
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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CONCERNING “RECORDS OF SEARCHING FOR SPIRITS” OF GAN BAO*

“Sou shen ji” (“搜神記”, literally translated as “Records of Searching for Spirits”, but more known as “In Search of the Supernatural”) is a famous work, in many respects an indicative, borderline, very popular and influential when it comes to the impact on the development of Chinese prose with a plot [1]. Modern philological works employ the term *soushenji* rather often (for instance, 搜神體, “*soushenji*-like”), used in regards to a number of collections, emerging later and inheriting the manner of “Sou shen ji” for its model. The author of this collection is a Jin high official, historian, man of letters and erudite person named Gan Bao (干寶, 280?—336) [2]. The offspring of a noble family that became poor, Gan Bao, having shown great thirst for knowledge from his youth, made a court career by climbing up the service ladder from the head of the district to the senior court historiographer carrying the title of Guannei-hou. The biographic data of Gan Bao that we have does not hold many details: it is known that he was distinguished in suppressing the revolt in 311—315 (for which he was granted a title) and later appointed to serve at the court. In 325, however, since his family was in need of funds, he solicited an office in the province and became the ruler of Shi An County (today it is known as the city of Guilin in Guangxi), and in 335 Gan Bao was appointed to join the imperial retinue [3]. It is also known that he was the author of a certain number of works (the majority of which has not survived) — “Jin Ji” (晉紀, “The Chronicle of Jin [Dynasty]”), a historical work in twenty *juans*, covering fifty three years of the Jin rule from the moment of its foundation in 265; a commentary to “Yi jing” in ten *juans* and 20 other works (indicated in the Jin and Tang histories); as well as “Sou shen ji” [4]. According to Li Jian-guo, Gan Bao began working on this collection pretty much at the same time as he did on “Jin Ji” and he laboured at it, with some breaks in between, practically until the day he died [5].

The official biography of Gan Bao in the Jin Dynasty history (*juan* 82) speaks of “Sou shen ji” in thirty *juans*; the bibliographical division of “Sui shu” (*juan* 33) it speaks of the same: “Records of Searching for Spirits”, thirty *juans*, authored by Gan Bao”; the same information is repeated in the old and new Tang Dynasty history (*juans* 46 and 59 correspondingly). When it, however, comes to the Song bibliographies — both official and private ones — this book is not included: apparently, from the 12th century on, the copies of “Sou shen ji” have been lost [6].

This situation remained the aforementioned status until about the 16th century, when a Ming scholar, poet, historian and literature theorist named Hu Ying-lin (胡應麟, 1551—1602), the owner of one of the richest private libraries of the time, restored the text of “Sou shen ji” [7]. Hu Ying-lin wrote:

Yao Shu-xiang was looking through the list of books, kept in my house, and having seen “Records of Searching for Spirits”, exclaimed with amazement: “Indeed, you have this book?!” To which I responded thus: “These are nothing more than extracts from ‘The Garden of the Law’, ‘His August Review’, ‘Literature’, ‘The Beginning of the Teaching’ and ‘Books Collection’. [Such books] are not mined for in precious baskets or stone chests dug out in the secret mountain corners! Generally speaking, all newly acquired rare books are of this kind [8].

It evidently follows from this quote that as much as he could, Hu Ying-lin completely restored the lost text of “Sou shen ji” from other sources he had access to (this work was supposedly finished sometime between 1589 and 1594). Certainly this was not the original collection contained in thirty *juans* — at the end of the day, Hu Ying-lin managed to reconstruct only twenty of them. But the main thing was done: the text of “Sou shen ji”

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