Notes on Female Sexual Roles in China in Readings from Du Halde, Diderot and van Gulik

Freerk Heule
Shi Ye

Poznámky k sexuálnym úlohám žien v Číne v interpretáciách Du Haldea, Diderota a van Gulika

Resumé Francúzsky jezuita Du Halde písal o čínskej kultúre v 17. a 18. storočí, pričom sa zameriaval na pohľad cirkvi. Diderot, filozof a encyklopedista, analyzoval čínske a tahitínske myšlenky ohľadne morálne slobodnej spoločnosti. Sinológ Van Gulik skúmal čínsku sexuálnu kultúru v dvoch dielach. Článok poskytuje prehľad na rolu ženy v Číne s odkazom na Západ.

Abstract The French Jesuit Du Halde wrote on China’s culture in the 17th and 18th centuries. His focus is the church’s point of view. Diderot, Philosophe and Encyclopédist, analysed Chinese and Tahitian thoughts for a morally free society. The Sinologist Van Gulik explored Chinese sexual culture in two works. This paper provides an insight into the female roles in China with the link to the West.

Key words Du Halde, Diderot, Robert Hans van Gulik · female roles, sexuality · China

Introduction

In this essay we will analyse several texts regarding Chinese sexual life from three authors. The first one is the Jesuit Jean Baptiste Du Halde, who published The
Lettres édifiantes et curieuses (1735/36) and «The General History of China» (1741), the second author is Denis Diderot who wrote as an editor on a range of related subjects for the Encyclopédie, and minor works like his Supplément au voyage de Bougainville (SVB, 1796) on Bougainville’s A Voyage round the world (1772), Rameau’s Nephew (1761–1774), and The Nun (1796). And finally the author Robert H. van Gulik who edited two books on Chinese sexology namely Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period (ECP, 2004) and Sexual Life in Ancient China (SLAC, 1961). These literary texts mainly cover the period of the Eighteenth century in China, though they were composed between the Seventeenth and Twentieth century.


4 Denis Diderot, Supplément au voyage de Bougainville (1796) [Addendum to the Journey of Bougainville], tr. by Herbert Dieckmann. (Genève/Lille: Droz and Giard, 1959).


Many of these stories are well known in the western world, that is why we will not expose the reader to close-reading of the texts, but put an accent on the interest the French philosophe had in general in the Empire of China and all it cultural aspects, such as the sexual life. The interest for China in the Eighteenth century was called 'Chinoiserie'. See Quote from Encyclopédie below.

1 Du Halde and the Jesuits on China

In the 18th century the French society was in despair due to socio-economic troubles, including interhuman relationships, and looked for solutions in Europe and in remote countries. The Jesuit missionaries to China had sent an enormous amount of information to Europe, later assembled in huge volumes. Here we only mention the works of Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (杜赫德, Du Hede, 1674–1743) and Louis le Comte (李明, Li Ming, 1655–1728, in China between 1688–1691). Their material formed a basis for the perception of China as laid down in the Encyclopédie. From the English edition of Du Halde’s «The General History of China», we give a few quotes considering ‘women’. Are they present in the society, how can they live a happy life?

In the cities, there are crowds of people as great as in the most frequented streets of Paris, but not one woman to be seen among them (I–75). In the suburbs, the streets were crowded with people, but there was not one woman among them (I–76). In Peking we passed along the street a good half league, in the midst of an incredible throng of people; and not one woman was to be seen among them (I–100). [Similar, I–140]. The question is ‘where are the women’? It is suggested that women lived in separate ‘women quarters’. The elite could make music, write poems, make

11 <bs.dayabook.com/home/the-general-history-of-china> (last retrieval April 14, 2017).
embroiderie in ‘inner chambers’ of the estates or enter nunneries. Common women, though, worked in industry like weaving, food and agriculture, etc. Many women disappeared in ‘woman trafficking’ often meaning to live as a concubine or in overt prostitution.

On the Isle of Formosa their marriages are agreeable enough; they do not purchase wives as they do in China (I–178). The wedding takes place at the house of the young woman, and the young man abides there afterwards, and returns no more to his father (I–271).

The women of Emperors were selected, honoured, but could be punished severely when in disgrace (I–310/1). The ladies at a court could be given away to make peace, for gratitude (I–358,389), or to marry princes (II–69). The father decides about the girl for his son with the parents of the girl; more customs: common people marriages, adoption, polygamy (concubines), second marriages, widows, divorce, reasons for delay of a marriage (II–140/6). The duties of the husband and wife (‘maximes de civilité’ and ‘les cinq devoirs’) (II–440 to 455). The courtesans, rites of conjugal love (II–822) and second marriages (II–834). De duties of the husband and wife (III–166–73). How to reign the house, and the separate apartment of the ladies (III–187/90). The ceremonies of marriage (III–215).

An important position of women is the relationship with men of power, and next to love, jealousy often was a key sentiment (often in concubinage), but Lady Zhen's


13 Encyclopédie, the lemma on «Concubinage», 3: 829–332.
life may be a different story. In the Du Halde’s «Annals of Chinese monarchy» many stories of women are given.

Fo hi 伏羲 [Fu shi] the first Emperor... made the laws flourish. (I–270) The sexes were not to be distinguished by different habits, but lived in common without shame, altogether ignorant of conjugal laws... Fo hi reformed this disorder: he commended women to distinguish themselves by their habit. He made laws for conjugal society, by one of which no man could marry a woman of his own name, whether related or not. (I–271).

The emperor Ti ye...was succeeded by Tcheou [Zhou] his third son, who was the son of the empress, to the prejudice of two other sons he had before by a woman of the second order... Tcheou married a woman named Ta Kia, who was the most beautiful person of the whole empire, but the most barbarous and wicked wretch of the age. [She erected a bronze pillar, and heated it. The criminals had to embrace this phallic symbol]. (I–310/3).

The emperor Tching ti of Han 漢成帝 had a passionate love for women [e.g. Empress Xu, dance girl Zhao Feiyan and her sister Zhao Hede, consort Li] and wine and this engaged him in all manner of vices (I–356). [He is an example of a man controlled by his mother].

The prince Hoei-ti (of the Tsin dynasty) had no spirit or genius... but a jealous and passionate wife soon put the court and empire into confusion. This woman had the title of second queen: she got the Empress removed from court, poisoned her only son, and procured all the nobles of the empress’ party to be put to death (I–369/70).

The emperor Vou ti 武帝 [Wu, 141–87 BC] gave himself up to all manner of luxury and sensual pleasures. This hero died by the hand of a woman, called the second queen and 'old lady', who was but thirty years old...

14 Lady Zhen (張夫人, 183–221 AD) was a woman full of wisdom; her life is in the Sanguozhi (Records of the Three Kingdoms), by Chen Shou in the 3rd AD.

15 Also: John Jackson, Chronological Antiquities: Or, the Antiquities and Chronology, concerning the Chinese (London: J. Noon, 1752), 2: 403–492.

16 Ta Kia 姒己 (Daji). Her father gave her to Emperor Zhou (1075–1046 BC) as an appeasement offer (An example of human trafficking?). See: the Chinese novel Fengshen Yanyi 投神演義 [Investiture of the Gods], in Tales of the Teahouse Retold, tr. by Katherine Liang Chew (Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press, 2002).
In the Yuen [Yuan] Dynasty there was a terrible famine... A woman, seeing her husband who had died of hunger, thrown in one of the pits, threw herself after him. She was taken out by order of the mandarin, but to no purpose, for not being able to survive her loss she died three days later.

Hi-Tsong [Xi zong or Tien ki 天啓, 1605–1627] of the Tang dynasty being naturally timorous and placing great confidence in the eunuchs, of which there were 12,000 in the palace, everybody feared he would never be a match for the Tartars. At that time there arrived a Chinese Amazon, who commanded a body of several thousand men. 17

Another important position of women is giving birth to children. In Vol. 4 many receipts are given for all kind of diseases that can occur to women in labour.

Ginseng 紅參 therapy...is good for women after delivery when she finds her blood in great agitation. (IV-14), and also ...for all kinds of weakness which happens after delivery, ...or when a child is turned the wrong way, the feet coming foremost. (IV-14/9).

Many authors are cited about the remedy with the sea horse (haima, 海馬)...When a woman is under the greatest extremity in labour she will be immediately delivered with the utmost facility after taking Haima, roasted or broiled (IV-14/9).

Du Halde reports: the Jesuit father Gerbillon (1654–1707) visited China in 1687. In his memoirs many stories can be found on 'Grand Tartary' i.e. Manchuria and Mongolia, in paraphrase: »When peace was settled with the Tartars, ...the emperor awarded the commander of the garrisons of the Great Wall and gave him a princess of the imperial family in marriage with a very considerable dowry (I–61)« and

Prince Senghé, the second son of Patou hum taiki not doubting that his eldest brother was dead, married his wife—according to the customs of the mongous- and his goods...

Later his brother came back, and the wife wanted to return to him, but Senghé did not like that and ordered the man to be killed. Another brother though, took revenge and killed him. (IV–142/90).

It was the habit for Chinese men to have concubines, especially among the elite.

The emperor Yeou vang had none of the good qualities which were admired in his father, but had very great faults, which made him contemptible to his people. He was

---

17 Compare to the legendary woman Hua Mulan 花木蘭 who fought against the Xiongnu 匈奴 (Hun?) invaders.
desperately in love with a concubine called Pao ssë, for whose sake he put away the empress and her son, who was the lawful heir to the crown, in order to put in his place the son which he had by his concubine (II–377).

Although Du Halde quoted from letters of Jesuits sent from China, he managed to give a broad overview of the customs of the Chinese regarding the role of women. An important focus is on the Imperial court, mandarins and princes, more interesting though, for our discussion are the habits among commoners. Moreover he is very much interested in moral aspects of marriage. Here he uses the principles of Confucian teachings, concerning the ‘moral duties’ (li 易经), and refers to the oracle book Yi Jing [Classic of Changes].

In Du Halde (vol. II) we further read about the duties of a girl for her mother-in-law (455). The daughters of emperors (773). About courtesans [concubinage] (822), and the rites (824) for instance regarding conjugal love. Widows and second marriages (834).

In vol. III again the duties of the husband and wife are given (166/73). Rules how to govern the house, and the separated apartment of the women (187/90). The ceremonies (Ly) of marriage (215), and on shame (242). The history of Tchouang tse and his wife is worth mentioning, for the man devotes his life fully to philosophy (Taoism) (401/16).18

2 Diderot’s Works

Denis Diderot 狄德羅 (Di Deluo, 1713–1784)99 was a writer and philosopher whose corpus of work contributed to the ideas of the French Revolution. After a typical Jesuit education he studied philosophy in Paris. In a decade writing prolifically, he advanced theories about logic, education and human society, often criticising organised religion and the traditions of the ancien régime. As a consequence in 1749 Diderot was imprisoned for almost a year. Soon he became the general editor of the Encyclopédie, a massive effort to disseminate knowledge, especially of technology and the mechanical arts, to the general population. The contributors

18 Tchouang tse 莊子 (Zhuangzi, 4th century BC) author of Taoist teachings the Zhuangzi.
19 Sophie Audidière, »Diderot philosophe«, Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie, <rde.revues.org/265> (last retrieval April 14, 2017).
to this project believed that this knowledge could overcome the reactionary and religious sentiments of the era. Reason should guide society and the scientific method could provide a route to truth. It took him more than two decades to complete this enormous twenty-seven volume work. Though it was loathed by the church and suppressed by the government, the *Encyclopédie* became the handbook to the French Enlightenment; it was widely read and discussed in the salons. Short summaries of his books follow here:

In *Rameau’s Nephew*, Rameau (Lui) is a self-admitted parasite upon society. He admits to having taught his son that money is more important than anything else and to mourning his deceased wife because he could have profited by prostituting her. Lui insists that his lifestyle is morally correct. Diderot (Moï), who is the embodiment of bourgeois morality, is appalled by Lui and vehemently objects to his assertions.

The *Nun* is written after a real correspondence, and drawing attention both to the then-current practice of forcing young women into convents in order to get them out of the way, and the corruption that was supposedly rampant among the clergy and in religious institutions.

In *D’Alembert’s dream*, Diderot is at the zenith of his development of rational, materialist theories. It is here that he introduces his theory on life and nature, indicating that matter is not fixed but that, on the contrary, subject to evolution. Each species in existence transforms itself and gives birth to a new species. Julie’s response is a great example to unpack this phenomenon—men and women can be simply monsters of one another. One can see then that every singularity is a monstrosity or that the first sexual difference is a genetic malfunction. It seems logical, that we encounter the moral monstrosity as we exit our discourse on science and philosophy, Bordeu does away with any notions of unnatural or ‘against nature’ arguments and instead, grades on mixed balance between emotions, pleasure and utility to understand the phenomenon of chastity, masturbation, homosexuality, bestiality etc. To the

---

doctor, all that happens is natural and if it does not happen, such as a new race of goat-men, it is because it is not natural. In these books Diderot discusses the physiology of sex to Enlightenment morality like Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Emile*. The texts offer a striking connection between concerns central to medical scholars, with the intention to improve procreation, and literary authors, for morality's sake by controlling female sexuality. Overall though there is comedy included.

The historian Blanning, quotes from Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) to explain the new vision of love between a man and a woman, in an early expression of Romanticism. Here Rousseau shows an antimodernist attitude, against rationalism, with a radical self-exposure, though full of morality—for which he departed with his former friend Diderot (p. 10): «In this style Banning details the role of sex as a psychological force, and the use of dreamlike imagery, thus unearthing the origins of 'sex appeal'.»

We conclude that Diderot, the great and influential author, may have contributed little to the Revolution of 1789, in general he advanced the conceptualization of new, socio-scientifically based ideas, such as, relevant in this context, the 'freedom of women', and sexuality.

A most interesting event in those days was the exploration of new territories. The reasons were to find new knowledge about the earth in all its aspects and its inhabitants, man and animals alike. Some sea travels had been undertaken already by James Cook (1728–1779), And for competition reasons after the Seven Years' War on England France sent out ships to travel east. It was in 1766 Louis Antoine de Bougainville 布干维爾 (Bugen Wei’er, 1729–1811), admiral and scientific

explorer, received Louis XV’s permission to circumnavigate the globe. His travelogue was a dull book, but in his *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1772, published in 1796), Diderot comments on the anyhow exotic story. He wrote about the society of Tahiti, where men and women lived together in total sexual freedom.

Diderot’s *Supplément* has often been read as a primitivist, utopian text. The sexually open Tahitians represent the purity and felicity of a natural life, free of the arbitrary constraints of modern civilization. Their contentment provides a stark contrast to corrupt and dysfunctional France. This reading makes Diderot an ally of Rousseau, singing the praises of natural man and condemning the follies of civilization. However, a dark side forms the issues such as colonization, immigration, slavery, materialism, abuse of women, and amorality.

25 Diderot, *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*.

26 Bougainville, *A Voyage round the world*.

27 Tahiti 大溪地 (Daxidi) one of the largest islands in the South Pacific, it was declared a French colony in 1880.


31 Amanda K. Miller, *Morality, Sexuality and Conformity: Diderot’s Outsiders Penetrate Foreign Societies*. M.A. thesis (Oxford; Ohio: Miami University, 2004), 3–10; Dena Goodman, »The Structure of Political Argument in Diderot’s Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville«, *Diderot Studies* 21 (1983), 123–137; Christie V. McDonald, »The Reading and Writing of Utopia in Denis Diderot’s ‘Supplement au voyage de Bougainville’«, *Science Fiction Studies* 3,3 (1976), 248–254; Guillaume Ansart, »Aspects of Rationality in Diderot’s ‘Supplement au voyage de Bougainville’«,
Along with many French Enlightenment thinkers, Diderot treated the Catholic Church with grave suspicion. Although his own religious beliefs varied over his life from theism to atheism to deism, Diderot routinely attacked the conventional morality of the day and was even jailed for his writings. His sceptical 'Pensées philosophiques' attacked both atheism and Christianity but was banned and ordered to be burned by the French government. Even the education-minded Encyclopédie, under Diderot’s editorship, was occasionally prevented from production due to the heterodox and radical views in some of the minor articles.32

3 The Encyclopédie of Diderot on China

The French occupation with the mysterious 'Middle Kingdom' was so immense that the term Chinoiserie was coined.33

The Empire of China has become, in these days, a very particular subject of our attention, our study, our researches, and our reasonings. The missionaries first excited the public curiosity on this head, by the wonderful relations they sent over and the country was at so remote a distance that the truth of those relations could not easily be confirmed, or the falsehood of them refuted. The philosophers afterwards took possession of the subject and drew from it, according to their custom, abundant matter for raising their voices against the abuses which they were emulous to destroy, at home and lastly, the prattlers, imitating the notes of the philosophers, gave a sort of currency to their commonplace remarks, by illustrations taken from China. Thus in a short time this country became the abode of wisdom, virtue and happiness; its government was the best upon earth, as well as the most ancient; its morality the finest and purest known; its laws, its police, its arts, its industry, were so many models for the imitation of every other nation under the sun.34


34 Quote from: Friedrich Melchior Freiherr von Grimm, Denis Diderot, Historical & Literary
The ideas about the Chinese people were diverse. In the *Encyclopédie* it is stated about their physical appearance:

The Chinese have their limbs well proportioned, are tall and fat, with a large, round face, small eyes, long eyebrows, lifted eyelids, small and flattened noses, sparse and clustered beards. Those who live in the southern provinces are brown with darker tanned skins than the others. The habitants of the middle of the empire are white; for the rest, these characteristics vary, but in general these people are soft, peaceful, indolent, obedient, superstitious, slaves, and ceremonial.

And a bit further it adds: «The Chinese and the Japanese are in the habit of preventing the growth of the feet of their women by violent means, such that they cannot walk», referring to the custom of footbinding of women. The *Encyclopédie* said: «Jealousy crushes the feet of women in China, and sacrifices their freedom in almost all the countries of the east.»

On the lemma «Marriage» [Mariage] we read Diderot's co-author, Louis de Jaucourt (1704–1779). This man was not a Roman Catholic, but a Protestant, who studied theology, natural science and medicine. More recently it has been acknowledge that he wrote more than one quarter of the *Encyclopédie*. Also on 'sex' [fr. sexe, morale], we quote (own translation):

«Sex, absolutely speaking, or rather the fair sex, is the epithet which is given to women, and cannot be taken from them, since they are the principal ornament of the world. Let them join to this deserved title all that is proper to their state, modesty, restraint, gentleness, compassion, and the virtues of tender souls: music, dance, the art of putting

---

36 From: Diderot, «Humaine espèce», *Encyclopédie*, tr. by Naomi J. Andrews 8: 344, <hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.242> (last retrieval April 14, 2017).
38 Denis Diderot and Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt. *Encyclopédie* 8 (1765), 439.
Heule, Shi Ye · Notes on Female Sexual Roles in China

colours on the canvas. These are the amusements which suit them, but the culture of
their mind is still more important and more essential. That, on the other hand, their
happy fecundity perpetuates love and grace. Thus, society owes them their politeness
and its most delicate tastes. That they should make the most dear delights of the
peaceful citizen; that by prudence, submissive and modest skill, adroit and without art,
they excite to virtue, revive the feeling of happiness, and soften all the labours of
human life: such is the glory, such is the power of the fair sex.40

Similarly on «Natural equality» [fr. égalité naturelle]41 and «Desire» [fr. désir],42
Jaucourt wrote the contributions to the Encyclopédie, and here the text contained
less ‘medieval metaphysics’ and was in the trend of thinking of Diderot himself.
The grand lemma on «Chinese Philosophy»43 was again written by Diderot.

4 Van Gulik on Sexual Life in China

Robert Hans van Gulik 高羅佩 (Gao Luopei 1910–1967, further Van Gulik) was a
sinologist, lawyer and author. He published on Chinese sexual life in Erotic
Color Prints of the Ming Period,44 and A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society,
from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.45 The books cover Chinese sexual culture, from
the Western Zhou Dynasty (1145–771 BC), to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Van
Gulik started with erotic color prints, which belong to China’s material culture
and his ideas were based on anthropologists working in Africa and Asia, often in
the context of missionary work, and the psychiatrist Freud46 who accentuated the
sexual aspect of human life.47 Scholars like Cahill gave their comments on the

40 Encyclopédie 15: 138.
41 Encyclopédie 5: 415
42 Encyclopédie 4: 885–886.
44 Van Gulik, Erotic Color Prints, ECP.
45 Van Gulik, Sexual Life in Ancient China, SLAC.
47 Paul Rakita Goldin, The Culture of Sex in Ancient China (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press,
2002), 48–74; Charlotte Furth, «Rethinking Van Gulik: Sexuality and reproduction in Traditional
Chinese medicine» in Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State, ed. by Gilmartin Christina,
erotic color prints, the value of his research, his studies on erotic illustrated novels, etc. 48

Before Van Gulik, the French scholars Jean Jacques Matignon (1866–1929) and Henri Maspero (1883–1945) have been writing on exotic Chinese sexual life. After Casanova (1725–1798) and De Sade (1740–1790), in China the studies on sexual culture began in 1912. In fact, Van Gulik was a man between cultures and episodes of art styles and spiritual ideas, free of moral hindrances. Europeans during and after the colonial epoch had an open eye for the new. The beauty of the faraway territories like China also had the evil, horror, and violence; even the ecstasy of lust. The desire of this sentiment was now called ‘exoticism,’ replacing Chinoiserie. As early as 1837 (Leiden), 1898 (Brussels) and 1934 (Rotterdam) museums opened with collections of ethnologic material; the public flooded in, and scientists started cultural anthropology studies. By the end of the nineteenth century many read the poet Baudelaire (1821–1867) who tried to escape from banality, boredom and melancholy of that epoch.49 The symbolist writers Poe, Mallarmé and Verlaine followed his steps; painters like Van Gogh and Gauguin did the same in a style later called ‘orientalism’. 50 Similarly Van Gulik indulged in the peculiarities of this new world. The real world there seemed a mental, immaterial construct based on Hindu and Buddhist knowledge in the school of idealists and philosophers, however many turned to the material world of objects.


During his life Van Gulik also took this turn into the new materialist approach in art, and had an open eye for the exotic of the Chinese world.

4.1 The sexual objects mentioned in Van Gulik’s monographs
Besides erotic pictures and sex toys, there is a whole range of related objects such as philters, clothes, bedrooms and its beddings mentioned by Van Gulik and as a spin-off he deals with the mental aspects of eroticism. Here we focus on three categories of objects: erotic color pictures, sex toys and philters.

Erotic color prints
Color prints are wood blocks with different colors. Art books such as Hu Zhengyan’s Shizhuzhai 石柱齋 [Treatise on the Paintings and Writings of the Ten Bamboo Studio] (1633), and the Jieziyuan Huazhuan 齊子園畫傳 [Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden] (1679/1701) are good early collections. The erotic prints rapidly spread from the high to the civil society and became more popular.

From the Yuan to the Ming dynasty onwards, many painters created erotic pictures for the rich. In the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), although there were laws to prohibit distribution of erotic prints and books, the number increased, however their quality varied and only the prints of Gai Qi 改琦 were implicit and elegant.

These pictures played a role in people’s sexual life. It was said as early as the Kangxi 康熙 period (1662–1722), that the erotic prints were contained in the dowry and not really considered as art works, especially the cheaper ones, for the lower classes. The prints were assumed to drive out evil spirits. Xuan Ding 宣鼎, recorded such superstition in his novel Ye yu qiu deng lu 夜雨秋燈錄 [Light rain was recorded in autumn]:

Every time when I read the ancient series of books, there are some records about our predecessors who abusively dug the ancient mausoleums and found a large number of oyster shells in them accidentally. Erotic paintings were drawn on every shuck. Over 51 Gai Qi (1773–1828)—a painter in the Qing Dynasty.
52 We think, with Cahill, that the difference between the word ‘erotic’ and ‘pornographic’ is only a matter of style.
53 Xuan Ding (1832–1880)—a writer, poet and painter in the later Qing Dynasty.
the coffins, there were a lot of iron boards. The engravings said that these can prevent
the coming of the flood dragons. Van Gulik noticed this belief too, and saw in Northern China people who
embroidered erotic pictures on babies' bellybands in order to protect them. Besides, some believed that these pictures could decrease the risk of fire, so they
put these prints in their stores.

The prints directly tell the story of the presentation; take for instance *Hua ying jin zhen* [The Fragrant Flower], its twenty four pictures show
different sexual positions, including same-sex relations. Let's see how Van Gulik interpreted the twelfth picture in *Yuan yang mi pu* 載鶴秘譜 [Mandarin Duck
Secret Spectrum]:

A naked monk is practicing *cunnilingus* on a woman who reclines in a large chair of
knobbed wood. The woman's maid is standing on the right, by the side of a barrel-
shaped porcelain seat with the monk’s discarded robe placed on top. On the large
stone table one sees a vase, a number of holy books in yellow covers, a large bronze
standing gong with the stick to sound it, and a small wooden gong mu-yu in the shape
of a fish, which is sounded while reading prayers. The woman is dressed as an itinerant
nun. She wears the conventional patched robe and has a rosary of jade beads around
her neck. Her round hat and staff are placed against the back of the chair. Here the activities of the monk and the nun breaking their Buddhist chastity vows
are presented, and the scene has an ironic touch. Another example is the twenty-
second picture *Yu you chun shui* 魚游春水 [A fish swims in the spring river] in the
aforementioned »Hua ying jin zhen«. Van Gulik's explains:

The embroidered quilt is spread in a corner of the garden room, protected by a folding
screen with an image of a stream with rocks and flowers on its banks and butterflies
fluttering about. On the right, a section of the balustrade and a large porcelain goldfish

54 Xuan Ding, *Ye yu qiu deng lu* 夜雨秋燈錄 [Sun and Rain. Autumn Stories], 8 vols. (Shanghai guji
55 »Hua ying jin zhen« 花營錦陣 [The Fragrant Flower], in *Classic Chinese Erotica in Art and Poetry*, tr.
56 The fourth picture of Han Linfeng presents the sexual intercourse between two men.
basin on a wooden stand, with a lotus plant rising from the water. The woman lies flat on her back without a pillow. One of her shoes has slipped off, and the wrappings of the foot have come loose. In the foreground is an embroidered towel.\textsuperscript{58}

The focus is on the embroidered quilt, screen, fish-basin, foot-binding and embroidered towel, and imply that behind the screen, on the embroidered blanket, coitus has just been savored. The woman’s bandages are loosened, and the towel is thrown away. In China the fish-bowl implicated the sexual play and the lotus meant love. Hence, all the objects in the picture have a metaphorical meaning, qua style and esthetic form.

The private items like underclothes, tube tops, sleeping shoes and loose bandages, in the bedroom on erotic prints represented taboos in China:

For our present purpose it suffices to remind the reader that representation of the woman’s uncovered feet is completely taboo. Even the designers of the most lascivious erotic prints did not dare to offend against this particular taboo. While most prints depict men and women stark naked with their sexual organs fully exposed, I have never seen a single one where a woman has uncovered feet.\textsuperscript{59}

The bandages for the ‘naked foot’ in ancient China were regarded as the ‘fig leaf’ in the Western nudes. He traced back this custom to the Southern Tang Dynasty (937–976) and the concubine Yao niang of Emperor Li Yu. She bound her feet to execute Li’s favorite ‘dances of the lotus flower’ in a sensually more attractive way. After the Southern Tang Dynasty, this became more popular: the smaller the foot, the more beautiful the woman was the underlying idea. The ancient Chinese women even wore soft-sole sleeping shoes in bed, as they wanted to hide their deformed feet.

This fashion finally ended in pre-modern China, probably under reform actions by missionaries. The scholar Tao Zongyi recorded one kind of ‘bound-feet worship’ in his collected works Chuogenglu [Records compiled after retiring from the farm]: some men used the shoe of a prostitute as ‘golden lotus cup’ for wine.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 225.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 170.
Here we can speak of foot and shoe-fetishism supported by sociology, folklore and sexology.\textsuperscript{61} He revealed also people’s general sexual fantasy caused by the secret clothing habits, »as regards the sociological value of these prints, it will be noticed that they give a good idea of the undergarments used by men and woman at the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)«.\textsuperscript{62}

As a rule erotic paintings were mounted either as horizontal hand scrolls, or as folding albums, never as hanging rolls,\textsuperscript{63} and were highly treasured:

> The owners of such scrolls and albums grudged no expense in embellishing them. The former are mounted with silk borders and a protecting flap of antique brocade, complete with a fastening pin of carved ivory or jade; the latter provided with frames of white silk and placed between pasted-on covers made of carved wood or thick cardboard covered with brocade.\textsuperscript{64}

Dorothy Ko\textsuperscript{65} discussed these remarks in her monograph on Van Gulik.\textsuperscript{66} We take as an example a color print in the erotic album \textit{Yan qin yi qing} \n\n\n\textit{Intimate scenes of leisurely love}\textsuperscript{67} attributed to the Ming painter Qiu Ying, 仇英 (1494?–1552). We see two pairs of shoes in front of a bed, with closed curtains. A pair of man’s shoes and two tiny lady’s shoes thrown carelessly beside them. A young maid is eavesdropping, and voyeurist. Van Gulik suggested the set of shoes to have a provocative effect.\textsuperscript{68}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Van Gulik, \textit{ECP}, 170.
\item Ibid., 160–161.
\item Ibid., 161.
\item Professor of History, Barnard College, History of women, gender, and material cultures, in early modern China, Columbia University, N.Y.
\item Dorothy Ko, »R. H. van Gulik, Mi Fu, and Connoisseurship of Chinese Art«, \textit{Biblid} 30,2 (2012), 265–296.
\item Qiu Ying 仇英, \textit{Yan qin yi qing: qiu shi zhao shi xing le tu} \n\n\textit{Intimate scenes of leisurely love} (Shanghai: Yiyuan zhenshang she, 1900). <jamescahill.info/photo-gallery/photo-gallery-test/12-scans-4/detail/370-3/thmpl-component> (last retrieval April 14, 2017).
\item Van Gulik, \textit{ECP}, 156.
\end{thebibliography}
**Sex toys**

In China, sex toys appeared not only in erotic prints, but also in erotic fiction books like *Jin Ping Mei* [The Plum in the Golden Vase];69 *Xiu ta ye shi* 託嫁野史 [The embroidered couch]; and *Chi pozi zhuans* 痴婆子傳 [The Biography of a Crazy Old Woman]. Van Gulik collected these toys and classified them as masculine or feminine.70 They were meant to stimulate sexual life: the silk belts or the jade rings were to keep the penis erected, whereas the vibrators were in use to amuse women. *The Plum in the Golden Vase*71 gives many details.

One day, the hero Ximen Qing took a parcel containing sex toys such as a silver support; a sheath; a jade; a white silk belt; a Burmese bell and so on to the home of his mistress, Wang Liu-er. Xi Men Qing used them to enlarge his penis and to postpone the time of the ejaculation. In order to attract Xi Men’s love firmly, his concubine Pan Jin-lian tied the white silk belt carefully and to make love that night.72

The Plate 15 of SLAC shows such an ivory ring:

> It is made of ivory, and decorated in front with a pair of dragons, carved in relief. Their tongues are twined together so as to form a protruding spiral. On the one hand, this spiral suggests ‘the pearl that shines in the dark’ (usually explained as a symbol of the sun, fertility and magic potency). Dragons give the suggestion of playful game, but the spiral element doubtlessly also had the practical function of stimulating the woman’s clitoris during the movement. The fastening-band was passed through the hole between the dragon’s tails.73

Feminine toys were generally used to masturbate. Van Gulik listed the Guang Dong Pang, the Burmese bell and the two-headed toys for female same-sex relations. Van Gulik noted that ancient Chinese showed permissiveness about masturbation, however there are rare documents supporting this. Besides gaining

---


71 Roy, *The Plum in the golden vase*, 1, 210, 455.


73 Van Gulik, *SLAC*, 281.
the information about toys from the pornographic novels, just as the erotic color prints, these toys opened a window for him to the exotic ancient Chinese sexual culture.

Besides the toys, traditional Chinese beddings are mentioned like »water lady« and »bamboo wife«. The water lady is a copper jug for hot water to keep the feet warm in winter. The ordinary bedding, but both got the nickname 'lady' or 'wife'. The sexual meanings are obvious. Van Gulik’s attitude is positive on these objects, contrary to the philters as we will see.

Philters
From the Warring States period (ca. 475–221 B.C.), people began to take ‘Dan drugs’ to pursue everlasting life: »At an early period, people just took different kinds of herbs. During the time of Emperor Wu (156–87 B.C), the man-made Dan drugs appeared«. Some drugs were aphrodisiacs that contained for example antler mushroom like Wolfiporia cocos, parts of the dessert plant cistanche, the plant cornus, Chinese yam, and the fruit of the cypress tree, honeycomb and so on. These Dan drugs are the early philters (chun yao). According to Wile the medical book Prescriptions for Nurturing Life (Yang sheng fang) from the Han tomb spoke of two philters for woman. Some ancient Chinese men got addicted to philters. In their carnal desire they overused the philters and in doing so killed themselves in the end. With this in mind, the sage Sun Simiao cautioned young people to use the philters carefully: »Men deserve to discuss the art of the bed chamber only after the age of 40. If you’re under 40 and lustful, you take philters too much in order to have excessive sex. Within half a year, you’ll exhaust your essence and head towards death. So younger males should use the philters with special caution«.

76 Sun Simiao 88–682 AD—a famous doctor and pharmacologist in the Tang Dynasty.
However, in every period, there were men who got obsessed with philters. In the late Ming Dynasty, the social conduct was depraved. The alchemists Tao Zhongwen 陶仲文 and Shao Yuanjie 邵元節 received favor from Emperor Jiajing 嘉靖 (1507–1567) for the philter Hong Qian, prepared from a virgin’s first menstruation blood. Besides this, placenta, urine, deer penis or dog penis could be the elements of a philter. Meanwhile, along with the spreading of Buddhism after 400 A.D., the so-called Indian philter became popular. «The main element of this philter is Chinese Blister Beetle, which can stimulate man’s kidney and urethra powerfully. Xi Men Qing died of overusing this kind of Hu-monk medicine.»

Therefore, many fiction books in the Ming and Qing Dynasties warned for the potential toxicity. Van Gulik pointed out, that philters both can rouse the male libido in case of lack of self-confidence, but overall his attitude to philters was negative and he quoted the text of the Ming scholar Wang Jia 汪楫, to express his opinion:

Foolish persons give themselves over to those dissolute practices till at last their potency dwindles and their member will not rise and they must have recourse to drugs made from birds and quadrupeds. The Red-Spotted Lizard is an ‘odd’ animal, and therefore used for making aphrodisiacs. They also take the genitals of a lewd animal as the beaver, and (with the drug obtained therefrom) anoint their member. Since the seal is said to mate with a hundred females, their genitals are also sold as aids in the ‘Art of the Bed-chamber.’ How can people thus destroy the truth and debase Tao, honor animals and despise human beings? Moreover, there are Taoist magicians who propagate the theory about ‘gathering the yin essence’ and argue that one can attain longevity by having intercourse with women. However, I have not yet seen that a lizard developed the Elixir of Life, that a beaver became an Immortal, or that a seal ascended to heaven in broad daylight!

78 Men Qinxuan 孟慶軒 and Chen Guozhen 陳國珍, Fangbing yu yong yao 700 ge wuqu he jinji 防病與用藥700個誤區和禁忌 [The 700 Misunderstandings and Contraindications on Disease Prevention and Medicine] (Beijing: China Textile Press, 2005), 430.
79 Fang and Matsumura, Sex in China, 85–105.
80 Wile, Art of the Bedchamber.
81 The quotation is from Wang Jia’s Guan Zi Xu [Expanded self-account of the useless man]. See also Keith McMahon, Miser, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-female Relations in Eight-
Van Gulik also quoted from the pornographic literature, like *Zhao yang qu shi* 昭陽趣史 [The interesting story of the imperial court], and *The Plum in the Golden vase*. Emperor Cheng of the Han Dynasty 漢成帝 and Xi Men Qing 西門慶, the heroes of these novels died from over-using the philters and over-indulgence in sex. This stems from a secret psychological factor: »A giant should have super sexual capacity and huge reproductive organs, in order to make love with ten women in one night and still be energetic.« 83 In the end it’s just an illusion and may engulf men’s life.

The philters thus played a special role in the exotic ancient Chinese sexual culture.

### 4.2 Metaphors for sexual activities and sexual organs

Besides the abovementioned objects, Van Gulik also noticed the phenomenon of metaphors of sexual activities and sex organs.

**Sexual images lent from nature**

First we mention the sexual images of ‘cloud and rain’, ‘wind and moon’, ‘peach, plum and melon’. When we say these expressions, everybody will think that they’re just natural elements. Euphemistic, implicit and poetic expressions are the traditional way of Chinese literati to express them. Song Yu 宋玉, a poet of the Chu State 楚國 in the Warring States Period wrote in his *Gao tang fu* 高唐賦 [Fu of the Gao Tang terrace] how the King was dating and having sex with the goddess of the mountain Wu (Wu shan 巫山) in a dream. The goddess told the King: »I am the cloud in the morning and rain in the evening. I am on the south hillside of..." 83

---

82 Yan Yansheng 袁啟生, *Zhao yang qu shi* 昭陽趣史 [The Romance of the Zhao yang Palace], in *Guoxue zhen benwen ku* 國學珍本文庫 [A Series of Chinese Rare Books], ed. by Jinxia Ge zhuren 徐霞客主人 (Shanghai: The Central Book Store, 1936).

83 Zhang Guoxing 張國星, *Xing, renwu, shenmei* 性·人物·審美——金瓶梅譯片 [Sex, People, Aesthetics—Some Comments on Jin Ping Mei], in *Jin Ping Mei gujin yanjiu jicheng* 金瓶梅古今研究集成 [A Collection of the Past and Present Jin Ping Mei Studies], ed. by Zhu Yixuan 朱一玄 and Wang Rumei 王汝梅 (Yanjì: Yanbian daxue chubanshe, 1999), 489.
the Wu Mountain every day. Since then, literati used ‘clouds and rain, Wu Mountain and Yang Tai (South terrace)’ to imply the sexual intercourse. The Tang poet Li Bai (706–762) used ‘clouds and rain’ in his verse: «A spray of flower is red, gorgeous, fragrant and has shining dew on it, my memories of the sweet sex with you are so heartbreaking.» Li Bai thus described the love between Emperor Xuanzong and his concubine Yang Guifei. He wrote this poem to reveal the lavish lifestyle of the rulers. The sexual image of ‘cloud and rain’ survives till today, to describe semen and vaginal secretion. ‘Wind and moon’ is another set to imply sex, prostitution and sexuality. Wei Zhuang, a poet in the late Tang Dynasty, liked to use this sexual metaphor in his verses: «To be a womanizer, I am lecherous all my life. / I always feel sad because of the parting with the prostitutes in different places and all kinds of acrobats are dreamy; all kinds of prostitutes are ruthless.»

Then the great poet Liu Yong in the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), used ‘wind and moon’ widely in his poems on an old tune, such as: «I can’t help recalling those beautiful places and sweet nights spending with you. [...] I’m in a lonely boat on mist-covered waters, while you’re in the small house / that witnesses our sweet love. We’re missing each other right now.»

The fiction books and operas in the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties often have ‘wind and moon’ in their titles, such as Guan Hanqing’s opera "Zhaopan'er fengyue jiu fengchen" (Rescued by the Courtesan Zhao)
Pan’erl; Cao Xueqin’s 曹雪芹93 Fengyue bao jian 风月宝鉴 [Precious Mirror of Love], also called Hongloumeng 红楼夢 [Dream of the Red Chamber]; Han Shang Men Ren’s 韩上卿人94 Fengyue meng 风月夢 [The Dream of love].

Van Gulik found the literary quotation: «love regenerates» (fengyue chang xin 風月長新) in Zhang Mi’s 張泌95 essay Zhuang lou ji 妝樓記 [Accounts of the dressing chamber] and every concubine who had sex with the Emperor could get that mark on her arm in the Tang Dynasty.

Besides the natural phenomena mentioned, also the metaphors of some plants and fruits were noticed.96 The plum stood for sexual pleasures and young women; ensuing venereal diseases are therefore called ‘prune poison’. However, unlike the peach, the plum is not used to designate a woman’s private parts. Another fruit, often used for the ‘vulva’ is the pomegranate, which at the same time stands for fertility, both meanings being derived from the suggestive appearance of the reddish pulp enveloping the seeds. The same would seem to apply to the melon, as used in the term the ‘broken melon’, and designating that a girl has reached womanhood.97

*The images of the sexual organs*

The representation of the sexual organs originated from the worship of reproductive organs in ancient times. It started from pudendum worship. Laozi 老子 (ca. 571–472 BC) has a well-known saying: «the female genitals are the foundation of the development of nature.»98 Similarly, Chinese scholars use ‘jade

---

93 Cao Xueqin (ca. 1715–1763)—the well-known writer in the Qing Dynasty, the author of Hongloumeng 红楼夢 [Dream of the Red Chamber].
94 Han Shang Men Ren, the pen name of a writer in the Qing Dynasty. Cloé F. Starr, Red light novels of the Qing (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 82.
95 Zhang Mi 張泌 (late 9th century)—a famous 词 poet in the Tang Dynasty.
96 Van Gulik, ECP, Plate 14.
97 Ibid., 275.
door‘, ‘golden drain’, ‘red cave’ or ‘furnace’ as metaphors for sexual organs. The words jade and gold reflect elegance and refinement.99

We mentioned Dan medicine before and it were the Chinese alchemists who used a furnace to refine the Dan drugs. Taoists suggested that a man could treat a woman as a furnace to refine his internal Dan by sexual intercourse. As a result, the woman and her vulva, vagina and uterus were called furnace. In some of the Taoist sex guides like Xiuzhen yan yi 修真演義 [Comprehension of romance],100 the woman’s secretions were prized as tonic for fatigue and sexual potency, however, it can be seen as ‘a sort of sexual discrimination’.

Using the images of birds or insects is another way to speak metaphorically about the partners in sexual relationships. ‘Butterfly and flower, fish and water, mandarin duck’ are all images in Chinese literature and artworks, often used to decorate the bridal chamber, bed-curtain, beddings, clothes and footgear. The tortoise is a special animal in this context. The glans penis is called the ‘head of the tortoise’ because of the similarity of their appearance, and in ancient times, the tortoise was the symbol of longevity with its rich Qi 氣 (‘energy’). Tortoise shell was used as a divination tool and applied to decorate an ink stone, vase or box. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, a stone tortoise was used as the base of stone tablets. After the Song Dynasty, the status of the tortoise declined due to its similarity to the penis.

Its sexual connotations were thought so offensive that the turtle was banished from fine and applied art, and the word gui 玺 (‘tortoise’) became taboo in the refined elite society. It is not without interest to trace the history of this degradation of a symbol, for it throws a sidelight on the development of Confucian puritanism.101

After the Yuan Dynasty, the word ‘tortoise’ was used to refer to the man who allowed his wife extra-marital escapades. As a symbol of longevity, the tortoise’s sacred meaning is still preserved in Southern China and Japan.

99 Yu Li (1611–1680?), Rou pu tuan 内藩團 [The Carnal Prayer Mat], tr. by Patrick Hanan (Hawai‘i: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996).
101 Van Gulik, SLAC, 226.
The battle and weapon metaphors of the sexual intercourse

These metaphors come from Taoist sexology. The main idea is 'absorbing Yin to nourish Yang' or the combat of absorbing Qi. The word combat indicates that the man and woman involved in Taoist sex are opponents. Van Gulik noticed that the ancient scholars liked the terms of war to describe sexual intercourse. These phenomena appeared in Taoist sex guides and erotic fictions. In ECP, Van Gulik included some fragments of Ji ji zhen jing 既濟真經 [Studying the old to promote the new]: »When a smart general is resisting the enemy, he is good at caressing and sucking. Then the enemy will close her eyes and go off into ecstasies. The general keeps provoking her and then withdraws troops. After sharpening his spear and dagger-axe, he fights and withdraws again in order to wait at ease till the enemy is exhausted.«

Thus 'general and enemy' are used as a metaphor for the man and woman in sexual intercourse. Correspondingly, a weapon like the spear implies the penis. Apart from the Taoist sex guides, the popular fiction books described the sexual activities as a battle, full of armaments like sword, spear, gun, fire etc. The novel The Plum in the Golden Vase has many of these descriptions; the most typical one is in Chapter 37. Xi Men Qing ‘figths’ with his mistress Wang Liu er. The prose is in a mocking tone and full of weaponry and military terms. Some albums of the erotic prints used these terms as their titles, like Hua yin jin zhen 花營錦陣 [The flower camp and brocade battle field]. Man and woman are two hostile sides, the failing one is always the woman because the man is in control of power. These combat and weapon metaphors refer to China as a patriarchal society with polygamous marriages. »The woman likes water while the man likes fire. Water can put out fire and Yin can extinguish Yang. The Yang Qi becomes weaker and weaker when the man indulges in sex. Then he falls sick because of the exhausting of the energy and sperm. When the sperm runs out he will pass away.«

102 Van Gulik, ECP, 91–92.
104 Li Wenbin 李文彬, Hua yin jin zhen 花營錦陣 [Flower camp and brocade battle field] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1921).
105 Song Shugong 宋書功, Zhongguo gudai fangshi yangsheng jiyao 中國古代房室養生集要 [The
So men are afraid of women sometimes and regard them as enemies in sexual intercourse subconsciously: »When you have sex with women, you should look down on them. They are just like water and stone while you are gold and jade. If you cannot help ejaculating, you must pull out from her vagina at once. Having sex with a woman is like using a rotten rope to control a horse. And on the brink of a deep hole, you should be much more careful not to fall down.«

Besides this factor, most men have strong desires to be in the powerful position and put women in a submissive sexual role. They dream to own magical skills to conquer numerous women; and hope their libido is strong forever by absorbing the Qi of their sex partner(s). So women become their imaginary enemies and the inexhaustible sources of Qi. Thus, men hide their secrets of selfish sexual techniques. »Men who nourish Yang cannot let women to understand their sex arts. Otherwise, men would be hurt and sick. Never loan your deadly weapon to the enemy... So if a man wants to benefit from his sex partner, never let her know your secret skills.«

With the exception of the story of the heroine Su’e 索娥 who is good at absorbing Yang to nourish her Yin in the fiction Zhu lin ye shi 株林野史 [Unofficial History of the Bamboo Garden], most pornographic books are full of selfish men who treat woman just as a furnace (material object), which supplies the Qi.
5 Discussion

The study of the sexual culture started early in Europe first, hidden, in the works on China such as Du Halde and Diderot. Compared with these Enlightenment forerunners Du Halde, who made the facts on China penetrate into the western minds, and Diderot, who presented knowledge, including ‘sex life matters’, both focused on empirical knowledge, oral and written sources, from Roman Catholic scholars and skeptical Enlightenment philosophers, Van Gulik studied the exotic aspect of Chinese sexual culture from the material point of view, and this was the provocative beginning of the academic trend towards ‘A new cultural history’, involving anthropology, and sociology.

In the Enlightenment period the miserable socio-economic situation of the lower classes versus the sumptuous position of the French elite deliberating in their ‘salons’, and contact with foreign cultures, like China, India, and Tahiti provoked chaotic ideas about own existence with sexual desires and behaviour.

Similarly, Van Gulik argued that it was the libertine environment that evolved after the capital moved from Nanjing to Beijing in 1403, and a lot of literati, artists and artisans remained in the old capital. Around Nanjing a well-developed economy blossomed with rich natural resources and attracted wealthy businessmen and retired officials. At that time, the political situation was weak. The Ming-Qing passage showed a booming luxurious climate and pornographic industry, with the artists Hu Zhengyan 胡正言 (1580–1671), Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470–1524) and Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494–1552).

News trickling in from the north told them that there were signs of the glorious Ming dynasty drawing near its end, and reminded them of the impermanence of all worldly pleasures. Some reacted to this fin-de-siècle atmosphere by retiring to a mountain-resort and devoting themselves to abstruse Buddhist and Taoist studies. In contrast, others engaged in a feverish quest for new excitement and gave themselves unreservedly to a life of dissipation.112

These erotic color prints then represented tradable goods. The protagonists in *The Plum in Golden Vase* and *The Carnal Mat* all bought erotic paintings with large sums of money in order to add fun to their sexual life. These objects were the important signs of (sexual) emancipation and an early commodity economy in the late Ming Dynasty.

Just like the tolerant Enlightenment ideology could only spread by the press, though initially controlled by censorship, this was the case for libertine Chinese concepts of sexual life. Only in the 1980s, the Western academic circles ranked ‘acceptance and consumption’ in the material culture research with publications like *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England*113 and *Material Culture and Mass Consumption.*114 Miller pointed out: »The possibility of material culture studies lies not in method, but rather in an acknowledgement of the nature of culture.«115 Van Gulik argued that sexuality played an important role in Chinese culture:

In the case of China, a historical survey of Chinese sexual relations, the main-spring of life, makes one incline to the belief that it was primarily the careful balancing of the male and female elements—studied in China as far back as the beginning of our era—that caused the permanence of Chinese race and culture. For it would seem that it was this balance that engendered the intense vital power that, from remote antiquity to the very present, has ever sustained and renewed the Chinese race.116

These relationships not only encompass the sexual bonding between the sexes, but also the family, and even at a national level. His ‘thick description’ on the mentioned sexual objects covered the elite and the popular as well as the material and the non-material culture. Thus, Van Gulik established the status of the sexual culture research in the field of the ‘New Cultural History’.

6 Perspective

By now the old China has disappeared. A new lifestyle has developed after the turmoil of the Twentieth-century’s war and revolutions. What’s new? Titillating woodcuts have been replaced by provocative visual arts of film, video, internet and the toys substituted by a post-ordered electric vibrator. The Dan drugs and philters have been put aside for products that promise instant sexual freedom like Viagra for an erection, or party drugs for a mental flash. Condoms with a spermicidal lubricant promise safe sex in an increasingly promiscuous society.

The moral freedom after many years of emancipation and fair knowledge of the physical body is however restricted by (Chinese) government censorship on public media and a lack of basic school sex-education. Sex in the Western lifestyle, now copied in the People’s Republic of China, has been commercialized. Many women are discriminated by exploiting abuse and trafficking, and sex became a more mechanical activity. Risks of unsafe sexual practices abound.

Whereas Diderot

117 This concept confirms the Confucian teachings of social life in the ‘five relationships’.
122 Fang and Matsumura, Sex in China, 85-105.
mentioned poisoning the ‘natural’ women of Tahiti by the ‘civilized’ sailors, Van Gulik spoke only in two places of venereal diseases like gonorrhea (linbing 淋病) and syphilis (meidu 梅毒). Recently the high-tech detection sets can warn on an early acquisition of venereal diseases including the modern plague HIV/AIDS. The numbers in health statistics have been increasing annually over the years.

This new scene in the Chinese society is in continuation with the world(s) Du Halde, Diderot, and Van Gulik described and is worth evaluating again and again. The saying of Confucius «Understand today with yesterday’s wisdom» holds true, to start with the Enlightenment period. Whilst the importance of the Eighteenth-century luxury debate as an overarching concern of the Lumière [the Enlightenment thinkers] has been recognised, little has been done to discover its influence on moral philosophy and literary texts not directly discussing the issue. Diderot, however, who published on the subject, also portrays the mechanisms of luxury and consumerism in Rameau’s Nephew (discussed above). In this text these mechanisms undermine his view of morality, which is rooted in his determinist materialism. The consequences of such a materialism coupled with consumerist ethics as pointed to in the Nephew are depicted in the libertine novels of the marquis de Sade, and pose the question of whether the combination of materialism in the consumerist sense and in the philosophical sense leaves any room for conventional morality.

Although the concept of the ‘New historical culture’ was created in the late 1980s in America, its spiritual father was the philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–

123 Van Gulik, SLAC, 182.
124 Ibid., 311–312.
128 «Wei Zheng: Confucius said, If a man acquires new knowledge while thinking over the old, he may be a teacher of others.» 為政：子曰：學而知新，可以為師矣，in Lunyu yi zhu 論語譯注 (The Translation and Annotation of Lun Yu), ed. by Yang Bojun 餘伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 17.
His controversial views, following Bataille,\footnote{George Bataille, \textit{L'histoire de l'erotisme} [The History of Eroticism] (Paris: Gallimard, 2015). This is a summary of vol. II (Eng.); \textit{Oeuvres complètes VIII 7–165}, La part Maudite.} opened up a new path for historical research.\footnote{Foucault, \textit{History of Sexuality} 2, 137.} It is interesting that Foucault quoted Van Gulik: \footnote{Peter Burke, \textit{Varieties of Cultural History} (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 193.} cultural history is also a cultural translation from the language of the past into that of the present, from the concepts of contemporaries into those of historians and their readers. Its aim is to make the ‘otherness’ of the past [in time and space] both visible and intelligible.\footnote{Anthony François Paulus Hulsewé, “Obituary. R. H. van Gulik (1910–1967),” \textit{Ts'ung Pao}, second series, 54,1-3 (1968), 120.}

Van Gulik, contrary to Du Halde and the Enlightenment philosophers, kept away from the philosophical problems of Chinese history and society, and only superficially touched morality of sex: \"He looked for unfrequented bye-ways, which led him to things that to him were fully as interesting, more so, for being comparatively unknown. However, once his interest had been roused, he spared no pains to analyze the details of things, like nearly all his studies testify.\" \footnote{Anthony François Paulus Hulsewé, “Obituary. R. H. van Gulik (1910–1967),” \textit{Ts'ung Pao}, second series, 54,1-3 (1968), 120.}

Concluding, one could say the roots of the—present day—open attitude to sex in China lie not in the 1960s but in the 1760s, so in the steps of Du Halde and Diderot \textit{cum sui}, and we opinionate that Van Gulik, not being ‘an armchair sexuologist’, further unveiled the ‘exotic’ in the oriental otherness of China’s historical sexual culture and provided his readers with an inside view.

\textit{Erasmus University in Rotterdam, Faculty of Philosophy  
Shanghai Normal University, Humanities and Communications College

\textsuperscript{130} Michael Foucault, \textit{History of Sexuality} (New York: Vintage Books; Random House, 1990), 51–74 (Scientia sexualis).  
\textsuperscript{132} Foucault, \textit{History of Sexuality} 2, 137.}