APPENDIX ONE

EARLY BIOGRAPHIES OF HO CHING-MING

The most important source for this book has been the corpus of Ho Ching-ming’s works, together with those of his contemporaries. All the same, frequent use has been made of biographical narratives as well, for they often contain accounts of events that go unnoticed in literary works. Broadly speaking, these biographies fall into three classes. First, there are independent accounts composed from scratch, as it were. Although they draw on a variety of sources, some of them identifiable but many now inaccessible, including personal memories, things heard from other people, and written documents no longer extant, they clearly represent fresh attempts to present Ho’s life and its significance. Then, there are numerous accounts found in biographical compendia of various sorts that typically draw on one earlier account, or in some cases two or three. These the compilers cut, pad, combine, and rephrase according to their own priorities. Works that fall into this class generally do so quite obviously, deriving both their arrangement of materials and most of their phraseology from a single pre-existing source. Finally, there are sources that eschew any attempt at a full account, offering instead one or more short biographical or critical essays as part of works consisting of similar materials about a wide range of people.

Although the last class of material has been drawn upon in this book, no attempt is made to give a full account of it here. The other types are inventoried and discussed one by one, but our primary concern is to give an account of the independent biographies, from the first two, prepared immediately after Ho died, down to the one that has served as summative for traditional scholarship, that included in the Ming Shih.

Such a review is worth undertaking for several reasons. First, it allows us to consider in one place various characteristics of particular biographers, such as Li K’ai-hsien’s penchant for dramatic presentation or the clouded relationship with Li Meng-yang that emerges from examination of Meng Yang’s version of Ho’s life. More
broadly, in the case of the larger compendia that include biographies of many Ming figures, it may suggest some priorities and cautions to those at work on Ming personalities and facing a long list of potential sources. Second, a chronological presentation of the biographies shows how Ho’s historical image shifted over time and according to the interests of later generations of biographers. This is not to suggest sinister or programatically manipulative motives on the part of the biographers so much as to call attention to the varying sorts of significance they attached to Ho’s life and works and hence to allow us to draw on their narratives while keeping their interests in mind. A particular secondary goal is to show in some detail how the biography found in the *Ming Shih* was assembled and to suggest why certain sources were relied upon and certain elements either included or omitted.

In general, these accounts contain two different sorts of material, which we might variously characterise as narrative and interpretive, chronological and impressionistic, or just as matters of fact and significance. That is, they all provide a certain amount of potentially falsifiable information such as dates, offices held, actions taken, and the like. In addition, they all attempt to record or assign significance to their information, whether explicitly in editorial comments or the recording of views held by other people, including Ho himself, or implicitly by the way in which information is included, omitted, or juxtaposed.

Although all the biographies share common characteristics conditioned both by the traditions of Chinese biographical writing and by broader cultural presuppositions, they vary in a number of respects. Perhaps the most obvious is their differing treatments of Ho’s relationship with Li Meng-yang. Another, less contentious, variation involves the balance between Ho’s public career and ‘moral’ actions, on the one hand, and his literary interests and practice, on the other. Yet another is a matter of organisation. Speaking broadly again, the earlier biographies tend to take chronology as their primary compositional principle, making interpretive comments along the way and reserving a section at the end for a synthetic account of Ho’s character and personality. Later writers are more likely to take their understanding of Ho’s historical, literary, and ethical significance as their basis and to subordinate chronology to this, where they do not abandon it altogether.