Foreword

1. Source of the texts:

A Selections from Classical Chinese Historical Texts is one of the supplementary readings to Classical Chinese -- A Basic Reader. The texts are chosen from the “Basic Annals” and the “Biographies” sections of the first four histories of China’s Twenty-four official histories. Six selections are taken from Shī Jì, and two selections each from Hàn Shū, Hòu Hán Shū, and Sān Guó Zhì, there are twelve selections in all.

B The Shī Jì by Sīmà Qiān (145-87? B.C.) recorded the political, social, economical, and cultural developments in three thousand years, from the Yellow Emperor’s time down to the early years of the reign of Emperor Wū of Hàn; it was the first and the only ‘universal history’ of China. Shī Jì is comprised of twelve ‘Basic Annals’, ten ‘Tables’, eight ‘Treatises’, thirty ‘Hereditary Houses’, and seventy ‘Biographies’; one hundred and thirty chapters in all. “Basic Annals” chronicle the deeds of the rulers; ‘Tables’ show the genealogies; ‘Treatises’ describe institutions; ‘Hereditary Houses’ trace feudal lords and nobilities, while ‘Biographies’ laud distinguished individuals. The entire book is based on a grand scale and has a well-knit structure. The Hàn Shū by Bān Gū (33-92 A.D.) inherits the format of Shī Jì, but confines its time span to one single dynasty, constituting the first ‘dynastic history’ of China. The ‘biographical’ style began with Sīmā Qiān and the ‘dynastic’ scope started with Bān Gū. Later histories all follow and continue the ‘Biographical’ and ‘Dynastic’ tradition, so Shī Jì and Hàn Shū are indisputably pioneering works that represent paradigms of Chinese historiography. The Hòu Hán Shū by Fān Yè (398-446 A.D.) is precise and to the point, while the Sān Guó Zhì by Chén Shòu (223-297 A.D.) is succinct and elegant. Both are highly regarded as excellent works; they are ranked next to Shī Jì and Hàn Shū to form the “Four Histories.”

C A stylistic feature of the ‘Annals and Biographies’ is to reflect and unfold in a realistic manner significant historical movements in the course of human activities. They recount extraordinary deeds of certain historical figures through vivid and prominent portraits, and by presenting historical events in lifelike manner. The historians sometimes employ rhetorical and literary skills to
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embellish their accounts, making them more fascinating and appealing; this is acceptable so long as historical facts are not distorted.

D Simǎ Qiān writes with a grand design and a careful structure. He excels at selecting precise words to describe objective things and events. The characters in his writing are true to life, and the events leap up in front of the reader. His language is easy and smooth, without any affectation. He writes with overwhelming momentum and great artistic appeal. Bān Gǔ, on the other hand, writes economically by using exact words within a rigorous structure, and his depiction of characters is minute and penetrating. Chén Shòu and Fàn Yè are both characterized as laconic in their writing styles. Though these historians write in different styles, their works are all specimens of excellent narrative prose and exemplary literary compositions. Scholars and writers throughout Chinese history have carefully studied their works to assimilate their literary styles; the best known examples are Hán Yù (768-824 A.D.) and Liǔ Zōngyuán (773-819 A.D.) of the Tàng dynasty, Oùyáng Xiū (1007-1072 A.D.) and Sū Shī (1037-1101 A.D.) of the Sòng dynasty, Guī Yōuguāng (1506-1571 A.D.) of the Míng dynasty, and Fāng Bāo (1668-1749 A.D.) of the Qīng dynasty. Modern Chinese scholars in the Humanities also strengthen their language skills through careful study of historical books. For those who have basic training in classical Chinese, close reading of these selections to analyze the structure and assimilate the writing skills will certainly help in understanding the grammatical rules more thoroughly and thus improve their overall ability in reading traditional Chinese texts.

2 Criteria for selection and arrangement of the texts:

A All texts are taken from the punctuated editions of the Four Histories, published by Zhōng Huá Book Company in the 1960s.

B These texts were selected because they involve major historical events and important historical figures; not only are they fascinating, but also they represent certain salient values or distinctive cultural features of the Chinese tradition.

C The original texts are often too long, so we have only excerpted what we considered to be their best and most salient parts. When necessary, as in the case of “Hóngmén Yàn,” a brief background of the story is provided.

D These texts are arranged in chronological order. Their lengths and levels of difficulty vary. Users need not read them in sequence as each selection is
independent and self-contained.

E After each text, there is a pinyin version to help students read the text aloud.

F The exercises provided at the end of each selection mainly consist of two parts:
1) Discussion questions about the contents or topics intended to reinforce the
   student’s understanding of the text and appreciation of the work as he or she
   expresses personal thoughts and comments.
2) Punctuating and translating passages taken from texts closely related to the
   ones just studied so that by using similar texts, the students can apply newly
   learned skills and gain fresh insights. The goal is to increase student confidence
   and encourage interest in further independent reading.

3 Annotations:
A Give the pronunciation
1) Each gloss is given a Mandarin pronunciation based on The Grand Dictionary
   of Chinese.
2) For words that have both an ancient and a modern pronunciation, such as
   (jū and chē), words that have both a literary and a colloquial pronunciation,
   such as 血 (xuè and xiě), or words that have two variant pronunciations, such as
   皮 (duó or duò), both pronunciations are given side by side.
3) The pronunciation of a certain word with multiple readings and meanings is
determined by its function and meaning in the text. For example, when the word
 王 is used as a noun, it reads wáng, meaning ‘a ruler,’ but when used as a verb,
 it reads wàng, meaning ‘to be a ruler.’
4) When a word is ‘read as’ or ‘similar to’ a second word, a reading is given for
   the second word. For example, 见 is read as 看 xiàn; 看 is similar to 看 cù.
B Determine grammatical function/part of speech
The grammatical category of each word is determined by its function and
meaning in the immediate context. Thus, when the word 决 means ‘to bid
farewell’, it is marked as a ‘verb,’ and when it means ‘certainly,’ it is marked as
an ‘adverb.’
C Explicate the meaning
1) The meaning of each word is determined by the context in which it appears.
2) When a word repeatedly appears in a text with different usages and meanings,
such as the word 载 in “Jiàng Xuǎng Hé”, which can in different contexts mean
'to shoulder,' 'to betray,' or 'to violate,' the word will be glossed at each occurrence to avoid possible confusion.

3) Personal names, place names, official titles, important historical events, are duly but briefly annotated.

4) When certain important words such as 'posthumous title,' 'reign title,' etc. appear in a long explanatory text of a gloss, they are separately noted at a lower level.

5) Important set phrases and allusions, such as ‘fù jīng qǐng zuì,’ and ‘sān gù máo lú’ are pointed out as they appear and briefly explained.

6) Certain sentence structures involving important grammatical points, such as ‘zì xià’ in a putative sense, ‘fù Qín qū’ in a causative sense, ‘ān zài’ as the inversion of pronoun in an interrogative construction, ‘wèi zhī qī’ as a negative inversion, ‘bǐn kè zhī qí shì zhě’ as a modifier postposition, etc, are all pointed out and explained.

7) Not only are important grammatical particles given equivalents in modern Chinese and in English, their grammatical significance are also explained, for example, 者 indicates a pause, or 且...哉 implies a rhetorical sense, etc.

The annotations of these texts are based upon traditional scholarship and explications of modern scholars. We have further expanded them, and rendered them into simple spoken Chinese and English. We strived to make them simple and precise, but there may still be many mistakes. We sincerely hope that the users of this book will kindly offer us their comments and suggestions.

The Authors