What is a Nation?
The Romans called ‘natio’, a race or a human group with a common ‘birth’. Today, the dictionary says that it is “a body of people who share a real or imagined common history, culture, language or ethnic origin, who typically inhabit a particular country or territory”. This is the case for Tibet.

Tibetans have an ‘imagined common history’, they descend from a male monkey, an incarnation of Avalokitesvara who married a mountain ogress. Their six offspring were the first Tibetans. The inhabitants of the Tibetan plateau are said to have the characteristics of both their ancestors. Except for the divine origin in the Tibetan legend, the modern Theory of Evolution is not too different.

As the supercontinent Gondwanaland broke up 100 million years ago, India separated from Africa. The Indian plate moved north and one day collided with the Asian plate. In the process the Tethys Sea was elevated to 5000 m. The Tibetan plateau was born.

A Tibetan legend speaks of a Tibet covered by a giant lake which dried up. The remaining lakes were prophesied to progressively shrink and give space to humans to live and practice their religion.
Archeological study of the Tibetan plateau is a relatively new discipline. Though explorers such as Tucci, Hedin, Richardson or Roerich did the first archeological surveys at the beginning of the 20th century, their studies remained superficial. The scenario has changed during the past 2 or 3 decades with more scientific studies being conducted by Tibetan, Western and Chinese archeologists. Their research dwells not only upon Western Tibet, rich in 'pre-Buddhist' vestiges, but also on other parts of the plateau, like Amdo and Kham.

The latest archeological discoveries open new perspectives on the history of the plateau, particularly regarding the Zhangzhung kingdom. Some archeologists believed that a climate change altered the balance of power a few millennia ago. Due to drought and the subsequent increased salinity in the areas around the large lakes of Northern Tibet, the political center may have progressively shifted to warmer and moister regions like Yarlung.
The Pugyal Dynasty

The Kings of Yarlung

Legend says that in 127 BCE, the inhabitants of Yarlung Valley elevated Nyatri Tsanpo as the first king of Pugyal (or Yarlung) Dynasty. Nyatri, the story continues, descended as a god-like being from the sky using a 'sky-rope.' When he landed, he met some herdsmen grazing their yaks; they took him on their shoulders and made him king. The seven first kings are said to have used a rope to leave this world after their death. They have left no tombs.

The first kings followed the Bon faith; Buddhism appeared only during the reign of Thori Nyatsen (5th century AD). Once again, it came from the sky. A casket containing the Mantra of Avalokiteshvara, Tibet's Patron fell on Yumbulagang, the royal Palace. Though the king was unable to read the scripts, he kept the casket as a Holy Relic.

More prosaically, historical research on the relations between the neighbouring kingdom of Zhangzhung and the Yarlung Dynasty is still in its infancy. The hypothesis of the existence of a script has not yet been elucidated.
Bon is considered the native faith of Tibet which has survived till the present day. For some, Bon is only a body of folk beliefs such as divination, propitiations, offerings, curses; for others, Bon is seen as a more complex religious system with priests called Bonpo, who are believed to have supernatural powers. For still others, Bon is a belief system which matured in the 11th century; this ‘organized Bon’ has characteristics closely resembling Tibetan Buddhism.

Some scholars divide the history of Bon into three periods. First, the pre-Buddhist era where Bon was a folk religion; the second period was characterized by the emergence of an organized priesthood and a more sophisticated doctrine. It was during this period that the Bon establishment confronted, often violently, Buddhism. The third stage took place after Buddhism became the State religion. Adherents of Bon had to assimilate several Buddhist features to ensure their survival. In turn Buddhism was deeply influenced by Bon.

Early Bon was closely linked with the Kingdom of Zhangzhung and later with the Yarlung Dynasty. Future research on Zhangzhung may shed more light on the historical relationship with other Himalayan beliefs and civilizations.
A Great Military Empire

The Three Religious Kings

Songtsen Gampo built the greatest Empire of his time in Asia. During his reign, the capital was moved from Yarlung to Lhasa. A fort was built where the Potala Palace stands today. The King was the first to understand the necessity of a balanced policy between Tibet’s neighbours: it is probably why he married several royal princesses.

Under subsequent kings, especially Trisong Detsen, the Second Religious King, the Tibetan Empire continued to expand. In 783 AD, a treaty was concluded which established the borders between Tibet and China.

In 821 AD, during the reign of Ralpachen, the Third Religious King, a peace agreement was signed between Tibet and China. The terms of the Treaty were engraved on three stone pillars: one demarcates the border between China and Tibet, the second is in the Jokhang Cathedral in Lhasa and the third in Chang’an in China.

The 821 AD Treaty reads: “Tibet and China shall abide by the frontiers of which they are now in occupation. All to the east is the country of Great China; and all to the west is, without question, the country of Great Tibet. Between the two countries no smoke nor dust shall be seen. There shall be no sudden alarms and the very word ‘enemy’ shall not be spoken. This solemn agreement has established a great epoch when Tibetans shall be happy in the land of Tibet, and Chinese in the land of China.”
After marrying a Nepalese and a Chinese Princess, King Songtsen Gampo converted to Buddhism. These two marriages played a crucial role in the spread of the new faith in Tibet. More than hundred years later, King Trisong Detsen invited Shantarakshita, the Abbot of Nalanda to teach the Buddha Dharma and ordain the first monks. Shantarakshita immediately faced serious difficulties due to the strong opposition from the indigenous Bon. He convinced the king that the only way out was to invite the Tantric Master, Guru Padmasambhava; he alone could subdue the forces adverse to Buddhism. Shantarakshita predicted that a dispute would arise between the two schools of Buddhism, the Indian and the Chinese. The issue was sorted out through the famous Samye Debate. After 2 years of intense discussion, the Indian path prevailed and a proclamation was issued stating that the Indian path was thereafter the orthodox faith.

Buddhist precepts were progressively incorporated into the laws of the Land of Snows. It was the first steps towards the transformation of the warlike Tibetans into people turned towards inner research.
One of the greatest merits of King Songsen Gampo was to have sent his Minister Thomi Sambhota with sixteen students to India to study Buddhism, Sanskrit and the Art of writing. On his return to Tibet, a Tibetan script, deriving from the Gupta alphabet was created. This script is still in use today. The translation of the first Buddhist scriptures could start.

Some Bon scholars believed that a Zhangzhung script predated the present Tibetan script. But no archeological evidence (on pillar, rock, etc) has been found so far.
The Tibetan system of Medicine, known as Sowa Rigpa or Art of Healing is a fascinating example of the influence of neighbouring countries on the culture of Tibet. During the reign of King Trisong Detsen, physicians and medical experts from India, China, Central Asia, Persia and even Greece gathered in Samye for a Medical Council to compare their respective knowledge. Thereafter, the great physician Yuthok Yonten Gonpo the Elder prepared the first compilation the Gyud Shi or the Four Tantras, based on the prevalent indigenous Tibetan knowledge. However several features from other systems, particularly from the Ayurveda were incorporated. An original and well adapted Tibetan Art of Healing was born.

Yuthok Yonten Gonpo the Younger, who visited India 6 times during the 12th century, edited the work of Yuthok the Elder to its present form. The 156 chapters of the Gyud Shi are still the essence of Tibetan medical knowledge and continue to be studied, not only in Tibet, but also in the entire Himalayan belt and Mongolia.
After Lang Darma killed his brother King Ralpachen in 838 AD, Buddhism was eradicated from Tibet. For more than one and a half centuries, the State lost its political homogeneity; it became fragmented into principalities which continuously fought among themselves. But an empire is truly great when the spirit which built it can survive destruction and reappear under a new and more complete form. It is what happened in the Land of Snows. At the end of the 10th century, the old king of Ngari, Lhalama Yeshe Od was instrumental in the revival of Buddhism in Tibet. Young Tibetans were sent to meet saints, yogis and scholars in the great Indian Viharas. They brought back original Buddhist scriptures which were translated into Tibetan. The most famous amongst them was Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo.

The spiritual renaissance originated from the Himalayan regions of Spiti, Kinnaur and Ladakh in India and Ngari and Guge in Tibet: these areas had been spared the Muslim invasions. Many renowned teachers participated in this movement; amongst others, the Indian monk Atisha Dipankara; the Tibetan layman Marpa and his disciple Milarepa. Their lives exemplify the continuous crisscrossing of men and ideas across the Himalayas and how the Buddha Dharma was preserved in its integrity.
The decline of the Buddhist faith in the Indian subcontinent had incalculable consequences for the Roof of the World. Four factors are usually mentioned to explain this decline: the revival of Hinduism mainly after the conversions undertaken by Adi Shankaracharya; the degeneration of Buddhism; the loss of princely patronage in Northern India. The coup de grâce came with the arrival of the Turkish armies who slaughtered monks and destroyed the viharas.

The monasteries of Tibet became the last repositories of the ancient wisdom which virtually disappeared in its land of origin. A Tibetan monk, Dharmasvamin who visited Nalanda in 1235 witnessed only destruction. He could not recover a single manuscript from what was once, one of the richest libraries of the world. He could however meet a 90 year old monk who taught him Sanskrit. When he was warned that the Muslim troops were approaching, he carried his master on his shoulders and hid until the raiders had gone. This image symbolized the end of India’s cultural influence over Tibet.
The history of Tibet took another turn with the rise of the Mongol Empire. At the end of the 12th century, the hordes of Genghis Khan overran Europe and Asia. A solution had to be found to defend the integrity of the Tibetan nation from the Mongols for whom the Buddhist concept of love and non-violence was still unknown. ‘Good luck’ came in 1244, when Godan Khan invited a leading Tibetan Lama, Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen to the Mongolian Court to be the Imperial Preceptor. The relation between the Khans and the Lamas of Sakya continued to flourish under Kublai Khan who adopted Buddhism as the State religion after Dogon Choegyal Phagpa, Sakya Pandita’s nephew had become the Khan’s teacher. In gratitude, Kublai Khan offered him political authority over Tibet in 1254.

The Priest-Patron relationship (or Choe-yon) developed thus: in exchange for their spiritual advice, the Lamas of Sakya were given temporal authority over Tibet, while getting protection against outside interference. This unique Central Asian institution would later become the cornerstone of the relationship between the Dalai Lamas and the Manchu Emperors.

The Choe-yon relationship solved the problem faced by the Buddhist State, which could not have survived without the external patronage of a strong military power.
As the power of the Yuan Dynasty declined, the princes of Phagmodru challenged the power of the Sakya hierarchs. In 1358, Changchub Gyaltsen marched to Sakya and emerged as Tibet’s new ruler.

For many Tibetans, this was a golden age; for the first time since the Religious Kings, no foreign ‘protection’ was required. A code of law, similar to the one adopted by the early kings was enforced and the Mongol administrative system was replaced by a purely Tibetan one. In 1368 in China, the Yuan Dynasty collapsed and was replaced by the Mings.

The Phagmodru princes ruled Tibet for nearly a century, before being replaced by another dynasty, the Rinpung in 1481. From 1565, until the advent of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1642, the princes of Tsang ruled Tibet.

The Chinese assert that Tibet has been a part of China since the Yuan Dynasty. Their ‘evidence’ is based on titles bestowed by the Yuans, Mings and Manchus on Tibetan Lamas. The process began with the Mongol Khans; it flourished during the Ming Dynasty and continued during the Qing Dynasty. There is no logic behind this ‘evidence.’
Lama Tsongkhapa founded the Gelug order. Born in Amdo province in 1357, he travelled extensively and studied under different masters. Integrating the lineages of the Kadampas with other traditions, his teachings became known as the New Kadampa school or Gelug. While he founded the Ganden monastery, his disciple Gedun Drupa, known retrospectively as the First Dalai Lama, built the Drepung and Tashilhunpo monasteries.

Gedun Gyatso was proclaimed the reincarnation of Gedun Drupa. A renowned scholar, he traveled widely to extend the Gelugpa influence. In 1512, he became abbot of the Tashilhunpo and a few years later of Drepung. Like Gedun Drupa, he wielded no political power.

Sonam Gyatso was the first to bear the title of ‘Dalai Lama.’ Visiting the Lake Kokonor area, he met Altan Khan, the Mongol chieftain in 1578. The Khan bestowed on Sonam Gyatso the title ‘Ocean of Wisdom’ or ‘Dalai.’ The Dalai Lama died later preaching in Mongolia.

The birth of Yonten Gyatso in Mongolia as the grandson of Altan Khan, helped to firm up the connection between Mongolia and Tibet. On his return to Tibet, he became a disciple of the Panchen Lama Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltsen who ordained him. However, till his death in 1617, the Drukpa School was still prominent in Tibet.