# An end to a usurper’s fairy tale

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Even in the magic-realist world of Philippine politics, where extraordinary tales of intrigue, duplicity, and absurdity in the pursuit of power are commonplace and just about nothing shocks the electorate anymore, the case of Alice Guo, the once- and now-disqualified mayor of Bamban, Tarlac, still stood out as a stranger-than-fiction story.

And why not? It had elements that seemed ripped straight from a thriller novel—mystery, danger, deception, skullduggery. There were allegations of swapped names, dual identities, a made-up family background, associations with a sprawling criminal enterprise, and—most unsettling of all—potential espionage, on behalf of a neighboring country waging bitter aggression against the Philippines over the West Philippine Sea.

And it all came out by accident. In May last year, Sen. Risa Hontiveros began looking into the background and activities of Zun Yuan Technology, Inc., a Philippine offshore gaming operations (Pogo) hub that had been raided by authorities on suspicion of human trafficking and illegal detention, even torture, of foreign nationals. The Pogo was located in Bamban, Tarlac, whose mayor was a 34-year-old first-term politician named Alice Leal Guo.

Guo had won the Bamban mayorship on her very first try. Cursory digging by Hontiveros revealed that Guo, who appeared to be a well-off individual, was an incorporator of Zun Yuan, and was also connected to the company that leased the land on which the Pogo hub was built, right behind the Bambang municipal hall.

## Incredible tale

Local politicians with their hands dipped in shady hometown activities are par for the course, but then Hontiveros found something else entirely disturbing about Guo: She appeared to have no family records at all. Summoned to the Senate to explain, Guo claimed to be the illegitimate daughter of a Filipino named Angelito Guo and his former housemaid Amelia Leal. Neither of the alleged parents had birth, marriage, or death records with the Philippine Statistics Authority. Business documents, on the other hand, said Angelito Guo was in fact a Chinese citizen named Jian Zhong Guo.

Asked about her growing-up years, Alice Guo spun an incredible tale—that, because she was born out of wedlock, her father had raised her in a pig farm in a town in Tarlac, with only a “Teacher Rubilyn” as companion. She couldn’t recall playmates or details of her supposed childhood, and to various questions about her murky provenance, she went back time and again to a standard opening line: “Lumaki po ako sa farm… (I grew up in a farm)”—as if she was trained to stick to talking points on a script.

## Questionable citizenship

Subsequent revelations were even more damning: Guo had her birth registered only when she 19. But a young Chinese girl named Guo Hua Ping had entered the Philippines on Jan. 12, 2003, at age 13. Comparing documents from the National Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Immigration, fingerprint experts subsequently certified that Guo and the Chinese girl were one and the same person.

That “infallible science of fingerprint examination” was what the Manila Regional Trial Court Branch 34 cited as the cornerstone of its recent decision disqualifying Guo from her government post, for being “nothing more but a usurper of the Office of the Mayor of Bamban, Tarlac.” And because she had passed herself off as a Filipino to run for public office, she was barred not only from occupying the office, but also running for it in the first place, thus making her 2022 electoral win and proclamation void.

The court’s 67-page decision provides a definitive answer to the quo warranto petition the Office of the Solicitor General had filed against Guo, and on the very question of Guo’s questionable citizenship. Based on document and fingerprint evidence, “Guo Hua Ping is Alice Leal Guo,” declared the court.

## Chinese spy

But the court did not stop there. It also took note of the far bigger, more alarming implication of a foreign national who was apparently able to change her identity with ease and, over the years, worm her way into Filipino society and politics. “Such a situation posed a risk to national security, which is far more than real,” warned the court.

Indeed, the question had been raised from the start: Was Alice Guo a Chinese spy? Was she part of a sleeper cell embedded in Philippine society and engaged in activities designed to undermine the country from the inside? According to a convicted Chinese businessman and self-confessed spy named She Zhijiang in an interview with Al Jazeera, she definitely is.

The country may have dodged a bullet with Guo’s underhanded enterprise getting exposed, and now with the relatively quick action by a court to banish her from civic life.

But, think about it: If someone like her had managed to secure a rising place in the country’s power circles until caught, how many more Alice Guos are out there—especially with the floodgates of fraudulent immigration that were thrown open during the Duterte years?