

Chinese Ghost Stories We Tell Ourselves



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Illustration by Gillbert

Welcome mortal, to this Quickstart in which We Tell Ourselves Chinese Ghost Stories, not just to others, but to yourself. To celebrate #BIPOCVAMPDAY, there is the juicy addition of *Jiangshi* (Chinese hopping vampires) to interact with. Special thanks to Jess, my amazing mentor and the Tabletop Mentorship Program, for breathing life into this game! The cover features Charles Allan Gilbert “All is Vanity”, which is in the public domain.

Before You Play: Safety Considerations

Chinese Ghosts Stories explores temporal feelings, cultural trauma, death and impermanence. There is an excellent TTRPG Safety Toolkit written by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Byrant-Monk that has been assembled. Use Lines and Veils, X's and Open Door Policy. Please be safe when you play this game.

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/114jRmhZBpdqkAlhmveis0nmW73qkAZCj>

Can I play if I'm not Chinese?

Yes! But this game intentionally focused on providing a space for the Chinese diaspora, also welcoming Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) that may find the themes and experiences familiar and relatable.

Gender considerations

The Chinese language didn't differentiate between genders and used one character, **tā**, to refer to every person. Until colonization implemented the gender binary in China, ancient Chinese text referred to genders ambiguously. You are also welcome to do this, despite the playbooks being initially gendered.

Chapter 1: Starting the Haunt

How Chinese People View Ghosts

For Chinese people, and perhaps much of humanity, ghosts represent fear of the unknown. Ghosts are not just temporal or disembodied voices, but also of natural disasters, strange, weird beasts and dangerous humans. The original etymology of the word 鬼 “gui” or ghost represent how early Chinese society viewed ghosts and how they were exorcised. The first graphic forms intimated human-like creatures with large heads, with a sense of “otherness” and creational chaos compared to Chinese humans. It's second meaning also derives from a pictogram of a person holding up a horrible, symbolic mask, impersonating the gui to exorcise them. Lastly, because Chinese is a tonal language, the same word can have different meanings or “homonyms”. “Gui” can also mean “to return”, and in relation to ghosts, “that which has returned.” To Chinese people, death isn't final or irrevocable. Ghosts are the continuations of human living existence.

What Makes a Chinese Ghost Story?

The most famous Chinese ghost stories come from Pu Songling's “Liaozhai Zhiyi”, or collected as Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio. Many of them were literary criticisms of society and

official history. They combined the fantastic, with the strange and who's to say that the weird account of a ghost story is any less true than a recorded human affair?

Chinese family dynamics

Some values embedded in family dynamics are harmony, loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, and wisdom, with roles and identities surrounding harmony- the most important Chinese value.

Chapter 2: Who is in Your Family?

The difference between the Chinese Ghost Stories We Tell Ourselves and the strange stories created by Pu Songling is that you'll all be able to play as members of a Chinese family. And you'll be co-creating a ghost story that seeks to increase your family fortune and life events that develop your family members, but also deal with the strange occurrences and ghosts that may enter the mortal realm.

Initially, everyone will choose a Family Member. There are four- Grandparent, Father, Mother and Child. Players will determine their destiny, while trying to assert their individuality, confront their inner demons, but also maintain harmony and belonging within the family and society. At this time, it's important for one person to read "How do Chinese people View Ghosts?" to set a precedent for the game and for everyone to be on the same page.

Then, once a Family Member is chosen, we will go around asking everyone to choose and answer, unique to their character: One inner demon, one history question, one red string of fate and one Family Belief. Players have a 20 to add or subtract to their family stats, depending on how the family member has answered the question and what fits the fiction.

First, inner demons. Inner demons represent the ghosts that lead us away from harmonious societal and familial interactions, ones that we may try to mask. Inner demons affect a player's individual roll when rolling the Family Stat of BLOOD, VOICE or INTELLECT.

Pride -10 to intellect

Greed -10 to intellect

Wrath -10 to voice

Envy -10 to blood

Lust -10 to voice

Gluttony -10 to blood

Sloth -10 to blood

While inner demons can never be completely healed or removed, they can be temporarily relieved for a scene. If a player raises the Family Stat of BLOOD within a scene, they can choose to ignore the negative condition on the roll for the scene.

Family Members want to roll **below**, not equal or higher than the Family Stat. Adding a +10 to a Family Member's personal roll, not the Family Stat, increases the chance of failure.

Second, Family History questions. This is where the family and the world that the family moves through and interacts with is created. Everyone will take turns answering one question, doing their best to tie in their history question with what has been said before them in a "yes, and" celebration.

What do others expect of you?

What are you sacrificing to live up to your duties?

What evils are you shielding your family?

How do you bring honour to your family?

What family secret are you holding?

Third, Red Strings of Fate. In Chinese culture and mythology, invisible red cords are tied around the fingers of those that are destined to meet one another, to be "soulmates." In Chinese Ghost Stories, we are celebrating familial love and they reflect how each family member is bonded to another. Each Family Member has two different red threads they choose between and to be connected with another Family Member.

Fourth, Family Beliefs. These reflect the current and expected behaviours of each Family Member, which incorporate their roles within the Chinese Family, but also their station and experiences in life. Two have already been chosen for each Family Member, with players needing to choose one more.

- To go fast, you must go slow first
- To hold back emotions shows emotional strength and discipline
- Failure is just as painful as death
- Leaving is not an option. Do and die, it's not do or die.
- If you are not perfect, than society and your family will judge you with disapproval and rejection
- The only tool you have is a hammer, so every problem looks like a nail
- Push through the pain

If you are the child:

Exploring uncertainty can be more important than tradition

Upholding tradition and giving deference to elders will gain their approval

If you are the mother:

The family's well-being comes first, your individual needs come after

Control, through any means, is justified by the end

If you are the father:

Stability and tradition are more important than exploring uncertainty

Control, through any means, is justified by the end

If you are the grandparent:

You have seen all the ways the world moves and want only the best for everyone

Calm words solve faster than anger

Fifth, Blood Tokens. Blood tokens represent a reinforcement of your role within the family. Blood tokens can combine both the VOICE and INTELLECT Family Stat to create the new (temporary) Family stat for BLOOD to use in a family member's next roll. Blood tokens can only be used once per game and are received when fulfilling another Family Member's Blood Token trigger.

Family members will choose one trigger for someone else to gain a blood token

Choose a trigger for someone to gain a blood token

Everytime someone echoes your words and guidance exactly, they receive a Blood token.

Everytime someone questions your actions, they receive a Blood token.

Everytime someone uses something they learned from you, they receive a Blood token.

Everytime someone asks for your help, they receive a Blood token.

Next up, we will look at Trees of Advancement, Family Stats, Family Moves and Family Objectives.

First, Trees of Advancement. These trees represent the skills, attitudes, behaviours and coping mechanisms we learn and try to unlearn a Family Member may do throughout their life. Each decision we make leads us down a certain path and shapes us. Trees of Advancement are separated into two trees- a "Success" Tree of Advancement and a "Failed" Tree of Advancement, dependent on the outcome of a roll a Family Member makes using a Family Move or an Advancement Tree move. Players will have a choice between two moves, connected to a certain destiny, presented on each tier of the tree. Once a move is chosen and "learned", it is permanently added to the player's moves (unless they are given an option to exchange or "unlearn" that move when prompted.) Family Members can only gain one advancement from both trees once per scene.

Second, Family Stats. This system uses a d100. Family members must roll **below** a Family Stat in order to **succeed**. Rolling **higher** or **equal** to a Family Stat is considered a **failure**, since that action is considered beyond and above the current Family's comprehension and skills. VOICE represents the Family's influence to resolve conflict and build success, BLOOD represents the Family's ties to one another to resolve conflict and build success, and INTELLECT represents the Family's use of wisdom and wits to resolve conflict and build success.

Third, Family Moves. These are general moves that are available to all Family Members. They allow Family Members to collaborate and co-create the ghost story their Chinese family moves through.

Family Moves

ROLL WITH VOICE, below percentage, take an advancement from the success tree, above percentage, take an advancement from the failure tree and interact with a strange occurrence

- Demand another character to act within their expected duties, if the character does so, they gain -10 to their next ongoing roll, if they refuse, they are harmed by a strange occurrence
- Intimidate or persuade another family member using subtle or great emotional force, leaving them vulnerable
- Ease tension by providing an anecdote, but is cryptic and misleads a character's next action

Answer: A family history question. If there are none left, gain -10 ongoing to your next action.

ROLL WITH BLOOD, below percentage, take an advancement from the success tree, above percentage, take an advancement from the failure tree and interact with a strange occurrence

- Get involved in a conflict that isn't your business, taking on the burden of mediator and an inner demon
- Reluctantly ask another family member for help, leaving yourself vulnerable
- Try to uncover the truth in a conversation with another family member, riddled with half truths and lies

Answer: A family history question. If there are none left, gain -10 ongoing to your next action.

ROLL WITH INTELLECT, below percentage, take an advancement from the success tree, above percentage, take an advancement from the failure tree and interact with a strange occurrence

- Investigate what another character is doing in the moment, but something weird happens
- Spot something that everyone has overlooked, but the environment obstructs you in the worst possible way
- Overcome a challenge using your intellect, boosting your self esteem on the external validation of your family to reduce a strange occurrence, but gaining "Pride" as an inner demon (if you cannot, mark the next inner demon)

Answer: A family history question. If there are none left, gain -10 ongoing to your next action.

Fourth, Family Objectives. In a regular game of Chinese Ghost Stories We Tell Ourselves, Family Members would complete a game by raising the Family BLOOD stat to 100. In this quickstart, Family Members can play through 1 or 2 scenes, to get a feel for the atmosphere and game. For both games, Family Members can only move onto another scene and draw new

scenarios, when all Family stats are raised beyond their original starting points, by any number of points, at least once during a scene.

Chapter 3: That Which Bumps in the Night

Let's discuss Scenarios, Strange Occurrences, Family Superstitions, and Inviting Ghosts into the World.

First, each Family Member draws or rolls randomly on the roll table, for a scenario. Family Members must connect their entrance into the scene with the set piece they are provided, and if there is another character or environment in the scene, to try and connect their character to what has been established.

Family Members are encouraged to roleplay and interact with other family members, utilizing the Family Moves to move the fiction forward. Since the objective of this quickstart is to increase the Family's Stats at least once during a scene, above their initial starting points at the end of a scene, the Chinese family cannot move onto a new scene until this has occurred. There are many ways a Chinese family can do this: by exploring their advancement trees by pushing the fiction using Family Moves, by interacting with Strange Occurrences, or by Inviting a Ghost into the World.

Second, Strange Occurrences can occur when Family Members fail their Family Moves or Advancement Moves. Family Members can choose not to interact with the Strange Occurrence, leaving it on the family board. However, if 4 or more strange occurrences occur, without any Family Member trying to resolve the strange occurrence, then the last Family Member triggers an Invitation for a Ghost to enter the World. Strange Occurrences can be resolved by a family member creating a Family Superstition. Their format must follow: "Whenever X occurs, we must X". This will be ongoing for the game. Creating a Family Superstition provides a permanent buff to a random Family Stat. Strange occurrences follow the Family into each scene, even new ones.

Third, Inviting a Ghost into the World. This is a dangerous move, mortals. Family Members will draw or use the role table to determine how they have caused misfortune onto their family. The only way to resolve this is by succeeding on a Family BLOOD roll. Blood tokens can only be used once per scene, per game. Inviting a Ghost into the world invites tragedy, uncertainty and calamity into the family, which may result in DEATH. However, Family Members may also gain a free Advancement from the Success Tree if they are so risky.

Roll Tables

Use these limited roll tables for your game! A full list will be available when the game is fully released!

Roll (D8)	Scenario Builders	Strange Occurrences	Invitation into the Ghost World	Superstition
1	Bright Red Lanterns	A Jiangshi (Chinese Hopping Vampire) hops across your path	An object is spellbound and moves in a strange manner	+5 to VOICE FAMILY STAT
2	White, leaded makeup	A singular eye is watching you	A person is spellbound and moves in a strange manner	+5 to INTELLECT FAMILY STAT
3	Flowery, silk qipao	A lively chorus composed of frogs	The family is seduced or tempted into a dangerous situation	+5 to BLOOD FAMILY STAT
4	Silver comb with a dragon head handle	A cast of mice perform a puppet like drama under masks	The mysterious and unexplainable disappearance of objects	+10 to VOICE FAMILY STAT
5	Steaming soup dumplings	A very, very old man sitting on the side of a cemetery	The mysterious and unexplainable disappearance of people	+10 to INTELLECT FAMILY STAT
6	Tasty, round mooncakes with lotus paste	A bereft tiger that brings a gift of dead animals to your door	The mysterious and unexplainable appearance of objects	+5 to BLOOD FAMILY STAT
7	Laughter of school children	A very beautiful woman, dress in a fine silk robe, walks across your path	The mysterious and unexplainable appearance of people	+5 to INTELLECT FAMILY STAT
8	Sudden cracks of firecrackers	A large, white snake slithers past your arm	The family is misled or tricked into a perilous situation	+5 to VOICE FAMILY STAT