



## **Women's Matrimonial Role in Classical Chinese Literature: A Case Study of the Protagonist in Shen Fu's Six Records of a Floating Life**



*Peran Perkawinan Perempuan dalam Sastra Tiongkok Klasik:  
Sebuah Studi Kasus tentang Tokoh Utama dalam Enam Catatan Kehidupan  
Mengambang karya Shen Fu*

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### **Abstrak**

Fusheng Liu Ji 'Six Records of a Floating Life' is the autobiographical prose composed by an intellectual Shen Fu in the High Qing era, which chronicles his impoverished life featured by both sorrow and exaltation. A substantial portion of the work concerns Shen's wife named Yun, who is adulated as one of the most meritorious women in Chinese literature by an illustrious writer and translator Lin Yutang. From a pre-modern perspective, in her postnuptial life, Yun complies with the Confucian teachings prescribing women's conduct, virtue and demeanour, viz. 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues'; additionally, Yun exhibits filial piety which is also a preponderant creed in imperial China. From a modern perspective, Yun demonstrates proto-feminist thinking and sentimentality that defy orthodox institutions, embodied by her courageous cross-dressing and harmonious matrimonial relationship enriched by profound emotional devotion and physical intimacy. Furthermore, Yun is equipped with intelligence, generosity, romantic spirit and artistic temperament, and is hence eulogised by her husband for possessing a mentality and merits like a man, which, I posit, is the ultimate accolade in a patriarchal context.

**Keywords:** Fusheng Liu Ji, Qing prose, 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues', proto-feminism, modern properties

### **Abstract**

*Fusheng Liu Ji 'Enam Catatan Kehidupan yang Mengambang' adalah prosa otobiografi yang dikarang oleh seorang intelektual Shen Fu pada era Qing Tinggi, yang mengisahkan kehidupannya yang miskin yang diwarnai dengan kesedihan dan kemegahan. Sebagian besar dari karya ini berkisah tentang istri Shen yang bernama Yun, yang dipuji sebagai salah satu wanita paling berjasa dalam literatur Tiongkok oleh penulis dan penerjemah terkenal Lin Yutang. Dari perspektif pra-modern, dalam kehidupan pascapernikahannya, Yun mematuhi ajaran Konfusianisme yang mengatur perilaku, kebajikan, dan sikap wanita, yaitu 'Tiga Kepatuhan dan Empat Kebajikan'; selain itu, Yun menunjukkan kesalehan berbakti yang juga merupakan kepercayaan yang dominan di kekaisaran Tiongkok. Dari perspektif modern, Yun menunjukkan*

*pemikiran proto-feminis dan sentimentalitas yang menentang institusi ortodoks, yang diwujudkan dengan pakaian silang yang berani dan hubungan pernikahan yang harmonis yang diperkaya oleh pengabdian emosional yang mendalam dan keintiman fisik. Selain itu, Yun dilengkapi dengan kecerdasan, kemurahan hati, semangat romantis dan temperamen artistik, dan karenanya dipuji oleh suaminya karena memiliki mentalitas dan kemampuan layaknya seorang pria, yang menurut saya merupakan penghargaan tertinggi dalam konteks patriarki.*

**Kata-kata kunci:** *Fusheng Liu Ji, prosa Qing, 'Tiga Ketaatan dan Empat Kebajikan', proto-feminisme, properti modern*

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## INTRODUCTION

浮生六记 Fusheng Liu Ji ‘Six Records of a Floating Life’ is an illustrious autobiography and confessional prose composed by 沈复 Shen Fu (1763-1825), an impoverished literatus, low-ranking court clerk, mediocre painter and occasional trader, circa 1810 during the Qing (1644-1912) dynasty (Li 2012; Chen & Zhang 2017). Written in elegant classical Chinese, Fusheng Liu Ji (henceforward Fusheng) attains renown and accolade, as it is replete with literary and historical allusions and textual references, rendering it best-selling upon posthumously published in 1879 in the Shanghai-based newspaper 申报 Shen Bao (Yeh, 2015; Chang, 2017). By virtue of literary prominence, the work has been translated into fourteen languages, among which the first English rendering was done in 1935 by 林语堂 Lin Yutang (1895-1976), an iconic cosmopolitan intellectual in modern Chinese literature (Zhai & Jiang, 2006; Guan, 2014; Zhang, 2015; Cui & Wang, 2016). As a bilingual writer, apart from his own fully-fledged writing that is overwhelmingly extolled, Lin’s compilations and translations of classic Chinese texts into English are also influential among Western readers (Williams, 2010; Qian, 2011, p. 1; Huson, 2016; Ratcliffe, 2017). Nevertheless, Fusheng remains an extant torso, in that among the original six fascicles, only four were attested when the manuscript was discovered in 1877, namely, 闺房记乐 Guifang Ji Le ‘Happy Married Life’, 闲情记趣 Xianqing Ji Qu ‘Pleasures of a Leisure life’, 坎坷记愁 Kanke Ji Chou ‘Frustrations and Sorrows’ and 浪游记快 Langyou Ji Kuai ‘Joyful Travels’ (Doleželová-Velingerová & Doležel 1972; Cheng, 2008a, 2008b; Chang, 2017), and the last two fascicles published in 1936 are propounded to be pseudepigrapha (Du, 2006).

Fusheng complies with the 性灵 Xingling school of Chinese literary tradition, which was initiated in the late Ming (1368-1644) dynasty and can be rendered into ‘native sensibility’ or ‘self-expression’ (Yuan, 2012; Li, 2017). ‘Xingling’ literature is characterised by authors’ authentic expression of individual personality and personal stances on glamour of living and social injustice via short pieces dubbed 小品文 xiaopin wen ‘familiar essay’ (Zhang, 2006; Liu, 2008; Huang, 2013); leading advocates of this school, in addition to Lin, include an unconventional sceptic-iconoclast and gastronome

袁枚 Yuan Mei (1716-1798) (Chan, 1991; Clart, 1996; Louie & Edwards, 1996, p. xxiii, Santangelo & Yan, 2013; pp. vii-viii) and 李渔 Li Yu (1611-circa 1680), who is of iconic fame in Classical Chinese literature (Hanan 1988, p. 34-35; Lu 2010). The title of *Fusheng* is surmised to appertain to a verse by a celebrated Tang (618-907 CE) poet 李白 Li Bai (701-762 CE), viz. 而浮生若梦, 为欢几何 *Er fusheng ruo meng, wei huan ji he* 'Our floating life is like a dream; how often can one enjoy oneself', and the memoir concerns observations and comments on gratifying trivialities in aestheticised daily life, by means of elaborate sketches of scenery (Liu 2010) as well as literary allusions and art criticisms (Lin, 1999; Cheng, 2008a, 2008b; Cui & Wang, 2016).

A substantial component of *Fusheng* depicts Shen's wife named 芸 Yun, who is bestowed a role of a protagonist from the very beginning of the vivid exposition (Doleželová-Velingerová & Doležel, 1972; Huangfu, 2019). Yun is extolled by Lin in the preface of his translation for being exceptionally endearing and virtuous (Lin, 1999; Zhang, 2004; Xia, 2012; Du, 2016), as shown in Examples (1-2). To be more specific, Yun displays an array of merits, exemplified by intelligence, diligence, thoughtfulness, self-possession, etc (Cheng, 2008a, 2008b; Zhai & Zhang, 2009; Xia, 2012; Sun 2014), and she is devoted to her husband and hence has been maintaining a close bond and rapport with him (see Li, 2012; Diao, 2015; Chen & Zhang, 2017; Huangfu, 2019, among many others). Nevertheless, Yun's entire life abounds in travails and predicaments and is haunted by impoverishment and agony, so she died immaturely from lingering chronic diseases in 1803 at the age of forty (Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 17; Cheng, 2008b; Chang, 2017).

- (1) 芸, 我想, 是中国文学上一个最可爱的女人。她并非最美丽, 因为这书的作者, 她的丈夫, 并没有这样推崇; 但 是谁能否认她是最可爱的女人?

*Yun, I think, is one of the loveliest women in Chinese literature. She is not the most beautiful, for the author, her husband, does not make that claim, and yet who can deny that she is the loveliest?*

(Lin, 1999, p. 20 Trans. Lu, 2010, p. 27)

- (2) 不过在芸身上, 我们似乎看见这样贤达的美德特别齐全, 一生中不可多得。

*The qualities of a cultivated and gentle wife combined to a greater degree of perfection than falls within our common experience*

(*Ibid*)

In this paper, I investigate the character Yun in *Fusheng* and propound that she is exemplary from both imperial and contemporary perspectives and encapsulates traditional Chinese women's matrimonial role indicated in classical literature.

## **THEORETICAL BASIS**

Traditional Chinese families are restricted by stringent precepts, exemplified by mutual veneration between husbands and wives, as well as 三从四德 *San Cong Si De* 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' that is a preponderant set of institutions prescribing women (Feng, 1948/2007, p. 40; Gao, 2003; Rosenlee, 2006, p. 90-92; Lee, 2009). Derived from the 106 CE rhetoric entitled 女诫 *Nü Jie* 'Lessons for Women' by a female scholar 班昭 Ban Zhao (circa 48-117 CE), which is an earliest extant treatise on women's prenuptial education (Chang 2000; Donawerth 2002, p.14; Wing 2003), *san cong* dictates that a woman must follow her father prior to marriage, her husband during marriage and

her son in widowhood, while *si de* is comprised of: 1) women's adherence to moral principles; 2) discipline of meticulous utterances; 3) perseverance of decent demeanour; and 4) diligence in household chores (Hamilton & Wang, 1992, p. 85; Lee, 1998; Pang-White, 2016).

In addition to the 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' and filial piety, Confucian canons prescribe discrepancies between genders, viz. 男女有别 *nannü youbie* 'between men and women, there are only differences' (Fei, 1948/2007, p. 41-45 Trans. Hamilton & Wang, 1992, p. 87), and such gender segregation is both physical and psychological: in affluent and educated families, each gender resides in dedicated sections of households, with women being consigned to the cloistered inner quarters; such separation also extends to rural areas, where conspicuous indifference can be attested between husbands and wives (Fei, 1948/2007, p. 40). Traditional institutions prohibit sexual or even social contact between genders, especially in the Qing era, when civilised and respectable women were restricted from free movement out of inner chambers, and aristocratic women were forced into isolation from interaction with unrelated men, thereby preventing damage of chastity (McMahon, 1987; Edwards, 1990).

## METHOD

Drawing on the concepts of 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' and 'between men and women, there are only differences', I examine the text of Fusheng through hermeneutic interpretation. I argue that the heroine Yun plays an exemplary matrimonial role in classical literature. From a pre-modern perspective, Yun adheres to the traditional 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' in postnuptial life; from a modern perspective, her merit is exemplified by her attempt constructing a harmonious matrimonial relationship.

## DISCUSSION

### *Pre-Modern Perspective*

In her postnuptial life, Yun abides by the 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' in a punctilious fashion. In terms of obeying her husband, Yun shows great courtesy and reverence for Shen even in private (Example (3)), and accommodates his preference meticulously (Example (4)).

- (3) 余性爽直, 落拓不羁; 芸若腐儒, 迂拘多礼。偶为之整袖, 必连声道“得罪”; 或递巾授扇, 必起身来接。

*I am by nature candid and unconstrained, but Yun was scrupulous and meticulously polite. When I would occasionally put a cape over her shoulders or help her adjust her sleeves, she would invariably say, 'I beg your pardon.' If I gave her a handkerchief or a fan, she would always stand to take it.*

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 32)

- (4) 其癖好与余同, 且能察眼意, 锤眉语, 一举一动, 示之以色, 无不头头是道。

*Yun's habits and tastes were the same as mine. She understood what my eyes said, and the language of my brows. She did everything according to my expression, and everything she did was as I wished it.*

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 40)

In order to ingratiate herself with her husband, Yun accompanies him to visit a courtesan in Suzhou and defends the conduct for him (Example (5)). Suzhou has frequently been mentioned together with Hangzhou since 吴郡志 Wu Jun Zhi 'Accounts of County Wu' in the Song (960 CE-1279) dynasty. According to a 13th-century

travelogue chronicling anecdotes of an Italian explorer Marco Polo, during the Yuan (1271-1368) dynasty, courtesans in the city of Kinsai (viz. Hangzhou) bewitch customers with sexual allure and sophisticated skills (Barendregt, 2006; Chen, 2007)—‘[t]hese ladies are highly accomplished in the use of endearments and caresses, with words suited and adapted to every sort of person, so that foreigners who have once enjoyed them remain utterly beside themselves and so captivated by their sweetness and charm that, when they return home, they say they have been in “Kinsai”, that is to say in the city of Heaven, and can scarcely wait for the time when they may go back there’ (Latham, 1958, p. 187; van Gulik, 1974, p. Xvi; Schirokauer & Brown, 2012, p. 149). Furthermore, Yun volunteers to scout for an attractive and educated concubine for her husband and has been endeavouring to find one. Upon first encounter with a high-quality courtesan, Yun proposes the idea and strives to entice her into becoming Shen’s concubine; what is noteworthy is that Yun is the one who initiates the concubinage and thoughtfully attributes it to her own preference, so as to preserve Shen’s face (Example (6)). In this sense, Yun is an archetype of a suppressed woman in the patriarchal feudal society.

- (5) 时余寄居友人鲁半舫家萧爽楼中, 越数日, 鲁夫人误有所闻, 私告芸曰: “前日闻若婿挟两妓饮于万年桥舟中, 子知之否?” 芸曰: “有之, 其一即我也。” 因以偕游始末详告之, 鲁大笑, 释然而去。

*At that time we were living with my friend Lu Pan-fang, at his home, the Villa of Serenity. A few days after our trip Mrs Lu heard some gossip, and took Yun aside. ‘Yesterday I heard that your husband had been seen drinking with two courtesans in a boat by the Ten Thousand-Years Bridge. Did you know that?’ ‘It happened all right,’ Yun replied, ‘but one of those courtesans was me.’ Because she had brought it up, Yun then told her in detail about our trip together. Hearing the explanation, Mrs Lu laughed heartily and dropped the subject.*

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 48)

- (6) 芸曰: “今日得见美丽韵者矣, 顷已约憨园明日过我, 当为于图之。” 余骇曰: “此非金屋不能贮, 穷措大岂敢生此妄想哉? 况我两人伉俪正笃, 何必外求?” 芸笑曰: “我自爱之, 子姑待之。”

*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 think of such a thing? And we are so happily married, why should we look for someone else?’ ‘But I love her too,’ Yun said, laughing. ‘You just let me take care of everything.’*

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 50)

In terms of *si de* ‘four virtues’, Yun observes all four credos in a punctilious fashion. As displayed in Example (7), Yun is deferential towards people in both superior and inferior status, which embodies her observation of the ethical creed of complaisance. Example (7) also illuminates Yun’s appearance and utterances that are accompanied by appropriate facial expressions and jovial manners. As for her diligence and competence in housework, it can be seen from the depictions in Examples (8-9), which also encapsulate her frugality and sagacity.



- (7) 芸作新妇, 初甚缄默, 终日无怒容, 与之言, 微笑而已。事上以敬, 处下以和, 井井然未尝稍失。每见朝曦上窗, 即披衣急起, 如有人呼促者然。

*As a new bride, Yun was very quiet. She never got angry, and when anyone spoke to her she always replied with a smile. She was respectful to her elders and amiable to everyone else. Everything she did was orderly, and was done properly. Each morning when she saw the first rays of the sun touch the top of the window, she would dress quickly and hurry out of bed, as if someone were calling her.*

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 29)

- (8) 芸善不费之烹庖, 瓜蔬鱼虾, 一经芸手, 便有意外味。

*Yun fortunately was good at making a meal without spending much money. Melon, vegetables, fish, and shrimps, when passed through Yun's hands, would take on a delicious taste.*

(Part II. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 64)

- (9) 余之小帽领袜皆芸自做, 衣之破者移东补西, 必整必洁, 色取暗淡以免垢迹, 既可出客, 又可家常。此又服饰省俭之一端也。

*Yun also made all my caps, collars, and socks. If clothes develop holes, they can be patched up using pieces of the same garment. They should look neat and clean. Clothes should be dark in colour so that dirty spots will not show; then they can be worn either to go out, or around the house. These are examples of frugality in clothing.*

(Part II. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 68)

Apart from compliance with the 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues', Yun manifests filial piety (孝 xiao) to support her prenuptial family (Example (10)). Being a salient Confucian virtue, filial piety functions as a preponderant precept of the Chinese moral system and the anthropological source of ethically evaluative sentiment (Hwang, 1999; Ivanhoe, 2000, p. 2; Chan & Tan, 2004; Van Norden, 2019). Therefore, Yun's filial piety also contributes to her identity as a virtuous woman in an imperial context.

- (10) 四龄失怙, 母金氏, 弟克昌, 家徒壁立。芸既长, 姻女红, 三口仰其十指供给, 克昌从师, 修脯无缺。

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

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 25)

### Modern Perspective

Yun demonstrates proto-feminist thinking that is defiant against traditional ethos. Example (11) recounts Yun's vivacious and courageous cross-dressing experience while visiting a carnival that is exclusive to men.

- (11) 于是易鬓为辮, 添扫蛾眉; 加余冠, 微露两鬓, 尚可掩饰; 服余衣, 长一寸又半; 于腰间折而缝之, 外加马褂...

及晚餐后, 装束既毕, 效男子拱手阔步者良久...芸揽镜自照, 狂笑不已。余强挽之, 悄然径去, 遍游庙中, 无

识出为女子者。或问何人, 以表弟对, 拱手而已。

*Yun thereupon braided her hair into a plait and made up her eyebrows. She put on my hat, and though her hair showed a little around her ears it was easy to conceal. When she put on my robe we found it was an inch and a half too long, but she took it up around the waist and put on a riding jacket over it...Yun was delighted, and when she had put on my clothes after dinner she practised for a long time, putting her hands into her sleeves and taking large steps like a man...Yun looked at herself in the mirror and laughed endlessly. I pulled her along, and we left quietly. We walked all around inside the temple, with no one realising she was a woman. If someone asked who she was, I would tell them she was my cousin. They would only fold their hands and bow to her.*

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 44)

More significantly, the harmonious matrimonial relationship between Yun and her husband, as shown in Example (11), functions as a gesture of her defiance against conventional ethos and precepts. There is a well-established hermeneutic interpretation that Shen and Yun are in a matrimonial relationship marked by profound emotional and physical intimacy (see [Cheng, 2008a, 2008b](#); [Li, 2012](#); [Diao, 2015](#); [Chen & Zhang, 2017](#); [Huangfu, 2019](#); among many others), which inspires Lin to translate this love-enriched and romance-featured work ([Zhai & Zhang, 2009](#); [Lu, 2010](#); [Li, 2017](#)).

There is no denying the fact that apart from Shen and Yun, in imperial China, there indeed, although scarce, exist matrimonial ties marked by a natural affinity and close rapport, exemplified by the most renowned female poet 李清照 Li Qingzhao (1084-circa 1155) and her husband ([Wang, 1989](#); [Liu, 2017](#); [Egan, 2019, p. xi](#)). Nevertheless, given the fact that such a pursuit of spiritual and emotional harmony between spouses is predominantly intertwined with societal and financial failure, it is censured by conventional Confucian norms and precepts ([Fei, 1947/2007, p. 467](#); [Chen & Zhang, 2017](#)). Furthermore, marriage is portrayed in a solemn and even calamitous fashion in Confucian classics exemplified by 礼记 Liji 'The Book of Rites' (5th-3rdc BCE), in that marriage is supposed to serve as a commitment and resolution to show reverence for ancestors and carry on the family line. In other words, the preponderant function of marriage is merely to reproduce and nurture offspring ([Fei, 1947/2007, p. 465](#)), so Confucianism precepts never indicate love in matrimonial relationships ([Feng, 1931/2011, p. 403](#); [Cheng, 2008b](#)). Therefore, providing that attaining enjoyment from life and fulfilling social responsibilities contradict, abnegation of the former is deemed obligatory for couples ([Fei, 1947/2007, p. 466](#); [Diao, 2015](#)).

Furthermore, Yun is a sentimental woman with aspiration and veneration for knowledge (Example (12-13)), yet such attributes are not advocated in imperial China. Sentimental women possessing emotionalism are traditionally construed as lascivious and ill-omened, and women in pursuit of soulmates are surmised to be doomed to inauspicious secular happiness, as manifested by a well-established axiom 女子无才便是德 nǚzi wucái biān shì dé 'a woman without talent is a woman of virtue' that anathematizes female talent for undermining familial service and being inimical to the reproduction of political order ([Ko, 1992](#); [Ho, 1995](#); [Judge, 2001](#)).

- (12) 见芸一人支颐独坐镜窗之侧, 余曰: “何不快乃尔?” 芸曰: “观剧原以陶情, 今日之戏徒令人断肠耳。” 俞与王皆笑之。系曰: “此深于情者也。”

*We found Yun sitting alone beside the dressing table with her head in her hands. 'Are you unhappy about something?' I asked her. 'Seeing an opera is supposed to be entertaining,' Yun said. 'But today's is heartbreaking.' Both Miss Yu and Miss Wang were laughing at her, but I told them they had to understand what a very emotional person she was.*  
(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 37)

- (13) 而于破书残画反极珍惜: 书之残缺不全者, 必搜集分门, 汇订成帙, 统名之曰“继筒残编”; 字画之破损者, 必觅故纸粘补成幅, 有破缺处, 倩予全好而卷之, 名曰“弃余集赏”。于女红中馈之暇, 终日琐琐, 不憚烦倦。芸于破笥烂卷中, 偶获片纸可观者, 如得异宝。旧邻冯姬每收乱卷卖之。

*On the other hand, she prized shabby old books and tattered paintings. She would take the partial remnants of old books, separate them all into sections by topic, and then have them rebound. These she called her 'Fragments of Literature'. When she found some calligraphy or a painting that had been ruined, she felt she had to search for a piece of old paper on which to remount it. If there were portions missing, she would ask me to restore them. These she named the 'Collection of Discarded Delights'. Yun would work on these projects the whole day without becoming tired, whenever she could take time off from her sewing and cooking. If, in an old trunk or a shabby book, she came across a piece of paper with something on it, she acted as if she had found something very special. Every time our neighbour, old lady Fung, got hold of some scraps of old books, she would sell them to Yun.*

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 40)

From a modern perspective, Yun is also intelligent in terms of memory, learning ability and literary aptitude (Example (14)) as well as practical wisdom in daily life (Examples (15-16)). 琵琶行 *Pipa Xing* 'The Mandolin Song' mentioned in Example (14) is a renowned poem composed by an illustrious realistic poet 白居易 Bai Juyi (772-846 BCE) in the Tang dynasty (Yang, 1996; Shang, 2011; Buswell & Lopez, 2013; Luo 2018), who is acclaimed as a leading figure of an innovative literary genre dubbed as 新乐府 *xin yuefu* 'new music bureau' (DeBlasi, 2002, p. 25; Chen, 2015; Tan, 2017). Bai's poetry is celebrated for a wide range of themes, styles and metrical patterns, as well as exquisite rhythm, plain language, sentimental nostalgia and elaborate depiction (Shields, 2006; Fang, 2010; Chan, 2011, p. 144; Zha, 2015). It is noteworthy that Yun's clever techniques portrayed in Examples (15-16) also illustrate her romantic spirit and artistic temperament that render her deprived life less sorrowful.

- (14) 生而颖慧, 学语时, 口授《琵琶行》, 即能成诵。...一日, 于书篋中得《琵琶行》, 挨字而认, 始识字。刺绣之暇, 渐通吟咏, 有“秋侵人影瘦, 霜染菊花肥”之句。

*Even while small, she was very clear. While she was learning to talk she was taught the poem The Mandolin Song and could repeat it almost immediately...One day Yun found a copy of The Mandolin Song in her brother's book-box and, remembering her lessons as a child, was able to pick out the characters one by one. That is how she began learning to read. In her spare moments she gradually learned how to write poetry, one line of which was, 'We grow thin in the shadows of autumn, but chrysanthemums grow fat with the dew.'*  
(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, pp. 25-26)

- (15) 静室焚香, 闲中雅趣。芸尝以沉速等香, 于饭镬蒸透, 在炉上设一铜丝架, 离火中寸许, 徐徐烘之, 其香幽韵而无烟。

*Burning incense in a quiet room is one of the refined pleasures of leisure. Yun used to take garu wood and other fragrant things and steam them in a rice cauldron. Then we would*



*burn them slowly on a brass stand about half an inch above a fire; the scent was subtle and lovely, and there was no smoke.*

(Part II. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 62)

- (16) 夏月荷花初开时, 晚含而晓放, 芸用小纱囊撮茶叶少许, 置花心, 明早取出, 烹天泉水泡之, 香韵尤绝。

*When lotus flowers bloom in the summer, they close up at night but open again in the morning. Yun used to put a few tea leaves in a gauze bag and put it inside a lotus flower before it closed in the evening. The next morning she would take out the tea and boil it with natural spring water. It had a wonderful and unique fragrance.*

(Part II. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 69)

Moreover, Yun is depicted as a generous and unostentatious woman who is disposed to give up jewellery and employs philosophical thought concerning the yin-yang dyad to abate her goodwill (Example (17)).

- (17) 余启堂弟妇, 王虚舟先生孙女也, 催妆时偶缺珠花, 芸出其纳采所受者呈吾母, 婢姬旁惜之, 芸曰: “凡为妇人, 已属纯阴, 珠乃纯阴之精, 用为首饰, 阳气全克矣, 何贵焉?”

*My younger brother Chi-tang's wife is the granddaughter of Wang Hsu-chou. As the time for their marriage approached, she discovered she did not have enough pearl flowers. Yun took out her own pearls that she had been given when we were married, and gave them to my mother for her to give to my brother's fiancée. The servants thought it was a pity that she should give up her own jewellery. 'Women are entirely yin in nature,' Yun told them, 'and pearls are the essence of yin. If you wear them in your hair, they completely overcome the spirit of yang. So why should I value them?'*

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 39)

Yun's generosity is inextricably intertwined with her preference for mental exaltation rather than material comfort. As can be seen from Example (18), Yun is disposed to sell jewellery in exchange for wine, thereby better indulging herself. Yun's statement in (19) further reflects her embracement of austerity. Therefore, Shen acclaims her for possessing generous and liberal mindset like a man (20), which I presume is the ultimate adulation in a patriarchal society.

- (18) 芸则拔钗沽酒, 不动声色, 良辰美景, 不放轻越。

*Yun even sold her hairpins to buy wine without a second thought, because we did not want to give up lightly such a beautiful time and place.*

(Part II. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, pp. 64-65)

- (19) 君画我绣, 以为持酒之需。布衣菜饭, 可乐终身, 不必作远游计也。

*What with your painting and my embroidery, it would give us enough to have a little to drink while we wrote poetry. We could live quite happily wearing cotton clothes and eating nothing but vegetables and rice. We would never have to leave here.*

(Part I. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 43)

- (20) 芸一女流, 具男子之襟怀才识。归吾门后, 余日奔走衣食, 中馈缺乏, 芸能纤悉不介意。及余家居, 惟以文字相辨析而已。

*Yun came to this world as a woman, but she had the feelings and abilities of a man. After she entered the gate of my home in marriage, I had to rush about daily to earn our clothing and food, there was never enough, but she never once complained. When I was living at home, all we had for entertainment was talk about literature.*

(Part III. Trans. Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p. 89)

## CLOSING

In this paper, I draw on examples from Fusheng to justify a postulation that Yun is an exemplary wife and commendable woman in classical literature. From an imperial perspective, Yun punctiliously complies with the ‘Three Obediences and Four Virtues’ in postnuptial life, in that she exhibits deference and complaisance to her husband, and ingratiate herself with her husband by means of scouting for a concubine for him voluntarily. Additionally, Yun strictly adheres to canons dictating women’s morality, language, appearance and diligence, and serves as a filial daughter during prenuptial life.

More significantly, Yun is meritorious from a contemporary perspective, especially by virtue of her proto-feminist thinking and sentimentality, both of which defy conventional institutions prescribing women’s familial and societal duties. To be more specific, Yun is passionate to practise cross-dressing and construct a harmonious matrimonial relationship characterised by emotional rapport and physical intimacy. Moreover, Yun is equipped with an array of merits, exemplified by literary aptitude, practical wisdom, romantic spirit, artistic temperament and embracement of austerity, all of which render her impoverished life less dolorous. Owing to her generosity and aspiration for mental exaltation instead of material comfort, Yun is extolled by Shen for having outlooks and attributes like a man, which should be regarded as supreme felicitations in a patriarchal context.

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Not applicable

## Availability of Data and Materials

All the data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly accessible due to confidentiality concerns but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

## Authors’ Contribution

**Aiqing Wang** developed the main conceptual ideas, contributed to data collection, perform analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

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