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SAN MAO GOES SHOPPING: TRAVEL AND CONSUMPTION IN A POST-COLONIAL WORLD

 *Miriam Lang*

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to situate one popular Chinese (Taiwan) writer's experiences of travel and consumption in the post-colonial world.¹

Much writing that considers 'non-white' post-colonial subjects has assumed their economic powerlessness, both domestically and globally. Issues such as cultural alienation, dispossession (as in much post-colonial writing in English) and social marginality (as in writing about minorities in white-dominated countries such as America, Britain or Australia) are frequently raised in this context. This study, however, takes as its subject a person from a former colony² which has relatively recently become a wealthy and increasingly significant player on the world stage. The popular writer San Mao 三毛, one of the first mass-culture 'celebrities' of the Chinese-speaking world, moves freely between four continents, in roles which have been largely perceived as the preserve of the coloniser (or the coloniser's post-colonial 'first-world' heir): traveller, chronicler, interpreter, and consumer. Indeed she could be said to be enacting something like what Sally Price has called "the Western principle that 'the world is ours'";³ San Mao too makes the world 'hers' and demonstrates her possession of it in her writings—most notably in *My Treasures*, the collection of stories under discussion here.

San Mao is a truly international shopper, selecting objects to fit and create her desired self-image wherever she travels. Yet the items which she purchases around the world (and then publicly catalogues for her readers) are not the expensive designer goods with 'European quality' brand-names (such as Gucci or Chanel) that, for many people, have come to embody not only 'international taste' but 'elevated taste' as well and have been embraced for their status value in East Asia as elsewhere.⁴ San Mao's consumption choices are conditioned by a rather more subtle set of identity markers linked

I would like to thank Lewis Mayo for the many insights he contributed to this paper, Colin Jeffcott for his careful reading, and Allan Lo and Peter Kwan for their kind help with my translation queries. I also gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of the Crown Publishing House (Huangguan Chubanshe), Taipei, in allowing the photographs from San Mao's book to be reproduced here. (Note: in this paper, the *pinyin* system of romanisation is used, even though this mainland system is not the usual form used in Taiwan.) This paper was first presented at the conference on 'Colonialism, postcolonialism and the Chinese world' held at the Australian National University in September, 1993. It is an offshoot of a larger study of the 'San Mao phenomenon', which will deal in more detail with her status as a cultural icon and with the content of her writings.

¹ I use the term 'post-colonial' to refer to the international political, economic and cultural situation that has existed since the breaking up of the empires administered by European nations. The use of the term is not intended to imply any sense of a 'liberation' of the world from colonialism and its lingering effects or to deny the presence of 'neocolonialism' in international structures of economic imbalance and cultural domination.

² Taiwan was administered as a colony by Japan from 1895 to 1945. In the late 1940s /OVER

/1940s, during the conflict between Communists and Nationalists on the mainland, many Nationalist supporters moved to Taiwan. San Mao's father, a former soldier for the Nationalists who had shifted his family from Shanghai to Chongqing when the Nationalists moved their headquarters there, was one of these; he brought his family to Taiwan in 1948.

³ Price notes this maxim in connection with "the accessibility of [the twentieth-century world's] cultures to those who enjoy membership in Western society" and the assurance of the world market system that "given financial resources, anyone can own anything from anywhere"; she notes that it is the basis of the collecting of "Primitive Art" and "its now aging parent, colonialism, and its somewhat younger cousins, travel journalism and tourism." Sally Price, *Primitive art in civilized places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp.23, 79.

Figure 1

Cover of *San Mao's My treasures*. All illustrations in this article are reproduced with the kind permission of Crown Publishing House (Huangguan Chubanshe), Taipei



to international taste regimes of a different kind.

As a citizen of Taiwan, San Mao does not fit unproblematically into the categories of 'coloniser' or 'colonised'. She did not experience the period of Japanese colonialism in Taiwan directly, although legacies of the Japanese administration remained in the Taiwan to which her family emigrated in 1948. As a mainland Chinese in Nationalist-governed Taiwan she can be seen as a member of a colonising élite; she takes on this position again as the spouse of a Spaniard in the Spanish colony in the Sahara desert. In her international travels between the 1960s and 1980s, she represented a Taiwan which had no political power despite its steadily growing economic power. As she notes in her writing, Taiwan was presumed poor and backward by Europeans she encountered on her international travels—yet as the daughter of a relatively wealthy professional San Mao not only had the economic power to travel and shop but could also impress with her European cultural knowledge.⁵ Her economic power allowed her to consume; her cultural authority allowed her to construct narratives of her dealings with 'others' from the 'third world' for consumption by Chinese readers. This examination of her narrative of inter-

national consumption experiences will attempt to shed some light on the world order by which they are informed.

San Mao and her Treasures

The popular Taiwan writer San Mao⁶ is well known throughout the Chinese-speaking world for her tales (purportedly factual) of her experiences in foreign lands. After studying in Spain and Germany in the late 1960s, she lived in the Spanish Sahara and in the Canary Islands for several years in the 1970s, writing about her experiences for publication in Taiwan. In 1981 a major Taiwan newspaper sponsored her to visit Central and South America on a six-month tour and write about her adventures there.⁷ San Mao's main ports of call are linked by European colonialism; her trajectory is from Taiwan to Europe, from Spain to Spanish possessions and territories, and thence to Spain's former colonies. Her studies in Spain and compet-

⁴ I am indebted to Tomoko Akami for her insightful comments about 'international taste'.

⁵ See the early story "Fu Ou lütu jianwenlu" [Record of what I saw and heard in Europe] in San Mao, *Yuji bu zai lai* [The rainy season won't come again] (Taipei: Huangguan Chubanshe, 1976).

⁶ 'San Mao' was the pen-name of Chen Ping 陳平 (1943–91).

⁷ According to one Taiwan writer, this kind of sponsored tour (which took place from November 1981 to May 1982, and spawned not only a number of articles, which were later collected into a book, but also

ence in the Spanish language granted her access to a world of tourism on three continents. Through her simply-written, direct and apparently personal stories of travel, relationships and everyday life in foreign countries, San Mao has been able to act for her readership as an interpreter of unknown worlds; anecdotal evidence suggests that she was also, to some extent, a role model for the fantasies if not the actual experience of readers.⁸

In 1985, San Mao arranged for some items from her collection of personal treasures to be photographed.⁹ The hundred or so objects in the eventual photographed set¹⁰ had been acquired by purchase or as gifts during her decade or so of residence outside Taiwan and her travels in foreign lands, as well as more recently in Taiwan. The photographs, together with San Mao's short explanations of the process by which she acquired each object, appeared in *Qiao 俏* (CUTE) magazine and *Huangguan 皇冠* (Crown) magazine.¹¹ Later they were compiled into the book *Wode baobei 我的寶貝* (My Treasures), published in 1987, which is the subject of this study.¹²

At first, San Mao tells us, she had no intention of publishing the photographs of her "treasures." The images were for herself alone—so that if the destiny that brought the treasures into her hands should take them from her again, she would still have the photographs as a record and not be sad at their loss (p.6). It is ostensibly this vision of the beloved objects moving into other hands that prompts the public record of their connection with her, so that the next person to possess them will be able to know their stories;¹³ therefore, she notes explicitly that "This is a story book, not a collection book" (p.9).

Accordingly, *My Treasures* takes the form of eighty-six short, self-contained accounts of the situations in which certain of San Mao's treasures were acquired. Each account is accompanied by a small black and white sketch and a colour photograph of the object (or objects) concerned.¹⁴ The photographs take the form of sharply focused images of each object, placed

/founded in 1954 and generally acknowledged to have a large circulation in Taiwan (although no exact circulation figures are available, these being closely-guarded secrets in the Taiwan magazine industry). In addition to its local edition it also appears in two foreign editions, for South-east Asia and America respectively, as a result of which *Crown* writers are well known among Chinese speakers in those regions as well. Most of San Mao's books (and indeed the books of many other well-known Taiwanese writers, most notably Qiong Yao 瓊瑤) appeared first in serialised form in *Crown* magazine and then were published as monographs by Crown Publishing House.

¹² San Mao, *My treasures* (Taipei: Huangguan Chubanshe, 1987), pp.5–6. All further references to *My treasures* will be given in the text.

¹³ Apart from such sentimental considerations, the publication of the photographs in a catalogue of this kind would also ensure a favourable price if San Mao chose to sell the items. There is perhaps a hint here of "the lustre of a famous owner" which "made for a considerable part of an object's market value," as Craig Clunas has noted in the context of late Ming-dynasty paintings and calligraphies: *Superfluous things: material culture and social status in early modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.113; Price has referred to a corresponding phenomenon in 'Primitive Art' collecting where the "history of ownership" helps to "define the object's pedigree" through "an authenticated line of descent, providing for the potential buyer a guarantee of the value of the purchase." Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, p.102. The items in San Mao's collection similarly acquire 'value' through their association with her.

¹⁴ I have been able to discern no overall pattern governing the order of presentation; objects of different types, with different market values and acquired in different places at different times appear for the most part in apparently random sequence. There is no attempt at chronological or taxonomic classification. Such a presentation is consistent with the aura of spontaneity and serendipity with which San Mao consistently surrounded her public persona, and is perhaps an attempt to reinforce her assertions that each of her treasures came to her through fate rather than through any kind of consistent buying pattern—indeed the author herself remarks in her preface that she has decided /OVER

/an extensive lecture tour in Taiwan) was quite without precedent. The *Lianhe Bao* [United Daily News] is said to have paid a million NT\$ for this tour, which would seem to be an affirmation of the extraordinary popularity of San Mao and the consequent profitability of her name appearing in its pages (interview with a Taiwan writer, who requested to remain anonymous, July 1995).

⁸ On many, many occasions I have been told by young women in both China and Taiwan that they wished to be like San Mao.

⁹ She invited the photographer Wu Hongming 吳洪銘 to photograph her jewellery. It is not clear how many of the photographs included in the book are the work of Wu Hongming, however, as no photographer is explicitly credited for any picture.

¹⁰ The publicly displayed set of 'treasures' is by no means an exhaustive inventory of San Mao's collections of objects. Her collection of

/bowls alone ran to more than 100 (*My treasures*, p.183 [cited in n.12 below]), but only a handful feature in this published record. As she remarks in her afterword, "I have more treasures other than just the tiny few in the book" (p.268).

¹¹ Both magazines, as well as the book, were published by Crown (Huangguan) Publishing House. *CUTE* was a short-lived magazine aimed at teenage girls, which began in March 1984 and apparently ceased publication in October 1985. Some of San Mao's treasures made their debut there in seven instalments beginning in August 1984 under the title of "Wode shoucang" [My collection]. The series ended when San Mao left Taiwan in 1985. After her return to settle in Taiwan in 1986 San Mao added to her collection by purchasing new 'treasures' there. The expanded "My Treasures" was serialised in *Crown* magazine through 1987 (beginning March 1987, vol.67, no.1). *Crown* is a general-interest magazine

Figure 2

San Mao with her 'treasures' (My treasures, p.179)



/against presenting a systematic classification because that is not the kind of person she is (p.8). Two photographs of San Mao herself sitting at a table on which is scattered a profusion of jewellery and ornaments support this impression of random abundance. For readers in the People's Republic of China, San Mao's treasures were one step less accessible as there were no photographs in the pirate edition published there in 1989.

¹⁵ Even though San Mao states in her introduction to the book that she likes to imagine the people who "have had contact" with the objects (p.6).

¹⁶ *Yuanfen* 緣分, a word usually used in connection with fortuitous and fortunate meetings between people, suggesting a predetermined or karmic link between them (defined by *The Pinyin Chinese-English Dictionary* as 'lot or luck by which people are brought together'). This narrative of *yuanfen* echoes the characteristic conviction of collectors noted by Susan Stewart that the col-

on tables or shelves with a minimum of background detail. There are no pictures of the places where they were purchased, nor of the people from whom San Mao acquired them. With a very few exceptions, the stories give no impression of the life or history of the objects before their fateful encounter with San Mao; the format of the photographs, in which there are no explicit outside referents, helps to create the impression that the items have no context apart from San Mao herself.¹⁵

Like all of the experiences which San Mao shares with her readers through her writings, the experiences of travel and consumption outlined in *My Treasures* are presented as meaningful in emotional terms. The importance of the items she has collected, she tells us, lies not so much in themselves or their 'value' as in their connection with the times, places and circumstances of their acquisition. In her preface to the book, San Mao writes that she loves her treasures, not just because of "my appreciation of beauty" or because the things in the collection come "from lots of different countries all over the world," nor even "because they make my home more pleasant and comfortable":

none of these factors alone could give these objects the importance that they have for me. The reason I love these treasures so much is that when my destiny and theirs came together, ... there was a different story behind each one ... They are a record of my life (pp.5–6).

In stating that the appeal of her objects is not principally their aesthetic or monetary value, San Mao removes the discussion of her collection from the realm of the 'art' object to a supposedly depoliticised and individual level of self-expression. San Mao insists and reiterates that her treasured objects have come into her life purely by fate or 'destiny'.¹⁶ They are not seen as outcomes of chance or coincidence, as consequences of greed or sentimentality, or as products of certain patterns of aesthetic preference. She betrays little awareness of the structures of taste that underlie her selections of objects to consume; what matters is the circumstances of each gift or purchase, her relationship with the donor or vendor, and the exotic foreign settings. Within San Mao's descriptions of these are encoded clear indications of her attitudes to the people and cultures of various countries, alongside a generally unexamined set of power relations.

At first glance there is little of intrinsic interest in a series of self-indulgent shopping stories, but there are two strands of meaning that make it worthy

of study. First, during a period in which consumption as an act of self-affirmation and lifestyle creation was becoming accepted in Taiwan, shopping stories of precisely this kind would have had a marked significance, particularly for newcomers to the game.¹⁷ In the absence of evidence about the preferred souvenirs of later Taiwanese travellers, and given that the objects in San Mao's collection itself are to some extent a reflection of international fashion, it is impossible to gauge the 'real' influence of a volume such as this; nonetheless it does represent part of a larger picture of material culture. Second, much of the importance of this book for its readers would have come from the persona of San Mao herself: the popular writer with the romantic international lifestyle and the 'exotic' foreign husband, whose unrestrained emotional life and authoritative interactions with the non-Chinese world had already been presented to readers through her books and articles for more than a decade before the publication of *My Treasures*.¹⁸ These photographs of her prized belongings serve as an even more concrete illustration for readers of the beauty and exoticism of San Mao's life. Many of San Mao's writings stress her love of beauty and art and the importance of emotion in her responses to them. *My Treasures* demonstrates this physically, in its cataloguing of the objects she herself has chosen and the gifts showered upon her by people who love her.

Shopping for Happiness

At the outset of her catalogue of consumption, San Mao declares that love is what really matters and objects are secondary:

People come empty-handed and leave empty-handed. In the twinkling of an eye, everything we possess in this mortal world turns to nothing. Aside from love, what can we take with us or leave behind us? When compared in this way, the surpassing value and the sublimity of love shows it to be eternal, beyond compare.¹⁹

Nonetheless, her enthusiasm for material possessions is undeniable. She tells

/as *Treatise on superfluous things*, *Eight discourses on the art of living*, and *Pure and arcane collecting*. The scope of such books extends beyond "high-status and high-value works like painting, calligraphy and early bronzes" to include such things as jades, strange rocks, plum trees and bamboos, tea, shiny white porcelain and "mysterious coloured pottery, old and new" (Clunas, *Superfluous things*, pp.104–5). Clunas notes further that this kind of "participation in debates about taste and style was accepted as a legitimate form of elite activity" (p.21). San Mao's presentation of her collection of personal treasures, however, does not direct readers to the 'correct' type of objects in generalised categories, as these Ming dynasty collections do. In accordance with her extremely personalised manner of presentation of other aspects of her life, San Mao avoids an overtly prescriptive approach in this record of consumption choices. Perhaps Gu Yuanqing's 顧元慶 *Illustrated praises of my ten friends* could be seen as a forerunner of this book of San Mao's, but there are still important differences. The "friends" of the title are ten of the author's possessions (including a table-screen, an ancient pottery vessel, a flute and an inkstone); precise measurements as well as detailed descriptions and pictures of them, along with a 'florid and literary "encomium"' for each (Clunas, *Superfluous things*, p.52). San Mao, on the other hand, is less concerned with accurate measurement than with the stories from her life that her 'friends' remind her of.

¹⁸ San Mao's first book, *Saharade gushi* [Stories of the Sahara] was published (by Crown Publishing House) in 1976. The question of precisely who San Mao's readers were and are is difficult to answer. It is fashionable to argue that her works are read only by teenage girls, and in the mid-1990s this may be true. During the early years of her popularity, however, her readership was undoubtedly much wider, largely owing to the fact that so much of her work was published in Taiwan's major newspapers, in particular the *Lianhe bao*. My own experience is that it is not easy to find an educated Taiwanese person of either sex under the age of about sixty or a mainland Chinese under about forty who has not read at least one of San Mao's works.

¹⁹ *My treasures*, p.6. Similar sentiments are expressed on pp.100 and 165.

/lection "just comes" to them: "collected objects are not the result of the serial operation of labour upon the material environment. Rather, they present the seriality of an animate world; their production appears to be self-motivated and self-realised. If they are 'made', it is by a process that seems to invent itself for the pleasure of the acquirer One 'finds' the elements of the collection The collector constructs a narrative of luck which replaces the narrative of production." Stewart, *On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p.165. A similar observation has been made by Pierre Bour-

/dieu in connection with "the love of art," which, "like any other kind of love," "recoils from tracing its origins and prefers on the whole [to see itself as the result of] not common conditions and experiences, but rather the chance happenings that can always be interpreted as predestination." Pierre Bourdieu, *L'amour de l'art*, quoted (in her own translation) by Sally Price in *Primitive art in civilized places*, p.18.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Geremie Barmé for drawing my attention both to this point and to Craig Clunas's fascinating book on the subject of the genre of books prescribing appropriate elite consumption in the Ming dynasty, such

²⁰ Questions of the monetary value of San Mao's treasures are never raised in the book—though certain treasures are undoubtedly valuable, such as a Phoenician pot (found by José on a diving expedition and later dated and authenticated by the Madrid archaeological museum; as it is broken and the museum already has several complete specimens, José is allowed to keep it—p.94). San Mao tells us in her preface that their value cannot be measured in terms of money (*My treasures*, p.5); their real value lies in their connection with the experiences of her possessive self and is thus truly “sentimental.”

²¹ Stewart, *On longing*, p.147.

²² Pearce identifies three modes of collecting: collections as ‘souvenirs’ (“objects which take their collection unity only from their association with ... a single person and his or her life history”); as ‘fetish objects’ (“which are ... organised and stored according to a clear rationale ... the collection plays the crucial role in defining the personality of the collector ... [thus] at the opposite pole to ... souvenirs ... Here the subject is subordinated to the objects”) and as ‘systematics’ (“organised, planned, assembled ... [with] principles of organisation perceived to have an external reality beyond the specific material under consideration ... not by the accumulating of samples, as fetishistic collecting does, but by the selection of examples intended to stand for all the others of their kind and to complete a set”). Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, objects and collections: a cultural study* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), pp.69–87. As for souvenirs in the sense of mementoes of foreign travels, Susan Stewart has noted that “the souvenir of the exotic” is “both a specimen and a trophy: on the one hand, the object must be marked as exterior and foreign; on the other hand, it must be marked as arising out of an immediate experience of its possessor” (Stewart, *On longing*, p.147); this characterisation fits San Mao's collection very neatly.

²³ “The romantic view holds that everything, and especially everybody, has a place in the true organic wholeness which embraces human relationships, in the traditional continuity of past into present, in the landscape and the changing seasons. It asks us to believe that life is not fractured, confused and rootless but, on the contrary, suffused

the reader that she actively collects bowls, coloured cloth, jewellery and Taiwanese folk jars. The excitement with which she consumes and recounts her shopping experiences is considerable—even to the point of being ‘dazed with total happiness’ (p.212) on one occasion when shopping in a Mexican market. San Mao does not conceal the fact that she collects objects for emotional fulfilment:

“You’ve already got a whole lot of old jars—what do you want more for?” my mother asked, uncomprehending.

I ... said to my mother, “I’m on my own, I don’t eat much, I don’t buy clothes, I don’t sleep, I’m not planning to get married, I don’t sing, I don’t have a car, I don’t have enough time, I certainly don’t go travelling abroad—I can’t even whistle. I ask you, if a person like this can make herself happy for a few days by buying a few folk craft objects, is that excessive?”

My mother ... thought about it, then wiped her eyes and said, “If it makes you happy, buy them” (p.254).

Although her analogy between shopping and sleep, time and marriage is presumably made flippantly, the fact that an exchange such as this can move her mother to tears indicates the significance of consumption in San Mao's life as a source of happiness.

The Possessing Gaze

Aside from being owned by San Mao, there is nothing to unite the items displayed for the reader in *My Treasures*. But despite their widely disparate nature and their varying degrees of monetary or artistic value, the objects in San Mao's collection are placed on an equal footing by being photographed and juxtaposed together in this catalogue of treasures. An old brass teapot, a dart board, a Phoenician pot, a plate printed with a sentimental message, an antique jade bracelet, a crocheted vest and some stones from the seashore (to name just a few examples)—all of these are placed together as equals. The objects are presented as meaningful to their owner not necessarily for any intrinsic value²⁰ but because of the emotion with which they are invested. Their value becomes equal, as all are equally important to San Mao.

Many of San Mao's treasures were purchased during her travels in foreign countries and as such might be termed ‘souvenirs’—exotic objects that represent ‘distance appropriated’.²¹ As objects unified solely by their association with their possessor, and not forming a matching or recognisably coherent set, the treasures can also be defined as ‘souvenirs’ according to Susan Pearce's taxonomy of collection types.²² San Mao's presentation of her collection resonates strongly with Pearce's characterisation of souvenirs as “intensely romantic.”²³ Although the treasures are featured in the book's title and are ostensibly its subject, these stories of San Mao's possessive self and its treasures amply bear out that the narrative of the souvenir “is not a narrative of the object; it is a narrative of the possessor.”²⁴

In her analysis of souvenirs Susan Stewart notes that they “allow the tourist to appropriate, consume and thereby ‘tame’ the cultural other.”²⁵ Identical metaphors of ‘taming’ and ‘appropriation’ have been applied to the photograph, which is, in the words of John Urry, “a way of taming the object of the gaze”;²⁶ “to photograph,” he affirms, is “to appropriate the object being photographed.” Urry observes that the photograph can be perceived not only as a statement about the world but also as a piece of it, “a miniature slice of reality,” even though that “piece of reality” has already been selected, structured and shaped for the viewer by the person taking the photograph. In buying her souvenirs and in commissioning photographs of them, San Mao has selected her slices of the reality of foreign cultures out of “an infinity of other images that were not chosen.” Not only do the objects themselves give their purchaser the illusion of possessing some essence of the culture they represent but their photographs also pass on the illusion in some measure to the viewer/reader. The objects in *My Treasures* could be said to be twice tamed, filtered through the two selection processes by which they become the representative objects first of their places of origin and then of San Mao’s life of travel as well, as San Mao reappropriates them as signifiers of herself.²⁷

Just as San Mao gives her readers no sense of real qualitative differences between her objects, she presents the circumstances under which she acquired them as also somehow equivalent. Relations of power are glossed over, and no explicit political considerations are addressed. An account of San Mao’s mother gathering pretty stones for her on the beach is somehow equated with the gift of a slave offered by an Arab nomad and the drums which he gives her when she refuses to accept the slave (as will be discussed further below). The purchase of the personal property of slum-dwellers or desert nomads and the receiving of gifts from wealthy neighbours are equalised in San Mao’s narrative of emotionally meaningful possessions. As the items are unified through possession by San Mao they are also drenched in a rhetoric of personal communion and feeling; the implicit message of *My Treasures* is that feeling between people transcends all other considerations, including the historical and political context of the acquisition of the items.

Consumption and Identity—Purchasing the Self

The function of modern consumption as an expression of the identity of the individual has been well documented.²⁸ The consumer selects items that will express his or her personality and individuality and at the same time structure the way he or she wishes to be perceived by others. Thus the selection and purchase of objects has a significance beyond the simple spending of money on commodities; the consumer seeks both to express his or her identity in what he or she buys and to buy the kind of identity he or she wishes to project. “Individuality,” notes Brian Spooner, “is expressed through choice in the material world,” by “the use of objects to make personal statements, to say something about who one is in relation to

/with grace and significance Souvenirs are an important part of our attempt to make sense of our personal histories, happy or unhappy, to create an essential personal and social self centred in its own unique life story, and to impose this vision on an alien world. They relate to the construction of a romantically integrated personal self, in which the objects are subordinated into a secondary role.” Pearce, *Museums*, pp.72–3. As already noted, this ‘souvenir’ quality of San Mao’s collection is one of the features that distinguishes it from earlier traditions of collecting in China. Although the precious objects collected by Chinese literati were doubtless a significant element in the integration of the personal selves of their possessors, they tended to be carefully collected as superior representatives of their type, based on a logic of connoisseurship, and thus more akin to the ‘systematic’ mode of collection.

²⁴ Stewart, *On longing*, p.136.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.146.

²⁶ John Urry, *The tourist gaze: leisure and travel in contemporary societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), pp.138–9.

²⁷ San Mao’s most ‘exotic’ travel experience, and the one that established her fame as a writer (namely the time she spent living in the Sahara Desert), was itself a direct result of the power of the photographic image. Her decision to go to the Sahara (despite Africa’s low placement in Chinese racial hierarchies) was a response to the persuasiveness of photographs in *National Geographic*. Seduced by a mass-produced image, San Mao went to Africa to pursue a fantasy of desert life.

²⁸ Among them Gail Reekie, “Changes in the Adamless Eden: the spatial and sexual transformation of a Brisbane department store 1930–90,” in *Lifestyle shopping: the subject of consumption*, ed. Rob Shields (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.170–94; Mike Featherstone, *Consumer culture and post-modernism* (London: Sage Publications, 1991); Daniel Miller, *Material culture and mass consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value,” in *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.3–63.

²⁹ Brian Spooner, "Weavers and dealers: the authenticity of an oriental carpet," in Appadurai, *The social life of things*, pp.195–235, at 226.

³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, transl. Richard Nice *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

³¹ She did not gain any degree or diploma qualifications from any of them, however.

³² San Mao's income for 1989 was estimated to be a million Taiwan dollars. See Yang Tian, "Huawen shijie shouru zuigao de zuojia" [Highest-earning writers in the Chinese-speaking world], *Jiangyi* 6.6 (March 1990): 76–9, at 79.

³³ The touristic desire for the 'exotic' has been noted by Janet Abhu Lughod in her account of the influence of tourist preferences for exotic markets or bazaars. The main city bazaar in Tunis has come to specialize in "Tunisian handicrafts, traditional goods, etc. It has kept its exotic architecture and multicolored columnades (*sic*). The plaintive (*sic*) sound of the ancient nose flute and the whining of Arabic music provide background for the European tourists in their shorts and T-shirts ... stopping to look and to buy. Few natives, except for sellers, are to be seen." As the main bazaar has become a relic of an exotic past for tourist consumers, a secondary bazaar has taken its former place as a site where local Tunisian people shop for such commodities as radios, jeans and soap; few foreign tourists are to be seen there. "Going beyond global babble," in *Culture, globalization and the world-system*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp.131–7, at 132.

³⁴ Appadurai in *The social life of things*, p.27. The taste for things of "the past and of the other" has a long history in China too. A taste for "antique things" in China was noted by the sixteenth-century traveller Matteo Ricci (Clunas, *Superfluous things*, p.94, quoted from Pasquale M. D'Elia, S.J., ed., *Fonti ricciane* [Rome 1942], vol.1, p.91) and, as Clunas has also pointed out, the élite consumers of the Ming dynasty were enthusiastic purchasers of "exotica," including "high-craft objects from Japan" and Korean lanterns (*Superfluous things*, pp.58–9). Clunas also draws our attention to their interest in "objects which partake of the nature of curiosities," such as "old lamps of the Yuan dynasty, imported Japanese folding fans and Korean

others."²⁹ Thus *My Treasures* bears witness to the construction of the individuality of one educated, middle class, cosmopolitan Chinese subject.

On what basis, then, does San Mao make her selections of items to consume? The processes by which individual tastes are formed and propagated have not received the attention from scholars that they deserve. Pierre Bourdieu links notions of taste and class with his concept of cultural capital, that legitimacy and authority of 'good' taste which an individual accumulates both from his or her family and class background and from his or her time spent in formal education.³⁰ San Mao would doubtless have gained a certain measure of cultural capital from her parents' household. The conventional category of 'father's occupation' as a class marker would place her firmly in the ranks of the middle class, her father having been a lawyer with a degree from a prestigious Chinese mainland university. Her educational trajectory too, although unconventional in that she had virtually no secondary schooling, took her to several tertiary institutions, first in Taipei and then in Madrid and Berlin;³¹ she was also to work intermittently as a lecturer at Taiwan's 'Culture University' (中國文化大學) after her travels abroad. Her experiences in Germany and Spain are important components of San Mao's status as a cultural icon in the Chinese-speaking world—not only from the point of view of her formal studies there but also from the easy familiarity with European languages and cultures that she presents to readers in her stories. These experiences too were made possible by her class background, as her father's income was sufficient to support her life of international study and travel until she was able to generate her own wealth through her writing.³² In class terms, then, the education of San Mao's tastes and her power to consume would place her in an upper middle-class grouping.

For many members of the upper middle classes, after the socialisation processes of Bourdieu's two categories of family and education as generators of cultural capital have done their work, there is a third process that is perceived to add a final extra layer of cultural confidence and authority: namely travel, and in particular travel to and time spent in Europe. The significance of travel as a bestower of cultural capital is known to all of us outside the 'metropole'; for Bourdieu, writing from what chooses to consider itself the 'centre', this question of the perceived importance of experience outside one's own cultural milieu (and in a milieu more culturally 'legitimate' than one's own) evidently did not arise. San Mao replicates the pattern of cultural pilgrimage to Europe that has long been an almost requisite part of the experience of young, educated, upper middle-class residents of Europe's former colonies. The example of San Mao's cultural authority, which was based at least in part on the 'cosmopolitan' image she gained from her years of residence in Europe and her knowledge of European languages, is perhaps an indication that the notion of Europe as providing 'definitive' experience and true culture is present to some extent not only in Europe's former colonies but also in a society that lies outside the recognised purview of European cultural dominance, such as Taiwan.

In her purchasing of identity and her search for 'unique' objects to express

her personality, San Mao's preferred shopping spaces are markets, which are full of 'a flavour that you can't find in department store displays' (p.212). In this respect, her consumption choices reflect a scheme of taste that is observable in industrial western countries, namely the preference for 'exotic', 'ethnic' goods from the so-called third world—a preference which may be linked to the fashions of the hippie movement of the 1960s, when San Mao first set out on her international travels.³³ Indeed in many ways San Mao's tastes reflect what has been considered to be "the Western taste for the things of the past and of the other."³⁴ In this context, we might borrow Sally Price's convention of taking the "capital-W Western" as signalling "an association with European-derived cultural assumptions, whether in the thinking of someone from New York, Tokyo or Lagos."³⁵ Clearly it is not only people from any geographically defined 'west' who "seek purity in order to demonstrate superior taste, to enhance ... their individuality" as Alfred Gell suggests that 'westerners' do.³⁶ The composition of San Mao's collection of souvenirs might be said to mirror some of the traditional structures of colonialism, where the west consumes the east—but San Mao herself, the consumer, is part of that 'east'.

Authenticity

Although San Mao, like most tourists, is convinced of the uniqueness of her own tastes, her choice of purchases seems to be informed by certain internationalised patterns of aesthetic preference. She expresses her individuality by consuming 'ethnic' items, the 'exotic', handcrafted products of Africa, South America and Asia, and in doing so mirrors structures of colonial dominance—not only in what she selects but (as will be demonstrated) in her purchasing behaviour as well. As noted above, San Mao demonstrates through her collection that the world is 'hers'. In her references to the artefacts of the place where she grew up, Taiwan, as well as to those of foreign countries, San Mao displays attitudes that are familiar in the context of consumption in 'the west': the appeal and 'integrity' of folk art, the honesty and simplicity of the countryside, and the dignity and beauty of manual labour.

Her preferences are for the antique, the hand-made, things that aren't 'too delicate' (p.29) or 'too touristy' (p.192). She likes brightly-coloured woven or embroidered 'ethnic' cloth³⁷ and 'ethnic' jewellery,³⁸ and declares herself

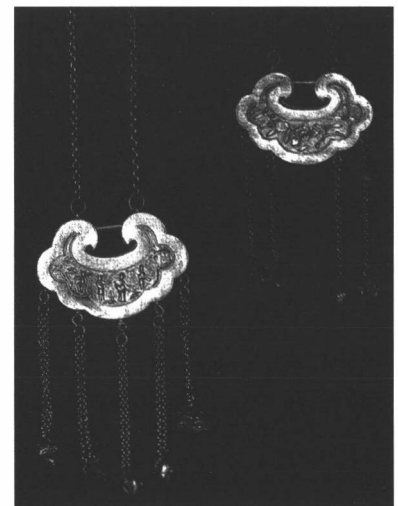
³⁶ Alfred Gell, "Newcomers to the world of goods: consumption among the Muria Gonds" in Appadurai, *The social life of things*, pp.110–38, at 130.

³⁷ San Mao states that books and coloured cloth are the things she loves most in the world (p.191). Books account for only one shopping story, when in Story 49 she buys a set of Spanish encyclopaedias. Four stories concern the purchase of cloth: from South America (Story 17), from the Sahara (Story 43), and two from India (Stories 60 and 85 respectively).

³⁸ In this collection she displays a brooch from Peru (Story 2), fish-shaped brooches from Bolivia (Story 3), a necklace of unspecified South American origin (Story 5), an Indian bead necklace (Story 20), a red stone heart from an unspecified 'Africa' (Story 21), anklets, bracelets, a pendant and a necklace from the Sahara (stories 22, 23, 24 and 45), an Afghan necklace (Story 32), necklaces from Thailand (Story 67), and an Indian bracelet (Story 73). Chinese jewellery features too in the shape of a number of small locks (Stories 6 and 7) and a brooch (Story 8). In addition to San Mao's purchased jewellery, the collection also includes gifts: a snake-shaped necklace of unspecified origin (Story 18) and other bracelets and necklaces (Stories 19 and 58).

Figure 3

Chinese lock pendants (My treasures, p.18)



/writing paper." (*Superfluous things*, p.85, from Wen Zhenheng, *Treatise on superfluous things*). Although San Mao may owe some debt to Chinese cultural traditions of collecting, there are many factors that set her situation apart from that of the Ming élite collectors—among them the difference in power and influence on the world stage between Ming China (arguably the most powerful state in the world at the time) and twentieth-century Taiwan; the inflow of goods to Ming China

/versus the international travels of San Mao in search of souvenirs; the amassing of luxuries for the sake of a display of wealth and taste versus the collecting of objects as monuments to personal experience; or the explicitly prescriptive accounts of the possessions appropriate to members of a particular social class versus the personalised and ostensibly non-prescriptive nature of San Mao's consumption tales.

³⁵ Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, p.3.

³⁹ 'Authenticity' is neatly defined by Spooner as "a conceptualisation of elusive, inadequately defined, other cultural, socially ordered genuineness." Spooner, in *The social life of things*, p.225.

⁴⁰ Stewart, *On longing*, p.140.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.143.

⁴² Spooner, in *The social life of things*, p.226. In connection with this souveniring of a 'real world' that is removed from modern experience, Stewart notes further that "Within the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic object become critical. As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence. 'Authentic' experience ... is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic and other fictive domains are articulated. In this process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object ... Furthermore, the seriality of mechanical modes of production leads us to perceive [what is] outside as a singular and authentic context of which the object is only a trace" (Stewart, *On longing*, p.133).

⁴³ It should be reiterated here that there is also a long Chinese tradition of perceiving authenticity to lie in the simple and unostentatious. The aesthetic of the genuine, of the thing without affectation that informed the pursuit of cultural objects by Confucian literati was presumably known to San Mao and could well have been an influence on her consumption choices. But San Mao's emphasis is different, as has been noted above, particularly in that there is no trace of any narrative of connoisseurship in her stories of her treasures.

⁴⁴ Here again there is a resonance with Price's observation regarding 'primitive art' collectors and dealers, who see their role as "a vigorously active one, not unrelated to an artist's act of physical creation," seeing their role as a "discovery" of qualities in an object that were not apparent to anyone else (including the object's maker) and describing it in terms such as "artistic intervention" through the sophistication of their appreciation and taste that can discern "quality" where others cannot (Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, p.104).

passionate about Chinese 'folk artefacts', including earthen jars, a rice bucket, a grindstone and hand-decorated bowls. But despite her protestations of individuality, her tastes are (as noted above) very much in line with educated western middle-class taste in their sentimentalised desire for the past, for handcraft, for the non-standard, for anything not mass-produced—in short, a taste for the 'authentic'.³⁹

San Mao's quest to express her individual tastes takes her to markets and antique shops on four continents where 'authenticity' is supposedly to be found. "The location of authenticity," in the words of Susan Stewart, "becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence we can see the souvenir as attached to the antique and exotic."⁴⁰ Souveniring the past involves "the objectification of the peasant classes, the aestheticisation of rural life which makes that life 'quaint' ... Every aspect of peasant and rural life, from tools to architecture to dialect to 'being' itself in the form of 'the character', becomes ... a potential souvenir."⁴¹ These objectifying tendencies are very apparent in *My Treasures*; many of San Mao's souvenir stories aestheticise the nomads, the vendors and the country people who represent the 'peasant classes' in her narratives of consumption.

In his explanation of the phenomenon of the modern quest for 'authenticity', Brian Spooner states that

the concept of authenticity belongs to industrial (even more to 'postindustrial') society ... authenticity (as we understand it now) became an issue at a particular stage in our social evolution—when with the appearance of mechanically produced clone-commodities we began to distinguish between the social meaning of handicraft and that of mechanical production, as between uniqueness and easy replaceability ... Authenticity is a form of cultural discrimination projected onto objects. But it does not in fact inhere in the object but derives from our concern with it. In seeking authenticity people are able to use commodities to express themselves and fix points of security and order in an amorphous modern society.⁴²

This projection of authenticity onto handicrafts and other survivors of the ways of the past is very evident in San Mao's catalogue of treasures; her personal tastes would seem to exemplify this particular aspect of modernity.⁴³ Yet the authenticity she seeks seems to reside as much in her experiences in acquiring her treasures, in her interactions with the people she encounters in the course of the acquisition, and even in her quest for a sense of emotional 'belonging', as in the objects themselves. The stories are, as noted above, principally stories of San Mao rather than stories of things; she is placing herself in the world, for her readers, through the situations into which her 'unique' tastes for 'authenticity' take her. San Mao's sense of her own uniqueness in the ability to select 'authentic' objects and imprint them with her own personality⁴⁴ comes very strongly through this collection of stories, with no suggestion of any recognised standard or shared aesthetic that might inform her choices. This sense of uniqueness and originality in her quest for authenticity suggests that San Mao saw herself as initiating new ways of

thinking for her readers, not reiterating traditional ones. In terms of its emphasis on 'unique' tastes and experiences, San Mao's collecting persona seems very akin to the modern romantic collector of souvenirs.

In addition to modernity, Spooner suggests that another major factor is at work in creating this narrative of the 'authentic'; "authenticity," he observes, "operates in an arena constituted by ... Western concepts concerning the Other."⁴⁵ Can San Mao's concepts of the 'other' be said to be 'western'? During her stay in Europe and her marriage to a European man, all manner of 'western' notions doubtless thrust themselves upon her, among them surely notions of what constitutes 'the other' in the modern world. Certainly there are strong commonalities between western orientalism and San Mao's touristic and exoticising gaze directed at Africa and South America, but this cannot be equated with a learnt 'western' notion of the 'other', since the people and cultures of these two continents are, of course, as unknown and 'other' to a Chinese as to a European. Although San Mao herself is, from a 'western' point of view, an 'other', the 'Orient' from which she comes is no less economically powerful than the generalised 'west', her urban background⁴⁶ creates for her the same kind of distance from 'traditional' rural life that is present in the urbanised 'west'.⁴⁷ Her sense of the 'otherness' of the poor and the rural could be analogous to corresponding 'western' attitudes without having been directly influenced by them. Obviously we cannot determine precisely where the attitudes expressed by San Mao in *My Treasures* come from, but it is fair to say that her interactions with 'others' as they are represented in this text display concepts of the 'other' that are very similar to those of the west—including the apparent 'otherness' of Taiwan, which will be discussed below.

Given that the authenticity of the past is thought to reside in the less 'complex', the handcraft, the village way of life, it is no surprise that it is to the economically less privileged areas of the world that the modern seeker of authenticity will go to search for it.⁴⁸ Many of the shopping transactions described in *My Treasures* are with economically dependent 'others', and San Mao's descriptions of them display a number of strategies for dealing with or glossing over the inequalities acted out through her consumption activities.

An international consumer of 'authenticity', San Mao is identified as such by an astute vendor in Bolivia who has figured out exactly what it is that people like San Mao want. When after a lengthy bargaining session San Mao has bought a brooch, the vendor tells her that

there is a reason why one of the coloured stones on the brooch is missing—otherwise, wouldn't people think it was new? It's only when there's one missing that you know it's an antique. That old woman was good with words, and she knew that what "culture people" are looking for is antiques—that's what she called me, a "culture person" (p.23).

The vendor is correct in her assertion that a "culture person" like San Mao⁴⁹ will not want her treasures to look too new. The 'authentic' must be seen to be authentic. Indeed it is her preference for the 'authentic' that reveals San

⁴⁵ Spooner, in *The social life of things*, p.226.

⁴⁶ Brought up in Taipei as the child of an immigrant family, San Mao had no family network to connect her to rural or small-town Taiwan.

⁴⁷ Again the connection can be made to Price's "capital-W Western" that has no connection with any geographical 'west' but connotes "an association with European-derived cultural assumptions" (Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, p.3).

⁴⁸ Spooner draws attention to the fact that "we tend to search for authenticity in economically dependent societies," noting that authenticity has "become an issue for us only since the condition of dependency has developed in the Other" (*The social life of things*, pp.228, 231).

⁴⁹ The term 'culture person' (*wenbua ren* 文化人) is used in Taiwan to denote people (usually with tertiary education) who work in academia, the professions, the arts and the media—as such it corresponds closely to Bourdieu's classifications of the possessors of cultural capital and the 'cultural intermediaries' who propagate the tastes of those with cultural capital to the wider community.

⁵⁰ A fascinating obverse to this nostalgic practice of preserving the appearance of age is mentioned in passing by Alfred Gell in his article about consumption practices among the Muria Gonds of India. "The silver ornaments ... are mostly old, but are cleaned and repaired by ... silversmiths so that to all appearances they are brand new. This is a source of perplexity to Western visitors in search of old and authentic-looking tribal jewellery." Gell, in *The social life of things*, p.121. Such preferences have been known in China as well as in the 'west', as an observation from Matteo Ricci regarding a market place in China reminds us: among the "antique things" which the élite class are seen to make much of, "many vases of bronze ... are highly valued, and they desire them with a certain particular corrosion. Without it, they are worth nothing." (From Pasquale M. D'Elia, *Fonti ricciane*, vol.1, p.91, quoted in Clunas, *Superfluous things*, p.94.)

⁵¹ Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, p.23. She goes on to note manifestations of this "Brotherhood of Man" ideology such as television commercials for Coca-Cola ("a many-shaded sea of faces, all smiling, and united by their human warmth and shared appreciation of the good things in life, including Coke"), the 1985 hit song, "We are the world" ("in which the singers' brotherly smiles, phenotypic diversity, and altruistic record contracts were never allowed to stray very far from the minds of those who were humming along with the melody; indeed, this song ... captures much of the essence of the Family of Man ideology, whose Brotherhood represents an idyllic regression to childhood ... and much of whose attraction lies in the satisfaction engendered by philanthropic goodwill") a French charity ad ("showing a little blond girl planting a benevolent kiss on the head of a little black boy, while his mother, dressed in African robes, stared blankly and passively into space") and "The United Colors of Benetton" advertising campaign ("a visually enhanced pun between the many-colored Italian clothes being promoted and the many-colored people featured in the ad"). She notes that in all of these "there is a definite suggestion of philanthropy. For, from the privileged perspective of white Europeans and Americans, the mingling of

Mao as a 'culture person' in the first place. San Mao admits to her readers that she likes to preserve a romantic patina of the past by polishing things a little, but not too much. When she brings back a pile of blackened old brass objects from the antique markets of Hong Kong, and her father is helping her to polish them, she says with a laugh, "Careful! Careful! Don't polish it too bright" (p.30). The same applies to her Bolivian silverware ("I don't polish it too dim or too bright"—p.231) and her pendant from the Sahara ("I washed it carefully—I didn't want to wash it too clean, but I couldn't have it dirty"—p.59). Although San Mao attempts to maintain the fantasy that all of her preferences are unconventional, such references as these point to some measure of self-consciousness about her souveniring of the past and the common tendency towards such nostalgia for the things of the past among 'culture people'.⁵⁰

Consumption as Compassion

One rather curious way in which San Mao deals with the unease inherent in many of the shopping transactions in which she is purchasing authenticity out of dependency is to emotionalise her buying, bringing together love and consumption with constant references to the emotional nature of her relationships with shopkeepers and street vendors. Personal feeling is presented as transcending any considerations of inequality. This emotionalising account of shopping experiences around the world seems to partake of the attitude noted by Sally Price of a kind of "planetwide closeness" brought about by the accessibility of the world's cultures to those with the means to travel or to view them via television, which is "from a Western point of view ... permeated with the flavor of Unity, Equality, and Brotherly Love," but in which "the 'equality' accorded to non-Westerners ... is not a natural reflection of human equivalence, but rather the result of Western benevolence."⁵¹ Certainly there is in San Mao's persistent exoticising and sentimentalising of the people she encounters on her travels a sense of San Mao as a benevolent figure lovingly exhibiting largesse to the lower orders. No notion of solidarity between San Mao and other 'people of colour' is present in her work. In her interactions with the small traders of Africa and South and Central America, San Mao does not identify with them; rather, by virtue of her superior economic power, she remains throughout in a position somewhat analogous to that of coloniser, exoticising their lives and protesting warm feelings for them as she bargains for their valuables. Frequently she superimposes a kind of loving concern onto the transaction relationship of vendor and purchaser. On several occasions she goes so far as to embrace shopkeepers in foreign countries (pp.90, 146, 218) and she often speaks of them as her "friends" (pp.24, 50, 89, 216).

Indeed the invoking of sentiment to add significance to consumption

experiences is an oft-repeated feature of *My Treasures*. For example, when San Mao is trying on clothes in a market in Mexico:

A pair of big, tragic eyes full of deep sorrow were gazing back at me from the mirror. I turned around and saw a stall selling things made of copper; sitting beside the stall was a young man ... I gazed at him, our glances met, and we smiled at each other—but even though he smiled there was deep pain in the young man's eyes (p.212).

At the time, San Mao doesn't have enough space in her bags to buy any of the copper objects he is selling. But,

That expression in the young man's eyes never let me go during that whole ... six month trip through Central and South America. As I travelled ... I was burdened with guilt because I hadn't bought any of the copper things on his stall. After six months, at the end of my journey, I went back ... It was six months later but that stall was still there, and the young man's eyes were still full of pain. I chose two copper pots. I didn't bargain; I gave the money to the youth quickly. Then at last my heart felt a little free. I left, and as I did so I couldn't help turning my head to look at him again. There was still sorrow in his eyes, which made me think that his sadness had nothing at all to do with business. And because of this backward glance I felt even sadder than before (pp.212–13).

In this as in other instances, San Mao's decision not to bargain is presented as indicative of some kind of emotional involvement with the vendor. Integrated into the desire to consume, this emotion enables San Mao to represent the purchase as an act of responsibility and kindness on her part. Even though her purchase does not bring the happiness to the vendor that she had hoped, the incident confirms San Mao's sense of connection with and compassion for him.

The sentimentalised presentation of her relationships with the people from whom she buys things tends to obscure the power relations present in the transaction by focusing on factors external to the economic realities of the situation. Perhaps San Mao's protestations of sentiment are a deliberate attempt to mitigate the feelings of guilt to which she succumbs in certain consumption situations. For San Mao, wishing to regard consumption primarily as emotional pleasure untainted by the sense of a guilty exercise of power, this is one possible means of dealing with that post-colonial dilemma of consuming in the so-called third world—that of wanting the 'ethnic' artefacts but not quite knowing how to go about acquiring them in an 'appropriate' or morally approvable way. The transaction is removed to an emotional plane where it can be dignified by some deep, meaningful understanding between herself and the vendor. Even (or especially) when the interactions are charged with embarrassment (sometimes on both sides), sentiment prevails.

/races strongly implies an act of tolerance, kindness, and charity." (Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, pp.23–5) San Mao's writings seem to demonstrate the same kind of 'Family of Man' attitudes, likewise predicated on her own "tolerance, kindness and charity."

Figure 4

Copper pots (My treasures, p.201)

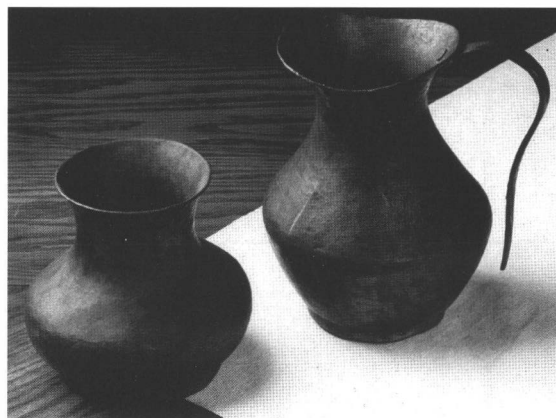




Figure 5

The shoeshine boy's box
(*My treasures*, p.181)

⁵² As Price has noted in the context of the purchase of 'primitive' art works, payment is "one thing when it occurs within a well-defined cultural setting in which both the creator and the owner-to-be share basic assumptions about the nature of the transaction ... [but] when a Western traveler in Africa spots an interesting looking wooden figure and offers to purchase it for a price that represents a negligible sum to the traveler and a large sum to the owner ... the buyer lacks understanding of the meaning of the object in its native context, the seller lacks understanding of its meaning in its new home, and there is no common ground in the evaluation of the price for which it has been exchanged" (Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, p.78).

A more extreme example takes place during San Mao's visit to Bolivia, where largesse is mingled with guilt. The sentimentalisation of working people and of various ethnic groups that pervades *My Treasures* reappears here in the story of a Bolivian shoeshine boy who pleads with San Mao to let him clean her shoes.

I looked at the crowd of shoeshine children all around me, and I didn't dare give money just to this one. That feeling of being surrounded by hungry people really makes me sad, and often when I had an ordinary meal I couldn't shake off the gaze of several hundred people outside the window ... An ice-block seller came by, and I bought a lot of ice-blocks and gave them out to the shoeshine children all around me. But when it came to money, I couldn't give them any (pp.185–6).

The boy offers to sell San Mao a little church-shaped box with a matador figure inside. In a gesture of moral responsibility, San Mao asks him if it is his to sell; when the boy replies that it belongs to his parents, she asks him to take her to see his mother.

We went off together, my arm around the child's shoulders. We walked until we were almost outside the city ... We came to a compound with a well ... an Indian woman with an infant on her back was squatting at a tap washing clothes. Seeing that her son had brought home a foreigner, this Indian woman stood up at once and stared at me, fingering her thick plaits nervously.

I went forward and greeted her, asking, "Is this your son? He wanted to clean my shoes." The woman was embarrassed, and apologised several times.

"Do you want to sell this box?" I asked.

The woman nodded, then nodded again.

I smiled and asked, "How much do you want for it?"

She couldn't say, but just stood beside me, simple and honest, hanging her head. As I looked at this Indian woman I felt a sudden flash of tenderness ... I took some banknotes out of my pocket and stuffed them into her hand. She stared at me dully, unable to say anything.

"So, thank you very much, I've bought the box now," I said.

I looked closely at the Indian woman again, then I took the child's hand and said to him, "Let's go—let's get back to town before dusk" (pp.187–8).

The embarrassment of this act of consumption is thickly overlaid with sentiment. San Mao deals with the moral guilt of the affluent shopper surrounded by beggars by benevolently dispensing sweets. Because of her professed 'tenderness' for the woman, the hasty stuffing of a random sum of money into her hand should be an appropriate payment for the item.⁵² As befits one of the exotic poor, the woman is characterised as "simple and honest." Attempts at humour are also added to help dispel the embarrassment, with repeated references to the fact that, as San Mao was wearing sneakers, she couldn't have had her shoes polished by the shoeshine boy anyway.

Shopping with Scruples

Several of the stories in this collection recount shopping behaviour that verges on the predatory.⁵³ Sometimes rapacious behaviour is tinged with guilt or apology, but without exception it is written about affectionately. San Mao's protested compunctions about certain buying methods are seen to be in tension with her pleasure in the actual possession of the objects and her proud display of them in the book.

However, the connections between shopping and guilt are very clear in various tales in which San Mao offers money for somebody else's only valuable pieces of personal property.⁵⁴ On one occasion, San Mao is buying food as the vendor is closing up her shop for the night. As the vendor puts on her cloak, San Mao notices the pair of silver fish-shaped clasps that it is fastened with.

I couldn't help putting out my hand and touching them. "Are these fish for sale?" I asked, my face reddening. The woman hesitated, then said "Yes, yes" very quickly as if she was afraid I would go back on the idea.

I'm an awful person—I exploited someone's trifling poverty. Neither of us could say how much I should pay for the fishes; we smiled at each other, both embarrassed. In the end I named a price and asked her if it was enough; she nodded eagerly, afraid I'd change my mind, and hurriedly took off the fishes. When she had taken them off, a gust of night wind blew her cloak off now that there was no brooch to hold it.

"I have something else old," she said, telling me to come back and find her the next day ... The next day ... she gave me ... two pairs of earrings set with red stones. Again it was a case of me naming a price and her nodding furiously. Once I had taken all she had, I felt uncomfortable for quite a while, wrapping the earrings in a handkerchief, unwrapping them and wrapping them again. After some years ... the image of the woman and her stall and her baby ... is tinged with a sense of lingering guilt. I think that if I go back to La Paz in a few years' time I will give these things back to that woman, because she loves them (p.22).

The questionable nature of San Mao's grasping, coveting and buying the clasps is perhaps supposed to be cancelled out by her protestations of remorse even as she displays the trophies to her admiring readers. San Mao's acknowledgment of her own 'awfulness' has an ironic ring, especially coinciding as it does with her trivialisation of the other woman's poverty as "trifling." Any sincerity in her expressed desire to return the clasps to the woman who "loves" them is undercut by the lapse of years that would make such an action difficult if not impossible. Yet the sincerity of San Mao's own 'love' for a treasured possession is never in doubt; the story of the Saharan

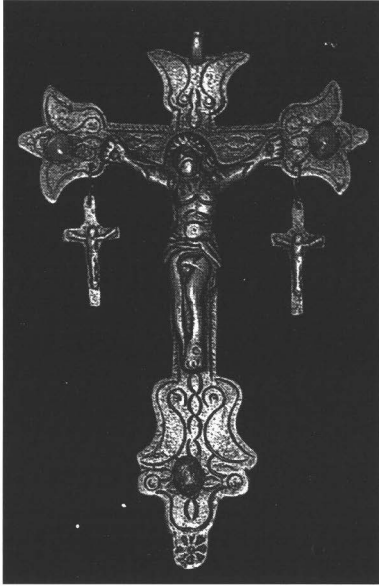
⁵³ Though they pale in comparison with stories of the despoiling of native cultural items by colonising powers or the systematic acquisition of objects by stealth, theft and deception by early anthropological expeditions (some account of which is given in Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, pp. 70–4).

⁵⁴ In other words, items which have not been presented for sale but which San Mao actively solicits to possess.



Figure 6

Fish clasps (My treasures, p.17)

Figure 7*Silver crucifix (My treasures, p.15)***Figure 8***The pendant (My treasures, p.58)*

⁵⁵ Not knowing a prospective vendor personally does not necessarily hamper her in her quest for an object she wishes to possess; she writes elsewhere of seeking a certain type of bracelet in the Sahara by going from tent to tent asking if anyone was willing to sell (p.57).

pendant discussed below is entitled "Beloved" (*Xin'ai de* 心爱的), the same phrase with which she described the importance of the fish-shaped clasps for the Bolivian woman in the example above. In San Mao's narrative of 'love', she herself seems to be the true and central subject.

On yet another occasion, San Mao spies a crucifix among the enamel basins, fake pearls and hair clips on a street stall in Ecuador. As in the story cited above, the item San Mao wants is the vendor's own property, and San Mao tells us that she feels somewhat guilty about buying it because of its religious significance to its owner. In what becomes a familiar gesture of atonement for buying it at all, San Mao forbears to bargain for the crucifix but just pays the first asking price. "I'll take good care of it for you," she promises (p.20) in a token gesture of respect for its importance to the vendor.

A similar scene takes place around a pendant which San Mao wishes to buy in the Sahara desert. Such pendants cannot be procured in the shops, and San Mao knows no one who is willing to sell her own.⁵⁵ Then one day an unknown woman appears, heavily veiled; she holds out a pendant to San Mao and holds up four fingers to indicate a price of 400 pesetas:

Taking the woman's hand, I asked gently, "Are you sure you don't want it?"

She shook her head determinedly, and the expression in her eyes held no story.

"Who told you I was looking for one?"

She shook her head again and made no reply.

I gave her 400 pesetas; clutching the money she opened the door and left ... I felt both happy and apologetic, as though I had robbed the woman.

I didn't have time to think about that (p.59).

Again, the narrative of San Mao's possessions denies the 'story' of the people whose economic necessity makes her consumption experiences possible. Would San Mao have acted otherwise if the expression in the woman's eyes had held 'a story'? Perhaps this absence of a story is offered as an explanation for San Mao's insistence on making the purchase. The awkwardness of the encounter suggests an awareness of the power relations of the situation, but sentiment and the desire to consume ultimately prevail over moral doubts. The gesture of holding the woman's hand is again reminiscent of the kind of benevolent condescension noted by Price.

In all of the above examples, San Mao invokes sentiments of affection and guilt to justify or mitigate her behaviour in purchasing precious items from strangers. The position is reversed in her story of buying a tapestry to use as a bedspread; here, her longing for the object in question overrides the 'friendship' she already has with the owner (p.119). While she is living in the Sahara (under Spanish colonialism and with her Spanish husband), San Mao wants to buy a bedspread but is unable to find exactly what she wants in the shops. One day, when she is a guest in the home of a Saharan friend, she is shown the family treasures. Among these is a piece of woven cloth which was part of her friend's grandmother's trousseau and is taken out only to be shown off to visitors. Obviously to San Mao's friend and host it is a precious and

significant possession, but here the wish to consume appears to override the personal relationship.⁵⁶ She is aware that it is customary for a guest in a Saharan home to leave after the third cup of tea, and exploits this cultural knowledge to engineer a consumption opportunity. To allow herself more time in which to work up to making an offer for the cloth, she deliberately keeps her cup in her hand and doesn't put it down to be refilled for a second time. Her host has no choice but to let her continue to drink slowly and stay as long as she wishes. Finally, to her friend's astonishment, San Mao says she wants to buy the cloth.

I was bad—I tempted this family with money. I offered them a price five times higher than the usual shop price, thanked them and left . . .

Having offered a good price, I didn't go to that friend's place again—that was a psychological war tactic, so as not to let them see how much I longed to have the thing . . .

Since they couldn't resist the lure of the price, before the end of the month when our friends' money was all spent . . . one of the women of the family . . . brought it to me. With a gleeful smile I took the . . . cloth, and I counted out some big notes and gave them to her (p.119).

As noted above, by the very act of including it in this collection of stories, San Mao dignifies consumption behaviour that is less than innocent. The admission 'I was bad' seems undercut by its juxtaposition with the rhetoric of consumption as combat. Again the incident is passed over with humour; the account ends with a remark to José, her Spanish husband, that from now on all they can afford to eat will be camel meat because she spent so much on the bedspread. The power relations in this situation are very much those of a colonial society; the Spanish colonisers, represented by José and by extension San Mao, evidently enjoy considerable material advantage over their Saharan neighbours. Although such behaviour as this is clearly (and self-consciously) exploitative, the power relations in question are transformed into the stuff of affectionate anecdote.

Imagined Equality

Saturating transactions with sentiment is not San Mao's only approach to exotic shopping among the poor. Sometimes she is just out to enjoy a good bargaining session. One story tells of her encounter with an old woman in Cusco, Peru, who knows how to get what she wants. San Mao takes a photograph of the woman sitting in the market-place in the sunshine, knitting socks. Immediately the woman begins to abuse her, demanding that she buy

Figure 9

Saharan cloth (My treasures, p.139)



⁵⁶ Although in retrospect San Mao expresses incomprehension at the greed that motivated this transaction, she nevertheless displays the cloth as a treasure alongside the rest of her collection.

⁵⁷ She is competitive too. When San Mao sees something she likes, she doesn't want anyone else to have it: "A woman who was nearby saw them and came over. She asked me if I wanted them or not; I was afraid she would buy them, and I quickly said I did. In a moment they had been wrapped up for me, and only then did I set my mind at rest and ask, 'Where are they from?'" (p.24); "The young people in the street crowded around; I was anxious and yelled 'They are all ours—don't touch them'" (p.209); "When I heard that the lock had been sold, I looked disappointed even though I had had no intention of buying it" (p.28). Pearce has noted that "Competition has always been a clearly-marked feature of collecting" (*Museums, objects and collections*, p.51); and Price has drawn attention to "the metaphors that collectors (of art) call on to evoke the emotions of collecting vary from game hunting to drug addiction to sexual conquest" (*Primitive art in civilized places*, p.101); on a lesser scale, emotions such as these may characterise San Mao's collecting activities too.

a pair of socks as some kind of compensation or photo fee. San Mao apologises but refuses to buy any of the proffered socks because they are too big for her. Both women become angry, and then they begin to laugh, abusing each other and laughing by turns until San Mao discovers that the old woman has something she would like to buy: a brooch. She stops fighting immediately and pulls up a stool, sitting and bargaining until sunset. She finally leaves with the brooch and a pair of socks, remarking that the old woman is a formidable saleswoman, fierce and articulate, and adding:

I'd say she's a rich woman—that was definitely not the only old brooch she had, and her asking price was very high—she could buy a sheep and weave some more socks (p.23).

Again San Mao displays an enjoyment of the thrill of the chase, bargaining enthusiastically both in the hope of a more favourable price and for the fun of it.⁵⁷ The final sentence, though perhaps jocular in tone, nonetheless encapsulates an idea that is not unusual on the part of rich 'first world' tourists—namely that the poor people they encounter in the countries they visit are not really as poor as they seem at all. The relationship played out in both this story and the story of the tapestry cited above is between someone with money and someone without—but for San Mao these are primarily encounters between individuals. The structures of power and domination in which her role is analogous to that of the coloniser are set offstage. Yet by suggesting that the old woman is rich, San Mao attempts to place her on an equal footing with herself and to negate any sense of her own superior economic power. As already noted, San Mao's position in this collection of consumption stories is never one of solidarity with the colonised; she is always in a position of economic power and will use that power in pursuit of what she desires to possess.

Orientalism: Spain's Exotic Colonies

In her writing about foreign lands, San Mao often paints them with an exoticised colouring strongly reminiscent of the Romantic strain of European orientalism so famously criticised by Edward Said.

San Mao's travels take her not only to colonies but also to ex-colonies and former colonial powers, and unlike the nineteenth-century European travellers to the countries of the 'Middle East' who constitute Said's paradigm of orientalism she is not herself an explicit representative of colonising power. Yet San Mao and her western counterparts, the international tourists and consumers of the post-colonial era, reproduce structures of nineteenth-century orientalism in their constructions of 'third world' countries as exotic 'others'. Although not a traveller and consumer from the 'west', San Mao fits quite naturally and comfortably into the same privileged space as spectator of 'local colour' wherever she goes.

She describes bus trips she has taken and markets she has visited in South America in terms strongly evocative of western tourist reminiscences or travel guides about China, exoticising the mode of transport and also (perhaps most reminiscent of western writing about China) the discomfort:

In my six months of travelling in Central and South America, I don't think I ever missed a market. Many times I would be sitting on a long-distance bus because I had heard that there was a market day somewhere, squeezed in with people, animals, goods for the market, pieces of wood. Sometimes I would be holding a little girl with a headful of lice on my lap.

Although these long-distance buses are very uncomfortable, I would never tire of sitting there for stop after stop because of the joy and surprise of the markets. The longest bus trip I took was three days and two nights ... I was tired, terribly tired—even worse, they didn't stop for people to go to the toilet.

With every situation that is painful at the time, if it's only physical pain, you've forgotten it once it's over. When you think back to it you're just happy, and sometimes you even laugh (pp.157–8).

This balancing of the excitement of the exotic against its attendant squalor and discomfort is strongly reminiscent of the orientalist outsider's view of foreign countries found in much western travel writing. Other hallmarks of orientalist writing too characterise her musings on her treasures and on the places where she acquired them. For example, there are hints of the macabre and the occult:

The ... dolls look frightening, like some accoutrement of witchcraft. But in fact they are made from old cloth handwoven by the Indians—once [the cloth] has been worn a long time they turn it into toys for the children (p.158).

The explicit connection San Mao makes between the dolls and witchcraft resonates strongly with one of Sally Price's observations about 'primitive art' as "capable of evoking in Western viewers images of pagan rituals—particularly cannibalism, spirit possession, fertility rites, and forms of divination based on superstition."⁵⁸ Although San Mao removes her treasures from discourses of 'art' as such, the appeal of the 'primitive' as 'pagan' is not only hinted at in the account of the 'witchcraft' dolls but explicitly present in the small stone 'fertility goddess' from Bolivia (p.47).

There is also the self-conscious fantasy of a foreign dream-world:

The precious things about the effect of memory are its magical fantasies and its beauty. At least, that's how my dream of Central and South America comes and goes. No, I don't dare go back there—this way I can keep what I have created myself in my memory (p.231),

Figure 10

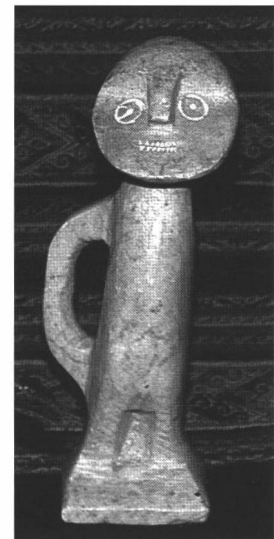
Cloth dolls (My treasures, p.161)



⁵⁸ Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, p.2.

Figure 11

Fertility goddess (My treasures, p.43)



as well as some vague sense of a Utopia for the expatriate amid the poverty:

When I think back to my days in the desert, it still seems so distant and vast; it's as if the clear cries of the goat-herding women are still resounding in my ears ...

At that time, practically all of the Spanish people who stayed in the Sahara loved that land passionately ... With no water, no electricity, no gas and no food ... there was something in this situation where we lacked material things that let us live like aristocrats in a spiritual sense (p.164).

Again hardship and discomfort are exoticised. There is also an implicit reference to the fantasy of the wealthy who may choose a 'simple lifestyle' that the very lack of material possessions is somehow ennobling to the spirit. The power and privilege of the colonials is concealed here, even though San Mao shows elsewhere that she is in a position to use her privileged situation of wealth deliberately and self-consciously to consume local culture (such as in the tapestry story cited above). Here San Mao is apparently subscribing to another common travel fantasy among post-colonial first world travellers—that is, that the hardships they undergo are the same as those experienced by the local people and that they can be at one with the local people in their suffering.

San Mao's privileged position as colonial outsider in the desert can bring dilemmas of a more complex kind. Colonial relationships become apparent yet ambiguous on one occasion when San Mao, José and their friends go out into the desert on a camping trip. At dusk when they pitch camp and light a fire, they suddenly realise that an unknown man is standing staring at them. Nobody had seen him arrive. A Spanish woman in San Mao's party who has no experience of desert travel screams at the sight of the stranger; secure in her superior knowledge and experience, San Mao ("to show acceptance") drops what she is doing, strikes the woman who screamed and goes out to meet the stranger. Although the man cannot speak much Spanish, it is established that he has come to beg for leftover food.

San Mao notes that whenever she and José travel in the desert they take along supplies of basic medicines, flour and sugar to give to people they might meet along the way who need them as a gesture of charitable concern. They offer the man some of each; since he is tired from walking, they arrange to deliver it by car. "Next morning," writes San Mao,

we went with him to his home—a tent, of course ... The Saharan had said that he didn't live far away, but we drove for a long time before we found that lone tent ... I felt very sympathetic towards him for having walked so far; he must have started walking towards us before sunrise ...

When we arrived at the tent, which had been patched and mended countless times, the women at once drew their veils shyly over their faces. There were three or four children ... I didn't understand what this family—this one family—was doing living alone so far out in the wilderness ...

They ... had no camels, only a little flock of skinny goats, standing there dumbly as if they were half dead ... We moved the flour, sugar and medicine.

Then a black man in a robe started lighting a fire with dry branches that he had gathered, to make tea to entertain the guests. They had a petrol drum full of water and measured it out very carefully ...

After we had drunk our tea we said goodbye and went home ... and forgot all about it. A couple of weeks or so later, someone knocked on our door at night ... outside stood the man from the tent, whom we had helped ... with a black man in a robe—the one who had made the tea ...

The man told us that he wanted to give us a slave, and pointed to the black man (pp.129–31).

Interestingly, San Mao and José do not assume the moral high ground of the liberal middle class repelled by the keeping of slaves. Aiming at ‘cultural sensitivity’, their protestations are couched in practical rather than moral terms, and they avoid condemning ‘local customs’ of slave-keeping outright:

We refused vehemently, saying our home was too small and we had no money to look after anyone, especially not a slave, and asked him not to put us in a difficult position ...

But their visitor insists:

“He can sleep on the balcony. You can keep him alive with one piece of bread a day.”

I pulled at the black man’s sleeve and drew him under the light to look at him. I asked him, “Do you want to be free? If we were to take you, then let you go, you would be free. Do you want that?”

The slave was clever, and he understood me completely. When I mentioned letting him go he was terrified, and kept pulling at his owner’s sleeve, saying “No, no, no.”

“If you set him free, where would he go?” asked the owner.

“You take him back then. We won’t accept this kind of present,” I shouted, hiding behind José.

“Won’t accept?”

“Really we can’t—this is too precious a gift.”

“Then I’ll give you something else,” said the owner.

“Anything’s fine, so long as it’s not a person,” I said.

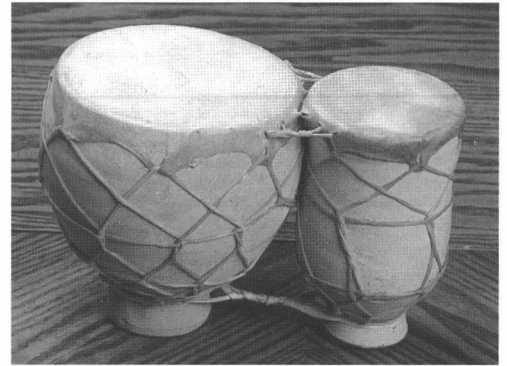
He ... bent over and rummaged in a flour bag and took out ... goatskin drums. We both let out our breath—it wasn’t a person.

We have called the drums ‘the slave’ ever since (pp.130–1).

In this story a complex set of relations of power and morality are resolved into an object of consumption and entertainment. The story of a slave-owning colonised people offering their colonial masters a slave becomes an amusing tale, affectionately recorded; when San Mao and José confront a situation of moral and political complexity, the end result is an ornament for their home. The suggestion of San Mao and José as potential slave-owners adds an element of exoticism and a hint of the pleasure of the ‘forbidden’. The whole story confirms their class power; they are in a social group that ‘deserves’ slaves, but they refuse to own them. Their refusal makes the article they

Figure 12

‘Slave drums’ (My treasures, p.140)



receive in exchange seem innocuous, even though they playfully preserve the slave-owning fantasy by referring to it as 'the slave'. The 'slave' drums are made exciting by the illusion of power being made innocent through the personal morality of San Mao and José.

Orientalism: Spain

⁵⁹ See Lung-Kee Sun (Sun Longji), *Zhongguo wenhua de 'shenceng jiegou'* [The 'deep structure' of Chinese culture] (Hong Kong: Jixian She, 1983), pp.45–6.

It is not only the so-called third world of Africa and South America that receives San Mao's orientalising and exoticising treatment. Her depictions of Spain are cast in similar fashion. There is an interesting interplay here between San Mao as a Chinese woman in an (initially at least) unfamiliar and exotic environment and San Mao as an international sophisticate who has apparently absorbed some of the standards and prejudices of European culture. Her affectionate writing about Spain is perhaps reminiscent of Lung-Kee Sun's suggestion that there is a resemblance in character and consequent deep fellow-feeling between the Chinese and Southern Europeans, based on notions of collectivity, family and means of political expression.⁵⁹

San Mao tells us that she likes the "character" of Spanish people, their "craziness and warm-heartedness" (p.193) and their wine-drinking lifestyle. All of these, she says, are embodied in the Spanish wineskin she buys, of a type that is passed around at festivals and in street parades for all and sundry to drink from (pp.192–3).

In Spain too she romanticises labour and hand-craft. Her quest for hand-crafted leatherwork takes her to a saddle-maker's workshop, a small half-open shop at the corner of a "snow-white wall." A bent old man dressed in black is sitting in the doorway, making a rope by hand. San Mao stops to gaze sentimentally upon the picturesque scene. On entering the shop, she strokes a saddle, picturing as she does so "a gentle little donkey" (p.203).

"Would you sell me this saddle? How much would it cost?" I asked warmly, dealing with this old man as gently as I could. As

I spoke, I was looking at his extremely coarse hands.

"No—it's not for sale. This is the last one I'll ever make. I'm old and I can't do it any more," said the old man hoarsely, without looking up.

"Is there no one studying your craft from you?" I asked.

"In this day and age? Hardly. What would young people want to study this for?"

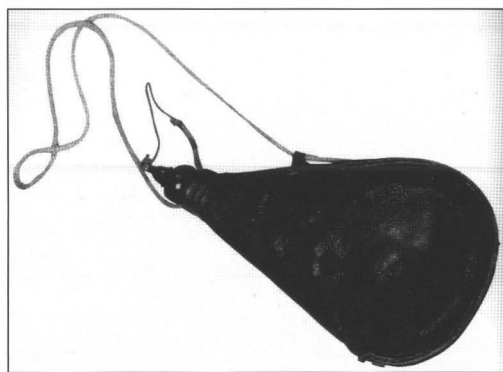
"Then would you accept me as an apprentice? I'm willing, would you take me?" ... I crouched in front of the old man and put my hands on his knees.

The old man stared at me as if uncomprehending; something intense shone out in his expression and then was gone. I caught him glancing at my hands.

"My hands are small but they can be trained. I can put up with hardship, and I'm willing to; I can be patient, will you take me?" I was still kneeling in front of him, unwilling to get up (pp.203–4).

Figure 13

Wineskin (My treasures, p.199)



We are not told of the old man's response—San Mao's romantic gesture is evidently more important than what the old man makes of it—but San Mao tells us that when she decides to make a purchase,

the old man didn't let me pay for it; he wouldn't take any money, saying he wanted to give it to me "In these times, if there's still some one like you who appreciates craftsmanship, that makes us friends. Money! What does that wretched stuff have to do with it?" (p.204).

Thus the old man is presented as participating in the construction of the encounter as primarily an emotional exchange. The picture of Spain which San Mao projects here is of a simple, innocent land, picturesque and charming, where young people might not study saddle-making but old men are quaint and responsive to San Mao's particular brand of sentiment. Spain's ambivalent position as the exotic 'poor relation' (indeed, the 'orient') of Europe combined with its 'innocence' *vis-à-vis* China (since, unlike so many European countries, it has no history of colonial involvement there) makes it possible for San Mao to present Spain as an appealing vision of handcraft and joyful sharing. In Spain as elsewhere, San Mao's target items are 'folk' handcrafts; Spain and its colonies together are linked into San Mao's romantic world where industry, capitalism and political inequality do not intrude.

Orientalism: Elsewhere

Although a superficial first impression of San Mao's travels (and perhaps the image she wishes to create) is of a free spirit roaming the world, her itineraries are, on the whole, structured around the Spanish empire. She remarks elsewhere on how convenient the prevalence of the Spanish language is in the countries she visits; no doubt some cultural superimpositions are familiar to her as well. The Chinese-speaking and Spanish-speaking worlds are obviously convenient targets for San Mao's shopping expeditions, but her apparent lack of interest in and contact with South-east Asia⁶⁰ seems nonetheless surprising, especially in the light of its proximity to Taiwan and its large ethnic Chinese populations. One could speculate that South-east Asia is too close at hand to be exotic enough for her—or perhaps it is too accessible to San Mao's readers for her to be able to turn it convincingly into her own unique romantic brand of story (although given her exoticisation of Taiwan, familiarity with the subject on the part of readers is not necessarily a barrier to San Mao's exoticising imagination, as will be demonstrated below).

San Mao does not visit Thailand herself in *My Treasures*, but her parents do, and she asks them to bring back some Thai jewellery for her. "All of my family have been to Thailand," she tells us, "because its exotic flavour is so

⁶⁰ With the exception of Singapore, where she buys an Indian embroidered cloth from an Indian shop (pp.263–4).

Figure 14
Necklaces from Thailand (My treasures, p.199)



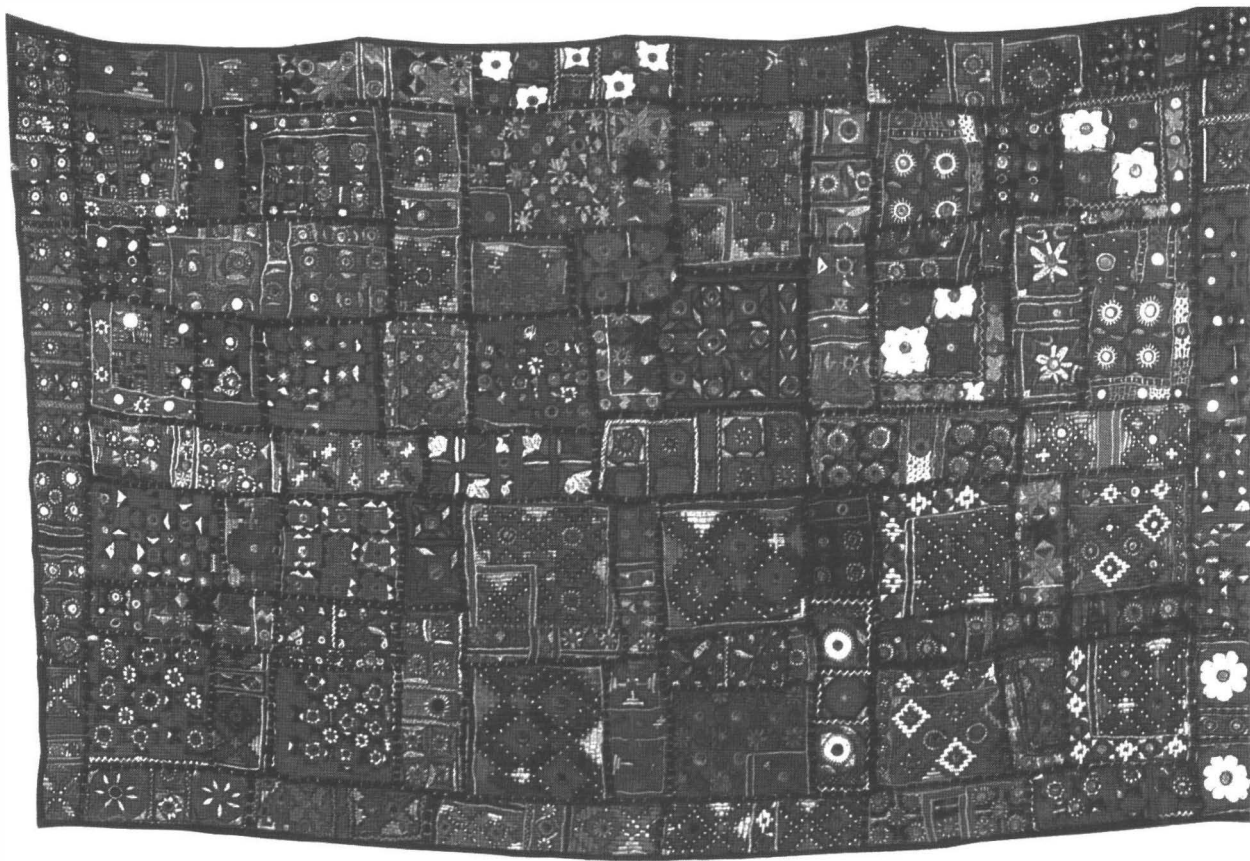


Figure 15

Indian embroidery (My treasures, p.258)

beautiful; they go whenever they have the chance" (p.195). The presentation of Thailand as exotic may or may not suggest 'westernised' notions of the east and of what constitutes the exotic—as noted above, it is not only 'the west' that may find 'others' 'exotic'.

Like South-east Asia, South Asia scarcely features in San Mao's travel and shopping experiences. She does, however, have one noteworthy indirect encounter with India when she buys an Indian bracelet from a shop in the Canary Islands owned by an Indian man. He is one of the shopkeepers whom San Mao counts among her friends, and one day he takes San Mao to his home in an old part of town. San Mao's luxuriant description of his house is suggestive of the lavish palace of some oriental potentate:

The house itself was a work of art. The ceiling of one room was made entirely of glass, and the sunlight through the glass shone upon a host of stone statues from the Renaissance, ivories as big as arched doors, platters of purple crystals, shelves of gold-leafed books from the Middle Ages; the floor was covered with Chinese porcelain vases; there were crystal chandeliers, full sets of antique silver, several hundred rosaries of different precious stones, several hundred enormous handwoven tapestries, big music boxes that you could open to play hundreds of tunes, inlaid marble tables, more than 200 antique clocks, a wall

full of Italian reliefs ... he also had paintings by the great Renaissance painter Rafael (p.217).

Inspired by the aura of oriental mystery of the house, San Mao's thoughts turn to exotic intrigue:

I had a wicked thought; I thought I'd like go all out to seduce him and marry him and then wait for him to die and then these things would all be mine ... But then I thought ... if he was to find out my plan he'd poison me first (p.217).

The Indian object which San Mao is to buy (a 'blood-red ivory bracelet') is made mysterious with a suitably macabre tale from the exotic Orient. San Mao asks how the blood-red colour is applied, and the dealer replies:

This came from a grave. Not all Indian corpses were burnt; they were buried as well. It's the blood from the corpse which accumulated over the years and was absorbed by the ivory (p.218).

Although San Mao scoffs at this explanation, the dealer goes on to remind her that Chinese jade with a reddish tinge is also considered particularly valuable. She is forced to admit that she is unable to explain where the red colour comes from—thus preserving intact one of the 'mysteries of the east'.

Representing China

As San Mao travels around the world she presents a self-conscious Chinese identity in her writings. She often speaks of being the only Chinese present, the sole representative of China in the desert or the person known to everyone in her Canary Islands community because she is the only Chinese there. She tells of the many gifts she has received from 'foreign' friends, neighbours and acquaintances, demonstrating how much she as a Chinese can be appreciated by Europeans—a garment made for her by a Spanish friend, a bracelet from a Swiss woman, and priceless antique Mauritanian scrolls from an English neighbour (pp.164–5, 166–72, 101–7).

Twice in foreign countries San Mao is given gifts simply *because* she is Chinese. On the first occasion, she is given "a jar used in old-style Spanish apothecary shops," a gift from the local Spanish pharmacy out of their "total respect and reverence for Chinese medicine" (p.98). On the second occasion a young Swiss man in the Canary Islands presents her with a sandalwood box on their first and only meeting, saying, "You are Chinese: do you play mahjong?" Although she replies that she does not, he insists that she take it. The mahjong set is a valuable one, handcarved

Figure 16

The blood-red ivory bracelet (My treasures, p.202)

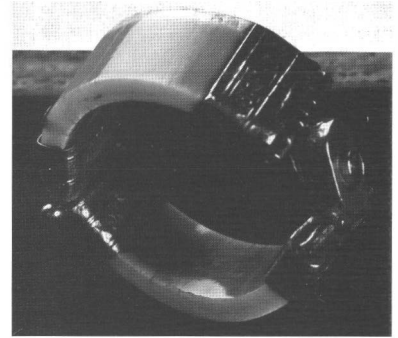
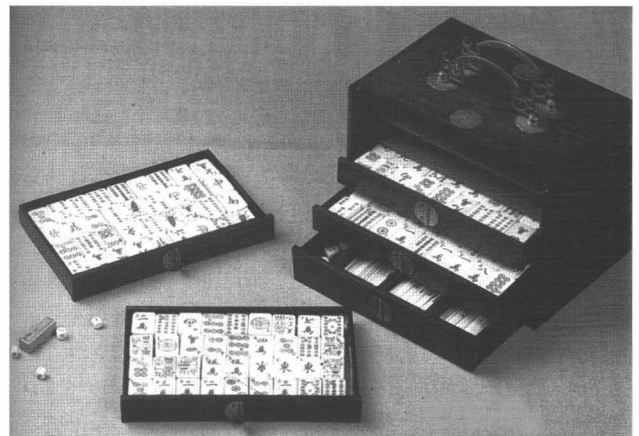


Figure 17

The mahjong set (My treasures, p.86)



⁶¹ Known in English as *The story of the stone* or *The dream of the red chamber*.

ivory on bamboo, given to the man's parents on their honeymoon in China many years previously by a Jewish friend and his Chinese wife with whom they stayed in Shanghai. During their stay, which lasted several months, they had learned to play mahjong. "See, today it has come back into a Chinese person's hands," says the man as he hands the mahjong set to San Mao (p.80). Evidently the young man feels that this personal action is an appropriate or 'right' thing to do, perhaps indeed a gesture of 'cultural repatriation' based on notions of 'moral ownership'. Paradoxically, as this gift that had represented China for the parents is 'returned' to a representative of China, the use value that it had had for its previous owners recedes; unlike the Swiss man's parents, San Mao does not play mahjong. But like all of San Mao's treasures, it is invested with both sentimental and ornamental values as another 'exotic' (albeit Chinese) item as she displays it as a trophy in this collection.

Thus San Mao presents to her (Chinese) readers a China which commands the respect of the world for its commodities. In addition, she displays her own Chinese identity to the rest of the world by consuming Chinese objects. Ironically, she describes an antique silk skirt as "the first Chinese object I bought." Having been raised in Taiwan, she would of course have been consuming Chinese objects all her life—but perhaps she does not perceive her own life or the objects in it as specifically 'Chinese' until she goes abroad and either becomes the 'other' herself or begins to perceive China as 'other'.

She explains how she came by the skirt:

I always choose clothes that have a natural style ... none of the fashionable clothes in the shop windows suit my tastes. They're so formal, they should

be for office workers ... I ... don't look at the clothes shops at all—I go straight to Guanghai market to look at old books.

On the second floor of the old book market, in a tiny antique shop ... I saw the red antique skirt.

... as I took it and looked carefully at the hand workmanship ... I felt a mysterious love and delight in my heart! (pp.31–2).

The skirt transports San Mao nostalgically back in time and into fiction, where Lin Daiyu 林黛玉, heroine of the classic eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Hong Lou Meng* 紅樓夢⁶¹ is wearing this very skirt. Back in the present, the skirt matches San Mao's sandals perfectly.

"Lin Daiyu was helping me get what I wanted—she wasn't at all mean. She wanted me to buy it, so I wore it home!" she exclaims. Later San Mao finds another antique skirt and she fantasises that it is the very one that was given



Figure 18
Silk skirts (My treasures, p.41)

by Xue Baochai 薛寶釵 to the maid Xiren 襲人 in the same novel. She wears the skirts as a demonstration of her Chineseness to the west:

When I wear this skirt on the streets of Europe, there is always some woman who stops me and wants to look closely at the hand embroidery. I am always happy when someone wants to look at my skirt. If anyone asks me where they can buy one, I say "A Chinese woman called Lin gave it to me—they are not easy to find" ...

This summer I will wear them again and wonder about my own personality: how much of me is Lin Daiyu and how much is Baochai? (pp.32–3).

Despite San Mao's assurances about her clothing preferences, it is difficult to see expensive heavily-embroidered silken skirts from last century as simple and natural. Nonetheless, seeing in herself the heroines of China's most famous novel, San Mao self-consciously wears ancient China on the streets of Europe and shows herself integrating it into a harmonious present.

The Folk and their Crafts

Apart from the silk skirts and a few pieces of jewellery from Hong Kong, most of the items of Chinese origin in San Mao's collection are 'folk crafts', purchased after her return to Taiwan. The 1970s and 1980s in Taiwan saw a vogue for 'folk craft' which went hand in hand with the 'nativist' movement in literature and art whose political corollary was Taiwanese independence. There are obvious parallels between this phenomenon and the tendency to exalt and exoticise peasant culture which accompanied the rise of nationalism along with modernism in Europe. The "folk craft" spoken of by San Mao here consists of "useful objects" such as ceramic or wooden vessels and kitchen utensils of a kind that modern urban dwellers no longer use; in collecting such items she demonstrates the modern nostalgia "for use value, for objects that characterised the pre-industrial village economy" which, "surviving their original contexts, are seen as traces of the way of life that once surrounded them"; each one bearing "the burden of nostalgia for ... the experience of the family, the village, the firsthand community."⁶²

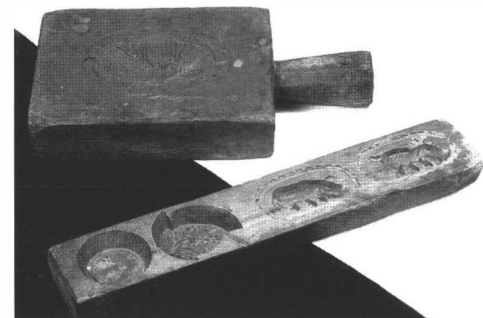
As is the case with her possessions gathered in the rest of the world, the objects of practical use which San Mao acquires in Taiwan become recontextualised to fulfil a purely decorative function. Her purchase of the everyday objects of an idealised Chinese village life as aesthetic items is consistent with the pattern of buying peasant items with the appeal of 'authenticity' from all over the world, exemplifying the nostalgia noted above that embraces the exotic and the past.⁶³ The gaze which exoticises and aestheticises 'the past' as represented by the rural embraces the local as well as the foreign, allowing the consumer to fantasise this peasant past as her own present. This shift of focus to the near-at-hand may indeed be a necessary consequence of the desire for the exotic; as Susan Stewart has pointed out, "once the exotic experience is readily purchasable by a large segment of the tourist population,

⁶² Stewart, *On longing*, pp.144, 140.

⁶³ Although the notion of the 'authenticity' of the 'firsthand community' has already been discussed at some length, it seems relevant here to refer to Appadurai's comments about the purchase and recontextualisation of the "community's" practical everyday objects. He has noted that it is in "the domain of fashion, domestic display and collecting in the modern West" that this "diversion of commodities from their original 'nexus' takes place," when "the functionality of ... workplaces is diverted to household aesthetics ... the everyday commodity is framed and aestheticized; this 'aesthetics of decontextualisation' (itself driven by the quest for novelty) ... is at the heart of the display, in highbrow Western homes, of the tools and artifacts of the 'other': the Turkmen saddlebag, Masai spear, Dinka basket. In these objects, we see not only the equation of the authentic with the exotic everyday object ... This enhancement of value through the diversion of commodities from their customary circuits underlies ... the purchase and display of 'primitive' utilitarian objects, the framing of 'found' objects, the making of collections of any sort" (Appadurai, *The social life of things*, p.28). The connection can be made again to Price's "capital-W Western"; San Mao too exhibits these tendencies and tastes, and her diversion of exoticised everyday objects (both into display in her home and into a published collection) demonstrates this same aesthetics of decontextualisation.

Figures 19–24

Chinese folk crafts (My treasures, pp.236–256, 238, 235, 181, 257, respectively)



⁶⁴ Stewart, *Onlonging*, p.148. Similar trends have been observed in Japan, both in the recent fashion for folk craft (*mingei* 民芸, which corresponds to the Chinese term *minyi* 民藝) and in the self-conscious incorporation of Japanese elements in interior decor styles. One decor magazine, for example, lists “Japanesque” (characterised by “a mixture of Japanese and Western furniture” and items such as “Japanese fans, traditional chests, lights, or even Buddhist statues”) along with “ethnic” (hardwood and batik), “Italian modern” and “all deco.” Nancy Rosenberger, “Images of the west: home style in Japanese magazines,” in Joseph J. Tobin, ed., *Re-made in Japan: everyday life and consumer taste in a changing society* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), p.122.

⁶⁵ See Stories 75, 82, 83 and 84 for particularly striking examples of this.

⁶⁶ A technique she rejects elsewhere in the world; speaking of shopping for jewellery at a market in Seattle, for example, she remarks that she will only buy something that is a true masterpiece and claims that buying in large quantities only brings trouble (p.88).

⁶⁷ *My treasures*, p.206. San Mao is not always amenable to the idea of sullyng her treasures through ‘use’. She tells of an occasion on which she is buying yet another bowl and the proprietor of the folk-artefact shop sug-

either more and more exotic experiences are sought ... or, in a type of reverse snobbery, there is a turning toward the ‘classic’ of the consumer’s native culture.”⁶⁴ Strictly speaking, Taiwan’s ‘classic’ folk crafts are not, of course, ‘native’ for San Mao at all, given that she was not born in Taiwan and both of her parents were mainlanders. After her family moved to Taiwan in 1948, when she was five years old, she is likely to have preserved some sense of being an ‘outsider’ there, particularly in view of the continuing mainland focus of many such immigrant families (who tended to regard their stay in Taiwan as only a sojourn until they would return to a Nationalist mainland) and their natural identification as outsiders (*waishengren* 外省人) by native Taiwanese. Despite (or perhaps because of) this outsider status, San Mao draws heavily on a rhetoric of love for the land, neighbourliness and belonging in her descriptions of Taiwan and its ‘folk artefacts’.⁶⁵ There may be an unspoken uncertainty or tension here regarding what is ‘her own’ in Taiwan and what is not. The world may be hers but, owing to political factors related to her immigrant/coloniser status, Taiwan perhaps is not. Yet, as we might have come to expect, there are no evident political considerations in her enthusiastic embracing of things Taiwanese. Notions of a distinctive Taiwanese culture and Taiwanese nationhood do not intersect for San Mao.

San Mao is an enthusiastic participant in the vogue for ‘folk craft’ in Taiwan. “Collecting folk objects,” she cries, “is like playing mahjong—you inevitably become addicted. To deal with this bottomless pit, you have to ... find ways to pass the time, otherwise you’ll just keep on indulging, and that happiness ... will send you insane” (p.253).

She tells us that she loves all folk objects:

Folk things, old things, embroidery, woodcarving ... we ... talked about them all ... people who saw us must have thought we were discussing the lottery—why else would we both be looking so happy? (p.248),

but makes the decision to confine her collection of folk craft to jars and not buy any other items:

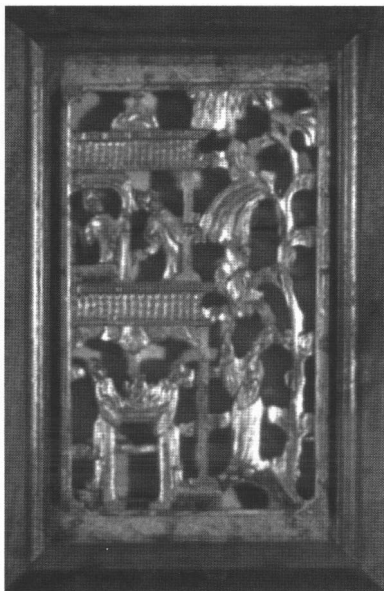
I thought and thought about it: what I don’t get tired of looking at is jars. If a jar isn’t for pickled vegetables then it’s for sprouting bean sprouts or for some other useful purpose—but they are different colours, different sizes and different shapes—also, they have been used by the common people, so on a spiritual level they are full of the emotions of life. They are replete with that most simple and honest flavour of clay, and there is a kind of ‘human’ kindness in them. This ‘humanity’ is the common folk of earlier times, who wore clothes, ate vegetables and pickled them, just the same as we do.

So, faced with this bottomless pit of antiques and folk objects, I have decided only to collect one thing: jars (p.260).

With these fantasies of the simple, honest and kind ‘folk’ San Mao exoticises both the poor and the past yet again.

Her search for the authentic folk item takes her on frequent buying trips to rural Taiwan, where she purchases first and evaluates later.⁶⁶

20



Once I went with two friends to Huandao 環島. I stopped at every village and shop to go and look for bowls till my friends moaned and complained, saying they had nowhere to put their feet—the floor of the car was covered in bowls and plates.

These were not particularly fine examples, but I didn't evaluate them carefully until I got back to Taipei. At the time, I just bought all of them that I wanted (p.183).

In a later story, we find San Mao telling her friends that she cannot invite them to dine at her home because she doesn't have enough bowls; she claims never to have thought of these treasured items (of which she has more than a hundred) as useable objects. Indeed it is not until a member of the urban working class 'folk' (whom she encounters when she hires him to help her move house) points out what a lot of bowls she has that she discovers their use value.⁶⁷ When she does begin to make practical use of the 'rough' hand-painted bowls in her collection, she fantasises about consuming the food of the poor, rural 'other' to match their bowls:

It's best not to put white rice into bowls like this; I should add some sweet potato ... then perhaps it will have more of a rural flavour (p.206).⁶⁸

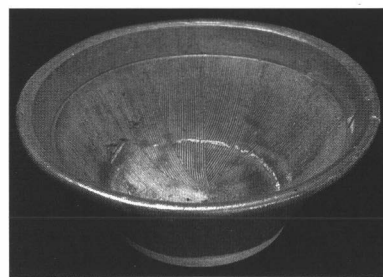
It has been noted above that there is ample precedent in the Chinese tradition for the collection of the old, the simple, the curious, and even the ugly, but that the preference for the simple, the antique, the 'authentic' is also a modern and international middle-class phenomenon. San Mao's search for authenticity brings her to select souvenirs of the rural poor not only in foreign lands but in Taiwan as well.

While San Mao and her shopping companions disdain the mass-produced stock in crockery shops and ask for old hand-painted crockery instead, sending crockery vendors rummaging around in old cupboards and corners to locate old bowls, she tells us that the local noodle seller (again one of the urban 'folk') recommends bowls made of plastic as being more hygienic and less likely to harbour germs (p.206). Evidently the international sophisticate San Mao has passed beyond the modernising preoccupation with cleanliness to the appreciation of the grimy 'authenticity' of pre-industrial objects. Her quest for the authentic folk artefact even leads her to the grime of the rubbish cart:

I ... caught sight of a ... rubbish cart passing slowly by. What good things were hidden in that rubbish? I was inspired, I wanted to follow the cart and find out ... I rushed out to follow the rubbish cart, and yelled out loudly "Stop! ... Please stop the cart, I'll help you push it to the side of the road," I cried out to the woman, who had already climbed off her cart. She was quite at a loss, obviously not knowing what I was obstructing her for.

We had hardly pushed the cart to the roadside before I had pulled off all of the cardboard boxes, broken wooden crates, worn out shoes and old buckets. I reached out my hands and a clay urn fell into them ... we found one clay jar after another, eleven in all, of various sizes (pp.208–9).

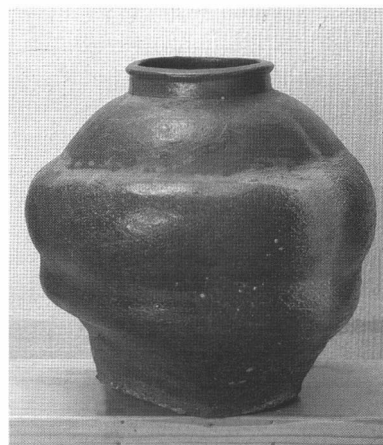
The woman is evidently not sure how much to charge for the job lot; in a now



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/gests to her that it would be very suitable for arranging flowers in. "All she talked about was function, function and function again—she was a thoroughly practical character. But I wouldn't ever use it for putting flowers in ... I wouldn't let any flowers rob it of its elegance—it shouldn't be allowed to come down in the world like that" (p.244). This fanciful logic on San Mao's part subsumes the 'authentic' history of the bowl as a vessel for grinding *mochi* (glutenous rice) paste in (p.243). The encounter ends with the saleswoman asking if she may have her photograph taken with San Mao in return for a folk jar, to which she happily agrees (p.244).

⁶⁸ The choice of sweet potatoes to represent the quintessential rural Taiwan has a significance beyond the importance of sweet potatoes as a staple peasant food. The term 'sweet potatoes' has been widely used in Taiwan to refer to local Taiwan-born Chinese, as opposed to the 'taros' who came from mainland China with the Nationalists in 1949 (San Mao, of course, among them). I am grateful to Lewis Mayo for reminding me of this point.



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⁶⁹ Although San Mao and her companions covet these jars as purely aesthetic objects, they speculate about the use to which they might have been put by the 'folk'; they cannot agree on whether they might have been used for storing bone ash after cremations (again the hint of the macabre that distances the object even further into the realm of the exotic) or for pickling vegetables (p.210).

familiar gesture, San Mao assures her she won't bargain but will pay whatever she asks. She asks for \$100 and is given \$120. As is so often the case with her purchases in foreign countries, San Mao feels apologetic, thinking that she has got the best of the woman. These scruples, however, do not move her to offer a sum great enough to dispel her own unease.⁶⁹

In general, San Mao's consumption behaviour is less scrupulous in Taiwan than elsewhere. No veneer of affection obscures her quest for the objects she wants to purchase. San Mao gives an unapologetic example of acquisitive shopping when she and her friends hire trucks to go on a three-day shopping expedition for folk antiques (the need for trucks evidently indicating a desire to buy in considerable bulk). Their purpose is thwarted, however, by suspicious peasants who are reluctant to sell.

None of the country people were willing to sell. Not even things that they just left outside in the wind and rain—when we pulled up in the car and said we wanted to buy them, the old women ... became agitated and said "It's not for sale, it's not for sale." One old man was even more interesting; he treated his pots and mortars and pestles as treasures and put them all under his bed, afraid that they'd be stolen. When we asked him to name a price ... he replied with a ridiculous sum that made us double up with laughter (pp.232–3).

There is a clear double standard here, as San Mao scoffs at an old man for regarding as treasures the very things that she herself sees as treasures. It seems that only someone with a high level of education, travel experience and international sophistication (a "culture person") is qualified to judge what is truly a treasure; for an elderly peasant to speak of "treasures" is merely laughable, even when San Mao considers the same items to be "treasures" too.

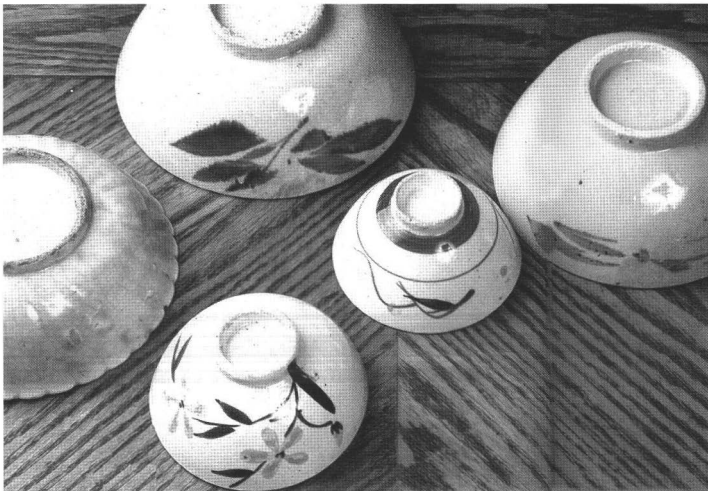
Despite the difficulties they place in the way of San Mao's wish to consume, she considers these old people quaint and appealing—the interesting old man in the above story and the agitated old woman in the story below are

true 'characters'. "The most interesting thing about that sort of trip," she tells us, "is not searching for things but talking to these old men and women. It can make you happy for a long, long time" (p.233).

After two days, San Mao's party has not been able to buy anything at all. Their last hope is the folk-craft shops.

When we surged into a folk antique shop—over a dozen of us—the old woman in the shop just couldn't keep her eye on all of us. These fifteen or so people filled every corner of the small shop, which was also her home, picking up things on every side and putting them down again so the old woman kept having to turn around. I could see that she was agitated.

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There was no way she could watch all of us, and she couldn't keep us in line. The quiet little shop had gone mad.

I was the first to go out to the place where the courtyard was, outside the kitchen, and there were almost 100 jars of all sizes piled there ... My friends eyed some of the jars saying they wanted to take them back to put flowers in.⁷⁰ If they were going to put flowers in them, they would have to test them to make sure they didn't leak.

The old woman kept saying, "They don't leak, they don't leak."

How could we believe that? We picked up the dipper and ... poured a brimming jug of water into a pot ...

I heard the old woman saying "This is our dining table—don't move it!"

But who was taking any notice of her? We moved the dining table to the doorway into the sunlight to see the effect.

It was chaotic—the air was full of offers and counter offers on all sides.

The old woman cried out bitterly, "No, no."

Taking advantage of all this chaos, I quietly picked up ... a clay stool. I didn't dare call out, afraid that if my friends ... saw it they would want to take it ... Just when the hubbub was almost over and people had bought a lot of things, the old woman cried out as if she was in distress. The children with us ... had filled all of the hundred or so pots with water and were checking them to see which few didn't leak. With great effort, the old woman picked up her big water vat—it was completely empty (pp.233–4).

Behaviour less reasonable than that described in San Mao's stories of shopping in foreign countries is here recounted as an amusing anecdote; the shopkeeper attempting to assert her rights is presented as a comic figure. San Mao does not create the same level of sentimental attachment to vendors in Taiwan as she did in South America. Although she constructs the physical environment and culture of Taiwan in a similar way to the 'third world' cultures where she travels and consumes (that is, as desirably exotic—as will be illustrated below), her buying and selling relationships in Taiwan are to some extent exempt from the sentiment that attends them elsewhere. Taiwan may merit the same glow of cultural exoticism as other countries, but San Mao can shop there without the same emotional and ethical questions as she faces elsewhere. There is a double standard operating here, in that the same behaviour occasions guilt abroad and amusement at home.

To leave the reader in no doubt about the 'amusing' (and perhaps, it is hinted, insincere) nature of the shopkeeper's behaviour, San Mao ends this anecdote with the words:

The most interesting thing about that trip to Jiayi was hearing the old woman crying out on several occasions. I think she did good business that day—she even sold her dining table in the end (p.234).

This is not San Mao's only story about questionable means of acquiring goods in Taiwan. On another shopping expedition outside Taipei, she is unable to sleep and goes for a late-night stroll:

As I was walking I saw a black dog by the ditch eating its dinner out of an old bowl.

⁷⁰ In contrast to San Mao, who would not sully her bowl's 'folk integrity' by putting flowers in it. See n.67.



⁷¹ Her desire for the dog's bowl may also partake of the desire of the 'connoisseur' to 'rescue' objects that are not sufficiently cared for where they are, in the same way as some collectors have justified their 'sometimes irregular methods of acquisition' by their supposed ability to treat the objects with greater care than the original producers and owners would, and to preserve them for posterity (see Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, pp.75–7).

⁷² *The tourist gaze*, pp.100–4, 138; Shields, *Lifestyle shopping*, p.8.

When I saw that dog's bowl I was transfixed; I waited in the darkness until the dog had finished eating so I would be able to take it.

That stupid dog thought someone was trying to steal its food, and it advanced threateningly towards me ...

I considered ... First, there was this fierce dog, and second, things wouldn't look good if the owner came out to catch the thief. I gave it some more thought, then crossed the ditch and went into the town.

In the town, she buys a new bowl:

When I returned, the dog was nowhere to be seen. There were no people either. Only the old bowl was there, licked completely clean. I crouched down and picked it up quickly, putting the new one in its place ... I didn't dare walk too fast—although I was frightened, I walked away at the pace of someone out for a stroll. I didn't dare look back until I had gone some distance. Once I knew I was safe, I washed the bowl in the ditch under a street light ... I took back enough bowls and plates [from that trip] to open a shop (pp.183–4).

The motivation for this somewhat bizarre and excessive means of acquisition is not entirely clear. Presumably San Mao could have negotiated with the owner of both the dog and the bowl. Perhaps it is the *frisson* of the illicit that causes her to reject this obvious course of action, or perhaps a fear that the owner would refuse to sell. Alternatively, one suspects that she might have been afraid that, once the owner realised the bowl was of value to her, he or she might have demanded a higher price than she would have been willing to pay.⁷¹ This collection of stories gives the reader the impression that San Mao likes to acquire things that she both values herself and considers to be of absolute value for a price that is in no way commensurate with this value (even though it may accord with its market value). Here, such considerations are simply bypassed by means of a furtive and secret exchange.

As noted above, although San Mao sometimes has compunctions about her purchasing behaviour in foreign countries, and disguises or excuses it with protestations of emotion, she appears less concerned with issues of morality and exploitation when she shops in Taiwan. This perhaps reveals a basic ambivalence in her attitude to Taiwan; it is touristic in the sense that the objects she wishes to consume there are 'exotic' and 'ethnic', and the people are quaint and exotic to— but because Taiwan is also her home territory she does not need to display reverent embarrassment and mystic affection for peasants as in South America, or even the hints of guilt attending her buying tactics in the Sahara. Rudeness and rapacity are apparently quite acceptable at home in Taiwan. San Mao seems to have no need to feel nostalgia and tenderness for these people.

Consumption spaces (and tourist sites) have been hypothesised as liminal zones where shoppers or tourists are freed from certain social constraints that condition their behaviour elsewhere.⁷² Does this mean that San Mao is at home everywhere except in Taiwan? The world is 'hers'; is Taiwan 'hers' too?

Her shopping behaviour in Taiwan might indicate that her relationship with Taiwan and its people is essentially that of the tourist, for whom the excitement and novelty of the experience can overcome polite restraints of behaviour. Or could it rather be the case that because she is 'at home' in Taiwan she can shop unhampered by the postcolonial guilts which (although she treats them with humour) might lurk behind her consumption adventures elsewhere—without acknowledging that they might be present in Taiwan as well?

Exoticisation of Home

The ultimate conclusion of San Mao's fantasy of herself freely at play in a post-colonial world is that home is best after all.⁷³ But in Taiwan she is somehow at home and a tourist at the same time, exoticising and fetishising the everyday even as she protests the ordinariness of it all. This presentation of Taiwan as extraordinary and exotic reveals an interesting tension between San Mao's Chineseness and her 'outsider' status after her years abroad—and perhaps also some internalisation of those "Western concepts concerning the Other" referred to above.

After travelling the world for more than a decade, San Mao finds her Utopian dream in Taiwan, among craftspeople in the countryside. An uncomfortable journey by truck along a dry, stony riverbed takes San Mao and her companions to "a village like a poem or a painting," and a kiln on the hillside above it where "people were living in a painting, making ceramics." "The peacefulness of that ... place," San Mao tells us, "was like something outside this human world" (p.224).

Like the landscape, the people are idealised:

She was a young woman out of a painting, with long hair, in a simple T-shirt and trousers and no makeup, with features as clear as a quiet scene in springtime ...

The woman, whose name was Meihua, serenely picked up a pot of water to make ... tea. What kind of person was she, hiding here being an immortal? ...

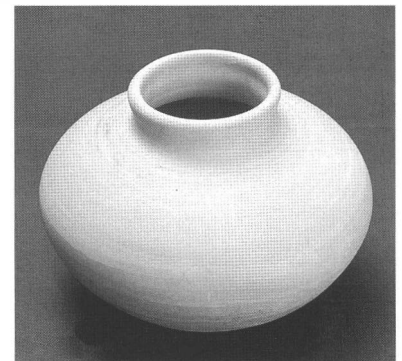
Gentle rain was falling on the pond, in which were lotus flowers ... It was so still that you could hear the wind in the treetops ... so still that people and clay merged into one, so still that I didn't wish to utter a single word ... I said to myself ... "I envy her ... if only I could be her. There is no one in the world more beautiful than she."

As I have borne my fate throughout my life, I have never ... envied anyone, never wanted to be anyone—only this once, my dreams alighted on this woman who made pots ...

When will I be able to cast off everything and go and be someone who makes pots and looks at the wild flowers? If that day ever comes, it will be the beginning of happiness and freedom (pp.224-6).

⁷³ As noted above, San Mao was not born in Taiwan, but her upbringing there from early childhood and residence until the age of twenty-four would qualify it as 'home' by most standards.

Figure 25
The unfired pot (My treasures, p.235)



⁷⁴ In addition to the lengthy passage quoted below, San Mao's excitement about her "neighbourhood" is also demonstrated in three stories devoted to her local teahouse and folkcraft gallery, the "Thatched Cottage" (茅廬), where she discusses (and buys) folkcraft items, samples tea, and participates in the community of "Thatched Cottage" patrons—even to the extent of writing a "Dear Neighbours" letter encouraging others to support their local teahouse and distributing copies around the neighbourhood (Stories 82–84).

The life of the potters, and in particular the person of Meihua, is idealised to such an extent that the fantasy momentarily engulfs the desire to consume. The consumption experience is almost forgotten among these fond dreams; it is only when Meihua asks her what she would like to buy that San Mao comes to her senses again and chooses an unfired pot.

Having idealised the countryside of Taiwan, San Mao applies her exoticising and idealising treatment to city life in Taipei as well. She presents her own life in the city as an ideal of urban vitality, variety and neighbourliness every bit as desirable as the peaceful and beautiful mountain retreat of the kiln workers.⁷⁴ Her ode to the liveliness and energy of Taipei sentimentalises and exoticises the small alley in which she lives, creating a walk through a "neighbourhood" as she itemises the shops and street scenes in the touristic style of a guide book, complete with the thrill of horrified glee over chicken-killing and blood:

I often ask myself, "Can someone who has wandered all over the world live peacefully in one lane?" The answer is "Yes—and live a life full of vitality too" ...

No metropolis in the world can equal the vigour of Taipei. Let's look at the lane where I live. Come in from the hotpot shop at the start of the lane, and you can buy fruit—you can also see people making crispy-ash chicken, puffed rice and cakes. You can go past the cafe ... You can look into the pharmacy ... you can go next door to the stationers and leaf through some colourful magazines ... there are things hanging in the window of the roast-meat shop that will make you salivate. If you should happen to remember suddenly that you are almost out of cigarettes, that little stall on the corner is bound to have them ... you can ... go and take a look at the art prints hanging in front of the glazier's, and you can buy maybe a little round mirror. It's easy to find a watch for NT\$90 in Taiwan, so if your watch isn't working, just throw it away! Go into the shop that sells watches and glasses to look at one and, if you go and chat with the owner, perhaps you'll buy a big wall clock as well.

The rows of meat and vegetable stalls on the right of the lane look like a watercolour painting ... You ... buy a piece of betel nut to chew on then you ask at the Chinese pharmacy for some herbs ... Then ... someone can kill a fowl for you—it's quite awful, and they'll ask you if you want the blood. If you aren't too afraid, you can take a plastic bag of blood home with you.

Maybe carrying the blood will make you feel sick, so you stop off next at the flower seller and buy a big bunch of lilies. Then perhaps you don't have any milk ... or bread ... so you go on a few paces. Once you've bought the milk, you can call out to the young man who repairs air-conditioning ...

You wave to the hairdresser and call "I'd like my hair washed after dinner." When you're almost home again, you remember your that your niece has just had a baby ... so you don't go home but go to the jeweller's and bargain for a little gold lock. Then the owner of the photo shop greets you, saying "The enlargements of your family photos are ready. They're lovely."

... The young apprentice from the garage smiles at you, and you suddenly start to discuss buying a bicycle with him ... Then you are transfixed in front

of the aquarium, watching the fluorescent fish.

... Then you go to the pet shop, the electrical repair shop, the paint shop, the typist, the tea seller, the Buddhist supplies shop, the hardware shop, the laundry, the beef noodle shop, the soup stall ... and then home ...

Yes, the boundless universe described above can all be seen and heard and lived in this one short street in Taipei. Even if you live your whole life here, every day is different—including all of those chickens being killed.

So the seven months I've lived in Taipei have been spent in this lane, and I'm so busy I can't fit everything in (pp.245–7).

It seems strange that San Mao should take such pains to describe the minutiae of urban life in Taipei when most of her intended readers might be expected to have some degree of familiarity with Taiwanese city life. Maybe this affirmation of Taipei's merits can be made convincing and authoritative to her audience because she has travelled so widely; if someone familiar with the capital cities of Europe can express such enthusiasm about Taipei, then the city and lifestyle must indeed be truly distinctive and an occasion for national pride.⁷⁵ Perhaps also San Mao's careful explanations of Taiwan life, even down to a definition of the Chinese word for 'alley', attest to her own cultural confusion and alienation after so long an absence. There is something about her eulogies which is reminiscent of the attitudes of cultural cringe exhibited by so many expatriates who return home after long absences and protest theatrically that they could never live anywhere else. Urry and others have suggested that people in the post-modern world have become so alienated from the former stabilising aspects of life ('losing attachments to work bench, neighbourhood, town, family etc.') that they have begun to look for real life elsewhere and thus to view everything and every place with the gaze of a tourist.⁷⁶ This may well have been the case for San Mao, whose writing exoticises foreign countries and home in equal measure, seeking out the 'non-aumatic' and the 'backstage' experience of authenticity, and looking for 'real life' in the lives and everyday activities of others.

After her paean to the gritty urban vitality of Taipei, San Mao reminds her readers of how far Taiwan has come in the past two decades as regards consumption opportunities:

Twenty years ago when I left Taiwan a friend gave me a little cluster of three cowbells. At that time no one valued native things. I remember too that you couldn't buy ready-made clothes in Taipei then; if you wanted clothes you had to go to the western-style tailor. Taking the cloth already cut, you'd sit on a stool leafing through American magazines and then when you saw the pattern you wanted you'd ask the tailor to make it up for you. And you had to go to town and buy the buttons yourself. That was a time when we worshipped the west, partly because there weren't many things in Taiwan (p.213).

Now, she maintains, Taiwan is as good as or better than anywhere else, measuring its value in terms of 'things'. Paradoxically, it is precisely because of her experiences elsewhere in the world that San Mao can claim supremacy

⁷⁵ There seems to be some resonance here with the determined characterisation of Toronto as a 'world class' city remarked on by Margaret Atwood in her novel *Cat's eye* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1989), p.14.

⁷⁶ Urry, *The tourist gaze*, p.8.

for the lifestyle and cultural products of Taiwan. However, occasional hints of familiarity with Europe remain to remind her readers of her international sophistication, with Europe presented as centre and standard. San Mao claims to have a “half-Spanish soul” (p.110); she remarks regretfully that only sweet wine is drunk in Taiwan, as opposed to the bitter-tasting wine she acquired a liking for in Spain (p.194); she is astonished that rich people on Taiwan television hold their wineglasses incorrectly (p.195); she likes to drink iced tea with sugar rather than Chinese-style tea (p.247). Folk pottery in Taiwan, she claims, is as good as that of Europe (p.244), thus reasserting the cultural hegemony of Europe even as she would ostensibly deny it. Taiwan’s “worship of the west,” she remarks, “is not decreasing—but it isn’t thoroughgoing enough either” (p.195). She herself, of course, has the best of both worlds. She understands both the ‘Asian’ aesthetic and the tastes of Europe, and can appreciate the folk craft of Taiwan as well as the great European masters.

Where East and West Converge: Unified by Consumption

In *My Treasures*, San Mao tells us of her ability to make objects come alive through her personality and creativity. She speaks of a piece of embroidered Indian cloth bought by her German neighbour, which looks out of place no matter what the neighbour does with it. San Mao

picked it up and folded it casually into a triangle; putting it around my shoulders, I smiled and said, “How does it look?”

Before she even answered I had shaken the cloth out and wrapped it around my waist. “Now it’s a skirt,” I said (p.191).

But it is not just San Mao’s personal flair that makes the cloth look right. It is her Asianness.

That golden-haired woman smiled and said, “There’s nothing else for it—you’re from the Orient; something like this, these colours, it has to go with a black-haired person. It doesn’t fit here at my place.”

I said to her, “This isn’t meant to be a piece of clothing. Try it if you don’t believe me—hang it on the wall, put it over the back of a chair, put it diagonally across a table—it would look good any of those ways.”

“It should still be at your place,” she said.

So I took the coloured cloth and went home. I threw it down casually and it came alive. At my house, it was as if the four birds in the pattern began to sing.

I went back to the German woman and said ... “You were right; it looks right at my place, so let me have it” (p.191).

Figure 26

Neighbour’s cloth (*My treasures*, p.182)



San Mao may be invested with European or international taste, but she also has an extra dimension of taste, an adaptability and practical flair that is presented to San Mao's Chinese readers through the eyes of her German neighbour. San Mao seems to agree with the neighbour that some "oriental" quality makes her (and not the neighbour) the rightful possessor of a cloth from India. Furthermore it is San Mao (and again not the neighbour) who is able to recontextualise objects in ways that ostensibly improve on their original function.⁷⁷

Moving between 'east' and 'west', it is by consumption that San Mao identifies herself with the surrounding community. In Taiwan she collects native folk art. Abroad, she identifies with her peers in Spain:

In Spanish homes, married women—more than ninety per cent of them—have a rosary hanging on the wall above their beds.

When I got married, I wanted one of those big rosaries too to hang on the wall (pp.120-1).

and in the Sahara:

Not every woman in the desert has [a pendant], but if you have one it's a family heirloom; it will hang around your neck all your life, and only after you are dead will it be taken by the family and passed on to your daughter or daughter-in-law.

In 1973 when I was going to get married I wanted a pendant to hang around my neck, just like the adult women of the desert (p.58).

In San Mao's world of equality by consumption, she can 'belong' and become 'local' anywhere. It is ironic that this identification by consumption can involve dubious purchasing behaviour—exploiting people in order to be one of them. Even more ironically, her very attempts to be part of a scene can mark her off as an outsider, as for example when she describes how she feels when she visits markets in South America.

South American markets are a succession of fantastic dreams. Sleeping in an inn, I could hear the crowds of people arriving before four in the morning. From the window I would watch the long line of Indian women with wares to sell, carrying them on their heads, pulling them in carts, or carrying them on horseback; that cacophony of voices, that flourishing vitality pouring out in the streets that were still dark was very exciting. Perhaps in a previous life I was an Indian woman—otherwise, how is it that when I see this kind of scene I want to cry? (p.158).

San Mao would like to think that her emotional response

⁷⁷ The item in this story is selected to represent the collection on the front cover of the book (see Figure 1).

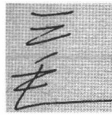
Figure 27

San Mao wearing the pendant (My treasures, p.15)



⁷⁸ San Mao's readers are invited to join in and belong too. At the end of the book, three pages are left blank save for line drawings of two of San Mao's treasures (the desert pendant and the 'slave drums') and the words, "Please put your treasure in the space below and record its story." Readers' participation is clearly to be subordinated to San Mao's; one treasure compared with a whole bookful, sharing space on the page with two treasures of San Mao's which were there first. Readers are exhorted to participate further by giving copies of the book to their close friends, because "what you give will be not only a story but also a big pile of ... so-called treasures" (p.269). Thus consumption of the book by the reader (and San Mao's consequent financial profit) becomes a loving gesture between friends rather than a simple purchase.

⁷⁹ A wealthy district of Taipei known for its expensive stores.



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to the market indicates a mystic communion with the local people. In reality, it would seem to be only the outsider, the person to whom the market is a new and exotic world, who would find in it an occasion for tearful emotion.

The desire to identify and to belong need not, however, be a problem in San Mao's world of travel and consumption.⁷⁸ With the international tastes San Mao has acquired she can shop freely everywhere. In selecting items to purchase and thus create and express her identity, she is self-consciously a 'citizen of the world'. *My Treasures* illustrates the internationalisation of consumption and demonstrates the effect of global shopping in reinforcing differences in power between nations and individuals, however much San Mao may wish the opposite to be the case. She presents her internationalised taste and consumption as a parable of world peace, a global unifier whereby the world can meet in her own person through what she has purchased:

I looked at myself: 'Kansas City, USA' was woven into my sweater ... I had a necklace from Chiang Mai ... around my neck ... the jeans I was wearing were bought in Shilin,⁷⁹ my boots were from Spain, my bag was from Costa Rica, and my jacket was from Paris. An international smorgashbord; and you could say they all united harmoniously and peacefully—and that's exactly me (pp.197–8).

In the final analysis, consumption is for San Mao an assertion of a post-colonial world of supposed equality. In San Mao's world, no power inequalities are involved in the global marketplace; Costa Rica and Paris are equivalent consumption zones, and she herself is free to partake innocently of everything the world has to offer. The world is 'hers', and it is not only united but happy and at peace as it is represented in San Mao's person and her record of her cosmopolitan possessions.