Translator’s Introduction

Zhu Weizheng's reflections on his re-reading of the history of modern China were composed in quiet moments, often at night. Many of them were in response to a request that he contribute articles to a newspaper website. In the manner of the biji, ('jottings' or ‘notebooks’) of earlier generations, they include anecdotes, quotations from classical literary and historical texts and ruminations on diverse historical and contemporary topics. They provide a fascinating insight into the thinking of a leading Chinese historian who practiced his craft on the Chinese mainland in the difficult political climate of the twentieth century. Many of his brief essays offer a restrained commentary on contemporary Chinese politics in parallel with the main focus on the Qing dynasty. Zhu's concept of modern history is rather broader than that usually accepted in the People's Republic of China: 'modern history' officially begins with the Opium War of 1839–1842 and ends with the May Fourth Movement of 1919, after which the Chinese Communist Party appears on the scene and history becomes 'contemporary'. Zhu's ruminations on history often take us much further back that this, to the early reigns of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) with many excursions into even earlier literary and historical traditions.

Zhu refers constantly to the sources for his historical thoughts, some of them familiar to students of Chinese history but many of them obscure or forgotten and the citations are plentiful. It is not a text with a clear central theme. It is, as his title indicates, a collection of essays—some more formal than others—based on re-reading material with which he is deeply familiar and in which he considers and reconsiders his thoughts and his concerns about history, historiography and China.

It is a fascinating study but a challenge to the reader and the translator. He assumes that his Chinese readers will have great familiarity with not only the history but the literary language of the period from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the lifespan of the Qing dynasty which ruled China from 1644 to 1911—and indeed much earlier, as there are many references to the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) and to even earlier writings in the Confucian tradition. Only a minority of his readers in the People's Republic will have this facility and, unsurprisingly this requires rather more explanation for an English-speaking readership, and even for a translator.

I have attempted to stay as close to the content of Zhu Weizheng's text as possible, correcting only obvious minor typographical errors. His factual statements and interpretations have been left unchanged although I have occasionally added some editorial notes in square brackets where I felt that the
English-speaking reader needed a little more information. It has not been possible to reflect the style of the original exactly. Zhu's prose style varies from the highly formal with the use of many *chengyu* set phrases, to the colloquial and casual. The vocabulary that he uses often reflects that period of the historical material on which he is commenting and his choice of words is at times unusual or even obscure. In this collection there is often considerable overlap and some essays have been edited to avoid unnecessary repetition.

It would not have been possible to complete this translation without the assistance of many reference works on Chinese history and language, in addition to the standard dictionaries and encyclopaedias. I acknowledge my indebtedness to these and have included the most important in the brief bibliography below.

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