

Celestial Soap

A Light-Hearted Storytelling Game Ostensibly Inspired by Quyi

The Chinese art of oral storytelling, while now known as *quyi*, was traditionally referred to as *shuochang yishu*. China has a long history of storytelling performed by amateurs and professionals alike. The oral tradition has been popular mainly among the common folk and covers a wide variety of styles – “about 300 genres are currently registered among the 56 nationalities of China-based mainly on the telling of stories, singing of ballads/lyrics or a combination of both.”¹

Traditional oral storytelling is performed by one to three storytellers. This game requires three players, who each will tell part of the unfolding story. An oral story can be told in many different ways, and the same story is often told substantially differently depending on the storyteller. This game, then, also does not force you to tell a story in any particular way.

Except this: It's a soap opera.

That's right. The point of play is to overact and create lots and lots of melodrama. The idea behind this is that you should feel free to go all out, throw in any complication you like, have characters that are not only emotional but over-emotional, and in the end share a laugh or two about them.

So that part about traditional Chinese storytelling? That was kind of an embellishment. Don't listen to the guy who said that.

The Narrator Character

The main character in this game is a catalyst for the events that unfold. Invariably, this character is a wandering sort who encounters a situation and leads to its resolution. He is not important because of his skills or traits; sometimes he just observes what is happening, and sometimes he resolves a dispute by sharing some words of wisdom. In the end, the main character is therefore the narrator of the story, but not necessarily the most important character.

¹ Vibeke Børdahl, *Chinese Storytelling* (<http://www.shuoshu.org/>).

When playing the narrator, you should be calm and composed. In other words, you're the opposite of the other characters.

Setting Up the Game

Sit in a circle and place the play sheet in the center. If possible, lighting some incense and putting on some lightweight Chinese music would be great. Or better yet, let a random Hong Kong movie run in the background. Try to relax—there's no pressure on you to perform here. Well, except for the pressure to act over-the-top. But I'm sure you can handle that.

Now it's time to fill out the sheet. The host goes first. He selects either a sky diagram dot or an earth diagram dot and names it. The sky diagram shows the most important characters in this story. There are always four central characters involved (plus the narrator). The earth diagram shows the locations at which the scenes of the story will take place. They can be general (marketplace) or specific (Shi-Ann's bedroom). Once all the dots have been names, the next player in line gets to fill in the Glyph field. Make a drawing of a symbol and name it after a profession—this is the background of the narrator character, something he can draw on for his (cryptic but completely unquestionable) wisdom.

Play -- Composition

The game is played over eleven rounds, followed by a conclusion. Each round has one of the players in the role of the narrator. In the very first round, this is the host. After each round, that responsibility is passed on clockwise.

The person to the narrator's left first picks a character who is involved in this scene from the sky diagram. The person to the right picks a second character.

Now the narrator creates a connection between two characters on the sheets by drawing a pencil line between them. One of them has to be one of the chosen characters for this scene. If the line goes through the white cut-out section, it needs to be a negative connection—it can be anger, or jealousy, or hatred, or whatnot. If it does not cross the white cut-out space, it needs to be a strongly positive connection, such as love or duty. If all connections are already made, skip this step. You can also skip this step if the only free links are ones that have already been undone (see below).

Next, the player to the left selects one of the earth diagram locations in which the scene will be set. In the first round, this location can be freely selected. In subsequent rounds, you can only select a location to which you could draw a line from last round's location without crossing the white space. The player then describes the scene but not the characters, including at least what scents are in the air.

Play -- Acting

The player to the right of the narrator begins playing the character he selected by making an opening statement that needs to be confrontational. For example, "You look nice" is not allowed, but "Why did you embarrass your family at the wedding" is perfect. If the two characters have a Fearful Symmetry, it needs to be addressed in the opening statement.

The two non-narrator players now go back and forth playing their characters. The narrator player can bring in the narrator character at any point, at which all three characters can interact.

The players need to actually act this out while standing up, using as much shouting and arm waving as possible. Pace back and forth, growl, throw your hands up—all as melodramatically as possible!

The scene ends in one of four ways:

- 1) One of the characters storms out. In this case, the narrator can speak some final words of wisdom to the remaining character. The narrator should use the Glyph as inspiration for phrasing. If that player accepts the narrator's words, the narrator gets to interpret that round's symbol (see below). If not, the player whose character stormed out has that honor.
- 2) If two characters who are connected by a negative link are in the scene, the narrator can attempt to "fix" the link. He must deliver words of wisdom based on the Glyph and appropriate to the situation. If both of the other players are satisfied with what's been said, the link is automatically erased. If just one of them disagrees, flip a coin; the winner gets to interpret the symbol. If both other players disagree with the narrator,

they flip a coin between them and the winner interprets. Play out the scene accordingly.

- 3) If the two characters are connected by a positive link, have no Fearful Symmetry, and no one storms out, the narrator must determine a Fearful Symmetry for these two characters. This is something that threatens the happiness of the two characters involved. The symbol is then interpreted by the narrator.
- 4) If the two characters do have a Fearful Symmetry, they need to play through the threat. In this case, it's the two players who have to persuade the narrator that they can overcome the issue. If not, the narrator ends the scene and interprets the symbol accordingly. If yes, the two players get to interpret the symbol.

Interpreting the symbol means that you write a word or short phrase below the symbol that signifies the events of the current round. Start with the left-most symbol of the Dreaded Tangut-a-Go-Go. Each symbol stands for one round, and the interpretation should have something to do with what happened in the scene. In some way. Don't sweat it, though.

Overall, when you play out these scenes, remember that this is a light-hearted game. No one's looking for darkly thematic issues. Just everyday drama, overplayed like a good storyteller does it, with some common sense thrown in.

Conclusion

Once all of the symbols have been interpreted (after eleven rounds), the conclusion starts. First, the next player in line (the one sitting to the right of the host) gets to pick a character and narrate the prelude for him or her. Then you go around clockwise three times so that each of the four characters gets to have a conclusion.

Finally, every player takes a piece of paper, selects at least five of the interpretations of the Tangut symbols, and writes a little chunk of wisdom from it. You get bonus points if you make a poem out of it. Don't use more than one sentence per interpretation. Finally, share the lesson learned that you wrote down with the other players.