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Nationalism on a Menu: Culinary Culture and Identity Politics in Contemporary Tibet

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the concept of gastronationalism and banal nationalism through the case of the Tibetan resistance movement. It seeks to explore how Tibetan foodways serve as a medium for identity assertion, cultural resistance, and institutional control across both the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and diaspora communities in India. The paper will also examine how assimilation and acculturation occur within Tibetan communities and the distinctions between these two phenomena. Tibetan identity has long been associated with that of Tsampa eaters, thus marking a clear association between the resistance movement, identity, and food. Yet existing literature overlooks the role of food in the Tibetan movement. Building on ethnographic secondary sources along with secondary qualitative sources such as newspaper reports, first-person narratives, interviews, articles, and other media coverage of Tibetan communities.

This paper argues that Chinese policies in TAR are reshaping and forcefully assimilating Tibetan culture not only politically and religiously but also through erosion of culinary traditions to weaken cultural identity. Second, it contends that Tibetan religious institutions, including the government in exile, have mobilized food ethics such as vegetarianism, anti-slaughter movements, not only for spiritual purposes but also as a form of passive resistance, challenging the Chinese hegemony. Third, it argues that diaspora food practices, through acculturation, offer a space for the reinvention and evolution of identity, thereby complicating resistance movements. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the discourse on gastronationalism by illustrating the expanded role of food and culinary culture as a key factor in the nationalist movement of Tibet.

Keywords

Gastronationalism, Tibetan Identity, Tibetan Cuisine, Sinicization, Diaspora Politics, Tibetan Autonomous Region

Introduction

Nationalism is a concept that has long existed and has evolved over time with the definitions not only sticking to the conventional ideas but also exploring across disciplines and mediums. It has evolved from the 18th-century European symbols and ideas of flags and anthems to the much recent ideas of everyday practices, i.e., the idea of banal nationalism, it shapes the idea of identity in both visible and invisible manners.

Similarly, food is a tool that not only carries the sentiments of cultures but also memories and feelings of belonging. Appadurai's *Gastropolitics* and Desoucey's *gastronationalism* explain how culinary practices play an important role in shaping national identity. In exilic geographies and contested nations, food stops being just a tradition but becomes a testimony to authenticity and a marker of identity. This paper aims to engage with these theoretical frameworks through the lens of Tibet, a region whose political status and cultural identity have remained contested for a long time. The Tibetan struggle for independence has usually been viewed through the lens of religion, language, and other human rights concerns as opposed to the Chinese state policies of assimilation. However, the role of food in this struggle remains largely unexplored in both the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and the Tibetan diaspora worldwide.

Tibetan identity has long been tied with the symbol of Tsampa, the roasted barley flour that used to be a staple across regions. In the Tibetan resistance movement, the commonly used phrase "Rise all Tsampa-eaters" shows how Tsampa and culinary traditions can impact identity and act as a unifying factor. While diaspora desperately clings on to their ways the Chinese state policies have altered religious structures, educational systems, and food production practices, all of which play a role in dismantling the Tibetan culinary culture. Exilic communities in India, such as those in Bylakuppe, Dharamshala, Majnu ka Tilla, etc, also undergo changes in culinary culture as they are subjected to acculturation and hybridization.

While an unchanging, "authentic" culinary culture is an unrealistic expectation, the forces driving change in Tibetan foodways within the TAR and in the diaspora are shaped by different dynamics than mere organic cultural evolution¹. Thus, this paper positions Tibetan food and

¹ Ute Wallenböck, *Connecting Foodways: Cultural Entanglement in Inner Asia* (2021).

culinary culture as a site of identity assertion, institutional influence and resistance. Central to this is the question in what ways is Tibetan food politicized across the TAR and diaspora, and how do culinary practices reflect resistance, institutional control, and shifting notions of authenticity in each context? Additionally it will also explore how the Chinese state and the Tibetan religious institutions influence culinary practice for their agenda of assimilation, nationalism and resistance respectively? Ultimately it will aim to expand the role of food from a passive agent of identity assertion to an active agent of nationalist movement.

Literature review

The idea of an authentic national cuisine is widely problematized, as culinary culture is dynamic and evolves in response to societal transformations and intercultural exchanges. This implies that the intertwined nature of culinary culture with the socio-economic fabric of the society makes it a site for political phenomena such as identity formation, resistance, and nationalist expressions to take place.

Concepts such as Gastronomicalism by Desoucey² and Banal Nationalism by Billig³ illustrate how food operates not only as a tool for cultural expression but also as a medium through which nationalist identities are formed, reinforced, and even contested. A range of scholarly works in sociology, anthropology, and political science focus on themes associated with cultural nationalism and identity, which also extend to diasporic cuisines, which are often influenced by nostalgia⁴. Mannur presents her case on the diaspora from the Indian subcontinent examining varied literary sources from the region. She examines the role of food in the lives of voluntary immigrants and how nostalgia leads them to ‘fabricate’ authenticity. This fabrication, as illustrated by Mannur, is guided by a sense of “imagined homeland” through emotions and memories rather than factual or material accuracy. Similarly, studies on Kimchi and the Korean diaspora in the US, for example, highlight how identity formation, ethnic markers, and assertion

² Michaela DeSoucey, “Gastronomicalism: Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union,” *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 3 (2010): 432–55.

³ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), 6.

⁴ Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

are influenced by the concept of national food.⁵ These studies, although different, illustrate the recurrence of certain themes in diasporic contexts.

These studies illustrate the influence of culinary practices on identity politics and other similar sociopolitical activities. While existing research is detailed, much of it lacks depth as to Tibetan cuisine. Most literature instead focuses on alternative variables such as religion, the Dalai Lama, and human rights violations linked to Chinese assimilationist policies targeted at non-Han communities and occasional connections to nationalist movements. The few works that are on cuisine explore them from a culinary sociology angle, such as Ute Wallenböck's work on tracing Tibetan cuisine in relation to the varying communities and climates across regions of Tibet.⁶ However, there are multiple qualitative sources, such as newspaper articles and interviews, that explore how food acts as roots amongst exilic communities such as Bylakuppe and Majnu ka Tilla, Chinese surveillance on Tibetan festivals, and multiple Chinese policies that have directly or indirectly impacted the Tibetan culinary culture.

While the sinicization of Tibetan culture isn't widely studied, the sinicization of religions, including Christianity, and positing it against westernization is a common recurring theme in scholarly work.⁷ Fengyang also suggests that Chinese Christians aren't against the cultural sinicization but against the political domestication, or what the author suggests, "Chinafication," which is an interesting angle to look at with respect to the TAR, as it is closely tied with the Tibetan perception of TAR as a part of China or an independent and separate region.

Another work that has been done in this area is the evolution of the term "sinicization" by Cheng Fangyi.⁸ Cheng discusses the major discourses conducted in the field of sinicization and divides them into 3 broad categories. Historical Acculturation and Assimilation wherein non-Han peoples adopt Chinese language, customs, and everyday practices, including economic life and,

⁵ Hong Sik Cho, "Food and Nationalism: Kimchi and Korean National Identity," *The Korean Journal of International Relations* 46, no. 5 (2006).

⁶ Ute Wallenböck, *Connecting Foodways: Cultural Entanglement in Inner Asia* (2021).

⁷ Fenggang Yang, "Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond," in *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*, ed. David Palmer (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

⁸ Fangyi Cheng, "The Evolution of Sinicisation," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 2 (2021): 321–42.

implicitly, foodways. Civilizational Superiority wherein sinicization is read as a function of the inherent superiority of Chinese culture, legitimizing cultural change and political absorption.

Diversity and Hybridity as stabilization wherein sinicization is reframed as a process of mixture and fusion, supporting the ideological stability of the contemporary Chinese polity by claiming an inclusive, flexible Chinese identity. These discourses help us understand that there are even contradictory demonstrations of the term sinicization thus showing the varied range of narratives. However, these discourses are limited as discussed earlier to the domain of religion and language, even though food is often central to these transitions.

Research Gap

While Tibetan nationalism has been extensively studied through the prisms of religion, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, there is a notable absence of scholarship examining gastrationalism as a lens through which Tibetan nationalism is negotiated, contested, and performed. Most academic and policy literature including UN human rights reports, critiques China's assimilationist policies in terms of language, religion, and culture, but rarely considers the impact of sinicization on Tibetan culinary traditions. Traditions that belong to Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) or among the diaspora.

In the TAR state-led development and assimilationist policies have altered traditional production, distribution, and consumption patterns, but these cultural shifts remain under-theorized. Meanwhile, in the diaspora, food often serves as a powerful medium of cultural memory and identity assertion. Yet, existing literature tends to critique this as nostalgia-driven fabrication of authenticity, without fully unpacking its political stakes or emotional economies.

This gap is further widened by the absence of comparative analysis that explores how Tibetan cuisine functions as a site of resistance, reinvention, or adaptation in both occupied and exilic geographies. Despite the centrality of food to collective memories, cultural survival, and nationalist sentiments, its role in Tibetan identity-making remains marginal in scholarly and policy discourses.

Central/ Primary research question:

In what ways is Tibetan food politicized across the TAR and diaspora, and how do culinary practices reflect resistance, institutional control, and shifting notions of authenticity in each context?

Subsidiary Research Question:

How does the Chinese state and the Tibetan religious institutions influence culinary practice for their agenda of assimilation, nationalism and resistance, respectively?

Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that Tibetan culinary practices, particularly around tsampa and traditional foodways, function as active sites of nationalist resistance within the TAR, shaped under surveillance and sinicization pressures, while simultaneously evolving through negotiation in the diaspora. This dual dynamic challenges simplistic notions of authenticity and highlights the complex role of food as both a cultural repository and a political tool.

Tsampa Eaters and the Cultural Identity

During the height of the Tibetan resistance in 1959, a letter published in the Tibetan Mirror was addressed “to all tsampa eaters.” This phrasing was not accidental. It aimed for a vocabulary of unity rooted in ordinary practice, barley, as the single thread that cuts across the deep regional and sectarian loyalties that marked Tibetan society up to that point. As Tsering Shakya writes in ‘Whither the Tsampa Eaters’, “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.”⁹

This move was significant. Until the years after 1959, Tibetans rarely perceived themselves as one unified community. Regional and clan loyalties, as well as religious distinctions, often had more gravity than any abstract sense of nation. The invasion and subsequent repression exposed the limits of these inward-looking solidarities; most Tibetans responded first as locals, not as

⁹ Tsering Shakya, “Whither the Tsampa Eaters,” *Himal Southasian*, March 2019, <https://www.himalmag.com/cover/whither-the-tsampa/>.

“nationals.” Even in moments of grave threat, as during the Great Leap Forward or the Chinese occupation, response to collective suffering was fragmented.¹⁰

What shifts in exile, and especially in the construction of nationalist discourse, are not just the content of what Tibetans rally around, but the form. Whereas the past emphasis was on faith—a sense of being “Nangpa” (insiders, Buddhists)—new symbols begin to surface, crafted and popularized in exile: the national flag, anthem, and perhaps most organically, tsampa. The slogan “Rise all tsampa eaters,” seen in protests and writings, signals a push to reimagine belonging. Food, something ordinary and omnipresent, becomes a touchstone for togetherness and difference, one that can be mobilized both in visible activism and in the everyday persistence of culture.

Tsampa, in this sense, stands at the intersection of nostalgia and resistance. For exilic communities in India and beyond, it is both a link to a homeland and a marker of refusal to forget, to assimilate fully, to let go of shared roots. In the Tibetan Autonomous Region, where policies seek to disrupt traditional foodways and impose new norms, such as by controlling social and religious gatherings where food was an essential ritual and restructuring of food production and settlement policies, eating tsampa remains an act of quiet defiance. A way to insist on the mundane yet profound continuities that survive even under pressure. The evolution of tsampa from a dietary staple to a symbol of national consciousness shows the broader shift within Tibetan identity politics, from a religiously defined collectivity to a more secular, everyday nationalism. This transition, while incomplete, marks food as an active agent.

Tibetan Cuisine and the Chinese Cuisine

Before examining the impact of political interventions on Tibetan culinary culture, it is crucial to understand the foundations and diversity of Tibetan cuisine and its organic interactions with Chinese foodways. Tibetan cuisine, shaped by altitude, climate, and resource availability, stands in sharp contrast to mainstream Han Chinese cuisines, both in ingredients and philosophy. Tibetan food reflects practical adaptation to scarcity and high plateau conditions. The

¹⁰Ibid

reliance on barley (most notably as tsampa), yak dairy, mutton, and a select range of durable vegetables gives Tibetan meals their signature simplicity and nutritional density.¹¹

Han Chinese cuisines often emphasize elaborate stir-fries, diverse meats, and fresh vegetables, Tibetan cooking mostly centers on boiled, slow-cooked, or steamed dishes, lightly seasoned, and designed for warmth and endurance at altitude. As Ute Wallenböck notes, Tibetan cuisine can be divided across 3 different regions. Kham: This region, spanning modern Yunnan, Sichuan, parts of Qinghai, and eastern TAR, features strong Chinese (especially Sichuanese) influences—spicier foods, more noodles, and pickled items due to cultural proximity and trade. Amdo: Found in Qinghai, Gansu, and northwestern Sichuan, Amdo cuisine blends Chinese, Muslim (Turkic/Hui), and Mongol elements—hand-pulled noodles, flatbreads, and halal meats are common. U-Tsang: Covering central and western TAR, U-Tsang cuisine reflects influences from India and Nepal, centering on barley, yak dairy, and local stews, with some imported spices and rice dishes appearing through historical trade routes.

Religious principles play a significant role. Tibetan Buddhism encourages compassion toward animals, influencing slaughter practices, ritual food offerings, and the recent promotion of vegetarianism though given the climate, complete abstention from meat is rare. In Amdo and border regions, Islamic traditions (Kache traditions) bring halal dietary rules and particular cooking styles, adding to the diversity.

Culinary differences also reflect the broader politics of identity and belonging. Han Chinese cuisine, with its rich array of ingredients, sauces, and codified recipes passed down in writing, contrasts sharply with the oral and practical tradition of Tibetan foodways, where recipes are inherited through observation, community, and daily repetition rather than written cookbooks. Urbanization and migration have encouraged some blending: noodles, dumplings (momos), and even chopsticks are now part of the Tibetan table, especially in cities and cross-cultural regions. Modern Tibetan cuisine remains closely tethered to its ecological roots but is also increasingly defined by adaptation, circulation, and diaspora. Staples such as yak meat, barley, and dairy

¹¹ Ute Wallenböck, *Connecting Foodways: Cultural Entanglement in Inner Asia* (2021).

persist, but new ingredients and techniques have entered the Tibetan culinary landscape through contact with Han Chinese markets, modernization, and migration.

Popular dishes, including momos (steamed dumplings), thukpa (noodle soup), thenthuk (hand-pulled noodle soup), and butter tea, retain strong symbolic and practical significance. Notably, while Chinese cuisine often relies on detailed written recipes and emphasizes the codification of regional cooking schools, Tibetan foodways continue to be primarily transmitted orally, through practice within families and communities.¹² In everyday practice, this means that food preparation and sharing are social activities, with recipes and techniques flowing between generations both at home and in exile. For Tibetans in India, Nepal, and elsewhere, adaptation is necessary; buffalo or beef may replace yak, and local greens supplement plateau vegetables but the communal rituals and nostalgia embedded in food remain a consistent thread connecting people to homeland and history especially in the case of exilic communities.¹³,

As Tibetan cuisine gradually gains international recognition, it stands at a crossroads: simultaneously preserving deeply localized food traditions and adapting to global and regional influences. This process underscores both the resilience and permeability of culinary identity in the face of political pressure and cultural exchange.

Sinicization and Surveillance in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR)

The Chinese state's sinicization policies in Tibet represent a concerted, multi-layered effort to assimilate Tibetan identity through various mechanisms of control, including an intensive surveillance apparatus that extends deeply into cultural and religious life. This dual strategy of ideological assimilation and pervasive surveillance targets both overt political expressions and subtle everyday practices—most notably those surrounding food, a cornerstone of Tibetan cultural identity. In this section, I explore how sinicization and surveillance converge to reshape Tibetan culinary culture, compelling forced cooperation with state agendas while provoking forms of cultural resistance.

¹²Ute Wallenböck, *Connecting Foodways: Cultural Entanglement in Inner Asia* (2021).

¹³ Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

The Political Context of Sinicization

Sinicization in Tibet is framed within three major discourses identified by Cheng Feyi: historical acculturation, civilizational superiority, and diversity as political stability. Under President Xi Jinping's administration, these discourses materialize through heightened CCP leadership, border security, urbanization, and "patriotic re-education" campaigns explicitly targeting "splittist forces"¹⁴. This marks a shift from Tibet's former religious nationalist mobilization, centered around Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama, to a secular nationalist identity symbolized by state icons like the Chinese flag.¹⁵ The secularization of Tibetan nationalism repositions cultural markers such as food from private tradition to public symbol, integral to identity assertion and resistance.

Surveillance and Restrictions on Culinary Culture

Surveillance in Tibet today extends to social, religious, and cultural spaces where food plays a critical role: An instance of such surveillance is in Kirti monastery, Aba in the Sichuan province which shows the reality of Chinese surveillance and pressure on Tibetans where there is a police station right at the main entrance.¹⁶ Although this region has seen development with respect to infrastructure, with better connectivity also comes more troops, tourists and surveillance, which has shifted the local landscape from one with monk robes and incense sticks to one with cafes and hotels. Similarly, tourist permits to Tibet are extremely regulated by bureaucracy effectively limiting transmission and communication with other parts of the world.¹⁷

¹⁴ Free Tibet. "Xi Jinping Calls for Further Sinicization of Tibet." August 2024. <https://freetibet.org/latest/xi-jinping-calls-for-further-sinicization-of-tibet/>

¹⁵ Tsering Shakya, "Whither the Tsampa Eaters," *Himal Southasian*, March 2019, <https://www.himalmag.com/cover/whither-the-tsampa/>.

¹⁶ BBC News, "How China's Religious Policies Affect Tibetan Identity," April 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5y772jlpqzo>.

¹⁷ *The Land of Snows*, "Travel in Tibet," <https://www.thelandofsnows.com/travel-in-tibet/>.

At major cultural festivals such as Losar and Shoton, surveillance is intensified, with police presence, checkpoints, concealed informants, and CCTV monitoring. These measures target communal meals, ritual animal slaughter, and food sharing, traditionally significant for Tibetan communal cohesion and religious observance¹⁸. Public eateries and markets selling foods in China often face inspection and regulatory pressure, often justified through food safety but in the case of Tibetan food this also functionally suppresses cultural expression.¹⁹

State institutions including schools serve meals aligned with Han dietary norms, disrupting culinary transmission and diminishing the role of traditional Tibetan foods such as tsampa and butter tea. These measures force Tibetans to live with sinicization policies, controlling not only what is eaten but how culinary knowledge is shared and preserved.²⁰ This systematic imposition of Han dietary norms functions as a subtle yet pervasive form of cultural assimilation. By standardizing food consumption in educational and institutional settings, these policies disrupt the intergenerational transmission of essential culinary knowledge and practices, undermining the very foundation of Tibetan cultural identity. From various sources of interviews, we can also find that these children also develop a distaste towards Tibetan cuisine.

The move to centralized, regulated meal provision also limits opportunities for families and communities to prepare and share traditional foods, which are normally transmitted orally and through lived experience rather than written recipes. Consequently, younger generations, particularly those in boarding schools or urban areas under direct state administration, are distanced from their culinary heritage, accelerating cultural erosion. These enforced dietary changes are not merely about nutrition or modernization but are part of broader sinicization efforts aimed at reshaping Tibetan identity by controlling everyday cultural expressions, including how and what people eat.

¹⁸ Tibet Watch, “China’s Digital Repression Model,” April 16, 2025, <https://tibetwatch.org/news/china-digital-repression-model/>.

¹⁹ Z. Liu, A. N. Mutukumira, and H. Chen, “Food Safety Governance in China: From Supervision to Coregulation,” *Food Science & Nutrition* 7, no. 12 (2019): 4127–39.

²⁰ Naeyong Choedon, “Assimilation as a Tactic for Cultural Genocide: Tibetan Children in Boarding Schools,” *Human Rights Watch*, 2018.

Impacts on Food Production and Religious Rituals

State-driven agricultural and economic reforms alter Tibetan foodways materially and symbolically: Barley cultivation, the backbone of traditional Tibetan food, is marginalized in favor of crops like wheat and rice preferred by Han settlers, undermining food sovereignty and eroding historic dietary patterns. Industrial meat production compels Tibetan herders to supply livestock to Han- or Hui Muslim-managed slaughterhouses, conflicting with Buddhist pastoral ethics and spurring anti-slaughter movements that face harsh repression.²¹

Religious rituals integral to Tibetan Buddhism undergo state control and restriction, limiting traditional offerings, festival feasts, and monastic dietary practices. The government's regulation of reincarnation and religious leadership further politicizes food-related practices, domesticating spiritual culture²². This is because food practices are a crucial part of rituals and the contest between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese state over control of the successor and other figures directly impacts the acceptance and the 'Tibetanness' of the religion and thereby participation in the ritualistic settings. Thus, while the Chinese state isn't necessarily targeting dietary culture, it is evident that through policies that alter production systems and turn nomadic communities into settlers, previously existing notions of culinary culture is also forcefully meddled with, leading to an easier process of sinicization of Tibet.

Tibetan Identity

Tibetan-ness however, is in itself a topic that is not simple or with one single definition. Instead, it is a complex, multifaceted construct, continuously negotiated and re-articulated through various cultural performances, including culinary practices, within the diaspora²³. To answer this

²¹ Katia Buffetrille, interview in "Yak Politics: Tibetans' Vegetarian Dilemma Amid China Meat Boom," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2021.

²² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "China's Coercive Religious Policies," 2024, <https://www.uscirtf.gov/resources/chinas-coercive-religious-policies-tibet>.

²³ Sri Hariyatmi. "FOOD: INVISIBLE BRIDGE CONNECTING THE PAST AND PRESENT DAY OF DIASPORIC IDENTITY." *Celtic: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching, Literature and Linguistics* 6, no. 2 (2019): 42–50

question we should refer to the core of identity politics and how the formation of a national identity takes place. This is especially interesting in the case of the Tibetan region as it did not have a consolidated identity until the Chinese annexation forced demand for a united effort thus emerging the one Tibetan identity. The Tibetan identity today is often seen synonymous with the Tibetan Buddhist identity in popular discourse, although this view often overlooks the rich tapestry of regional, linguistic, and religious diversity that historically characterized the Tibetan plateau. This perceived homogeneity, particularly from an external perspective, frequently erases the nuanced variations in culinary traditions, dialects, and spiritual practices that distinguish communities across Amdo, Kham, and U-Tsang, as well as the unique identities of Bon practitioners and other indigenous groups.²⁴

The true nuance of this varied identity and the homogenisation of the identity however, can be seen in the cases of the Kache community. This community, descendants of Kashmiri Muslim traders who settled in Lhasa centuries ago, exemplifies how non-Buddhist groups have historically contributed to and been integrated into the broader Tibetan cultural fabric, yet their distinct culinary practices and religious identity often challenge the singular, Buddhist-centric narrative of Tibetan nationhood. Their halal dietary laws and mosque-centered community life mark them as different within the dominant Buddhist nationalist rhetoric. Despite these differences, Tibetan nationalist institutions and activists have made deliberate efforts to accommodate the Kache as integral Tibetans, emphasizing despite religious differences, culturally and in the challenges they face, they are the same.. The Dalai Lama himself has extended special recognition to ensure that the Kache feel connected to the broader Tibetan struggle, illustrating a politics of inclusive nationalism that seeks to transcend sectarian divides while maintaining cultural cohesion.

This cautious inclusion of non-Buddhist minorities reveals that Tibetan identity, while mobilized in nationalist discourse as relatively coherent and unified, remains at its core a negotiated and contested space where varying histories, beliefs, and cultural expressions intersect. It underscores the need for any analysis of Tibetan nationalism and gastronationalism to account not only for

²⁴ Angana D’Rozario and Mithilesh Kumar Mishra, “Food, Identity, and Tradition: Eating Out in Tibetan Diaspora Communities,” *Asian Anthropology* 20, no. 4 (2020): 345–60.

dominant narratives around “authentic” Tibetan culture but also for the plural identities and food practices that complicate and enrich the movement’s cultural fabric.

Culinary Culture as Resistance and Identity Assertion in the TAR

Despite intense pressures from sinicization policies, surveillance, and state restrictions, Tibetan culinary culture in the TAR remains a resilient site of cultural assertion and everyday resistance. Food, deeply interwoven with Tibetan identity and tradition, transcends sustenance to become a symbolic and political marker in the ongoing struggle to preserve Tibetan culture under assimilationist pressures.

Tsampa, the roasted barley flour central to traditional Tibetan diets, has transcended its role as mere nourishment to become a powerful emblem of resistance and Tibetan identity. The politicization of tsampa is evident in its prominent role in protest slogans, such as “Rise up, all tsampa-eating Tibetans!” which has been voiced since the 1959 uprisings and continues to resonate in contemporary youth activism (#TsampaRevolution) on platforms such as X and facebook. Monks and protestors publicly consuming tsampa at rallies or during communal prayers transform this everyday food into a visible assertion of collective identity and political protest.

To worsen the situation, state surveillance intensifies during religious and cultural festivals such as Losar and the Shoton Festival, both of which traditionally center on Tibetan communal food practices. Authorities impose restrictions on public rituals involving slaughter, ceremonial feasts, and food sharing, with security measures including checkpoints, informants, and camera monitoring. These regulations curtail the public visibility of Tibetan food rituals and impose standardized, Han-centric menus within schools, monasteries, and other institutions, undermining the intergenerational transmission of traditional culinary knowledge and weakening food’s role as a cultural anchor.

Beyond overt protests, daily Tibetan culinary choices function as repeated micro-acts of political autonomy. Families conducting private Losar feasts, monks promoting vegetarian diets as passive resistance against state industrial meat policies, and the hidden transmission of recipes

despite forced attendance at state boarding schools exemplify how food rituals persist quietly yet potently under surveillance. These everyday practices constitute a form of cultural resilience and subtle defiance, asserting Tibetan identity through embodied and habitual acts that evade direct state control.

With the suppression of public religious expression banning images of the Dalai Lama, limiting Tibetan-language education, and controlling religious gatherings, food has taken on a preeminent role in the secular articulation of Tibetan identity. Celestial symbols like tsampa evolve from religiously anchored practices into broader cultural shorthand for Tibetan-ness, enabling inter-regional and inter-sectarian solidarity under heavy state scrutiny. This secularization aligns with shifts identified by scholars comparing Tibetan culinary identity to other diaspora food cultures, such as the political significance of kimchi among Koreans, highlighting food's unique ability to fuse cultural nostalgia with political dissidence.

Chinese food-related policies in Tibet actively target dietary norms and production practices as mechanisms for assimilation. Subsidies encourage cultivation of wheat and rice rather than traditional barley; industrial livestock production and meat-processing facilities replace pastoral herding patterns; and the imposition of Han dietary standards in public institutions reshape daily Tibetan consumption patterns. These policies are strategic instruments of cultural engineering, transforming stomachs and identities alike to fit state narratives of modernization and national unity.

Monastic groups have mobilized culinary ethics as a form of spiritual and cultural resistance to Chinese assimilation efforts, particularly through anti-slaughter campaigns. These campaigns protest state-run commercial slaughterhouses, which disrupt traditional pastoral cycles and violate the Buddhist ethical framework that emphasizes compassion for animals. The Tibetan Buddhist clergy's advocacy for vegetarianism, especially in settled communities, constitutes a complex form of resistance that also reflects internal tensions within Tibetan society, where nomadic lifestyles historically necessitated meat consumption for survival. This religiously motivated shift faces challenges in balancing spiritual ideals with practical realities under the pressures of modernization and sinicization.

This promotion of vegetarianism as part of anti-slaughter activism both resists state economic policies and initiates internal debates over Tibetan cultural continuity. While monasteries increasingly advocate for spiritual vegetarianism, nomadic communities historically reliant on meat challenge this shift. This tension reflects broader negotiations about how Tibetan identity should evolve amidst external pressures and internal reform, revealing that culinary practices are not only battlegrounds between Tibetans and the state but also arenas of intra-community dialogue about tradition and modernity.

Another distinction in society is based on Gender. Like most South Asian communities, Tibet also has a predominantly patriarchal structure with women usually being in charge of child rearing and household chores, minor field work while the men were in charge of providing for the family, usually by tending to livestock or crops, trade or construction work. Thus, women also became naturally in charge of transmission of indigenous knowledge systems, especially pertaining to culinary traditions as Tibetan systems were transmitted orally. The gendered nature of culinary labor often renders women's contributions to cultural preservation invisible within both traditional and nationalist frameworks. While men's political resistance receives recognition and documentation, women's daily acts of cultural maintenance, preparing traditional foods, teaching children recipes, and preserving seasonal practices remain largely unacknowledged as forms of resistance. This invisibility due to the domestic nature of work comes to light through the lens of gastrationalism.

This role becomes even more important in this era where convenience takes over culture in the maintenance of cuisine²⁵ However, this is not to be mistaken with the lack of women's movements in the nationalist movement or as voiceless in the family unit. Countless women have been arrested and tortured for their involvement in the nationalist movement. Pema Dachen says this is also the case for Tibetan women in exile.²⁶ In a society with dying culture due to

²⁵ Samtso Kyi, "A Threat to Traditional Tibetan Foods: Convenience vs. Culture," October 23, 2019.

²⁶ Pema Dechen, "The Role of Tibetan Women in the Independence Struggle of Tibet," 1995, <https://www.tibetjustice.org/reports/women/women.html>.

convenience, westernization, and assimilationist policies by the Chinese state, transmission and preservation of cultural practices become extremely crucial to maintain the Tibetan identity. This perspective not only brings food out as an active agent in identity assertion but also highlights the role of women and domestic roles especially in case of regions with contested identities.

Within Tibetan diaspora communities in India, women navigate the challenges of exile by creatively adapting their culinary traditions to local contexts through processes of acculturation and hybridization. Rather than representing cultural loss, these adaptations constitute acts of preservation that reveal the gendered character of gastronationalism, showing how acts by women that employ traditional knowledge to maintain national identity under conditions of displacement and resource scarcity.

Role of Institutions

Institutional actors fundamentally shape the evolution of Tibetan identity, resistance, and everyday life within the TAR. The entanglements of Buddhist clergy, the symbolic and political presence of the Dalai Lama, and the pervasive reach of the Chinese state constitute a triad of power and contestation.

The clergy

Monastic institutions and clergy have long been the custodians of spiritual authority, education, and cultural memory in Tibet. Recent monastic campaigns, such as anti-slaughter and vegetarianism initiatives, signal not only spiritual cultivation but also quiet resistance to both state-imposed economic models (e.g., promotion of commercial slaughterhouses) and Han-centric food policies.²⁷ The clergy's arguments to shift settled communities toward vegetarianism distinguishing them from nomadic necessity show internal debates over the future of Tibetan practice, while simultaneously pushing back against imposed dietary change.

The Dalai Lama

Although images, teachings, and open veneration of the 14th Dalai Lama are banned or harshly

²⁷ Katia Buffetrille, interview in “Yak Politics: Tibetans’ Vegetarian Dilemma Amid China Meat Boom,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2021.

restricted within the TAR, his absence is itself a powerful, galvanizing presence. The Dalai Lama's figure serves as an absent architect of unity across region, class, and sect, invoked in private prayers, coded rituals, and even food symbolism such as tsampa used in both protest and celebration²⁸. His spiritual authority both inspires micro-acts of defiance and fortifies a shared narrative of "Tibetanness" against fragmentation, even as state policies seek to engineer alternative sources of religious legitimacy.

The Chinese state

The Chinese state's project of governance via pervasive surveillance, sinicization policies, and deliberate transformation of public institutions directly targets both religious and secular Tibetan life²⁹. Major interventions include forced adaptation of monastic curricula, regulation of reincarnation, compulsory "patriotic re-education," and the standardization of food systems (Barley-to-wheat policy, school meals, etc.). State-driven secularization extends even into the culinary sphere: by reorienting production, consumption, and festival ritual toward Han dietary norms, the state aims to remold not only Tibetan practices but also identities at a fundamental, sensory level.

Media as an institution

Media institutions operate as powerful arenas where the meanings of food, identity, and nationhood are constructed, contested, and communicated. In the context of Tibetan gastrationalism, media does more than simply report on culinary practices or cultural events; it actively shapes how Tibetan identity is imagined and performed through the symbolic politics of food.

Firstly, diaspora and pro-Tibetan media often frame Tibetan culinary culture as a unified, coherent expression of national identity. This narrative strategically emphasizes shared food traditions, such as the consumption of tsampa or butter tea, as common denominators that

²⁸ Tsering Shakya, "Whither the Tsampa Eaters," *Himal Southasian*, March 2019, <https://www.himalmag.com/cover/whither-the-tsampa/>.

²⁹ Fenggang Yang, "Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond," in *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*, ed. David Palmer (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

transcend internal social divisions and regional differences. By doing so, these media cultivate a sense of solidarity and resistance against cultural assimilation, portraying food as a vehicle of both nostalgia and active political defiance.³⁰ The media thereby participates in constructing a collective culinary identity that supports nationalist goals, selectively including diverse communities, such as the minority Kache population, as integral parts of the Tibetan whole. The flattening or smoothing of internal diversity reflects a tactical choice, where a singular culinary identity is privileged because it serves political unity and mobilization.

In contrast, Chinese state media functions as a counter-gastronationalist force by presenting Tibetan cuisine as one of many ethnic curiosities within a multicultural China. This framing positions Tibetan food as an exotic yet consumable cultural product, designed to attract tourism and project an image of ethnic harmony under Chinese governance. Moreover the extreme censorship in China doesn't allow sensitive issues to be accessed. For example words news reports containing Tibet, Lhasa, riot, etc cannot be accessed.³¹ Such narratives depoliticize and commercialize Tibetan culinary heritage, stripping it of its subversive potential and relegating it to the realm of entertainment and consumption. This instrumentalization aids the state's broader project of sinicization and territorial integration, normalizing Tibetan identity within a broader Chinese nationalist framework.

Importantly, these competing media narratives are not simply external impositions; they interact with Tibetan self-perceptions and community practices. Media plays a crucial role in defining what is "authentic" or "traditional," influencing which foodways are valorized, maintained, or marginalized on both collective and individual levels. In this sense, media acts as both a battleground and a crucible for gastronationalist identity-making, mediating between lived experience and political ideology.

Furthermore, the commercialization and globalization of Tibetan cuisine through media channels complicate notions of authenticity. As Tibetan food enters global markets and food tourism, media narratives often oscillate between preserving cultural heritage and accommodating

³⁰ Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

³¹ Tibet Policy Institute, "Chinese Censorship vs Tibetan Activism on Social Media," <https://tibetpolicy.net/chinese-censorship-vs-tibetan-activism-on-social-media/>.

hybridized, market-driven adaptations. This tension illustrates how gastrationalism is debated not only in political terms but also through economic and cultural globalization processes.

Presentation of Tibetan women in human rights networks and diasporic channels is often seen to be emotional and presents them as vessels suffering the brunt of Chinese policies, such as that of birth control. However, a more understated, quiet representation can be seen in interviews and pieces showcasing culture, where women are essentially shown as custodians of the culture. In contrast the Chinese media presents women as cheerful members of the harmonious society who showcase the diversity of Chinese cuisines. The gendered dimensions of these competing media narratives reveal how women's food work becomes doubly politicized: on one hand, as nationalist media cast Tibetan women as anchors of tradition and resistance, and on the other, as state media commodify their cultural labor to promote integration.

Thus, the media as an institution not only functions in the transmission of information or the creation of awareness, but also acts as a powerful agent in shaping, reinforcing, and sometimes erasing cultural narratives and differences. In the context of Tibetan gastrationalism, this means the media can actively reinforce homogenizing narratives of identity, erase or marginalize women's labor and intricate cultural differences, or serve as arenas where alternative, plural, and contesting voices strive for visibility. Recognizing the media's dual role, as both a mirror and a maker of social reality is essential for understanding how food, gender, and nationalism are negotiated and understood both within and beyond Tibet

The Tibetan Diaspora

The Tibetan diaspora, dispersed primarily across India, Nepal, North America, and parts of Europe, occupies a distinct position in the politics of culinary culture. The movement of people following the 1959 uprising was not only a political displacement but also a profound ecological and gastronomic rupture. Displacement from the plateau meant the loss of direct access to traditional ingredients such as high-altitude barley, yak dairy, and endemic vegetables, forcing Tibetans in exile to negotiate new foodscapes while attempting to preserve the symbolic essence of their culinary heritage. Adaptation, therefore, became an inevitable yet politically charged process. Barley remained central to identity, but the varieties grown in Indian or Nepali soils differ in texture and flavour from those of the Tibetan plateau. Buffalo or beef often substituted

for yak, and rice and wheat became more prominent staples.³² At times materials are also imported from places such as Sikkim, which provide a similar environment. Yet these substitutions must not be framed as losses; rather, they should be narrated as continuities that preserved the act, memory, and meaning of traditional foods even when their material composition shifted.

The mode of transmission remained oral and performative, with recipes learned through observation, apprenticeship in family kitchens, and collective festival preparations. An example of this was the celebration of Lokhar or white Wednesday in Majnu ka Tilla.³³ This continuity in knowledge-sharing practices reinforced intimacy and collectivism, both of which remain vital for identity maintenance in exile. Moreover, these communities such as bylakuppe, Dharamshala, and Majnu ka Tilla have become popular tourist attractions and famous for their food too. There have been Tibetan restaurants opened across the country which present Tibetan food as Tibetan and not under the section of ‘Chinese’.³⁴

For younger generations born and raised outside Tibet, culinary identity is shaped less by personal memory of the plateau and more by what Mannur terms “fabricated authenticity.” Their “authentic” Tibetan dishes are mediated reconstructions such as momos seasoned with Indian spices, or thenthuk using locally milled flour. While materially different from their plateau counterparts, these adaptations are nonetheless imbued with emotional legitimacy, functioning as sensory anchors to an “imagined homeland.” Such practices reveal how nostalgia operates not as a static recollection of the past but as an evolving cultural strategy, one that blends memory, invention, and political necessity.

The culinary hybridization and adaptive practices of the Tibetan diaspora expand the conceptual boundaries of gastronationalism beyond the geographic and political confines of Tibet. Diaspora communities, through their evolving foodways, actively participate in nationalist projects by

³² Aravinda Anantharaman, “Eating thukpa in exile: How the Tibetan community built bridges with food,” *Livemint*, June 24, 2023.

³³ *The Hindu*, “A Peek into Tibetan Culture at Majnu Ka Tila,” April 15, 2022.

³⁴ Aravinda Anantharaman, “Eating thukpa in exile: How the Tibetan community built bridges with food,” *Livemint*, June 24, 2023.

asserting Tibetan identity in ways that incorporate hybridity, resilience, and innovation. This broader, more inclusive form of gastronationalism recognizes the multiplicity of Tibetan experiences and expressions, challenging rigid or exclusionary definitions of authenticity. It also reflects how displaced communities can rework food as a cultural symbol to sustain resistance and belonging in transnational contexts, thereby enriching the ongoing nationalist discourse.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored how Tibetan food is deeply political, serving as a site where identity, resistance, and control play out both in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and across the diaspora. It showed that Tibetan culinary practices are not just about culture or tradition; they carry powerful meanings in the face of political pressures and social change.

In the TAR, Chinese state policies don't just affect politics or religion; they reach into everyday life through food. By enforcing Han dietary standards in schools and institutions, regulating traditional food production, and controlling festivals and communal meals, the state attempts to weaken Tibetan cultural identity from the inside out. These efforts disrupt how culinary knowledge is passed down and practiced, making food a tool of assimilation. Yet, food also becomes a subtle form of resistance that is practiced quietly within homes, monasteries, and communities.

At the same time, Tibetan religious institutions contribute to resistance by promoting food ethics like vegetarianism and anti-slaughter movements. These campaigns aren't just about spirituality; they challenge state control and offer alternative ways to think about Tibetan identity and survival in a changing world.

In the diaspora, the story is different but equally complex. Displaced from their homeland, Tibetans adapt their food in new environments, substituting ingredients, blending flavors, and inventing new recipes. For younger Tibetans, whose memories of Tibet are shaped more by stories and images than direct experience, food becomes a form of "fabricated authenticity" that helps keep a sense of belonging alive. This ongoing adaptation shows how Tibetan identity is flexible and resilient, shaped by both memory and present realities.

The media plays a key role in these processes. While diaspora and international media highlight food as a symbol of Tibetan unity and resistance, Chinese state media presents Tibetan food as a tourist curiosity, stripping away its power as a political symbol. These competing stories influence how Tibetans see themselves and how others perceive their culture.

Gastronationalism also provides a lens to view the domestic labour and activities of women as resistance and identity assertion. Their roles in Tibetan culinary culture are both foundational and deeply political, yet too often remain underrecognized in dominant narratives. Across both the TAR and the diaspora, Tibetan women perform the hands-on labor that keeps oral and performative culinary traditions alive, selecting barley, preparing staple foods like tsampa and momos, passing on family recipes, and adapting to the shifting demands of exile and resource scarcity. As central agents of knowledge transmission, their daily work is not merely “domestic” but is, in itself, a form of resistance and identity-making, keeping Tibetan foodways resilient in the face of political, ecological, and cultural pressures.

Overall, this research supports the hypothesis that Tibetan foodways are active sites of resistance and identity formation shaped by state pressures in the TAR and evolving creatively in the diaspora. Rather than being simple traditions, these food practices are ongoing political acts that express resilience in the face of assimilation. By highlighting the central role of food in Tibetan nationalism, this paper opens up new ways to understand how everyday cultural practices become powerful tools in struggles over identity and belonging.

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