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# Introduction to the *Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography*



When I was in junior school in Britain in the 1970s, I memorized the lists of British kings and queens from the late Saxon period, about 1,200 years ago, up to the present day. This was a particular point of pride for me, and perhaps the highlight of my whole school career was being able, in front of the class, to go through each monarch with his or her dates.

Understanding the separate royal houses and the main members within each over the last millennium of British history was useful beyond the interest of knowing about the separate characters and the stories of each figure. It was interesting, of course, to know how fiercely history had judged a figure like the medieval King John or put someone like Henry VIII on a pedestal, a position that the brutal and somewhat terrifying stories of his period of rule slightly detracted from. Furthermore, having human stories and faces to put to the long stretch of British history helped to make it manageable and comprehensible. While

historians subscribe less and less to the “great men and women” trope of history, and try to listen to the voices of other figures who did as much, if not more, to shape the contours of a country’s development and its cultural rises and falls, it does help to put history within the finite boundaries of major political figures like kings and queens and their reigns. This provides an easy starting point for further exploration.

The history of the central British state and its institutions and people is relatively long, but of course it is nothing compared to what the Chinese believe they have. Contemporary Chinese political leaders, at least in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), have been fond since the 1990s of referring to the “five thousand years of civilization.” There are many ways in which the cohesiveness and continuity of this history can be deconstructed and questioned, but the simple statement that many public figures in China firmly stand by this notion of continuity is easy enough to prove.



Speeches by figures from the first decade of the twenty-first century such as PRC President Hu Jintao are littered with the phrase. It seems to have entered the lifeblood and collective consciousness of the country.

For someone outside or inside China coming to this vast history, it offers bewildering challenges. How on earth can one try to make sense of this seemingly endless stretch of time? British history grows blurred and imprecise before the seventh century CE. The first written records of the British Isles are patchy and oblique, coming second-, third-, or fourth-hand from three or four centuries before the Common Era. Even Julius Caesar's accounts of his visits in 54 and 55 BCE are short and elliptical. With China, however, we have, as many of the entries in this dictionary testify, written records stretching back well into the first millennium BCE and archeological records from long before this. These continue throughout the dynasties from the Qin era of state unification in the third century BCE right up to the present day. They are a testament to one of the greatest histories and civilizations humankind has ever produced. How can anyone try to start comprehending this history so rich in detail, so full of different events and figures?

This present work was born from a simple impulse. As someone who had studied mostly contemporary China, and in particular China from the last Maoist period onward, I have only ever

had time to glance at the previous eras and dynasties of the country's history, a history that is claimed to stretch back five millennia. To get at least some understanding of it, I have looked at general overviews and some accounts of key figures. Yet I was never able to find a single place where I might be able to understand through specific figures—figures to whom I could relate—the almost impersonal, abstract course of China's dynastic development. Even trying to plot out the main dynastic boundaries, from the Hàn 汉 dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) to the Táng 唐 dynasty (618–907 CE), the Sòng 宋 dynasty (960–1279) to the Yuán 元 dynasty (1279–1368), and the Míng 明 dynasty (1368–1644) to the Qīng 清 dynasty (1644–1911/1912), was hard work. Many of these periods stretched on for centuries and encompassed within themselves radical changes. China in the seventh century when the Tang period commenced, for example, was a different place than it was at the end of this period, a little under three centuries later.

Trying to see beneath the surface of modern China, despite its radical modernizing impulse and the ways in which so much of the material vestiges and habits of history have been subverted or simply destroyed, without at least coming to grips with some of this history would be to misunderstand the country.

Therefore, the main challenge is to find some manageable way to conceptualize this history while not becoming overwhelmed. History does matter in

modern China, but its interpretation, and the selection of key elements or dominant narratives, is highly contentious, as I will argue in more detail below. The opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 typified this, with its looming presentations of great figures like Zheng He—the Ming naval general whose vast fleets reached Africa; or Confucius—a figure reviled and attacked in the Maoist period but who has now, two and a half millennia after the period in which he lived, made a spectacular return as a figure that carries the weight of government aspirations to spread a deeper awareness of how it articulates and postulates its culture and philosophical outlook to the rest of the world. If people in China take this history seriously, then so should people outside China.

William Jenner, an English sinologist who specializes in Chinese history and culture, and many others argue that China is a culture and polity weighed down by this history: a history that does not exist so much in the material landscape (the PRC has almost remade and rebuilt this history in the decades since its establishment in 1949) but in the language, cultural memory, and habits of the people—a history that is often a prison-like restraint as much as a source of pride. Those that try to engage with the particular issues that contemporary China poses—e.g., its development model, the behavior of its political elite, the ways in which society is governed—in an ahistorical way are moving into

treacherous waters. Even a simple understanding of issues like Tibet, Xinjiang, China's ethnic minority populations, and its maritime border disputes with neighboring countries is impossible without some attention to historical issues. However heavy history lies in China, it is unavoidable.

This dictionary therefore is intended to offer a simple route for those who want to learn the context of that history and want to do so in a way that is manageable, does not get lost too quickly in abstraction and detail, and shows at least the main contours of the last millennia. It is, in fact, written for people like me, of whom there are an increasing number, who did not come to the engagement and study of imperial China originally as specialists and have had to acquire a working knowledge of this history quickly. Much about this project might irritate purists, who would wish to work at a level of detail that would take a lifetime to achieve. This project instead is produced on the premise that it is better to know something about this astonishing, inspiring history rather than veer away from it because it is too intimidatingly large. It might even be that some who first look here are motivated to then do further research and reading. For this reason, some suggestions for further reading are included after each entry, so that those individuals' journeys into more-detailed material can begin.

The approach of writing about history by looking at specific life stories is,



in fact, one that the Chinese can claim they invented. The mighty figure of Sima Qian, who is the subject of one of these entries, looms over this. He was the author of *Records of the Grand Historian*, a history in the Han dynasty, a century before the Common Era, which, for readers in the twenty-first century, still has an eerily contemporary feel to it. Sima Qian's writing of history through the details of particular figures and their personalities underscores a psycho-history rather than just a chronology of dates and developments. His treatments of Confucius and of the First Emperor, Qin Shihuang, frame interpretation of these figures to this day by capturing revealing details and moments. It would be too grandiose to pretend that this current work is in any sense aspiring to parallel Sima Qian's great and tragic achievement (his personal suffering through castration while writing the work is one of the great parables of endurance and commitment still drawn from Chinese cultural history), but it works in his shadow, taking key figures from the ocean of Chinese history with its diversity and vastness and then trying to work the story of their times around them.

There are of course ideological debates about whether this then privileges specific narratives and elites over others. In the early stages of planning this work, I talked to an eminent scholar of classical Chinese. "Well," he said when I explained the idea, "the problem when you write Chinese history before the

Qing dynasty is that individuals didn't really exist. It was all about emperors and the world around them. Nothing else really survives, telling us even what scientists and writers did." This is an extreme position. The powers of imperial rulers, of course, were extensive, and as reference points they are utterly irreplaceable. Writing something akin to a "People's History" of China without these ruling figures factored in would be a huge challenge, though perhaps archeological evidence being produced now might make it more possible than in the past. This is not what we have tried to achieve here.

Even so, while accepting the centrality of political figures in this dictionary and having a pretty wide range of important dynastic rulers, we have also tried to steer away as much as possible from an endless list of emperors (and empresses, though of course Wu Zetian from the Tang dynasty does figure here, not only for her gender but also for her immense political achievements and historic significance). The great Joseph Needham, scholar of the history of science in China, in his *Science and Civilisation in China* emphatically documented and analyzed the contribution that scientists and philosophers made throughout the dynastic stretch of Chinese history, and how they contributed as much as any to the creation of a national identity and cultural outlook. Representatives of this crucial constituency are therefore included here among the political figures.

One outcome of treating Chinese history in this way—telling the story of particular eras through representative figures—beyond it making that history human and something those of us in the West, even from our wholly different cultural outlook and perspective, can still relate to, is that it also gives some space to handle the diversity of this history. This diversity is shown not just in the differences of specific figures, but in how, as the great epic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written by Luo Guanzhong in the fourteenth century, says in its famous opening words, *the empire comes together and unifies, and then falls apart*. This is the pattern of history, and it is visible here in the highly unified periods like the Tang and the Ming as well as in dispersed eras like the early Song or the collapse of dynasties like the Qing. For long periods, there were “Chinas” rather than “China.” Moreover, in the Yuan period, rulers who were alien to the dominant culture that had reigned until then became rulers, complicating the direction of history even more. History written as it is in this work, through the treatment of diverse figures, at least maps out some of this complexity. The overwhelming impression if one takes a step back from all of this is how hard it is to supply a dominant narrative or framework. What we have instead is the sense of a political, social, and historic tradition that is the result of many conflicting and often very contradictory impulses and ingredients.

The principles of selection in this dictionary have been kept deliberately simple. No one would be foolish enough to pretend that in a little over 100 figures one could tell the story of a history as long and complicated as China’s. Striving for anything like completeness would be impossible. Lewis Carroll in *Sylvie and Bruno* wrote of the perfect map:

“And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!”

“Have you used it much?” I enquired.

“It has never been spread out, yet,” said Mein Herr: “the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.”

This impulse for completeness is understandable but inevitably self-defeating. More often than not, it is the principles of exclusion rather than inclusion that are key. For this dictionary, there were figures that of course had to be included—ones of great historic significance, like Confucius; Mencius; Sima Qian; Wu Zetian; Chinggis (Genghis) Khan; the Qianlong, Kangxi, and Yongzheng emperors; and great founding figures of dynasties, like Emperor Hongwu





of the Ming. There were cultural figures like the great Tang poets Li Bai (Bo) and Du Fu, and classical authors like Cao Xueqin, the illusive author of *Story of the Stone* (also known as *Dream of Red Mansions*). Besides these, however, it was important to find figures who were significant during turning points in Chinese history—those who were involved in the catastrophic An Lushan Rebellion during the Tang dynasty or the devastating Taiping Rebellion of a millennium later. Religious figures had immense impact on former dynasties too, particularly during the Yuan dynasty of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when forms of Buddhism began to penetrate profoundly into Chinese and Inner Asian society through the patronage of the great Khans.

And of course it was important to recognize the contributions of scientists and inventors, figures like Bi Sheng from the Song dynasty, Wang Zhen from the Yuan dynasty, or Zhan Tianyou of the Republican era. Inevitably, imperial leaders are still strongly represented, almost like a backbone throughout this history, but authors have been asked to craft these entries so that they tell the story of the times in which these rulers lived. This is not, and was never intended to be, court history. I have to say here that the selection of figures is highly subjective, no matter what the overt criterion. The main objective in the end is to have a broadly representative selection of figures from the main periods in

Chinese history. One could have endless arguments on whom to include and whom to leave out. The best I can say here is that this is the beginning, and perhaps in future editions we can hope to amplify, add to, and improve on the contents. We have to start somewhere.

The principles of how each entry has been written are simple. Firstly, the authors have been asked to write for a general audience for whom no specialist knowledge is assumed. They have been asked to write as non-technically as possible and to try to create a narrative for each particular figure, linking the figures to the times in which they lived. Secondly, there are no footnotes, and limited references. This work is for a general audience, one that is interested and engaged enough to learn the basics of particular figures but that might not have the time to delve into footnotes and scholarly asides. We have, however, asked that each entry have some recommended reading where future exploration might start for those who want to take their understanding further. Finally, and most importantly, we have asked for accessibility. For a number of reasons, Chinese history, languages, society, and culture are regarded as being hard to understand. The sheer physical inaccessibility of the PRC in the Maoist period from 1949 to 1976, when it was almost impossible to get visas and even visit the country, added to this sense of a place that was remote, difficult to understand, and—most dreaded quality of



all—radically different and exotic. That Mandarin and other dialects of Chinese were and are regarded as grammatically and phonetically challenging solidified this idea, with a fiendishly difficult written system and, to add to the confusion, a form of classical Chinese largely incomprehensible even to those who had taken the time and effort to master standard modern Chinese.


All of these barriers conspired to make Chinese history and literature look like an area circumscribed for entry to a group of select elite who had spent years in isolated, concentrated study in order to gain admission. The notion that this world might be opened up to those who had not gone through decades of preparation and specializing was an alien one. The writer Elias Canetti in his masterpiece *Auto-da-Fé* depicted the quintessential stereotype of a sinologist in his protagonist Peter Kein, a remote, austere, driven figure who is so committed to his Chinese books that he lets the rest of the world around him conspire to drive him to ruin while he remains married to his pure scholarly ideal. Trying to break free of the restraints of this sense that scholarly engagement in a subject like Chinese requires sustained commitment to learning specialist skills like language acquisition, cultural and specialist social understanding, and engagement in the complexity and diversity of China through its historic and contemporary manifestations is increasingly necessary now that China through its current

economic and political importance has increasingly entered the mainstream. This dictionary therefore is the result of a commitment to pragmatic engagement. It has been written by some of the world's leading scholars in their area: people with decades of profound engagement in their subject who are also willing to share their understanding and insights with a broader audience.

Luckily, Canetti's depiction of the sinologist was wrong. The collective endeavor represented by this dictionary shows that the study of China and of Chinese is, after all, the study of a living culture and people, and not of some abstract, dead object. We hope that the lively—and vital—vignettes offered throughout this work awaken in as many people as possible a sense of the profoundly human stories we see in Chinese history and get us as far away as possible from any sense of China being somehow esoteric, remote, and superficially exotic.

Through the stories of historic Chinese figures, we have the opportunity to stand back and try to capture some of the characteristics of China's development and growth. We can see large trends and rhythms, not just of centralization and then dissolution, but also of diversification and development, decay and regeneration. For me, reading through the different entries assembled here from different scholars working in different communities and areas has been an opportunity to understand a bit more deeply both the ways in which we





can try to tell history and the role of particular unexpected elements in that history. Two things in particular have powerfully impressed me in working on this dictionary. The first is the role of outsiders, those who came from what would be regarded as the margins of different versions or forms of Chinese society as they existed in the past, and who were agents effecting radical and fundamental change. This subverted the idea of a powerful, centralized, and highly decided sense of identity that one sometimes might sense in writings on China—the idea of a profoundly rooted and established “Chineseness” that somehow transcends any real attempts to change and reform it. One of the supreme paradoxes is that two of the three major dynasties since the Yuan dynasty in the thirteenth century have been non-Han: the Manchu-led Qing, and the Mongol-led Yuan. Half of this period therefore saw China ruled by ethnic groups from the periphery. Outsiders had a role even in the establishment of the Ming dynasty, created by a mendicant in 1368 who was again wholly outside the established power structures of this period.

The second issue that has impressed me relates to traditions of historiography. As with any account of long-term history, the deeper into the Chinese past we go, the more archeological evidence becomes as important as written material, and of course in the very earliest histories becomes the sole

resource. In some of the entries for these early figures, it is fascinating to see the mixture of myth and history and to watch, through mythology, something akin to the birth of a sense of historic “truth.” The written history of China’s past is rich and long, but even with this extraordinary heritage there is still a sense in which figures like Confucius are both very familiar and yet also utterly unknowable, buried in centuries of reinvention, reinterpretation, and, at times, attack. Having a sense of our understanding of what history is and of what it says about us, the current tellers of these stories, as well as the worlds being written about, bring an interesting element to these entries. They show not only a world we are trying to look into, but also much about the world we are currently living in. The ways in which, as some entries make clear, intense efforts and movements of revisionism impact the classic representations of historic figures is illustrative of this. There are the historic figures themselves, and then different phases in understanding and coming to terms with them. In that sense, the dynamism of historic understanding becomes clearer as we look at a project like this dictionary as a moment along a much broader path of historic understanding—an audit, as it were, of what a scholarly community across the world thought at a particular moment about important figures from China’s past, but one that might, even in a few years,

be revised, changed, and fundamentally re-contextualized.

This is particularly important in the case of China because of the ways in which history has been politicized since 1949. When they came to power, the Communists did so with a strong justificatory historic narrative, some of it built around the framework of Marxism-Leninism historiography in which feudalism embodied in the previous dynastic political structures of China was replaced by a proletarian-led liberation force. Histories of China's imperial past were written within this framework, with a clear moral message and an overt sense that the PRC was the culmination of a long process of struggle, enlightenment, and modernity. Many have observed what a battleground that history, and the understanding and research and writing of that history, became in China over this period. Even the Cultural Revolution that began in 1966 involved dense and often esoteric arguments related to contemporary issues about the meaning of specific figures such as Hai Rui, an official in the Ming court, or interpretation of the *Dream of the Red Mansion*.

There is more space for diversity in China now, but the contentiousness of some phases of history has not gone away. The status of Tibet, for instance, under the Yuan dynasty onward, and other border regions like Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang remains highly controversial, with some referring to

interpretations of the past that prove Tibet's status as a full part of Chinese sovereign territory and others arguing the opposite. Similarly, passionate debates occur over the PRC's claims to contested maritime borders with its neighbors, and to the political status of Taiwan.

It therefore is not surprising that for some of the entries in this work, these controversies will be touched on. There are interesting differences in the ways in which, for instance, some might write of the Yuan dynasty inside and outside the context of modern historiography in the PRC. Chinggis Khan was portrayed in the Cultural Revolution as one of history's great tyrants, a world-class feudalist and desecrator of civilization, who left many people in contemporary China with a sense of historic victimhood and shame that their ancestors had been so traumatized and exploited by him and his armies. More recently, however, the Great Khan has had better press, presented at least in Inner Mongolia as a unifier, the creator of an empire that went on to flourish and to produce some of the great cultural artifacts of the last millennium. For modern Chinese leaders, the past before 1911 is seen as a period of inspiration, a time when China was a great civilization, and therefore something to which the country under its project of rejuvenation and historic mission wishes to return. The resurgence of pride in this history after decades of attack and criticism is striking.



This dictionary, beyond being a celebration of the diversity and richness of the Chinese past, is also a testament to the extraordinary amount of scholarship, engagement, and commitment that exists across the world in understanding China. Entries have been written by people from Europe, America, Australia, and China itself. I hope that the individual perspectives and voices of each of these authors come through to illustrate this varied engagement. In reviewing and editing different entries, I have tried to retain each author's voice as much as possible. Authors have come from different backgrounds, different language communities, and different disciplines. Some are academics, some are journalists and writers, and some have privately developed deep interest in specific figures. It is excellent to see younger scholars, and students at the graduate and post-graduate levels, also contributing. A glance at the list of contributors and their affiliation or place of domicile shows just how international and global this endeavor has been.


Finally, for those who come to this dictionary looking for a reference tool or a compass to help them take some steps into deeper understanding of specific aspects of the Chinese past, I hope that the extraordinary and rich stories contained in the tales of these people offer something inspiring, interesting, and even diverting. They often show the extraordinary depths of

human endurance and the ways in which, against sometimes quite terrifying odds, people have suffered and fought for what they believed in and worked toward ideals of a better world. This truly is the final overwhelming impression after looking through each separate story. I think of this dictionary as being a little like Google Earth, starting from the widest possible lens and then slowly honing in. If these stories allow readers to then focus in on a specific place, start to walk in it, see its shape and topography, and move away from some grand vision that is both global and abstract, and is often overwhelming and uninformative, then the ambition behind this work will have been partially achieved.

I would like to record my thanks here to all the authors who have worked on this, and to acknowledge their dedication and patience in the years since 2008 when this work was first devised. In particular, I want to express my deep gratitude to Karen Christensen and her team at Berkshire Publishing, who have been utterly fantastic both in keeping the project going and in guiding it toward its conclusion. Marjolijn Kaiser has been a tireless assistant, working both in the US and Europe to get entries checked and edited. I have also deeply appreciated the assistance of Bill Siever at Berkshire, of Winnie Tsui, and of Patrick Boehler, who helped in harvesting entries and in tracking down new names to approach and new figures to

include. I am also sincerely thankful for the many peer reviewers and those who offered their advice and services along the way. It has been heartening to see so many give up their time to write for us and share their immense expertise, and

I hope that the end result is, at least to some extent, some recompense for all their effort.



Kerry Brown, Editor in Chief

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## Publisher's Note



This project began in London, at Chatham House, home of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, not long before the Beijing Olympics in 2008. It was a time of great optimism and curiosity about China, and at Berkshire Publishing Group we were nearly finished with work on the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China*, and just beginning an even bigger project on sustainability. I was in London to chair the Green Data Centres Conference, and heard about an Olympics-related event at Chatham House, a place I knew of but had never visited. I quickly sent an email asking if I could attend. The next morning I heard from the organizer, Head of Asia Programme, Kerry Brown, who said I was welcome to come. He then apologized that his articles for the *Encyclopedia of China* were late.

This situation is one of the job hazards of being a publisher and needs to be handled carefully. I never want to give the impression that our deadlines are not firm. Berkshire Publishing has a reputation for twisting arms and cracking the whip in order to get our big, challenging projects done on time. On the other hand, we value and respect our authors and always try to convey our deep appreciation to them. When I realized that Kerry

had agreed to write numerous articles for the *Encyclopedia of China*, including important ones on the Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaoping, I told him that, yes, we could extend the deadline.

That first meeting was the beginning of a correspondence that evolved into a discussion about biography, and before long we were talking about using a reference work on important Chinese individuals as a way to tell the story of China. Now, after reading Kerry's introduction to this work, I see that his interest in biography began as a schoolboy, while mine came later, largely through work on the *Encyclopedia of Leadership* and the *Encyclopedia of China*.

In the early days of work on the *Dictionary of Chinese Biography*, I went to the Asian & Middle Eastern Division section of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue and was assisted by Chinese Language librarian, Qi Xie, as I looked at the many volumes of specialized biographies. Our aim, it became clear, would be different: we wanted to bring all individuals under one roof, and present their stories in a way that would contribute to the bigger story of China itself.

We had in mind the classic work of Western biography, the Oxford *Dictionary*





Publisher Karen Christensen at Tanzhe Temple in western Beijing standing in front of the Jade Emperor's Fish, which, according to folklore, was a gift from the Daoist ruler of Heaven.

of *National Biography*, a revised edition of which had recently won the American Library Association's Dartmouth Medal. We realized that people around the world need access to similar information about China—a need that will continue to grow as China's significance on the world stage grows—and that we could develop a sound approach to telling Chinese stories, consistent with Chinese traditions, knowledgeable about Chinese scholarship and sources, and yet providing the utilitarian Western structure of *Who, What, When, Why, and Where*. We wanted Chinese history and Chinese stories to make sense to Western readers without turning them into Western narratives.

We normally impose many rules on our encyclopedia authors and edit articles rather severely to make them

consistent in structure and tone, but we took a somewhat different approach with the *DCB*. We gave the authors more space, and literary freedom, than we do in a traditional encyclopedia, because we see more than ever that our job is to enlighten and engage rather than simply to provide information.

We asked people to write about unfamiliar individuals in the hope of getting something different; we didn't want just a listing of ten thousand influential figures in Chinese history with a blurb about each. We wanted to bring readers into the heart of Chinese history by way of biography, and we expect some of the biographers to present unconventional (or at least unexpected) pictures of their subjects. On the way, for example, we've learned that the general and rebel leader An Lushan, leader of the rebellion that bears his name that claimed untold millions of lives, and famous as a villain in hundreds of works of literature since, had a charming personality that led several people to adopt him as a son; he also spoke several languages, and yet was illiterate. We learn of the self-styled "middling hermit" Tang-dynasty scholar, administrator, and poet Bai Juyi, who eventually found happiness ensconced in his private garden, where he had wine, music, scenery, good health, a good salary, and leisure: surely a recipe for the good life.

We even learn that Khubilai Khan, the formidable Khan made famous in the West first by Marco Polo and later by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was raised by



a powerful mother who ensured that he and his brothers learned the traditional Mongol skills of riding, hunting, archery, and combat, and were tutored by the finest scholars in literature and the arts and sciences. It is these details of peoples' lives that bring history to life, which is especially important when trying to get a grasp of something as vast as Chinese history.

## Inclusion and Exclusion

The question of whom to include, and equally important whom not to include, in a project such as this, is a hard and complicated one. As Kerry Brown explains in his introduction, we have tried to strike a balance between the obvious figures who cannot be left out of any overview of Chinese history, and lesser-known individuals, whose life and achievements can nonetheless provide insight into China's development.

One of the challenges we have faced is the dearth of coverage of female figures in Chinese history, but at that first event at Chatham House, I remember talking with three women who are leaders today in the China world. One was Hu Shuli, the crusading journalist and editor of the influential Chinese magazine *Caijing* 财经, and who is now editor in chief of Caixin Media Company in Beijing. Another was Isabel Hilton, founder and editor of *chinadialogue*, who provided invaluable advice to us while we were working on the China/India/East Asia volume of the *Berkshire*

*Encyclopedia of Sustainability*. In addition, the speaker that day, on the subject of the Olympics and what they meant for China, was Madame Fu Ying, the Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom.

Women clearly play a key role in today's modern society, and it is hard to argue that they were of little significance in history, even though information about them from historical sources is scarcer. The exact role of women in Chinese history is a matter of debate, however, and one that has gained increasing popular and academic attention in the last decades. This shift is reflected, for example, in the recent biography of Empress Dowager Cixi by Jung Chang, author of the popular *Wild Swans*, which documents the travails of three generations of women in her family. Chang defends the concubine-turned-Empress, claiming that rather than being the ultimate villainous (Cixi's usual depiction), Cixi was in fact a great reformer and set China on the course to modernity, as is apparent from the book's title: *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China*.

Another prominent woman discussed in these volumes is the first-century scholar Ban Zhao. Ban is considered the first female Chinese (or likely any) historian; she wrote in her essay *Admonitions for Women* of a utopian vision of ideal gender relations where wives and daughters-in-law were obedient and humble, and widows remained chaste; elite men were delighted



Publisher Karen Christensen and Kerry Brown at an editorial meeting in London, 2008.

by her conservative view of female propriety and lauded Ban Zhao as the pinnacle of female wisdom. While revolutionaries and feminists have dismissed her views as retrograde, more recent scholarship has tried to account for some of the seemingly misogynistic content of *Admonitions for Women* by viewing it through the gender relations of its era.

But the biographies of women in this dictionary all clearly challenge this orthodox view of female roles: the ancient queen and warrior Fu Hao, who commanded thousands of men in battle; the seventh-century female Emperor Wu Zetian (the only woman to rule autonomously as Emperor, rather than as Empress Dowager); Li Qingzhao of the Song dynasty who, it is said, encapsulated the three perfections of poetry, calligraphy, and painting; and in a somewhat more modern era, Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing. All took

surprising steps outside of the realm of what we, as readers, may expect of them.

The fact remains that most of these figures are men; as Kerry writes in his introduction, this simply means this work is just the beginning. We also had to make a decision early on about whether to include non-Chinese figures, such as Joseph Needham, author of the mammoth twenty-seven-volume *Science and Civilization in China*, and familiar figures such as Marco Polo and Pearl S. Buck. After much discussion, we decided to limit these essays to individuals who were influential within China itself, and less in terms of China's relationship with other parts of the world. This was an unfortunate instance of having to "draw the line somewhere." In the end, the only Western figure included here is the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, a mathematician, cartographer, and scholar—in short, a polymath—whose various activities would have a huge impact on Chinese culture. Ricci should be seen, therefore, as a figure representing early Westerners in China.

In future volumes and in the full online database for which this dictionary will serve as the base, we intend to cover non-Chinese and overseas Chinese figures throughout history who have played a role in world affairs, and in connecting China to the rest of the world—not to mention lots more women.

## The Structure of the DCB

Volumes 1–3 of the *Dictionary of Chinese Biography* contain 135 long biographies,



ranging from 1,000 words for a few early semi-mythical figures to over 8,000 words for the major figures such as Communist leaders Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong, or Sima Qian, author of a systematic thousand-year chronicle of China, titled the *Records of the Grand Historian*, that provides invaluable (if not always unbiased) accounts of early Chinese figures.

This set provides complete coverage through to 1979, the year when China resumed diplomatic relations with the United States: a change in diplomacy that had come about in the early 1970s via ping-pong (strange but true). This began, under Deng, the “opening up” to the rest of the world that has transformed China over the past 30 years. Volume 4 (published separately) will pick up in the 1970s and will bring us to the present. Unlike the *Dictionary of National Biography*, we will include living individuals if they are essential to understanding China today, and we will include Westerners, overseas Chinese, and some people whose place in history is not yet assured but who are well-known and influential today, such as the blogger /auto racer Han Han, quite possibly the world’s most popular blogger. (The trend for combining seemingly disparate careers is not a new one, and in volumes 1–3 readers will come across several poet-warlords, emperor-calligrapher-poets, and alchemist-administrators.) This means many short entries, with less in-depth coverage, but still providing an essential way of understanding China.

These four volumes are the beginning for Berkshire Publishing Group, the foundation of a full-scale database of Chinese biography that will provide essential information comparable to that found easily in English about Western individuals. I urge all readers to sign up at our website ([www.berkshirepublishing.com](http://www.berkshirepublishing.com)) for updates, book reviews, and new biographical resources.

## Chinese Biography

One reason it is so important to learn these individuals’ histories is that people in China have been studying the thoughts of their predecessors for many centuries. Mao, who had studied the Chinese classics as part of his schooling, applied the strategic lessons of Sunzi, who himself studied and compiled the tactics of previous military strategists. The stories of these earlier figures help us understand the hopes and dreams of modern Chinese leaders, and give us new ways to look at what leadership means in China. These biographies are long enough to have substance and to allow the author some latitude with approach and style but short enough to read in a sitting. The articles will make sense to the general reader as single entries, while reading the full set will provide an enjoyable way to learn Chinese history, a subject that is more important than most people realize.

Learning Chinese history is incredibly helpful to anyone seeking to understand contemporary China. And because peoples' worldview is to a large extent shaped by their history, the only way we can understand a society that is, in many ways, so radically different from the West is to understand its history. But it

has to be noted that we have to see that history on its own terms, and that is exactly the goal of this project: if we understand China's history better, and view China less as a strange and foreign land, we are also more capable of seeing our commonalities, an attitude so necessary for our mutual future survival.



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