

## Robert Hans van Gulik Reading Late Ming Erotica<sup>\*\*</sup>

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### Abstract

This study closely looks at Robert Hans van Gulik's (1910-1967) treatment of the *Huaying jinzhen* 花營錦陣 (Variegated Positions of the Flowery Battle), a late Ming woodblock album of twenty-four erotic prints included in his privately published book *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming*

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*Period*. By reading van Gulik's meticulous description of the pictures and his translation of their accompanying poems, this paper suggests that van Gulik has a tendency to narrativize the content of these pictures, which may be partly due to the viewer's formed viewing habits shaped by his acquaintance with late Ming culture, including erotic literature. Indeed, a comparison of the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures and several late Ming fictional works reveals important similarities between pictorial and verbal representations of the erotic. Moreover, that van Gulik classifies erotic albums and fiction under the same label "erotic book" points to the close affinity that he perceives between them. At the same time, van Gulik's treatment of these works points to another important aspect of erotica, i.e. the "anti-narrative" tendency that marks many late Ming representations – visual or verbal – of the erotic: erotic details, either in pictorial or literary form, can be and are often isolated by the reader from the larger narrative or context and appreciated separately. Moreover, it can be observed that at work within such erotic fragments is a mechanism that, aiming to maximize pleasure, is antagonistic against narrativity. In the final part of the essay, I turn to the detective stories van Gulik himself writes and illustrates, with the aim to further demonstrate the proximity he sees/shows between the verbal text and the visual one. In sum, a close reading of van Gulik not only tells us about this versatile man himself, but also unveils important but sometimes overlooked or understudied aspects of late Ming erotica.

**Keywords:** Robert Hans van Gulik, late Ming, woodblock erotic books, *Huaying jinzhen*, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*

## 1. Introduction

Brill's reprinting of Robert Hans van Gulik's (1910-1967) *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.* (2003) and *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period: With*

*an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch'ing Dynasty, B.C. 206-A.D. 1644* (2004), several decades after these books' first appearances, seems to signal the return of Robert Hans van Gulik.<sup>1</sup> With its reappearance, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* once again brings to light a late Ming erotic album entitled *Huaying jinzhen* 花營錦陣 (Variegated Positions of the Flowery Battle).<sup>2</sup> *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* consists of two volumes. Volume 1, the focus of the present study, contains three parts: While Part 1 offers a historical survey of erotic literature from the Han dynasty to the late Ming, the second part is a short survey of erotic pictures from the Han to the Ming, with a special section devoted to the Ming period; in Part 3, entitled "Hua-Ying-Chin-Chen [i.e. *Huaying jinzhen*] Annotated Translation," van Gulik provides a detailed description for each of the twenty-four pictures from the *Huaying jinzhen* as well as a translation of their twenty-four accompanying poems – he sometimes also supplies notes on the contents of the poems wherever he feels necessary.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* was originally published privately by van Gulik in 1951. *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, an extension of several sections in *Erotic Prints of the Ming Period*, was first published by Brill in 1961. For an evaluation on van Gulik's return signaled by these republications, see Charlotte Furth, "Rethinking van Gulik Again," *Nan nü* 7.1 (2005): 71-78, and Paul R. Goldin, "Introduction," in Robert Hans van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. xiii-xxx.
  - 2 The first edition of the book had only fifty copies, which van Gulik sent to selected libraries in the world. For a detailed introduction to the book and van Gulik's albums of erotic color prints, see James Cahill's "Introduction to R. H. van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Late [sic] Ming Period*," in Robert Hans van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period: With an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch'ing Dynasty, B.C. 206-A.D. 1644* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. ix-xxv, and J. S. Edgren, "A Bibliographical Note on van Gulik's Albums of Erotic Colour Prints" in the same book (pp. xxvii-xxx).
  - 3 Volume 2 of the book "consists entirely of Chinese text materials," many of which were partially quoted in Volume 1, and the final volume is "a reprint of the erotic album *Hua-ying-chin-chen*, struck off from the set of old printing blocks in my [i.e. van Gulik's] possession" (van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, pp. lxxi). All quotations from *Erotic Colour Prints of the*

If the surveys in the first two parts of Volume 1 offer us a glimpse of an erudite van Gulik, the descriptions, translations, and notes in Part 3, while suggesting his remarkable sensitivity to an important but often shunned subject, provide us a precious window into how van Gulik read erotica from a world that was geographically, temporally, and culturally removed from “his own.” The present study, however, will not tarry on these prints *per se*, nor is it merely concerned with how van Gulik views them; rather, it seeks to show what his viewing tells us about the viewer himself as well as about late Ming erotica. In this sense, the goal of this study is twofold: First, I am interested in van Gulik as a viewing subject embedded in his own time and his multi-identity as scholar, collector, connoisseur, viewer, fiction-writer, illustration artist, and lover of Chinese culture. Second, concerned with the larger question of late Ming erotica or even erotica in general, this paper also hopes to see, tentatively, some of the characteristics of late Ming erotica that van Gulik’s treatment of the *Huaying jinzhen* prints wittingly or unwittingly discloses.<sup>4</sup>

To van Gulik’s eye, what each of the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures represents is not the simple addition of the visual elements present in it; rather, his viewing is a process of embodiment and creative “narrativization.” Approaching the prints with both his rich knowledge of Ming culture and creative imagination, this viewer not just observes, but imagines, infers, creates, contextualizes, narrates, and, importantly, narrativizes, and what he *sees* in the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures is an embodied world with not only spatial but also temporal dimensions.<sup>5</sup> I suggest that this narrativizing tendency may

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*Ming Period* are taken from volume 1 unless otherwise indicated.

4 Mine is not the first study of van Gulik’s *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* – the three introductory essays – by James Cahill, J. S. Edgren, and Wilt Idema respectively – included in the 2004 Brill edition of the book not only offer an excellent overview of van Gulik’s work and career, but also examine his pursuit in the area of erotica by situating it in the larger literati culture (see *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, pp. ix-lix).

5 My understanding of the question of embodiment draws upon Michael Fried’s brilliant reading of Adolph Menzel’s (1815-1905) drawings and painting. For Fried’s discussion on embodiment,

be seen as related to van Gulik's reading habits associated with his familiarity with Ming-Qing fiction. Indeed, in his treatment of pre-modern Chinese erotica, van Gulik does not make a clear-cut distinction between visual (e.g. albums) and literary works (e.g. novels and stories), but categorizes them under the same rubric, "erotic books."<sup>6</sup> Vague as this term may sound, its invocation points to the intimate relations that van Gulik sees between verbal and visual representations and between erotic pictures and erotic fiction,<sup>7</sup> and points to the possibility that his rich experience with fictional narratives may have influenced the way he reads pictures.

Yet, paradoxically, despite its success at contextualizing the erotic and narrativizing the events surrounding the central act of sex, his attempt to describe late Ming erotic works – be it the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures or *Chunmeng suoyan* 春夢瑣言 (Trifling Words of a Spring Dream; *Trifling Words* hereafter), an alleged late Ming story he privately published in 1950 – often "fails" to "faithfully" re-present and to narrativize *the erotic*. I hold that this is partly because the erotic has a tendency to claim autonomy from the larger narrative in which it is embedded; moreover, with a working mechanism that seeks to maximize pleasure, it is by nature antagonistic against narrativity, which threatens to and inevitably does bring an end to any sexual encounter. In short, erotic representations are often marked by what I shall call "anti-narrativity." I thus argue that van Gulik's "failure" to narrativize the erotic in his re-presentation of late Ming erotica wittingly or unwittingly discloses to us

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see his *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), particularly Chapters 1, 3, and 5.

6 As will be discussed below, in his introduction to the alleged late Ming story *Chunmeng suoyan* 春夢瑣言 (Trifling Words of a Spring Dream), van Gulik repeatedly uses this term to refer to both erotic fiction and albums.

7 Indeed, as scholars such as James Cahill point out, van Gulik's post-WWII career is marked by a joint interest in visual art and fiction, which he treats as inextricably linked. See Cahill, "Introduction to R. H. van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Late Ming Period*," *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period: With an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch'ing Dynasty, B.C. 206-A.D. 1644* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. ix-xxv.

an important feature of erotic representation (verbal or visual), i.e. the “anti-narrative” tendency. Moreover, such anti-narrative tendency can also be found in the illustrations that van Gulik creates for his Judge Dee stories, which I briefly look at in the last part of this essay.

There has been ample scholarship on the relationship between image and word, between pictorial and literary narrative. For instance, in her examination of the illustrations of various editions of *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The Story of the Western Wing), Ma Meng-ching 馬孟晶 has offered a compelling analysis of the shift of emphasis in these pictures away from the storyline, noting the emergence of a “poetic mode” under which illustrations relate to the verbal narrative only in a fragmented or supplementary fashion.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on a notion that she calls “performance illustration,” Li-Ling Hsiao’s investigation of illustrated late Ming theatrical texts looks at not only the relationship between image and text, but also the larger cultural trends reflected by the development of this relationship.<sup>9</sup> Wu Hung, in his comparative study of pictorial and literary representations of the idealized Beauty (*meiren* 美人) and the feminine space, argues that seemingly rigid stereotypes in fact have the potential to become sites for artistic creation and reinvention as well as personal expression.<sup>10</sup> While actual pictures play an important part in these three scholars’ works, Judith Zeitlin’s article “The Life and Death of the Image” contributes to our understanding of the relationship between the visual and the

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8 See Ma Meng-ching 馬孟晶, “*Ermu zhi wan: cong Xixiang ji banhua chatu lun wan Ming chuban wenhua dui shijuexing zhi guanzhu* 耳目之玩：從西廂記版畫插圖論晚明出版文化對視覺性之關注” (Looking Through the Frame: Visuality in Late Ming Illustrations to *The Story of the Western Wing*), *Taida Journal of Art History* 13 (2002): 201-276, and “Linking Poetry, Painting, and Prints: The Mode of Poetic Pictures in Late Ming Illustrations to *The Story of the Western Wing*,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 5.1 (2008): 1-51.

9 See Li-Ling Hsiao, *The Eternal Present of the Past: Illustration, Theatre, and Reading in the Wanli Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

10 See Wu Hung, “Beyond Stereotypes: The Twelve Beauties in Qing Court Art and the *Dream of the Red Chamber*,” Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 306-365.

literary by focusing on literary representations of the visual.<sup>11</sup> In short, these scholars approach the relationship between image and narrative from a wide range of perspectives and with different foci. The present study draws upon this rich scholarship;<sup>12</sup> at the same time, it also seeks to make its own contribution by paying particular attention to the representation of the erotic, which, with its “anti-narrative” tendency, constitutes a unique site for us to rethink issues of representation, genre, narrative, the visual, and the verbal.

## 2. Embodying and Narrativizing: The Connoisseur’s Eye

What does van Gulik *see* in the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures? He obviously has a scrupulous eye for detail. “Things” that he notices and describes range from human figures, their gestures and body positions, to clothes, furniture, flowers, fabrics, rocks, birds, insects – just to name a few. Let’s turn to his treatment of Picture 1 – I quote the description, translation and annotation van Gulik provides for this picture and its accompanying poem in their entirety:

### PICTURE 1. *As in a Dream*

[Description: A padded quilt is spread upon the floor, protected against indiscreet eyes by a large, one-panel screen decorated with a painting of rocks and flowers. The man is naked, the woman wears a loose jacket. On both ends of the quilt are their discarded clothes. The man’s shoes lie in the foreground.

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11 This article also analyzes several actual pictures. See Judith Zeitlin, “The Life and Death of the Image: Ghosts and Female Portraits in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Literature,” Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang, eds., *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 229-256.

12 These are not the only recent studies of the relationship between word and image. For a survey of recent scholarship on the relationship between viewing and text, see my essay “*Wenben yu guankan: jinnianlai yingyu hanxuejie dui shijue yu wenben guanxi zhi yanjiu* 文本與觀看：近年來英語漢學界對視覺與文本關係之研究” (Text and Visuality: Recent English-Language Scholarship on the Relationship between Text, Viewing and Visuality in Pre-Modern China), *Zhongzheng daxue zhongwen xueshu niankan* 中正大學中文學術年刊 (*Chung Cheng University Journal of Chinese Studies*) 14.2 (2009.12): 35-67.



如夢令  
 一夜兩紅雲闌濃興不  
 知宵永露滴牡丹心骨  
 芳卽酥鎔雞動情重情  
 重都白字第卅一夢  
 桃源主人

Fig. 1 “Rumeng ling” 如夢令 (As in a Dream)

“*Huaying jinzhen*,” rpt. in Robert Hans van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period: With an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch’ing Dynasty*. B.C. 206-A.D. 1644 (privately published in fifty copies, Tokyo, 1951; reprinted in 2004), vol. 2, pp. 229-230. Reprinted here with permission from Brill.

In the upper right corner is a table of spotted bamboo with an incense burner and a small vase.]

Text: “All night long these two have fought the intense battle of love but ardent passion does not keep count of time. When the Dew moistens the Heart of the Peony, her limbs grow powerless for melted by lust they can hardly move. What a burning love, burning love! All like a dream of Hua-hsü!

(Signed) “The Master of the Peach Spring”

Notes. The original name of the metrical pattern Joe-mengling was YEN-T’AO-YÜAN 宴桃源 “Feasting at the Peach Spring.” This name refers to the well known ancient story of the man who, having lost his way in the mountains, came upon a peach orchard which was the entrance to a kind of Arcadia where people lived in simple bliss, ignorant of the world outside. Hence the fanciful name with which the poem is signed.



“Hua-hsü” in the last line also refers to Arcadia. The Yellow Emperor once dreamt that he visited the Land of Hua-hsü where people lived in natural happiness. Cf. *Lieh-tzû*, ch. II, 1. Later Hua-hsü became a name of the God of Sleep.

The text is practically identical with the *tz'û* at the end of section 4, Part I of HTYS; cf. Fol. 182/1-2.<sup>13</sup>

In his description of Picture 1, the objects van Gulik notes include larger ones such as the quilt, the table and the screen as well as relatively smaller ones such as the discarded clothes, the man's shoes and even the items in the more distant background such as the incense burner and the vase. At the same time, he also mentions the human figures, succinctly describing the male figure as “naked,” and the female figure as wearing “a loose jacket.” In short, van Gulik seems to have noticed every “thing” isolatable and visibly present in the picture.

But is van Gulik simply re-presenting what he *sees*? Remarkably, his account also notes the specific qualities of the objects: The quilt is “padded”; the screen, “decorated with a painting of rocks and flowers,” is a one-paneled one; the table is made of spotted bamboo; and the vase is small. In fact, objects in other pictures, *as van Gulik describes them*, are also marked by various specific features. Take, for example, the “quilt,” on which the central act of lovemaking takes place in quite a few pictures in the album: It is of brocade in Pictures 2, 14, and 15; in Pictures 3, 17, and 22, it is “embroidered”; in Picture 5, it is described as “a thick mat with brocade borders.”<sup>14</sup> Not all these features are readily graspable by the viewing eye. While the eye can tell whether a

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13 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, pp. 209-210.

14 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, pp. 208-227. Moreover, in van Gulik's description of Picture 15, the brocade quilt is also “padded” (p. 219). The screen also appears in several pictures in various forms and/or of various materials: van Gulik tells us, there is a “folding screen” respectively in Pictures 8, 14, and 16, and there is “a single panel screen” in Picture 24 (see pp. 208-227). In his description of Picture 15, he mentions the screen again, but this time it is of a very different kind – it is “a *silk* screen attached to poles driven into the ground” (see p. 219; italics mine).

panel is singled-paneled or not, information such as the material (e.g. “silk”), of which the described object is allegedly made, does not seem to be something the eye can directly perceive. However, when describing the objects in the pictures, van Gulik has the tendency to indicate – with apparent confidence – the materials that these objects are supposedly made of.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes, van Gulik also describes how these objects *feel* like.<sup>16</sup>

This kind of description begs a question: can a spectator *visually* perceive all those features – i.e. the materials of the objects and how they feel to the touch – that van Gulik matter-of-factly describes? Take, for instance, Picture 1: Can we tell by looking at the picture that the quilt is padded (or of brocade, as van Gulik tells us about the similar item depicted in several other pictures)? And do we know for sure that the rectangular piece upon which the man and the woman are having sex is a *quilt*? Indeed, some viewers may take it to be a rug. Furthermore, while we do *see* dark spots on the lower part of the table in Picture 1, how exactly do we *know* that the table is made of spotted bamboo? In fact, to some people, the very term “spotted bamboo” may sound utterly alien. Similarly, how do we know that the barrel-shaped seat in Picture 11, the round bath in Picture 13, and the goldfish basin in Picture 22 are of porcelain, while the incense burner in Picture 19 is made of bronze, as he indicates them to be?

My concern here is not whether van Gulik has offered the right or wrong description of the objects; rather, I am more interested in what his re-presentation of the pictures reveals about his viewing experience in relation to his other artistic and literary pursuits at the time. It is clear that these

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15 For instance, in addition to the above-mentioned examples, van Gulik informs us without hesitation that in Picture 11, there is “a barrel-shaped *porcelain* seat,” and in Picture 19, “a *bronze* incense burner”; Picture 14 features a “*bamboo* balustrade,” and Picture 22, “a large *porcelain* goldfish basin on a *wooden* stand.” We are also told that there is “a round *porcelain* bath” in Picture 13. See van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, pp. 208-227; italics are mine.

16 Take, for example, his description of Picture 17: “An embroidered quilt is spread upon the ground, a number of stitched volumes in a cloth cover serve as a pillow, *softened* by the woman’s robe laid over them.” van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 221; italics mine.

descriptions of the pictures contain messages that cannot be obtained solely through viewing. The eye with which the spectator examines the pictures does not simply view; rather, relying upon his knowledge of late Ming culture, van Gulik also infers, speculates, imagines, and creates. Indeed, his descriptions of the prints demonstrate his acquaintance with late Ming objects. Not only is he able to identify various types of things (e.g. furniture, vases, clothes, etc.), he also shows a general familiarity with their functions. For instance, he identifies the rack on which the female figure in Picture 6 suspends herself as “a clothes rack,”<sup>17</sup> whose intended function may not be recognized by those unfamiliar with Ming furniture.

The connoisseur’s eye also infers. His description of Picture 2, entitled “Nightly Boat Trip (*Ye xingchuan* 夜行船),” reads, “In a secluded corner of the garden the brocade quilt has been spread in the shadow of a large artificial rock.”<sup>18</sup> In this picture, while the “brocade quilt” is indeed placed nearby a “large artificial rock,” it is not clear if it is “spread in the shadow of” it, for no shadow is *visually* represented. Similarly, van Gulik describes the setting of Picture 4 “The Way of the Academicians (*Hanlin feng* 翰林風)” as “[a] shadowy courtyard corner”:<sup>19</sup> again, whereas the central act of lovemaking depicted in this print seems to take place under a tree, strictly speaking, simply by looking at the picture, we do not know for sure if this “courtyard corner” is in shadow. In sum, the shadow in these pictures is only inferred by the viewer according to the positions of the central acts in relation to other objects depicted.

Well-versed in Chinese pictorial art, van Gulik is familiar with the usual process in which traditional Chinese paintings and prints are created. As shown by the historical survey of erotic pictures included in *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, he is aware that in their artistic creation, pre-modern Chinese

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17 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 213.

18 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 210.

19 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 211.

painters relied heavily on what is known as the “*diben* 底本” (literally, “basis volume”), “i.e. the ‘painters’ models’ which play an important role in Chinese pictorial art”:<sup>20</sup>

A *ti-pen* [i.e. *diben*] originated as follows. A gifted artist would create a picture, for instance, of an old man sitting on the bank of a rivulet, cooling his feet in the water. Later artists, struck by the original beauty of this motif, would copy the figure, often changing its details and general features but carefully keeping the essential brush strokes that lent life to the figure. Thus, this particular representation became the ‘*ti-pen* of a man cooling his feet’ – to be found on scores of paintings of the Ming and Ch’ing periods.<sup>21</sup>

As van Gulik puts it, “Hundreds ... of such *ti-pen* ... were transmitted through the centuries by means of collections of sketches in painters’ ateliers and in the remarkable retentive visual memories of Chinese artists.”<sup>22</sup>

Robert van Gulik then makes an astute comparison to further illustrate the function of *diben*: just like “what Chinese characters are to the calligrapher or bricks to the architect,” *diben*, to the Chinese painter, is like “the raw material necessary to the creation of a work of art.”<sup>23</sup> While the creation of individual components of a picture may be based upon pre-existing models, when they are put together within a single frame, instead of a simple addition of these visual elements, what the viewer gets is a new picture, in which each of these elements is a constituent part of a newly created organic world, and exist in relation to each other. Correspondingly, the spectator’s viewing is an embodying, constructing, and contextualizing process.

Viewed in “realistic” terms, the world in each of the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures becomes an embodied whole, a three-dimensional space that is not confined by the frame of the picture, but exists as part of a larger world and

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20 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 160. “*Diben*” literally means “root version.”

21 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 160.

22 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 160.

23 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 160.

thus has a spatial beyond. Quite a few descriptions by van Gulik suggest this spatial beyond. Verbally “re-depicting” Picture 18, he describes, “Somewhere in the open, in a secluded spot behind a rock and a blossoming tree. On the right one sees the edge of a cliff with an agaric growing among a tuft of grass.”<sup>24</sup> In this picture, although we do see this “somewhere,” “the open,” which is not directly visible to any scrutinizing eye, is an imaginary space in which van Gulik situates this immediately seeable “somewhere.”

Like the world directly present within the frame, to van Gulik, this beyond is not void of human existence. In his description of Picture 17, he tells us that what is present in the picture is “[a] corner in the garden, *protected* by a screen with a landscape.”<sup>25</sup> Protected against what? The description of Picture 1, which, like many other pictures in this album, also features a screen, implies that it is against “indiscreet eyes” that the central act of lovemaking is protected. That the screen is not simply viewed as an object, but as one with a specific function emphasizes the ubiquitous presence of the invasive gaze, pointing to the existence of a larger human world, in which the seemingly confined space in the picture is inseparably situated. Indeed, by envisioning the intrusive “indiscreet eyes,” van Gulik ultimately smashes the border of the picture.<sup>26</sup>

To van Gulik’s inferring eye, the space within the border is not abstract, but is concrete and dividable. For instance, he sees the library in Picture 19 as “opening on the garden,” which lies “outside.”<sup>27</sup> In Picture 24, he sees “[a] pavilion in the middle of a lotus pond.”<sup>28</sup> In the same picture, van Gulik also notices some curtains, which he claims to have been “drawn aside to admit

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24 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 221.

25 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 221; italics mine.

26 See Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) for a brilliant full-length examination of the multiple roles of the screen as an object as well as a representation.

27 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 222.

28 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 226.

the cool breeze [into the pavilion].”<sup>29</sup> This imagined movement of the wind from outside into the pavilion again points to the perceived divisibility and extensibility of space. Nonetheless, there may be a different reason why the curtains are drawn: they are drawn aside so that the human figures engaged in an encounter can be fully exposed to the viewer of the print. In fact, given the disproportionately large size of the human figures in relation to the pavilion, we may even say the pavilion and the curtains are more meant to be decorative than realistic. By highlighting the diegetic function of curtains and overlooking its nondiegetic decorative function, van Gulik reads the picture as constituting a world isolatable and indeed isolated from the world of the viewer. In contrast, the anonymous author of the preface contained in the original *Huaying jinzhen* seems to have a very different take on this. According to him, the purpose of this album is to teach couples to properly execute the art of sexual intercourse, and in order to learn this art, the reader “must scrutinize these pictures with the greatest care” so that he/she will better master the positions the album depicts.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the contents of these prints always refer to their (intended) viewers.

Moreover, if the purpose of this album is to exhibit copulative positions, then whether the human figures have individual identities does not matter. However, in van Gulik’s reading, these human figures are not just demonstrators of sexual moves, but are given a “realistic” footing in the embodied world he envisions. For instance, in his description of Picture 20, in which a woman figure is peeping at the sexual encounter between a man and a woman, van Gulik attempts to establish a relationship between these figures, taking the peeper to be “one of the man’s other wives or concubine.”<sup>31</sup> A third female figure also appears in Pictures 14, 18, and 23, and when describing these pictures, van Gulik identifies this third figure as the maidservant –

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29 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 226.

30 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 208.

31 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 223.

although the maidservant is commonly present in erotic scenes in late Ming and early Qing fiction, in this picture, there is no definite evidence indicating that she is of such a status.

In his study on the seemingly stereotypical image of the idealized Beauty (*meiren* 美人) in Ming-Qing literature and art, Wu Hung convincingly shows how established literary or artistic formulae could serve as sites of creative imagination and invention.<sup>32</sup> Judith Zeitlin, in her investigation of “the slippage between beautiful women pictures and individual female portraits”<sup>33</sup> in late Ming Chinese literature, also stresses “the freedom of the viewer’s imagination to construe the image as he or she pleases.”<sup>34</sup> In the present case, despite the album’s alleged pedagogical function, which links the represented world in the pictures and the viewer, van Gulik not only views creatively, but imagines a world that, with both spatial and temporal dimensions, exists autonomously from the world of the viewer. If each of the prints captures an instant of an intimate encounter, van Gulik’s verbal re-presentation narrativizes this moment by inserting it into the flow of time – that is, he sees the moment visually captured in the picture as part of an ongoing happening that has duration in time.

Nonetheless, this viewing is not just constructive, but, significantly, is also marked by omission; one of the things that his description noticeably shuns is the erotic, the supposed central element in these pictures. For instance, in his description of Picture 1, van Gulik sounds detached, and, only briefly mentioning that “[t]he man is naked, the woman wears a loose jacket,” he makes no direct comment on either sex or physical pleasure. He sometimes describes particular gestures and body movements of the depicted human figures. For instance, he tells the reader that in Picture 19, “[t]he man is naked, but the woman has only shed her trousers. She leans on the table, cupping

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32 See Wu Hung, “Beyond Stereotypes,” pp. 306-365.

33 Zeitlin, “The Life and Death of the Image,” p. 256.

34 Zeitlin, “The Life and Death of the Image,” p. 232.

her chin in her hand, with one leg raised on a low tabouret.”<sup>35</sup> Although his description of the human figures’ gestures and body positions seems objective, if we read it without looking at the picture itself, we actually do not know what action he is describing – in many cases, we cannot even tell whether there is physical contact between the depicted figures or not.

Clearly, what is left out in his descriptions of the prints is the explicitly erotic. Perhaps these descriptions are not meant to be read by themselves. As van Gulik plans, this book includes the complete album of *Huaying jinzhen* in the last part.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, as was mentioned above, for each picture, in addition to a description, van Gulik also provides a translation of its accompanying poem. Often overtly sexual, these translated poems offer extra illustration to the eroticism portrayed in the prints, making up what van Gulik refrains from mentioning in the descriptions. Take, for example, Picture 19. Robert van Gulik’s translation of the accompanying poem reads:

半榻清風，一庭	The cool breeze blows over the narrow table. Moon light
明月，書齋幽會	fills the garden. The delights of this secret meeting in
情難說。美人兀	the library are beyond description. The beautiful lady is
自更多情，番做	animated by a fanciful passion. This time they attempt the
箇翰林風月。	Style of the Academicians.

回頭一笑生春，	Looking over her shoulder, her smile betrays her lust.
卻勝酥胸緊貼，	This is better than pressing against her milk-white breasts!
尤雲滯雨，聽嬌	When the Special Clouds receive the Rain, one hears her
聲輕聒，疏竹影	soft and tender whispering. There is hovering shadow of
蕭蕭，桂花香拂	the sparse bamboo and the fragrance of cassia perfumes
拂。	the air. <sup>37</sup>

While the poem does not give a detailed account of the gestures of the couple, it does not shy away from commenting directly on the woman’s desire and the

35 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p. 222.

36 In the 2004 Brill reprint, this album is included in the second volume, between pages 225 and 276.

37 van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, pp. 222-223.



great pleasure she is enjoying at the moment. In this way, although van Gulik himself does not comment on this aspect of the picture, by juxtaposing his own translation of the poem with his “controlled” description, the erotic is not completely eclipsed.

Robert van Gulik’s omission of the explicitly erotic here might be seen as a deliberate effort to avoid a head-on engagement with the sexual. Indeed, his reservation here shows a kind of concern and unease, which, also evident in *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, is described by Paul Rakita Goldin as “considerable anxiety about sexuality as a topic for academic research.”<sup>38</sup> In this sense, the translation of the poems becomes a convenient way for van Gulik to bring out what he himself does not or does not want to overtly engage in the descriptions. However, is this the only reason for the eclipse of the erotic in van Gulik’s re-presentation of the prints? I would suggest that his “shying away” from the sexual is also partly due to what I will call the “anti-narrative” nature of erotica (both visual and verbal), which I shall discuss below.

### 3. Picturesque Fiction

Robert van Gulik’s tendency to embody, contextualize, and ultimately narrativize the *Huaying jinzheng* prints should be seen as intimately related to his other activities during the same period when he published *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*. In his notes written for the Robert van Gulik Collection of Boston University Libraries, van Gulik lists six publications under his “second Japanese period” (1948-1952): *Dee Goong An: Three Murder Cases Solved by Judge Dee* (1949), *Ch’un-Meng-So-Yen*

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38 Goldin, “Introduction,” in *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.*, p. xv. In this introduction, which is included in the 2003 Brill edition of *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, Goldin points out that in this book van Gulik maintains a cautious distance from the subject of sexuality by demarcating it as one whose proper sphere is sexology. See Goldin, “Introduction,” pp. xv-xvi.

(i.e. *Chunmeng suoyan* 春夢瑣言) (1950), *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* (1951), “Brief Note on the Cheng, the Small Chinese Cither” (an article published in 1951), “The Mango-Trick in China” (an essay published in 1952), and *Meiro-no-satsujin*, the Japanese translation of *The Chinese Maze Murders* (1951).<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as his remarks on his Judge Dee series reveal, although the original English versions of his first two Judge Dee novels *The Chinese Bell Murders* and *The Chinese Maze Murders* were published later, they were originally written during this period. *The Chinese Bell Murders*, van Gulik’s “first attempt at writing a Chinese-style detective novel,” was “drafted in Tokyo when [he was] serving there as Counsellor of the Netherlands Embassy, from November 1948 till December 1951”;<sup>40</sup> while *The Chinese Maze Murders* “was written in Tokyo, in 1950, and translated at once into the Japanese language by ... Professor Ogaeri Yukio, a wellknown Japanese Sinologue...”<sup>41</sup>

In “Introduction to R. H. van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Late Ming Period*,” James Cahill makes an astute point about the relationship between van Gulik’s scholarly and creative sides: “... his creative side, as author of the Judge Dee novels and artist of the illustrations for them, could not be kept entirely apart from his scholarly side as writer of high-level and erudite academic studies: the one tended to leak into the other.”<sup>42</sup> Cahill further observes that the period between the late 1940s and early 1950s is particularly marked by this kind of mutual “leaking”: “In his works from this period we can observe him shading subtly into mixing his own capacity of discoverer, transmitter, and translator of rare Chinese materials in Japan with a new role as maker of new creations in a Chinese manner.”<sup>43</sup>

39 *Bibliography of Dr. R. H. van Gulik (D. Litt.)*, p. 68. This detailed bibliography was compiled by the Boston University Library based on the notes that van Gulik wrote.

40 *Bibliography of Dr. R. H. van Gulik (D. Litt.)*, p. 71.

41 *Bibliography of Dr. R. H. van Gulik (D. Litt.)*, p. 72.

42 Cahill, “Introduction to R. H. van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Late Ming Period*,” p. xviii.

43 Cahill, “Introduction to R. H. van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Late Ming Period*,” p. xviii.

While in general I agree with Cahill, I would make two further points. First, this period seems to be largely shaped by van Gulik's activities in Tokyo, to which he returned after a six-year absence due to the Pacific War.<sup>44</sup> Second, the work he engaged during this period seems to have had a determinant impact on the directions of most of his future projects. For instance, his keen interest in the erotic and the research conducted for *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* in the end led to the 1961 publication of *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, which remains to this day his best known scholarly work. His later works *De Boek Illustratie in het Ming Tijdperk* (Book Illustration during the Ming period; 1955), and *Scrapbook for Chinese Collections* (1958; a translation of Lu Shihua's 陸時化 (1714?-1779) *Shuhua shuoling* 書畫說鈴), and *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur* (1958) richly illustrate his sustained interest in Chinese pictorial art, an interest that was already quite clear in *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*;<sup>45</sup> furthermore, his annotated translation of the "13th century manual of Jurisprudence and Detection" *Tangyin bishi* 棠蔭比事 (Parallel Cases from under the Peartree) (1956) no doubt reflects an interest in the legal already evident in his Judge Dee series.<sup>46</sup>

In his essay, Cahill pays particular attention to three privately published books – *Dee Goong An*, *Trifling Words*, and *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, observing that “[i]t is in these three works, especially the first and third, that we can observe the blurring of the dividing line between van Gulik the scholar and van Gulik the author-artist.”<sup>47</sup> Again, while in general agreeing

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44 *Bibliography of Dr. R. H. van Gulik (D. Litt.)*, p. 3.

45 Van Gulik also published an undated Dutch-language pamphlet on Chinese woodcuts entitled *Chinese Houtsneden*, a copy of which is deposited in the Robert Hans van Gulik collection at Boston University's Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center.

46 For a recent introduction to van Gulik's major works, see Chen Jue 陳珏, “*Gao Luopei qiren qixue* 高羅佩其人其學” (Robert Hans van Gulik and His Work) serialized in *Wenwei bao* 文匯報 15 Apr. -3 Jun. 2006. See also Janwillem van de Wetering's *Robert van Gulik: His Life, His Work* (New York: Soho Press, 1998), a book-length biographic account of van Gulik's career and work.

47 Cahill, “Introduction to R. H. van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Late Ming Period*,” p. xviii; italics mine.

with Cahill, I would press his view further: Compared with *Dee Goong An* and *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, *Trifling Words* is no less helpful in shedding light on van Gulik's mixed interest during and after this period; furthermore, to gain a better view of the mutual impact of his projects on each other, we should also take into consideration the two Judge Dee works – *The Chinese Bell Murders* and *The Chinese Maze Murders* – from this period.

An examination of *Trifling Words* and its publication sheds light on for van Gulik's treatment of the late Ming erotic prints in several ways. First, although the authenticity of *Trifling Words* as a late Ming work is uncertain,<sup>48</sup> what matters here is the fact that the activities surrounding its (alleged) acquisition and subsequent publication is revealing about van Gulik's activities in Tokyo as a collector, connoisseur, and publisher. His publication of the story, just like his publication of the *Huaying jinzhen*, may be seen as “following the practice of the Chinese literati, whose privately printed publications, often combining scholarship with aesthetically high-level creative work of their own.”<sup>49</sup>

Second, of particular significance is the timing of the publication of *Trifling Words*, which was not only the second major work van Gulik published after WWII, but was published in close tandem with other important works of his “second Japanese period,” namely, *Dee Goong An* (published in 1949), *Erotic Colour Prints of the Mind Period* (published privately in 1951), *The*

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48 According to Chen Ching-Hao 陳慶浩 and Wang Chiu-Kui 王秋桂, the story only exists in manuscripts from Japan. With regard to the van Gulik version, they hold: Although the writing in general is “clear and smooth” (*qingtong* 清通), its diction and syntax are sometimes unidiomatic; some words and phrases are rarely found in typical late Ming erotic fiction. Chen and Wang suggest that it is possible that the story was faked by some Japanese sinologue, although they also point out that to prove this, further research is needed. See Chen Ching-Hao and Wang Chiu-Kui, eds., *Siwuxie huibao* 思無邪匯寶, vol. 24 (Taipei: Taiwan daying baike, 1995): 343-345. Despite the uncertainty about its authenticity, what is important to the present study is that van Gulik takes it as a late Ming work, and what we are concerned here is what his treatment of these works tells us about himself and about the larger question of the relationship between the erotic and narrative.

49 Cahill, “Introduction to R. H. van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Late Ming Period*,” p. xviii.

*Chinese Bell Murders* (drafted between 1948 and 1951), and *The Chinese Maze Murders* (written in 1951). Clearly, this was an extremely productive period in van Gulik's career, which may be attributed to the fact that his post-war appointment had lent him convenient access to (alleged) late imperial Chinese books available in Japan.

What is especially noteworthy about van Gulik's treatment of *Trifling Words* and the *Huaying jinzhen* – both purportedly collected, studied, and privately published during this period – is that he regards them as belonging to the same category, i.e. “erotic books.” In his own English introduction to *Trifling Words*, he spends quite a few passages commenting on the rarity and value of Ming erotic woodprints. Lumping both Ming albums of erotic woodprints and erotic fiction under the rubric “Ming erotic books,” van Gulik juxtaposes albums such as *Fengliu juechang* 風流絕暢<sup>50</sup> and *Huaying jinzhen* with erotic novels and short stories such as *Sengni niehai* 僧尼孽海 (Ocean of Iniquities of Monks and Nuns), *Xiuta yeshi* 繡榻野史 (Unofficial History of the Embroidered Couch) and *Rou putuan* 肉蒲團 (Carnal Prayer Mat).<sup>51</sup> Many of these books, according to him, “survive only in rare Chinese originals, or in Japanese manuscript copies.”<sup>52</sup> He urges that “there should be made a systematic search for erotic Ming prints preserved in Japan,” for “[i]f such *books* are not republished and the various existing Japanese manuscripts collated, it must be feared that in course of time most will be lost beyond recovery.”<sup>53</sup> In fact, the manuscript of *Trifling Words*, which he claims to have

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50 According to Cahill, this album, whose title was translated as “Summum Elegantium” by van Gulik, is “basically trustworthy as a late Ming production” (Cahill, “Introduction to R. H. van Gulik,” p. xii). For a discussion on the importance of this album in Chinese print history, see Song Pingsheng, “The Importance of the *Fengliu juechang tu* in Print History,” *Orientalism* 40.3 (2009.4): 51-54.

51 See the introduction in Robert Hans van Gulik, ed., *Ch'un-Meng-So-Yen* [i.e. *Chunmeng suoyan*] (privately published in Tokyo, 1950), pp. 1-2. The version I use for this study is the copy deposited at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center of Boston University.

52 van Gulik, ed., *Trifling Words*, p. 3.

53 van Gulik, ed., *Trifling Words*, p. 3; emphasis mine.

been found “on the shelves of a well-known Japanese collector,”<sup>54</sup> was among such items he discovered and rescued in Japan and China.

What we see here is not merely a connoisseur’s combined interest in late imperial Chinese pictorial art and literature. Rather, van Gulik’s treating erotic fiction and prints as inseparably linked well captures an important aspect of late Ming cultural production, i.e. the fact that the production of woodblock prints and that of literary texts, as part of the booming print and publishing culture, are inextricably entangled. As Robert E. Hegel points out, the Wanli 萬曆 period (1573-1620), “the ‘golden age’ for Chinese woodblock printing,” saw a steep increase in the publication of illustrated fiction.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Hegel and quite a few other scholars have rather compellingly shown that for of late Ming readers of literature, visual images are an essential or even inseparable part of their reading experience.<sup>56</sup>

It thus seems natural that van Gulik, an experienced reader of late Ming fiction, classifies erotic albums and fictional works with a single umbrella label “erotic books.” Indeed, an examination of van Gulik’s own collection of Chinese books reveals that he owned a considerable amount of late Ming fictional works, many of which are illustrated editions.<sup>57</sup> This also seems to explain, at least partly, his tendency to narrativize the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures, as his experience of them may have been influenced by his reading habits as a fiction reader. His inclusion of a section entitled “Historical Survey of Erotic Literature” in *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* further

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54 van Gulik, ed., *Trifling Words*, p. 3.

55 Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 183-184.

56 See, for instance, Hegel’s *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* and Li-Ling Hsiao’s 蕭麗玲 *The Eternal Present of the Past: Illustration, Theatre, and Reading in the Wanli Period*. For a detailed review of recent scholarship on publishing culture in late imperial China, see Tobie Meyer-Fong, “The Printed World: Books, Publishing Culture, and Society in Late Imperial China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66.3 (2007.8): 787-817.

57 The van Gulik collection that I looked at is a microfiche collection that the Library of Congress purchased from the Leiden University, where the original collection is deposited.

demonstrates this propensity to collapse the boundary between verbal and visual materials. Robert van Gulik must have been reading *Trifling Words* during the same period when he was working on the *Huaying jinzhen* prints – given the proximity of the respective publishing dates of *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* and *Trifling Words*. Remarkably, he takes *Trifling Words* as “representative of the best produced in this genre of Chinese literature [i.e. ‘erotic books’].”<sup>58</sup>

Despite the apparent difference in form, *Trifling Words* bears some striking similarities with the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures. Robert van Gulik summarizes the story in *Trifling Words* as follows:

The plot of the story is simple, and a familiar one in Chinese literature. A distinguished young scholar roams alone in the mountains enjoying the scenery. Suddenly he comes upon a secluded abode, where two beautiful damsels, Miss Li and Miss T’ang, live in a luxurious mansion attended upon by a bevy of maids. *The girls entertained him at dinner, during which they exchanged poems and songs. He stays there overnight and the three of them engage in amorous dalliance, which is described in considerable detail.* When dawn is near the cry of a cuckoo is heard over the roof. The young man wakes up and finds himself resting on a stone in the open air, between a plum tree and a crab-apple tree that are in full bloom; the girls and their abode have disappeared completely. Then the young man realizes that it was nothing but a dream, and that his beautiful companions had been elves, the spirits of the plum (*li* 李) and the crab-apple (*t’ang* 棠) tree. The morning breeze showers him with their red and white blossoms as he goes his way, reflecting on the transitoriness of all earthly pleasure.<sup>59</sup>

Curiously, the majority of this summary is devoted to the initial meeting and final parting of the three main characters, while the night they spend together, which takes up the bulk of the original story, is re-presented here in a most succinct fashion – i.e. in two sentences. I argue, however, such a summary is revealing about the narrative mode characteristic of late Ming and early Qing

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58 van Gulik, ed., *Trifling Words*, p. 3.

59 van Gulik, ed., *Trifling Words*, pp. 4-5; my own emphasis.

erotic fiction. Erotic novels and short stories from this period typically contain graphic and sometimes lengthy descriptions of sexual intercourse. In such accounts, emphasis is often placed on the enticing details of these encounters and on how exactly each act is executed – indeed, supposedly such titillating descriptions are what the reader expects and takes pleasure in reading. Despite the fact that such encounters take place in time and space, in some cases, the descriptions of them may look like deliberately and selectively magnified moments or “timeless” pieces detachable from the narrative. In reality, these parts may actually sometimes be deliberately “scooped” out of the story by the reader to enjoy separately and even repeatedly. (Indeed, as scholars such as Wu Cuncun 吳存存, Craig Clunas, and Katherine Carlitz have shown, publishers’ reuse and appropriation of erotic passages or pictures from a larger work for commercial gains were not uncommon during the late Ming.<sup>60</sup>)

Take, for example, one of the best-known late Ming erotic novels, Lü Tiancheng’s 呂天成 (1580-1618) *Xiuta yeshi* 繡榻野史 (Unofficial History of the Embroidered Couch; *Embroidered Couch* hereafter), which van Gulik

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60 In her study of *Fugui qiyuan* 富貴奇緣 (Remarkable Liaisons Among the Well-to-Do), a novel found in Leiden University’s van Gulik collection, Wu Cuncun offers us a good example of this kind of consumption of the erotic. According to Wu, *Fugui qiyuan* is an abridged and corrupted version of another Ming novel titled *Taohuaying* 桃花影 (Peach Blossom Shadows). Despite its poor quality, however, *Fugui qiyuan* manages to retain erotic details, and thus is “evidence that there was a readership interested primarily in titillation, a market serviced by cheaply available forms of pornography stripped of any literary pretension.” See Wu Cuncun, “Remarkable Liaisons Among the Well-To-Do,” *IIAS Newsletter* 44 (Summer 2007): 27. Commenting on the circulation and appropriation of the pictures in the erotic album *Fengliu juechang*, Craig Clunas illustrates the “detachability” of images by observing, “... images were capable of becoming detached from their original contexts, and inserted into new ones: they could migrate. ... sometimes there was a desire to add pictures to unillustrated texts. And ... these images ... are also objects, to be handled as well as viewed” – see Clunas, “Looking at the Lewd in Ming China,” *Orientalism* 40.3 (2009.4): 38. In a study on various editions of *Lienu zhuan* 列女傳, Katherine Carlitz also notes the flow of illustrations from book to book. See Carlitz, “The Social Uses of Female Virtue in Late Ming Editions of *Lienu zhuan*,” *Late Imperial China* 12.2 (1991.12): 117-148.



discusses at length in *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*.<sup>61</sup> Consisting of a series of sexual episodes, this novel describes these encounters in lush detail. These erotic scenes are not unlinked, and the characters are related in one way or another. On the other hand, the storyline, whose role seems to mainly lie in linking the sexual bouts together, is by no means the most important aspect of the novel, and may often be overlooked by readers eager for enticing details. Furthermore, the formation of ties of between individual characters is largely facilitated by sex, and their bonding is often in direct service to further erotic extravaganzas. For instance, in this novel, it is due to the already existent relationship between the male protagonist Dongmen sheng 東門生 and his student, a younger man named Zhao Dali 趙大里 that Dongmen's wife meets Zhao and then establishes an intimate relationship with him; subsequently, this relationship leads to the encounters between Dongmen and Zhao's mother and maid servant. In other words, the creation of each new tie produces a new occasion for an elaborate account of the encounter, while the different traits of each involved character – age, social status, personality, previous sexual experience (or lack of it), etc. – contribute to the narrative's creation of a rich variety of erotic acts and experiences.

To put it a somewhat reductive way, in these stories, priority is often given to sex, rather than to plot or characterization. On the other hand, however loose the links between the sexual episodes are, they are still threaded together and framed into a whole by the plot. In this sense, unlike the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures, which may be seen by some readers as completely independent from each other, the sexual scenes in *Embroidered Couch* are embedded in the holistic world held together by the narrative.<sup>62</sup> There are

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61 For an account of Lü's career, his time, and the impact of his work, see Wilt Idema, "Blasé Literati": Lü T'ien-Ch'eng and the Lifestyle of the Chiang-nan Elite in the Final Decades of the Wan-li Period," *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period: With an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch'ing Dynasty, B.C. 206-A.D. 1644*, pp. xxxi-lix.

62 In this sense, despite the similarities they share, erotic fiction is not identical to sexual manuals. In his survey of erotic literature in pre-Qing China, van Gulik makes a distinction between what he calls "handbooks of sex," which he puts under the larger rubric of "serious literature," and erotic

also differences between short erotic stories and longer pieces. A comparison between *Embroidered Couch* and *Trifling Words* shows that while the length of *Embroidered Couch* allows the author to offer a good number of detailed sexual episodes, *Trifling Words*'s much shorter narrative contains only one.

Robert van Gulik summarizes the sexual scene in *Trifling Words* in one single sentence: "He [i.e. the male protagonist] stays there overnight and the three of them engage in amorous dalliance, which is described in considerable detail." Similar to his treatment of the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures, this summary is marked by the eclipse of the explicitly erotic. Again, van Gulik might just be cautiously avoiding directly engaging a sensitive subject. On the other hand, his terseness here, like that in his descriptions of the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures, may be partly due to the fact that representations – visual or verbal – of sexual encounters are intrinsically resistant against summarization. If the role of the summary is to re-present by condensing, that of the "typical" erotic description is the opposite – such a description/representation is often required to elaborate, to zoom in, to magnify, to linger, and to present the central act from various angles, and even repeatedly. In short, while erotica's supposed goal is to put sexual acts on display, summarization inevitably leads to eclipsing, even just partially, the spectacle, thus fundamentally undermining its working mechanism.

Robert van Gulik's unavoidably reductive summary is sandwiched in a relatively detailed description of the beginning and ending of the protagonist's adventure, which offers an introduction to the protagonist's identity ("a distinguished young scholar"), the circumstances of his chance encounter with the two women, and his final disillusionment. Such a description serves to situate an otherwise timeless encounter in a "concrete" locale. So, although van Gulik's summary of the story "fails" to reproduce the sexual scene, it succeeds in highlighting its embeddedness in a specific, embodied world that exists in

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fiction, which includes both novels and poetry. See van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, pp. 105-145.

concrete time and space. The sexual episode thus is part of a larger narrative, and, despite its anti-narrative tendency, this status endows it a concrete temporal and spatial footing.

A close reading of *Trifling Words* reveals even more similarities between the world it depicts and the one van Gulik fleshes out of the *Huaying jinzhen* pictures. In this novella, the elaborately described sexual acts between the male protagonist Han Zhonglian 韓仲璉 and the two beautiful women Lijie 李姐 and Tangniang 棠娘 take place, as van Gulik himself notes, in “a luxurious mansion attended upon by a bevy of maids.”<sup>63</sup> The mansion where these women entertain Han is one with “grand and splendid pillars and windows. On the walls there were rubbings from ancient inscriptions, calligraphic works, and paintings (*fanglong chuanguhu, jixi huali. Bishang duo gutie shu hua* 房樞窗戶，極悉華麗。壁上多古帖書畫)....”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, like the rooms van Gulik sees in the *Huaying jinzhen*, the room Lijie and Tangniang prepares for Han is also full of luxurious items:

棠娘曰。賓得無罷乎。宜備枕席。侍兒即收壺觴。周屏風設七寶床。桃枝簟。珊瑚枕。繡鴛被。床前腳爐安鼎。煎香湯。案上玉盃盛薑橘鹽麩之類。金荷檠然。明炬大如臂。	Tangniang said, “[Our] guest must have had enough of this [i.e. eating, drinking, and entertainment]. It’s time to prepare pillows and mats [for sleeping].” The maids then put the [wine] jugs and cups away. [They] erected screens around, and took out a Seven-Treasure bed, on which there was a mat made of peach-trig bamboo, a pillow made of coral, and an embroidered quilt with mandarin duck patterns. A foot-warmer and an incense burner were placed in front of the bed. Fragranced water was being boiled. Ginger, oranges and the like could be found in a jade container on the table. The lamp, like a golden lotus, stood tall, and candles as large as human arms were burning bright. <sup>65</sup>
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This setting obviously bears striking similarities to the indoor settings that

63 van Gulik, ed., *Trifling Words*, p. 4.

64 Chen and Wang, eds., *Chunmeng suoyan*, in *Siwuxie huibao*, p. 361.

65 Chen and Wang, eds., *Chunmeng suoyan*, pp. 364-365; my own translation.

van Gulik sees in the *Huaying jinzhen*: Beddings and the precious materials of which they are made are emphasized; luxurious items such as incense burners and containers are part of the scene; interestingly, as in many pictures in the *Huaying jinzhen*, the screen also figures conspicuously in the room here.

Apparently, this room is described in a clichéd fashion characteristic of numerous Ming-Qing literary and artistic works.<sup>66</sup> Sometimes, the narrator only lists the items, without bothering to show whether or how exactly they are used. Realism obviously is not the aim of narratives as such – at least not their primary concern; rather, their goal often is to create a sensuous or “*xiangyan* 香艷 (fragrant and lavish)” setting for the love-making that is to be put on view.

Voyeurism constitutes another parallel between the world van Gulik sees in the *Huaying jinzhen* and the world of *Trifling Words*. As was mentioned above, the screen is commonly found in the *Huaying jinzhen* prints. In van Gulik’s reading, the screen is not just a decorative item to enhance the splendor of the setting, but is of important practical function – it conceals the act of lovemaking from the purportedly omnipresent peeping eye.<sup>67</sup> What makes van Gulik read the peeping eye into these pictures?

A reading of *Trifling Words* may offer us an answer. In this story, voyeurism and eavesdropping also feature significantly. After dinner, Han retires to rest. Yet, unable to sleep, he listens attentively to Tangniang singing a love song next door, feeling even more restless. This eavesdropping, in effect serving as foreplay, leads the story into an intimate direction. A few moments later, Lijie and Tangniang enter Han’s room, and the audacious (“*tangtu* 唐突”)<sup>68</sup> Lijie begins to make love to Han. Remarkably, this sexual

66 Again, it should be noted that in the present case, the authenticity of *Trifling Words* is uncertain. Yet even if it is a forge, its success as a “convincing” one maybe partly attributed to its successful reconstruction of the “*xiangyan*” setting typically found in late imperial erotica.

67 Paradoxically, although these prints are intended to be seen by the viewer, the secrecy that the presence of the screen creates in effect intensifies – or is meant to intensify – the pleasure associated with surreptitious watching.

68 Chen and Wang, eds., *Chunmeng suoyan*, p. 366.

encounter takes place in the very presence of Tangniang, who is said to be too shy to participate. As in the case of the *Huaying jinzhen* prints, this diegetic voyeur is not the only onlooker, for, together with the bashful Tangniang, who is increasingly aroused by what she sees, the reader also witnesses this meticulously described encounter – on a non-diegetic level. Later, when Tangniang makes love with Han, Lijie herself takes up the role of the watcher.<sup>69</sup>

In sum, a comparison of the *Huaying jinzhen* prints and *Trifling Words* reveals significant similarities between visual and literary representations of the erotic, for instance, setting (e.g. location, furniture, *the xiangyan* atmosphere, plant, food, drink, etc.), theme (e.g. peeping and eavesdropping), narrative (e.g. the emphasis on maximum pleasure and the clarity of sexual details, and the resulting anti-narrative tendency) – just to name a few. While an in-depth comparative study of erotic literature and erotic art is beyond the scope of the present study, our examination of the *Huaying jinzhen* and *Trifling Words* as well as van Gulik's treatment of them nevertheless demonstrates not only comparability but intimate links between visual and verbal erotic representation.

#### 4. Illustrating Fiction

In the discussion above, we have seen noteworthy similarities between

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69 Numerous late Ming erotica feature voyeurism, for instance, the anonymous novel *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase) and *Embroidered Couch*. The ways in which voyeurism is used in both *Trifling Words* and the *Huaying jinzhen* prints point to the paradoxical status voyeurism typically has in late Ming erotica: in this body of texts (artistic or literary), although clandestine peeping is often imagined as invasive and both the gazing and the gazed at are frequently associated with the forbidden, spectacle – either visually or literarily constructed – is ultimately privileged in the sense that, as fundamental to the viewer/reader's pleasure, it constitutes the very basic pleasure-generating mechanism that erotica depends upon. For a discussion on the role of the screen in the representations of voyeurism, see Wu Hung's *The Double Screen*, particularly Wu's discussion of Ming illustrations of *Xixiang ji* on pp. 243-259.

the *Huaying jinzhen* prints (as van Gulik read them) and a purported late Ming erotic story. The popular Judge Dee series, which includes detective stories van Gulik translates and writes, and illustrations that he claims to have drawn in the late Ming style, throws more light on van Gulik's combined interest in the literary and the visual as well as the intricate relations between them. In fact, in his remarks on *The Chinese Maze Murders*, van Gulik claims that his research on late Ming erotic prints is entangled with his work as a detective fiction writer and illustrator.<sup>70</sup> As quite a few of the illustrations in his Judge Dee works feature female nudes, these texts not only showcase van Gulik's combined use of the fictional and the pictorial, but, on a general level, offers us another chance to examine the workings of the erotic in illustrated fiction.

As mentioned above, despite his involvement with erotica, van Gulik constantly sought to maintain a cautious distance from such a sensitive subject. At the same time, however, the sheer quantity of his eroticism-related works shows that this subject seems too attractive for him to remain absolutely aloof from. Yet, if, in the works that are written in a more conventionally scholarly fashion, i.e. works such as *Sexual Life in Ancient China* and *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, he has managed to be relatively more standoffish, his employment of the overtly sexual in the detective stories and their illustrations threatens to undo this carefully maintained distance.

In fact, the very first work of his Judge Dee series, his 1949 translation of *Dee Goong An*, contains a nude picture, which is also used as the cover.<sup>71</sup> Entitled "Mrs. Djou tortured before Judge Dee in the tribunal," it illustrates

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70 In these remarks, van Gulik mentions that it was precisely out of the need to use a female nude on the cover of *The Chinese Maze Murders* – as required by the publisher – that he started his search for and research on pre-modern Chinese pictures of nude bodies, of which he claims to have no prior knowledge. See van Gulik's notes in *Bibliography of Dr. R. H. van Gulik*, p. 72. Idema holds that van Gulik's denial of any prior knowledge of the existence of a Chinese tradition of drawing nude bodies sounds suspicious (see Idema, "'Blasé Literati,'" p. xxxii).

71 Cahill holds that his picture is likely to be drawn by van Gulik himself. See Cahill, "Introduction to R. H. van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Late Ming Period*," p. xx.

an episode in which an adulteress named Mrs. Djou is questioned and tortured by Judge Dee (see Figure 2). This picture is used not simply to illustrate the torture scene; rather, physical punishment conveniently and reasonably occasions the appearance of a female nude. In this illustration, Judge Dee and his assistant occupy the compositional center of the picture. Yet curiously, the female nude, located in the lower left corner, appears to be the real center of the picture, for the gaze of the centrally positioned male figures is directed to her. Furthermore, the naked torso of the female figure is “unreasonably” – but obviously deliberately – twisted in such a way that instead of facing her questioner, her entire upper body is frontally exposed to the gaze of the non-diegetic viewer, i.e. the reader (or the potential reader this cover is meant to attract).

Clearly, this picture is meant not only to illustrate, but also to entice. In *The Chinese Maze Murders*, the first published Judge Dee story that van Gulik himself writes, the use of the female nude bears conspicuous similarities with the one in *Dee Goong An*. First, while sex has a conspicuous role (i.e. an adulterous relationship that leads to murder) in the story, the author refrains from offering graphic descriptions or illustrations of sexual encounters. Nonetheless, making use of occasions where the appearance of naked women makes sense, the author manages to create illustrations with female nudes. For example, in Chapter 16, Judge Dee’s lieutenant Ma Joong visits an urban district where many foreigners dwell, and encounters several Uigur girls, who are said to be very different from usually conservative Chinese women: “Ma Joong noticed that the wide muslin skirts of those girls were so thin that one could see right through. From the door opening in the back emerged a fourth girl, not unattractive in a vulgar way. She was barefoot, and dressed only in a loose pleated skirt of faded silk. Her naked torso was shapely....”<sup>72</sup> Using her non-Chineseness to explain and legitimize her nakedness, van Gulik makes

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72 Robert Hans van Gulik, *The Chinese Maze Murders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 177-178.



Fig. 2 “Judge Dee questions Mrs. Djou under torture”

From Robert Hans van Gulik, *Dee Goong An* (New York: Dover, 1976), p. 62a. Reprinted here with permission of the Robert Hans van Gulik Estate.



Fig. 3 “Dark Orchid surprised while taking a bath”

From Robert Hans van Gulik, *The Chinese Maze Murders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 287. Reprinted here with permission of the Robert Hans van Gulik Estate.

this girl the central figure of the illustration he supplies here. Remarkably, like the torture picture discussed above, this girl, being gazed at by the other three figures in the picture and with her naked torso facing frontally toward the reader, becomes the focal point of the viewers both inside and outside the illustration/story.

In short, while the author shuns the overtly or too graphically sexual, he surreptitiously introduces the erotic into both the stories and the illustrations by relying on or even inventing situations where the appearance of nudity is



reasonable. Another example can be found in Chapter 27 in *The Chinese Maze Murders*, where a bathing scene becomes such an occasion for van Gulik to stage not only female nudity but also the provocative theme of “sapphism.”<sup>73</sup> Although van Gulik again avoids offering an explicit sexual encounter – in the story as well as and in the picture (Figure 3), by making the naked young woman exposed fully to the female villain who sexually victimizes young girls and who in this illustration is gazing intensely at the girl’s fully exposed body with “a long, sharp knife”<sup>74</sup> in hands, the author creates unmistakable erotic tension. But there is a twist here. Since the picture itself does not elucidate the murderess’s sexual interest in girls, the reader has to rely on the story to get this information before he/she can *better* grasp the sexual tension in the picture. In this sense, it is the story that illustrates the picture. On the other hand, although in many cases the story does help better bring out the erotic in the picture, the presence of the female nude alone is already sufficient to evoke it. Indeed, if only for the sake of titillation, these illustrations may be viewed by themselves.

Readers of the *Huaying jinzhen* may also enjoy the pictures without having to read their accompanying poems. The illustrations featuring female nudes in the Judge Dee series share another important feature with the *Huaying jinzhen* prints, i.e. the visual clarity with which nudity is presented. In the *Huaying jinzhen*, the central act depicted in each picture is portrayed with such lucidity that the viewer sees plainly how exactly the sexual act is executed. Similarly, in van Gulik’s own illustrations for the Judge Dee stories, although explicit sexual acts are shunned altogether, the female nudes, which probably represent the farthest extreme that the illustrator could go, are portrayed in a way that they almost always frontally face the viewer – even if such a positioning sometimes makes the composition of the whole picture look unrealistic – so that the viewer has an unobstructed view of the naked upper torso (particularly the exposed breasts).

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73 For van Gulik’s discussion on “sapphism,” see his notes in *The Chinese Maze Murders*, p. 320.

74 van Gulik, *The Chinese Maze Murders*, p. 286.



Fig. 4 “Sketch for *The Chinese Bell Murders*”

Drawn by Robert Hans van Gulik, and deposited at Boston University’s Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center. Reprinted here with permission of the Robert Hans van Gulik Estate.



Fig. 5 “A Buddhist abbot surprises a guest”

From Robert Hans van Gulik, *The Chinese Bell Murders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 193. Reprinted here with permission of the Robert Hans van Gulik Estate.

Take, for instance, a sketch van Gulik drew for *The Chinese Bell Murders* for the illustration of an episode where a young female visitor to a Buddhist temple is intruded upon at night and sexually taken advantage of by one monk after another (Figure 4).<sup>75</sup> As in Figure 2, the naked female figure does not occupy the geometric center of the picture, but is placed in the lower left corner. However, as the monk’s gaze is directed at her, the female nude becomes the actual focal point toward which attention is directed. Gazing upward at the monk and making eye contact with him, the woman turns slightly

75 This sketch is published here with the gracious permission of the Robert Hans van Gulik Estate.

toward him, and this interaction between the two figures contributes to the creation of a flirtatious tension in the picture. At the same time, as both figures are absorbed in their mutual gazing, the reader actually is endowed a privileged position to view the woman – unobserved; in fact, the woman’s naked body is frontally exposed to the reader.

In the final published version of the illustration (Figure 5), van Gulik makes several important changes, which, intriguingly, mostly take place in the lower left part of the picture. First, instead of looking upward and making eye contact with the monk, the girl in the final version is made to look down demurely. Second, while the girl in the sketch faces the monk, in the final version, she is captured in the very moment of turning to face the unexpected intruder, and her pose suggests that she was sitting on the couch with her back turned to the monk previously. Third, the transparent fabric on her legs in the sketch is now replaced by an opaque piece, and her right hand is grasping the sheet. In short, compared with the girl in the sketch, the one that van Gulik finally presents to the reader looks more decorous and reserved. On the other hand, despite his efforts to subdue the flirtatious, the illustrator still insists on an explicit display of the girl’s naked upper body, which is at once gazed at by the intruder and exposed to the reader. As the story tells the reader, it is to help Judge Dee collect evidence that the girl voluntarily takes the role of a potential victim, and lets herself be violated by the monks. So, in order to be convincing in such a role, the girl has to behave like a real victim, who cries, entreats, and struggles against the attackers. Curiously, none of these violent actions is presented in the illustration. Rather, though not as active as she appears in the sketch, the girl looks tranquilly alluring and at ease, even with a statue-like quality.<sup>76</sup> Surrounding the two figures is a touch of light-heartedness, serenity and even harmony, which is reminiscent of the “*xiangyan*” atmosphere depicted in the *Huaying jinzhen* prints as well as numerous late imperial erotic fictional works. In this sense, rather than offering a “faithful” representation

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76 To my eye, this figure vaguely resembles a “Western” sculpture.

of the story, this illustration “fails” to fulfill its supposed illustrative function. Yet must the function of the illustration solely be to faithfully represent the story? In practice, it is not uncommon for illustrations to “fail” – intentionally or unintentionally – to translate the story into the visual.<sup>77</sup> In fact, if we look at the relationship between story and illustration in Benjaminian terms of translation,<sup>78</sup> we may even say that not only is an absolutely faithful translation ultimately impossible, it is, after all, unnecessary.

In the present case, while the illustration avoids depicting the sexual contact between the girl and her attackers that the narrative explicitly mentions, the erotic conveyed by the illustration is no less intense. At the same time, compared with the story, which presents the sexual encounter in the form of the court testimony made by the girl, the presentation of the erotic in the picture seems to be resistant against narrativity; that is, the erotic displays a kind of autonomy untamed or even untamable by any narrative (the girl’s own or the narrator’s). As in the *Huaying jinzhen* prints, the erotic, in its pictorial form, is marked a sense of self-referentiality and independence characteristic of many late Ming erotic pictures (including illustrations): on the one hand, the moment captured in the picture is part of a sexual encounter, which takes place in time; on the other, despite the implied temporal dimension, the erotic depicted and evoked in the picture is marked by an anti-narrative bent, a resistance against moving forward, and an tendency to come back upon itself, for its working mechanism is such that the viewer, supposedly yearning for (maximum) pleasure, is invited to linger on it, amplify it, isolate it from both its spatial and temporal context, and enjoy it for its own sake.

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77 For instance, Ma Meng-Ching shows us clearly that, rather than “faithfully” following the storyline, the illustrations of some late Ming editions of *Xixiang ji* shift their attention away from the narrative, maintaining a rather distant relationship with the story. See Ma, “Linking Poetry, Painting, and Prints.”

78 For Walter Benjamin’s conception of translation, see his “The Task of the Translator,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 69-82.

By way of conclusion, I would like to raise a question, Why is van Gulik worth rereading today? We reread van Gulik because, as Charlotte Furth points out, "... [his] works and life themselves constitute a chapter in the history our own discipline that is worth thinking about."<sup>79</sup> We reread van Gulik also because, to borrow Paul Goldin's way of putting it, like his well-known *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, many of his works are among "those rare and monumental achievements that open an entirely new field[,]... [standing] as a testament to his erudition and intellectual courage."<sup>80</sup> And, as the present study shows, what is also important about the rediscovery of van Gulik is that this versatile man's vigorous and sometimes imaginative engagement with his materials discloses to us many aspects of late imperial Chinese cultural production that we otherwise might fail to notice – in the case examined above, through his creative eye, we gained an opportunity to rethink the intricate relations between fiction and illustration, between the verbal and the pictorial, between narrative impulses and anti-narrative tendencies in late imperial representations of the erotic.

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79 Furth, "Rethinking van Gulik Again," p. 74. It should be noted that Furth also holds that we should read van Gulik critically; for instance, she problematizes van Gulik's treatment of his materials by observing, "He was a fine scholar of editions of rare works, but he did not wrestle with questions about the status of the text as such, or the relationship between its language and the real world it claims to reveal." See Furth, "Rethinking van Gulik Again," p. 73.

80 Goldin, "Introduction," p. xxv.

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## 艷情書籍

### ——試論高羅佩對艷情敘事和圖畫的處理

郭 劼\*

#### 摘 要

本文通過細讀荷蘭漢學家高羅佩（Robert Hans van Gulik, 1910-1967）在其著作《秘戲圖考》（1951）中對晚明木版春宮圖冊《花營錦陣》中二十四幅圖畫的描述以及他對每幅圖所配詩歌的翻譯，指出高羅佩在觀看這些圖畫的時候將圖像內容敘事化的傾向。這種傾向部分上源於他對明代文化，尤其是晚明小說的熟悉。透過將《花營錦陣》中的圖畫與若干晚明艷情小說相比較，不難看出，儘管媒介不同，這些圖像和文學作品在各自對情慾的處理、表現上，有著重要的相似之處。而高羅佩自己在處理這些作品時，常常把涉及艷情的圖像和文字作品歸成一類，以“erotic book”（艷情書籍）一詞稱之。從這個角度看，高羅佩將圖像內容敘事化的傾向或許與他對明代小說豐富的閱讀經驗有關。同時，高羅佩對這些艷情作品（不論是圖像還是文字作品）的處理也為我們揭示出情慾表述的另一種特點，其反敘事（anti-narrative）傾向。也就是說，對情慾行為的表述，不論是以圖像還是文字形式出現，往往不受限於作品的整體敘事框架，並經常被讀者獨立出來單獨觀、閱、欣賞。由於這些表述往往以滿足讀者的情慾欣賞為目的，在具體表現上更不時放大細節，並在效果上削弱承載這些細節的敘事結構對讀者的重要性。本文最後一部分簡單檢視高羅佩自己創作的偵探小說和插圖，尤其是它們在展現情慾情節時相互之間的互動關係，以進一步驗證前面提出的觀點。

**關鍵詞：**高羅佩、晚明、艷情書籍、花營錦陣、秘戲圖考

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