



SIX RECORDS OF A FLOATING LIFE

I have had warm cotton clothes, enough to eat,
and a pleasant home. I have strolled among streams
and rocks, at places like the Pavilion of the Waves
and the Villa of Serenity. In the midst of life, I have
been just like an Immortal.

—Shen Fu

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INTRODUCTION

Shen Fu was born in Soochow in the latter part of the eighteenth century, at the height of the Ch'ing Dynasty. He was a government clerk, a painter, occasional trader, and a tragic lover, and in his mid forties he set out his life in six moving 'records' that have delighted the Chinese ever since they came to light in the nineteenth century.

While it is much more, the *Six Records* is known among the Chinese as a love story. As such, from a Western point of view, it is unique. For though it is indeed a true love story of Shen Fu and his wife Yün, it is a love story set in a traditional Chinese society—and thus their love coexists and intermingles with Shen Fu's affairs with courtesans, and with his wife's attempts to find him a concubine. And yet, for all that, it is none the less love.

The role of the courtesan as described in the *Six Records* is an example of what makes the book a valuable social document. It is difficult for Westerners to understand just what a courtesan in China was, because the only equivalent we have for the role is a prostitute. But a courtesan properly called was respectable and respected, and her sexual favours were by no means necessarily for sale. As van Gulik has described in his classic *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1974), a courtesan could often be more independent and powerful than the men she ostensibly served. It is this kind of small but significant alteration to our perceptions and presumptions which the *Six Records* can effect that makes it so important a book for Westerners.

Chinese readers find something else in it. It must be recalled how common arranged marriages were among the Chinese until quite recently. Even now, a great deal of parental influence, or economic or social coercion, is still present as an influence in the choice of marriage partners in many Chinese societies.

And so a book arising out of the Imperial literary tradition that extolled enduring, romantic love easily became, and has remained, a favourite among Chinese readers: it has recently been reissued in China by the People's Literature Publishing House, and is certainly the first primarily romantic book to come out in China for decades.

Shen Fu has described his life with his wife in what is probably the most frank and moving story to come to us from the literature of his time. He has given us a remarkable picture of Yün, his child love and his wife. Her life was hard but she played on all its graces, and Shen Fu's portrait of her manages to infuse the greatest tenderness into what is one of the most realistic accounts of the life of a woman ever given in traditional Chinese literature.

The book's remarkable frankness is broader than that, however. Official literature of the Imperial period, of course, tells us little of the daily life of the more ordinary Chinese people. Novels, plays, and tales of mystery do tell us a bit, but are often so taken up with details of their plots that there is little space left over to tell how people living in China then actually spent their time. The *Six Records* does tell us in great detail, while managing to avoid many of what must seem to Western readers to be the convolutions that plague so much Chinese popular literature of the time. Fortunately for us, Shen Fu accomplished a rare feat in traditional China: he became literate without becoming a *literatorus*.

Shen Fu was, by his standards and by our own, a conspicuous failure in many ways. The highest he rose officially was to the position of private secretary to a powerful friend, a role that fell to many luckless *literati* of the Ch'ing. He was not much of a painter, he was a poor businessman frequently in debt, and by the end of his book he seems to have become entirely estranged from his family.

Yet while he was so often a victim, he was still determinedly upright when the chance to be so came his way. He resigned one official post in disgust at his colleagues' misdeeds, and he is gentleman enough not to tell us what they did that so upset him. He restored a peasant girl to her family when a man of influence was trying to force her to become

a concubine. He was a trusting friend, often to his cost.

If Shen Fu was a failure in so many ways, much of his failure was related to the class from which he came—the *yamen* private secretary. The secretaries in a *yamen*—a government office—were failures almost by definition.

The origin of the profession of *yamen* secretary lay in two uniquely Chinese administrative practices. The first was a rule against assigning magistrates to their home districts. Throughout the post-feudal Chinese dynasties this was a standard means of attempting to ensure that officials administered their districts honestly, unswayed by local loyalties or favourites.

The second practice arose from the Chinese determination that government officials should be scholars first and bureaucrats second. One of the largest empires in the history of the world was administered by a small group of men who, prior to their first assignment, had not had the slightest training in administration, and who knew more about the poetry of a thousand years before than they did about tax law.

The typical Chinese magistrate, therefore, found himself in a district of which he had little personal knowledge—indeed, he might be woefully ignorant even of the local dialect of the language—and with only the slightest acquaintance with the complex laws and customs by which he was supposed to carry out his manifold responsibilities. He needed help, and he found it in the private secretary.

Literate and technically skilled, the private secretary was the magistrate's link between the scholarly ethics and the practical realities of Imperial Chinese government. Ch'ü T'ung-tsu (*Local Government in China Under the Ch'ing*, Harvard University Press, 1962) divides the secretaries into seven categories of specialists: law, tax administration, tax collection, registration of documents, correspondence, preparation of documents, and book-keeping. It is nowhere stated clearly in the *Six Records*, but Shen Fu seems to have specialized in law, the most prestigious of the seven.

The secretaries prepared almost every document a magistrate saw. They recommended decisions for him, handled virtually all his official correspondence, helped organize court sessions, and drafted replies on

his behalf to official queries about his actions, actions which probably had been recommended by themselves in the first place. The quality of his secretaries could make or break a magistrate's career; they were very powerful.

They were also very unofficial. Except for one brief and unsuccessful experiment, the Ch'ing Dynasty never officially recognized their existence. They were the employees of the magistrate—not of the government—recruited by him and paid out of his personal funds. They were well paid—Ch'ü estimates they were the only members of a *yamen* staff able to support themselves on their salaries—and well respected. Whenever Shen Fu records going to work for a magistrate, he describes himself as being 'invited' to take the position; this is not an affectation. Once employed, the secretaries were far more than servants; resignation in protest was far from uncommon and, as noted above, Shen Fu himself seems to have done it at least once.

Who were the private secretaries, and where did they come from? Since they were well educated—they had to be well educated in order to do their jobs—most had, on one or more occasions, taken the examinations which were the natural culmination of the education system of the day. If they had passed those examinations—and some of course did—they would have become officials themselves, rather than secretaries. We are talking, therefore, about a group of men who had either denied, or had been denied, entrance to the scholar-official class; men who had studied for the highest posts and failed to attain even the lowest.

It must have been a painful situation. Raised in the traditions of China's greatest poets and administrators, they were forced to live the only life their world offered them— itinerant and temporary employees, their only domain the shadowy world of *yamen* clerks, their only power that derived from their patron, towards whom it would have been only natural to feel a certain amount of jealousy.

All this must be kept in mind in considering what sort of man Shen Fu was, for it must be admitted that on the surface there are a fair number of unpleasant things about him. Perhaps the most difficult to

understand is his repeated failure to provide for his family, apparently because it might not fit in with his image of himself. When his wife was ill and needed medicine, for example, he opened a shop to sell paintings—which he admits brought in only enough money to buy part of the medicine she needed—rather (we must unkindly note) than taking on a lower-status job that might have given him a more than occasional income.

Such facts are quite unquestionable; Shen Fu himself sets them out, though not as harshly as we have just done. So how much of a scoundrel was he? We leave that for the ultimate judgement of the reader, but we do think there are several points that ought to be remembered in making that judgement.

True, Shen Fu was a terrible romantic, a dreamer, often a victim of self-deception. But it should be noted that the education he received was intended exclusively to fit him for a part in life as a scholar-administrator; and beyond that education, no one of his class had much training at all. True, Shen Fu seems to us to cling to that education long after it has become irrelevant to his life; but perhaps he simply believed its promises, or was more enraptured by its graces, than others would have been. On a more practical level, it is worth asking what other profession he would have been suited for, had he decided to try to find something else to do; or, for that matter, what other profession his all-powerful parents would have allowed him to take up.

While granting all his personal faults, it seems to us that Shen Fu's inability to assume responsibility was not really due to them. He was dealing with a difficult life with the only set of rules he understood; his tragedy was that they were not enough to see him through. It was this same tragedy that, a few decades after his book was written, began to overtake all his countrymen.

The original text of the book as we have it today is incomplete. The last two of the *Six Records* were lost before a manuscript of the book was discovered and published for the first time in the 1870s. During the 1930s the World Book Company published in Shanghai what it claimed was a complete text of the book discovered by one Wang Ch'ün-

ch'ing in Soochow; in this form the book has recently gone through several impressions in Taiwan. The last two *Records* which it presents are known to be false, however, having been copied from works by other authors; details of these forgeries appear in Appendix 3 to this translation. Apart from these pieces of information, we can add only the testimony of Shen Fu himself that he was working on the book in 1809.

The quality of the book presents some challenges. By his own admission, Shen Fu was not always the most explicit of writers. There are references in the book that are not clear, some that make little sense. Sometimes his facts are not consistent. There are also great differences between our modern ideas and Shen Fu's of just what a book ought to be. The *Six Records* is not the chronologically constructed tale that we are now used to reading. Instead, Shen Fu takes particular topics and follows them each through his life, one at a time; the book is thus intended to be six different layers that add up to a 'floating life', each layer having little regard for its relationship to any other. Where we expect transitions, Shen Fu gives us few, and where we expect logical explanations he often gives us none. Sentences frequently stand almost by themselves. The book is meant to be mused over and, by our standards, read very slowly. There is much that is left unsaid. What is said, however, is rich in the life of the times. The troubled black sheep of a declining family, Shen Fu has left us a lively portrait of his era that in places strikes chords which are remarkably resonant with those of our own times.

It would be unusual if such a work had not come to the attention of translators before. Lin Yüt'ang first translated the book in 1935, when it was serialized in the *T'ien Hsia Monthly* and in *Hsi Feng*. His translation of the entire book has appeared in several editions.

With the greatest respect for our predecessor, however, we felt that there was room for a full translation of the *Six Records* into modern English which would—by the use of extensive but, we hope, not intrusive notes and maps—present to the modern English reader a more complete exposition of the tale Shen Fu told. He wrote for an audience of his own time and place, and neither of those will ever live again. We

hope that our contribution to this work may help it to live in the minds of today's Western readers, as its author intended it should live in the minds of his contemporaries.

We have tried to provide a complete translation that is, in the words of Anthony C. Yu, 'the most intelligible fidelity to the original'. Corrections to our work are inevitable, and we welcome them with the respect which is due to the original.

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PART 1 The Joys of the Wedding Chamber

I was born in the winter of the 27th year of the reign of the Emperor Chien Lung,¹ on the second and twentieth day of the eleventh month. Heaven blessed me, and life then could not have been more full. It was a time of great peace and plenty, and my family was an official one that lived next to the Pavilion of the Waves² in Soochow. As the poet Su Tung-po wrote, 'All things are like spring dreams, passing with no trace.' If I did not make a record of that time, I should be ungrateful for the blessings of heaven.

The very first of the three hundred chapters of the *Book of Odes* concerns husbands and wives, so I too will write of other matters in their turn. Unfortunately I never completed my studies, so my writing is not very skilful. But here my purpose is merely to record true feelings and actual events. Criticism of my writing will be like the shining of a bright light into a dirty mirror.

When I was young I was engaged to a girl named Yu from Chinsha, but she died when she was eight years old. Eventually I married Chen Yün, the daughter of my uncle, Mr Chen Hsin-yü. Her literary name was Shu-chen.³

Even while small, she was very clever. While she was learning to talk she was taught the poem *The Mandolin Song*⁴ and could repeat it almost immediately.

Yün's father died when she was four years old, leaving her mother, whose family name was Chin, and her younger brother, Ko-chang. At first they had virtually nothing, but as Yün grew older she became very adept at needlework, and the labour of her ten fingers came to provide for all three of them. Thanks to her work, they were always able to afford to pay the tuition for her brother's teachers.

One day Yün found a copy of *The Mandolin Song* in her brother's book-box and, remembering her lessons as a child, was able to pick

out the characters one by one. That is how she began learning to read. In her spare moments she gradually learned how to write poetry, one line of which was, 'We grow thin in the shadows of autumn, but chrysanthemums grow fat with the dew.'

When I was thirteen, my mother took me along on a visit to her relatives. That was the first time I met my cousin Yün, and we two children got on well together. I had a chance to see her poems that day, and though I sighed at her brilliance I privately feared she was too sensitive to be completely happy in life. Still, I could not forget her, and I remember saying to my mother, 'If you are going to choose a wife for me, I will marry no other than Yün.'

Mother also loved her gentleness, so she was quick to arrange our engagement, sealing the match by giving Yün a gold ring from her own finger. This was in the 39th year of the reign of the Emperor Chien Lung,⁵ on the 16th day of the seventh month.

That winter mother took me to their home once again, for the marriage of Yün's cousin. Yün and I were born in the same year, but because she was ten months older than I, I had always called her 'elder sister', while she called me 'younger brother'. We continued to call one another by these names even after we were engaged.

At her cousin's wedding the room was full of beautifully dressed people. Yün alone wore a plain dress; only her shoes were new. I noticed they were skilfully embroidered, and when she told me she had done them herself I began to appreciate that her cleverness lay not only in her writing.

Yün had delicate shoulders and a stately neck, and her figure was slim. Her brows arched over beautiful, lively eyes. Her only blemish was two slightly protruding front teeth, the sign of a lack of good fortune. But her manner was altogether charming, and she captivated all who saw her.

I asked to see more of her poems that day, and found some had only one line, others three or four, and most were unfinished. I asked her why.

'I have done them without a teacher,' she replied, laughing. 'I hope you, my best friend, can be my teacher now and help me finish them.'

Then as a joke I wrote on her book, 'The Embroidered Bag of Beautiful Verses'. I did not then realize that the origin of her early death already lay in that book.

That night after the wedding I escorted my relatives out of the city, and it was midnight by the time I returned. I was terribly hungry and asked for something to eat. A servant brought me some dried plums, but they were too sweet for me. So Yün secretly tugged at my sleeve and I followed to her room, where she had hidden some warm rice porridge and some small dishes of food. I delightedly picked up my chopsticks, but suddenly heard Yün's cousin Yu-heng call, 'Yün, come quickly!'

Yün hurriedly shut the door and called back, 'I'm very tired. I was just going to sleep.' But Yu-heng pushed open the door and came in anyway.

He saw me just about to begin eating the rice porridge, and chuckled, looking out of the corner of his eye at Yün. 'When I asked you for some rice porridge just now, you said there wasn't any more! But I see you were just hiding it in here and saving it for your "husband"!'

Yün was terribly embarrassed, and ran out. The whole household broke into laughter. I was also embarrassed and angry, roused my servant, and left early.

Every time I returned after that, Yün would hide. I knew she was afraid that everyone would laugh at her.

On the night of the 22nd day of the first month in the 44th year of the reign of the Emperor Chien Lung⁶ I saw by the light of our wedding candles that Yün's figure was as slim as before. When her veil was lifted we smiled at each other. After we had shared the ceremonial cups of wine and sat down together for the wedding banquet, I secretly took her small hand under the table. It was warm and it was soft, and my heart beat uncontrollably.

I asked her to begin eating, but it turned out to be a day on which she did not eat meat, a Buddhist practice which she had followed for several years. I thought to myself that she had begun this practice at the very time I had begun to break out with acne, and I asked her, 'Since my skin is now clear and healthy, couldn't you give up this custom?'

Her eyes smiled amusement, and her head nodded agreement.

That same night of the 22nd there was a wedding-eve party for my elder sister. She was to be married on the 24th, but the 23rd was a day of national mourning⁷ on which all entertaining was forbidden and the holding of the wedding-eve party would have been impossible. Yün attended the dinner, but I spent the time in our bedroom drinking with my sister's maid of honour. We played a drinking game which I lost frequently, and I wound up getting very drunk and falling asleep. By the time I woke up the next morning, Yün was already putting on her make-up.

During the day a constant stream of relatives and friends came to congratulate Yün and me on our marriage. In the evening there were some musical performances in honour of the wedding, after the lamps had been lit.

At midnight I escorted my sister to her new husband's home, and it was almost three in the morning when I returned. The candles had burned low and the house was silent. I stole quietly into our room to find my wife's servant dozing beside the bed and Yün herself with her make-up off but not yet asleep. A candle burned brightly beside her; she was bent intently over a book, but I could not tell what it was that she was reading with such concentration. I went up to her, rubbed her shoulder, and said, 'You've been so busy these past few days, why are you reading so late?'

Yün turned and stood up. 'I was just thinking of going to sleep, but I opened the bookcase and found this book, *The Romance of the Western Chamber*.⁸ Once I had started reading it, I forgot how tired I was. I had often heard it spoken of, but this was the first time I had had a chance to read it. The author really is as talented as people say, but I do think his tale is too explicitly told.'

I laughed and said, 'only a talented writer could be so explicit.'

Yün's servant then urged us to go to sleep, but we told her she should go to sleep first, and to shut the door to our room. We sat up making jokes, like two close friends meeting after a long separation. I playfully felt her breast and found her heart was beating as fast as mine. I pulled her to me and whispered in her ear, 'Why is your heart beating

so fast?’ She answered with a bewitching smile that made me feel a love so endless it shook my soul. I held her close as I parted the curtains and led her into bed. We never noticed what time the sun rose in the morning.

As a new bride, Yün was very quiet. She never got angry, and when anyone spoke to her she always replied with a smile. She was respectful to her elders and amiable to everyone else. Everything she did was orderly, and was done properly. Each morning when she saw the first rays of the sun touch the top of the window, she would dress quickly and hurry out of bed, as if someone were calling her. I once laughed at her about it: ‘This is not like that time with the rice porridge! Why are you still afraid of someone laughing at you?’

‘True,’ she answered, ‘my hiding the rice porridge for you that time has become a joke. But I’m not worried about people laughing at me now. I am afraid your parents will think I’m lazy.’

While I would have liked it if she could have slept more, I had to agree that she was right. So every morning I got up early with her, and from that time on we were inseparable, like a man and his shadow. Words could not describe our love.

We were so happy that our first month together passed in the twinkling of an eye. At that time my father, the Honourable Chiafu, was working as a private secretary in the prefectural government office at Kuichi.⁹ He sent for me, having enrolled me as a student of Mr Chao Sheng-chai at Wulin.¹⁰ Mr Chao taught me patiently and well; the fact that I can write at all today is due to his efforts.

I had, however, originally planned to continue my studies with my father after my marriage, so I was disappointed when I received his letter. I feared Yün would weep when she heard of it, but she showed no emotion, encouraged me to go, and helped me pack my bag. The night before I left she was slightly subdued, but that was all. When it was time for me to go, though, she whispered to me, ‘There will be no one there to look after you. Please take good care of yourself.’

My boat cast off just as the peach and the plum flowers were in magnificent bloom. I felt like a bird that had lost its flock. My world was shaken. After I arrived at the offices where my father worked, he

immediately began preparations to go east across the river.

Our separation of three months seemed as if it were ten years long. Yün wrote to me frequently, but her letters asked about me twice as often as they told me anything about herself. Most of what she wrote was merely to encourage me in my studies, and the rest was just polite chatter. I really was a little angry with her. Every time the wind would rustle the bamboo trees in the yard, or the moon would shine through the leaves of the banana tree outside my window, I would look out and miss her so terribly that dreams of her took possession of my soul.

My teacher understood how I felt, and wrote to tell my father about it. He then assigned me ten compositions and sent me home for a while to write them. I felt like a prisoner who has been pardoned.

Once I was on the boat each quarter of an hour seemed to pass as slowly as a year. After I got home and paid my respects to my mother, I went into our room and Yün rose to greet me. She held my hands without saying a word. Our souls became smoke and mist. I thought I heard something, but it was as if my body had ceased to exist.

It was then the sixth month, and steamy hot in our room. Fortunately we lived just west of the Lotus Lovers Hall of the Pavilion of the Waves, where it was cooler. By a bridge and overlooking a stream there was a small pavilion called My Desire, because, as desired, I could 'wash my hat strings in it when it is clean, and wash my feet in it when it is dirty'.¹¹ Almost under the eaves of the hall there was an old tree that cast a shadow across the windows so deep that it turned one's face green. Strollers were always walking along the opposite bank of the stream. This was where my father, the Honourable Chia-fu, used to entertain guests privately, and I obtained my mother's permission to take Yün there to escape the summer's heat. Because it was so hot, Yün had given up her embroidery. She spent all day with me as I studied, and we talked of ancient times, analysed the moon, and discussed the flowers. Yün could not take much drink, and would accept at the most three cups of wine when I forced her to. I taught her a literary game, in which the loser has to drink a cup. We were certain two people had never been happier than we were.

One day Yün asked me. 'Of all the ancient literary masters, who

do you think is the best?’

‘*The Annals of the Warring States and Chuang Tsu* are known for their liveliness,’ I replied. ‘K’uang Heng and Liu Hsiang are known for their elegance. Shih Chien and Pan Ku are known for their breadth. Ch’ang Li is known for his extensive knowledge, and Liu Chou for his vigorous style. Lu Ling is known for his originality, and Su Hsün and his two sons for their essays. There are also the policy debates of Chia and Tung, the poetic styles of Yü and Hsü, and the Imperial memorials of Lu Chih.¹² I could never give a complete list of all the talented writers there have been. Besides, which one you like depends upon which one you feel in sympathy with.’

‘It takes great knowledge and a heroic spirit to appreciate ancient literature,’ said Yün. ‘I fear a woman’s learning is not enough to master it. The only way we have of understanding it is through poetry, and I understand but a bit of that.’

‘During the T’ang Dynasty all candidates had to pass an examination in poetry before they could become officials,’ I remarked. ‘Clearly the best were Li Pai and Tu Fu.¹³ Which of them do you like best?’

Yün said her opinion was that ‘Tu Fu’s poetry is very pure and carefully tempered, while Li Pai’s is ethereal and open. Personally, I would rather have Li Pai’s liveliness than Tu Fu’s strictness.’

‘But Tu Fu was the more successful, and most scholars prefer him. Why do you alone like Li Pai?’

‘Tu Fu is alone,’ Yün replied, ‘in the detail of his verse and the vividness of his expression. But Li Pai’s poetry flows like a flower tossed into a stream. It’s enchanting. I would not say Li Pai is a better poet than Tu Fu, but only that he appeals to me more.’

I smiled and said, ‘I never thought you were such an admirer of Li Pai’s.’

Yün smiled back. ‘Apart from him, there is only my first teacher, Mr Pai Lo-tien.¹⁴ I have always had a feeling in my heart for him that has never changed.’

‘Why do you say that?’ I asked.

‘Didn’t he write *The Mandolin Song*?’