
When Brill Academic Publishers reprinted Robert van Gulik’s classic *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, first published in 1961, it was first of all an act of homage to a renowned native son of Holland. It was probably also a shrewd marketing move to capitalize on the post-feminist popularity of works on the history of sexuality. Rereading this famous book today will certainly provoke reflections on how much the landscape of China’s cultural history has been changed by feminism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism, and by the sheer explosion of historical studies of premodern China. Further, as one contemplates the half life of such a monument of scholarship from a former time, even its rhetoric and style will remind a reader of its embeddedness in questions we no longer ask. Ultimately one may end up wondering whether historical classics can in fact be updated: perhaps history is intrinsically mutable, as Marc Bloch once said, shaped by the questions of the present into a discourse that takes generational form, and that is destined to be challenged by the generation succeeding it.

The case for updating *Sexual Life in Ancient China* is made capably in an introduction by Paul R. Goldin, himself author of a monograph on intellectual conceptualizations of sex in the philosophical, literary, and religious writings of late classical culture. Goldin pays tribute to the sheer range of classical texts van Gulik commanded and translated
for this book. One finds anecdotes from the Zuozhuan 左傳 (Spring and autumn chronicle) as well as the official dynastic histories; selections from the lyrics of the Han dynasty poets Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (died 117 BCE) and Zhang Heng 張衡 (78-139 CE); Ge Hong’s 葛洪 (fl 300 CE) Baopuzi 抱朴子 (The master who embraces simplicity), and Ban Zhao’s 班昭 (died 116 CE) Nüjie 女誡 (Women’s precepts). There are the narratives of the Song dynasty brothels of Hangzhou compiled by the Yuan scholar Zhou Mi 周密 (1232-1308), the autobiographical memoir and poems of Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1081-1140), Buddhist “Tables of Merits and Demerits” of the thirteenth century, anecdotes from the famous Ming erotic novels Jinpingmei 金瓶梅 (Golden lotus) and Rouputuan 肉蒲團 (Prayer mat of flesh), and the late Ming reminiscences of the scholar Mao Xiang 冒襄 (1611-1693) mourning the death of his favorite concubine. All these and many more are quoted in profusion, in addition to the lengthy translations of the various medieval “bedchamber manuals” (fangzhongshu 房中書) which form the famous centerpiece of his narrative. Today every one of these works is recognized as a gem of Chinese literature, each the object of specialist analysis. Van Gulik was the product of an era when a few learned European men (they were men) could command the heights of an unexplored country named Chinese Civilization. Van Gulik romped through its rich landscape with the agility of a polymath and the exuberance of a lover.

While acknowledging the seductions of this literary journey, Goldin’s introduction also summarizes well-known recent criticisms from feminists, including myself, and specialists on Chinese religion. Van Gulik’s framework for understanding sex itself was based on ideas of “repression” and “perversion” identified with Freud and Kraft-Ebbing—the scientistic physiological psychology of early twentieth century “sexology,” with its agenda of liberalizing mores by redrawing rather than problematizing boundaries between normal and abnormal. That van Gulik never questioned the essentialist view of male-female differences assumed by sexologists can be seen by his uncritical acceptance of the male voice of his bedchamber manuals, by his uneasy treatment of homosexual themes, and even by his surprisingly prim editorial decision to render sexually explicit passages into Latin rather than English. As for his view that the medieval bedchamber manuals addressed the obligations and joys of masters of polygamous households, specialists on Chinese religion like Kristofer Schipper have pointed out that he failed to appreciate the macrobiotic and cosmological beliefs that linked them to cultic visions of longevity or immortality rather than to the goal of sexual pleasure for either women or men.