

七十二

Above the Chang Jiang
we heard an old story
a miraculous tiger
once leapt to his glory
in a cave at a crossing
we spotted moon bears
like lumbering dogs
with giant derrières



Chapter 72 – Tiger Leaping Gorge

About 60km northwest of Lijiang, in the province of Yunnan, on the banks of the Jinsha River, a small tributary of the Changjiang (Yangtze River), lies the magnificent river canyon, Tiger Leaping Gorge (虎跳峡 Hǔ tiào xiá.) Tiger Leaping Gorge runs between the Haba Snow Mountain (哈巴雪山 Hābā Xuěshān) and the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain (玉龙雪山 Yùlóng Xuěshān.) Legend has it that a tiger, in two bounds, leapt across the river in the gorge at its narrowest point to escape from a pursuing hunter. First onto a giant rock jutting out in the river and from there, a magnificent leap to the other side. Rumors of this magnificent gorge began surfacing in the West in the 1980's, but it wasn't until 1993 that the Chinese government officially allowed foreigners access. In 1997, some friends decided that Tiger Leaping Gorge would be a great adventure. Unfortunately, tagging along was not an option for me. Naturally, they took their primary school age kids, and not one of them spoke more than a few words of Chinese. The following are some of the memories they shared with me about Tiger Leaping Gorge circa 1997.

“We took the high trail because they were blasting for a road through the gorge at the river level. There were a number of sections where the trail was rather narrow, cut into vertical rock faces. The girls were quite sensible, but the boys, ‘being boys’ would scurry in manners that caused a few adult heart stoppages.



As we traversed, we had no map, guide, or Mandarin. We only knew that we were headed for Daju at the other end of the gorge. When we were unsure of which trail to follow and saw a farmer in a field, a mule train driver, or another Chinese person, we would say “Daju”, and they would point in a direction, which we then followed.

We stayed in a farmhouse about half-way to DaJu. The place where we slept was a single-story building across from a courtyard. The animals were kept under the main residence. The view from the “outdoor loo” was spectacular across the gorge, to snow covered Jade Dragon Snow Mountain on the eastern side.” (KR)

“Along the route we took through the gorge, the farmers were harvesting potatoes. Every time we made a meal stop we would try to get some kind of dish with potatoes. Since they were fresh from the field it would take at least an hour for them to clean, shred, and then cook them up. It was worth the wait because they were so tasty and fresh.” (LK)

“We descended somewhere a little over the middle of the gorge – I think near Walnut Grove. Somewhere in that region, we came across a crew blasting for the road. They would use an instrument like a straight heavy hexagonal 2-3 meter iron rod that had what I would call a “star drill” tip. With raising and lowering the rod by hand and slamming it into the rock, they would eventually excavate a hole approximately 1-2 metres deep into the rock face.

They would drop a lighted dynamite charge with a short fuse down the hole, and then run. There was no way for us to get by the point of the blasting. The trail was too narrow. As soon as the charge was dropped into the hand-drilled hole, all the workers in the area ran in one direction. Since we did not understand (Mandarin or local language) directions, we just ran in the same direction as the workers did.” (KR)

(20 years later) The hike from Qiáotóu (桥头) to Tina’s Youth Hostel’s famous apple pie at Walnut Garden is approximately 17 km on the upper trail. The hike itself is rigorous, but if you plan an overnight stay at the Half-Way House along the way, it’s a really pleasant and beautiful trek. Lucky hikers might get to see a Sea of Clouds in the early morning. Depending on the time of year, wildflowers remind one of why the botanist, Joseph Rock, was so reluctant to leave this spot on the Earth when he finally had to exit China in 1949. An interesting plant which grows wild all along the trail is Cannabis sativa. Funny how I happened upon similar plants in the town of Dali, a town in southern Yunnan and a part of the old “Hippie Trail.”



The last time I visited Tiger Leaping gorge was in 2007. We were hiking down to the river a few miles down the road from Tina's. It was a narrow, winding, gravelly trail that seemed to go on forever. As we neared the spot where a small boat was waiting for us, we saw three dogs lumbering on the far side of the river near some huts and caves. Then I stopped. That wasn't how dogs moved. I was watching three bears playing on the other side of the river. I think they were moon bears because I'm pretty sure I saw white marks on their upper bodies.