

Review Article

## Representation and Reception of the Female Images in the English Version of *Stories of the Sahara*

Tan Xinyu<sup>1</sup>, Hua Jing<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>BA Student at School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, 200237, China

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor at School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, 200237, China

\*Corresponding Author: Hua Jing

Associate Professor at School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, 200237, China

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**Abstract:** San Mao (English pen name Echo), a famous wandering female writer from Taiwan, China, has influenced the growth of several generations of Chinese people, especially Chinese women, with her works and life experiences. Taking the English version of San Mao's most famous work, *Stories of the Sahara*, as an example, this paper analyzes the English version, especially the translator Mike Fu's representation of San Mao's female image. The article holds that San Mao, as a narrator, bystander and witness of Saharan life, has a rich personal image, which is influenced by both eastern culture and western culture. Translator Mike Fu insists on "faithfulness" and has androgynous translation consciousness, which successfully reproduces the image of San Mao. Through the foreign translation platforms of China literature, such as Paper-Republic, and the promotion of foreign mainstream medias, the English version has gained more readers and comments, and San Mao has formed an irreplaceable female image through the understanding of different readers.

**Keywords:** *Stories of the Sahara*, Female Image, San Mao, Mike Fu.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Once published in 1976, *Stories of the Sahara*, written by San Mao, attracted wide attention in China and influenced the growth of many Chinese women in the following decades, for its fresh and simple language, touching love story, exciting Sahara life and San Mao's personal charm.

It was not until 2019 that its first English translation was published and officially oriented towards readers in the English-speaking world. Under the publicity of many mediums, especially the promotion of platforms such as Paper-Republic, more readers have paid attention to such a legendary woman, who has also added a gorgeous page to the China female image album in the hearts of readers in the English-speaking world.

## 2. The Image of San Mao in *Stories of the Sahara*

### 2.1 San Mao's Female Consciousness and Image

In *Stories of the Sahara*, the author San Mao, with the unique sensitivity and delicacy of women, writes down real life and expresses sincere feelings.

In these stories, San Mao is first and foremost a narrator.

She drives the story with emotion rather than skill. Taking "Child Bride" as an example, the title reflects a contradictory sadness. Throughout the article, San Mao not only uses environmental description to render the sad

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atmosphere, such as the desert dyed red by dusk and the depressing drums like crying, but also directly expresses his anger and heartache in dialogues or monologues many times. What infects readers is not only the custom of insulting women like that, but also San Mao's emotion without any deliberate trace.

Her simple and plain words have expanded a large number of readers for these stories. In the 1970s, compulsory education in China had not yet started, and the national cultural level was low, but as San Mao said, "My writing is very shallow, people can read it whether they are children in the fourth grade of primary school or old men". San Mao prefers simile and analogy. She can skillfully link irrelevant things together, casually but interestingly, as if she's rebelling against the boring desert. Her colloquial language and wide use of reduplicated words, onomatopoeia and short sentences makes the book reads kindly. What is magnificent is not only the desert scenery, exotic elegance, but also San Mao's words, which painted a spiritual lamp for readers.

She chose the name of "San Mao" as her pen name to faithfully record the lives of ordinary people who can't speak for themselves. For this purpose, although these stories are unreliable first-person narration, the recording and description of local people should be relatively objective. Among the ordinary people she describes, the most are local women, who are wrapped in black gauze all day long and subordinate to men. No matter how objective the writing is, the choice is subjective. The female perspective will unconsciously empathize with women and reveal the desire for gender equality.

At the same time, San Mao is also a bystander and witness. She examines the desert life under the firm control of patriarchy from a unique female perspective. Being full of sympathy and pity for people in the desert with relatively backward civilization, especially women, she distributed her clothes and medicines to local women, treated them with her own experience and knowledge from books, and even set up a free girls' school to teach them some common sense and skills in life. She doesn't condescend to show her civilization, but becomes friends with them and influences their slight changes in sincere communication. Feminism emphasizes women's pursuit of personal happiness and desire, but it is the true meaning of San Mao's feminism to help more women improve their lives.

## **2.2 The Female Image under Chinese Traditional thoughts' Inheritance and Western Advanced thoughts' Influence**

Having characteristics surpassing the age and environment, San Mao was not the epitome of Chinese women at that time. However, she is a female model of a generation in China, inspiring women at the crossroads of the times to rush to the unknown tomorrow.

San Mao is a wanderer with China cultural genes engraved in his bones. She opened "Chinese Restaurant" and invited Jose's colleagues to taste China cuisine. She has read books on Chinese medicine and treated local women with this knowledge. In this book, she mentioned China's traditional culture and values many times, such as "The Water Margin" and "backbone" ... In addition, the wandering feelings of China people can still be seen in such a wanderer who pursues freedom. Even if she seldom talks about her memories of life in her native land, her eyes will be wet when Jose mentions her parents.

San Mao is also a woman who has been greatly influenced by western thoughts. She read a lot of western literature since she was a child, then studied and traveled in many countries and became a wandering writer. Extensive knowledge and western open mind broadened her horizon. Besides, Christianity invisibly deepened her feelings of fraternity and influenced her outlook on life. *Stories of the Sahara* impacts on Chinese readers only by the Sahara life that far away from us, but also by San Mao's knowledge, courage and yearning for freedom and beauty that beyond most women in China at that time.

Contradiction seems to be a part of San Mao's character. She is not only a China traditional Chinese painting with lofty realm and still water flowing deeply, but also a colorful and passionate western oil painting. San Mao has enough knowledge to enrich the soul, has mutual respect and love, can find treasures in the desert to decorate his home, and has the enthusiasm to ignite all boring life; However, she can't ignore Gueiga, who was forced to get married when she was only ten years old, the sergeant who was killed by the Sahrawi people and the dumb slave whose body was "imprisoned" and whose mind was still free ... She hopes to stick to the filial piety, but she is more eager to wander in the spiritual oasis that is divorced from the secular world. After Jose's death, she returned to her native land ... Contradictions make her a round and authentic character, and she speaks for herself: In the real world, women can be fairies symbolizing life and beauty, or housewives chopping suet in the kitchen 3, and the two can coexist.

## **3. The Representation and Reconstruction of San Mao's Image in the English version of *Stories of the Sahara***

*Stories of the Sahara* are the first English version of 《撒哈拉的故事》, translated by Mike Fu, an American Chinese, and prefaced by Sharlene Teo, a Singaporean female novelist. Before the translation, Mike Fu made sufficient

preparations, including going to Spain to talk with Jose's niece and visiting San Mao's old residence. In the process of translation, he accepted the opinions of many native Chinese speakers and the suggestions of Bloomsbury's editorial team, and took other language versions as reference. Mike Fu's translation is basically faithful to the original text and the needs of readers, and truly recreates the image of San Mao. As a male translator, when facing the text of a unique female writer like San Mao, he also showed androgyny translation consciousness and recreated female consciousness of the author. In addition to the translator's efforts, Bloomsbury Publishing House's editing of English versions also plays an important role in promoting this book and restoring San Mao's image.

### 3.1 Chapter Order Adjustment

As a collection of short stories, each Chinese version of *Stories of the Sahara* contains different chapters, but all of them start with "The Marriage Chronicles" or "A Desert Diner". The comparison of catalogues between the 2022 edition of Chinese version and the English version is shown in Table 1. Because both San Mao's touching love with Jose, San Mao's spreading of Chinese food culture and San Mao's unrestrained personality are more popular among China readers. In the English version, they chose "A Knife on a Desert Night" as the first chapter: this chapter records San Mao's confidence, cultural shock and the process of overcoming difficulties and fears when she first arrived in the Sahara Desert. There is no Jose in this chapter, only an ordinary woman with great adventure spirit. She is brave but not heroic brave, for she will also be full of fear and feel lonely. She's like an oriental heroine, holding a sharp knife and breaking into the desert alone.

Howard Goldblatt, a famous translator, thinks that "British and American readers are used to reading the first page of a novel first to decide whether it is worth buying; China writers just don't pay attention to the first sentence of the novel, and readers in China are also very tolerant and could read on patiently. Foreign editors believe that novels need a good opening to attract readers' attention" 4. The first sentence of "A Knife on a Desert Night" is "When I first arrived in the desert, I desperately wanted to be the first female explorer to cross the Sahara" (*Stories of the Sahara*, 2019:1) This sentence not only meets the readers' expectations for the content of this book, but also can arouse readers' interest in reading with the ambition of being the first in the world. At the same time, "when I first arrived in the desert" not only conforms to the time sequence, but also makes readers curious: whether San Mao, who has lived in the desert for a while, still has such an ambition and whether she has achieved such a goal.

The adjustment of this chapter order is more in line with the expectations of western readers for the content of adventure wandering. What's more, it also highlights San Mao's brave, optimistic and tenacious female image at the beginning of this book.

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	Contents of the Chinese Version	Contents of the English Version
1	结婚记(The Marriage Chronicles)	A Knife on a Desert Night
2	沙漠中的饭店(A Desert Diner)	A Desert Diner
3	悬壶济世(Apothecary)	The Marriage Chronicles
4	娃娃新娘(Child Bride)	Apothecary
5	荒山之夜(Night in the Wasteland)	Child Bride
6	沙漠观浴记(The Desert Bathing Spectacle)	Night in the Wasteland
7	爱的寻求(Looking for Love)	The Desert Bathing Spectacle
8	芳邻(Nice Neighbours)	Looking for Love
9	素人渔夫(Dilettante Fishermen)	Nice Neighbours
10	死果(Seed of Death)	Dilettante Fishermen
11	寂地(Lonesome Land)	Seed of Death
12	天梯(A Ladder)	A Ladder
13	平沙漠漠夜带刀(A Knife on a Desert Night)	Hearth and Home
14	白手成家(Hearth and Home)	My Great Mother-in Law
15	收魂记(Stealing Souls)	Stealing Souls
16	沙巴军曹(Sergeant Salva)	Sergeant Salva
17	搭车客(Hitchhikers)	Hitchhikers
18	哑奴(The Mute Slave)	The Mute Slave
19	哭泣的骆驼(Crying camels)	Crying camels
20	附录 回乡小笺(Appendix)	Lonesome Land

### 3.2 The Translator's Androgyny Consciousness

Due to gender differences, people's specific use of language will show a certain tendency, thus producing "gender language." Virginia Woolf put forward the theory of androgyny in literature in *A Room of One's Own*, which means that the creator has androgyny consciousness<sup>3</sup>. Translation is not in the shadow of the author, and translators also have their own consciousness. Therefore, when translating the works of female authors, male translators often need to put aside their physiological gender identity and clearly express the original content in the target language from a female perspective. In the process of translation, Mike Fu stood in San Mao's perspective and replaced San Mao's feelings. His tone and wording were loyal to the original, so the female consciousness in the translation was also clearly visible.

**Example 1:** 我不是妇女解放运动的支持者，但是我极不愿在婚后失去独立的人格和内心的自由自在化，所以我一再强调，婚后我还是“我行我素”，要不然不结婚。<sup>1</sup>

**Translation:** I'm not involved in the women's lib movement, but I wasn't willing to toss aside my independence and my carefree spirit<sup>2</sup>.

In the article "A Desert Diner", this remark of San Mao is intended to show that she pursues freedom and does not want to sacrifice her independent personality for marriage, but “我不是妇女解放运动的支持者” which means “I am not a supporter of women's liberation movement” can cause misunderstanding and ambiguity. Mike Fu combines the reality and context to translate San Mao's original meaning, that is, she believes that she does not participate in the feminist movement and political activities. This translation avoids ambiguity and shows Fu's grasp of San Mao's attitude towards feminism: San Mao does not deliberately preach feminism. In fact, San Mao's articles are full of grievances against the patriarchal society and complaints about the unequal treatment of women in the desert.

**Example 2:** 渐渐的他以为我已经不喜欢玩医生的游戏了。<sup>1</sup>

**Translation:** Gradually he got to thinking that I no longer had any interest in playing doctor<sup>2</sup>.

San Mao's treatment of ailments for Sahrawi women who don't want to go to hospital is in itself an act of kindness, but her description of it as “game” obliterates that kindness, as if she's doing it for fun and to pass the time. A literal translation of this sentence might offend the readers. However, Mike Fu's translation of “play doctor” only means that “play the role of doctor” weakens or eliminates the meaning of “game”, explains the original intention of San Mao's behavior, and reflects his feminist translation consciousness.

When translating female works, male translators may unconsciously be in an androgynous state or maintain a male perspective and unconsciously change the tone and wording of the original text with gender discrimination. In the face of the translation of works without the author's explicit feminist writing intention, Mike Fu can change his perspective and retain or even strengthen the female consciousness expressed in part, which is undoubtedly icing on the cake.

### 3.3 Faithfulness and Hijack

"Faithfulness" is one of the fundamental problems of translation studies and one of the basic principles of translation activities. The important reason why Mike Fu's translation is recognized is that he pays attention to the translation fidelity in meaning, effect and aesthetic to the original, which makes the image of San Mao in the English version recreated to a large extent.

First of all, the accuracy of translation is the basis of fidelity. When dealing with Chinese proverbs and idioms, Mike Fu tends to choose English idioms corresponding to the concept, and directly explain the meaning when there is no corresponding expression. When dealing with the Spanish expressions explained by the author in the original text for the convenience of Chinese readers, the translator tends to retain the original language and increase the exotic features of the article. In addition, as far as possible to retain the author's true thoughts and opinions, is to respect the author and readers.

**Example 3:** 我对婚礼这样的结束觉得失望而可笑，我站起来没有向任何人告别就大步走出去。<sup>1</sup>

**Translation:** That the ceremony had to conclude in such a way was deplorable and ridiculous. I got up and strode out without saying goodbye to anyone<sup>2</sup>.

In “Child Bride”, San Mao is furious at such insulting marriage practices. Although such remark may be considered discriminatory and disrespectful to other cultures and customs, Mike Fu retains the original meaning and does not change it. Anger at the denial of Saharan women's rights and the violation of their happiness and freedom is a sentiment that runs through the whole text, which has nothing to do with civilization and race. It is a feminist writer's empathy for a group of unfortunate women. Translator Mike Fu also has such awareness and empathy, so he chooses to respect the author and retain the original meaning.

Secondly, the retention of the language features of San Mao is also a representation of the image of San Mao, and the respect of her image as a narrator image. In the translation, Fu Mai continues San Mao's "pompous" expression, translating her attitude towards the application of marriage documents: "这事最烦人" into "It was the bane of my existence", which is in line with San Mao's humorous language feature. When translating the modal particle "oh", he did not use the common English "Ah!" "Oops" or "Vaya" in Spanish, but "Aiya" in Chinese pinyin, keeping the original pronunciation and image of a Chinese woman.

Although *Stories of the Sahara*, the only English version, have been praised for their fidelity to the original, Mike Fu's translation does not faithful to the author entirely. He has added his own interpretation to some of the content to serve the overall image.

**Example 4:** 生命的过程，无论是阳春白雪，青菜豆腐，我都得尝尝是什么滋味，才不枉来走这么一遭啊！（其实青菜豆腐都尝不到。）<sup>1</sup>

**Translation:** I wanted a taste of many different lives, sophisticated or simple, highbrow or low. Only then would this journey be worthwhile (Although perhaps a life plain as porridge would never be an option for me) 2.

In fact, in the original text, the author did not make a clear choice between "阳春白雪" and "青菜豆腐", she admitted that she hoped her life could be both poetic and mundane, but "其实青菜豆腐都尝不到。" is more like a self-mockery of her desert life for she cannot taste the most common Chinese dishes, and does not indicate that "a life plain would never be an option for me". The different translation from the original meaning in parentheses may be caused by the author's over-interpretation because he did not fully understand it, or it may be because the author hijacked the original meaning of this sentence by San Mao's other remarks and her image, in order to emphasize San Mao's love of adventure and pursuit of extraordinary life.

### 3.4 The Emphasis and Supplement of the Vice Texts on San Mao's Image

The vice texts of the English version *Stories of the Sahara* mainly includes cover, author profile, translator profile, preface, notes, translator's notes and translator's acknowledgements, in which both the cover and preface have a good overview, emphasis and supplement to San Mao's image.

Of all the 14 editions of *Stories of the Sahara* in Chinese, only three editions have pictures of San Mao on their covers (Figure 1), six editions' covers have little or nothing to do with San Mao and the life of the Sahara (Figure 2), three editions have the concept of desert in the covers (Figure 3), and one edition contains images of desert, San Mao and Jose (Figure 4). The English version chose a photo of San Mao on the street as the cover (Figure 5): in this photo, we can't tell whether the background is Sahara or not, and we don't see the imagined image of San Mao: A woman walks alone in the desert in a floral dress, with her long hair fluttering in the wind. It just shows us the most authentic San Mao, and takes people rather than the desert as the focus of this book.



Figure 1



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Figure 1

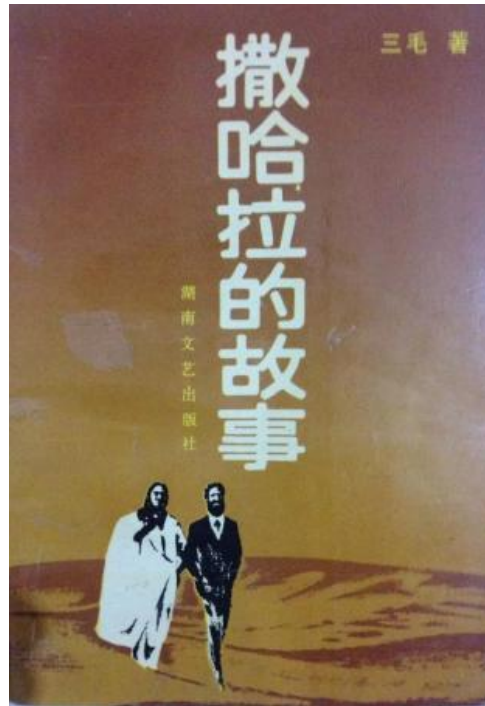
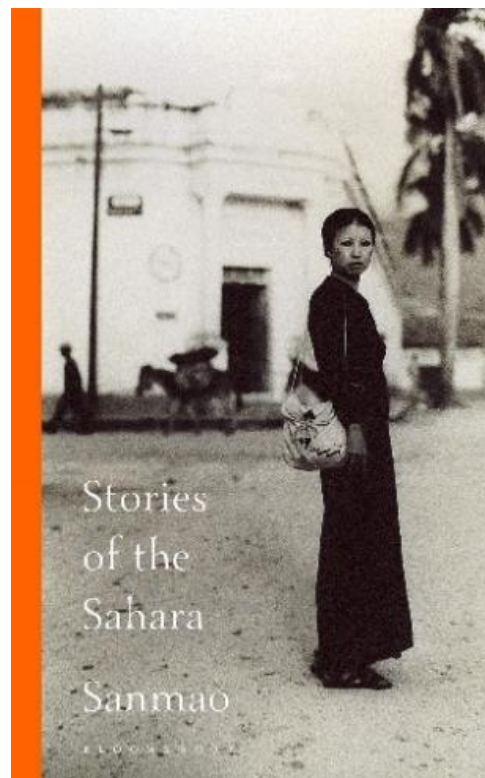


Figure 1



Of all the 14 editions of *Stories of the Sahara* in Chinese, only three editions have pictures of San Mao on their covers (Figure 1)

In addition to pictures, the cover of the English version also shows selected comments from well-known media all over the world, which makes a high evaluation of San Mao's image and influence.

In the preface, Sharlene Teo not only gave us a general introduction to the content and influence of this book, but also made a supplementary introduction to San Mao's life. She also highly praised San Mao's contradictory,

independent and brave personality, saying that San Mao is free, intelligent, highly creative, pays attention to self-exploration, and is a model for Asian women. As an Asian woman writer, Sharlene Teo emphasized the influence of San Mao on more Asian women. According to statistics, there are eight words related to women in the preface, including women, girl, femininity and so on.

The prominence of San Mao's female image in the vice texts is an attraction to potential readers, and it is also a guide for readers before reading, guiding readers to pay attention to San Mao, an extraordinary female author and wanderer, while enjoying the plot.

#### **4. The Promotion and Feedback of the English version of *Stories of the Sahara* in the English World**

##### **4.1 The Promotion and Feedback of Chinese Literature Translation Websites for English Readers**

Chinese literature translation websites for English readers, represented by The Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing and Paper-Republic, have jointly produced high-quality English versions of China's contemporary literature. They selected a wide range of works, introduced them in various forms, and collected book reviews from readers, thus forming a cross-cultural communication platform with comprehensive functions. The series of activities of this kind of platform not only contacted Chinese and foreign readers and translations, translators and authors themselves, but also established contacts between translators and more foreign sinologists, literary planners and publishing houses, forming a communication model with good market success rate of "sinologists initiate and translate + Western commercial publishing houses" 5.

In the works recommended by The Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing, in addition to San Mao, there are also many unique female images created by female writers, such as Qian Xiaohong, an individualized, principled working girl in *Northern Girls*, and three generations of women who are hardworking, optimistic, concerned about the environment and love their hometown in Li Juan's *Distant Sunflower Fields*...

In May, 2021, The Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing selected San Mao as the monthly author, promoted the English version of *Stories of the Sahara*, and reprinted the chapter "Hitchhiker" as the featured story of the month. This platform briefly introduces San Mao's life and the content of the book. By February, 2023, the platform had collected five book reviews from readers and shared them in the "Book review" column. In November, 2022, famous translator Nicky Harman and Mike Fu also participated in the online "Reading the English Translation of San Mao's Hitchhiker" organized by Paper-Republic in conjunction with The Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing and Confucius Institute, and discussed issues such as San Mao's perspective and the tone of the work.

The five book reviews in The Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing and Asian Review of Book's comment that this platform has linked are integrated and classified, and the feedback information is divided into the following four parts:

First, it's the praise of San Mao's personal character and the recognition of her influence. Readers generally believe that San Mao is brave and tenacious woman, who can endure heat waves and hard conditions. She's optimistic about life, and has strong empathy for the misfortunes of others. Some readers praised San Mao as "the most quoted Chinese figure of the past century behind Chairman Mao and Lu Xun".

Second, it's the evaluation of China culture conveyed in the book. Cross-cultural communication is the main theme of the book. Besides the culture of the Sahara Desert and the European culture represented by Jose, the China culture promoted by San Mao from time to time also left a deep impression on readers. For example, food culture in China, traditional Chinese medicine culture and traditional filial piety in China. In accepting the cultural part of China in the book, readers do not fully recognize it, or show the novelty of cultural collision.

Thirdly, it talks about that shaping and influence of this book on the female image in China. As an outstanding China woman, San Mao presents readers who don't know China with a brand-new cognition. Asian Review of Books believed that "Often, female characters are portrayed as weak, subjugated victims and moral decline seeps into every corner. However, this work is a candid reflection by a strong-willed author of her experience of living in the Sahara during the 1970s as the region moved to independence from Spanish colonialization" 7.

Readers also believe that "she has inspired Chinese women who want to give up the traditional road and live in their own way."

Fourthly, it is the recognition of Mike Fu's faithful translation.



Although the effectiveness of this platform in attracting foreign readers to read China literature is hard to quantify, as far as *Stories of the Sahara* is concerned, it provides readers with a new reading direction and focus: feeling the charm of Chinese culture and paying attention to San Mao's image.

#### 4.2 West Mainstream Media's Recommendation and Book Reviews on the English version of *Stories of the Sahara*

The English version of *Stories of the Sahara* was published in 2019 and is the only English version so far. In 2019, the New York Times's "Overlooked" column introduced San Mao's life and creation in detail, which, to a certain extent, inspired readers in the English world to read this book. At the same time, foreign publications such as The Spectator, Paris Review and Asian Review of Books all made detailed positive comments on the book.

By April, 2023, on Amazon official website, netizens had rated the translation as 4.6 star, with a majority of positive comments 8. Many readers expressed their curiosity about San Mao, the writer deeply loved by people in China, and finally learned a lively image of San Mao through the English version. By February 24th, 2023, 2156 people had rated the book on Goodreads 9, the world's largest online reading community, with a total score of 4.46 and 96 comments. Through the analysis of book reviews with more than 1 like on Goodreads, it can be found that most readers are deeply infected by San Mao's adventurous spirit, empathy and sense of humor while a few readers think that San Mao has racial discrimination and colonial mentality. The positive and negative evaluation of San Mao's image is about 20: 1.

Comparing the book reviews on Amazon and Goodreads websites with readers' feedback from The Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing, it's clear that the former pays more attention to the story itself and San Mao's personal image, but pays little attention to the female image represented by San Mao, the Chinese culture she spread and her influence on Asian women.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the author and translator's writing consciousness, translation consciousness and the image of San Mao are analyzed through contrast reading of the original text and English version. Generally speaking, San Mao presents readers in the English-speaking world with a distinctive image under the inheritance of Chinese traditional thoughts and influence of western thoughts, and a female idol who pay close attention to women's equality and freedom; This image helps people in the English-speaking world to get rid of the general and one-sided cognition of Chinese women. The translator and Bloomsbury's editorial team successfully recreated and refreshed San Mao, a unique female image, by adjustment of text order, faithful translation in meaning, aesthetics and female consciousness, and using vice texts to supplement and emphasize San Mao's image. Finally, this paper analyzes the promotion and feedback of two kinds of platforms on the English version of *Stories of the Sahara*, and examines the effectiveness of this English version in representing and spreading the image of San Mao women. The professional book reviews listed in The Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing show that the female image represented by San Mao and the traditional Chinese culture written by her have been recognized to some extent. However, the number of book reviews is small and the representative group is small, which cannot represent the readers of the whole English-speaking world. Goodreads presents a large number of book reviews, but it does not pay enough attention to the topic of female images represented by San Mao.

Therefore, to make the female images in English translations of Chinese literature more dazzling in the world literature, it requires not only the joint efforts of authors and translators, but also the continuous expansion of the influence of the cross-cultural communication platform of Chinese literature to maximize its advantages.

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