Six Chapters of a Floating Life (Fu-sheng liu-chi 浮生六記) was written around 1810 by Shen Fu 沈復, a poor Chinese literatus and painter from the southern city of Soochow. Of the six original chapters, only four were found when the manuscript was discovered in 1877; until now, Shen Fu's work remains a torso.

1) The exact year of Six Chapters is not known. In his introduction to the Czech translation of this work (Prague, KLIU 1956, p. 11), Professor Průšek indicates the years around 1809 as the probable time of the origin of Shen Fu's work: Shen Fu was born in 1763 and in Chapter IV of his book he writes that he is forty-six. On the other hand, Professor Demiéville in the introduction to the French translation by J. Reclus (UNESCO, Gallimard 1967, p. 17) gives the year around 1816, because at the very beginning of Chapter IV Shen Fu speaks about his thirty years of activity as a clerk and we know that he started to work as yamen clerk in 1788.


3) The first four chapters were first printed in 1877 and often reprinted later. In 1935, an edition of a "complete" Shen Fu book appeared, entitled Tsu-pen Fu-sheng liu-chi 足本浮生六記; according to Chao T'iao-k'uang 趙佶 who wrote a preface to this edition, the text was discovered by chance by a certain Wang Chün-ch'ing 王均卿 in the 1930s. However, it was proved by Liu Fan 劉樊 in his article "Fu-sheng liu-chi i-kao pien-wei" 浮生六記逸稿辨偽 (in: Kuo-wen chou-pao, Vol. XIV, no. 6, Feb. 1, 1937) that the fifth and sixth chapters in this edition are mere plagiarisms, apparently written by the "discoverer" himself. Liu Fan demonstrated that the fifth chapter is taken almost verbatim from diary notes Shih Liu-ch'iu chi 使琉球記 by Li Ting-yüan 李鼎元; the sixth chapter is compiled primarily from Ts'ung-hsien-chai yü 聽訓齋語 by Chang Ying 張英 and partly from Shu-hsüeh tsu-shu 述學自叙 by Wang Jung-fu 汪容甫. Yet the tsu-pen, Fu-sheng liu-chi was reprinted in Taiwan in 1962 by the Shih-chieh shu-chü Publishing House under the title Tsu-pen Fu-sheng liu-chi teng wu chung 足本浮生六記等五種.
This charming masterpiece of classic Chinese prose is well-known to the Western public; it has been translated into several European languages and published in many editions 1). Its popularity is certainly due to what Professor Průšek has called the "originality" and "modern character" of the work 2). In another connection, Průšek summarizes the historical importance of Shen Fu's book in the following words: "In Shen Fu's work we already find all those qualities which are so characteristic of the literature between the two wars: subjectivism, individualism, the disregard for traditional bars and considerations, the awareness of the tragedy of life. It is, without doubt, the most interesting document of the close connection between revolutionary literature and the literature of the Manchu period" 3).

1) The first translation into English was done by Lin Yü-t'äng 林語堂 and appeared under the title "Six Chapters of a Floating Life" in the Shanghai periodical T'ien-hsia Monthly, Vol. I in 1935. This almost complete version of the original was later more or less abbreviated and reprinted in several of Lin Yü-t'äng's books (My Country and My People, 1936; The Importance of Living, 1938; The Wisdom of China, 1942). A "pirated" reedition, without the translator's name and with some changes of the English text, appeared along with the Chinese text in Hongkong in 1961, printed by the English Publishing Company. The second English translation under the name "Chapters from a Floating Life" was done by Shirley M. Black (Oxford University Press, London-New York-Toronto 1960). It is stylistically excellent, but completely arbitrary in its manipulation of the structure of the work. Thanks to Jaroslav Průšek's outstanding translation published under the title "Sest historií prchávěho života" in 1944, Czech readers were among the first Westerners to become acquainted with Shen Fu's work. The second edition of Průšek's translation appeared in Prague in 1956 with a long introduction from which we quote in this article (further: Průšek, Introduction). An Italian translation was provided by Lionello Lanciotti and Tsui Tao-lu ("Sei racconti di vita irreale", Roma, ed. Gherardo Casini, 1955). Two different French translations published successively in a short span of time, but done independently of each other, were provided by Pierre Ryckmans ("Six récits au fil inconstant des jours", Bruxelles, Éditions F. Larcier, 1966) and by Jacques Reclus ("Récits d'une vie fugitive", UNESCO, Gallimard, 1967). Prof. Paul Demiéville wrote an illuminating introduction to the latter translation. Our quotations of Shen Fu's text are based on Lin Yü-t'äng's translation in The Wisdom of China and India (Random House, New York 1942, p. 964-1050) which, however, was checked against the original Chinese text published in Shanghai in 1925 by the Liang-ch'i t'u-shu-kuan Publishing House.

2) J. Průšek, Introduction.