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SAN MAO AND THE KNOWN WORLD

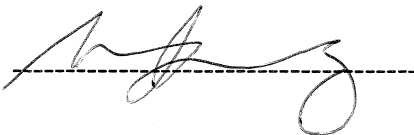
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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the Australian National University

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or equivalent institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Miriam Lang', is written over a horizontal dashed line.

Miriam Lang

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✓

ABSTRACT

'San Mao' was one of the most popular writers of the 1970s and 1980s in the Chinese-speaking world. This study deals with some of San Mao's best-loved stories, namely the tales set in the Sahara Desert and in Europe. It examines San Mao's portrayals of foreign countries and foreign people, and of herself in interaction with them. It endeavours to demonstrate the function of San Mao as an exemplary self for readers, and to situate the San Mao persona in relation to the world she created in her texts.

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Chapter 1:

To boldly go

San Mao

In 1974, a young woman from Taiwan wrote a story about life in the Sahara Desert, and sent it to a Taiwan newspaper for publication under the pen-name 'San Mao'. The woman's name was Chen Ping (1943-1991); but she was to become known throughout the Chinese-speaking world by the name of her alter ego, San Mao. It did not take long for the boundaries between the person Chen Ping and the textual persona of 'San Mao' to blur and their identities to merge - not only for readers but also, apparently, for Chen Ping herself.

In private life she had a third identity: 'Echo'. When she travelled to places where European languages were spoken, such as Spain and Germany, Chen Ping was known as 'Echo Chen'. She is reported to have chosen the name for its ambiguous story and poetic resonances.¹ Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that there is some kind of Narcissus/Echo relationship between the author Chen Ping and the persona of San Mao which she created, and which became a kind of alternate or even substitute self. As Chen Ping travelled around the world, she created echoes of her own life in the writings she produced as 'San Mao' and about 'San Mao'; and the more she revealed about the illusory figure named San Mao, the fainter the image of Chen Ping herself became.

This study takes as its subject the textual creation 'San Mao', the 'I' of the stories written by Chen Ping under the pen-name of San Mao: the romantic idol of more than one generation of young women, the subject of three biographies and much media interest, and the literary burden which Chen Ping, towards the end of her life, expressed the wish to destroy so that she, Chen Ping, could resume an inconspicuous and anonymous life without having to enact the larger-than-life qualities of San Mao any more.²

¹ The myth of Narcissus and Echo is recounted in *San Mao: yesterday, today, tomorrow*, pp. 5-6. San Mao's biographers also discuss the story; Cui and Zhao suggest that 'San Mao adopted the name "Echo" as early as her teenage years, to express the sadness and self-love of a young woman', Cui and Zhao p. 49; Lu, Yang and Sun also retell the story, p. 5.

² The public figure San Mao is said to have wished that 'San Mao' (the literary persona) could die, leaving the woman Chen Ping free to live an ordinary life away from the publicity that 'San Mao' constantly created and attracted. For example, the words of 'a friend of San Mao' are quoted in the programme notes to a Hong Kong dance drama based on San Mao's life: 'In the end she wanted to "kill San Mao". She wanted to shout into the telephone receiver, "Let me tell you. The San Mao that you're looking for is dead! It's true. She died last night, and broke the wire of the desk lamp when she fell down', quoted in program for 'San Mao', a dance drama on the life of San Mao by the

Thus it is the literary persona 'San Mao' and not the person 'Chen Ping' who is the subject of this present discussion: the San Mao who charmed readers with stories of foreign countries and the adventures and social interactions she claimed to have experienced there, and who 'through [her] writings, facilitated the dreams...of people tied by circumstance to a single location'³ at home in Taiwan or across the straits in China, bringing 'the promise of other lands and other cultures' and 'dreams fulfilled'.⁴

The woman who created and 'became' the character 'San Mao' left Taiwan in 1967 at the age of twenty-four for Europe, to spend two years or so in Spain and Germany.⁵ This was the first of several sojourns abroad (even after her return to settle permanently in Taiwan in 1981 she did not stop travelling), and her published representations of her encounters with Europe spanned more than twenty years, from 1968 to 1991.⁶ She also lived in the Sahara Desert, probably for about two years,⁷ and it was while she was there that she began sending stories to Taiwan's *United Daily News* under the pen-name 'San Mao'.⁸ The first was published in 1974, and won immediate acclaim. When her stories were collected and published in book form, 'San Mao' quickly became a popular and best-selling writer in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore; later, when pirated editions of her books began appearing on the mainland in the early 1980s, she became equally famous and popular there. Her position as a mass media celebrity was established not only through her writings but through public lectures, participation in the literary and cultural scene in Taiwan,

City Contemporary Dance Company and Shanghai Youth Dance Company, Hong Kong, November 1995.

³ Hanne p. 15.

⁴ Porter p. 13.

⁵ The circumstances of San Mao's decision to go to Europe are not really discussed in her stories; biographical material hints at the ending of an unhappy love affair which drove her to flee abroad (discussed in Chapter 2).

⁶ Her first Europe story, 'Antony, my Antony', was first published in June 1968 (in *Lion-cub literature*, Youshi Wenyi 174), before she acquired the pen-name San Mao. Europe stories appeared in several later collections (for example, *Rear View*, 1981) and small anecdotes of Europe feature in her last works, *My Treasures*, (published 1987) and *Dear San Mao*, (an agony column in *Jiangyi* magazine, 1989-1990, collected and published as a monograph after her death in 1991).

⁷ Though San Mao did not specify dates, biographers construct the period as being from March or April 1973 until October 1975.

⁸ The story 'The Restaurant in the Desert', published in the *United Daily News* in 1974, was the first work to be published under the pen name of San Mao; several earlier stories, which had been published under her real name, Chen Ping, were later republished in monograph form as *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* under the name 'San Mao', to capitalise on the success of her first collection of Sahara stories (*Stories of the Sahara*), published in 1976. After her death, there was dispute about who had 'discovered' San Mao; it was reported in the *Liberty Evening News* (Zili Wanbao) on 20 January 1991 that San Mao went to the Sahara in April 1974 as a special correspondent for *Industrial World* magazine, and that her first publication as 'San Mao' had been a letter from the Sahara published in *Industrial World* in May 1974 (*Liberty Evening News*, 20 January 1991, p. 18).

Hong Kong and Singapore, and a very high level of publicity about her life. Her active writing life lasted for 15 years (or 21 if early works from before the time she chose the pen-name 'San Mao' are counted), and she produced 23 works, among which are numerous short story collections, translations from English and Spanish, whimsical 'random thoughts', agony column correspondence collections, an illustrated book about her souvenirs, and a film screenplay. The repeated reprintings of her work, as well as her high media profile, attest to the fact that she was the object of widespread interest during her lifetime and beyond.⁹

Secondary material relating to San Mao and her influence combines with anecdotal evidence to suggest a strong emotional identification on the part of many readers with San Mao and her experiences, her personal philosophies of life and the ideologies that informed them.¹⁰ The 'exotic' foreign settings of many of her stories were an important factor in San Mao's great appeal to the reading public. Another was the fact that the protagonist of the stories is ostensibly herself: a young Chinese woman living in 'foreign' places and dealing with foreign people and all their exotic and unpredictable ways. Her depictions of life in Africa and Europe, supposedly based on her own experiences, came at a time when foreign travel was a luxury available to few readers in Taiwan (and later China). In her stories, San Mao created a persona that interacted with the unfamiliar and the 'exotic', then relayed and interpreted the encounter back to readers at home. Her consistent deployment of a first person narrator called 'San Mao' gave the impression of a real person relating real experiences; her simple and personal writing style, reminiscent of the style of personal letters, reinforced this impression.¹¹

⁹ It was fashionable in the late 1990s to downplay San Mao's influence. At the time when her work was first published, through the 1970s and 1980s, however, its popularity was undeniable. San Mao's biographers Cui and Zhao describe her as 'one of the best loved and best-selling writers on the Chinese literary scene in the 1970s and 1980s. Among people who like literature in the Chinese-speaking world, there wouldn't be many who haven't heard San Mao's name. Among young readers, there would be very few who have not read San Mao's works', Cui and Zhao p. 293. During San Mao's lifetime, more than capacity crowds attended her public lectures; stories abound of San Mao herself having difficulty getting into a hall to give a lecture because of the crowds, and on one occasion the enthusiastically surging crowds broke the glass doors of the auditorium where she was to speak. Her public story-readings and storytelling were also popular, preserved on audio tapes released under the titles *San Mao Tells Stories* (1986), *Meteor Shower* (1987) and *The World of Reading* (1990). San Mao's best-selling books ran to many editions in both Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (even though her stories had also been widely circulated in magazines as well) and have continued to be reprinted after her death in 1991.

¹⁰ Gu Jitang describes San Mao's stories as full of 'honesty and humanitarian concern between people; reading San Mao's works, you feel the beating of an honest heart from start to finish, a kind of mutual love between people and a mutual thoughtful caring', Gu p. 120.

¹¹ Many, many people who have read San Mao's stories have remarked on the intimate and personal nature of her work. Comments such as 'when I read San Mao it is as if she is standing next to me' or 'it is like a letter from her to me' are typical of this view.

During her lifetime, Chen Ping/San Mao was one of the best-known writers and 'personalities' in the Chinese-speaking world. After her death, every major Taiwan paper and mainland dailies ran lengthy obituaries;¹² now, almost ten years later, her books continue to be reprinted, biographies continue to be written, and her name is still a household word. Though she does not lack admirers in the Chinese literature departments of universities and among others who are influential in the ongoing process of creating and maintaining literary canons, her writing is not infrequently relegated to those ghettos into which 'things that *other* people like' tend to be consigned (books that only women read; books that only teenagers read; books that only people without university education read);¹³ consequently she is regarded by many as a 'popular' author who enjoyed a burst of acclaim among young women but whose work has no lasting relevance.¹⁴

Such categorisations of San Mao's work reflect the changes I have observed over the past decade in the way she is discussed. In the People's Republic of China in the mid to late 1980s, students in élite tertiary institutions were eagerly reading her stories, passing them around among their friends and recommending them to a new reader of Chinese like myself as the work of an interesting and rewarding author. In Taiwan ten years later, San Mao was spoken of as a writer associated with a specific

¹² Her death was front-page news in most Taiwan newspapers; whole pages were devoted to accounts of her life and career, commemorative articles by people who had known her, speculations about why she should have chosen to commit suicide and analysis of the significance of this 'San Mao phenomenon'.

¹³ See Harriet Hawkins, *Classics and Trash: traditions and taboos in high literature and popular modern genres*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1990 for a discussion of this process of dismissal. This categorisation may be because of the sentimental nature of many of San Mao's stories. Her status vis-à-vis the intellectual/literary communities of the Chinese-speaking world is, however, somewhat ambiguous. Despite the supposedly 'popular' nature of her writing, she won literary prizes, taught creative writing at university level, gave lectures sponsored by institutions such as Taiwan's National Central Library, took part in writers' workshops and suchlike. The fact that the authors of several books on San Mao are graduates of major universities in China perhaps lends some extra credibility; Zhang Yun, for example, is a graduate of Shanghai Foreign Languages Institute who worked on the magazine *Chinese Literature*, was a member of China's UNESCO delegation in Paris, worked at the UN in Geneva and Dakar, then worked for the *People's Daily*; Cui Jianfei is a graduate of Nankai University and Zhao Jun a graduate of Beijing University; Gu Jitang is a graduate of Wuhan University and a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

¹⁴ The mainland journalist Zhang Yun, who spent four years covering the Magreb region for the *China Daily*, notes his dismissal of San Mao's stories until he had actually read them. Before he went to Africa, his daughter (a fervent San Mao fan who had read San Mao's books as a junior high school student), asked him to visit the place where San Mao had lived in the Sahara. Zhang had 'thought San Mao's books were just for teenagers' but 'discovered later that that was prejudice' after friends urged him to read her work ('Since you've been to the desert, you should read *Stories of the Sahara*; you should visit the Sahara where San Mao lived'), prompting Zhang to observe that it was as if what he himself had seen was 'just a fake Sahara, the only real Sahara being where San Mao had been'. When he finally read *Stories of the Sahara*, Zhang found it absorbing and exciting, full of experiences that he could relate to from his own experiences there, Zhang pp. 1-9.

time, whose work, though it had been appreciated in the 1970s, could be of no further interest. Many people with whom I have discussed San Mao have suggested that Taiwan had somehow 'outgrown' San Mao, even to the point of embarrassment that her work had ever been taken seriously at all.

The fact that her books continue to be reprinted indicates that they are still being read, and it may be (as seems to be popularly thought) that her only audience in the late 1990s is female high school students. Yet it was not always so. It is rare to meet a Chinese-literate person who was living in Taiwan in the 1970s or China in the late 1980s who does not know of San Mao's reputation as the legendary Chinese woman of the Sahara desert. Her stories appeared in newspapers and magazines with very large circulations;¹⁵ she featured in the social as well as literary pages of newspapers; magazines carried photo-feature articles about her and about her home; and, as noted, her death was front-page news in every major Taiwan daily and many mainland newspapers.¹⁶

However one chooses to categorise her writing, San Mao is an important cultural figure - even a cultural icon - of the late 20th century in the Chinese-speaking world, not only for her writings but also for the public and mass media activities in which she participated (public lectures, story-readings, the literature and creative writing classes she taught for a short time at Culture University, magazine and radio interviews, lecture tours, literary seminars, literature prizes, magazine agony columns, pop-song lyrics, and the screenplay of the award-winning film *Red Dust*). She remained a prominent figure in the Chinese literary and social world as a

¹⁵ In Taiwan's *United Daily News* and *Crown* magazine, then in popular magazines on the mainland (as well as being collected and published in book form).

¹⁶ San Mao's popularity is difficult to quantify, as sales figures for her books are not available; the number of print runs would suggest, however, that demand remains steady. Her effect on the thinking of her readers is also difficult to demonstrate or quantify. Obviously readers bring their own preconceptions and experience to their reading of a text, and do not perceive it in a uniform way. Through many conversations with Chinese women who were San Mao fans in their youth, however, I have learned of the common fantasy of marrying a bearded foreigner just like José, travelling like San Mao, or decorating a house in San Mao's style. I have also heard many former San Mao readers compare themselves to her, or their own experiences of foreign countries to hers. My conviction that San Mao has been a serious influence on her readers is based on purely anecdotal evidence and I do not propose to make it a feature of this study. As John Frow has pointed out, texts do not 'impose meaning', neither do they 'unilaterally shape the consciousness or the political opinions of their readers'; rather, they 'become a locus of struggle in which the business of belief is negotiated by readers choosing textual sense on the basis of their worldly experience', John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, pp. 69-70. Though San Mao may have influenced many readers in many ways, it is obviously impossible to trace any incontestable cause/effect link between the ideas in San Mao's books and the thinking of her readers. Such abstract questions as San Mao's influence will be left aside here.

'personality' and celebrity from 1974 (upon publication of her first Saharan story) until her suicide in 1991, at the age of 48, and interest in her continues today.¹⁷

The term 'legend' is frequently used in reference to San Mao.¹⁸ She has been described as the first Chinese hippie¹⁹ and a Chinese Jack Kerouac;²⁰ she has been compared to Lawrence of Arabia and a character in a Hemingway novel.²¹ The craze for San Mao has been characterised as 'the San Mao whirlwind' (*San Mao xuanfeng*), 'the San Mao phenomenon' (*San Mao xianxiang*) and 'San Mao fever' (*San Mao re*), and she has been described as 'a comet on the literary scene' whose works are 'like a tornado, sweeping through readers' hearts...through Hong Kong, Singapore and the whole world.'²² Over the past 25 years, works by San Mao have frequently been selected by teachers of Chinese language to foreign students both in Taiwan and on the mainland for their students to read;²³ as recently as 1999, a teacher of English in China reported to me that, in language-teaching games and role-plays, students would contend for the chance to play San Mao.²⁴ Biographical and critical literature regarding San Mao is still being produced and, as the first draft of this chapter was

¹⁷ San Mao herself claimed to have received thousands of letters from readers, and that affection and concern were shown to her constantly by her public in everyday life, *Dear San Mao* pp. 7-10. San Mao's biographers Lu, Yang and Sun note that 'San Mao fever' lasted 15 years (presumably counted from the publication of her first collection in 1976 to her death in 1991).

¹⁸ The word is oft-repeated in biographies and appears constantly in San Mao's obituaries.

¹⁹ This expression has come up in conversations with many, many people about San Mao, both in Taiwan and on the mainland.

²⁰ John Maier, a former associate of San Mao's, in a private letter, 1995.

²¹ See *The World of San Mao* and *San Mao Speaks to You Softly*, Though the comparison with T.E. Lawrence is probably simply to do with the fact that he, like San Mao, lived in the desert, Dennis Porter's discussion of Lawrence and his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* does indeed point to elements that would seem parallel with the case of San Mao. Lawrence too presented himself as involved in and vital to 'the Arab nationalist cause' (for a similar presentation by San Mao, see Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'). Lawrence promotes the myth that for 'people of colour' to 'pursue a national goal', they need his leadership (Porter p. 221); San Mao too presents herself advising a Polisario leader on affairs to do with Sahrawi independence (see Appendix 2). Lawrence wrote from 'a position of power and privilege' in the desert base on his membership of an imperial system (Porter p. 227); San Mao too, although without Lawrence's full set of 'race, nation, class and gender' power and privilege, nevertheless enjoyed the benefits of Spanish citizenship in a colony of Spain, along with a position of material ease and the freedom to come and go as she pleased. Porter suggests that Lawrence sought 'alternative forms of existence among other peoples' (Porter p. 227); this too could be said of San Mao. Lawrence writes of his loyalties being divided, between imperialist identification and comradeship with the natives, p. 228-229. For Lawrence, 'the desert Arab becomes, in part, an expression of the age-old nostalgia for the supposed lost harmony of the primitive world', Porter p. 234; for San Mao, the desert is also the place for 'nostalgia' and is bound up with notions of the 'primitive' and with things that the 'modern' world has lost (see Chapter 2).

²² *The World of San Mao* p. 224.

²³ Colleagues and students at the Australian National University have told me of encountering stories by San Mao in language classes in both Taiwan and China from the late 1980s; others have spoken of teachers recommending San Mao's stories to them as leisure reading.

²⁴ My thanks to Andrew Benoy for this piece of information based on his experiences as an English teacher in Xiangtan, Hunan.

being written, a dance drama based on the life of San Mao was created by a Shanghai dance company and performed in Hong Kong.²⁵ The mainland literary critic Gu Jitang, in his 1991 evaluation of San Mao, described the outrage of his audience at a lecture on Taiwan literature at Nanjing University in the late 1980s when they found out that San Mao's work would not be included;²⁶ Chai Ling, one of the leaders of the student demonstrations in China in 1989, claimed that San Mao was her favourite writer and spoke of being inspired to join the democracy movement by the example of San Mao's love for humanity;²⁷ and in the early 1990s the Chinese-American traveller Ma Zhongxin was spurred to write a book about San Mao out of chagrin that, when he gave public lectures about his own travels, his audience would always bring up San Mao and ask him about the places she had written about.²⁸

It could be said that the work of any big-selling 'popular' writer and the ways in which their writings are received reflect something about the society that produced and acclaims them, and that they in turn help to create and reinforce that same climate of social opinion that is receptive to their ideologies and world views. Critical work on 'popular' genres such as travel literature, autobiography and romantic fiction discusses the ideologies of these genres by situating them in their social context, relating them to such issues as economic prosperity or lack, social expectations, gender roles, geopolitical factors and so on. The work of San Mao, which bears some resemblance to the travel narrative and to the romance, can be discussed in similar ways.

San Mao's best loved stories are set in the Sahara Desert, a place few Taiwan or mainland readers would have visited in the 1970s and 1980s when her stories appeared, and a place with which Taiwanese and Chinese interests had had little contact - indeed a place that was also outside the sphere of interest of Euro-American cultural priorities that we call 'general' knowledge (other than as a quasi-fictional setting for romance). Other stories by San Mao are set in various parts of Europe and its colonial peripheries, some of which would have been objects of cultural

²⁵ 'San Mao' was performed as part of the Chinese Dance Festival held in Hong Kong in October-November 1995. The programme incorporates several quotations from San Mao and gives a chronology of her life. The initial note on the dance drama reads: 'San Mao's story is legendary, romantic, and clouded with a heavy fog of resignation. The experiences of modern men and women can be seen imprinted on her struggles throughout her entire life....we shall follow San Mao's heart to look at her previous life and her next life. We shall also follow it and watch her wavering between the identities of Chen Ping and San Mao' (program, City Contemporary Dance Company and Shanghai Youth Dance Company, Hong Kong, November 1995).

²⁶ Gu Jitang, pp. 2-3.

²⁷ Videotaped interview by journalist with Chai Ling in Beijing, June 1989.

²⁸ Ma expresses scepticism about San Mao's stories and decides to travel to the places where San Mao lived to discover her 'true' story, Ma p. 4-11.

knowledge, stereotype or fantasy for readers (Paris, Berlin) and some of which, probably, would not (Madeira, the Canary Islands). Later, she wrote about trips to the Americas (the USA, Central America and South America) and about life in Taiwan, both in childhood and in the present. This study, however, discusses only the writings of San Mao about Africa and Europe - writings in which she portrays not only African and European people and societies but also a Chinese heroine ('San Mao') having adventures, making friends and finding a place for herself among 'foreign' people in 'foreign' places. Through a reading of these tales of San Mao, Africa and Europe, I will outline and discuss the picture of the world and China's place in it that San Mao presented to her audience.

It should be noted at the outset that, although much attention is paid to representations of countries 'foreign' to San Mao, the writing discussed here is not considered primarily as 'travel writing.' Towards the end of her life, San Mao frequently stated that her travels were not 'wanderings' (*liulang*), as they had often been called, with connotations of self-indulgence and lack of serious purpose.²⁹ It was San Mao's contention that she had always conscientiously fulfilled the roles she had chosen (for example housewife or student), and that this had just happened to be in places far from home³⁰ - even though her earlier writings appear to create an impression of a free spirit spontaneously moving around the world. Scholarly analysis of travel writing as a genre suggests that the actual journey is an important component of the travel narrative - the departure, the means of transport, the trip, the arrival.³¹ By this criterion, San Mao's narratives are not exactly 'travel writing.' Most of her stories show her already settled in a 'foreign' country, trying to establish a stable life for herself and for her husband, José. If depiction of landscape is another important component of travel writing, then San Mao's stories again do not match the 'travel' classification; scenic descriptions are relatively rare in her work, which focuses much more on interactions with people.

²⁹ The meaning of the word has shifted since its usage earlier in the 20th century in times of famine, war and dislocation to describe the movement of displaced wandering populations, poor and homeless (as in the title of Zhang Leping's story of an orphan boy on the streets of Shanghai, *The Adventures of San Mao*, San Mao *liulangji*).

³⁰ *The World of San Mao* p. 129. San Mao's accounts of her student life in Germany create the impression of an extraordinarily dedicated scholar, with five or six hours of class each day and ten hours spent each evening memorising the homework. So successful are San Mao's studies that her teachers, she claims, ask her to record tapes to demonstrate how much a dedicated and talented student could learn in six months, *Taking the City* pp. 228-229.

³¹ As noted by Dennis Porter, in 'traditional...nonfictional "literary" travel writing...the author records his impressions of a journey to a foreign country, dates his [sic] arrivals and departures, and respects the order of the itinerary he [sic] actually took', Porter p. 237.

But San Mao's writing, if not exactly 'travel writing', is not 'not-travel writing' either. Here I borrow from Susan Horton's analysis of Olive Schreiner and Isak Dinesen, two women who did not 'travel' as such but who produced narratives of 'exotic' places in which they lived for an audience back in their 'home' countries. Dinesen and Schreiner, writes Horton, 'were not travelers to Africa and generically speaking they did not produce travel literature. But what they produced is not quite *not* travel literature either'; their works are 'not travel literature and not not-travel literature; not memoir but not not-memoir.'³² As '*not* travel writing', San Mao's writing is informed (as will be demonstrated) by a wish to belong, to be part of a community, to make a home, and to invoke a stable 'real life' rather than a brief travel experience. Her narratives, like those of Schreiner and Dinesen, are exoticised stories of what may have been 'everyday' for her but was 'exotic' for her readers, accounts of events that may have been recalled from memories of 'real' events and, equally, may not. San Mao claimed that everything she wrote in her stories was true, based upon her own experiences or those of her 'neighbours and friends',³³ and more than one attempt has been made to seek out the 'truth' of her stories (whether or not people she wrote about really existed, whether or not events she described had actually taken place or customs she described had ever really been practised), with varying levels of success. It seems generally agreed that she went to the Sahara and to Europe, although such questions as how long she stayed, and how and why she went are subjects of disagreement.³⁴ Questions of the veracity of San Mao's accounts are,

³² Horton p. 28. San Mao portrays herself *living* in foreign places rather than travelling to them; thus she also resembles the travellers discussed by Foster who, 'because of their extended stays in the countries they visited, could be considered temporary residents rather than travellers in the strict sense,' Foster p. vii.

³³ San Mao herself has been quoted as saying that 'Everything I have written is a factual record of my life...there's a record of my own feelings, and some experiences of my neighbours and friends...that is to say I have no fictional stories, because I can't make up stories,' Sima Zhongyuan et al. (ed.), p. 114; 'My works are just an autobiographical record...a record and reflection of my life and my experiences,' Mei pp. 162-163. Anecdotal evidence attests to a belief in the truth of San Mao's stories among some readers; more significantly, her biographers reproduce the content of her stories in reconstructing the 'facts' of her life. The journalist Zhang Yun, in his journey to the Sahara and conversations with associates of San Mao's, treats discrepancies between their stories and San Mao's as either failures of memory or unwillingness to be truthful on their part.

³⁴ See Ma Zhongxin *The Truth of San Mao* for a skeptic's account of San Mao's stories. Ma suggests that, contrary to her claims, San Mao was never a student in Europe, was not pursued by José (who was not, as she claimed, an engineer with a university degree), never worked in schools or embassies in Europe, stayed in the Sahara less than a year, and did not have the kind of relationship with José or with his family that her books describe. My own interviews with people who knew San Mao would tend to confirm the belief that the general outlines of her stories were based upon her life. Jerry Martinsson, for example, noting San Mao's skills as a story-teller, commented that any good story-teller is likely to embellish and exaggerate at certain points in order to produce a well-paced, readable and engaging story, and that San Mao was no exception (personal interview, Taipei, August 1995).

however, beyond the scope of this present discussion, which deals with San Mao's textual world rather than trying to fit her narratives into the 'real' world of Chen Ping's life.³⁵

Despite her status as a cultural icon in the Chinese-speaking world, very little has been written in English on the impact of her life and work, from the point of view either of her writings or of her public persona as a mass-media celebrity. As one of the most public of public figures of her generation, who inspired great attachment and even affection among many readers, San Mao's significance is hard to deny. Indeed, as the acclaimed Taiwan literary novelist Li Ang has noted, a writer like San Mao 'who could create a great whirlwind like this is a social phenomenon deserving of close examination'.³⁶

A brief timeline of the life of Chen Ping/San Mao appears in Appendix 1. Briefly, although she was born on the mainland, she was raised in Taiwan from the age of five; she received very little formal secondary school education (supposedly withdrawing from high school at fourteen after a humiliating experience at the hands of a teacher)³⁷ but spent three or four years being educated at home, with minimal social interactions outside; at eighteen she began to study art with a teacher who encouraged her creative writing talents, and her first story was published soon afterward; after a period of auditing classes at Taiwan's Chinese Culture Academy she went to Europe (to Spain and Germany), financed by her father, and briefly to the

³⁵ The concern of this study is not whether or not a real person had these actual experiences; rather, my concern is with the actions, words and thoughts represented as those of the persona named San Mao who is the narrator and protagonist of these stories. Whether or not these bear any relationship to those of Chen Ping (who wrote as 'San Mao') is not, in my view, relevant to the discussion. (For the record, among many young educated people with whom I discussed San Mao in the People's Republic of China in the late 1980s, there seemed to be a prevailing view that San Mao's writings were 'truthful' accounts of real lived experience; Taiwan readers in the mid-1990s were more skeptical, and I am personally inclined to agree with them).

³⁶ *China Times* (Zhongguo Shibao), 5th Jan 1991, p. 3. Zhang Yun also claims that everyone he met on his travels in Africa was fascinated when they heard about San Mao. An Ethiopian UN secretary is quoted as exclaiming that 'she had only heard of the adventures of Europeans in North Africa, and never imagined that a Chinese woman writer could have lived in the Sahara desert for so many years. She also said with great interest that if San Mao's Saharan stories were made into a film, the vivid plot would be as good as that Hollywood film *Casablanca*', Zhang pp. 15-16. Western Sahara officials are likewise depicted as expressing interest in San Mao and suggesting that her works be translated into Arabic, see Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'.

³⁷ For the story of San Mao's withdrawal from school see Lu, Yang and Sun pp. 50-52. To summarise briefly, San Mao showed little aptitude for mathematics at school, and would score zero on maths tests. When one day she managed a perfect score, the teacher suspected her of cheating and devised another test for her, which she failed. As a punishment for 'cheating', the teacher painted two big black zeros around San Mao's eyes and made her parade around the school to be seen and mocked by all. After this experience, San Mao gradually ceased going to school. At the beginning of the following semester she returned to school, but only for a few days; reluctantly, her parents agreed that she should formally withdraw from school.

USA; returning to Taiwan, she taught at the Chinese Culture Academy³⁸ and prepared to marry; upon the sudden death of her fiancé, she returned to Spain; from Spain she went to the Western Sahara, where she married a Spaniard, José, and began to write stories about life there; when Spanish rule in Western Sahara was coming to an end amid the Polisario Front's fight for independence and competing territorial claims from Morocco and Mauritania,³⁹ she and José left the desert and moved to the Canary Islands (in 1975); a few years later, in 1979, José died in a diving accident; San Mao returned to live in Taiwan two years later in 1981 and, with the exception of 6-month stints in the Americas and other shorter trips, she remained resident in Taiwan until her death in 1991.⁴⁰

As biographers have tended to accept San Mao's stories as autobiographical and to use them as source material for their accounts of her life, much of the material in biographical works may be regarded as speculative.⁴¹ The internal chronologies in

³⁸ Two of her former students have described their own responses to San Mao as a teacher. Guo Mingling responded to 'her confident and modest personality, her warmth and her broad knowledge. San Mao was 'a complete teacher, who lived in the students' world, sincere and involved', who moved her students to worry lest they disappoint her. Guo claims that 'her emotions are so real, she expresses herself so creatively, so vividly - because of her vivid life...I want to love San Mao more and more...I never expected to have a lamp to show me the way in life - but San Mao is perhaps...a star', *The World of San Mao* pp. 186-189. Ji Xiuyun remembers her 'gentle' and 'deep' gaze; the way she demonstrated how a piece of fabric could become a cape (she put it over her head and - look! - she became Lawrence of Arabia'; the way she would talk about sex when other people would avoid the topic; that 'she was herself, a whole and real person'; the sorrows she had endured and her need for true friends; the way she gave her students hope in life; the way she has 'all the human frailties, but in her they become glorious'; and the fact that one student had dropped her class because she felt that San Mao's personality was too magnetic, and that the only possible response to her was to accept her and follow her, *The World of San Mao* pp. 191-196.

³⁹ For a discussion of stories set at this time, see Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'.

⁴⁰ She died in hospital where she was having treatment for gynaecological and hormonal complaints, by hanging herself in the bathroom of her private ward. After her death, hospital authorities noted that her physical illness had been relatively minor and easily treatable, but that she had been about to be transferred to a psychiatric ward. Speculations about the causes of her death included depression, the burden of fame and public expectation and an inability to carry on being 'San Mao' for her public, a wish to join her dead husband (with whom she had supposedly been communing through mediums) in the afterlife, and the fear that her popularity was waning and that she had nothing more to write about that would restore it. Many San Mao readers expressed regret that San Mao had died such an ugly death after having lived such a beautiful life. San Mao's suicide is discussed at length in three biographies: Cui Jianfei and Zhao Jun, *San Mao: a biography*, pp. 277-288; Pang Xiangli, *San Mao: a biography* pp. 171-173 and Lu, Yang and Sun, *San Mao: a biography*, pp. 362-379.

⁴¹ Sara Mills has noted the tendency in published analyses of travel accounts by women to assume an unproblematic narrating 'self' that maps exactly onto the traveller and writer, Mills p. 36. Biographers of San Mao have certainly tended to treat her work in this way, reconstructing the 'facts' of her life from the plots of her stories and interweaving material from her own narratives with such dates as can be deduced. Some more critical writers have brought accusations that San Mao's stories are 'untrue', suggesting that such basic elements as her marriage to a Spanish man and his early death were fabrications and not, as she claimed, real experiences. Numerous articles have attempted to 'disprove' various stories; authors have journeyed to sites of her tales in attempts both to disprove and to verify her accounts.

San Mao's works are vague and not always consistent, and there are inconsistencies between biographies over basic data (such as her birth date, which is variously given as 1943 and 1945, or the number of times she married). Thus the life of Chen Ping is as enigmatic as the persona of her literary creation, San Mao.

The known world

As already noted, the basis of San Mao's fame was her stories of foreign countries (her earliest and most popular work being set in the Sahara Desert, Spain and Germany). It is clear that her particular view of the world touched a sympathetic chord among many readers, and that her stories were to some degree influential in creating images and expectations of worlds they had not themselves experienced - among them, 'western' behaviour and life in 'western' countries. For most of San Mao's readers, the Sahara Desert was completely unknown; consequently, she could 'make' the Sahara for them. Europe, by comparison, was better known (through its cultural products, translated literature and film images); and what San Mao wrote could feed into what readers already knew, or believed they knew, and could interact with their prior knowledge or fantasies or both.⁴²

San Mao's writings could be said to constitute a superior 'knowledge' of the world, which she imparted to her readers, teaching them to know her world - a more spacious one than their own - and to know her as she acted within it. Thus San Mao's world is 'known' in the sense that it is her own world (of which readers have no experience), which she makes known to them through her stories. With regard to conventional usages of the term 'the known world' (to include the 'old' world of Europe and North Africa and only the fringes of Asia, with the Americas and Oceania lying beyond the world of knowledge), the world of San Mao's most successful stories can be also said to be 'the known world'.⁴³

⁴² Dennis Porter has pointed out that for travel writers even before this century, 'The vast majority of the places visited....especially in Europe, were already familiar through a great many representations in various media...the challenge thrown down to the traveller is to prove his [sic] self-worth by means of an experience adequate to the reputation of a hallowed site,' Porter p. 12. Though San Mao does not generally situate herself in 'hallowed sites' (as noted in Chapter 4), her earliest stories of Europe are set in famous cities of which readers would have some impression, however sketchy or romanticised. San Mao's narrated experiences, those of a young Chinese woman coming to terms with life in these foreign places, is not only adequate to the reputations of European cities but actually enhances them through their connection with herself. The Sahara, by contrast, was in some sense 'created' by San Mao for her readers and became something of a 'hallowed site' through her stories.

⁴³ Though she discusses visits to the Americas in later writings (notably in *Stirring Up the School, Over the Hills and Far Away*, and *Lilies of the Plain*), these are not included in the scope of this present work, which deals only with San Mao's 'African' writings and her European writings.

In using the term 'Africa' throughout this study I do not intend to suggest or try to bring into being any kind of equation or unity among a myriad of national, linguistic and cultural groups, or to set up a clearly-defined and separable 'Africa' as a polar 'other' in relation to anywhere else. Rather, I wish to refer to a pervasive view that has informed so much writing about Africa and other parts of the world by those who take upon themselves the position of superior observer and narrator, of an undifferentiated and exotic place of mystery that is somehow inferior to the traveler/narrator's own home country, whatever it be.⁴⁴ My references to literature relating to 'Africans' or locations in 'Africa' that have nothing to do with the Spanish Sahara (such as the writings of Isak Dinesen or Olive Schreiner) are intended to invoke narratives built upon a sense of authorial privilege vis-à-vis those the traveller encounters on his/her travels, based upon a system of political and cultural presuppositions and inequities, that has manifested itself in many different writings about many different societies in the continent generalised under the name 'Africa'. I draw also upon colonial narratives of Africa, the Americas and India, which tend to display similar assumptions and generalisations that appear to be common to colonial views of 'natives' everywhere. In cases where San Mao's narratives partake of colonial stereotypes of natives, I have invoked other narratives of natives by way of comparison and, I hope, illumination.⁴⁵

By contrast, the term 'Europe' is employed, according to current usage, to include natives of European capitalist nations⁴⁶ and their colonial possessions (such as the Canary Islands and Madeira) as some kind of 'Greater Europe' that is united and exclusive of a clearly-defined 'non-Europe'. The Europeans in San Mao's narratives are mostly Spanish, German, Swiss, French, English, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian.

The coupling or contrast of 'Africa' and 'Europe' does not reflect any belief of mine in united continental entities that may be defined in opposition to each other. Rather, I wish to make the point that San Mao is 'at home' in a diverse world symbolised by two continents. Generalisations (taking Madrid as 'Europe', or El

⁴⁴ Given the international structures of travel writing and publishing, the 'home country' is likely to be an industrialised country and comparisons are likely to take industrialised countries as their 'standard'.

⁴⁵ I do not wish to iron out differences between individual cases; rather, it is my intention that the use of material relating to various countries should enlarge the pool of theoretical debate. Colonial impressions have much in common wherever they are drawn and similar rhetoric is used of 'natives' everywhere; my drawing upon the literature or analysis of colonial superficialities should in no way be interpreted as a negation of differences between cultures and specific situations.

⁴⁶ Now including a united Germany which, in San Mao's day, was divided between the capitalist west and communist east, both of which feature in her stories.

Ayoun as 'Africa') are intended to illuminate how San Mao's stories of an individual self at play in various 'exotic' locations (exotic, that is, to most Chinese-educated readers at the time of first publication) enact and reinforce global cultural power relations.

The standard English-language model for examination of the known world has generally been the European traveler venturing out to an 'exotic' and probably 'less civilised' non-Europe. My aim here is to demonstrate that though San Mao may travel to 'Africa' and portray it and its people in ways that are similar to the conventions of European colonial narrative, she travels also to a 'Europe' where the natives are equally in need of her good example, her civilised behaviour and her self-sacrificing virtue.⁴⁷ Though I reject such notions as 'civilised' and 'uncivilised', 'advanced' and 'backward', these terms are used in discussing what appear to be underlying ideologies and preoccupations in the writing of San Mao and others.

The undiscovered country

It is not my intention to add to the already ample literature dealing with the reasons for which people travel and the motivations and ideologies that underlie travel literature. Dennis Porter, for example, has discussed some of the many motivations for which Europeans have travelled in the past few centuries (ranging 'from exploration, conquest, colonization, diplomacy, emigration, forced exile, and trade to religious or political pilgrimage, aesthetic education, anthropological inquiry, and the pursuit of a bronzer body or a bigger wave').⁴⁸ Travel has been discussed as a means of fleeing from something at home,⁴⁹ of seeking something new, or both;⁵⁰ the 'curative dream of travel' could be seen as an antidote to 'the malaise of boredom',⁵¹

⁴⁷ Thus she both affirms the structures of a world built on European colonial domination and challenges them.

⁴⁸ Porter p.10.

⁴⁹ A 'personal escape from boredom and repression' and from 'the strictures of life at home', Mills p. 35.

⁵⁰ To 'cross physical and ideological distances' and 'expand institutional and psychological borders', Frawley p. 15. Frawley suggests that for the woman traveller from Victorian England, travel was a way of leaving behind 'the boundaries and borders of a domestic sphere...to a place where one could do more'; certainly San Mao could 'do more' in foreign countries than at home, such as for example the amateur practice of medicine (see Chapter 3). Frawley also notes an equation between the activity of travel and that of writing; both 'occur in conjunction with one another and are necessary to one another; and both are intimately connected to the writer's sense of her self and of her relationship to others. Both give to the writer an identity with purpose and a basis for accomplishment', Frawley pp. 14-15.

⁵¹ Dennis Porter in Hanne (ed.), p. 53. Travel could thus be connected to 'the faith that there are places on this earth where we may go in order to learn the secret of living freer, fuller, happier, more authentic or more purposeful lives than is currently the case where we happen to reside', p. 53.

or indeed for other more serious physical maladies of those who travel for the sake of their health. San Mao's biographers have suggested all of these as contributing factors to her travels, and in particular that she traveled for the sake of her mental and emotional health - to 'heal her wounds' after broken relationships or deaths.

Travel, especially to parts of the world regarded by the traveler as culturally 'civilised', is also a means to accumulate cultural capital.⁵² Ros Pesman has discussed this cultural capital aspect in the context of Australian women journeying to Europe, the supposed home of 'real' culture to which Antipodeans must travel to encounter true civilisation. Residents of Europe's former colonies are not the only ones to regard travel to Europe as a way of amassing important cultural experiences, however; for example, Joseph Tobin has pointed out the importance of this aspect of foreign travel for Japanese elites too.⁵³ Certainly San Mao's European experience was an important contributing factor to her position of cultural authority for readers, an authority not only to describe the world but also to speak authoritatively over a wide range of aspects of life.

Travel to a place considered by the traveler to be somehow 'backward', on the other hand, can be motivated by nostalgic longings for an innocent 'past' that is supposedly to be found there; this may also be accompanied by the urge to transform what is there (in the manner of a 'civilising mission', for example). Both of these aspects of San Mao's international experiences will be discussed in the following chapters. The enjoyment of a new type of play that is facilitated by the dissolution of the social rules of home in the 'liminal zone' of the 'foreign' society with its new social conditions⁵⁴ is also a feature of San Mao's narratives. The idea of becoming somehow 'whole' through travel (whether the wholeness be physical or mental) and the notion of creating or discovering a new personality in a new land as motivations

⁵² See Appendix 3, 'San Mao goes shopping'.

⁵³ Tobin p. 13. Tobin characterises travel for Japanese elites of the Meiji period as 'a finishing school of worldly tastes and western life-style'; people journeyed 'in search of sophistication, adventure and self-actualization'; and '[t]he tradition of living in New York, London or Paris to acquire cultural capital' continues to this day'. San Mao's travel experiences could be characterised in a similar way. It is perhaps significant that her European experience was initially in Madrid and Berlin rather than the more internationally glamorous capitals of the time, London and Paris; though this was probably largely due to economic factors (discussed in Chapter 4), her residence in these cities - less frequented by Chinese-speaking elites and therefore less 'known' to readers - added to her cultural capital through her unique authority to create 'knowledge' of these places for readers.

⁵⁴ As Ros Pesman has noted of her own travels in her youth, 'We had no doubt that life was freer, more tolerant, and less repressive over *there* - and of course we were right, not because *there* was necessarily different, but because the constraints were not our constraints, the neighbours were not our neighbours', Pesman p. 2.

for or results of travel are particularly relevant in the case of San Mao, given that 'San Mao' was, precisely, a new personality, created by Chen Ping in a foreign land.⁵⁵

The political dimensions of travel in terms of hierarchies of cultures have also been well documented. Dennis Porter alludes to the self-satisfactions of a traveller's sense of superiority to other societies that he or she believes to be less 'civilised' than his or her own;⁵⁶ and in her study of Australian women travelers, Ros Pesman has discussed the twin narratives of travelling for what one can supposedly receive from another society and for what one can contribute to it. This is one of the underlying themes of the chapters that follow.

In her discussion of discourses of travel and displacement, Caren Kaplan notes at length the various modes of self-image in foreign lands, notably 'the exile' (with its romantic connotations of solitude, creativity and importance) and the 'immigrant' (with associations that are less romantic, to do with the wish to seek a better material life and to assimilate into the new society rather than remain defiantly at odds with it or with the home society).⁵⁷ Kaplan adds that 'many modern subjects may participate in any number of these versions of displacement over a lifetime - never embodying any one version singly or simplistically', and this may be truly said of San Mao, who occupies a somewhat ambiguous space in between the definitions of 'exile' and 'immigrant'. She is a romantic figure and often a solitary one, but exhibits the wish to 'settle and 'belong'; she projects 'a spiritual or creative identity or profession' characteristic of the 'exile', but also displays a willingness to associate

⁵⁵ Robert Edwards, in María-Inés Lagos-Pope (ed.), *Exile in literature*, pp. 20-21: 'The prime consequence of losing social institutions is to remove external definitions of self, but its secondary effect can be the creation or discovery of a new personality'. The notion of travel as a way of healing (and of 'writing the self whole') has been embraced by San Mao's biographers. Certainly San Mao appears to have suffered frequently from both physical and mental illness: depression, dramatic extremes of mood between withdrawal and sociability, a spinal injury in a car accident in the Canaries, rumoured cancer after her return to Taiwan, gynaecological complaints, a hormone imbalance causing mood swings towards the end of her life. She attempted suicide many times throughout her life (two attempts are recorded in biographies; associates of San Mao suggest that there were many more).

⁵⁶ 'To travel through the world is to gather a series of impressions and to make a succession of more or less conscious notations on the superiority or inferiority of other societies, when compared to one's own, in respect of the satisfactions they afford their members', Porter pp. 28-29.

⁵⁷ Discussed at length in Caren Kaplan's book, *Questions of Travel: postmodern discourses of displacement*. (Duke University Press, Durham 1996). Kaplan discusses the privileged space given to 'singularity, solitude, extrangement, alienation' in Euro-American culture, and the notion of the 'artist in exile' (p. 28, pp. 36-37); 'the exile/expatriate' is defined against the immigrant with the belief that immigrants 'intend' to assimilate, having supposedly left their homes without reluctance and being eager to become 'as much a part of the nation or community as possible', supposedly with 'financial or material gain' as their goal. The romantic exile, on the other hand, 'may be seen to be displaced for spiritual, political or aesthetic survival alone', with 'aesthetic gain' as his/her principal goal', p. 110.

herself with 'less romantic forms of labor'; she neither embodies 'the desire to return to a lost origin' nor is eager to reject it. Her accounts of herself in foreign countries could be said to draw upon the experiences and perspectives of exile, immigrant and other positions in between:⁵⁸ and a progression could be suggested between early narratives of a new country (in which her persona could be said to be closer to the 'exile' mode) and stories written after a longer stay, when her concern is to write herself into the new society (perhaps resonant with 'immigrant' mode).

In addition to the practice of travel itself, much has also been written about narratives of travel - both in terms of statements of 'self'⁵⁹ (constructed in relation to an 'other'),⁶⁰ and of the problems of 'representation.'⁶¹ Indeed Porter suggests that

Nowhere perhaps as much as in the field of travel writing...is the fundamental ambiguity of 'representation' more apparent. To represent the world is a political as well as an aesthetic-cognitive activity. It is an effort both to put something alien into the words of a shared language for someone else at home and to put oneself in the Other's place abroad in order to speak on its behalf. One is at the same time *representator* and *representative*, reporter and legislator. And in all that one writes one also inevitably (re)presents, however, imperfectly, oneself.⁶²

Ros Pesman makes a related point:

The first tale is always the one that the subject tells herself in the moment in order to make sense of experience...Travellers' tales are always suspect; travel is the area for tall stories. After all, who can verify or confound? and much of

⁵⁸ It could be suggested that San Mao is not an 'exile' (there is no narrative of rejection of 'China' or Taiwan), but not *not* an exile; she is not an 'immigrant' as such (she does not move to a new country permanently, to seek a better life), but neither is she a non-immigrant. It might be noted that San Mao is not dependent upon the economy of the foreign countries in which she lives; she is supported at first by an allowance from her father in Taiwan, and then by the proceeds of her book sales in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore (the editions of her books that sold so well in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s were pirate copies, and San Mao received no financial gain from them).

⁵⁹ 'The writings of travellers and explorers are usually...at least as revealing about the character and prejudices of those doing the travelling and writing as about the people and places they claim to have discovered...While the tales of some travellers are extraordinarily informative, for those who have stayed at home, about the rich variety of peoples, landscapes and customs around the globe, a majority, perhaps, serve to confirm a belief in the superiority of the traveller (and by implication the reader) over members of all other races', Hanne p. 4.

⁶⁰ Porter suggests that 'in the geopolitical imaginary of Europeans down to relatively recent times at least, there is a hegemonic geometry of center and periphery that conditions all perceptions of self and the Other', Porter p. 19.

⁶¹ Discussed at length by Sara Mills, who notes a tendency in women's travel writing 'to exhibit a concern with displaying the "self"' (p. 19). Quoting Mary Louise Pratt, Mills discusses two types of travel writing, each with its own 'narrative figure': 'the "manners and customs" figure' (which is largely impersonal, with the narrator absent and statements emanating from 'an impersonal source which is not identical with the narrator who travels from place to place') 'the "sentimental" figure' (which foregrounds the narrator), Mills pp. 72-75. Considered as 'travel narratives', San Mao's stories fit the 'sentimental type'; they are sentimental also in the focus on her own emotions as she interacts with new people and new places.

⁶² Porter pp. 14-15.

the point of travel is to gather tales. Indeed, the tale can be more important to the traveller than the experience. Who dares return without some adventure to recount?...Images of self, as well as consciousness of audience, of the expectations of others, and of reputation, both censor and embellish writing - just as they shape our construction of ourselves...The tale discloses much about self image and self construction, about perception of social expectations and of audience, about the possible and permissible range of roles within culture specific to time, place, class and gender'.⁶³

Though San Mao's writing is not necessarily classifiable as 'travel writing' (as noted above), she is certainly 'representing a world' for her readers - a world perceived, understood and narrated through the various filters and moulds of her own gender, social position, nationality, income level, ability to consume, and sense of place in the world.⁶⁴ And in representing that world she is also, of course, representing a self is actively engaged in the activities of experiencing and representing.

It will be noted that critical literature examined in this section deals exclusively with European travellers, and largely with women whose travels considerably predated those of San Mao. This European focus is a result of the constitution of the field of study of travel narratives. While there is ample scholarly literature dealing with the aims, adventures and narratives of European subjects journeying out into an unknown non-European world, there is in comparison very little that focuses upon travels by the people of that non-European world.⁶⁵ Rey Chow has noted in the context of cultural criticism an 'editing out of non-Western capacities for looking, and the presence of "non-western" gaze'; and this has also been the case with the literature of travel.⁶⁶ For a discussion of the dynamics of travel, English-language studies of travel abound; Chinese-language studies are fewer. The preponderance of the European model is not, however, uninformative in a study of San Mao for, as will

⁶³ Pesman pp. 15-16

⁶⁴ As Foster reminds us, the responses of travellers to unknown worlds are 'partly directed by their social position and nationality', Foster p. 2.

⁶⁵ Chinese literary precedent for San Mao's stories is difficult to find. The travels of princesses married to 'barbarians', especially in the Han and Tang dynasties, are a major literary trope in classical and premodern vernacular narratives; they are not, however, written by the women themselves (even though they may be written as if from the women's point of view). There are many records of travel by Chinese imperial officials both within the empire and to neighbouring countries; these are largely the product of tours of Chinese imperial outposts (for example, the *Travels of Lao Can* are confined to China). Travel stories of Fan Chengda or of Xuanzang, Faxian and other Buddhist pilgrims would, of course, have been known to San Mao, as would the travels of Xu Xiake and Zheng He and later accounts by members of the late 19th-early 20th century 'romantic generation' (discussed below) of their sojourns abroad. It would be difficult to prove any direct influence of earlier travel accounts upon San Mao, or even any sense of lineage from other Taiwan writers of mainland origin (such as Yu Lihua). Secondary material relating to Chinese travellers is, as noted, scarce. The work of Hu Ying is a useful beginning to the study of Chinese woman travellers (Hu Ying, 'Re-configuring *neiwai*: writing the woman traveler in the late Qing', *Late Imperial China* 18(1) June 1997, pp. 72-99).

⁶⁶ Chow, *Primitive Passions*, p. 13.

be argued, there are commonalities between the narratives of the nineteenth-century European lady-traveler and the Chinese woman who narrated a world for readers of Chinese in the second half of the twentieth century.

Travel and representation

It need not be re-stated that a representation of a society or of a self can never be 'true' and complete and that the portrayal of places, events, other people and the self cannot but be created by selectivity and ideologies (conscious and unconscious) on the part of the narrative agent. Various explanations have been given for the narrative choices of women in their stories of 'foreign' cultures and of themselves. Sara Mills has pointed out in her analysis of travel narratives by European women that such texts written by women have often been considered by critics and readers to be 'realist' rather than 'creative', and that this assumption of 'factuality' has in turn allowed criticism of their work to be based on doubt of its supposed 'truthfulness' or 'factuality', with 'accusations of exaggeration and falsehood.'⁶⁷ Mills suggests that there is a concomitant tendency for women writing of their travels to 'exhibit a concern with displaying the "self",⁶⁸ and in particular to stress 'personal involvement and relationships with people of the other culture.'⁶⁹ These observations apply also

⁶⁷ Mills p. 4, pp. 12-13. 'One of the major problems in the analysis of women's travel writing is that of assuming that the texts are autobiographical, and that they are straightforward transcriptions of the lives of the women travellers. When talking about "the self" in writing of any kind there are immediate problems. Firstly, we are making an assumption that we all know what the self is: it is used as an easy shorthand for something amorphous and untextualisable. The self is presumed to be the writer's self which is translated into the persona or narrative voice of the text. It is assumed that the reader can discover the 'self' of the woman travel writer in the narrator position in the text. But if we accept that the writer's self in the first place is not a coherent entity, nor is it entirely under the control of the writer, then we cannot imagine that what we read in the text is a faithful representation of the writer. Secondly, we have to deal with the problem of assuming that this self can be faithfully transcribed into a text. The self is not easily grasped in any case, but the representation of it is even less so because it is mediated by discourse, i.e. the writing system and its rules for making sense within the existing meanings of the time. This is further complicated with texts from another period where you cannot be entirely sure that you are reading with anything like the same frames of reference as the writers or readers of the time. Our notions of self conflict quite markedly with other periods' textualisations. In texts, we are dealing with an illusory textualisation of an illusory construct, and this representation is itself not coherent or unified since textualisation, although it may attempt some form of unity, always exceeds this attempt. Since words have potentially multiple meanings, and multiple references, various connotations, and therefore different possible interpretations, dependent on the text's context or the reader's frame of reference...a coherent "self", in textual terms, is impossible. The text itself is not a stable field of meaning, but something which readers work on and interpret. Therefore the range of meanings which the unstable self of the writer attempts to encode are never decoded in a predictable way by the unstable self of the reader', Mills p. 36.

⁶⁸ Mills p. 19.

⁶⁹ Mills suggests that European women travel writers of the 19th century were caught between conflicting discourses: that of imperialist adventure (requiring 'action and intrepid, fearless behaviour') and that of femininity (requiring 'passivity from the narrator and a concern with relationships'); in comparison with the writing of their male peers, they stress 'personal involvement

to San Mao, whose work has been criticised for not being 'true' (though, unlike the writers Mills discusses, San Mao persistently claimed that her stories were all based on her own experience) and in whose narratives the 'self' is paramount, displaying itself in engagement with the people of the 'foreign' cultures among whom she lives.⁷⁰ Susan Horton invokes metaphors of mirrors and screens to describe the project of displaying the self (both to readers and, perhaps, to itself) in the writing of Dinesen and Schreiner: their use of 'Africans' as characters in their narratives (who could be 'brought close or kept at a distance in whatever manner would best set off the desired identities of the authors') was, she suggests, as 'a kind of mediating screen' through which the writers themselves would become visible for their European audience,⁷¹ presenting themselves 'mirrored in African eyes.'⁷² Just as Dinesen made use of 'the Africans of her imagination' in her narratives, to enhance her own self-presentations,⁷³ so too does San Mao; and in her stories of Europe, 'the Europeans of her imagination' fulfil precisely the same function.

Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out the importance of humour of an ironic kind (bathos, self-deprecation) as a narrative strategy of women writers of travel narratives, suggesting that the heroic narrative poses of male colonial travel writing (such as 'the monarch-of-all-I-survey', the 'seeing-man') are, for various social reasons, 'less available to women'.⁷⁴ These humorous devices characteristic of the writings of the women discussed by Pratt, such as Mary Kingsley, are widely used by San Mao as well. Her whimsical presentation reflects the tendency noted by Pratt

and relationships with people of the other culture' as well as taking a 'less authoritarian stance...vis-à-vis narrative voice', Mills pp. 21-22. Relationships are the primary focus of San Mao's stories as well; again the 'feminine' concern with human interaction and interest in personal stories combines with stories of fearlessness, independence and adventure, to create a suitably nurturing female persona that is also brave and adventurous.

⁷⁰ Porter too notes that travel representations 'are always concerned with the question of place and of placing, of situating oneself once and for all vis-à-vis an Other or others', Porter p. 21. 'Since the narrative of a journey gives an author great freedom to focus on whatever it is in an unfamiliar land that 'strikes his fancy', it invites a form of self-disclosure that is only partially conscious, but that is in any case different from what one finds in other forms of writing precisely because of the stimulus of *dépaysement*. There is a sense in which a foreign country constitutes a gigantic Rorschach test; it stimulates free association of a kind that is not reproducible in other ways. As a result, in their writings travelers put their fantasies on display often in spite of themselves', Porter p. 13.

⁷¹ 'But identity does require an audience, and if that audience needed to be European, Schreiner and Dinesen not infrequently constructed "Africans" as a kind of mediating screen through which they would become visible...both the production and the dissemination of their identity were controlled by a process of alternately setting themselves off against and settling themselves comfortably among Africans whom they variously constructed...Africans also serve each woman at times as a kind of audience in attendance at their identity formation', Horton p. 72.

⁷² Horton p. 195: 'Becoming real to herself by seeing her reflection in their eyes, Dinesen becomes real and important to European and American audiences by reporting those reflections'.

⁷³ Horton p. 55.

⁷⁴ Pratt p. 213.

that 'women protagonists tend to produce ironic reversals when they turn up in the contact zone'⁷⁵ with the humourously self-deprecating narrative personas so often characteristic of their writing.⁷⁶ Kingsley and San Mao also share the 'rhetoric of feminine curiosity'⁷⁷ and the tendency to become involved and get in amongst objects of interest rather than observing them from a dignified distance.⁷⁸ Pratt refers also to the female traveller claiming 'an innocence already given by her gender',⁷⁹ and a further assumption of innocence based on childlikeness.⁸⁰ San Mao too claimed feminine and childlike innocence, reinforced by the connotations of the pen-name 'San Mao' (discussed below), to present herself as a new arrival in strange lands, full of childlike wonder and curiosity and in search of fun and stories.

Shirley Foster suggests that the writings of 19th century English women travellers, in response to a climate in which travel for pleasure might be regarded with suspicion, tend to include some self-justification for the travelling and to present some kind of sense of purpose.⁸¹ San Mao too (as noted above) claimed not to be 'wandering' but to be travelling for a serious purpose and diligently fulfilling her

⁷⁵ Pratt p. 102.

⁷⁶ Pratt notes in the work of Mary Kingsley 'a relentlessly comic irony applied to herself and those around her. Pleasure is constant, but it lies in play, not in beauty; Africa is a rousing jolly good time. Above all, Kingsley's book owes its enduring popularity to this masterful comic irreverence....At the same time as it mocks the self-importance and possessiveness of her male counterparts, Kingsley's irony constitutes her own form of mastery, deployed in a swampy world of her own that the explorer-men have not seen or do not want', Pratt p. 215. San Mao too constitutes a world of her own mastery, in the small-scale community of her neighbours and acquaintances and her personal domestic dramas. However, like Kingsley, San Mao too 'did locate herself within the project of empire, however much she rejected the tropes of imperial domination'; Kingsley's position...recovers European innocence..."Not knowing" for her does not mean "needing to know"; "not seeing" does not mean "needing to see"; "not arriving" does not mean "needing to arrive". The bumbling, comic innocence of everyone in her writings, including herself, presupposes a particular way of being a European in Africa. Utopian in its own right, her proposal seems expressly designed to respond to the agonies of the European who has landed in the swamp after falling from his promontory', Pratt p. 215..

⁷⁷ Pratt draws attention to 'a curiosity (desire) marked as female, in need of control', in contrast to the noble curiosity of the male travelers/writers, who 'are to be driven by curiosity, which legitimates their every move', Pratt p. 104.

⁷⁸ For example, Kingsley discovers the value of swamps 'not by looking down at them or even walking around them, but by sloshing zestfully through them in a boat or up to her neck in water and slime...Her comic and self-ironic persona indelibly impresses itself on any reader of her book', Pratt p. 213.

⁷⁹ Pratt p. 105.

⁸⁰ Pratt p. 216.

⁸¹ Though 'to a greater or lesser extent, the woman voyagers saw their journeying as a release, an opportunity to experience solipsistic enjoyment and to enrich themselves spiritually and mentally...such desire still smacked too much of self-pleasing and irresponsibility, and so certain strategies were employed to "cover" it, regarding both the journeys and the published accounts. Chief of these is the insistence on "proper" purpose, a way of validating the respectability and usefulness of the activity, especially when this could be related to current notions of womanhood', Foster p. 8. Often this was done by declaring a 'philanthropic purpose', p. 10. Though San Mao's narratives do not explicitly draw on discourses of philanthropy, her activities nonetheless appear philanthropic.

appointed duties, whether they be those of student, housewife, teacher or writer. Maria Frawley, also discussing English women travellers of Victorian times, has suggested that they were able to use their travel experiences to establish an authority for themselves that they could not otherwise have had;⁸² certainly this is also true of San Mao, whose supposed knowledge and mastery of unknown worlds demonstrated in her travel narratives invested her with the authority to speak and write about many areas of life, particularly in the aesthetic, emotional and cultural spheres.⁸³ The notions of 'professional identity and cultural legitimacy' that Frawley suggests lent interest to women's travel accounts were certainly characteristic of San Mao's narratives as well; indeed travel and cultural experience was a vital element in San Mao's legitimacy as a public figure and her claims as a writer, given that she had left school in her early teens. Frawley points also to the 'confidence, freedom of spirit and sense of accomplishment' that was exhibited in the writing of Victorian women travellers, qualities characteristic of the self-representations of San Mao as well.⁸⁴

Susan Horton has suggested that, as they produced their narratives of a past in which the self takes central place as agent and heroine, Isak Dinesen and Olive Schreiner '*became* themselves in the act of "remembering" and communicating a past that was a construction in and of the moment of writing.'⁸⁵ Certainly 'San Mao' was created and became 'herself' through writing. Though I do not use the term 'identity' as a category in discussing San Mao's narratives, there is considerable commonality between writings about 'identity' and the framework of self-representation used in this work.⁸⁶

In the presentation of a 'foreign' society to readers, the function of an experiencing and narrating self is partly to bridge the gap between two conflicting

⁸² Frawley p. 8.

⁸³ Not just in the stories she wrote but in interviews, articles and magazine advice columns, which deal with practical matters (such as home decor), matters to do with the emotions (what to do when one's husband has an affair; how to deal with cruel parents), attitudes to life (adolescent angst, feelings of inadequacy) and simple matters of opinion (such as magazine advertising). *Dear San Mao* and *Heart-to-Heart* contain pronouncements by San Mao on these and other topics.

⁸⁴ Frawley p. 13.

⁸⁵ Horton p. 244. As Ros Pesman has pointed out, we 'craft ourselves' in the act of narrating experiences - and, indeed, in the experiencing of them, Pesman p. 15.

⁸⁶ See for example Stuart Hall: 'identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within representation. Identity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one's own self...We have the notion of identity as contradictory, as composed of more than one discourse, as composed always across the silences of the other, as written in and through ambivalences and desire. These are extremely important ways of trying to think an identity which is not a sealed or closed totality', Hall in King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, ed Anthony D. King, Macmillan, London, 1991, p. 49.

objectives - that is the effort not to 'domesticate' the subject matter too much and the desire not to alienate readers excessively from something unfamiliar.⁸⁷ The situating of the *self* within that 'foreign' setting - a self which is attractive to the reader, with which the reader may identify, which can safely lead him/her through unfamiliar and potentially threatening territory without fear of alienation - can ensure that not even the most familiar landscapes (even, indeed, those of home) will not seem dully familiar or over-domesticated and that the most unfamiliar will not seem unthinkable or threatening. This is one of the functions of the 'San Mao' of San Mao's narratives: as a Chinese female self leading the reader into the unknown with a keen sense of irony, a taste for 'the exotic' and a playful interest in cultural differences, San Mao is presented as being comfortable and 'at home' wherever she goes, while also able to see the 'exotic' charm, irony and difference in the world around her, whether the location be 'known' or 'unknown' to readers. The discussion in later chapters of San Mao and the writing she produced in or about Africa and Europe will revisit many of the aspects of travel and self-representation noted above.

The 'lifework'

The self-presentation in San Mao's writing was enhanced and reinforced by her self-presentation in other aspects of her life - which might in turn be incorporated into her writing to create a seamless and consistent public San Mao whose fame, social visibility and writings were inseparably intertwined. The life of 'San Mao', first created and enacted in texts of her own composition, was backed up by biographies and continued through interviews, correspondence and personal appearances. Mary Louise Pratt, in her discussion of Alexander von Humboldt, has observed that he existed not primarily as a traveller or travel writer but as 'a Man and a Life', having 'produced his own journeys and subject matters and spent a lifetime of energy promoting them'.⁸⁸ San Mao too, a textual creation and penname, became - through a network of texts and through the cultivation of the persona of the texts even outside them - 'a Woman and a Life'. This 'Life' was a work of conscious creation that

⁸⁷ Mary B. Campbell, quoted by Ledford-Miller in Hanne (ed.), p. 23.

⁸⁸ Pratt p 115. Pratt notes further that 'Humboldt in his writings is *doing* Romanticism' (Horton p. 137), and her remarks about Romanticism may be instructive to a discussion of San Mao almost 200 years later: 'To the degree that "romanticism" shapes the new discourses on America, Egypt, Southern Africa, Polynesia or Italy, *they* shape *it*. (Romantics are certainly known for stationing themselves round Europe's peripheries...Romanticism *consists*, among other things, of shifts in relations between Europe and other parts of the world, notably the Americas, which are, precisely, liberating themselves from Europe.....westerners are accustomed to thinking of romantic projects of liberty, individualism and liberalism as emanating *from* Europe *to* the colonial periphery, but less accustomed to thinking about emanations *from* the contact zones *back* into Europe', pp. 137-139.

spanned the textual life of San Mao and the 'real' life of her creator Chen Ping who 'became' San Mao. Susan Horton's concept of 'lifeworks' (outlined in her analysis of the writings of Isak Dinesen and Susan Horton) is an appropriate one to invoke here. 'Lifeworks' are the sum of self-presentation in which 'Myth, story, performance, physical self-presentation, letters, lectures, radio broadcasts, allegories - all become strategies that open up a space and a place for a self-performance',⁸⁹ and in which the gap between self and performance disappears. Isak Dinesen, suggests Horton, is perhaps 'best known as the architect of her own flamboyant persona',⁹⁰ dressing, speaking and arranging her bodily positions to perform her chosen mode of self-presentation that dove-tailed with the persona that is the narrator and subject of her writings.⁹¹ San Mao too dressed and spoke distinctively;⁹² and photographs of San Mao, like those of Dinesen, seem engineered to buttress the image of the persona through the choice of background and pose.⁹³ For San Mao too these 'attempts to produce artful, visually and emotionally satisfying configurations of space, material, movement and gesture' helped to lend her persona the character of legend;⁹⁴ her lifework, like Dinesen's, 'is a kind of montage'⁹⁵ in which she marks out a space for herself through her self-presentations, presenting what she wishes to present and keeping hidden what she does not wish to be seen. Horton suggests that literary productions, biography, letters and bodily presentation can be treated together as contributors to and manifestations of the 'lifeworks'.⁹⁶ Thus a host of intersecting elements of the San Mao persona - her style of dress, her hairstyle,⁹⁷ her ways of

⁸⁹ Horton p. 246.

⁹⁰ Horton p. 4.

⁹¹ Horton p. 72. 'Dinesen's cloches and large hats, her carefully constructed photographic representations, her ethereal storyteller's voice - all separated her from a crowd even in its midst'.

⁹² As noted, San Mao favoured distinctively long, loose, flowing clothes and an immediately recognisable hairstyle that made her conspicuous in public places; she also spoke in a soft, childish-sounding 'hyper-feminine' voice (as heard on her storytelling tapes, *San Mao Tells Stories, The World of Reading* and *Meteor Shower*).

⁹³ For example, they depict her striding through the desert, her hair flying in the wind; posing in front of an antique wooden door; at her desk in front of shelves crammed with books (prodigious reading being an important part of her self-presentation); or surrounded by her collection of 'treasures' (exotic objects collected from her life of travel).

⁹⁴ Horton pp. 13-14.

⁹⁵ Horton pp. 34, 31. Dinesen, notes Horton, invested a great deal in 'living with style what she referred to...as "what is generally known as 'one's life'" (Horton p. 31); San Mao could also be characterised in this way.

⁹⁶ Horton p. 37.

⁹⁷ San Mao frequently refers to the casual style of her clothes (her jeans, her long cotton skirts, her simple shirts, her sandals) and explicitly connects her clothing preferences to her desire for freedom (indeed biographer Pan Xiangli claims that San Mao exemplified 'the spirit of jeans' - comfortable, classless, and at home everywhere, Pan p. 140. She was, indeed, recognisable by her clothes and her distinctive hairstyle of two plaits, in a style she claimed to be 'American Indian'.

interacting with people,⁹⁸ her hobbies,⁹⁹ her way of decorating her homes,¹⁰⁰ her travels and other leisure activities, her public associations with other literary figures,¹⁰¹ her relationships with family members and friends,¹⁰² the events and causes she chose to involve herself with,¹⁰³ and even her distinctively sloping handwriting - were all significant elements in her self-presentation. All combined to contribute to her fame, each reinforcing the others. San Mao's life and work created each other through the performance of her persona and the construction of the public self as a work of art.¹⁰⁴

Comparisons between San Mao and Dinesen or Schreiner suggest areas of similarity in the self-representation choices of their 'lifeworks' - indeed San Mao combines many features of the two other women's personas as analysed by Horton. Both, Horton notes, were 'difficult women for those around them'¹⁰⁵ (as was San Mao, from the time of her suicide attempts in childhood and withdrawal from school to her taking family and friends as material for her stories; Ma Zhongxin suggests that she was such a difficult personality that José chose to live on another island rather than with her).¹⁰⁶ A sense of identity as an artist was a common feature of Isak Dinesen and San Mao; both studied art (San Mao privately, Dinesen at art school) and both presented themselves as women equipped with aesthetic sensibility and assumed

⁹⁸ Everyone I have spoken to who knew San Mao has commented upon her impression of personal warmth and her way of getting on well with people; one characterised being with San Mao as being like having a warm shower. Her stories create a similar impression of easy likability, with accounts of a stranger giving her a blade of grass (*Taking the City* pp. 132-133) and people responding to her with warmth wherever she goes (notably in *Over the Hills and Far Away*).

⁹⁹ San Mao discusses her hobbies of painting stones and patchwork in her stories, and her collections of 'folk objects' are well known from her collection book, *My Treasures* (discussed in Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping').

¹⁰⁰ San Mao's home decor will be discussed in later chapters. Her homes were legendary for their decor, described in detail in her biographies and much photographed.

¹⁰¹ Including her publisher Ping Xintao, the romantic novelist Qiong Yao, the modern dance director Lin Huaimin, associate writers at *Crown* magazine and so on.

¹⁰² San Mao's parents and siblings frequently appear in her stories; she wrote about her father (supposedly disapproving and hard to please); her mother (supposedly smothering her with love and care); her brothers, sister, cousin and nieces. Both of her parents wrote about her in turn: 'My Daughter, Everyone's San Mao' (*A Horse for You* pp. 7-11) and 'Daughter' (*Taking the City* pp. 4-6); they appear as Uncle and Aunt Chen in secondary literature about San Mao, and seem to be regarded as fantasy parents who could understand their daughter's character and talents and could allow her to leave school early, encourage and teach her, and not force her to conform.

¹⁰³ San Mao supported Lifeline, the telephone counselling service; she was also involved in writers' festivals and art events, particularly events sponsored by *Crown* magazine and publishing house.

¹⁰⁴ Her life as well as her work helped to create her myth, and her work was supposedly based on her life, and helped create it. The construction of self in her writing and in her life can thus be conceived at some level as a unified self-presentation.

¹⁰⁵ Horton p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ Ma pp. 179-182.

authority over the aesthetic realm.¹⁰⁷ Horton describes Dinesen as 'a sucker for ..the beautiful, for transcendently true and everlasting love';¹⁰⁸ San Mao too projects a love of beauty and claims transcendence for the relationship between herself and José. Like Dinesen, San Mao presented herself as a woman with whom men often fell in love. Both women had lovers or husbands who died young, and both depicted themselves making visits to the beloved's grave.¹⁰⁹ Both women claimed sincerity in their writings; both apparently suffered from depression, alternating sociability with withdrawal; both depict their personalities as passionate and dramatic. Both valued the thinness of their bodies.¹¹⁰ Although San Mao is often perceived as an independent and bold traveller, there are also aspects in her self-presentation that are reminiscent of the 'hyperfemininity' and 'extremely traditional...roles for males and females' that Horton has noted were characteristic of Dinesen's writings.¹¹¹

All three women lived in both Europe and Africa, and all three 'collected' both places to include in their lifeworks, as pieces of 'the very artful bricolage that was their work of self-construction.'¹¹² All three constructed something they could present as 'African behavior and belief' in their constructions of an 'Africa' and of their own experiencing and narrating selves in interaction with 'Africa' as they created it.¹¹³ Each of the three devoted 'prodigious quantities of...will and great amounts of imaginative energy...to carefully designing and positioning her own body for viewing both in and out of the African landscape, and then to careful reporting or representing of those positionings'.¹¹⁴ The connections of all three with both Africa and Europe

¹⁰⁷ Horton p. 171. Dinesen studied art in Copenhagen and Paris; San Mao studied art privately in Taipei and later won funding to study ceramics in the USA.

¹⁰⁸ Horton p. xiii.

¹⁰⁹ Horton discusses 'the untimely death of Denys Finch Hatton in a plane crash' and Dinesen's story of visiting his grave, Horton p. 175; José's untimely death in a diving accident and San Mao's visits to his grave are described in *How Many Flowers Fell While I Slept*. Horton notes that Dinesen presents herself at the grave as 'tableau' rather than narrative (which would have required 'telling the story of the failed relationship'; but 'by force of will and skill, Dinesen wards off that threat even as she invokes the more powerful and positive aspects of the relationship that is now gone', Horton p. 175; if, as Ma Zhongxin claims, the relationship between San Mao and José - depicted by San Mao as a great and lasting love - was strained to the point of his seeking a divorce, a similar analysis could be made of San Mao's presentation of herself at the grave of José.

¹¹⁰ Horton p. 58. San Mao's references to her slenderness will be noted in the following chapters.

¹¹¹ Horton p. xiii. There are also similarities between San Mao and Olive Schreiner, who is described as egoistic and possessive, with 'a tendency to delusion about her health and also a slight touch of persecution mania, accompanied by its opposite: the conviction that everyone admired and revered her if they were not positively in love with her', Horton p. 12, quoting Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, Pantheon Books, New York 1972.

¹¹² Horton p. xii.

¹¹³ Horton p. 5. Horton notes the importance of both Africa and Europe to Schreiner's and Dinesen's work of self-construction, Horton p. 35.

¹¹⁴ Horton p.42.

were important to the success of their self-productions; they took what they chose from both continents that would enhance their own personas and support the significance they claimed for themselves. They were also, of course, 'inevitably entangled in both the colonial and the sexual politics of their times and places',¹¹⁵ whether upholding or resisting them, and reflected them in the narratives they produced.

Horton suggests that Africa was 'an escape' for Dinesen and Schreiner.¹¹⁶ San Mao's biographers have likewise suggested that going abroad was an 'escape' (whether from an unhappy love affair, from the death of a lover, from 'smothering' mother-love), constructing her journeys away from Taiwan in 1965 (when she left for the first time) and in 1972 or 1973 (when she left again after her fiancé's death) as ways of healing her emotional wounds. In the writings of both Dinesen and Schreiner, who claimed both Africa and Europe as 'homes', Horton has noted an ambivalence of feeling, noting that when they were in one 'home' they spoke of longing for the other.¹¹⁷ For San Mao, whose 'home' was neither, the questions of 'home' and of ambiguous longings is perhaps more complex. She claimed to have a 'half-Spanish soul'; to José, she was 'my Saharan heart'; she would wake up in the morning wondering if she was in Taipei or in Spain dreaming of Taipei.¹¹⁸ Though Taiwan was her 'home' on account of her having been brought up there, she claimed a 'home' in China as well - not only by ancestry and birth, or by a sense of united Chinese cultural heritage, but also by narrating a 'China' in which she was accepted, acclaimed and loved (as she also claimed to be in Africa and Europe). This work will demonstrate San Mao's representation of herself as 'at home' wherever she went, and her projection of 'belonging' in whatever place she happened to be - Europe, Africa, or China.

In the creation of an identity and a narrative persona in Africa and Europe, a varied cast of characters is called upon to interact with, contrast with, complement or applaud the narrating subject. Likewise the narrating persona, once created, requires readers to interact with it. As Horton has pointed out, identity requires an audience; and in order to become visible, the narrating persona of San Mao (like those of Dinesen and Schreiner), constructed Africans (and Europeans) 'as a kind of mediating screen...both the production and the dissemination of their identity were controlled by

¹¹⁵ Horton p. 5, p. 18.

¹¹⁶ Horton pp. 51-52.

¹¹⁷ Horton p. 23.

¹¹⁸ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 113.

a process of alternately setting themselves off against and settling themselves comfortably among Africans' (or Europeans). These same Africans (and Europeans) 'also serve each woman at times as a kind of audience in attendance at their identity formation, and sometimes as a defense or shield'.¹¹⁹ Thus lives other than their own are incorporated into the 'lifeworks' as accessories to the presentation of a whole and authoritative self.

The creation of their own 'lifeworks' as well as literature by writers has, of course, a history in China as well. In his discussion of 'the romantic generation' of serious Chinese literati figures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Leo Lee notes that their lives and personas were as much a part of their fame as their writings;¹²⁰ 'the *wenren* was...renowned for his life and personality as much as for his work'.¹²¹ Lee points out the long-established characteristics of the literatus-genius that these romantic lifeworks tend to reproduce.¹²² The example of Yu Dafu may be instructive here by way of comparison with San Mao: he read *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng) at an early age (so did San Mao);¹²³ he quit school early (so did San Mao); he studied abroad and wrote a story about a love affair between a Chinese student and a local person (so did San Mao - Yu Dafu in Japan and San Mao in Spain and Germany); enjoyed travel to remote places¹²⁴ but later noted that he had lost the urge to travel (so did San Mao).¹²⁵ There are similarities also between Lee's remarks

¹¹⁹ Horton p. 72.

¹²⁰ For example Su Man-shu, who 'could gain popularity from his personality and lifestyle as much as from his literary accomplishments', Lee p. 63. Su was, notes Lee, 'the picture of a melancholy genius whose thoughts were too unique and whose sensitivities were too acute to be wholly understood by his age - a posture that many self-styled men of letters were later to adopt eagerly. Su Man-shu was among the first men to exemplify the idea that the style of a man is, both to himself and his public, as important as the man himself', Lee pp. 63-65. Su Man-shu gained popularity 'from his personality and life style as much as from his literary accomplishments'; Lee describes his fictional writings as 'imaginary reconstructions of many actual events in his life', a description that could equally be applied to the writings of San Mao.

¹²¹ Lee suggests that what audiences acclaimed was 'neither the expertise of craftsmanship nor the vigor or exuberance of creative imagination but rather the intensity of the author's own emotional experience', what readers believed to be 'the scintillating personalities of the literary men', Lee p. 248. This same 'exaltation of the writer's personality and life experience' is clearly evident in written and anecdotal accounts of San Mao.

¹²² Lee pp. 85-88.

¹²³ *Honglou meng* has become something of a standard for the expression of sensitivity and literary appreciation, and San Mao claimed to have read the book hundreds of times.

¹²⁴ 'I liked traveling, especially in deserted regions unreached by trains, airplanes, steamships, and all those effective vehicles of modern transportation...Once in a wide and thinly populated area, you could sing and hum, lay bare your body, and wash off all the false etiquettes and rigid manners of society', quoted Lee p. 105.

¹²⁵ 'But this kind of disposition for traveling and drifting has gradually been diminished in recent years', Lee p. 105. As noted elsewhere, after years of travel San Mao too distanced herself from 'drifting' or 'wandering'. Further comments by Lee about Yu Dafu also have resonance for San Mao. He notes that for Yu, 'all literature is autobiography; the reverse seems also applicable, that all

about Xu Zhimo and the persona of San Mao. Xu was a keen reader of novels, to the detriment of other academic work; nonetheless, he 'invariably scored highest in Chinese composition tests'.¹²⁶ This same characteristic is an important part of the San Mao legend.¹²⁷ Thus stories of San Mao told both by herself and her biographers situate San Mao within the lineage of Chinese high-culture literary figures of the late 19th and early 20th century. Though her writings may not be classified as 'high culture', her 'lifeworks' place her within well-established high culture traditions; they may indeed be regarded as a 'popularisation' and 'feminisation' of an existing male high-culture tradition.

In his discussion of the 'romantic generation', Lee also draws attention to the iconic 'three big words: love, freedom and beauty'¹²⁸ - and these three words surely encapsulate the spirit of San Mao's own persona of romantic adventure as well. Lee notes the importance in the literary persona of a 'love of nature', of 'being easily moved to tears' and of a 'focus on "I"' - also conspicuous and important elements in San Mao's self-presentation. Further, he suggests that these writers display a paramount emphasis on 'the intensity of the author's own emotional experience'; this too is a hallmark of San Mao's writing. The heightened sensitivity of the artist, expressed in his/her 'difference' from those around him/her, is another feature shared by San Mao and the literati discussed by Lee.¹²⁹ Other characteristics of the literary

autobiography - at least his autobiography - is literature. This autobiographical impulse is the motivating force for most of his creative output....(but) behind the simple unity of his life and works lies a maze of ambiguities between reality and appearance, between the self and visions of the self...The story is...neither strictly imaginary nor strictly realistic, but a delicate blending of the two. With a heavily imitative technique and an emerging autobiographical impulse, the young writer attempted to accomplish two tasks: to paint the contours of an imaginary figure based on his own image and to inflate this fictional personality to the proportions of an ideal, larger-than-life vision', Lee pp. 110-113.

¹²⁶ Lee p. 124.

¹²⁷ See *Rear View* and *Taking the City* for San Mao's stories of her school days, of her novel reading habit and the teacher's disapproval, and her high scores in literature exercises. Like San Mao, Xu also lived abroad (in the USA and England), returning 'exultant with acquired European tastes', Lee p. 124.

¹²⁸ Hu Shi characterised Xu Zhimo's '*Weltanschauung*' as consisting of 'a simple faith on which were written three big words: love, freedom, and beauty. He dreamed of having these three ideal conditions merge into the life of one individual. This was his simple faith. The history of his life was the history of his seeking the realization of this simple faith', Lee p. 159. Lee further connects the 'simple faith' with notions of romantic love. Hu Shi's description fits San Mao's world view admirably.

¹²⁹ 'By virtue of this superhuman endowment of sensitivity and feeling', notes Lee, 'a literary man considers himself superior. Since he is different, he is accursed with loneliness; but because he is also superior, he deserves and demands attention and adulation...In the eyes of the modern *wenren* themselves, the problem of identity and alienation can be turned into a personal asset...Being alienated, the typical modern *wenren* considers himself different from the mundane crowd. This sense of difference is derived also from a discovery of the preciousness and uniqueness of his own life experience...His hypersensitivity, which dooms him to suffering for life, can also be a blessing, a gift of feeling that average mortals do not possess', Lee pp. 251-252. In San Mao's case, however,

genius figure in Chinese history include a rich emotional life,¹³⁰ an early love of literature and also of travel,¹³¹ a love of plants and gardens,¹³² an appreciation of deserted regions, and fastidiousness about his/her personal surroundings.¹³³ The persona of San Mao displays all of these.¹³⁴

By drawing on these conventions, San Mao's self-presentation - and the presentation of San Mao constructed by biographers - places her in connection with the traditions of Chinese scholars in the imperial period, 20th century creative writers and great romantic figures.¹³⁵ She has been likened also to the fictional character Jia Baoyu, hero of Cao Xueqin's classic novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. A hyper-sensitive youth, full of feeling for all around him, Baoyu leaves his family at the end of the novel to become a wandering monk. One commentator on San Mao has suggested that San Mao's leaving the secure home of Taiwan and the warm, romantic, social student life of Spain to live in the Sahara Desert was an act of similar spiritual, self-denying significance that signalled a rejection of the vulgar world and a quest for life on a higher plane amid solitude and silence¹³⁶ (thus the classic Chinese novel

'difference' is framed by a depiction of exceptional sensitivity to other people and skill in human relationships.

¹³⁰ Liang Qichao, for example, characterises himself as 'emotional' (*fuyu ganqing*).

¹³¹ San Mao assumes such traditional attributes of the literatus as 'precocity in literature and...early love of travel,' Clunas p. 23.

¹³² Clunas notes that a love of gardens was essential to the image of a Qing literatus, Clunas p. 24. San Mao too speaks of her love of growing things, telling how she treasures her pot plants in the Sahara, and often referring to her garden in the Canary Islands.

¹³³ Craig Clunas notes that the Qing literatus was 'fastidious in his preferences for bright windows, cleanliness, swept floors and the aroma of incense', Clunas p. 24.

¹³⁴ The person Chen Ping, like the literati discussed by Clunas, found 'ways of transforming economic power into cultural power' (Clunas p. 13) through travel, writing about travel, collecting and so on.

¹³⁵ San Mao was tenuously connected with this world through her father, who had been a student in Shanghai at this time. Leo Lee, of a comparable age to San Mao, reminisces in the preface to his book: 'As "emancipated" intellectuals fresh from college in the early thirties, my parents adopted a "modern" method in raising their first son, steeping him in Greek mythology and the music of Chopin. Western literature - Dumas, Lamartine, Byron and Romain Rolland in Chinese translation - became the regular educational fare in my adolescent years in Taiwan. I can still recall with vivid immediacy how my father gave me special permission one night to read through *La Dame aux Camélias* until early dawn. And it did not take me much time to find out that the initial letter in my father's European name stood for Armand...my father, a musician by profession, was also a poet in his college years in Nanking', Lee pp. vii-viii.

¹³⁶ Cui and Zhao suggest that San Mao's wish to visit the Sahara was a choice to slough off the temptations of the material world, 'just like Baoyu becoming a monk' Cui and Zhao p. 290. They note San Mao's liking for the novel, suggesting that it 'gave her enlightenment on life' from the time she was a primary school student'. Though she studied philosophy at Culture Academy and Madrid University, they continue, the philosophy she studied and the concepts of life it imparted could never surpass the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, with its 'Buddhist and Daoist thinking' that 'life is dust', Cui and Zhao p. 291. Cui and Zhao suggest that from an early age San Mao quested for the meaning of life; that her teenage withdrawal was somehow nun-like, as she shut herself up and wore 'sad and drab' clothing like that of a nun and pondered the meaning of life; that she was disappointed in

most admired in modern times is invoked to provide a template for interpreting San Mao's life and work, both by San Mao herself and by her commentators).

It was in the Sahara that 'San Mao' (pen-name, persona, narrator, adventurer) was born. The name is an important element in the lifework, giving rise to several associations that all highlight aspects of the San Mao persona.

The pen-name

The reasons for San Mao's choice of pen-name have been much discussed by biographers, based on various hints given by San Mao herself. One common explanation is that she named herself after the cartoon character hero of *San Mao the Wanderer*, (created by the Shanghai artist Zhang Leping in the 1940s) which she spoke of as the first book of which she became aware as a child.¹³⁷ The San Mao of the cartoon is a small boy, an orphan living on the streets of Shanghai; San Mao the author claimed to have chosen the pen-name not only to commemorate the fact that it was the first book she ever read. There is also a 'Peter Pan' aspect to the name; she liked the fact that the boy 'wandered everywhere and never grew up'.¹³⁸ The childlike connotations of the name enhanced her persona of playful and innocent wanderer around the world. In later life, San Mao was to contact Zhang Leping, creator of the cartoon child San Mao, to tell him who his story of a boy roaming around and never growing up had inspired her with a love for 'small', insignificant people; this will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

The writer San Mao gave the simplicity and ordinariness of the name 'San Mao' as another reason for her choice to use it: 'San Mao is a very simple and ordinary name; I'm an ordinary person writing about ordinary life, so I don't need a

philosophy classes at Culture Academy, as they did not bring her the meaning of life (indeed gave her nothing more than she had already learned from *Dream of the Red Chamber*); that as a student in Spain she was healed of her 'love wound's by the youths serenading her with love songs, but that this did nothing to add to her philosophy; and that finally she left the dust of the secular world to go to the desert and embrace her 'nostalgia for a previous age', Cui and Zhao pp. 291-292. Returning to Taipei after the death of José was a return to 'the swirling red dust of the secular world'; after the purity of the desert, she could not be happy there again. Cui and Zhao connect her eventual suicide with the Buddhist monk or nun's renunciation of the world and 'casting off' of joys and sorrows. Thus her acquaintance with the world's 'dust' was short, and Cui and Zhao note that her final writing is scattered with *Dream of the Red Chamber* references (in her *Red Dust* screenplay, in the story of her trips to Suzhou and Dunhuang), claiming that the 'enlightenment' of the novel was with her to the end of her life: 'She may have seen her own death as the casting off of bitterness. She couldn't have been too unhappy. Her supramundane life concept directed her whole beautiful and tragic life', Cui and Zhao p. 292-293. According to Ma Zhongxin, San Mao (though generally considered to be a Protestant Christian) often spoke of becoming a Buddhist nun; he concludes after conversations with prominent Chinese Buddhists that she was either insincere or deluded.

¹³⁷ She spoke of it as one of her favourite books, *The World of San Mao* p. 37.

¹³⁸ Guan Guoxuan, 'San Mao' from "Brief biographies of people of the Republic of China", in *Biographical Literature* 376, September 1993, pp. 143-147.

very literary name'. This 'simple and ordinary' motif is common in discussions of San Mao.¹³⁹ She was often praised for her interest in and affection for 'little' people, people in low-status service occupations rather than the kind of powerful people that a famous writer could supposedly mingle with in preference. Stories abound of San Mao singling out cleaners, tea-ladies and drivers to chat with; commentators suggest that she allied herself with the ordinary and praised them in her stories, while shunning the powerful.¹⁴⁰

Other explanations of the choice of pen-name are based upon the meaning of the words '*san mao*' as 'thirty cents'. San Mao is quoted as saying that the name seemed suitable because she is just a small, ordinary person who does not care about wealth and has only thirty cents in her pocket.¹⁴¹ Elsewhere, there is a suggestion that her writing itself is small and ordinary and not worth more than thirty cents.¹⁴² In both of these explanations, the image remains of San Mao as one of the 'little' people.

Though 'San Mao' may be an unremarkable nickname, it should be noted that name is usually associated with male rather than female children. The choice of a boychild penname was clearly not intended to conceal the fact that Chen Ping was a woman. The very first sentence of the first story she wrote as 'San Mao' ('Unfortunately, my husband is a foreigner')¹⁴³ makes her sex clear.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the name is intended to convey something of the solitariness, independence and confidence (despite his poor conditions) of the lone boy-child of the *San Mao* comics; and this forms an interesting tension with the feminised, sociable chatty, presentation of her stories with their emphasis on emotions and relationships. Indeed the incorporation of characteristics stereotyped as masculine as well as feminine may be

¹³⁹ These connotations of 'ordinariness' and insignificance and of not claiming great literary status differentiate San Mao from the literary tradition discussed above; though she may have manifested some of the standard attributes of the sensitive literary genius, she did not - like Yu Dafu or Xu Zhimo - claim the 'greatness', seriousness and 'universality' for her work that these men of letters did for theirs.

¹⁴⁰ See the three San Mao biographies and Gu Jitang. There is perhaps an association here with the original San Mao of the cartoon; the story of the boy San Mao, who is mistreated by both 'the west' and China, contains an element of social critique regarding the economic 'progress' of early 1940s Shanghai that has left 'little' people like him behind.

¹⁴¹ 'When I started writing stories, I didn't want a very literary pen name, because I am just an ordinary person. I thought for a while and thought of this name - San Mao, and what it expresses is that I am just a little person with only 3 *mao* [thirty cents] in my pocket', *The World of San Mao* p. 113.

¹⁴² This remark is imputed to San Mao herself, *The World of San Mao* p. 37.

¹⁴³ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 19.

¹⁴⁴ I thank Josephine Fox for drawing my attention to this and pointing out the similarity to Karen Blixen's choice of 'Isak' as a pen-name.

one reason for the success of the San Mao persona.¹⁴⁵ Such ambivalence is not inconsistent with other perceptions of female narratives of foreign countries; as Sara Mills has pointed out, the narrative of the 'tomboy' was often invoked by critics and analysts of earlier European women's travel texts.¹⁴⁶ This 'traditional' view of the woman traveller has been articulated by Shirley Foster. 'As women became able to travel more widely and more independently', she notes, 'they had to adopt a position of gender ambiguity, taking on the "masculine" virtues of strength, initiative and decisiveness while retaining the less aggressive qualities considered appropriate to their own sex'; as a result, many of these women 'lay stress on their femininity even while engaging in the most daring and hazardous pursuits'.¹⁴⁷

It might be suggested that San Mao's constant emphasis on her housewifely activities and caring for José fulfilled a similar function, proving her 'femininity' throughout her adventures in the desert. Furthermore, it might be noted that one of her most dramatic stories, in which she escapes the predations of three Sahrawi men and saves José from drowning in a swamp, contains reminders of the fact that she is a woman (her dress, her physical 'weakness', the hint of male sexual violence) throughout the text. For the young women who constituted the main part of San Mao's continuing readership, a persona that combined travel and domesticity, independence and 'traditional' female family obligations, the exotic and the mundane, may have been equally a challenging or a reassuring one. In a world of changing female roles, San Mao provided an example of someone who had enviable international adventures, a stable heterosexual relationship and a career that brought her fame and popularity.¹⁴⁸ San Mao's tendency to link travel and adventure with the

¹⁴⁵ I thank Yang Dong for his comments about San Mao having been perceived as being 'like a man' in that she travelled independently in the desert in search of adventure.

¹⁴⁶ Mills p. 35.

¹⁴⁷ Foster p. 11. Sara Mills has noted that analyses of women's travel writing tend to dwell on 'markers of femininity, such as concern with personal relations and appearance', Mills p. 39; this has also been the case with commentary on San Mao's writing. San Mao herself pays considerable attention to these aspects, with frequent references to her appearance (in particular long hair and her clothing), characterising herself as beautiful, and frequently taking personal relations (in particular her own charm and kindness) as the main subject of her narratives.

¹⁴⁸ Such a synthesising of the unknown and the known may have been particularly appealing to women who themselves wished for some combination of independent travel, a 'glamorous' career, and marriage; this would have included the Taiwan counterparts to the group in Japan described by Lise Skov and Brian Moeran as 'the growing number of unmarried women in their late 20s and 30s... "elite cosmopolitans" [who] simultaneously take part in a global consumer culture - through travel, fashion and so on - and in a local culture which lays claim on them to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers', Skov and Moeran p. 7. Many young Chinese-speaking women in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s grew up reading stories in which San Mao travelled, married, wrote, and 'participated in global culture'.

persona of a happy housewife have earned her the epithet of 'old fashioned new woman'.¹⁴⁹

In her discussion of Isak Dinesen, Susan Horton has noted that Dinesen distances herself from the submissiveness expected of women while expanding the allowable space for female activity and self-representation; thus, suggests Horton, her literary persona identifies itself as 'not male and not not-male'.¹⁵⁰ The self-representation encapsulated in San Mao's pen-name likewise suggests a gender-transcending adventurer - but an infantilised one. This sense of infantilisation not only suggests an aura of childlike innocence but also contributes to a popular perception of San Mao as younger than she actually was.¹⁵¹

The final connotation of the 'San Mao' name is perhaps an accidental rather than intentional one. At the time of the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900, terminology relating to foreign influence was expressed in terms of one, two or three *mao*. 'One *mao* people' were 'western' foreigners; 'two *mao*' people were Chinese converts to Christianity; 'Three *mao*' people were Chinese people who had been influenced by 'the west' to the extent that they used and admired foreign things.¹⁵² San Mao's encounters with the 'foreign' - and indeed her explicit statement that she had learned from foreign societies and recommendation of 'foreign' ideas to her readers (noted in Chapter 6) - would suggest that she was a true 'three *mao*' person.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Pan Xiangli p. 97.

¹⁵⁰ Horton pp. 34-35.

¹⁵¹ Biographical sources disagree on the date of her birth, and commentators tend to gloss over her age; references within San Mao's work to her age or specific references to dates often do not add up. This vagueness may be to do with attempts to reduce the age gap between her and José or with youthfulness enhancing her playful persona. Zhang Leping, creator of *The Adventures of San Mao*, claimed after San Mao's death that she had actually claimed to be older rather than younger than she was (suggesting that she had falsified her age in order to be able to study abroad). Although San Mao was 33 when her first book came out, there is a perception that San Mao's books are both by and about a much younger woman. That her age was given as 48 at the time of her death caused great surprise among readers, many of whom believed that she had been much younger. The fact that readers have tended to imagine both the character 'San Mao' and the author San Mao as somewhat younger than this is perhaps attributable to the persona of childlike curiosity and uninhibited emotion created in San Mao's work; it may also be partly a manifestation of the disrupted socialisation of her teenage years (resulting from her withdrawal from school at the age of 14 and consequent years of social isolation); it may owe something to a general perception that students and people who travel are likely to be young; and it may be to do with the simplicity and naïvety of the language in which the stories were written. A sense of youthfulness - whether or not it was connected with actual youth - was an important component of the San Mao persona.

¹⁵² I thank Josephine Fox for bringing these terms to my attention.

¹⁵³ Maybe even a two *mao* person, as she occasionally expressed sympathy for Christianity and is thought to have been Christian.

The wandering child

The San Mao spirit is well illustrated by one of her most popular tales, a story from Chen Ping's childhood published some years after Chen Ping had become 'San Mao'; thus it is a story of 'San Mao' set at a time long before she went to the desert, but written and published at the height of San Mao's fame.

In a primary school in Taiwan one day in the early 1950s, the children are asked to write an essay on 'My aspirations'. The child who would grow up to be San Mao begins:

When I grow up, I hope to be a rag-and-bone woman, because in this job I could breathe the fresh air and I could also roam around the streets and lanes and have fun. I could work and play at the same time, as free and happy as a bird in the sky. Even more important, I could pick up lots of useful things that other people had thrown away thinking they were rubbish. The happiest time for a rag-and-bone woman is when she can discover good things among the dust. This...¹⁵⁴

The teacher is enraged at this lack of 'aspiration'. 'If you're going to be a rag and bone woman', she roars, 'there's no point in being at school. You may as well just get out now; how would you face your parents?' The child is ordered to start again and write a new composition.

She begins:

When I grow up, I hope to be a streetside vendor, selling ice-blocks in summer and baked sweet-potatoes in winter, because in this job I could breathe the fresh air and I could also roam around the streets and lanes and have fun. Even more important, while I was working I could have a look in the rubbish bins on the street, to see if people had thrown anything good away. This...¹⁵⁵

Again the child is ordered to rewrite it.

'So all I could do', sighs San Mao to the reader, 'was write some nonsense':

'When I grow up I want to be a doctor and save lots of people's lives...'.
The teacher was very moved when she read it, and gave me an A.
'Now *this* is an aspiration that shows ideals, and that won't let your parents down'.¹⁵⁶

Little did the teacher know, states San Mao, that nothing could change her devotion to the rag-and-bone career (all her life, she remarks, she has been picking up other people's discarded things to reuse).¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ *Rear View* p. 50.

¹⁵⁵ *Rear View* p. 51.

¹⁵⁶ *Rear View* p. 51.

¹⁵⁷ *Rear View* pp. 49-52.

The story introduces several constant images in the life and persona of San Mao.¹⁵⁸ First, the protagonist ('I') is characterised as a small, socially-insignificant person who does not seek wealth or social advancement - and who does not despise others who are low and insignificant on the social scale. Second, she is a free spirit, roaming and playing where she pleases, as free and as distant from worldly considerations (such as economics or politics) as the birds of the air. Third, she is a collector - a collector of objects, and later also a collector of tales, anecdotes, characters - who can see value where others cannot, and can pluck what is overlooked and despised by others out of the dust and transform it into something useful and good.

Yet the fundamental tension in the San Mao persona may already be apparent. San Mao is not a rag-and-bone woman or a street vendor. She comes from a comfortable middle class background; when she resists school, her parents are able and willing to educate her at home; her father is wealthy enough and willing to support her to study and travel abroad for several years; she becomes a best-selling writer with an estimated income of a million NT dollars per year.¹⁵⁹ When she actually tries to sell food on the street, she is too embarrassed to make any sales at all.¹⁶⁰ The free and outdoor life envisaged by the child is simply a romance; she grows up not to do a humble, low-paid and despised job but to be a widely-travelled writer, popular public lecturer and sometime university teacher.¹⁶¹ The picking up of what other people discard remains a hobby; the picking up of new and unusual experiences - facilitated by her privileged background - becomes her livelihood. Nonetheless, evaluations of San Mao and her work continue to incorporate the discourse of the playful, romantic child, wandering innocently around the world, picking up undiscovered treasures - which she can, of course, 'sell' again as stories.

San Mao's stories

¹⁵⁸ In a later story, San Mao tells of her early fascination with the rag-and-bone cart that would visit her lane in Taipei 'crammed with treasures' - bamboo poles, brushes, stools, dustpans, wok stirrers, washboards and so on. Food vendors' carts fascinated her with the colours of the crockery. As she grew older, she became fascinated with Chinese pharmacies, with so many different herbs and barks with beautiful poetic names in little drawers, and began to dream of being a pharmacist - then a dry-goods vendor, then a flower seller, then the person in charge of the prayer slips at a temple, then a dessert vendor, *Rear View* pp. 149 -151.

¹⁵⁹ Yang Tian, 'Highest-earning writers in the Chinese-speaking world', *Jiangyi* 6.6, March 1990, p. 79.

¹⁶⁰ Discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁶¹ Indeed even such experiences of unskilled work as she has (for example, spraying perfume and directing customers in a department store, noted in Chapter 5) are converted into cultural and economic capital by the act of writing and publishing about them.

Biographers Cui and Zhao have classified San Mao's work into three literary periods: the 'rainy season' (*yuji wenxue shiqi*), the desert period (*shamo wenxue shiqi*), and the dessert-vendor-in-the-city period (*dushi yubing wenxue shiqi*).¹⁶²

The 'Rainy Season' writings are her early stories, written before the age of 22 (although some of the stories collected in *The Rainy Season Will Not Return*, from which Cui and Zhao take the name, were written in Europe between the ages of 24 and 26). According to Cui and Zhao, these stories are characterised by sadness, depression and confusion; most are about adolescent love.¹⁶³ The 'rainy season' stories were published under the name 'Chen Ping'; the 'San Mao' pen-name was adopted for the first Saharan stories and used in all later work.

Cui and Zhao date San Mao's desert literature period from June 1974 (shortly before her marriage to José in the Sahara) to José's death in 1979. San Mao's 'desert period' works are collected in four volumes (*Stories of the Sahara*, *Diary of a Scarecrow*, *Crying Camels* and *The Tender Night*), and are considered by Cui and Zhao to be her best work, with the title story of *Crying Camels* (discussed in Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History') as her 'creative peak'. Not all of the 'desert period' literature was written in the desert; many of the stories in these four collections were written after San Mao left the Sahara and was living in the Canary Islands. The 'desert period' stories, described by Cui and Zhao as imbued with a healthy, open, smooth and easy style, established her as a literary star throughout the Chinese-speaking world.¹⁶⁴ The stories discussed here are, for the most part, 'desert period' stories.

The third period of San Mao's creative writing, the 'dessert vendor in the city' period, began after the death of José in 1979, when she returned to Taiwan and lasted until her death.¹⁶⁵ The 'vendor' notion is taken from a comment by San Mao herself that she saw herself as a street vendor, selling stories to passers-by; the dessert (*yubing*) is a link with Taipei. In this period, suggest Cui and Zhao, 'the desert and the beach virtually disappeared, and were replaced with beautiful and pure stories from her heart'; they name the title story of *Taking the City* as 'the masterpiece of this period'.¹⁶⁶ It was, they suggest, a lonely time for San Mao; she threw her energies

¹⁶² Cui and Zhao pp. 294-295; *yubing* is a popular dessert in Taiwan made with crushed ice, syrup and agar agar sold by street vendors.

¹⁶³ Cui and Zhao p. 78. 'Although she lacked literary talent', they continue, 'Chen Ping's name is a little star amid the star-filled literary sky.' The handful of 'Rainy Season' stories that discuss Europe (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) express a more cheerful tone.

¹⁶⁴ Cui and Zhao p. 250.

¹⁶⁵ *Dushi yubing wenxue shiqi*.

¹⁶⁶ Cui and Zhao p. 256.

into lectures, seminars, phone calls, banquets and autograph-signing as well as writing, and her many commitments built up 'a pressure that she could not overcome'.¹⁶⁷ This pressure, indeed, is one of the many reasons that has been suggested for San Mao's suicide in 1991.

Cui and Zhao suggest that, before her death, San Mao had 'said goodbye to her dessert-vendor-in-the-city life'; she had, they claim, 'fixed her gaze upon the mainland' and was about to enter her fourth literary period, her 'mainland period' (indeed they suggest that her screenplay, *Red Dust*, was the first work in this new period). San Mao's 'return' to the mainland will be discussed in Chapter 6.

San Mao, Taiwan and China

Though San Mao grew up in Taiwan, her family had no roots there; they had fled from the mainland in 1948 along with other supporters of the Kuomintang (Nationalists) when the Communist forces were prevailing in the civil war which they would ultimately win in 1949.¹⁶⁸ Many Nationalists in Taiwan preserved a focus upon the mainland and a mentality of self-conscious exile, connected with the official Kuomintang line of 'retaking' the mainland as legitimate rulers of a united 'China' that would include both the mainland and Taiwan. Though many of these new arrivals in Taiwan were economically poor at first, they quickly established themselves as an elite - not least because of their connections with the ruling party. San Mao's father had been a Kuomintang officer; he had a law degree from a prestigious mainland institution, and after moving his family to Taiwan was able to establish himself as a lawyer in Taipei. San Mao herself had been born on the mainland, in Sichuan, an inland province to which the headquarters of the Kuomintang forces had retreated during the Japanese invasion. Her 'hometown' is, however, identified according to custom as the birthplace of her ancestors and her father, on an island belonging to Zhejiang province off the eastern seaboard. (Information about San Mao's life can be found in Appendix 1).

San Mao grew up in a Japanese-style house (one of the remnants of the period of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan, from 1895 to 1945), in which her own family and her father's elder brother and his family lived together as one household. She characterises the area of Taipei in which she grew up as semi-rural, and her childhood as idyllic until she encountered the rigours of Taiwan's competitive education system.

¹⁶⁷ Cui and Zhao p. 295.

¹⁶⁸ Thus in Taiwan they were, in the parlance of the day, *wai sheng ren*, 'people from other provinces', that is mainlanders.

Upon withdrawing from school at the age of thirteen, she studied literature, foreign languages, music and art at home with her father and private tutors. Her stories describe several years of withdrawal and anomie in which her contact with other people - even her family - was minimal; the role of European art in her recovery of sociability is noted in Chapter 4, as are the circumstances of her first journey away from Taiwan in her early twenties.

Looking back on that time, she would later note that the Taipei she left in 1967 had been a place with few consumption choices, where clothes were made by tailors rather than being available ready-made, and where there was only one department store.¹⁶⁹ By the time her stories of foreign countries began to be published, however, the cultural and consumption-related options in Taipei were already becoming more numerous and more internationalised.

Crown magazine, in which all San Mao's stories except the first few were published (before being republished as books by Crown Publishing Company), is a useful case study of this development. The relationship between *Crown* and San Mao was undoubtedly symbiotic; *Crown* promoted San Mao and her work, and the popularity of San Mao's stories contributed to the popularity of *Crown*.¹⁷⁰ *Crown* was established in 1954 by Ping Xintao as a *Readers Digest* style of magazine, publishing mainly translated articles from its American counterparts. From the 1960s onward, the magazine incorporated more stories by Taiwan writers,¹⁷¹ gradually introduced several celebrity interview formats (that helped to create a public impression of a vibrant cultural scene in which well-known people in various fields interacted together and discussed issues of interest or exchanged anecdotes), increased the number of life-style features and, significantly, published many travel-related articles. According to the literary sociologist Lin Fangmei, *Crown*

started with very small circulation but gradually became widely accepted by readers. Now it is one of the most popular and long-standing magazines in Taiwan. From the beginning it was not a purely literary magazine. In addition to fiction and poetry, it contained articles of general interest on cultural affairs,

¹⁶⁹ *My Treasures* p. 213

¹⁷⁰ The literary sociologist Lin Fangmei has noted of the novels of Qiong Yao that 'her novels and *Crown* have mutually reinforced each other. When she published her first work, *Crown* was already a successful magazine; her readership would have been much smaller if she had published in a less well-known magazine. As her popularity increased, it pushed up the circulation of *Crown*', Lin p. 163. This was also the case with San Mao's work.

¹⁷¹ The first feature story by a local writer appeared in 1961, 7 years after the magazine was established. Among others, *Crown* published the work of Qiong Yao (love stories), Sima Zhongyuan (ghost stories in local settings), and the Hong Kong writer Ni Kuang; in the late 1980s *Crown* also published several accounts of trips to China (by Qiong Yao, San Mao, Ling Chen and others).

lifestyles and leisure activities. It is a high-quality middle-brow journal that strikes a balance between good taste and easy consumption. Moreover, this magazine recruited many unknown novice writers who later became popular and famous... As a publishing firm, Crown thus plays an important role in Taiwan's literary production.¹⁷²

San Mao became a personal friend of Ping Xintao, the publisher of *Crown*. As literary editor of the *United Daily*, Ping was responsible for the publication of the first 'San Mao' story;¹⁷³ as founder and publisher of *Crown* magazine and publishing house, he republished her stories of the Sahara in book form. All of her later stories appeared first in *Crown* magazine and then as collections published by Crown Press. San Mao became one of the flagship writers for *Crown*, her stories alternating with those of the popular romance writer Qiong Yao as an attraction in *Crown* for several years.¹⁷⁴

According to Ping Xintao, when *Crown* began to introduce articles on places of interest within Taiwan in the 1960s, most Taiwan people lacked the means to travel even to the next town.¹⁷⁵ Gradually, however, Taiwan became more prosperous;¹⁷⁶ incomes rose; travel within Taiwan became more frequent; opportunities to study abroad became more possible; and interest in both local communities and foreign countries was high. A wave of 'studying-abroad literature' (*liuxuesheng wenxue*) in the 1960s and 1970s (with Yu Lihua as a prime exponent)¹⁷⁷ introduced readers to the lives of Taiwan students in foreign countries. *Crown* published the work of Yun

¹⁷² Lin Fangmei pp. 162-163. In Lin's classification of 'acclaimed' writers of the 1960s (those who received the most column space in literary reference books, serious literary journals and academic works) and 'popular' writers (the most prolific authors), 'only a couple of the acclaimed authors in the 1960s were *Crown* authors, but almost all of the recognised authors were recruited by Ping', Lin p. 163.

¹⁷³ Ping was chief literary editor of the *United Daily*, Taiwan's largest newspaper, from 1963 until 1976. The literary page of the *United Daily* was at that time one of the main arenas for the introduction of new writers, and any writer whose work appeared there became immediately well known as a 'conversation topic' (I thank Chin Heng-wei for providing information about the function of the *United Daily* literature page).

¹⁷⁴ Through the 1980s, new stories by Qiong Yao or San Mao would appear in first position in the magazine, immediately following the advertising and contents pages.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Ping, Taiwan, August 1995. The Taiwan journalist and commentator Chin Heng-wei notes that reportage literature (*baogao wenxue*) concerning interesting things and places around Taiwan became very popular at a time when people couldn't afford to travel and see other parts of Taiwan for themselves. Local travel literature was gradually superseded by 'foreign student literature' (*liuxuesheng wenxue*), which highlighted the life of the Taiwan student abroad (mainly in the USA and discussed their own culture shock and struggles living in a foreign society. The 'San Mao craze' of admiration for the playful, romantic 'childlike' woman of the desert was the next phase (interview, Taiwan, August 1995).

¹⁷⁶ Statistics relating to Taiwan's economic growth, incomes and consumption between the 1960s and 1980s can be found in the *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of China* (Administrative Yuan Statistical Bureau, Taipei); Chan and Clark give some of this data in appendices, pp. 158-177.

¹⁷⁷ Yu Lihua returned to Taiwan in 1962; her books are published by Crown Publishing company.

Qing (who went to America and, like San Mao, married a bearded 'foreigner') and a regular column by the journalist Zhào Ning about life in the USA.

It has been suggested that San Mao differed from the writers of 'studying-abroad literature' not only in that she went to Spain rather than the USA¹⁷⁸ or had none of the usual qualifications to study abroad but also in that her whole enterprise was to do with personal fulfilment - following a romantic dream to a foreign country rather than dedicating herself to learning in order to contribute to her own country.¹⁷⁹ San Mao's stories were personal accounts of human interaction and feeling, without an explicit underlying narrative of service to Taiwan/China. The following chapters will attempt to demonstrate that, though the narrative of 'saving the nation' is not explicitly present in San Mao's work, her stories do not lack political elements. They are, I will suggest, affiliated with narratives of the nation and are in fact imbued with ideologies of 'civilising', 'improving' and, ultimately, enacting the superiority of 'China' wherever she goes.

In the 1970s, when San Mao's stories appeared in *Crown*, the advertisements and articles that appeared alongside them give some indication of the increased means of consumption and the widening range of international (mainly Euro-American) choices available. Advertisements for numerous foreign brand-name goods (Wrangler jeans, Adidas sports clothes and shoes, Wacoal underwear, Tissot and Citizen watches, Wrigleys chewing gum) proliferated. Travel features abounded: about New Guinea and New Caledonia (1976-77); Bali (April 1978); Morocco and Algiers (August 1977); a photo spread on Florence (July 1977); an article on food in Thailand (No. 285); 'letters from Panama' (1979); stories of life abroad as well as travel articles were also numerous. *Crown* ran its first advertisement for an international airline (Thai) in May 1980. Performances of 'western' high culture were advertised and reviewed (such as the first performance of the ballet 'Swan Lake' in

¹⁷⁸ By the 1960s and 1970s there was already a considerable volume of writing in Chinese about the USA, Japan, France and Britain (including that by Xu Zhimo and Yu Dafu, two of the 'romantic literati' invoked above). Images of Spain and Africa may have been introduced through the novels of Hemingway, and the Sahara desert would presumably have been known from film images such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Beau Geste*; but accounts of Chinese experiences of these places were, as far as I am aware, non-existent.

¹⁷⁹ I thank Chin Heng-wei for his useful discussion on this point (personal interview, Taipei, August 1995). Chin noted that most students studying abroad at that time embraced some measure of the 'saving the nation' ideology inherited from the May 4th student movement, and that this was reflected in their writings - while San Mao, though she referred occasionally to national questions, embraced an ideology of fun and play in most of her stories of studying abroad.

Taiwan in late 1979), and articles appeared on various producers and products of internationalised popular culture.¹⁸⁰ San Mao's work fitted well into this context.

In addition, *Crown* was influential in creating a kind of fictive community of local celebrities in Taiwan through a system of interlocking interviews, discussions and quick quotes from well known figures in the arts and popular culture. Writers, actors, singers, disc jockeys and other famous local people interviewed each other in *Crown* magazine, participated in group discussions that were printed in *Crown*, contributed short opinion pieces or wrote small articles on a given topic (for example 'My first job'; 'Someone who gave me a helping hand'; 'My father').¹⁸¹ San Mao participated in this public dialogue as one of *Crown's* celebrities. In the 1980s-1990s, as the so-called 'culture industry' burgeoned (and, among other developments, the number of magazines competing for the consumer's attention increased dramatically),¹⁸² *Crown* consolidated its position in the culture market by initiating other cultural activities (for example supporting modern dance, opening its own art gallery, sponsoring a prize for 'mass fiction'). As already noted, *Crown* is a mass-circulating magazine that is not without cultural influence; its publication of San Mao's work was a major attraction and, correspondingly, it provided a 'frame' for her work.¹⁸³

Given San Mao's association with this widely-read and influential magazine, it might be suggested that she has played some role in the formation of tastes, aspirations and emotional frameworks of *Crown's* general readers at the time of publication of her stories, as well as for readers who specifically sought out her books

¹⁸⁰ Translated articles continued to appear, but over time less translated literature was printed in *Crown*. Translated material tended more towards articles about 'western' culture and cultural figures; over time, 'popular' culture has come to feature as much as or perhaps more than 'high' culture. Examples from 1977 include articles on the love-story writer Barbara Cartland and the film character James Bond; an article about the Doonesbury cartoon series appeared in May 1978. Popular foreign films were also advertised and discussed in *Crown* (*The Deep*, February 1978; *Saturday Night Fever*, July 1978; *Star Wars*, Feb 1978; *The Omen*, August 1979). Fiction translated in *Crown* in the 1970s included the works of Mary Stewart, Gerald Durrell, Georges Simenon and Somerset Maugham. A translated series on 'famous men' in 1978 included George Bernard Shaw, John Steinbeck, Picasso, Stravinsky, Tennessee Williams, John F. Kennedy and Prince Charles.

¹⁸¹ I thank Tomoko Akami for pointing out the influence of Japanese magazines on this aspect of the *Crown* style.

¹⁸² The number of periodicals published in Taiwan increased from 331 in 1954 to 3748 in 1988, Chan and Clark p. 170.

¹⁸³ At time when San Mao's work was first published, Taiwan was under KMT domination, under the official line that Taiwan would 'reclaim' the mainland. 'Taiwan' consciousness was suppressed, and was thus a less significant feature of public discourse than it is at present. The fact that arguments about 'Taiwanese-ness' do not play a major part in this discussion is not a failure to understand their importance but an omission based upon the fact that they play no part in San Mao's writing (except, perhaps, implicitly in *My Treasures*, discussed in Appendix 3). It might be noted that Ping Xintao, founder of *Crown*, was of mainland origin, as was Qiong Yao.

to buy. Her stories fit neatly into *Crown's* template of valuing leisure, travel, self-fulfilment, literature and community; the San Mao 'lifestyle' - despite the personal sadness experienced by Chen Ping/San Mao through the loss of partners, illness and loneliness - appeared to exemplify the ethos of individual self-realization and constitute the ideal of a 'beautiful life'.¹⁸⁴ Thus San Mao's stories of herself (an international self travelling on several continents; a social self involved in her community; a caring self who is kind to others; a female self who combines independence with a stable relationship; a playful self who can take and enjoy whatever the world has to offer) were contemporaneous with the increasing prosperity and the proliferation of options for readers in Taiwan.

When her works began to appear on the mainland in the early 1980s (a decade or so later than in Taiwan), China was recovering from years of relative isolation from international influences. After decades of serious literature with an emphasis on explicit political morals, readers were receptive to the 'softness' of stories such as San Mao's.¹⁸⁵ It was my impression at that time that many readers considered San Mao's work to have been factual, accurate descriptions of life in foreign countries; further, they demonstrated a way of being, and a way of being *Chinese*, that was at that time unfamiliar and - to many readers - deeply appealing. As well as providing 'information' about foreign countries, San Mao's stories introduced a young Chinese female persona who overcame difficulties, cared for others, and claimed to be full of sincerity and a concern for the world that extended also to each individual reader.

'San Mao' was a literary construct and a pen-name, not a person; and what she was known for was, supposedly, not so much skill in fictional writing as an

¹⁸⁴ San Mao exemplified the 'beautiful life' that was talked of longingly in the 1980s and early 1990s: a life in which a taste for 'the beautiful' should prevail in everything (indeed a 'lifework' of taste), including clothing, home decor, other forms of consumption, foreign travel and other leisure activities - or, in the words of Joseph Tobin, a life in which 'the central notion is to create an identity of one's own through enlightened consumption', Tobin pp. 18, 24.

¹⁸⁵ I thank Li Kaiyu for his enlightening comment that for mainland readers in the early 1980s, accustomed to 'hard' ideological literature, the 'soft' stories of San Mao and Qiong Yao made them seem like 'fairies'. Chen Xiaomei has suggested that at that time 'Chinese intellectuals were seeking an "authenticity" in Chinese writing', a 'historical, social and collective conscious of the Chinese people', under the influence of Jung, whose works became popular in China at that time (Chen p. 92). Placed in the context of Chen's discussion of the so-called 'misty (*menglong*) poets' of the 1980s, phenomenon of 'roots-seeking (*xungen*) literature' and new modernist writers, the popularity of San Mao with its focus on an 'authentic', sincere Chinese self may not be entirely disconnected from the 'allegorical self-expression' of the 'misty poets' or the 'social concerns and...quotidian...prose styles' of writers such as Liu Suola and Xu Xing (Chen p. 85, 93). While San Mao's prose style has often been criticised as being excessively influenced by European languages (or simply as childish), the content of her stories, in which a Chinese woman shows herself fulfilling her dreams of exotic travel, long-term residence abroad and 'international marriage', served not only as wish-fulfilment fantasy but also an affirmation of 'Chineseness' and its value on the world stage.

actual revelation of herself - her adventures, her personality, her world. Her lifeworks - with all of the attendant trappings of the self - became a sought-after commodity (through the consumption of her writings, tapes and songs; through attendance at her lectures; by tracking her through the many interviews and articles in various mass media that chronicled her life, her writing, her house, her philosophy and, ultimately, her death) and, furthermore, became the basis for authority in many areas of life.¹⁸⁶ As Stuart Ewen has noted, '[t]he phenomenon of celebrity reflects popular longings. In celebrities, people find not only a piece of themselves, but also a piece of what they strive for'.¹⁸⁷ In San Mao, readers could find a fantasy self: a woman who - apparently - travelled the world, loved and was loved, knew how to fit easily into whatever context she chose, achieved fame, brought happiness to many, and felt deeply and sincerely about everyone and everything.

Ewen suggests also that the true celebrity is

both a product of the modern machinery and one who, simultaneously, transcend[s] it...This transcendent, and critical, quality is an aspect of many celebrities...[and] is unquestionably part of their bond with their audiences'.¹⁸⁸

San Mao exemplifies this aspect of celebrity perfectly. She was a product of the mass media - newspapers, magazines, a magazine publishing house - and yet presented as an individual largely untouched by commerce, a spontaneous free spirit motivated by feeling (playfulness, concern for others, a spirit of adventure, a great love for José). Furthermore, as Ewen points out, 'the consumption habits of the celebrity generally

¹⁸⁶ San Mao's 'authority' is clearly illustrated in her participation in magazine 'agony columns'. *Dear San Mao* and *Heart-to-Heart* illustrate the areas in which readers were publicly presented as having written to San Mao for advice. Major areas of San Mao's 'authority' include emotional relationships and aesthetic questions (including home decor). As many scholars have noted, amid the uncertainties of a fast-changing world (such as changes in family relations, greater independence for young people, new educational and career opportunities appearing and so on), the need arises for examples or advice from some kind of cultural intermediary on appropriate ways of being; San Mao was presented as able to fulfil this function.

¹⁸⁷ Ewen p. 96. Ewen notes the increasing importance of the ability to purchase and construct a lifestyle to 'middle class' status. Ewen pp. 64, 70. From the early twentieth century onward, 'the marketplace of consumer goods...provided instruments for the construction of a self...to be seen, to be judged, to simultaneously scale and maintain the wall of anonymity. In the worlds of work and love, status and aspiration, the assembly of 'self' was becoming compulsory for ventures into the society at large.....Style provided an extension of personality on a physical plane, leaving its mark on the sundry accessories of life: personal apparel, the home, even the foods one ate....A central appeal of style was its ability to create an illusory transcendence of class or background', pp. 76-77. Ewen also points out the appeal of the fact that celebrities, 'though they shine above us, are also - many of them - very much like us. Identification is easy. The whole story of their success is that they came from 'the mass', p. 94. San Mao too came from 'the mass' and was perceived to continue to give her attention to 'the masses' rather than the powerful; her experiences, though set in 'exotic' places, were on the whole small-scale stories with which readers could easily identify.

¹⁸⁸ Ewen p. 96.

become part of the picture';¹⁸⁹ and so with San Mao, as argued in Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping'.¹⁹⁰ The attention paid to San Mao's various homes is a further manifestation of this tendency.¹⁹¹

In Taiwan, San Mao's celebrity evolved along with cultural and economic changes in Taiwan's media and society in general. In the People's Republic of China, San Mao appeared suddenly as one of the first celebrities brought to the public by private media rather than as a role model promoted by the state.¹⁹² In both places, her books brought her fame and her persona won many admirers. Yet, as Stuart Ewen reminds us,

The commodity status of celebrity remains. To be known is to be sold. It is this objectification of the person that, most probably, explains much of the turmoil and grief, the identity crisis that often accompanies stardom. Perhaps celebrities, too, become uncomfortable in their own skins as they, in the eyes of others, become frozen images; as their faces and bodies and mannerisms become icons; always the personage, never the person. It is difficult to be a disembodied image.¹⁹³

Towards the end of her life, Chen Ping was reportedly deeply uncomfortable about having to be 'San Mao' for the public. As noted above, she spoke of killing San Mao and coming back anonymously as Chen Ping; indeed San Mao's friend the architect Deng Kunyan designed a fantasy funeral for the character 'San Mao' in which a body in a glass coffin would be accompanied by an enormous procession through Taipei - and then in a burst of thunder and lightning the coffin would split open and the body

¹⁸⁹ 'The critical content gets boiled down for its most valuable element: style, to merchandise, to consume. Along the way, the consumption habits of the celebrity generally become part of the picture, completing the circle, providing models...[their] style is transformed into a 'look', Ewen p. 96.

¹⁹⁰ Ewen notes the function of magazines in the creation of Hollywood celebrities, noting that they dovetail with the star's presentation in movies to provide 'a seamless tableau of fashions, hairstyles, favorite foods, personal habits, reading interests, decorating ideas, and recreation interests', Ewen p. 97. Interviews with and articles about San Mao likewise dovetail with her presentation in her stories to provide a continuous image of her as a 'personality'.

¹⁹¹ Biographers' attention to San Mao's home decor has already been noted. Joseph Tobin's edited volume on the 'domestication' of 'western' modernity in Japan contains discussion of home decoration that may also have relevance in the case of Taiwan. The wish for an 'independent life-style' is noted, along with the turning to cultural mediators (in this case, home decor magazines) for advice. As in Ewen's comments on 'celebrity', there is a fundamental tension noted between the notion of 'individuality' (associated with expressing personal tastes) and the following of packaged taste examples. See Nancy Rosenberger in Tobin (ed.), pp. 106-125.

¹⁹² Like the singer Teresa Teng, San Mao appeared as an ostensibly independent figure of glamour, talent and 'femininity' - with the added appeal of being from Taiwan, whose cultural products had been unavailable to mainlanders for decades - and appealed to an audience for whom these attributes had, for the past decade or more, been in short supply. I thank Lewis Mayo for his comments on this aspect of San Mao's celebrity.

¹⁹³ Ewen p. 101.

would be gone; and no one would notice the anonymous woman inconspicuously becoming just another one of the crowd.¹⁹⁴

The chapters that follow will discuss some of the narratives of San Mao from which this celebrity arose. Africa and Europe are discussed as sites for the manifestation of the San Mao persona, whether in play, responsibility or emotion. Attention will be drawn to some commonalities between the stories of San Mao and the writings of women travellers from Europe, Australia and America in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁹⁵ The world of San Mao is, of course, somewhat different from the world of these women, and her connections with world economic and political systems was even less clearly defined than theirs.¹⁹⁶ Though they may have been 'generally considered not to be actively involved in the project of colonial expansion',¹⁹⁷ their ethnicity and nationality bound them to a world order in which many of their rights were assumed.¹⁹⁸ For a Chinese traveller and resident in Africa and Europe, however, the situation is more ambiguous. She was a beneficiary of

¹⁹⁴ *Liberty News* (Zili wanbao), 8 January 1991, p. 19.

¹⁹⁵ Most of the accounts of travel and life in foreign countries on which theories of travel and its links with colonialism have been based are accounts of travels by European travellers to countries under the economic or political control of Europe. Indeed, while there is abundant theoretical literature relating to the experiences of European travellers in other parts of the world, there is very little discussion of non-European writing about Europe. Numerous Chinese travellers have written accounts of Europe since the writing of Mao Dun (?) in the early 20th century, and there are doubtless many other individual accounts by Asian, African, South American, Australasian and Pacific writers about European travel and life; even so, theoretical literature of travel remains very much focused on the experiences of the European subject moving outward (into so-called 'new' worlds that are new only to them). Like so many other fields, the field of travel literature seems underpinned by the pervasive notion of Euro-American traveller as universal subject, travelling to places supposedly less developed or civilised than their home countries, describing and representing from a position of international cultural authority as well as, usually, economic sufficiency. Equivalent cultural authority is denied by Europe to non-European observations of Europe, which tend to remain within the domain of individual story rather than buttressing a general narrative of European Us and Inferior Them. A study of a modern European or American traveller (Isabelle Eberhardt, say, or Paul Theroux) would fit straight into a long-established framework of knowledge and preconception, while a study of San Mao does not. Moreover, in discussion of a European or American writer, the Europeanness or Americanness of the subject has not generally been considered his or her most salient or significant feature. There is an assumption of 'naturalness' that they would travel, observe and record. In discussing my research on San Mao, however, I am often questioned about why she should have wanted to do these things. To suggest that China and the Chinese world is somehow relevant only to itself is untenable. Some readers may feel that there is insufficient Chinese historical context in this present analysis (for example, that more attention should be given to Ming travellers, or Chinese travellers of the early 20th century). These subjects are, of course, deserving of attention, but they are not my concern here. Rather, I wish to place San Mao within the larger international phenomena of modernity, travel, self-expression and the quest for innocence. I have deliberately avoided taking any kind of contrastive approach between 'East' and 'West', but have tried to demonstrate commonalities between San Mao's narratives and European writing of foreign countries.

¹⁹⁶ Mills p. 1.

¹⁹⁷ Mills p. 1.

¹⁹⁸ Writers such as Mills have rightly demonstrated that travel writing was itself 'an instrument within colonial expansion' which helped to reinforce colonial rule, Mills p. 2.

(and, it could be argued, participant in) the Spanish colonial project through her links with Spain and Spanish citizenship; yet, as a Chinese woman in Africa and in Europe her position could be represented as that of an innocent, unprivileged outsider. Outside a European world order, she could present herself as a compassionate sharer of African suffering, facing discrimination in Europe, bullied by 'the West' - yet transcending racism and proving China more than a match for a European colonial power. She is not an agent for any larger colonising mission on the part of a Chinese state, but (as will be demonstrated) she appears to enact some kind of civilising mission, demonstrating a self-conscious wish to embody positive 'Chinese values' and 'improve' the people she has placed herself among.¹⁹⁹

As Mary Louise Pratt has noted in her analysis of literature of travel and exploration, such writing 'has *produced* "the rest of the world" for European readerships';²⁰⁰ it also 'produced Europe's differentiated conceptions of itself in relation to something it became possible to call "the rest of the world"'.²⁰¹ The following chapters discuss the world that San Mao 'produced' for readers, and the conceptions of 'China' that differentiate San Mao and her readers from the rest of that world. Most of these conceptions are implicit rather than explicit; only becoming visible after careful reading and comparison of San Mao's stories. My aim here is not generalisation but a specific reading of individual stories, in order to show how the ideologies of her work emerge with the unfolding of the narrative. I have recounted whole stories rather than plucking out short samples, in the hope that by articulating some of the narrative threads that run through her work and link one story with another, some of the underlying ideas may be illuminated. As these ideas achieve their effect through the narrative system in which they are presented, they have been recounted as they appear in context rather than extracted for brief summary.

Chapters 2 and 3 will examine San Mao's stories of Africa; chapters 4 and 5 will deal with stories of Europe. The final chapter will review some aspects of San Mao's African and European stories, discuss her trips to China, and consider her assumption of a personal place in the world.

¹⁹⁹ Here San Mao's self-confident values and behaviour in 'the world' is reminiscent of Rojek's description of the 19th century bourgeois traveller, who 'confronted peripheral cultures with the self-consciousness that he had more to teach than to learn. The self-realization of bourgeois culture demanded that peripheral cultures and peripheral peoples should be...subjected to the bourgeois programme of self-improvement', Rojek p. 122.

²⁰⁰ Pratt p. 5.

²⁰¹ Pratt p. 5. As Pratt points out, travel writing is intimately connected with 'forms of knowledge and expression that interact or intersect with it, outside and inside Europe.' Pratt p. 5.

Chapter 2: In the Desert¹

The pen-name 'San Mao' and with it the persona of the Chinese woman of the desert was introduced to the world on 6th October 1974 with the publication of the story 'The Chinese Restaurant'.² Popular acclaim was instant, and 11 more Saharan stories soon followed.³

In May 1976, the 12 stories were collected into the volume *Stories of the Sahara* and published by Crown Publishing House. Even though the stories had been published already, the book was an immediate best-seller; the stories continued to be widely read and discussed, and interviews with San Mao proliferated in Taiwan magazines and newspapers. The author herself was mobbed by fans when she returned briefly to Taiwan in 1976.⁴ San Mao's first book remains her most widely read; indeed, in conversations with readers about San Mao, it is still the book that people almost invariably mention in association with her name. It established her as a best-selling author and created an image in popular imagination of San Mao as a romantic and playful free spirit roaming in exotic climes with her Spanish husband, having adventures and collecting stories to send home to those whose lives were confined to school or humdrum work in Taiwan.

¹ 'Sahara' here being that part of the Sahara desert that was a colony of Spain from 1884 to 1976 (when Spain withdrew and the territory was divided between Morocco and Mauritania). Known also as the Western Sahara, this region of 102,703 square miles located in northwest Africa 'is bordered on the north by Morocco, on the west by the Atlantic Ocean, on the south and east by Mauritania, and in the northeast for 26 miles by Algeria', Damis pp. 1, 9. The local residents, the Sahrawi, comprise several tribes of nomadic herders; their language is Hassaniyya Arabic. Estimates of the population 'have varied dramatically according to the political interests of those counting' (31,500 was counted by Spanish estimate in 1954; 150,000 by Moroccan estimate in 1966; and 750,000 by the Polisario Front, 'the national liberation movement...fighting for an independent Saharan state'; the figure of 73,497 counted in a 1974 census (administered by Spain) is questioned by the Polisario Front on the grounds that it supposedly missed many nomads or counted 'only the one male member of a family who had an identity card and normally had contact with the Spanish administration', Damis, p. 8.

² The story was published on the literature page of the major Taiwan newspaper *United Daily News*. After San Mao's death, there was a rival claim that 'San Mao had published an article in *Industrial World* May 1974).

³ 'Sent from the Sahara desert' was printed next to each story as it appeared on the *United Daily News* literature page, accompanied by a small graphic of a postmarked stamp on an airmail envelope. This letter graphic presumably served to create a sense of up-to-date immediacy and to create or strengthen an impression for the reader that the stories really had come all the way from the remoteness of Northwest Africa. This identification of San Mao's short stories with letter-writing was to become a significant element in her appeal.

⁴ San Mao returned home for medical treatment, on the proceeds of *Stories of the Sahara*. An interview in *The Woman (Funü zazhi)* gives an indication of the interest in her at that time ('The woman readers are mad about', *Funü zazhi* July 1976.

This chapter will discuss some of the 'stories of the Sahara' that so captured the imagination of San Mao's readers,⁵ beginning with the first story published under San Mao's name:⁶ 'The Chinese restaurant' (later retitled 'The restaurant in the desert').

The restaurant in the desert

Perhaps surprisingly for a story that was to be the first in a series whose appeal came in part from their exotic settings in the Sahara desert, there is nothing identifiably 'Saharan' about 'The restaurant in the desert'. It is a story about San Mao cooking Chinese food for José, her Spanish husband, and could be set anywhere at all where the basic ingredients needed for Chinese cooking are not readily available.⁷ In choosing 'feminine' domestic details of food preparation and home making as the subject of her story, San Mao shows strong similarities to the many European women who have written about their lives in Africa since the mid-19th century. Catherine Barnes Stevenson has pointed out a tendency among these women writers to include stories of 'ingenious housekeeping adapted to the difficulties of a hostile land' and to dwell on 'the domestic trials and triumphs of the housewife in Africa', with Africa being 'sometimes merely an exotic backdrop to their domestic dramas'.⁸ This could equally be said of 'The restaurant in the desert'.

While San Mao is living in the Sahara with José, her Spanish husband, her mother sends her a parcel containing various Chinese foodstuffs.⁹ 'A friend in Europe' sends vinegar and soy sauce, and then, San Mao tells us, 'the "Chinese restaurant" in my home opened for business right away'. 'Unfortunately', she adds, 'there was only one customer, and he didn't pay - but later on, long queues of friends arrived wanting to eat there'.

Emboldened by the fact that José has never been to Taiwan and is thus in no position to judge the quality or authenticity of her 'Chinese food', San Mao

⁵ Most stories discussed in this chapter are from the book of the same title. San Mao's Saharan stories can be found in the collections *Stories of the Sahara* (Sahala de gushi), Huangguan Chubanshe, Taipei, 1976; *Crying Camels* (Kuqi de luotuo), Huangguan chubanshe, Taipei, 1977), *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* (Yuji bu zai lai), Huangguan chubanshe, Taipei, 1976; and *The Tender Night* (Wenrou de ye), Huangguan chubanshe, Taipei, 1979.

⁶ A few stories had already been published a decade or so earlier under her own name, Chen Ping (see Appendix 1).

⁷ San Mao's biographers Cui and Zhao suggest that the story 'approximates the playful and humorous dialogue between the couple, and the impromptu jesting found in classical Chinese drama'. Cui and Zhao p149.

⁸ Stevenson pp. 23-24. Mary Louise Pratt has also pointed out the employment of 'feminized ...metaphors of bedroom and kitchen' in the work of Mary Kingsley and other women travellers to Africa (Pratt p. 214).

⁹ The foodstuffs included various types of Chinese noodles, Chinese vegetables, dried mushrooms and dried pork.

gives him fanciful explanations of the unfamiliar foods as he takes second helpings. Bean-starch noodles, she tells him, are made from 'the first rain of springtime';¹⁰ next time she serves them she tells him they are made of fishing line.¹¹ Sceptical about her explanations of her dishes, he enters into the spirit of the game by refusing to eat the sushi she has made, claiming to believe that they are made of carbon paper; showing him that her mouth has not been stained blue, San Mao claims in return that she used 'the reverse side of the carbon paper'.¹²

The circle of 'customers' begins to widen when José shares some dried pork with his colleagues.¹³ When the supply of Chinese foodstuffs is almost exhausted, however, San Mao reverts to cooking 'western' food (represented here by steak). José is at first delighted to see his favourite food on the table again, but after three days of it he is pining to eat 'rain' again.

There are two obvious and complementary readings for the story up to this point. First, one could say that it demonstrates how 'the west' is won over by the superiority of 'the east', as José the Spanish husband is won over in spite of himself by the superiority of Chinese food over his familiar steaks. Second, it could be argued that here the superiority of China is created and affirmed by 'the west'; the reader can believe that the food of China really is superior if a Spanish man accustomed to that exemplar of western plenty (and hedonism), a meat-rich diet, can abandon the preferences of a lifetime once he has been introduced to Chinese food and discovered that the latter is better. In the person of José and in the arena of food, Europe resoundingly acknowledges the superiority of the East.

But the story does not end here. One day José announces that his boss is complaining that 'everyone in the company has been invited to our home for a meal except him and his wife. He's waiting for you to invite him for a Chinese meal!'¹⁴ The following day José relays to San Mao his boss's request that she

¹⁰ 'It falls on the mountain-tops and freezes in strips; mountain folk [that is Taiwan's Aboriginal people] bundle it together and carry it down the mountain and sell bunches of it to get money to buy rice wine', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 21.

¹¹ 'It's the nylon line you use when you go fishing - Chinese people process it until it is white and soft', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 21.

¹² *Stories of the Sahara* p. 23. Once he has tasted the sushi, however, he is readily able to identify the wrapping as seaweed.

¹³ In an attempt to stop José eating it all, San Mao tells him that the contents of a bottle of marinated dried pork is actually Chinese medicine ('Throat pills, to help people who have a cough'). This is to no avail, however; having discovered the 'medicine' to be tasty, José takes half of it away to share with his workmates, who from then on constantly feign coughs in hopes of another taste of the 'medicine'. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 22.

¹⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 24.

cook him 'dried mushrooms stir-fried with bamboo shoots'.¹⁵ Though there is no bamboo to be found in the desert, San Mao replies, 'OK, invite them tomorrow night. No problem - we'll grow some bamboo'.¹⁶

The following evening, San Mao

put candles on the table, and a white cloth with a red one diagonally across it. It was quite beautiful. The meal delighted everyone; not only was the food attractive and delicious but I also dressed up nicely and put on a long skirt. After dinner, when the boss and his wife got into the car to go home, they said specially to me, 'If we need someone in the PR office one day, I hope you will come and work for us and be part of the company'.

My eyes brightened. This was all to the credit of the 'dried mushrooms with bamboo shoots'.¹⁷

Delighted at the positive impression his wife has made on the boss, José exclaims,

'The dried mushrooms with bamboo shoots was really good! Where did you get the bamboo shoots from?'

'What shoots?'

'The bamboo shoots you made tonight'.

I laughed. 'Oh, you mean the dried mushrooms with cucumber?'

'What? ...It's OK for you to trick me, but you dare to deceive the boss?'

'I didn't deceive him. That was the best dried mushrooms and bamboo shoots he ever had - he said so himself'.¹⁸

The story ends on this note of triumph for San Mao, with José likening her to 'that monkey that can do 72 transformations'. Thus with mysterious Oriental tricks to rival those of the legendary Sun Wukong,¹⁹ San Mao has won over José's boss and received a job offer into the bargain; indeed she has successfully demonstrated the excellence of her Chinese cooking skills, her resourcefulness and artistic hospitality not only in the domestic circle but also to José's superior in the Spanish phosphate company where he works. In addition to the 'international marriage' relationship that is a major focus of the story, this episode both foregrounds the playfulness of San Mao's own nature²⁰ and hints at the European reinforcement and approbation that clearly underlie her authority as a 'citizen of the world' and representative of China in various international

¹⁵ 'Well!' remarks San Mao ironically, 'a boss who has seen the world! You shouldn't underestimate foreigners', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 24. Elsewhere San Mao ironically connects European consumption of Chinese food with 'civilisation', noting that the many Chinese restaurants in the Canary Islands cater to tourists from northern Europe, as 'native Canary people are not yet civilised to the extent that they start to try Chinese food', *Crying Camels* p. 189.

¹⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 24.

¹⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 24

¹⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 25.

¹⁹ The monkey hero of the classic Chinese novel *The Journey to the West*.

²⁰ The previous chapter noted the tendency towards ironic self-presentations common to women travel writers (as noted, for example, by Mary Louise Pratt, that 'women protagonists tend to produce ironic reversals when they turn up in the contact zone', Pratt p. 102.

settings. Although it is set firmly within a purely domestic, feminised sphere of cooking and home-making, the story affirms San Mao's international competence and charm with the seal of European approval (achieved through humorous deception by playing on the boss's ignorance). It also sets the scene for the personality of the heroine and her relationship with José (far more, indeed, than it prefigures dramas of adventure in the desert). The second story in the series ('Record of a marriage') likewise gives readers few glimpses of Saharan exotica, focusing on the bureaucratic difficulties San Mao and José encounter as, she claims, the first non native-Saharan couple to struggle with the formalities of getting married in the desert.²¹

A larger narrative emerges when the stories are viewed together, collected into the *Stories of the Sahara* volume and elsewhere. The author takes the reader outwards from the entirely domestic setting of 'The restaurant in the desert' and presents various adventures in the desert and interactions with its people. The overall effect is not only a record of her own playful persona (which confounds not only José but colonial officials too) and of her interactions with and observations of the Sahara and Sahrawi, but of her shifting identifications of herself with 'China' (Taiwan), Spain and the Sahara. For the most part the focus of *Stories of the Sahara* is on relatively mundane, everyday topics - bathing, lending household items to neighbours, fishing, taking a driving test, home decoration and so on.²² After a tour of some of San Mao's interactions outside the home, the collection closes, as it began, with a homely account of nest-building in the desert and the bestowal of European approval on San Mao's abilities. A discussion of this story will conclude the present chapter.

San Mao's sojourn in the Sahara lasted, at most, about two and a half years, from April 1973 until October 1975.²³ During her time there, in selecting subject material for her Saharan stories, there were obviously choices to be

²¹ According to the officials in the local Spanish colonial law-court, no other non-Sahrawi couple has married in the desert. After a series of bureaucratic difficulties, the court officials are full of festive excitement when San Mao and José finally marry, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 33, 40-41. The marriage took place in July 1973. San Mao's marriage story captures the imaginations of her biographers, who reiterate the story of José's present to her of a camel skull, the casual clothes they wore for the occasion and their general casualness and absence of planning and attention to ceremony (see for example Cui and Zhao p. 123).

²² Larger scale, more dramatic issues such as murder and revenge, and Saharan independence struggles are treated in a later collection, *Crying Camels*; these are discussed in Appendix 2, San Mao Makes History.

²³ Though San Mao rarely specifies dates, hints in her books would suggest that her desert sojourn lasted from mid-late 1973 till late 1975. Biographers tend to give more specific dating, though their dates are not consistent. 30 or 31 October 1975 is given by most biographers as the date of her departure, but the date of her arrival is less precisely stated. The skeptic Ma Zhongnan suggests that San Mao's desert stay lasted less than a year.

made. It has been noted in connection with the writings of two European women about Africa earlier this century (Isak Dinesen and Olive Schreiner), that 'women colonials writing in and of the African landscape...had to make certain choices...about how to render that landscape...about whether and how to situate themselves in it; they 'faced constant decisions about how much to allow themselves to figure or merge with the landscape, how much to remain isolated, and how much to create protective boundaries around themselves...Implicated as they were by...ethnic or national origin, and by association with the colonial order changing the landscape of Africa...They made choices about whether to present the landscape as seen by privileged colonizers/tourists in a world not their own, "taking the view" as tourists habitually do, and "buying" momentary ownership of a place not their own', or, alternatively, to present a different view, that 'seen by residents taking "legitimate" possession of the landscape in which they lived and worked'.²⁴ These same choices were available to San Mao, and in her African stories she too presents herself both as a touristic outsider in the desert and as a resident whose 'real life' there is lived through interactions with the desert and its people. As a Chinese woman in the Sahara, she can portray herself as innocently at play (indeed deceiving the powerful) with no connections to wider political considerations; but through her marriage to José she becomes identified with the Spanish colonial enterprise and thus not only gives herself a more 'legitimate' purpose for being there but can also benefit from her affiliations with colonial power. In her stories she not only gazes wide-eyed at the sights and experiences the Sahara has to offer but also does her best to involve herself in its life and create some sense of belonging there. This chapter will focus on San Mao as she 'takes the view'; the following chapter will discuss her 'taking possession' and seeking to belong to the desert.

The romance of the desert

But what was San Mao doing in the Sahara in the first place? What prompted her to make the journey from Europe to a place which, as Susan Horton has observed in connection with Isak Dinesen's journey to Africa in 1914, 'Europeans of her time thought of as the past'?²⁵ It is not until the final story in the *Stories of the Sahara* volume ('Setting up home empty-handed') that San Mao purports to explain the motivation that prompted her Saharan journey.

²⁴ Horton p. 189.

²⁵ Horton p. 244. Just as Europeans of Dinesen's time might have thought of Africa as 'the past', Africa could be consigned to 'the past' in San Mao's generation in a Taiwan that was rapidly modernising, urbanising, industrialising and becoming increasingly prosperous.

For half my life I have been travelling to many countries. I have lived in advanced civilized societies; I have seen enough to be left with no illusions about them, and I have had my fill of them. It's not that I have been untouched by them; my lifestyle has been very much influenced by them. But I have never left my heart in a city where I have lived...

I don't know how many years ago...I was flicking casually through a *National Geographic*, which happened to be about the Sahara Desert. I only read it once; I couldn't explain it - a nostalgia like the memory of an earlier age; inexplicably, I gave myself over to that great unknown land without holding anything back.²⁶

'Advanced' societies have ceased to satisfy San Mao; she is in search now of something different.²⁷ Like so many European travellers and writers before her, San Mao sees in the 'unknownness' of this part of Africa an 'Orient', 'a place of promise'; it is a space 'both factual and yet imaginary' which, although it 'could be located precisely, geographically, on a map', is also 'imbued with additional symbolic meaning'.²⁸ In his discussion of European travellers' preconceptions about Tibet, Peter Bishop suggests that many travelled there with certain fantasies already present in their minds, with which 'the actual encounter with the empirical place' would interact 'to confirm or contest'.²⁹ Similarly, San Mao's narrative notes how her imagination was prepared before her arrival there, both from the *National Geographic's* presentation of the Sahara and from fantasies of her own. Like Tibet for Bishop's travellers, the Sahara exercises

²⁶*Stories of the Sahara* pp. 211-212. This 'nostalgia' for the Sahara is amplified by San Mao's biographers, such as Cui and Zhao pp. 157, 292, 239. Twenty years later the journalist Zhang Yun too feels 'nostalgia' on his first sight of the Western Sahara from his plane; connecting the desert landscape in his mind with the evocations of bleak landscapes found in Tang dynasty border poetry, he exclaims that it is no wonder San Mao should have felt nostalgia for the memory of an earlier age on seeing the *National Geographic* article about the Sahara. Zhang, *Following in San Mao's Footsteps* p. 17. The 'nostalgia' motif also prefigures a theme that appears in San Mao's later work, namely the suggestion of previous existences; in later writings San Mao expressed a belief that she had been an American Indian woman in a previous life (see San Mao, *Over the Hills and Far Away*).

²⁷ Citing Dean MacCannell's work on tourism, Caren Kaplan notes 'the propensity of occidental "moderns" to look "elsewhere" for markers of reality and authenticity as a primary facet of Europe-American modernity. The quest for better models, new forms, fresh images, and relief from the ills of metropolitan centers compels the modernist to move further and further into what are perceived to be the margins of the world', Kaplan pp. 34-35. 'Reality and authenticity', suggests MacCannell, are thought to reside 'in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles. In other words, the concern of moderns for "naturalness", their nostalgia and their search for authenticity are not merely casual and somewhat decadent, though harmless, attachments to the souvenirs of destroyed cultures and dead epochs. They are also components of the conquering spirit of modernity - the grounds of its unifying consciousness'. Such attitudes are characterised, Kaplan suggests, by 'a complicated tension between space and time. When the past is displaced, often to another location, the modern subject must travel to it, as it were', Kaplan p. 34-35.

²⁸ Bishop p. 13. Bishop notes that 'the orient' was presented by 'many 19th century travel writers as 'a certain type of experience - a place of pilgrimage, a spectacle, a ...world of exotic customs, of disturbing yet alluring sensuality, and combined with horrific bestiality and perverse morality' (Bishop p. 7), and such a description has resonances in the writings of San Mao. Likewise Edward Said notes that 'In the Orient one suddenly confronted unimaginable antiquity, inhuman beauty, boundless distance', Said, *Culture and imperialism* p. 134, quoted in Bishop p. 7. Such terms are common in San Mao's stories of the Sahara.

²⁹ Bishop p. 22

something of the fascination of a 'sacred space' for San Mao;³⁰ it is 'endowed with the qualities of a dream', 'an eternal sanctuary outside (or even indifferent to) space and time'³¹ where the 'solitude and silence of boundless luminous spaces' are 'far from the confusions and turmoil of modern life'.³²

The Sahara, with whatever qualities the *National Geographic* article has transmitted into San Mao's imagination, is seen here in comparison with 'many countries' that are 'advanced' and 'civilized' and which San Mao knows well, yet have failed to satisfy her longings. Readers familiar with San Mao's career (as most soon were) would know that Spain, Germany and the USA are being referred to here. The decisive factor in San Mao's longing for the Sahara, however, is to do with the world order; for while she is living in Spain it occurs to her that '280,000 square kilometres of land there was Spanish territory'.³³ Residency in Spain and knowledge of the Spanish language have equipped her to partake of the opportunities that Spanish colonialism offers:³⁴ to live and identify herself with the colonisers in a distant and poor region of the world

³⁰ Bishop defines the 'sacred space' in terms of 'its separation from the profane world, by the limited access accorded to it, by a sense of dread or fascination, by intimations of order and power combined with ambiguity and paradox'. Bishop notes further that sacred places tend to be located at 'the periphery of the social world', and are imagined to have some kind of 'essential continuity with the past, with the Ancients'; they are 'sites of paradoxical power - of destruction and also of renewal' which 'can induce a sense of both serenity and terror'. They are 'terrible, yet fascinating'. Bishop p. 10. San Mao's configuration of the Sahara Desert would seem to partake of this 'sacred space' fantasy. The landscape of the Sahara is for San Mao 'a living symbol...a premeditated and constructed sign...a naïve dream world, myth concretised into fact' (Bishop p. 223); Her 'nostalgic' longing for the Sahara is presented almost as a spiritual quest, reminiscent of the 'secularised pilgrimage' discussed by Bishop (p. 5).

³¹ The notion of 'boundless space', 'boundless light', an 'empty region' and 'solitude' were built into the European imaginings of Tibet discussed by Bishop, p. 160. Likewise 'timelessness' is an important feature of the sacred space of the imagination. Here the Sahara, like Tibet, holds the apparent promise of 'a different order of space and time outside the strictures of European modernism' (Bishop p. 145); San Mao's experiences there can be envisioned, as travellers to Tibet envisioned theirs, as being somehow 'outside space and time'; the land itself could be imagined as 'ancient', 'unchanging' and 'unaffected by the outside world' (Bishop p. 149), as if it were somehow 'backwards in time', as if 'time seemed to have stopped', as if 'nothing ever seemed to have changed or moved'. (Bishop p. 154). The notion of 'primitive' is included in this sense of 'timelessness' for Bishop's travellers to Tibet ('prehistorical'; 'primitive'; 'the most elementary, primeval forms of human life'; 'even the landscape seemed "primeval"; 'like a land before the arrival of humans', Bishop p. 156), and similar notions are present in San Mao's writings of the Sahara.

³² Bishop pp. 7, 164-165. Chris Rojek has also noted the modern 'western' idea of 'wild spaces' being somehow refuges from modernity: 'The mountains, the forests, the lakes, the moors, the deserts and the national parks seem to have resisted the juggernaut of modernity. Free from the wreckage of the metropolis these places seem to be oases of serenity', Rojek p. 198.

³³ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 212. Spain's historical interest in the territory was, according to Damis, as 'a strategic area for the support of the Canary Islands, where the Spanish were firmly entrenched, and as a commercial asset linked to the Canaries' fishing industry'. (Damis p. 9). In 1958 the Western Sahara became 'a Spanish African province' by a decree of the Spanish government that incorporated the territory into metropolitan Spain, Damis p. 11.

³⁴ As Sara Mills has pointed out in her discussion of women colonial travel writers, their texts stand in relationship to colonial systems; they did not just travel as individuals, but their travels around the world were part of colonialism as a whole, Mills p. 29.

which, like so many other unindustrialised places, has been heavily invested in 'western' minds with fantasies of an 'unspoiled', 'traditional' and exotic playground for those who can choose both to live there in more material comfort than the 'natives' and to leave and return to the 'civilisation' of their real homes whenever they wish to. In her descriptions of the Sahara, there is a strong element of the fantasy with which western travellers have imbued Tibet as a relic of history and of innocence.³⁵ The very isolation of the Sahara and its wilderness landscape are what appeals to San Mao; like Tibet, the Sahara represented a place of sanctuary where the wilderness was relatively untracked and unmapped and culture remained 'primitive', distinct and, supposedly, unaffected by the outside world. As Peter Bishop has pointed out, this 'appreciation of wilderness' and 'aesthetic relationship to such places' is a feature of industrial cultures.³⁶

San Mao states that her initial desire in visiting the desert was to be 'the first woman adventurer in the world to cross the Sahara'.³⁷ The challenge of such an adventure lies in the fact that 'the desert was not a civilised place' and her consequent expectation that it would be different from places she had visited - and that the usual rules of travel, as she has experienced it so far, will not apply.³⁸ For six months before going there, she claims to be 'tormented' by her longing for the desert and ridiculed for it by friends.³⁹ Finally, she makes her decision to set out.⁴⁰ José, her Spanish boyfriend, takes a job with the Spanish

³⁵ Bishop notes that in the first half of the twentieth century 'Tibet symbolized everything the West imagined it had itself lost...Tibet also seemed to symbolise a lost innocence', Bishop p. 204. The three 'imaginative contexts' for Tibet in the British imagination which Bishop puts forward (imperialism, changing attitudes towards wilderness landscapes and new ideas about personal experience, Bishop p. 11) may correspond with changes in imaginings of the world for San Mao - new, more confident, imaginations of Taiwan's place in the world as it grew wealthier, similar tendencies to romanticise wilderness, and the emergent sense of a free, individualistic self at play in the world that characterises San Mao's writing.

³⁶ Bishop speaks of 'a radically new aesthetic appreciation of wilderness regions' developing in late 19th century Europe (Bishop p. 117), which is connected with various aspects of romanticism, such as a new aesthetic based on appreciation of 'wild, empty and barren parts of the world' which caused 'wilderness' to be seen as something 'sublime' and turned the 'waste' of Tibetan landscape into something 'wonderful', Bishop p. 113. Bishop also notes 'the sense that many Westerners had of belonging to such distant places' at that time, Bishop p. vii. The Chinese hermetic tradition, it might be noted, also aestheticises wilderness and seclusion.

³⁷ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 177. Not only the first woman adventurer but also, of course, the first Chinese, although ethnicity is not explicitly invoked in her self-representation here.

³⁸ 'Experiences of travelling in many countries', she notes, 'would not be very useful to me there', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 177.

³⁹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 212.

⁴⁰ 'Actually I was the person who insisted on going to the Sahara desert', writes San Mao, 'not José. Later, after staying a long time, it was for José and not for me', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 211. This is disputed by Ma Zhongnan, in his book *The Truth About San Mao*. Claiming to have interviewed members of José's family and others who knew San Mao and José at that time, he asserts that José had actually done military service in the Western Sahara, and had signed a contract to return to work for the phosphate mining company before San Mao reappeared in

phosphate mining company in the Sahara⁴¹ and goes ahead of her⁴² to the little town of El Ayoun, the capital of the Western Sahara.⁴³ Then

I concluded all trifling matters without saying goodbye to anyone. Before I got on the plane, I left a letter and my share of the rent for the three Spanish girls I shared a house with. I shut the door...thus closing the door on my familiar lifestyle, and rushed off to the desert I did not yet know.⁴⁴

Arrival

Mary Louise Pratt, who has written so insightfully about European travel accounts of Africa and South America, notes the importance of the actual arrival in what she calls the 'contact zone':⁴⁵ 'arrival scenes', she says, 'are a convention of almost every variety of travel writing and serve as particularly potent sites for framing relations of contact and setting the terms of its representation'⁴⁶. The arrival of San Mao in the desert is related only in the final story in the *Stories of the Sahara* collection, after eleven other tales of her adventures there; the reader, therefore, does not 'arrive' along with San Mao but rather encounters the shock of arrival only after building up a picture of life in the desert from the scenes San Mao has already presented.

San Mao's arrival in the Sahara begins with her reunion with José, the Spanish man she would soon marry (and whom the reader already knows as her

Spain and renewed contact with him. According to Ma, San Mao pleaded with José to take her with him to the Sahara when he went, and that he had simply been too good-natured to refuse, Ma pp. 63-68.

⁴¹ The phosphate mine was 'the one big capital investment of the Spanish in the Sahara', Damis pp. 4, 12. Set up in 1962 by the Spanish National Institute of Industry, it was named Fosfatos de Bou Craa (Fosbucraa) in 1969. 'An estimated \$400-500 million from Spanish and international sources provided the necessary investment to acquire mining equipment and to construct treatment, storage, dock and port facilities' Damis pp. 4, 12-13. According to San Mao, the Fosbucraa site was two hours drive from El Ayoun, *Crying Camels* p. 68.

⁴² Biographers give February 1973 as the date of San Mao's arrival in the Western Sahara (eg Cui and Zhao p. 121). Zhang Yun gives this date as the time that José arrived there, with San Mao arriving in mid-April (Zhang p. 12), though by San Mao's account José was in the desert for three months before her arrival.

⁴³ El Ayoun (now La Ayoune) was the capital of the Western Sahara, with a population of about 25,000 in the early 1970s, Damis p. 70.

⁴⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 213. San Mao's biographers Cui and Zhao reproduce San Mao's version, noting that José had a very hard life in the desert but had been willing to put up with it for her sake. Their account states that, having arrived in the desert, José wrote to San Mao asking her to come over and marry him; and San Mao, though seeking adventure rather than marriage in the desert, had read his letter ten times, gone out for a walk, come home and written a farewell note for her sleeping flatmates saying she had gone away to get married, and left forthwith. Cui and Zhao pp. 121-122.

⁴⁵ 'Contact zones' being 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination - like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today' (Pratt p. 4); also described as the 'space of colonial encounters, where peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict', Pratt p. 6.

⁴⁶ Pratt pp. 78-80, quoted from Pratt.

husband). Before she has even left the airport terminal and seen her first glimpse of the desert, her initial impression of life there is one of extreme physical hardship, expressed in the physical changes wrought in José after only three months of living in the Sahara. His skin is chapped and sunburned, his lips are cracked and his hands are coarsened,⁴⁷ and San Mao realises from this how unprepared she is for the realities of desert life. 'Only then did I make the connection', she sighs, 'that the life I was about to face would be a serious test for me, and not the romantic life of my idealising childish imagination'.⁴⁸

As she emerges from the airport, 'the nostalgia of half a lifetime had come home to this piece of land in a day, with a myriad thoughts and feelings'.⁴⁹ Previously, as noted above, the desert had been a land for which she felt some kind of nameless nostalgic longing. Now, she explicitly names the fantasy of longing and expectation which she brings to her encounter with the Sahara: 'The Sahara desert had been my dream lover in the secret depths of my heart for so many years!' Curiously, it is José, San Mao's real-life lover, who gives voice to this fantasy of intimacy with the personified desert, greeting San Mao with the words, 'You are in the embrace of your desert now'. San Mao can only nod, her 'throat constricted' with emotion.⁵⁰

In this initial encounter, the personified desert-as-lover displays both beauty and a vague sense of threatening power or terror.

I raised my eyes and looked out. A strong lonely wind blew sighing over the endless yellow sand; the sky was high and the earth was deep and majestic, silent. It was dusk, and the setting sun dyed the desert blood-red, it was bleak and terrifying. [I]...had expected hot burning sun; the early winter weather turned the land into poetic desolation.⁵¹

Here are none of the numerous cast of pushy native porters, noisy throngs and lawless drivers that surge plentifully through so many stories of arrival in the 'Third World'. Only the sympathetic José seems to be present, and since not a single person is there to mar San Mao's narrative of arrival in the desert, she is free to indulge her fantasies of being swept off her feet by the Sahara-which-is-her-lover and to commune alone with the desert's vast expanse.

⁴⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 213. In his narrative of following in San Mao's footsteps 20 years later, the journalist Zhang Yun notes that after visiting the Fusbucraa dock and seeing the dormitory where José lived, surrounded by desert and continually engulfed by whirling sandstorms, he can understand José's weatherbeaten appearance after three months there (Zhang p. 131).

⁴⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 214.

⁴⁹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 214.

⁵⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 214. Interestingly, on later occasions when San Mao personifies the desert, it is a woman, its undulating dunes likened to the curves of a woman's body (eg *Crying Camels* p. 77). Zhang Yun, arriving 20 years later, claims that 'anyone who is interested in the Sahara will have more or less the same emotions as San Mao when they arrive in the Western Sahara, and I am no exception'. Zhang p. 22.

⁵¹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 214.

The first ordeal that the desert-lover demands of San Mao is the forty-minute walk to the house José has rented on the outskirts of El Ayoun. Along the way she registers the presence of 'people, sand and gas stations' and the lights of the town shining through the near dark; looking back at the town from her house San Mao's attention is caught not so much by the presence and dwellings of Sahrawi people but by the Spanish institutions (representing colonial government, military power and commercial wealth) lined up along the main road through the Saharan town:

'This is the bank, there's the government, the court is on the right, the post office is below the court, there are several shops, our company's main office is in the row in front, the one with the green light is a restaurant, the one painted yellow is the cinema'.

'That row of apartment blocks is so neat - who lives there? Look, there are trees behind that big white wall, and a swimming pool - and that mansion with music coming from those white gauze curtains is a restaurant, is it?'

'The apartment blocks are...for high-level workers; the white house is the governor-general's, and of course it has a garden; the music you can hear is from the military officers club'.⁵²

Amidst these monuments to the presence of Spanish rule in the desert, San Mao is delighted to espy a building that appears to her more authentically 'native', 'a Moslem emperor's palace fort'. José is quick to disillusion her, however: 'That's the National Hotel - four-star - for important people from the government. It's not a palace'.⁵³

The homes of the indigenous inhabitants are less noticeable. Though José assures her that Sahrawi homes are to be found 'both in town and outside town', it is not until the end of their forty minute walk, as they reach the outskirts of the of El Ayoun's 'smoke and houses', that Sahrawi begin to enter the landscape - and then only from afar. Preceded in the narrative by their dwellings and their animals, the people of the Sahara are still placed far enough away to be idealised and romanticised:

Some way away from the road...were pitched several dozen patched and holed tents, and galvanised iron huts. There were a few dromedaries and flocks of goats on the sand.

The first time I saw this people, who were always clad in dark blue, was like entering another world for me - a fantasy land.

The wind brought the laughter of little girls playing...

In a wild and backward and poor place like this, life is thriving in growth just the same; it isn't a struggle for existence at all. For the people living in the desert, the cycle of birth, age, sickness and death is a natural thing.

⁵² *Stories of the Sahara* p. 219. A governor-general had been stationed in El Ayoun since 1958 (Damis p. 11); Spanish military personnel numbered at least 15,000, Damis p. 12. According to Zhang Yun, this 'big building like a Saharan castle' becomes the office of the chief administrator of the district after the Spanish withdrawal, Zhang p. 30.

⁵³ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 220.

As I looked at the smoke rising, I felt that they were so serene as to be excellent, refined.

In my view this easy and free life is civilisation of the spirit.⁵⁴

At this safe distance, the Saharans are 'serene', 'refined' and 'natural', civilised of spirit, thriving with life, and with a special closeness to the realities of birth and death (that San Mao, her Spanish companions in the desert and her readers at home have presumably lost). This romantic vision of the Saharans is strongly reminiscent of the 'elegaic tone in describing Africa and Africans' encountered in the writing of earlier European travellers who, it has been pointed out, were often 'prompted by Africa's representing in Europeans' minds their own lost natural Eden as well as the more gentle *civilization* lost to their own continent'.⁵⁵

Now San Mao calls us back from the general sublime to the scene of the new life before her:

In the end we came into a long street, along the sides of which decaying square houses made of hollow bricks stood scattered under the setting sun.

I looked especially at a very small house at the end of the row, with an arched doorway; it told me directly that it was mine....

There was a big rubbish tip opposite...and beyond that was the vast sky.

Behind the house was a high hill, not sand, just big lumps of scattered rocks and gravel.

I couldn't see anyone in the neighbouring houses; there was only the ceaseless wind blowing fiercely and playing havoc with my hair and long skirt.⁵⁶

Even as she arrives at her new home in Golden River Street, Cemetery District, the vastness and apparent emptiness of the desert of San Mao's pre-prepared imagination creates a certain sense of drama for her self-production, and appears to constitute a tabula rasa for her adventures. Here in the desert there is scope as endless as the unbounded sands for a life as epic, dramatic and exotic as anyone could wish; San Mao can create her own life out of the very emptiness of the landscape around her. In this initial encounter with the desert she produces 'a psychic landscape, one of infinite, uninhabited - and thereby liberating - space around her own figure'.⁵⁷ In the manner of many European travel writers to Africa before her, San Mao's writings 'first empty out African

⁵⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 215-216. The resonance of this view with earlier European evocations of 'wilderness' can be seen from a passage quoted by Maria Frawley (from *Cities of the Past* by Frances Power Cobbe, Trubner and Co., London 1864; 'A Day at the Dead Sea'): 'The simple realities of existence, which so rarely approach us at all in the orderly and overly finished life of England, where we slide, without jolt or jar from the cradle to the grave, along the smooth rails laid down by civilization, are present once more in the wilderness of the East', Frawley p. 154.

⁵⁵ Quoted by Susan Horton from Langbaum's description of Isak Dinesen's writing about Africans, Horton p. 208.

⁵⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 216-217

⁵⁷ Horton p. 179.

landscapes and then proceed to fill them up again';⁵⁸ but unlike these other (mostly male) adventurers, she fills them not with 'statistics, scientific cataloguing of species, or metaphors that transform African landscapes into more familiar...ones'⁵⁹ but with people - the people who were there all along but who emerge only now as they come into interaction with San Mao herself. Notions of the vast emptiness of the landscape do reappear throughout San Mao's writings, but it is in her encounters with the people around her, and not with the solitude of the desert, that most of San Mao's project of self-creation takes place. In her interactions with the Sahrawi people, she creates not only herself but them as well, and the idealised 'noble savage' of her first impression is quickly banished.

It should not need to be stated that the Saharan people have their own history independent of Spain's, Morocco's or San Mao's interventions; behind San Mao's writings there are, of course, real Sahrawi whose lives, thoughts and behaviour have no necessary relationship to the way she chose to represent them in her stories. This thesis makes no attempt to guess at the 'real' stories of Sahrawi people in the mid 1970s, at the time San Mao produced her narratives about them; it is an analysis of how one influential writer made a world for readers in which the material she invented or embroidered involved lives (real or fictional) other than her own. In the words of Susan Horton, 'obviously to posit ways in which [these] representations of Africans are misrepresentations presupposes a knowledge of real Africans (in that place and at that time) that the present author cannot have'.⁶⁰

'First contact'

San Mao's attempts at contact with the Sahara and its people begin, ironically enough, with Spanish officialdom. Once settled into the rented house in El Ayoun, she is keen to begin her project of travel into the wider desert.⁶¹ El Ayoun (which, although the 'capital' of the Western Sahara, can boast no more than '3 or 4 streets, a few banks, and a few shops'⁶²) is perhaps not 'authentic'

⁵⁸ Horton? p. 154. See also Pratt p. 80: 'the territorial, colonizing aspirations of Euroimperialism are idealized into the depopulated face of the country'.

⁵⁹ Horton p. 154, summarising the larger arguments presented by Pratt.

⁶⁰ Horton p. 196.

⁶¹ Biographers Cui and Zhao, configuring love and marriage as the central issue of San Mao's life, play down San Mao's serious travel aims and gloss over the experiences described in this section, noting simply that 'apart from hitching rides, seeing mirages and going with the water truck to take photos of folk customs, all San Mao could do was stay obediently at home waiting to get married', Cui and Zhao p. 123.

⁶² San Mao notes further that El Ayoun 'has the strong bleak atmosphere of a town in a western; there is none of the prosperity of a capital here' (*The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 177); also that El Ayoun has no traffic lights, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 206.

enough as desert - and her aim, after all, was a coordinated project of travel right across the desert expanse. In search of true and definitive desert travel experience, she goes first to the representatives of Spanish colonial order in the Sahara: the police.

The police prove far from helpful, however.⁶³ When she asks the Spanish deputy commander how to go into the desert, he replies derisively, 'The desert? Aren't you in the desert? What do you see when you look out of the window?'⁶⁴ The desert of San Mao's imagination, as we have seen, is not to be found in the town;⁶⁵ she wishes to travel across the Sahara to the Red Sea. Hearing this, the policeman is even more dismissive, telling her to give up and take the next plane back to Madrid and thus save the police trouble. Only with great difficulty does she manage to persuade him to grant her three months of residency in the Western Sahara on the understanding that the police will take no responsibility for her - and she is no closer to her goal of travel across the desert.

Frustrated, she turns for help to another representative of Spanish control in the desert - the military - asking 'the retired commander of the 'Desert Forces'⁶⁶ to advise her on how to travel out into the desert. He too is discouraging, pointing out on the map how few roads there are; even these, he explains, are merely 'the tracks of people who have gone that way before. When the weather is good you can see them; if there is a sandstorm they blow away'.⁶⁷ Her plans rejected by both police and army, San Mao turns at last to 'the local residents (who) have lived in this desert for aeons - they must', she surmises, 'have their own point of view'.⁶⁸

She seeks them out in a square outside the town where

camels and jeeps, merchandise and goats were all crowded in together...I waited for an old Muslim man to finish his prayers and then went up to ask how to cross the Sahara. He could speak Spanish, and as soon as he started to speak, many young people gathered round.

In this rather stage-managed scene where the foreign visitor goes to the market full of local colour and consults the venerable elder amid the circle of youths who obligingly cluster about to listen, the Saharans appear to retain in relation to

⁶³ Indeed San Mao depicts them as positively obstructive, compelling her to go to the police station every day, keeping her passport, and 'always trying to make me leave', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 178-9.

⁶⁴ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp 178-179.

⁶⁵ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 186 - 'In fact, both in and outside of the town was all sand, but I still wanted to go further afield'.

⁶⁶ The retired commander is 'the very first person I got to know in the desert'; he is described as a Spaniard who, having spent 'his whole life' in the desert, has no wish to return to Spain even in retirement, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 180.

⁶⁷ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 180.

⁶⁸ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 180-181.

San Mao 'the essential colonized quality of *disponibilité*' in that they unquestioningly accept her intrusion and spontaneously take up the roles she wishes them to.⁶⁹ Yet as the scene progresses, the Sahrawi soon subvert this apparent traveller's fantasy. San Mao does not receive the kind of native wisdom that she was expecting; and although she initially assumes that this is because of some lack on the part of the old man, she has become by the end of the encounter the implicit butt of his joke.

'You want to go to the Red Sea? I have never been there. You can fly to Europe now, and change planes and get to the Red Sea easily. What's the point of going across the desert?'

'Yes, but I *want* to cross the desert. Please show me!' I called shrilly, afraid he hadn't heard me clearly.⁷⁰

To cross the desert, the old man tells her, she must hire two jeeps and engage a guide - but this will cost far, far more than San Mao can afford. She begins to walk away, disappointed, and then the old man adds:

'You can also do it without spending much money...you could move around with the nomads, they are all peaceful people. They go wherever there is water. That way won't cost much. I can introduce you to someone'.

'I'm not afraid of hardship; I'll buy my own tent and camel. Please help me. Then I can leave immediately'.

The old man laughed. 'It's not definite that you can go. Sometimes they stay a couple of weeks in the same place, and sometimes they stay half a year or six months. It depends on where the goats have a few withered trees to eat'.

'How long does it take for them to go all around the desert?'

'I can't say. They are very slow - perhaps 10 years or so'.

The listeners all laughed. I was the only one that couldn't laugh.⁷¹

Frustrated by her lack of success in acquiring the knowledge she sought from the locals (and perhaps by the fact that she will need more than a romanticised willingness to 'endure hardship' to discover the desert of her dreams), she ponders the irony of having come all of this way to the desert only to find herself confined to this tiny town.

The natives having failed to come up with the suitable plans she had hoped for, she turns once more to the Spanish occupying forces - and this time she is able to benefit successfully from their presence in the Sahara. Her relationship with the Spanish military commander allows her to travel safely 'alone' (that is, in the company of Sahrawi) far out into the desert under his protection. Thus the agency of Spanish colonialism makes it possible for her to travel into the 'real' desert and to encounter 'authentic' tent-dwelling Sahrawi in

⁶⁹ This definition of *disponibilité* is from Pratt, p. 163.

⁷⁰ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 181.

⁷¹ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 182.

addition to the town-dwelling people who live around her in El Ayoun. Yet as she so often does, San Mao presents institutional privileges as merely the coincidental happy consequences of personal contact:

By introduction of the retired commander of the Foreign Legion, I often went with the truck that sold water in the desert around a several hundred kilometre radius. I put up a tent at night and slept near the nomadic tribes; because of the army commander's concern, no one dared bother me'.⁷²

It is on these trips out into the wider Sahara that San Mao begins her attempts to establish relationships with the people of the desert. Thwarted in her goal of being the first woman to cross the Sahara, she turns to another of her 'greatest ambitions': to take photos of the life style of the nomads who live in this 'wilderness'.⁷³

'If one analyses it, my enthusiasm for the culture of different peoples comes from the great difference between them and me, to the point of creating beauty and feeling in my soul. I often went deep into the desert...and at that time, when I first came to this mysterious vast land I used every possible means of transport to go out and get to know its many faces. Even more precious, I wanted to see why it is that people have the joys, loves and hates of life in this place where not even grass will grow.'⁷⁴

With this statement of the radical difference of these 'others' from herself and the wonder that they can experience human emotions in an environment different from those familiar to her, San Mao introduces the story of her journeys out into the desert with her camera, 'longing to take pictures of everything'; 'As for the people who lived in the desert', she declares,

the way they walked or the way they ate or the colours and styles of their clothes, their gestures, their language, marriage, religious faith - I had an inexpressible love for them all...What I liked even more was to get close to observe them carefully and satisfy my endless curiosity about them.⁷⁵

Underlying her photographic project is an explicit wish to 'organise the largest desert in the world' by means of her camera, and thus to impose her own order onto the wilderness of the Sahara. This ambitious and comprehensive photographic record of the Sahara proves, however, too large an undertaking.

⁷² San Mao claims to have spent two months in this way. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 224.

⁷³ *Crying Camels* p. 21. Dennis Porter and Caren Kaplan have discussed the significance of the figure of the nomad to popular non-nomad imaginations: 'The desert Arab becomes, in part, an expression of the age-old nostalgia for the supposed lost harmony of the primitive world, a modern Noble Savage, who is different not only from the half-Europeanized and decadent Turks but also from city Arabs...it is far from clear that in the hierarchical opposition between Western civilization and Eastern barbarism - the fundamental Orientalist trope - the good is on the European side', Porter p. 234; further discussion on the romanticisation of nomads can be found in Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'.

⁷⁴ *Crying Camels* p. 22.

⁷⁵ *Crying Camels* pp. 23-24.

Unable to organise the entire desert, she must limit her plans; she makes the decision accordingly to take photographs only of people.⁷⁶

On her excursions out of El Ayoun into the wider desert, San Mao accompanies a Sahrawi man, Bashin, and his assistant on their journeys to deliver water, which last several days.⁷⁷ To wherever the nomads' tents are gathered Bashin brings petrol drums full of water in his

broken-down old truck with...no roof and no windscreen... for several thousand kilometres in the sun - it was a big physical challenge and harship...Even though the nomads' tents were in groups, there were still scattered widely; only a few camels and goats mingled together in flocks, sustaining their lives by nibbling at a few wretched leaves on the withered trees.⁷⁸

San Mao is equipped on these journeys with the things she herself needs, but she soon discovers that she has neglected to bring 'the things that the nomads were hoping for'. In a naked equation of material objects and personal feeling, she states that because of this she 'couldn't receive any friendship'.⁷⁹ She does not make the same mistake twice: next time, she is well prepared, having realised that

even at the ends of the earth there are women who love to be beautiful and children who love to eat, and so I...bought lots of lovely necklaces and cheap rings, and...a whole lot of glittering keys...fishing line, sugar, milk powder and sweets.

Going out into the Sahara taking these things really made me feel ashamed of exchanging goods for friendship, but I asked myself what I wanted from them - and it was just to let them get closer to me and let me understand them. All I wanted in return was just their kindness and friendship, and I hoped that through my gifts they would see that I loved them, and go a step further to make them accept this foreign woman who might as well have come from outer space.⁸⁰

Thus the natives of the Sahara are to be assured of San Mao's love through the archetypal item of unequal colonial exchange - beads - along with shiny keys that have, of course, no practical value at all for tent dwellers. The effectiveness of the beads in buying the 'friendship' San Mao desires may be questionable, but

⁷⁶ *Crying Camels* p. 24. Frustrated in her photographic ambitions, she perhaps contents herself with her attempts to impose order on the chaotic 'otherness' of the desert through her stories of her life there - that is, in words rather than in pictures. For an account of San Mao's one published attempt at organisation by means of photography of the world and her place in it, in which she has taken photographs only of objects, see Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping'. In *Crying Camels* San Mao also records photographing a banquet and taking pictures of animals (pp. 32-33). Cui and Zhao assert that San Mao's fascination with people's customs and interest in taking photographs of the living conditions of the nomads in the wilderness was stronger than with ordinary tourists. Cui and Zhao p. 137.

⁷⁷ Their trips take them from the Atlantic coast almost as far as the Algerian border and back...2000 km in one trip', *Crying Camels* p. 24.

⁷⁸ *Crying Camels* pp. 24-25.

⁷⁹ *Crying Camels* p. 24.

⁸⁰ *Crying Camels* p. 25.

they are certainly successful in purchasing for her some experiences of native *disponibilité*. Whenever the water truck stops, she tells us, San Mao jumps out and hastens towards the tents. The 'lovely and easily frightened inland people' would 'run for their lives' at the sight of 'this stranger', but Bashin would yell at them and 'herd them like sheep to stand in front of me....I never let Bashin force them to come close to me, I couldn't bear that'⁸¹ (there is no 'force' involved, it seems, in 'being 'herded like sheep'). Once she begins to hand out the gifts, however, the Saharans (like the animals to which they have already been likened) are apparently reassured by her gentle tone of voice (even though they do not understand the Spanish language in which she addresses them), cease to panic and crowd around her as she wishes. 'Here, come and take some beads, they're for you', she cries as she hangs a necklace around a little girl's neck; the girl obediently allows San Mao to 'pull her close and stroke her hair'.⁸²

These trips into the desert, San Mao tells us, continued for some months until she married José and they had a car shipped from Spain. On every trip she brings sugar, fishing line, medicine and cigarettes 'to give to the people who had nothing';⁸³ and each time she returns to El Ayoun 'empty-handed, as though I had been robbed. The poor Sahrawi living in the desert took everything down to my tent pegs, to say nothing of the things I was carrying about my person'.⁸⁴

In return for her gifts she receives human interactions that she can transform into colourful anecdotes for her stories. To be sure of receiving the longed-for photographs is, however, a much less simple matter. On one occasion, for example, she is invited into a tent where (by means of gestures) she attempts to coax a group of women into removing the veils that conceal their faces.

In a very embarrassed manner, two of them revealed their light brown cheeks. Their beautiful faces were set off by big eyes, blank expressions, and unconsciously sexy lips; their appearance entranced me so much that I couldn't stop myself lifting my camera.⁸⁵

⁸¹ *Crying Camels* p. 25.

⁸² *Crying Camels* p. 26.

⁸³ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 224.

⁸⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 123.-124 San Mao's inventory of largesse to the desert dwellers also includes medicines; this will be discussed in Chapter 3.

⁸⁵ *Crying Camels* p. 27. Zhang Yun recalls this scene when, travelling through the desert, he insists on stopping to look into one of the tents pitched near the roadside. The nomads are 'astonished by their strange guest' and shake hands 'not very naturally'; Zhang is careful to note their 'strange smell'. The women, he notes, 'hovered at a distance, not daring to approach' - 'I couldn't see their expressions but they seemed very simple and natural...I didn't take a photo - not because I was afraid they'd say I had stolen their souls but because it was late and my guide was urging me to hurry', Zhang pp. 94-95.

The lifting of women's veils is well known in male travel writing as a metaphor for the 'unveiling' of the secrets of exotic lands.⁸⁶ Later in the chapter we will find San Mao observing the hidden bodies as well as faces of Sahrawi women, and again hoping to capture the image on film; and the discovery and revealing of female mysteries (the private disposition of the body) appears to be a compelling subject for writers of secondary literature on San Mao⁸⁷. It has been noted also by Vron Ware that many European writers since at least the 19th century have singled out the position of women as an index of civilization, with veiling (along with arranged marriages and the dowry system) as a potent symbol of 'backwardness'.⁸⁸ San Mao's narratives too suggest this pattern, connecting veiling with backwardness in this story and elsewhere;⁸⁹ her story of arranged marriage and dowry will be discussed below.

Here, as San Mao replicates the male cliché of the uncovering gaze, she reproduces also the sexualising gaze that inserts seductiveness into the sight of beauties that are usually hidden (such as the women's lips).

The women, meanwhile, are gazing back:

I don't think these women had ever seen a camera - much less a Chinese person - so they were entranced by these two strange things as well. They looked at me, motionless, and let me take the photos.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Noting that 'the image of the eternal feminine' is 'at the forefront of fantasies about the unknown and fascinating', Bishop points out the 'almost voyeuristic' attitude of travellers who perceive themselves as penetrating 'veils, purdahs' and so on 'to get a "peep" at Tibet' (Bishop p. 177). Sara Suleri has pointed out the fascination for Englishmen in India of women 'sequestered in the unknowability of the zenana...it is only after such a sanctum has been penetrated that the Anglo-Indian can claim to "know" the Indian', Suleri pp. 92-p3. San Mao proudly notes that when young Sahrawi women come to her home to visit, they take off their veils, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 131.

⁸⁷ Zhang Yun, for example, is keen to learn about Muslim women's bodies beneath their veils. His first question on visiting the Western Sahara is whether or not Sahrawi women still swathe their bodies in cloth and hide their faces; once he has satisfied himself that at least some of them do, there are three more things he wishes to know about the 'lifestyle' of the Sahrawi people: are Sahrawi women too modest to consult doctors - and would they rather die than expose their bodies to the gaze of a male doctor as San Mao suggests (see Chapter 3); do they marry when they are still children as San Mao suggests they do (see below) and do they still perform colonic irrigations on each other (see story below). Zhang identifies these as 'the three most interesting customs', Zhang p. 39.

⁸⁸ Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: white women, racism and history*, London: Verso, 1992, p. 14. 'Purdah, arranged marriages, the dowry system, were held up as examples of non-European, non-rational and even "primitive" customs which marked out the societies that practised them as backward and needing to be civilized. The veil, and the degree to which women are obliged to cover their heads, continues to be one of the most potent symbols of cultural difference in the twentieth century'. Ware pp. 250-251. In her story of a Sahrawi marriage (discussed below), San Mao concludes from the fact that the bride's brother is not keen to include her in the ritual party that 'Women have no position at all in this place', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 62.

⁸⁹ The fact that Shayida - the beautiful, clever and heroic Sahrawi woman whose story is discussed in Appendix 2 - appears without a veil (and is Catholic rather than Muslim) is presented as a part of her 'liberated' persona and as one of the reasons that other Sahrawi mistrust her (see Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History').

⁹⁰ *Crying Camels* p. 27.

This photography session in the female space of the women's tent is soon forcefully interrupted by the paterfamilias, who comes in to see what is going on; when he discovers San Mao taking photographs, he rushes over with a shout, variously kicking out at and abusing the group of women crowded inside the tent, who huddle together in a frightened group, apparently on the point of tears.

'You...you've taken their souls! They'll die!' he said in broken Spanish.
 'What?' I was amazed. This really was unfair to me.
 'You, you, woman...you can cure diseases...you can catch souls, and you've collected them all in here'. He pointed at my camera.⁹¹

The narrative of soul stealing is not new here; the same notion of the stealing of souls through photography was present at the time of the introduction of photography to China (and San Mao later jokes about her own 'pure, stainless soul' being captured by José's camera).⁹² As the 'stealer of the desert women's souls', under accusation from this angry man, San Mao remarks that 'things weren't quite right' (although her concern seems perhaps more for his unfairness to herself than to the other women), and runs towards the truck, 'yelling out for my protector Bashin';⁹³ Bashin, however, is powerless to stop the angry people from giving chase. San Mao's thoughts immediately turn to the persuasive measures that would be available for her (through her access to Spanish power or her superior education) to deploy against them if she chose - but, fortunately, resists the notion of using them ('we didn't have to use refusing to deliver water or [bringing in] the desert forces or deeper superstition to scare them with').⁹⁴ As already noted, many of San Mao's stories present her as a figure of infinite resourcefulness, reminiscent of the inventive trickster monkey Sun Wukong. Now, faced with people who are afraid they will die from being photographed, she comes up with an idea: to tell the Sahrawi that their souls have indeed been captured inside the box of her camera but can be freed and given back. She asks Bashin to communicate this to the crowd, adding, 'Tell them not to be afraid'.

'Miss, they're crazy! They're ignorant, take no notice'. Bashin's manner was very arrogant, and I felt disgusted.
 'Go on! get out of here!' Bashin waved his sleeves, and they unwillingly dispersed a little.
 The women whose souls I had stolen saw that the engine was running and the truck was about to leave...they crouched down, their faces ghostly pale.
 I...said to the people, 'I am going to let the souls go. Don't worry'.
 In front of them all I opened my camera, and with the air of performing a magic trick I took the film out. Then I jumped off the truck and faced the light to let them see. The negatives were blank; there were no pictures of

⁹¹ *Crying Camels* p. 27.

⁹² See note 98 below.

⁹³ *Crying Camels* pp. 27-28.

⁹⁴ *Crying Camels* p. 28.

people. When they saw this they sighed with relief...The people smiled, satisfied.⁹⁵

The arrogance of the town-dwelling Sahrawi Bashin towards the desert-dwellers again provides the appropriate contrast with the indulgent manner and inventiveness of San Mao. While he herds them like goats, she cajoles them with gifts; he condemns their ignorance, while she craftily exploits it to extricate herself from a tricky situation. Although her desired photographs have been lost in the process, she joins with Bashin in hearty laughter once safely back in the truck.

But San Mao's encounter with Sahrawi ignorance and her opportunity to display her own ingenuity is not over yet. An elderly Sahrawi man in the back of the truck pursues the topic of souls: 'There used to be a thing that you could put in front of people and you could see their souls getting caught in it'. She asks Bashin to translate; then

When Bashin had explained and I understood, I took a little mirror out of my backpack and without a word I gently held it up in front of that old man's face. When they saw it, they yelled and almost fell out of the truck, frantically hitting Bashin on the back, telling him to stop the truck. The truck braked, and they jumped out, almost falling off. I was startled...and looked up at Bashin's water truck again. Sure enough, it had no rear vision mirrors.⁹⁶

The questionableness of playing such a trick on genuinely terrified people is perhaps supposed to be neutralised by the fact that San Mao does it 'gently'. The success of the trick leads her to ponder on the nature of people who can be scared by so simple a thing as a mirror:

You certainly can't say that material civilisation is necessary for humankind, but I was shocked and surprised that there could actually be people living on the same earth as us who have never seen a mirror. I couldn't help feeling sorry for them. Was ignorance such as this just the limitations of their geographical environment? or were there human factors? I couldn't find an answer.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ *Crying Camels* p. 28.

⁹⁶ *Crying Camels* p. 29.

⁹⁷ *Crying Camels* p. 29. This is not San Mao's only story of photography trickery and its connection to 'civilisation'. On another occasion she and José encounter a young Sahrawi man outside El Ayoun; he can speak Spanish, used to help on a mobile clinic run by nuns, and describes himself as 'civilised'. He is fond of having his 'soul' taken and asks José to exchange clothes with him for a photo, fastening José's watch on his wrist and twisting his hair into 'a style that didn't belong to him at all, like a very rustic fake European'. San Mao's portrayal of the young man as comic in his preoccupation with 'civilisation' and the inexperience of European ways that causes him to select the hairstyle of a rustic yokel continues as she mocks his lack of understanding of western technology: he asks if their camera takes black and white or colour photographs, not realising that it is the film rather than the camera that influences the colour of the photo (and indeed telling San Mao that she does not understand this fact). Telling him that his camera is the best colour camera in the world, José takes his photo 'in the clothes and appearance he thought of as civilised'; and San Mao laughs and laughs at the thought of José 'deceiving the youth by exploiting his own error'. As José photographs her, she cries, 'The colour

Bashin is evidently not the only one inclined to an arrogance that dismisses inexperience as inferiority. But San Mao does not dwell for long on these essentialist speculations; rather, she brings the focus back to herself, going on to tell of her clever strategy for taking photographs unobserved, combined with her campaign to educate Sahrawi people not to be afraid of mirrors:

When I went to the desert again I took a medium-sized mirror, and when I got off the truck I would prop this gleaming object up on some stones. Everyone would go to look at it, terribly afraid, and they didn't take so much notice of my camera because the truly terrible soul-stealing device was now the mirror.

This strategy of 'keeping the people ignorant' that I came up with for taking photos was not the most noble behaviour, so I would often crouch down myself in front of the mirror and comb my hair or rub my face and look at myself - and then I'd go nonchalantly away.

I made it clear that I wasn't afraid of the mirror at all, and slowly the children would come over, and dart quickly in front of the mirror; they'd discover that nothing happened and so they'd do it again, and again, and then the mirror would be surrounded by twittering Saharans. In this way, the soul-stealing affair disappeared.⁹⁸

Thus San Mao's 'soul-stealing' story ends with the tendency noted by Sara Mills in women travel writers' descriptions of the 'colonial countries' they visit to present them as 'populated by harmless, loving children'.⁹⁹

Interactions with the natives and photographs are not the only rewards of San Mao's trips out into the desert. The pleasures of scenery and of desert fauna also combine to please her. 'Only when I saw the lovely sight of the herds of galloping wild antelopes at sunrise and sunset far out in the desert', she remarks, 'could I forget the tedium and hardship of real life'.¹⁰⁰

But what was the nature of this tedium and hardship that only the desert landscape and animals enabled her to forget? In El Ayoun, it seems, there are few sources of diversion:

This poor little town only has one dirty broken-down cinema; as for the streets, there's no life in any of them. Most of the newspapers and magazines we get are out of date; we get TV on average 2 or 3 times a month and the people on it look like ghosts...the electricity and water are always cutting off, and if you want to go for a walk there are sandstorms all day.

Living here (apart from Sahrawi who live happily), Europeans drink too much, couples fight, single people often commit suicide - all of these are tragedies forced by the desert.¹⁰¹

camera comes to seize the pure white stainless soul! Please spare me this time', *Crying Camels* pp. 34-35.

⁹⁸ *Crying Camels* p. 30. Zhang Yun, visiting the 'old town' twenty years later, talks of veiled women 'scurrying away behind me, afraid I'd take their photo', Zhang p. 45.

⁹⁹ Mills p. 22.

¹⁰⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 224.

¹⁰¹ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 142-143.

The physical desert is also, it seems, something of a cultural desert for San Mao, and the limitations of El Ayoun are supposedly enough to drive the European coloniser mad (although the natives may live happily). For San Mao too, whose previous life had been spent entirely in cities (Taipei, Madrid, Berlin),¹⁰² life in a small desert town would have had its difficulties - and would have seemed increasingly alien to San Mao's readership also, in a Taiwan where standards of living were rising rapidly and consumer culture, café culture, and television and magazine culture were all burgeoning. 'Being cooped up...in this little town that only has one street', San Mao notes later, 'is as lonely as being a person with a broken leg living in cul-de-sac';¹⁰³ she stresses the importance of her car as a means of escape from the boredom of El Ayoun and the confines of Cemetery District.¹⁰⁴

In response to the scarcity of entertainment and material choices, San Mao turns both outward (travelling into the wider desert with José in their car) and inward (into the domestic sphere, investing her energies in creating a home base into which she can retreat). This will be discussed below, after a brief consideration of San Mao's narratives of desert hardship.

Hardship

As well as the lack of entertainment, general material scarcity is, of course, an important aspect of the desert's 'emptiness'. For the privileged traveller in a relatively poor foreign land, having undergone some physical hardship (genuine or otherwise) can be an important part of the experience, or even a badge of honour. Indeed the discomfort is often not (as Pratt has pointed out in the context of Victorian travellers in Africa) just something to be put up with, but actually becomes a significant and meaningful feature of the trip itself. It is not uncommon for the traveller to take a certain pride in the hardships of everyday life that he or she has chosen to undertake (and that the native residents, of course, have no choice but to endure).

In San Mao's desert narratives, references abound to the hardships of the natural environment, such as the frequent sandstorms¹⁰⁵ and painful extremes of

¹⁰² Amenities of the city such as cafés, department stores and subways feature prominently in San Mao's stories of Europe.

¹⁰³ *Crying Camels* p. 66.

¹⁰⁴ 'When the car that José had had shipped over was driven to our door that day, we practically rushed out to meet it. Even though it was not a big jeep like that most practical and distinguished of vehicles, the Land Rover, and was not suited to driving about in the desert, we were still delighted with it'. *Crying Camels* p. 66.

¹⁰⁵ 'In the season of wild sandstorms, at midday when it is burning hot, the sky is full of yellow dust, and it hurts as if your lungs were full of sand, visibility is zero, the car would toss about as if in a raging sea, and all around you is the deafening sound of the hurricane of sand and stones hitting the sides of the car', *Crying Camels* p. 74. The constant and inescapable intrusion of sand

heat and cold¹⁰⁶. Material hardship is an even more frequent theme.¹⁰⁷ Indeed the fact that she lived in Cemetery District at all is supposedly regarded by the other Spanish Fosbucraa wives as unendurable; they will not visit the area for fear of catching something.¹⁰⁸ San Mao's biographers Cui and Zhao concur that living in Cemetery District constituted great hardship, perceiving some kind of superior moral quality in San Mao's ability to live there among the Sahrawi, and suggesting that José had somehow wronged her by setting up house in a district of town populated by Sahrawi.¹⁰⁹

Procuring water is a particular problem.¹¹⁰ She tells, for example, of having to carry buckets of water (purchased from the government, as much as 10

to make San Mao's desert life uncomfortable - reminiscent of 'the pestilential omnipresence of the subcontinent' noted by Suleri, p. 91.

¹⁰⁶ She describes, for example, the freezing cold on her first night in the desert, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 222.

¹⁰⁷ San Mao notes that prices are so high that she can afford a mattress but not a bed; when they arrive, their household effects are '5 big coarse grass mats that the Saharans use', a pot, 4 plates, 2 forks and spoons, 11 knives, a bucket, a broom, a brush, some coat hangers, soap, oil, rice, sugar and vinegar - 'The things', she notes, were horrifyingly expensive', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 222; 'Even though we had bought a few things', she continues, 'our home was just a few mats on the floor'. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 223.

¹⁰⁸ The wife of José's boss praises San Mao's home for its tasteful decor ('Her home is decorated with real style - I never imagined she could make a room rented from Sahrawi as beautiful as something in a magazine'), but the other women eschew the whole district ('I have never been there; I'm afraid of catching a disease'). San Mao argues that experiencing material hardship is a valuable part of the desert experience ('I think that when you come to the Sahara if you don't experience hardship in material life, it is a loss to everyone in terms of experience') and suggests that the others do not share her interest in the desert, Sahrawi or the value of experience ('What desert? Forget it! Living in these dorms we don't feel as if we're in the desert. But you! What a shame! Why don't you move into town? Mixing with Sahrawi...', *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 252-253. The disgust of the Spanish wives is perhaps connected to the notion of 'going native', discussed by Dennis Porter in connection with T.E. Lawrence: 'going native - in traditional colonial society that was the ultimate apostasy. A peculiar opprobrium was attached to the white European who chose to live and dress like the natives or who appeared to prefer their company', Porter p. 230. As an 'outsider' in the Spanish community as well as the Sahrawi one, San Mao exercises the freedom to choose her community, and 'made up my mind never to move into town'.

¹⁰⁹ 'José could only afford to put his lovely wife in an ordinary district outside town, mixing with Sahrawi. Fortunately, San Mao didn't feel wronged', Cui and Zhao p. 140. 'Before coming to the Sahara', they continue, 'San Mao had an excess of humaneness. Living with the natives whom the white wives despised, San Mao did not feel like a pearl cast in darkness; on the contrary, the longer she lived there the more she became like a Sahrawi....She fell in love with them. Eating camel meat didn't make her feel sick any more. The stink of the Sahrawi wasn't as terrible any more', Cui and Zhao pp. 140-141.

¹¹⁰ José applies to the city government for water, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 222; the government provides salt water for washing, drawn from deep desert wells, delivered daily in a government truck at a cost of 90 pesetas per container, and stored in a petrol drum on the flat roof of the house; drinking water, on the other hand, must be bought in town, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 177-178. 'The water we used for washing and cleaning was the government's responsibility; after one big bucket a day they didn't give you any more. So if we bathed, we couldn't wash our clothes as well, and if we washed clothes we couldn't wash the dishes or clean the floor. We had to calculate carefully how much water was left in the bucket on the roof before doing these things. The water...was very salty, we couldn't drink it - we had to go and buy drinking water from the shop. It is very precious here', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 132. When Zhang Yun visits the desert 20 years later and meets the region's chief administrator, the subject of water is raised immediately as a difficulty that would have faced San Mao: the administrator

litres each time) on foot along the dusty road from the town to her home on its outskirts.¹¹¹

Under the burning sun, I'd pick up the handle of the water tank and go 4 or 5 paces, then stop and pant a little, carry it 10 more steps, then stop, then go again, sweat falling like rain, my back so sore that I was trembling, red in the face, my steps feeble - and home was still a tiny black speck in the distance. I'd never get there!

Once I'd carried the water home, I would immediately lie down on the mat. My back would hurt a bit less that way'.¹¹²

Gas bottles for cooking also had to be fetched from town.

Sometimes the gas would be all used up and I had no strength to drag the empty container to town and exchange it - if you wanted to get a taxi you had to walk into town first, so I didn't often go.

So I'd often borrow a neighbour's galvanised iron charcoal stove, and crouch outside fanning the fire till the smoke brought tears to my eyes.¹¹³

In addition to the difficulties of securing basic necessities, the lack of consumer choices is one of San Mao's very first observations about the desert.¹¹⁴

For readers in a rapidly urbanising society like Taiwan, where material life for the general population was improving quickly in the 1970s and 1980s when San Mao's books appeared, the author's decision to abandon comfort in favour of inconvenience may have seemed to represent not only some kind of eccentricity but also a certain spiritual superiority. Certainly San Mao's biographers have seized on San Mao's choice to undergo the material hardship that life in the Sahara desert entailed as something of more than material

states that it would not have been easy for a Chinese woman in the Western Sahara at a time when 'drinking water and other water was a serious problem, even for rich Sahrawi families'. San Mao's stories of procuring water are taken as proof that she must have lived 'among the Sahrawi' as she claimed, and not in a Spanish enclave. Zhang p. 31.

¹¹¹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 37; 'it is a great hardship to walk to get water, and most uncomfortable', *Crying Camels* p. 66.

¹¹² *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 225. The story of fetching water cited here is one of the ways in which San Mao marks herself off as different from her neighbours (though in a self-mocking way, with references to her sheltered upbringing): the tenderly reared young woman from Taiwan is the only one who has never had to do such heavy work. She brings into the narrative 'a tough and sturdy woman from the Canary Islands' who lives nearby and sometimes accompanies her on the walk to town for water. On the way there, with an empty bucket, San Mao can keep pace with her; but on the way back, carrying 10 litres of water, she cannot. The neighbour, she notes, 'mocks' her with the words, 'How come you're so useless? do you mean to say you have never carried water before?' whereupon San Mao urges her to go on ahead and not to wait for her. Drawing attention to the 'tough' and 'hard' qualities of her neighbour, San Mao highlights her own slenderness, contrasted with the body of her neighbour, just as in contrast with Sahrawi women in the bathing story discussed below (*Stories of the Sahara* p. 225).

¹¹³ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 225-226

¹¹⁴ When San Mao and José buy a fridge and a stove, San Mao remarks that there is only one fridge in stock and all of the stoves are the same, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 220. 20 years later, Zhang Yun notes in contrast that El Ayoun's shops are full of all kinds of goods - T shirts, toys, duty-free goods from the Canary Islands, fashionable clothes and European and Japanese electrical goods, Zhang p. 38.

significance¹¹⁵ - as proof, even, of her moral quality. Indeed San Mao herself leads their thoughts in such a direction, pointing to the discrepancy between her lifestyle in Taiwan and in the desert by invoking what she imagines would be her mother's feelings if she could see her toiling along the road with the gas bottle:

...her lovely face would be a mass of tears for her beloved daughter. 'We cherished our daughter in the hollow of our hand; we cared for her as our family's precious pearl!' And she would cry weakly.¹¹⁶

Yet San Mao's hardships are not, of course, without profit; not only can they be subsumed into her philosophy of experience ('it's valuable for people to have a few extra life-experiences')¹¹⁷ but they also contribute to the narrative of the Chinese woman of the desert that proved so appealing to Taiwan readers and helped to launch her as a literary celebrity.

A detailed case-study in San Mao's narrative of hardship is provided by the house in 'Cemetery District' on the edge of El Ayoun where she and José live. It is depicted in very bleak terms and great detail: a hallway four paces long; a tiny living room (4 paces by 5 paces); a bedroom in which there is barely room to edge past the bed and through the door; a kitchen the size of four spread-out newspapers, with a dirty cracked sink; a bathroom equipped with only a bucket, a hand-basin and a mug.¹¹⁸ Overhead on the communal roof-space the landlord's goats are kept in a pen from which they frequently escape, creating constant mess and disorder and sometimes falling down the open roofwell into San Mao's house.¹¹⁹ The concrete floor is not level; the roof seems about to collapse; the dingy grey walls are both ugly and poorly constructed;¹²⁰ and the wind blows in through a hole in one corner. A naked lightbulb hangs from the ceiling on a cable encrusted with flies; the tap brings forth 'a few drips of thick green liquid' in lieu of water. The rent for this dilapidated house in an area of town regarded by other Europeans as extremely undesirable is, according to San Mao, 'higher than Europe levels'.¹²¹ Although the first sight of the house

¹¹⁵ Cui and Zhao in their biography quote extensively from the water-carrying story and the smoking fire story, noting that San Mao was a 'hothouse flower' who had never had to do rough work, Cui and Zhao pp. 128-129.

¹¹⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 226. Although San Mao often talks of the hardships of desert life, she is nonetheless able to shop by taxi, buy a washing machine and a car, and keep a substantial amount of money in the bank, *Crying Camels* p. 46, 102, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 220.

¹¹⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 226.

¹¹⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 217.

¹¹⁹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 52, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 188.

¹²⁰ The walls are hot to the touch at midday and ice-cold at night, and their dingy colour makes them feel even colder. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 226.

¹²¹ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 177-178. As rents closer to town are even more exorbitant (*Stories of the Sahara* p. 237), San Mao and José remain in the Cemetery District house. San Mao claims that Handi, the landlord, would not put up the money even for plaster, and that when she and José have made all kinds of improvements themselves he wishes to increase the rent. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 237, 258.

depresses her deeply, San Mao is able to turn it to her advantage by transforming it into a comfortable, aesthetically appealing home base for herself and José (which gains cultural capital for her among both Europeans who visit it and readers at home viewing pictures of it)¹²² and into a colourful tale.

Little House in the Desert¹²³

San Mao puts considerable time, effort and expense (in terms both of her literal physical labour and her detailed descriptions of it) into creating an attractive picture of this grim dwelling as she and José transform it into the desert's most beautiful house. She and José work day and night on the necessary structural repairs,¹²⁴ and then on furnishing and decorating the house. All of San Mao's ingenuity is required for the task - and for the depiction of the home-building project and its effects on those whom she allows to enter it. First she takes possession of some abandoned wooden crates that she finds in the town square - timber for furniture-making costing more than they are prepared to pay - and thus provides not only timber for furniture but the material for an anecdote as well, as the crates turn out to be coffin packaging. Soon the house is equipped with furniture constructed by José;¹²⁵ San Mao's suitably feminine contributions are matching sofa covers and curtains and ornaments.¹²⁶ She dwells in some detail on her own ingenuity and ability to pick up things deemed worthless by

¹²² Home decor skills became an important component in San Mao's image. Biographers discuss her home decor at length (for example Lu, Sun and Yang, p. 296), and photographs of San Mao's house featured in Taiwan magazines. San Mao's biographers Cui and Zhao describe her home in Gran Canaria as being 'a scene like a painting', Cui and Zhao p. 159.

¹²³ The Laura Ingalls Wilder flavour of this title is not inappropriate for a discussion of home-building in the wilderness by a woman who had avidly read Wilders' books in translation as a child (see Chapter 4). Citing a letter to San Mao from her mother, Cui and Zhao note that the growing acclaim for the Saharan stories as they were published one by one in the *United Daily News* reached a climax with this tale of home-making in the desert; after it was published, they assert, 'you could hear people talking about San Mao everywhere'. Cui and Zhao p. 148. One of the principal aims of Zhang Yun in visiting the desert 20 years later is to locate San Mao's former home, which he claims to have succeeded in doing - even though Golden River Street has a new name, very few people are still living there after twenty years, and much of the cemetery of Cemetery District has been built over (see Zhang pp. 45-51).

¹²⁴ With no help or co-operation from the landlord they assemble lime and concrete, borrow ladder and tools and set to work. Subsisting on bread, milk and multivitamin tablets, they are soon 'so thin that our eyes bulged and we couldn't walk straight' (*Stories of the Sahara* p. 238).

¹²⁵ Out of the coffin crates José constructs bookshelves, cupboards, a table and a small coffee table. Later in the story, San Mao portrays herself playfully scaring two European guests by telling them that they are sitting on coffin boards; then, when they leap up in horror, she reassures them, 'Don't be afraid, there aren't any mummies inside'. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 256. San Mao notes that the macabre origins of the timber caused her to like her furniture even more than before, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 235.

¹²⁶ She makes 'bright new patterned curtains of Saharan hemp', and constructs a sofa out of bricks, planks and foam cushions covered to match the curtains; the colours are 'bright and beautiful against the white wall'. San Mao repeatedly points out their lack of chairs and of a bed to put their mattress on; this is not only a constant reminder to the reader of the empty and unhomely beginnings from which San Mao's nest-building progresses but also highlights (through contrast) the impressiveness of the finished product of her creativity and imagination.

others and imagine them in new contexts as practical, useful and decorative objects; several items in her house in the desert are taken, indeed, from the rubbish dump.¹²⁷ An old car tyre and 'an almost rotten goatskin' scavenged from the dump become, after her improving treatment, a chair and a cushion;¹²⁸ other trash items become ornaments:

I took a big dark green bucket home [from the tip] and stuck some thorns ...into it. I felt it had a strong and sad poetic meaning.
I bought a little tin of paint and painted Indian-style designs and colours on a variety of soft-drink bottles...

Thus the transforming imagination of San Mao not only turns experience into anecdote; it transforms trash into art as well through techniques such as 'ethnic' painting and Saharan goatskin curing.¹²⁹ She ornaments her home also with a camel skull,¹³⁰ a lamp made by José out of glass and wire, and various other Saharan items: straw mats,¹³¹ 'a goatskin drum, a goatskin water-bottle, leather bellows, a water pipe, coloured bedspreads hand-made by the Sahrawi, and strange-shaped desert stones we had collected'.¹³² Her most prized ornaments of Sahrawi origin have a longer story attached. In the graveyard one day, San Mao encounters an old Sahrawi man carving stones.¹³³

I was stunned to the point of dizziness. I crouched down and said, 'You're a great artist! Are you selling these?'
I picked up a human face, not believing my own eyes. That rough yet moving and natural creation - I had to have it.
The old man lifted his head, confused, and looked at me with an expression like that of a madman.
I picked up 3 of his carvings and gave him 1000 pesetas. I forgot that I was going into town and rushed off towards my home.
Then he called out hoarsely and came staggering after me.

¹²⁷ Cui and Zhao present the rubbish dump in orientalisising fashion as a 'lovely garden' for San Mao, as if she 'had discovered an Arabian treasure house' (Cui and Zhao p. 23,) or 'an Arab treasure house given by Allah', Cui and Zhao p. 131.

¹²⁸ San Mao scrubs the tyre and places a cushion inside to make it into a 'bird's nest' ('everyone who came fought to sit in it'); she treats the goatskin with salt and alum 'as the Sahrawi do' to make a cushion. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 242.

¹²⁹ Biographers Cui and Zhao present the house as an artistic success for San Mao, noting that from the age of 13 she had dreamed of being an artist but had not been successful at either Chinese or western painting - she remained, however, full of confidence in her own artistic gifts and deployed them in the design of her home (Cui and Zhao p. 130). They also remind readers that San Mao had briefly studied ikebana after withdrawing from school at 13, adding that 'She was a professional by training'. Cui and Zhao p. 131. The home decor described by San Mao here is reminiscent of the house-decorating techniques she describes visiting a few years earlier in a large house inhabited by a group of penniless artists in Spain, where colourfully-covered mattresses and colourful cushions act as sofas and chairs, and there are artworks and handicraft pieces everywhere, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return*, pp. 199-200.

¹³⁰ The skull is given to San Mao by José as a wedding present (see *Stories of the Sahara* p. 38). The placement of the camel skull 'love gift' on the bookshelf next to the lamp made by José is described by Cui and Zhao as 'an Arab miracle', Cui and Zhao p. 131.

¹³¹ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 177-178.

¹³² For a further discussion of San Mao's 'found art', see Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping'.

¹³³ The little stone sculptures are of birds, camels, antelopes and other animals, and people.

I was holding the pieces of stone tightly and wouldn't let go. He followed me and pulled me back, and I pleaded with him, 'Is this not enough? I don't have any more money with me. I'll give you more, more'

He was unable to speak. He bent over and picked up two stones in the shape of birds and put them into my hands. Only then would he let me go.¹³⁴

San Mao is delighted with her new treasures: 'I didn't eat that day; I lay on the floor playing with these works of a great anonymous artist and admiring them. I was so moved in my heart that I have no words to describe it'. The excitement her appreciation of the carvings and the sense of them as the work of a 'great artist' is very reminiscent of Sally Price's discussion of the 'connoisseur' of 'primitive art';¹³⁵ the sense of other cultures (here, Sahrawi culture) as 'exotic' and 'primitive' creates for San Mao an ecstasy over the carvings that her Sahrawi neighbours do not share:

When [they] discovered that I had paid 1000 pesetas for them, they laughed themselves almost to death. They thought that I was a fool. I thought that this mutual incomprehension was produced by the fact that we had different cultural levels.

For me, these were priceless treasures.¹³⁶

The next day San Mao returns to the graveyard in search of more carvings, but to no avail¹³⁷; the fact that there is now no trace of the stone carver allows her to add another layer of exoticism to the objects with an element of supernatural fantasy: 'My five stone figures are like keepsakes given to me by a ghostly spirit'.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 245-247. For further discussion see Appendix 3.

¹³⁵ Sally Price discusses responses to such works ('strange excitement', 'what moved me so deeply', 'a direct response to the power and beauty of that creation'; 'It was as if a force radiated from the statue', 'I did not use words. The perception was pure intuition') and the ideology of 'silent encounters between Primitive objects and Civilized viewers', Price pp. 90-92. Price also discusses the notion of 'artistic intervention', by which collectors and dealers perceive their role as 'a vigorously active one, not unrelated to an artist's act of physical creation...by selecting, according to their personal vision, exceptional works crafted by people who had no comparable vision, people whose criteria of excellence had no significant aesthetic component', Price p. 104. Price discusses the notion that 'Primitive Art emerges directly and spontaneously from psychological drives....Primitive artists are imagined to express their feelings free from the intrusive overlay of learned behavior and conscious constraints that mold the work of the Civilized artist.... Western enthusiasts of Primitive Art have always argued that its authors are in particularly close touch with the 'fundamental, basic and essential drives of life' - drives that Civilized Man shares but 'buries' under a layer of learned behavior', Price p. 32.

¹³⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 247. See 'San Mao Goes Shopping' for a discussion of 'cultural level' and 'ethnic' art.

¹³⁷ So entranced is San Mao with her art purchases that she wants more. She returns to look for the old man among the graves, but he is not there. San Mao's 'cultural level' has transformed the figures into 'primitive' artefacts and the elderly mute man into a 'ghostly spirit'. When the figures appear again in a later story, they constitute an illustration of the shared appreciation of the 'primitive' between San Mao and European 'culture workers' (see below).

¹³⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 247.

The 'atmosphere' for San Mao's home is created by touches of Chinese cultural input from San Mao's family and friends:

I put a white cloth on the table and on it the fine bamboo screen that my mother had sent me...I had also received a ceramic tea-set. My dear friend Lin Funan had sent me a big modern print, and Mr Ping had sent me a big box of *Crown* books...When my mother's paper lightshades were hung up and 'Cloud Gate Dance Company' was on the wall in Lin Huaimin's calligraphy like dancing dragons and phoenixes in white characters on a black background, our home began to have an inexpressible atmosphere and feeling.¹³⁹

With the addition of 'the fragrance of books', magazines (including, of course, *National Geographic*), pot-plants (ingeniously acquired by San Mao from another Spanish colonial institution)¹⁴⁰ and soft music from a cassette player, San Mao can say that 'after a year, our home had become a real palace of art'.¹⁴¹ This detailed account of San Mao's creation of a private, aesthetic, personal space in the desert sparked enormous interest among readers and biographers,¹⁴² and her personal tastes in home decor were to become an important feature of her image throughout her life.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 240-241. 'Mr Ping' is Ping Xintao, editor of *Crown* magazine and founder of the Crown Publishing House, which published San Mao's works (also literary editor of the *United Daily News* who published her first stories); Lin Huaimin, a noted Taiwan dancer and choreographer, is the founder of the Cloud Gate (Yunmen) Dance Company.

¹⁴⁰ San Mao and José creep one night into the garden of the governor general's house to pillage plants. When the guard sees them and comes their way, San Mao urges José to hold her close and kiss her, making sure that the plastic bags of stolen plants are squashed between them and out of sight of the guard. Thus the guard, unaware that they are pilfering plants, simply orders them on their way - and they sidle off, the bags of plants still sandwiched between them. *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 243-244.

¹⁴¹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 248.

¹⁴² For example Pan Xiangli, in her biography of San Mao, cites the home decorating story at length and notes that 'San Mao not only settled in the desert but also created a miracle through her own wisdom and ability: she set up a home out of nothing, establishing with José a desert castle that became like paradise', Pan p. 36.

¹⁴³ From time to time photographs of the interior of her house in Taipei and of the ornaments with which it was filled were printed in Taiwan magazines (e.g. a four-page pictorial article of her new house on Yangming Shan in *Nüxing* (Woman) 195, Feb 1983. *My Treasures*, a collection of photographs and stories of some of San Mao's ornaments and jewellery, contributed to this public visibility of San Mao's tastes (see Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping'). Many former San Mao readers have told me in conversation that at the time they were reading her work they wished to decorate their homes like San Mao. After San Mao's death, the last house in Taipei she had decorated was kept intact by her family as a San Mao museum, a monument to her taste. The importance of home as display and expression of the self, visible in the proliferation of 'home' products and magazines and the emphasis on a coordinated 'lifestyle' is characteristic of middle classes in Taiwan as in other affluent societies in the late twentieth century. In a published letter to a reader who wrote asking how to have a better life, San Mao's advice is to redecorate her room (in similar manner to her own home decoration in the Sahara, with bright white whitewash, beautiful curtains, pot plants and posters, bookshelves, a 'soft and gentle lamp' and a radio); 'Decorating the room beautifully', she states, 'is the first step towards changing your state of mind and enjoying life', *Heart-to-Heart* p. 90. Chris Rojek has discussed notions of privacy and self-expression through creative home decoration stemming from Victorian times, when middle class women 'were expected to cultivate gentility, comfort and security as a refuge from the vast, "unnatural" external world of urban, impersonal bourgeois society'. As in the case of the 19th-century English middle classes, the cleanliness and order of

In their discussions of the writings of European women in Africa, Susan Horton and Mary Louise Pratt have both noted the tendency towards a 'space clearing and home building' project¹⁴⁴ and the importance for these women of their homes as 'private seats of selfhood' from which 'they depict selves emerging to explore the world in circular expeditions that take them out into the public and new, then back to the familiar and enclosed'.¹⁴⁵ San Mao's nest-building in the desert also manifests this urge to create the 'room of one's own', the small corner of privacy within the foreign environment on which she can stamp her own personality and express her individuality as she pleases.¹⁴⁶ For her desert home to be an acceptable seat for the kind of self that she creates through her writings, it must be an artistic space as well as a comfortable haven; and the tastefully furnished environment created by her creativity and hard work gains approval from all comers. From this home base, San Mao moves out to interact with the desert and its people, and into it come those she selectively invites. There are, however, interruptions from the desert that are beyond her control: the sand that blows in through the open roofwell in sandstorms, the landlord's children who sit on the roof watching her and José as they eat and sleep¹⁴⁷, the goats that from time to time fall through the roofwell into the house, and the Sahrawi neighbours who are to play such an important part in the stories of the Sahara.

San Mao's home likewise symbolised virtue; and she too, from her own 'bourgeois interior...made criticisms of the moral disorder and aesthetic ugliness' of what surrounded her (i.e. the desert), Rojek pp. 68-72. Rojek draws parallels between the ordering of the house and the moral activities that Victorian women took upon themselves in society; San Mao's moral, 'civilising' activities will be discussed in the following chapter.

¹⁴⁴ 'If the male European colonizer's impulse was to encircle and claim countries and continents', notes Horton, 'the European woman's seems to have been to draw a minute circle within that circle that produced [a] room of her own', Horton pp. 63-64.

¹⁴⁵ Pratt contrasts these accounts by women with male writings, in which, she notes, homes and interiors of rooms are almost never described. She notes the function of the 'home' for colonial women in foreign lands as 'the site above all of solitude, the private place in which the lone subjectivity collects itself, creates itself, in order to sally forth into the world'. Pratt pp. 157-160. Though San Mao's home is shared with José, it is presented very much as the personal space in which she spends much of her time alone (while he works irregular shifts far away at the phosphate mine), where she performs her persona as woman of the Sahara, where outsiders come to seek her, where she invites locals to visit but excludes them when she chooses. It is also, of course, the place where she finds the solitude to write her narratives and thus to create the San Mao that captured so many readers' imaginations back at home in Taiwan.

¹⁴⁶ Mary Louise Pratt has discussed the tendency in women's writings about travel and residence in foreign lands for the books to be 'emplotted in a centripetal fashion around places of residence from which the protagonist sallies forth and to which she returns'; the women may make 'lengthy inland journeys', but 'it is this fixed positioning that organizes the narrative'; their 'territorial claim was to private space, a personal, room-sized empire', Pratt pp. 159-160. For San Mao as for the writers considered by Pratt, 'social and political life are centers of personal engagement'; 'the indoor world is the seat of the self'; like them, she 'privileges' her house as a 'refuge and source of wellbeing'.

¹⁴⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 128.

Sahrawi

Living in a small town in the desert, alone at home all day and with no outside employment, San Mao would have had ample time in which to observe the locals and interact with them when she chose. Several stories in *Stories of the Sahara* concern the habits of her Sahrawi neighbours. San Mao was free to write whatever she liked about these people with perfect impunity; there was no chance that any of them might become literate enough in her language to be able to read her representations of them, let alone respond to what she said¹⁴⁸. Thus, as so many outsiders in economically poor and culturally unfamiliar places have done before her, she was able to produce the locals as 'natives', selecting or fabricating habits that seemed to her quaint and customs she considered barbaric.¹⁴⁹ A presentation of 'alien' people as aesthetic and sensual, savage and barbarous is, as Shirley Foster has pointed out, an effective way of creating a distance between them and oneself,¹⁵⁰ and San Mao's careful differentiation of herself from them will be discussed below.¹⁵¹ In her depictions of these 'natives', she is of course creating also a picture of herself as reflected in their reactions to and interactions with her. The projects of self-creation and the creation of the Sahrawi are interdependent; as Susan Horton has pointed out, 'spectacular acts of self-construction and home building require..large audiences of erstwhile participants'.¹⁵²

For an outsider in any society, there are obviously difficulties in getting to know people; in San Mao's case, as well as the difficulties of finding opportunities to build relationships with new people, there are linguistic and cultural, social and economic differences between herself and the Sahrawi people around her. San Mao can speak the coloniser's language, Spanish, but not the language of the local people,¹⁵³ and she remarks on her loneliness when first

¹⁴⁸ Claiming to have made contact with some of the people who appear in San Mao's Saharan stories, Zhang Yun notes that none of them knew that she was a writer at all, and certainly had no idea that she had written about them; he also notes that at least one (Guka) was worried about what San Mao might have said about her, Zhang p. 164.

¹⁴⁹ What San Mao chooses to report on is reminiscent of what Bishop has described as themes that fascinated the European imagination of Tibet for 150 years: these include dirt, animals (dogs in Tibet, goats in the Sahara), ceremonies (funerals in Tibet, weddings in the Sahara), religion, national character, religion, landscape views and idleness, Bishop p. 41, 63.

¹⁵⁰ Foster pp. 63-4.

¹⁵¹ At the same time, there are ways in which she presents herself as close to certain Sahrawi - notably Shayida and the family of Bassiri - see Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History' for a discussion of San Mao's strategies for making herself 'belong'.

¹⁵² Horton p. 8. As noted in Chapter 1, 'the European subject becomes real to itself by seeing its reflection in the eyes of another'; and this process of becoming real took narrative, for Isak Dinesen at least, 'not so much [as] descriptions of Africans as reports of Africans' responses to *her*', Horton p. 195. Similar observations can be made of San Mao's writings of the Sahara.

¹⁵³ The language spoken by the Sahrawi people in El Ayoun (and indeed the majority of population of the Western Sahara) is Hassaniyya Arabic, Damis p. 6). Though San Mao cannot

she arrived in the desert: 'I was very lonely. I couldn't speak Arabic and the neighbours were all native Saharans, Africans. Very few of their women could speak Spanish - but the children could half speak it'.¹⁵⁴ In their neighbourhood on the outskirts of El Ayoun there are, she notes, very few Europeans,¹⁵⁵ and therefore there is little choice of social contact other than the Sahrawi people; a touch patronisingly, perhaps, San Mao states that 'José and I were happy to know the locals, so most of our friends were Sahrawi'.¹⁵⁶ Her interactions are restricted, however, to those who have some knowledge of Spanish. For outsiders in any community, particularly those without the necessary language skills to participate fully in the life of that community, small casual encounters with the people one meets in the course of everyday life (such as shop-keepers) can assume great significance as personal contacts, and the most superficial of acquaintances is often considered a 'friend'. This certainly appears true for San Mao: 'After I'd been there for a month or so' she claims, 'I had met a lot of people, and had both Spanish and Sahrawi friends'.¹⁵⁷

We had lots of Sahrawi friends in this town - the person selling stamps in the post office, the guards at the law courts, the company drivers, shop proprietors, the people pretending to be blind and begging, the person who delivered water ...powerful clan leaders, penniless slaves, neighbours of both sexes and all ages, policemen, pickpockets, all kinds of people were our *shaheibi* (friends).¹⁵⁸

Many of the interactions San Mao describes with Sahrawi are with the family of Handi,¹⁵⁹ her landlord and next-door neighbour. The day after she moves into her El Ayoun house, 'a big group' of Handi's children come to visit. The first impression she receives (and passes on to her readers) of the children is

she frequently displays the few words she knows, transliterated into Mandarin: *xiaoyima* (tent); *shaheibi* (friend); *heke* (good), *wayeda* (boys).

¹⁵⁴ 'I don't want to keep harping on about my loneliness, but for the first while I could hardly endure this lesson, and I wanted to hit the road back to Europe', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 178. She describes herself pleading with José not to go to work, but to stay with her, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 227. Later, however, once she has got to know some of her neighbours, she notes that 'Thanks to these neighbours, my life in the desert was full of interest and variety, and I didn't know what loneliness was like any more', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 136.

¹⁵⁵ The Spanish population in the Western Sahara was about 35,000 in 1973; about half of these were soldiers, and the rest were civilian administrators, technicians and business-people and their families. According to Damis, '(v)irtually no Spaniards lived outside the towns or the military garrisons', Damis p. 12. The Spanish wives of Fosbucraa employees whom San Mao meets will not so much as visit such a district, let alone live there. Spain is represented only by José and one other Spanish family, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 225. Zhang Yun, writing about El Ayoun 20 years later, reiterates that San Mao 'did not live with the Spanish, but with the Sahrawi', but also casts doubt on her claim to be 'alone' among the Sahrawi; his Sahrawi guide tells him that the inhabitants of Golden River Street had all been 'Spanish people and wealthy Sahrawi', Zhang p. 53.

¹⁵⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 49.

¹⁵⁷ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p.184.

¹⁵⁸ *Crying Camels* p. 101.

¹⁵⁹ Handi, a Sahrawi, has worked for the Spanish for more than 20 years; a policeman, he speaks 'good Spanish'. *Crying Camels* p. 106; *The Rainy season Will Not Return* p. 183.

of dirt and smell, and her attention to the fact that they are poorly clad seems to suggest that this is a result of their taste for the 'barbaric' or 'primitive' rather than because they are poor: the girls' skirts are 'filthy'; some of the boys are naked; none of the children are wearing shoes; and they all smell strongly. All of them, notes San Mao, are 'good-looking', but 'a bit too dirty'. This dirtiness and smell are to become recurring features of San Mao's descriptions of the desert-dwellers, and will be further discussed later in this chapter. The children are accompanied by a beautiful fat woman dressed in the manner that San Mao is later to note as typical of Sahrawi women;¹⁶⁰ she takes the initiative and greets San Mao warmly. 'I liked her a lot', notes San Mao, assuming her to be Handi's wife.¹⁶¹ Later, when Handi tells her that she is actually his eldest daughter, Guka, and that she is only ten years old, San Mao is astonished and disbelieving: 'Guka was very mature; she looked as if she would be about 30'.¹⁶² The question of Guka's age remains ambiguous, but she is to become San Mao's closest Sahrawi friend.¹⁶³ Such a relationship between a thirty-year-old woman and a child of ten might seem a little strange, though it would certainly highlight the diversity and flexibility of San Mao's social interactions. Guka herself is portrayed as not knowing her age, thus leaving open the possibility of error.¹⁶⁴ Yet when Guka is compelled by her family to marry, San Mao unquestioningly places her at ten years old in order to highlight the 'barbaric' nature of Saharan marriage customs. Guka becomes for San Mao the exemplar around whom she can construct her narratives of what 'the Sahrawi' are like: dirty, childlike, lacking in responsibility, addicted to gossip and enslaved to traditional marriage customs; and Guka is one of San Mao's earliest subjects for the civilising aid she

¹⁶⁰ She is wrapped in an outer layer of voluminous dark cloth over her other clothes, and her hair is covered, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 183.

¹⁶¹ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 183.

¹⁶² The archetypal story of guessing games about age in cross-cultural encounters is not one-sided: 'Miss', ventures the landlord, 'you'd be in your teens? You can make friends with my daughter'. Now it is San Mao's turn to be embarrassed, not knowing how to tell him her real age (thirty, the very age she had thought Guka was) *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 184.

¹⁶³ 'Out of all the neighbours', remarks San Mao, 'the one I was most friendly with was Guka'. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 134. Biographers Cui and Zhao suggest that Guka, her father Handi and her brother Bashin, the shop-keeper Shalun (see Chapter 3) and 'a beautiful young woman named Mina' (whom San Mao mentions only once, suggesting that she has designs on José) are all San Mao's good friends, but that only the noble, beautiful and doomed trio Aofeilua, Shayida and Bassiri are her 'close' friends, Cui and Zhao p. 141. According to San Mao's account, she would appear to have met Bassiri on only two or three occasions; the story of Aofeilua, Shayida and Bassiri, one of San Mao's most dramatic Saharan tales, is discussed in Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'.

¹⁶⁴ When San Mao asks her, Guka refers her to her father with the words, 'We Saharan women don't know our own ages', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 57. In a later story, San Mao describes asking her if she is really only ten years old. Guka replies that she can only count as far as her ten fingers, and that women don't keep count of their own ages; San Mao asserts that neither Guka's mother nor any of the neighbouring women can count or know their ages either, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp.183-184.

offers to the Sahrawi (discussed in the following chapter).¹⁶⁵ Guka's position becomes something akin to that of the 'anthropologist's friend' for San Mao in this foreign culture, both exemplifying and explaining it to her as the situation requires. Her 'judgment of right and wrong', for example, often astonishes San Mao,¹⁶⁶ and the example of Guka's supposedly deviant Saharan morality that follows relates to a habit that San Mao generalises as endemic among the whole community that surrounds her: borrowing.

One night, when San Mao and José are dressing for a function at the National Hotel¹⁶⁷, she discovers that the 'patterned high-heeled leather shoes' to match her black evening dress are missing; 'a pair of filthy black pointy-toed desert shoes' is there in their place. These she recognises as Guka's.

I rushed to Guka's house, grabbed her and asked fiercely, 'My shoes! what about my shoes? why did you steal them?' I yelled at her; 'Find them and give them back at once, you bastard!'

Guka went slowly off to look for them - in the kitchen, under the mats, among the goats, behind the door - she looked everywhere but couldn't find them.

'My sister wore them out to play; they aren't here', she said calmly.

'I'll come back and settle this with you tomorrow'. I went home with gritted teeth.¹⁶⁸

Without the right shoes, San Mao cannot wear her evening dress as planned. The simple outfit she wears instead causes her (and by extension José) to lose face among the formally dressed (European) wives of José's superiors.¹⁶⁹

The next day, Guka brings back the party shoes - 'ruined'.

'Oh, you're angry, you're angry - but I won't get angry'. Guka's face was red and swollen. She was very angry. 'Your shoes were at my place, but my shoes are not still here at your place - it's me that should be angry, more so than you'.¹⁷⁰

Despite her annoyance, San Mao cannot help laughing at Guka's 'ridiculous explanation', and she tells Guka that she belongs in a mental asylum - a reference that Guka is at a loss to understand. But the behaviour that makes San Mao laughingly question both her sanity and her morality is not unique to Guka. All Sahrawi are presented to the reader through San Mao's gaze as inveterate borrowers, shamelessly willing to exploit the superior efficiency of San Mao and José who are responsible enough to buy everything they need and

¹⁶⁵ She practises medicine on Guka (making a paste out of ground soy beans as a poultice for a boil) and lends her cleaning equipment to Guka's household because she is offended by the dirt.

¹⁶⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 134.

¹⁶⁷ That is the 4-star hotel which San Mao had initially thought was a 'native palace'.

¹⁶⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 135.

¹⁶⁹ San Mao is wearing a 'white cotton dress and sandals' among 'their atmosphere of jewels and pearls', and certain 'ill-intentioned colleagues' remark that she looks like a shepherdess, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 135.

¹⁷⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 135.

capable enough to build and repair things around the house. The borrowing begins with cleaning materials;¹⁷¹ but before long, we are told, there are Sahrawi arriving all day, every day, to get what they can from San Mao and José:

From about 9 am every day, there were children at our home incessantly wanting things.

'My brother says we need to borrow a lightbulb'.

'My mother says we need an onion'.

'My dad wants a can of petrol'.

'We need cotton wool'.

'Give me the hairdryer'.

'Lend my sister your iron'.

'I want some nails, and a bit of electric cable'.

The other things they wanted were astonishing: the annoying thing was that we always had everything, and we felt apologetic if we didn't give it to them - but if we did, of course they wouldn't return it.

'These awful people, why don't they go into town and buy them?' José would often say - but then whenever the children came to borrow he would still give them what they wanted.¹⁷²

There are certain things it seems only San Mao can supply - space in a fridge, for example,¹⁷³ or mercurochrome.¹⁷⁴ But is not out of poverty, she claims, that her neighbours wish to borrow her things; she prefers to believe that they are not poor at all:

Their dirty clothes and smell gives the erroneous impression that they are a poverty-stricken, down-and-out bunch. In fact, every family that lives near us not only has a subsidy from the Spanish government but a formal job as well, in addition to which they rent their houses out to Europeans to live in and they have big flocks of goats. Some have shops in town as well. Their income is extremely stable and quite considerable. So the local people often say that Sahrawi without any economic foundation could not possibly live in the little town of El Ayoun.¹⁷⁵

If the endless borrowing does not stem from poverty, we are perhaps to draw the implication that it is a result of childlike disorganisation on the part of the Sahrawi, and a childlike curiosity about her home that prompts them to 'surge in'

¹⁷¹ 'Because we were so close to our neighbours, my bucket and broom would circulate until sunset and I wouldn't get a turn at using them. But that didn't matter, because once they had finished using these 2 things they would return them to me', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 124.

¹⁷² *Stories of the Sahara* p. 125.

¹⁷³ A child brings a dead camel to the door with the words, 'My Mum says we can put this camel into your fridge', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 126.

¹⁷⁴ Though San Mao often talks of dispensing medication to her Sahrawi neighbours (discussed in Chapter 3), the borrowing of mercurochrome on this occasion has nothing to do with medicinal uses; rather, the neighbouring women paint their faces and hands with it and gather on the roof to dance and sing together. 'Seeing the strange use [it] was being put to, I couldn't be angry', San Mao exclaims, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 127.

¹⁷⁵ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 123. Indeed Golden River Street, where San Mao lives, is supposed to house only 'the rich people of the desert' (*Stories of the Sahara* p. 124). The 'subsidy' noted here was, notes Damis, a response to 'the severe drought that persisted throughout the Sahel from the late 1960s to 1974'; 'the Spanish administration was in close contact with the vast majority of Sahrawi nomads through the provision of essential food subsidies that were given only to persons formally registered with the government', Damis p. 8.

and discover all of San Mao's possessions.¹⁷⁶ Explicit links are also made between supposed Sahrawi wealth, filth and the 'barbaric' marriage customs discussed below.¹⁷⁷ Thus the Sahrawi are portrayed by San Mao as prompted by values that, through their alienness to her own, make them not only childlike but comic as well. San Mao's biographers Cui Jianfei and Zhao Jun interpret her story of their borrowing habits as an exposure of the Sahrawi people for the 'many small injustices' they inflicted upon San Mao and José by constantly borrowing their possessions.¹⁷⁸

Finally, exasperated with Guka over her borrowing of the shoes, San Mao asks her,

'Guka, let me ask you, and then you go and ask all of the neighbouring women: apart from my toothbrush and my husband, is there anything in this house that you aren't interested in and don't want to borrow?'
She...asked at once, 'What's your toothbrush like?'
'Get out of here', I yelled.
As she left, Guka said, 'I only wanted to have a look at your toothbrush, I don't want your husband - really!'
When I had shut the door, I could still hear Guka saying loudly to another woman in the street, 'See, she hurt my pride'.¹⁷⁹

As an exemplar of Sahrawi ways, Guka does not feature only in the borrowing story. It is through Guka that San Mao is exposed to Sahrawi marriage practices as well, in a story titled 'The child bride'.¹⁸⁰ San Mao writes

¹⁷⁶ 'after a while my door was opening and shutting all the time; and when I opened it, a bunch of women and children would surge in, so our neighbours could see our lifestyle and everyday household objects very clearly. José is not mean and neither am I, and we are kind to other people, so our neighbours gradually learned how to exploit this weakness fully', *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 124-125. After likening the presence of the neighbouring women in her house to 'a disaster movie', San Mao describes them coming to 'knock hard on the door and abuse me' when José has bought a television and they want to come in and watch it, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 251.

¹⁷⁷ 'Learning to drive was the big fashion in the desert. There were big cars parked outside many patched and worn tents...Lots of desert fathers sold their beautiful daughters and bought cars with the profits. For the Saharans, the sole symbol of advancing toward civilisation was to sit in their own car. It didn't matter if people stank', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 188.

¹⁷⁸ Cui and Zhao pp. 139-140.

¹⁷⁹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 136. 'Hurting my pride' is, according to San Mao, a common catchphrase of Sahrawi women; indeed she claims that respect for Sahrawi pride is the reason for lending them everything they want. She places the phrase in ironic contexts and depicts herself 'learning from the neighbours' and using it herself when, trying to borrow back some matches from a neighbour to whom she had given five new boxes of matches a few days earlier, she is told that only three matches can be spared from the last remaining box (*Stories of the Sahara* p131). San Mao claims that Guka and her sisters even borrow her underwear, taking it from the washing line on the roof and returning it, worn and unwashed, several days later. José, in fact, builds a wall across the roof to keep out 'not only the neighbour's goats but his daughters as well', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 129.

¹⁸⁰ 'Wawa xinniàng', literally 'baby bride'. The 'child bride' theme is also mentioned by San Mao in an earlier story, but without the level of personal involvement that she claims to have in the story of Guka. A male friend tells San Mao that he will be marrying soon. She is surprised that her high-school educated friend is planning to marry a poor tent-dweller, and horrified to learn that his fiancée is 'only 11'. The young man is angry and defensive when San Mao chides him, and tells her that 'when my first wife married me she was only 9; now she's 14, and we have 2 children'. San Mao becomes even more incensed when she discovers that the reason he has

herself immediately into a central place in the marriage drama as soon as Handi announces to her that a husband has been chosen for Guka and she is to marry soon.¹⁸¹ After a token exchange about Guka's supposedly young age (in which San Mao apparently learns that ten is by no means young by Sahrawi standards),¹⁸² San Mao portrays herself being asked to break the news to Guka.¹⁸³ It hardly seems likely that an outsider thought to be coeval with Guka should be selected for this task; however, San Mao depicts herself breaking the news to Guka the very next day - in what seems a far from sensitive way. Handing her a cup of tea she remarks,

'Guka, it's your turn now'...

'What?'...

'Silly, you're going to be married'...

She was obviously amazed. She reddened suddenly, and asked in a small voice 'When?'...

'10 days after Ramadan. Do you know who it might be?'

She shook her head, put down cup and left without a word. That was the first time I saw her face sad.¹⁸⁴

Later San Mao also takes on the responsibility of telling Guka who her husband is to be. She describes the chosen husband, Abudi, in approving terms,¹⁸⁵ and chooses to interpret Guka's obvious embarrassment as assent.¹⁸⁶

The preparations and the marriage are described with horrified fascination and in great detail. When the bride price is delivered, San Mao declares herself astonished by the number and value of the gifts and, although disapproving of the custom ('This is really trading in human beings!'), is willing to participate in José's jokes about it ('I never thought Guka was worth so much!' he remarks), and ironically admits to being impressed and rather envious of

never mentioned his first wife is that he does not think women are important enough to be worth mentioning, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 184-185. Throughout the anecdote, San Mao expresses a belief that Spanish education should have eradicated such practices, similar to her belief that Handi, her landlord, should have learned 'civilised' values from working with the Spanish colonial police force (see Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'). Thus San Mao replicates 'the dominant ideology of imperialism: that it was only through contact with Western civilization that the "natives" had any chance of being delivered from their own tyrannical customs', Ware p. 147.

¹⁸¹ In addition to stressing her age, San Mao notes the youthfulness of Guka's appearance here. In contrast to her description of Guka in other stories as a woman in her thirties, wrapped in cloth and with her head covered, San Mao presents Guka in the marriage story as being dressed as a child - barefoot, unveiled, her hair uncovered and without the extra cloth swathed over her clothes that adult women wear, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 57.

¹⁸² Don't you think Guka is a little young? She is only 10', protests San Mao; Guka's father responds with the words 'Young? My wife was only eight when she married me', whereupon San Mao notes that this is 'Saharan custom' and argues no further. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 58.

¹⁸³ San Mao demurs ('Why don't you talk to her yourselves?') but Guka's parents insist ('How can we talk directly about something like this?'), *Stories of the Sahara* p. 58.

¹⁸⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 58.

¹⁸⁵ He is handsome and polite, makes a very good first impression and is 'not dark', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 59.

¹⁸⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 59.

Guka's obvious 'worth' ('My parents didn't get so much as one goat when I got married'). Both disgust and humour here serve here as elsewhere to distance San Mao from the 'backwardness' of Sahrawi custom.

As preparations for the wedding continue, Guka acquires the material badges of maturity: she begins to dress differently¹⁸⁷ and is 'smeared' all over with 'pungent perfume'; this, 'mingled with the strange smell of not having washed for years', gives rise to yet another invocation of Sahrawi dirt and smell. As a result of these changes, notes San Mao, 'one felt she really was a Sahrawi woman' - although it will be remembered that she is supposed to be ten years old. San Mao is also careful to remind us that, as a Sahrawi woman, Guka is now largely confined to her home. This forms another contrast with San Mao herself, who depicts herself driving freely around the desert and travelling wherever she pleases. The contrast continues when Guka dresses for her wedding. San Mao can approve of her ceremonial hairstyle (which reminds her of 'a Chinese palace woman of old'), but other aspects of Guka's adornment offend her aesthetic sense; Guka does not wear make-up for her wedding, does not bathe (again the ever-present fascination with dirt), and looks fat in her wedding dress.¹⁸⁸ When San Mao gives voice to her disgust ('You're so fat!') she is assured by Guka's aunt that 'Fat is beautiful - we want fat'; to San Mao, however (whose valuing of thinness will be discussed further below), only Guka's face can be considered beautiful.

Guka is sent to her aunt's house for the night, to be fetched back in the morning in a marriage ritual that publicly enacts the authority of bridegroom over bride in the form of a ritualised capture.¹⁸⁹ Some show of violence is, according to San Mao, an accepted part of the proceedings; the bride is expected to resist and the bridegroom to use force.¹⁹⁰ Meanwhile, at Handi's home, where the festivities have already begun, San Mao's detailed descriptions hold threatening touches:

the filthy mats were gone, the goats had been chased out, there was a slaughtered camel at the door...there were lots of red Arab carpets on the floor, and a goatskin drum stood in the corner. It looked about 100 years old...At dusk...the drum began to sound, gloomy and monotonous, and it

¹⁸⁷ Guka begins to wrap herself in an outer cloth, to wear gold and silver anklets, and to put up her hair, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 60. As noted, this conflicts with San Mao's description of her first meeting with Guka, when she is already dressed in the manner of an adult Sahrawi woman.

¹⁸⁸ In 'her new white dress with many little folds wrapped around with a piece of black cloth, her already fat body looked even more swollen', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 61.

¹⁸⁹ Such marriage customs are often associated with payment of bride price. Guka and Abudi are to stay in Guka's parental home after the marriage; this, notes San Mao, explains the high bride price - not the 'worth' of Guka.

¹⁹⁰ A bloodied cloth is to be displayed as proof of consummation. Zhang Yun asks his Sahrawi guide if the custom of the bride fighting the groom still exists, and is told that some places still preserve it, Zhang p. 41.

carried a long way. If we hadn't know beforehand that it was a wedding, this mysterious rhythm would actually be rather terrifying...I fantasised that I was entering into a beautiful story in the Arabian Nights...Inside the house, the atmosphere wasn't very nice; a whole bunch of Sahrawi men were sitting in the main room, all smoking, and the air was really bad.¹⁹¹

The atmosphere is exotic to the point of transporting San Mao not only back in time but also into fiction and the thrilling world of the macabre. As in her initial arrival story, the empty stage set delights her; what brings her back from her fantasy is the physical presence of real Sahrawi. Their music is another point of distance for San Mao (she describes it as 'wailing shrilly' with a 'primitive' voice', 'a song with no rising or falling, a tune like weeping');¹⁹² the fact that women are barred from the festivities (the slave musician is the only woman whose presence is permitted) is presented as in keeping with the 'primitive' nature of the occasion. The music continues late into the night; then, at 3 o'clock in the morning, Guka's sisters fetch San Mao to watch the 'fun' of Guka's homecoming. Again the bar on women's participation is stressed - but San Mao, perhaps by virtue of her place as an outsider, is able to argue herself a place in the party. A convoy of jeeps drives out into the desert with a great fanfare of horns; when they arrive at the house of Guka's aunt, the men call out to her - with voices described again as 'primitive'¹⁹³ - to open the door.

Throughout the distressing scene that follows, the emotional focus is not upon the young woman whose suffering is the centre of the action, but on San Mao herself - who, we learn, is 'angry', 'agitated', 'indignant' and 'anxious' by turns:

What made me really angry was watching the groom's party 'collecting the bride'. Abudi got out of the car and barged into the room where Guka was sitting with lots of his friends - without greeting anyone, he just went up and grabbed Guka's arm and pulled her roughly to come out. Everyone was laughing; only Guka struggled with her head bent. Because she was very fat, Abudi's friends helped pull her, and she began to cry and shout. I've no idea if she was really crying or just pretending, but seeing this bunch of people grabbing her so rudely and violently made me very agitated. I bit my lip and watched to see how the drama would unfold, even though I was already indignant.

Now Guka was outside. Suddenly she reached out her hand and...scratched Abudi's face. Several trickles of blood appeared. Abudi wasn't weak, and he twisted Guka's fingers in return. Then everyone around became quiet, and the only sound in empty night was Guka's intermittent short sobs.

Guka was dragged towards the jeep as they fought. I was very anxious, and I cried out to her, 'Get in the car, silly, you can't beat them!'.

¹⁹¹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 61.

¹⁹² Indeed San Mao admits that if she had not known that the occasion was supposed to be a joyful one, she could not have divined this from the ambience, the dress of the participants or the music. Again the implication is that this is a Sahrawi lack - a failure to project enough delight.

¹⁹³ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 63.

Guka's brother said to me with a smile, 'Don't worry, this is our custom; if you don't fight when you get married, people will mock you afterwards. You're only a good woman if you fight'.
 'If you have to fight hard, it's better not to get married'.
 'Just wait till she goes into the bridal chamber; she has to cry and yell! Wait till you've seen that, that's really interesting'.¹⁹⁴

'Yes', remarks San Mao in an aside to her readers, 'it is really interesting - but I don't like this way of getting married'.¹⁹⁵ Although she is careful to set herself aside from the 'festivities' by her protestations of emotional outrage, she is nonetheless eager to participate in watching the 'fun'.

Returning to Guka's home, they are met by her female relatives and friends, who escort her to an inner room to sit alone, waiting, while the party continues outside. San Mao and José are invited to feast with Abudi and his friends; San Mao, though tired, cannot bear to leave because 'the best bit was yet to come' - the 'best' bit, of course, being the most painful part for her friend. Guka continues to wait offstage while the male guests 'clap and groan' along with the sound of the drums until, near sunrise, Abudi rises to his feet. The drums stop, all eyes are fixed on him, and his friends 'laugh stupidly' as he walks towards Guka's room. In admitting her own sense of guilt or complicity, San Mao brings the focus firmly back to herself:¹⁹⁶

I began to be extremely nervous, with a nameless unease in my heart, thinking of what Guka's brother had said (that she has to cry when they go into the bridal chamber), I felt that the people waiting outside (including me) were scoundrels enough. The strange thing was that they had used the excuse of 'custom' and hadn't changed it.¹⁹⁷

Now Abudi enters Guka's room.

I don't know how many centuries passed till we heard Guka's sobbing cry, 'Ah!', and then silence. She was required by custom to cry out, but her voice held such pain - it was so real, so helpless, so long, that my eyes became wet as I sat quietly there.
 'When you think about it, she's still just a 10 year old girl. It's cruel', I said to José angrily.¹⁹⁸

At this juncture, San Mao adds the words, 'We were the only outsiders there that day'. It is unclear what these words are intended to convey. Perhaps the implication is that 'outsiders' have not witnessed such an event before; or that if more 'outsiders' were there to witness it then they could have prevented it from taking place; that she and José are somehow especially privileged (although repelled) to have been included; or indeed that they are somehow especially

¹⁹⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 63-64.

¹⁹⁵ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 64.

¹⁹⁶ This tendency to focus on her own reactions is discussed in Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'.

¹⁹⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 64-65.

¹⁹⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 65.

guilty (more 'scoundrels' than the Saharans) by virtue of their superior education and enlightened moral values. Whatever the implication, it is difficult to avoid a sense of voyeurism in San Mao's account; the spectacle may be a sad one but it is a spectacle nonetheless.

When Abudi came out carrying a white cloth stained with blood, his friends began to yell, with a warmth in their voices that I cannot describe. In their view, a wedding night was no more than just the violent snatching of a little girl's chastity.

I felt that for the wedding to end in this way was disappointing and ridiculous. I stood up and strode out without saying goodbye to anyone.¹⁹⁹

Again the focus moves to San Mao's own reactions, her own sense of superior morality and civilised behaviour. She makes herself even more central to the story when, after five more days and nights of singing, drumming and feasting, she is summoned by Guka's sister to the small, dark room which Guka has not left for 6 days and where, apart from Abudi, no one has been allowed to visit her. San Mao's outsider status, it seems, gives her licence to go straight into Guka's room²⁰⁰ and to bring her some food from the wedding feast. Guka is very happy to see her; kissing her, she begs, 'San Mao, don't go'.

'San Mao, do you think I will have a baby soon?' she asked me softly. I didn't know how to reply,..her face, which had been so fat before now, had become so thin in five days that her eyes were sunken. My heart jumped and I stared at her mutely.

'Give me some medicine, OK? That medicine that stops you having a baby?' she pled with me in a low, urgent voice.

I couldn't avert my gaze. I kept looking at her ten-year-old face.

'OK, I'll give you some. Don't worry, this is a secret between the two of us'. I patted the back of her hand gently. 'Now you can go to sleep - the wedding is over'.²⁰¹

Thus San Mao becomes the narrative focus again and furthermore provides the closure, both to the ceremony (by telling Guka it is over) and to the story. Guka seeks the help that supposedly only San Mao can provide (by virtue of her status as an outsider to whom the local customs do not apply, as a 'liberated' woman unshackled by barbaric customs and as someone with the means, financial and otherwise, to procure medicines²⁰²), and San Mao undertakes to provide it. It might also be noted that the focus on the 'barbaric nature of Sahrawi marriage custom has removed any doubt about Guka's age; now there is no hint of her

¹⁹⁹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 65.

²⁰⁰ 'Because I was an outsider', remarks San Mao, 'I didn't bother about proprieties', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 66.

²⁰¹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 66.

²⁰² San Mao's role as provider of medical help to Sahrawi people will be discussed in Chapter 3.

being more than ten (even though San Mao can acknowledge her need for contraception). Thus ends the story of the 'child bride'.²⁰³

Dirt

It may already be apparent that references to dirt and smell are constant preoccupations in San Mao's descriptions of her interactions with the Sahrawi people around her.²⁰⁴ Some of her first attempts at improving or 'civilising' those around her are prompted by this dirt:

The first time I came back from having tea with the neighbours, José's and my shoes were covered in goat shit, and there was a big patch of saliva from Handi's little son on my long dress. The next day I began to teach Handi's daughters how to mop the floor and wash mats. Of course the bucket, soap powder, mop and water were all supplied by me.²⁰⁵

Though cleanliness is for San Mao an index of 'civilisation', the Sahrawi around her, it seems, have other priorities. San Mao presents them as valuing material display over hygiene: 'For the Sahrawi', she asserts, 'the symbol of advancing towards civilisation was to drive their own car. It didn't matter if people stank'.²⁰⁶ As in the story of the young man who wanted to be photographed in 'civilised' clothes, the desire for material wealth or modern appliances is presented as unreasonable. The important 'civilising' project for San Mao is the

²⁰³ Twenty years later, Zhang Yun claims to have met Guka. She is 'a serious young woman, wrapped in coloured cloth...quite fat, quite dark-skinned'. Zhang asks if she still remembers San Mao; "Of course I do", she replies, 'we were friends. She was very good to me. But I had no idea what happened to her after she left. I only just heard that she died. I'm very sad'. Guka's husband is still a policeman, and they have several children. Zhang tells her that San Mao wrote about attending her wedding; 'as soon as she heard that she had been written about, her lips moved as if she wanted to say something' but the presence of her father apparently constrains her. It is not until he has left the room that she asks, 'What exactly did Echo write about me in her book?' She seems a little worried, and Zhang is certain that she must be afraid that San Mao has told her secrets...For example, on the 5th day of Guka's marriage, she asked San Mao for contraceptives, and San Mao promised to keep her secret. Now I felt more and more that if Guka was so nervous she must be afraid San Mao had told the world the secrets they had shared. So I quickly said to her, "She didn't write about anything in particular, just a few Sahrawi customs.'" Zhang pp. 162-164.

²⁰⁴ References have already been made to San Mao's reiterated remarks about the personal dirt and smell of Sahrawi people. 'Some of the women had very strong body odour', *Crying Camels*, p. 27; 'From their outer appearance, my neighbours all seem to be extremely filthy and slovenly', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 123. Frequent mention is made of the 'filthiness' of her neighbours' houses, with particular attention to the dirtiness of the mats on their floors. Sahrawi dirt pervades San Mao and José's car as well: after José has given some children a lift home, the car is 'covered in soil inside and out', and 'an unusual smell blasted out'; 'the front seat clearly had snot on it', 'the back seat had a urine stain', 'there were little hand prints all over the windows, and there were crumbs everywhere', *Crying Camels* p. 70.

²⁰⁵ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 124. When Zhang Yun meets Handi, now a high-ranking army officer living in a comfortable apartment, he immediately 'thought of San Mao in the desert, how his family was then, sleeping on filthy mats, not knowing how to mop the floor or air the mats, with goats and people living together. When San Mao and José went there for tea, they got goat shit on their shoes', Zhang p.159.

²⁰⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 188

elimination of dirt, in line with the 'aestheticising' project of the European civilising mission noted by Pratt.²⁰⁷

Her fascination with the Sahrawi tolerance of dirt provides the material for several anecdotes. For example, when she learns that the people around her do actually wash sometimes, she constructs the sight as something marvellous and longs to witness it; accordingly, she goes to observe them in their bathhouse. It will be 'a new and fun place to go', she remarks,²⁰⁸ making out of the mundane event of bathing an exotic spectacle.²⁰⁹ San Mao's story of spectating on Sahrawi bathing illustrates 'the intrusiveness of "getting a look"' discussed by Mary Louise Pratt;²¹⁰ and though she does not present her gazing as anything other than innocent, she ultimately denies having been a spectator at the sight for fear of blame by Sahrawi friends.

Although the bathhouse looks unpromising (it is dirty), a Sahrawi woman takes her payment and leads her to a changing room where Sahrawi women's garments are hanging from hooks. Even the empty clothes of the Sahrawi offend her: 'A strong, weird smell assailed my nose, and I held my breath', she complains. The woman orders San Mao to undress.

Silently I took off my dress, to reveal the bikini I had put on at home. I hung up my dress.

'Take them off', she urged again.

'I have!' I looked at her blankly.

'How can you wash wearing this weird thing?' she pulled roughly at my little floral cotton bra and tweaked at my pants.

'How I wash is my business'. I pushed her hand aside.²¹¹

Although San Mao has made it her business to know how the Saharans wash, she insists on retaining for herself the physical privacy herself that she seeks to penetrate in the Sahrawi. Clad in her bathing suit, she takes a bucket as directed and follows the woman to a room where, sure enough, there is a spring welling up from the ground. She is 'moved' by the sight first of the spring in the desert, and then of the women laughing as they draw water from it; the Sahrawi women, on the other hand, stop in embarrassment at the sight of a clothed foreigner staring at them. But they behave kindly towards her, even though she is dressed while they are naked, cannot speak their language and does not seem entirely at ease despite their kindness:

²⁰⁷ Pratt p. 205. Vron Ware has also drawn attention to the moral aspects of hygiene, noting that personal cleanliness 'provided another measure of civilization in the colonies, Ware p. 247.

²⁰⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 92.

²⁰⁹ Zhang Yun is apparently fascinated by San Mao's bathing story, and he is eager to find out more. Passing a bathhouse in El Ayoun, he muses that 'the young people in modern dress who are coming and going don't look as if they would use stones to wash with as San Mao describes' (see below) - but he is 'not curious enough to go in and have a look', Zhang p. 39.

²¹⁰ Pratt p. 66.

²¹¹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 93.

We looked at each other and began to smile. They couldn't really speak Spanish. One of them came forward and got a bucket of water for me; 'This way, this way', she said to me very kindly.

Then she poured a bucket of water over my head. I hurriedly wiped my face, and she poured on a second bucket.

I promptly ran over into the corner, saying 'Thank you, thank you'. I didn't dare learn any more!²¹²

The women continue to help her solicitously, directing her to another room to warm up when they realise she is cold. Opening the door, she is met by a blast of steam from a big bath 'like a Turkish bath'; gradually through the steam she discerns rows of women sitting on the floor, each with a bucket of cold water beside her.

'Sit here'. A naked woman sitting in the corner moved along to make room for me.

'I'll stand, thanks'. Looking at the wet, muddy floor, I couldn't have sat down even if I hadn't been afraid of the heat.

...Each woman had a wet stone with which she was scraping her body, and filthy black sludge would appear with every scrape. They didn't use soap and they didn't use much water either; they scraped till they'd loosened all of the dirt, and then they poured water over themselves.²¹³

San Mao is repelled by the sight, and again does not dare to breathe for the smell. She is further disgusted - indeed to the point of nausea - when the woman next to her picks up her bucket to douse herself with water: 'I could see through the steam that the black sludge she had rinsed off was slowly covering my clean bare feet. My stomach heaved'. Even after they have washed, San Mao asserts that the women are still very dirty.²¹⁴ Again the Sahrawi have made space for her and shown her how things are done; again San Mao declines to join in the activity she has come to inspect, and again she is physically sickened by what she sees. She seems to find the very physical presence of the naked Sahrawi women repulsive:

I was used to seeing the women wrapped up like mummies. Suddenly seeing how big and fat their whole naked bodies were was really a shock, they really betrayed their true selves in the bathhouse.²¹⁵

²¹² *Stories of the Sahara* p. 94.

²¹³ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 95.

²¹⁴ San Mao's own cleanliness is a constant contrast. She tells the women, 'I'm not dirty. I washed at home', and one of them responds, 'What's the point of coming if you're not dirty? I only come once every 3 or 4 years'. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 95.

²¹⁵ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 96. Zhang Yun seems fascinated with the bodies of the Sahrawi women and with the idea of fat as beautiful; he is apparently pleased to discover that few women under 30 are fat (this must be, he decides, the biggest change in the Sahara since the time San Mao was there - more significant, apparently, than the withdrawal of the Spanish and the annexation by Morocco). 'Even though they still swathe their bodies in cloth', Zhang notes, 'they are slender underneath; their conception of beauty has obviously caught up with the rest of the world', Zhang p. 37.

The 'true selves' of the women, that San Mao feels should normally be kept hidden, are, it seems, their fat bodies. Just as she had cried out 'You're so fat!' at the sight of Guka in her wedding garb, she notes that in comparison with the Sahrawi women, she herself was like a slender blade of grass growing beside fat cows.²¹⁶

Her disgust continues:

The room was very small, with no windows, and the bubbling water was constantly producing steam. I felt my heart racing, my sweat was pouring down like rain, and there were a lot of people in the room. With the mingled odours of stinking people, I was on the point of vomiting. I went to lean on the wet wall, and then I discovered that there was a thick layer of something sticky like snot on it; a big patch of it stuck to my back. I gritted my teeth; straightening up, I scrubbed at it frantically with my towel²¹⁷

But her nausea is not over yet:

There was a woman who had scraped all the black sludge but hadn't rinsed it off yet - her child was crying in the next room, and she ran off naked and brought the several-month old infant back, and sat down on the ground to breastfeed it. The filthy water from her chin, neck, face and hair ran down to her breast, and her child drank the milk mixed with the filth. I stared stupefied at this thoroughly foul sight, my stomach churning again. I couldn't bear it any more; I turned and left.²¹⁸

Perhaps it is unwarranted to read disgust even into her simple noting of the fact that the woman went naked to fetch the child and then breastfed it among the crowd (though such overtones may be present). San Mao's crescendo of revulsion seems to ooze filth and disgust as she suggests that the very walls of the bathhouse do.

Longing for escape from the foulness of what she has come to observe, San Mao runs back to the changing room, where she stands gulping fresh air before going back to dress.²¹⁹ Yet even though her actual presence in the bathhouse has made her physically ill the game has been worthwhile: she has gained material for further anecdotes and another exotic story of the peculiarities of the desert-dwellers, whose washing practices are made to seem deliberate products of their own capriciousness rather than connected in any way with scarcity of water and distance from water sources due to nomadic lifestyles. There is some resonance here with Peter Bishop's remarks on the view of twentieth century British travellers to Tibet that the Tibetan people were like

²¹⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 96.

²¹⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 96.

²¹⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 96.

²¹⁹ The old woman in the dressing room greets her with the words, 'They said you didn't wash, you just stood and watched - what was so interesting to look at?' 'The way you wash', replies San Mao; 'It wasn't expensive, and it was worth it!' *Stories of the Sahara* p. 97.

children, and 'their indifference to or even glee in their own filth was part of this perceived infantilism'.²²⁰ Here too the fact that the Sahrawi are comfortable with their own filth seems to be used as evidence of their status as not-quite-equals to San Mao, as she presents a picture of childlike people wallowing unconcerned in stench and filth that turns the stomach of the sensitively fastidious ('civilised') outsider who knows the true value of cleanliness.

But her fascination with Sahrawi bathing practices is not yet exhausted. The old woman in the changing room alerts her to the possibility of a new spectacle by remarking that 'This is for washing the outward body; you have to wash inside too'.²²¹ Full of horrified fascination at the thought (and at the woman's gesture of 'pulling out her intestines') and having ascertained where this sight may be seen, San Mao duly drives 400 kilometres across the desert with José to the Atlantic coast. From the top of a cliff they gaze down:

a few dozen feet below, the blue water lapped into a peaceful, calm half-moon bay. On the beach there were countless white tents, and men, women and children coming and going. They looked very peaceful and at ease.²²²

So idyllic is the scene that San Mao invokes the well-known Chinese Utopia story of the peach blossom spring;²²³ but the scene she is about to observe in this peaceful natural setting provides a dramatic contrast with the idyllic mood she has established here.

She and José climb down the cliff with a rope and hide behind a rock to watch as

Three or four completely naked Saharan women drew water from the sea. They carried the water up onto the sand and poured it into a big jar, with a leather pipe underneath for the water to flow through. One woman lay half-reclining on the sand, and the other pushed the pipe into her body, as if to irrigate her intestines; at same time she lifted the jar so that the water flowed through the pipe into her intestines... When the whole jar of water had flowed in, another women poured another jar ...and they continued to irrigate the woman who was lying there, 3 times in all. She couldn't help groaning and then...she began to cry out sharply, as if suffering extreme pain.²²⁴

²²⁰ Bishop p. 159. Dennis Porter also attests to the tendency of 19th century European travellers to invoke fatness and smell in their descriptions of 'natives' everywhere, noting that 'What seems to disturb...even more as a sign of their brutishness is the indifference they show to the inventions of modern Europ[ean civilization]', Porter p. 81.

²²¹ San Mao questions her eagerly, alarmed when the woman 'made a gesture as if pulling out her intestines'. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 97.

²²² *Stories of the Sahara* p. 98.

²²³ San Mao refers to the peach-blossom utopia story several times in her writing, claiming to find this same utopian dream in fields of the Canary islands (discussed in Chapter 4) and in the mountains of Taiwan (see Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping').

²²⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 99

San Mao, meanwhile, intent on preserving an image of the scene, gestures to José to take a photograph - but he is too transfixed by the sight.²²⁵ This episode undercuts her earlier affirmation that 'I've never dared get out my camera and take photos feverishly as soon as I arrive in a place, without having got close to the people first. I think that is a disrespectful thing to do'.²²⁶ Faced with a spectacle like this, notions of 'disrespect' are apparently abandoned.

As they watch, the people on the beach

took the leather hose out and stuck it into another woman...The woman who had already been irrigated was having water poured into her mouth...It is unbelievable that a person's body could hold so much water.²²⁷

But there is more:

Before long the woman who had been irrigated struggled up and came slowly in our direction. She squatted on the ground and started to shit; she shat a pile and then moved back a few paces and shat again, at the same time grabbing sand and covering the shit pile in front of her, and shitting and burying in this way she shat a dozen or so piles without stopping. Countless dirty things were released from her insides.

When she suddenly started to sing, squatting there, I couldn't help laughing out loud. It was such a funny situation, I couldn't help laughing.²²⁸

Protected both by distance and the by fact that she is unobserved, the San Mao who was so sickened by the dirt of the Sahrawi bathhouse is now intrigued and even amused by this bather's diarrhoea and her apparent pain. But at the sound of laughter, the woman turns and sees them; 'her face twisted', she runs to give the alarm. The people from the beach pursue them angrily as they flee back up the cliff; but with the advantage of a car, San Mao and José are able to escape - with their camera.²²⁹ Telling the story in retrospect, San Mao expresses regret; not for the embarrassment or anger of the woman she had been spying on, or for her spying itself, but for a pair of 'beautiful sandals' that she left behind in her haste.

But the story of San Mao's spectatorship of Saharan bathing is not yet at an end. A Sahrawi friend reports to José that he has heard rumours about 'an

²²⁵ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 99

²²⁶ *Crying Camels* p. 26.

²²⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* p100. San Mao recalls with horror that the old woman at the 'spring' had told her that people 'wash' in this way 3 times a day, for 7 days.

²²⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 100.

²²⁹ Retelling this story, San Mao's biographers Cui and Zhao suggest that the Sahrawi people on the beach would have killed San Mao and José if they had caught them, and that only a desire to live enabled San Mao and José to outrun them. The Sahrawi in pursuit were, they claim, 'about to grab San Mao's clothes when José pulled her into the car'; further, they claim that the Sahrawi cursed the car as it left and that 'San Mao and José escaped with their lives'. Their account concludes, 'San Mao never published the pictures. One can't say for what reason', Cui and Zhao p. 138.

oriental woman going around everywhere watching people having baths; people say that you...'. To divert suspicion from herself, San Mao rushes in immediately:

‘Yes, I know that an oriental woman has been going to watch people bathing’, I said with a smile.. ‘Didn’t a big planeload of Japanese arrive last week? Japanese people like to research how other people bathe - especially Japanese women - and they went around everywhere asking where the bathing place was’.²³⁰

As San Mao diverts suspicion from behaviour that her Saharan friend finds distasteful with a lie,²³¹ the emphasis is less on her fiction than on her success in making her Sahrawi friend embarrassed at having thought that she might be the woman in question. He apologises profusely, blushing, while San Mao chides him; then he departs, leaving her full of glee at her victory. Here she is a triple winner; she is successful in observing private Sahrawi practices, in shifting blame onto someone else, and in diverting the embarrassment at having acted dishonourably from herself onto the unsuspecting Sahrawi friend. San Mao's biographers all retell the story of the 'internal bathing', and Zhang Yun, who 'follows in her footsteps' to the Sahara, links it explicitly with that other Sahrawi practice so revolting to San Mao in the stories of both 'external bathing' and 'barbaric marriage': the valuing of fat female bodies as beautiful.²³²

While discussing a story about bodily functions, it seems apposite to mention San Mao's stated eagerness to get a photograph of a Sahrawi man kneeling to urinate.²³³ Certainly it could be argued that she demonstrates something of a prurient interest and pleasure in those aspects of Saharan life (such as dirt, spit,²³⁴ toilet habits,²³⁵ the proximity of farm animals to human life,²³⁶ animal slaughtering, unhygienic eating practices²³⁷ and violence) that are

²³⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 102.

²³¹ Here and on other occasions San Mao exploits the idea that all East Asians look the same. When caught out in tricky situations, or when she wishes to distance herself from the behaviour of other Taiwanese, pretending to be Japanese proves a convenient alibi.

²³² Zhang Yun asks his Sahrawi guide if women 'still' go for colonic irrigations by the sea. The guide explains the practice to him in terms of the valuing of fat; the most effective way of becoming fatter was supposedly for the women to 'wash out everything' so that they could eat more and thus become fatter more quickly and easily. Once Sahrawi women 'caught up with the modern world' and no longer strive to be fat, there is no more need to 'go to the beach and suffer like this any more', Zhang p. 42. Zhang continues with the observation that 'for us Asians', the suffering involved in the colonic irrigations (the leather hoses, the pain of the irrigation, 3 times a day for 7 days) is quite astonishing - yet he too finds the thought of it entertaining, and remarks that 'anyone who saw it would be like San Mao, and wouldn't be able to stop themselves laughing out loud', Zhang p. 42.

²³³ She is fascinated to see a Sahrawi man kneel to urinate and is eager to take a photograph, despite José's questioning the 'artistic value' of such a picture, *Crying Camels* p. 33.

²³⁴ She describes, for example, a young Sahrawi woman offering to plait her hair then spitting on her hands in preparation, *Crying Camels* p. 99.

²³⁵ *Crying Camels* p. 33.

²³⁶ The number of gleeful horror stories about the landlord's goats attests to this; they are depicted climbing on the roof, breaking the roof and falling through into their house (*Stories of*

furthest from genteel modern, 'civilised' middle-class life. As already noted, this recurring theme of filth and 'grossness' connects with the supposed irresponsibility of the Sahrawi to create a picture of infantilised 'natives'. There is much in San Mao's descriptions of life among the Sahrawi that is reminiscent of Mary Louise Pratt's characterisations of colonial writing on both African and American continents, where 'travelers struggle in unequal battle against scarcity, inefficiency, laziness, discomfort, poor horses, bad roads, bad weather and delays'; 'provincial society' may be 'picturesque', but its inhabitants are indifferent 'to the virtues of comfort, efficiency, cleanliness, variety and taste'; 'employees are lazy, deceitful, dishonest'; and 'the population's "filthy habits" are a subject of constant comment'. The net effect of this kind of report, writes Pratt, is a reinvention of the place as being 'manifestly in need of the rationalized exploitation the Europeans bring...the civilizing mission'; and a production of its people as 'natives', as 'reductive, incomplete beings suffering from the inability to have become what Europeans already are, or to have made themselves into what Europeans intend them to be...One needed only to see a person at rest to bear witness, if one chose, to the trait of idleness. One needed only to see dirt to bear witness to the trait of uncleanness'.²³⁸ Behind the depictions of Saharan filth can perhaps be found lurking the spectre of a 'civilising mission'; as Pratt has noted, 'depicting the civilizing mission as an aesthetic project is a strategy...for defining others as available for and in need of its benign and beautifying intervention'.²³⁹ San Mao's more explicit attempts at 'civilising' the natives will be discussed in the following chapter.

It is unsurprising that elements of this kind of colonial representation found in western accounts are also present in San Mao's narratives (even though her depictions of human interaction can move beyond the level of colonial generalisation). She was living, after all, in a colony of Europe, and attitudes

the Sahara pp. 128-129) - indeed falling on top of José - eating San Mao's precious plants (p. 130). Goats also feature prominently in San Mao's account of desert hitch-hikers too (discussed in Chapter 3) where she picks up an old man and his goat, which not only 'panted with its stinking breath against my neck' but also 'gnawed my hair as if it were hay', *Crying Camels* p. 73.

²³⁷ *Crying Camels* p. 32 San Mao describes a visit to a friend's tent, where a goat is killed in her honour: 'The way they eat goats is very simple. The goat is cut into about 10 pieces and is set, still dripping with blood, to roast on the fire. When it is half-done, it is put in an earthenware pot as big as a basin, salt is sprinkled on it, and then everyone crowds around to eat it together. Everyone picks up a big piece of meat to gnaw, and after a few bites they throw it down and go outside to drink tea and play chess with little stones. After about an hour they call everyone back together and they crowd around that already gnawed-at meat again, take up whichever piece happens to be in front of them and start eating again. This eating and then putting it down process happens lots of times before a goat is industriously eaten down to the bones'. She notes that 'There is probably 3 or 4 people's saliva on this piece of meat that I'm eating', *Crying Camels* p. 32.

²³⁸ Pratt pp. 148-153.

²³⁹ Pratt p. 205.

such as these provided the social framework in which her desert life took place - and indeed made it possible in the first place. Not only her narratives but her experiences and even her very presence in desert was a result of and was to some extent shaped by the discourses of colonialism that produce 'natives'. In contrast to these 'natives', we have seen San Mao writing herself as industrious, well-prepared, well-equipped, slender and - above all - clean.²⁴⁰

An appropriate postscript to this section is found in the story of San Mao and José returning from a camping trip in the desert and preparing to attend a camel race in town.

A sandstorm was blowing...I was covered in dust and sand and looked very ugly..I rushed to the bathroom to wash, hoping to look a bit cleaner to go to the camel race, because the Sahara reporter from Spanish TV had promised to put my photograph in the news.

When I was covered in soap, the water wouldn't come. I called José to go up onto the roof and check the water drum.

'It's empty. There's no water', said José.

'It can't be! we haven't been home these last couple of days, we haven't used a drop!'

I couldn't help getting anxious.

Wrapped in a big towel, I ran barefoot up to the roof. The bucket was as empty as if in a nightmare. I looked at our neighbour's roof, where lots of flour sacks were drying, and I suddenly realised that they had used all of our water.

I wiped the soap off with the towel and went off to the camel race with José.

That afternoon all of our frivolous Spanish friends raced galloping on camels. It was a magnificent sight. Only I stood under the hot sun, watching the others. As those knights rode past they laughed at me - 'Coward, coward!'

How could I tell them that the reason I couldn't ride was that I was afraid of sweating too much? - I would not only stink but I would get soap bubbles on my skin as well.²⁴¹

San Mao's cleanliness and hygiene sets her apart from the Sahrawi around her and, by implicit contrast, situates her in the world of true 'civilisation', while 'rich' Sahrawi willingly remain in their filth and fatness. Perhaps something of the distinction between her and the Sahrawi might be lost if her own person should become comparable to theirs - that is, if she should allow herself to be dirty - and the unwanted dirtiness is presented not as any failure on her own part but as a consequence of Sahrawi unreliability. Further, San Mao's very 'difference' from the 'natives' (as the slender, clean and civilised

²⁴⁰ Thus San Mao's China has achieved the progress of civilised modernity; things that European travellers to China criticised in the 1920s and 1930s (lack of hygiene, 'barbaric' marriage customs) have been eliminated (see John Fitzgerald, *Awakening Chin: politics, culture and class in the Nationalist revolution*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1996. San Mao shows herself able to co-exist with the dirt around her (and to be ironically curious about it) while remaining separate from it.

²⁴¹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 133.

Chinese woman of the desert) is to be recognised with a reward from Europe, in the form of being selected by a Spanish journalist for inclusion on the Spanish television news; she forfeits the reward, however, because of yet another example of Sahrawi behaviour categorised as irresponsibility and failure to respect other people's property. The message throughout the story seems to be that Sahrawi people do not (cannot?) live up to the standards which San Mao wishes her readers to know that she sets for herself. Here again there are echoes of Pratt's observations. Discussing the self-representations of the 18th century traveller Mungo Park in Africa (where, as in San Mao's Sahara, 'the 'obstacles to the utopia are, of course, not European but African'), Pratt points out the implicit question that underlies accounts of the traveller's virtue among the 'less civilised': "Can the Africans become that good too?"²⁴²

The persistent contrasts which San Mao sets up between herself and Sahrawi women are resonant with the ideology noted by Vron Ware, in which 'the image of the Western "liberated" woman, who enjoys equality with men that is enshrined in law, together with the freedom to dress, behave and work as she likes, is thrown into sharp relief by that of the Muslim woman, forced into submission from girlhood and deprived of any social, economic or political rights'.²⁴³ Ware has drawn attention to the deployment of the image of Princess Diana to highlight the supposed gulf between 'the civilized white woman who is distinguishable from her non-white and non-Christian sisters by her clearly marked social and sexual freedom'.²⁴⁴ When the English princess visited the 'Middle East' in 1986, for example, in British media descriptions 'Diana's clothes, her figure, her conversation, her marriage, even the rims of her sunglasses become symbols of the cool, sophisticated and, above all, liberated womanhood that marks Britain out as a more civilized country'.²⁴⁵ In San Mao's descriptions of herself among the Sahrawi women, she too is set apart from the fat, dirty local women who are 'smothered in clothing'²⁴⁶ and enslaved in arranged marriages - by her slenderness, by her cleanliness and hygiene (that is,

²⁴² Pratt p. 85.

²⁴³ Ware p. 13. Ware notes the 'ways in which representations of white femininity articulate powerful, if subtle, racist messages that confirm not only cultural difference but also cultural superiority.... the image of the Western 'liberated' woman, who enjoys equality with men that is enshrined in law, together with the freedom to dress, behave and work as she likes, is thrown into sharp relief by that of the Muslim woman, forced into submission from girlhood and deprived of any social, economic or political rights to independence', Ware pp 13-14.

²⁴⁴ Ware p. 15.

²⁴⁵ Ware p. 15. The British press's horrified fascination with Diana's 'unsuitable' friendships with 'Asian' (Muslim) men (Hasnat Khan, Gulu Lalvani, Martin Bashir and of course the al Fayed family), which were of course at odds with this function of the princess's image, is consistent with Ware's view. The British press's distaste for the marriage of English-Rose Jemima Goldsmith to Imran Khan shows similar factors at play.

²⁴⁶ Ware p. 15

manifestations of a supposedly superior bodily discipline, and indeed a superior bodily 'modesty' among the Sahrawi bathers), by the clothing that she so often describes in such detail²⁴⁷ and by her freely-chosen relationship with José.²⁴⁸ In the comparison of 'different styles of femininity',²⁴⁹ San Mao positions herself in the same place as the British press positioned their princess. This way of thinking is underscored by Zhang Yun in his account of visiting El Ayoun twenty years later; he replicates the preoccupation with dirt/bathing, fatness and veiled women, and reiterates San Mao's superiority to the 'uncivilised' people of the desert.²⁵⁰ Thus a narrative initiated by San Mao is expanded by Zhang Yun; and the superiority of the culture of the Chinese observer is reinforced.

'Western Standards'

The collection of *Stories of the Sahara* ends just as it began: with San Mao receiving European approval. Like the Spanish boss in the initial story, Spanish journalists in the final story are recruited into the narrative to admire the life she has created for herself in the Sahara, represented in its material aspects - which in turn indicate her mastery of the feminised skills of cooking and home decor. The initial story showed her impressing José's boss with her ability to cook Chinese food (and to stamp it with her own inventiveness, altering and substituting in order to convince him that he had eaten a different dish); in the final story she impresses journalists and designer professionals from Europe with the beauty, ambience and artistic flair of a home that is also stamped with her inventiveness.

Amid the process of debate on the future of the 'Spanish Sahara', the Polisario guerilla action and the United Nations Visiting Mission (discussed in Appendix 2),²⁵¹ European journalists arrive in El Ayoun to cover the story of

²⁴⁷ San Mao frequently draws attention to what she is wearing - bikini, jeans, shorts, long dresses, boots, sandals, high-heeled shoes and so on - and these contrast with the hot, drab, shapeless and unmodish swaddlings of the barefoot Sahrawi women. Ware discusses this issue further in the context the function of clothing in the distancing of English colonial women from the Indian women among whom they lived, Ware p. 139.

²⁴⁸ Though the marriage may have been freely chosen, the relationship San Mao describes with José is not a particularly 'liberated' one for her. This will be discussed in Chapter 4. It might be noted also that San Mao is distanced from arranged marriage less by distance/ethnicity than by time/modernity, as marriage by parental arrangement has been practised throughout Chinese history.

²⁴⁹ Ware p. 15.

²⁵⁰ Zhang Yun seems to disapprove of both 'backwardness' and 'modernity' among Sahrawi women. He is eager to establish that women still wrap themselves in an extra piece of cloth over their other garments; many do, but he does not like the make-up and high-heeled shoes that they are also wearing. He also does not seem to like the fact that 'they did not seem inhibited' and chatted easily with passing UN soldiers, Zhang pp. 37-38.

²⁵¹ At the time of unrest in the Western Sahara, with Spain's withdrawal imminent and Morocco and Mauritania asserting territorial claims, San Mao notes that 'reporters all came from everywhere, bringing their piles of photographic equipment,' *Stories of the Sahara* p. 253.

Spanish decolonisation, settling themselves into the National Hotel. One of these journalists (described as a 'foreigner')²⁵² is diverted from the dramatic events of international significance that he has come to observe and is drawn to San Mao's home instead. San Mao and José rescue him when his car becomes stuck in the sand; he invites them to dine at the National Hotel to thank them; and he turns up at their home a couple of weeks later with a colleague. As she fetches drinks for them, San Mao overhears their reactions to her home: 'Heavens! Are we in the Sahara? Heavens!' San Mao is delighted to hear them 'sighing in appreciation' at her 'found art'; 'Heavens!' they exclaim again, 'This is the most beautiful desert home I have ever seen!' With a deprecating smile, San Mao reminds them (and the reader) that these are just pieces of rubbish; it is her own artistic and creative strategies that have transformed them into art.²⁵³ In contrast to the Sahrawi neighbours, these Europeans, like San Mao, are excited by her prized figures carved from stone by the man in the cemetery, touching them appreciatively and even expressing a wish to buy them from her.²⁵⁴ Plainly they, like her, share the affluent modern 'western' taste for 'primitive art'.

A further seal of European approval comes from a Dutch 'foreigner' contracted by the Spanish government to design and build dormitory-style accommodation for Sahrawi in El Ayoun. He has heard from his journalist friend that San Mao has 'the most beautiful home in the whole desert', and he approaches her and José one day in the cinema (identifying San Mao by her Chinese ethnicity) to ask if he might visit their house, hinting that he wishes to use it as a model for his own work. He arrives the very next day and takes numerous photographs, asking also to see pictures of what the house looked like when they moved in for purposes of comparison.²⁵⁵ 'Please tell your husband', he instructs San Mao on his departure, 'that you have created a beautiful Rome'.

²⁵² *Stories of the Sahara* p. 254.

²⁵³ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 254-255. She also tells them the macabre fact that the sofa they are sitting was made from coffin crates. They are gratifyingly shocked but still admiring, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 256.

²⁵⁴ Rather than put a price on her beloved art objects, she chooses one to give them as a gift. 'No need to pay. It is beyond price for someone who appreciates it, and worthless for someone who doesn't'. When they press her, she suggests that it is an exchange for the bunch of flowers they brought her, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 256. The two European men leave, she notes, 'with many sincere thanks'. San Mao's biographers Cui and Zhao, in their discussion of this scene, describe the admiring exclamations of the journalist as rude, and claim that the journalist had with complete disregard for politeness told San Mao that he had 'fallen in love with one of the art works in her gallery' and wanted to buy it 'as a memento'; San Mao, they say was 'satisfied' with his admiration and presented the stone figure to him as a reward for his appreciation, Cui and Zhao p. 132.

²⁵⁵ Cui and Zhao applaud this 'foreigner' for not exclaiming aloud like the other, and confidently assert that he takes San Mao's home as a model for his own work: 'San Mao's house was one of the blueprints for future Saharan dwellings', Cui and Zhao p. 132.

Basking in European (and indeed professional) approval, San Mao admits herself to be 'intoxicated with my castle in the desert'. 'If no one else comes to prove it to you', she points out, 'you can never see your own worth'.²⁵⁶ It is only, apparently, European approval that she values, however. Once she has finished decorating her house, she discontinues the informal classes she organised for local women (see Chapter 3) because of the disorder they produce in her home.²⁵⁷ When Handi, her Sahrawi landlord, comes calling, he gets short shrift - especially as he does not express appreciation of the aesthetic environment she has created but is actually keen to raise the rent.²⁵⁸ The ensuing argument suggests how she is placed by Sahrawi vis-à-vis the Spanish ('You...you...you Spanish people are out to bully us Sahrawi', cries Handi) and shows her insulting Sahrawi in religious terms ('You are not a good Muslim! Even if you pray every day, your god will not help you'). San Mao throws him out²⁵⁹ and immerses herself into the cultured comfort of her superior European home, playing Dvorak's New World symphony and sitting 'like an emperor' in the tyre-seat after 'raising the drawbridge' behind Handi.²⁶⁰ In the opening story, 'The restaurant in

²⁵⁶ It should be noted that it is approval from male, and mostly non-resident Europeans that proves to San Mao her own worth. For the wives of José's Fosbucraa colleagues, San Mao's home is a way of identifying herself with Sahrawi, as none of them dare venture into Cemetery District for fear of catching a disease (discussed in Chapter 3). Biographers Cui and Zhao put a somewhat different construction on San Mao's home decor project and the admiration it wins for her, reinforcing the significance of home decor in the San Mao myth by taking it as an occasion to generalise about the world and about the supposed relationship between San Mao and José. 'All women in the world have a somewhat contradictory attitude to their own level of judging what is beautiful; on the one hand, they have 100% self-confidence, and on the other hand they have 100% doubt. The former is when judging other people, and the latter is when being judged by others'. Women, they suggest, are both the 'gods' and 'slaves' of beauty. San Mao is 'the absolute god'; José, for whom 'everything San Mao did was right', did not dare to be San Mao's 'god' and could not let her doubt, preferring rather to be her 'slave'. Cui and Zhao reiterate that San Mao's house was an art gallery; and they suggest that she craved admiration for it. European approval came first from José, then from his colleagues (who Cui and Zhao claim admired San Mao's home decor as well as her Chinese cooking) and only then from the European visitors to the Sahara, Cui and Zhao pp. 130-132.

²⁵⁷ 'Once our home was decorated, so comfortable, clean and beautiful, the free school for girls that I had set up disbanded for a long holiday. I had taught the neighbouring women for almost a year, but they didn't care about counting or health class, and they didn't mind if they could recognise money or not'. *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 250-251.

²⁵⁸ Handi is not presented as an attractive character in San Mo's narratives. He forces his daughter into an early marriage; he allows his goats to despoil San Mao's things; he uses up all of her water; he will not make any renovations to the property (refusing to put up a roof over the roof-well in the middle of the house, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 128) or finance any of her renovations to his property (he is unwilling to buy so much as plaster, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 237); and he has the effrontery to wish to raise the rent after she has improved the property: 'I told you long ago that the house you were renting was the best one in the Sahara, and I think you are clear about that now...You can't rent a house of this standard with the price you've been paying up till now. I'm going to ...raise the rent', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 258.

²⁵⁹ 'I just want to raise the rent a little, and you insult my religion', he yelled. 'You have insulted your religion yourself. Now please leave'. 'I...I....you damned'...I shut my castle and pulled up the drawbridge. I couldn't hear him cursing out in the street. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 259.

the desert', San Mao established her acceptability to Europe by her difference from Europe; here she merges to become part of a European political and cultural entity, identified as such by Sahrawi.

In the initial story, 'The restaurant in the desert', San Mao established her acceptability to Europe by her difference from Europe (and her ability to live up to - and play with - Spanish expectations of Chinese culture); here, she merges and becomes part of a European political and cultural community, identified as such by Sahrawi. The importance of San Mao's home and her decor styles in the 'legendary' San Mao persona has been noted. The little house in the desert has remained a focus of interest for readers and for writers on San Mao, as a stable focus in the life of the Chinese woman of the desert.²⁶¹ San Mao's biographer Pan Xiangli identifies San Mao's house specifically as 'a Chinese home' in the desert. It is also the case, however, that in a colonial context San Mao's house (clean, neat, with all of the comforts of home) demonstrates the values of 'home' and civilisation', the 'maintaining of standards' in the wilderness of the colony.²⁶² Though the values of San Mao and her 'home' may not map perfectly onto Spanish ones, they are certainly values of modernity and 'civilisation' which she shares with Spain and which her Spanish guests respond to when they visit the haven of culture that is her house on Golden River Street.

This chapter has outlined San Mao's early impressions of the Sahara, based mainly on tales from her first collection among whose subject matter can be found some of the staple foci of the orientalisising gaze: the people as a part of an exotic landscape, the bathhouse, the bride and the wedding ceremony. The following chapter will discuss San Mao's attempts to come closer to the Sahara and its people, and engaging in activities redolent of the 'civilising mission'. Susan Horton has noted the wish of Dinesen and Horton both to merge with and to be separate from the Africans among whom they lived.²⁶³ San Mao too, having set herself apart from the Sahrawi people in the stories discussed so far, also expresses a wish to 'belong' and to be part of a desert community - though, paradoxically, the very means of belonging set her apart as the bringer of

²⁶⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 259. It may seem significant that San Mao chooses programmatic music related to being a foreigner in a new land.

²⁶¹ For example, when Zhang Yun visited El Ayoun twenty years later in search of traces of San Mao, he asked a Sahrawi who knew her exactly what her home had been like. 'I really wanted to hear', notes Zhang, 'from someone who had seen the home that had charmed so many readers'. His Sahrawi companion recalls that 'it was furnished in a very modern style, and it was very comfortable. Also, they had a lot of newspapers and books, English and Chinese'. Zhang pp. 142-143.

²⁶² Vron Ware has pointed out the function of women in 'the expansion and maintenance of the Empire' of provide a guarantee that the correct morals and principles of the 'home country' were adhered to in the colony, Ware pp. 37-38.

²⁶³ Horton p. 142, 218.

'civilisation' - healing, educating, improving, and setting a noble example. The following chapter will discuss San Mao's civilising and 'belonging' activities in the desert, and will also note the things that San Mao receives (or attempts to receive) in return - in other words, it considers San Mao's quest for reciprocity with the desert and its people.

Chapter 3: San Mao of the Sahara

Having created a peaceful and aesthetic home for herself in El Ayoun, San Mao not only forays out into the desert but is also sought out by Sahrawi people who come to her house. As her sojourn in the Sahara lengthened,¹ her stories of her desert life depict her in closer and closer contact with the desert and its people, involving her in Sahrawi lives and creating a space for herself in their community. Her presentation of herself in the desert seems characterised by a wish to 'belong', through interaction with Sahrawi and intervention in their lives.

'Belonging' is by no means an unusual aim for a person resident in a foreign country. It may, however, have a particular significance in the specific historical situation of the Western Sahara in the late 1970s. National movements around the world had been fighting for and gaining independence from their colonial masters, and throughout the 1960s and 1970s Spain was becoming less and less able to demonstrate any valid reason for its presence in the Western Sahara - especially when Portugal had been forced to withdraw from its African colonies.² The Spanish colonial regime did not 'belong' in Africa; increasingly regarded as out of place, they were eventually compelled to relinquish their desert 'possession'.³

As a resident with Spanish citizenship in the 'Spanish Sahara', San Mao was involved in the colonial project by association. Along with the other Spanish people there, she too watched the waning of Spain's power in the desert, the increasing activism of Sahrawi political groups, the vacillation of the Spanish government, the

¹ The longest her stay in the desert could have been was about two and a half years, from April 1973 to October 1975. She herself does not specify dates (though she claims to have spent 'three years' there, *My Treasures* p. 57), and biographical accounts vary. Biographers have specified the date of her departure from the Sahara on October 30 or 31, 1975; as noted in Chapter 2, Ma Zhongxin dismisses her stay in the desert as 'just a few months'.

² Throughout the 1970s, Spain was reluctant to withdraw from the 'Spanish Sahara' because of its investments in the phosphate industry there; Morocco and Mauritania asserted rights to the territory (based on historical or ethnic/cultural ties with the tribes of the area); and pro-independence groups such as the Polisario Front continued to advocate and fight for independence. John Damis notes that Spain had been unmoved by United Nations resolutions and diplomatic pressure, but was 'moved to action by revolution in neighbouring Portugal and rapid Portuguese withdrawal from Angola and Mozambique'; consequently it was announced in early 1975 that a plebiscite would be held, under UN supervision, to determine the future status of the 'Spanish' Sahara. The Spanish government was apparently still hoping that a vote for independence would leave a weak Saharan state which would be reliant on Spain and thus allow Spain to maintain control of the phosphate mining there, but could 'see the heavy liability of trying to hang on to one of the last remaining colonial territories in Africa', Damis pp. 50-51.

³ Spain's 'right to belong' was finally overturned by the ruling of the International Court of Justice in October 1975 that the Western Sahara had not been *terra nullius* before the arrival of the Spanish, Damis p. 59.

intervention of the United Nations and the eagerness of neighbouring nations to fill any vacuum left by Spanish withdrawal, aware that once Spain had given up its colonial territory her own basis for residence there would disappear.⁴ Yet at the very same time as Spain was casting about to find a way of withdrawing from the Western Sahara 'that would both give the appearance of honour and preserve intact its vast investment in its phosphate mine',⁵ San Mao in her writings was working on a diametrically opposite project: that is, constructing ways to belong, writing herself into the life of the Sahara, and striving to be a part of the desert just as she sentimentally felt the Sahara to be a part of her.⁶

This chapter discusses San Mao's attempts to write herself into the desert by writing herself into Sahrawi lives. She claimed in her writings that after a few months in the desert her attitudes to the Sahrawi people underwent a fundamental change. Initially, she states, she was charmed by their 'backwardness'; the more 'primitive' they were, the more appealing they were as a spectacle. Longer familiarity, however, supposedly brought with it a sense of mission and purpose; a sense of mission that has many similarities to European 'civilising missions'.⁷ This discussion of San Mao's stories of interaction with Sahrawi people will therefore draw upon colonial discourses of 'helping' and 'civilising', along with notions of what might be expected in exchange.

The very narrative structure of San Mao's stories is in itself a way of 'belonging', in that the tales are written in the first person, as though from 'inside', from among the people.⁸ In addition, the assumption of an innocent, childlike

⁴ San Mao pays comparatively little attention to the political situation of the Western Sahara in her stories. Only two deal directly with the local and international pressure on Spain to withdraw and the Sahrawi struggle for independence; both of these were written after her departure from the region. They are discussed in Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'.

⁵ Damis p.

⁶ Chapter 2 noted San Mao's 'nostalgia' for desert long before she went there and suggested that her urge to belong in the desert bears some resemblance to the writings of 'Western' visitors to Tibet at a time when they seemed increasingly out of place, where 'the surest solution was somehow to *belong* to Tibet', Bishop p. 229.

⁷ According to Pan Xiangli, 'Curious before, she had kept her distance; it was a kind of touristic curiosity, with no sympathy with their ignorance, because the more primitive they were the better it was to look at. But later, when she became one with them, she couldn't help giving them consultations for minor ailments and cured them, started a school for women in her home to teach them to count and recognise coins. She sympathised with the ignorant "child bride", treated the slave as an equal, and gradually became part of the Sahrawi people. She could not drive off to a distant place and secretly dump the camel meat her neighbours had brought over again, and naturally accepted customs which she could not understand. The Sahrawi people's deep love for the Sahara deeply infected this oriental woman', Pan Xiangli pp. 34-35.

⁸ In his discussion of western travel to Tibet, Peter Bishop draws attention to the many travel accounts claiming to have been written from '*inside* Tibetan life', to give the '*true* picture' from the point of view of someone who *belongs*, Bishop pp. 227-9.

persona collecting anecdotes through play places San Mao in a position where economic and colonial power are generally (though not always) unacknowledged or un-analysed. This allows her to represent herself simply as a part of her chosen society, a benign and unthreatening presence, a playful character having fun and adventures in the desert. Sara Suleri has noted how historical experiences (such as, for example, the cruelties of colonialism) are often transformed by the dominant group into anecdote, thus eliding official, political interpretations in order to enter what she calls 'the privacy of the picturesque'.⁹ This chapter will suggest that despite its playful, anecdotal presentation, San Mao's writing exhibits features recognisable from genres of colonial writing. Looking beyond the 'privacy of the picturesque' in these anecdotal stories, it can be observed that San Mao is not simply a free spirit having fun in a foreign land. The activities depicted in her playful and ironic stories have strong resonances with the discourses of colonialism: among them, the myth of reciprocity, the urge to 'improve' the 'primitive' land and people, and the practice of genteel philanthropy in a personal 'civilising mission'.

Reciprocity

In her discussion of colonial travellers, Mary Louise Pratt has discussed the urge for 'reciprocity' manifested in their writings, noting that reciprocity 'has always been capitalism's ideology of itself', produced by suppressing the difference between equal and unequal exchange.¹⁰ The adventurers and explorers discussed by Pratt represent themselves, in their various ways, as participating in relationships of reciprocity, however tenuous, with the peoples they encounter in the 'contact zones', acting to mask the fact that the colonial 'civilising mission has been, in Pratt's words, 'the greatest non-reciprocal exchange of all time'.¹¹ The desire to 'establish equilibrium through exchange', notes Pratt, has seen 'expansionist commercial aspirations idealize themselves into a drama of reciprocity'; thus the Spanish phosphate interests in the Western Sahara that provide José and hence San Mao with an income dovetail with notions of introducing 'modern civilisation' to a backward or uncivilised Africa. These same notions of 'civilisation' are expressed in San Mao's playful stories of philanthropy.

⁹ Suleri p. 82.

¹⁰ Pratt p. 84: 'while doing away with reciprocity as the basis for social interaction, capitalism retains it as one of the stories it tells itself about itself.' 'The difference between equal and unequal exchange is suppressed.'

¹¹ Pratt p. 85.

Pratt introduces the concept of 'anti-conquest' to refer to peaceful expeditions to the contact zone for the purpose of adventuring or fact-finding that had no explicit goals of furthering the cause of colonial power but which in fact both depended upon and implicitly upheld it.¹² San Mao's presentation of a playful self gathering stories in the Sahara partakes of the 'anti-conquest' in that it likewise denies the acts of conquest that have brought her there. Just as the colonial adventurers of the 'anti-conquest' constructed relationships of reciprocity in their writing, to present themselves as legitimate, useful, even necessary presences in the 'contact zone', so San Mao writes herself into the Sahara through an assumption of give and take, to create an impression of legitimate, innocent participation and belonging.

San Mao's relations of reciprocity with the desert are formed and represented in a number of ways. In her early encounters with Sahrawi people, discussed in Chapter 2 (as curious visitor and photographer, then closer observer, helpful resource for her immediate community through her possessions, and participant in community festivity), she is already presented as both giving (giving beads, lending household goods, helping Handi and his wife with the instigation of Guka's marriage, helping Guka herself with contraceptive medicine) and receiving, from both Sahrawi and Spanish residents of the Sahara (taking photographs, receiving desert art, benefiting from desert hospitality, and receiving protection from the Spanish military). These relationships of exchange are intensified in later stories, where 'the mystique of reciprocity'¹³ that characterises colonialism is shown at work, and her project of giving to the desert and its people is expressed through the provision of medical care, education, transport and, finally, moral values. In terms of gain, San Mao shows herself able to profit from the desert - but this is more from the Spanish administrative presence there than from Sahrawi people themselves, as will be discussed below.

In both what she gives and what she receives, San Mao's class position is a significant factor. As a Spanish wife in the desert, she can claim a status of privilege vis-à-vis the natives despite the insignificance of her position in the colonial hierarchy. Her amateur practice of medicine, for example, or her establishment of an ad hoc 'village school' fits into a long tradition of the dispensing of humanitarian aid and 'civilising values' to natives by colonial wives. As Sara Mills has pointed out, discourses of femininity and discourses of empire neatly intersect in the notion of

¹² Such as, for example, the journeys of Mungo Park or the students of Carl Linnaeus for 'the innocent pursuit of knowledge' in Africa and the Americas, Pratt p. 84.

¹³ Pratt p. 69.

philanthropy,¹⁴ and in the case of San Mao too her efforts to 'improve' the natives are quite consistent with her persona of feminine caring and her class position in the 'Spanish Sahara' - even though she might wish to present these 'civilising' activities as simple personal play, motivated purely or principally by her own search for amusement. Such activities as providing consumer goods on loan and giving or trading trinkets, in which San Mao uses her superior material wealth for the benefit of her neighbours, are typical activities of the civilising mission; so, as noted above, is the wish to aestheticise.¹⁵ The connections between housekeeping, hygiene and morality were also noted in Chapter 2.¹⁶ San Mao's offerings of medicine, education, transport and egalitarian, humanitarian values to the Sahrawi have more obvious affiliations with the civilising mission, acting out the 'social reformism' which, as Pratt points out, is a form of female imperial intervention in the contact zone, indeed another branch of the civilizing mission.¹⁷ Indeed the very notion of humanitarianism itself is connected with the various forms of anti-conquest, and this view neatly intersects with the theories of the connections of 19th century female middle class philanthropy with the ascendancy of capitalism put forward by Chris Rojek and others.¹⁸ San Mao could be said to be acting out the 'anti-conquest' through her encoding of what she sees as 'unimproved' and thus 'as *disponible*, available for improvement'.¹⁹ Her desire for reciprocity with the natives based on a desire to civilise is very reminiscent of the 'quests for self-realization and fantasies of

¹⁴ Mills p.

¹⁵ Noted in Chapter 2 in connection with her constant observations about the dirt she finds around her (dirty people, filthy houses, ugliness and smell) and her attempts to improve their hygiene through loans of cleaning equipment, and her project of aestheticising her surroundings to create an 'art gallery' home. San Mao's aestheticising eye also 'improves' the desert with references to European art, seeing 'surrealis paintings' in its landscape.

¹⁶ As noted by Chris Rojek in connection with middle-class matrons of Victorian England, who took on 'the role of chief moral educator', involved themselves in social welfare and recreation issues, and played a vital role in creating 'the aesthetic values of industrial society', Rojek, p. 73. Like those other bourgeois leisured women who applied the order and hygiene of their domestic lives outside their homes to 'civilise' the poor, San Mao too devoted herself to good works and deserving causes among the Sahrawi.

¹⁷ Pratt p. 160.

¹⁸ Pratt p. 74. Pratt notes that 'humanitarian' ideologies made the 'broken treaties, genocides, mass displacements and enslavements of imperialism "less and less acceptable", leading to 'new forms of Euroimperial interventions, and new legitimating ideologies: the civilizing mission, scientific racism, technology-based paradigms of progress and development'. In the context of 19th-century bourgeois philanthropy, Rojek also discusses the notion of 'caring capitalism' buttressed by 'the voluntary welfare work', 'good works' and 'deserving causes' in which bourgeois women immersed themselves, Rojek p. 76-77.

¹⁹ Pratt p. 61.

social harmony' noted by Pratt in the colonial travel accounts of 19th-century Englishwomen.²⁰

Thus, though San Mao may appear to be distanced from the ideologies and processes of colonisation and ruling by her identity as a non-Spaniard by birth and as a woman, many of the activities described in her stories would actually appear to be upholding and reinforcing them. Yet in her privileged position as the Chinese woman of the desert, she is able to move freely between a number of different standpoints and allegiances, taking the part of Spain or of the Sahrawi - or neither - as she sees fit at the time. Susan Horton has pointed out the same tendency in the case of another woman writer from the colonial 'contact zone', Isak Dinesen, noting that she changed allegiance 'according to contingency or ideology', identifying with the colonial European community in Kenya and its values when it suited her, yet also claiming a deep identification with the indigenous people. Horton suggests that Dinesen's outsider status (as a Dane) made possible for her the fantasy of being some kind of go-between or mediator between colonial governing forces and Kikuyu, a true member of neither camp but a positive presence for both. This was San Mao's position in the desert too; indeed, as she was less explicitly aligned with the colonising project than the plantation-owning Dinesen, her standpoint is even more flexible. Despite her membership of the Spanish community, as 'the Chinese woman of the desert' she occupies a somewhat ambiguous space. Being neither ethnically Spanish nor Sahrawi, she is able to identify with either, or with both; or she may identify with neither, but choose instead to align herself with the black slave class or with China and/or Taiwan. Her Chinese ethnicity gave her the option of distancing herself from Spain when she felt it necessary to do so.²¹

Mary Louise Pratt has further suggested that the 'drama of reciprocity' in colonial writing is characterised by a denial of personal profit,²² and in this respect too San Mao's Saharan stories are similar to the European colonial narrative. In Chapter 2, we saw her giving beads (and taking photographs (and, she claimed, friendship); as for the European colonial adventurers, 'European commodities

²⁰ Pratt p. 169.

²¹ San Mao's changing identifications in the Western Sahara are discussed in detail in Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'.

²² Discussing the desire of travellers to demonstrate their interactions as reciprocal, Pratt takes the example of Mungo Park: 'Reciprocity...is the dynamic that above all organizes Park's human-centered, interactive narrative. It is present sometimes as a reality achieved, but always as a goal of desire, a value. In the human encounters...what sets up drama and tension is almost invariably the desire to achieve reciprocity, to establish equilibrium through exchange', Pratt p. 80. Park is careful, however, to avoid the 'decidedly non-reciprocal momentum of European capitalism', and though he may engage in trade, his trading is never for profit. (Pratt p. 81).

produce symbolic exchange'²³ and never material gain for San Mao. Likewise, for San Mao as for the colonial travellers, 'the very act of observing' is constructed as 'a reciprocal activity';²⁴ and for her as for them, the pursuit of experience and knowledge often serves to affirm native *disponibilité*.²⁵ Though San Mao suggests that some natives are equal to the task of subverting her good intentions, such subversion is manifested in childlike and unconstructive ways (despoiling her home, for example, or not caring about learning the knowledge she offers them); the 'obstacles to utopia' are, as already noted, consistently Sahrawi.²⁶ In Chapter 3 she dispenses medication, education and transport, but always for the sake of amusement, anecdote and playful involvement in Sahrawi lives, never for profit; and when she explicitly tries to gain materially from the desert (fish, fossils, jewellery) her attempts end in frustration and she does not achieve what she hopes for. Though her use of the sights, experiences and anecdotes she collected in the desert resulted in financial profit (and enormous fame) from her published writing, her activities in the desert as presented in her stories are innocently and playfully philanthropic, free of any suspicion of personal financial gain.

There was, it seems, plenty of scope for humanitarian intervention in the Western Sahara under Spanish colonialism. By reducing nomadism, Spanish rule had undermined the commercial caravan economy that had been an important feature of Sahrawi society;²⁷ transport infrastructure remained minimal;²⁸ fresh-water sources had been developed only at El Ayoun and the main military garrisons (that is, where the ethnically Spanish population was concentrated);²⁹ by 1975 the literacy rate among Sahrawi was still less than 5 per cent;³⁰ and public works and social welfare were introduced only in the last few years of Spain's occupation and on a

²³ Pratt p. 81.

²⁴ Pratt p. 84.

²⁵ That is the locals unquestioningly accept whatever behaviour she chooses to manifest, and, for the most part, 'spontaneously take up the roles [she] wishes them to', Pratt p. 163.

²⁶ 'The obstacles to the utopia are, of course, not European but African. African greed, African banditry, African slave trading threaten the mystique of reciprocity at every turn - and they are the only points on which Park does not reciprocate. He would rather die than steal. Can the Africans become that good too? Through his anti-conquest, Park acts out the values that underwrote the greatest non-reciprocal non-exchange of all time: the Civilizing Mission', Pratt p. 85.

²⁷ Damis p. 13.

²⁸ For example, the Spanish built only 300 miles of paved road in the Sahara and no railway, Damis p. 12.

²⁹ Damis p. 12.

³⁰ Only twelve Sahrawi held advanced technical diplomas and only two Sahrawi people held higher university degrees (Damis p. 12); and at the time the Morccans moved into the territory in late 1975, fewer than 1700 Sahrawi children were enrolled in school, Damis p. 79.

piecemeal basis.³¹ The one area in the Sahara in which the Spanish had substantially invested was the phosphate industry - with the obvious motive, as Damis has pointed out, of exploiting a rich resource for Spanish use.³² According to Damis, 'there is evidence of open cultural and social discrimination during the last phase of Spain's colonial presence', with contact between the Spanish and Sahrawi populations reduced to a minimum.³³

In this environment, San Mao claims to transcend all barriers to establish close friendships with Sahrawi. Her circle of acquaintances focuses chiefly upon those Sahrawi who lived in El Ayoun - a somewhat atypical group in that several of them work for the Spanish administration at a time when, according to Damis, few Sahrawi had any contact at all with Spanish institutions.³⁴ It might be suggested that, as conditions for 'natives' worsened under colonial policies, Spanish residents in the Western Sahara might have experienced the same kind of constriction relations between them as the settlers did vis-à-vis the Kikuyu in Isak Dinesen's Kenya. Like Dinesen, San Mao often seems to wish into being an ideal Africa in which 'native Africans and colonial settlers [worked] side by side in harmony in some comfortable or comforting simulacrum of mutuality',³⁵ the 'mutuality' here perhaps being an extension of the 'reciprocity' already noted, in which the relationships of exchange are ostensibly perfected when settler and African unite in a common purpose of 'improvement'. As in Dinesen's writing, there is sometimes an 'elegaic tone' in San Mao's descriptions of her own relations with Africa and Africans (notably those discussed in Appendix 2); there are also 'articulations of exasperation at colonial administrators' who deny this vision of reciprocity or mutuality (for example in the story of the slave discussed below) and a continual emphasis on the appreciation of herself by the Africans closest to her.³⁶ Such expressions of identification with the natives serve to reinforce the impression that the colonising dweller in the colony can and does truly 'belong' there.

³¹ Damis p. 12. 'Although Spain did engage in some public works (wells, local primary and secondary schools plus university education in Spain, loans, food subsidies, monthly stipends for the needy) during the last decade of its rule, these uncoordinated eleventh-hour efforts were intended mainly to encourage the Sahrawis to think well of Spain when it came time to decolonize the territory', Damis p. 12.

³² Damis p. 12. Damis adds that Spain was eager to end its dependency on Morocco for phosphate. As noted, San Mao's husband José, was employed in the phosphate mine along with many other Spanish nationals.

³³ Damis p. 12.

³⁴ Damis p.

³⁵ Horton p. 209.

³⁶ Horton p. 209.

As San Mao sought to make the Sahara her own, to improve it, to involve herself and to make a place for herself in its life, her stories tended to become more serious and emotional. Her second collection of Saharan stories, *Crying Camels*, culminates in her representation of herself as participating in the political events surrounding the Spanish withdrawal from the Western Sahara (discussed in Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'). Stories discussed in this chapter are taken from both Saharan collections, *Stories of the Sahara* and *Crying Camels*, to illustrate San Mao's project of belonging through reciprocity.

Giving to the desert

In the depictions of reciprocal participation that serve to consolidate San Mao's presence in the Sahara as not only justifiable but even necessary, instances of giving (in various guises) are a vital element. Her importance as a lender of things (along with the wish, if not the need, of the Saharans to borrow, their childish ingratitude and their failure to respect her sacrifices for them) has already been noted, as has her pivotal role in the narrative of Guka's marriage. Her importance (and José's) to her immediate neighbours goes much further than this, however. San Mao claims, for example, to be providing all kinds of practical help to the neighbourhood:

We have been living here more than a year and a half, José has become the electrician, carpenter and concreter for the neighbours. As for me, I have become the scribe, nurse, teacher, tailor - anyway, it is the neighbours who have made me learn to do all of these things.³⁷

This practical assistance is expressed particularly through medicine, education, transport, and moral advice (united as elements of the colonial civilising mission), thus creating an impression of a presence that is therapeutic and beneficial to the natives.³⁸ Reciprocity is at work as San Mao both gives and receives - though what she receives (anecdotes, material for stories and a sense of importance as well as an opportunity to fulfil her nostalgic dreams and take part in both Spanish and Sahrawi communities) is perhaps suggested to be outweighed in both quantity and quality by what she claims to have given. There are again common elements here with Isak Dinesen's narratives of herself in Kenya. Like Dinesen, San Mao writes herself into African lives in the position of 'protector, adviser, guide, good parent', which together constitute 'the familiar discursive domain of the colonizer'.³⁹ As noted above, San Mao's urge to belong and to produce 'a secure home for herself' in the

³⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 131.

³⁸ In the colonial idiom articulated by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*: 'If it were not for me they would be worse off', quoted by Horton, p. 163.

³⁹ Horton p. 210.

desert involved 'producing Africans who reflected back her own self-sufficiency and power'⁴⁰ (that is who assume suitable attitudes of *disponibilité*), and her writings, like Dinesen's, are characterised by the 'use of Africans to construct her own identity'⁴¹ as well as the presentation of herself as necessary and important in the lives of neighbouring Africans, and a choice of allegiance with 'natives' or colonisers. Enlisting locals into her own project of self-construction, San Mao recruits Saharan people and events to validate her own presence and actions in the desert, showing herself (like Dinesen) 'reflected in African eyes'.⁴²

There is a further parallel with Dinesen in San Mao's personalisation of the needs and lacks she believes she finds among Sahrawi and her personal efforts to fulfil them, and the failure to acknowledge the structures that have created them. Susan Horton has noted of Isak Dinesen that she constructed

the classic identity of the pioneer going it alone, solving individual health, economic and educational problems for the natives as if neither she nor they were playing roles specifically designed for them by those policies that were systematically and indeed purposively generating exactly those problems she was setting herself to solve.⁴³

San Mao shows herself responding to these same social problems. She expresses her outrage at discovering that the Spanish are profiting from and tacitly condoning slavery (discussed below);⁴⁴ she laments the powerlessness of daughters forced into arranged marriages at a very early age (discussed in Chapter 2);⁴⁵ she initiates informal arithmetic and general knowledge classes for the uneducated neighbouring women;⁴⁶ she brings medical aid to Sahrawi people; and, like Dinesen, she too presents such problems as individual difficulties ('to be solved, if at all, through the ingenuity, largesse, whim or ability'⁴⁷ of her own person). Again, as noted above, if there are any flies in this ointment of concern with which San Mao heals those around her, then these obstacles to the utopia are constructed as Sahrawi deficiencies (ingratitude, or a failure to reciprocate as they ought - for example, not returning San Mao's lent objects in good condition, and not lending in return). The chief deficiency of the colonial administration here is its failure to correct these Sahrawi faults.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Horton p. 210.

⁴¹ Horton p. 32.

⁴² Horton p. 195.

⁴³ Horton p. 218.

⁴⁴ *Crying Camels*, pp. 246-247.

⁴⁵ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 57-66.

⁴⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 49.

⁴⁷ Horton pp. 217-218,

⁴⁸ Pratt p. 85.

Although San Mao's activities in the desert seem stamped with the ideology of the colonial 'civilising mission', she constantly maintains that her 'civilising activities' are explicitly for the purpose of her own pleasure. She brings help to the Sahrawi people for her own amusement, to add variety to her otherwise potentially tedious life in a small desert town. The self-conscious posture of the serious civiliser is largely absent from her narratives; though San Mao plainly accepts the institutional privileges of her position as one of the Spanish in the desert, she continually eschews any institutional responsibility. In this respect her desert exploits differ from the usual model of the 'civilising mission'.

The following sections discuss specific manifestations of San Mao's involvement in the lives of Sahrawi people through activities of giving and 'civilising'.

Medicine

On her first few trips out into the desert, as we have seen, San Mao laid the foundations for the hoped-for relations of reciprocity by distributing beads and keys to secure 'friendship' in return. Before long, however, she claims to have learned 'the importance of being a witch doctor', and begins to take 'a small medicine chest' on these trips; once her gifts are distributed, she can 'see patients' and dispense medication:

I put anti-inflammatory ointment on people with skin diseases, I gave aspirin to people with headaches, I gave eye medication to people with sore eyes and vitamins to people who were too thin; even more important, I gave them lots of vitamin C tablets.⁴⁹

Her flippant use of the patronising term 'African witch doctor' (*wuyi*)⁵⁰ is perhaps an indication of the lack of seriousness with which San Mao interferes in the health of nomadic Sahrawi people, and is reinforced by her later characterisation of these activities as 'playing doctor'.

Chapter 2 described San Mao's Sahrawi neighbours flocking to her home to borrow household items; they come also to ask for medication and to solicit her help in treating their diseases. San Mao tells of dispensing mercurochrome, antiphlogistics

⁴⁹ *Crying Camels* p. 26.

⁵⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 47. The meaning is inverted, however: as a 'witch doctor', San Mao has no ceremonially significant position; she is not (like earlier 'witch doctors') a native healer whose intentions are serious but whose medical beliefs and practices are held to be 'unscientific' and therefore risible by colonial European observers; rather, she is an outsider who brings 'scientific' medicine but has no particular knowledge or expertise in its application.

and painkillers, and of improvising techniques from both Chinese and western medicine to treat Sahrawi ills.⁵¹

Mary Louise Pratt has drawn attention to the importance of 'medical exploits' in the narratives of European colonisers and adventurers.⁵² Like theirs, San Mao's activities too rest upon a sense of the 'authenticity, power and legitimacy' of western medical and scientific traditions - and also of Chinese medicine. She presents her medical interventions as important - even life-saving - as well as fun and playful. Although José is consistently disapproving of what he calls her 'doctor games',⁵³ the Sahrawi, of course, are presented as acclaiming her. Her success rate, she claims, is perfect, and thus the natives supply perfect *disponibilité* for her medical persona ('I, the witch doctor', she cries, 'was effective in every case').⁵⁴ At the same time, she notes, when the neighbouring women who come to her for treatment discover that she will dispense gifts of western clothing as well as medicine, the number of 'patients' coming to consult her increases still further.⁵⁵

An explicit rationalisation is given for San Mao's 'doctor games', namely the 'backwardness' of the Saharan women who, out of ignorance, superstition, and

⁵¹ Among other cases, San Mao treats a boil with bean paste according to 'an old Chinese prescription' (*Stories of the Sahara* p. 47), soothes a child's skin disease by bathing him with medicated soap, and cures a dying nomad woman with vitamin pills, diagnosing her illness as simple malnutrition. San Mao herself was often in poor health; all accounts suggest that she had constant health problems, both physical and mental, for much of her life (including sinus problems, gynaecological complaints, hormone imbalances and depression) and she often mentions taking pills in her writings (she refers to taking sleeping pills and painkillers in lieu of food when detained at airport immigration in England, discussed in Chapter 4; taking vitamin A for her eyesight, *Rear View* p. 220); and taking tranquillisers after an argument, *The Tender Night* p. 266). It is likely that she was well equipped with medication in the desert, though less likely that she would have been able to supply her whole community.

⁵² Pratt p. 83. Pratt notes that western medicine was 'one of Europe's points of leverage' in the imperial encounter. Discussing the medical exploits of Mungo Park, for example, she comments, 'It is no accident that this ideological exchange occurred around what had proven to be (and remains) one of the most effective forms of Euroexpansionism, western medicine...[Park's] combination of humanism, egalitarianism and critical relativism [is] anchored securely in a sense of European authenticity, power and legitimacy'; she notes further that 'medical exploits' are common among European travellers and colonisers, Pratt pp. 83-84. Peter Bishop has also observed that the use of Western medicine was one of the usual methods by which Europeans gained access to Tibet (Bishop p. 124). Dinesen too adopted the persona of European dispenser of medicine and binder of wounds (see *Out of Africa* pp. 28-29: 'I was a doctor...my fame as a doctor...my renown as a doctor'). San Mao's 'doctor games' combine western and Chinese remedies, and she shows herself master of both.

⁵³ José is not only critical; he is also, claims San Mao, the only person who will not let her treat him, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 53.

⁵⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 53. Elsewhere San Mao claims that '80% of the women and children to whom I gave medicine were cured', which emboldened her to deal with emergency cases as well as dispensing pain-killers, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 46. Though San Mao suggests that she had no choice in handing out pain-killers, José's attitude is that she is 'curing illness as if I was playing with dolls'; he did not know that 'there was a great loving heart' behind her apparently 'random' and 'rash' doctor games, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 46.

⁵⁵ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 46.

customary religious and familial traditions of modesty, are reluctant to consult male doctors. According to San Mao, they would rather die than be seen by a male doctor, and would not consult one even if they were dying; therefore, if she can 'help them with medicine for small complaints to lessen their suffering' and, at the same time, alleviate the loneliness of her own life in the desert, she is well pleased.⁵⁶ When José expresses his disagreement in very callous terms ('If this woman dies, and they think you killed her with your treatment and they still don't go to the doctor, then they deserve to die'⁵⁷), San Mao finds his point of view 'reasonable'; yet in her argument that the ignorance of the Sahrawi women is to be pitied there is an implicit affirmation that she is doing the right thing for them with her doctor games - and after all, playing doctor is fun.⁵⁸ Her lack of training or specialised knowledge is no barrier. Considerations such as use of inappropriate drugs or adverse reactions to medications do not arise; as long as the patient does not die, we are to assume that San Mao knows best, and that her 'witch-doctoring' has been not only fun for herself but also beneficial to the patient. Clearly the colonial setting of the 'Spanish Sahara' has made possible for her an activity that would be impossible for her at home in Taiwan; inadequate medical provisions and a narrative of native foolishness and backwardness give her the opportunity to take on the technology and practice of medicine that would be closed to her as an untrained amateur in Taiwan. As an educated and privileged member of the colonising entity, she can take upon herself this role of playful, ad hoc medical practitioner entirely on her own terms. In addition to her certainty that for Sahrawi women death is preferable to consulting a doctor, there is a hint that the medical treatment might be really only play for them as well as for herself. She describes the case of a 'patient' who is either just pretending to have a headache or just pretending that San Mao has cured it. When San Mao gives the old woman two aspirins 'and a key to hang as a decoration on her turban', the woman immediately

⁵⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 46. Visiting the Western Sahara twenty years later, Zhang Yun expresses a particular interest in whether or not this observation about Sahrawi women is 'still' correct. His Sahrawi guide tells him that town-dwelling and even nomadic Sahrawi women *do* consult doctors - particularly since the Moroccan government (which took over the Sahara when Spain withdrew) had introduced health insurance. 'A few older women', he notes, 'still won't go, and there are also some young women who won't go there to give birth. But they are very few; more and more Sahrawi are interested in modern healing, but it takes time to change customs'. Zhang is pleased when his guide mentions the faith of many Sahrawi women in the curative powers of Chinese 'Tiger balm' ointment, Zhang p. 40.

⁵⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 48.

⁵⁸ 'I was very curious', states San Mao, 'and I was bold as well, so I wouldn't listen to him', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 48.

nods to convey that her headache has gone - before the aspirin could have taken effect.⁵⁹

As well as dispensing medication, San Mao prepares to venture into midwifery as well. Despite some initial misgivings she sets out to deliver her neighbour Fatima's baby; she is, however, prevented by the horrified intervention of José, who is afraid of the trouble that might ensue if Fatima were to die and insists on taking Fatima to hospital in his car. There she gives birth safely with the assistance of a doctor, and is apparently quite satisfied with this situation despite San Mao's earlier insistence that she would not go to the hospital because the doctors are all male.⁶⁰

San Mao also practises amateur dentistry, playfully putting toxic and ineffective 'fillings' of nail-varnish in neighbours' teeth. The treatment, she claims, is successful - and the neighbours are delighted with it.⁶¹ Again the 'treatment' is predicated on the assumption that Sahrawi women cannot be persuaded to seek real professional help and that this makes San Mao's dentist games supposedly justifiable and even necessary. San Mao quickly discards the positive example of Fatima's successful hospital-assisted birth, maintaining her narrative of intractable conservatism on the part of Sahrawi women and indeed acting to reinforce the very attitudes that she considers 'backward' by practising playful treatments upon them herself.

In addition to doctor and dentist she plays vet too, and her narrative juxtaposes the treating of Sahrawi with the treating of animals. Having forced wine down the throat of a goat to ease its pain in giving birth, she asserts that

⁵⁹ Indeed 'less than 5 seconds after she swallowed the aspirin', *Crying Camels* p. 26.

⁶⁰ When San Mao's neighbour Fatima first asks San Mao to assist at her labour, San Mao refuses ('I am not a doctor, and I have never given birth') but Fatima pleads with her, invoking the illustrated book about childbirth that San Mao has shown her ('It's all so clear in your book'). San Mao continues to refuse ('you'd be putting your life in my hands') but Fatima insists ('I am healthy; I can give birth on my own, you'd just need to help me'). When the call comes from Fatima's husband to say that she is going into labour, San Mao picks up her book, scissors, cotton wool and alcohol, sighing 'I'm a bit nervous; I don't think I can do it'. 'Do what?' asks José. 'Deliver the baby'. 'You're mad!' roars José, taking the book from her; 'I won't let you go. You have never given birth; you'll kill her'. San Mao replies that she can follow the pictures in the book; José physically restrains her; she accuses him of being 'a pitiless, cold-blooded beast'; he tells Fatima's husband that 'San Mao can't go and deliver the baby. She would hurt Fatima'; then he fetches the car to take Fatima to hospital. *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 49-51.

⁶¹ José is, again, horrified - though this time San Mao suggests that his horror is as playful as her dentistry. The story is introduced when a Sahrawi woman remarks to him, 'Your wife is wonderful! After she put the filling in my tooth it hasn't hurt for ages.' San Mao admits to having filled the teeth of 'two women and a child', none of whom would go to hospital, and happily informs him that 'Actually, they stopped hurting after the fillings, so they can bite now'. She assures José that 'The filling material 'won't fall out, it's waterproof, it's flexible, it tastes good, and it's a pretty colour', *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 53-54.

Actually being a vet was a lot of fun, but I never told José about my guest appearances as a vet because he had been so scared by the affair of Fatima's birth. Gradually he began to believe that I wasn't playing doctor any more.⁶²

The idea that José should feel the same concern about a goat as he would feel for Fatima apparently equates delivering Fatima's baby with assisting the neighbour's goat.⁶³ The apparent conflation of Sahrawi human and animal is continued in the playful remark that if a Muslim man may not drink alcohol then he might be compromised if his goat should do so.⁶⁴

In all of these medical games, San Mao's own pleasure and play is the vital factor. If everything she does is for the sake of play, then she can distance herself from any explicit serious project of improving the natives. Furthermore, she is free to indulge in the fiction that the natives are drawn to her by the force of her own personality, sense, warmth and medical skill, and not because they may be in need and may believe that she has the skills to relieve that need. As Susan Horton has pointed out of Isak Dinesen,

Like all good writings from the colonies describing the contact zone, hers imply also that her social relations with Africans are strictly voluntarist. It is the magnetism of her personality, her superior skill as a negotiator, her prestige, her good sense, her warmth, her humor, her skill as a physician, and not economic necessity, that accounts for Africans' attention to her.⁶⁵

San Mao, like Dinesen, presents the conviction that it is she *herself* that is needed; and through her writings of that need and her fulfilment of it she may gain status in her own estimation, in the desert and also in the eyes of readers around the world. Like Dinesen, she becomes real to herself by seeing her reflection in African eyes - and becomes real and important to her reading public by reporting those reflections.⁶⁶

Education

In addition to 'playing doctor', San Mao also 'plays teacher' by setting up an informal 'free school for women' in her home. Here again, as in the 'doctor games', her urge to improve the people around her is motivated both by the wish to dispel the loneliness (it is a way of getting to know people, since 'I had nothing to do most of the time')⁶⁷ and find fun and amusement, and by a perceived lack on the part of the natives - here, female ignorance (akin to the female 'backwardness' that was the

⁶² *Stories of the Sahara* p. 52.

⁶³ This is perhaps reminiscent of Isak Dinesen's claim that learning to approach wild animals had enabled her to deal with African people, *Out of Africa* pp. 23-24.

⁶⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 52.

⁶⁵ Horton p. 195.

⁶⁶ Horton p. 195.

⁶⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 49.

pretext for her doctor games). As noted above, Sahrawi women supposedly did not know their own ages; neither could they count or recognise money. San Mao teaches them such things in her 'school', along with simple addition⁶⁸ and 'the facts of life'; Sahrawi women - even those with several children - supposedly have no idea where babies come from.⁶⁹

As noted above, San Mao's playful mission of civilisation brings an amateur philanthropy to bear on problems that are presented as individual instances of ignorance rather than insitutional failures which bring about structural inequalities. Through the personalisation of her skills (Sahwari need *her*, not government-provided literacy training or health care) she gains a sense of belonging and importance in the desert, thus claiming to achieve the desired reciprocity.

Yet again, as in the story of Sahrawi borrowing, the local people are seen as failing to be appropriately grateful for what San Mao provides; yet again, the obstacles to Utopia are African. The Sahrawi women do not learn; they do not care;⁷⁰ their minds remain filled (in San Mao's view) with childlike acquisitiveness, lack of respect for personal property or care for material objects, and trivia of international 'western' media which, it is implied, they have no right to know as well as they do:

I had taught the neighbouring women for almost a year, but they didn't care about counting or health class, and they didn't mind if they could recognise money or not. When they came over every day it was to borrow my clothes and shoes; they wanted lipstick, eyebrow pencil and handcream, or they wanted to lie on my bed...for them, having always slept on mats, it was something new.

When they came, my tidy home became chaos. They couldn't read, but they knew more about Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and other such famous people than I did; they also knew about Bruce Lee, and even more the sexy Spanish stars, male and female - and when they saw picture they liked they would rip them out of the magazine. They would take my clothes without telling me, wearing them under those cloths that they wrapped themselves in, and a few days later when they returned them they would be filthy and the buttons would have been cut off.

⁶⁸ 'I taught the better ones arithmetic (like $1 + 1 = 2$)', she adds. The class varies in size from 7 to 15 'students', who come and go as they please, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 49.

⁶⁹ Rather than concentrating on their lessons, the 'students' take all of the books off San Mao's shelves; when an illustrated volume on *The Birth of a Child* catches their eye, San Mao gives up on the arithmetic classes to spend 2 weeks explaining its contents. Even though several of the women have as many as 3 or 4 children, they 'gave soft, sharp cries as if they couldn't understand how life is formed at all', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 49.

⁷⁰ 'All they cared about', declares San Mao, 'was whether they were fat or not. Fat meant beautiful, regardless of age or youth', *The Rainy Season Won't Come Again* pp. 183-184.

If they came to my home there was no need for a script; they would direct and produce a terrifying 'disaster movie' themselves.⁷¹

The 'disaster movie' scenario described here is the antithesis of the 'feminotopias' discussed by Pratt, in which women travellers claim to share 'idealised worlds of female autonomy, empowerment and pleasure' with the women of the countries they visit.⁷² These 'feminotopias' are feminine environments into which the traveller is invited; here, however, the feminised environment has been created around herself by San Mao for her own amusement. In a 'feminotopia' situation, the Sahrawi women would prove *disponible* and apply themselves to docile learning; but in San Mao's account they lay waste her home and show no gratitude whatsoever for the tuition she proposes to give them. The harmony of reciprocity is thwarted; and the obstacles to feminotopia as well as to utopia are African.

There are other avenues through which San Mao seeks to deploy her superior education in the service of Sahrawi, such as acting as scribe for illiterate neighbours. A young Sahrawi man named Shalun, for example, manages a small shop near San Mao's home.⁷³ San Mao receives preferential treatment in Shalun's shop, as he allows her to purchase on credit; but, since he is illiterate, he cannot keep any record of her purchase and she herself has to do so, calculating and paying her own bill on trust.⁷⁴ San Mao notes that when she tries to persuade him to check her accounts, he appears embarrassed; this is interpreted as embarrassment at the very idea that she might need checking, not at the fact that his illiteracy prevents him from keeping the accounts himself.⁷⁵ Again there is implicit in San Mao's scrupulous example of her own superior education and moral trustworthiness the question that Pratt notes in other colonial accounts of personal virtue: 'can the Africans become that good too?'⁷⁶

⁷¹ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 250-251. Again there are resonances with Isak Dinesen's portrayal of Kikuyu people; though she sympathises with their plight under colonialism 'and makes genuine and significant efforts to improve their situation, she thinks of them frequently as primitive children'. Horton pp. 210.

⁷² The 19th-century women travellers Flora Tristan and Maria Graham wrote, in Pratt's words, 'elaborate constructions of what might appropriately be called 'feminotopias'', idealized worlds of female autonomy, empowerment and pleasure', sometimes with 'a decidedly orientalist flavour' that evokes the image of a Garden of Eden, Pratt pp. 166-168.

⁷³ San Mao frequently shops there, dropping in '4 or 5 times a day' when she runs out of things. *Stories of the Sahara* p.105. Again in the shop the Sahrawi people constitute an 'obstacle' - 'I couldn't always come and go in ten seconds as I wanted to', notes San Mao, 'because of the crowds of neighbours shopping there too', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 105.

⁷⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 105-106.

⁷⁵ 'He trusted me', San Mao adds, 'so I was always terribly careful when I added up the bill; I didn't want to cause any errors that would bring blame on him', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 106.

⁷⁶ As noted above, Mungo Park 'would rather die than steal. Can the Africans become that good too?', Pratt p. 85. Similarly, can the Sahrawi live up to the standards of honesty set for them by San Mao?

Once San Mao's own exemplary moral position is established, San Mao tells her story of Shalun, who invites her to intervene in his personal life by writing, on his behalf, a letter to his absent wife.⁷⁷ San Mao presents herself not only as the nearest literate person but also as the only possible confidante for Shalun; and her position throughout the story is one of clear-sightedness, cleverness, and immediate and complete understanding both of the situation and of the protagonists' feelings. The wife, she intuits on the basis of a photograph, is a prostitute and a con-woman, who writes back to ask Shalun to send her still more money. He takes on a second job as a baker to earn extra money for her, but through his exhaustion he badly burns his hands on the oven. The the story ends with his disappearance with a sum of stolen money.⁷⁸ Here, San Mao's use of her education for the benefit of Sahrawi is presented not so much as play than as sad duty; her deployment of her literacy on Shalun's behalf brings him only distress; and her superior perception and knowledge brings him pain. Even when she provides the material items that Sahrawi are always seen to lack (giving Shalun stamps for his letter) and medical help (dressing his burnt hand), these gestures merely add to the story's atmosphere of foreboding sadness; the triumph of being proved right brings her little pleasure. A sense of adult responsibility intrudes upon San Mao's fun here; dispensing education on her own terms to a mass of local women may be fun,⁷⁹ but when a named member of her immediate community, a daily contact who provides a service that she relies upon, calls on her assistance in a situation of deep distress, San Mao's literary and medical

⁷⁷ Thus she insinuates herself (like Dinesen) 'not just into the working lives of the ['natives']...but into their personal lives as well', Horton p. 6.

⁷⁸ Shalun had married in Algeria the previous year, spending everything he had as bride-price to marry her; but his wife had failed to follow him to the Sahara as promised. He returned to Algeria to seek her, but discovered that she had gone to Monte Carlo. He has not been able to write to her because there was no one in whom he could confide. San Mao's immediate assumption is that the woman has played a confidence trick, and she is astonished that he could have been taken in, but she agrees to write the letter for him. A long time afterwards' he receives a reply to the effect that his wife loves him but 'cannot come to the Sahara right now because she hasn't any money'; she asks him to send money for her plane ticket to her brother in Algeria, who will make the necessary arrangements, and then they need never be parted again. This seems to San Mao to be naked deception, but Shalun is 'not at all disappointed'; on the contrary, he takes on a second job to raise the money, working day and night with only 3 hours sleep. Though his health declines and he injures his hands he will not stop working; every evening he comes to San Mao for ointment and dressings for his burnt hands and to talk about his wife. One night San Mao loses patience; 'Do you really not know', she says angrily, 'or are you pretending not to know that she is a prostitute?' whereupon Shalun rushes away wordlessly into the night. She herself is convinced that 'He has always understood, right from the beginning, but he wouldn't wake up and wouldn't save himself, and no one else could save him'. The following evening Shalun reappears as usual, but after that he is never seen again, *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 107-120.

⁷⁹ When she does not feel like entertaining the neighbouring women in home, she cancels the class and does not let them in, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 250.

capacities are no longer a matter of free choice and personal amusement. There is little pleasure in the exercise of them, either for her or for the Sahrawi person who is the object of her concern.⁸⁰ Shalun fails to accept and acknowledge her wisdom; again the obstacle is African and again the utopia of reciprocity does not result. And, since her utopias fail, San Mao can remain an innocent seeker after fun without appearing complicit in any formal project of transforming the natives.

Transport

Ownership of a car in the desert is apparently only possible because of San Mao and José's privileged financial and class position.⁸¹ The car, like her doctor games or teacher games, is also primarily associated with her own pleasure,⁸² offering numerous possibilities for play: free movement around town and the surrounding desert, camping trips, outings to the coast and so on. Further, the car provides a new avenue of reciprocity for San Mao in the desert: giving by picking up Sahrawi as passengers, gaining involvement in more Sahrawi lives and collecting experience, anecdote and a personal sense of belonging importance. 'Driving in out-of-the-way places', notes San Mao, 'when I saw someone trudging along by the roadside in the hot sun, I couldn't possibly ignore them'; 'I couldn't drive past a person who was trudging along' but would always stop to pick them up.⁸³ These Sahrawi pedestrians are described as being 'like oxen', 'troublesome' and 'annoying'; this ironic 'troublesomeness' lies, of course, in the notion that San Mao is too kind-hearted not to stop and pick them up.

⁸⁰ Twenty years later, Zhang Yun claimed to have met the Shalun of the story. His account of the past differs from San Mao's; she had helped him with his English while he had been running the shop, but then he had left the shop to take a job with José at Fosbucraa. He had asked 'Echo' to write a letter on his behalf, but it was to his sisters in the USA ("I knew this was wrong!" claims Zhang Yun; 'it was to his lover in Algeria'). He is shocked to hear of San Mao's death, as she had been 'so optimistic and lively! she loved life so much!' She was also, he adds, 'an intelligent, curious, brave and kind woman' who always asked questions about everything; 'we all really liked her. She was the only Chinese woman in the desert at that time, and she had lots of friends - Spanish and Sahrawi. I heard that she had a good relationship with her Sahrawi neighbours, and also had a really good Sahrawi woman friend', Zhang pp. 137-41.

⁸¹ Though San Mao claims that many Sahrawi around her owned cars (*Stories of the Sahara* p. 188), other accounts dispute this; Ma's interviewees, for example, say that private cars were unusual, and that San Mao must have been unusually well-off to afford one.

⁸² San Mao often refers to the monotony of life in Cemetery District without a car, and describes her great joy at their car's arrival from Spain (*Crying Camels* p. 66). At first José monopolises it, but when he brings the car home late and in a filthy condition (after picking up Sahrawi passengers) San Mao's wrath is such that he meekly promises that she too may use it. Though driving around might not sound very entertaining for a city-dweller, she notes, it was far preferable to sitting alone in her little house in the desert through the long, lonely afternoon, *Crying Camels* pp. 71-72.

⁸³ She would 'always slow down unconsciously' when she saw a 'little black dot slowly moving against the horizon'; 'the figure would seem so tiny and insubstantial under the great arching sky that I couldn't...drive past a person who was walking with dragging steps', *Crying Camels* p. 72.

Stories of San Mao and José picking people up in the car have been mentioned in Chapter 2, in the discussion of Sahrawi dirt. Other stories of picking up pedestrians highlight the inconvenience to San Mao and José themselves, expressed in terms of a personal kindness on their part that will not allow them to ignore people by the roadside. For example, San Mao tells of driving past a boy who is trying to cycle through a sandstorm; when she stops to pick him up (noting the discomfort of the sand in her face), he pleads for water, but San Mao does not have any. He will not accept a ride because his bicycle will not fit in her car, so she drives off 'helplessly'; but she cannot put the boy out of her mind, and finds herself driving home to fetch food and water to bring back for him. The impression of a kindness that goes far beyond the call of duty is reinforced in several ways: by José's disapproval of her going out again in the storm; by her insistence on doing so;⁸⁴ by her repeated emphasis of the long distances involved; and by a checkpoint soldier who fights his way over to her through the sandstorm to ask why she is going out in such weather.

San Mao likewise pays tribute to her own and José's forbearing kindness and willingness to inconvenience themselves for the sake of their passengers in a tale where José ends up a comic loser after picking up three old Sahrawi men. José recounts:

All the way I had to put up with their stink and it almost made me pass out. Then when we got to the place where they wanted to get out, they said something in Arabic. I didn't know if they were talking to me or if I should just keep driving - and do you know what they did? The old man sitting behind me took off his...shoe and hit me as hard as he could on the head; he almost beat me to death.⁸⁵

In stories of picking up Sahrawi, the emphasis is generally upon their personal dirtiness and the animals they bring into the car with them. Stories of European passengers, by contrast, tend not only to be longer and more detailed, but also to give a greater impression of individual personalities and circumstances (such as the young

⁸⁴ 'It's for that troublesome little devil...If I don't take any notice of them, who will? do you want that kid to die of thirst?' *Crying Camels* p. 76.

⁸⁵ *Crying Camels* p. 82.

soldier⁸⁶ and the sex-worker).⁸⁷ This is not simply to do with linguistic barriers to conversation with Sahrawi, as an encounter with a non-Sahrawi passenger with whom there is no common language to communicate (an American back-packer) is still described in detail.⁸⁸ San Mao claims that there is a special pleasure in picking up someone from 'outside':

The happiest thing was meeting someone in the desert who came from outside. Even though we lived in this vast desert, we were spiritually very closed in, and it was exciting and moving for me if someone came from somewhere else and talked with us about the dazzling world far away from us.⁸⁹

Picking up Sahrawi, on the other hand, is presented as something of a risk. When José hears that San Mao has given transport to a Sahrawi man he is annoyed:

'San Mao, my father wrote and said that you can't trust a Sahrawi even when he's been dead and buried for 40 years. When you're crossing the desert on your own and actually...'⁹⁰

San Mao protests that the man had been 'really old', but José's opinion is unchanged: 'Not even old ones!' he replies. The unspoken threat of sexual assault posed by Sahrawi but not Spanish men which is put to San Mao by two generations of Spanish men - José and his father - replicates the common attitude in colonial writing that the wives of the colonisers were in unique danger from native men.⁹¹ Discussing 19th

⁸⁶ San Mao describes picking up a 'heroic looking' young Spanish soldier, who is assumed to be safe to pick up because of 'the obvious youthful naivety of his face' (and, presumably because he is Spanish and not Sahrawi men (discussed below). This polite youth is on his way to town to see a movie, but has missed the army vehicles and must walk all day. San Mao is moved by his willingness to undergo such hardship, and also by his youth, politeness, cleanliness and correctness of manner. He salutes her 'solemnly and childishly' when he alights in town, and as she drives away San Mao muses that he has 'touched a place in my heart that was rarely touched' in that he reminds her of her younger brother, who is about the same age and is currently doing military service back in Taiwan', *Crying Camels* pp. 79-81.

⁸⁷ San Mao tells the story of stopping for a woman on the Fosbucraa road at night; she turns out to be one of the many prostitutes who, she states, fly over from the Canary Islands every weekend after Fosbucraa paydays and ply their trade along the road from the mine to El Ayoun. San Mao is surprised to learn how much these women earn, and even more surprised to discover that the other woman knows her by sight and has a boyfriend who works at Fosbucraa. Though derisive of the 'ignorant conversation' of this passenger who 'pathetically stopped cars in the desert, and obviously thought she was clever', San Mao is enchanted by her happy, 'colourful' demeanour, *Crying Camels* pp. 87-90.

⁸⁸ José picks up the American youth en route to the Fosbucraa mine. They cannot converse, as the American knows no Spanish and José no English. When they arrive at the mine, the guard will not allow the American to enter without a pass, whereupon the young man simply announces 'I'm an American' and marches in, *Crying Camels* pp. 82-84.

⁸⁹ *Crying Camels* p. 82.

⁹⁰ *Crying Camels* p. 69.

⁹¹ Discussing the crucial role of gender issues in organising ideas of 'race' and 'civilization', Vron Ware notes that 'One of the recurring themes in the history of colonial repression is the way in which the threat of real or imagined violence towards white women became a symbol of the most dangerous form of insubordination. In any colony, the degree to which white women were protected from the

century colonial travel narratives by women, Sara Mills draws attention to the consistent presentation of a female narrator who travels without protection and comes to no harm, suggesting that it conveys to the reader that 'the colonised country is so much under [the coloniser's] control that even women can be represented travelling through it without "the natives" daring to approach her'.⁹² Though San Mao's confidence about her personal safety could likewise be read as an expression of faith in ability of the colonial administration to afford protection to non-native women, it seems likely also to be an implicit suggestion that her own person (supposedly radiating kindness, goodness and concern for the natives) could never be in any danger of harm from Sahrawi. Elsewhere, the threat of sexual violence from natives is made explicit and San Mao writes of being assaulted by Sahrawi men (on a trip into the desert where she is, ironically, not alone but accompanied by José - discussed below); San Mao shows herself overcoming them through her resourcefulness and quick-thinking and saving the life of José into the bargain. On another occasion, she is walking through a graveyard late at night when she encounters a man crouching beside a grave. Boldly taking the initiative she accosts him loudly with the words, 'Who are you? you shameless beast, hiding there to scare women! what are you up to?' and succeeds in scaring him far more than he had scared her.⁹³ San Mao's message of female capability and self-reliance may have been one of the elements that helped to create the strong and unusual sense of a personal bond with the author among her predominantly female readers.⁹⁴

When José cites patriarchal authority and enjoins San Mao to beware male Sahrawi, she reminds him in turn of their own safe hitch-hiking experiences, when they had been picked up by drivers who had 'a bit of confidence in human nature'. José replies with the implicit suggestion that there are different kinds of human nature: 'That was in Europe; now we are in Africa, in the Sahara desert! Get it clear in your

fear of sexual assault was a good indication of the level of security felt by the colonial authorities'. Such discourses are hinted at here in San Mao's position as a Spanish wife and José's - and his father's - distrust of the 'natives' around her. Like the white women in Ware's analysis, San Mao as a colonial wife could be said to be the 'symbol of the most valuable property known to white man' that had to be 'protected from the ever-encroaching and disrespectful black man at all costs'. Vron Ware pp. 37-38.

⁹² Mills p. 22

⁹³ *The Rainy Season Won't Come Again* pp. 192-194.

⁹⁴ Sara Mills notes that it is rare to find even the slightest hint of the possibility of danger from men and that conflict is rarely mentioned - though an underlying dread of unspeakable dangers to colonial wives from 'native' men has long been present in colonial writing. She explains this absence as owing to the notion that it would be 'improper' for a woman writer to allude to the real possibilities of assault of a sexual nature, Mills p. 22.

mind'.⁹⁵ In José's view, Europeans can evidently be trusted to behave in a civilised way; Sahrawi, on the other hand, can be expected to be lawless and violent. Though San Mao does not agree with José that Europeans should be trusted and Sahrawi should not, she is in agreement that the situation in the Sahara is different from that in Europe:

This was different. In a civilised society, because it is too complicated, I would never feel that other people and things have anything to do with me - but in this wild, windy, barren place, if you see a blade of grass, or a drop of water...let alone a person, they touch my heart. How can I see a lame old man limping along in this lonely place and not take pity on him?⁹⁶

Thus San Mao bases her willingness to offer a lift in her car to anyone who requires it - whether they be male or female, Sahrawi or Spanish - on a narrative of compassion for all living things in the harsh environment of the Sahara. Again, San Mao intervenes in the life of the desert with a narrative of personal goodness, with no acknowledgment of the insitutional failure that creates the 'problem' she steps in to solve. The lack of public transport becomes an occasion for the expression of her own emotions towards the desert, her sense of personal connection, the urge for reciprocity with Sahrawi society and the assumption that it is she who is needed in order for the desert to be improved. And this time her efforts are met with appropriate gratitude (unlike the spoiled utopia and failed reciprocity of the provision of education). Indeed the rewards for picking up Sahrawi far surpass the amusement of play or indeed the pleasure of picking up people from 'outside':

when they [Sahrawi] got out, they would always thank me almost worshipfully; I could still see those humble people waving to me in the distance across the vast land right up until my car was almost out of sight. I was often moved by their expressions when they got out - such simple and honest people!⁹⁷

Thus in offering help to pedestrians in the desert San Mao achieves a sense of reciprocity of emotion: her compassion for the desert is rewarded not only by the fun she seeks but also with simple, humble Sahrawi 'worship'.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Crying Camels* p. 69.

⁹⁶ *Crying Camels* p. 69. It might be noted that the whole conversation about picking up Sahrawi men takes place when José is annoyed that San Mao has arrived late to pick him up from work; San Mao's excuse is that there had been deep sand on the road and that the home of 'that person' (the Sahrawi man) had been so far away. *Crying Camels* p. 68.

⁹⁷ *Crying Camels* pp. 72-73.

⁹⁸ The story of picking up passengers is retold twenty years later, when Zhang Yun visits the desert. He tells his Sahrawi guide and driver how 'sympathetic and compassionate' San Mao would pick up 'old people, children, soldiers, prostitutes - even nomads with their goats...San Mao cared for these complete strangers and solitary, helpless people so much...she didn't ask for payment or reward...What spirit was it that supported San Mao in doing this?' The two Sahrawi are very 'moved'; 'She really was a good person!' they conclude, Zhang pp. 125-126. The guide and driver tell Zhang that 'local

Enlightened values

One of San Mao's longest desert stories deals with her own moral values and the Sahrawi practice of slave-keeping.⁹⁹ The sought-after reciprocity is achieved, but is shown to be inadequate; institutions triumph over sentiment; and the narrative of individual lack (rather than a set of institutional inequalities) which can be filled by individual, personal charisma and concern breaks down completely.

The tale begins soon after San Mao's arrival in the desert. She and José, together with two other Spanish couples, are invited to a rich man's home for a banquet.¹⁰⁰ The food is cooked and served by a boy of eight or nine, and San Mao is impressed by the boy's 'beautiful' movements as he anoints each guest with aromatic oil,¹⁰¹ prepares camel kebabs and peppermint tea, then kneels to serve each guest in turn.¹⁰² She rewards him with a smile; the two Spanish women, by contrast, rudely refuse the food.¹⁰³ San Mao sets herself apart here as a guest who

people don't dare pick people up lightly in the wilderness, let alone a woman!' - though of course local people in the 1990s would be without the level of protection available to San Mao as the Spanish Chinese woman in the Spanish-colonised desert.

⁹⁹ Various Saharan tribes have traditionally used 'acquired outsiders' as 'servants, herders and farmers'; this was 'an adaptation to the cycles of drought in the Sahara' which 'gave them human resources upon which they could fall back as they withdrew from the desert in the face of drought', Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds), *Slavery in Africa: historical and anthropological perspectives* pp. 45-6. There are two accounts of slavery in San Mao's stories; for a discussion of the other one see Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping'. Her stories of black slaves place her in a long line of such references in modern Chinese literature - see Frank Dikötter *The discourse of race in modern China* for references to other Chinese sources. Dikötter seeks to show that structures of racist thought similar to those in Europe and its colonial offshoots were also present in China; he notes that the term 'black slave race' was used in some Chinese documents in the 19th and early 20th centuries to describe Africans (Dikötter p. 146). The existence of this stock of references does not imply any direct connection between 19th century racial concepts and San Mao's African stories; indeed, San Mao presents herself as firmly opposed to slavery.

¹⁰⁰ The rich man is the brother-in-law of their friend, Ali. San Mao stresses the opulence of the surroundings (the silver tray, the silver tea-set, the perfume, the 'intricate charcoal burner', his wives' 'innumerable robes of gold and silver thread, rare in the desert' and his own manner (he is 'an old and apparently very cunning Saharan, smoking a hookah...his manner was easy and inexpressibly arrogant', *Crying Camels* pp. 239-240. She seeks admission to the inner rooms to see his 'beautiful wives' who are presented as eagerly longing to meet her too. Tiring of the xenana, she returns to the party (the four 'beautiful young wives' are too shy to show themselves to the other guests) wearing Sahrawi robe and veil, enjoying the fantasy that the other guests might think that she had 'become the fifth wife', *Crying Camels* p. 240.

¹⁰¹ 'The child knelt quietly before us and then...brought over the silver perfume bottle and poured perfume lightly into everyone's hair. This was a solemn ceremony in the Sahara. I bent my head to let the child pour on the perfumed oil. He didn't stop until my hair was soaking wet...so that perfume filled the Arab palace; the atmosphere was moving and solemn'. It is not only the 'atmosphere' that is changed by this ceremony; the Saharan people themselves, whose tolerance of dirt so offends San Mao, are improved as well: 'the powerful bodily stench of Saharan people completely disappeared', *Crying Camels* p. 241

¹⁰² *Crying Camels* pp. 241-242. As the 'two other Spanish wives' chat together about their own children, only San Mao appreciates the Sahrawi boy and participates fully in the occasion.

¹⁰³ 'Heavens', they cry, 'I can't eat this! I'll be sick! Bring me some fizzy drink at once!' *Crying Camels* p. 242.

knows how to behave, a sophisticated and polite cosmopolitan in comparison with the Spanish 'country bumpkins' whose behaviour embarrasses her because 'they had no breeding'.¹⁰⁴ Distancing herself physically as well as morally from the other women she goes over to sit with the boy and begins to cook her own kebab. As he gives her a slight smile, San Mao notes that he 'looked very smart':

I had a lot of respect for him. I asked him first before fanning the fire and turning the meat, because he really was a capable child. He flushed with happiness; I imagine people very seldom made him feel so important.¹⁰⁵

There is a suggestion here that Mao is bringing new, modern and 'civilised' ways of behaviour to the natives in the form of respect for children (which the Spanish women plainly do not share), which is met by the boy with a smile that she interprets unambiguously as one of delight (rather than, perhaps, embarrassment). She chides Ali for making the child work so hard, but it is not until pressed by José that he admits with some embarrassment that the boy is 'neither a family member nor a neighbour's child'. Amid the awkward silence that ensues, it is José who understands and explains to San Mao - quietly, lest the child overhear - that the boy is a slave.

Appalled, and with 'intolerance and distress' in her face, San Mao does her best to embarrass Ali further with questions and a denunciation of slave-keeping.¹⁰⁶ Ali is defensive, replying that

We have never treated our slaves badly. Take this child, for example - he goes home to his parents' tent at night, he lives outside the town. He's very happy; he goes home every day.

San Mao asks how many slaves the rich man owns, and Ali replies:

More than 200. They have all been released to build roads for the Spanish government, and at the beginning of the month he gets their wages. That's how he became so rich'.

'What do the slaves eat?'

'The Spanish bureau for contract workers feeds them'.

¹⁰⁴ 'Ali had invited us to eat typical desert food and these two awful women despised it and kept on squealing. They didn't want tea, they wanted fizzy drink; they couldn't sit on the ground, they wanted chairs', *Crying Camels* p. 243.

¹⁰⁵ *Crying Camels* p. 243.

¹⁰⁶ 'How did the slave get here?' I asked Ali coldly. 'They have been here for generations. It's hereditary; he was born a slave'. 'Do you mean to say that it was written on the face of the first black person when he was born: "I am a slave?"...Of course not. They were captured. When they saw black people living in the desert they went and caught them, they knocked them out and tied them up with ropes for a month - and then they didn't run away. If the whole family is captured they're even less likely to run away, and thus they have become hereditary property over the generations and now you can buy and sell them', *Crying Camels* p. 244-245.

'So, you use slaves to make money for you, and don't look after them'.¹⁰⁷ Though San Mao argues against the practice of slave-keeping, she is not unaware that the legitimacy of her presence in the Sahara rests upon that same Spanish system that upholds slave-owning system by using slave labour for road construction projects and paying wages to the slave-owners; the following day she takes up the argument with a Spanish official (discussed below). Meanwhile, however, the other Spanish guests at the rich man's party demonstrate their willing complicity with slavery in this Spanish colonial territory: one woman mutters, 'Ah. We have a few too', whereupon her husband, embarrassed and angry, replies 'Shut up, bitch'.¹⁰⁸ The contrast between San Mao and these Spaniards is now presented as more than just a difference in levels of politeness and cultural sensitivity; it is now a qualitative moral difference expressed in their attitudes towards slave-keeping. As the party says its farewells and leaves the rich man's house, San Mao refuses to shake the slave-owner's hand.

The slave boy follows San Mao as they leave. Slipping away from her companions, she thanks him and stuffs some money into his hand, aware of and discomfited by the moral difficulties and ambiguities of the situation:

I was ashamed of myself. What could money represent? Could what I wanted to say to this child be said through money? I couldn't think of any other way - but really, this was a debased form of kindness'.¹⁰⁹

San Mao goes to express her indignation to the nearest representative of the Spanish administration, the secretary at the courthouse. To his affectionate greeting she replies: 'Secretary, allowing people to keep slaves in a Spanish colony! That's pretty admirable!' The secretary sighs.

'You're telling me! every time a Sahrawi and a Spaniard fight, we lock up the Spaniard. With a violent bunch of people like this, we can't even do enough to appease them - how would we dare question their own affairs? We'd be scared to death!'

The colonial official's defence of Spain reproduces colonial assumptions about the barbarism and violence of the people they rule, and also implies that Spain would never really injure Sahrawi interests. Though Spanish power in the desert is strong enough to take control over territory and resources, it is too mild to question (let alone put and end to) slave-keeping. Any fault on Spanish side of a fight with a Sahrawi is

¹⁰⁷ *Crying Camels* pp. 244-245.

¹⁰⁸ *Crying Camels* p. 245.

¹⁰⁹ *Crying Camels* p. 246. Similar moral dilemmas arise on San Mao's trip to Madeira (see Chapter 4) and in the stories discussed in Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping'.

elided in the narrative of Spanish grievance against native strength and solidarity, to suggest that it is actually the Spanish who are disadvantaged under Spanish colonialism in the Sahara; and fighting is placed on the same level as slave owning as simply an issue to with maintaining public order. Sahrawi transgressions are supposedly overlooked while Spaniards suffer for them, and there is, it is suggested, nothing that the colonial government (despite Spanish military and civil structures in the territory) can do. The official apparently assumes that he and San Mao will be in agreement, sharing the 'knowledge' and fear about the lengths to which Sahrawi might go if the Spanish government 'questioned their affairs' (and indeed that they will agree that the Spanish government does *not* question their affairs). San Mao, however, refuses complicity and distances herself from Spanish colonial policy. 'You're accomplices!' she continues; 'It's far more than just not regulating it; you're using slave labour to build roads, and giving their wages to their owners. It's a joke!' The official reiterates his conviction that the real power in the desert lies with the colonised and not the coloniser, and that Spain is powerless to act: 'The owners are all heads of tribes, and these are the powerful Saharans who are the representatives at the parliament in Madrid. What can we do?' San Mao's reply, again critical of Spain, encodes her own distance in a reference to Spain as her 'second homeland'; she herself, positioning herself in relation to a 'first homeland' which is neither Catholic nor generally considered a colonising power, is free to accuse: 'A Catholic country where you can't divorce but you can keep slaves! It's ludicrous! It's great! Ah, my second homeland! for goodness' sake'. As a representative of a socially advanced 'first homeland' that neither allows slave-keeping nor prohibits divorce, San Mao can display enlightened values to both Sahrawi and Spain; this aspect of San Mao as a bearer of Chinese/Taiwan morality to the world will be discussed in more detail below. In reply to her outburst, however, the court secretary merely tells her not to get so excited in the hot weather; the argument closed, San Mao gives up and goes home.¹¹⁰

That same evening, a stranger appears at San Mao's door, a middle-aged black man clad in rags, who makes a humble bow to her - 'clasping his hands in front of his chest as though he was praying to me. His gestures made a striking contrast to those of the 'impolite Sahrawi'.¹¹¹ This courteous stranger cannot speak, but can communicate with gestures - which San Mao is consistently confident of

¹¹⁰ *Crying Camels* pp. 246-247.

¹¹¹ *Crying Camels* p. 247.

understanding correctly (later claiming she can 'tell at a glance' what he means).¹¹² He conveys that he is the father of the slave child, and tries to return the money she had given to the boy; with difficulty San Mao persuades him to accept it. With another prayer-like bow and a smile, he leaves.

San Mao is impressed not only by the man's superiority to the Sahrawi in terms of manners, but also by his understanding of reciprocity. A few days later, some vegetables are left on San Mao's doorstep, and she knows immediately whose gift they are; claiming to be too moved to eat them, she places them in a vase instead, as if they were flowers. Reciprocity is clearly established: this time not with Sahrawi inhabitants of the desert, but with a member of the enslaved underclass. Again the man's behaviour is contrasted explicitly with that of the Sahrawi:

we lent and gave countless things to our Saharan neighbours every day, but the only person who repaid me was a slave who was so poor that not even his own body belonged to him. This moved me even more than the story of the widow's mite in the Bible.¹¹³

Soon after, when San Mao's neighbours hire a slave to do some concreting work on their roof, the workman ('the best concreter in the desert') turns out to be the same man. When San Mao sees him again she prevents him bowing, and they shake hands instead.¹¹⁴ She gestures her thanks for the vegetables, and interprets his makes answering gestures as, 'If people like you don't eat vegetables, your gums will bleed'. San Mao is amazed at his intelligence and knowledge,¹¹⁵ and remarks happily that this 'international language' of gestures is 'really convenient'.¹¹⁶ Indeed the man's disability may actually facilitate communication between them; were the slave able to speak, it is unlikely that, as a slave of a Sahrawi family, he would have learned Spanish, and San Mao knows no Arabic or any other local language that he would be likely to know. His inability to speak actually enhances the scenario of reciprocity, and San Mao assumes that their wordless exchanges constitute perfect

¹¹² *Crying Camels* p. 250. An early story (not discussed in this present work) tells of a childhood encounter with an army cook who is also mute and with whom she converses in gestures; from his gestures she is supposedly able to discern that he is from Sichuan, he was forcibly conscripted by the KMT when he was out buying medicine for his pregnant wife, he has not seen his wife since, and he has never seen his child, *Taking the City* p. 31.

¹¹³ *Crying Camels* p. 249.

¹¹⁴ In response to her greeting 'his sincere smile was like a flower opening on his face', *Crying Camels* p. 250.

¹¹⁵ 'How could a desert slave have this kind of general knowledge?' *Crying Camels* p. 250.

¹¹⁶ *Crying Camels* p. 250.

communication; and again individual goodwill on both sides is willed into being to cancel out unpleasant notions of inequality.¹¹⁷

In the unbearable midday heat, San Mao wonders how the concreter is managing without shelter on the roof, and braves the furnace-like air to go and see. She finds him lying wretchedly under a broken mat from the goat pen, clutching a lump of hard bread which she recognises as goat feed.¹¹⁸ He is hesitant when San Mao invites him downstairs; when she pushes him towards the stairs he descends, bowing as he goes, but he will not enter her living room. San Mao suggests that his reluctance is connected with the fact that he is black;¹¹⁹ there is no hint of any other reason, such as the wish to avoid a potentially compromising situation in a society where the difference in the political and social positions of colonial wives and native men would not work in his favour. On this occasion she accepts his unwillingness and does not press him, though later he is persuaded to come in and dine when José is present. This time she places a mat in the corridor for him instead, brings him food and quickly withdraws lest he be embarrassed by her presence.¹²⁰ Again she is certain of the uniqueness of her own understanding and kindness. 'No one had ever treated him as a human being before', she asserts; 'how could he not be scared to death?'¹²¹

The awkwardness of the encounter continues when San Mao discovers that he has not touched the food she brought him, evidently saving it to take home for his family. As she packs a bag of food for him to take home to his children, she regrets the limitations of what she can offer to him and muses that he must have a very happy home life - two themes which recur throughout the story.¹²² Meanwhile he watches her with a 'complicated expression of embarrassment and happiness' which she cannot bear to look at, then with another bow he returns to work, 'almost weeping with happiness'.¹²³

¹¹⁷ Implicit, for example, in the idea that 'people like her' will have special dietary requirements that might be different from those of 'people like him'.

¹¹⁸ It is 'old bread that the Sahrawi get from the military camp - they usually grind it and feed it to their goats', *Crying Camels* p. 252.

¹¹⁹ 'pointing to the colour of his skin' in explanation, *Crying Camels* p. 252.

¹²⁰ *Crying Camels* p. 253.

¹²¹ *Crying Camels* p. 252.

¹²² 'I thought that the mute slave must really love his children - he must really have had a happy home, or he wouldn't have been so delighted just for the sake of a few things to eat...Actually we didn't have much food; what I could give him wasn't good enough (really too poor.)' *Crying Camels* p. 254.

¹²³ *Crying Camels* p. 254.

In this story, there is more weight than usual given here to the moral ambiguities and difficulties in San Mao's relationships with people in the desert;¹²⁴ the concreter, as a slave, occupies a different social space from the supposedly well-to-do Sahrawi among whom San Mao lives or the nomadic Sahrawi roaming the desert beyond. As already noted, San Mao, though a Spanish national in the desert, is still an 'outsider' in the desert through her Chinese ethnicity and is therefore identify herself with the Sahrawi as non-Spanish; in this story, however, we find her aligning herself most closely with another group of 'outsiders' in the Sahrawi community of the Spanish Sahara, that is, the people who have been enslaved by the Sahrawi because of the 'difference' of the colour of their skin. Here the targets of San Mao's philanthropy are those under double oppression, exploited and denied humanity by both Spanish and Sahrawi; and only San Mao, as an outsider, is shown as sensitive to the common humanity between herself and the most despised inhabitants of the Spanish Sahara. Numerous contrasts are set up: between San Mao (who cares about the slave and his family) and the Spanish (who tacitly accept slavery); between the Sahrawi (who enslave and humiliate the black tribesmen among them) and San Mao (who endeavours to set up a relationship of reciprocity and friendship with the slave and his family); and between the Sahrawi (rude, arrogant and ungrateful) and the slave (courteous, grateful and a willing partner in reciprocity). In San Mao's narrative, only she can value the positive attributes of these members of the slave class that their oppressors are too ignorant and prejudiced to see. Yet even as she attempts to do the right thing, San Mao shows awareness of the moral compromise attendant on her position of privilege in the colonised desert. Acts of individual sensitivity and moral worth do not - as in the medical, educational and transport stories - make up for the lacks left by colonial policies. In this narrative, we see Sahrawi keeping slaves with apparent Spanish sanction, with the only expression of dissent and the only manifestation of the wish for equality and humaneness coming from San Mao. The obstacles to utopia are not only Sahrawi but also European; non-

¹²⁴ Of all of San Mao's stories, this is perhaps the one that shows her in the best light. Her striving towards sensitivity and kindness in her dealings with the slave in this narrative is not undercut by the constant shifting of focus to herself and her own feelings and reactions that is so characteristic of her Saharan stories and which often serves to create the opposite effect - that is, to present the narrator as self-absorbed and eager to present herself as admirable, her sensibilities as unusually keen and her actions as uniquely good. The characteristic references to her own emotional state ('I was moved'; 'I was transfixed'), though present in this story, do not prevent the overall effect of her self-presentation from being positive. Her concern for the mute concreter and his family is perhaps on a more credible scale than her humanitarian exploits in other stories, and the expression of doubts about the appropriateness or effectiveness of her own actions seems not to be ironic here as it is in many other stories.

Spanish San Mao is presented as a moral example, and along with her partner in reciprocity, the enslaved non-Sahrawi concreter.

As the story continues, San Mao introduces the concreter to José, gesturing to indicate that the three should be 'friends' and declaring herself 'moved' by the ingenuous smile he gives in reply. This wish for the reciprocity of friendship is expressed through another invitation to the slave to dine with San Mao and José, and then through his invitation to them in return to visit his tent. As the relationship of reciprocity advances, San Mao exults in the fact that the slave begins to shake hands rather than bow; she fancies that the slave's 'sense of inferiority' is 'quite naturally' decreasing, to be replaced by 'fellow-feeling' (again, of a kind he is presumed never to have experienced before).¹²⁵ When he visits San Mao's home again, their interactions oscillate between inclusion and differentiation; he will enter the living room, but he cannot eat the rich food San Mao has prepared; José is amazed at his knowledge of astrology and geography;¹²⁶ San Mao's sense of familiarity and equality with him is such that she can jokingly insult him by calling him 'stupid', and he can respond in kind by almost falling over with laughter at the joke;¹²⁷ yet because of his 'inhibited manner' at not being able to eat what she has provided, San Mao decides that it is better not to invite him to eat with them. The awkwardness in their interactions brought about by the inequalities between them is not concealed; indeed it is frequently mentioned, reinforced by San Mao's frequent expressions of amazement at his level of knowledge and sensitivity, and the fact that the neighbours' children are abusive about him.

San Mao presents herself introducing the subject of slavery with him, pointing to some birds in the sky and making flying gestures to convey that 'You are not free; you've worked half to death, and you don't get a cent for it'.¹²⁸ The reply she imputes to him and her own interpretation of it accord precisely with her own earlier assumptions about the happiness he derives from his life and his family even though he is enslaved:

The slave looked at the sky and then at his skin, and sighed. After a while he smiled again and pointed to his heart, then to the bird, and made a gesture of flying.

¹²⁵ *Crying Camels* p. 254. The idea is intensified by the suggestion that José has been helping him with the concreting work.

¹²⁶ He is able to plot the positions of stars, to find the Sahara Desert and Spain instantly on a map and to identify José with Spain; though he cannot locate Taiwan specifically, he indicates Asia on the map as San Mao's place of origin, *Crying Camels* pp. 255-256.

¹²⁷ *Crying Camels* pp. 256.

¹²⁸ *Crying Camels* p.257.

I knew that what he wanted to say was: 'My body is not free, but my heart is free'.¹²⁹

San Mao's account of their visit to his tent home underlines the extreme poverty of the household¹³⁰ but also reinforces this impression of family happiness; San Mao and José are moved by their familial affection.¹³¹ 'At least the slave has a happy home!' San Mao remarks; 'He's not that poor. Family is a source of happiness for everyone! There is warmth even for the poorest of people; even the slave had a family, so we couldn't feel that he was someone to feel sorry for'.¹³²

Nonetheless, the slave's entrapment within 'the humanitarian, though also negative, category of poverty'¹³³ moves San Mao and José to philanthropic action. On their first visit they bring gifts of food, and later they buy more presents for the slave's family. Here there is none of the easy and generalised exchange of trinkets for photographs and 'friendship' that characterised San Mao's early interactions with nomadic Sahrawi; the practical gifts she provides for the slave and his family (cloth, charcoal, meat) are charged with a deep embarrassment at giving this kind of 'charity',¹³⁴ and she uses a Muslim festival as a pretext for presenting her gifts. The reciprocity continues; just as the gift of money had been repaid with vegetables, the slave does what he can in return:

He had nothing to repay us with, but he would quietly fix the awning for us where the goats had trodden on it; he...washed our car for us at night; when storms blew he brought our clothes in...and took down the awning for us.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ *Crying Camels* p. 258. As so often in San Mao's stories, José preaches restraint, telling her not to get the slave excited. 'I want to get him excited!', replies San Mao, 'He has the skills of his trade, and if he was free he would have no problem supporting his family', pp. 257-258.

¹³⁰ His tent, pitched alone at the edge of the town, is 'very ragged'; there are no mats on the floor, only a few hemp sacks on the bare sand; there are no cups, so the guests must drink in turn from the kettle in which the water was boiled. The two younger children are naked (the eldest, of course, is at the rich man's house where he works); and the slave's wife is raggedly and inadequately clothed. Their poverty contrasts sharply with the wealthy man's house (his wives' gorgeous robes, the rich carpets, beds and the floor-length mirrors). San Mao and José are moved by his hospitality and his embarrassment at having no cups to offer them. Again the contrast with the scene in the rich man's house (where the slave's eldest child served them with sweet and fragrant tea from silver vessels) is unstated but clear, *Crying Camels* pp. 258-259.

¹³¹ As they arrive together, the slave's children come running out to welcome their father home and are met with embraces, and as they leave they look back upon the slave standing waving at the opening of his tent, his children in his arms, *Crying Camels* p. 259.

¹³² *Crying Camels* p. 259.

¹³³ Pratt p. 163.

¹³⁴ 'I would always go during the day when he was out; I'd leave the things outside the tent and run away', *Crying Camels* p. 259.

¹³⁵ *Crying Camels* p. 260. The 'kind and simple' wife of the slave is also depicted as grateful; now modestly wrapped in the cloth San Mao has provided, she always smiles when she sees her. Again this behaviour is contrasted with that of the Sahrawi: she 'was not a Sahrawi with no breeding', *Crying Camels* p. 259-260.

Again his behaviour is contrasted with that of the Sahrawi: 'he was not a Sahrawi with no breeding'.¹³⁶ Though San Mao and José give thought to how their friend might be helped out of slavery, no solution occurs to them. They do not actively seek a way to set him free because they 'never seriously considered that the fate of the slave could be even more cruel than it was at present'.¹³⁷ They are also far from confident of the wisdom of trying to obtain his freedom, fearing that he would become entirely their responsibility¹³⁸ - even though, as San Mao had remarked earlier, he would be able to support his family with his skill as a concreter. Unknown to them all, however, a dramatic change is about to occur in his circumstances, through which he is deprived of the very thing that San Mao feels has allowed him to maintain such dignity and happiness as he has. When the concreting is finished, San Mao learns that the slave's owner has sold him: he must leave his family and go to Mauritania to tend his new owner's animals.¹³⁹

San Mao hastens to see what can be done - but it is too late. The transaction has taken place, and the slave is sitting in a jeep, his hands and feet bound and his face expressionless. Unable to save him, San Mao gathers up all the money she can find at home and hands it to him along with 'the big, brightly-coloured desert rug that was spread on my bed'. Immediately he leaps from the jeep and runs toward his tent, his captors in hot pursuit and San Mao running behind them. Once at his tent, he stumbles towards his waiting family, and San Mao's heart is wrung by the sight of him handing the money to his wife and enfolding her and his children together in the rug.

But the pursuers soon catch up, force him back into the jeep and drive off.

The slave's shadow gradually disappeared into the setting sun. His family did not cry, but hugged each other in a circle, shrinking inside the red rug like three stones in a sandstorm.

My tears ran down my face like a river. I slowly walked back and shut the door. I lay down on my bed, and was unaware of when the cocks crew.¹⁴⁰

Thus the story ends with a focus upon San Mao and her feelings. The reader does not learn about the fate of the slave's family after his departure. Their story is closed, and only San Mao's own emotions remain.

¹³⁶ *Crying Camels* p. 260.

¹³⁷ *Crying Camels* p. 260.

¹³⁸ 'If we could get him his freedom, we didn't know how we should fulfil our responsibility to him; if we should happen to leave, what would he do?' *Crying Camels* p. 260.

¹³⁹ *Crying Camels* pp. 261-262.

¹⁴⁰ *Crying Camels* p. 264.

Though this story presents the character of San Mao doing her best to behave honourably in a situation of injustice and inequality, her persona of goodness could be said to be compromised in a number of ways: by the expression of continual surprise at the slave's humanity (his knowledge, his familial affection, his humour); by the proud certainty that her own feelings and actions are uniquely good, as no one will ever before have attempted to bridge this unbridgeable social gulf (indeed no one but her could do so); or by the very act of recording and circulating her kind deeds for fame and profit, and thus gaining both moral and financial capital. It might also be said that any attempt to act well in such a situation is undercut from the start by the social structures of Spanish colonialism in the desert and the power relations inherent in any relationship between one of the Spanish community and an outcast slave. While San Mao may attempt to act well as an individual, she cannot but be embedded in existing networks of practice and experience in relationships between slave groups, Sahrawi and Spanish in the desert. She and José are members of a slave-owning class (alongside the other Spanish couples at the beginning of the story, who do have slaves in their households) but they refuse to be actively involved in slave-keeping and explicitly criticise others who do not place themselves morally outside this system. Both Sahrawi and Spanish communities are implicated in the slave system, and both are therefore targets of San Mao's criticism.¹⁴¹

Thus, as with other civilising missions, San Mao's provision of material aid and moral example in the desert seems based on a wish to break down the social hierarchies of the desert but in practice helps to reinforce the existing power and class relations. Her stories of philanthropy in the desert have nonetheless caught the imagination of biographers here, who praise her for her concern for the 'backward' natives and her willingness to associate with them. The mainland literary critic Gu Jitang commends her for caring for Sahrawi despite two factors which, he suggests, would militate against this: the fact that her ethnic origins are in an ancient civilisation (ie she is Chinese) and the fact that her position in the desert is that of the wife of one of the Spanish colonial outsiders:

Even though José was Spanish, and San Mao was his wife, they not only did not take the attitude of rulers and bully the locals, but actually made a wide range of local friends and did good things for the local people in a multitude of ways...Throughout all of San Mao's work there is no praise of those who hold political authority; on the contrary, in all of her works the subjects and people she describes are almost all workers from the lower strata. Many people, when

¹⁴¹ In a later narrative, San Mao tells of being presented with a slave as a gift by a Sahrawi who is grateful for material assistance which she has given him; she and José refuse, and the donor gives them an inanimate gift instead. The story is discussed in Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping'.

they go to backward areas, have an instinctive feeling of superiority and pride vis-à-vis the indigenous people, and unconsciously harbour a kind of disgust towards them, a feeling of dislike. Settling in the Sahara Desert, San Mao had not only been born in an ancient civilized country but had also experienced westernised [sic] Taiwan society. In addition, she went there as a wife of the conquering and ruling nation; usually such people feel refined and superior, occupy a commanding position and give orders. But San Mao was not at all like that. She always treated them equally, never discriminated, and actually used her personal mental and material power to run a school for them and teach them various kinds of knowledge'.¹⁴²

In Gu's opinion, San Mao's good deeds set her apart from the Spaniards around her - and her relationship with Sahrawi is supposedly extremely close as a result:

Those women behaved in her home just as they did in their own homes. They used San Mao's makeup and wore her clothes. San Mao behaved towards them with the attitude and feelings of a sister, so they had no inhibitions at all with her. Because they completely trusted San Mao, a woman who had her face veiled so that people couldn't see was even willing to go to hospital to have her baby delivered by a male doctor.¹⁴³

Gu praises San Mao also for a lack of class-consciousness and a concern for ordinary people, and links her interest in Sahrawi people to the notion of solidarity among 'Third World' people who have experienced the sufferings of colonialism.¹⁴⁴ San Mao's biographers Cui and Zhao are even more fulsome in their praise of San Mao as the healer of the Sahara. Considering her provision of medicines, tuition, letter-writing, opposition to slavery and 'financial aid' to the slave, and noting her cleverness and concern for the natives, the claim that¹⁴⁵

In the eyes of the Sahrawi she was a princess from the Orient. Teaching classes, healing their diseases, writing letters, giving all kinds of financial assistance - so much so that it made people think of the saviour, Jesus....San Mao had faith, hope and love.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Gu pp. 71-72, p. 111.

¹⁴³ Gu p. 111. Gu continues by retelling San Mao's stories of helping her Sahrawi neighbours, quoting the story of her lending her mop and bucket, the incessant borrowing that ensues, the fact that women would take off their veils in her house and so on. Gu p. 113.

¹⁴⁴ 'San Mao's love, sympathy and support for the Sahrawi people did not stem from any need of her own to get something from them, and definitely did not start from collecting material to write about;...it came simply from a pure and innocent feeling, from a natural affinity that came from her view of life, from her sympathy for ordinary workers and people of the lower classes, and from her support for oppressed people and oppressed nationalities...San Mao's attitude to and feeling for the Sahrawi was completely different from the discriminatory, arrogant and bullying attitude of westerners...It came from the sympathetic connection between the Chinese and African peoples of the Third World, who had long suffered the bitterness of colonialism and imperialist enslavement', Gu p. 113 For further discussion see Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'.

¹⁴⁵ She wanted 'to change some local customs; it was normal for the Sahrawi aristocracy to have slaves. San Mao was not used to this, and went to court to oppose it, and also gave a mute slave a lot of financial aid', Cui and Zhao p. 141.

¹⁴⁶ Cui and Zhao p. 143.

Thus secondary literature relating to San Mao constructs her as a civilising, even saving, figure for the people of the Sahara; a saviour from the East, an oriental princess, a teacher and healer in a barbaric land 'as lonely as death', bringing the natives not colonial oppression but salvation.¹⁴⁷ Indeed the Taiwan critic Li Ao quotes San Mao as saying that her motive for going to the desert in the first place was a desire to help 'the black people among the sand dunes' who needed her help, out of Christian motives and admiration for such people as Schweitzer and their activities in Africa.¹⁴⁸ Cui and Zhao attribute her 'spiritual understanding' of the people of the desert to her adolescent 'autism' and loneliness, which supposedly created in her 'habits of closeness'.¹⁴⁹

Amid these discussions of saving and civilising, the narrative of reciprocity is still present. Gu, for example, claims that San Mao achieved true reciprocity with the Sahrawi people among whom she lived:

Because San Mao was good to Sahrawi, treated them equally, and and helped them to the best of her ability, the Sahrawi were good to her too. Not only did they bring interest and pleasure into her life, but they also gave her all kinds of help, so that she could realise her ideal of crossing the desert. They not only enabled her to feel the tenderness of the desert, but also enabled her to feel safe; not only did they allow her to satisfy her curiosity fully, but they also allowed her to obtain the greatest richness and variety of material for writing, and to create a name as a writer of desert travel prose.¹⁵⁰

In the words of Cui and Zhao, San Mao in the desert 'had no more doubts about her own worth. She had gained self-confidence'.¹⁵¹ She had supposedly made a place for herself in the desert through her daily-life activities, and had certainly established one in her narratives. The Chinese woman of the desert had indeed 'created a name'.

All of the activities discussed above were made possible by the level of privilege enjoyed by San Mao and José as Spaniards in a Spanish colony, as people in the social grouping that has the wealth to buy medications, to own a car, to travel out into the desert.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Cui and Zhao p. 143.

¹⁴⁸ Li responds by asking why she didn't stay at home and help benighted Chinese people instead, *San Mao Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* p. 135.

¹⁴⁹ Cui and Zhao p. 143.

¹⁵⁰ Gu p. 113. Gu adds cryptically, 'Some people say that life is the source of literature, or that the people are the mother of literature; San Mao proves both of these', Gu pp. 113-114.

¹⁵¹ Cui and Zhao p. 143.

¹⁵² San Mao suggests that all Sahrawi in El Ayoun have cars (the people she picks up supposedly not being town dwellers) and that they happily sell their daughters in order to purchase them - unlike José, whose purchase of a car is through honest labour, and is even delayed until he is able to pay for it in cash.

Through all of her desert experiences, San Mao is of course gaining - in addition to the self-confidence her biographers claim she found in the desert - another very important harvest in the form of material for stories. In any situation she can collect experiences, sights, anecdotes, 'characters' and unfamiliar customs to fashion into best-selling tales, and novelty value is transformed into exchange value in the writing and circulation of San Mao's Saharan story collections. The quest for reciprocity with Sahrawi that has formed the basis for several stories so far has focused upon San Mao as a giver to the people around her. The remainder of the chapter will discuss San Mao as receiver of what the desert has to offer. Receiving from the desert, it might be suggested, is less successful for San Mao than giving; and thus her persona as caring provider without thought of recompense is reinforced.

Taking from the desert

Three of San Mao's Saharan stories show her attempting to profit from the desert and outline the results of these attempts. When she hunts fossils, picks up what seems to be a piece of jewellery, and tries to profit from the marine resources of the Saharan coast, she is thwarted every time by three elements in various combinations: the desert (in its very landscape), desert people (with ill-intent or evil supernatural power), and her own personality (in which avarice is consistently undercut by generosity and kindness). From time to time San Mao's stories mention casual finds in the desert (goat skulls, bullet cartridges,¹⁵³ the whole camel skull which José gives her as a wedding gift,¹⁵⁴ and of course the 'found art' from the rubbish dump with which she decorates her desert home), the three long accounts of attempting to gain from the desert all end in failure; moreover, lives are risked in the process on two of the three occasions.

Fossils

The story of her hunt for fossils is one of San Mao's more dramatic tales. When she and José drive out into the desert one night (despite the considerable risks of such an expedition)¹⁵⁵ to a place where they have heard fossils are to be found, José is sucked waist-deep into a muddy swamp and cannot pull himself free; he is left clinging to a rock in the desperate hope that San Mao can find a way to save him

¹⁵³ *Crying Camels* pp. 77-78.

¹⁵⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 38.

¹⁵⁵ Such as the extreme cold, the likelihood of getting lost in the darkness, and perhaps also an unspoken fear of danger from Sahrawi. The risks are underlined by the fact that José lies to the checkpoint guard about how far they intend to go, knowing he would stop them if he knew how distant their destination was. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 70.

before he sinks under or dies of exposure in the freezing desert night. San Mao's attempts to save him are thwarted by three Sahrawi men, who not only refuse to help but actually assault her; yet by bravery, quick thinking and resourcefulness she manages to escape them and rescue José as well (by detaching the car seats and floating them as stepping stones in the swamp, then tearing her dress into strips to make a rope for him to pull himself out with), all in the freezing dark.¹⁵⁶ They return home empty handed but are eager to resume the hunt for fossils the very next day.

Jewellery

The second instance of her wish to possess desert objects bringing disastrous and terrifying consequences for San Mao is her discovery of 'a native pendant', a medallion-like object on a leather thong, lying in the sand. When she hangs it around her neck, a bizarre and frightening chain of events ensues, and she is forced to abandon her new possession. The medallion is, she claims, an amulet associated with a supernatural world of curses and evil, whose mystic power destroys whatever it touches. It supposedly causes her to fall mysteriously and dangerously ill; it makes her tape recorder ruin tapes; it causes the brakes on her car to fail; and it makes coffee boil over on the stove, extinguishing the gas flame and filling the house with lethal fumes.¹⁵⁷ She and José are, it is suggested, lucky to escape with their lives; when an imam destroys the amulet's power, things return to normal. The charm, it turns out, is not local magic but 'witchcraft' from Mauritania.¹⁵⁸ Though San Mao's

¹⁵⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 71-86.

¹⁵⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 163-181. Such items are worn in the desert by 'everyone, male and female, young and old', and San Mao has long wanted to possess one but has never seen one for sale. It is made of bronze, with an embossed iron edging; on closer inspection it proves to be in a rather distinctive style, a little different from those worn by the Sahrawi around her. Threaded onto the cord alongside it are a small cotton bag and a heart-shaped fruit kernel, both of which San Mao throws away before hanging the pendant around her neck. When it swings against the tape recorder, the machine begins to malfunction. Then San Mao is seized with a sneezing fit, a nosebleed, a fit of vomiting, a sharp pain in her eye, and dizziness; the next wave of symptoms is severe stomach cramps and pains in her chest and lungs. José drives her to the military camp to see a doctor, whereupon the symptoms recede and the doctor can find no physical cause for the pains. As they drive home, the pendant swings against José, who is driving, and immediately the car speeds up and the brakes fail - though no mechanical problem can later be found. The pendant swings against José again as he helps San Mao out of the car, and he slams the door on San Mao's fingers. She falls to the ground, certain she is dying; the neighbours who help her indoors assume that she is miscarrying, as she is discharging blood. Suddenly a Sahrawi neighbour notices the pendant and cries out in terror. Handi insists that it be taken off at once or else San Mao will die, and José pulls it off. San Mao feels an invisible force enter the room and come to rest in the pendant; and at the same moment the smell of gas comes into the room; the coffee pot has boiled over, extinguishing the gas flame. José manages to drag San Mao out of the house before turning off the gas. Other hints of supernatural evil in the Sahara appear in a story where San Mao describes the supposed bewitching of the neighbour's son by a prostitute by drinking some kind of charmed brew, *Rear view* p.p. 77-81

¹⁵⁸ José's Sahrawi colleagues tell San Mao that this is the worst and most dangerous kind of curse, a form of 'Mauritanian witchcraft'. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 178. The cursed amulet is distinguishable from the pendants which all Sahrawi wear by its iron edging and by the fruit kernel and the little cloth

wish to possess the medallion is supposedly subverted by desert magic, the usually lethal magic spares her life; thus she may still present herself as favoured by the desert, for though she may blunder upon secrets best left alone, her life is spared.¹⁵⁹ Nonetheless, the piece of desert jewellery she wished to possess has eluded her grasp, and again she has failed to gain from the desert.

Fish

The third story of attempting to gain from the desert begins with San Mao's idea of saving money by exploiting the desert's natural resources and her suggestion that she and José make the 100km journey to the coast to catch fish.¹⁶⁰ As with San Mao's philanthropic activities, the wish for play is as important an element in the fishing plan as any practical considerations.¹⁶¹ San Mao and José pack their tent, drive to the coast and, just as on their excursion to observe the 'bathers', descend a cliff by rope to an idyllic scene. This time the peaceful beauty of the scene is not a site of 'uncivilised' customs but of undeveloped resources waiting to be exploited. Excitedly San Mao lists the creatures lying there for the taking,¹⁶² caught by the fantasy of 'discovery' that is so familiar in colonial travellers' records of travel and adventure, namely the notion that they are the first people ever to find this place¹⁶³.

bag that accompanied it; had San Mao not thrown these away, they tell her, she would certainly have died. After the fact, San Mao decides that either the events were purely coincidental or she had somehow willed them out of some kind of death-wish born of her loneliness and sadness in the Sahara, which had manifested itself in psychosomatic illness. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 180.

¹⁵⁹ Zhang Yun inquires about the medallion story, and his guide expresses complete belief in the story, telling him that there are two kinds of desert witchcraft, dating from well before the arrival of Islam in the desert: defensive magic ('the white way') and aggressive magic ('the black way'). The former, he says, is now incorporated into local Islamic beliefs, but the latter has long been prohibited; both involve the wearing of bronze medallions charged with magical inscriptions - for good (fertility, protection from evil, prevention of disease) or evil (creating difficulties for an opponent, causing an enemy to die). Zhang pp. 105-106.

¹⁶⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 143.

¹⁶¹ Ironically, the very economic woes that supposedly motivate their fishing in the first place are the cost of 'play', as the reason they feel badly off is that so much of José's income has been spent on travel and photography - that is, on play - which is, of course, precisely what San Mao has come to the Sahara for in the first place. They have bought no clothes for six months and have not wasted any money; everything has been spent on 'eating with friends, taking photos and long trips' (camping in the desert). *Stories of the Sahara* p. 142. It seems unlikely that José's income from Fosbucraa as an expatriate Spaniard would be low by the standards of the Sahrawi among whom they live, and the implication that they are not well off is doubly misleading in the light of the substantial amount of money that San Mao has safely deposited in the bank in El Ayoun; San Mao was financially supported by her father during her sojourns in Europe and Africa. On arrival in the desert she is carrying her allowance, true to her childlike persona, stuffed in wads inside a pillow-case. She and José make the decision to put this money in the bank and live only on José's salary. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 221.

¹⁶² Crabs, octopus, mussels, several kinds of eels and fish, and seaweed to be dried and used in soup, *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 143-144.

¹⁶³ 'No one had come to this cliff before', cries San Mao, 'it was still pristine and fruitful', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 144. The fishing expeditions of San Mao and José on the Saharan coast is somewhat

Not only is the shoreline rich but the sea teems with more fish than even the skilled spear-fisherman José could ever catch, and for San Mao the very abundance of the resources they have 'discovered' in the otherwise poor and infertile desert colony is a lesson in avarice, a feeling she has supposedly never known before:

When José came to shore, he had about 10 big fish slung about his waist...
'Look - there are so many I can't get them all'. At that moment I realised how it feels to be greedy.¹⁶⁴

In the absence of other people, the coastline's very existence seems to be for the purpose of rewarding the enterprise of its 'discoverers' with its bounty. The coast, like the Sahrawi people themselves, is read as *disponible*, available for the improvement San Mao can bring. 'This is King Solomon's treasure', she exclaims; 'we're rich!'¹⁶⁵ The idea that these are treasures for which the natives would supposedly have no use (the Sahrawi, San Mao claims, do not eat fish)¹⁶⁶ perhaps adds to this fantasy so akin to the myths of colonialism, that of innocently collecting things that others would not know how to use, in places where no one has ever thought to come before.

Their plunder of these untouched resources is halted only by the turning of the tide.¹⁶⁷ Returning home with their spoils, however, San Mao is undermined by her

reminiscent of Susan Horton's remarks about the lion hunts that Isak Dinesen describes in her stories of Africa - 'artful representations of bourgeois leisure, portraits of white Europeans wealthy enough to purchase a piece of prelapsarian Eden where they might play at being self-sufficient creatures hunting their own food', with 'all the comforts of the 'civilized' world and the challenge and romance of the uncivilized'. As Horton concludes, 'The effect is one of 'a world in which one can have it all, with an application of enough will, imagination - and cash. If as critics suggest the modern was being born at exactly the moment when everyday life was being colonized and commercialized and pleasure was being transformed into leisure, Dinesen's landscapes of Africa, where they are painted through the mists of nostalgia, oscillate between nostalgic descriptions of the "exotic"...and far more straightforward looks at those altered landscapes *and* at her own imbrication in the undesired transformations going on in the African landscape', Horton p. 191.

¹⁶⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 144.

¹⁶⁵ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 144. Here San Mao's sense that good resources are going to waste and that it is her right to take advantage of them is reminiscent of 18th and 19th century writing about Africa discussed by Pratt, where European travellers were 'affronted by the non-use of land' and felt that it was incumbent upon them to 'improve' what they found. 'The European improving eye', notes Pratt, tends to see emptiness and wastage that could be 'improved' to produce 'a marketable surplus' and to encode what they encounter as 'unimproved', and, in keeping with the terms of the anti-conquest, as *disponible*, available for improvement...It is not only habitats that must be produced as empty and unimproved, but inhabitants as well. To the improving eye, the potentials of the Eurocolonial future are predicated on absences and lacks of African life in the present', Pratt p.61.

¹⁶⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 154. According to Zhang Yun, Sahrawi had fished all along the coast before Spanish colonial times, but the Spanish had monopolised the fishing industry by establishing large fleets and sending their catches to Spain, thus forcing local fishermen out of business and driving them inland to become nomads. Zhang p. 73.

¹⁶⁷ In less than an hour San Mao has collected a bucket of mussels, 16 crabs 'as big as little basins' and a large pile of seaweed; José, meanwhile, is spearing fish and catching about 20 more crabs, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 144.

own generosity, inviting José's colleagues to eat with them. Thus their gain at the beach is cancelled out by their hospitable impulses towards others in the Spanish community. No fish are left to preserve - and indeed the end result is further expenditure, as José's friends are eager to join in successive fishing trips and San Mao buys extra provisions accordingly.¹⁶⁸ Although the play aspect of the camping and fishing expeditions has been successful, the economic purpose has not been achieved.¹⁶⁹ The next fishing trip, they resolve, will be strictly business, and they will sell the entire catch.¹⁷⁰

With a commercial end in view, however, the fun has gone; it is transformed into grim effort, hard work and suffering, from the 4am departure in the freezing darkness to San Mao's swollen knees and cut hand to José's 'ashen-faced' exhaustion to the 200km drive back to El Ayoun in the blazing midday sun.¹⁷¹ 'The strange thing was', sighs San Mao, 'that this time hadn't been as much fun as the last few, and we were absolutely exhausted...Earning money isn't easy!'¹⁷²

If the profit motive has cancelled out the element of play in the fishing, the business of actually selling the fish is even further removed from notions of personal fun. San Mao presents herself and José as totally unaware of how to go about finding buyers for their 'mountain of fish' and actutely embarrassed about practising 'trade' in this way. They seek customers only among the Spanish community, starting with Spanish institutions.

First they try to sell their fish at the National Hotel, the four-star haven for the colonial Spanish from the dust and dirt of the desert behind a 'fortress-like wall' (discussed below). Full of agonised embarrassment at every turn, however, they end up selling only a few of the fish and at far too low a price.¹⁷³ Their ignorance in matters of trade is suffused with implications of innocence and honesty, but the decisive factor in their fish-vending difficulties may be more precisely a sense of their

¹⁶⁸ Carefully enumerated: 10 kilos beef, 5 cabbages, made more than a dozen omelettes, provided fridge, stove, 5 big drums of water, 6 pairs of gloves, a crate of Coke and a crate of milk. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 145.

¹⁶⁹ Broke again, they comfort themselves with the notion that friendship constitutes riches far beyond the value of fish, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 146.

¹⁷⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 146.

¹⁷¹ San Mao's knees are painful from kneeling on the rocks for so long to scale, gut and clean the fish, and she has injured her hand with the knife. José is exhausted from spearing more than thirty fish (weighing, San Mao estimates, 60 or 70 kilos) without rest; it then takes them three trips each to haul all of their spoils from the beach to the cliff and then up the cliff to the car, *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 147-149.

¹⁷² *Stories of the Sahara* p. 149.

¹⁷³ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 149-151. They skulk around, speaking in whispers, San Mao hiding behind José, too nervous to say what they have come for.

class position as being above such practices - specifically, a fear that if they are seen to be trading in fish they might not again be able to mix so comfortably among the privileged enclave of National Hotel patrons. But as they move down the scale of luxury in the Spanish institutions of the desert they have no more success in selling their fish. Their attempt to sell fish to Sisters' Hotel (the local house of ill-repute) is frustrated by San Mao's desire to keep José away from the 'sexy sisters';¹⁷⁴ and at the military camp, the cooks are not interested in so small a quantity when they must cater for thousands of soldiers. Finally, they try hawking the fish in the street outside the post-office¹⁷⁵ - but embarrassment hampers them yet again, and it is not until a passing colleague of José's stops to show them how to call out their wares that they are eventually successful in selling all of their fish.¹⁷⁶

The intensity of embarrassment in these very personalised accounts of fish-selling seems perhaps a little excessive. Why should the process 'humiliate' them so? It is ironic that the young San Mao of Chapter 1, who longed to sell ice-blocks and sweet potatoes on the streets, is paralysed with embarrassment when in later life she does indeed find herself hawking food - so much so that she cannot bring herself to do it. Whatever its cause (whether it stems from a class disdain for 'trade', or from a fear of being conspicuous, or from the idea that if they have been selling fish they will somehow be unable to take their place with the other Spaniards in the desert and socialise in the National Hotel any more, or simply from the uncertainty of being in a situation that is unfamiliar and in which they do not know the rules), this embarrassed reluctance effectively distances San Mao and José from commercial activity. The world of practical trading for money is not their world, but is presented as something

¹⁷⁴ San Mao is reluctant to enter Sisters' Hotel, and waits outside for José. When he has not returned in 20 minutes, she picks up a fish and goes in to find that one of the 'sisters' is stroking his face. San Mao drops the dead fish on the bar between them, roaring 'Do you want fish or not?' and naming a price that is, unbeknownst to her, ten times higher than José has already quoted. José pushes her out of the bar, protesting quietly that she has spoiled the sale; she replies by asking him if he is selling fish or sex, and hits him repeatedly for allowing the woman to stroke his face, wishing that they could just throw the fish away. The encounter ends with San Mao and José 'hot and empty-handed, hungry, thirsty, exhausted and angry with each other'. *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 151-152.

¹⁷⁵ It is by now five o'clock in the evening; 'the airmail packages and letters' have arrived, and many European expatriates are there checking their mailboxes, *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 153-154.

¹⁷⁶ Even the picture of a fish displayed in the window of their car is enough to make them 'red-faced with embarrassment'. Unable to face the thought of selling they sit on the pavement, not even daring to look at the passers-by, of whom not one stops to buy their fish. Fortunately one of José's colleagues comes past, 'an old bachelor, a rough and ready kind of guy', with none of the fastidious distaste for selling that has crippled San Mao and José in their attempts to make money. 'If you're selling fish, you have to call out about it!' he tells them; 'It won't work if you are so embarrassed'. To show them how, he picks up a fish and shouts, 'Fresh fish'; immediately a crowd gathers, and the fish are gone in a flash. San Mao and José add up the takings, and by the time they remember to look around for the colleague to thank him, he has disappeared. *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 154-155

foreign to them, and such a position serves to deny San Mao's participation or complicity in the colonial enterprise of profiting from the resources of the colony; she can enjoy them, but she cannot derive personal gain from them. San Mao's position is innocent, even childlike; she plays, but she cannot put business first and cannot really care seriously about profits. She takes part in the society of the National Hotel, and she enjoys the leisure afforded by the desert environment, but she is not seen to be an efficient coloniser.

Even when all of the fish have eventually been sold (through the agency of José's less squeamish colleague) the difficulties and mortifications of the project are still not over. When San Mao and José return home exhausted from their fishing and marketing trip, José ungraciously refuses the noodles that San Mao is preparing for their evening meal and stalks off to eat at the National Hotel; San Mao follows, instructing him to order the cheapest dish on the menu. Before they have had time to order, however, José's boss arrives, delighted to have found companions with whom to eat. 'I hear there is fresh fish today!', he cries, 'What about it? Let's try it - you can't often get fresh fish in the desert'. Without consulting San Mao or José, he orders fish for them as well as for himself. Now San Mao and José really do have cause for embarrassment, as the very person to whom they sold their fish that afternoon walks past their table to see them eating their own fish, priced at twenty times the amount he paid them for it.¹⁷⁷ Politeness compels them to fight with the boss over who should pay the bill; and when José 'wins', he hands over the total sum they had earned from the sale of their catch. Only then does the realisation come to San Mao that they have sold their fish far, far too cheaply.¹⁷⁸

A parallel may perhaps be drawn here with San Mao's initial Saharan story, 'The Restaurant in the Desert'. In both tales, San Mao inserts herself into the desert economy by means of food. On the first occasion, this is done through the provision of hospitality for the Spanish in the desert (José, his colleagues, his boss), and on the second, through providing the raw material for Spanish dining at the National Hotel.

¹⁷⁷ 'He was astonished', notes San Mao, 'as if he had seen two madmen', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 157.

¹⁷⁸ The final ironic disappointment in this story of frustrated ambitions to profit from fishing comes the following morning, when San Mao mistakenly puts the the National Hotel's docket for the fish, (which was to be redeemed for cash) into the washing machine, and it turns to pulp. Now San Mao and José are back exactly where they started, their best efforts to profit from the desert through hard work and commerce undercut - ironically - by qualities in their own natures that San Mao presents as positive: generosity, unworldliness and the kind of social embarrassment and social correctness necessary for pleasing the boss and interacting successfully with the people who frequent the National Hotel. The quest for fish and financial gain, like the quest for fossils and the acquisition of the pendant, has come to nothing, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 157.

In both 'desert restaurant' settings, the Spanish boss exerts his authority over José and San Mao; in the first instance - in her own home - San Mao outwits him, but in the second - in the expensive restaurant - she and José come off the losers. More precisely, outside the home, and where real trade is concerned, San Mao and José do not prevail. The world in which they can triumph is demarcated as a domestic and non-commercial world, where fun and not profit dominate. As pleasure and play, cooking and fishing can be successful - but not when real commercial exchange comes into the equation.¹⁷⁹ San Mao fails in the business of extracting the desert's resources (fish); yet her livelihood in the desert comes from José's involvement with the extraction of desert resources (phosphate). Just as San Mao's personal failure in the 'civilising' project discussed above enables her to appear innocent of formal programs of 'civilising', her failure in the fishing enterprise enables her to maintain innocence vis-à-vis the real economic interests that are profiting from the Sahara.

Privilege

Though San Mao has been thwarted in gaining what she desires from the desert itself, she is still in a position to gain from the desert through her status as a Spanish citizen in a Spanish colony, or, more precisely, to profit from the many institutional and personal privileges available to the colonial Spanish and to herself as one of their number.¹⁸⁰ The privileges of San Mao's position and the benefits of the Spanish administration for Spanish citizens in the Sahara are an underlying presence in San Mao's stories of the Sahara; they do not form the basis for individual stories but are a constant background to her life in the desert.

One of these benefits is, of course, the society of the National Hotel referred to above, where European expatriates gather to partake of the food, wine and company of home. For the expatriate living in a place materially poorer than the home

¹⁷⁹ It might be recalled that the provision of food for 'foreigners' (through gardening and restaurants) has historically been a stereotypical occupation of communities of Chinese people in many 'western' countries, and an archetypal way in which they have inserted themselves into local economies around the world. San Mao transforms the hard labour of Chinese in producing food for 'foreigners' into play, with fun, and not profit, as her goal. The significance of food in the encounter between China and 'the west' can be seen also in the writings of other influential Chinese writers; it is a feature, for example, of Lin Yutang's writings in English about life among the Europeans and Americans, where he describes preparing the finest products of China for people with the finest of European taste - or the cookbook (*How to Cook and Eat in Chinese*) compiled by the wife of the Chinese linguist Zhao Yuanren to instruct the American middle classes in the preparation of Chinese food.

¹⁸⁰ Ma Zhongxin has suggested that the whole point of San Mao's marriage to José was an opportunity to stay in the desert without a visa. Thus as the wife of a Spanish national she gained the 'right' to remain at will in a Spanish-occupied territory; she also received health insurance as José's spouse. In addition, as a result of his marriage, José was able to claim a lump sum as a furniture allowance, a raise in salary, a 'married subsidy', rent relief each month and a tax reduction and health insurance for San Mao, *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 235-236.

country, the hotel can become an important focus because of the opportunities it offers for the leisured consumption of familiar goods, for the removal of him/herself from the society of the host culture into that of other expatriates, and at the same time for reinforcement of his/her 'difference' encoded in a privileged economic (and possibly social) position vis-a-vis the native people.¹⁸¹ San Mao and José likewise, removed from the possibilities that urban life in Taipei or Madrid would offer for entertainment and recreation, partake from time to time of the 'good life' offered by El Ayoun's hotel. The National Hotel has already been noted as one of San Mao's first impressions of the desert because of its apparent 'authenticity'; it has more of the expected local colour than the other buildings and resembles what she imagines 'a Muslim emperor's palace fort' would look like with its high walls and huge gateways.¹⁸² The decor and atmosphere of the hotel restaurant, like its exterior, resembles the palace of San Mao's exoticising imagination:

The National Hotel was set up by the Spanish government. The restaurant was decorated like an Arabian palace, with lots of local character and soft lights. There were never very many people eating there. The air was fresh here, there was no smell of dust, the knives and forks were polished till they shone like snow, the table-cloths were stiffly ironed, and faint music flowed

¹⁸¹ This phenomenon will be familiar to those who were 'foreign' students and teachers in China in the 1980s. Even for people for whom hotels had never before been part of their lifestyles, the buying-power of their salaries and a wish to temporarily 'escape' from a culture they did not understand would often see them spending time in the lounges and bars of high-class local hotels - indeed often beginning to feel particularly entitled to the benefits of the hotel by virtue of their superior wealth and cosmopolitan experience coupled with the reduction in material comfort they experienced in China compared to their home countries. Caren Kaplan notes the importance of the hotel and its social construction in discussion of travel experiences and writings, suggesting that 'that the metaphor of the "bourgeois hotel" can engender critical examinations of the power relations in cultural production and reception' representing as it does 'the site of a diverse set of particular, historical subjects', Kaplan p. 106, 132. Zhang Yun praises the new hotel that has superseded the old National Hotel as the oasis of luxury for expatriates in the desert (chiefly high-ranking visitors from the UN and officers of the UN forces there): 'built to resemble 'an old Saharan castle', it offered all of the usual comforts of the international hotel ('thick carpets...air-conditioning...television...the same as any hotel in any country today...a hairdryer in the bathroom, which you only get in five-star hotels...typical French food, UN standard; it is rare to be able to eat food like this in the middle of the desert') so that 'I hardly dared believe I was in the middle of the desert', Zhang pp. 27-28. As noted in Chapter 2, the European journalists in El Ayoun to cover the worsening situation in Sahara all stay in the National Hotel - but some are diverted to admire San Mao's house, in which she has created comfort and aesthetic decor reminiscent of the type of European upper middle class home they are familiar with.

¹⁸² Twenty years later, Zhang Yun also admires the building 'like an old castle' which is the best and most famous hotel in El Ayoun. In the time of Spanish rule, he is told, it accommodated high-ranking Spanish officials and other important people. The surrounding wall ('like a city wall, with a gateway like a city gate') puts Zhang less in mind of a palace (as San Mao thought) as a history museum. He is impressed by the style and decoration that, he says, incorporate Islamic and Arabic artistic traditions, and is not surprised when someone tells him that it is copied from the Alhambra Palace in Granada, with 'arched doorways, soft wood floors, coloured glass in the windows, in the style of Spanish Andalusian culture and Arab Moorish culture. The hotel restaurant, he notes, is exactly as San Mao described it. Zhang pp. 63-64.

along like a brook. When I sat there I often forgot that I was in the desert, as if I had gone back to the good life of days past.¹⁸³

This is precisely the point; among the familiar luxuries of a European restaurant, the sojourner can forget that she is in the desert at all. The 'fortress-like wall' of the National Hotel¹⁸⁴ is not merely symbolic, for the environment of luxury in the hotel is created in part by excluding those deemed inappropriate to its ambience.¹⁸⁵ Significantly, it is in this environment recreated by the Spanish government in their colonial territory that San Mao claims to see 'local character', even though intrinsic attributes of the desert environment (such as the dust) as well as the people have been artfully excluded. The 'authenticity' of the external architecture is mirrored by the 'authentic' interior, where local colour is located - yet the 'local colour' provided by the Arab-fantasy decor of the hotel contrasts sharply with the everyday 'local colours' of dusty streets littered with goat dung. The foods and wines served in the hotel are exotic imports rather than local produce; the food is presented upon silver plates; and San Mao is moved to sigh over the delicacies so tastefully arrayed for the moneyed patron, 'Ah! the bluebird of happiness is here!'¹⁸⁶

As well as profiting from being Spanish, being the only Chinese woman in the desert,¹⁸⁷ and thus conspicuous and well-known to all,¹⁸⁸ is also of benefit to San

¹⁸³ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 140.

¹⁸⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 149

¹⁸⁵ The excluding and including functions of the hotel have been noted by Chris Rojek: The hotel..is reminiscent of the domestic bourgeois interior in defining itself in opposition to the tumult and disorder of the exterior...The lobby is like the gateway of an ancient walled city. It signifies the entry point between the inhospitable exterior and the sanctuary of civilization....The cleanliness of the hotel lobby signifies an efficient, healthy environment which contrasts with the disorder and dirt of the streets', Rojek pp. 191-192. As John Urry has noted in the context of tourist consumption, the presence of other 'appropriate' consumers (and the absence of those deemed 'inappropriate') is also vital to the experience of the hotel. What is consumed in the hotel is 'a particular social composition of other consumers', the right 'ambience', with the satisfaction of the experience stemming partly from the fact that 'other people are also consumers of the service and these people are deemed appropriate to the particular consumption in question', Urry *Consuming Places* p. 131. Thus San Mao and other expatriates in the Spanish Sahara can consume a peaceful dining experience from which the desert and its people are apparently excluded.

¹⁸⁶ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 140-141.

¹⁸⁷ Twenty years later a Sahrawi believed to be the Shalun of San Mao's story (noted above) states categorically that 'she was the only Chinese person there at that time', Zhang p. 141.

¹⁸⁸ Even, as noted above, to the sex worker from the Canaries whom she picks up in her car one evening, *Crying Camels* p. 88. Twenty years later, Zhang Yun too is eager to present himself as unusual and conspicuous as an 'Asian'; he frequently describes people's surprise at seeing an 'Asian'; encountering soldiers from North Korea he feels 'close to these Asians' and imagines 'what attention San Mao must have attracted here from the "foreigners"' (ie the 'non-' people), Zhang p. 43; he quotes a woman telling him that people in desert respect outsiders (p. 44) and notes that people in his hotel are happy to talk to a Chinese person and wouldn't have seen many (p. 64); people 'watched this Asian hung about with cameras with curious eyes' (p. 49); everyone at the dock stares at 'the Chinese person' (p. 72); nomadic people are 'astonished at this strange guest'; people are 'astonished to see an Asian' (p. 103); the three UN officials he meets in Smara 'never thought they'd have breakfast

Mao. Thanks to her personal connections in the military forces, she has a guarantee of safety when she travels around the desert (noted in Chapter 2) and she is known to the soldiers at the checkpoint on the road out of El Ayoun¹⁸⁹ - presumably also a great advantage for her security.

But it is not only security that she receives from the military. She receives personal concern as well, as noted above, when she is suddenly taken ill and José takes her to the army camp, where not only the doctor but also the guard at the gate is concerned and solicitous for her health.¹⁹⁰ The army provides her also with a cheap place to shop; although the foreign services welfare store is apparently intended only for the benefit of military personnel in the desert,¹⁹¹ San Mao is a welcome customer there who takes ample advantage of its subsidised goods.¹⁹² The soldiers at the welfare store know her by name, and her absence is missed if she does not appear for a while.¹⁹³

It is not only her physical conspicuousness as a Chinese woman, San Mao tells us, that impresses those around her and gains her privileges; it is her personality too. For example, it is her cultured and civilised ways that gain her preferential treatment at the welfare store:

The first time I went, I felt very uneasy. I couldn't grab things at random the way the other women did; I lined up in an orderly way, and by the time I had bought a basket of food, I had waited for 4 hours...Later, I would often go there, and when the soldiers saw that I really had breeding they came to my rescue.

They were even rather partial. As soon as I got to the counter - without pushing in - they would call to me loudly across the crowd of fat rude women, 'What do you want today?'

I would hand them my list and after a while they would have everything packed up for me at the back door; then when I paid and went to get a taxi, a

with a Chinese person' (p. 111); 'the people all watched these foreigners' (p. 116). By contrast San Mao herself, despite making it clear that she was conspicuous and well known in El Ayoun, claims not to have attracted much attention there: 'In the desert, I wasn't someone who attracted a lot of attention myself, even less so in this place where population is very sparse and if you want to see another person perhaps you could stand on the sand and block the sun with your hand, and if you can see a person like a black spot on the horizon you'd be happy', *Crying Camels* p. 21.

¹⁸⁹ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 70.

¹⁹⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 169-170.

¹⁹¹ The amazement of José's colleagues that San Mao shops at the military camp is based upon her being a woman. 'Don't the families of soldiers go there to shop too?', San Mao defends herself, 'of course I go there'. 'But you aren't a legal ordinary civilian', they reply, to which she counters, 'Ordinary civilians in the desert are different from in town. The army and the people are as one'. She adds that the military treat her more politely than the average person in town, *Crying Camels* pp. 44-45.

¹⁹² Groceries there are 'a third cheaper than in the usual stores', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 244; the store also provides such items as a cassette recorder and tapes, and a washing machine.

¹⁹³ *Crying Camels* p. 49.

soldier would pick up my purchases to help me load them...I would be home in less than half an hour.¹⁹⁴

As in so many other situations, institutional privileges are viewed here in a very personalised way. For San Mao, it is more than her position of alignment with the Spanish that gives her advantages: it is her refined manners and appealing personality as well.¹⁹⁵ She establishes a clear difference between her own civilised behaviour (and slenderness) and the rudeness (and fatness) of the 'other women' in the shop (presumably Spanish women here). Her view of the soldiers in the desert, in return, is a very positive one - as long as they are European, cultured, and willing to treat her with proper respect.¹⁹⁶

The army is not the only European institution in the Sahara where San Mao receives special treatment. At the court-house where she and José marry, the officials are caught up in the excitement of their marriage, as happy as if they had been family members.¹⁹⁷ At the driving school where she takes her driving test she is again able to exempt herself from many of the formal requirements. This is achieved both by means of her personality and her 'difference' as a Chinese;¹⁹⁸ each step in the process of gaining a driving licence offers further scope for her playful resourcefulness, and she consistently subverts normal procedures, simply talking her way out of the lessons that she is obliged by law to take¹⁹⁹ or reversing roles with her the teacher (see Chapter 5).²⁰⁰ She seeks exceptional status again when it comes to

¹⁹⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 244-245.

¹⁹⁵ San Mao receives preferential treatment in other places too - again perhaps by virtue of conspicuous position, but also, it is suggested, because of her appealing personality. One such example is when she stops to play with one of the orphan children tended by nuns at the local hospital, picking him up and walking off with him. One of the nuns comes after her, shouting anxiously; but all is well when San Mao replies, 'It's me!' *Crying Camels* p. 115.

¹⁹⁶ 'there were lots of different kinds of soldiers stationed here; the only ones I liked were the Foreign Legion...They were very masculine, they could endure hardship, and they respected the women who ought to be respected'. She notes approvingly that the Foreign Legion are skilled in both *wen* and *wu*; not only can they fight, but they can provide culture in the midst of a cultural as well as physical desert through performances of popular classics by the Foreign Legion Symphony Orchestra, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 245.

¹⁹⁷ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 40-41.

¹⁹⁸ According to San Mao, Spanish law required that anyone taking a driving test must be nominated by a driving school, and therefore attendance at such a school was mandatory, (p. 187), but the driving test is notoriously difficult to pass in the desert. Even though she has no licence, San Mao drives around freely; and though the Chinese woman of the desert is as conspicuous behind the wheel of her car as anywhere else, and she frequently attracts the attention of the Spanish traffic police, she is outwits them every time to avoid penalty, *Stories of the Sahara* p. 189, 194, 206-207.

¹⁹⁹ She must take a course of fifteen driving lessons, but decides to sign up but not actually attend. The instructor is delighted at this, and they go off together for a drink to celebrate the end of the classes. *Stories of the Sahara* p. 191.

²⁰⁰ As well as displaying the resourceful playfulness of San Mao who can outwit the forces of order and discipline, this story may perhaps suggest a slackness in such systems as driving schools in the desert, as though efficient systems are not really needed in the 'backward' Sahara, so that the serious

taking her written test, trying to persuade the director of the driving school to allow her to take the test orally rather than in writing. The director tells her that there is no precedent for administering the test orally, though in fact there are many precedents; Sahrawi people may take the test orally, and San Mao has already observed that the driving school holds separate classes for Spanish and Saharawi.²⁰¹ As the wife of a Spaniard, San Mao is classed with the Spanish for this purpose²⁰² - but she now wishes to claim her non-Spanishness and to identify with the Sahrawi.²⁰³ The director agrees that she may take an oral test as the Saharans do - but this would secure her the kind of licence that the Saharans have, that is one that can be used in the Spanish Sahara only.²⁰⁴ Immediately San Mao revises her position, deciding that to maintain Spanish privileges by playing by the Spanish rules is the best policy after all. The written test is, therefore, inescapable, and her plea for exceptional status has failed this time.²⁰⁵

In San Mao's description of her practical driving test, she is again 'mirrored in African eyes', her exploits affirmed and applauded by an admiring audience. The narrative places a large audience (divided into 'people' and 'Sahrawi')²⁰⁶ in the testing station to acclaim her performance; 'even the Sahrawi', she claims, 'were calling out, "The Chinese girl is great! Great!"' But even this assembled crowd of 'people' and 'Sahrawi' are not sufficient; the inmates of the Spanish Sahara prison (situated opposite the test site) are also enlisted into the narrative to cheer her on.²⁰⁷

enterprise of learning to drive can become nothing more than play for a member of the colonising group.

²⁰¹ This is likely to have been for reasons of comparative literacy as much as language, given the low rate of education among Saharawi under Spanish colonialism.

²⁰² Her Spanish classmates, however, do not bother to attend the class.

²⁰³ 'Let me be the precedent', she pleads; 'I've heard that Sahrawi are allowed to do it orally; why can't I?' In the classroom next door to San Mao's, she can hear Sahrawi 'loudly reading aloud, reciting the road rules one by one, as if they were mad or drunk. I had never heard so many earnest Sahrawi', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 191.

²⁰⁴ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 196.

²⁰⁵ Compelled to follow the rules for the Spanish, San Mao applies herself to studying the highway code, remaining persistently unavailable to Sahrawi neighbours who come continually to disturb her and who berate her for not answering the door: 'The neighbours all knew I was going to take test, and they scolded me every day: "When will you be finished? It's inconvenient for us when you don't open your door"', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 193.

²⁰⁶ 'a big crowd of people, two or three hundred, and lots of Sahrawi as well', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 198.

²⁰⁷ The prisoners are, presumably, Spanish, as they are described as 'people who had beaten someone up because of jealousy over a woman, or workers from the Canary Islands who had got drunk and fought with Sahrawi. Not the real dregs of society, local ruffians and hooligans didn't exist in the Sahara - the place was so much a wilderness, even if hooligans came, they couldn't make a name for themselves.' The really serious criminals, she adds, are locked up in the police station, *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 198-199. Their prisoners' catcalls to the Spanish women taking their driving tests are presented as innocent jollity and San pronounces herself grateful for their 'support' - 'Hearing them

Out of the dozens tested, only San Mao and seven Spaniards pass²⁰⁸ - along with six Sahrawi who, unlike her and the other Spaniards, will have only restricted permits rather than 'real' licences sent from Spain and valid for use there.²⁰⁹ All attention is still upon San Mao; when the director invites them all to the 'traffic corps welfare office' for a soft drink, it is she that he singles out for a joke and, when José arrives to take her home, the prisoners on the jail roof call out to him with the news that she has passed. In a final gesture of reciprocity, San Mao rewards them for their participation in her driving test experiences by sending them 'two big crates of Coke and two cartons of cigarettes'.²¹⁰

The driving test story shows San Mao outwitting traffic officers, undermining authority, and being acclaimed by all, even the inmates of the local jail. When playful San Mao pits herself against desert institutions she wins almost every round; the only point on which she gives way is to do with the oral test, but she certainly does not lose out as a result, as (unlike the Sahrawi) she receives in return for her concession a full Spanish licence. The driving school and testing station become another field of play for San Mao and, like Sahrawi individuals, Spanish institutions provide colorful material for anecdotes in a landscape characterised as otherwise empty and boring.²¹¹ Play, philanthropy, colonial privilege, and a 'barbaric' desert with the domestications of Spanish colonialism add up to create interesting experiences - not only for San Mao but for millions of readers.

In the discourse of reciprocity that underlies these narratives of the Sahara, San Mao presents herself as a tireless giver who receives in return only abstract benefits, and who is unsuccessful in all attempts at material gain; the profits inherent

yelling out so rudely and happily, I couldn't help laughing...Actually I liked the crazy people on the roof a lot - at least I had never seen so many happy and colourful criminals', *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 198-199.

²⁰⁸ *Stories of the Sahara* p. 204. San Mao is successful on her second attempt. The licences gained by Spanish candidates are only temporary permits, for use until the real thing arrives from Spain. San Mao is the only woman to pass.

²⁰⁹ Twenty years later, Zhang Yun quotes Shalun as claiming to have been one of the Sahrawi who received a driving licence on the same day as San Mao, Zhang p. 137. He points out the driving test site, a little way out of El Ayoun, and reminisces, 'that's where Echo and I took our driving test. That day 7 people got their licences; Echo was the only woman. I can still remember how excited she was when she got it.' Recalling that 'San Mao said 16 people got licences: 8 Spanish, 7 Sahrawi and me', Zhang concludes that Shalun is confused about it. Zhang p. 142. Driving and mobility are connected with differentiation between Spanish and Sahrawi in later story, where San Mao and José are driving into the desert with a Sahrawi friend and must leave their ID cards at the checkpoint as they leave El Ayoun. San Mao notes that the ID cards of Spanish and Sahrawi are different colours, *Crying Camels* p. 121.

²¹⁰ *Stories of the Sahara* pp. 204-205.

²¹¹ 'The days passed, and that's how I (this black sheep that hadn't been born and bred in the desert) passed the long oppressive time in interesting pursuits', *Stories of the Sahara* p. 207-208.

in her position as part of a Spanish community tend to be pushed into the background. As Pratt has noted of the eighteenth to nineteenth-century traveller Mungo Park, who seems to emerge from his adventures of exchange 'with nothing but his life - and his innocence', proving himself 'greater than all of it in the end',²¹² San Mao too preserves a narrative of innocent reciprocity and of personal transcendence of native shortcomings. If colonialism's civilising mission is 'the greatest non-reciprocal exchange of all time',²¹³ San Mao's stories of attempted, failed and successful reciprocities show a familiar set of exchanges: giving philanthropic aid and gaining in self-importance, considering herself necessary to her community and showing herself incapable of profiting materially. At the same time, San Mao's stories show rules, procedures and economic and political relations as nothing more than games; this denial of constraint may be one of the factors contributing to San Mao's appeal to readers.

In relation to the project of improving the natives, Susan Horton has noted the ambiguities present in self-presentations within the colonial exchange. Although Isak Dinesen's 'constant references to the esteem in which the Africans held her' may seem at first glance to be 'nothing more than the usual colonial writer's self-aggrandising accounts of the adulation of a "simple" people for a "greater" person of the sort that can be found in all colonial writings', Horton suggests that other concerns may also be present behind her 'pseudomodest accounts of the admiration with which Africans regarded her' and her 'exasperation at not being able to "help" the Kikuyu': namely, a sense of her own distress at the 'the gradual worsening of Kikuyu prospects during the years she was in Kenya' as well as her own sense of 'genuine Kikuyu appreciation of her efforts in their behalf'.²¹⁴ This may well have been the case for San Mao as well, living in the Sahara during the fight for Sahrawi self-determination, guerilla uprisings against Spanish rule, Spanish racism and other tensions relating to the Spanish presence in the desert, with contact or co-operation between Spanish and Sahrawi becoming less possible and less imaginable. There is a particular significance to San Mao's claims of special appreciation from Sahrawi close to her, in that some of these individuals are prominent in the fight for the independence of their land from Spanish rule (discussed in Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'). The culmination of her desert experiences of reciprocity is where San Mao writes herself into a relationship of quasi-familial acceptance with an idealised Sahrawi family (who

²¹² Pratt p. 81.

²¹³ Pratt p. 85.

²¹⁴ Horton pp. 209-210.

are contrasted with other Sahrawi by being beautiful, clean and heroic) with a gift of jewellery to match the jewellery worn by the daughters; in the same narrative, she presents herself giving crucial help to Sahrawi in a time of political crisis and gaining a place for herself in Saharan history.²¹⁵

The meaning of life

Twenty years after San Mao's departure from the Western Sahara, Zhang Yun too is leaving El Ayoun after a week of following in her footsteps and searching for traces of her life there. As he gazes down from his plane at the 'wild, almost moonscape land', he muses that, after experiencing the desert for himself, he is now better able than before to answer the questions he has constantly been asking himself about her: Why did San Mao want to come here? why did she like this place so much? and why did she like the Sahrawi people so much? He concludes that she came because she liked it; but why she should like the place or the people is rather more difficult for him to answer. After noting San Mao's 'boundless curiosity about everything', which of course included the Sahara, he quotes her own stories to conclude that the reason she liked the desert was that she found the meaning of life there:

I think that anyone who likes a place must have found something there that they couldn't find anywhere else..I can say that she certainly found something there that she hadn't found elsewhere: namely the answers to life and human existence...Before going to the desert, San Mao was always looking for answers to life and human existence...San Mao studied philosophy, but said, 'Philosophy did not allow me to find the answers to life'...Also, San Mao had travelled in many countries in Europe, and in the USA, and had even lived there, but she didn't find any answers to life there either. On the contrary, the many vexations of civilised society added to her world-weariness... But the desert gave her the answers to life and human existence. The vastness, emptiness, serenity and plainness of the desert allowed her to leave the madding crowd and the roiling dust of the everyday world for a time; it allowed her to get spiritual rest and mental peace for a time..San Mao's love for the desert was sincere, ardent, extraordinary. Because in her view, the desert was not common desert but a simple, unadorned, plain, peaceful society, a world without annoying disturbance or vain pursuit of fame and wealth...the kind of life the Sahrawi lived was her own ideal life of 'plainness'. She appreciated them so much: 'They had no idea what fame and gain were; they were just one product of the desert, like a rock or a little cactus flower; they belonged to nature'...She praised them so highly: 'If everyone in the world was like the Saharwi, the world would not advance but at least it would be peaceful'...After setting her mind on the desert and deciding to live there, she virtually abandoned everything from the past. She began to be deeply concerned for the Sahrawi around her...'I became one of them; and my personality gradually mixed with theirs'...they were a very happy bunch of people, and they did not

²¹⁵ Described in Appendix 2, 'San Mao Makes History'.

need to go seeking after the new playthings of modernisation. She liked and appreciated them so much that she could not only truly adapt to their customs but could also call herself one of them, and feel it was an honour that 'my personality gradually mixed with theirs'. No wonder everyone I met in the Western Sahara who knew her was most impressed by her liking and concern for the Sahrawi, and had great respect for this woman from the East who lived among them as their friend for so long.²¹⁶

What San Mao gained from the desert, the meaning of life, could not be found in philosophy, or in Europe, or anywhere other than the Sahara. The landscape and quiet contributed to this meaning, but it is in the people - simple, backward, part of nature, happy without modernisation, happy without amusement - that the real meaning supposedly resided, and in San Mao's apparent devotion of herself in service to them. For the reader, further meaning can be found in the claim that San Mao, a woman from 'the East', was able to be the friend and win the respect of these extraordinary people in this distant, harsh, 'uncivilised' land. Her dissatisfaction with what European cities offered, her willingness to forgo the comforts of 'civilisation' and her supposed closeness to a generalised Sahrawi people as the universally known Chinese woman of the Sahara provide a nationalistic as well as a sentimental meaning to these stories of San Mao in the desert.

Chapter 6 will further discuss San Mao's own explicit references to what she believes she has learned from the Sahara, and from Europe as well. First, Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 will discuss San Mao's writings about Europe and her presentation of herself among Europeans. The discourses of reciprocity, playfulness and philanthropy, it will be suggested, were not peculiar to the San Mao's Saharan writings but inform her narratives of Europe as well.

Following San Mao to Europe initially requires a step back in time, as she lived in both Spain and Germany before she went to the Sahara. Then, after leaving the Sahara (like most Spanish residents, she left in late 1975 before the official withdrawal of Spain by February 1976),²¹⁷ she settled in the Canary Islands, a

²¹⁶ Zhang pp. 169-172.

²¹⁷ San Mao describes the events leading up to her departure but does not deal with the departure itself. For the story of the ending of her stay in the Sahara, see Appendix 2 ('San Mao Makes History'). Through 1974, Spain had begun to move toward a referendum in the Western Sahara on self-determination, and Morocco had been campaigning to 'recover its despoiled Saharan provinces' (Damis p. 50). In late 1975, when the UN ruled that Spain had no legal right to the territory, the Moroccan king led the so-called Green March of volunteers to 'reclaim' it for Morocco. Meanwhile guerilla activity by the independence activist group Polisario in the western Sahara increased (Damis p. 55). Spain had withdrawn its military and administrative forces by early 1976 (maintaining, however, a 35% interest in Fosbucraa, Damis p. 67), and under a temporary Tripartite agreement between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania, the territory was divided between Morocco and Mauritania. Mauritania later resigned its claim and the Western Sahara remains a province of Morocco; Polisario

longstanding settler colony of Spain, where her immediate community consisted largely of migrants from northern Europe. An understanding of San Mao's stories of Europe and Europeans, published or re-published after her Saharan adventures, may be informed by the themes outlined in the narratives already discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

still claims an independent state, and a United Nations peacekeeping forces still maintains a presence there.

Chapter 4

Among the Europeans

Although it was the Saharan stories that established her fame, San Mao had lived in Europe before she went to the Sahara (as noted in Chapter 2).¹ She spent time in Europe in the late 1960s² then, after three years at home in Taiwan, she went back briefly to Spain before journeying to the Sahara. When her Saharan life came to an end along with the ending of Spanish colonialism in the Western Sahara,³ she moved with José to another Spanish possession, the Canary Islands. There she remained until 1981, when she returned to settle permanently in Taiwan (José having died in 1979). During her time in the Sahara and after her return to Taiwan she continued to visit Europe regularly, and her tales of life among Europeans span two decades.⁴

In terms of her public life as a writer, the authority established with *Stories of the Sahara* was reinforced by her tales of her triumphs in Europe, which include sketches of life as a student, a tourist, a housewife, and part of a community of European relatives, neighbours and friends. Among the Europeans San Mao presents herself as both an upholder and a challenger of stereotypes of Chinese womanhood: as a self-conscious representative of Chinese culture; as the sole kind-hearted person among the cold Europeans, caring for the sick and dying when others will not; as a beautiful oriental woman who fascinates European men; as a prize student; and as a wife and a dutiful daughter-in-law in a Spanish family. This chapter will discuss San Mao's representations of her earliest European experiences and her few tourist trips there. Chapter 5 will focus on her narratives of participation in European society at a deeper level by making herself 'belong' among the Europeans. In San Mao's European stories as in her African ones, narratives of initial contact at a distance quickly give way to narratives of belonging and reciprocity.

It should be reiterated at the outset that, while there is abundant theoretical literature relating to the experiences and narratives of European travellers in other parts of the world (some of which was invoked in Chapters 2 and 3), there is as

¹ It was to Europe that San Mao went when she left Taiwan for the first time at the age of 24, in 1967.

² Her European sojourn began in 1967; its end date is more difficult to ascertain. Her trip abroad lasted for about three years, but included time in Seattle as well as Madrid and Berlin before her return to Taiwan in 1971.

³ As noted above, she left the desert in late 1975.

⁴ Her earliest Europe story, 'Antony, my Antony' was first published in *Youshi Wenyi* (174, June 1968) under the name Chen Ping, and republished in *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* in 1976 to capitalise on the success of *Stories of the Sahara*. Other Europe stories appear in later collections (such as *Rear View* 1981, *Diary of a Scarecrow*, 1977 *Taking the City* 1985); small anecdotes of Europe feature in her final works, *My Treasures* (1987) and *Dear San Mao* (1991).

yet no substantial body of secondary scholarship in English or Chinese relating to travel in which the travelling subject is not European or American. While similarities may exist between San Mao's activities in and narratives of Africa and those of the many Euro-American travellers and narrators, it is more difficult to find comparative perspectives for San Mao's narratives of Europe.⁵

It should be noted also that 'Europe' here is taken in the sense that Europe presents itself to the rest of the world: as an entity that is not only composed by modern economic alliances but which supposedly shares the world's definitive and standard history, culture, and 'civilised' values,⁶ defined against other supposed entities such as 'Africa', 'Asia' or 'the Muslim world'. The encounter between San Mao and Spain or Germany is conceived primarily as an encounter between 'China' and a 'west' characterised by prejudice that is best approached by non-Europe with an assumption of inferiority. This chapter outlines San Mao's transition from meek deference to a self-confident seizing of the initiative that is accompanied by increased cultural and linguistic knowledge about Europe; and this enables her to advise Chinese readers on how to behave in Europe.

Before examining San Mao's European experiences, it seems relevant to discuss the Europe projected by San Mao's imagination before she experienced it first-hand.

A European romance

Four years before San Mao first left Taiwan for Europe, a short story titled 'Autumn Love' (Qiulian) was published on the literature page of Taiwan's *Central Daily*.⁷ The author was 'Chen Ping', who was to become (nine years later) San Mao, the Chinese woman of the desert. The story was a romantic encounter between a young Chinese woman and a Chinese sailor in a Parisian café.

Like Africa, Europe existed in San Mao's imagination long before she went there. Unlike Africa, however, her imagined Paris (shared in the imaginations of people in Taiwan and around the world) was 'real' and detailed enough for her to set a story there. The Paris of San Mao's imagination is informed by many of the

⁵ Many travel accounts of Europe have been written by non-Europeans, but secondary scholarship is scarce. The most useful work I have found is Ros Pesman's account of Australian women's travels to Europe, allowing for the fact that San Mao is not connected to Britain or any other part of Europe by narratives or structures of empire.

⁶ Indeed, as John Urry has pointed out, the term 'European' has been used to stand for 'history' and 'culture' in European self-presentation to foreign tourists, as localities in Europe package themselves as self-consciously 'European' and promote 'historical' and 'cultural' images by establishing cultural and other 'festivals', designating artistic quarters, developing areas of outdoor cafés and restaurants, preserving old buildings and street layout, redeveloping of river and canalside waterfronts and using 'the term European as standing for "history" and "culture" for marketing that particular place', Urry, *Consuming Places* p. 169

⁷ The story appeared in the *Central Daily News* (Zhongyang Ribao), the main official newspaper of Taiwan's ruling party, the Kuomintang, on January 10, 1963.

staple clichés familiar to any 'western' imagination; it is a place where artists live in garrets and drink coffee in cafés; and it is a place of romance, where men impulsively buy flowers from streetside stalls for their lovers, where young lovers stroll hand-in-hand by the river and kiss on street corners and where, somehow, language is hardly necessary because romantic emotion can be communicated and discerned without speech. It is a place of dramatic emotion, of passionate tears and passionate kisses, and heightened awareness of loneliness and loss.

'Autumn Love' was Chen Ping's second published story, and is by her own account 'the only story I have ever written that isn't something that happened to me'⁸ (though it does foreshadow the silent, intense encounter which San Mao describes between herself and an East German man in a later story, discussed below). The unnamed heroine of 'Autumn Love' is, as noted above, a young Chinese artist living in Paris; given that San Mao herself was studying western painting, devouring European novels and dreaming of Europe at this time, it seems reasonable to assume some element of self-fantasy in the story. In later narratives of Europe, the San Mao persona, like the artist in 'Autumn Love' is a frequenter of cafés; she loves her 'wandering life' but feels its loneliness deeply; she has a mysterious silent romantic encounter;⁹ she is conspicuous by virtue of her Chineseness; she rarely sees other Chinese people and tends to avoid them suspiciously when she does; she smokes, but not without ambivalent feelings about the habit;¹⁰ and she sentimentally recalls the scene of her parting from her parents at the airport in Taiwan.

In 'Autumn Love', then, a young woman meets a seaman in a café; a superficial but emotionally charged conversation ensues, and then the young woman flees. After a sleepless night of loneliness and reflection she returns to the café hoping to meet the young man again. He too returns; they spend the day together and then part forever.¹¹

⁸*A Horse for You* p. 39.

⁹ Described in 'Taking the City', discussed in Footnote 11.

¹⁰ The heroine of the story writes home to say that although she has taken up smoking she is not a 'bad girl' - just a lonely one - and has always hated to see women smoking. San Mao too, though a smoker, took pains not to be photographed with a cigarette.

¹¹ The artist has been studying art in Paris for almost two years. Though she claims to love her 'wandering life', she is homesick and lonely. Suddenly a young Chinese man appears outside the window of the cafe where she is sitting. He comes in; they gaze at each other wordlessly; the proprietor of the café smiles to convey his pleasure that 'the ashen-pale, lonely Chinese girl who comes in every day to drink coffee has found a friend.' The young man tells her that he has been watching her for some time; she admits she is 'just a bit homesick' and avoids his gaze, 'afraid he'd see through her'. He is 'self-mocking', but with 'restrained loneliness' in his eyes. Their dialogue is rather awkward and punctuated by frequent silences and various nervous gestures. When he tells her that the following day is his last day in Paris, she feels a sudden rush of emotion - not for him, but for Paris; she longs to cry out, 'Stay! Stay! Not for me, but for Paris!', but restrains herself. 'We were just two travellers', she muses, 'who had happened to meet at the ends

Written when the author was twenty years old, this is closer to the conventional love story genre than any of her later work - though as noted above, one later story evokes a smiliar romantic sensibility with a silent encounter between San Mao and a soldier (where also a handsome man appears from nowhere gazing at a lonely young Chinese woman; verbal communication is replaced by intense and passionate gazing; their meeting is short and emotionally charged; and then they part forever).¹² It is also tailored for a party/government-run newspaper, with its nod to the politics of the 'two Chinas' (and the chaste

of the earth. Nothing more. Just two strangers who didn't know each other's names'. With a few 'deliberately mechanical' platitudes, she leaves him and rushes home 'as if escaping', hating herself for doing so because she is lonely and 'needed a friend and needed happiness'. She weeps for loneliness and does not sleep that night. The following morning she skips her painting class to wander the Parisian streets. Returning to the café, she sits smoking and pondering a line by Tagore: 'The gift of love is timid, it cannot say its name; it brushes past as a shadow, it spreads happiness on the dusty ground - grasp it, or it will be lost forever'. The young man reappears; he touches her shoulder; she trembles; they gaze at each other wordlessly. In silence they leave; they do not 'rush to see the tourist sights' but sit silently together by the river. Learning that it will soon be her birthday, he buys her flowers; she weeps and the her tears fall on the flowers. At dusk his eyes are red and he implores her not to leave him. Late at night she drops her flowers into the Seine to be carried off by the water as he too will be on the morrow. Like the flowers in the water, 'everything passes and is gone - time, happiness, love and hate, gain and loss'. The story ends with an aside to the reader: 'My dear friend, if you had gone to that little house in the Latin Quarter in Paris that night, you would have seen a pair of young lovers kissing in sadness and love, embracing as if after tomorrow they would not see each other again. And that, in fact, is how it was', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 33-39.

¹² In 'Taking the City', San Mao visits East Berlin to apply for an East German visa. At the border she is refused entry into East Berlin, as East Germany does not recognise Taiwan passports. Suddenly aware that she is being watched, she turns to see a handsome young East German military officer gazing at her. He asks why she does not go back to West Berlin; she explains that she has been refused entry to apply for the visa she came to get. Quickly he arranges a permit for her to visit for the day, paying for her set of photographs and pocketing the spare one. He waits with her at the checkpoint queue; 'We didn't speak again. A long time passed, but I didn't want the queue to move quickly. It seemed both of us felt the same'. He accompanies her across the border; 'He looked at me deeply and said slowly in English, "You are very beautiful"'. San Mao suggests that they meet again when she crosses back in the evening, but he will be off duty by then. They gaze at each other; 'His deep eyes - I don't know why they were so deep - made you feel helpless and sad as if you had fallen into water'. All through her day in East Berlin, she thinks of nothing but the soldier; 'my lonely heart had been left in the deep eyes when we parted...My heart was still in those eyes...those eyes, I had just seen them this morning and I had had to part from them so soon'. When she arrives at the checkpoint in the evening to return to West Berlin, the soldier is there. 'He took my arm and held me gently, while I trembled incessantly'; train after train passes without San Mao boarding, as she stands in silent communion with the soldier. 'I didn't know the time..I couldn't see the clock; I couldn't see train after train flying past...I didn't get on a train, and he wouldn't leave. We just faced each other...until it was so dark that I couldn't see his face apart from those eyes'. When the last train arrives, he pushes her towards it. 'Come with me!' she cries; 'I can't', he replies; 'I have parents'. 'I'll stay another day', cries San Mao; but in the end she boards the train, and as it carries her away from East Berlin she recalls that 'in those eyes was a fascination and pain that couldn't be explained or spoken; I don't know what relationship we had had in a previous life...that pain and emptiness was like a knife stabbing and cutting without ceasing'. Returning to her dormitory, San Mao falls ill with a high fever for several days, longing for the soldier; the story ends with someone asking her if she has ever been to East Berlin and her replying, 'Yes'. *Taking the City* pp. 236-242. San Mao's biographers Cui and Zhao hail 'Taking the city' as an outstanding story for its beauty, vigour and poetic meaning; it is, they claim, not only 'an exquisite piece among San Mao's works' but also 'an exceptional work among works in Chinese literature on the subject of love', Cui and Zhao p. 256.

nature of the interactions between these two archetypal representatives of 'liberated' lifestyles (the artist and the sailor), who sit by the Seine by day and kiss at night):¹³

'Are you from Taiwan?' he asked.
 'Taiwan. Free China', she replied slowly and clearly.
 He seemed to sigh with relief and relax into his chair.
 'Good. I was worried about that'.
 'Me too'. She replied, her mind easing too.¹⁴

The kind of images seen in 'Autumn Love' in connection with Paris and romance (based, it would seem, on San Mao's own reading - and perhaps film watching - about Europe and love)¹⁵, complete with exotic setting, weeping, glamourised loneliness and artistic pain, were to become the stuff of the San Mao legend. Many features of this early story are, however, quite unlike her later work - for example the third-person narration¹⁶ (in contrast to the first-person narration that is one of the hallmarks of San Mao's work), the unrelieved solemnity (in contrast to the playful irony of the San Mao persona), and the use of landmark sites as settings.¹⁷

More significantly, when San Mao comes to live among the Europeans - rather than experiencing them second-hand through books - her sense of representing China among them becomes more than simply looking conspicuously different. It is expressed more in terms of responsibility and community, connection and duty. A parallel with San Mao's Saharan stories could be suggested here: in early stories of Europe as of the Sahara, cultural differences and unexpected behaviour were taken to be remarkable or amusing, and formed the material for anecdote. As her stay among the Europeans lengthened and her contact with Europe and European people became more than

¹³ Political messages are also present in the story of the East German soldier; San Mao cannot get a visa because East Germany supports the People's Republic of China; and she describes East Berlin in the bleakest of terms as colourless, dirty and grim, with people who are plainly 'not free', *Taking the City* p. 236.

¹⁴ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 35.

¹⁵ As a teenager, San Mao was an avid consumer of the novels of Qiong Yao, Taiwan's foremost author of love stories. She stated elsewhere that she was too embarrassed to show 'Autumn Love' to her painting teacher and mentor because she was embarrassed to have written a love story like this at her age (20), *A Horse for You* p. 39.

¹⁶ The third-person narration is used in a handful of very early stories written before her departure from Taiwan (and published under her own name, Chen Ping) and republished in 1976 (two months after the publication of *Stories of the Sahara*) to take advantage of the success of her Saharan stories, in the collection titled *The Rainy Season Will Not Return*. With the exception of 'Autumn Love', the other early stories in this collection are all set in Taiwan; despite their third-person narration, they are assumed by biographers to be autobiographical. San Mao discusses her early writing in the story of her adolescent withdrawal, her art lessons and the beginning of her creative writing career in *A Horse for You* pp. 23-44.

¹⁷ The story mentions several Parisian sites - the Latin Quarter, the Seine, the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe. In later stories of Europe, San Mao avoids references to monuments and named sites.

that of the short-term tourist, her stories are less to do with spectacle than with concern, involvement and, it will be suggested, civilising. The occasional clashes of 'Chinese' and 'western' values that characterise her stories of early experiences in Europe give place to a merging with European society, a sense of belonging (similar to that manifested in the Sahara), a mastery of European cultures and styles of behaviour, and an empathy and engagement with the Europeans among whom she lives. As in her stories of the Sahara, San Mao ultimately writes herself into Europe by interactions with people around her that show her not only belonging as a part of them but also, as we shall see, pivotal to them. This argument will be expanded in Chapter 5, along with a discussion of San Mao as a self-conscious representative of China.¹⁸ This present chapter will discuss San Mao's stories of early contact and touristic encounter with Europe, to demonstrate both similarity to her initial Saharan encounters and contrast with her later modes of interaction with Europeans.

European beginnings

For San Mao as for many non-Europeans, fantasies of Europe (of the kind that informed the story outlined above) came from many sources - notably European literature and images of Europe on film. Though San Mao did not discuss in detail her early encounters with films of Europe, she expounds the influence of literary Europe at some length in her records of childhood reading.¹⁹ Some of her earliest literary memories, she notes, are of Hans Christian Andersen, the brothers Grimm, Alice in Wonderland and Pinocchio.²⁰ During her primary school years she was an avid reader of translations of Dumas, Cervantes, Charlotte and Emily Bronte and Daphne du Maurier;²¹ after her first year at junior high school, she spent the summer holiday reading Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy.²² At the age of thirteen she withdrew from the education system,

¹⁸ While in the desert San Mao's position was somewhat ambiguous (as one of the Spanish colonial community but also as a Chinese), her identity in Europe is more straightforward as 'the Chinese girl'. San Mao's sense of conspicuousness and representativeness and the self-consciously Chinese flavour of her 'mission' to Europe will be discussed in Chapter 5.

¹⁹ San Mao also enumerates Chinese and Japanese authors and works of literature that she read and enjoyed in her youth; as this chapter is concerned only with Europe, these will not be discussed. Details can be found in *Rear View* p. 21 and *A Horse for You* p. pp. 32-33.

²⁰ San Mao notes that at the age of three or four, before she could read, she loved to look at picture books and would ask her older sister and cousin to tell her the stories in their old children's books, *Rear View* p. 20.

²¹ She lists such works as *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Don Quixote*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Forever Amber* and *Cousin Rachel* as some of the books she read at that time, along with Laura Ingalls Wilder's 'Little House' series about the adventures of an American 'pioneer' family, *Rear View* p. 23.

²² *Rear View* p. 29.

but continued to read voraciously at home.²³ When at eighteen she began to study art, her teacher introduced her to more European and American literature, including Homer, Baudelaire, Camus, Kafka, Rilke, D.H. Lawrence, Edgar Allan Poe, e.e. cummings, and Walt Whitman.²⁴ *Europe* magazine, a small literary journal put out by Taiwan students in Europe containing literary translations, existentialist philosophy and a kind of self-conscious 'Europeanness' may have been another source of European knowledge and fantasy for San Mao, though she does not mention it in her own writing.²⁵ Obviously San Mao was not the only young reader in Taiwan to be exposed to such material; her own fantasy images of Europe are surely to some extent communal ones, which both fed on and reinforced her readers' literary impressions of Europe.

Art, too, played a part in San Mao's attachment to Europe from the time when, at eleven years old, she first felt moved by a sketch;²⁶ two years later, when shown a book of Picasso's works, she describes being filled with strong emotion that she transferred from the paintings to the painter, longing to grow up and become 'Picasso's other woman'.²⁷ Five years later, her studies of 'western' art began the process of liberating her from the anomie of her early teen years²⁸ through Gu Fusheng,²⁹ the artist who taught her sketching and water-colour painting and, says San Mao, 'changed my life' - through his kindness, patience, loans of books and literary magazines (as noted above) and encouragement to literary endeavours of her own.³⁰

²³ San Mao's interest in European literature may have been influenced by her father, who had studied in Shanghai at a time when a great deal of European literature in translation was appearing in literary magazines; *Fiction Monthly*, for example (published 1921-1930), devoted special issues to Tolstoy, Tagore, Byron, Hans Christian Andersen, Romain Rolland, Turgenev, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Maupassant, Zola, Blake, Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, Dante and Virgil (among others), Leo Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Chinese Writers* pp. 13-18.

²⁴ San Mao, like Olive Schreiner (who from the age of 15 studied alone at home with a governess), 'found her closest companions during those formative years to be...the writers she read so voraciously. They were all male', Horton p. 80. Later in life, San Mao wrote about her appreciation of Marquez and Solzhenitzyn; see *A Horse for You* pp. 75-78, where San Mao muses on freedom after hearing a lecture by Solzhenitzyn, and pp. 81-83, in which she expresses her admiration for Marquez.

²⁵ I thank Chin Heng-wei for drawing my attention to this magazine and its influence on young people in Taiwan at this time.

²⁶ *Taking the City* p. 60, also noted in Cui and Zhao p. 30.

²⁷ Her only concern, she recalls, was that Picasso would die while she was still a child, *Taking the City* pp. 63-64.

²⁸ Biographers Cui and Zhao note that she had already studied Chinese painting, but that she had found the discipline of Chinese painting too difficult, preferring the 'freedom' of complete creativity. Thus her interest in 'western' oil painting is taken to suggest that 'western indiscipline' suited the 'black sheep' and 'hothouse flower' that was San Mao, Cui and Zhao p.

²⁹ Gu Fusheng, the grandson of a Kuomintang military officer (Gu Zhutong), was one of the 'Stars' art group, and was already famous in Taiwan, Cui and Zhao pp. 59. San Mao began art lessons after being impressed by a cartoon drawn by a guest at her sister's birthday party who was studying art from Gu, *A Horse for You* p. 26.

³⁰ Her first story was published through Gu Fusheng's agency, as he sent it without her knowledge to his friend Bai Xianyong, editor of *Modern Literature* (Xiandai Wenxue).

In addition to these general cultural factors, there was something of a family tradition that would have led to a more personal sense of connection with Europe. Several members of San Mao's immediate community went there to study;³¹ and San Mao's grandfathers had both lived in Europe, in the Netherlands and England respectively.³² 'Those two stout fellows', she notes, were 'the first people in my family to see foreign devils'; they not only stayed a long time among 'those people' but also interacted and did business with them 'before returning safely home to produce their children' (the word 'safely' already implying some kind of ironic doubt that a safe return from barbarian territory should be possible). Decades later, claims San Mao,

my maternal grandfather remembers the lovely girlfriend he had in England. He is over 80, and when he is happy he will still talk in that twittering foreign language to frighten the children.³³

The familiar spectre of the 'foreign devil'³⁴ thus appears early in San Mao's tale, long before her own interactions with foreign people begin - but San Mao uses the term with heavy irony, playing with the established verbal convention not only to link the idea of 'devilishness' with a cartoon-like manifestation of supernatural difference but also to include herself as partaking of that 'devilishness' as her own interest in the 'west' and her aptitude for studying European language mark her out as 'devilish':

I too studied a few words of foreign devils' talk. Nothing in particular would happen if I got it wrong; but, unfortunately, when I got it right, my eyes would glitter and shine with ghostly sparks, a green glow would appear in an explosion around my head, and I had the look of a devil.³⁵

³¹ Wang Guoliang, a musician friend of San Mao's and her cousin's classmate, went to study in France when San Mao was in her teens, *Rear View* p. 37; the cousin, Chen Maoliang, also a musician and aspiring composer, who lived with San Mao's family, ended up in Vienna. San Mao also mentions friends and legal colleagues of her father's who live in England in Spain (the latter meets her at the airport when she arrives in Madrid, and she tries to contact the former when she encounters immigration problems at Gatwick airport, discussed below. *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 126, *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 64.

³² *Rear View* p. 218, *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 62.

³³ The language referred to here is likely to be English. *Diary of a Scarecrow* pp. 61-62.

³⁴ The well-known rhetoric of 'foreigners' as 'devils' has featured in writing from China since at least last century. Frank Dikötter notes the rhetoric of foreigners as 'demons' in 19th century China and quotes several early sources about negative responses of Chinese people to (white) 'foreign' people, Dikötter p. 36. Though omitting to discuss the context of global European imperial domination and racial hierarchies of colonial society in which such statements were produced, Dikötter supplies a number of instances of racially divided thinking: Dikötter pp. 38-39, 43-46, 82-83 (Liang Qichao declaring 'that the whites were arrogant and disliked hard work. The yellows, on the contrary, were humble and diligent'; and Sun Yat-Sen's thinking being 'supposedly based on the idea of confrontation between white and yellow', with 'yellow above white'), 123-127 (Sun Yat-sen's reform projects and supposed belief that 'the West was individualistic, China was communalistic; the West was utilitarian, China was ritualistic; Westerners emphasized struggle, the Chinese preferred tranquillity' and, ultimately, the 'east was "spiritual", the west was "materialistic"').

³⁵ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 62.

This early success with 'foreign devils' talk' foreshadows a later gift for European languages that would not only facilitate travel and communication on three continents but was also to become an important component in the San Mao persona. This early story appears to be the only one of San Mao's stories in which she uses the term 'devils' to describe foreign people; one might speculate that as she began to identify with European people (interacting closely with European family and friends, and taking her place as part of a community) this cliché of jocular insult might have seemed to her less appropriate, even in the heavily ironic fashion in which it is deployed here.

San Mao's own early interest in things foreign is described in an ironic passage where she outlines her realisation that Chinese people are not the only people in the world, speaking of her own discovery in terms of a Chinese national history.³⁶ Encounters with Europe here are configured as cultural or national conflict, in which Chinese San Mao must win or lose. Her self-presentation here is explicitly linked with notions of appropriate conduct expressed in terms of self-conscious Chineseness and Chinese 'virtue' - to which the 'west' responds either by exploiting her at a personal level or discriminating against her institutionally as a (Taiwan) Chinese for political reasons. The personalisation of issues such as these seems to have been an important element in readers' identification with the San Mao of the stories.

San Mao draws upon the rhetoric of the Yellow Emperor, legendary ancestor of the Chinese, which has been a potent symbol of Chinese ethnic unity and nationhood since the late 19th century.³⁷ The 'descendants of the Yellow Emperor' (that is, the Chinese people), she notes, used to call foreign people 'foreign devils; now we call them international friends'; in the past, Chinese people went abroad 'either to fight or to make peace with the barbarians', but now they go to 'enhance their social status by studying overseas'³⁸ or to 'stay in foreign parts'.³⁹ San Mao herself, as we will see, does all of these things: fighting with the 'barbarians' and making peace as well, turning 'devils' into 'friends', and creating status for herself - both among the 'devils' of the west themselves, and at home through her popular stories of her triumphs abroad.

³⁶ 'When I was young, I thought there was only one kind of person in the world - namely my family, classmates, teachers, and the other people I saw on my road to school every day. Then when I grew up and studied geography, I understood that as well as the Chinese people that I had seen, there were also different people living in different places', *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 61.

³⁷ For recent discussion of uses of Yellow Emperor mythology and their significance to Chinese revolutionary movements, see Kai-Wing Chow, 'Imagining boundaries of blood: Zhang Binglin and the invention of the Han "race" in modern China', in Frank Dikötter (ed.), *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan*, Hurst and Co, London 1997, pp. 34-52.

³⁸ Literally, 'to get gold plating'.

³⁹ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 61.

Spain

Travel to Europe was, for San Mao, a bestower of great cultural capital; familiarity with European languages afforded her an even more authoritative position.⁴⁰ The significance of Europe as place of supposedly unique and superior culture has been discussed at length by Ros Pesman in her study of upper middle class Australian women's travel to Europe over the past two centuries. Since mythologies of European culture are present in other parts of the world (such as Taiwan) and not only former European colonies, some of Pesman's observations may be relevant to a discussion of San Mao's journey to Europe. Pesman notes the importance of travel as an assertion of personal independence for women who travelled to Europe, and also the idea of visiting Europe as a flight from the mundane world of home 'to what literature and travel writing represented as the romantic and the exotic'.⁴¹ San Mao's record of childhood and adolescent reading, her early story of 'Autumn love' in Paris, her preconceptions of Spain and her stories of tourist Europe (discussed below) would suggest a similar image of Europe as romantic and exotic.

Pesman also notes the importance of 'culture' as an inherent feature of Europe that is somehow supposedly lacking elsewhere. 'It was above all in Europe', she suggests, 'that culture was acquired. Refinement, good taste and culture were the virtues of Europe'.⁴² Though the consciousness and effects of European cultural hegemony may be particularly potent in Europe's former colonies, other parts of the world are not exempt from knowledge of the international cultural and historical hierarchies in which Europe has consistently placed itself at the top. For the traveller from an archetypal 'ancient civilisation' such as China, there may be some sense of exposing the self to 'different forms of civilized life that, if not always higher, are at least equal to those with which one

⁴⁰ See Appendix 3, 'San Mao goes shopping'. In her discussion of Australian women's travels to Europe, Ros Pesman notes that from the 1920s women pursued goals of amateur accomplishment, professional training, and the acquisition of qualifications and reputation as the means to a self-supporting life; they travelled 'as independent single women seeking self-fulfilment and social roles beyond those of dependent wife or degraded spinster. The areas they first chose as the means to professional life and travel were those of traditional accomplishment and sanctioned travel patterns - music, art, writing, teaching', Pesman p. 40. San Mao's travels could be said to conform to this pattern; she studied European languages; enhanced her interests in European art and literature; worked upon her return to Taiwan first as a German language teacher and teacher of European philosophy, then a creative writing teacher; and otherwise supported herself by writing.

⁴¹ Pesman p. 78.

⁴² Pesman extends her observations from Australians 'and other colonials' to North America and indeed to 'all denizens of new settler societies that lacked the patina of time and tradition and aristocracies to show the way', Pesman p. 26. Though Pesman's concern is with the powerful claim of European culture upon Europe's former colonies, it is by no means only residents of 'new' societies who approach European cultural centres with 'awe and deference', 'craving and "cringe"', Pesman p. 5.

is familiar'.⁴³ In San Mao's case, however, this self-conscious sense of embodying an ancient culture is combined with an immediate personal background in the 'new' society of Taiwan, a place which did not feature highly (if at all) in European hierarchies.

Like the young Australian women discussed by Pesman, San Mao profited from her first trip to Europe through 'education, cultural and social finish'; indeed her travel and education in Europe were for San Mao (as for the women in Pesman's study) 'a form of cultural capital, a dowry that women could bring to marriage'.⁴⁴ The supposed cosmopolitanism wrought by experience in Europe was an important part of San Mao's appeal to those who met her in person as well as her readers, and San Mao was, according to her own and biographers' records, constantly sought after by men, both in Taiwan and abroad. Pesman notes that the improved marriage prospects of women who had had a European 'finishing' could be accompanied by both a dissatisfaction with 'the availability and quality' of men at home and an ambition to marry a European; indeed for those many young women 'for whom the voyage to Europe was intended as escape or flight, marriage was a sanctioned means of remaining abroad'.⁴⁵ Such may well have been true for San Mao, whose marriage to a German man was supposedly prevented only by his untimely death and who subsequently married a Spanish man. Her European romances - and particularly her marriage to José - have caught the imagination of her biographers as well as readers, and would appear to be an important element in her popularity and legend.

In short, travellers to Europe would return home (and still do) with greatly increased cultural capital⁴⁶ as a result of having consumed both European sites and European goods which, 'like foreign knowledge....have always carried high value because of their exotic origins and their role as tangible evidence of foreign experience, and hence as visible symbols of power and status'⁴⁷ - even more so in the days before European travel became affordable to people other than financial elites and export networks began to make exotic goods more widely available.

⁴³ Dennis Porter p. 54.

⁴⁴ Pesman p. 28.

⁴⁵ Pesman p. 30.

⁴⁶ 'Whatever their status in Europe, when they returned home the women enjoyed positions of superiority. Travel to Europe *per se* conferred status and social power. The very ability to engage in the trip indicated both wealth and leisure. Knowledge of distant places, of the foreign, of the exotic has always been a means to and a sign of power...Young women finished in Europe had an authority denied to and envied by those whose world was restricted to the colonies', Pesman p. 36.

⁴⁷ Pesman p. 37.

As noted above, the significance of travel to Europe as a bestower of cultural capital is not confined to Europe's former colonies.⁴⁸

San Mao does not discuss her motivation or decision to go to Europe in any detail in her stories, though many of Pesman's observations are undoubtedly apposite in her case. It is not clear whether her primary aim was tertiary study, visiting Europe *per se* or simply leaving home. Biographies suggest that the ending of an unhappy love affair drove her to flee abroad.⁴⁹ (Pesman too notes out the role of European travel as a distraction and a 'cure' for broken hearts⁵⁰ - especially applicable in the case of San Mao, who is said to have fled to Europe not once but twice because of romantic experiences that ended in sadness).⁵¹ Prior to her departure, she had been auditing classes in philosophy at Chinese Culture Academy,⁵² and she claimed to have continued her studies of European philosophy at Madrid University and Freie Universität, Berlin after language training. Whether she was chiefly concerned with travel or study is difficult to determine. Certainly the impression she gives of her early years in Europe in her stories is one of intensive study and heavy workloads - though it should be noted that she did not gain any degree or diploma from any of the institutions where she claimed to have studied in Europe. Indeed one commentator has suggested that San Mao did not study in Europe at all.⁵³ After her return to live permanently in Taiwan, however, she repeatedly claimed (in response to public discussion of her life in terms of romantic irresponsibility) that her residence abroad had always been based on serious purpose - that is, she had been a genuine student and a dutiful housewife, and not simply a fun-seeking wanderer or vagabond.

⁴⁸ Chapter 1 referred to the importance of foreign travel for Japanese elites, quoting Joseph Tobin that 'the tradition of living in New York, London or Paris to acquire cultural capital continues to this day', Tobin p. 13. The cultural capital accrued for San Mao by travel is discussed further in Appendix 3, 'San Mao Goes Shopping'.

⁴⁹ See for example Cui and Zhao pp. 81-82; Lu, Yang and Sun pp. 105-106. Liang Guangming (the writer Shu Fan) is named as the partner in this relationship; indeed he is often referred to as her 'fiancé', though this was not the impression given by Liang in a personal interview (Taipei 1995). Cui and Zhao claim that San Mao used threats of going abroad to force Liang into agreeing to marry her - arranging passport, visa and air-tickets in the assumption that he would change his mind - but that, to her dismay, he failed to give the required 'guarantee of love' and she found herself unexpectedly using the passport and tickets and leaving for Spain.

⁵⁰ Pesman p. 28. She notes that 'a long trip abroad could...provide the means to end unsuitable relationships or to test the depth of feelings...Long voyages and fresh fields were also a conventional cure of broken hearts', Pesman p. 30.

⁵¹ San Mao is believed not only to have fled abroad after a failed romance with Liang Guangming but also to have fled back to Europe to assuage her sorrow after death of her German fiancé (see San Mao biographies).

⁵² *Zhongguo wenhua xueyuan*, now Chinese Culture University (*Zhongguo wenhua daxue*). A classmate of the time has described her as unusually mature in comparison with the other students, and unusually cultured, skilled in European languages and Chinese and western art (see interviews in *The World of San Mao*).

⁵³ Ma Zhongxin claims to have discovered on the basis of interviews with people who knew her in Europe that San Mao did not undertake these studies but was simply a tourist.

From the late 1960s into the 1970s, travel in Europe was becoming increasingly difficult for Taiwan people as a result of the general movement towards official recognition of the People's Republic of China among European countries. For a Taiwan resident in the 1960s wishing to visit Europe, study was perhaps the most reliable road. For those who could afford to travel,⁵⁴ visa restrictions were often stringent because of the political standoff between China and Taiwan. Few countries officially recognised Taiwan.⁵⁵ According to San Mao's publisher, who visited Europe in the 1970s, no European country would give a visa of longer than 10 days to the holder of a Taiwan passport, and even these limited visas were troublesome to obtain.⁵⁶ To be able to stay in Europe for a longer period of time was impossible on a tourist visa; a student visa, however, could afford a longer trip.

If higher education was San Mao's primary goal, Spain was, as already noted, an unusual choice of destination. At the time she left Taiwan to study there, travel overseas for study purposes was not unusual in Taiwan but the preferred destination was the USA.⁵⁷ This avenue would have been closed to San Mao, however, because of her lack of qualifications;⁵⁸ as noted above, she

⁵⁴ In 1960s Taiwan, overseas travel was far from easy. Economic constraints prevented many from even domestic travel, let alone from leaving the country. San Mao's father, a well-to-do lawyer, could afford to make his daughter an allowance to finance her travels; according to an associate of San Mao's from that time, San Mao's father gave each of his children a sum of US\$5000 to spend how they chose, and San Mao chose to spend hers on study abroad. During her time in Spain, San Mao notes, her father gave her US\$100 per month to live on, of which \$60 went on board; the remaining \$40 'was more than enough for shopping in department stores, a sheepskin (leather?) coat was only US\$60, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 152.

⁵⁵ Naturally East Germany, as part of the Soviet bloc, recognised the People's Republic of China and not Taiwan (despite the Sino-Soviet split). San Mao describes her difficulties in trying to get a visa for East Germany; first the military officer at the border asks her why she has bothered to apply ('We don't acknowledge you - and moreover your policies are the same as South Korea's') before refusing her application. When the handsome officer helps her to cross the border, the passport officer in East Germany is so surprised to see a passport from 'Chiang Kai-Shek's place' that he summons his colleagues to see it; and when it is time to cross back into West Berlin, the officers are again suspicious, asking her how she had got the permit to cross to East Berlin in the first place. San Mao insists that she was given the pass legally and that if they are in doubt they should call the checkpoint to check rather than harrassing her; immediately they give in and let her pass, *Taking the City* pp. 235, 238, 240.

⁵⁶ Personal interview, Taipei 1995. I am grateful to Ping Xintao of *Crown* magazine and publishing house for his kind cooperation. These visa restrictions were presumably based on an assumption that residents of 'Asia' (other than, perhaps, Japanese) were likely to overstay or work illegally.

⁵⁷ Many senior Nationalist government officials have doctoral degrees from institutions in the USA; a number of other prominent figures in Taiwan society also undertook higher education in the USA around the time that San Mao went to Spain, and students from Taiwan have continued to study in the USA (many accounts have been written of the experiences of Taiwan people in the USA, several (for example the work of Yu Lihua or Zhao Ning) have been published by San Mao's publisher, Crown).

⁵⁸ I am grateful to Chin Heng-wei for pointing out that San Mao's 'lack of formal schooling, lack of recommendations, lack of qualifications, and everything unfinished' would have prevent her from being accepted to study in the USA (personal interview, Taipei 1995).

had not finished high school⁵⁹ and had not taken the all-important university entrance examination, let alone gained an undergraduate degree. Formal tertiary education even at home in Taiwan was not an option; at Culture University she audited classes rather than taking them for credit, and her studies there did not lead to any kind of degree or diploma on the basis of which she could have gained entrance to any foreign university that had stringent entrance requirements or regulations governing the recognition of foreign qualifications. With this lack of documentation, San Mao's overseas university choices would have been extremely limited.

San Mao suggests that Spain was a choice based in romantic motives born of a feeling for Spanish culture - her early love of Picasso, her enjoyment of a record of Spanish guitar music.⁶⁰ An associate of San Mao's at that time has suggested that Spain was simply a case of economic imperative, as the cost of living there was low in comparison with other European countries.⁶¹ The presence in Madrid of an associate of San Mao's father may also have been a factor.⁶² Whatever her motivations, San Mao left Taiwan for the first time at the age of twenty-four, in 1967, and went to Europe, where she would remain for more than two years.

How the west was won

The rite-of-passage story that sets the tone for San Mao's interactions with Europe and Europeans is less an 'arrival story' than a story of her departure from Taiwan and her first few months in Spain. Her European interactions are outlined as a battle between San Mao as a descendant of the Yellow Emperor (the legendary ancestor of all Chinese) and western barbarians or 'devils'.⁶³ This is played out through a conflict of values, of 'Chinese' and 'western' styles of behaviour, seen in terms of passivity and endurance versus self-assertion and

⁵⁹ As already noted, San Mao left school in her early teens and was educated at home. The circumstances of her leaving school are described in 'Skipping school to study' (*Rear View*, pp. 17-39).

⁶⁰ Cui and Zhao note that 'She knew little of Spain, though she had read Don Quixote and suchlike. Why did she choose Spain? She said that in her 3rd year of university she heard a Spanish classical guitar record and was deeply moved; she imagined a courtyard, pastoral songs, herders, a little white house, a donkey and boundless vineyards - and she was charmed....Spain was still a romantic choice'. They add that she was trying to escape the pain of love - not through the study of philosophy but through simply being in Spain, Cui and Zhao pp. 82-83.

⁶¹ During the time of San Mao's studies in Europe, her father supported her with a monthly allowance (US\$100 per month in Spain and US\$150 in Germany), *Rear View* p. 153.

⁶² The anti-communist stance of the authoritarian Spanish state under Franco may also have been a consideration for a resident of Taiwan of mainland nationalist family origin in the Chiang Kai-Shek era, though San Mao and her biographers do not refer to this.

⁶³ San Mao is not alone in her choice of image, as combat with devils is a staple theme in traditional Chinese fiction and also in the scriptures of Daoism.

aggression. Both 'East' and 'West' expect passivity and meekness to be a feature (perhaps the defining feature) of Chinese womanhood; San Mao, however, rejects both 'East' and 'West' to create her own individual personality, in which a sense of justice, persistence, resourcefulness and assertiveness enable her to triumph - not only equal but superior to the western players in the game, even when it is they themselves who have set the rules.

The first story to be discussed in this section concerns San Mao's experiences in accommodation shared with 'foreigners' (student hostels) and the second records an incident at airport immigration. Both institutions which play an important part in the experience of foreign students everywhere - and of more and more Chinese people working and undertaking studies abroad, and emigrating around the world. In both stories, San Mao is wronged but ultimately triumphs over that wrong. Her self-presentation is characterised by a self-conscious Chineseness; the 'west' responds to her 'Chineseness' by exploiting her meekness (which she presents as correct 'Chinese' behaviour) at a personal level, or by institutional discrimination against her as a Chinese for political reasons. Anecdotal evidence suggests that both stories of injustice and triumph outlined below seem particularly resonant for readers of San Mao's work - and especially those who have themselves experienced encounters with 'the west'.⁶⁴ Biographers and other analysts of San Mao's work also pay considerable attention to these two stories in which San Mao is wronged by 'the west' but wins in the end.

'The west doesn't know how to behave'

As San Mao boards her plane for Spain, leaving home for the first time, her parents give her some parting advice through their tears:

'You'll be overseas from now on, and you won't be a child any longer. While you're abroad, when you deal with people you must have Chinese breeding, endure and give way on everything; to come off worst costs little. If you do happen to have any strife with anyone, this is how you must think: retreat, with no limits. Don't blow off steam at people; you must have a magnanimous heart'.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Many, many times I have encountered among Chinese people of my generation - particularly educated Chinese women living outside the Chinese-speaking world - a strong sense of identification with the San Mao of these two stories. The first story discussed here, 'The west doesn't know how to behave', was widely reprinted in mainland magazines in the mid 1980s. When I arrived in China as a foreign student in 1985, people recommended the work of San Mao to me constantly, and I was encouraged to read this story in particular - with the twin implications that, as someone from 'the west', I would be able to identify with the behaviour of the 'westerners' in the story and perhaps that I myself as a 'westerner' did not know how to behave.

⁶⁵ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 63. This kind of rhetoric has a long history in China; for example, Dikötter quotes He Chengtian (370-447) as follows: 'The inborn nature of Chinese is pure and harmonious, in accordance with altruism and holding to righteousness...Those people of foreign countries are endowed with a hard and obstinate nature, full of evil desires, hatred and violence'

Although these are personal injunctions about personal conduct from San Mao's parents, they are couched in a rhetoric of representing the nation; moreover, their advice seems very much to presuppose that 'bullying behaviour is what San Mao should actually expect from the 'west' and that the salient feature of her life there will be things that she will have to make herself 'endure' and give way upon.⁶⁶ San Mao does not really understand her parents' instructions,⁶⁷ but it is too late to question; the plane takes off, her parents' shadows recede in the distance and 'from now on', she sighs, 'I just had to look to myself'.⁶⁸

In Madrid, San Mao is to stay at a student women's hostel ('the Academy'), and as the first Chinese student ever to live there she is as unknown to the Spanish inmates as they are to her: 'As I looked at the foreign devils', she notes, 'they looked at me as well; I was a kind of devil too. The devils faced each other in their battle lines - it was something new'.⁶⁹ Again the term 'devil' is applied to herself as well as to the 'foreigners', though there is little sense of identification together as the 'battle lines' are drawn between them. The battle begins at once and 'retreat' is immediately required: when San Mao learns to her annoyance that she must share a room, then finds someone else lying on the bed assigned to her, she suppresses her anger and 'endures', making a determined effort to interact with the 'devils'.

For the first few months, relationships between roommates and classmates are harmonious. San Mao behaves meekly as her parents had instructed: 'The first time I talked with the devils I was very self-abasing, polite, mild and sweet. They liked talking too, and when I came back after class there was always someone to teach me to speak'.⁷⁰ She reports to her parents that

I am gradually being able to speak, and I have begun studying. The foreign devils here are all nice, there are no demons...I haven't forgotten what you instructed me, always to retreat and give way, and they haven't bullied me.⁷¹

(quoted from Zürcher, *The Buddhist conquest of China: the spread and adaptation of Buddhism in early mediaeval China*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1959, p. 265 in Dikötter p. 19).

⁶⁶ Such expectations may well have been shaped by Chinese people's experiences of foreign countries at a time of restrictive and discriminatory immigration policies, in response to which the best strategy may well have been self-effacement and deference in order to avoid difficulties in everyday life.

⁶⁷ 'My parents had added it up wrong; how could coming off worst be cheap? And if you retreated, and fell into an abyss, did there still have to be no limits?' *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 63.

⁶⁸ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 64. Gu Jitang suggests that San Mao's father's advice was born of his classical education which had steeped him in 'Chinese cultural psychology' and the teachings of Confucius and Mencius. San Mao's inability to understand is taken to be a consequence of her youth; she did not understand the 'Chinese traditional way of personal conduct' and yet, as a filial daughter, still did her best to do as her father advised, Gu pp. 48-49. Thus 'Chinese virtue' is cast by a mainland commentator in terms of ageless tradition, unconnected to Kuomintang ideology.

⁶⁹ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 64.

⁷⁰ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 65.

⁷¹ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 65.

Here again is the lurking suggestion that the 'west' can be expected to bully her and that retreat will often be called for - but San Mao is behaving with true Chinese restraint: 'I had not lost my temper once', she notes; 'I never forgot that I was Chinese and that I should get on well with everyone so as not to let down the good name of the Yellow Emperor's descendants'. Being a descendant of the Yellow Emperor does not mean that 'Chinese breeding' is a natural way of behaving for San Mao, however: 'my real nature', she confesses, 'had not yet shown itself'. This 'real' nature, it seems, is far from the 'Chinese breeding' of her parents' injunctions; on the contrary, that it has little in common with the image of the meek Chinese patiently accepting suffering is soon to be revealed.

It is on the issue of physical labour (specifically, housework) that 'endurance' gives way to conflict. During San Mao's first month at the Academy, her three room-mates politely insist on sparing her the housework chores, doing her share as well as their own. As time goes on, however, the room-mates stop doing any chores at all, and it is left to the dutiful San Mao to 'give way' and do them all.

I don't know when it started - I began to make the others' beds sometimes as well as my own. First I was quietly making two beds, then three, then four....After three months, I was quietly wiping the table, hanging up the others' clothes, washing the dirty floor, picking up the paper that had been thrown down on it the day before. And my room-mates would come and go, casting brilliant smiles in my direction, and they wouldn't see what I was doing - just as they didn't know how to make their beds any more.⁷²

The cleanliness and neatness of the room is a matter of communal concern as well as individual housekeeping standards and preferences, since daily inspections are carried out by the 'president' of the 'Academy'.⁷³ San Mao raises the matter assertively with her room-mates - 'But the next day, the beds were made but nothing else was done'. Again San Mao 'gives way' and tidies the room, performing the ideal of meek 'Chineseness'. 'I never forgot what my parents had told me', she reiterates:

to retreat and give way in everything...I was happy to be making a big contribution to citizen diplomacy; and the more I wanted to get on with people, the more I agreed to do things for everyone.⁷⁴

The 'citizen diplomacy' or 'person-to-person' diplomacy' (*guomin waijiao*) to which San Mao refers here is a concept well-known in Taiwan, starting from 'Life and ethics' (*shenghuo yu lunli*) classes in the compulsory primary school curriculum. 'Citizen diplomacy' fuses Confucian notions with more modern ideas of politeness and nationalism to form an ideology of personal behaviour as

⁷² *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 66.

⁷³ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 65

⁷⁴ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 66.

representing the nation as a whole. The quality of an individual's manners and behaviour, it is supposed, will display the quality of the nation and of Chinese culture to 'foreigners', who will in turn be impressed by the personal conduct of Chinese people and therefore with China as a nation.⁷⁵ Although 'citizen diplomacy' has its origins in the New Life movement of the 1930s,⁷⁶ it gained particular currency in Taiwan after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and Taiwan's resulting diplomatic isolation (and the corresponding need to win favour through informal means). Connected with the idea of 'citizen diplomacy' is the notion of China (represented by Taiwan) as a nation of courtesy and righteousness (*liyi zhi bang*), whose citizens will display these qualities both at home and abroad.

Thus the personal admonitions of San Mao's parents dovetail with national ideology. San Mao's behaviour is supposed to be representative of a civilised Chinese culture and nation, and through it the 'devils' are supposed to be impressed by 'China'. San Mao does indeed show herself performing the ideal of meek 'Chineseness' - even though it is contrary to her own nature and requires suppression of her personality. It is, however, by no means evident that her meekness has created among her classmates a respect for 'China'; on the contrary, she is given more and more scope for exercising restraint and choosing to give way, for the 'devils', it seems, stand ready to exploit her meekness and take every advantage they can of her Chinese virtue. Not content with leaving all of the housework to her, her Spanish classmates are out to possess her belongings too. San Mao has, she tells us, 'lots of beautiful clothes'; now her wardrobe becomes 'a fashion boutique' for the Academy's thirty-six residents:

Every day there would be a different girl coming to borrow clothes. Hiding my anger I would let her choose, without a word of resistance. At first, the shop opened every day and people borrowed and returned things in an orderly fashion. Gradually, when they saw that this devil was so reasonable, they began to come and take things themselves. At meals every day there would be five or six girls wearing my clothes.⁷⁷

Again San Mao herself is the 'devil', ironically imagined through western eyes as an alien being displaying unexpected humanity and benevolence. Profiting from this devil's meekness and her possessions too, her classmates are kind: they call

⁷⁵ I thank Yang Tsung-Rong for his enlightening comments about 'citizen diplomacy'.

⁷⁶ The New Life movement was initiated by the Nationalist Party based on the premise that the public culture and public morals of Chinese people needed to be reformed; hence the movement was aimed at the regeneration of manners and culture. Traditional virtues were promoted and in some cases supplemented by modern standards of polite conduct. The originator of the movement, Song Meiling, had studied abroad (in the USA, in the 1920s); thus 'citizen diplomacy' had from its outset a connection with overseas study. It is reasonable to suppose that Song Meiling's sense of appropriate public demeanour for Chinese citizens was to some extent a response to her experiences outside China.

⁷⁷ *Diary of a Scarecrow* pp. 66-67.

her 'strange names like "treasure", "sunshine" or "beautiful"', and 'they always praised me to the skies, no one spoke ill of me'. She becomes, indeed, 'the most popular girl in the 'Academy'. Despite her room-mates' appreciation of her meekness, however, San Mao's state of mind becomes worse and worse. As she innocently and self-consciously applies parental and national rules of 'Chineseness', she consistently comes off the loser.

There are perhaps echoes here both of San Mao's purchasing of the 'friendship' of the Sahrawi people with beads and keys, and of the incorrigible borrowing of her Sahrawi neighbours. Here again, as in the Sahara, something has gone wrong with the reciprocity San Mao wishes for; and the generosity/popularity nexus fails because the other side is playing by different rules. Again the 'obstacles to utopia' come from the other party's greed.

Soon San Mao is effectively the servant not only of her room-mates but of the whole 'Academy' community. As she rarely goes out (unlike the others, she has no steady boyfriend and spends most of her time studying), she is pursued both in person and over the phone with constant requests:

'San Mao, it's raining - bring my washing in'.
 'San Mao, I'll be eating out - don't go to sleep, so you can let me in'.
 'San Mao, treasure, go down and iron those red trousers, so when I get back I can change and go out again quickly, please!'
 'Keep some food for me, beautiful - I'll be home right away'....
 'Darling, come and curl my hair for me, and bring your nail polish':⁷⁸

Her room-mates even complain about her failure to do the housework for them.⁷⁹ Still San Mao 'endures' - and still the rewards for her endurance fail to be positive. Constantly she asks herself :

Why do I have to retreat and give way on everything? Because I am Chinese.
 Why do I have to help people? Because that's virtue.
 Why don't I resist? Because I have breeding.
 Why do I have to do so many things? Because I am capable.
 Why don't I get angry? Because I am not at home.
 My parents had educated me in Chinese propriety; I followed them completely and embodied them. And they had said that it cost little to be the loser. Now I really was a cheap person.⁸⁰

Among the 'devils', in a society 'completely different from that of China', the ways of a 'virtuous person' of 'Chinese propriety' are clearly not working as intended. Although the Europeans appreciate her meekness ('I really was everyone's treasure'), they despise her for it as well ('everyone thought I was stupid'). 'Amongst a group of evil bullying foreign devils', sighs San Mao, a

⁷⁸ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 67.

⁷⁹ 'San Mao, the president told us off today, why didn't you sweep the floor?' *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 68.

⁸⁰ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 68.

perfect Chinese person doesn't really get anywhere'.⁸¹ The 'Chinese' virtues of endurance and restraint, in short, seem to be counter-productive among 'devils' who play by quite different rules. If, however, the ways of 'China' do not seem appropriate for a Europe that is too selfish or assertive to appreciate them, it is not 'China that is to blame'; San Mao is careful to assume personal responsibility by suggesting that her predicament is a result of her youthful immaturity, implying that, if she had been less young and inexperienced, she would have been better able to adapt her 'Chinese' behaviour to fit her circumstances.⁸² As it is, her outward meekness and inward anger continue until an incident one night proves more than she can meekly endure.

The catalyst for the end of San Mao's 'Chinese meekness' is that legendary infringement of rules in Catholic institutions: San Mao's room-mates steal the communion wine. They gather on San Mao's bed to drink it, and initially she joins in, enjoying the party. As the noise level rises, however, and as she will be the chief suspect in any official enquiry as they have chosen her bed for their carousing, she becomes annoyed, repeatedly urging her classmates to move elsewhere.⁸³ They do not; and the noise summons the dorm president, who appears 'steely faced' in the doorway and silences the party with a single roar. The blame, as expected, falls upon San Mao. 'San Mao', roars the president, 'it's you!'

'I've been meaning to warn you to behave for a long time, but since you are a foreign student I have never said anything. Get out! I heard long ago that you were selling contraceptive pills. You scum!'⁸⁴

Ironically, while her classmates have been taking advantage of San Mao's 'Chinese' meekness, and San Mao has endured and given way because she is 'Chinese', the president has held back from accusing her for exactly the same reason - because she is 'foreign'. It was San Mao's passivity that caused her to suffer; now she is accused of active wrongdoing. The quality of her behaviour had clearly not inspired the president with any respect for China at all; on the contrary, San Mao must now 'endure' yet another injustice, namely the president's mistaken suspicion. But her endurance is at an end, and she is beyond restraint

⁸¹ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 68. 'I realised that I had done nothing wrong', concludes San Mao, 'but I had completely lost my confidence'.

⁸² 'I was young at that time, and I didn't know how to change. I just monotonously gave in', *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 68.

⁸³ So annoyed is San Mao that 'even if I was the hero Lin Chong they'd have forced me up Liangshan', *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 69. Lin Chong, a famously loyal member of the imperial guard of the Song dynasty, was driven by injustice to Liangshan to become an outlaw (in the classic Chinese novel *Shuihu zhuan*, known in English as *Outlaws of the Marsh* or *The Water Margin*).

⁸⁴ *Diary of a Scarecrow* pp. 69-70.

and Chinese breeding.⁸⁵ Now, to 'vent the resentment that I had kept in my heart for so long', and to the astonishment and fright of her classmates who are accustomed to meekness on her part, she picks up a broom and flails it about, screaming and shouting and hitting out with all her might at anyone within reach. The episode ends with her emptying the contents of a vase over the president's head; the president, with a final barked command to reassert order and a glare at San Mao, stalks off.⁸⁶

After San Mao's outburst, everything changes. Her classmates begin to treat her politely. Borrowed clothes begin to return, and San Mao is newly assertive when they do: when a classmate returns a dress, she responds, 'Wash it before you give it back - I won't take it now'.⁸⁷ Her behaviour becomes, she notes, 'cold'; every morning she leaves her bed unmade, ignores the rubbish on the floor, slams the door and goes to class - and when she returns her bed has been made and the room is tidy. Whereas in the past she was always 'considerate of what other people thought', she now borrows recordings of Peking opera and plays them at high volume to annoy her classmates (likening herself to Sun Wukong - to whom José compared her in Chapter 2 - creating havoc in heaven).⁸⁸ Instead of dutifully answering the phone, she pulls it out of the wall.

'The strange thing was', she observes,

that...I didn't apologise. I ignored people, I was wilful and stubborn, I threw away everything my parents had taught me - and these devils began to fawn on me.

When I came down to breakfast late, a girl would give me some food that she had kept for me.

When I washed my hair, someone would ask, 'Would you like me to dry your hair?'

When it rained and I got wet, someone would say, 'San Mao, darling, come under my umbrella! Don't get cold!'⁸⁹

⁸⁵ 'I had always been the most cooperative person in that dorm, and the one who had put up with the most. Now being wrongly accused by the president made those many, many wrongs and grievances explode in me like a volcano', *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 70. As one commentator on San Mao has put it, 'She could bear it no longer; couldn't consider things like breeding and propriety; she was in the unfavourable situation of being alone among a bunch of foreign people - alone, with no one to aid her', Mei p. 74.

⁸⁶ 'San Mao', she barks, 'you will apologise in front of everyone tomorrow, and then go and confess to the priest'. 'Me?' screams San Mao, and dashes a book to the floor in a gesture of frustration. *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 71.

⁸⁷ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 71.

⁸⁸ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 72. As noted above, Sun Wukong is the monkey hero of the Ming dynasty fantasy novel *Xiyou Ji*, (*The Journey to the West*). In 'The restaurant in the desert', José likened San Mao to Sun Wukong because of her resourcefulness in tricking his boss.

⁸⁹ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 72.

In short, the 'devils' are now treating San Mao with a consideration that her parents' moral advice or 'citizen diplomacy' could not elicit from them, offering her the very things that they had formerly been demanding from her.⁹⁰

A month passes before the president comes to seek San Mao out and summon her to an interview in her room. There the table is set with snack food and wine; pouring a glass, for San Mao, the president begins:

'San Mao, you should have been thrown out for your behaviour, but I don't want to let it get so serious. I'd like to talk to you today to make peace'.

'It wasn't me selling the pills'.

'It was you that hit people'.

'You wronged me first'.

'I know you were wronged, but you could have worked it all out without losing your temper like that'.

I gazed at her, picked up my glass and took a sip without replying.

'Pax?'

'Pax'. I nodded.

She kissed my cheek softly, gave me a few sweets and told me to go to bed....

After that, my time in the dorm passed very happily.⁹¹

In San Mao's representation, the president admits that the real fault is on the Spanish side. San Mao's violent outburst is not punished; on the contrary, it is rewarded by the president with wine, kisses and sweets, while the other dorm inmates spontaneously atone for their behaviour towards her. In other words, the inhabitants of the Spanish dorm, like the Sahrawi nomads whom San Mao photographs, take up the postures she would wish them to assume, providing a moment of European *disponibilité*. In the conclusion of this story there is some suggestion that the behaviour and values of these Spanish people are somehow random and lacking in logic or principle. They have been forced by San Mao's outburst to acknowledge that she has been wronged by them, yet the violence and abusiveness by which she has brought this about is tolerated and thus tacitly approved, just as their own exploitation of her has been. When San Mao is good, she suffers; when she is bad and loses her temper violently she is rewarded rather than rebuked. San Mao concludes:

⁹⁰ In the use of the word 'fawn' there is perhaps a hint of some lack of self-respect in the classmates' behaviour that San Mao is right to despise. In contrast to Chinese meekness, presented as a positive virtue based on principle and strength (but misunderstood by the bullying 'devils'), this new western meekness in dealing with the newly assertive San Mao is portrayed more as weakness or cowardly capitulation in reaction to her violent outburst.

⁹¹ *Diary of a Scarecrow* pp. 73-74. In retelling San Mao's tale, the literary critic Gu Jitang adopts her scenario of conflict between good and evil: 'In a foreign devils' society, among a bunch of foreign devils who bullied the good and feared the wicked, what her father had taught her did not work. If she carried on like that, San Mao would become everyone's treasure but also everyone's fool; she would not only lose her initiative but also her self respect; she would not only waste a lot of time, but it would affect her own health. San Mao was keen to excel, and in the end she could not endure it - and would not endure the life of a slave'. After she fought back, 'those foreign girls not only didn't order San Mao around any more, they also started taking the initiative to help her', Gu pp. 49-50.

In this world, a person with breeding will not be respected in a society that doesn't have the same breeding. The fact that a barbaric person can establish prestige is a strange case of black and white being inverted. Citizen diplomacy is indeed important, but we can't have citizens suffering setbacks before diplomatic ties are established. If we do, then, apart from being bullied by other people, the ties that are established will have no respect.⁹²

Although lip-service is still paid to the value of citizen diplomacy, experience has obviously taught San Mao quite another lesson. It has confirmed that foreign devils 'bully' Chinese people with 'breeding', and that only by behaving in a 'barbaric' fashion can one assert authority among them. While citizen diplomacy may be a positive thing, there is no value in ties based on foreign bullying and exploitation of meek China. San Mao herself has behaved in a 'barbaric' way and, almost by accident, established respect and ties in the process. No longer the Academy's servant (indeed, actively rejecting the role of 'coolie' or manual worker for the Europeans) she can enjoy the rest of her time at the Academy. The tale ends with the words, 'This is the first chapter of "The Victory of the Yellow Emperor over Chi You". It is clear who won and who lost'.⁹³ San Mao as a descendant of the Yellow Emperor has prevailed over modern barbarians analogous to Chi You, the barbarian chief with a human body but the head of a wild beast,⁹⁴ in an epic battle that links San Mao into further narratives of Chinese nationalism.⁹⁵ San Mao has learned how to 'win' among European 'barbarians' by rage and violence rather than to impress them with meekness. Citizen diplomacy is gone for good; later stories will show her deliberately choosing strategies other than meekness for dealing with 'bullying' from Europe.

Round two of the battle takes place in West Berlin, again in a student hostel. This time San Mao is assigned a single room; and a woman from Iceland

⁹² *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 74. Quoting the two final sentences of this utterance, Mei Zihan notes that 'San Mao said that her acting in this way...was entirely because these people did not give her the respect that she ought to have. She wanted dignity', Mei Zihan p. 80. It might be noted that the narrative of 'diplomatic ties' (a consequence of the split between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan and the diplomatic isolation of Taiwan) is interpreted by mainland critics as a timeless issue to do with how 'China' should act in the world.

⁹³ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p.74.

⁹⁴ Chi You was the chief of the 'Nine Li' peoples (Southern Barbarians), best known for his skill in making weapons and in summoning rain and clouds, *Cihai*, Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, Shanghai 1989, p. 1236.

⁹⁵ Sun Yatsen, the founder of the Republic of China, for example, refers to the victory over Chi You in his 'sacrificial oration' on the Yellow Emperor:

'China was founded 5,000 years ago,
There the Yellow Emperor's name has been known since ancient times,
He invented the compass-cart and suppressed the challenge of Chi You,
Among the civilisations of the world, ours alone is the first'.

Quoted by Barry Sautman in 'Myths of descent, racial nationalism and ethnic minorities', in *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan*, ed. Frank Dikötter, Hurst and Co, London 1997, p. 79.

moves in next door, an 'iceberg neighbour' who is 'as cold as ice' towards San Mao.⁹⁶ Having learned from her own difficulties in Spain, however, and with perhaps a sense of already 'belonging' in the German dorm and thus able to be magnanimous to a newcomer, San Mao is disposed to be tolerant despite the other's ungracious behaviour.

At first, as in Madrid, things are peaceful. San Mao is busy with her heavy workload of classes and homework, and the Icelander is out most of the time. Within two or three months, however, the 'iceberg' neighbour has acquired a bevy of boyfriends and is holding wild parties in her room every few nights. This 'festive atmosphere' leaves San Mao with 'weak nerves' and unable to study. For three weeks San Mao 'endures' - but another loud party after a couple of days' lull rouses her to action. There is perhaps a sense of surprise in San Mao's account of the party, and for readers in 1960s Taiwan this type of noisy gathering in private homes may well have been unfamiliar. The noise of the party is described in some detail ('earsplitting music', dancing, clapping, loud talking and laughter, and the sound of empty bottles being dropped) but there are worse excesses even than these: people are 'running around and fooling about' naked on the balcony between the Icelander's room and San Mao's. San Mao knocks on her neighbour's door to ask politely for quiet - only to find that there are 'three men and two women crammed into that little room, all naked'.⁹⁷ The angry Icelander pushes her out of the room and carries on partying until almost dawn, but San Mao does not knock again.

Her forbearance is couched once again in terms of national stereotypes, but this time it is not Chinese endurance that holds her back; it is the supposed character of Europeans. Spanish people, she notes, are warm and kind; Icelanders, by contrast, are intractable: 'I understood that quarrelling was no use in dealing with someone like this, because she wasn't Spanish. Spanish people are, ultimately, honest and kind'.⁹⁸ Interestingly, San Mao's biographers interpret this to mean that San Mao encountered difficult experiences in Germany because of the character of German people, namely, their work ethic and their 'patient' and

⁹⁶ First impressions are not good: 'When she came into the kitchen to cook, that woman spoke only to the men. She disliked me from the very first day. She looked me up and down: mini skirts were fashionable at that time, and I was wearing a very short skirt above my dark stockings. I smiled at her; she glared at me, turned on her heel and walked off. In the light of my own behaviour, I know that establishing diplomatic relations is difficult; I smiled happily and went on boiling my egg', *Diary of a Scarecrow* pp. 74-75. The reference to San Mao's clothes may be intended to hint at a possible cause of the Icelander's coldness towards her - that is, that she is attractive to men in her short skirt and therefore a competitor.

⁹⁷ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 76.

⁹⁸ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 76 (although as has been seen in the story of the Spanish dorm, the honest kindness of San Mao's classmates was not always in evidence; a violent outburst from San Mao was required to bring out their ultimate 'honesty and kindness').

'earnest' character (in contrast to the easy-going Spanish) - qualities, it might be noted, that are not dissimilar to the 'Chinese breeding' initially advocated as a model for San Mao's behaviour abroad. Amongst the serious Germans, they claim, San Mao was no longer the 'brightly-coloured butterfly' she had been in Madrid, and was no longer able to fly.⁹⁹ The critic Gu Jitang's view of San Mao's behaviour in Germany is that she was 'a Chinese girl like a lotus flower that grows in the mud but is not stained by it' and 'a burning lamp in dark surroundings, sending out the light of Chinese culture and morality' to the benighted Germans; in other words, her restraint and her decision to abide by the rules demonstrate admirable Chinese breeding after all.¹⁰⁰ Whether responding to the Icelander's supposed lack of honesty and kindness or to the imagined character of the dorm authorities, San Mao shows herself rejecting the passion and fury of her behaviour in the Spanish dorm. She decides to act through official channels, and goes straight to the dorm management office to make a complaint.

The student counsellor ('a middle-aged lawyer') does not go out of his way to be helpful, apparently doubting San Mao's word that a problem really exists or that he can do anything about it even if it does.¹⁰¹ San Mao notes that he has 'no sense of justice'; just as in the Spanish dorm story, European authority figures are again portrayed as mistrustful of the Chinese woman among them. Even when San Mao is set at a disadvantage by the behaviour of her European neighbours, they fail to support her even when there is justice on her side.¹⁰² This time, however, San Mao has methods other than 'barbaric' behaviour with which to counter European injustice. A week later she is back in the counsellor's office with a tape recording of the noise from her neighbour's party. The counsellor is convinced; the matter will be referred to a management meeting for discussion, and the Icelander will be moved out. The counsellor is more annoyed than impressed by San Mao's resourcefulness, sighing:

'There aren't very many students from your country like you. They are usually very mild; they always get good marks, and they're quiet, careful

⁹⁹ Cui and Zhao p. 99.

¹⁰⁰ Gu Jitang p. 51.

¹⁰¹ The counsellor points out that no one else has complained about the Icelander's noise, and is sceptical even when San Mao explains that their two rooms are separated from the other residential rooms by bathrooms and kitchen. 'What she is doing is against the rules', he concedes, 'but we can't ask her to move just because of a complaint from one person. And I can't just go believing what you say'. 'Is that your answer?' I glared angrily at this person who had no sense of justice. 'For the moment, yes. Farewell. Good day'. *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 77.

¹⁰² Another later story also presents German people as unreasonable and reluctant to help. When renting a house in the Canary Islands, San Mao deals with a German agent who 'looked mild but was really a sly German'; San Mao is dissatisfied with the cleaner employed by the agency to clean her flat, and tries to arrange to dispense with the cleaner's services in return for a rent reduction, but the agent will not allow this, *The Tender Night* p. 253.

and cautious. Something like this happened once before, in a dorm where there were 2 people to a room, and one was from Taiwan. His roommate moved his girlfriend in to stay for 3 months, and he didn't complain; when we found out and asked him about it, he smiled and said it didn't matter'.¹⁰³

In other words, the Taiwanese student had behaved with 'Chinese breeding'; he had 'given way', 'retreated', and 'endured', just as San Mao's parents had advised her to do. As with San Mao's experiences in Spain, his 'citizen diplomacy' had failed to elicit admiration for China;¹⁰⁴ on the contrary, his meek behaviour had fulfilled or even helped to create German expectations of the appropriate 'Chinese' demeanour that are now putting San Mao at a disadvantage. There is perhaps a hint here of a vicious circle of 'Chinese breeding' conforming to 'foreign' expectations of 'Chinese' behaviour, constructing in turn a 'Chinese' demeanour that may be in self-conscious and deliberate opposition to what is perceived as 'foreign' behaviour.

As we have seen, however, San Mao has found 'Chinese breeding' and 'citizen diplomacy' wanting, and has rejected them as strategies for dealing with the Europeans. She is unimpressed and annoyed by the counsellor's citation of Chinese meekness (by implication, the kind of meekness that he expects San Mao herself to display). Her annoyance is directed both at her compatriot's behaviour (that is, his manifestation of 'Chinese breeding') and foreign judgment and expectation: 'I was distressed to hear it' she exclaims; 'I hated that shameless foreigner, and I hated my own countryman for being too nice'.¹⁰⁵

The Icelander moves out, and the practical problem is 'satisfactorily solved' - but the story of San Mao and 'Chinese breeding' is not yet over. Encountering two Chinese students in the cafeteria queue,¹⁰⁶ she smiles in greeting - but instead of responding, they begin to talk about her:

'Where is she from?' one of them asked nervously...

'Spain', the other answered mysteriously.

'Look at her dress! Really!'...

'She's really out to attract attention! She's only been here a few days and she still can't really speak the language - and she's been quarrelling with her neighbours already. It's strange - she doesn't think about being Chinese'.

'How do you know about her?'

'They were talking about her in the student union. Everyone discussed it for ages, whether or not they should speak to her and tell her not to be so lacking in breeding. Our beautiful Chinese tradition - what a loss of face to go to the student counsellor. Just think about it - just a little matter,

¹⁰³ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 78.

¹⁰⁴ 'China', of course, being the Republic of China here, construed by itself in the 1960s as the guardian of Chinese culture.

¹⁰⁵ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 78.

¹⁰⁶ This is a rather unusual occurrence in San Mao's stories. With only rare exceptions, San Mao represents herself as the only Chinese person wherever she is living abroad.

going to complain...and she goes out with Germans, she was seen the first time..'107

Both individual Chinese and the Chinese students' union take exception to San Mao's way of dealing with Europeans - her unwillingness to meekly 'endure', her assertiveness, and her fraternising with Germans. So far removed is San Mao from 'our beautiful Chinese tradition' that the two Chinese women distance themselves from her by identifying her first of all with Spain rather than as Chinese. There is perhaps a suggestion here that success in dealing with Europeans might have some adverse effect on relationships with other Chinese people, causing suspicion or perhaps envy on the part of others. What San Mao's compatriots are advocating here is 'Chinese breeding' again: giving way and enduring. Reporting a problem through the appropriate channel is, for them, a loss of face; it is equated with 'quarrelling with neighbours' and is plainly not acceptable 'Chinese' behaviour'.¹⁰⁸ While San Mao 'hates' her compatriot for being 'too nice', 'the west' is upset by San Mao not behaving in a 'Chinese' enough way - and her Chinese compatriots resent her for exactly the same reason. Her self-assertiveness and the kind of 'sense of justice' which was lacking in the German student counsellor (and apparently in these two Chinese women as well) are subversive to the notions of ideal Chineseness that both 'the west' and 'China' seem to expect. In this way San Mao's tale is as critical of 'Chinese' behaviour (and, by extension, of official Republic of China ideology) as it is of European.

Yet although San Mao is enraged by her compatriots' 'wounding me sorely behind my back', she notes that 'I couldn't turn round and tell them off. I endured it'. Thus, faced with objectionable or wrong behaviour by compatriots, she takes refuge in 'Chinese breeding': she 'endures'. When 'bullied' by the 'west' she will fight and win; when 'wounded' by her compatriots she will retreat - and this retreat is played out literally as she takes her food to a table in a distant corner of the canteen. 'I understood something', she asserts:

things that you can't put up with from a foreign devil, you must endure a hundred times from your own compatriots - and you have to take it a hundred times without fighting back.

In my opinion, for compatriots to get on fine with people but to be completely lacking in principle is weakness. The unequal treaties don't go far enough - and we're still getting intoxicated with self-satisfaction.¹⁰⁹

San Mao's message here seems to echo the sentiments of earlier and more intellectually sanctioned critics of Chinese culture - such as Lu Xun, whose stories criticise the same kind of 'Chinese breeding' and claim that Chinese people

¹⁰⁷ *Diary of a Scarecrow* p. 79.

¹⁰⁸ Perhaps there is also some hinted notion here of 'eastern' and 'western' vices; gossip and envy, and unfairness and bullying respectively.

¹⁰⁹ *Diary of a Scarecrow* pp. 79-80.

are actually glorying in their own submissiveness.¹¹⁰ When terms are imposed upon them that seem unfair (as in the 'unequal treaties'),¹¹¹ by regarding meekness and endurance as a virtue, they can, it is suggested, derive self-satisfaction from injustice when they respond to it with this kind of 'Chinese breeding'. San Mao herself has shown herself unwilling to 'endure' foreign-imposed injustice, and has rejected 'Chinese breeding' as a way of dealing with Europe; yet faced with injustice from Chinese compatriots demanding submissive behaviour from her, she is willing to give way and endure.

In conclusion, San Mao reflects upon the relationships between China and the rest of the world as played out in her own relationships with 'foreigners'.¹¹²

Again and again I examined myself: why did I have problems getting on with people in every country I went to? Were the foreigners out to bully me? or was my character too meek, too unwilling to set aside the concept of our people's modesty, and thus unwittingly colluding with them? It was only because I was an undefended city that outsiders could invade! How I longed for foreigners to appreciate my manners; it was clear, alas, that they liked them but were not repaying me with the respect I deserved. I wouldn't think about what my parents told me any more. I would rather change into a ferocious tiger when I am in a foreign country, change into a fierce wild beast, and be a true descendant of the Yellow Emperor when the foreign devils don't know how to behave.¹¹³

Thus the rhetoric of 'citizen diplomacy' is well and truly rejected in favour of that of contest. Again the rhetoric of combat is deployed to describe her interactions with 'the west', which stands ready to 'invade' her if she does not have the necessary 'defences'. Again the west is unable to respect virtuous 'Chinese'

¹¹⁰ The most famous example is Lu Xun's story 'The true story of Ah Q' ('A Q zhenzhuān').

¹¹¹ The 'unequal treaties' are of course the series of treaties between China and various imperial powers that began after the first Opium War and continued into the early twentieth century, forcing the Chinese government to grant trading and diplomatic concessions and, in some cases, to cede territory. The conditions imposed upon China in these treaties have been consistently perceived as national humiliation, and as such have proved a continuing source of resentment.

¹¹² First she outlines some of the difficult interactions that take place when she moves next to the USA, where 'the west' continues to demonstrate that it does not know how to behave: her American neighbour keeps her awake by typing all night and then complaining that the light from San Mao's room is keeping *her* awake; there are inequities in splitting the bill for shared food; and American man asks her to pay him back for the coffee he has bought her when she will not allow him to put his arm around her; and an elderly American couple wish to adopt her, explicitly offering her their considerable wealth in return for a pledge that she will take care of them for the rest of their lives. This last example of 'western' behaviour particularly catches the imagination of Gu Jitang, who writes that 'She would not become the adopted daughter of foreigners, even though there would have been enormous benefits - a big inheritance - a Chinese person's dignity and character is a treasure beyond price...The couple who wanted to adopt her bullied her. To them she was like a dog or a cat, or a toy. Citizens of the most democratic country in the world, overlooking other people's existence, invading other people's human rights, damaging other people's self-respect, with no feeling that this kind of behaviour is ridiculous - and they thought that San Mao cared about money, so they used money and property to tempt her'. Gu pp. 56-57. Even though San Mao was furious at this insult, continues Gu, she was a child of China, 'a nation of courtesy and righteousness'; therefore she did not wish to hurt the childless Americans and simply left without saying what she thought of their proposition.

¹¹³ *Diary of a Scarecrow* pp. 86-87.

behaviour. Faced with the threat of foreign 'invasion', it is best to be strong, confident and threatening like a wild beast. If the descendant of the Yellow Emperor is to be victorious in her encounters with a west that 'does not know how to behave', the learned familial and national rules of conduct must be refined and adapted into new modes of interaction.

'My experiences traveling in Europe'¹¹⁴

The new strategies that are more effective than 'citizen diplomacy' for dealing with 'foreigners' (through which stereotypes of Chinese womanhood can be confounded, injustice defeated, principle defended, and 'western' men charmed in the process) are triumphantly displayed in the second story to be examined here. The 'wild beast' rhetoric remains, but here the tiger is an obstructive foreign bureaucracy; San Mao herself is characterised as a 'pig', a powerless creature who nonetheless prevails over the strength and wiles of the tiger.

Returning to Spain after three years back in Taiwan,¹¹⁵ San Mao's approach to Europe is different now from when, 'still a child', she first left home for Spain.¹¹⁶ She has abandoned strategies of 'endurance' and will demonstrate herself to be an embodiment of the 'sense of justice' that Europeans supposedly lack. Along with this sense of justice is a presentation of herself as full of concern for other people;¹¹⁷ and this familiar characteristic of the San Mao persona combines with assertive behaviour into a character that can display both 'hardness' and 'softness' at the appropriate times towards the appropriate people:

¹¹⁴ First published in 1973 in *Shiye shijie* 92, then republished in *The Rainy Season Will Not Return*, Crown, Taipei, 1976.

¹¹⁵ In late 1974 or early 1975; from Spain she would travel to the Sahara. Having spent two years in Spain and Germany and six months in the USA, San Mao had returned to Taiwan, where she taught German language at Chinese Culture Academy. Biographers suggest that her return to Europe was a wish for a change of scene after the death of her fiancé (a German professor) in Taiwan. San Mao herself does not mention this experience, but again portrays her return to Europe as a purely emotional choice: 'My decision to come back to Spain was a romantic choice rather than a rational one. Compared with all the other countries I have been to and lived in, I have particular love for Spain, and a feeling almost of homesickness drew me back', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 114. 'I went around the world', she notes, 'and came back to Europe; I changed languages and saw familiar places again, and beautiful girls, surrounded by white trees, and big billboards in Spanish. I took the subway into town, sat in the autumn sunshine, sat in an open-air cafe and watched people passing. I felt that my time in Taiwan was a dream, and I also felt that this might be a dream too - perhaps I would wake up one day and be sleeping in my own bed at home in Taiwan', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 113. Biographers Cui and Zhao suggest that she was returning to the land that had cured her of her broken heart (her 'wounds of love' after her first unhappy love affair, Cui and Zhao pp. 109-111).

¹¹⁶ 'This time', she tells us, 'what I sought was not the life of the student prince', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 114. Her departure from Taiwan is also much more low-key than it was the first time, and few friends come to the airport to see her off. 'This shows that there is already progress - everyone is busy, and they don't worry about greeting visitors and seeing them off any more', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 113.

¹¹⁷ As well as changing seats, she takes under her wing an elderly woman from Ningbo, assisting her throughout the flight and the arrival, and helps to amuse the small child sitting in front of her.

softness for compatriots and underdogs, and hardness for those in authority who 'bully' other people, especially Chinese people. Although San Mao willingly 'gives way' on a plane full of Chinese 'compatriots' from Hong Kong (changing seats three times to allow family members and friends to sit together), she will not endure foreign bullying.

San Mao is to change planes in London for Madrid - arriving at Gatwick and leaving from Heathrow.¹¹⁸ Only a single immigration counter is open at the airport, and after two hours in the queue San Mao is still waiting. The immigration officer has rejected several people - some, like her, transit passengers on Taiwan passports.¹¹⁹ English indifference to justice is established early on; a nearby Englishman only laughs unsympathetically at San Mao's angry remark that the situation is 'like trying criminals'.¹²⁰

When at long last it is San Mao's turn, the official tells her, despite her polite smiles and explanations, that she may not enter the United Kingdom. She shows him her onward ticket and her Spanish visa by way of proof that she is only a transit passenger, but he responds with a racial insult: 'Ah, you are smart, you're going to use the pretext of changing airports to slip into England illegally, right? You Chinese people!' Thus European expectations of Chinese criminality are added to their expectations of Chinese meekness and docility.¹²¹ San Mao must wait for a second interview when all of the other passengers have been dealt with; an hour and a half later, she is the only person from her flight who has not been reconsidered and allowed through immigration.¹²² She has plainly been singled out as a special case, and is handed over by the immigration official to a 'handsome young Englishman' named Larry, who ushers out of the air terminal and into a police car.¹²³ She is taken to a detention centre, conducted to a room and urged to sleep. 'I knew it was all over', she sighs - but even so, she refuses to quietly 'endure', arguing persistently with the duty policeman, asking questions and demanding a lawyer until he loses patience. 'Why don't you go into your

¹¹⁸ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 116.

¹¹⁹ All of the reasons for their rejections are alarming to San Mao: one is rejected despite the 15 days left on his/her English residence permit; one is rejected because he has arrived early for the study term; and one Taiwan man planning only to change planes in London is rejected while his Belgian wife and their children are allowed through, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 119.

¹²⁰ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 120.

¹²¹ Repressing her anger at this accusation against not only herself but 'the Chinese people' ('I won't get angry - just let me past, and there will be time to abuse you then!'). San Mao notes that this is the second time that she has been 'embarrassed' like this (the first having been in Chicago).

¹²² Even the Taiwan man with the Belgian wife has been allowed through; they both reassure San Mao as they leave, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 122.

¹²³ He pretends to be taking her 'for some coffee'; once outside, where her fellow-passengers are retrieving their baggage and a police car is waiting for her, she realises that 'I had been tricked!' Even as people gather round to watch her climbing into the police car, she maintains her sense of irony: 'It was a real spectacle! This was the climax of my travellers' tales!' *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 123.

room and hug the pillow and cry?', he demands, 'You're making so much noise that I can't work!' As in the story of the German dorm, there is an explicit European expectation of Chinese passivity and endurance, but San Mao again rejects the proffered model of Chinese meekness and feminine helplessness, and continues to behave assertively despite the policeman's continued obstructiveness. Again as in the case of the German dorm, the official is reluctant to accept what San Mao says; the policeman is reluctant to believe that she might know a lawyer in England whom she could contact, and then reluctant to allow her to make a phone call to him. Agitated by the argument, she retreats to her room to regather her strength; when she reappears a moment later,

The policeman was steaming with rage. 'What have you come out again for? What are you looking for?'

I said, 'A broom. I want to sweep the floor'.

He said, 'You are very cool, Miss. Have you been in jail before?'¹²⁴

Yet despite his initial annoyance, the policeman is soon won over - by her 'coolness', by her spirit and determination, or perhaps simply by the fact that this 'lovely young lady' is the only woman detainee. Giving up the fight, he invites her to join him for a cup of coffee.¹²⁵ No longer an 'undefended city', San Mao immediately turns his invitation to her advantage, to outwit the policeman for the benefit of the other detainees and to demonstrate her own persona of obligingness and fairness. 'Please put lots of water in', she says to the policeman.

'Why?'

I didn't reply. I lined up lots of cups, then I went and called to the people in all the cells, 'Come out! come out! The boss has invited you for coffee'.

Lots of people came out, all of them men, of many different nationalities, all very sad and depressed-looking. They all stared at me.

When the policeman saw that I had called them all out, he said, 'You devil! My head is splitting'.

I asked, 'Have you had a Chinese woman here before?'

'Yes, but she wasn't like you! She cried quietly in her room. Why don't you go and cry?' (Why not? Why didn't I cry? Why didn't I cry? Bastard!)¹²⁶

The policeman's expectations of Chinese female passivity and San Mao's refusal to play a passive feminine role has already been noted. As in the story of the German dorm, European expectations are again confounded by a Chinese woman who shows initiative, self-confidence and unwillingness to put up with injustices or situations disadvantageous to her - and her self-assertion makes her, for the policeman, a 'devil'. Like the admiring gaze of the audience at her driving test in Chapter 3, the stares of the other inmates here reinforce this sense of San Mao's

¹²⁴ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 125.

¹²⁵ The first offer of coffee (by Larry) tricked San Mao out of the airport terminal; she makes sure she wins the upper hand with the second.

¹²⁶ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 125.

remarkableness; the implication is that they have never seen a Chinese woman like this before. She herself deliberately adds to this impression with the cool reply, 'I won't cry; is this trifle worth crying about?'¹²⁷

It is now past the time for her flight to Spain, and San Mao is still resisting her captors at every step.¹²⁸ Eventually she persuades Larry to help her phone a lawyer - but her father's legal colleague is out of town, and her last hope seems gone. Though Larry offers to tell the immigration bureau that she is sick in the hope that they will let her go sooner, San Mao is too distressed and exhausted to reply; and retreats to her room to lie down.¹²⁹

Hearing the theme tune of a familiar television show, she re-emerges to find Larry and his colleague, Maria, watching TV. Idly they ask San Mao that archetypal 1970s question about standards of living and levels of 'civilisation' outside Britain: 'Do you have television in Taiwan?'¹³⁰

'We have three at home', replies San Mao;

'colour TVs are really common'.

They stared at me. 'You must be a millionaire's daughter; there can't be many with that standard of living'.

'I'll show you a picture if you don't believe me! Every house in a Taiwan country village has a TV aerial. How could I be a millionaire's daughter? I come from an ordinary home; the standard of living is generally high in Taiwan'.¹³¹

San Mao's ability to surprise is magnified by the English wardens' complete ignorance about Taiwan. It is perhaps not surprising that, as custodial staff of an immigration detention centre in a nation accustomed to assuming world-leading status, they are unable to conceive of a Taiwan where ordinary families might own colour televisions; presumably it is as much in the interests of immigration agencies wishing to screen people out to assume low standards of living in the home countries of the people they detain as it is to San Mao's advantage to generalise Taiwan living standards from the example of her own middle-

¹²⁷ She hides the rage she feels at the policeman's apparent attempts at jocularity, just as she suppressed her anger at the unjust taunts of the immigration official noted above. For her readers she adds an aside that takes her coolness even further, giving an ironical view of the situation as a new and exciting experience that she is privileged to have: 'Or, looked at another way, you couldn't get this kind of experience if you asked for it. How many days are there in your life, and how many times in your life do you get to go to prison?' *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 125-126.

¹²⁸ Refusing, for example, to wear the uniform-like garment her captors offer her to sleep in: 'What's this? Prison clothes? I won't wear it, I am not a criminal', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 126.

¹²⁹ 'I couldn't reply', she notes, 'I was afraid that if I opened my mouth I would weep', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 127. She has also developed a number of physiological symptoms (cough, stomach ache, swollen eyes, taut nerves, ringing in her ears, and a headache that made her head fit to explode), and takes a sleeping pill and an anti-inflammatory pill in lieu of food.

¹³⁰ In Britain in the early 1970s (around the same time as San Mao's airport experience) I soon lost count of the number of times I was asked, 'Do you have television in New Zealand?'

¹³¹ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 127-128.

class family home.¹³² It is not only her account of Taiwan's wealth that impresses her captors, however; they are amazed also at her familiarity with 'western' television shows.¹³³ Here San Mao, representing an 'Asia' configured by the Europeans as both poor and unfamiliar with Euro-American cultural products, confounds her English captors with both economic affluence and Euro-American cultural awareness.

Lamenting the injustices she has suffered at European hands that day,¹³⁴ San Mao notes the chief among them as a wounding of her self-respect.¹³⁵ Self-respect, she muses, is 'a basic common principle of coexistence in our society', 'as important to human life as food and clothing'; readers are included here in 'our' society, with the implication that societies other than 'ours' (such as England) do not understand or value self-respect as Chinese people in Taiwan do. It seems reasonable to suggest that there is some resonance here with wider debates on European (and indeed English) activities in China that have been interpreted as assaults on national integrity and self-respect; San Mao's narrative of English bullying can fit easily into existing arguments about national pride and historical grievance.¹³⁶

Here the focus turns from San Mao's captors to her fellow captives, and it becomes clear that English 'bullying' extends beyond China/Taiwan; indeed some of the other detainees are European: Greek and Austrian students are also cited as targets of English suspicion.¹³⁷ Though Taiwan is not the only victim, it is only San Mao (as a representative of Taiwan and of Chinese culture) who can

¹³² Figures do not support San Mao's confident assertions that colour televisions were everywhere in Taiwan. Steve Chan and Cal Clark quote statistics showing that the percentage of households in Taiwan with color televisions, although it increased quickly in the 1970s (with almost half owing a colour TV set by 1978 and 65% in 1980) was only 23% in 1967 and 35% in 1977 (Chan and Clark p. 168). San Mao is writing here of 1973; multi-television households such as that of San Mao's lawyer father were not the general case at that time.

¹³³ When asked if foreign television shows are shown in Taiwan, she replies, 'Yes. *The Avengers*' with a meaningful glare at her captors; they are impressed by her wit and her ability to make a joke in English as well as her knowledge of an English television show, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 128.

¹³⁴ 'I had been in that queue since early morning, I wasn't allowed through immigration, then I was tricked into the police car (on the pretence that we were going out for coffee), then not being allowed to make a phone call, and being accompanied by Maria even when I went to the bathroom, then being told to change into a uniform - and they still hadn't given me anything to eat', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 128.

¹³⁵ 'I acted as if I didn't mind, but in fact my self-respect had been severely wounded'; the Europeans, by keeping her in detention, have 'robbed me of my one piece of self-respect...I will not easily forget it', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 128. Yet even here her famous playful irony does not desert her: 'It wasn't bad there', she later remarks; 'If young friends at home in Taiwan are interested in having a look around, you could do worse than follow my example and get on a plane and come here to have a bit of fun', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 128-129.

¹³⁶ Chiefly the Opium Wars, and the rhetoric of the 'unequal treaties' in which arrogant colonial powers forced China into a position of humiliation and servitude.

¹³⁷ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 129. It might be noted that the story was written at a time of debate about and resistance to the idea of Britain joining the European 'Common Market' (outlined in a government 'white paper' in 1971).

impress her captors and successfully resist their coercion. The chief role of the other detainees in the narrative is, like Sahrawi discussed in preceding chapters, to admire San Mao and for her exploits to be mirrored in their eyes. They provide a contrast with her own behaviour (demonstrating, indeed, the passivity that Europeans have been shown to expect a Chinese woman to display);¹³⁸ they marvel at her resourcefulness; they profit gratefully from her thoughtfulness (receiving through her agency the unexpected favour of coffee and cigarettes);¹³⁹ and they gain a sympathetic listener to their sad stories.¹⁴⁰

San Mao maintains her solidarity with and concern for her fellow-captives (along with her resistance against the immigration warders) when Maria invites her to come out and eat with her and Larry:

I looked at the other people and shook my head. I have always been embarrassed to be special or different.
 'What about them?' I said.
 Maria got angry. 'What's the matter with you? Isn't it enough just to go yourself?'
 'Thank you! I'll stay here'.¹⁴¹

Again a 'sense of justice' is shown to be lacking among Europeans. The English warders cannot understand San Mao's concern for her fellow detainees - indeed they respond to it with laughter - while the detainees themselves watch with suitable admiration and appreciation as San Mao resists her captors' invitations to favoured treatment. No longer does San Mao suppress her own personality to 'endure' and 'give way'; instead, she presents herself as persistently standing up for what she believes to be right.

Finally, after nine hours in detention,¹⁴² San Mao is taken back to the airport for her case to be discussed. The immigration officer orders her to be

¹³⁸ The critic Gu Jitang suggests that anyone encountering English 'bullying' such as this for the first time would be 'terrified', would 'lie low and avoid incident, 'obey commands from on high' and 'wait quietly for the situation to develop', Gu p. 54. The other detainees, he observes, conform to this pattern; only San Mao dares to resist.

¹³⁹ The other detainees stare as she lights a cigarette, and she assumes that they are unaccustomed to seeing women smoking - until it occurs to her that they are all longing for a smoke themselves, whereupon she distributes her cigarettes among them. Her captors rebuke her with a warning that she will not be able to get any more until she is freed, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 129.

¹⁴⁰ San Mao takes a personal interest in each of their situations, and discovers that 'every one of them had a sad story'. For example, a French-speaking African youth (with whom she communicates through gestures and pictures) stowed away on a boat to flee his country to escape the sentence of having his hand severed as a punishment for theft, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 129. When at last food is brought for the detainees, San Mao gives her portion to the others, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 130.

¹⁴¹ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 129-130.

¹⁴² And twelve hours after her arrival at Gatwick. To pass the time, San Mao 'does everything there was to do' in the detention centre: she reads the fashion magazines at the reception counter, writes 'I am from here' under Taiwan on the wall map, waters the pot-plants, combs her hair, counts her money, and then wanders from room to room 'to see if there was anything I could do'. Eventually Maria offers her drawing materials - then pounces on her finished drawing (a crying

upstanding while he reads out the case against her. Although 'nervous to breaking point', San Mao claims to maintain her resistance, refusing to stand and insisting on her own right to speak:

'I won't stand up! Please sit down. I refuse to let you speak. You haven't let me have a lawyer, so I will defend myself; without this process I won't listen, and I won't leave - I'll stay in your detention centre for the rest of my life'.¹⁴³

Under the horrified stare of the immigration and detention officers, and after a warning that she will be deported immediately if she is not polite, San Mao listens to the case against her: One, Britain does not recognise Taiwan passports ('Stupid British empire!' interjects San Mao in her narrative); two, San Mao has insufficient grounds to apply for immigration, so will not be permitted to enter; three, San Mao has intent to enter England illegally; four, she is to be deported to Spain, or, if Spain should refuse entry, to Taiwan via Hong Kong that very evening. The official hands San Mao a pen and asks her to sign it 'if you agree with it'.

Refusing to sign until she has a chance to speak, San Mao begins her 'counter-attack':

the four points that the immigration department has raised are all incorrect...This is just a misunderstanding. I just bought tickets for flights that left from different airports, that's all (the travel agency at home should take blame for that; if they had tickets just for Heathrow, it would save people trouble).

I am grateful for the trouble you have taken to take care of me, but the first reason you give - not recognising my nationality - I agree with, because I don't recognise the British empire either.

Second, you said that I have insufficient grounds to apply for entry. Please get this clear: 'I have not applied for entry'. Every airport in the world has a transit lounge for people without visas changing planes. Unfortunately I took the wrong way today - but you wouldn't let me go. This is not my mistake; it is your failure in your duty to serve the public, and you should examine yourselves about this. There is no need for this nonsense about refusing my application.

Three, I have no intent to enter illegally...Maybe there is a minority of bad elements among us Chinese who have done things like that, and have given you a bad impression, but I want to tell you clearly that I have no intention of immigrating illegally. I don't want to stay in England at all; Spain is much better.

Four, you can't send me back to Hong Kong. You have no right to decide my destination. If you want to send me back, I will get a lawyer and sue

face) to add to the collection of detainees' art work that she plans to take to a psychiatrist 'to analyse the state of mind of inmates here'. San Mao wryly notes that she had been quite correct when she likened the detention centre to a mental institution, *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 129-130.

¹⁴³ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 132. Although 'awkward and ill-at-ease' because she 'didn't know what tricks they were up to now', San Mao continues with her customary irony: observing the pile of typed documents on the desk beside her own papers, she 'couldn't help admiring their seriousness about their work' despite 'their stupidity in wasting everyone's time in this manner', *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* pp. 131-132.

you in the English court. I am not afraid of a court case; I will fight you to the death. As for being 'deported', please change that - because from 6 am till now I have not taken a single step out of any formal exit lounge, so I am not 'in'. I am still 'out', so how can you force me 'out'? If you agree, then change the document: write, 'Changed planes for Spain', and I will sign. If you don't agree, Goodbye! I'll go and tell the detention centre people that I'll be having dinner there. That's all I have to say'.¹⁴⁴

San Mao presents herself refuting each one of the charges with irony and inventiveness. On a personal level, she apportions blame, but not to her captors; on the contrary, she makes ironic thanks to the immigration department for their care, redefining the terms of the dispute from arguments of legality to a discussion of standards of service to the public, and assuming a position of kind superiority by advising them that their 'service standards' need improvement. On the level of national argument, she places Taiwan and Britain on the same level politically by holding British imperialism to be as hollow and fictitious as her captors evidently hold Taiwan's position in the world to be, thus claiming political equality between Britain and Taiwan;¹⁴⁵ the message that Britain cannot claim supremacy is reinforced when she praises Spain to Britain's detriment. In an oblique reference to the official's earlier assumption that Chinese people are crafty exploiters of opportunities for illegal immigration, she goes on to distance herself from bad Chinese elements, although accepting that such a minority might exist - just as, ironically, she has repeatedly distanced herself from the kind of Chinese that Europe apparently likes, by refusing to be meek, passive and uncomplaining. Then, returning to the personal, she threatens to fight her case in court. Perhaps most persuasively, she refuses to be cowed by officialdom, remaining resourceful, defiant and articulate throughout. And this time, San Mao wins respect. Although the rhetoric of 'citizen diplomacy' has long been left behind, one could argue that, in this context of official challenge to her legitimacy as a citizen of the Republic of China in England and her effective arguing of Taiwan's position, San Mao is enacting a new kind of 'diplomacy', based this time on confidence and assertiveness rather than meek yielding.

In response to this long speech of San Mao's, the official is silent and thoughtful for a long time. His eyes, San Mao tells us, have softened - and so has his attitude. He shakes her hand, pats her shoulder and announces:

'You're a brave girl! Go on, you can get the 9.30 plane to Madrid from Heathrow. You'd be very welcome to get a visa and come to England again - and don't forget to come and see me. You are pretty when you talk; thank

¹⁴⁴ *The Rainy Season Will Not Return* p. 133-134.

¹⁴⁵ Though the logic is the same, the situation is, of course, inverted; San Mao does not believe in the British empire, while the British do believe in the People's Republic of China (but not in the Republic of China).