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The Somaesthetic Dimension of the Chinese Qi Erotics

Commentary: Richard Shusterman,
Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love
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Richard Shusterman is not the first scholar in the West who introduces sex and sexuality in the Chinese tradition. Other scholars engaged in this theme include Robert van Gulik,¹ Michel Foucault,² Douglas Wile,³ and Fang Fu Ruan.⁴ Nevertheless, Shusterman is the first one who brings the topic from the perspective of somaesthetics and within a bigger context: the classical arts of love in different cultures. It should be noted that sex or sexuality has received little attention in the history of Western philosophy, and it is still not an easy topic to address in philosophical discourse today in the face of “the somatic turn” in recent decades.

In contrast, sexual representation with reference to body consciousness has always been an important part of the Chinese philosophical and religious tradition, and Daoism in particular, as remarkably presented by Shusterman in the chapter “Chinese Qi Erotics: The Beauty of Health and the Passion for Virtue” (AE, 150–94).

1) Robert H. van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003).

2) Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Volume 1 of the History of Sexuality (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 59–60.

3) Douglas Wile, *Art of the Bedchamber: The Chinese Sexual Yoga Classics Including Women’s Solo Meditation Texts* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1992).

4) Fang Fu Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1991).

The term “*qi*-erotics” coined by Shusterman reflects well the unique nature of Chinese cultural interpretations of sexual practice in terms of a lived experience that combines *ars erotica* with a sexological science of health. In the Daoist context, for example, sexuality is never just sex; it is an integral part of physical, mental, and spiritual cultivation and perfection. Practitioners believe that by performing these sexual arts, one can stay in good health, attain longevity, and spiritual advancement. This is the reason why early sex manuals in China are often related to the practice of the “internal alchemy” (*neidan* 內丹), where the human body is said to become a *ding* 鼎 or cauldron in which what is called “the three treasures” or the “three primal *pneumas*,” that is to say: essence, (*jing* 精) life breaths (*qi* 氣), and spirit or somatic/spiritual soul (*shen* 神) are cultivated and transformed. According to Daoist sexology, *jing* is connected to the kidney, thus influences the repositories of sexual and reproductive energy. *Shen* or “spirit” in Daoism should not be understood as “soul” that is separated from the body; instead, it is more like an “unconscious quasi-body” linked to the meridian system and the Daoist physiological alchemy.

In Daoist meditative practice, the “three treasures” are regarded as the procreative power, life-sustaining power, and spiritual power respectively. Although the flow of the *qi*-energy in meditation does not always correspond to the body’s physiological dimensions, it still can influence them and direct them towards the external world. Accordingly, instead of encouraging instinctual impulses or sensual pleasures, Daoists speak more of controlling one’s sexual desires and cultivating and harmonizing that energy for the sake of longevity and spiritual well-being. Sex practices are also known as “joining energy” or “the joining of the essences.” The harmonization of sexuality is called *heqi* 合氣 meaning the “unification of *qi*-energies” or *he yinyang* 合陰陽 (meaning the unification of *yin* or earth and *yang* or heaven), which harmonizes all aspects of internal energy flow, and by which the body is used as a site to achieve a cosmological balance. Sexual union as such is viewed as the commencement: the beginning of nature as well as human society which is, for Daoists, a prerequisite for attaining the Dao/Way with the greater scale of life.

It has been well-known to the readers in the West that Daoism is closely associated with the Chinese *ars erotica* tradition and the works by van Gulik reflects this point well.⁵ Yet, the “art of bedchamber” (*fang-zhongshu* 房中術), as Shusterman indicates, concerns the “technique” or “skill” rather than “art” in a distinctive aesthetic sense (AE, 153). The Chinese word *shu* 術 denotes the meaning of “techniques,” “skills,” or “methods,” and thus the “art of bedchamber” is usually put in the genre of medical books. For example, the “Health Benefits of the Bedchamber” (<房中補益>), an essay written by Sun Simiao (孫思邈, 581 AD–682 AD) – a famous physician and Daoist practitioner in the Tang dynasty – links the sex act to health and wellbeing. It is included later in the Daoist canon. Van Gulik’s *Erotic Color Prints of the Ming* has also cited some chapters from the essay.⁶ Another sex manual, the *Record of Nourishing Nature and Extending Life* (《養性延命錄》) written by Tao Hongjing (陶弘景, 456 AD–536 AD), a Daoist master and pharmacologist of Northern and Southern dynasties (420 AD–589 AD), also emphasizes the importance of health in sexual intercourse like the practice of coitus *reservatus* or a deferral of “pleasure” (i.e., enjoyment in orgasm). Therefore, sexual pleasure, says Shusterman, “cannot be the highest goal in lovemaking, since health interests clearly outweigh it” (AE, 165). This observation is also reflected in Shusterman’s earlier work on Chinese *ars erotica* where he points out that “sexual pleasure should be used to regulate and refine one’s body, mind, and the character.”⁷ In other words, the ancient Chinese sexual theories put sexual activities in the context of “the larger goals of health and good

5) Van Gulik’s works on the history of Chinese sexology have had a strong influence on the West. Some French postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-Francois Lyotard are said to be inspired by his research on *ars erotica*.

6) See Wile, *Art of the Bedchamber*.

7) Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetic*, (London/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 275.

management (of self and household),” as Shusterman puts it, which means, again, “sexual pleasure should be used to regulate and refine one’s body, mind, and the character.”⁸ Although Daoist teachings do not condemn any non-reproductive sexual activities, they do not promote the idea that the pursuit of sensual desire is the only goal of sexual activity.⁹

Therefore, Shusterman’s challenge to Foucault’s interpretation of Chinese *ars erotica* is insightful, specifying that Foucault’s misunderstanding is based on his study on ancient Greek and Roman literature and erotic arts (AE, 150–152). In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault makes a distinction between *scientia sexualis* (or science of sexuality) and *ars erotica* (or erotic art), through which Foucault attempts to conceptualize the differences between Western and Eastern discourses of desire and pleasure.¹⁰ With this distinction in mind, Foucault categorizes the Daoist sexual practice in the class of *ars erotica*. However, Daoist sex practice is not about the “pleasure-seeking hypothesis” *vis-à-vis* the “repressive hypothesis” as mentioned earlier. Despite the fact that the Daoist view of sex may not fit into the Western and modern definition of science or the scientification of sex, it is not just *ars erotica* as Foucault sees it. Foucault ignores the holistic understanding of the body in Daoism with its emphasis on dietetics, drugs, meditation, and so forth. Shusterman has made an excellent point when he says that it is very misleading to “characterize the classical Chinese texts of *ars erotica* in sharp contrast to sexual science and the medical approach to sex” (AE, 152). “[Foucault] is confused in thinking that pleasure, for them [the Chinese], is more important than the sexual act because it is pleasure that they seek to prolong by delaying and even abstaining from the act. Instead, it is the act itself that the Chinese male seeks to prolong so as to magnify his *yin* and *yang* powers and the salutary benefits these bring.”¹¹ Moreover, Foucault’s distinction between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* would be problematic for the Chinese tradition, for the latter would reject a dualistic distinction between the scientific and the erotic, or between the objective and the subjective. As a matter of fact, the Chinese tradition recognizes two aspects of the body, namely, the objective aspect of the body when observing the body from outside and the subjective aspect of the body when feeling one’s own body from within.

Shusterman has correctly pointed out the polyvalent meaning of the Chinese word “body” (*shen* 身): apart from the physical body, it also indicates self, self-identity, and person. “Sex is thus inscribed in the very notion of the human self” (AE, 163). Therefore, while somatic sensation is important, it is not the ultimate concern at hand. In a sexual meditative act, practitioners learn to prevent the sexual energy from falling into the state in which *shen* or spiritual energy latent in the mind-body cannot be activated due to the reason that one’s impulsive desires/pleasures fail to go through a kind of *qi*-transformation (*qihua* 氣化), that is, the purification of sexual impulses. In the *Secret of Golden Flower* (*Taiyi Jinhua zongzhi* 太乙金華宗旨), a book of Daoist meditation, the concept of *shen* or the spiritual power is called the “heavenly mind” or the “celestial mind” (*tianxin* 天心) which is also another name for the Dao.¹² For Daoists, the cosmic Dao is also the primordial nature of

8) Ibid.

9) In fact, Daoist sexual practice entails two forms of practice: One is called “spiritual intercourse without physical intercourse” (*shenjiao xingbujiao* 神交形不交) and another is called “physical intercourse without spiritual intercourse” (*xingjiao shenbujiao* 形交神不交). Both forms are performances of “joining energy” that enables one to attain “peaceful bliss” (*anle* 安樂).

10) Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, 59–60.

11) Richard Shusterman, “Asian Ars Erotica and the Question of Sexual Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 1: 59–60.

12) For the English translation of the *Secret of the Golden Flower*, see the version by Thomas Cleary, trans., *Secret of the Golden Flower*, Reprint Edition, (San Francisco, CA: Harper One; Reprint edition, 1993).

the human heart-mind. Accordingly, sexual practice is also part of the practice of cultivating one's emotions and thought.¹³

It is also worth noticing that Shusterman's discussion on the Chinese *ars erotica* touches on the issue concerning gendered sex and women such as the role of the foreplay for the female partner, female attractiveness, female experts in *ars erotica*, and the mystical female deities like Su Nü. In fact, one of the earliest Chinese sex manuals is called *Su Nü Jing* (《素女經》 *The Classic of Su Nü*). The text consists of a dialogue between the Yellow Emperor and a mystical female deity by the name of Su Nü (literally means "the white girl" or "immaculate girl"). What is interesting about this text is that it is Su Nü, a female, who offers sexual instruction to the Yellow Emperor, a male, where gendering sexual pleasures are implied.

Despite that the Daoist claims that sex was not just about pleasing a man, we can easily find the texts that emphasize the benefits enjoyed by male practitioners or shows a manipulative exploitation of women, such as the notion of having sex with multiple virgins as sexual partners in order to gather women's *yin* to nourish a man's *yang*. Such degradation of women into subordinate roles became more noticeable due to the increasing influence of Neo-Confucianism (which is "notorious for endorsing male privilege") after the Song dynasty. For example, in *Instruction in Physiological Alchemy* (《張三豐內丹養生修煉秘法》) written by Zhang Sanfeng (張三豐, fourteenth century CE), a legendary Daoist master who was well-known for creating the *Taiji quan* (a moving meditation based on the dynamic relationship between *yin* and *yang*), the woman's role as a sexual partner is seen as a *ding* or furnace upon which a man cultivates his sexual drive and vital energy.¹⁴ In fact, desirability of multiple female partners is explicitly expressed in many Daoist sex manuals. Nevertheless, such a view was also challenged within the Daoist tradition itself. For instance, female Daoists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rejected the practice of "nurturing the *yang* at the expense of the *yin*" by shifting sex practice to what is called *nudan* 女丹 (an inner alchemy specially designed for women) with its focus on gender-specific practices of breath meditation and visualization for the purpose of longevity and immortality. I hoped that Shusterman would have said more on sexual representation in light of this gender issue.

Was *ars erotica* considered art in ancient China? The answer is yes. In fact, the Daoist *ars erotica* played an important role in the development of Chinese literature, especially during the Tang dynasty (618 AD–907 AD), the golden age of Daoist philosophy and religion. For example, a new literary genre known as *Tang chuanqi* 唐傳奇 ("fantastical fiction" about the scholar-beauty romance) was created, which offers an elaborate account of sex, passion, and desire. One of the representative works is a romantic story entitled *Poetic Essay on Great Bliss of the Sexual Union of Heaven and Earth and Yin and Yang* (*The Great Bliss; Tiandi yinyang jiaohuan dale fu* 《天地陰陽交歡大樂賦》). It was written by Bai Xingjian (776 AD–826 AD), depicting sexual acts committed in various settings by persons involved in various relationships. This story is also mentioned in van Gulik's *A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. Till 1644 A.D.* Another text of Tang erotica

13) Sex is viewed as the ritual of the union of the *qi*-energy that involves all the physical and spiritual faculties of the partners. In fact, early Daoism (i.e., the Celestial Master Daoism) had a sexual initiation rite, that is, ritualized intercourse in the name of merging primordial *pneumas* or *qi*. This practice was discontinued later due to criticism from both inside and outside of Daoism. In *The Way of the Yellow and the Red: Re-examining the Sexual Initiation Rite of Celestial Master Daoism*, Gil Raz argues that "the procedure [of the initiation ritual] is not emulation of the procreative coupling of *yin* and *yang*, but rather an ascent through this binary stage of emergent cosmogony to the primordial stage of the three primal *pneumas* [i.e., *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*] within the undifferentiated unity of the Dao." For a detailed discussion of Daoist sexual ritual, see Gil Raz, *The Way of the Yellow and the Red: Re-examining the Sexual Initiation Rite of Celestial Master Daoism*, (Leiden and Boston: Brill Publishers, 2008), 86–120.

14) A female *ding* is classified in three ranks: The lower rank comprises women between the ages of 21 and 25. The middle rank comprises virgins between the ages of 16 and 20 years old who have not reached maturity. The highest rank comprises virgins of 14 years old. See Ruan, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture*.

is *You xianku* 遊仙窟 (*Merrymaking in a Transcendent Dwelling*) by Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (660 AD–740 AD), an eminent Tang literati-official. The story tells of a sexual encounter between a literati-official and a mystical widow. It was not recorded in any post-Tang bibliographies in China but attained popularity in Japan and played an important role in the development of Japanese literature. Both stories express the idea that passion and sexual satisfaction for both men and women are central to many aspects of human life.

How about the relation of sexuality to the passion for virtue? Shusterman discusses the concept of *de* 德 (meaning special excellence or qualitative power) and its connection to the idea of *mei* 美 (beauty) as well as the combined term *meide* 美德 (meaning “beautiful virtue”). In *The Analects* 9:18, Confucius says, “I have yet to meet a man who loves virtue as much as he loves sex” (*se* 色; also translated as “the beauty of women”). It is quite intriguing that Confucius connects virtues directly to the erotic play of sex or beauty. I think that what Confucius means here is that he hopes that our passion for virtuous excellence could be something natural and spontaneous and thus virtues truly become part of our inner power. We may consider it as a Confucian way of thinking with the body. Meanwhile, to see virtue as something “beautiful,” there is clearly an aesthetic dimension in Confucian ethics, as Shusterman has observed (AE, 175).

One more thing I would like to mention is about the aestheticization of sexual activities via the use of euphemized metaphors with regard to the Chinese *ars erotica*, including the description of genital organs (in fact, they are never addressed directly), such as “the cloud and rain” (referring to the sexual act), “fishes touching”/ “dragon twisting”/ “intwined silkworm” (referring to different sexual postures), “the jade gate” (referring to the female organ), “the jade stalk” or “the lonely steep mountain” (referring to the male organ), and so forth. Sexual metaphors are widely used in other cultures such as the use of baseball metaphors in American culture today. But the metaphors used in ancient China offer a more nuanced and poetic representation of eroticism. For the Chinese, sexual pleasure can be amplified by the enjoyment of nature, music, words, and mutual affection.



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