

Book Review: A Historical Atlas of Tibet by Karl E. Ryavec

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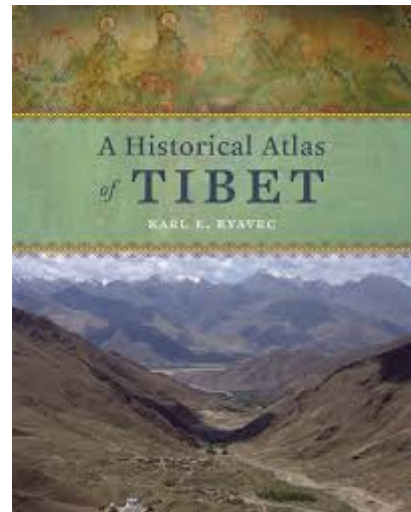
October 30, 2015

Following two decades of research, Karl E. Ryavec expertly presents the historical and cultural transformations of Tibet since the Palaeolithic period through a series of 49 maps supplemented by detailed keys, essays and accompanying photographs. The first work of its kind, A Historical Atlas of Tibet is a beautiful reference book of value to a range of scholars and students including historians, anthropologists, historical geographers and digital cartographers, writes Tim Chamberlain.

***A Historical Atlas of Tibet.* Karl E. Ryavec. University of Chicago Press. 2015.**

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How to define Tibet today is as contentious as it is complex. A large part of the problem derives from the perception that Tibet has always been viewed, in one sense or another, as peripheral. Attempts by outsiders to map Tibet only really began seriously in the nineteenth century with the colonialist paranoia of the 'Great Game' era, when the government officials of British India looked warily to the Himalayan border region, fearful of a possible territorial challenge from Russian Imperial encroachment entering India through 'unknown' Tibet. Yet, even before this time, Warren Hastings, as the East India Company's Governor General of Bengal, had looked to Tibet as a possible entry route into the frustratingly impenetrable markets of Emperor Qianlong's China. Hastings famously dispatched George Bogle, who managed to establish arguably the first meaningful diplomatic contacts with the Tibetan hierarchy through the court of the sixth Panchen Lama during the winter of 1774-75, although the death of the Panchen Lama soon after meant that the venture never came to fruition.



Later attempts to know and map the reality of Tibet were famously attempted by the Indian 'pundits' who were recruited, trained and secretly dispatched over the mountainous borderlands disguised as holy men on pilgrimage to the sacred sites of Tibet, thereby infiltrating a country otherwise forbidden to foreigners, making rudimentary route surveys as they went. Today this sense of mystery continues to pervade; the aura of Tibet as a faraway and largely unknown land, still closed off from the rest of the world, lingers on. Karl E. Ryavec's *A Historical Atlas of Tibet* aims to rectify this situation by placing Tibet at the centre, rather than at the periphery, of other cultural and historic concerns.

Aside from being a work of impressive scholarship, *A Historical Atlas of Tibet* is a beautiful book to behold – large but portably sized, with all maps and illustrations rendered in colour throughout. It is the culmination of two decades of research by a single academic geographer aided and informed by a host of other noted scholars from a range of different academic fields. Ryavec utilises a wide range of primary and secondary source material, along with modern digital cartographic techniques, to collect and render comprehensive datasets in easily readable visual formats.

The book is comprised of a series of 49 separate maps which have been supplemented by detailed keys, concise explanatory essays and contextually illustrative photographs as well as by informative tables and graphs with clear scholarly notes and references. The maps cover a wide-ranging set of themes and topics, some of which extend beyond Tibet itself to cover areas of North China, Mongolia and Beijing. The maps which make up the core of the atlas visualise the Tibet cultural region as a whole and focus in on key central, western and eastern regions, illustrating the historical and cultural transformations of Tibet from the Palaeolithic period to the present day. Divided into four parts, these core maps describe the Prehistoric and Ancient Periods, circa 30,000 BCE to 600 CE; the Imperial Period, circa 600-900; the Period of Disunion, circa 900-1642; and the Ganden Podrang Period (Kingdom of the Dalai Lamas) from 1642 to the twentieth century.



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Eight introductory maps at the start of the atlas set Tibet in its regional, geographical and cultural contexts, illustrating not just the physical topography of the region, but also the historic trade networks and the time it would take to travel these long established routes; the growth of Buddhist temples and monasteries throughout the core regions of Tibet between circa 600-1950; and the geographical extent of the various languages and dialects spoken today by roughly six million 'Tibetic'-language speakers. The atlas concludes with a set of four maps, which details the present-day natural resources, land

cover patterns and population distribution of the Tibetan Plateau as well as the demarcations of the modern territorial administration system within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

As the first historical atlas specifically centred on Tibet, this book will undoubtedly come to serve as an invaluable basic reference work for both students and established scholars across a wide array of academic disciplines. It will be of essential use to historians, anthropologists, historical geographers, digital cartographers, archaeologists and scholars of religion and other aspects of Tibetan culture and society. The essays accompanying each map provide succinct descriptions of the information each map intends to describe or illustrate, whilst also providing a comprehensive outline of the source material used to inform the map and how it might in certain cases be limited as a consequence, with a full set of references provided for anyone who wishes to look into these aspects or examine these areas in more detail.

In his preface to the atlas, Ryavec modestly acknowledges that, in undertaking the first work of its kind dedicated solely to Tibet, there were advantages and disadvantages he encountered when compiling the necessary information to draw up these maps. In producing a new resource, there was nothing of such detail with which to compare his efforts, and in some areas, both academic and regional, there is still a vast amount of data that does not yet exist and so remains speculative. However, his background as an academic geographer with a particular interest in Tibet studies meant that he was able to begin the work of assembling the relevant datasets in order to attempt the task of creating such an atlas, and – as he notes later on in the book – a future revised and expanded edition will hopefully be able to build upon this very admirable start. In the meantime, with regards to Tibet studies as a topic that is both central to itself and set within the wider scope of Asian studies, there is plenty of information expertly distilled into these 49 maps. They will absorb anyone with an interest in the cartographic visualisation of information, as well as those seeking to understand and place the history and culture of Tibet.

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