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

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

Reviewed by Michael Andregg

This is a fantastic scholarly work (20 pages inclusive, 49 detailed maps plus over 100 photos and illustrations) that adds greatly to the body of scholarship on ancient and modern Tibet. In his introduction, Ryavec explicitly calls Tibet a civilization in its own right despite many entanglements with Chinese Empires, being conquered by the Mongols, and being influenced by steady flows of trade long the Silk Road and by Buddhist monks from India promoting their brands of enlightenment to any who would listen. Thus, there came to be a predominantly Buddhist Tibet, until the communist Chinese took over from 1951-59 on.

To this day, no one in the West knows how many monks were killed and monasteries destroyed during that takeover. Ryavec claims that “It is estimated that prior to the 1950’s, about 1/4<sup>th</sup> of Tibet’s male population consisted of Buddhist monks” (p.14). And later (p. 28) that “the total number of Tibetic-language speakers is roughly 6 million” at the time of his writing. Ryavec needed access to his area of study on many occasions, so I think he was careful not to tread on CCP (Chinese Communist Party) sensitivities, which are of concern to scholars worldwide.

So, Tibet is by population a very small country surrounded by much larger ones, on a very high plateau that provides headwaters for at least three billion people who drink from the Indus, Ganges, Salween, Mekong and Yangtse Rivers from Pakistan and India to Southeast Asia and China. Survival of Tibet’s culture is ever at risk when occupiers determine what can be written.

Ryavec follows the form of his primary mentor, Joseph E. Schwartzberg, who wrote a similar breakthrough work in 1978 called “A Historical Atlas of South Asia.” Both are (or were, Joe died in 2018) geographers and as importantly, cartographers, who thoroughly understood the value of carefully researched maps. It took 16 years for Schwartzberg to create his historical atlas of South Asia, which required riding bicycles through much of India, Kashmir and to a lesser extent Pakistan to gather information. Ryavec spent 20 years on his magnum opus, 12 on research and 8 to develop the detailed maps which merge much new digital information at the heart of his work.

This makes it the first, and only current historical atlas of this important and contested region. His introduction is a sparse 30 pages, covering the major regions and natural features of Tibet, the historical Tibetan world including a brief period of empire, and a review of the Tibetic languages and how Ryavec used those variations in his field work.

Part 1 is even sparser, reflecting the dearth of good information on Tibet's prehistorical and ancient periods, circa 30,000 BCE to 600 CE. But Ryavec produces two detailed maps of the more ancient and more modern periods in this long span and cites his sources meticulously.

Part 2 covers what Ryavec calls "the Imperial Period" from 600-900 CE, but he can produce only four maps of critical changes during these 300 years. On page 48 he notes that "The Yarlung Kingdom of Central Tibet expanded territorially...to become an empire by the mid 630's CE." This endured for over two centuries but was blown away by what Ryavec calls the Period of Disunion. Here, the whirlwinds of change were very strong.

Part 3 covers 85 pages with 18 maps on "The Period of Disunion, circa 900-1642 CE." What a time of *Sturm und Drang*! First, the only real Tibetan Empire falls ~ 904-910 CE. Fragments continue along major trade routes like the Silk Road networks, but imperial union does not return. Then, the Mongols invade in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, and they were known for slaughtering conquered aristocracies, then imposing their own chosen practices. Ryavec summarizes his chapter of change with: "Not only are primary sources lacking, but the entire region was fraught with numerous wars and invasions well into the modern period" (p. 73).

Part 4 on the "Ganden Podrang Period (Kingdom of the Dalai Lamas)" covers change from 1642-1951 CE with 13 more maps over 40 pages of text and illustrations. This appears to me a kind of golden age for Tibetan culture, albeit always challenged by external forces. Tibet came under the rule of the Chinese Qing dynasty in 1720, continuing to 1912. The progression of Tibetan kingdoms interacting with Chinese Empires can be bewildering, but Ryavec does the best he can to put this chaos into understandable context. His conclusions continue to about the year 2000, ending with a delicate discussion about how Tibet is administered in: "Tibet in the People's Republic of China, circa 2000: The territorial administration system."

Because I knew Ryavec's dissertation advisor and mentor Joseph Schwartzberg quite well,<sup>1</sup> I read Ryavec's acknowledgments closely.

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<sup>1</sup> A reader of Comparative Civilizations Review can find a review I wrote on Dr. Schwartzberg's last book, and the last book ever published by the United Nations Press, called "Transforming the United Nations System: Designs for a Workable World," 2013, at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2022&context=ccr> . Joseph E. Schwartzberg was incredibly dedicated to the global welfare of all civilizations, and peoples, and he was an indefatigable scholar ever searching for solutions to the world's greatest problems. He worked as hard on those issues as an Emeritus Professor at the University of Minnesota as he did when he bicycled all over India and Kashmir to map their complex histories. We who knew him well miss him very much.

What I read was a story of an earnest scholar at the intersection between competing academic ideologies, and sometimes methodologies, who managed to secure very substantial support from a wide range of eastern and western scholars at many universities, before finally finding Joe who could help him over the finish line of the Ph.D. in 2002. Thank God, because we are all better off for both of their efforts.

Therefore, without reservation, I can write that Ryavec's work on the history of Tibet is a truly exceptional magnum opus of scholarship that advances the whole field of Tibetan studies. It was a true joy for me to see it on offer, and to write this review about a book that told me more about Tibet than everything else I have read about this important country in my lifetime.