

By the time Ah-Q – his dues paid – made his way back to the Temple of Earth and Grain, the sun had gone down, and he was beginning to feel a slight malaise. Eventually, it dawned on him that the root cause of it all was the absence of his shirt. Remembering that he was still in possession of a ragged cotton jacket, he draped it over his shoulders and lay down. When he next opened his eyes, the sun's rays were beating down on the wall facing west. 'Damn,' he muttered to himself, sitting up. @

Once up, he set out to wander the streets, as he usually did. Although he felt no particular physical discomfort as a result of the lack of clothing on his top half, something seemed to strike him as Not Quite Right with the world. From that day on, the women of Weizhuang seemed suddenly timid of him, darting into doorways on seeing him approach. Even Mrs Zou – not far shy of fifty – would take shelter like the rest of them, pulling her ten-year-old daughter in with her. 'Whores,' Ah-Q mused curiously to himself. 'Acting like Vestal Virgins all of a sudden.' @

It took a little while longer, however, for this sense of Not Quite Rightness to take firm hold. One, the tavern began to refuse him credit. Two, babbling some nonsense at him, the old caretaker in the Temple of Earth and Grain seemed to be ordering him off the premises. Three, for days now – how many exactly, he couldn't quite say, but a good number – no one had hired him. To be refused credit in the tavern – this was something he could put up with; to be chased out of the temple – a temporary inconvenience; but when he didn't get work, Ah-Q's stomach bitterly complained. This, indeed, was a confounded nuisance. @

When he could stand it no longer, Ah-Q was obliged to make inquiries of his old employers – except for the Zhaos', from whose gate he had been banned. But things seemed different now. A furious-looking man would always stalk out and tell him to get lost – as though he were a beggar. @

Most extraordinary, pondered Ah-Q. Families that until now had always been clamouring for a bit of casual labour now seemed to have nothing going. Ah-Q smelt a rat. Further careful investigation around his old employers revealed that when there was work to be done, they now called upon another individual whose name posterity has not precisely recorded but which, using a now tried-and-tested method, we will leave as D: an impoverished runt whose position in the great hierarchy of things – as Ah-Q saw it – lay somewhere below that of the hairy Wang. Never, in his worst nightmares, would Ah-Q have dreamt that this utter weed would make off with his own bowl of rice.

Now this – this was cause for fury. Ah-Q stormed off, waving his fist in the air and bursting spontaneously into song, reprising a line from one of his favourite operas, *The Battle of the Dragon and the Tiger*: @

‘I-I-I-I will thrash you with my mace, yes, I will!’ @

A few days later, he at last encountered D opposite the main gate to the Qians’. Eyes gleaming with antagonistic recognition, Ah-Q advanced, with D holding his ground. @

‘Pig!’ Ah-Q glared, spittle flying. @

‘Or how about,’ D negotiated, ‘slug?’ @

This pleasing show of modesty succeeded only in intensifying Ah-Q’s rage. Forced to improvise in the absence of a mace, he rushed forward to grab hold of D’s queue. His opponent left one hand protecting the base of the pigtail, while attacking Ah-Q’s own queue with his other. Although the old Ah-Q would not have been given an instant’s pause by the pathetic D, the recent hard times on which he had fallen had reduced him to a comparable physical state. Now pretty much a match for each other, for a good half-hour they remained locked in struggle, one hand on their own, the other assaulting the other’s queue, backs curved into a blue arch against the whitewashed front wall of the Qian household. @

‘All right! All right!’ their audience interjected: perhaps to arbitrate; perhaps to express approval; or perhaps to stir things up a bit more. @

Yet the adversaries were as deaf to their surroundings. Ah-Q would advance three paces, and D retreat as many; standstill would be reached. Then D would retake these same three steps, this time with Ah-Q retreating; standstill again. After maybe another half-hour – as there were no striking clocks in Weizhuang, it is hard to be precise on the subject; it could have been twenty minutes – their hair was steaming, their foreheads running with sweat. At the exact instant that Ah-Q relaxed his grip, D did the same. Straightening up, both stepped back and pushed their way out of the crowd. @

‘Let that be a lesson to you!’ Ah-Q tossed over his shoulder. @

‘Let that be a lesson to you!’ came the reply. @

There was a certain lack of clarity and closure about this particular battle between the dragon and tiger of Weizhuang. Who was victor? Who was vanquished? Was the audience satisfied with the performance? No particular opinion was expressed either way. And still no one hired Ah-Q as a labourer. @

One unusually mild day, when the breeze seemed to have the breath of summer about it, Ah-Q began to feel cold. Which he wouldn’t have minded on its own; it was the hunger he couldn’t stand. First his quilt, his felt hat and his shirt had gone; then his padded jacket – all sold. Now he was left only with his trousers – which he couldn’t let go – and his ragged cotton jacket, which nobody would want, except for making shoe soles. He dreamt of finding some money on the road, but never did; he dreamt of finding a coin or two in the dilapidated room he was living in, but a frantic search yielded nothing. He decided to go out in search of sustenance. @

He walked past familiar sights – the tavern, trays of steamed rolls – without pausing, without registering a twinge of desire for either. He was searching for something else; though what that something was, he couldn’t say. @

Weizhuang was not a big place, and soon enough he reached the end of it. The village was fringed by paddy fields busy with pale green shoots. The occasional black dot wove among them: farmers working their land. Without stopping to appreciate this pastoral idyll, Ah-Q went on; he still had some way to go, he intuited, on his quest for food. Eventually, he neared the Convent of Quiet Cultivation. @

The convent’s whitewashed walls emerged unexpectedly out of the fresh green fields that surrounded them. A vegetable garden was tucked inside the low earthen wall to the back. Ah-Q hesitated, glancing around him: there was nobody about. He then set about scaling the garden wall, hauling himself up on a bunch of knotweed. As the surface of the wall crumbled, Ah-Q’s feet began to tremble beneath him, before he managed to scramble over via an incidental mulberry tree. Though the garden within was lush with vegetation, there seemed to be no wine or steamed rolls or indeed anything else edible in sight. A copse of bamboo lined the western wall, its shoots visible at the base, but they unfortunately needed cooking first. Elsewhere, there were bolting

oilseed rape, flowering mustard greens and pak-choi that was past its first flush of youth. @

Ah-Q prowled up to the garden gate, feeling a keen sense of the injustice of it all. There, however, a joyful surprise awaited him: a bed of elderly turnips. He squatted down and tugged at them. A round head suddenly popped up at the gate, then shrank back again: Ah-Q's old enemy, the young nun. Even though Ah-Q had always been scrupulous never to have the slightest respect for people such as young nuns, discretion sometimes turns out to be the better part of valour and so, after uprooting four turnips as fast as he could, he twisted off their green outer leaves, and tucked them into his jacket, just in time to greet an old nun. @

'By the Buddha! What are you doing in our garden, Ah-Q, stealing our turnips!... Stop thief!' @

'Me? Stealing turnips?' Ah-Q said, edging away. @

'What's that under there, then?' The old nun indicated the protuberance beneath his jacket. @

'Reckon they're yours, do you? Do they answer if you call them? You...'  
@

Ah-Q broke into a run, pursued by a sizeable black dog usually stationed at the front gate; how it had found its way to the back garden was a mystery. But just as the dog's fangs snarled inches from Ah-Q's leg, a turnip happily fell from his jacket, giving the creature brief pause – just long enough for Ah-Q to scramble back up the mulberry tree, get a leg over the earthen wall, and hurl himself, together with the surviving turnips, to the ground beyond, leaving the black dog barking up at the tree, while the old nun chanted her prayers. @

Afraid the dog might be set loose on him, Ah-Q gathered up his trophies and set off, picking up a few small stones from the road as he went along; but the black dog made no reappearance. Discarding the stones, Ah-Q ate the turnips as he walked. There was nothing for him here, he thought; time to try his luck in town. @

In the time it took to eat three turnips, his mind was made up. @

