

# **Six Records of a Floating Life Study Guide**

**Six Records of a Floating Life by Shen Fu**

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## Plot Summary

"Six Records of a Floating Life" tells the story of Shen Fu's life in 18th century China. He records his memoirs in categories so they move circularly, each one beginning in his youth, and telling the stories in that category, and then the next starts again at the beginning to tell about its stories. In order, they are "The Joys of the Wedding Chamber" about his love for Yun, his wife; "The Pleasures of Leisure" about his more quiet hobbies of gardening, painting and keeping house; "The Sorrows of Misfortune" about his losing his father and Yun, and "The Delights of Roaming Afar" about his travels through China.

In the first record, he tells the story of his first meetings with Yun when the two of them are children. The two have a bashful engagement and marry when they are seventeen years old. They remain incredibly fond of each other, stimulated by their mutual love for poetry and united even more securely by a life that sends them from place to place, and frequently finds them alienated from family. She is intelligent and unrestrained by tradition, willing and eager to shun the usual place of women staying behind while the men travel, and even disguising herself to be able to see things with Shen Fu.

The chapter on the pleasures of leisure focuses on the activities that filled Shen Fu's days. He writes about what makes a beautiful garden, and how to create those scenes and illusions with plants, rocks and their placement. He also spends long, detailed paragraphs describing the care and pruning of plants, and composes it like an instruction manual on keeping a beautiful home and garden.

Shen Fu's Sorrows chapter is when he tells about Yun's sickness. Although he never defines it completely, we know bleeding is a part of what ails her, and that it comes on when she is under emotional duress. There are several instances of disapproval from Shen Fu's family, something that is particularly hard on her. Shen Fu's irregular employment is also a trial, since he is required more than once to travel for work and money. We also hear about their children in this chapter, Ching-chun and Feng-sen. Not long after Yun dies, Shen-Fu's father dies, as well, before father and son ever get the chance for reconciliation.

His stories about traveling are filled with happy memories again, some with Yun and some without, starting in his childhood traveling with his father, he tells about business trips, concubines and pleasure-filled trips with Yun and friends. The book also includes a comprehensive appendix to define literary and historical references, a chronology, a list of measures, and an introduction and conclusion explaining the history of the book and the efforts at completion that came after it.



# Introduction and Part I: Joys of the Wedding Chamber

## Introduction and Part I: Joys of the Wedding Chamber Summary and Analysis

The book opens by putting the original book and its author in their historical and literary context. The introduction describes "Six Records" as a story written according to categories, instead of incorporating all of those categories into one life-encompassing narrative. It becomes a work that describes in better detail than most literary works of the time what it was to live in the daily realities of 19th-Century China. Aspects like what it was like to be in love in a culture of arranged marriages and courtesans, and the daily activities of a woman make up the details of the stories the book tells. As love stories from that era in China are rare, it became a national favorite for that reason.

The reader also learns from the introduction that Shen Fu, the book's author, is an educated man, but only enough to be secretary to the men who hold the positions for which his education was meant to prepare him. Instead of becoming magistrate, he became the man who informed the magistrate about the will and character of the people in his district, and did his paperwork and bookkeeping. He could be described as a failure, never able to reach the stature for which his preparation was meant to suit him, but still upright and virtuous, even despite his humble station. His failings are described as falling in the category of provision for his family, since he refused lower-status positions in favor of self-employment even when his wife is sick, and in need of medicine. Still, the translators caution that culture and family expectations might have prevented him from rectifying the things Western readers might judge harshly.

The introduction closes by explaining that the transcript is incomplete and, while others have attempted to pass off other chapters as the final two of the six records, only the four they translate are genuinely from Shen Fu. It describes some shortcomings characteristic of untrained writing that must remain in the translation to be true to the original transcript, and offers the translation that follows as an effort to make what is a valuable historical memoir accessible to modern Western readers. As further help in understanding the translation, the translators offer next a chronological timeline of Shen Fu's life and a guide to weights and measures used in the book.

The first record, "Joys of the Wedding Chamber" opens when Shen Fu and his wife Yun met as children. They were cousins, and Shen Fu writes that he told his parents he would have no one but her when he was but thirteen years old. He describes her as very clever, and able as a child to support her family with her needlework, a skill she taught herself. She also taught herself to read and write poetry from a book she found as a child, and Shen Fu loves her cleverness and poetry all their lives. He tells about their sheepishness during their engagement, since her family laughed at her secretly



setting food aside to give to him when he visited, causing her to hide whenever he visited again until their wedding day.

Their love as husband and wife is an outgrowth of their mutual respect and admiration for each other. They are both intimately involved in the details of each others' worlds, and even talk about being reincarnated in reversed roles in their next life, so they can perfect themselves in the context of their love for each other. While they are separated for Shen Fu's continued education as a government official under the tutelage of a friend of his father's, Yun wrote letters faithfully, asking him about himself and encouraging him in his studies. His missing her is so evident to his teacher that he sends him home to write his compositions.

They lived in the era of his schooling near the Pavilion of the Waves' Lotus Lovers' Hall, a manicured place with a stream running through that became a cool and beautiful haven for the young lovers. They go there frequently while he writes, and drink wine while they discuss the moon and play poetry games. He describes their banter as playful and full of literary illusion. Yun is very polite and modest, and even their most familiar exchanges were refined by her continued good manners. They lived together always trying to get closer and steal more time together, so much so that Shen Fu wonders at older couples who live together like strangers, living himself in such a happy, close relationship.

The two of them lived in constant gratitude for their happiness, and prayed to Tien Sun, the god of separated lovers, on the day reserved for the purpose of finding partners, that in all their lives to come they might remain lovers. She remains an open book to him in every subject, telling him why she does her make up and perfumes herself the way she does, and playing with him about his tastes. Once, they fall ill together after a night out by the water when they hear an inexplicable splash, and Shen Fu sees it as an omen that they are not to grow old together.

Next he writes about the Mid-Autumn Festival, during which people walk through the parks, and the two of them row out to an island to which no one else has come and enjoyed a night under the full moon. He writes about time with his adopted brothers and sisters, when the women all wanted to share a bed, and he teasingly threatened them that when they were married, he would invite their husbands away, so they could miss them like he missed Yun. It is the first of many references to women's affections for each other being expressed like the affection between lovers. They watch operas and visit gardens together, and the contrast with the sisters, particularly Miss Wang, just serves to highlight Yun's emotional and aesthetic sensitivity.

She Fu writes about the differences in Yun's diet from his, and her taste for decorating with old, rejected things. He also describes how well she knew the nuances of his expressions, tailoring everything she did to his tastes, based on his reactions to things. To be sure that the two of them could remain together in their next life, they worship the Old Man of the Moon, who arranges matches, having him painted by a portraitist and making a shrine to him in their home. When they move to Granary Lane, he names their bedroom, "The Pavilion of My Guest's Fragrance," after Yun's name. That is where they



arrange to live in the house near the vegetable garden, the old woman who takes care of them, and the old couple who brings them vegetables from their garden. The two made plans to improve the land with a garden, and to live a simple and self-sufficient life there. As he writes about their dreams together, he sighs at the pain of having lost her.

The Lighting of the Flowers festival comes, and Yun wants so badly to go with her husband that they disguise her as a man, and they enjoy the day together until she is discovered by a group of girls who were there as maids. Similarly, they scheme to allow Yun to travel with him when a friend dies and he has to travel for the funeral. She says of that trip that she has now not lived in vain, having seen such a beautiful and different place. It is on their return trip that they sit and drink with the boatman's daughter, and the neighbor asks Yun if she knows of the woman Shen Fu was drinking with the night before. Not long after that, they meet Han-yuan, the sing-song girl, of whom Yun becomes very fond, and who she wants to procure for herself and Shen Fu. There follows the symbol of the jade bracelet that, if Han-yuan is wearing, means she agrees to belong to them. When she is sold to an older business man, Yun is deeply saddened at the loss, and Shen Fu says it is part of the reason for her short life.



# The Pleasures of Leisure

## The Pleasures of Leisure Summary and Analysis

Simple stories of childhood pleasures mingle with complex descriptions of how to create places of beauty in a home and garden in the record entitled "The Pleasures of Leisure." At times reminiscent and sentimental and at other times meticulously descriptive to the point of being technical, Shen Fu seeks in this chapter to record his memories of the simplest of pleasures. He begins with memories from his childhood of laying eye-level with the grass to watch the bug fly through it, imagining that he is watching cranes fly through trees and mountains. One day as he sits in the grass, an earth worm bites his scrotum, and as therapy, his family's servants get a duck to open his mouth over the wound. When they lose their hold on the bird, Shen Fu screams with fright at the thought of being bitten in that most delicate place, and the episode becomes a family joke.

He describes the beginnings of his love for flowers, talking about how much he loves things that grow, and the gift from a friend of a pot of orchids that look like lotus flowers. His favorite orchid was destroyed by a friend who had asked for a cutting, and Shen Fu refused. Azaleas and chrysanthemums become similar favorites, and he spends time describing how to display them in pots and vases to best celebrate their beauty. His descriptions become quite technical here of how to make cut flowers look like they have grown in a pot in which they are being displayed. He gives instructions on putting curves in stems, using all manner of greenery in flower arrangements, and pruning and growing trees into the most desirable shapes. Wan Tsai-chang is the only man Shen Fu says he ever knew who had accomplished the task of fulling raising and pruning a tree through the thirty or forty years it takes for them to become mature.

He goes on to describe the effects one can accomplish in a garden with stones, making them look like mountains and naturally occurring formations, concealing their chisel marks and creating illusions with them. He talks about including the small with the large and vice-versa, creating illusions of grand and natural landscapes in small home gardens. He goes on to describe the way scholars in modest homes should arrange them to make them look like grand homes, and tells of the effect the arrangement had on the smallest of the homes he and Yun shared. Yun was also very clever in artistic innovation, and he learned a great deal by posing his questions to her.

He describes landscapes they created through which he would let his spirit wander, the way he did when he was a boy, and feel as if he had visited Peng Island. One night fighting cats destroyed all their work, and Yun said their beautiful creation had incurred the jealousy of heaven, so it had to be destroyed. Another of Yun's ideas was to do with how he could study insects to paint them more precisely. She suggests that he pin them into place, killing them, but preserving them and holding them still. He employed the technique both for painting, and for inclusion of the bugs in plant displays. She also had a way of making movable flower screens that friends loved as much as Shen Fu.



Describing leisure spent with friends, Shen Fu talks about the meals they were able to make simply and inexpensively enough that they could still provide their guests with wine, and about the drinking games they played. With no talk of business allowed at the Villa of Serenity, they held parties at which everyone would play examination games, when one guest would begin a couplet, and the other guest would complete the poem, competing for the best one. Then the winner would start the next round with an original couplet of their own.

Once a guest painted Shen Fu and Yun in the garden together, and when another painted the shadows of flowers, it became a treasured piece of art in their home. Yun was so clever and beloved by friends, demonstrated again by her innovation of paying a street merchant to bring his stove with them on a trip into the park, so they could have a picnic, but not have to sacrifice warm wine. She thought of every detail, and the guests were the envy of everyone else in the park. He concludes with an explanation of what things they were able to make themselves, knowing when to save money and when it was necessary to spend it to have the highest quality of life at the least cost.





# The Sorrows of Misfortune

## The Sorrows of Misfortune Summary and Analysis

The record opens with Shen Fu's posing the question, why do misfortunes come. He reflects that he has always been friendly and honest, his father helping people whenever there is a need, and still misfortunes come. He tells about when money is tight for Yun and him, and people started talking about why they no longer socialized with friends. Yun is the third lady of Shen Fu's family's house, being married to the second son. However, when times got hard they start referring to her as the third wife, implying that she is ranked third among her own husband's multiple wives, and a sign of disrespect. She still did everything she could to protect Shen Fu's family and relations with one another, sending him letters while she stayed with them when She Fu was gone for business, and telling him what was happening, and what needed to be done. She wrote letters to her father-in-law for Shen Fu's mother, but when gossip arose, she assumed Yun had written something improper in her name, and Yun was scorned. Shen Fu's father thought Yun had just refused to write for her anymore. Similarly, after Yun found Chia-fu a concubine, and Shen Fu's mother believed she was making him sick, Yun tried to have Shen Fu arrange for a dignified departure for her, but Chia-fu found out, and Yun was cast out of the house.

This is the impetus for Shen Fu and Yun to move to the Villa of Serenity, the home of a friend, where the two of them lived quite happily, but this part of the narrative is where Shen Fu finally talks about the illness that afflicts Yun. He describes a bleeding disorder that affects her when she is in emotional distress, like that caused her by being exiled from Shen Fu's family. He says that she feels everything so intensely that it affects her physically, and Shen Fu therefore became mediator between his family and his wife. Their scorn only deepened after they learn about her affection for Han-yuan, the sing-song girl. By the time their daughter, Ching-chung was fourteen, and their son Feng-sen was twelve, money was so tight that in order to keep the children in warm clothes, Yun swore she would never see a doctor or buy medicine. She did work for friends embroidering, but worked so fiercely at it that it made her sickness worse.

More misunderstandings follow with Shen Fu's reactionary father, leading him to believe that friends' debts were Shen Fu's, and friends inquiring after Yun's well-being were friends of the sing-song girl, and his anger only worsened. They are forced to steal away in the night, not even telling the children where they are going. They arrange for a marriage for Ching-chung to a cousin, and for an apprenticeship for Feng-sen, and leave by boat. Feng-sen knows instinctively he will never see his mother again, an instinct that proves in the end to have been correct. Shen Fu tells his father where they are going, and Yun tells their daughter that they will arrange to be together again.

They find a place to live with an old friend and sworn sister to Yun — the one who had inquired after her — and Yun begins to improve. They decide Shen Fu should go to a relative Yun had been kind to once before, and owes them a favor, to see if he can



provide money or a job. It is a long journey in the winter, but Shen Fu comes across a stranger whom he had helped once before who helps him get where he needs to go. The friend is only able to offer a repayment of the original debt, having fallen on hard times himself. They learn, though, that the children are doing well, and so Shen Fu takes a job working for the Salt Bureau in Hanchiang. Yun's health improves substantially, but when Shen Fu's job is cut from the Salt Bureau, her health declines again quite rapidly. The boy Yun's sworn sister gave them as a servant, Ah Shuang, steals all of their things while Shen Fu is away seeking help, and Yun is weeping and wailing when he returns about how she will ever face her friend again. Shen Fu quiets that fear, but her compounding worry and indignation are too intense, and Yun talks like it is the end.

She tells him as she lay dying how happy she has been to have been his wife for the twenty-three years they had together, and that she has lived like an immortal with him. She says she asked for too much, living like a goddess while still in mortal flesh, with several lives' worth of lessons to learn. Shen Fu assures her that she is his ultimate love, and they part looking forward to being together again in the next life. Shen Fu sells everything he has and combines that with a loan from a friend to give Yun a proper burial. He tells about the Time the Spirits Return, and how he stays in the house, despite all of the warnings of friends not to, for her return visit, hoping for a glimpse and a moment with her. An inexplicably flickering candle is the only symbol of her presence, and he is "transported with love," elated to have had a sign of her.

The children return home to mourn with him, and he learns from his son that his father is still angry with him. He resolves to go to him, but his father dies before he can reach him. His brother—who had taken the loan and asked Yun to be the guarantor causing their first expulsion from the house—confronts him expecting that he came to quarrel about inheritance. Shen Fu, for the first time, records an instance in which he is able to speak truth in power to a family member accusing him wrongly. The relief of having spoken so frankly to one who had so wronged him and his wife finally allows him to go to his father's coffin and weep loudly. He is even able to tell his mother, who scolds him for being away so long, that he only even learned of his father's illness from his own son, not from any of his brothers, sisters, or parents, and she is silenced. After sending away debt-collectors his brother has sent to confront him, he kowtows to his mother, and leaves his family home.

Friends of his implore him to remain living in honor of his wife and out of respect for his family, saying his soul would be ill at ease if he drifts away from this world now. They invite him to stay at a Buddhist temple until a certain man, Shih Cho-tang, who can give him work returns from his travels. Ching-chun helps set him up at the monastery with things his father left him, so he is quite comfortable there, and lives a peaceful, pure life, painting and gardening with the monks for several months before Shih Cho-tang returns. He is a childhood friend, and they are happy to see each other. He bids his mother farewell, and she tells him his brother is unreliable, so the honor of the family name is his to secure.



The chapter ends when he is on his way to his new life, and learns that his son Fengsen has died. He is grief-stricken again, and his friend Chho-tang gifts him with a concubine who "renewed in [him] the spring dreams of life. I was thrown back into the maelstrom of daily existence, a dream from which I do not know when I shall awake."



# The Delights of Roaming Afar

## The Delights of Roaming Afar Summary and Analysis

Shen Fu begins his writing about travel talking about how fortunate he has been to see both refined and natural wonders, and about how one person's impressions of a place may be very different from another's. He starts when he was a boy, and he was sent to Shanyin to study with his father's friend. While he is there, he is able to go to Ho mountain in his free time. He describes the Water Garden and the stone bridge to the Land Garden there, and is unimpressed. He regrets that he had more fun making bamboo explode and echo in the mountains than going to certain historical sites to which he has been so close. When his teacher moved them to Hangchou, Shen Fu was able to see the scenery of the West Lake district there, and says it is lovely. He likes the places best that are least manicured — least like a heavily made-up woman, and left fresh and natural. The Cottage of Tranquility is a favorite of his spots there.

In the same place is the Chungwen Academy, where he and his friend from youth took their examinations. The friends had a day of sightseeing there, and then visited the Purple Cloud Cave where they drank wine and ate dried venison. The two of them wandered among many famous sites, impressed by Sunrise Terrace's view of Hangchou most of all. He attends a celebration of the Chingming Festival with his teacher, and they see the Pleasant Waters Cave, covered with wisteria, and flowing with water that quenches his thirst instantaneously.

Following an episode of taking care of his father during a severe illness, Chia-fu sends him to a teacher named Ssu-chi to learn his trade, not thinking he would recover. Although he did recover, and so did Yun, under the care of a doctor, Ssu-chi is able to introduce him to a boy who would become Shen Fu's best friend, Hung-kan. Hung-kan dies when they are only twenty-two, and Shen Fu always misses him, but he tells of a few of their adventures here. They climb Han Mountain together, taking a leaf boat to The White Cloud Villa at Kaoyi Garden where they drink wine Yun sends with them, and have the boatman make them rice. He describes an ethereal place filled with lush plants, and a fissure in the rock they climb to see the sky. The best garden he ever sees is where the boatman takes them next, where Ssu-chi retired at the end of the Ming Dynasty.

Next, Shen Fu and Yun live in Weiyang, where he accepts a position, and from whence he can see Chin and Chiao Mountains for the first time. On the route to Pingshan Hall, he sees the only manicured garden that he thinks would have pleased even the gods all along the way, joining all of the residences along the route. Rainbow Park is on that route, as are Little Gold Mountain, Shengkai Tower, and Lotus Seed Temple, all favorites of his. He confesses that he visits these places when they were prepared for a visit from the emperor, so he sees them at their very best. His second experience of regal preparation is when he and his father and associates were preparing for the



emperor to visit Nantouyu. He says the decorations were everywhere, and dizzying, and if he had lived in the country, he never would have seen their like.

While he is in Haining, Shen Fu visits the Chen family's Garden of Peaceful Waves, and he says it is the most natural-looking rock garden he has ever seen built on flat land. Even having dinners there, the scent of the flowers covers the scent of the food. It is also a beautiful place from which to watch the tides moving in and out, as he does with his father.

When he is twenty-five, he moves to Huichou County to work for the magistrate there in the town of Chihsi, where he could see Yellow Mountain and Stone Mirror Mountain. There one could find a reflection of what he had been in a former life until a hateful woman looked in and burned the cave for what she saw there. At the nearby Great Cave of Burning Clouds, he and friends took meals to eat at a Buddhist Monastery there, and had to learn not to feed the novice who served them, as their exotic fare made his vegetarian stomach upset. Here he is confronted with the idea of the life of solitude and contemplation monks live, benefiting from simple things, so they can more effectively shun the pleasures of the flesh. This is the post Shen Fu leaves after two years on principal, as he disapproves of his colleagues' dishonest dealings.

After returning to the Villa of Serenity with Yun, Shen Fu is invited to go with his cousin's husband Hsu Hsiu-feng to South-of-the-Mountains to work. They go via the Yangtze River, and he has a wonderful time. After a scenic journey, the two arrive in Foshan County where Shen Fu is introduced to the concubine boats. Hsiu-feng tells him what he can find on each one, and encourages him toward a boat with girls he thinks he will like. There, he meets Hsi-erh, a girl who reminds him of Yun, and with whom he spends a great deal of time. He regrets that Yun could not be with him, and never seems to consider it infidelity, but a kind of stand-in for his beloved wife while he is away.

One day when they are returning from working, they stop at the boats and decide to take the girls back to their apartment. When the landlord's nephew sees them coming home with them, they have to smuggle the girls back out or be blackmailed. Hsi-erh is so touched by his good treatment, working to protect her honor and keep her safe, that she begins sending for him to return every five or ten days. He listens with compassion to the girls' stories of how they came to be concubines, and what their treatment is like, and thereby becomes a kind of celebrity among the girls. Perhaps the most striking part of this story is that, when the madam asks him to buy Hsi-erh, he doesn't like her pestering, so refuses, but encourages Hsiu-feng to buy his girl, since he had fallen in love, and he leaves with very little feeling about it. The reader may simply conclude that he is happy in his love with Yun, and needs no supplement to her, since he is on his way home to her again.

It is not long after his return that Yun meets Han-yuan, and that scandal alights the family. He is invited to the Temple of Arriving Cranes by the Shuita Bridge at the foot of the mountains with friends, and so makes that his next trip. It is an enchanting garden walled in with stones in the middle of a bamboo forest, and monks there serve them



their meals and look after their comfort. The temple becomes their home base, and they spends their days exploring the beautiful places all around it.

Another pleasurable trip comes after his father dies and he accompanies a friend named Shih-chu to The Sands in Chungming County so he can gather his crops. The friend and his accountant are both lovers of entertaining, and eager to enjoy their guest, so their friendship is easy and he gets to tour the rice fields. It is land that is newly emerged from the ocean, so it is very fertile, and every day they can see more land emerging.

After a brief description of some of the most beautiful places around his hometown of Soochow, he describes a trip he takes to Pu Mountain to perform the spring sacrifices and visit their ancestors' graves. It is a beautiful place covered with flowers, and it inspires him to paint a set of paintings he later presents to Chieh-shih, the friend's uncle. Similarly, he made a trip to Szechuan when a friend took up duties as magistrate, and he describes the tomb of a former loyal minister in the Yuan Dynasty. He sees places on this trip that are the most beautifully built edifices he sees in his whole life. He describes climbing through snow to a particular temple, and says that all thoughts of the things of the world fall away at the sight of it. One of the columns was carved with poems inspired by the place, and he includes in his record the only one he was able to memorize.

He concludes his chapter on travel with stories of the happy time he spent in Chingchou, spending the time in leisure, selling their clothes to buy wine, and his living in the south of a garden in a house shaped like a boat, enjoying the beauty of the place. The book closes with his writing that in the second month of the year following his happy time in the beautiful gardens of Chingchou, he takes an appointment at Laiyang.

The book concludes with an explanation of the attempts some have made to falsify an end to this treasured collection of Chinese stories.



# Characters

## Shen Fu

Author of the book, Shen Fu's literary name is San Pai. He lived in the late-1700s in Soochow China, and was educated to be a magistrate, but only succeeded in enough of his education to become a secretary to the magistrates in yamen offices, or government buildings. The focus of his records, however, focus almost entirely on his personal life outside of work, so his mediocre success is relevant only in that it is the cause for his moving with his wife several times, and at some times not having quite enough money. He is a lover and an artist primarily, and writes his memoirs with emphasis on those things, inviting the reader to enter in to his most precious and felicitous memories.

He and his wife, Yun, have a playful and equitable romance, respecting each other so completely that they hope that in their next lives, they can be born in reversed roles, so Yun can be the husband, and Shen Fu her wife. He writes in his first record all about their romance, and deep and constant affection, and a marriage in which their only struggles were with his family and her health. His next record focuses on his leisure, and here he demonstrates his capacity as an artist and a landscaper. He fills this record with detailed instructions on how gardens should be arranged, blending illusion with reality, working with scale to recreate grand landscapes in gardens and working with non-plant elements inside and outside the home to create beautiful places. It amounts to a how-to pamphlet on eighteenth century Chinese aesthetic, and an insight into the repose he and Yun found giving their attention and free time to the creation of beauty.

When he writes about losing Yun, he is equally unabashed in bringing the reader in to his most personal moments and their mutual struggle as they recognized that her death was coming. He writes about his children in this chapter, as well, and how Yun and he had to leave them to flee his father in the night. Western readers will recognize a level of detachment from his children in this chapter, possibly only present because of the intensity of his affection for Yun. He also writes about losing his father in this chapter, and about his having to stand up to the injustice of a judgmental brother for seemingly the first time as a result. The final extant record is about his travels, and is full of more happy adventures with Yun, and with his best friend, who we only read about in this chapter, since he died when they were young. Shen Fu writes in this chapter about his experiences with concubines, and several stories about monks, fishermen and businessmen from whom he learned about the places he visited throughout his life.

## Yun

Yun is Shen Fu's wife, and the one occupier of his heart since he was thirteen years old. The two are cousins, and Shen Fu asks his mother to arrange their marriage much to her delight, and so the two are married while they are still quite young. She is talented with embroidery and well read in the poetry of the day, a fact that attracts Shen Fu all



the more. Her industriousness allows her to support her family when she is young, and her self-education in poetry allows her and Shen Fu to play poetry games and compose lines to describe the beautiful places they see, lending a sort of music to their affection. She desires to travel much more than being a woman in eighteenth century China allows, however, so frequently wishes she was a man, able to travel with her husband as a peer. There is one occasion on which she and Shen Fu disguise her as a man, so she can go with him to a festival she has always wanted to see. She supports her husband as an advocate to his family, and seeks always to help him please them, but is eventually misunderstood and the two are forced to leave them for a time. The emotional stress becomes a stress on her body, and while her condition improves when her stress is lessened, her bleeding (possibly ulcers) is ultimately what kills her.

## **Hung-kan**

Shen Fu's best friend and companion through their studies and early travel. Hung Kan died when they were still teenagers.

## **Chia-fu**

A traditional Chinese father, Shen Fu's was prone to rash judgment and dismissal of Shen Fu, a quality that finds them banished from the family when Yun was trying to help her husband by letter to please his father.

## **Han-yuan**

The sing-song girl with whom Yun had a long friendship, and whom she tried to secure for Shen Fu and herself, earning the disdain of Shen Fu's family.

## **Ching-chun**

Shen Fu and Yun's daughter and first-born.

## **Feng-sen**

Shen Fu and Yun's son.

## **Hsi-erh**

The concubine Shen Fu befriended during his trip to Canton in 1792, and who was so touched by his compassion that she told all of her friends about him, making him a favorite celebrity among the concubines.





## **Hsiu-feng**

The business associate who showed Shen Fu around Canton the year they were there together, acquainting him with the world of the concubines.

## **Lu Pan-feng**

The friend who owned the Villa of Serenity, the beautiful place Shen Fu and Yun lived during their year of exile from Shen Fu's family.

## **Hsia Yi-shan**

The friend with whom Shen Fu visited the Yungtai Sands, the Sea of Fragrant Flowers and Pu Mountain the year his father died.



## Objects/Places

### Rice Porridge

Yun hid rice porridge in her room to give to Shen Fu on the evening of his first visit to her house after their engagement was arranged. Her family teased her about it until they were married, bringing an element of bashfulness to their engagement.

### Wine

An element in much of their leisure, wine was frequently accompanied by drinking games based on literature, poetry or hand-games.

### Yun's Journal

Yun kept a journal of poems and private emotions that Shen Fu renamed "The Embroidered Bag of Beautiful Verses." He alludes to her deeply feeling the events in life being her downfall when he writes that he couldn't have known when he first saw the book that the seeds of her demise already lay inside it.

### Jasmine and Lime

Yun describes lime as the gentleman of perfumes, able to stand on its own strength, and subtle enough not to be overtly noticed. Jasmine, on the other hand, is a commoner, reliant on the scent of women's make-up for its allure.

### The Pavillion of Waves

Yun and Shen Fu's first home together, and the first of many places with names meant to describe what makes them significant either historically or aesthetically.

### Fragments of Literature and Collection of Discarded Delights

Elements of old books and household items with which Yun decorated their home.



## **The painting of the Man in the Moon**

The portrait artist Chi Liu-ti painted a portrait of the Man in the Moon for Yun and Shen Fu so that they could pray to him, and ask that in their next life, they might be able to be together again, but next time, with Yun as a man and Shen Fu as a woman.

## **Tunting Temple/Narcissus Temple**

The site of the festival of the "lighting of the flowers" for which Yun dressed up as a man to be able to go and see it with her husband.

## **Soochow**

Shen Fu and Yun's birthplace, childhood home and the town in which they began their married life.

## **Plants**

Shen Fu's obsession since he was a small boy, he loved to grow small plants and flowers so that they looked like large trees, and to artfully arrange them, both cut and in gardens and pots.

## **The South Garden and the North Garden**

The places the group of friends went to see the rape flowers in bloom in the second record, and where Yun arranged to have a street merchant come with a stove to warm wine and food for them on their picnic, to the envy of passers-by.

## **Hungchiang**

The place where Shen Fu's father lay sick at the time of Yun's letter about the girl Yao living there, and the root of the misunderstanding that got the two of them cast out of the family for a time.

## **Villa of Serenity**

The place Shen Fu and Yun lived during their exile, belonging to Lu Pan-fang.



## **Chingchiang**

The town to which Shen Fu traveled when Yun was most ill to see their brother-in-law about getting some money, since he was employed in the Salt Bureau there. The trip was in the heart of winter, and proved a much longer trip than Shen Fu would have liked.

## **Ping Mountain**

A place Yun speaks several times about wanting some day to see; she died before she ever did.

## **Chungwen Academy**

The school where Shen Fu took his examinations.

## **Fenghsien**

The first place Shen Fu studied the government office, where he worked in a yamen with his best friend, Hung-kan.

## **White Cloud Villa at Kaoyi Garden**

The place with the ruined temple he visited with Hung-Kan, and they climbed Chicken Coop Mountain.

## **Garden of Peaceful Waves at Haining**

A beautiful place Chen Fu visited as a child, where he met his second-closest friend, Chu-heng.

## **Chihsi**

The place where Shen Fu was invited at the age of 25 to work for the county magistrate.

## **Canton**

The site of Shen Fu's many adventures with the concubines and his friend, Hsiu-feng.



# Themes

## The Value of True Love

Shen Fu and Yun's romance was the type that transcended every other role they played in life, and defined everything they did in it. From the day he met her, Shen Fu knew he wanted to marry her, even though he was only thirteen years old, and from the very beginning, their interaction centered around their mutual respect for each other's intellects and interests. As might have been expected at the time, Yun took intense interest in Shen Fu's family, work and travel, coming along side him to help in every way she could. Yun encouraged Shen Fu to be the best he could, even to the point of insisting that his pursuits come before her, as in the case of her letter writing when he was away studying.

As was likely far more exceptional for the time, Shen Fu took an equal amount of interest in Yun's pursuits, encouraging her in her embroidery, participating in her poetry, congratulating her for her cleverness in arranging parties, participating in the gardening and housekeeping, and even helping her disguise herself as a man so she could attend festivals with him. They were so constantly stimulating one another's intellects that even their games centered around literary themes and exercises, like the impromptu composition of poetry. Their affection was so intense and equitable, that they prayed that in their next lives, they might be born in reversed roles, so Yun could be husband and Shen Fu could be wife.

## The Value of Leisure

Shen Fu reveals his recognition of the value of leisure in the fact that he dedicates an entire record, technically written, to its pursuit. He writes about his finding beauty in the smallest details of outdoor life, like the motion of mosquitoes flying in air, and the texture and shape of flowers viewed from close-up. For long sections of the chapter, he writes vividly detailed instructions to his readers on how to design gardens, accomplish particular effects and illusions in gardens and arrangements of cut flowers, and make the best use of indoor space. He speaks to the theme outside his chapter on leisure, as well, making it clear that the parts of his life spent with Yun he most treasured were those they spent taking in the beauty of the world around them, and the delights of a good meal in each other's company. He writes similarly throughout the book about leisure, giving it a much higher priority than his work by far, working only when it is necessary for survival, and spending the rest of his time seeking out places of beauty and good friends. It is a valuable insight into the psychology of an ancient civilization to readers from a work-dominated western world, and an eastern world whose work has come to define it in the years since he wrote.



## The Value of Travel

Shen Fu writes in meticulous detail about the places he has visited in his lifetime, even describing those of the places he found wanting, in order to tell the reader exactly what he didn't like about them. Those places he loves, he does so because of their intense natural beauty, and the hospitality of the people there. Yun shares his love for travel, although her being a woman limits her ability to do so, and talks about how much she wishes she were a man, so she might be able to go and see the beautiful places she has only heard about. In the fourth record, Shen Fu names every place he visits, and spends even more time than on the people he is with on the things he sees, their history, and what makes them beautiful. His writing is at its most poetic in these sections of description, and he contemplates the people who made them famous and the empires that rose and fell in these places, reinforcing with every description that seeing as much of China as he can is one of his favorite life-pursuits.



# Style

## Perspective

Shen Fu writes as an autobiographer, born in the second half of the eighteenth century to an intellectual father in China. He is schooled to be a government magistrate, but only passes enough of his examinations to serve as secretary to magistrates, inspiring his title, "Six Records of a Floating Life," as he floats from one city and position to another all his life. His education would have acquainted him with traditional literature of the Imperial period in which he wrote, in which there was included very little detail about the details of daily life. For that reason, his diary-like frankness about those very details set his telling apart from those of his contemporaries. He writes as a tragic lover and an artist, as well, deeply engrossed in the details of his heart and imagination. He also offers a perspective on traditional families that makes him unique, unabashedly writing about his father's disinterest in learning all of a story before passing very harsh judgments. Shen Fu writes these details matter-of-factly and without judgment, and the book is the richer for his honesty. He is equally frank about his one-time disgust with colleagues in his profession, leaving a position without any compunction whatever when he recognized that their dealings were dishonest.

## Tone

Shen Fu's writing as a lover, an artist, a quasi-intellectual and an explorer all lend his writing a tone of deep emotion and a desire to learn. He is also unflinchingly honest about his own shortcomings in business, and his less-than-consistent ability to provide financially for his family, providing for the only moments of emotionless writing. His writing about Yun is particularly emotional, even playful as he recounts the stories of evenings they spend drinking wine and dining in their gardens, playing poetry games and looking at the stars. His writing about painting and gardening alternate between nearly mathematical detail and poetic metaphor-laced fascination. It is almost as if he is daydreaming about the plants and gardens in his memory as he writes, wandering among them in text as he remembers. His most emotive record, by far, is the record on "The Sorrows of Misfortune," when he puts on paper all of the last moments he and Yun have together, his heartbreak at losing her, and wanting to see her again when the spirits visit. He also dives right into the injustice he experiences from his family with indignation and and seeming vindication when he is able to tell his mother and brother of their unfairness. The book ends in a tone of gratitude and peaceful reflection on a life filled with travel and exploration.

## Structure

The book is written as four individual records, each one describing all of the details relevant to its established theme reaching from the beginning of Shen Fu's life to the



time of his writing. Beyond that framework are the introduction the translators include to describe the history of the text, the author and its history, as well as a chronology, a list of measures and a conclusion describing the attempts other writers have made to counterfeit the two final, lost records. The book itself tells the stories of Shen Fu's life circularly, the first describing his love with his wife Yun, and their adventures together. The second describes Shen Fu's leisure, including gardening, cutting and arranging flowers, painting, decorating the interior of a home, and dressing. In the third, Shen Fu focuses on his misfortunes, describing his unsteady employment, the trial of Yun's sickness, her separation from their children, her death, the death of his father, and his subsequent retreat into the care of a monastery where the quiet and beauty of the life nursed his heart back to health. In the final extant record, Shen Fu writes about his travels, beginning when he was a little boy traveling with his father and to study, progressing through his business travels and trips of pleasure with friends. The final record certainly leaves the book feeling unfinished, but the four chapters collectively serve to provide a highly intimate look at the author's life and times.





## Quotes

"Yun'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 Yun grew older she became very adept at needlework, and the labor of her ten fingers came to provide for all three of them. Thanks to her work, they were always able to afford to pay for the tuition for her brother's teachers." Part I, page 25

"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 Yun 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." Part I, page 30

"We used to make up impromptu poems there, one line of which was, 'Beast-like clouds eat the setting sun, the bow-like moon shoots falling stars.' After a while, when the moonlight fell directly into the pond and the sound of insects came from all around, we would move the bed out beside the fence. The old woman would come to tell us when the wine was warm and the food was hot. We would drink in the moonlight until we were a little tipsy, and then eat. After having a wash, we would fan ourselves with banana leaves, and sit or lie down and listen to our old neighbors tell stories of sin and retribution." Part I, page 43

"'Today I have met someone who is both beautiful and charming,' said Yun. 'I have just invited Han-yuan to come and see me tomorrow, so I can try to arrange things for you.'  
"'But we're not a rich family,' I said, worried. 'We cannot afford to keep someone like that. How could people as poor as ourselves dare to think of such a thing? And we are so happily married, who should we look for anyone else?'  
"'But I love her too,' Yun said, laughing. 'You just let me take care of everything.'" Part I, page 50

"During the summer, whenever I heard the sound of mosquitoes swarming, I would pretend they were a flock of cranes dancing across the open sky, and in my imagination they actually would become hundreds of cranes. I would let mosquitoes inside my mosquito netting, blow smoke at them, and imagine that what I saw were white cranes soaring through blue clouds. It really did look like cranes flying through clouds, and it was a sight that delighted me." Part II, page 55

"In laying out gardens, pavilions, wandering paths, small mountains of stone and flower plantings, try to give the feeling of the small in the large and the large in the small, of the real in the illusion, and of the illusion in the reality. Some things should be hidden and some should be obvious, some prominent and some vague. Arranging a proper garden is not just a matter of setting out winding paths in a broad area with many rocks; thinking that it is will only waste time and energy." Part II, page 60



"By the deep autumn the morning glories had grown all over the mountain, covering it like wisteria hanging from a rock face, and when their flowers bloomed they were a deep red. The white duckweed also bloomed, and letting one's spirit wander among the red and the white was like a visit to Peng island." Part II, page 62

"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. But a true Immortal must go through many incarnations before reaching enlightenment. Who could dare hope to become an Immortal in only one lifetime? In our eagerness for immortality, we have only incurred the wrath of the Creator, and brought on our troubles with our passion. Because you have loved me too much, I have had a short life!" Part III, page 88

"I cannot help but think of the countless chaste and virtuous women who since ancient days have been buried without being remembered, and of the many who have been remembered for only a short time; yet while this Hsaio-hsaio was nothing but a sing-song girl, everyone since the Southern Chi Dynasty has known of her. Is it because her spirit is supposed to make the lakes and mountains more beautiful?" Part IV, page 103

"The pity is that we only met like bits of duckweed drifting on the water, and were not together for long." Part IV, page 112

"We all went together, cloaked in the fragrance of the cassia flowers along the road bordered by a frosty forest. The sky stretched out empty and vast in the moonlight, and all the world was silent. At the pavilion Hsing-lan played 'Three Variations on the Plum Blossom' on his lute, and we felt as if we were floating off to the land of the Immortals. Caught up in the spirit of the moment, Yi-hsiang pulled an iron flute out of his sleeve and began playing a plaintive tune on it." Part IV, page 128

"To the left of the mountain there were four ancient cypress trees that people called by the names 'Pure', 'Rare', 'Ancient', and 'Strange'. 'Pure' had a straight trunk flourishing into green branches. 'Rare' sprawled on the ground, and had three twists in its trunk. 'Ancient' had bald branches at the top, and was flat, broad and half decayed, so that it looked like the palm of a hand. The trunk of 'Strange' spiraled up like a conch shell, and its branches did the same. It was said that these trees dated from before the Han Dynasty." Part IV, page 137



## Topics for Discussion

What are the most pronounced differences between the culture in which Shen Fu's story takes place and that of today?

Shen Fu's focus on the pleasures of life define many of the stories he tells. Are there lessons to be learned from his approach to living, or do you see his preference for leisure as a weakness? Explain your answer.

What conclusions can you draw about the normalcy or exceptionality of Shen Fu's relationship with Yun? Explain.

What do you see as Shen Fu's greatest strengths of character? What are his weaknesses?

Describe your impressions of the culture of the concubines, and their presence in Shen Fu and Yun's relationship.

Yun's do words to Shen Fu as she lay dying do to describe her world view, and her thoughts about deity and eternity?

In what ways does the culture Shen Fu describes serve to clarify your understanding of modern Chinese culture?