

Karen Christensen



Like Berkshire Publishing Group's other reference works, the new *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, reviewed on p. 123, is very much a labor of love and a reflection of the interests of publisher Karen Christensen. RBB editor Mary Ellen Quinn spoke with Christensen about the encyclopedia by phone.

BKL: *Berkshire is a small publisher with a small list, and you have to make careful decisions about what to publish. Why an encyclopedia of China?*

CHRISTENSEN: The answer to that is different now than it would have been when we started. When we started, it seemed like a nice fit with the other things we were doing. It didn't seem at that point as much of a foundation for other projects as it does now. It really has become more central to our mission, which is to build bridges of understanding.

BKL: *In the introduction you mention being inspired by Joseph Needham's Science and Civilization in China. How did his work influence you?*

CHRISTENSEN: I don't think I had heard of Needham when I started, but at some point I grasped that the only person who had been perhaps even more ambitious than I in trying to explain China had been this professor at Cambridge who, interestingly, was not a China specialist. Even though he was primarily a scientist, he really looked at every aspect of culture in China. The other thing that brought Needham to life is that Simon Winchester, who recently published a biography of Needham [*The Man Who Loved China: Joseph Needham and the Making of a Masterpiece*, 2008], is a friend who lives near me. I'm sure you've heard me talk about *guanxi*, which is networks and relationships. Well, in this project, there has been so much *guanxi*. It's been one thing—one chance meeting, one small-world connection—after another.

BKL: *The encyclopedia has a very Chinese look. Can you talk about some of the decisions that went into the design?*

CHRISTENSEN: I think an encyclopedia should be beautiful. I looked at Chinese books I've been collecting at the Beijing Book Fair, and I've worked with Chinese publishers a lot, and many of the elements in the encyclopedia are things I've seen in Chinese books, which are really beautifully designed. And then I was introduced to Joan [Joan Lebold Cohen] and discovered that she had this unbelievable collection of photos going back to the 1970s that fit with what we were trying to do. What we're saying with the page design is, we want you to be able to see China in different ways.

BKL: *You have taken several trips to China in the past few years. What are some of the biggest changes you've seen since your first trip, in 2001?*

CHRISTENSEN: My son Tom was just talking about one really obvious thing. The first year we were there, we stayed in a hotel in central Beijing not far from Tiananmen Square. We

walked out of the hotel in the morning to what was the edge of a construction site with rubble and broken tiles, and we would go into this little hut and gesture to get dumplings and soup for breakfast. We were the only Westerners in the place, and they thought we were quite funny. Tom and I have

both on subsequent trips gone back to that corner, and there's a huge high-rise there. And everything else has changed. I went to a lunch for Premier Wen Jiabao last fall with people who are the upper tier of China Hands, and I was amazed because almost everyone I talked to said, "I can't believe how much China has changed." It struck me that even for people who are really experienced, the pace of change is hard to grasp, and it makes them feel when they come back here that people just don't get it. You can read about it in the paper, but you don't get the almost physical impact of the energy.

BKL: *Tell me about some of your other China projects.*

CHRISTENSEN: We're doing a three-volume *Dictionary of Chinese Biography*. We're also doing a little spin-off book called *This Is China*, a very compact distillation of key things from the encyclopedia that can be used in classrooms. I'm really interested in making the encyclopedia something that will be used for teaching, and *This Is China* is part of that effort. We've already started working on a second edition of the *Encyclopedia of China*. We have a few articles, and I've started adding to the editorial board. It's an interesting thing that now that the encyclopedia is actually out, people who were extremely skeptical of the concept to start with are willing to join the editorial board. A lot of people are just stunned by the fact that it exists.

BKL: *Why were people skeptical? Was it just too big a project?*

CHRISTENSEN: Too big a project, too many pitfalls. They understood the unevenness of scholarship and the various cultural and political challenges. Also, nobody else had ever done this before.

BKL: *What are your plans for electronic versions of the encyclopedia?*

CHRISTENSEN: We're working with a company that has put the *Encyclopedia of China* in full color online, and you can preview and search it freely, and a fair number of articles are available in full view. I'm about to set up a Twitter feed of three articles per week that are free, and they will be full-color versions. A subscription e-book is available in an individual license or an institutional license through most of the major e-book platforms. Those are reproductions of the black-and-white print version. We'll be offering a free one-year license for people who buy the encyclopedia in print.

BKL: *You mentioned earlier that you want the encyclopedia to be useful for teaching. Why is that important to you?*

CHRISTENSEN: I want the encyclopedia to empower people, especially the generation of students in high school and college, for whom China is going to be more important than it ever was for you or me. I want to provide them with the foundation that will help them prepare for the world they're going to face.

Interview conducted by Mary Ellen Quinn