

The Mandarin Game

By Gary Giombi

Introduction

The following presentation is a game that is designed to help illustrate a number of important points: the value of each human being, the weakness of the "end justifies the means" principles, the consequences of playing God, violence and nonviolence, the solidarity of the human community, criteria of decision-making, and the price of peace. I have used this game with people of all ages, from junior high students to adults. I have found the best response at about the ninth grade level, but almost everyone participating in the game has found it a good experience for clarifying ideas while, at the same time, being enjoyable. I suspect that it could be simplified for younger students.

The idea of the game is not original to me. In the summer of 1967, I worked in an Upward Bound program in which one of the English units, called "To Kill a Mandarin", posed this question. If pushing a button would bring 200 years of peace and prosperity, but would also kill a Chinese mandarin, would you push the button? The amplifications on this theme are my own.

The Game

The leader distributes a dozen sealed envelopes, numbered 1 through 12. A candle is then lit and the leader tells the group members that for the next hour they are to suspend their disbelief in astrology. For the next 60 minutes, they will assume that the stars can have an effect on the lives of men. The leader then asks the person who has envelope #1 to open it and read the message inside.

Envelope #1

A candle flickers. Its flame dances with life... a life more delicate than the breath of life in a man. The astrological heavens reinforce the candle's importance. A blood-red moon joins Venus in the third quadrant, linking this fragile flame with the life of a man. In a remote village of northern China, a mandarin, a village elder, doesn't even dream that his life will cease if the candle flame is snuffed out. If you blow out the flame, he dies.

But now the heavens change a bit. Jupiter comes into the fourth quadrant in direct relationship to the moon and Venus. The mandarin's life is still linked with the candle flame, but so is something else. If the candle flame is extinguished, earth will have 200 years of peace and prosperity. Do you blow out the candle and

bring peace and prosperity to the world at the cost of the mandarin's life? Vote. If yes, read letter #2. If no, read letter #3.

Then the leader, in his own words, repeats the gist of the letter. He asks for some reasons in favor of blowing out the candle, perhaps writing them on the board. Then he asks for reasons against it. This process of recapitulation is to be repeated after the reading of each odd numbered letter. When the reasons have been discussed, the leader calls for a vote and writes the tallies on the board. He then asks for either letter #2 or letter #3 to be read, depending on how the vote has gone.

Envelope #2

The mandarin is dead. Peace and prosperity have come to the world, but it is the peace and prosperity of the cemetery. When one person says he can decide who will live and who will die, then any person can claim that right. Unfortunately, this was not the only candle astrologically linked with someone's life. Every person on earth had a candle linked to someone else. When you voted to blow out the candle, everyone made the same decision you did. With one breath, every man, woman, and child on earth was killed.

Peace.

Envelope #3

The mandarin goes on living. But all his life he's been a dedicated communist. His fondest dream is that one day communism will govern the entire world. He believes that this will bring peace and prosperity to everyone. You can still blow out the candle and bring 200 years of peace and prosperity at the price of this man's life. Do you blow it out? If yes, read letter #4. If no, read letter #5.

If the vote has been to keep the mandarin alive, the game goes on. If the vote has been to blow out the candle, the leader has a number of alternatives. He can just end the game, or he can ask the participants whether they want to continue the game as if they had voted not to blow out the candle. (On one occasion when a group had voted to kill the mandarin, I ended the game and had a trial in which those who had voted to kill the mandarin were charged with murder).

After reading envelope #3, the "recapitulation, reasons for, reasons against" format is repeated. Then the group votes either to blow out the candle or not. If yes, they read letter #4; if no, letter #5.

Envelope #4

Twenty years ago the mandarin died mysteriously. We are now living in a world of peace and prosperity unparalleled in human history. This has happened because one government now rules the whole world, and rules it with an iron hand. It demands control over every aspect of its citizens' lives. When you voted to kill the mandarin because he was of the wrong political party, because his views did not agree with yours, then you were in effect saying that others could do the same thing. So we now have peace and prosperity, but bought at the price of a government which watches every move you make, and exterminates those who do not agree with it.

Envelope #5

The mandarin still lives, but as an outcast. Some villagers have brought evidence that he had stolen village funds that were supposed to be used for badly needed food and medicine. Even though he is hated by the whole village, the mandarin is still happy to be alive. He looks forward to seeing the sun rise every morning. Do you blow out the candle and buy peace with his life? If yes, read letter #6. If no, read letter #7.

For the next letters, the same procedure is followed.

Envelope #6

The mandarin has died. Some say he died of a broken heart because the village rejected him. This was especially unfortunate because a few days after his burial, new evidence was found to show that he had not stolen any of the missing funds. An uneasy peace and prosperity now hovers over the world. It is uneasy because of a group called The Deciders. If a person is suspected of conduct disruptive to peace and prosperity, The Deciders have him killed. This way, things are peaceful, although the population is a lot smaller.

Envelope #7

The mandarin is still alive, friends with everyone because the missing money has been found. He was innocent. But the mandarin is not happy. His wife has died and all the joy of his life is gone. Nothing brings him happiness anymore. He

was so close to his wife that he wishes he were dead so he could be with her. He is completely depressed and sick of living. Do you blow out the candle? If yes, read letter #8. If no, read letter #9.

Envelope #8

The mandarin is dead. Peace and prosperity have come to the world. One of the things responsible for this is that depressed or mentally sick people are no longer allowed to live. They are thought to mess up society. Suicide is also encouraged. People feel that anyone who really wants to die is probably no good to society.

Envelope #9

The mandarin is happy again. He has realized that if he really loved his wife, he could not continue to grieve over her death. She wouldn't want him to. He again enjoys life, but, unfortunately, his age is catching up with him. He's come down with a painful lung infection that has him near death and in constant pain. Yet he's still happy to be alive. Do you blow out the candle? If yes, read letter #10. If no, read letter #11.

Letter #9 is the last decision letter. The vote leads to either letter #10 or #11. If the mandarin is still kept alive and #11 is read, the group sees that peace and prosperity can best be achieved by our own efforts, not by immoral means. If the group has never chosen to blow out the candle, the leader, at this point, could read them the unopened letters and point out what would have happened if.

Envelope #10

The old man is dead because the candle of flame has been blown out. Peace and prosperity have come to the world, but at a tremendous price. We have no more homes for the aged, no more hospitals, no more invalids who are a burden on society and the economy. Mercy killing has become an accepted thing. Only the strongest are allowed to survive. The old and the sick are put away for good.

Envelope #11

The old man somehow pulled his strength together and survived. During his illness, he had a vision of a plan to bring peace and prosperity to the world through a recognition of the value of each person and the universal brotherhood of man. The old mandarin walked to Peking to take his plan to the leaders of China. They in turn took it to the United Nations where, with the cooperation of the United

States, all nations on earth accepted it, bringing for the first time in the history of our planet, an age of universal peace and prosperity.

The leader now asks who has the last **envelope, #12**, and has the class speculate on what might be inside, what the message might be. When the student or retreatant opens the letter, a blank piece of paper is inside. The leader then asks what the significance of that might be.

An objection that is sometimes raised is that the game is rigged. Admittedly, it is, but not in a totally dishonest way. Every time the group votes to kill the mandarin, they do suffer for it, but each time the suffering is a possible outcome. It's not just a *dues ex machina*. Also, each time they vote to kill the mandarin, what they are repaid with is their very action, and the rationale of their action, multiplied on a wide scale. This seems possible and honest. If they can kill for reason X, other people can kill for reason X. This is sort of Kant's moral imperative in a negative way.

Although this presentation can be used by itself, I often tend to use it as part of a unit on the value of the human person. On one occasion, I used it with the short story, "The most Dangerous Game" by Richard Connell on another, with the movie, *The Wild One*. On retreats I like to use it in conjunction with a values exercise that allows the retreatants to compare their values with those of Christ. There are many songs that could be used with the presentation: for instance, "What a Piece of Work is Man" from *Hair*, or "I 'm Alive" by Tommy James and the Shondells, although both are a bit old now.

Oh yes, what about you? Would you kill the mandarin?

Brandon's Notes:

After using the Mandarin Game on several different occasions, I have noticed a few things that I believe can make the game more effective. Following are some suggestions for creating a more interesting experience:

One problem I've noticed is that, by the time they reach the last couple envelopes, the participants have "figured out" the pattern. Initially, the information given about the mandarin is negative and simply accumulates. We discover that he is a communist... then we find out that he is a criminal (albeit a happy one). At that point, if the mandarin goes on living, the participants discover that he is not a crook after all. If the group allows him to live beyond his 'wanting to die', the negative information is turned around again. At this point, **everybody** knows that no matter how bad the new information seems, they should not kill the mandarin.

With this in mind, I recommend the following changes be made to two of the envelopes:

Envelope #7

The mandarin is still alive, but his life is not a happy one. His wife has died and all the joy of his life is gone. Nothing brings him happiness anymore. He was so close to his wife that he wishes he were dead so he could be with her. He is completely depressed and sick of living. Do you blow out the candle? If yes, read letter #8. If no, read letter #9.

(The participants do not discover that the mandarin was innocent unless they blow out the candle. This way, as far as they know, he is still a criminal.)

Envelope #9

The mandarin is still alive but, unfortunately, his age is catching up with him. He has come down with a painful lung infection that has him near death and in constant pain. There are no adequate medical facilities close enough for him to travel to, and even if he could, he would have no means by which to pay for proper care. Do you blow out the candle? If yes, read letter #10. If no, read letter #11.

(This version removes the knowledge that the mandarin has come to terms with the death of his wife. As far as the participants know, he may still want to die.)

Admittedly, these changes make the game even more "rigged". The reasons that can be used to justify killing the mandarin just keep compounding, making it

ever more likely that the group will choose to blow-out the candle. On the other hand, if they allow him to live, it will more likely be due to their actual beliefs rather than their ability to recognize a pattern.

Other points:

With larger numbers, it is helpful to break them into small groups and have them discuss each issue amongst themselves, then send a 'representative' to meet with the game leader. The leader then has an open discussion with the representatives, in front of the large group. Inevitably, other people will want to give input to this discussion, but by starting in small groups you allow everyone a chance to have their say.

The leader needs to monitor the discussion and, to some degree, play the 'devil's advocate'. For example, if the group is leaning heavily towards blowing out the candle in round one, the leader should make sure that they have thoroughly discussed the situation.

Another example might be where the vocal majority is pushing everyone toward letting the mandarin live and only offers reasons such as "because it's wrong to kill someone". If the group is simply going along because they don't want to argue, then the leader should step in and ask some tough questions. "So you have a communist, who has stolen money from his neighbors and wants to die... yet you think his life is more important than 200 years of peace for the entire world?"

In any event, the leader should not attempt to convince the group of a particular course of action. The goal is to stimulate discussion.

If the idea of "the end justifies the means" does not come up, it may be worthwhile to initiate the discussion. Use examples that are difficult to argue against. "If my family was being threatened by a man with a gun, and I had a gun available, I would try to kill him. The protection of my family justifies it. If you tell me the safety of my family is less important than a burglar with a weapon, I'll tell you you're sick and wrong." The usual argument is, "You don't have to kill him, you can just shoot him in the leg or something." To which you respond by commenting on the difficulty of hitting such a small target while your hands are shaking and you're scared out of your mind. "You aim for the chest and hope for the best."

Another idea that can be put to the group is the fact that Jesus died that we might be saved. Apparently God agrees that the end justifies the means? This comment, of course, can open up a major can of worms that the leader better be

prepared to deal with. The obvious difference in the two scenarios is that the mandarin has no choice in the matter but, presumably, Jesus did.

If the group ends up killing the mandarin, it is very important to thoroughly discuss the outcome. Normally, the group ends up very angry... with each other, with the game, and with the leader. It is vital that the leader be prepared to diffuse this emotion and turn it towards a constructive dialog.

On the other hand, when the group does not kill the mandarin, it is also important to process their reactions. Often, there are people who have advocated killing the mandarin, and others in the group start in with the "See! We told you so!" remarks. It is important to turn the discussion away from judgment and focus on the reasons why the game is set up the way it is.

Inevitably, the group wants to know what was in the unopened envelopes, which can be a good place to start the closing dialog. I recommend that the leader collect all of the unopened envelopes and read them one by one. In doing this, you are able to control the "effect", by using the appropriate somber attitude while dramatically reading the other possible outcomes. You will probably find that Envelope #2 has by far the greatest impact on the group. (Read it slowly and allow a long pause at the end.)

One final note... when referring to the death of the mandarin, I do not use the term "kill" unless the group is being particularly bloodthirsty and I am attempting to create more discussion around the issue. Normally, I refer to "taking the life of" or "sacrificing" the mandarin.

In closing:

These notes are simply a few ideas to help you facilitate the game. Feel free to use it as originally written, or as I have modified it. Before you facilitate the game for the first time, it is beneficial to sit down with someone else and go through it step by step, fully discussing each point along the way. Keep in mind that you do not have to defend a particular point of view. As the leader, you will be able to agree and disagree with either side... and change your stance as you see fit! Whatever it takes to stimulate discussion, for that is what makes this game effective and allows learning to occur.

Good luck, and enjoy!!