

English Encyclopedia a definitive China reference

By Zhang Dongya

After three years of work by 300 Chinese and foreign contributors, Berkshire Publishing Group has found success: a five-volume, 2,800-page text with 800 articles covering the history, politics and culture of China.

Since May, it has been adopted by many prestigious universities in the country, such as Peking University, and has been reviewed positively by major university libraries and public libraries in the US. It has also become a reference for corporations and government agencies such as the CIA. Berkshire is pitching it as the West's best source of general and authoritative knowledge about China.

"Westerners can tell you what famous events happened in 1492, but they have no idea what was happening in China. Our overall goal is to place China within global history – when a student thinks about a particular point in time, we want them to think about what was happening in China," Karen Christensen, 52, chief publisher of Berkshire, said.



Part of the production team behind *Encyclopedia of China* (from the left): Brad Walrod, Karen Christensen, Marty Lubin, Tom Christensen.

Choosing China

Founded in 1998, Berkshire is a small 10-staff publishing house located in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. It focuses on global subjects and has published a highly acclaimed series of encyclopedias. The *Encyclopedia of China* grew out of its landmark six-volume *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*, published in 2002 with Scribners.

In the late 1990s, Christensen turned her attention to Asia. After one trip to China in 2001, she was fascinated by the country.

"I could feel the energy and determination of the whole population. I relished the conviviality and humor, and the sense of possibility I felt in the air along with an intense focus on what lay ahead," Christensen wrote in the Introduction to the *Encyclopedia of China*. "It was all irresistible."

She became convinced that every American needed to know more about China's history, culture, language, jokes, politics and economics. She thought they needed to understand Chinese perspectives in every area – in business, education, politics, innovation and personal life – to be ready for the 21st century.

The *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*, covering nearly all aspects of 20th-century Asia, gave the team a jump start on its China project. Some authors from the Asia project continued their efforts in new China volumes, including the previous China editor Cheng Lisun of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

"We were considering a similar book on India or Latin America, but for now we think China gives us more than enough to focus on," Christensen said. "Right now, Western students know more about the solar system than they do about China. We want to change this."

New and fascinating

The voluminous book collects 800 articles arranged alphabetically, with coverage sorted into categories and sub-categories. They are working with Chinese scholars to make the *Encyclopedia of China* more interesting and relevant to technological developments, science, education and online social networking.

Also, since Berkshire emphasizes environmental and economic issues, they are adding more about these subjects.

The head editor Cheng Lisun turned to a wide variety of Chinese references in preparing the original article list. It included all periods and knowledge domains, and many interesting aspects of traditional culture, such as towpaths and ancient libraries. That list was forwarded to academic contacts in the US and China, and to universities from Ireland to Shanghai, asking for suggestions and checking what other encyclopedias covered.

They dropped topics that were short on recent research and added new topics on environmental issues and the recent economic crisis.

It also left space for recent phenomenon like the Super Girl TV talent show, because Christensen said it may be something looked up often by Western students and professors.

"It all depends on what students and professors are asking for, and what we see as particularly important areas in education. We are always finding new, fascinating aspects of Chinese culture and history that we want to share," she said.

For other topics like Tibet's history, it includes its close ties to ancient Chinese dynasties, such as the story of Princess Wencheng, and details about the area's social progress in the last 50 years. "We are trying to work on better ways to explain Chinese and Western perspectives, and we try very hard to present both sides," she said.

They plan to make a new version every two to three years and are working on an arrangement for ongoing revisions and updates to the online edition. The revised and expanded second edition will be released in 2011.

Beyond the project, Berkshire is also producing smaller books as supplements for specific classes in the US.

One of them, *This Is China: The First 5,000 Years*, released in January, is a 120-page paperback distilled from the encyclopedia.

They are also making smaller academic books which cover specialized subjects like Chinese branding, education and communication.

Foreign insights

"It is a worthy cause. The world does need to know more about China. The Chinese are not all that good about telling for-

eigners about themselves, so a good outside publisher is the best thing for them," Wang Gungwu, a professor at the National University of Singapore, said.

With a foreign team and Chinese scholars in the US, the *Encyclopedia of China* is expected to have distinctive foreign insights on the country and its history.

"We often see ourselves more clearly through the eyes of others," Christensen said. "If a book or an article is written by an insider, it will not mention the details and history that provide context for readers unfamiliar with the subject."

As an outsider, they have to explain many terms, concepts and events in their publications that would be obvious to Chinese readers but that are completely unfamiliar to those in the US.

"We also make difficult ideas understandable by comparing them to something familiar, such as the land area of a Chinese province to a US state," she said.

One Western ignorance for which they tried to compensate was famous Chinese historic figures.

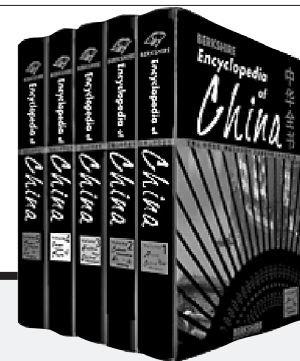
In the West, everyone knows Christopher Columbus and Julius Caesar, but they do not know that the Yongle Emperor of the Ming Dynasty ruled an empire just as big as Caesar's, and began a series of explorations that reached from Russia to Africa, the publisher said.

They are specially developing a three-volume *Dictionary of Chinese Biography*, collecting the life stories of 150 key figures, selected from the earliest dynasties to the present day.

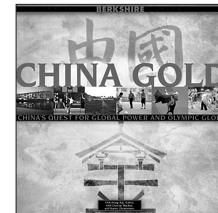
Chinese culture and Chinese inventions are also fully explained. "I suppose this might be the other great difference [from the China's Encyclopedia]: how we try to place China within global history as an imperial power and source of innovation," she said.

The China project has also lent more information to Berkshire's other books, the *Encyclopedia of Sustainability* and *Encyclopedia of World History*.

Christensen compared the producing of *Encyclopedia of China* to "fusion food," which combines the best elements of China and the West. "We want to learn from the Chinese, and we also need to help them understand us, and what Western readers desire from them," she said.



Berkshire's books on China



China Gold: China's Quest for Olympic and Global Glory
Edited by Karen Christensen, Hong Fan and Duncan Mackay, *The Observer*, 144 pp, \$24.95

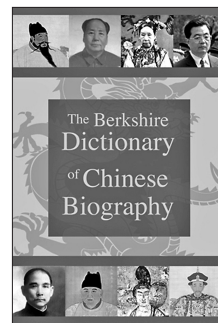
The book, written in close collaboration with US and European sports writers, provides a Chinese view of sports history, great Chinese athletes, martial arts, sports in the media and related political dramas.



This Is China: The First 5,000 Years

Edited by Haiwang Yuan, 120 pp, \$14.95

The book contains everything people need to know about 5,000 years of history, 30 years of "opening" and a future that promises to shape the 21st century. Drawn from the vast resources of the Berkshire Encyclopedia of China, this concise 120-page book is recommended for classroom use, curriculum development and student review.



Dictionary of Chinese Biography

Edited by Kerry Brown and Chatham House, 3 volumes, 1,840 pages, \$525, coming in October 2010

This book uses the life stories of 150 key individuals, selected from the earliest dynasties to the present day, to tell the story of the country. These individuals include emperors, politicians, poets, writers, artists, scientists, explorers and philosophers.

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Photos provided by Berkshire Publishing Group