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## SAN MAO MAKES HISTORY\*

史 Miriam Lang

The Taiwan writer San Mao's 三毛 stories of the Spanish decolonization of Western Sahara lie at the intersection of multiple historical peripheries. The struggle of the Sahrawi Arabs for independence from Spain and Spain's eventual withdrawal from the Sahara occupies a peripheral place in the history of the Spanish empire. It is peripheral to the history of 'the Arab peoples' as well, and also to the history of Morocco (which annexed the territory when Spain withdrew). Indeed as a struggle for national independence which has not resulted in the establishment of an independent country, the story of Western Sahara is peripheral to any history of 'states', being neither a tale of imperial glory nor the chronicle of the birth of a nation. For an international academic world that is largely dominated by the English language, a story of Western Sahara written in Chinese is situated at yet another historical periphery—especially when that story is written by a writer from Taiwan, itself at the periphery in a Chinese-speaking world dominated by the mainland.<sup>1</sup> This history of our own times—the history of modern Chinese culture as well as of global processes of decolonization—is, of course, as deserving of attention and remembrance as any other, though other competing histories have gained more public attention. Indeed one might note the irony of the fact that stories which unite three of the world's major language groups (Chinese, Arabic and Spanish) could be considered 'peripheral'.

Just as the story of Western Sahara is a 'peripheral' history, San Mao's work

\* The title draws on that of Kate Grenville's novel *Joan makes history* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1988), in which the fictional heroine and narrator, Joan (or a series of Joans) inserts herself into various scenes throughout Australian history. Though there are obvious differences between placing a fictional 'everywoman' into historical events and narrating a story of oneself participating in events of one's own time, the allusion to Grenville's title is intended to invoke questions of history-making as both history-writing and acting to write oneself into history ('history' refers here to 'stories about the past' rather than history as an academic discipline). My grateful thanks to Lewis Mayo, Tomoko Akami, Geremie Barmé, Josephine Fox, Hank Nelson and Jeremy Taylor for their helpful comments on the issues discussed here. Thanks also to Yahia Zoubir, Sophie Caratini, Laurence Mazure and Stephen Zunes for their willingness to consult over matters of Western Sahara history. Special thanks to Tony Hodges for his comments—including the observation that "San Mao Makes Up History" could also be an appropriate title.

<sup>1</sup> Taiwan, at the periphery of the Qing empire, and after 1895 the periphery of the Japanese empire, has remained at the periphery of mainland China despite the claims of the Kuomintang (KMT) to 'true' Chinese centrality. The recent election in Taiwan, in which the KMT

/government was voted out for the first time, represents another stage in the ongoing effort in Taiwan to resist this consignment of Taiwan to the periphery of China and the persistent tendency of non-Taiwanese to consider it primarily as just another part of a Chinese

/world. As a member of the mainland political élite on Taiwan, San Mao perpetuated the notions of periphery and 'exile', remaining culturally focused upon the mainland and triumphantly returning 'home' to visit once this became possible in the late 1980s.

<sup>2</sup> Biographers have nominated these as the best of her stories. One commentator claims that the Hong Kong film director Yim Ho (Yan Hao) was eager to turn “Kuqi de luotuo” [Crying camels] into a film and asked San Mao to write a movie treatment (she did not, however, do so). See Cui Jianfei and Zhao Jun, *San Mao zhuan* [San Mao: a biography] (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Chubanshe, 1995), p.269.

<sup>3</sup> Her stories have been described as full of “honesty and humanitarian concern between people”; “reading San Mao’s works, you feel the beating of an honest heart from start to finish, a kind of mutual love between people and a mutual thoughtful caring.” Gu Jitang, *Pingshuo San Mao* [Evaluating San Mao] (Beijing: Zhishi Chubanshe, 1991), p.120. San Mao herself is quoted as saying that “Everything I have written is a factual record of my life ... there’s a record of my own feelings, and some experiences of my neighbors and friends ... that’s to say I have no fictional stories, because I can’t make up stories ...” Sima Zhongyuan; Zhang Kuowu; Xiao Feng; Ying Weichi et al. (eds), *San Mao de shijie* [The world of San Mao] (Taipei: Jiangshan Chubanshe, 1984), p.114; “My works are just an autobiographical record ... a record and reflection of my life and my experiences,” Mei Zihan, *San Mao qiaoqiao dui ni shuo* [San Mao speaks to you softly] (Taipei: Xiaochang Shufang, 1991), pp.162–3. Anecdotal evidence attests to a belief in the truth of San Mao’s stories among at least some readers; more significantly, her biographers reproduce the content of her stories in reconstructing the ‘facts’ of her life. In the journalist Zhang Yun’s later interviews with Sahrawi twenty years after San Mao’s sojourn in the Sahara, he treats discrepancies between their stories and hers as either failures of memory or unwillingness to be truthful on their part (Zhang Yun, *Zai Xisabala taxun San Mao de zuji* [Following in San Mao’s footsteps in Western Sahara] (Beijing: Zhongguo Youyi Chubanshe), 1996.

<sup>4</sup> For most of San Mao’s readers (myself included), there are few readily available sources of information relating to the mid-1970s Sahara.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Goldsworthy, *Navel gazing* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1998), p.45. The quotation is well illustrated by the film *Titanic*, which created ‘historical knowledge’ for countless viewers; this prompted the descendants of one person depicted therein to challenge the veracity of his portrayal,

is peripheral to academic discourse. As a ‘popular’ writer, San Mao is easily placed at the margin of Chinese literature—yet her work has been among the most widely read literature of the Chinese-speaking world over the past twenty years. The two stories examined in this paper are among her best-known and most admired works.<sup>2</sup> These fragments of ‘history’ were not written by the ‘victors’, nor even by a member or representative of any of the principal parties to the action; indeed they are peripheral to the notion of history-writing itself, for they take short story form, dramatized and undoubtedly fictionalized. Yet San Mao’s representations of the Sahara and her supposed experiences there cannot be completely dismissed as ‘non-history’ either for, despite their quasi-fictional form, they encompass publicly recorded events; more importantly, they have been accorded a high level of credibility (not only by readers but also by biographers and other commentators on her work) both because of the quasi-autobiographical narrative style in which they are written and the author’s own persistent claims that she wrote only from her own experience.<sup>3</sup>

Since the history of mid-1970s Western Sahara is not generally well-known, there are few external reference points by which San Mao’s readers might evaluate these accounts. In contrast with stories of a more widely discussed event (such as, for example, the Second World War), there would be for most readers very little framework of existing knowledge into which these Saharan stories can be fitted.<sup>4</sup> The idea that historical ‘knowledge’ can be created by those who process past events for popular entertainment is not new. “History,” it has been said, “is written by the Oscar winners”<sup>5</sup>; and this is certainly the case with San Mao’s ‘history’ of Spanish decolonization in the Sahara. It has become for readers more than just a history of San Mao herself, or even ‘a history’ of the Sahara; it has become ‘the history’ of the Sahara—a history in which, however, the stories of the Sahara and San Mao’s own life are inextricably intertwined.

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/with subsequent payment of compensation by the film-makers.

<sup>6</sup> Though dates and details in her life are often unclear, Chen Ping (1943–91), known to millions of readers as ‘San Mao’, is believed to have arrived in Western Sahara in March or April 1973. Western Sahara (the ‘Spanish Sahara’) was bordered by Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria and the Atlantic Ocean. A colony of Spain from 1884, it was incorporated into metropolitan Spain as ‘a Spanish African province’ in 1956; when Spain withdrew from the territory in 1976 it was absorbed into Moroccan and (briefly) Mauritanian territories. See John Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa: the Western Sahara dispute* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> An article in *National Geographic* inspired her interest in the Sahara. See San Mao, *Sabala*

*/de gushi* [Stories of the Sahara] (Huangguan Chubanshe, 1976), pp.211–12. The fascination with ‘wilderness’ (the ‘unspoiled’, the ‘traditional’, the ‘exotic’), the apparent uniqueness of this appreciation of wilderness to modern industrial cultures and its connections with various aspects of romanticism have been discussed by Peter Bishop in his *The myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, travel writing and the western creation of sacred landscape* (London: Athlone Press, 1989); San Mao’s desert writing partakes of these same elements, stressing isolation, ‘emptiness’, ‘primitiveness’ and ‘difference’ from cultural ‘centers’.

<sup>8</sup> According to San Mao’s account, her Spanish boyfriend, Josemaria Quero, took a job with the Spanish phosphate mining company Fosbucraa, near El-Ayoum, in early 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Later republished in *Sabala de gushi*.

### *Chen Ping/San Mao*

In early 1973, a young woman from Taiwan by the name of Chen Ping 陈平 arrived in the territory then known as the Spanish Sahara.<sup>6</sup> Her motives were romantic<sup>7</sup>; her journey was facilitated by her familiarity with the Spanish language (acquired in Spain in the 1960s); she would marry a Spanish man there<sup>8</sup>; her stay would last for two and a half years, until October 1975; and she was to introduce to millions of Chinese readers a Sahara Desert organized by her own imagination and literary style. The first of her “Stories of the Sahara” was published in a major daily newspaper in Taiwan in 1974 under the pen-name ‘San Mao’, and fame quickly followed.<sup>9</sup> Until her death in 1991 Chen Ping/San Mao continued to publish collections of stories, becoming one of the best-known literary figures in the Chinese-speaking world, famous as a ‘celebrity’ as well as a writer, and the subject of a number of biographies as well as heroine of her own narratives.<sup>10</sup>

To disentangle the writer Chen Ping from the pen-name and literary persona San Mao would be an extremely difficult task, and it is not my purpose to undertake it here.<sup>11</sup> Since almost all of her stories are narrated in the first person by a young female character called “San Mao,” “San Mao” is

<sup>10</sup> San Mao's books sold in great numbers in Taiwan and China. The stories that particularly captured readers' imaginations were those of the Sahara; others deal with Europe, Central and South America, the USA, childhood and family, and returning to Taiwan after years abroad. All her books ran to numerous editions; in addition to her short stories she wrote magazine agony-aunt /OVER

#### **Figures 1 and 7**

*San Mao in the Sabara. The setting, dress and posture in this picture (and in the other images of San Mao in the desert reproduced here) give an impression of the persona of romantic adventurer and free spirit which was San Mao's hallmark and which informs her 'history' of the Sabara (from San Mao, Bei ying [Rear view] [Taipei: Huangguan Chubanshe, 1981], p.4)*



/columns, pop song lyrics and a film screenplay, gave lecture tours, and participated in literary and cultural events in Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong. The list of her complete works contains more than twenty items, including cassette tapes of her public lectures and story-readings.

<sup>11</sup> It was 'San Mao' (and not 'Chen Ping') who was the subject of public debate in magazine and newspaper features, biographies and (latterly) obituaries.

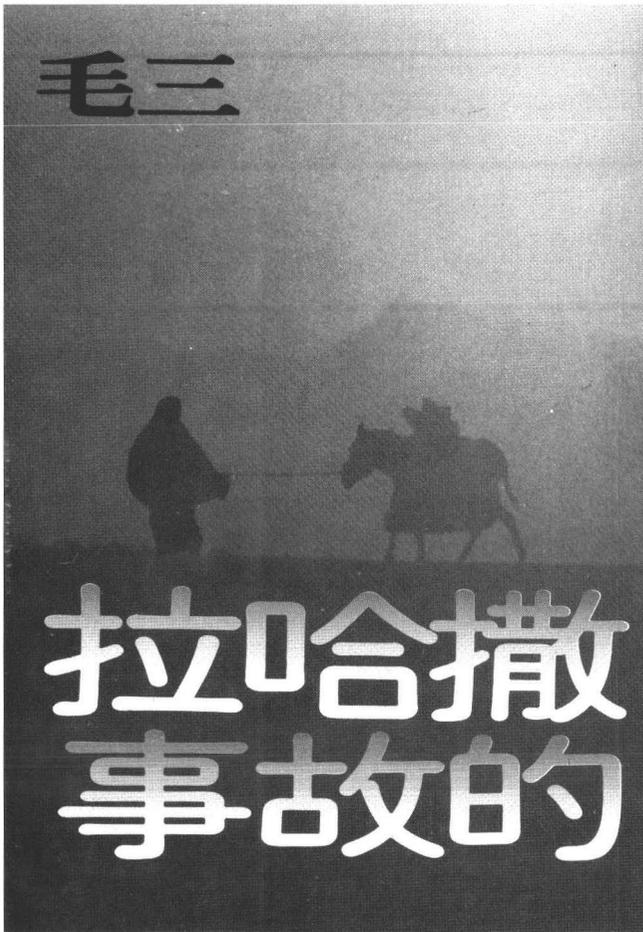
<sup>12</sup> Occupying a space somewhere between genres of autobiography, travel literature and fiction, San Mao's work is rather difficult to categorize. Various elements of the colonial

not only author but heroine and narrator as well. Furthermore, as noted above, Chen Ping/San Mao claimed that all of her stories were based on real events and experiences; thus situations and characters with the characteristics of fiction are claimed as historically truthful—at least in terms of the story of her own life.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, my consideration of San Mao's work as 'history making' does not centre upon distinguishing 'truth' from 'fabrication' in San Mao's works.<sup>13</sup> Rather than verifying or disproving her stories through archival research or interviewing witnesses I will focus upon discussion of the intersections of her self-presentation with the politics and history of Western Sahara in the narration of stories which have, as noted below, attained the status of 'history' in Chinese literary debate. In these two stories, "Sergeant Shaba" and "Crying Camels,"<sup>14</sup> which interweave personal history with national history, San Mao writes herself into the process of Spanish

decolonization of Western Sahara: 'making' history by recording her personalized version of the political events she experiences and participating in a national history as a significant agent, linking her own history with Saharan history and making the history of the Sahara her own.

## Figure 2

Cover, *Stories of the Sahara*



### *Stories of the Sahara*

San Mao's earliest stories of the Sahara tell of her decision to go to live in the desert, her arrival and everyday life in El-Ayoun<sup>15</sup> (the capital of the 'Spanish Sahara'), the desert landscape, the people she encounters and their 'exotic' customs.<sup>16</sup> The two later stories examined here, however, link personal experience with the turbulent events of Western Sahara in the 1970s and place San Mao into the story of the struggle for liberation from Spanish colonialism and Spanish withdrawal from the territory (after which Western Sahara, rather than gaining independence as most of its inhabitants apparently wished, was partitioned between Morocco and Mauritania).<sup>17</sup>

Chen Ping/San Mao gained legitimacy as a resident of Western Sahara through her Spanish husband, José (through whom she also gained Spanish citizenship), and lived as a Spaniard in El-Ayoun with a corresponding level of privilege. Socially, her life was divided between Spanish and Sahrawi friends and acquaintances. In the course of her narratives she identifies with different—and

sometimes opposing—interests in the Sahara. She may align herself with Spain (as a Spanish citizen by marriage, and through her connections with the Spanish community) or with Sahrawi (through being non-Spanish, and through her wishful sense of ‘belonging’ to the landscape and its nomadic inhabitants). As a non-ethnically-Spanish outsider, she could also distance herself from both sides when she chose, identifying herself as Chinese—indeed (as she claimed) the only Chinese person in the desert. She does not maintain a permanent identification with any ‘side’ in the conflicts in Western Sahara, and her shifts in identification throughout the two stories follow various permutations and combinations of these three positions according to convenience or to her perceptions of what is morally right in each individual situation. These shifting identifications are akin to the ‘oscillations’ which Susan Horton has noted in the African writings of Isak Dinesen and Olive Schreiner: being between two entities and thus truly representative of neither side, and being at the same time “complicit in and resistant to the colonial order,” produced “oscillations” between positions of identification, which in turn gave rise to a sense that this status had positive possibilities as “go-between,” “intercessor” and “mediator.”<sup>18</sup> Above all, however, San Mao claims for herself the central position in “a grandly abstract narrative of ‘shared’ human experience.”<sup>19</sup> The character of San Mao is presented as a

/travel narrative are visible in her stories, such as the assumption of innocence, and the preoccupation on the part of travellers from imperial centres with creating an impression of reciprocity with the people and lands they visit. See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Archival research and interviewing witnesses to verify or disprove San Mao’s ‘history’ could (and in future may well) be undertaken by scholars of Spanish and Chinese. Though more than one popular account has been written of attempts to retrace San Mao’s life and establish the veracity or otherwise of her stories (by Zhang Yun and Ma Zhongxin among others), no scholarly work of this type has as yet been done. Neither does my argument attempt to set up an allegorical relationship between Western Sahara and Taiwan, though some parallels may be drawn (for example, between the army camp massacre discussed below and the 2.28 incident, in which the KMT killed many Taiwan civilians, or between Spanish *terra nullius* claims in Western Sahara and the claims of the KMT to Taiwan—I thank Jeremy Taylor for reminding me of the resonances of these incidents for modern Taiwan readers). In my opinion, such a reading

/would not only invoke a historical sensibility that San Mao did not appear to have but would also elide the sense of a greater human or Chinese experience on which the stories seem to be built, borne out by the consumption and admiration of these stories by a global Chinese audience, and not just by Taiwan readers. It would also downplay the role of the specific experience as a mainlander in Taiwan that inflects her sense of innocent possession of the world. Raised in a mainland family at a time when Taiwan was firmly under KMT control and generally identifying as ‘Chinese’ or a citizen of the Republic of China, San Mao displays little that would constitute ‘Taiwan consciousness’ in her writings in the 1970s; indeed she was eager to be regarded as a ‘Chinese’ rather than a ‘Taiwan’ writer. To articulate a specifically Taiwan ‘experience’ does not seem to have been her goal. Furthermore, the main tenor of the story concerns not so much a consciousness of political and historical specificities (as one might expect in a history of decolonisation) as a universalistic humanism in which these struggles are cast as a human drama. This stress on the humanistic and universal effectively obscures the questions of colonial power involved in the story; it also allows the stories to be appropriated in nation-

/alistic mainland critical literature, in which the specificities of San Mao’s life are eliminated to make her a representative both of universal values and of a ‘greater’ China that transcends individual political divisions. For further discussion of San Mao’s world as a humanistic universal construct see Miriam Lang, “San Mao and the known world,” PhD diss., Australian National University, 1999. For a discussion of San Mao’s appropriating the world—including Taiwan—as ‘home’ through consumption, see Miriam Lang, “San Mao goes shopping,” *East Asian History* 10 (Dec. 1995), pp.127–64.

<sup>14</sup> In San Mao, *Kuqi de luotuo* [Crying camels] (Taipei: Huangguan Chubanshe, 1977). *Kuqi de luotuo* ran to 27 editions during her lifetime (see *Zili Wanbao* [Independent evening news], 5 Jan. 1991) and has been reprinted several times since her death.

<sup>15</sup> Known as Laayoune since the territory came under Moroccan rule.

<sup>16</sup> These stories are collected in *Sabala de gushi, Kuqi de luotuo* and *Yuji bu zailai*, and are discussed in Lang, “San Mao and the known world.”

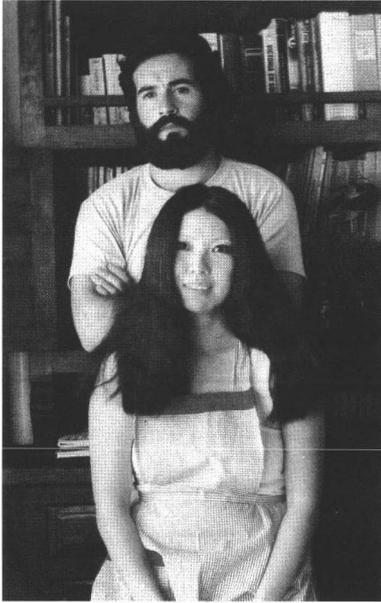
<sup>17</sup> As Spain prepared to leave the Sahara, Morocco claimed it as part of its own territory on the basis of historical ties; Mauritania too asserted a claim; Algeria, though it made no territorial claim, remained a significant player, supporting Morocco and Mauritania until mid-1975, when it reversed its position and supported Saharan self-determination. See Damis, *Conflict in northwest Africa*, pp.14–15, 45. At the time of publication of this article, Western Sahara was still part of Moroccan territory. It is perhaps significant that these two stories were written when San Mao was short of money. After she had fled the unrest in the desert and settled in the Canary Islands, her publications were the only source of income for herself and José; accordingly, she wrote at a faster rate and employed more colourful themes than before. Cui and Zhao, *San Mao zhuàn*, p.160.

<sup>18</sup> Susan R. Horton, *Difficult women, artful lives: Olive Schreiner and Isak Dinesen, in and out of Africa* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp.166, 221–2.

<sup>19</sup> I thank the referee of this paper for this phrase that sums up San Mao’s philosophy so aptly.

**Figure 3**

*San Mao and José* (from San Mao, Zuori, jinri, mingri [*San Mao: yesterday, today and tomorrow*] [Hong Kong: Wenxue Yanjiushe, 1983], p.1)



force of universal empathy in which national, political, economic and other differences are subsumed into a greater story of human experience. The authority of a great personal sensibility overrides the history of struggles between socially and politically differentiated groups, and the decisive effects of colonial power are rendered largely invisible as a result. It is this assumption of a transcendent and universal experiencing self that creates the capacity to 'oscillate' at all. If the greater narrative of human feeling is above human differences, then the authentic feeling self may innocently and generously choose to lay its sympathies in any place it may wish.

### *A Secret History*

Most of San Mao's stories would seem to be outside the category of history as it is conventionally understood. The focal point of the narratives (as in so much writing about foreign countries) is in the personal reactions of the observer to new sights and experiences, new people and new situations, which are often superficially observed and tangential to any sense of a 'real' life ruled by explicit economic and political imperatives, creating an atmosphere of curiosity, innocence, leisure and play. Stories such as these are not usually scrutinized by readers for their 'historical accuracy', and their contents are not normally a matter of public record.

In the two stories discussed here, however, the narrative of personal experience is placed in a setting of national unrest, of social tension and personal suffering, where the upheaval and conflict that provide a background to the narrator's own activities are, to some extent, attested beyond her own description of them. 'History' records that the people of Western Sahara *did* struggle for independence; the Polisario Liberation Front *did* engage in guerilla activities; the United Nations *did* send an inspection team to Western Sahara to gauge the will of the people; King Hassan of Morocco *did* lead his people in the so-called Green March to 'reclaim' Western Sahara; Bassiri *was* a known historical figure; conflicts, explosions, injuries and deaths *did* take place; and San Mao apparently *did* experience the history of the Sahara in 1975. In San Mao's 'history', the violent events are personalized into individual deaths. Whether or not she has 'made up' the people who die and the circumstances of their deaths (as seems likely), these narratives claim a specific political relationship of San Mao to Saharan history and Saharan history to herself.

Writing herself into the political situation of the mid-1970s Sahara, San Mao positions herself at the heart of the story, observing, acting and reacting, and presenting the capacity to be 'moved' by events as action in itself. As the supposedly truthful experiences of a young woman from Taiwan intertwine with the history of Western Sahara, the geographical and temporal settings of the stories not only give them an extra quality of vividness or immediacy but also exert some claim upon the 'real' place and time. The Sahrawi struggle

for nationhood and the contending claims of Spain, Morocco and Mauritania appear as part of a romanticized history of personal authenticity, an adjunct to the presentation of the self. Correspondingly, the self-presentation of San Mao against that background has created a Chinese ‘interest’ in the Sahara,<sup>20</sup> generating commentaries and biographical literature that build further on the relationships between San Mao, China, Spain and the Sahara that began with these stories of the desert. San Mao has ‘made’ Saharan history by establishing a relationship for it with Chinese readers.

It should be noted also that San Mao’s writing of their history has hitherto been closed to the other participants in the events. As an account they have not been able to read, it could be said to be a secret history. Writing in Chinese, San Mao could be certain that the Sahrawi and Spanish people who appeared in her stories would not read them, and would therefore not take issue with what she wrote.<sup>21</sup> Her account has not been subject to scrutiny by the community which it describes; it has been read solely by communities far removed from the original events.

As noted above, the recent history of Western Sahara, though not well known internationally, is very well-known all over the Chinese-speaking world through San Mao’s stories, in a form interpenetrated with the personal, romantic narrative of San Mao and her life in the desert.<sup>22</sup> In these stories violent deaths, even those of people she claims to know and to love, appear as colourful events in the narrative of her own adventures and emotional life (‘colourful’, that is, because the struggles she describes have no direct impact on the lives and histories of her readers), structured by the context of her writings as a whole. Her accounts also generate history in their wake, as they give rise to a literature of commentary which unites her into a history with the ‘characters’ in her stories and situates her within further narratives of history (discussed in the final section).

### *Sergeant Shaba*<sup>23</sup>

- *The Ugly Colonizer*

The first indication for San Mao that all is not harmonious in the desert is the discovery of a crowd of Sahrawi youths gathered around a Spanish soldier lying drunk on the ground, mocking and spitting at him. She interprets this display of contempt less as a manifestation of Sahrawi resentment against Spain and its military forces than as a personal distaste for this particular soldier (who, we are to learn, is a well-known drunkard). The idea that bad feelings on the part of the Sahrawi towards the Spanish are personal and unrelated to the colonial system becomes something of a recurring theme through these two stories—even though San Mao is plainly aware of the existence of the Polisario organization, its ‘enmity’ toward Spain and its widespread popular support. “At that time,” she notes,

<sup>20</sup> ‘Interest’ in both senses: both making it interesting to Chinese readers and making it into a place for Chinese political and diplomatic involvement. Although these Saharan stories have little direct ‘relevance’ to the interests of most Chinese-speaking societies, the interest in the Sahara created by San Mao’s writing has led to its incorporation into a ‘Chinese’ history; it forms a part of Chinese literary and cultural history and also broader narratives of China and its place in the world (see below).

<sup>21</sup> The historical identity of these stories is thus removed from any claims in relation to participant interests. The Sahrawi and Spanish people in San Mao’s stories could not read Chinese; several in the stories discussed here (the Spanish sergeant and the chief Sahrawi protagonists) are dead. Zhang Yun, who claims to have located individuals who appeared in some of her Saharan stories, notes that they have no idea that San Mao wrote stories about them or even that she was a writer at all (Zhang, *Zai Xisabala taxun San Mao de zuji*, p.160).

<sup>22</sup> The stories are well known in overseas Chinese communities as well as in Taiwan and China through the Southeast Asian and American editions of *Huangguan* [Crown] magazine, where the stories first appeared.

<sup>23</sup> Names: I have transliterated San Mao’s Chinese-character versions of Arabic names in Hanyu pinyin for the sake of consistency with the original text. I thank Gloria Kupresanin for suggesting ‘Chavez’ as the most likely Spanish original for San Mao’s ‘Shaba’. I thank Muhammed Kamal for providing Arabic versions of the names San Mao apparently used: Shāhida (Shayida); ‘Al-felwa (Aofeilua); Sha’lun (Shalun); Hādi (Handi); ‘Ajibi (Ajibi). Zhang Yun, noting the distance between San Mao’s transliterations and the Arabic originals, suggests that some of the names she uses are nicknames rather than formal names anyway. Translations: All translations are my own.

<sup>24</sup> *Crying camels*, p.42. Regarding the history of anticolonial movements in Western Sahara, Tony Hodges has noted that their leaders in the late 1960s and early 1970s had generally settled in small towns after spending much of their childhood in a nomadic environment, and had attended school, or even university. By 1970 the colonial intelligence services were already alarmed by the widespread support among young urban Sahrawi for the Organization for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Oued ed-Dahab (a precursor of Polisario). Tony Hodges, *Western Sabara: the roots of a desert war* (Westport Conn.: Lawrence Hill, 1983), pp.153–4.

<sup>25</sup> The Polisario Liberation Front emerged in 1973 (its predecessor organization—a non-violent advocate for independence—had been violently suppressed by Spanish forces in 1970 [discussed below]). Polisario guerilla activity began one month after San Mao's probable arrival in Western Sahara; and the liberation movement had already been led for two years by someone other than Bassiri. After Spain's withdrawal, Polisario established a government in exile in Algiers; it still claims to be the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people. See Hodges, *Western Sabara*, p.38.

<sup>26</sup> *Crying camels*, p.48.

<sup>27</sup> One of the two regiments of the Spanish Foreign Legion permanently stationed in Western Sahara (and not just a single camp) was named after Don Juan de Austria (Anthony G. Pazzanita and Tony Hodges, *Historical dictionary of Western Sabara*, [Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1994], p.415).

<sup>28</sup> Don Juan of Austria defeated the Turkish navy at Lepanto in 1571, ending Ottoman power in the Mediterranean and supposedly freeing the Christian galley slaves of the Turks.

<sup>29</sup> These words perhaps imply a belief in a greater Spanish unity that ought not to be divided and 'lose' its territory.

<sup>30</sup> *Crying camels*, p.50.

the young people of Western Sahara had formed the 'Polisario People's Liberation Front'. ... almost all the young people in town sided with them in their hearts. Relationships between Spanish people and Sahrawi were already very fraught; the desert force was thus, of course, their deadly enemy.<sup>24</sup>

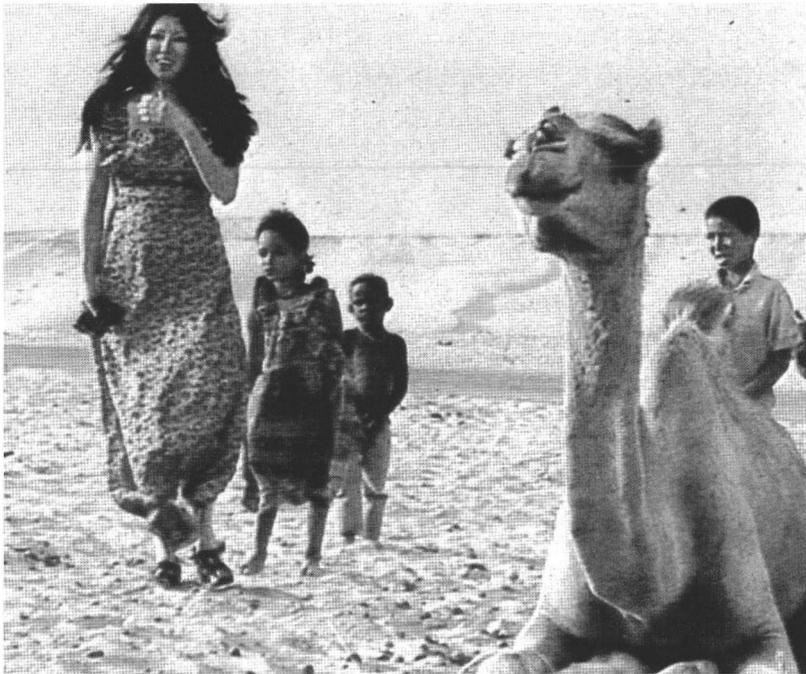
As we will see, Polisario will feature as prominently in San Mao's own personal narrative of her Saharan life as it did in the events surrounding the process of decolonization (and recolonization and ongoing struggle) itself.<sup>25</sup> Faced now with the drunken Spaniard, she and José drive him back to the military camp, and they are saluted by the guards with the words, "Thank you, compatriots." Identified by the Spanish as one of their own, San Mao reaffirms this sense of herself as Spanish by referring to the soldiers as "our own army." The Spanish desert forces are 'ours' as San Mao takes her position in Western Sahara along with the ruling Spanish, claiming her right to be part of Spain as a Spanish citizen in Western Sahara and thus accepting an identification (implicit or explicit) as part of a colonizing force.

San Mao's Sahrawi neighbour, Shalun, supports her dislike of the sergeant by starting in fear at the sight of him "as if he had seen an evil spirit"; and when San Mao asks the sergeant his name, he replies: "To my Saharan friends I have no name," and leaves abruptly. San Mao's immediate questions to Shalun about the soldier manifest both an implicit identification with the interests of Spain (through the belief that Sahrawi should have no reason to fear the Spanish military) and an assumption of her secure place in the confidence of the Sahrawi (assuming that she would know if Shalun was a member of Polisario, she assures readers that he is not). His reply is reassuring neither to her sense of Spanish rightness nor to her own understanding of the 'natives'—indeed he undercuts both: "That sergeant hates all of us Sahrawi ... everyone knows; you're the only one who doesn't."<sup>26</sup>

Encountering the sergeant again, San Mao notices a heart tattooed on his arm along with the words "Don Juan of Austria"—the personal name, she is told, of King Carlos I (from a time "before Spain and Austria were divided")—and also the name of a former military camp of Spain's desert forces.<sup>27</sup> The invocation of an earlier large and 'complete' Spain—indeed a Spain engaged in warfare with Muslims<sup>28</sup>—is perhaps significant in this context where Spain, by reluctantly withdrawing from its colonized Saharan territory, is about to be 'divided' again.<sup>29</sup> When she questions the sergeant directly: "Excuse me, why do the Sahrawi have a rumour that you hate them?" he replies, "Because I do!" then, with a fierce glare at a nearby group of Sahrawi, strides away.<sup>30</sup>

#### • *The Colonizer 'Wronged'*

The aura of mystery surrounding the sergeant is dispelled only when the setting moves from San Mao's 'Spanish' life to her 'Sahrawi' life. In the former, we see her settled in her home in the desert capital, partaking of Spanish privilege and entertaining Spanish friends, while in the latter she roams the



**Figure 4**

*San Mao in the desert (from San Mao, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, p.4)*

wider desert and depicts herself as a treasured guest in the tent homes of nomadic Sahrawi. In the two stories examined here, San Mao moves between these two lives; in both, the main action takes place in her 'Spanish' life, and Sahrawi desert-dwellers serve to underline her own observations and actions, to accept her legitimacy and 'rightness' in the desert, and to contribute vital knowledge of things that are hidden from her in town. In both stories she writes herself into the lives of nomadic Sahrawi families: first on a casual basis as a visitor, and then as an honorary family member (as discussed below).

On this occasion, a visit to a Sahrawi family in their tent by an oasis outside the town brings satisfaction of her curiosity about the sergeant. Welcomed by the family patriarch, San Mao expresses surprise that only a tiny handful of people are camped around the hospitable oasis. He tells her that in times past, thousands of tents had been pitched there, but a cruel and terrible event had caused people to move away: namely, a massacre of the desert forces by the Sahrawi.

Sixteen years previously, relates the old man, the Spanish foreign legion had arrived at the oasis and set up camp. San Mao is quick to counter with a *terra nullius* argument ("at that time the Sahara desert didn't belong to anyone. Anyone could come here; they weren't breaking the law")<sup>31</sup> in defence of the Spanish forces (who, after all, make it 'legitimate' and indeed possible for her to be there herself). The question of who this piece of the Sahara 'belongs' to, the central issue in the conflict over the territory, is pushed aside with the assertion that the land is 'unowned'.<sup>32</sup> This defence of

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>32</sup> It does not 'belong' to the Sahrawi under Spanish colonial rule; its 'belonging' to Spain is about to be questioned and overturned by the United Nations; it is soon to 'belong' to Morocco and (briefly) Mauritania; and self-determination for the indigenous inhabitants to whom it truly 'belongs' has not as yet come to fruition.

<sup>33</sup> The two situations are not, of course, identical. The Kuomintang aimed to 'restore' Taiwan and its people to a national unity after Japanese colonization. Although Western Sahara had supposedly been part of Spain since 1956, Spanish policies did not attempt to make the Sahrawi culturally Spanish. It should also be noted that, at the time these stories were written, any suggestion of Taiwan independence from China was illegal.

<sup>34</sup> And the mainland Kuomintang supposedly no less right to Taiwan than the longer-term Chinese residents, let alone the indigenous inhabitants. The 'ownership' of Taiwan is still contested, as dispossessed Aboriginal inhabitants assert their rights, and the Minnan (Hokkien)-speaking Chinese whose ancestors settled in Taiwan from four centuries ago (a large majority of the population) increasingly assert political and cultural sovereignty. Although governments on Taiwan may have asserted Taiwan's independence as a state, China continues to assert its claims to sovereignty over Taiwan as a part of a 'unified China'.

<sup>35</sup> *Crying camels*, pp.52–3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54.

the army may resonate with the circumstances of San Mao's own childhood. Her father (a former Kuomintang military officer) brought his family in 1948 from the warring mainland to Taiwan—where the Kuomintang not only assumed political power (on the grounds that Taiwan was indisputably a part of China) but also maintained a sense of their own importance as civilized representatives of the culture of the Chinese 'centre' in the less civilized periphery, who would restore the Chineseness of a Taiwan supposedly corrupted by fifty years of Japanese colonialism. They also harbored a sense of mission for a unified China along with a sense of temporariness about their residence in Taiwan (where they intended to stay only until they returned triumphant to the mainland to rule there).<sup>33</sup> For San Mao, the Spanish military have no less right than the Sahrawi to this 'unowned' land<sup>34</sup>—and their camp is as acceptable a presence in the desert as the flocks and tents of the nomads.

The Sahrawi nomads, however, had challenged the 'right' of the Spanish army to camp by the oasis and take water from it, and the conflict had ended when "a big group of Sahrawi made a surprise attack on the camp and killed all the desert forces in one night while they were asleep. Killed them all with knives."<sup>35</sup> All except one, that is: the mysterious sergeant from San Mao's 'Spanish' desert life, who had been lying in a drunken stupor outside the camp.

San Mao's imagination recreates the scene for herself and for readers:

[I]t was as if I could see a group of Spanish soldiers in uniform in hand-to-hand combat with turbaned Sahrawi, falling down under the knives in slow motion like on TV—piles of crawling bodies bleeding onto the Saharan sand, thousands of helpless arms reaching up to heaven, wordless astonishment on the bloody faces gasping hoarsely. In the dark night wind of that place, the only sound was the laughter of the empty cavern of death.<sup>36</sup>

Her description of how she imagines the massacre would have been makes of it a televisual image more suited to a fictional movie than a documentary account. Her presentation of the scene involves not a history of archival verification but an imagistic intensity of feeling, and the relationship that readers may acquire to the history of the Sahara from these images is not that of scrutineers of a repository of evidence but rather that of viewers to a spectacle. There is in San Mao's tale of treacherous Sahrawi violence against an unsuspecting Spanish army a connecting of herself with a Saharan past—in which the colonizing nation of her own affiliation has supposedly been wronged—and a Saharan present in which a native patriarch involves her in local lore by telling her the story of the past. Ten years after San Mao's own Saharan sojourn, the journalist Zhang Yun 章云, visiting the desert seeking traces of her life there, is taken to an oasis which he believes to be the one in this story. He presents both the reticence and the sketchy explanations of his guide as corroborative evidence to San Mao's account. The guide does not relate 'the tragic story' ("He couldn't possibly imagine," notes Zhang, "that I not only understood this place but had also

been shaken and moved by what had happened here”) but finally tells Zhang that a conflict between Sahrawi and Spanish at the oasis had killed many and caused the remaining people to move away. “Compared with the history of the place, he hadn’t told me much,” muses Zhang, “but he had more or less confirmed the truth and reliability of the story. So there was no need to question any further.”<sup>37</sup> For Zhang, it seems, San Mao’s story has created a reliable history of the place by emotional (rather than archivally corroborated) authenticity; things unspoken produce in his mind an impression of a historical truth that is too painful to be discussed more fully.

For the present, however, San Mao’s interest is less with the tiny remnant oasis community than with the drunken Spanish survivor. The old Sahrawi man describes the sergeant waking from his stupor and falling among “the corpses of his brothers, shaking like a madman.” His name, however, is still a mystery; “since the massacre, he has refused to tell it to anyone.”<sup>38</sup>

- *The Struggle for the Sahara*

Back in El-Ayoun in the mid 1970s, where no one speaks of “that tragedy that was already history,” conflict between Spanish and Sahrawi is intensifying:

[S]uddenly this piece of desert that the world had forgotten became complicated. Morocco to the north and Mauritania to the south wanted to carve up Western Sahara between them, but the desert’s own tribes formed a guerilla army and went into exile in Algeria. They wanted independence, but the Spanish government kept vacillating; it was favorably disposed, but didn’t know how to abandon this territorial possession on which it had already expended so much effort and concern.

At that time Spanish soldiers who went out alone were killed; wells were poisoned, time bombs were found on the school bus, the phosphate mine conveyor belt was set on fire and the night watchman hanged on an electric cable, and land mines exploded on the roads outside the town, killing people in passing vehicles ...

Amid this ceaseless chaos there was fear in the town at the slightest sound. The government closed the schools forthwith, and the children were evacuated back to Spain. There was a total curfew at night ... . In this hitherto peaceful little town, people were beginning to sell off their furniture cheaply, and there were long queues outside the airline office every day for tickets. The cinema and all the shops were closed. All Spanish civil servants who remained were issued with pistols. The air was tense, and the town, where no real direct conflict or aggression had yet occurred, was full of unrest and fear.<sup>39</sup>

“People,” of course, are Spanish here. Although identified and identifying with Spain, San Mao declines to join the other women who are being evacuated to Spain with their children. José goes to work every day as usual. Every day San Mao scans the Spanish newspaper to “find out exactly what the government was going to do with this piece of land”—but there is no news.

<sup>37</sup> Zhang, *Zai Xisabala taxun San Mao de zuji*, pp.86–7. I have not been able to find any historical basis for this incident. It may refer to “some event during the uprising against Spain, led by the Army of Liberation ... a battle which took place at Edchera on 13 January 1958, during which 51 Spanish soldiers were killed or wounded, according to the Spanish government at the time. The subsequent rout of the Army of Liberation during a combined Franco-Spanish campaign, operation Owagon, led to the mass migration of Sahrawis to southern Morocco, and this was partly responsible for the depopulation of oases” (Tony Hodges, personal communication, May 2000). For further details of these events see Hodges, *Western Sahara*, pp.73–84.

<sup>38</sup> *Crying camels*, p.55.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.55–6.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.57. I thank Hank Nelson for pointing out that this scene is consistent with the Spanish military practice of repatriating war dead.

<sup>41</sup> *Crying camels*, p.58.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

### *Spain's Loss*

In this time of tension and uncertainty about the future of Western Sahara and Spain's place in it, it is San Mao herself who divines the news, reading the intentions of the Spanish government in events she claims to have witnessed. A military vehicle loaded with coffins arrives at the military cemetery, and soldiers proceed to exhume the bodies for repatriation to Spain, "lifting out their dead brothers one by one" and placing them in new coffins. Now San Mao understands: "Spain was going to give this land up after all!"<sup>40</sup>

Through the crowd that has gathered to watch the exhumation she observes the nameless sergeant. When the third row of grave-stones has been dug up, he strides over to one of the graves and jumps into it "as if he had been waiting a long time for this moment." Before San Mao's romanticizing gaze, his normal unpleasant manner is transformed:

With his own hands he lifted out that undecayed corpse and held it in his arms like a lover; holding it gently in his arms he looked attentively into the dried up face, no enmity or anger in his own. All I could see there was tender sadness.<sup>41</sup>

As the Sahrawi crowd watches expectantly, another soldier quietly explains to San Mao: "It's his younger brother—he was killed with the others." "An age" passes before the sergeant carries his brother's long-dead body to the coffin to place it "as gently as if he were a baby, into the bed where he would rest forever."<sup>42</sup>

Despite her personal dislike of the sergeant, San Mao feels a moment of connection and sympathy with him, which fuses concern for his grief for his dead brother—for his personal loss—with sorrow at a shared national loss. The soldier has lost his brother; Spain is about to 'lose' the Sahara; San Mao is about to lose the romantic Saharan life of her dreams and with it her persona as the Chinese woman of the desert. As he leaves, she turns away lest he feel that "I was just a curious bystander watching unconcerned"—like the Sahrawi crowd, who pick up their children and flee as he passes. San Mao can empathize with the sergeant's loss; these Sahrawi, as objects of the Spaniard's hatred, are fearful rather than sympathetic. The repatriation of dead Spanish 'brothers'—literal or metaphorical—is not an occasion of regretful emotion for them, and there is no 'loss' to them in Spain's withdrawal. San Mao, however, from a position of personal identification with Spain, identifies here with Spanish emotion—even that of a Spaniard she dislikes—at personal loss, Spain's loss and by extension her own loss too.

#### • *Spanish Goodness*

Nothing is left in the military cemetery except "the neat rows of crosses, shining white in the sunlight over empty graves," and the story seems closed. That same day, however, an explosion is heard in El-Ayoun—and "that sergeant" is killed in the blast.

He was driving past ... a group of Sahrawi children ... playing with a box with a guerilla flag stuck into it. The sergeant thought there was something not quite right about the box, and he got out of his truck and ran over to the children to tell them to get away from it. Then one of the children took the flag out and the box exploded ... The sergeant threw himself onto the box and was blown to bits. Only two of the children were injured.<sup>43</sup>

In death as in life, the sergeant is full of mystery—though now the mystery is his unexpected goodness rather than his hatred. His body is buried the following day; he is the only Spanish soldier in the newly vacated military cemetery.

His brothers had long been taken away, and were sleeping peacefully in another land. But he had missed them; he was buried quietly in the Sahara, and this place that he both loved and hated was to be his eternal home.<sup>44</sup>

Only after his death does San Mao learn his name (written, of course, on his headstone with the date: 1975).

As in the story of the massacre at the oasis, a casual reader might wonder whether or not this story is true: whether or not Sergeant Shaba was a real person, and whether San Mao's account is a reliable version of documentable events, a fictionalized version, a cobbling together of verifiable events into a fictional sequential narrative, or pure fabrication.<sup>45</sup> English-language sources on the history of Western Sahara do not refer to any

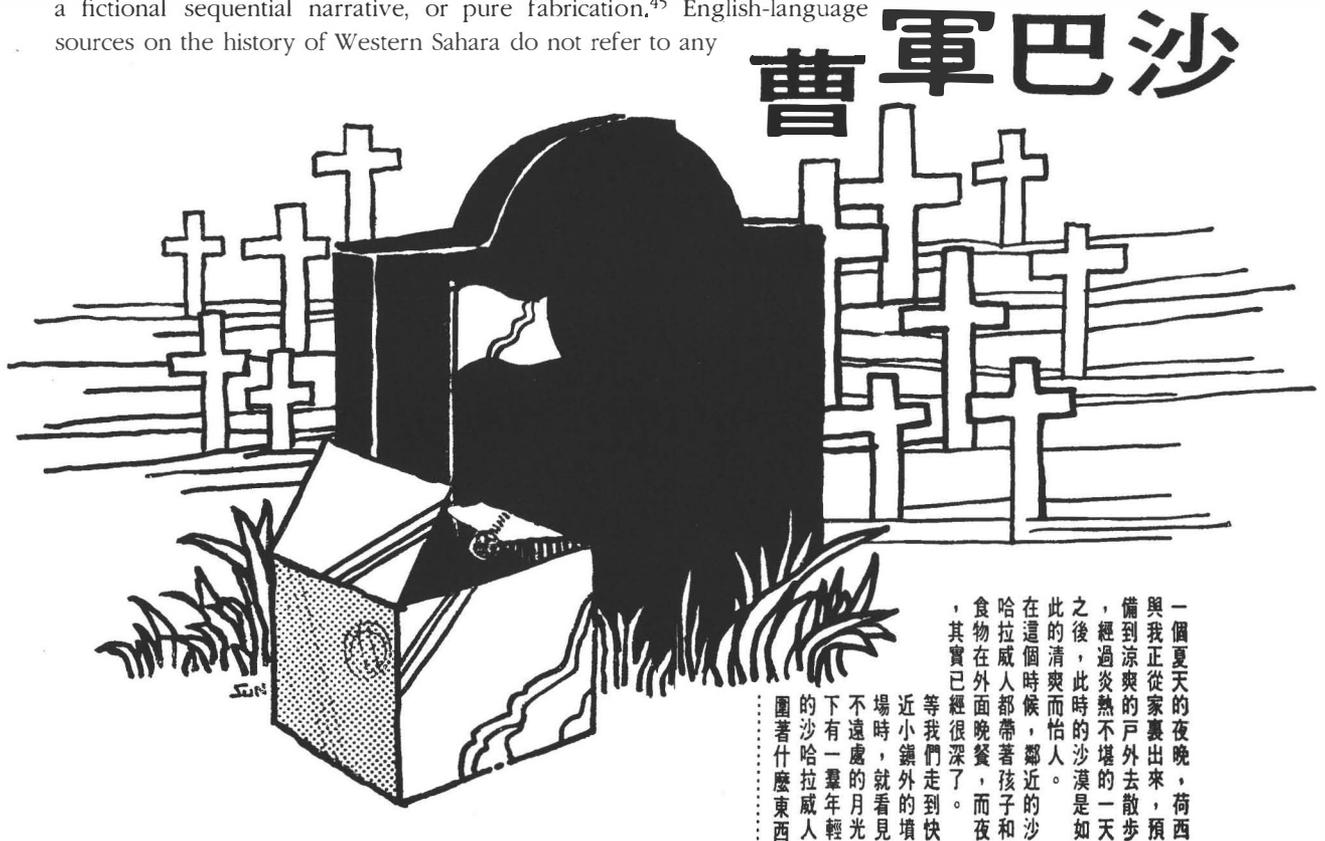
<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp.59–60.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.60.

<sup>45</sup> Zhang Yun does not attempt to verify the story of Sergeant Shaba on his visit to El-Ayoum or seek his grave, but notes that part of the cemetery has been built over.

### Figure 5

Title page, "Sergeant Shaba" (Crying Camels, pp.38–9)



such events. Subjecting parts of it to historical examination (through archives, newspapers, interviews) would not necessarily establish the story as ‘definitively’ true or false in all its details, and neither would it shift this account by San Mao from fiction to history or vice versa; the fact of San Mao’s insertion of herself into Saharan history remains, along with the position she takes up *vis-à-vis* the parties to the conflict. Her incorporation of Spain’s military withdrawal from the desert into her own story makes it a crucial part of her placement of herself in the social and historical process and her imagination of that process. Verifiability is not the only issue at stake in San Mao’s story of Sergeant Shaba. As a Spanish resident of Western Sahara at a time when Spain’s presence is being continually and violently contested, San Mao places a story of Sahrawi violence that takes the lives of ‘innocent’ Spanish soldiers alongside a Spanish act of heroism that saves the lives of

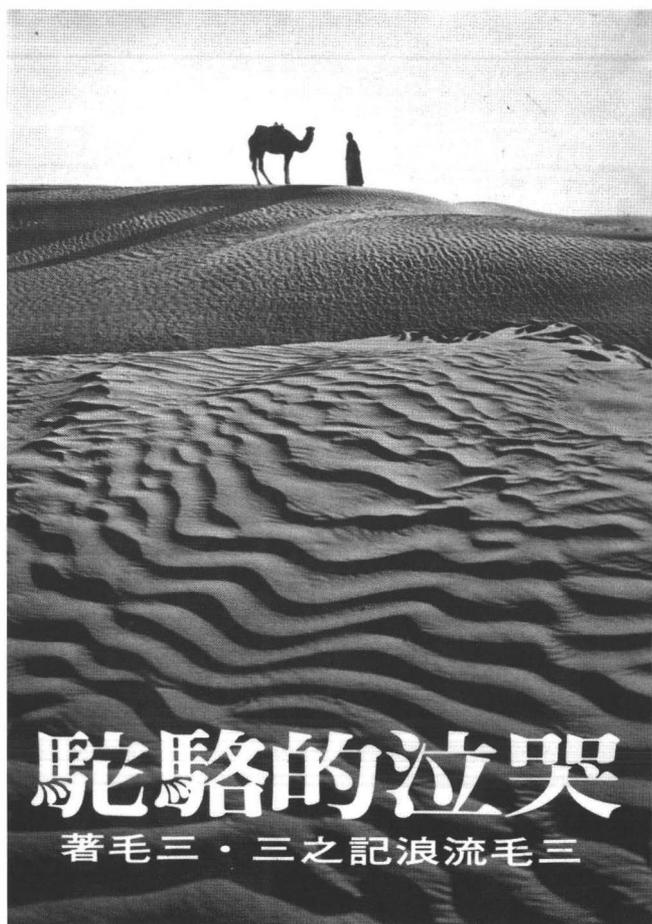
innocent children. An apparently evil man is shown repaying past Sahrawi evil with a final gesture of Spanish good; rather than avenging the deaths of his comrades and brother he lays down his life for the ‘enemy’ Sahrawi children and thus supplies a sense of personal nobility and rightness to Spanish actions in the desert. Spain is perhaps the real hero here. Even as Spain prepares to withdraw, it is shown as self-sacrificing even in defeat; though it may have suffered at the hands of treacherous and ungrateful Sahrawi, it can display a fine moral example in return. The reader of San Mao’s story is implicitly invited to admire Spanish virtue in the person of the sergeant.

San Mao herself begins as a peripheral observer, distancing herself from the unattractive Spaniard and his vengeful enmity for the Sahrawi. Yet by the story’s end, sympathy for him merges with her own identification with Spain to create a picture of Spanish withdrawal as a tragic sacrifice involving a sense of real loss. By writing the sergeant and his story into her history, San Mao writes herself into their history and the Sahara’s too.

As already noted, “Sergeant Shaba” is primarily a tale of San Mao’s ‘Spanish’ life in the desert; Sahrawi act simply as informants of local knowledge or to provide a contrast to her own behaviour. In the second story examined here, San Mao’s ‘Sahrawi’ life is nearer the foreground and she involves herself more deeply in the story of the Sahara as a participant as well as an observer. By presenting herself in close connection with the people of the

**Figure 6**

Cover, *Crying Camels*



Sahara—and by representing their suffering as her own suffering—she seeks to make the Sahara her own and to ‘belong’, so that its history can become ‘hers’. In “Crying Camels,” the political upheavals of Western Sahara are configured into a desert love story in which she herself is closely involved. The story places San Mao into various phases of the process leading to Spanish withdrawal from Western Sahara (Polisario guerilla activity, the United Nations delegation, the World Court resolution, the Green March) and in interaction with a Sahrawi liberation fighter (Bassiri, a figure of historical record). Of all San Mao’s autobiographical/historical stories, this is the most problematic; it has also been acclaimed by commentators as her most successful.

### *Crying Camels*

- *Deserving and Undeserving Natives*

In the delineation of the chief Sahrawi protagonists in this story, physical beauty is an important and constantly recurring theme. Aofeilua is a handsome, young and unusually likeable Sahrawi from an old desert family; Shayida too is beautiful and good. They also have in common a higher level of education than most Sahrawi under Spanish rule (both have had senior high school education in a colonized ‘province’ where even primary school education for the indigenous people was rare) and both work for Spanish institutions in El-Ayou: Aofeilua as a policeman and Shayida as a midwife at the local hospital. Familiar with Spanish ways as well as the Spanish language, they are for San Mao set apart from the ‘ignorant’ Sahrawi ‘masses’; they not only interact with her according to Spanish linguistic and social codes and demonstrate acceptance of and affection for her, but can voice political opinions as well.

It is with San Mao herself that the story begins, and this prefigures what is to come: throughout the story and throughout the suffering of her friends, the focus remains upon herself. The opening creates the atmosphere of a fictional narrative, with the landscape mirroring her mood as she recalls the deaths of her friends the previous day. A Fosbucraa representative arrives at her home to tell her that arrangements have been made for her and her friend to leave for Spain—but only one of the air tickets will be needed, as this friend is now dead. The Fosbucraa official offers San Mao his protection against the Sahrawi who surround her; and, though she declines, she locks her doors and windows as he leaves. In this atmosphere of tragedy, fear and insecurity begins the flashback tale that culminates in the story of the deaths of her friends the previous day.

The leading female character, Shayida, is introduced by hearsay. A crowd of Sahrawi women are discussing the explosions they had all heard the previous night, which San Mao supposed to be the work of the Polisario

<sup>46</sup> Namely the gate of the military camp and the Fosbucraa primary school.

<sup>47</sup> *Crying camels*, p.101.

<sup>48</sup> The excitement of proximity to a Sahrawi woman intensifies when she removes her head-covering to reveal an 'exotic' beauty (cheeks the color of ivory; "shining black eyes whose depths you could not see"; a smile like "the newly risen moon"). Her unveiled beauty draws all present "into an ancient dream," and thus Shayida is marked as representing something old and timeless as well as exotic, backward as well as beautiful, these qualities reinforced by her 'mysterious' silence. *Crying camels*, p.103.

<sup>49</sup> I thank Tony Hodges for his comment regarding the likelihood of Shayida's religion: "While it cannot be ruled out that one or two Saharawis may have converted from Islam, I have never heard of this happening. This looks ... like a literary embellishment to dramatise the contrasts ... between the ugly ignorant Sahrawi masses and the enlightened exceptions whom San Mao befriended" (personal communication, May 2000).

Liberation Front. Two of the bombs had targeted centres of Spanish military and economic power in the desert<sup>46</sup>; the third, however, is believed by the neighbouring women to have been a personal attack on a rejected suitor of Shayida's. San Mao's response is a condemnation of Sahrawi guerilla tactics and a defense of Spain: "Actually the Spanish government have made repeated assurances that they will grant self-determination, so what are they agitating about?" The Spanish government, it should be recalled, persistently stalled on its stated willingness to withdraw from Western Sahara, until such time as Spain could make certain of retaining influence in its former territory and safeguarding its huge phosphate mining investments there. Here, however, at least some of the bombing is presented not as a political act but as an act of personal revenge: Ajibi is in love with Shayida, who has supposedly rejected him for Aofeilua, thus giving rise to violent rivalries and vendettas between the two men and their supporters.

The contrast between the venal 'everyday' Sahrawi masses and the noble, good and deserving Sahrawi individuals is established early and recurs throughout the story. The ugly, dirty, petty, gossiping Sahrawi in San Mao's neighbourhood are placed in contrast with those extraordinary Sahrawi (like Shayida and Aofeilua) who are distinguished not only by superior physical beauty and unusual cleanliness but also by their greater appreciation of San Mao. Both 'types' of Sahrawi are represented by families: the dirty family next door and the beautiful, clean, tent-dwelling family (with which, as we will see, San Mao presents herself as entering into a deeper kinship). In this opening scene San Mao stresses childishness and ugliness on the part of her neighbours (barefoot and filthy, nail-biting, "stinking all over," hair in disarray and stiff with mud, "very ugly, unspeakably jealous and hateful ... like an ignorant ghost"), contrasting them in her mind with the lovely Shayida ("refined and pure ... beautiful as a spring flower ... with a high level of civilized [that is, Spanish] education").<sup>47</sup>

The drama continues when Aofeilua brings Shayida to visit San Mao and José. Finding them entertaining some Spanish friends, he is reluctant to stay. San Mao interprets his reluctance as purely personal, again demonstrating the same kind of political naivety that assumed that her neighbour Shalun should have no misgivings towards Spanish soldiers. When San Mao eventually persuades them both to come inside, Shayida's effect on the Spanish men is electric; they have never, claims San Mao, been so close to a Sahrawi woman before, let alone one willing to remove her head-covering, revealing a face of astonishing beauty which San Mao describes in orientaling detail.<sup>48</sup>

Next morning, the dirty, gossiping family next door complain to San Mao about her entertaining Shayida in her home, condemning the latter as a "whore" and a non-Muslim (she is a Catholic).<sup>49</sup> Handi, the patriarch, objects to Shayida as a potential pollutant of his own family, and the conversation between him and San Mao highlights some issues of 'insider' and 'outsider' interaction in a colonial setting. When Handi accuses San Mao of leading his own pure daughter astray by consorting with undesirable people, she replies

by invoking the ‘open’ Spanish mind and the effect it should have had on Handi after his years of service with the Spanish police<sup>50</sup>; in defence, Handi takes refuge in ‘tradition’, maintaining that he is acting according to Sahrawi culture. Distinguishing sharply between ‘you’ and ‘us’,<sup>51</sup> Handi identifies San Mao with the Spanish as incapable of understanding Sahrawi ways while at the same time bringing into their midst practices that might contaminate their supposed cultural purity. On this occasion San Mao chooses to accept and identify with this ‘difference’ of herself and Handi, expressed in terms of ‘modern’ and enlightened values *vis-à-vis* ‘backwardness’ and conservatism on the part of the Sahrawi.

Later she discusses the ‘closed minds’ of their Sahrawi neighbours with José. “The guerillas themselves are telling them every day in their broadcasts to free their slaves and send their daughters to school,” sighs José, “but the only thing they hear is ‘independence’—they just ignore the rest.” Here the Polisario leaders are seen to be encouraging the very values of modern ‘progress’, ‘civilization’ and ‘morality’ that have been implicitly presented as inherent in the Spanish but lacking in the Sahrawi. The two examples cited by José (slavery and female education) are areas in which Spanish rule of the Sahara had initiated little progress; in presenting them here without reference to Spain’s colonial aims, but simply as objective facts that are implicitly ‘right’, San Mao and José are positioned as partakers in that objectivity and rightness. The ‘common’ Sahrawi people, on the other hand, are shown as unwilling to listen to sense no matter who speaks it; despite attempts at moral guidance from both the ‘open-minded’ Spanish and the Polisario Liberation Front, they maintain a childish disregard for morality and remain unresponsive to any ‘progressive’ message (indeed ultimately destroying not only Spanish rule in the desert but the leaders of their own liberation movement, and thus supposedly proving themselves unworthy of either). San Mao presents their wish for ‘self-determination’ as a simple-minded fixation on a rhetorical concept that they cannot understand, which is somehow equated with irresponsibility and backwardness—especially as Spain is supposedly willing to ‘grant’ them self-determination anyway. Defending Spain again, San Mao finds another party to blame: Morocco. If Morocco is the barrier to right action, then Spain may be exonerated from criticism of its continued procrastination and unwillingness to act upon its promises.

#### • *Independence Versus Foreign Rule*

As political tensions increase in El-Ayoum (bombs explode intermittently, Spanish residents are leaving and the town is “as desolate as a ghost town”)<sup>52</sup> the Sahrawi people are, in San Mao’s view, unaware of and unaffected by the conflict over their land and their future. Any sense of their understanding of the issues, support for Polisario or direct involvement in political activity is subsumed into fantasies of ignorant people in a ‘primeval’, changeless place. For San Mao, Sahrawi incomprehension of the issues of self-determination

<sup>50</sup> “Handi, you have been with the Spanish government for more than twenty years! You have to open your mind a bit some time. Times are changing.” [Handi replies:] “Times might change but traditional Sahrawi customs don’t change. You are you, we are us . . . . A person betraying the religion of her own people—is there anything more shameful?” *Crying camels*, p.106.

<sup>51</sup> Discussing Korea under Japanese rule, Kenneth Wells has pointed to a defensiveness among a male population under colonial rule when confronted with questions of women’s rights: “the humiliation of the Japanese removal of the traditional male elite’s prerogative to rule and consequent subjugation of Korean men rendered them extremely sensitive to any suggestion of loss of prerogatives in the home, let alone any call for Korean women to assert themselves against Korean men” (Kenneth M. Wells, “The price of legitimacy: women and the Kūnuhoe movement, 1927–1931,” in *Colonial modernity in Korea*, ed. Shin Gi-Wook and Michael Robinson [Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1999]). San Mao’s portrayal of Handi, in which he appeals to a static ‘tradition’ that forms a polar opposite to the ways of the colonizer, suggests a similar tendency.

<sup>52</sup> *Crying camels*, p.107.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp.107–8.

<sup>54</sup> Tony Hodges has suggested that Sahrawi people were “rather well-informed” at this time: “The role of Arabic as a common *lingua franca* and the spread of transistor radios enabled them to obtain access to a wide range of information and political ideas. In fact, the flood of cheap radios from the Canary Islands ... under the territory’s special customs ‘free zone’ meant that virtually no Saharawi family was without one. ... With the plethora of Arabic radio stations, it was therefore not difficult for Saharawis to hear of the UN resolutions, the neighboring governments’ declarations on Western Sahara, or, of perhaps as great influence, the inspiring struggles for national independence being fought elsewhere in the third world [sic], from Vietnam to Palestine, and Guinea-Bissau to Eritrea.” Hodges, *Western Sahara*, p.153.

<sup>55</sup> *Crying camels*, p.108.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.109.

<sup>57</sup> The implication that she can ‘belong’ simply by feeling that she loves the place is reminiscent of the modern ‘western’ notion that ‘the world is ours’ put forward by Sally Price in *Primitive art in civilized places* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>58</sup> The literary critic Gu Jitang identifies “something of the tone of an aristocrat” in this dismissal of the Sahrawi which reveals that although she “was sympathetic with and supported the Sahrawi struggle, she still looked down on them.” Gu, *Pingshuo San Mao*, p.72.

<sup>59</sup> This has been interpreted as a demonstration of the capacity of uneducated people for patriotic feeling: “That the thinking of a veiled woman could be as mature as this, her standpoint as steadfast as this and her ethnic feeling so clear was something that her good friend San Mao had no way of understanding ... Shayida was not a guerilla, and she had no education or specialized training, yet her thoughts were on this high level. From her example we can see the level of the Sahrawi struggle for liberation” (Gu, *Pingshuo San Mao*, p.73). Shayida’s schooling and her nursing and midwifery work are overlooked here in order to praise a ‘simple’ and supposedly ignorant nationalism among Sahrawi people in general.

<sup>60</sup> *Crying camels*, p.109.

is a necessary part of the quality of the Sahara, part of a timeless cycle of nature separated from the world of politics and indifferent to any ‘modern’ concepts:

The people who actually lived here seemed unclear, unable to tell where their borders were. The sand was the same sand; the sky was the same sky; the whirlwinds were the same whirlwinds; and at the edge of this world cut off from the world, in this place so primitive that heaven and earth was vast and empty, for many people actually living in this place the United Nations, the International Court in the Hague, national ‘self determination,’ all of these strange words were as insubstantial and unreal as smoke.<sup>53</sup>

Though San Mao’s assumption of Sahrawi ignorance here may be very far removed from the actual situation,<sup>54</sup> it allows her to present Shayida again as different from and better than the others. Unlike the Sahrawi ‘mob’, Shayida is credited with understanding. When San Mao discusses the political situation with her, asking her what she will do if the Spanish withdraw, the attitudes of ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ to colonial rule in the Sahara become very clear. Shayida responds with a counter-question:

“What kind of withdrawal? if they give us independence? or if they let Morocco grab some land?”

“Either could happen.” I shrugged my shoulders, not caring one way or the other.

“If we’re independent, I’ll stay. If we’re partitioned, I won’t stay.”

“I think your heart is Spanish,” I said slowly.<sup>55</sup>

For San Mao, affiliated with the colonising Spanish, there is no real difference between Sahrawi independence and rule by Morocco; the presence or non-presence of Spain is for her the only important issue, and she interprets Sahrawi unwillingness to remain in a Western Sahara that is even partially ruled by Morocco (rather than fully independent) not as a desire for an independent state but as love for the Spanish colonizers. The Sahrawi woman’s response places the focus back on the Sahara and on ties of kinship and ‘home’; but when she asks San Mao in turn what she will do when Spain withdraws, San Mao’s answer is bounded by no considerations other than a free preference to live wherever she chooses:

“I don’t want to leave. I like it here.”

“What is there here that attracts you?” she asked me, surprised.

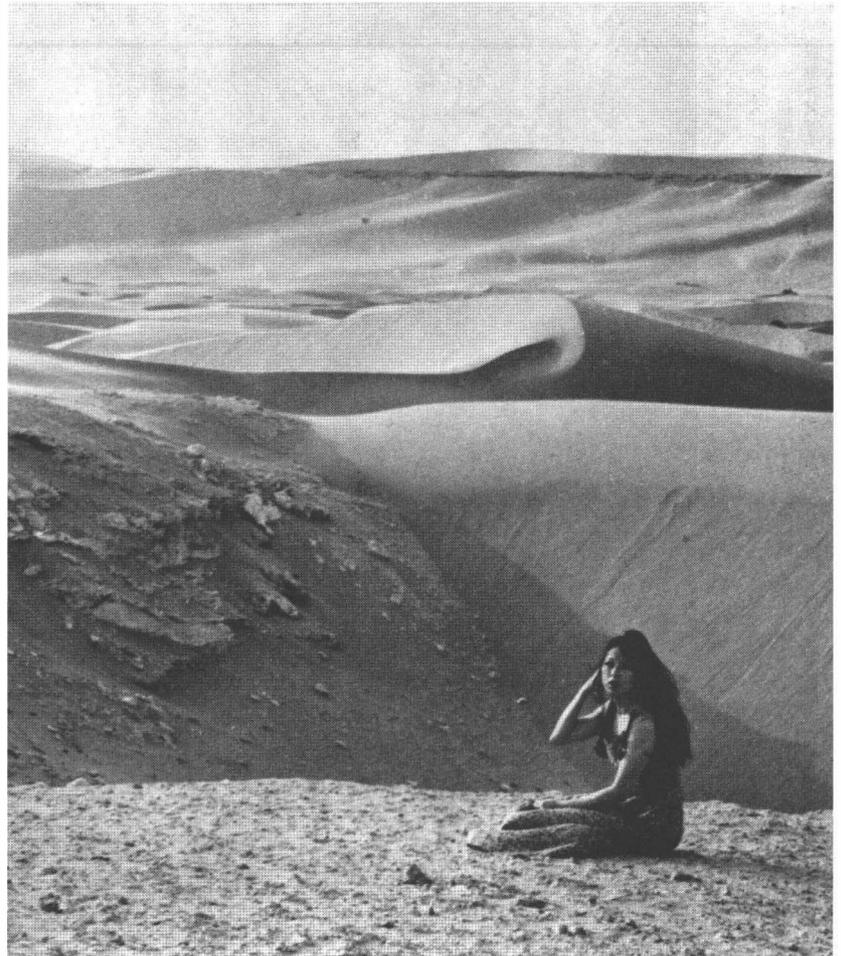
“What attracts me here? The vast sky and the vast earth, the burning sun, the violent wind, the lonely life—they make me happy, and sad; even these ignorant people, I love and hate them in the same way. I have mixed feelings—Ah, I can’t even make it out myself.”<sup>56</sup>

Something of the romantic outsider’s fantasy can be seen here. San Mao is attracted by the extremities of the desert (the wildness, the climate) and by extension its inhabitants (configured as another part of the natural world: undeveloped, primitive and wild). Shayida, who has had a Spanish education, must therefore occupy a rather different space from her compatriots, and so

San Mao counts her along with Spain. The ‘insider’ Shayida, through her superior personal qualities and education, is perceived here as somehow not quite Sahrawi, while the ‘outsider’ San Mao can identify herself as loving the desert and belonging there by simply choosing to. For Shayida the desert is her home and her history; for San Mao it is a quasi-mythic world that she has chosen for herself. The difference in their attitudes toward the future of Western Sahara is underlined when Shayida asks San Mao what she would do “if this land was yours.” The question, of course, presupposes that it is not hers; yet for San Mao, as we have seen, the issue of whether or not she truly belongs is insignificant: “What’s the difference if it is mine or not?” she replies.<sup>57</sup> Shayida, for whom the question of self-determination is a vital part of belonging, asks, “You’ve never thought about independence?” “Sooner or later,” replies San Mao, “colonialism will be a thing of the past. The problem will be after independence—this bunch of ignorant violent people—how many years will it take before they can be established? I’m not optimistic at all.”<sup>58</sup> To this classic colonial view Shayida responds with quiet confidence, “It will happen one day.”<sup>59</sup> San Mao is shocked: “Shayida, you can only say that to me—whatever you do, don’t go saying it lightly to other people.”<sup>60</sup> With these words she marks herself as different, separate from the conflict between Spanish and Sahrawi, and uniquely able to ‘tolerate’ Sahrawi political ideas even though she does not agree with them.<sup>61</sup>

**Figure 7**

*San Mao in the Sahara—see caption to Figure 1 (from Fu-nü tsa-chih, Taipei (July 1976), p.51)*



/to backward areas, have an instinctive feeling of superiority and pride *vis-à-vis* the indigenous people, and unconsciously harbour a kind of disgust towards them, a feeling of dislike. Settling in the Sahara Desert, San Mao had not only been born in an ancient civilized country but had also experienced westernized [sic] Taiwan society. In addition, she went there as a wife of the conquering and ruling nation. Usually such people feel refined and superior; they assume a commanding position and give orders. But San Mao was not at all like that. She always treated them equally; she never dis- /OVER

<sup>61</sup> Gu apparently accepts that San Mao’s attitudes and behaviour were very different from those of other non-Sahrawi residents of Spanish Sahara. “Even though José was Spanish, and San Mao was his wife, they not only did not take the attitude of rulers and bully the locals, but they actually made a wide range of local friends and did good things

/for the local people in a multitude of ways . . . Throughout all of San Mao’s work there is no praise of those who hold political authority; on the contrary, in all of her works the subjects and people she describes are almost all workers from the lower strata. Many people, when they go

/criminated, and she actually used her personal mental and material power to run a school for them and teach them various kinds of knowledge.” Gu, *Evaluating San Mao*, pp.71–2, 111 (this contradicts his observation about San Mao’s “tone of an aristocrat” noted above).

<sup>62</sup> *Crying camels*, p.112. English-language accounts record Bassiri as having studied not law in Spain but journalism in Egypt and Syria in the 1960s. See Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical dictionary of Western Sahara*, p.292. These twin notions of ingratitude and treachery echo a lament found in much colonial writing (and in fictional histories such as the 1992 film *Indochine*, where the French colonisers complain of Vietnamese revolutionaries taking education and values that had supposedly been bestowed upon them by a benevolent France and using them to resist French rule). As Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out, when the harmony of reciprocity that European colonial rule imagines itself to bring to its colonies does not eventuate, the blame is inevitably laid upon the colonized. See Pratt, *Imperial eyes*, p.85. Ironically, as Tony Hodges has noted, “the Spanish government’s oft repeated yet hypocritically void commitments to self-determination and its paternalist defense of Sahrawi rights against the predatory designs of neighboring governments played a significant part...in engendering a nationalist consciousness.” Hodges, *Western Sahara*, p.152.

<sup>63</sup> “Damn it, these guys don’t even know how to eat or shit—and they think they want to be independent! We Spanish are too tolerant. If you ask me, we should beat them to death if they dare to abuse us! There are only 70,000 of them—it would be no trouble to blow them away with machine guns, the way Hitler did with the Jews...Slaughtering a Sahrawi is no different from killing a dog. Even dogs are better than them—dogs know they should wag their tails at the person who feeds them.” *Crying camels*, p.112.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

### • *Multiple Manifestations of Colonial Racism*

When anti-Spanish graffiti suddenly appears all over El-Ayou, San Mao’s ‘difference’ cannot protect her from the implications of a revolt against a system in which she belongs by association. Distressed by the graffiti, she and José seek out Spanish company in the Fosbucraa coffee shop. There is more than just graffiti to concern them: the imminent arrival of a United Nations delegation to canvass the will of the Sahrawi people for their political future; Fosbucraa’s plans for its operations and its employees; Morocco’s interests in Western Sahara and their implications; and the activities of Bassiri, whom they believe to be the leader of Polisario (though, as noted below, historical record of Bassiri ceases in 1970, before San Mao’s arrival in the Sahara—and the leader of Polisario at that time was El-Ouali Mustapha Sayed). Enunciating the classic lament of the colonizer, one Spaniard sighs, “I heard that Bassiri had a Spanish education and graduated from law school. He was in Spain for many years—how can he come back and become a guerilla and start opposing us?”<sup>62</sup> Another claims that the Spanish are “too tolerant” of Sahrawi unrest and should simply kill any Sahrawi who make trouble.<sup>63</sup> At “these inhuman words” San Mao’s sympathies transfer from Spain to the Sahrawi. At the same time, her Chinese ethnicity becomes a significant issue in the terms of the discussion, for the speaker suddenly notices her and shifts his argument to incorporate the example of British colonialism in Hong Kong and his prejudices about Chinese people under British rule:

“It’s not just Spain that has colonies. The Chinese in Hong Kong are only too eager to fawn on England, and all these years they’ve been doing exactly what they were told. The Sahrawi can’t see this example—but we can.”<sup>64</sup>

Thus San Mao presents Spanish racism extending to Chinese people as well as Sahrawi, but based upon different assumptions: the Spaniard despises Chinese people for their supposed compliance as much as Sahrawi for their wish for independence. With Spain and England placed together as colonial powers, and Western Sahara and Hong Kong placed together as territories that ought to be subjugated, San Mao’s Spanishness is effectively canceled out as she is numbered with the ‘fawning’ Chinese and not alongside the ruling Spanish. In response, San Mao does not defend the honor of ‘the Chinese people’, but rather takes on the role of peacemaker, counseling unity among Spaniards. José mutters angrily that his ugly compatriot should learn about Chinese struggles against colonialism (“He thinks that people who won’t accept rule by a foreign power should just die like flies; how about you resisting the Japanese in Taiwan at that time? Does he know about that?”), but San Mao places herself back with the Spanish:

“José, I don’t agree with colonialism either—but we are on the Spanish side; what is there to say? Getting into conflict with your own people will just mean that you get a reputation for being unpatriotic, and what’s the good of that?”<sup>65</sup>

There seems to be an equation of colonialism with issues of racism and patriotism here, as if rejecting the ugly Spaniard’s attitudes is equivalent to

opposing colonialism.<sup>66</sup> Yet San Mao's relationship to colonialism is surely more complex than this, for she was complicit in the colonial order, and her Saharan life was only made possible by colonial structures with which, by counselling solidarity with other Spaniards, she reasserts her own status of belonging. For José, who is unambiguously Spanish (without the option of identifying as non-Spanish) Spanish prestige among Sahrawi is the important concern ("This guy brings disgrace on us all. How can you blame the Sahrawi for not liking us?"). Given a choice between arguing against racist colonial attitudes (thus dividing the Spanish community) and uniting with fellow-Spaniards into an ethnic bloc (thus being identified alongside people who hold the racist views of José's colleague), which she appears to regard as equal evils, San Mao takes a middle ground<sup>67</sup>—but again the blame is removed onto a third party with her suggestion that Spain and the Sahrawi could settle their differences happily were it not for the Moroccans stirring up trouble ("It could have been solved peacefully. If Morocco didn't want to partition them, it wouldn't have got so urgent, to the point of them wanting independence").<sup>68</sup> The problem in Western Sahara still seems for San Mao and José more a matter of personal discord and misunderstanding between Spanish and Sahrawi than any systemic fault, and the more immediate issue for them seems to be that of maintaining unity before a common enemy—Morocco—rather than a matter of colonialism, resistance and decolonization.

With the arrival of the United Nations inspection team imminent, José

<sup>66</sup> Though San Mao might oppose colonialism she defends Spain. Biographers have claimed a strong anti-colonialism stance on her part, though the issues they discuss seem to be related more to the personal difficulties brought about by the resentment against the Spanish in the desert than to matters of principle. The ambiguities of her position have been noted: "In El-Ayoun, very few Spanish people lived in districts where the Sahrawi lived. White people were aristocrats in the desert. San Mao and José, living among the Sahrawi and mixing with them, had feeling for them . . . . But in the eyes of the average indigenous person, they were still colonizers." Cui and Zhao, *San Mao zhuàn*, p.156.

<sup>67</sup> "We don't pander to either side. On that side they call the guerillas dogs, and on this side we fly into a rage when we hear our own people talking." *Crying camels*, p.114.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 8**

*San Mao and José  
in the Sahara*  
(from *Stories of the  
Sahara*)

<sup>69</sup> “Forevery daythat Spain is in occupation, I’ll stay a day. And even when Spain leaves I might not leave.” *Crying camels*, p.114. Biographers hail this stance as a manifestation of great courage in time of danger and claim that she was one of the very last Spanish wives to leave the Sahara (Cui and Zhao, *San Mao zhuàn*, p.56; Lu Shicheng, Yang Youli and Sun Yongchao, *San Mao zhuàn* [San Mao: a biography], Taipei: Chenxing Chubanshe, 1993), p.208.

<sup>70</sup> At this point San Mao introduces a Sahrawi child into the narrative, an appealing four-year-old in the care of the nuns who run the hospital; later this child is revealed to be Shayida’s.

<sup>71</sup> His mother, horrified, distances herself from his words and apologizes: “We don’t discriminate . . . We aren’t like that. Please forgive us; sorry, sorry.” *Crying camels*, p.118.

<sup>72</sup> As in the case of Shalun in the previous story, San Mao does not entertain any suspicion that Aofeilua might have connections with the “guerillas” to back up his guarantee of safety. Tony Hodges has noted that support for an earlier independence movement was particularly strong among policemen (as well as interpreters, drivers, “administrative auxiliaries” and teachers of the Koran); thus the fictional Aofeilua would be a likely candidate to be a supporter of Polisario.

<sup>73</sup> *Crying camels*, p.124.

<sup>74</sup> His gift of a silver anklet to match those worn by his daughters appears to become for San Mao a gesture of acceptance into the family. *Crying camels*, pp.124–5.

suggests that San Mao leave the Sahara for a while, to return when the ‘chaos’ is over. She refuses, reasserting her ‘right’ to be in the desert—indeed not only to be with the Spanish in a Spanish colony, but to continue to ‘belong’ once they have left.<sup>69</sup> El-Ayoun is becoming more and more tense amid signs of disquiet and military activity<sup>70</sup>; martial law is imposed; the Spanish police search Sahrawi in the streets; and the conflict enters San Mao’s own home when one of the neighbour children strikes her, shouting, “First they’ll kill José, then you. They’ll kill José, kill José . . . The guerillas are coming; they’ll kill José and they’ll kill San Mao!”<sup>71</sup> Despite her conviction that the child does not know the meaning of what he is saying, San Mao is frightened, and her fear combines with confusion, powerlessness and a sense of being wronged. Her ‘belonging’ in the desert is obviously under question here; though she herself may see the land as ‘hers’ simply through her own innocent, romantic personal choice, such an assumption nevertheless carries political implications which she cannot escape.

#### • *Fantasies of Acceptance and Reciprocity*

When Aofeilua asks San Mao and José if they will take him into the desert in their car for a family gathering (in the tense political situation he cannot as a Sahrawi get a permit to leave town in his own car), she adopts the terms of the child’s chant in her refusal: ‘you’ Sahrawi wish to kill ‘us’ Spaniards. Aofeilua assures her that he can guarantee their safety, yet she is still unwilling to help—until she recalls the relationship of reciprocity that exists between her and Aofeilua’s family. José too appeals to the bonds of reciprocity in their friendship with Aofeilua, agreeing to help him as long as he really can guarantee their safety outside Spanish-garrisoned El-Ayoun (and thus not ‘betray our friendship’). Such a guarantee is possible in the present political situation not through Aofeilua’s capacities as a policeman (and hence guardian of colonial law and order) but because he is Sahrawi (and, as is later revealed, has connections with Polisario). His concern for their safety is presented as a personal matter of reciprocity, not a duty to the colonizing force that employs him; his certainty of his ability to protect them is apparently accepted as a logical aspect of a personal relationship, and the political connections that might make it possible are omitted.<sup>72</sup> This discourse of reciprocity and relationships of family and friends reinforces the ‘belonging’ of San Mao and José within meaningful reciprocal relationships with Sahrawi.

Their ‘belonging’ is underlined by the affectionate welcome they receive from Aofeilua’s family (mother, sisters and brother)—all of whom are beautiful, clean and (it is implied) good. For them, San Mao reserves her ultimate compliment: unlike all other Sahrawi, they do not seem to smell. Again San Mao claims the desert as ‘home’, by equating her arrival with “a homecoming, like being with relatives.”<sup>73</sup>

Aofeilua’s father is presented as a venerable family patriarch, sadly aware of the coming conflict in the desert and eager to accept San Mao and José wholeheartedly into the life of the family.<sup>74</sup> Aofeilua’s mother is a wise earth-

mother figure, raising her hands over the desert “in a graceful gesture” with the words, “The Sahara is so beautiful,” extending her gesture of blessing over the land to anyone who ‘loves’ the Sahara and thus including San Mao among those who ‘belong’ there:

At the magical lifting of her hands, the world around us seemed suddenly filled with poetic sighing. It penetrated my whole being. There is only one Sahara in this world; and only to those who love it does it reveal its beauty and tenderness, and silently repay your love with its eternally unchanging sky and land, and calmly keep the promises it made to you, wishing only that your children and grandchildren will stay and be born in its embrace.”<sup>75</sup>

Thus San Mao’s will to ‘belong’ is further extended—from membership in the colonizing group to participation in a family to a union with the desert itself. Though political forces may challenge her presence there, the very landscape is presented as welcoming her and accepting the rightness of her presence.

The familial idyll is momentarily disrupted when Aofeilua’s elder brothers arrive; to San Mao’s horror, they are all clad in Polisario uniforms. The whole family are quick to reassure San Mao that there are no ulterior (political) motives to the day’s gathering—that familial affection is the sole concern—but she is not convinced until one of the brothers “sincerely” puts forward another explanation:

Actually it isn’t easy for Lua to leave town, but he doesn’t have to trick you to be able to come. The truth is, we brothers wanted to meet you; Lua often talks about you, and we don’t often get the chance to meet, so we wanted him to invite you. Please don’t be offended. Within this tent, please let us be friends.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, far from being a generalized Spanish enemy for these Polisario members, San Mao and José are shown as something truly special: not ordinary Spanish citizens and colonizers, but individuals whom the ‘guerillas’ have singled out as good and whom they wish to get to know.

A day of “happiness and affection” that embraces San Mao and José as honorary family members is spent on communal chores. Gradually San Mao becomes aware that there is something remarkable about Aofeilua’s second elder brother; again and again she notes that he stands apart from all the rest (he is described as bold, noble, courteous, kind, quick, mature, handsome, glorious and prince-like). When the talk turns to desert politics it is this exceptional second brother who argues the case for Polisario, claiming that the organization has complete support in El-Ayoun. San Mao is sceptical:

“You are all idealists, full of romantic feelings about establishing your own country. If you did happen to get independence, I’m afraid you’d be at a loss to deal with the ignorant and illiterate majority in town ...”

“Developing our resources and educating the citizens is the first step.”

“Who is going to develop them? Even if these 70,000 people all went to block the border, they couldn’t occupy the whole of it—and with Algeria as a protector you’d be worse off than you are now.”

“San Mao, you are too pessimistic.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.130.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp.131–2.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.132.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.133.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.134.

<sup>81</sup> Their marriage, says Aofeilua, is secret for political reasons, lest the Moroccans should capture Shayida to try to find out about Bassiri's movements. San Mao's biographers attribute the secrecy to faults on the part of the Sahrawi people, claiming that it is on account of "the foolishness of others of their tribe" that "their love could not be openly known." Cui and Zhao, *San Mao zhuan*, p.192. Aofeilua tells San Mao that not even his parents know about the marriage, because the family patriarch would never accept a Catholic daughter-in-law. Given that the historical figure Bassiri has been described as a Koranic scholar and teacher, marriage to a Catholic would seem rather unlikely.

### Figure 9

*Mohammed Sidi Ibrabim Bassiri: below—taken by the Spanish Consul soon after Bassiri's arrest in 1970. Obtained later by members of his family, the photograph is reproduced on the website devoted to Bassiri's disappearance, and is used here with the permission of the site administrators; opposite—from Hodges, Western Sahara, courtesy of Tony Hodges*



"You are too romantic. You can be guerillas, but it isn't the time for establishing a nation."

"We'll do as much as we can. Whether we succeed or fail is not something we can plan."<sup>77</sup>

These essentially pro-colonialism arguments have been heard from San Mao before. Delivered to a Polisario member along with criticism of the anti-colonial movement, however, they are perhaps intended to carry a new authority. Although the 'guerilla' does not accept her opinion to be true, San Mao does not show him offering arguments that can convince her that she is wrong.

At sunset San Mao and José prepare to leave; they promise to return, but Aofeilua's parents believe this will never be possible:

"There won't be a next time. I know it; this is the last time. You and José will have to leave the desert forever."

"If by some chance you get independence, we will come back."

"We won't get independence. The Moroccans are about to come in. My children are dreaming, dreaming ..."<sup>78</sup>

Thus both earth mother and patriarch are enlisted to echo San Mao's own belief that independence is impossible—though for them it is a foreign power that stands in the way, and not inherent limitations on the part of the Sahrawi people. San Mao and José embrace the family in farewell; the second brother takes her hand and says quietly:

"San Mao, thank you for looking after Shayida."

"Shayida?" I was astonished—how did he know Shayida?

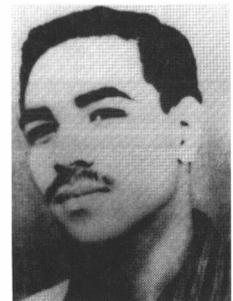
"She's my wife. I have great trust in you." Suddenly his eyes filled with tenderness and deep pain. We looked at each other, sharing the secret ... then he turned round and strode off.<sup>79</sup>

A greater shock is yet to come, however, when Aofeilua tells her that his prince-like second brother is the Saharan liberation leader, Bassiri.

#### • Bassiri, "Soul of the Sahrawi"

"Bassiri! Your brother is Bassiri?" I cried out, my blood raging through me. The incomparably fierce leader of the guerillas, the soul of the Sahrawi people—that was who had just spoken Shayida's name and shaken my hand.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, in San Mao's account, she and José are made party to information that most Sahrawi do not know: that Bassiri is Aofeilua's brother, and has been married to Shayida for seven years.<sup>81</sup> San Mao's friendship with Shayida takes on a new significance and her involvement in the story of the Sahara deepens through this claim of a connection with a Sahrawi political figure: she is a close friend of his wife, personally invited to meet him, specially thanked by him



for her kindness, and able to criticize him for his 'romantic' politics and lecture him on the future of the Sahara.

The 'real' Bassiri, a historically verifiable person, was Mohammed Sidi Ibrahim Bassiri, a leader of the Organization for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Oued ed-Dahab, "the country's first urban-based political party" and a precursor of Polisario.<sup>82</sup> Public knowledge of Bassiri ceases, however, soon after a violent confrontation between the Organization and the Spanish authorities at Zemla on 17 June 1970, in which Spanish soldiers opened fire on demonstrators.<sup>83</sup> Bassiri was arrested by security forces in the early hours of the following morning and "has never since been seen."<sup>84</sup> Relatives of Bassiri's in Tan-Tan (his birthplace) informed the United Nations in 1975 that they had had no news of him since 1970. Thus San Mao's claims to have met Bassiri after all record of him had ceased (in 1973 at the earliest, but perhaps as late as 1975) and—as described below—to know the circumstances of his death constitute a rather different history of Bassiri from that given in other accounts of the history of Western Sahara.

#### • *Morocco and the United Nations*

After San Mao's supposed meeting with Bassiri, political events unfold quickly. Spain's official position for the past two years had been to reaffirm Saharan self-determination but to delay their own withdrawal for as long as possible in the hopes of preserving their investments there. A referendum in the desert had been promised; meanwhile, however, at the behest of Morocco and Mauritania, the International Court of Justice was preparing a verdict on whether or not Western Sahara had been *terra nullius* before Spanish colonization. In early 1975, while submissions for the court were in preparation, guerilla activities in the desert intensified and control over public order became more and more difficult for Spain to maintain. In May 1975 the Spanish government made the announcement that it would "transfer

/ition listing their demands to the colonial government, holding a counter-demonstration to a pro-Spanish rally sponsored by the colonial authorities in El-Ayoum on June 17 (Bassiri reportedly did not support the plan, arguing that such a move "would invite repression that the movement was still poorly equipped to survive," but went along with the majority decision). While about five hundred people assembled for the government-sponsored rally in the centre of El-Ayoum, a crowd of about 1500 gathered in Zemla, an outlying suburb, demanding that the governor-general (the speaker at the official rally) come in person to receive their petition. He "eventually conceded" to meet the demonstrators and, after hearing the petition, ordered the demonstrators to disperse and departed himself with the petition. Later that day, López Huertas, the *delegado gubernativo* of the northern part of region, returned to Zemla with "a sixty-strong squad from the Policía Territorial." Three youths stepped from the crowd to meet him, hoping that he was bringing a reply to the petition. They were arrested immediately, and the crowd began to throw stones at the police, one of which hit López Huertas. According to the Spanish government, two people died in the incident; other estimates based on eye-witness reports report a dozen or so dead. Repression ensued, with many arrests. See Hodges, *Western Sabara*, pp.154–5.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155. Spanish officials claimed to have deported him to Morocco a few days later, but the Moroccan government has always denied this, claiming no knowledge of his return to Morocco. His fate remains unknown. Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical dictionary of Western Sabara*, p.293. Further information can be found on web-sites regarding Sahrawi who disappeared at that time. The site <<http://www.desaparecidos.org/sahara.basiri>> gives a brief history of Bassiri's life and the circumstances of his disappearance, noting that he was supposed to be deported on 27 June 1970 but that there were reports in 1971 that he was still involved in his "old anti-government activities" in Morocco. Even if Bassiri had still been alive in 1973–75, he was not the leader of Polisario. El-Ouali Mustapha Sayed was the leader of the Front from its founding in 1973 until his death in 1976.

<sup>82</sup> According to Tony Hodges, Bassiri was born between 1942 and 1944 near Tan-Tan, then part of Spanish Southern Morocco. He was educated in Casablanca with the aid of a government scholarship, then studied at the universities of Cairo and Damascus from 1962. After graduating with a diploma in journalism he returned to Morocco in 1966, and founded a radical Sahrawi journal, *Al-Chibab* [The torch]. He left Morocco for Western Sahara in late 1967, and "managed to persuade the Spanish authorities to grant him a residence permit." There he worked as a Koranic teacher and recruited "the nucleus of an underground anticolonial movement." The movement "advocated wide-ranging reforms as well as progress toward decolonization,"

/calling for a reorganization of institutions and the abolition of the tribal structure. See Hodges, *Western Sabara*, pp.153–4. Damis's account differs in some details. He names Bassiri explicitly as founder of the organization (which he terms the MLS, Saharan Liberation Movement) in 1968, noting that the movement "began with a reformist orientation and a gradualist approach that sought full autonomy and equal rights of citizenship for Sahrawis through peaceful means. Bassiri ... was the prime mover behind the group's newspaper, *Our Sabara*." Damis, *Conflict in northwest Africa*, p.38.

<sup>83</sup> According to Hodges, a majority of the movement's members resolved to "emerge from clandestinity" and publicly present a pet-



**Figure 10**

*Pro-Polishario demonstrators during the visit of the United Nations mission of enquiry to El-Ayoun in May 1975 (from Hodges, Western Sahara, courtesy of Tony Hodges)*

<sup>85</sup> Damis, *Conflict in northwest Africa*, p.55.

<sup>86</sup> Constituted of representatives from Iran, Ivory Coast and Cuba, the UN delegation visited Saharan towns to discern the will of the Sahrawi people. Its report (published 14 October 1975) stated that the Sahara's indigent population supported independence and opposed the territorial claims of Morocco and Mauritania; it also called for a UN plebiscite in the Sahara on the question of independence. Damis, *Conflict in northwest Africa*, p.59.

<sup>87</sup> *Crying camels*, p.136.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* San Mao likens the relationship between Spaniard and Sahrawi to that of 'guest and host' (*bin-zhu* 宾主), concealing the inequality of their respective positions to make the Spaniards welcome guests and

the sovereignty in the Territory of Sahara in the shortest time possible,"<sup>85</sup> though it continued to delay withdrawal plans in the hope that the United Nations would decide in Spain's favor. In the same month, a United Nations 'inspection team' arrived in Western Sahara to observe the situation.<sup>86</sup> San Mao describes the scene:

Crowds of Sahrawi lined the road from the airport into town ... with Spanish policemen facing them. There was no noise; they just waited quietly for the convoy of cars.

When the governor-general drove into town with the delegation ... the Sahrawi all cried out with a noise like thunder, "Self determination! Self determination! Please, please! Self-determination! Self-determination!"

Thousands of tattered guerilla flags of all different sizes were raised ... The slow procession of cars was followed by yelling and crying as if to rend heaven and earth; the Sahara howled in its final struggle.<sup>87</sup>

Again San Mao dismisses the Sahrawi and their wish for self-determination. Their cries are "lunatic ravings"; they are "moths" throwing themselves into a flame. She herself, of course, is assumed to possess a superior understanding—as is the Spanish government, whose delaying tactics are presented here as kindly, wise, dignified, even-handed and tolerant (they "put up with them doing all they could to grab the UN, and didn't prevent or oppose

/the Sahrawi welcoming hosts. Ironically, *zhu* also means 'master'; it is not, of course, the Sahrawi who are the masters of the Sahrawi here; neither are the Spanish 'guests' as their

/presence is not by invitation of the 'hosts'. I thank Lewis Mayo for drawing my attention to this ambiguity.

them”). Rhetorically wondering who could replace the Spanish if they were to withdraw, San Mao concludes that “it couldn’t be Bassiri; he would never be the leader of this weak people.”<sup>88</sup>

After the UN team’s brief visit, San Mao claims that a “strange intimacy” springs up between Spanish and Sahrawi. Now united against a common foe, they are “more amicable than before”<sup>89</sup>; “Spain stood firm on its promise to the Sahara; it seemed that self determination would become a reality, and both sides ... cooperated ... under the threat of war from densely populated Morocco.”<sup>90</sup> Again, Morocco is the villain.

The International Court of Justice announced its long-awaited decision on 16 October 1975: that the Sahrawi population had the right to self-determination.<sup>91</sup> There is celebration in El-Ayoun’s streets; José too is pleased (despite his sadness at Spain’s decline)<sup>92</sup> as a peaceful outcome means that his own position in the Sahara can continue. San Mao is doubtful: “It won’t be that simple,” she foretells, and is soon proved correct. That same night, King Hassan of Morocco summoned volunteers to march with him peacefully into Western Sahara to claim it as part of Morocco.<sup>93</sup>

The 350,000-strong “Green March” begins forthwith, and each night those in El-Ayoun with television watch the Spanish news to see the Moroccan marchers advancing towards the border between Morocco and the “Spanish

<sup>90</sup> *Crying camels*, pp.136–7.

<sup>91</sup> The Court ruled that Western Sahara had not been *terra nullius* at the time of colonization by Spain, and that the “legal ties of allegiance” between the Moroccan sultan and some Western Sahara tribes did not constitute territorial sovereignty. Damis, *Conflict in northwest Africa*, p.59–60.

<sup>92</sup> “Colonialism is on the wane. It’s not that the Spanish government is being generous; Spain is on the wane too.” *Crying camels*, p.135.

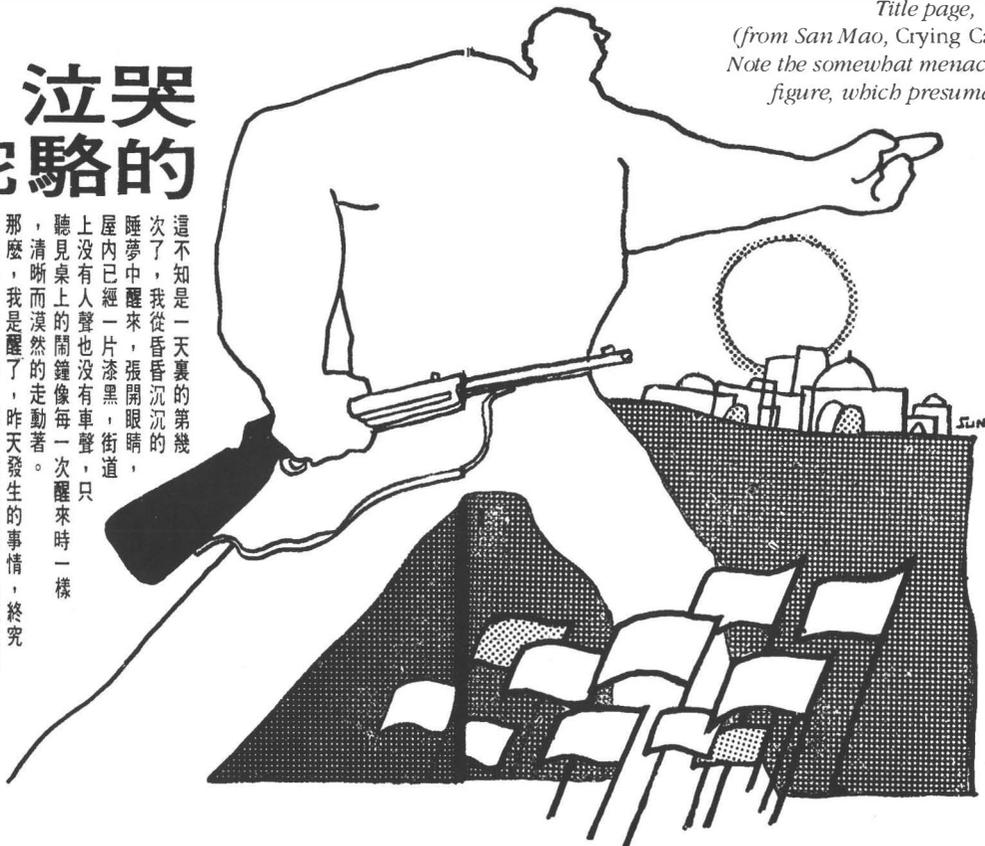
<sup>93</sup> The march, from the Moroccan-Saharan border to the outskirts of El-Ayoun and back (100 miles) was to last twelve days. Volunteers came from all provinces of Morocco, and all of Morocco’s political parties supported the march. Fearing violent confrontation between the marchers and the troops of both Spain and the Polisario Front, the UN Security Council adopted resolutions against the march, but to no avail. Damis, *Conflict in northwest Africa*, pp.60–5.

Figure 11

Title page, “Crying Camels”  
(from San Mao, *Crying Camels*, pp.92–3).  
Note the somewhat menacing aspect of the  
figure, which presumably represents a  
Polisario fighter

## 泣哭 駝駱的

這不知是一天裏的第幾次了，我從昏昏沉沉的睡夢中醒來，張開眼睛，屋內已經一片漆黑，街道上沒有人聲也沒有車聲，只聽見桌上的鬧鐘像每一次醒來時一樣，清晰而漠然的走動著。那麼，我是醒了，昨天發生的事情，終究不只是一場噩夢。每一次的清醒，記憶就逼著我，像在奔流錯亂的鏡頭面前一般，再一次又一次的去重新經歷那場令我當時狂叫出來的慘劇！



<sup>94</sup> The march (including delegations from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar) crossed the border into Western Sahara on 6 November 1975. To avoid confrontation, Spanish troops had withdrawn from the border and established a “dissuasion line” about 12 kilometres away. Though the march crossed into the territory it stopped short of this line, thus sparing the Spanish army “the dilemma of choosing further retreat or firing on unarmed civilians.” On 9 November, informed of a “turning point” in the negotiations (clearing the way for agreement between Morocco, Mauritania and Spain), King Hassan instructed his marchers to return to Morocco. Thus both King Hassan and the Spanish army were able to save face. Damis, *Conflict in north-west Africa*, pp.60–5.

<sup>95</sup> *Crying camels*, p.139.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.149.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.141–2. On 22 October (the day before the Green March is intended to reach El-Ayoun) Handi puts up a Moroccan flag on his house in order to avoid trouble for his family. *Crying camels*, p.139.

<sup>98</sup> Again San Mao refers to the child of Bassiri and Shayida (who is supposedly leaving for Spain the following day with the Spanish nuns), thus again purporting to record a ‘history’ about Bassiri.

<sup>99</sup> Pratt, *Imperial eyes*, pp.164–6.

Sahara” (only 4,000 kilometres away).<sup>94</sup> The marchers have announced that they will take El-Ayoun on October 23; on October 21, messages are broadcast in the town calling for all Spanish women and children to be evacuated. José works day and night at the docks to expedite the withdrawal of soldiers and munitions; San Mao’s (Spanish) friends rush to the airport, urging her to leave too while there is still time. The Spanish police disappear from the town, and the streets are empty save for the crowds outside the airline office.<sup>95</sup>

#### • *San Mao at the Centre*

The night before the Green March is expected to arrive in El-Ayoun, Bassiri reappears in San Mao’s narrative, arriving on her doorstep with Shayida to seek her help. “You’re courting death coming here” exclaims San Mao in horror; “Handi has gone over to the Moroccan side.”<sup>96</sup> The contrast between the two desert families thus reaches its ultimate point: the dirty, gossiping family next door are traitors, while the beautiful, noble family are heroic and brave. San Mao states that most residents of El-Ayoun, like Handi, have switched their allegiance to Morocco in preparation for the Moroccans’ arrival<sup>97</sup>; there are, she claims, few Polisario supporters left in the town, and therefore Bassiri is in great personal danger there. Nonetheless, fearing for Shayida’s safety if the Moroccans should march as far as El-Ayoun, he has left his fellow Polisario troops at the border (where they have assembled, along with the Spanish forces, to stop the Green March) and has travelled alone for many days and nights to reach her.

Here San Mao writes herself into a vital role in Bassiri’s story as provider of food, shelter and advice for him and for Shayida. Although in her narrative Bassiri declines her offers of shelter, he demonstrates a high level of trust in her by asking her to take Shayida with her when she leaves.<sup>98</sup> Her role in the situation thus becomes pivotal—not only through her willingness to be involved, but also through the willingness of Sahrawi (indeed, the very leader of the ‘guerillas’) to solicit her help. The placement of her domestic space in intersection with global events and the presentation of herself as a stable centre in a time of unrest continues a pattern found in the work of certain European women travel writers. Flora Tristan and Maria Graham, for example (in Chile and Peru at times of political and military upheaval), “make their houses and themselves privileged sites of political understanding and action” and write themselves into national histories, just as San Mao does, with published accounts of sheltering and advising revolutionary heroes.<sup>99</sup> Such a presentation, of course, creates a position of personal importance for the writer that goes far beyond simply being present and witnessing events.

San Mao’s goodness is displayed in her offer of assistance; Bassiri’s reluctance to accept it demonstrates his regard for her; and his request for further help confirms his confidence in her. Having affirmed San Mao’s

importance to the personal narrative of a key player in the political drama, he disappears. The following day San Mao learns of his death when she discovers a road blocked off because of a burial: Bassiri's.

As already noted, San Mao's placement of herself into connection with Bassiri is subject to question, as Bassiri had disappeared five years earlier. According to the available English-language sources, however, the fate of Bassiri "remains a mystery."<sup>100</sup> Though "both Moroccan and Sahrawi observers have suspected that he was murdered by his Spanish jailers"; and Bassiri's disappearance had already been raised as an issue with the UN Visiting Mission to the Sahara in May 1975,<sup>101</sup> his disappearance in 1970 is absolute only in retrospect. Though it would seem extremely unlikely that a popular leader could return in secret (known only to his immediate family and San Mao) and die in El-Ayoun beyond the reach of the knowledge of historians and political activists concerned with establishing the facts of his history, there is no absolute guarantee that San Mao's story is untrue.<sup>102</sup> As with Doris Gentile's claim to have witnessed the death of Mussolini, the lack of corroborative records "renders her story implausible but not impossible."<sup>103</sup> There are important implications here, however, about San Mao and her role: all would supposedly have been well—and the hero of the Sahrawi would not have died—if he had only taken her advice and done as she suggested. San Mao's supposed involvement with Bassiri is crucial to her own significance in this narrative, and indeed to the significance that her narrative can claim to have. Biographers have further reinforced her claims of her connections with this revolutionary leader by extending the relationship from her own account of their two meetings to present them as very close friends.<sup>104</sup>

Though Bassiri is gone, the story of Shayida is not yet over. The Sahrawi 'mob', on the pretext of believing her to have betrayed Bassiri to the Moroccans, plan to execute her that evening at the camel-slaughtering ground.<sup>105</sup> San Mao, of course, is the only person to know the truth about Shayida and Bassiri, and the only one who can save her. Resolving to prove Shayida's innocence, she joins the procession to the slaughtering ground where the crowds wait silently for the action to begin.

Throughout the scene, the narrative focus shifts constantly between San Mao herself, the crowd and Shayida, as if all were equal participants in the scene. There is no trial procedure and no chance for Shayida or anyone else to speak in her defence—just as San Mao had imagined would be the case among people she has characterized throughout as ignorant and violent. In San Mao's portrayal of barbaric natives executing a beautiful and innocent woman and her own distress at the sight there is a resonance with Sara Suleri's observation about "the collaboration between violence and sentimentality" in colonial myth-making.<sup>106</sup> The intensity of detail increases through the scene; not a painstaking, inexorable piling up of dreadful detail upon dreadful detail (such as Evelyn Cobley has described as a technique of representing horror in World War I narratives)<sup>107</sup> but an emotionalized detail

<sup>100</sup> Pazzanita and Hodges, *Historical dictionary of Western Sahara*, p.293.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Though it is Tony Hodges's view that "there is absolutely no possibility that Bassiri was active in the Sahrawi liberation movement in 1975 or that he died in Western Sahara just before the Green March" (personal communication, May 2000), the absence of definitive evidence has allowed San Mao to make (or make up) her own version of Bassiri's history.

<sup>103</sup> Like San Mao, Doris Gentile (an Australian living in Italy from 1943–45) claimed a connection with a historical figure and a significant role in the drama towards the end of his life, claiming in the unpublished "fragments of two autobiographical novels" to have witnessed Mussolini's execution. Ros Pesman, *Duty free: Australian women abroad* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.105–7.

<sup>104</sup> See Cui and Zhao, *San Mao zhuan*, p.156 and Gu, *Pingshuo San Mao*, p.72. Her supposed friendship with a political figure has been used by biographers to establish importance for San Mao; conversely, the importance of these two figures to her has established a special position for them in the Chinese-speaking world—not only as protagonists in popular stories by San Mao but as romantic, heroic characters in comparison with the other Sahrawi who feature. Her interactions with them have been praised as the flowering of her goodness: "San Mao's humane spirit and feeling finds full expression in her attitude in dealing with Bassiri and his family." Gu, *Pingshuo San Mao*, p.122.

<sup>105</sup> The chief executioner is to be Ajibi, Shayida's spurned suitor.

<sup>106</sup> See Sara Suleri, *The rhetoric of English India* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.103.

<sup>107</sup> See Evelyn Cobley, *Representing war: form and ideology in First World War narratives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

<sup>108</sup> *Crying camels*, p.152.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.152–3.

<sup>110</sup> Cui and Zhao, *San Mao zhuàn*, pp.194, 191.

<sup>111</sup> Spain withdrew from Western Sahara in February 1976, and Morocco and Mauritania moved in to try to absorb it into their own national territories. In August 1979 Mauritania “bowed out of the conflict”; Morocco is “still confronting the Polisario Front.” See Damis, *Conflict in northwest Africa*, p.45.

<sup>112</sup> A tripartite interim administration in Western Sahara was established between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania from 14 November 1975 to 26 February 1976. Polisario, though increasing in strength and resisting both Moroccan and Mauritanian forces, was ultimately unable to prevent the takeover of the territory; even though it announced the creation of an independent Saharan state, Morocco and Mauritania partitioned the territory between them. See Damis, *Conflict in Northwest Africa*, pp.65–78. For an account of the declaration of independence of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic by the president of the Provisional Sahrawi Council in February 1976, see Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *The Western Saharans*, p.248. In 1991 a ceasefire was negotiated between Polisario and Morocco, enforced by the United Nations peace-keeping mission MINURSO (Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara), to enable the long-awaited referendum to take place. The referendum was scheduled for 1992, then postponed and suspended in 1996; it was rescheduled for 1998 and postponed until December 1999; it still has not taken place. Thousands of Sahrawi fled their homes during the unrest of 1975–76, most to Algeria, where they may still be housed in refugee camps. Information on recent developments in Western Sahara history and ongoing activities regarding the Western Sahara situation can be found on various web-sites, including those of Polisario, the United Nations and the United States Department of State. See, for example,

<<http://www.nodo50.org/fpolisario/historia.htm>>

<<http://www.arso.org/6-1.htm>>

[cont. opposite]

centred upon the self as spectator, which situates Shayida as a terrible spectacle. Amid the alternating voyeuristic description and focus on her own sensitivity (demonstrated by her distress at the sight) are assurances of San Mao’s own impotence:

I wanted to cry out but I couldn’t; I wanted to cry, but I couldn’t; I wanted to look, but I couldn’t bear to; I wanted not to look, but my eyes were fixed on Shayida, and I couldn’t look away.

“No, don’t ... ah ... don’t,” I heard my own voice screaming, hoarsely, not really a voice.<sup>108</sup>

It is left to Bassiri’s ‘real’ family to bring about the dénouement. Aofeilua suddenly leaps forward, pulls away Shayida’s assailants, drags her back from the slaughtering slab and draws a pistol. As the crowd scatters, the focus shifts back to San Mao pushing vainly against them. Aofeilua is surrounded; a shot is heard; Shayida cries, “Kill me, kill me, Lua, kill me.” The end is violent and conclusive:

Terrified, I cry out, but ... I heard several shots; people shouted out in shock, pushing as they fled. I fell back, trampled by people. It was suddenly empty and quiet all around ... Two corpses lay on the ground: Lua ... and Shayida. It looked as though Lua’s dying gesture had been to crawl across to Shayida and protect her with his own body.

I crouched down on the sand at a distance shaking, shaking, without ceasing. It was so dark all around that I couldn’t see them clearly. The sound of the wind suddenly died down, and gradually I was unable to see anything at all. All I could hear was the grief-stricken cries of the camels in the slaughterhouse, louder and louder, higher and higher; slowly the whole sky filled with the enormous echo of camels crying, which engulfed me like thunder.<sup>109</sup>

In this dramatized and sentimentalized view of the death of a close friend, in which the powerlessness of the observing self receives an emphasis equal to that of the pain of the observed sufferer, the suggestion that Shayida actually wished to die is perhaps intended as a mitigating factor for San Mao’s failure to save her. San Mao can thus maintain her own innocence to the last; if Shayida did not wish to be saved, then it did not matter that no one saved her. This story of failure and venality on the part of the Sahrawi ‘masses’ (and their slaying of their own ‘best’ people) and of San Mao’s part in the political drama of Western Sahara has been hailed as “the best of San Mao’s Saharan stories”; biographers invoke it to demonstrate that she is “not far from being a *great* writer” (my italics).<sup>110</sup>

The story of Sergeant Shaba ended with San Mao identifying with Spain, feeling sympathy for the sergeant and for the Spanish loss of ‘their’ territory. “Crying Camels” ends with San Mao on the side of Shayida and Bassiri, identified with the good and noble Sahrawi, pitted against the Sahrawi ‘mob’, bearing the vital secret of Shayida’s innocence. Yet, like the former, this latter

story also implicitly affirms the rightness of Spain's conduct towards the Sahara and ultimately reinforces Spain's position of colonial superiority. In depicting Sahrawi mobs killing the very people who are supposedly best qualified to rule, San Mao deploys the 'ignorant' Sahrawi to prove their own unfitness to govern themselves. As Spanish authority weakens, only injustice and violence can apparently result among people for whom, San Mao maintains, self-determination could never be possible. Spain—on the point of withdrawing from Western Sahara—is again shown to good advantage by implicit contrast.

Thus San Mao's Saharan dream ends in a scene of brutal violence. Having achieved her romantic wish to belong, she stands by powerlessly as the beautiful and noble desert family is destroyed. She herself has no more legitimate presence in the Sahara; Spain is about to give up and withdraw,<sup>111</sup> but San Mao leaves first. "Sergeant Shaba" and "Crying Camels" were written soon after her departure, while in Western Sahara and at the United Nations events continued towards the withdrawal of Spain and the arrival of Morocco and Mauritania in its place.<sup>112</sup>

### *Suffering and Belonging*

Incorporating the Spanish decolonization of the Sahara into her own self-presentation, San Mao gives a very personalized account of these events, and her shifting identification maintains her innocence throughout. As noted, the wish to 'belong' (and the sense of a 'right' to belong) in the desert forms a constant thread throughout these narratives; strategies of 'belonging' range from a claim to love and appreciate the desert and its people, through a portrayal of herself in a familial relationship with a Sahrawi family, to the creation of a relationship between herself and an important political leader in which his respect for her is unchallenged and, lastly, to a picture of herself suffering along with Sahrawi heroes. As she makes the story of the desert her own story, it could be said that she claims entitlement through suffering: if the suffering of desert people is her own suffering, then in sharing their pain she too 'belongs'. This, perhaps is the 'promise' that the desert makes and keeps to those who truly 'love' it. Her consistent focus upon how 'moved' she is by scenes, people and events in the desert places her in a position of generalized sympathy with the Sahara that elides any necessity for political commitment or even belief in the possibility of independence for its people. Indeed, as noted, San Mao presents herself as suffering along with Spain as well as with the Sahara, claiming a compassion that can grieve losses wherever they occur; and by presenting her participation in these Saharan and Spanish histories as a matter of feeling, she stakes a claim upon a position that is beyond considerations of politics.<sup>113</sup>

<[http://www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/1998\\_hrp\\_report/wsahara.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/wsahara.html)>

<<http://www.derechos.org/human-rights/mena/doc/wgm1.html>>

<<http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/espana/doc/saharae.html>>

<<http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/europa/parlamento/sahae.html>>

As for San Mao herself, once uncoupled from the history of the Sahara her fame declined from its earlier heights. After leaving Western Sahara, commentators claim, "her artistic life was far from its pinnacle"; among readers, "San Mao fever cooled and her glory receded" (Lu, Yang and Sun, *San Mao zhuàn*, p.297). Without the history of the Sahara, the 'ascent' that took her to the heights of *Stories of the Sahara* supposedly reversed into a decline (Cui and Zhao, *San Mao zhuàn*, p.194); though her fame continued, she was unable to recapture the heroic glory of her Saharan stories. Thus it might be concluded that San Mao needed Western Sahara, and needed the suffering of Sahrawi people; her 'greatness' was built upon them, and declined once they were no longer available to her.

<sup>113</sup> As noted, San Mao's inclusion of herself in Saharan history is based upon a narrative of human compassion, which must ignore—at least to some extent—the realities of the colonial context. The struggles in these stories are not a history of global European power and resistance to it, but of the experiencing individual ego that sympathises and suffers with the world. This authorial assumption of the power to speak for all and to experience everything is perhaps most familiar in the work of Euro-American writers and thinkers, though it has also characterised much Chinese writing of the twentieth-century. San Mao's universal sympathy and humanity envelops Spaniard and Sahrawi alike; she can empathise with both the colonising power (that is, the supposedly 'universal' European human subject) and the colonised people struggling for liberation (that is, the nationally specific subjected group).

<sup>114</sup> Literary devices used extensively in these stories include: the invocation of the weather to prefigure or mirror the plot action; continual references to the narrator's physical state to indicate the depth of her emotions; the introduction of grim details for literary effect; and the merging of personal observations with discussions of political issues. This emotional presentation differs markedly from the usual practices of historical writing, in which historical reliability is equated with an elimination of emotional effects; and the result of San Mao's incorporation of a narrative of feeling is a history that is more of San Mao herself than of the Sahara. I thank Tomoko Akami for pointing out the 'feminization' effect of this emphasis on emotion and personal detail that tends to debar narratives such as these from categories of 'history'.

<sup>115</sup> Biographers praise the creation and sustaining of narrative tension, the flashback beginning, the pacing of the narrative rhythm, the creation of characters, the setting up of contrasts, and the 'rounding' of Shayida's character. See Cui and Zhao, *SanMaozhuan*, pp.192–4. San Mao's taking of moral sides is also noted; the stories are "full of mourning

### *Stories and Histories*

As noted above, San Mao's biographers and commentators on her work have generally tended to accept her stories as true, and biographical material relating to San Mao is to a great extent based upon her own narratives, repeating the plots of her tales as the 'facts' of her life. At the same time, "Sergeant Shaba" and "Crying Camels" have been praised for their literary merits using criteria more suited to a discussion of fictional techniques than to a factual record,<sup>114</sup> San Mao's biographers Cui Jianfei 崔建飞 and Zhao Jun 赵珺, as noted, regard "Crying Camels" as San Mao's best work; and, though they link it explicitly with 'facts' (such as the date on which San Mao left the Sahara), they describe it in the emotive terms of a discussion of fiction.<sup>115</sup> Thus the quasi-fictionality of the story actually serves to establish its historical importance.

In 1995, twenty years after San Mao left the Sahara, a journalist from China named Zhao Zhangyun 赵章云 (pen-name Zhang Yun) visited Western Sahara in search of traces of her life there and published an account of his findings.<sup>116</sup> His record underlines her significance as a writer and celebrity—and also her own claims to 'belong' in Western Sahara through ties of emotion—by remarking on a high level of interest in her there. Important officials are presented as seeing her as a significant link between China and the Arab world,<sup>117</sup> and express respect for her; Zhang Yun's driver and guide are

**Figure 12**

*El-Ayoun,  
twenty years after  
San Mao's time  
there (from Zhang  
Yun, Zai Xisahala  
taxun San Mao  
de zuji, courtesy of  
Zhongguo Youyi  
Chuban Gongsi)*



“moved” by the stories he tells them of San Mao’s desert life and conclude that she must have loved the Sahrawi people; and a Chinese officer of the United Nations peace-keeping force in Western Sahara tells Zhang that Chinese soldiers there constantly take photographs of sites that they imagine might have had some connection with San Mao.<sup>118</sup> Zhang seems eager to corroborate both the truthfulness and seriousness of her stories as he enlists Sahrawi to express interest in and admiration for San Mao and seeks out places and people mentioned in her narratives to ‘prove’ that they are ‘real’<sup>119</sup>; he is also eager to appropriate San Mao for the People’s Republic of China and to incorporate her in his narratives of friendship between states.<sup>120</sup>

In his interactions with Sahrawi, Zhang not only creates an impression of San Mao’s personal qualities but also establishes a sense of innocence: both on San Mao’s own part and on the part of the ‘China’ that he appropriates her to represent (just as she herself had created an innocence for Spain). Zhang presents his guide, Mustapha, as asking: “It is my impression that very few Chinese people came exploring in Africa. How come that Chinese woman writer was brave enough to come here and have those adventures in the desert?” In reply, Zhang tells him of Chinese explorers as unknown to Sahrawi as Sahrawi had been for China before San Mao’s literary interventions:

Chinese people came to Africa very early. In the Ming Dynasty, Zheng He came to the east African coast, to Malindi and Mogadishu, half a century before the European seafarers. The navigator Zhu Dayuan of the Yuan Dynasty may even have come to Tangier in the north of Morocco, just a few decades after Marco Polo came to China. Even in the present day, many Chinese people are seeking their livelihood abroad. But it’s true that not many have come to Arab countries. San Mao coming to Western Sahara was a special exception.<sup>121</sup>

Zhang presents Mustapha as recognising China’s innocence by ascribing to him the following comment:

If I’m right, Chinese people only came to Africa to explore, and when they’d done that they went home again. Europeans came to Africa to get rich, and so they stayed and didn’t want to leave.<sup>122</sup>

This viewpoint is, of course, consistent with San Mao’s own narrative position of innocent adventurer in the desert. Zhang gives further reinforcement to both her innocence and her importance in national-level narratives when he asks his driver and guide for their impressions of this Chinese woman of whom they had never heard until he arrived on his quest. “She was so good to us Sahrawi,” replies Mohammed, “and I want to thank her on behalf of us Sahrawi. I only regret that she has sadly passed away, or we should get her to come back to see our Western Sahara again.” Hassan agrees: “Yes, it’s a real

(the *People’s Daily*) before becoming chief editor of the *People’s Daily*’s “International section.” See Zhang Yun, *Zai Xisabala taxun San Mao de zuji*, back cover.

<sup>117</sup> The Chief Administrator of El-Ayouf district and the Governor of Smara province are shown expressing great interest in San Mao, claiming that Chinese and Sahrawi people had long enjoyed friendly relations. They express admiration for San Mao for being able to endure desert life, and urge Zhang to arrange for her books to be translated into Arabic for them to read. Zhang accordingly agrees to explore the possibilities of translation with the respective embassies. See Zhang, *Zai Xisabala taxun San Mao de zuji*, pp.30–33, 110–14. Thus the Moroccan ‘villains’ of San Mao’s stories, who brought about the end of her stay in the desert, are transformed into supporters and promoters of her stories.

<sup>118</sup> Zhang presents the People’s Republic of China as a diplomatic player in the history of the Sahara through its participation in the UN Peacekeeping Force in El-Ayouf (Zhang, *Zai Xisabala taxun San Mao de zuji*, p.27). Indeed China had supported Morocco’s annexation of the territory in 1975 and was thus indirectly responsible for San Mao’s departure.

<sup>119</sup> In addition, claiming to have found the house where San Mao had lived, Zhang pictures scenes (imperfectly remembered) from “Sergeant Shaba” and “Crying camels”: “Outside this door, the Spanish sergeant whom San Mao admired had let himself be blown to bits by a bomb to save Sahrawi children; and San Mao’s good friend the policeman Aofeilua and his beautiful sister-in-law Shayida were beaten to death.” Zhang, *Zai Xisabala taxun San Mao de zuji*, p.148.

<sup>120</sup> Zhang’s gesture of appropriation is perhaps to do with San Mao’s mainland connections. She was born there and, although brought up in Taiwan, maintained a focus upon the mainland as the cultural and spiritual home of the Chinese people (as did most KMT supporters who fled to Taiwan in the late 1940s; as noted, they tended to regard their lives in Taiwan as a temporary exile until they could return to a China ruled by the KMT).

<sup>121</sup> Zhang, *Zai Xisabala taxun San Mao de zuji*, p.108. (In this passage, ‘Moluoge’ (Morocco) is misprinted as ‘Mogege’.)

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

/and respect for the heroes” and “enmity and rage” for the “bandits, assassins and invaders,” Gu, *Pingshuo San Mao*, p.74.

<sup>116</sup> Zhang Yun, a graduate of the prestigious

/Shanghai Foreign Languages Institute, had represented China abroad in various diplomatic and journalistic capacities (including being in charge of reporting on the Magreb for

**Figure 13**

*The building in El-Ayoun in which, according to Zhang Yun, San Mao lived during her stay in the Sahara (from Zhang, Zai Xisahala, courtesy of Zhongguo Youyi Chubans Gongsi)*



<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167.

<sup>124</sup> In contrast to San Mao's own narratives (in which Morocco is the real villain) Zhang's story presents Spain as the bully; thus San Mao's history acquires another layer of historical explanation.

<sup>125</sup> "Even though the Sahara Desert was a wasteland where nothing grew, it was sorely coveted by rapacious colonizing powers old and new. Even though it couldn't meet the demands of their greed for wealth, it could satisfy their territorial ambitions. Even though it was sparsely populated, abusing power in the desert could satisfy their cravings. The local indigenous people carried out their resistance against the greed of imperialism and colonialism to various extents and in all kinds of ways. Whatever the difficulties they encountered, for every day that invasion and oppression existed their resistance would continue a day. Imperialism was not going to withdraw from these territories by itself, and the people there were not going to end their own struggle ... A considerable part of the Sahara Desert in which San Mao and José lived was occupied at the time when the old colonist, Spain, was at the zenith of its piratical power. Even though at that time

shame. But now we should translate her books into Arabic, so that people here can learn all about her" (a wish already expressed, Zhang tells us, by the Chief Administrator of the El-Ayoun region). "Don't forget us Sahrawi, and remember us to our Chinese brothers," adds Mohammed.<sup>123</sup>

San Mao is thus appropriated by the People's Republic of China as an important player in a narrative of anti-imperialist solidarity, and is integrated into a story of international co-operation, linking "our two nations" in brotherhood, involving embassies (as Zhang promises to discuss translation possibilities with embassy personnel) and officials, and representing Chinese interest, friendship and help. The "two nations" invoked are, of course, the People's Republic of China (which continues to claim sovereignty over Taiwan, San Mao's home) and Morocco (which claims sovereignty over Western Sahara).

The mainland literary critic Gu Jitang 古继堂, in his analysis of San Mao's work, is eager to establish the 'non-innocence' of Spain as well as Morocco.<sup>124</sup> The 'old and new colonizers' are equally culpable<sup>125</sup>; the heroes are the Sahrawi people in their fight against dual colonialism—with the help of San Mao, whose Chinese ethnicity he presents as a vital factor in her ability to sympathize with the Sahrawi struggle for independence. Her interest in the Sahrawi people, he suggests, is a manifestation of solidarity among "Third World" people who have experienced the sufferings of colonialism:

San Mao's love, sympathy and support for the Sahrawi people did not stem from any need of her own to get something from them, and definitely did not start from collecting material to write about; ... it came simply from a pure and innocent feeling, from a natural affinity that came from her view of life, from her sympathy for ordinary workers and people of the lower classes, and from her support for oppressed people and oppressed nationalities ... San Mao's attitude to and feeling for the Sahrawi was completely different from the discriminatory, arrogant and bullying attitude of westerners, who call Africans 'black devils'.<sup>126</sup> It came from the sympathetic connection between the Chinese and African peoples of the Third World, who had long suffered the bitterness of colonialism and imperialist enslavement.<sup>127</sup>

It should be noted here that Gu's writing (and indeed that of Zhang and biographers Cui and Zhao) follows the Marxist narrative of a united 'third world' opposition to colonialism, promoted by the People's Republic of China; thus San Mao is recruited not only as a representative of 'Greater

China' but also an exemplar of mainland-espoused ideologies quite at odds with those of Taiwan's political leadership of the time<sup>128</sup> (and which San Mao herself, as the daughter of a Nationalist [KMT] family who fled the mainland when the Communists came to power, is unlikely to have supported). Further, claims Gu, San Mao's descriptions of Sahrawi sufferings can (and should) stir up Chinese nationalistic feelings:

In "Crying Camels," San Mao's descriptions of the enterprise of people's liberation undertaken by the leader of the local Sahrawi people's movement, the guerilla leader Bassiri, and of his cruel slaying, can all awaken our memories of the past sufferings of the Chinese people and, for a person who has had the experience, it can make them seem to see the cruel scenes of the Japanese militarists invading China. They have a great enlightening significance for the reader.<sup>129</sup>

San Mao's descriptions of the "aborted struggle for liberation and freedom" on the part of the Sahrawi people, Gu suggests,

can stimulate our latent internationalist spirit, and make us reawaken the shame and cruelty of imperialists and invaders. They can make us realise the significance of an independent motherland and a rich and strong nation and race.<sup>130</sup>

Moreover, lessons for China are supposedly to be found in San Mao's 'history':

If one day a nation and race should lose its independence and self-determination, it also loses its defensive shield, and lets the evil wolf in through the front, back and side doors; its life and dignity vanish into nothingness. Tragic things like the burning of the Yuanmingyuan<sup>131</sup> and the rape of Nanking could happen again. At that time, our fate may be worse than that of the Sahrawi today. Our parents, brothers and sisters might not have the security that the Sahrawi have today. Therefore loving our motherland, loving our race, and loving our people is not an empty phrase ... but is linked with our life and fate. I think it would be a great contribution on San Mao's part if reading her work can lead to this kind of reflection.<sup>132</sup>

Thus patriotic fervor is to be transferable through 'third world' solidarities, and San Mao's writings are considered to have a vital function in keeping the memories of colonial wrongs alive. But that is not, according to Gu, the only contribution that San Mao has made to world consciousness through her 'history' of the Sahara. Her stories, he urges, should be used as *source documents* when an official history of Western Sahara comes to be written:<sup>133</sup>

San Mao's depictions of the people there, her descriptions of the desert landscape, and her descriptions and records of many events there can be seen in total as a very precious historical account and historical source. When people in the future write the history of the Sahara and the history of the 1970s, San Mao's works will have a thoroughly important reference value and will be an extremely important piece of literary evidence. Of San Mao's works, "Crying Camels" has the greatest historical significance; we can say without the

/Spain was unable to fend for itself, it did not take care of its domestic economic depression ... it sent a 'desert force' to the Sahara to rule the Sahrawi. However, the nations neighbouring the Sahara, such as Morocco, seeing Spain being defeated, rose up to bully it, and snatched the lamb from the tiger's mouth." Gu, *Evaluating San Mao*, p.71.

<sup>126</sup> Gu's claim for Chinese innocence in comparison with the 'west' is somewhat misleading here. 'Black devils' (*beigui* 黑鬼) is a term in common currency in China; see Frank Dikötter, *The discourse of race in modern China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992) for a discussion of racial attitudes in earlier Chinese writing.

<sup>127</sup> Zhang, *Zai Xisabala*, p.113. "In 'Crying camels', the depiction of Bassiri and his brother Lua constitutes an exalted and tragic hymn in praise of African ethnic heroes' struggle for ethnic liberation and Third World independence ... The depiction ... expresses the justice and total heroism of the revolutionary heroes." Gu, *Pingshuo San Mao*, p.128.

<sup>128</sup> Though Sun Yat-Sen had been an opponent of colonialism, the Taiwan KMT government was generally supportive of the American opposition to the spread of communism and opposed 'third world' liberation struggles that were in any way associated with that ideology.

<sup>129</sup> Gu, *Pingshuo San Mao*, pp.118-19.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119.

<sup>131</sup> The sacking of the Yuanming yuan (the Manchu garden palace) in Beijing by British troops in 1860 remains one of the most potent symbols of imperialist incursions on Chinese territory for Chinese nationalist consciousness.

<sup>132</sup> Gu, *Pingshuo San Mao*, p.119.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p.129.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p.139. San Mao did not in fact claim to have personally witnessed the actual death of Bassiri (see above).

<sup>135</sup> Gu, *Pingshuo San Mao*, p.129.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p.119.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p.129.

<sup>138</sup> Stuart Hall, "Old and new ethnicities," in *Culture, globalization and the world-system*, ed. Anthony D. King (Houndmills, Hants: Macmillan Education, 1991), p.48.

slightest doubt that it is a chapter in the history of the Sahrawi people. With her own eyes San Mao witnessed the cruel repression of the Sahrawi revolution by colonialism and local despotism; with her own eyes she witnessed the tragic scene of the inhuman slaying of the Sahrawi hero Bassiri, his family and comrades by bandits. In "Crying Camels," San Mao created a very clear and detailed record of this process from beginning to end ... Works like *Crying Camels* and *Stories of the Sahara* are unofficial histories of the Sahara written by San Mao, who was a resident of the Sahara.<sup>134</sup>

San Mao, for Gu, has done what the Sahrawi people could not. For them, he notes, "Writing a 'Down with imperialism' slogan was extremely difficult, let alone using literature to write their own history."<sup>135</sup> In addition, he claims the emotional nature of San Mao's 'history' to be an important part of its meaning:

San Mao's descriptions of the great Sahara desert and her portrait of the masters of the Sahara, the Sahrawi, her representation of Saharan customs and conditions and the Sahrawi people's aborted struggle for the sake of their own liberation and freedom, the wild happiness of their celebration of victory, and the description of their vehement sadness when they encountered difficulty, have profound informative value for us. She has not only let us know about these amazing things we had never heard of, but has also transmitted such rich and varied knowledge about the desert, and has given us great enlightenment.<sup>136</sup>

"History," he continues,

is for letting people know clearly about the origins and development of their own nationality and country and their great achievements, to strengthen their sense of ethnic pride and responsibility, to incite people all the better to create new history and continue the patrimony of their ancestors, and to develop a more magnificent future.<sup>137</sup>

If, as Gu claims, the nationalistic functions of history are to be paramount and the writings of San Mao are to be considered truthful eye-witness records of real events, then the status of San Mao's writings as history is apparently accepted, on some level at least, within public discussion as well as within the minds of readers wishing to believe in the reality of the Chinese woman of the desert. Her authority to speak for Sahrawi is accepted completely, as is the historical 'truth' of her stories.

Thus are San Mao's stories (her histories of herself) fitted into history (into Spanish history, Saharan history and Chinese history) and deployed in the process of making more history, recruited into two otherwise quite separate narratives of anti-colonial nationalism. These Chinese stories of the Sahara, it could be said, exemplify Stuart Hall's observation that the idea of "two histories, one over here, one over there, never having spoken to one another ... is simply not tenable any longer in an increasingly globalised world."<sup>138</sup>

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