

BARBARIAN STATES

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Nomads of the Western Desert: The Nine Tribes

To the west of the mountains of Chi Province lies an open plain, fed by broad rivers and dotted with small cities and farming communities. Though the people of this region are not part of the great Middle Kingdom, they live in its shadow and are inevitably tied to it through trade and cultural links.

As one travels further westwards, however, the fertile land grows ever more arid, eventually giving way to the vast Western Desert known as Xi Shamò. This is a great and seemingly endless region. Parts of it are broken badlands, covered by rocks, hills, and crags. To the south lies an enormous sea of sandy dunes, unbroken by even a single tree or blade of grass. It stretches hundreds of miles in every direction, running nearly to the southern coast itself.

The trackless wastes are as inhospitable as any part of the continent. Yet even here, life can be found. The desert is peopled by the Nine Tribes—the Xi Bùlùomen. Though little more than savages, the Xi Bùlùomen are proud and strong, hardened by centuries of nomadic wandering. They dress practically in long, loose-fitting robes and turbans which protect them from the sun. Their lot is a harsh one; they travel endlessly between the desert oases, which they guard jealously. Raiding and conflict between the tribes over water rights is commonplace. Out here, far from civilization, water is all-important.

Trading caravans sometimes cross the wide Xi Shamò desert. The journey is fraught with peril. In addition to the dangers of travelling in the remote desert, tribute must be paid to the Xi Bùlùomen tribes, both for the privilege of using their oases and for protection from marauding thieves. These thieves are usually raiding parties from rival tribes, seeking to make life difficult for their neighbors.

The rewards for making the passage are great, however. The western emirates along the coast pay a high price for silk brought from the east, and caravans can then return laden with spices for the markets in the Middle Kingdom. The caravan drivers, escorting mercenaries, and travelling merchants alike all grow wealthy from making the dangerous trip.

The Emirates of the Western Coast

Beyond the vast deserts to the west, the sandy wastes eventually give way to a more fertile region, lying along the farthest coast of the great continent. Here, too, the savage, nomadic tribes of the desert are replaced by the more civilized emirates of the western coast.

These lands display a remarkably advanced culture. The study of science, mathematics, and magic there is highly advanced, and the merchant fleets of the coastal ports range far over the open seas on voyages to faraway, exotic islands. Their knowledge of philosophy is more primitive, however, and lacks the sophistication that has been achieved in Zhongguo.

This land is divided into many small city-states, each centered on a wealthy trading port ruled by an Emir. The people there are a strange and foreign lot. There are wealthy merchants, powerful warriors, sinister thieves, wise sages, and mysterious, veiled women. Despite their more civilized nature, they retain the haughty pride of their nomadic cousins in the desert. The men there dress in bright, even garish robes, often worn together with a sort of vest, and with large and elaborate hats or turbans. Women wear long robes that cover them from head to foot, hiding their features behind veils.

The cities are large, and are curtained by mighty walls to protect against the occasional incursions of the desert bandits who covet their wealth. Within the walls stand fantastic palaces, broad gardens, and towering minarets. There are teeming markets where anything in the world can be bought or sold. There are mazelike warrens of alleys that snake between the myriad domed houses of the common folk.

By day, the entire city does business, engaging constantly in the commerce that is the lifeblood of the emirates. Goods brought from faraway lands are exchanged, and loaded onto ships or caravans for transport to markets hungry for these foreign wares. By night, the city rests. As the sun sinks below the western sea, bright stars come out over the domes and minarets, and the cooling breeze drives away the daytime heat.

Beyond the cities, these lands are dotted with small farms. The rolling hills leading towards the great desert are terraced with orchards, vineyards, and olive groves. The country folk are simpler than those in the cities, and live much as peasants do anywhere.

The Xi Yêren Steppes

North of the great Xi Shamò desert lies the region of Xi Yêren. Here the rocky desert highlands open out onto a broad, flat plateau, covered by rolling steppes. Rivers cut across the plains, but the region is a cold one, and the summer growing season is too short to allow crops to be raised. As in the desert to the south, the people here are nomads, following the great herds of steppe-beasts that sustain them.

The nomads here are savages and call themselves the Ala Shan. They consist of a collection of wandering bands, all owing loose allegiance to a weak king called the Khan. Though the Khan technically rules the entire area of Xi Yêren, his actual authority is limited. By long tradition, succession is through victory in combat, so few Khans die peacefully in their beds—they are almost invariably cut down by some challenger in a civil war.

Despite this, there is never a shortage of rivals for the title. The current Khan is now old (as Khans go), and has retained his position through skillful diplomacy by playing the factions that would vie for his crown off against each other. While this has kept his head on its shoulders, it has not earned him the respect given by the Ala Shan to a victorious young warrior, and as a result his power to rule has waned considerably over the years. There is increasing talk that maybe the time has come for someone to replace him, but though many have tried, none have yet managed to outwit the wily old wolf.

The nomad bands are generally extended family units, connected to each other by a complex and incomprehensible network of oaths and allegiances. With the Kahn's power so weak, they spend much of their time warring amongst each other, and long-held feuds divide them. The most common source of strife is raiding for cattle or mounts, because animals are the only real thing of value to the Ala Shan. A family's worth is determined by how many beasts it owns. Because agriculture is all but unknown to the Ala Shan, land is considered nearly valueless.

Bands of Ala Shan raiders frequently sweep into the lowlands west of Chi province to seize gold, animals, and slaves. A series of border forts have been built to hold them at bay, but the nomads frequently slip between the garrisons undetected, appearing suddenly and ferociously far behind them. Moving quickly on their sturdy mounts, they are usually able to slip back out again, carrying their spoils with them, before forces can be mobilized to block their escape.

The legends of the Ala Shan are filled with tales of a great warrior-king, who will rise to become the “Khan of Khans”, uniting all the tribes into a single force. He will then lead them to conquest, driving his enemies before him and establishing a great empire. His coming is eagerly awaited and often predicted. Every few years some tribal chieftain claims to be the legendary warrior and seeks to rally the scattered tribes under his banner. Inevitably, however, such efforts come to naught, as the factionalism and rivalries drive alliances apart. This does nothing to lessen the near-religious anticipation held by the Ala Shan for this great Khan; they inevitably rationalize these failed efforts away as the work of mere charlatans or pretenders. Surely, they say, the true warrior king will appear one day...

The Kingdom of Cháo-xian

In the cold north, beyond Jin province, lies the barbarian kingdom of Cháo-xian. This is located on a broad, curving peninsula. The eastern half is open lowlands, which in the south is warm enough to be fertile cropland. To the west lies a tall mountain range, known as the Diamond Mountains due to their glittering, icy caps. This is the northern tip of the great, continent-spanning range that runs throughout the Middle Kingdom's Chi province. Cháo-xian is a primitive place. There are virtually no roads to speak of, so travel is very difficult. This leads to great isolation, and most of Cháo-xian is a rural backwater.

While uncivilized, the people of Cháo-xian are a hardy, sturdy lot. They tend to be physically short and stocky, with thick fur and strong limbs. They are also talkative, quarrelsome, and headstrong. Their stubbornness is well known, and they are not easily impressed. They speak their own language, which is a harsh-sounding tongue. They guard their independence fiercely, and have little wish to be absorbed into the Middle Kingdom.

Cháo-xian is governed by a feudal aristocracy of pony-men. It is ruled by a king from a great capital city in the south, near the border with Jin province. He is the latest in a long dynasty which traces its rule back for three centuries. There is also a great royal palace complex, spectacularly located high atop a mountain, from which it is said twelve thousand peaks can be seen.

The history of the peninsula is marked by strife. Before the current dynasty took power, civil wars were common. Upon taking power, they touched off religious unrest. Fearful of the influence of neighboring Zhongguo, the new king declared that Daoism would no longer be tolerated. Within a generation, the monasteries that had sprung up throughout Cháo-xian were abandoned or sacked. Today, they still stand. Many are empty, deserted shells, standing in lonely isolation and rumored to be haunted. Others have been taken over by industrious locals, and these great structures, once home to thousands of devoted monks, are now used as pleasure-houses or secluded hideouts for bandit gangs. One can still read the names of long-dead pilgrims carved into the rocks around these abandoned temples.

In the absence of more enlightened spiritual beliefs, Cháo-xian is now consumed by primitive superstition. Demonolatry is commonplace, and travellers frequently encounter carved wooden "devil posts," each topped with a sinister, leering face, designed to ward off evil spirits. There are two great schools of shamanic sorcery here, which draw their ranks from the lowest class of society. The Mutang are all women, while the Pansu are blind. They lead wandering lives, travelling from village to village and driving away demons in exchange for food and shelter.

The kingdom is plagued by dangerous, man-eating beasts, which have never been entirely driven away. They frequently threaten the rural farming communities. Organized guilds of hunters have formed to pursue and destroy these creatures, in exchange for bounties paid by the local nobles. These hunters must be highly skilled, both as trackers and as fighters, and their profession is fraught with danger.

The Yindù Princes

South of Chu and Wu provinces lies the nation of Yindù, home to a vast population. Yindù is a land of contradictions. It is a place of brilliant wealth, of lofty palaces and fantastic gardens, yet it is also a place of crippling poverty, where most of its people live in the most miserable of conditions. It is a land of great cities, teeming with life, and open countryside covered by fertile cropland. It is a land of spiritual and philosophical sophistication, home to learned seers of great knowledge, while at the same time one of primitive superstition and shamanism. This rich and complex country defies ready understanding.

The Yindù kingdom is a divided one. It is broken into a great many lesser states, each ruled by a hereditary prince known as a Maharajah. Though they all owe allegiance to the Yindù King, in practice they rule their states as they see fit, free from central interference. From time to time, the king tries to reassert his authority over the various provinces, usually with mixed results. The current king is the a wise and ancient elephant. His days are drawing to a close, however, and as he has left no son, many wonder who will succeed him.

Compounding the political division in Yindù are great social and cultural gaps. The region is home to many dozens of languages and dialects, which make communication difficult. People in neighboring states often speak completely different tongues. There is also a haphazard patchwork of religious beliefs. Different faiths, creeds, and cults vie for followers, in a spiritual struggle that sometimes erupts into violence. One of the most notorious cults is that of the Thuggee, a sinister and secretive sect that practices ritual murder, preying upon pilgrims and travellers in the uncivilized hinterlands.

The people of Yindù are a strange mix. Most are friendly and welcoming of outsiders. They are curious and eager for news from other parts of the world. Aside from this, very little can be said about them as a whole. The complex blend of traditions and cultures makes it difficult to generalize about them. As perhaps befits this diversity, travellers here will encounter a bewildering variety of attitudes, customs, and costumes.

The west coast borders on a wide, sheltered sea and is a relatively prosperous region, home to many ports and trading fleets. This area displays a strong cultural influence of the distant Western Emirates, with whom they trade extensively. The southwestern coast is gripped by terrible poverty. It is a marshy lowland, thick with mosquito-infested swamps and prone to flooding. Every year, typhoons sweep in from the sea and destroy the small fishing villages there, often killing thousands.

The east coast is perhaps the most culturally advanced area, and is home to many settlers from the Middle Kingdom's southern provinces. As such, it has close cultural ties to the Zhongguo itself. The mountains to the northwest are a particularly uncivilized area, where no government has ever been able to take hold. Instead, it is home to feuding hill-tribes, who only unite when some outside invader threatens their land. Few outsiders travel into this desolate and lawless region. The central lowlands are a great breadbasket, where rice and tea are grown and distributed throughout the Yindù kingdom.