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Paper Topic Proposal:

The Disenfranchised Culture of the Lower Literati

My research paper centers on a close analysis of Shen Fu’s *Six Records of a Life Adrift*, using his account as a window into the culture of the lower literati during late Qing China. The quota system of the civil service exam limited the number of classically educated men who could pass the civil service exams. Shen Fu and others like him turned to alternate means of employment to earn a living, all the while attempting to live up to their status as the cultural elites of China: the literati. Indoctrinated from birth to embody the literati lifestyle, Shen Fu still aspires to the trappings of elite culture, yet often fails to financially. He and his wife Yun transcend certain aspects of elite culture, producing and manifesting their own divergent culture: the disenfranchised culture of the lower literati. They push against the rigid social norms which define their society and consequently are punished for their transgressions.

The broad historical conjunctions taking place in China towards the end of the 18th century (flourishing trade and booming population growth, as well as ecological disasters and official corruption), can be contextualized through the writings of Shen Fu. The marginalization of millions of lower literati must be seen in the context of these overarching changes. A new culture divergent from the traditional elites was arising, as the lower literati branched into art, trade, and particularly contact with foreigners. The Confucian social hierarchy, the foundation of all Chinese society, was straining to accommodate these disenfranchised elites. Shen Fu’s account offers a glimpse into these changes in Chinese society, and the transition to “modernity”.
The Disenfranchised Culture of the Lower Literati:
Wealth, Status, and Transcendence of Elite Culture

Shen Fu reveals much about the life of the lower literati at the tail end of the High Qing in his autobiographical account, *Six Records of a Life Adrift*. He confronts the Confucian social norms and strives to maintain his spiritual freedom, all the while encouraging his wife Yun to do the same. Together, they transcend certain aspects of literati culture, such as the ritual relationships between people and the proper Confucian social hierarchy. Yet they are still bound by the material constraint and run into hardship when their divergent culture clashes with Jiafu’s traditional outlook. Shen Fu and Yun share a unique relationship, in contrast to the overarching social norm of the patrilineal family structure. Their divergent lower literati experience can be examined in the context of what was acceptable and reveals much about the transcendence of elite culture by the lower literati.

Coming of age in the later years of the High Qing period was the son of a scholar and, by cultural tradition, he was destined for scholarly pursuits himself. Over a century of relative peace and stability had swelled the ranks of China's most affluent regions, where many scholar families resided. The nature of the civil service examinations was by a quota system, mandating the number of officials to be promoted that year. As the population grew and the quota system stagnated, it became increasingly difficult for many scholars to complete the one task they had been raised from birth to fulfill. Still imbued with the classical teachings and scholarly traditions, these literati aspired to the high culture and elite lifestyle denoted by their social status. However, without the official position to supply them with an income, these “failed” literati had to seek out new means of employment. These lower literati could become scribes or secretaries,
painters or artisans, or they could move into the burgeoning merchant class. It is into this world, into the thriving center of literati culture and the economic heartland of the empire in the lower Yangzi delta, that Shen Fu is born. The son of a private secretary, he aspires to the civil service exam and the status, income, and high-minded culture which were the prerogative of the educated class.

The vast overflow of members of the literati class who could not make good on their civil service exams produced a sub-genre of “failed” literati, which I will henceforth refer to as the lower literati. These were the men who had been educated and groomed for the exam their whole lives, yet were unable to pass due to the quota system and the increasing population. The imperial economy was booming during the High Qing period, as China “vacuumed up the world's silver”.¹ This inflow of silver facilitated the development of a more advanced and specialized economy, with the lower literati comprising a large portion of the material goods producers. They applied their familiarity with elite culture to create products which would be salable to the well-off literati families and wealthy merchants who provided patronage. The need for income combined with their cultural traditions as elites meant the lower literati sought out and filled a variety of social niches. They became studio artists, physicians, or private secretaries, finding ways of lending their education and talent to whoever would pay.

The Social Barrier

Separation and sequestration of women in the home was standard practice for all elite families. The patrilineal social order placed great value on preserving and protecting the lineage.

¹ Professor Hu Lecture
Women had to be kept indoors away from any bad elements so they could remain chaste and virtuous wives. The separation of the sexes thus served a social function by preserving the integrity of the hierarchical social order. The reason it was so important to marry a virtuous woman and not a talented one had everything to do with keeping women in the home and under control as well as preserving the patrilineage. Widows were not allowed to pollute the lineage, and the cult of chastity grew out of this obsession with maintaining virtue and the purity of the lineage. This social order had a long tradition in Chinese history, as Susan Mann tells us, “As early as the Han dynasty, philosophers argued that the separation of the sexes was vital to that order, indeed, that it was the foundation of heaven and earth, and of all human relationships”.  

This omnipresent philosophy was heavily endorsed by the Qing state and elite families’ alike, creating intense social pressure to conform.

The Qing government was first and foremost interested in maintaining social harmony – this meant preserving the divine social hierarchy and making sure everyone occupied their proper place. For men, this entailed loyalty to the dynasty, and as the saying goes, “Seek a loyal subject in a filial son”. In order to ensure that people did not stray from the government approved norms, they imposed laws mandating what they believed to be proper social behavior. At one point in Record Three, Shen Fu's father threatens to “report him for disobedience”, and Sanders notes that “lack of filial piety was one of the Ten Abominations in the Qing legal code... punishable by death”. Clearly there was immense pressure, both from the family and from the state, to conform to the social norms and be a proper and loyal subject. Men who did not adhere to their social expectations, who for whatever reason could not find a wife, were labeled as bad

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2 Susan Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, (Cambridge University Press, 2011) pg. 28.
3 Mann, *Gender and Sexuality* 14.
elements and pejoratively called “bare sticks”. With no family to support or obligations to attend to, these outcasts often turned to banditry or other socially reprehensible practices, perpetuating their images as bad elements.

While loyalty was the chief virtue for men, fidelity and devotion to your husband was the social custom for women, and we find the same kind of family and state pressure on women to conform to their properly defined role. From a young age Chinese girls were raised to love only one husband. This societal obsession with fidelity proliferated among the elites and spawned a bizarre social practice termed “the cult of chastity”. As Susann Mann describes the cult, “Widows who remarried were scorned, and the government honored with silver and monuments women who, although widowed young, maintained their chastity until death...”\(^5\) By offering a substantial monetary incentive, the government ensured the cult of chastity would thrive, as every literati family would want to bring in a virtuous daughter-in-law. If the remunerative policies were not enough, the pressure from the family would ensure that widows retained their virtue. By the time of Shen Fu, the government did not have to regulate people's behavior directly at all, elite families would take it upon themselves to regulate and control their women to make sure they grew up to be virtuous wives.

The segregation of sexes, long established as the social norm, led to a system of social interaction which Susan Mann termed homosociability. Men traveling far from home on official assignment or looking for a secretarial position would stay with colleagues and friends from their days of study and examinations. Women who remained in the ladies' quarters had female servants and in-laws to socialize with and while away the long days while their husbands were away. Even the lower literati where still subject to this all pervasive division of the sexes. This

\(^5\) Mann, *Gender and Sexuality* 14.
social order led to such strong social bonds as the scholarly circles and sworn sisterhoods which Shen Fu and Yun circulated in respectively. It also produced a unique elite culture to service men while they were away from their wives.

The courtesan culture, which flourished in the late Ming-early Qing, has a special draw for westerners, without an analogue in our own cultural history. Part of being a scholar entailed constant travel and long absences from home. Since it would be socially improper for these sojourning males to bring their wives along on their travels, the courtesan culture grew and evolved to satisfy their needs. A long tradition in Chinese history, the ideal of the Scholar-Beauty romance could be played out in the temporary sanctuary of the flower boats. By the time Shen Fu was old enough to sample this taste of elite life, however, the courtesan culture had declined to a “debased, commercialized form, and as an ideal resonating behind more mundane realities”. This is where the market economy rears its ugly head, providing ever more young girls to fill the role of the courtesans and perpetuating as long as lonely men needed a female companion. Yet the culture of the courtesans was so ingrained in society it had developed its own type of woman. The social orthodoxy drew a clear line between the refined and “virtuous” women who were groomed to become wives, and the talented women who were destined for prostitution.

The courtesans were far more than just prostitutes – they had to be able to entertain refined men, in both sexual and intellectual ways. Many of the stories about the ideal Scholar-Beauty romance involved courtesans as the object of the scholar's amorous liaison. While cultured and well versed in poetry, music, and literature, the courtesans were not wife material. Here we see the striking dichotomy between the virtuous and talented women. Yaoqing's father

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responds to his daughter's poetry by yelling at her, “For a woman to be without talent is itself a virtue!” Shen Fu echoes this sentiment, lamenting the hardships brought about by Yun's talent. Though both types of women were educated and intended to keep the company of literati men, virtuous women were supposed to stay in the home and embroider and raise children, while talented women were raised to entertain men and thus lacked virtue. The dialectic between the virtuous woman she was raised to be and the talented woman Shen Fu wants and encourages her to be is central to Yun's hardships and the divergent culture of the lower literati. Chinese society was divided along gender lines in almost every aspect, especially in access to knowledge and education. Male literati were expected to study and pass the exams, while women were raised to be virtuous wives. They were indoctrinated from a very young age that they should aspire to nothing more than to be good wives, being taught “a husband is like heaven to his wife...a wife follows only one husband” They were allowed to sit with their brothers until the age of 12, when they were removed to the women's quarters, where their mother took over their education. If they wanted a further education beyond the basics they were on their own, though enterprising women could teach themselves as evidenced by Yun's introduction to poetry through the *Mandolin Ballad*. Women's education was restricted as a means of control – if a woman was unintelligent, she would be more dependent on her husband and less free spirited, and thus more virtuous. Yun gets into trouble because her intelligence and free spirited behavior makes her talented, which Shen Fu's parents perceive as offensive and unfilial. Her talent and passionate feelings bring her into contact with Hanyuan the courtesan, and their hardships unfold from there. Elite men had to pretend to love virtuous wives to maintain social harmony, and would thus seek out courtesans for companionship. Shen Fu does not have this problem, finding talent

8 Mann, *Talented Women* pg. 30.
9 Mann, *Talented Women* pg. 62.
in his wife and encouraging it, producing a cultural divergence in the form of a virtuous yet talented wife. The cold/hot meiren hua which Cahill discusses are indicative of the ritual social dichotomy, where the cold “woman waiting for her husband” images showed the virtuous ideal, while the hotter, eroticized images were more likely hung in the bedrooms or boudoirs of courtesans.

When Shen Fu makes his extended journey to Guangzhou absent Yun, he finds himself pining for his missing soul mate. Yet he does not just sleep with a bunch of different girls, flaunting his hubris. Rather, he finds a singing girl who speaks his dialect and reminds him of his beloved talented wife. It is significant to note that there was absolutely nothing wrong with Shen Fu visiting a prostitute while his wife pined away at home. Such social customs had become so ingrained into literati culture that it was not just acceptable, but encouraged for him to acquire concubines as a mark of status. And while it was perfectly acceptable for Shen Fu to sleep with another woman, it was completely unacceptable for Yun to become a dear friend to such a person. Later, Yun tries to acquire a concubine for Shen Fu and becomes sworn sisters with her, which provokes the fury of Shen Fu's parents (Shen 59). While it was virtuous for the wife to welcome a concubine into the house and filial to promote the patrilineage, it was not at all acceptable for the virtuous and the talented women to interact as equals, let alone become sworn sisters.

Shen Fu depicts literati culture as being intertwined with courtesan culture at a most basic level, alluding to the courtesans without a second thought. The social norm of the virtuous wife waiting for her husband while the man travels out for work lends itself to extramarital liaisons. Without his wife to comfort him, Shen Fu takes a singing girl who speaks the same dialect and
reminds him of Yun. It was the duty of the virtuous wife to run the household while her husband was absent. This left a sexual vacuum for elite males which the courtesans filled. They not only had to be beautiful but talented as well, able to entertain their guests on an intellectual level. We can discover much about this dichotomy of women from Hanyuan, the courtesan which Yun becomes infatuated with and tries to bring into the house. Hanyuan underscores the Confucian social distinctions between talented courtesans and virtuous wives in her conversations and relationship with Yun. Hanyuan refers to Yun as “a lady like you” understanding her place in the hierarchy and her position relative to a respectable woman. She also remarks that, “my mother considers me very valuable” and recognizes that she is “not at liberty to make up my own mind in these matters” demonstrating her self-awareness as a material commodity to be purchased by a wealthy man. Shen Fu is unable to acquire her into his house because he lacks the necessary funds. Hanyuan is not dumb and understands that this relationship may not actually come to fruition saying, “I would like to take things one step at a time.” She certainly feels affection for Yun, but she is being pragmatic, understanding her position as a courtesan in training. The worldly Hanyuan contrasts with Yun, who feels too intently. Yun and Hanyuan become instant friends, showing Yun’s divergence from her social role and her identity as a talented woman trapped in the social role of virtuous wife. Foreshadowing the coming tragedy, Hanyuan says “The power to bring us together is completely in your hands, my lady”\(^{10}\) -- showing at once her awareness that she is a piece of material culture to be purchased, as well as her obedience to her social position as a courtesan. Hanyuan has no say in the matter and Yun cannot afford to purchase her.

\(^{10}\) Shen Fu, pg. 32.
The immense double standard of the wife/courtesan shows a clear delineation between what was socially acceptable and what was abhorrent. The wife had to be virtuous and well-groomed, educated in an elite family and occupying her proper place in the Confucian hierarchy. Meanwhile, the talented woman/courtesan culture was the other side of the same coin, giving the elite literati men what they truly desired and what they were not allowed to marry. Shen Fu’s rejection of these social norms and his encouragement of Yun’s talent are what produce their own divergent culture. Marriage politics and the courtesan culture were tightly intertwined, limiting the options for the wealthy elite. Shen Fu rejects this social norm, finding his own happiness with Yun. As a lower literati, with all the social pressures but none of the money, Shen Fu and Yun transcend this strict division of women’s behavior. Their companionship and mutual understanding is a product of this transcendence.

**The Material Constraint**

As a member of lower literati, Shen Fu’s life is fraught with financial difficulty. A central theme in Shen Fu's story is the divergence of literati status and the reality of their financial situation. While Shen Fu is travelling in search of a secretarial position, Yun is left at home to fulfill her duty of managing the household. This precipitates problems for the couple when Yun is incorrectly accused of mismanaging finances and being unable to cover her debts. While framed in the context of ritual behavior and acceptable social customs, the root of the issue is always money. While fulfilling her duties as a virtuous wife should, she still oversteps her bounds as a result of her special relationship with her husband. In her letter to Shen Fu, she discusses the affairs of her mother in law and Shen Fu's “old man”, a breach of her proper Confucian role and disgraceful in the eyes of Shen Fu's father. Her informality in addressing her social superiors in this way contrasts with her upbringing, as an earlier passage reveals. Shen Fu
makes a comment about respect lying in the heart and not in formalities, while Yun responds “No one is more dear to us than our parents; could we actually respect them in our hearts alone while being reckless in our actions and words?” Yun knows what the social rituals are, but has evolved an unmatched rapport with Shen Fu which transcends their social position. They share a unique bond, contradictory to the separation of the sexes and the rigid social hierarchy which is the foundation of society. Hardships arise when their special relationship is viewed from the outside, such as Jiafu’s anger upon reading Yun’s letter.

With such intense social pressure to conform to, to be a talented woman raised in an elite household was a very difficult situation. Tang Yaoqing happily shows her poetry to her father, who angrily explains that “Women's words do not pass beyond the women's quarters!” The internal contradiction between being talented and being virtuous manifest themselves as Yun – raised to be a virtuous wife, but married to a man who encourages her talent. Being too talented and revealing one's emotions through poetry were considered abhorrent behavior because the woman risked compromising her virtue. The dangers of being too talented as perceived by the traditional elite males included “having her poetry used by others to speculate about her personal life... winning fame that might... ruin her chaste personality... [and] coming into contact with men or women whose reputations might not be suitable”. These social perceptions pervaded elite culture, and Yun was undoubtedly aware of what was expected of her as a virtuous wife. Though, being married to Shen Fu, she often transgressed from what was proper and eventually made the fateful decision to become sworn sisters with a singing girl – an action completely

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11 Shen Fu, pg. 12.
12 Shen Fu, pg 61.
13 Mann, Talented Women pg. 13.
14 Mann, Talented Women, pg. 13.
unacceptable to Shen Fu's father. Poetry as a talent could be dangerous to an elite woman, with the danger coming from her knowledge and education, her feelings and passions, causing her to stray from her place as a virtuous wife. While Yun strays from the path society has mandated for her, Yaoqing manages to cover up her talent and play the virtuous wife – at least for a while. After her father's harsh reaction, she burns the poem and swears off poetry, not penning a line until the death of her son. A proper Guixiu, or “outstanding person raised in the inner quarter”, would never reveal such an activity willingly, or partake in it at all, for that matter. Again we see Shen Fu's lack of adherence to social norms and his desire to make Yun a talented wife despite the contradictory orthodoxy, as he asks to see her poems and affectionately inscribes on her poetry notebook “Brocade Pouch of Fine Verses”.

Shen Fu is expecting that Yun will be a devoted wife, but he is not concerned with the virtuous social norms which surround elite marriages. He wants her to express herself in the same way that he does, by deciding for herself what is good. They share many of their idle hobbies and drink together, finding pleasure in each other’s company rather than in embroidery and diligent study. Their friendship as children evolves into a genuine companionship on a level of mutual respect. Their relationship reflects Shen Fu's status as a lower literati, without the money or social pressure from other elites to conform to the rigid social norms. High officials and wealthy families put intense pressure on their children to ensure they made a good match and succeeded in the exams, while poorer families did not have the social imperative or the available cash to ensure proper behavior. Shen Fu foreshadows their coming hardships on the first page of Record Three when discussing an early transgression of the ritual behavior. Yun is referred to as Taitai, or madam, an improper title for the wife of a commoner like Shen Fu which mocked the

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15 Shen Fu, pg. 59.
16 Shen Fu, pg. 3.
proper Confucian social hierarchy. Shen Fu, writing years after the fact, wonders if “this was when all our troubles began”. ¹⁷ He uses this anecdote to symbolize their disregard for socially proper behavior and the hardships that will follow.

Shen Fu and Yun were cousins growing up, betrothed to each other at the age of 13 sui. Their relationship is long and their affection for each other deep. Their friendship as children grew into a love which flourished despite the restrictions placed on them by social custom. Shen Fu is looking not for a submissive wife to stay in the home and maintain her virtue; rather, he prefers Yun to be his companion, both intellectually and physically. They embark on journeys together, drink and play games, and even compose poetry in the company of friends. He treats Yun not as a man ought to treat his wife, instead nurturing her talent and passion. Yun responds to this affection, coming out of her cloistered upbringing and gradually becoming comfortable with Shen Fu's unorthodox behavior. She relishes their time together, such as their impromptu trip to Lake Tai, and expresses her sadness that so many women will never see such sights.²⁸ Her position as the wife of a lower literati enables her to have a higher degree of outdoor mobility than the wives of high officials and wealthy merchants, and also fuels her passions and unorthodox behavior.

Throughout the Six Records, it is Shen Fu who is pushing against the social norms, attempting to maintain his spiritual freedom. In doing so, he encourages Yun to be more open and expressive, in contrast to Tang Yaoqing’s father and the acceptable behavior for a proper woman. Early in record one, he discusses his first separation from Yun after they have been married. Shen Fu laments that “her letters contained twice as many questions as answers and . . .

¹⁷ Shen Fu, pg. 55.
¹⁸ Shen Fu, pg. 27.
they were mostly words of encouragement with polite civilities filling out the rest”. Shen Fu does not expect or even want Yun to behave as a proper virtuous wife should. Rather, he encourages her to be more open with her feelings and to shun orthodox behaviors. Shen Fu is always the one encouraging Yun's “bad behavior”, as evidenced by the dressing as a man episode. It is Shen Fu who twice suggests she break the prevalent and overarching social norms so they can spend more time together. Shen Fu just does not care about how orthodoxy states a woman should behave, instead encouraging Yun to be more free and unrestrained. Yun was raised to be a virtuous wife, and her timid behavior reflects her traditional upbringing, such as when Shen Fu writes, “In the beginning, Yun was quite reticent and enjoyed simply listening to my disquisitions on various topics”. Shen Fu's personal preference and unorthodox mannerisms reveal themselves, as he writes “I was able to coax her into speaking more... and she slowly began to voice her opinions”. He is more interested in hearing what her true feelings are than in maintaining the acceptable social behavior between man and wife. Shen Fu's carefree attitude and personal character are the force which transforms Yun into a companion rather than a virtuous wife.

Young girls of elite families were educated through classical guides and rulebooks on how to be virtuous wives, which was a completely different form of writing than poetry. The primary purpose of this education was obviously to teach them the rules and fashion them into respectable and proper Guixiu. Yun perhaps had some of this formulaic women's education, but she used what limited education she had and her knowledge of Mandolin Ballad to teach herself

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19 Shen Fu, pg. 7.
20 Shen Fu, pg. 25.
21 Shen Fu, pg. 18.
how to read and write poetry.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, it was somewhat by chance that Yun cultivated her talent and caught a glimpse through the window into the world of passion and talented women. Wealthy families could ensure their daughters did not stray from proper behavior and invested in them to groom them into \textit{Guixiu} while Yun, whose father perished early, was left to her own devices and acquired some literary skills. This kind of talent was not entirely discouraged, but it was still considered unacceptable behavior, even for the lower literati. Cultivating poetic talent was associated with passion and feeling, dangerous traits for a virtuous woman and which eventually lead to Yun's tragic end. Her exposure at a young age to such passion filled stories as \textit{Mandolin Ballad} and \textit{Dream of the Red Chamber} kindle her interest in poetry and developed her talent and passion. On her deathbed, Yun will recall that “My sickness began when... my grief was too much to bear; it persisted because of my passionate feelings...”\textsuperscript{23} Both Yun and Shen Fu recognize that their hardship stems from Yun's talent and their transgressions against the social norms.

Yun's passion and their companionship which defies the norm can be seen again when Shen Fu describes a scene where he was drinking with Yun and a singing girl playing drinking games. Someone perceives the situation as two singing girls, since social customs dictated that men would not behave in such a way with their own wives. A proper, educated, and virtuous wife was supposed to have social inhibitions, as her place was in the home, away from the licentious ways of the concubines. Shen Fu and Yun both lack many of the inhibitions that restricted the wealthier families, as Shen Fu's attitude towards his wife and her reciprocal affection cause them to drift into their own world, living as “immortals amid the cooking fires”.\textsuperscript{24}

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\textsuperscript{22} Shen Fu, pg. 2.
\textsuperscript{23} Shen Fu, pg. 70.
\textsuperscript{24} Shen Fu, pg. 71.
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This special relationship is what brings them hardship in the end, as their familiarity with each other spills over and is considered unacceptable by others. In striving for so perfect a relationship contrary to the acceptable norms, Yun laments that she has “provoked the jealousy of the Fashioner of Things who torments me with the demons of passion”. In the end, it is their close relationship and transcendence of the Confucian hierarchy and acceptable behavior that causes their hardship and Yun's tragedy.

Their disregard for the strict social conventions may be symptomatic of a divergent lower literati culture which was breaking away from the traditional literati expectations. Poorer families did not have the money to live up to elite pretensions and as such could forge new identities in the broad category of lower literati. Shen Fu begins Record Four by recognizing that there are expectations that society has placed on him, but he has lived his life “forming my own opinion rather than blindly following what others say is good or bad”. He is seen by society as a lazy failure, simply because he does things society does not want him to do, and strays from the proper social order of things.

Cultural Transcendence of The Lower Literati

Shen Fu lived at the eve of a great transformation in Chinese society. The lower literati culture flourished in the lower Yangzi delta during the high Qing period, and was about to be washed away forever by the Taiping rebellion. Yet by contextualizing Shen Fu and Yun in their time and place, we can catch a glimpse at the divergent culture of the lower literati and the market forces which shaped their lives. The material constraint is the one aspect of his life which Shen Fu can neither transcend nor avoid. He escapes the majority of elite pretensions, preferring

\[25\] Ibid.
\[26\] Shen Fu, pg 85.
to “form his own opinions” about what is good and forming his own culture as a lower literati. He can avoid the ritual formalities of the literati, but he can never escape the market forces and the issue of money diverging from his status.

Since the 16th and 17th centuries, merchants had become more prosperous and successful with the increase of inter-regional trade. These merchants facilitated the commercialization of elite culture by spending their newly acquired wealth on the material culture of the literati, the traditional elites. By the 18th century, merchants could become wealthier than even the successful literati. The merchant-urban class contributed to changes in values, status, and wealth in the urban centers, influencing the market through their patronage. A new urban hierarchy centered on money was supplanting the traditional view that only the literati were the holders of culture and wealth. Shen Fu transcends much of the cultural ritual of the literati, but is still bound by his financial situation, which he could neither transcend nor defy. He produces his own divergent culture as a lower literati, such as when he and Yun are arranging their living space on the Taiping boats. Though they are comfortable and happy together, Yun notices “This arrangement may be refined, but it still doesn’t have the feel of a wealthy family’s house.”

Shen Fu and Yun can transcend certain aspects of literati life, producing a unique culture through their poverty and poetry.

The art and material culture which flourished throughout the high Qing was a product of the social stability of the era and the market economy which burgeoned was a direct result of that stability. The majority of the art of this period has been dismissed as Suzhou Pian, or trivial images from Suzhou, because the subject matter did not “rise above this dusty world”. However, the lower literati who produced these works had been raised to take the civil service exam, and

27 Shen Fu, pg. 42.
were familiar with the high literati culture to which they had aspired their whole lives. They had 
studied the classics, but had failed the exams. Though it was considered “low-minded” by the 
elites, the absence of the stress and obligations of an official post allowed the lower literati artists 
to appreciate what was around them, adding a human element to their work. Thus their artwork 
shows a familiarity with elite culture, but reveals compassion with their subjects which is lacking 
from elite literati brushwork. The lower literati were a substantial market force, both producing 
and consuming the material culture which was available to even the poorest literati.

The literati set themselves apart from the common man through years of rigorous study of 
the classics. This corpus of classical learning was useless in practical terms, but was the mark of 
knowledge and power in the imperial system. It set the literati apart from the commoners, giving 
them the moral authority and a “high minded” taste which made them the jet-set of imperial 
China. The literati presented themselves as the moral authority for society, being the most 
educated and having imbued the messages of the sages from antiquity. High literati culture was 
glorified as the elite standard to which all educated men should aspire to. Thus literati artwork 
was by nature superior to studio artists, since literati members were “men who were supposed to 
manifest their high-culture refinements in their paintings”.\footnote{Cahill, pg. 4.} The literati were not only the 
creators of much of this high-culture, but were also the arbiters of what constituted quality – their 
own “high-minded” creations. Yet by Shen Fu's time the literati who actually rose to high office 
were far outnumbered by lower literati like Shen Fu. The quota system limited the number of 
high officials, or Juren degree holders, to a very select few, perhaps 100 new members per 
annum. Meanwhile, the vast overflow of lower literati and licentiates numbered over 2.5 million, 
all of whom had been raised since birth to pass the exams. Therefore, the majority of the studio
artists and technical masters were never officials themselves, allowing them the time to focus their attentions elsewhere – their art, leisure time, and in Shen Fu's case, their wives.

By 1800 social mobility of the literati class had declined dramatically and many scholars were forced to seek alternate means of employment. This was the background against which Shen Fu's narrative is set— a time of diminished opportunities, yet a growing market economy. Shen Fu's day to day activities must be contextualized in order to understand his motivations and his shortcomings by literati standards. He is constantly drinking with his friends and wife, playing drinking games to set the mood. This facet of lower literati life was spawned by the social forces indicated above. Declining upward mobility and failure to pass the exams would mean fewer obligations and study and more time for drinking and cavorting with friends. The market economy which had flourished throughout the high Qing ensured that there was a range of choices for even the poorest literati to slake their thirst. Members of the lower literati who failed to pass the exams found other forms of employment, such as painting, in order to “keep [themselves] in wine and poetry”. \(^{29}\) This obsession with drink was just one aspect of the divergence of elite culture which grew alongside the swelling ranks of lower literati.

The lower literati had the training and education of the literati, combined with the down to earth realism of the working man. These were the artists who produced the wealth of vernacular images discussed in James Cahill's *Pictures for use and Pleasure*. Influence by the west in the works of these studio artists is pervasive, though often denied due to post-colonial sentiments. But this influence should not be credited to western artists, for it was the studio artists themselves who independently chose to branch out into new styles. As Cahill points out when discussing the influence on Chinese art by western paintings, “Recognizing this influence

\(^{29}\) Shen Fu, pg. 24.
in no way demeans the Chinese artists who did the appropriating – in fact, it demonstrates their salutary openness with what had otherwise become a dangerously self-absorbed artistic tradition”. The self-absorbed elites could not possibly accept such a transition from the traditional orthodoxy, while the lower literati were free to experiment and produce art which served a variety of functions. Studio artists fulfilled an important role in the artistic world, producing a range of vernacular images for every occasion from the New Year’s festival to images of sacred Buddhist figures, transcending the pomp and form which surrounded elite literati painting. Shen Fu commissions a fellow artist to paint a portrait of the old man beneath the moon, which he and Yun pray to twice a month for blessing them with such a blissful marriage. The lower literati were an incredible social force, contributing to the market economy as both consumers and producers of vernacular art and other forms of elite material culture. The craftsmanship and utilization of western techniques to produce new styles with a wide variety of social functions must be seen in the context of the market and the divergence of elite culture during this time. Western influence and the shift in vernacular art was thus not an individual occurrence, but a product of specific market and cultural factors.

While Shen Fu fails as a scholar, he finds something he thinks to be better, a true companion and soul mate. And who is to say that Shen Fu's personal taste was wrong? A failure in his own time and place, we look upon Shen Fu as a visionary of the future, breaking with tradition and finding romantic love with his wife, of all people. It is interesting to compare Shen Fu's “failure” with Zhang Qi, a scholar who becomes a magistrate and eventually takes up a post in a dangerous area. He brings his family along with him, yet they have experienced such hardships in his absence, selling their homemade goods and eating gruel during lean times. In the

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30 Cahill, pg. 68.
31 Shen Fu, pg. 22.
end, his wife dies “far from home, in a remote northern country where her husband was enjoying the ironic rewards of his scholarly struggles”. After all his hard work and sacrifice for his family, the “successful” scholar is rewarded with more hard work. Shen Fu experiences his share of hardship, but he is also pursuing his own interests and finding his own happiness with Yun, transcending the role of a literati like Zhang Qi and embodying his own culture.

The Golden Age is always in the past, as the sages’ long dead have lived out a purer existence and were thus wiser than “modern” people. So goes the Confucian orthodoxy and the general Chinese cosmology of the time. Shen Fu does not bind up his thoughts with scholarly work and essays about sages from antiquity; he lives in the moment, charting a path through unorthodox waters. The reality for Shen Fu and Yun was far removed from the expectations of the elite, yet they still must contend with the market and social forces that push down on them. Suzhou and other wealthy cities in the lower Yangzi, the center of literati culture, spawned this sub-culture because of the diminished social mobility of the literati. In Shen Fu's account, we catch a glimpse of the life of a lower literati at the tail end of centuries of stability and peace termed the High Qing. Shen Fu lived on the eve of the Taiping rebellion, which would demolish the lower Yangzi as well as the lower literati culture which emerged there. The government's non-interference with people's lives by maintaining a standard for elites to aspire can be contrasted with the PRC government's direct interference in people's everyday lives.

The orthodoxy which the Qing government promoted and the elite literati embodied is summed up perfectly in the eulogy for the late Bao Mengyi. In reference to maintaining the proper Confucian social hierarchy, and thus the separation of the sexes and the ritual performances that go along with it, her Uncle remarks that “The orderly state of governance of

32 Mann *Talented Women* pg. 44.
all under heaven is based entirely on just such conduct” (Mann 172). In this context, Shen Fu's unorthodox behavior was not simply his own personal search for what is good, but was throwing into jeopardy the entire state of orderly government. The literati were trained and manipulated from birth to follow this government sanctioned dogma and in turn instilled those values in their progeny. Shen Fu never fully buys into this ideology, having neither the money nor the reputation to fulfill his prescribed social role. He and Yun journey in their own drifting world, at once entangled with the realities of life, yet free from the social imperatives of the elites. He is both a producer and consumer of elite material culture, making him and all of the lower literati a substantial social and market force. The Confucian orthodoxy pushes against this kind of free thinking and tries to enforce the acceptable social norms. Shen Fu does not care; he has found something better than money, status, or an official position – a true companion and soul mate.