Introduction

The Aims of This Book

This is a study of intellectual conceptions of sex and sexuality in China from roughly 500 B.C. to A.D. 400. Ancient Chinese writers discussed sex openly and seriously as one of the most important topics of human speculation. This sophisticated and long-standing tradition has been almost entirely neglected by historians for a number of reasons that will be considered presently. The consequence is that studies of writings dealing with sex are sorely needed to redress our ignorance of a subject that was central to the ancient Chinese tradition. The sources for this book are primarily philosophical, literary, and religious texts. This work is not intended as a history of sexuality or sexual behavior (and the material on which it is based sheds very little light on people’s sexual practices). Historians have begun to question whether any such history can—or should—be written; and in any case, for ancient China, the extant sources are not sufficiently informative for that purpose. The sources do reveal, however, that Chinese authors wrote earnestly about sexual activity and expected their readers to consider the subject thoughtfully. Sexual intercourse constituted a fundamental source of imagery and terminology that informed the classical Chinese conception of social and political relationships.

The book is divided into three chapters and an epilogue that progress in roughly chronological order. Chapter 1 surveys the major preimperial sources that employ the image of copulation as a metaphor for various human relations, such as those between a worshipper and his or her deity, or between a ruler and his subjects.
These sources include some of the most revered and influential texts in the Chinese tradition, such as the *Shih-ching* (Canon of Odes), the *Tso-chuan* (an orthodox commentary to the Springs and Autumns), and the *Ch’u-tz’u* (Lyrics of Ch’u). The study focuses on such central works in order to highlight the significance and utility of the metaphor of copulation in the ancient Chinese literary world. I intend to show, first, that there is far more sexual symbolism in ancient Chinese literature than is often recognized and, second, that there are crucial dimensions of the classical texts that can be appreciated only with a greater sensitivity to both the presence and the literary functions of these images. It is especially important for readers to be aware of these issues because some of the most powerful uses of sexual imagery lie at the very core of the literary tradition and profoundly influenced succeeding generations.

The next chapter focuses on the Confucian view of women. What mental capacities did early Confucians recognize in women? This is a critical question because Confucians viewed the mind (and its corresponding moral responsibilities) as the fundamental distinction between humans and animals. The early Confucian tradition conceived of women as moral equals of men—despite the charges of sexism and misogyny that have been voiced in modern times. Views of women from other philosophical camps are also considered. According to one popular paradigm, females are soft and pregnable whereas males are hard and impregnable, and the two sexes must be assigned duties commensurate with this basic difference. *Methods of War*, by Sun Pin (fl. 354–341 B.C.), for example, divides all fortresses into “male” and “female,” depending on how easily they can be penetrated by an attacker. Such texts as the *Lao-tzu* (Tao-te ching) expand on this concept by elevating the “female” and her welcoming softness. The “female” conquers by submitting, for, like water, she is formless and can adapt to any situation, whereas the rigid “male” cannot mold himself to the shape of the Way. However, it should be noted that the *Lao-tzu* (like other texts that made use of these categories) was referring not to men and women but to ideal “male” and “female” aspects present in all human beings.

The focus of the third chapter is the new imperial ideology of the Ch’in and Han dynasties. In accordance with the conceptions reflected in the metaphors of copulation described in chapter 1, sexuality was now conceived as the most telling indication of one’s
political intentions. Consequently, unregulated or illicit sexual activity was associated with, or construed as symptomatic of, unregulated or illicit political activity. The four centuries of the Han dynasty witnessed an increasing emphasis on the regulation of sexual relations and the concomitant ritualization of relations between male and female. Chinese scholars have long pointed out that many of the famed liaisons of preimperial times would have violated the rituals that were set down in the Han. (The original point of such observations was to show that these rituals, which subsequent generations took to be documents from highest antiquity, were really imposed products of a later age.) This tendency shows the imperial ideology at work, gradually tightening the reins on permissible sexual activity in order to contain lawlessness in political life.

Finally, the epilogue surveys the aristocratic rejection of this ideology after the fall of the Han, at a time when real political power came to lie in the hands of wealthy hereditary families, who continually resisted the claims of sovereignty made by the impotent emperors of a succession of short-lived dynasties.

An ancillary intention of this study is to provide for theorists and comparatists an account of the ancient Chinese case. One of the most basic ideas in the history of sexuality is constructionism, which holds that our own notions of sexuality and identity are a function of our culture and society—our discourse, as it is sometimes called. The point is often made by invoking what we call sexual orientation; a sexual human being is typically considered today to be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. In ancient Greece, however, such distinctions are famously absent, as historians have demonstrated repeatedly. Simply put, the only relevant distinction was between the penetrator and the penetrated. So the consequence of constructionism must be that we cannot understand sexuality apart from its cultural environment, and we would gain far more insight into our own sexualities if we compared as many different sexual discourses as possible. However, the fact remains that the modern case has been compared almost exclusively with that of ancient Greece. So far, most recent work in the sexuality of cultures other than that of ancient Greece has taken the form of discrete lecture-length articles bound together in collaborative volumes, and not in synthetic, book-length histories.
The history of “Chinese studies” as a field helps to explain why the subject matter of this book, crucial though it may be, has been ignored for so long. The first Western scholars of China tended to fall into one of two categories: missionaries or Orientalists. The missionary tradition extends all the way back to Jesuits like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), whose avowed intention was to bring the Christian faith to all parts of the globe, but who soon discovered that they would be vastly more persuasive if they could claim to know something about the cultures in which they established their missions.5 Other missionaries—such as James Legge (1815–1897)6 and Séraphin Couvreur (1835–1919)—contributed greatly to the understanding of China in the West, but they were primarily interested in those aspects of Chinese civilization that would help them become more effective proselytizers: Confucianism and the Chinese classics; religion; literature; history; and so forth. Understandably, they were not much interested in books about sex. Their legacy has silently influenced posterity in this respect as in so many others. Because much of the later work was designed to further the scholarship of missionaries like Legge, it was perhaps inevitable that sex would be overlooked as a legitimate subject of inquiry.

The other great branch of early Sinologues was the Orientalists, or scholars who perceived “the Orient” essentially as a monolithic, coherent entity. Their work was often intended to show the ubiquitous similarity of various cultural forms, whether in India, China, Mesopotamia, or Persia. Perhaps the greatest example of the Orientalist approach was that of Arthur Waley (1889–1966), whose English translation of the canonical Odes is accompanied by numerous footnotes pointing out that such-and-such a practice is found today among Koreans, Annamese, Jews, and so on.7 For the Orientalist, these comparisons are compelling because they are thought to demonstrate the basic unity of cultures throughout the Orient.8 For our purposes, the general problem with Orientalism is that it is primarily concerned with China not as China but only as part of a putative “Orient.” Orientalists were never interested in studying the Chinese discourse as a unique case in the history of world civilizations; to them, it merely represented an “Oriental” case that could be fruitfully compared to that of other “Oriental” cultures. (The specter of imperialism is inescapable here. “The Orient” never made any sense as a geographical unit except as one that was available to Europe in
the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries for exploitation and colonization.)

Moreover, the Orientalists were professional academics and were encumbered by the same prudishness that has infected the entire academy until only recently. Like the missionaries, but for different reasons, they were not inclined to publish scholarly works dealing with sexuality as an intellectual problem.

Times have changed, and it is much more feasible now to engage in the kind of study proposed here. There have, in fact, been many recent studies of sex in modern and early modern China in the context of various disciplines, such as law, literature, and history. But there still are almost no works that consider the ancient period. The most notable exception is R.H. van Gulik’s *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, first published in 1961 and still the only secondary source available for much of its subject matter. However, van Gulik’s work needs to be superseded in many respects. His decision to render all potentially indelicate passages into Latin is outmoded and indicative of his ambivalent attitude toward his own subject of inquiry. In addition, his citation errors are too frequent, even though his erudition is equally admired by his supporters and his critics. But the main problem is more serious: the book relies on an obsolete methodology.

Van Gulik has been both praised and criticized for his contention that ancient Chinese “sexual habits were healthy and normal” and that “pathologia sexualis” was not largely represented. As van Gulik himself declares, one of the main purposes of his *Sexual Life in Ancient China* was to refute the idea that ancient Chinese sex practices were abnormal or depraved. Herein he is hamstrung by his Victorianism. It is clear from his book that he is thinking mostly of sadism and masochism, categories that he evidently inherits directly from the great Austrian psychologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902). The whole notion of sexual perversion (or pathologia sexualis) is a well-documented product of nineteenth-century Europe, when psychiatrists as professionals arrogated to themselves the task of defining “healthy” and “perverted” sexual impulses. Reading perversion or the lack of perversion back into the ancient Chinese arena is analogous to projecting our conceptions of homosexuality and heterosexuality back onto ancient Greece: it is fundamentally anachronistic. So the limitations of van Gulik’s work on China, and in particular his concern with the idea of perversion, are the result of his failure to set aside the paradigms of his own time and place.
Van Gulik is also famous for his admiring comments on the ancient Chinese and their enlightened concern for the sexual pleasure of women. He has thereby misled untold numbers of casual readers. The noted contemporary critic and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, for example, engaged in a lengthy meditation on the Chinese conception of female jouissance (she was apparently working from a French translation of van Gulik’s book, in which the term “jouissance” must have been used to denote orgasm) in terms that sound so Freudian and mystical as to obscure any remaining affinity with the original Chinese context. The reality is much less pretty and has to do with early Chinese medical theories.

All human beings were thought to be made up of ch'i, literally “vapor,” or undifferentiated matter, which appears in the world in two complementary aspects, yin and yang. Furthermore, human beings were thought to contain ching, or “refined essence,” which is ch'i in its most concentrated form and which is emitted from the body at the moment of orgasm. For men, the ching was conceived as the semen, or ch'i in its ultimate yang state; for women, the ching was conceived as vaginal secretions, or ch'i in its ultimate yin state. Furthermore, it was believed that all human beings needed a healthy balance of yin-ch'i and yang-ch'i, and one of the best ways to obtain the aspect of ch'i that one lacked naturally was by having sexual intercourse with a member of the opposite sex and absorbing his or her ching in the process. It was especially beneficial if one could stop up one's own ching, so as not to lose any of one's own precious essence, while taking in that of one's partner. This is the source of the basic idea that a man should refrain from ejaculating excessively and should either injaculate or repress his ejaculation entirely. But for the sex act to have any medical value, the male had to make sure that the female reached orgasm and emitted her yin-ch'i. This is why so many sex manuals—which were written exclusively for men—go to great lengths to counsel the reader on the art of pleasing women sexually. In theory, of course, a woman could do the same thing to a man by repressing her own orgasm and encouraging his, and a number of later texts refer to that possibility explicitly. But the concern for female sexual pleasure that van Gulik observed ultimately derives from those works, intended for male audiences, which explain how to tap the life essence of unsuspecting females. Certain other manuals stress the importance of pleasing a woman so as to keep her by one's side as a willing victim in a state of constant sexual readiness.
The motivation was hardly an egalitarian concern for the woman’s pleasure. This model may help to explain, incidentally, why there are so few notices in ancient Chinese literature of homoeroticism, whether between men or women. In the calculus of ch’i exchange, sexual intercourse between members of the same sex was absolutely irrelevant, because the losses and gains of each party effectively canceled each other out. There are some references to sexual encounters between women in the same harem (one of many indications that the extant texts belong to the world of the social elite), but these women, of course, are never portrayed as homosexual or even bisexual. Women were simply containers of yin-ch’i, and it was immaterial how they exchanged their ch’i with each other, as long as they remained healthy sources of energy for the males who kept them. As we shall see, there were other, less reifying images of women as well; nevertheless, it was inconceivable for anyone to consider sexual relations between women as an issue with social ramifications or as a sign that different women might have different sexual orientations.

We must not forget that these issues were not commonly recognized by historians until well after van Gulik’s day. It would hardly have been possible for van Gulik to take into account historiographical problems that we ourselves have only recently come to appreciate. However, now that the historical study of human sexuality has reached a requisite level of sophistication, it is possible to begin the daunting task of reexamining Chinese conceptions of sexual relations.