

SO YOU WANT TO BE A FENG SHUI PLAYER?

by [Justin Alexander](#) - June 23rd, 2020



So you want to play [Feng Shui](#)? The roleplaying game of Hong Kong action films? The game where you can:

- Get caught in the middle of a gun-fu shootout between corrupt cops and righteous Triad rascals.
- Lock eyes with the samurai who killed your sister, dew glistening on the edges of your blades.
- Travel through temporal portals to the 19th century, fighting British oppressors seeking to corrupt Chinese civilization.
- Serve as court detectives to Empress Wu, rooting out the seditious conspirators who would destroy China's only female regnant.
- Slide down the gleaming black side of a pyramidal arcology while locked in a furious melee with a dozen cyber-ape ninjas.

Then you're in for a rollickin' ride!

This article is not designed to teach you the game. Nor is it a rules reference or a setting guide (there's a [cheat sheet](#) for that and the [entire rulebook](#) besides). We're here to orient you into awesome. It's kind of like a strategy guide, but only if you remember that this is a game where the only winning move is to make the game more memorable and fun for everyone at the table. It's a little bit about what the game expects of you, and a lot about getting into the mindset of Hong Kong action flicks.

As such, it'll be particularly useful for those who aren't already familiar with these films. But even if you're a long-time fan of the genre, you may still find some useful tips in here.

ORIENTATION: FILMOGRAPHY

The best way to get into the groove of Hong Kong action movies, of course, is to actually watch the films themselves (and the films they've inspired around the world). *Feng Shui 2* includes an extensive filmography in which Robin D. Laws provides a fantastic overview of the entire medium/genre. It lets you to pick any of a dozen different sub-genres/actors/directors and dip your toes in, but it can still be easy to feel completely overwhelmed by the dozens and dozens and dozens of films it discusses.

So here's my essential/idiosyncratic list of twelve films to watch if you want to grok the unique mash-up of genres and the language of action in *Feng Shui*:

- *Hard Boiled* (1992, John Woo)
- *The Killer* (1989, John Woo)
- *Chinese Ghost Story* (1987, Ching Siu-Tung)
- *Mr. Vampire* (1985, Ricky Lau)
- *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010, Tsui Hark)
- *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000, Ang Lee)
- *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986, John Carpenter)
- *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004, Stephen Chow)
- *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015, George Miller)
- *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991, Tsui Hark)
- *Armour of God II: Operation Condor* (1991, Jackie Chan)
- *Police Story 3: Supercop* (1992, Stanley Tong)

If you want to narrow this list even further:

- Pick *Hard Boiled* OR *The Killer*
- Pick *Chinese Ghost Story* OR *Mr. Vampire*
- Pick *Armour of God II* OR *Police Story 3*
- Skip the Hollywood films (*Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Big Trouble in Little China*)

It's likely you're still looking at this list and thinking, "This is way more stuff than I want to do before my first session." That's no problem! That's why we're here, actually. But if you like the game and want to go deeper, you can start here. And if you find stuff you like, then you can use the filmography in the rulebook to continue exploring.

GETTING STARTED

Let's start with the basics. You'll need to have some basic understanding of the setting. This text is partially excerpted and adapted from "Getting Started with Feng Shui" on page 5 of the rulebook:

You play heroes of the Chi War, protecting humankind's destiny in a titanic struggle across space and time. Victory depends on your gravity-defying kung fu powers, your ancient magics, your post-apocalyptic survival instincts, or your plain old-fashioned trigger finger.

Chi warriors grasp the fundamental truth of existence: the power of Earth. Certain sites that harness and intensify chi, the life force that animates man and nature, extend across the planet. Those controlling these sites benefit from the increased flow of chi, and gain great fortune in matters both mundane and mystical. Since ancient times, the Chinese have honed their

knowledge of Earth magic — or geomancy — into the discipline known as feng shui.

History belongs to those who have attuned themselves to feng shui sites, forging a mystical bond harnessing their chi energy. When the Chi War ends, the victors will use their control of chi to rewrite history — past, future, and present. We will live the way the victors want us to, and we will have always done so.

Chi warriors have also learned how to access a mysterious realm known as the Netherworld. This Inner Kingdom lies between times, and by traveling through the Netherworld you can literally walk into other time periods: 690 AD (home to sinister magicians), 1850 AD (an era of imperialist oppressors), the present day (controlled by a secret conspiracy), and 2074 AD (ruled by cyborg rebels-turned-tyrants whose excesses collapsed the future). Some participants in the great struggle take their cue from this and refer to themselves as Innerwalkers.

Fortunately, the world of *Feng Shui* rewards heroism: You can dodge machine gun bullets, run sideways up a tree, bounce off a branch, and then clash swords with your opponent. In your best moments you might even run up the stream of oncoming machine gun bullets or cling to the bottom of a bad guy's Maserati as it screams through the midnight streets of Hong Kong.

DEFAULT ACTIONS

If you're playing *Feng Shui* and you aren't sure what you should do next, what can you do? The default action of a game is something your character can do to trigger cool stuff when all else fails.

Hit up a contact. Possibly literally. Either approach one of your existing contacts or create a new one, as detailed in the rules tucked away on page 114 of the rulebook. This works whether you've gotten lost in the middle of a scenario (and just need a new lead or a little help to figure out how you can do the thing you want to do), but it's also a great way of setting things up for your GM to hook you into new scenarios.

Attune to a feng shui site. This is the default goal of the game. If there's nothing else that your character particularly wants to accomplish right now, you can always fall back on identifying a feng shui site and trying to attune with it. (If you don't know where any appropriate feng shui sites might be, refer back to hitting up a contact to get a lead.)

Pursue a melodramatic hook. This is the default goal of your character (see page 22 of the rulebook). The GM will use your melodramatic hook to draw you into scenarios, but it will also often be something you can actively pursue when nothing else is currently on your plate.

Extra Tip: Look for ways to invoke your melodramatic hook in small ways throughout the game. For example, if your melodramatic hook is searching for your lost daughter then you might declare that a GMC looks just like them. Or in a quiet moment you might describe your character pulling their daughter's photo out of their wallet. Going overboard with this will wear thin, but invoking your melodramatic hook thoughtfully will help unify the campaign into one cohesive heap of awesome.

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY



Feng Shui is a game about pulse-pounding action and face-pounding fights. One of your key responsibilities as a player is to describe your character's actions as if they were part of one of the greatest action movie fight sequences of all time. (You can do this because you have an unlimited budget and zero safety concerns.) Whether you're performing a stunt or not, what your character does should sound *awesome*.

Some people can find this daunting. It can feel like a lot of pressure to have to *always* come up with something awesome. So here's the first secret: If you can't think of anything, it's okay to go with something simple. It's okay to just say, "Lao Zhi punches Ting-Ting in the face."

A second (and related) secret is this: Not every single attack needs to carry the weight of the entire fight. Great action sequences are exactly that: *Sequences* of actions that build on each other. If you have an idea for an amazing, splashy centerpiece – great! But it's also okay to just say something nifty and pass the baton to the next player.

Passing the baton quickly, clearly, and efficiently is almost as important as the action you actually take. If you keep the pace of the fight boiling along, you'll often find the awesomeness of the fight seeming to grow as if of its own accord.

Respect the dice. Before the dice are rolled you don't want to commit to a description that's dependent on the outcome of the dice. For example, you don't want to say, "I punch Ting-Ting so hard that one of her horns cracks in half, goes flying across the room, and gets stuck point-first in the wall." (the attack check fails) "Okay, none of that actually happens." There are generally two ways of respecting the dice, one basic and the other more advanced:

- **Hold narration.** The simpler option is to limit your action declaration to something very basic ("I try to punch Ting-Ting"), possibly no more than the mechanic or schtick you're using ("I'm going to use Pincer and attack Ting-Ting"). Once the outcome of the action is known, you can narrate its full glory.

- **Narrate to the point of success/failure.** The more advanced technique is to fill both sides of the attack check with cool choreography. The trick here is to correctly identify the point at which success or failure is ultimately determined and only narrate up to that point. (“As the BMW speeds past, I leap in through the open window and try to punch Ting-Ting in the face.”) Once the action is mechanically resolved, you (or the GM) can pick up from that moment and complete the action appropriately. (“You punch Ting-Ting so hard that she flies out the far side of the car and goes rolling across the tarmac.” or “You leap through the window, but Ting-Ting raises one hand and grabs your fist in mid-air, stopping all your forward momentum. You’re now hanging halfway out of the car.”)

Extra Tip: Focus on one or two of these techniques at a time. When you get comfortable with a particular technique, add another one to your repertoire. Within just a few sessions you’ll have lots of options at your fingertips.

Add one cool detail. Start by adding just one cool detail your description. So if you’re thinking, “I want to punch Ting-Ting in the face,” you might add one detail and say, “I punch Ting-Ting in the face so hard that one of her teeth flies out.” Things to think about if you’re having trouble thinking of a cool detail include:

- **Invoke your weapon** (“I smash my fist into Ting-Ting’s face; as I pull my hand back we can see blood dripping from my brass knuckles”) or your schtick. If all else fails, you can just **name your schtick** (“I’m Strong as an Ox when I punch Ting-Ting in the face!”).
- **Use the environment** (“I leap up onto the railing and then even higher, pile-driving my fist into Ting-Ting’s face with all the force of gravity behind me”). This can include **amazing lighting and sound design** by master cinematographers and the best foley artists in the biz. (“My fist plows into Ting-Ting’s face and the boom of the impact echoes through the empty warehouse like a cannon shot.”)
- **Describe hair or costuming.** (“I punch Ting-Ting in the face, then step back and smooth the front of my bespoke suit from W.W. Chan and Sons.”) This can include the hair and costuming of your opponent. (“Ting-Ting’s head snaps back so quick her hair can’t keep up and her face disappears into a swirl of glistening black.”)
- **Use quippy dialogue.** (“Looks like you’ll have to move up that dentist’s appointment.”)
- **Describe the camera move.** Seemingly impossible camera moves are great because you don’t need to figure out how to actually film them. (“The camera whips around as we exchange blows, then zooms down my arm, following the arc of my fist as it plows into Ting-Ting’s face.”) **Slow motion** will almost always awesome something up, but is best used sparingly. **X-ray shots** (showing internal damage) are innately awesome, but need to be used even more sparingly.

Extra Tip: Looking at your character’s personality and schticks, you can actually prep some of these cool details before play begins. (For example, a Bodyguard has the Fast Draw schtick. You can brainstorm cool ways to describe how your character fast draws their weapon before ever sitting down at the table.) This can be particularly true for characters with Sorcery schticks, where this brainstorming also begins laying down the rules for how your particular brand of magic works.

Don’t let this become a trap, though: The best descriptions are still going to be those that arise organically and spontaneously out of the immediate circumstances. The best fight choreographers come prepared, but continue to collaborate and develop ideas.

Describe awesome misses. In *The Matrix* there’s a shot where Agent Smith throws a punch at Neo, misses, and his fist plows through a concrete column. Earlier a host of mook cops unleash a wall of machinegun fire at Neo and Trinity. Not a single bullet hits, but the barrage of gunfire completely

annihilates the room — marble panels explode, rock goes flying through the air, Neo does a cartwheel through the rubble.

These are all examples of awesome misses: In an RPG we have a bias towards dismissing missed attacks because nothing changes mechanically, or we describe them as embarrassing failures for the attacker. But in action movies missed attacks are often just as impressive as the big blows (wreaking environmental damage), and near-misses are often highlights of the awesome martial arts ability of the person avoiding the blow.

Improvise props. As Robin D. Laws says, “If you want to hit somebody with a pair of skis, you say there’s a pair of skis there, and there is.” This is a central principle of the game: If there’s something that can make the fight a little more awesome, the camera can always pan over to reveal it. This extends to scenery, too. If you need to jump out of a third-story window, then *of course* there’s an awning down there to break your fall. If you need a trampoline to launch yourself up to the demon’s head and land a roundhouse kick, then of course there’s a gymnasium just on the other side of the wall.

Think about the environment where you’re fighting. What would be there? How could you use it to whup ass? If that particular object hasn’t been mentioned, you don’t need to ask the GM, “Are there any cars parked on the street?” You can just describe your character running over the top of them in order to jump up and reach the demon’s horns, yanking its head down and slamming it into the wall.

Reuse props. Once skis or a trampoline have been introduced to a fight scene (whether by you or by somebody else), look for ways to use that prop again. And again. And again. This works best if there’s a new twist to the action each time you reuse the prop.

Jackie Chan is a master of this, with many of his movies featuring a fight sequence in which a single everyday object (like a ladder or refrigerator) is constantly reinvented to attack, defend, or simply get in the way.

Tie actions together. Similarly, you can tie your current action to another action that just happened. The easiest example of this is ganging up on a single foe. (“Now that Ching has pulled the demon’s head down towards the ground, I deliver an incredible uppercut that sends it reeling backwards! It falls onto a Ferrari, crushing it flat!”) But more elaborate combos are possible, like scooping up the gun Bai Lin kicked out of the triad mook’s hands and firing it at the sorcerer Xiong Xuegang.

Off-turn collaborations. If someone is materially assisting you, that’s a Boost and needs to be mechanically accounted for. But the battlefield is a dynamic place and you shouldn’t picture the other characters all standing in freeze-frame while you’re resolving your action. You can describe yourself as switching weapons by sliding across the floor and scooping up a sword dropped by the recently deceased OR you can shout, “Bai Lai! Toss me that sword!” and then let Bai Lai describe executing a perfect roundhouse kick that sends the sword swooping into the air so that you can snag it mid-flight. You can describe yourself running up a wall OR you can describe jumping off Bai Lai’s head to reach the balcony.

Extra Tip: Describing other characters (PCs and GMCs alike) battling in the background of your shot is another effective way of tying the action together. This background action isn’t mechanically resolved and will never inflict wounds (if it was significant it would be the focus of the shot, right?), but it once again emphasizes the fluid nature of the battlefield.

Flexible action descriptions. You have a great deal of leeway in how you choose to describe your attacks and schticks. This may be obvious with Martial Arts, but it’s equally true for Guns. Don’t forget the rules for Unconventional Attacks (*Feng Shui 2*, p. 110) which spell out that you can use your normal Attack Check to take advantage of the location to do straight-up damage with the same Smackdown as your default weapon. So, yes, you can shoot somebody. But you can just easily shoot the chandelier and have it fall on them: The mechanics are identical; there’s no penalty for this.

Extra Tip: These are sometimes mistaken for stunts. Actions are only stunts if they do something more than damage the target: So slamming a chandelier into someone and causing them damage isn't a stunt. Dropping a chandelier onto someone so that it pins them to the ground and they can't move IS a stunt.

Elaborate your supernatural theme. This flexibility of action description extends to Sorcery and Creature Powers, too. What can be most effective for this is to develop a consistent mystical motif or set of arcane rules for your character. Maybe they inscribe spells onto slips of paper and then burn them for effect. Maybe they unlock sorcerous powers by pushing needles into specific acupuncture points on their body.

You shouldn't feel tightly bound by these "rules." Quite the opposite: Developing a supernatural "language" for your characters gives you a rich toolkit for improvising new material. For example, maybe you start by scribing spells on slips of paper and burning them. Then you slap one of these onto a hopping vampire to bind it in place. Then you place them around a building to ward it against evil. Then you paint the symbols directly over the acupuncture points of an ally in order to mystically aid them.

(This is in many ways like reusing props or tying actions together, just over the long term.)

If you ever need to do something completely new? Well, it's a good thing you visited that secret Tibetan monastery in the Ancient Juncture between episodes. Or studied those ancient tomes you found in the ruins on Taiwan island. Or maybe it's just something you learned from your master but haven't mentioned before.

Extra Tip: Improvising awesome fight choreography is a skill. And, like any skill, it can be learned, practiced, and improved. Here's an exercise you can use to practice away from the table: Take a really great fight film – any of the ones in the orientation list work, but also stuff like The Matrix, Rocky, Raiders of the Lost Ark, or John Wick – and narrate the action as it happens on screen, as if you were describing it to your gaming group. It may sound silly, but it will build your repertoire of action descriptions and push you to improve how you connect and transition between actions in a fight.

SPEAKING CINEMATIC LANGUAGE

In *Feng Shui* the characters don't break the fourth wall. They don't wink at the camera, get thrown into the stage lighting, read the subtitles, or anything like that. (This tends to degenerate the game into farce or parody, which isn't what we're aiming for.) As *players*, however, it is frequently effective to express things through a cinematic lens. The GM will introduce a scene by describing how the "camera" pans across it. As a player, you'll talk about the extreme close-up on your magic cop's Colt .45 as they jam it into the squealing face of a cyber-chimp.

When you first start doing this, it may feel like an awkward or artificial conceit. But it's just a different way of communicating character, intention, and the narration of fictional reality. As you become more familiar with the technique, you'll find that it naturally evokes the heightened reality and the particular types of story beats from the action mash-up genre we're seeking to emulate.

In speaking cinematically, there are any number of techniques (close-ups, smash cuts, slow motion) that are common in films on both sides of the Pacific. Here are a few that are particular to the Hong Kong action genre that you might be less familiar with.

Inner Dialogue with Micro-Flashbacks. Instead of using voice-over or narration, Hong Kong films will often communicate the inner thoughts of their characters through a very quick sequence of flashbacks. These micro-flashbacks are usually only one or two seconds long, and often consist of footage or snippets of dialogue seen earlier in the film.

For example, if someone sees their friend get riddled with bullets, you might get four or five shots in rapid succession summarizing the entire course of their relationship. Or if someone is at their boyfriend's bedside in the hospital, there might be a quick flash of the scene where they first met at the beginning of the film.

You can use this same technique to communicate your character's inner thoughts to the table. Instead of saying, "Ying thinks that this is a terrible idea." You might say, "We cut from Ying raising an eyebrow to a shot of Chunky falling down that pit in the Tomb of the Jade Emerald. And then a shot of Chunky tripping the infrared lasers at the Met. And then a shot of that time Maggie hit him in the face with a cream pie. Then Ying says, 'Sure. Why not? What could go wrong?'"

Visual Emotions. Just as you create scenery in a fight scene to do cool kung-fu tricks, you can create scenery in interstitial scenes to express emotion — family photos, religious iconography, a flower vendor selling jasmine blossoms, the smell of a burning leaf.

As with micro-flashbacks, it's usually best to keep these short and punchy. But if your character's anger fills the whole scene, then it's just fine if you keep coming back to the image of the flames in the hearth behind them roaring up and filling that end of the room in a reddish light.

Freeze Frame Emphasis. Freeze frames (usually close-ups of a character's face or moments of group celebration) are used to emphasize emotional beats of particular importance. They are often used at the end of a film, and such scenario-enders are most likely to be invoked by the GM. But they can also be found elsewhere, usually at particularly important emotional turns or moments of transition, and you should feel empowered as a player to describe such cinematic freeze frames to highlight significant personal milestones to the rest of the table.

Ensemble pieces will sometimes feature a series of such freeze frames at the end of the film, emphasizing each character in turn. GMs may use a similar technique, framing up each freeze frame and prompting each player to fill it with their character's current emotional state.

This technique was more popular in classic Hong Kong films and seems to have become less used in recent years, but that's no reason not to include it in the *Feng Shui* mash-up.

Bullet Time. True bullet time (as opposed to just slow motion) is almost virtually exclusive to *The Matrix*. (Even the *Matrix* sequels didn't actually use it.) But it nevertheless deserves a call out here.

Cue Music. Movies are not strictly a visual medium. The soundscape is also a vital part of the artform. You can invoke the audio of cinema at the game table just as you can camera angles and cuts. Describe the music playing in the scene to invoke your character's emotional state, signal how important the current moment is to them, for humorous effect, or for any of the other myriad signals music can send.

(If you're feeling ambitious and it's appropriate for your table, you could actually select a hero track for your PC and then literally play it at key moments during the game. Over time you and the rest of the group could develop a rich variety of leitmotifs.)

A NOTE TO THE GM

If you're planning to run *Feng Shui* for a new player, consider sending them the link to this essay to quickly orient them to the game. You may find a lot of the techniques described here are also useful tricks to add to your own toolkit.

The cheat sheet below is designed to be serve as a quick, at-the-table reminder of the techniques and expectations described here.

FENG SHUI – NEW PLAYER CHEAT SHEET

DEFAULT ACTIONS

- Hit up a contact
- Attune to a feng shui site
- Pursue a melodramatic hook

CINEMATIC LANGUAGE

- Inner dialogue with micro-flashbacks
- Visual emotions
- Freeze frame emphasis
- Bullet time
- Cue music

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY

Remember:

- Pass the baton
- Respect the dice

One Cool Detail:

- Invoke your weapon
- Name your schtick
- Use the environment + light/sound
- Describe hair or costuming
- Use quippy dialogue
- Describe the camera move
- Slow motion & X-ray shots

Advanced Techniques:

- Describe awesome misses
- Improvise props
- Reuse props
- Tie actions together
- Off-turn collaborations
- Flexible action descriptions
- Elaborate your supernatural theme