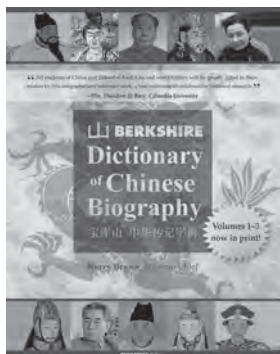


Special Segment: Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography



Editor's Introduction: The *Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography* promises to be a long-lived and unique pedagogical tool of immense value for instructors, students, and anyone else interested in China who can utilize English-language resources. Currently, three volumes of the *Dictionary* are available, with the final volume (post-1979) scheduled for publication in spring 2015. The first portion of this special segment includes three review essays by outstanding historians of China who also are master teachers. Readers should be aware that so many of the best historians contributed to the *Dictionary* that it was difficult to find essayists who were not involved in the *Dictionary's* development. Two of the three essayists for this segment also contributed to the *Dictionary*. **Thanks to Berkshire Publishing, EAA readers can access one of the 135 entries on Soong Mei-ling in the online supplements for this issue.**

Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography

EDITED BY KERRY BROWN ET AL.

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Volume 1: Xia and Shang Dynasties through the Tang Dynasty

Reviewed by Jeffrey L. Richey



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A few years ago, historian Jonathan Steinberg commented on the rise of biography as history during the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century:

Biography established itself, I think, because the social science models left out the power of human personality. Serious historians of National Socialism realized that they had to solve the Hitler problem . . . Biography can be proper history if it asks the kind of questions which an academic historian can define and offers evidence to support the answer.¹

By “the kind of questions which an academic historian can define,” Steinberg presumably means the sort of questions that are fundamental to all historical study: Who or what caused a given event to occur? What changed as a result, and what remained the same? How did this event facilitate or limit future developments? How is this event similar to or different from comparable events in other eras or cultures? How did those who were most affected by this event view it, and how did this event impact their worldviews? This perspective on the historiographical uses of biography appears to be shared by Kerry Brown, the editor-in-chief of the *Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography*—a three-volume series that

encompasses the full range of Chinese cultural history from antiquity to the dawn of the Deng Xiaoping era in 1979—who writes:

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 . . . [such as] 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 . . . [T]hese entries . . . show not only a world we are trying to look into, but also much about the world we are currently living in . . . I think of this dictionary as being a little like Google Earth, starting from the widest possible lens and then slowly honing in.²

If the use of biography as history is intended to help account for the human element of social development (as opposed to the grand rise and fall of entire societies), and if the goal of the *Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography* is both to illuminate broad patterns of change and provide focused portraits of people who both shaped and were shaped by their place in space

and time (as opposed to merely narrating individual lives), then this series succeeds admirably on both counts. Entries contain cross-references to other entries, each marked by an asterisk, and also mention other figures and topics that help readers discover the connections between historical moments, social movements, geographic locations, dynastic eras, and human personalities. In the process, readers who take full advantage of these resources also may discern the relationships that not only connect early China to global antiquity, but also to the world of today, including today's China.

The historical hyperconnectivity embodied by millennia of Chinese culture is best-demonstrated in entries devoted to truly epochal figures, such as Han Wudi (156–87 BCE), one of the most famous Chinese rulers of all time. Looking up the sixteen-page entry titled “Wu, Emperor (of Han),” one first encounters a succinct, paragraph-length summary that mentions Confucianism, the Silk Roads, Central Asia, the Chinese practice of identifying periods within dynastic reigns by distinct names, and the perennial Chinese interest in personal immortality, all of which can lead to further fruitful searches through the volume's index, as well as the sources listed in the extensive

suggestions for “Further Reading” that conclude the entry. In between the opening summary and the concluding bibliography may be found not only a chronological account of the emperor’s family background, youth, policies, and initiatives; personal interests; and place in history, but also a one-page sidebar entry on “Wall-Building in Ancient China,” which in turn points the reader to entries on the Great Wall, the Warring States period, several different dynasties, Gansu Province, the Korean peninsula, and Mao Zedong. Even entries dedicated to lesser (or less well-known) figures, such as the cosmological thinker Zou Yan (ca. 324–250 BCE), introduce the reader to a rich array of asterisked references to entries on Sima Qian, Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Dong Zhongshu, Sunzi, and Deng Xiaoping. Along the way, the reader also encounters mentions of many defining characteristics of Chinese civilization, including Confucianism, Daoism, yin-yang theory, the correlation of the five elements with cosmic processes, and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), as well as graphics and tables that illustrate these characteristics.

Like any reference work, volumes in this series suffer from a lack of overall narrative that can guide readers strategically and comprehensively from point to point. That is the weakness of any such resource, as well as its strength: readers can direct themselves from entry to entry, following the paths outlined by cross-references and asterisks, and may end up in vastly different places depending upon their starting

points. It is clear that each volume is intended to be used in combination with the others in the series, which ought to help curious readers’ experiences of Chinese biography as history from becoming too narrow or shallow. The front matter found in volume 1 includes a political map of contemporary China with place names given in both *pinyin* (romanization) and *jiantizi* (simplified Chinese characters).

What looks like a valuable set of appendices, including guides to pronunciation, key terms in pinyin, and chronological periodization, is included only with the third volume, although a thirteen-page index of the entire series may be found at the end of each volume. (A future fourth volume will include the biographies of post-1979 Chinese figures.)

The large, widely spaced text of each entry makes it easy to read. The intended readership of this series appears to be high school and first- and second-year university students, although those who teach younger students can make good use of this resource, and older students and adults who lack a background in Chinese studies may benefit from the clear, concise information provided in the volume. Although nearly all students now learn to read Chinese in its simplified form (at least initially), it is unfortunate that the editors neglected to provide equivalents for simplified

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renderings in *fantizi* (traditional Chinese characters) as each Chinese term is introduced, especially in a volume that focuses exclusively on early China, when no simplified system was in place. However, these equivalents may be found in one of the appendices included in volume 3. Moreover, the readers most likely to make use of this resource probably will be less concerned with orthography and more interested in seeing how the 135 individuals profiled in the series fit into the mosaic of the world’s oldest continuous civilization. In that endeavor, the *Dictionary* triumphs by virtue of being the best English-language resource for novice students of Chinese cultural history with which I am familiar. It is a resource that all libraries and many teachers should make an effort to acquire. ■

NOTES

1. “Is Biography History?,” *OUPblog*, last modified February 10, 2011, <http://blog.oup.com/2011/02/biography>.
2. Kerry Brown, introduction to *The Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2014), xxi-xxii, xxiv.

Volume 2: Song Dynasty through the Ming Dynasty

Reviewed by James Anderson



JAMES ANDERSON is an Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. A historian of premodern China and Việt Nam, Anderson’s first book is *The Rebel Den of Nùng Trí Cao: Loyalty and Identity Along the Sino-Vietnamese Frontier* (University of Washington Press, 2007). Anderson is currently engaged in research for a new book on the southwestern Silk Road between China and northern Southeast Asia during the ninth through thirteenth centuries. Anderson is the coeditor, with Nola Cooke and Li Tana, of *The Tongking Gulf Through History* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) and coeditor with John Whitmore of *China’s Encounters on the South and Southwest: Reforging the Fiery Frontier Over Two Millennia* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

The *Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography* is the product of a superb effort by numerous scholars to create a reference work for students to learn more about significant figures in Chinese history from all walks of life. This compilation of biographical sketches, illuminated with well-researched and contextualized information about the lives and achievements of the men and women featured here, is an impressive accomplishment. All students of

Chinese history and scholars of China in general will benefit from consulting these detailed biographies.

My review focuses on volume 2 from this multivolume set, which includes the biographies of figures from the Song, Jin, Yuan, and Ming dynasties. This volume covers nearly 300 years of history, and its contributors have selected an array of historical personages to illustrate the great philosophical, technological, military,

and political trends of this extended period. The volume’s layout is clearly arranged, with a map and a detailed list of entries at the beginning of the book. Each entry contains helpful illustrations, as well as sidebar passages of poetry or prose for many of the literary figures. The large, easy-to-read text makes the volume relatively simple to skim for information. The volume has the appearance of a well-organized textbook, which suggests that the target audience would