CHAPTER TWO

THE SONGS OF HE ZHU, 1080–98

‘Song’ (gexing 歌行) is He Zhu’s term for heptametrical poems unrestrained by the rules of Regulated Verse. It was his least favorite genre, if numbers can be used to gauge such things: his thirty-eight surviving Songs amount to only seven percent of his total oeuvre. Yet it was also the genre in which he mourned his daughter, poked fun at friends, celebrated precious gifts given and received, and performed some odd experiments. Some of his most memorable works are Songs. As is usual with the form, he varies the line length to create exclamatory and other effects. (It is in only about a quarter of his Songs that the line length is uniformly heptasyllabic.) As is also usual with the form, he often (in thirty-one of the thirty-eight poems) breaks Songs into sections by changing the rhyme—even if there are only eight lines in the poem.

In several ways, this genre requires more of a poet simply because there are more options, meaning more choices, from large to small. How long will the poem be? How many sections will there be, and how long or short does each need to be? How prosy should it be, or how musical? Because of the longer line and unpredictable line length, one is apt to use rhyme at the end of more lines in order to keep the structure from dissolving, and so there is a great deal of pressure to come up with rhymes. True, one can change rhymes freely, but changes driven solely by limitations in one’s creativity and bearing no relation to the content of the poem would be fatal. Fanghui had a great deal of fun with the Song, I sense, but this was not a form to be used lightly.

Perhaps for that reason, we don’t get a Song from He Zhu until 1080, and it not until 1084 that he gives us a second one. An additional oddity is that while the first ten Songs are identified as “songs” in their titles,¹ after 1088 only a single heptametrical Ancient Verse (Poem 036, dated 1097) is called a “song.” We may wonder why the subgroup of poems with ‘song’ in the title dominates those first few years to the exclusion of all other heptametrical Ancient Verse and then nearly disappears. There seem to be no tendencies in meter, rhyme, or mixed line length that consistently distinguish those ‘songs’ from the other heptametrical Ancient Verses in He Zhu’s collection. After all, in his preface to his collection Fanghui expansively lumps together as ‘Songs’ all poems “that have mixed line-length [or] that change rhymes, regardless of whether [the meters of individual lines are]

¹ Five of the titles in 1080 and 1084 use the term ge; the remaining five in 1084, 1085, and 1088 use other terms.
ancient' or 'regulated'.” However, in He Zhu’s collection a ‘song’ will tell us in its title that it is on a set topic—a place or an object—or is a performance of an old song type. If we understand a ‘song’ as a work on a topic rather than as the explicit outgrowth of an experience, it comes as no surprise that Poems 002 through 007 were written in Xuzhou in 1084 and 1085 as part of group exercises, with the topics distributed among the participants. This does not tell us why no earlier Songs were written on our poet’s own initiative as responses to events rather than to topics, but it does suggest that it was the prodding of others that eased He Zhu into this genre. The non-‘song’ heptametrical Ancient Verses start even later, in 1089; these poems indicate in their titles a use, an occasion, or a context: “presented to so-and-so,” “sent to so-and-so,” “seeing off so-and-so,” and so forth. This kind of poem accounts for the vast majority of He Zhu’s heptasyllabic Ancient Verse.

1080–85: HANDAN AND XUZHOU

1080: AN ANCIENT SITE IN HANDAN

Song of the Clustered Estrade 叢臺歌 is on the topic of an edifice originally constructed in the fourth century B.C. The location is Handan, at that time a populous and prosperous city on the western edge of the North China plain. Invasions and population flight seven centuries before Fanghui’s time had spelled the end of the city’s glory, but Handan and the Clustered Estrade were still celebrated in the works of such poets as Li Bo, Du Fu, and Bo Juyi. Apparently taking its name from the fact that it had been built as a complex or “cluster” of terraces and pavilions, the Estrade was but a ruin in the northeast corner of the city wall when Fanghui climbed it with his friend Du Yan in the seventh month of Yuanfeng 4 (1080).3

001 累土三百尺
   流火二千年
   人生物數不相待
   擎頹故址秋風前
   Piled-up earth for three hundred feet; declining Fire[-Star] for two thousand years. In human life, the Numbers of the objective [world] do not wait for us; shattered and ruined, an old relic faces the winds of autumn. A

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2 1.12497; 1.1a.
3 Fanghui ascribes the poem to 1081, but Zhong Zhenzhen, “Du ‘He Fanghui nianpu’ zhaji,” 437–38, points out several reasons why this is an unlikely date. He proposes the seventh month of 1080 as much more plausible. Two months later, Fanghui will draw on his memory of the outing with Du Yan as he writes Replying to Du Zhongguan’s Climbing the Clustered Estrade, Which He Sent to Me, (058), from which we quoted in the previous chapter.