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SOCIETY ENTERTAINMENT ART FASHION BEAUTY LIVING HEALTH SEX & RELATIONSHIPS LGBTQ+ CURATED BY

Sofia Stiletano Feb 13

## Let's Talk - Millenary Civilizations and Sexual Act Depictions

Sex and specifically pleasure during sex has been taboo for a long period of modern western history. But has it always been like this? Actually, numerous ancient civilizations appear to have had a more organic connection with sex.

How can we say this? As Reay Tannahill explains in her book, Sex In History, we 21st century people are lucky enough to have records of decorative objects, artworks and texts that prove this point.

Why sex has been taboo for a long period of time? We can only infer that something must have been lost in the path to “modernization”. In order to try to bring a little bit of light to this matter today, we will be talking about Chinese “sex manuals”.

### A little bit of history

China was ruled by the Ming dynasty from 1368 to 1644 CE. The Ming court was very supportive of artists. It was the first time in approximately 240 years a Chinese dynasty was ruling the land. Until 1368 CE, Mongol emperors ruled over Chinese territory. Therefore, the early Ming rulers were interested in restoring the cultural-artistic supremacy of the past.

Literature adopted different shapes during the Ming dynasty, such as poetry, colophons, manuals (of taste or social conventions) and simple texts accompanying paintings. Subjects that were considered to be of interest to society were often discussed by scholars and literati, with books consequently published. Visual artists were inspired by these texts (among others) and created images based on those ideas and stories.

Regarding religion, the Ming lifestyle was to some extent determined by its moral principles, which referred to how people should conduct themselves. During this period, different religions coexisted in the same region. However, it is also true that there have been periods during Chinese history when

one form of religion was patronized by the emperor or became more popular than others. These values influenced art.

For example, according to Jacques Pimpaneau (a French sinologist and professor), in ancient China, a link between eroticism and sin didn't exist. Pimpaneau emphasizes the idea that for Buddhism, an individual would not be condemned to "hell" for all eternity per their deeds but he/she could spend some time there. After they had received the "adequate punishment" (whatever that may be), the reincarnation cycle would restart. Therefore, eroticism would be related to "sin" only because it would be the reason why one could divert from behaving properly in life.

The author claims that founded on Confucian practices, which gave structure to the family, limits were put to sex. As for Taoism, since safeguarding and prolonging life was a main concern, the sexual act was regarded as natural, like food, and had to be respected because it was part of nature. Moreover, Taoists attached no taboo to eroticism, whose only disadvantage as far as they could see was that it was likely to suck vital energy from individuals and thus compromise the lifespan. They also understood that the Ying and the Yang were made to be released and transformed, and without sexual encounters, it would be retained and blocked. Therefore, even at an advanced age, sexual encounters should occur. If not, longevity would be compromised as the human spirit would feel agitated.

According to Robert Van Gulik (Dutch diplomat and Orientalist from the twentieth century), contemporary literary evidence shows that prudery was practically nonexistent before and during the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). This practice began to be accepted in society in the Song (960-1279 CE) period when, during a re-examination of the ancient Confucianist classics, some archaic taboos relative to the separation of the sexes were re-interpreted by scholars. This attitude relaxed during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 CE), and frivolous amusement emerged so the Chinese drama and the erotic novel flourished.

Subsequently, the Ming dynasty brought a revival of the national culture, including its many taboos and inhibitions relative to sex. However, towards the end of this period, from about 1570, aspects of the refined scholars' cultured life, including their sex habits, were made a subject of discussion among literati and artists. It is during this period, Van Gulik says, that the erotic picture albums were created.

During the Ming period, principles of sex manuals were practiced in China. Moreover, they had a powerful influence in regulating sexual life. However, It is believed that this literary genre was not a popular public discussion theme, as it was during the Song dynasty.

In general, the topics included in sex-related manuals mentioned the following themes (among others):

The origin of intercourse and its benefits;

Sexual positions and their use;

Descriptions about female genital organs and the importance of pleasure;

How to benefit a woman health by stimulating her Yin essence;

Penis size and other descriptions regarding its use;

The right number of times men of different ages should ejaculate;

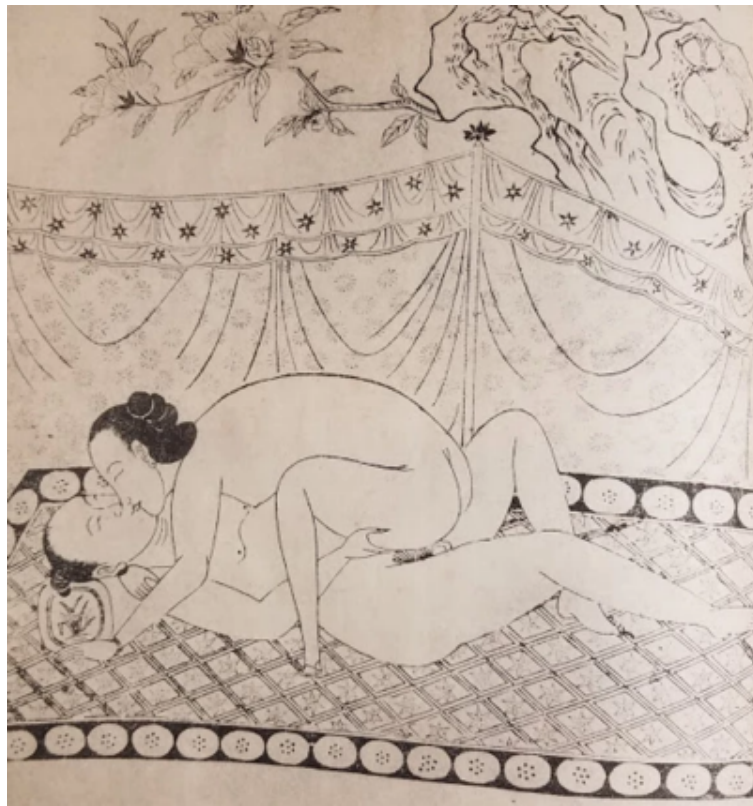
How intercourse can strengthen the male vital essence;

How to procreate;

When is the best time to conceive children;

The knowledge that the head of the family collected through his sexual activity “peak years” to guide and instruct his children. Such documents known as chia-hsün (instructions for the family) were originally created for the author's own family, but many became famous in Chinese literature;

With the hope of providing more depth to the topic that we have been discussing, the following are some examples of images published in ancient manuals.



From Erotic Colour Prints of The Ming Period by R.H. Van Gulik (1951)

This image is part of the printing block of the erotic album “Hua Ying Chin Chen”, dated circa 16th or 17th century CE. This was originally an edition in color. During the Ming period, the arts flourished, and family was an important part of Chinese culture, as were proper moral values. Therefore, Van Gulik suggests that the development of this kind of sexual book appears to be expected as a consequence of the importance of the relationship between men and women.

In this image, it is possible to see a couple actively involved in a sexual act. They are both lying on a carpet in what appears to be a garden. This can be inferred because of the rocks and trees that appear behind a curtain, giving the couple some kind of privacy. The natural scenery organizes the scene by redirecting the attention to the young lovers.



From Gardens of Pleasure: Eroticism and Art in China by Ferdinand Bertholet (2003)

This image is part of a series from an unknown artist, formerly in the collection of C.T. Loo. This collection consists of eight paintings. Their dimensions are 55.5 x 39.5 cm. They were made with ink and color (made from finely powdered minerals, such as malachite, lapis lazuli and vermillion) on silk. It is thought that the series dates from circa the 17th century.

This painting depicts a couple sitting over a floor mat, looking at an illustration book in a garden scenery. The woman has the upper half of her body covered with a red piece of textile; thus the lower half of her body is uncovered, giving a hint to the viewer of what has just happened or what may happen shortly. Her feet are banded, as it was considered a status symbol and a mark of beauty. The man is holding the illustration book (possibly a sex manual) and is showing its content to his partner.

The artist paid special attention to the plants and flowers in the garden. In the center of the piece, a low table holds a greenish & blueish vase containing some flowers – which resemble peonies. A vase with a peony is said to represent peace. Moreover, it also represents prosperity as peonies are a symbol often associated with wealth and rank. Therefore, it could be possible to infer that this image represents a couple of lovers that have a prosperous and happy future in front of them.



Gardens of Pleasure: Eroticism and Art in China by Ferdinand Bertholet (2003)

This picture also belongs to the C.T. Loo collection. In this case, you can see a couple embraced and actively involved in a sexual act. The woman lying on her back is holding the man's head with her left hand when she lifts her left leg over his back. Although they are almost fully dressed, it is possible to glimpse that the woman's left foot is bound and that the man is dressed in a blue textile.

As for the natural scenery, a prunus tree — often related to happiness — is depicted at the upper right corner of the scene. The fact that it is starting to show some flower blossoms means that spring is coming. Below this tree it's possible to visualize a green ceramic bowl containing fruits, which may be peaches, pomegranates, or citron fruits. These types of fruits are often employed to represent good wishes such as abundance, blessings, or longevity.

These manuals show us an attitude of acceptance towards sex. We can appreciate that sexualization does not rule over sex education. As Van Gulik mentions in his book Sexual Life in Ancient China "sexual relations, seen as the human equivalent of the cosmic creative process, were regarded with respect and were not associated with the idea of moral guilt or sin."

Artistic heritage often represents a shortcut to a different way of living, even forgotten ways of life. Motifs trespass time and are hopefully carried on to future generations. They tell a story about a particular culture and serve as a tool to understand history. Discussing the past gives us the possibility to ask questions and better understand where we stand today.