Translator's Preface

Few things delighted Chen Yun, the love of Shen Fu's life and the soul of this book, more than the chance discovery of fragmented manuscripts, which she would then bind with care. It is thus fitting that *Six Records of a Floating Life* was published only posthumously, in 1877, after being found in manuscript form at an inconspicuous book stand in Shen's native Suzhou, with only the first four of its six intended records surviving. This is also to say that, like the life of its author, *Six Records* drifted.

The historical person of Shen has remained obscure. Most of what we know of him comes from this autobiography alone: that he was born in 1763 to a scholarly family, married Chen in 1780 after the two fell in love as children, and held a series of low-level bureaucratic posts, working between them as an art dealer and, briefly, a merchant. The span of Shen's experience means that his personal narrative also doubles as an unguarded window into life and society in late imperial China, framed by the civil service examination system, patrilineal kinship structure, regional and foreign trade, as well as prevalent practices of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion.

As a character, Shen is fallible, and he was aware of his foibles. One wonders if this awareness was what gave rise to the autobiography its nonlinear, quasi-palimpsestic construction: *Six Records* unfolds in thematic chapters that are each largely self-contained and internally chronological, yet speak to and refract upon one another. The first record tells of a love story that is almost an idyll, but ends abruptly at the first stirring of grief. The second record, at times veering toward a connoisseur's manual, details the couple's various idle pleasures and aesthetic pursuits, perhaps a kind of self-soothing that readies the writer for the self-lacerating confessions soon to follow. In the third chapter, we witness the distress and calamities the couple endured in those very same years and the bitter circumstances surrounding Chen's death, for which Shen offers himself up as culpable. From there the book begins to quite literally wander, as Shen recounts his travels through Qing China, from which Chen was mostly excluded as a matter of social norms. The effect is such that, even though Chen is alive during the temporal frame of this final record, her absence haunts throughout.

Something beautiful was once had and is now lost. The poet cannot help but look back, aware that what remains is only the poem, not the person. The reader, however, is gifted this moving narrative—itself almost lost once more but here with us by some grace or accident. And perhaps more than that, the reader is granted a glimpse of inner freedom. To the extent the third chapter, "Record of Trying Sorrow," inflects the second, "Record of Idle Pleasures," the inverse is just as true: we see a couple who, even at their most destitute, held fast to ideals of beauty and love. *Six Records* is also a rarity among classical Chinese texts in its portrayal of what the contemporary reader might recognize as a polyamorous liaison, borne out of sapphic desire—striking, given the patriarchal era Chen lived in. By Shen's own account, the couple paid dearly for their defiance. Yet it is this very entwinement of pleasure and pain, of freedom and frustration, that renders their shared life enduring—relived each time it is read, worthy of return not in spite of its sorrow but because of all that made it whole.

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