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The Odd Tiger Out

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The Odd Tiger Out

“Marco!”

I’m standing in the middle of a swimming pool, toes gripping the popcorned floor beneath me, eyes squeezed shut. Chlorine-saturated water gently laps against my chest, agitated by the stealth movements of my younger brother Nick and cousins Austin and Zachary. “Marco!” I call out again, waiting for the chorus of “Polo!”s to guide me towards their locations. Behind my closed eyelids I can vaguely orient myself, the sudden flush of red and warmth against my pale skin when I turn signifying I now face the setting sun. Sharp corners of stone jut out from the pool’s border, poking my ribs as I make my way forward. “Marco!” I call out again, hoping their response will give me a better clue of where my family hides. Instead of a “Polo,” I hear the ragged breaths of a land mammal dangerously close to my face. My hand grazes its forearm and I flinch, instinctively blocking my face to protect my blinded figure. A viscous drop of saliva oozes onto the bridge of my nose, no doubt from the monster ready to cleanly slice through my neck with razor-sharp fangs. Once I open my tightly shut eyelids, however, the threatening image of a tiger I envisioned is replaced by my neighbor’s startled collie.

“Polo!”

Hosting a pool party without playing at least one round of Marco Polo is virtually impossible. To stymie the scalding Dallas summer heat, I fondly remember birthday parties where we would play until our fingers pruned. Although millions play Marco Polo every year, the game’s origin remains a mystery.¹ One prevailing theory is that it parodies the journey of Marco Polo (born 1254, Year of the Tiger²), a famed explorer whose travels to Mongol-dominated China are contested to this day. The absence of critical details like the Chinese use of chopsticks to eat comes off as suspicious.³ Instead of the complicated social stratosphere of DFW pool parties, Marco Polo traversed much larger bodies of water: the swallowing depths of

the South China Sea and Indian Ocean.⁴ If Marco Polo did, in fact, go to China, he faced being an outsider separate from this bewitching land he entered. Polo's famed voyage came before Western merchants were commonplace in China, leading to ostracizing from both Mongol conquerors and indigenous Chinese people. This separation, this lack of belonging with your community, resonates with me. As a half-white, half-Vietnamese man, navigating both Vietnamese and white spaces feels how Marco Polo must have in the Mongol capital of China. My intersectional experiences are constantly invalidated, my Vietnamese family weaponizing my American parentage and my Caucasian friends using similar rationale to justify racist jokes. A white man invading an Asian space? This feeling isn't thousands of years old for me.

“Marco!”

My most recent Tết, or Vietnamese Lunar New Year, started out the same as it always has. My mother (Hà) and I (no Vietnamese name) arrived at the festival several hours late, forgoing the trap of gambling tables to grab dinner from the food stalls. We met our cousins (Trúc in 10th grade, Aileen in 6th) as they hurtled away with church friends without so much as a “chào anh” to me or “chào bác” to my mom. Only Michelle, the six-year-old remained, waiting patiently for me to finish eating before dragging me through the various kiddy booths. After passing through (and donating a modest sum to) several games to procure a white balloon Michelle could not live without, we took a break and paused in front of a crowded folding table. This off-brown industrial tabletop will be used for the rest of the year as a meeting place for First Communion small groups or Confirmation study sessions, bright-eyed children cheerfully chirping prayers around it they will scoff at in a matter of years. For now, though, all religious pretense has been evicted, the Parish Hall transformed into a vessel for the sinful rituals taking place this Tết.

A sign taped at Michelle's eye-level loudly declared "\$10 LIMIT BẦU CUA" with what looks like a coin purse tied with gold string traced and colored in pencil. Michelle squeezed her head between the lanky arms of two young parishioners and peered at the game board in front of her. 6 circles have been printed onto the ivory fabric, and before she could catch a glimpse of their designs, dollar bills are cast on top of the ornate images. Someday she will know these as the symbols of Bầu Cua: bầu (calabash gourd), cua (crab), cá (fish), gà (chicken), nai (deer), and tôm (shrimp), but today they are meaningless placeholders, parking spots for bills snatched up by eager grownups. An austere ông handled the porcelain plate behind the board, a parishioner since the days when Michelle was little more than an idea in her parents' American Dreams. He placed an ornate serving cover over 3 dice, each side corresponding to a Bầu Cua symbol, and shook it. As these dice rattle around their temporary prison, Uncles and Aunties sprang into action, tilting heads against the table to hear the dice's movements or scratching fingernails against the polyethylene to calculate the odds of a chicken or shrimp. While everyone around me focused on their rituals, my attention again zeroed in on the sign. It read "Bầu Cua Cá Cọp," Gourd Crab Fish Tiger in English, which confused me because why is there a tiger in this game's name?

"Polo!"

After mulling over the question all night, I decided I needed to start researching answers. Bầu Cua Cá Cọp is the most popular Vietnamese game played during Lunar New Year. The game's name theoretically originates from the different elements on the die: gourd, deer, chicken, fish, shrimp, and crab. In answer to my question from before cọp is the Vietnamese word for tiger, my Zodiac sign. As my translations reveal, the tiger does not appear on either the dice or gameboard. One of the few tangible clues comes from Vietnam's name: Nam Việt, literally "South of Việt." The Nam Việt kingdom formed during the Triệu dynasty and was taken

over during the many Han Dynasty conquerings.⁵ China subsequently instituted the mandarin system, uprooting local government and traditions to place bureaucratic scholars in leadership positions for almost one thousand years.⁶ The constant presence of Chinese officials from a country with a rich tiger folklore offers a possible explanation as to why Bàu Cua would have traveled there. Every article or piece of information I found likewise referenced a Chinese game called Hoo Hey How (魚蝦蟹) with similar rules and gameplay to Bàu Cua. If this game did in fact travel to Vietnam, why was it important enough for the mandarins to bring? No matter the importance of gambling, the easy-to-lose dice, heavy covering, and decorative game board would have been too much hassle to carry thousands of miles to Vietnam. More research, it seemed, would be necessary.

“Marco!”

Some of my happiest memories have been times spent rolling gỏi cuốn with my grandmother. Gỏi cuốn, called spring or summer rolls in English, are filled with shrimp, noodles, or greens and wrapped in soaked rice paper. They can be purchased freshly made in Vietnamese restaurants, but my family always makes them ourselves. The evening after this Lunar New Year I had plans to make gỏi cuốn with my Bà Ngoại (my mom’s mom’s) at her house within a 5-minute walk away from mine. I rang the front doorbell and she answered with her characteristic gasp, a lilt of surprise she always makes when her favorite grandson comes to visit. I’m not being conceited; I’m her favorite grandson and she loves to remind her other grandchildren of it anytime they see her. This night I was not the only guest of honor, and after 20 or so minutes of catching up, my extended family began helping set the dinner table. Throughout this chaos, my grandpa sat in his massage chair watching Animal Planet, a daily routine he stringently adheres

to. Not until everyone seated at the table started praying did he mute the TV, slowly rose from his shiatsu, and assumed his position at the head of the table.

We began the almost-mechanical process; rice paper is soaked in a curved, thin vase filled with water, laid flat onto a plate, filled with various ingredients, folded on both sides, then rolled tightly into a compact package. I spend an excessive amount of time painstakingly forming mine into the perfect shape, while my brother produces his signature tapered, jumbo-stuffed gỏi cuốn I call cigars. Making precise gỏi cuốn not only proves a source of pride but also spares me from my grandfather's lectures about how "your technique is so sloppy" or how I "need to flatten the meat before you just rush into rolling." This process also includes gossiping about family members or those in our local Vietnamese church. As my mom, Bà Ngoại, and aunt Hiền droned on, the memory of Tết lingers in my mind. I knew the women in this room had the highest likelihood of knowing the answer, much more than my initial online search. However, I remembered all too well the mild eyebrow raise, the feigned look of surprise when my brother or I miss a key piece of Vietnamese culture. "I'm shocked you never learned this folktale every single Vietnamese person knows, but since your dad is white I'm really not shocked at all." Thinking about these past experiences brought a swell of courage, as I have undergone enough of these humiliating experiences to no longer fear them. I seized a rare opportunity when my mom stopped for air to blurt out, "Bà Ngoại, where did Bàu Cua come from?"

"Polo!"

I addressed this question to my grandmother because her background is far from ordinary; she survived both the French colonization of Vietnam and the Vietnamese War, went from extreme poverty in her early life to starting a national-level Asian food brand in late adulthood, and still wakes up at 4:00 am every day to go to church. After coming to America

with only \$40 and her daughter, she has made over 10,000 times that and will leave behind hundreds of descendants born into the Land of the Free. Both in her home country and in her adopted one, my Bà Ngoại intimately understands Bàu Cua's cultural significance, making her response all the more surprising. Instead of imparting her usual family story or ancient myth, my grandma furrowed her brow in concentration, thought for a moment, and replied that things like Bàu Cua's history lacked enough importance to write down. It makes sense; why worry about why it says tiger in the name of a dice game when there are bigger problems like dying from war or starvation? Justifying her response, however, did not make its ambiguity any less vexing.

“Marco!”

Fortunately, I began this search in the second semester of my college career, with all the resources a liberal arts education can provide. I reached out to my university's library for assistance, beginning a research journey that would lead all the way to Harvard's Yenching Library of East Asian studies. One of their Chinese experts, Xiao-He Ma, sent back a 10-page PDF written in Mandarin. Finally, a lead. I translated this document along with several others found through online research. These sources indicated the game was created in China through divination rituals, as divination has existed since the beginning of recorded Chinese history and oracle bones are the only reason we have records from the first historical (Shang) dynasty.⁷ People from this time could not rely upon science or the internet for answers, forced to cast objects or play games with deities to have their wishes granted. Some Chinese historians believe Liubo, the ancestor to Chinese Chess, was created as a way for the evil king Wu Yi to prove he could best the gods.⁸ Using a wooden statue as the gods' stand-in, Wu Yi won every match because his attendants did not want to anger him by winning. A similar Shang Dynasty game called the Six Wands Game was played by casting 6 bamboo “wands” onto the board and

divining answers from their patterns, “wands” which were eventually replaced with dice like Bàu Cua.⁹ Two Bàu Cua figures also appear as constellations in the Chinese star map, the White Tiger (白虎) and Vermillion Bird (朱雀).¹⁰ Finally, the calabash gourd (bầu) has held many important roles in China since its first uses as a vessel for water or the medicines of doctors. Gourds symbolized balance, order, and fortune, even birthing the entire universe in one myth.¹¹ It seemed the origin of Bàu Cua was definitely Chinese, and it was in mainland Chinese sources I could find the tiger’s meaning. Case closed, right?

“Polo!”

There are few things more important to Vietnamese families than your zodiac year. Each passing Lunar New Year is a year closer to Your year, and this celebration promises great prosperity. Being 20, I have only experienced this special event once, the year of my 12th birthday. At this age, I was still an active student of kung fu, a discipline I kept for over a decade. I was also a dedicated member of the school’s lion dance troupe, filling every role the four years I was active, including carrying the colorful lion head, playing the “butt” to support the “head” in its complicated choreography, bringing props onstage for the lions, drumming, playing the cymbals, and banging the gong. My first and only Year of the Tiger was spent flying to the dome of Dallas’ Reunion Tower in a bullet elevator. Internationally-acclaimed chef Wolfgang Puck hosts an annual Lunar New Year party at his restaurant 560, and this was the first year we were invited to perform. I remember trying to work on homework before the performance, too excited to focus on my math problem set. I was playing cymbals that evening and stuffed my ears with the fluorescent construction earplugs my mom gave me to prevent hearing loss.

Lion dance has been part of my life every New Year since birth, the intricately choreographed routines present at both Chinese and Vietnamese celebrations. I remember the amazement I felt watching these impressive displays, the ways people could take a papier-mâché skeleton and transform it into a living, breathing animal. Performing at Reunion Tower was one of the first times I felt embarrassed by my cultural heritage. Patrons adhered to the Lunar custom of handing red envelopes to the lions for good luck in the coming year. Although many of the non-Asian guests participated in the ceremony, it was often superficial, baiting the lions with the envelope for a “candid” photo or laughing at, not with us. Some could not be bothered to stop their conversations, simply tossing envelopes over their shoulders mid-sentence like a suburban parent chucking garbage onto the curbside while checking their phone. In this instant I felt the familiar sensation of being a stateless stranger in a foreign land, self-conscious and aware of my intrusion. On one of the most special nights of my life, I should have felt like a proud, strong tiger; instead, I looked at the dome’s polished glass windows and saw a circus monkey, forcing a smile and banging his cymbals for attention.

“Marco!”

There are many reasons the China theory cannot be proven outright. Firstly, no time period or records explicitly ties *Bầu Cua* to the Middle Kingdom. My aunt Hoa also raised the counterpoint that Vietnamese writers oftentimes use puns for phonetic purposes or to avoid obscenities. The rhyming and relevant word *còp* would replace *độ* for “gambling” in order to circumvent direct endorsement of vices. This practice can be seen utilized by authors as famous as Shakespeare, who invented different words to fit rhyme schemes or needs of the meter.¹² The prevalence of this technique in Chinese literature, however, further confuses the matter. Tang dynasty poet Wen Tingyun famously used witticisms for social critique and innuendo,¹³ and the

most famous Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* sees characters named after homonyms for truth (甄/真) and falsehood (賈/假).¹⁴ If not from China, however, the game must have come from Vietnam. My alternative theory postulated Hoo Hey How was developed from Bầu Cua and spread upwards into China. Poor Vietnamese farmers could have created Bầu Cua to pass the time between harvesting seasons, rolling dice to see which animals they believed would appear before them next. Tigers would still have been commonplace a thousand years ago, native to the tropical forests of Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam. Centuries of poaching for rare pelts or the “anti-inflammatory” powers of tiger bones (especially prominent in the last 100 years) have led the tiger population to continually tread downwards, from the hundreds of thousands in 1900 to less than 4,000 in 1970. Tigers now inhabit only 6% of their historic domain, with certain experts projecting they will go extinct within the next decade.¹⁵ The sharp decline of wild tigers makes it possible the still-common nai (deer) replaced them on the gameboard. Fish, shrimp, crab, calabash gourds, these are also all Vietnamese staples and could easily have appear in these ancient rice paddies. Could this finally be the answer?

“Polo!”

Three peasant farmers in the countryside province of Huế, the central region of Vietnam, could have squatted around a game board. Thanh, Minh, and Hải have been up since before dawn, adhering to a backbreaking ritual: feed the livestock, tend to the plants, and prepare a breakfast of phở, all before sunrise.¹⁶ Monsoon season has just begun, and they are waiting for the incessant flood rains to dwindle before they can begin harvesting crops. They sit underneath the slanted roof of Thanh’s hut, surrounding a crude version of Bầu Cua. What does the gameboard look like? What year are they playing in? Would even they have known the answer, given their limited education? These questions do not bother the farmers, as they have already

placed their bets: Minh on cá, Hải còp, and Thanh cua. Gripping the flimsy edges of their seats, they survey the tropical landscape, straining nearsighted eyes to find their animal of choice. Minh wins first, a catfish surfacing in the nearest paddy followed by an enthusiastic whoop from the group. Thanh wins second, the slender forceps of a crab extending and hauling its body from the shallow ponds of another field. Only Hải remains, and the trio spends hours waiting for a single tiger to appear. Somehow, the tigers have sensed their prying and retreated deep into the woods. All the three farmers know for sure is that, besides the cascading sheets of rain and relentless din of droplets pummeling dirt, nothing else can be seen or heard.

“Marco!”

Language evolves, changes, and warps with the evolution of societies. Language brought me many questions throughout my search to find the tiger of Bàu Cua, and language has made this problem virtually unsolvable. After all, how can we answer which Fish-Prawn-Crab came first: those in Hoo Hey Ho (魚蝦蟹) or the cá-tôm-cua of Bàu Cua? One of the languages most vulnerable to changes is Tiếng Việt, Vietnamese. China forcibly implemented Classical Hán characters as the language of all official writing from 206 BC to the 20th century.¹⁷ From chữ Hán Vietnamese scholars developed chữ Nôm using a combination of Chinese characters and indigenous phonetics.¹⁸ Chữ Nôm remained the primary language of creative expression until Hồ Chí Minh’s declaration of independence from France in 1945. Classical Chinese, Nôm, and French were all removed as national languages and the Latin Romanized quốc ngữ was instituted and continues to be used today. It took less than a century for Nôm to be all but forgotten, and Trần Trọng Dương of the Nôm Preservation Foundation estimates only 100 people currently understand the language which dominated Vietnamese literature for hundreds of years.¹⁹ This linguistic exchange proves problematic, as the calabash gourd is pronounced and spelled almost

the same in both Classical Chinese (bao) and Vietnamese (bầu). The plant stems from both countries, and Classical Chinese has been used in both countries' writing almost uninterruptedly since the 5th Century BC.²⁰ Which language did Bầu Cua come from? Where did it come from?

“Polo!”

Whenever I tell people my first language is not English, they immediately assume Vietnamese because of my mom's heritage. However, my mom chose not to teach me Tiếng Việt because she worried I would either develop an accent or speak only in a language my white father cannot understand. While my parents focused on working and worrying about my language development, I grew up with my Tia Emma, an employee at their offices who only spoke Spanish. Cuando ellos estaban preocupado con mi Vietnamese, ellos no escuchaban hablando en español/When they were worried about my Vietnamese, they did not hear me speaking in Spanish. My Bà Ngoại, concerned I would lose interest in my Vietnamese heritage without a foundation of language, gave me a priceless gift: the ability to read quốc ngữ. Many Vietnamese-Americans are illiterate in their native tongue, including my mom who needs me to pronounce words aloud for her to understand. Spanish, Vietnamese, English, they were a congealed mess in my brain and I defaulted to Spanglish, asking questions like “Hey mom, cuando vamos a eat dinner?” In learning more about Chữ Nôm and the erosion of the Vietnamese language, I could not stand by and watch part of my heritage and culture melt away with each passing year. So, I wrote a poem combining the languages of my birth (English and Spanish), the language which should have been mine from birth (Vietnamese), the language of Vietnam's past (Chữ Nôm), and the language of my current studies (Mandarin). It might not be perfect, but I created it to contribute to a culture I hope will never fade away:

²¹English: Rich landscape, wild trees, soft beach, rice farm, beautiful country.
Spanish: Paisaje rico, árboles silvestres, playa suave, granja de arroz, hermoso país.
Mandarin: 富士, 野林, 软滨, 米田, 佳国.
Quốc Ngữ: tốt phong cảnh, hoang cây, mềm bãi biển, com trang trại, đẹp đất nước.
Chữ Nôm: 財景, 荒核, 穠溲瀾, 耜垌, 美邦.

While my attempts to recreate Classical Chinese poetry may seem unnecessary, the preservation of key records has oftentimes been neglected or interfered with. Vietnam’s historical deterioration has been unceasing; although Vietnam has been occupied since the Paleolithic era, significant recorded history before China has been lost to time.²² More than just a national language was lost when Chữ Nôm ended its official use in 1945; Nôm represents a key component of the Vietnamese national identity, and the voices of centuries of Vietnamese creatives go silent without it. While initial preservation efforts like the creation of an Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies in Hà Nội are being made, many of these endeavors are in the North and recorded in a completely different dialect (Bắc).²³ Archiving history like Bàu Cua’s has never been more critical, especially as crucial indicators fade from recorded memory. The transition from a useless pastime to significant cultural tradition can happen within several generations, but the story of that evolution can dissipate in just one. “Why is it called bàu cua cá **còp**?” I cry out to the nothingness, waiting for the reassuring response that the “Polo!” of an answer can provide. This tiger and its unanswered question still elude me; it eludes the librarians at my university library, it eludes my Chinese professor, it eludes the heads of the Chinese and Vietnamese collections at Harvard Yenching Library. Writing poetry about nature can preserve language but does nothing for the previously lost knowledge.

“Marco!”

The tiger is rapidly vanishing, and in due time it and the chase will disappear as if nothing was ever there. Whether through intentional means like colonization, or unintentional

ones like deciding a game is too trivial or controversial to record, a little bit of the Vietnamese chronology decays with each passing year. In important archives like the US National Museum's 1889 report on Chinese games, *Bầu Cua* never makes an appearance. Almost no scholarly sources record the history of dice games, and the meager research that does exist is rarely available or written in English.²⁴ Even contemporary attempts to revive the usage of dice, domino, and card games in ancient China devote only two sentences to dice games without even bringing up the monumental *Bầu Cua*.²⁵ The sources which could help me find answers exist only in buried footnotes or casual references, the original manuscripts often lost to time or inattention. "Why is there a tiger in the name of *Bầu Cua*?" will forever evade an answer, because any proof has already washed away. What was the point of all of this?

“ ”

I always end up cheating at Marco Polo. The constant baiting and taunting become unbearably infuriating and I throw my eyes open, first slyly and then blatantly to end my cousins' torment. If I do end up winning on my own it always takes too long, the novelty of manipulating me into hitting the concrete pool walls long gone. I hate nothing more than these long stretches of blind stumbling, my face burning at the realization of how stupid I must look. Triumphant at this game feels like an obvious skill everyone else in my family inherently possesses and researching *bầu cua*'s history has only magnified my feelings of otherness. Because my family only uses English at home I rarely speak Vietnamese, responding to my relatives' platitudes always in the wrong language. Much of my project has remained a secret from my family, despite their interest in the material. I can already hear grumblings about how unqualified I am being half white, and their judgments would simply affirm what I already believe to be true. My questions are those of an outsider, an undesirable mongrel navigating

Vietnamese spaces one step behind his more informed relatives. Each family gathering, each Tết festival is like embarking on a journey, sailing through foreign waters with only a rough understanding of the terrain. From each of these encounters I mature, starting by spending hours recording my Bà Ngoại's stories and continuing in my search for the Tiger of Bàu Cua. I might never be Vietnamese enough, but maybe one day my efforts to save our family's history will be successful enough.

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