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Forming Tibetan Taipei

On a humid afternoon about five years ago, just off a narrow alleyway bordered by homogenous rows of five-storey apartment structures that line much of the crowded¹, subtropical metropole of Taipei City, inside a Tibetan restaurant that occupied the ground floor of one of those narrow buildings, I sat, ostensibly doing ethnography, but really playing with the food I had just ordered. Of course, these two specific events of doing ethnography and playing with food are not necessarily contradictory.

That Tibetan restaurant appeared as an ideal ethnographic site, a well-defined space from which I could observe and collect social data. Given the centralized infrastructural organization of the island around its capital, Taipei City, the seat of government, as well as an agglomeration of universities, businesses, motorized scooters, and, again, five-storey apartment buildings; and given the rarity of Tibetan restaurants there, that Tibetan restaurant *should* have functioned as a hub of Tibetan socio-cultural exchanges and identity formations among the 5,000 or so² members of the Tibetan diaspora community living on the island at the time.

Opposite: Photo taken at the site in 2012.

The size of this diaspora community, or at least the part of it that I encountered during my field work, counts for an exceedingly small percentage of the island's predominantly Han (Chinese) population and seemed manageable as an object of observation. If one were to diagram this Tibetan community along the lines of an ethnographic kinship chart (replacing filial connections with labor affiliations, which largely determine immigration to the island) there would have been one big section for Tibetan factory workers, one big section for Tibetan religious workers, and a third, smaller section for students and entrepreneurs, such as the owners of the Samdon Tibetan Restaurant (in Chinese 藏味館 or Tibetan *bSam-sgron Za-khang*), where I sat.³

Despite the size of that particular population, its ethnographic importance seemed clear. The owners of the restaurant offered a semi-communal space that was, at once, less sectarian than the many Tibetan Buddhist religious centers and more accessible than factories far away from the capital. Multiple religious centers in and around the capital accommodate its large population, Tibetan and otherwise, with each Tibetan Buddhist religious center dedicated to one of the four main sects of the religion, as well as to newer Buddhist ecumenical movements. This is to say that the Tibetan religious organizations, despite some filiation with the Dalai Lama, cannot claim to represent all Tibetans, as Tibetan ethnic identity subsumed competing religious and political statuses.⁴ In contrast to these religious centers, factories were often in geographically isolated locations at some distance from both Taipei and regional cities.

Expanding from its position on the island, a social analysis of the Tibetan community centered around that restaurant presented, ideally, a means of comprehending the larger issue of contemporary interethnic relations between Tibetan and Han peoples, offering a means of understanding the possibilities of ethnic interaction between the two

groups outside of the circumscribed, juridical⁵ territory of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), PRC. While the Tibetan diaspora community accounts for only a small percentage of the world's Tibetan population, most of whom reside within either the TAR or its adjacent provinces, Qinghai and Sichuan, Tibetans outside of China have more commonly chosen to reside in India or other non-Han majority polities. The mere presence of a Tibetan community in the Han-dominated state of Taiwan offers several striking parallels to interethnic relations in China from which ethnographers can begin to structure comparisons. This periphery can thus complicate the center.⁶

However, other factors always complicate such direct claims of infrastructural or global relevance. Apart from the rhetoric of the owners who claimed to be serving the local Tibetan diaspora community with something that can be translated as “home-cooking”,⁷ and apart from my informants' progressively showy assertions of Tibetan nationalist identity,⁸ the reality of the business was that both customers and servers at the restaurant were more likely to be non-Tibetan, and predominantly students from the nearby university. This shifted much observation of intra-Tibetan ethnic interaction to that of a presumed inter-ethnic interaction (myself presuming that consumers presumed to encounter and consume Tibetan culture). While the encounter between server and consumer at that, at least, proprietarily Tibetan space may offer some insight on the possible destabilization of local Chinese identity so relevant to recent political movements on the island, such an encounter also complicated any clear picture of the object of ethnography, the Tibetan diaspora community.

However, members of that community, both monastics and laity, more often male, certainly did come to visit. This fact likewise posed its own problems, since the Tibetan community that had aggregated in Taiwan was itself diverse, having immigrated from various Tibetan

diaspora communities in India, Nepal, and elsewhere. As such, their exchanges with Indian, Nepalese, and other proximate non-Tibetan cultural, linguistic, and national groups appeared just as significant as exchanges confined within Tibetan groups. That is, ethnic Tibetans were not simply “Tibetan.” For instance, they often spoke Indo-Iranian or Dravidian languages, in addition to Tibetan, Chinese, and English, from having spent much of their lives in India. Tibetan immigrants also identified themselves as Nepalese nationals or otherwise.

This compounded complication of the presumed singularities of ethnicity and community revealed certain aporias to the normative ethnography I had intended, an ethnography defined by the accumulation of precisely quantifiable data consisting of preconceived social exchanges that occur a specified number of times. Such data would then be thickened into a description⁹ used to valorize the ultimate object of ethnography, the ethnos or culture of study, through the recognition and categorization of representative social exchanges, relative to the subjectivity of an academic institution. Within this system, the ethnographer is tasked with commitment of body and observational skills to a specified number of hours spent constructing this ethnos and presenting it to the academic institution.

Maurizio Lazzarato’s definition of immaterial labor “as the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” thus certainly fits with the production of ethnography,¹⁰ taking a commodity to be “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference.”¹¹ In such a system, culture itself becomes the commodity, objectified and alienated from the subjectivity of both the laborer who produces its content, an ethnographic discourse, as well as the consumer who “wants” it.¹²

Despite the immateriality of ethnography in its service to an objectified and commodified concept of culture, the labor of ethnography regularly entails the production of very specific, material “things”.¹³ In addition to its manifestations as written words, ethnography, within discipline of anthropology, as well as etymologically, denotes the graphic representation of culture.¹⁴ One normative form of such graphic representation is the aforementioned kinship chart.¹⁵ Charts such as these might have helped the institution that determined my ethnographic research—namely, the public university I attended in Taiwan¹⁶—to account for the particular culture represented by the segment of the population to be charted.

However, diagramming structurally accurate charts of the social exchanges among this Tibetan restaurant’s community became less valuable than other observations enabled by my position. In particular, I found myself disregarding the identification of kinship and other social relations and, instead, was engrossed by an embodied practice and an interaction with materiality that uniquely occurred within this restaurant space: pinching a piece of *tsampa* between the fingers. I became so taken by the practice that I recorded myself doing so with a videocamera. Thus, my focus shifted from the social construction of reality, as represented through discourse with ethnographic informants, to a direct engagement with the material substance of differentiation. My practice remained ethnography, now conceptualized as graphical depiction, as expressed through the digitization of my sensorial experiences of a commodity into video (a type of -graphy) of an object that was not merely foreign to the dominant cultural traditions of the island and to my own, peculiarly Southern Californian tastes, but that also came to present a separate ontological system that transcended differentiation into discrete, subjective and objective social groupings.



Figure 1: A still of the ethnographic documentary.

This video (a still from which is offered on Figure 1), a purportedly ethnographic documentary or visual anthropology, an ephemeral product of my immaterial labor that is now barely extant as occupied space on an old hard disk drive, hardly fits into the concept of collecting social data in the service of an institution. Yet, reexamining it now, at some remove from the event that it represents, does give the video some value. In one sense, the video can now be categorized as being akin to the earlier Boasian anthropological discipline of salvage anthropology, which sought to record culture that was being lost on the way to modernity, or global capitalism.¹⁷ Five years later, the restaurant is no longer a place. It and most of the restaurants on that street closed, due to the sudden enforcement of zoning laws, not long after I ended my ethnographic project. Around the same time that I was doing ethnographic fieldwork there, other restaurants were opening nearby and areas near the alleyway started to feature signage advertising the area as a center of foreign

food.¹⁸ These factors caused a short period of increased popularity, with more foot traffic for more hours in the day. This popularity, in turn, apparently resulted in upstairs residents complaining to the local government about high noise levels. Despite an organized and visible protest among the affected businesses, the restaurants were eventually forced to vacate, officially because the street was too narrow for them. Two photographic digital images, one taken at the site in 2009 and another taken in 2012, illustrate the visual disruption of the site between the period before enforcement and the period after the laws took effect (Figure 2 and Figure 3, respectively).

The Tibetan restaurant, the food it sold, and the social matrix enabled by its spatial presence are all gone, and all that remains are immaterial things. All I can access now are a business card or two and my stored ethnographic records.¹⁹ Businesses close, but life continues. The three primary owners of the Samdon Tibetan Restaurant went in different directions. One moved to Canada, while another opened another restaurant on a different part of the island. I am unsure what happened to the third. My current position at another institution in Berkeley, California, has, coincidentally, placed me in a locality occupied by a much larger number of Tibetans and other restaurants run by members of the Tibetan diaspora. It likewise remains the case that the importance of knowledge production through the rigid diagrammatization of social roles and social movements is subsumed by a visual/tactile analytical engrossment with the substance and form of a type of food altogether foreign to the locality.

Substance

The immaterial form of the Tibetan restaurant in Taipei now has a certain presence, or rather, the material remains of my immaterial labor serve as an index to the presence of that place. The video still valorizes



Figure 2: Photo taken at the site in 2009.

a commodity. However, apart from valorizing a specific ethnos as an object of study, the video now serves to direct the attention to another object. Forms represented in the video and specific to that moment in the restaurant—plates, a tablecloth, a cup of tea, and a dark wooden bowl—all seem to offer a kind of background that foregrounds the cognition of another thing, a somewhat unrecognizable grouping of forms or non-forms in the middle of the composition intertwined into the banally familiar form of my hand. That thing changing shape and being shaped in my hand and the similar things sitting in the wooden bowl, it was *tsampa*—but what is *tsampa*? Given the background setting of an obvious dining space, it is most certainly food, but my perception of these forms as evading immediate categorization, in formal, visual and tactile terms, as food compels some descriptive and interpretive account be made regarding their basic material constitution, their



Figure 3: Photo taken at the site in 2012.

substance, or their being, apart from their forms.

Despite its immaterial presence as virtual image from the digital video, *tsampa* really exists as a material substance. *Tsampa* (also romanized as *rTsam-pa*) is the Tibetan name for ground and roasted barley meal. As such, it is a prepared food in powdered form. Being barley, it is more familiar in the traditional diets of a range of ethnic groups throughout southwestern Eurasia extending to the Tibetan plateau.²⁰ Despite its early geographical specificity, barley, like many other species of domesticable grain, is now an internationally cultivated and traded commodity, and has functions outside of its consumption as food, such as in the production of beer or animal feed. In addition to enabling the grain's current global circulation, the nutritive, domesticable and commodifiable qualities of the grain have also made it into a traditional staple food among Tibetan societies. This function has also given the grain significance as an ethnic

and national identifier among Tibetan groups seeking to distinguish themselves from non-Tibetans. This latter function has particularly been evident in the last sixty years, during which time many ethnically Tibetan communities were subjugated under the People's Republic of China. In turn, these Tibetan communities have responded by asserting their identity, first, against government policies that have attempted to culturally and linguistically assimilate the “ethnic minority” (Chinese 少数民族) Tibetan population into the Han Chinese population,²¹ and, second, within the modern global paradigm of differentiable and unique national identity. The migration of many Tibetans to sites in India and elsewhere in opposition to PRC subjugation has conflated these two factors of identity construction into a Tibetan nationalist movement that asserts a political structure and community in the same manner as other nations, albeit “in exile.”

Barley, as a material substance, fits neatly within such a paradigm. The substance's relative foreignness to staple diets within Han Chinese society makes it a more immediately recognizable and acceptable sign of cultural difference. Likewise, in the interethnic relations between Tibetan diaspora communities and the non-Tibetan national polities that receive them, barley is certainly more familiar than abstract and potentially divisive forms of interethnic difference, such as language and religion. Tibetans throughout the recent period, both in China and outside of it, have thus self-identified as “*tsampa*-eaters,” appropriating the relative uniqueness of Tibetan barley consumption for the purposes of ethnic identification. In his description of *tsampa*, Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu cites several articles written during the 1950s in the Tibetan-language newspaper, *The Tibet Mirror*,²² that explicitly refer to their readers as *tsampa*-eaters in an effort to organize a nationalistic solidarity against the PRC.²³

Tsampa has likewise been valorized as Tibetan. The Tibetan scholar Tsering Shakya's 1993 article, “Whither the *Tsampa* Eaters?,”

is a critique of various terms used to describe Tibetan ethnic identity, such as the term “Tibetan” itself, as well as *bod-pa*, the Tibetan-language term most closely resembling the kind of ethnic identity inferred by the term “Tibetan.” For Shakya, the term “Tibetan” is “used by Western academics” and is structured by “social relationships” and “ideology,” while the definition of *bod-pa* is relative and varies according to particular sub-groups. Shakya approvingly cites an earlier reference that categorizes “barley as the most basic element which united the Tibetan-speaking world. If Buddhism provided the atom of Tibetanness, then *tsampa* provided the sub-particles of Tibetanness. The use of *tsampa* transcended dialect, sect, gender, and regionalism.”²⁴ Certainly, the three-part configuration of Buddhism, Tibetan identity, and barley is problematic to those who do not align themselves with all three forms simultaneously, and this is addressed by another article in the same journal.²⁵ However, Shakya’s equation of barley “sub-particles” and “Tibetanness” does suggest an attempt at systematizing a potentially shared, transcendent, categorical materiality for both barley and Tibetan people.

Assertions of *tsampa* as Tibetan and Tibetans as *tsampa*-eaters continue in the Tibetan diaspora community. Examples include the “Tsampa Revolution” online presence and the “Tsampa Eater” Tibetan-language music video by diaspora Tibetan rapper Shapaley.²⁶ As these titles suggest, identification with *tsampa* takes varied forms. Regarding Tsampa Revolution, a twitter and facebook presence, as well as a “proposal” for “non-violent . . . solidarity” with the New York General Assembly of Occupy Wall Street,²⁷ *tsampa* appears to be a more arbitrary signifier for the Tibetan independence movement as a whole, as the substance of *tsampa* makes no overt presence nor has a direct instrumentalism in the proposed revolution. *Tsampa*’s singularity as a somewhat foreign and unfamiliar signifier—relative to the American English-language

context of a popular movement that characterized itself as constituted of multiple, plural subjectivities aligned in protest against a singular, isolatable elite—coincided with the logic of the movement as a whole. *Tsampa*, as an actual substance, might be somewhat superfluous in that regard, or at least its substance is implied as understood, and thus not asserted. In the latter video, Shapaley distinctively asserts a shared “Tibetan spirit” or “soul” established through the eating of *tsampa*.²⁸ This inner soul must be contrasted to the term he uses to categorize the *tsampa* and *tsampa*-related objects on display, “SWAG,”²⁹ which exists in the video’s discourse as one half of an oppositional binary between the nomenal “soul” and phenomenal substance.

As outlined in the music video and elsewhere, Tibetan material engagements with *tsampa* have not simply been limited to affiliation with the substance of roasted barley meal. Tibetans likewise maintain specific habits and equipment in preparing the *tsampa* for consumption that are likewise Tibetan. For some, these habits and equipment, as well as their phenomenal presence, must be resolved through a self-conscious dialectical relationship with the phenomena of global modernity. For instance, in the aforementioned “*Tsampa Eater*” video, Shapaley states “I carry a *tsampa* bag,” and he sits next to an actual *tsampa* bag that is prominently displayed onscreen.³⁰ The video serves to identify the bag as a component of “Tibetan spirit” and valorizes the prominent display of the bag to establish a less alienated integration of visual forms, combining Shapaley’s situatedness in iconic New York City backgrounds with the prominent *tsampa* bag. The bag, which ideally facilitated individual transportation of *tsampa* powder for personal consumption, is somewhat disconnected from this function and is instead made to fit within a conceptualization of global modernity that emphasizes the mere form of the *tsampa* bag alongside other forms, each of which is presumably expressing its own somewhat arbitrary

national spirit or *geist*. For example, the image of Times Square in the background of several shots in the video is a normative symbol of global cosmopolitanism and secular advancement.

It should be noted that *tsampa* itself, as an essentially granular material substance, does not lend itself to immediate human consumption. The substance is normally made more palatable through the addition of other substances such as liquid binders used to form a solid mass,³¹ somewhat like *polvorón* or cookie dough. Salted and buttered brewed brick tea, or *bod ja* in Tibetan, is the standard binder. The resulting mass complicates the issue of Tibetan identity given that tea is Chinese, at least according to a popular 18th century Tibetan manuscript, the *Ja-chang lha-mo'i bstan-bcos* or the *Debate Between the Goddess of Tea and the Goddess of Barley Beer*.³² In the text, the goddess of tea, or Ja lha-mo, engages in a debate with Chang lha-mo, the goddess of barley beer. Each goddess is represented as equally eloquent in formal argumentation within the standard debate procedures at the court of a Tibetan king. In addition to exemplifying a certain cosmopolitanism, also relevant here are the particular subjectivities ascribed to these two food substances beyond their functions as objectified commodities. Barley beer and tea enter into a relationship with the king that is differentiated by gender and species—taking goddesses as a species of sentient beings superior to, or at least separate from, that of the presumably human king—instead of being differentiated by a consumer and commodity relationship.

The binding of barley *tsampa* and tea, according to various ethnographic accounts such as in my own records, involves using a finger to carefully knead, “pinch”³³ or “fold”³⁴ the powder into the butter tea. Continued mixing forms the substance into a mass or *pag*, a transubstantiation from granules into a malleable solid aggregate, which is then ready for ingestion. For writers such as Norbu, this

kneading constitutes a kind of skill in which a more desirable substance is produced through a slow and careful process of gradually folding in regular distributions of the grain.³⁵ Such a differentiation in skill and labor indicates subdivision of *tsampa* consumption according to quality and taste.

Despite the various methods of preparation, assertion of a shared identity constructed around the material and culture of *tsampa* exhibits a seemingly universal understanding of food and eating as having a more or less direct relationship to concepts of embodiment and subjectivity, in that a food's specific nutrients come to constitute a person and subsequently a people—"Tell me what you eat..." as Brillat-Savarin says.³⁶ Such a statement is not completely ideological or immaterial, as diet certainly does have some effect on the formal development of the human body. Of course, any single material substance or isolated set of substances cannot be completely determinative of social difference, in the same way that such isolated substances cannot complete the material assembly in which the substance functions. However, the preparation and consumption of food, particularly a staple food, does determine a certain habitus and a certain mode of perception that can be identified as one iteration of a normative mode of interaction between materials and subjectivities in the world. *Tsampa* thus appears to have a degree of agency as a means of structuring embodied identity through the specific ways in which its consumption is adapted into the lives and practices of its eaters.

In addition to this general material relationship with its consumers, *tsampa* and other foods also have a more unique historical role in many Tibetan communities. *Tsampa* cakes and related butter sculptures are required in the performance of many tantric Buddhist³⁷ rituals, and thus appear displayed in a range of Tibetan social practices. Tantric scriptures often involve the sculpting of *tsampa*-and-butter substances

into various forms, such as icons of historical or mythical figures. These ritually formed icons, figural and otherwise,³⁸ are known as *torma* (or *gTor-ma*). After sculpture, *torma* subsequently serve in a range of functions for the performance of these rituals. Though distinguished by their visual form, the *torma* in such rituals are not necessarily limited to positions in which they are contemplated visually as images. *Torma* serve in various positions within the cosmos of the ritual event, relative to the positions present in that cosmos. For instance, some rituals are explicitly violent, and the respective *torma* becomes instrumentalized within the act of violence. Patricia Berger describes one such ritual, in which the officiant, a high-ranking official representative of the Qing imperial court presided:

[He] invoked the great and violent ‘*torma* rite of She Who Wields Power Over the Desire Realm,’ the fierce goddess Dokham Wangmo, another name for Mazorma or Lhamo, the principal female protector of the Gelukpa. Just as soon as the ritual *torma*-weapon was launched, ‘the great *torma* came down, [and] a huge mass of flames broke into pieces and went in the direction of the enemy.’³⁹

In this particular instance, the *torma* were likely shaped to resemble European artillery and then ritually deployed in a related fashion, to coincide with the simultaneous use of real cannon fire. While the military efficacy of the *torma* in such a rite has not been scientifically proven, the ritual *torma* do certainly function in a manner at odds with basic ingestion. Their shaping into identifiable forms determines their function as the forms represented, often quite distinct from their function as food. In fact, the material quality of *torma* seems to enable formal transformation, as if its malleability as a food, coupled with its conceptualized property of transformability, through

ingestion by extension, made the substance particularly receptive to transubstantiation through sculpture by a particular skilled laborer. The ritual formation of the *torma*, the imposition of a conceptualized form onto the substance, assigns the thing not merely with a different form but a different category of materiality or being.

The complicity of such ritual practices to general ideological reification and the perpetuation of a tantric social hierarchy are open to question. The positions of ritual masters and state officiants are clearly in a reciprocal valorization circuit with the production of sculptural forms that require these positions in order to be efficacious. In addition, certainly not all of the individuals involved in the production and use of *torma* completely attested to its efficacy. Given that belief in efficacy appears to determine the maintenance of related social configurations, the complicity of each person involved in such rituals must be considered individually.

Despite these ideological complications, the material substance of certain foods—as exemplified by *tsampa*, *pag*, *tsampa*-and-butter, butter tea, and others—can be comprehended separately from their discursive functions within tantric ritual. Not everyone accustomed to seeing *torma* is fluent in the cosmologies of the tantric rites that consecrate the things. Instead, *torma* are more commonly perceived outside the context of tantric ritual practice and within a larger system of mundane visual and tactile aesthetic practices. Within such a system, food is not merely categorized as a comestible substance, but is understood as a complex, transformational substance that expresses its function through form. Perceived as transformable substance, food can exist within an ontic system that does not quite match the categories associated with global modernity, in which food is simply for consumption. Of course, global modernity is by no means homogenous, and one analog might be the continued fascination with certain paintings by Giuseppe Arcimboldo,

in which food is arranged in such a way as to resemble the human form.⁴⁰

This perception of edible substances such as *tsampa* not merely as food but as malleable and transformable, as capable of manifesting real forms by a process of sculpture, reorients the conceptualization of our interaction with food, transcending the substance's function as food. One might suggest that food, in such a Tibetan system, often functions in the same way as clay or wax in fine art traditions. Further, stylistic and aesthetic modes of forming are developed specific to the medium.⁴¹

Form

Similar to my reactions to certain fine art sculptures, I was initially a little bewildered by *tsampa* during my first experience with it at that restaurant five years ago. Upon ordering, I received four slightly elongated masses in a wooden bowl. Each mass had very pronounced latitudinal ridges that more or less encircled the form in relation to the axis on which the form was elongated. These uneven ridges were clearly produced by someone having squeezed measured amounts of the *pag* with the fingers of the hand in such a way as to force the ridges to protrude out between each of the fingers. The repeated form of the *pag* indicated that its shape was not merely the product of a single unconscious or untrained squeeze of the hand. Though the slight irregularities in pattern made the shapes of the ridges individually unique to each mass, the overall ridged forms thus produced were obviously indicative of some intentionality and subjectivity in selecting a proper amount of *tsampa* and then shaping it into the desired form.

Moreover, the size, shape, and texture of each mass were such that the undulating ridges were superfluous to any obvious gustatory or otherwise practical function. The form produced through squeezing seemed almost arbitrarily related to the substance of the *pag*, presumably *tsampa* and butter tea. The primary quality that the form of the finger



Figure 4: A still from *My Hands Are My Heart*.

ridges immediately evoked was the fundamental facture of the product, indexical to an adult-sized hand, dispelling any doubt as to whether or not the product had been physically manipulated by the direct touch of another person. The concave grooves in which other fingers had only just been present were more indexical, more idiosyncratic, and more personal. These grooves presented a distinctively intersubjective exchange. Instead of being a mere food commodity, the mass of barley bore markings as unique as a set of fingerprints. The mass had been given some kind of other, undetermined being or thingness, certainly not that of food.

Prior to this experience, my understanding of the process of consuming tsampa was from ethnographic reports,⁴² which had never suggested anything other than the individual tsampa-eater's freedom to sculpt the kneaded mass into any desired form. Tsampa powder was to be folded into tea upon the taste and discretion of the consumer, whose



Figure 5: A still from *My Hands Are My Heart*.

hand ultimately formed/produced the thing. Each instance of tsampa-eating inherently entailed a degree of semi-skilled labor required of the tsampa-eater. However, the restaurant product differed from etic accounts in that it imposed a given form onto the substance, rendering more labor on the part of the consumer superfluous. This imposition of form meets the demands of diaspora capitalism, additional labor on a commodity by the producer to offset the limits of unskilled consumers for increased amounts of consumption, ready-to-eat.

Yet I was not so ready to eat. This was not because the form of the tsampa was inherently unappetizing. My fascination with the particularity of the form of the prepared tsampa had a unique power in displacing my appetite, instead inspiring further reflection and analysis.

The size of the ridges and the size of the piece of tsampa as a whole attest to a most basic and simple gesture of grasping, the grasping of a hand approximately the same size as my own. Such a form has a more

precise analog in Gabriel Orozco's 1991 multimedia assemblage *Mis manos son mi corazón* (*My Hands Are My Heart*, Figure 4-5), a familiar and valorized object in contemporary art, as evidenced by its visual reproduction on various journals and websites. The object is manifest in real space as two photographic images, each roughly the size of a folio page oriented horizontally, and a heart-sized mass of light reddish-brown terracotta displayed in the round. Though the clay mass is twice as large as the individual masses of tsampa I had been given, ridges remarkably similar to those impressed on the tsampa in front of me, are formed on the clay. In addition, the earthen color and granular texture of the clay recall the formal properties of the tsampa.

Extending beyond the basic visual similarities of Orozco's heart to the squeezed tsampa, the overall reception of Orozco's object among its audience requires a mode of perception that is familiar. Benjamin Buchloh exemplifies this reception in his description of Orozco's squeezed heart as expressing "the immediacy of incorporating the bodily imprint into the making of the sculptural object, and making the sculptural object nothing but the pure indexical trace of the process."⁴³ Buchloh's immaterial, discursive valorization of Orozco's product is presented in terms of embodiment and facture. Though the object is both a representational heart and an index of the artist, such criticism makes the heart iconography almost superfluous. Likewise, in the title of the object, the equation between Orozco's real, material hands, indexed in and indexical to the terracotta form, and his figurative heart, made material, calls attention to the material process of forming. The object is valuable because of its direct foregrounding of indexicality.

In translating this visual paradigm back to the tsampa and by perceiving it as this "pure indexical trace of the process," part of my initial response to seeing the forms served in the restaurant makes more sense. Because my response to the form of the tsampa was not

at all due to my inculcation within a Tibetan visual regime—not being a tsampa-eater—interpreting my own response to the squeezed form according to some Tibetan iconographical paradigm of objects similarly grasped, for instance, wish-fulfilling gems (Tibetan *yid-bzhin nor-bu*) or esoteric *vajra* (Tibetan *rdo-rje*) scepters, seems irrelevant. My bewilderment at the ridged form occurred in part because the form is not representational to me; its form is completely beholden to its indexical objectification. This very positioning within the Peircean sign system at once determines the reception of Orozco's terracotta mass in contemporary art criticism while also determining my reaction to the mass of tsampa in the restaurant.

For that uncategorizable moment of confusion or bewilderment, the tsampa became neither agreeable nor good—it was not appetizing, in the sense that it loses its immediate, sensorial identification as food. Nor could I abstractly rationalize some kind of teleological function for the thing, ethical, alimentary, or otherwise. It was not sustenance nor was it some commodity in the panoply of possible exchanges, between myself and the restaurant, ethnographer and ethnos, or even nutrition and digestive system. At that moment of categorical obviation, the object instead presented me with a series of questions: whose subjectivity is being indexed from this form; how subjective is your judgment on its ontological categorization; and what now?

Any immediate response to the first question of indexicality signified was precluded, as I could not specify whose hand had formed my order of tsampa (although it was probably Samden, Dorje, one of the owners). The restaurateurs never really offered me a good look at what was going on in the kitchen (though I did end up peeking into the space after the restaurant had closed and while workers were busy cleaning up). Rather, the things appeared fully formed out of the mysterious back space of the restaurant. A generalized subjectivity for

this indexed hand can be somewhat inferred through more systematic differentiation with Orozco's heart. The appreciation of Orozco's work is predicated on the recognition of Orozco's fulfillment of his position as artist. The traditional order between artist-subject and art-object is reaffirmed repeatedly throughout the art-object. Aside from the handprints, there are photos of Orozco's bare chest serving as a unified corpus with the heart. The shared positioning and resemblance of the squeezed form to Orozco's actual heart-organ likewise reflects the overall gesturing to the embodied identity of the artist. The object is also displayed in such a way as to contextualize it within Orozco's artistic *corpus*, either cited as such in articles or next to explanatory labels in gallery sites.

The indexicality of the congealed mass of barley is likewise obvious, but it denies the recognition of an artist-subject, and instead indexes a subject less individualized and more purely bound to the semi-skilled labor of squeezing in the hand and to the subjective determination that gave the form its finished shape. Proceeding from the idealized relationship between *tsampa* and Tibetans, non-*tsampa*-eaters such as myself are compelled to imagine the *pag* being formed, if not by a Tibetan, then by someone trained in *tsampa* kneading by a Tibetan *tsampa*-eater. This imagined Tibetan, again, represents a position somewhere between factory worker and religious worker, the two normative occupations for local Tibetans at the time. This affiliation with diasporic Tibetan ethnicity, with a determined class of labor, and with a situated cultivation of taste thus subsumes the individual subjectivity evident in the finger-"prints" within the more generalized subjectivity of an ethnic group, a socioeconomic status, and an aesthetic regime. Categorization under such a rubric seems less than useful, as the personalized indexicality of the *tsampa* is only tenuously related to the actual ethnicity, class, or taste of the person who left an imprint on

it. The same proviso seems to apply to all determinations of identity ascribed onto objects that index an unknown subjectivity. Rephrasing the second question above in another manner: does my response to the form of the *tsampa* fit any precedents? Other than highlighting my own foreignness relative to Tibetan eating practices and my complicity in the normative reception of contemporary art, my perception of the *tsampa* more generally fits within some general Kantian framework. Following up on the responses of Orozco and his collectors, the heart assemblage might function in eliciting that Kantian judgment located somewhere between the agreeable and the good. T.J. Clark writes that Orozco's terracotta heart is "beautiful" and "disarming", and that it lacks "pomposity".⁴⁴ Orozco's own statements only partially situate his objects within this subjective framework:

Beauty? I don't use the word beauty anymore. Never. It's not that the thing itself is beautiful. It's the relationship that you establish that makes something beautiful. And so the word 'beautiful' is not an absolute. It's a moment . . . in which you look at something and you feel alive, you feel that you are enjoying something. And that is a moment of poetry, pleasure, revelation, thinking.⁴⁵

Orozco's shrewd use of such a system is significant, as claims of beauty in art likewise entail contentious claims of genius. Likewise, the general reception of *tsampa* has to be taken into such a system. The particular forms of the *tsampa* as they appeared in the restaurant were standardized and mass-produced in such a way as to prevent ascriptions of individual genius to their indexed subjectivity. However, this does not diminish appreciation of the individual forms of the objects. The familiarity of such forms within *tsampa*-eating societies rather pluralizes Orozco's "moment" in which "you feel alive." In those few moments between

the completion of the process of kneading and the completed object's ingestion, tsampa-eaters have an opportunity to form the substance according to their imaginations. This moment enables a subject to simply play with the formal possibilities that the substance offers. Given that the formless quality of the tsampa lends itself to a limitless array of forms, any such play is an opportunity to feel alive, to feel less alienated from the objectified product of one's own hand, and the material of consumption. The freedom to play with form appears as a regular aspect of everyday life.

What does one do in response to such an encounter, and the recording of the encounter in ethnography? In having subsequently picked up the tsampa-thing, and in playing with it, my attention shifted to its tactile qualities. Squeezing it, breaking it into pieces, the mass was then reformed by my own somewhat unconscious desire to understand it. Playing with the thing became a way for me to test the limits of its form and its substance. Eventually, I became more self-conscious and ate it, because playing with food in public seemed inappropriate at the time.

[Endnotes]

1. Taiwanese census figures from 2010 list population density for Taipei City's Da-an District, the site in question, as 26,561.9 people per square kilometer <<http://ebas1.ebas.gov.tw/phc2010/english/53/63/63010.pdf>>.
2. Official immigration records in Taiwan are organized by nationality and not ethnicity; see NIA 2014. As such, ethnic Tibetans immigrating from the PRC or sites in India do not appear as a separate group in the records. The figure "5,000 or so" was taken from various interviews with ethnologists and Tibetan residents.
3. Data was primarily collected through interviews, recordings, and field notes at the site of the restaurant in Taipei, Da-an District, 2009.
4. Among the individuals I interviewed, there was a general claim of allegiance to the Dalai Lama for his general leadership of Tibetan religious and ethnic representation. Such allegiance may have been politically expedient and not necessarily religious, as the Dalai Lama was serving as both the official leader of the Gelug (Tibetan dGe-lugs) religious sect of Tibetan Buddhism and unofficial,

“spiritual” leader of the political institution of the Central Tibetan Administration (also known as the Tibetan Government in Exile). My informants were mainly affiliated with the Nyingma (Tibetan rNying-ma) religious sect and not the Gelug. 5. Foucault makes a distinction between “juridical” and “liberal” state institutions; see Foucault 2007. While the situation in the PRC may not precisely map onto such a distinction, current policies indicate more juridical policies in place regarding ethnic differences. Also see Note 21, below.

6. On the importance of “marginalized” social groups, see Bhabha 1994, 133.

7. The explicit term was in Mandarin Chinese: “家鄉口味,” perhaps better translated as “hometown flavor.”

8. In addition to interviewees more frequently wearing Tibetan-style clothing to recording sessions, rhetoric became more pan-Tibetan, as particular sectarian sentiments were gradually exchanged with a general allegiance to the institution of Tibetan Government in Exile.

9. Geertz, 1973, is the standard source for thick description. Also see Clifford and Marcus 1986.

10. Lazzarato, 1996, 133.

11. Marx 1976, 26.

12. Such a commodity is desirable in a certain epistemic construction of the world maintained by the institution of academia, which structures the world within its categories of objects of study. Culture conceptualized as ethnos perpetuates its Latin (*ethnicus*) and Greek (ἔθνος) derivation, translated as “foreign”, “heathen”, and “pagan” (OED Online, Oxford University Press, last modified March 2014, accessed May 16, 2014, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64786>>), and categorizes an ontological other, not in terms of individual subjectivity, but group subjectivity, the organismic *corpus* of the *communitās*. This objectified, other ethnos, by mere fact of its difference from the body of the subject, is secondary to the presumed community that constitutes one’s own subjectivity, while simultaneously circumscribing a limit to the body of the subject.

13. Bill Brown provides a succinct, post-Heideggerian definition of a “thing” as “the semantic reducibility of things to objects, coupled with the semantic irreducibility of things to objects; Brown 2001, 3.

14. Despite a still current definition of ethnography as “writing culture” (see, specifically, Clifford and Marcus 1986), the “writing” (-graphy, from Greek -γραφία) component of ethno-*graphy*, does not, in fact, denote simply writing. Writing, in Western alphabetical traditions, exists purely as an arbitrary index to speech, which is again arbitrarily indexical to some numinous mental ideation (Derrida 1997 is instructive here). This somewhat disavows the material presence of writing, often as ink on paper or digitized into a computer.

15. Kinship charts, a continuing disciplinary legacy from British social

anthropology, still constitute a substantial and important part of ethnography. In Tim Ingold's analysis of the graphical form of these tree-charts, he writes, "it is in charts of kinship and descent...that lines are most frequently drawn in anthropological notebooks and texts" (2007, 104). Also see Ingold, 2011.

16. Regarding my personal investment in my ethnographic research, it was primarily conducted to fulfill the requirements of an Ethnology graduate degree.

17. Clifford, in 1986, writes, "Few anthropologists today would embrace the logic of ethnography in the terms in which it was enunciated in Franz Boas's time, as a last-chance rescue operation" (113). However, many anthropologists do not have the privilege of witnessing their ethnographic sites completely disappear.

18. Signs read 異國料理 or "Exotic/foreign cuisine" with arrows pointed towards the alleyway underneath.

19. Remaining records are primarily digital video-recorded interviews and digital photographs.

20. See Zohary, Hopf, and Weiss, 2000, 59–69.

21. This is not to say that there is no debate within the PRC's assimilationist policies. The situation in China is, first of all, complex, as policies in and on the TAR change frequently. See, for instance, Ma Rong, 2011.

22. The Tibetan name of the newspaper *Yul-phyogs so so'i gсар-'gyur me-long* might be more directly translated as *Mirror of the News of All Places*; Tharchin 1925.

23. Norbu 2011.

24. Shakya 1993, 9.

25. The article by Charles Ramble is on page 21 of the same journal issue, *Himal* 6, No. 5 (Sept–Oct. 1993).

26. Shapaley 2012.

27. Alia 2012.

28. Shapaley 2012, <1:47> and <1:41>, respectively.

29. *Ibid.*, <0:45>.

30. *Ibid.*, <0:36>.

31. Notably, the English term "mass" is derived from the ancient Greek μάζα, or «barley cake.»

32. See Bon-grong-pa 1993.

33. The actual term used was the Chinese term *nie* “捏” (the informant's name is Cho-dak, from a 2009 interview).

34. Norbu 2011. Norbu's article cites a range of sources, both Western and Tibetan, in his discussion of *tsampa*.

35. *Ibid.*

36. “. . . I'll tell you what you are” or “Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es”; Brillat Savarin 1848, ix.

37. Non-Buddhist Tibetan Bon religious practitioners also have similar rituals.
38. See, for instance, http://tormas.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/img_3935-e1353648010528.jpg.
39. Berger cites a translation of the officiant Rol-pa'i rDo-rje's (1717–86) diary entry. See Berger 2003, 157.
40. Arcimboldo's 16th century portrait Rudolf II as Vertumnus features an anthropomorphic frontal portrait composed of diverse fruits, vegetables, and grains transubstantiated into the face and upper torso of a person.
41. Western religious traditions are also relevant to a degree. The activation of the golem in Qabbalah or transubstantiation in Catholic context might be contiguous.
42. Many of these are cited in Norbu 2011.
43. Buchloh 2009, 186.
44. Clark 2011.
45. Orozco 1992.