

Alexandra Wetzel; translated by Jay Hyams, *China: from the foundation of the empire to the Ming dynasty*, (*Dictionaries of Civilization Series*), Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 2009, 384 pp.

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This very attractive book first appeared four years ago in Milan, Italy, originally written by Sinologist Alexandra Wetzel. It was then published in French the following year with the title *La Chine ancienne*, where it was, perhaps more accurately, described as forming part of a *guide des arts* collection, as the book is strong on artistic objects used to complement and give visual insights to the historical text. It has now reappeared, cleverly rendered from the Italian into English by Jay Hyams, as part of an educational series entitled *Dictionaries of Civilization*. However, rather than the usually heavy volume that one has come to associate with the word dictionary, the U.S. version replicates the original pocket reference book format. These fun-to-peruse publications by the University Press have covered the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome since 2007. The latest, dealing with the civilization of China, came out last year together with a dictionary on Africa.

One of the main assets of this publication is its praiseworthy historical scope and cultural aims, as it attempts to provide an overview, through text and illustration, of Chinese civilization from the foundation—one could say the invention—of the Chinese empire by Qin Shi Huangdi in the third century BC, to the end of the Ming Dynasty in 1644 AD. The focus thus given to Chinese history is brilliant, for it makes readers aware that China's unification along imperial lines by Chinese rulers has distinct limits. A sort of organizational grasp for this vast historical period is achieved by arranging its material into a variety of categories, which appear in seven sections devoted to people, power and public life, religion and philosophy, daily life, the world of the dead, capitals, and finally Buddhist cave temples. There is also a short introduction, as well as an equally short section providing references for in the last pages of the book.

As regards content and format the book is basically divided into two basic parts. One is a historical introduction to each of the many subjects discussed under each main category or theme, which subjects may be as few as seven or as many as twenty-five. The other part is an adjacent page to the text showing beautiful reproductions of works of art and architecture related to the subject under discussion. These illustrations do ample justice to the theme of ancient China. Most are in colour, but there are also good black and white reproductions that immediately catch the eye of the reader, with large or smaller images artistically and tastefully laid out in a way calculated to complement rather than obscure the text. There is great merit in a designer's ability to understand and respect the written word; this not always being the case. The explanatory texts themselves cannot really be regarded as other than introductions to each of the subjects, with the information carefully condensed. Some aspects of Chinese culture are hardly mentioned, but the explanations are nonetheless wonderfully concise, accurate and interesting.

There are some aspects of the book where the inevitable difficulties could have been eased. The mentioned brief introduction, for example, is mainly devoted to explaining the historical and cultural aim of the book in a couple of pages, but does little to make the choice of subjects more understandable to readers. Its general index is not much to speak

of; it consists of no more than two narrow columns almost imperceptibly placed in the inner folds of pages 382 and 383. Also the main categories and their many subordinate subjects at times appear somewhat arbitrary. What, for example, are the reasons for going from a discussion of the ancient capitals of China that go from the Qin capital Xianyang (350 BC), to the Ming capital in Beijing, the latter capital rebuilt by Kublai Khan (who reigned 1260-1293 AD), and later expanded in 1406 by the Yongle Emperor, and from these capital cities jumping to a category dealing with Buddhist cave temples? In the same way the theme of “people” is rather broad. Here, fortunately, a line has been drawn and the reader encounters a fascinating group of historical characters that includes emperors and poets. The section entitled “power and public life” includes gardens, novels, horses, the great wall and other less related subjects, and without an explanation in the introduction some of these choices may seem a bit puzzling. The book nonetheless manages to create for the reader the impression of a fascinating journey through China’s history and culture, a journey that is both entertaining and instructive.