

The Empire of Perfect Unity

The sun, golden and radiant in the morning, rises in the east over the Great Dragon Mountains which encircle the whole of the world. The land encircled by this majestic range of mountains is bisected from east to west by another barrier: a wall as high as the mountain's highest peak. To the south of this wall, one would find rice paddies, bustling cities, captivating waterfalls, well-kept graveyards, and a thousand towering pagodas filled with bureaucrats. To the north, one finds rocky plains, freezing deserts, and lakes that belch poisonous gases. Nomads and bitter exiles roam this place, eking out a meager existence from a world whose civilization has rejected them.

In this world, a human life, without the order imposed by society, is ruled by chaos. This simple truth is the first lesson taught in the many worthy schools of the Empire of Perfect Unity. As these children grow older, they learn that this axiom (originally penned by the Philosopher Wong Fei) rules all aspects of life for all people. It dictates humble things, such as when one is expected to take meals, but it also lays standards for grand things such as who claims the throne of the Emperor. Although strict, it is not a harsh philosophy. Those who live within the boundaries of its tenets are guaranteed a fruitful life. With correct action, everyone will have enough to eat. With the proper training, an educated populace, and the correct number of doctors, disease can be completely eliminated. Those who reject fear and selfishness will end their days knowing only the perfect bliss of a life without doubts. It matters not whether one is a peasant toiling in the dust or an Emperor sitting on a throne of purified jade. As long as one acts appropriately for their Station, they will experience only harmony.

However, there are those in the world whose moral judgment and focus are found wanting. They cannot understand the perfection of pure unity, instead choosing to question things that are beyond question. Their morality is deficient. The rigorous moral education of monastic culture has failed to correct such individual's wayward behavior. These people seek to break harmony by doing deeds outside of the realm of orthodoxy. Artists who work outside of the Thousand Acceptable Forms reject correct action. They do not understand that the forms put forth in ancient times are the only forms that evoke happiness in human beings. Husbands and wives that seek the company of others reject the hard work done to ensure that their union would be an auspicious one. If one were to learn the Thirteen Harmonious Changes out of order, they would risk corrupting everything that the Harmonious Changes stand for.

To protect society from such decadent rebels, a place has been created in the north for deviants to wallow in their own unhappiness without fear of disrupting the unity of the people. The North Wall was erected to be the barrier between chaos and form. It stands to protect the civilization of the Empire of Perfect Unity from those who cannot be civilized. An elite order of mystics, known as the Stone Lions, protects the wall, and thus, protects the Empire. Beyond the North Wall lies disorder, as wandering bands of nomads come into conflict with one another. Men lie with men like their wives. Drooling madmen create works of art which are incorrectly critiqued by passing vagabonds. Townships, assembled in defiance of established geomantic principles, have risen up without the Twenty-Four Forms of Excellent Stability. These places are thus prone to disease, violence, lightning, fire, and pests. Worse still, there are people so far removed from the Empire that they have never heard of the Doctrine of Perfect Unity. These poor souls suffer terribly in the mountains of the far north, ignorant of how one should live one's life.

Despite the rigors of chaos, there are legitimate critiques of the Empire that can be made. Those on the Northern side of the wall, as exiles and descendants of exiles, know that the “Perfect Unity” is in fact far from perfect. If it is so perfect, they reason, why bisect the world into distinct portions? People on both sides of the wall would certainly agree that the Empire has real flaws. Those loyal to the Empire would argue that the flaws are the result of people rejecting tradition and living selfishly. People north of the wall would claim that any flaws in the Empire are because it fails take into account humanity, a desire for personal freedom, and the need for unencumbered expression. Within the Empire, it is argued by the exiles, there is no place for a different perception of the world. There is no room for a pursuit of love and beauty. There is no humanity in their application of the works of Wong Fei. What Imperials call chaos, northerners call the freedom to decide one’s own fate. Whereas bandits in the north might be apprehended by concerned folk, corrupt bureaucrats operate in the Empire shielded from prosecution by the very order they defraud. In the north, romance is a personal matter, and one can bed who they like in whatever terms they desire. There is no lengthy legalistic marriage process and ceremonies to endure. If one wishes to learn a profession beyond the wall, they need only learn the skills involved. Within the wall’s boundaries, one is assigned their trade based on their horoscope and the observations of administrators.

The History of the Empire of Perfect Unity

The Unwise Age

The world began when the sky and earth separated from one another, leaving behind animals, plants, natural features, and mankind where the two had once been connected. Little else is known about this era because it took place such an incalculably long time ago. Mankind established settlements and took sustenance from the land, creating the first pale shadow of civilization. Powerful martial artists rose to prominence, clashing with one another for no reason other than to prove their superiority. In a frighteningly short amount of time, they began to draw scores of less skilled warriors. This is referred to as "the Invention of War" by Wong Fei.

Chaos was everywhere. Mankind established kingdoms, and each one made war upon their neighbors for supremacy. This era, known as the Seven-Hundred Emperors Period, was incredibly violent. Not a single generation passed in which each kingdom did not at some point make war upon each other. Frequently, provinces would rebel against their king and declare themselves sovereign in order to make raids upon the ally of the hour. Further adding to the complexity, martial arts societies flourished and frequently clashed with each other, often crossing political boundaries to do so. Loyalties were consistently unclear. Chains of command could not be established, for fear of subversion and treachery. When armies were not marching upon one another, mobs of warriors clashed in the streets.

Superstition was terrible as well. Hungry Ghosts would return from the dead and secretly continue their old lives. Some even came to be kings themselves, attempting to rule their lands eternally, siring children upon their own descendants in order to establish faultless dynasties. Mortals claimed to have discovered means of immortality through alchemy, obscure deities, martial arts, or nihilistic meditative practices, though these were all lies. There was little social cohesion as well, and citizens of one settlement shared very little cultural similarity to citizens of another settlement. Families clashed amongst themselves, as brothers vied for the bloody throne of their own slain father. Sisters poisoned

each others chalices to increase their own bride price. Everyone of the time suffered terribly, not understanding the source of their ailments.

Into this unenlightened wasteland came a truly transformative figure, known collectively as The Philosopher. His message, which has come to be known as the Doctrine of Unity, was simple; social unity promotes wellbeing. He believed that human endeavors required trust in one's fellows and a duty to one's family. Without that faith in one's compatriots, society would wallow in abject chaos and continuously destroy the lives of those within. In order to facilitate this trust, rigorous standards and clearly defined stations would need to be created. The Philosopher, who was known as Wong Fei in life, spoke very infrequently about himself. Popular accounts claim he achieved true enlightenment while meditating under a waterfall. Every village has a story about how he arrived in their village. If these accounts are to be believed, such visits would have taken place over ten thousand years ago.

Miracles blossomed in the wake of the Philosopher, as his enlightenment manifested upon the physical world. Hungry Ghosts bowed before him and disappeared when he showed his open palms. The earth cast down those who wished to do him violence. To be in his presence was to know peace. People learned that by following in his footsteps, such as reciting his vision of the perfect society, they could use their enlightenment to change the world in harmonious ways. This practice, now known as the Thirteen Harmonious Changes, flourished amongst the Philosopher's disciples. Even in those times, the Harmonious Changes were numbered and well regulated. This tradition has since become more rigorous, requiring all practitioners to be ingratiated into the bureaucracy of the Empire. In imitation of the Philosopher's personal aesthetic, crafters and artists began pioneering a more humble style of design now known as the Thousand Acceptable Forms. This style became the foundation of all Imperial artwork, from architecture to the culinary arts.

Those that traveled with the Philosopher grew quite wise. Villages that were visited by the Philosopher were forever changed by their experience. His message of strength through unity bore fruitful results for those settlements that adhered to it. Powerful figures began to see the significance of these teachings. One of the great warlords of the age was taught the Doctrine of Perfect Unity by one of his closest advisors. Immediately realizing the significance of this new way of life, the warlord set out to visit the Philosopher and learn at his side. In his travels, the warlord assembled the entire teachings of the Philosopher from each of the villages he visited. Fearful of missing even a single of the Philosopher's aphorisms or parables, he scoured the entire world to achieve enlightenment. His armies traveled with him as well, bringing each province to heel as they sought out the source of this new wisdom. In his wake, a vast and efficient bureaucracy organized his conquests in the mode of the Doctrine of Perfect Unity. Although he never actually met the Philosopher himself, he succeeded in conquering the entire world from one of the Great Dragon Mountains to the other. He crowned himself Emperor of the world, which was thereafter named the Empire of Perfect Unity. On that day, the sun rose a bloody red in the east. This figure, now known as the First Emperor, established a dynasty that was unbroken for thousands upon thousands of years.

His reign was not without its own brand of chaos. Although the old way of life had been banished and made obsolete, there were a great multitude of people unwilling to accept the new ways. The martial arts societies who had once vied against one another unified against the great unifier. Realizing that society would always have individualists, selfish malcontents, and hedonists that would threaten the

Perfect Unity of his Empire, the Emperor began plans to segregate chaotic elements away from his well ordered society. Noting that the north lacked the resources of the southern part of the Empire, he evacuated the loyal people who lived in the north to the more fertile lands of the south. Because the First Emperor believed enough blood had been shed over the war of unification he declared that those that violated his law would be banished to the north instead of executed. In his wisdom, he began work on a wall that would span the whole of the empire. Although he never lived to see his wall completed, his descendants carried on his dream of Perfect Unity. The tradition of banishment continues to modern times and fresh criminals are sent north of the Wall every day.

The structure of the Empire is astoundingly simple. The Emperor's word is law except where it is found to be in contradiction with the Doctrine of Unity. This is determined by the August Deliberative of Unified Days, a political body composed of the highest ranking bureaucrats in the Empire itself. If an Imperial Decree is found to be in conflict with tradition, the matter is sent back to the Emperor with instructions to return to the works of the Philosopher for inspiration. The August Deliberative of Unified Days was given this power in recognition that an advisor to the First Emperor was the first to show him the works of the Philosopher. Justicars, ascetic mystic bureaucrats, serve to adjudicate social change, subject to over-riding by the Emperor (who, in turn, can be overridden by the August Deliberative). However, Justicars appoint their own members according to strict essay testing. Justicars serve as investigators, exorcists, and magistrates to the Empire. They oversee the bewildering array of lesser bureaucracies of the Empire. The Imperial family is the only nobility of the Empire, but they often serve in the bureaucracy instead of living like hereditary lords. The simplicity of the Empire has remained mostly the same despite the incalculably long time it has existed.

The Red Hand Rebellion

With small and notable exceptions, civilization has remained stable for untold eons, unchanged from the vision of the First Emperor. Whenever malcontents raise their heads to counter the ancient arguments of the Philosopher, those malcontents are exiled so that they will no longer trouble society. Social cohesion has been maintained and unbroken for so long that much of the knowledge of the past has passed beyond mortal reckoning. Nothing recognizable from the Seven-Hundred Emperors Period still exists, either swallowed by time or deliberately destroyed because of its imperfection. The idolatry of the past was banished, the fighting societies disbanded, and the unwise ways mostly fell away. The Second Emperor, son of the First, established an order of warriors, known as the Stone Lions, to safeguard the Wall and deter any potential invasion of exiles. The Stone Lions, once themselves one of the now illegal fighting societies, used the Thirteen Harmonious Changes to protect the Empire's sacred order. The Scholar's Sword flourished amongst the bureaucrats of the Empire; reclaimed from the martial arts world of the past for use by the Empire of the present.

During the thousands of years that the Empire remained stable the truths that had once been so revolutionary became simple tradition. It became understood that one would build their house according to tradition because it was the best possible way to do so. Justicars, the highest order of bureaucrats, fought to ensure that culture did not drift or alter its course. When change was undeniably necessary, the Justicars consulted the works of the Philosopher to find the most harmonious way for society to change. As time went on, the weight of tradition became stronger and stronger until a person could live their entire life without performing a single act that had not been first sanctioned by the Empire's bureaucracy. Forging one's own path became impossible. The life of an individual had little

value compared to the vastness of society. As time has progressed, the Empire has felt more and more fragile and stronger and stronger action has been needed to maintain societal cohesion.

Fourty-three years before the present, things changed radically. One of the Emperor's favorite advisers on the August Deliberative of Unified Days was exiled for arguing against new agricultural development in a region of wilderness. Had that land been cleared, a small saffron-colored wildflower would have been rendered extinct because it needed the forest's shade to blossom. Fu Sun, the exiled adviser, argued against the development on the floor of the August Deliberative of Unified Days for many days despite the censure of his peers. Eventually, Justicars sentenced him to exile for his lone dissent.

For three years, five days, and two hours, Fu Sun wandered the wilds of the North without any human contact. When he joined a community of exiles, it was immediately burned to the ground by slavers. Fu Sun was captured, but later released because the leader of the slaver band recognized his military talent. Fu Sun later usurped control of this bandit community by slaying the slaver lord with his Scholar Sword. Fu Sun began amassing an army, known as the Red Hands because of the dyed gloves that signified allegiance to the cause. Fu Sun absorbed numerous bandit forces into his army, supplemented by tribal forces from the far north. When he announced his intention to invade the Empire, the remainder of the northern settlements joined under his banner. Young Imperial warriors, who had never lived life as a nomad, went north to join his cause as well. The Empire shuddered as armies amassed across the Northern Wall.

One day, a red sun rose across the mountains and Fu Sun saw this as a sign that he should attack on this day. The Stone Lions were prepared for assault, and each entrance was manned by one of those implacable sentinels. Although each entrance was defended by only one man, the Thirteen Harmonious Changes made it impossible for an army to overrun a single one of the Stone Lions. Fu Sun was a brilliant tactician, however, and had a plan to breach the Wall that was as tall as the mountains. He stood before one of the oldest and most powerful of the Stone Lions and brought forth a young woman and her sickly children. Fu Sun had discovered that this woman was the granddaughter of this particular Stone Lion. She had been exiled for writing love poetry about someone other than her husband. The Stone Lion broke down at seeing the disheveled state that the Empire had thrust upon his family. Weeping, the nameless Stone Lion stepped aside and allowed the invasion to take place. Without the treachery within the Lions' ranks, the Red Hand rebellion would not have been able to assault the Empire. The Lions have a name for this man. They call him Cracked Jade.

For six days, the Red Hand army marched across the Empire unopposed. Aside from the Stone Lions, the Empire did not have a standing army. The Stone Lions had always been sufficient to prevent invasion. When a force did rise up against the Empire, they wiped it away like a mother brushes tears from an infant's face. However, the Red Hand Rebellion had done what no other force could do; fight to the very Palace of Sublime Jade where the Emperor handed down his decrees. They had done so in shorter than a year's time, as well. When they arrived, Fu Sun demanded that the Emperor bring him the Golden Seal of Three Birds (the seal of the Emperor) and face him in personal combat. If he agreed to do so, he would spare the royal family's lives. The Emperor himself was a man of ninety-four winters who had began his professional career as a doctor in the far Southern provinces. The law has difficulty reaching the South, and the Emperor had met more than one Hungry Ghost in his travels. He

was a warrior of no small renown. As he walked down the steps, he held the Golden Seal of Three Birds in his left hand and his Scholar's Sword in his right.

The Emperor exhorted Fu Sun to turn back his rebellion and abandon his foolish bid for the throne. Fu Sun laughed recklessly and proclaimed that a new era had come to the Empire. He would rename it the Empire of the Scarlet Sun, reform the bureaucracy, and reevaluate the standing of tradition within the Empire. The debate that ensued was doubly as furious as the mortal combat both men locked themselves into in that instant. When the battle was over, Fu Sun had been slain by the Emperor, who was himself terribly wounded. The Golden Seal of Three Birds was stained with the blood of two men. Seeing the loss of their commander, the Red Hand army rushed the steps of the Palace and assaulted the Emperor himself. They lost half their number to the Emperor's steel that day, but eventually succeeded in killing the man who had once commanded the whole of the world. The Palace was sacked, its treasures divided. The Empire was besieged by three days of abject chaos. Riots, looting, and pillaging ruled the day.

One of Fu Sun's lieutenants, a woman named Wan Bei, shouted above the din of chaos and tamed the armies of the Red Hand Rebellion. She proclaimed the establishment of the Empire of the Scarlet Sun and immediately went about calming the madness that had briefly overtaken the world. Bureaucracy was reestablished, but with a decidedly progressive tilt. The old ways were abolished; the Stone Lions disbanded, the August Deliberative of Unified Days repopulated with exiles, and the Justicars given new mandates. Although the Wall still stood (what force could dismantle it?), nothing prevented anyone from passing north or south at will.

For the first five years, Wan Bei passed incredibly ambitious reforms in all areas of life. She made very expensive and heavy handed attempts to "civilize" the northern provinces, much to the consternation of the far northern tribes. Her agricultural reforms were a disaster. Although they gave new rights to hereditary peasants in an attempt to improve social mobility, they led to widespread famine throughout the south as peasants abandoned their fields in the hope of improving their social rank. Many of the most skilled of Justicars resigned in disgust, artificially weakening their numbers to the point where Hungry Dead became an insurmountable menace in rural provinces (a problem which persists to the present). A new style of architecture was mandated for all state buildings in order to proclaim that a new era had begun, but the workmanship was prone to fires and collapse. Although Wan Bei had spared the royal family, even this caused chaos as counter-revolutionaries periodically sabotaged infrastructure in the hopes of returning the old Dynasty to the throne once more.

For the original rebels, the Empire of the Scarlet Sun did not hold any of the utopian promise they had been sold by the now-deceased Fu Sun. Exiles and descendants of exiles failed to integrate into society as had once been assumed. Those who had grown up in the wilderness had no desire to participate in agriculture; there was no sport in hunting animals in pens. Although women were extended equal legal standing and rights of ownership, society still stigmatized a woman who wished to wield a weapon or run a business. In the chaos of the post-rebellion period, many bandit lords ingratiated themselves to the bureaucracy, using it as a means of embezzling huge sums of money. It was not as romantic as leading their own brigand legion, even if the money was better. Their crimes were laconic and mostly existed on paper.

At the end of the first five years, it was clear that new reforms were harming the Empire and that many of the old ways would need to be adopted once again for the Empire to flourish. Wan Bei established a council to institute a policy known as Her Glorious Redemption of Five Summers, which aimed to return ousted public servants to service and bring prosperity to the land. The policy reversed many of the Empire of the Scarlet Sun's earlier reforms while at the same time proclaiming them to have been a success. This was explained by saying that those earlier policies had been experimental and that they had revealed new wisdom about the nature of the Empire. The Empire of the Scarlet Sun began to resemble the earlier Empire of Perfect Unity more with each passing month.

In time, Empress Wan Bei grew more sullen and withdrew from the public sphere entirely. Her August Deliberative of Unified Days had been replaced with its previous members and had mostly ceased giving her any advice at all. At the end of the second five years of her reign, Wan Bei had entirely ceased giving any dictates. When she spoke from the stairs of the Sublime Palace of Jade under a red sun, she shocked the entire world with her words. The City of Blue Stone by Yellow Water had been decorated to commemorate the ten year anniversary of the Red Hand Rebellion, but her announcement was not in the spirit of that event. She brought with her a young man named Li Kao who she claimed was of the royal family. Introducing him as the next Emperor of the Empire of Perfect Unity (not the Empire of the Scarlet Sun), she abdicated her throne. Upon that announcement, she took personal responsibility for the slaying of the previous Emperor and sentenced herself to execution by live burial.

The new Emperor decreed that Wan Bei had paid the price of justice for the crimes that had been committed against the Empire and that everyone involved in the Red Hand Rebellion was absolved of all wrongdoing. Anyone who had been a northerner would be allowed to remain a citizen of the Empire if they desired it, but that the Stone Lions would be reinstated and the tradition of banishment to the north was to be the law of the land once again. He left no doubt that the new, more chaotic way of life was not going to be tolerated. Whatever reforms the Red Hand Rebellion had attempted to install would be removed in favor of traditional methods. The Empire of the Scarlet Sun would be scourged from the world and replaced once more with the Empire of Perfect Unity. Unsurprisingly, many of the northerners who had moved to the Empire during the Rebellion period returned to the northern wilderness.

Order returned to the Empire. Northerners abandoned all hope that they would ever find a world in which they could be both free and happy. Sentences of exile became significantly more commonplace as social cohesion once again reasserted itself. Corrupt bureaucrats, wayward or unlicensed students of the Harmonious Changes, nomadic tribes, homosexuals, experimental artists, and even unruly children were banished at a greater rate than ever before. The Empire cheered on efforts to cleanse the effect of the Red Hand Rebellion, and even the Thirteen Harmonious Changes altered slightly to reflect the lessons learned from that bloody era (with the approval of the Justicars, of course).

Modern Times

Thirty years have passed since the end of the end of the Red Hand Rebellion and Emperor Li Kao shows no sign of altering from his style of heavy-handed traditionalism. So that the Empire would never again be threatened by invasion, the Emperor has created a military. It is relatively small, but very well equipped. Since military craft has not been practiced since the days of the First Emperor, ancient texts on the arts of war are once again seeing circulation at the Interlocking Dragon and Tiger

martial monastery. Using these long lost techniques, the Empire seeks to train an army (an unprecedented thing) in as “traditional” a method as possible. Most citizens and bureaucrats have a disdain for the military however, seeing it as a shameful symptom of the Empire’s decline. Upkeep of a military is expensive and, to the perceptions of most Imperials, it yields nothing in the way of prosperity or infrastructure. However, for all of this, being a soldier or officer is far more prestigious than serving as a farmer.

Malaise permeates every settlement in the Empire, from the glorious state-run bureaus of the City of Golden Papers, to the oft neglected far southern provinces, to the bandit kingdoms of the northern deserts. In the Empire proper, citizens have prosperity without freedom. In the north, personal freedom is common but the tyranny of scarcity is a far harsher lord than any Emperor. Everyone, from the highest paper-pusher to the lowliest millet-serf, believes that the world is in a sorry state and that there is a better way. However, memories of bloodshed and chaos are fresh in the minds of Imperial citizens. The Empire itself is violently resistant to change of any sort, fearing those terrible days of rebellion when the world was briefly turned upside-down. It is unlikely that change will happen from within the Empire.

However, change seems to be inevitable given recent developments. Although the Empire is nearly identical to what it has been during the past thousands of years, a new element threatens to instigate vast and rapid change. The phenomenon was first discovered four years ago by Stone Lions passing between the gates of the Northern Wall. Mystic gateways to another world seemed to periodically manifest along the line of demarcation between the North and South. Later, it was discovered that these strange doors could open anywhere at any time. Imperial astrologers set about unlocking the secrets of the phenomenon, and eventually discovered that the doors were mostly predictable. The Emperor deemed that the gravity of the moment was so great that a new class of citizen, known as Explorers, would need to be created. It is only by Imperial sanction that travel through these gates is considered legal, but the Empire understands that people are sometimes marooned there against their will.

The Emperor himself is endlessly fascinated with these doors. He has sent several Glorious Advanced Expeditions (as Imperial incursions are known) to the world beyond in the hopes of unlocking the secrets of the place beyond. However, the world beyond is a place of turmoil, and two Expeditions have been lost utterly to the aggression of unknown forces. A third has been dispatched, but its fate is unknown. Many Imperial citizens find the new reality of contact with other worlds rather unsettling. There are no protocols for dealing with foreign cultures. The Philosopher made no mention of the world beyond. There is no traditional precedent to react to this new reality.

However, many within the Empire see the presence of other worlds as a chance to put some positive chaos back into the Empire. For citizens of the Empire, the opportunity to discover new treasures and knowledge are quite alluring. Many would travel through the gates simply to serve the will of their Emperor. Others might search for new ways of life to enrich their stiflingly homogeneous world. Northerners on the other hand might seek out a more fertile world or find a place beyond the crushing reach of ten thousand years of tradition. Many exiles seek a return of the Red Hand Rebellion, and such would-be revolutionaries believe that the Forest of Doors (as the world beyond is sometimes called) would be the perfect staging ground. Recently, a red sun rose over the Empire with no

explanation. Nothing of import happened in the Empire. However, people wonder if something of great importance did not happen somewhere beyond the world they know.

Currently, only licensed and exceedingly loyal Imperial astrologers know the secrets of how and when the doors open. However, most northerners know that the doors tend to open in places of transition, such as waterfalls, mountain peaks, and ruins. The most common place, however, is the Wall itself. Often, a single gate will flicker with a strange glow and then reveal the Forest momentarily. Because of the frequency at which gates open along the Wall, the Emperor is considering making the Stone Lions the caretakers of the doors themselves. There is a great deal of anxiety in the Empire, mostly among middle-ranking bureaucrats, that the world beyond will have a corrosive influence on Imperial culture. This xenophobia is quite strong and the Emperor has decreed that any unauthorized travelers to the Forest of Doors should remain in the Forest of Doors (including unwilling travelers). As it stands, only the most loyal subjects are assigned to be Explorers and many believe that common folk would not be able to resist the temptations of a world without governance. The Emperor has stated that no citizen of another world will be permitted to dwell within the Empire, and so far no such person is known to have arrived in the Empire of Perfect Unity. It is unclear what would happen if the citizens of the Empire were exposed to an alternate way of life.

Society of the Empire of Perfect Unity

Although the totality of the world is known as the Empire of Perfect Unity, the world is anything but unified. In fact, there are several distinct regions which make up the world and each has variable levels of Imperial control. The areas furthest to the south of the world are completely loyal to the Empire as a political entity, but are mostly devoid of the bureaucracy seen elsewhere. The far south is mostly rural but social cohesion is maintained through the importance of agriculture. The central region of the Empire is the heart of the Empire itself, both geographically and culturally. It is the most populated, the most educated, the most prosperous, and the most socially homogeneous region. The Emperor himself lives there, dispensing his Imperial edicts that alter the course of the entire world. North of this region lies the Northern Wall which demarcates where Imperial civilization ends and chaos begins. Just north of the wall, bandit and exile communities eke out whatever existence they can on the open plains. There is little cohesion to these groups, but even they resemble Imperial culture to some extent. Even further North, all pretense at civilization ends. In the foothills of the northern Great Dragon Mountains there are tribal communities who have never heard the Doctrine of Unity and hearken back to the Age of the Unwise (as it is known in the Empire).

Imperial Culture

The Emperor is the living embodiment of social order, without which all of existence is chaos and madness. The family grants life, fulfillment, and morality. Focus is granted by the Ancestors. Through education, morality is ingrained in the individual so that the State need not exert its power over individuals. For citizens of the Empire, this is unquestionable. Imperial culture exists primarily to establish order and social cohesion. This is the central tenet of the Doctrine of Unity. Imperial culture is obsessed with clear delineations of station and behavior, with each person given a caste that defines their role in society. From the outside the system might seem inflexible and arbitrary but the Empire has elements of meritocracy that allow for a high degree of social mobility. As dictated by the Doctrine of Unity, politeness, education, hard work, tradition, deference to one's elders, and respect for authority are the strongest values held by Imperial citizens.

The Empire has a bewildering array of castes (Stations), each with defined relations to each of the other castes. Although there is clearly a hierarchy implicit in naming castes, it is assumed that no Station is morally superior to any other, even if the degree of respect given to any Station is unequal. In fact, the caste system of the Empire deliberately humbles the higher Stations by saddling them with a diverse set of taboos and requirements. For instance, the Emperor himself (the highest Station in the Empire) is required to eat only millet instead of rice and to eat only one fish per week. The Emperor is further required to catch this fish himself, or else go without. This is the essence of the Doctrine of Unity; every soul has equal spiritual weight, even if the realities of social life require an inequality in social standing. Greater levels of social importance require greater degrees of humility.

Education is of primary importance in the Empire and governs many aspects of Imperial life. The Philosopher himself states “It is through education that the moral mind is made to be harmonious. It is only through indoctrination that shame can be learned. Without shame, there is only the threat of Law. With a sense of shame, the people shall correct themselves irrespective of Law. Through education of moral excellence, punishment becomes obsolete.” Education, like the institution of the family, is one of the major sources of social cohesion in the Empire. Even in the far-flung southern regions, moral instruction is the primary goal of society. A majority of students are taught in monasteries, where an ascetic life ingrains the individual with a sense of discipline. Men and women are educated in separate monasteries, but both are required to shave their hair for the duration of their education. Peasants in rural areas are generally too poor to allow their children's hands to remain idle in classes. However, the same tests are administered to every child to determine their vocation, regardless of their level of education.

Monks, who serve as the world's teachers, are given their own caste in the Empire and it is afforded with higher respect than many others. Station is assigned to individuals of talent by way of a great standardized test known as the Five-Legged Essay. This test, combined with an individual's astrological horoscope, determines the vocation that a person is assigned to. Individuals who score highly on this test can expect to be taken into the vast bureaucracy of the Empire while those who do poorly can expect a life of toil in the fields. Astrology, which is used to reveal a person's areas of talent, also weighs heavily on this calculation. The stars can reveal talents, such as dexterity and social aptitude, which do not readily appear in scholarly testing. It is believed that astrology carries greater weight in the appointment of Justicars and Stone Lions than other Stations. The Five Legged Essay itself is deceptively simple. Students are provided with five unrelated subjects which they must expound upon and weave together a coherent thesis on the nature of the Empire and one's place within it. Those who are proud of their performance on this essay display them in their homes so that friends and relatives might obtain a small measure of enlightenment.

Almost all of life's choices are made by the state or one's family. Vocation and Station are determined by state testing. Marriages are by arrangement only, decided upon by elder family members and the consultation of specific match-making bureaucrats. The range of acceptable aesthetic choices are governed by tradition, so individuals are not permitted to make artistic choices outside of what has been deemed appropriate. The life of the individual is not much valued by Imperial society, which believes that acting in an individual way actively harms society by breaking down established norms. Those people who are different or pursue ways of life other than the established path are thought of as being preeminently selfish. This is why exile is not seen as being terrifically inhumane; if a person has

decided to forsake society, it is clear that they desire to be free of the Imperial way of life. To loyal Imperial citizens, to cease living the Imperial way of life means leaving behind the benefits of civil society.

Part of the process of education is merely understanding what is expected of you. Imperial culture is, as stated before, rigorously regulated. Each profession has very exacting rules and there are long treatises on the best way to execute specific tasks within a profession. For instance, shoe makers are expected to create their wares in precisely the same design and technique as their ancestors did so ten-thousand years prior. To accomplish this, endless manuals are produced on each of the acceptable styles that are produced in the Empire. Likewise, a massive bureaucratic infrastructure has been set up to monitor and regulate every aspect of every trade. Because of the manpower required for this monumental task, the bureaucracy is immense. If it is seen that a person is carrying out their professional or personal life in a manner inconsistent with the Doctrine of Unity, it is likely that they will be censured or, if the infraction is serious enough to merit it, be exiled.

The Doctrine of Unity

The Doctrine of Unity is the philosophy upon which the Empire of Perfect unity was founded over ten-thousand years ago. It was first espoused by Wong Fei, the Philosopher of All Ages, in the closing days of the Unwise Age. It provided an ideal around which the First Emperor could conquer the world, establish his dynasty, and produce a lasting civilization. It stresses education, family, and correct action above all other considerations. The tenets are relatively simple, but are applied broadly:

Respect tradition. The wisdom of the Philosopher is evident when one respects the old ways. It is important for a culture to have a sense of continuity between generations, in order to avoid inefficiency and chaos. For a follower of the Doctrine of Unity, there is a real bias in favor of the wisdom of the past as opposed to the quick-and-easy methods of the present. This manifests in the certainty of Imperial citizens that they have discovered the best possible way to live one's life. If this is so, then why attempt to innovate? Innovation, therefore, is a form of selfishness. This belief is also seen in the deference paid to elders and especially to Ancestors. When there is some question about how to proceed, people of the Empire seek out the wisdom of the Ancestors so that they can properly adhere to established methods of behavior. The Thousand Acceptable Forms, therefore, are the best forms possible for workers to produce. This is also the tenet that binds families so closely together. The elder head of a household controls the affairs of their progeny; it is expected that the elder will show wisdom and that their juniors will honor that wisdom with all due deference. Should either side be found lacking by society, both are judged by the same stroke of the pen. For this reason, to be closely related to someone who has been exiled is a terrible shame. In the Unwise Age, this tenet was badly abused; wisdom of the moment prevailed and people lived and died over transitory things. Nothing glued society together, so it continuously spun out of control.

Promote harmony. It is one's moral duty to prevent conflict and promote the wellbeing of others. There is no greater taboo for a follower of the Doctrine of Unity than to willfully cause conflict, whether it is ideological, personal, or metaphysical. It is a moral imperative, therefore, for one to continuously present a polite demeanor at all times. Resolving conflicts is of utmost importance. This is the tenet that most appeals to a sense of compassion, and it is this belief that exhorts one to perform acts of kindness. To relieve suffering, protect the weak, or alleviate ignorance are all forms of

harmonious change. It is true that the First Emperor shed an incalculable amount of blood, but it is also true that he exhorted his sons to exile, rather than to execute. This is the proper way of things, that one continuously seek inner and outer peace. It is the goal of every follower of the Doctrine to achieve total union with everything. Upon achieving total enlightenment, it is believed, one's consciousness unifies with the physical world. It is this tenet that forbids learning the Thirteen Harmonious Changes out of the proscribed order. It is believed that doing so actively reduces overall harmony, because it fools the world into believing that one has achieved a higher degree of enlightenment than one actually possesses. In the Age of the Unwise, harmony was all but absent. It seemed that serf continuously fought king, woman blandished man, and that Ancestors deliberately hid wisdom. Without any possibility of reconciling on its own, the world would have continued to debase itself had the Philosopher not intervened.

Support the supremacy of law. Without governance, mankind will fall into barbarism. Without regulation, inefficiency will creep in. Without justice, morality cannot be promoted. It is the duty of everyone, from the Emperor down to the lowest peasant, to support the Empire and its bureaucracy. The bewildering complexity of the law serves to ensure that society is working equally well for every person involved. There is no clemency, in the eyes of the law, which can be offered to those of higher Stations but not the lower. The law must be, and will be, enforced fairly and equitably. It is only through hard work that one might better their lot. It is believed that if one performed their profession well in their current life, that they might be reincarnated into a higher Station in their next life. It is believed that every soul currently living has a chance to be reborn as the Emperor, or ultimately, into union with everything. Without clearly delineated Stations and Imperial standards, this logical progression of enlightenment would be broken and souls would wander, unsure of their place. However, even though the government is given tremendous authority to punish, it is believed that actually performing such a thing is quite tragic. The Doctrine of Unity, at its core, seeks to prevent infractions of law by rigorous moral instruction. The entire system of education focuses strongly on ethics and correct action. Anyone who transgresses against the law is seen as being badly educated or simply selfish. Without law, the spiritual world, as well as the physical one, would be in disarray. As an example, the Unwise Age had some semblance of feudal lordship. However, it had no bureaucracy and was more like a series of warlords than any sort of unified government.

Stations

Each person is assigned a Station upon completion of their Five-Legged Essay. This Station, in many ways, defines a person's place in the world according to the Doctrine of Unity. Most of these Stations are identified by the Philosopher as necessary for social harmony, however, some have been created through the needs of the moment. They are listed here in order from least respected to most respected, although the final Station (Explorers) do not have a clear placement in this hierarchy, and thus, are listed lastly. Each Station has designations that further delineate how individuals rank against one another, but these are so finely tuned that it is far too difficult to list them all (Farmer of the Third Rank, Stone Lion of Seven Commendations, Monk of the Second Saffron Sash, etc).

Farmers (Those Humble Masters of Soils and Seed)

Farmers make up a bulk of the population of the Empire because it is an agricultural economy. Farmers are given very little respect from their Station, but a farmer who performs their duty well throughout their lifetime has the same chances of becoming an Honorable Ancestor as does the

Emperor himself. Farmers are universally poor, but possess a down-to-earth dignity that is absent in the other Stations. This Station, although named after the agricultural class, represents all professions that gather, harvest, mine, or otherwise produce raw material. Unfortunately, because of the poverty associated with this class, most Farmers cannot afford to have their children idle away at the local monastery, even if it has a chance to better their Station. Therefore, children of Farmers rarely attain higher Station, keeping poor families in a spiral of poverty. The highest ranking Farmer in a rural area is referred to as a 'headman', or village leader.

Soldiers (Those Whose Blades are Ready)

The Station of Soldier is one that is very rarely bestowed upon individuals, and with considerable angst. The position itself is a very modern invention, set up only scant decades ago in an attempt to ward off future invasion from the North. Because it was deemed that the Stone Lions were insufficient to protect the Empire, most citizens see the creation of a military to be an excessively shameful thing. In many ways, it is an undeniable manifestation of the Empire's own lack of unity. Soldiers therefore are a very low Station, considered by the state to be above Farmers, but often given a degree of contempt in excess of their agricultural counterparts. The bureaucracy, however, holds Soldiers in higher Station and thus they can expect better pay and better legal representation. Soldiers are fielded most often to the southern provinces to deal with the lawlessness and Hungry Ghosts of the area. Soldiers are expected to be either agile, strong, or tough and must possess at least the Second Rank of some weapon skill (this is part of basic training).

Craftsmen (Those Studied Masters of Hammer and Needle)

Toil is a sacred part of the Doctrine of Unity; it transforms raw materials into finished goods, each one capable of improving the life of an Imperial citizen at a fair price. Craftsmen are expected to adhere rigorously to the Thousand Acceptable Forms and a massive bureaucratic infrastructure has been set up in order to monitor the production of goods. Each member of the Craftsman Station is assigned to a Bureaucrat whose job it is to oversee their efforts and ensure the quality of goods. Dallying outside of the Acceptable Forms can land a Craftsman in big trouble, including exile if the offense is considered heinous enough by the prosecuting Justicar. Craftsmen are given a higher Station than Soldiers and Farmers because, it is reasoned, that Craftsmen require considerably more training and education than their inferiors. It also requires that one gain a higher scoring on their Five Legged Essay. Each Craftsman must be apprenticed to an elder Craftsman until they achieve the Second Rank of their Craft. Craftsmen are expected to be either learned or perceptive.

Those women who are assigned to be childbearing housewives are also of this Station, given the special designation "Craftswoman of the Home". Unlike more traditional Craftsmen, they are expected to upkeep, decorate, and otherwise maintain their husbands property and home as well as provide meals. They are apprenticed in much the same way as their counterparts until they are married, when their well-being becomes the responsibility of their husband. Although it is not forbidden to marry between Stations, Craftswomen of the Home are not permitted to marry Farmers or Soldiers. It is reasoned that their trade and arts do not aid society when the beneficiary is one with such a lowly job. Surely the blissful domestic space that accompanies a Craftswoman of the Home would be better given to someone with a much more demanding job! Craftswomen of the Home are also considered craftsmen of well rounded, loyal, and virtuous Imperial citizens. The rearing of healthy Imperial children is an expected duty of this sub-designation. Craftswomen of the Home must possess the First

Rank of Diplomacy as well as display the attributes of charisma or empathy.

Bureaucrats (Those Honest Regulators of Society)

The Doctrine of Unity holds that each person should be given the chance to advance their family's status by proving their worthiness for higher Stations than their own parents. This drive for social mobility is expressed in the Five Legged Essay, which could theoretically allow a farmer's son or daughter attain the highest ranks of Imperial power. When preparing and studying for the Five Legged Essay, children are instructed in ways that are thought of as weighing their score towards the Bureaucrat Station. That is because this is the highest Station that is reasonably attainable. Whereas the criteria used to place Stone Lions and Justicars is incredibly difficult to quantify, the Bureaucrat Station is chosen from among the top 10% ranked students. Therefore, an excellent score assures a student will join this Station. Bureaucrats live considerably well; each one can expect enough income to have a manor as well as servants of their own. This represents, in essence, a "middle class" between the elites of the highest Stations and the more labor intensive lower Stations. Bureaucrats are incredibly important to the Imperial system. Bureaucrats file paperwork, ensure the quality of goods, keep birth and death records, and generally ensure that society is well oiled and well documented. Even if their work is mostly boring, each one carries out their tasks as if the Emperor himself relied upon it. The Royal Family ensures (through mostly honest means) that this is the lowest rank their progeny generally attain. Bureaucrats are expected to be learned, willful, perceptive, empathic, or charismatic. Bureaucrats must possess the First Rank of Mercantile and the Second Rank of Scholarship.

Monks (Those Sagacious Masters of the Written Symbol)

The term (and Station of) 'monk' is given to any number of masters who live in the many monasteries of the Empire. There are many varied types of monks, but suffice to say that each one serves as a receptacle of living wisdom. Monasteries house the entire Imperial education system, from primary school to extremely specific degree programs. Because of their importance, and high population density, most monasteries are sprawling affairs. The largest are somewhat like cities unto themselves. This is because each one is hospice, temple, college, library, and gymnasium built into a single structure. Monks are usually elderly as a matter of course. Many of them were given this Station in order to be moral teachers to the younger generation. Others joined the monastery later in life, either to teach their chosen profession or to convalesce (and pass into either a new life or join the Honorable Ancestors). Most citizens, when faced with terminal illness, will retreat to their local monastery to live out the remainder of their life in contemplation of the Doctrine of Unity. Anyone with sufficient wisdom is permitted to join a monastery (and thus, improve their Station) but the life is not without its ascetic difficulties. Monks are vegetarian and are expected to spend their free moments away from students in meditation. Some who are assigned this Station early in life are unprepared for the rigors of monastery life and voluntarily exile themselves. The monk Station is assigned according to ephemeral criteria, lending their elevation a mystical quality not generally ascribed to other Stations. There are no clear talents or traits that mark one as being destined for this Station. Lower Stations may "trade up" to the Station of Monk by appealing to the bureaucracy. However, it is generally only awarded to those candidates that are seen as being exceptionally wise for their Station and nearing the end of their lives.

Physicians (Those Compassionate Arbitrators of Illness)

Doctors are given a very, very high degree of respect because they are considered to be the bringers and

maintainers of human life in the Empire (seconded in respect only by the Stations that keep the Harmonious Changes and the Stations that serve the Emperor directly). Their intense training allows them to maintain the bodily health of society. In many ways, being a doctor is considered semi-divine; he raises the seemingly dead, his knowledge counteracts the effect of invisible diseases, and he gives his life in service of others that they might be able to fulfill their own destiny. However, members of the physician Station must earn this societal approbation. Each one is expected to train in the furthest reaches of the Far South, where jungle diseases and the Hungry Dead kill an equal number of people each year. While this ensures that the Southern reaches have inferior medical care (their doctors are always untrained and more than a little "wet behind the ears") it also ensures that the South maintains some measure of Imperial decorum. Without this civilizing influence, Southern culture might very well have fallen into anarchy long ago. When doctors have performed their time in the South, they return to the civilized north as hardened veterans. Aside from simply being better in the medical arts, they often generalize into other areas such as wilderness survival, alchemy, or even swordplay. Doctors are expected to be learned, empathic, or perceptive. Although it is not a requirement, many find that their residency leaves them quite toughened or strengthened by the experience. Physicians are expected to have the Second Rank of Healing at the beginning of their career and are permitted to return to the seat of the Empire after achieving the Fifth Rank of Healing.

Stone Lions (Those Whose Stance is Harmonious)

Stone Lions once existed as a fighting society in the Age of the Unwise. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the Second Emperor conscripted the (illegal) remnants of this group to guard the Great Northern Wall. Taking a lifestyle similar to that of monks, but of a decidedly more martial bent, the Stone Lions have stood at the gates of the Wall since the earliest years of the Empire. The criteria used to elevate students to the ranks of the Stone Lions by the content of their Five Legged Essays is unclear. Students must be either willful, tough, or attuned to the Harmonies as a matter of course, but there are no guidelines that students can adhere to on their Essay to generate a guaranteed entry into this Station. Life as a Stone Lion is quite ascetic. Lions are expected to do their turn standing at the Wall's many gates and then spend their free time training or meditating. Initiation into the Stone Lions requires that students initiate into the Philosophy of the Thirteen Harmonious Changes. By performing this initiation, they learn how to perform each of the 12 basic Changes (although, they will only be able to actually perform a handful). Students are expected to master these Changes, from one to six, in the correct order as proscribed by the Philosopher (whose wisdom revealed the Harmonious Changes). Common people know very little about the Stone Lions since they live separate from them. Therefore, those of low Station sometimes believe that Stone Lions are actually mystic guardians of the Wall (which is half true). If a Stone Lion learns all six of the 'Stone Lion' Harmonious Changes, they may petition the Justicars for a special test which, if completed to the satisfaction of the Justicars, allows the Stone Lion to elevate into the Justicar Station. The sections of the Wall where Stone Lions live are referred to as "chapter houses". This is a linguistic remnant of their time as a fighting society that was never corrected. Stone Lions are considered full members of the Station upon performing the Implacable Stone Lion for the first time.

Justicars (Those Whose Judgment is Beyond Reproach)

The Empire, since its founding, has always been incredibly conservative and resistant to any sort of societal drift. Language, law, burial rites, the Thirteen Harmonious Changes, and other pillars of societal cohesion are entrusted to the Justicars. This is not to say that the Empire fights all change. To the contrary, both the Emperor and the Justicar Station are permitted to periodically redefine certain

aspects of Imperial culture in order to make it more flexible in dealing with the challenges that a world-wide Empire faces. For instance, Craftsmen were permitted to make certain alloys only as long as it contained very specific percentages of each metal involved. When faced with a tin shortage in the 7th millennium of the Empire, many alloys were illegal to create until the Justicars determined that similar alloys could be produced safely with a smaller percentage of tin. However, before these alloys were determined to be safe, many Craftsmen were exiled for selling goods which would, a matter of months later, be considered perfectly legal. Justicars have many duties to perform. Aside from arbitrating cultural drift, they also serve as magistrates. Justicars can hand down any sentence to anyone of lower Station than Stone Lion, up to and including exile. Only a senior Justicar (Or the Emperor...) can overturn another Justicar's ruling, but this simply never happens. Justicars are also the last line of defense against Hungry Dead. When they are discovered, a Justicar is called to exorcise those wayward souls and send them to their next incarnation. Justicars, likewise, have the power to regulate badly behaving Honorable Ancestors or contact their superiors in the Golden Palace. Like the Stone Lions, Justicars practice a portion of the Thirteen Harmonious Changes. Justicars are expected to master the Changes, starting with the seventh and ending with the twelfth, in ascending order. If a Justicar completes the twelfth Change, they are permitted to lower their Station (by act of judgment) to that of Stone Lion in order to learn the first through sixth Changes. The criteria for choosing Justicars based on a subject's Five Legged Essay is unknown, but Justicars are either perceptive, willful, empathic, or charismatic. Justicars ascend to their Station upon performing the Inquisitor's Bearing for the first time.

Advisers (Those Whose Imperial Wisdom is Both August and Chaste)

When the Philosopher traveled the world, wise men walked with him from village to village, in awe of the wisdom he provided. When the First Emperor was informed of the Philosopher's existence (by his own adviser, interestingly), he sought out the Philosopher so that he could also learn from the master. However, the First Emperor never encountered the Philosopher himself. Instead, he drew to him a council of advisers composed of those who had learned directly from the Philosopher. Because the Emperor had not had any first-hand moments with the Philosopher, he was less familiar with the Doctrine of Unity than those who had actually witnessed the Harmonious Changes in person. So that he would not unknowingly transgress against the Doctrine of Unity, he informed his advisers to intercede when his actions went against the Doctrine. This tradition has continued long after the First Emperor, with each Emperor forming his own council of advisers, known as the August Deliberative of Unified Days (or August Deliberative, in its more brief form). This body is composed of scholars whose singular duty is to read, understand, and interpret the Doctrine of Unity as it relates to Imperial edict. If the Emperor performs an action that is seen as being outside of the Doctrine of Unity, the Deliberative may veto the action and cite passages for the Emperor to reread before returning to that specific matter. This power is rarely used, especially in modern times when the Emperor cannot afford to be seen as anything except a bastion of stability. Advisers are not considered wise enough to sit on the August Deliberative unless they have achieved the Seventh Rank of Scholarship, in addition to having lived an unblemished life in service of the Empire.

Emperor (He That Holds the Golden Seal of Three Birds)

The Doctrine of Unity establishes many of the Stations without naming them directly in their modern form. The Philosopher cited the need for an agricultural class, an intellectual class, guardians of order, and fair-minded judges. He also notes that a singularity of vision is required for the sort of bold leadership that rallies men against the forces of chaos. This "highest of stations" (as spoken by the

Philosopher) intrigued the First Emperor when he was still a common warlord. With a single enlightened leader, a society could avoid the inefficiency, corruption, and inaction that would otherwise plague a society with such an extensive bureaucracy. The Emperor, who is chosen by right of succession from the eldest son of the previous Emperor, is this Station. The Emperor's word is law, except where it conflicts with the Doctrine of Unity. Furthermore, this Station is saddled with a bewildering array of things that are forbidden, in order that the Emperor remain humble in his mighty throne. Although his skin rarely touches anything other than jade and silk, he must be vegetarian (except of course for his single fish) and can eat only millet (not rice). The current Emperor, once named Li Kao, ascended his throne at the end of the Red Hand Rebellion and has adhered to traditional notions of the position to an extreme. It has been remarked upon more than once that he raises his eyebrows only at moments where the Philosopher would have personally approved of the gesture.

Explorers (Those Whose Dedication Allows Their Departure)

The Explorer Station is a recent addition and scarcely qualifies as a Station in the strictest sense. Unlike the other Stations, the status of 'Explorer' is bestowed in addition to the person's actual Station. The reason that this sub-Station exists at all is because of the recent discovery of the Forest of Doors; the Emperor and his Justicars felt that the discovery warranted the creation of an entirely new societal niche that had never been proposed by the Philosopher. Explorers are known as 'those whose dedication allows their departure' because their job is to explore the Forest of Doors while at the same time remaining as true to the Doctrine of Unity as is possible in such a rugged environment. The Station of Explorer is bestowed only at the behest of the Emperor himself, and as such many people close to the Emperor have been granted this status. However, he also chooses individuals he has not met based on their record of public service, Five Legged Essays, and reputation. Only those who display a real commitment to the Doctrine of Unity and the Thousand Acceptable Forms are chosen for this position, because, it is reasoned, absence from the Empire is corrosive to one's rightful place in society. In many ways, travel beyond the world itself is seen as a form of exile, even if it is in service of the Emperor. It is only by being bestowed the mantle of Explorer that one is permitted to return to the Empire legally. Explorers are permitted to dwell in the Forest wherever they feel they can serve the Empire best (either through literal exploration, diplomacy, or other means) but there is a central encampment (known as the Third Glorious Advanced Imperial Exploration Settlement) that serves as a central hub for Imperials. This settlement is overseen by Grand Explorer Yellow Dragon Li, a childhood friend of the Emperor. The Forest is extremely fascinating to the Emperor, and thus, new information is highly prized by his majesty. Explorers are encouraged to participate in the local economy of the Forest and the Empire provides a stipend for Explorers who faithfully fill out their monthly reports (which Imperial citizens excel at).

Imperial Measurements, Calender, and Astrological Signs

The Empire of Perfect Unity makes considerable use of its bureaucracy and this requires that things be quantified in order to hold individuals accountable on some sort of equal basis. To this end, the Empire makes use of an advanced measuring system that was proposed by the Philosopher and formulated by the First Emperor's many worthy scholars. The measurement system is based on the length of the Empire, the weight of water, the temperature at which water freezes and boils, and other easily quantifiable measurements. Length is measured in meters, temperature by degrees, weight by grams, and time by seconds, minutes, and hours. Each unit is subdivided into greater and lesser bases of ten, making it quite intuitive to use quickly. Therefore, one one-hundredth of a meter is a centimeter, one one-thousandth of a second is a millisecond, etc. The Imperial currency is known as "koku," small

brass coins with a square-shaped hole in the center for ease of transport. A koku is worth precisely one bale of rice, and thus, the Empire's economic standard is a rice standard. Thankfully, the price of rice has remained unchanged in the Empire since the Red Hand Rebellion. In the Seven Hundred Emperors period, each kingdom held its own measurements, based on a host of random metrics (king's feet, grains of rice, the temperature of a dead man's hand, etc).

The Empire has even felt it necessary to quantify pure abstractions, especially as it relates to job performance. Thus, Imperial culture makes reference to Ranks of Excellence. Using extremely legalistic and exhaustive criteria, this system seeks to apply a ranking system to human skill and experience. Mostly, it relies on observations and specific tests of skill to determine where a particular person is ranked in specific skill sets. This ranking system is rated one to twelve, with one being the least skilled. The benchmark for each skill set is unique. The Thirteen Harmonious Changes are ranked based on number of Changes known, including any Empowered Changes or Greater Workings. In swordplay, an individual is not considered to be of the Fourth Rank of the Sword until they can recover instantly from an opponent's disarming attempt. The Ranks of Scholarship are based upon degrees attained and efficiency of research. The bureaucracy of the Empire keeps exhausting records on the capabilities of its citizens. Should someone be discovered to be under-performing based on their Ranks of Excellence, they can expect that their superior will want to know why.

The Imperial calendar is based on lunar cycles, called months. There are twelve months, named simply First Month, Seventh Month, Tenth Month, etc. Each month has exactly 30 days, each of which is composed of twenty four hours. The first four months are referred to as the Season of Sun (hot months), the second four called the Season of Harvest (warm months), and the last four called the Season of Wind (cold months). While Imperial culture regards these seasons for the purposes of record-keeping, everyone there still understands and uses the concepts of winter, spring, summer, and autumn in daily speech. Each season is associated with three animal constellations. These star signs are the basis for the Empire's rich tradition of astrology. Although it is not considered predictive of the future, it is believed that hidden truths can be revealed about individuals based on the positions of nine sacred animal constellations. Each individual falls under the influence of three constellations based on the time of their birth (one from year, one from a 40-day cycle, and one from the day itself). It is currently a Year of the Tiger ((2010)). Normally, individuals have three separate star signs, but some individuals are born on specific days in specific months of specific years that allows them to fall under one constellation multiple times. Such individuals are expected to epitomize that particular star sign's aspects and associations.

Dragon - the Attuned Trait, esoteric enlightenment, Stone Lions, energetic, spices, mountains, Season of Sun

Tortoise - the Tough Trait, stoic endurance, Farmers, self-reliant, rice, roads, Season of Sun

Monkey - the Agile Trait, furious action, Monks, humorous, fruit, jungle, Season of Sun

Ox - the Willful Trait, incorruptible wisdom, Justicars, goal-oriented, grains, fields, Season of Harvest

Dog - the Perceptive Trait, critical sight, Craftsmen, thoughtful, meat, city, Season of Harvest

Mantis - the Empathic Trait, natural wisdom, Physicians, compassionate, nuts, graveyards, Season of Harvest

Tiger - the Strong Trait, unstoppable might, Soldiers/the Emperor, authoritative, tea, forest, Season of Wind

Raptor - the Charismatic Trait, noble action, Bureaucrats, gregarious, sweets, plains, Season of Wind

Crane - the Learned Trait, ancient wisdom, Advisers/Explorers, analytical, fish, streams, Season of Wind

Exile Culture

In the shadow of the Wall exiles eke out a living free from Imperial strictures and bonds. Very few of these people are second generation exiles; a majority were themselves cast out from the Empire by Imperial Law. However, most of those under the age of twenty are themselves children of exiles. More people are exiled on a daily basis, and thus, the population of first generation exiles grows steadily. Many of those currently exiled were participants in the Red Hand Rebellion or descendants of members of the Red Hand. However, a number of exiles come from upstanding families who never possessed rebel sentiments. These individuals have been caught up in the tightening perception of what is and is not acceptable in the Empire proper. Many of these unfortunates are artists who strayed beyond acceptable forms, those who were not satisfied in their arranged marriages, or people seeking to break from one of millions of state-mandated traditions. Of course, there are also a fair number of outright heretics; profaning the Doctrine of Unity and Wong Fei is a time honored tradition in the North.

On the surface, exile culture seems to have nothing in common with Imperial culture. It values the individual over the community. It rejects the Thousand Acceptable Forms and the Doctrine of Unity. It has no form of civil society at all. Banditry is the most common profession (assuming one considers it worthy of such a title). Artists, cultists, martial artists, and slaves round out the other common professions. However, to say that they utterly reject the Imperial way of life is far too simple. The reality is far less cut-and-dry. Although they have no government proper, people still gather in communities. People still style themselves similarly (albeit, with a flare for the personal), but only similarly. The only society, aesthetic, or way of life exiles know comes from the Empire. Their point of view is clearly different than that of their more loyal counterparts, but their moral code is likely to be very similar as well.

Before the Red Hand Rebellion, however, the exiled people had a culture that was much more distinct from their southern counterparts. Some of that culture remains, but the mingling of Imperial and Exile culture during the Empire of the Scarlet Sun blotted out the distinct cultural boundaries that had existed beforehand. Exile culture had once been proudly individualist and tales of “ronin” warriors (warriors without Station) were told around every fireside. Popular mythology tells of seven such warriors (whose names are different in each telling) standing against a horde of bandits who threatened a small dusty hamlet. They all lost their lives, as the story goes, but they annihilated the greatest brigand band in all the North. Even though the literary tradition of the ronin is still carried on in the North, there are almost none of these larger-than-life figures left. Anyone willing to stand up against injustice or proclaim themselves to be “without master” are likely to be murdered in the night. This is one of the reasons many Northerners hate the Red Hand Rebellion as much as Southerners; it watered down any distinct sense of cultural identity Northerners may have once had.

Despite the best efforts of the Empire to stamp out the ancient tradition of worshipping spirit-beings, the tradition is alive and well in the North. The ancient martial societies of the Age of the Unwise revered gods who they believed bestowed victory in battle to those who most closely emulated their fighting styles. Those fighting styles have been lost in those intervening years since the Age of the Unwise, but the cults remain. Imperials and a majority of Exiles consider this practice to be completely idiotic. It is well documented that their efforts are largely wasted and their offerings are received by precisely no one. Their rituals are meaningless, whereas the rituals of the Thirteen Harmonious Changes are, without a doubt, effective (whether or not you practice them the Imperial way). The names and types of beings invoked by cultists are far too many to document, each more improbable than the last.

The North lacks fertility. The area just north of the Wall is dusty plains that are highly unsuitable to agriculture. Nomadic hunting groups are far more effective at eking a living from the land than settled villages. However, despite this, Exiles forge forward with settlements in imitation of the lives they once had. Life is certifiably hardscrabble. Time spent defending one's home from bandits is time spent doing something other than growing crops, so villages frequently pay off bandits or else use slave labor to pull sustenance from the land. Storms frequently sweep in from the far northern Great Dragon Mountains, stopping just short of the Wall itself. Such storms are not the docile affair seen in the far south; lightning bolts seem as if they are as common as the raindrops themselves. It almost seems as if they seek out villages to set fire to, as if they desire to punish those whose houses defy the traditional mode. Locusts, unknown elsewhere, darken the skies on a biyearly basis.

If that wasn't bad enough, the Dead walk the North. Because death rites are nearly always performed incorrectly, if at all, Hungry Ghosts roam the wilderness. In the absence of Justicars, freelance ghost-hunters charge communities for their service when particularly nasty cases arise. Worse of all, some of the dead even possess some measure of self awareness and seek to return to their lives or use their newfound immortality to dominate a region. Luckily for the Exiles, the Thirteen Harmonious Changes flourish in the absence of rigorous regulation. One is never very far from someone who knows the Ghost-Killing Hands. However, it is likely that to convince such an individual to use their talent, one would have to promise half of your next harvest. Failing to meet a bargain of this nature is likely to be one's undoing, as ghost-hunters tend to also know how to kill in such a way as to deliberately produce one of the Hungry Ghosts.

Tribal Culture

Far in the North, there are people who have never heard of the Doctrine of Unity. They dwell in the farthest Northern Mountains where the stones of the Great Northern Wall were hewn. Camping in the artificial plateaus created by that massive civil effort, they live plain lives as hunters and warriors. They have nothing in the way of infrastructure. Their method of dealing with Hungry Ghosts is to appease them or form a war band to drive them off. They are illiterate, filthy, perpetually disease ridden, quick to anger, mostly witless, and prone to parasites. They worship the sky and the land (personified in the form of wasp and termite gods). They regard exiles as hideously house-bound. It would truly drive them mad to know that people live as they do in the Empire proper. It would seem to them to be far too fantastic to even consider.

Still, some few nomads from the far north mingle with exiles as mercenaries, slavers, or even scholars

(of a sort). There is some measure of cultural exchange, even though most nomads chiefs consider their southern cousins to be hated enemies. Most tribal folks remember the Empire of the Scarlet Sun era, when bureaucrats came up from the south to obliterate their way of life and subjugate their people. They fought back with ferocious force, drove back the civilized hordes, and have maintained their independence every day since. Nomads curse Empress Wan Bei as much as anyone in the Empire, if not moreso.

Ancestors and Hungry Ghosts

Death in the Empire is a public event, as the deceased family wears white and all friends wear black. Society acknowledges the passing of its honorable dead, showing the soul of the departed that they were valued in their life. It is of vital importance that each citizen be put to rest so that their soul can be appeased. It is believed that souls normally reincarnate upon death, assuming that their burial is performed correctly, respectfully, and in accordance with the subject's Station and horoscope. Correctly performing burial rites is so important to the society of the Empire that the Overflowing Fullness of Imperial Infallibility (also known as the Public Treasury) matches funds with families for the purpose of holding funerals. Therefore, even poor families can pay for a monument at a state-appointed and maintained graveyard. The importance of correctly performed funerary rites cannot be overstated, as the fate of souls hangs in the balance. When performed correctly, a soul passes to its next incarnation or lingers on as an Ancestor to preserve cultural wisdom. Otherwise, the soul becomes Hungry. This is a tragedy in the eyes of society. It is intolerable for such a thing to be allowed to persist. The less said about such a thing, the better. All ghostly forms, whether Ancestor or Hungry Ghost, are physical. The idea of indistinct ghostly wraiths would seem absurd to Imperial citizens.

Ancestors are an important part of Imperial society despite no longer being alive. The nature of this "second life" is not often discussed amongst the living in the hopes of avoiding offense to the Ancestors. Little is known of its nature, and little scholarship is performed on the issue. When a person dies having lived an honorable life, they sometimes regain consciousness in the Golden Hall of Honorable Ancestors. This is a physical location in the Empire itself, but forbidden to everyone except Ancestors. There, the souls of the honorably departed hold court amongst their own. What they do there is unknown to the living. Exiles have no Ancestors. It seems as if the process cannot happen outside the strict regulation of the Empire. Ancestors appear as they did in life, but with white robes and hair. Their skin, however, usually appears youthful in contrast to their colorless beards and hair.

There are aspects of an Ancestor's existence where they intersect with the living. Each Ancestor makes their presence clear to their descendants by appearing at the first full moon after their funeral. It is expected that family members, especially direct descendants, will erect a shrine in their household to honor the Ancestor. Thereafter, any descendant can speak to their Ancestor at the shrine itself during the full moon. Imperial families that can afford a room devoted to shrines always do so, for access to an Ancestor is a very important thing. Keeping an Ancestor in highest regard is key to keeping in his good graces. It is expected that family members will keep their Ancestors up to date on the happenings in their lives, often being held accountable for the actions they take. Young people often dread their moments of prayer at their Ancestors' shrine, omitting moments of individual action or personal creativity. Attention to the shrine and to the Ancestor itself ensures that the Ancestor remains in this incarnation and does not pass beyond. If an Ancestor has no descendants left to advise or is no longer honored, they will pass into their next life.

Ancestors can appear at their shrines on the full moon and speak with the living, if they desire. Ancestors are seen as an incorruptible source of wisdom and lynchpins of traditional society. Since their lives were lived honorably (as a requirement for becoming an Ancestor) and their current state is freed from the vicissitudes of bodily life, it is assumed that they are an invaluable moral instructor. Silent Ancestors are seen as a sign of disapproval. Ancestors can bestow luck on those they deem worthy or curse those that displease them. Likewise, Ancestors that are unreasonable or cruel are no longer honored by their descendants (and they pass beyond). Large families support large numbers of Ancestors, while small families cannot support a large number because they do not have sufficient time to focus their attention on an endless number of departed family. Families with no Ancestors are ashamed of their state. One must wonder why their family line is so deficient in honorable lives.

However, even Ancestors are merely human and although the Courts of the Golden Hall of Honorable Ancestors clearly have their own means of sanctioning wayward Ancestors, they are sometimes seduced by the lure of the living world. Ancestors are physical beings, even though they are the souls of the dead. Their bodies are laid to rest in state-run graveyards, but their souls have never forgotten the pleasures of life. Ancestors can sometimes attempt to return to their old lives or start a new life in a new city where they would not be known. It is hideously shameful for a family's Ancestor fall to such a base way of life. Justicars regulate the dead where the Golden Hall of Honorable Ancestors cannot. If the name of the dead is known, a Justicar can summon him to his presence to account for his actions. If the Ancestor cannot be returned to their rightful station, the Justicar can reveal a funerary prayer strip to the ghost just as the Philosopher was said to have done. If the Justicar be powerful in the Thirteen Harmonious Changes, the Ghost-Killing Hands is sufficient to do away with even the most recalcitrant ghost.

The Hungry Ghosts are a fact of life in the Empire. Even with the most lavish funerals, some souls are brought back by their own desires. Personal desires, especially, tend to bring a soul back as a Hungry Ghost. When one dies with their sole desire unfulfilled, it is likely that they will be reborn as a Hungry Ghost. It is said that faithfully living according to the Doctrine of Unity prevents one from coming back as a Hungry Ghost, so it assumed that when someone is reborn in that state that they were secretly acting against the Doctrine away from the eyes of polite society. It is a shameful thing for a family to have one of these dishonorable dead in their line. Like Ancestors, Hungry Ghosts are physical beings born from the souls of the dead. Unlike Ancestors, their nature is pure wickedness. They seek only to consume. Depending on their level of wickedness, they might seek out wine, the embrace of the opposite sex, fine clothing, art, or the flesh of the living. This hunger is an unreasoning madness that takes over all other needs. Because Hungry Ghosts cannot think beyond their own needs and desires, they cannot be a part of society. Because they cannot be a part of society, they must be destroyed. Justicars do not attempt to bring the Hungry Ghosts back into the fold of civil life. They destroy them as quickly as possible, for Hungry Ghosts steadily grow in power from the moment of their death. Their wickedness increases with each passing season, until they are rabid corpses seeking out children for their sweet innards. Imperial citizens do not speak about Hungry Ghosts because it is such a hideous thing to behold. Exiles are not permitted such frivolities and must contend with Hungry Ghosts on a regular basis.

Names

In traditional Imperial culture, one's family name is always presented first. This is because family is of prime importance to Imperial culture. An Imperial citizen's honor and face are often based on the behaviors of their family members, and as such, knowing who a person is related to is more important than knowing simply who an individual is. One's personal name is listed second. Those who have the same given name as a close relative will sometimes receive a second given name to distinguish the two individuals. A person's rank, if any, is listed after their name in formal situations and official documents. When addressing an immediate superior (for instance, a soldier addressing his sergeant or a student addressing her teacher) Imperial citizens refer to their superior as 'master'.

Ai, Bao, Fu, Geng, Gu-yu, Hei, Ji, Kang, Ke, Liu, Shei, Tan, Tong, Tree, Wang, Xiang, and Yu are common family names.

Common male surnames include Bo, Chan, Chen, Chung, Ho, Hsin, Jin, Li, Manchu, Ming, Shen, Shing, Sun, Wang, Wen, and Yuan. Common female surnames include An, Bo, Chow, Chyou, Genji, Guan-yin, Heng, Hua, Jin, Jun, Lian, Lien, Mee, Mingmei, Sun, and Tao.

Northerners and exiles are more likely to refer to themselves by a nom de guerre or nom de plume than by their given name. Epithets are quite common. Names like Four Serpent Warrior, Xidhou the Merciful, and Forbidding Hand Lord are common amongst the various war bands and slavers. One is said to have "made their name" once people start recognizing and repeating one's chosen name. In this way, northerners name themselves through their deeds (an act of will), instead of being at the mercy of one's family (an act of chance). Pragmatically, these names convey the deeds or character traits of a person. This is far more important to northerners than to whom one is related.

Explorers from the Forest of Doors have a very strange phenomenon to report about the Forest of Doors as it relates to names specifically. According to reports, the Forest has a language of its own that it enforces upon those who dwell there. This sorcerous tongue aggressively translates the languages of other worlds in order to make them intelligible to one another. However, this translates names that are drawn from words used in common speech. For instance, the Imperial name "Bai Guey'hu" is translated to "Ghost Tiger" when spoken in the Forest. Therefore, names that "mean something" (as opposed to names that are pure abstraction) become translated. This can make northern and southern names seem more alike than they really are.

Foods

Rice and millet (a less nutritious but easier crop than rice) are the common staple of the Imperial diet. Peasants and the royal family dine almost exclusively upon millet with proper supplements to avoid losing their night vision (as is proper). Peasants eat millet because they cannot afford better; royalty dine upon millet according to the Doctrine of Unity in order to impose deliberate humility upon them. Those in the bureaucracy eat rice or, more commonly, noodles made of rice. The innovation of forming rice into noodles makes it easier to eat with chop sticks (the only acceptable method of delivering solid food to one's mouth). Breads are rare in the Empire, relegated almost entirely to sweets. Most confections are pastries filled with sweet bean curd or preserves.

Sauces and stir fries are universally served upon a bed of rice or rice noodles. Common ingredients include pork, cabbage, chicken, soy, vinegar, molasses, peanut, curry, and mushrooms. Unlike many creative endeavors in the Empire, culinary arts are given tremendous leeway to produce new and unique dishes. However, food preparation itself is doubly more regulated than most professions to ensure absolute food purity. In the fast-paced city life, most people take their meals in restaurants and tea houses where meals are prepared by specialists in various sauce-based dishes. For an unmarried woman, or married man, to dwell in such places is considered absolutely unseemly. Unmarried women are not permitted because their virtue might come into question in a place populated by men who have no wives to cook for them. For a married man to dwell there begs the question as to why his wife did not prepare his meal. Soups are also commonly served, usually on a bed of noodles or with small squares of tofu. Members of the Physician Station are expected, as a requirement of their profession, to know how to brew various soups made of medicinal herbs.

Pork is the primary meat consumed in the Empire, but beef and chicken are widely consumed. Every social class has access to fruit. Plums, peaches, oranges, dates, apples, and cherries are commonplace. In communities with access to rivers or lakes (nearly every settlement of the Empire proper) fish are very common. During the Empire of the Scarlet Sun rebels and bureaucrats alike experimented with new forms of food inspired by Northern cultural traditions once considered anathema. These innovations include sushi, which, while still not fully accepted by the hard line conservatives, was never deemed to be outside of the Thousand Acceptable Forms. There is a real bigotry against “eating raw fish” from more traditional culture, but the young and adventurous adore the stuff. Of course, those same young and adventurous souls would never admit to eating such a thing in front of their Ancestors, for doing so would be preeminently shameful. Those unable to afford meat or fish live off of tofu and soy bean. Monasteries, and the students in them, are expected to be vegetarian.

Tea crosses all social boundaries and cultural considerations and although the poor may drink a different type of tea than the bureaucrats, every household has the proper settings and ritual implements to serve. Tea is considered by most to be a symbol of civilization and of a properly functioning society. Tea is taken at appointed times during the day, each with its own rules of etiquette. An endless and complex series of rituals are ascribed to settings where tea is served. There exists a “tea culture” that exists in the Empire in the numerous tea houses across the country, where ritual, warm brews, and politics dominate all interaction. In this setting, hotly debated subjects are permitted to be spoken of. This is because all interaction is highly ritualized to promote harmony and avoid argument. It is assumed that the presence of tea will enliven and bring about acceptable debate without bruising egos or harming relationships. Both women and men visit these establishments at the same time because the behavior there is so rigidly regulated that it is believed that nothing unseemly could transpire. Furthermore, since tea houses exist primarily to serve tea, and not food, there is no stigma for being married or unmarried.

North of the Wall, the diet consists mostly of millet and small game. Hare, goat, quail, and beef are the most commonly prepared meats. Agriculture is hideously ineffective in the North, and thus, grain is a scarce commodity. Most settlements use grain to pay off bandits who might raid their livelihood. Tribal communities eat whatever they can get their hands on. They are not above eating a mountain lion or wild fruits whose pits contain heart-stopping venoms. They are also likely to disregard wild plants that are wholly edible because of local superstitions. The lakes of the North lands are horrifyingly toxic and are more likely to yield poisonous gas than they are to yield edible fish or game.

Clothing and Fashion

Men and women are expected to dress differently in the Empire, but both generally wear tops or shirts with cloth buttons. Men, however, usually wear pants and saffron robes or capes. Women usually are expected to wear skirts and forest green robes. Generally, clothes tend towards neutral colors for everyday wearing. However, special events such as holidays, funerals, market days, or weddings require specific colors. For celebrations, women wear red and silver, as symbols of life. Men celebrate in gold and yellow tones, symbols of good fortune. During funerals and during well-regulated periods of mourning, bereaved family members wear white. Non-family mourners are expected to wear black or other dark color. Black, however, is also the color students wear as a sign of their austere studies. Monks and teachers universally wear robes (generally saffron colored, but this is not always the case). In winter, everyone wears thick, dark cloaks to hold in heat. Cotton, and thus linen, is the approved fabric for all fashionable iterations of the Thousand Acceptable Forms, but silk is permitted to anyone belonging to a Station higher than that of Farmer (any Farmer that can afford silk is clearly a criminal). Clothing in the north does not adhere to the Thousand Acceptable Forms, and thus, people wear what they like. Silk was once unknown in the north, but recent exiles and refugees from the Red Hand Rebellion brought it northward where it was mostly snatched up by bandits. Many northerners wear furs in imitation of the tribal nomads whose battle with the cold mountain winds are the stuff of legends.

Although not everyone wears their hair long, it is a symbol of both masculine and feminine strength. When worn in such a way, long hair is always pulled back or put into a topknot or braid. Shaving one's hair signifies that one is seeking enlightenment, unconcerned with worldly affairs. Thus, most monks and students shave their head in order to no longer have to worry about such personal vanities. Women are permitted to go without tonsure in their later schooling years in order to ensure that they are marriageable upon completion of school, and thus, less likely to shame their Ancestors.

Imperials generally shun jewelry, as it is considered too ostentatious. However, amulets and trinkets of jade are worn as protective measures. It is believed that such adornment has protective qualities against disease, injury, and financial misfortune. However, it is considered unseemly to simply spend all of one's days decked out in jade. Such a person would be seen as a hypochondriac at best and a coward at worst. Because of this, one would only protect themselves with jade if they felt a real and present need to do so (sickness in a household, financial chaos, going to war, etc). The warlords of the north, however, see jade and gold as sacred minerals that must be claimed at all costs. The power of a warlord is frequently measured by his horde of treasure, and thus, they bedeck themselves in precious metals and stones. Some even go so far as to poke holes in their bodies (against all established tradition) in order to hold more riches on their person.

The Empire rejects the art of tattooing. Ancestors universally frown on the modification of one's body in all forms, as it is seen as a rejection of nature. Since one is expected to achieve harmony with nature (and the universe itself), any bodily changes are seen as rejecting that harmony. However, for all this, tattoos are tremendously popular in the north. Tattoos can signify loyalty, membership in a martial spirit cult, ronin status, or serve as a sign of personal decoration. Some (mostly young) Imperials have been known to bribe Stone Lions to allow them to pass north to seek out the services of well-known tattoo artists. Even though they pay high prices for such things, they never reveal their markings to

their Ancestors.

Architecture, Art, and Music

Architecture is the most exacting of arts all of the Thousand Acceptable Forms. It is well documented that a house or structure that is not built in exactly the proscribed manner will be besieged by misfortune. One need only look back to the well-ornamented bureaus built during the Red Hand Rebellion to know that any building constructed outside of the traditional method is doomed to strife. Instead of the austere stonework of its predecessors, Wan Bei's aesthetic was inspired by the graceful, flowing forms of bamboo. Like the threads inside bamboo, it attempted to reinforce its walls with small filaments of iron. This allowed the Empire of the Scarlet Sun to build much higher bureaus than the Empire of Perfect Unity. However, the iron rusted and eroded away leaving the structures to collapse underneath a stiff breeze. Most of these structures were gone before Wan Bei's ten year reign ended and whatever still remained were wiped from the face of the Empire by order of Emperor Li Kao.

In contrast, the buildings of the Empire of Perfect Unity have always been almost entirely made of stone (with bamboo and paper separating rooms). Surveyors must first use a ritual compass to determine the correct direction the building should face. This depends primarily on its use, as differing directional orientation imbues the structure with luck in specific endeavors. For instance, bureaucracies are always built facing west because doing so keeps its inhabitants hard working and honest. Houses, however, are built facing east to ensure health and riches. Schools are made facing south, their gaze set away from the imperfections of the north to ensure that moral instruction is at its most potent. All other structures face north, keeping the shame of exile fresh in the minds of those who dwell there. Gravesites and Ancestral dwellings are similarly regulated, and must be taken into account when building nearby. Some structures cannot be permitted to be built in certain areas because stars pass over that location that would cause undue chaos. Therefore, astrologers must be consulted beforehand in addition to the array of architects, monks, and stoneworkers. Each of these professions have the power to stop a project before it starts if it is found to be disharmonious. The amount of paperwork required is prodigious, to say the least, but it ensures that the building will have the most auspicious location possible. Failure to determine sources of chaos at any point in the process ensures that the structure will be prone to earthquake damage, lightning strikes, disease, conflict, and all-around bad luck. Improper construction will be punished by both the sky and the land.

It is believed that all other arts outside of architecture have a similar effect on their surroundings, and thus, must be made according to the Thousand Acceptable Forms in much the same way. The aesthetic that artists are taught to exalt is known as "Forms of Emptiness". It is believed that, in art, having fewer flourishes is far superior to having many flourishes. Thus, painters are told to use the minimum number of brush strokes. Playwrights are told to introduce fewer characters and use only a single set. Musicians focus their compositions on the space between notes, rather than the notes themselves. There are several reasons why the "Forms of Emptiness" style has dominated all artistic accomplishment for the ten-thousand years the Empire has stood. Firstly, it hedges out possible sources of conflict by minimizing the number of elements an artistic work can produce. Unlike in architecture, most art has a single author. Because creative expression is so open, artists can draw on a wide array of patterns, themes, and references. There is no compass to determine whether or not a melody is irritating. There is no formula one can use to determine whether an audience will have

empathy with the morally deficient villain of a play. The stars do not reveal whether a poem has themes that conflict with itself. Therefore, keeping the elements as simple as possible reduces unintended consequences. Secondly, the “Forms of Emptiness” technique makes art more powerful because its message and beauty are understated. When a character says what they are feeling in an opera, we know that this is the truth because our author is not bombarding us with subtle nuance. When we hear a melody in a song, we know that this melody is written with the pure intention of producing melody. When we see a painting of the Northern Wall enshrouded in mist, we can be assured that the Wall is the subject of the painting, not the land surrounding the Wall.

Of the visual arts, stone carving and painting are dominant. Statuary, usually depicting the Emperor or the Philosopher Wong Fei, is common on every corner in the Empire. Every village has a statue to represent, in visual form, the local story of how the Philosopher came to dwell there. Protective statuary, such as stone lions or dragons, are often included in the construction of any threshold. Likewise, paintings adorn the houses and tea rooms of the Empire to beautify such dwellings. Common subjects are the Northern Wall, waterfalls, graveyards, and local schools. Human forms are more common in statuary than in painting. Music is performed on an array of lap-sitting stringed instruments such as the guzheng, koto, or sanxian. Percussion is usually reserved to small drums, gourds, or gongs. Bianqing, a series of suspended stone bells, produces rhythm as well as melody. Peasants and monks frequently employ bamboo flutes to create small, personal melodies.

Prejudice and Superstition

Superstitions are stigmatized in the Empire. Being seen to believe in magical things is shameful in the extreme. This is because the Doctrine of Unity expressly rejects the existence of magic and magical beings. Undead creatures that dwell in the world (such as Hungry Ghosts and Ancestors) are seen as being wholly natural. Furthermore, the Thirteen Harmonious Changes are not looked upon as being “sorcery”. Rather, they are a manifestation of the world’s recognition of an enlightened mind. Belief in “otherworldly” beings would seriously anger one’s Ancestors. Outright worship might be enough to get you exiled to the North. Citizens of the Empire of Perfect Unity do hold one creature in high esteem that is not seen; the Dragon. It is believed that Dragons once ruled over the world before mankind had fully taken root. Imitating the grace of the Dragons, mankind discovered the secrets of martial arts. Once humanity established itself, they took to hunting Dragons for the pearls in their heads. Such pearls, it is said, can be used to summon rain or reroute rivers. Realizing that they could never have peace with mankind, they fled to the mountains. Dragons were never seen again. This would have taken place tens of thousands of years before the Empire was founded. No one has verifiably seen a Dragon in the ten-thousand years the Empire has stood.

Because faith in things beyond the Doctrine of Unity is considered grounds to be exiled, exiles hold onto a rich and varied array of superstitions. During the Age of the Unwise, fighting societies emulated a series of divinities. When those same fighting societies were banished, they became cults in the far north. Whatever techniques the original fighting societies used has been lost, but the traditions remain. Cults of Luck, the Dead, He Who Cleaved Sky From Land, Warfare, various Animal Gods, Celestial Emperors, Kitchen Deities, and Thunder still flourish in the north. Temples rarely exist to worship these beings and when they do exist, they are badly in need of upkeep. Newly exiled Imperial citizens have universal disdain for such nonsense. Why would any deity permit their temples to fall into such disarray? The very notion of worship is absurd, let alone slaving away to beings who clearly

are not listening (and probably do not exist at all). Furthermore, many exiles still believe in mythic creatures and attempt to ward them off. With such harsh living conditions, sacrifices to propitiate mythical creatures can be a real burden.

However, for all their posturing of rationalism, the Empire has its fair share of unreasonable prejudice. Imperial society is terrified of social breakdown the likes of which occurred during the Red Hand Rebellion. Because of this, the sentence of exile is most common. There is usually little attempt to reform the individual. Transgression from the Doctrine of Unity signifies a desire to be free of Imperial society in the minds of most Justicars. Had the individual been serious about participating in civil society, it is reasoned, then they would not have deviated from the standards of civil society. Oftentimes, this is not the case. Usually, someone breaks standard practice on accident or was driven to their transgressions in a moment of unrepeatabe passion. Many exiles attempt to reform themselves once they are cast out, seeking to return to their old way of life amid the madness of the North. Most Justicars will even tell you that there is something deeply wrong with the Empire itself, but no one seems to be willing to make the changes necessary to reform it. Everyone is afraid of what might happen if real change actually came to the Empire.

Families, Gender Roles, and Marriage

Family is the axis upon which the Empire turns. All societal relation, in some fashion, incorporates the family as a social unit. Children are indoctrinated early with endless parables of filial piety, with children sacrificing themselves for the safety of their parents or else righting the wrongs of their siblings. Families are likewise judged by the same stroke of the pen; dishonorable parents, it is reasoned, lead to dishonorable children. When a child exceeds their parents' Station, it is reasoned that the parents succeeded in producing excellent servants for the Empire. Honorable Ancestors, themselves part of a family structure, exist for the sole purpose of dispensing wisdom, justice, and prosperity to their descendants. Those without families are at a severe disadvantage as a result. They lack the blessings of Ancestors, the labor that children produce, or the connections that a wife or husband brings to a marriage. However, they are freed from the potential shame that an exiled relative brings upon a family. They are freed from the disapproving stare of an Ancestor who has not lived in several centuries. Those that live in the North ascribe as much value upon filial relations as they wish. Despite their rough ways, bandit clans and tribal alliances are built upon specific bloodlines. In this manner, even Northerners place a high value on blood relations (except, of course, when they don't).

Marriages and matchmaking is the process by which families are constructed in the Empire. This process belongs partly to the families involved and partly to the bureaucracy itself. Families may enlist the power of state-provided matchmakers (subsidized by the Treasury) or else pay for their own private matchmakers. However, professional advice must be present throughout the process. If the families have a preference of partners (often chosen for political alliances, economic considerations, shows of friendship, or, on odd occasions, romance between the betrothed) they must clear the choice with their matchmaker. Otherwise, the matchmaker will supply potential choices for the family to choose from. Once a partner is selected, the process begins in earnest. The matchmaker interviews both candidates, compares the results for compatibility, and consults the stars. If all elements are found to be in order, the matchmaker contacts the Ancestors of both families and consults them. Assuming the Ancestors approve, the matchmaker then sets about setting up the wedding. If any senior family member or Ancestor objects along the way, the marriage cannot and will not be recognized by the Empire.

Children have little say in who their families choose for their lifelong mates, but loveless marriages are considered just one more sacrifice made in the name of social unity. Romance is the stuff of literature. Even if the marriage itself is without glory, Imperial weddings are always exercises in beautifully grand affairs. In many ways, weddings are excuses to celebrate the joy of life in a relatively unencumbered way. Participants in wedding celebrations are not subject to as stringent social disapproval as would otherwise be the case. In the North, marriages proceed however, whenever, wherever, and between whomever the parties desire. The notion of marriage itself is often challenged by northerners. This is in part because infractions of marital piety (such as adultery or fornication) are often punished by exile in the Empire proper.

In the North, there is much less distinction between the sexes. Many current exiles were banished for homosexuality or other similar rearrangement of traditional gender roles. This can be something as trivial as a woman studying swordplay to an unacceptable degree, a man taking up the art of sewing, or a young child stealing gender-inappropriate toys from their siblings. Such a legacy has permanently altered exile culture towards a less restrictive view of sexual politics. This gender equality (or neutrality) has always set exile culture apart from Imperial culture. Imperial culture is quite chauvinistic, in fact. It is well known that the Five Legged Essay is heavily weighted against women for the purposes of scoring Stations lower than Stone Lion. Women are not forbidden from serving as Soldiers, Bureaucrats, Monks, or Physicians, but something in the scoring process weights them heavily towards the Craftsman Station (especially the Craftswoman of the Home designation). However, of the highest levels of Imperial power (Stone Lions, Justicars, and Advisers), you will find an equal number of men and women. Indeed, female Justicars are prized for their "unique" perspective on the nature of society. Still, a majority of women are given a low Station based partly on their gender alone. Many women in the Empire feel that this is unfair and that they might be able to perform similar labor without being ranked higher on the Five Legged Essay. How, though, can ten thousand years of tradition be overturned when women routinely do achieve those more desired Stations (although in much smaller numbers than male counterparts)?

Law and Crime

The notion of any sort of criminal prosecution in the North is laughable. Justice exists only inasmuch as individuals are willing to dispense some measure of justice by their own hand. More frequently, justice is carried out by mobs, vigilantes, mercenaries, or vengeance-obsessed swordsmen. Some find this freedom from needless litigation as a blessing, especially if one's chosen profession is criminal in nature. In the Empire, though, crime is not tolerated in any fashion. The smallest transgressions are punished by exorbitant fines (based on the Station of the individual) and very brief incarcerations (never longer than three months). Anything more severe is considered grounds for being exiled. Anyone transgressing beyond a certain point is considered a danger to society and is removed. Once a person steps outside the realm of orthodoxy, it is reasoned, they have ceased participating in society and thus cannot be allowed to reap its benefits. Since the Empire has outlawed execution for ten thousand years, exile is the only means of removing subversive individuals from society. Justicars are judge and jury for all infractions of law, meting out sentence once they feel they have adequate evidence for conviction. Families are permitted to argue on behalf of their members during exile proceedings because of the shadow it casts over an entire family line.

The following acts are grounds for bringing exile proceedings against an individual. Justicars have

huge leeway in prosecuting these crimes, interpreting the charges in any way they feel fit. However, the Justicar must prove that the act has, in some way, transgressed against the Doctrine of Unity. Justicars must prove that one of these charges is the appropriate one for prosecution, but as is shown below, each charge is administered in a very broad fashion.

Treason

The charge of treason can be levied against anyone who harms the security of the Empire, conspires with exiles, speaks against the Doctrine of Unity, or otherwise conflicts with the social enterprise known as the Empire of Perfect Unity. This was the charge that eventually saw Fu Sun exiled from the August Deliberative and into the arms of brutal slavers, for being the only member speaking out against the Empire's agricultural plan. It is also the charge levied against unlicensed practitioners of the Thirteen Harmonious Changes. Again, Justicars are given tremendous leeway in bringing this charge against citizens. Soldiers who flee from battle, intellectuals who question the Ancestors' wisdom, and craftsmen who cut corners have all been exiled under this crime.

Family Crimes

The charge of 'crimes against the family' are any who subvert the Imperial mode of family norms. This charge is generally levied against adulterers, but extremely unruly children and women who refuse the advances of their husbands are also caught up by this crime. As with all Imperial law, Justicars may interpret it as they feel appropriate. Thus have people been exiled for such seemingly insignificant crimes as writing love poetry that seems to be about someone other than their appointed spouse, allowing one's eyes to linger too long on a friend's wife, or skipping monastic school a second time in a row.

Violence

Violence is the essence of disharmony. In the presence of bloodletting, there can be no Unity, Perfect or otherwise. Needless to say this crime applies to all assaults, murders, extortions, and similar acts. This is often an easily proven infraction of the law, but has been successfully prosecuted against small punch-ups, very loud arguing, and the making of violent threats. The Empire really has no tolerance for a lack of courtesies, to say nothing of actual violence. Wong Fei, the Philosopher, spends a great deal of time explaining why violence is unacceptable and it is this wisdom that inspired the First Emperor to ban capital punishment (but not before having slain thousands unifying the Empire). However, despite the prohibition against violence, many Bureaucrats, Stone Lions, and Justicars spend their days training in the Scholar Sword. Such a technique exists primarily as a means of defense, they reason, and therefore is not training for any sort of murder or wounding.

Selfishness

Selfishness is in fact considered grounds for exile, assuming the harm against society can be proven sufficiently to banish the accused for all time. Theft, lying, falsifying records, or withholding needed commodities are all grounds for bringing this charge. Unlike other charges, however, this one is given far greater scrutiny, for it is often brought against another party as a means of carrying out a grudge. Oftentimes, a party considers themselves injured and seeks to gain redress by exiling whoever they perceive as having wronged them. In their minds, the target of this charge is certainly guilty of

selfishly harming others for their own personal gain. Such specious charges are nearly universally thrown out.

Holidays of the Empire

The Empire proper celebrates two major observances, which are almost entirely ignored elsewhere. Northerners have a host of strange celebrations, honoring children, false deities, and fallen heroes. None of these have wide practice and are not seen outside of specific communities.

Ancestor's Day (Winter Holiday)

On this day, each family retreats to their ancestral family homes (with bundles of incense in hand) for the purpose of propitiating their Honorable Ancestors. Ancestors are expected to spend the day with their families, away from the Golden Palace. Even those who are had previously been in dereliction of honoring their predecessors find their way home for this day. The living, likewise, spend their time with each other, strengthening the bond between the family, including those who are distant. Because of this observance, travel during the winter months increases considerably as people find their way back to their family's ancestral mansions. Local Justicars also visit the various households in whatever area they happen to be in at the time. This helps foster a feeling of familiarity and trust between the Justicar and the local residents (whether or not that Justicar is in a region they normally govern). The head of each family is expected as well to speak to the Justicar, noting the needs of their family as well as any concerns they may have about that particular Justicar's service. Indeed, this is one of the few times lower Stations are permitted to criticize the actions of the Justicars. It is assumed that Justicars will take whatever concerns are given in the best light possible, and reflect on the answers they are given. Small gifts and food are expected to be provided by the family being visited. As a parting custom, the Justicar is permitted to give a bit of wisdom or a small request to the family. Should they ignore the wisdom or refuse the request, it is considered an affront to the entire spirit of Ancestor's Day.

Festival of the Empire's Rebirth (Spring Holiday)

Wan Bei gave a speech regarding her abdication of the Imperial Throne amid the rising red sun which had once signaled a change of the very face of the world. As her penultimate decree, she stated "Let this day, by Imperial Decree, henceforth be known as the Festival of the Empire's Rebirth." With her final decree, she sentenced herself to death while at the same time pardoning every Rebel of the Red Hand as well as every member of the government. While this anniversary has become the modern incarnation of this celebration, it is a celebration of the Empire's correction as well as of a hope for the future. In the Empire, Stone Lions march across as much of the Empire as they can spare, often days or weeks in advance in order to show their presence in places distant from the Northern Wall. Where they pass, it is customary to give them gifts in proportion to one's wealth; Farmers can spare a meal here and there, Monks can grant wisdom, and wealthy Bureaucrats endow Chapterhouses with rich coffers. Heroic efforts performed by Stone Lions, and the actions of Scholar Sword disciples, are lauded across the Empire. Parades, with noise-makers and dragon costumes, are thrown in honor of these celebrated figures. In the Northern lands, as in the Empire, it is a celebration of the new calendar year. However, the North rejects any other overtones; Exiles hate and vilify the Stone Lions as a majority.

Thirteen Harmonious Changes

As the Philosopher roamed the countryside, his very presence caused tremendous commotion amongst the established warlords and fighting societies. Both these pillars of the Seven-Hundred Emperors period sought him out to exterminate his brand of socially-unified enlightenment. The whole of the nascent Empire's civilization turned its ire on Wong Fei and his followers. No weapon seemed able to harm the Philosopher as long as he stayed rooted to the ground. When he moved, the sword strokes ricocheted off with minimal harm. No crafted thing near him remained broken for long and the earth swallowed up those who threatened him. Perfumed smoke rose around him, blocking all attempts to harm his disciples. His rebukes caused the unrighteous to pause and consider their own unworthiness. When he held a prayer in his palm, Ghosts would genuflect and pass into their next incarnation. Likewise, he could call echoes of worthy souls to dispense luck and wisdom to those who would hold them to be Honorable. When he dwelt in a properly crafted structure, no army could assault it. These miracles were rightly seen as a manifestation of the Philosopher's moral wisdom, and many flocked to his presence in order that they could learn these Changes. He taught very few such precious secrets, but of those he did bless with such wisdom, each one found their way into the service of the First Emperor. Using the Philosopher's model of an ideal society, the Emperor founded a Station to "keep the Thirteen Harmonious Changes". Those individuals became the Emperor's first Justicars. After making the spirit-worshiping fighting societies illegal, the Emperor co-opted the Stone Lion martial arts society into his service. The Stone Lions became keepers of the first six Changes, with the Justicars keeping the more abstract seventh through twelfth Changes (as well as the ability to alter them as society needed).

The Thirteen Harmonious Changes are perceived quite differently in the Empire than in the North. In the Empire, they are seen as a manifestation of inner enlightenment. This enlightenment is a product of soul having achieved a level of perfection that permits its entry into the highest levels of the Empire's power structure. Presumably, Stone Lions and Justicars have already lived multiple lifetimes as Honorable Ancestors or else have performed millennia of laudable service. It is only by their position in the bureaucracy that Justicars and Stone Lions are permitted to practice the Thirteen Harmonious Changes. It is only through the utmost dedication and purity that one is allowed to perform its miracles. Interestingly, the process of initiating into the Changes requires that a participant learn (not master) all of the twelve common Changes of the style. However, mastery is required to actually perform any of the Changes. To this end, practitioners are required to master (not learn) the Changes and associated rituals in ascending order (one to six for Stone Lions, seven to twelve for Justicars), or else face the specter of exile.

To master the Changes out of order, or worse, to learn or teach them without permission, is an affront to the natural order according to the Empire's tradition. It is true that individuals can, and frequently do, practice the Changes without Imperial sanction. This is because, it is reasoned, the universe's sense of justice is blind to selfishness where the Changes are concerned. Just as a murderer goes unpunished without the strong hand of society to dispense justice, so too do these anti-miracles blossom in the presence of a dysfunctional hierarchy. It is up to mankind, therefore, to prevent infractions of the Thirteen Harmonious Changes. According to Imperial dogma, when the Changes are performed in an unlawful way, it does tremendous spiritual harm to the practitioner. Although the universe has no defense against charlatans practicing the Changes, it is still recorded as a terribly bad deed upon that soul for the purposes of future reincarnation. It is said that a single use of a Change without sanction at the beginning of the Empire (ten thousand years prior by common reckoning) would have been redeemed only in recent years. By this logic, hardened users of the Changes who flaunt their power would face hundreds of thousands of years of atonement. Of course, the Northerners have no such

qualms about the Changes, which they learn in any way they feel necessary. Ghost hunters, fake (or fallen) Stone Lions, ascetic madmen, roaming mystics, "enlightened" ronin, and similar figures wander the dust of the wilderness with the Changes upon themselves.

Although the Stone Lions are considered "keepers of the Thirteen Harmonious Changes" as spelled out by the Philosopher, it is the Justicars who have the ultimate authority over the Thirteen Harmonious Changes. At various times during the Empire, the Justicars have met and deliberately altered the content of the Harmonious Changes. Some of these alterations have been lost to apocryphal history books, but the Red Hand Rebellion was considered an important enough event to warrant the remaking of a specific ritual in (relatively) recent memory. This ritual, known as the Seven-Hundred Emperors Lesson before and during the Rebellion period, required that a Justicar decry the society and gods of the Unwise Age. The Philosopher himself made great use of this ritual, preaching the decadence of the age and the necessity of the Doctrine of Unity. However, after ten thousand years of pontificating on the folly of a society that no longer existed, the Justicars reasoned that the ritual had lost its meaning and could be recaptured for a new purpose. Thus, the Justicars remade the Seven-Hundred Emperors Lesson into the Five Summers Lesson. This alteration appeared immediately for those were loyal to the Empire, but much slower for unlicensed users. For many in the North, the ritual remained exactly as it had always been, but interestingly, such individuals found that they could not initiate others into the Changes until they had accepted the newer, official version. Many voluntarily accepted the new version on ideological grounds, hating the Red Hand Rebellion as much as their southern cousins. Some elderly exiles still use the older version of the Lesson, but because of their inability to pass on their version of the Changes, it is clear that their Lessons are doomed to extinction.

The Philosopher makes it clear that there are in fact Thirteen Harmonious Changes, but that the Thirteenth makes itself apparent only to those most enlightened souls shortly before they achieve unity with the totality of everything. Much speculation exists as to the nature of this particular Change and thousands of years of scholarship on the subject has failed to yield verifiable information. Many differing schools of thought have weighed in on the subject with no clear resolution. Some believe that the Thirteenth Harmonious Change can only be learned after mastering the first twelve Changes. Such individuals begin as Stone Lions and pass rigorous essay testing to become Justicars, or else begin as Justicars only to voluntarily lower their Station by becoming Stone Lions. Others believe that the Thirteenth Harmonious Change has nothing at all to do with the first twelve. In fact, this more radical belief states that anyone of any Station could achieve the final Change by simply excelling at their chosen field of study. This hypothesis has some credence to it, as the Imperial Ranks of Excellence use standards of one through twelve. By achieving this theoretical "Thirteenth Rank of Excellence" one would then achieve the final Change. The final (and most nihilistic) faction on the controversy of the Thirteenth Change believes that the Thirteenth Change is in fact death itself. Through this Change, a mortal is judged based on the actions of their life, and if they are wise enough to enact the Change, they achieve a union with the universe itself. Fu Sun, the manufacturer of the Red Hand Rebellion, claimed that the final Change was in fact the rising of the red sun, signaling the presence of momentous destinies. Northerners with a plethora of anti-Imperial sentiment sometimes jokingly say that the only possible Harmonious Change that hasn't happened yet is the death of the Empire itself.

Cities and Locations of the Empire of Perfect Unity

City of Golden Papers

Although the Emperor and his Advisers inhabit the Blue-Yellow Capitol, all of the other major decisions are made in the City of Golden Papers. In many ways, the City of Golden Papers is like a second capitol for the Empire. It is the center of the bewildering Imperial bureaucracy, including the Imperial Treasury, the Justicar Council, and the many profession-specific bureaucracies that enshrine the Thousand Acceptable Forms. In many ways, the City of Golden Papers likes to think of itself as "supremely Imperial" as opposed to all other places which are merely "acceptably Imperial". This snooty attitude has been hard earned, as the City of Golden Papers has kept the Empire running smoothly for uncountable generations. Furthermore, citizens of this city can expect higher wages, greater opportunities, and a generally improved quality of life over their rural counterparts. Bureaucrats in the Empire generally live at least some of their life in this place, especially given that the prestigious Circle of One Thousand Voices is located there. This member of the Five Great Imperial Monasteries is devoted to the training of intellectuals, bureaucrats, artists, writers, and calligraphists. Its graduates can be expected to make significantly higher salaries than their peers and it boasts a number of Emperors as graduates.

City of Blue Stone by Yellow Waters (aka Blue-Yellow Capitol)

Located on the banks of the breathtakingly beautiful Yellow River, this city houses the Emperor, his retinue, and the apparatus of state that relates to Imperial edict. The city itself, and its accompanying maze of palaces, is built out of blue stones washed down the river. The river provides surrounding areas with incredibly fertile, saffron-colored silt that gives the river its flowery name. The Palace of Sublime Jade, the Emperor's personal palace, is carved from a single piece of creamy green jade hauled from the furthest peaks of the Northern Great Dragon Mountains. It is often commented upon that the Emperor can go days without touching any object not made of jade or silk. Citizens of the Blue-Yellow Capitol (as it is known colloquially) take pride in their culture, and thus, produce a higher volume of art and philosophy than their counterparts in other cities. The Capitol is also home to the Sanctuary of Perfect and Saffron Earth, the Empire's premiere agricultural academy (one of the Five Great Imperial Monasteries). It should come as no shock that the same city that holds an immense jade palace should also be home to the largest and wisest collection of low-caste Farmers. Like the Emperor's dietary restrictions, it serves as a means of humbling an otherwise celebrated metropolis.

Orange Blossom Village

Just a few years ago, Orange Blossom Village was overrun by Hungry Ghosts. Situated between a network of fruit plantations in the Far South, there had been no reason for Justicars to roam in such a distant place. That is, until the souls of the neglected dead began organizing. Southern Poisonous Witch, a powerful Hungry Ghost, had been allowed to remain in her incarnation for a hundred years. In that time, she drew hordes of the Hungry to herself in order to assault the relatively weak Southern holdings of the Empire. The newly formed Imperial Military was dispatched (instead of Justicars), but what followed was a hideous campaign of jungle fighting against savage Ghosts. This brief but bloody war has come to be known as the Three Villages Dead Campaign, named after the three villages that had already been devoured (and recruited) by the Ghosts. Southern Poisonous Witch was eventually tracked down and sent into her next incarnation, but not before widespread destruction had already taken place. Orange Blossom was among those three doomed villages, but has since been reclaimed for the Empire in the past three years. Those that dwell there now are transplants, sent there to purify any undiscovered remains and return the plantations to their best possible capacity.

Golden Palace of Honored Ancestors

In the middle of what was once a flood plain (its river no longer exists) lies a clearing littered with a million small white pebbles. In the middle of this dead flood plain lies a glorious palace, bright as the

sun, and certainly more ornate. Its facade depicts a forest of bamboo in yellow and white gold, pocked by beautiful orange golden skulls. This is the Golden Palace of Honored Ancestors and it is not a place where the living are permitted to dwell. Inside, the Honorable Ancestors meet in a society of their own making. To what rules they adhere is anyone's guess. Ancestors do not speak on the subject, nor can anyone attempt to peer into those immense golden gates. It is said that a mortal's heart will stop if they touch any of the white stones surrounding the Palace itself. Legend claims the interior is made of obsidian, not gold, but this is purest speculation.

Ku Ran Outpost

Ku Ran has always been at the center of major changes within the Empire. It was first built by the Second Emperor as the "center point" for the Great Northern Wall, but in successive generations it has become a sort of central command point for the Wall's upkeep and infrastructure. Most of its inhabitants are either retired Stone Lions, descendants of Stone Lions, Stone Lions themselves on leave, or otherwise related to that stony cabal of mystics. Ku Ran was the site of the Red Hand Rebellion's famous breach of the Wall. Likewise, it was also the spot where the doors that lead beyond the world were first discovered. It has since become the staging point for all interactions with the Forest of Doors and its alien inhabitants. It is, in many ways, the central location for the Explorer Station and the worthy Imperial astrologers who know the secrets of the mystical portals. Ku Ran Outpost is renowned for having the most loyal citizens of anywhere in the Empire (a product of the Stone Lion culture), and consequently claims many Explorers from its humble homes. Ku Ran is also the site of the Interlocking Tiger and Dragon (another Great Imperial Monastery), the Empire's one and only military academy. At one time, the Interlocking Tiger and Dragon existed as a college of the sciences, astrology, and the Scholar's Sword. Despite its very academic leanings, the structure itself (ancient before the Second Emperor chose Ku Ran as his command) was clearly raised to be a war monastery. Now, the monastery is devoted once again purely to the arts of war.

Crimson Princess Lake

Legend has it that this massive salt-water lake was formed when a Dragon was slain by an ancient warrior. In retribution for such a wicked deed, the Great Dragon Mountains themselves sloughed off an immense glacier that destroyed the warrior's home village and salted the nearby lands. However, in modern times, the soil is perfectly arable and has become home to a number of settlements along its banks. One such settlement, one of the Great Imperial Monasteries known as the Foundation of the Humble Cub, is devoted to the teaching and practice of the Thirteen Harmonious Changes. Here, items of mystical significance are studied, Greater Workings researched, and speculations on the nature of the Thirteenth Harmonious Change argued. Across the lake itself, in the center, lies the Island of Brine, Blossom, and Blood. No men are permitted to set foot upon the island, as it is itself the last of the Five Great Imperial Monasteries. Here, world famous Craftswomen of the Home are forged into house-making mavens, destined to marry those of the highest Stations the Empire offers. Though their Station is not amongst the highest, very few could argue that graduates of this academy are powerless. Indeed, the Island teaches how to use pillow talk and well-prepared meals to shift the political landscape (in perfectly pious ways, of course).

The Philosopher's Star-and-Sky Waterfall

It is said that somewhere in the Empire, there exists a sacred waterfall under which the Philosopher became enlightened about the nature of the world that would come to be known as the Empire of

Perfect Unity. Legend depicts it as a place of unsurpassed beauty. Each Emperor since the earliest days of the Empire have sent their worthiest scouts to seek out this place, but none has ever succeeded. It is known to exist, however, as the Philosopher himself speaks about his time there, and yet it has eluded every mortal soul. Supposedly, the water reflects the sky and stars, uniting land, sky, heavens, and water together as a symbol of the Doctrine of Unity. It is said that this union of nature is said to reveal ones place in the totality of everything. According to the party line of the Red Hand Rebellion, Fu Sun had also visited the waterfall shortly before uniting the north beneath the Red Hand banner. If this is so, his luck was not equal to the Philosopher who came before him. Many others have since claimed to have found this sacred location, but if they have, none have returned with the kind of wisdom the site is famed to reveal.

The Northern Wall

The First Emperor, in his might, conquered the entire world but even he could not complete the Great Northern Wall before the end of his life. His son however continued the effort and completed it shortly before his own death. The Wall is austere. It has no adornment. Its gates are wide enough only for a single man to pass through. It was not made with trade or travel in mind. Indeed, it was created to be a perfect, unassailable barrier against chaos itself. It is the transition between the civilized lands of the Empire and the wild lands of the North. It was constructed with bricks hewn from the furthest Northern Great Dragon Mountains. In fact, this civic effort left their mark so profoundly upon the mountains that in modern times tribes of northerners make their homes on the artificial steppes created by the excavations. The crenelations at the top of the wall are indeed as tall as the Great Dragon Mountains themselves, a fact which no Emperor has failed to point to as a sign of their people's correctness. The Wall actually alters weather patterns as well, preventing clouds from traveling further north where they would quench the hideous desert created by such changes in weather. At each gate stands a single Stone Lion, each of which uses the First Harmonious Change, the Implacable Stone Lion, in order that no enemies will overtake them. Behind him stand two alternates, ready to take their position in case the primary Lion must retreat to perform their rituals once more (a precaution added within the past generation due to past failures). Stone Lions actually live in the Wall proper, in what are referred to as "chapter houses". Outsiders are not permitted inside the Wall without specific permission and for exiles, it is the last moment they ever spend in the Empire. Doorways to the Forest of Doors occur frequently in the Wall's many gates. Both Northerner and Imperial have equal access to the doors in this manner (although, the Empire has better intelligence on when they open).

The Wooden Metropolis

Very few large scale settlements exist in the North because of the immense scarcity there. However, a city, known as the Wooden Metropolis, defies this trend by drawing together all northerners together in the spirit of freedom. The city gets its name from the fact that most Imperial cities are made of stone primarily. In the North, however, good stone for building is much rarer, and thus, they improvised with wood. The city is prone to fires, but in the spirit of anarchic cooperation, everyone bands together to quench the blaze. This is because the city is tremendously important to the well-being of the entire North. It is one of the few places where trade (in the form of barter) can take place in a relatively safe environment. Slavery is illegal there, not by any law passed, but rather, by general consensus. Bandit Lords protect the city because it allows them to sell their goods. Idealists love it because it shows that civilization can exist outside of the Doctrine of Unity. Ex-Red Hand Rebels and Northern cultural revivalists love it because it is an untouched bastion of exile culture. Everyone else loves it because it is a respite from the hideousness found everywhere else in the North. Even if the city and its cease-fire

policies are constantly under threat of burning down forever, the whole of the North will mobilize, as a symbol of unity, to rescue the city when it needs rescuing.

Common Aphorisms and Colloquialisms

"A human life, without the structure of society, is ruled by chaos" - This aphorism, first spoken by Wong Fei, is considered by many to be the essence of the Doctrine of Unity.

"Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." - Another traditional aphorism by the Philosopher. It is a stinging rebuke of the Fighting Societies of the Seven Hundred Emperors Period, but its use extends into the modern age.

"the Thousand Acceptable Forms" - This refers to a specific style of craftsmanship considered traditional (and superior) in the Empire. It can also refer to geomantic principles that are said to imbue certain dwellings with certain properties. Broadly, it refers to the physical representation of the Doctrine of Unity.

"May you live in interesting times." - A traditional curse, reserved most often for the foolhardy, overeager, or belligerent.

"The Doctrine of Unity" - A philosophy of personal living that emphasizes tradition, societal cohesion, nonviolence, and legalism.

Five Things Every Citizen of the Empire Knows

Every Imperial Citizen knows...

...Their Five Legged Essay

Every Imperial resident has taken a Five Legged Essay and has been assigned a place in society based on that test. Thus, do citizens prize their Essays as a record of their life. Imperial characters should know what the five unrelated subjects they were tasked to write about as well as their actual placement and scoring. Even to be assigned a very low Station signals an individual's willingness to play their part; The Five Legged Essay is a matter of true Imperial pride. Citizens who received an education would also know the monk or sifu they studied under and whether or not they attended one of the Great Imperial Monasteries.

...Their Station

Every citizen of the Empire is given a Station, each tasked with their own strata of labor, rights, and restrictions. Characters should know their place in society and what it means in relation to themselves. Each Station has unique requirements and each is given a different degree of status commensurate with their level of responsibility. Likewise, the higher Stations are deliberately humbled in specific ways.

Characters that have been assigned to travel to the Forest of Doors are given the Explorer Station in addition to their normal Station.

...How to Live According to the Doctrine of Unity

The Doctrine of Unity is the dominant political, spiritual, and economic mode of thought in the Empire proper. Everyone knows that it was given to mankind by the Great Philosopher Wong Fei and collected by the First Emperor. Everyone has at least one quote from the Philosopher that they trot out to make their points. Characters should be versed in at least the basics of what the Doctrine is about (tradition, correct action, harmony, rule of law, and social unity). To show ignorance of the Doctrine is a terrible thing, indeed, marking one as barbaric.

...Their Family History

Living history is never very far from Imperial citizens, often in the form of Honored Ancestors. Because of this closeness, Imperial characters should know the names and histories of their Honored Ancestors. If they have no Ancestors, that in itself is worth noting. Families are judged by the members that make up their ranks, and therefore, social standing often hedges on the esteem one's family obtains. The Empire is itself ten thousand years old (with some families that are even older), but every family suffered under the Red Hand Rebellion that happened a mere generation ago.

...Their Astrological Signs

The stars are said to reveal natural talents and a system of astrology has been set up so that hidden strengths can be divined. Characters are therefore expected to know their astrological signs (day, month, year), as a means of having their character understand their own Traits. Imperial culture does not permit useful skills and personal talents to go to waste; a rigorous system has been set up to inform everyone of their inborn advantages. Imperials might refer to their Attuned Trait by referring to their birth under "the Year of the Dragon" or by simply saying "I am Attuned to the energies of the universe."

Five Things Every Imperial Northerner Knows

Northerners are a diverse lot and very few generalizations can be made about them as a group. However, every Northerner knows...

...Whether or Not They are an Exile and, If So, How They Came to Such a State

Given that almost everyone in the North is either an Exile or the descendant of an Exile, nearly everyone knows the reason that they came to dwell in such a terrible place as the North. Exiles know the law that they transgressed; Descendants of Exiles may or may not know how their family was cast out. Tribal characters and dyed-in-the-wool Red Hand Partisans obviously care little for Imperial law and know that they are not Exiles at all. They are living in a world of their own making, free from meddling Justicars and Philosophers.

...Their Strengths and Weaknesses

Imperial culture has always had the desire to quantify human strengths and weaknesses, and this is

something Northerners have adopted as well. Because of the harsh realities of living in the North, people are forced to take an accounting of their own capabilities. Where one falls short, one can only hope to find others who will shore up one's own deficiency (presumably, for pay or else as an act of camaraderie). Therefore, as a matter of bargaining and survival, Northerners know where their strengths lie and their weaknesses fall.

...The Value of Freedom

Even those Exiles who still adhere as closely as possible to the Doctrine of Unity still get a taste of what is known as "freedom". Every Northerner knows the value of this strange state of being. Many would kill or die for it. Others see it as being essentially useless; what value is freedom to choose one's destiny when they have not had a meal in a fortnight? The value of freedom is, in many ways, the lense through which each Northerner sees the world.

...The Lessons of the Red Hand Rebellion

The Red Hand Rebellion was devastating to the Southern part of the Empire, but it was a cosmic blow to everything that Northern culture stood for. Aside from the fact that it failed spectacularly, it completely wiped out a sense of distinct Northern cultural identity and forced the Empire to take a much harder stance against dissidents. Northern characters should be familiar with the Red Hand Rebellion and, likewise, have a clear and concise opinion about how it changed the world (positively or negatively).

...Their Personal Beliefs

Northerners all hold very strong beliefs, many of which may have caused the person to have been Exiled. These beliefs are highly personal, and may be political (Red Hand Partisans, Pro-Imperial Exiles), spiritual (Cultists, unsanctioned use of the Changes), or scholarly (alternate readings of history, deniers of the Philosopher). There are as many world-views amongst the Northerners as there are Northerners, and each one is likely to tell you all about their point of view (whether you agree or not).

Inspirational Material

Bridge of Birds (Literature)

Li Kao and Number Ten Ox set out to find the mythic Ginseng root that can cure their village's plague. Outside of manhua (chinese language manga) and wuxia (chinese martial arts) novels, this is one of the few literary works set in fantastic China.

Red Beard (Movie)

A doctor (who also happens to be a martial arts badass) in a small Japanese village thwarts the local gangs when they cross too far over the line. Like doctors in the Empire, apprenticeship is expected to be an ordeal that strengthens the spirit.

Journey into the West (Literature)

Monkey King and his companions, an anthropomorphic pig and the warrior Sand River God, make their way across the Middle Kingdom. Part novel, part fairy tale, all Asian fantasy, this is to date one of the oldest known works of literature.

Analects of Confucius (Literature)

A key source of inspiration for the Doctrine of Unity; Confucius outlines a society where moral education prevents the need for the state to use its full might. He rejects supernaturalism and exhorts his followers to greater heights of filial piety. The words of Confucius can, in many cases, be used as quotations for the Philosopher of All Ages (assuming they do not contradict the rules of our fantasy setting!).

Hero (Movie)

A nameless hero rises up to slay the First Emperor, but when the trap is sprung, the hero's sword echoes his own doubts with its stillness. No other work of art has influenced the writing of the Empire of Perfect Unity more. "All Under Heaven".

Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Literature)

In the first century, the Middle Kingdom is thrown into chaos as three distinct Empires rise and oppose each other. Good men shed each other's blood, as warriors choose the virtue of loyalty over the virtue of civility. An excellent vision of the Seven Hundred Emperor's period; unclear chains of command and endlessly shifting loyalties.