Sometime late in 1515 or early in 1516, about the time of his letter to Li Meng-yang on poetics, Ho wrote a farewell poem for a man named Ku Ying-hsiang (顧應祥 1483-1565), who was going south to Kwangtung as an Assistant Surveillance Commissioner. This is the only recorded contact between the two men. It may be that Ho was invited to Ku’s farewell party by some mutual friend and simply joined in the presentation of poems. Ku is now known chiefly for his mathematical writings, but he was in interesting figure in several respects. Although he had studied with Wang Yang-ming, his biographer tells us that he had no time for abstract chatter, to which he greatly preferred concrete action. The better part of his career was spent in provincial posts, often ones that required him to deal with military emergencies. In fact, his next appointment after Kwangtung was to Kiangsi, to help deal with the aftermath of the rebellion of Prince Ning.

Ku spent several years in Kwangtung. Assistant Commissioners frequently had specific responsibilities, and his was the supervision of maritime trade. Thus it happened that in 1517 he was the official responsible for dealing with some of the very first Europeans to arrive on the Chinese coast, a Portuguese party led by Fernão Peres de Andrade and with Tomé Pires as ambassador. Ku’s brief account of these visitors, the earliest such record extant, is chiefly concerned with the cannons with which the Portuguese sailors had cheerfully fired off a salute in Canton harbour, an action that required a flurry of
‘exchanges of explanations’ to resolve.3 Ku begins:

Fo-lang-chi 佛郎機 is the name of a state, not of the cannon. In the ting-ch’ou 丁丑 year of Cheng-te (1517), I was an Assistant Surveillance Commissioner for Kwangtung in charge of maritime affairs. Two large sea-going ships suddenly appeared and proceeded directly to the Huai-yüan 懷遠 post station of Canton. They claimed to be presenting tribute from the country of Fo-lang-chi. The man in charge of their ships is named Chia-pi-tan 加必丹 (Capitan), and his men all have high noses and deep-set eyes. They wrap their heads in white cloth like the costume of Moslems.4

Ku goes on to give a brief account of how the ambassador and his party, having been properly instructed in diplomatic decorum, were sent to the capital. Their case could not be immediately disposed of because the Emperor, who had expressed interest in meeting them, was away on his southern expedition. Wu-tsung’s patronage of ‘foreign monks’, it will be recalled, had been among the abuses criticised by Ho Ching-ming and other officials in their memorials at the time of the palace fire. On the accession of Shih-tsung in 1521, the survivors among the Portuguese party were sent back to Canton and expelled from the country as part of the general posthumous clean-up of Wu-tsung’s personal collection of riffraff.

This event would have appeared to Ku Ying-hsiang and his contemporaries as a curious but ephemeral stir. As usual, we know better. Peres de Andrade’s party was only the beginning of a slow but inexorable building of pressure on China from a Europe driven by commercial, religious, and imperial ambitions. It would be many decades before Westerners gained a foothold in China, and centuries before they began to affect Chinese life decisively, but a historical process had now been set in motion that Ho Ching-ming and his friends would have found not only appalling, but literally unthinkable.

---

3 Ku’s short essay on the Portuguese cannon was included in the Ch’ou-hai T’u-pien 筹海圖編 (Compilation of Charts for Maritime Defense) compiled in the early 1560s by Cheng Jo-tseng 陳若曾 (ca. 1505-80), not by Hu Tsung-hsien 胡宗憲 (1511-65), as the Ssu-k’u editors believed, see DMB, p.207; and in the Wu-pei Chih 武備志 (Treatise on Military Preparedness), preface dated 1621, compiled by Mao Yuan-yi 毛元儀 (1594-ca.1641), grandson of Mao K’un 毛坤 (1512-1601), who had written a preface to the Ch’ou-hai T’u-pien.

4 Ch’ou-hai T’u-pien (SKCS) 13.37b (422); Wu-pei Chih (T’ien-ch’i edition; repr. Ssu-k’u Chin-hui Shu Ts’ung-k’an 3:23-26 (Peking: Peking Ch’u-pan-she, 1998) 122.7b (644).