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Scientia sexualis versus ars erotica: Foucault, van Gulik, Needham

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ABSTRACT

This paper begins with a discussion of the *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* distinction, which Foucault first advances in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, and which has been employed by many scholars to do a variety of analytical work. Though Foucault has expressed his doubts regarding his conceptualization of the differences between Western and Eastern discourses of desire, he never entirely disowns the distinction. In fact, Foucault remains convinced that China must have an *ars erotica*. I will explore Foucault's sources of authority. To this end, I introduce the work of famous Dutch sinologist Robert Hans van Gulik, who published the tremendously influential *Sexual Life in Ancient China* in 1961, and also explore Joseph Needham's view on Chinese sex. I argue that, Foucault, in his fierce polemic against the "Repressive Hypothesis", himself imagined a utopian Other where pleasure and desire were organised differently. I end on a discuss on Orientalism and the project of "Sinography" of comparative literature scholars Haun Saussy, Eric Hayot and others.

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What we must work on, it seems to me, is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure.

– Michel Foucault¹

1. Themes of the paper

This paper is broadly concerned with a number of themes, which will be delineated before Foucault's *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* distinction, from *History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, is explored. The first is the history of French intellectual thought in the twentieth century. This paper advocates a return to Foucault's classic work to investigate Foucault's sources of information. The recent publication of Graham Burchell's translations of Foucault's lectures at the *Collège de France*, edited by Arnold Davidson, has encouraged scholars to pay close attention again to the evolution of Foucault's thought, to compare the lectures with his publications, to see what has been kept, elaborated,

omitted or altered. Foucault's books may be regarded as write-ups of his ideas—and sometimes they are *provisional* write-ups—and they do not necessarily demonstrate Foucault's thinking processes or provide readers with his sources. How did Foucault *come to know* what he knew? In the case of *History of Sexuality*, how did he come to know what he knew about "other" sexual cultures about which he made generalisations? This kind of consideration—finding out what kind of resources were available to French theorists, what sorts of books Foucault and his contemporaries encountered, what kind of primary sources or knowledge of other cultures they mobilised in their work—would help historians to understand the conditions under which French intellectuals produced their theoretical concepts. This in turn would help us understand what we are doing when we invoke and appropriate these theoretical concepts in our historical practice. My position is simple to articulate: if historians do not seriously examine the context under which terms—like the *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* distinction—come into being, then we may be carrying over all sorts of ideological baggage and problematic assumptions in our analyses.

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¹ Foucault (1989, p. 206).

The second theme of this paper is the relationship between history of sexuality and East Asian history of science and medicine, particularly the question of circulation, transmission and transformation of knowledge across different cultures. In this episode, involving Foucault's distinction, we have an illustration of how the "East" features in the construction of the theoretical scholarship in the "West"—an often overlooked connection between French theory and the Sinological enterprise. Moreover, an analysis of the global networks of history of science and China scholarship, a reflection of the modes of production of pioneering generations of historians of East Asian science, and a study of their institutional affiliations, methodological divergences, political commitments, philosophical outlooks, and their communications and interactions with each other, will illuminate what we ourselves are trying to accomplish when we talk about the "East" and the "West", about "knowledge in transit" and globalising the history of science. Towards the end of this paper, the question of "Orientalism", translation and the project of "Sinographies"—associated with prominent comparative literature scholars such as Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy and Steven G. Yao—will be discussed.

2. Foucault's orthodoxy

Many of the claims that Michel Foucault makes in *History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* should be extremely familiar to all historians by now—in fact they have become something of an orthodoxy and a good deal of scholarship in the history of gender and sexuality basically takes Foucault to be correct, or at least, Foucault was "on to something". The first important lesson from *History of Sexuality Volume 1* is that sex has been colonised, exploited, deployed as a codeword, used as a point of anchorage for a whole variety of concerns: disciplining, governing and surveying a population; securing the sovereignty of a territory; maintaining the productivity of the nation through the regulation of reproduction and the bodily economy. As Foucault writes, sexuality is "useful for the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of manoeuvres and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin [*charnière*, literally a "hinge"] for the most varied strategies".² It is not as if everything is just an elaborate metaphor for sex—the pansexualist position—but rather, sex appears to be an elaborate metaphor for just about everything else.

Foucault's second important argument is that contemporary thinking about sexuality has been tainted by what he labels the "Repressive Hypothesis", which links together "the revelation of truth, the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come, and the promise of certain felicity".³ The Repressive Hypothesis is the conviction that the history of sex has been nothing but the history of painstaking repression, that the cultures of the past had denied individuals' sexual desires and their fundamental human nature, and what was therefore needed to liberate ourselves was the fullest affirmation of our inner drives and instincts. According to this view, we need to talk about sex openly in the public and to reject the sexual morality of the past, because it produced nothing but prudishness, obfuscation and dishonestly. Foucault disputes the idea that sex has been silenced and repressed, and argues that the discourse of sex has proliferated and intensified since the eighteenth century, reaching a peak in the middle-

late-nineteenth century with the inauguration of the sciences of sex.

Foucault further argues that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, sex became installed as the core of our being, perceived as "a kind of natural given which power tried to hold in check" and "an obscure domain which knowledge tried gradually to uncover".⁴ Sex was "implanted into bodies, slipped in beneath modes of conduct, made into a principle of classification and intelligibility, established as a *raison d'être* and a natural order of disorder".⁵ Then there are the many classical passages from *The Will to Knowledge*: Foucault argues that "the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him [...] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species".⁶ In what is a particularly lyrical passage, Foucault puts forward his "working hypothesis":

The society that emerged in the nineteenth century—bourgeois, capitalist, or industrial society, call it what you will—did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal of recognition. On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it. Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it also set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex. As if it suspected sex of harbouring a fundamental secret. As if it needed this production of truth. As if it was essential that sex be inscribed not only in an economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge. Thus sex gradually became our object of great suspicion; the general and disquieting meaning that pervades our conduct and our existence, in spite of ourselves; the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us; the fragment of darkness that we each carry within us: a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends . . . we demand that sex speak the truth . . . and we demand that it tells us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness . . . From this interplay there has evolved, over several centuries, a knowledge of the subject; a knowledge not so much of his form, but of that which divides him, determines him perhaps, but above all causes him to be ignorant of himself . . . the project of a science of the subject has gravitated, in ever narrowing circles, around the question of sex.⁷

One of the most elegant elaborations of Foucault's "working hypothesis" comes from Arnold Davidson's *Emergence of Sexuality*: it is not because we became preoccupied with our true sexuality that a science of sexuality arose in the nineteenth century; it is rather the emergence of a science of sexuality that made it possible, even inevitable, for us to become preoccupied with our true sexuality. Thus our existence became a *sexistence*, saturated with the promises and threats of sexuality.⁸ Davidson's project of "historical epistemology" develops from Foucault; Davidson tries to show how the experience of "sexuality" is linked to the emergence of new structures of knowledge, new institutions, new "styles of reasoning".⁹ I have quoted Foucault at length, because the passages cited

² Foucault (1978, p. 103).

³ Foucault (1978, p. 7).

⁴ Foucault (1978, p. 105).

⁵ Foucault (1978, p. 44).

⁶ Foucault (1978, p. 43).

⁷ Foucault (1978, pp. 69–70). Ellipses in original.

⁸ Davidson (2001a, p. 37). Italics in original.

⁹ Davidson (2001a, p. xiii).

here are the ones most frequently found in current scholarship. It does appear that these enigmatic, beautifully-written passages often function as a proxy, a substitution for careful argumentation (and this author is no less guilty of this!); the quotations stand there like an intimidating scarecrow in the academic battlefield, shooing, frightening away the young fledglings. An indented paragraph—the intrusion of the Master’s Voice. But it is also simultaneously a strange kind of euthanasia. Once certain key paragraphs, or even sections of an entire book, are elevated to a certain authoritative status—and become a stand-in for the entire text—they become “trump cards”, mobilised by us for persuasion, but in the process they become fossilised, preserved, perhaps even stale, dead, suspended. Foucault’s words are fascinating to read, yet they are also somehow “boring”, because we already know, or think we already know, what Foucault has said; the case is closed. This is the paradoxical logic of citation and reiteration: citation is not necessarily just an “in additional to”, but simultaneously an “instead of”—a displacement. One spells the death of an argument or a text—or makes it “undead”—by ironically displaying its passages in plain sight; one talks about Foucault precisely to avoid talking about him, when that act of talking, that citation, becomes ritualised, a perfunctory nod, a tip of the hat. We allow Foucault to become indented, or to continue to live in footnotes or endnotes, to ensure somehow that he does not affect or infect the main text. *History of Sexuality Volume 1* has an odd “undead”, suspended status. It is a canonical, paramount “Ur-text” and a obligatory point of passage in Gender Studies, History of Sexuality and Queer Theory. The book appears in countless reading lists and syllabuses in humanities courses at all levels at universities sometimes it is asterisked or even double-asterisked in the margin to signal its formidability. But it is at once over-read and unread, revered and ignored, at once the voice of the master and the whisper of the spectre. This is what prompted my closer re-reading of what Foucault has written, and for me, one of the most problematic sections in *History and Sexuality Volume 1* is concerned with the distinction between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*.

3. “Mystified irritation”

According to Foucault, the “entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning sex” that exists in “our civilisation” is *scientia sexualis*. He claims, in another long and enigmatic passage, that “historically there have been two great procedures for producing the truth of sex”:

On the one hand, the societies—and they are numerous: China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arabo-Moslem [*sic*] societies—which endowed themselves with an *ars erotica*. In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience, pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul. Moreover, this knowledge must be deflected back into sexual practice itself, in order to shape it as though from within and amplify its effects... The effects of this masterful art, which are considerably more generous than the sparseness of its prescriptions would lead one to imagine, are said to transfigure the one fortunate enough to receive its privileges: an absolute mastery of the body, a singular bliss,

obliviousness to time and limits, the elixir of life, the exile of death and its threats [...] our civilisation possesses no *ars erotica*. In return, it is undoubtedly the only civilisation to practise a *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilisation to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession.¹⁰

“They” in the “East” have an *ars erotica*; “We” in the “Christian West” have a *scientia sexualis* that apparently “emerged in the nineteenth century kept as its nucleus the singular ritual of obligatory and exhaustive confession”.¹¹ And sexuality, our modern subjectivity, our sexual self, are the products of this. Sex was “defined by being ‘by nature’: a domain susceptible to pathological processes, and hence one calling for therapeutic or normalising interventions; a field of meaning to decipher; the site of processes concealed by specific mechanisms; a focus of indefinite causal relations; and an obscure speech that had to be ferreted out and listened to”.¹² In contradistinction, *ars erotica* does not aim to incite others to speak about their sexual behaviour. *Ars erotica* does not classify or name, does not forbid or permit, does not medicalise or pathologise, does not biologise or naturalise, does not discipline, interrogate, decipher, survey or administer bodies. *Ars erotica* attempts to enhance pleasure and intensity, the duration and quality of experience; it is transmitted secretly, esoterically, from an adept to a disciple.¹³

The experience of reading Michel Foucault has been beautifully described by John Forrester. Forrester tells us that he “was not always a grateful admirer of Michel Foucault”.¹⁴ When he first read *Madness and Civilisation*, Forrester’s reaction was one of “mystified irritation”; he “set the book aside, impatient, confused, yet could not forget some of the poignant images or its most brilliant passages” like the Ship of Fools or Pinel striking the chains of the insane. Forrester continues:

Those images—they do remain with you, however disdainful and dismissive one’s overall attitude to Foucault [...] Images that are not so much unforgettable as riveting—they draw the sensibility tight to them and will not let go [...] Once read and understood, the images return almost involuntarily, as if they represented a coded, shorthand version of what one has learned, an image that sums up the argument the way a mathematical equation is thought to sum up, or “re-present” an argument [...] Even the empiricist historian’s discomfort is often, like my own initial reaction, a rather irritated and dismissive one, coloured and complicated by the difficulty of weighing the significance of those images, behind which is masked a density of argument that historians are not used to confronting.¹⁵

Foucault’s pronouncements on *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* produce a similar kind of discomfort that Forrester describes. Foucault’s deliberate use of Latin terminology, for instance—why did he not say “sexual science” and “erotic art”? Is *ars erotica* a reference to Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*—humorous and subversive poetry that teaches us to become refined lovers? *Scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* give the impression that there are two mighty opposites, two impersonal forces, two mythical beasts (complete with their Linnaean classification!) inhabiting opposite corners of the world, ruling over the carnal desires of the mortals. The *scientia sexualis* in the “Christian West” invokes images of total institutions—hospitals, asylums, prisons, laboratories. It reminds us of the sexual

¹⁰ Foucault (1978, pp. 57–58).

¹¹ Foucault (1978, p. 68).

¹² Foucault (1978, p. 68).

¹³ For a similar characterisation of *scientia sexualis/ars erotica*, see Foucault (2001e).

¹⁴ Forrester (1991, p. 286).

¹⁵ Forrester (1991, pp. 286–287).

science of Havelock Ellis, Freud and Krafft-Ebing; or perhaps Alfred Kinsey asking Americans about their sex life, collecting sexual fauna as he did with gall wasps; questionnaires, databases, classifications, individuals placed in life-determining pigeonholes like male/female, heterosexual/homosexual; the medicalisation of the “deviant”, enforcement of gender norms, control of reproduction. *Ars erotica* on the other hand invokes entirely different scenes: something outside of science and outside of time, away from modernity, eroticism in an open and permissive world; *Kama Sutra*, *Perfumed Garden*, pillow books and erotic prints from the floating worlds of China and Japan, or extended treatises on sexual positions, on the sacred transformative power of sex, on the pursuit of pure, intense pleasure. A hedonist garden, a dim candle-lit bedchamber saturated with intoxicating fragrances, limbs entwined. The images in Foucault’s passages tempt and seduce, become lodged in one’s mind, but something is very troubling with Foucault’s dazling, “gleaming words”.¹⁶

4. Foucault’s screwdrivers

Scholars have employed Foucault’s distinction to do all sorts of theoretical work. For Ronald Boer, in his book on the relationship between the Bible and popular culture, “the emergence of the literal and the decline of the allegorical reading of [*The Song of Songs*] coincides with the slow transition from *ars erotica*, of which the *Song* is one of the earliest documents, to *scientia sexualis*, with the rise of modernity per se”.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Peter Cryle attempts to map the dichotomy on the narration of sex in eighteenth-century libertine fiction in France, and Gerald Doherty argues that D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* “reinscribes the two great Foucauldian procedures for eliciting the truth about sex, opposing a sexological theory of desire, based on an insatiable hunger and striving, to an *ars erotica* theory of pleasure, based on transcendent attainment”.¹⁸ Vittorio Lingiardi tells us that the history of same-sex desire is the history of the displacement of *ars erotica* (represented by Ganymede) by *scientia sexualis* (Batman and Robin), whilst Jabir Puar uses Foucault’s distinction to analyse the characters Mr. Garrison and Mr. Slave from *South Park* and from there informs us the “sexuality of terrorism”.¹⁹ Denise Roman suggests that postcommunist queer experience in Romania is an intermediate between “Western *scientia sexualis*” and “Eastern *ars erotica*”, whilst Maxine Sheets-Johnstone illustrates the difference between Foucault’s and Sartre’s theorisations of desires using the distinction.²⁰ Linda Williams argues that cinematic pornography emerges out of *scientia sexualis* and not earlier representations of the erotic, and sociologist Anthony Pryce curiously tells us that those “engaged in online sexual activities is concerned with *ars erotica* [...] conversely, the apparatus of the online ‘Netaddiction.com’ culture represents the deployment of technologies and governmentality of *scientia sexualis*”.²¹ Finally, psychotherapist Stuart Sovatsky tells us that “the several-thousand-year-old Eastern somatic spirituality of kundalini yoga” is the *ars erotica* “where spirituality and philosophical pursuit—along with the body’s vast capacities to move and feel—cohere together as a unitary whole”,

and the practice of “tantric celibacy” and “spiritual intimacy” is a form of resistance against an oppressive Western *scientia sexualis*.²²

Foucault’s dichotomy has been used to cover everything from discussions on erotica, theology, Greek and Roman bodily practices, literature in early modern England, or nineteenth century Germany, American modernist poetry, film and photography, Islamic culture, Gothic writing, masculinity in art, gender in Australia, Canada, Israel, Italy, Turkey ... We could put these references to Foucault in three categories. The first is the most dangerous: uncritical adoption. The author essentially states that a particular phenomenon or historical episode coincides with what Foucault calls *scientia sexualis* or *ars erotica*, without “working through” the concepts to see if it actually holds water or requires modification. In part, Foucault himself encourages this. He repeatedly presents his texts as ready-made, pre-fabricated, off-the-shelf tools to be picked up by others for their own purposes:

Tous mes livres sont de petites boîtes à outils. Si les gens veulent bien les ouvrir, se servir de telle phrase, telle idée, telle analyse comme d’un tournevis ou d’un desserre-boulon pour court-circuiter, disqualifier, casser les systèmes de pouvoir, y compris éventuellement ceux-là memes dont mes livres sont issus ... eh bien c’est tant mieux!²³

J’écris des choses qui semblent utilisables. En somme, des choses utilisables dans un sens différent, par des gens différent, dans des pays différents dans certains cas.²⁴

Je voudrais que mes livres soient une sorte de *tool-box* dans lequel les autres puissent aller fouiller pour y trouver un outil avec lequel ils pourrait faire ce que bon leur semble, dans leur domaine ... Je n’écris pas pour un public, j’écris pour les utilisateurs, non pas pour les lecteurs ... Je suis attaché à ce livre [referring to *Discipline and Punish*], bien sûr, parce que je l’ai écrit, mais aussi parce que je l’ai écrit, mais aussi parce qu’il a servi de *tool-box* à des personnes différentes les unes aux autres, comme les psychiatres de l’antipsychiatrie britannique, comme Szasz aux États-Unis, comme les sociologies de France.²⁵

C’est ça, une théorie, c’est exactement comme une boîte à outils ... Il faut que ça serve, il faut que ça fonctionne.²⁶

The problem with this perception of theory is immediately apparent: these “tools” were constructed at a certain moment, under a certain political backdrop, and came with the ideological biases of the constructor. This means that the project of the historicisation of these theories—the investigation of the *making* of these “screwdrivers” and “spanners”—is valuable to us in that we can detect the shortcomings of the tools available in the scholar’s workshop. More importantly, we know how we can modify these tools and create our own variations, instead of seeing Foucault’s ideas as a neat set of tools which we can freely summon whenever we have a bunch of historical episodes and observations that we need to chip and sand into a coherent narrative.²⁷

¹⁶ I borrow Alan Sheridan’s description of Foucault’s style; Sheridan (1980, p. 1).

¹⁷ Boer (1999, p. 56).

¹⁸ Cryle (1994, p. 7, 2001, pp. 12–14) and Doherty (2006, p. 139).

¹⁹ Lingiardi (2002, pp. 1–21) and Puar (2007, pp. 74–75).

²⁰ Roman (2007, pp. 127–157) and Sheets-Johnstone (1994, pp. 21–31).

²¹ Williams (1999, pp. 43–46) and Pryce (2007, p. 123).

²² Sovatsky (1998, p. 158).

²³ Foucault (2001a, p. 1588).

²⁴ Foucault (2001b, p. 1488).

²⁵ Foucault (2001c, pp. 1391–1392).

²⁶ Foucault (2001d, p. 1177).

²⁷ For more on the question of Foucault’s “toolboxes”, see O’Farrell (2005, pp. 50–60).

The second type of reference to *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* is the perfunctory footnote and the obligatory, perhaps grudging, acknowledgement. Citing Foucault's distinction—or citing any theorist—may be one way to flaunt one's "capital", displaying one's familiarity with privileged, canonical texts, arguments and concepts. More often it is a pre-emptive strike, defending oneself against charges of ignorance or omission—but this is done without serious engagement: "for the *scientia sexualis* versus *ars erotica* distinction, see Foucault (1978), page numbers".²⁸ It is a perfunctory nod, paying lip service. We will no doubt benefit from a self-reflexive, sociological analysis of our habits of reference to shed light on the past and present of the disciplinary matrices which we inhabit—the unspoken rules we have, our figures of authority and key texts, the "trump card" quotations and concepts routinely mobilised for persuasion, the tools in our theoretical arsenal.

The third and final species is the angry sideswipe, a glancing punch—stopping short of a systematic, full-frontal critique of Foucault. Mark Johnson, for instance, states that the distinction "too easily falls into a kind of essentialist and essentialising Occidental/Orientalist, East/West divide, which is not only politically suspect but also empirically dubious and theoretically unproductive".²⁹ James Grantham Turner claims that the libertine writing from sixteenth to seventeenth century Europe is a "dizzying synthesis of sex and knowledge, desire and connoisseurship, that undermines Foucault's distinction".³⁰ Dina Al-Kassim, Valerie Traub and others complain that "Foucault's axiomatic division of East and West in his description of the *ars erotica* and the *scientia sexualis* is historically accurate", without describing how.³¹ Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, in the Introduction to their translation of the *Kama Sutra*, also charge Foucault with "characteristic Eurocentrism", whilst Ben Grant equates the distinction to an intellectual naïveté or even "failure".³² Charles Stone summarily dismisses Foucault's "stereotypical comparisons of East and West", which "tells us very little worth knowing about either", and that Foucault's postulation of the dichotomy meant that he "evidently never heard of Daoist physiology alchemy" (Foucault *did*—the postulation was a product of an encounter, not of ignorance).³³ One of the best examples of this anger and frustration can be found in a deeply admirable work, Gregory Pflugfelder's study on Japanese homosexuality, *Cartographies of Desire*:

No less imposing a scholar than Foucault was content to *assert vaguely* [the distinction between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*]. Foucault's *simple dichotomy* [...] is clearly inadequate to describe the differences that exist amongst and within sexual knowledge and systems in these diverse societies, and, *in typically Eurocentric fashion, makes little allowance for historical change outside of the West* ... Only in recent years has the *orientalising vision of Foucault* given way to more nuanced Western-language accounts of the historical construction of sexuality in Japan [...] The *orientalist temptation* of narrating the development [of the medical and scientific model of sexuality that took root in Japan after the nineteenth century] in terms of "East" and "West"—a *romantic narrative* in which the naïve charm of the former inevitably succumbs to the virile strength of the latter—must be resisted, however, because such geographical markers do not do justice to the global dimensions and local complexities of the knowledge system in question.³⁴

The problem is that Pflugfelder's criticisms of Foucault are too brief, and come across as "sideswipes" as opposed to sustained argument. Pflugfelder is making a very sophisticated point on the "global network of sexual knowledge", and the translation, transmission, circulation and appropriation of scientific and medical knowledge which Foucault completely overlooks. Indeed, Pflugfelder's book is testament to the way that East Asian history can fundamentally reconfigure our historiographical perspectives on empire, colonialism and globalisation of science. One wishes Pflugfelder will talk about Foucault in greater detail; Foucault never appears again after these mentions in the early parts of his book.

5. Foucault's half-hearted retractions

Foucault himself has backpedalled from his distinction. As a matter of fact, fifteen pages after he first stated the *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* dichotomy in *History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault characteristically deconstructs the categories he put forward. In yet another dense, enigmatic and bewildering passage, he claims:

[A] *rs erotica* did not disappear altogether from Western civilisation; nor has it always been absent from the movement by which one sought to produce a science of sexuality. In the Christian confession [...] there was a whole series of methods that had much in common with the erotic art [...] And we must ask whether, since the nineteenth century, the *scientia sexualis*—under the guise of its decent positivism—has not functioned, at least to a certain extent, as an *ars erotica*. Perhaps this production of truth, intimidated though it was by the scientific model, multiplied, intensified, and even created its own intrinsic pleasures. It is often said that we have been incapable of imagining any new pleasures. We have at least invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth [...] the specific pleasure of the true discourse of pleasure [...] the formidable "pleasure of analysis" (in the widest sense of the latter term) which the West has cleverly been fostering for several centuries: all this constitutes something like the errant fragments of an erotic art that is secretly transmitted by confession and the science of sex. Must we conclude that our *scientia sexualis* is but an extraordinarily subtle form of *ars erotica*, and that it is the Western, sublimated version of that seemingly lost tradition? Or must we suppose that all these pleasures are only the by-products of a sexual science, a bonus that compensates for its many stresses and strains?³⁵

Whilst Foucault's open-ended questions on the "pleasure" one might access via *scientia sexualis* amounted to an ambiguous problematisation of his distinction, he was more explicitly backpedalling during his interviews and conversations with Hubert Dreyfus, Paul Rabinow and their colleagues at Berkeley:

Dreyfus and Rabinow: But you already illustrated that in *The History of Sexuality* by contrasting our science of sexuality with the oriental *ars erotica*.

Foucault: One of the numerous points where I was wrong in that book was what I said about this *ars erotica* [...] *The Greeks and Romans did not have any ars erotica to be compared with the*

²⁸ Examples include Lochrie (1999, p. 237 n114) and Potvin (2008, p. 78 n57).

²⁹ Johnson (2005, p. 124).

³⁰ Turner (2003, p. 18).

³¹ Traub (2008, p. 17).

³² Doniger & Kakar (2003, p. xv) and Grant (2008, p. 54).

³³ Stone (2003, p. 178 n22).

³⁴ Pflugfelder (1999, p. 7 and 13). Emphasis mine.

³⁵ Foucault (1978, pp. 70–72). For analyses of this passage, which addresses psychoanalysis, see Davidson (2001b) and Forrester (1991, pp. 310–316).

Chinese *ars erotica* [...] They had a *techne tou biou* in which the economy of pleasure played a very large role. In this “art of life” the notion of exercising a perfect mastery over oneself soon became the main issue. And the Christian hermeneutics of the self constituted a new elaboration of this *techne* [...] If by sexual behaviour, we understand the three poles—acts, pleasure, and desire—we have the Greek “formula” [...] In this Greek formula what is underscored is “acts”, with pleasure and desire as subsidiary: *acte-plaisir-(désir)*. I have put desire in brackets because I think that in the Stoic ethics you start a kind of elision of desire, desire begins to be condemned [...] The Chinese “formula” would be *plaisir-désir-(acte)*. Acts are put aside because you have to restrain acts in order to get the maximum duration and intensity of pleasure. The Christian “formula” puts an accent on desire and tries to eradicate it. Acts have to become something neutral; you have to act only to produce children [...] and pleasure is both practically and theoretically excluded: *(désir)-acte-(plaisir)* [...] And I could say that the modern “formula” is desire, which is theoretically underlined and practically accepted, since you have to liberate your own desire. Acts are not very important, and pleasure—nobody knows what it is!³⁶

Foucault admits that he has made a mistake in *History of Sexuality Volume 1*, but nevertheless insists that China has an *ars erotica*. Why? How did Foucault come to know what he knew about China? Whose account of Chinese culture did Foucault use to draw his conclusions about sexual behaviour in China?

Before answering this set of questions, we should take a quick step back to look at how we can problematise the *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* distinction. We can argue against Foucault via the route of *scientia sexualis*. First, is *scientia sexualis* itself a useful category for historical analysis, or does it have the tendency to flatten out the heterogeneity of inquires on sex and human behaviour?³⁷ Second, is *scientia sexualis* exclusively invented by the “Christian West”, or have other societies come up with ways to regulate reproduction and desire that may resemble *scientia sexualis*? What were people in the “East” doing exactly whilst *scientia sexualis* developed in the “West”? Does Foucault fail to account for how the “East” is also involved in the construction of *scientia sexualis*? Does Foucault’s characterisation encourages a particular historiography of sexual science, which sees *scientia sexualis* as originating from the West and then diffusing to the rest of the world, thus relegating non-Westerners to the role of “handmaidens of modernity”, “disciples” and “facilitators”, instead of active participants and contributors in a global network of scientific and medical knowledge?³⁸ Third, does confession

only exist in the “West”? Foucault argues that the scientisation of confession—a “technology of the self”—was the precondition of the establishment of *scientia sexualis*, but was it only the “Western Man” who had become a “confessing animal”, whilst the “Eastern Man” remained silent?³⁹ Fourth, Foucault flirts with the idea that *scientia sexualis* is a “sublimation” of *ars erotica*, that the pleasures of the flesh evolved into the pleasures of narrativisation and (psycho)analysis—we prefer *talking* about sex instead of *doing* it. But is there another way to argue that *ars erotica* was, *toujours-déjà*, at the origin of *scientia sexualis*? In other words, can one make a “contamination” argument, à la Derrida? Alternatively, we can argue against Foucault via the route of *ars erotica*. So, fifth: does *ars erotica* accurately describe the sexual cultures of China, Japan, India, Roman and Muslim societies? Is it a romantic misrepresentation? Is it “Orientalist”? How does *each* of these cultures conceptualise sexual behaviour, pleasure and desire, and how different are they from each other? Sixth: if we take into account Foucault’s elaboration of the Greek *techne tou biou* and the “art of life” in *History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, to what extent is the Greek *techne* really different from *ars erotica* or *scientia sexualis*?

This list of questions is by no means exhaustive, and each question will require a separate paper, if not individual monographs to answer. Here two of the most crucial objections to Foucault will be pointed out. First, the “two great procedures”, *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* are entwined, mutually complicit. In *Erotic Margin*, the historian of Ottoman Empire Irving Schick analyses the works of erotica read by the Europeans from the eighteenth century. They were read not simply for shock or entertainment, but were actively appropriated as “raw material or ‘data’ for their *scientia sexualis*”.⁴⁰ Schick points to Richard Burton’s essay on his translation of *Thousand and One Nights*, which turned a piece of work that was at once philosophical, instructional, humorous, fantastical as “positive ‘evidence’ pertaining to the ways in which sexuality was actually practised in xenotopia”.⁴¹ Since sexuality in the “Orient” is “degenerate”, “androgynous”, and so forth, the Eastern Others had to be colonised and civilised. As such, the appropriation of Eastern erotica is at once transgressive and conservative—it aims to expose and mock the hypocrisy and prudishness of the Europeans, yet simultaneously maintains the political status quo by exhibiting the “primitive” rituals and practices of the “barbarians” who were to be dominated and enlightened. It provided the basis for the construction for the “Orient” and a “non-scientific”, mystical *ars erotica* as an Other, against which the “Occident” and the positivist, “scientific” inquiry of sex could define itself. As Irving Schick argues, the “sexuality of the ‘Other’ was a technology of place; its function was the spatialisation of difference, the differentiation of space”, and that sexuality was

³⁶ Foucault (1983a, pp. 234–235, 242–243) and Forrester (1991, p. 385 n62) points out that the final sentence “seems to be in considerable tension with Foucault’s arguments elsewhere (particularly in *History of Sexuality Volume 3*) that the Christian examination of the self is in sharp contrast with, rather than a prolongation of, the Greek care of the self”.

³⁷ For instance in Foucault (1978, pp. 63–64), he lumps together: Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746–1818), who wanted to advance Prussian society by maximising the *Brauchbarkeit* of each citizen through universal, practical education; Christian Gotthilf Salzmann (1744–1811), Rousseau pedagogical thinker; Heinrich Kaan (1816–1893), who published *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1844; Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902), who published another more widely known *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886; Auguste Ambroise Tardieu (1818–1879), who wrote about the “battered child”; Albert Moll (1862–1939), author of *Die konträre Sexualempfindung* (1891); Havelock Ellis (1859–1939), author of six volumes of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*.

³⁸ This is essentially one of Gregory Pflugfelder’s thesis in *Cartographies of Desire*, see (1999, p. 13). The Eurocentric way of writing the history of sexual science easily degenerates into attempts to “measure” the varying degrees of “Third World” natives’ faithfulness to and respect of “First World” culture, commending those non-Westerners who are deemed to have “reproduced” science correctly whilst denouncing those who appropriated or rejected Western thought.

³⁹ Foucault (1978, p. 59). Chloe Taylor, in the most recent study of confession, traces the genealogy of the “confessing animal” from Augustine to Foucault himself – thus agreeing with Foucault that the “East” never gave birth to the “confessing animal”. See Taylor (2008). Other works which take confession as an exclusively Western phenomenon include Brooks (2000), Radstone (2007), Streit (2004) and Tambling (1990). On confession as a “technology of the self”, see Foucault (1988). A detailed comparative study of confession “East” and “West” has not yet been written. Bernard Faure and Wu Pei-yi argue that there was something identifiable as “confession” in China, though rather different from Roman Catholic practices: there was no “sinful confessant” versus “expert confessor” dynamic, rather it was an internal dialogue or “self-scrutiny” (*fansheng*). And if the confession was textual, then it was either for private reading or circulation amongst other close literati friends, as opposed to publication or dissemination on a wide scale. See Faure (1993, 1998) and Wu (1979, 1990). In my own work on Zhang Jingsheng (1888–1970), who produced the first translation of Rousseau’s *Confessions* in the late 1920s, I find that many early twentieth century Chinese intellectuals claimed that China never had confession; it was a new, Western practice to be imported for the making of the modern self. See Rocha, unpublished PhD thesis, pp. 128–132.

⁴⁰ Schick (1999, pp. 187–188).

⁴¹ Schick (1999, p. 188).

“made into a historical invariant that could be used to characterise East and West, North and South, Self and Other, Here or There”.⁴² One of the goals of *scientia sexualis* was to describe the differences between Eastern and Western civilisations, between different races, using sexuality and sexual practices as attributes, which in turn further reinforces the divide between Western science and Eastern superstition.

One could further point out that those involved in the enterprise of sexual science actually looked to the East for inspiration. Late-Victorian and modernist intellectuals were known for their explorations of different forms of mysticisms and religions. The works of historian Joy Dixon and Hugh Urban are particularly instructive. Dixon documents the complex relationship between theosophy and the suffragettes, and traces the connections between sexual reform, inquires into sex, and the consumption of alternative and esoteric spiritualities by the British bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.⁴³ Hugh Urban analyses the emergence of a *magia sexualis* in the same period, a fusion of older esoteric traditions such as Gnosticism and Kabbalah, Hinduism, Daoism, Buddhist Tantra, in turn a response to the “seeming loss of the sacred in modern industrial society [...] the most explicit attempt to rediscover the sacred in and through the most ‘profane’ aspects of human life, sexuality itself”.⁴⁴ Edward Carpenter, who wrote *Love’s Coming-of-Age* in 1906, travelled to India and was deeply interested in the sexual aspects of Hinduism, which he contrasted to the hypocrisy and repression in his native land. We have the infamous case of Aleister Crowley, who travelled to China in 1905, was fascinated by the *Book of Changes (Yi Jing)*, and introduced his brand of sexual esotericism in Britain, freely mixing different strands of tradition to form a programme of spiritual enlightenment, personal empowerment and social liberation. Havelock Ellis, whom Foucault singles out as representative of *scientia sexualis* alongside Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Albert Moll and others, is now mostly remembered for his six volumes of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. But Ellis was also a China-watcher and an admirer. In 1923, Ellis published *The Dance of Life*, which, though rarely read today, was his most popular and best-selling book during his lifetime. In this lyrical manifesto, Ellis laid out his utopian vision in which life was conceptualised as a dance performance and the future society would be regulated by art, music, ceremony and rites that would animate the whole being—a place he thought much like “China”:

I well remember how in youth a new volume of the *Sacred Books of the East* series, a part of the Confucian *Lî-Kî [Book of Rites]*, came into my hands and how delighted I was to learn that in China life was regulated by music and ceremony. That was the beginning of an interest in China that has not ceased to grow, though now, when it has become a sort of fashion to exalt the spiritual qualities of the Chinese above those of other peoples, one may well feel disinclined to admit any interest in China [...] There had been reached [in China] the highest point of urban civilisation to which Man has ever attained, characterised by courtesy, fair dealing, an impartial exercise of justice, and hospitals in every city and no beggars [...] Their cheerful, practical, social, good-mannered, tolerant, peaceable, humane way of regarding life, or the remarkably educable spirit in which they are willing, and easily able, to change even ancient and deep-rooted habits when it seems convenient and beneficial

to do so; they are willing to take the world lightly, and seem devoid of those obstinate conservative instincts by which we are guided in Europe [...] This simple, childlike, yet profound attitude towards life results in a liberation of the impulses of play and enjoyment.⁴⁵

Modernist intellectuals in the West were looking to the Orient for orientations; they were looking to “Oriental” philosophies, exotic religion, age-old, “timeless” wisdom and “harmonious” social structures—in order to revise their understanding of themselves. Some of them found mysticism and spirituality, associated with the “East”, as good ready-made remedies to their problems at home. The mysterious “Orient” living in some far away garden seemed to have a privileged access to enjoyment; they were more emancipated and enlightened, or even closer to Nature. This is a species of Orientalism—even though they did not necessarily denigrate the culture of the Other, nevertheless they mobilised an idealised, Asiatic Other to construct the Self. The *scientia sexualis* that Foucault delineates overlaps with *ars erotica* and Hugh Urban’s *magia sexualis*. In other words, *ars erotica* was always already at the origin of *scientia sexualis*; the distinction itself contributed to and was also a product of *scientia sexualis*. Given that Foucault’s categories slip into each other, and contaminate each other, as empirical historians we should of course be very sceptical.

6. “Si l’on croit van Gulik...”

How did Foucault find out what he knew about Chinese sexuality? Most likely, exclusively from the work of sinologist Robert Hans van Gulik (1910–1967). There are a number of smoking guns from Foucault’s writings. First, van Gulik was cited on two occasions in *History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*:

The documents assembled by van Gulik, pertaining to ancient Chinese culture, seem to show the presence of the same thematic complex: fear of the irrepressible and the costly act, dread of its harmful consequences of the body and health, representation of the man-woman relationship in the form of a contest, preoccupation with obtaining descendants of good quality by means of a well-regulated sexual activity.⁴⁶

[W]e could not be further from the arts of conjugal pleasure such as one finds, according to van Gulik, in ancient China. There, prescriptions concerning the woman’s obedience, her respect, and her devotion were closely linked with advice on the correct erotic behaviour to manifest in order to increase the partner’s pleasure.⁴⁷

If one studies the bibliography in the Tel Gallimard edition of *L’Usage des plaisirs*—the bibliography is in fact omitted in Robert Hurley’s English translation—one finds that the 1971 French translation of van Gulik’s *Sexual Life in Ancient China* is the only text cited on China.⁴⁸ No Chinese primary sources were cited. In at least two interviews, both from 1983, Foucault name-checks van Gulik:

Dans l’érotique chinoise—si l’on en croit van Gulik—l’élément important, c’est le plaisir qu’il fallait majorer, intensifier, prolonger autant que possible en retardant l’acte lui-même, et à la limite en s’en abstenant.⁴⁹

⁴² Schick (1999, p. 232, 13).

⁴³ Dixon (1999, 2001).

⁴⁴ Urban (2006, p. 6). See also Irwin (2004), Schuchard (2000) and Urban (2003).

⁴⁵ Ellis (1923, pp. 20–21, 24).

⁴⁶ Foucault (1985, p. 137).

⁴⁷ Foucault (1985, p. 143).

⁴⁸ Foucault (1984, p. 338).

⁴⁹ Foucault (2001f, p. 1441).

If you read books ... I speak for myself ... I've never read Chinese books about the erotic art, but I've read books about this ... and the very interesting book by van Gulik, I don't know if you've read it ... which is very, very, very interesting, and you'll see that the problem was not at all the problem of desire. The problem of the Chinese erotic art was a problem of pleasure, how to take pleasure, with which intensity and so on and so on. And I think we're a civilisation, maybe *the* civilisation, where the problem of desire became much more important than the problem of pleasure. And, what's the reason? Why we recognise ourselves as subjects of desire, and not, as agents of pleasure? Why?⁵⁰

The book to which Foucault referred was van Gulik's *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 BC till 1644 AD*, first published in 1961 by Brill. Van Gulik also wrote another famous work, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* (1951), but there is no evidence that Foucault knew this work. *Sexual Life in Ancient China* was translated into French by Louis Évrard, a friend of Michel Foucault, and published in 1971 as *La Vie sexuelle dans la Chine ancienne*. It is important to note that Évrard translation was part of the *Collection Tel* of the prestigious Parisian publisher Gallimard.⁵¹ *Collection Tel* was the spiritual successor of *Collection Tel Quel*, founded in 1966 by philosopher Philippe Sollers. It was first conceived by Claude and Antoine Gallimard, who wished to produce a series of affordable, pocket-sized paperbacks of "classic" humanities texts. The books in *Collection Tel* have an iconic white cover, and some of the titles were illustrated by Hungarian artist Victor Vasarely. The *Collection* occupies a prominent position in the French literary field and includes some of the most glamorous works of European thought, the "must-reads" for the intellectual elite in the 1960s and 70s: from Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* (1943, "Tel 1"), Émile Benveniste's *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (1945, "Tel 4"), Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1972, "Tel 9") to works by Raymond Aron, Erich Auerbach, Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes. Foucault's *History of Sexuality Volume 1 (La Volonté de savoir)* was "Tel 248" in the series, and van Gulik's *Sexual Life in Ancient China* was "Tel 17". Given that the French intellectual scene in the late 60s and 70s was captivated with Mao and China, a study of ancient Chinese sexuality might be deemed to be an extremely valuable piece of work, and thus van Gulik's inclusion in the *Collection Tel* is unsurprising. Indeed, van Gulik's work was appropriated extensively (and idiosyncratically) in Jean-François Lyotard's largely forgotten *Economie libidinale* (1974) and in Julia Kristeva's *Des Chinoises* (1974).⁵² The English original of van Gulik's work did not enjoy as wide a reception; it was mostly read by Sinologists.

The name Robert Hans van Gulik (1910–1967, in Chinese "Gao Luopei") should be very familiar to all scholars in East Asian Studies. Today, van Gulik is often remembered outside of academia as a writer of Chinese detective fiction, the *Judge Dee Mysteries (Dee Goong An)*, which are still printed by Dover and University of Chicago Press. Van Gulik was the son of a medical officer in the Dutch Indies, and later became a Dutch diplomat and Sinologist. He was raised in Java and learned Chinese from a young age. Educated at the University of Leiden, he moved to Utrecht and completed his doctoral thesis in 1935, entitled *Hayagriva: The Mantrayanic Aspect*

of the Horse-Cult in China and Japan (the Hayagriva is a horse-headed deity in Hinduism and Buddhism), supervised by famous Indologist Jan Gonda and published by Brill. A true polymath, van Gulik knew Dutch, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Arabic, Japanese, English, French, German, Russian, Javanese, Indonesian, Malay and possibly many more languages. After his doctoral studies he joined the Dutch Foreign Service and was posted to various countries in Asia and continued researching, writing, corresponding with academics. Throughout his career, van Gulik produced an extraordinary range of impeccable scholarship: comparative linguistics, the language of Blackfoot Indians, the history of music and musical instruments (especially the Chinese lute), translations of Sanskrit plays, studies in Zen Buddhism, theology, art collecting, calligraphy, jurisprudence and history and philosophy of law, and one of his best loves—gibbons.⁵³ In the Preface to *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, van Gulik related how he stumbled upon Chinese sexuality:

In 1949 when I was serving as Counsellor of the Netherlands Embassy in Tokyo, I happened to find in a curio-shop a set of old Chinese printing blocks of a Ming erotic album, entitled *Hua-ying-chin-chen* [*Hua ying jin zhen*], "Variegated Battle Arrays of the Flowery Camp". The blocks emanated from the collection of an old Japanese feudal house that in the eighteenth century had been closely connected with the China trade. Since such albums are now exceedingly rare, and important from both the artistic and sociological point of view, I thought it my duty to make this material available to other research workers. My original plan was to have a few copies struck off from those blocks and publish them in a limited edition, adding a brief preface [a 200-page essay] on the historical background of Chinese erotic art.⁵⁴

This became the three-volume *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* (1951), which had a limited circulation as only fifty copies were privately printed in Tokyo. Cambridge University Library was presented with one copy, and Joseph Needham also had one in his possession. Needham and van Gulik first met in 1943 in Chongqing, when Needham was the Director of the Sino-British Science Co-operation Office and van Gulik was the secretary for the Dutch mission to Chiang Kai-shek's government. The two men became close friends and when van Gulik married Frances Shui Shifang (granddaughter of Zhang Zhidong, one of the "Four Famous Officials of the Late Qing"), the wedding party was held at the Science Co-Operation Office and Needham delivered a speech for the newlyweds. Needham would later leave Chongqing for Paris to become the Head of the Natural Sciences Division at UNESCO, before returning to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge in 1948. Meanwhile van Gulik continued his peripatetic life and spent time in Washington DC, Tokyo, New Delhi, Cairo, Kuala Lumpur, Beirut and The Hague. Needham and van Gulik maintained their friendship and continuously corresponded. Needham held van Gulik in extremely high regard, discussing in a series of letters around 1966–1967 the possibility of van Gulik taking the Chair of Chinese at Cambridge upon his retirement from the Foreign Service.⁵⁵ Given Needham's difficult relationship with Cambridge, following his controversial report on American use of biological weapons in Korea, he was unlikely to have much leverage

⁵⁰ Foucault (1983b). I thank Catherine Jami for her help dealing with Foucault's accent.

⁵¹ As of July 2009, this French edition of van Gulik is still widely available as a paperback for 12.50 euros. Compare this with the English version by Brill (2003 reprint), as part of the *Sinica Leidensia* series of specialist monographs on China, priced at 122 US dollars.

⁵² Lyotard (2004, pp. 202–241) and Kristeva (1977, pp. 61–64, 76, 82). For an analysis on Lyotard, van Gulik, "sexual vampirism" and Marx's theory of capital, see Heubel (2003).

⁵³ The definitive biography of van Gulik is Barkman & de Vries-van der Hoeven (1994). Carl Dietrich Barkman (1919–2006) was himself a Dutch diplomat and Sinologist. Another biography is by Dutch crime novelist Janwillem Lincoln van de Wetering (1987). For something sweet and concise, see Paul Rakita Goldin's Introduction to the 2003 reprint of *Sexual Life in Ancient China*; Goldin (2003).

⁵⁴ Van Gulik (1961, p. xi).

⁵⁵ Needham Research Institute SCC2/260/12.

over the employment issues at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, and Denis Twitchett (1925–2006) took over the Chair from 1968 to 1981 after Edwin George Pulleyblank (1922–) relocated to the University of British Columbia.⁵⁶ If it were not for his early death from cancer in 1967, van Gulik might well have been reunited with Needham in Cambridge in some capacity, engaging with the *Science and Civilisation in China* project. The two men influenced each other's view on Chinese sex, science and Daoist alchemy enormously.

7. Van Gulik, Bob Cohen and Routledge

The making of *Sexual Life in Ancient China* is a tale full of twists. Paul Goldin claims that “Brill commissioned van Gulik to compose” the book; this is not quite the full story.⁵⁷ The starting point is in fact Bob Cohen (Robert Sonn e Cohen, 1924–), currently Professor Emeritus of Philosophy of Science at Boston University, and founding editor of the important *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*. In the 1950s Cohen was Associate Professor of Philosophy and Physics at Wesleyan, but left because of McCarthyism and travelled to Britain and spent time at the University of Cambridge. He was acquainted with John G. Carter, one of the directors at Routledge and Kegan Paul. At that time Routledge published the “Sexual Life series” of books, which included Bronisław Malinowski's *Sexual Life of Savages in North West Melanesia* (1929), translations of Hans Licht's [Paul Brandt] *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* (1932), Otto Kiefer's *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome* (1934) and Johann Jakob Meyer's *Sexual Life in Ancient India* (1953). All of these were pioneering works of scholarship.

Cohen told Carter that Routledge ought to add a volume on sexual life in ancient China, and that Joseph Needham would be the ideal man to write it. Carter wrote to Needham on 13 September 1956, inviting him to write a foreword to Edgar Zilsel's *The Social Origins of Modern Science*, and to consider the possibility of beginning a project on sex in China.⁵⁸ Needham replied on 28 September, accepting his invitation to write the Zilsel foreword, but declined the opportunity to write on sex. Instead Needham recommended van Gulik, who at that point had already published *Erotic Colour Prints in the Ming Period*. Needham then wrote to John G. Carter:

I can assure you that I shall do my best to persuade [van Gulik] to undertake the task, because there is a debt which has not yet been paid to Chinese civilisation. By this I mean that Chinese sexology was of an extremely healthy, humane and non-sadistic character, comparing favourably with the sexual theory and practices of other Asian peoples, and indeed with all other peoples in the world.⁵⁹

Needham then wrote to van Gulik, stationed in Beirut, on 28 September 1956:

Indeed I really do hope that you could see your way to preparing a book of a general character on the subject, summarising for the general educated public the most important features of your study of Chinese sex life published in Tokyo in 1951 [i.e. *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*]. I believe you would

be doing a very great service to world culture if you think seriously of this, and at the same time pay a debt owing to the Chinese for their very healthy and humane ideas on these subjects throughout the Middle Ages and later times.⁶⁰

On 5 October 1956, John G. Carter replied:

Dr Robert van Gulik is without a doubt most competent to undertake the volume on SEXUAL LIFE IN ANCIENT CHINA for our series. He is customer of our Bookshop, Kegan Paul of Great Russell Street [in Bloomsbury, London]. It is most kind of you to write to him personally on our behalf and I value your introduction which I will now follow up.⁶¹

On 6 November, Carter wrote to Needham again:

I have had a favourable letter from Dr Robert van Gulik in acknowledging my suggestion that he contributes to our series a SEXUAL LIFE IN ANCIENT CHINA [...]. He also suggests he would eventually like to consider a book on ARABIC SEXOLOGY. It is all very promising and I hope that we will reach a satisfactory understanding and a contract for the two books.⁶²

Van Gulik did reach an agreement and prepared a manuscript. However, eighteen months later, on 16 June 1958, Carter informed Needham that:

Dr van Gulik has honoured the agreement by delivering the manuscript on time but, to my great regret, the work is so frank that it would not bear publication in this country without attracting the attention of the public prosecutor. Our views have been confirmed by the counsel for the Authors' Society [Society of Authors, Playwright, Composers], Mr [Denys] Kilham Roberts, who also had the advantage of consulting the present sitting committee, who are advising the government on obscenity.⁶³

Norman Franklin, another director at Routledge, also wrote to Needham and van Gulik to extend his apologies, stating that Routledge “could not undertake [the] publication [of *Sexual Life in Ancient China*] without such heavy expurgation that the work would be meaningless”.⁶⁴ Van Gulik then decided to publish *Sexual Life* through Brill of Leiden. All sexually explicit passages were rendered in Latin. But when Louis  vrard translated *Sexual Life* into French, he translated all of the Latin passages into French. Finally, Brill reprinted *Sexual Life in Ancient China* in 2003, edited by Paul Rakita Goldin, Professor of East Asian Languages and Civilisation at the University of Pennsylvania, with van Gulik's “scandalous materials” in Latin translated back into English for the very first time. Had van Gulik published his book with Routledge, its circulation in the English-speaking world would have been much wider.

8. Sexual vampirisms and the interventions of the Cambridge Don

In *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* (1951), van Gulik did not have a wholly positive view of ancient Chinese sexuality. In

⁵⁶ For accounts of the history of Chinese studies in Cambridge, see McMullen (1995), Que (2002) and Sterckx (2008). I thank Roel Sterckx, who is now the Joseph Needham Professor of Chinese History, Science and Civilisation, for bringing this history to my attention.

⁵⁷ Goldin (2003, p. xv).

⁵⁸ Needham (2004, pp. xi–xiv). Zilsel's book also contains a Preface by Bob Cohen.

⁵⁹ Needham Research Institute SCC2/213/9/10.

⁶⁰ Needham Research Institute SCC2/213/9/10.

⁶¹ Needham Research Institute SCC2/213/9/10.

⁶² Needham Research Institute SCC2/213/9/10.

⁶³ Needham Research Institute SCC2/213/9/10. Roy Jenkins' Obscene Publications Act came in effect in 1959 (i.e. it became possible to challenge the legal definition of an obscene publication by using as defence the artistic or scholarly merit of the text in question), and the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial in 1960 (Regina v. Penguin Books Ltd) was the first test case for the Act.

⁶⁴ Needham Research Institute SCC2/213/9/10.

particular, he highlighted the Daoist alchemical practice of *coitus reservatus*—“returning the semen to the brain” (*huan jing bu nao*), prolonging erection, absorbing sexual fluids or “yin energy” through intercourse with many young girls—as a form of “sexual vampirism”.⁶⁵ Under this scheme, women and especially young virgins, became repositories or batteries of vital essence available at the disposal of the male practitioner of alchemy in his project of rejuvenation, preservation of youth, attainment of higher consciousness and immortality. The practitioner harnessed women as a resource like any other; pleasure, particularly for the female, was inconsequential. For van Gulik, this was an exploitative, objectifying, misogynistic and possibly “perverted” practice, “black magic” and superstition. He “confessed that those practices had rather shocked me”.⁶⁶

Needham, who was at the time working on Volume II of *Science and Civilisation in China (History of Scientific Thought)*, consulted van Gulik’s *Erotic Colour Prints* at the Cambridge University Library. He completely disagreed with van Gulik’s assessment and castigated him in a series of letters sent between June and July 1955.⁶⁷ Needham told van Gulik, “On the contrary, Daoism had on the whole influenced favourably the development of sexual relations, and enhanced the position of Chinese women in general”.⁶⁸ Van Gulik succumbed to the gravity of Professor Needham’s expert intervention, and corrected himself when he wrote *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, even going as far as saying that as a “layman”, it was “difficult to maintain always proper detached attitude of mind”.⁶⁹ Needham later recalled, perhaps a little smugly, that he “persuaded van Gulik that there was nothing perverse or pathological in the sexual techniques described and prescribed by the Daoist adepts [...] Chinese sex life through the centuries had been remarkably healthy, free from the aberrations of sadism and masochism, but immensely skilled in happy variation and mutual donation”.⁷⁰ I agree with Paul Goldin’s assessment that “with hindsight, we can see today that van Gulik’s earlier thoughts on the matter were more judicious, and it is a pity that he allowed himself to be hectored [by Needham]”.⁷¹ Daoist sexual teachings did not necessarily encourage mutual gratification or respect of women, nor could the sex manuals be constitutive evidence of sexual freedom—instead they had to be understood “in the context of concealment and suppression”, of “regulation and restriction”.⁷² Needham’s idealisation of ancient China appears to be misplaced.

For Needham, the “wisdom of Chinese culture in the affairs of the heart, in love and sex” is the antidote “needed by all people everywhere”, “startling though it may be for Westerners”.⁷³ Needham’s ideology of sex is particularly clear in an address delivered at the Chapel of Gonville and Caius, his final one as Master of the College, on Whit Sunday 1976, a heavily polemical piece attacking the distinction between *agape*, *philia* and *eros*.⁷⁴ For Needham there ought not be any “distinction between sacred and profane love” (which according to him does not exist in China); because it led to the repression, prudishness, hypocrisy, hysterical Puritanism, and needless shame and guilt in the Christian culture of the West.⁷⁵

Moreover, Needham wrote a foreword to Jolan Chang’s (Zhang Zhonglan) *The Tao of Love and Sex: The Ancient Chinese Way to Ecstasy* (1977). In this book, a transcript of Needham’s address at the Caius Chapel was included as a postscript.⁷⁶ Jolan Chang (1917–2002) was a Canadian-Swedish Chinese writer and a good friend of Needham. Chang claimed to be a practitioner of Daoist sexual regimes and would “make love several times a day”, even though he was close to sixty when he wrote *Tao of Love and Sex*:

Often on a Sunday I make love two or three times in the morning and then go cycling for nearly the whole day, about twenty or thirty miles, and then make love again before going to sleep. The result is that I am not in the least exhausted, and my health could not be better or my mind more tranquil. And above all the helpless situation of lying beside an unsatisfied mate no longer exists. What is the reason for this change? The answer is that I now practise what the Daoist physician Sun S’sû-Mo [Sun Simiao] prescribed 1300 years ago: “Love one hundred times without emission”.⁷⁷

Needham said Jolan Chang was:

[A] luminary [appearing from the] skies, our friend Chang Chung-lan from Stockholm, whose book on Chinese—and Universal—sexology I here commend to the candid reader. With considerable learning and skill has found words to explain to men and women of the modern world something of how the wisdom of Chinese culture manifested itself in the affairs of the heart, in love and sex.⁷⁸

Chang’s book was a hodgepodge of “sex tips”, including: the regulation of ejaculation; the importance of foreplay and female satisfaction; the claim that male orgasm and ejaculation are not the same thing; the control of the rhythm and depth of male penetration; “four basic positions and twenty-six variations”; erotic kissing and oral sex; how to overcome impotence through Daoism; breathing exercises based on T’ai Chi. Many of these Chang said had become “important points in the Women’s Liberation Movement and in the scientific studies of Kinsey, Masters and Johnson, and the rest”.⁷⁹ In other words, Daoist practices of sex have been vindicated by Western science. One could place Chang’s book within the genre of self-help manuals from the 1960s and 70s in Europe and America; its language and ideology of sex are comparable to publications such as Alex Comfort’s *Joy of Sex* (1972). Indeed the similarities between Chang and Comfort may lead one to think that Chang’s book is “*The Joy of Sex* with Chinese characteristics”. Chang’s attempt to show the apparent compatibility between ancient Chinese “wisdom” and Western science—and thereby implying that China had always already had the answers to Western cultural crises—was also similar to Fritjof Capra’s *Tao of Physics* (1975) and the writings of Mantak Chia.⁸⁰ It would not be unfair to call Chang’s book “Orientalist”, and Needham’s unreserved praise of *Tao of Love and Sex* was highly problematic.

⁶⁵ Van Gulik (1951, p. 11). On “sexual vampirism” see Goldin (2006).

⁶⁶ Van Gulik (1961, p. xiii).

⁶⁷ Correspondence between Needham and van Gulik, 7 June to 4 July 1955, Needham Research Institute SCC2/213/9/5.

⁶⁸ Van Gulik (1961, p. xiii) and Needham (1956, p. 146).

⁶⁹ Van Gulik (1961, p. xiii).

⁷⁰ Needham (1977a, pp. 9–10).

⁷¹ Goldin (2003, p. xxii).

⁷² Schipper (1993, p. 147).

⁷³ Needham (1977a, pp. 9–10).

⁷⁴ Needham (1977b).

⁷⁵ Needham (1977b, p. 121).

⁷⁶ Needham Research Institute SCC2/220/1/7.

⁷⁷ Chang (1977, p. 120).

⁷⁸ Needham (1977a, pp. 9–10).

⁷⁹ Chang (1977, p. 17).

⁸⁰ For an analysis of twentieth-century appropriations of Daoist practices on sex, see Clarke (2000, pp. 117–139).

Charlotte Furth, in her trenchant attack on *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, repeatedly labelled van Gulik an “Orientalist”.⁸¹ Furth argued that the “classical bedchamber manuals teaching Daoist secrets of longevity portray an aristocratic and lavishly polygamous society where very young women were exploited as sexual handmaidens—the stereotype of a royal harem”.⁸² So-called *ars erotica* in China was not at all bothered about pleasure, instead they were concerned with: (a) cultic visions of longevity or immortality through preservation of health, bodily disciplines, regimens including breathing exercises, diet and ingestion of medicines; (b) the regulation of reproduction and gender relations. In the latter, Chinese sexual culture is not at all diametrically opposite to the aims of so-called *scientia sexualis*. But it has to be noted that Furth’s line of argument is actually in agreement with the early van Gulik: he was not a naïve Orientalist when it came to sex in China, but to a certain extent, Needham made him so. Given that Michel Foucault bases his opinion on China and his formulation of *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* on a source as contentious as van Gulik’s *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, of course as historians we have to approach Foucault’s distinction with extreme caution.

9. Foucault’s Chinese dreams

The “China” that Foucault speaks of, one in which *ars erotica* is supposedly practised with the aim to heighten pleasure and delight, is a utopia. Foucault is trying to, in his own words, “think otherly” (*penser autrement*), to imagine the possibility of “living otherly” (*vivre autrement*) without the surveillance and regulation of sex associated with *scientia sexualis* in the “West”.⁸³ To borrow Fredric Jameson’s words: “Sexuality, itself a meaningless biological fact, is in such [utopian] societies far less invested with all the symbolic meanings with which we modern and sophisticated people endow it. What would it mean, then, from within our own sexualised existentiality, to imagine a human sexuality that was so unrepressed, yet so utterly divested of the multiple satisfactions of meanings as such?”⁸⁴ This is one of the central paradoxes that the later Foucault grappled with. Foucault dreams of the day when:

... in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organisation, were able to subject us to the austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow.⁸⁵

And as opposed to the “incitement to speak”, the proliferation of discourse on sex, the compulsive and compulsory confession that Foucault diagnoses in the “West”, Foucault prefers “Eastern silence” over “Western science”:

Silence may be a much more interesting way of having a relationship with people [...] I think silence is one of those things that has unfortunately been dropped from our culture. We don’t have a culture of silence [...] The Japanese do, I think. Silence was then a specific form of experiencing a relationship with

others. This is something that I believe is really worthwhile cultivating. I’m in favour of developing silence as a cultural ethos.⁸⁶

The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge was written partly to critique the idea of a “Sexual Revolution”, particularly the politics of Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich, who argued that capitalism relied on sexual repression to ensure the productivity of the labour force, and thus lifting the repression on libido would undermine capitalism.⁸⁷ Yet, despite his fierce polemic against the “Repressive Hypothesis”, in the process of conceiving the possibility of a whole different configuration of desire and pleasure, Foucault dreams of the East, and via van Gulik dreams of China, of *ars erotica* from a less repressive, faraway land, and thus ends up implicating himself in the repression-liberation mode of thinking that he painstakingly deconstructs.

This kind of dreaming about the East and China was by no means exclusive to Foucault. In fact, it was a common symptom amongst the *Parisiens* in the 1960s and 70s: Barthes, Lacan, Kristeva, Derrida, Lévi-Strauss, Bataille, Lyotard, Sollers, Irigaray and many others.⁸⁸ All of these thinkers had invoked China in their work, as a “utopian strategy” to escape the world in which they inhabited, as a kind of cognitive estrangement, shock treatment for ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism. “China” is used to defamiliarise, to remind us of the specific history that lies behind dichotomies and classifications which furnish the way “we in the West” understand the world around us. “China” is deployed to unsettle our smug, lazy patterns of thought, our delusions of grandeur and universality. “China” is meant to be dumbfounding, astonishing, astounding, a space outside of the fortress of “Western” thought, outside the prisonhouse of “logos”. As Haun Saussy lyrically puts it:

As images of a possible world, these constructions of China lend support to a deconstructive project. To put it quite simply, China is deconstruction; or perhaps, China is what deconstruction will turn the world into or reveal the world as always already having been. Staging the surprise-effect of news from faraway, the writers calculate (more or less transparently) a demystifying outcome. The distinctiveness of [China] evokes a vision of logical relations, subjectivity, ontology, temporality, and eschatology that counters the models associated [with the West]. A certain way of doing things is not the only way; history could have a different set of givens and a different plot structure; the end of civilisation as we know it would just be the end of civilisation *as we know it*. [None of Foucault, Sollers, Derrida etc. have] to be a China specialist to say this or listen to the complaints of those of us who *are*.⁸⁹

Foucault is always at pains to point out the specificity, situatedness, localness, the “Western” flavour of the discourses he analyses: “the historical consciousness in the West” in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, “history of techniques of power in the West” in *Discipline and Punish*, “the deepest strata of Western culture” in *The Order of Things*. The dilemma is that Foucault’s attempt to “deliberate the finite, Occidental boundaries of the collection of practices and systems he is studying inevitable leads into a subtle essentialisation of the West (and implicitly the East)”.⁹⁰ The West is mocked

⁸¹ Furth (1994, pp. 126–128).

⁸² Furth (1994, pp. 145–146); see also Furth (2005).

⁸³ Foucault (1985, p. 8). Robert Hurley translates “penser autrement” as “think differently” but “think otherly” or “think otherwise” is a better fit to Foucault’s meaning.

⁸⁴ Jameson (2004, p. 53).

⁸⁵ Foucault (1978, p. 159).

⁸⁶ Foucault (1990, pp. 3–4).

⁸⁷ See Foucault (1978, p. 131).

⁸⁸ Lacan was the only one to have studied Chinese; he did so at the School of Oriental Languages in Paris during the Occupation. He was also a friend of Sinologist François Cheng (Cheng Baoyi, 1929–), whom he consulted on Chinese classics such as *Laozi*. Roudinesco (1997, pp. 158–159, 351). Barthes, Kristeva, Marcelin Pleynert, Sollers and François Wohl travelled to China in 1974; Lacan was originally scheduled to travel with this group but withdrew at the last moment. See Hayot (2004, p. 110). It is worth noting that the “China” that Lacan wants is the “Confucian” China, whereas the Tel Quelians embrace the “China” of Mao.

⁸⁹ Saussy (2001, pp. 149–150); see more generally pp. 146–182.

⁹⁰ Almond (2007, p. 24).

for its preoccupation with individualism, for its inauthenticity, superficiality, repression and denial, whilst the East becomes equated to honesty, authenticity, collectivism, immutability, resilience—the therapy that Foucault prescribes to dispel Eurocentrism is ironically entirely Eurocentric. At times Foucault is aware that his resort to Asia, his talk of “Chinese encyclopaedias”, *ars erotica* and other curiosities of the East is a calculated, tactical move:

Is not China, in our dreams, the privileged home of space? For our imaginary system, Chinese culture is the most meticulous culture, the most hierarchical, the most impervious to occurrences in time, the one most attached to the pure unfolding of distance. We imagine China as a civilisation of dikes and dams under the eternal face of Heaven, spread and mobilised across the whole extent of a wall-encircled continent. Even Chinese writing does not reproduce in horizontal lines the fleeting passage of the voice, but arranges in columns the motionless and still recognisable images of things themselves.⁹¹

In the universality of the Western *ratio*, there is this division which is the Orient; the Orient, thought of as the origin, dreamt of as the vertiginous point from which nostalgia and promises of return are born, the Orient offered to the colonising reason of the Occident, but indefinitely inaccessible, for it always remains the limit: the night of the beginning, in which the Occident was formed, but in which it traced a dividing line, the Orient is for the Occident everything that it is not, whilst remaining the place in which its primitive truth must be sought. What is required is a history of this great divide, all along this Occidental becoming, following it in its continuity and its exchanges, whilst also allowing it to appear in its tragic hieratism.⁹²

“The Orient is for the Occident everything that is not”, Foucault advises us. However, in *History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault appears to have forgotten his own prescription and lost his critical distance from “the Western *ratio*” that his projects are supposed to examine. He is actively inscribing and reinforcing the East–West divide himself—erasing affinities, continuities, identities, similarities, contact and exchange between “East” and “West”. *Scientia sexualis/ars erotica* turns from a defamiliarisation strategy into an indefensible historical claim. Ian Almond suggests that Foucault’s use of the East is carried over from Nietzsche, whilst other scholars argue that it comes from Heidegger, who interacted with Sinologists and Japanologists in Germany.⁹³ In Foucault’s later career, his preoccupation with Eastern thought—with Zen, magic and mysticism, hermeticism, Gnosticism, Pythagoreans, Kabbalah, ascetic speculation—was to do with the attempt to construct a “counter-discourse” to modernity that “appropriates Oriental lore in opposition to Western strategies of control”.⁹⁴ Or to use Karlis Racevskis’s elegant phrase, the Orient was Foucault’s “epistemological alibi”.⁹⁵ This is Foucault’s motivation for searching the Orient for solutions, to travel to faraway lands, or at least the Asian section of his library, for elixirs, panaceas, antidotes, anecdotes...

10. Sinographies and the empire of theory

The point of this paper is resolutely *not* to chastise Michel Foucault, Joseph Needham, Robert van Gulik and others for their “Ori-

entalism”, for being “naïve” or “misinformed”—that would be too facile. In fact I am wary of the way that “Orientalism” has been often bandied around and ends up foreclosing analysis. My aim is not to wag my finger, or simply correct wrongs and misrepresentations. My obvious point is that we absolutely need to subject the theorists whom we regularly invoke in our work to historical and sociological analysis. We need to unpack the rich history often embedded in a single concept. As I have already explained, the notion that theory is a set of prefabricated, “off-the-shelf” tools which we can pick up “tighten” our historical narrative—an image of theory that Foucault himself perpetuates in his talk of screwdrivers and spanners and *petites boîtes à outils*—is extremely dangerous. Some scholars in East Asia Studies have become incredibly allergic to “theory”, because they have seen far too many uncritical uses of “theory” and “-isms” in the literature, or cases in which the adoption of ideas from literary criticism or critical theory is not carefully explained.⁹⁶ We should pay close attention to the natural history of the Parisian intellectuals, and analyse their pride and prejudice, their preoccupations and obsessions, their sources of information and authority, their operations in the industry of theory. What kind of books did different groups of people read to find out about China? Foucault and his colleagues read van Gulik for sure, some of Max Müller’s *Sacred Books of the East* definitely, Fenollosa’s *Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, Maria Antonietta Macciocchi’s bestselling *De la Chine* (1970), Marcel Granet’s work on matrimony in China (*Catégories matrimoniales et relations de proximité dans la Chine ancienne*), and so forth. How did these avant-garde intellectuals use “China” for the purpose of aesthetic and political inspiration, edification, renewal and rejuvenation, defamiliarisation, dichotomisation, legitimation, as a rhetorical device, a literary trope? How does “China” become grist for the Parisian theoretical mill; how does “China” animate their ideas? What sort of “Chinas” are being written into being? Moving across the Channel, what images of China inform British scholars such as Joseph Needham?

What we have here is a dovetailing of two projects. The first is “Sinographies”, associated with comparative literature scholars Haun Saussy, Eric Hayot, Timothy Billings, Christopher Bush and Steven G. Yao. As Hayot explains:

I take Sinography, literally the “writing” of “China [...] the study not simply of how China is written *about*, but of the ways in which that writing constitutes itself simultaneously as a *form* of writing and as a *form* of Chineseness [...] any particular writing of China both establishes a particular Chinese difference (from the West, from itself) and simultaneously posits China as the origin and source of the difference that makes its difference visible, as it were, in the object of study I hope to name with term *Sinography*. Taken in this way, Sinography relates to Sinology as historiography does to history. To read Sinographically would be to abandon the attempt to force every reference to “China” into truth or falsehood, without at the same time abandoning the question of reference altogether—rather, the question of reference would have to be folded into the broader discussion of writing “China”, a discussion [...] of the action of writing China as it actualises itself within the world-text independently of the notion of authenticity.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Foucault translated by and quoted in Saussy (2001, p. 147).

⁹² Foucault (1961, p. iv). This passage comes from the Preface of the first edition of *Madness and Civilisation* which is subsequently suppressed in all future editions. I am using Jean Khalifa’s 2006 Routledge translation, p. xxx.

⁹³ Afary & Anderson (2005, pp. 17–21). For Heidegger’s relationship with East Asian thought, see May (1989), Ma (2007, pp. 10–26) and Zhang (2006, pp. 45–86).

⁹⁴ Schaub (1989, p. 308).

⁹⁵ Racevskis (1983, p. 18).

⁹⁶ In the context of Chinese history, one thinks of, for instance, Joseph Esherick’s famous attack on the “postmodern” (or “poststructural” or “postcolonial”) study by James Hevia of the Macartney Embassy, *Cherishing Men from Afar*. Hevia (1995). For this debate, see Esherick (1998a, 1998b), Hevia (1998), Elman & Hutters (1998) and Zhang (1998b). On the question of “postmodernism” and Chinese history, see Dirlik (2001). On literary theory and Chinese literature, see Hockx & Smits (2003).

⁹⁷ Hayot (2004, p. 185). See also Hayot (2009), Hayot et al. (2007), Saussy (2001).

The second project is the study of intellectuals and the academic industry in the vein of Bourdieu's *Homo academicus* (1990), Marjorie Garber's *Academic Instincts* (2001) or Stefan Collini's *Absent Minds* (2006). One might ask: In what way did knowledge of other cultures, including China, count as cultural capital and how was such knowledge consumed and displayed in the literary field? How were different social positions in a *habitus* related to philosophical outlooks? How did historical actors maintain their relationships and alliances with various institutions, translators, booksellers and publishers? How did ideas concerning China circulate—transnationally, globally via long-range networks?

By way of concluding this paper, I will elaborate on the final question, particularly pertinent to contemporary debates on the “empire of theory”—the industry of cultural and literary theories produced in Europe and America, and their impact on academic production around the world. The global expansion of the “theory machine” has changed what non-Western scholars in other parts of the world have to read, and what they have to cite—for instance Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, psychoanalytic theorists, postcolonial thinkers, etc.—in order for these non-Western scholars on the “periphery” to be accepted by institutions at the “centre”—be they university departments or English-language journals. “Third-World” scholars now have to write, according to the rules of the genre of “Western” academic writing, in order to be recognised as *bona fide* knowledge-producing subjects. This is a development of what Edward Said has long ago called the question of “travelling theory”:

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. Having said that, however, one should go on to specify the kinds of movement that are possible, in order to ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation [...] Such processes movement into a new environment is never unimpeded. It necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalisation different from those at the point of origin. This complicates any account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, commerce of theories and ideas.⁹⁸

Said uses “travelling theory” to discuss the appropriation of Georg Lukács’ ideas by Lucien Goldmann, and then the appropriation of Goldmann’s version of Lukács by Michel Foucault and Raymond Williams. Limiting his analysis to European contexts, Said sees this as a benign phenomenon—it is for him, as quoted in the passage above, “a fact of life” and an “enabling condition of intellectual activity”. However, in a recent, highly polemical volume, Latin American Studies scholars Daphne Patai and Wilfrido Corral have taken the opposite view.⁹⁹ They strongly argued that the spread of theory around the world as something malevolent and

crippling, and an imperialist force to be resisted, because French theory denies the “authentic” voices of “Third World” scholars, homogenises the production of scholarship, and leads to the dearth of empirical work and even gross misrepresentation of non-Western Others. Neither side seems to be entirely correct, but it is true that “Third World” scholars appear to be stuck in a terrible dilemma: they have to shoulder the burden of engaging with Western theory, or risk marginalisation or accusation of ignorance. They have to show their appreciation of the depth and sophistication of Western theory, or they end up being labelled of butchering ideas which do not belong to them. The other side of the coin is that Third World scholars have to learn Western theory in such a way that they do not just end up being seen as an imitator, simply parroting what Western scholars have said.

The next important step in the current analysis of Michel Foucault’s *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* distinction is how it has travelled back to China, or, a more general investigation of the reception of Foucauldian ideas amongst Chinese scholars, who are conspicuously absent in this paper. *History of Sexuality Volume 1* was first translated into Chinese in 1988 by Wang Yongmin and Yu Baofa, both Professors of the College of Foreign Languages and Literature at Fudan University in Shanghai. Wang and Yu used Robert Hurley’s English translation and neither knew French. Another translation is produced in 1999 by Ji Xusheng, also based on the English translation. The most recent translation of all three volumes of *History of Sexuality* appeared between 2000 and 2005 (published as *Xing Jinyan Shi*, literally “The History of Sexual Experiences”), by Yu Biping, Professor of Philosophy at Fudan, who went back to the French original. An important and amongst the first systematic analysis of *History of Sexuality*, with an eye towards the question of sexual liberation in post-communist China, was sexologist Li Yinhe’s *Foucault and Sexuality: Decoding Foucault’s History of Sexuality*.¹⁰⁰ From some of my observations on the historiography of Chinese sexuality in China, there is evidence that the *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* distinction has made a round-trip back to China. The oeuvre of Liu Dalin (1932–) is particularly striking. Liu was the recipient of the Magnus Hirschfeld Medal of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozialwissenschaftliche Sexualforschung in 1994 and was formerly Professor of Sociology at Shanghai University. In 1992 he produced the so-called “China Kinsey Report” of sexual behaviour in China, and upon retirement, set up the “China Sex Museum” (*Zhonghua xing wenhua bowuguan*) in Shanghai in 1999—moving to Tongli in Jiangsu Province in 2001, because the Shanghai authorities did not allow Liu to put up a sign that read “Sex Museum”, concerned apparently with the question of decency and the public display of the word “sex” (*xing*).¹⁰¹ Liu Dalin’s prolific output on the history of sexuality, particularly that of ancient China, has been labelled as “self-orientalising”.¹⁰² It appears that Liu has read Foucault and adopted the *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* distinction. His 2001 book is actually entitled *The History of Sexuality (Xing de lishi)*, which is a history of Chinese sexuality *qua*, simultaneously, the history of repression—with foot-binding, chest-binding and the castration of eunuchs as emblematic of Chinese perversion and brutality—and the history of pleasure-oriented, life-affirming *ars erotica*. Liu Dalin also accepts Robert van Gulik’s romanticisation of ancient Chinese sexuality in *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, and in this regard he contrasts with famous Sinologist Li

⁹⁸ Said (1983, p. 226).

⁹⁹ Patai & Corral (Eds.) (2005). For critiques of Patai and Corral, see Holbo (2007).

¹⁰⁰ Li (2001).

¹⁰¹ China Sex Museum’s website: <http://www.chinasexmuseum.com/jsp/index/> and the so-called “China Kinsey Report” is Liu (1992). See Judith Farquhar’s description of Liu Dalin in Farquhar (2002, pp. 239–241). For a study of the global circulations of theory, using translation and the Turkish intellectual field as a case study, see Susam-Sarajeva (2006). For the Chinese case, see Wang & Sun (Eds.) (2008). For America, see Cusset (2008), Lotringer & Cohen (Eds.) (2001) and Van der Poel & Bartho (1999).

¹⁰² The “self-orientalising” comment comes from Micollier (2005, p. 9). Some of Liu Dalin’s output include: Liu (1993, 1998) entitled *Sexual Life in Past Dynasties in China (Zhongguo lidai fangnei kao)*, a clear reference to van Gulik’s *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, the Chinese title of which is *Zhongguo gudai fangnei kao*; Liu (2001) *History of Sexuality (Xing de lishi)*; Liu (2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

Ling—Chinese translator of *Sexual Life in Ancient China*—and historian of science Jiang Xiaoyuan.¹⁰³

Are there any good reasons for Chinese scholars like Liu Dalin to portray ancient Chinese sexual culture as *ars erotica*, superior to the *scientia sexualis* of the West? It may be related to sexual politics in the present—to contrast Communist sexual repression, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, against the perceived freedom and pleasure that the Chinese in the past enjoyed (barring several “unfortunate” historical developments like foot-binding or the subjugation of women).¹⁰⁴ The claim is that the ancient Chinese had a tradition of erotic play, that this is one of the important aspects of “Chineseness”—a “real” Chinese cultural heritage to be celebrated, revived, displayed and discussed.¹⁰⁵ It is ironic then, to see the *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* distinction becomes part of the “Repression Hypothesis” that Foucault takes apart in *History of Sexuality Volume 1*—in this case the distinction is subsumed in the repression-liberation rhetoric of the Chinese, and in the construction of a “Chinese sexual tradition” that then contributes to the search of Chinese cultural identity, to the things that separate “us Chinese” from “them”.

Foucault’s “China”, van Gulik’s “China” and Needham’s “China” come to impact the writing of “Chinas” here and in China, as if we are all finding ourselves in a cross-cultural hall of funhouse mirrors. Thus the ambition of the Sinography project is to understand these intellectual dynamics—how assumptions concerning the “essential features” of “Chinese civilisation” precede the act of producing knowledge about China. In figuring out whether China is similar or different from the West, we have often already decided that China is similar or different from the West. Reading in a Sino-graphical vein will not only reveal what visions of China we are all carrying with us, it will also confront the politics of re-presentation and identity, and encourage the kind of healthy self-reflexive thinking on the global business of academic writing and theory production which we urgently need.

Note on Romanisation and East Asian Characters

The *pinyin* system of Romanisation has been used throughout this paper, with the exception of (a) a few spellings best known outside of China in another form, (b) names of Taiwanese persons which are often written in the Wade-Giles system.

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¹⁰³ See the Prefaces to the 2007 reprint of *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, translated by Li Ling, Guo Xiaohui and others, published by Shanghai's Commercial Press as *Zhongguo gudai fangnei kao: Zhongguo gudai de xing yu shehui*. For a critique of van Gulik, and of Chinese scholars sympathetic to van Gulik, see Jiang (2005).

¹⁰⁴ For discussions on the question of sex and repression in Maoist China, see Honig (2003) and Zhang (2003).

¹⁰⁵ For the politics of talk of *ars erotica* in China, see Farquhar (2002, pp. 243–284).

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