

## THE CAMPAIGN

The *Dragon Fist* setting assumes that player characters will take up the struggle to depose the corrupt emperor. The PCs are among the first secret society members to explore this new united front. This style of campaign has a lot to offer: a nasty villain, sinister henchmen, an epic scope, intersociety rivalry, and the fate of an empire. The rules and background presented in the first six chapters give you everything you need to tell this story, but we haven't yet talked about how to construct it. This chapter offers some advice on running a *Dragon Fist* campaign. As well, look for an introductory adventure, "Dragon and Phoenix," available on the *Dragon Fist* web page in December 1999.

## The Villain Tree

Emperor Jianmin is the ultimate villain of the *Dragon Fist* story. If you play through to the end, the climactic battle will pit the PCs versus the Son of Heaven himself. However, the martial arts mastery of Emperor Jianmin is a little much for starting, 3rd-level characters. In the great tradition of Hong Kong action flicks, there must be a good villain for the early stages of the campaign. As DM, you want your players to face challenging villains throughout the campaign, and you know that their ultimate foe is Jianmin. What you need then is a hierarchy of villainy, a procession of bad guys to give your campaign focus as the PCs rise in level. This is the central concept of the "villain tree," one that gives you an easy framework to build a campaign around.

Building a villain tree is easy. Let's say you've decided to start your campaign in the city of Anmei in the province of Bei Jei. The villain for the first part of your campaign could be the magistrate of the city. He's been ordered to clear out the secret societies, creating instant tension for the PCs. Now the first villain is the magistrate, and the last villain will be the emperor. You only need to fill in the rest of the list. A typical campaign escalation could look like this.

### EXAMPLE VILLAIN TREE

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Emperor Jianmin
|
Lord of the West Wing
|
Provincial Governor
|
Eunuch Sorcerer
|
City Magistrate
  
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After the PCs defeat the city magistrate of Anmei, they come to the attention of the governor of Bei Jei province. If they prove a thorn in his side, he may appeal to the Lord of the West Wing, the eunuch sorcerer in charge of that section of the empire. The Lord might send a powerful eunuch sorcerer to help the governor. Despite this help, the PCs defeat the governor, and move on to confront the Lord of the West Wing. Since the eunuch sorcerers are the emperor's trusted lieutenants, they need only overcome them to face the Son of Heaven himself.

In play you may change certain characters or alter things due to the PCs' actions. That is to be expected. You may also want to adjust the villain tree to keep it in line with the experience of the PCs. Generally speaking, each villain should be good for two character levels of game play. If in the example above the PCs have made it to 9th level but are still fighting the provincial governor, you may need to skip the eunuch sorcerer and bring the Lord of the West Wing himself to the province.

Remember that these won't be your only villains, just the focal ones for different periods of the campaign. The example features many bureaucrats, in part because they command hordes of underlings to fling at the PCs. The defeat of each villain should be the climax of that stage of the campaign.

## The Campaign Focus

With your villains in place, it's time to think about the general plotline of the game. While the backstory and a good villain are enough to get things going, you're going to need more than that for a continuing campaign. Wanting to overthrow the evil emperor is one thing, but figuring out how to do that is something else entirely.

As the DM you have many plot options at your disposal. Ideally, you should pick one overarching story to organize your adventures around: This is the campaign focus. This is not to say that all the adventures you run should relate to this plot—far from it. However, having a framework in the background is very useful, especially during those times when you're fresh out of ideas and need to have an adventure ready in an hour.

Here are three different campaign foci, the first of which was used during the in-house playtest of *Dragon Fist*. All of these lend themselves to player choice. You certainly could just start your players down a particular path, but you don't want them to feel disenfranchised. They should always feel like they have control over their characters and that their decisions make a difference. Experienced Dragon Masters know that this is mostly an illusion; it is, however, an important one to maintain. As long as your players feel like they're important, they'll be happy.

### The Five Legendary Weapons

You've already read about the Five Legendary Weapons in Chapter 5: Experience and Magic Items. Just from the story of these fabulous artifacts it should be clear that they would be of great aid to anyone struggling against the emperor. Drop a few hints about the fate of the Five Legendary Weapons, and your players are bound to run off looking for them. That's five good adventures for your campaign, related by theme and working towards a final goal. Once the PCs have collected all five artifacts, they'll feel ready for a final showdown with Jianmin.

### The Mandate of Heaven

The concept of the Mandate of Heaven is important in Tianguo's society. The general feeling of the populace is that the emperor has lost this authority and thus the right to rule. A serious rival claimant to the throne would require the Mandate to prove himself, and certainly many revolutionary leaders will assert that they have it. If the PCs have imperial pretensions of their own, one of them will have to win the Mandate of Heaven. Proving one's righteousness to the Jade Emperor is not an easy task, but a series of heavenly tests makes for excellent adventure.

### The Dragon Kings

Diao Zu'en is one of the great heroes of Tianguo, so great that he is now a god. Diao went to ask the Dragon Kings to protect Tianguo from foreigners; after hearing this legend, your PCs may think it's a good idea to visit the Dragon Kings themselves. The journey should be arduous, itself the pretext for adventure, and any aid given would have a price. To this day no one knows what service Diao Zu'en provided the Dragon Kings. The PCs could find themselves traveling to distant lands, fighting fearsome sea monsters, or lifting ancient curses in return for the dragons' help. And while they're away beneath the sea, who knows what is transpiring in Tianguo?

### Variant Campaigns

The default campaign of *Dragon Fist* is the struggle to overthrow Emperor Jianmin. However, not everyone will be interested in this story. You may have different ideas of how you want to use the setting. Below are some suggestions for other types of campaigns you can run in either the empire of Tianguo or a setting of your own design, using the rules presented in this book.

### *The World of Martial Arts*

Many wuxia films revolve around struggles in the “World of Martial Arts.” While these stories are nominally set in ancient China, the emperor and the army play little part in them. Rather, the action focuses on clans or martial arts schools and the struggle for dominance among them.

If this type of campaign appeals to you, it's easy enough to set up. Just let the emperor fade into the background. He's there, he's evil, but he's wrapped up in his own schemes and leaves the World of Martial Arts alone as long as they stay out of politics. In this kind of game, most of the action involves the internecine plots of the secret societies. A classic example is to have the leaders of one or more of the societies foully slain after a grand deception, leaving the PCs as the only ones who can restore honor to their societies and get revenge on their enemies. Other plots include a martial arts competition between the societies and stopping the “super-evil secret society” (whichever one you want that to be).

You could also run this type of game in a different historical period of Tianguo. The first half of Jianmin's reign, for instance, was a time of peace and rebuilding. It makes perfect sense for the martial schools to vie against one another when the empire is at peace. You'll note that all the secret societies have long histories, even if they weren't always secret. In a World of Martial Arts campaign, it's perfectly fine to have many of these groups instead be martial arts societies that are public and open.

### *Oust the Foreign Devils!*

Tianguo has already been invaded once by strange barbarians. Who these barbarians were has been left deliberately vague to allow you flexibility in fitting Tianguo into your existing campaign. You could easily run a campaign in which Tianguo has been defeated by the invaders and the secret societies are struggling to free their homeland. This is a great way to combine *Dragon Fist* with other campaign worlds. Maybe the invaders are from the Scarlet Brotherhood in Greyhawk, or an expansionist power from your own campaign.

This kind of campaign could even draw its inspiration from China's own woes in the 19th century, when it was beset by imperialist powers like Great Britain and the United States. You could draw a parallel to this in Tianguo with the introduction of a corrupting influence from overseas, perhaps a drug central to a magical ritual that would spell the end of the empire for good.

### *In Search of Adventure*

You might decide you don't want to run a game that takes place in Tianguo at all. You could run a fun campaign in which the characters are all refugees or explorers from the Heavenly Kingdom. Perhaps they found a hidden pass through the uncrossable Dragon's Spine Mountains or managed to sail through the bao feng and find the lands beyond. In either case, the characters would be alone in the foreign land, trying to survive and learn something of this strange new world.

Again, you could use nearly any campaign setting for this purpose. While *Dragon Fist* characters use a modified version of the AD&D 2nd Edition rules, they are fully compatible with that system. Every character still has an AC, hit points, and the like. You could adopt the stunt system for your campaign or only let characters from Tianguo use stunts, reflecting their martial arts training. See Appendix 1: Conversion Notes for more about converting *Dragon Fist* to the AD&D system.

### *Adventure in Kara-Tur*

Fans of the **Forgotten Realms**® campaign setting may remember the land of Kara-Tur. This was the “Asian” half of the world of the Realms and was detailed in a series of supplements published in the late '80s and early '90s. While this setting has been out of print for many years, there is quite a bit of source material out there for those who want to use it. The **Oriental Adventures** book for 1st edition AD&D was never updated for the 2nd edition, for example. To address that, you could use the rules from this book in conjunction with the Kara-Tur setting. This works best if you set the game in either Shou Lung or T'u Lung, which are

both based on different historical periods of China. You could either add in the secret societies from this book, rename them, and modify their histories to reflect Kara-Tur, or use the kits as virtual character classes. (For example, to create an evil thief, use the Ghost Eaters kit.)

### *Once Upon a Time in China*

The information in this book is solidly based on real Chinese history and mythology, and of course Hong Kong action movies. You may decide you'd like to use these rules to run historical campaigns or recreate famous HK films. Either approach can be great fun. Maybe you've read the justly famous *Romance of Three Kingdoms* or *Outlaws of the Water Margin* and you'd like to run games set in those historical periods. These rules work fine for that purpose.

In the end, what matters most is that the players and the DM have fun. Wherever you set the story and however you customize the game, you're doing *Dragon Fist* right if you're kicking plenty of butt!