A Taste of Identity:

Food, Material Culture, and Materiality in an Exhibition of the *Museum of Chinese in America*

View of the sculptures table in *Sour Sweet Bitter Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America*, Museum of Chinese in America, New York, retrieved from *Cool Hunting*, accessed July 4, 2018, http://www.coolhunting.com/culture/sour-sweet-bitter-spicy-moca-nyc-exhibition.

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Introduction

The study of food has seen a steep increase in attention in the past decades, expanding its influence from its traditional core of anthropology and sociology, to numerous fields such as philosophy, film studies, and museum studies. Just last year, Bloomsbury published a book edited by Nina Levent and Irina D. Mihalache, *Food and Museums*, which testifies to the growing interest of museums to work with food and to reflect about this universal cultural practice and physical necessity, be it through their exhibitions or their eating facilities. Food, despite being so ubiquitous and essential, never seems to bore us. Maybe it is precisely the omnipresence of food which fascinates us. Or its malleability: its capacity to be nourishment as much as delight, an everyday social practice as much as a form of art. One aspect of food which is particularly intriguing is exactly this capacity to break boundaries, to permeate different aspects of our lives and, not least, of our bodies. Food is out there, on a plate. A moment later, through ingestion, it is inside us, it has become part of who we are. It goes from being something Other, to becoming integral part of the Self. Food so well blurs the dichotomy on the basis of which we define our identities. Therefore, I was particularly interested when I found out that a New York museum dedicated to the history and culture of Chinese immigration and community in the States decided to do an exhibition about food, and to discuss, along with it, questions of identity of the Chinese American community. It made me wonder what could such an intimate and relatable topic as food, stir in the museum visitor, and how?

The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) was founded in 1980 as the New York Chinatown History Project by historian John Kuo Wei Tchen and community resident and activist Charles Lai.[1] At the time it was a community-based organisation which tried to record the histories and memories of the first generations of Chinese immigrants, by collecting documents, photos, artefacts, as well as oral histories.[2] It already strived however, to become a new kind of history museum, one able to represent the 'multivocal history' of the Chinese community in America, across its regional, national, and generational diversity. This led the project to evolve into the Chinatown History Museum, a 'dialogue-driven museum' focused on promoting understanding of its community (composed of Chinese as well as non-Chinese New Yorkers, as much as tourists) and understanding their interactions in the formation of the city's Chinatown. At that time the museum was very much focused on and entangled with the local Chinatown community, in a process aimed at

1 John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment," in *Museums and Communities: the Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 286.

2 "History," Museum of Chinese in America, accessed July 4, 2018, http://www.mocanyc.org/about/history.

understanding and reclaiming the past, as much as in creating an educational space for the generations to come. Founder John Kuo Wei Tchen states, “we want to fashion a learning environment in which personal memory and testimony inform and are informed by historical context and scholarship.”[3] Tchen's and the museum's democratic attitude towards history and its role in everyday life has marked the development of the institution ever since. Today MOCA still strives to make “Chinese American history accessible to the general public, ranging from scholars to young children, from community members to international tourists;” it aims at creating thought-provoking exhibitions which, besides being informative, are able to involve visitors into the “history that is in the making,” inviting people to engage in dialogue transcending “generational, geographical and cultural boundaries.”[4]

The museum today offers a rich range of exhibitions, tackling Chinese American history and culture from a variety of perspectives. The semi-permanent exhibition *With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America* offers a critical overview of politics and history of Chinese immigration and community in the States, while never losing sight of people's individual experiences. The current temporary exhibition *Chinese Medicine in America: Converging Ideas, People, and Practices* investigates the intersection between traditional Chinese medical practices and orthodox medicine, considering how this relationship has evolved through time and how it could contribute to our present, for instance to the American healthcare system.[5] Further exhibitions have ranged from anthropological case studies, to overviews of the work of Chinese American artistic figures, to displays on contemporary Chinese artists, or Chinese American designers. Throughout this, MOCA maintains its proposition of remaining an accessible museum. Its strength relies on its ability to unravel everyday practices, topics, and objects, and to bring the visitors to reflect critically about them. In this regard, it is worth mentioning two 2012 connected exhibitions: *Marvels and Monsters: Unmasking Asian Images in U.S. Comics, 1942-1986,* and *Alt.Comics: Asian American Artists Reinvent the Comic*. The first reflected on “stereotypical and politically charged depictions of Asians and Asian Americans” in comics, while the second exhibition considered the work of contemporary Asian American comic artists and how they appropriated this art form to bring about their own narrative and challenge old stereotypical depictions.[6] Besides its archive and the exhibition, central to MOCA's work are also educational programs, community-based projects, tours, festivals, workshops, and a continuous engagement in collecting oral histories.[7]

3 Tchen, “Creating a Dialogic Museum,” 286.
4 “About,” Museum of Chinese in America, accessed July 4, 2018, http://www.mocanyc.org/about/.
5 “Chinese Medicine in America: Converging Ideas, People, and Practices,” Museum of Chinese in America, accessed July 5, 2018, http://www.mocanyc.org/exhibitions/chinese_medicine_in_america.
6 “Marvels and Monsters: Unmasking Asian Images in U.S. Comics, 1942-1986 and Alt.Comics: Asian American Artists Reinvent the Comic,” Museum of Chinese in America, accessed July 4, 2018, http://www.mocanyc.org/exhibitions/marvels_and_monsters_and_altcomics.
7 “About,” Museum of Chinese in America.

The Exhibition

In September 2016, MOCA opened *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America* (*SSBS*). This temporary exhibition well represented MOCA's work and goals, since, through the topic of food and by investigating the work of contemporary Chinese and Asian American people, ranging from star chefs to everyday home cooks, it delved into the histories of the Chinese community and the States as an immigrant country. The show was curated by Herb Tam and Andrew Rebatta, respectively curator and assistant curator of the museum, in collaboration with Audra Ang and Kian Lam Kho. Ang is a food journalist and book author, whereas Kho is a food writer, consultant and teaches Chinese cooking classes at several cultural and culinary institutions. Even though the museum has grown in size and in its outreach, Rebatta defines the cooperation with Ang and Kho as one way in which the museum collaborates with the Chinese American community, by reaching out to figures of the community who are able to help the museum understand what the landscape regarding a particular issue looks like at the moment.[8]

The choice of MOCA to do an exhibition on food was influenced by trends in the New York food scene and a worldwide increasing interest for the subject of cooking. Rebatta tells of how the changes of New York culinary landscape are reflective of shifting patterns of Chinese immigration to the US. For instance, the largest group in recent years has been Fujaneese, which together with other groups from mainland China, supplanted people from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Chinese diasporas, as the dominant Chinese population in the US. These changes in immigration patterns, which started around the 1990s, brought about a more diverse New York food scene as well. Notwithstanding this diversification, in the mind of many Americans 'Chinese food' still corresponds to a very narrow understanding of this cuisine, still subjected to stereotyping and generalizations. Furthermore, the rise of the figure of celebrity chefs, through both television and social media, is representative of the popularity of food and cuisine nowadays, which promised for a successful show. It was not until the process of preparing the exhibition and collecting the material had already started, that the topic of food revealed to be ideal for rising deeper issues which eventually became central to the exhibition's narrative: identity and authenticity.[9]

Although I did not visit the exhibition, as I begun this research after its closure, my perception was not so far from the first-hand experience that visitors had. Owing to the central role played by the multimedia in the exhibition, and thanks to the access to the written and photographic material granted to me by the museum, I was able to experience *SSBS* like a visitor from a distance.

The exhibition was presented as a getting together, an imagined banquet of the chefs and home

8 Andrew Rebatta, interviewed by the author, personal interview, Skype, March 14, 2018.
9 Rebatta, interview.

cooks which have been interviewed for the project.[10] A video installation alternated fragments of the different interviews the museum conducted with thirty-three Chinese and Asian American chefs and home cooks, belonging to different generations and coming from various backgrounds. In order to gather information both for the exhibition and the museum archives, MOCA started recording oral histories from Chinese Americans about their relationship to food. As the ensemble of collected stories turned out increasingly interesting, the museum curators conceived a video installation, which gathered the chefs in a fictional conversation, allowing the interview material to become the main element of the exhibition (Fig. 1).[11]

Fig. 1 – "Susann Foo," view of the video installation and ceramic table of *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America*, courtesy of the Museum of Chinese in America.

The video installation was constituted by four panels, on which the interviews accompanied by both images of the speakers' dishes and photographs from their life, were projected. Framed by the videos, in the centre of the room, was a long table hosting all thirty-three chefs at an imaginary banquet (Fig. 1). For each one of the guests a table setting was laid down, with ceramic chopsticks, a fork, and a spoon. A brief personal and professional profile and a map tracking their (very often intricate) movements across continents identified the cook. Next to the profiles, a ceramic sculpture visualized each person's cooking style. At the centre of the table were further ceramic sculptures,

10 "Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America," *Museum of Chinese in America*, Exhibition brochure (n.p., n.d.), 4-5. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized by and presented at the Museum of Chinese in America, October 6, 2016-September 10, 2017.

11 Rebatta, interview.

which this time materialised not a chef's personal cooking style, but either a regional Chinese cuisine or an example of fusion cuisine. These were placed on six revolving table tops (reminiscent of Chinese restaurant tradition) and accompanied by labels describing the traits of the kind of cuisine and its most popular dishes (Fig. 2). The sculptures were commissioned by the museum to artists Heidi Lau and Lu Zhang, in order to present something which could substitute the actual food inside the exhibition.[12]

Fig. 2 – View of the sculpture table in *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America*, courtesy of the Museum of Chinese in America.

In a second gallery, personal belongings by the featured cooks were exhibited. Each one accompanied by a brief text about the story and meaning which the objects carried for their owner (Fig. 3). All around the room, at various tablet stations, it was possible to hear more detailed stories.

Before visitors started venturing in the exhibition, an introductory text greeted them with a question: "So how do you define Chinese food in America and how does food define Chinese in America? We hope you'll think about it while you're here," inviting visitors to reflect upon issues of food and identity.[13]

12 Rebatta, interview.
13 "Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy" exhibition brochure, 5.

Fig. 3 – Chef's belongings, view of *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America*, courtesy of the Museum of Chinese in America.

Besides this provoking question however, on first impression the exhibition appears to be a simple narration about the histories of the Chinese diaspora in America, limited to the life stories of the interviewees. The exhibition texts and curatorial guidance through the material was rather limited, mainly reduced to one introductory text, and for the most part descriptive. Compared to *SSBS*, MOCA's permanent exhibition *With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America* offers a much clearer and critical deconstruction of stereotypes and (invented) traditions of the Chinese American community. For instance, the permanent exhibition too touches upon the topic of food, presenting Chop Suey as a Chinese American creation, developed by the first Chinese restauranteurs in order to cater to American taste.[14] Chop Suey was actually just one of the means the Chinese community had to come up with in order to attract people to Chinatowns, so as to sustain themselves in a society which marginalised and stereotyped them. Chinatowns became oriented towards American expectations, in an effort by Chinese immigrants to use tourism to support their community. Here for instance a poem cited in the permanent exhibition offers a critical perspective on the way the Chinese community and Chinatowns were stereotyped, and yet played a meaningful role in society:

14 Label, "Chop Suey", *With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America* Museum of Chinese in America, New York.

"Yellowface" it is called.
With tape and glue, eyeliner and powder,
they pretend to be us.

"Chinatown" it is called.
With meat and celery, soy and rice -
We feed them to make some pennies.
We feed them to save her and to
send home.

They seek us to fear.
They seek us to fancy.
They seek the fantastic.

This is our commons and our cage.
Out there, we can't work.
Out there, we can't live
except behind our shops.
So, we create Chinatowns.
For them,
a diversion.
For us,
a refuge.

Our Chinatown, their Chinatown.
Woven like a braid.
Each
an other to the other,
yet intertwined.[15]

Compared to the active approach chosen for the permanent exhibition in deconstructing stereotypes, *SSBS* might at first come through as a light-hearted spectacle, focused merely on the pictures of mouth-watering dishes and entertaining life anecdotes. The interviews do touch upon deeper and delicate issues, such as the aforementioned 'identity' and 'authenticity'. Yet, how much access does the visitor have to these topics? Are the discussions surrounding identity accessible? Would a more critical curatorial opinion have been more fruitful in this regard? I intend to argue that, notwithstanding the entertaining side of the exhibition, *SSBS* had a lot to offer to its visitors. Even if not always laid out openly in the form of a curatorial text, the meaning behind food and cuisine for

15 Wall text, "Wellcome to Chinatown!*", With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America*, Museum of Chinese in America, New York.

the Chinese diaspora comes through not only due to the interviews, but also due to the very topic of the exhibition: food. Even though actual, edible dishes were not presented, I intend to argue that the topic of food itself can be sufficient to make topics of immigration, integration and creation of identity relatable to people.

Research Aims

With this thesis, it is my intent to demonstrate the value of using everyday material culture in producing exhibition narratives. On the one side, exhibiting material culture allows for a more democratic approach to whatever topics addressed, accounting for a greater relatability to even seemingly abstract matters. On the other side, it reveals how theoretical issues are grounded in everyday life, allowing the museum to bridge a gap between academia and practice. What is however material culture? As the 'things' which surround us and permeate all areas of our lives, so material culture studies range across multiple disciplines, from archeology to anthropology, from geography to economics, from the humanities to design and architecture. As much as the subject, the object of this 'undisciplined' discipline itself is also hard to define. Daniel Miller, a leading anthropologist in the field of material culture and consumption studies, stresses this indefinability by titling one of his books on the subject simply *Stuff.* Things, stuff, objects, artefacts, … the words used are multiple and the definition is fluid. Yet, I align with the above cited anthropological approach, in placing my focus on the interaction between things and people, trying to understand the implications of this interaction. Therefore, by laying my focus on food as material culture and its physical impact on the surrounding environment, I wish to emphasize the importance of considering not only the discourses which mould our perception, but also the concrete, tangible aspects of our society. With my thesis I will attempt to answer the question, **how does the choice of food as topic for the exhibition enables to deconstruct and problematise narratives of identity and authenticity of the Chinese American community? How does it help to make them relatable to a large audience?**

The notion of focusing on food as material culture comes from the understanding that material culture plays a very strong role in the lives of individuals. This thought brought me to reflect upon the impact that such an omnipresent and essential material element of our lives like food could activate in an exhibition, in the way people perceive such exhibition. In order to try to understand whether and how food acted in the context of *SSBS*, I will focus my thesis on two aspects: food as a frame to identity, and the relationship between food and the senses. Chapter 1 will deal with the role of food in defining our identities. Inspired by theories of material culture which see an impact between the material environment and people, I will develop a concept of frame, based mainly on Derrida's

idea of *parergon*, to try to assess the way in which food and identity are intertwined. I will then apply the idea of frame to analyse the interviews of *SSBS*'s video installation. Chapter 2 will thematise the absence of actual food in the exhibition, nevertheless considering the impact of the materiality of food and the role of the senses in perceiving the exhibition. This will be possible using theories from the field of anthropology on multisensoriality, synaesthesia, and the connection between memory and the senses; while theories from film studies will help me define the term materiality for the purpose of my analysis. Always central to my research will be the idea of approachability, relatability, and empathy of the exhibition, namely how the use of material culture enabled this in the visitor. I hope that the two theoretical approaches will allow me to penetrate a different layer of the exhibition, helping me to illustrate the richness and relevance of material culture in the process of exhibition making.

Chapter 1: Food as Frame to Identity

In order to delve deeper into the meanings of the exhibition *SSBS* and to unravel the discourses on food and identity which remain hidden on a first look, I am going to use the idea of 'frame' as a theoretical approach.

In *Material Culture and Mass Consumptio*n (1987), Daniel Miller delineates a theory of culture, in which the process of objectification is central, inasmuch as it explains the mutual influence between people and their environment. According to Miller, culture is an ongoing transformation, which is the result of a dialectical creation process between human subjects and material objects – the process of objectification. Both subject and object cannot be untied from this process which they constitute and through which are themselves created.[16] In few cases is this as evident as in the case of food. As Judith Farquhar argues, "food makes human form – it directly produces bodies and lives, kin groups and communities, economic systems and ideologies, while being produced in its turn by these formations."[17] In this chapter, I wish to theorize this interdependence between food and people, how this connection relates to issues of identity, therefore allowing me to establish the significance of the role played by food in the context of the exhibition *SSBS*.

In his analysis on the nature of artefacts, Miller draws upon the work on the frame by art historian Ernst Gombrich to exemplify the impact objects have on our perception and categorization of our environment. For instance, it is by means of the 'invisible' object of the frame that we are able to respond to a work of art in a suitable manner; it is the frame which (unconsciously) "establishes the mode of appreciation we know as art."[18] These thoughts brought me to consider the role of material culture, and specifically of food, as a frame to our lives. How much do our cooking and eating habits mould our perception of the world? Of ourselves? What is the connection between food and national and cultural identities? And in the context of *SSBS*, how does food influence the visitor's perception of the exhibition? In what follows, I will first take into account several theories of the frame, in order to delineate one which best suits the aims of this thesis. Subsequently, I will look at theories on the formation of identity and see how food can be involved in this process. To conclude, I intend to consider which reading of *SSBS*, the idea of food as frame enables.

16 Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 29-3.
17 Judith Farquhar, "Food, Eating, and the Good Life," in *Handbook of material culture,* ed. Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Küchler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer (London: Sage, 2006), 146.
18 Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption,* 101.

The Frame

The concept of the frame appears to be a rather popular one, having been addressed by several authors, from the field of art history, to sociology and philosophy. It is interesting to observe how much attention has been devoted to it, both as a (material) object, as well as an (abstract) subject. I will start analysing those theories addressing the physical object of frame, leading later on to more abstract concepts. This overview aims at helping the reader visualise and grasp the significance of the frame for this thesis, as much as to define what the frame does *not* represent in the context of this thesis. One of the earliest takes on the frame is offered by art historian Meyer Schapiro in his paper "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," which was originally presented at a 1966 conference on semiotics. Here Schapiro discussed the frame as one of the "non-mimetic elements" of the image, which create the image-sign.[19] He defines the frame as a "finding and focusing device placed between the observer and the image."[20] Schapiro also studies the interaction between the frame and its content, and how the artist can use the frame to 'crop' a figure of the painting or to outline an object, accentuating "the forms of the sign."[21] Although Schapiro somehow considers the impact of the frame on perception, his theory is still very much bound to the realm of art history and to the frame as marginal, decorative element for being of use to this research.

A further take on the physical object of the frame, offers a slightly more helpful approach. In his work *The Sense of Order* (1979), dedicated to the study of decorative art, art historian Ernst Gombrich tries to understand how we perceive the object of the frame, its decorations, and function. According to him it is thanks to the isolating and enhancing quality of the frame that we are able to perceive the meaningfulness of an object.[22] The 'force of habit' is a mechanism at work here. The frame is a rather ordinary object, almost ubiquitous when it comes to paintings. It never requires us to interpret its meaning anew, and yet it constantly and silently acts upon our perception. Subconsciously, we are very well aware of the meaning it implies, categorising whatever it frames as an artwork. Gombrich's ideas on the frame and its impact on perception could very well relate to the role of food in our lives. It touches upon the aspect of the 'humility' and ever-presence of material culture, and its impact upon our perception. However, Gombrich's frame is still very much theorised as a boundary, as limiting, preventing us from understanding the mutual process at stake between food and people, such as the way meaning is attributed to material culture. For the aim of my research, this is therefore a rather restrictive perspective and would not allow a full understanding of

19 Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 6, no.1 (1972): 9.
20 Ibidem, 11.
21 Ibidem, 12.
22 Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), 152.

the interaction between identity and food, as much as the value of the latter for the exhibition.

A different perspective on the frame is offered in the field of social sciences by Erving Goffman, who theorised the frame (or framing) as the process through which we organise experience. In *Frame Analysis* (1974) he identifies 'primary frames' as the schemata which enable us to interpret and react fittingly to a given situation. Goffman considers such frameworks to be a convention which comes quite natural to the social actor, who, if asked, is probably unaware of the working of a framework and therefore also unable to describe it.[23] If Goffman theorises the frame as a normative construct, which guides the individual's perception and involvement in an activity, he also considers the possibility of breaking the frame. If, in the context of a framework, the unmanageable happens (i.e. an occurrence which cannot be ignored yet which the frame is not able to explain), a break of the frame occurs, which causes bewilderment and mortification in the participants.[24] By considering the event of a fracture, Goffman's theory literally opens up the understanding of frame, but it still reveals as rather static concept, not able to confront the intricate relationship between food and identity which shows through the exhibition *SSBS*. At the same time, his focus on social convention and practices departs too much from the focus of this paper on the power of material culture.

In order to overcome limiting and static definitions of frame, without sacrificing the physical aspect of the frame, I am going to consider the theory advanced by philosopher Jaques Derrida in his essay "The Parergon" (1979). In this writing Derrida confronts Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and his idea that the *parergon* (the draperies of a statue, the colonnades of a façade, the frame of a painting, …) is just a dismissible adjunct to the work (*ergon*). In contrast, Derrida recognises the fundamental role of the *parergon* in the way it plays on an intrinsic lack within the work, becoming essential to it since it "inscribes something extra, exterior to the specific field […] but whose transcendent exteriority touches, plays with, brushes, rubs, or presses against the limit and intervenes internally only insofar as the inside is *missing*" (emphasis added).[25] Considering this condition of mutual dependency between *ergon* and *parergon* is at the core of Derrida's definition of frame, and is what makes his theory ideal for the treatment of this analysis. This interdependency is further emphasized by the fact that a clear-cut definition between work and frame, *ergon* and *parergon*, inside and outside is impossible. The main characteristic of the *parergon* in fact lies in its "disappearing, sinking in, obliterating itself" in regard to both the work and the milieu.[26] Derrida asserts that "the *parergonal* frame is distinguished from two grounds, but in relation to each of these, it disappears into the other. In relation to the work, which may function as its ground, it disappears into the wall and then, by

23 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 21-39.
24 Ibidem, 345-78.
25 Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," trans. Craig Owens, *October* 9 (1979): 21.
26 Derrida, "The Parergon," 26.

degrees, into the general context. In relation to the general context, it disappears into the work".[27] The impossibility to draw a line between what is an *ergon* and what is a *parergon* stresses the importance of both elements and their interdependence.

Derrida's idea of *parergon* has also been interpreted in a negative way. Art historian Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll (2017) identifies in the glass vitrine ubiquitous in museums an instrument which reproduces and reinforces binary oppositions between inside and outside, centre and periphery, the self and the other.[28] However, crucial to Derrida's theorization of the *parergon* is exactly a problematisation of a hierarchical binary opposition. Instead, Derrida aims at proving the interdependence of the two elements being counterposed.[29] Even though, frames could at first sight be conceived as constructing categories and mapping boundaries, the idea of the *parergon* not only appears flexible in relationship to the object and its milieu, since it is bound to our perception. It also allows us to understand the mutual influence between work and frame, *ergon* and *parergon*.

In order to better grasp Derrida's thoughts on the frame it is useful to consider his discussion on the 'supplement' in *Of Grammatology* (1976). Here Derrida reports Rousseau's idea of the written sign as an artificial supplement which replaces the authenticity and naturalness of the spoken word, corrupting its integrity.[30] He counters Rousseau's statement by considering the supplement (e.g. the written sign) both as an addition to a presence (e.g. spoken language), therefore confirming it, as well as a substitution which is possible only because of a lack inherent to the original presence.[31] For instance, in the case of Rousseau's writings, Derrida's sees a discrepancy in the ideas he maintains about the corruptness of the written language and the very fact that he declares in his *Confessions* that only through writing is he able to talk about his true essence and so to state his own presence.[32]

Juxtaposing Derrida's theories enables to see more clearly the mechanisms at work in his deconstructions. *Parergon* and supplement are both characterised by their ambiguous relationship to the main object they relate to — the frame to the work, written to spoken language. *Parergon* and supplement are both additional to the main object, they emphasize such presence. At the same time, they are essential for its existence, because they compensate its intrinsic lack, completing the given object. When comparing the idea of supplement to Derrida's emblematic term *différance,* Arthur Bradley refers to the supplement as "another way of theorising the fact that every apparently

27 Ibidem, 26.
28 Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the vitrine: Three *parerga* of a feather headdress," in *The Inbetweenness of Things: Materializing Mediation and Movement between Worlds*, ed. Paul Basu (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 23-36.
29 Robin Marriner, "Derrida and the Parergon," in *A Companion to Art Theory,* ed. Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 352.
30 Jaques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore [etc.]: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 141-64.
31 Ibidem, 144-5.
32 Ibidem, 142.

self-identical presence depends upon what it places outside, below, or after itself in order to obtain even the effect of identity."[33] This same idea is the one acting in the *parergon*, which placed outside the *ergon*, still "inscribes something extra, exterior to the specific field […] but whose transcendent exteriority touches, plays with, brushes, rubs, or presses against the limit and intervenes internally only insofar as the inside is missing."[34] In the coming paragraphs, I aim to establish if this is the relationship at work between food and identity, to understand whether they presuppose each other and are entangled in a complimentary constitutive process.

Identity

In the context of *SSBS*, establishing the connection between food and identity allows me to highlight the relevance of food for understanding identity and identity formation processes in the context of the exhibition from the visitor's perspective. As the title claims and as it becomes apparent through the interviews constituting the exhibition, *Sour Sweet Bitter Spicy: Stories of Food and Identity in America* subtly discusses how food and identity are related and which influence they possess over each other. Food can be considered the frame to cultural and national identities, the *parergon* which adds to, and by so doing is a constitutive element of the work. In order to consider the connection between food and identity and understand which impact this connection has on the perception of the exhibition *SSBS*, I first need to define both cultural and national identity. Given the position of Chinese as an immigrant community in US society, I will pay particular attention to the mechanisms which constitute identity of diasporic and marginalised groups and how these are related to more general national identities. To address cultural identity, I will consider the writings by cultural theorist Stuart Hall on the identity, diaspora, and ethnicity. Whereas for tackling the formation of national identities, I will discuss the idea of the 'double-time of the nation' by critical theorist Homi Bhabha and the writings on the multiple temporalities of the nation by scholar Michael J. Shapiro. I will regularly refer back to the notions of food and frame to embed these theories about identity in the context of my analysis.

Cultural Identity

In his article "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall opens with the question, "can identity itself be re-thought and re-lived, in and through difference?"[35] He questions a Western notion of identity rooted in the idea of a 'true self', an inner core which guarantees our 'authenticity',

33 Arthur Bradley, *Derrida's Of Grammatology*. Edinburgh Philosophical Guides. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 102.
34 Derrida, "The Parergon," 21.
35 Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 41.

and recognizes how modernity has caused a de-centering of the self and an erosion of homogeneous collective identities.[36] In alternative, Hall invites us to consider identities in the “wake of their erosion,” introducing the idea of identities as always in process. This process should not be understood as a teleological one, leading to the fulfilment of the 'true self'. Instead, the process of identity is one of constant transformation, given by a continuous identification, or repositioning of one self, through ambivalence, a 'splitting' between the Self and the Other.[37] Hall's introduction of identity as a process of constant repositioning, rather than a fix definition, allows us to consider the ways in which identity is constantly negotiated, and to ask which are the frameworks which enable us to define the Self and the Other. As I will discuss later in the analysis, food is often used as the element to both create and negotiate this ambivalence.

In a previous article “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1989), Hall identifies coexisting aspects, or mechanisms, at work in the formation of identity. Cultural identity can be understood as a sense of 'oneness', as shared cultural and historical experiences. Yet, this 'oneness' is made of a coming together of 'differences'.[38] Hall defines these two perspectives as two 'axes' (one is the axe of similarity and continuity, the other the axe of difference and rupture) which, through their dialogic interaction, form and help think of identities.[39] This dialogic element, caused by a constant repositioning of the subject towards history and by a 're-telling' (instead of a mere archaeology) of his or her past, allows Hall to problematise ideas of authority and authenticity to which cultural identities often lay claim.[40] In this article Hall discusses the cultural identities of the Caribbean diaspora and how they are held together both by continuity and by common culture, as much as by their characteristic differences. In the case of Caribbean diasporic identities, he considers three 'presences': the African Presence, the European Presence, and the American Presence. The African Presence, for instance, is seen as a common 'signifier'; not a geographical entity to which the diaspora could possibly return, but a new Africa, re-told through “politics, memory and desire.”[41] The problematisation of authenticity as well as the relationship of a diaspora to the 'presence' of its place of origin, will prove illuminating when considering the ways in the Chinese American cooks position themselves in relation to an 'authentic' Chinese cuisine.

Furthermore, Hall's theories consider representation and how this interacts with identity, allowing me to introduce the role of food in the process of identity formation: “Identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within representation. Identity is not

36 Hall, "Old and New Identities,” 41-3.
37 Ibidem, 47-8.
38 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media,* Vol. 36 (1989): 223-5.
39 Ibidem, 226-7.
40 Ibidem, 222.
41 Ibidem, 230-2.

something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one's own self."[42] Hall's discussion of representation is reminiscent of Derrida's idea of frame in the way it both informs and is informed by identity. In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" Hall discusses the role of Caribbean cinema as a representation of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, not as a simple "mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak."[43] Here cinema could be compared to food, for food itself is a form of representation, since it allows people to position themselves and state who they are through their cooking and eating habits. Yet, representation, for its very own etymology, means it represents, it stands for something, or somebody. Food therefore is not only the moment through which identity is formed, but I would argue also the sort of 'banner', the frame which enables to re-affirm one's identity. Representation, as much as the frame, is therefore both an essential contribution to the creation of identity, as well as a moment of re-statement of the given identity.

National Identity

Food can be seen playing a central part in the formation of identity, also when considering the collective phenomenon of national identity, if this is discussed in terms of the 'performative' dimension or of narratives that challenge national coherence, as in the theories by Homi Bhabha and Michael J. Shapiro. In his essay "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" (1990), Bhabha identifies an ambivalence in the way the nation is constructed and represented. On the one side, there is the pedagogical dimension promoted by the state. The nation is seen as having a chronological and teleological history, its existence is justified by its 'ancient past', and its citizens are seen as object of such past narrative. On the other side, there is the performative dimension of the national narrative, one developing in the present, in which individuals are active subjects involved in the making of the nation. The 'split' between the pedagogical and the performative allows for a 'time-frame' in which the performative acts upon the pedagogical, allowing marginalised temporalities to become part to the national narrative.[44] Bhabha's theory is relevant for this case study, since it considers the 'margins' of the nation-state, a position comparable to that of the Chinese community in the States. Moreover, his concept of the performative allows to consider the impact of food, a daily practice, on national identity.

Michael J. Shapiro also contributes to the theorization of the impact of marginal narratives to the collective notion of national identity. He draws upon Bhabha's idea of the double-time of the nation

42 Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," 49.
43 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 236-7.
44 Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*. (London [etc.]: Routledge, 1990), 292-7.

in his essay “National Times and Other Times: Re-Thinking Citizenship” (2000), where he conceptualises modern citizenship as a temporal phenomenon, rather than a spatial one. This allows him to take into consideration the disjunctive fragments which make up the official national narrative. While narratives of citizenship articulated by the nation-state promote coherence, homogenise the past, and monopolise the future, it is still possible to perceive “a trace of non-presence,”[45] a backdrop of counter-historical narratives. These multiple, invisible, disjointed presences become apparent by means of alternative 'modalities of writing', as in novels, journals, and diaries, which challenge the state's official narrative and allow the nation to be understood as a “being in common of particularities,” which “eschew generalized communal attributes” and considers also the cultures at its margins.[46] Shapiro's idea of 'presence' and 'non-presence' in discourses on national identity allow me to tie back in with Derrida's idea of the frame. As much as the *parergon*, which inscribes that which is missing, food is one of those alternative narratives which contribute to include different presences in national identity discourses. It allowed for instance Chinese narratives to become acknowledged as part of an American national identity. Both authors identify ways in which individuals and minorities, either through their actions or peripheral narratives, contribute to creating an idea of nationhood which is constituted by marginalised temporalities as much as by state narratives. Culinary culture and foodways can be seen as belonging to the performative practices and alternative narratives through which individuals articulate their identities and are able to impact national ones.

Not surprisingly, the relationship between food and identity has long been a topic of interest in the social sciences (Goodie 1982; Fischler 1988; Appadurai 1988; Ohnuki-Tierney 1994; Cwiertka 1998; Stajcic 2013; Parasecoli 2014; Stano 2016). But how does this correlation between food and identity tie in with the notion of frame raised above? Can food be considered a frame to identity? Food and its narratives can be considered the *frame* used to emphasise and delimit identities, as Arjun Appadurai (1988) discusses for instance in his treatment of cookbooks and Indian national cuisine, or Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1994) in her book on Japanese identity and the use of rice as a marker of a Self-Other boundary. In these cases, food is employed by people as a frame, as a marking device, to celebrate and promote a sense of identity in contrast to the Other. At the same time, in the light of Bhabha's and Shapiro's theory of identity, food and its narratives can be seen as those performative practices and individual narratives which, through their simple unfolding, play on a lack of the narrative of national identity (which focuses on a historicist past, but is oblivious to present developments) and contribute to its formation. Food is part of what Bhabha defines “the present of people's history”, which is “a practice that destroys the constant principles of the national

45 Michael J. Shapiro, "National Times And Other Times: Re-Thinking Citizenship," *Cultural Studies* 14, no.1 (2000), 83.
46 Ibidem, 80, 82, 81.

culture that attempts to hark back to a 'true' national past," and instead contributes to the moulding of national identities.[47] Nevana Stajcic elaborates on the idea of identities as performative and therefore "not static, given, nor determined ahead of time for us, but are constantly in the act of being performed."[48] Food is part of this performance and informs not only individual identities, but, following Bhabha, national ones as well. Food is as ambiguous as the *parergon* in its relationship to identity, i.e. the *ergon*. Food is the by-work of identity, it is the result of a specific culture, of traditions, of a community. Yet it also determines this culture, it is actively employed to mark in or out, to define, to delineate an identity. Establishing this connection between food and identity in the light of Derrida's theory of the *parergon* is relevant for this analysis because it explains how the choice of food as the pivotal point of the exhibition *SSBS* enables for a wider and more effective outreach. The fact that matters of identity, migration and integration are presented through their being rooted in essential everyday practices like cooking and eating, allows a wider audience to better relate and appreciate them. Food also visualizes and materializes identity for the visitor. Food in the context of the exhibition is the binding element, the "bridge over the abyss" between theory and practice, words and facts.[49] From this perspective, food theorized as frame in Derrida's sense, ties back to Daniel Miller's idea that the physicality of the material culture is what allows "understanding its power and significance in cultural construction."[50]

Analysis

I will now emphasise the moments of *SSBS* when the relationship food-identity becomes evident, and by analysing them I will attempt to answer the questions which have arisen during the theoretical reflections. What does food as a *parergon*, a by-work to social and cultural identity, enable in the context of the exhibition? Is it an addition - does it supplement otherwise invisible identities? Why and how does this frame enable the visitor to grasp, to connect to issues of Chinese-American identities?

As mentioned in the introduction, the main room of the exhibition hosted a video installation, featuring the 33 home cooks and chefs interviewed by MOCA in the process leading up to the creation of *SSBS*. The interviews were organized in four chapters — "Sour", "Sweet", "Bitter", and "Spicy", each representing a particular feeling and moment in people's life, reminiscent of the Chinese saying **酸甜苦辣** (suān tián kǔ là), meaning "sour, sweet, bitter, spicy," which refers to the

47 Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 303.
48 Nevena Stajcic, "Understanding Culture: Food as a Means of Communication," *Hemispheres. Studies on Cultures and Societies*, Issue 28 (2013), 9.
49 Derrida, "The Parergon," 4.
50 Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, 99.

joys and sorrows of life.[51]

The importance of food in Chinese culture is made evident by the most common Chinese greeting: 吃饭了吗? (chī fàn le ma?), or 'have you eaten yet?'. Exhibition interviewee Tommy Wong, chef and owner of several restaurants in Louisiana, stresses the importance of food and commensality in Chinese culture: “At my house, when we were in Hong Kong, my mom, by the time we sit down to eat, we always had an extra five or ten people that would come over and we'd just invite and sit down and eat.”[52] If indeed there is a connection between food and identity, certainly it is so in Chinese culture. Throughout the interviews there are several moments, when the speakers make statements which clearly presuppose a connection between food and identity.

The first section, “Sour”, deals with the “challenges in adapting to life in a new country and culture, the discrimination against Chinese in America, and the negative perception of Chinese food.”[53] The struggles the interviewees faced as Chinese immigrants in trying to integrate into US society were narrated through episodes related to food. Wilson Tang, owner of New York's *Nom Wah Tea Parlour*, recalls asking his mother as a child to “just make sandwiches” instead of the “weird lunch boxes” his mother would provide him with.[54] This memory emphasizes the power of food in defining a person, in moulding people's perception of him or her. Through the food one eats, a person is set apart or integrated in the surrounding society. Even though not all the visitors of the exhibition might have an immigration background and are therefore able to relate to this specific story, who has not experienced a similar situation growing up? Difference in lunch boxes and snacks, if not because of a different ethnicity but because of a different social background, are common experience for school children.

A 2011 study on the US National School Lunch Program (NSLP), for instance shows the “potential discriminatory effects of competitive foods” to the national program, since they identify NSLP lunches with 'subsidized low-income students' or stigmatization of the NSLP.[55] My aim by citing this study, is to prove how discrimination through food is not just experienced by people with an immigration background, but by anybody. This increases the relatability of the statement by Wilson Wang to a wider audience. Here the way food is implicated in moulding one's identity and people's perception of given identity is not only evident, but also relatable. Along the same lines, Nancy Chen, a home cook from Naperville, Illinois, recalls her children's reaction to her serving 'Boneless Eight Treasure Roasted Duck' for the Thanksgiving dinner, instead of a classic American turkey. Her

51 “Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy,” exhibition brochure, 4.
52 Tommy Wong, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation: *Stories Of Chinese Food And Identity In America*, video installation, 1:31, courtesy of the Museum of Chinese in America.
53 *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.
54 Wilson Tang, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.
55 Rajiv Bhatia, Paula Jones, and Zetta Reicker, "Competitive Foods, Discrimination, and Participation in the National School Lunch Program," *American Journal of Public Health* 101, no. 8 (2011): 1380.

children complained at first, “Mom, how come we don't have turkey? Everybody has turkey, you know, we want turkey.”[56] Here again, the fear of being cast as different, as not belonging, is associated with the choice of food. Nancy Chen's children seem to react to the idea that their Thanksgiving meal defines who they are. Again, this story reflects not only the way food and identity are related, but also how food can be actively used to frame one's identity and mark one's sense of belonging to a culture, and to a place.

Another interesting point comes from Leonard Liao, the owner of the Chino Latino restaurant *Mi Estrella*, in the neighbourhood of Jackson Heights, New York. Liao's family comes originally from China, but made their way to the US via Cuba, where Liao's father lived and operated a restaurant business until the 1960s, when he was forced to flee again, this time to New York.[57] In the video Liao reflects about his identity, growing up wanting to be American and white, and later developing a sense of pride in being Chinese. Although he adds, “I'm actually Chinese American, I can't say I'm Chinese because I was born here. And I eat apple pies and I eat hamburgers and pizza, so I am American at the same time, but I'm proud of Chinese heritage.”[58] The apple pie-American identity link here is very explicit. In Liao's words, the way he grew up and the food he ate contributed to the formation of his American identity, along with his Chinese one. Food again appears to give form to an identity (to provide the concrete element), which the abstract notion of identity lacks, enabling it to anchor a narrative into its concrete environment. This obviously does not equal saying that food is the sole element which grounds identity, but that it is an important contributor to this process. It is the *parergonal* feature which enables identity to materialise and unfold, framed and informed by this cultural practice.

At the same time, not only does identity presuppose food, but food culture presupposes identity as well. Ken Hom, a renowned Chinese American chef and tv figure, talks about his 'Chineseness' and how this has been essential to him and his work: “It actually helped me not only to survive, but inform the way my career and how I use cooking to teach about my culture and my Chineseness [*sic*].”[59] In this case the idea of Chineseness, the association of a Chinese identity, prompted the creation of a cuisine which is representative of Ken Hom's personal history, adding to the depth of his identity. Again, the formation of identity is visualized and made relatable through the element of food, allowing a concrete, graspable example of an otherwise very abstract, and theoretical issue.

As mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, food is particularly important in Chinese culture. This did not change after people migrated to the US, on the contrary, food and restaurants became the

56 Nancy Chen, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.
57 Talek Nantes, “What REALLY lies beneath New York City’s #7 train,” *Matador Network*, May 3, 2017, https://matadornetwork.com/read/really-lies-beneath-new-york-citys-7-train/.
58 Leonard Liao, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.
59 Ken Hom, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.

main source of survival for the Chinese community. The anti-Chinese sentiment, which started growing around the mid 19th century, led to the passing of a Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-1943), the first restriction on immigration in the US based on nationality and race.[60] Despite this wave of anti-Chinese feeling and the enforcement of restrictive legal measures, Chinese restaurant businesses kept on thriving in the US. Historian Heather R. Lee was able to establish a connection between this law and the sudden increase of Chinese eateries. The Chinese Exclusion Act aimed at stopping the immigration of cheap Chinese labour, yet "merchant visas" were still released to owners of specific businesses, who were so able to move in and out of the States freely and also sponsor further family members.[61] After a court case in 1915 which recognised restaurant owners as eligible for merchant visas, Chinese restaurants were opened in order to outmanoeuvre the restriction on immigration and allow Chinese business owners to invite family members to the US. As a consequence, Chinese restaurants boomed thereafter. New York, for instance, saw the number of Chinese restaurants quadrupling between 1910 and 1920. Obtaining merchant visas remained a difficult process, complicated by the mistrust of immigration agents and the in-depth inquiries, which required quite some inventiveness from the side of the Chinese entrepreneurs.[62] Nonetheless, it did not stop Chinese immigration during the years of the Chinese Exclusion Act, and instead contributed to the flourishing of the restaurant business.

Considering the strong connection between Chinese immigration and the opening of Chinese restaurants, MOCA's show seems further justified in its attempt to represent today's Chinese community in the States. Through the interviews it becomes clear how different generations relate differently to this history and status of the Chinese food in the USA. Chris Cheung opened *East Wing Snack Shop* inspired by now extinct coffee shops of Chinatown. When discussing the disappearance of these places he comments,

> "People came to America, they opened these restaurants so they can make a better life for their children. They worked hard and they worked hard all day to make these restaurants good for their community. And their children, they made some money and they sent their children to college. And when the time came for them to retire, the children weren't going to take over the restaurants. The children are now accountants and lawyers and doctors and everything that the parents wanted them to be. So they had nobody to hand off these restaurants to."[63]

Now yet another generation has come, and young entrepreneurs, like Cheung, do open new eateries, either on a wave of nostalgia or determined to introduce the 'real' Chinese kitchen to the

60 "Timeline," Museum of Chinese in America, accessed June 14, 2018, http://www.mocanyc.org/timeline/timeline.html.
61 Heather R. Lee, "The Untold Story of Chinese Restaurants in America," *Scholars*, May 20, 2015, https://scholars.org/brief/untold-story-chinese-restaurants-america.
62 Ibidem.
63 Chris Cheung, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.

US. Throughout the interviews of *SSBS*, it becomes apparent that several young chefs feel the need to present their audience with 'authentic' cuisine. Older chefs disagree. The dialogue between these different viewpoints, which has been enhanced through the editing process of the interview material, is illuminating with regard to the role played by authenticity, tradition, and regional differences in the formation of identity.

Jason Wang, the owner of *Xi'an Famous Foods*, a popular New York chain serving Sichuan cuisine, moved to the states in his youth.[64] In the interview, he recalls tasting Chinese food in America for the first time and thinking, "Wow, this is what they call Chinese here? I can't wait to show what Chinese really is about."[65] Jeff Gao, a restaurant entrepreneur both in China and the US, joins in the outcry when recalling his experience of Chinese food across the States, "how can you call this Chinese food? This is not Chinese food. But also it just horrified me how can people actually live with this kind of food?"[66] This opinion seems to be shared by most chefs of the young generation, who now aspire to present the American audience with 'authentic' Chinese cuisine. Wilson Tang of New York's *Nom Wah Tea Parlour* talks about one of his restaurant's bestsellers, 'The Original', an egg roll which owes its name to the traditional aspect of the recipe that was passed down by Tang's uncle.[67] Why are all these chefs striving for 'authenticity'? What do they mean with this term?

Cori Xiong, who came from China to Texas when she was 12, seems to try answering this question when she comments, "I don't feel right, I feel like if I make Egg Roll and Sweet and Sour Chicken,[68] I feel, I feel it's like *I'm trying to pretend to be someone I'm not*" (emphasis added). Her husband Heng Chen reinforces, "we would just become one of, you know, everybody."[69] These statements highlighted here by the exhibition, again suggest how deeply felt is the link between food and identity, and in this case also the link between 'authentic' food and identity understood as being loyal to a 'true self'. It seems that 'authentic' food fulfils the need for that continuity which Hall identifies as one of the axes of identity, allowing people to give depth to their own stories and anchor themselves within a culture. Here the idea of 'authentic' food 'bridges the gap' intrinsic in the diasporic Chinese identity. As asserted in Hall's text, the people belonging to the Caribbean diaspora identify with an African Presence, so some people of the Chinese diaspora confront the 'Chinese Presence' of their identity through their food. The speakers represent themselves not only through what they cook, but also by *how* they cook it. In contrast to what was just discussed, it could also easily be argued that authenticity is a trending concept: in a world where ethnic diversity

64 Label, "Jason Wang," in *Sours, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories Of Chinese Food And Identity In America*, Museum of Chinese in America, New York.
65 Jason Wang, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.
66 Jeff Gao, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.
67 Wilson Tang, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.
68 Chinese-American dishes, rather than 'authentic' Chinese food.
69 Cori Xiong and Heng Chen, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.

is so easily accessible, the 'authentic' option sets the bar higher. However, in light of the statements by Xiong and Chen, it becomes clear that intimate and important values are at stake when discussing authenticity.

Other interviewees however, have very different opinions regarding the meaning and value of authenticity. Famous chef Peter Chang, often challenges guests who ask for 'authentic' Chinese food: “What is so-called 'authentic' and 'not authentic'?”. He rejects absolutisms about authenticity, and in his cuisine prefers instead to focus on “uniqueness and innovation,” preserving throughout the 'soul' of the cuisine.[70] He and other chefs agree on the necessity of adapting the food to new environments: “Authenticity can only go so far. You got to cater to your clientele, what the people want, expect.”[71] These second perspectives allude to the experience of repositioning oneself, of negotiating one's own identity between continuity and difference. Identity is not only anchored to the common denominator, each identity often needs to be reassessed and repositioned. The relationship between food (as frame) and identity resurfaces. At times, 'authentic' food is used to ground one's identity, to bridge a gap in the narrative of identity. Other times, food culture is moulded by changes, by a repositioning of identity. Alternatively, changes in the environment end up determining the cultural practices, and therefore identity.

The edited debate among the chefs on the meaning and value of 'authentic' cuisine, enabled the exhibition *SSBS* to touch upon important contemporary issues. Authenticity and tradition are an increasingly critical topic today, when discussing national identities. Today's ease of global movements of people and goods, the waves of refugees and migrants which many countries find themselves confronted with, often cause heated debates about the 'right' of people to be included or excluded from a community. On one side, people do enjoy the benefits of a multicultural community (let us consider the booming of ethnic cuisine, and take the Chinese experience as an example); while on the other, the political choices of the people around the world reveal an increasing discontent. This is often caused by fear of those who are different — who bring new traditions, culture, and habits — challenging people's perspective and assumptions about their way of living. Promises on the preservation of tradition, and staying loyal to one's 'national' and 'cultural' values, seem to be on the mouth of every popular politician at the moment — tradition and therefore authenticity, being two powerful elements of their rhetoric. By addressing these same topics through the example of food and cuisine, *SSBS* is able to show the relativity of these arguments in a very approachable way. The dialogue between promoters of authenticity like Wilson Tang with sceptics like Peter Chang, enables the visitor to reassess the value and meaning of authenticity and discover the complex network of factors at stake when the term is used.

70 Peter Chang, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation, translated by the Museum of the Chinese in America.
71 Tommy Wong, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.

Chinese food, Chinese-American food, Chino-Latino, Sichuanese, Yunnanese: All these labels might be unsettling for the visitor at first. Was this not an exhibition about 'Chinese food'? Lines start to blur – what is Chinese food? What is American? An American visitor might be surprised to hear Cecilia Chang utter, “is this Chinese food? Never heard of Chop Suey before.”[72] Isn't Chop Suey a Chinese dish? If not Chinese then what, American? Is it 'authentic' food? The lines between cultures all of a sudden blur. Food culture and identity reveal themselves as 'processes', which become, evolve, as the result of the intersection between cultures and, most importantly, between themselves. Food and identity, *parergon* and *ergon*, blur the lines between what is inside and what is outside – is a certain dish representative of a specific identity, the result of a specific culture? Or is this identity defined by a certain cuisine? Apart from the statements of the chefs, the exhibition in itself problematises the idea of 'authentic Chinese food' through its set up. The long banquet table where all the chefs share their imaginary dinner presents the multitude of regional as well as personal and transcultural traditions, which come to be understood as Chinese food. The visitor is invited to discover all these different facets of so-called 'Chinese food'.

To conclude, I wish to stress the importance of analysing the interviews and the exhibition through the prism of the frame. By theorizing the interconnection between food and identity, showing the way in which they presuppose and interact with each other, the idea of frame enabled me to delve deeper into apparently simple statements. Many of the interviewees appeared to imply ways in which their identity was determined by the food culture they grew up with; at the same time, the experience of other chefs illustrates how their association with Chinese identity had an impact on their cuisine. Their statements also made evident the importance of material culture in moulding their identity, and I would say, also in offering the visitors a way to connect with the topic. By showing the relativity behind the idea of what is an 'authentic' dish, the exhibition also problematised the concept of identity, especially when bound to the nation and to tradition.

72 Cecilia Chiang, *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy*, video installation.

Chapter 2: Food and the Senses

In the first chapter, I discussed how a reading of the exhibition *SSBS* through the theory of frame enabled an understanding of the relationship between food as a form of material culture and identity. Throughout the above analysis, I also emphasized the importance of the use of food for discussing issues of identity in the context of the exhibition, insomuch as it provides a relatable topic for a diverse audience. In the following chapter, I wish to further delve into the issue of the approachability of the exhibition, discussing what the implications of the materiality of food are on the visitor's perception and learning process.

At this point, it is worth emphasising a crucial aspect of *SSBS*, namely the fact that it did not entail any real food: videos, narrations, images, sculptures, and artefacts constituted its exhibit. How is it then possible to argue for the importance of the materiality of food and its relatability and empathy in addressing the issues of identity and authenticity? At first sight, this appears like a missed opportunity for MOCA. Would an exhibition *with* food have not been more effective than one simply *about* food? In the context of the exhibition, the presence of actual food could have complemented narratives which language alone cannot do full justice to. The strength of the museum lays in its ability to offer a space for approaching knowledge and learning by alternative means, in contrast, for instance, with the academic world which focuses on words. Does the museum not represent an opportunity to enable access to theories and ideas through experience and visual means rather than through text alone? Why not expand this by making a multisensory experience out of the museum visit?

Interdisciplinary scholar Kylie Message defines the field of museum studies as a 'boundary discipline', occupying the interstitial spaces between “disciplinary canons (such as history and anthropology), dichotomized terms (such as theory and practice), and the space of conflict between territories or positions defined in opposition to each other (such as the political 'left' versus the political 'right').”[73] In my opinion, the same could be said of the museum itself — it is the in-between space which “is both influenced by and infiltrates its neighbouring fields.”[74] My main concern here is to highlight this inbetweenness in relation to theory and practice, to learning through language or through an embodied experience. The use of real food could have amply contributed to this aspect of the museum, which allows theory to be complemented by an experience, enabling a different approach to Chinese American history and identity. The materiality of food could have prompted a

73 Kylie Message, “Introduction: This is not a protest. This is a process,” *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge* (Routledge, 2018), https://books.google.com.

74 Ibidem.

multisensory take on the exhibition, instead of one where perception is subordinated to knowledge through language. Furthermore, as Juhani Pallasmaa argues in his contribution to the volume *The Multisensory Museum*, by accessing the topic through the senses, the exhibition would have turned "into a personal experience grasped through embodied sensation instead of offering intellectualized information or mere visual stimuli," therefore allowing the exhibition to remain with the visitor long lastingly.[75]

Since the exhibition did not entail any real food, why then do I wish to argue for the importance of the *materiality* of food? What do I mean with the idea of materiality? To answer these questions, I turn towards the field of film studies, where scholars are often confronted with the challenge of trying to grasp the connection between what the eye sees on screen and the bodily reactions they evoke (Marks 2002; Sobchak 2004). In her work *Carnal Thoughts*, cinema and media theorist Vivian C. Sobchak establishes the importance of "the embodied and radically material nature of human existence and thus the lived body's essential implication in making 'meaning' out of bodily 'sense'."[76] For Sobchak, considering the weight of the 'embodied experience' allows us to appreciate "how our own lived bodies provide the material premises that enable us, from the first, to sense and respond to the world and others."[77] Here the author talks about materiality not as a physical presence, but as quality of things enabling an embodied experience, having repercussions on the way we perceived and relate to people and situations. This is the way I wish to frame materiality in this thesis. Even if food was not present in the exhibition, previously embodied experiences of food affect the visitor's perception of the exhibition and the topics examined.

Sobchack's thought owes much to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, however such an approach is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, her use of the term *materiality*, understood as a quality of the object enabling an embodied experience, is of help in my discussion of absent food in the context of *SSBS*. I will now turn to anthropology and material culture for a theoretical framework, which highlights a connection between the subconscious and materiality, as well as between memory and materiality — through the senses. I claim that food, by stimulating the senses, activates other ways of understanding things, opposed to the use of language. And that these experiences can be easily re-invoked through the use of language and images, prompting a more sensory and intuitive understanding of the topic treated.

75 Juhani Pallasmaa, "Museum as an Embodied Experience," in *The Multisensory Museum*, ed. Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 241.
76 Vivian C. Sobchak, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley [etc]: University of California Press, 2004), 1.
77 Ibidem, 3.

Theoretical Framework: Materiality and the Senses

The field of material culture studies has, in the past years, tried to move away from an approach which subordinated objects to the realm of language. With the event of semiotics in the 1960s, linguistic methodologies have been applied to the study of material culture, leading to a neglect of "the object qualities of things to their word-like properties."[78] However, the stance which maintains a greater significance of language over other ways of expression, offers a rather limiting approach not only to the study of material culture, but to an understanding of the world around us in general. Daniel Miller brings the example of how limited language proves to be when attempting to describe differences in taste between two different sorts of fish, or in shape between a milk and a sherry bottle, and invites to question the often assumed superiority of language. He comes to the conclusion that objects are "equally impressive in the areas of expression and communication in which language is most esteemed."[79]

What clearly differentiates objects from language is their materiality. Miller considers an artefact first of all for its "physically concrete form independent of any individual's mental image of it".[80] This quality provides material culture, food included, with an essential ability to connect with our subconscious. Here the author draws upon theories from the field of psychoanalysis and child development, which claim that at a certain stage, artefacts are the main means for a child to articulate feelings, and that this connection between objects and the subconscious remains relevant even after the introduction of language.[81] According to Miller, it is this quality which makes material culture a powerful tool in the process of cultural construction: "it acts as a bridge, not only between the mental and physical worlds, but also, more unexpectedly, between consciousness and the unconscious."[82] Material culture seems therefore to fill a 'gap' there where language is unable to express something. Referring back to Derrida, material culture acts as a supplement for a lack inherent in language and allows further meanings to unfold. If this is the additional value which material culture brings to an exhibition, it is worth trying to understand not only what labels and wall texts have to say, but also the unarticulated meanings conveyed through things and how such form of communication occurs. In this way it is possible to consider what different impact an exhibition on food can have on its beholders.

Miller has not been the only one calling to attention the lack of interest in the materiality of things in the field of material culture studies. Anthropologist Victor Buchli joins him in this critique asserting

78 Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, 95-6.
79 Ibidem, 98.
80 Ibidem, 99.
81 Ibidem, 85-95.
82 Ibidem, 99.

that the sensory experience of artefacts is mostly reduced to the two-dimensional reality of the scholarly text or the sterile display of the museum.[83] Anthropologist David Howes further develops this idea maintaining that what is neglected is not simply the materiality, but rather the 'sensuality of material culture'. According to him, we should be able to touch, smell, feel, weigh, hear objects, moving away from an approach too strongly influenced by the museum tradition's emphasis on looking, stressing that "a material culture that consisted solely of images would be immaterial."[84] Sensory studies' scholar Constance Classen also brings this deficiency of museums to our attention, highlighting the discrepancy between what is expected of visitors when entering the museum — we are expected to stay at a reverent distance from the artefacts, wandering through the galleries like "disembodied spirits," without engaging the "'lower' senses;" and yet the intuitive response visitors tend to have towards art and artefacts — to engage with them in a more corporeal way.[85] However, as I intend to argue in the pages to follow, the distinction in a five senses sensorium is a rather limiting "Western folk taxonomy".[86] Experiencing art or artefacts cannot be strictly divided into these five categories, since things and images often activate other embodied experiences and memories, giving rise to a multi-sensory experience through synaesthesia. This is why even a traditional museum visit with focus on visual and audio stimuli, is still able to initiate more sensory and bodily experiences since it is inevitably going to involve memory and the sensations associated with it. Therefore, even though the exhibition *SSBS* might have not directly engaged the 'lower senses', as it did not involve real food to taste and smell, I will nevertheless argue that, through the use of food as topic, these senses were indeed stimulated, hence activating further experiences and meanings in the visitors.

In the field of humanities and in particular of the social sciences, food has been studied from a variety of perspectives. Seminal works in the field of anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked* (1969) and Mary Douglas' "Deciphering a Meal" (1972), take a structuralist approach and understand food as a code, with a working similar to language, reflecting deeper societal structures. In sociology, works like *Distinction: A Social Critiques of the Judgment of Taste* (1984) by Pierre Bourdieu took a more sensory approach to eating since he took into consideration the sense of taste, albeit merely as an indicator of aesthetic judgement and class distinction; whereas Roland Barthes in his essay "Toward a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption" (2013 [1961]), in line with his semiotic perspective, conceptualised food as a system of

83 Victor Buchli, "Introduction," in *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. Victor Buchli (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 13.

84 David Howes, "Scent, Food and Synaesthesia: Intersensoriality and Material Culture Theory," in *Handbook of Material Culture,* ed. Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Küchler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer (London: Sage, 2006), 168-9.

85 Constance Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1, 3.

86 Yannis Hamilakis, "Senses, Materiality, Time: A New Ontology," *Archaeology And The Senses: Human Experience, Memory, And Affect (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 113.

communication. Around the 1980s the approach to the study of food widened, starting to pay increasing attention to the implication of the senses in the study of food. The work *Sweetness and Power* (1985) by anthropologist Sydney Mintz set the focus, probably for the first time, not only on food (sugar) as a commodity, but also on sweetness as taste and studied the impact both the product and its flavour had on society. This method has led towards works which take a more sensory approach to food and can be defined as a "Proustian anthropology," in the way they link food, sensory experience and memory (for an overview see Holtzman 2006).[87] A seminal work in this regard is David E. Sutton's *Remembrance of Repasts* (2001), an anthropological publication which analyses the connection between food and memory. If the earlier structuralist works on food always tried to see beyond the materiality of their object of study, approaches such as Mintz's and Sutton's embrace the physical experience of food and make it the focus of their research. I will now delve deeper into anthropological theories about food and the senses, to prepare the reader for a 'sensory' analysis of the exhibition *SSBS*.

Synaesthesia

In his paper "Food and the Senses" (2010), Sutton calls for a deeper engagement of anthropology with taste and the sensory experience of food, placing its physical experience, before any abstract, symbolic implication. He warns, however, against drawing dichotomies between the symbolic and the material, and invites the reader instead to more transversal approaches.[88] Sutton is interested in delving into the connection between food and memory, and in order to do this he introduces the idea of synaesthesia, namely experiencing something through a union of the senses. Art historian Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett summarises well the synaesthetic experience surrounding food: "From color, steam rising, gloss and texture, we infer taste smell and feel.... Taste is somethings we anticipate and infer from how things look, feel to the hand, smell (outside the mouth), and sound.... Our eyes let us 'taste' food at a distance by activating the sense memories of taste and smell."[89]

Carolyn Korsmeyer, for instance, considers the 'collaboration' between taste and vision in creating an experience of food. She maintains that eating and tasting are always deeply connected with the act of seeing the object, which provides an "anticipation of flavour."[90] Even though the appearance of food might be misleading regarding its taste, still this (mis-)correlation is a proof of the collaboration between the senses, or indeed that all the senses "coordinate in fruitful synergy to produce a full taste experience."[91] Taking blind taste tests as an example, she aims at proving that

87 Jon D. Holtzman, "Food and Memory,"*Annual Review of Anthropology 35* (2006): 365.
88 David E. Sutton, "Food and the Senses," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 220.
89 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium," *Performance Research*, 4:1 (1999): 3, quoted in Sutton, "Food and the Senses," 218.
90 Carolyn Korsmeyer and David E. Sutton, "The Sensory Experience of Food," *Food, Culture & Society*, 14:4 (2011): 462-3, DOI: 10.2752/175174411X13046092851316.
91 Korsmeyer and Sutton, "The Sensory Experience of Food," 462.

taste is always going to be influenced by our knowledge or belief about the tasted food, and that sight plays an important role in activating that knowledge. To describe this mechanism Korsmeyer introduces the notion of 'cognitive penetrability' and 'impenetrability', philosophical terms used to describe whether sensory and emotive experiences can be affected by belief or previous knowledge.[92] My question now is if the opposite can be true as well: Do sensory experiences influence our knowledge and beliefs? In particular, regarding the *SSBS* exhibition, how do previous sensory experiences related to food have an impact on the visitor's perception of the exhibition? What role does the synaesthetic experience of food play in perceiving *SSBS*?

Gustemology and Memory as a Sense

Besides breaking down the boundaries between different senses by introducing the concept of synaesthesia, David E. Sutton also redefines what our senses are, and how they are created. According to him, tastes are not objective and passive experiences, but a construction created between people. “Tastes are not separable from the objects being tasted,” since the sense of taste and food are part of a culturally determined synaesthetic experience which constructs the senses.[93] These considerations on the way food and the senses are embedded in social constructs has brought Sutton to develop what he calls a 'gustemological approach,' namely a “gustemic way of knowing.”[94] With this term he defines “approaches that organize their understanding of a wide spectrum of cultural issues around taste and other sensory aspects of food.”[95] Following this approach, senses like taste and smell become an example of a 'total social fact' as theorised by Marcel Mauss, for they tie “to multiple domains of social life.”[96] He understands a human sense as “a type of communicative and creative channel between self and world, rather than the traditional view of senses as passive receptors of data.”[97] This allows him to add memory to the human sensorium, since memory also is a communicative channel “through which we shape our interactions with others and with our environment.”[98] Since the exhibition *SSBS* did not include any samples of real food and therefore did not directly stimulate the visitors' sense of taste or smell, I will now delve deeper into the connection between memory and synaesthesia, which will allow me to still discuss the exhibition in terms of a sensory experience.

92 Korsmeyer and Sutton, “The Sensory Experience of Food,” 464.
93 Sutton, "Food and the Senses," 218.
94 Korsmeyer and Sutton, “The Sensory Experience of Food,” 469.
95 Sutton, "Food and the Senses," 215.
96 Korsmeyer and Sutton, “The Sensory Experience of Food,” 469.
97 Ibidem, 471.
98 Ibidem.

Synaesthesia, Memory, and the Materiality of Food

Although already touched upon briefly, I wish now to emphasise the correlation between synaesthesia and memory. Central to this argument is again the materiality of things, which on the one side enables memories to be stored as embodied experiences; while on the other, it is the very stimulus which initiates a synaesthetic experience and helps recall memories. Anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis, in an article dedicated to an extinct quality of peaches in Greece and to the nostalgic memory of its flavour, discusses the power of the artefact as follows:

> Mnemonic sensory experience implies that the artifact bears within it layered commensal meanings (shared substance and material reciprocities) and histories. It can also be an instrument for mobilizing the perceptual penetration of historical matter. As a sensory form in itself, the artifact can provoke the emergence, the awakening of the layered memories, and thus the senses contained within it. The object invested with sensory memory speaks; it provokes recall as a missing, detached yet antiphonic element of the perceiver.[99]

This quote well summarises the power of material culture to contain in itself memories and histories, and to release them onto the perceiver whenever a sensory connection is established. Important here is to speak of 'perceiver', not of viewer: even when considering an artefact noted simply through sight, it is essential to consider the synaesthetic experience activated through the stimulation of 'layered memories'. In “Synesthesia, Memory, and the Taste of Home” (2005), Sutton goes in depth about this connection. He studies “the power of tangible everyday experiences to evoke memories on which identities are formed,” by observing the Greek community in the UK and the way food represents a physical anchor to their memory, which facilitates a 'return to the whole', meaning an attempt to regaining a totality lost through the dispersive experience of migration.[100] Sutton discusses the evocative power of the senses, on the basis of Dan Sperber's *Rethinking Symbolism* (1975), which considers specifically the capacity of smell to evoke memories. Sutton extends Sperber's thought to the realm of taste. What the authors argue, given the unclear categorization of these senses in our society, is that precluding a “semantic field” of either smells or tastes, the only way we are able to recall these sensory experiences is through an image (for instance, one does not remember the smell of the incense, rather the church where that time of smell has been experienced). These issues notwithstanding, a smell or taste can be recognized over many years, even if we are not able to analyse and describe them as we can with a visual memory. These ideas find validation in recent research which confirms that memory is often the result of associations of different stimuli and experiences occurring simultaneously; and this is particularly true for the 'lower senses', since they relate to 'episodic' memories, those concerning to our lives, rather

99 C. Nadia Seremetakis, “The Breast of Aphrodite,” in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Oxford [etc.]: Berg, 2005), 303.

100 David E. Sutton, “Synesthesia, Memory, and the Taste of Home,” in *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Oxford [etc.]: Berg, 2005), 304, 305-6.

than to 'semantic' memories concerning phenomena.[101] Finally, Sutton touches upon the issue of the subjective versus the culturally determined nature of these correlations. Even though, at first sight, the relationship between a specific smell and an image appears to be purely personal, through "repetition in ritual and other forms" people in the same society tend to relate to the same cultural symbolism. This enables Sutton's theory to be relevant in explaining how taste and food can bring one back to a common place, to a feeling of 'wholeness', to a common identity.[102]

This first part of the chapter laid the theoretical frame for understanding how the materiality of food has served in the context of *SSBS*. Despite the fact that the exhibition did not present any real, edible food, thanks to the concept of synaesthesia we are able to grasp how elements such as the photographs, the descriptions, or the sculptures of food, activated further senses and bygone memories in the beholder, allowing the unarticulated, latent meanings of food to unfold. In the second part of this chapter, I will apply these ideas to my case study, in order to reveal how the exhibition was able to act on a different level and why it represents a good example of an easily relatable exhibition.

Analysis: Activating Memory, Activating the Senses

After considering the power of food in relating to people's senses and memories, its lack in MOCA's exhibition might appear regrettable. Nonetheless, what I wished to argue using Sobchak's definition of materiality, is that the food did not necessarily need to be present in order to evoke embodied experiences in the visitor. This can be considered the case when looking at both the title, as much as at the subdivision of the video installation — both highlight a correlation between sensory experience and emotions. The phrase "sour, sweet, bitter, spicy" refers not only to the four flavours, but also to the Chinese expression **酸甜苦辣**(suān tián kǔ là), which alludes to "all the pains and pleasures of life".[103] The curators decided to follow this philosophy in organising the interviews according to these four flavours. The first section "Sour" focused on the challenges Chinese immigrants have been facing while arriving in a new country and trying to adapt to its culture; sour refers as well to the discrimination they experienced, and to the negative general perception of Chinese food. The section "Sweet" represented the sweetness of both childhood memories and personal success and career, as well as in general the important role food plays for the Chinese diaspora in America. The third section "Bitter" addressed both the exhausting hours of kitchen work and the tribulations of life, and finally "Spicy" dealt with heated debates on authenticity and how

101 Sutton, "Synesthesia, Memory, and the Taste of Home," 310.
102 Sutton, "Synesthesia, Memory, and the Taste of Home," 309-11.
103 "suān tián kǔ là (**酸甜苦辣**)," Collins Dictionary Chinese-English, accessed June 24, 2018, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/chinese-english/%E9%85%B8%E7%94%9C%E8%8B%A6%E8%BE%A3.

regional pride is expressed through food.[104]

Taste and Language

The classification of the interviews into these 'gustatory sections' is the first sensory element which adds to the experience of the exhibition. Juxtaposing these flavours to the stories of the interviewees, unlocks the viewer's 'embodied experience' or 'sensory memory', allowing the visitor to associate flavours and emotions. This connection might not refer simply to personal memories, but to socially accepted ones, which see an association between a specific taste and an emotional condition. Let us consider, for instance, the third section, “Bitter”. The adjective bitter in English can be understood either as taste (“being or inducing the one of the four basic taste sensations that is peculiarly acrid, astringent, or disagreeable and suggestive of an infusion of hops”) or as feeling (“caused by or expressive of severe pain, grief, or regret”).[105] The correlation between the two words already indicates how the reference to a sensory experience is used in the English language to communicate specific feelings. The interviews showed in this section describe deprivations and struggles under occupied or communist China, of famines, droughts, political unrests, and food rationing. When the younger generation speaks, the difficulties are related to those encountered throughout their culinary carriers. By using 'bitter' as frame for these stories, the exhibition evokes in the visitor not only a specific mood and memories, but a sensation, a bodily experience, which helps visitors empathize with the struggles of the narrators. What is interesting to underline here, is that the correlation between taste and emotions is not only limited to the English language. In Chinese for instance, the expression 吃苦(chī kǔ), or literally “to eat bitterness,” signifies “to put up with hardship”.[106] Furthermore, the association between bitter flavour and bitter experience seems to be one common to various societies, where it is often used in the context of rituals and rites of passage.[107] Even if it is not my intention here to draw universalities about the significance of the meaning of 'bitter' in different cultures, it is evident that the association between taste and feelings is an ordinary one, which in the context of the exhibition allows a relatively wide audience to empathize with the mood of the conversation.

The other categories reflect a similar function. The adjective sour is associated both with the taste of acid foods, as well as with unpleasant feelings and something distasteful.[108] The interviews in this section tell of difficult moments in the speakers' life, whose recollection is displeasing and difficult to

104 “Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy,” exhibition brochure, 4-5.
105 "Bitter," Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed June 24, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bitter.
106 “Chī kǔ (吃苦),” Collins Dictionary Chinese-English, accessed June 24, 2018, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/chinese-english/%E5%90%83%E8%8B%A6.
107 Sutton, "Food and the Senses," 216.
108 “Sour,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed July 3, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sour.

digest. The sweet taste also found its way into the English language, describing things agreeable, gratifying, or appealing.[109] In *SSBS* it was used to frame recollections of pleasant memories, communicating a feeling of security and comfort. The association between 'spicy' and the debates around authenticity arising in the fourth chapter, informs the visitor of how “lively and spirited”[110] the discussions are. In my opinion, these correlations between taste and language are highly productive for the aspiration of the exhibition in communicating with its visitors. Their involvement is enhanced by the recollection of an embodied experience which gives a 'body' to the stories told by the interviewees.

My taking in consideration of language might surprise the reader, after the argument above for the inability of language to fully express material culture. But what I wanted to emphasise above is that language and its function should not be forced on or taken as superior as other approaches. In this analysis, language works as a medium, as a 'translator' as film theorist Laura. U. Marks states. In the introduction to her book *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Marks is concerned about how to convey “audiovisual, sensuous materiality” of artists' media into language.[111] She claims that the translation would be successful if the reader is able to re-experience, in his or her own body, the author's experience. In my opinion, the way *SSBS* used language to subdivide the video installation successfully achieved this act of translation. Memory of the embodied experience of taste is evoked, enabling the visitor to expand his or her experience and understanding of the issues examined.

As described in the introduction, the exhibition was divided into two areas, one with the video installation and sculpture, the other with memorabilia of the chefs. I am not going to discuss in depth the second section, where personal objects by the chefs and home cooks, where accompanied by a comment by the owner. This part of the exhibition seemed to respond to more classical curatorial methods, utilising the exhibition of artefacts. Furthermore, the stories related to the objects are not always illuminating, they seem again to flatten the level of the exhibition to a sharing of anecdotes. Especially when compared to the video installation, which allows for the speakers to express themselves in length, the labels narrating childhood memories and work experiences seem quite redundant. Instead, I will now focus on other elements of the exhibition which allow me to consider the impact of materiality and enabled the exhibition to make up for the lack of actual food. As I argued in the theoretical section, the use of visual stimuli in the exhibition (photos, video, sculpture) should have allowed for a recollection of an embodied experience in the visitor. However, how could

109 “Sweet,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed July 3, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sweet.

110 “Spicy,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed July 3, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spicy.

111 Laura U. Marks, “Introduction,” in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis [etc.]: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), ix.

this be possible, if the visitor never had a particular dish or cuisine before? It has to be kept in mind, that many of MOCA's visitors might not have been familiar with Chinese culinary traditions. Even if this was not the case, it is still of extreme importance to consider how it is possible for *SSBS* to reach exactly those people with the least knowledge of Chinese culinary tradition, in any of its regional or fusion forms. How is it possible to consider the impact of a sensory experience with this kind of audience, if they possess no frame of reference? Hence, it is now time to consider the implications of MOCA's choice not to exhibit real food, as well as to try to evaluate the alternative they offered: the ceramic sculptures.

The Sculptures

The exhibition of food in a museum presents challenges regarding the logistics, the infrastructure, and not least the funds necessary to serve food on sight. The museum had to find a way to solve these problems, and so it opted for an exhibition design which gathered the chefs and home cooks in a banquet installation which featured ceramic sculptures of personal or regional cuisines, rather than the real dishes (Fig. 4). The museum collaborated with two ceramic artists, Heidi Lau and Lu Zhang, ready to share authorship with the curatorial team, who could thus set certain parameters around the appearance and message of the works.[112]

Fig. 4 – View of the video installation and ceramic table of *Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy: Stories of Chinese Food and Identity in America*, courtesy of the Museum of Chinese in America.

112 Rebatta, interview.

Indeed, the sculptures were not adequate if we consider them a sheer replacement of the missing food. However, they should not be reduced to a mere representation, since they did not just refer back to dishes and styles of cuisine. I will now advance several hypotheses about which possible meanings the exhibition activated by integrating the sculptures.

In the previous chapter, I briefly recounted how the history of Chinese immigration is deeply intertwined with the development of Chinese restaurant businesses in the US. Food has not only played an important role for the Chinese American community itself, it has always been one of the most distinct characteristics Chinese people have been associated with in American society. Due to its cheap price and around the clock availability, by the 1920s Chinese food was a staple in American food culture,[113] and according to some it was a determinant factor towards the democratisation of the dining out experience in the States.[114] This has led to stereotyping of the Chinese American culinary tradition, one which *SSBS* aimed at undermining by presenting the great variety of Chinese cuisine and its developments in different environments.[115] The popularity of Chinese eateries has furthermore led to a general association of the Chinese community with the restaurant industry. It is not my intention to say that the Chinese American community today is still associated only with the restaurant industry, especially among fellow Americans. Yet, an exhibition about food might attract predominantly a crowd whose approach to Chinese and Chinese American culture is still restricted to those dining occasions or, since the museum is situated in a rather touristic part of the city, an audience completely new to the culture. Did *SSBS* help oppose this cliché? I think that the curatorial choice not to present any real food probably helped to contrast stereotyped expectations which people might have about the Chinese American community. Even if the exhibition had exhibited and thematised a refined choice of regional foods, MOCA might still have reinforced the commonplace about the Chinese community merely as one of restaurant entrepreneurs. Moreover, an audience-pleasing food feast might have obfuscated the interesting dialogues and stories conveyed through the video installation.

The collaboration with a Chinese and a Chinese American artist, can be seen as a way to represent the diversity of the community, again avoiding the reinforcement of stereotypes of a culture revolving solely around food. As a result, MOCA helped to dislodge comfortable assumptions about the Chinese American community, broadening people's perceptions of it. Furthermore, since it includes artworks, *SSBS* probably attracted also an audience more interested in the artistic element than in the historical and social context of the exhibition. This could have contributed for diverse audiences

113 Heather R. Lee, "A Life Cooking for Others," in *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader* ed. Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 54.
114 Yong Chen, *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 1.
115 Rebatta, interview.

to come together, confront each other, and interrogate each other's stance. If one agrees with curator Andrew Rebatta, sculptures and installation art is interesting because “it's about experiencing other people experiencing it.”[116] Hence, through the sculptures and the banquet installation, an exhibition, which at first sight appeared to be an agreeable entertainment revolving around succulent stories and colourful sculptures, reveals to be also the ground on which ideas are contended and exchanged. This is made possible mainly by the approach MOCA has developed over the years, conscious of its role for the Chinatown community as well as for the rest of New York's citizens, for the Chinese American community as much as for US society as a whole, and eventually also for the stream of tourists visiting Chinatown every day.[117] MOCA is sensible to this diversity of stances when creating its exhibitions: it develops shows which appeal to these different people, yet it still aims at provoking them in their assumptions. By including contemporary Chinese American artists in an exhibition about food, the museum further complicates and diversifies the image of the Chinese American community, preventing it from becoming crystallized around an association with the restaurant industry.

The solution of MOCA to opt for ceramic sculptures to represent food, could likewise be criticised for not challenging a tradition of museums which oblige the visitors to wander galleries as 'disembodied spirits', like Classen suggested. The choice seems even more questionable at a time when multi-sensory museums attract increasing attention, both from the academic field as from the practice (Levante and Pascual-Leone 2014). Art history as well is turning more towards the sensory perception of art (Bacci and Melcher 2013). It has been at the core of my thesis to emphasise the importance of the senses both in perceiving and recalling things. However, my argument revolves also around the idea of materiality as embodied experience, and how this embodied experience can be re-invoked through synaesthesia and memory. I find that the visual and visual-haptic quality of the ceramics was highly relevant from this perspective. Thanks to the variety offered by the technique of ceramics, due to the great diversity of firing methods, composites, as well as finishing procedures, glazing, and colouring, ceramics are able to conjure up an incredible variety of consistencies and texture, inviting the beholder to all possible associations. They are there for establishing a contact with people's memories, with people's embodied experiences, and to bring about associations which still allow the visitors to make their own opinions of the food.

116 Rebatta, interview.
117 Museum of Chinese in America, “About.”

Fig. 5 - Lu Zhang, Yunnan, 2016, high-fire porcelain and stoneware with low temperature glaze, 25 x 19 x 16 cm, Museum of Chinese in America, New York, accessed July 1, 2018, https://thisismold.com/event/exhibitions/moca-sweet-spicy-bitter-sour-exhibit#g0p5.

For instance, the sculpture depicting Hunan's cuisine (Fig. 5) uses red pinnacle like shapes to represent both the landscape of Zhangjiajie mountains, as well as the pickled chillies of the region.[118] The colour red and the shape help in making the association with the chillies, while the shiny low temperature glaze could recall the juices of the pickled vegetable. Whereas the sculpture presenting Shandong's food (Fig. 6) uses an intricate mesh structure and a coppery *shino* glaze to reflect the texture and colour of 'pot-stickers', namely pan-fried dumplings which become golden and crispy.[119] The sculptures therefore offer references not directly to food itself, but to textures, consistencies, and flavours, which the visitors might be able to relate to, even if they never tasted a specific Chinese dish before. The visitors' 'haptic sight' is stimulated by the sculptures, which enable them to connect to the materiality of previously embodied experiences, generating memories and images of what given dish or cuisine might entail.

118 "Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy," exhibition brochure, 14-5.
119 "Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy," exhibition brochure, 18-9.

Fig. 6 - Lu Zhang, Shandong, 2016, paper clay porcelain, porcelain slip, shino glaze, 19 x 19 x 7 cm, Museum of Chinese in America, New York, accessed June 6, 2018, https://thisismold.com/event/exhibitions/moca-sweet-spicy-bitter-sour-exhibit#g0p5.

It could be disputed that this method of approaching visitors to Chinese cuisine could not solve an ignorance regarding the culture, since it only relies on people's personal perception and imagination. How much more will these people know about Chinese and Chinese American cuisine when they leave the exhibition? Furthermore, it could be argued that the sculptures only end up satisfying stereotypes (due to the use of characteristic elements), as much as they might offer merely a one-sided perspective of the artists and the curatorial team. In response to the first question it has to be considered that the sculptures were accompanied by information about the region, the cuisine's dominant traits, the typical dishes, and eventually a description of the ceramics. The argument made above about the importance of the materiality of the sculpture in reviving embodied experiences complemented this information, allowing the visitor to develop an image not only of a cuisine, but also of the context in which this arose. In the case of Yunnan for instance (Fig. 7), a blue glazed porcelain brings together elements of the landscape as much as the culinary practice. The description ascribes the conical shape at the centre of the artwork to “Yunnan’s clay steam pot, used for preparing many regional dishes,” while petal-like elements surrounding it stand for the tree mushrooms which grow numerous in the region and are a Yunnanese distinct ingredient. Moreover, the shapes and the colours of the sculpture refer to “Yunnan’s high elevation and mountainous landscape.”[120] The visitor is offered relevant information, a visual aid to place the cuisine in a geographical and cultural context, as well as an inference of the taste one might encounter there.

120 “Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy,” exhibition brochure, 24.

Fig. 7 - Lu Zhang, Yunnan, 2016, wheel thrown porcelain, over five different layers of high-fire glazes, 12 x 19 x 19 cm, Museum of Chinese in America, New York, accessed July 1, 2018, https://thisismold.com/event/exhibitions/moca-sweet-spicy-bitter-sour-exhibit#g0p5.

Finally, I want to consider the contribution which including artwork might have towards the discussion of authenticity. As already discussed, the section “Spicy” of the video installation articulated around discussions of authenticity, what it actually means, and it questioned if it can actually be defined at all. If the curators had included real food in the exhibition, there might have been the risk for visitors to interpret the food presented as 'the original' Chinese food. Given the authority usually attributed to museums, it might have been easy to offer the visitors a one sided portrayal of Chinese food, eventually crystallising its definition. So what did the sculptures allow in this regard, which the food itself might not have enabled? Which other thoughts do the artworks contribute to stimulate in the visitor? Art in general, and the semi-abstract sculptures by Lu Zhang and Heidi Lau in particular, requires a rather active role from the side of the beholder. It is demanded of the viewer to take part in the meaning-making process of the artwork, in determining its significance. Having to deal with artworks and with their more or less concealed meaning, the visitor might be confronted with the power of his or her own interpretation. The sculptures are mostly accompanied by a description, but visitors might find themselves agreeing or disagreeing with the given associations. The artworks somewhat offer the beholder a first-hand experience of the subjectivity involved in perceiving and assessing an object, but this might be a concept, or a

situation as well. By acknowledging this, the beholder is confronted with the relativity of defining something as 'authentic' for instance. If the museum had exhibited real food, a connection might have been established between 'real' and 'authentic', threatening to cement the definition of a cuisine, something which MOCA aimed at fighting.

This last part of the chapter considered a series of hypotheses for evaluating the role of the sculptures for the exhibition. The ceramics might have helped to disrupt a stereotyping of the Chinese American community, which associates it strictly with food. Or the artworks could have offered the visitors a tool to appreciate the relativity of definitions and the subjectivity of perception, allowing the visitors to establish correlations between this experience and the discussions on authenticity raised in the video installation. At last, it is worth mentioning that MOCA did also provide people with an alternative to taste actual food outside the realm of the exhibition. The museum organised (and continues to organise) food tours of Chinatown (Fig. 8), where the guests are taken on a “multiregional tasting tour of Chinatown” to discover the dishes, “the diverse food and cooking styles of Chinese cuisine.”[121] The tour includes a sample of 5 to 6 tastings across the multiregional taste-scape of the neighbourhood. This activity reflects the interest of MOCA to offer its visitors approachable, relatable (as much as entertaining) experiences, in order to promote an understanding of the history and state of the Chinese American community, apparently also through the 'actual' materiality of food and by stimulating the 'lower senses'.

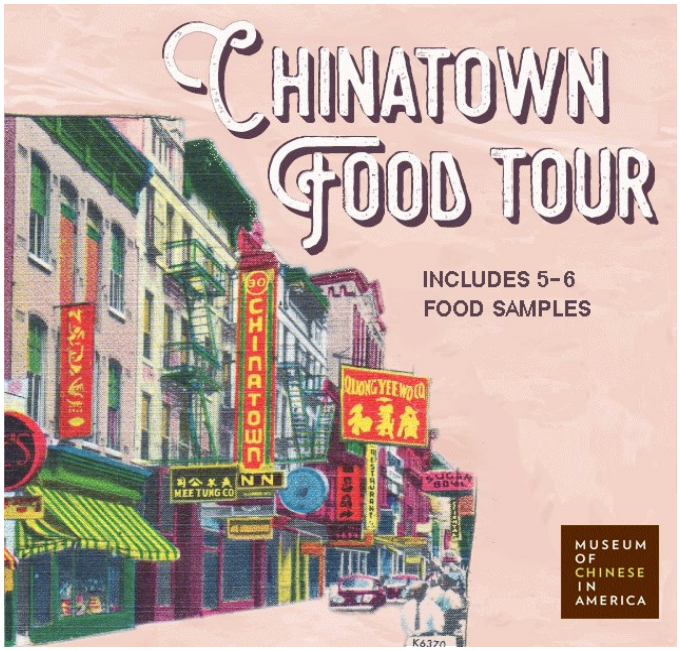

Fig. 8 - “Chinatown Food Tour,” Museum of Chinese in America, New York, accessed July 3, 2018, http://www.mocanyc.org/visit/events/chinatown_food_tour.

121 “Chinatown Food Tour,” Museum of Chinese in America, accessed July 3, 2018, http://www.mocanyc.org/visit/events/chinatown_food_tour.

Conclusion

With this thesis, and through the analysis of the work of MOCA on the *SSBS* exhibition, I intended to show on the one hand the impact food has on our lives, and on the other hand how this power can be and has been used in an exhibition.

In the first chapter I made use of Derrida's theory of frame to theorise the relationship between food and identity — food as representative of the environment which moulds and defines us. At the same time, it is a cultural trait which we ourselves develop and name. The way in which food and identity both presuppose and form each other was compared to the working of *ergon* and *parergon*, and to their fluid interaction. This theoretical framework allowed not only for an analysis of the statements made by the chefs and home cooks in the *SSBS* video installation, it also accentuated the significance of using food to access discourses on identity. By unmasking the mechanisms we rely on to build our identities, the exhibition invited the audience to reflect upon and, perhaps, question them. This was enhanced by the problematisation of the concept of authenticity. Different speakers, often from different generations, exchanged their contrasting opinions in the video installation. Is a certain recipe 'the original'? Can anything be original in the first place? When do different chefs acknowledge the numerous influences on their cuisine? When do they simply define it as 'their own'? Given the fact that MOCA represents an immigrant community in an immigrant country, these thoughts are especially provoking in challenging homogenising discourses on culture and identity. They help visitors see the nuances involved when discussing issues of tradition, authenticity, and integration, which are not only relevant to one's personal life, but are also occasion for heated debate today in the public discourse. Furthermore, the fact that food is an essential element in our lives, be it simple nourishment or an elaborated meal, increased the approachability of the exhibition, making it a more democratic experience, not dealing simply with abstract thoughts on identity and authenticity.

The second chapter focused, therefore, on the materiality of food and how this particular aspect could have possibly enhanced the relatability of the exhibition. Crucial to this part of the analysis was a definition of materiality which focused on the embodied experience of all things material, and how this bodily involvement can be recalled through a synaesthetic cooperation of the senses. However, no real food was presented at MOCA. Was this a missed opportunity for the museum to engage its visitors in new and unconventional ways? The absence of actual food in *SSBS* was thematised, while elements of the exhibition were considered which compensated this lack. First, the use of language to link taste, bodily sensations, and feelings was discussed. And to conclude, special attention was devoted to the sculptures and their impact on the visitor. Did the use of sculptures

instead of actual food prevent a further stereotyping of the Chinese American community? By introducing contemporary art in the exhibition, was the diversity of the community emphasised? Might the variety of approaches taken in *SSBS* have brought together different audiences, expanding discussions? Was the visual-haptic quality of the sculptures able to activate associations in the mind of the visitors? Could the artworks challenge furthermore the meaning of an 'authentic' cuisine? These are some examples of the hypothesis which one might draw from visiting the *SSBS* exhibition, and those that were considered in this paper.

Overall, I aimed at enhancing the power of material culture in creating exhibitions which combine the theoretical, the abstract with the physical reality around us, the concrete elements which we perceive through our senses and bear great impact on our lives and our perception of the world. Using everyday material culture in this way enabled MOCA to be the middleman between these two positions, offering a democratic approach to discussing important social issues such as identity, immigration, and integration.

On a different level, this thesis also intended to offer access to unexpected meanings, those surfacing when looking at the exhibition, as well as at the world itself, from a different angle. A theory of food as frame to identity offered a perspective which challenged the apparent banality of certain statements and of the role of food in our lives. It emphasised a connection which might instead have gone unnoticed. On the other side, a focus on the materiality of things and on embodied experiences called the attention of the reader to the impact which tangible objects have on us, therefore allowing us to see things in a new light — or to experience new flavours, tastes, and consistencies. Both methodological approaches, even if apparently unrelated, aimed at unraveling that which is not explicit. They were complementary in the way they juxtaposed the realm of theories, words, abstraction, and symbols, to that of practice, objects, that which is material and which we approach with our senses. They revealed two different outlooks on the world, and yet two complementary ones, which enabled us to grasp meanings of the exhibition which remained hidden at first sight. Be it a concept like 'identity', or a common element of our lives such as food, my wish was to invite the reader to look beyond the obvious, and reflect on the way words and things affect us.

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