

WORD ON THE STREET II: THE TONGS

by Michael Chumblor

The young man walked into the tavern with an air of confidence he didn't have the first time he visited. He walked directly to the booth in the back to meet his contact, only to find the booth empty. He managed not to panic and, instead, cast what he hoped was a surreptitious look around the dim room. He heard a soft rustling to his left and wheeled toward the sound, his hand shifting discreetly to the small of his back, before he recognized Frankie 'Twice Pipe' Whitaker grinning at him.

"Hey young'un, there's no need for the ironmongery. So I'm sittin' somewheres else. You need to know up front you don't live long in the business if ya go gettin' predictable.

"It does warm these old bones to see ya again after your little escapade in the Osiris 'Zone. Now don't go lookin' so surprised kid, I wouldn't be much of an information broker if 'n I couldn't tell what was goin' on in a place what I sent ya to. It's my business to know such things, and since I've taken an interest in ya, I thought I'd track how your little trip went. Can't quite say ya've made your bones yet, but ya got in and out without gettin' pinched and with some coin for your troubles, so I guess ya've earned the right to pick up on who's likely to be your competition. However, you know how this exchange goes, so I've got to see your consideration before I can go any further."

The young man nodded, understanding, and dropped a small pouch onto Twice Pipe's table with a clink. His contact picked it up, gauged its value adroitly by its heft in his hand, and nodded in satisfaction. He slipped the pouch into his pocket, relit his pipe, and continued with his line of thought.

TONGS BACK THEN

"Now, I'm sure ya have heard of the word Tong, as ya don't gotta be in the business to know about 'em. Might be as ya know already that the word Tong means 'hall', which sounds harmless enough. 'Course, as with most things in this here 'Verse of ours, harmless ain't harmless

enough. Ya see, the gist is that some folk what came from China proper on Earth-That-Was up and left their homes and spread out back on Man's homeworld. Well, for some fool reason, they weren't exactly welcomed in their new towns, and them fellers had to band together for protection from some unfriendly *liu mang*¹. They met in 'halls', which they called Tongs, and formed secret societies to keep them unfriendly folk off their backs. Ya know how folk are, it don't talk long for the best intentions to go astray. Since these secret Tongs were good at protectin' their own and operatin' unseen by the local law enforcement of the day, it didn't take long for the Tongs to branch out from protectin' their own to straight up protection rackets. Once on that road, well ... drugs, prostitution, smugglin' and other crimes followed. Soon the word Tong came to mean somethin' far more sinister.

"So there's your two-bit history lesson behind how Tongs came to be, which might be some great info for impressin' some of them uppity rich folk at some Core World cotillion or some such folderol, but not what ya might call practical on the Rim.

TONGS RIGHT NOW

"Anyway, despite the big upheaval caused by the Exodus to the 'Verse, the Tongs survived the long trip and dropped right back into the same old things they got known for. If ya go stickin' your nose into the less than pleasant parts of our right shiny Alliance, you can bet dollars to doughnuts that ya'll find a Tong a'waitin' for ya.

"Thing is, what most upstandin' folk don't ken, is that not all Tongs is bad news. Some are no different as them as were back on Earth-That-Was, just folk what banded together to protect themselves from somethin' what was givin' 'em a hard time. These Tongs can be the difference between livin' and dyin' out on the Rim, cause sweet merciful Buddha knows the Alliance ain't gonna be there to help ya when ya really needs help. Figurin' out if

¹ Hoodlums

the Tong group ya've hooked up with is just a protective group or a bunch of *xiong can sha sbou*² is only a matter of knowin' the family tree.

FAMILY TONG AND FIGHTIN' TONG

"If the name mentions a male member of the family—brother, father, uncle, nephew or that sort thing—then that there Tong is a protective association and is not usually involved in criminal activity. Most important thing to ken is they *don't* use a family member name just cause they likes the name; they really consider themselves a family. Cross any one of 'em and ya cross all of 'em. On the other side of the coin, if'n ya make friends with one, ya makes friends with every single one of 'em. They defend their own. They don't go lookin' for trouble what don't come to 'em first.

"Now the Fightin' Tongs is a different story, they name the group anythin' they want and it usually ain't friendly. Some glommed onto names from the original Earth-That-Was Tongs like *Hip Sing*, *Tong Tran*, or *Bing Kong*. Others went for somthin' what makes 'em sound tough, like Black Lotus, Swift Dragon, Strikin' Fist, or some such. Ya hears name like one of those, then ya better step lightly, like a woodpecker with a headache, around 'hem and their territory, cause they would just as soon spill your guts ya as look at your miserable hide. The main thing to ken with the Fightin' Tongs is they consider themselves a family too, but they will go lookin' for trouble and if'n they can't find trouble by lookin', they'll just start some cause they can and that's trouble ya'll ain't never seen a'for. [1]

DEALIN' WITH THE TONG

"So how is an up and comin' feller such as ya'll to deal with a Tong? Best way is to make friends with a member, but in *tian xiao de*³ do not join a Tong unless ya'll is ready for a lifetime commitment! Regardless of kinship, once ya joins, ya becomes family. Ya picks up all the baggage that family owns. Ya gets some friends, ya gets some enemies, and ya gets a whole passel of obligations, just as with any other family ... for life. If ya ain't ready for that sort of obligation then ya best leave it alone, like a grizzly with a toothache. Tongs are big on tough

love and ya don't walk away from a Tong. At least not under your own power—typically, it's toes up, if'n anybody finds ya corpse at all. [2]

"Makin' friends with a member is no different than makin' friends with anyone else, so there ain't no one sure fire way to go about it. Best way is doin' 'em a service, as they are real big on honor. Even the worst of 'em respect a debt of honor for someone that does 'em a service or, even better, renders aid to a member. Ya might get to thinkin' hey, I can stage a situation where I save a Tong and that way they will owe me. I won't say it ain't been done successfully before. But, ya better be a Pan-Universal Award winnin' actor, as I can tell ya straight up, ya'll ain't got the life experience to realize just how bad what they will do to ya will be if'n they suss out that ya fooled 'em. Cause all Tongs, good and bad, are big on *mianzi*⁴ and if'n ya make one lose face, there will be a reckonin'. One ya won't like and won't survive. [3]

SAVIN' FACE

"Even though I came at it from a different road as I had planned, since I done mentioned how important the concept of *mianzi* is to the Tong, guess I might as well clue ya in on the rest of the story. No one likes to be embarrassed, but savin' face is a cultural thing for the Tong. If bein' there for a fellow member is their first rule in what passes for their 'code of conduct,' then the second rule is that any insult which causes a loss of *mianzi* must be repaid in full and is almost always in blood. Never forget this if'n ya'll try and swindle a Tong. [4]

GETTING' IN ON THE ACTION

"Workin' between the spaces of our glorious legal system means sooner or later, if'n ya wants to be an operator, ya will have to deal with one or more of the Tong. Trick is, how ya goes about it is based on exactly what business ya'll is runnin'. Just as Sun Tzu said know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles ya will never be in peril, learnin' about what the Tong ya'll is tryin' to work with, or work around, is into, is the key to survival. Just like the original Tongs, some run protection rackets, others drugs, smugglin', prostitution, gun runnin', slavery, and anythin' else ya'll can

2 Ruthless killers
3 Name of all that's sacred

4 Cultural concept of how an individual's prestige is perceived by others

think of. Tryin' to muscle a Tong out of an established operation is a damn fine way to end up very dead, so don't even try.

"Ya want the best way to deal with a Tong, I'd put long money on findin' out what a given Tong is into and do somethin' else. If'n a Tong starts musclin' in on your operation, it's usually best to let 'em, cause not many folk have got the juice to go toe to toe with a Fightin' Tong and live to talk about it, but since that don't fit your situation yet young'un, ya ain't got to worry about it now. However, if'n ya do make your bones and ya'll do find yourself in that situation, remember this here little talk we had tonight, forget all about pride and let 'em have it, cause ya can't get paid when your dead.

PARTIN' WORDS

"I guess if'n ya don't remember anythin' else I say tonight, make it be this ... Tong folk ain't all that different than other folk and are, in most cases, businessmen — hard, ruthless businessmen — but businessmen just the same. Ya'll show 'em the respect they're due and never try to cross 'em and ya'll will do right well around 'em. Even the Fightin' Tongs can be worked with, but never forget, unless ya'll choose to go and get as stupid as a doorknob and join one, ya'll never be a part of their world.

[5] "Now I think that ought to be enough for tonight cause goin' by how your eyes is gettin' that glazed over look, I'm startin' to sound like just another old man what's been talkin' too long. Ya'll run along now and cogitate on what I just told ya for a bit and if'n ya choose to return, I'll clue ya in on once of most lucrative gigs in the 'Verse, which just happens to be the ship-jackin' business. But, that's a story for another place and another time."

The young man smiled and slid out of the booth, stopping to talk briefly to the bartender before leaving the tavern. None of this was lost on Twice Pipe, but he did feel unusually pleased when the barkeep brought him another drink, compliments of his young friend. He took a sip and smiled with contentment at the fine vodka, savoring the fact that he didn't have any more appointments for the night.

"The boy bothered to learn what I drink, shows real promise he does, gotta be sure to keep my eye on him".

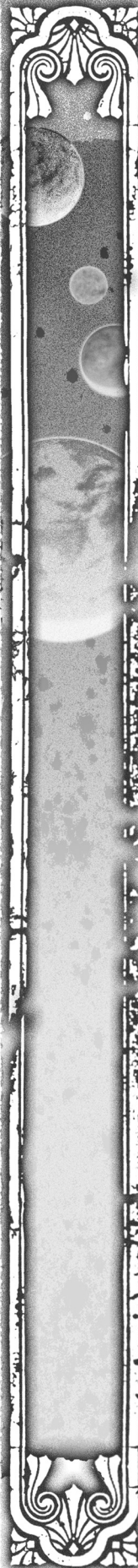
GAME NOTES ON USING THE TONGS

[1] Make an AVERAGE (7) Intelligence + Covert (or Streetwise) action to know the difference or an AVERAGE (7) Intelligence + Perception (or Deduction) action to figure out the difference if the PC has never dealt with a Tong before. If they're old hands at this, then it's an EASY (3) Recall (Intelligence + Willpower) to remember the difference.

[2] Joining a Tong requires sponsorship by a member of the Tong. The GM can design a specific set of circumstances that results in a PC meeting a member and gaining their friendship in that manner. Otherwise the PC can attempt a HARD (11) Willpower + Influence (or Persuasion) action to earn the friendship of a Tong member. Gaining sufficient trust to be sponsored into the Tong requires a second Willpower + Influence (or Persuasion) action at a FORMIDABLE (15) level.

[3] An example of staging a fake event to gain a Tong member's trust would be pulling the person out of the way of a speeding hover mule, which would be a HARD (11) Agility + Performance (or Acting) action for the event and another FORMIDABLE (15) Willpower + Performance (or Acting) action to act out gaining the Tong member's trust. However, failing in either roll will result in the Tong member inviting the PC to the Tong meeting place before they are subdued by overwhelming numbers, leading to an excruciatingly painful interrogation and creates a ready made hook for GMs to exploit.

[4] Any form of dealings with a Tong by an outsider carries the additional burden of avoiding embarrassing anyone in the Tong. This includes something blatant such as directly stealing from the group to something outwardly less obvious like interrupting an elder while they are speaking. A severe embarrassment, such as swindling a Tong in a con, results in that PC gaining a Deadly Enemy Complication. A minor embarrassment would result in the individual being unable to do any further business with that Tong. Avoiding minor insults is an AVERAGE (7) Intelligence + Influence (or Streetwise) action for short interactions for someone without knowledge of that particular Tong. Longer interactions would be a HARD (55) Complex Action of the same skill with each



roll taking ten minutes. Once the Threshold is reached, the PC knows enough of the Tong's rules to not have to roll again. A single Botch increases the task to FORMIDABLE (75), while a second Botch insults the Tong and ends any dealings with them.

[5] In most cases, gaining information on a given Tong requires observing them as they operate, which is a FORMIDABLE (15) Agility + Covert (or Surveillance) action, unless the Tong is known to be especially secretive. Finding someone who would know if a Tong has that reputation is a HARD (11) Willpower + Influence (or Streetwise) action. If the Tong is known for secrecy, the GM provides either a specific means of gathering information on them, or the PC can make an INCREDIBLE (23) Agility + Covert (or Surveillance) action to learn anything about the Tong.

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