EAC205 -- RECOMMENDED DICTIONARIES FOR CHINESE-LANGUAGE STUDENTS

I. Chinese English Dictionaries (Han-Ying cidian 汉英词典):

There is a dizzying array of choices when purchasing a Chinese dictionary. Many standard dictionaries are periodically revised, and new ones are constantly being published in China, Taiwan, and the United States. Before you can purchase a Chinese-English dictionary, you will have to make one preliminary decision: simplified or traditional characters. The simplification of characters was accompanied by a revision of standard dictionary organization. Not only was the order of the characters within the dictionary changed, but the methods of locating the characters have changed as well. We will discuss this in greater detail when we begin doing exercises on how to use East Asian dictionaries.

As a practical matter, the widespread use of simplified characters throughout mainland China and the fact that most students have study abroad experiences in the People’s Republic of China make it advisable to begin with a simplified dictionary. Be aware, however, that those of you who intend to study in Taiwan or who are interested in pursuing the serious study of traditional Chinese civilization should consider also purchasing a traditional dictionary. Unfortunately, it is easier to pick up simplified characters after you have learned the traditional forms, but millions of Chinese learn simplified first without adverse effects.

At the least, you should choose a dictionary with between 4000 and 5000 individual characters that contains in the neighborhood of 30,000 phrases (compounds). If you choose to buy a dictionary with simplified character forms, you should choose one that also lists the traditional (complex) form of the character along with the simplified version.

Dictionaries owned by the University library are indicated below with an asterisk.

A. Dictionaries with Simplified Characters

Here are some reasonable beginners’ options:

**Oxford Concise English-Chinese Chinese-English Dictionary**

This is probably the most popular beginning dictionary. It has reasonable coverage and the added, convenient feature of including pronunciation in the English-Chinese section. It also includes traditional forms.

**A Chinese-English Dictionary (Revised Edition)**
Edited by the Beijing University Department of Foreign Languages
This dictionary is a good option having almost 100,000 compounds and phrases. It also uses pinyin and simplified characters (with traditional characters in parentheses). It only contains a Chinese-English dictionary (in contrast to the Oxford Concise).

**Cheng & Tsui Chinese-Pinyin-English Dictionary for Learners** *
Wang Huan, Editor-in-Chief.

B. Dictionaries with Traditional Characters

**Far East Chinese-English Dictionary**
Liang Shih-chiu, comp.

This comes in three size formats (small, medium, and large). All are identical except for their physical size. It is more comprehensive than those listed above having more than 7000 characters and 120,000 compounds and phrases. It does not, however, have simplified characters.

**Mathews’ Chinese English Dictionary** *

This dictionary must be used carefully (e.g., the pronunciations given are highly unreliable), but it is the dictionary that a couple of generations of Sinologists grew up with. It is still useful as a starting dictionary when you begin to read Classical Chinese (wenyanwen 文言文).

C. Electronic dictionaries

There are two types of electronic dictionaries. The first are hand-held electronic devices. These are, of course, available in China and other Chinese speaking regions. They are also sometimes available in Chinatown or electronic stores catering to a Chinese clientele. Although these often include other reference works (e.g. character dictionaries, English language dictionaries), they are mostly designed for Chinese learning English, so their Chinese-English selections are the weakest part of the package.

In addition, there are online dictionaries. A particularly scholarly one is the Chinese Characters Dictionary Web at [http://www.zhongwen.com/](http://www.zhongwen.com/). See the course index for other options of varying quality.
II. Other Dictionaries

A. English-Chinese Dictionaries (Ying-Han cidian 英汉词典)

In addition to the Oxford dictionary listed above, there are numerous English-Chinese dictionaries available. You should be aware that most of these are not designed for English speakers, but rather for native speakers of Chinese who need to look up an unfamiliar English word. They therefore rarely give the pronunciation of the relevant phrases (the Oxford Concise Dictionary is an exception to this). These dictionaries also divide according to the simplified/traditional dichotomy.

Simplified characters

*A Concise Practical English Chinese Dictionary*

Traditional characters

*Far East Practical English-Chinese Dictionary*
Liang Shih-ch’iu, comp.

This is the companion volume to Liang’s Chinese-English dictionary. It also comes in three size options.

B. Specialized Dictionaries

Although you are not expected to purchase any of these, you should be aware that there are numerous dictionaries that deal with specialized subjects. To cite just a couple of examples, you can find dictionaries of business terms, military terms, scientific terminology, diplomatic language, and even romance.

III. Chinese-Chinese Dictionaries

A. General Dictionaries

As your language abilities improve, you will find that Chinese-Chinese dictionaries are incredibly useful. They generally have more characters and phrases usually with more nuanced definitions. There are many options, but the most widely used and available one is:

*Xiandai Hanyu cidian* 现代汉语词典
B. Character Dictionaries (zidian 字典)

For those interested in the characters themselves, there is a class of dictionaries that emphasize the specific meanings of the characters. Unlike the dictionaries listed above, which try to be reasonably comprehensive in their coverage of common phrases, character dictionaries either include very few or no phrases. In exchange, they usually cover many more individual characters. They are useful for tracking the variety of nuances in the characters themselves.

The most popular and is the following:

Xinhua zidian 新华字典

C. Classical Dictionaries

The best one-volume dictionary of classical Chinese currently available is:

Wang Li Gu Hanyu cidian 王力古汉语词典

This was a work begun by the great historical linguist Wang Li (who spent many years teaching at Beijing University) and published posthumously.

There are also two competing dictionaries, first published in the early 20th century and subsequently revised many times, that are useful for working with classical texts:

Ciyuan 辭源 *

Cihai 辭海

The library has earlier versions of this.

D. Encyclopedic Dictionaries

You are not expected to purchase these, and you may never need to use them, but you should be aware that they exist. As one scholar has noted, they are analogous to the Oxford English Dictionary (if you have not heard of the OED, you should go to the library right now and look at it! Okay, you can also consult it online
through the library webpage) in that they trace the history of characters and phrases through history.

**Hanyu da cidian** 漢語大詞典
This contains approximately 370,000 phrases under 23,000 characters. There is a CD-ROM version of this. The library has a CD-ROM version of this work.

**Hanyu da zidian** 漢語大字典

This is the character dictionary counterpart to the *Hanyu da cidian*. It contains entries for over 50,000 characters.

**IV. Where does one buy these things?**

You have some choices. Here are places to start:

**Online**
- [http://www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com): they have a decent collection, plus are connected with used booksellers.
- [http://cheng-tsui.com](http://cheng-tsui.com): Cheng & Tsui, a Boston based company that sells books and other materials relating to Asia.

**Bricks and mortar**
- **Oriental Culture Enterprises Co., Inc.**
  13-17 Elizabeth Street, 2/F, New York, NY 10013
  Tel: 212.226.8461 Fax: 212.431.669
  This store has a very impressive array of reference works such as dictionaries and books in Chinese on a wide range of subjects (including fiction). SUNY Albany faculty members have been spotted in its aisles.
- Both **Barnes and Noble** and **Border’s Books** on Wolf Road occasionally have some of the dictionaries suggested above.