Emperor Chu Yu-t'ang, who had reigned during the Hung-chih era (1487-1505) and is known by his posthumous title Hsiao-tsung (‘Filial Ancestor’), died in June of 1505 at the age of only thirty-five, to be succeeded by his thirteen year old son Chu Hou-chao. It is not easy to find a Ming emperor whom one can characterise as ‘good’, but Hsiao-tsung had been among the best. He had made a serious attempt to be a ruler in the Confucian style, had generally avoided harsh treatment of his court officials, had kept his personal expenditures within reason, and had restrained the influence of eunuchs.  

His death would affect not only Ho Ching-ming, but all of his fellow officials and, indeed, the course of Chinese history. Had he lived to a more normal span, China might have been spared some of the unfortunate consequences of the reigns of his irresponsible son, known posthumously as Wu-tsung and Shih-tsung, the head-strong nephew who succeeded Wu-tsung in 1521. As it was, the high hopes and expectations for the future felt in the circle of young officials to which Ho Ching-ming belonged were in for a series of cruel disappointments.

Indeed, the unhappy days of Wu-tsung’s reign had been foreshadowed even in the last months of his predecessor. One of Hsiao-tsung’s few failings was the latitude that he allowed the relatives of Empress Chang. In the spring of 1505, Li Meng-yang memorialised against a number of current abuses, some of which...
clearly implicated the Changs. He was arrested briefly for his presumption, and was in danger of serious punishment, but a senior official spoke in his favour to the Emperor himself, and in the end Li was only fined. On the accession of Wu-tsung he was even promoted, as was Pien Kung.

The death of Hsiao-tsung brought a new responsibility for Ho Ching-ming. He was ordered to go as formal bearer of the news of the succession to the province of Yunnan, in the far southwest. Such a mission was something of a ‘plum’, since it meant that Ho would be travelling with a pass allowing him to use the post system for transportation and to lodge in official quarters. Potentially the trip might also have allowed him to improve on his finances considerably by accepting expensive gifts from his hosts or from others wanting a word said for them in the capital. Li Meng-yang saw him off with a long poem, in which he described in somewhat hyperbolic terms the grief and consternation felt by the civil officials on the death of Hsiao-tsung.

All within the seas wail as though for a loving mother; The hundred officials run wildly about; the Heavens turn black . . .

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2 MTC records his arrest in the third month (40.1529). See the set of seventeen poems that Li wrote during his imprisonment, “Telling of my Indignation: Seventeen Poems written in the Fourth Month of the Yi-ch’ou Year of Hung-chih [1505]” 一十七首弘治乙丑四月作, K’ung-t’ung Hsien-sheng Chi (1530; repr. Taipei: Wei-wen, 1976) 10.1b-4b (200-206). The second of Ho’s “Replying to Hsien-chi [Li Meng-yang]” poems (see above, chapter two) probably refers to Li’s release, HTFC 9.9b (114; 351:015). Ho begins it with the declaration, “Our prince is a Yao or Shun of ancient times!” 吾君古堯舜.

3 The despatch of officials to the most distant provinces, including Yunnan, is recorded in the Hsiao-tsung Shih-lu under a date corresponding to June 24, 1505 (Taipei: Chung-yang Yen-chiu Yüan, 1964) 224.5a (4245). The officials are not named. For a study of Ho’s mission and its route, see Yao Hsüeh-hsien 姚學賢 and Ts’ao-mu 草木, “Ho Ching-ming Ch’u-shih Yunnan Tsa-k’ao” 何景明出使雲南雜考 (Miscellaneous Studies of Ho Ching-ming’s Mission to Yunnan), Honan Shih-fan Ta-hsüeh Hsüeh-pao 20.4 (1993): 48-51. They are chiefly concerned with correcting errors in Fu K’ai-p’ei. 新編武宗unte.

4 “Presented to Drafter Ho, who is Conveying the Proclamation to Various Districts in the South” 贈何舍人齎詔南紀諸鎮, K’ung-t’ung Hsien-sheng Chi 18.2a (387). Ho’s compositions on the occasion were the equally hyperbolic “Announcing the Calamity” 告咎文, HTFC 3.3b; (29; 錦602), and a poem of farewell for Wang T’ing-hsiang whose allusions to the Han dynasty writers Chia Yi 賈誼 (“able at critical Memorials” 賈生能抗疏) and Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju 司馬相如 (“excellent at