The aim of this paper is to introduce the wooden moulds known as zan par and to explore their ritual significance. Zan par are used to create small effigies of dough as scapegoats (glud), to give as offerings to propitiate evil spirits or to please the deities. In order to understand the concept of zan par, one needs to bear in mind the Tibetans’ belief in the sanctity of their landscape, inhabited by both gods and demons. Prior to the advent of Buddhism, both the indigenous folk religion and the Bon practised a form of shamanism and performed a series of rituals in order to cope with the natural and supernatural forces at work in their hostile environment (Dowman 1997: 9–15).

Initially, many of these rituals involved the use of sacrifice to appease the spirit world. Early evidence for this is found in the eighth century Dunhuang manuscripts and in Bonpo literature (Lalou 1952: 339–61). The animal (or in some cases human) would act as a scapegoat (glud) or offering to the deities. The practice of transferring evil to another being or scapegoat is common to many cultures around the world, but it was particularly widespread in Tibet (Stein 1971: 236–40). After Buddhism was proclaimed as the state religion of Tibet (c.779 CE), these rituals were actively discouraged, as living sacrifice was considered contrary to the Buddha’s teachings. Instead various forms of non-violent offerings were introduced as symbolic substitutes.

Chief amongst these are the gtor ma or sacrificial cakes made of dough. The idea of gtor ma originated from the Indian offering known as bali, food offerings made of rice, fruit or sweets. In Tibet, rtsam pa (roasted barley ground into flour) is mixed with water or milk to make the dough for gtor ma. The word gtor ma derives from gtor ba, to cast away, break up or scatter. This conveys the Buddhist notion of giving without attachment and the gtor ma itself is often broken up or scattered at the end of a ritual. But in addition to gtor ma, other scapegoat substitutes made of dough were used as offerings, after the introduction of Buddhism.
There is reference to this in Ye shes mtsho rgyal’s biography of Padmasambhava:

All Bon rites containing unwholesome aspects were abolished to prevent immediate evil. The Bon were ordered to construct stags’ heads with branching antlers out of wood, and yak and sheep statuettes out of dough. (Butler 1996: 40)

The Bonpos claim it was the founder of their religion, Ton pa Shen rab (ston pa gShen rab), who initiated the tradition of dough offerings as substitutes for sacrificial animals many centuries earlier. Although there is no early written evidence to support this, it can safely be said that both gtor ma and dough effigies are of Indic origin and were being used in Tibet by the 8th century. Whether the zan par was in existence at this time is not known, and the earliest example I have managed to source only dates from the Ming dynasty (Jian/Zheng 2003: 306–11). The zan par is usually 20–30 centimetres long (plate 82) but there are shorter and longer varieties. Some are flat wooden boards carved on two sides, whilst others are four, six or eight-sided and carved all over. The flat boards often come in a set attached with a leather thong, so that they can be fanned out (colour plate 83; Bellino 1999: 32–33). The moulds vary in content and some are occasionally named according to the images they represent. The use of the zan par appears to be widespread throughout the Tibetan cultural and religious domain and in both the Bon and Buddhist traditions (particularly amongst the Rnying ma pa).

The wood selected for making the zan par is usually birch, as this is considered the easiest for carving. However, zan par made of hazel, walnut and fruit woods are also found. Traditionally, monks made the zan par, but in practice this work is often carried out by skilled lay craftsmen. The method employed in carving a zan par is a similar technique to that used in carving rlung ta or prayer flag blocks (Dagyab 1977: 58–59). Designs are drawn on paper, and then stuck onto the wood with a light flour paste. This is left to dry and then the initial outline is carved through the template, or occasionally the paper is peeled off leaving an imprint. The wood is moistened before further detailed carving. The tools used are varying sizes of burins or gravers with oblique ends. In the case of cruder zan par, the designs appear to be carved freehand.