

**SAN MAO: OASIS OR MIRAGE?**  
**THE PHENOMENON OF THE "CHINESE WOMAN OF THE DESERT"**

by

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## **SAN MAO: OASIS OR MIRAGE?**

### **THE PHENOMENON OF THE "CHINESE WOMAN OF THE DESERT"**

Sandi P. Ward, M.A.

University of Pittsburgh, 2017

San Mao 三毛 (1943-1991) was one of the most popular writers of the Chinese-speaking world in the 1970s and 1980s. Her most popular works, *Stories of the Sahara* and *Weeping Camels*, describe her life in Spanish Sahara (now Western Sahara) and the Canary Islands with her Spanish husband in the early 1970s. These tales portray San Mao as an independent, resourceful wanderer, able to make a home for herself wherever she goes, and keen to interact with overlooked members of society. San Mao's self-depiction as a representative of Chinese culture spreading goodwill throughout the world found a receptive audience in 1970s Taiwan. Her fame spread to mainland China in the 1980s, when economic liberalization resulted in an expansion in publishing, giving mainland readers access to types of literature that had not been widely available for decades. These waves of enthusiasm for San Mao's work were dubbed "San Mao Fever" or the "San Mao Phenomenon."

This thesis explores San Mao's popularity using Raymond Williams's term "structures of feeling." Williams used "structures of feeling" to describe the state of experiences as they emerge and develop, before they solidify into recognizable social and cultural forms. Structures of feeling are emerging experiences that later identify a particular generation or the spirit of an era. I argue that San Mao achieved such great popularity not simply because of her writing style or

the appealing self-presentation offered in her works, but also because her work articulated a structure of feeling with which sympathetic readers identified. This structure of feeling emphasized freedom and self-expression, at a time when readers in Taiwan and mainland China faced varying degrees of government oppression and isolation from the international community. Meanwhile, critics treated San Mao with disdain in part because of their inability to appreciate her method of articulating this structure of feeling. Concluding the thesis is my own translation of San Mao's essay "From Empty Hands, A Home," selected from *Stories of the Sahara*.

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## PREFACE

I would like to extend special thanks to my thesis committee: Dr. Kun Qian agreed to direct my thesis before we ever met in person, and I thank her for that vote of confidence, as well as for her constant encouragement and helpful critiques as my ideas about San Mao developed over the course of my writing process. Dr. Katherine Carlitz was my first contact at the University of Pittsburgh. She has been incredibly supportive during my time at Pitt, and it is an honor to have her as a member of my thesis committee. Dr. Carol Bove has offered insight to the translation process that has shaped my understanding of the art of translation.

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Some resources used herein were gathered in the spring of 2016, when I traveled to Tainan, Taiwan to do research in the archives of the National Museum of Taiwan Literature and at the library of National Cheng-Kung University. This trip was supported by the John H. Tsui Memorial Scholarship, awarded by the Chinese Room Committee of the University of Pittsburgh's Nationality Rooms. I would like to thank the members of the Chinese Room Committee (Mei Hwang, Maggie Lin, Jim Sismour, and Karen Yee), along with Jack Tsui and the staff of the Nationality Rooms Program for affording me this unique opportunity. Additionally, my thanks to the staff of the National Museum of Taiwan Literature.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: THE CHINESE WOMAN OF THE DESERT

I don't remember when it was that I flipped through the American magazine *National Geographic*, an issue that happened to introduce the Sahara Desert. Just looking at it once, I got this nearly indescribable feeling, like nostalgia for a previous incarnation of myself. It was as if I'd lived on that land in a previous life. Ineffable, this feeling that I'd retained some memory of this strange bit of earth. [...]

I often said, I think I'll go to the desert for a while, but nobody thought I was serious. Among the people who knew me, this kind of mood of mine was usually seen as a joke.

But there were also friends who better understood me, and explained away my yearning for the desert as a way to reject the world for a monastic life -- a self-exile, going and never coming back -- but this was incorrect, too.

Luckily, the way others analyzed me had nothing to do with me at all.<sup>1</sup>

San Mao 三毛, "Baishou chengjia" 白手成家 ["From Empty Hands, A Home"]<sup>2</sup>

These words are a short sample of the enormous output of San Mao, one of the Chinese-speaking world's most popular writers of the 1970s and 1980s. Brief as this selection is, it encapsulates many of the themes of this enigmatic writer's work: wanderlust, nostalgia, synchronicity, mysticism, alienation, and independence of spirit.

Born Chen Maoping 陳懋平 in 1943, San Mao made her name -- literally, as "San Mao" was a pseudonym -- with chronicles of her life in the Spanish Sahara (now Western Sahara),

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<sup>1</sup> All translations herein are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> San Mao 三毛, *Sahala de gushi* 撒哈拉的故事 [*Stories of the Sahara*] (Beijing: Beijing chuban jituan gongsi, 2014, 31st ed.), 122-3.

where she lived with her Spanish husband in the early 1970s. These missives, written in the prose essay genre called *sanwen* 散文<sup>3</sup> were first serialized on the literary page of the Taiwan newspaper *Lianhebao* 聯合報 [*United Daily News*] beginning in October 1974, and later published in the collections *Sahala de gushi* 撒哈拉的故事 [*Stories of the Sahara*] (1976) and *Kuqi de luotuo* 哭泣的駱駝 [*Weeping Camels*] (1977).<sup>4</sup> Subsequent collections of essays reflected on San Mao's life as a single woman studying in Europe in the late 1960s; her husband José's 1979 death in a scuba diving accident; travels in Central and South America; and language study in Seattle; as well as childhood reminiscences and descriptions of life in Taiwan. All were well-received by readers. Through publishing books, writing for magazines, penning pop song lyrics, giving lectures, and teaching creative writing courses, San Mao stayed in the public eye until her suicide in 1991, and her life story continues to attract interest.<sup>5</sup>

San Mao the character-narrator had such a force of personality that the writer became inseparable from her pseudonym.<sup>6</sup> Whether describing her encounters with local guerrilla

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<sup>3</sup> A literal translation might render the term *sanwen* 散文 as "scattered writing." An apt comparison might be literary essay or creative nonfiction. In *Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 15, Charles A. Laughlin describes the term's contemporary usage as "denot[ing] prose essays with literary value." In this thesis, I have generally chosen to describe these works as "stories," to acknowledge the poetic license with which San Mao most likely handled the facts of her desert life. Questions of authenticity plagued San Mao's entire career; for her part, she insisted that everything she wrote was true. In describing her work as "stories" it is not my intention to wade into this debate, but rather to acknowledge the constructed nature of any piece of writing whose facts are impossible for readers to verify readily.

<sup>4</sup> *United Daily News* is owned by what is now called Crown Culture Limited Company (Huangguan wenhua youxian gongsi 皇冠文化有限公司); in the 1970s the company was simply Crown Publishing (Huangguan chubanshe 皇冠出版社,) and was later called Crown Literature Limited Company (Huangguan wenxue youxian gongsi 皇冠文學有限公司). The company also publishes *Crown* (Huangguan 皇冠) magazine, in whose pages San Mao often published.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Taiwan's Ministry of Culture recently announced the sale to Bloomsbury of the rights to the first English translation of *Stories of the Sahara*, though publication information is still forthcoming. See CONCLUSION.

<sup>6</sup> Readers were aware that "San Mao" was a pseudonym; in *Pingshuo San Mao* 平說三毛 [*Evaluating San Mao*] (Beijing: Zhishi chubanshe, 1991), 11, Gu Jitang 古繼堂 notes that because San Mao had professional and personal associations with romance novelist Qiong Yao/Chiung Yao 瓊瑤 (the pseudonym of Chen Che 陳喆) and because the two writers both had the family name Chen 陳, some readers assumed the two were sisters. For more on literary connections between San Mao and Qiong Yao, see Section 3.0, and Section 4.0 Structures of Feeling.

movements or her quest to gain a driver's license in the Sahara, San Mao projects a personality that is willful, spontaneous, unorthodox, and independent, as well as caring, curious, and benevolent. In her Sahara Desert and Canary Islands stories, San Mao engages with serious topics, such as child marriage, slavery, and terrorism, but also comically details the quotidian inconveniences of desert life, which she inevitably overcomes with her signature moxie. Meanwhile, her first-person narration maintains an ironic detachment, sharing with readers a laugh at the foibles and fallibility of the character San Mao.

These efforts to connect with readers and invite them to participate in creating the persona of San Mao extended to outlets such as magazine correspondence columns, television interviews, and public lectures,<sup>7</sup> doing much to fan the flames of "San Mao Fever" (*San mao re* 三毛熱) or the "San Mao Phenomenon" (*San mao xianxiang* 三毛現象) in Taiwan from the 1970s up until, and even after, San Mao's suicide in January 1991.<sup>8</sup> When San Mao's work was published officially in mainland China in 1984,<sup>9</sup> a new set of readers caught San Mao Fever. Though mainland readers' thirst for this writer's work arose from different historical circumstances, it was no less acute, as at this time, citizens on both sides of the Taiwan Strait faced oppression from their own governments, and estrangement from the international community. Taiwan's move toward a market economy and a subsequent gradual relaxation of some strictures of martial law in the '70s and '80s, and Deng Xiaoping's *gaige kaifang* 改革開放

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<sup>7</sup> Miriam Lang, "San Mao and the Known World" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Australian National University, 1999), 5, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/10954>

<sup>8</sup> San Mao's works have sold steadily, and 11 titles were reissued by Crown in a tribute edition in 2011, twenty years after her death.

<sup>9</sup> In "San Mao and Qiong Yao: A 'Popular' Pair," (*Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 2): 76-120, Miriam Lang writes that pirated editions of San Mao's work began appearing in mainland China at the beginning of "reform and opening-up" in the late 1970s. See Section 4: STRUCTURES OF FEELING.

["reform and opening-up"] economic policies of 1978 had a profound effect on the dreams and aspirations of young people, contributing to creation of a receptive audience for San Mao.

In her lifetime, San Mao was wildly successful; Taiwan's Ministry of Culture reports that *Stories of the Sahara* alone has sold over 10 million copies in Taiwan and mainland China to date.<sup>10</sup> Despite -- or perhaps because of -- this commercial success and popular acclaim, critics have been sharply derisive, and academia has largely ignored this writer, although Miriam Lang, one of the few scholars writing about San Mao in English, points out that the academic and professional bona fides of San Mao's biographers from mainland China may offer San Mao's work extra credibility.<sup>11</sup>

Criticisms of San Mao mainly seem to arise from a faulty categorization of her work as romance, a label inspiring near-instant skepticism. Though San Mao's entire body of work is imbued with a romantic ethos -- a love of adventure, a search for beauty in everyday life, a quest for self-fulfillment, a belief in the good of humankind -- and though her cross-cultural marriage was just one topic she wrote about, critics often reduce San Mao's work to a single thread: the love story of San Mao and José. Journalist Li Duoyu 李多鈺, though taking the view that she would "love" San Mao just as well without José, writes that "San Mao's story is the story of a woman much in need of love who never finds a man who dares to love her."<sup>12</sup> These kinds of

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<sup>10</sup> Taiwan Ministry of Culture. "Stories of the Sahara." *Books From Taiwan*. [http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/images/books\\_img/STORIESOFTHESAHARA.pdf](http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/images/books_img/STORIESOFTHESAHARA.pdf) (Accessed February 12, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Lang, "Known World," 4. Lang writes, "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, [and] 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."

<sup>12</sup> Li Duoyu 李多鈺, "San mao shi shei?" 三毛是誰? ["Who is San Mao?"]. In Ma Zhongxin 馬中欣, *Sanmao zhenxiang* 三毛真相 [*The Truth About San Mao*] (Beijing: Xiyuan chubanshe, 1998), 313, 315.

hasty summations of San Mao's subject matter do an injustice to the wide variety of experiences represented in her work.

Further, the early works that helped San Mao make her name focused on lands far from Taiwan, and thus she was not part of the *Xiangtu* 鄉土 [Nativist/Native Soil] or *Bentu* 本土 [Localist] schools that dominated discussion of so-called serious literature in Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s. Off the record and off the cuff, a scholar of literature in Taiwan recently told me that because San Mao did not write about Taiwan at a time when most serious writers focused their energy on questions of Taiwanese identity, she is not considered "real literature." Actually, San Mao *did* write about Taiwan, both before she adopted her nom de plume, and later in her career, after her return from the Canary Islands. But beyond that, I argue that although San Mao's earliest essays are set in the Sahara Desert and the Canary Islands, they are obliquely about Taiwan, in that their extraordinary popularity tells us worlds about the feelings and aspirations of Taiwan readers in the 1970s. Furthermore, the extension of this work's popularity into mainland China in the 1980s provides evidence of affective links between readers on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, the types of affinities that may transcend political boundaries. This aspect of San Mao's writing has been largely ignored by cultural elites. I contend that San Mao's writing, particularly her earliest and most famous work, is due for a reassessment. The rereading I propose not only acknowledges that San Mao's written world did not revolve around a formulaic love story, but also recognizes that San Mao's fans may have taken to her work so readily not in an effort to satisfy dreams of heterosexual romance, as some critics have contended,<sup>13</sup> but because the world San Mao created for her readers appealed to a shared yearning for freedom, equality, and self-expression that originated from the political and cultural

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<sup>13</sup> See Miriam Lang's discussion of what she calls the "romantic link" between San Mao and Qiong Yao in "San Mao and Qiong Yao: A 'Popular' Pair," 83-91.

realities of Taiwan and mainland China in the 1970s and 1980s. In general, critics have dismissed San Mao not because they did not endorse the type of freedom she sought, but because they were unable to appreciate the manner in which she articulated her particular world view. Critics dismissed San Mao in part because their focus on the so-called "romantic" aspects of her writing blinded them to her larger project. Reexamining San Mao offers a window into the thoughts and feelings of her fans, whose concerns may not have been considered by those involved in sanctifying and canonizing Chinese literature in the 1970s and 1980s.

I propose that San Mao's readers in Taiwan and mainland China were intimately linked through what Raymond Williams terms "structures of feeling."<sup>14</sup> In his 1977 book *Marxism and Literature*, which outlines his own theories of cultural materialism, Williams used the term "structures of feeling" to describe the state of experiences as they emerge and develop, before they solidify into fixed social and cultural forms.<sup>15</sup> He argued that "the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed" and proposed that in contrast, "structures of feeling" account for "the specificity of present being."<sup>16</sup> In other words, structures of feeling are incipient social changes, initially taken to be purely personal or private, rather than social and shared.<sup>17</sup> Later, such ostensibly personal but in fact communal, social experiences solidify into "formed wholes" or "finished products," to be viewed from the present perspective and spoken of in past tense.<sup>18</sup> Structures of feeling account for the present tense of these social experiences or feelings as they come into being.

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<sup>14</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 5-6, 128-135.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128.

"[W]hat we are defining," Williams writes, "is a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period."<sup>19</sup> Despite the different political and social trajectories of post-war Taiwan and mainland China, readers in both places received San Mao's work with equal enthusiasm because of their union in a structure of feeling exemplified by her writing. Williams himself admitted that "structures of feeling" was a "difficult" term, in part because such structures "are often more recognizable at a later stage,"<sup>20</sup> but if we endeavor to give a name to the structure of feeling uniting San Mao and her audience, it might most simply be termed a structure of freedom and self-expression. In her work, San Mao espoused love for humanity, regardless of social status, age, national origin, race, or ethnicity; furthermore, she presented her transnational marriage as a relationship based on romantic love and free choice that was also an equal partnership. In the 1970s and '80s, citizens of Taiwan and mainland China were isolated in their own ways, facing both government oppression and alienation from the wider world; San Mao's writing tapped into a structure of feeling uniting readers across political boundaries, a shared yearning for equality, freedom, and the pursuit of self-fulfillment in both personal relationships and on the international stage. Further, this structure of feeling is palpably realized in the material world described within the pages of San Mao's desert writings.

This thesis seeks to account for San Mao's enormous popularity, and the gap between popular and critical reception of her work, by using the concept of "structures of feeling" to examine her writing. In the first section, "Oasis," I examine the degree of popularity San Mao enjoyed in Taiwan and, later, mainland China, as well as the particular nature of readers' responses to her. The following section, "Mirage," discusses some representative criticisms

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<sup>19</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 131.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

lodged at San Mao by a few of her key detractors. Then, in section four, "Structures of Feeling," I will ground the reader in the relevant social realities of 1970s Taiwan and 1980s mainland China which linked readers in structures of feeling outside of the purview of hegemonic political and social narratives. This section follows a rough chronology to trace San Mao's career and the popularity of her writing in Taiwan (where it began appearing in the 1970s) and mainland China (where it did not appear in official publication until 1984). Through this arrangement, I hope to emphasize how the development of San Mao's own concerns with equality, freedom, and self-expression gave specific voice to a structure of feeling that already existed, and which united readers on both sides of the Taiwan Strait during different periods. This section includes discussion of San Mao's early short fiction (published under her given name, Chen Ping 陳平, in the 1960s), to trace what Williams turned "pre-emergences"<sup>21</sup> that give clues to the formation of a new structure of feeling, which was to be fully realized in the writings of San Mao's desert period. In addition, this section examines the ways in which structures of feeling link San Mao to and her readership to the popular Taiwan romance writer, Qiong Yao 瓊瑤. In outlining these connections, I hope to define what Raymond Williams calls "a specific structure of particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions, and...particular deep starting-points and conclusions"<sup>22</sup> that relate to the structure of feeling and provide further evidence of its historical formulation in mid-twentieth century Taiwan.

I conclude by briefly discussing the potential of a current wave of renewed interest in San Mao. The body of the thesis is followed by my own translation of San Mao's essay "Baishou chengjia" 白手成家 ["From Empty Hands, A Home"]. This piece, selected from *Stories of the*

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 126-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

*Sahara*, will first be examined in detail in section four. I believe it offers readers a representative sample of San Mao's desert writings.

## 2.0 OASIS

Unfortunately, my husband is a foreigner. Describing one's own husband like this has an inevitable whiff of xenophobia, but since language and customs differ between countries, our married life definitely has a lot of points on which we can't find common ground.

-- San Mao 三毛, "Zhongguo fandian" 中國飯店 ["Chinese Restaurant"]<sup>23</sup>

So begins San Mao's first story<sup>24</sup> to be published in the literary supplement of Taiwan's *United Daily News* on October 6, 1974.<sup>25</sup> It would be the first of many appearances in this forum. With the byline "personally sent from the Sahara Desert," the piece was printed alongside San Mao's own note to the newspaper's literary editor, who at that time was Ping Xintao 平鑫濤, owner of Crown Publishing and editor of *Crown* magazine, where San Mao's work would also soon appear. Owing to the popularity of San Mao's appearances in *United Daily News*, Crown later reprinted her columns in book form, and remained her publisher throughout her life and posthumously. As San Mao addressed Ping:

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<sup>23</sup> San Mao, "Zhongguo fandian" 中國飯店 ["Chinese Restaurant"] Taipei: *Lianhe bao* 聯合報 [*United Daily News*], October 6, 1974. Later collected in *Sahala de gushi* [*Stories of the Sahara*] as "Shamozhong de fandian" 沙漠中的飯店 ["The Chinese Restaurant in the Desert"].

<sup>24</sup> San Mao published several works of fiction under the name Chen Ping 陳平, a shortening of her given name, Chen Maoping 陳懋平, in the 1960s. See Section 4: Structures of Feeling.

<sup>25</sup> In Taiwan, the year is often expressed using a system that counts 1912 as the first year the Republic of China; thus, the *United Daily News* expresses this date of publication as 中華民國六十三年十月六日, or, 63rd Year of the Republic of China, October 6.

Editor Sir:

It's already been many years since I went abroad to study, I write Chinese characters terribly, and I'm married to a foreign husband. However, I'm Chinese; I have a Chinese heart; this part can never change.

My father helped me subscribe to the overseas edition of *United Daily News*. If you are able to publish my story, I think it will be the first one [you have published] about life in the Sahara desert, and will also be the biggest encouragement and happiness for me...<sup>26</sup>

-- San Mao 三毛, "Benwen zuozhe laixin" 本文作者來信 ["Letter from the Writer"]

San Mao's letter to the editor is both a succinct autobiography and a sample of the self-effacing and sincere tone that featured in much of her work and helped to make this writer and her extraordinary adventures accessible to readers. It also gives a hint of her thematic concerns. Like "Chinese Restaurant," much of San Mao's work deals with encounters between people of different cultures. She spent much of her early adulthood in western countries, and the topic of navigating foreign countries as a Chinese woman appears throughout her oeuvre.<sup>27</sup> Thus, this initial report to *United Daily News* readers was a glimpse of a life that would grow larger and larger in the coming years, as San Mao published more of her desert diaries. For many readers, San Mao stories would become a kind of oasis, an escape from the humdrum of life in Taiwan,

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<sup>26</sup> San Mao, "Benwen zuozhe laixin" 本文作者來信 ["Letter from the Writer"] (Taipei: *United Daily News*, October 6, 1974).

<sup>27</sup> Besides books about the Sahara, the Canary Islands, Europe, and language study in Seattle, San Mao also published *Wanshui qianshan zoubian* 萬水千山走遍 [*Far Across the World*], a collection of travel pieces about Central and South America (Crown, 1982). She spent six months there in 1981 with the support of *United Daily News*, which serialized her travelogues before Crown published them in book form. As Miriam Lang remarks, the cost of the trip (NT\$1 million) affirms that work by San Mao was still highly profitable nearly a decade after her career began. See Miriam Lang, "San Mao Goes Shopping," *East Asian History* 10, no. 10 (Dec. 1995): 127.

which in the 1970s was fettered by martial law, but quickly industrializing and prospering, thanks in part to the work of young women, who were entering the workplace at an increasing rate, contributing to Taiwan's economic miracle and becoming an economic force in their own right.<sup>28</sup>

For San Mao herself, the desert was an oasis; as she professes in "From Empty Hands, A Home," she had long dreamed of traveling there.<sup>29</sup> "Unfortunately, my husband is a foreigner," begins her first San Mao story, but although the couple's "lack of common ground" is played for laughs in this and many other tales, being married to Spanish citizen José Maria Quero y Ruiz seems to have been anything but unfortunate, as far as San Mao's writing career was concerned. Though the two did not marry until after their arrival in Spanish Sahara,<sup>30</sup> it was through José's work as an engineer at a Spanish-owned phosphate mine that the couple was able to settle in El Aaiún, the capital of the territory, in 1973.<sup>31</sup> Further, the "lack of common ground" between San Mao and José provided a bounty of material for these early stories, with San Mao presenting herself as impetuous and strong-willed, yet adept at finding ingenious solutions to the quandaries of life in the desert, while José is rational and stubborn in his own right, at turns exasperated by San Mao's impulsiveness and admiring of her resourcefulness.

Indeed, at the close of "Chinese Restaurant," in which San Mao colorfully describes surmounting the privations of the desert in order to cook Chinese food that is acclaimed by the likes of José and his Spanish boss, José tells her, "You're that monkey, the one with 72

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<sup>28</sup> Doris T. Chang, *Women's Movements in Twentieth Century Taiwan* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 62-63.

<sup>29</sup> San Mao, *Sahala de gushi* [*Stories of the Sahara*], 122-3.

<sup>30</sup> As chronicled in the stories "Baishou chengjia" 白手成家 ["From Empty Hands, A Home"] and "Jiehun ji" 結婚記 ["Marriage Diary"] in *Sahala de gushi* [*Stories of the Sahara*].

<sup>31</sup> The ambiguity of dates in San Mao's writing is one source of the intense skepticism with which many critics treat her work. Commenting on this controversy in her article "San Mao and the Known World," 52, 106, Miriam Lang notes, "The longest her stay in the desert could have been was about two and a half years, from April 1973 to October 1975."

transformations, what's his name?" to which San Mao replies, "That great sage, Sun Wukong -- and don't you forget it!"<sup>32</sup> The conclusion of the story, where San Mao likens herself to the Monkey King of the classic Chinese novel *Xiyouji* 西遊記 [*Journey to the West*], presages another of the most striking features of San Mao's body of work -- a narrative persona that alternates between ironic self-effacement and nearly delusional self-confidence. Tales of desert trials -- marauding goats, mercenary landlords, cursed amulets -- and the confidence and ingenuity with which the narrator San Mao prevails over all opponents, human or otherwise, soon became the writer San Mao's stock in trade. San Mao's stories are well-plotted, with a strong narrative arc, but it was the protagonist San Mao that resonated with readers. Chen Ping wrote of the adventures of her idealized self, "San Mao," who was charming, simple and down-to-earth, full of joie de vivre and a wanderlust that many of her readers might have hoped to emulate. Yet I will argue in this paper that San Mao was not seen simply as a "role model," as few readers would have had the economic and political freedom to play such a "role" at the time of her first publications in Taiwan and mainland China. Rather, San Mao was an emblem of a more complex current of emotion and aspiration she and her readers shared -- a structure of feeling.

The self-possessed gamine sketched in the "Chinese Restaurant" and developed in later desert tales clearly captured readers' imaginations. When *Stories of the Sahara* was published in May 1976, it was an overnight bestseller, even though the stories it contained had already appeared in *United Daily News*.<sup>33</sup> When San Mao returned to Taiwan briefly later that year, a

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<sup>32</sup> San Mao, *Sahala de gushi* [*Stories of the Sahara*], 5.

<sup>33</sup> Lang, "Known World," 48.

mob of fans greeted her.<sup>34</sup> By 1989 -- two years before her death -- San Mao's income was reportedly 1 million New Taiwan Dollars per year (approximately US\$38,000).<sup>35</sup>

San Mao's debut appearance in *United Daily News* came more than a decade after her first publication: in 1962, at age 19, she penned a piece of short fiction, "Huo" 惑 ["Doubt"], which appeared in the Taiwan literary journal *Xiandai wenxue* 現代文學 [*Modern Literature*] under her given name, Chen Ping 陳平.<sup>36</sup> In 1967, San Mao traveled to Europe, met José but dismissed his interest in her, and returned to Taiwan.<sup>37</sup> There, she became engaged to a professor from Germany who died suddenly; after his death, she traveled back to Madrid, where she reunited with and became engaged to José, before the pair relocated to Spanish Sahara, where they married in 1973.<sup>38</sup> From these experiences emerged the persona San Mao, which soon became not just a textual construct, but the public face of the woman behind the tales of desert romance and adventure.

Chen Ping transformed herself into San Mao to write stories of her overseas adventures and her romance with José, and henceforth acquired legendary status in the Chinese-speaking world. When Ping Xintao chose "Chinese Restaurant" for inclusion in the *fukan* 副刊, or literary and cultural supplement, of *United Daily News*, called *Lianfu* 聯副, he was already familiar with San Mao/Chen Ping, having published her story "Moon River" ("Yuehe" 月河) in his own *Crown* magazine in 1963, a detail that might make San Mao's "Dear Editor" letter above a bit

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<sup>34</sup> Lang, "Known World," 48.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 357. I performed a historical currency conversion using Forecast Chart at forecast-chart.com. According to historical data from Trading Economics (tradingeconomics.com), this was about 60 percent higher than the average yearly wage in Taiwan at the time.

<sup>36</sup> For further discussion, see Section 4: Structures of Feeling.

<sup>37</sup> Shi, Yonggang 師永剛, Sha Lin 沙林, and Chen Wenfen 陳文芬. *San mao: 1943-1991*. 三毛: 1943-1991. (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2011), 233-4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

disingenuous. Presumably, as she had just adopted the pseudonym "San Mao," she was eager to present herself as a new writer, breaking with her earlier work; Ping may have also been happy to be seen as having discovered a new literary voice. Following publication of "Chinese Restaurant," San Mao went on to become a frequent contributor to both *Lianfu* and *Crown*.

As Miriam Lang notes, circulation numbers for periodicals are "closely-guarded secrets in the Taiwan magazine industry,"<sup>39</sup> but suffice it to say, San Mao's frequent appearances in both *Lianfu* and *Crown* put her work in front of a great number of readers' eyes, greatly contributing to the first wave of San Mao's popularity, which came to be known in Taiwan as San Mao Fever. Furthermore, San Mao was not just a contributor to these publications, but also a subject of their reporting, testament to the intense public interest not just in San Mao's writing, but in her personal life.

For example, a brief notation in the June 9, 1976 edition of *Lianfu* by popular advice columnist Weiwei Furen 微微夫人 reports on San Mao's recent return to Taiwan from Spain, noting that although she needed to stay in the hospital for observation the first two days, she had treated the place like a hotel room, receiving a constant stream of "loving friends."<sup>40</sup> Alluding to criticism San Mao was receiving just two years after her debut, Weiwei Furen goes on to note that, "Some people say, 'I'll go to a place where no Chinese live and send a few articles back; then I'll become famous overnight, too.'"<sup>41</sup> She insists that, to the contrary, not just anyone could successfully write tales of foreign lands as San Mao has, and remarks that while some people are enchanted by San Mao's descriptions of the "odd manners and unusual customs of the desert,"

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<sup>39</sup> Lang, "Known World," 349.

<sup>40</sup> Weiwei Furen 微微夫人, pen name of Yue Chenjun 樂菟軍, "San mao de na ke xin" 三毛的那顆心 ["San Mao's Heart"], Taipei: *Lianhe bao* 聯合報 [*United Daily News*], (June 9, 1976): 6.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. For more on criticism of San Mao, see Section 3, MIRAGE.

she herself is captivated by San Mao's "heart," described as "tender, benevolent, and brave."<sup>42</sup> Without such a heart, the writer argues, San Mao could not have written such a piece as "The Mute Slave,"<sup>43</sup> and what's more, "She already has friends in the mountains of Taiwan, so she needn't go to the Sahara in order to be able to write the kind of the kind of world that enchants and fascinates."<sup>44</sup> Weiwei Furen's appreciation of San Mao has been echoed by many others: that she was a distinct personality, and this personality imbued her work with a certain spirit that was beyond imitation. Further, it lends support to the view that the curious content of San Mao's stories was not the only source of their appeal, which rather arose also from the tenderness and sense of humanity with which San Mao treated those people described in her stories, capturing a particular feeling that touched and intrigued readers.

The comings and goings of San Mao continued to be reported for the rest of her life. Such reports reinforced the character Chen Ping had created in her works and was now expected to embody in real life; it is rumored that Chen Ping later wished she could kill off the San Mao character and live normally.<sup>45</sup> A March 1980 piece in *Lianfu* reproduced several readers' letters regarding public lectures by San Mao (which were arranged by *Lianfu* and Gengshen Culture Institute *Gengshen wenjiaoyuan* 耕莘文教院), giving a taste of the public's interest in seeing San Mao in the flesh and hearing her speak.<sup>46</sup> At this point, San Mao had been in the public eye for almost six years, yet one reader, Li Wanyu 黎婉玉 claimed that newspaper reports of 600 attendees may have underestimated the crowd by at least several hundred, since people were

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<sup>42</sup> Weiwei Furen, "San Mao's Heart."

<sup>43</sup> San Mao 三毛, "Yanu" 啞奴 ["The Mute Slave"], *Kuqide luotuo* 哭泣的駱駝 [*Weeping Camels*] Taipei: Crown, 1977, 236-264.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Lang, "Known World," 1.

<sup>46</sup> "San mao yanjiang zhi huisheng" 三毛演講之迴聲 ["Echoes from San Mao's Lectures."] Taipei: *Lianhe bao* 聯合報 [*United Daily News*] (March 5, 1980): 14.

lined up outside the auditorium door, hoping to listen in.<sup>47</sup> Another reader, Lin Yuling 林玉玲 wrote that although San Mao is a good storyteller, her personality and adventurous spirit may interest readers more than her prose: "Every time I pick up an article about her, the first question I ask is 'What has happened to San Mao now?'" Lin goes on to echo Weiwei Furen's sentiment regarding San Mao's uniqueness: "Only a person like San Mao could go to a poor place like the desert and create such a rich life."<sup>48</sup> (This tendency of San Mao to "make something from nothing" is epitomized by the essay "From Empty Hands, A Home," included in Appendix A and discussed in detail in section four.) A reader named Lin Suyue 林素月 responded enthusiastically to the way that San Mao "from life and love proceeded to talk about writing," clearly explaining how she had written her essays, rather than discussing technique and theory as other writers might, which to Lin only makes their work even more enigmatic.<sup>49</sup> Among the latter two readers, the assessment of San Mao seems similar and yet paradoxical; they agree that she has a *je ne sais quoi* that has contributed to the success of her writings, and yet, as the reader Lin Yuling put it, her authorial presence at her lectures was so friendly that it "made readers want to turn her into their friend."<sup>50</sup>

The prevailing sense is that readers want to be San Mao's friend, or feel as if they know her, and yet paradoxically view her as a breed apart. This feeling was in part buoyed by *Crown* magazine's creation of what Miriam Lang calls "a kind of fictive community of cultural players within its pages, in which writers, actors, artists, dancers, radio and television personalities,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "San mao yanjiang zhi huisheng" ["Echoes from San Mao's Lectures."] Taipei: *Lianhe bao* [United Daily News] (March 5, 1980): 14.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

singers, and the occasional politician or academic were linked in dialogue."<sup>51</sup> *Crown* created a kind of textual salon; within its pages, leading writers and other culture creators interviewed one another, contributed quips and quotes on broad topics such as love or happiness, or penned essays on generic themes like "My First Job."<sup>52</sup> San Mao's magazine appearances were not limited to the pages of *Crown*. From 1989 until shortly before her death in 1991, San Mao wrote a monthly advice column for Taiwan's *Jiangyi* magazine (*Jiangyi zazhi* 講義雜誌); *Crown* posthumously published a selection of these columns as the book *Qinaide San Mao* 親愛的三毛 [*Dear San Mao*, 1991].

*Jiangyi*, known in English as *Better Life Monthly*, is a general interest, *Reader's Digest*-style magazine featuring lifestyle articles, both original works and translations from western publications. Sample article titles: "The China of Memory"; "Lessons from Rockefeller"; "Must I Have a Boyfriend?"; "How Much are Writer's Pen Names Worth?"; "Highest-Earning Writers"; "Talking About Women" (a collection of quips such as "If all the women in the world stopped talking, the phone companies would go out of business"),<sup>53</sup> etc. San Mao's frank responses to her readers' queries are refreshing amongst such musty fodder. Reviewing the letters sent to San Mao suggests that, even 15 years after the start of San Mao Fever, readers in the late '80s were still taken with the San Mao they knew from her various travel essays. Though some readers likely found San Mao's advice disconcerting at times -- for example, the suggestion that a housewife is to blame for her husband's affair<sup>54</sup> -- the esteem with which San Mao was held by the readers who wrote to her is obvious from the delicate questions they entrust to her: how to deal with

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<sup>51</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 79.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>53</sup> *Jiangyi zazhi* 講義雜誌 [*Better Life Monthly*], Vol. 6., No. 6 (1990).

<sup>54</sup> San Mao, *Qinaide san mao* 親愛的三毛 [*Dear San Mao*]. (Taipei: Huangguan wenxue youxian gongsi, 1991), 116-124.

abusive and/or neglectful parents, what to do if you're gay, and even how to endure after being raped (the subject of more than one letter).<sup>55</sup> San Mao's responses to her readers more often than not take the form of "tough love." This is especially apparent in her responses to several letters that ask for advice about, basically, *how to be San Mao*.

For example, in one of the more extensive letters in the collection, a sixteen-year-old girl who signs her name Yuru 育如 writes to San Mao, first complimenting her work, then confessing her adolescent torpor brought on by failing the high school entrance examinations, and asking for advice on how to live a similar lifestyle to San Mao's:

[...] you're totally like someone living in a novel, but really, it's always the people who love dreams and illusions who most understand reality. [...] My heart died early. It's the world's imperfection that killed it. [...] I have no money, but I don't want to be a rich person. I just want to work and travel, sometimes play music or paint, and be in nature. As long as I don't freeze to death, I'll be happy. I want to die before I'm 35. [...] I have a practical question I'd like your advice about: besides getting married or studying abroad, how can I stay abroad without having to return to Taiwan every few months or every year? [...] How can I secure that kind of visa? [...] My questions are really laughable. Maybe this is just a dream.<sup>56</sup>

In the opening of her response, San Mao does admit there is something amusing about Yuru's letter, writing, "Your young person's big dream is really too adorable," but then she goes on to offer the wisdom that, "The years after age 35 are the high point of life. Why would you give them up? As for being old, that's the harvest season of our lives. It's not as hard as you

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 134-8.

<sup>56</sup> San Mao, *Qinaide san mao* [*Dear San Mao*], 63-66.

imagine."<sup>57</sup> Regarding Yuru's queries about how to obtain a visa that would allow her to travel from country to country without returning to Taiwan, San Mao's advice is less generous, a bit insipid, and perhaps even irresponsible: "As far as traveling, just go on! Don't come and ask me how to do it. Dear Yuru, I've traveled to 59 countries and never asked anyone how to do it -- go be your own trailblazer, you can do it. As long as your heart doesn't die, you can do anything you hope to."<sup>58</sup>

This advice may have left readers still puzzled about how to travel internationally, or perhaps it is just that San Mao underestimated the difficulty Taiwan's young people had in arranging travel plans in the early years of post-martial law Taiwan.<sup>59</sup> Yuru is not the only young person writing to San Mao to ask how to get out of Taiwan. More of the *Jiangyi* advice columns reprinted in *Dear San Mao* address the topic of travel, with San Mao betraying a mix of admiration for and frustration with her readers:

My dear young friends,

The letters I receive regarding going abroad to study, traveling, and touring are already quite a few. When I see letters from my young friends whose hearts are full of dreams, my heart is moved.

Though the letters' contents are of all kinds, they can all be summed up to one conclusion: just question marks, question marks, and more question marks. Oh, that's good.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> San Mao, *Qinaide san mao* [*Dear San Mao*], 68. In a tragic irony, San Mao herself committed suicide in 1991, at age 47, less than two years after writing these words.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>59</sup> Martial law was lifted in 1987.

<sup>60</sup> San Mao, *Qinaide san mao* [*Dear San Mao*], 70.

Following this, San Mao launches into a somewhat obtuse anecdote, in which she describes asking a Frenchman how long it would take to walk to Montmartre, Sacre Coeur, and elsewhere, only to have him repeatedly answer, "Just start walking." After receiving this response for the third time, San Mao stomps away, but this time the Frenchman calls her back and, having appraised her pace, tells her it will take her about 90 minutes to reach Montmartre. San Mao reports that in the end, it took her two hours and twenty minutes, because though she maintained the pace she'd demonstrated, she stopped five or six times to consult the map.<sup>61</sup>

The anecdote demonstrates the characteristic San Mao humor, with its combination of humility and self-confidence, but San Mao stresses the moral of the story: "Our personalities are different, and the way we deal with problems are also different; the difficulties we'll encounter while abroad can never be the same...The opinions I can give you won't necessarily be of benefit to you..."<sup>62</sup> She goes on to suggest that difficulties help us appreciate new vistas, and ends by remarking that "of the young people who've gone abroad that I've met in the past few years, the greatest loss I've seen is that the money they've taken along has been too sufficient, so they've given up a lot of chances to turn poor situations into something magical."<sup>63</sup> Here, as in her response to Yuru's letter, above, San Mao shirks responsibility to share advice on how to set off on the kind of travels she had the good fortune to enjoy. Her response could seem tone-deaf to the obstacles these aspiring globe-trotters faced in their ambitions to see the world outside of Taiwan, but it may also speak to part of San Mao's appeal: her demonstrated belief in self-sufficiency as well as the faith in human kindness that provides a refrain through her entire body of work, no matter the difficulties and setbacks she encounters in foreign lands.

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<sup>61</sup> San Mao, *Qinaide san mao* [*Dear San Mao*], 70-71.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

Though these letters to "Dear San Mao" demonstrate fans' intense level of interest in and respect for San Mao, my intention is not to present these excerpts as evidence San Mao was a "role model." In fact, I believe fans' relationship to San Mao and her work is more complicated than that. In this thesis, I would like to explore more deeply the nature of readers' attraction to her work. Readers did, clearly, want to emulate San Mao's adventures, but there are plenty of writers of travel narratives they might have chosen as role models, from literary classics to the more recent "overseas student literature" (*liuxuesheng wenxue* 留學生文學), which was often published in *Crown*.<sup>64</sup> As I will argue later, there was a structure of feeling uniting San Mao and her readers in both Taiwan and mainland China. Before looking more closely the nature of this structure of feeling, I would like to examine critics' response to San Mao, which sharply contrast with the ardent devotion of her readers described above.

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<sup>64</sup> Lang, "Known World," 40.

### 3.0 MIRAGE

The force of San Mao's personality extended far beyond the margins of her books' pages, making readers feel that they knew her, and even prompting some to consider her their idol.<sup>65</sup> It also appears to have been San Mao's personality at which critics directed many of their barbs. Perhaps the best-known attack came from Taiwan essayist Li Ao 李敖, who in 1981 issued a scathing criticism of San Mao, who had recently published *Mengli hualuo zhi duoshao* 夢裡花落知多少? [*How Many Flowers Fell While I Slept?*],<sup>66</sup> a tribute to husband José, who drowned in a scuba diving accident in 1979. Li excoriated San Mao for

repeating the same love story over and over [...] If San Mao were a beauty, maybe she could keep issuing forth wave after wave of these tales, since that is a beauty's privilege -- but San Mao obviously isn't [a beauty], so her "beautiful" love story is something that in actuality she couldn't bear the weight of, nor could José, so she ought to just give up the ghost...Right now she's going around "weeping with grief for her love god," and I just think this pose is totally wrong; the older she gets, the more wrong it seems. One time, I saw her in Far East Department Store, wearing

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<sup>65</sup> Wu Huashan 吳華山, "Lun 'San mao re' chansheng yu xiaojian de yinsu" 論"三毛熱"產生與消滅的隱形因素 ["Discussing Invisible Elements of the Rise and Decline of 'San Mao Fever.'"]. *Jinzhong xueyuan xuebao* 晉中學院學報, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Feb. 2006): 36.

<sup>66</sup> San Mao, *Mengli hualuo zhi duoshao* 夢裡花落知多少? [*How Many Flowers Fell While I Was Sleeping?*] (Taipei: Huangguan wenxue chubanshe, 1981).

a 17-year-old's hairstyle and a seven-year-old's babydoll dress, and I couldn't keep myself from laughing...<sup>67</sup>

In addition to these ad hominem attacks on a grieving widow, Li Ao disparaged San Mao's writing as simply a variant of the style of romance perfected by novelist Qiong Yao: "Qiong Yao's theme is flowers and moonlight, insipid longing, while San Mao takes this same theme and tosses in a handful of sand."<sup>68</sup> In other words, San Mao makes her hack, formulaic writing stand out by sketching in a few sand dunes and camels for exotic kitsch.

As for contemporary criticism, Miriam Lang is one of the few sources of scholarship on San Mao in English, and as such her work, written in the late 1990s and early 2000s, could play a major role within academic discourse in interpreting and situating San Mao for readers who encounter *Stories of the Sahara* in its forthcoming English translation. In her Ph.D. dissertation, "San Mao and the Known World," and in her articles "San Mao Makes History" (about the connections to Western Sahara's Polisario Liberation Front that San Mao describes in *Kuqi de luotuo* 哭泣的駱駝 [*Weeping Camels*]) and "San Mao Goes Shopping" (about San Mao's *Wode baobei* 我的寶貝 [*My Treasures*], a collection of stories about objects acquired during her world travels), Lang examines San Mao's work through what might be termed a "postcolonial with a caveat" lens. That is, Lang sees San Mao as "mov[ing] freely between four continents, in roles which have been largely perceived as the preserve of the coloniser [sic] (or the coloniser's post-colonial first-world heir): traveller [sic], chronicler, interpreter, and consumer," but notes that San Mao cannot easily be labeled "colonizer" or "colonized": having arrived from the mainland

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<sup>67</sup> Li Ao 李敖, "San mao shi weishan he jin yong shi weishan" 三毛式偽善和金庸式偽善 ["San Mao-Style Hypocrisy and Jin Yong-Style Hypocrisy"], [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_559a7b13010009s6.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_559a7b13010009s6.html) (Accessed December 23, 2016).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

in 1947, she did not experience Japanese rule of Taiwan (1895-1945), but as a Chinese woman married to a Spanish man, she benefited from the privilege of the colonizer during her time in Spanish Sahara.<sup>69</sup> While some of Lang's arguments about San Mao's authorial stance vis-à-vis colonial subjects in Africa are nuanced and compelling, oftentimes her interpretations of San Mao's texts feel shoehorned into a rigidly generic "postcolonial" frame. Comparisons of San Mao's work to those of western women writing about their encounters in colonial Africa sometimes feel strained, given differences in ethnic background, purpose for visiting Africa, and historical moment. Furthermore, Karen Blixen, Olive Schreiner, San Mao, and others wrote about vastly different cultures on a vast continent. Such comparisons among them therefore treat Africa as a monolith, harkening back to one of the cardinal sins of the Orientalist, as defined by Edward Said: the belief in "Arab perdurability, as if the Arab had not been subject to the ordinary processes of history."<sup>70</sup> In other words, since supposedly "primitive" cultures never change, comparisons of recorded encounters with these cultures written decades are accurate and justified. While some of Lang's thematic comparisons are intriguing, it is hard not to question them, given the rather superficial similarities between writers on which they are based.

That said, Lang's scholarship has helped me greatly in thinking through my own work. In addition, her article "San Mao Makes History" deserves praise as a particularly well-researched piece of literary forensics that works through San Mao's professed interactions with the Polisario Front in Spanish Sahara. Miriam Lang writes that she "does not count [herself] as a San Mao fan,"<sup>71</sup> while I enjoy San Mao's writing for its fundamental audaciousness, clever, inventive humor, and endearing introspectiveness, though I sometimes find San Mao's attitude toward the

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<sup>69</sup> Lang, "San Mao Goes Shopping," 127.

<sup>70</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1991), 230, 234.

<sup>71</sup> Lang, "Known World," iv.

Sahrawi people to be a bit patronizing, to say the least. Our difference of opinion notwithstanding, Lang deserves credit for taking seriously a writing whose work has affected, and continues to affect, many lives.

While San Mao/Chen Ping's first short story, "Doubt," was chosen by Modernist fiction writer Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇 to appear in *Modern Literature* in 1962, suggesting early approval from Taiwan's literary elites, after the publication of *Stories of the Sahara*, her great commercial success and her efforts at connecting with readers may have played a role in keeping her from being considered "serious" literature.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, in the 1990s, Pai disavowed his connection to her early career, remarking that Chen Ping had no talent, and that although her story "Doubt" was "strange," he quickly forgot about it.<sup>73</sup> Lang suggests that this was a way for Pai, one of Taiwan's most highly-regarded writers, to distance himself from "the literary 'lightweight' San Mao."<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, it also attests to the elite literary culture's inability to address or reflect the concerns of ordinary readers who responded so readily to the "trash" of writers like San Mao and Qiong Yao.

For Miriam Lang, there is a political element to the hasty demotion of both Qiong Yao and San Mao from "treasure to trash." Lang observes that while Qiong Yao's first novel, *Chuangwai* 窗外 [*Outside the Window*] was read as an indictment of feudal marriage practices and given serious critical recognition, her subsequent output was dismissed at best as trivial, and at worst, as dangerous to teenagers' morality.<sup>75</sup> Lang notes that Qiong Yao's early novels "establish[ed] a pattern in which personal fulfillment through love was paramount."<sup>76</sup> This

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<sup>72</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 102.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

pattern is ever present in San Mao's work, appearing both in her early stories written as Chen Ping, and in her later work. However, I believe San Mao's relationship with José has been afforded more attention by readers and critics than San Mao herself gives it in her work. I share Anna-Stiina Antola's contention that José is more often written of as a kind of Sancho Panza, a sidekick there to "save [San Mao] from her delusions";<sup>77</sup> José sometimes feels reduced to a literary device used to advance the plot, and he is certainly not always described in glowing terms. Nevertheless, critics seem to view San Mao and José's romance as the nucleus of San Mao's work, and base their judgments accordingly: Miriam Lang argues that the demotion of both Qiong Yao and San Mao has much to do with the tendency to equate writing concerned with romantic relationships as less valuable than work that takes on other topics.<sup>78</sup> It could be that critics have overemphasized the role of José and the love relationship in San Mao's work because of this tendency to devalue such themes. As Virginia Woolf observed, critics consider books dealing with "masculine values" (war, football) to be self-evidently important, those that discuss "the feelings of women in a drawing-room" to be trivial.<sup>79</sup> To Miriam Lang, "These social dynamics are no less evident on the Taiwan literary scene than in the politics of English-language literature."<sup>80</sup> This undervaluing and devaluing of writing that appeals to women relates as well to the common contention that women are more likely than men to be seduced and manipulated by the fictions they read. As Rita Felski writes, "Critics seek to go behind the scenes[...]to prove that beautiful images serve as a screen for perfidious political realities."<sup>81</sup> For

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<sup>77</sup> Anna-Stiina Antola. "Through San Mao's Eyes: Representations of Foreign Characters in San Mao's 一個陌生人的死 (The Death of a Stranger) and 啞奴 (The Mute Slave)." Paper presented at the 7th Biennial Nordic Conference on Chinese Studies, Helsinki, Finland, June 2005.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>79</sup> Virginia Woolf and Susan Gubar. *A Room of One's Own*. Orlando, FL.: Harcourt (2005), 73.

<sup>80</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 94.

<sup>81</sup> Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 56.

sympathetic readers, San Mao's themes of freedom, equality, love for humanity, self-expression, and self-fulfillment through adventure created an oasis. For critics, on the other hand, they were a shimmering mirage, created to mask San Mao's project of narcissistic self-indulgence.

Finding another reason San Mao may have been dismissed by critics, Lang observes that nowhere in San Mao's foreign travel writings is there evidence that she subscribed to the notion of "saving the nation" (*jiuguo* 救國), carried over from the May Fourth Movement and identified by Lang as "learning things overseas with the self-conscious purpose of using them in the service of the motherland upon return."<sup>82</sup> San Mao's publisher, Crown, had previously published books written by Taiwan students who had studied in foreign countries, part of a wave of overseas student literature in the 1960s and '70s.<sup>83</sup> Lang has observed that although the writers of this overseas student literature could be seen as embracing the rhetoric of nation-saving, San Mao consistently portrays her travels as a quest for personal fulfillment.<sup>84</sup> Although she often expresses her love for "China" [that is, the Republic of China] or "Free Taiwan," her focus in travel was interacting with new people, observing new scenes, and satiating her wanderlust, rather than satisfying a responsibility to her homeland.<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, this is another point on which Li Ao took San Mao to task, claiming that San Mao, a Christian, told him she had been inspired to go to Africa in part because she wanted to help people there as Dr. Albert Schweitzer had. Li's response -- which he reports left San Mao flabbergasted -- was to ask her, "Why don't you help the Chinese people, here in the darkness?"

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<sup>82</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 104.

<sup>83</sup> Lang, "Known World," 40-41.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, "Qiaoyao qidao you" 逍遙七島游 ["Breezing Through Seven Islands"], short vignettes about ordinary people San Mao and José encountered while touring each of the Canary Islands, in *Kuqi de luotuo* [Weeping Camels] (Taipei: Huanguan chubanshe, 1977), 154-191 .

Your own compatriots could use your help!"<sup>86</sup> Li concludes that all San Mao really wanted to do in Africa was put on a "show," and that she cannot really be a Christian since she superstitiously believes in astrology and fate, and was seen kneeling and drawing lots for divination at a temple in Tainan.<sup>87</sup> Such is the criticism often leveled at those who express a wish to "do good" outside the boundaries of the nation-state. Readers seem to have responded more sympathetically to San Mao's project of caring and humanity, focusing not on any perceived hypocrisy, but on her bravery in traveling so far from home, and her decency in treating those she encountered equally, regardless of their social status.

San Mao's interactions with those she claimed to have met on her travels have also been the subject of criticism and skepticism. Taiwan's Ma Zhongxin 馬中欣, a travel writer and photojournalist, seems to have read San Mao as if her work appeared in the reportage section of *United Daily News*, rather than in its literary supplement. He was so intent on debunking San Mao's claims that in the early 1990s, not long after San Mao's suicide, he retraced her steps in Spain, the Sahara, and the Canaries, producing a series of reports for the mainland *Yangcheng wanbao* 羊城晚報 [*Yangcheng Evening News*], later collected in the volume *San mao zhenxiang* 三毛真相 [*The Truth About San Mao*].<sup>88</sup> On the point of whether or not San Mao's fabrications are important, Ma contradicts himself over and over again, writing that "you only need the slightest bit of wisdom to see that, in writing her own story, San Mao used some degree of exaggeration and fabrication...in writing an essay, you must make some things up in order to

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<sup>86</sup> Li Ao 李敖, "San mao shi weishan he jin yong shi weishan" ["San Mao-Style Hypocrisy and Jin Yong-Style Hypocrisy"].

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ma Zhongxin 馬中欣, *San mao zhenxiang* 三毛真相 [*The Truth About San Mao*] (Beijing: Xiyuan chubanshe, 1998).

make it enjoyable to read."<sup>89</sup> Having first said this, Ma then devotes his 300-page book to attempts to discredit San Mao's life story, taking particular aim at her romance with José. Beyond quibbling with San Mao's fabrications, he takes especial issue with the way in which San Mao "promoted herself to the center of everything she had supposedly 'experienced,' and then wrote about it so perfectly, so excessively, it was romantic to the point of fantasy."<sup>90</sup> Again we see the wide chasm between critics' derision and fans' enthusiasm.

Mainland critics have generally handled San Mao with more generosity. Miriam Lang points out that many seized on what they perceived as San Mao's "love for and commitment to a greater 'China' and the Chinese people,"<sup>91</sup> though even in the course of claiming her for "greater China," at least one of those critics, Gu Jitang 古繼堂, recognizes that it often may be the reader's responsibility to furnish San Mao's political position:

Talk about love for her motherland and love for her ethnic group is not apparent everywhere in San Mao's writings, yet love for her motherland, for her ethnic group, and her people permeates it. Even though themes of love for the motherland and love for the people are not very strong in every single one of San Mao's works, there are many works that do express this theme.<sup>92</sup>

Elsewhere, Gu praises San Mao as "a loyal daughter of China."<sup>93</sup> Miriam Lang sees San Mao's work as expressing a "quasi-familial affection" between residents of Taiwan and the mainland<sup>94</sup>; this feeling was likely heightened after San Mao's "root-seeking" (*xungen* 尋根) trip to her family's ancestral home on the mainland after Taiwan and China renewed travel links in the late

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 105.

<sup>92</sup> Gu Jitang. qtd. in Miriam Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 105.

<sup>93</sup> Gu Jitang 古繼堂, *Pingshuo san mao* 平說三毛 [Evaluating San Mao], 11.

<sup>94</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 106.

1980s.<sup>95</sup> For both Taiwan and mainland readers, San Mao represented an ideal of freedom and self-expression beyond the confines and considerations of the nation-state. San Mao was herself an idealized version of her creator, Chen Ping, and she represented an idealized future that later became an accessible reality to many of her readers, following the gradual relaxation of and eventual end to Taiwan's martial law in 1987, and the improvement of the mainland economy in the decades after the debut of Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening-up" policy of 1978.

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<sup>95</sup> Miriam Lang, "San Mao Makes History," *East Asian History* 19, no. 145 (2000): 145.

#### 4.0 STRUCTURES OF FEELING

Critics of San Mao have sieved through her work, looking for inconsistencies in the narrative that might expose her as a mirage, something inconstant, feeling that her personal flaws made her undeserving of readers' admiration. But rather than feeling manipulated by San Mao's exaggerations and elisions, readers focused on the affective elements of San Mao's work and the overall continuity of her sentimental vision. Looking closely at this discrepancy in reception, we can see that San Mao and her readers shared in what Raymond Williams called "structure of feeling," a particular current of thought and emotion which eluded critics, perhaps not because they did not share the core values it represented, but because they resisted San Mao's particular articulation of these values.

Raymond Williams posited that structures of feeling are "social experiences in solution, as distinct from other semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available."<sup>96</sup> In this chemical metaphor, structures of feeling are elements of social experience still floating in the ether of everyday life, not yet precipitated out into a solid form. As they become better articulated, they become recognizable, until they are perceived as a social and shared, with a solid social form that may be identified as a movement or trend. Williams suggests that most art "relate[s] to already manifest social formations," while in

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<sup>96</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 133-34.

contrast, the structure of feeling "relates [...] primarily to emergent formations."<sup>97</sup> For Williams, the structure of feeling "is never mere flux. It is a structured formation which, because it is at the very edge of semantic availability, has many of the characteristics of a pre-formation, until specific articulations -- new semantic figures -- are discovered in material practice."<sup>98</sup> Writing from the Sahara desert, a land far removed from her readers' homes, San Mao gave expression to a structure of feeling not just in descriptions of the romantic and interpersonal relationships that dominated her work, but also in detailed descriptions of her own material practice. A stranger in a strange land, San Mao presents herself as responding to cultural alienation and relative material deprivation with creativity, spontaneity, and flexibility -- liberating herself from the acceptable and orthodox, and letting inspiration and feeling guide her. This aspect of San Mao's writing will be discussed more thoroughly later in this section, as I examined the story "Baishou chengjia" 白手成家 ["From Empty Hands, A Home"], which I have translated in Appendix A.

Next, I will suggest some possibilities for how the structure of feeling that may account for San Mao's popularity emerged, and how it was possible for both Taiwan and mainland readers, who felt their lives affected by unique socioeconomic forces, to find union in this particular structure of feeling transcending political boundaries. Within discussion of San Mao's initial wave of popularity in Taiwan, and her later reception in mainland China, I have interwoven my own reading of several of San Mao's pieces informed by Williams's notion of structures of feeling. In this section, I discuss several of San Mao's early works, published under the name Chen Ping 陳平. I have adopted this strategy of examining San Mao's early efforts as

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

well as her later, more famous work, to trace what Williams termed the "pre-emergence"<sup>99</sup> of structure of feeling, the nascent stage of what is, in itself, an embryonic social change. This approach allows the reader to view the evolution of concerns within San Mao's writing alongside social and historical changes that impacted herself and her readership.

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<sup>99</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 126-27.

#### 4.1 SAN MAO'S DEBUT

As Gu Jitang 古繼堂 writes, when San Mao's work appeared in 1970s Taiwan, it created a "whirlwind"<sup>100</sup> -- a breeze from the desert, stirring the air of a nation under martial law. In *Stories of the Sahara*, San Mao often makes much of hers and José's desert deprivation, downplaying her own privilege in being able to travel, and emphasizing a self-presentation as simple and ordinary.<sup>101</sup> In her stories, San Mao's persona strategically vacillates between self-aggrandizement and self-effacement, creating a larger-than-life figure that is paradoxically down-to-earth, thus offering readers a sense of hope that the future they yearned for might come true for them as it did for San Mao. Taiwan's robust growth in the 1970s earned it a place as one of the four "Asian Tiger" economies, meaning that for at least some readers, lands outside Taiwan were becoming visible on the horizon as destinations for travel or study; however, this type of dream was still out of reach of most, given Taiwan's domestic political strife and low international standing. A confluence of economic, political and cultural developments in Taiwan over the preceding decades fostered the "pre-formation" (Williams's term)<sup>102</sup> of the structure of feeling to which San Mao's desert writings gave "specific articulation" in the 1970s.

At the close of World War II in 1945, General Order No.1 forced Japan to relinquish control of Taiwan, which it had held since 1895. Thereafter, the island was administered by the

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<sup>100</sup> Gu Jitang 古繼堂, *Pingshuo San Mao* 平說三毛 [Evaluating San Mao], 11.

<sup>101</sup> Lang, "Known World," 32.

<sup>102</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 134.

Republic of China (Nationalist) government.<sup>103</sup> In 1946, the Chinese civil war broke out, and Nationalist supporters began flooding into Taiwan from the mainland. Among them was San Mao's family, who arrived in Taipei from Chongqing in 1947, when San Mao was four years old.<sup>104</sup> They were part of a wave of migration that, by 1949, numbered approximately two million people, helping increase Taiwan's population from around six million to approximately eight million in half a decade.<sup>105</sup> In 1949, General Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist army retreated to Taiwan,<sup>106</sup> establishing the Kuomintang 國民黨 (Nationalist) headquarters in Taipei.<sup>107</sup>

The Nationalist government that had assumed control of Taiwan in 1945, led by Kuomintang general Chen Yi 陳儀, was corrupt and repressive, leading to tension between newly-arrived mainlanders and native-born Taiwanese, culminating in the 2-28 Incident of February 28, 1947, a Taiwanese uprising that was forcefully suppressed by the Nationalist government.<sup>108</sup> Within weeks of the incident, thousands of Taiwanese had been executed and more had been jailed.<sup>109</sup> Chiang Kai-shek declared Taiwan under martial law in 1949.<sup>110</sup> The period beginning with the 2-28 Incident and ending with the lifting of martial law in 1987 came to be known as the "White Terror" (*baise kongbu* 白色恐怖), an era in which, in the name of

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<sup>103</sup> Melissa Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>104</sup> Lang, "Known World," 347. According to Miriam Lang, San Mao's father, a lawyer, had previously served in the Nationalist army.

<sup>105</sup> Christopher Hughes, *Politics in Asia: Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism: National Identity and Status in International Society*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 27, 165 note 3. Hughes notes that statistics for this period may be unreliable. The estimate given here is based on his calculations using the 1980 *China Yearbook*, which compared a 1940 Japanese census of Taiwan with Taiwan's 1952 population, arriving at a population increase of just over two million.

<sup>106</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 4.

<sup>107</sup> "Party's History." Kuomintang Official Website.

<http://www1.kmt.org.tw/english/page.aspx?type=para&num=108> (accessed February 11, 2017).

<sup>108</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 9.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Hughes, *Politics in Asia*, 26. Martial law ended in 1987.

promoting social stability, the government severely restricted civil rights and freedom of expression, and individuals felt an imperative to self-censor to avoid arrest and imprisonment.<sup>111</sup> The number of Taiwanese imprisoned for suspected opposition to the Nationalist government during this period is estimated at 140,000, with a further 3,000 to 4,000 people executed, many without trial.<sup>112</sup> Intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and landowners were particular targets, with some "beaten and killed on the spot."<sup>113</sup> Chiang also purged his own followers, eliminating any he suspected of Communist sympathies.<sup>114</sup>

Besides the political tumult of the immediate post-war period, Taiwan also experienced economic hardship during the early years of Nationalist rule. In 1949, inflation was 3,400 percent.<sup>115</sup> Shortages of capital, low productivity, underemployment, and an international trade deficit plagued the island.<sup>116</sup> However, through a combination of United States investment,<sup>117</sup> land reform,<sup>118</sup> expansion of compulsory education,<sup>119</sup> and a shift of focus from agriculture to manufacturing,<sup>120</sup> the economy showed rapid improvement: from the 1960s until the lifting of

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<sup>111</sup> Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), viii. Li-chun Lin, Sylvia, *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Lin notes that "White Terror" is sometimes used to refer only to the persecution of intellectuals in the 1950s, while others (including Lin) use the term to refer to the entire period of Martial Law.

<sup>112</sup> Huang Tai-lin, "White Terror Exhibit Unveils Part of the Truth." *Taipei Times*, May 20, 2005, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2005/05/20/2003255840> (Accessed December 17, 2016).

<sup>113</sup> Zhang Weibin, *Taiwan's Modernization: Americanization and Modernizing Confucian Manifestations* (River Edge, NJ: World Scientific Publishing, 2003), 50. Accessed December 3, 2016, ProQuest ebrary.

<sup>114</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 60.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>116</sup> Zhang, *Taiwan's Modernization*, 119.

<sup>117</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 60.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>119</sup> Zhang, *Taiwan's Modernization*, 90. Also noted in Ping Shaw, "Demystifying Women's Magazines in Taiwan" (Ph.D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1997), 88.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-121.

martial law in 1987, per capita growth averaged 7 percent per year, compared to 2 percent in the United States during the same period.<sup>121</sup>

San Mao, whose father was a lawyer, came from a solidly middle class family, and so may not have felt the effects of the rising tide of the Taiwanese economy as dramatically as those Taiwanese in more humble circumstances.<sup>122</sup> Her family's class status afforded her vastly different opportunities than the limited choices available to the lower classes, such as the female factory workers who greatly contributed to Taiwan's manufacturing sector during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>123</sup> Raymond Williams points out that the relations between a structure of feeling and "other specifying historical marks of changing institutions, formations, and beliefs" are "an open question."<sup>124</sup> In other words, structures of feeling do not necessarily exist along class lines. Though growing income equality in Taiwan led to an expanded middle class<sup>125</sup> with expanded opportunities to consume San Mao's tales of foreign life -- even if they were not able to live such adventures themselves -- participation in the structure of feeling uniting San Mao and her readers was not restricted by class. As ethnologist Norma Diamond has pointed out, single women living in Taiwan's urban factory dormitory settings had some degree of personal autonomy, including the ability to purchase and the time to read popular fiction and magazines.<sup>126</sup> San Mao's writing described overseas adventure that was inaccessible to most of her readers, not simply because of their class status, but also because of Taiwan's political situation. As more and more European countries moved toward recognition of the People's Republic of China in the 1960s and 1970s, it

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<sup>121</sup> Kristof, Nicholas D., "A Mellowing Taiwan Sees a Different Mainland," *New York Times*, October 18, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/18/weekinreview/a-mellowing-taiwan-sees-a-different-mainland.html>

<sup>122</sup> Lang, "San Mao Makes History," 154; *Ibid.*, "Known World," 347.

<sup>123</sup> Shaw, "Demystifying Women's Magazines in Taiwan," 88.

<sup>124</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 131.

<sup>125</sup> According to Ping Shaw, "[T]he bottom two-fifths of [Taiwan's] population had only 11 percent of the national income in 1953 while the top one-fifth of the population had 61 percent. In 1975, the corresponding figures were 22 percent for the former group and 39 percent for the latter." "Demystifying Women's Magazines in Taiwan," 89.

<sup>126</sup> Norma Diamond, "Women and Industry in Taiwan," *Modern China* 5, no. 3 (July 1979): 318-9.

became more difficult for Taiwanese to travel in Europe due to visa restrictions.<sup>127</sup> What united San Mao's readers was not a class structure, but a structure of feeling responding to such limits on personal freedom.

Insofar as San Mao's writings articulated no strident political messages concerning the ruling Nationalist party or Taiwan's relationship to China, she may not have felt direct restriction of her own freedom of speech during martial law. However, the publications in whose pages she rose to fame could not have existed had they not toed the line of KMT regulation. Mainstream publications like *United Daily News*, which helped make San Mao a household name in the 1970s, had, over the previous 25 years, internalized the Nationalists' sinocentric ideology as a means of survival during this authoritarian period. In doing so, they contributed to the ascendancy of literature that Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang describes as "neotraditionalist," "ostensibly apolitical," and "middlebrow."<sup>128</sup>

Such mainstream venues were a perfect forum for a writer like San Mao, who penned breezy, easy-to-read lyrical essays of self-imposed exile in Africa that foregrounded her ethnic identity as a Chinese woman over her status as a citizen of Taiwan. Meanwhile, her desert stories presented readers with a literal world of possibility in which a woman from Taiwan could travel unencumbered by her passport, marriage to a Spanish citizen having afforded her greater freedom and privilege. It is a state of being far different from that described in San Mao's earlier essay, *Fu ou lutu jianwenlu* 赴歐旅途見聞錄 ["A Record of What I Saw and Heard on My Journey to Europe"], in which San Mao describes traveling from Taiwan to Spain shortly before she went on to reunite with José in the Sahara, where they married.<sup>129</sup> San Mao, bound for

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<sup>127</sup> Lang, "Known World," 152.

<sup>128</sup> Chang, *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law*, 104.

<sup>129</sup> Her arrival in Spanish Sahara is described in "From Empty Hands, A Home," included in Appendix A.

Madrid, attempts to change planes and airports in London, transiting from Gatwick to Heathrow to catch her connecting flight. Lacking a visa for the United Kingdom, San Mao is refused entry and held in detention for a night, charged with attempting to enter the country illegally using a passport -- Taiwan's -- that the U.K. does not recognize. "Shameful British Empire!" San Mao interjects at this point in the narrative.<sup>130</sup> The essay, published in *Shiye shijie* 事業世界 [*Industrial World*] magazine in November 1973, predates "Chinese Restaurant," San Mao's first published "Sahara story," by about one year.<sup>131</sup> If a structure of feeling is "concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt," then "A Record of What I Saw and Heard on My Journey to Europe" is a record of what Williams termed a "pre-emergence," a structure of feeling in the nascent stage.<sup>132</sup>

"A Record" is a chronicle of the trials and tribulations Taiwan passport holders might face while abroad, compounded by the British immigration authorities' stereotyped expectations of both Chinese sneakiness (San Mao is taken for a would-be illegal immigrant) and Chinese passivity (San Mao at turns surprises, exasperates, and impresses the British police by asserting herself, insisting on speaking to a lawyer, and finally arguing her case with clarity and logic). Sympathetic readers on either side of the Taiwan Strait could have found room to appreciate San Mao's heroics, as she argues for Taiwan's identity as well as for the identity of the Chinese people. When San Mao began publishing her Sahara stories 11 months after "A Record" was printed, the "emergent formations" found in "A Record" had solidified into what Williams terms "specific articulations."<sup>133</sup> In her Sahara stories, San Mao no longer battles a (western) world of

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<sup>130</sup> San Mao, *Yuji bu zailai* 雨季不再來 [*The Rainy Season Will Not Return*] (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2007), 229.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>132</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 126-27.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

authorities indifferent to the status of Taiwan and skeptical of her existence as a Chinese woman. Engaged to José -- the couple's subsequent Saharan marriage is chronicled in the story "Jiehun ji" 結婚記 ["Marriage Diary"] -- San Mao settles in the desert, where she can pursue her project of self-expression, secure in a relationship based on a sense of equality between herself and José.

The structures of feeling brewing in San Mao's early work, that receive full articulation in her desert stories, are useful in pinpointing this writer's enormous popularity, a phenomenon that may not be attributable to writing style or content alone. San Mao's style is characterized by a simple syntax, economical yet generally effective description, and paragraphs so spare they often feel fragmentary, lending the prose a breezy, yet somewhat remote feeling; we are no sooner offered a thought than that thought is withdrawn and another takes its place, calling to mind Williams's assertion that structures of feeling concern "not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought."<sup>134</sup> Though at times distancing, this lends an immediacy to the narrative that may contribute to the assertion by readers that when they read San Mao, they feel as if an intimate friend is narrating her own adventures for them personally; as Ou-yang Na 歐陽娜 writes, "[...] it's as if she's a neighbor we've known for years."<sup>135</sup> San Mao is not given to long passages of thorough-going exposition, but rather gives primacy to emotion. Nearly every paragraph offers some kind of emotional reflection, creating an effect of gentle lyricism, an undercurrent of feeling rippling through each piece. Readers may not have been able to identify easily with the desert life San Mao described, but they could respond readily to her meditations on interpersonal relationships, the search for beauty and the realization of self, and the plight of

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<sup>134</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132.

<sup>135</sup> Ou-yang Na 歐陽娜, "Zai du san mao" 再讀三毛 ["Rereading San Mao"] *Yuwen tiandi: gaozhong ban* 語文天地 高中版, no. 21 (2006): 37.

humanity, which figures prominently in such essays as "Yanu" 啞努 ["The Mute Slave"] and "Shaba juncao" 沙巴軍曹 ["Sergeant Shaba"].

Though certainly a strong writer, San Mao could, at times, have benefited from more judicious editing. While in her desert writings, San Mao's episodic tales feature a strong forward momentum that lends a feeling of suspense, they are sometimes bogged down in unnecessary dialogue; San Mao often insists on reporting directly the kind of inconsequential speech that might best be summarized, as in this example from "Baishou chengjia" 白手成家 ["From Empty Hands, A Home"]:

In his hand was a big bunch of cellophane-wrapped bird of paradise flowers.

Additionally he was followed by a friend, whom he introduced as his coworker.

"May we come in?" he asked politely.

"Please come in."<sup>136</sup>

As for content, certainly the exotic desert setting and the cast of both native Sahrawi and colonial Spanish characters might have been cause for curiosity among readers. However, many of the incidents San Mao describes in her desert writings, particularly those humorous domestic scenes involving José, could have taken place almost anywhere; as Miriam Lang has pointed out, very little about San Mao's first essay, "Chinese Restaurant," would identify it as being set in the Sahara.<sup>137</sup> Critics tend to have cited the "exotic" desert setting and the romance of San Mao and José's life as secrets of San Mao's success. Though critics like Li Ao 李敖 have suggested San Mao manipulated the exotic desert environs as a tool to enhance the generic "love story" described in her writings, such criticisms seem based on a faulty premise, as San Mao's stories

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<sup>136</sup> San Mao, "Baishou chengjia" 白手成家 ["From Empty Hands, A Home"] *Sahala de gushi* [Sahara Stories], 152. See page 118, Appendix A.

<sup>137</sup> Lang, "Known World," 49.

represent a wealth of concerns beyond love, marriage, and domesticity. As Ou-yang Na 歐陽娜 puts it, "San Mao looked at love clearly: she truly was not anyone's other half; she was an independent person, and so she picked someone with a similar view on life [José]." <sup>138</sup>

Though San Mao claimed everything she wrote was true, questions about her stories' veracity plagued her from the beginning, and some critics sought to disprove her claims. <sup>139</sup> The fundamentals of San Mao's stay in Western Sahara have been established, and given the relative briefness of her sojourn there, the ephemeral nature of the encounters she described, and the dissolution of Spain's colonial presence which led to San Mao leaving the Sahara, <sup>140</sup> further attempts to prove or disprove the finer details of what she wrote are likely to be unsuccessful, especially now that more than 40 years have passed since San Mao departed from the Sahara. Of course, although San Mao claimed everything she wrote was true, all writing is constructed; no writing can duplicate reality. There are numerous examples in San Mao's writing that test the reader's credulity, such as in "Wawa xinniàng" 娃娃新娘 ["The Child Bride"], when the parents of Guka, a 10-year-old Sahrawi girl, ask San Mao to be the one to tell Guka she will be married off, as they cannot bear to do it themselves. <sup>141</sup> The unlikelihood of this request, coupled with inconsistencies about Guka's age as well as San Mao's somewhat ambiguous stance regarding the custom of child marriage, lend a haziness to the story. This suggests that San Mao's priority was not strict fidelity to an objective truth, but rather fidelity to the expression of her own personal truth. For readers, this personal, emotional truth seems to be what resonated most strongly.

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<sup>138</sup> Ou-yang, "Zai du san mao," 37.

<sup>139</sup> The best-known example may be Ma Zhongxin 馬中欣 *San mao zhenxiang* 三毛真相 [*The Truth About San Mao*].

<sup>140</sup> Lang, "Known World," 52. Ibid., "San Mao Makes History," 174.

<sup>141</sup> San Mao, *Sahala de gushi*, 25.

As mentioned in section three, Ma Zhongxin criticized San Mao for "promot[ing] herself to the center of everything she had supposedly 'experienced,' and then [writing] about it so perfectly, so excessively, it was romantic to the point of fantasy."<sup>142</sup> For their part, sympathetic readers of San Mao embraced her *because* she put herself at the center of everything, living and writing about a life that was an enactment of the structure of feeling with which her readers identified. Williams wrote that in examining structures of feeling

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships; not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.<sup>143</sup>

San Mao's "practical consciousness," and her ability to transcribe her adventures with such clarity, created a verisimilitude in her written world that engaged readers emotionally. San Mao was ever the hero of her own stories, and by drawing readers in emotionally, she allowed them to imagine themselves, if not in her shoes, at least by her side, cheering her on as she wins battles on their behalf. In "A Record of What I Saw and Heard on My Journey to Europe" San Mao defends Taiwan by disabusing her English jailors of their preconceived notions about the standard of living in Taiwan, surprising them by claiming her family owns three color televisions.<sup>144</sup> Later, she wins the admiration of the immigration officers hearing her case with her persuasive rhetoric, responding to the United Kingdom's refusal to recognize the Republic of China's legitimacy with her own dismissal of the British imperialism ("You don't recognize my

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132.

<sup>144</sup> San Mao, *Yuji bu zailai* 雨季不再來 [*The Rainy Season Will Not Return*], 225.

nationality, and I agree, because I don't recognize the British Empire.")<sup>145</sup> Her behavior throughout the essay is a repudiation of stereotypes of Chinese meekness and passivity. It may be the piece in which San Mao tackles such concerns most directly. Soon, her attention would turn elsewhere, as this pre-formation blossomed into a full structure of feeling that reflected Taiwan readers' hopes to occupy a larger space on the world stage. After running the gauntlet of British immigration, San Mao arrives in what she has long imagined as a kind of spiritual home: the Sahara desert. It is here that she begins to develop a transcendent identity outside the confines of the social and political narratives that might have stifled her if she had stayed at home in Taiwan. Here, she fashions a new identity that is part Chinese citizen of Taiwan, part wandering citizen of the world, and always independent and free-spirited. It is this identity, and the particular material manifestations that accompanied it, with which so many sympathetic readers identified.

In "A Record," San Mao pits herself directly against a narrative the West has imposed on Taiwan and on Chinese females. After relocating to the desert via Spain, San Mao finds a way to fully articulate the structure of feeling precipitated by this battle with British immigration. In the airports of London, San Mao fights tooth and nail for equality and, literally, for the freedom to transit on to her destination. When she ultimately arrives in that destination, it is a new stage of a social process, which may now be called "emergent" rather than "pre-emergent"; in the desert, San Mao is not fighting for Taiwan's status or for equal recognition as a Chinese female. Instead, she takes much of that for granted, and turns her attention to local people, many of them less well off than herself and facing oppression far more serious than that which she encountered in her period of detention in London. She has "arrived" physically, but also philosophically. Though San Mao wrote that many of her friends viewed her desert sojourn as "rejecting the world for a

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<sup>145</sup> San Mao, *Yuji bu zailai* 雨季不再來 [*The Rainy Season Will Not Return*], 230.

monastic life,"<sup>146</sup> what she describes in her desert stories was not a life of solitude, but one of interaction. Though not without flaws and contradictions, San Mao's organizing narrative in these desert stories is one of sympathy for the local people, including the Sahrawi liberation movement, the Polisario Liberation Front and its freedom fight against the Spanish colonial presence in Western Sahara, and a general concern with equality and freedom.

"A Record"'s publication in *Industrial World* magazine did not receive the same acclaim as "Chinese Restaurant" and subsequent desert stories San Mao published in *United Daily News* beginning a year later, in October 1974. Still, according to Miriam Lang, after San Mao's death in 1991, there were rival claims as to which publication had "discovered" her, with some claiming *Industrial World* had actually sent her to the desert as a special correspondent.<sup>147</sup> Nevertheless, it seems clear that the desert essays San Mao published in the *fukan* of *United Daily News* were primarily responsible for her instant celebrity. In fact, Taiwan's *fukan* played a major role not just in San Mao's career, but in shaping the direction of literature in martial-law era Taiwan.

According to Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, in Taiwan's immediate post-1949 years, the government closely supervised all cultural activities, but "absolute control over literary production by the state lasted only a few years."<sup>148</sup> Cultural production was able to retain much of its autonomy as the country moved toward a market economy.<sup>149</sup> The Nationalist government's language policy, which declared Mandarin Chinese the official language, and banned the use of Japanese and the Taiwanese dialect, put non-Mandarin speaking native Taiwanese at a disadvantage in the literary world, which was therefore dominated by what

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<sup>146</sup> San Mao, *Sahala de gushi*, 122.

<sup>147</sup> Lang, "Known World," 2.

<sup>148</sup> Chang, *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law*, 63.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Chang terms "trusted mainlander writers."<sup>150</sup> Though sanctioned by the government, and thus "predisposed to compliance," these individuals strove to carve out a creative space mostly free of interference.<sup>151</sup> The survival strategies adopted included the development of a new take on *chunwenxue* 純文學 ["pure literature"], which was ostensibly apolitical and could be used as a shield to protect writers from being enlisted as propagandists.<sup>152</sup> Lin Haiyin 林海音, who helmed *Lianfu*, the *fukan*, or literary supplement, of *United Daily News*, from 1953 to 1962, was a strong proponent of "pure literature," helping to reinvent the May Fourth tradition in Taiwan by "[a]voiding subversive themes like 'class' and 'revolution'...focus[ing] on the humanist spirit of May Fourth and its lucid, easy-to-understand prose."<sup>153</sup> Lin's influence over the literary direction of *Lianfu* helped establish an aesthetic tradition into which San Mao's stories fit perfectly a decade later. On the surface this was due to their mostly apolitical nature and light, easy-reading style, but equally important was the structure of feeling apprehended by discerning readers.

By self-censoring as a way to recuse themselves from government service, writers and editors like Lin Haiyin codified a set of aesthetic choices, and a conservative mainstream literary culture arose. Raymond Williams writes that "the idea of a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions -- semantic figures -- which, in art and literature, are among the very first indications that a new structure is forming."<sup>154</sup> This new iteration of "pure literature" is one such example of these forms and conventions. It was inspired by political necessity, and was on the one hand suppressing something -- absolute freedom of

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Chang, *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law*, 8; 81-82.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>154</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 133.

expression -- and on the other hand leading to the emergence of something else, a structure of feeling reacting to such suppression.

The *fukan* of major newspapers included recipes, jokes, travelogues, publication news, and "social gossip," while also providing an outlet for amateur writers "to share intimate personal feelings and unorthodox forms of knowledge in a more or less casual manner with a sympathetic readership."<sup>155</sup> In mainland China in the 1920s and 1930s, *fukan* had been bastions of the new culture movement, publishers of the May Fourth movement's "new literature" and forums for cultural discussions.<sup>156</sup> The editors of Taiwan's *fukan* upheld this tradition of "social enlightenment," but under their direction, the *fukan* also became useful to the authoritarian government, as a tool in the Nationalists' sinicization project, which emphasized Chinese identity.<sup>157</sup> Entrenched in an ideological battle against the Communists, the Nationalists sought to reinvent the May Fourth tradition; its aesthetic features (such as use of vernacular language) were emphasized while its leftist, revolutionary aspects were downplayed.<sup>158</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1956, the Nationalist government dissolved the official journal of the Chinese Writers' and Artists' Association, *Wenyi chuangzuo* 文藝創作 [*Creative Writings*].<sup>159</sup> In its vacuum, a small independent journal, *Wenxue zazhi* 文學雜誌 [*Literary Review*], was allowed to emerge, edited by Xia Ji'an 夏濟安 (T.A. Hsia), an English professor at National Taiwan University.<sup>160</sup> The *fukan* of the major newspapers continued to publish "creative literary products,

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<sup>155</sup> Chang, *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law*, 84.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Chang, *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law*, 87-88.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

in particular the subgenre of *sanwen* 散文, San Mao's primary genre.<sup>161</sup> Sung-Sheng Yvonne Chang observes that many of the same writers and editors were involved with *fukan* and with elite literary journals -- but it was the pioneers of Modernism that had "greater symbolic capital" than the denizens of the mainstream "pure literature" camp.<sup>162</sup> When *Literary Review* folded in 1960, one of its founders, Pai Hsien-yung, established *Modern Literature*, and two years later gave Chen Ping her first chance to see her name in print.

Chen Ping was an artistically-inclined teenager who, at age 12, dropped out of school after suffering a humiliating punishment at the hands of her mathematics teacher.<sup>163</sup> Thereafter, she was taught at home by her father,<sup>164</sup> and received private tutoring in oil painting by artist Gu Fusheng 顧福生, a friend of Pai Hsien-yung who encouraged Chen Ping's writing and sent "Doubt" to Pai.<sup>165</sup>

In "Doubt," we find the first evidence of the structure of feeling San Mao would fully articulate in her later work a decade later. In this brief story, a young woman becomes so obsessed with the Jennifer Jones/Joseph Cotten film *Portrait of Jennie* that she comes to believe that she is actually possessed by Jennie. The theme music from the film triggers hysterical episodes in the girl, who narrates in first-person. She insists to her alarmed parents that she is not ill, but rather that she and Jennie are becoming "closer."<sup>166</sup> The story is both a psychic and a literary "doubling" many times over, as the film on which the story is based is itself an adaptation of a novel by Robert Nathan, and all are concerned with the potential of art to enchant

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid. *Sanwen* 散文 is comparable to the modern English language genre of the literary essay or creative nonfiction.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> As she later recounted in *Beiyong* 背影 [*Rear View*] (Taipei: Huangguan wenxue chubanshe, 1981), 17-39.

<sup>164</sup> Shi, Yong-gang 師,永剛 et. al. *Sijia xiangce* 私家相冊 [*Echo: Primary Album*] (Beijing, Zhongxinchubanshe, 2005), 36-43.

<sup>165</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 98.

<sup>166</sup> San Mao, *Yuji bu zailai* 雨季不再來 [*The Rainy Season Will Not Return*], 77.

us to such a degree that we can no longer distinguish it from reality. In discussing this pre-San Mao story by Chen Ping, Zhang Yi-lei 張毅蕾 suggests that "we can already see San Mao's dissatisfaction with 'the rules of the world,' an intense awareness of a thirst for liberation of the self."<sup>167</sup> In other words, it is another instance of "pre-emergence," as Williams would have it, the thirst for self-liberation forming over the next decade, finally solidifying into a structure of feeling reflected by *Stories of the Sahara*.

The stories that made San Mao famous were written from her perspective as a married woman in her early 30s. Yet after the publication of *Stories of the Sahara*, early stories such as "Doubt" were collected and published in *The Rainy Season Will Not Return*, and later volumes such as *Rear View* included essays reflecting on her younger years. Thus, readers who missed the publication of "Doubt" and San Mao's other short fiction encountered these pieces later, after her legend as "The Chinese Woman of the Desert" was well-established. Incidents in San Mao's teenage life that she related in *The Rainy Season* and later books took on an almost totemic quality that attests to the particular affect, or structure of feeling, she and readers shared. Chief among these legends was San Mao's aforementioned humiliation by her mathematics teacher, which led to her being home schooled -- an early instance of self-exile -- and later on, sitting out Taiwan's arduous university entrance examination.<sup>168</sup> As Miriam Lang has noted, San Mao "expressed support for young students laboring under a demanding high school education system."<sup>169</sup> The girlish hysterics of "Doubt" might be seen as one method of escape from such a system; later, readers identified readily with San Mao's reflective essays that detailed the

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<sup>167</sup> Zhang Yi-lei 張毅蕾, "Yi ge shidai de meng" 一個時代的夢 ["The Dream of an Era"], *Mangzhong luntan* 芒種論壇 [*Mangzhong Literature*], 2012, no.5: 24.

<sup>168</sup> San Mao, *Beiyong* 背影 [*Rear View*], 17-39.

<sup>169</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 83.

pressures she faced as a student in Taiwan, due to readers' and writer's union in a structure of feeling that was in part a pushback against the conformity of this system.

Raymond Williams writes that in delineating structures of feeling "we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies." The narrator of "Doubt" may at first be taken as experiencing an isolated, private breakdown; the teenage angst and decision to drop out of the educational system San Mao later described might be seen as an early, private expression of her extremely idiosyncratic personality. Yet the sympathy with which readers responded to such tales reveals a structure of feeling in which the yearning for recognition and self-expression that motivated San Mao's break with formal schooling are shared between writer and reader, even if few of San Mao's readers had the means to take a similar course of action.

"Doubt" is affected yet affecting; its stream-of-consciousness narration, layers of artifice, concern with the uncanny, and ambiguous, elliptical ending, all put it squarely in the modernist camp, which took its cues from western literary trends, in part as a resistance against the conservatism of the mainstream "pure literature."<sup>170</sup> Chen Ping's appearance in *Modern Literature*, which published many of the best-known Taiwan modernist writers as well as Chinese translations of western modernist luminaries like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, was no doubt a coup for the aspiring writer. Even so, any prestige publishing in this journal's storied pages earned her faded quickly. From this early flash of experimentation, Chen Ping moved on to publish several much more conventional fiction pieces in mainstream publications, likely

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<sup>170</sup> Chang, *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law*, 44, 102, 107.

precluding her once and for all from consecration by Taiwan's literary elites. This trajectory mirrored that of popular romance novelist Qiong Yao, whose work could be seen as engaging the same structure of feeling present in San Mao's writing, though some, like Miriam Lang, argue that readers are not so quick to link the two writers as critics have been.<sup>171</sup>

Lang has written extensively about San Mao's personal and professional relationship to Qiong Yao, noting that the two are often paired together in critical discussions of "Chinese popular writing," although there are significant differences in their work and in their personal lives.<sup>172</sup> Qiong Yao achieved fame a decade before San Mao; while much of San Mao's fame came as a result of her writings about international travel and her foreign marriage, Qiong Yao was based in Taiwan and most of her work is set there; and "[t]hough readers apparently felt that they 'knew' San Mao through her work, Qiong Yao has remained a slightly remote figure."<sup>173</sup> Lang argues convincingly that San Mao and Qiong Yao's affinity in the imagination of the general public can be credited to three "links": their connection with Crown Publishing and *Crown* magazine; their perceived real-life relationship with one another; and their focus on "romance as a way of life"; Lang further suggests the existence of a fourth, more nebulous link, in the "changing literary and critical classifications of their work."<sup>174</sup> That is, while both writers' initial output was taken seriously and treated as modernist fiction, the estimation of their literary worth soon declined sharply (coinciding with their rise in popularity).<sup>175</sup>

Qiong Yao's first novel, the reportedly semi-autobiographical *Chuangwai* 窗外 [*Outside the Window*], was a story of forbidden love between a high school student and her teacher, a

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<sup>171</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 76.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

middle-aged man. Lang notes that it was lauded for its depiction of the generation gap, its dramatization of the "conflict of 'traditional' values with 'progressive' ones ('traditional' being interpreted in terms of a repressive mother who wants to control her daughter's choice of mate) and an expose of the poverty of these 'traditional' values."<sup>176</sup> Many of the narrative's "negative elements," such as "parental opposition, financial difficulties, illness, death, and suicide" are employed in both modern realism and melodrama, Lang writes, and she argues that when such elements appear in what are seen as "romance" novels, they are generally regarded as "melodrama," carrying with them all the negative baggage encumbering such a designation.<sup>177</sup> In the case of Qiong Yao, as her popularity increased, so did the tendency of critics to classify as melodrama those narrative elements of her work that might have, if emanating from another writer's pen, been interpreted as realism; Lang notes that "before the end of [the 1960s], [Qiong Yao's] novels came to be considered formulaic, commercialized, and 'popular': in short, 'trash.'"<sup>178</sup> The adaptation of many of her works for film and television likely compounded this devaluation of her work.<sup>179</sup>

Returning to San Mao/Chen Ping's earliest work, we see further evidence of the "pre-emergence" of the structure of feeling that later crystallized in San Mao's desert writing. Chen Ping's second publication was a more conventional short story titled "Qiulian" 秋戀 ["Autumn Love"] concerning a chance encounter in a Paris cafe between a female art student and a sailor,

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<sup>176</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 92.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 94. Wenchi Lin, "More than Escapist Romantic Fantasies: Revisiting Qiong Yao Films of the 1970s" *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2010): 45-50. Lin argues that while many of the more than 50 films based on Qiong Yao's works do, as critics assert, offer little more than romantic escapist fantasies completed indifferent to Taiwan's social issues, those made by Lee Hsing and Bai Jingrui in the early 1970s stand out for their positive depictions of "working-class girls" and promote Taiwan's dominant ideology of the time, which "promote[d] hard work in order to accelerate Taiwan's industrialization and upgrade Taiwan's economy," 49.

both from Taipei.<sup>180</sup> The story was printed in *Zhongyang Ribao* 中央日報 [*Central Daily News*] in January 1963, shortly after "Doubt" appeared in *Modern Literature*.<sup>181</sup> Much like "Chinese Restaurant," San Mao's first desert story, "Autumn Love" could be set almost anywhere. There is scant description of setting, with the action confined to "a cafe in the Latin Quarter" and a bench by the Seine.<sup>182</sup> At this point, 20-year-old Chen Ping had yet to travel to Europe; the Paris of this story is thus a dreamscape, one whose physical details the reader is asked to supply with that simple prompt, "a cafe in the Latin Quarter." As Miriam Lang notes, in contrast to the Sahara, which Chen Ping/San Mao described a decade later, Europe would have been better known to her readers through literature and film, and what Chen Ping put on paper could "interact with their prior knowledge or fantasies or both."<sup>183</sup> The Paris of "Autumn Love," incidentally, is one far removed from the city rocked by student protests in the late '60s, which it is possible Chen Ping, while traveling in Europe later in the decade, could have witnessed first-hand. For now, Paris remains a storybook city of romance.

The protagonist of "Autumn Love" is a 21-year-old female art student from Taiwan, who sits in a cafe, smoking cigarettes -- a habit she guiltily acknowledges she has acquired in her two years abroad. She weeps with homesickness, and then

Lifting her head to look out the window, she nearly fainted. There was a young Chinese she didn't know staring at her, and what's more, it looked like he'd been there a while. She was confused, didn't know how to greet him. There were so few Chinese people here; unless you went out searching for them, you could go a

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<sup>180</sup> San Mao, *Yuji bu zailai* 雨季不再來 [*The Rainy Season Will Not Return*], 155-9.

<sup>181</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 99-100.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>183</sup> Lang, "Known World," 12.

week without running into one, except for those overseas Chinese who spoke Qingtianese and opened up restaurants. He pushed open the door and came inside.

Interestingly, Chen Ping singles out "those overseas Chinese who spoke Qingtianese and opened up restaurants" as being the only Chinese one would be likely to meet in Paris -- besides the protagonist herself.<sup>184</sup> Is the implication that this particular group of Chinese doesn't quite count to the narrator, whether because of their occupation, their dialect, or their ubiquity? If so, this off-hand remark is at odds with the "San Mao" personality developed in later works, who often describes deeply-felt personal exchanges between herself and various service workers.<sup>185</sup> Whether the narrator is performing a kind of Othering of fellow Chinese or not, this line nonetheless may speak to the barriers to overseas travel those in Taiwan faced at the time -- Chen Ping easily imagines a Paris in which her Chinese narrator is shocked to see a fellow countryman. It serves to an once emphasis the protagonist's homesickness and isolation, and call attention to her distinctiveness in having been able to make such a journey. Much like San Mao herself in "A Record of What I Saw and Heard on My Journey to Europe," discussed earlier, the protagonist of "Autumn Love" is a pre-figuring of the San Mao of the Sahara. That is, in "A Record" and "Autumn Love," Taiwanese still face obstacles to foreign travel and difficulties even once those obstacles have been surmounted: lack of recognition and ill treatment by the British immigration bureaucracy in the former, homesickness and isolation in the latter.

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<sup>184</sup> Ironically, "those overseas Chinese who spoke Qingtianese" hailed from Zhejiang Province -- Chen Ping's birthplace. Given a different family background, different shifts in history, Chen Ping herself might have been part of the relatively substantial twentieth century migration of Chinese from Zhejiang to Paris.

<sup>185</sup> Examples abound. For example, in "Aide xunqiu" "愛的尋求" ["The Pursuit of Love"], from *Sahala de gushi* [*Stories of the Sahara*], San Mao becomes so friendly with the teenage clerk at a nearby convenience store, Shalun, that he asks her to read French letters from his wife who, upon receipt of his bride payment, left for Monte Carlo and has yet to return to the Sahara. The perceptive San Mao suspects the bride of having absconded with the money, but agrees to play Cyrano, helping illiterate Shalun write to her, 55-56.

Meanwhile, in San Mao's desert stories, such obstacles and difficulties are subordinate to the San Mao character's project of adventure, romance, and human connection in the desert.

The protagonist of "Autumn Love" appears to dismiss out of hand the prospect of associating with Zhejiangese restaurant owners, but is cheered by happening upon another fellow Chinese, who quickly reveals himself to be from Taiwan. Readers are informed of the protagonist's obvious happiness in meeting a compatriot by a description of the cafe owner, who "turned to her and made a face, as if he was happy for her. This wan, lonely Chinese girl who came to drink coffee every day had found a friend."<sup>186</sup> The protagonist herself is taken aback by her own happiness: "She thought it was a bit comical. *Just because he's a Chinese person, it makes me this happy?* She looked at him again; he looked like a sufficiently deep guy."<sup>187</sup>

After a conversation of only a few lines, the couple awkwardly part; when the protagonist returns to her garret, she throws herself on the bed, sobbing and mentally berating herself for not trying harder to assuage her loneliness by forging a relationship with the sailor. The next day, she skips meeting with her painting instructor (like Chen Ping, the protagonist paints) and instead returns to the cafe. Her sailor has had the same idea, and the two spend his last afternoon ashore not "desperately trying to take in the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, and the Arc de Triomphe," but rather sitting on a stone bench by the Seine, staring into the water, nearly silent until the protagonist realizes her twenty-second birthday is just three days away. The sailor tells her "Happy Birthday!" in English; eyes red, he holds her hand and begs her not to leave. The couple's rejection of the picture postcard Parisian landmarks and their "romantic" reputation throws into relief the sadness and angst wrought by their brief union. The protagonist goes home; the sailor, we assume, returns to his ship.

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<sup>186</sup> San Mao, *Yuji bu zailai* 雨季不再來 [*The Rainy Season Will Not Return*], 156.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

In the last two paragraphs of the story, Chen Ping slyly addresses the audience directly, in a moment that foreshadows many of the invitations to meaning-making San Mao would proffer her audience through direct address in later writings. "My dear friends," she writes, "If you had passed through the Latin Quarter that night, in front of a quiet little place you might have seen a pair of young lovers embracing just as if they would never see each other again. In fact, that is how it was."<sup>188</sup> The story rejects a common romance trope, the happy ending, and the ambiguity of its final lines suggest the possibility of reading it as nonfiction, though the timeline of San Mao's travels in Europe make the story's setting, at least, unlikely to be inspired by an actual visit to Paris, as San Mao did not travel to Europe for the first time until 1967,<sup>189</sup> four years after "Autumn Love" was published.

Comparing "Autumn Love" to Chen Ping's later work as San Mao, we see traces of the San Mao style of quasi-autobiography. What's more, in addressing her unknown audience as "friends," and in seeming to assume they *could* have passed through the Latin Quarter at some time, we see, again, a pre-emergence of the structure of feeling to which her later success is attributable. Though when "Autumn Love" was written, San Mao had not yet traveled to Europe, her family had the means to help her do so; as she reported later in *Bei ying* 背影 [*Rear View*], during her inaugural trip to Europe in 1967, her father gave her a monthly allowance of US\$100 in Spain and US\$150 in Germany.<sup>190</sup> Though 24-year-old San Mao was somewhat unique in being able to make such a costly trip, as mentioned earlier, Taiwan's middle class was rapidly expanding during this period, meaning more and more young people yearned to be those "friends" San Mao addresses in "Autumn Love," familiar with the Latin Quarter and likely to

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<sup>188</sup> San Mao, *Yuji bu zailai* 雨季不再來 [*The Rainy Season Will Not Return*], 159.

<sup>189</sup> Lang, "Known World," 173.

<sup>190</sup> Lang, "Known World," 173.

have their own liaisons on the banks of the Seine. During this period, travel was restricted by martial law as well as by Taiwan's lack of international recognition, but obtaining a student visa was one way for young Taiwanese to take extended European trips.<sup>191</sup> From 1960 to 1979, 50,000 college graduates left Taiwan to pursue advanced studies overseas.<sup>192</sup> Additionally, from 1950-1974, 30,765 undergraduates were sent to the United States to study by Taiwan's government.<sup>193</sup> These numbers, while not insignificant, pale in comparison to current figures: the *Taipei Times* reports that in 2014 alone, just over 60,000 students from Taiwan studied abroad.<sup>194</sup> Clearly, Chen Ping's ability to go to Europe was unique as well as coveted.

Suffice it to say, in "Autumn Love" Chen Ping related a fantasy Europe. She would soon become one of the privileged few with access to that fantasy, but her own story is in direct tension with the path by which many other Taiwanese of her generation went to Europe. Miriam Lang notes that Chen Ping's choice to study in Spain, rather than in the United States, was unusual at the time, and may have been motivated in part by her lack of education credentials.<sup>195</sup> Additionally, by all indications, San Mao did not receive a degree as a result of her European studies, though she attended philosophy courses at Madrid University and philosophy and language courses at Freie Universitat in Berlin.<sup>196</sup> Williams argues that a structure of feeling "is a cultural hypothesis [...] [which has] a special relevance to art and literature, where the true social content is in a significant number of cases of this present and affective kind, which cannot

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<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>192</sup> Kwok, Viem, and Hayne Leland. "An Economic Model of the Brain Drain," *American Economic Review*, vol. 72, no. 1 (March 1982): 91.

<sup>193</sup> Shi Xiaolang. "The Return of the Westward Look: Overseas Chinese Student Literature in the Twentieth Century" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona, 2009), 11.

<sup>194</sup> Rachel Lin and Jake Chung. "More Students Going Abroad: Data." *Taipei Times*. March 4, 2014. <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2014/03/04/2003584849>

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>196</sup> Lang, "Known World," 171.

without loss be reduced to belief-systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships."<sup>197</sup> San Mao presented a world many readers did not have access to, due to their class status, Taiwan's political position, or both. Yet her tales of foreign adventure do not seem to have alienated lower-class readers; as Miriam Lang suggests, both San Mao and Qiong Yao strove to create "highly personalized relationships...between [themselves] and their readers" and that both particularly identified with readers who lacked a university education.<sup>198</sup> Thus, San Mao's privilege vis-à-vis readers did not preclude them from enjoyment of her works, due to the overriding strength of structure of feeling.

"Autumn Love" is a far cry from the burgeoning avant-garde style Chen Ping displayed in "Doubt," making its inclusion in the literary supplement of the mainstream *Central Daily News* unsurprising. What's more, its protagonist's concern with finding another Chinese person on foreign soil as the key to assuaging her loneliness and homesickness might have found a receptive editor at the *Central Daily News*, which received heavy investment from the KMT to ensure its continued replication of official ideology.<sup>199</sup> The *Central Daily News fukan* had also, according to Xiao Wei 肖偉, emulated the push for "literary quality" on the cultural pages that had been pioneered by Lin Haiyin at the *fukan* of *United Daily News*.<sup>200</sup> While its inclinations are toward introspection and angst, "Autumn Love" also displays some conventions of romance fiction -- the romantic encounter is cast as fated and life-changing; the couple exchange a symbolic token of flowers -- details that Miriam Lang points out are "reminiscent" of motifs

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<sup>197</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 133.

<sup>198</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 83.

<sup>199</sup> Chang, *Literary Culture in Taiwan: Martial Law to Market Law*, 146.

<sup>200</sup> Xiao Wei 肖偉, "Wenxue jingshen yu shidai xingge" 文學精神與時代性格 ["The Spirit of Literature and the Character of an Era"] *Taiwan yanjiu jikan* 台灣研究集刊 [*Taiwan Research Quarterly*] (2002.1): 68.

appearing in stories by Qiong Yao.<sup>201</sup> "Autumn Love" is a middlebrow story, the kind of accessible but studied writing suitable for inclusion in a mainstream *fukan*.

Within the year, San Mao had published another piece of short fiction, "Moon River" in *Crown* magazine.<sup>202</sup> Like "Autumn Love," "Moon River" takes a romantic encounter as its central concern, and casts a female artist as its protagonist.<sup>203</sup> However, "Moon River" has a heightened sense of disconnection and angst, and, like "Doubt," contains elements of the supernatural (fated love, premonitions). In addition, its conclusion, in which the protagonist imagines herself and her estranged love interest separated by the waters of the titular Moon River, alludes to the Chinese mythological figures *zhinü* 織女 (the weaver girl) and *niulang* 牛郎 (the cowherd), who were banished to opposite sides of the Milky Way. The lovers of the folktale are separated when the Goddess of Heaven discovers that *zhinü*, a fairy, has married and borne children with *niulang*, a mortal. As the story goes, once a year the world's magpies fly into Heaven to form a bridge so that the lovers may reunite for one night. In a postmodern twist, the conclusion of "Moon River" turns the folk tale on its ear: the protagonist, Lin Shan, recognizes that "the boat is on [her love interest's] side of the river," and he is unlikely to cross over to her again.<sup>204</sup> She imagines the two of them calling to one another across the Moon River, remarking that since the love interest has charge of the boat, her only option is to wait "for years and years." Drawing the story to a close, however, Lin Shan thinks, "Quite possibly, tomorrow I'll have a different outlook on life and the world."<sup>205</sup> Rather than hold stubbornly to the belief that she and her love interest were fated to be together -- despite the same "fate" leading him to graduate

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<sup>201</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 100.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> San Mao, *Yuji bu zailai* [*The Rainy Season Will Not Return*], 120-130.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

study in Canada, across a vast ocean from her -- Lin Shan accepts that tomorrow is another day, that perhaps she was mistaken about their "fated love." Thus, this story emphasizes not just the importance of finding a mate with which one's personality truly resonates, but also the danger in waiting for someone in the (possible mistaken) belief that fate has ordained it. As Lin Shan come to realize, the world keeps turning, and in romantic relationships, women do have agency.

In reimagining this folk tale, Chen Ping also obliquely argues for the importance of free choice (rather than family intervention) in romantic relationships: *zhiniü* and *niulang* were themselves in a love relationship not sanctioned by family (the Goddess of Heaven of the story is sometimes understood to be *zhiniü's* mother). This feature of the story echoes the concerns of Qiong Yao's *Outside the Window*: free romantic choice versus parental opposition. The way in which Chen Ping's protagonist initially pursues, then ultimately rejects, her counterpart after her contemplation about their lack of a profound connection also prefigures San Mao's famous romance with José and its presentation in terms of equality and understanding between the two.<sup>206</sup> Here also, we see the "deep starting-points" of a structure of feeling<sup>207</sup> linking San Mao and Qiong Yao, and linking the concerns or "emergent formations"<sup>208</sup> of Chen Ping's early work to her later articulation of them in a more solidified form as San Mao.

Though the budding relationship in "Moon River" is initially discussed in terms of "fate," the fated event ultimately turns out to be the protagonist's personal revelations, rather than a union with her male counterpart. This emphasis on individual agency in romance might have held particular appeal to readers coming of age in Taiwan in the late '60s: as Lin Fang-Mei

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<sup>206</sup> See, for example, the opening lines of "Baishou chengjia" 白手成家 ["From Empty Hands, a Home"] (Appendix A), in which San Mao writes that José was the only one of her "friends" to truly understand her longing for the desert.

<sup>207</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 134.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

reports, at the time only 12 percent of marriages in Taiwan were decided by husband and wife alone.<sup>209</sup> 39 percent were a "joint decision" between the couple and their parents, while 48 percent were decided solely by the parents -- a figure that had fallen 30 percent over the previous decade.<sup>210</sup> The concerns of "Moon River" also harken back to the May Fourth movement, with its opposition to arranged marriage and avowal of romantic love's "supremacy in the meaning of life."<sup>211</sup> The emphasis on careful consideration in choosing a partner as prefigures San Mao's romance with José, in that she famously rejected his first advances, seeing him as too young for her, only to reunite with and marry him six years later.

San Mao and José's relationship has been discussed and analyzed to the point that it has nearly become mythology, but as argued earlier, the role of José has often been misunderstood or overstated. He is often written of as a killjoy, short-tempered and intolerant of San Mao's whims, and often unsympathetic to, or even scornful of, the many downtrodden strangers San Mao is often compelled to help or at least pity; here, perhaps, he is a stand-in for the indifferent mainstream, "civilized" society with which San Mao so often expressed her frustration. Though José is often used for comic effect, his lack of sympathy and suspicion of strangers often also throws into strong relief San Mao's generosity and attempts to do good works -- perhaps further emphasizing what is often read as self-aggrandizement on San Mao's part. Thus José is both an integral part of the structure of feeling San Mao's work represents -- the partner chosen out of love and affinity, not family pressure or cultural concerns -- and in direct tension with it, as San

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<sup>209</sup> Lin Fang-Mei, "Social Change and Romantic Ideology: The Impact of The Publishing Industry, Family Organization, and Gender Roles on The Reception and Interpretation of Romance Fiction In Taiwan, 1960--1990" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 394. <http://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI9227710>

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Fan Ming-ju. "The Changing Concepts of Love: Fiction by Taiwan Women Writers" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1994), 52.

Mao's project of love for humanity, equality, and fellow feeling among strangers is frequently shown to test José's patience.

Further, as Miriam Lang points out, it is not just "the great, life-structuring love affair," with San Mao and Qiong Yao are concerned, but also the "romance of the everyday."<sup>212</sup> The plots of San Mao's desert stories generally revolve around her relationships with others, with appearances by José used to complicate or forestall the action. In "From Empty Hands, A Home" (see Appendix A), San Mao writes

José wasn't a romantic person, and in the desert I hadn't felt much stir of the "wind, flower, snow, and moon" sort of romance myself. What we most thought of was improving our surroundings, overcoming our material and spiritual suffering.<sup>213</sup>

In one attempt to alleviate "material suffering," the two sneak onto the grounds of the governor-general's home to dig flowers from his flower beds to decorate their home. Though José finds that three plants are enough, San Mao's appetite for green things has only just been whetted, and she insists they keep scavenging until they spot a guard approaching, at which time she entreats José to put his arms around her and kiss her, hiding the bag of plants safely between their bodies. This brief incident typifies the way Chen Ping dramatized the dynamics of San Mao and José's relationship. José emboldens San Mao to petty thievery -- sanctioning her actions by accompanying her on her sortie -- then attempts to reign in her impulsiveness. San Mao's stunt almost leads to negative consequences, but she saves the day with quick thinking, playing to the guard's assumption that José might have chosen the grounds of the

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<sup>212</sup> Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 87-88.

governor-general's house as a place to "make romance," as he puts it before sending the two on their way.<sup>214</sup>

The tenor of San Mao and José's marriage is on display here, but so are San Mao's sensual concerns, reflecting Williams's contention that the discovery of "specific articulations" through material practice bring about structures of feeling as more developed stages of "emergent formations."<sup>215</sup> San Mao's lovingly detailed descriptions of her material life in the desert provide the *feeling* with its *structure*. Feeling and sentiment are reflected in San Mao's practical, material concerns. Taiwan was, at this time, industrializing and moving to a market economy, with an ever-expanding middle class. As Fan Ming-ju remarks, women's work contributed greatly to Taiwan's economic miracle, and women who, like San Mao, came of age in the '60s and '70s had equal access to education under the law.<sup>216</sup> While women may have seen concomitant improvement in their own economic outlook, they also faced pressure from "conflicts stemming from the opposition of traditional and modern discourses."<sup>217</sup> For her part, San Mao offered her lifestyle as a full articulation of the "emergent formation" within such a conflict: an independently-chosen marriage based on romantic love. Meanwhile, San Mao, already comfortably middle class, both reflects economic privilege -- the privilege in having time and money to travel -- and diminishes its importance through her material practice, with her "trash to treasure" ethos and emphasis on personal expression.

"From Empty Hands, A Home" is a prime example of San Mao's descriptions of her desert lifestyle. The piece primarily concerns setting up housekeeping upon arrival in El-Aaiún, both in terms of creating a livable environment and getting to know the neighbors in the

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<sup>214</sup> San Mao, *Sahala de gushi* [*Stories of the Sahara*], 144-5.

<sup>215</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 134.

<sup>216</sup> Fan, "The Changing Concepts of Love," 27.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

"cemetery district," where José has chosen for them to live; owing to his position as an office worker, rather than a manager, his Spanish-owned company has not offered him employee residence hall accommodations.<sup>218</sup> To furnish their home, San Mao and José turn their rooftop terrace into a makeshift workshop, spending days in the desert sun, sawing and hammering wood San Mao has salvaged from a coffin shop to create their furniture. From a nearby garbage dump, San Mao gathers a rubber tire to make a chair, and a bicycle wheel to make a piece of what she dubs "pop art."<sup>219</sup> Her creativity is recognized first by a pair of European news service reporters, and then by a Dutch contractor, who goes so far as to photograph her home. Throughout the essay, San Mao emphasizes her own ingenuity not just in finding a use for discarded things, but in adding value to them through her deft touch. The point seems to be not simply accumulating material goods, but acquiring items that can be used to express herself creatively.

Miriam Lang has discussed the public's interest in San Mao's home decoration, noting that her home in Taipei was photographed for magazine spreads, and after her death, her family kept her house intact as a San Mao museum.<sup>220</sup> Lang notes that "[t]he 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."<sup>221</sup> While this is true, and while I, too, argue that the rise in Taiwan's middle class had a connection to San Mao's vast appeal, San Mao's impulse not just to decorate her home but to record its transformation in her essays speaks to something other than conspicuous consumption. In turning treasure to trash, San Mao

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<sup>218</sup> San Mao 三毛, *Sahala de gushi* [Stories of the Sahara], 151.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>220</sup> Lang, "Known World," 78, note 143.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

is rejecting the attitudes of women such as the Spanish wives of José's company's managers, who are aghast to learn San Mao lives "outside of town"; one of the wives remarks that she wouldn't venture there for fear of catching a disease from San Mao's Sahrawi neighbors.<sup>222</sup> In this clash of bohemian vs. bourgeois, San Mao, despite her middle class roots, comes out on the side of expressive freedom and, at the same time, advances her humanistic agenda by distancing herself from the Spanish wives who deny the locals' humanity.

Quoting Chris Rojek's research on women's self-expression in Victorian times, Miriam Lang finds a parallel between San Mao and Blixen et. al, via the Victorian thread, noting that Victorian women "were expected to cultivate gentility, comfort and security as a refuge from the vast, 'unnatural' external world of urban, impersonal bourgeois society."<sup>223</sup> Though I am somewhat uneasy about the basis of this comparison, since San Mao was not white, from a first-world nation, or writing in the first half of the 20th century, I agree that San Mao's nest building could be viewed as a rejection of "urban, impersonal bourgeois society" as epitomized by the Spanish wives she encounters, who at first receive her warmly, which San Mao remarks is because they know she has a higher educational background than they do. "What use are educational qualifications?" San Mao asks the reader rhetorically. After encountering these insular expatriate wives, San Mao vows never to move to town to live.<sup>224</sup> San Mao challenges these women's bourgeois concerns with educational attainment and physical comfort. She herself is certainly not unconcerned with education -- she studied languages in Europe, and a separate piece in *Stories of the Sahara* describes giving math, reading, and biology lessons to

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<sup>222</sup> Lang, "Known World," 78, note 143.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> San Mao, *Sahala de gushi* [*Stories of the Sahara*], 151.

the Sahrawi women in her neighborhood.<sup>225</sup> She is also interested in having a welcoming home in which to receive guests. But in all her activities, she writes of herself as following her own feelings and quest for personal expression and self-fulfillment, regardless of the monetary value of the ornaments in her home or of the status afforded by her (in fact relatively modest) educational attainment. San Mao presented to her readers in Taiwan a different way of being middle class, unfettered by societal expectations or, as mentioned earlier, by Taiwan's educational system. She also presented a different way of being a woman -- one in a freely-chosen romantic relationship, who is equally at home cooking Chinese food in the desert ("Chinese Restaurant,")<sup>226</sup> building furniture ("From Empty Hands, A Home"), and saving her husband from marauding desert thugs and quicksand ("Night on Yellow Mountain")<sup>227</sup>. These stories from her married life, full which richly describe her personal approach to the material world, do not depict San Mao as representing a particular social class, but rather as enacting a structure of feeling in which readers who dreamed of something beyond Taiwan's traditional expectations for romance, felt they belonged. In a few years, San Mao's Sahara reached a new set of readers in mainland China, uniting them with Taiwan readers in a shared structure of feeling.

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<sup>225</sup> San Mao, "Xuanhujishi" 懸壺濟世 ["Practicing Medicine to Help the Poor"] *Sahala de gushi* [Stories of the Sahara], 16-23.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., *Sahala de gushi*, 1-5.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 32-44.

## 4.2 SAN MAO FEVER IN MAINLAND CHINA

On December 16, 1978, U.S. President Jimmy Carter announced that the United States had shifted its official recognition of "China" from Taipei to Beijing. On New Year's Day 1979, the mainland began sowing seeds for reunification with its "Message to Taiwan Compatriots," which called for cross-strait negotiations.<sup>228</sup> The Beijing leadership identified literature as an invaluable tool for bringing Taiwan back into the fold, and set about pushing for inclusion of Taiwan writers in mainland literary magazines.<sup>229</sup>

Initially, mainland-born Taiwan Modernists such as Nie Hualing 聶華苓 and Pai Hsien-yung, who were seen as having inherited the May Fourth modernist tradition, were most championed.<sup>230</sup> Soon, though, owing to "the inherent ambiguity of modernist writing," preference was given to Taiwan's Nativists, such as Chen Yingzhen 陳映真 and Wang Tuoh 王拓, whose work, it was felt, more closely resembled socialist realism.<sup>231</sup> Economic liberalization quickly led to a rise in commercial publishing, and popular Taiwan writers such as Qiong Yao and San Mao made their first appearances on the mainland in the late 1970s or early 1980s.<sup>232</sup>

San Mao and Qiong Yao's first publications in mainland China are hard to trace, Qian Ying writes, because while officially sanctioned Taiwan writers like Nie Hualing and Pai Hsien-yung were printed by large publishers in Beijing and Shanghai, San Mao and Qiong Yao's work was initially put out by "periphery publishing houses" in Fujian and Guangdong, who had the

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<sup>228</sup> Ying Qian. "Reception of Taiwan Literature in 1980s Mainland," 2.  
<https://www.soas.ac.uk/taiwanstudies/eats/eats2007/file38478.pdf>

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. 2, 5

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 4.

advantage of geographic proximity to and cultural contact with Taiwan and Hong Kong.<sup>233</sup> Qian suggests Qiong Yao was likely published by one of such companies prior to 1980, as Nie Hualing was asked about Qiong Yao's work when she visited mainland China to lecture in 1980 (she responded with a disdainful assessment of Qiong Yao's literary worth and influence on young readers).<sup>234</sup> As for San Mao, her first appearance in a mainland magazine was the short story "Qingcheng" 傾城 ["Taking the City"], a tale of the difficulties she encountered traveling to east Berlin with a Taiwan passport, which appeared in the magazine *Haixia* 海峽 [*The Strait*] in February 1982.<sup>235</sup>

It was not until 1984 that San Mao's works were published in official editions in mainland China by *Youyi chubangongsi* 友誼出版公司 [Friendship Publishing Company].<sup>236</sup> According to Wen En-zhu 文恩珠, the works were immediately successful, so much so that other publishing houses clamored to put out their own editions.<sup>237</sup> "San Mao Fever" in mainland China was part of a general "Culture Fever" that emerged after Deng Xiaoping announced his "Reform and Opening" policy in late 1978.<sup>238</sup> Wu Huashan 吳華山 writes that at that time, China had "just escaped from the cultural starvation of the Cultural Revolution, and inevitably headed toward the summit of reading. San Mao Fever wasn't independent; at the same time emerged 'Aesthetics Fever,' 'Literature Fever,' etc...this was a transition period from a time without books to a time when people swarmed to books."<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>234</sup> Qian, "Reception of Taiwan Literature," 10.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>236</sup> Wen En-zhu 文恩珠, "San mao xianxiang" 三毛現象 ["San Mao Phenomenon"] *Zuojia zuopin xin lun* 作家作品新論, 2010, no.9: 37.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Wu, "Discussing Invisible Elements," 36.

Ying Qian links the popularity of Qiong Yao to the lingering effects of the Cultural Revolution, which came to an end in 1976, noting that at this time, "people were completing the odyssey [back] to the domestic space. After the Cultural Revolution, urban youth who had been sent to the countryside gradually returned to their home cities. Many were still single, their chances for marriage having been affected by politically unfavorable family backgrounds and involuntary job assignments."<sup>240</sup> Housing shortages meant many of these young people returned to live with their parents; combined with a "lack of material well-being," many families found their relationships strained.<sup>241</sup> Qiong Yao's works, many of which addressed intergenerational relationships, may have found a sympathetic audience.

As for San Mao, regarding her first publication in the mainland, "Qingcheng" 傾城 ["Taking the City"], Ying Qian sees an immediate point of resonance with mainland youth. In the story, San Mao describes herself studying German in Berlin, diligent to the point of exhaustion, living a life of material deprivation because she feels that to do anything less would dishonor her parents. Qian suggests that while the reopening of mainland universities in the late 1970s brought optimism, this was accompanied by great stress as students sought to "prepare for the Future [and fulfill] one's responsibilities to the Past."<sup>242</sup> Probing further, Qian finds that San Mao's insistent questioning of "generational, national and social expectations on young people" caused her work to be enthusiastically received.<sup>243</sup> As testament, Qian points to a letter San Mao responded to in her advice column in *Qingnian wenzhai* 青年文摘 [*Youth Digest*], in which she told a distressed young woman that the meaning of life is ""to find authentic freedom," and then

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<sup>240</sup> Qian, "Reception of Taiwan Literature," 13.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 17.

enjoy life."<sup>244</sup> San Mao suggests that the reader move toward this goal by redecorating their rooms with handmade curtains, buying inexpensive new dresses, or changing her hairstyle.<sup>245</sup> While this could sound frivolous, Ying Qian reminds us that young people who had grown up seeing, or had themselves worn, the drab uniforms of the Cultural Revolution, may have welcomed someone like San Mao who sanctioned the transformative power of bright colors.<sup>246</sup> Qian remarks that San Mao's and Qiong Yao's descriptions of clothing became used as guidebooks for Chinese youth eager to "experiment with color."<sup>247</sup> This echoes Taiwan readers' interest in San Mao's home decoration. As opportunities for consumption and the ability to consume increased on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, there was a parallel yearning toward consumption as a means of self-expression, and to this impulse, San Mao offered both her endorsement and her instruction.

Wen En-zhu suggests that young people were most affected by San Mao, both by her work itself and by her "outlook on life" and her fashion sense.<sup>248</sup> Above all, Wen writes, San Mao's life of travel and freedom attracted mainland readers: "People fervently longed for freedom, longed for the kind of romantic love that San Mao had experienced; this inspired people to long for the freedom to chase after romance and love, to the extent that many young people imitated San Mao's graceful, flowing black hairstyle, setting off a long hair trend."<sup>249</sup> Qian Ying also observes that while Qiong Yao's novels embraced a middle class aesthetic of "mansions, cars, and wool winter jackets," San Mao was the bohemian alternative, providing a

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>248</sup> Wen, "San mao xianxiang," 37.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

model of "simple grace achieved by creativity and spiritual freedom rather than by wealth."<sup>250</sup> Wen En-zhu adds, "With her profound wandering, her bohemian spirit, San Mao was the idol of Chinese people of [the 1980s]. For her readers, her literary works were like a spiritual sustenance."<sup>251</sup> For Raymond Williams, structures of feeling offer "the sense of a generation or period."<sup>252</sup> Wen En-zhu's commentary suggests that San Mao's mainland readers were part of a generation characterized by longing for freedom to go after the types of experiences San Mao described in her work.

Wen delineates three different "San Mao Fevers" in mainland China. The first came with the 1984 publication of all of the books San Mao had previously published in Taiwan.<sup>253</sup> The second fever came immediately after San Mao's shocking suicide in January 1991; Wen reports that stores sold out of San Mao's books in the days following her death.<sup>254</sup> The third wave of San Mao Fever came in 1996 when China's *Yangcheng Evening News* began publishing reports by Ma Zhongxin on his fact-finding mission to retrace San Mao's steps in Spain, the Sahara, and the Canaries, through which he sought "the truth" about San Mao's relationship with José, and subsequently cast doubt on many of her reports of "desert life" written more than 20 years earlier. Wen notes that this new scrutiny of San Mao's work provoked an immediate reaction among readers, igniting discussions about the "truthfulness" of San Mao's travel writings and debates about her personal character.<sup>255</sup> This third wave of San Mao Fever presumably led old fans to turn to their copies of San Mao's work to compare what they remember reading to Ma

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<sup>250</sup> Qian, "Reception of Taiwan Literature," 18.

<sup>251</sup> Wen, "San mao xianxiang," 37.

<sup>252</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 131.

<sup>253</sup> Wen, "San mao xianxiang," 37.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 38.

Zhongxin's findings, as well as inspiring the uninitiated to purchase their own copies of San Mao's books so that they might participate in the conversation.

One debate over San Mao took place in 1991 on the pages of *Beijing qingnianbao* 北京青年报 [*Beijing Youth News*], published by the Beijing Municipal Communist Party Youth League.<sup>256</sup> The editors of the newspaper asked readers to weigh in on two quotations, one by San Mao, the other by Jiao Yulu 焦裕禄 (1922-1964), a Communist party secretary who had died from cancer and overwork, but whose image was resurrected in 1990 as part of a campaign "aimed at reconciling the masses with the party by convincing them that there are -- or at least were -- good and incorruptible cadres."<sup>257</sup> Readers were asked to write in and answer the question "Which Would You Choose?" regarding the following quotations:

In his heart he had a place for all the People, but no room for himself (Jiao Yulu).

If you give everything to others, you will realize you've spent your life abusing one person: yourself (San Mao).<sup>258</sup>

The aim of the survey was to contrast Jiao's martyrdom for the People with, as Geremie Barmé puts it, "the self-interested egotism of a bourgeois writer who killed herself for no socially significant reason."<sup>259</sup> Naturally, the paper printed more of those letters that extolled Jiao's commitment to the Party and the People, and his good works; however, one of the printed letters observed that Jiao Yulu was a good man, but not an appropriate role model for modern youth since "He made life such a chore"; another asked "How can you ask us to make such a simplistic choice when we are faced by such complex realities?"<sup>260</sup> After analyzing hundreds of letters,

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<sup>256</sup> Barmé, Geremie R., *In the Red* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 109.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-8.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 110. Barmé's translations.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

Zhang Qian, a commentator from Beijing Youth Political College, lamented that most correspondents who chose Jiao "rationalize[d] their choice in general 'humanist' terms. They evaluate him from various angles: 'love,' 'conscience,' and 'self-fulfillment.'"<sup>261</sup> These "humanist" considerations, Barmé notes, were "anathema to official class-based party propaganda."<sup>262</sup> Interestingly, they are also the same criteria that might be used in evaluating San Mao, as "love," "conscience," and "self-fulfillment" could be said to be guiding principles underlining her work to which readers responded enthusiastically.

Another important element of the "San Mao Phenomenon" of 1980s mainland China was San Mao's identity as a citizen of Taiwan. In her writing, San Mao consistently refers to herself as "Chinese," i.e. a subject of the Republic of China government; the closest she comes to taking a political stand might be when she expresses mild annoyance at an East German border guard who tells her "We don't acknowledge you [Taiwan]."<sup>263</sup> Born in the mainland, raised in Taiwan, San Mao could appeal to readers in different parts of the Chinese-speaking world. And for mainland readers, her deeply personal writings may have offered a window into the Taiwanese psyche. As Wen En-zhu writes, "Readers weren't just curious about the gorgeous, colorful world San Mao's pen described, full of strange atmosphere and unusual customs, but about San Mao's Taiwan identity. At that time China and Taiwan were still cut off from one another -- how did people across the Strait live? Were their thoughts and feelings totally different from mainlanders? This is what people were curious about."<sup>264</sup> Further, as Miriam Lang notes

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>263</sup> San Mao 三毛, *Qingcheng* 傾城 [*Taking the City*], 235, qtd. in Lang, Miriam. "San Mao and the Known World," 172. Lang's translation.

<sup>264</sup> Wen, "San mao xianxiang," 38.

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. Like the [Taiwan] singer Teresa Teng [Deng Lijun 鄧麗君], San Mao appeared as an ostensibly independent figure of glamour [sic], 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.<sup>265</sup>

According to Wen En-zhu, the 1980s in China was "a period when thought was stuck between being liberated and not-yet liberated...in which the fetters and misgivings created by the time, and by politics, had not yet crumbled away."<sup>266</sup> The literary world was still "trembling" from attempts to shake off those fetters, Wen writes, and so San Mao's publication was an "unexpected surprise" in that her books were not heavy historical treatises or self-righteous sermons, but rather easy-reading works that allowed readers to feel they were following in the writer-narrator's footsteps.<sup>267</sup> Wen gives credence to the appeal of San Mao's simple narrative style, but also suggests that the era in which San Mao's independent spirit appeared was critical to her popularity: "If a writer similar to San Mao appeared with a similar style of article today, she probably would not be able to inspire the same reaction."<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Lang, "Known World," 45.

<sup>266</sup> Wen, "San mao xianxiang," 38.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. The opinion that San Mao might not cause such a "fever" if her work appeared on the scene today has been echoed by many people who have given me informal feedback on this project: some have noted that the ability to travel the world is taken for granted by many Chinese and Taiwanese today, while others have suggested that by Western standards, San Mao's life of romantic love and adventure was never anything special. "You have to look at San Mao through Eastern eyes to understand what she meant to people of the time," is how one acquaintance put it.

Like readers in Taiwan, mainland readers, who were late to catch San Mao Fever, seem to have seen her San Mao as both exceptional and down-to-earth. Mainland writer Chen Binbin 陳彬彬 comments that Qiong Yao "unit[ed] Taiwan and the mainland through feeling,"<sup>269</sup> and in Miriam Lang's estimation, San Mao's stories of interest in the dispossessed, which positioned her as "a representative of Chinese culture in a wider world" created a similar cross-Strait "union of feeling."<sup>270</sup> Both comments hint at what I have attempted to argue here, that despite their different economic and sociopolitical trajectories, readers on both sides of the Taiwan Strait responded to San Mao due to a share structure of feeling. Though to my knowledge, San Mao has not been the subject of an extended reader response study, there is copious anecdotal evidence to suggest that the worldview she espoused in her writings provided real motivation, and not just the aforementioned "spiritual sustenance,"<sup>271</sup> to some readers. To offer one rather high-profile example, Chai Ling 柴玲, a leader in China's 1989 student movement, said that San Mao's "love for humanity" had inspired her to join the democracy movement.<sup>272</sup> To critics outside the structure of feeling shared by San Mao and her readers, though, what this writer offered was not a beacon of freedom and free-expression, but a self-indulgent, narcissistic mirage.

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<sup>269</sup> qtd. in Lang, "San Mao and Qiong Yao," 81.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Wen, "San mao xianxiang," 37.

<sup>272</sup> Lang, "Known World," 7.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

"[T]he making of art is never itself in the past tense," Raymond Williams writes. "It is always a formative process, within a specific present."<sup>273</sup> Williams devised the term "structures of feeling" to account for this "undeniable experience of the present," the incubation period before experiences transform into identifiable social forms. Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to contextualize San Mao in her own present tense, to describe the structures of feeling that I believe accounted for the intense enthusiasm readers in both Taiwan and mainland China felt for this enigmatic writer. Though San Mao has been viewed as an unorthodox, enigmatic individual, her persona was only one half of the recipe for her great success, with the other being the particular economic and sociopolitical context in which her readers lived -- and dreamed. By focusing on structures of feeling, I have attempted to describe "a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange."<sup>274</sup> It is my contention that San Mao's work was so popular because it gave voice to an underlying desire for freedom, equality, and self-expression shared by her devoted readers.

San Mao's work continues to attract such readers. Wen En-zhu writes that in the years up to 2007, Beijing October Literary Publisher (*Beijing Shiyue Chubanshe* 北京十月出版社) had

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<sup>273</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 129.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

printed at least 100,000 copies of San Mao's complete works, and that in a poll of China's favorite writers, San Mao came in sixth, directly behind Li Bai.<sup>275</sup> In 1991, 20 years after San Mao's death, Crown Culture Limited Company reprinted a new edition of 11 of her works. Since its initial publication in 1976, one of those works, *Stories of the Sahara*, has sold over 10 million copies in Taiwan and mainland China.<sup>276</sup>

Despite never being translated into English in her lifetime, a quick search for "San Mao" online will reveal many fervent tributes to her in English -- and far more can be found, of course, by searching her name in Chinese. Fan-produced slideshows of San Mao, set to pop songs whose lyrics she wrote, are easy to find on YouTube, and some have attracted millions of hits.<sup>277</sup> As recently as April 2016, San Mao's brother and sister were interviewed for the mainland Chinese television magazine *Luyu youyue* 魯豫有約 [*A Date with Luyu*], hosted by journalist Chen Lu-yu 陳魯豫, who has written about her own adoration of San Mao.<sup>278</sup> There is no doubt that the San Mao legend persists.

Raymond Williams writes, "Perhaps the dead can be reduced to fixed forms, though their records are against it."<sup>279</sup> Many critics have pointed out San Mao's inconsistencies (or hypocrisies), and some have gone to great lengths to disprove her personal "truth" as expressed in her writings. Yet none of these attempts to, in effect, reduce her to one of Williams's "fixed forms" seem to have had a lasting effect. Readers in Taiwan and China are much more able to

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<sup>275</sup> Wen En-zhu, "San mao xianxiang," 37.

<sup>276</sup> Taiwan Ministry of Culture. "Stories of the Sahara." *Books From Taiwan*.  
[http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/images/books\\_img/STORIESOFTHESAHARA.pdf](http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/images/books_img/STORIESOFTHESAHARA.pdf) (Accessed February 12, 2017).

<sup>277</sup> For example, a slideshow set to the folk pop song "Olive Tree" (sung by Qi Yu 齊豫), for which San Mao wrote the lyrics, has received over two million views and nearly 500 comments since 2007.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrjQmZ8t8nQ&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed January 6, 2017).

<sup>278</sup> See, for example, Chen Lu-yu 陳魯豫 "Wo ai san mao" 我愛三毛 ["I Love San Mao"], *Zhongxuesheng* 中學生 no. 2 (2010): 54.

<sup>279</sup> Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 129.

travel now than they would have been when San Mao first began writing, yet her books continue to sell and attract new readers, perhaps proving that it was not simply tales of foreign lands and people that were San Mao's major selling point, but the feeling and sentiment that inspired such voyages. Further, an upcoming reincarnation of San Mao, the first English translation of *Stories of the Sahara*, could attract an entirely new set of readers. According to Taiwan's Ministry of Culture, an English translation of *Stories of the Sahara* has been completed by Canaan Morse (translator of Ge Fei 格非 and others), with world English rights sold to Bloomsbury<sup>280</sup> -- meaning San Mao may soon be introduced to a new generation of readers. The Fundacio Institut Confuci de Barcelona (Confucius Institute of Barcelona)'s webpage reports that new editions in both Catalan and Castilian are imminent.<sup>281</sup>

"A free and easy lifestyle, in my understanding of it, is the civilization of the spirit," San Mao writes in "From Empty Hands, A Home"; such sentiments would not seem to have an expiration date. That there is new interest in bringing San Mao's Sahara stories to a fresh audience more than 40 years after they were written may indicate the existence of a parallel structure of feeling among, at least, the English-language editors banking on San Mao's popularity in translation. San Mao has been an oasis for her readers in the Chinese-speaking world for over 40 years now, and has provided fertile ground for scholarship and debate. In our current era of globalization, questions of ethnic and national identity are as present now as they were during the age of San Mao Fever, as are concerns about globalization's effect on human

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<sup>280</sup> Taiwan Ministry of Culture. "Stories of the Sahara." *Books From Taiwan*.

[http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/images/books\\_img/STORIESOFTHESAHARA.pdf](http://booksfromtaiwan.tw/images/books_img/STORIESOFTHESAHARA.pdf) (Accessed February 12, 2017).

<sup>281</sup> Fundacio Institut Confuci de Barcelona [Confucius Institute of Barcelona]. "San Mao, un clasico del siglo XX. Presentacion y mesa redonda del libro *Diarios del Sahara*." ["San Mao, a classic of the twentieth century. Presentation and roundtable discussion of the book *Sahara Diaries*."] *Publicado el Miercoles*. Published 19 October 2016. Retrieved 1 January 2017.

society. Such concerns are omnipresent in San Mao's writing, though she may not have approached them directly or in an overly intellectual or academic way. Readers who encounter San Mao in contemporary translation may find her simple, straightforward impressions of desert life to be a refreshing oasis.

## APPENDIX A

### "FROM EMPTY HANDS, A HOME" (TRANSLATION)

Actually, the one who originally insisted on going to the Sahara was me, not José.

Later, we stayed so long for José, not for me. Half a lifetime, I'd floated through many countries. Highly-civilized societies, I'd lived in them, and understood them thoroughly -- I'd tried that enough. It's not that I wasn't changed by them -- my lifestyle had to some degree felt their influence. But all along, I'd never been in a fixed place, never really given my heart to the city I lived in.

I don't remember when it was that I flipped through the American magazine American magazine *National Geographic*, an issue that happened to introduce the Sahara Desert. Just looking at it once, I got this nearly indescribable feeling, like nostalgia for a previous incarnation of myself. It was as if I'd lived on that land in a previous life. Ineffable, this feeling that I'd retained some memory of this strange bit of earth.

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In 1974, I had returned to Spain and settled on a place to live. Knowing Spain still held a 280,000 square kilometer territory in the Western Sahara, my longing to rush off to that desert

came back to gnaw at me again. Among the people who knew me, this kind of mood was generally seen as a joke. I often said, *I think I'll go to the desert for a while*, but nobody thought I was serious. Among the people who knew me, this kind of mood of mine was usually seen as a joke.

But there were also friends who better understood me, and explained away my yearning for the desert as a way to reject the world for a monastic life -- a self-exile, going and never coming back -- but this was incorrect, too.

Luckily, the way others analyzed me had nothing to do with me at all.

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I planned my time for myself, and prepared to live in the desert for one year. Other than my father, who encouraged me, I only had one other friend who didn't laugh at me, try to keep me from going, or stand in my way at all. He just silently packed a bag, and went off ahead of me, to work in a desert phosphate mining company. After everything was settled, he waited for me to travel around Africa by myself until he could look after me. He knew I was a willful and obstinate female, who wasn't going to change her plans.

This person endured hardships in the desert for love, and so my heart decided I'd roam the rest of my life, to the ends of the earth, with him.

That person is now my husband: José.

That was all old business that happened two years ago.

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After José went to the desert, I finished up a few trifling tasks, and said goodbye to no one. Before getting on the plane, I left a letter and the rent for the three Spanish women who shared an apartment with me. Coming outside and shutting the door, I was also shutting off my

old familiar lifestyle, and rushing to face a vast, unfamiliar desert.

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When the plane landed at the prefab hangar of the El-Aaiún airport, I finally saw José, whom I'd been separated from for three months. That day, he was wearing a khaki shirt, like a military uniform, and long jeans. He gave my arm a vigorous hug. His hands had grown rough, and his hair and beard were completely covered in yellow dust. The wind had blown his face a scorched red; his lips were dry and cracked, but his gaze seemed to betray a hidden suffering.

I saw that in this short amount of time, both his exterior appearance and his expression had undergone a violent change. It made my heart throb in pain.

It wasn't until then that I realized, the life I was about to be confronted with would be an ordeal, not the naive romantic fantasy I'd imagined.

Emerging from the airport, I felt my heart beating faster; it was hard to control my excitement. Half a lifetime of nostalgia, of one day wanting to return to this land I felt I knew; my thoughts and feelings couldn't really be my own.

The Sahara Desert had for years been my fantasy lover, deep down in my heart!

I raised my eyes to look out on the boundless yellow sand, lonesome gales sobbing across it. The sky was high; the earth, deep and majestic, but peaceful.

It was just nightfall. The setting sun dyed the desert blood red, frigidly terrible, horrifying. It was nearing early winter. I had imagined blistering, scorching sun. Compared with this expectation, the earth seemed poetically desolate.

José waited patiently for me. I looked at him a moment.

He said, "Your desert. Now you're in its embrace."

I nodded my head, my throat full.

"Stranger, let's go!"

José had started calling me this name years before. It wasn't because Camus' novel was so popular then; it was because in my opinion, "Stranger" was a perfect nickname.

It's because I've always felt like I'm not really a part of all the living things in this world. I always want to run away from the average person's way of thinking, and do things for which I don't really have an explanation.

Now the airport was totally empty. The few people who'd gotten off the plane were already gone.

José hoisted up my big trunk; I carried my backpack and a pillowcase, and followed him out.

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From the airport to the rented house where José had already lived for half a month was a bit of a distance. As soon as we got on the road, since my trunk and all my books and papers were heavy, we walked slowly. At the sides of the road, from time to time we'd see a car or two, and would reach out a hand to hitch a ride, but no one would stop. After we'd walked almost forty minutes, we came down a slope and onto hard-top. Only then could we see houses and smoke from chimneys.

José called into the wind, "Look. This is the outskirts of El-Aaiún town. Our home is down there."

Far from the road we were walking on were dozens of big, raggedy tents, and a few tin-roofed huts. On the dunes were a few camels and some herds of mountain goats.

The first time I saw the indigenous people wearing their deep-blue cloth, for me, this was like entering a fantasy land in another world.

The wind brought the sound of little girls laughing as they played games.

Any place with people always has an indescribable liveliness and interest.

Life, in this kind of desolate, backward, and poor place, was still growing and thriving all the same; it wasn't struggling to survive. For residents of the desert, being born, living, growing old, and dying here all seemed natural. I stood looking at the smoke as it rose serenely and gracefully.

A free and easy lifestyle, in my understanding of it, is civilization of the spirit.

Finally, we came to a long street. On each side of the street, a few square cinderblock houses were scattered beneath a setting sun.

I took special notice of the last house in one row, a small one with a big arched door. My intuition told me this one was definitely mine.

As expected, José turned and walked over to that house. Sweating profusely, he set my big trunk in the doorway and said, "We made it. This is home."

Directly facing this house was a huge garbage dump, and beyond that was a valley of sand, like a wave. In the distance was the expanse of sky.

Behind the house was a big hill, with no sand, but a big piece of hard rock and hard earth. I didn't see anyone in the neighboring houses. There was only the wind unceasingly, fiercely blowing my hair and my long skirt.

José opened the door, and I set down my heavy backpack.

A short hallway appeared in the dimness before my eyes.

José picked me up from behind. He said, "I'll carry you into our first house. From today on, you're my wife."

This was the combination of something ordinary and profound. Never before had I

ardently loved José, but all the same, I felt completely blessed and comfortable.

José took four big steps, and with that he had walked the length of the hallway. I raised my eyes to take in the square opening at the middle of the house. Outside this opening was the dove gray sky.

I struggled to get down from José's arms, dropped the pillowcase from my hand, and immediately went to look at the rooms.

I actually didn't need to walk around; with this house, I could just stand in the middle, and everything was obvious at a glance.

The larger room faced the street. I went to walk across it. It was four paces wide and five paces long.

The other room was so small that after having a bed put in it, there was only the space around the doorway, and another shoulder-wide horizontal space.

The kitchen was the size of four sheets of newsprint, and had a cracked yellow sink and a cement counter.

The bathroom had a flush toilet but no water tank, a small sink for face-washing, and, to one's amazement, a big white bathtub. It was a total Dada piece, completely impractical to use -- just a sculpture.

Finally, I wanted to go out onto the stone steps outside the kitchen and bathroom, just to see where they went. José said, "You don't need to go look. Down there is a shared balcony. You can have a look tomorrow. A few days ago I bought a nanny goat, and put her there with the goats the landlord's raising. Soon we'll have goat milk to drink."

Hearing that we had a goat was an unexpected surprise. José pressed me to tell him my impression of the house.

I heard my voice, which seemed nervous and artificial, answer him, "It's great. I like it. Really. We'll fix it up little by little."

When I said this, I was still doing my best to take in everything. The floor was unevenly laid cement; the walls were unpainted gray cinder blocks whose tops hadn't even been painted over with lime, so you could see the naked seams between each block.

Lifting my head to look, I saw a small bare bulb, with houseflies covering the wire. The top left corner of the wall had a hole in it, and the wind blew in without stopping. Opening the tap, the few drops of liquid that flowed out were deep green, without a drop of water. I looked at the roof, which seemed on the verge of collapse, and asked José, "How much is one month's rent here?"

"10,000, not including water and electricity." This was about seven thousand Taiwan dollars.

"Is water expensive?" I asked.

"To fill up one gasoline barrel is ninety dollars," José told me. "Tomorrow I'll apply for the city to deliver water."

I sat desolately on my trunk, without saying anything.

"OK, let's hurry into town to buy a refrigerator, get some food, and all our life's problems will be solved."

I promptly picked up my pillowcase and followed him out the door.

There were houses on this road, sand dunes, a cemetery, gas stations. We walked until the sky was almost completely dark, until we finally saw the lights of the town.

"Here's the bank, there's the city government, the court is to your right, the post office is in its downstairs, there are lots of stores, our company's chief offices are that row of buildings up

ahead, the place with the green light is a bar, the place with its outside painted yellow is the movie theater -- "

"That row of apartments is so neat. Who lives there?" I asked. "Look, that big white house has trees growing in there, and a swimming pool -- I hear music coming out of that window with the white gauze curtain -- is that big building also a bar?"

"The apartment block is a dormitory for high officials, the white house is the governor-general's residence -- of course there's flowers -- the music you hear is the officers' club."

"Whoa, there's an Islamic imperial palace, José, look!"

"That's an international hotel, four stars, visitors of the government stay there. It's not a palace."

"Where do the Sahara natives live? I've seen a lot of them."

"They live in town, out of town, both. The neighborhood where we live is called the cemetery district, so in the future if you need a taxi, tell them that."

"There are taxis?"

"Yes, and they're all Benzes. In a minute, after we've bought everything, we'll call one to take us back."

We went to a variety store, where we bought a tiny refrigerator, a frozen chicken a gas stove, and a blanket.

"I didn't handle these things ahead of time, because I was afraid what I'd buy wouldn't be to your liking," José explained in a low voice. "Now, I can let you pick."

What could I pick? This store only sold one small refrigerator, and all the stoves were the same; thinking again of the dull gray house we'd rented, I had absolutely no interest in anything. When we went to pay, I opened the pillowcase and said, "We're not yet married. I'll pay part."

This was an old habit from when José and I were just friends -- we'd always share the cost.

José didn't know what this thing I'd been carrying in my hand was. He craned his neck to have a look, and with an exclamation of surprise, he clasped the pillowcase to his chest with one hand, and thrust another into his pocket to get enough money to pay the bill in its entirety.

He waited until we were outside to ask me calmly, "Where did you get that much money? And how could you carry it around in a pillowcase without telling me?"

"My dad gave it to me, and I brought it with me."

José looked displeased without saying anything. In the wind, I stared back at him.

"I thought -- I thought, you couldn't get used to living in the desert, and after you were done with your trip, I'd resign my position, and we'd leave together!" José said.

"Why? What have I complained about? Why would you want to resign?"

José slapped the pillowcase, and chuckled patiently.

"You coming to the Sahara is a stubborn on the outside, romantic on the inside kind of business. You'll quickly come to loathe the desert. With that kind of money, your days won't need to be spent like other people's."

"The money isn't mine. It's my father's. I don't need it."

"That's good. Early tomorrow morning, we'll go deposit it in the bank. You -- from this day on, use the salary I earn for spending money; in any case, we can keep going."

I heard what he said, and almost became furious. We'd known each other this many years, I'd traveled this many countries on my own, but just because of this little bit of money, in his eyes I was just a flighty, vain woman. I wanted to strike back at him, but I didn't open my

mouth. I thought, I'd just have to prove myself to him from now on. Right now, talking about it more would just be a wasted argument.

Then, that first Friday night, I really rode in a Benz back to my home in the cemetery district.

The first night in the desert, I retreated into my sleeping bag, and José wrapped himself in the thin blanket. In the nearly zero degree weather, we just had a canvas tent to cover the floor, and shivered until daybreak.

Early Saturday morning, we went to the courthouse to put in our marriage application, and bought an unreasonably expensive mattress. A bed frame was something only to be dreamed of.

While José was at the city government applying for water delivery, I went to buy five big woven mats of the kind the Sahrawi people used, a pot, four plates, two forks and two spoons. As for knives, the two of us together had eleven that could be used as vegetable knives, so I didn't buy any more. I also bought a bucket, a broom, a scrub brush, clothespins, oil rice sugar vinegar...

Things were so expensive they made you downhearted. I held the thin stack of money José had given me, and didn't dare buy anything else.

My father's money, which I had wired back to the Central Bank of the Republic of China, couldn't be put to use for half a year. The interest rate was 0.46.

Returning home at midday, we went to pay a visit to the landlord. He was a generous Sahrawi, or at least my first impression of him was as a good guy.

We borrowed half a barrel of water from him. José cleaned the filth out of the water barrel on the roof. First, I steamed a fish. When the rice was hot, I dumped it out and used the

same pot to cook half a chicken.

When we were sitting on the straw mats eating, José said, "Did you put salt in the rice?"

"No, I used the water we borrowed from the landlord."

It was then that we realized, El-Aaiún's water was taken from a deep well, and was salt water, not fresh water.

José usually ate at the company, so he naturally wouldn't have thought about this.

That house, even though we'd bought quite a few things, all you could see were the mats spread on the floor. We spent the whole weekend cleaning. Soon, Sahrawi children were gathered around our skylight, poking their heads in and making weird, groaning cries.

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Sunday evening, José had to leave home to go to the phosphate ore construction site. I asked if he'd be coming back the next afternoon, and he said he would; the place where he worked was about a 100-kilometer roundtrip from the house we'd rented.

That house only had a man living there on the weekend. On usual days, as soon as José got off work, the sky was already dark, and he took a shuttle bus to the workers' dorm. In the daytime I'd go into town, and in the afternoon, if it wasn't hot, Sahrawi neighbors would come to visit me.

The marriage documents were slow to arrange. I became acquainted with a retired officer of the Spanish Legion, whose introduction helped me be able to hitch a ride with the truck that sold water, so I could go dashing across hundreds of kilometers of the nearby desert, in the evening sleeping alone in a tent near the nomadic people. Because of the care of that commanding officer, no one dared bother me. I'd often carry sugar, nylon string, medicine, cigarettes, and other such things to give to the desert inhabitants, who had nothing.

It was only deep in the desert, watching the rising and setting sun, with a herd of antelope sprinting through the scenery, that my heart could forget the arduous monotony of normal life. In this way, I passed the two months before we married, often leaving town to travel.

When our preparations for marriage had been announced to the court of the district where we used to live in Madrid, I knew I would soon really settle down.

Home, also suddenly became a place I could not leave.

That mountain goat of ours, every time I grabbed her to milk, she'd jump and jab me with her horns; every day I had to buy a lot of grass and wheat to give her to eat. The landlord was still upset we'd borrowed his goat pen.

Sometimes, I went rather late, and the goat milk had already been completely milked out by the landlord's wife. I desperately wanted to love this goat, but she never really took to me or to José, so in the end we gave her to the landlord, rather than keep trying to force her.

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In the short period before we got married, in order to make some extra money, José often covered the night shift for others, working from day into night. We couldn't meet often. At home, without him there, I often did a lot of rough and heavy work myself.

In the neighborhood, besides Sahrawi, there lived a Spanish family. The wife was a robust and healthy woman who'd come from the Canary Islands.

Every time she went to buy fresh water, she invited me to go with her.

On the way there, the water barrel was empty, of course, so I could keep pace with her.

But after buying ten liters of fresh water, I always told her to walk ahead of me.

"Are you really so useless? Don't tell me in your whole life, you've never carried water," she'd jeer loudly.

"I -- this is really heavy. You got first -- don't wait for me."

Under the scorching sun, my two hands grasping the barrel's handles, I took four or five steps, stopped a moment, gasped for breath, then carried the barrel another couple of dozen steps, stopped again, kept walking, sweat flowing like rain, spine hurting so much I shook, face flushed, steps weak -- but home, home was still a distant black dot that it seemed I'd never reach.

As soon as I'd carried the water home, I hurried to lie down on the woven mat, which helped my spine stop hurting quite so much.

Sometime when I'd used up all the coal, I had no strength to take the empty bucket into town to trade. To get a taxi, I'd have to first walk into town to flag it, so I was even less inclined to go.

As a result, I often borrowed a charcoal stove from the neighbor, and crouched outside fanning the coals, with the smoke choking me and my eyes streaming tears.

At this kind of moment, I was thankful my mother wasn't clairvoyant, and couldn't see more over thousands of miles, otherwise, her beautiful cheeks would be wet with tears for her beloved daughter -- *our daughter we held in our hands, like a precious pearl!* -- she would definitely weep helplessly like this.

I wasn't at all discouraged. In life, there were many different kinds of experiences that could be treasured.

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Before we got married, if José had to work overtime, I'd just sit on my woven mat, listening to the mournful wind blowing outside the window.

There weren't many books in the house, no television, no radio. I sat on the floor to eat, and slept in the other room on a mattress on the floor.

At midday the walls were hot enough to burn your hand; at night they were ice cold. Electricity -- with luck it would come back, but most of the time there was none. At dusk, I'd look at that square hole in the roof, and watch the gray powdery sand spilling in.

At night, I'd light a white candle, and watch to see what shape its tears would take.

This house had no drawers, had no closet; our clothes were kept in the trunk, our shoes and other odds and ends were stored in a cardboard box; to write, I had to find a piece of wood to lay across my knees and write on. At night, the cold, dark gray walls gave me a cold, dark feeling.

Sometimes José had to hurry to catch a night shuttle back to the construction site. I'd wait until I heard him close the door, and then for no reason started crying, rush to the balcony to look, and seeing his silhouette again, I'd run back down and go out to chase after him.

I'd run until I was out of breath, catch up to him, and walk along panting beside him with my head down.

"How about you just stay? Please, today there's no electricity again. I'm lonely." Hands in my pockets, I turned against the wind to beg him.

José was always difficult. If I chased after him as he was walking away, his eyes would go red.

"Sanmao, tomorrow I have to cover someone's morning shift. I have to be there at six. If I stay here, how can I get over there first thing in the morning? What's more, I don't have a pass for riding in the morning."

"You don't need to make extra money. We have money in the bank. You don't need to work as if your life depended on it."

"That money in the bank, later we can ask your father to loan it to us for buying a house.

Spending money, I'll earn for you. Just be patient -- after we're married, I won't work overtime anymore."

"You'll come tomorrow?"

"I'll definitely come in the afternoon. In the morning, you go to the hardware store and ask the price of wood. When I come back after work, I can make a table for you."

He gave me a big hug, then turned me toward home with a little push. I walked away toward home slowly, turning my head back to watch him at the same time. Under the starry sky, José turned to wave at me.

Some evenings, José's coworker who had his wife and children along with him, would drive over to call on me. "Sanmao, come to our house to eat dinner and watch some TV. Afterwards, we'll drive you home. You don't need to be stuck in the house alone."

I knew their kindness had an element of pity. I proudly declined. In that time period, I was like a wounded beast. The smallest thing would provoke me, so much so that I'd cry.

The Sahara is so beautiful, but nevertheless, you have to persevere to make yourself become accustomed to it.

I didn't loathe the desert, it's just that in the process of getting used to it, I suffered a lot of frustrations.

The next day, carrying the list of items José had written, I went to the town's big hardware store to ask the price.

I waited a long time for my turn. The shopkeepers calculated back and forth, finally telling me it would be over \$25,000 -- wood was still scarce.

I thanked them and walked out, wanting to go to the post office to check the mailbox,

estimating that the money we had for building furniture wasn't enough to buy a few pieces of wood.

Walking through the public square outside the store, I suddenly noticed that this store had made a stack of long wooden shipping boxes. They were made of long boards, with galvanized metal bands holding them together. It looked like no one wanted them.

I went back into the store, and asked them, "Those empty wooden crates outside -- could you give them to me?"

Saying these few words, my face flushed. I'd never in my life begged someone for a few pieces of wood like this.

The boss said quite amiably, "Sure, sure. Take as many as you like."

I said, "I'd like five. Would that be too many?"

The boss asked me, "How many people in your family?"

I answered, feeling his question a bit irrelevant.

After getting the boss's agreement, I hurried to the square where the Sahrawi congregated, and arranged two donkey carts, loading five wooden boxes onto them.

At the same time I thought I should add some tools, so I bought a saw, a hammer, a tape measure, two cattles (one kilo) of assorted nails, and also added a block and tackle, some hemp rope, and some coarse sandpaper.

On the road home, I followed behind the donkey cart, almost whistling as I walked. I'd changed; after three months of desert life, the former me had unconsciously disappeared. I could unexpectedly be made happy by a few empty wooden crates.

At home, the crates couldn't be wedged through the front door. I was uneasy about leaving them outside, fearful that the neighbors would come and carry away my treasures.

The whole day through, I opened the door every five minutes to make sure the crates were still there. I was this nervous until dusk, when I spied José's figure on the horizon.

I rushed up to the balcony to wave and give him one of our signals, and, understanding me, he rushed to get home.

Rushing up to the door, he saw the crates blocking the window. His eyes got wide, and he set to touch them all over.

"Where did these nice boards come from?"

From my seat on the low wall of the balcony, I said, "I begged them. The sky isn't dark yet. Let's hurry to make a pulley and hoist them up."

That evening, we ate four boiled eggs, then braved the bone-chilling wind to make a pulley, lifted the crates up onto the balcony, took off their metal bands, and pulled apart the crates. José's hands were bleeding from the nails. I wrapped my arms around a crate and braced my feet against the wall to help him separate the thick boards.

"I was thinking, why do we even need to make furniture, why couldn't we learn to be like the Sahrawi, and spend a lifetime sitting on woven mats?" I said.

"Because we're not them."

"Why couldn't I do it, I ask you." I was holding three boards, pondering this question.

"Why don't they eat pork?" José asked me, laughing.

"That's a religious issue, not a lifestyle issue."

"Why don't you like to eat camel meat?" he went on. "Can't Christians eat camel meat?"

"In my religion, camels are used for putting through the eye of a needle, not for anything else."<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> San Mao was a Christian. Here, she alludes to Matthew 19:23-26, in which Jesus is reported to have said, "Again,

"So we have to have furniture before we can live without feeling sorrowful."

This was a bad explanation, but I was set on having furniture, a fact that made me feel ashamed.

José couldn't come the next day. In that little period of time, we'd used up the money he'd made. He was working like his life depended on it to be sure the future would be smooth and steady.

The day after that, José still couldn't come. His coworker drove over to let me know.

The balcony was stacked with thick boards in piles two persons high. One morning, I went into town, and when I came back the pile had become the height of half a person. The rest of the boards had been taken by the neighbors to make a goat fence.

I couldn't continually sit on the balcony keeping watch. Without any better ideas, I went across the road to the trash dump and picked up a bunch of empty tin cans, punched holes in them, and then hung them along the four sides of the wood pile. If anyone came to steal my treasures, I'd hear the noise and run up to catch them.

But I was still fooled by the wind dozens of times. When the wind blew, the tin cans raised their alarm.

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That afternoon, I was arranging some books and papers that had arrived by sea mail, and by chance came across some photos of myself.

In one I was wearing a long evening gown, with a fur draped over my shoulders, my hair flowing loose, and long earrings. I had just come from hearing "Rigoletto" at the Berlin Opera House. The other was taken one winter night in Madrid, with a bunch of girls hanging around a

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I tell you it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." The line may also be found in Mark 10:24-27 and Luke 18:24-27.

bar in the old district, singing, dancing, drinking red wine. I look beautiful in the picture, my long, glossy hair on my shoulders, a face full of smiles.

I looked and looked, one photo after another, then cast aside the stack, so dejected I crumpled to the floor. My mood was like an empty body whose soul had been placed on a promontory facing homeward, to look helplessly, hopelessly at her loved ones.

I couldn't look back. The tin cans on the balcony summoned me once again. I had to guard my boards. At this moment, there was nothing more important than that wood.

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In the course of life, no matter if it's mild spring or snowy winter, green vegetables or tofu, I want to have a taste and see what the flavor's like rather than miss a chance in vain. (Actually, I couldn't get a taste of either green vegetables or tofu here.)

It's nothing extraordinary. On this earth, how many people like me were there, who were lucky enough to witness Wang Wei's "The long river's sun sets round / the vast desert's lonely smoke rises straight,? (Here there was no long river, and the smoke didn't rise straight.)

Then I thought, an ancient road, a skinny horse in the western wind, the sun setting in the west, a heartbroken person in a faraway place -- this frame of mind fit me. (But there wasn't a skinny horse; there was a skinny camel.)

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Friday was the day I most looked forward to, since José would come home and stay until Sunday evening.

José wasn't a romantic person, and in the desert I hadn't felt much stir of the "wind, flower, snow, and moon" sort of romance myself. What we most thought of was improving our surroundings, overcoming our material and spiritual suffering.

I was really silly before. I just used one pot to make rice and vegetables, separating it into two steps, but now I realized I could just mix rice, vegetables, and meat all together, to become vegetable rice, which was much simpler.

Friday evening, by candlelight, José meticulously drew out diagrams for several styles of furniture and told me to pick one. I chose the simplest.

Early Saturday morning, wearing thick sweaters, we set to work.

"First I'll cut the pieces we measured. You sit on the boards, so they're easier to cut," José said. He never stopped working. I took each piece he'd cut and wrote a number on it.

Hour after hour went by with the sun over our heads. I took a wet towel and laid it on José's head, and also spread some oil on his bare back. Blisters formed on his hands, but I couldn't do anything besides hold the boards, fetch cold water for him to drink now and then, and chase off the children and the flock of sheep who crashed through the fence.

The sun was like molten lead dripping down, and I'd gotten so much exposure I felt I could see the earth and sky slowly revolving.

José didn't say a word. He was like Sisyphus pushing his stone.

I was really proud of having this kind of husband.

In the past I'd only seen him typing out orderly documents and love letters. It wasn't until today that I knew a new José.

After eating some vegetable rice, José lay on the floor. When I came out of the kitchen, he was already asleep.

I couldn't stand to wake him, so I quietly went back to the balcony and separated out the wood for the table, bookshelf, clothes rack, and tea table into different piles. When José woke up, it was already dusk. He hopped up and said angrily, "Why didn't you make me get up?"

I lowered my head without speaking. Silence is a woman's greatest virtue. I didn't bother to say that he'd used up all his energy. When it came to saying he needed rest, that kind of talk, José's head was made of some kind of high-tech cement.

After working until eleven at night, we finally had a table.

The next day was the Sabbath, so we should've stopped working and taken a rest, but if José wasn't working, his spirit couldn't rest, so instead, he kept going, pounding away up on the balcony. "Give me a little more food, and in the evening I won't have to eat again. I have to attach the clothes rack to the wall, and I'll need a little more time for that."

While he was eating, José suddenly lifted his head, as if he'd suddenly remembered something that made him laugh at me.

"Do you know what these wooden crates we got were used to pack? That day Mading, the taxi driver, told me."

"That big, maybe they were used to pack a freezer."

Hearing this, José couldn't stop laughing.

"I'll tell you, okay?"

"Or maybe they had machines packed in them to ship here?"

"It....was....cof....fins.... The hardware store ordered fifteen coffins from Spain."

At this moment I finally realized, this was why the hardware store boss had so amiably asked me how many people were in my family.

"So you're saying we, two people living in the cemetery district, are using the shipping containers for coffins to make furniture..."

"Well, what do you think?" I asked him.

"I think it's all the same." José wiped his mouth, got up, and went back to the balcony to

keep working.

Because of this mishap, I was really excited. I thought it was really unusual, and loved my new table even more.

A few days later, the court notified us we could marry. Right after we married, we went to José's company headquarters, to request a morning ride pass, marriage allowance, rent allowance, tax allowance, and my social health insurance.

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By the time we were formally married, this house had a bookcase and a table; in the bedroom's empty space we'd hung a clothes rack; in the kitchen, there was a small tea table under the countertop where we'd put oil and sugar bottles; and we had curtains made of desert sackcloth in multicolored stripes.

When guests came, they still had to sit on the woven mats, and we'd never bought a wire bed frame. The walls were still hollow cinderblocks that had never been covered with lime, so of course we couldn't paint them.

After we were married, the company promised a \$20,000 furniture allowance, and José's salary was raised by over \$7,000. The tax was lowered, and there was a rent allowance of \$6,500 a month. Also, they gave us half a month for a honeymoon.

Because we'd signed our names on a marriage certificate, we'd unexpectedly gotten a big improvement in our finances, thus I can't keep opposing tradition: marriage really has its advantages.

One of José's coworkers volunteered to fill in for him, so we ended up with a whole month to ourselves.

"The first order of business, is to take you to see phosphate ore."

Sitting in the company's jeep, we followed the transport route from the phosphate ore mine. After driving over 100 miles, we came to the port on the ocean, to the phosphate ore shipping dike, which was where José worked.

"God! This is a James Bond movie. You're 007, I'm that wicked Asian woman in the movie..."

"It's a spectacular sight!" José said in the car.

"Who is constructing this huge project?"

"Germany's Krupp Company." José sounded a little annoyed.

"It looks to me like Spanish people don't make any really amazing things."

"Sanmao, why don't you help me out by shutting up, all right?"

For our honeymoon, hired a guide, rented a Jeep, and went west, passing through Al Mahbes, passing through Algeria, then turning back through Spanish Sahara, from Smara to Mauritania, until we got to the new inner border, then from a different road we went up to the Spanish Sahara's Guelta Zemmur, and only then did we return to El-Aaiún.

This time, driving straight across the Sahara, we both fell into its snare, no longer wishing to leave this flowerless wasteland.

Returning to our sweet home, we only had one more week of vacation left. We started going crazy decorating our humble dwelling.

We asked the landlord to put up wallpaper. He refused. We went into town to ask about rent there. Everything was more than 300 American dollars. That situation wasn't ideal, either.

José calculated all evening. The next day he went into town and bought lime and cement, then went to borrow a ladder and tools. He set to work himself.

We worked day and night, ate white rice and bread, drank milk and ate all kinds of

vitamins to maintain our strength, but after coming back from our long and arduous travels, without having time to really rest, we both were suddenly so thin our eyes were big and wide, our footsteps unsteady.

"José, later I'll be able to rest, but you have to hurry back to work next week. Couldn't you rest a day or two before doing it?"

From the ladder, José looked my way without really looking at me.

"Why do we need to be so frugal? What's more -- I -- I have money in the bank."

"Don't you know that in this place, masons figure their wages by the hour? Also, there's no difference in how I do it and how they do it."

"You fool, you want to keep that money until you're old, and give it to your future children to waste?"

"If we have a child in the future, when he's twelve years old he'll have to go out to work part-time and go to school part-time. We won't give him money."

"Who will you give your future money to?" I quietly asked from beneath the ladder.

"To give my parents and help them in retirement. Your parents, after we leave the desert and settle down, we'll bring them over."

Hearing him mention my parents, who were a thousand mountains and ten thousand seas away, my eyes teared up. "Father and mother both are really understanding with us, but their hearts are still quite proud. My father especially wouldn't be willing to live in a foreign country."

"Willing or not, you going back and pulling him with both hands, or they both running away back to Taiwan, these are all things that won't happen for a long time now."

Hence, for the sake of this ideal son-in-law's future plans, I thought it best to keep working on the lime and cement. From time to time, a lump of cement dropped from the ladder

and hit my head and nose.

"José, you should learn Chinese soon."

"I'll never be able to learn it. I refuse."

José was capable of anything, except he had no knack for languages. He'd been studying French for almost ten years, but it seemed to me he couldn't speak it too well. Never mind Chinese -- on this, I couldn't force him.

By the last day, our house was painted pristine white, inside and out. Within the cemetery district, it was definitely like a crane among chickens. We had no house number, yet with a house like this we didn't need to go to the city government to apply for one.

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In July, we got an extra month's pay. (We worked eleven months, and got fourteen months' pay.) The marriage subsidy, the rent allowance -- we got them all at once.

José got off work, and came home by way of a shortcut over the dunes. As soon as he came in the door, he pulled money out of every one of his pockets, and tossed it on the floor in a big green pile.

In my opinion, maybe it wouldn't astonish most people, but for José, who'd really only just ventured into the world, it was the first time in his life he'd earned so much money.

"Look, just look: now we can buy some cotton cushions; we can buy a blanket for the bed. We can have sheets and pillows; we can go out to eat. We can buy another water barrel, add another cooking pot, get a new tent..."

The two money worshippers kneeled on the floor, paying their respect to the bills.

After counting the money carefully, with a cry of laughter, I took eight thousand and laid it to one side. "What is this?"

"It's for you to buy some more clothes. Your trousers are all worn shiny, and your shirt collars are all torn. Your socks all have holes in them, and your shoes -- you ought to have a respectable pair."

"I don't want that. Let's first put it toward the house, before we dress me up. In the desert, there's not much use for clothes."

He kept on wearing leather shoes with holes in the soles to work.

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I lined up some cinderblocks on the right side of the living room, put a piece of wood from the coffin boxes on top, and then bought two cotton cushions, one for the seat and one for the back. I covered them with the same multicolored, striped fabric used for the curtains, and sewed it up tightly across the back.

It was really a unique sofa, the strong colors complimenting the pure white walls, exceptionally beautiful.

The table I'd covered with white cloth, and on top of that placed some thin bamboo scrolls my mother had mailed to me. My loving mother had even mailed me the Chinese cotton paper lampshades I'd wanted.

I'd also received a clay tea set. My good friend Lin Fu Nan had also sent me a scroll of modern calligraphy. Mr. Ping had sent me a big box of Crown's books by airmail, and when my father got off work and saw an unusual poster, he'd buy it and send it to me. My older sister paid tribute with some clothes, and my little brothers were most interesting, they got a kimono-style bathrobe to send to José. Wearing it he looked like Toshiro Mifune, one of the actors I most admired.

With my mother's cotton paper lampshades hanging low, and on the wall a poster for Lin

Hwai-min's Cloud Gate Dance Company, with its black background and the four Chinese characters flying across the page in white calligraphy, like flying tigers and dancing phoenixes, our house started to have its own indescribable atmosphere and mood.

This kind of house had an air of constant improvement.

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When José was at work, I oiled the bookshelf a deep wood color. I didn't use paint, but rather a kind of brown stuff that was dabbed on. I didn't know what it was called in Chinese. The bookshelf's feeling became even more grand.

I often analyzed myself. The social classes people are separated into as soon as they were born are hard to cast off. My house, in the Sahrawis' eyes, was full of unnecessary things, but for me, I couldn't throw off these fetters, I had to make all my surroundings as complex as before.

Slowly, I once again stepped back to my former self. In other words, I stepped back into the romantic "wind, flower, snow, and moon."

When José went off to work, I went to the trash dump across the road to pick up junk.

A worn-out tire: I brought back and cleaned up, laid it flat on the woven mats, and stuffed a red cushion inside. It was like a bird's nest, and whoever came fought to sit on it.

A dark green water bottle: I brought it back, and stuck some blooming wild thistles and thorns inside, giving a feeling of intense but poetic pain.

I bought some small cans of oil paints and used them to cover some soda bottles with designs and colors reminiscent of American Indians.

The camel's skull<sup>283</sup> had long since been placed on the bookshelf. Next I forced José to use galvanized metal and glass to make a lantern.

I picked up a sheepskin that was nearly rotting, brought it home, and tried the Sahrawi method of first using salt, then applying "sepa" (alum) to tan it. Now I had one more thing to sit on.

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Christmas came, and we left the desert to go back to Madrid and see José's parents.

When we came back, we brought José's books, from childhood to university, back with us. Our little cottage in the desert henceforth had a literary air.

I saw the desert as really enchanting, but the desert didn't return this feeling.

Pitiful civilized people! You can't get over these useless things.

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"This house still lacks plants. There's no green feeling here." I said to José one evening.

"There are a lot of things it lacks. You'll never be satisfied."

"Right, so I'll go all over the place picking up stuff."

That evening, we crawled along the low wall outside the governor-general's house, risking our lives digging up his flowers with our four hands.

"Hurry, shove them in the plastic bag! Quick, I also want that big clump of ivy."

"Heavens, how could these roots grow so deep?"

"We also need some dirt -- hurry and dump it in."

"That's enough now, isn't it? We have three plants." José asked in a light voice.

"One more. One more and I'll be okay." I was still pulling up plants.

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<sup>283</sup> Given to San Mao by José as a wedding present, as mentioned in "Jiehun ji" 結婚記 ["Marriage Diary"], *Sahala de gushi* [Stories of the Sahara], 12.

Suddenly, I saw the guard positioned at the front door of the governor-general's house come strolling over. I was so frightened my soul flew away, leaving my courage in pieces. I took the plastic bag and shoved it against José's chest, telling him, "Put your arms around me, hold me tight, kiss me hard, there's a wolf coming, hurry!"

José embraced me, with the pitiful flowers squashed between us.

Sure enough, the guard hurried over, his bandolier clattering against his chest.

"What are you doing? Are you sneaking around here?"

"I -- we --"

"Hurry and get out. This place isn't for you two to make romance in."

We held each other by the hand and walked along the wall. Oh heavens, when we climbed over the wall, we'd better not let him see the flowers!

"Hey, go out the main gate, hurry up!" The guard yelled at us again.

We walked away slowly, our arms around each other, and I even gave the guard a 15 degree bow.

Later I described this affair to the old Spanish Legion officer, and he laughed and laughed.

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I was still dissatisfied with this house. A place without music always seems like a landscape painting without a stream or a waterfall.

In order to save up money for a radio, I'd walk to the faraway Spanish Legion welfare society to buy vegetables.

The first time I went, I was really uncomfortable. I wasn't able to act like other housewives, madly crowding in and scrambling; I stood obediently in line, waited four hours to buy one basket of vegetables. The price was one-third cheaper than most grocery stores.

After that I often went there. The soldiers there recognized that I definitely had been brought up well, but had met with some injustice.

They also were a bit prejudiced. As soon as I got close to the counter, but hadn't quite broken through the crowd, they would openly look past the crowd of crude, plump women and loudly ask me, "What would you like today?" I'd hand over my list, wait a while, they'd go through the back door and prepare my whole box, I'd pay, run out to call a taxi, and before the taxi even stopped completely, a big man in military uniform would carry my box and load it into the car for me. I was away from home less than half an hour. There were a lot of different branches stationed here. I only loved the Spanish Legion (that is, the desert army I mentioned before).

They were really masculine, could endure a lot of hardship, and they respected those women who should be respected. They could fight in wars, and could be elegant; every Sunday at dusk, the Spanish Legion symphony orchestra performed at the city hall plaza; they played all kinds of classical music, from "The Magic Flute," "A Night on Bald Mountain," "Bolero," ending with "The Merry Widow."

A tape player and tapes were all saved up for by going to the Spanish Legion welfare society. But a TV and a washing machine -- neither one ever attracted me.

We started saving money again, our next plan being to buy a white horse. Modern horses could be bought on an installment plan, but José didn't want to be a modern person; he definitely wanted to pay in full. So, I was forced to walk, and put it off three or four months.

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The only quick route for me to go to town passed through two Sahrawi cemeteries. Their method of burying people was to wrap them in cloth, put them in a hole in the sand, and pile a jumble of rocks on top.

One day I was, as usual, taking a winding route through these piles of rocks, so as to avoid stepping on these eternally sleeping people and disturbing their peace.

This time, I saw an extremely old Sahrawi man sitting by a grave. Curious, I went to see what he was doing. It was not until I got close that I could see he was carving stone.

Heavens! By his feet were nearly 20 carved stone figures. He had three-dimensional, convex human faces, he had birds, he had posing children, he had naked women lying with their legs spread open, their genitalia even surprisingly showing the carved figures of half-born infants. He'd also carved a lot of animals -- antelope, camels...I was so shocked I felt like fainting...I squatted down and asked him, "Oh, great artist, do you sell these things?"

I put out my hand to pick up a human face. I couldn't believe my eyes. Such a rough and touching but natural creation, I definitely wanted to snatch it.

This old man suddenly raised his head to look at me. His expression was that of a madman. I picked up three of his sculptures, pressed a thousand dollars at him, and forgetting the business I had in town, turned to head home. It was only then that he blurted out a "ya!" and staggered to his feet to chase after me. I held the stones tightly, not willing to give them up.

He grabbed me and pulled me back. I desperately asked him, "Was it not enough? I don't have any more on hand right now, I can give you more later, I can --"

He couldn't say anything, just bent at the waist to pick up two small bird statues and pressed them into my bosom, then finally let me walk away.

That day, I didn't eat anything, just lay on the floor admiring these great, anonymous works of art. My heart was so moved I can't use words to give a description.

When my Sahrawi neighbors got a look at the things I'd spend a thousand dollars to buy, they laughed until it seemed like they'd die laughing. They thought I was a real idiot. I thought, this was just a difference in levels of culture, and what it brings about cannot be communicated.

To me, these were priceless treasures!

The next day, José gave me two thousand more dollars. I went to the graves, but that old man didn't appear.

Scorching sun lighting up the empty cemetery, besides the piles of stones on the yellow sand, there was no trace of anyone. Those five statues seemed like souvenirs given me by a ghost. I felt incredibly grateful.

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The big square hole in the roof was soon covered by José.

Our house also had the addition of a goat-skin drum, a goat-skin canteen, a leather bellows, a hookah, a multi-colored bed net hand woven by desert people, weirdly-shaped stones blown together by sandstorms -- here people called them "roses of the desert."

The magazines we'd subscribed to also came one after another. Besides Spanish and Chinese, of course we couldn't do without a copy of the American *National Geographic*.

Our house, in just over a year, had already become a genuine art palace.

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When single coworkers were on holiday, they never objected coming from far away to spend all day with us.

When these people with no family came over, I always exhausted myself thinking up a

way to get fresh fruit and vegetables for them to eat, and also making sweet and sour pork.

In this way, José came to know a few people who became our completely devoted friends.

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Our friends never forgot about us. When their faraway mothers sent Spanish ham and sausage, they'd never forget to call José and have him come over after work to get some to share with me. They were really thoughtful people.

One weekend, José unexpectedly came back clasping a huge, precious "bird of paradise" flower. I slowly reached out a hand to take it, fearing this big flower would be heavy, and the splendid red bird would fly back to heaven.

"Manolo sent it to you."

I accepted this gift more precious than gold.

Thereafter, every weekend there was a bird of paradise in the corner blooming, burning itself up. All of these flowers were passed on to José to bring back.

Pretty much all of José's books were guides to the fields and forests, the deep sea, and the starry sky. He didn't like digging into questions of people's innermost selves. He'd have a look, but he always said life shouldn't be analyzed like this.

So, for the bird of paradise, he'd devoutly change its water, add an aspirin tablet, cut off the stalks that had gradually rotted. Toward Manolo's heart, he just never had much concern. Ever since the burning bird came into our house, Manolo never agreed to come over.

One day when José went to work, I went over to the office and used the interoffice telephone to dial Manolo directly. I said I wanted to meet with him on my own.

He came out. I gave him a cold bottle of soda and looked at him gravely.

"Just say it! Your heart will be a lot lighter."

"I -- I -- you still don't understand, do you?" He put his head in his hands, a posture of extreme dejection.

"I had something of a feeling before, but now I get it. Manolo, dear friend, lift up your head!"

"I don't have any way to try -- I don't have any hope -- please don't blame me!"

"Don't keep sending flowers, okay? I can't accept them."

"OK. I'll go. Please be understanding of me. I've offended you -- and José -- I --"

"Vega (I said his family name), you haven't violated me, you've given a woman great praise and encouragement, you don't need to ask me to forgive you --"

"I won't keep bothering you. Goodbye!"

His voice was so quiet, it was like silent weeping.

José didn't know Manolo had come alone.

After a week, he got off work and came home, carrying a big cardboard box of books, saying, "Manolo, that weirdo, all of a sudden resigned and left. The company wanted to keep him until the end of the month, but he refused. He left these books for us."

I picked up a book. To my surprise, it was a copy of *Under the Starry Skies of Asia*.<sup>284</sup>

For no reason at all, a thread of disappointment flitted across my heart.

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After that, whenever single coworkers came by, I was always mindful of my words and behavior. A housewife staying in the kitchen replaced the important player who'd once squeezed

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<sup>284</sup> The book that San Mao calls 在亞洲的星空下 [*Under the Starry Skies of Asia*] is likely to be *En Asia se Muere Bajo las Estrellas* [*In Asia, One Dies Under the Stars*], a travelogue by Spanish author José Maria Gironella describing a journey through eight Asian countries, which was published in 1974.

into their midst, debating everything from earth to sky, north to south.

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With the house arranged this cozy, clean, and lovely, the free women's school I'd started took a long vacation.

I'd taught the neighborhood women for nearly a year, but they didn't have any care for arithmetic, nor did they care about our hygiene class. They also didn't care if they could count money. They came every day, only to borrow my clothes, shoes, lipstick, eyebrow pencil, nail polish. Other than that, they just wanted to lie on my bed, because I'd finally bought a bed frame, and for these women who slept on mats on the floor, it was a really novel experience.

When they stopped by, my tidy house was thrown into disorder. They couldn't read, but they were more familiar with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis than I was. They also knew Bruce Lee, sexy male and female Spanish actors -- it was like they were cataloging family heirlooms; when they saw a photo they liked, they immediately tore it from the magazine; my clothes they'd wear under their covering of cloth, taking them without telling me; after a few days they'd return them, filthy and with the buttons cut off.

This house, if they came over, you didn't need to write a script; they'd just perform for your enjoyment a shocking, shocking "disaster movie."

After José had bought a television, they'd even more vehemently pound at my door, but I wouldn't open it.

When we actually had electricity, TV was our only way of direct contact with the distant outside world, but I still didn't love watching it.

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After we'd used our hands to wash bed sheets countless times, José brought home a tiny

washing machine.

I still wasn't satisfied. I wanted a white horse, wanted it to look just like the one in the multicolored advertisement.

\*\*\*

At that time, I met a lot of European women in town.

I'd never had the habit of going visiting, but, there was one who was José's boss's wife, a 100% agreeable middle-aged woman. Of her own volition, she decided to teach me to design clothing. Sometimes I reluctantly went to the company's management living quarters to see her.

One day, I picked a suit whose cuffs I couldn't get sewn on and went to consult her. It just so happened there were a lot of other wives at her house.

At first they were welcoming, since my educational background was higher than theirs. (Really common people, can one's educational background really measure what a person is? What use are academic qualifications?) Afterwards, I don't know which fool asked me, "Which residence hall do you live in? Next time we'll come to see you."

I naturally answered them, "José is a first-level office worker, not a manager. We weren't assigned a residence hall."

"But we can still come to look for you! You can teach us English! Which of the town's streets do you live on?"

I said, "I live outside of town, in the cemetery district."

The room was suddenly overtaken by an embarrassed silence.

The kind boss's wife, as if trying to protect me, quickly said to them, "Her house is really decorated with style. I never even thought, a house rented out by a Sahrawi person could be turned by her into a magazine-style beauty."

"That's a place I've never been to," Another one of the wives said, and laughed. "I'm afraid of getting an infectious disease."

I'm not an inferior-feeling person, but their words touched a sore spot in me. "I think, coming to the desert, if you don't experience some difficulties in material circumstances, it's more or less a loss to every person's experience," I said slowly.

"What desert? Forget it, we live in this kind of residence hall, simply feeling like we're not even in the desert. But you! It's a pity. Why not move into town to live? Living mixed in with the Sahrawis -- tut tut --"

When I bid farewell, the boss's wife chased after me, softly saying, "You'll come back! Please come back!"

I laughed and nodded, nodded my head, then ran back to my sweet, sweet, little white house. I made a solemn resolution not to move into town to live.

\*\*\*

At the time Morocco and Mauritania partitioned the Spanish territories in the Sahara, the desert here became a news zone. Reporters from every country came, carrying huge amounts of photography equipment.

They all lived in the international hotel. That place I had no natural reason to frequent. At that time we bought a car (my white horse), so there wasn't much need for us to stay in town on holidays.

It happened that on one day, we were driving back to town, and at a place more than fifty miles outside of town, we saw someone waving a hand. We quickly stopped the car, and looked to see what had happened to that person.

It turned out his car had completely sunk down into the soft sand, and he needed

someone's help.

We had experience, and immediately grabbed an old rug. First, we used our hands to help this foreigner dig four trenches around the tires, then put the rug ahead of the front wheels. We told him to start the car, with us at the back pushing.

On the soft sand, with the big rug we'd pushed in, the tires couldn't sink down.

We worked almost an hour before we finally restored his car back onto the hard road.

This person was a reporter sent by a news service. He wanted to invite us to the international hotel to eat.

We were at that time so tired, too tired, we evaded him and went straight back home. By the second day we had forgotten this business.

\*\*\*

After less than half a month, one day I was home alone, when I heard someone outside the window say, "It can't be wrong, it must be this house. Let's try."

I opened the door. Standing before my eyes was that person whose car we'd helped push.

In his hand was a big bunch of cellophane-wrapped bird of paradise flowers. Besides that, he was followed by a friend, whom he introduced as his coworker.

"May we come in?" he asked politely.

"Please come in."

I took his flowers and first put them in the kitchen, then poured some cold soda and came back. Because I was carrying a tray in my hands, I walked slowly.

At this time I heard this foreigner use English to softly say to the other one, "Heavens! Are we really in the Sahara? Heavens! Heavens!"

I walked into the small room. They immediately got up from the sofa to take the tray from me.

"Don't bother. Please sit."

They looked east, glanced west, and couldn't resist touching the statues I'd bought in the cemetery. They didn't look at me as they clucked and praised them.

One used his hand to softly give a push to a small, rusting bicycle wheel I'd hung in the corner. This hoop moved in an arc.

"Living in this desert, I'm forced to make some pop art." I grabbed the wheel and looked at him, laughing.

"Heavens! This is the most beautiful household I've seen in the desert."

"It's all done with trash." I said, proudly laughing.

They sat on the sofa again.

"Take care! What you're sitting on is coffin wood."

With a gasp, they jumped back up, and lightly opened the cloth covering to look inside.

"There's no mummy inside. You don't need to be afraid."

In the end they tried to wear me down, wanting to buy one of my statues.

I muttered for a while, then picked up a bird made of stone to give to them. The bird's body had a natural mark of pink across it.

"How much?"

"I don't want money. For a person who knows how to appreciate it, it's priceless; to someone who doesn't understand it, it's worthless."

"We -- we'll pay you a small token."

"Didn't you give me bird of paradise flowers? I'll consider it a trade." They left with a

thousand thank yous.

\*\*\*

After passing a few more weeks, when we were in town waiting to watch a movie, suddenly another stranger walked toward us, first putting out his hand, which we shook with a feeling of unnameable mystery.

"I heard another new service's reporter say you have the whole desert's most beautiful house -- I thought I mustn't have the wrong people!"

"You didn't make a mistake. I'm the only Chinese person around."

"I hope -- I hope -- if it's not too presumptuous -- I'd like to have a look at your house, to give me a reference for a certain matter."

"Please let me ask, you are...?" José asked him.

"I'm a Hollander, I receive support from the Spanish government, and I came here to supervise building houses for the Sahrawis to live in. We want to make a dormitory district; I'd don't know if I may or mayn't --"

"You may. We welcome you to come at your convenience," José said.

"May I take photos?"

"You may. You needn't worry your mind about these little things."

"Your wife can also be in the photos?"

"We're ordinary people. You don't need to bother," I said quickly.

The next day, that person came, took a lot of pictures, and also asked me at the time we'd rented this house, what kind of scene it was.

I let him look at the pictures taken the first month after we'd moved in.

When he left, he said to me, "Please tell your husband, you two have created a beautiful

Rome."

I answered him, "Rome was not built in a day."

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It's really odd, without an outsider coming to vouch for you, you often just can't see your own worth.

In that spell of time, I felt enchanted inside this sandy castle.

\*\*\*

Then one day, the landlord came by. Before, he had rarely come in to sit down. He came in, sat down, and with much twisting and turning of his body, looked all around. Then he said, "I told you two long ago, what you rented is the entire Sahara's best house. I think you understand clearly now."

"Please let me ask, what business do you have?" I directly questioned him.

"This grade of house, using the former price, you'd never be able to rent it now. I was thinking...to raise the rent."

I wanted to tell him -- "You are a real pig."

But I didn't say anything. I picked up the lease and coldly dropped it in front of him. I said to him, "If you raise the rent, tomorrow I'll go to sue you."

"You -- you -- you Spanish just want to bully us Sahrawis." He suddenly got angry with me.

"You're not a good Muslim. Even if you pray every day, your god won't look after you. Now please get out of here."

"Just a little money, and you insult my religion -- " he yelled.

"It's you yourself who insulted your religion, now please get going."

"I -- I -- you fucking -- "

I locked up my castle, drew up the drawbridge, and didn't listen to him cursing in the street. I put on a tape. Dvorak's "New World" symphony completely filled the room.

I walked over to the round, cushioned chair made from a tire, and slowly sat down, like a queen.

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