

## The Casino

Her fire made a dry bubble of air that kept out the fog coming off the mountains. The woman lifted the boiling kettle off the fire's floor grill and topped up her pot. She stood-up from squatting on the floor and refilled the mugs of card playing customers, sitting on grass mats, at low tables. One of her ancestors might have done this for Marco Polo.

She heard the newest croupier was asking a big man at his table, 'What you do?'



*Figure 1 One of her ancestors might have done this for Marco Polo.*

He was just a scruffy boy. His brother had taught him how to deal cards so he could make money from tourists.

'I'm a fireman.' The customer replied, as he eyed his cards. To him the boy's white shirt would have been rejected by the Salvos, not that these boys would know what that was.

'Fireman.' The croupier repeated, his eyebrows furrowed, and he looked at his brother, dressed in a maroon shirt that would have looked Okay in a 70's disco.

The brother pointed to the precious wood fire the woman was tending. 'That's fire.'

The man smiled. 'Yep.'

The croupier turned back to the big man. 'You make fire?'

The man laughed. 'I put them out.' He mimed the actions.

'Why you not in the army? Wouldn't they have you?' The

croupier asked.

The customer's laughed as they drank from their steaming mugs of Rockshi through bamboo straws that kept the fermented wheat in the mugs. 'A fireman is what I wanted to be.'

The croupier looked confused. He turned to another westerner. 'What you do?'

'I'm retired.'

The brother knew this one. 'His children look after him.'

The men's laughter wasn't meant to be unkind. but the brother looked angry. 'That is right, I know what retired means. Stop being tricky or you pay for Rockshi.'

'Sorry, I don't work anymore, but I used to be an accountant.'

'An accountant.' The boys didn't recognise the word

The fireman took two more cards. 'This man counted money for other people.'

The croupier dealt more cards to the accountant. 'Oh, a bank clerk. You had good job. How much did your watch cost?'

The accounted converted it into rupees for him.

The croupier nodded. 'And your...?' He couldn't think of the word.

'My camera?' The accountant held it up.'

‘Camera.’ The croupier tried out the word.

The accountant did the sums again and told him how much it cost, before asking? ‘Are you going to let your brother retire when you take over his table?’

The croupier smiled at his brother. ‘His turn to be home. I be sending money to family now.’

‘That’s why you need to improve your English.’

‘Yes. You talk to me. I need English. If you talk to me – Rocshi free.’

‘How much would you make here in a night?’

The croupier told him. The accountant did a calculation. He was carrying on him things that were worth more than the croupier could earn in his lifetime.