Choosing China


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 country. 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, language, culture, 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 Asian project continued their efforts in new China volumes, including the previous China editor Cheng Lian from 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 Lian 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 toponyms and ancient libraries. That list was forwarded to academics 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 foreigners about themselves, so a good outside publisher is the best thing for them,” Wang Guang, 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 especially 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 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.