



**Karl E. Ryavec, *A Historical Atlas of Tibet***

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 216 pages. 121 color plates, 36 halftones, 2 tables. Cloth, \$45.00; e-book, \$27.00. ISBN 9780226732442 (cloth); 9780226243948 (e-book).

ACCURATE MAPS OF Tibet have long been conspicuous by their absence. Travellers in remote areas of the plateau may still experience that unsettling feeling of realizing their map is wrong, while scholars, particularly those working on historical texts, are often unable to precisely locate places mentioned in their sources. The impediments to toponymical precision are many. They include the propensity for places to have names in three or four different languages at any one time and for toponyms to shift with migrating social and ethnic groups. In addition, the boundaries of political units have shifted over time, and in the case of many historical frontiers imprecision in definition has been diplomatically valuable under traditional mandala or “ritual state” systems. Political and cultural considerations have hindered scientific mapping, as has the rugged terrain, and to those difficulties the use of different transcription systems in rendering toponyms into European languages has further confused the reading of such maps. While the cartographical output of certain scholars has been of considerable value—one thinks of Guntrum Hazard on Yarlung dynasty sites and John Bellezza

on archaeological sites in Ngari, for example—in general cartography has lagged far behind other areas of Tibetan studies.

We can, therefore, welcome the publication of Karl Ryavec's *A Historical Atlas of Tibet*, a reference work that any scholar in the field will want to have at hand. It includes a total of forty-nine maps of political, cultural, and religious sites across most of the Tibetan Buddhist world, including sites in Mongolia and Manchuria, along with maps of such aspects as major Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Beijing in the Yuan and Ming periods, language and population distribution, natural resources, and land cover patterns. The maps are annotated with relevant details and accompanied by an explanatory text that effectively serves as a concise and well-balanced history of Tibet. This work is clearly a labor of love and the author has also ventured beyond the cartographic and historical remit, with agreeable, if not original digressions into areas such as Tibetan currency, caterpillar fungus (*yartsa gumbu*), cultural artefacts, and long-distance trade items. It includes a variety of historical and contemporary photographs that mean the work will also appeal to the “coffee table” market, and there is a good general index, although understandably it does not include all of the sites indicated on the maps, and cannot avoid the transcription issue.

There is a good regional balance in the maps between western, central, and eastern Tibet, and it is organized into sections on the prehistoric and ancient periods, the imperial period (ca. 600–900 CE), the “period of Disunion” (900–1642), and the Ganden Podrang Period. In general the maps are clear, with A4 size pages and paper quality enhancing that clarity. A word of caution, however, to those contemplating purchasing the electronic edition; it may prove impossible to read much of the map detail in that format.

There are few obvious errors, at least in the sections this reviewer is qualified to comment upon. Ngari does not include the source of the Ganges (as stated on page 14); maps eighteen and thirty-one show a Hindu temple at Gangotri for which there is no evidence in the relevant periods; and the formal Tibetan toponym of Mount Kailas(h) is Tise (*Ti se*) rather than the more colloquial *Gangs Rinpoche* given here. In addition, given the political implications, the statement that the TAR “roughly” equates to the area of traditional Tibet (4) might have been better replaced by a map showing the actual differences.

Given the pioneering nature of this work, there are naturally some reservations concerning its scope and contents. The author notes (120) that a revised and expanded edition is intended in the future, and this should include resort to the British-Indian maps in the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library, which the author does not appear to have directly utilized. These shed considerable light on southern Tibet at least, and would enable the provision of more detailed large-scale maps of those areas. In addition, maps of historically relevant areas of the greater Tibetan cultural world to the south and west of the plateau—Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan, and so on—might be added, and consideration given to the inclusion of some examples of indigenous cartographical representations.

Despite such reservations, this is a reference work that will repay detailed study. The author's modest hope that it will be of “some value” is more than fulfilled.

A. C. McKay  
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