Yun and Shen Fu: An Uncommon Couple?
The Confucian Family System in Theory and Practice

Lydia Stamato

The Confucian family system of China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was one of male dominance and female subordination. It was a world where women were ostracized from their natal families yet unwelcome in their husbands'—a world deprived of equality and humanity. In theory, women were objects to be used as their fathers, husbands and eventually, sons saw fit. In practice, however, many women enjoyed more freedoms than they were prescribed to have. Although familial expectations implied by Confucianism were portrayed as "normal" or "ideal," the actual dynamics were often far more flexible depending on a family's social class and the individual relationship between a husband and his wife. This relaxation of social mores and codes is exemplified in Shen Fu's memoir *Six Records of a Floating Life,* in which Shen recounts his beautiful and unique relationship with his wife Yun.

Confucianism, a philosophy of behavior and ethics, was founded circa 400 B.C.E. and was first integrated into the government during the Western Han Dynasty, lingering for more than 2000 years (Wei 6). Although Confucianism was a peaceable creed, it was the "essential theoretical source of sexual discrimination in China" for it looked upon women as "inferior creatures" (Wei 6). Naturally, China was not the only culture to treat women as inferior; gender discrimination has been a pattern in societies across space and time, and still exists today. In the beginning, the codification of Confucian principles as familial principles was only among the elite, but over time it spread to the general populace and its theories were grossly exaggerated to be even more stifling for women (Johnson 24). By the middle of the Qing Dynasty, when the first cries for social reform sprang up, "Chinese women were embedded in perhaps the oldest, most highly developed, male-dominated kinship system in history" (Johnson 24). By this point in time, women were clearly viewed as "temporary members or future deserters of their natal families and stranger-intruders in their new husbands' families" and were caught in a cycle that would prove to be very difficult to break (Johnson 9).

A great deal of long-standing scholarship articulates women in China as having been violently oppressed and abused with no hope for a decent life. According to Chen Hongmou, an eighteenth century scholar and official, women were not allowed to socialize, even with other women, and were expected to hide their hair and faces in public to prevent themselves from being observed. Their "proper ritual place" was being "sequestered in the inner apartments" (Chen). When Shen Fu's father speaks to him about Yun's behavior he says, "'If you have any shame at all, you will recognize *your* errors'" [emphasis mine] showing that Yun's actions were Shen Fu's responsibility (Shen 75). Yun, though she enjoyed a special situation in life, understood that this was the expected place of a woman and cleverly used this to her advantage when she cried saying, "I may have been wrong…but father should forgive the ignorance of a woman" (Shen 75).

Not only were women demoralized by their circumstances, they were often times physically disabled because of it. The ancient and brutal tradition of footbinding was clearly a "physical manifestation of the restrictions placed on women's lives and of women's subordination to men" and underscored women's role as "goods for exchange" (Johnson 16). Women of all classes in China were crippled by footbinding and immobilized for their entire lives because men in the Tang Dynasty found abnormally small feet erotic (Johnson 16). This sadistic practice continued for over a thousand years because of a desire among the lower class to emulate the elite and because of the tradition and

expectation it became for all but a few (in this case) fortunate farming women. While footbinding was invented for its aesthetic qualities, it had an important side-effect: total physical control over women by men. "Feet are bound not to make them beautiful as a curved bow, but to restrain women when they go outdoors." (Lang, qtd. in Johnson 16)

One reason this cycle of ill-treatment was perpetuated so long was the concept of the uterine family, that is, the connection a woman had with her children, particularly her sons. Though young women may have been idealistic and had thoughts of changing society when they were older, they became jaded by time and circumstance and when they assumed power as a mother-in-law, they sacrificed their ideals for the only family they could hold on to, the only family they belonged to and belonged to them: their sons. Johnson, a contemporary historian, states, "Women's strategies directly and indirectly reinforced the traditional Confucian family system…through their actions to resist passivity and total male control, [women] became participants with vested interests in the system that oppressed them." (Johnson 21) Many traditional Chinese folktales depicted the archetypal cruel and manipulative mother-in-law, a true reflection on society. (Johnson 21) Women, who suffered their entire lives oppressed in a loveless relationship, often made sure they chose wives for their sons that they could easily demean and control. By doing this, they ensured their sons' full love and loyalty. Ideal wives were submissive and diligent. Often women "adopted" girls at a young age (or traded their own daughters) as to raise them to their liking, thus creating the "perfect wives" for their sons. Also beneficial to lonely mothers, betrothed children who were raised in the same household often regarded one another as siblings which greatly reduced the romantic feelings between them. (Johnson 19) Yun, however, did not have an interest in protecting her uterine family because of her rare and loving relationship with her husband and her unusual acumen.

Though women were indeed oppressed and victimized, the view Chen and other scholars portray is oversimplified and outmoded. According to contemporary scholars, women exercised more power than they were intended to have and had considerable influence over the course of their own lives. As Johnson states, "Studies of women's behavior in male-dominated family systems indicate that women are rarely as passive as norms dictate. Rather, women often actively attempt in patterned ways to influence their own lives and others even as they overtly accept the broad restrictions on formal rights and authority imposed on them by the system." (Johnson 17) The view of women as helpless victims undeniably had merit but was too static to illuminate the actual lives of Chinese women. For example, Confucian norms indicated that when a woman's husband died she was to remain faithful to him and his family for the remainder of her life. In practice, however, it was not uncommon for widows to remarry, especially among the lower classes. Nevertheless, this was a decision to be made by her parents-in-law. When a woman did remarried, her children remained, by both law and custom, the property of her first husband's parents (Johnson 14).

The relationship between Shen Fu and his wife Yun seems to be an anomaly in its power; but even today love like theirs is rare and cherished. Still, the dynamic of their relationship exemplifies that of many couples who had a bond that extended beyond law and custom. Shen Fu said to Yun, "It's a pity that you are a woman and have to remain hidden away at home. If only you could become a man we could visit famous mountains and search out magnificent ruins. We could travel the whole world together. Wouldn't that be wonderful?" (Shen 40) Though Yun had to stay in the house according to custom, Shen Fu often took her out and even dressed her up as a man on one occasion. He also encouraged her to spend time with her female friends and praised her intelligence and talent. Shen remarked, "When we were first married Yun was very quiet, and enjoyed listening to me discuss things. But I drew her out, as a man will use a blade of grass to encourage a cricket to chirp, and she gradually

became able to express herself…" (Shen 38) In many ways, Shen Fu and Yun were ahead of their time. Though they lived in the eighteenth century, they behaved like a modern twentieth century couple. This was particularly evident in the way they regarded one another as equals. They "lived together with the greatest mutual respect," (Shen 33) illustrating the slogan "women can hold half the sky" that was popular in 1949 during the foundation of the People's Republic of China, when equality of men and women began to be accepted (Wei 11).

However, stating that women usually enjoyed certain freedoms is also an overgeneralization. It must be understood that the quality of life for women in China varied immensely. Shen Fu and Yun were unique. After they were married they became progressively more comfortable with each other and ceased hiding their affection; "Neither of us thought about this and it seemed quite natural…the strangest thing to me then was how old couples seemed to treat one another like enemies. I did not understand why. Yet people said, 'Otherwise, how could they grow old together?' Could this be true, I wondered?" (Shen 33) Shen Fu and Yun did not grow old together; this was perhaps attributed to their unusual devotion to each other and the warning of the old couples. Depending on a woman's class, location, personality and primarily her husband, her life could be one of isolation and abuse, or, like Yun, she could enjoy seeing the world, have friends, a loving family and enjoy art and poetry. Before her premature death, Yun told Shen Fu, "I have been happy as your wife these twenty-three years. You have loved me and sympathized with me in everything, and never rejected me despite my faults. Having had for my husband an intimate friend like you, I have no regrets over this life…in the midst of this life, I have been just like an Immortal." (Shen 87-88) Though the freedom Yun enjoyed in her life was exceptional, her story, in addition to Johnson and Wei's research, indicates that many women in eighteenth and nineteenth century China had similar experiences to differing degrees.

References

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Bio:

Lydia is a sophomore history major concentrating on American history, but is particularly interested in Asian history and anthropology. This paper was written in the spring of 2005 for HST 321: Modern China, under Professor Gang Zhao, whom she credits with the idea of this topic.