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An Atlas of the Tibetan Plateau is a masterful melding of science and art created by British architect and cartographer Michael Farmer. Based on extensive contemporary data painstakingly woven from satellite imagery, the intrepid and apparently indefatigable Farmer has, over decades, produced a unique and indispensable reference work.

Farmer’s Atlas offers a panoramic garuda’s\(^1\) eye view of the vast Tibetan plateau — “the largest and highest plateau in the world,” an inhospitable area inhabited by humans for 40,000-plus years, birthplace of an ancient and unique civilization that has long magnetized the curiosity of outsiders. Detailed understanding of the characteristic geography of this high-altitude region is available for the very first time with the potential to enlighten and inspire a wide readership.

Indeed, the socio-political and scientific challenges that can be inferred from the information collected here affect us all. Farmer’s Atlas belongs in the hands of cartographers, bibliophiles, librarians, comparative civilizationists. It is for policy wonks, international relations gurus, boundary-negotiating diplomatists, anthropologists, archaeologists, Tibetologists, Sinologists, revisionists and visionaries, climate change scientists, students, teachers, adventurous curmudgeons, and the cadre of tourists seeking the exotic who find themselves drawn to the Tibetan area newly re-named “Shangri-la.”\(^2\)

An Atlas of the Tibetan Plateau is a sustainably produced object that is both beautiful and beautifully made. It was produced as one of the remarkable series called Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library, edited by Henk Blezer, Alex McKay and Charles Ramble. At 5.32 pounds and 393 pages, it is a weighty tome that carries moral weight, as well. Almost impossible to put down, this atlas turns out to be, well, an actual page-turner, thus achieving a wondrous star-quality this reviewer had not previously associated with atlas-reading. Yes, it’s true; here am I, waxing lyrical about an atlas. Shamelessly singing its praises, I mean to praise not only what Farmer has done, but how he has done it.

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1 A garuda is a powerful bird-like creature based in Buddhist and Hindu mythology.

2 Perhaps an example of the Sinicization of branding and marketing?
An atlas, it is said, is just a collection of maps. However, the 120-full color maps featured here are not just any old maps: they’ve been drawn according to a graphical aesthetic that operates in the service of clarity.

The maps are as eloquent as they are elegant: a single glance suffices to reveal multiple levels of meaning. Each graphic element — color, shape, line — is set down in perfect balance, not flooding the reader with too much information, nor too little, but gracefully treading the middle way.

**Map 1:** The key depicts an overview of the various politically defined areas on and bordering the Tibetan plateau. This map outlines the prefectures of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in dark violet, within which each prefecture is a distinctively colored area: Ngari (violet), Xigaze (light blue), Nagqu (pink), Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (light green), Haixi Mongol Tibetan Prefecture (light beige), Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (lighter green), and so on, with additional colors.

The plateau areas are shown surrounded by other polities in light grey: CCP China provinces (*Yunnan* and *Sichuan*), independent border countries (Myanmar, India, Bhutan, Nepal), with disputed border areas shown as well.

The first of 108 main maps, it presents a rendition of the whole Tibetan plateau with its constituent parts and is overlaid by a series of rectangles running north to south and then east to west. Each rectangular area outlines and numbers in scarlet a close-up map that will follow. Within many rectangles are very small rectangles, bordered in black. These denote the location and numeration of maps covering the outlined details in even finer detail. These small sub-area map squares are numbered in scarlet, making it easy to find the area you want, note its map number, note the map number of the detailed map, then turn to each one further on in the atlas, an easy and logical process. There is a consistent and generous overlap from one map to the next, which creates a smooth, natural join that makes the visual flow seem seamless.

Turning to the main maps themselves, the topography of each section forms the background of each map. These subtle sepia/white graphics show clearly very specific geographic contours known from extensive satellite imagery. This formidable yet unobtrusive background creates there a visual space to hold a host of additional information as to borders, hydrologic features, geology, rail and roads, urban areas, and a myriad of religious structures characteristic of Tibetan civilization. Miraculously, the two fact-filled layers manage not to compete for readers’ attention but enhance one another.
The next page shows the legend, presenting icons denoting specific features. Borders have four icons: lines marking national borders, province borders, county borders, and disputed territory. As to roads, there are nine marked features, eight in pairs: expressways and expressway tunnels, highways and highway tunnels, secondary roads and secondary road tunnels, tertiary roads and tunnels.

Last is a line of brown dashes denoting “tracks.” There are three icons for rail lines; one icon marks airports. There are icons to denote hydrologic features: fresh lakes, salt lakes, salt pans, reservoirs, glaciers, rivers, visible streams, and intermittent streams. Topography icons include black triangles for high peaks and inverted parentheses to mark high mountain passes.

There are six icons for settlements according to size, from national capitals to villages. There are sixteen different icons denoting religious centers, according to sect, and 3 denoting buildings (stupas, ruins, and fortresses). Names are written in simple Tibetan phonetic spelling where possible, followed up by names written in Han Pinyin or Zang Pinyin.

Everything comes together in Map 2, page 33. Against the sepia-beige contours of rugged mountains are black triangles marking the location and altitude of high peaks such as Liushu Shan (7,167 m.). A curved outline colored blue-grey stands for a salt lake called Kotra Tso (4,998 m.).

In darker blue, we can see to the south a freshwater lake called Tsokar Tso (5,115 m.). In this region, the light blue coloration marks the location of very many glaciers and a number of border areas claimed by both India and China. As to roads, in this desolate area there are few: one is G219, a highway marked in burnt orange that slashes through the frigid wilderness on a north/south axis. Three tracks are marked in brown; all of them run along an east-west axis.

In this whole mapped region, in all that is encompassed by Map 2, there is a township, Gyipug, nestled between two salt lakes, virtually attached to the highway. The only other township, Dongru (Dongruxiang), is next to a track, more like a path than a road. No monasteries, no ruins, no chortens. No salt pans here, no airports, no tunnels. Peaks, lakes, and glaciers.

Fast-forward past 108 such maps; arrive at two maps on facing pages, denoting the population density across the plateau. One map shows the sparsely settled west; the next shows an increasing density the closer one gets to CCP China proper. Maps 111 and 112 show the density of religious locations, gompas spread across the west to the east. Maps 113 and 114 show the distribution of nine lineages of Tibetan Buddhist culture as they appear from west to east.
Maps 115 and 116 show the distribution of climatic features from west to east, according to the Kloppen Classification. Maps 117 through 120 present satellite views of the whole Tibetan plateau, in all its complexity.

A detailed index of place names and physical features follows, given in Tibetan transliteration, in Tibetan u-chen script as well as in Zang Pinyin, Mandarin phonetics, Hanzi and Han Pinyin.

This section of the atlas is arguably the most crucial of all. It helps to keep names and religious traditions alive, resisting the civilizational erasure that continues to threaten Tibetan civilization and culture — through dilution, through neglect, through the swollen oblivious ego of a polity currently in power, through zero-sum racism, through overt genocide and covert Disneyfication, not to mention the naturally debilitating effect of time and protracted thralldom on memory. And meaning.

There is more, much more in this excellent atlas. Pick it up. Take a look. See what has happened.

Ask yourself, why are there so many airports built and planned at such very high altitudes? Why do some of those walled monasteries look from the air not like gompas but prisons? Why did a peaceful and flourishing community of thousands of meditation practitioners pose such a threat to the CCP that the party had no choice but to make it (poof!) disappear? Why does CCP China see itself “a model for social governance?” Why does Xi Jinping wish to have his empire strike back and “promote the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism”?

What does that even mean? — Never mind.

*An Atlas of the Tibetan Plateau* by Michael Farmer is a spectacular achievement, deserving of our attention, appreciation, and grateful support.