

## 四十九

The road back to Beijing  
was curvy and long  
we spied an old lady  
but something seemed wrong  
she beckoned us over  
and said that she knew  
some secrets about me  
and things I must do



## Chapter 49 – Entering the Tiger’s Lair

不入虎穴 · 焉得虎子 bù rù hǔ xué, yān dé hǔ zǐ “To catch the tiger cub, one must enter the tiger’s lair.” Problem was, I found myself in the middle of the tiger’s lair, but I had no desire to catch a tiger cub. I was enjoying my surroundings and was curious to know more. There’s another Chinese saying, 不到长城非好汉 bú dào chángchéng fēi hǎohàn. “You can’t really call yourself a 好汉 hǎohàn (This term is tough to translate – can mean “hero”, but in this context it’s more like “a real Chinese”) until you been to the Great Wall of China.” I’d been to the Great Wall, but I still didn’t feel that I’d earned my “haohan” merit badge.

Not sure when the “tiger cub” idiom first appeared, but the best-known backstory centers on an historical figure called 班超 Bān Chāo, who hailed from Xianyang in the province of Shaanxi. He was both a military leader and a diplomat who lived in the Eastern Han dynasty during the first century A.D. The story goes that Ban Chao, along with 36 subordinates, was on a diplomatic mission for the Eastern Han Emperor to visit the kingdom of 楼兰 Lóu Lán in the Tarim Basin, located in the present day Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. He had been asked to improve and cement a relationship with its king. When Ban Chao arrived, he was given a warm reception and things were looking good. After a few days, however, things seemed to cool down. He learned that another delegation had arrived at about the same time as his. This much larger delegation were 匈奴 Xiōngnú, fierce warriors from north-eastern China. Ban Chao knew the only real weapon he possessed at that moment was surprise. He sent 10 men to beat drums and start shouting. The rest of Ban Chao’s men lay in ambush and swiftly slew 30 of the Xiongnu soldiers, including the leader, whose head he severed. The remaining Xiongnu fled the kingdom erroneously believing that they had been attacked by a large Han force. The next day, Ban Chao presented the severed head of the Xiongnu leader to the king of Lou Lan, and the Lou Lan king decided to form an alliance with the Eastern Han. Ban Chao had entered the tiger’s Lair and had successfully captured the tiger cub. Finally, there was a man by the name of 樂廣 Yuè Guǎng who invited a friend to a bar about a thousand years ago during the Jin Dynasty. While tipping and staring into his cup, the friend appeared startled and suddenly left the bar. Wondering what had happened, Yue Guang popped by his friend’s home later on to make sure he was OK. “I thought I saw a snake swimming in my drink.” said his friend. “It really scared me so I came home.” Yue Guang was curious. He went back to the bar and sat at the same spot his friend had sat and drank the same drink. Then he smiled. The snake his friend had seen, was, in fact, the reflection of a bow that was hanging on the wall. He quickly returned to his friend’s house and explained the illusion. . . and they went back to the bar and finished their drinks.

I knew I was no Ban Chao. There have been a few times in China, however, when I have felt a little like Yue Guang's friend, where I may have mistaken a snake for a bow 杯弓蛇影 ( bēi gōng shé yǐng. ) The road back to Beijing reminded me of the snake in the cup, but my eyes closed and I drifted back into the tiger's lair.

