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If Chen Yun Had Written about Her “Lesbianism”: Rereading the Memoirs of a Bereaved Philanderer

An important trophy for scholars who have been commendably in quest of evidence with which to write the history of lesbianism in China has been the pining of Chen Yun 陳芸, wife of the genteel eighteenth-century ne'er-do-well Shen Fu 沈復, for a young courtesan (or courtesan-to-be) called Hanyuan 憇園. Her tragedy is recorded in two chapters of Shen's discontinuous first-person narrative, *Fusheng liuji* 浮生六記 (*Six Records of a Floating Life*). Conventional responses to a central episode raise troubling questions about the historiographical use of autobiographical texts written in classical Chinese. A style whose virtues are economy and reticence offers the perfect vehicle for authorial concealment, and yet the question “What may be concealed in Shen's account of his wife's death?” remains to be addressed. Authorial reticence forces the reader to interpret; conscious of having done that, the reader risks failure to notice his or her continuing proximity to the surface of the text. Let me begin by presenting Chen Yun's story as it is understood in orthodox contemporary Western scholarship.

Shen Fu, born in 1763, was, by his own confession, an unsuccessful member of a subordinate stratum of the social élite of late-imperial China. In 1794 he returned to Suzhou 蘇州 from a business trip to Guangzhou 廣州 (Canton). In the same party was an affinal relative called Xu Xiufeng 徐秀峰, who had acquired a beautiful concubine in

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the south. This gave Chen Yun ideas. Just over one year later, the thirty-two-year-old mother of two was swearing sisterhood with Hanyuan in a ritual whose real purport was betrothal – between Hanyuan and her husband. Asked by the bemused Shen whether she was trying to imitate the wife in Li Yu’s 李漁 play *Lian xiang ban* 憐香伴 (*Tenderness for a Scented Companion*), she answered “That’s right.” This answer is thought to reveal her motivation. The wife in *Lian xiang ban* was enamored of another woman. She arranged for her husband to take her sweetheart as his secondary wife so that the mutual homoerotic passion could be consummated and sustained. Indeed, Yun had said “I love her myself” on the first day of her acquaintance with Hanyuan, in the very conversation in which she announced her intention to acquire the latter for Shen.¹

Striking as this evidence may be, there is more. From the time of the quasi-betrothal on, Yun did not let a day go by without talking about Hanyuan. Unfortunately, the betrothal was only an informal understanding between the parties to the intended *ménage à trois*. The agreement of the cultured young beauty’s “mother” had yet to be obtained, and she was a fashionable figure in the Suzhou demimonde. Not surprisingly, after another year or so Hanyuan was “snatched away” by some powerful individual who could pay handsomely for a concubine. “In the end, Yun died because of it” (the couple’s inability to bring the Shen Fu–Hanyuan union to fruition).² In the meantime, Yun had presumably kept in touch with Hanyuan. Her father-in-law regarded her as having disgraced the family by swearing sisterhood with a woman of Hanyuan’s class. According to the bereaved husband, writing perhaps six years after Yun’s death, her first meeting with Hanyuan inaugurated more than twelve months of freedom from the chronic apparent menstrual irregularities (literally, “blood indisposition 血疾”) that Shen traced to her extreme grief when her brother ran away and her mother sickened and died in consequence. However, when, in 1796 or 1797,

¹ Shen Fu, *Fusheng liuji*, ed. Zhao Tiaokuang 趙荅狂 and Zhu Jianmang 朱劍芒 (Hong Kong: Shanghai yinshuguan, 1961), j. 1, pp. 13–14. Li Yu’s *Lian xiang ban* is analyzed, along with other late-imperial literary works that feature lesbianism, in H. Laura Wu, “Through the Prism of Male Writing: Representation of Lesbian Love in Ming-Qing Literature,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 4.1 (2002), pp. 1–34. For convenient summaries of Shen Fu’s life, see biography by Fang Zhaoying in Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period (1644–1912)* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943–44) 2, pp. 641–42, and Leonard Pratt and Chiang Su-hui, trans., *Six Records of a Floating Life, Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, by Shen Fu (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1983), pp. 16–18.

² Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 1, pp. 13–14.

Yun found out that Hanyuan had been given to another, her mortification provoked a major attack. The excessive bleeding could not be stopped, apart from brief respites. Taking to her bed, she wasted away, her bones protruding from a body that had always been slender. After a series of further misfortunes, including banishment from the Shen parental home and growing impoverishment, she died in 1803, aged about forty. When she was heard sleeptalking in the last phase of her illness, one of her complaints was "Why did Hanyuan let me down? 慙何負我," or, in Leonard Pratt and Chiang Su-hui's translation, "How could Hanyuan turn her back on me?"³

If the claim were only that Shen's joking allusion to *Lian xiang ban* attests familiarity with lesbian literary themes among the lower strata of the Qing elite (at least in Jiangnan), we would be on fairly firm ground.⁴ However, the unfortunate Yun features in Western scholarly print as a positively historical embodiment of homoerotic yearning in a Chinese woman. For example, Bret Hinsch's short appendix entitled "Lesbianism in Imperial China" mentions the sad story told by Shen as a "presumably nonfictional account" of female same-sex "infatuation."⁵ Hinsch accepts Paul Ropp's view that the "disappointment" of losing Hanyuan was "too much for Yun, whose earlier illness return[ed] and claim[ed] her life."⁶ Hinsch's Yun, indeed, "went into a deep bout of melancholy, fell ill, and died."⁷ Ropp, having declared faith in the non-fictional status of the story in 1981, reasserted four years later, in an essay on the women depicted in this work, that "What Shen describes, with some astonishment, is the process of Yun falling in love with a beautiful singing girl and then grieving herself to death over the girl's apparent betrayal."⁸ An unfortunately imprecise citation in Susan Mann's half-

³ Ibid. 1, p. 1; 3, pp. 24–25, 30–31; Pratt and Chiang, *Six Records*, p. 87 (Wade-Giles transcription replaced with *pinyin*).

⁴ Kuang Yanzi has questioned whether – at least at the moment of the joke – Shen and his wife would necessarily have seen the relationship between the female protagonists of *Lian xiang ban* in terms of homoerotic bonding. They may have been alluding only to the way in which the marital arrangements depicted in Li's play enabled the two women to solidify bonds of deep friendship; Kuang Yanzi 鄭龔子, "Fusheng liuji zhong Chen Yun de qing shen zhi lei" 浮生六記中陳芸的情深之累, in Zhang Hongsheng 張宏生, ed., *Ming Qing wenxue yu xingbie yanjiu* 明清文學與性別研究 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2002), p. 870. I thank Noguchi Miwako 野口弥和子 for drawing my attention to the two essays on *Fusheng liuji* in this collection.

⁵ Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1990), p. 176.

⁶ Paul S. Ropp, *Dissent in Early Modern China: Ju-lin wai-shih and Ch'ing Social Criticism* (Ann Arbor: U. Michigan P., 1981), p. 147.

⁷ Hinsch, *Passions*, p. 176.

⁸ Ropp, *Dissent*, p. 147; Paul S. Ropp, "Between Two Worlds: Women in Shen Fu's *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*," in Anna Gerstlacher et al., eds., *Woman and Literature in China* (Bochum: Studienverlag Brockmeyer, 1985), p. 113.

paragraph on female “homosexual attraction” in gentry homes suggests that it is on Yun’s case that she relies in noting that “a wife might select a concubine for her spouse with her own sensibilities in mind.” From the context, it appears that Mann means “sexual sensibilities.”⁹ This interpretative tradition continues where Sang Tze-lan writes, albeit to a very different purpose: “That a wife might follow her own sensibility to procure a girl of her fancy for her husband . . . plays an important role in the account of married life given in *Fusheng liu ji*. . . .”¹⁰ Even Laura Wu, for whom lesbianism is only a “peripheral” theme in Shen Fu’s narrative, takes Yun’s “That’s right 然” at face value, claiming that she “openly states that she is imitating *Lianxiang ban* in her arrangement of finding a concubine for her husband, that is, she is taking the woman into her household more as her own lover.”¹¹

Ropp, in 1985, went further. It is fair to note that he explicitly rejected the assumption that Yun necessarily “enjoyed or even conceived of” a physical relationship with Hanyuan, preferring the view that Yun, in being “literally ‘in love’ with Hanyuan,” was expressing her deeply “passionate” and romantic nature. However, he also rejected, as an aberration fit only for “modern students,” the notion that there might have been “ulterior motives” behind Yun’s interest in finding her husband a concubine – perhaps “that Yun wants a concubine for Shen only out of desperation to keep him at home under her watchful eye.” This, he opined, cannot be right, for “there is nowhere in *Six [Records]* any evidence of insecurity or jealousy on the part of Yun.” Rather, the relationship between Shen and Yun offers a beautiful model of “non-possessive” love. Yun is happy for her husband to have “involvement with other women” because of “her own attraction to beautiful and talented women as well as her romantic nature and her perception of concubinage (and flower-boat culture) as natural parts of life that do not threaten conjugal love, commitment, and harmony.” Indeed, Ropp

⁹ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1997), p. 60. Mann’s reference (p. 247, n. 43) reads only “See the discussion in Ropp 1985.” The only “Ropp 1985” listed in her bibliography (p. 309) is “Between Two Worlds” (see previous n.), and the “discussion” in question is presumably that on pp. 116–18, which is about the Hanyuan episode.

¹⁰ Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: U.Chicago P., 2003), p. 50. Sang cites the Chen Yun story in her impressive critique of what she terms “the recurrent Ming-Qing literary fantasy of utopian polygamy” (*ibid.*, pp. 49–52).

¹¹ Wu, “Through the Prism,” pp. 5, 13 n. 31. So also Pratt and Chiang in a note to their translation: “Yün’s confirmation that she had this play in mind gives us our principal clue about just what her real relationship with Han-yüan may have been: the play tells the story of a young married woman who falls in love with a girl. . . .” (and so on). Pratt and Chiang, *Six Records*, p. 153, n. 44.

continues, "Yun and Shen share an emotional bond so close that neither ever betrays the slightest doubt in the other's love and fidelity. Yet both also accept intimate third-party friendships as natural and desirable. There is no hint of jealousy on the part of either, nor is there evident any assumption that all one's needs should or could be filled by one's spouse exclusively."¹² Dare one suggest that Western romanticism here discerns in China the fulfillment of one of its own recent countercultural ideals?

It is fortunate indeed that the present spate of high quality, sophisticated, and altogether welcome scholarship on representations of homosexuality in premodern China makes it unnecessary to cling to weak and ambiguous evidence. Especially pertinent is Sang Tze-lan's thoughtful discussion of "female same-sex desire" in the late-imperial period. Informed by sensitivity to the suffering to which strongly homosexual women were presumably destined by "compulsory" matrimony in Confucian China, Sang's properly imaginative inquiry brings both a new seriousness and a new critical sharpness to bear on easy assumptions and non-resistant readings of male-authored texts. Much inspiration can be drawn from her pioneering interest in the question of how female same-sex attraction might have been represented in a world in which it was not to be understood or valorized.¹³ Clearly, research has passed the stage of demonstrating that there are Chinese chapters in gay and lesbian history, important as that earlier stage has been.¹⁴

The new approach has set new standards, as has recent scholarship in cognate fields. For example, no one who has read Maureen Robertson's brilliant analysis of "performance," "reinscription," and "invention" as techniques of poetic self-representation by Ming and Qing women will lightly suppose that one can go directly from a literary text to an accurate and certain understanding of the feelings of a

¹² Ropp, "Between Two Worlds," pp. 109, 113, 116-18.

¹³ See Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, part 1, "Premodern China," esp. pp. 72-86, 91-94. Other major contributions to the new scholarship on representations of homosexuality in premodern China include Wu, "Through the Prism"; Chloe Starr, "Shifting Boundaries: Gender in *Pinhua baojian*," *Nan Nü* 1.2 (1999), pp. 268-302; Giovanni Vitiello, "Exemplary Sodomites: Chivalry and Love in Late Ming Culture," *Nan Nü* 2.2 (2000), pp. 207-57; Wu Cuncun 吳存存, "Ming Qing shehui nanxing tongxinglian fengqi" 明清社會男性同性戀風氣, chap. 4 of her *Ming Qing shehui xing'ai fengqi* 明清社會性愛風氣 (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 2000); Keith McMahon, "Sublime Love and the Ethics of Equality in a Homoerotic Novel of the Nineteenth Century: *Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses*," *Nan Nü* 4.1 (2002), pp. 70-109. Also important is the chapter on Qing legal views of male homosexuality in Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2000).

¹⁴ For an account of the historiography of Chinese same-sex love, see Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, pp. 37-40.

historical person, even if that person was the author.¹⁵ That prose autobiography is problematic as a guide to the true feelings of its author was surely obvious even before Robertson, while it would be a rash scholar indeed who would propound the notion that it could serve reliably as guide to the feelings of anybody else. While an autobiographer may, of course, accurately represent the feelings of another, it is methodologically unwise to assume that this intrinsically thorny task has been accomplished. Speaking of methodology, furthermore, perhaps it is not unreasonable to prefer that invocations of *Fusheng liuji* refer directly to the text of the original. Hinsch, it seems, relied solely on Ropp; Ropp, in his article-length study of the work, apparently consulted the original (which is cited in his notes), but quoted repeatedly from a previous English translation, that of Shirley Black.¹⁶ A translation that renders “in the end, Yun died because of it 芸竟以之死” as “Yun actually grieved herself to death over the loss of Hanyuan” offers, I submit, insufficient evidence on which to hail a long-dead forty-year-old mother of two as a fully historical Chinese lesbian.¹⁷

Not for a moment do I question the service that Ropp and those who echo him have rendered to the study of gender and sexuality in premodern China. That this is now one of the most dynamic fields in Chinese studies owes much to their pioneering efforts. In the early 1980s, to be sure, the image of a literate, resourceful, convention-disregarding, loving and, to cap it all, bisexual Yun was perhaps needed to dethrone previous stereotypes and thereby open new lines of inquiry. But the succeeding wave of scholarship has done its work: with literary women everywhere one looks, and “agency”-possessing women impressively salient in the writings of Dorothy Ko, Yun no longer looks as remarkable (historiographically speaking) in 2007.¹⁸ Does the charm

¹⁵ I refer in particular to Robertson’s exposure of the multiple subjects behind the “I” of a lyric poem. See her “Changing the Subject: Gender and Self-inscription in Authors’ Prefaces and ‘Shi’ Poetry,” in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1997), pp. 177–78.

¹⁶ Shen Fu, *Chapters from a Floating Life*, trans. Shirley M. Black (London: Oxford U.P., 1960).

¹⁷ Black’s rendering is quoted in Ropp, “Between Two Worlds,” p. 116. Ropp explained his quotation and citation policy in *ibid.*, p. 137, n. 5. He admitted that Black had committed “occasional overtranslation” but generally quoted from her work because he found it “the most felicitous English translation” available.

¹⁸ Landmark publications have included Charlotte Furth, ed., “Symposium on Poetry and Women’s Culture in Late Imperial China,” *Late Imperial China* 13.1 (1992); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1994); Widmer and Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*; and Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004).

of Shen's prose, and of the Yun who can be resurrected from it, serve to deflect even feminist scholars from recognition that *Fusheng liuji*, a male-authored text, is suspect? Now that we no longer need the Yun of Ropp's romantic image, it may be time to cross-examine the testimony from which it was built. Ko, after all, has brought "resistant reading" to Chinese gender history with her interrogation of the moralist Li Gong's 李埭 vicarious depiction of his marital experience.¹⁹ Let her magnificent example not be wasted on us.

In what follows, I feel my way to an alternative reading (presented towards the end of this essay) of the original text of those passages of *Fusheng liuji* that tell the story of Chen Yun's preoccupation with Hanyuan. This reading yields a slightly more hard-headed historical Yun, but one who claims our sympathy no less than Shen Fu's image of her. There is no solid reason to suppose this Yun either bisexual or lesbian. My conclusion on the latter point is similar to that of Kuang Yanzi 鄺龔子, although reached from a more critical standpoint; with his analysis centered on the "depth" of Yun's emotions, Kuang addresses the issue of her sexuality from within the same conceptual domain as Ropp.²⁰ Although, of course, I would not wish to be dogmatic that my reading is correct, I hope that the fair-minded will consider it at least as plausible as the received interpretation, which indeed it undermines at one point. Lest others yet more radical than I find my approach uncritical, let me clarify that it is in order to grapple with previous English-language writing about Yun's sexuality on its own terms that I follow some of its conventions. While the possibility of Shen's having misinterpreted Yun's feelings and symptoms is noted here, that of his having perpetrated conscious misrepresentation or outright fabrication will not be considered. Nor will the accuracy of his recollections be questioned. Even the ability of his classical Chinese renditions of conversations presumably conducted in the Suzhou vernacular (and miraculously inscribed in memory exactly as spoken) to capture every nuance of the original, avoiding distortion and ambiguity – this too will be assumed. Are these assumptions rash? Of course they are, but I shall blithely make them. Most basically, I shall assume that *Fusheng liuji* is indeed autobiography, and that there is therefore a historical Chen Yun to be recovered. This precludes exploration of some inter-

¹⁹ Dorothy Ko, "Thinking about Copulating: An Early-Qing Confucian Thinker's Problem with Emotion and Words," in Gail Hershatter et al., eds., *Remapping China: Fissures in Historical Terrain* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1996), esp. pp. 68–75. It was, of course, Judith Fetterley who challenged female scholars to become "resisting" readers; Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1978).

²⁰ Kuang, "Fusheng liuji zhong," pp. 869–71.

esting avenues that might have been opened by a decision to regard the work as fiction.²¹

Let us start with this historical Chen Yun's recorded symptoms, viewed in the light of modern medicine. Recognized causes of vaginal bleeding, defined as "an abnormal condition in which blood is passed from the vagina, other than during the menses," are "abnormalities of the uterus or cervix, an abnormal pregnancy, endocrine abnormalities, abnormalities of one or both ovaries or one or both fallopian tubes, or an abnormality of the vagina."²² Vaginal bleeding is the "cardinal symptom" of endometrial (that is, uterine) cancer, "the fourth most common cancer in women aged 25 to 59 years" in modern, presumably industrialized, populations.²³ Alternatively, if we regard her complaint as menorrhagia ("heavy menstrual bleeding"), the list of recognized possible causes is no less impressive and includes both endometrial and cervical cancer.²⁴ While Yun's relative youth, slim build and child-bearing history make endometrial cancer a less likely retrospective diagnosis than the bleeding would suggest, the mere possibility that she died painfully of cancer should bring us up short when dreaming of romantically more appealing explanations. If the length of time that elapsed between the first onset of symptoms and her death makes cancer actually unlikely, we can readily hypothesize that a fatal bacterial or viral illness supervened after years of vaginal bleeding or menorrhagia that had one or more of the known physical causes. Vaginal bleeding would have been worrying and inconvenient; whatever the cause in Yun's case, we may legitimately suspect that it was the onset or recurrence of her symptoms that intensified her emotional reaction to distressing events such as the loss of Hanyuan.²⁵ After all, in contemporary medicine it is amenor-

²¹ Cf. Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, pp. 49–52. In a 1992 paper, Harriet Zurndorfer referred to *Fusheng liuji* both as "autobiography" and as "novel," thereby reminding us of the permeability of the distinction between these two genres. See her "The 'Constant World' of Wang Chao-Yüan: Women, Education, and Orthodoxy in 18th Century China: a Preliminary Investigation," in Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, comp., *Family Process and Political Process in Modern Chinese History* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 581–83. While this is an important point, exploring its potential in *Fusheng liuji* scholarship awaits another essay.

²² Douglas M. Anderson et al., comps., *Mosby's Medical, Nursing and Allied Health Dictionary*, 6th edn. (St Louis: Mosby, 2002), p. 1788.

²³ Vivienne O'Connor and Gabor Kovacs, *Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Women's Health* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2003), p. 568–69; Anderson, comp., *Mosby's Medical*, pp. 269 and 598.

²⁴ O'Connor and Kovacs, *Obstetrics*, pp. 509, 511.

²⁵ It is fair to confirm, however, that the pattern recounted by her spouse was that the distressing events preceded the outbreak of symptoms, and that she enjoyed a one-year respite from the latter during the quasi-betrothal of himself and Hanyuan. Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 3, p. 24. On the grave concern with which menstrual irregularities (chiefly amenorrhoea) were viewed

rhoea and oligomenorrhoea (the opposite of Yun's problem) for which emotional disturbance and other forms of stress are more likely to be held responsible.²⁶ I do not question that Yun was genuinely distressed by losing Hanyuan, nor do I deny the possibility that she was sexually attracted by Hanyuan, and that physical intimacy with Hanyuan, made possible through a polygamous marriage, would have brought her deep personal fulfilment. Frustrated sexual longing, however, is unknown to modern medicine as a direct cause of death, even in socially isolated persons, which an idyllically married mother of two living children can hardly be called. Yun's death was real, and her dismay was real, but it does not follow that disappointed homoerotic passion was the cause of either. It behooves us to interrogate Shen's narrative for some other reason for her obsessive reaction to the loss of Hanyuan.

Fusheng liuji may not be fiction, but it is certainly literary. It further behooves historians seeking to use a literary text to consult qualified practitioners of literary criticism before rushing to treat the source as if it were a straightforward repository of fact (not, of course, that historians today treat any source as a simple repository of fact). The available literary discussions of *Fusheng liuji* are indeed worth consulting. Jonathan Hall alerts us to look out for "the negotiation of contradictions, a concern shared by novels and autobiographies alike." He writes in another context of "a troubled relationship between the narrator [Shen Fu] and his tale."²⁷ Chang Han-liang observes that "the narrator of *Six [Records]* never seems to have the awareness that what his text reveals is not so much his past as his present."²⁸ As if to amplify Chang's comment, Stephen Owen, in an essay on "memory and repetition" in *Fusheng liuji*, focuses on Shen's compulsions as a narrator and asks "What is he doing, making stories out of memories, taking broken stones out of his past and shaping them into a miniature mountain where lovers

in the Chinese medical tradition, see Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1997), pp. 326-34. See also Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960-1665* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1999), pp. 74-77, 292-93.

²⁶ For the kinds of oligomenorrhoea and secondary amenorrhoea in which stress can play a role, see O'Connor and Kovacs, *Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Women's Health*, pp. 468 and 470-71. I thank Dr. Kathryn Hewetson for a medical opinion on some of the issues raised in this paragraph.

²⁷ Jonathan Hall, "Heroic Repression: Narrative and Aesthetics in Shen Fu's *Six Records of a Floating Life*," in *Comparative Criticism* 9 (1987), pp. 159, 162.

²⁸ Han-liang Chang, "The Anonymous Autobiographer: Roland Barthes/Shen Fu," in Ying-Hsiung Chou, ed., *The Chinese Text: Studies in Comparative Literature* (Hong Kong: Chinese U.P., 1986), p. 65. I omit the rest of Chang's sentence, which is not relevant to my present purpose.

may dwell forever, or may once have dwelled, but where they do not dwell now?" "If *we* look at the mountain or read the memoir," Owen later comments, referring both to a narrated act of "artifice" and to the whole narration, "we may be deceived, but neither the mountain nor the memoir is truly for us: they are acts of desire and of eternally unsuccessful self-deception."²⁹ Deception and self-deception are of the greatest interest to practising historians, but the interpretative challenges posed by a possibly deceitful text are to be recognized before that text can be made useful.

It is reasonable to speculate, *pace* Owen, that Shen wrote precisely in order "to escape, to get on to something new."³⁰ Writing the story of his marriage may, in other words, have been a way for Shen to come to terms with its unhappy end and his own share in the responsibility for the couple's difficulties. Of course, he could not be expected to "tell all." He presumably tells some of what he knows (for he may not know all), and what he tells is what he wants to see preserved, the part to which he reconciles himself. He "fissures" (Hall's word) the narrative precisely at the point where his responsibility would be unbearable, were continuity permitted to expose it.³¹ To speak brutally of the purpose of his text, he writes to achieve a sense of what people nowadays call "closure" as he settles into his new life with the concubine a friend has given him. The gesture was a kindness, offered and accepted because of the death, in 1806, of Shen's son by Chen Yun. Shen writes little of this second marriage, giving the reader to understand only that he is once more absorbed in the illusion of living.³² Empathetic reading of his memoirs is, of course, one option; Paul Ropp has embraced it without asking how Yun might have told the story. Perhaps it comes more naturally to a female reader to address that question.

The project of "reading as a woman" is, of course, fraught with conceptual and practical difficulties – not least the outrageous accusations that one risks by trying it. Let me therefore begin by clarifying that I believe neither that all women read (or feel) in the same way, nor that the reading proposed here reflects "female-exclusive" insights.³³ While

²⁹ Stephen Owen, "Repetition: Of Small Pleasures in Idleness," chap. 6 of his *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1986), pp. 99, 102, 103.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³¹ Cf. Hall, "Heroic Repression," pp. 162–63. I return to this point later.

³² Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 3, p. 35.

³³ For a careful exploration of what "reading as a woman" might involve, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1982), chap. 1, part 2. The remarks at the top of p. 58 are especially pertinent.

eschewing female-chauvinist denial of the imaginative potential of male colleagues, I would nonetheless like to recall the inspiring contributions of two scholars who have used their observations and emotional experience as women to propose new insights into Chinese culture. First is the anthropologist Margery Wolf, observer of live women in rural Taiwan, whose account of traditional Chinese kinship from a female perspective added the fruitful concept of "uterine family" to the repertoire of tools for analyzing the Chinese kinship system. Second is the historian Patricia Ebrey, retriever of dead women from Song China, who dared to write the words "I can imagine" in a sensitive, indeed exemplary, discussion of the problem of jealousy for elite middle-aged wives whose husbands took young concubines.³⁴ Emboldened by these successes, I here attempt a reading of Shen's narrative from the viewpoint not, to be sure, of Everywife, but of *a* wife and occasional observer of other wives, including some who are East Asian. From the text written by her husband, what can I imagine Chen Yun having felt?

Let us stand back for a moment to confront the realities of Yun's idyllic marriage. To call Shen a philanderer may be unfair, perhaps even Eurocentric. In the extant chapters of *Fusheng liuji*, he confesses to only one adulterous relationship, although two of his translators suspect another dalliance.³⁵ Moreover, for a premodern Chinese man, extramarital enjoyments may not have incurred the mild moral disapproval connoted by the word "philanderer" in English. We are told that in traditional Chinese society, a husband's extramarital liaison might be seen as an offence against the patriline if its cost cut into needed family resources, but not as an offence against his wife.³⁶ However, given all of Ebrey's evidence of Chinese wifely jealousy even towards concubines (legitimate secondary consorts), it cannot be completely Eurocentric to suppose that many Chinese wives would have preferred monogamy, appreciated marital fidelity, and were especially worried by affairs outside the home. May this not have been true of Yun?

My theory is that Chen Yun's anguish was not over her personal loss of Hanyuan, but over a feared alienation of her husband's commitment to herself and their two children. The acquisition of Hanyuan would have been important not because of any emotional fulfilment

³⁴ Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1972), esp. chap. 3; Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1993), pp. 165-71, esp. p. 167 for the quotation.

³⁵ Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 4, pp. 44-48; Pratt and Chiang, trans., *Six Records*, p. 152, n. 39.

³⁶ Margery Wolf, *The House of Lim: A Study of a Chinese Farm Family* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), p. 133.

that it might have meant for Yun, but precisely because it might have enabled her to keep her husband's sexuality at home. In other words, the explanation rejected by Ropp is likely to be correct, and it takes only a little wifely common sense (or male empathy) to see this. The cynicism of the "modern student" is beside the point.

Let us look more closely at the timing of the concubine-hunt that resulted in Hanyuan's quasi-betrothal to Shen Fu. As I have mentioned, and as the reader learns in chapter 1 of *Fusheng liuji*, Yun became taken with the idea of finding her husband a concubine in 1794, when Shen returned from Guangzhou with his affinal kinsman Xu Xiufeng and the latter's newly-purchased concubine. What the reader does not learn until chapter 4 is that this concubine – in Yun's eyes, "beautiful all right, but one could hardly call her elegant" – had almost certainly been bought from the same "flower boat" (floating brothel) where Shen himself had had a tender but expensive relationship with a vulnerable young woman known to him as "Pleasure" (Xi'er 喜兒).³⁷ On the first night, he had convinced himself that she looked somewhat like his wife. His four months of customer loyalty to this tragically sensitive victim of the sex trade cost over 100 taels of silver. This would have been enough for Shen to buy the titular studentship in the Imperial Academy that could have served as a first step to paid employment as a full civil servant – or, to use a down-to-earth standard of value, enough to provide up to about twenty people with a year's supply of rice at current Suzhou prices.³⁸

Although we cannot exclude the possibility that there were sound business reasons for Yun's long wait for Shen's return, skepticism is justified by Shen's disclosure that the trade goods he had taken to Guangzhou were sold within ten days of his arrival.³⁹ For the casual,

³⁷ For Yun's comment on Xu's new concubine, see Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 1, p. 13.

³⁸ For the flower boat episode, see *ibid.* 4, pp. 44–49. The standard price of a *jiansheng* 監生 title for persons without academic qualifications was 108 taels. See, e.g., First Historical Archives (Beijing), *Zhupi zouzhe* 硃批奏摺, *Caizheng* 財政, *Cangchu* 倉儲 (Rescripted palace memorials, Fiscal matters, Granary reserves), memorial by Xu Rong 許容 dated Qianlong 8/3/22; cf. Chang Chung-li, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on Their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: U. Washington P., 1955), p. 104. The available Suzhou prefecture rice price data for the 1790s are problematic; in order to avoid exaggerating Shen's extravagance, I have used Wang Yeh-chien's "31-year moving average" price of 1.9 taels per *shi* 石 (Chinese bushel) for 1794 rather than his "annual price" of 1.44 tals/*shi* for that year; Wang, "Secular Trends of Rice Prices in the Yangzi Delta, 1638–1935," in Thomas G. Rawski and Lillian M. Li, eds., *Chinese History in Economic Perspective* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1992), table 1.1 and pp. 49–51. Wang Yeh-chien has estimated "national average" *per capita* grain consumption in 18th-c. China as 2.5 *shi* per year; Wang, "Food Supply in Eighteenth-Century Fukien," *Late Imperial China* 7.2 (1986), p. 88.

³⁹ Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 4, p. 44.

small-time commercial venturer that Shen had temporarily become, were the prices in Suzhou of any Guangzhou purchases for which one had to wait four months enough to cover the cost of the sojourn and still leave a worthwhile profit? Yun was, however, lucky (although Xi'er was not): Shen went home when the madam's calls for him to buy Xi'er for 500 taels became importunate. Xi'er, reportedly, was wretched almost to the point of suicide when he failed to return; he noted – perhaps euphemistically – that the episode had given him the chance to taste the lychees of the south.⁴⁰

Did Yun find out? Perhaps wives know some things without being told. One hopes that she did not learn all, but she probably knew enough. Of course she had reason to fear for her *ménage*. The days of the couple's poverty were yet to come, but it was already clear that Shen had no permanent profession. It may not have been ancestral wealth that he had squandered, but if Pratt and Chiang are right in interpreting "I discussed it with my friends and assembled funds to serve as capital" as meaning that he borrowed from those friends, this fact may possibly have made his conduct still more heinous.⁴¹ He may have left himself in debt – besides, of course, wasting a strategic opportunity of putting his dependents on a sounder economic basis. Yun herself had invested effort and imagination in procuring goods that would sell well in Guangzhou.⁴² Whether or not her companionate marriage meant as much to her as Ropp assumed, it is most unlikely that she viewed the evidence of her husband's unreliability without dismay. What would she have to suffer next, and at what cost to her children's food and clothing, or to her son's schooling? Presumably to put a check on Shen's irresponsibility, her father-in-law withheld permission for him to return to Guangzhou the next year.⁴³ Lacking any such power herself, Yun had to take whatever steps she could.

I find it odd that Ropp writes that "We are never told Yun's reaction to Shen's stay in Guangzhou, but no evidence is given or [*sic*] any strain of dissension in their marriage from this event."⁴⁴ We are told exactly how Yun reacted; it is just that there is nothing as crude in Shen's record as an account of her berating him. This may or may not have happened, but there is no reason to attach particular significance

⁴⁰ Ibid. 4, pp. 48–49.

⁴¹ Ibid. 4, p. 43. Cf. Pratt and Chiang, trans., *Six Records*, p. 116, "I got together some money by borrowing from several friends."

⁴² Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 4, p. 43.

⁴³ Ibid. 4, pp. 48–49.

⁴⁴ Ropp, "Between Two Worlds," p. 112.

to this silence in the record. The Yun portrayed by Shen was complaisant, resourceful and, in some ways, intelligent.⁴⁵ Her response to her new crisis was fully in character. What would have been accomplished by making a scene?⁴⁶ Unwilling to find herself in the position of Xu Xiufeng's wife, Yun acted – her approach being a natural choice in a polygamous society. An addition to the household might achieve the strategic goal of keeping Shen focused on his family, and who better than the wise, discerning Yun to choose him a companion who would not destroy the ambience of their life together?

Yun's first reaction to Shen's return was to search obsessively for a suitable person. Unfortunately, the couple's lack of funds meant that no deal could be struck. By chance, the mirage of a solution appeared just as fresh evidence made the quest more desperate. Shen, who had been "dragged" by others to visit the flower boats of Guangzhou, had now been unexpectedly "dragged" off for afternoon entertainment at the parlor of Hanyuan's fashionable "mother" – thus leaving his own mother and his wife to set off without him on that day's planned outing to the suburban beauty spot called Tiger Hill.⁴⁷ Shen participated as a guest in social rituals that he himself could not have afforded; part of the service for which a third party paid the bill was the release of Hanyuan to accompany Shen and his friend by boat to Tiger Hill, where they would meet Yun and Shen's mother at a prearranged spot. When the two parties met, Yun liked Hanyuan at once. She took every opportunity of testing her reaction to the charming teenager, going round the sights with her and, on the way home, persuading Shen to let Hanyuan travel in the boat that carried herself and her mother-in-law. By the end of the evening, she was well on the way to making up her mind that Hanyuan was the one. She arranged for the girl to call on them the very next day. Volumes were spoken by her husband's reply (as he remembered it) when, late that night, she told him of her plans. The first objection was that it would be wildly unrealistic for an

⁴⁵ E.g., Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 1, pp. 1, 3, 9; 2, pp. 19, 21.

⁴⁶ Instructive here is Zhang Li's portrayal of the response of a contemporary migrant woman to her businessman spouse's infidelity. "Mei" clearly is not happy with her husband's conduct, but she does not "confront" him; rather, she cultivates "the image of a virtuous wife" as a deliberate containment strategy. Most significantly, she shows awareness that it may be in a wife's interests to conceal her knowledge of the spouse's liaisons; Zhang Li, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2001), pp. 133–34. Did a wisely dissembling Yun fool not only Shen, but also her erudite late-20th-century sympathizers?

⁴⁷ For the Guangzhou "dragging," see Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 4, p. 44. On Tiger Hill as "public resort," see Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), pp. 135–36.

impecunious type like him to aspire to keep a concubine from such a background. Hanyuan would have come with expectations that were financially beyond his means. In second place ("Besides. . .") was the obvious fact that he and Yun were so devoted to each other. "Why insist on looking outside [our marriage] 何必外求?"

Yun knew the answer all too well, but, to humor him, she laughed and said "I love her myself 我自愛之." The verb *ai* 愛 ("to love") is not only the word that Shen used of Yun's reaction to her favorite view on Tiger Hill but also that which he used of his own mother's response to Yun on seeing her as a young teenager. What Shen recorded was that his mother, having been informed by his thirteen-*sui*-old self that he would marry no one but his cousin Yun, and also "loving" Yun's gentle (literally, "soft and harmonious") disposition, took off one of her own rings on the spot and betrothed the two of them.⁴⁸ This was the part of the discussions between his mother and her widowed sister-in-law (Yun's mother) that the adolescent boy had been allowed to see. *Ai*, then, was a word that could be used of a woman's response to a girl whom she deemed a fitting sexual partner for her nearest and dearest, be the lucky male son or husband. It did not necessarily imply that she wanted the lovable party for herself.

We are thus not compelled to suppose that what Yun meant was "I am in love with her myself." However, the single-mindedness with which she pursued her scheme would have left her open to her husband's teasing, given that people in their *milieu* could conceive of lesbian love at least as an amusing possibility. After all, the outrageous Li Yu had written a play about it (*Lian xiang ban*). As the real issue between husband and wife was not open for discussion, it was easier for both of them to tease or accept teasing (as the case might be). She solemnized the ritual of swearing sisterhood with Hanyuan, gave the girl a jadeite bracelet from her arm to symbolize the lasting nature of their mutual pledge and, choosing to believe that Hanyuan's "heart" had been secured, assured her husband that she would now work on a plan for the hard part, persuading Hanyuan's "mother." That Shen thought it worth recording his celebrated quip ("Are you going to imitate Li Yu's *Lian xiang ban*?") perhaps suggests that he was proud of it – the way one is on thinking that one has said something clever. Was Yun sharing his little joke when she said "That's right," or was she thinking "Let him believe that if it helps my plan"? Either way, "That's right" was a good answer in the circumstances.

⁴⁸ Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 1, pp. 1, 14.

Yun had taught herself a good deal about literature, but her experience would hardly have given her much education in the ways of the market in cultured female companions. This was an instance in which her husband was correct and she mistaken. As Shen's account makes clear, the signs were there for reading on the very day on which the oath was sworn. That Hanyuan could not stay and drink with them after the ceremony because she had an excursion to go on should have been a warning that her perspective on the Shen household was different from theirs. The stilted opening of her response to Yun's proposal showed that she knew what to say, but it is unlikely that it meant much. The elevation that Yun had in mind for her, she indicated, would truly be a case of "a wild weed relying on a tree of jade." More significant was the sequel: her mother had extravagant hopes for her, she was not her own mistress, and she would like both sides to take their time to work the matter out. To Yun's explanation of the meaning of the gift of her jade bracelet, the response was "The power to bring [us] together lies entirely with you, madam." Yun, in her innocence, took this as an acceptance on Hanyuan's part, but a more worldly-wise reading would be "It will be for you to come up with a sufficient offer."⁴⁹

Shen's text says nothing about an active friendship between Yun and Hanyuan continuing until the fateful day when Hanyuan was sold to a more eligible customer. One imagines that Yun sent occasional gifts (possibly shoes that she had lovingly embroidered) and paid occasional incongruous calls on the "mother's" establishment. There must have been enough continuing interchange to account for her intolerant father-in-law's having mistakenly assumed, early in 1801, that a messenger from a "sworn sister" of Yun's girlhood came from Hanyuan.⁵⁰ Yet there is no reference to any personal yearning or intimacy that might have explained Yun's being so "wounded" (Pratt and Chiang) that she promptly began to "grieve herself to death" over Hanyuan's defection.⁵¹ In principle, of course, this silence is no more significant than that about any outburst on Yun's part when Shen came back from Guangzhou – but for one curious fact. The text does not say that Yun was "wounded." It says something else.

The crucial passage goes as follows. Shen explains about his wife's history of "blood indisposition" brought about by grief over her broth-

⁴⁹ The above account is based on *ibid.* 1, pp. 13–14.

⁵⁰ Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 3, p. 25.

⁵¹ Pratt and Chiang (translation): "I comforted her repeatedly, but having been so wounded Yun still suffered great discharges of blood. She was bedridden and did not respond to any treatment." Pratt and Chiang, *Six Records*, p. 76.

er's disappearance and her mother's death. He notes the remission of symptoms during the year and more since she had made Hanyuan's acquaintance 自識愍園. He says that he was just rejoicing over Yun's having found this "good medicine" when news arrived of the disposal of Hanyuan. At first, Shen did not dare to tell his wife. It was only when she went to pay a call that she found out. Back home with Shen, she sobbed the words "I had no idea that Hanyuan had so little feeling 薄情乃爾." He pointed out that her own feelings had been unreasonable – that she herself had been "carried away 情癡."⁵² One should not expect "feeling" (the belief that swearing sisterhood meant something, understanding of the meaning of Yun's gift of her jade bracelet) on the part of people from that background. In view of the danger that Hanyuan would not have found their frugal ways acceptable, it was just as well that Yun's plan had come to nought. But Shen's efforts to console her were of no avail. "In the end, resenting [the fact that] she had been made a fool of 受愚, [Yun suffered] a major outbreak of [her] blood indisposition."⁵³ At least she understood her situation at this point.⁵⁴

Thus the notion that Yun sickened because of pain at losing a prospective same-sex partner does not come from Shen. Nor does it come

⁵² Cf. Pratt and Chiang's translation (ibid.): "Your own feelings are too deep." True, Sophie Volpp has shown that the phrase *qing chi* was used in poems by the elite members of a 17th-c. aesthetic coterie to refer to homoerotic infatuation with a "boy" actor – in which context it may fairly be rendered "crazed with passion," "crazed with *qing*," (her translations); Volpp, "The Literary Circulation of Actors in Seventeenth-Century China," *JAS* 61.3 (2002), pp. 952–53. However, the motivation for Shen's use of the phrase was probably stylistic: here was a rhetorically effective, nongratuitous retort to Yun's complaint that Hanyuan had a *qing* deficiency. It would be arbitrary to assume that in this context *qing* means the capacity for romantic bonding. As Glen Dudbridge has noted (personal communication, March 12, 2003), later on the same page (Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 3, p. 24) the word *qing* is used of the sense of obligation, created by friendship, to stand as guarantor for a substantial loan. Even Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) referred to himself as *qing chi* in claiming pathological generosity to friends and unknown victims of misfortune, not to mention commitment so deep as to induce insomnia when his humanitarian efforts failed (Volpp, op. cit., p. 970). *Qing*, in short, is more the "feeling" of Robert Burns's "Ilka [every] man of finer feeling," than that of Lennon/McCartney's "I can't help my feelings, I'll go out of my mind."

⁵³ 芸終以受愚爲恨血疾大發 (Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 3, p. 24). I thank Wang Yiyan 王一燕 for native-speaker confirmation of the meaning of *shou yu*. Cf. the Pratt and Chiang translation, copied in n. 51 above. Lin Yutang's 1935 rendering, although inexact, perhaps reflects a clearer insight into what was really taking place. He translates: "Yün could never quite recover from the shock of being betrayed and her troubles came again"; Lin, trans., *Fusheng liuji: Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, by Shen Fu (Chinese-English synoptic edition, with illustrations. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 1999), p. 135. I thank Clark Alejandrino for sending me a copy of this book.

⁵⁴ Two recent Chinese authors notice the *shou yu* (Kuang, "Fusheng liuji zhong," pp. 868, 871; Cheng Zhangcan 程章燦, "Fusheng liuji zhong Yun de xingxiang fenxi" 浮生六記中芸的形象分析, in Zhang, ed., *Ming Qing wenxue yu xingbie yanjiu*, p. 856). But then, neither is advocating the "homoerotic" reading of the Hanyuan episode, and Kuang is raising doubts about that reading.

from the reported speech of Yun. Her own deathbed explanation of her illness invokes, in chronological order, excessive grief over the loss of her two closest relatives, the stirring of unspecified emotions 情感 (*qinggan*), and anger 分激 – presumably at being made to look a fool.⁵⁵ To be sure, we cannot eliminate the possibility that *qinggan* refers to homoerotic passion for Hanyuan, replaced by anger when whatever encouragement Hanyuan may have given was proved false. But it is equally open to us to take *qinggan* as referring to the complex, self-deceptive processes involved in forcing oneself to imagine happiness in an ordinary, heterosexual-polygamous *ménage à trois*, with a “both beautiful and elegant” younger woman whom one felt one could “love.” On this reading, what was frustrated was not sexual longing for Hanyuan, but every aspect of Yun’s rescue plan for her domestic happiness and her children’s security. The emotional effort she had poured into affection for the girl was trampled in the mud.

Over the ensuing years, the couple’s fortunes went from bad to worse. Shen does not admit to betraying her again, either through extramarital encounters or by wasting money. Yet, as a husband, he failed her, being unable in the long run to provide materially for the family. If on her deathbed she blamed Hanyuan for “letting her down,” she was not being rational (for Hanyuan would have been, at best, an extra mouth to feed), but rationality is not expected of sleepwalkers. Her subconsciousness was recalling the terrible years when suddenly her married happiness had started to dissolve. The symbol of destruction could not be the prostitute whom she had never seen, still less her inadequate spouse. It was Hanyuan.

Shen Fu’s literary talents earned him an incongruous place in Arthur Hummel’s biographical dictionary of “eminent Chinese of the [Qing] dynasty”; let us therefore note his effectiveness in both confession and concealment.⁵⁶ On one hand, he invests a great deal in portraying his wife’s extreme sensitivity,⁵⁷ yet on more than one occasion he reveals a distasteful truth in parallel: that he would always disap-

⁵⁵ 妾病始因弟亡母喪，悲痛過甚；繼爲情感；後由忿激 (Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 3, p. 30). Pratt and Chiang translate the last two clauses as “It [my illness] continued because of my affections, and now it has returned because of my indignation” (Pratt and Chiang, *Six Records*, p. 87; emphasis added). They presumably take *fenji* as referring to anger when a “child servant” whom the couple had been given stole from them and ran away. But anger does not feature among the emotions with which Yun is shown reacting to this setback, which in any case occurred *after* the most recent return of her symptoms. Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 3, pp. 28–29.

⁵⁶ Hummel, *Eminent Chinese* 2, pp. 641–42, where the biographer (Fang Zhaoying) goes so far as to describe *Fusheng liuji* as “a literary masterpiece, beautifully written, and permeated with deep emotion.”

⁵⁷ E.g., Shen, *Fusheng liuji* 1, p. 7.

point her, never quite match up to her aesthetic sensibility. It is not just that she explained exactly why she preferred Li Bo 李白 to Du Fu 杜甫 while he was only able to reel off a catalog of famous writers and the characteristics for which each was esteemed.⁵⁸ Right at the beginning of the story, while his precocious cousin, barely in her teens, is able to produce arresting lines like "One's shadow grows thin at the invasion of autumn; the chrysanthemums wax luxuriant as the frost bites," all he can do is write the hackneyed phrase "fine lines from the brocade bag 錦囊佳句" on the label of her composition book. She had shyly suggested that she was hoping for a teacher.⁵⁹ So much for confession, but the fragmented structure of the narrative, characterized by Hall as "linearity coexist[ing] with structurally patterned antithesis," may not only be aesthetically charming to the literary analyst; it was also psychologically functional for a self-revealer with a painful truth to hide.

Hall sees the psychological function of the alternation between conjugal narrative (chapters 1 and 3) and aesthetic excursion (chapters 2 and 4) in terms of authorial "self-affirmation," of validation of a self that compensates for its "heroic[ally]" accepted abasement under patriarchal familism by asserting its autonomy in matters of aesthetic taste.⁶⁰ This interpretation is certainly interesting and may well be valid, but I would like to draw attention to something more basic. As mentioned earlier, the account of the quasi-betrothal of Shen and Huanyuan comes in chapter 1, and that of the background to it (Shen's relationship with the unfortunate young prostitute) in chapter 4. This breach of linearity saves Shen from exposing his most painful truth. He is not forced to write "I spent four months and a small fortune bestowing my tenderness on a Guangzhou prostitute, and when I came home my wife sought desperately to provide me with sexual variety at home, thereby unleashing a sequence of events that I blame for her death." Thus concealment in the best indigenous tradition – that of Sima Qian 司馬遷, no less – served male literary interests.⁶¹ Shen may have been too blind to Yun's pain to be able to depict it (and Yun may have done her own artful concealment, with her pain as its object).⁶² A sensitive

⁵⁸ Ibid. 1, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 1, pp. 1–2. For those who still remembered, the cliché *jinnang jiaju* alluded to the practice of the Tang poet Li He 李賀, said to have carried an old brocade bag about with him as a receptacle for draft lines of poems. See the *Cihai* 辭海 dictionary, entry for *jinnang*. I would like to acknowledge that I have changed one word in my translation of Yun's couplet in response to a sensitive and scholarly reading by my former student Huang Ruyin 黃如音.

⁶⁰ Hall, "Heroic Repression," p. 163.

⁶¹ Cf. Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1958), pp. 96–98.

⁶² Cf. n. 46, above, and, on (Chinese) male incomprehension of wives' emotions when con-

portrayal of Yun “heroically” adjusting to her deposition would probably have had to wait for the imported literary techniques and interests of the May Fourth era. There was to be no “Chen Yun’s Diary.”⁶³

Unfortunately, we shall never know whether most nineteenth-century Chinese readers who understood the allusion to *Lian xiang ban* really believed that Chen Yun was “in love” with Hanyuan, still less whether late-Qing readers of both genders really interpreted the episode in the same way. I therefore conclude with one simple point about the use of autobiography in historical writing – a topic of some importance if we are to take up Ko’s challenge and become historians of Chinese emotions.⁶⁴ Let us remember that if we think of autobiographers and those of whom they wrote as real people, we must treat them as such. I do not refer here to plausibility. That is, my point is not that our own social and emotional experience may leave us wondering whether we can really have *both* the idyllically married Yun of Shen’s description *and* a Yun capable of (shall we say?) losing the will to live when deprived of the prospect of erotic cohabitation with a younger woman. After all, the problem may be with the narrowness of “our” experience.

What I want to stress is that real people have a complicated relationship with their own past, and that we should expect this fact to be reflected in their writings on the subject. Real people also use language in many ways – to joke, to tease, to deceive, to tell their present version of the truth, to show off, to discourage further conversation. We shall not make much progress in our understanding if we are too prone to take recorded utterances literally.

fronted with effective sexual competition, Ebrey, *Inner Quarters*, pp. 165, 167, 170.

⁶³ Cf. Shi Pingmei 石評梅, “Lin Nan’s Diary,” translated in Amy D. Dooling and Kristina M. Torgeson, eds., *Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women’s Literature from the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1998), pp. 119–30.

⁶⁴ Ko, “Thinking about Copulating,” pp. 60–62.