

Modern Chinese Literature Book Club Session 2



Facilitators of Session 2

Mike Fu is a writer, editor, and Chinese-English translator based in Tokyo. His translation of *Stories of the Sahara* by Sanmao was critically praised, and shortlisted for the 2021 National Translation Award in Prose.

Emily Jones is a founding Trustee of Paper Republic, a charity which promotes Chinese literature in English translation. Her publications include novels such as *Black Holes* (性之罪) by He Jiahong (何家弘) and *The Sky Dwellers* (天行者) by Liu Xinglong (刘醒龙); she has also translated short stories as well as poetry.

Nicky Harman translates full-time from Chinese into English, focussing on fiction. Several of her translations have been recipients of an English PEN Translates award and she has won a Mao Tai Cup People's Literature Chinese-English translation prize in 2015. In 2013, she won the first prize in China International Translation Contest, Chinese-to-English section, with Jia Pingwa's *Backflow River* (倒流河). She is also trustee of Paper-Republic.org.

Edited transcript

Dr KAN Qian:

Emily will first introduce *Paper Republic* very briefly. And then Nicky will say a few words about Sanmao (三毛) as an author, followed by Mike giving us a summary of the story, *Hitchhikers*. Then we come to the discussion session when we open the floor to you. So, whoever wants to, share your thoughts, or ask questions, just raise your hands or you can put your questions in the chat; we'll monitor that. And then, as I said earlier, the second section will not be recorded.

So, without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Emily.

Emily Jones:

Thank you, Qian. And it's lovely to see so many people online today. Well, I can't actually see you, but I see the numbers and I'm looking forward to a great conversation. And thank you particularly to Mike for joining us. It's great to have the actual translator here to talk about the story.

I will keep this quite brief, particularly for those of you who were at our first session, but I wanted to say a few words about *Paper Republic* before we start. We were founded as a charity, two or three years ago now, with the aim to promote Chinese literature in English translation, so really sharing writing from contemporary writers and helping people understand what is out there that is available

and brilliant and fantastic to read in English. What's new, what's great. And also, through our work with translators, really trying to make sure that all translations are as brilliant as Mike's translation of Sanmao is, and others too. If you go to our website, paper-republic.org, you'll find a Chinese literature database, which has information about Chinese authors, their translators, the books that are available, that is ever evolving and growing, as you can imagine. If you do happen to spot somebody who's not on there yet, who should be, please message us - you'll find all the contact details online.

We also have *Read Paper Republic*, which is our collection of translated stories that are available online, completely free to read, by various different authors. In fact, we have, over the years - I think we started the *Read Paper Republic* idea/campaign as a first series in 2015 – we've done a number of different series since then. We've had everything from people's responses to COVID, through to our most recent series looking at female poets writing in Chinese, which is fantastic. We've had literary nonfiction essays, as well as *Bare Branches*, which you can see on there is a series about what it's like to be a singleton in China on the 11th of November. So a real range of topics and themes, which hopefully allows people to explore what's great about Chinese literature and the real breadth and variety that is out there.

We also have our *Guide to Contemporary Chinese Literature*, which is here, and which is available to buy in hardcopy but also to buy as an e-book, or from our site, or the e-book is also available on Amazon. And in here we have a series of essays, first of all, covering different topics around Chinese literature. And then at the back we have a deliberately-not=attempting-to-be-comprehensive selection of Chinese authors, who are selected on the basis that their works are available in English. The idea behind the guide is to try to help people navigate the world of Chinese literature in English translation, so if you're interested in finding out more about the authors, or you don't even really know where to start, you want to have a flick through, then this guide would be a really great place to start that journey.

That's enough about *Paper Republic*!

Today is the second session of our book club with The Open University, and we're delighted, and thank you very much to Dr Kan and others for allowing us to be here with you all. Last time you remember we looked at a story by Yan Ge, today we're focusing on Taiwanese author Sanmao, who I'm sure many of you will know, for her work and her life are famous. I'm not going to attempt to do a full introduction: Mike will tell us about Sanmao and *Hitchhikers*. Mike will speak a little bit about that in a minute, but I just wanted to say that I'm really looking forward to the discussion today because I know how much people love Sanmao and her writing. And I do too. I'm really looking forward to being able to discuss some of her stories with you. I also wanted to say thank you. The *Hitchhike's* story that we shared with you all was originally published on the website of the *Leeds Centre for New Chinese writing*, with whom we collaborate. Do take a look at some of the resources they have on there. There is a great book club, and they run regular events. In fact, I think there is an event next Wednesday on science fiction, which looks really interesting. So that is another great place to go if you're interested in finding out more about Chinese literature.

Before we really turn and focus on talking about Sanmao, next time, we have a date - Friday the 20th of January next year - when we will be looking at A Yi, a very different writer than Sanmao. We're going to look at two really, really short stories, one translated by Michelle Deeter, which is called *Who's Speaking Please?*, which is very atmospheric, and then one translated by Dylan Levi King, which is called *A Message Held to the Flame* in English, which A Yi actually very kindly wrote for us during COVID, and during the pandemic, and it's a really reflective, very short, reflective essay, talking about his reactions and findings and responses to COVID. They're both really interesting and quite different to each other, so I'm looking forward to that as well. I'm going to put this in the chat in a minute, but as I said, we have lots of resources on our website: we have a newsletter, which goes out monthly, which talks about all different topics to do with translation from Chinese into

English, we obviously have the short stories from *Read Paper Republic*, and you can follow us on Twitter and Facebook, if you are on those channels.

I know times are really hard, but if you do have the ability and would like to support us as a charity, then please do consider donations; we are extremely grateful for any and put the money towards funding new series of *Read Paper Republic*. So, thank you in advance if you're able to, but please don't feel any pressure.

Mike, I'm going to hand over to you now if that's alright, just to talk a little bit about Sanmao and *Hitchhikers*.

Mike Fu

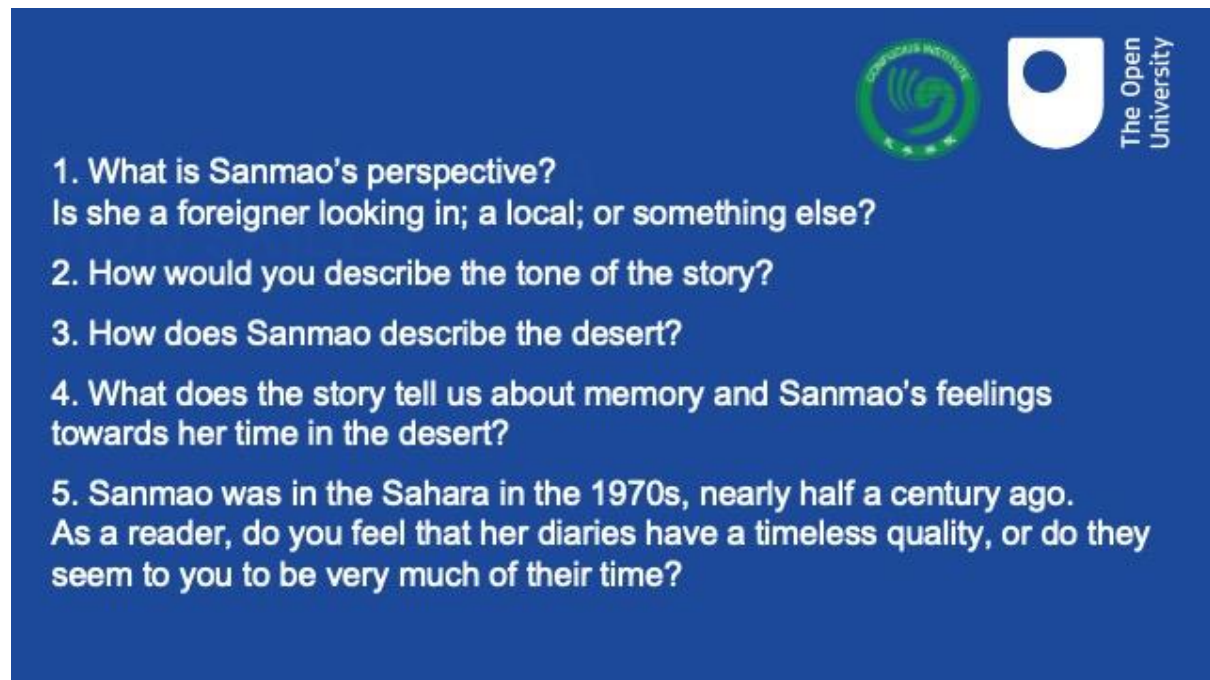
Yes, thank you so much for the introduction, Emily, and thank you to Emily, Nicky and Dr Kan for organising today's event and inviting me to be here with you all. It's such a delight to have this many attendees in the room today. Thank you for making the time to just talk about Sanmao with us.

So, for many of you, Sanmao probably needs no introduction, but I'll just give a very brief overview of who she was. Sanmao was the pen name of a writer from Taiwan, who was born in 1943, in mainland China, in Chongqing (重庆), and then she migrated with her family to Taiwan in the late 40s, I believe. She was basically a very prolific author throughout her lifetime. And this collection *Stories of the Sahara* was her debut collection of stories that launched her into the literary spotlight in the mid 70s in Taiwan, and eventually Hong Kong and mainland China as well. So, Sanmao was the pen name, as I mentioned, of this woman whose name was Chen Ping (陳平), and she had a very adventurous and kind of glamorous life, especially during the time that she came of age in the 60s and 70s or so. She studied abroad in Europe in the 60s in Spain and also in Germany and several other places. Eventually she ended up migrating to the Western Sahara, which at the time was a Spanish colony, and it was in during this period that she got married to her husband, Jose, who figures prominently in these stories. She began writing autobiographical, semi autobiographical, accounts of her life in the Sahara desert with her Spanish husband, and that's kind of what we have collected here. So, when this was published in Taiwan in the 1970s, it immediately drew a lot of attention. Actually, I should back up and say that the stories were first serialised in the newspaper and eventually collected as one volume, or two volumes to be precise. There was *Stories of the Sahara* and *Crying Camels*, which became merged into one in later reprints.

But that's a little bit of a digression, so to get back to the actual story that we're talking about today, it's called *Hitchhikers*. It is one of the more light-hearted pieces in *Stories of the Sahara*. And *Hitchhikers* is essentially about Sanmao's experience of having a car in the desert for the first time. In this story she describes the life-changing joy of having access to a vehicle and how that reshaped her life because they're living in a very small town in the Spanish colonial Sahara, and in this sort of existence - her husband is working at a mining company, she's mostly playing the housewife day to day - so the car's the first thing that really gives her a sense of freedom and liberates her from these humdrum routines. And, of course, along the way, as she's driving to and fro through the desert, Sanmao and her husband Jose can't help but pick up the people they see along the side of the road, particularly as they're toiling through the desert under these very harsh conditions, and oftentimes physically moving large objects and so on. So out of the empathy in their hearts, they, they pick up all sorts of strangers: Spanish people, and also the Sahrawi, who are the natives of the Sahara desert land. So, the story is really just about these cross-cultural encounters between Sanmao, Jose and the people in their immediate vicinity while they're living out the waning days of Spanish colonial rule in Western Africa. As I mentioned, it's, I would say, mostly light-hearted in comparison to some of the other stories that form this collection. But at the same time, I think this is a great story that showcases her emotional range, because you get a sense that there's something underlying, beneath the text, while she keeps it relatively empathetic and open-hearted and displaying a curiosity towards the people around her and the world that she lives in. There is a sense of maybe

some darker emotions, some sadness, some moral quandaries that she's experiencing while living there. I think this is a great story to discuss in the context of the collection, and of the life that she led in the Spanish Sahara.

I guess I'll leave that there and then maybe we can just move into some of the discussion questions. I'd love to hear what the audience members have to think about this story as well.



1. What is Sanmao's perspective?
Is she a foreigner looking in; a local; or something else?

2. How would you describe the tone of the story?

3. How does Sanmao describe the desert?

4. What does the story tell us about memory and Sanmao's feelings towards her time in the desert?

5. Sanmao was in the Sahara in the 1970s, nearly half a century ago. As a reader, do you feel that her diaries have a timeless quality, or do they seem to you to be very much of their time?

Emily Jones:

Thanks, Mike. That was brilliant. These questions are the ones that we shared with your when you signed up to the event. They're not trying to be prescriptive in any way. We wanted to just ask some questions of you to sort of start your thinking as you were reading the text, whether that was in English or in Chinese. Really, what we would like to do in our time together this afternoon is just to hear from everybody, thoughts that you have on the story or responses to the text itself or to Sanmao - and I can see already in the chat that people are talking about their memories of reading Sanmao and the warmth that they felt towards her in the 60s and 70s, which is great.

[The discussion that took place afterwards was not recorded for data protection reasons.]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

The next book club session is taking place on:

- **Friday 20th January, 2023, 13.00-14.00**
- We will be discussing two stories by A Yi: *Who's Speaking Please?*, translated by Michelle Deeter, and *A Message Held to the Flame*, translated by Dylan Levi King. Both translators will be joining our discussion.
- To register your interest, please visit the [Eventbrite page](#):
- To contact us email: Online-ci@open.ac.uk