Reviews of Books

ABC Chinese-English Comprehensive Dictionary. Edited by JOHN DEFRANCIS. ABC Chinese Diction-
ary Series. Honolulu: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I PRESS, 2003, 2009. Pp. 1464. $67.

The *ABC Dictionary*, containing some 200,000 entries in fine print on thin paper, is the work of the
late John DeFrancis (1911–2009) and of decades of selfless encouragement by Victor Mair. Thanks to
electronic editions from Wenlin and Murage and other licensees, not to mention closely related materi-
als found on free websites of all sorts, the *ABC Dictionary* and its contents are now the most widely
distributed American dictionary of Chinese.

Briefly, the best thing about this dictionary is the completeness of its coverage, a boon to those
intermediate users who cannot handle an all-Chinese dictionary. For advanced users, however, it is
somewhat marred by sloppiness in basic lexicographic work (perhaps due to its overreaching for cover-
age), by totally inadequate treatment of parts of speech, and by the alphabetic principle on which the
dictionary is organized and for which it is named—a principle that is helpful in some respects but less
so than the editors intended.

Treatment of standard translations: A substantial fraction of the material in Chinese-English dic-
tionaries, consisting of ordinary verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and common (i.e., not proper) nouns, is
more or less standard and varies little from one book to another. Proper nouns and the jargon from
various technical and professional fields, too, are well on their way to being normalized in translation.
The *ABC Dictionary* contains all that may be expected in regard to these words, and there is little to
say beyond that where standard translations are concerned, little appears to be lacking. Much of this
matter already belongs to common bilingual knowledge, so in that sense it is not strictly original to the
ABC Dictionary.

But a Chinese-English dictionary should provide a translation only when it is really useful. In many
cases, a definition—which explains meaning and usage—is better than a simple English equivalent
because it can be more precise. That is true even for ordinary lexicon. A large part of the ordinary
lexicon in the *ABC Dictionary* is rendered in translation rather than being defined, and in places that
must be accounted a weakness.

As an illustration, virtually all Chinese-English dictionaries render the transitive verb *pèifu* 佩服
as 'to admire; to be impressed', as does the *ABC Dictionary*. But as clear as this translation is, we
might be better off with a definition. Consider that where English 'admire' indicates a state of esteem
or approval, *pèifu* implies that the object has at some point made an impression on the subject. Rather
than equating *pèifu* directly with 'admire', we might better define it as 'to be impressed with someone
or with someone's qualities'. Moreover, *pèifu* is sometimes used with considerable irony, transitively
or intransitively, just as when we say in English, "I'm impressed," even though we may be no such
thing. 'Admire' is not easily turned to that ironic usage; it is no better than a rough rendering of *pèifu*.

As another example, the verb-object compound *tiáoqíng* 調情 is translated 'flirt' here. But the
two words differ in scope and collocation. English 'flirt' can involve dallying with an idea or activity,
whereas *tiáoqíng* cannot. *Tiáoqíng*, on the other hand, can describe the affectionate teasing that takes
place between lovers in a long-running romance or between a husband and wife, domains outside the
scope of 'flirt', since to flirt is normally to express or feign casual amorous interest. A definition such
as 'to engage in affectionate teasing or flirtation' could make these differences clear; a simple transla-
tion like 'flirt' overlooks them.

Another example: the pejorative verb-object compound *qǔqiǎo* 取巧 means to take a clever shortcut
in getting something one wants, avoiding the time or effort that is normally due. The *ABC Dictionary*
offers three translations: 1. finagle; wangle, 2. take a snap course, 3. use finesse. All three have serious
problems. 'Finagle' and 'wangle' suggest circumventing the rules, which is sometimes an element of
qǔqiǎo; but as they stand they render the full meaning incompletely. 'Take a snap course' (a course in

school that can be passed with a minimum of effort) is a possible example of *qǔqiǎo*, but it hardly suffices as either a general translation or a definition. 'Use finesse', too, might be applied to those instances of *qǔqiǎo* where a delicate touch is required, but in itself it leaves much of *qǔqiǎo* unexpressed.

Countless cases of imprecise translation are to be found in the *ABC Dictionary*, where definitions would serve us better. That said, many of the translations, like 'admire' for *pèifu*, are familiar ones, so the dictionary is not necessarily introducing an error. But in a work of this size and prestige we would prefer to see better than merely the status quo.

There is also the matter of parts of speech. Many Chinese verbs have both transitive and intransitive usages, but the *ABC Dictionary* does not distinguish them, assigning both to "v." unless the intransitive verb is an example of "v.o." construction (as are *tiáoqíng* and *qǔqiǎo*, above). A further problem with the translations 'finagle' and 'wangle' for *qǔqiǎo* is that they are commonly transitive in contemporary English, whereas to make the intransitive quality of *qǔqiǎo* clear to today's readers one would have to say something like 'do some finagling'. There are many cases of transitivity mismatch in the dictionary, and the part-of-speech notations fail to resolve them.

Beyond transitivity, the dictionary contains curious cases of well-known verbal expressions being rendered nominally or as whole subject-predicate sentences. We also often find intransitive verbs being rendered as English adjectives. Admittedly, Chinese part of speech is a very tricky matter in English translation. It calls for finesse (though not for *qǔqiǎo*). But the instances of this inevitable problem could have been reduced if the lexicographers had chosen to define words rather than translate them.

Rare words and idiom: As with most dictionaries of this size, a vast part of its inventory will never be encountered in living usage. Having more entries than anyone else is good for the publisher's advertising, but those entries are hard for users to check, and one wonders whether the editors ever checked them, either. The *ABC Dictionary* does not normally indicate that a usage is obsolete or otherwise unusual, and the reader may be left with the impression that the compilers' only interest was in collecting as much material as possible, without verifying its currency or the accuracy of their treatment of it.

Even idiom, the component of the lexicon in whose treatment the lexicographer's craft should show most brilliantly and idiosyncratically, seems rather conventional and stuffy in this book. Users may have the sensation that they have seen it before. And perhaps they have. A certain proportion of the idiom in the *ABC Dictionary* has indeed already appeared elsewhere.

By way of example, below are a number of idioms as defined in the 2009 *ABC Dictionary* and the 1978 *Chinese-English Dictionary* 漢英辭典 of Wú Jǐngróng 吳景榮 (1915–1994):

yìtuán qīhēi 一團漆黑	**2009:**	N.	1. pitch-black; completely in the dark; 2. utterly hopeless
	1978:		utterly hopeless
yìshǒu zhētiān 一手遮天	**2009:**	F.E.	hoodwink the public
	1978:		hide the truth from the masses; hoodwink the public
yìbǐ mǒshā 一筆抹殺	**2009:**	V.P.	totally negate
	1978:		blot out at one stroke; condemn out of hand; totally negate
yìchóu mò zhǎn 一籌莫展	**2009:**	F.E.	be at wits' end
	1978:		can find no way out; be at one's wits' end; be at the end of one's tether
rénmiàn shòuxīn 人面獸心	**2009:**	F.E.	beast in human shape; wolf in sheep's clothing
	1978:		a beast in human shape
dīshēng xiàqì 低聲下氣	**2009:**	F.E.	soft-spoken and submissive
	1978:		1. soft-spoken and submissive; 2. servile; obsequious; cringing

dàodǎ yìpá 倒打一耙	**2009:**	V.P.	make an unfounded countercharge
	1978:		make unfounded countercharges; put the blame on one's victim; recriminate
zài jiē zài lì 再接再勵	**2009:**	F.E.	make persistent efforts
	1978:		make persistent efforts; continue to exert oneself; work ceaselessly and unremittingly
míngwán bùlíng 冥頑不靈	**2009:**	F.E.	impenetrably thickheaded
	1978:		impenetrably thickheaded
chūshēng rùsǐ 出生入死	**2009:**	F.E.	brave untold dangers
	1978:		go through fire and water; brave untold dangers
wēijī sì fú 危機四伏	**2009:**	F.E.	crisis-ridden
	1978:		beset with crises; crisis-ridden
sīkōng jiànguàn 司空見慣	**2009:**	F.E.	common sight/occurrence
	1978:		a common sight; a common occurrence
tóngliú héwū 同流合污	**2009:**	F.E.	wallow in mire with sb.
	1978:		wallow in the mire with sb.; associate with an evil person
sàngxīn bìngkuáng 喪心病狂	**2009:**	F.E.	frenzied
	1978:		frenzied; unscrupulous; perverse
sìpíng bāwěn 四平八穩	**2009:**	F.E.	1. very steady; well-organized 2. lacking in initiative and overcautious
	1978:		1. very steady; well-organized 2. lacking in initiative and overcautious
gùbù zì fēng 固步自封	**2009:**	F.E.	complacent and conservative
	1978:		stand still and refuse to make progress; be complacent and conservative
núyán bìxī 奴顔婢膝	**2009:**	F.E.	subservient; servile
	1978:		subservient; servile
qūdǎ chéngzhāo 屈打成招	**2009:**	F.E.	confess to false charges under torture
	1978:		confess to false charges under torture

The honor paid by DeFrancis and Mair to Wú's pathbreaking work is quite clear in their treatment of these and many other idioms.

In China, Wú's 1978 dictionary has occupied the place of a national public resource for translation, so it is not surprising that these definitions should have continued to appear in later sources, and to have made their way into this book as well. Many of them appear not only in the *ABC Dictionary* but also in various unrestricted on-line sources, virtually word for word. What is curious, however, is that the part of speech for a high proportion of these four-character idioms is given in the *ABC Dictionary* as "F.E.," which is no part of speech at all, but stands for "fixed expression," meaning an idiom with a certain learned air. Failure to clearly mark parts of speech has been characteristic of Chinese lexicography until recently; even now, native dictionaries hardly ever distinguish transitive from intransitive verbs. Of course, checking the part of speech of a Chinese expression is hard, empirical work and requires the same labor that is needed to establish the meanings of those expressions. Indeed, meaning and part of speech are usually settled at the same time when lexicographers read Chinese corpora; the two are actually part of the same process, because Chinese part of speech is ambiguous and can only be determined by context.

Could it be that the inexactness of both, in so many of the *ABC Dictionary*'s entries, is a sign that neither was done afresh for this book?

"Topolect": A small annoyance is that the dictionary uses "topolect" to mark all regionalisms. This word was coined by Victor Mair to render Chinese *fāngyán* 方言 (normally 'dialect' in all its modern senses, also 'dialect group' and 'regional language'). Here is not the place to debate the nationalist applications to which "topolect" is now being turned, or whether there is any need for this coinage in linguistic classification. But it is clear that regionalisms in a Mandarin dictionary could simply have been marked "regionalism," without introducing a controversial new word.

The alphabetic principle: The name "ABC" in the title originates in the fact that the dictionary's entries are alphabetized by Pinyin romanization. Strictly alphabetic ordering of Chinese dictionaries is a principle long championed by DeFrancis and first prominently seen in the two-volume Chinese dictionary published at Seton Hall in 1966 and 1971, bearing the name of Fred Fang-yü Wang 王方宇 (1913–1997) as editor.

As a way of focusing the user's attention on the actual sound of words rather than their Chinese orthographic garb, alphabetical ordering is a superb tool. Consider that the dictionary contains forty distinct words pronounced *jishi* in various tones:

jīshī	機師, 雞虱
jīshí	基石, 積食, 雞食, 機時, 雞什
jīshǐ	激使
jīshì	幾事
jíshī	楫師
jíshí	及時, 即時
jíshǐ	即使, 疾駛, 急駛
jíshì	急事, 集市, 吉事, 嫉/疾視, 即事, 即世
jǐshí	幾時, 幾十
jìshī	技師, 祭師
jìshí	記時, 紀實, 計時, 記實, 寄食, 芰實
jìshì	記事, 既是, 紀事, 濟世, 濟事, 繼室, 技士, 記室, 季世

(In passing, we note that *jīshǐ* 雞屎 'chicken droppings' seems to have fallen by the wayside.) Native orthography assigns (in theory, at least) a different graph to each etymologically distinct syllable-morpheme, with the result that twenty-five of these *ji-* syllables have their own characters, as do seventeen of the *-shi* syllables. In a traditional character-centered dictionary, the user has to hunt down the correct first syllable *ji-* among the many *ji-*morphemes scattered around the book, and then search under that *ji-* for the correct *-shi* character before finally reading the definition. Any user who is unsure how to write the word in traditional orthography may have to read dozens of definitions before finding the right one. In DeFrancis' vision, however, the user flips quickly to the entries for *jishi*, which are in alphabetical order between *jishexiang* and *jishi'anmin*, then picks the appropriate combination of tones on each syllable, and finally examines the characters and definitions. Considered purely as an algorithmic process, this is far more economical than looking up words either by characters or by first syllables distinguished by character. All that is necessary is that the user know the pronunciation of all the characters. Economy of this sort means less time wasted, and more time to be spent elsewhere on the lifelong journey that is the study of Chinese.

Unhappily, this "alphabetical single-sort method" is based on English orthographic rules, without regard to Chinese phonological structure. The dictionary mixes together different Chinese sounds based on the fact that in alphabetized English they would be adjacent. The most serious consequence of this

practice is in the case of syllable codas *-n* and *-ng*. As an example, consider the three syllables *kua* and *kuan* and *kuang*. Someone who understands the structure of the Chinese syllable will look for any word whose first syllable is *kua* ahead of any whose first syllable is *kuan*, and similarly for any word beginning with *kuan* ahead of any beginning with *kuang*. *Kua > kuan > kuang* would be a normal and intuitive alphabetic sequence for romanized Mandarin. But in this book, because of the rigid principle of whole-word alphabetization, we find the following words in the following order:

kualei	(*kua + lei*) . . .
kuanfei	(*kuan + fei*) . . .
kuangtu	(*kuang + tu*) . . .
kuangu	(*kuan + gu*) . . .
kuari	(*kua + ri*)

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Chinese romanization is being treated as though it were simply English, with no attempt to elucidate the structure of the language. Some of the time the user has saved thanks to alphabetization now has to be repaid as a sort of tax on English spelling. As part of that tax, the user is obliged to think about the fact that *kuange*, which appears sandwiched between *kuangdu* and *kuangfang*, contains no *kuang-* at all but *kuan-*; it is made up of *kuan + ge*; if *kuang + e* had been meant, it would have been spelled *kuang'e*.

Similarly, the dictionary takes those words whose initial element is the single sound written *ch* and places them in the midst of the words whose initial is the different sound *c*. For people who are literate in English but know no Chinese, that is certainly convenient—Pinyin is being treated as though its letters had the same significance as in English. But they do not, for *ch* is one single phoneme and *c* is another, totally distinct, and the dictionary has commingled them because of an accident of English orthography. Similarly *sh* is embedded within *s* and *zh* within *z*. It would have been wiser to arrange the entries by the well-established phonology of Chinese, rather than by English spelling rules. The one consolation is that since electronic dictionaries are now making such deep inroads into publication on paper, the linear ordering of words is much less important than it was when the ABC series was conceived.

On balance, this book is a relatively useful resource because of its extensive inventory of words, in spite of having too many translations instead of definitions, unchecked parts of speech, and one or two needlessly facile editorial decisions. Considerably more work must be done in refining content before this can be called a great dictionary, but perhaps improved editions will soon follow this one.

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Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era. By YURI PINES. Honolulu: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I PRESS, 2009. Pp. vii + 311. $55.

Yuri Pines described the purpose of his acclaimed first monograph *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 722–453 B.C.E.* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2002) as "to expose the roots of the Zhanguo intellectual breakthrough by exploring intellectual developments that preceded the age of Confucius" (p. 205). Consequently, the reader of this new book may expect that it seamlessly continues the author's analysis of Chunqiu political thought into the subsequent Warring States period, which indeed it does. Yet, Pines' second monograph is much more than a mere