Foreword

Selected Readings in Classical Chinese Poetry and Prose is the literary supplement to Classical Chinese -- A Basic Reader. It applies the same rigorous standard set forth in the Basic Reader and reinforces its linguistic lessons with carefully chosen exemplary works in literature to expand the scope of linguistic contact to a new realm. Literature is a linguistic art. It uses language as the medium to create pieces of writing that have lasting value because of their excellence of form, great emotional effects, remarkable imagination, etc. Chinese writers in ancient times were all influenced by the Confucian humanism and the Taoist naturalism. As a result, traditional Chinese literature demonstrated the linguistic characteristics of the Chinese language in its form, and to various degrees, either covertly or overtly, embodied the essentials of the Confucian and the Taoist teachings.

1. The Contents:

This volume comprises three sections: Poetry, Lyrics, and Prose. Section one contains thirty-two poems chosen from the Book of Odes, Han dynasty anonymous poems, Wei and Jin pentasyllabic poems, six dynasties folk songs and poems by known authors, and down to Tang dynasty ancient poems and regulated verses in pentasyllabic and heptasyllabic meters, with the last poem drawn from the Song dynasty. Section two contains nine lyrics chosen from Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song times, plus the last selection which is a Yuan dynasty song-poem. Section three contains 15 short pieces of prose from Warring States period down to the Qing dynasty, including one from the Chu Ci at the beginning, and a parallel prose at the end. These selections represent a great variety of themes and styles, showing the richness and colorfulness of Chinese literary works. They are arranged in chronological order with an exception of the parallel prose, placing Chinese literature in a historical perspective to reveal its continuity and change over a long course of development. In addition, two brief introductions, to regulated verse and to parallel prose, are provided so as to enable users of this book to get a better sense of the linguistic and artistic characteristics of these two highly sophisticated literary forms.

2. The Formats:

As poetry and lyrics are intimately related to music, and prose writings also needs to be chanted or read aloud, so each selection is here romanized in Hanyu Pinyin, with special attention called upon to reduplicative, alliterative, and rhyming compounds as these are
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frequently used devices for versification. The end rhymes of poems and lyrics are listed at the end of each selection, and their reconstructed sound values (of C. 600-1000 A.D.) are also given, so that users can get a feeling of the auditory effects they created. Regulated verses, lyrics, and song-poems are highly developed forms of Chinese literature. In order to highlight their respective structural characteristics we have provided specific rules for four regulated verses, two lyrics and one song-poem to show the cadence and tonal design in each form.

A brief biographical sketch is given to each of the known author as a study aid. The glosses are explained in both modern Chinese and in English, as brief and to the point as possible. The grammatical categories and parts of speech of the glosses are determined by their functions in their immediate contexts. When a gloss has two readings, both readings are given. Noteworthy grammatical points and sentence patterns are explained or analyzed immediately under the glosses where they appear. Some key words in the explanation of glosses are further explained, with a ♦ sign preceding them. Set phrases derived from the text are marked with a * sign. Additional vocabulary that can help clarify or elucidate the meaning of the text are given with a © sign preceding them.

3. Understanding and Appreciation of Literature:

As a linguistic art, literature is very difficult to understand fully. One needs to go beyond the basic linguistic meaning—lexical, syntactic, and onerall structural—to grasp its descriptive, lyrical, narrative, or expository mode of expression; to perceive its visual, auditory and psychological appeal; to apprehend its theme and philosophical implication. Whether a work of literature is serene, lively, dashing, grand, cheerful, sorrowful, contemplative, or soul-stirring, it can be understood and appreciated through carefully analyzing its special linguistic effects—diction, imagery, alliteration, assonance, etc., and its literary techniques—allegory, contrast, allusion, personification, inversion, hyperbole, antithesis, etc. For each of the fifty-seven selections we have provided an introductory note to point out what we regard as some remarkable features of the work, in the hope that students can explore the work further along these lines. If students, after such exploration, can come up with their own understanding and critical assessments, it will be a very good substitute for routine linguistic exercises.
4. The Goals:

Like philosophy and history, literature is a major component of culture. Poetry and prose hold the leading position in Chinese literature. They touch upon the exploration of men and universe, the glorification of Nature, the adherence to life’s ideals, the pursuit of love and beauty, and the lament for anitya or the impermanence of life and the eventual transcendence of that sorrow. They amply reveal the depth and breadth of Chinese culture.

Through reading these selections students will further improve their knowledge in classical Chinese: such as the monosyllabic, tonal nature of Chinese morphemes and the grammatical versatility of Chinese words; will strengthen their command of major grammatical rules; at the same time, through carefully analyzing the forms and contents of these texts, will better comprehend and appreciate the artistic conceptions created in these literary works, and gain a better and deeper understanding of the thoughts, ideals, and aspirations of their authors, wherein lies the inner secret of Chinese culture. If in this process students develop a keen interest in the study of Chinese literature, we would regard that as an added gain.

The Authors