

STORIES OF THE SAHARA

撒哈拉歲月

* Over 10 million copies sold in Taiwan and China

First published in 1976, *Stories of the Sahara* was the literary breakthrough that launched the career of one of the most captivating and enigmatic voices in the Chinese language of the twentieth century. The mystique surrounding Sanmao persists in no small part thanks to this book, her first and most well-regarded work. Sanmao was the pen name of Chen Ping, a woman from southwest China who spent her childhood amid the turbulence of World War II and the Chinese Civil War, before her family moved to Taiwan and then she in turn moved to Europe, where she met her Spanish husband José Maria Quero.

Stories of the Sahara is autobiography, yet at the same time, 'Sanmao' becomes not only penname but also a *persona extraordinaire*, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, truth and fantasy. Originally serialised in Taiwan's *United Daily News* as well as other outlets, these are vivid stories painted against the canvas of the Spanish colonial Sahara of the 1970s and the impending political turmoil driving the narrative to its melancholy end. It is her awareness of the unique burdens as well as advantages inherent in her Otherness and her descriptions of the desert landscape that have stuck with readers ever since, turning it into a modern classic of Chinese language literature.

Sanmao 三毛

Sanmao's status in both Taiwan and China is almost legendary, she is an icon to her fans. Known for her unique storytelling sensibility, her writing is characterised by an insatiable wanderlust, a sharp eye for detail, and a life marred by tragedy. Her husband José, the love of her life, would die in a fatal diving accident in 1979, and in the end, Sanmao was to take her own life in 1991. Her writings were republished as a collection of eleven titles in 2011 to mark the twentieth anniversary of her death, a tribute to one of the most beloved writers of her generation.



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By Sanmao. Translated by Canaan Morse.

The Deaf Slave

The first time I was invited to dinner at the house of an extremely wealthy Sahrawi landowner in the village, I was entirely unacquainted with the host.

According to his cousin's wife's brother Ali, the rich man was not the type to extend casual invitations to his table. The only reason we and three other Spanish couples were being given this chance to eat barbecued camel's liver and hump was because we were Ali's friends.

After entering the labyrinthine passages of the rich man's grand, white house, I did not sit down on the sumptuous Persian rug with the other guests to await the feast of delicacies that might turn your stomach.

The rich man came out only briefly to greet his guests before returning to his own room.

He was an old Sahrawi man with a look of sharp, energetic intelligence, who conversed elegantly in French and Spanish as he smoked his hookah. His demeanour evinced a relaxed self-assurance touched with arrogance.

He left the work of attending to his dinner guests to Ali.

After we had admired the beautifully-bound books in the rich man's collection, I asked Ali very politely if I could enter the boudoir and meet his lovely wives.

'Of course, please go in. They want to meet you, too, they're just too embarrassed to come out.'

I went in alone and walked through the many rooms. I found sumptuous bedrooms with floor-length mirrors, beautiful women, Simmons mattresses, and many gold- and silver-laced melfa robes—a rare sight in the desert.

I had really hoped to show the rich man's four young, gorgeous wives to José, but they were too shy, and did not dare go out to meet the guests.

I wrapped myself in a woman's magenta melfa and covered my face before returning to dinner. When I entered the room the men all jumped up in surprise, thinking that I was wife number five.

Feeling that my costume was perfectly in tune with the atmosphere, I decided to keep it on, only tucking the fabric that had covered my face under my chin. Thus we waited for our desert feast.

Not long after, a boy no taller than a barstool came in carrying a charcoal burner. He had a sweet, deferential smile on his face, and he could not have been older than eight or nine.

He carefully placed the burner in one corner of the room and went out. Moments later he returned, swaying under the weight of a massive silver platter, which he placed in front of us on the red, patterned carpet. The platter held a silver teapot and sugar bowl, a bright green pinch of mint leaves, perfume, and a small, delicately-wrought charcoal burner, over which hot tea simmered.

I sighed in amazement. The ornate, spotless tea set enraptured me.

The boy gently kneeled in front of us, then got up to sprinkle perfume on the head of every guest, an important desert ritual.

I bent my head and allowed him to sprinkle the scented oil over me. He did not stop until my head was nearly completely wet. In an instant, the Arab palace was filled with a fragrance

that made it feel even more dignified and compelling.

The intense body odour the Sahrawi people had also disappeared completely.

Later, the boy also brought in a large bowl of raw camel meat and silently fixed a wire rack over the charcoal burner. We, the guests, were all talking loudly, the two Spanish wives vividly describing their experiences of childbirth. I stayed quiet and observed the little boy's every move.

He was systematic in his work, skewering the meat and placing it on the rack to grill, while simultaneously managing the other burner that brewed the tea. When it boiled, he threw in mint leaves and hard lumps of sugar. When he poured the tea he raised the pot over his head, letting the liquid fall in a long, graceful arc into the cups.

After the tea was poured, he kneeled in front of us once more, and offered each cup with both hands. It was a strong, delicious brew.

When the first batch of skewers was cooked through, the boy brought them to us on a plate.

Camel's hump is nothing but cholesterol; the meat and liver are just barely edible. The male guests and I each picked up a skewer and started in. The young boy kept his eyes fixed firmly on me, and I smiled and winked back to indicate the food was good.

When I was on my second skewer, the two boorish Spanish wives started up an appalling squawk: 'Oh, God! This is inedible! I'm going to puke, quick, get me soda water!'

I couldn't help but feel embarrassed by their coarseness.

So much food had been prepared, and I was the only woman eating it. To ask a child to wait on us hand and foot while we did nothing but sit and eat seemed stupid, so I got up and went to sit next to him. I helped him cook the skewers and ate over there. A little more salt was enough to mask the gamey taste of the camel.

The boy continued with his work in silence, with his head down and a faint smile on his lips. He was extremely nimble.

'A piece of meat, then a piece of hump, then a piece of liver... skewer them together and add salt, right?'

In a low voice he replied: 'Hakeh!' (Meaning 'correct,' or 'yes.')

I wanted to show him respect, so I asked him before fanning the fire or flipping the skewers. He was an extremely capable little child. I saw his happy face blush red, and imagined that few people had ever made him feel so important before.

The group sitting by the fire was not so inspiring. Ali was treating us to an authentic desert meal, but the two brainless Spanish women continually made condescending yelps and demands. They did not want tea, they wanted soda water; they would not sit on the floor, they had to have chairs.

All these demands Ali barked out as orders to the boy.

The boy, who was minding the fire, now had to rush out to buy soda water, bring it in, go get chairs for the women, then run back to check on his grilling. Distress was evident in his face.

'Ali! You're not doing anything, and neither are those women. Is it really fair to make the little one do all the work?' I yelled over at Ali.

Ali swallowed a piece of meat, then pointed at the kid with his skewer and said: 'He usually has to do a lot more than this. He's lucky to be here today.'

'Who is he? Why does he do so much?'

José immediately changed the subject. When their conversation broke, I repeated my question over the fire. 'Who is he, Ali? Tell me!'

'He's not from this family.' Ali looked uncomfortable.

'If he's not from this family, why is he here? Is he one of the neighbours' children?'

'No.' The room fell silent and all conversation ceased. I had only just moved to the desert,

and so I had no idea why they all looked so awkward. Even José was silent.

‘Well, who is he?’ I was getting impatient. Why all this hesitation?

‘Sanmao, come here.’ José waved me over. I put down the skewers and went to him. ‘The boy is a slave,’ he said in a whisper, afraid the child would hear. I covered my mouth with one hand and stared at José, then turned to look again at the boy who was working, his head bent down. ‘How did you end up with a slave?’ I asked Ali coldly.

‘They’ve been slaves for generations. They’re born to it.’

‘As if the first African ever born had ‘SLAVE’ tattooed on his face?’ I stared at Ali’s coffee-coloured face, unwilling to let him avoid my questions.

‘Obviously not—they’re taken by force. When they found Africans living in the desert, they captured them. Knocked them out and tied them up for a month, so they didn’t run away. They were less likely to escape if they took a whole family. Generations pass, and they eventually become personal property to be bought and sold.’ Seeing the anger rising in my expression, he quickly added: ‘We don’t treat the slaves badly at all. Boys like him can go home to their families’ tents at night. He lives at the edge of the village, it’s very nice, he can go home every day.’

‘How many slaves does our host own?’

‘Over two hundred. They’ve all been sent to build roads for the Spanish government. On the first of the month, he goes to collect their salary. That’s how he got rich.’

‘What do the slaves eat?’

‘The government department that contracts for the construction feeds them.’

‘So, the slaves make you money, and you don’t even take care of them?’ I looked askance at Ali.

‘Hey, let’s get a couple ourselves,’ one of the Spanish wives whispered to her husband. ‘Shut your goddam mouth!’ I heard him curse back.

As we left the house, I took off the melfa and gave it back to the rich man’s lovely wife. I thanked him, but didn’t shake his hand; I had no desire to see such a person again.

Our party had walked the length of the street before I noticed the little African slave had followed us. He was watching us from a corner, his quick eyes soft as a doe’s. I left the group and jogged over to him. Reaching into my purse, I pulled out two hundred pesetas and stuffed them into his palm. I told him, ‘Thank you,’ then turned and left.

But I felt ashamed of myself. What did money represent—how could it convey the kind of message I wished to give to him? It was the basest form of charity, even though I couldn’t think of a better alternative.

The following day I went to the post office to pick up my mail. Thinking back once more of slavery, I stopped in at the courthouse to talk to the old magistrate.

‘Aha, Sanmao, it’s been a while. Glad you remember me.’

‘Your Honour, I must say I’m impressed that the Spanish government openly allows slaves to be kept in its colonies.’

On hearing this, the magistrate heaved a long sigh, and replied, ‘Oh, that. Every time the Sahrawis fight the Spanish, we lock up the Spaniards. We barely even have the time to pacify the ruffians, let alone go messing about in their business. We wouldn’t dare.’

‘You’re not just ignoring it; you’re accomplices. Hiring slaves to build roads and paying the owner? It’s ridiculous.’

‘Is it? And what business is it of yours? The owners are all tribal leaders. The MPs of the Mauritanian parliament are all powerful Sahrawis. What can we do?’

‘The grand Catholic empire that doesn’t even allow divorce openly sanctions slavery. Truly

a marvelous thing. Something worth celebrating. Jesus! My second mother country...'
'Enough, Sanmao, don't be such a nuisance! It's too hot for that—'
'All right! I'm gone. Goodbye!' I strode out of the courthouse.

That evening, I got a knock on my door. It was very polite—three soft raps, then nothing more. I was surprised; who out here would be so civilised?

I opened the door to find an unfamiliar, middle-aged African man standing in my doorway.

He was dressed terribly—almost in rags, and he wore no turban. His white-stranded hair waved in the night wind.

Upon seeing me, he bowed with his hands folded over his breast. His demeanour stood in stark contrast to the habitual impoliteness of the Sahrawi.

'And you are, sir?...' I waited for him to speak.

But he couldn't speak. A gravelly sound came from his throat as he lowered a hand down to a child's height, then pointed to himself.

I didn't take his meaning, and could only reply: 'Sorry? I don't understand. Sorry?'

He immediately took out two hundred pesetas, pointed in the direction of the rich man's house, and put his hands at child's height again. I understood: he was the boy's father, and he was determined to give me back the money. I refused, and gestured with my hands to indicate I had given it to the child because he had cooked for me.

This slave was obviously a smart man, and understood quickly. He was clearly not congenitally mute, since he could make noise with his throat. It was his deafness that prevented him from speaking.

He looked again at the money, obviously with the impression it was a fortune. He thought for a moment, then tried to give it back again. We went back and forth for a while before he made another bow, put his palms together, and finally smiled at me, thanking me over and over again before he left.

That was my first encounter with the deaf slave.

Less than a week later, I woke up as I did every morning at around a quarter past five to see José off to work.

When we opened the door, we discovered a bright green head of fresh lettuce sitting on the ground outside, so fresh there were still beads of water on it. I carefully picked it up off the ground, and, once José was out of sight, I closed the door and went in search of a water bottle large enough to hold it. I placed the lettuce in it like a flower and put it on the guest room table.

I knew exactly from whom the gift had come.

We lent out or gave things to our Sahrawi neighbours almost every day, yet the only one so far to give back was a slave family who did not even own their own bodies.

I found the gift even more moving than the Biblical story of the poor widow's offering.

I hoped to see more of the deaf slave, but he did not appear again.

About two months later, our neighbours decided to build a room on their balcony. Their hollow bricks were brought over and stacked at our door before being lifted onto the balcony above.

Our dooryard became a total mess, and our white walls were badly scraped up by the bricks. When José came home I did not dare mention it, for fear of setting off his temper and hurting our neighbours' feelings. I merely waited impatiently for them to start work, so we

could at least have peace once more.

We waited and waited, but we saw no indication that the work was going to start. I went out to hang the laundry and looked down through the neighbours' skylight. When would they start? I asked.

'Soon. We're renting a slave. He'll be over in a few days once we've negotiated the price. The master is charging an exorbitant amount; he's the best cement worker in the desert.'

After a few days, the mason arrived. I went up onto the balcony to have a look, and found the very same deaf slave, squatting on the floor, mixing cement.

Surprised, I walked directly to him. Seeing my shadow, he looked up at me, and when he recognised who I was, he smiled—a beautiful, sincere smile that opened on his face like a flower.

This time, when he began to bow, I reached out immediately and shook his hand. Gesturing with my hands, I thanked him for the lettuce. He realised I knew it was he who sent it, and blushed. He asked with his hands: 'Was it good?'

I nodded vigorously, and said José and I had eaten it all. He smiled happily once more, and said: 'If people like you don't eat vegetables, your gums bleed.'

I was a bit shocked that a slave in the desert might possess this kind of understanding.

The deaf slave spoke in simple, clear hand gestures, which served perfectly as a *lingua franca*. He was expressive enough that you knew what he meant the moment you saw it.

After a few days of work, the deaf slave had already raised a three-foot wall.

It was August, when infernal summer heat flowed down at noon like lava from a volcano. Inside the house, I closed all the doors and windows and taped them over to keep the waves of heat from pouring in. I scrubbed the grass mats with water and held ice cubes wrapped in a towel on my forehead. Yet the 55-degree heat was enough to drive you insane.

When the heat was at its worst, all I could do was lie on a mat and wait, minute by minute, for evening to come. When the cool evening breeze blew in, I was finally able to sit outside for a while. It was the only pleasure I hoped for.

After several days of this I remembered the deaf slave working on the balcony. I had forgotten him; what could he possibly be doing in this heat?

I ran up the balcony, ready to brave the sun. The minute I opened the door a wave of heat engulfed me, and my head began to pound. I skittered outside to find the deaf slave. There was not a square inch of shade anywhere.

I found him curled over his knees with his back to the wall, like an old dog who can struggle no longer. He had covered himself with an old grass mat recovered from the sheep pen.

I hurried over, called to him, and pushed him. The sunlight ran over my skin like liquid iron. It was only a few seconds before I started to wobble.

I yanked off his grass mat and pushed him. He raised his poor face to me slowly, as if he'd been crying, and looked up.

I pointed to the house and said: 'Come on, let's go, go inside.'

He stood up weakly, indecision clearly visible in his pallid countenance.

Unable to stand the heat any longer, I pushed him hard. He gave an embarrassed bow, and finally walked under José's makeshift tent roof and down the steps. I closed the balcony door and went down with him.

The deaf slave stood under the tent next to our kitchen, holding a chunk of dried bread as hard as a rock. I recognized it as the stale bread the Sahrawis get from the military barracks, which they usually grind into meal to feed to goats. My neighbours, who had rented the slave to build their wall, had given him this to survive on.

He was nervous, and did not dare move from where he stood. It was hot under the tent roof,

so I invited him into the living room, but he would not go. He pointed at himself, then pointed at his skin, and refused to budge.

'You, me, we're all the same. Please come in,' I gestured. No one had ever treated him like a human before, how could he have not been scared? He seemed so uncomfortable I stopped pushing. I set him up with a grass mat in a dark corner of the hallway.

I opened the refrigerator for a bottle of orange juice, a piece of fresh bread, a block of dry cheese, and the hard-boiled egg José had left this morning. I placed all these next to him and invited him to eat. Then I closed the living room door and left him alone, afraid he would be too uncomfortable to eat in front of me.

By three thirty in the afternoon the lava was still flowing down. Inside was boiling hot; there was no telling how bad it was outdoors.

Worried that his owners would scold him, I went to remind the deaf slave to get back to work.

He was seated like a stone statue in the hallway. He had eaten all of his own bread, but drunk only a few sips of orange juice. The rest of the food was untouched. I folded my hands together and looked at him.

The deaf slave understood perfectly well. He stood up immediately, gesturing to me: 'Please don't be angry. I'm not eating because I want to bring this home to my wife and children.' He pantomimed three children, two boys and a girl.

I finally understood. I went and found a bag, placed the food inside and added another piece of cheese, half a watermelon, and two bottles of Coca-Cola. I did not have much saved up myself, otherwise I could have given him more.

When he saw me adding things to the bag he bowed his head, his expression indicating a conflict of happiness and embarrassment. I could not bear to see it.

I stuffed the bag into our half-empty refrigerator, and pointed at the sun. 'Come back for it once the sun is down. I'll keep it here for you.'

He nodded energetically and bowed again, his expression ecstatic to the point of tears. Then he ran quickly back up the stairs to his work. The deaf slave must love his children, I thought, and he must have a happy family. Otherwise, he would not save such little food. I paused for a second, then opened a box of José's favorite taffies, grabbed a handful, and stuffed them into the deaf slave's bag.

In truth, we did not have much in the way of food; it really was a pretty scant offering.