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# Sex in Chinese Civilization\*

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In view of the universal importance of sex, it is striking, but probably not surprising, to find how few of the original Chinese writings on the subject have survived, and how scant until fairly recently has been the attention paid to it by modern scholars. The first serious study in a Western language is that of van Gulik 1951, reproducing and discussing erotic color prints dating from the Ming dynasty (1368–1643). This was joined ten years later by the much more comprehensive, as well as more readily available, further study by van Gulik 1961, which still remains the standard work on the subject. In recent years there has been an increasing flow of additional publications, some of them serious,<sup>1</sup> others popular and uncritical attempts to capitalize on the current interest in sexual matters. These latter lean heavily on the translations made by predecessors, notably van Gulik, sometimes without giving due acknowledgment.

Among classical Chinese thinkers, only one seems to have had the boldness to recognize the sex drive as a dominant ele-

ment in the human psyche. "Food, sex: that's human nature." So asserted Kao Tzu in his famous debate with the Confucian thinker Mencius (372?–289? B.C.) on the subject of human nature.<sup>2</sup> Mencius, curiously, offers no direct response to this assertion, which makes one wonder if the record of the debate is complete at this point.<sup>3</sup> But there can be no doubt that this reduction of human nature to two instinctual drives, devoid of any metaphysical component, would be thoroughly distasteful to virtually all Confucians. The only conceivable exception might have been Hsün Tzu (ca. 298–ca. 238 B.C.), in view of his denial of any spirituality in heaven and his consequent assertion that human nature in its raw state is "evil," by which he really means uncivilized.

As is true of many Chinese key terms, the word *sê*,<sup>4</sup> translated above as "sex," is ambiguous in that it embraces several meanings, among which "sex" is by no means primary. The basic meaning appears to be "color," from which are successively derived other important meanings, including "countenance," "appearance" (facial), "beauty" (primarily feminine), and hence "sex" (in the sense of feminine allurement). This sequence reveals at once the disapproval usually attached to *sê* when it carries a sexual connotation. Confucius (551–479 B.C.), for example, remarks of the *chün tzu* or true gentleman that "in his time of youth, before his blood and breath have yet become stable, he guards himself against [the temptations of] sex (*sê*)."<sup>5</sup> Legge 1960 and Waley 1938, in order fully to bring out

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\* Presented in abbreviated form at the annual spring meeting of the Society, 20 April 1984. The paper is slightly modified from one of the chapters in an as yet unpublished contribution to the seventh and final volume of Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1954–). The contribution deals with the numerous possible factors—linguistic, intellectual and sociological—that may have helped or hindered the development of science, technology and scientific modes of thinking in China before approximately 1600, when the Jesuits began coming to China, bringing with them European ideas.

the word's unfavorable connotations, both translate it here as "lust," and by and large it is not a word in good repute in the Confucian literature.

Very occasionally, however, *sê* is used in a favorable or at least a neutral sense. When King Hsüan of Ch'i, for example, confesses to Mencius that he suffers from a weakness, namely that he likes *sê*, Mencius replies by citing the example of an early ancestor of the Chou ruling house who also liked *sê* and loved his wife, but saw to it that among his people there would be no dissatisfied women and unmarried men. Mencius assures King Hsüan that if he too were to give his people the conditions for satisfying the liking for *sê*, universal rulership could become his.<sup>6</sup> It can hardly be doubted that *sê* signifies sexual satisfaction here, even though Legge 1960 translates it as "beauty," presumably in the sense of "feminine beauty."

There are many uncertainties and no clear consensus in attempts to evaluate the sexual mores of traditional China. In the first place, there is the question how significant the differences really were between Confucianism, with its strongly patriarchal orientation, and Taoism, with its traditionally greater emphasis on the female side of life. Van Gulik initially maintains that "the difference between the two Schools in their attitude to this subject was only a matter of emphasis, the Confucianists stressing eugenics and the obtaining of offspring, the Taoists stressing the sexual disciplines for prolonging life and for obtaining the Elixir of Immortality." Yet later he seems to contradict himself by saying that "Taoism has been on the whole much more considerate to woman, and has given much more thought to her physical and emotional needs than Confucianism ever did."<sup>7</sup> The latter statement seems to me closer to reality.

Yet granted this greater consideration for women, there still remains room for argu-

ment as to whether the Taoist attitude, at least from a modern point of view, should really be considered "progressive." The major purpose of the Taoist sex manuals was less to ensure pleasure for the participants or engender progeny than to secure long life for the male partner. This the male could achieve by always inducing the sexual satisfaction of his female partner (or partners), in order thereby to absorb into himself the vital power believed to be emitted by the woman at the moment of female orgasm. In order to receive maximum benefit, it was essential for him not to lose his own vital force, as embodied in his semen. His aim, therefore, was to prolong the sex act as much as possible in order to gain maximum benefit from the woman, but at the same time to experience actual ejaculation himself as rarely as possible. It might be argued that frequent stimulation of the male in this way with only very infrequent ultimate satisfaction could be neither physiologically nor psychologically healthy.<sup>8</sup>

Although from the woman's point of view the Taoist insistence on her satisfaction is certainly praiseworthy,<sup>9</sup> doubt arises as soon as we consider its motivation. For as we have seen, it is the man's (not the woman's) vital energy that is to be built up through the prescribed sex hygiene, and the woman's that is to be transferred to the male for this purpose. Thus looked at, the procedure can be, and has been, condemned as a typical example of male selfishness. Thus we are told by Ishihara and Levy (1970, p. 227): "The generalization that the Taoists accepted 'the equality of women with men' . . . is not borne out by the specific texts that we have translated. Our texts show that the woman was manipulated and made to serve man's longevity-salvation objectives." And the specialist on religious Taoism, K. M. Schipper, writes still more forcefully (1969, p. 24) in comment on one of the Taoist texts:

This is only one example of all the methods of extracting the breath and essential female force. The remarkable thing is its absolute selfishness. The woman is without exception considered to be an enemy. Sexual union does not lead to creation by the other [i.e., to joint procreation by the couple]. The semen must be withheld to fortify one's own body, and to create in it the immortal embryo.

Though the Taoist view of sex is thus really far from truly egalitarian, it nevertheless seems miles ahead when compared with the Confucian attitude, which approves of sex for procreation only and regards any overt expressions of affection between the sexes as immoral. The puritanical attitude of early Confucianism could be demonstrated by a great many passages. The following are two taken from the chapter in the *Li chi* (Record of Rites) entitled "Rules for the Household":<sup>10</sup>

Except at sacrifices and funeral rites, they [men and women] do not hand objects to one another. Or if there is such a handing of something, the woman receives it in a basket. And if she have no basket, they both sit down [on the ground], where he puts the thing on the ground and she then picks it up. Whether outside or inside [the house], they do not both go to the same well or same bath. They do not share the same sleeping mat, do not request or borrow things from one another, and do not wear the same kind of clothing.

Men and women do not share the same clothes rack. She [the wife] dare not hang [her clothes] on the husband's rack nor store [her belongings] in her husband's boxes or baskets. She dare not bathe together with him.

Lest we think these and similar passages are perhaps exaggerated, coming as they do from a ritual text, they should be compared with a passage in the *Mencius*<sup>11</sup> in which someone asks Mencius: "Is it the proper practice that a man and woman do not allow their hands to touch when giving or receiving something?" Mencius replies

that it is. The interlocutor then asks whether, in that case, a man should use his hand to rescue his sister-in-law from drowning. Mencius replies that he would be a beast if he did not, for though it is ordinarily proper for man and woman not to touch hands, the use of the hand to rescue a woman is necessitated in this particular case by the emergency. The important point here is not that Mencius granted the permissibility of touching hands in an emergency but rather that he accepted the taboo on hand touching as the accepted mode of behavior under normal circumstances.

One might argue that the Confucian injunctions about relationships between the sexes were either only theoretical and never really expected to be carried out; or that, if originally taken seriously, they failed to be perpetuated; or yet again, that even if they were perpetuated, they were taken seriously only by the small top minority constituting the "scholar-gentry." Without going into the only too familiar details of filial piety, arranged marriage, subordination of wife to husband, domination by her parents-in-law, and so on, I think that each of these assumptions can be disproved by citing a few representative passages from the systematic community studies made in recent times by well-known Chinese anthropologists. In general, the studies deal with rural villages or small towns in which most of the people interviewed are of non-gentry origin. The first passages come from the 1945 account by Martin C. Yang of his native village of about 750 people on the Shantung coast in North China:<sup>12</sup>

The meeting of the engaged boy and girl before marriage is definitely improper.

Unmarried people are not given information about sex. When a daughter is ready for marriage a mother may tell her everything about being a wife except the sexual aspect. A girl may learn something from her brother's wife, but this is unusual and is strictly forbidden in a decent

family. A boy is similarly handicapped. . . . His father, brothers, or uncles do not speak to him of such matters. . . . In general, every couple has to go through a period of trial and error.

Although the couple often achieve a genuine affection for each other after a brief period of living together, they must not let their love be apparent. . . . A young husband must not mention his wife too often. . . . A young wife must also keep from showing that she loves her husband.

In the last thirty or forty years, there has been only one case of divorce. The wife had become pregnant [through someone else] before her marriage.

In Taitou there have been only two cases in which men married, or simply took, widows.

The next passages come from Fei Hsiao-t'ung's famous study, made in the 1930s, of a town of slightly under fifteen hundred persons located in the lower Yangtze valley, not far south of the T'ai Lake in Kiangsu:<sup>13</sup>

Before the birth of the child, her husband, at least overtly, is indifferent to her. He will not mention her in conversation. Even in the house, in everyone's presence, if he shows any intimate feeling for his wife it will be considered improper and consequently will become a topic for gossiping. Husband and wife do not sit near each other and very seldom talk to each other in that situation. Rather they talk through a third party. . . . But when a child is born, the husband can refer to his wife as the mother of his child. Thereafter, they can converse freely and behave naturally towards each other.

The people are prejudiced against any intimate relations of a woman with a man outside wedlock. To prevent such a possibility prenuptial chastity is strictly maintained by social disapproval of any intimate association between grown-up girls and boys. . . . Adultery of married women is still more grave. Husbands, in theory, can murder the adulterers with impunity. But in practice it is seldom done.

Our final examples come from the field study (1941-43) made by Francis L. K. Hsü of a fair-sized town (some eight thousand persons) located in western Yunnan, not far from the wartime Burma Road, but two

to three weeks by foot from Yunnan's capital, Kunming:<sup>14</sup>

If a girl were known to have been mixed up in any clandestine affair, her only chance of marriage would be to go to some distant village or to Kunming, where no one would know her history.

In her second marriage a woman is a dishonored object. The marriage may touch off the wrath of the gods as well as the spirit of her departed husband.

The development of a close relationship between the sexes is considered detrimental to the supremacy of filial piety. . . . Women must not be attractive to men and must not display their personal charms. . . . Sex is considered unclean, and women carry the burden of this uncleanness. That is why there are various taboos on mothers who have just given birth and on women during menstruation. . . . Women are inferior to men and must assume a strictly subordinate role.

The culture says to the male: No upright man shows signs of intimacy in public with any woman, not even his wife; your primary duty is toward your parents. . . . It says to the female: To be attractive to men is unnatural. . . . It is shameful to be sexually attractive, even to your husband. . . . Your main duty is toward your parents-in-law. . . . While the gratification of sex in the physiological sense is not barred, all possible awareness of it is to be eliminated, and all secondary expressions, such as tenderness of feeling and mutual possessiveness which are normally associated with sex, are to be banned.

The values and practices here described can hardly be regarded as other than constituting a very repressive Confucian brand of sexual puritanism.<sup>15</sup> The cited passages, which could readily be multiplied from other sources, demonstrate the persistence down to recent years in rural China of a view of life which, despite its general acceptance by almost all members of the population, must have created untold suffering over the ages, both physiologically and psychologically.<sup>16</sup> In saying this, I wish in no way to assume an attitude of superiority. As I fully recognize, sexual repression,

cruelty, ignorance and inequality have been widespread in most or all of the so-called "higher" civilizations during the greater part of their history. They have by no means disappeared from modern Western society, despite its recent sexual permissiveness.

About Confucianism it has often been stated, and is no doubt true, that it accepts sex as entirely "natural" and morally permissible as long as it is performed within the bonds of matrimony and primarily for purposes of procreation. Hsü's insistence, therefore, that the people of the town studied by him regarded sex as unclean seems at first sight puzzling.<sup>17</sup> But I believe that the idea of uncleanliness has a Buddhist origin and that its prominence in Hsü's Yunnan town reflects the amalgamation of Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist ethics that has dominated the thinking of ordinary Chinese during the past several centuries. This interpretation is confirmed by Wolfram Eberhard's study of Chinese concepts of guilt and sin,<sup>18</sup> for which he analyzed a considerable number of popular moral tracts (*shan shu*, lit., "good writings"), most of them modern (nineteenth and twentieth centuries), but in one case going back to a Buddhist tract of the sixth century. The influence of Buddhism in these writings is of course very strong, but Taoist and Confucian ideas are also conspicuous, the latter increasingly so in the more recent tracts. The tracts stress the uncleanliness of body functions and of sex, and prescribe so many taboos on the latter that according to Eberhard's calculation, only some one hundred days in the year were recognized as auspicious for sex relations. Eberhard's conclusion (1967, 80-81) is:

If one had to keep all these rules constantly in mind and had to be afraid that in any case of violation either his health would be destroyed, or miscarriages would occur, or children with bad character qualities would be born, or the deities would be offended and mete out punish-

ments, Chinese sex life could not have been very "natural" and sexual inhibitions and fears must have been quite strong from fairly early medieval times down to the present.

The great unknown quantity is the extent to which these prohibitions were really heeded. Hsü (1948, 151-152) noted similar moral tracts in circulation in his Yunnan town, and found that some twenty-one birthdays of gods and goddesses were annually taboo to sexual intercourse. However, most of his informants confessed to having failed to observe or forgotten one or another of the tabooed dates at one time or another. Nonetheless it can hardly be gainsaid that the Buddhist view of sex must have reinforced Confucian puritanism, especially among the less well educated sectors of the population for whom the moral tracts were especially designed.

Before we leave this topic, note should be taken of the insistence with which three otherwise somewhat disparate groups of writings (two Chinese, one European) all proclaim the need for sexual taboos. On the Chinese side, the writings include not only the just-mentioned moral tracts but also the sex manuals of early imperial centuries; on the other side of Eurasia, they comprise several penitential pronouncements of the Christian church in medieval Ireland. Perhaps it is unsurprising that such religiously-oriented penitentials, like the similarly-oriented moral tracts of China, should view sex as sinful or potentially sinful and hence attempt limitations on its practice. More remarkable, however, are the similar restraints demanded by the Chinese sex manuals, despite their non-religious character and strongly favorable views of sex. No doubt the motivations of the three groups differed (for example, correct sex hygiene was a major concern of the manuals but not of the other writings), as did the particular days they specified. Yet the net result in each case was the same: the imposition on married couples of

sexual prohibitions variously ranging from somewhat under two-thirds to well over two-thirds of the days in each year.<sup>19</sup>

Let us turn now to the question of possible historical changes in Chinese sexual attitudes. It is a major thesis in van Gulik's 1961 study of Chinese sexual life that Confucian puritanism assumed prominence only from the thirteenth century (late Sung dynasty) onward, and became an obsession only during the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1911), when the Chinese "showed a nearly frantic desire to keep their sexual life secret from all outsiders." Before the thirteenth century, he maintains, the ancient sex manuals continued to be widely studied, the separation of the sexes was not strictly enforced, and sexual relations were freely talked and written about. Van Gulik even goes so far as to attribute the change in attitude to a very specific historical experience: the hiding by Chinese householders of their women from the Mongol soldiers who were billeted among them when the Mongols were conquering the country in the mid-thirteenth century. "One suspects," he writes, "that it was during this period that the germs of Chinese prudery came into existence."<sup>20</sup>

I am very sceptical that a change in thinking of this magnitude, if indeed it was as great as van Gulik indicates, could have been sparked by such a relatively short-lived situation. Rather I believe that it was part of a much longer and slower process of social and intellectual change which had begun already in late T'ang (618–906) or early Sung (960–1279) times and continued into and beyond the Mongol period. Van Gulik himself points to indications of change in sexual attitudes beginning long before the Mongol invasion. One was the growing practice of female footbinding (tenth century onward), which brought dancing by women to an end. Another was the change in feminine fashion which began during the Southern Sung (1126–1279), re-

sulting in the formerly bare throats and lowcut bosoms of the ladies being covered by a short jacket which was worn under the outer robe and buttoned in front with a high tight collar.<sup>21</sup>

Intellectually, the growth of prudishness can hardly be divorced from the rise of Neo-Confucianism (eleventh century onward). Specifically, Ch'eng Yi (1033–1108), the man who more than any other started the school which Chu Hsi (1130–1200) brought to completion, was apparently a single-minded and humorless man, an ascetic and a true puritan. In the words of a modern Chinese scholar, Ch'eng "was stern and arrogant; unblessed with an aesthetic sense, he self-righteously refused to join any gathering devoted to the enjoyment of art"; on one occasion, when invited by a colleague to drink tea and see paintings, "he declined, saying that he never drank tea and did not know anything about paintings."<sup>22</sup>

Ch'eng Yi was more responsible than anyone else for strengthening the social convention (it was not a law) denying remarriage to widows (but not of course to widowers). The following is his famous interchange on the subject with an interlocutor, as included (and therefore approved) by Chu Hsi in his Neo-Confucian anthology, the *Chin-ssu lu* (Reflections on Things at Hand):<sup>23</sup>

*Question:* "According to principle, it seems that one should not marry a widow. What do you think?"

*Answer:* "Correct. Marriage is a match. If one takes someone who has lost her moral integrity to be his own match, it means he himself has lost his integrity."

*Further question:* "In some cases the widows are all alone, poor, and with no one to depend on. May they remarry?"

*Answer:* "This theory has come about only because people of later generations are afraid of freezing or starving to death. But to starve to death is an extremely small matter. To lose one's integrity . . . is an extremely serious matter."

It is not surprising that Wing-tsit Chan, translator of the *Chin-ssu lu*, comments here: "This is perhaps the most extreme statement in the *Chin-ssu lu*, the most controversial, and, in the twentieth century, the most condemned."

Despite the evidence of growing sexual repression from Sung times onward, however, I believe it would be a mistake to underestimate the considerable degree of repression that must have existed previously. First of all, we have seen that the sexual views of classical Confucianism were essentially just as repressive as those of Neo-Confucianism; the one real difference was the greater effectiveness with which the Confucian ethic was universalized during the Neo-Confucian period (though, as indicated above, there was a considerable admixture of Buddhist and Taoist ideas on the popular level). Even before Neo-Confucianism, however, the influence of Confucian values was always enormous, especially in fields like law and administration where the government exercised immediate control.

A striking example is the provision in the T'ang penal code of 653 imposing one year of penal servitude on married couples who conceived a child during the standard twenty-seven months of mourning required upon the death of a parent of the husband. Perhaps this article was not consistently enforced, and there is some evidence that it was intended primarily for members of officialdom rather than the populace at large. Even so it was an extraordinary attempt to legislate sexual morality, and one that remained on the statute books of successive dynasties until its abolition in 1374 by the founder of the Ming dynasty, who said that it ran counter to the dictates of human nature.<sup>24</sup>

In the second place, any weaknesses in pre-Sung Confucianism were compensated for by the corresponding strength of Buddhism which, as indicted above, re-

garded sex as unclean. Buddhist asceticism and Confucian prudery, for example, were equally scandalized by the communal sex practices current among certain Taoist groups around 400. The result was a counter-movement which had made great inroads into this kind of Taoism by the middle of the sixth century and led to its disappearance by the seventh.<sup>25</sup>

More significant are two long-lasting phenomena which, I believe, sharply distinguish China from most other high civilizations. The first is the virtual absence of any tradition of dancing between the sexes. The dancing noted by van Gulik as having been halted by the rise of footbinding was not heterosexual at all, but a solo accomplishment performed by courtesans for the delectation of their male admirers. As such, it was part of the catering to male needs, and had nothing to do with egalitarianism between the sexes. Equally solo were the dances sometimes performed by female characters in stage plays (where, however, during much of the Ch'ing dynasty, female roles were always performed by men). On the other hand, the group dances performed in Confucian temples on the occasion of sacrifices to the sage or in conjunction with other ceremonies belonging to the state cult were apparently always restricted to males. Only by going back to the Chou dynasty (trad. 1122-256 B.C.) and pre-Chou times, and to the peasant mating festivals which Granet 1932 postulated for that epoch, does the possibility arise that dances may then have occurred involving both men and women. But even this is speculation, and if such dances did exist, they are not recorded and had probably virtually disappeared by the creation of the Chinese empire in 221 B.C. All of this is puzzling in view of the existence down to modern times of heterosexual dancing among many of the tribespeople—the Miao, Lolo and others—scattered through south and southwest China. The significance of the dance in Chinese

culture is a little-explored subject which would repay further study.<sup>26</sup>

Another major feature that distinguishes China sharply from the Indo-European (but not the Semitic) civilizations is the almost total absence of any tradition of nudism in art. Wellnigh no indication of it can be found in early Chinese religious art, and when, in late imperial times (especially during the Ming), nude male and female figures are portrayed in various acts of love in the secular erotic paintings and blockprint illustrations known as "spring pictures" (*ch'un hua*), one cannot but be struck by their aesthetic crudity, painful literalness, anatomical clumsiness, and general unattractiveness.<sup>27</sup> Phallicism existed in prehistoric and early historic China; for example, the upright pointed ancestral tablets were probably of phallic origin. Yet already by late Chou times the original symbolism had probably been largely forgotten, and though traces of phallicism (and a corresponding cult of the female sex organ) sometimes occur much later, their manifestations were generally kept *sub rosa*.<sup>28</sup>

The overall conclusion of this article, then, is that the prevailing Chinese attitude toward sex during the greater part of imperial history was repressive, puritanical and masculine. Perhaps the sexual conventions were somewhat looser for the unlettered masses than for the gentry, yet Confucian prudery, supplemented by Buddhist asceticism, seems to have been remarkably widespread among all social classes. Even the Taoist manuals and practices, enlightened though they seem by comparison, reflect a society in which the male always held first place. Even at their peak they probably reached only a tiny fraction of the total population, and long before the coming of Neo-Confucianism they had been largely suppressed and destroyed.

During the latter part of the Ming (1368–1643) there seems to have been something

of a reaction against the rigors of Neo-Confucian puritanism. This is evidenced by the appearance of erotic literature of which the novel, *Chin P'ing Mei*, is the supreme example, as well as the graphically frank "spring pictures." Yet these were probably all produced for, and reflected the lives of, only a small, well-to-do urban class which was predominantly mercantile. This is certainly true of the *Chin P'ing Mei* itself (whose male protagonist is a merchant), and the "spring pictures" equally unmistakably portray a life of great luxury within large urban households containing numerous concubines and servants. This fact is made especially plain when, as in some cases, the pictures show the master of the household extending his favors to two or even three women simultaneously.

Finally, what is the relevance of all this to science, especially Chinese science? Unfortunately, it is very difficult to give a firm answer. I myself would be happy if it could be demonstrated with assurance that sexual emancipation (but *not* unbridled license), together with religious diversity, political democracy, and the rise of modern science, are *all* equally parts of a single spectrum labelled "freedom." Unfortunately, at least as far as sex is concerned, such assurance is apparently not yet possible.

A large and often repetitive book was published in 1934 to demonstrate that sexual repression is a prerequisite for the cultural flowering of a tribe, people or nation. The author (Unwin 1934) based his findings on the study of eighty "uncivilized" societies, to which he added the Sumerians, Babylonians, Hellenes, Romans, Anglo-Saxons and English as "civilized" peoples. For each group he measured on a numerical scale its degree of sexual freedom, using as his criterion the extent to which prenuptial chastity and postnuptial sexual denial (outside of the legitimate marital relationship) were insisted upon by the society in ques-

tion for its women. (Significantly, he did not apply this criterion to men.) Against these measurements he then attempted to measure the degree of cultural creativeness of the given society. His conclusion was that imposed sexual limitations result in sublimation which in turn generates what he called "social energy." In his own words: "A society which displays *productive social energy* [italics in original] develops the resources of its habitat and by increasing its knowledge of the material universe bends nature to its will."<sup>29</sup>

From this he went on to say that the continuation and intensification of sexual checks for at least three generations leads to a further unparalleled outpouring of energy (exemplified in only three of his selected societies—the Athenians, Romans and English):<sup>30</sup>

Under the influence of still greater sexual checks, the society bursts its boundaries, conquers, slays, subdues, and explores; but, if this intense continence remains part of the inherited tradition for two generations, the energy increases abundantly, changes its form. . . . The society . . . exhibits a terrific mental energy that is manifest in the arts and sciences, refines its craftsmanship . . . exerts considerable power over its environment.

One regrets that the author did not reduce the number of obscure tribes in his study and correspondingly increase the number of higher civilizations. Had he included at least China, he would have found that this country perfectly fitted his criterion of strict prenuptial chastity and limited postnuptial sexual opportunity outside of marriage, and did so over a period ten or twenty times as long as his specified three generations. Would he have found that it too therefore "conquered, slayed, subdued, explored," and "bent nature to its will"?

Quite the contrary thesis was advanced more recently in a study specifically on science (Feuer 1963), which one reviewer

has described as "simple-minded, one-sided, frequently ignorant, and stimulating."<sup>31</sup> Feuer's general thesis is that sexual freedom is a primary ingredient in the movement for general intellectual freedom out of which, he believes, modern science arose. To support this thesis, he makes a frontal attack on the theory of the interrelation between English Puritanism and science, especially as formulated in Merton 1970. As he does so, however, he rather unexpectedly admits that Puritanism *was*, after all, helpful to science; not, however, because of its religious asceticism, but because its spirit of revolt won freedom from institutions, ideas and persons. "We might state the matter concisely by saying that it was the Protestant politic, not the Protestant ethic, which lent a helping hand to the scientific movement."<sup>32</sup>

It is a pity that the author did not include Victorian England in his discussion, because this would seem to have been an age of intense sexual repression which nevertheless somehow achieved great scientific and technological progress. Concerning China and Japan, which he does discuss, his conclusion is that

it is in this repression of the emotional energies, this thwarting of the natural direction of sexuality, that the primary cause for the failure of Asian civilization [i.e. the civilizations of China and Japan] to produce a sustained scientific method will be found.<sup>33</sup>

Some of his remarks in support of this thesis reveal insight,<sup>34</sup> others only ignorance or misunderstanding.<sup>35</sup> Worst of all are certain comments on Chinese psychological attitudes. For example, he asserts that "all the classical schools of Chinese philosophy were affected by self-defeat and renunciation; all looked upon nature through the masochistic mode of resignation"; he finds that a "feeling of profound doubt and despair" has been a persistent theme in Confucian writings; and, for him, cyclical

conceptions of history are "always a projection of pessimism."<sup>36</sup>

Thus we reach the end of this article, unhappily unable to achieve a clearcut conclusion. In China, where the attitude to sex was generally repressive, a modern science failed to arise. In India, where the social life of all periods was characterized by "vigorous sexuality,"<sup>37</sup> a modern science likewise failed to arise. In Europe, where sexual habits changed greatly from one age to another, a modern science did arise. It almost seems as if sex, despite its overwhelming importance for the individual, may after all not be such a decisive factor

in the development of societies, including their scientific development.

Yet of this we cannot be really certain as long as the historical aspects of the subject still await really adequate study, not only in China but elsewhere. Meanwhile, though one may not agree with Kao Tzu's apparent belief that food and sex make up the whole of human nature, there is no question that they constitute an extremely important part—so much so that despite our concluding uncertainty, sex could not possibly be omitted from any serious consideration of the psychological/intellectual background of premodern Chinese science.

#### NOTES

1. For example, Beurdeley 1969 (important for its illustrations but often loose in its scholarship) and Ishihara and Levy 1970 (an annotated translation of a Chinese sex manual preserved in the *Ishimpō*, a Japanese medical work of 982). On female footbinding—an important aspect of Chinese sexual mores—see the monograph by Levy 1966.
2. See the *Mencius*, 6a.4; trans. Legge 1960, 2: 397.
3. The comment on the subject by I. A. Richards (1932, 50) is no doubt too caustic: "The initial inarticulation of Kao Tzu's statement, 'Food, Sex, Nature,' need not detain us once we have realized how foreign to our own ways of thinking any thought which is satisfied with it must be."
4. Constituting, in its written form, no. 139 among the 214 basic radicals or keys under which all Chinese written characters are classified.
5. *Lun yü* or *Analects* of Confucius, 16.7; trans. Legge 1960, 1: 312–313, and Waley 1938, 205–206, modified.
6. *Mencius*, 1b.5; trans. Legge 1960, 2: 163–164.
7. Van Gulik 1961, 78 and 84.
8. This situation could be bettered to some extent by the Taoist-sanctioned practice of "making the semen return," i.e., at the moment of ejaculation, pressing the urethra so as to divert the seminal excretion into the bladder, whence it would be later voided with excreted urine. The Taoists supposed that in this way the seminal essence was caused to ascend and rejuvenate the upper part of the body.
9. This opinion is also expressed in van Gulik 1961, e.g. 84, in contrast to van Gulik 1961, where the estimate of Taoist theories is less favorable.
10. Ch. 10; trans. Legge 1885, 27: 454–455 (first passage) and 470 (second passage), modified.
11. 4a.17; trans. Legge 1960, 2: 307.
12. Yang 1945, 109, 114, 54, 116 and 118 respectively.
13. Fei 1939, 47 (both passages).
14. Hsü 1948, 98, 104, 207 and 246.
15. How fanatical this puritanism could be is shown by the 1943 episode reported by Hsü 1948, 27 and 225, of the young man who had returned to his town in Yunnan from Hong Kong (where he had obviously picked up new ideas), and who, together with his bride, had a bucket of human excrement thrown over his head because they were walking down the street holding hands.
16. It should be noted, however, that what Hsü 1948 calls the "estrangement between the sexes" could, as he points out (247–248), be more rigidly adhered to in wealthy homes, where all necessary work was performed by servants, than in the homes of the poor, where man and wife were commonly obliged to do hard work in cooperation, and where therefore the relations between them were necessarily less formal.
17. Besides his statement in the next-to-last of the passages quoted above, he writes on 151 of his 1948 study: "Sexual intercourse, as well as everything that is connected with it, is unclean."
18. Eberhard 1967, esp. 64–65 and 80–81.
19. The Chinese moral tracts accepted only some 100 days annually as auspicious for sex relations, which means that they regarded the remaining 265 days or so as inauspicious. There is a striking numerical agreement here with the days of abstinence enunciated in some of the Irish penitentials: approximately 260, for example, in one of the oldest, the Penitential of Cummean (mid-seventh century), whose prohibited days included Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday of each week, as well as a 40-day period preceding each Easter and Christmas and following each Whitsunday. See Bieler 1963, 117, translating the Penitential of Cummean from Latin, chap. 2, paragraph 30. In the Chinese sex manuals, the tabooed days are somewhat fewer: 200 and more annually,

- including the first and last days of each lunar month, the days of full and quarter moon, days in the recurring Chinese cycle of 60, and so on. See Maspero 1981, 531-533.
20. For this paragraph, see van Gulik 1961, esp. xi-xii, 22, 237 and 245-246. The two quotations appear on xi and 246 respectively.
  21. Van Gulik 1961, 222 and 237.
  22. See Li Chi 1972, 57.
  23. Chap. 6, sect. 13; trans. Wing-tsit Chan 1967, 177 (slightly modified) and, for the comment by Chan which follows below, xxv.
  24. See Bodde and Morris 1967, 39. The law itself is article 7 in book 12 of the T'ang code, and is also referred to in art. 2 of bk. 3 (the context of which is the basis for the supposition that the law may have been applicable primarily to officialdom). The Ming founder, when he abolished the law, could very well have cited the dictum of Kao Tzu as quoted at the beginning of this paper, but of course he did not do so.
  25. See Maspero 1981, 533-541.
  26. The brief and poorly documented study in H. A. Giles (1914, 119-131) is only an introduction to the subject. Much more scholarly are Max Kaltenmark (1963) and S. Kuchera (1977), the former on sacred dances in China, the latter on a particular kind of dance (the *ch'i p'an wu* or "dance of the seven plates") performed for entertainment purposes by a few highly skilled professionals, mostly women. Neither article controverts the point here being made, namely that dancing between the sexes was virtually unknown in traditional Chinese civilization.
  27. See the many illustrations in van Gulik 1951 and Beurdeley 1969.
  28. See Karlgren 1930 and 1942, and Ling Shunsheng 1959a and 1959b. Nudity was occasionally practiced for magical or religious reasons (e.g., the exposure of naked shamesses to the sun in order to induce rainfall). The subject has been admirably treated in Schafer 1951.
  29. Unwin 1934, 314.
  30. Unwin 1934, 431.
  31. This is the first sentence in the review of Feuer 1963 by Fleming 1965.
  32. Feuer 1963, 228. Merton's new preface to the 1970 reprint of his book (originally published in 1938) contains several pages (xxiv-xxvii) of rebuttal, in which, among other things, Merton finds Feuer guilty in one passage of having misquoted him (Merton) slightly but significantly.
  33. Feuer 1963, 253.
  34. As on individualism or the compatibility of Taoism with science, for which see Feuer 1963, 248 and 256.
  35. As when he compares the Chinese attitude to law with the English preference for common law (ignoring the fact that the Chinese compiled massive law codes for each major dynasty), or suggests that the mechanism of the Chinese political thinkers known as Legalists might have been as conducive to science as the mechanism of seventeenth-century European philosophy (ignoring the Legalists' almost complete lack of interest in the natural world). See Feuer 1963, 251 and 253.
  36. Feuer 1963, 257-258. Cyclical conceptions of history, although prominent in Chinese historiography and philosophy, are by no means the only Chinese ways of viewing time.
  37. Basham 1959, 170.

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