



The Waterfall and the Fountain

Geographically and anthropologically distant cultures inspire awe and fascination: for centuries, Europe and China, the West and the East have fantasized about each other, longed for journeying toward each other, mutually projected onto each other their own alter egos. Modern innovation in the transport of people, goods, and especially cultural contents in digital form has increasingly narrowed the distance between these two geographic and human poles. Today, China is everywhere in the West, and viceversa. Yet, facility of access is not always tantamount to in-depth comprehension. Century-long differences, prejudices, and asymmetries still persist. Comprising the essays of several specialists in cultural theory and analysis, both from Europe and China, the volume seeks to uncover the semiotic formula underpinning the encounter, the dialogue, but also the clash between Western and Eastern aesthetics, especially in the neglected field of popular culture and arts. The title hints at the Chinese fascination for waterfalls and the natural flowing of the elements, compared with the European attraction to fountains as exploitation of technological mastery over nature: each chapter in the volume focuses on many aesthetic dialectics, spanning from literature to painting, from videogames to food.

Contributions by Lei Han, Massimo Leone, Gabriele Marino, Jia Peng, Simona Stano, Bruno Surace, Mattia Thibault, Jia-Jun Wang, Gao Yan, Jun Zeng, Kuiying Zhao, Haitian Zhou.

Massimo Leone is Full Tenured Professor of Semiotics, Cultural Semiotics and Visual Semiotics at the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, University of Turin (Italy) and Permanent Part-Time Visiting Full Professor of Semiotics in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, University of Shanghai (China).

Bruno Surace is a member of AISS (Associazione Italiana Studi Semiotici), CUC (Consulta Universitaria Cinema), and CIRCe (Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sulla Comunicazione, Turin). He has written articles for numerous peer-reviewed journals and given lectures in conferences and seminars in Italy, various places in Europe and China.

Jun Zeng teaches Theory of Literature and Arts at the College of Liberal Arts, Shanghai University. His interests in scholarship include the theory of literature and the arts and cultural theory and criticism.

In copertina
teamLab, *Universe of Water Particles in the Tank. Transcending Boundaries*, TANK Shanghai, Shanghai 2019.

euro 25,00

ISBN 978-88-255-2787-2



9 788825 527872

The Waterfall and the Fountain edited by M. Leone, B. Surace, J. Zeng

ARACNE

THE WATERFALL AND THE FOUNTAIN

COMPARATIVE SEMIOTIC ESSAYS
ON CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN CHINA

edited by
Massimo Leone
Bruno Surace
Jun Zeng



The Waterfall and the Fountain

Comparative Semiotic Essays on Contemporary Arts in China

edited by

Massimo Leone

Bruno Surace

Jun Zeng

contributions by

Yan Gao

Lei Han

Massimo Leone

Gabriele Marino

Jia Peng

Simona Stano

Bruno Surace

Mattia Thibault

Jia-jun Wang

Jun Zeng

Kui-ying Zhao

Hai-tian Zhou





Aracne editrice

www.aracneeditrice.it
info@aracneeditrice.it

Copyright © MMXIX
Gioacchino Onorati editore S.r.l. – unipersonale

www.gioacchinoonoratieditore.it
info@gioacchinoonoratieditore.it

via Vittorio Veneto, 20
00020 Canterano (RM)
(06) 45551463

ISBN 978-88-255-2787-2

*No part of this book may be reproduced
by print, photoprint, microfilm, microfiche, or any other means,
without publisher's authorization.*

Ist edition: October 2019

Contents

- 9 Introduction
Massimo Leone

Part I

Chinese Aesthetics from the Inside

- 33 A Cultural Analysis of Temporal Signs in Twenty-First Century Chinese Literature
Jun Zeng (曾军)
- 53 Mimetic Desire or Productive Work?
Hai-tian Zhou (周海天)
- 73 Art as a Presencing Sign
Kui-ying Zhao (赵奎英)
- 97 On the Semiotic Model of Objecthood Proposed in Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind
Jia Peng (彭佳)
- 111 Narratology for Art History: Narrativizing Western Influence and Chinese Response in the Modern Era
Lian Duan
- 165 A Historical and Semiotic Analysis of *Cina's* calling on/relationship to China in the Cultural Revolution
Lei Han (韩蕾)

8 Contents

179 The Empty Mirror as Metaphor
Yan Gao (高燕)

193 *The Rap of China* and Hip-Hop's Cultural Politics
Jia-jun Wang (王嘉军)

Part II

Chinese Aesthetics from the Outside

223 The Semiotics of the Battle
Massimo Leone

247 The Musical Marco Polo
Gabriele Marino

277 The Aesthetics of Food
Simona Stano

303 Ellipses and Amnesias: Poetics and Figures of Time in Contemporary Chinese Cinema
Bruno Surace

329 Taming Play: A Map of Play Ideologies in the West and in China
Mattia Thibault

345 *Authors*

The Aesthetics of Food

Chinese Cuisine(s) Between the East and the West

SIMONA STANO¹

ABSTRACT: Chinese cuisine is known and especially praised for the attention it pays to every aspect of food, “from its palatableness to its texture, and from its fragrance to its colourfulness; until, as in other works of art, proportion and balance are instilled in every dish” (Feng, 1966 [1952]). Within its huge variety — including gastronomic traditions originating from various regions of China, as well as from Chinese people living in other countries —, in fact, such a cuisine strongly emphasises the aesthetic dimension of food, in relation to both its preparation and consumption. This acquires further importance if we consider the extensive spread of Chinese food around the world and its consequent hybridisation with other foodspheres, including Western gastronomic traditions. This paper explores the aesthetic values associated with Chinese culinary arts by making reference to existing literature on Chinese food cultures and analysing some relevant case studies, especially in relation to the collective imaginary of Chinese cuisine between the East and the West. In the conclusion, a more general reflection concerning the philosophical and semiotic discussion on taste and its judgement is provided.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics; taste; food; arts; Chinese cuisine(s).

1. Marie Curie Fellow; University of Turin and New York University.

1. Chinese cuisines and the aesthetic dimension of food

Chinese cuisine is known and especially praised for the attention it pays to every aspect of food, «from its palatableness to its texture, and from its fragrance to its colourfulness; until, *as in other works of art*, proportion and balance are instilled in every dish» (Feng, 1966 [1952], p. 11; our emphasis). Despite the huge variety of gastronomic traditions originating from different regions of China², as well as from Chinese people living in other countries³, in fact, a common feature of all variations of Chinese cuisine has been historically pointed out: the emphasis put on the *aesthetic* dimension of food. This acquires further importance if we consider the extensive spread of Chinese food around the world and its consequent hybridisation with other “foodspheres” (cf. Stano, 2015b), including Western gastronomic traditions.

Building on these considerations, this paper explores the aesthetic values associated with Chinese culinary arts by making reference to existing literature on Chinese food cultures and analysing some relevant case studies, especially in relation to the collective imaginary of Chinese cuisine between the East and the West. In the conclusion, a more general reflection concerning the philosophical and semiotic discussion on taste and its judgement is provided.

2. The diversity of cooking techniques, ingredients and seasoning across the country depends on both material differences (e.g. historical, geographical and climatic background) and sociocultural aspects (e.g. ethnic groups, imperial expansion and trading, etc.). The “Four Major Cuisines” or “Four Cooking Styles” of China are *Lùcài* (魯菜, “Shandong cuisine”), *Chuāncài* (川菜, “Sichuan cuisine”), *Huīcài* (徽菜, “Anhui cuisine”) and *Yuècài* (粵菜, “Guangdong” or “Cantonese cuisine”), representing North, West, East and South China cuisine correspondingly. The common modern classification of the eight best known and most influential cuisines of China, includes the Four Major Cuisines plus *Mǐncài* (閩菜, “Fujian cuisine”), *Xiāngcài* (湘菜, “Hunan cuisine”), *Sūcài* (蘇菜, “Jiangsu cuisine”), and *Zhècài* (浙菜, “Zhejiang cuisine”). For further details, see in particular Chang, 1977; Anderson, 1988; So, 1992; Roberts, 2002.

3. Mainly due to the so-called “Chinese diaspora” (see in particular Pan 1994), as well as to the historical power of the country, Chinese cuisine has influenced a number of other Asian culinary systems. For further details, see in particular Wu, Tan, 2001; Wu, Cheung, 2002.

2. The collective imaginary of Chinese cuisine(s) between the East and the West

It is interesting, first of all, to refer to the so-called “collective imaginary” — i.e. the socially shared depository of images or figures that encompass part of a cultural encyclopaedia (cf. Eco, 1975; 1979; 1984) directing and regulating its imaginative paths according to the dual dimension of an “internal imaginary”, intended as a «cultural pattern for the production of images and figures» (Volli, 2011, p. 35 [our translation]), and an “external imaginary”, conceived as a «material system of production and storage of [such] images» (*ibidem*) — of Chinese cuisines between the East and the West, also relating to the extremely rich literature on this topic. To this purpose, considering the large number of movies featuring Chinese food, we have decided to focus primarily on cinema, considering both movies characterised by an internal look and some Western representations of Chinese cuisine.

2.1. Chinese cuisines in cinema: Two emblematic case studies

Eat drink man woman by Ang Lee (1994): tradition, variety, balance, omnivorousness, and freshness

An unavoidable reference when dealing with movies featuring Chinese cuisine is certainly *Eat drink man woman* by Ang Lee (Lǐ Ān), which stresses the importance of food even in its title — reporting a quote from the Confucian *Book of Rites*, which describes food and sex as basic human desires. Over 100 different recipes were used in the movie, and a food expert was consulted to ensure their authenticity⁴. This is also evident in the opening scenes of *Eat drink man*

4. The movie is set in Taipei, so the cuisine it features is the Taiwanese one — which, however, has been strongly influenced by Chinese traditional cuisines, and especially by the so-called *Mǐncài* or Fujian cuisine, as Wu and Cheung (2002), Yi-lan Tsui (2001) and a number of other scholars in food history support.

woman, which show Mr. Chu, a former chef, preparing a feast for his family. Although the world surrounding Chu is racing towards modernisation, his meal emphasises traditional dishes, whose preparation takes up the entire day and requires a varied set of competences and tools. In fact, a very strong emphasis is put — mainly through the use of close-ups and extreme close-ups — on the tools used for cooking⁵ and, in particular, cutting⁶ food, which in turn point out the varied set of skills and knowledge required to use them. Such skills and knowledge are visually expressed through extreme close-ups of the man's hand (Fig. 1), whose actions are very fast and resolute. This makes the entire cooking process resemble a sort of dance, as is underlined by Mr. Chu's harmonious movements, as well as by the predominance of the instrumental soundtrack, which harmoniously incorporates within itself the noise produced by each tool.



Figure 1. The “Chinese cleaver”, screenshots from ANG LEE (1994), *Eat drink man woman*.

Accordingly, the abundance and diversity of cooking techniques is particularly stressed. In fact, Chinese cuisine encompasses well over

5. I.e. woks, bamboo basket steamers, a number of bowls, ladles, etc., not forgetting the chef's hands, real incarnation of his *knowing-how-to-do*.

6. More specifically, the camera insists on the so-called “Chinese cleaver”, that is, an all purpose knife generally employed for slicing, shredding, peeling, pounding, crushing, chopping and even transporting cut food from the chopping board or a plate directly to the wok or the pot used for cooking it.

500 different methods of cooking, of which — according to Roberts (2002, p. 21) — five may be described as characteristic (and can all be seen in the opening scenes of the movie, together with a number of other practices such as stewing, deep-frying, etc.): red-cooking, stir-frying, clear-simmering, steaming, and cooking drunken foods. The basic idea emphasised by the long visual prelude of Lee's movie is precisely the need to combine the right foods with the right techniques in order to get to a perfectly *balanced* dish. Such balanced perfection has been traditionally (see in particular Anderson, 1988; So, 1992; Roberts, 2002) described as originating from an adequate blending of *flavours, textures, and colours*.

As regards flavours, the basic ones in Chinese cuisine are traditionally said to be salty (mainly obtained by using soy sauce, soy-bean paste, or salt), sweet (sugar, honey, jam...), sour (vinegar, tomato sauce...), hot or pungent (pepper, ginger, mustard, chilli...) and bitter (almond, orange peel, herb ...). Most commonly, however, chefs opt for particular combinations of these flavours, with some of them used to correct, or rather to further enhance other flavours — such as in the case of the steamed chicken soup prepared by Mr. Chu, who uses an old chicken to make the broth, and then steams the younger chicken using that broth. In this respect, it is very interesting to consider the description provided by Nicole Mones in *The Last Chinese Chef*: when asked about Chinese cuisine by journalist Maggie McElroy, chef Siam Lang says

One of the most important peaks of flavor is *xian*. *Xian* means the sweet, natural flavor—like butter, fresh fish, luscious clear chicken broth. Then we have *xiang*, the fragrant flavor—think of frying onions, roasted meat. *Nong* is the concentrated flavor, the deep, complex taste you get from meat stews or dark sauces or fermented things. Then there is the rich flavor, the flavor of fat. This is called *you er bu ni*, which means to taste of fat without being oily. We love this one. (Lang, 2007, p. 53)

This description, and especially the idea of “fragrant flavour”, in turn highlights the importance of another crucial factor in the aesthetic appreciation of Chinese cuisine: texture. Again, Mones’ pages are a crucial reference in this sense:

There are ideals of texture, too—three main ones. *Cui* is dry and crispy, *nen* is when you take something fibrous like shark’s fin and make it smooth and yielding, and *ruan* is perfect softness—velveted chicken, a soft-boiled egg. I think it’s fair to say we control texture more than any other cuisine does. In fact some dishes we cook have nothing at all to do with flavor. Only texture; that is all they attempt. [...] Anything more would distract. The gourmet is eating for texture. Once you understand the ideal flavors and textures, the idea is to mix and match them. That’s an art in itself, called *tiaowei*. (Lang, 2007, pp. 53–4)

And finally there are colours, which also highlight the need to wisely combine and blend different ingredients in order to obtain the perfect balanced dish. In this sense the table acquires a particular importance, since it is the place where the results of the chef’s work are exhibited — all at the same time, according to the typical Chinese multi-course meal, which highly differs from the Western syntagmatic succession of starters, main plates, etc. The table is also where some cooking operations are finalised, as *Eat drink man woman* shows, and the pleasure of sharing food (symbolised by the typical Chinese round table and the communal plates) finds expression.

Moreover, both the cooking and eating scenes of the movie evidently stress the “omnivorous” characterization of the Chinese meal (whose ingredients range from frogs to ducks, from carps to *bái cài*, etc.), in which conceptual balance still plays a crucial role: dominance is held by *fan* — that is, grain and other starch food, either rice or wheat made into noodles, breads and dumplings — while *cai* is the flavoured food accompanying *fan* — such as seasoned vegetables, and a great variety of meat and fish — for which all the previously mentioned aspects related to flavours and textures apply.

Finally, another crucial element to be highlighted is *freshness*: a perfect meal can only originate from fresh ingredients.

This requires the ability to recognise them, as the close-up of Mr Chu's face (Fig. 2) effectively symbolises, together with the need to sometimes kill living animals — when not eating them still alive, as will be further discussed in the analysis of the following example.



Figure 2. Omnivoraciousness and freshness, screenshots from ANG LEE (1994), *Eat drink man woman*.

The Chinese feast by Tsui Hark (1995): “*mise en plat*”, extreme omnivoraciousness, illusion, and synaesthesia

The wonderful sequence-shot opening Tsui Hark (Kè Xú)'s *The Chinese feast* is highly representative of the emphasis put on the aesthetic dimension of eating within the Chinese foodsphere.

It is impossible not to notice the balanced combinations of colours dominating the screen, with the creation of figurative natural sceneries in the final plates (Fig. 3). Towards the end of the sequence, then, the camera passes by a plate where food substances and colours are put together and arranged in order to figuratively recall the yin and yang symbol (Fig. 3, last image), which — according to the Taoist philosophy — describes the interconnection, interdependence and complementarity of contrary forces. In this view, food — exactly like any other thing — has both yin and yang aspects (for instance hot and cold, or dry and wet elements) which should be effectively balanced and harmonised (see in particular Craze, Jay,

1999). This highlights not only the highly philosophical, but also the medical character of Chinese cuisine (see in particular Flaws & Wolfe, 1983; Farquhar, 1994; Tan, 1995), which should be able to heal both the body and the mind by keeping such a balance: refreshing foods (such as water-cress and seaweed), for instance, can be used to treat fever and rashes, while foods which furnish heat (such as fatty meat, chillies, ginger, and high calorie foods like bread) are generally prescribed to counter wasting illnesses, in a perpetual need to maintain balance and harmony. At a more general level, food is regarded as supplying *qi*, that is, vital energy, to the body and mind. To this purpose, according to traditional philosophy, it should be fresh, cooked plainly and served simply with due regard to texture and colour — thus evidently impacting on the aesthetics of Chinese cuisine, as the prelude of Hark's movie effectively shows.



Figure 3. Combination of colours and foods, screenshots from TSUI HARK (1995), *The Chinese feast*.

The multiplicity of colours, foods, and eating tools appearing in such an opening sequence finds a correspondence in the subsequent scenes introducing two competing chefs, who are in fact represented by their very varied cooking toolkits. Moreover, the editing of the movie contributes to emphasising how the same food — in Fig. 4 rice, but other foods are also used in the competition — can be cooked in a variety of ways: while the younger chef rinses the rice by using a bamboo basket, the older one opts for shaking it by means of a tool

made of bamboo canes. And while the former cooks it through a multi-layered steaming procedure, the latter wraps it with a lotus leaf and a layer of clay, finally placing it on a hot grill. This stresses the chef's competence, which consists not only in mastering cooking techniques, but also in recognising the right foods for each technique, and viceversa.



Figure 4. Cooking techniques, screenshots from TSUI HARK (1995), *The Chinese feast*.

Accordingly, a wide variety of foods is also featured in *The Chinese feast*: adopting such diverse procedures, for instance, the two chefs obviously opt for different types of rice; and they do the same with other food categories, in a set of competitions that strongly emphasise the “omnivorousness” we already pointed out in *Eat drink man woman*, bringing it to its very extremes (with bear paws, exotic animals and other uncommon foods being prepared) and even beyond them, with a sort of condemnation in the end, when a team pretends to serve the jury the brain of a still-living monkey, but in fact decides not to kill the animal and builds up a simulation by using tofu and sound effects.

This in turn stresses the importance of *illusion* in Chinese cuisine, as effectively described by Mones:

Artifice. Illusion. Food should be more than food; it should tease and provoke the mind. We have a lot of dishes that come to the table looking like

one thing and turn out to be something else. The most obvious example would be a duck or fish that is actually vegetarian, created entirely from soy and gluten, but there are many other types of illusion dishes. We strive to fool the diner for a moment. It adds a layer of intellectual play to the meal. When it works, the gourmet is delighted. (Mones, 2007, p. 36)

This is not exactly the case of the monkey, which represents in fact a condemnation of the killing of certain animals for culinary purposes, but applies to various plates prepared in the movie, and also echoes the emphasis put on another crucial competence a good chef should have: being able to shape food, that is, to make it a pleasure not only for taste in the strict sense, but also for the sense of sight. In addition to the “mise en place” — i.e. the common arrangement and organisation of tools and ingredients before cooking — therefore, the Chinese meal requires what we might call, by playing on French words, a “mise en plat” — that is to say, the aesthetic arrangement of foods within the plate. Thus the chef becomes a real sculptor, who is able to manipulate food and shape it in a variety of ways exactly as common artists do with other substances such as wood, clay, etc.

Correspondingly, the scenes showing the jury evaluating the chef’s dishes effectively give expression to the *synaesthetic* nature of the tasting experience, which involves various senses — in particular sight and smell (Fig. 5) — in addition to taste.



Figure 5. Taste and synaesthesia, screenshots from TSUI HARK (1995), *The Chinese feast*.

2.2. *The Western representation of Chinese cuisine*

According to John Anthony George Roberts, «the spread of Chinese food throughout the world is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable examples of the globalization of food» (Roberts, 2002, p. 216). In his book *China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West*, he describes the Western relation to Chinese food from Marco Polo's *Travels*, based on the explorer's experiences in China between 1275 and 1292, to contemporary days. This leads him first of all to recall and compare the impressions of the first Western travellers⁷ who visited China over the centuries and laid the foundations of the collective representations that then spread all over the US and Western Europe. Apart from a few positive voices, most of their letters and *memoires* mainly condemned Chinese cuisine because of

- a) its omnivorousness;
- b) the poor hygiene standards causing diseases;
- c) the habit of sharing communal plates and eating in crowded places;
- d) even its cheapness (which was considered a sign of the poor quality of the food used).

Things started changing in the 1950s, when the globalisation of Chinese food became evident in the US, and then in Europe (especially Britain and then France), as a result of both its convenience and its character of “internal tourism” allowing people to experience foreignness without having to travel abroad. As Chinese restaurants became common, however, their owners had to choose between emphasising or playing down their exoticism. In most cases the second option pre-

7. Mainly missionaries or adventurers such as the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone, the Portuguese adventurer Galeote Pereira, the Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz, the scholarly Augustinian missionary Martin de Rada, the English adventurer Peter Mundy, Father Matteo Ricci, Friar Domingo Navarrete, Jean-Baptiste du Halde, the Chevalier de Jaucourt, Captain Alexander Hamilton, Lord Anson, John Barrow. For a detailed description of their reports, please refer to Roberts, 2002, Chap. 2.

veiled, originating a process of fusion and real domestication of Chinese cuisine resulting in the creation of new Westernized dishes, such as the famous *chop suey* (see in particular Coe, 2009; Roberts, 2012) or the so-called “fortune cookies” — which are in fact American “inventions”⁸ (see in particular Chang, 2003; Lee, 2008).

Building on these premises, the following paragraphs focus on some emblematic case studies in order to point out the main aspects characterising the Western representations of Chinese cuisine, again by referring primarily to cinema.

A Christmas story by Bob Clark (1983): between disgust and mockery

Among the vignettes forming part of *A Christmas story* by Bob Clark, there is an episode referring to Chinese cuisine: on Christmas Day, after the dogs burst into the kitchen and eat the turkey, Ralphie’s father and his family decide to go to a Chinese restaurant for their Christmas dinner. Here the variety characterising the previously analysed examples totally disappears, while the above-described Chinese omnivorousness strongly emerges, causing disgust and derision, and pointing out the crucial role played by sight and cultural factors in the aesthetic appreciation of food. In fact, while Western dishes generally try to remove any reference to the living beings whose meat was used to produce them, animals are instead often cooked and brought entire to the table in China, as happens in this case with the duck (which is also interestingly referred to — we might say “translated”⁹ — as “Chinese turkey”). Hence disgust, and then also mockery (caused by the intervention of the owner of the Chinese restaurant, who cuts the duck’s head in an attempt to solve the problem, but in fact ends up reaffirming the stereotype of Chinese insensitivity toward animals) emerge, echoing the caricaturising effect of the opening scenes of the vignette,

8. The term “invention” is here used to refer to the idea of “invention of tradition” introduced by Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) and further analysed in relation to food by Stano (2014).

9. Cf. Stano, 2015, 2016.

showing the Chinese waiters awkwardly trying to entertain the family with some typical Christmas songs.

The Joy Luck Club by Wayne Wang (1993): *unintelligibility, closeness and chagrin*

Another interesting example of the perception of Chinese cuisine — and, more generally culture — in the West can be found in the movie *The Joy Luck Club*, which deals with the relationships between four young American–Chinese women and their Chinese immigrant mothers. One of them, Waverly, wants to marry an American man, Rich, and brings him to a family dinner.



Figure 6. Rich having a Chinese dinner, screenshots from W. WANG (1993), *The Joy Luck Club*.

In this case the emphasis is put on the strict and apparently unintelligible rules of Chinese food etiquette, which makes the American guy's attempt to respect and praise such etiquette and food totally fail, thus paving the way for misunderstanding, closure and humiliation. When he fails to use chopsticks properly, he is reproached for bragging that he is a fast learner; when he tries to praise Lindo (Waverly's mother)'s cooking by taking a big portion of food (which very briefly appears on the screen, leaving the floor to the characters' body, as shown in Fig. 6), he is criticised for not paying attention to others; and when he does not understand that the old woman is insulting her best plate according

to common Chinese etiquette¹⁰, and copiously adds soy sauce to it, he ends up humiliating her in front of the whole family.

Mickey blue eyes by Kelly Makin (1999): misunderstanding and rudeness

Misunderstanding and incompatibility are also central in *Mickey blue eyes*' famous scene taking place at a Chinese restaurant: Michael asks the owner of the restaurant to put his marriage proposal for Gina into a fortune cookie, but she erroneously mixes it up with the one for a couple on another table, also persistently breaking the couple's privacy, and responding rudely to Gina's refusal to eat the biscuit immediately.

This scene recalls Wenying Xu's reflections on the reception of Chinese food in the West, according to which «when it's not representing Asian food as disgusting, the [Western] culture exoticizes [it]» (Xu, 2008, p. 8): the variety characterising traditional Chinese cuisines is here reduced to the presence of a unique, briefly shown, American-born Chinese food. Furthermore, exactly as in Clark's and Wang's movies, Chinese characters are evidently caricatured and stereotyped, with a totally dysphoric connotation based on values such as inaccuracy, impoliteness, intrusiveness, and unintelligibility.

Chinese tradition vs. Western adaptation: Cook up a Storm by Raymond Yip (2017)

In order to move toward the conclusion of the paper, let us consider a final case, which focuses on the comparison between tradi-

10. Waverly (voice-over): «But the worst was when Rich criticized my mother's cooking, and he didn't even know what he had done. As is the Chinese cook's custom, my mother always insults her own cooking, but only with the dishes she serves with special pride».

Lindo: «This dish not salty enough. No flavor. It's too bad to eat. Please».

Waverly (voice-over): «That was our cue to eat some and proclaim it the best she'd ever made».

Rich: «You know, Lindo, all this needs is a little soy sauce» [which he copiously adds to the platter].

Everyone: [Gasps!]

tional Chinese cuisine and its Western reinterpretation. Director Raymond Yip's *Cook up a storm* deals with the story of two young talented chefs, Sky Ko, a southern-style Chinese cook trained by his father's friend Uncle Seven, and Paul Ahn, a Michelin-starred half Chinese-half Korean chef living in France, where he has also been trained in experimental and *haute* cuisine. From the opening scenes of the movie, the differences between them are highly emphasised especially in terms of setting: Sky works at a little traditional restaurant (*Seven*) in the old area of Hong Kong, which struggles to hold up against the surrounding pressing modernity; Paul, himself born from the fusion of two different Eastern cultures and then raised in a third (Western) one, appears on the screen while working in a typical Western aristocratic palace, where he is preparing a special meal for a royal family with a number of assistants. And when Paul decides to leave France and go back to China, becoming the chef of *Stellar* (a restaurant owned by the Li Management Group that is trying to delete any trace of the old city), such a difference is further increased. The screenshots represented in Fig. 7, for instance, chromatically and topologically stress the opposition between the two restaurants, their chefs and staffs.



Figure 7. Seven vs Stellar, screenshots from R. YIP (2017), *Cook up a storm*.

The same applies to the cooking techniques that Sky (Fig. 8) and Paul (Fig. 9) use and the food they serve at their restaurants, with

the former basically recalling what we analysed in the case of *Eat drink man woman* and *The Chinese feast* (in terms of tools, ingredients, practices, etc.), and the latter rather experimenting with molecular cuisine, *sous-vide* cooking, and so on and so forth, thus using very different tools (such as specialised machines, pincers, etc.). Again, then, such differences are particularly stressed when the two chefs meet each other and start competing. Paul is presented as a sort of *chemist* using machines and combining substances according to specific rules, as is also remarked in the end, when his assistant Mayo steals his manual and takes advantage of it and his gradual loss of taste to take his place at Stellar. This evidently recalls Lévi-Strauss' (1962) description of the figure of the *engineer*, that is to say a subject that firmly follows a system of strict regulations in order to meet his goals. By contrast, Sky, thanks to a specific competence (i.e. his deep knowledge of traditional Chinese cuisine), rather looks like an *alchemist*, that is, a sort of “magical chemist” that, going beyond pure objectual rules and tools, acts as — in Lévi-Straussian terms — a *bricoleur* who is able to invent new contingent solutions by adjusting and re-adjusting the various means he has at his disposal by using «not only [his] tongue» — as is said in the movie —, «but also [his] eyes, nose and heart to cook».



Figure 8. Paul cooking, screenshots from R. YIP (2017), *Cook up a storm*.



Figure 9. Sky cooking, screenshots from R. YIP (2017), *Cook up a storm*.

3. Concluding remarks: The aesthetics of (Chinese) food between the East and the West

First of all, it should be remarked that aesthetics represents an intrinsic characteristic of Chinese cuisine, which — as stated above — defines the perfect dish not only on the basis of flavours and textures, but also in relation to colours and their combination and balance, thus combining different senses and sensibilities. According to Stephen H. West, in the Chinese semiosphere «food was elevated at an early period from necessity to *art*, from sustenance to elegance» (West, 1997, p. 68, our emphasis). This has also contributed to establishing and enhancing a particular link between food and the body — which is not conceived as a mere material object, but rather as an immaterial entity made of flows of *qi*, emotions, temperaments, etc. — thus strongly relating cooking and eating to medical, religious and philosophical thinking. In this view, taste can be considered a real gateway to Chinese cognition, as effectively shown by Ye Zhengdao (2007), who draws on the linguistic analysis of some Chinese expressions based on the generic nominal term *wèi*, “taste”,

to discuss the cultural bases for the peculiar Chinese “embodied” way of experiencing. More specifically, Ye points out the important role played by taste in the formation of the Chinese conceptual system, as well as one of the major modes of perceiving the world for Chinese people, also relating to early Chinese philosophy: «His eyes then find greater enjoyment in the five colours, his ear in the five sounds, his mouth in the five tastes, and his mind benefits from processing all that is in the world» (Xunzi, I.14, 340–245 B.C.).

Such a conception is in evident opposition to the Western semiosphere, where food aesthetics has become important only recently, especially as a result of the so-called process of «aestheticisation of taste» (cf. Stano, 2017, 2018). In Plato’s *Phaedo*, for instance, Socrates says: «Do you think it is the part of a philosopher to be concerned with such so-called pleasures as those of food and drink?» (64d2–4)¹¹. Generally speaking, the Western philosophical tradition has regarded personhood as an autonomous and disembodied mind; any philosophical attention to the embodied self has then been often deemed to be ordinary and meaningless. Such a split between body and mind, as Deane Curtin (1992, p. 6) points out, has tended to silence philosophical interest in food.

A key reference in this sense is certainly Immanuel Kant (1790), who subordinates the judgement of taste to a subjective¹² but strictly non-sensuous aesthetics. In his view, the bodily sense of taste does

11. English trans. by D. GALLOP, *Phaedo*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1911.

12. «I shall try the dish on my tongue and palate, and thereby (and not by universal principles) make my judgment. It is a fact that any judgment of taste we make is always a singular judgment about the object. The understanding can, by comparing the object with other people’s judgment about their liking of it, make a universal judgment, e.g.: All tulips are beautiful. But such a judgment is then not a judgment of taste; it is a logical judgment, which turns an object’s reference to taste into a predicate of things of a certain general kind. Only a judgment by which I find a singular given tulip beautiful, i.e., in which I find that my liking for the tulip is universally valid, is a judgment of taste. Its peculiarity, however, consists in the fact that, even though it has merely subjective validity, it yet extends its claim to all subjects, just as it always could if it were an objective judgment that rested on cognitive bases and that [we] could be compelled [to make] by a proof» (Kant, 1790; Engl. trans. 1987, pp. 148–149).

not meet the requirements of a pure aesthetic judgement, thus representing a cognitively and aesthetically empty “sense of pleasure”:

Three of [the five senses: i.e., touch, sight, and hearing] are more objective than subjective, that is, they contribute, as empirical intuition, more to the cognition of the exterior object, than they arouse the consciousness of the affected organ. Two [i.e. smell and taste], however, are more subjective than objective, that is, the idea obtained from them is more an idea of enjoyment, rather than the cognition of the external object. Consequently, we can easily agree with others in respect to the three objective senses. But with respect to the other two, the manner in which the subject responds can be quite different from whatever the external empirical perception and designation of the object might have been. (Kant, 1798 [1796/97]; Engl. trans. 1978, p. 41)

A similar conception characterises Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s philosophy (1790), which categorically excludes taste and food from arts and, therefore, from any kind of aesthetic assessment:

The sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing, while smell, taste, and touch remain excluded from the enjoyment of art. For smell, taste, and touch have to do with matter as such and its immediately sensible qualities. ... for this reason these senses cannot have to do with artistic objects, which are meant to maintain themselves in their real independence and allow no *purely* sensuous relationship. What is agreeable for these senses is not the beauty of art. (Hegel, 1975 [1835], pp. 38–9)

Only recently have Western thinkers started recognising that food can lead not only to immediate aesthetic enjoyment, but also to cognitive significance, thus extending taste beyond simple physical satisfaction and relating the senses to sense¹³.

13. For further details, see in particular Curtin, Heldke, 1992; Telfer, 1996; Korsmeyer, 1999, 2014; Rigotti, 1999, 2015; Kaplan, 2012; Perullo, 2012, 2014.

In accordance with such an opposition, the considered examples of movies featuring Chinese food evidently exalt the aesthetic dimension of food not only in relation to eating and tasting, but — even more interestingly — also to cooking. On the contrary, in the representations of the Western re-semanticisations of Chinese food, aesthetics tends to lose its importance: if in *A Christmas story* looking at Chinese food causes disgust or mockery, to the extent that some characters cannot help covering their eyes or laughing at it, in *The Joy Luck Club* the Chinese aesthetics of food even becomes the reason for incommunicability and misunderstanding, thus undergoing an evident negative axiologization. Sometimes, then, the aesthetic dimension of food totally disappears, as in *Mickey blue eyes*, where Chinese food not only takes the form of an American invented tradition, but becomes a mere form that has no meaning but containing and temporarily hiding a meaningful — though mistaken, as we described above — content.

A different case is that of *Cook up a storm*, which, in fact, problematizes the opposition between the Eastern and Western conception of food aesthetics: we already pointed out the interesting opposition between the figure of the Western “chemist-engineer” Paul, on the one hand, and that of the traditional Chinese “alchemist-bricoleur” Sky. But two more important reflections concerning aesthetics arise from this movie, and help us illustrate the main conclusion of this paper also in relation to the other analysed case studies.

The first one concerns the idea of *illusion*, which plays a vital role in both foodspheres, but with a crucial difference: in Chinese cuisine, artifice plays with the natural conformation and modification of substances, requiring a specific competence (in terms of a *knowing-how-to-do*) that in turn allows the individual to recognise which foods permit such a transformation and which do not (as brilliantly remarked, for instance, in the preparation of the beggar’s duck by Sky during his TV competition against Paul). Western cuisine, on the contrary, uses machines allowing anyone (*being-able-to-do*) to subvert the nature of food, by decomposing and recomposing it (as

exemplified by the dishes cooked by Paul). Therefore, if the Chinese illusion can be described as an “intellectual artifice”, as Mones highlights in *The Last Chinese Chef* (2007), the Western illusion rather corresponds to a sort of “unintelligible trick”, as observed on various occasions in Yip’s movie.

This relates to what we previously referred to as the *mise en plat*, that is to say, the arrangement of food within the plate. The use of shots in *Cook up a storm* is highly significant in this regard: when showing Paul’s dishes, that is to say the Western domestication of Chinese food, the typical aesthetic representation of so-called “food porn” seems to be adopted, with extreme close-ups of plates, exceeding the surface of the screen, used to emphasise mainly a *haptic*, or “tactile” look (cf. Marrone, 2015), removing all veils from the dishes. Sky’s traditional Chinese creations, on the contrary, feature a different aesthetics, which also characterises the representation of Chinese food in movies such as *Eat drink man woman* or *The Chinese feast*. We propose to call such an aesthetics “food eroticism”: in contrast with the idea of getting rid of the veils surrounding food, Chinese cuisine rather seems to exalt them, since only such veils can originate a contemplative, rather than a simply tactile, look.

This in turn recalls the tension between *aesthesis* and *aesthetics*, and particularly the idea of “aesthetic grasp” (*saisie esthétique*) described by Greimas in *De l'imperfection* (1987) as the point of contact between a subject and an object that goes beyond the simple *junction* supposed by the canonical narrative schema, producing a real *fusion* through a series of sensory perceptions organised in sometimes very structured and often synesthetic syntagmatic chains. As a way of conclusion, therefore, we here suggest reconsidering food aesthetics in the light of Greimas’ theory: the analysed examples show that, although unintelligible *per se*, the aesthetic grasp presupposed by Chinese cuisine is precisely what allows the move from the senses to sense¹⁴. Such a movement takes place according to a sort of

14. In fact, this does not happen in the considered representations of Western re-semantisations of Chinese food, which on the contrary neglect such an aesthetic grasp and

inner process that highlights the crucial role of food aesthetics not only in relation to sensuous perception and pleasure, but also — and especially — to cognition and semiosis, and which — we think — perfectly conforms to Merleau-Ponty's reflection on art: «For I do not gaze at it [in our case, food] as one gazes at a thing, I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see *according to*, or *with it*» (Merleau-Ponty, 1964 [1961]; English trans. in Lawlor, Toadvine, 2007, p. 355; our emphasis).

References

- ANDERSON E.N. (1988), *The Food of China*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT).
- CHANG IRIS (2003), *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History*, Viking, New York.
- CHANG KWANG-CHIH (1977) *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT).
- COE A. (2009), *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States*, Oxford University Press, New York (NY).
- CRAZE R., JAY. R. (1999), *The Tao of Food*, Sterling Pub Co Inc., New York.
- CURTIN D.W. (1992), *Food/Body/Person* in D.W. Curtin, L.M. Heldke (eds.) (1992), *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis (IN), pp. 3–22.
- CURTIN D.W., HELDKE L.M. (eds.) (1992), *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (IN).
- ECO U. (1975), *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Bompiani, Milan.
- (1979), *Lector in fabula*, Bompiani, Milan.
- (1984), *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, Einaudi, Turin.

in some cases even make fun of it.

- FARQUHAR J. (1994), *Eating Chinese Medicine*, «Cultural Anthropology», vol. IX, n. 4, pp. 471–97.
- FENG DOREEN, HUNG YEN (1966), *The Joy of Chinese cooking*, Faber & Faber, London.
- FLAWS B. H. LEE WOLFE (1983), *Prince Wen Hui's Cook: Chinese Dietary Therapy*, Paradigm Publications, Brookline (MA).
- GREIMAS A.J. (1987), *De l'imperfection*, Fanlac, Périgueux.
- HEGEL G.W.F. (1975), *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, T.M. Knox (Engl. trans.), Clarendon Press, Oxford (UK) 1988.
- HOBBSAWN E., RANGER T. (1983), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK).
- KANT I. (1798), *Die Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Nicolovius, Königsberg, East Prussia; (1978), *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, V.L. Dowdell (Engl. trans.), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale–Edwardsville.
- (1790), *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg; (1987), *Critique of Judgement*, W.S. Pluhar (Engl. trans.) Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis (IN).
- KORSMEYER C. (1999), *Making Sense of Taste. Food and Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, New York.
- (2014), *Aesthetic Value, Art, and Food* in P.B. Thompson, D.M. Kaplan (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*, Springer, Dordrecht, pp. 1–8, available at https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-94-007-6167-4_23-3.pdf (last access 06/08/2019).
- LAWLOR L., TOADVINE T. (eds.) (2007), *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston (IL).
- LEE J. (2008), *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food*, Twelve, New York.
- LÉVI-STRAUSS C. (1962), *Le totémisme aujourd'hui*, PUF, Paris; (1963), *Totemism*, R. Needham (Engl. trans.), Beacon Press, Boston.
- MARRONE G. (2015), *Food Porn*, “Doppiozero”; available at www.doppiozero.com/materiali/critica-del-gusto/food-porn (last access 28/10/2018).

- MERLEAU-PONTY M. (1964), *L'œil et l'esprit*, Gallimard, Paris; (2007), *Eye and Mind*, M. Smith (Engl. trans.) in L. Lawlor, T. Toadvine (eds.), *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston (IL), pp. 351–78.
- MONES N. (2007), *The Last Chinese Chef*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York (NY).
- PAN L. (1994), *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: A History of the Chinese Diaspora*, Kodansha America, New York.
- PERULLO N. (2012), *Taste as Experience: The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Food*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- (ed.) (2014), *Cibo, estetica e arte. Convergenze tra filosofia, semiotica e storia*, Ets, Pisa.
- RIGOTTI F. (1999), *La filosofia in cucina. Piccola critica della ragion culinaria*, il Mulino, Bologna.
- (2015), *Manifesto del cibo liscio*, Interlinea, Novara.
- ROBERTS J.A.G. (2002), *China to Chinatown. Chinese Food in the West*, Reaktion Books, London.
- SO YAN-KIT (1992), *Classic Food of China*, Macmillan, London.
- STANO S. (2014), *The Invention of Tradition: The Case of Pasta, one of the Symbols of Italian Identity/传统的生成: 意大利面何以成为意大利人认同的象征?*, «Signs & Media», vol. VIII, pp. 136–52.
- (2015), *Eating the Other. Translations of the Culinary Code*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne (UK).
- (2016), *Lost in translation: Food, Identity and Otherness*, «Semiotica», vol. CCXI, pp. 81–104.
- (2017), *Gli 'aspetti' del cibo: meditazioni semiotiche su gusto e disgusto*, «Lexia», vol. XXVII–XXVII, pp. 415–39.
- (2018), *Mauvais à regarder, bon à penser: il food porn tra gusti e disgusti*, «E/C», vol. XII, n. 23, pp. 1–7, available at www.ec-aiss.it/monografici/23_nuove_pratiche_digitali/Stano_28_2_18.pdf (last access: 27/10/2018).
- TAN C. (1995), *Family Herbal Cookbook: A Guide to the Ancient Chinese Philosophy of Food and Health*, Gulf Publishing Co., Houston (TX).

- TELFER E. (1996), *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food*, Routledge, London.
- WEST S.H. (1997), *Playing With Food: Performance, Food, and The Aesthetics of Artificiality in The Sung and Yuan*, «Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies», vol. LVII, n. 1, pp. 67–106.
- WU D.Y.H, CHEE BENG TAN (eds.) (2001), *Changing Chinese Foodways in Asia*, Chinese University Press, Hong Kong.
- WU D.Y.H, CHEUNG S.C.H. (eds.) (2002), *The Globalization of Chinese Food*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu (HA).
- XU WENYING (2008), *Eating Identities, Reading Food in Asian American Literature*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu (HA).
- YE ZHENGDAO (2007), *Taste as a Gateway to Chinese Cognition* in A.C. Schalley, D. Khlentzos (eds.) (2007), *Mental States*, vol. 2 (*Language and Cognitive Structure*), John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam–Philadelphia (PA), pp. 109–32.
- YI-LAN TSUI E. (2001), *Breakfasting in Taipei: Changes in Chinese Food Consumption* in D.Y.H Wu, Chee Beng Tan (eds.) (2001), *Changing Chinese Foodways in Asia*, Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, pp. 237–56.
- VOLLI U. (2011), *L'immaginario delle origini*, «Lexia», vol. VII–VIII, pp. 31–61.

Filmography

- CLARK B. (1983), *A Christmas Story*, United States, 93'.
- HARK TSUI (1995), 金玉滿堂 – *The Chinese Feast*, Hong Kong, 100'.
- LEE ANG (1994), 飲食男女 – *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Taiwan, 123'.
- MAKIN K. (1999), *Mickey Blue Eyes*, United Kingdom–United States, 102'.
- WANG WAYNE (1993), 喜福會 – *The Joy Luck Club*, United States, 139'.
- YIP R. (2017), 決戰食神 – *Cook up a Storm*, Hong Kong and China, 97'.