

THE BEIJING TEA HOUSE SCAM

/ MATT WHELAN & P.J. KELLY



When should I have realized something was wrong? Was it when they insisted we couldn't take photos? Or when they wouldn't show us a menu? Or when a mean and ugly descendant of Genghis Khan blocked the only exit? Now we were running like panicked animals through the streets of Beijing, slowing only for the armed police posts that appear around the Chinese capital with dystopian regularity. We had 27 minutes to catch our flight.

Only four hours ago I'd landed with my girlfriend at Beijing International on a short layover on our way to Singapore. Realizing that Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City were only a quick train ride away, we were soon snapping photos of soldiers standing guard under a huge portrait of Chairman Mao.

A young couple approached, Li and Min, students from Shanghai they said, and they'd just love the chance to practice their English, and would we like to go for tea? Sure, we said, we had an hour to kill, and who'd come to China without trying the tea? We rounded a corner, went down an alleyway and walked into a tiny room within the outer wall of the monumental Gate of Heavenly Peace.

Our peace, however, would not last long.

There was a low ceiling, a rosewood table set, and the dulcet tones of a pipa playing softly through an old stereo. Looking back at the door, I could only see this massive, grizzly reincarnation of Genghis Khan.

"For our security," said Min.

"Hmm," I said, nodding.

A young woman in a traditional red and gold dress shuffled forth with a tray of teas and hot water. She brewed them one at a time, pouring a little of each over a miniature stone Buddha before offering us our own little cup while we chatted with Li and Min about our travel plans and their professional aspirations.

It was charming, but time was getting on, and we had a flight to catch. We began to excuse ourselves. Li and Min, however, wanted to practice their English, and no amount of tea, it seemed, could quench their thirst. It had been lovely, really, we said, but we had to get back to the airport.

"Ok," said Min, reluctantly, turning to the tea lady to ask for the bill.



我該在什麼時候意識到出問題了呢？是當他們一再堅持不讓我們拍照的時候嗎？還是當他們不肯給我們看菜單的時候呢？又或者是在當一個成吉思汗的傳人又蠻橫又粗魯地攔住出口的時候呢？此刻，我們像受了驚的小動物一樣在北京的街頭亂竄，只有當看到反烏托邦式井然有序的警察崗亭時才慢下來，距離我們的飛機起飛還有27分鐘。

四小時之前，我和我的女友在去往新加坡的途中降落滯留在北京的首都國際機場。我們意識到天安門和故宮僅僅只是一列地鐵快車的距離，很快我們就已經在端著相機拍攝那些保衛著巨大毛主席像的士兵們了。

一對年輕的情侶向我們走來，李和閔，他們自稱是上海來的學生，只是想借此機會練習英文，所以問我們是不是願意去茶館一坐？當然了，我們一口答應，畢竟還有一小時的時間需要消磨，再說誰來到中國不想喝點兒茶呀？我們拐了一個彎，沿著一條胡同一路走到底，然後走進一間在天安門城牆裏頭的小屋。

我們的“安”，並未持續太久。

屋子的天花板很低，屋裏有個紅木桌子，整個房間飄蕩著琵琶奏出的古老卻悅耳悠揚的曲調。回頭再看門口，我只看到一個魁梧壯碩的轉世成吉思汗。

“他是保安。”閔說道。

“嗯……”我點頭答道。

一位身穿紅金色傳統裙子的年輕姑娘端著一盤茶和熱水走上前來。她一次次地為我們沏茶，趁著我們和李還有閔聊到我們的旅行計劃和他們的職業理想時，每一次她都會先倒一些茶在一尊小小的石佛上，之後才倒到每個人的小杯子裏。

茶道很妙，但時間不等人，我們還有飛機要趕，於是我們開始找機會告辭。然而，李和閔二位好像很饑渴地想練習英文，喝再多茶也解不了他們這種“渴”。我們解釋道，這次邂逅很棒，但我們真的不得回機場了。

“好吧。”閔答道。轉身讓奉茶的姑娘結賬埋單。

“總共 2000 元，”我說。“400 多美金。”

“我覺得肯定弄錯了，”我女朋友說道，“他們可能錯加了一個 0 吧。”

即使是這樣，我還是覺得 40 美金喝一杯茶也算貴了，尤其是在中國。

“That says 2000 Yuan,” I said. “That’s more than \$400.”

“I’m sure it’s a mistake,” said my girlfriend. “They probably just added a zero by accident.”

Still, I thought, \$40 is a lot to pay for tea, especially in China.

But there’d been no mistake. They wanted \$410. For tea.

It didn’t take long then for me to realize we’d been duped. I was soon in an indignant rage, jabbering like the frightened tourist I was, shaking my brand new Canon PowerShot in the air and shouting things like: “You bastards! That’s more than I paid for this fucking camera!” Which, in retrospect, was an unwise thing to do in the presence of thieves.

Genghis growled, and the situation deteriorated quickly. We dropped an American \$20 bill on the table and got to our feet.

“Do you think that’s enough?” my girlfriend asked, ever mindful of her manners.

“It’ll have to be,” I said, and we began to move for the door.

Li looked sheepishly at the floor, but Min began to scream, waving his finger in my girlfriend’s face and jabbing her in the cheek. I grabbed him by his shirt lapels and shoved him across the room, where he crashed into and shattered a small wooden chair. Genghis left the doorway to lift Min from the ground. The need to leave had become absolute, and we burst out into the street, unsure if we were being chased, but too scared to look back and find out.

We ran out of the alleyway. We ran from the gaze of Chairman Mao. We ran past Tiananmen Square, its hallowed, haunted ground now floodlit by bright, giant screens advertising tropical holidays. We ran down into the subway to be herded, then physically squeezed into cars like battery chickens by teams of subway pushers wearing surgical masks and big yellow speakers on their belts that shrieked out directions in Mandarin—probably things like: “We don’t care if there isn’t any more room, get on the fucking train!” Which was fine with us. We had a flight to catch.

但事實是他們並沒有弄錯。他們真的向我們要 410 美金，付茶錢。

我很快意識到我們被騙了。然後立刻暴怒起來，就像個受驚嚇的遊客那樣嘖嘖喳喳起來，一邊揮舞著我新買的佳能 POWERSHOT 新相機一邊叫喊“混蛋！這比買這個相機都他媽貴啊！”事後回想起來，我覺得在小偷面前這麼做很不明智。

那個成吉思汗咆哮起來，情況很快就惡化了。我們在桌上扔下一張 20 美金的鈔票就想起身離開。

“你覺得這些夠麼？”女朋友一邊註意著舉止一邊問我。“不夠也得夠了。”我一邊答一邊往門口走。

李羞怯地看著門，但是閔突然開始尖叫，朝我的女友揮舞著手指還戳到了她的臉。我立刻抓起他的衣領，猛地一推，他穿過整個房間摔在一張小木椅子上，把椅子都砸爛了。“成吉思汗”趕緊從門口跑去攙扶他。我們的脫身念頭越來越強烈，於是沖出門去跑到街上，不知道有沒有追上來，但我們怕到頭也不回地只顧往前跑。

我們跑出小巷。跑過毛主席像，穿過天安門廣場。廣場神聖的地面被日光照得閃閃發光，巨大的電子屏幕播放著度假廣告。我們一頭鑽進地鐵車廂，就好像鑽進了電動小雞玩具堆裏，還有帶著口罩、褲腰帶上別著黃色大喇叭不斷地呼喊著的地鐵工作人員。他們可能是在喊“我們不在乎是不是還有空間，趕緊上車！”但我們能接受這一切，畢竟還有飛機要趕。



The ride back to the airport gave pause for doubt. Had we been wrong? Had we cheated them, left an innocent couple at the mercy of an irate tea lady and Genghis Khan's giant, distant progeny? I could see us being held at passport control, having been reported to the police as wild, foreign criminals, running out on the bill in one of China's most revered monuments, destroying furniture and assaulting a young student in the process.

The next day though, in an Internet café in Singapore, I typed into Google the words "Tea service, Forbidden City, and Rip-off."

Here were stories just like ours—of hapless tourists taken for tea then relieved of massive sums of money for fear of losing face or breaking the law. In huge bold font at the top of one page was the warning: "Beware the Beijing Tea House Scam." And so you should. One story told the misfortune of a businessman who'd been taken for more than \$800 after a three-hour tea binge.

\$20, then, was just about right.

回機場的這段路讓我有時間思考了一下。是我們錯了嗎？是我們騙了他們，把一對無辜的情侶留在那裏，獨自面對一位憤怒的茶道姑娘還有成吉思汗般的壯漢？我甚至想象到了我們被邊境處扣留的畫面，因為有人舉報我們像國外來的禽獸在中國最受人尊敬的紀念碑前逃避埋單，還毀壞家具，期間還攻擊了一位年輕的中國學生。

第二天，在新加坡的一家網吧，我在谷歌上搜索了“茶，故宮，坑騙。”

有許多跟我們經歷一樣的故事——有許多倒黴的遊客真的付了一大筆錢，只是為了顧全面子或是不違法。其中有一個網頁用了加大加粗的字體警示道：“小心北京的茶館騙局”。所以你也應該吸取經驗了。有一個故事說到一個不幸的商人為他3小時的茶歇付出了800多美金的代價。

20美金，相比之下，剛好。