

There are, it is said, some victors who delight only in victory against worthy adversaries; to whom the conquest of the weak or stupid is as dust or ashes in their mouths. There are others again who, after overcoming everything and everyone in their path, when the field is strewn with the corpses of the slain, with the obeisances of the surrendered; when there is no enemy left to fight, no friend with which to celebrate – then, and only then, do they feel the desolate solitude of victory. This was not a weakness to which our Ah-Q, in his inexhaustible delight with himself, was susceptible – living proof, perhaps, of the global superiority of Chinese civilization. @

See him now: walking on air after a busy day of moral victory! ff

This latest victory, however, did bring an unusual twist in its tail. Eventually, he floated off to the Temple of Earth and Grain, where, according to well-established custom, he should have immediately lain down and begun snoring. Inexplicably, however, this particular evening he had difficulty keeping his eyes closed. There was something very curious about his thumb and forefinger: both felt softer, silkier than usual. Had something on the nun's face attached itself to his fingers, or had her face rubbed them smooth? @

'May you die without descendants!' echoed in the cathedral of Ah-Q's mind. 'She's quite right,' he thought to himself. 'I ought to have a woman. If I die without descendants, I'll have no one to offer a bowl of rice at my grave... A woman's what I need.' For in the words of one or other of the ancient sages: 'There are three ways of betraying your parents, of which dying without descendants is the most serious.' Or then again: 'Those without descendants will become hungry ghosts.' His thinking on this point was, therefore, fully in line with scripture; a pity, then, that his approach to resolving the difficulty erred on the unorthodox side. @

'Woman...' he thought. 'Must... find... woman... @

'Sauce for the goose...' he thought some more, '... must... find... woman!' @

As to when, exactly, Ah-Q began snoring that evening, we have no reliable information. The only point on which we can be certain is that he fell asleep with that light-headed feeling of satiny smoothness still on his fingertips. 'Woman...' @

Irrefutable proof that women are at the root of all evil. @

The great majority of Chinese men in history would have become saints and sages had they not been ruined by women first. Just look at the Shang dynasty – destroyed by the licentious concubine Da Ji; while Bao Si performed the same service for the Zhou. The Qin dynasty, now... well, the sources aren't entirely unequivocal on this, but were we to surmise there was a woman involved somewhere, we probably wouldn't be wandering too far from the truth. Moving swiftly on to attested fact and the Later Han,<sup>6</sup> it was of course yet another concubine, Diao Chan, who led Dong Zhuo to his death. @

Until this point in his career, Ah-Q had been blessed with a character that was rigid in its uprightness. Although we have no way of knowing whether he had ever received personal moral guidance from any celebrated spiritual authority, he had always strictly upheld classically ordained prohibitions concerning the segregation of the sexes, and rejected – with righteous bile – the conduct of heretics such as the young nun or the Fake Foreign Devil. All nuns, as he saw it, were having affairs with monks; any woman walking the streets had designs on strange men; any man or woman in conversation, wherever they were, must be up to no good. He was always disciplining them with his Angry Glare, or with a few sentences of penetrating criticism; if there was nobody else about, he would cast a pebble at them from behind. @

Yet here he was, at the age of thirty – the year in which Confucius enjoined men to 'stand firm' – losing his head, in a thoroughly un-Confucian way, over a nun. What abominable creatures women truly were; if only that nun's face had not been so bewitchingly smooth, or if it had been modestly veiled, Ah-Q would not, in turn, have submitted to being bewitched. Some five or six years past, wedged within a packed opera audience, he had taken the opportunity to pinch a woman's thigh, but her intervening trousers had protected against this debilitating light-headedness. That heretic vixen of a nun, with her shameless naked face. @

'Woman...' Ah-Q went on thinking. @

Ah-Q often kept women he suspected of having designs on strange men under close surveillance, but they never smiled at him. He also listened carefully to women who spoke to him; but they never tried to seduce him either. Further proof of female perfidy: they were all of them hypocrites, pretending they were pure as the driven snow. @

One evening, after a day spent husking rice at Mr Zhao's, Ah-Q sat in the kitchen smoking a postprandial pipe of tobacco. In other households, casual

labour went back home after dinner, but at the Zhaos', dinner was served early and exceptions occasionally made to the rule against keeping the lamps on after dinner. When the Zhaos' eldest had been revising for the examinations, he had been allowed a lamp to study in the evening. And when they hired Ah-Q for odd jobs, he was permitted a lamp to get on with his rice-husking after it got dark. And so it was that Ah-Q came to be sitting in the kitchen, taking his time over his pipe before he went back to his work. @

Once the dishes were done, Mrs Wu, the Zhaos' only maid, sat down on the bench to chat to Ah-Q. @

'The mistress hasn't eaten for two days, because the master is going to buy a concubine...' @

'Woman... Mrs Wu...' Ah-Q thought. 'She's still young... a widow...' @

'The young mistress is having a baby in the eighth month...' @

'Woman...' @

Ah-Q put down his pipe and stood up. @

'She's – ' Wu chattered on. @

'Sleep with me!' Ah-Q suddenly rushed forward, dropping to his knees before her. @

There was a moment of stunned silence before she fled the room, shuddering, her screams rippled with sobs. @

After staring perplexedly at the wall a while, still on his knees, Ah-Q placed both hands down on the empty bench and propelled himself slowly back to his feet, assailed by a sense that he could have somehow handled things better. Having distractedly tucked his pipe into his belt, he decided to return to his rice-husking. At which moment a heavy object landed, with a thump, on his head. Spinning round, he discovered the village genius – the Zhaos' eldest – standing in front of him holding a large bamboo pole. @

'You filthy little...' @

Down came the bamboo again. Covering his head with both hands, Ah-Q took the weight of the blows directly on the joints of his fingers, which caused

him no little pain. He rushed out of the kitchen, taking a valedictory strike to the back as he went. @

‘Bastard!’ The man of letters honoured him with a touch of scholarly invective. @

His fingers still stinging, Ah-Q took solitary refuge in the rice-husking room, feeling deeply unsettled by this ‘bastard’. No common-or-garden term of abuse around Weizhuang, it was a usage favoured by the well-to-do, by those with official connections. He was no longer in any mood for romance. But since the bamboo and the expletive seemed to have brought the whole matter to a close, Ah-Q set to his husking again, as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his mind. Soon, beginning to overheat from the exertion of the work, he paused to remove some layers of clothing. @

As he did so, he heard a great commotion outside. Now Ah-Q loved nothing better than a spectacle and so out he went in search of it. The noise drew him inexorably to the inner courtyard around which Mr Zhao’s apartments were arranged. Although dusk had fallen, he could still make out many of the assembled company – all the resident members of the Zhao clan, including the hunger-striking lady of the house, Mrs Zou from next door, and a couple of slightly more distant relatives, Zhao Baiyan and Zhao Sichen. @

‘Come on out.’ Mr Zhao’s daughter-in-law was trying to coax Mrs Wu out of the servants’ quarters. ‘Don’t let it upset you.’ @

‘No one thinks the worse of you,’ Mrs Zou interpolated, ‘you mustn’t think of killing yourself.’ @

Mrs Wu’s response was incoherent with sobs. @

‘Rum,’ Ah-Q thought to himself. ‘What’s up with her?’ As he sidled over to Zhao Sichen, in the hope of learning more, he became swiftly aware of a rapid approach from Mr Zhao, who was holding a thick bamboo stick of his own. Reminded of the thrashing he had not long ago received from Zhao junior, he deduced that the present lively situation might have something to do with him. Turning to exit back to the husking floor, he found his path blocked by this new stick. Logically enough, he decided to leave by the back door, and soon found himself back inside the Temple of Earth and Grain. @

After sitting there a while, Ah-Q began to feel goose bumps prickling his skin. The spring nights were still not warm enough to go comfortably bare-chested. He had, he now remembered, left his shirt at the Zhaos'; memory of the bamboo discouraged him from trying to retrieve it. At which point the village constable entered. @

'Damn you, Ah-Q! Can't you even keep your hands off the Zhaos' servants? I haven't slept a wink tonight thanks to this mess. Damn you!' @

On he went for a while, lecturing Ah-Q on his various misdeeds, to which the latter very naturally had nothing to say. As their meeting drew to its conclusion, Ah-Q had to tip the constable four hundred coppers – double the usual rate – because he'd been called out at night. Since Ah-Q had no cash on him, he mortgaged his felt hat, then was obliged to sign up to the following five conditions. @

1. To take a pair of red candles – a pound each – and a packet of incense to the Zhaos' tomorrow, as an apology. @
2. To cover the costs of the Daoist priest that the Zhaos had hired to exorcise evil spirits. @
3. Never to set foot, ever again, over the Zhaos' threshold. @
4. If any accident, of any unforeseen kind, were subsequently to befall Mrs Wu, Ah-Q, and Ah-Q alone, would be held responsible. @
5. To abandon all hope of recovering his wages or shirt. @

Regrettably, Ah-Q lacked the funds to make good his indemnity. But as, by happy coincidence, it was spring, he was able to do without his cotton quilt, which he pawned for two thousand coppers, enabling him to fulfil the demands of the peace treaty. After kowtowing, bare-chested, he found himself with a few coppers left over, which he chose to blow on wine rather than redeem his felt hat. The Zhaos didn't burn the candles and incense right away, preferring to keep them for when the mistress of the house next paid her respects to the Buddha. Most of his tattered old shirt was recycled into nappies for the baby that was born to the younger mistress in the eighth month; any off-cuts were used by Mrs Wu for the soles of her shoes. @

