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## Translating Travel in the Spanish Sahara: English Versions of Sanmao's Stories of the Sahara

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**TRANSLATING TRAVEL IN THE SPANISH SAHARA:  
ENGLISH VERSIONS OF SANMAO'S *STORIES OF THE SAHARA***

A Thesis Presented

By

YING XU

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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Comparative Literature

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ENGLISH VERSIONS OF SANMAO'S *STORIES OF THE SAHARA***

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ABSTRACT

TRANSLATING TRAVEL IN THE SPANISH SAHARA:

ENGLISH VERSIONS OF SANMAO'S *STORIES OF THE SAHARA*

MAY 2015

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Sanmao (1943-91), author of over 19 books, is well known in Chinese-speaking communities for her travel writing. The present work offers a critical introduction to Sanmao's life and work as well as an English translation of three selections from her most recognized travelogue, among both general readers and critics, *Stories of the Sahara* (1976). This text recounts her experience of travelling in the Western Sahara with her husband José María Quero y Ruíz from Spain. Chapter 1 introduces Sanmao's career, her travel narratives, and the extant scholarship on her work to the English-speaking audience. More specifically, it highlights her time living in the Western Sahara among three cultures and languages—Chinese, Spanish, and Sahrawi—and contextualizes *Stories of the Sahara*, especially drawing attention to moments that require special care when the text is moved from Chinese to English. Next, this chapter focuses on the central role that language and translation play in Sanmao's travel writing. This analysis is informed by Roman Jakobson's classification of translation as used to study travel literature by Michael Cronin. I provide a discussion of my choices concerning translating the texture of the Western Sahara and the linguistic aspects of Sanmao's writing, as well as the

characteristics of Sanmao's legacy that I attempt to emphasize through my translation. Chapter 2 includes my English translation of three texts from *Stories of the Sahara*. A brief introduction and a short conclusion open and close this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

On June 26, 2011, an exhibition and conference with the theme “Timeless Sanmao”<sup>1</sup> was held in The National Museum of Modern Chinese Literature in Beijing, China. The conference was divided into two sessions. In the first session “Sanmao and Me,” Sanmao’s friends and family members shared their stories about Sanmao and exhibited her photos, manuscripts, the clothes she used to wear, and items she bought during her travels. Chaired by the chief editor of Beijing October Literature and Art Press Han Jingqun,<sup>2</sup> the second session of the conference “Sanmao and Us” featured a discussion of Sanmao’s writing and its long-lasting influence. Although twenty years had gone by since Sanmao passed away in 1991, more than 200 individuals attended the event, confirming her influence and popularity.

Sanmao (1943–91) was a writer and translator from Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> Her career as a travel writer began with her first book, *Sahala de gushi (Stories of the Sahara)* (1976),<sup>4</sup> which tells the experience of her temporary dwelling in the Western Sahara. She was a prolific author, as she wrote 16 travelogues in the 15 years that she was actively engaged in writing.

This thesis presents *Stories of the Sahara* to an English-speaking audience via a critical introduction to Sanmao’s life and work as well as an English translation of

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<sup>1</sup> 三毛 is translated as Sanmao in this thesis to avoid the misunderstanding of taking either “San” or “Mao” as her surname. Sanmao is Chen Maoping’s penname, taken from a character of a famous Chinese caricaturist Zhang Leping’s work. Sanmao literally means “three hairs.”

<sup>2</sup> Chinese personal names in this thesis are provided in the Chinese order with surnames coming first.

<sup>3</sup> While Sanmao was a Taiwanese writer, she has always identified with Chinese people, culture, and language, and she refers to herself as Chinese. See Sanmao, “Qin bu qin, guxiang ren” (“Close or Not, The People of My Country”), in her *Beiyong* [Silhouette from Behind] (1981), 77-96.

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of Miriam Lang’s article, all of the writings about or by Sanmao mentioned in this paper are in Chinese. Their titles and passages in discussion are translated into English by me.



selections from the text. In Chapter 1, I introduce *Stories of the Sahara* by focusing on its intriguing content and reception by the general public and critics. Further, I explain the reasons for which *Stories of the Sahara* in its entirety is appealing to an Anglophone audience, and then discuss the three particular texts I choose to translate for this project: “Xuanhu jishi” (“On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert”), “Fanglin” (“Nice Neighbors”), and “Tianti” (“Jacob’s Ladder”). The features that characterize these texts are those that characterize Sanmao’s travel writing in general, and they contribute greatly to her writing’s rapturous reception by her readers.

In the second section of Chapter 1 “Sanmao: ‘Free as Air,’” I provide biographical and bibliographical sketches of Sanmao. Sanmao’s rich travel experiences and life between cultures have provided her with the opportunity to present diverse cultures to her avid readers.

The following section, “Language and Translation in Sanmao’s Travel Writing,” examines cases of interlingual and intralingual translation in Sanmao’s travel narratives, supporting the centrality of language and translation in travel and travel writing. In my discussion of interlingual translation, I note a change in Sanmao’s visibility not only as a writer, but also as a translator. By familiarizing herself with languages and cultures, Sanmao sets out on the journey of self-exploration and discovers a new self. For example, I discuss the use of English between Sanmao and her father, both native Chinese speakers, Silbo Gomero, a whistled register of Spanish from La Gomera in the Canary Islands, and Chinese dialects, with their variations and special effect in Sanmao’s travels and writing.

In the final sections of Chapter 1, I discuss the choices made in translating the three selected texts from *Stories of the Sahara*. In translating the texture of the place where

three cultures meet, my English translation incorporates Spanish and Chinese to highlight these interactions. Linguistic aspects of the source text, particularly idioms and verses, pose difficulties for the translation but also present opportunities to introduce Chinese culture to an English-speaking audience.

Chapter 2 consists of three translated texts from *Stories of the Sahara*. The first, “On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert” tells of Sanmao’s experiences curing people and animals of their diseases in the Sahara Desert. She uses unorthodox methods such as soybeans, wine, and nail-polish to treat her patients. In the next text, “Nice Neighbors,” Sanmao describes her relationship with her neighbors and offers anecdotes about life with them. It seems that she and her husband José have been “bullied” by their neighbors, but it is also the neighbors who turn living in the desert into an amusing experience which leads to endless storytelling. “Jacob’s Ladder” tells the story of how Sanmao passes both written and road driving tests to get her driver’s license. It is with much difficulty that Sanmao passes the tests, but the process is entertaining because of her descriptions of interactions with Spanish traffic police and local prisoners. In all of the texts, Sanmao builds suspense that intrigues readers to continue consuming her writing. As readers, we wonder if each of Sanmao’s treatments will lead to success, if her neighbors will return the items they frequently borrow, and if Sanmao can overcome the obstacles that prevent her from getting her license.

Finally I conclude by comparing my translation process to an amazing journey in which I learn and grow.

## CHAPTER 1

### LIVING AMONG SAHRAWI AND SPANISH: NEGOTIATING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN TRAVEL WRITING

#### *I. Stories of the Sahara*

Sanmao wrote *Stories of the Sahara*, a collection of twelve short texts, when she and her husband from Spain, José María Quero y Ruíz (1951–79), were living in the Sahara Desert for three years from 1973 to 1976. Some of these stories first appeared in the *United Daily News* in Taiwan in 1974 and met with such great success that they were published in book form two years later.

In *Stories of the Sahara*, Sanmao depicts her romantic relationship with José, whom she married in the Western Sahara, then a colony of Spain;<sup>5</sup> her adventures in the Desert; and her neighborly relationship with the Sahrawi people, the Arabic-speaking local population of the Western Sahara.

As Sanmao's first book, *Stories of the Sahara* remains her most well-known work. It is widely read by audiences from Taiwan, Mainland China, and Hong Kong. Readers remember Sanmao as a woman passionate about life's small wonders and compassionate towards the people around her. As many of her later publications are also about her experiences abroad, this book marks the beginning of Sanmao's travel writing. As a writer who was constantly on the move, she lived first-hand and introduced readers to a life that was novel for numerous readers in Taiwan and Mainland China, who at the time

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<sup>5</sup> The Western Sahara is a disputed territory occupied by the Kingdom of Morocco today. It was occupied and ruled by Spain between 1884 and 1975. Spain abandoned the Western Sahara on Nov. 14, 1975 due to the pressure from the United Nations, Morocco, Mauritania, and the Polisario Front. For a discussion of the history of Spanish Sahara, see Besenyő János, "Western-Sahara under the Spanish Empire."

when the book was first published, knew very little about foreign countries.

Like most travel writing,<sup>6</sup> *Stories of the Sahara* is a book about cultural exchanges and clashes. The area Sanmao lived in was a colony under the control of the Spanish government, but the local Sahrawi people had their own distinctively different cultural traditions. In addition, Sanmao herself was from yet another culture. The exchanges she encountered included learning the food habits, customs, religious practices, and legal issues of other cultures. Inevitably, misunderstandings originated from the cultural differences. As Sanmao was constantly negotiating the coexistence of cultures, *Stories of the Sahara* presents opportunities for the study of intercultural communications. As this writing took place during the time of Spanish colonization, the book reflects a version of the history of this particular colony in the Western Sahara seen by a writer who is an outsider to both the colonizing and colonized cultures.<sup>7</sup>

Critical studies on *Stories of the Sahara*, along with Sanmao's other travel narratives, can be divided into two periods. The first period is from 1980 to 1991, the year Sanmao passed away. The second period is from 1992 to the present. In the first period, critical discussions focus on the popularity of Sanmao's work in both Taiwan and Mainland China. In "Taiwan nv zuojia Sanmao chuanguo jianlun" ("A Brief Analysis of Taiwanese Female Author Sanmao's Works") (1983), Zhang Moyun proposes four features in *Stories of the Sahara*: novel content, interesting characters, true feelings, and humorous language (116). Bai Xiangxin, on the other hand, analyzes the strong sense of

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<sup>6</sup> Travel writing is defined by Carl Thompson as writings about "the negotiation between self and other that is brought about by movement in space" (9). For a more detailed discussion on its definition, see Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (2011), especially Chapter 2. Travel writing has been studied in many disciplines, including literary studies, women's studies, anthropology, sociology, history, and geography. See Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, edited volume titled, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002), especially "Introduction" and Chapter 15.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of reading Sanmao's works as history, see Miriam Lang, "San Mao Makes History."

national identity in Sanmao's work in "Luelun Sanmao zuopin de yishu tese" ("A Brief Analysis of Sanmao's Writing Technique") (1987) (21). In "Yedi li de jingji: Sanmao fengge tan" ("Thistles in the Wild: Sanmao's Style") (1986), Lu Weiqing approaches Sanmao's writing from the perspective of reading her work as a negotiation between the East and the West (90). The study of the work of these three critics represents the major readings of Sanmao in the first period.

At the beginning of the second period, scholars turn to analyze Sanmao's state of mind when she writes her travelogues. The discussion revolves around nomadism as numerous critics view Sanmao as a nomad in constant search of a spiritual home (Xu et al.). Other critics discuss the question of genre of Sanmao's writing, with some favoring reading her work as novel (Wang 46). Another approach in studying Sanmao's travel writing during this period is to research the reception of her work and study how her texts travel in Chinese-speaking communities (Zhang 11). The study of Sanmao's travel writing, *Stories of the Sahara* in particular, remains the center of scholarly attention. Her other writings, the play script *Gungun hongchen (Red Dust)* (1990), letters, and her translations from English and Spanish into Chinese, have been rarely addressed by critics. While this critical tendency highlights the popularity of her travel narratives, it also shows the limitations of the extant criticism on her work.

As Zhou Qianqian confirms in "A Summary of Research on Sanmao in Mainland China" (2012), it is commonly acknowledged today that *Stories of the Sahara* is a travel narrative (89). Why in mid-1990s, then, do critics question the genre of *Stories of the Sahara*? The answer lies in the fictional elements in travel writing. A careful reading of the book's title provides an approximation as to how the author makes sense of her

experiences in the Sahara Desert. In the Chinese text, Sanmao uses *gushi*<sup>8</sup> “story” to label her accounts. *Gushi* is an ambiguous term that can be understood as a real or unreal account. Thus, the title invites the reader to consider these texts as fiction or non-fiction and calls attention to the degree of reality in Sanmao’s writing. While Sanmao states in her interview “Redai de gangye” (“Tropical Harbor at Night”) (1983) with *Nanyang Business Daily* that her writings are based on facts and are autobiographical, she also mentions that authenticity can be sacrificed to produce better works (74-75). Thus, readers should not expect to read nothing but truth. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson put it, “[W]hen one is both the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative, as in life writing, the truth of the narrative becomes undecidable; it can be neither fully verified nor fully discredited” (15-16). The ambiguity of “story” exemplifies the “undecidable” quality of truth in life writing,<sup>9</sup> as it indicates that the line between fiction and reality is anything but precise, for the everyday new experiences in the Desert can be disorienting. Sanmao’s work then calls attention to the literary and fictional qualities of travel writing.

Each text in *Stories of the Sahara* has a different theme and features one aspect of life in the Desert. Most texts tell usually banal experiences from a different light. The assortment of novel experiences often poses challenges to Sanmao, a newcomer who often manages to find a way to overcome the challenges or reconcile with local conditions. The three texts I translate in this project are cases in point. They are “On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert”, “Nice Neighbors”, and “Jacob’s Ladder”. In “Jacob’s

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<sup>8</sup> Instances of Chinese in this paper are transcribed according to *pinyin*, the official phonetic system for transcribing the Mandarin pronunciations of Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet in both P.R. China and Taiwan.

<sup>9</sup> *Stories of the Sahara* fits with Smith and Watson’s definition of life writing, which is “a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical” (4). For a discussion of autobiographical truth in life writing, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Life Narrative: Definition and Distinctions,” in their *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010).

Ladder,” for instance, Sanmao recounts how she passes her driving test by conquering the language barrier and her anxiety about taking tests. She also tells anecdotes about Spanish traffic police and prisoners as audiences for driving tests in this text, which place the tests in the new context of the coexistence between people from different cultural backgrounds. Apart from presenting novel experiences, these three texts display some of the most distinctive characteristics in Sanmao’s writing: humor, intertextuality, and beliefs in equality and love.

Each of the three stories has a humorous tone. In “On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert,” for example, by presenting a girl who is alleged to be dying and Sanmao’s simple prescription of multivitamin caplets and mutton soup, humor develops from the contrast between a seemingly critical condition and an easy solution, especially for a Western reader. Humor is sometimes conveyed by proverbs, idioms, and quotations from classical Chinese poems. One example of intertextuality can be found in “Jacob’s Ladder,” which includes a quote from Li Shangyin (813-58) – “A moment that ought to last forever, has come and gone before I knew it” – to describe Sanmao’s temporary amnesia when taking a test (*Sahala* 89). Li is famous for his allusive lines that are open to multiple interpretations, and this quote provides such an example of many possible readings. The verse of a ninth century poet in this new context produces a humorous effect, which will be further explained in the third section, “Language and Translation in Sanmao’s Travel Writing.” The welcoming of the lines of a classical Chinese poem speaks to the influence this literature has on Sanmao’s writing. Despite her relocation to a place thousands of miles from home, she is still anchored to Chinese culture via literature.

The three texts I translate also address themes of equality and love. In “On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert” and “Nice Neighbors,” the narrator uses her limited supply of medicine and daily necessities, which are expensive and rare in the Desert, to help the local Sahrawi people. She provides medicine and classes to Sahrawi women, and lends daily necessities to her neighbors who do not seem to be grateful to her. She treats the colonized Sahrawi people as equally as she treats the Spanish colonizers, if not better. She shows tremendous love and tolerance towards the locals. Sanmao also views prisoners on an equal footing, and sends them soda and cigarettes after she passes her driving tests, as depicted in “Jacob’s Ladder.”

The themes of equality and love in Sanmao’s work, along with many other features of her writing, have motivated me to translate her texts into English. First, my interest in making Sanmao accessible to Anglophone readers stems from my personal preference for her works. I am humbled and moved by her courageousness in coping with challenges and her sincerity in communicating with people of different cultures, genders, ages, and social statuses. I am also attracted to her love for freedom and insistence on equality. In my translation I strive for these qualities, which are also valued in U.S. culture, to shine. Sanmao writes *Stories of the Sahara* in Chinese, but aspects of her ideas and virtues are universally cherished. Moreover, in translating Sanmao, I hope to introduce aspects of Chinese culture to U.S. readers and promote cultural understanding. There has been a growing interest in the Chinese language and culture in the United States (Chen, Wang, and Cai x), but there are many U.S. readers who have a very vague idea of China and find it mysterious or only know a little about Chinese economy and politics. In reading Sanmao, U.S. readers can access classical Chinese poems and traditional arts of healing,



among many other facets of the culture that are present in her work, and all the while have a hearty laugh over the humorous stories. Additionally, the three cultures at play in *Stories of the Sahara* heighten the translational nature of the text as Sanmao's readers experience Chinese culture and see abroad from abroad. In translating Sanmao, I aim to bring the constant negotiations of her linguistic and cultural situation to the surface, and try to remind the reader of the three cultures from which she writes.

*Stories of the Sahara* was translated into Japanese in 1991, but this translation, fraught with redundant words and unclear meanings, is not well received in Japan (Fujimoto, "Japanese Translation"). Regrettably, none of Sanmao's work has been translated into English in book form.<sup>10</sup> Among the few pieces of her writing that have been translated, her lyrics to the song "Ganlan shu" ("Olive Tree") have received the most attention. It is the theme song of the movie *Huanyan (Your Smiling Face)* (1979) directed by Tu Zhongxun. The search for the "Olive Tree" in a faraway place repeatedly mentioned in this song inspires the audience to dream and to pursue freedom. The song is frequently performed in concerts and galas by several Chinese singers to this day. Sanmao is a hidden gem yet to be discovered by English-speaking audiences.

## II. Sanmao: "Free as Air"

Sanmao was a Taiwanese writer and translator. She was born in Chongqing, a city on Mainland China, and relocated to Taiwan with her whole family at the age of five. Her works mainly consist of autobiographical travelogues, reflective essays, correspondence

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<sup>10</sup> Excerpts of her writing have been translated into English, French, Japanese, Spanish and 11 other languages. The translations were published in issues of *Reader's Digest*. After her death, the copyrights of her works belong to her younger brother, Chen Jie. A monument was put up in the cemetery in Santa Cruz in La Palma to commemorate Sanmao and José María Quero in 2013.

with her readers,<sup>11</sup> a film script,<sup>12</sup> and translations.<sup>13</sup> Sanmao traveled to 59 countries in 23 years. Her rich travel experiences have led the renowned Taiwanese poet Yaxian (1932– ) to call her “Odysseus in a dress” (4). Sanmao had an impressive amount of publications with more than five million characters of travel narratives.

In 1955, after being humiliated by a mathematics teacher who suspected Sanmao of cheating on her exams and drew two circles around her eyes with ink, Sanmao suffered from depression and quit middle school.<sup>14</sup> Sanmao’s father then taught her classical Chinese and English at home.<sup>15</sup> In 1964, she began studying in the Department of Philosophy at Chinese Culture University. During her time at the university, Sanmao began publishing essays and short stories in journals. These short pieces were later put together and published in her second book, *Yuji buzai lai (The Rainy Season Will No Longer Return)* (1976). The style of these pieces varies considerably from her other works, for at that time Sanmao was a sentimental girl who liked to write about a sense of loss and longing.

In 1967, Sanmao suspended her schooling in Taiwan and went abroad to study at the Complutense University in Madrid. This experience marks the beginning of her negotiation between cultures as she started to travel extensively to non-Chinese speaking

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<sup>11</sup> *Tanxin (Intimate Conversations)* (1985) and *Qin'ai de Sanmao (Dear Sanmao)* (1991) are collections of letters between Sanmao and her readers.

<sup>12</sup> In 1990, Sanmao published a film script, *Red Dust*, which is her first attempt to write in the third-person.

<sup>13</sup> Sanmao translated four books in her lifetime. Two are translated from Spanish into Chinese: *Mafalda I* (1966; translated in 1980) and *Mafalda II* (1967; translated in 1980), and two are from English into Chinese: *Chingchuan Story* (published simultaneously with the Chinese translation in 1984) and *Song of Orchid Island* (published simultaneously with the Chinese translation in 1982).

<sup>14</sup> This was mentioned in Sanmao’s interview with her painting teacher Gu Fusheng. The interview was published *People’s Livelihood Newspaper* in Taiwan on September 15, 1981.

<sup>15</sup> In her teens, Sanmao also learned oil painting with Gu Fusheng (1935– ) and traditional Chinese painting with Shao Youxuan (1915 – 2009), both of whom are well-known painters in China.

countries. Later she learned German at the Goethe Institute in Germany. She then worked in the Albert E. Jenner, Jr. Library in the University of Illinois in the United States. These early encounters with Spanish, German, and U.S. cultures are recounted in “Xifeng bu shixiang” (“Insensible West Wind”) in *Daocaoren shouji (The Scarecrow’s Journal)* (1977), “Chujian Mengnalisha” (“My First Sight of Mona Lisa”) and “Zui kuaile de jiaoshi” (“The Most Entertaining Classroom”) in *Wo de kuaile tiantang (My Joyful Paradise)* (1993), and “Qingcheng” (“Enchanting the Entire City”), which is the title text of her travel narrative published in 1985. These pieces feature a young Sanmao who explores romance, different ways of learning, and new lifestyles abroad.

In 1973, Sanmao travelled to the Western Sahara, where she married her old friend from Spain, José María Quero y Ruíz.<sup>16</sup> During her time in the Sahara Desert, inspired by the local Sahrawi culture and people, Sanmao resumed writing after almost a decade’s break. While Sahrawi culture was not the first non-Chinese culture Sanmao encountered, it was the first one she wrote about. In describing her negotiations with Sahrawi and Spanish cultures in the Western Sahara, Sanmao began her journey of writing travel narratives and became a prolific writer. *Stories of the Sahara* and *Kuqi de luotuo (Weeping Camels)* (1977) tell her adventurous travelling experiences in the Desert. *Wenrou de ye (A Tender Night)* (1979) includes her experiences both in the Sahara Desert and on the Canary Islands, where she and José moved in early 1976 when wars broke out in the Western Sahara. These travel narratives show Sanmao’s passion for life and enthusiasm in learning about local cultures and picking up local languages. Her next book, *Beiyong (Silhouette from Behind)* (1981), is dedicated to recounting her life on the Canary

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<sup>16</sup> They became friends when Sanmao studied in Spain in 1967. Upon knowing that Sanmao wanted to travel to the Western Sahara and live there for some time, José sought and found employment in a mining company in the Western Sahara and arrived there two months before Sanmao did.

Islands, and spans the time before and after José's unexpected death in 1979 in a diving accident while working in La Palma. In the last few pieces of *Silhouette from Behind*, Sanmao begins recalling her time with José on the Islands, and she continues writing about the recollections in *Mengli hualuo zhiduoshao (Flowers Falling Unnoticed in Dreams)* (1981) with a sorrowful tone. Together these four travel narratives, *Stories of the Sahara*, *Weeping Camels*, *A Tender Night*, and *Silhouette from Behind*, become a moving account of the emotional rollercoaster Sanmao goes through in this period.

Overwhelmed by the tragedy of José's death, Sanmao left La Palma for Taiwan and stopped writing for almost a year. Then from November 1981 to May 1982, sponsored by *United Daily News*, she travelled to 12 countries in Central and South America. Accounts of this journey are collected in *Wanshui qianshan zou bian (I Have Walked Thousands of Miles)* (1982) and *Gaoyuan shang de baihehua (Lilies on the Plateau)* (1993). Sanmao bought an assortment of items during this journey, including a cross from Riobamba in Ecuador. This cross, along with 85 other items Sanmao purchased over the many years she travelled, is depicted in *My Babies* (1987). Her "babies" are reminders, both to herself and her readers, of the people of different nationalities she has encountered and the diverse cultures she has experienced.<sup>17</sup>

After Sanmao returned from Central and South America, she made public speeches about her writing and life experiences in Taiwan. These speeches, greatly aided by the popularity of Sanmao's books, triggered a "Sanmao Sensation" in Taiwan and Mainland China in the 1980s and the number of audiences attending a single public speech could

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<sup>17</sup> Apart from travel narratives, Sanmao's publications include two essay collections, *Song ni yipi ma (Giving You a Horse)* (1983) and *Suixiang (Random Thoughts)* (1985), in which she writes short essays on various topics like children, happiness, money, love, and friends. The posthumously published *Wo de linghun qi zai zhibei shang (My Soul Rides on Paper)* (2001) collects her letters to her family and her photographs. These personal letters, read as accompaniment to her writings, are of great interest to her avid readers.

amount to more than 6,000 (Shi et al. 243). Novelists, poets, and editors sing praise to her, and each offers a take on the attractiveness of Sanmao's works (Sima et al. 1-7). They compare Sanmao to a cloud which constantly changes its form, a flower that can survive in the desert, and an intriguing play from which readers can learn about the essence of life. These different readings of Sanmao and her works display the richness of her writing; readers find different features in her books that appeal to them.

Sanmao travelled to many places in pursuit of freedom, and she wanted to be "as free as air" (Yuji 203). Her responsibilities to her family and readers, on the other hand, bound her to live and to write. In the end, she chose to free herself from emotional and physical sufferings and finally became "as free as air." On January 4, 1991, she committed suicide with silk stockings while she was in the hospital. There are many suspicions as to why she would end her life this way. Many believe that it is related to her loss of loved ones earlier in her life.

### **III. Language and Translation in Sanmao's Travel Writing**

Most authors of travel narratives leave the culture they were born into, venture into unfamiliar cultures, meet people not speaking the travellers' mother tongue, and write about their travelling experiences in translation. Sanmao, as one of such authors, writes her travelogues almost exclusively in translation. She travels mostly to non-Chinese speaking countries and publishes all her travel narratives in Chinese.<sup>18</sup> No matter in which language she travels, she translates her experiences into her native language in

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<sup>18</sup> I refrain from claiming that Sanmao travels continuously in translation, as she has such a firm grasp of Spanish that she thinks and speaks the language like a native speaker. Sanmao tells that when she returns to Taiwan after her husband José's death, she sometimes talks to her mother in Spanish, forgetting that her mother cannot understand any Spanish (*Naoxue* 9).

writing. Translation and languages, I argue, play a central role in Sanmao's works and in the construction of her identity. The significance of language and translation in travel narratives is meticulously discussed by Michael Cronin (1960 – )<sup>19</sup> in his seminal work, *Across the Lines: Travel, Language, Translation* (2000). In this book, Cronin convincingly proposes that the traveller is a translator who moves cross cultures (2). He structures *Across the Lines* based on the three types of translation proposed by Roman Jakobson, interlingual translation, intralingual translation, and intersemiotic translation (233). In a similar vein, my discussion of language and translation in Sanmao's travel writing follows the first two types, interlingual translation and intralingual translation.<sup>20</sup>

When Sanmao first starts writing about her travel experience, she has less visibility as a translator in her text. “A Restaurant in the Desert” (initially titled “Chinese Restaurant”<sup>21</sup>) is Sanmao's first published piece of travel writing. In this text, there is a conversation between Sanmao and José in which she insists, “I'll stick to my old ways of doing things” after marriage, and José replies, “I want you to stick to your old ways of doing things” (*Sahala* 1). The source text for “stick to my old ways of doing things” is “我行我素,” literally meaning “I do I usual.” José's reply creates a humorous effect in the source text, as “我行我素” is a set phrase in which the pronoun “I” cannot be simply replaced by “you,” which is what José has done. The effect is similar to responding with “to your surprise” when someone says “to my surprise” in English. José sounds like a

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Cronin has published widely on issues concerning translation and travel, translation and identity, as well as translation and technology.

<sup>20</sup> Intersemiotic translation is not as prominent in Sanmao's travel narratives. Since Sanmao can often speak the language of the place she travels to, her senses that perceive smells, sights, or tastes become less acute than the travellers who do not speak the local language.

<sup>21</sup> Sanmao changes the title because she thinks the original one is not intriguing and does not have any suspense (*Mengli* 170).

non-native Chinese speaker who has not yet understood the basic rules of expression and makes a funny mistake in attempting to copy Sanmao's words in his response to her. At first, this conversation is misleading in the way that Sanmao and José seem to be conversing in Chinese. As one continues to read, however, we can deduce that they speak Spanish, José's native language rather than Sanmao's. We discover that José cannot even tell the difference between “人” and “入” when he reads them.<sup>22</sup> It is very unlikely then, that José can understand and borrow Sanmao's four-character set phrase (even though he changes it into a wrong expression), as it is a form of expression that suggests a rather advanced stage in learning Chinese. Sanmao also mentions that José's Chinese is so poor that she has to speak his language (*Sahala* 1). The use of a wrong set phrase uttered by José, even as it suggests that the speaker comes from a non-Chinese background, creates an illusion of linguistic transparency and masks the translated nature of the dialogue. This conversation happens in Spanish, but Sanmao presents it in a way that readers are led into believing that it happens in Chinese, especially with José's language mistake. One reason for this “manipulation” is that by employing the distinctive set phrase, Sanmao confirms her Chinese identity through language. Also, she needs the phrase to make a joke about a person who does not understand Chinese well and create the humorous effect for her Chinese readers.

Interlingual travel can be a lonely experience, which can be turned into a much more enjoyable one once the traveller has some understanding of the local language. This difference is conspicuous in Sanmao's travel writing. Sanmao decides to visit the Sahara Desert because she reads one issue of *National Geographic* that features the Sahara

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<sup>22</sup> The effect is similar to having a beginner in learning English who confuses “it” with “is,” which are basic words that look different to native speakers. As a person who confuses “it” with “is” is unlikely to understand English well, one who confuses “人” and “入” is also unlikely to understand Chinese well.

Desert, and she feels an inexplicable homesickness for this place, as if it was her home in her previous life (*Sahala* 97). When she first arrives in the Desert, she experiences culture shock and suffers from great solitude, which is revealed in her letters sent home. In a letter written on October 11, 1974, for example, Sanmao mentions twice that she is lonely and she misses home. She writes, “I hope I can return to Spain in December, and José also wants to visit his parents. The Africans here are not nice and I can’t make any friends” (*Wo de linghun* 110). In an interview with the journalist Gui Wenya, Sanmao mentions that at the beginning she even regrets going to the Desert, and the almost unbearably low quality of life and loneliness have caused a crisis in her marriage and she thinks about separating (*Yuji* 193). She is in despair. It is then that she starts to learn the local language, Hassaniya Arabic, and makes friends with her neighbors. In *Across the Lines*, Cronin states that, “Foreign language provides a stage, a space for the exploration of another self or of another element of self, depending on whether the writer has a unitary or fragmentary notion of self” (53). Sanmao discovers another (element of) self through speaking Hassaniya Arabic. She starts to care about her neighbors and closes the distance between them. She says, “I used to have no sympathy for their ignorance, and even thought the ignorance was good and hope it perpetuated, as for a sightseer, a more primitive view worth more sightseeing” (*Yuji* 195). As Sanmao becomes able to communicate with the local people and learn Sahrawi customs, she feels that she has become one of them, and when she thinks of China (Taiwan), she feels as if China became her home in her previous life (*Yuji* 196). Influenced by the attitude of local people, she explores a self that no longer seeks fame or wealth, but finds happiness in everything. This part of Sanmao remains with her long after she leaves the Desert, as



demonstrated by various existing accounts of her generosity and kindness towards friends and strangers.

The observation that speaking a new language, in this case Hassaniya Arabic, provides a space for Sanmao to explore “another self” and create a new identity can also find support in her travel narratives. We witness a dramatic change in attitude towards the local Sahrawi people between when she writes the letter quoted above and when she writes “On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert” and “Nice Neighbors.” In the letter, she simply refers to the local people as “The Africans,” which is a generalized term that displays Sanmao’s lack of interest in them. In “On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert,” she writes that, “most of our friends are local Sahrawi people” (*Sahala* 15), which shows Sanmao has come a long way from saying “The Africans here are not nice and I can’t make any friends” (*Wo de linghun* 110). Two forms of writing, letters and travel narratives, are compared here. The letter is considerably more private as it addresses Sanmao’s family members. Travel narratives, on the other hand, are accessible to any interested reader. Carl Thompson points out incisively that travel writing “usually offer[s] a carefully staged presentation of self” (119). It is therefore possible that Sanmao is more aware of her self-image in writing the travelogues and is more careful with her word choice.

Sanmao’s language suggests the change from an indifferent outsider to a caring neighbor appreciative of the local Sahrawi way of living. When her neighbor is about to deliver a baby and sends a little girl to ask for Sanmao’s help, the little girl can only tell Sanmao the pregnant woman’s name, as the girl “couldn’t speak any Spanish” (*Sahala* 16). Sanmao says to the girl, “Go and get her husband. Do you understand me?” (*Sahala*

16). The question “Do you understand me?” is ambiguous in this context, as Sanmao can be asking it because she speaks poor Arabic, or she speaks Spanish but the girl does not understand Spanish well, or they understand each other well and Sanmao is just asking because she is speaking to a little girl. While Sanmao fails to specify in which language they have this conversation, we can deduce from the context that they speak the little girl’s tongue, Hassaniya Arabic.<sup>23</sup> The girl cannot speak Spanish, and Sanmao possibly needs to verify if she is understood in Arabic. The inference that they use Arabic is further confirmed in “Sanmao: A Gambler in a Strange Land.” In this text Sanmao mentions that she has the experience discussed above when she has picked up some Arabic (*Yuji* 196). Offering help to a pregnant woman is one of the many cases in which Sanmao becomes involved in the lives of the locals with the aid of language. In this kind of emergency, there is hardly any time to find an interpreter, and the ability to communicate is vital to the outcome of the event. As a temporary resident in the Desert, Sanmao offers learning the local language as a gift to the host culture, which also enables her to establish close relationships with local people.

The ability to speak Hassaniya Arabic also provides Sanmao with what Cronin phrases as “an *autonomous* or independent relationship to translation” (76; emphasis in original). According to Cronin, a traveller has two communication options: hire an interpreter and “have an *heteronymous* or dependent relationship to translation,” or learn the local language and “have an *autonomous* or independent relationship to translation” (76; emphasis in original). In the second instance, the traveller is his or her own translator who can decide what to translate from the traveller’s native language. Sanmao chooses

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<sup>23</sup> Sanmao speaks either Hassaniya Arabic or Spanish with the local Sahrawi people. She describes the language barrier she encounters when she first lives in the Western Sahara, as she “cannot speak Arabic” and “very few local women can speak Spanish” (*Yuji* 156). The choices of language are limited to these two.

the second option and gains autonomy. This autonomy is crucial to any traveller who is aware of the possible manipulation in translation and would like to express ideas that are unlikely to be supported by potential translators. In “A Dumb Slave,” Sanmao recounts her experience of befriending a slave serving a rich local Sahrawi family who cannot hear and thus cannot speak. When Sanmao and José invite the slave to dinner, Sanmao “turned to the dumb slave, opened [her] mouth wider than usual, and spoke slowly in Hassaniya Arabic, ‘Sha – Hei – Bi’ (friend)” (*Kuqi* 209). In this text, Sanmao and José are the only two people other than the slave’s family who are nice to the slave and treat the slave as a human being equal to themselves. Their neighbors even develop some hostility towards them for having dinner with the slave. In this case, it is unlikely that Sanmao could find someone who is willing to translate “friend” into “Sha hei bi” for her. Sanmao translates for herself and avoids the possibility of any distortion of meaning by a translator. By learning how to say “friend” in Hassaniya Arabic, she has more control over the way in which she develops her relationships.

In “A Dumb Slave,” there are five instances of transcribing Hassaniya Arabic into Chinese, which is considerably more than the number of such transcriptions in *Stories of the Sahara*, with only one transcription throughout the book. “A Dumb Slave” is collected in Sanmao’s fourth book, *Weeping Camels*, and is her last book focused on her life in the Sahara Desert. By offering the transcription along with its meaning in Chinese, Sanmao becomes more visible as a translator in the text. By now her readers are more familiar with the desert life, and may be more receptive to lexical exoticism. Incorporating more transcriptions also suggests Sanmao has a better command of Hassaniya Arabic and feels comfortable to put its sound into writing. She is also more

comfortable in her relationship with writing amongst the different languages.

Transcription of Hassaniya Arabic words in “A Dumb Slave” introduces readers to a foreign climate, a climate in which slaves live in a deplorable state and are treated poorly. The first instance of transcription happens when Sanmao asks a little slave a question, and the little slave replies, “Ha ke! (it means right, yes)” (*Kuqi* 198). While what Sanmao says and what other people say in the same scene are not in Chinese, Sanmao only shows how the little slave sounds in Hassaniya Arabic, which is also the slave’s only recorded utterance. The slave’s reply is rendered more real, more significant, and more tangible in this transcription, and readers can imagine the scene with an obedient slave saying “yes” in Hassaniya Arabic to Sanmao. Another instance is Sanmao’s neighbor cursing a slave as a “Ha lu fo (Ha lu fo means pig)” (*Kuqi* 210). Readers are reminded by the exotic word that they are reading a text with a foreign setting and they pause in their reading, even if for a bit, and pay more attention to the locals’ discrimination against slaves.

Since there is a figure of a slave who is not able to communicate verbally in “A Dumb Slave,” translation between gestures and words abounds in this text. This type of intersemiotic translation explores the possibilities of human communication. Sanmao writes, “He (the dumb slave) turned to us, pointed to his heart, pointed to a bird, and made a gesture to fly. I understood that what he wanted to say is, ‘Even though my body is not free, my spirit is free’” (*Kuqi* 212). This example is similar to travel narratives describing the use of mime to get meanings across in interlingual travel in the sense that at least one party mimes because he or she cannot express their meanings verbally. People with or without the disability to speak can all resort to gestures, and sometimes the translation from gestures to words leaves a deeper impression than smooth verbal

communication. The message from the slave, for example, is repeated through the translation and leaves readers a more dynamic imprint. The translation process becomes visible and desirable.

In other instances, Sanmao uses untranslated words, because they are related to culture-specific items that have no equivalent in Chinese. A kind of food called “Gu si ge” (*Kuqi* 28), for example, is transcribed into Chinese without much explanation. Readers can infer it is food, as a plate of “Gu si ge” is served with tea. Another example is the word “Casta[ñ]uela,” which Sanmao keeps in Spanish in her text, and explains that it is a pair of castanets that people in Spain hold in their hands when dancing (*Kuqi* 136). While these untranslated words display differences across cultures, paradoxically, by bringing the words of other cultures together, as Cronin puts it, “the hope is that in this way the other culture should ‘speak to everyone’ in the target language” (43). A local word that appears in travel writing travels to other cultures and gains universal significance.

There are more cases of intra-textual translations in Sanmao’s travel narratives. Since Sanmao can speak many languages, she is sometimes featured as a translator. Her role as a translator can be central to the development of her narrative. The subtitle for one of her texts is “I Will be Able to Understand Chinese When Tomorrow Comes” (*Yuji* 146). This subtitle is intriguing and humorous, and readers would like to find out in what situation will a native Chinese speaker tell the blatant lie of not being able to speak Chinese for only one day. It turns out that an annoying friend of hers needs her to translate a business letter from Chinese into Spanish, and she gives the excuse to delay tending to the friend’s business. When she learns that the letter also concerns her interest, she immediately recovers the ability to read Chinese. Sanmao then plays another little

joke that again draws readers' attention to the role of translation:

“Read it out loud!” he urged me.

“Okay, I'll read it: To whom it is concerned ...”

“Read it in Spanish! Damn, this is killing me.” I've never seen Mr. Ai so anxious.

(*Yuji* 148)

Sanmao pretends not to understand what her friend means by “Read it out loud!” at first, which reminds readers that what follows is a Spanish translation of the Chinese letter, a detail that a careless reader might forget. The traveller-translator figure that actually does the translation job for others in the travel narrative is a curious echo of Sanmao as an author-translator. The echo effect is most conspicuous in this letter scene. Her Chinese text can very well be a back translation, a translation from what she interprets for her friend in Spanish, which is translated from Chinese.

To be able to translate the letter into Spanish and to understand what is in the letter becomes a pivotal moment in this text, as the letter brings a business opportunity that saves her friend's company. The eagerness to have the letter translated, the anxiety in listening to Sanmao interpreting the letter, and joy of understanding the letter, all point to the important role that translation plays in international trade.

In another text, “Qin bu qin, guxiang ren” (“Close or Not, The People of My Country”), Sanmao also needs to assume the role as a translator, but this time she chooses whose words she would like to translate. She recounts various unpleasant experiences with Chinese travellers, whose behaviors are so rude that Sanmao wants to write about them to remind other Chinese travellers not to behave in a similar way. Those tourists are travelling in Spain but cannot speak Spanish, thus need Sanmao's help as a translator. In

one incident, they get to a fruit stand, and the tourists pick fruits by pinching and squeezing them, and finally leave without buying anything. The vendor is furious and calls them “barbarians” (*Beiyong* 87), which Sanmao translates for those tourists. The tourists then want to curse back and start a quarrel, but Sanmao refuses to translate for them. Sanmao reasons that the vendor is only defending himself. On another occasion, Sanmao’s uncle visits her in Spain, and on a taxi ride, the taxi driver says to Sanmao that the modesty and gentleness of people from the East makes one feel very comfortable, and asks Sanmao to translate for him to her uncle. Her uncle replies in Chinese, “All people belong to one big family, and a friend afar brings a distant land near. So long as love exists between human beings, people with different origins are similar” (*Beiyong* 91). Sanmao comments that she is happy to be the interpreter in such a conversation.

The above two examples are simple, straightforward cases in which the translator speaks her mind and decides whether or not to translate, but there are many other more subtle or tricky situations in which a translator can have a much more difficult time making such a decision. Translation involves much more than language proficiency; it is also complicated by the ethics of the translator.<sup>24</sup> As Mona Baker (1953– ) observes in *Translational Conflict: A Narrative Account* (2006), “Consciously or otherwise, [translators and interpreters] translate texts and utterances that participate in creating, negotiating and contesting social reality” (105). Translators should be aware of and

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<sup>24</sup> Translation ethics has increasingly become a concern for scholars in translation studies. Lawrence Venuti discusses the criteria for an ethical translation in *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice* (2013). He proposes that the ethical translation “challenges the styles, genres, and discourses that have gained institutional authority” or “stimulates innovative thinking, research, and writing” (*Translation Changes* 185). This perspective shows opposition to a single dominant culture that excludes new knowledge, and correlates with Venuti’s advocacy for foreignizing translation in his earlier work, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (2008). Venuti argues that foreignizing translation can prevent a culture from becoming “exclusionary or narcissistic” (*Translator’s Invisibility* 20). Two other researchers, Mona Baker and Maria Tymoczko both draw attention the importance of developing an ethical sense for translators. Baker addresses one possible way of producing an ethical translation: to (re)frame the texts (111). Tymoczko, in *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (2006), offers concrete suggestions to approach translation ethics, like studying “how ethics and ideology figure in texts” (317).

responsible for the consequences that their texts may create.

In Sanmao's texts, she is not the only person capable of translation. Her husband from Spain, José, while not as good at language learning as Sanmao, can speak some French and English and a few Chinese words. On one occasion, Sanmao is seriously ill and in a fatal condition, and José:

knelt down beside the bed, so anxious that he almost cried. He kept calling [Sanmao] in Chinese, with the nickname that only [her] parents and older sister called [her] when [she] was little, "Meimei! Meimei! Meimei!" (*Sahala* 76)

Sanmao becomes dumbfounded when she hears José calling her "Meimei" (younger sister), and begins to call for her parents also in Chinese. This is the only time in the collection *Stories of the Sahara* that Sanmao specifies that José speaks Chinese, and the words have a great impact on Sanmao. In this emergency in which Sanmao may die, José chooses Sanmao's mother tongue, the language most intimate to her. Sanmao is immediately reminded of her family, and the fact that she is dying thousands of miles away from home becomes cruelly unbearable. By speaking Chinese, José also brings home to Sanmao, which can be comforting to the traveller. Sanmao eventually recovers.

José also knows how to use language to forge a closer relationship. When José first meets with Sanmao's parents on the Canary Islands, he finds it very hard to call her parents "Mom" and "Dad" as Chinese do.<sup>25</sup> But one day when the four of them are having dinner and Sanmao is chatting happily with her parents, José suddenly tells Sanmao that it is his turn to talk. Then José:

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<sup>25</sup> Instead of mother-in-law and father-in-law, Chinese call their spouse's parents mother and father, the same way they address their own parents.



said in his unnatural English, “Daddy, could you tell Echo<sup>26</sup> that I want to buy a motorcycle?” José had wanted to buy a motorcycle for a long time, but he needed [Sanmao’s] permission. When [Sanmao] heard what he said, [she] stood up, went into the washroom, covered [her] eyes with a towel, and couldn’t leave. (*Mengli* 135)

Sanmao explains that she cries because she is touched with how José calls her father “Daddy.” From “Dad” to “Daddy,” José strategically uses language to indicate his closeness, or at least, a willingness to be close to Sanmao’s family. He says “Daddy” for Sanmao’s father, but also for Sanmao to hear. In the end, José gets his motorcycle.

The conversation between José and Sanmao’s parents exists in translation, as all of them translate from their mother tongues into English. English serves as the common language without which their communication would still be possible, but would have to include Sanmao as a translator. If this were the case, José’s strategy of calling Sanmao’s father “Daddy” might not have worked so well. To gain autonomy in translation, in this case, helps José to present himself as being sincere in wanting to treat Sanmao’s father as his own father.

Interlingual communication can even happen between speakers of the same native language. In October 1986, seven years after José’s death, Sanmao sells their house on Gran Canaria, one of the Canary Islands, and flies back to Taiwan after she finishes dealing with all the business on the island. Instead of picking up Sanmao at the airport, Sanmao’s father writes her a letter in English, with “Dear daughter” in salutation and “Love” in closing (*Naoxue* 247). Sanmao has translated this English letter into Chinese in

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<sup>26</sup> Echo is Sanmao’s English name.

her book *Naoxue ji (Days Spent Studying)* (1988), thus the exact English wording is not clear. However, the reason for which Sanmao's father writes this letter in English is clear. While he loves Sanmao very much, it can still embarrass him to say "dear" or "love" to his daughter. It is rare for Chinese parents to express their love to their children; the parents show their love mostly by doing whatever they can to help the children. Sanmao's father also writes "I'm very proud of you" in the letter (*Naoxue* 247), which is again very uncommon for a Chinese parent to say, if not intended ironically.<sup>27</sup> Writing in English then becomes the solution to express the father's love and concern for Sanmao, as it is common to say these words and phrases in English-speaking culture. Moreover, as English is not their native language, it has an added distancing effect that brings a sense of euphemism in the communication, which further reduces the awkwardness of a Chinese father expressing his love. With the help of English, Sanmao's father assumes a new identity and he becomes able to convey his emotions more freely.

Beyond these examples of interlingual translation and intersemiotic translation, there are also cases of intralingual translation in Sanmao's travel writing. The following example, taken from "Xiaoyao qidao you" ("A Leisurely Wander on Seven Islands"), features intralingual translation with intra-textual translators. Sanmao recounts her experience on La Gomera Island, one of the Canary Islands. La Gomera Island has fewer tourist attractions compared to other islands and is much less prosperous, but Sanmao and José visit the place because the inhabitants of this island can communicate by whistling. Upon Sanmao's request, two fifty-year-old men "perform" whistling for her. Sanmao asks one of them to whistle the movements of sitting down, standing up, and dancing, and

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<sup>27</sup> Chinese parents are more expressive about their love for their children these days, but much less so in Sanmao's time.

by understanding what the whistle sounds mean, the other man does all the movements accordingly. Finally, Sanmao asks the man close to her to whistle the message “please go to the café” and “she wants to buy the other man a red wine” (*Kuqi* 139). Other people who can also understand this whistle message ask Sanmao to buy them a drink too. Whistling, as Sanmao learns from their conversation in the café, historically used to be the primary form of communication, and the local people began to talk to each other in Spanish only after police arrived from other places and banned communication by whistling, as it can be used to inform suspects of the police’s intention to arrest before the police arrive.

In this case Sanmao explores one more possibility of human communication, a whistled language that can transmit complicated messages. This language, Silbo Gomero,<sup>28</sup> a whistled register of Spanish, as Sanmao notes, came into being for the practical purpose of long-distance communication on the mountainous island, but since its ban of usage by the police, the younger generation cannot speak Silbo Gomero very well and the older generation is worried that it will become an endangered language (*Kuqi* 139). In the end, Sanmao laments that this island fails to attract tourists with its whistled language, and she believes that Silbo Gomero is “a treasure that can lift the island out of poverty” (*Kuqi* 139-40). Language, albeit one very different from those we commonly use in the way it is pronounced, is put in the spotlight in Sanmao’s text. The whistled language becomes a tourist attraction, and the translation process once again becomes visible and desirable. The intralingual translation from Spanish to Silbo Gomero is presented as a performance that has the potential of generating business profits.

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<sup>28</sup> Silbo Gomero was declared as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2009.

Other intralingual translations in Sanmao's texts involve Chinese dialects.<sup>29</sup> Sanmao's family is originally from Zhoushan City, Zhejiang Province, where the Zhoushan dialect is spoken. When Sanmao stays on Tenerife, one of the seven Canary Islands, one day she runs into a man who asks her in Mandarin if she is Sanmao. Sanmao replies yes very politely, and asks him if he is Chinese. Unexpectedly, the man looks embarrassed by Sanmao's politeness and sighs, "*Mang ji ta la*" (*Beiyong* 49) from the Zhoushan dialect. It means "You have forgotten" in this context, and if it were spoken in Mandarin, it would be "Wang diao le." Mandarin and the Zhoushan dialect are different to the extent that they are mutually unintelligible, but they both belong to the Chinese language, and speaking them on a foreign land immediately associates the speaker with a Chinese origin. What is significant here is that while most Chinese can speak Mandarin, normally only a person from that particular city such as Zhoushan, can speak the Zhoushan dialect. These four syllables, "*Mang ji ta la*," have an almost magical effect on Sanmao and she writes:

This one sentence from this man standing in front of me, blew open another world that I've lost touch with in a long time. The people and items in that world lit up like sparks in my mind. And I, had my eyes wide open and stared at the man, couldn't move nor speak, as if suffering from a pressure-point attack. (*Beiyong* 49)

With this sentence of Zhoushan dialect, Sanmao recognizes that the man is her cousin-in-law. The contrast between Mandarin and Zhoushan dialect is clear in this scene,

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<sup>29</sup> It is commonly acknowledged among scholars of Chinese linguistics that Chinese is an encompassing language name that includes all its dialects. Jerry Norman discusses the notion of a Chinese language existing in varied forms in *Chinese* (1988). According to Norman, "[Chinese] is made to serve at once for the archaic inscriptions of the oracle bones, the literary language of the Zhou dynasty sages, the language of Tang and Song poetry and the early vernacular language of the classical novels, as well as the modern language in both its standard and dialectal forms" (1). For a discussion of the reasons for using such an all-inclusive language name, see Jerry Norman, *Chinese*, especially Chapter 1 and Chapter 8.

as Sanmao is not as impressed when she hears Mandarin at first. We see an appreciation of intralingual differences. A language, in this case a regional dialect, indicates one's origin. With its particular variations that point to a small group of speakers, the dialect is identified with home, remote and precious to a long-time traveller like Sanmao. By conversing in the dialect, the traveller is transferred into a space that resembles home. Language, with its close relation to its speakers and culture, can be powerful in constructing a shared memory and evoking a sense of home.

Sanmao also writes about her intralingual travel experience to her hometown in Mainland China. She first arrives at Shanghai, then travels to Suzhou, Ningbo, and finally reaches Zhoushan. On this trip, while the dialects spoken in these four cities all belong to the Wu dialect group, each dialect has its own features that distinguish it from the dialect used in another city. Upon leaving Suzhou, Sanmao “says in the Wunong dialect, ‘Outside the moon is white, I want to take a look’” (*Wo de kuai* 85). Wunong dialect mainly refers to the dialect spoken in Suzhou. While in this sentence Sanmao has translated what she says into Mandarin, she keeps the expression “the moon is white,” which is not common in Mandarin. Sanmao uses this uncommon expression to draw readers' attention to the translated state of her conversation, stressing that she is travelling in this particular area of China that she can speak the dialect and identifies as home. When Sanmao travels to the Zhejiang Province, she changes her dialect again. She does not understand what her brother says, and:

asks in Ningbo dialect, “*Suo xi?*” In this trip, [Sanmao] changed from Shanghai dialect to Suzhou dialect, and then from Suzhou dialect to Ningbo dialect. In [her] mind, the view of mountains and rivers of the old country changes as [she] travel[s],

and the changes all lie in the language. (*Wo de kuai* 85-86)

“*Suo xi?*” means “What?” and is “Shenme?” in Mandarin. In this case Sanmao does not bother to translate and has the readers guess its meaning from the context. Instead of describing the scenery or architecture of the places she travels to, Sanmao marks out the differences in each city by its dialect. She is a linguistically sensitive traveller, and language is an important element in her texts. Readers do not know how different each place is or if there are perceptible differences in view in these places, but the dialect renders the uniqueness of each city palpable. The similarities in the Wu dialect group, on the other hand, serve as a constant reminder to the traveller that she is close to her hometown, and when she hears and speaks the Zhoushan dialect, she will have arrived at the destination.

The various examples of interlingual and intralingual translation in Sanmao’s writing point to infinite possibilities of communication in finite spaces. The multiple negotiations of translation and language, as discussed above, are crucial to Sanmao’s travel experience and the progression in her travel narratives.

#### **IV. Translating the Texture of Place**

Michael Cronin proposes the following analogy in *Across the Lines*, “If each translation is a journey, then no one translator ever gets to the target language by the same route” (105). Translators start the journey with interpreting and understanding the source text, which leads them onto different routes for translators as readers have different interpretations of a single text. Then as translators begin to render the text into their intended language and make specific translation choices, the roads each translator

takes diverge farther. The linguistic and cultural backgrounds of translators, as well as the ethical and political commitments they have, all contribute to influencing translation choices and shaping the translated text. This analogy applies well to my translation journey, in which I take a route that presents my understanding of Sanmao and shows my interest in drawing attention to the negotiation between cultures in travelogues. I interpret Sanmao as a courageous and loving woman who shines in the Sahara Desert, with her perseverance, her linguistic abilities, and her big heart.<sup>30</sup> I also focus on highlighting the exchanges among the three cultures, Chinese, Spanish, and Sahrawi that come into play in her texts. Rendering Sanmao's writing in English introduces a fourth dimension to my translated text, which further complicates the negotiation and interplay between languages and cultures. I take into consideration the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of my Anglophone U.S. readers when I make translation choices and endeavor to make my texts accessible to them.

In my translation process, I do not strive for equivalence, as linguistic and cultural differences suggest that a translation can never be identical with the source text. As André Lefevere (1945-96) points out in his article "Translating Literature/Translated Literature: The State of the Art" (1980), "optimal translation" does not exist, and a translation always displays both correspondence with and deviation from the source text

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<sup>30</sup> Yanning Wang discusses Chinese women's travel writing in Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and Qing dynasty (1644-1912) in *Reverie and Reality: Poetry on Travel by Late Imperial Chinese* (2014). Poems make up the majority of the writing. Wang Hui's, Li Yin's, and Shan Shili's travel poems are analyzed in Wang's book. Shan Shili (1863-1945), the wife of a diplomat, was an international traveller and published travel writing in both prose and verse. Her writing includes *Kuimou lxxing ji (Travelogue in 1903)* (1904), *Guiqian ji (Journals in Retirement)* (1981), and *Shouzishi shigao (Poem Drafts from Shouzi Studio)* (1985). For a discussion of Western women travel writing and their translations, see Alison E. Martin and Susan Pickford's edited volume *Travel Narratives in Translation, 1750-1830: Nationalism, Ideology, Gender* (2012), especially Chapter 8-10; Sara Mills's *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1991); and Indira Ghose's *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze* (1998).

(154).<sup>31</sup> No translation reads the same as the source text; they are different texts. My translation is then a text in English that show traces of my individual interpretations of Sanmao's writing.

#### A. Place

One challenge of translating travel narratives is to localize the story on a foreign land with multiple cultures while keeping the texts accessible to the intended readers. This is important for me, as one of my goals of translating the texts is to introduce Chinese, Spanish, and Sahrawi cultures to U.S. readers.

My translation choices in localization involve translating Chinese into Spanish and keeping Chinese characters in my text. In the first instance, Sanmao is trying to play dumb and get away from a traffic policeman who finds out she has been driving without a license. She writes:

It didn't look good for me, so I immediately shifted from Spanish to English and said, "I'm so sorry. I don't speak Spanish. What did you say?"

Hearing that I wasn't speaking his tongue, the policeman was dumbfounded.

"*Carnet! Carnet!*" He shouted.

"Don't know," I replied with embarrassment and made a helpless face. (*Sahala* 86)

Instead of its English equivalent "license," I translate "执照" into the Spanish word "carnet," because I want to draw readers' attention to the different languages spoken in this context. This conversation happens in Spanish, and Sanmao translates it into Chinese

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<sup>31</sup> Lefevere later develops his idea and argues that translation is a form of "refraction" or "rewriting" ("Literary Theory" 10; "Why Waste Our Time" 217). Translations, as Lefevere proposes, are refracted texts that aim to "adapt a given text to another audience" ("Literary Theory" 10). Translators are engaged in rewriting the source text to introduce the text to speakers of another language. "Refraction" and "rewriting" share the same meaning in Lefevere's arguments; "refraction" is used when he first develops the idea of translation as refraction in "Literary Theory and Translated Literature" (1982), but he opts for "rewriting" in later publications, as in "Why Wastes Our Time on Rewrites?" (1984).



in her text. By translating “执照” back into Spanish “carnet,” I emphasize Sanmao’s role as a translator and assume the same role as hers. “Driver’s license” has been mentioned a few times before this point, and will soon appear in a conversation in the same situation, which can be understood to refer to “carnet.” Also, many of the Anglophone readers in the U.S. understand some Spanish, but are for the most part familiar with U.S. Spanish or some variant of Spanish from the Americas at large, and not the Spanish from Spain. The word used in the United States, according to the Spanish version website of Department of Motor Vehicles in many states, is licencia, not carnet. I choose not to sacrifice the representation of the Spanish language and culture from Spain for transparency. After all, the Western Sahara was a Spanish colony, not a U.S. one.

In the next example, Sanmao describes the Chinese characters written by her instructor who is supposed to be teaching her traffic regulations. My translation reads:

On the second day, as soon as I walked into the classroom, my instructor handed me a notebook that read, “人人人天天天…”

He asked me humbly, “What do you think of my handwriting? Do my Chinese characters for human and sky look okay?” (*Sahala* 88)

“Partial translation” is deliberately adopted here not because “人人人天天天” is untranslatable (Catford 21). I could have easily translated “人” into “human.” However, since the characters are discussing handwriting and the meaning of the Chinese characters is not important in this context, retaining the source language would paradoxically seem to facilitate readers’ understanding of the translation. I also choose a font that shows that the characters are handwritten. In this process, I introduce characters, which are essential

to Chinese culture, to U.S. readers without much prospect of resistance.

“Carnet” and “人人人天天天” are examples of polyglossia, which bring readers’ attention to the different voices in the text. They serve as visual reminders of the text being a translation and operating across different languages and cultures. They also highlight the negotiation among cultures in Sanmao’s text.

### B. Material culture

In “Nice Neighbors,” Sanmao and José decide to add a section of a rooftop to the house. The architectural style in the Western Sahara is distinctly different from that in China and in the United States. This part thus presents difficulties in understanding both for translator and intended readers.

Sanmao first explains why she needs a new roof:

Literal translation: In the desert, in the middle of the house roof there is always empty space that does not make roof.

My translation: In the desert, there’s always part of a house that has no roof. What I’m trying to say is, the middle part of the roof is missing. (*Sahala* 56)

The literal translation is a long, confusing sentence that overloads communication. Eugene Nida (1941-2001), a Bible translation theorist who put forward a seminal distinction between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence, calls attention to communication overload in translation in *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964).<sup>32</sup> The literal translation is provided here to show the choices I have made to avoid communication overload.

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<sup>32</sup> Nida explains that, “Though normal language usage tends to center around 50 per cent redundancy, and thus provides a considerable ‘cushion’ against noise and misunderstanding and keeps fatigue at a reasonable level, a translation often tends to overload the channel of communication simply because of its foreign background and content” (132). The level of redundancy in a translation should be taken into consideration so as avoid communication overload.

While this sentence is not very long, breaking it in two can facilitate understanding, since short sentences require shorter memory retention, and allows me to incorporate redundancy and prevent overloading the message. I add information like “part of a house” and use “What I’m trying to say is” to add redundancy to my translation. With more explanation and a higher level of redundancy, the target text becomes more comprehensible.

In the next example, I change the direction of attribution and apply “right-to-left” (Nida 134) attribution to avoid communication overload:

Literal translation: Not long after, a new white translucent plastic plate roof again was built. José also made a half of a man tall wall to separate our rooftop from our neighbors’.

My translation: Soon a new roof made of white translucent plastic plates was built.

José also put up a wall about waist tall to separate our rooftop from our neighbors’.

*(Sahala 56)*

The literal translation follows the attribution in the source text, which has the order of what Nida calls “left-to-right (ie. from preceding to following word)” (134), as “roof” and “wall” are both put at the end of the structure and preceded by modifiers. Nida points out the potential drawback of this type of attribution, which is to cause the problem of memory retention (134). To solve this problem and lower the degree of communication load, I move up “roof” and place “wall” before its attribution. The most important information carried in these two sentences, “a new roof” and “José put up a wall” are highlighted, as they are put in front of each sentence.

## V. Translating Linguistic Aspects

### A. Idioms and verses

Sanmao's texts abound with idioms, partly because in both written and oral form, Chinese is a language that favors using idioms. Idioms can be difficult to translate, as many idioms are culturally loaded with rich meanings. In *Translation* (2014), Susan Bassnett affirms the difficulty in translating idioms: "It has always been obvious that not everything is translatable. The translation of idioms, proverbs, puns and other forms of wordplay are a good test of the untranslatable" (147).<sup>33</sup> Bassnett then proposes a functionalist approach to tackle this translation problem: "the translator has to create a text that will render for target readers the objective or purpose of the source text" (148). This approach opens up the possibility of rewriting the text to achieve an effect similar to the source text. In rewriting Sanmao's text, however, not only do I intend to recover Sanmao's objective in using the idioms, I would also like to introduce Chinese culture to Anglophone readers via the translation of idioms. Idioms, in their "untranslatable" state, can function to introduce the source culture. Bassnett's single consideration of "the purpose of the source text" in translating idioms is inadequate. Moreover, idioms with culture-specific associations are meant to be "untranslatable," if "translatable" means being able to find equivalents in the intended language. In "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign" (2000), Antoine Berman (1942-91) warns against using equivalents to translate idioms. This piece of advice concerns what Berman sees as "the properly ethical aim of the translating act," which is to "receive the Foreign as Foreign" (285-86). Using

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<sup>33</sup> Mona Baker puts forward similar views in *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (1992). She discusses four types of situations in which translating idioms present difficulties. In the first situation, she talks about culture-specific idioms and proposes that these idioms "[associated] with culture-specific contexts can make it untranslatable or difficult to translate" (68).

equivalents to translate idioms risks assimilating the “Foreign” culture to the intended culture and effacing the differences across cultures.

In translating the idioms and verses, I start with identifying their meanings when they were first recorded in written texts or when they were composed, and track the changes in their interpretation or usage. In this process I gain a good understanding of the culture associations with the idiom or verse. Then I interpret the expressions and lines as they appear in Sanmao’s texts, and ask what purpose she wants to achieve by using each idiom or verse.

Chinese idioms have a variety of forms. In *Cihai*, a semi-encyclopedia Chinese dictionary, idiom is defined as set phrases or sentences, whose structures are fixed and usually should not be changed, including four-character set phrases, proverbs, maxims, common sayings, and two-part allegorical sayings (Xia 117). In most cases of idiom translation, deviation from the source language, especially in terms of form, is inevitable.

Four-character set phrases are literary expressions with structures and vocabulary of Classical Chinese. In most cases they come from or allude to events in classical texts. While formal or literary writings may include more set phrases, it is not uncommon to use them in daily conversations or informal or nonliterary texts. The meaning of some set phrases can be elusive to the general public, but some of them are so often used that they are as popular as common sayings. Sanmao employs many easy-to-understand set phrases in her narratives, which render her description more vivid and saves text space, as most set phrases consist of only four characters.

The title of “On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert” is a set phrase: “悬壶济世,” literally meaning “hang gourd help world” (*Sahala* 13). The first two characters “悬壶”

mean to hang a gourd, which refer to practicing medicine, as doctors once used gourds as their medical bags in ancient China. The phrase indicates a humanitarian spirit, for “world” includes everyone. A more literal translation of this phrase is “practice medicine to help people in the world.” My initial translation of this title follows very closely with the literal meaning: “Practice Medicine to Help the World,” however, this title has many limitations. It reads like a call for action, and the word “World” can be puzzling, as the setting of this text is in the Sahara Desert, and that is precisely what I would like to call attention to as I introduce Sanmao to Anglophone readers. Also, “Practice Medicine” is too formal and does not suit Sanmao’s role well, since she is not a professional doctor with a license. In revising my work, I question the purpose Sanmao wants to achieve with the title and what essential information is conveyed in “悬壶济世.” The Chinese title sums up what Sanmao does in the text, which is helping people like a doctor. Thus I decide to retain “doctor.” “World” is replaced by “Desert,” which is more relevant to the setting and more intriguing, as desert evokes a sense of unfamiliarity and seemingly infinite possibilities for many people. “Desert,” with its focus on place, is crucial to the development of narration, for Sanmao’s experiences as a doctor are made possible only because she is in the Sahara Desert and the experiences cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world. The title finally settles on “On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert,” which emphasizes the trial and error in Sanmao’s experience, a process with no finality, and has a touch of humor that is consistent with the tone of the text. It also displays that translation does not only involve finding equivalents.

Another example of the set phrases is to describe how effective her medicine works for Sahrawi people. In “On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert,” Sanmao explains how she

becomes a doctor in the Sahara Desert, and one reason is that most people whom she has given medicine to recover soon. She employs the set phrase “药到病除,” literally meaning “medicine arrive disease remove” (*Sahala* 13), which means as soon as the patient takes the pill, the symptom vanishes. The phrase creates an exaggerated tone in the text, and the translation I offer in the last sentence seems too wordy. Thus I use “The medicine worked like a charm” to achieve the purpose intended in the phrase “药到病除.” This sentence is simple in structure and conveys a sense of exaggeration.

Sanmao also uses proverbs in her travel narratives. While it is true that in many cultures proverbs are an oral form of expression that does not find its way into literature, this is not the case in Chinese.<sup>34</sup> Liu Xie (ca. 465-522) writes in *Wenxin diaolong* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) (501) translated into English by Vincent Shih in 1959, which is the first systematic work of literary criticism and the first work on aesthetics in China: “If ... works from the hands of the sages, quote proverbs which, as literary expressions, are the most vulgar<sup>35</sup> imaginable, how can one overlook [the proverbs]?” (153). This shows that using proverbs in texts has a long history in Chinese literature, and proverbs still play an important role in modern writing. In Chinese idioms, proverbs differ from common sayings in that proverbs are often complete sentences with the purpose of advising or warning. Many proverbs originate from shared experiences, myths, history, religions, and classic works, thus a literal translation of proverbs into another culture may not make sense.

In “Jacob’s Ladder,” Sanmao uses a proverb to remind herself not to make a careless

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<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of the usage and tradition of proverbs in Chinese, see John S. Rohsenow, “Proverbs,” in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (2001), 149-59.

<sup>35</sup> Chinese distinguishes between written language and colloquial language. The written language is considered elegant while the colloquial one is considered vulgar.

mistake again. The proverb is “大意失荆州,” literally meaning “carelessness lose Jingzhou” (*Sahala* 94).<sup>36</sup> Transposing the proverb to “Carelessness would lead to failure” can get the meaning across, but the cultural connotation is lost in this version. I decide to stealth gloss<sup>37</sup> and provide historical background. My translation reads, “Inattentiveness had led Guan Yu, the great general in Eastern Han dynasty, to lose three strategically important counties in Jingzhou Province, which partially led to the downfall of his kingdom.” In translating this proverb, I face a problem similar to the one that many translators of Chinese poems also encounter: the source text is syntactically unspecific, leaving readers to fill in the sentence subjects and context. Since the majority of my intended audience will not be able to fill in the gaps, I interpret the source text and add the information for them. I also choose not to footnote the proverb because the footnote would interrupt the flow of the narrative. In “Footnotes sans frontières: Translation and Textual Scholarship” (2014), the literary translator and critic Esther Allen (1962- ) writes about the opposition to footnotes in contemporary works in Anglophone culture (216). As she observes, “Nuances of meaning, sources and additional contextualization are to be worked into the translation itself via a literary virtuosity” (217). In this process, translators rewrite the source text with their linguistic and cultural skills to help their intended readers understand the text. Since my intended audiences are English-speaking U.S. readers, I need to take into consideration the accepted practice of excluding footnotes.

Compared to four-character set phrases and proverbs, common sayings are freer in

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<sup>36</sup> Jingzhou was one of the nine provinces in ancient China.

<sup>37</sup> In “Choosing an English for Hindi,” Jason Grunebaum introduces how he uses “stealth gloss” to “sneak a definition of the word or phrase into the English text” (158).



forms and more colloquial. There is no restriction on the number of characters and often they do not consist of complete sentences.

The vivid common sayings in Sanmao's writing render the texts more readable and humorous. At the end of "Jacob's Ladder," Sanmao has one more encounter with the Spanish traffic police, who have been trying to catch her in an illegal act. Again Sanmao outwits the two policemen who seem not to be very smart. Sanmao describes this experience as "官兵捉强盗," literally meaning "officer soldier capture robber" (*Sahala* 96). The use of this common saying suggests that Sanmao does not take the police very seriously. In order to highlight Sanmao's good humor in this situation, I translate the common saying into "In this game of 'cops and robbers.'" Compared to a more literal translation of "In the event of the police capturing the robbers," my translation conveys a sense of lightheartedness that shows Sanmao's courage and the ease with which she moves across languages and cultures. Moreover, it points to her lack of seriousness regarding the situation that she drives around without a license.

Idioms are not the only loaded expression with cultural connotations in Sanmao's texts. Verses pose another challenge, a bigger one in most cases, as verses are more open to interpretation and often have several layers of meaning, which can make them difficult to comprehend in the source language. Verses are a good case of "the impossibility of determining a 'pure' meaning behind words" (Bassnett 64). My method is to focus on the semantic context in Sanmao's texts and to translate, or to transform the verses so that they are also meaningful in the translated text.

In "Jacob's Ladder," Sanmao quotes from a classical Chinese poem to describe her temporary amnesia during tests when she is too nervous. The poem is written by Li

Shangyin (813-58), who is most famous for his dense and allusive poems. This quote comes from Li's "Jin Se," which is his most well-known and cryptic poem. The enigmatic nature of "Jin Se" is immediately revealed by its title, which is taken from the first two characters in the poem, a Chinese convention used when the poet does not want to give a title. It is essentially one of Li's many "no title" poems, which all hide the gist of the poems by not offering a title. She quotes the last two lines from the poem and writes:

Source Text: 这叫——此情可待成追忆，只是当时已惘然也。 (*Sahala* 89)

Crib: This called – this feeling how could wait to look back, only then already sense of loss and longing.

My translation: It reminded me of lines by the great ninth-century poet Li Shangyin – “A moment that ought to last forever/ has come and gone before I knew it.”

A literal translation would not fit into the context of “Jacob’s Ladder.” Instead of using “feeling” which directly corresponds to “情,” I choose “moment,” as it is not the nervous feeling that Sanmao misses in the story. Rather, she regrets missing the moment to write her exam paper. The essence of the quotation is to express Sanmao’s regret and the passage of time, which I make sure to convey in my translation. My interpretation is based on how Sanmao adds “this is called” right before the quote, which suggests that the verses repeat the meaning of the previous sentence, “I would come to my senses later, but my mind would go blank in the moment that mattered.”

This poem “Jin Se,” as other “no title” works, is open to multiple interpretations. Readers cannot identify with certainty what the “feeling” is about. The general sense is that the “feeling” is related to something very important in life. There are speculations of

this poem being about the loss of Li's wife, the love between him and his maid, his unsuccessful career, and corrupt politics. Here Sanmao uses lines that reflect on critical issues or relationships to refer to her test. The contrast between their significance creates a humorous effect. Considering this contrast, I use "ought to last forever" to add significance to the "moment." My translation shows a large degree of departure from a literal translation, but such a decision is inevitable as I strive to convey my understanding of the essence of the quote in this particular text. As Susan Bernofsky puts it, "In the end, all translation is transformation. It just isn't possible for a text to work in its new language and context in exactly the same way it worked in the original" (233). A translator acts as a mediator moving across languages and cultures in this transformation process, and retains, removes, as well as incorporates elements that help a text work in the intended language. In my transformation of the source text, I add the poet's background information in the translated text to inform readers of the source of this quote and to show how Sanmao's writing is rooted in Chinese culture.

### B. Metaphors

Metaphors, with their roots in cultures, as well as shared life experiences and imaginings, often call for more deliberations when translated into another culture.

M. B. Dagut discusses the translatability of metaphors in "Can 'Metaphor' Be Translated" (1976) and proposes that when the experience metaphors draw is shared by the intended readers, they are easier to translate (32). This point of view finds support in my translation: "extreme thirst and intense heat had already started torturing me like wild dogs." Since feeling thirsty and hot is a common experience, the metaphor is relatively easy to translate. It is translated "sensu stricto" (77), which is one metaphor translation

strategy put forward by Raymond Van Den Broeck (1932-2011)<sup>38</sup> in “The Limits of Translatability Exemplified by Metaphor Translation” (1978). In this article Van Den Broeck proposes three strategies to translate metaphors: translation “sensu stricto,” substitution, and paraphrase (77). The degree of deviation from the source text increases from the first to the last.

One metaphor in the source text is particularly difficult to translate and I finally decide to employ the third strategy — paraphrase. My translation reads:

When the instructor released me from the time machine that traveled back five thousand years in Chinese history, it was as dark as a night could be. (*Sahala* 88)

In contrast with my initial translation: When the instructor released me from the five thousand years of “time tunnel,” it was as dark as a night could be.

In this example, I paraphrase by using a non-metaphorical expression which would serve more like an explanation of the metaphor. In translating the metaphor, I need an expression that relates time to a place or an object that a person can be released from, so “time machine,” which is commonly imagined in Anglophone culture, becomes my best choice. The great time-span indicated in the “time tunnel” metaphor is then compensated by the commentary “that traveled back five thousand years in Chinese history.”

It is also an example of how some metaphors are “concepts we live by” (Lakoff, and Johnson 3). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their seminal book *Metaphors We Live By* (2003), provide linguistic examples to show that people think metaphorically, and metaphors play a central role in linguistics and philosophy.

The “we” in “concepts we live by” refers to the Chinese-speaking people that are so

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<sup>38</sup> Raymond Van Den Broeck is one of the founding theorists of translation studies. One of his contributions is a reevaluation of the concept of equivalence based on functional relevance, which challenges the traditional thinking on equation.

accustomed to the metaphor of time as tunnel and would say “穿过时间,” which means “to pass through time.” The high degree of familiarity of this metaphor leads me to overlook the fact that I am translating a metaphor and presume it will also be a common expression in English. After one of my readers pointed out the elusiveness of “time tunnel,” I reworked this metaphor and made the translation choice discussed above.

### C. Puns

Puns, like idioms, poetry, and metaphors, can be very difficult to translate. Puns are often a word with multiple meanings or different words with a similar sound. Thus they are specific to one language and the punning effect can be easily lost in a different language.

In one instance Sanmao plays with homophones. She uses “魔王” (pinyin pronunciation: mo wang; literally meaning “devil king”) to refer to the King of Morocco. The first character of “Morocco” in Chinese is “摩” (pronunciation: mo), which sounds the same as the first character in “魔王” but is not related to devil. My translation reads:

I had been telling myself last week that before the King of Morocco, King Hassan, came to the Spanish Sahara for tea, I wanted to climb to the top of Jacob’s Ladder.

Now I had reached the top, yet the Monster Lord has not come.

I choose “monster” to suggest the evil character of the King. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the collocation of “monster lord” is listed as an example. Also, the first two letters in “monster” and “Morocco” are the same. Then I capitalize the “M” in “monster,” hoping to draw attention to the connection between “Morocco” and “Monster.” The punning effect is still not as obvious as in the source language, but the translation process is a search that highlights the differences in meanings and sounds across languages.

## CHAPTER 2

### BRAVE SANMAO:

#### TRANSLATING CHINESE NARRATIVES OF THE SAHARA DESERT

##### I. On Becoming a Doctor in the Desert

I'm the type of person that doesn't like to go to the doctor when I'm sick. That is not to say that I'm rarely ill. On the contrary, I get sick so often that I simply get too lazy to go. For a long time now wherever I go, I take a black medicine bag along as if it's my baby. By now I have some experience treating minor ailments.

When traveling in the Sahara Desert last year, I cured an old Sahrawi woman of her headache with two aspirins. Ever since then, people have been coming to my tent with their kids or elders asking for medicine. At that time, I only dared to give them simple things like mercurochrome solution, antiphlogistine, and aspirin, but even these produced dramatic effects on the nomads who were cut off from modern civilization. Before returning to the small town of El Aaiún, I gave all my food and medicine to the poor tent-dwelling Sahrawi people.

Not long after I was back in El Aaiún, one of my African neighbors came to me asking for an aspirin for her headache. I knew there was a public hospital in town, so I suggested she go there for treatment. To my surprise, all the women were just like me and wouldn't go to the hospital when they were sick. But their reason was not mine. All the doctors were male, and veiled women would rather die than have male doctors treat them. I had no choice but to give my neighbor the two aspirin. From then on, the news spread, and the women in my neighborhood often came to me to treat their illnesses. What

delighted them even more was that apart from medicine, I also gave them some Western clothes, which helped me become even more popular. I figured that, since they would rather die than see a doctor, if it was only minor illnesses that they were suffering from, there was no harm in helping them out. Giving them medicine killed two birds with one stone, alleviating their pain and my own feelings of loneliness. I also noticed at the same time that eight out of ten women and children whom I'd given medicine to recovered. The medicine worked like a charm. By and by I gained confidence, and I even made some house calls. My husband José saw how I treated the patients like play dolls and became worried about me. He felt that I was just acting recklessly. What he didn't know was that I did this out of love.

My neighbor Guka was ten years old and about to get married. Half a month before the wedding, a red, swollen boil began to grow on the inside of her leg. During my first home visit, the boil was just the size of a coin. It felt hard and there was no pus. The swelling caused the surface to glisten. Two of her lymph nodes had swollen up into bulging lumps. When I went to see her the next day, the boil on her leg was about the size of a walnut. It pained the girl so much that all she could do was lie on the worn out mattress on the floor and moan. I said to her mother, "We have to get her to a doctor!" To which her mother replied determinedly, "No! Her leg should never be seen by a doctor, especially not when she's about to get married!" I had no choice but to keep giving her antiphlogistine. It went on for three or four days, but the girl was not getting any better. This time, I asked her father. "Can we take her to a doctor?" The answer was the same. "No, no," her father said.

It occurred to me that I had some soybeans at home. I was at my wit's end and

decided, why not use an old Chinese prescription to treat an African woman? So I went home to grind up the soybeans. José saw me in the kitchen and asked, “What’s for dinner?” I replied, “I’m just making Chinese medicine for Guka.” He was silent for a moment, then asked, “Why soybeans?” “It’s a traditional method I learned from a Chinese medical volume.” Hearing this, he responded disapprovingly, “I can’t believe these women would rather put their trust in you than in a doctor. Don’t get too involved.”

I poured mashed soybeans into a small bowl. Mumbling to myself, “I’m an African sangoma,” I went over to Guka’s home. On that day I covered Guka’s swollen boil with mashed soybeans and bandaged it. On the second day, seeing that the boil was getting softer, I applied new soybeans to it. On the third day yellow pus began to appear under her skin. Then on the afternoon of the fourth day, a large amount of pus and a bit of blood oozed out. I applied some gentian violet solution and after a few days, Guka fully recovered. I told José very proudly when he came home from work.

“She’s cured!”

“By soybeans?”

“Yes.”

“You Chinese people are really a mystery.” He shook his head, bewildered.

One day my neighbor Hadiyetuo came to me. She said, “My cousin just got back from the desert and is staying in my place. She’s dying. Can you come and have a look?” Hearing that she was dying, I hesitated for a moment. “What does she have?” I asked Hadiyetuo.

“I don’t know. She’s very weak. She feels dizzy. She’s gradually losing her vision. She’s lost a lot of weight, she’s almost down to nothing.” I found her description vivid



and compelling. José overheard us from the next room and shouted to me impatiently, “Sanmao, could you come here for a moment?” I had to tell Hadiyetuo in a low voice, “I’ll be there once my husband goes to work.” The minute I closed the door, José began scolding me, “You’ll have to take full responsibility if the woman dies under your care. She is ill and yet refuses to see a trained doctor? She deserves to die!” “They don’t have much education and they’re poor,” I argued half-heartedly, knowing that what José said made sense. But I was just too curious and too bold to take his advice. As soon as José left home for work, I sneaked out.

When I arrived at Hadiyetuo’s, I saw a bony young girl with deep-sunken eyes lying on the floor. I examined her and concluded that she did not have a fever. Also, the color of her tongue, fingernails, and eyes were all normal. I asked her how she felt, but she couldn’t express herself clearly. Hadiyetuo then explained in Arabic what her sister was trying to say to me, “She’s gradually losing her eye sight. There’s a humming sound in her ears. And she doesn’t have the strength to stand up.” I had an idea. I asked Hadiyetuo, “Was your cousin living in a tent while she was in the desert?” She nodded. “And I suppose she didn’t have enough food?” I continued to ask. Hadiyetuo replied, “There was virtually no food for her!” “Just a moment,” I said. With this, I ran back home and gave her fifteen caplets of a multivitamin. Then I asked her, “Hadiyetuo, are you willing to slaughter a goat to save your cousin?” She nodded right away. “Ask your cousin to take the vitamins two or three times a day. Also, make some goat soup for her.”

Within ten days, the cousin that was no longer dying walked to my house and chatted with me for a long while, obviously in good health. When José came back home and saw her, he smiled and said, “Once on death’s door and now fully recovered? What

was her illness?” Grinning, I replied, “She wasn’t sick at all! She was only suffering from extreme malnutrition.” “How did you figure it out?” José asked. “Well, it just came to me.” To my surprise, he seemed proud of me.

We lived in the suburbs of the town El Aaiún. Very few Europeans resided there, and José and I were both happy to make friends with the locals. Our friends were mostly Sahrawi people. Since I didn’t need to work, I decided to open a free school for girls at our place. I taught local women how to count and use coins. The more advanced among them studied arithmetic (such as “one plus one equals two”). All together I had seven to fifteen female students. There was a lot of flexibility in this school as they were free to come and go. One day in class, one of the students could not concentrate and went over to my bookshelf, where she pulled out some random books. By chance she picked up a book titled *El Nacimiento del Bebé*. This book was written in Spanish with charts and pictures. The colorful photos in the book explained with lucid descriptions a baby’s development from conception to birth.

The book aroused great curiosity amongst the students, so we put arithmetic aside for a while. It took two weeks to get through explaining the materials in the book. They gave little shrieks as they went through the pictures and seemed completely ignorant of how a life formed, even though some of them already had three or four kids. When José saw this, he found it really amusing and said, “It’s such a wonder that a teacher who has never had a baby teaches mothers how they got their babies.” I answered, “In the past they only knew how to have babies, but now they understand the science. It’s easier to do something than to know how it works.”

At least these women could gain a little bit more general knowledge, even if the knowledge did not necessarily make their life happier or healthier. One day my student Fadima asked me, “Sanmao, can you come and help me have my baby when he comes?” I looked at her dumbfounded. I saw her almost every day, and I hadn’t even realized she was pregnant. “You? How many months?” I asked her. She couldn’t count so she had no way of knowing the number of months. I finally persuaded her to take off the cloth that she used to cover her head and body. She only had her long dress left. “Who helped you when you had your first baby?” I knew that she had a three-year-old boy. “My mother,” she replied. “Ask your mother again then. I can’t help you with this.” She lowered her head and said, “My mother can’t be there. She’s dead.” I had to drop that idea, so I asked her instead, “Why not go to the hospital? There is nothing to fear.” She refused at once, “No. They’re male doctors.” I looked at her belly and estimated that she was about eight months along. I told her hesitantly, “Fadima, I’m not a doctor and I’ve never delivered a baby. I can’t be your midwife.” On the verge of tears, she begged me, “Please! The whole thing is written out in your book so clearly. Please help me. Please!” I was moved by her pleading, but after much thought, I decided that I couldn’t do it.

I hardened my heart and said, “No. Please don’t beg me. You may lose your life.”

“It won’t be like that. I’m healthy and I’m able to push the baby out on my own. You only need to help a little bit, that’s all.”

“I’ll think about it.” But I didn’t promise her anything.

A little more than one month passed and I had completely forgotten about my talk with Fadima. One day at dusk, a girl I didn’t recognize came to my place. I opened the door. She couldn’t speak any Spanish. All she could say was, “Fadima, Fadima.” I came

out and locked the door, saying to the little girl, “Go and get her husband. Do you understand me?” She nodded and scooted off. I arrived at Fadima’s home. She was lying on the floor, sweating profusely and in great pain. Water flowed from the mattress Fadima was lying on and her three-year-old boy was crying beside her. I picked up the boy in my arms and took him quickly to a neighbor’s place. Along the way, I had also brought a middle-aged woman to come with me to Fadima’s place. That woman saw Fadima, scolded me angrily in Arabic and left. I learned afterwards that in this town it was considered unlucky to watch a woman give birth. I had to tell Fadima, “Don’t be afraid. I’m going to go home to get a few things, I’ll be right back.” I dashed home, ran to the bookshelf to fetch *El Nacimiento del Bebé*, opened the book, glanced through the chapter about delivery, thinking to myself, “Scissors, cotton, alcohol, what else do I need? What else?” Only then did I notice that José had come back home. He looked at me, confused. “Damn! I’m so nervous. Maybe I can’t do it.” I mumbled to José, trembling. “Do what? Do what?” He asked. My tension was contagious. “Deliver a baby! Her water has already broken.” I held the book with one hand and picked up a large roll of cotton with my other hand, while looking for scissors everywhere. “You’re mad! You can’t go.” José took the book away from me. “You don’t have any experience delivering a baby. You could lose her!” José yelled at me. I felt more rational and though knowing he was right, I argued, “I have a book, and I’ve watched documentaries about deliveries...” “You can’t go,” José said. He ran over to me and grabbed me. My hands were full, so I hit his ribs with my elbows. I was struggling and screaming, “You ruthless, cold-blooded animal, let go of me!” “I won’t. You can’t go.” He held me stubbornly.

In the middle of our pushing, shoving, and fighting, we suddenly saw Fadima’s

husband standing by the window looking inside, completely at a loss. José let go of me and said to him, “Sanmao can’t deliver the baby. She could harm Fadima. I’ll go and get a car. Your wife has to go to the hospital.”

Fadima gave birth to a baby boy in the public hospital. Because Fadima is a local resident, the Spanish government covered all her medical expenses. When she got home from the hospital, she was very proud of herself, as she was the first woman in the neighborhood to have a baby in the hospital. The fact that the doctor was a man was never mentioned again.

One morning, when I went up to the roof to hang my clothes, unexpectedly I saw two kids inside the goat pen that the landlord built on the balcony. I was incredibly excited and shouted to José, “Come up here! Look! There are two lovely new-born kids.” He ran up, saw the kids and commented, “These little kids will taste best roasted.” I was shocked. I asked him angrily, “What are you talking about?” I pushed the kids towards their mother. It was then that I noticed that after giving birth to two kids, the nanny still had a large chunk of something that looked like a heart trailing from her insides. It was probably the placenta and it looked gross. Three days passed and the huge, dirty placenta was still hanging there, refusing to fall off the nanny.

“Let’s kill and eat it,” suggested the landlord.

“If you kill the mother goat, how will the kids survive?” I quickly came up with an excuse to save the nanny.

“With the placenta outside, the nanny will die sooner or later,” said the landlord.

“I can try to cure her. Please don’t kill her,” I blurted out, not knowing exactly what

to do. I went back home and thought for a while. I had an idea. I fetched a bottle of wine, went to the balcony, caught the nanny and poured the wine into her mouth. If the nanny did not get too intoxicated and die, there was a good chance she'd be cured. I happened to learn about this from a farmer and remembered the treatment right away.

The landlord told me two days later, "She's better. The dirty thing from her belly has fallen off and she's fine now. Can you please tell me how you did it? Thank you so much!" I smiled and told him softly, "I just gave her an entire bottle of wine." He said again, "Thank you so much!" Then it occurred to him that since Muslims cannot drink wine, his nanny can't drink wine either. He left, feeling that there was nothing else he could do with the wine his nanny had already drunk.

The sangoma in me found a way to treat everybody, except José. He was terribly afraid of me and hardly ever gave me any chance to take care of him. I did everything I could to help him gain confidence in me. One day he had a stomachache. I gave him a bag of *Xilong* powder. I told him to mix the powder with water and drink it. "What's this?" he asked. I replied, "Just try it. It works really well for me." He took the powder unwillingly, but felt uncertain, and went to check the powder's plastic package. He couldn't understand the Chinese characters on it, but the package happened to say in English "Vitamin U." He said to me with a sad face, "Is there such a thing as Vitamin U in the world? How can it cure a stomachache?" I had no idea. I took the package and saw the "Vitamin U." I laughed for a long while, and José's stomachache did go away.

Working as a vet was actually great fun, but since I had almost scared José to death by trying to deliver Fadima's baby, I didn't tell him that I was now treating animals.

Gradually he thought I was already over the game of playing a doctor.

We had three vacation days last week. The weather was neither cold nor particularly hot, so we planned to rent a jeep and go camping in the desert. When we were outside our front door moving water tanks, tents, and food into the truck, a female neighbor with very dark skin came over. She walked toward us with her veil not completely covering her hair. Before I could speak, she said to José in a good mood, “Your wife is brilliant! My tooth hasn’t ached since she filled it for me.” Hearing this, I hurried over to change the topic. I said loudly, “That’s funny. Where’s the bread? I can’t find it!” At the same time I couldn’t help giggling to myself. Sure enough, José looked at me not knowing whether to cry or laugh and asked, “May I ask when you got a job as a dentist?” Seeing that there was no point in denying it, I looked up, thought for a while, and replied, “Last month.”

“So how many patients have you treated?” he also smiled.

“Two women and a child. None of them were willing to go to the hospital. I had no other option, so.... In the end, their toothaches were cured with my fillings. Their teeth were even strong enough to chew food.” I wasn’t exaggerating.

“What material did you use for the fillings?”

“I can’t tell you,” I answered hastily.

“I won’t go camping unless you tell me,” he said.

I couldn’t believe he was threatening me this way. All right! I ran one step away to keep my distance from José and answered in a low voice, “It is sticky, water-proof, colloidal, fragrant, colorful, and beautiful. Can you guess the name of such a wondrous thing?” “What is it?” he asked again, not even bothering to ponder the question. “Nail-po-lish!” I shouted. “What? Using nail polish to fill human teeth!” He was so

shocked that all his hair stood on end, and he became just as attractive as a character from a comic book. I saw how petrified he got, so I retreated farther back, laughing the whole way. By the time José realized that he should have come after me, the sangoma had already fled a long way away.

## **II. Nice Neighbors**

On the outside my Sahrawi neighbors seem extremely filthy and sloppy.

Because of their untidy clothes and unpleasant smell, people wrongly assume that they are down and out. In fact, every household in the community receives subsidies from the Spanish government, and the family members have steady jobs. My neighbors also rent houses to Europeans and raise large flocks of goats. Some of them even open shops in town. Overall, they have stable and handsome incomes.

That's why local people often say that it's impossible for Sahrawi people with meager means to live in the town of El Aaiún.

In the first few months when I came to the desert last year, I was not yet married, so I often left town and travelled deep into the desert. Every time I returned from my trip, I always came back home empty-handed as if I had been robbed. Those poor Sahrawi people living in the desert stole pegs from my tent, not to mention the belongings I had with me.

When later I settled down on a long road called Golden River Avenue in El Aaiún, I heard that the neighbors in the area were all moneybags. I felt fortunate and fantasized about all the benefits I would get from having wealthy neighbors.

Now, come to think of it, I'm the one to blame for what happened later.



The first time I was invited to have tea at a neighbor's place, José and I came back home with goat shit on our shoes. And my long dress was wet from the drool of Handi's youngest boy. The next day, I taught Handi's daughters how to mop the floor and dry mattresses in the sun. As you would expect, I provided the bucket, soap powder, mop, and water.

The neighbors here are all very close and they take turns using my supplies. Usually, I don't get them back until after dusk. I don't complain about it, because they always return the bucket and mop to me in the end.

Though there is nothing outside my place to indicate that I live here, I've been on Golden River Avenue for some time now. Neighbors come from near and far to call on me from time to time.

Except for opening my door to give them some medicine, I rarely communicate with my neighbors. I stick to the maxim that "a hedge between keeps friendship green."

Time passes and inevitably our doors open and close several times a day. As soon as I open the door, the women and children rush in. Our neighbors clearly take in our way of living and things we use on a daily basis.

José and I are not stingy and are usually kind to people, so our neighbors gradually learned how to take full advantage of these weaknesses.

Every morning, starting around nine, children continuously come to my home to borrow things.

"My older brother says he wants to borrow a light bulb."

"My mother says she needs an onion."

"My dad needs a container of gasoline."

“We need some cotton.”

“Give me your hair dryer.”

“Let my big sister borrow your iron.”

“I need some nails and a bit of electric wire.”

Other things that they have asked for are even more bizarre, but as much as I don't want to share, they are all things that we have in our possession, and I'll feel ill at ease if I refuse, but once I give them, I can never manage to get them back.

“What annoying people! Why don't they go to town and buy their own stuff?” José often says. But when the children come again, he continues to give them whatever they want.

I don't remember exactly when the children in the neighborhood started to ask for money. Children would surround us as soon as we stepped out of our place. They shouted, “Give me five dirhams! Give me five dirhams!” The landlord's children were also among them.

I would never give them any money, but they were persistent and came to pester me every day. One day I told the landlord's children, “Your dad rents out this dilapidated place to me and charges me 10,000 dirhams a month. If I give you five dirhams every day, I might as well move to a new place.”

Since then, the children stopped asking me for money. They started asking for chewing gum instead. I was willing to give them that.

I figured they didn't want me to move, so they never begged for money again.

One day a little girl named Labu came knocking at my door. I opened it and saw the

carcass of a camel that was as large as a hill lying on the ground. There was blood everywhere. The scene was ghastly.

“My mom says the camel needs to be stored in your fridge.”

I turned around, looked at my fridge that was the size of a shoebox and sighed. I crouched down and said to her, “Labu, please go tell your mom, if she gives me your big house to use it as my sewing box, this camel can be stored in my fridge.”

She asked me at once, “Where are your needles?”

Of course the camel was not put in my fridge. But Labu’s mother had a stern face for almost a month. She only spoke to me once that month, “You’ve hurt my pride by refusing me.” Every Sahrawi is very proud, so I dare not hurt them too often and dare not refuse to lend things to them.

One day several women came to me to ask for “purple potion,” but I refused to give them what they wanted and replied, “If anyone gets a scratch, tell them to come to my place.”

But they insisted on taking the iodine back home with them.

When I heard the sound of drums a few hours later, I ran out to see what had happened. It was only then that I saw that on the community rooftop, all the women’s faces and hands covered with my iodine. They were singing and dancing and wiggling, all looking very happy. When I found out that iodine had such a magical effect, I could not get angry with them.

What is more annoying is that a Sahrawi neighbor who works as an assistant in the hospital rejects using his hands to dine like the rest of his family members. He has been edified by civilization. That’s why every day at dinner time, his son knocks on my door.

Every time he begins with “My dad wants to eat. I’m here to get him a fork and knife.”

Even though the boy that came to borrow the fork and knife always returned them, I became tired of lending things to him every day, so I bought him his own set and told him not to come back again.

To my surprise, the boy appeared outside my door two days later.

“Why are you here again? Where are the fork and knife I just gave you?” I asked him with a serious face.

“My mom said the fork and knife are new and should be put away. My dad wants to eat now ...”

“Why should I care that your dad wants to eat?” I yelled at him. The boy was frightened and cowered like a little bird. I couldn’t bear to see this, so again I lent him a set. After all, dining is an important matter.

In the desert, there’s always part of a house that has no roof. What I’m trying to say is, the middle part of the roof is missing. No matter what I do in my home, eating or sleeping, my neighbor’s children watch me from the edge of the roof.

Sometimes when a sandstorm comes, sand falls like rain drops in the house. Living in this weather, José and I have to play the character Sand Monk living in the Quicksand River from *Journey to the West*, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. We just can’t afford to play another role.

José has made several requests to the landlord, but the landlord never agrees to build a complete roof for us. So we ended up buying our own materials and José spent three

Sundays putting up the roof that was missing. It was made of yellow frosted glass so the light could come through. It was beautiful and neat. I put nine potted plants that I'd nurtured with great care under the new roof. The refreshing green sight has greatly improved my life.

One afternoon I was in the kitchen, absorbed in reading cake recipes while listening to music. All of a sudden, I heard something on the glass roof that sounded like someone was walking on it. I went out of the kitchen to see what had happened, and I saw clearly the shadow of a giant goat overhead. That despicable goat was climbing our slanted rooftop as if it was a hill.

I grabbed a kitchen knife and ran towards the staircase leading up to the rooftop. Before I could reach the rooftop, I heard a faint sound of the splints split, accompanied by a bang loud enough to shake the sky and ground. Splints and glass shards fell like rain drops. Of course this huge goat descended from the sky and fell into my tiny home. I was so nervous that I hurried to beat the goat out of my place with a broom. Then I stared angrily at the sky through the hole in the roof.

As we could turn to no one to compensate for our broken roof, we could only buy materials out of our pockets to mend it.

“What about using asbestos tiles this time?” I asked José.

“Asbestos tiles won't work, because this house only has one window facing the street. Asbestos tiles would block all the light.” José was very vexed, as he didn't like working on Sundays.

Soon a new roof made of white translucent plastic plates was built. José also put up a wall about waist tall to separate our rooftop from our neighbors'.

This wall serves not only to guard against goats, but also to prevent the neighbors' girls from taking away my underwear hung on the rooftop to dry. They were not stealing, because they'd throw it back on the roof after they had worn it for several days. Their excuse was that it was the wind that blew the underwear over to their side.

The new roof is made of plastic plates, and goats have fallen through it four times in six months. We ran out of patience and said to our neighbors that the next goat that falls through our roof would be killed and eaten by us. There was no way we would return the goat, so they should keep their goats in the cote.

Our neighbors are very smart. They paid no attention to our complaints, squinting and smiling at us with a goat in their arms.

The wonder of the "flying goat falling through the roof" occurred repeatedly, but José was always not home, so he never had the chance to experience how impressive the sight was.

One Sunday at dusk, a flock of crazy goats jumped over the fences, and without the neighbors even noticing, they climbed onto the rooftop again.

I screamed, "José, José, the goats are coming!"

José threw away his magazine and charged out of the living room. But it was already too late. A giant goat crashed through the plastic plate and fell heavily onto José's head. Both of them lay on the ground, moaning.

José got up silently, pulled out a string to tie the goat to a pillar, and got on the rooftop to see what little bastard let the goats out.

There was no one on the roof.

"Great, we'll kill and eat the goat tomorrow," José said, gnashing his teeth in anger.

After we got off the rooftop, we went to check on the goat. Instead of bleating, our slave seemed to be smiling. I then looked down. Oh my goodness! The goat ate all the nine potted plants with 25 leaves that I'd spent a year nursing with hard work.

Shocked, angry, and sad, I raised my hand and mustering all the strength I had, I gave the goat a slap. I screamed to José, "Look, Look!" Then I ran into the washroom and held a large towel, letting big teardrops fall.

That was the first time that I cried over the frustration of living in the desert.

The goat, of course, was not killed.

We continued to get along well with our neighbors with all the opening and closing of the door to borrow things.

Once I ran out of matches and went to the neighboring landlord's home to ask for some.

"No, we don't have any," the landlady said with a smile.

I then went to the kitchen of another neighbor. "I'll give you three matches. We don't have many left," Hadiyetuo told me with a stiff expression.

"It was I who gave you this box of matches last week. I gave you five boxes in total. Don't you remember?" I became angry.

"Right, and now I only have one box left. How can I give you more?" She became even more unhappy.

"You've hurt my pride," I said to Hadiyetuo, imitating their tone.

Going home with three matches, the entire way I thought that it was not easy to live like Albert Schweitzer.

We've lived here for one year and a half, and José has become the repairman,

carpenter, and mason for our neighbors. As for me, I've become the scrivener, nurse, teacher, and tailor – thanks to our neighbors.

Young Sahrawi females often have light complexions and very beautiful faces. They always cover their faces in front of other Sahrawi people, but they remove their veils when they are at our place.

One of them is called Mina and she looks very sweet. She not only likes me, but she likes José even more. Whenever José was home, she would dress up neatly and visit our place. When later she couldn't find anything interesting to do at our home, she began to find excuses to ask José to go to her place.

One day she came over. She stood outside the window and shouted, “José! José!”

We were dining, so I asked her, “What do you need José for?”

She replied, “Our door is broken, and we need José to repair it.”

As soon as José heard it, he put down his fork and wanted to stand up.

“Don't go. Keep eating.” I poured my plate of food onto José's plate, so he had one more plate of food.

Here people can have four wives, but I don't like four women sharing José's paycheck.

Mina wouldn't leave. She stood in front of the window and José looked at her again.

“Stop looking. Treat her as a mirage.” I said sternly.

When this beautiful “mirage” finally got married one day, I was very happy and sent her a large piece of cloth.



The municipal government controls the water we use for washing and provides one large bucket of water a day. That's it. If we wash our bodies, we can't wash clothes, or if we wash clothes, we can't wash bowls or the floor. All these washing plans have to be carried out after a careful calculation of the amount of water left in the bucket on our rooftop. The water in the bucket on the roof provided by the government is too salty to be drinkable. We go to stores to buy fresh water for drinking. Water is very precious here.

Last Sunday we hurried home after our camping trip in the Desert, traveling hundreds of miles to participate in the "camel race" in town.

On that day the wind blew hard with sand, and I arrived home with sand plastered to me from head to toe. I looked awful. I went through the front door and rushed into the bathroom to take a shower, hoping that I would look cleaner when I rode on the camel, as the reporter from Televisión Española based in the desert had agreed to film me in the news. When I had soap all over my body, the water stopped running. I immediately asked José to go to the rooftop and check the bucket.

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

"That's impossible! We haven't been home for two days and we haven't used a single drop of water." I began to get nervous.

I wrapped myself with a large towel and ran barefoot up to the roof. The bucket was empty. What a nightmare! Then I saw a dozen flour bags hanging on the neighbor's roof. Suddenly I understood. The water turned out to have been drunk by the flour bags when they were washed.

I used the towel to wipe away the soap on me and followed José to the camel race.

That afternoon, all of our Spanish friends who like having fun and enjoying

themselves rode camel back in the race. It was magnificent, and I was the only one standing in the bright sun watching the others. These riders laughed at me when they rode past me, “*Cobarde!* You coward!”

How could I tell them that the reason why I couldn't ride a camel was that if I sweated too much, my body would itch and soap bubbles would appear everywhere.

Of all the neighbors, Guka is the closest to me. She is a gentle and smart woman who likes to think. But Guka has this shortcoming: she comes up with ideas different from ours. That is to say, she surprises us with her judgment of what is right or wrong.

One night José and I planned to attend a wine tasting at the local national hotel. I ironed my black evening dress that I hadn't worn in a while, then took out some expensive necklaces that I don't usually wear.

“When is the wine tasting?” José asked.

“At eight o'clock.” I looked at the clock; it was already a quarter to eight.

After I had put on my dress and earrings, I was ready to put on my shoes. I realized that the pair of grain-leather high-heels that had been on the shelf all along was gone. I asked José, but he said he didn't move it.

“Just pick any pair.” José did not like waiting at all.

I looked at the long row of shoes on the shelf – sneakers, wooden slippers, flat sandals, cotton shoes, and high boots – not one pair that could match the long black evening dress. I started to feel anxious. I took another look – what? What the heck is that? When did that get here? What is that?

A pair of dirty, pointed-toe, black, desert boots lay quietly on the shelf. I

immediately recognized that they were Guka's shoes.

If her shoes were on my shelf, then where would my shoes be?

I ran to Guka's home at once. I grabbed her and asked her angrily, "Where are my shoes? Where are my shoes? Why did you steal them?"

Then I scolded her loudly, "Find them fast and give them back to me, you damn thief!"

Guka searched for the shoes at an irritatingly slow pace: in the kitchen, under the mattress, among the flock of goats, behind the door – she looked everywhere, but couldn't find them.

"My sister is wearing them and she went out. They're not here now," she answered me very calmly.

"I'll get even with you tomorrow." I went home, gnashing my teeth in anger. At the wine party that night, I had to wear a white cotton dress with a pair of sandals. I looked terribly out of place among those wives of José's bosses, who were adorned with brilliant jewels and pearls. José's wicked colleague complimented me on purpose, "You look great. Tonight you look like a shepherdess, only without the stick."

The next morning Guka brought my high-heels back to me. The shoes were in poor shape.

I stared at her and snatched the shoes back.

"Humph! You get angry...furious, but I can be angry too." Guka's face also reddened with rage.

She continued to say, "Your shoes are at my place, but aren't my shoes at your place? I'm angrier than you are."

Hearing her extremely ridiculous explanation, I couldn't help but laugh heartily.

"Guka, you should go to the loony bin," I pointed at her temple.

"Where?" She didn't understand.

"Never mind. Guka, let me ask you something, then you can go around and ask all the female neighbors: what else do you want from me besides my toothbrush and my husband?"

As if wakening from a dream after she heard my words, Guka asked immediately, "What does your toothbrush look like?"

When I heard this, I shouted with agitation, "Get out – Go."

Guka said as she backed away, "I only want to have a look at your toothbrush. I didn't even ask for your husband, damn it."

After I closed the door, I still heard Guka speaking loudly to another woman on the street, "Look, look! She has hurt my pride."

Thanks to these neighbors, they have made my days in the desert resplendent with all kinds of colors, and I no longer know what loneliness tastes like.

### **III. Jacob's Ladder**

Thinking back on it, I cannot recall how I learned to drive. For many years, when I was in the car with someone else, I just sat next to the driver and watched them carefully. Then when I had the chance, I sat behind the steering wheel and practiced driving. After a while, I just knew how to do it.

I was quite bold. When I could get into someone's car, I would often ask the owner politely, "May I drive? I'll be very careful."

Most of the people who heard me plead so humbly entrusted their car to me. No matter whether the vehicle was big, small, new, or old, I never let the owner down. I drove well, and nothing ever went wrong.

These people who trusted me with their cars always forgot to ask me the single most important question. Since they didn't enquire and I didn't want to open my mouth and give it away, I always drove the car around in silence.

When José bought a car, I fell in love with this "white horse" and drove around in it to run errands in town. Sometimes I drove my white horse to pick up my "Prince Charming" from work.

Since I was driving well and nobody ever asked me for my driver's license, without my noticing it, I fell into a deceptive trap and stubbornly convinced myself that I already had a license.

There were a number of occasions when, sitting around at home chatting with José's colleagues, they would say, "It's more difficult to get a license here than it is to climb up to the sky. So-and-so's wife took the written test fourteen times and still hasn't passed. And there is a Sahrawi who has been trying to pass the road test for the past two years."

I listened quietly to the talk about this terrible topic, not daring to say anything or even to look up. But my car kept moving around silently every day.

Ascend to the sky – for now I'm not ready to climb the ladder to the Department of Traffic and Vehicles.

One day I received a letter from my father. He wrote, "If you have a lot of free time in the desert, take the test and get your driver's license there. Don't keep putting it off like this."

Whenever José saw that I'd received a letter from my family, he'd always ask, "What did Mom and Dad say?"

I wasn't on guard that day and with a slip of the tongue I replied, "Dad said that I shouldn't wait any longer to get my license."

Hearing this, José grinned with satisfaction and told me, "Great! Now it's Dad's orders rather than mine. Let's see how you manage to get out of this."

I thought about it for a while. It was one thing to consciously deceive myself, and it had had nothing to do with others. But if driving without a license meant going behind my father's back, I didn't want anything to do with it. He hadn't asked me about driving before, so technically I hadn't lied to him.

In Spain you have to go to a driving school to learn how to drive and get a license. Only the school can register you for the driving test. So even if you know how to drive, you still have to give your money away to the driving school.

We lived in Africa, in a Spanish colony far away from the motherland, but we still had to abide by Spanish law.

The day after I consented to attend driving school, José went to his colleagues to borrow the practice test booklets from several different schools. I was supposed to have a look at these books to get an idea of the traffic regulations.

Rather put off, I said to José, "I don't like reading."

He found my reaction strange and replied, "Don't you feed on books all day like goats chew away grass? How can you not love reading?"

Then he pointed at the bookshelf and continued, "You have books on astronomy, geography, demons and ghosts, detective stories, romance novels, zoology, philosophy,

horticulture, Chinese, recipes, comics, films, tailoring, and even secret recipes of traditional Chinese medicine, magic, hypnosis, and fabric dyeing. I've never seen such a mess of books. How can a few traffic regulations defeat you?"

I sighed and took the thin books from José.

This was different. I didn't like reading anything that was assigned to me.

After several days I took some money and drove to the driving school to register for lessons.

It seemed that the boss of this "Sahara Driving School" was a big fan of his own appearance. He had a dozen enlarged color photos of himself in a variety of outfits on his office wall. The office glittered so much that I felt I was inside a movie theater.

A bunch of noisy Sahrawi men surrounded the reception desk. Business was booming! It was a huge fad in the desert to learn how to drive. Countless tattered tents in the desert had large cars outside of them. Fathers sold their beautiful daughters to buy a car. For Sahrawi people, the only symbol of civilization was to drive their own cars. It did not matter, for example, whether the man himself was stinky or not.

Squeezed between Daraa robes, I finally managed to push my way to the counter. As soon as I said that I wanted to register for driving lessons, I saw two Spanish traffic policemen standing beside a Sahrawi man next to me.

I was so frightened that I thrust my way out as quickly as I could and fled to admire once again the dazzling photos of the boss of the driving school.

I could see one of the policemen trotting towards me in the reflection of the glass.

I remained calm, didn't move, concentrating on counting the number of buttons on the boss's shirt.

The policeman stood beside me and looked me up and down. Finally, he spoke. He asked, “Do I know you, Señora?”

I had no choice but to turn around and reply, “I’m so sorry. I don’t believe so.”

He said, “I heard you say that you wanted to register for driving lessons. That’s odd indeed! I’ve seen you driving around town on more than one occasion. Do you not have a driver’s license?”

It didn’t look good for me, so I immediately shifted from Spanish to English and said, “I’m so sorry. I don’t speak Spanish. What did you say?”

Hearing that I wasn’t speaking his tongue, the policeman was dumbfounded.

“*Carnet! Carnet!*” He shouted.

“Don’t know,” I replied with embarrassment and made a helpless face.

This policeman ran to fetch his colleague and pointed at me, saying, “I saw her driving to the post office this morning. It was definitely her. But she claims this is her first time here at driving school. What you do think? How do we penalize her?”

The other one replied, “Well she’s not in her car now. Why didn’t you catch her before?”

“I see her driving all the time, so I assumed she had a license. Why would I stop her and ask for her license?”

In the heat of their argument, they forgot about my presence. I quickly turned around and pushed my way through the Sahrawi crowd of Daraa robes.

I filled out all the paperwork and paid my tuition. I also asked the lady working there to register me for the test – I planned to take it two weeks later.



Having finished all of this, I took several of the school's books on traffic regulations and walked out at ease.

I opened the door, got into the car, started the engine, and just as I was about to pull away from the school, I looked in the rearview mirror and saw those two policemen hiding around the corner of a wall waiting to catch me.

Frightened again, I hurriedly got out of the car and strode away. I had to wait until José got off work to ask him to rescue my white horse.

My driving lesson was scheduled at half past twelve. We practiced on a loop the driving school had set up on a few bumpy roads among the desolate dunes outside of town.

The driving instructor and I baked inside the tiny car, going around and around the practice course like two laboratory mice.

The temperature in the desert at noon is over fifty degrees Celsius; I was drenched in sweat. The sweat dripped into my eyes and the sand blew into my face as if someone were slapping me. It was only fifteen minutes after the class began, but extreme thirst and intense heat had already started torturing me like wild dogs.

The instructor couldn't stand the heat and without asking me, took off his top and sat next to me bare-chested.

After three days of lessons, I couldn't take the fierce heat anymore and asked my instructor to change our class time. He said, "You are fucking lucky. Another señora takes her class at 11 p.m., and it is so cold and dark that she isn't learning anything. And you want to fucking change your time. *Joder.*"

When he finished speaking, he pounded the scalding car roof and part of the roof sank with a bang.

This instructor was in no way a bad guy, but I couldn't imagine driving in a giant mobile oven with a shirtless man for fifteen more lessons. And I wasn't fond of those four- and five-letter words coming out of his mouth, either.

I pondered for a moment and asked him, "What do you say if I sign all the attendance sheets and we stop the classes? I'll take full responsibility for my test."

It suited him perfectly so he replied, "Great! I'll let you take the fucking days off. That's it then. See you at the test!"

Before we parted, he bought me a cold bottle of soda to celebrate the end of the driving lessons.

José was furious when he learned that I gave the tuition away and wouldn't go to the school again. He made me sign up for night class to learn the traffic regulations. He explained that the tuition was expensive and since night class was part of the package, I had to learn something to recover the loss.

So, I went to my first night class.

It was a funny scene. The Sahrawi students in the classroom next to mine were reading aloud, memorizing traffic rules. They seemed enraptured with one traffic rule after another. I had never seen so many hard-working Sahrawi people.

My class was taught in Spanish. There should have been more students, but very few of them attended the class. Three or four cats were also in the classroom.

My middle-aged instructor was a cultured man, tall and thin with a moustache. He didn't use any four-letter words. Civil and military instructors were different after all.

As soon as I sat down, he approached me and enquired courteously about Chinese culture. I ended up spending the whole class teaching him about Chinese culture. I even drew and explained some pictograms to him.

On the second day, as soon as I walked into the classroom, my instructor handed me a notebook that read, “人人人天天天…”

He asked me humbly, “What do you think of my handwriting? Do my Chinese characters for human and sky look okay?”

I replied, “Your handwriting is better than mine.”

The instructor was very pleased and started to consult me again about Chinese culture. He wanted to know about Confucius and Lao Zi, just my area of interest. I answered him with clarity and logic. When I asked him if he knew of Zhuang Zi, he asked, “But isn’t Zhuang Zi a butterfly?”

One hour passed quickly, but I also wanted to hear my instructor talk a little bit about rules relating to traffic lights. He found this request odd and asked me, “You aren’t color blind, are you?”

When the instructor released me from the time machine that traveled back five thousand years in Chinese history, it was as dark as a night could be.

I arrived home and rushed to get dinner ready for a starving José.

He asked me, “Sanmao, are you clear on the different functions of all those small lights on the back of a truck?”

I replied, “I can almost tell the differences. My instructor explains things really well.”

During the day, when José was at work, I brought the Driver's Manual with me no matter what I was busy doing – washing or ironing, making the bed, sweeping the floor, dusting, cooking, or knitting. I kept mumbling those traffic rules to myself, just like I used to recite Bible verses in Sunday school when I was little. I wanted to learn every line of every chapter by heart.

Around that time, my neighbors all knew that I was preparing for a test. I closed the door tightly and wouldn't open it no matter who came over.

The women in the neighborhood hated me to death and cursed me every day. "When will you ever finish with this test? Life sucks for us when you keep your door closed."

This time I was serious and ignored all of them.

The test date was close. I wasn't afraid of driving, but the written test was no guarantee. In my head, I'd mixed up the traffic regulations with vegetables, eggs, yarn, Confucius, and Zhuang Zi. I had gone about it in a sloppy fashion.

On Friday night, José picked up the Driver's Manual and said, "You're taking the written test the day after tomorrow. If you fail it, you can forget about the road test. Now let's see how well you remember these regulations."

José had always thought of me as a combination of genius and idiot, so he sternly threw all types of questions at me. It was a real mess and I couldn't understand a word.

"Slow down! I have absolutely no idea what you're saying."

He continued with the questions but I was too worked up and couldn't come up with any answers.

He threw the book aside angrily and stared at me. "You still know don't know anything after so many classes. *Idiota!* Idiot!"

I got angry too, ran to the kitchen, drank a mouthful of cooking wine, calmed down, cleared my mind, and threw the Driver's Manual back to José.

Word for word, I slowly recited all the traffic rules to José. The book was small, but it had close to one hundred pages. But I was still able to recite the whole book.

José was dumbfounded.

“How about that? My elementary school teachers trained me to learn by rote,” I told him with a sound of triumph.

José still wasn't completely convinced. He asked me, “Won't all your efforts be wasted if you get too nervous on Monday and can't read Spanish?”

This question kept me up all night tossing and turning in bed.

I did have this bad habit: I would hand in a blank exam paper when I panicked. I would come to my senses later, but my mind would go blank in the moment that mattered.

It reminded me of lines by the great ninth-century poet Li Shangyin – “A moment that ought to last forever/ has come and gone before I knew it.”

I couldn't sleep the whole night and finally saw the day break. José was still fast asleep. It had been a rough week for him, so I didn't want to wake him up.

I put my clothes on and quietly left the house. After starting the car, I drove to the Department of Traffic and Vehicles, which was quite some distance outside of town.

Driving to the Department of Traffic and Vehicles without a license was like walking into a trap. But if I had walked there, my hair would have become disheveled and I would have left a bad impression. Then I probably would not have pulled off what I planned to do at the Department.

I drove all the way to the office door and naturally, no one stopped me to check for my license. No one suspected that there could be such a bold moron in this world.

As soon as I entered the office I heard someone call out, “Sanmao!”

I was stunned and asked the gentleman, “May I ask how you recognize me?”

He answered, “I have your application photo here. Look, you’re taking the test on Monday!”

“That’s why I’m here,” I replied hurriedly. “I want to meet the examiner of the written test.” I continued.

“What for? The examiner is the colonel.”

“Can you please tell the colonel that I would like to see him?”

Seeing that I was acting mysteriously, he went into the back office immediately. After a while, he came out and said, “Please come this way.”

To my surprise, the colonel was an elegant officer with white hair. Having lived in the desert for some time and all of a sudden seeing a man of such high bearing, I was reminded of my father. My mind went blank for a moment.

The colonel got up from his desk and came over to shake my hand. He also pulled up a chair for me and asked someone to bring me coffee.

“What can I do for you? You are?”

“I’m Señora Quero ....”

I started to plead with him, as he was my only hope in resolving the issues that had kept me awake all night.

“Okay, so you want to me to administer the test on the traffic regulations orally to you, is that right?”

“Yes, that’s about it.”

“This is a great idea, but we don’t have such a precedent. And ... I can see that your Spanish is perfectly fine. You won’t have any problem with the language.”

“Not really, I do have some difficulty. You can set a new precedent with me.”

He looked at me without replying.

“I heard that Sahrawi people can take an oral test. Why can’t I?”

“If you only want a license to drive in the Sahara Desert, you can take an oral test.”

“I want one that I can use everywhere.”

“Then you have to take the written test. It’s a multiple-choice test. You don’t need to write out your answers, just mark your choice.”

“Those multiple choice tests are tricky. I’ll panic and make mistakes. I’m not a native speaker.”

He pondered for a moment and replied, “No. All of the exam papers are archived. If you take an oral test, we won’t have any record and won’t be able to account for your test. There’s no other way.”

“There’s always another way. My recording can be archived. Colonel, Señor, be a little more flexible por favor ....”

I was starting to show my contentious nature.

The colonel looked at me affably and said, “Hear me out. Just come and take the written test on Monday. You’ll most definitely pass. Don’t be so tense. *Relájese.*”

Seeing that he wouldn’t agree and I couldn’t force him into anything, I just thanked him and left in a good mood.

The colonel stopped me at the door and said, “Por favor, wait a moment, I’ll get two *hijos* to accompany you home. The Department of Traffic and Vehicles is too remote.”

He actually called his subordinates children!

I thanked the colonel again, walked out of the door, and saw the two “*hijos*” standing very straight and waiting for me by a car. The encounter surprised us all.

They happened to be the two policemen that wanted to capture me for driving without a license the other day.

I said to them very politely, “I really don’t want to bother you. If you can do me a favor and let off this one time, I’ll just drive back on my own.”

I was pretty certain that they wouldn’t arrest me at that moment.

And so I drove back home.

José was still asleep when I got home.

I spent all of Sunday memorizing the manual, nothing else. José and I only ate bread and butter with some sugar.

On Monday morning, José didn’t go to work. He explained that he had asked for the day off and would work some extra time next Saturday, as he wanted to accompany me to take the test. I didn’t need his company at all.

We arrived to see a large crowd outside of the testing place. There must have been two to three hundred people, among whom were many Sahrawis.

Both the written and road tests were conducted in the same place. There happened to be a desert prison across from the testing place. None of the prisoners here were felons, for felons were locked up under the supervision of police troops.



Most of the people locked up in this jail were nabbed for fighting jealously over women. Or else they were drunken workers from the Canary Islands who had brawled with the Sahrawis.

There were no real scum criminals in the desert. Perhaps this was because this place was too desolate, and even if a gangster did come, he wouldn't be able to make a name for himself here.

As we were waiting to get into the examination room, the prisoners watched us from on top of their roof.

Every time a Spanish woman came alone to take the test, these rough fellows would clap and shout, "Wow! Hey sweetie, *qué guapa*, go ahead and take the fucking test! Don't be scared, we're here for you! *Joder! Guapísima!*"

I burst into laughter when I heard these boors yelling with so much passion.

José said, "You actually tried to insist on coming alone. If it weren't for me, you'd be getting cat-calls too."

Honestly I enjoyed watching these maniacs up on the roof, at least, I'd never seen so many cheerful prisoners. This could add a new tale to *Modern and Ancient Wonders*.

There were both new and returning test takers that day, more than two hundred in all.

As soon as the colonel showed up with one other gentleman and opened the door to the examination room, my heart raced, my head spun, my stomach churned, and my fingers were too cold to curl.

José held onto my hand tightly so I couldn't run away.

Those whose names were called all behaved like lambs being led to slaughter. They walked obediently into that huge, terrifying cave.

When the colonel called out my name, José nudged me gently so I had to step forward.

“Buenos días!” I greeted the colonel tearfully.

He looked at me intently and told me very precisely, “Please sit in the rightmost chair in the first row.”

I thought, why didn’t he assign seats to anyone else? Why was I the only one crucified? It must be that he didn’t trust me.

The examination room was deathly silent. Everyone’s test paper was already under their chair, and every paper was different, so peeping at others’ wouldn’t help.

“All right, please start now. You have fifteen minutes.”

I pulled out the paper from under my seat as fast as I could. All the words were like exotic ants. I couldn’t recognize any of them. I tried desperately to calm myself down, but nothing worked. The ants all spoke a foreign language.

I could only put down the pen and paper, cross my hands, and sit still for a moment.

On the other side of the window, seeing me sit in “meditation,” José was so anxious that it looked as if he was about to burst in with a club to shout at me and wake me up.

After my “meditation,” I read the test paper again. I could understand it now.

I finally had an answer as to why I was crucified on this particular seat.

The test questions were as follows:

If while driving you come upon a red traffic light, you should: a. speed through b. stop c. blare the horn.

When you see pedestrians on the crosswalk, you should: a. wave at the pedestrians and tell them to get out of the way as fast as possible b. crash into the crowd of people c. stop.

Such hilarious, outrageous questions went on for two pages.

I read the exam paper, chuckled to myself quietly, almost choked on my giggles, and finished the exam as fast as lightning.

The last question was: If you encounter Catholics with the statue of Virgin Mary in a procession while you are driving, you should: a. applaud b. stop c. kneel down.

I chose “stop,” but I believed since the exam was offered by a Catholic country, they’d be more pleased if I’d chosen “kneel down.”

Like that, I finished my exam in eight minutes and handed in my test.

When I handed in the paper, the colonel smiled meaningfully at me. I said to him softly, “Gracias! Good day!”

I walked through the group of head-lowered, pen-biting, paper-shuffling, shaking, frowning test takers, opened the door silently and stepped out.

When it was the Sahrawi’s turn to take the oral test, José kept comforting me, “It’s all right, no big deal. If you fail, you can retake the test next week. Just relax.”

I didn’t say a word, because I wanted to keep José in suspense.

At ten o’clock, a gentleman came out with a list and began to call out the names of those who had passed. Names came and went but mine was not among them.

Subconsciously, José reached out and put his hand on my shoulder.

I wasn’t concerned at all.

When “Sanmao” was loudly called out, I glanced at José mischievously.

The suspense wasn't too great, but José was genuinely surprised, like he was experiencing fire and ice at the same time. He lifted me up and hugged me in one motion, exerting so much strength that my ribs were almost broken.

The prisoners on the rooftop saw this and cheered loudly for us.

I made the "V" for Victory, my facial expression just like Nixon's from his days as president. My test became another "Watergate."

Next came the road test on the course.

The big trucks and small cars from driving schools were all lined up here. This place was bustling with noise and excitement, as the prisoners screamed more loudly than gamblers at the horse races.

Only eighty out of the two hundred test takers remained after the written test, but there was still a large crowd of spectators.

My instructor wasn't shirtless this time: he was neatly dressed.

The instructor told me repeatedly, "Don't be the first three to get into the car. Wait till others have warmed up the engine. Then you go and the car won't stall so easily."

I nodded. I had this under control, so I didn't need to be nervous.

When the second person finished the test, I said, "I don't want to wait. I'll take the test now."

As soon as the light in the test field turned green, my car leapt forward and dashed out like a mustang.

Change gear, change back, park the car, start the car, make left and right turns, perform a three point turn, drive down a ramp, parallel park; drive up a ramp, brake, start,

drive down the ramp, change gear .... I made all the maneuvers properly and in an orderly way without any mistakes. I was nearing the end of my test.

I could hear that the spectators were all clapping for me, and even the Sahrawi people were yelling, “This Chinese girl is awesome! She’s got it!”

I was so happy, I don’t know what got into me, and I suddenly looked back at the tower platform where the examiner was seated. Turning my head distracted me, and the car veered off the road. It charged towards the waves of sand. I panicked and the car stalled right there.

The applause turned into exclamations, then guffaws. The sound of José’s laughter was the loudest among them.

I couldn’t resist laughing myself as I fled out of the car. I wished I could laugh myself to death so I could die the same way the Greek gods did.

The following week, I learned my lesson from the bitter experience and thought about it. Inattentiveness had led Guan Yu, the great general in Eastern Han dynasty, to lose three strategically important counties in Jingzhou Province, which partially led to the downfall of his kingdom. I should learn from this and pay more attention next time.

On the following Monday, I went to take the test on my own. This time I was in no hurry. I waited patiently for forty to fifty test takers to finish their tests. Then I entered the fray.

In two minutes and thirty-five seconds I finished all the maneuvers that the test allotted four minutes to complete. My driving was flawless.

Merely sixteen examinees passed the test and had the names called out, and I was the only female among them.

The colonel teased me and said, “Sanmao drives so well that her car is as fast as a cannonball. In the future, you could be a very helpful assistant should you join the traffic police force.”

As I started to walk home, I saw José coming to pick me up with his face shining with happiness. His workplace was dozens of miles away, but he used his noon break to come see me.

“Congratulations!” He said as soon as he saw me.

“How come? Can your eyes see things a thousand miles away?”

“It was those prisoners on the rooftop who just told me.”

I pondered that the people locked inside the prison were not necessarily more corrupt than those outside. The real wicked people in the world were like what we Chinese called “dragons.” They could be big or small, invisible or conspicuous, and you wouldn’t be able to catch them nor lock them up.

While I was making lunch for José, I asked José to go by himself to send two large cases of Coke and two cartons of cigarettes to those people in prison. At least they cheered for me like members of a fife and drum corps during my test.

I didn’t look down on them, as I didn’t have better ethics than them.

At noon I drove a long way to send José off to work, then drove back to town, hid the car, and only after that did I walk to wait for the final road test. It became more and more interesting to climb “Jacob’s Ladder,” and surprisingly I began to like this exam process a lot.

It was midday, the temperature was fifty degrees, and there was only a scorching hot sun making short shadows of rows of buildings on deserted streets. The whole town seemed to have died, and even time was frozen.

The scene I saw was entirely a reprint of a surrealist painting, which was deeply moving. If a little girl rolling a hoop could be added, the scene would have been even more vivid.

The road test began in this place where there was no traffic.

Even though I knew that at that time of the day, no dog in town would be crushed and no tree out of town would be knocked down, I should still pay attention.

Signal before pulling away, check over your shoulder to see clearly, keep right after pulling away, avoid touching the yellow line, stop at the intersection, slow down before crosswalks. There were no traffic lights in town so I didn't need to worry about that.

Very soon all sixteen people finished their tests, and the colonel invited us to have a soda at the snack counter in the Department of Traffic and Vehicles.

We were eight Spaniards, seven Sahrawis, and me, Sanmao.

The colonel gave those who had passed all the tests a temporary license, as the official one would be sent from Spain.

I had been telling myself last week that before the King of Morocco, King Hassan, came to the Spanish Sahara for tea, I needed to climb to the top of Jacob's Ladder. Now I had reached the top, yet the Monster Lord has not come.

The colonel handed out seven licenses, and I got one of them.

After I got my license, I drove with a considerably different mood and attitude. It was in comparison that I felt the difference.

One day as I started to walk away after I had parked my car, all of a sudden the two policemen who I had mentioned before jumped out in mid air and shouted, “Ha! We got you this time.”

I took out my license with unruffled calm and held it up before the police.

They did not even look at the license and continued to write the ticket.

“Fine. 250 dirhams.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“Parking at the bus stop! Ticket!”

“There is no bus in town. There were never any,” I screamed.

“There will be. The bus sign is right there.”

“You cannot give me a ticket. No way! I refuse to pay.”

“No parking at a bus stop, with or without a bus.”

When I got angry, my mind became particularly organized, and I flipped through the traffic regulation manual page by page in my mind.

I pushed away the police, jumped into the car, charged the car away from the bus sign for several inches, stopped, got out of the car, and gave the ticket back to them.

“The traffic regulation says that pulling a car away in two minutes is not considered parking. I drove away in two minutes after I parked, so I didn’t break the rule.”

In this game of “cops and robbers,” these two cops have lost again. Let them feed the ticket to the goats.



I laughed heartily, carried my basket, and walked towards the store of the “desert legion.” I wanted to see if I had good luck today and could buy some fresh fruit and vegetables.

Day after day, I, a “black goat” that didn’t grow up in the desert, endeavored to live a wonderful life in a long and dreary time period.

I was reminded of lines by the great twelfth-century poet Xin Qiji – “Now that I have experienced so much and understood what woe really is, what more do I have to say? About to speak, but hold it back; I would rather talk about how nice and cool autumn is.”

## CONCLUSION: AN AMAZING JOURNEY

I started out my journey of translating *Stories of the Sahara* much like a timid little child, afraid of making mistakes or getting lost. I held on tightly to the Chinese text of *Stories of the Sahara* like a toddler holding on to parent's clothes in walking. In this process, close reading helped me develop an intimate relationship with Sanmao's writing. I paused at every phase to construct a coherent web of meanings from the text. The web became an image of Sanmao as a traveller and translator who, with her appreciation for diverse cultures and languages and a willingness to learn, straddles across cultures with ease. In translating the text, I let go of the Chinese text and walked along its side. When I completed reading and translating and started revising, my source text left me and asked me to return alone, but showed up now and then when I felt confused. I retraced my steps and left deeper imprints in places where I considered worthy of attention. Spanish words and Chinese characters, for instance, are such imprints that highlight my reading of the text as negotiation between languages. When I finally arrived my destination, I realized that I have grown up, nurtured by encounters with English, Chinese, Spanish, and Sahrawi cultures and languages. It is an amazing journey.

My translation showcases an extraordinarily brave Sanmao who finds merriment in the challenging circumstances of living in the Sahara Desert. The appeal in Sanmao's writing, lies not only in the joy in her story, or the exotic setting she depicts. It is her love that she shares with the people she meets during her travels, regardless of nationality, gender, religion, and social status, that underlies her text and I hope can attract my English-language readers. Her ability to speak several languages and to translate into the local language is crucial to her expression of love and care.

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