional Chinese music, extreme romantic complications and super-low budget sets and props. The first film sets up the precedent for the series' power struggle, whereas the second film stars Jet Li and Brigitte Lin for a satisfying conclusion. There are plenty of female as well as male martial artists who can hold their own in this film, making it a particularly good choice for those interested in gender in kung fu films.

Butterfly and Sword (San lau sing woo dip gim, 1993)

Butterfly and Sword is a blood-soaked wuxia classic rarely screened in its entirety starring Michelle Yeoh, Tony Leung and Donnie Yen. Released at the height of the over-the-top wuxia/kung fu craze in the mid-90s, the film tells a tale of a love triangle between Sister Ko (Yeoh), Meng Sing Wan

(Leung) and Yip Cheung (Yen) amidst a rebellion plot against an evil emperor. The plot, however, certainly plays second fiddle to the film's extensive use of crazed magical effects and excessive brutality. Bodies are hacked in half, characters charge through each other with swords, close-ups of gaping neck wounds flash on the screen for lengths of time, and... well, you get the picture. For *Mist-Robed Gate* players, this movie offers a veritable ballet of flying maneuvers, outlandish Chi-based magic, and the eminently enjoyable sexual tension between the young Leung and Yeoh. *Butterfly and Sword* pushes the conventions of wuxia and wirework to their necessary extremes, almost leaving a viewer little room to breathe.

The Bride with White Hair (Bai fa mo nu zhuan, 1993)

Told like a fairy tale, *The Bride with White Hair* is a surreal swords-and-sorcery tragedy that showcases a host of tacitly bizarre situations without once revealing a tongue in its cheek. Brigitte Lin plays Lian Nichang, a former child raised by wolves who now works as a supernatural enforcer for the wicked Siamese twin sorcerer Ji Wushuang's cult, while Leslie Cheung plays her love interest, the reluctant successor to the Wu-Tang clan throne named Zhuo Yi-Hang. Nichang and Yi-Hang fall hopelessly in love, but their uncertain loyalties to their respective factions ultimately tear them apart, killing her in a memorable living-person-to-ghost sequence and condemning Yi-Hang to watch over the flower that blossoms among the ice crystals every 20 years. Glorious slow motion and glamorous profile shots taken by Academy Award-winning Peter Pau (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) transform a borderline B-movie into a brilliant work of cinematic art.

The Myth (San Wa, 2005)

As over-hyped as the film was in Hong Kong, *The Myth* appears to a contemporary audience to be an odd hybrid of a Jackie Chan sci-fi stunt-comedy and a full-blown, costumed wuxia tragedy. Dr. Jack Chan (guess who?) is an archaeologist in present-day 2005 who dreams of a past life when he was supposedly General Meng Yi of the Emperor's army and

fell in love with the Emperor's bride-to-be, Ok-soo (Heeseon Kim). Chan's physicist friend William (Tony Leung Ka Fai) wants him to explore a legendary temple in the fictional region of India known as Dasar, where he believes ancient materials with anti-gravity properties will be uncovered. Three scenes in this film are notable. One is the end of the initial fight scene, where a rival over Ok-soo's love stabs himself with his sword in order to help Meng Yi keep her flaming out-of-control cart from plummeting off a cliff—classic *Mist-Robed Gate* material. Another scene involves an exceedingly entertaining fight on a conveyor belt in a rat glue factory, an homage to the manic creativity of Chan's earlier films. The final scene of note is the one that lands this film squarely in the Fantastical and not in the Martial Arts category: a climactic showdown against the evil architect Mr. Ko (Zhou Sun) in a massive anti-gravity-sustained tomb.

The Forbidden Kingdom (2008)

Jet Li and Jackie Chan share the silver screen for the first time in this recent Hollywood feature about a young Bostonian kung fu-film nut named Jason (Michael Angarano) who finds the antique staff of the Monkey King in the back of a video rental store and travels back in time to ancient China for the adventure of his lifetime. Chan plays Lu Yan the drunken kung fu master and Li the Silent Monk, both of whom meet Jason while he's trying to release the Monkey King from his prison. Equal parts *Neverending Story*, *The Last Action Hero*, and *Iron Monkey*, *The Forbidden Kingdom* refreshes a tired 1980s plot formula with great special effects, mook battles, wirework, and strong Buddhist overtones. One should see it for the fight scene between Jackie Chan and Jet Li, as well as the multitude of cinematic references to most of the great films previously mentioned on this list.