

Motes In The Eye Of The Emperor

In his wisdom, the last Solar Emperor saw the setting of the sun, and sent his children off into the night. The most glorious Emperor of Old Kitay saw what most chose to ignore: that the time of the Solar people was coming to an end. In preparation, he chose the best and brightest of his subjects and put them to sleep for a voyage through the heavens.

Servants toiled for forty years to create the Pa Kua, the eight resplendent craft that would be worthy to carry the Emperor's chosen to the stars, built with a sublime quality, completely unmatched either before or since. The last Solar Emperor was no coward – he honorably stayed in Old Kitay, to guide and comfort his remaining subjects in the final days. And so, upon each of these magnificent vessels, the Emperor placed the imperial seed, so that his line would be forever unending.

The astronomers and seers of the Imperial court selected as their destination the horses of Tsao Fu; as the man who brought an Emperor to the peaches of immortality, it was a most auspicious and splendid choice for the journey. And it was the star called Alrai that bore fruit – the bountiful world of New Kitay, a paradise to put Old Kitay to shame. Certainly, the Pa Kua vessels were blessed by the heavens.

And what a place New Kitay is! The largest moon of Chung-kuo, which in turn is the largest planet of Alrai, it has flourished in the shade and protection of its exalted parent like a spoiled child, and it is we that reap the rewards. Of course, it is not an easy life – Chung-kuo is a fickle man, diving forever into the embrace of Alrai before running away once more. There are times it is foolhardy to stand outside, both due to heat and cold.

The captains and administrators of the Pa Kua each founded their own city on New Kitay, and from those humble beginnings, the eight Minzu were founded. In the sky, as the architects of the Pa Kua planned, the eight vessels were combined to create Yi Jing, the city in the sky. And it was in Yi Jing, the High Palace, where the imperial seed took root, and the first Celestial Emperor was born.

It is said the nova of Old Kitay marked his birth: the end of the old heralding the beginning of the new. Sixty-four generations have since passed in this hallowed dynasty of the Celestial Emperors, and not once have any of the sacrosanct Emperors touched the soil. In their age, the Solar Emperors ruled from the earth – but the Celestial Emperors, they belong to the sky.

New Kitay teems with people across the four continents. The capital cities are overflowing, while in the countryside every bit of arable land is being used to feed the population. The wild swings of the spring and winter are tempered by Chung-kuo, a protective father that pulls his child around him for protection before letting her go in the world once more.

Yi Jing remains pristine and perfect, floating in the heavens, the Eye of the Emperor, the pinnacle of all Kitay achievement. Access to the Jewel of the Heavens is carefully controlled – it is the seat of the government, after all, so only the most select and honored may come to live and work there. Even the beggars in Yi Jing are more exalted than the highest noble down below, and have their place in the Jewel of the Heavens.

From time to time, the Celestial Emperor sends his agents to the eight Minzu of New Kitay, where they collect the most distinguished for the honor of living and working for the Emperor, spending the rest of their lives in the Ascendant City. The young and old alike begin competing for the privilege of being one of the Blessed as soon as it is announced.

Some, in their eagerness, abandon their duties, so the Celestial Emperor normally chooses to do this at the hottest and coldest parts of Chung-kuo's procession.

It is often an entire revolution of New Kitay around Chung-kuo after the announcement before a small selection of names are chosen to be Blessed. Once selected, the Blessed spend another revolution learning the protocols of the High Palace from high-Level ministers, given the honor (or perhaps punishment) of being posted to the Island Palace, and the freedom to travel New Kitay. Many of the Blessed wash out before completing the training – but even they are sacrosanct, forever privileged and honored by their people for bringing the wisdom taught by the ministers home with them.

The handful that last through the whole revolution around finally are sent to Sanyuan, the Island Palace in the middle of the Yellow Sea, where the Morning and Evening Star crosses once a revolution. They spend only a night there before boarding a vessel that will bring them to the Celestial Throne, there to begin their new lives, never to see their families or probably even set foot on New Kitay for the remainder of their lives. And it is aboard the vessel that carries the Blessed to Yi Jing where **Motes in the Eye of the Emperor** opens its first scene.

Playing the Game

Motes in the Eye of the Emperor is a game for 3-8 players. Select one of the players to be the Emperor – this player will be responsible for arbitrating rules disputes and personifying the various individuals populating the faceless bureaucracy of Yi Jing, possibly up to and including the Emperor himself. The other players each take on the role of one of the new Blessed, ready to start their new lives as celestial bureaucrats – in the text, these players are called Motes, to differentiate them from the Emperor.

Each player should have at least two ten-sided dice, of different colors, labeled from 1-10 (most ten-sided dice use the 0 for 10). These are most often rolled as a 'percentile' – choose one of the dice to be the tens place and the other to be the ones place, then read them in order to form a number from one to 100. Thus a roll of '0' '3' would be three, while a roll of '3' '0' would be thirty. A roll of '0' '0' is 100.

In addition, each Mote should have a record sheet, to record the information about their Blessed character. Right now, everything should remain blank. The Motes also start with 50 qi; you may wish to track this with poker chips or beads or coins, but all the qi will be gone at the end of the first scene, so props aren't precisely a high priority.

As the Motes play through the first scene (called the Genesis), they will spend their qi to establish their character's names, skills and abilities, and then finally determine the numbers that will fill the rest of their sheet. A "perfect" person – one at the peak of the human condition, will have 100 in each of the eight aspects. However, there are more important things than being perfect...

Only after no Mote has any qi left to spend on their Blessed will their characters arrive at Yi Jing to begin their new lives.

Genesis

It is at the launching of the vessel from Sanyuan where most Blessed first meet one another, though of course they have heard all sorts of tales about each other, some exaggerated, some not. But the ceremonies surrounding the launching are a lot of pomp and circumstance; their first impressions are a flurry of introductions that leaves them breathless and

fills their head with half-heard rumors and possible truths. The Blessed don't have time to relax and get to know each other until the vessel has launched.

The Blessed are always alone after the launch; the vessel in which they travel is always automated, to minimize contamination from the surface. After the ceremonies of launching, with the final farewells to family and friends, the Blessed are emotionally exhausted. Their teachers and mentors remain in Sanyuan, continuing their duties in the Island Palace; apart from a few mementos stowed in the cargo hold, they have left all their belongings behind; the only company they have is one another, and they have nothing to distract them.

The Blessed were the most special people in all of New Kitay. They are ambitious – they competed with millions of their fellow Kitaens to achieve their position. They are alphas, they are sharks, they know they were selected above all others, and have spent an entire revolution with a high-level Minster, becoming assured of their superiority as they basked at the feet of their masters. If they are arrogant, it is justified; if they are humble, it is not because they are ignorant of their capabilities. They are most assuredly looking around the vessel and sizing up their competition, wondering how much they've heard is true.

Identity

The first step of Genesis is determining each character's name and Minzu. Names from New Kitay are mostly Chinese in flavor, but keep in mind that at least sixty-four generations have passed; any linguistic drift is understandable. The Minzu are the eight nations, founded by the eight captains of the Pa Kua. They are spread across the four continents of New Kitay – two medium sized ones with two Minzu apiece, one massive continent with three, and one small continent with only one Minzu. The Celestial Emperor, in his infinite wisdom, never claims more than one Blessed at a time from each Minzu.

Each Minzu is associated strongly with one of the aspects, The first two Minzu, Qian and Dui, and are associated with Strength and Endurance, respectively. The second two Minzu, Li and Zhen, are associated with Grace and Accuracy. The third three, Xun, Kan and Gen, are associated with Charm, Perception and Willpower. Lastly, lonely Kun is associated with Reason. Of course there is much more to each Minzu than simply their association with the Aspects; they are whole nations of people, subjects of the Emperor, and will be described in more detail later. For the moment it is enough to know that everyone from a Minzu may choose which die is the tens digit and ones digit after their roll, when rolling for their associated aspect.

Each Mote in turn must say, "And which one of you is _____ from _____?" The first blank must be filled in with a name, and the second with one of the Minzu that has not yet been claimed. Once this question is asked, the Mote to their left, if they do not yet have a name, may put forth any number of qi that they have, in an attempt to take that name. The next Mote in line, if they want the name, must put forth more qi, or pass. Any Mote whose Blessed already has a name may not claim another; and a Mote that proposed a name may only have it if nobody else wanted it.

Once an entire round has passed without further bidding, the Mote who put forth the highest claim spends the qi they staked, and formally claims the name. "I am _____ from _____" they must say, cementing their claim on the name. If everyone passed on the first round, the Mote that proposed the name has earned it for his own Blessed, and must next say, "I am surprised none of you recognized me!"

This step continues until each of the Motes has proposed a name (and thus, each of the Blessed has been named). Motes can propose names in any order they want – basically, whoever manages to talk first – but each must propose one name before the process is over. The Emperor makes the final decision if there is a disagreement, or if nobody wishes to go.

Ability

Once all the Motes have named their Blessed, the Emperor starts handing out Abilities, which are listed in the **Abilities** section on page XX. Each of the Abilities will only manifest once amongst the Blessed (though the Ability may be possessed and shared by other inhabitants of Yi Jing) and represents an Impossible Thing that the Blessed can do.

Abilities carry with them an Office and a Duty – the Office defines one of the positions the Blessed character holds as a result of their Ability, while the Duty describes a responsibility to which the Blessed is expected to adhere. It is by fulfilling these Duties that the Blessed can climb the social ladder and to greater favor and come closer to the Emperor.

Abilities are auctioned by the Emperor, and may be offered up in any order the Emperor's whimsy might bring. The Emperor starts the bidding at the minimum cost listed under each Ability, and then Motes bid from their qi until they decide they wish to spend no more. Motes may choose to pass on the opportunity to bid on a particular Ability (meaning that the Ability will belong to none of the Blessed, and will be absent from the game).

Yes, it is possible for a character to start without any Abilities – and thus, unable to assume any Offices (nor to have any special Duties). They start their life as simple clerks in the Eye of the Emperor, lowly Level-one bureaucrats at the bottom of the social ladder, their only Duty to the Emperor himself. For those characters that do have Abilities, their starting Level is increased by 1 for each Office they hold, closer to the Celestial Emperor.

In addition to Abilities, there are also Skills. Unlike Abilities, Skills do not come with either an Office or a Duty. However, they can be held by more than one of the Blessed. At the start of the game, each of the Blessed has exactly one Skill (skill listings start on page XX). They will gain more as they earn Levels in the bureaucracy of Yi Jing.

Aspect

Once there are no more Abilities available to be chosen, the Motes divide their remaining qi across their Body and Mind (called the Essences); neither may be higher than 25, because no person can surpass perfection (which is defined as 100 points in each Aspect). After that, they follow the equations written on the sheet to calculate the four Foundations and the eight Aspects. These equations are only important during Genesis – afterwards, each of the attributes may go up and down independently.

Sometimes, other parts of the Aspect trees are used (Body and Mind, especially), but mainly it is the Aspects themselves that Motes will roll against in play.

The Eye of the Emperor

Once they arrive at the Ascendant City, the Blessed separate, and go their own ways. Each has a place already assigned to them, specially chosen from their Abilities; each has their own duties, and desires, and ambitions. The High Palace is not a small place, and it is possible they might go without ever meeting again, though it is unlikely. Still, soon

they will have more urgent and important things to worry about than the well-being of their fellow Blessed (though of course they wish them well, if not as well as they wish themselves).

Life aboard Yi Jing is mainly governed by precedence and tradition. Sixty-four generations of decisions handed down by the Celestial Emperor and his staff have created a compilation of Protocols so detailed and complex that, to an outside observer (such as the players), they might seem random (though of course, to the Blessed of the High Palace, they are anything but).

Of course, the combined weight of sixty-four generations of protocol and precedence is quite heavy; no player could be expected to memorize them all, and surely no designer could be expected to write the long and involved documents that must surely spell them out. But at the core of each Protocol is a Key Aspect – one that defines the core of the struggle, the means by which the Blessed is expected to achieve their desires. That is where the Key chart comes in – after the goals of the Blessed are determined, one rolls 1d10 and consults the chart. The Aspect that comes up is the most appropriate one for the goal – in fact, it is the *only* Aspect that can legitimately be used to pursue the goal.

This may lead to some strange results, from the perspective of the players. Perhaps the protocols will suggest the use of Endurance for seduction, or require a duel to be fought with Charm. Even a seemingly identical situation might be approached with different Aspects on different occasions, which of course is the result of some obscure detail the players may never have been aware (but of course, the Blessed, trained in the Protocols, noticed). Conversely, sometimes there is no Key Aspect – sometimes, the Protocols say that the course that's chosen is infelicitous, and should be abandoned.

Rest assured that the Protocols flow forth from the infallible wisdom of the Celestial Emperors, and players should take advantage of the stranger combinations to stretch their creativity. It is only by following the Protocols that the Blessed can best climb up the social ladder, gaining higher Levels – so even if a Blessed fails in achieving a goal, that they followed Protocol is often enough. On the other hand, a Mote may decide this particular goal is important enough to their Blessed that they're willing to step outside the Protocols to do it.

Level is important. Any Level may hold any Office, but the level of a Blessed determines how close to the Celestial Emperor they may reach – more literally, a Blessed may not venture higher on Yi Jing than their current Level – so characters at Level 1 may not leave the lowest areas, with the storage and the docks, while characters at Level 64 can travel almost the entire span of the Ascendant City. In addition, Motes have some narrative power over other Motes whose Blessed is of a lower level than their own.

Process

The Emperor crafts a scene, looking at the character's Skills, Duties, Offices and Level for inspiration.

[Stuff leading up to the moment the dice are rolled. Skills come into play here, in some fashion, along with a vaguely Polaris-like negotiation – *very* vaguely. This is also where having a higher Level can be handy, since it lets you sort of act like an assistant GM.]

After determining that it's time to turn to the dice, the player rolls a single ten-sided die against the Key Aspect chart. If the roll comes out 9 or higher (in other words, there is no Key Aspect), there is no proper way to approach the situation; the Protocols suggest the entire endeavor is infelicitous, and no matter what Aspect the Mote might try to use, they will fail. Otherwise, the Mote should describe how their Blessed is using the Key Aspect to approach the situation.

The Mote then rolls two dice as described earlier (getting a number between 1 and 100) to see whether their Blessed has succeeded or failed in their attempt. A failure occurs when the Mote rolls above the Key Aspect. If the Mote rolls less than the Key Aspect, the Blessed has succeeded. A roll equal to the Key Aspect is a special case.

If the Mote rolls doubles when following the Protocols, they have stressed themselves in the process – reduce the appropriate Aspect by the value of the die (so rolling 99 means reducing the Aspect by 9). Regardless of success or failure, the Mote adds the number they just rolled to their Experience (so rolling 99 means adding 99 to their Experience) as long as they rolled above their current Level (as one's Level goes up, more spectacular displays are necessary to rise further in the ranks).

If the Blessed would otherwise fail at achieving their goal (either because the Protocols deny them, or their roll against the Key Aspect failed), the Blessed has one final resort. They can use their Abilities to succeed, regardless of the Protocols or their actions so far – Abilities involve Impossible Things, and so the Protocols purposefully exclude them.

Of course, doing Impossible Things comes with its own price. Using an Ability requires the Mote to sacrifice a point of either Body or Mind from their Blessed. This loss cascades down the arrows on the character sheet – removing a point from all four associated Aspects, and the two Foundations as well. In return, the Blessed gets what they want, without question – no need to roll. On the other hand, since they are outside the Protocols, using an Ability means that the character does not collect any Experience for any roll they might have made.

Designer's Notes

Motes in the Eye of the Emperor was designed for the Reverse Engineering contest and based on Jeff Moore's sheet, available at <http://www.kevinallenjr.com/reverseengineer/jeff%20moore.pdf>. The sheet immediately communicated to me a very ordered society, and from the moment I saw it, I had science fiction images running through my head, which was counter to the reaction everyone else had upon viewing my sheet (saying 'oh, it's a kung fu sheet' almost invariably). In fact, that particular reaction led me to want to create something that wasn't very kung-fu at all.

The trigrams on the sheet didn't have to come from the I-Ching, but the more I read about the I-Ching, the more I thought it interesting enough to include, especially considering that one of the science fiction authors I enjoy, Philip K. Dick, was an I-Ching fanatic himself. Early on, I adopted the idea of a space station, which soon transformed into the innermost sanctum of the Celestial Emperor thanks to all the reading on China and the I-Ching I was doing. Suddenly the characters were all bureaucrats, and I knew what the Key Aspect chart would do for me.

The sheet pretty much dictated at least one die I had to work with – the Taint of the Wolf, the d10. It's funny that I'd love to design a game using d5s and d7s, but d10s sort of make me shy away. Still, I embraced it. Jeff's equations led for some interesting inflation in numbers by the time you got from Body and Mind out to the Aspects, so eventually I decided to go the percentile route since anything else (dice pools, etc.) would have suggested that Body and Mind be very small, to keep the Aspects down (a 3 Body and a 3 Mind means everything at 12 and, sorry Exalted fans, but that's too many dice to be rolling on a regular basis).

I sort of feel bad I haven't found a use for more of the traits that comprise the majority of the document – the middle four to be precise. Right now they're almost entirely filler, and that makes me a bit frustrated. I feel that the landscape they take up on the sheet means they should be *important* in the game, and so far they're not. Hopefully as I continue working on **Motes in the Eye of the Emperor** I'll find more uses for the numbers, so that they can all be used.

I understand and accept that **Motes in the Eye of the Emperor** is not a completed work, but hopefully enough of the framework is here for any reader to see the awesome. Among the things I'm aware are still needed:

1. Descriptions of the Eight Minzu, in a sort of splat-slash-tour guidebook format.
2. A list of Abilities and their Duties and Offices (thinking of possibly putting these on cards a la Roach)
3. The 'Stuff' in the brackets that happens after the scene is framed, and before the roll
4. Exactly what happens when you earn a Level