

Teaching the Geographies of Asia

The Berkshire Encyclopedia of China: Modern and Historic Views of the World's Newest and Oldest Global Power

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BERKSHIRE PRESS, 2009

2,756 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0977015948, HARDBACK

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This five-volume set is an impressive educational tool. During sixteen years as editor for *Education About Asia*, I have refrained from writing essays or reviews in the hard copy journal, but because I think the *Encyclopedia of China* is a significant contribution to Asian studies education that will have just as much longevity as the still-available *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (1983), I am contributing this review. Necessity also stimulated this review; the books languished in my office for months as I solicited numerous suggestions and discussed possibilities for reviewing the work with board members and other trusted colleagues. None of the approaches to review the work seemed satisfactory since they would have been either too lengthy or the elapsed time for procurement of joint reviews was unacceptable. This essay is a general description of the *Encyclopedia of China* and a more detailed description of two topics that are important in my own teaching and pedagogical research: Confucianism and the economic history of the Song Dynasty. Examples are included to provide readers with a more concrete notion of entries.

The *Encyclopedia of China* is a five-volume set with 800 articles written by China scholars from the US and a number of other nations; those of us who teach about East Asia will recognize names when skimming the list of contributors that are included at the beginning of each volume. There are eight major content categories, and the editors do a nice job of including a wide range of topics—from history and the origins of Chinese religions and belief systems to contemporary subjects such as the environment, economics, food, globalization, and politics. Even though example historical topics are included in this essay, readers can rest assured that, in compiling the work, the editors struck an excellent balance between past and present. Most pages also include interesting visuals culled from a wide variety of sources including libraries and museums. The work includes 1,200 photographs, as well as maps,

timelines, tables, and primary source-side bars. Each of the entries, which range from 500 to over 6,000 words, contain a short introductory abstract. The editors deliberately designed the *Encyclopedia of China* to make it easy for teachers to reproduce entries for classroom use. As much as I utilize and treasure the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, the design, graphics, and accessible prose in *Encyclopedia of China* make it a more effective resource than the aforementioned Japan reference classic for teachers, professors, and students.

I teach Confucius and Confucianism each semester in two survey-level courses—Foundations of Education, and History and Social Science Educational Methods and Materials—and there is limited time for in-depth treatment of any given topic. Students in my classes usually have little or no background knowledge of China. A significant number of students will encounter Confucius in perhaps one or two additional courses at most. None of the students are majoring in Asian studies since my university only offers Asian studies as a minor field. In each class, I have about two and a half hours to “cover” Confucius, excluding my students’ homework assignments. My objectives are to foster rudimentary student understanding of the many manifestations of this seminal Chinese belief system and, hopefully, to stimulate a lifelong interest on the part of at least some students to learn more about Confucianism. Reading eight *Encyclopedia* entries on the topics was quite helpful to me in thinking how better to attain these goals.

For example, James Sellmann, in his excellent three-page entry “Confucian Ethics,” vol. 1, 467–469, provides a definition of Confucian ethics “as a contextualistic virtue ethics based on self-cultivation” (467). My students are future teachers, and “unpacking” this simple clause through classroom discussion affords a pathway to a number of issues, including the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western ethical perspectives, the effect of Confucianism on human relations, and the difference between Western beliefs in values relativism and East Asians’ affinity for contextualizing virtue ethics. Entries on Qufu, the legendary birthplace of Confucius and Confucian temples, offered both vivid examples of how Chinese rulers—beginning in the Han dynasty and now continuing with the current Confucian revival—have used the geography of the sacred space to legitimize their own authority. One simple statistic that I have never seen in a textbook—in November 1966 two hundred Red Guards destroyed approximately 6,000 artifacts from Qufu—clearly illustrates the animosity of young adherents of the Cultural Revolution against this previously-venerated tradition.

The Confucian-related entry that will most probably be a part of my syllabus next term is Daniel Bell’s “Confucianism-Revival,” vol. 1, 482–492. Because of my affinity for historical Confucianism and specific ignorance of critical aspects concerning the resurgence of Chinese

interest in Confucius, I have confined my class discussion of the subject to mentioning that the Chinese government once again approves of Confucianism and that Confucius Institutes have been located in various foreign countries. Bell does an excellent job of discussing the causes and the different and often conflicting directions of the Confucius revival. Readers of this entry will learn about the Chinese government's "Confucianism for harmony," the Oprah Winfrey-like self-help Confucianism of best-selling author Yu Dan, the "Left Confucianism" of socialist (of a sort) intellectuals, and the "liberal democracy" version of Confucianism propagated by some (primarily) foreign scholars. Students reading Bell's entry who have some knowledge of contemporary Christianity should gain an even better understanding of the multiple schools of thought within any major belief system.

Chinese economic history in comparative world history is a personal teaching and pedagogical research interest because of my perception that many historians and economists with no background in East Asia fail to recognize that China prospered because often the imperial system afforded substantial amounts of economic freedom to many people. Reading entries from the *Encyclopedia* related to the Song Dynasty economy and considering their classroom applications was a useful exercise.

Even though I have a general knowledge of mid- and late-imperial Chinese economic history, several entries were helpful to me. Apparently, the word-count limitations incentivize authors to write powerful, succinct generalizations with interesting supporting examples. For example, Thomas Bartlett in the entry "Song Dynasty", vol. 4, 2038–2045, contends that in a global context, the Song had characteristics of modern societies, including a fundamentally rational view of the world, superior technology, and development (at least domestically) of strong and influential institutions. This is an excellent beginning generalization for either the classroom or an article or monograph where Song economic history might be compared with Italian city-states, Mogul India, or other economies that could be considered successful in a pre-modern context. In the same entry, Bartlett does a good job of linking the movement of landlords to towns and cities to the creation of more competitive and open commerce in Chinese towns and cities than had been the case in earlier dynasties.

Any consideration of the relative domestic prosperity and stability of the Song must also include an understanding of the ascent of the civil service examination system and its positive consequences for the Chinese state. Jiu hwa Lo Upshur does a good job in the entry "Examinations, Imperial," vol. 2 781-783, of briefly pointing out to readers the linkage between declining book prices and greater access to the examination for many men from socio-economic backgrounds who would otherwise not have the resources to study. Benjamin Elman,

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in his excellent “Civil Services Examinations,” vol.1, 405–10, puts to rest the notion that the civil service examinations were in and of themselves an avenue for social mobility on the part of the general population. However, Elman warms the heart of anyone interested in economics with a brief but effective paragraph on how the unintended consequences of legions of examination failures developed the talents of so many men who would go on to work in the private economy. I’ll also include the Elman entry in my course syllabus next term.

Most probably those educators, schools, and universities who acquire the *Encyclopedia of China* will find it useful for a long time. I highly recommend the set for middle and high schools as well as colleges and universities. Detailed information regarding prices, discount possibilities, print and digital options, and permissions and reproductions accompany this review.