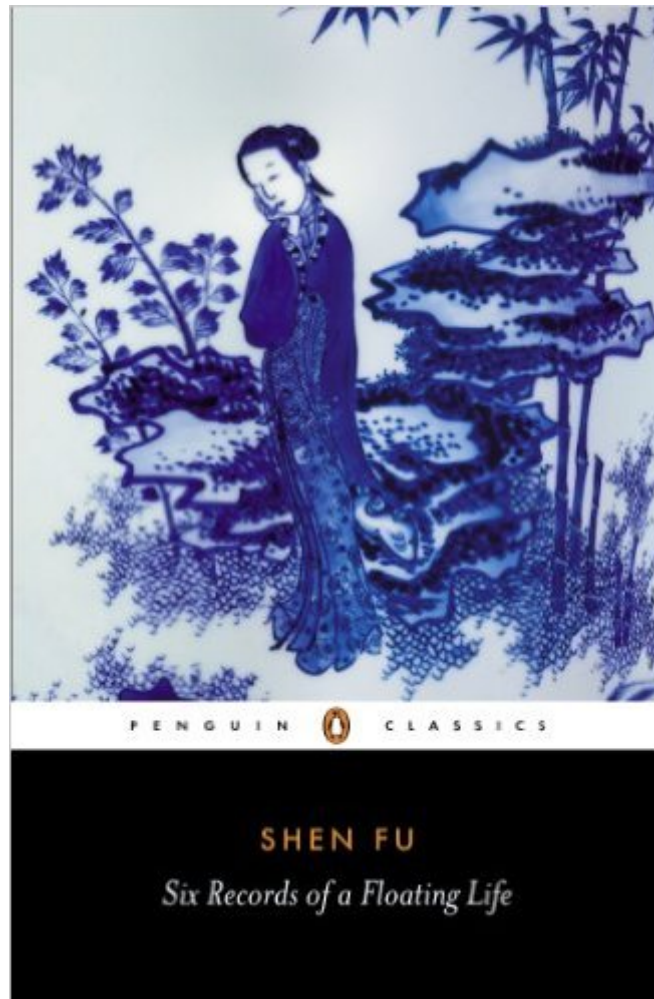


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Six Records Of A Floating Life (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Six Records of a Floating Life (1809) is an extraordinary blend of autobiography, love story and social document written by a man who was educated as a scholar but earned his living as a civil servant and art dealer. In this intimate memoir, Shen Fu recounts the domestic and romantic joys of his marriage to Yun, the beautiful and artistic girl he fell in love with as a child. He also describes other incidents of his life, including how his beloved wife obtained a courtesan for him and reflects on his travels through China. Shen Fu's exquisite memoir shows six parallel "layers" of one man's life, loves and career, with revealing glimpses into Chinese society of the Ch'ing Dynasty. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

There are so many contradictions within this quirky memoir that it could only possibly be true. This is a memoir of life right around the start of the 19th century. It recounts the adult life of Shen Fu, a man who appears to have been ordinary in the extreme. Although educated, he did not pass the literary tests of the civil service. At best, his career could have been a secretary under one of the successful

examinees, but his times weren't always the best. His positions never lasted, and his business attempts failed. Often, he sold his possessions and his wife's down to the clothes on their backs (or less). He fell out with his family, in a time when filial duty was enforced by law, and became outcast in almost every sense. But his life never wholly failed, either. Perhaps it was the glow of nostalgia, but his twenty-three years of marriage were always a joy to him, even when his wife's health failed, and even when she may have been the source of some of his problems. They had their times of poverty, but never to the point of starvation. He was honorable enough to quit a corrupt position when it offended his honor too deeply. He was devoted enough to heal the familial rifts. His joys and Yun's were simple - travel, each other, the beauty of the full moon, and maybe a little too much wine shared with happy company. Shen Fu and his devoted Yun never demanded much from their lives, and usually got enough to enjoy. The text wanders. The first three chapters chart the ups and downs of the marriage to his beloved wife. She died early, from some frightening disease. Still, she and he accepted it stoically, or mostly did. The fourth chapter collects a few decades of moments together, the sights and sounds of travel.

I decided to read "Six Records of a Floating Life" after spending a summer in Suzhou, the city of Shen Fu's birth and his home for many years. When describing this work, my Chinese friends were quick to use words like "romantic" and "touching". However I was skeptical since I had also heard that this book detailed Shen Fu's relationship not only with his wife, Yun, but also concubines and courtesans - thus setting it far outside the scope of what is traditionally considered "romantic" by modern, Western standards. Yet, if one is willing to keep an open mind and look at Shen Fu's extra-marital relations (which are, in fact, treated very briefly) within the context of the time and culture during which he wrote, one can see that that author and his wife were very much in love and cared passionately for each other for more than twenty years. Fu's description of the airy joys and carefree pleasures they experienced together as husband and wife are sure to bring a smile to the face of anyone who's ever been in love. Yet, with great happiness Shen Fu also experienced great pain and numerous hardships. Considered a failure in both business and scholarship, he was never wealthy and he struggled to provide even a modest living for himself and his family. Indeed, Fu drifted from place to place, job to job, often relying on friends and relatives to provide him with money and shelter. Adding to the pressures of poverty was his wife's chronic illness, which eventually took her life. Shen Fu's description of his wife's death is truly heart-breaking, as he writes: "Her spirit vanished in the mist and she began her long journey... When it happened there was a solitary lamp burning in the room."

If one reads the introduction, this book is not meant to be read as a sequential narrative, instead it is a collection of memoirs and hence the word "records" in the title. Through this collection of records and memoirs, readers are welcomed to peer into segments of the author's bumpy life. The records follow Shen Fu on his numerous failed attempts to find contentment in life: As an educated man, Shen Fu tried to gain a position through civil examinations but got nowhere, he tried his hand at being a painter but found that he had no talent, he made friends with people who eventually betrayed him, he got into debt and was disowned by his father, and the final blow came when he lost his child and beloved wife, Yun. In the end Shen Fu's decided to live a "floating Life" by giving up worldly matters to wander China. Shen Fu is also a groundbreaking author. He is very descriptive of his environment, which is uncharacteristic of Chinese writers of his time. Through Shen Fu's accounts the reader can experience the long lost customs of ancient China, for example, lonely men with a bit of pocket money can visit brothel boats sitting "like aimless floating leaves" on the river. Moreover, Shen Fu's accounts of his wife, Yun, were against conventions because he does not cease in describing her only as a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law according to Confucian ideology, but he portrays her as an intelligent and adventurous woman who was willing to dress up as a man to visit a temple (which forbids women) with him. To Shen Fu, Yun was his soul mate and she transcends his memoirs into a love story.

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