

Six Records of a Floating Life, by Shen Fu: A Pavilion for Suzhou 2016
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...*The floating life is but as a dream...* Li Bai (701 – 762)

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree... "Kubla Khan; or, A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1777 – 1834)

In an increasingly globalized world our sense of a place and what it can offer to that world becomes paradoxically ever more fundamental to all of us. *Six Records of a Floating Life, by Shen Fu: a Pavilion for Suzhou* takes as its model the title of the famous book written by Shen Fu (1763 – 1825) who lived most of his life in Suzhou. The book consists of six chapters – "Wedded Bliss," "The Little Pleasures of Life," "Sorrow," "The Joys of Travel", and two further missing chapters – "Experience," and "The Way of Life." Shen Fu's *Six Records* are said to be part love story, part social document and part autobiography. His interests were scholarly and at times he earned his living as a civil servant and even – significantly – an art dealer.

It was especially interesting to note that Coleridge and Shen Fu, while worlds apart, were contemporaries to one another. Shen Fu, similar to Coleridge, referenced literature; both had in common a capacity for the enjoyment and celebration of everyday pleasure. In fact, Shen Fu seems to us to have been surprisingly modern – even bohemian as understood by nineteenth century Europeans – in his rejection of traditional formalities and customs and preference for living within the present and its pleasures.

Why a pavilion? Coleridge's famous poem has always articulated the exotic allure that China has held in the modern Western mind. That allure has its history as well in the European obsession with the picturesque – the careful placement of small pavilions in a designed landscape to locate a viewpoint that would bring sheer delight to the eyes of the beholder. Those pavilions were frequently designed in the shape of Chinese temples, and this suggested that a pavilion for the *Six Records* offered a compelling connection between East and West. Given the title and structure of Shen Fu's book, that pavilion needed to be six-sided, with each one of the six sections dedicated to one of the six *Records*.

Another factor in the pavilion's conception is particular to Shen Fu. His title was adapted from a preface to a book of poems by Li Bai. It seemed delightfully surprising then that Li Bai's phrase "a floating life is but a dream" connected also to Coleridge's "Vision in a Dream". It was this dream-like quality that we felt was the most important consideration in the pavilion's design. This quality is difficult to transfer to the solidity of material construction, and in that difficulty we felt lay an opportunity – to effect a transfer through reflection both as a metaphysical concept and as a physical manifestation. The solution to this puzzle lay in the reflective or mirror-like aspects of highly polished stainless steel. With the pavilion's six-sided columns mirroring the six central star-shaped recesses – both fabricated in this reflective material – the pavilion can seem to float, as in a dream, as in Shen Fu's life, providing the contemporary viewer a place – a sanctuary – for reflection and the integration of their own experience – their own story – into that of Shen Fu's.

Importantly as well, the pavilion is an echo of Shen Fu's characteristic style, and in our design of the pavilion we have tried to incorporate the essentially circular nature of the *Six Records*. Each *Record* reflects the whole only in the part – each record takes its subject from youth to the end of its particular story. The records overlap and key events are later retold from a different perspective with no regard to the last. Both the six-sided columns and the six recesses play with the idea of the fragmented and reflected whole. In the pavilion each *Record* is separate from the next, and just as the *Six Records* are non-chronological, thematic, and episodic, the pavilion's hexagonal form provides no guide as to how it is to be entered. Like Shen Fu's intriguing narrative-play with layered effects – with major themes suddenly appearing without warning to leave the reader unsure of their ground – the visitor to the pavilion is left standing in a myriad of uncertain simultaneous reflections produced by the pavilion's mirrored surfaces. Where Shen Fu's tension between illusion and reality plays back and forth in the *Records*, the pavilion's reflective qualities construct an illusory stability as the surrounding context shifts and changes in its mirrored surfaces, creating a similar tension between *here* and *there*.

We noted that Shen Fu seems interestingly modern, and in the pavilion the visitor is invited to enter randomly at any one point, to enter any one of the *Six Records*, to sit, to reflect and take those reflections with them to the next titled record, and then to the next, and finally into the contemporary world where the

intimacy of Shen Fu's confessional style – both universal and contemporary – finds a familiar voice within each visitor in today's embracing social media.