

**Through San Mao's Eyes:
Representations of Foreign Characters in San Mao's
一个陌生人的死 (The Death of a Stranger) and
哑奴 (The Mute Slave)**

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Abstract

An often recurring story type in San Mao's short stories is one where she aids and suffers alongside a character that is marginalized by mainstream community, such as the elderly Jiali in the community of Scandinavians in 一个陌生人的死 (The Death of a Stranger) and the black slave Yanu in the Sahrawi community in Spanish Western Sahara in 哑奴 (The Mute Slave). These marginalized characters have share certain characteristics: they are unable to speak. Their despair is thus depicted by intense moments of crying or stillness, and confinement through metaphors such as Yanu's skin color or Jiali's empty house. By portraying herself as their helper, San Mao rises to be the hero to a Chinese audience by portraying the rest of the community, especially middle-aged women, both Spanish and Scandinavian, in a comic, flat and stereotypical way. Her characters are also judged by Chinese norms of courtesy.

San Mao is the pen name of the Taiwanese writer Chen Ping, who wrote autobiographical fiction based on her life in the Sahara with her Spanish husband and her travels to Europe and America. Since the mid 1970's, her works have been among the widest read popular literature in Taiwan and later in China. The heroine of her stories, also called San Mao, is the only Chinese character present in her stories, and in this paper I argue that the rest of the characters are foreigners to her and to her readers. Though her character is saturated with a romantic kindness and goodness and she helps people in need wherever she travels, I will examine, by a close reading of two of her short stories, “哑奴” (The Mute Slave) and “一个陌生人的死” (The Death of a Stranger), how the author San Mao portrays the 'others'; how she keeps with and breaks traditional European (Orientalist and Africanist) stereotypes, and how her foreign characters simultaneously suppose and create a Chinese identity for San Mao and for the reader.

I chose the above mentioned short stories for their representative nature: both were written before her husband José's death, and can thus be considered to belong to the same writing period. (Wang and Liu 2002: 508) Despite the fact that they take place in communities that are so different, they both belong to the same kind of story type where San Mao helps the oppressed. "The Mute Slave" is set in the community of Sahrawis in Western Sahara, the place for which San Mao's stories are most well known; "The Death of a Stranger" is from when she moved to the Spanish Canary Islands and into the community of Scandinavians there. The stories of this type have many elements in common: the home and the town as scenes of action; the same actants on the level of characterization. The character San Mao, aided by Hexi, helps someone who is segregated from the community. The views of the community and society are mediated by other characters. The authorities (who stand for the law, the church, etc.) are also portrayed.

The value of reading San Mao in the light of post-colonial critical theory is that it is such a prominent characteristic of her writing: San Mao's characters, even the ones without names, are almost always defined by ethnicity, gender, wealth and status, in other words social attributes

(by the social code, if we were to use Aleid Fokkeman's definition of connotative codes). Jiali and Yanu, the two characters that their short stories are named after are important because of their standing in their societies and their marginalized place, as can be seen by the fact that neither of their names even appears in the titles of the short stories (Yanu is not given a name at all). Into the category of her marginalized characters I would also add the Christian Sahrawi Shaida, the child bride Guka, the nameless Norwegian beggar, and Taniai, a Swiss child who takes care of his parents¹. San Mao is sympathetic toward them - not so toward the characters that represent mainstream culture. She has a tendency to depict people that are not in their homelands, settlers such as herself. Complicated social and political hierarchies exist in her stories, such as San Mao as wife to her husband Hexi; her own peripheral place as a foreigner in the Spanish community; children to their parents; the Sahrawis to the Spaniards and the slaves to both of the aforementioned; the elderly to the middle-aged; the sick to the able-bodied. Multiple reversals of centrality and periphery occurs as she depicts herself and the lives of those that are not a part of the main-stream community.

San Mao's Identity in a Post-colonial context

Miriam Lang, a researcher of Taiwanese popular fiction, has pointed out how the construction of "San Mao", the heroine of the short stories and also the role that Chen Ping took in public life, was one of the main reasons for San Mao's popularity. It is very hard to distinguish between the author, the character and the narrator "San Maos", especially since Chen Ping claimed that her writings were based on her own life. San Mao's idealized and fictionalized identity is something readers could get to know personally and identify with. Part of San Mao's appeal is also

¹ In 哭泣骆驼骆驼 (Crying Camels), 娃娃新娘 (The Child Bride), 温柔的夜 (The Gentle Night), and 巨人 (The Giant) respectively.

her portrayal of herself as a the romantic wanderer in exotic settings, faced by hard living conditions and nature, but knowing how to appreciate local "color". San Mao often comes across as the resourceful and righteous hero, even physically as when she rescues Hexi from a sandpit and outruns a gang of rapists in “荒山之夜”. These qualities of an adventurer she combines with a feminine "domestic self", concerning herself with cooking, cleaning, interior decoration, and charity work. She is the epitome of both a good girl and a good hero: her innocence is a central characteristic. This innocence is maintained by the purity of her emotions. Hexi, her faithful "sidekick" and partner in dialogue is often given the aggressive role when he is present, for example when he gets angry at Jiali's nurse, it could be seen to be on San Mao's behalf (San Mao 2002, 594). Hexi could be likened to a Sancho Panza, that is there to save her from her delusions, her emotional highs and lows (a particularly fitting example can be found in 相思农场 (Lovesick for a Farm) San Mao 2002: 597).² This feminine hero with her good intentions is obviously someone who would appeal to San Mao's readership, that is, (young) Chinese women. A factor just as important, one I would consider crucial to her success, was her identification as Chinese and with a Chinese heritage: this is something that makes her short stories so entertaining and interesting to a Chinese audience.

Miriam Lang proposes that San Mao's innocence stems from her emotional awareness and sensitivity, and because of her ability to feel for another person, something that transcends cultural boundaries, she is able to tell the stories of those who are unable to (or do not, in her works) speak for themselves. In her article "San Mao Makes History" Lang shows how San Mao identifies herself in the story 哭泣的骆驼 (Crying Camels) with the Sahrawis and Europeans in turn, and sometimes with her own Chinese identity, thus staying out of the conflict. (2000: 148-150).

² Lang has stated that many critics have dwelt on San Mao's relationship with Hexi as a "perfect marriage" and the ultimate romance story and that Hexi would fit the type of a "latin lover". While this may be true, I feel as though he is her "sidekick"; Hexi's role is important to the narrative elements of her stories. His role is much more marked than that of the other characters: he is often her partner in dialogue and also acts as a narrator in some of San Mao's works (by writing letters, or in lovesick for a farm). That is why I will not consider him separately as a "foreigner" in this essay. He is what legitimates San Mao to think of Spain as her second homeland.

The "authority of experience" such as what San Mao uses as her legitimization has long been called into question in ethnographic literature as elsewhere. Who can represent cultures accurately and truthfully and who has the right to represent them are both politically significant questions. (Clifford 1988: 8.) On a global scale, San Mao's descriptions of people as a Chinese person to the Chinese add to the wealth of points of view that we have. On the other hand, her point of view could just be seen as the substitution of eurocentrism with another ethnocentrism. Western literature in a post-colonial world can no longer count on a certain type of readership, but since San Mao wrote in Chinese, she did not have to worry about those depicted in her works to contest her views; she could portray the Sahrawis and Europeans as she wanted, because they would not read her works (Lang has also noted this, 2000: 151).

There are other questions that can be asked: how can she write in one language about something that happened in another? Shouldn't there be discrepancies in the text, omissions, strange language? San Mao's descriptions of people are problematic, because despite the goal of transcending cultural boundaries in human understanding and feeling, the setup of her short stories is one in which she is better off than those she offers help to. Even though the main theme in her stories is the helping foreigners, the depiction of foreigners hinges, in fact, on San Mao's views of them. In "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination", Toni Morrison has discussed how in American literature Africanism has been a way to build up whiteness: how individualism, freedom, morals and ethics can be considered by showing the marginalized, the silent, the poor. Freedom, morals, and individualism are precisely some of the questions that San Mao wishes to address.

Toni Morrison has postulated six linguistic strategies in the portrayal of Africanist personas: the economy of stereotype, metonymic displacement, metaphysical condensation, fetishization, dehistoricizing allegory, and patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language (Morrison 1992: 67-69). Many of San Mao's characterizations do fit into these categories, such as

the stereotypic elements of the old man and the slave; the "metaphysical condensation" of her speech-impaired characters. San Mao's works differ, however, from eurocentric travel writing in that she portrays both marginalized and mainstream foreigners, and that she does not give society in general a favorable portrayal.

Yanu and Jiali, Men in the Margins of Society

For someone who is trying to make the stories of the oppressed visible, she does not make them heard. The slave Yanu and Jiali the old man both (as well as many of San Mao's other "oppressed" characters) have trouble communicating. Jiali does not know any of the languages San Mao speaks and Yanu is mute. San Mao claims to be able to understand them and their pursuit of communication legitimates her narrative authority. For example, she calls Yanu's gesturing "speech":

哑奴说的是简单明了的手势，这种万国语，实在是方便。他又会表达，一看就知道他的意思。(San Mao 2002, 576)

The mute slave spoke with simple and understandable gestures. This kind of a worldwide language was truly convenient. He could express himself, at first glance you knew what he meant.

Yanu's and Jiali's names both refer to their oppression: the characters 哑奴 mean "mute slave", but San Mao uses this as his "name"; she objects to Hexi calling him "哑巴" (a mute). Jiali 加里 is homophonous with 家里 (at home; inside the home). Jiali's "ghost house" becomes a metaphor for his loneliness, his seclusion and his sorry state as San Mao describes how dirty and empty it is. The flowers blooming like a brocade in his back yard could be seen to refer to some inner beauty in Jiali that is not noticable from the outside. But the house is also something that walls him off from the outside world that San Mao aesthetizes; San Mao dreams of seeing him "爬出来晒太阳", "crawl out" into the light (San Mao 2002, 590). By linking Jiali to an inanimate object and

using verbs such as crawl she effectively bars him from the human realm and makes communication impossible. In fact, both characters fail to recognize San Mao at some point and are then "out of reach". San Mao can only describe them from the outside and Yanu is repeatedly likened to an immobile statue, rock, or clay figurine. He is a prisoner in the story, but this prison the author reduces to the color of his skin in a dialogue where San Mao sees Yanu comparing his own skin color to the blue sky. Then he shows how his spirit is free like a bird. (San Mao 2002: 580). The romantic portrayal of the tragic enslavement of such a "noble man" is as unrealistic as her seeing Yanu see a color.

Just as San Mao does with her own role as housewife, she does not try to change the stereotypical portrayal of the slave, but instead glorifies the slave's qualities of loyalty, ardousness, suffering, and compassion. San Mao does depart from the depiction of a black slave in that San Mao considers Yanu very intelligent, because he is able to communicate with San Mao, he can read a map, and he has common sense:

"他再度欢喜的笑了，又说：'你们这种人，不吃生菜，牙龈会流血。'我呆了一下，这种常识，一个沙漠的奴隶怎么可能知道。" (San Mao 2002, 576)

"He [the slave] liked it, laughed, and said: "People like you, if you do not eat vegetables, your gums will bleed." I was dumbstruck. Such common knowledge, how could a desert slave know such a thing?

The slave is the best builder in town and can even tend sheep and help with the calving of camels. Even his son has intelligent eyes and great skill. Such exaggeration is common in San Mao's short stories: in the *Crying Camels* physical beauty is linked to the 'goodness' of characters and she describes her friend Shaida in orientalizing detail. However, Jiali is given no "wonderful characteristics", signs of his actual human nature are limited to a faded photo and the whistling he does on his deathbed. In fact, she narrates his foot's repulsive state in grotesque detail and and calls him "frightening". San Mao stated that he could be anyone to her, it did not matter *who he was* (San Mao 2002). This perhaps has to do with place of the elderly in Chinese society. Jiali shouldn't need to possess any laudable characteristics in order to be taken care of.

The contrast between stereotype and humanity, picture and speech is something that disrupts the portrayal of these characters. No wonder San Mao could not stand the torn look that rose onto the slave's face and Hexi was surprised that the old man could whistle.

Upholding Customs: The Law, the Church, and Middle-aged Women

The neighborhood tends to form the most important setting for San Mao's short stories. The author San Mao often creates a character to embody and profess the cultural values of the community (note that she does not always do this, as in *温柔的夜* (The Gentle Night) when she herself refuses to give money to a person she mistakes for a beggar. Hexi might also take the place of her partner in dialogue). The characters in her neighborhood could be seen as certain types in literature: they are rather flat, nameless, and are usually distinguished only by age, gender and nationality. Most are middle-aged women, portrayed very differently from herself and men. In the following example, the two Spanish ladies in "The Mute Slave" refuse the tea (something also valued by the Chinese) offered them when they are visitors at a rich Sahrawi's house:

我吃第二串时，那两个土里土气的西班牙太太开始没有分寸地乱叫起来。

"天呀！不能吃呀！我要吐了呀！快拿汽水来呀！"

我看见她们那样没有教养的样子，真替她们害羞。

(San Mao 2002, 571)

As I was eating my second shishkebab, those two obnoxious Spanish ladies began to cry out without any sense of common decency: "Heavens! This is unedible! I'm going to throw up! Quick, fetch me a soda!"

When I saw the way they acted, as if they hadn't been brought up properly, I felt really embarrassed on their behalf.

Similarly, in "The Death of a Stranger" the local ("不孝") attitude toward the elderly is professed by three middle-aged women from the same neighborhood. It is interesting that they are all of differing nationalities: a Dane, an Englishwoman and Swede. Here San Mao could either be showing how this is a problem in many Western countries, or then assuming that the Danish, English and Swedish should all collectively take responsibility for the neighborhood they live in

across national boundaries. If that is the case, it is odd that their nationalities are their most prominent characteristics.

San Mao's middle-aged ladies are stereotypical. A stereotype lets a writer form an easy and quick picture to the reader without specificity. Since San Mao's readers were Chinese, I believe that San Mao used certain phrases that actually refer to the Chinese stereotype of the "meddling middle-aged Chinese gossip" such as "少管闲事" and "土里土气". Also, the prevailing stereotype of western foreigners, I believe, is that of straightforwardness and bluntness. San Mao's characters certainly fit into this category as can be seen from the excerpt from "The Death of a Stranger" below:

"啊！那个老加里，他住了快两年了，跟谁也不来往."
"他没法子走路."我轻轻的反驳这个中年的丹麦女人："那是他的事，他可以弄一辆轮椅."
"他的家那么多石阶，椅子也下不来."
"三毛，那不是我们的事情，看见这种可怜的人，我心里就烦，你能把他怎么办？我们又不是慈善机关，何况，他可以在瑞典进养老院，偏偏住到这个举目无亲的岛上来."
"这里天气不冷，他有他的理由."我争辩地说着，也就走开了。(San Mao 2002, 589-590)

"Oh, that old Jiali, he's lived here for almost two years, but doesn't associate with anyone."
"He can't walk," I quietly refuted this middle-aged Danish woman. "That's his business, he could get a wheelchair."
"His house has so many stone steps, he wouldn't get the chair down."
"San Mao, that's none of our business. When I see pitiable people like that, I feel troubled in my heart. What can we do about them? We aren't a charity organization, and anyway, he could enter an old-people's home in Sweden. But instead he's had to come live on this island, where there aren't any of his relatives."
"The weather isn't cold here, he has his reasons." I retorted and then left.

Befriending Authorities

Law, state and religion in San Mao's short stories are not some faceless structures that control the lives of people. San Mao is shown as the personal friend of these authorities, both of the chancellor at the courthouse in "The Mute Slave" and the local representative of the Swedish community in "The Death of a Stranger". Her personal relations with these authorities legitimize her role as narrator.

The difference between a personal relationship with an authority and one that has "no

face" is best exemplified in this passage from "The Death of a Stranger" by comparing the styles in which the local representative and the person on the phone from the Swedish consulate speak to San Mao:

"三毛，我只是大家公推出来做一个名誉责任人，我是不受薪的，这种事你还是去找领事馆吧！我可以给你领事的电话号码."
"谢谢!"我拿了电话号码回来，马上去打电话。
"太太，你的瑞典邻居又老又病，不是领事馆的事，只有他们死了，我们的职责是可以代办文件的，现在不能管他，因为这儿不是救济院。" (San Mao 2002, 592.)

"San Mao, I am only a commonly elected honorary representative, I don't get paid. In these kinds of matters it would be best if you went to the consulate! I can give you the consul's phone number."

"Thank you!" I took the phone number and called them at once.

"Lady, so your Swedish neighbor is old and sick. It doesn't concern the consulate. Only in the event that he dies, we can handle the paperwork on his behalf, that is our duty. Currently, we cannot take charge of his affairs because we are not an infirmary."

The local representative calls her by her name; the latter uses colloquial language and is noticeably more rude.

An intriguing description of a Swedish funeral³ can be found in the beginning of "The Death of a Stranger". Here the negative portrayal of both the consul and priest relies less on stereotype and more on her own feelings. She is angry that they arrive in a fine car and socialize with each other, becoming "sad" only when approaching San Mao and Hexi. The consul's invitation of the priest and his presence are not seen as signs of respect, and since San Mao doesn't understand what the priest is saying, the short ritual that he performs also seems to lose its meaning. The most important characterization is that of the priest: he is comic in manner and appearance. He is young and has hair that reaches down to his shoulders like a hippie (San Mao 2002, 585). When the wind blows into the graveyard and upsets his hair he grows frustrated and wants to leave.

Communality and courtesy as "reading instructions"

San Mao's characters are rather easy to approach, since she uses stereotypicality and

³ The burial with its holy water does not seem like a Lutheran ritual, although most Swedish people are Lutherans. San Mao also calls the priest 神父 (priest) instead of 牧师 (pastor).

embellishment and also speaks out her own judgements of them. However, there is also another dimension to this: San Mao's judgements are directed to a Chinese readership. Her short stories, besides that we know that they were meant for a Taiwanese audience, dwell on topics that have to do with Chinese cultural heritage or problems, such as the Chinese food she cooked in her house, helping the Sahrawi with her Chinese medicine, helping Moli, a Japanese person, or helping the Norwegian beggar. Communitarity and family are also a central theme in San Mao's novels. When San Mao visits the slave's home she feels that he is not pitiable because he has a happy home and Jiali's death is also so pitiable, because his family is so far away. San Mao's befriending of the authorities could also be seen as a Chinese tradition of *guanxi*.

There are instances in the text where San Mao's characters can be seen to have "Chinese" attributes, and if not, to at least be judged according to Chinese norms of courtesy. The author pays much attention to the conduct of her characters: not only does she describe who thanked and acted courteously (or not), but these manners also come out in dialogue, for example in the Secretary's greeting: "哈，三毛，久不来了，总算还记得我。" (San Mao, you haven't been around for a long time, I'm glad you still remember me.) (San Mao 2002: 573). The descriptions are often very detailed, as in how San Mao and Hexi acted toward their neighbors, how they greeted them (San Mao 2002: 588). San Mao also notes things like Yanu's and the Swedish neighbor's polite smiles. As Yanu tries to return the money given by San Mao to his son they begin arguing in a manner that strangely resembles haggling over who gets to pay the bill after dinner (San Mao 2002: 575). These matters could be seen as imposing Chinese norms of courtesy onto foreigners, especially in the larger context, for example when San Mao thinks that the Sahrawis are wrong for not returning the things that she lent them.

Of foreign customs, the role of the handshake is embellished and San Mao describes how she shakes hands with most people she meets, for example the pastor and the consul as well as Jiali. The handshake grows into the symbolic representation of (Western) equality and reception in

"The Mute Slave" as San Mao refuses to shake hands with the slave owner, even though she thanks him for the visit (and thus remains a courteous person and sustains her innocence). When Yanu meets Hexi for the first time, he does not bow, but shakes his hand. This change from old (Chinese) feudal habits into "modern" ones is emphasised by how San Mao describes his bows with the term "拜" (worshipping gods. San Mao 2002: 574).

The sinification of characters can be seen as cultural reading instructions written into the text. On the level of language translators do much of the same and try to make language sound idiomatic - but on the level of characterization, she has had much wider options. Her foreign characters are stylized with comic and stereotypic elements and thus remain foreign to her and to her readers, which I am sure can relate to San Mao much more readily. Though her short stories are named after foreign characters, San Mao is the protagonist of her own novels, she goes on adventuring. The ones who are left behind most often aren't as fortunate.

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