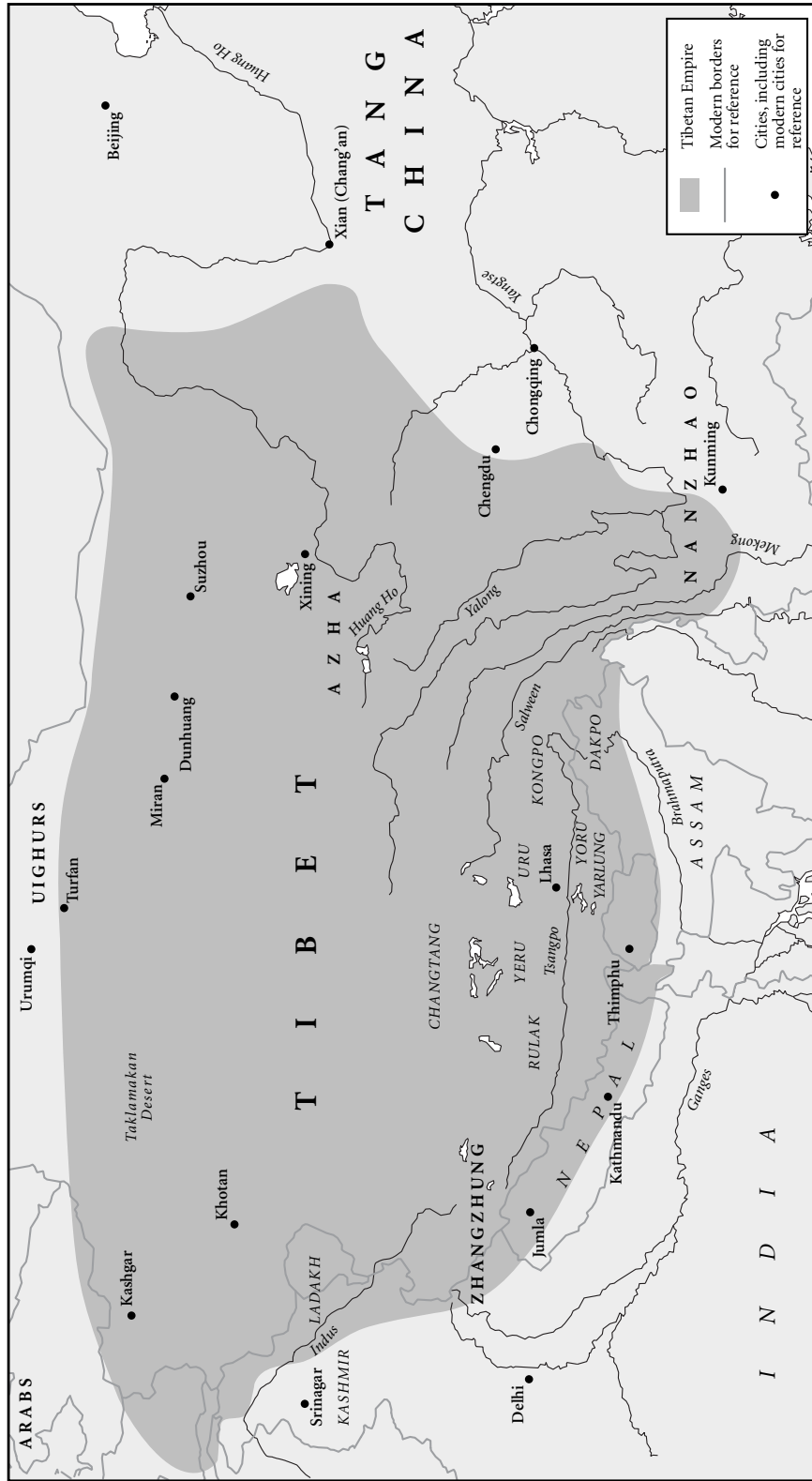
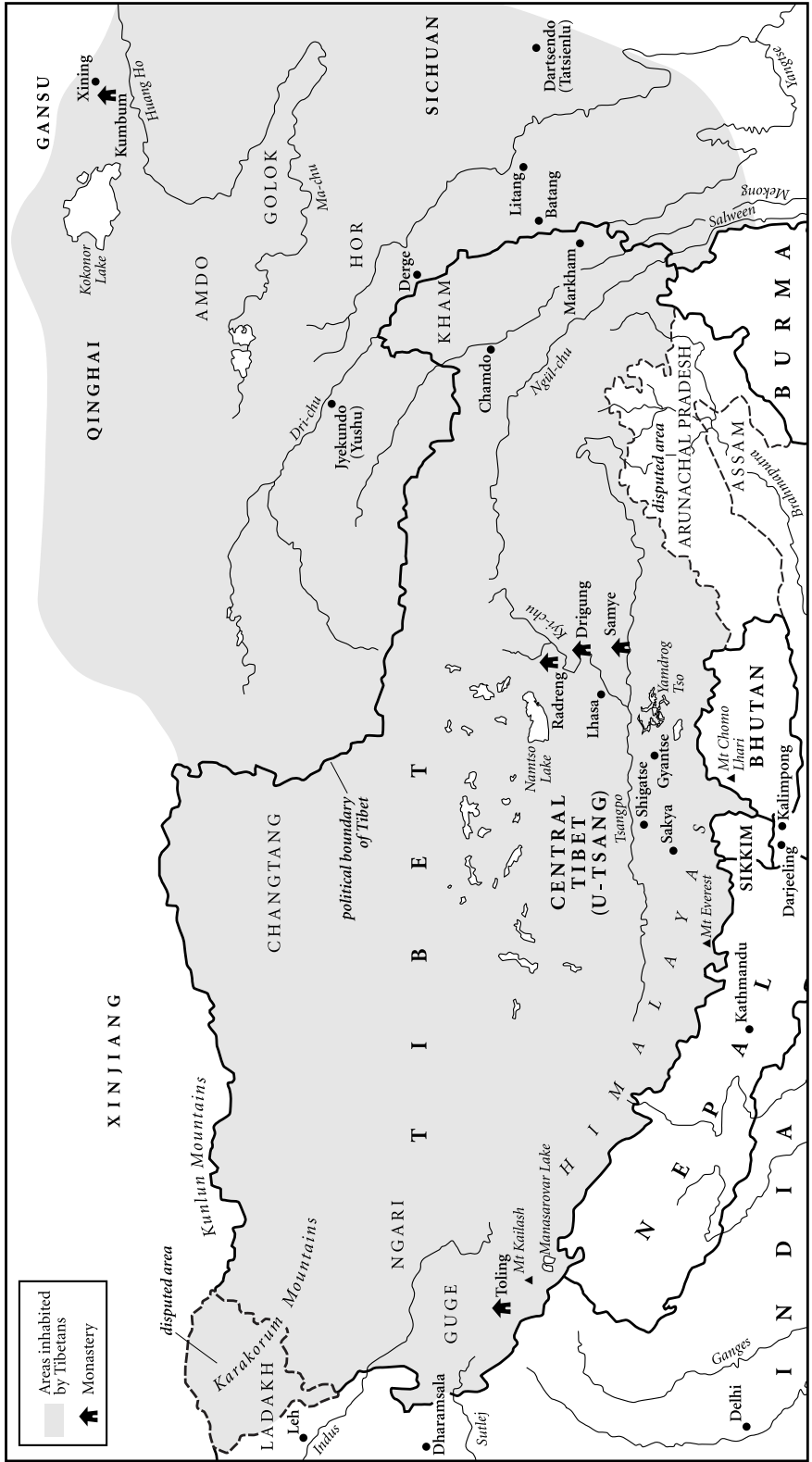


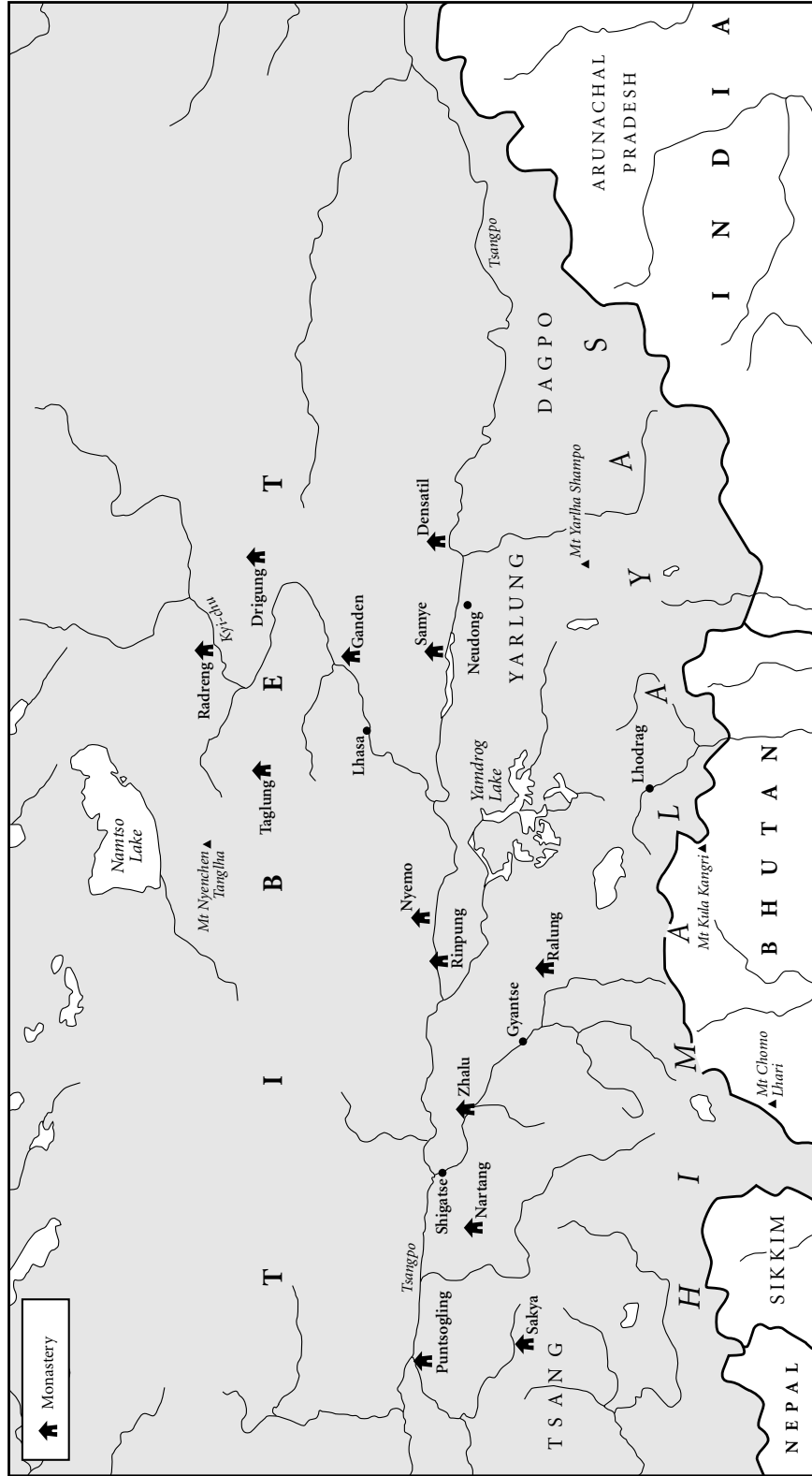
I Modern China and its neighbours.



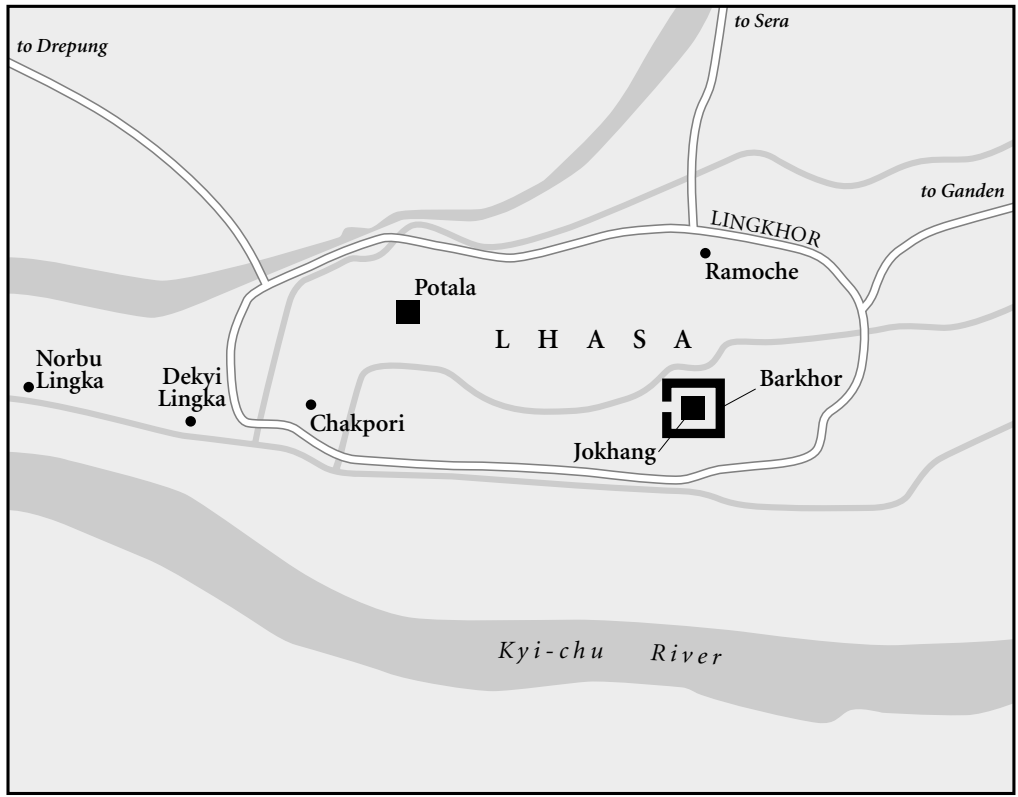
2 The Tibetan empire in the eighth to the ninth centuries



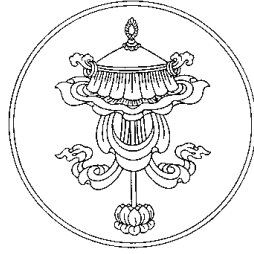
3 Tibet.



4 Central Tibet and Tsang.



5 Lhasa.



1

Tibet Appears, 600–700

EMPEROR ON THE RUN

One day in the winter of 763, the unthinkable happened to China's great Tang empire. A victorious enemy army rode through the streets of the imperial capital, Chang'an. These were the Tibetans, a people of whom, barely a century earlier, most Chinese hadn't even heard. The city of Chang'an was not only home to the emperor and his court – it was a capital of culture famous throughout Asia, its streets thronging with merchants, musicians, monks and officials going about their daily business. It was the prerogative of the Chinese emperor to look down upon everything outside his realm as barbaric, and here in Chang'an one could perhaps forgive him for doing so.

Yet the Tibetan conquest was no simple barbarian onslaught. The Tibetans had first lured the Chinese general Tzuyi and his army out of Chang'an to fight them in the western provinces. Then suddenly, and too late, the Chinese had realised that allies of the Tibetans were marching on Chang'an from the east as well. The emperor fled, leaving the city stripped of both its army and its imperial court. The Tibetans now had a window of opportunity to seize the city before the return of the Chinese army. That window was opened by a rebellious faction at the Chinese court who had gone over to the Tibetan side. A Chinese rebel opened up the city gates and the Tibetans walked into the capital unopposed.

The Tibetan general leading the army had no ambition to set up a Tibetan government in Chang'an. Instead, he rewarded the Chinese rebels by placing

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their leader, the prince of Kuangwu, on the imperial throne. In a matter of days the new emperor had appointed a new government and declared a new dynasty. Meanwhile, totally demoralised by the cowardice of the previous emperor, the Chinese army simply fell apart. The situation looked dire for the dethroned emperor who, as the Chinese historians put it, was left 'toiling in the dust', while the imperial army had broken up into armed bands that were roaming and pillaging the countryside.

It turned out that the Tibetans had no desire to try to put this chaos in order: no desire, in other words, to rule China itself. Having put their puppet emperor on the throne, they left the city. Some say that they heard rumours of a vast Chinese army advancing from the south. The general Tzuyi was indeed approaching, but at the head of a ragtag army numbering only a thousand or so. When he came to Chang'an he found only a remnant of the Tibetan army still there, and a rather frightened puppet emperor on the throne. Since Tzuyi's army was so unimpressive he decided to enter the city beating a drum to let the citizens of Chang'an know that the old order had been restored. Soon afterwards the Tang emperor returned, his empire much reduced. Though they may have had no taste to rule from the imperial throne, the Tibetans set their border only a few hundred miles to the west of the capital and forced the Chinese emperor into a series of peace treaties that cut China off from the West.

How did the Tibetans come to pose such a threat to China? To find out, we must go back a century to the time when a king calling himself 'Son of the Gods' had managed to harness the power of Tibet's warring clans and turn it outwards. This explosion of energy overwhelmed everything in its way: and so Tibet appeared. At its centre was the Divine Son, a man with the glamour of a deity, Songtsen Gampo.¹

THE DIVINE DESTINY OF PRINCE SONGTSEN

Prince Songtsen was born into destiny. Surrounded by ritual from the moment of his birth, he was raised to fulfil a special role, never in any doubt that he was different from other boys. His father was a great king, and no ordinary king but a *tsempo*, the embodiment of the divine in this world. When Songtsen inherited that title from his father, he would also inherit the glamour of the divine that his father embodied, a glamour that was already sweeping all of Tibet before it. If few people had heard of the *tsempo* before, Songtsen's father was changing

that as he forged alliances with other clans. He was always willing to use his semi-divine status to meddle in clan struggles while at the same time seeming to rise above them. It was the nature of the tsenpo to be of this world and beyond it at the same time.

Throughout his childhood, Songtsen was told his family history. The first of the tsenpos, it was said, came down from heaven via the local sacred mountain. Like rain falling from the sky, he enriched the earth. Local chiefs bowed down before him, for his fate was to rule over them. The first tsenpos were essentially gods among men. During their tenure on earth, the connection to heaven was always there, a 'sky cord' made of light leading from the top of their heads up into the beyond. The indignity of death was not for them. Instead, at the appointed time, they ascended back to heaven on the sky cord. Still, Songtsen knew that his family had fallen somewhat since the age of these noble ancestors. The sky cord was gone, squandered by a more recent tsenpo called Drigum.

It seems that Drigum had been a troublemaker who got involved in pointless feuds with his subjects and constantly challenged them to duels – hardly fair considering that he fought with a divine sword forged in heaven. The tsenpo finally met his match when he challenged one of his courtiers to a duel. The courtier agreed, on condition that the tsenpo put aside his magical weapons. At the same time the courtier prepared a trick. He took a hundred oxen and loaded sacks of ashes onto their backs. Then he fixed gold spearheads to their horns. When the duel began, the cattle were loosed, and in the chaos of swirling ash, the courtier killed the tsenpo. Thus the sky cord connection was lost. Drigum's body was put into a copper coffin and cast into the river.²

Nowadays, as Songtsen knew, the tsenpos died like other men; and there were many opportunities for death. Songtsen's father was not shy of riding into battle at the head of his troops. His divine glamour and personal bravery had won over several clan leaders, extending his domain beyond its humble beginnings in the Yarlung valley in the south of Tibet to encompass much of Central Tibet. These clans were nomads who had migrated from the Central Asian plains to settle down in Tibet's southern valleys. At the bottom of these valleys were green fields tended by long settled farmers, who had no way to resist their nomadic conquerors. These nomads, as they began to settle, made their homes in tall castles built to withstand sieges on the rocky slopes above those green fields.³

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How much did the clan leaders really believe in the tsenpo's divinity? Most likely, they believed when it suited them. The tsenpo was a useful emblem to gather around. Somebody who is, at least in theory, above petty disputes could encourage the clan leaders to set aside their quarrels in pursuit of a greater end, even if that end was only more power. The clan leaders were bound to the tsenpo, and each other, by the most solemn of oaths, sworn beneath the heavenly bodies, before the great mountains, and in the presence of the divine beings of the earth. The oath was carved in stone and sealed with a sacrifice. In practice, though, the clan leaders supported the tsenpo when it served their interests, and conspired against him when that seemed more useful. The history of this Tibetan dynasty is, like that of most dynasties, rife with conspiracy. Rarely did a tsenpo pass away without a violent dispute over the succession; as the new tsenpo was usually just a child, there was ample opportunity for ministers, especially the prime minister, to become the real power behind the throne.

In the direst of situations a clan leader could always retreat to his castle. Only one of the castles from the early era still remains. Yumbu Lhakang stands atop a rocky peak, tall and imposing, its whitewashed walls sloping slightly inwards, windowless at its lower levels but with a four-sided tower to provide views in every direction for miles around. It offers a potent evocation of how perilous life must have been for the early clan leaders. Songtsen's father's greatest victory ended in a siege of one of these castles. His toughest rival was Lord Zingpo, a man whose charisma must have matched that of the tsenpos for he was equally good at forging allegiances with other leaders. After many battles and betrayals Zingpo ended up hiding out in his castle. So impregnable were these structures that the tsenpo had to divert a river and flood the castle's defences to bring about the final defeat of his enemy.

Prince Songtsen was now heir not only to a divine heritage, but to the largest kingdom Tibet had ever seen. Yet it was not to be handed to him on a plate. When Songtsen was just thirteen, his father was poisoned. The parts of his kingdom that had been absorbed from other clan leaders rose up in an insurgency, showing just how much the new Tibetan kingdom needed the unifying figure of the tsenpo. Songtsen knew this. He captured the traitor who had killed his father and executed him, had the insurgency put down and then rode west at the head of his troops to subdue a hostile army harrying the Tibetan border. Still a teenager, he had proved his authority. The destiny of the tsenpos was in safe hands.⁴

POWER AND THE PRINCESS

At the centre of Songtsen's kingdom was the town of Rasa. The name meant 'Walled City', an apt description of a place that was part town, part fortress. It was perched on the bank of the Kyichu river and had the mighty mountain range of Nyenchen Thanglha soaring above it to the north, separating it from the great elevated plateau known as Changtang, the 'Northern Plains'. As it grew with the fame and power of the tsenpo, Rasa acquired a new, more dignified name: Lhasa, the 'Divine City'. The tsenpo's court, true to nomadic tradition, moved around Central Tibet in great tented encampments, but increasingly Lhasa was becoming the heart of the kingdom.

It is easy to be forced into a corner in Tibet. The pressure of the Indian subcontinent has pushed up some of the highest mountains in the world to wall the Tibetan plateau. To the west, the famously treacherous Karakoram guard the passes into Afghanistan and Ladakh; to the north, the Kunlun hold back the world's most hostile deserts; to the south and east are the highest mountains of all, the Himalayas. But Songtsen's kingdom was not only hemmed in by mountains.

Across the Himalayas, the king of Nepal ruled over the prosperous Kathmandu valley, benefiting from the vast number of traders passing through his little kingdom. To the west was another ancient kingdom, Zhangzhung. Its people were not unlike the Tibetans, their rocky castles perched over even more hostile terrain. Still, they boasted not only their own language, but a culture with a distinct Persian flavour, thanks to the close contacts between Zhangzhung and the lands to the west. Finally, towards China there was a confederacy of tribes known as the Azha, who periodically taunted the Chinese with raids into their territories.

The previous tsenpo had been content to forge alliances with these kingdoms, but Songtsen had bigger ambitions. As long as these neighbours were in place, Tibet would remain a small player. Each neighbour was also a gatekeeper behind whom a greater power lay half-concealed. Behind Nepal lay India, ruled by Harsha, one of the greatest kings in Indian history. Behind Zhangzhung lay Persia, home of a rich and ancient culture. And behind Azha lay China, which was just emerging from a long period of turbulence under a new and powerful dynasty, the Tang.

It didn't take long for Songtsen to kick down the gates. In dealing with Zhangzhung, he first let it seem that he was happy to follow his father's

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example. One of the royal princesses was married off to the king of Zhangzhung to seal an alliance: a common practice in Asian diplomacy, in which princesses were political pawns. Union in marriage with a hostile power made family, and families do not attack their own members. That at least was the theory. Tibetan bards sang songs about the princess sent to Zhangzhung. In these songs, she speaks of her new home with touching dismay.

The place that it's my fate to inhabit
Is this Silver Castle of Khyunglung.
Others say:
'Seen from outside, it's cliffs and ravines,
But seen from inside, it's gold and jewels.'
But when I'm standing in front of it,
It rises up tall and grey.⁵

Perhaps Songtsen saw an opportunity in the princess's unhappiness. Or perhaps he had intended all along that she would bring down the kingdom of Zhangzhung from within. In any case, a few years after the marriage the Tibetan princess, now a queen, started working as a spy. She sent Songtsen detailed reports of the movements of the king of Zhangzhung and his troops. When the time was right, Songtsen sent an army to ambush the king while he was away from his castle. The plan was wildly successful: the king was killed, and the vast territory of Zhangzhung – all of what became Western Tibet – was swallowed up by Songtsen's kingdom.

At the same time, Songtsen was also going about securing foreign allies. The opportunity for an alliance with the kingdom of Nepal fell into Songtsen's hands when King Narendradeva was ousted and fled into exile in Lhasa. Narendradeva and his court remained there for most of the 630s, and the Tibetans learned much from them. During this time Tibet's oldest Buddhist temple, the Jokhang, was built on the model of a Nepalese temple, with architectural details carved by Nepalese craftsmen. Though it has been much restored and enhanced in the interim, the Jokhang still stands in Lhasa today as a place of pilgrimage for Tibet's Buddhists. When Narendradeva returned to Nepal at the beginning of the 640s, it was at the head of a Tibetan army, and when he regained his throne it was essentially as a vassal of the Tibetan empire.⁶

And so to the east and China. During the 630s, the newly established Tang dynasty was busy securing its western frontiers, including the troublesome Azha. Songtsen sent an ambassador to the Chinese court in 634, with little effect. Four years later, and that much bolder, he sent another ambassador to ask for the hand of a Chinese princess. It is a testament to the importance of this mission that the ambassador was Songtsen's prime minister and general right-hand man, Gar Tongtsen, scion of the ancient clan of Gar. Apparently, Gar was treated politely and his request was still under consideration when a prince of the Azha suddenly appeared and made exactly the same request. Despite its victories elsewhere, Tibet remained an obscure little kingdom in the barbarian south as far as the Chinese court was concerned. The princess was thus promised to the Azha, and Prime Minister Gar was sent home with little ceremony, empty-handed.

This was an affront to Songtsen's new sense of his own importance. If the Chinese had underestimated the Tibetan empire this time, they would not be allowed to do so again. Songtsen sent his army, now bolstered with troops from Zhangzhung, up towards China to fight the Azha. Victory followed quickly, and the whole region to the northeast of Tibet – today's Amdo – was absorbed into the Tibetan empire. With his army now stationed right on China's border, Songtsen's bargaining power was much greater. No more polite requests: he demanded the princess, threatening to send his army deep into China if he was refused again. The Chinese emperor, still dismissive of this new upstart kingdom, rejected Songtsen's demands and despatched his army to teach the Tibetans a lesson. The Chinese troops were easily defeated. The emperor would have to revise his opinion of this new threat.

AT THE COURT OF THE GREAT TANG

The Chinese emperor, Taizong, was not so different to the Tibetan tsenpo. He was one of history's great empire-builders, and one of China's most capable leaders. Since he had been born into a respectable family of warrior horsemen, and his mother's clan was of Turkish origin, he had a close affinity with the semi-nomadic people who lived to the west of China. Taizong and his father had toppled the previous dynasty, the Sui, and erected their own, which was given the name Tang, on its ruins. For centuries China had been divided between petty kingdoms and short-lived dynasties, most of them founded by nomadic warriors pouring in from the steppes. Many people looked back nostalgically to the Han dynasty, which had once ruled a vast territory from

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Korea in the east to Kashgar in the west. But the Han had fallen apart nearly four hundred years before. It was only with Taizong that the Han empire was matched, and for that achievement Chinese history remembers him as one of its greatest heroes.⁷

Thanks to his relatively lowly origins, Taizong was practical and – for an emperor – humble. He had little time for the divinations and magical potions that had fascinated many of his predecessors, and he was always willing to take the advice of experienced officials. As was the case with Songtsen in Tibet, his empire-building was a team effort. Nevertheless, he cut an imposing figure at court, tall and intimidating, with a tendency to fly into purple-faced rages. His impressive stature and fearsome temper stood him in good stead with the Tang's rivals, who were mostly tough warrior people such as the Turks and the Tibetans.

Once Songtsen had made his point by defeating a sizeable Chinese battalion, he pulled his army back and sent Gar to see the Chinese emperor again. The prime minister arrived in Chang'an in 641 laden with treasure to offer as tribute. For any Tibetan, Chang'an would have been both exciting and intimidating. A city of nearly two million inhabitants with countless foreigners passing through, it was one of the most cosmopolitan places on the globe. Turkish princelings, Japanese pilgrims and Jewish merchants rubbed shoulders in the city's marketplaces where, especially in the disreputable western market, almost anything could be obtained. For the more respectable, there were the festivities held at the city's many impressive Buddhist monasteries, which brought the Buddhist culture of India right into the heart of China's empire.

At the Chinese court, distrust of foreigners was mixed with a fascination for the exotic. In particular, a love of all things Turkish permeated the Tang era, resulting in strange sights in Chang'an, such as Chinese women riding through the streets dressed as Turkish horsemen. Taizong's son, the crown prince, succumbed to Turkomania to such a degree that he went to live in a camp of Turkish tents in the palace grounds, insisted on speaking in Turkish and eating boiled mutton sliced with his own sword in the Turkish manner. At the same time, Taizong's own standards had started to slip. Initially he had decried the excesses of previous dynasties, but by the 640s he was already beginning to look like a parody of a decadent emperor. A vast and incredibly expensive palace complex was built, but was torn down when Taizong decided that the architect had chosen the wrong location. And officials had started to complain

that Taizong had become addicted to the hunting games that were one of the traditional pastimes of Chinese emperors, and as a result was hardly ever seen at court.⁸

Chang'an must have seemed far removed from the rocky castles of Tibet. Foreign ambassadors were met with an intimidating display of courtly ceremony, designed to inspire awe and reverence. They were put up in one of four hostels situated at the city's four gates, and all of their activities were directed by hosts who also served as spies to the emperor. Ambassadors were ranked in precedence according to how important the emperor thought they were: hence the Tibetans' unceremonious ousting on the arrival of the Azha embassy last time round.

When the time came for the ambassador to see the emperor himself, an elaborate ceremony was enacted to impress the foreigner and display the superiority of the Tang dynasty. As the ambassador entered the vast imperial hall, he passed five divisions of armed troops dressed in scarlet. Like a character in a play, the visitor had to recite lines in which he offered his country's tribute as a vassal to the great emperor. The emperor had no need to speak at all, as everything was handled by his officer of protocol.

Nevertheless, Taizong, who had little time for ceremony, questioned Gar personally and was impressed by his clever answers. There is a portrait of Gar at this audience; in it we see a slender middle-aged man with a long thin nose and a light beard, wearing a black headband and dressed in a red and gold robe of Persian design.⁹ Gar won the emperor's respect, and was offered the hand of another princess for himself. He showed his skill at diplomacy in turning the emperor's offer down gracefully. 'I have a wife in my own country, chosen by my parents,' he said, 'and I couldn't bear to turn her away. What's more, the tsenpo hasn't yet seen the princess who is to be his bride, and I, his humble subject, couldn't presume to be married first.' Taizong was impressed again, but would not countenance a refusal. So Gar returned to Tibet with two Chinese brides.

If Chinese historians speak highly of Gar, Tibet's bards sing of his exploits in more colourful fashion. Their stories are entertaining and, if hardly historical, at least show us how affectionately Gar's resourceful nature was remembered by the Tibetans. According to the bards there were a number of rival suitors for the Chinese princess and Gar had to pass several tests set by the emperor to win her for Songtsen. In one, each of the parties was given a hundred pots of beer, and the emperor promised that the princess would be

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given to whoever could finish off the beer by noon the next day without spilling any or getting drunk. The other parties, downing huge jugs of beer one after another, got very drunk, vomited and spilled drink everywhere. But Gar issued his men with tiny cups so that they could drink only a little at a time. Thanks to this sensible measure, no beer was spilled and the Tibetans stayed reasonably sober.

The final test was to pick out the princess from a line-up of a hundred ladies. Gar had already become friendly with the Chinese noblewoman who was looking after the Tibetans at their hostel. Now he became even more friendly, eating, drinking and finally sleeping with his hostess. In an intimate moment Gar asked her to describe the princess, but she refused, scared that the princess would use divination to discover who had betrayed her. Gar's response was ingenious, if a little bizarre. He locked the door of his quarters, and had a large kettle placed on the floor, filled with water and the feathers of rare birds. On top of the kettle he placed a red shield as a lid, and then asked the hostess to sit on the kettle. A clay pot was placed over her head, and a copper pipe inserted into the pot. 'Give me your description through the tube,' Gar said, 'and if anybody ever finds out by divination, they'll never believe it anyway. So make it a good description.' His hostess described every feature of the princess's body and attire, and the next day Gar succeeded in claiming her for the tsenpo.¹⁰

And so the princess was escorted to Tibet. The marriage ushered in two decades of peace between the Tibetans and the Chinese. It was also an era of cultural exchange in which young Tibetan aristocrats travelled to Chang'an to study in the city's schools, while Chinese craftsmen skilled in the making of paper and ink were sent to Tibet, where they demonstrated new technology such as silkworms and millstones. According to Chinese historians, once the princess arrived in Lhasa she set to work civilising the Tibetans, convincing the Tibetan nobility to swap their felt and fur clothes for Chinese silk, and to abandon the old practice of painting their faces red. According to Tibetan historians, however, the princess's greatest contribution was Buddhist in nature. She brought with her a statue of the Buddha, the first to arrive in Tibet, which was placed in a special temple called Ramoche. Later it was moved to the other Buddhist temple, the Jokhang, where it remains to this day.¹¹

Elsewhere in Lhasa there is a statue of Songtsen, flanked by his Chinese princess on one side and a (perhaps legendary) Nepalese princess on the other. For later Tibetans, it was these princesses, their introduction of Buddhist statues to Tibet, and their encouragement of the tsenpo in building Buddhist

temples that became the defining images of Songtsen's rule. At the time, though, neither Songtsen nor his courtiers are likely to have perceived things in this way. Of the tsenpo's many consorts, it was one of his Tibetan wives who provided him with his heir. Buddhism, for the time being, was only one of many new cultural imports circulating in Tibet.¹²

CULTURAL CAPITAL

Tibetans are quite self-deprecating when it comes to their ancestors. Referring to the time before they were softened by the civilising effects of the Buddhist teachings, they call their forebears 'red-faced barbarians'. This is a reference to the ancient practice – still seen today among the remaining nomads of Western Tibet – of painting one's face with red pigment. Even the origin myth of the Tibetan people is a bit rough and ready. In the far-distant past a monkey mated with an ogress, and their offspring were six monkey children. The monkey father took the children to a forest, where they could live on the fruit of the trees, and left them there. After three years, the parents returned and found to their surprise that the monkey children had drastically increased in number from six to five hundred, and eaten the forest bare. Lifting up their arms, the five hundred little monkeys moaned: 'Mother, Father, what can we eat?' Their monkey father, at a loss, prayed to the compassionate Buddhist deity Avalokiteshvara, who scattered grain upon the ground. The grain grew into crops, which the father handed over to his many children.

Thus the first Tibetans thrived on the crops that were to become the staples of the Tibetan diet. They grew, and over time their tails shortened, their body hair reduced, they learned to speak and ultimately became humans. It might be a stretch to claim that this is an early version of the theory of evolution, but the legend does assert a kind of genetic legacy from these first parents. It states that Tibetans can be divided into two types: those who take after the monkey father, and those who take after the ogress mother. The first type are tolerant, trustworthy, compassionate, hard-working and softly spoken. The second type are lustful, wrathful, profit-hungry and competitive, physically powerful with a loud laugh. Never content to be at rest, they are always changing their minds, leaping into action and allowing their hot tempers to get them into trouble.¹³

It was certainly true that Tibet's early enemies regarded its people with fear and trepidation. But, like the legendary monkey children, the early Tibetans

had another side to them. They were eager to learn from the more established cultures that they encountered in the course of their military expansion. Though not without a culture of their own, the Tibetans were hungry for more. And so they learned from Nepal, India, China and Persia, adopting and combining elements from each to create a distinct culture of their own. Lhasa, the empire's capital, became the centre of these new developments.

One of the most impressive achievements of this period was the invention of a whole system of writing for the Tibetan language. Songtsen had shown his regard for the technology of writing when he asked the Chinese emperor for the secrets of paper and ink. Now Gar had brought back men who could train the Tibetans in these new techniques. At the same time, Songtsen was trying get someone to invent an alphabet for the Tibetan language. The tsenpo had already sent a number of Tibetans to India to learn Indian writing systems, but all had failed, some of them dying in the extreme heat. Now he appointed a young man from the Tonmi clan to go to India and derive from the Indian scripts an alphabet in which the Tibetan language could be written. Having survived the journey, Tonmi was able to procure the services of an Indian Brahmin. He asked: 'Will you teach me writing?' and offered half of his gold. The Brahmin haughtily replied: 'I know twenty different writing systems. Which one would you like to study, child of Tibet?' Tonmi ambitiously asked to study them all, so the Brahmin instructed him using a pillar on the shore of a lake on which these twenty different scripts were carved.¹⁴ Tonmi was such a good student that he earned the Indian name Sambhota, meaning 'The Good Tibetan.'

Having learned these scripts, Tonmi returned to Tibet and created a Tibetan alphabet based upon them. Once the alphabet was formulated, it was taught to Songtsen and select members of the royal household. The tsenpo shut himself away for some time in order to learn to read and write Tibetan. His absence caused unrest among the people, upon which the ministers were happy to capitalise. According to one history, a minister said to the people: 'This tsenpo hasn't appeared for four years! He's a know-nothing idiot! The happiness of the Tibetan people is down to us, the ministers.' Songtsen, overhearing, thought: 'If the ministers call me an idiot, it won't be possible to control the people.' Hence, emerging from his seclusion, he proceeded to set down – in writing – ten laws for the subjects of the Tibetan empire.¹⁵

So goes the story, anyway. If there really was a Tonmi, he is lost in the misty valleys of legend. Yet the Tibetan letters are based so closely on the writing of Nepal and northern India, which were coming under the sway of the Tibetan

empire during Songtsen's time, that the story of Tonmi may contain more than a grain of truth. The appearance of writing in the middle of the seventh century demonstrates like nothing else the Tibetans' commitment to becoming a culture fit to stand beside their neighbours. It is rightly regarded by Tibetans as one of their great achievements, one of the reasons that Songtsen became known to posterity as Songtsen Gampo, meaning 'Songtsen the Wise'.

The new Tibetan alphabet was soon put to work in the administration of this vast new empire. The latter was divided into five *ru*, or 'horns', each of which contained ten 'thousand districts', each of which comprised a thousand households. These were sources of revenue through taxes and soldiers through forced draft. The Huns, Turks and Mongols all organised their territories in a similar fashion, which suggests that the Tibetans inherited this system from their nomadic ancestors. If the new way of parcelling up Tibet meant that the clans were split between different administrative districts, so much the better. The power of the clans was still a threat to Songtsen's lineage.¹⁶

As for the Tibetans in charge of all this, they needed to be controlled as well. A rigid hierarchy developed in which the noblemen working for the new Tibetan imperial administration were organised with the prime minister at the top, followed by the four chief ministers, then the ministers who held royal insignia granted by the tsenpo – turquoise for the most important, followed by gold, white gold, silver, brass and copper. All of these officials were drawn from the clan aristocracy. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the vast majority of Tibetans, the peasants and nomads whose way of life would remain largely unchanged until the latter part of the twentieth century.

The peasants lived on the estates of the aristocratic landowners. They were bound to their lord from birth, and worked his land, not unlike the peasants in medieval Europe. Thus most of them lived on the same piece of land all their lives, travelling only if the opportunity for trade or pilgrimage presented itself. The nomads (known as *drogpas* in Tibetan), on the other hand, moved about freely, living in black tents made of yak hair and following the seasons as they moved their herds of sheep, goats and yaks to new pastures. Naturally there were differences among the peasants as well, from those who barely scratched a living from the land to those who dwelt in large houses with their own servants and domestic animals. This whole social structure was a pyramid of power with the tsenpo at its apex. Although it broke down after the fall of the empire, to be reconstituted later in different forms by different rulers, the constant factor was that Tibetan society remained deeply stratified.

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For later Tibetans, who came to see Songtsen as the first of the great Buddhist kings, his lawmaking went hand in hand with Buddhist ethics. Though it seems unlikely that Songtsen really did create a new Buddhist system of law, the image of the great empire-building king who was also a compassionate Buddhist proved a powerful one, and Songtsen's supposed reconciliation of the realms of government and religion became a model to which all subsequent Tibetan rulers aspired. Down the centuries, through to the twentieth century, the Tibetan ideal of government was a union, not a separation, of Church and State.¹⁷

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

Bowing to tradition, Songtsen stepped down from the throne when his son reached the age of thirteen. As the old rituals demanded, the glamour of the tsenpo passed from him into the body of his son. But the prince died shortly afterwards, and Songtsen assumed the mantle of the tsenpo again. There was much to occupy his mind. Events during the last years of Songtsen's life brought Tibet into direct military conflict with India. China had developed a good diplomatic relationship with King Harsha, another great empire-builder who now ruled much of northern India. Envoys had been travelling back and forth between the Chinese and Indian emperors throughout the 640s.

Then, in 648, an embassy of high-level Chinese envoys arrived in India to find that Harsha had died. A new Indian warlord attacked the envoys, killing all except for two who escaped to Tibet. One of these was Wang Xuance, a seasoned envoy who was on good terms with the Tibetans. Songtsen granted him an army composed of Tibetan soldiers and Nepali cavalry to accompany him back into India. After three days of fighting the Indian troops were routed and the warlord was sent to China as a prisoner of war.¹⁸ India, or at least a part of it, thus succumbed to the Tibetans. Having shown how far his reach could extend, Songtsen spent the last year of his reign consolidating the empire. He died in 649, the same year that his old enemy and sometime ally Taizong passed away in China. Songtsen had achieved everything the founder of a new empire could wish for – everything, that is, except leaving a viable heir. After the death of his son, the new crown prince was Songtsen's tiny grandson. Into this power vacuum now stepped Prime Minister Gar. His moment had come.

But first it was necessary for Gar and all of the other high officials to attend Songtsen's funeral. The burial of a tsenpo was a solemn affair, involving a range of ritual specialists and lasting months or even years. In these elaborate royal

funerals – which echo those of the Scythians, Huns, Turks and Mongols – the Tibetans preserved the customs of their nomadic forebears. Soon after the tsenpo died, his body was taken to a temple to be prepared for burial. During this period, mourners could pay their respects to the corpse; the nobles showed their grief by ancient symbolic actions such as painting their faces red, plaiting and cutting off their hair, and lacerating their bodies.¹⁹ Many centuries earlier the Greek historian Herodotus had heard about the custom of self-laceration among Scythians mourning their king. The Romans also observed this practice among the Huns, and braids of plaited hair have been found in their excavated graves.²⁰

When the time for Songtsen's burial arrived, the corpse was carried in a magnificent procession to the tomb, a vast earthen structure rising out of the ground. Only a few scattered descriptions of these great funerals remain, but they are sufficient to allow us to picture Songtsen's procession winding its way through the Yarlung valley under the shadow of the mountain where his ancestors first came down to earth. The tsenpo's jewelled funeral carriage is accompanied by priests wearing turbans and feathered headdresses, who move to the eerie sound of horns, crashing cymbals and thudding drums. When the procession arrives at the towering earthen tomb, the priests make the final sacrifices of horses and other animals, and intone the sacred words:

The spear is plunged into the body of the bird,
 The blade is thrust into the body of the hare,
 The power of life is broken,
 The carcass is thrown away.²¹

And with that the tsenpo, seated in a copper coffin, is sealed into the tomb. This tomb is no halfway house to heaven. A great trapezoid mound, shaped like the royal tents, it towers over the plain. Even today, Songtsen's tomb – now surrounded by those of later tsenpos – is still an impressive sight, 13 metres high and 130 metres long. Since their sky cord had been severed, the tsenpos had no way back to heaven. It seems the Tibetans, like the Turks, may have believed that the spirit of their kings lived on inside the tomb, for the latter was made as comfortable as possible, with treasure and everyday necessities all provided. Servants were included too.

In earlier times the custom was that the tsenpo's closest allies, those ministers who had sworn an oath of fealty to him, would be sacrificed and follow

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their leader into the tomb. Though this kind of human sacrifice was carried out in the royal funerals of many Central Asian peoples, by the time of Songtsen's death the practice seems to have been replaced by something a little less cruel, if no less eerie. Instead of being killed, the tsenpo's retainers became the living dead, spending the rest of their lives within the confines of the tomb grounds, taking care of them and accepting offerings to the deceased tsenpo. The living dead subsisted on what they could grow near the tomb, on the offerings to the tsenpo, and on whatever cattle wandered into the tomb grounds. That which they touched was considered to have become part of the realm of the dead and no living person would try to reclaim it.²²

Once the interment of the *tsenpo* was complete, the tomb was sealed with a stone pillar. These standing stones were not just for marking the tombs of the tsenpos. Those clan leaders who had rallied round the tsenpo had their allegiance marked with a standing stone, and the oath was renewed every year under the stone. An animal was sacrificed and those present would vow that the same bloody fate would befall anyone who broke their oath. In Tibet today one still finds heaps of stones piled up at mountain peaks and passes, representing the gods of the sky. Whenever a vehicle passes, the passengers will scatter little pieces of paper called 'wind horses' printed with Buddhist prayers and shout an ancient battle cry: *ki ki so so lha gyalo!* – 'May the gods be victorious!'

RED-FACED WARRIORS ON THE SILK ROUTE

Tibet had now grown to encompass huge swathes of Asia. With Songtsen gone and the new tsenpo a mere toddler, Gar Tongtsen had the freedom to mould the new empire as he saw fit. He turned out to be as impressive a leader as he had been a prime minister. The Chinese historians of the Tang dynasty, famously contemptuous of most foreigners, wrote: 'Although he was illiterate, he was naturally wise, resolute, strict and honourable, a brave warrior and a skilful general, making a most successful regent.'

But Gar was no Chinese stooge. In fact, he quickly showed that his ambition matched that of his old master. In 663, he crushed the Azha, the semi-nomadic people from the Mongolian steppe who had harried the Chinese and the Tibetans over the past fifty years. After this final defeat they gradually became Tibetanised as they absorbed the language and culture of their conquerors. Gar used the newly invented Tibetan alphabet to conduct a census of the empire's territories, the better to raise taxes and recruit armies

from these newly conquered lands. In a few decades the Tibetans had gone from being a simple alliance of southern clans to being masters of a pan-Asian empire. The only way they could sustain this progress was to raise armies from the lands they conquered. Fortunately, Tibet's neighbours were also semi-nomadic warriors and made formidable soldiers.²³

The Tibetans celebrated the fact that their soldiers were superior fighters, capable of winning despite being outnumbered by their enemies. In a bardic version of an encounter between one of Gar's sons and a Chinese general, the two exchange taunts about the quality of their respective armies. After the Chinese general has flaunted the superior size of his army, Gar's son replies:

There is no disputing the matter of numbers. But many small birds are the food of a single hawk, and many small fish are the food of a single otter. A pine tree has been growing for a hundred years, but a single axe is its enemy. Although a river runs ceaselessly, it can be crossed in a moment by a boat six feet long. Although barley and rice grow over a whole plain, it is all the grist of a single mill. Although the sky is filled with stars, in the light of a single sun they are nothing.²⁴

The Tibetan soldiers wore leather scale armour. Some of these scales have been dug out of an ancient Tibetan fort in the Central Asian desert. They are tough overlapping rectangles covered with bright red or black lacquer and decorated with painted circles. According to some accounts, the Tibetan soldiers wore feathered plumes atop their helmets and carried battle flags on long straight poles, ancestors of the peaceful prayer flags that adorn Buddhist sites in Tibet today. The prowess of this Tibetan army was soon to be tested in one of the most forbidding landscapes on earth: the Taklamakan desert.

At the beginning of the 660s, the Chinese empire still controlled the lucrative Silk Route. But its grasp on the distant colonial territories that were part of this network was starting to weaken. The western Turks were in fighting mood again. This time Gar saw an opportunity to extend his empire further. He had already pushed across the mountains into Kashmir, giving the Tibetans a strategic advantage that the Chinese failed to appreciate until it was too late. Now allied with the Turks, the Tibetans conquered Kashgar, cutting off China's Silk Route connection.

Poised on the edge of the Taklamakan, the Tibetans were ready to attack the little city-states of the Silk Route. One of the most vulnerable, and one of its

greatest prizes, was the ancient city of Khotan. A Chinese pilgrim who stayed there shortly before the Tibetan invasion spoke in glowing terms of the people's politeness, their easy-going nature and their love of the arts, particularly literature, music and dance. Other Chinese sources tell us that Khotanese women moved freely in society, wore trousers and rode on horseback like the men, and were allowed a certain degree of sexual freedom – at least more than was customary in China. Khotan remained fervently Buddhist until the forced conversion of its people to Islam at the hands of the Karkhanid Turks at the beginning of the eleventh century; the enthusiasm with which the Khotanese practised Buddhism prior to that was regularly remarked upon by visitors.

One popular activity among the Khotanese was the composition of Buddhist scriptures – some of which contained detailed prophecies about Khotan and its dealings with Tibet. The *Enquiry of Vimalaprabha* is a Buddhist scripture that does nothing to hide its interest in contemporary concerns of the Khotanese in the 670s: the plight of the Khotanese Buddhists at the hands of invaders. The text has a heroine, the Khotanese princess, a kind of Buddhist Joan of Arc, determined to save Buddhism in Khotan from the depredations of fierce warriors whom she calls 'the red-faced ones'. They are, of course, the Tibetans, who must have been a terrifying sight as they rode into cultured Khotan, clad in leather scale armour, their cheeks smeared with red.

In the story, the Tibetans conquer Khotan and desecrate its monasteries and the sacred Buddhist reliquaries called *stupas*. The Khotanese princess flees into exile and formulates a plan involving paying off the Tibetans, who are perceived as being motivated more by greed than anything else. Her aspiration is summarised in a prayer: 'When the red-faced ones and the Chinese battle each other, may Khotan not be destroyed. When monks come from other countries to Khotan, may they not be treated dishonourably. May those who flee here from other countries find a place to stay here, and help to rebuild the great stupas and monastic gardens that have been burned by the red-faced ones.'²⁵ It is apparent that the Tibetans made life very hard indeed for the Buddhists of Khotan. Indeed, the *Enquiry of Vimalaprabha* even has the Buddha pronouncing that the Tibetans have formed a perverse ambition to destroy his religion. The picture of a Tibetan army lacking any respect for Khotan's Buddhist institutions is surprising, but quite credible at a time when Tibetan interest in Buddhism was still restricted to the court. The advocates of Buddhism did not have the power – yet – to temper the violence of the red-faced warriors.²⁶

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And so, having gained the respect of the Chinese, Gar had now become their greatest scourge, cutting off the Tang empire from its western conquests and from the trade routes that connected China with India and Persia. He returned from his campaigns an old man. Arriving back in Central Tibet in the year 666, he had an audience with the young tsenpo, who lacked both the power and the will to oppose the *de facto* leader of Tibet. When Gar died the following year, the Tibetan empire was divided up between his sons. They ruled competently, but conflict was inevitable. At some point a tsenpo would begin to chafe against his role as a figurehead. In the end it was Songtsen's great-grandson Dusong who took it upon himself to destroy the Gar clan. Dusong had one advantage over the sons of Gar: he was at court while they were constantly away campaigning or ruling over distant territories. In addition, the luck of the sons of Gar was beginning to turn.

In the 690s, as the curtain fell on Tibet's first century on the world stage, the scions of Gar began to lose their grip on the empire. First, Gar Tsenyen, the governor of Khotan, was defeated by the Chinese. Dusong had him court-martialled and executed. Next, Gar Tagu was captured by Sogdians. Time was also running out for the only remaining son of Gar with real power, the general Gar Tridring. After years of campaigning, his soldiers were restless, and some had begun to defect to the Chinese side. There was an inherent weakness in the Tibetan army, in that it had had to grow rapidly to keep pace with the startling expansion of the Tibetan empire, drafting able men from its conquered territories. But the further these new soldiers came from the centre of Tibetan culture, the more their loyalty was a matter of concern. Now the formidable Empress Wu was on the throne in China. Seeing the weakness of the general's position, she hatched a plan to defeat him without engaging him in battle.

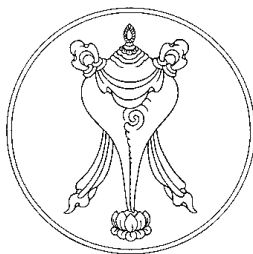
While Gar Tridring was still loyally campaigning on China's borders, the empress cleverly offered a peace deal – not to the general himself, but directly to the tsenpo. The Tibetan court, like the army, was tired of battle. A peace deal would leave the last significant member of the Gar clan stranded, and the tsenpo knew it. He therefore accepted. Then he brought all of the members of the Gar clan – apart from Tridring, who was still in the field – together in a hunting party. This proved a deadly trap, and all members of the clan present were slaughtered. Before word could filter to Gar Tridring, the tsenpo led an army of his own towards China. When the army reached Tridring, he knew the

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game was up. Neither his father nor his brothers had ever openly opposed the tsenpo, let alone led an army against him. To do so would undermine the sacred rationale for the whole Tibetan empire. In acting as it had, the Gar clan had only after all been ensuring that the tsenpo ruled over a kingdom befitting his majesty. Anyway, Tridring's army was exhausted and close to mutiny. Thus, as the tsenpo approached, the last of the Gars committed suicide and his army fled across the Chinese border.

Dusong had done it: the tsenpo was the true ruler of Tibet again. But Tibet was overstretched and Empress Wu's army was now pushing its soldiers back from the borders of China, out of Central Asia. The year was 692, just half a century after the Tibetans had started to create their own empire. In that time Tibet had become a participant in the currents of world culture, with its capital, Lhasa, developing into an unlikely cosmopolitan centre, home of Nepalese and Chinese nobility and a destination for foreign missionaries and merchants keen to have a stake in the new expanding empire.

Pushing into the deserts of Central Asia, the Tibetans had crossed and recrossed the ancient Silk Route arteries of world trade that carried silk, jade, spices and slaves between East and West. Of course, these trade routes were conduits for culture and ideas too. Ideas from Rome, Byzantium, Persia, India and China were passed along these ancient arteries throughout the first millennium, making the world a much more interconnected place than is often thought. Tibetan aristocrats wore Chinese silks and sipped Chinese tea; a Persian lion still stands over one of the tsenpo's tombs. As the seventh century drew to a close, Tibet was poised to take its place among the world's great cultures. But its own culture was still inchoate, a melting pot swirling with different ideas, rituals and technologies. And the Tibetans were about to encounter another young and vibrant culture: the Arabs. Yet, in the following century, the scales would start to tip towards the Buddhist religion, and the Buddhist holy land of India, as the defining influences on Tibetan culture.



2

The Holy Buddhist Empire, 700–797

DEATH IN LHASA

In the early eighth century Lhasa was a busy city. Another Chinese princess and her entourage had arrived to marry the tsenpo and, it was hoped, usher in another period of peace between Tibet and China. Life for anyone sent away from home to serve as a glorified diplomatic bartering chip was destined to be tough, but it went especially hard for Princess Jincheng. The Chinese emperor loved his adopted daughter dearly, and did nothing to hide his sadness in letting her go. He wrote a wordy letter to the tsenpo, which ended thus: ‘Princess Jincheng is our little daughter, and we are very fond of her, but as the father and mother of our subjects, we feel for the black-haired people. Since by granting their request and strengthening the bonds of peace, the borderlands will be untroubled and the officers and soldiers at rest, we sever the bond of affection for the good of the state.’ In practice, the bonds of affection were not so easily severed, however, and at the farewell banquet the emperor called over the Tibetan envoy and told him how young the princess was, and how hard it was for him to send her so far away. Then he broke down, sobbing on the envoy’s shoulder ‘for a long time,’ as the Chinese historians note.¹

Even if the teenage princess managed to steel herself in the face of the emperor’s emotional outbursts before departure, she then had to face a dauntingly long journey over the Tibetan plateau.² It must have been some comfort that she had been given an entire mini-court to emigrate along with her,

placing her at the centre of a little Chinese cultural satellite in Lhasa. Some Chinese were nervous about offering the Tibetans such an insight into their own culture. When Jincheng asked for books to be sent to Lhasa, one minister advised the emperor to refuse. ‘Your servant has heard that the Tibetans are naturally endowed with energy and perseverance, that they are intelligent and sharp, and untiring in their love of study,’ he warned darkly. ‘By reading these books they will certainly acquire a knowledge of war.’ This minister, who was in charge of the public records, pointed out that Confucius had thought it better to give away cities than literary classics, and argued that it was not really the princess who was behind this request. But the emperor, either less convinced by the power of books or more trustful of the Tibetans, waved away the protest.³

Despite the comforting cushion of her portable Chinese court, the princess did not have an easy time in Lhasa. Her husband, the new tsenpo, was only a child. As Jincheng settled in to life as a queen, it could not have been long before she realised where the real power lay. Once again the tsenpo was a mere figurehead: this time it was his mother, Tri Malo, who was running the empire as Tibet’s unofficial empress. It must have been galling for Jincheng, brought up as the darling of one of China’s greatest emperors, to have ended up thousands of miles from home under the thumb of an all-powerful mother-in-law. After Tri Malo died in 712 the tsenpo was enthroned at the age of just eight, and given the title Tride Tsugtsen. Even then, Jincheng seems to have occasionally contemplated getting out; the death of her father left her particularly isolated, and in 723 the king of Kashmir received a secret letter from her asking whether she might be welcomed there as a guest in exile.⁴

In the end, there was no need for the princess to flee. Instead she found a role for herself in Tibet as a patron of Buddhism. First of all, Jincheng restored the Buddhist temple that her predecessor, Songtsen’s Chinese bride, had established. As a good Confucian, she performed religious services for this ancestral spirit stranded among barbarians. As a good Buddhist, she made sure that the statue brought by the previous princess was properly honoured with regular offerings. Moreover, she tried to get the Tibetan court to practise funerals in the Buddhist way.

And so, when scores of wandering refugee monks began to arrive in Lhasa, Jincheng rushed to their aid. These were monks from India and Central Asia who had been expelled from China by the new emperor, who, unlike her father, was no friend of Buddhism. As they fled west along the Silk Route, the

monks were thrown out of each town they stayed in, until they arrived at last in Tibet, beyond the emperor's jurisdiction. Pleading with the tsenpo to help these refugees, Jincheng obtained the imperial seal of approval for her plan. The monks were invited to Lhasa, and they came, setting up a refugee camp nearby. Jincheng hurried down from the palace to talk to them. She particularly wanted to know if there were any other Buddhist refugees on Tibet's borders. Indeed there were, the monks told her. To the west, towards Kashmir, there were many more monks. Jincheng sent messengers to invite them to the capital as well.

As the refugee camp swelled, new monasteries were built to house the monks. Within a few years, Lhasa was home to a large immigrant community. If resentment stirred among the local Tibetans, it was ignored. Jincheng had not only found a role that suited her status, she had also made a real difference to the lives of these refugees. Then, three years after the arrival of the monks, disaster struck. A disease was spreading among the foreign monks and the local Tibetans of Lhasa. The afflicted developed a nasty rash, and many died. It was probably smallpox. Jincheng, ever charitable, was not the type to lock herself away in the palace. One day she discovered a pustule on her breast. It was the beginning of the end. As fever consumed her, Jincheng asked that her Chinese attendants, who numbered in the hundreds, be made Buddhist monks. This last wish was granted just before she died. But, with the epidemic raging, it was not a good time to be a Buddhist in Lhasa.⁵

Resentment about the large community of foreign monks now came into the open. People said that the foreigners had brought this plague upon Tibet, and they were probably right. Without Jincheng to speak up for them, popular feeling against the monks grew; in truth, many of the Tibetan ministers felt the same way. The inevitable order came: all monks should leave the kingdom. A few Tibetans who had joined the foreigners tried to challenge the anti-Buddhist feeling among the Tibetan government, arguing that Buddhism was no longer just a foreign movement. The meeting did not go well. 'If these monks are expelled,' the Tibetan monks threatened, 'we won't stay either.' To which, unsurprisingly, the ministers answered: 'Go where you like.'⁶

The epidemic passed. With the princess dead and the monks gone to find a more hospitable host, Lhasa was peaceful again in the 740s. But the image of Buddhism was tainted. All of Jincheng's Buddhist innovations had come to this, a terrifying plague. The old ways of worship had been neglected, and look what had happened. Anti-Buddhist feeling grew until the government decided

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to pass laws against Buddhist practice. The limits of tolerance had been reached, for now.

THAT OLD-TIME RELIGION

What was the religious life of the Tibetans before Buddhism arrived? Since the latter grew to be so successful in Tibet, it is hard to say. The clans that had migrated to Central Tibet from the northern steppes had brought their own mythology and rituals with them: the stately funerals of the *tsempo*s were the most impressive examples. But the nomadic clans had settled among people who were already tending the land in the fertile valleys of Central Tibet, and who had their own rituals and customs. Add to that the religious ideas filtering in from India, China and Persia, and it becomes clear that there were already many layers of religious practice in Tibet before Buddhism arrived on the scene.⁷

One thing is clear: the Tibetans have always lived in a world swarming with spirits, demons and minor deities. All sorts of names for these still exist in Tibet. Sometimes it is said that the world is ruled by three types of spirit: the *lha* in the heavens, the *nyen* in the air and on the peaks of mountains, and the *lu* in the underworld and rivers. The mountain deities were particularly revered, with each clan having its own mountain and the clan leaders considering themselves the descendants of the mountain's divine embodiment. The mightiest mountain of all was *Yarlung Shampo*, from which the ancestor of the *tsempo*s first came down to earth.⁸

Though these deities were the most powerful in Tibet, there were many more. There were the warrior gods of each of the clans. There were the spirits of the mountains, rivers and lakes. There were the spirits of the house and the family. Get on the wrong side of them and they could make you very ill, or even kill you. But keep on good terms with them and they might assist you in all sorts of ways, healing your family, attacking your enemies, or helping you to predict the future. Fortunately, there have always been specialists to deal with the fickle world of the spirits. In the days of the empire they were known as *Bon* and *Shen*. These specialists carried out the delicate business of keeping the bad spirits at bay. A spirit could be summoned and trapped inside a special device made of coloured threads stretched over a cross made of wooden sticks. These devices are still used today and can be seen lying at crossroads, discarded there according to the old custom at the conclusion of a ritual.

Another popular way of tackling the spirits was through substitution. Little figurines of people, houses and the like were used to divert the spirits from their flesh-and-blood targets. These figurines can also be seen today, standing in the street and doing their work.

As well as keeping spirits at bay, the ritual specialists were able to make the spirits do their bidding. They acted as oracles, telling the future through special divination practices, or even allowing the spirits to speak directly through them. To keep the spirits happy, it might be necessary to put out food for them, or burn incense or branches of the fragrant juniper tree. For serious rituals, an animal sacrifice might be required – though this was discouraged by Buddhists. In short, the ritualists saw to the everyday needs of both the aristocrats and the ordinary folk, curing the sick, disposing of the dead, keeping malign influences at bay and ensuring the best of luck through fortune-telling.

This religion – if we can call it that – was mostly about day-to-day life. Before the arrival of Buddhism, there were already some vague ideas of an afterlife. Every person had a soul, called the *La*, which could survive death, either remaining at its tomb to receive offerings (like the souls of the *tsempo*s), wandering around and causing trouble, or departing to another realm, the afterlife in a happy land of the gods, or a land of suffering. Even in life one had to be careful to avoid one's soul leaving the body, which would cause sickness and eventually death. In such cases, a ritualist had to be brought in to call the soul back to its home. Some people had a soul tree, or a soul lake, or special turquoise stones carved into animal shapes as a home for their soul.⁹

All these beliefs and practices might fall within our idea of 'religion', but before Buddhism the Tibetans probably did not think of themselves as following any particular religion. Even though all of these beliefs are sometimes lumped together under the name *Bon*, we should be careful. In the earliest documents *Bon* is a kind of priest or ritual, not an organised religion. The early Tibetans did have some idea of religious practice, which was called *Chos* (pronounced *chö*). This was of two kinds: the religion of the gods, and the religion of men. If the religion of the gods was the job of the ritualists who liaised with the spirit world, the religion of men was the job of poets and storytellers.¹⁰

We have already seen how the exploits of culture heroes such as Gar Tongtsen were retold by the Tibetan bards. It was also the job of the latter to tell of the divine origin of the clans, thus justifying the rule of the clan leaders. In fact, all of the ceremonies that marked life in Tibet were accompanied by

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poetic recitations telling the story behind the ritual. Storytelling was also a way of passing down wisdom and morality from one generation to the next, as it has been in cultures all over the world. Thus, through stories and poems it was ensured that everything in the world would remain in its proper place.

None of this – the world of the spirits, the ritual specialists who dealt with them and the techniques they used – ever left Tibet. When Buddhism triumphed in Tibet, it accommodated itself to this world, which remained fundamental to the lives of most Tibetans. Now we can see how these old ways preserved the established order: the rule of the tsenpos, the role of the clans, and the relationships between spirits, gods and human beings. And we can begin to understand why the sudden arrival in Lhasa of hundreds of Buddhist monks with their own ideas, rituals and newly built temples was seen at first as a dire threat to the established order, especially once the spirits had made their displeasure known through a terrible plague.

With the foreign monks expelled from Tibet, and their patron, the Chinese queen, dead, it must have seemed that the old ways were safe. The interference of Buddhist monks in the life of Lhasa must have looked like an irritating interruption. Certainly there was no reason to think of these outsiders as the harbingers of Tibet's religious future. The tsenpo, who had been a child when he married the Chinese queen, was growing old – indeed, he lived to be old enough to be remembered by the nickname Me Agtsom: 'Bearded Ancestor'. But it was not to be a peaceful old age: intrigues at the court swirled around him, and he eventually fell to assassins hired by two clan leaders.¹¹ Then, just as it seemed that the tsenpos might disappear for good, the greatest of the line appeared, asserting his authority under the banner of the Buddhist religion.

THE BALANCE OF POWER

With the infighting at the Tibetan court threatening to tip the country into civil war, and the Tang empire maintaining its stranglehold on the lucrative Silk Route, Tibet was in trouble. The Silk Route was vital for an economy that thrived on the export of luxuries such as musk, yaks' tails and fragrant honey. Faced with an impenetrable wall of Chinese soldiers to the east, in desperation the Tibetans turned to a new and dangerous power in the west: the Arabs. Forging an alliance with them, the Tibetans moved into the lands known today as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Now they could trade with the

West. Yet, by the early 750s, the Chinese were threatening to close these routes down too.¹²

Then suddenly, in the winter of 755, everything changed. The Tang empire was dealt a blow from which it would never really recover. It came from one of the emperor's most brilliant generals, a man called An Lushan. Though a favourite of the emperor, he surprised everybody by launching a military coup against the Tang dynasty. With his own private army Lushan waged war on the emperor's armies, defeating them over and over again, until he took the capital, Chang'an. He set himself up as emperor and in 756 announced the end of the Tang and the beginning of his own dynasty. It was clear to all that the balance of power in Asia was about to change. And in that same year Trisong Detsen was enthroned in Tibet.

At first the youthful new tsenpo was able to sit back and watch as China descended into chaos. In 757, Tang loyalists assassinated Lushan and called on the help of the Uighurs, a fearsome Turkic people, to wrest back control of China. By 763, the rebellion was over and a Tang emperor was on the throne again. But millions had died in the fighting and an accompanying famine, and the empire would never recover from its wounds. The Uighurs roamed the country, taking what they wanted. And all over the empire, especially in the far-flung colonial territories, local rulers threw off the yoke of rule from Chang'an.

Now Trisong Detsen made his first move as leader of the fearsome Tibetan army, sending his soldiers back onto the Silk Route. This proved spectacularly successful. Nothing illustrated the depths to which the Tang dynasty had fallen as dramatically as the Tibetans' daring conquest of Chang'an that winter. Though it only lasted a couple of weeks, the Tibetan occupation of the Chinese capital set the tone for a new phase of Sino-Tibetan relations. While the Chinese annalists continued to write as if their emperor was lord over all neighbouring 'barbarians', the Chinese now had to treat the Tibetans as equals, and reluctantly agree to treaties placing the Sino-Tibetan border only a few hundred miles from their capital. Though Chang'an remained in Chinese hands, the Tibetans camped frighteningly close by and attacked almost every autumn, the traditional nomadic campaigning season. One Chinese general lamented that, when faced with the might of the Tibetans, the Chinese forces were nothing but an easily frightened mob.¹³

One after another, the western cities, China's gateway to the Silk Route, fell to the Tibetan army. Since whoever controlled the Silk Route controlled trade,

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wealth now flowed into Tibetan, instead of Chinese, coffers. One Chinese city held out against the Tibetans with particular tenacity: Dunhuang. For eleven years inhabitants were placed under siege by the Tibetan army. When, after the first year, the besieged governor talked of burning the city and fleeing, the commander of the Chinese troops murdered him and took his place. After seven more years of siege, the commander managed to sell off the city's supplies of silk to the Tibetans in exchange for food. But, two years later, there was no more food, and the commander went onto the city walls and offered to surrender as long as the Tibetans promised to let him and his people stay in the city. The Tibetans agreed.

The citizens of a Chinese city conquered by the Tibetans had to get used to a new way of life. The way the land was apportioned and taxes were levied, the way contracts and letters were written, all this altered. Tibetan became the language of government, law and business. Even the dates changed, the Chinese system of identifying the year by the name of the current emperor and the year of his reign being replaced by the twelve-year animal cycle of Tibetan astrology. Though this resulted in the problem that the year of the sheep, for example, came up every twelve years, you could explain *which* year of the sheep you meant by consulting the royal annals and checking what had happened in that particular sheep year. A few centuries later, the twelve animals were conjoined with five elements, so that sixty years would pass before you encountered another year of, for example, the wood sheep.

In any case, a few Tibetans took the highest posts in Dunhuang, making sure things ran smoothly, while the Chinese inhabitants had to wear Tibetan clothes, learn to write in the Tibetan alphabet, and work in the Tibetan civil service. The first generation to submit to Tibetan rule felt keenly the loss of their cultural identity, as the annals of the Tang dynasty tell us: 'The inhabitants of the city all adopted foreign dress and submitted to the enemy; but each year when they worshipped their ancestors they put on their Chinese clothes, and wept bitterly as they put them away again.' Indeed, Tibetan documents confirm that the Chinese were second-class citizens, with Tibetans in the lowest government positions still outranking Chinese in the highest.¹⁴

Popular revolts were not uncommon, and at least once the Tibetan rulers of Dunhuang were killed in a Chinese uprising. Yet Tibetan culture thrived in Dunhuang, and later generations, some of them from mixed marriages, grew up learning both the Tibetan and Chinese languages. Indeed, the city was to play a fateful part in the preservation of Tibetan culture. At the end of the tenth

century, thousands of manuscripts were placed in a nearby cave and sealed away, forgotten until their rediscovery in the twentieth century. These are now the earliest Tibetan documents extant anywhere in the world.

By the time Dunhuang fell, the Chinese emperor could see that there was no way the Tang dynasty was going to regain its former glory, so he agreed to a peace treaty allowing Tibet to keep its conquests on the Silk Route. Tibetan prisoners were freed and allowed to return to Tibet. In response, Trisong Detsen freed eight hundred Chinese prisoners: ‘generals, warriors and Buddhist monks’, according to the *Tang Annals*. Then in the early spring of 783, the two sides came together to formalise the treaty.

At the new border between Tibet and China, the city of Qingshui, a great altar was set up. On either side of the altar were massed ranks of Tibetans and Chinese, two thousand of each. Half were soldiers, standing with drawn weapons. The air must have been heavy with threat, and at first things did not go smoothly. Though both sides had agreed to solemnise the treaty by sacrificing an ox and a horse, the Chinese general, sickened by the idea of the treaty, demanded that a sheep, a pig and a dog be used instead. The Tibetans agreed, but nobody could find a pig, so the Tibetan general produced a wild ram instead. In accordance with the old custom, the animals were killed and their blood was collected in two bowls. The Tibetans and Chinese each took a bowl and smeared their mouths with the blood. Then the Tibetan general suggested that both parties should go into a Buddhist temple, temporarily set up in a tent on the other side of the altar, to burn incense and swear the oath again. After that, the two generals drank wine together and exchanged gifts. The whole tense business was over.

The written treaty spared the blushes of the Chinese emperor, beginning with the words ‘the Tang possess all under heaven’ before going on to cede all of the western regions previously held by the Chinese to the Tibetans. The Sino-Tibetan frontier was now established at Qingshui, at the eastern edge of modern Gansu province – perilously close to the Chinese capital. And there it remained until the fall of the Tibetan empire. Despite the favourable terms of the treaty, the Tibetans soon began to flout it, raiding further and further across the border, and taking territory north of the capital, effectively surrounding China on all sides except the east.¹⁵ The Chinese were not about to take this humiliation lying down. An ambitious Chinese general secured an alliance with the Arabs and the Uighur Turks. It was a bold move, and one that hurt the Tibetans, as they were drawn into a long war on their western

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frontiers with the Arabs, who were enjoying a period of great strength under the famous caliph Harun al-Rashid. At the same time, the Uighur Turks were now fighting the Tibetans along the Silk Route.

Yet in the end these alliances were of limited benefit to China. A decisive Tibetan defeat of a joint Chinese–Turkic army in Central Asia in 791 put paid to Chinese ambitions to seize back control of the Silk Route. It would be nearly a thousand years before China regained these Central Asian territories, which are known today as the province of Xinjiang.¹⁶ It was the Tibetan empire that now bestrode the Silk Route, its borders reaching well beyond the Pamir mountains to the west, and deep within China to the east. Trisong Detsen had radically changed the balance of power on the Asian continent. At the same time, he was reshaping Tibetan society with his revolutionary decision to adopt Buddhism as the state religion.¹⁷

THE DHARMA KING

During Trisong Detsen's youth, anti-Buddhist feeling at the Tibetan court had hardened into an outright ban on Buddhist practice. The old religion was back in pride of place, and Buddhism was, it seemed, out of the running. To bring Buddhism back to Tibet would require a revolution of sorts, and this was what Trisong envisaged. In 762, he decided to tackle the anti-Buddhist faction head on. In a revolutionary edict, he declared that Buddhism was now the official religion of Tibet. Of course, as supreme leader he had the authority to do so, but it was a courageous act, not least because, as we have seen, the old religion provided the whole ritual and mythological culture that supported the divine authority of the tsenpos. Trisong invoked the example of his predecessors – hadn't Songtsen Gampo built Buddhist temples? In truth, no previous tsenpo had made anything like the commitment to Buddhism that Trisong now envisaged, but it helped his case that some of them had at least dabbled in Buddhist patronage.

Since the state adoption of Buddhism was so important for the future of Tibet's culture, we might well ask why it happened. Intentions are, of course, hard enough to divine in our contemporaries, let alone in figures from the distant part, but this has not stopped historians from trying to understand the conversion of Trisong Detsen. Tibet's traditional Buddhist historians saw it as a purely personal religious matter, a recognition of the truth of the Buddha's teachings and their potential benefits to the Tibetan people. Though there is

surely something in that view, modern scholars have tended to see the conversion of Trisong in a more political light. For one thing, the ministers who initially opposed his coming to the throne were from the anti-Buddhist faction, and adopting Buddhism as the state religion would have been a good way of placing them beyond the pale.

There was also a wider political context for Trisong Detsen's decision. Buddhism was an international religion. When the Tibetan empire expanded under Songtsen and his successors, it encountered Buddhist countries on every side. India, Nepal and China all had long histories of supporting Buddhist monks and monasteries. Buddhism was a cultural language spoken by all, whereas Tibet's own religion was specific to Tibet, and, despite being drawn from a variety of influences, must have seemed rather parochial. As Tibet's empire swallowed up further-flung cultures, including Buddhist ones, it was unlikely that Tibet's local religion would provide a cohesive cultural force. In truth, there was only one religion that could.

The Tibetans had, of course, encountered other religions. In 715, they had sent an embassy to an Arab governor requesting a teacher of Islam to be sent to Tibet. Later, an Arab writer recalled that, in the early ninth century, the king of Tibet adopted Islam and sent the caliph a golden idol, which was sent on to Mecca. Though the presence of a Tibetan statue of the Buddha – for that is surely what it was – in Mecca was an interesting anomaly, it did not survive there long. Apparently it was melted down a few years later by the governor of Mecca, not in a fit of iconoclasm but in order to enable him to strike gold coins. As for the tsenpo's adoption of Islam, this looks like a strategic fiction on the part of the tsenpo or a pious hope on the part of the historian.¹⁸

And the Christian Church had hopes for the Tibetans too. Timothy I, patriarch of the Nestorian Church between 780 and 823, wrote a letter listing the lands in which the *Trisagion*, one of the oldest Christian prayers, is recited: it included Tibet. In another letter, Timothy wrote that he had recently appointed a metropolitan bishop for the Turks and was just about to do the same for the Tibetans. Both letters date to the early 790s, during Trisong Detsen's reign. Then there are the crosses carved on rocks in Western Tibet, and sketched in manuscripts from Northeastern Tibet. But in the end it seems that, despite the hopes of the patriarch, the Tibetans were never very interested in Christianity either. The Persian religion of Manichaeism fared even less well, becoming the subject of a damning edict by Trisong Detsen, who branded its prophet Mani a 'great liar'.¹⁹

If the attraction of Buddhism over these other religions was partly its prestige among Tibet's neighbours, what about the Buddha's teachings themselves? The missionary pamphlets of Tibet's first Buddhists, written to convert adherents of the old religions, emphasise one thing again and again: karma, the Buddha's fundamental teaching on cause and effect. The word literally means 'actions'. The Buddha taught that our current situation in this life is the result of our previous actions, and only through our actions can we change this situation for the better. This was a radical contradiction of the Tibetan belief that the way to avoid misery and ensure happiness was to worship and placate the gods and spirits. As one of these pamphlets stated: 'There is no other expert – you have to do it yourself.'

The Buddhist missionaries also tried to replace the rather simplistic ideas in the old religion of either a happy or an unhappy afterlife with the Buddhist idea of rebirth. This is the argument that consciousness continues after the death of the body, not as a permanent soul, but as an ever-changing flux impelled only by the force of previous actions. These previous actions determine whether one is reborn in one of the lower realms of hell-beings, ghosts and animals, or the higher realms of humans, demigods and gods. The missionaries argued that in Buddhism rebirth in the higher realms was open to everyone. The pamphlet quoted above goes on to say:

The mighty Buddha is hugely compassionate and makes everyone equal. He protects everyone without making distinctions. This is excellent. Anyone who tries to go to the land of the gods through committing sins will not be liberated to the place of joy. You may say 'whoever stops this worship will fall into hell,' but it is actually you who have the power to choose between joy and suffering. You have the excellent religion – practise it in accordance with the eternal teachings.²⁰

As well as teaching that karma was the true agent of happiness and sorrow, the missionaries spoke of a state entirely beyond the cycle of rebirth. This was the state of the Buddha himself, free from the ordinary mind's mistaken concepts of 'self' and 'other' and suffused with compassion. The worship of local deities never died out in Tibet, but Buddhism provided a significant alternative to this spirit world, a broader framework that was attractive to those who envisioned a new international role for the Tibetan empire. Even if the adoption of Buddhism as Tibet's national religion was at first a political move, it soon came

to have a religious significance as Tibetans became convinced of the efficacy of the Buddha's teachings. And if Buddhism was at first the religion of the court, it gradually became the religion of the people too, thanks to the efforts of Trisong Detsen and his successors to propagate Buddhism throughout the empire.²¹

THE GREAT MONASTERY

Trisong Detsen had made his mark in the international arena of politics and war. He had shown the scale of his ambition in the conquest of the Chinese capital, and the strength of his resolve in holding Tibet's imperial borders against attacks by the Arabs, the Turks and the Chinese. In this he had surpassed the achievements of his ancestors, even Songtsen Gampo, the greatest of the tsenpos. And he had similar ambitions for Buddhism in Tibet. Everything that had been done by his predecessors in a haphazard and piecemeal fashion, he would do properly.

The establishment of Buddhism in Tibet by Trisong Detsen became a kind of foundation myth for later Tibetan Buddhists, an idealised time of pure religious aspirations. But earlier histories suggest that things actually got off to a rather shaky start. We can follow the story in one of the very earliest Buddhist histories, the accounts of the Ba clan. At the beginning of Trisong's reign, while he was still a teenager, the ban on Buddhism was in full swing. The statue of the Buddha brought by Songtsen Gampo's Chinese bride was taken out of the temple and buried. Two of Lhasa's Buddhist temples were converted into slaughterhouses, with carcasses hanging off the arms of the statues and entrails wound around their necks. Buddhist funeral rituals, particularly despised because funerals were the speciality of Tibet's non-Buddhist priests, were banned.

But the Buddhist rituals were not so easily suppressed. When a Lhasa noble called Ba Selnang lost his son and his daughter at the same time, he arranged for a traditional Tibetan ritual to be performed outside his house, but asked an old Chinese monk to come secretly into the house to perform the Buddhist ritual as well. The old monk asked Selnang if he wanted the two children to be reborn as gods or humans. The father replied that they should be reborn as gods, but the mother wanted them to be reborn again as her own children. The old monk placed a pearl, half of which was painted red, in the mouth of each child and performed the ritual. Afterwards he told the parents

that the son would be reborn in the god realm, while the daughter would be reborn as their next child. And, indeed, when another child was born to the family, he grew up with a half-red pearl on his tooth. Understandably impressed, Ba Selnang became a convert to Buddhism, which he practised in secret.

When Trisong Detsen wanted somebody to find a high-ranking Buddhist teacher, Ba Selnang put himself forward. He travelled to Nepal, where he met an eminent Buddhist abbot called Shantarakshita, and invited him to Tibet. However, when Shantarakshita arrived in Lhasa, Trisong had second thoughts, worried by the possibility that the abbot might be smuggling in foreign spirits and black magic. Shantarakshita was quarantined inside Lhasa's Jokhang temple, where he kicked his heels for several months. Since nobody at the Tibetan court could speak Shantarakshita's language, men were sent out to find a translator. In the end they found a Brahmin called Ananta, an educated man who had been sent into exile in Tibet after his father was convicted of a serious crime. Ananta was brought to the Jokhang and translated while Shantarakshita was subjected to cross-examination by one of the tsenpo's ministers. Finally, when Trisong was satisfied that he posed no danger to Tibet, Shantarakshita was brought before the tsenpo and, with Ananta still translating, explained the Buddha's teachings. It was this explanation that finally convinced him to authorise the propagation of Buddhism in Tibet.²²

Now Trisong Detsen started to make plans for a vast Buddhist monastery that would dwarf everything that had been built in Tibet before. But as word spread, a series of disasters struck, including a Buddhist temple being flooded and the royal castle at Lhasa being hit by lightning. People at court started murmuring about the tsenpo's patronage of Buddhism causing the anger of the local gods once again, and Trisong Detsen decided that he had better send Shantarakshita back to Nepal until things cooled down a bit.

After enough time had passed to calm the anti-Buddhist feeling at court an invitation was extended to Shantarakshita again. The abbot, showing considerable patience towards the Tibetans, accepted. But this time he brought a reinforcement with him in the form of a tantric adept called Padmasambhava. Hailing from the Swat valley in modern Pakistan, Padmasambhava was a specialist in demon-taming rituals. Shantarakshita introduced him to the tsenpo, and pointed out that what Tibet really required was the magical power of tantric Buddhism: Padmasambhava was the man to do what was needed, subduing Tibet's unruly gods and spirits, and impressing the Tibetans with tantric feats.

As soon as they arrived, Padmasambhava, along with Shantarakshita and a Nepalese construction expert, began to plan the tsenpo's new temple, which was to be called Samye, 'The Inconceivable'. Padmasambhava identified the spirits that had been causing trouble through a special divination practice using a mirror. Then he summoned them by calling out their names and their clans, and forced them to take human form. Once they were visible in the room, Padmasambhava threatened them and Shantarakshita taught them about karma with the aid of a Tibetan translator. When they were finished, Padmasambhava told the tsenpo that he was now free to practise Buddhism in Tibet.

The construction of the new monastery began. Problems continued, however. Padmasambhava was disliked by many at the Tibetan court. He expounded the powerful tantric methods of Mahayoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga, and was particularly keen on discovering new sources of water and introducing new methods of irrigation to transform the landscape around Lhasa. But, coming from a foreigner, these ambitious plans seemed to annoy the Tibetan nobles. Some of them started a whispering campaign against Padmasambhava, suggesting that he was intending to seize power from the tsenpo. These rumours had their desired effect when Trisong Detsen began to be suspicious of the foreign sorcerer. Cautiously, and politely, he suggested to Padmasambhava that he had done what was necessary and should return to Nepal.

Padmasambhava was angry. 'I thought', he said afterwards, 'that the teachings could be established firmly in the land of Tibet, so that the whole country could be led to virtue, and become a prosperous and happy land. But the tsenpo was narrow-minded and greatly jealous and suspected that I might seize his political power. I don't even desire universal power, so how could I want the power of such a king?' He left Lhasa, but, still afraid that Padmasambhava would somehow bring it harm, the Tibetan court sent archers after him. Padmasambhava made these would-be assassins freeze like paintings, and continued on his way unharmed. His sojourn in Tibet had been brief, but his full legacy would only become apparent in later centuries when he would rise to fill the role of Tibetan culture hero as the 'Precious Teacher', Guru Rinpoche.²³

With the tensions over Padmasambhava resolved, the construction of Samye continued apace. The aristocrats joined Trisong Detsen in planning and overseeing the temple's construction, and some of the best-looking local Tibetans were taken as models for the faces of the new statues being built for the monastery. At the same time a group of Tibetans were ordained into the

Buddhist *sangha* – the community of monks. The layout of Samye itself was based on the great Indian monastic complex of Odantapuri in Bihar. The three-storeyed main building at the centre is said to have been designed with its first storey in the Indian style, the second in the Chinese style, and the third in the Khotanese style. Four temples surrounded it in each of the four directions, and a boundary wall encircled the whole complex. The monastery also reflected an Indian idea of the map of the world, with the *axis mundi* of Mount Meru at the centre and four outlying continents in each of the four cardinal directions.

Completed at last in the 780s, Samye still stands today in the valley of the Tsangpo river, despite near-destruction in the civil unrest of the tenth century, a great fire in the seventeenth century, an earthquake in the nineteenth, and the Cultural Revolution of the twentieth. Though another storey was subsequently added to the main temple, and other buildings were constructed within the perimeter wall, Samye preserves Trisong Detsen's original design plan. Just to the left of the entrance to the main temple is a pillar set there by the tsenpo, a memorial to the occasion when he and his court gathered there to swear an oath to protect Buddhism in Tibet. The text on the pillar reads:

The supports for the Three Jewels set up in the temples of Rasa, Dragmar and elsewhere – and the practice of Buddhism there – must never be abandoned or destroyed. The supply of all that is needed must never be diminished or reduced. From now on every generation in the lineage of the tsenpos must make this vow. So that no violation of this oath should be perpetrated, we invoke the worldly and transworldly gods and the non-human beings as auspicious witnesses. The tsenpo and his sons and the lords and ministers have all made this promise together upon their own heads. A detailed version of this oath exists elsewhere.²⁴

Indeed, the detailed versions of this oath were copied and sent all over the kingdom, from Zhangzhung in the west to Amdo in the northeast. Whereas in the past imperial support for Buddhism had been rather tentative – Songtsen Gampo's small temples, or the guarded support for the refugee monks from Khotan – Trisong Detsen in his mission to bring Buddhism to Tibet now showed the same determination and thoroughness evident in his military command. He was serious about committing Tibet to the practice of Buddhism, and this time there would be no going back.

THE GREAT DEBATE

To begin with, Trisong Detsen looked to both India and China for the Buddha's teachings. The nobleman Ba Selnang, who was sent to Nepal to invite Shantarakshita to Tibet, was also despatched to seek the advice of Chinese teachers. The accounts of the Ba family tell how Selnang journeyed to China, where he met a Buddhist monk from Korea. This monk turned out to be a famous Zen teacher known as Reverend Kim, who advised the Tibetan on the best scriptures to show the tsenpo in order to persuade him to follow Buddhism. He also taught him to meditate using the methods of Zen, in which the meditator recognises that the enlightened state is already present within, obscured by everyday thoughts.²⁵

After further adventures in China, where he even met the emperor, Selnang returned to Tibet. One result of this journey was that Zen teachers were invited to Tibet. One of the most popular was a monk called Moheyan, who had been teaching in Dunhuang, the Silk Route city conquered by Trisong Detsen in the 780s. But Zen's radical tendencies were disliked by some of the Indian Buddhist teachers in Lhasa. As followers of the Mahayana, or 'Greater Vehicle' of Buddhism, all were in agreement about basic principles. Their aim was to transcend samsara, the vicious cycle of suffering, and to bring all living beings to the state of enlightenment. The dispute concerned how to achieve this. The Indian Buddhists insisted on the need to combine meditation with rational analysis and the basic practices of ethical conduct. For Buddhists of the Greater Vehicle this combination was summarised by the Six Perfections: giving, morality, patience, energy, meditation and wisdom. By contrast, the Zen teachers said that if one recognised the true nature of one's own mind, the Perfections could be dispensed with.

This doctrinal disagreement soon threatened to blow up into a full-scale religious controversy. The Indian teachers and their students started complaining to Trisong Detsen that the Chinese Buddhists were not teaching genuine Buddhism, and should be stopped. When the tsenpo seemed to be inclining to support the Indian faction, the Chinese side started a rather extreme protest. One of the Tibetan Zen students gashed his own body, another crushed his own genitals, and a Chinese teacher set fire to his own head. Some thirty other adherents of the Chinese side went to the tsenpo armed with knives and threatened to kill the Indian teachers before committing collective suicide.²⁶

Consulting with the Tibetan abbot of Samye, Trisong Detsen decided that the civilised way to put an end to this unedifying dispute among the Buddhists was a formal debate. The Indian abbot Shantarakshita had passed away, but he had told the tsenpo to call on his student Kamalashila if there was any disagreement about the practice of Buddhism. Kamalashila, a great Indian scholar in his own right, was asked to come and represent the Indian side in the debate, while Moheyan was asked to argue the Chinese side. On the day of the debate the two sides entered one of the smaller temples at the Samye complex. The tsenpo sat enthroned in the middle, with Moheyan seated on his right side and Kamalashila on his left. Behind them their disciples lined up in two rows.

Both debaters were good Buddhists of the Greater Vehicle and agreed on the basic principle that samsara was a product of deluded thoughts and emotions, and both agreed that ultimately there were no permanent and independent things, both the personal self and external phenomena being part of a network of interdependence, existent only in a relative sense. This insight, known as 'emptiness', is expressed in the words of the Heart Sutra: 'form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.' What the two sides disagreed about was how that insight was to be realised. As Moheyan stepped up to begin the debate, he put his position very succinctly, saying that it was only by stopping ordinary thought that the cycle of samsara could come to an end. Both virtuous and sinful actions, the very distinction between them belonging to ordinary thought, were part of the problem. They were like black and white clouds; both blocked out the sun. The Buddha's teachings on the practice of virtue were for his duller disciples. The sharpest could get straight to the point by abandoning ordinary thought.

Then Kamalashila stepped up, bristling with philosophical refutations. Moheyan's whole approach went against his scholarly training. Real wisdom, he said, came about through analytical insight. To abandon analysis would be to cut off wisdom at its root. The practice of analytical insight was in fact the way to transcend concepts, for it was analysis that undermined the validity of concepts as anything but conventional labels. So, for Kamalashila, the Chinese teacher's attempt to achieve a state of non-conceptualisation without analysis was not a genuine method, and would just result in a state akin to that of someone who has fainted: 'a practice', as he put it, 'of stupidity'.

After further exchanges, the debate was concluded, and victory awarded to the Indian side. The result was that the tsenpo would now support only those

who taught the path of gradual practice, and would reject the instantaneous approach of the Zen teachers. By extension, Buddhist scriptures from India would be preferred over those from China. This, anyway, is the Tibetan version of the story. Some ancient manuscripts indicate that Moheyan had a more nuanced view of meditation, and a Chinese version of the debate concludes with the tsenpo giving his blessing to the Chinese teachers. Modern scholars have even questioned whether a debate ever really took place, or whether there was instead a series of discussions and literary exchanges. But you can't keep a good story down, and the narrative of the debate at Samye became a fundamental part of the consciousness of Tibet's Buddhists. The need for the graduated path, and the preference for India as the source of true Buddhism, came to characterise Tibetan Buddhism more and more over the next centuries, and the debate story justified this position.

One thing we can say for sure is that when it came to translating the Buddha's words, India, not China, became the great source. How could it be otherwise, when India was itself the home of the thousands of Buddhist scriptures and commentaries translated into Chinese? Now Trisong Detsen sent invitations out to more Buddhist teachers from India and Nepal. Once in the Tibetan capital, they teamed up with Tibetans who had learned Sanskrit in order to translate great swathes of Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan. This translation project, undertaken with great seriousness, began to build one of the world's largest religious canons, the collection of Buddhist scriptures translated into Tibetan. When these were collected together centuries later they filled some three hundred volumes.

This astonishing feat remains, as one modern scholar has put it, among the greatest achievements of the medieval world.²⁷ It required a transformation of the Tibetan language, as hundreds of new terms were invented for the technical vocabulary of Buddhist Sanskrit, and it resulted in the wholesale import of one culture into another. Tibetan Buddhism would develop its own flavour and individual approaches to the Buddha's teachings, but all of this flowed from the faithful translation work that began in earnest under Trisong Detsen.

An apparent contradiction embodies Trisong Detsen's reign. In a series of bloody wars the tsenpo had carved out an empire that was wider than that of any of his predecessors. At the same time, he had embraced a religion that eschews violence. Yet there was nothing new in warlike rulers adopting Buddhism, and Trisong Detsen would no doubt have argued that in his military campaigns he was working towards securing Tibet's borders so that it

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might then enjoy peace with its neighbours. Though he failed to achieve peace in his own lifetime, Trisong Detsen certainly laid the groundwork for the Tibetan empire to exist as an equal with its neighbours, the Chinese, the Arabs and the Turks.

Trisong Detsen's achievements would shape not only the future of Tibet, but that of Mongolia and China as well. His twin concerns, to expand the empire and spread Buddhism, made the Inner Asian reaches of the Tibetan empire receptive to Tibetan Buddhism long after the fall of the empire itself. This would make it possible in later centuries for Tibet to enter into relationships with the Mongols based on their shared religious heritage. It also led to China being governed for centuries by two Inner Asian dynasties that followed Tibetan Buddhism: first the Mongols and then the Manchus. Thanks to Trisong Detsen, Tibet's cultural influence would extend much further than its frontiers.