CHAPTER TEN
A CAREER IN GOVERNMENT

LOSSES AND GAINS

A topic of rather frequent incidental reference in works going back as far as the complaints of summer heat had been the current troubles on the frontiers. 1 Shortly after the farewell to Ho Shih, Ho Ching-ming actually devoted a poem to the subject of one of the nomad leaders, whose name in Chinese was Hua-tang 花當. 2 Ho’s tone is the one usual in Chinese comment on unruly barbarians: shock and disappointment that someone so fortunate as to be living on the fringes, at least, of civilization, and who had been so well-behaved (for a barbarian) in the past, should so suddenly have gone bad.

At about the same time, Ho received a letter from Wang T’ing-hsiang. The letter is not extant, nor does Ho tell us what it said, but he did write a poem recording his feelings on receiving it:

得王子衡贛榆書
萬里一書劄、逾年傳帝都。竄身天地遠、垂淚海雲孤。柳送燕臺 駿、花留漢殿鳧。赤霄終道路、白髪且江湖。

On Receiving a Letter from Wang Tzu-heng [T’ing-hsiang] in Kan-yü3

Come ten thousand leagues, a single letter,
After a year, brought to the Imperial capital.

1 See “Song of Suffering from the Heat” 苦熱行 (tenth of ten poems), HTFC 29.10a (521; 374:040); “Watching an Eclipse in the Sixth Month” 六月望月食, HTFC 22.2a (382; 352:285, see above, chapter nine); “Visiting Ho of the Court of the Imperial Stud During Rain” 雨過何太僕, HTFC 27.1a (472; 372:072); “Liu Ju-chung [Yün] Visits During Rain: We Play Chess, Read Poetry, and Talk About the Frontier Situation” 雨中劉汝忠過對棋觀詩談邊事作, HTFC 21.6b (366; 352:290).
2 “Hua-tang” 花當, HTFC 21.15a (378; 352:292). For Hua-tang, who later came to an understanding with the Ming, see TK 174.
You live in retirement, distant as heaven and earth;
Tears are brimming, alone by ocean clouds.
Sent off by willows, a steed from the Terrace of Yen;
Kept on by blossoms, a duck from the Palace of Han.
Scarlet clouds at the end of a travelled road,
White haired now, but still on the rivers and lakes . . .

The ‘single letter’, usually written with the character 札, rather than 劊, is a common poetic tag that goes back to the seventeenth of the “Nineteen Old Poems.” “A visitor came from far away, / Bringing me a single letter” 客從遠方來、遺我一書札.4

No source is evident for the steed and duck of Ho’s third couplet, probably referring to Wang and Ho respectively. The Terrace of Yen is likely to be a reference to the ‘Golden Terrace’ 黃金臺 built on the orders of the King of Yen with the purpose of attracting worthy advisors.5

One seeks in vain in poems from the early autumn of 1515 for a reference to the death of Ho’s friend Wang Hsi-meng, the prosecutor of Liu Chin, which occurred on September 1.6 Ts’ui Hsien tells us that he and Ho had been tending Wang daily before he died, but his condition was evidently not conducive to poetry. As it is, one waits until the middle of the eighth lunar month for a poem on visiting Wang’s former home, and this poem only comes after a series of poems celebrating jolly gatherings on each of the evenings leading up to and down from the Moon Festival itself: at Hsü Tsin’s on the thirteenth (September 20), Li Lien’s on the fourteenth, Liu Wen-huan’s on the fifteenth, and a Drafter named Yin Chi-tsu’s 尹袐祖 on the sixteenth, with Liu Yün.7 This farewell poem, for example, was

4 WH 39.7b (400); YTHY 1.3a (17); Lu Ch’ìn-li, p.333; cf. the translation in Birrell, p.31.
6 The date is given in the epitaph by Ts’ui Hsien, Ts’ui Shih Huan Tz’u (1554; repr. TM 4:56, Tainan, Chuang-yen Wen-hua, 1997) 12.32a (439), Huan Tz’u (SKCS) 6.16a (506).