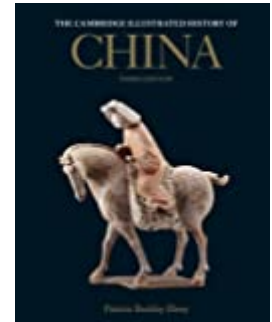


**Patricia Buckley Ebrey.** *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. 3rd. ed. Cambridge University Press, 2023. Illustrations, maps. 400 pp. \$44.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-00-915144-3.



**Reviewed by** Feng Schöneweiß (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut / Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte)

**Published on** H-Environment (March, 2025)

**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Scales matter in historical research and writing. Patricia Buckley Ebrey's *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (third edition) operates on vast scales of time, geography, ecology, culture, and ethnicity, while masterfully knitting thematic threads into stories of China in a global, dynamic context. It is among the most inviting, visually informed, and up-to-date introductions to the history of China. The book spans a temporal scope from China's Neolithic cultures (ca. 7000 BCE) to the COVID-19 pandemic and China's energy transition until 2021. Many reviews have been written since the publication of the book's earlier editions (1996, 2010). The current review thus prioritizes a thematic assessment of the book, instead of a chapter-by-chapter account, in order to leave ample space for the new features of the third edition.

In thirteen chronological chapters, the book presents a diverse range of topics, including religions, philosophical foundations, material culture, art, gender, family, the economy, and politics. In-

corporating recent archaeological discoveries, the book highlights “a fuller treatment of environmental history and Chinese interaction with the wider world, placing China in global context” (back-cover blurb, pp. 10-11). Paying critical attention to “change over time, both long-term trends and important turning points,” in Chinese history, the author argues that “China was never isolated and that interaction between the Chinese and non-Chinese was of significance to both sides” (pp. 10, 11). This overall argument is substantiated with a rich array of primary materials and scholarly insights from a wide spectrum of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Written for a “Western general public with little knowledge of China or its history,” the book has become arguably the most popular undergraduate textbook on the history of China written by a non-Chinese author, and among the most accessible introductions to the history of China written in English (p. 10).

As an art historian, I commend the selection and printing of color illustrations in the book.

These helpful images mainly include newly commissioned maps and photographic reproduction of artworks, historical photos, line drawings, and cultural objects. In total, the book features thirty-eight high-quality maps with clearly recognizable legends and informative coloration. Each chapter begins with a list of key dates within the chapter's temporal range and often features a map of China (or a region in focus) that presents shifting political boundaries or environmental changes. The maps include, for example, China's mean annual precipitation, Ming China's maritime contacts with much of Asia and East Africa, trade routes of the cosmopolitan Tang Empire, and the Eurasian campaigns of the Mongol Empire. China's changing population and its shifting distribution are visualized side by side in four maps. In the map showing the conflicts between the Southern Song and Jin dynasties during the early twelfth century, Chinese centers of tea production are also clearly marked, in addition to their respective production scale in weight, in order to illustrate a nuanced understanding of Chinese economic vitality despite military retreats. These tea centers, in turn, can also serve as indicators of local climate conditions in a period marked by mild but dropping temperature and increased soil moisture. An accomplished historian of art, the author selected images of superb quality, amounting to more than 240 reproductions of photographs, manuscripts, paintings, and other artworks. The images do not merely serve the purpose of illustrating historical events but oftentimes also stand out as key evidence for chapter- and section-level arguments. Many of the images are of critical importance for understanding the contemporary history of China, for instance, the doctored photographs of Mao Zedong's (1893-1976) funeral rally and a picture of the iconic "Tank Man," the courageous protester standing against a dozen tanks on Tiananmen Square, where the regime had just cracked down on pro-democracy demonstration in June 1989.

Each chapter includes two to three concise analytical sections titled "In Focus," which treat

engaging yet small-scale case studies over one to two pages. Some topics in focus deal with histories of women in China and their lived experiences, for instance, the archaeological findings from Lady Hao's tomb (ca. 1250 BCE), Ban Zhao (ca. 45-116) and women's education, love stories and the notion of female attractiveness, and modern female intellectuals like Ding Ling (1904-85). These shorter cases complement longer sections on relevant topics, such as women's wider social involvements and their participation in political protests and agricultural work. The sections about women go hand in hand with those on issues of religions, ethnicities, and suppressed communities.

For readers of this H-Environment review, who are likely to be scholars in environmental humanities, the book is an inviting entrance to the vast regions, diverse ecological conditions, and fluid boundaries of what we call China today. Although the book is not an environmental history of China, nine out of the thirteen chapters include dedicated sections with a focus on aspects of environmental history. Environmental historians in particular will appreciate the rich contextual information provided in the book, situating China's environmental changes and Chinese thoughts on nature in various social, technological, and intellectual dimensions. The author offers a general depiction of "the natural environment" of China, in addition to varied landscapes and riverscapes. Animal-human relations are dealt with in several sections, concerning the southward retreat of Asian elephants in China, zoomorphic images on ancient bronze vessels, the production of silk in early China (animal-plant-human interactions), and the agrarian economy during the foundational periods of China's political institutions. These are continued by topics on the Han River Valley in central China and its native people, referred to by the Chinese as Man or Nan Man, the "southern barbarians" (p. 100). Political, environmental, and fiscal crises during the Little Ice Age receive the author's analytical attention, as this climatic

change has been convincingly related to the fall of the Ming dynasty. For the decline during the nineteenth century, the author depicts a picture of population growth in contrast to environmental degradation, leading to what she terms “total humiliation” between 1894 and 1900 (p. 274). For the twentieth century, the book emphasizes several periods of “environmental costs,” as a result of continuous war until 1945, frequent political conflicts and policy failures (e.g., the Great Leap Forward), and the ecological consequences of modernization attempts (p. 307). Most of examinations of environmental history are embedded in relevant social and historical contexts and connected to specific thoughts, figures, and events. This feature of the book makes it an accessible introduction for readers who have no prior knowledge of the varied regions in China or their languages.

Ebrey (b. 1947) is professor emerita at the Department of History, University of Washington, and a laureate of the American Historical Association’s Award for Scholarly Distinction. Ebrey is a historian of China with an astonishingly wide array of expertise. In her five-decade career since earning her PhD (1975), she has published award-winning monographs in social history, family history, women’s history, and the history of arts and collections, while writing avidly for undergraduate students and a wider public audience. From the perspective of her academic biography, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* can be seen as a successful incorporation of her long-term research and teaching experiences.

Yet such a book further deserves its own object biography, which is beyond the scope of this review. First published in 1996, the book attracted wide attention, evidenced by multiple reviews published in periodicals aimed at academics and school librarians. The first paperback edition was released in 1999 and was reprinted eight times within ten years. The second edition was published in 2010. It has been translated into several languages, including Chinese. By the early 2010s,

the book has become a classic in the field, to the extent that it has also become a case study in the field of translation studies.[1] The current edition is a full revision of the previous. Many chapters have been rewritten and reconceptualized. The content on the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) is now divided into two chapters, while a new chapter closely traces the “transformation of China into one of the world’s leading economies,” titled “Engaging with the World: China Since 1976” (chapter 13).

With a nonexpert intelligent audience in mind, the author does not include Chinese characters throughout the text, using pinyin romanization of Chinese names of places, historical figures, and works. One exception is the section on the Chinese writing system in chapter 1. This legitimate authorial decision serves the function of the book, and perhaps also the convenience of book production, yet original characters would probably have facilitated expert readers and students of Chinese languages and cultures for further research. As a survey, the book offers only one page of endnotes, aided by an up-to-date list of selected further readings arranged according to themes and important historical periods. Notes are only provided when quoting directly from other scholars’ translations of Chinese primary sources. Despite the minimum usage of endnotes, the author manages to hint at the body of scholarship that has informed her own work, making it possible for keen readers of Chinese history to decipher the references. For instance, the book’s first treatment of environmental history quotes a map, titled “Retreat of the Elephants,” pointing at Mark Elvin’s award-winning monograph, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (2004) (p. 15). Showing a Chinese migrant worker painting an authentic replica of one of Vincent van Gogh’s sunflowers, a photograph illustrates the main points of the section on domestic migrant workers and China’s reengagement with the world after 1978, meanwhile alluding to Winnie Wong’s award-winning monograph on the Dafen

village near Shenzhen, *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade* (2013).

Overall, Ebrey's third edition of *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* is distinguished with its interdisciplinary and thematically comprehensive qualities, encompassing diverse scales of analyses. As a general introduction to the history of China, the book is a leading choice among the best. It certainly deserves a place on the bookshelves of students, teachers, and historians who are interested in the dynamic histories of China in a global and long-duration context. For environmental historians who wish for a deeper and focused introduction to China's ecology, climate, and geography, several recent books could certainly complement Ebrey's illuminous volume. As recommended by Ebrey, Robert B. Marks's *China: An Environmental History* (2017) could be a follow-up reading.

#### Note

[1]. Fang Zhang 张芳, “汉学论著翻译问题论析: 以伊沛霞《剑桥插图中国史》为例” [A research on translation problems of Sinological literatures: A case study of *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* by Ebrey], *Journal of Jiangsu Second Normal University (Social Science)* 30, no. 7 (2014): 93-97.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

**Citation:** Feng Schöneweiß. Review of Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. March, 2025.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60072>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.