

## Chopsticks

Chopsticks have become a quintessential part of the Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese culinary experience across the globe, with more than one fifth of the world's population using them daily to eat. In this vibrant, highly original account of the history of chopsticks, Q. Edward Wang charts their evolution from a simple eating implement in ancient times to their status as a much more complex, cultural symbol today. Opening in the Neolithic Age, at the first recorded use of chopsticks, the book surveys their use through Chinese history, before exploring their transmission in the fifth century to other parts of Asia, including Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Mongolia. Calling upon a striking selection of artwork, the author illustrates how chopstick use has influenced Asian cuisine, and how, in turn, the cuisine continues to influence chopstick use, both in Asia and across the globe.

**Q. Edward Wang** is Professor of History and Co-ordinator of Asian Studies at Rowan University and Changjiang Professor of History at Peking University, China.

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**Chopsticks**  
A CULTURAL AND  
CULINARY HISTORY

Q. EDWARD WANG



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*To my mother who taught me to use chopsticks  
in China and for my son who is using them in the  
US, as the tradition lives on from past to present,  
China and beyond.*

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## Acknowledgments

Researching and writing this book has been a pleasant experience for me. I also would like to express, with pleasure, my gratitude to the people who helped me in the process. I do not exactly remember when the idea of writing a book about the history of chopsticks first came to me. But I do remember that at the very early stage when I checked several major library catalogs online, trying to look for any book or article on the subject, I was quite surprised that essentially none had been written in English, save for a few children's books. This finding spurred me to take on the task. At the same time, I also realized that I would have less to draw on from existing scholarship. Fortunately, I received a prestigious fellowship from the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) at Princeton in 2010, to work on a different (yet related) subject. With the kind agreement and encouragement of Nicola Di Cosmo, professor of Asian history at the IAS, I was able to pursue the initial research on this subject instead. The excellent research facility and friendly and capable staff at the IAS facilitated my work. The Gest Library at the neighboring Princeton University also offered me important access to many useful sources. Toward the end of my tenure at the IAS, I gave my first presentation on the research. I am grateful to Professor Di Cosmo and my fellow IAS members for their knowledge, help and comments, especially Daniel Botsman, Fa-ti Fan, Marie Favereau-Doumenjou, Sarah Fraser, Jinah Kim and Don Wyatt. During that period, I also sought advice and suggestions from Professors Ying-shih Yu, Benjamin Elman and Susan Naquin at Princeton University and Professors Paul Goldin, Xiaojue Wang and Si-yen Fei at the University of Pennsylvania. In the following academic year, while teaching as a visiting professor at the University of

Pennsylvania, I gave a presentation, entitled “Chopsticks: ‘Bridging’ Cultures in Asia.”

I also presented my research for the book at Brandeis University and Rowan University (my home institution) in the US, and at Fudan University, Peking University, the Institute of Modern History, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the National Library of Taiwan in Asia. Professor Aida Y. Wong, an art historian of China and Japan, arranged my talk at Brandeis University. A staunch supporter of the project from the beginning, Aida loaned me books and helped me in finding illustrations for the book. My talk at Fudan University in Shanghai was arranged by Professor Ge Zhaoguang, then the director of the Advanced Research Institute for the Humanities, and chaired by Professor Zhang Qing, head of the History Department at Fudan. Zhao Xiaoyang and her colleagues at the Institute of Modern History invited me to talk at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Presided over by Huang Ko-wu, director of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, my presentation at the National Library of Taiwan was the first lecture of the series “Center for Chinese Studies Scholars Worldwide,” introduced by Keng Li-ch’un, Jane Liao and the staff at the Center for Chinese Studies at the Library. Here I would like to express my deep appreciation for all the above invitations, which were a major encouragement for me in writing the book. I am also grateful to the audiences for their enthusiasm and questions, which helped me to explore more aspects of the history and culture of chopsticks.

I conducted the bulk of my research at Peking University where, since 2007, I have taught in summers and winters as Changjiang Professor in its History Department. As China’s leading university, Peking University has a library which provided me with excellent access not only to its huge source collections but also to several key databases, including Zhongguo jiben gujiku and Hanji dianzi wenxian ziliaoku. When I gave my talk on chopsticks culture on the campus in June 2013, I received useful information and interesting queries from the audience. I would like to thank the faculty and students at Peking University for their support and assistance; especially Professors Li Longguo, Liu Qunyi, Luo Xin, Rong Xinjiang, Wang Xinsheng, Wang Yuanzhou and Zhu Xiaoyuan. Graduate students at Peking University, such as Zong Yu and Li Leibo, also provided help for my research.

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*Acknowledgments*

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colleagues. Corinne Blake, James Heinzen, Scott Morschauer and Joy Wiltenburg kindly proofread several of the chapters and offered useful suggestions for improving the prose. Rowan colleagues in other departments also helped my work. Yuhui Li, a native of Northwest China, taught me a good deal about the dietary traditions and practices of the region, as did Hieu Heyuen, who answered my questions about the dining customs in Vietnam. Tomoyo Fukumori provided useful firsthand information regarding the eating etiquette in Japanese society. She also helped me gain a better understanding of the Japanese texts for my research. Her assistance, therefore, was much beyond her duty as a student worker, for which I am very grateful. At various stages, my writing of and research for the book received encouragement from Bill Carrigan, our current chair in the Department, and Cindy Vitto, dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan.

For my research, I visited several museums and private collections, and interviewed food scholars in Asia, such as the special chopsticks collections at the Lüshun Museum in Lüshun, the Sanxia Museum in Chongqing, the Yangzhou Museum in Yangzhou, the Shanghai Chopsticks Private Collection in Shanghai, China, the National Folk Museum of Korea in Seoul, South Korea, the Museum of Chopsticks Culture in Kyoto, the Tokyo National Museum and the Edo-Tokyo Museum in Japan. I am indebted to the following individuals for those visits, as well as to the museums, which helped provide useful images for illustrating the book and enhancing my knowledge of chopsticks use: Ai Zhike, Chen Yunqian, Cui Jian, Han Junshu, Li Yujie, Liu Junyong, Liu Li, Liu Shilong, Luo Lin, Ouyang Zhesheng, Park Mihee, Wang Nan, Wang Rong, Xu Yue, Yu Xiaohang, Zeng Xuewen, Zhao Yi, Zhao Yifeng and Zhou Yiping. In particular, I would like to thank Mr. Lan Xiang for meeting and talking with me in June 2013. A chopsticks collector of many decades and owner of the Shanghai Chopsticks Private Collection, Lan is a prolific author on chopsticks culture and history. It was a pleasure to meet him and I obtained his permission for using some of the photos I took of his collection. Liu Jianhui, professor at the International Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, kindly accompanied me on my visit to the Museum of Chopsticks Culture in Kyoto in July 2013. Though the Museum was closed, we managed to find its owner Mr. Izu, with whom I had a brief conversation. Our subsequent visit to the Chopsticks Shop, Ichihara-Heibei Shoten in Kyoto, which has been in existence since 1764 and is one of the oldest chopsticks shops in Japan, was also very fruitful. I thank the shop owner for sharing with me an article featuring their store, which bears the

interesting title “Chopsticks: A Tool that Bridges Food and Culture.” It stresses that since chopsticks and bridge are pronounced the same in Japanese, chopsticks are a means for cross-cultural communication and exchange.

In addition, I would like to thank Han Jiang, Han Junshu (again!), Lim Jie-hyun, Okamoto Michihiro, Pan Kuang-che, Dennis Rizzo, Sun Weiguo, Xing Yitian, Zhou Bing and Zeng Xuewen who either helped me find research materials or provided clues and/or answers to my queries. On-cho Ng, Di Wang and two other anonymous readers reviewed my original prospectus for Cambridge University Press and offered valuable suggestions. Their ideas were useful for shaping and improving the structure of the book, for which I am thankful. Marigold Acland at Cambridge University Press, with whom I first discussed the idea of writing this book, was a strong supporter of the project from the outset. After completing the manuscript, I also received valuable help from Lucy Rhymer, Marigold’s successor, and Amanda George at the Press. Without their professional knowledge and assistance, this book would not be the one it is now.

I essentially wrote this book for my mother and my son. To my mother, I owe a debt for her teaching me how to use the utensil correctly all my life. I also hope my son, who is old enough to use chopsticks, can carry on this tradition, and pass it on to his children. Last but not least, I thank my wife Ni who, a college professor herself, has a deep understanding of what it entails for me to complete a task like this one. My appreciation of her patience and support is beyond words.

## Plates

1. Bone spoons unearthed at a Neolithic cultural site in Sichuan, China.  
(*Courtesy of Ai Zhike, the Sanxia Museum, Chongqing, China*)
2. Neolithic bone chopsticks found in Longqiuzhuang, a Neolithic cultural site in Jiansu, China.  
(*Courtesy of the Yangzhou Museum, China*)
3. Neolithic bone chopsticks (the two thin sticks in the lower part) in Longqiuzhuang.  
(*Courtesy of the Yangzhou Museum, China*)
4. This brick carving shows how chopsticks were used in early China, c. first century CE.  
(*Zhongguo huaxiangzhuan quanji [Complete collections of Chinese brick carvings], ed. Yu Weichao, Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2006, p. 59*)
5. Eating customs in early China – sitting on the floor with foods placed on short-legged tables, shown on a brick carving, first to third centuries CE.  
(*Zhongguo lidai yishu: huibhua bian [the Chinese art in different dynasties: painting], Beijing: Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1994, part 1, p. 72*)
6. Brick painting from the Fresco Tombs of the Wei and Jin Dynasty showing chopsticks used as utensils for cooking in early China, c. third–fifth centuries CE.  
(*Painting from the Fresco Tombs of the Wei and Jin Dynasty located in the Northwestern Gobi desert 20 km from Jiayuguan city.*)

- (*Mural paintings in Jiayuguan, Jiuquan tombs of the Wei and Jin periods*), ed. Zhang Baoxun, Lanzhou: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 2001, p. 261)
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  12. “Literary Gathering”, Zhao Ji (1082–1135). Handscroll, ink and colors on silk, 184.4 × 123.9 cm. (*Courtesy of the National Palace Museum, Taipei*)
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14. A mural found in a tomb from Song China (960–1127) portraying a couple, or the Zhaos, eating together at a table on high chairs, suggesting communal eating had begun in the family after the tenth century in China.  
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15. A family eating together at one sitting during the Jurchen period (c. thirteenth century), suggesting the spread of a communal eating style in Asia.  
*(Zhongguo mush bihua quanji: Song, Liao, Jin, Yuan [Complete collections of Chinese tomb murals: Song, Liao, Jin and Yuan dynasties], Shijiazhuang: Hebei Jiaoyu chubanshe, 2011, p. 114)*
16. “Women 22” by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1862). The Japanese have been accustomed to chopsticks since approximately the seventh century, as shown in this Ukiyo-e painting, a popular genre in Edo Japan.  
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17. “A Group of Trackers,” drawing by a European visitor to eighteenth-century China depicting how the Chinese ate with chopsticks.  
*(From Views of Eighteenth Century China: Costumes, History, Customs, by William Alexander & George Henry Mason, © London, Studio editions, 1988, p. 25)*
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*(Private Collection / The Stapleton Collection / Bridgeman Images)*
20. Pairs of chopsticks to be packed into bentō boxes in Japan.  
*(Author’s photograph)*
21. Japanese “husband–wife chopsticks,” which are often painted with lacquer. The pair for the husband are slightly longer and less colourful than the pair for the wife.  
*(Author’s photograph)*

22. Japanese festive chopsticks, shaped with two tapered ends and a round body, reflecting the belief in humans and deities sharing food together at one meal on holidays and at festivals.  
*(Author's photograph)*
23. Training chopsticks, a Japanese invention, ensure that a young child can easily put the tool on his/her fingers and pick up food.  
*(Author's photograph)*
24. Using Japanese chopsticks to eat soba noodles and duck meat.  
*(© TOHRU MINO WA/a.collectionRF/ amana images inc. / Alamy)*
25. The fact that rice can be transported in clumps using chopsticks has led to chopsticks becoming the main utensil used in Asia.  
*(© Keller & Keller Photography / Bon Appetit / Alamy)*
26. Chinese chopsticks, chopstick rests, porcelain spoons and bowls at a market stall, Stanley Market, Stanley, Hong Kong, China.  
*(© Steve Vidler/ SuperStock / Alamy)*
27. Decorative chopsticks sold in Japanese stores, which are more of a gift than an eating implement.  
*(Author's photograph)*
28. Eating Chinese takeout with disposable chopsticks.  
*(© Kablonk RM/ Golden Pixels LLC / Alamy)*
29. Couples dressed according to Han Dynasty customs eating together in a group wedding ceremony in Xi'an, China.  
*(© Corbis)*

Color plates are located between pages 92 and 93.

*Timeline*

Time	China	Korea	
To 4000 BCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Early humans</li> <li>✓ Neolithic period (Yangshao)</li> <li>✓ Crops</li> <li>✓ Discovery of bone utensils</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Neolithic period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Pal</li> <li>Ne</li> <li>(Jo</li> </ul>
4000–1000 BCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Neolithic period</li> <li>✓ Xia, Shang, Zhou dynasties</li> <li>✓ Oracle bone inscriptions / Writing system</li> <li>✓ Bronze Age (bronze utensils)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Neolithic period</li> <li>✓ Origin myths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ne</li> <li>✓ Ori</li> </ul>
1000 BCE to 300 CE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Zhou and Warring States periods</li> <li>✓ Qin and Han dynasties</li> <li>✓ Silk Road</li> <li>✓ Confucianism and Daoism</li> <li>✓ Millet as staple in north and rice in south</li> <li>✓ Spread of wheat flour foods</li> <li>✓ Shift from using fingers to utensils for foods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Bronze Age</li> <li>✓ Iron Age</li> <li>✓ Chinese Han military commendaries</li> <li>✓ Early Three Kingdoms period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ne</li> <li>(Jo</li> <li>✓ Ya</li> <li>✓ Ori</li> </ul>
300–600 CE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Fall of the Han dynasty</li> <li>✓ Buddhism</li> <li>✓ Period of Northern and Southern dynasties</li> <li>✓ Tang dynasty</li> <li>✓ Spoons and chopsticks used as a set of eating tools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Three Kingdoms period</li> <li>✓ Discovery of bronze utensils (spoons and chopsticks)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ko</li> <li>per</li> <li>✓ Asu</li> <li>✓ Bu</li> </ul>

Time	China	Korea	
600–1000 CE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Tang dynasty</li> <li>✓ Spread of Buddhism</li> <li>✓ Silk Road</li> <li>✓ Wheat and millet were staples in North China and rice in South China</li> <li>✓ Fall of the Tang dynasty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ United Silla</li> <li>✓ Goryeo period</li> <li>✓ Use of utensils for food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Asu</li> <li>✓ Na</li> <li>✓ He</li> <li>✓ Spr</li> <li>✓ Jap</li> <li>Ch</li> <li>✓ Intr</li> <li>ute</li> <li>✓ Dis</li> <li>cho</li> <li>✓ Lat</li> <li>✓ Kar</li> <li>Mu</li> <li>✓ Ch</li> </ul>
1000–1450 CE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Song dynasty</li> <li>✓ Liao dynasty</li> <li>✓ Jin dynasty</li> <li>✓ Xixia dynasty</li> <li>✓ Introduction of Champa rice</li> <li>✓ Mongol conquest and Yuan dynasty</li> <li>✓ Neo-Confucianism</li> <li>✓ Ming dynasty</li> <li>✓ Development of communal eating style</li> <li>✓ Chopsticks became exclusive eating tool</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Goryeo dynasty</li> <li>✓ Joseon dynasty</li> <li>✓ Neo-Confucianism</li> <li>✓ Mongol conquest</li> <li>✓ Meat consumption</li> <li>✓ Metal utensils</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Lat</li> <li>✓ Kar</li> <li>Mu</li> <li>✓ Ch</li> </ul>
1450–1850 CE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ming dynasty</li> <li>✓ Qing dynasty</li> <li>✓ Porcelain soup spoon</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Joseon dynasty</li> <li>✓ Ming China and Joseon against Japanese invasion</li> <li>✓ Spoon and chopsticks as a set of eating tools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Mu</li> <li>✓ Un</li> <li>✓ Tol</li> <li>✓ Ed</li> </ul>

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r. Map of East Asia.