The first Chinese encyclopedia, *Huang lan* (Book for the Emperors) was printed during the reign of the Weiwen emperor (187–226 CE). China’s first dictionary was compiled in the second century. Encyclopedic writing has played a significant role in Chinese scholarship and culture, valued as the ultimate assembly of traditional knowledge. Today China publishes both comprehensive and specialized encyclopedias and dictionaries.

In China, as elsewhere, encyclopedias are reference books that cover either all branches of human knowledge or all the knowledge of a specific branch. Dictionaries in Chinese are reference books devoted to either characters or words, and in which individual components are arranged by certain methods of indexing, marked with correct pronunciations and tones, and provided with their proper forms and meanings.

**Encyclopedias**

The English term *encyclopedia* is Greek in origin, meaning “general knowledge.” The Chinese term *baike quanshu* comes from Japan. *Baike* (a hundred subjects) refers to the extent of knowledge, whereas *quanshu* (all books) refers to comprehensiveness. An encyclopedia provides facts and other information. At the same time, it meets educational purposes by broadening the user’s horizon and providing him or her with a systematic way of acquiring knowledge.

Encyclopedias originated from people’s desire to generalize and classify the knowledge they had acquired. The ancient Greek scholar Aristotle developed many kinds of teaching materials that broadly encompassed the knowledge available at his time. Thus he is known in the West as the father of the encyclopedia. The Chinese book *Erya* (Approaching What Is Proper), appearing during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), covers the natural and social sciences and is considered the prototype of the Chinese encyclopedia. There are various traditions suggesting a much earlier origin, and the book’s significance through early Chinese history is evident since it was included among the twelve Confucian classics during the Tang period (618–907 CE). The first Chinese encyclopedia, or *leishu* (a book with material taken from various sources and arranged according to subjects), was *Huang lan* (Book for the Emperors), edited by Liu Shao, Wang Xiang, and others during the Weiwen emperor’s reign (187–226). Unfortunately, none of the several hundred *leishu* produced between the third and the eighteenth centuries was an encyclopedia in the truest sense. All were compilations of books already published. In a 1966 article on the Chinese encyclopedia, Wolfgang Bauer discussed the fluid boundaries between a dictionary and an encyclopedia and explained, “A longer commentary delving into history and culture and provided with extensive quotations of sources is . . . more characteristic of the encyclopaedia.” He also wrote, “Although they may include an opinion on the subject, they
rarely contain an original opinion. As countless other works of Chinese literature the encyclopaedia was usually compiled by the ‘scissor and paste’ method and not really written.”

**Western Encyclopedias Explained to Chinese Readers**

Encyclopedias of ancient times, such as the ancient Greek and Roman encyclopedias intended for education, were authored by individuals who used medieval methods of classification. The thirty-seven-volume *Naturalis Historia*, written by the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder during the first century, is typical of such ancient encyclopedias. Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages, bearing the theological and religious marks of the time, were mostly compiled as textbooks for clergymen serving in monasteries during the fifth to sixteenth centuries. Most of them were still based on the medieval seven-liberal-arts classification system. The eighty-volume *Speculum majus* (Bigger Mirror), written by Vincent de Beauvais of France, was the epitome of encyclopedias of this period. Under the influence of the English philosopher Francis Bacon, a more scientific classification system began to be adopted by encyclopedists of the late Middle Ages and has since become the basis for the compilation of modern encyclopedias.

Encyclopedias of modern times date since the eighteenth century. The pioneer was the French philosopher Denis Diderot, who led French encyclopedists in producing the twenty-eight-volume *Encyclopédie* (Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts) from 1751 to 1772. Modern encyclopedias enlighten the reader with knowledge of modern science and technologies and arrange entries in alphabetical order, like dictionaries, for convenience. Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, Great Britain, Germany, United States, France, Italy, Russia, and Japan produced authoritative encyclopedias, of which the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (published in Great

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**Reference Works about China Published Abroad**

Until the *China Great Encyclopedia* (*Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu* 中国大百科全书) began to appear in 1978 from Encyclopedia of China Publishing House in Beijing, the most comprehensive references on Chinese culture were published outside China. The earliest of such works was probably the *Encyclopaedia Sinica*, written by an English missionary named Samuel Couling and published in 1917. Morohashi Tetsuji’s *The Great Chinese–Japanese Dictionary* (*Dai Kan–Wa jiten* 大漢和辭典) appeared in thirteen volumes from 1955 to 1959. A wide variety of European and American reference works about Chinese history, culture, and biography appeared in the twentieth century, some of them single-volume compilations designed for students, and others—like the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Chinese History*, published by Cambridge University Press in ten volumes—are a collection of the work of many scholars. The famous reference series *Science and Civilisation in China*, also published by Cambridge University Press, had a primary author, Joseph Needham, but some later volumes were written by other scholars.

The *Encyclopedia of China Today*, a 1980 volume, was arranged in topical chapters like a textbook, not arranged alphabetically. It was the first general resource published to help Americans get up to speed on a country that they had been cut off from for nearly thirty years. The foreword—by John Service, the most prominent of the U.S. China experts to be pursued by the McCarthy Commission—is in itself evidence of the change that was taking place in the United States after the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC in March 1979.

In March 2009, exactly thirty years after normalization, the first comprehensive scholarly English-language encyclopedia, the five-volume *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China* was published by Berkshire Publishing Group, a U.S. company specializing in global information that had developed the six-volume *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia* published by Charles Scribers Sons in 2002.
Britain before the fourteenth edition and subsequently in the United States) is generally considered the outstanding example.

**China's First Modern Encyclopedia**

The *Encyclopedia of China* (or *China Great Encyclopedia, Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu 中国大百科全书*) is the first large-scale comprehensive modern encyclopedia in the Chinese language. The compilation began in 1978. Published by the Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, the encyclopedia was issued one volume at a time, beginning in 1980 with a volume on astronomy. The final volume was completed in 1993. It comprised seventy-four volumes, with more than 80,000 entries divided into sixty-six subject categories. Within each category entries were arranged by pinyin, as are many modern Chinese dictionaries. Its second edition was published in 2008. The Encyclopedia of China Publishing House has also translated and published the *Concise Encyclopedia Britannica* (ten volumes), which was originally compiled and printed by American Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., and the *Soviet Encyclopedia Dictionary*, originally compiled and published by the former Soviet Encyclopedia Publishing House.

**Types**

Contemporary encyclopedias come in all types to satisfy the needs of readers of different professions and educational backgrounds. The encyclopedias fall into three major types: comprehensive, specialized, and regional.

Comprehensive encyclopedias cover all the branches of knowledge and are used to access basic knowledge. In accordance with readership, they are further divided into scholarly encyclopedias, such as *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Encyclopedia of China*; popular or secondary school encyclopedias, such as *Compton's Encyclopedia* and *Xin shiji zhongxuesheng baike quanshu* (*New Century Middle School Students' Encyclopedia*); and young adult and children's encyclopedias, such as the *Oxford Children's Encyclopedia* and *Zhongguo ertong baike quanshu* (*China's Children Encyclopedia*).

Specialized encyclopedias focus on one branch or subject of knowledge, and their coverage can be as broad as that of the U.S. *Encyclopedia of Science and Technology* or as narrow as that of the *Zhongguo jiyou baike quanshu* (*Chinese Encyclopedia of Stamp Collection*).

Regional encyclopedias are limited to a certain region, country, or even a city, such as the *Encyclopedia of Asia*, *Jianming Zhonghua baike quanshu* (*Concise Encyclopedia of China*), and *Aomen baike quanshu* (*Encyclopedia of Macao*).

**Structures and Processes**

Encyclopedias are arranged mainly by entries that are systematically ordered for easy access. After the editors of an encyclopedia analyze and process the knowledge available—either general knowledge in a comprehensive work, or specific scholarship on the particular subject the work will cover—the headings are designated in such a way as to make the encyclopedia “user friendly.” The subjects are then assigned to various scholars or authors who will prepare the text of the entries. A contemporary encyclopedia can have as few as 1,000 or as many as 100,000 entries. Related entries are often connected with cross-references so that overlapping subjects can be treated without redundancy and related subjects can be associated to each other. Entries often include diagrams, if diagrams, tables and graphics when appropriate, and suggested readings.

Entries are compiled in three ways: by alphabetical order of the first letter of entries, by subject, and by a combination of the first two ways (and with each branch of knowledge contained in a different volume). Encyclopedias of the West often adopt the first method. The *Encyclopedia of China*, nevertheless, employs the last method, the benefit of which is that users find it easy to use and affordable to purchase because they can buy separate volumes as they need.

Apart from the entries that form the main body of text, an encyclopedia also has appendixes to make it more useful. Indexes and appendixes that provide additional information and data, such as maps and chronological tables of important events, are the most important pages of what is called the “back matter.”

**New Media**

Traditional encyclopedias printed on paper have existed for more than a thousand years. With the advent of computer-based information technology in the 1980s, electronic versions of encyclopedias emerged. The early
electronic encyclopedias used a different medium, compact discs. In no time a new type of electronic encyclopedia came into being, one that was interactive and multimedia. This meant that users could not only “talk” to the computer (book) but also could enjoy pictures, audios, and videos alongside the texts. An encyclopedia thus becomes alive and active. If a traditional paper-based encyclopedia is seen as “a university without walls,” then an interactive and multimedia encyclopedia is “a window to a university at home,” which, teaching with three-dimensional demonstrations, gives users enjoyment as they learn.

**Evaluation**

All kinds of encyclopedias with different qualities serve various purposes. A reader must know how to evaluate them and select those that are most helpful. The evaluation should concentrate on four areas: types, functions, readership, and quality. When assessing the quality of an encyclopedia, six criteria should be followed:

- Authority of the writers, editors (editorial board), and publishers responsible for the entries
- Careful selection of complete and up-to-date information
- Objective presentation of views and facts that allows no political, religious, and social biases
- Concise and understandable language
- An easy and precise searching system (the placement of entries and cross-references as well as the creation of indexes)
- Binding and layout, such as the design format, printing, and the quality of paper and binding

**Dictionaries**

Ancient Chinese dictionaries did not differentiate between 尺 (single characters) and 词 (words with multiple characters). The Chinese called dictionaries of this nature zishu (books of characters). Not until publication of Kangxi zidian (The Kangxi Emperor’s Dictionary of Characters) in the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and the emergence of the term cidian (dictionary of words) in modern China did the Chinese begin to distinguish the concept of zidian (dictionaries of characters) from that of cidian (dictionaries of words). Nevertheless, the difference between zidian and cidian is blurred in that a zidian may have words as its entries, whereas a cidian may also have single characters as its entries. They differ only in their focuses. The English term *dictionary* is, however, indiscriminative of characters and words. There is no such thing as an English zidian, or dictionary of characters. The Japanese "字典" (pronounced “ziyin” in Chinese) is mostly akin to the Chinese zidian.
As early as the second century, Xu Shen compiled his *Shuowen jiezi* (Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters), a dictionary arranged in accordance with the structures of each character, which numbered more than nine thousand. It was one of the world’s earliest dictionaries. Then around the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) *Yupian* (Jade Chapters) appeared. It consisted of more than twenty thousand characters. Between the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and the period before the First Opium War (1839–1842) during the Qing dynasty, *Kangxi zidian* appeared along with another compilation, *Zihui* (Character Collection), which comprised 33,179 characters. With forty-seven thousand characters, *Kangxi zidian* is typical of the Chinese dictionaries of characters and remained the largest Chinese dictionary for a long time. Modern Chinese *zidian* have been written on the basis of ancient dictionaries of this nature. The most outstanding is the *Zhonghua da zidian* (Comprehensive Chinese Character Dictionary), compiled by Lu Feikui and others during early Republican China (1912–1949). It not only included more than forty-eight thousand characters, more than the *Kangxi zidian* did, but also corrected more than two thousand errors in the latter. In 1986 *Hanyu da zidian* (Comprehensive Chinese Character Dictionary), containing as many as fifty-six thousand Chinese characters, was published. The *Zhonghua zihai* (Sea of Chinese Characters), published in 1994, records a staggering 85,568 characters.

**Comprehensive and Specialized**

Because of the different purposes they serve and the different users they target, modern Chinese *zidian* fall roughly into two major categories. One is the comprehensive *zidian*, like the *Xinhua zidian* (New China Character Dictionary), used chiefly for learning and reading the Chinese language. The other is the specialized *zidian*, such as the *Jingdian shiwen* (Textual Explanations of Classics and Canons), *Gu Han yu changyongzi zidian* (Dictionary of Frequently Used Classic Chinese Characters), and *Zhongguo shufa da zidian* (Comprehensive Chinese Dictionary of Calligraphy). They are written for those who specialize in the study of the forms and pronunciations of Chinese characters.

Commonly used *zidian* are arranged in three ways: according to the pronunciation of the characters, of their radicals, and of the strokes at each of the four corners of a character in coded numbers. Some *zidian* use one of the three ways, whereas others use two or all of them at the same time.

Because language constantly changes and new knowledge is continually gained, dictionaries and encyclopedias are destined to be important documents, no matter what their form.

**LIU Hang**

*Translated and used, with permission, from the Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu 中国大百科全书 (China Great Encyclopedia), with the addition of the “Encyclopedias about China Published Abroad” sidebar.*

**Further Reading**


Collison, R., Jin, C., & Lü Qianfei. (1980). *Encyclopaedias: Their history throughout the ages: A bibliographical guide with extensive historical notes to the general encyclopaedias issued throughout the world from 350 B.C. to the present day.* Beijing: Zhishi chubanshe.


