

On the reconstruction of the *Shenxian zhuan*

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The *Shenxian zhuan* is a biographical (or hagiographical) collection of great importance to our understanding of the formation of the Taoist religion in the early centuries of the Common Era. A text of this name was put together by Ge Hong (283–343), but it has long been suspected that the best-known version currently available was actually confected for commercial rather than academic purposes in the sixteenth century from quotations in other sources, and that the direct tradition of the text has been lost. The careful reconstitution of a reliable version of the original work—or at least of an ancient version—has been the goal of a number of scholars, and the appearance of such a work of scholarship in the form of a translation, as part of what will doubtless prove to be a standard reference series for Taoist texts in English, certainly gives full occasion for congratulating not only the author, Robert Ford Campany, but also the series editor and indeed the press that has made the publication of this typographically complex and lengthy monograph possible.¹

There is indeed much to admire here, right from the ‘Foreword’ by the series editor, Stephen R. Bokenkamp, which provides (on p. xxii) a stout defence of academic translation against those, including tenure and promotion committees, who see it as ‘just a skill, like taking dictation’.² This publication does, however, give an unrivalled opportunity for assessing how much we have learned concerning the reconstitution of lost texts from the period of disunion following the collapse of China’s first period of imperial unity, and it is on this question of how to go about the work of reconstitution that the following remarks will concentrate. Clearly such a narrow focus to any critical notice inflicts a major injustice on an author whose work covers not simply textual scholarship and translation but also broader questions in the history of religion. This is especially the case in a ‘state of the field’ review, which is inevitably designed to point out areas where some refinements of current approaches are possible, rather than simply commend what has been achieved so far. The commendatory statements from respected scholars that adorn the jacket of this book suggest, however, that the author already possesses some insurance against the ignorance and stupidity of tenure and promotion committees, while the overall object of the exercise is to demonstrate that textual scholarship, in some circles seen as a skill yet more mechanical and unreflective than taking dictation, is actually an enterprise calling not only for relentless and painstaking hard work but also the relentless exercise of a very high level of reflective critical judgement.

And if the end result may involve the imputation of lapses on either score to Robert Campany, or to Stephan Bumbacher or Benjamin Penny, his

¹ Robert Ford Campany: *To live as long as heaven and earth: a translation and study of Ge Hong’s Tradition of divine transcendents*, xxviii, 608 pp. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. (Daoist Classics, 2).

² For a recent case of obdurate and ill-informed hostility towards basic scholarship, see Wendy Adamek, ‘Transmission and authority in medieval Chinese Buddhism’, *BDK Fellowship Newsletter* 5, 2002, pp. 2–4: n. 4, p. 3, which ends with the sentence ‘I would very much like to revise and publish my annotated English translation of the *Lidai fabao ji*, but for the time being it is being held hostage by the prejudice against translations that is endemic to the current tenuring system of U.S. academic institutions’. Since, as noted earlier in this journal (*BSOAS* 66/1), the text in question contains the first mention of Jesus in a Zen source, one can only find this extremely regrettable.

companions and (in terms of publication) predecessors in the reconstruction of the *Shenxian zhuan*, then this should not be taken as meaning that we should in any sense underestimate the difficulty of the work involved. It is a type of work that has often been shied away from in sinological circles, so that perforce we are obliged to quote from printed texts whose antecedents are often quite unclear. No one working with materials of a similar age in Europe would tolerate such a situation, so unless we are happy with the imputation that Chinese texts do not matter so much because Chinese civilization forms an inferior, more amateur field of research, we must take steps to rectify it. Yet models derived from classical studies in the West, readily available in the form of reconstitutions of the sayings of pre-Socratic philosophers and the like, do not entirely suit the Chinese situation, partly because the early invention of printing in China means that we are often confronted by a plethora of printed editions dating back sometimes almost as much as a full millennium, and partly because the Chinese method of recapitulating earlier knowledge through systematic quotation in a multitude of encyclopedias (*leishu*) usually presents us with a wealth of indirect textual evidence now also in printed form but derived from the manuscript tradition perhaps as much as half a millennium earlier still. These considerations further isolate Chinese textual studies from other established traditions of textual scholarship in Asia, such as those concerned with Persian or Sanskrit, though in the case of works no older than the rise of mass market printing in the late sixteenth century in China, forms of textual analysis derived from the European experience have proved useful, as Andrew West has shown.³ For the Six Dynasties period Campany and his colleagues have had no models at all, for although much may be learned from the recent work on pre-imperial texts by Paul Thompson and Harold D. Roth, and from the magnificent reconstructions of sources of Tang date by Glen Dudbridge, no publisher has until now been persuaded that any text of the period deserves a full edition and translation in English.⁴

Two decades have now passed since I contemplated—and eventually shied away from—the problems of reconstituting Six Dynasties materials. One problem that did concern me at the time was that for texts of this period, like texts of the early Tang but unlike pre-imperial texts, materials preserved in Japan sometimes have a bearing on the work of reconstitution, if not because the text in question itself circulated there, then either because early *leishu* such as the *Xiwendian yulan* seem to have survived there at least until about 1200, or else because even late commentators, such as the Shingon scholar Unshō (1614–93), appear to have had before them a tradition of annotation stretching back to Tang times, in which we find for example materials otherwise only known through Dunhuang manuscripts cited.⁵ The problem of *Shenxian zhuan*

³ Wei An (Andrew West), *Sanguo yanyi banben kao*. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996.

⁴ Paul Thompson, *The Shen Tzu fragments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Harold D. Roth, *The textual history the Huai-nan Tzu* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1992); Glen Dudbridge, *The tale of Li Wa* (London: Ithaca Press, 1983); *Religious experience and lay society in T'ang China: a reading of Tai Fu's Kuang-i chi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Lost books of medieval China* (London: The British Library, 2000). In 1974 Kenneth DeWoskin completed a Columbia doctorate bearing on the text of the *Soushenji* by Gan Bao, an associate of Ge Hong whose work also suffered considerable vicissitudes in its transmission, but although DeWoskin eventually published together with James Crump a translation of the text, *In search of the supernatural: The written record* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), the remarks on the text included in this work fall far short of an edition.

⁵ Note in particular p. 169 at n. 6, and n. 28 on p. 175 of T. H. Barrett, 'On the transmission of the *Shen Tzu* and of the *Yang-sheng yao-chi*', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1980/2, pp. 168–76. For a startling example of a Tang citation in Shingon tradition, see Takaoka Ryūshin (ed.), *Shingonshū zensho* 40 (Tokyo: Shingonshū zensho kankōkai, 1939), p. 7 (continuous pagination), which cites *in extenso* a work otherwise known as far as I am aware from the publication of a Dunhuang manuscript by T. Makita in the Festschrift for Z. Tsukamoto.

materials preserved in Japan is evidently known to Penny, who refers to a citation in the surviving fragments of the vast Japanese *Hifuryaku* encyclopedia of 831, but is not addressed by either Bumbacher or Campamy.⁶ This neglect, perhaps following on the natural tendencies of Chinese scholars themselves, extends here to Chinese works based on quotations lost or damaged in China but more successfully transmitted in Japan until their modern republication. One example of this type is the Buddhist philological work of Huilin, *Yiqie jing yinyi*, completed in 817 and republished in 1986 by the Shanghai Guji chubanshe, reproducing a Japanese edition of 1737 unknown in China until the late Qing: p. 34.6a of this work includes a passage on the giant turtles that tow the magic island of Penglai to and fro that is there attributed to the *Shenxian zhuan* but is not discussed by either Campamy or his predecessors. This is not to say that they have not noticed it: there is a strong chance that the attribution is incorrect, since the passage in question was, to judge by the contemporary commentary of Yin Jingxun (himself a source of a related *Shenxian zhuan* quotation overlooked by everyone) on a parallel passage in the *Liezi*, in Huilin's day certainly also attributed to the earlier (probably second century CE) Daoist hagiography known as the *Liexian zhuan*; indeed, the passage would seem to occur in one of the earliest known citations of that work in the commentary of Wang Yi, who died in 158 CE.⁷ Yet Huilin is plainly aware of Wang's note, since he cites its phonological gloss on the word for turtle. Carelessness aside, either on the part of Huilin or Yin, or more probably on the part of the *leishu* whence they both no doubt derive their information, one possible explanation is that this story was both in the *Liexian zhuan* and in the *Shenxian zhuan*, even if it is in neither today, since these works in fact share a small number of biographies in common. At the very least we should add both passages to Campamy's final section, 'Items attributed to the *Shenxian zhuan* excluded from this translation' (pp. 547–52).

Of course not all the citations from the *Shenxian zhuan* preserved in Japan are particularly significant. In the couple of hours I have been able to devote to the task of looking in likely but convenient places for quotations, I have been able to establish, for instance, that the *Yichu liutie*, a Buddhist encyclopedia completed in 954 and only made available in China from a Japanese edition in the middle of the twentieth century, contains no more than a somewhat garbled summary of a passage better attested in Campamy's reconstruction, p. 195.⁸ An early fourteenth-century commentary adds a snippet textually inferior to, but apparently from the same proximate source as, the passage from *Taiping yulan* 361 given by Campamy, p. 427.⁹ This is disappointing, and not simply because, as Penny and Bumbacher correctly note, the presence of the *Shenxian zhuan* as an independent work is attested for Japan in about

⁶ See p. 195 of Benjamin Penny, 'The text and authorship of *Shenxian zhuan*', *Journal of Oriental Studies* xxxiv 2, 1996, pp. 165–209. The survival of important Chinese materials in Japan is, of course, but one aspect of the wider problem of the survival of Chinese materials outside China, sometimes in the case of Chinese Buddhist works in the form of translations, for instance into Tibetan or Sogdian.

⁷ For the *Liezi* commentary, see Yang Bojun (ed.), *Liezi jishi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), p. 153; this page contains: (a) a citation from Yin's *Liezi shiwen* of the *Shenxian zhuan*, not as far as I can see in Campamy's reconstruction, on the God of the North, master of the turtles; (b) a citation by the modern editor, Yang, of Wang's commentary on the *Chu ci* concerning the turtles; (c) a citation by Yin of the *Liexian zhuan* concerning the turtles. It should be added that scholars have for some time recognized that the transmission of the *Liexian zhuan* is also not free from problems: the specific example treated here is raised by Max Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan* (Peking: Centre d'études sinologiques, 1953), p. 3, to illustrate these uncertainties.

⁸ See the 1669 edition reprinted by Makita Tairyō, *Giso Rikuchō* (Kyoto: Hōyū shoten, 1979), p. 8.46b; continuous pagination, p. 162.

⁹ In the series *Dai Nihon Bukkyozensho*, Volume 112, p. 57, the only volume from this useful array of Buddhist materials which I have had immediately to hand.

890.¹⁰ It was also popular enough there during Heian times to inspire an imitation, in which Buddhist ascetics of Japan are pressed into service to provide a local parallel series of extraordinary beings.¹¹

But a quotation by Unshō, the Shingon priest already mentioned above, again raises questions about the treatment of materials of doubtful attribution, and this time questions of yet greater importance. The tradition that he comments on was obviously aware of *Shenxian zhuan* materials, for he cites, without however providing a reference to it, the charming story of Huang Chuping, who could turn stones into sheep, until recently a figure little known outside Ge Hong's work, but now the centre of one of Hong Kong's most successful cults—indeed, at least one Chinese takeaway named after him may be found in this country already, in the Totterdown area of Bristol.¹² More problematic, however, is a reference to a Dong Weinian, who, as Unshō notes, was a figure not found in the version of the *Shenxian zhuan* available to him, presumably the Ming commercial reconstruction.¹³ A slightly later co-religionist, Tsūgen (1656–1731), identifies two surviving sources for the passage, in the *Yiwen leiju*, 78, and the *Tang leihan*, 108—the latter work is an early seventeenth-century recompilation of early *leishu* from the Tang period, so it is not surprising that it should contain a quotation from the *Yiwen leiju*, which was compiled in 622–24, and which forms one of the major sources for its own recompilation.¹⁴ When we turn, however, to the sources given by Penny, Bumbacher and Campany, we find that only the first named lists this passage as part of the *Shenxian zhuan*, on the basis of the *Yiwen leiju* quotation; Bumbacher shows that he is aware of it, citing the slightly earlier (but textually less reliable) encyclopedia *Beitang shuchao*; and Campany, whether by error or on principle, mentions it not at all.¹⁵ Before turning to the underlying reasons for the divergence between Penny and Bumbacher (and perhaps Campany) on this score, it is first necessary to point out the implications of the presence of this piece of text in two early Tang *leishu*.

For the assumption must be that they must both most probably derive from a common source in some earlier *leishu* than from some independent anthologizing of the *Shenxian zhuan* itself. One such possibility as a source would be the *Xiuwendian yulan*, mentioned above, which was a large compilation of late sixth-century north China. But a close reading of the preface to the *Yiwen leiju*, which contrast true literary anthologies like the *Wenxuan* with the more accessibly organized but purely 'factual' *leishu* like the *Huanglan*, the first work of this type from the early third century, and the massive [*Hualin*] *Bianlue*, compiled in south China in the early sixth century, suggests that it was the latter that was taken to provide the 'factual' material for each entry, with added literary quotations then distributed amongst the whole in order to

¹⁰ Penny, 'Text and authorship', p. 175; Bumbacher, 'On the *Shenxian zhuan*', *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* LIV 4 (2000), pp. 729–814, p. 735.

¹¹ This work, not in itself germane to our purposes here, has been rendered into English by Christoph Kleine and Livia Kohn, 'Daoist immortality and Buddhist holiness', in *Japanese Religions* 24/2 (1999), pp. 119–96, though a better sense of its own somewhat problematic textual state may be derived from the Italian translation by Silvio Calzolari, *Il Dio incatenato* (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1984).

¹² *Shingonshū zensho* 40, p. 132. For the Hong Kong cult, see Graeme Lang and Lars Ragvald, *The rise of a refugee god: Hong Kong's Wong Tai Sin* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), where pp. 4–5 concern his early hagiography; note especially n. 10 on p. 162 for some rather disparaging remarks about his supposed magical powers.

¹³ *Shingonshū zensho*, 40, p. 210.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 336. The quotation in question may be found in the modern typeset edition of the *Yiwen leiju* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982 reprint, with index, of 1965 edition), p. 1328.

¹⁵ Penny, 'Text and authorship', p. 196; Bumbacher, p. 761 of 'On the *Shenxian zhuan*'.

create a new type of literary encyclopedia.¹⁶ If so, then the *Shenxian zhuan* entered the *leishu* textual tradition, broadly conceived, only two centuries or so after its composition, at about the same time and in the same place that we find it cited by Tao Hongjing (Campany, p. 119, at no. 5).

This is, of course, an optimistic way of construing the situation—more optimistic even than Campany's outlook, which is based on the (incorrect) assumption that the *Taiping yulan* may be regarded as an early Tang text on the grounds that it was 'based entirely on *leishu* dating to no later than 641' (p. 380; cf. pp. 125, 128), a misreading of the preface, which names the *Xiuwendian yulan*, the *Yiwen leiju*, and another, larger, seventh-century product amongst its sources. Unfortunately every new compilation added fresh material, and in the process of rearranging material there were plenty of opportunities for copying mistakes and misattribution. But is the story of Dong Weinian misattributed? Yes, in the view of Bumbacher, on the grounds that he lived under the same dynasty as Ge Hong, and that Ge in his own writings refers to him simply as a 'gentleman of the Tao' (*daoshi*), not as a *xian*. The observation that Ge does not list persons under his own dynasty Bumbacher derives from a preface to a much later hagiography written by Deng Guangjian (1232–1303).¹⁷ Since, however, this worthy begins his preface by quoting Bai Yuchan (1194–1227?) to the effect that the *Shenxian zhuan* contains one thousand biographies—a totally impossible figure in the light of all earlier, more reliable, evidence—he himself cannot have been at all familiar with the text, which must have been rare if not unavailable by his day; his evidence is therefore none too compelling, and certainly impossible for us to verify in the absence of a complete text of the work.

Whether Ge Hong may have called the same person a *daoshi* and a *xian* depends, of course, on the meanings that we believe should be assigned to those terms. Recent discussion of the labels by which Taoism and Taoists were denominated in early times must make us more than cautious on the first of these expressions, which only settles down to its accustomed meaning of 'Taoist priest' in the fifth century at the earliest, and seems to mean whatever an author chooses it to mean before that point. As for the *shen* (that is, 'holy', 'numinous', 'daemonic', or what you will) *xian*, the topic of Ge's biographies, words evidently fail us in English, for Campany (pp. 4–5), while rejecting 'immortal', as favoured by Penny and many others, in favour of 'transcendent', as championed by some American scholars, cautions that even this does not mean what we think it does, and indeed Penny shows in another study that transcending, or going beyond, normal human expectations is a description much better applied to a different category of wise men altogether.¹⁸ At least Buddhist translators had some notion of what these people were, since they use the term *xian* regularly (and not just in their early days, when an arhat was considered a close enough equivalent of a Taoist 'realized man' to be called a *zhenren*) to render Indian language words such as 'rishi' (as in 'Maharishi') or 'muni' (as in 'Sakyamuni'), signifying austere, powerful, but in Buddhist terms not by definition enlightened beings with a penchant for keeping to themselves. Though a Chinese term involving the troublesome

¹⁶ Compare the somewhat condensed translation of the relevant passage from this preface given in Ernst Wolff, *Chinese studies: a bibliographic manual* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981), as part of his useful discussion of *leishu*; the hypothetical interpretation is, however, my own responsibility.

¹⁷ Bumbacher, 'On the *Shenxian zhuan*', p. 744, evidently quoting p. 5b of Deng's preface to the Taoist Canon edition of the *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian*.

¹⁸ Note p. 24 of Benjamin Penny, 'Jiao Xian's three lives', in Benjamin Penny (ed.), *Religion and biography in China and Tibet* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002), pp. 13–29.

pinyin initial ‘x’ is unlikely to be readily anglicized, I have noticed one as yet unpublished translator concede defeat by attempting to introduce into English the Japanese version of *xianren*, namely ‘sennin’, which at least as a Cornish place name has overtones of Britain’s magical Celtic fringe about it.

Ultimately any decision as to the likelihood of Dong Weinian having been included in the *Shenxian zhuan* depends not on any unreflective and automatic textual criteria, but on a matter of judgement. How inconsistent is Ge Hong likely to have been, taking one view of an individual at one point in time, and another a little later? How much inconsistency should we expect in an author of the Six Dynasties, or the Tang? Not much, according not only to Bumbacher but also to other scholars, whose views I have accepted in the past, but have now come to doubt.¹⁹ A fair amount, in the view of Campany, who suggests that inappropriate expectations of consistency lie behind arguments attempting to show that the *Shenxian zhuan* cannot as it now stands derive from Ge Hong, since its conception of immortality appears to differ from that expressed in Ge’s *magnum opus* setting forth his own philosophy, the *Baopuzi* (pp. 120–21). Even so, one notes that Campany takes the methodologically significant further step of questioning the contrast between the two works without any apparent hesitation, and indeed blurs the distinction completely in his own description of the religious ideas of the *Shenxian zhuan* (pp. 18–97), which would seem to draw quite freely on the *Baopuzi* as well—though (to turn aside for a moment from textual matters) his observations, especially on such matters as the social setting of Ge’s hagiographies, are often of great interest.

Penny, methodologically more cautious, remains agnostic on the argument for the rewriting of the *Shenxian zhuan*, which certainly cannot be definitively proven, but is prepared to envisage a considerable difference of thought between the *Shenxian zhuan* and the later, more personal *Baopuzi*.²⁰ This would seem to be a possibility at the very least well worth bearing in mind: Ge Hong, in his autobiography distinguishes his biographical writings (another compilation, on hermits, seems to have been entirely lost; unless its fragments—in the shape perhaps of the story of Dong Weinian, for example—have contaminated the *Shenxian zhuan*) both from his more personal literary and philosophical writings and from his ‘transcriptions’, of which no examples survive but which doubtless consisted of excerpts put together in a more straightforward ‘scissors-and-paste’ fashion.²¹ But Campany notes another passage where he refers to his collection of materials on the *xian* in a fashion implying more of a ‘scissors-and-paste’ approach to this enterprise too, albeit one in which the recording of orally transmitted data also played a part (pp. 102–3). He is of course aware (p. 108) of the possible influence of editorial intervention or at least preference in the compilation of the *Shenxian zhuan*, but does simultaneously stress the ‘pre-formed’ nature of Ge’s materials, thus in principle agreeing with Penny, even if in practice he has not kept Ge’s personal outlook on how to become a *xian* distinct from the range of examples of how to go about achieving this feat that are presented in his reconstructed text.

To return, however, to the specific case at issue, one of the best principles

¹⁹ Two decades ago I incautiously accepted the suggestion of Kimura Eiichi that the Yang Liang commentary on Xunzi could not be a unitary work because of the inconsistency of its formulae for citing texts, something that may easily be explained by Yang’s reliance on different *leishu* using different formats, since (as I already recognized) given such aids, few commentators of the period are likely to have sought out their references *de novo*: cf. Barrett, ‘On the transmission of the *Shen Tzu* and of the *Yang-sheng yao-chi*’, p. 169, at n. 7.

²⁰ Penny, ‘Text and authorship’, pp. 172–3.

²¹ The text of the passage in question may be found in Wang Ming (ed.), *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, revised edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p. 377.

of textual criticism to have been enunciated in China, and one tacitly observed by all good scholars elsewhere, was that of ‘transmitting the doubt’, in other words of passing on problematic passages or even conflicting evidence in the form encountered, whatever emendations or solutions might occur to the editor, in the hope that others might one day be better placed to make sense of the problem. Since Campany duly observes this rule by appending to the end of his monograph a listing of ‘Items attributed to *Shenxian zhuan* excluded from this translation’, the absence of the story of Dong Weinian even from this section must be accounted an oversight. The utility of the section as a whole, however, is easily demonstrated, since a first reading uncovers a good example of an attribution found in a late source that might just possibly, in view of occasional cases of *recentiores non deteriores* in other literatures, have turned out somehow to have constituted a genuine fragment otherwise unattested, but that can be clearly demonstrated to belong to another text compiled some six centuries later.

This is the story of Xiao Jingzhi (p. 551), found in the twelfth-century *Ganzhu ji*; in a footnote to the discussion of this source on p. 382, Campany notes: ‘To my knowledge, this passage (GZJ 2/142) is the only one extant concerning Xiao Jingzhi anywhere in Daoist hagiography’. In fact Xiao is also dealt with on p. 10.5b of the Taoist Canon edition of the *Sandong Qunxian lu*, another twelfth-century source discussed on p. 383, where his story is brazenly attributed to the *Liexian zhuan*. This is even more out of the question; a much fuller account of Xiao contained in the *Taiping Guangji* of 978 (listed p. 381) mentions the Tang period examination degree of *jinshi*: the attribution there to the early tenth-century *Shenxian ganyu zhuan* of Du Guangting is therefore entirely likely, even if it is not in the current Taoist Canon edition of this work, which would appear to be by all accounts only about 50 per cent complete.²² It has not, however, been the purpose of the foregoing remarks to attempt to improve upon the considerable labours of Campany and his fellow scholars, but to show—doubtless at the expense of magnifying through extended discussion errors that cannot be taken as representative of their work—not simply the complexity but also the intellectually demanding nature of their studies. Without work such as this, our researches into the age-old traditions of China, and in this case our researches into a tradition that, all expectations to the contrary, seems to be very much alive, are built entirely upon shifting sand.²³

²² Li Fang (ed.), *Taiping Guangji* 24 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), pp. 162–3.

²³ Note Bill Porter, *Road to heaven: encounters with Chinese hermits* (London: Rider, 1993), for a first-hand account of travels in search of contemporary would-be emulators of the ancient *xian*.